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A Victorian Disposition: Emotional Susceptibility in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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Abstract

A Victorian Disposition: Emotional Susceptibility in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

This dissertation argues that the nineteenth-century construction of "emotional susceptibility" turned a much-derided quirk of psychology—the long retention of one's earliest affective impressions—into a basis for radical interventions into thinking about attachment, ethics, and the Victorian novel. I focus in particular on the work of Henry Mackenzie, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy—writers who depicted and sometimes reconceived the lived experience of susceptibility, a rigorously other-oriented disposition defined by a tendency to form intense and durable ties.

The dissertation positions their fiction within a charged cultural debate about sympathy and demonstrates that susceptibility presented a strong conceptual alternative to that normative code of feeling, not only for nineteenth-century Britons but also for scholars today. Examining the formal and conceptual rethinking of this disposition across the century, from experimentation with susceptible narrators to applications for intractable social inequities and emergent anxieties around Darwinism, I establish susceptibility as a central axis of the Victorian imagination and an abiding preoccupation of the period's major intellectual novelists. My study identifies an underexamined strain of character in nineteenth-century fiction and shows how writers mobilized it as a generative source of literary invention and ethical analysis.

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Introduction: Impressibility and Susceptibility

1. A "keen susceptibility" to impressions

At a critical moment in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor* (1857), a globetrotting dinner guest named Hunsden falls into debate with his host Frances Henri. Describing himself as "a universal patriot" whose "country is the world"—a common trope at the time that resonates with recent scholarly discussion about cosmopolitan detachment—Hunsden argues for an impartial, universal ethics in which a person's sympathies are distributed evenly across all others.[1] Frances demurs, voicing an objection to this popular ideal: "Sympathies so widely diffused must be very shallow" (201).

Frances prefers concentrated, long-lasting attachments that are strictly limited in number. She distinguishes between Hunsden's egoistic posture, in which sympathies are widespread but fleeting, and another, nascent code characterized by a more-constant, selfless disposition. The latter—standing at the intersection of affect and ethics—rigorously de-emphasizes personal desires and preferences in ways deserving of analysis. Frances privileges the well-being of a few people to whom she has been tied the longest, and her earliest impressions of them remain salient all her life.

With this scene, Brontë began to fashion the concept of *impressibility*, specifically as a counterpoint to the social and emotional mores of sympathy. Although not named as such until her experimental last novel, *Villette* (1853), the impressible disposition structured most of

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[1] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201. On Victorian detachment, see Amanda Anderson, *Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Brontë's thought and writing from the 1840s (when *The Professor* was drafted) through the end of her career.

The emotional category had a long prehistory, but novelists and moralists in the decades before had cast it aside in favor of sympathy, as formulated by eighteenth-century philosophers such as Adam Smith and David Hume. Like Frances, Brontë disagreed with the prevailing ideal, and through her fiction launched the recuperation of a disposition that would be mobilized in almost every domain of Victorian thought. Reworked in and through the fictional imagination, *impressibility* informed debate in contexts as varied as gender relations, the franchise, evolutionary ethics, and the nature of narrative. Recasting by successors including George Eliot and Thomas Hardy extended the disposition's lineage across the nineteenth century and into modernist fiction and poetry. This project builds a genealogy of Victorian formulations of the impressible mind, showing how far-reaching are the implications of a largely overlooked disposition.

In the chapters that follow, I track the rehabilitation and long arc of this affective disposition from Hume to Hardy. I examine its influence and effects on Victorian literature, specifically around normative representations of attachment. The authors I examine in this study, including Henry Mackenzie, Brontë, Eliot, Hardy, and Henry James, all depicted minds organized around the tendency to take and retain affective impressions of other people. (They were also deeply interested in *unimpressible* characters who tend toward "shallower," more serial forms of attachment.) For the impressible mind, imprints received in childhood or youth are preserved into adulthood, even until death. This seemingly minor difference of duration underpinned sweeping new ethical ideas involving a radically other-oriented style of thought.

This dissertation argues that the nineteenth-century construction of impressibility turned a supposedly undesirable quirk of psychology—the long retention and influence of one's early affective impressions—into a seed of radical interventions into thinking about emotion, ethics, and, just as crucially, the novel. Extrapolating from Brontë's and Eliot's novels, I locate that peculiar susceptibility to impressions at the heart of Victorian fiction, particularly as the latter engages ethical questions through its detailed depictions of human psychology and behavior.

Impressibility—or *susceptibility*, as it was sometimes called, including by Eliot—had been defined from the seventeenth century onward as an oversensitivity to mental and moral impressions.[2] (For the purposes of this introduction, I will use the terms "impressibility" and "susceptibility" interchangeably.) In the latter half of the eighteenth century, a susceptibility to *affective* impressions—to be distinguished from sensory ones—came to be associated with a "cult of Sensibility [that] stressed those qualities considered feminine in the sexual psychology of the time: intuitive sympathy, susceptibility, emotionalism and passivity."[3]

By the early nineteenth century, even former proponents of this "sickly delicacy" had turned their backs on it.[4] Prominent physicians wrote books about the dangers of the emotional life to the physical health of leisured women, sounding the alarm against the hysteric diseases to which the woman of sensibility was marked as especially prone.[5] The disposition was increasingly medicalized; for the Victorians, such sensitivity always stood in danger of tipping into a potentially fatal "nervous fever" or disorder. Fiction, as well, routinely emphasized the

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[2] "*susceptibility*, n.1" OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press (accessed October 10, 2019).
[3] Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (York: Methuen Publishing, 1986), 110.
[4] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, ed. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98.
[5] William Buchan's *Domestic Medicine* (1794) and Thomas Trotter's *A View of the Nervous Temperament* (1808) both admonish the public about this danger.

failings of a susceptible sensibility; a *sympathetic* response, in which one "felt with" others

through imaginative identification, was considered preferable.

In *Villette*, Brontë gave a wholly new interpretation of this posture toward one's affective

impressions. Using perplexingly similar terms, narrator Lucy Snowe anatomizes two opposing

dispositions: *impressionability* and *impressibility*. The former she associates with an egoistic

sympathy, a cast of mind characterized by the rapid turnover of impressions. Impressibility, by

contrast, involves the painfully long retention of the imprints others leave on the mind.

Describing her egocentric friend Graham, Lucy remarks that his "natural attitude was not the

meditative, nor his natural mood the sentimental; *impressionable* he was as dimpling water, but,

almost as water, *unimpressible*: the breeze, the sun, moved him—metal could not grave, nor fire

brand."[6] The "impressionable" Graham takes and then sheds affective impressions as continually

as the surface of a river shakes off markings made by a breeze. Impressible minds like Lucy's

keep them indefinitely, as if they were engraved by a metal point, or branded into the receptive

material of the psyche. These excruciating "brandings"—most commonly, a kind of mental

portrait of another's face, and one intensely imbued with emotion—may be retained for a

lifetime, and as such can entail an unbreakable tie. Brontë represented the tendency to preserve

impressions in this way as normative, while not tiptoeing around its stifling or even damaging

personal consequences. Building on recent scholarship, I flesh out the connection between

Brontë's depictions of psychic distress and her critique of sympathy through an examination of

the impressible mind.[7]

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[6] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Random House, 2001), 300; emphasis in the original. The terminological similarity of these two opposing dispositions is a point of potential confusion, but I preserve Brontë's own words to echo her emphasis on the impression as key to both.

[7] Rachel Ablow argues that Brontë's "allegories of physical pain . . . indicate the novel's resistance to and critique of the normalizing tendency of sympathy" and "serve as the basis of an alternative form of interpersonal

Inheriting Brontë's interest in an other-oriented disposition that *incorporated* suffering rather than avoiding it, Eliot recast susceptibility as an affective mechanism with the potential to advance her social reformist project. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860)*,* the youthfully self-centered Maggie Tulliver experiences an intriguing form of sadness: "Maggie, with all her keen susceptibility, yet felt as if the sorrow made larger room for her love to flow in, and gave breathing space to her passionate nature."[8] This peculiar sorrow carved out narrative and psychic space to feel for and with others, especially when they were in distress. Unlike Brontë, Eliot did not dismiss sympathy. Rather, she noted that an egoistic person would often simply decline to cultivate it, and theorized susceptibility as a key tool for producing strong attachments in such characters. That disposition could do what sympathy could not because it operated *pre-evaluatively*, often in childhood. In a critical passage describing the formation of Maggie's earliest bonds, Eliot writes that susceptibility works on her "before the labour of choice," etching affective impressions into her young mind before she had developed the capacity to choose for herself (*Mill* 160).

Eliot established susceptibility—specifically, its ability to preempt selfish choices and behaviors—as the basis of her provocative communitarian ethics. Protagonists Maggie Tulliver and Daniel Deronda, for example, prove lastingly susceptible to their earliest affective ties, a quality of their psychology that delivers a kind of "training" in loving others from whom they might otherwise have withheld their sympathies. (Maggie's toxic brother Tom, to whom she is irrevocably tied, is a prime example.) Eliot saw susceptible experience in childhood as an emotional prerequisite to the amelioration of social inequities. By her view, those who fall

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connection, grounded . . . in the ability to feel pain" (Rachel Ablow, *Victorian Pain* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017], 73).

[8] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 273.

outside the circle of our concern do so mostly because of our own egoism, not their lack of desert. Her early supernatural tale *The Lifted Veil* (1859), in which the clairvoyant Latimer is subjected repeatedly to the thoughts of others, depicts the unchosen process of self-extension by which this narrowness can be overcome. Latimer, who dislikes his father, initially finds his clamoring thoughts intrusive and grating, but later, after they are reconciled, he ceases to be bothered by them, and even feels profound compassion.

Eliot stretched the capacity for sympathy and identification on the part of characters and readers alike, according to her theory of realist fiction, demanding that it encompass peoples and cultures beyond one's local experience. From the context of the newly enfranchised working classes in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) to the plight of English Jews in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) to the mavericks and misanthropes peopling *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), she positioned susceptibility as the compulsory first step in fostering a broad sympathy.

Toward the end of the century, Thomas Hardy's fiction revived an intensive focus on the *un*impressible temperament, particularly when manifested as serial male promiscuity. He depicted the retention of affective impressions—until and even beyond the death of those who had produced them—as a form of compensatory preservation for characters rendered disposable by his egoistic, inconstant men. For Hardy, a novel such as *The Woodlanders* (1887) was itself impressible, a record of those lost in a sexual economy that tended especially to discard representatives of a more traditional way of life. A major destination for this peculiarly Victorian disposition, Hardy's fiction shifted much of the work of impressibility from the level of character psychology to that of narrative. In a figuratively Darwinian clash between modern values and older ones, the role of the realist novel was to act as a bulwark against the loss of whole cultures.

Victorian thinkers, painters, and writers were fascinated by questions about the duration of impressions in the mind, particularly in their ethical import. Drawing on an image that intrigued her contemporaries, Eliot described how "[o]ur moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze."[9] Alexander Bain, psychologist and reader of Eliot, echoed the point, picturing the mind as a march of impressions: "It is the very nature and necessity of our transient impressions to pass out of the conscious area of the moment, and to give place to others in succession. . . . Yet, what has passed out of consciousness for the moment has a hold and a status little inferior to the actual occupants."[10] Writers such as Brontë and Eliot recognized that people too could be treated as mere pictures passing in succession before the eyes of a spectator, and strove—chiefly via impressibility and susceptibility—to identify and resist that tendency. Hardy's portrayal of philandering husbands distilled a century-long preoccupation with egoism, understood specifically in terms of fleeting impressions of others.

While adjacent concepts and emotional postures—including sentimentalism, sensibility, and sympathy—have each received careful and systematic critical treatment, scholars have largely overlooked susceptibility as an independent concept and disposition.[11] Yet Victorian novelists themselves evinced sustained interest in the impressible cast of mind and its capabilities, particularly as a possible model for rethinking or replacing prevailing norms of sympathy. In the hands of the novelists whose work I examine, a cast of mind that had once

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[9] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 193–94.

[10] Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 675.

[11] On sentiment, see John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); on sensibility, see G. J. Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); on sympathy, see Audre Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); on sensitiveness, see Tom Sperlinger, "'The Sensitive Author': George Eliot," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2007): 250–72.

conjured up images of nervous girls and sickly, effeminate men was rehabilitated so extensively as to become a major cornerstone of nineteenth-century thought. Delineating a distinct strain in the history of the literary mind, this dissertation seeks to restore impressibility as an organizing category of Victorian fiction.

2. "Susceptible of lasting impressions": The Prehistory to a Victorian Disposition

The dispositional tendency to retain impressions has a complex, multistranded history in British and European thought that threads forward from René Descartes and John Locke through eighteenth-century empiricists such as David Hume. Philosophers wrote about this psychological feature—almost always pejoratively—for at least two centuries before the Victorian fiction that forcibly remade impressibility into a concept central to their investigations into ethics and narrative. In this section, I examine these philosophical texts to illustrate how fundamental were the cognitive and ethical questions Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy set out to address. Over two generations spanning the second half of the nineteenth century, novelists fashioned and refashioned a new affective framework out of a much-maligned disposition of human emotion. The project of recuperation required not just deep historical knowledge and probing moral innovation, but an almost violent defiance of normative judgments around the retention of impressions.

Despite his acknowledged influence across many other domains, Descartes has not figured prominently enough in histories of Victorian emotion and psychology.[12] For the purposes of this brief history, I return to him as a critical forerunner of Victorian thought about

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[12] In her excellent book on the circulation of feeling, for example, Adela Pinch begins her history of emotion with Locke's departure from Descartes on the grounds that emotion was a form of understanding, not volition (Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996], 18).

susceptibility, specifically through his introduction of the emotional category *admiratio* into

inherited taxonomies of the passions.[13] Typically translated as "wonder" or "astonishment,"

admiratio was for Descartes "the first of all the passions"; the others—love, hatred, desire, joy,

and sadness—were derived from it.[14] This newly formulated passion involved

> a sudden surprise of the soul causing it to consider with attention those objects which seem to it novel and unexpected. Primarily it is caused by an impression we have in the brain. . . . It is also conditioned by the movement of the [animal] spirits which, owing to this same brain-impression, . . . are made to flow with great force to the part of the brain where the impression is located, for the fortifying and conserving of it there. (292)

The capacity for wonder and astonishment led directly to the creation of "fortified" impressions

that might remain in the mind indefinitely.

Crucially for its nineteenth-century revival, *admiratio* linked the notion of long-lasting

mental impressions to the *pre-evaluative* nature of wonder. Descartes wrote, "When a first

encounter with an object surprises us . . . this causes us to wonder. . . . And since this can happen

prior to our knowing at all whether this object is or is not serviceable to us, it seems to me that

wonder is the first of all the passions" (290; my emphasis). By virtue of this emphasis,

Descartes's account should be considered a major forerunner to Victorian ideas about affect,

particularly in the context of childhood. Unlike his empiricist successors, Descartes did not

classify the passions as states of understanding; as such, his theory carved out the space for a

distinct and durable kind of impression. The formation of the latter, and its fixity in the mind,

predated any real knowledge or assessment of the astonishing object that gave rise to it.

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[13] On Thomas Aquinas's taxonomy of the passions, the prevailing theory before Descartes, see Robert Miner, *Thomas Aquinas on the Passions: A Study of Summa Theologiae* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011). On connections to the Victorian context, see Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26–61.

[14] René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul* in *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Random House, 1958), 290.

A disposition to focus intense attention on something prior to any evaluation of it as *worthy* of attention was, however, hardly cause for celebration. Bernard Malebranche dubbed Cartesian wonder an imperfect passion for exactly this reason; a disregard for the good or evil of the object of astonishment was deeply concerning. Descartes too warned about the necessity to prevent "excessive wonder" (295). Ostensibly, a person could learn to subdue love, hatred, and the other passions through volition, but the "sudden surprise" of *admiratio*—and the fortified mental impression it created—operated in advance of any determination by the will.

Descartes's account of how an object or person can leave a durable impression on the brain was reprised and reworked by philosophers and novelists from the eighteenth century on, but it was Victorian novelists who found *uses* for his caveat about the circumvention of the will. That quality of wonder offered a physiological basis for thinking about the nature and, later, the consequences of childhood attachments, practically a novel subject in the nineteenth century and one that would become intensely interesting to Victorian autobiographical fiction. Writers mobilized the idea of an emotional response that was specific to *first encounters*, and intimately related to enduring memories, to analyze early development relative to the emotional habits of adults. *Jane Eyre* is a prominent example, given its protracted attention to Jane's childhood experiences prior to the Bertha plot, which (as I argue in Chapter 2) dramatizes the resurgence of an early tie. No less important, the pre-evaluative aspect of wonder informed the effort by the authors in this study to construct an alternative ethical framework to that of sympathy. The latter's conduciveness to self-regarding conduct made it an unlikely solution to egoism, perceived to be pervasive in society. A capacity to form lasting impressions that did not depend on knowledge or evaluation held out the hope of a dispositional catalyst for radical ethical reform.

Locke split from Descartes in his categorization of the emotions, but preserved his predecessor's emphasis on the impression as primary in the formation of a mind. Arguably, it was Locke who gave the earliest recognizable formulation of susceptibility as nineteenth-century writers later understood it. His analysis brought together several of its essential features, including a close association with childhood, its potential to lead to sorrow, and, crucially, its emphasis on the *durability* of sense impressions as they related to a person's cast of mind.

For Locke's "impression model of sensation," in which the human being is "utterly open, permeable" to "the world's imprints," the associations among one's impressions and ideas were a matter of critical importance.[15] Understanding the world as it actually was, for him, required mental associations to correspond to natural ones. In *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, he writes: "Some of our Ideas have a natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another: It is the Office and Excellency of our Reason to trace these, and hold them together in that Union and Correspondence which is founded in their peculiar Beings."[16] But reason can fail at that task, leading us to form associations that are "wholly owing to Chance or Custom" (2:33:5). He named childhood susceptibility as the culprit:

> [T]hose who have Children, or the charge of their education, would think it worth their while diligently to watch, and carefully to prevent the undue Connexion of Ideas in the minds of young People. This is the time most *susceptible of lasting Impressions*. . . . This wrong Connexion in our Minds of Ideas . . . is of so great force to set us awry in our Actions, as well Moral as Natural, Passions, Reasonings, and Notions themselves, that perhaps there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after. (2:33:8–9; my emphasis)

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[15] Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 49; 47.

[16] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*, 4th ed. (London: Awnsham and John Churchill, 1700), 2:33:5.

Driving home the point that susceptibility was a serious and underappreciated problem, he declared it the cause of "Madness," claiming that it was "the foundation of the greatest, I had almost said, of all the Errors in the World; or if it does not reach so far, it is at least the most dangerous one" (2:33:4; 18).

Aside from pointing up the need for a project of rehabilitation, Locke's negative evaluation of susceptibility was for Victorian writers such as Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy less important than the connection he made between a person's manner of taking impressions and her *character*. This move, linking a basic cognitive mechanism to complex questions about emotion and attachment, recurs in much nineteenth-century fiction. Locke described, for instance, a mother who had lost a beloved child, explaining that, until "time has by disuse separated the sense of that Enjoyment, and its loss, from the Idea of the Child," she will be unable to feel any joy (2:33:13). If it happens that "the union between these Ideas is never dissolved," she will "spend [her life] in Mourning, and carry an incurable Sorrow" to her grave (2:33:13). For Locke, it was the woman's temperamental tendency to form lasting impressions that generated these "Habits of Behavior and Feeling" (2:33:17). That is, susceptibility was not just a freak cognitive malfunction associated with immaturity; it could be the defining aspect of a person's emotional disposition. For Thomas Hardy, writing in the 1890s, the importance of noticing the connection between impression-taking and protracted grief was made practically a basis for realist fiction. Reprising Locke's example of a woman who had lost a child, Hardy remarked that a good writer would "see the ghost of that child in her face even now," years later.[17]

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[17] Thomas Hardy, "The Science of Fiction," in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 264.

Characters such as Frances Henri in *The Professor* and Marty South in *The Woodlanders* are, this dissertation contends, descendants of Locke's notions about the grief so often incurred by those with a susceptible cast of mind. Though profoundly reimagined, they nevertheless recall the (narrow) warning he issued about an impression that can long outlive the person who helped generate it. Locke could not foresee the ethical arguments that would be made in favor of this form of long constancy; those required a Victorian context to be articulated. He is nonetheless a foundational figure in the genealogy of thought about a disposition that makes one "susceptible of lasting Impressions" (2:33:8).

Hume closed the first book of his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) with a well-known image of the self that anticipated the extremes of Brontëan impressionability. He claimed, influentially, that personal identity was "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity."[18] By his account, perception involved rapid displacement, in which "[o]ne thought chaces [sic] another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell'd in its turn" (1:170). Perception and self-identity resembled each other in this continual turnover, especially in how that continual change shaped one's experience of others. The successiveness or seriality of perceptual content, as well as its tendency to remain in "perpetual flux and movement," proved invaluable to Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy as major features of the impressionable men they portrayed and criticized (1:334).

Hume represents a culminating chapter in the history I have described. An astute theorist of impressionability, as Brontë and others later formulated it, he established an analogy between perception and emotional disposition that underpinned whole swathes of Victorian fiction.

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[18] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1:334.

Nineteenth-century novelists drew explicitly on his language of mental impressions in their portraits of human character. More dramatically, writers such as Mackenzie—publishing just a few decades after Hume, and a direct influence on Victorian ideas about sentiment—used Hume to reimagine the relationship between emotional disposition and narrative forms. For Mackenzie, the never-ending march of impressions through the mind accorded with a certain model of *narrative* attention, often rendered episodically. At the same time, a different disposition toward affective impressions, in which those taken in childhood lingered through adulthood, suggested not just different forms of attachment but new narrative structures to portray them.

In the chapters that follow, I also take up the relationship between Hume's account of impressions and his virtue ethics, a theory of responsibility that Victorian fiction-writers examined extensively and found both highly appealing and conceptually useful. As a moral sense theorist, Hume held that "it is because we are the kinds of creatures we are, with the dispositions we have for pain and pleasure, the kinds of familial and friendly interdependence that make up our life together, . . . that we are bound by moral requirements at all."[19] For him, it was not reason but those inborn dispositions—operating in us prior to conscious experience, conditioning and coloring our *reception of impressions*—that supply the motivation to act morally.

Where Descartes and Locke worried about the excesses of susceptibility, Brontë—channeling and reworking Hume—highlighted the damaging extremes of its opposite, impressionability. In *The Professor*, for example, William Crimsworth protests unconvincingly that he is not of the "sand-like sort where impressions, if soon made, are as soon effaced" (94). His word "impressions" clearly connotes more than mere sensation, as he later insists that

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[19] Rachel Cohon, "Hume's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, August 20, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral.

"neither [his] reason nor feelings are of the vacillating order" (94). For characters such as William, who are so *in*susceptible to forming lasting impressions, other people—particularly women—could be rendered as a series of perceptions that rapidly "succeed each other" one after the next. For authors motivated to challenge prevailing norms of sympathy, the Humean model provided a powerful tool for depicting and critiquing a damaging form of egoism.

A starting point in rejuvenating susceptibility after its long history of disparagement, Brontë reexamined the disposition for one's impressions to be "soon effaced," a phrase that evokes the figural erasure of others' faces. In a sharp departure from the status quo, she would highlight that disposition's close ties to the much-lauded concept of sympathy, while also constructing a strong alternative in impressibility. Defined against the image of a "serial" self, in which affective impressions of others must be endlessly renewed, impressible characters represented a novel form of other-orientation, designed specifically to counter, and perhaps correct, the intransigence of egoism—especially when that selfishness could be packaged as sympathy.

3. Smithian Sympathy and the "Affective Picaresque"

By the 1830s, well before Brontë began to imagine the impressible disposition, statesmen, moralists, philosophers, and novelists had established sympathy as the dominant secular framework for thinking about the ethics of relating to others. Sympathy as Adam Smith had formulated it in the 1750s and beyond pervaded British society and exercised a powerful influence over Victorian fiction.[20] For Smith, sympathy grounded norms of virtue, generated feelings of moral approbation, and underpinned the sense of justice; it gave an expansive range

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[20] See Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750–1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xix–xx.

of human feelings and institutions their particular form.[21] In practice, its malleability as a concept

made sympathy as convenient as it was elusive. Writers steeped in the Enlightenment tradition

could attach it to whatever view they favored, in domains as diverse as marriage, economics, and

the colonial project. Smith's sprawling, influential theory silently eclipsed other forms of

"feeling-with," and to this day sympathy has had no real conceptual competition. As such,

impressibility offers a much-needed alternative for thinking at the intersection of emotion and

ethics.

Perhaps no work of Victorian fiction crystallized the moral allure and perceived social

necessity of sympathy better than did Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol* (1943).

Published four years before *Jane Eyre*, Dickens's story has enjoyed its reputation as an example

of the power and virtue of Smithian sympathy ever since. A quick, self-contained examination

will help us to specify the multiple, coordinated axes along which that affective-ethical code

operated.

Building on work by James Chandler, I find it helpful to describe sympathy's function in

the nineteenth-century novel as *affective picaresque*.[22] Evoking the genre of the sentimental

journey (or picaresque)—an episodic narrative in which a likeable rogue has a series of

encounters on the road—the affective picaresque comprises sympathy's formal, emotional, and

ethical components.[23] Dickens's novella neatly demonstrates how they intertwine in his tale

about a selfish miser learning to feel for others.

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[21] See Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Millar, 1761), 1:3:1; 1:1:5; 1:1:3; 7:2:1; 2:2:1.

[22] See James Chandler, *An Archaeology of Sympathy: The Sentimental Mode in Literature and Cinema* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 180.

[23] Chandler writes that that nineteenth-century sympathy derives partly from Laurence Sterne's "sentimentalization of the picaresque" in novels like *The Sentimental Journey* (1768) (180).

A Christmas Carol embodies the deeply reciprocal relation between sympathy and certain modes of fictional representation. Structured as a parade of poignant scenes—each arranged for the benefit of Ebenezer Scrooge—the novella itself displays the affective-ethical disposition to which its protagonist is ultimately converted. Specifically, the affective structure of sympathy manifests itself formally in the central conceit: the three ghosts who visit Scrooge wield the power to whisk him across space and time, confronting him with a series of freestanding episodes.

Emphasizing the spectatorial aspect of sympathy, the novella gives detailed descriptions of what Scrooge sees after being deposited elsewhere by his ghostly guides.[24] He is shown strolling "down a well-remembered lane," passing "a mansion of dull red brick, with a little weathercock-surmounted cupola, on the roof, and a bell hanging in it…. [The] walls were damp and mossy, [the] windows broken, and [the] gates decayed. Fowls clucked and strutted in the stables; and the coach-houses and sheds were over-run with grass."[25]

Scrooge is then abruptly torn away to a new setting, and the sharp discontinuity *between* places begins to produce an episodic structure. In rapid succession, he visits the Christmas gatherings of a family of miners, two lighthouse keepers, the men on a ship at sea, and more: "Much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited. . . . The Spirit stood beside sick beds, and they were cheerful; on foreign lands, and they were close at home; . . . In almshouse, hospital, and jail, in misery's every refuge, . . . he left his blessing" (116). The iteration of tableaux, in the training montage of Scrooge's re-education, constitutes a series.

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[24] See Chandler, *Archaeology*, 148.
[25] Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol, in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1845), 49.

Building on the work of Chandler, as well as on Brontë's own analysis, my reading of Victorian sympathy here stresses its potentially insidious seriality. The affective picaresque registers the reflection of its *formal* seriality—that is, an episodic narrative structure—in the domain of affect. Converted to sympathy, Scrooge becomes a tourist of the distress of others.[26] Ostensibly, the redemptive purpose of his tourism is philanthropy, a generalized (and Hunsden-esque) love of humankind that also evokes a specifically Victorian form of private charitableness.[27] Scrooge's longtime habit of remaining at home, selfishly lounging in luxury, illustrates the parochialism of his concern. Sympathy spurs him to go out into the world and witness the poverty he in fact finds everywhere. Explicitly threatened with a Dantean punishment of eternal wandering, the man who "never walked beyond [his] counting-house" becomes a world traveler, but also an affective tourist (31).

For all sympathy's pretensions to universal ethical fairness, Scrooge's charitable tourism reveals his earlier characterization as a miser to be aptly ironic. His reformation requires him to stop counting his own money, but sympathy recruits that impulse and redirects it into accumulative spectatorship. In place of coins and possessions, he amasses objects of sympathy. One episode after another, Scrooge "counts up" the downtrodden people on whom he peers in, doling out money and concern to them in a travesty of his former greed. Formally, sympathy makes the tale itself into a counting-house; it narrates itself as a serially spectatorial ethics.

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[26] The association of tourism with exploitation and imperialism spans the century, from the impressionable Rochester masquerading as a gypsy and a sultan to Kipling's English protagonist in *Kim* (1901), who disguises himself as various Indian natives as part of the Great Game. See Edward Said, Introduction to *Kim*, by Rudyard Kipling, ed. Edward Said (New York: Penguin Books, 1987).

[27] On charitableness in George Eliot's fiction, for example, see Daniel Siegel, *Charity and Condescension: Victorian Literature and the Dilemmas of Philanthropy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012), 75–100.

Recently, sympathy of this kind has undergone strong criticism, revealing the many harmful practices to which it has historically given cover. From justifying state surveillance to "redeeming" the labor class, sympathy suffused nineteenth-century social relations so extensively as to be dangerously invisible.[28] Critiques by Amit S. Rai, Audrey Jaffe, and Nancy Armstrong represent attempts at reassessing its blind spots.[29] While there is productive disagreement here, even criticism of sympathy nevertheless tends to reinscribe its status as the best and ultimately the only way to analyze Victorian affect in the context of ethics. Novels by Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy, by contrast, decenter sympathy by advancing conceptually and ethically robust alternatives.

Unlike scholarly critiques today that take sympathy to task for its incipient jingoism, paternalism, and gender bias, Brontë in the 1840s simply affirmed that there is a limit to the number of people to whom one can and should be tied. (With its celebration of *limited* love, impressibility anticipated aspects of Freud's critique of generalized love or *caritas*.[30]) Because the sympathetic response does not bind observer to sufferer, the former can simply move on, leading to a series of brief episodes (or "scenes," to use Jaffe's word). Like the impressionable man, the serial sympathizer registers the impression of another's distress (or attractiveness) intensely, but—as with the water-like Graham in *Villette*—the impression quickly fades and a new object of interest is found to take its place. As we have seen in the conversation with Hunsden, this ability to detach is often presented as disinterestedness, as sympathetic

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[28] Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, xix–xx.

[29] See Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, 8; Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 12.

[30] Impressible attachment looks ahead to Freud's critique, but on different grounds. For Freud, one's neighbor should often *not* be loved as oneself, since he is rarely worthy of it (see Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey [New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2005], 100). For Brontë—and even more so for Eliot, given her approach to social reform—our ability to evaluate another's worthiness of love is often either undeveloped or badly compromised.

impartiality. For Brontë, however, the latter too often rationalizes either a touristic relation to others or affective ties that are shallow, brittle, and too often seen as replaceable. As her novels show, men are especially liable to cause suffering in a serial fashion, and the ideology of sympathy can seem to justify a tendency to disengage, not least from those whom one has wronged.[31]

4. Conclusion

Victorian writers and intellectuals inherited susceptibility and egoism as twin cultural "problems," and this dissertation engages with five novelists who grappled extensively with them, including through attempts to rehabilitate the former disposition so as to mitigate excessive self-regard. I represent successive treatments as a genealogy of thought whose terminology shifted over the course of the century while remaining focused on a distinctive affective posture toward impressions.

In my opening chapter I examine an inchoate, highly ambivalent portrayal of the impressible mind in Henry Mackenzie's popular sentimental novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), published only a decade after Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. By reading it alongside Smith's account of spectatorial sympathy and Hume's description of mental impressions, I demonstrate that, while Mackenzie's novel articulates and even advocates for a dispositional tendency to form binding attachments, its episodic structure of discrete, moving vignettes turns it instead into a clearer instantiation of the affective picaresque. In adapting the form of the sentimental journey to the structure of sympathy, Mackenzie's novel simultaneously crystallizes

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[31] The violence of serial sexual accumulation evokes the story of Bluebeard, a tale that fascinated Victorians. On *Jane Eyre* as a bluebeard story, see Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard Gothic:* Jane Eyre *and its Progeny* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 21–64.

a version of male egoism defined by the continual transfer of "sympathies" to new objects and presciently sketches what will become a century-long Victorian interest in the ethical (and erotic) salience of early ties.

Charlotte Brontë's fiction, the focus of my second chapter, represents for this project and arguably for the culture at large a definitive origin-point for Victorian impressibility. Drawing on an empiricist discourse of cognition, she constructs an ethics of mind rooted in the disposition to take indelible affective impressions of the face of the other. Brontë's recuperation of impressibility, I argue, crosses narrative, formal, and ethical dimensions, according to which she figures her own novels as discursive transcriptions of mental portraiture. My analysis of *Jane Eyre* shows how Brontë transposed this psychological mechanism and its effects to the level of plot. Embodying an insurgent, originary impression that returns to dispute her effacement, Rochester's first wife Bertha Mason is also used problematically to catalyze the conversion of a serial philanderer to impressibility.

My third chapter examines the "preemptive" nature of susceptible ties in George Eliot's novels. Established before the development of any real capacity to choose, early filial ties involve a kind of psychic inhabitation by others who, for Eliot, often turn out to be oppressive and even toxic, as in the case of Maggie Tulliver's brother Tom. Eliot mobilizes this early habituation to preemptive attachments to address complex contemporaneous questions (including British anti-Semitism and classism) whose resolution, in her view, depends on a radical relinquishing of self-interest in favor of a "community of feeling."[32] Far sterner than benign forms of fellow-feeling, however, susceptibility is a harsh measure designed to catalyze an

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[32] On communities of feeling in Eliot, see Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 14.

egoist's transition to sympathy through early emotional dependence on unchosen (and seemingly undesirable) others.

My penultimate chapter, an extended reading of Hardy's *The Woodlanders*, looks at impressibility in the context of evolutionary theory, specifically around the perceived erosion of individuality as occasioned by radically updated knowledge about natural selection and extinction. I argue that, in order to limit the damage inflicted by evolutionary forces and egoistic men, Marty South gives herself over to the mnemonic accommodation of others in a fashion recalling the radical unselfishness of characters in Brontë and Eliot. As the androgynous Marty recuses herself from the novel's arena of erotic conflict, taking on a more narratorial and testimonial role, she comes to resemble the novel's own mode of preserving "impression-picture[s]" of the members of a traditional community bound for figural extinction (10).

A coda to this dissertation considers Henry James's turn-of-the-century fiction, in particular those narrators who are "highly susceptible of registration."[33] Susceptibility functions as an essential—and deeply ambivalent—feature of narration in fiction on the cusp of modernism. In works such as *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904), an exquisite sensitiveness to impressions informs the narrators' capability to "register" the subtlest emotional shades while also teetering on the edge of excess, in which a "dreadful *liability* to impressions" distorts what it records.[34] James's adaptation of this Victorian disposition recapitulates a tension that runs through the history of susceptibility, in which a corrective to egoistic detachment leads also to damaging excesses of attachment, most saliently on the part of characters who act also as narrators.

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[33] Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 4.
[34] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Tales*, ed. Kimberly C. Reed (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2010), 181; my emphasis.

 In studying these five writers' construction, use, and continual remaking of the impressible mind, I hope to demonstrate how the conceptual and formal rethinking proved central not just to contemporary debate about ethics and psychology but, as important, to the Victorian novel itself, to its understanding of emotional development in protagonists, and to its modeling of perspective, in particular on deep affective attachments and dependencies. Obsessed by the concept of the impression, the nineteenth-century novel—especially in the hands of these writers—made clear that it was deeply committed to analyzing the ties, obstacles, and responsibilities between self and other. Impressibility presents a significant key to that fiction.

**"Imprint the virtue of thy sufferings on my soul": Attachment and Disposition
in David Hume's *Treatise* and Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling***

1. Sympathy and an Alternative

In Adam Smith's epoch-making tableau of suffering and sympathy, a man looks on as his brother

endures unspeakable agony. He finds himself cut off utterly from the other's experience, isolated

in attitude and affect: "Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our

ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us

beyond our own person."[1]

Smith begins *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) with this now-infamous spectacle

of torment to establish sympathy as the all-pervading "sentiment" that structures practically

every aspect of human experience. Underpinning our concept of virtue, producing the feeling of

moral approbation, and driving our sense of justice, sympathy for Smith gives an expansive

range of human feelings and institutions their particular forms.[2] And yet, in this canonical

display of sympathy, he lingers on the radical *dis*connection between observer and sufferer. The

book's opening spectacle thus implicitly poses a seemingly unanswerable question. When the

uttermost suffering of those who are closest to us makes no impression whatever on our own

senses, how is the "feeling-with" of sympathy possible?

Smith answers by recourse to a paradox that informs arguments he makes across topics as

disparate as *laissez-faire* economics and evolutionary ethics: to attune oneself most intimately to

the other, to understand him or her most completely, one must recede into the self.[3] The spectator

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[1] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 2nd ed. (London: A. Millar, 1761), 1:1:1.

[2] On moral approbation, see Smith, *Theory*, 1:3:1; on virtue, see 1:2:5; on justice, see 2:2:1.

[3] See Smith, *Theory*, 2:1:5. In a modified "invisible hand" argument, he claims that, in the figurative "economy of nature," the preservation of the species is brought about "independent of [people's] tendency to produce it" (2:1:5).

can only sympathize by imagining how he would himself feel in the other's place; any identification of self with other occurs only in the imagination.[4]

According to Smith, then, sympathy starts with the self. More surprisingly—and, for many for Victorian novelists, even less adequately—it often ends with the self, too. His pitch for sympathy frames its benefits in terms of the social rewards that accrue to the sympathizer: "*How amiable does he appear to be*, whose sympathetic heart seems to re-echo all the sentiments of those with whom he converses" (*Theory* 1:1:5). The role of the sufferer in the sympathetic transaction holds out similar benefits (or penalties): "[w]e are disgusted with that clamorous grief, which, without any delicacy, calls upon our compassion with sighs and tears and importunate lamentations. But we reverence that reserved, that silent and majestic sorrow" (1:1:5). Offering sympathy makes onlookers revere us for our amiability, even as the sympathizer himself lauds others for the majesty of their self-restraint; crucially for a proper mutuality, the category of the self is reinforced on both sides of the sympathetic exchange. And though such motives to sympathize do not add up to mere "self-love," Smith makes it clear that acts of sympathy that entail inconvenience to oneself are *not* motivated by a love of others:

> It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. . . . It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind. . . . It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters. (3:1:2)

In the final analysis, we help others not because we love them, but because we love our own praise-worthiness, our own high moral character. Thus even for Smith, for whom it is so pervasively important, sympathy is not equal to the task of subduing the stronger impulses of

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[4] See Smith, *Theory*, 1:1:1.

egoism. He argues that the best bulwark against asocial behavior stemming from selfishness is simply a different and nobler form of self-regard.

For Smith as for many of his nineteenth-century successors, including George Eliot, the recursive objective of sympathy was typically to *extend* it, and this had dramatic implications for its ethics. (I discuss Eliot's stated aim for her fiction—"the extension of our sympathies"—in Chapter 3.[5]) The counterpart to Smith's thought experiment about a suffering loved one in immediate proximity is the case of a far-flung stranger, a circumstance that allowed him to reflect on the extremes of impartiality (to use a key word for him) demanded by his code of feeling and conduct. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* relates a parable about a man who knows that he is destined to lose his little finger the following day, and finds himself completely unable to sleep, while the deaths of a hundred million Chinese people in an earthquake do not disturb him in the least (3:1:2). His extreme *partiality* toward his own minor injury runs counter to a universalized conception of sympathy, and moreover he misses an opportunity to demonstrate moral worthiness.

Smith's reasoning is still with us today, suggesting the long half-life of his claims. Under the heading of "expanding" the circle of our moral concern, contemporary philosopher Peter Singer offers a thought experiment about the intuition that, if we came across a child drowning in a shallow pond, we should save her, even though it means muddying our clothes.[6] Having established the point, he asserts that if that child happens to be "far away, in another country perhaps," and can be saved at a comparably low cost, we should do so, for the same reason that

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[5] George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 110. Elizabeth Gaskell expresses a similar desire to broaden her readers' sympathies to include factory workers (Preface to *Mary Barton* [New York: Penguin Books, 1996], 3).

[6] Peter Singer, "The Drowning Child and the Expanding Circle," *New Internationalist* 289 (April 1997).

we would wade into the pond ("The Drowning Child"). This argument for radical impartiality gives sympathy a comparativist bent that may require one to travel far and wide—either literally, as I have discussed in relation to *A Christmas Carol* (1943), or via philanthropy, as Singer suggests—in order to act on one's moral feelings. Under sympathy, local suffering, including and perhaps especially the distress of those to whom one is closest, can never be allowed to eclipse far-off pain. In nineteenth-century Britain, such arguments were often a convenient way to disguise other motives for intervention abroad.

While the influence of Smith's iconic account of spectatorial sympathy can hardly be overestimated, later poets and novelists found it impoverished, and for compelling reasons.[7] A conception of fellow-feeling as, ultimately, little more than a desire for one's own moral superiority proved inadequate to attempts to portray the depth and longevity (and even sometimes the toxicity) of human ties. Further, spectatorial sympathy of the kind described in Smith's famous opening passage is often more a type of *attention*—of looking—than it is of *attachment*. As such, it could seem unhelpful for authors interested in depicting lasting emotional bonds. For Smith, sympathy depends on physically seeing the sufferer, and we cannot really feel it for those we do not see. (It is partly for this reason that advocates for sympathy exhort us to widen our experience, to go out and actually *see* the suffering in the world.) The implications of an "out of sight, out of mind" model of feeling are far-reaching: to the extent that competing norms resist a structural sympathy, they must do so at every level of fiction, from the depiction of mind to the trajectory of plot to genre itself.

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[7] There are some notable exceptions, including Edward G. D. Bulwer-Lytton's enormously popular novels of the 1820s and 1830s.

This chapter presents a counternarrative to readings that raise Smith to the status of a founding father of Victorian emotion, with a view to demonstrating the centrality—to nineteenth-century fiction and its ethics—of a disposition that *involves* suffering rather than *avoiding* it. That emphasis is especially important, given Smith's now-canonical importance to our understanding of sympathy. Drawing on his insistence on sight and self-projection, for instance, Audrey Jaffe argues that sympathy originates in the disturbing fantasy of occupying another's class position.[8] Her analysis is persuasive for a certain category of fictional encounters, but in its acceptance of an ever-present possibility of simply averting one's gaze, it neglects a form of attachment with which the Victorian novel repeatedly juxtaposes sympathy. I propose instead to focus on a disposition of mind that is, in fundamental respects, opposed to sympathy, to understand more precisely both the affective experience of characters cast in this other mold and, crucially, the social configurations and ethical questions that arise out of it.

To formulate this competing model of feeling, as well as the generic features that conduce to it and the ethics that stem from it, I begin by examining Henry Mackenzie's immensely popular sentimental novel *The Man of Feeling* (1771), published only a decade after *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The protagonist of Mackenzie's story oscillates unstably between a loosely Smithian rubric of attention and another, emerging conception of attachment. The latter represents a nascent formulation of the disposition that Brontë would later refashion as *impressibility*, but in Mackenzie's novel it goes unnamed. Not until the 1840s would it undergo a full recuperation.

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[8] See Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 4–10.

The Man of Feeling went through more than forty editions in the first ten years of its existence.[9] Although early reviewers were less effusive than the general public, *The Monthly Review* went so far as to declare that "the Reader, who weeps not over some of the scenes it describes, has no sensibility of mind," and readers worried that they might not "cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility."[10] The normative pressure to have a suitably sympathetic response was strong around sentimental fiction. The reviewer's emphasis on affecting "scenes" is also apt: the novel is a series of episodes and interpolated vignettes. (A much later edition, published in the 1880s, satirized this aspect of the book's form by including an "Index to Tears," supposedly a time-saver for the busy person of sensibility.) However, the implications for many of the novel's eighteenth-century readers—in proving through tears that they had proper moral feelings—obscure the novel's equivocation around sympathy. Readers and reviewers tacitly preferred and amplified that form of attention, neglecting its understated alternative: a dispositional tendency to form binding attachments that persist not for the length of a scene, but rather for the entire remainder of a character's life.

Modern editions of the novel similarly downplay the tension internal to its representation of these different styles of feeling. They do so, in part, by contextualizing the depiction of sensibility with relevant passages on sympathy from Smith and David Hume. But the novel itself is far more ambivalent about the model of connection it favors, and contrasts received notions of sympathy with an emotional posture toward others that it does not name. This disposition— whose tentative, multifaceted development from Mackenzie through the nineteenth century is the

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[9] See Maureen Harkin, "Mackenzie's Man of Feeling: Embalming Sensibility," *ELH* 61, no. 2 (Summer 1994): 320.

[10] Anon., *The Monthly Review* 44 (1771): 418; Lady Louisa Stewart to Sir Walter Scott, September 4, 1826, in *The Private Letter-Books of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Wilfred Partington (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1930), 273.

central concern of this dissertation—distinguishes itself from the serial teariness of spectatorial

sympathy in three respects: its salience early in life, the singularity of its object, and the (often

inescapable) durability of ties formed on its basis.

The overlooking of this alternative disposition is understandable in light of its tantalizing

underrepresentation in Mackenzie's novel. Far more prominent is the string of engrossing

adventures its protagonist, Harley, experiences, as well as the mode of *narrative* attention that

best conduces to the portrayal of his habits of feeling. In contrast with Harley's only-inchoate

disposition to form a long-lasting attachment, he inclines toward a succession of brief encounters

with others who are more like representative types than particularized individuals. In its

disjointedness of plot and its propensity for the episodic, the novel's form—a *manuscrit trouvé*

missing numerous chapters—reflects and facilitates Harley's touristic sympathy, in which he

spectates on a series of strangers in distress. Inhabitant and generic habitat accommodate each

other.

Mackenzie's novel adapts the form of the picaresque to the structure of sympathy. "As

the rambling and repetitive picaresque narrative unfolds," observes David Marshall, pointing to a

relation between sympathy and the picaresque in the French context, "we can recognize a

dramatization of . . . the experience of becoming a spectator to a moving spectacle; the novel . . .

repeatedly ask[s] what it means to behold people as if they were spectacles, texts, or

representations."[11] Nancy Armstrong, discussing the picaresque in eighteenth-century British

fiction, stresses its ties to an emergent individualism, an emphasis on the discrete self according

to which an individual man cut off from society could enjoy social and literal mobility in a series

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[11] David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley*
(Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 28.

of adventures on the road.[12] Building on Armstrong's analysis and Marshall's claim for a symbiosis between sympathy and genre, I refer in what follows to *The Man of Feeling*'s narrative mode as *affective picaresque* to highlight the emotional makeup that underpins an episodic, spectatorial sympathy.

The subtle violence of framing that sympathy entails, through its conversion of suffering into spectacle, represents the paradoxical starting point of an ethics.[13] By the logic of sympathy—as opposed to Harley's other, incipient disposition—the radical disjunction between the experience of spectator and sufferer involves a conviction that other people can never truly be known. Citing Levinas's twentieth-century definition of ethics in terms of alterity, Rebecca N. Mitchell argues that "the ethical imperative" in the Victorian novel "arises from interaction with the unknowable other."[14] Mitchell is especially interested in encounters with difference that have often gone unnoticed as such, and argues that the "otherness found . . . in the closeness of familial or communal relationships" is no less radical than the differences between people separated by nationality, class, race, or gender: "those who look much like oneself must in fact be understood as radically other as well" (11). According to Smithian sympathy, people are divided from each other by an unbridgeable difference, and any ethics must start with a recognition of this universal condition of mutual isolation.

To elucidate an alternative to the bonds and ethics of sympathy—one that becomes increasingly prominent in the Victorian novel's conception and construction of character—I begin with Mackenzie's depiction of a mind organized around the emotional tendency to *take*

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[12] Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 5.
[13] See Marshall, *Surprising Effects*, 35.
[14] See Rebecca N. Mitchell, *Victorian Lessons in Empathy and Difference* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 2.

and permanently retain affective impressions of other people. Amid the continually shifting terminology that novelists use over the nineteenth century to pick out this disposition, the language of *impressions* remains central.

Mackenzie, I am arguing, initiates a decades-long rehabilitation of a particular disposition associated with a sentimental sensibility that, by the 1770s, was simultaneously celebrated as a form of emotional refinement and denigrated as characteristic of a "cult" of effeminacy.[15] Its role as a cultural pivot was critical, for social bearings as for the novel that often tried to articulate them. Victorian writers such as Brontë and Eliot extended and elaborated this massive (if ambivalent) recuperation of the sentimental temperament in the form of new affective-ethical codes. Framing my analysis of Mackenzie's novel in terms of a distinction between attention and attachment, which recasts its debts to (and departure from) Smith, I stress the emotional dispositions that underlie and shape the ties between people. *The Man of Feeling* articulates— albeit hesitantly—a striking alternative to the feelings and relations associated with sympathy. Over and against an insistence on spectatorial apartness, this disposition emphasizes the tendency early in life to take lasting affective impressions of others, and thereby establishes the parameters for a class of fictional mind that represents a central axis of the Victorian imagination.

Following my discussion of Mackenzie, I turn to David Hume's 1738 account of mental representation, in part because it directly influenced Mackenzie's novel. Variety and difference in *how* the mind takes impressions emerge, I propose, from a "gap," or slippage, in Hume's "copy mechanism." The same gap in ideation orients a mental disposition defined by the

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[15] See G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 102.

tendency to receive uncommonly deep affective impressions, an emphasis with significant and

lasting implications for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century thought and fiction, given the number

of writers and thinkers it influenced.[16] The focus on Hume here is not to suggest that his

philosophical writings are the source of literary representations of mind and character; rather,

that numerous subsequent literary accounts arise out of a cognate interest in the most basic

mechanisms of thought, particularly around how the latter may inform (or at least supply a

vocabulary for) higher-level experiences of feeling and attachment.

     Mackenzie resolves Hume's account of mind into a continuum of different temperaments,

in which the greater or lesser persistence of the affective (as opposed to sensory) impressions

received from others constitutes a defining, and ethically salient, character trait. Crucially, while

professing to endorse the long-lasting impression, the novel implicitly holds up the fleeting

impression as the proper formal "disposition" for a sentimental narrative. In addition, then, to its

implications for personal temperament and for the nature of the relationship between self and

others, a predisposition to deeper or shallower impressions exerts a profound influence on

narrative form, including on the way we think about a protagonist's consciousness. These threads

come together in complex, new configurations in nineteenth-century fiction, where the ethics of

the relation between self and other, including self and community, takes center stage.

2. Harley's Double Disposition in *The Man of Feeling*

Right at the start, in its opening paragraphs, Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* formulates a dual

theory of character. The framing of the scene is notable, given the correspondence that will

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[16] On the connection between the depth and durability of impressions in Locke, see Jules David Law, *The Rhetoric of Empiricism: Language and Perception from Locke to I. A. Richards* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 64–67.

emerge between affective disposition and narrative form. While this standalone scene—which both establishes the frame narrative that enfolds the story of Harley's life and constitutes the first chapter of that manuscript—presents a theory of two opposing dispositions, its narrative mode differs strikingly from the affective picaresque that defines the chapters that follow.

Two men, Mr. Silton and an unnamed other, sit by a fire, quietly talking and philosophizing. Unlike Harley—whose embodiment of the two dispositions under discussion emerges gradually over subsequent scenes—neither man embarks on a dangerous, exhilarating journey to see the metropole and meet its cast of characters. On the contrary, Silton speaks eloquently against such adventuring. As he contemplates the value of staying at home, his companion paints a homely word-picture of him, gently suspending him in time and place. Though Silton gives his two theories of character in the same scene, the narrative mode sides tacitly with the domestic cast of mind that he endorses, setting itself against the roving, spectatorial sympathy associated with the picaresque.

Silton subtly undermines the novel's own conceit of being a found manuscript by delivering a eulogy to beginnings, specifically the emotional character of men in childhood and youth. Despite the fact that the first ten chapters of the document are supposedly missing, chapter eleven—the first that we read—opens with this disquisition on human beginnings, and, perhaps not surprisingly, human endings. Silton praises youthful "rust," his metaphor for an early "bashfulness":

> There is some rust about every man at the beginning; though in some nations (among the French for instance) the ideas of the inhabitants, from climate, or what other cause you will, are so vivacious, so eternally on the wing, that they must, even in small societies, have a frequent collision; the rust therefore will wear off sooner: but in Britain it often goes with a man to his grave; nay, he dares not even pen a *hic jacet* to speak out for him after his death.[17]

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[17] Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. Brian Vickers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

In this complex meditation on the relation between character and time, Silton declares that the exceptional nature of the British causes them occasionally to pass through their entire lives without losing this particular childhood quality. His companion, the baronet's brother, responds by sketching out the opposing temperament, which prefers to "rub [that rust] off by travel" (7).

The discussion of ideas and travel involves an equivocation that, invoking and reimagining the Humean account of mind, generates a theory of two casts of character. Hume distinguishes between the two kinds of perceptual content—impressions and ideas—in terms of their "force and vivacity."[18] In his response to Silton's allusion to the Humean "vivacity" (or "vivaciousness") of "ideas . . . [that are] eternally on the wing," the baronet's brother relies on an unstated analogy of ideas and people. He answers with reference not to ideas but to *people* who travel with "the velocity of a modern tour" (*Man of Feeling* 8). The flitting-around of ideas becomes the rapid traveling of a certain kind of person, and we can infer that the mind of this modern traveler tends also toward rapid changeability. The rust of beginnings is "rub[bed] off" these globe-trotting men through the "frequent collision" that comes of ricocheting like a pinball among a multitude of others (7).

Silton offers himself as exemplary of an English tendency *not* to travel widely, and not to rub shoulders with thousands of other people, but instead to hold on to a retiring, youthful shyness all his life. He contends further that the retention of one's "rust" is the basis of wisdom. The bashful sensibility of youth can develop, he says, into "a consciousness, which the most delicate feelings produce, and the most extensive knowledge cannot always remove" (8). That rust, if carefully guarded, accumulates over the years, becoming "rather an encrustation, which

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[18] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1:8; my emphasis.

nature has given for purposes of the greatest wisdom" (8). The rust of Silton's beginning is still there in his old age, buried but punningly present in the "enc*rust*ation" of his mature character.

Harley tendentiously represents both types of character—sedentary and mobile, youthfully bashful and restively experienced—and the opposed modes of attachment and attention that Mackenzie's novel associates with each. On the one hand, a young Harley takes and retains until his death the affective impression of a single other person, Miss Walton. On the other hand, the majority of the novel, and almost the entirety of its action, concerns not his tie to Miss Walton but rather his ricocheting among (temporarily) interesting strangers. Again by contrast with his attachment to Miss Walton, who is granted a measure of particularity, Harley's tendency on the road to convert the objects of his sympathy into spectacles takes the turn of representing them as character types rather than distinct individuals.

In order to grasp the complex way in which Mackenzie depicts the reception, on both models, of affective impressions, it is necessary to take the invocation of Hume's theory of ideas seriously. Taking my cue from Silton, I turn to *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1738) to consider the philosophical context of Mackenzie's innovation and Hume's influential account of ideation. According to both writers, these processes—by an analogy with dispositional tendencies in a pre-reflective youth—operate prior to our awareness of them. Hume also provides a rich conceptual vocabulary for thinking about the mind's capacity to take impressions. More provisionally, before returning to *The Man of Feeling,* I draw on Hume to construct a heuristic for the analysis of disposition in Mackenzie's novel and beyond. Extrapolating from Silton's covert citation of Humean "vivacity" and his companion's unstated analogy, I argue that Hume's account of the differences between impression and idea can be productively analogized to the distinction

between the two dispositions Harley embodies—a desire for lasting attachment, and a more roving, inconstant form of sympathetic attention.

3. The Gap Between Impression and Idea

The mental mechanism that copies impressions into ideas represents the starting point of Hume's *Treatise* and, indeed—by his account—of the mind itself. The Enlightenment philosopher considers the claim that "all ideas are copied from impressions" to be "the first principle . . . in the science of human nature," and this "copy principle" constitutes a kind of bedrock in his thought across a range of topics, from questions about personal identity, to the sources of belief, to the nature of causation (*Treatise* 1:1:1). He grounds his empiricist description of ideation in a claim about the causal relationship between a sensory impression, as it arrives through one of the five senses, and the idea that corresponds to that impression. And it is this claim that—with Hume's expression of skepticism about causation—will open up a "gap" in the copy mechanism from which different dispositions toward impressions, including the two embodied by Harley, emerge.

Hume's emphasis on the impression represents a critical first step in the rethinking of sympathy that Mackenzie initiates, and that Brontë and Eliot profoundly expand in the nineteenth century. Radically open to sensation, the Humean mind takes the impression of whatever object or person impinges on it. Searching for a vocabulary to capture the intricate interconnectedness of their characters—and, just as important, to counter Smithian claims about selfish human isolation—later writers tapped Hume's characterization of attention and feeling in terms of impressions. His dual insight into the communicable, "transpersonal" quality of feelings and his description of the continually flowing, successive nature of mental impressions laid the

foundation for fiction-writers to construct analogies between the basic processes (and habits) of perception on the one hand and emotional dispositions on the other.[19] Further, and more speculatively, I suggest that Hume's uncertainty over the mechanics of mental copying—the process by which impressions become ideas—would prove enormously generative once the impression had undergone this conceptual revision and expansion.

According to the copy principle, itself of profound significance for later writers' understandings of the relationship between perception and memory, "our impressions are the causes of our ideas," and every simple idea "exactly represent[s]" the simple impression of which it is a copy (1:1:1). Hume yokes these two aspects of copying closely: an idea is an exact representation of the impression that produced it, he argues, precisely because their relation is causal. Our certainty about the exactness of mental representations hangs on the nature of causation, then, and any looseness in the fit of cause to effect would introduce the possibility of variety and changeability in the mental reception of impressions—a possibility that he initially denies. Hume instead gives a simple narration of the process by which concrete sensory impressions are copied: "An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind or other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea" (1:1:2). Thus a person forms the idea of heat as a result—and only as a result—of receiving the sensory impression of something hot: all ideas originate with the mind's being imprinted by sensory experience.

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[19] On "transpersonal" feelings in Hume, see Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 3.

Considering his emphasis on certainty, Hume's gesture toward skepticism about causality at the end of Book 1 of the *Treatise* threatens to modify, even to dismantle, his account of how the mind copies and stores impressions that pass through consciousness.[20] Given my focus on an emerging alternative to sympathy, as Smith conceives of it, and specifically one organized around a different response to impressions, it is important to follow Hume's argument about the *non*-variability of ideation step by step. Dispositional difference begins with the variability that he starts by denying.

Hume has established clearly that impressions *cause* ideas. However, this assertion is undermined by his claim that we cannot perceive causation through the application of reason: "our reason fails us in the discovery of the ultimate connexion of causes and effects" because reason can only operate on "past instances," and as such can never explain a present instance of causation with certainty (1:3:7). Where reason falls short, the human imagination steps in. It is only through the association of ideas—which, for Hume, occurs in the imagination—that we perceive causation. He defines "cause" here as "an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other" (1:3:14). He understands causation entirely in terms of copying: a cause is that thing that, under certain conditions, "determines the mind" to produce a mental copy. For Hume, then, the only way to identify a causal relation between objects in the world is by making a deduction from the activity of the copy mechanism.[21] Given, for instance, that the impression of a flame "determines" the

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[20] See Tom Seppalainen and Angela Coventry, "Hume's Empiricist Inner Epistemology: A Reassessment of the Copy Principle," in *The Bloomsbury Companion to Hume*, ed. Alan Bailey and Dan O'Brien (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 38.

[21] See Hume, *Treatise*, 1:3:2.

mind to form the idea of heat, we can infer (granting certain other conditions) that flames cause heat.

But the dependence of Hume's definition of causation on the way that a given impression "determines" the mind to perform certain actions is problematic in light of the synonymy of "to cause" and "to determine."[22] Thus, he defines causation circularly as the causal relationship between an impression and its copy. In this way, he pushes the definition back further than the level of imagination, and its association of ideas, to the more fundamental level of what he calls the "relations" or "principles" of the mind. Only from those "principles"—or, more specifically, from the activity of the copy mechanism in its capacity as a "determiner" of mental attention— can we perceive causation in the external world.

Hume expresses profound disappointment at his failure to illuminate causation, but even in voicing his frustration he gestures at a fascinating byproduct of that shortcoming: "And how must we be disappointed, when we learn, that . . . [the] energy in the cause, by which it operates on its effect . . . lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which . . . causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant, and from the impression of one to the lively idea of the other?" (1:4:7). Defined, originally, *in terms of* causation, the copy mechanism reveals itself to be the psychic hardware that *produces* causation at the level of the imagination. The copy mechanism is the fundamental "principle" that determines the mind to act in the particular way it does: copying underwrites mental attention. Hume thus gets his definition of causation through a posited serendipity: he simply asserts (at least initially) that external causation, as between physical objects in the world, operates on the same principle as

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[22] See Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 100.

does the internal causation of ideas. With this uncoupling of internal and external causation, the operations of the mind as a recipient of impressions seem suddenly freer, less determined, and potentially more idiosyncratic.

While Hume recognizes the circularity of his definition—that ideation is causal, with causation revealing itself through ideation—he does not linger over its implications for how the mind takes and stores impressions. As mentioned above, his claim that ideas are the exact representations of the impressions that produced them depends entirely on their having a causal relation. His acknowledgment of the obscurity of causation therefore generates a corresponding uncertainty in mental copying: furnished, inexplicably, with an impression, the human mind inexplicably produces a copy.[23]

Defined *as a function of* the copy mechanism, causation crucially can no longer act as a guarantor of the exactness or precision of that same copy mechanism. In this way, Hume implicitly loosens the joint, as it were, between impressions and their mental representations, in a move of signal importance to subsequent writers and thinkers. With his acknowledgment of the possibility of imprecision—or what I call a "gap"—in the copy mechanism, Hume implicitly carves out the space for a range of disposition-specific responses to impressions. In place of "exact" copies, idiosyncrasy and variety burst forth.

It is from this gap that more-personalized forms of mental representation emerge in subsequent decades. A multitude of dispositions springs up, like grass between paving stones, in the space that was not supposed to exist between impression and idea. With no play in the mechanism, there was little possibility of variability in its working; with Hume's uncertainty on that point, however, room for temperamental diversity in the reception of impressions appears.

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[23] See Hume, *Treatise*, 1:1:2; 1:3:5.

More specifically, a particular disposition, defined by the longer retention of impressions, materializes in the gap in Hume's account of ideation. This disposition, which *The Man of Feeling* reimagines as the ability to receive affective "imprints" that can last a lifetime, is associated with the persistence not of sensory impressions, but of affective impressions received at a higher level of experience, in encounters with other people. Put slightly differently, novelists such as Mackenzie imbue the fleetingness or enduringness of affective impressions with a moral element that will move to the foreground in Victorian formulations of this same disposition.

Hume's anxiety about the possibility of variety in the reception of impressions comes through in the course of his making a tangential point about the trustworthiness of duplicated documents. In an evocative analogy, he compares the mental copying mechanism to the copying processes used by professional "Printers and Copyists" (1:3:13). He asserts that a document that has been copied hundreds of times is no less trustworthy than a document copied only once—*if*, that is, there is "no variation in the steps" (1:3:13). This claim bears in two respects on my argument about the emergence of disposition-specific responses to sensory impressions.

First, that Hume associates mental representation with the replication of texts sheds light on his association of ideation with print, and situates him as a forerunner of a nineteenth-century tradition of figuring the faces of others as texts. Mackenzie, too, in his emphasis on the "imprint" that one person can leave on another, represents an early inheritor of the association. (Decades later, as I discuss in Chapter 2, Charlotte Brontë massively develops the tradition by incorporating the vocabulary of eighteenth-century sciences that proclaimed to "read" the physical protuberances and impressions on the human head and face.) Hume in the *Treatise* links mental and textual copying so closely that, in his winding argument about the reproduction of documents, he patches a cavernous gap in observation with his claim about the exactness of

printing processes. The two processes are sufficiently similar for the latter to stand in for the former. This is particularly arresting in an empiricist account of mind, in which all knowledge derives from direct "observation and experience" (1:3:13). Hume, though, is willing to farm out the work of direct observation to the "Printers and Copyists" who reproduce texts (1:3:13). If their processes are "exact" and "[t]here is no variation in the steps" of making a copy, he reasons, then no error can creep in, even in a long series of copies of copies (1:3:13).

Second, Hume's rhetorical construction of the copy mechanism arguably relies quite specifically on contemporaneous technologies for copying texts, such as William Ged's stereotyping process. (It should be noted that the modern sense of "stereotype," as an oversimplified, often-derogatory image of a particular group, was not in use in the eighteenth century.) Reported to have once remarked that "character is the result of a system of stereotyped principles," Hume evidently associated temperament with the technology developed by his fellow Scotsman while they were both living in Edinburgh.[24]

Hume's notion of mental copying resembles stereotyping in a number of respects, perhaps most important of which is its failure to live up to the promise of exactitude. To make a stereotype, letters of movable type were arranged in a frame, then soldered permanently into a single plate. That plate was then pressed firmly into moistened plaster of Paris, so as to produce a deep impression of the text. When the plaster dried, Ged poured liquid lead into the impressions, and what emerged was a copy that could then be used on the printing press to make an indefinite number of printed pages.[25] This technology of impressions removed not only much labor, but

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[24] See James Wood, *Dictionary of Quotations from Ancient and Modern, English and Foreign Sources* (Glasgow: Good Press, 2019), 40.

[25] See George Adolf Kubler, *A Short History of Stereotyping* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1930), 18–20.

also a great deal of imprecision and human error: the hundredth copy of a text was nearly

identical to the first. Causation as Hume imagines it is deeply akin to stereotyping: the

mechanism of the mind efficiently produces "exact" representations of the ceaseless stream of

original configurations that flow from the nerve endings to the brain. Ideas are, for him, the

stereotype of impressions.

Just as there is a worrying gap in the copy mechanism, however, so there is imperfection

in stereotyping. Letters in the stereotype were often elongated, or too shallow, and the quality of

the words around the edge of the stereotype tended to degrade through repeated use.[26] I do not

mean to suggest here that Hume's conception of the copy mechanism is modeled rigidly on the

technology of stereotyping; rather, I see a looser analogy between the two, citing in particular the

decreasing "vivacity" of copies made by the mind's own printing press, and Hume's growing

anxiety about the possibility of an inexact fit between an impression (whether mental or metal)

and the ideas that it produces in the mind and on the page.

With this resemblance in mind, we can fashion a heuristic for the analysis of disposition

in *The Man of Feeling*. I examine Hume's legacy in Mackenzie's novel through an analysis of

his distinction between the originary, singular quality of the stereotype-like sensory impression

and the text-like copies that it produces. In modified form, this heuristic—which makes a bridge

from Hume's description of impression-taking to broader questions of attachment and

community—forms the basis of this dissertation's argument about the emergence of a new

affective ethics in nineteenth-century fiction.

In order to understand the analogy by which the *affective* experience of fictional

characters functions on the model of *sensory* experience in Hume's account—an analogy that

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[26] See Kubler, *Stereotyping*, 68.

goes to the heart of Mackenzie's challenge to sympathetic selfishness—we should also recall Hume's assertion about the unknown source of impressions. For Hume, simple impressions are originary and highly particularized. He writes that impressions of sensation "arise[] in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (*Treatise* 1:1:2). The empiricist hunting for a source of experience *prior* to impressions finds only more impressions. Every sensory impression, then, is a kind of first encounter, and as such is unique among all other mental perceptions in not being a copy. A human nerve simply receives an impression—a moment of coldness, a patch of green— from beyond itself. From this starting point, the mechanism of ideation sets to work. Like a process of asexual reproduction, the copy mechanism reproduces the singular impression that the nerves have transmitted to the mind. That copy can then be copied again, reflected on, or imaginatively combined with other ideas, all of which actions produce more perceptual content. In this way, perceptions rapidly ramify, branching and multiplying like the diagram of a family tree.

It might be more accurate to liken the Humean mind to a forest, in which each tree of derived ideas is rooted in a single, original impression. The upper branches interweave thickly, but every twig in the forest can trace its source back to the ancestral root-system of simple impressions. While sensory impressions can be reproduced, then, their *primacy*, or position in the tree of perceptions, can not. Simple impressions retain their enduring first-ness, or originary status, despite the breakneck recursive copying that populates the mind around them.

For a protagonist who receives and retains *affective* impressions on the Humean model for taking and copying impressions, I submit, the distinction between particularized, original impressions and the multitude of derived perceptions can serve as an analytic for understanding affective dispositions in the novel more generally. Specifically, I suggest that the primacy and

particularity of sensory impressions inform the portrayal of early, enduring ties to a single, individualized other, such as Miss Walton. The secondariness and increasing generality of copied ideas correlate with a series of encounters with representative types. As mentioned above, these two sets of tendencies correspond with the two contrasting dispositions that Harley is made to embody in *The Man of Feeling.*

4. The Ambivalent Brevity and Endurance of "Disposition"

Hume's distress over the gap between an impression and an idea leads us now to ask, in a question of critical importance to fiction at the turn of the nineteenth century: What is a disposition? Before we can return to Mackenzie's striking and complex elaboration of the disposition-specific responses to stimuli (including other people) that emerge from Hume's account, in part to trace their importance to nineteenth-century fiction and ethics, a word is needed on my adoption of this term to categorize the particular turn of mind this dissertation examines. I take the term from Hume, for whom "disposition" denotes two distinct but related concepts. Most abstractly, he conceives of a disposition as the spatial arrangement of a set of objects. In a passage typical of this usage, he invites his reader to "suppose a man, who takes a survey of the fortifications of any city [and] . . . observes the disposition and contrivance of the bastions, ramparts, mines, and other military works" (*Treatise* 2:3:10). Here, bastions and ramparts all have particular positions in space, and the arrangement of these objects relative to one another constitutes their disposition. "Disposition" is a function of "position."

The other sense Hume adopts when using the word links the notion of spatial arrangement to aspects of the human mind. In fourteenth-century astrology, the position of planets at the time of one's birth was believed to exercise an influence over one's character. The

spatial disposition of planets in the heavens determined emotional disposition on the ground. Thus *disposicion*, in Old French, denotes both "arrangement" and "turn of mind."[27]

For Hume, the objects that, in some particular arrangement, constitute a person's disposition are his or her "organs of mind." Setting aside a closer examination of this phrase, it will suffice for now to observe that the arrangement of one's organs of mind is perpetually shifting. Dispositions are for Hume "successive" in a fashion he associates with the "succession of perceptions that constitutes our self or person" (1:4:1; 1:4:7). ("Perceptions" comprise impressions and ideas.) In one sense, then, a Humean disposition is the *momentary* configuration of certain aspects of one's mind; an instant later, a new configuration prevails. In a famous analogy, he likens this condition of dispositional flux to a republic that maintains its identity despite continually gaining and losing members. "[I]n like manner," he writes, "the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity" (1:4:6). While his primary emphasis here is that the identity of the republic (and of the person) is preserved despite constant change, the point is made by underscoring the impression-after-impression fleetingness of human dispositions.

Not unlike Mackenzie in his portrayal of Harley, Hume later in life uses "disposition" to refer not to a momentary mood, but to the identity that is preserved *despite* the continual shifting of mood. Hume's stress on the protean, momentary quality of a disposition changes over time, to establish some underlying constancy amid the flux. Reflecting on his personal history in an autobiographical preface to *The History of England* (1754), he finds the notion of a lasting disposition useful to explain the longer trajectory of his character, considering himself to have

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[27] "*disposition*, n." OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press (accessed May 28, 2021).

been generally "*disposed* to see the favorable than unfavorable side of things."[28] For Hume—

thinking perhaps of his elder brother's sizeable patrimony—such a disposition was a more

valuable inheritance than "an estate of ten thousand a year" (vii). Even as he contemplates his

final illness, he declares that, "notwithstanding the great decline of [his] person," he continues to

"possess the same ardor as ever in study, and the same gayety in company" (xii). Speaking in the

past tense, he concludes the sketch with a posthumous précis of his own character: "I was . . . a

man of mild disposition, . . . capable of attachment, but little susceptible of enmity, and of great

moderation in all my passions" (xiii).[29]

Adopting Hume's ambivalent usage of the term for my analysis of Mackenzie's novel, I

revise it progressively—through my reading of the trajectory of treatments from Brontë through

Eliot and Hardy—to describe both a rapidly changeable turn of mind and another, more-constant

one, defined by its long retention of affective impressions. Associated (through Hume) with the

processes of perception, and with the bare capacity for sensory experience, this latter disposition

of mind precedes and shapes ideation and memory: according to this understanding of emotional

response, the depth and duration of an impression are largely *functions* of disposition. I also take

up the term's importance to Hume's ethics. As a moral sense theorist, he held that "it is because

we are the kinds of creatures we are, with the dispositions we have for pain and pleasure, the

kinds of familial and friendly interdependence that make up our life together, . . . that we are

bound by moral requirements at all."[30] Accordingly, it is not reason but those inborn dispositions

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[28] David Hume, "The Life of David Hume Esq.," in *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Abdication of James the Second, 1688* (Boston: Phillips Sampson, and Company, 1854), vii; my emphasis.

[29] See also Hume's reference to Rousseau's (consistently) paranoid "disposition," which caused him to "entertain groundless suspicions of his best friends" (David Hume to the Marchioness de Barbantane, February 16, 1766, in *Letters of David Hume to William Strahan*, ed. G. Birkbeck Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 79.

[30] Rachel Cohon, "Hume's Moral Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, August 20, 2018), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral.

that operate in us *prior* to conscious experience, conditioning and coloring our reception of impressions, that supply the motivation to act ethically. The stress Hume places on the ethical interdependence of individual and community also prepares the way for massive nineteenth-century elaborations on the notion of an *ethics* of emotional disposition, many of which single him out as a specific influence.

By an interesting quirk of etymology, the essential spatiality of disposition will return, in an altered sense and context, in my discussion of communitarian ethics in the novels of George Eliot. The particular "disposition" of objects in space obliquely evokes Eliot's central figure of the "web" of manifold interrelations that organize a community. Eliot's novels, by my argument, mobilize the "susceptible" disposition to configure and reconfigure—affectively and in space— the members of small communities. The metaphoric spatiality of the Humean disposition, combined with his recognition of the ethical centrality of interpersonal bonds, thus—according to Victorian writers and thinkers such as Brontë and Eliot—etymologically enact the fundamental argument of this dissertation, that the "disposition" or affective constellation of individuals in a small community can find its blueprint in the "disposition" or arrangement of a particular cast of mind.

This disposition, which emerges from Hume's emphasis on the primacy of impressions, comes to be defined by a particular tendency with respect to the reception and retention of those impressions. Novelists writing in the decades after Hume drew explicitly on his language of mental impressions in their portraits of human character. Most dramatically, writers such as Mackenzie and Brontë develop an analogy between simple sensory impressions and the affective impressions that a character can receive from others. This extension of a basic mental mechanism to more sophisticated levels of human experience transformed a whole philosophical

lexicon of impressions and imprints through nineteenth-century literary conceptions of mind and of the ethics that spring from different dispositions.

5. Affective "Pressing" in Mackenzie

The protagonist of *The Man of Feeling,* argues Ildiko Csengei, is "a tool designed to find—and produce—sentimental readers. Harley is a character who, like a mirror, deflects the reader's gaze, shifting it away from Harley onto all those who narrate, see, and read him."[31] Arguing that the novel strives to inculcate its readers with a sentimental subjectivity through specific techniques of reading, Csengei observes that Harley's visit to a madhouse offers readers "a text whose figures stand for stories of interesting and once successful human beings now turned into mere signifiers" (965). And indeed, the series of characters that signify as representatives of types is a long one. As if flipping through a catalog of human misfortunes, Harley encounters a beggar, a mad mathematician, a bereaved lover, a misanthrope, a prostitute, and so on, and this string of encounters constitutes the series of "little adventures, in which the dispositions of a man"—that is, Harley himself—"unfold themselves" (*Man of Feeling* 93). That series both registers and helps to produce the emotional makeup of the protagonist.

The tendencies of the reading gaze—or, we might say, of attention—that we are meant to mimic appear different, however, if considered in light of the plotline that concerns Miss Walton. Harley's encounters with her exactly bookend the series of adventures among character types that Csengei analyzes. He meets and falls in love with Miss Walton on the day before he strikes out into the world, and they are reunited at the novel's end just in time for him to confess his lifelong love and die. The period of that professed love therefore coincides neatly with the series

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[31] Ildiko Csengei, "'I will not weep': Reading Through the Tears of Henry Mackenzie's *Man of Feeling*," *The Modern Language Review* 103, no. 4 (October 2008): 957.

of sentimental encounters that constitutes the novel's main action and the "unfolding" of his

disposition. Given this juxtaposition of his tie to Miss Walton and his encounters on the road, the

language of Harley's expression of love is suggestive: "'There are,' said he, in a very low voice,

'there are attachments, Miss Walton'—His glance met hers—They both betrayed a confusion,

and were both instantly withdrawn" (96). Harley implies, falteringly, that his "attachment" to her

has lasted from the day they met, long before, until the moment of this exchange; it has,

evidently, constituted the emotional background of his adventuring.

In this way Harley contrasts his attachment to Miss Walton with his encounters—

whatever their nature—with the series of people he meets during the long interval between her

appearances. He implicitly highlights Miss Walton's singularity and individuality by contrast

with the multiplicity and type-like quality of those with whom he intersects on the road.

Csengei's suggestion that the novel instills certain sentimental "reading" habits by parading

objects of sensibility before its audience is persuasive; Harley's novel-spanning attachment to

Miss Walton, however, which Csengei does not address, serves primarily to throw that serial

mode of attention into relief.

The novel does not explicitly suggest that Harley must choose between serial attention

and protracted attachment. Instead—and recalling the priority of the *impression* in the Humean

mind—Harley ostensibly faces a different choice, one between a life deformed by coercive

pressure (described repeatedly as "pressing") and a voluntary, emotional form of "pressing" in

which characters affectionately imprint themselves on one another. This section examines the

series of scenes that establishes that *initial* dichotomy, which advocates for deep feeling in a

seemingly uncomplicated way. I go on to show how the novel subtly overturns its own professed

commitment in favor of an episodic mode of attention toward a revolving door of character types.

The choice with which Harley seems to be presented hinges on imagery and language associated with pressure. A pattern emerges in which the novel subjects four of its characters first to a coercive instance of "pressing"—in which an authoritarian figure exerts a forcible influence over their feelings for the sake of financial gain—and then, in each case, to a beneficent form of "pressing." The character lovingly (and voluntarily) presses another to himself so as to take the "imprint" of his or her virtue. As mentioned above, this act underlines the second aspect of Hume's impact, and Mackenzie's innovation: *The Man of Feeling* adapts the Humean mechanism of ideation to a description of emotional experience. The individual takes and retains not a sensory impression of some stimulus but an affective impression of another's character. This tendency to take affective impressions of others forms the conceptual basis of nineteenth-century understandings of the relationship between psychology and ethics, and stands in direct opposition to Victorian depictions of egoists who are defined by a tendency to overwrite past impressions with new ones.

The model of attachment that the novel appears to endorse entails taking the imprint of another "on [one's] soul" (71).[32] As *The Man of Feeling* makes clear in the cases of Harley and his childhood caretaker Edwards, whom he re-encounters on the road, this indelible impression corresponds to a specific mode of lasting attachment to a single, particularized other. A condensed rehearsal of four instances of the relevant pattern will demonstrate how emphatically the novel insists on this reading.

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[32] On the argument that *The Man of Feeling* consciously satirizes excessive sensibility, see John K. Sheriff, *The Good-Natured Man: A Character Study in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 82–84.

Initiating the motif, the young woman Harley meets in Bedlam tells him a tale of how, after the death of the man she loved, she was "pressed by her father to marry a rich miserly fellow, who was old enough to be her grandfather" (26). Concluding her story, she "stretched out her hand to Harley; he pressed it between both of his, and bathed it with his tears" (27). First "pressed" by an "inhuman parent" to abandon her feelings for the sake of his financial gain, the woman then has her hand "pressed" kindly between Harley's in a kind of allegorical enactment of the impression she has produced on him (26). An affectionate form of pressing follows an imperious, unfeeling one.

Edwards, who relates his story to Harley as they travel, passes through the same pattern. When the "press-gang" accosts his son, threatening to force him into service if Edwards does not pay them a bribe, Edwards elects to take his son's place (70). In a tale within a tale, Edwards then tells the story of an "Old Indian" who allegedly knew the location of "a treasure hidden somewhere" (69–70). Soldiers "pressed him to discover it" by giving him fifty lashes a day (70). Edwards finds an opportunity to help the man escape, and as a result is himself lashed and dismissed from his post. When Edwards encounters the freed man outside camp, the man "pressed [Edwards] in [his] arms, and kissed the marks of the lashes on [his] back" (70). When Edwards finishes the sorrowful story of his impressment, Harley repeats the Indian's gesture (and reprises his own act with the young woman): "he pressed [Edwards] in his arms. . . . 'Edwards,' said he, 'let me hold thee to my bosom; let me imprint the virtue of thy sufferings on my soul" (71).

Like an open parenthesis that must, by the novel's logic, be closed, each instance of coercive pressure is redressed by a second, voluntary "pressing." Edwards, pressed into service under the threat of state violence, meets the Indian man who is "pressed" brutally; the latter then

closes the parentheses of his violent mistreatment by pressing Edwards affectionately in his arms, and Edwards's own pattern is concluded when Harley takes him in his arms and receives a lasting impress of his suffering.

In light of these three iterations, we can make better sense of the fourth, Harley's, which takes a somewhat different form. From the beginning of the novel, Harley is pressed and oppressed by various guardians—including his aunt, who has the evocative habit of "pressing her rebellious linens to the folds she had allotted them"—to simulate or dissemble his feelings for mercenary gain (11). When they arrange for Harley to act as companion to a rich relative, with the intention that he will eventually inherit her money, Harley cannot play the game: he frowns when she wants him to laugh, and "refuse[s] to eat when she presse[s] him" (11). Finally overpowered by the "torrent of motives that assaulted him," Harley falters in his resistance when his guardians "press[] him with the utmost earnestness to accept" an offer to lease crown-lands that would enable him to live on the rent (11).

However, the day before Harley leaves to make the financially motivated arrangement, his status as a "man of feeling" reasserts itself through the person of Miss Walton: the novel offers a red-herring choice between the mercenary impulse of his guardians and his personal feelings for Miss Walton. He falls instantly in love and, according to his pronouncement at the novel's end, remains in that state until his death. While the "open parenthesis" of Harley's having been urged to use others selfishly for his own gain is not immediately closed—for reasons of sexual propriety, the affectionate form of pressing cannot occur during his first meeting with Miss Walton—the pattern established by the young woman, Edwards, and the Indian man encourages the inference that Harley's lifelong "attachment" to her is based on his

having received the imprint of her virtue and "humanity" on his soul (13). In his last moments, Harley "seize[s] her hand," as if finally to take her impression, and dies (96).

This overdetermined pattern culminates in the novel's last scenes, which gesture at a theme of posthumous persistence via impressions, one that recurs across the long trajectory I examine in the following chapters. Just as Harley is said to retain the impression of Miss Walton from their first meeting until his final heartbeat, so the novel's narrator retains in *his* heart an impression of *Harley's* virtue. At the wake, the narrator finds himself involuntarily speaking Harley's name aloud, as if he is under another's control, and he feels "a pulse in every vein at the sound" (97). The novel concludes with a visit he pays to Harley's grave, where "every beat of [the narrator's] heart awakens a virtue!" (98). Evidently, Harley is so deeply imprinted on the narrator that that impression constitutes a kind of afterlife: his virtue continues to run, as it were, on the pump of the narrator's heart, revived with every pulse. Brontë and Hardy will make much of this idea, reworking it as a model for how—in the case of characters who take impressions in this fashion—the dead may be agonizingly preserved.

Across the multiple scenes of impressing I have discussed, the novel claims emphatically to uphold the virtue of a character's remaining faithful to his or her attachments. The reward for that faith is a privileged bond in which that character receives the indelible imprint of another of kindred sensibility. Still, as noted earlier, Harley's bond with Miss Walton conforms only imperfectly to the pattern established by other characters: no language of impressing or imprinting is used to describe his attachment—an attachment that, despite everything, he never quite articulates.

The absence of such language, and Harley's silence on his feelings, can be understood as artifacts of his embodying two distinct dispositions. I suggest that, rather than a choice between

coercion and affection, the novel encodes in Harley a different opposition. On the one hand, in his deathbed expression of lifelong devotion to Miss Walton, he becomes an exemplar of the "imprint" conception of enduring ties. Surprisingly, though, given its full-throated celebration of such imprints, the novel declines really to depict that model of interpersonal feeling: all but a few moments of his life are spent away from Miss Walton; Harley and the young woman in Bedlam separate forever after he presses her hand; and Edwards never sees the Indian man again. Unlike the nineteenth-century novels in which this stated ideal will become an organizing trait, with all its benefits and drawbacks dramatized in detail, *The Man of Feeling* includes this affective cast of character only in the abstract.

Thus, while the novel claims to valorize the indelible imprint one can receive from a single, highly individualized other, its *actual* investment is a kind of open secret. Harley's series of exciting encounters on the road, which coincides exactly in time with his professed attachment to Miss Walton, commands almost the entirety of the novel's attention. Harley's "touristic" approach to others recalls the reference, in story's opening taxonomy of English dispositions, to "the velocity of a modern tour" (51). Further, the novel shows the contest between his attachment to Miss Walton and the touristic form of attention he displays on his travels to be zero-sum. Harley can represent both, but only in alternation, as each precludes the other.

In a crucial irony, the *formal* dimension of sympathetic attention bears a telling resemblance to the model of feeling that the novel critiques as insidiously coercive. In the encounter with the young woman in Bedlam, for example, which seems to endorse affectionate closeness over the financial benefits of marrying a rich but unappealing man, the scene's structural function in the affective picaresque reveals its transactional nature. That is, the sympathetic vignette is a repeatable structure—as subsequent scenes make clear—in which

Harley exchanges his sympathy for the pathos of the woman's story. Edwards's tale, in which

villainous soldiers "press" him and the Indian man for their own gain (bribes and treasure),

operates identically with respect to the affective picaresque. This model of sympathetic

attention—defined by its iterability, and by the brief, transactional nature of encounters with

generic others—constitutes not just a defining quality of Harley's disposition, but a crucial

shaping force of the narrative itself.[33]

We can now return to the heuristic I began to construct through my reading of Hume. For

characters that receive affective impressions in a way that resembles Hume's model for taking

sensory impressions, the distinction between the two modes of feeling the novel entertains can be

understood by analogy with the perceptual building blocks of the Humean mind. Describing the

sequence of thoughts that occupy the mind in terms that recall Harley's sequential experience of

other people, Hume writes: "One thought chaces [sic] another, and draws after it a third, by

which it is expelled in its turn" (*Treatise* 1:4:6). Conceiving of this particular cast of mind in this

way was common in the period. As Jessica Riskin notes, "the full transformation of the passive,

impressionable mind into each successive impression" was understood to define a certain

disposition at the level of cognition.[34] Mackenzie's novel, in an important revision, displaces this

tendency to the realm of interpersonal feeling: a mind like Harley's is occupied exclusively by

each successive other he encounters.

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[33] On Harley as antiquarian "virtuoso" who collects character types (the busy-body, the dissembler, the pedant), see Barbara M. Benedict, "The Sentimental Virtuoso: Collecting Feelings in Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*" *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 28, no. 3 (Spring 2016): 478–79. I add to Benedict's analysis a consideration of the cognate quality of Harley's collector's eye and the novel's disjointed, episodic form.

[34] Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 46.

Put schematically, *The Man of Feeling* resolves the Humean mechanism of ideation into a spectrum of dispositions. At one end of this spectrum stands a predilection for unwavering, lifelong attachment to a single, particularized other. At the other lies a propensity toward the serial meting-out of "sympathetic" attention. The latter model tends to manifest itself in short encounters with characters that, appearing only briefly, are representative types more than individuals. Using the heuristic introduced above, I interpret this dispositional spectrum in terms of the basic constituents of the Humean mind, the sensory impression and its copies. I suggest that the slight looseness of this analogy—to singular, originary impressions, and to the cascade of derived perceptions, respectively—is an interpretive asset, and enables us both to distinguish between the two competing modes of feeling Harley embodies and to tie characters' dispositions back to fundamental mechanisms of perception in a way that anticipates Victorian conceptions of emotion.

6. Concluding the "Affective Picaresque"

In her analysis of the figure of the "man of feeling," Janet Todd points helpfully to the "narrative problems of what to do with the man of feeling who has, in an unfeeling world, avoided manly power and assumed the womanly qualities of tenderness and susceptibility but who cannot be raped and abandoned."[35] Todd is quite right that Harley stands in opposition to an unfeeling world that, as discussed above, attempts to "press" him toward ends that are anathema to his own feelings. As I have argued, however, the novel actually represents two distinct dispositions toward interpersonal feeling, and Harley is made, unstably, to embody both. Todd's analysis partially conflates them. Moreover, her observation about the narrative difficulties posed by the

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[35] Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (York: Methuen Publishing, 1986), 88–89.

impossibility of rape—while accurate—elides the way in which Harley himself (though clearly not a violent offender) consumes the anguish of others. As David Marshall notes, "[s]ympathy exhibits its effects according to an extremely ambiguous logic in which it is difficult to differentiate between cruelty and pity" (*Surprising Effects* 4). Todd's emphasis on the "male suffering and sensibility" of the protagonist papers over his propensity to sustain himself on others' misery (*Sensibility* 89). As if strolling through a bazaar of human suffering, Harley lingers for the length of a chapter at each stall, before moving on to the next in an indefinitely extendable sequence. While he does not *cause* harm, then, he certainly consumes it. And the feeling of sympathy, by the novel's lights, is a high-maintenance affect: to keep it at a high pitch, and wring the maximum number of tears from characters and audience alike, sympathy must be plied continually with new spectacles of suffering.

If the cloudburst of sympathetic tears is brief, it must therefore be iterated repeatedly for levels of sympathy to be maintained. As such, sympathy (at least as this novel conceives it) requires—and tends to produce—an essentially episodic narrative mode, one constructed through an array of victims whose suffering is sufficient to elicit it. Harley's emotional tendencies, expressed as a disposition to pass from one encounter to the next, are reflected in how the objects of his interest are described. Almost invariably, they are identified only by their membership in a category: the beggar, the mathematician, the businessman, the schoolmaster, the madwoman in Bedlam, the misanthropist, the con-man, and so on.

In the affective picaresque, a form fully conducive to the unfolding of one of Harley's dispositions, each of the novel's brightly painted characters passes through the spotlight of narrative attention, occupying it for its allotted period before being forced offstage by the arrival of the next object of sympathy. In Hume's account of consciousness, a certain "bundle" of

impressions similarly occupies the mind for a moment, only to be displaced by new impressions in the flowing stream of perception. Drawing on the hermeneutic elaborated above, I suggest that this continuous turnover in sensory perception underwrites the form of Harley's (and the novel's) attention to sympathetic objects. Harley offers his attention to unfortunate others in the form of a series; character types monopolize the novel's attention for the "long impression" of a single chapter, then fall by the wayside.

While Harley may not seem adequately roguish to be the hero of a typical picaresque, the episodic discarding of each successive object of attention is—like Harley, from whom it takes its structure and whose attention it mimics—sufficiently *un*feeling to be considered an affective reworking of that narrative mode. His heightened sensibility notwithstanding, Harley's serial sloughing-off of others runs directly counter to his endorsement of the lifelong tie. Or, put differently, his early-formed tie to a particular woman is represented as requiring the discarding of many more-generic others.

The enduring tie, as embodied by Harley's to Miss Walton, appears in the novel only as a negation, and functions mainly as a device to aid closure. Though the novel's form has little actual interest in her emotional makeup, Miss Walton represents a prototype of the more durative affective structure that nineteenth-century novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *The Mill on the Floss* will dramatize. In *The Man of Feeling*, however, Miss Walton primarily serves to provide closure to a mode of attachment that, defined by its repeated iteration among copies of copies, has no intrinsic ending itself. In her unchanging desire and desirability, as well as her geographic fixity, Miss Walton gives the wandering eye of sympathetic "attention" a final resting place. Moreover, she retrospectively legitimizes Harley's affective tourism by suggesting that it was always headed, like a proper process of Bildung, toward monogamous commitment.

As endings and beginnings are so intimately intertwined—both in *The Man of Feeling*, and in the disposition to receive enduring impressions that it formulates—we can conclude here by returning to the novel's opening discussion of the rust that Mr. Silton claims to have carried from childhood to old age. Gazing at Silton as he delivers his theory of bashfulness and wisdom, the baronet's brother sketches a quasi-physiognomical word-painting of him:

> He sat in his usual attitude, with his elbow rested on his knee, and his fingers pressed on his cheek. His face was shaded by his hand; yet it was a face that might once have been well accounted handsome; its features were manly and striking, and a certain dignity resided on his eyebrows, which were the largest I remember to have seen. (50)

It is a portrait Johann Kaspar Lavater, the Swiss physiognomist, would have appreciated. In his *Essays on Physiognomy*, Lavater calls for an artist who can "retain[]" the most fleeting of others' characters in order to set them down:

> How often does it happen that the seat of character is so hidden, so enveloped, so masked, that it can only be caught in certain, and, perhaps, uncommon positions of the countenance, which will again be changed, and all the signs disappear, before they have made any durable impression! . . . How many, even, are not to be retained by the imagination! . . . Who shall describe, who delineate, the cheering, the enlightening ray; who the look of love[?][36]

Charlotte Brontë, who read Lavater as a child, would answer his summons with her own extraordinarily subtle depictions of the human face and character. Moreover, she would write characters such as Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, for whom the ability to receive a "durable impression" of other people—which she dubs *impressibility*—would rise to the level of both a defining trait and a new code of affective ethics. Brontë terms its opposite *impressionability*, perhaps best embodied in *Villette*'s Ginevra Fanshawe. The latter disposition is energetically depicted in *The Man of Feeling*, as the "impressionable" tendency to be "eternally on the wing"

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[36] Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: William Tegg and Co., 1878), 54.

(7). But though Mackenzie's novel takes the critical step of dividing received notions about impressions into a dichotomy (or perhaps a spectrum) of different dispositions, it largely declines to *represent* what Brontë will call the impressible mind. Still, the legacy of Mackenzie's innovation is considerable. In its narrative reimagining of sympathy and its translation of Humean ideation into the language of affect, *The Man of Feeling* opens the door to Victorian treatments by Brontë and Eliot in which the early tendency to form a singular, long-lasting bond will become an organizing disposition.

**"Impressionable as Dimpling Water": The Form and Ethics of Impressibility
in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction**

"[W]hat her mind had gathered of the real concerning them [her neighbors] was too
exclusively confined to those tragic and terrible traits of which . . . the memory is
sometimes compelled to receive the impress."
          –Charlotte Brontë on her sister Emily[1]

"Her attachments are strong and enduring—indeed, this is a leading element of her
character."
          –From a reading of Charlotte Brontë's skull[2]

1. Impressibility and Impressionability

In her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell invites the reader to sympathize with the

novelist on account of her unhealthy tendency to dwell on suffering. The younger novelist did so,

according to Gaskell, for such extended periods that it became branded into her character:

[W]e must remember that [Brontë] was a sensitive thoughtful child, capable of reflecting
deeply, if not of analyzing truly; and peculiarly susceptible, as are all delicate and sickly
children, to painful impressions. What the healthy suffer from but momentarily and then
forget, those who are ailing brood over involuntarily and remember long,—perhaps with
no resentment, but simply as a piece of suffering that has been stamped into their very
life.[3]

This portrait of a "peculiarly susceptible" person helpfully glosses what Brontë, in her fiction,

calls "impressibility"—the tendency of the mind to "stamp[] . . . painful impressions . . . into

[one's] very life" (59). Gaskell couples this disposition with its apparent opposite, what Brontë

names "impressionability," an inclination to forget past suffering and the emotional ties that

often cause it.

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[1] Charlotte Brontë, Preface to *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë (New York: Penguin, 2002), lii.
[2] J. P. Browne, "A Phrenological Estimate of the Talents and Dispositions of a Lady," quoted in George
Smith, *George Smith, A Memoir: With Some Pages of Autobiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press,
2012), 93.
[3] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 58–59.

From her earliest novels to the last paragraph of "Emma," her final, unfinished work, Brontë explored these contrary though deeply interrelated dispositions.[4] Although impressionability and impressibility oppose each other in almost all of her fiction, it is not until *Villette* (1853) that the traits are given names. Figured as "sand-like" and as "dimpling water," in either case unable to retain an impression, the *impressionable* mind recalls Mackenzie's Harley and evokes a sensitive but self-regarding posture toward others.[5] The *impressible* disposition, by contrast, preserves indelible affective impressions of others, thereby precluding—or at least vexing—serial attachment.[6] Brontë's formulation of these two categories launches the rehabilitation of a certain strain of eighteenth-century sentimentalism by distinguishing between an egoistic sensibility she associates with sympathy (impressionability) and one whose narrative implications involve an ethics of erotic and filial constancy (impressibility).

Brontë's strategy for rehabilitating the latter was to draw on an already established empiricist discourse of mental impressions, turning the mind's sensory receptiveness into a metaphor for *affective* "impressions." These are then freighted with feeling and ethical significance, linked to how long they endure. Broadly, the novels endorse the impressible propensity for permanent attachments, while also depicting the agony such characters undergo when they are compelled to cut a tie.

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[4] In a draft of *Ashworth* (1839), the proto-impressible Mrs. Turner receives a "deep impression" on her "organ of veneration" (Charlotte Brontë, *Ashworth*, ed. Melodie Monahan [Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983], 52n). The last sentences of fiction Brontë wrote also allude to the two dispositions. Abruptly concluding the fragment "Emma," an impressionable woman is informed that she will never comprehend the impressible mind: "That kind of nature is very different from yours—It is not possible that you should like it—but let it alone—We will talk more on the subject tomorrow Let me question her—" (Charlotte Brontë, "Emma," in *The Professor* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 242).

[5] Brontë, *Professor*, 94; Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Random House, 2001), 300.

[6] Tony Tanner glosses impressionability as involving "registering a sensation on the surface of the senses," while impressibility allows sensations "to penetrate and leave a mark on the inner self" (Introduction to *Villette* [London: Penguin Classics, 1985], 24). While not naming impressibility, Rachel Malane argues that Brontë considered the female brain "vulnerable to incursion because of its . . . permeability" (*Sex in Mind: The Gendered Brain in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Mental Sciences* [New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2005], 69).

Brontë's recuperation of impressibility, I will argue, crosses narrative, formal, and ethical dimensions. *The Professor* (1857), her first novel, drafted between 1845 and 1846, constructs the impression-taking mechanism of her characters' minds, turning it into a prototype for the later fiction. Conceiving of character in physiognomic terms, Brontë represents the mind as stamped by "portraits" of the faces of others.[7] The novel figures narration as translating the physiognomic "text" of those portraits into actual prose. Exploring the inchoate ethics of the two dispositions, this early novel charges impressionable minds with the crime (or at least the indelicacy) of mentally "effacing" those portraits so as to make room for new attachments. *Jane Eyre* (1847) transposes this psychological mechanism to the level of plot. Embodying an insurgent and originary impression who returns to dispute her effacement, Bertha Mason problematically catalyzes the conversion of an impressionable man to impressibility.

Brontë's last novel, *Villette*, culminates her treatment of impressibility, giving it its richest and most complex elaboration. Structuring multiple plotlines and informing the psychology of every main character, the disposition becomes an organizing concept both narratively and formally. I examine the two lines along which narrator Lucy Snowe's impressibility develops: the painful process of transferring her affections from an unsuitable man to an impressible one, and her evolving posture toward traumatic memories of a childhood loss. Drawing on a particular quirk of the impressible mind, this latter plot produces striking formal effects. Prone to the commandeering of their attention by old but persistent memories,

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[7] Brontë was grappling with ideas for which, in the 1840s, there was little terminology beyond that of eighteenth-century sciences of mind. By the end of the nineteenth century, a wealth of psychoanalytic vocabulary would emerge. Brontëan impressibility is a prescient formulation of the concept of an "imago," an impression cathected with particular intensity which becomes embedded in the unconscious during childhood. In the twentieth century, object relations theory and specifically the concept of introjection, in which an individual unconsciously adopts the attitudes and values of another, represent crucial elaborations on Brontë's theme.

impressible characters can be forcibly recalled to events sometimes decades in the past. The

novel plays with a "depressed" narrator's radical dislocations in time, figuring the space between

its volumes as periods in which her—and the novel's—attention has been captured by

impressions too traumatic to relate (*Villette* 365).[8] Only in its closing summary does the novel

hint that, with a symbolic repetition of her early loss, Lucy is finally liberated from the influence

(to which her disposition makes her susceptible) of both domineering men and her own

memories.

Fundamentally, I aim to redress Gaskell's mischaracterization of impressibility as morbid

and pitiable and to restore that disposition to critical attention alongside a long-dominant

sympathy. While Gaskell echoes Brontë's initial ambivalence about impressibility, as I show in

my reading of *The Professor*, the later novels' deep investment in impressibility reveals a

divergence from Gaskell's own commitments.[9] Indeed, Gaskell's earnest *sympathy for* the young

Brontë's impressibility unconsciously enacts the overlooked contest between the two modes of

feeling: "we must remember that she was a sensitive thoughtful child," Gaskell writes, claiming

Brontë's susceptibility "to painful impressions" prevented her from "analyzing truly" (*Life* 58–

59). In short, Gaskell tries to subsume under an increasingly naturalized sympathy the upstart

ethical disposition that Brontë's later novels strive to recuperate.

Modern critics have also disregarded impressibility as a strong and viable alternative to

sympathy. Even forceful critiques of the latter reinforce its status as the defining affect of

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[8] As I discuss below, *Villette* is perhaps the first English novel to be narrated by a character who is "depressed" in the modern sense of the term.

[9] On sympathy in Gaskell's novels see Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 108–40 and Audre Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 77–94.

Victorian ethics.[10] Brontë herself takes another view. Without whitewashing the anguish or the intractability of impressible characters, she shows us that their tendency to ground attachment in pain is not so much to be cured as studied, even admired.[11] Moreover, Brontë herself mounts a powerful critique of sympathy through its alignment with impressionability. Against that shallow tendency to efface one's impressions of others, Brontë advances an ethics in which they are retained indefinitely. Accordingly, impressible characters are generally rendered as models of constancy.

As impressibility precludes the overwriting of one's impressions, owing to long retention, the sheer number of ties an impressible person can form is limited. Dispositionally unable to cut ties at will, impressible people remain subject to early impressions all their lives. Taking up Brontë's challenge, I revive her implicit critique of sympathy and elaborate both the alternative ethics and specific narrative forms to which impressibility gives rise.

2. Physiognomic Portraiture in *The Professor*

In *The Professor*—Brontë's first novel, though published last—the protagonist William Crimsworth protests that he is not of the "sand-like sort where impressions, if soon made, are as soon effaced" (94). "Impressions" here connotes more than mere perceptual content. The word is imbued with feeling, as William explains in the same breath: "neither [his] reason nor feelings are of the vacillating order" (94). Insisting on the long-lasting nature of his affections, he represents himself as impressible. And, though a zealous constancy risks tipping over into

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[10] Jaffe's excellent *Scenes of Sympathy* is the best example of this tendency.

[11] On the ethical importance Brontë grants to suffering, see Rachel Ablow, *Victorian Pain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017). Ablow argues that Brontë's "allegories of physical pain . . . indicate the novel's resistance to and critique of the normalizing tendency of sympathy" and "serve as the basis of an alternative form of interpersonal connection, grounded . . . in the ability to feel pain" (73).

intractability, Brontë makes it clear that that disposition is an antidote to excessive

impressionability, which she figures as far more socially destructive.

The Professor introduces many of the themes and concepts that would engage Brontë for

the rest of her career. With its figuration of faces as "texts" of human character and its depiction

of the mind as a taker of portraits, it formulates the mechanism by which the bare act of

perception undergirds an ethics defined by the long retention of affective impressions.[12] Indeed,

its opening sentence announces an investment in the relation between personality and portraiture:

> "DEAR CHARLES—
>
> I think when you and I were at Eton together, we were neither of us what could be called—popular characters—; you were a sarcastic, observant, shrewd, cold-blooded creature; my own portrait—I will not attempt to draw—but I cannot recollect that it was a strikingly attractive one—can you?" (5)

An invitation is extended—explicitly to the letter's addressee, implicitly to the reader—to draw a

"portrait" of William's character.

Chronicling his journey to Belgium, where he teaches English to Belgian and Flemish

boys and girls, courting first his employer Zoraïde Reuter and then his pupil Frances Henri, *The

Professor* investigates tensions among their various dispositions. William's changeable

affections and Frances's more-constant cast of mind establish a figural framework for traits that

will later be known as impressionability and impressibility.

The Professor's portrayal of the latter reveals a mechanism I call *physiognomic

portraiture*.[13] Characterizing perception in Brontë's novels, this mechanism has two figural parts,

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[12] William explicitly yokes these two figures. He refers to his word-paintings of his students as "pictures" and "portraits," and the discourses of physiognomy and phrenology permeate these portraits, from the "propensities" expressed in the girls' features to their "organs of benevolence" (81–83).

[13] On ethics in relation to the face of the other, see Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 187–200. See also Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 18.

united by impressibility. The first involves depicting the gaze as a form of portraiture. William's memory, which he describes as a gallery of paintings, is a case in point. Brontë's conception of the mind as a taker-of-portraits associates impressibility closely with the human face. While the medium of this metaphoric portraiture varies by context, from painting to engraving to printing, the upshot is unvarying: the impressible mind is a gallery hung with portraits.

Unlike Brontë's later narrators, the *equivocally* impressible William tends to take these portrait-like impressions not of others' faces, but of landscapes that are then analogized to the human face. In a critical passage, he asks: "Reader—perhaps you were never in Belgium? Haply you don't know the physiognomy of the country? You have not its lineaments defined upon your memory as I have them on mine?" (46).[14] Characterizing the vista as a face with a particular physiognomy, he describes his impression's persistence as a painting whose lines are "defined upon [his] memory." William's memory, as he conceives of it, is a gallery populated by mental pictures that express the "physiognomies" of the places they depict. Anthropomorphically, he ascribes to Belgium the "lineaments" of a human face.

Drawn from the lexicon of physiognomy, the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century practice of reading character via face and head, the word "lineament" invokes the belief that the lines of a face are decipherable text. The figuration of faces as text represents the second part of Brontë's perceptual mechanism in *The Professor*. Physiognomists such as Johann Caspar Lavater based this notion on the claim that the brain "imprints itself" on the skull from the inside, producing legible contours on the head:

> [t]he skull is visibly fitted to the mass of the substances which it contains, and follows their growth at every age of human life. Thus the exterior form of the brain which

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[14] *Villette* paints a similar portrait of Europe's coastline, with the notable difference that the more-impressible Lucy does not depict the scene as a face (Brontë, *Villette*, 62).

imprints itself perfectly on the interior surface of the skull, is at the same time the model of the contours of the exterior surface.[15]

Accordingly, the skull—"fitted" tightly to the brain and replicating its physicalized propensities—constituted a précis of character. To take a mental impression of someone's face was allegedly to impress on memory not arbitrary facial features but a portrait capturing the other's inborn characteristics.

As a young woman, Brontë read the family's copy of Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1741), one of the founding texts of physiognomy, and the theory of character she found there (along with that of its cousin phrenology) furnished her with a rich lexicon of emotional tendencies, drives, and qualities. As many critics have noted, the discourse of physiognomy permeates her fiction, which is imbued with Lavater's notion that (in Sally Shuttleworth's phrase) "God had inscribed a language on the face of nature for all to read."[16]

Brontë's oeuvre can be read as a monumental response to the claim that the "seat of character" reveals itself in "positions of the countenance," as well as Lavater's call for artists capable of receiving a "durable impression" before "the signs all disappear" (*Physiognomy* 54). Their task, he contends, is to "paint," "engrave," or "delineate" the impressions that he or she takes from the faces of others (55). William seems designed to answer that call himself. During

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[15] Johann Caspar Lavater, *Essays on Physiognomy*, trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: William Tegg and Co., 1878), 149, quoted in Joan K. Stemmler, "The Physiognomical Portraits of Johann Caspar Lavater," *The Art Bulletin* 75 (March 1993): 157.

[16] Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 59. For Lavater on the face as a legible text, see *Physiognomy*, 51; 146. For the most extended treatment of Brontë's use of physiognomy and phrenology, see Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*. Shuttleworth argues that the ideology of phrenology, and not that of physiognomy, informs the novels. According to her, phrenology's materialist emphasis on externals yields a radically different understanding of the Brontëan self from previous readings, which stressed an interest in immaterial interiority. More recently, Leila S. May has persuasively argued for a return to earlier understandings of Brontëan subjectivity (Leila S. May, "Lucy Snowe, a Material Girl? Phrenology, Surveillance, and the Sociology of Interiority." *Criticism* 55:1 [2013]: 43–68).

an exchange with Zoraïde Reuter, his skill at physiognomy enables him to intuit her true

character as revealed by a fleeting expression:

> At the moment I turned, her countenance looked hard, dark and inquisitive, her eyes were bent upon me with an expression of almost hungry curiosity; I had scarce caught this phase of physiognomy ere it had vanished; a bland smile played on her features, my harsh apology was received with good-humoured facility. (*Professor* 127)[17]

Impressibility in Brontë's novels conjoins these tropes (the mind's portrait-taking

function, and the face as a précis of character) into a mechanism for taking affective impressions,

while adding the key dimension of time.[18] As a result, the mere act of perception constitutes an

incipient ethics: the relation to the other is defined by the mind's reception of a lasting impress of

his or her face. For a variety of reasons, enduring ties often lead to grief, but impressible people

have an aptitude for such suffering, and Brontë contrasts their mnemonic fidelity with the

proclivity of the impressionable for fleeting and shallow attachment. (The young Rochester, in

Jane Eyre, is exemplary in terms of his touristic approach to women. Like Mackenzie in *The*

Man of Feeling, Rochester embodies the *affective picaresque*.) Unable to efface affective

impressions, by contrast, impressible characters are often psychically incapable of severing such

ties and forging new ones.

William's assertion that his "impressions" are not "sand-like" underscores the importance

of temporality to impressibility and the link between mental portraiture and emotional

attachment. *His* impressions, he insists, are not "soon effaced": they persist and endure

(*Professor* 94). Importantly, the difference between the two dispositions is not one of sensitivity;

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[17] The phrase "phase of physiognomy," while seeming to imply that Zoraïde's physiognomy can change, passing through multiple phases, instead underlines how she cannot *perpetually* conceal her real character behind "a bland smile" (127). Her nature—unchanging behind her disguises—eventually exposes itself, and the sharp-eyed observer takes a lasting impression of that short-lived revelation.

[18] On the duration of impressions in Lavater, see *Physiognomy*, 57–58.

it emerges over time, recalling Lavater's insistence on an artist's ability to receive a "durable impression" (*Physiognomy* 54).

However, William's boast that he does not "efface" his impressions rings false in light of his habit at the blackboard of "fingering the sponge" that would "enable [him] to *efface* the [chalk] marks when they had served the purpose intended" (*Professor* 69; my emphasis). In a novel that regards faces as texts, effacement of text is a defining act of impressionability. His tendency to wander—professionally from trade to teaching, and romantically from Zoraïde to Frances—bears out the subtle indication of his posture at the blackboard.[19] His moments of heightened attraction amount to little more than infatuations, and the impressions both women make on him are erased "when they had served the purpose intended."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the effacement of mental impressions goes hand-in-hand with the shrugging-off of suffering. At first deeply hurt by the discovery that his friend Pelet is carrying on a secret affair with Zoraïde, William writes melodramatically that his "faith in love and friendship" is "extinguished" (93). Yet he recovers quickly: Pelet "had not I found wounded me in a very tender point[;] the wound was so soon and so radically healed" (152). William does not explain the cause of his faster-than-anticipated recovery, but the reader can infer it: the preceding chapter has seen him reunited with Frances after an extended separation. Transferring his attentions to a new object, he dissolves his tie to the previous one. Moreover, in explaining away this characteristically impressionable action, William unknowingly echoes his earlier disavowal of that disposition: the painful impression made on him is "soon" healed. His feelings,

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[19] While William does eventually marry Frances, he is highly changeable during their courtship. First he is "on the brink of falling in love" with Zoraïde; he then transfers his affections to Frances, noting that he had to exert a "distasteful effort" when he was later "obliged . . . to leave" her, whom he "most prefer[ed]"; two weeks later, when Zoraïde "made room for [him] to sit beside her," "temptation penetrated to [his] senses at the moment" (89; 123; 130). The momentariness of these temptations is characteristic.

it turns out, are precisely of that "sand-like sort where impressions, if soon made, are as soon effaced" (94). In wiping out his mental impression of Zoraïde, he also brings his feelings for her, and any distress they have caused, to an abrupt end.

Building on his conception of the mind as a mechanism for taking and preserving "portraits," William describes a scene in front of him in rich, painterly detail: "Grovetown church clock struck four; looking up, I beheld the last of that day's sun, glinting red through the leafless boughs of some very old oak trees surrounding the church—its light coloured and characterized the picture as I wished" (38). As physiognomic portraiture is, in this novel, the mechanism by which lasting attachments are formed, it is of great significance that William's impressions are not of *people's* faces but rather of the "faces" of scenes. His impressibility is expended on places, leaving his relations with people, especially women, to be governed by the other aspect of his disposition.

William's mental gallery of scenes, first mentioned as he describes his arrival in Belgium, proves to have far-reaching implications, especially for the strange formal effects Brontë explores in her last novel. The four landscapes on the "walls" of his memory correspond to the four periods of his life: schooling, clerkship, teaching in Belgium, and married life. In a subtle but profound effect that has gone unnoticed by scholars, his metaphor for memory never actually terminates. Even after his prose description of the "paintings" ends, he remains in the ekphrastic mode, translating the portrait-*like* impressions of memory into the prose of the story. Through an implicit identification that Brontë will develop in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, *The Professor* represents narrative as ekphrasis from the mind's portraits.

William describes the four paintings in order, beginning with his schooldays: "First, Eton" (46). Next is the unnamed Yorkshire manufacturing town where he served as clerk to his

older brother, an episode that makes up the novel's first section: "Second, X——; huge, dingy; the canvass [sic] cracked and smoked; a yellow sky, sooty clouds" (46). Crucially, the place and its mnemonic portrait merge: the canvas is "cracked" by exposure to smoke and soot. This merging renders the "paintings" of memory and of retrospective prose continuous with each other.

Continuing, William brings us up to date in a passage whose ambiguous pronouns confirm the connection between mental pictures and narrative: "Third—Belgium; and I will pause before this landscape. . . . This is Belgium, Reader—look! Don't call the picture a flat or a dull one—it was neither flat nor dull to me when I first beheld it" (46). In the last sentence, the pronoun "it" equivocates between William's portrait of Belgium, drawn from memory and converted into prose, and the place itself. The grammatical sleight reframes his narration of events. As we pass from *overtly* ekphrastic language into a seemingly straightforward account of William's actions—"I left Ostend on a mild February morning and found myself on the road to Brussels"—we could easily overlook how the novel represents these past actions, too, as features in a mental painting (46).[20] Hearkening back to Lavater's call for a physiognomist who could capture the subtlest expressions of physiognomy, Brontëan ekphrasis mediates between nature, as it "speaks" through the contours of the face, and the novel, as it puts down in language the content and exploits of the character expressed there.

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[20] The novel reprises this effect a moment later, as if to insist on it. William's word-painting of the countryside—with its "reedy swamps, fields fertile but flat, cultivated in patches that made them look like magnified kitchen-gardens," the "gleam of the lights of Brussels," and so on—shades imperceptibly into the narration of action: "Next morning I awoke from prolonged and sound repose" (47). At one moment, we are at his side, gazing at the "belts of cut trees, formal as pollard willows," painterly details from his mental impression, and at the next he is an actor *in* the scene, "throwing back the white curtains of [his] bed" and walking downstairs to order his breakfast (47).

3. Sympathy and Impressibility

At the time Brontë drafted *The Professor*, sympathy was well-established as the dominant framework with which to think about how to relate ethically to others. Adam Smith's influential theory of sympathy frequently eclipsed other forms of "feeling-with." Frances Henri's nascent ethics challenges this Smithian model of feeling, whose thorough naturalization often rendered its more questionable implications invisible.

Near the end of the novel, Frances falls into a conversation about morality with her husband's cosmopolitan friend, Hunsden, who puts forward an ethics based on sympathy. Hunsden describes himself as "a universal patriot" whose "country is the world," a popular trope at the time that substantiates Amanda Anderson's recent work on cosmopolitan detachment (201).[21] Hunsden is endorsing an impartial ethics and a model of feeling that do not tie him to any particular group, but are shared evenly among all. Frances differs with him, replying that "[s]ympathies so widely diffused must be very shallow" (201). For the impressible mind, attachments are, as a result of their durability, strictly limited in number, and Frances is unabashedly partial to her own small circle.[22] This sets her against contemporaneous constructions of sympathy and cosmopolitanism, a crucial legacy of eighteenth-century ethics. The novel, however, takes her side. Comically, the sympathy felt by lifelong bachelor Hunsden

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[21] Anderson argues for a sensible position of female detachment somewhere between "the model of unreflective feminine power" and "the model of the aggrandized agent" (Amanda Anderson, *Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* [Princeton: Oxford University Press, 2001], 53). See also David Bromwich, *A Choice of Inheritance: Self and Community from Edmund Burke to Robert Frost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 106–32. Bromwich's "genealogy of disinterestedness" usefully contrasts Arnold's endorsement of a critical detachment that is unbound by the particularity of place with Hazlitt's embrace of the subjective. For Hazlitt, as for Frances, "a thing is interesting" not objectively but "when it interests *us*" (*Inheritance*, 118).

[22] The partly-impressible William nods to this numerical restriction in specifying that his gallery of lasting impressions contains *only* four paintings (46).

is so disinterested as even to prevent him from marrying: to tie himself to one woman would, it seems, be unacceptably partial.

Like that of most of his contemporaries, Hunsden's conception of sympathy is Smithian.[23] As critics such as Amit S. Rai have shown, that ideology pervaded British society.[24] Smith and Hume—their intellectual differences notwithstanding—represented the principal anchors for the nineteenth-century valorization of sympathy.[25] Indeed, sympathy's malleability as a concept made it both useful and ripe for abuse. Writers working in the ideological mainstream of the Enlightenment tradition could use it to legitimize whatever view they favored, in domains as dissimilar as marriage and imperialism. Less cynically, but no less sprawling in terms of application, many nineteenth-century novelists, Gaskell among them, saw in sympathy a resolution to problems such as labor disputes and the mistreatment of "fallen women."

Smith's view of the power of sympathy to humanize both observer and object retains its appeal to this day. Martha Nussbaum has recently urged readers to "identify sympathetically with individual members of marginalized or oppressed groups within our society" so as to develop "habits of mind" that would "lead toward social equality in that they contribute to the dismantling of stereotypes."[26] Echoing a long tradition of arguments for the humanizing

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[23] Brontë links Hunsden explicitly to the Smithian notion of an impartial spectator; see *Professor*, 21.

[24] Amit S. Rai, *Rule of Sympathy: Sentiment, Race, and Power, 1750–1850* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), xix–xx.

[25] Smith writes that "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it" (Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley [New York: Penguin, 2009], 1:1:1). On Hume's account of "extravagant" emotions, see Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1.

[26] Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 93–94.

influence of literature, Susan Sontag writes similarly that novels "enlarge and complicate—and, therefore, improve—our sympathies. They educate our capacity for moral judgment."[27]

But sympathy also has strong critics. From justifying state surveillance to "redeeming" the working classes, sympathy suffused nineteenth-century social relations so extensively as almost to be invisible, and therefore effectively beyond reproach.[28] Critiques such as Rai's, as well as work by Audrey Jaffe and Nancy Armstrong, represent attempts at reassessing its blind spots.[29] While there is productive disagreement here, even criticism of sympathy tends to reinscribe its status as the best and even only way to analyze Victorian affect in the context of ethics. Brontë's novels, by contrast, decenter sympathy by advancing an alternative to it.

Unlike analyses that take sympathy to task for its incipient jingoism and gender bias, Brontë in the 1840s affirms simply that there is a limit to the number of people to whom one can and should be tied. Her critique draws on nineteenth-century anxieties about the figure of the egoist—the philandering, roaming, masculine figure who continually transfers his sympathies and attention to new female objects. Narratively, sympathy tends to manifest itself as a series of brief episodes (or "scenes," to use Jaffe's word) because the sympathetic response does not bind the observer to the sufferer, and the former can simply move on.[30] Like the impressionable man,

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[27] Susan Sontag, "At the Same Time: The Novelist and Moral Reasoning" in *At the Same Time: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 213. See also Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 28–34; Thomas Laqueur, "Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative," in *The New Cultural History*, edited by Lynn Hunt (University of California Press, 1989): 176–204.

[28] See Rai, *Rule of Sympathy*, xix–xx.

[29] In *Scenes of Sympathy*, Jaffe rebuts prevailing notions of sympathy's power to bind self and other by highlighting the class anxieties that underlie it (8). Nancy Armstrong's critique analyzes sympathy's role in the consolidation of nineteenth-century individualism (*How Novels Think* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2005], 12).

[30] Vivasvan Soni critiques sympathy in similar terms for what he sees as its inability to motivate action. Arguing that Smithian identificatory sympathy is unmediated by narrative, Soni points out how sympathy tends to occur in standalone moments that are not integrated into events that precede and follow (*Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010], 301).

the serial sympathizer registers the impression of another's suffering (or attractiveness) intensely, but—as with sand or chalk—the impression is "soon effaced," and a new object of interest is found. This ability to detach, as we've seen with Hunsden, is often presented as an ethical impartiality. For Brontë, however, claims of impartiality are, in practice, typically a justification for a touristic relation to others. As her novels show, men are liable to cause suffering in a serial fashion, and the ideology of sympathy can give its stamp of legitimacy to a tendency to disengage, not least from those whom one has harmed.[31]

In the character of Frances, Brontë begins to lay out an ethics of unwavering, lifelong attachment—sometimes beyond death—that defines itself against the rapid and recurring transfer of interest and attention. Neither model is perfect, as Brontë clearly recognizes; but impressibility acts as a brake on and corrective to the extremes of sympathy. For a variety of reasons, including the fickleness of impressionable men and the fact of mortality, the enduring nature of impressible ties leads reliably to loss and grief. Impressible people, however, display a special aptitude for this kind of suffering. Preoccupied by the idea of "fortitude in bearing grief," Frances does not slough off painful impressions (*Professor* 135). Leading lives defined by loss, impressible characters maintain lifelong attachments to a small handful of others, often long after separation. Characteristically, that is, impressibility involves the mnemonic retention of those who have been lost.

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[31] The violence of serial sexual accumulation evokes the story of Bluebeard, a tale that fascinated Victorians. On *Jane Eyre* as a bluebeard story, see Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard Gothic:* Jane Eyre *and its Progeny* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 21–64.

4. The Impressible Plot of *Jane Eyre*

Peripheral in *The Professor*, impressibility occupies a central, more normative position in

Brontë's next novel—not least because *Jane Eyre* instantiates that trait in its narrator.

Additionally, Brontë raises physiognomic portraiture to the level of story, in what we might call

an *impressible plot*. Staging a contest between an older impression and a newer one, *Jane Eyre*

dramatizes the conflict between Rochester's affective impressions of Bertha Mason and of Jane.

The novel begins with its young protagonist's discovery that her way of taking in the

world alienates her from her adoptive family.[32] The images conjured in Jane's mind by the

engravings in Bewick's *History of British Birds* are, she finds, "strangely impressive" (*Jane Eyre*

11). In the novel's opening sequence, a wide variety of forces are understood in terms of how

they "press" on Jane's mind: mental images are "impressive"; her mood is one of "forlorn

depression"; and, rendered almost unconscious by the terrors of the red room, she describes

herself as "oppressed" (11; 19; 21). Brontë's imagery of an external world forcibly pressing itself

into the malleable material of the young mind captures how sensations can "penetrate and leave a

mark on the inner self."[33]

Anticipating *Villette*'s definition of impressibility, in which experience is "grave[d]" into

one as if by "metal," *Jane Eyre* depicts the impressible mind as excruciatingly etched by the face

of the other (*Villette* 300). Finding an opportunity to observe Rochester unnoticed, Jane makes an

unnerving discovery: "my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; I could not keep their lids

under control: they would rise, and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute

pleasure in looking—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony"

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[32] Jane is excluded until she "acquire[s] a more social and child-like disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner" (Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [New York: Penguin Books, 2006], 9).
[33] Tanner, Introduction to *Villette*, 24.

(*Jane Eyre* 202). Her mind registers his image as if it were violently carving itself into her:

merely to look is to be worked on by the "steely point" of an engraver's instrument.[34]

Rochester is absorbed elsewhere, yet Jane feels an agonizing pleasure as if his face were

somehow engraving *her*. Recalling William's characterization of narrative, she proceeds to relate

in ekphrastic prose the physiognomic portrait being cut into her mind: "My master's colorless,

olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm,

grim mouth—all energy, decision, will— . . . were more than beautiful to me" (*Jane Eyre* 203).

To her, his face is a text: "I understand the language of his countenance" (203).

Naturally, Jane's ability to read Rochester's face does not remove the obstacles between

them. Rochester is, at the start, thoroughly impressionable, and the clash of their dispositions

forms the main axis of action, part of which is to stage the difficult transformation of an

impressionable man into an impressible one.

Jane Eyre problematically renders Bertha Mason as an affective impression that

Rochester has effaced and overwritten. On the basis of her status as his first affective tie, she

asserts her claim on him, catalyzing his "reformation." Defending her right (per the ethics of

impressibility) not to be effaced and replaced, Bertha compels him to be more impressible by

forcing him to confront the primary nature of their bond. Overriding his tendency to supplant

impressions, she forces on him the reckoning with originary ties that impressible people

experience as an inborn emotional imperative.

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[34] The image of the "steely point" is somewhat ambiguous. However, the evidence—including *Villette*'s definition of impressibility (300), the prominence in *Jane Eyre* of Bewick's wood engravings, the diction of pointiness ("acute," "poignant," "steely point"), and the novel's imagery of characters being "graved" with emotion (*Jane Eyre*, 436)—strongly suggests an engraving tool.

What *Jane Eyre* adds to *The Professor*'s portrayal of impressibility, crucially, is the possibility of dispositional reform. However, the process by which Rochester becomes impressible suggests that this change is only possible because of a latent predisposition. Despite exhibiting behavior typical of a philanderer, he also maintains an unbroken connection to the first woman who made an affective impression on him. Bertha lives, suggestively, in his attic, as if permanently locked in the mind of the house. Further, the novel associates that bond with the marriage vow; the force of Bertha's refusal to be effaced aligns with legal prohibition against bigamy. The supersession of an early tie by a later one is made criminal. So while *Jane Eyre* reveals that it is possible to *become* impressible, the means of that conversion are strikingly violent, involving incarceration, attempted murder, suicide, and mutilation. Put differently, the violence involved in Rochester's transformation makes clear how much ground separates the two dispositions.

Rochester's history of impressionability takes recognizable form as a string of brief romantic entanglements. Fleeing the first of these, Bertha Mason, he goes to Europe and takes a series of mistresses: "The first I chose," he tells Jane, "was Céline Varens. . . . She had two successors: an Italian, Giacinta, and a German, Clara. . . . Giacinta was unprincipled and violent: I tired of her in three months. Clara was honest and quiet; but heavy, mindless, and unimpressible: not one whit to my taste" (358–59). A decade passes in itinerant womanizing: "For ten long years I roamed about, living first in one capital, then another: sometimes in St. Petersburg, oftener in Paris; occasionally in Rome, Naples, and Florence. . . . I sought my ideal of a woman amongst English ladies, French countesses, Italian signoras, and German gräfinnen" (358).

In a moment of impressionability that underscores the erasure of others, Rochester

expresses *self*-pity at how "long" it felt to spend ten years sampling various kinds of European

noblewomen. These women turn out to be "not . . . to [his] taste"; like William Crimsworth, the

changeable Rochester prefers a mistress who is not "unimpressible" (359). This attraction of

dispositional opposites initiates the task the novel sets itself: how to reconcile in love an

inconstant man with an impressible woman.

Rochester tries to entice Jane to become Clara's successor: "You shall go to a place I

have in the south of France: a white-washed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean. There you

shall live a happy, and guarded, and most innocent life. Never fear that I wish to lure you into

error—to make you my mistress" (350). But Jane knows better: "Sir, your wife is living: that is a

fact acknowledged this morning by yourself. If I lived with you as you desire—I should then be

your mistress: to say otherwise is sophistical—is false" (350). Jane recognizes that she will be

only the next, not the last, in Rochester's series.

Yet he appears blind to or—at the least—overly accepting of his tendencies, explaining

them away as natural law. To his mind, it is simply the way of the world that one must always

move on from one's attachments:

> "You [Jane] must have become in some degree attached to the house,—you, who have an
> eye for natural beauties, and a good deal of the organ of Adhesiveness?"
> "I am attached to it, indeed."
> [. . .]
> "Pity!" he said, and sighed and paused. "It is always the way of events in this life," he
> continued presently: "no sooner have you got settled in a pleasant resting-place, than a
> voice calls out to you to rise and move on, for the hour of repose is expired."
> "Must I move on, sir?" I asked. (288–89)

Bertha Mason's existence, however, and the identification of her claim on Rochester with

marriage, interfere with his complacent sense that a tendency always to "move on" from

attachments can be chalked up to "the way of events in this life." Surging up as if from the depths of a mental palimpsest, Bertha demands an explanation for her effacement.

Jane and Rochester are in the end brought together a second time, and this raises the question of how the novel—given its general promotion of the ethics of impressibility— ultimately dismisses Bertha's claim on Rochester. I propose two ways to think about that seeming contradiction, and both involve the novel exploiting a loophole in its own principles.

One explanation would hold that Bertha never made an impression on Rochester—that her claim on him is merely legal, not affective or ethical. That is, we could take Rochester at his word that he was simply deceived into marrying her for his father's financial benefit. Rochester "seldom saw her alone," he tells Jane, "and had very little private conversation with her" (352). Bertha "allured" and "dazzled" him, but while he "thought [he] loved her," he was really only caught up in the competition with other men (352). He claims never to have loved her: "I never loved, I never esteemed, I did not even know her" (352). By that explanation, their bond was merely legal, not affective, and so in jettisoning Bertha he did not violate the norms of impressibility.

That account, based on Rochester's own, is unsatisfying in two ways. First, it cancels the force and ethical complexity of Bertha's reappearance. It makes her little more than a logistical obstacle to Rochester and Jane's marriage. Under this interpretation, the novel's primary conflict is quite thin. Contrary to this view, it is clear that *Jane Eyre* regards marriage not as a legal contract but as a sacrament, symbolic to many Christians of an unbreakable bond with Christ. More important still, Rochester's explanation glosses over the racializing language that he and

Jane independently use to describe Bertha.[35] He claims that the Masons "wished to secure [him],

because [he] was of a good race" (*Jane Eyre* 352).[36] Later, rebuking himself for his foolishness

in marrying her, he calls himself "mole-eyed," implying that he was blind to what he calls

Bertha's "pigmy intellect," supposedly written on her face for him to read (352; 353). Racist

clichés about the intellect of "pigmies," a slur for a variety of ethnic groups of short-statured

Africans, circulated widely at the time.[37] Jane also participates in Bertha's racialization.

Describing Bertha at the moment she destroys the wedding veil, Jane writes: "It was a

discoloured face—it was a savage face. I wish I could forget the roll of the red eyes and the

fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments!" (327). Rochester and Jane's systematic efforts to

discredit Bertha suggest that they fear her claim may be valid.

The second explanation assumes that Bertha did in fact impress herself on Rochester, and

as such represents an originary affective impression. For narrative reasons having to do with

Jane's development, the novel rationalizes Bertha Mason's effacement from Rochester's mind by

vilifying her, in racist terms, as a madwoman.[38] In this way, the novel attempts to justify

Rochester's abandonment of Bertha: there are some special cases, it implies, in which an early

tie is so utterly compromised that one is permitted to break it and form a new one. Through an

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[35] In the following pages, I draw on the postcolonial reading of *Jane Eyre* in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (October 1985): 243–61. See also Susan Meyer, *Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 60–95. For more on Brontë's racist notions about madness, see response to Susan Meyer in Sue Thomas, "The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1 (1999): 4.

[36] If the phrase "good race" is intended to suggest only that Rochester is a well-bred European, subsequent language about phenotypical racial difference makes it clear that the modern, racist meaning is operative as well. On Rochester's racialized antipathy for Bertha, see Lara Freeburg Kees, "'Sympathy' in *Jane Eyre*" *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 45, no. 4 (Autumn, 2005): 880.

[37] For example, the OED cites a similar usage in *Life of E. B. Pusey* (1835). "*pygmy*, n. and adj." OED Online. November 2018. Oxford University Press (accessed November 10, 2018).

[38] On Bertha's "madness," see Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 336–71.

act of violent metalepsis, the novel vitiates Bertha's capacity to override Rochester's tendency to

efface others by taking upon itself the responsibility for effacing her.

The novel disfigures Bertha—transforming her from a "tall, dark and majestic" woman

into a "vampire" with a "savage," "purple" face and "swelled," "dark" lips—at precisely the

moment she most expressively contests her effacement (*Jane Eyre* 327). Bertha's anger falls

symbolically on the wedding veil, the object representing both her impending displacement as

Mrs. Rochester and Rochester's disposition to efface earlier affective impressions made by

women. A veil, of course, literally covers the bride's face, and it is Rochester's right to replicate

this act affectively that Bertha disputes. After donning the veil and gazing into the mirror, she

"rent it in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trampled on them" (327). She defiantly

displays her face. Crucially, the transformation of that face from human to "savage" in this scene

is told from Jane's perspective, and the scene occurs before she knows anything of Rochester's

marriage. The novel presents Jane's physiognomic portrait of Bertha as impartial. As Rochester

could never become impressible by *affectively* effacing his first tie, the novel takes on itself the

work of effacing Bertha *physiognomically*. What Rochester was not permitted to do, *Jane

Eyre*—granting itself a dispensation—does on his behalf.

With this passage, physiognomic portraiture renews its historical connection with

scientific racism. Physiognomy and phrenology, frequently mobilized in the nineteenth century

in attempts to provide a scientific basis for white supremacy, are here used to find a loophole in

an ethics that would otherwise prevent Rochester and Jane's union.[39] With the word

"lineaments"—Jane characterizes Bertha's "lineaments" as "fearful[ly] blackened"—the text

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[39] See John Beddoe, *The Races of Britain: A Contribution to the Anthropology of Western Europe* (London: Trübner and Co., 1862). See also Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë*, 110–11 and James Poskett, *Materials of the Mind: Phrenology, Race, and the Global History of Science, 1815–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019).

draws explicitly on the language of physiognomy to denigrate Bertha and invalidate her claim on Rochester (*Jane Eyre* 327).

Lineaments and disposition being closely identified, Rochester's transformation into an impressible man requires *him* to be effaced as well. Caught in the fire that Bertha sets at Thornfield, he loses his eyesight and sustains extensive burns on his face. Blind, and with the physiognomy of his "cicatrised visage" symbolically erased by scarring, he can neither see nor, in a sense, be seen (503). His effacement, though, turns out to be less permanent than Bertha's. Through reconciliation with Jane, he is able literally to regrow his facial features. "I passed my finger over his eyebrows," Jane writes, "and remarked that they were scorched, and that I would apply something which would make them grow as broad and black as ever" (505). Effacement is the general method of punishment in *Jane Eyre*, and Bertha's lethal experience of that mode of discipline—carried out by the novel itself—makes it possible for Rochester's effacement to be rehabilitative.[40]

What is the significance to impressibility of Rochester's blindness and effacement? To answer this question, we must remind ourselves that *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre* construct the concept of impressibility by using sensory impressions as a metaphor for affective ones. This metaphor's close association of "impressing" with the act of "stamping" (as in Gaskell's remark that Brontë's mind was "stamped" enduringly with "painful impressions") elucidates Rochester's injuries.[41]

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[40] Punishment takes the form of effacement because, in Brontë's novels, one's physiognomy expresses one's character traits, and because blameworthy behavior is presumed to stem from a bad character. Effacement therefore represents the destruction of one's immoral traits.

[41] Evoking an association that goes back to the sixteenth century, *Villette* frequently links stamping to impressions, as when Lucy receives a letter sealed with wax that has been "stamped with the well-cut impress of initials" (277). See "*stamp*, v." OED Online. December 2018. Oxford University Press (accessed December 16, 2018); Gaskell, *Life*, 58–59.

Reading the end of *Jane Eyre* alongside a passage in *Villette*—in which Lucy asks Polly whether she has "outgrown the impressions with which joy and grief . . . stamped [her] mind ten years ago"—illustrates the point (*Villette* 320). At the end of *Jane Eyre*, by comparison, Jane "*impress[es]* by sound on [Rochester's] ear what light could no longer *stamp* on his eye" (*Jane Eyre* 519; my emphasis). The impressible mind is stamped by emotions such as joy and grief in the same way that "light . . . stamp[s] . . . the eye" and sound "impress[es]" the ear. Impressibility is built on the chassis of sensation.

Affective impressions, I have shown, take the form of a mental portrait, as in episodes when Jane's mind engraves itself with Rochester's physiognomy (*Jane Eyre* 202; 187). In being stripped temporarily of his eyesight and face, Rochester is deprived of his abilities both to take another's impression and to have his own taken. He lacks the eyes to be impressed by a new young noblewoman's appearance as well as the "lineaments" that she would inscribe on her own mind. His injuries halt the impressionable cycle of effacement and replacement. Crucially, his blindness also throws him back on past impressions and their associated connections. The specific nature of his wounds enforces impressibility at a sensory level. Physically unable to take new impressions—having lost, as it were, his wandering eye—Rochester comes to approximate an impressible man through the constraint that he subsist on older, more primary, affective impressions.[42]

Jane Eyre, I have argued, reveals a surprising feature of impressibility involving the exercise of control over a character's attention: the attention of such minds can be forcibly directed toward certain objects. (Brontë's conception of attention, it should be noted, departs

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[42] Rochester's sight does begin to return at the end of the novel. Having been violently retrained according to the norms of impressibility, he is deemed deserving of seeing again the one person to whom he is now tied.

markedly from Mackenzie's, as analyzed in Chapter 1.) Describing the experience of having her

attention commandeered and directed at Rochester's face, Jane emphasizes her lack of volition:

"my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face; I could not keep their lids under control: they

would rise, and the irids *would* fix on him. I looked" (202; my emphasis). With Bertha's

intrusion into Rochester's courtship of Jane, the novel transfers the phenomenon to the level of

plot. Calling on Rochester's dormant impressibility, Bertha commands his attention by

descending the stairs of Thornfield and appearing at his and Jane's bedsides. Brontë's last novel

picks up and expands on this theme, exploring the formal effects produced by the hijacking of

impressible attention.

5. "Impressionable as dimpling water": Two Strains of Impressibility in *Villette*

When a fire breaks out in the theater where they are watching a play, Lucy Snowe's childhood

acquaintance Graham Bretton tells her not to move. She observes:

> [T]hus adjured, I think I would have sat still under a rocking crag: but, indeed, to sit still
> in actual circumstances was not my instinct; and at the price of my very life, I would not
> have moved to give him trouble, thwart his will, or make demands on his attention. We
> were in the stalls, and for a few minutes there was a most terrible, ruthless pressure about
> us. (*Villette* 302)

Even under dire circumstances, Lucy does not try to "make demands on [Graham's] attention."

The attention of an impressionable man, she knows, tends either to flit casually from one object

to another or to be firmly under his own control. While Graham easily directs his attention away

from her, she cannot help but attend to him.

Stressing the importance of "attention," as well as exploring its formal effects, *Villette*

represents Brontë's most complex and variegated treatment of impressibility. As Lucy navigates

her way from a childhood home with her godmother to Belgium, where she teaches English at a

boarding school and struggles with her desire for both Graham and the impressible teacher Paul Emanuel, she encounters characters who embody its traits in a sprawling range of forms. Propagating itself across every plotline—including Lucy's tortured passion for Graham, Paul's constancy to a dead lover, the Gothic return of a long-dead nun, and the seemingly-shallow Ginevra's abiding attachment to Lucy—the organizing disposition of the author's oeuvre shapes every character's experience and trajectory.

In these closing sections I examine that disposition's two central plots: Lucy's erotic entanglement with the impressionable Graham, and the evolving effects, psychological and formal, of a childhood trauma. Both begin with a primal impression that Lucy takes as a girl. As the passage above attests, her early attachment to Graham—which initiates the main drama of the novel—exercises a powerful influence well into her adulthood. The novel reveals that men, including both Graham and Paul, can rivet her attention, a feature of the impressible mind that accounts for much of her anguish in romance.

The formal effects of impressibility stem not from interactions with others, but from the force of Lucy's own memories. This second line along which her disposition develops begins in another, equally enduring childhood impression: a fatal tragedy that befalls her family. Through the late confluence of these two strains of impressibility, *Villette* ultimately liberates its heroine from the most rigid and "depressed" form of her disposition, and in doing so decisively distinguishes itself from *Jane Eyre* (*Villette* 199). With Paul's drowning, which recapitulates the allegorical language of Lucy's childhood loss, the two primary expressions of impressibility collide, and Lucy becomes the first and last Brontëan creation to develop beyond that cast of mind.

A primary cause of Lucy's suffering, impressionability too marks the novel, notably in how certain settings reflect Graham's serial mode of attention. Of the many place-names that evoke shallow hollows—*Villette*'s image for the impressionable mind—the street where Madame Beck's school for girls is located is most telling. Rue Fossette, which translates literally as "Dimple Street," covertly cites one of the most crucial passages in Brontë's oeuvre, in which (through Lucy) she schematizes the two dispositions that underpin so much of her thinking across the novels. In that scene, Lucy characterizes the mind of her godmother's son as forming a dimple-like impression of another's face: he is, she writes, "impressionable . . . as dimpling water" (300).[43] The street name "Rue Fossette" transfers the concavity of a dimple from a woman's face to the surface of an impressionable mind to, finally, the topography of the novel itself. Young women enjoy a brief tenure in this low point on *Villette*'s cartography before they are pushed out—exactly as if from the mind of an impressionable man—by new girls coming along behind them.

Villette's simile for Graham's mind underlines the brevity of its impressions with an image that revives the association of perception with portraiture. The dimples on the faces of the two women he is observing become dimples in the surface of his mind. The figure recalls the defining activity of the Brontëan mind: to take an impression of another's face. And, like dimples, the impressions last only a moment. Able (like water) to register the gentlest effect of a breeze, the impressionable mind cannot *preserve* a shape any more than water can. Lucy prefers the long retention of impressions to Graham's tendency to erase and overwrite them. His

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[43] *Villette* frequently visualizes impressionability as a small hollow that acts as a temporary container. An earlier passage analogizes Graham's affection to a "transitory rain-pool" that "hold[s] in its hollow one draught" (265). The brevity of these impressions enacts the flitting of his attention from one object to the next. (It is for this reason that Frances in *The Professor* refers to widespread sympathies as "shallow.")

impressionability, she adds, makes him "*unimpressible*: the breeze, the sun, moved him," but "metal could not grave, nor fire brand" (300; emphasis in original). As Brontë's fiction has taught us well, impressible minds keep affective impressions as if they were engraved by a metal point. Such "brandings" are steeped in emotional content, and, retained for a lifetime, often entail not brief but unbreakable ties.

Lucy is a young girl when she first takes a mental "portrait" of Graham, initiating a long and agonizing erotic attachment. Even after a decade's separation, when she comes across a watercolor of him, her physiognomic description of it blurs the distinction between painting and a ten-year-old impression: "a youth of sixteen, fair-complexioned, with sanguine health in his cheek; hair long, not dark, and with a sunny sheen; penetrating eyes, an arch mouth, and a gay smile" (197). Calling up a portrait-like memory, she describes how, as a girl, she used to gaze into the "bonny wells of [the painting's] eyes, whose glance under their hazel lashes seemed like a pencilled laugh" (197). Graham's mouth, it transpires, reveals his darker side: "his lips menaced . . . caprice and light esteem" (197).

It is precisely this ambivalence—Graham is "sunnily" handsome on the one hand, and menacingly capricious on the other—that provokes Lucy's central moral task: how is she to discern and evaluate the emotional natures of the characters around her, and of Graham in particular? For a long time, completely devoted to him, she can see only his best side: he does benevolent medical work for the poor, and is a charming companion and affectionate son. As she explains, however, this appraisal changes over time: "Reader, if, in the course of this work, you find that my opinion of [Graham] undergoes modification, excuse the seeming inconsistency. I give the feeling as at the time I felt it" (222).

Lucy's feelings about Graham first begin to shift with his utter failure to recognize *her* after their ten years apart. His non-retention of a mental portrait recalls a half-serious threat he once issued to his doting playmate Polly Home. In a psychologically complex exchange, he tries to extract a kiss from the young Polly, who is infatuated with him, in exchange for not destroying an etching of a boy she associates with him (20–22). He threatens specifically to destroy the face, to "split[] little Harry's nose," as if to erase his own physiognomy from where it is "etched" in her mind (21). The scene distills the relation between dispositional types: an impressible girl is obliged to preserve an image of an impressionable boy, and he is free to exploit that deeply-felt obligation. Like Polly, Lucy retains a physiognomic portrait of Graham her whole life, while he characteristically forgets her, despite enjoying the benefits of her memory, and, later, her advice on *his* infatuations.

Lucy's attachment reaches its crisis when Graham, with heartless inconsideration, asks her to whisper something about himself into Polly's ear, so as to give him the pleasure of observing Polly's face. Lucy refuses: "I felt . . . an inward courage, warm and resistant. . . . With now welcome force, I realized his entire misapprehension of my character. . . . He did not at all guess what I felt: he did not read my eyes, or face, or gestures; though, I doubt not, all spoke" (367–68). In moments like this, Graham is utterly uninterested in others, wanting only "to feed th[e] ravenous sentiment [of his "masculine self-love"], without thought of the price of provender, or care for the cost of keeping it sleek and high-pampered" (229). Even his interest in Polly manifests itself as wanting to scrutinize her face while she is thinking about *him*. Unlike Lucy—preoccupied by others' feelings, and held hostage by old attachments—he is interested almost exclusively in his own gratification, and is often "oblivio[us] of all but the present" (229). Graham, she concludes, is fatally unimpressible.

Partly as a consequence of this incompatibility of dispositions, Lucy experiences intermittent bouts of intense depression: "A sorrowful indifference to existence often pressed on me—a despairing resignation to reach betimes the end of all things earthly. Alas! When I had full leisure to look on life as life must be looked on by such as me, I found it but a hopeless desert" (179).[44] Describing her temperament as "soon-depressed," she is occasionally overcome by feelings of "agonizing depression" (365; 182). Indeed, *Villette* has a case to be named the first novel to depict "depression" in its modern psychiatric sense. Departing markedly from the older phrase "depression in spirits," which evokes an early modern notion of melancholia, Brontë's novel anticipates twentieth-century diagnoses of depression as a mood disorder. Citing a 1905 article in a psychology journal as the word's first usage in its modern, technical sense, the OED traces its appearance in fiction only as far back as George Eliot's novel *Daniel Deronda* (1876).[45] Published more than two decades earlier, Lucy's story chronicles her long struggle with—and somewhat miraculous recovery from—this characteristic peril of the impressible mind.

Late in the novel, beginning to emerge from her depression, Lucy gives a condensed account of the rest of Graham's life, and in the process softens her damning accusation of selfishness: "there are some human beings so born, so reared, so guided from a soft cradle to a calm and late grave, that no excessive suffering penetrates their lot. . . . And often these are not pampered, selfish beings, but Nature's elect, harmonious and benign" (506). Entrancing as he

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[44] Although the most immediate cause of her feelings in the quoted passage is her solitude during the school's summer break, that vacation is preceded by a tense exchange with Graham, which she leaves feeling "very chill" (174).

[45] "*depression*, n." OED Online. May 2019. Oxford University Press (accessed May 21, 2019). The phrase "depression of spirit" goes farther back in time, but its connotations—which coincide with those of "melancholy"—are fundamentally different from the word as Lucy uses it.

once was, his inexperience with suffering has rendered him unimpressible. For Lucy, Graham's "sunny" temperament is, ultimately, little more than "bland" (227). Unlike herself, Polly, and the novel's other impressible characters, he is not saddled with any "tyrant-passion" that captures his attention continually over the course of many years (369). Finally free of him, Lucy finds herself drawn to another man, whose capacity for long attachment Brontë explicitly contrasts with Graham's (472). Before considering the constancy of Paul Emanuel, however, it is necessary to return to Lucy's childhood and examine the novel's formal impressibility, which unfolds contemporaneously with her vexed devotion to Graham.

6. "What Belonged to Storm": Impressible Form in *Villette*

As a shaping characteristic of the *narrator's* mind, the second strain of impressibility manifests itself formally as well as psychologically. As with the plotline involving Graham, the origin of these formal effects lies in impressions Lucy took in childhood. Having lost her family as a girl, she is permanently "branded" with that suffering, and when those traumatic impressions return suddenly to her mind, her ability to perform the duties of narration is threatened.

A novel, Brontë suggests implicitly, is the sum of what its narrator attends to. Accordingly, a speaker who can be forced (by her own disposition) to fixate on certain affective impressions profoundly shapes that novel's form. Reworking the theme of Bertha Mason's "return" from the past, *Villette* arranges for its narrator to experience the disorienting psychic effects of such a reappearance not as a spectator, as in Jane's case, but firsthand. This tampering with the narratorial consciousness interferes with the narrative itself, generating what I call *impressible form*.

Specifically, the latter involves impressibility commandeering Lucy's attention and directing it, bewilderingly, toward memories of a traumatic childhood event. Although that event is presented in allegorical language, we infer that it involves the death of her family, who, she implies, drowned at sea during a storm. The unspeakable horror of this resurgent material defines impressible form: the narrator is made to attend to impressions she cannot consciously remember or narrate, and is also psychically unwilling to revisit. *Villette* enacts this paradox by aligning the end of each volume, where Lucy's narration is about to be suspended, with a threat to her consciousness. These moments signal the occupation of her attention by impressions of a past about which she is unable to write.

To represent these nonnarratable events and the emotion they generate, *Villette* mobilizes imagery of "almost articulate" storms (41).[46] Blocked from describing the defining event of Lucy's childhood, the novel builds a system of images that figurally endows the blank pages after each volume with the power to express what the text proper cannot. These phantom "passages," which *Villette* metaphorizes as a kind of subarticulate speech, are invariably preceded by stormy weather, likely the cause of Lucy's loss. Readers are invited to imagine that such storms continue to rage during the hiatus, and narration only resumes after they abate. Ending all of its volumes with the introduction of this other voice, the novel implicitly treats these textless pages as figuring unthinkable events in the not-quite-articulate idiom of storms.

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[46] I am drawing here on D. A. Miller's concept of nonnarratability. See *Narrative and Its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 4–5. See also Gretchen Braun, "'A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession': Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette,*" *ELH* 78, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 189–212; John Hughes, *Affective Worlds: Writing, Feeling, and Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2011), 129.

Perhaps counterintuitively, these radical interruptions in the chronological flow of narrative time dramatize an ethics of constancy.[47] Acting as violent reminders of a character's originary bond to a past still present in the form of a mental impression, these "knottings and catchings" in time actually underline the unbroken continuity across decades of indelible affective impressions (426).

An early episode involving Miss Marchmont, who hires Lucy as caretaker and companion, epitomizes the indelibility of impressions and elucidates their connection, through storms, to impressible form. Thirty years after the death of her fiancé, Frank, who died in an accident on the way to see her, she tells Lucy the story in uncannily vivid detail, right down to the play of firelight on her dress that evening. A double to the novel's elderly narrator, Miss Marchmont rhapsodizes about how much she "love[s] Memory to-night" as it revives the thoughts and feelings of her youth (42). The personified entity, she tells Lucy, "is bringing back to my heart, in warm and beautiful life, realities . . . that I long have thought decayed, dissolved, mixed in with grave-mould. I possess just now the hours, the thoughts, the hopes of my youth. I renew the love of my life—its only love—almost its only affection" (42). Reliving and "renew[ing]" her love for her long-dead suitor, Miss Marchmont asks: "For what crime was I condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow?" (43).

Miss Marchmont's aptitude for long suffering derives, she herself explains, from her impressible constancy. Unlike impressionable characters—the novel is anticipating Lucy's critique of Graham—Miss Marchmont has "strong and concentrated" feelings whose object, "in its single self, was dear to [her], as to the majority of men and women, are all the unnumbered

[47] On the expression of sexual interiority as proto-modernist experimental form in *Villette*, see Joseph Allen Boone, *Libidinal Currents: Sexuality and the Shaping of Modernism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 33–61.

points on which they dissipate their regard" (42). Her observation recalls Frances's, in *The Professor*, that "[s]ympathies so widely diffused must be very shallow" (*Professor* 201). A tremendous toll is exacted on those who do not "dissipate their regard," Miss Marchmont recognizes, and "years of sorrow" are often their lot.

The night before Miss Marchmont is transported back three decades, to relive the agony of her fiancé's death, Lucy presciently describes the "almost articulate" keening of a coming storm:

> After a calm winter, storms were ushering in the spring. I had put Miss Marchmont to bed. . . . The wind was wailing at the windows; it had wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it took a new tone—an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear; a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust. (*Villette* 41)

The past's violent irruption announces itself here with almost-comprehensible "speech." Via the pathetic fallacy—the attribution of affect to inanimate phenomena—storms and tempests in *Villette* herald the strange, time-traveling consequences of permanent ties. Indeed, this ethics of long constancy plays frequently on the etymology of "tempest." Describing the school's five-week summer vacation, Lucy notes that "[t]hree weeks of that vacation were hot, fair, and dry, but the fourth and fifth were tempestuous and wet. I do not know why that change in the atmosphere made a cruel impression on me, why the raging storm and beating rain crushed me with a deadl[y] paralysis" (180). Derived from the Latin *tempus*, the word "tempestuous" reveals the nature of the depressive "fever of the nerves" to which Lucy succumbs: like Miss Marchmont, she has been carried back through time and cast among the "well-loved dead" (182; 183).

Lucy's reference here is elliptical, but an earlier scene gives a fuller account of why stormy weather leaves such "a cruel impression." She mentions that, having left her godmother's

house, she "betook [herself] home, having been absent six months" (37). No details about the

location or inhabitants of her home are given. But storms quickly intrude on the "halcyon" scene:

> [I]t cannot be concealed that . . . I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there
> must have been a wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time—of cold, of
> danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and
> saltness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. . . . [T]here was
> a storm, . . . a heavy tempest lay on us; . . . the ship was lost, the crew perished. (37–38)[48]

As the visceral immediacy of the "saltness of briny waves in [her] throat" attests, this long-past

event is not really consigned to history. Lucy's shifting verb tenses capture its ongoing horror in

the present moment: changing from a past-tense account of having "fallen over-board," she

writes that the nightmare "repeats."[49] The event is re-experienced, intermittently, up "[t]o th[e]

hour" of writing.

In her description of the tempest, in which "the crew" of her family's ship "perished,"

Lucy joins the imagery of storms to that of impressions. In a terrifying instantiation of the

concept of affective impressions, the saltwater exerts "icy pressure on [her] lungs" (38). This

pressure is not merely descriptive, but traumatic, evoking what impressible characters retain all

their lives.[50] Old impressions haunt as an embodied pressure, relived with unrelenting intensity

over the decades that fall between the event and the moment of writing. When these traumatic

events return, they commandeer Lucy's attention, leading to the paradoxical situation of a

narrator attending to events she cannot narrate.

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[48] See Gilbert and Gubar on how "the horror of [Lucy's] life . . . is the horror of repetition" (*Madwoman*, 412).

[49] This repetition is literalized in the yearly fête commemorating an unspecified "crisis" in the history of Labassecour (*Villette*, 525). Like the inaccessible interior in which Lucy preserves memories of her own early crisis, "an enclosure . . . in the old Basse-Ville" holds "the sacred bones of [the] martyrs" who died in that event (525).

[50] On *Villette*'s imagery of drowning, see Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D. H. Lawrence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 110–18. Polhemus takes Lucy's metaphor of drowning to be a retrospective narrator's prevision of Paul's death at the novel's end. It seems tendentious, however, to claim that Lucy conceives of a childhood trauma in terms of a later loss. In fact, Lucy frames the storm that kills Paul in terms of the attention she has paid to weather since girlhood (573).

Each of *Villette*'s three volumes ends with the "almost articulate" "keening" of a storm (41; 573). Conceiving of the blank space between volumes as a "swoon[ing]" in narratorial consciousness—as the novel encourages—suggests that storms represent (among other things) an unconscious expression of Lucy's grief (191).[51] They keen for losses that she cannot describe without resorting to allegory. *Villette*'s impressible form takes shape around the structural breaks that ensue from the disarticulating force of childhood trauma. At such times, when storms overwhelm the novel, the burden of the unrepresentable has compelled her attention.

In the final paragraph of Volume One, Lucy loses herself in a storm, recalling her earlier description of her family's death: "Strong and horizontal thundered the current of the wind from north-west to south-east; it brought rain like spray, and sometimes a sharp, hail like shot; it was cold and pierced me to the vitals" (187). The volume closes in unconsciousness: "I tried to reach the porch of a great building near, but the mass of frontage and the giant-spire turned black and vanished from my eyes. . . . I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss. I remember no more" (187). Readers of *Villette*'s 1853 edition would have found two blank pages after these words, and then the volume's back cover.[52] Volume Two begins: "Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell" (191). Plummeting into the blank "abyss" between volumes, where past horrors linger, Lucy ceases to "remember" because she has been cast down among unconscious memories (187; 183).

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[51] The actress Vashti—who, like Lucy, "belong[s] to storm"—is perhaps the only character able to match its expression of emotion (301). In fact, with "her throes, . . . gaspings," "breathing" and "panting," she mimics its "almost articulate" wails (301).

[52] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1853), 324.

After an ironic reference to storm at the end of volume two, the novel's third volume

gives a final twist to the association between the "keening" tempest and narrative form.[53]

Following a three-year absence, Paul Emanuel, now Lucy's fiancé, has set sail for Europe to

resume life with her:

> The wind shifts to the west. Peace, peace, Banshee—"keening" at every window! It will
> rise—it will swell—it shrieks out long: wander as I may through the house this night, I
> cannot lull the blast. The advancing hours make it strong: by midnight, all sleepless
> watchers hear and fear a wild south-west storm.
>   That storm roared frenzied for seven days. It did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn
> with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance. Not till the
> destroying angel of tempest had achieved his perfect work[.] (573)

In a repetition of earlier imagery of drowning, this last storm ends the novel by taking Paul's life

as well.

This conclusion would seem to reprise the end to Volume One—a storm, a death, the

pathetic fallacy, and the blank pages we have been trained to read as a wordless expression of

grief. In a critical difference, however, Lucy is apparently not incapacitated. On the contrary, she

remains entirely lucid. The novel's last words do not show her "pitch[ing] headlong down an

abyss"; rather, she calmly summarizes the afterlives of three characters, and closes with a poised

"Farewell" (187; 573). This formal difference suggests that a shift has occurred in her

disposition: but what has changed, such that she is able to endure a tremendous loss and enter the

space beyond narrative without an accompanying loss of consciousness?

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[53] The storm that ends Volume Two is a figurative one. As they ride home from a party, Ginevra Fanshawe
starts to tax Lucy's patience, and Lucy decides to give her a "moral drubbing": "I made it my business to storm
down Ginevra" (372). The strained quality of this storm's appearance in the final paragraph of the middle volume
confirms the pattern and ironizes it, suggesting some change in the trope.

7. Constancy-in-Separation

Strolling one night in the allée défendue—the "forbidden" path that tends to accumulate "the relics of past autumns," and the place where a long-dead nun is said to walk—Lucy's future fiancé Paul holds forth to her about impressibility and the mnemonic retention of those who have died (123). Asked whether she believes in the supernatural, she responds cryptically in translated French: "it has happened to me to experience impressions" (425). Paul then delivers a speech about their similar physiognomies: "there is an affinity between us. Do you see it, mademoiselle, when you look in the glass? Do you observe that your forehead is shaped like mine—that your eyes are cut like mine?" (425–26).

Unlike Lucy and Graham, she and Paul share the impressible cast of mind, and have both experienced the strange temporal effects it can generate: "Yes, you were born under my star!" he says (426). "Tremble! for where that is the case with mortals, the threads of their destinies are difficult to disentangle; knottings and catchings occur—sudden breaks leave damage in the web" (426). The nun, he explains, embodies "damage in the web" of an impressible person's psychical ties. To such characters, the death of someone close guarantees the latter a long afterlife, in the form of a haunting, indelible impression. As if to confirm these time-distorting effects, the nun interrupts the conversation. To the sound of "rending" among the trees, as if she were tearing her way through the fabric of time, the nun appears "with a sort of angry rush," sweeping "close, close past [their] faces" (427).

The temporal dimension of such "damage in the web" corresponds to an ethics of constancy first formulated by Frances in *The Professor*. In *Villette*, Miss Marchmont, Lucy, and Paul are the novel's three exemplars of impressible ethics, in which early ties are maintained across time, often despite lasting separation. Ensconced in the room in Madame Walravens's

house that is more "dedicated to relics and remembrance, than designed for present use," Lucy

hears the story of Paul's constancy to his long-dead fiancée Justine Marie (453). While another

tempest rages, compelling Lucy to seek shelter and attend to the tale, Père Silas tells Lucy that

Paul "was and *is* the lover, true, constant and eternal, of . . . Justine Marie" (458; emphasis in

original).

Père Silas's "was and *is*" suggests that the affective "time-travel" her characters undergo

stems from the long preservation of early impressions. Lucy notes that Paul's love for Justine

Marie was early and singular: his "one grand love, the child of this southern nature's heart, . . .

had laughed at Death himself . . . and, in victory and faith, had watched beside a tomb twenty

years" (461–62). Seeking (like Madames Beck and Walravens) to gain from such devotion, Père

Silas ends by underscoring the code of impressibility: "His [Paul's] heart will weep for her

always: the essence of Emanuel's nature is—constancy" (459).

That quality stands in marked contrast to the conduct of impressionable men: "*His*

[Paul's] friendship," writes Lucy, "was not a doubtful, wavering benefit," or "a sentiment so

brittle as not to bear the weight of a finger" (472; emphasis in original). Recalling Crimsworth's

"vacillating" feelings in *The Professor*, and alluding to Graham's "doubtful, wavering"

attachments in *Villette*, Lucy articulates a strong preference for indelible attachments, despite the

suffering they entail (*Professor* 94). In describing her love for Paul, she writes that it has been

"furnace-tried by pain, [and] stamped by constancy" (*Villette* 542).[54]

Examining the trajectory of impressibility through *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*,

however, complicates an apparently unqualified celebration of constancy. As Brontë's oeuvre

increasingly puts that disposition front and center, characters who exhibit it are progressively

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[54] See also Brontë, *Villette*, 490; 541; 542; 559.

isolated from those to whom they have pledged constancy. Lucy is alienated from Graham; and before she can marry Paul, he is forced to leave her, and dies abroad. In a seeming paradox, the novels paint portraits of impressible women who are less and less "encumbered" by men, while at the same time stressing with greater emphasis an ethics of constancy.[55] To whom are impressible women to be constant when men—of whatever disposition—have vanished from their orbits?

In the movement across these novels, Brontë evolves the ethics of impressibility into one of *constancy-in-separation*. Though constancy to others in proximity is hardly assured—as those of an impressionable disposition make clear—impressible characters seem to require a sterner trial, despite (perhaps even because of) what Lucy calls the "corroding pain" of separation (555). Indeed, attachment in Brontë is associated more with pain than pleasure. At one point, thinking she may never see Paul again, Lucy anticipates the torment produced by being forced to attend to her impression of him while he himself is absent: "Will this day—will the next hour bring him? or must I again assay that corroding pain of *long attent*—that rude agony of rupture at the close, that mute, mortal wrench . . . while the hand that does the violence cannot be caressed to pity, because absence interposes her barrier?" (554–55, my emphasis).

Lucy's years of flourishing in Paul's absence corroborate the notion that—contrary to *Jane Eyre*'s ending—impressibility can develop beyond a stable relationship with an impressible man. Lucy's disposition is ultimately fulfilled by solitary means, specifically *after* her romance with Paul. The three years of their separation are, she writes, "the three happiest . . . of [her] life," as she dedicates herself to nurturing a school set up by Paul, implying that she will thrive in

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[55] I borrow the word "encumbered" from Graham, who says of Lucy that "she will be neither hindrance nor incumbrance" (303). At the time, Lucy proves him right, but Brontë ultimately inverts this formulation, and it is Lucy who is disencumbered of men, including Paul, Graham, and all their precursors.

his absence (570). Graduating from changeable men, with their damaging attractions, to more constant ones, impressibility finally insulates itself from maleness, having replaced actual men with women's affective impressions of them.[56]

That independence constitutes a fuller development of impressibility is certified by its coincidence with a remission in Lucy's depression. Product of the main wellsprings of suffering in her life—namely, a dispositional tendency to preserve attachments on the basis of originary impressions of Graham and her family—Lucy's depression finally wanes: "Few things shook me now," she writes; "few things had importance to vex, intimidate or depress me" (571).

Strikingly, the two categories of things that can co-opt the "long attent" of impressible women, triggering their enduring constancy, are men and the trauma of loss. Some deep resemblance exists between Rochester's face, as it forcibly holds Jane's attention, almost carving itself into her mind, and the childhood experiences that are cut permanently into Lucy's memory. *Villette* associates—even implicitly equates—the two.

It's in this equation of men with trauma that the two strains of impressibility I have discussed converge. One history of suffering culminates in the resolution of the other: Paul's death in a storm at sea, on the novel's last page, reprises the childhood trauma that has "repeated" in Lucy's mind over the years. This doubling, moreover, sheds light on why she remains conscious at the end of the last volume. The death of a man who could commandeer her attention at will seems to liberate her from this quirk of the impressible temperament. And the proof is in the pudding: under the joint blow of Paul's death and the memories it summons up, Lucy does not lose her ability to narrate. The two lines of her impressible development are, in the

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[56] Given the incorporation of the other involved in impressibility, a person like Lucy is never fully "insulated" from Paul. However, it is notable that her "constancy" requires his initial presence (not least to secure a place for her school) and later absence.

end, only one: Paul's death-by-storm simultaneously repeats her traumatic experience and completes her progressive isolation from maleness, resolving both. In full possession of her wits, even as she passes out of narrative, Lucy is no longer subject to the hijacking of her attention, either from without, by Graham and Paul, or within, by persistent impressions.

Structuring the minds of her characters, her plots, her ethics, and her experimentation with form, Brontë's categories of impressibility and impressionability together represent a probing model for the analysis of interpersonal dynamics that later novelists, including George Eliot, would adopt and recast for their own ends. From the figural framework governing *The Professor* through the impressible plot of *Jane Eyre* and Lucy's eventual release from the strictures of long constancy, Brontë launched an extended investigation into a retiring, seemingly passive disposition that she built up into a monumental theory of character, attachment, and narrative.

"Before the labour of choice": Susceptibility and the Ethics of Unchosen Attachments in George Eliot's Fiction

"This is what makes the susceptible woman a bad lover. She prefers to love rather than to be loved. . . . Her pleasure is so completely of an imaginative kind that when two are brought actively into it, she ceases to enjoy it with . . . fanatic zest."
                –"Susceptible Girls"[1]

1. Emotional Susceptibility

Years before her earliest fiction, in the first publication of her career, George Eliot alludes to an obscure emotional disposition that would come to be a central concern in the decades and novels to follow:

> It may be doubted, whether a mind which has no susceptibility to the pleasure of changing its point of view, of mastering a remote form of thought, of perceiving identity of nature under variety of manifestation—a perception which resembles an expansion of one's own being, a pre-existence in the past—can possess . . . the ready sympathy . . . which characterizes a truly philosophic culture.[2]

In later years, looking back, she would see herself as having always had a certain "susceptibility," and would associate the quality with a Brontëan notion of permanent impressions. Her father, she writes, "was a youth of sixteen when the [French] Revolution began, and that mighty event . . . had left an indelible impression on him, and the convictions . . . it had fostered in his mind permeated through . . . into the susceptible soul of his youngest daughter."[3] Eliot's cast of mind was decided, she suggests, three decades before her birth. Several of her protagonists would experience their own susceptibility to a past impression with similar belatedness.

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[1] "Susceptible Girls," *Every Saturday: A Journal of Choice Reading* (August 1867): 281.
[2] George Eliot, "Mackay's *Progress of the Intellect*," *Westminster Review* 54 (January 1851): 354.
[3] George Eliot, *George Eliot's Life As Related in Her Letters and Journals*, ed. J. W. Cross (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1885), 3.

Seen by many scholars and readers as the Victorian era's great apostle of sympathy, Eliot was preoccupied throughout her career by this other emotional disposition and its quite-different model of interpersonal relations.[4] Further, as she explains in the quotation above, it is only on the basis of susceptibility that one is able—later in life—to "possess . . . [a] ready sympathy" (*George Eliot's Life* 3). What, then, is this cryptic temperament, and how does it relate to the supposed moral aim and ideal of her fiction?

Eliot's interest in susceptibility and sympathy stemmed from concern about the threat that egoism could pose to communal unity and stability. Scholars have frequently cited egoism as the paradigmatic moral error in Eliot's fiction. As Terry Eagleton puts it, perhaps too tendentiously, "There are no villains in Eliot, just egoists."[5] Generally unamenable to moral counsel by others, the thoroughgoing egoist presented for her, as for society at large, a tantalizing ethical challenge. In response, Eliot's novels formulate the concept of susceptibility, differentiating it from sympathy on several grounds: the former operates involuntarily; it is associated with an earlier developmental stage; and those who embody it experience susceptibility as an acute (if sometimes desired) form of suffering.

Though she is credited with the second published use of the word *altruism* in the English language (her partner, George Henry Lewes, being first), Eliot's novels do not foreground, as many critics have suggested, an effortful, years-long cultivation of other-oriented compassion. In a move characteristic of twenty-first-century scholarship on Eliotic sympathy, George Levine

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[4] Suzy Anger articulates this view of Eliotic sympathy well: "Eliot's fundamental moral principle is that the capacity for sympathy is a necessary condition for a moral agent, since morality grows from the ability to imagine another's state of mind" ("George Eliot and Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001], 80).

[5] Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 184. On egoism's centrality to Eliot's fiction, see also John Halperin, *Egoism and Self-Discovery in the Victorian Novel: Studies in the Ordeal of Knowledge in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), 125–94; A. S. Byatt, Introduction to *The Mill on the Floss*, by George Eliot (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), xxviii.

affirms the latter description of Eliotic sympathy prior to his analysis of its ethical shortcomings: "the efforts at the self-discipline of self-denial in the face of the powerful and demanding ethical reality of the other are at the heart of George Eliot's art."[6] Yet Eliot recognized that the committed egoists she portrays would simply choose not to exercise such self-discipline and self-denial; many run rampant in the small towns where her stories are set, their corrosive influence unchecked by sympathetic persuasion. They ignore what Levine describes as the "profound connection between the effort of knowing [the other] and the ethic of loving" (27). In the case of a selfish character, sympathy has no way to get off the ground.

In susceptibility, perhaps because so few other remedies are viable or enforceable, Eliot depicts the subjection of egoists to an excruciating, poison-like invasion by others. Unlike an effortful process of learning about the other, susceptibility involves the self's forcible psychic occupation by that other. Her narrators emphasize repeatedly that this phenomenon is involuntary; indeed, for it to work at all, it must bypass a character's ability to choose. The unchosen disciplines enforced via susceptibility constitute a stronger medicine than sympathy for the ailment Eliot saw in Victorian Britain.

Making this susceptibility to "indelible impressions" the psychological basis of her ethics, Eliot's novels represent a different and complex continuation of earlier treatments of the subject by Henry Mackenzie and Charlotte Brontë. Contra Smithian sympathy and its mode of serial spectatorship, Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* (1771) describes a dispositional tendency to form binding attachments. Such characters embrace suffering rather than fleeing it—narratively, via the affective picaresque—for new, and pleasurably cathartic, spectacles of

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[6] George Levine, *Realism, Ethics and Secularism: Essays on Victorian Literature and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 26–27.

distress. With the concept of impressibility, Brontë both expands and recasts Mackenzie's

formulation. An agonizing and unchosen cast of mind (often linked to suffering and endurance),

impressibility opposes the flippant, touristic model of sexuality that Brontë associates with its

opposite, impressionability. Equally importantly, she represents impressibility as a viable

alternative to sympathy. A generation later, Eliot would take up and enliven the same ethical

quandary, expanding it once again to address questions of gender, class, and religion, but also

milder forms of violence and antagonism that escape the purview of the law.

Nineteenth-century thinkers treated the concept of susceptibility more systematically than

those of the twentieth and twenty-first, and recent scholars have tended to focus on susceptibility

in the eighteenth-century context.[7] Understood from that century onward as a "capacity for

receiving mental and moral impressions," and as a "disposition or tendency to be emotionally

affected," susceptibility lent itself, in the hands of Victorian novelists and thinkers, to debates

about the nature of mind, self, and community ethics.[8] Most nineteenth-century commentators

expressed only derision, at best concern, for those burdened by this "affliction of character," and

psychologists such as Alexander Bain and George Payne saw it as tending toward pathology.[9]

Anticipating Eliot's emphasis on childhood, the eminent phrenologist George Combe wrote in

the 1830s that "[a]ge diminishes the susceptibility and activity of the organs; and hence they are

unable to receive and to reproduce impressions with the vivacity of youth."[10]

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[7] See G. J. Barker-Benfield, *Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 25–27; 118; John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 16; 64; 207.

[8] "*susceptibility*, n.1" OED Online. September 2019. Oxford University Press (accessed October 10, 2019).

[9] Payne's *Elements of Mental and Moral Sciences* (1828) was written, according to its subtitle, "to exhibit the original susceptibilities of the mind." I discuss Bain's views on susceptibility below.

[10] George Combe, *A System of Phrenology*, 3rd ed. (London: Longman & Co., 1838), 486.

As part of a broader wave of scholarship on the psychology of sociality in the Victorian novel, several recent studies of Eliot have found susceptibility and related concepts useful.[11] Examining the multiple valences of "sensitivity" in Eliot's life and fiction, Tom Sperlinger helpfully brings together a set of concerns that includes "emotional susceptibility," affective connectedness to others, and one's consequent ability or tendency to do good or evil.[12] His work resonates particularly with the protagonist of *The Lifted Veil* (1859), given that character's self-described "morbidly sensitive nature."[13] Mary Beth Tegan claims that susceptibility in Eliot's work represents an "unhealthy" openness to external influence, arguing that this excess can be corrected "[t]hrough encounters with sensational bodies and texts," which can aid "a too susceptible 'fair sympathizer'" in becoming "reacquainted with her own body's truths."[14]

Acknowledging susceptibility's tendency to slip into oversensitivity, and building on these scholars' conceptual framework, I suggest that the moral polemic encoded into this unusual cast of mind represents a cornerstone—largely overlooked—of Eliot's views on psychology and ethics. I take susceptibility to involve a pre-evaluative attachment to others that leads to an

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[11] Alicia Christoff's reading of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) through object relations psychoanalytic theory, in which the psyche is conceived as being populated and even constituted by others, develops a cognate logic to that of susceptibility ("Alone With Tess," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 48, no. 1 [2015]: 18–44). Fredric Jameson argues relatedly that George Eliot seeks to break down existing systems of ethics and to install in their place the conviction that individual lives only accrue meaning and ethical value through their interrelations with others (*The Antinomies of Realism* [New York: Verso, 2013], 114–37). See also Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), which captures well the affective condition of being bound to another who inhibits one's flourishing; Adela Pinch, *Thinking About Other People in Nineteenth-Century British Writing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010); and Vanessa L. Ryan, *Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[12] Tom Sperlinger, "'The Sensitive Author': George Eliot," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 36, no. 3 (2007): 250–72. Reading *Adam Bede* (1859), Sperlinger sees sensitiveness (embodied in Arthur Donnithorne) as a form of pure egoism, while Adam, the "immovable obstacle" who is not susceptible to outside influence, represents the novel's romanticized image of the right-feeling working man.

[13] George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil* and *Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 15.

[14] Mary Beth Tegan, "Strange Sympathies: George Eliot and the Literary Science of Sensation," *Women's Writing* 20, no. 2 (2012): 177; 181.

anguished participation in their experiences, especially their suffering. Individual cases of this form of preemptive attachment are shown to lead to misery and disaster; Eliot's willingness to accept (perhaps even quietly endorse) such outcomes indicates the severity, in her view, of the problem she sets susceptibility to address. Her novels imply that egoism warranted radical measures that could seem plainly unethical in themselves. Embodying a radical rejection of individualist morality, and experiencing consciousness as a shared or reciprocal phenomenon, susceptible characters find that others are always already irresistibly present in and constitutive of the mind. Her fiction, I will show, portrays such attachments as coming about through the psyche's intrinsic but unwilling "openness" to the other.

The Lifted Veil offers a first depiction of Eliot's conception of susceptibility. The novella's science-fictional elements make it a useful laboratory for working out her ideas about both that emotional makeup and the particular style of attachment it entails. Subject to extra-sensory "intrusion[s]" and explicitly labeling himself "susceptible," Latimer—the text's telepathic protagonist—finds that his mind can be invaded and occupied by the clamorous thoughts of other people (*Lifted* 18; 13; 8). The innermost feelings of everyone he knows are "unveiled" to him; only the alluring Bertha Grant is exempt from his clairvoyance. In a figure crucial for Eliotic susceptibility, the novella likens her influence over him to a poison administered so gradually that he does not perceive the slowly mounting symptoms of his attachment. While the egoism of the novella's first-person narrator colors events—a fact that complicates Latimer's status as an example of the disposition—he does embody this characteristic "poisonability" of the susceptible mind, becoming aware of his tie to Bertha only after it has become unbreakable.

Eliot's next novel, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), represents Tom Tulliver's insinuation into the affections of his sister, the susceptible Maggie, as similarly poisonous. Comparing him to a toxic plant called a tare, which closely resembles wheat during the early stages of its growth, the novel figures him as an infiltrator into the root-like network of his young sister's ties. Associating these roots with the web-like structure of a family, Eliot casts "keen susceptibility" as a defining feature of childhood attachments and influence.[15] Maggie's affective dependence on her family develops prior to her ability to differentiate between those people who (like wheat) would sustain her and those who (like tares) would do her harm. As a result, she is, in later years, unable to dislodge or "uproot" more damaging ties without destroying altogether her capacity to bond with others.

Remaking the image of intertwining roots into the web of communal relations, *Middlemarch* (1871–72) represents Eliot's most complex treatment of susceptibility and its ethics. I examine the novel's portrayal of susceptibility as a pervasive experience emerging not from individual psychology but rather the fundamental condition of being embedded in a community. *Middlemarch* shows this kind of susceptibility to have two closely related benefits: it can catalyze moral advancement (toward sympathy), and it tends to foster traits that facilitate effective cooperation among antagonistic members of a community. The latter, I suggest, enable a person to make social changes guided by the ethics of the former. Through her morally courageous support of Dr. Tertius Lydgate, and her eventual work on electoral reform, Dorothea represents a further development of susceptibility in demonstrating how it can be mobilized effectively in a political context through practical service to others.

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[15] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. A. S. Byatt (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 273.

Eliot's last novel, *Daniel Deronda* (1876), represents a somewhat unexpected elaboration of her interest in the usefulness of susceptibility for alleviating suffering. Focused less on the acceptance of one's given neighbors than on the *creation* of such a community, in a specifically political sense and toward political ends, the novel examines how certain key traits, many of them encapsulated by Daniel's Jewishness, equip him to contribute to the project of founding a new state based on a "community of interest."[16]

The chapter argues that Eliot's imagery of poison captures a particular temporality of *preemption* in which susceptible characters become inextricably entangled with others—like the roots of wheat and its toxic lookalike—before they realize the process has even begun. Important differences notwithstanding, Latimer and Maggie's marriage-like attachments to Bertha and Tom, respectively, become fixed and irreversible prior to their ability to evaluate (and willingly to choose) those others.[17] In *Middlemarch,* the self's permeability to others, a condition literalized by poison, extends well beyond its protagonist. And, while the negative connotations of poison are undeniable, pointing to Eliot's understanding that susceptible "poisonability" can result in damaging attachments, the risk is intrinsic to her ethical ideal of "a wide fellow-feeling with all that is human" (*Mill* 518). To feel for and with "all that is human," including those who would harmfully exploit such feelings, is necessarily to hazard personal well-being.

For Eliot, the susceptible disposition can be a critical catalyst in the process of converting an egoist into a more sympathetic character. Toothless against the egoism exhibited by

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[16] On the concept of a "community of interest," see Suzanne Graver, *George Eliot and Community: A Study in Social Theory and Fictional Form* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 6–9.

[17] *The Lifted Veil* and *The Mill on the Floss* did not exhaust Eliot's interest in the preemptive nature of childhood attachments. *Brother Jacob*—published five years later, in 1864—stresses this aspect of a susceptible character's "choices." On the basis of a childhood sweet tooth, David Faux, the main character, "wed[s] himself irrevocably to confectionary" as a career (49). Eliot makes it explicit that sweets represent a pre-critical desire to which David—not unlike Latimer—becomes permanently "wedded."

protagonists and villains alike, sympathy recruits susceptibility to initiate a coercive ethical

rewiring. In its emphasis on the formation of undiscriminating attachments, susceptibility

enables the radical unselfishness of Eliotic sympathy. Generating attachments that precede

choice, and which are therefore not predicated on a judgment of the other's worthiness,

susceptibility represents a developmental model for—and perhaps a harrowing bridge to—the

mature, intentional form of sympathy that Eliot believes realist fiction can foster.

2. The Temporality of Poison in *The Lifted Veil*

Visiting Lichtenberg Palace with his half-brother's fiancée Bertha Grant, Latimer becomes

transfixed by a portrait of a "cruel-eyed woman" (*Lifted* 18–19). As critics have noticed, his

figure for her effect on him initiates the novella's poison plot.[18] "[F]ascinated by the terrible

reality of that cunning, relentless face," he feels "a strange poisoned sensation" (19). Moments

later, Bertha, with similarly "cruel eyes," appears beside him and slips her arm through his (19).

An "intoxicating numbness" suddenly overtakes him and he has a vision of a future in which she

has become his wife:

> Intense and hopeless misery was pressing on my soul; . . . Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand—Bertha, my wife—with cruel eyes . . . every hateful thought within her present to me . . . "Madman, idiot! why don't you kill yourself, then?" It was a moment of hell. I saw into her pitiless soul—saw its barren worldliness, its scorching hate—and felt it clothe me round like an air I was obliged to breathe. (19)

The Lifted Veil tells the story of the telepath Latimer's "boyish passion" for Bertha, the

one woman who is exempt from his "diseased participation in other people's consciousness" (16;

17). After the death of his brother, Latimer marries her, despite his supernatural prevision of the

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[18] See Thomas Albrecht, "Sympathy and Telepathy: The Problem of Ethics in George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil,'" *ELH* 73, no. 2 (Summer 2006): 448. On the broader significance of poison, see Cheryl Blake Price, "Poison, Sensation, and Secrets in *The Lifted Veil*," *Victorian Review* 36, no. 1 (2010): 203–16.

"scorching hate" she will one day feel for him (19). Years pass, and they become estranged.

When her maid dies under mysterious circumstances, Latimer's friend, the doctor Charles

Meunier, performs a dramatic blood transfusion to the corpse, and the maid—momentarily

revivified—accuses Bertha of (literally) poisoning her husband.[19]

The critical scene in the palace exhibits both forms of Latimer's clairvoyance, "insight

and foresight," and links them, ambiguously, to *The Lifted Veil*'s poison plot (6). The first, his

"superadded consciousness," involves "the frivolous ideas and emotions" of other people

"forc[ing] themselves on [his] consciousness like an importunate, ill-played musical instrument"

(15; 13). Contrary to a common formulation in the scholarship, insight does not give him

"unrestricted *access to* . . . other minds"; rather, his mind is *occupied by* others' thoughts.[20] He

finds himself subjected to "the obtrusion on [his] mind of the mental process going forward in

first one person, and then another" (13). Foresight, in contrast, grants him glimpses of future

events, including a detailed "prevision" of his own death (18). In the scene above, for the only

time in the story, these two kinds of supernatural knowledge converge: he hears "every hateful

thought" Bertha is having at a time years in the future (19).

Why, we may ask, does *The Lifted Veil* require two forms of clairvoyance, seemingly

unrelated as they are? I suggest that, working in concert, they reveal the unchosen but

nevertheless binding nature of Latimer's attachment to Bertha, and of susceptible ties in general.

I will treat the two in order. Insight highlights the fact that he does not consciously *choose* her;

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[19] More precisely, Mrs. Archer only accuses Bertha of *planning* to poison Latimer. However, we can infer from the later degradation of his ability to read Bertha's thoughts that she has in fact been poisoning him. No other event accounts for his loss of insight during the alleged plot to kill him.

[20] Sophie Alexandra Frazer, "George Eliot and Spinoza: Toward a Theory of the Affects," *George Eliot–George Henry Lewes Studies* 70, no. 2 (2018): 133; my emphasis. See also Albrecht, "Sympathy," 438; Jill Galvan, "The Narrator as Medium in George Eliot's *The Lifted Veil*," *Victorian Studies* 48, no. 2 (2006): 240.

indeed, she is a cipher to him at the time he develops a full-fledged attachment.[21] *The Lifted Veil* underlines this aspect of susceptibility by making Bertha the one person into whose thoughts and feelings he (initially) has no insight. Not being based on an informed judgment of her character, his tie to her is, in a deep sense, unchosen. Only afterwards—though, critically, before they marry—does Latimer discern Bertha's character and their mutual incompatibility.

Susceptible ties involve a logic of preemption in which one becomes aware of an attachment only retrospectively. *The Lifted Veil* conveys this by analogizing attachment-formation to the "temporality" of a poisoning. The novella is preoccupied by questions about time, most obviously in its use of foresight, but no less centrally with respect to poison, in both its literal and psychic manifestations. Administered incrementally, poison could produce irreversible effects before a character became aware that he was being worked on at all. The gradual pace of this process evokes how others insinuate themselves into the susceptible mind by unnoticeable degrees. Standing in front of the painting, Latimer notes that it is in the nature of many poisons that one does not recognize their effects until too late. In the first moment of noticing that quality of the portrait's gaze, he feels "as if [he] *had long been* inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects" (19; my emphasis). Latimer links this quality to Bertha, suggesting that this "poisoning" represents the latter's influence over him, which has caused his "growing passion" to become a fixed attachment (18). Crucially, the "poison" preempts his ability to choose, accomplishing its aim prior to his having a reason either to pursue or avoid her.

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[21] As I discuss below, Latimer's prevision of marriage occurs only *after* he has ingested the "fatal odour" that binds him to her (19).

Foresight enables Eliot to give him that reason with supernatural force, and thus to show that such attachments are no less binding for being unwilled. Notably, Latimer verifies an earlier vision (of specific details about the city of Prague) *before* he marries Bertha (23). The second prevision, of his future misery in marriage, is therefore credible, and seems to arrive just in time to prevent his infatuation from becoming a permanent legal bond. Indeed, Eliot's device gives him a better excuse not to marry than naturalistic circumstances could ever provide; his inability to break with her thus implies the impossibility of such a split under normal conditions. Love (or infatuation) binds him to her before he is able to make an informed choice, and no subsequent actions or information—including magically procured knowledge of future torments—can empower him to sever that tie.

Poison in *The Lifted Veil* has the temporality of a *fait accompli*, an action that is "completed (and irreversible) before affected parties learn of its having been undertaken."[22] I borrow the term from Eliot herself, who had reflected on historical *faits accomplis* in *Adam Bede* (1859).[23] In *The Lifted Veil* she associates them with the discovery, in hindsight, that one has become attached. Tapping into a contemporaneous panic about poison, specifically the anxiety felt by many husbands that their wives might already be in the process of murdering them, Eliot makes this act of violent "influence" a figure for the mind's vulnerability to an imperceptible occupier.[24]

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[22] "*fait accompli*, n." OED Online. June 2019. September 2019. Oxford University Press (accessed July 13, 2019).

[23] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin Classic, 1985), 315.

[24] On Eliot's familiarity with this trend in murder, see Price, "Poison." As Price notes dryly, the panic around women poisoners acted as a smokescreen for the larger-scale violence men inflicted on women (205). Men sometimes poisoned too. In 1856, just three years before the novella was published, there had been a widely publicized trial of William Palmer, the so-called Rugeley Poisoner, who was accused of poisoning his patients rather than treating them.

Recognizing the peculiar temporality of Latimer's susceptibility to Bertha clarifies the novella's need for foresight in the first place. Scholarship is surprisingly short on explanations for this almost-unique deployment, in Eliot's fiction, of a supernatural device (as distinguished from psychologized gothic elements).[25] Susceptibility offers a solution: if poison accomplishes its end before one knows it's even begun to work, then it stands to reason that the only defense is foresight. The latter represents a counterbalancing temporality to the *fait accompli* of susceptible attachment. Only prevision might stand a chance against another's ability preemptively to produce feelings of attachment. (It is worth noting that foresight without insight would likely be useless, given Bertha's tendency to dissemble. Latimer must know not just her future actions, but also her future thoughts.)

The novella carefully stages a contest between these two temporalities, susceptibility and foresight. It is during the palace scene that they square off, each vying to determine Latimer's future actions with respect to Bertha. The sequence of events in this decisive moment—the *fabula*, as opposed to the *sujet*—is critical. First, Bertha "poisons" Latimer. This act secures him to her. Next, he *realizes* that he has become attached, comparing that process to having unknowingly ingested a poisonous odor. Finally, his clairvoyance gives him a glimpse of his miserable future with Bertha. With these three events, the stage is set for *The Lifted Veil* to pose the pivotal question of its plot: will he marry her? Put differently, which temporality will decide his future, preemption, coercing him to marry, or foresight, urging him to leave?

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[25] Scholars tend to focus on the metaphoric aspects of Latimer's clairvoyance. It can be understood to represent a sympathy that preserves difference (Albrecht), or possibly the medium-like attributes of a narrator (Galvan). Terry Eagleton is inclined to deny that Latimer is a telepath at all. However, none of these interpretations quite accounts for why, in this one instance, Eliot—despite writing extensively elsewhere about the same themes—would need to give her character supernatural attributes in order to make a metaphorical point about sympathy or any other topic.

Latimer marries Bertha. Foresight cannot override susceptibility; the latter evidently nullifies subsequent counterpoints. The effects of Latimer's disposition in *The Lifted Veil* turn out to have been, in fact, irreversible. However, the triumph of susceptibility poses a narrative difficulty that brings us to the novella's climax, and specifically to the culmination of the poison plot. While Latimer's *figurative* poisoning can be revealed after the fact, through the discovery that he has become attached, his literal poisoning cannot come out retrospectively because it is the novella's first-person narrator being murdered. That one's victim does not notice he is being poisoned is precisely the appeal of that method of killing, as well as why Eliot adopts it as metaphor. How, then, can readers be made privy to the poison plot, if the narrator dies before he knows of it? (Evocatively, the poison erodes Latimer's clairvoyance, so he cannot read Bertha's presumably murderous thoughts. Susceptibility not only bests foresight; its figure, poison, literally destroys it.) Bertha's secret—and this crucial plot point—would seem to be inaccessible to Latimer and reader alike.

I suggest that the novella's climactic final scene, in which the corpse of Bertha's maid receives a blood transfusion, constructs a countervailing temporality that neutralizes Latimer's susceptibility to poison-like preemption. This allows the poison plot to be exposed. Rather than devising a new, third temporality, however, the transfusion turns Bertha's power to preempt against herself. In line with *The Lifted Veil*'s conception of susceptibility and clairvoyance in temporal terms, Eliot's infamous climax involves a medical procedure that effectively causes time to flow backward.

The secret of Latimer's poisoning can only come out because Bertha believes that the window of time in which it *could* be revealed has passed. As her maid and confidante Mrs. Archer slowly dies, Bertha looms over her, refusing to leave her side. The doctor notices a

"strange prompting" in the maid "to say something," and Latimer wonders, "What secret was there between Bertha and this woman?" (40; 41). Even so, Bertha intimidates her into silence. Latimer recognizes her tactic as a waiting-until; when at last Mrs. Archer dies, he intuits that "Bertha had been watching for the moment of death as the sealing of her secret" (41). The doctor pronounces the death and Bertha relaxes her guard, allowing herself to be led from the room.

The blood transfusion transports Mrs. Archer back to a time "prior to" her death, that is, before the moment in which Bertha thought her safety from discovery was secured once and for all. With his wife out of the room, Latimer performs artificial respiration and the doctor (his friend Charles Meunier) transfuses blood into the corpse. Eliot's description of the dead woman's "return" suggests a movement backward from death into life: "[Latimer] could see the wondrous slow return of life; . . . the eyelids quivered, and the soul seemed to have returned beneath them" (41). Bertha bursts into the room in time to hear herself accused: "You mean to poison your husband," the maid cries out; "the poison is in the black cabinet" (42).

Bertha's vulnerability to Mrs. Archer symbolically parallels Latimer's susceptibility to herself: both are acted on prior to the time in which they are aware that others *could* act on them. In other words, both are preempted according to the logic of susceptibility. Thinking (reasonably enough) that Mrs. Archer's death is final, and that all events must now take place after that death, Bertha does not anticipate any threat from the returned-to-life maid. Having turned out to be invulnerable to foreknowledge, susceptibility is ultimately outmaneuvered by its own logic of working on a person in her own past.

We can extrapolate from these events that, even in her early fiction, Eliot understands affective bonds and the responsibilities they confer in terms of temporality. Mrs. Archer's revelation exposes Bertha's plot against Latimer; more salient to Bertha's own psychology, the

revelation also shows that she cannot abuse Mrs. Archer with impunity. Bertha is revealed to be susceptible not simply to a plot twist, but via a formerly close bond that retains the capacity to preempt even after Mrs. Archer's death. In the moral universe of susceptibility, such ties, once established, cannot be retroactively undone.

Faced with the narrative problem of how to bring the poison plot to light, Eliot finds a solution that preserves susceptibility as a central concern, rather than dispelling it. Crucially, Bertha and susceptibility are outdone not by some new, stronger force, but by her own powers turned against her. The blood transfusion preempts the novella's (former) representative of the power to preempt. As such, the *fait accompli* of a poisoning remains an appropriate heuristic for thinking about the temporality of susceptible attachment.

3. Susceptibility and Sympathy

Published five years before *The Lifted Veil*, psychologist Alexander Bain's *The Senses and the Intellect* (1855) proposed a surprising relation between a widely derided susceptibility and a widely celebrated sympathy. Eliot knew Bain's writing well, and scholars have discussed important intersections in their thought.[26] Given her own suggestion, several years before Bain's book, that "ready sympathy" depends on a certain "susceptibility," it is clear that, despite different conclusions, both thinkers believed that the latter disposition might help resolve their questions about the genesis of sympathy. And Bain's view of susceptibility, while less sanguine, illuminates Eliot's conviction (in *The Lifted Veil* and beyond) that this supposedly "touchy," "foolish" temperament could be the crucial ingredient for the alchemical transformation of egoists into sympathizers ("Susceptible Girls" 281–82).

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[26] See Tegan, "Strange Sympathies," 168–85; Jennifer Judge, "The Gendering of Habit in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*," *Victorian Review* 39, no. 1 (2013): 158–81.

Bain's account of sympathy begins with the will. The function of the will is "to urge us *from* pain or *to* pleasure."[27] Its fundamental purpose is "self-conservation" (*Senses* [1874 ed.] 344). As such, sympathy for others represents "an exception to the ordinary action of the will."[28] In an attempt to account for this exception to the rule, Bain observes that people occasionally behave not in accordance with the will but on the basis of "mere recollection, imagination, or idea" (*Senses* [1874 ed.] 342). At these times, "an idea possesses the mind so forcibly as to act itself out in opposition to the will, and therefore in opposition to those interests that the will should side with—the deliverance from pain and the furtherance of pleasure" (342). Although this contrary tendency constitutes a "determining principle of human conduct," it is typically "kept in check": "the general rule is that ideas do not act themselves out; their urgency is so small as to be in complete subjection to the will" (342).

Bain attributes an idea's ability to override the will to susceptibility. He understands the latter disposition in terms of the retention of impressions and ideas; the chapter in which he discusses it, as well as sympathy, is titled "Retentiveness." When a "diseased impression" of some early experience "haunt[s] a person through life," he writes, that person is exhibiting an "undue susceptibility to the influence of an idea" (343).[29] The long preservation by susceptible individuals of early, haunting impressions can lead them astray from the proper course of self-conservation. Implicitly, this can induce them to perform sympathetic actions. Carried to the

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[27] Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1874), 342; emphasis in original.

[28] Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894), 362. Eliot would echo this characterization n *Middlemarch*, referring to Bulstrode's "self-preserving will" (George Eliot, *Middlemarch* [New York: Penguin Books, 1994], 727).

[29] Bain gives "mesmeric sleep" as a clarifying example of the tension between will and intellect. In that condition, "the senses and the mind are unsusceptible to the external situation" (342). At such times, one's "susceptibility" to the *internal* situation of ideas predominates.

extreme, however, the "disposition to proceed [into action] from a mere recollection" can culminate in pathology, even "[i]nsanity" (342; 343).

In the very next paragraph, Bain makes it explicit that an "undue susceptibility" can generate other-oriented behavior. Indeed, as far as he can ascertain, nothing else can. He thus posits susceptibility as the basis of human sympathy:

> The only way I am able to explain the great fact of our nature, denominated Sympathy, fellow-feeling, . . . is by a reference to this tendency of an idea to act itself out. We are able to conceive the pains of other beings . . . [and] we feel urged to the same steps of alleviation as if the pains were our own. (344)

Susceptible tendencies carve out space for something other than "*self*-conservation," and sympathy, which flourishes in that space, becomes the "great fact of our nature."

Bain's notion that susceptibility enables expansion from a self-focused outlook to a broader, more sympathetic mode of being elucidates Eliot's own. It is instructive to return briefly to *The Lifted Veil* to spell out a crucial similarity in their thinking that persists and evolves across her later novels. Bain's frequent characterization of the mind as being "occupied"—by thoughts associated either with the self or with the other—sheds light on the relationship between the trope of telepathy and Latimer's susceptibility.[30] For Bain, sympathy involves the mind's occupation not by "the reality of *our own* experience" but by the experiences and suffering of others—for which there is "no reality corresponding" (*Senses* [1874 ed.] 344; my emphasis). As he might have explained Latimer's telepathy, the "senses and . . . mind" become "unsusceptible to the external situation," the sensory data on which a self-focused will depends, and instead are

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[30] Bain pictures the mind as a march of impressions: "It is the very nature and necessity of our transient impressions to pass out of the conscious area of the moment, and to give place to others in succession. . . . Yet, what has passed out of consciousness for the moment has a hold and a status little inferior to the actual occupants" (*Senses* [1902 ed.], 675). He repeatedly refers to the way in which sensations and ideas "*occupy* the mental and cerebral system" (355; my emphasis).

coercively "occupied" by the subjectivities of others (342). As Latimer himself puts it,

describing his worsening condition, his "diseased consciousness [became] more intensely and

continually occupied with [others'] thoughts and emotions" (*Lifted* 14). Susceptible telepathy

forces Latimer toward a necessarily un-willed sympathy.

Though Eliot's hopes for susceptibility are much farther-reaching than Bain's, she builds

on their shared notion that an unchosen openness to the experiences of others can extend one's

sympathies. Contrary to arguments that *The Lifted Veil* reveals sympathy to be intrinsically

narcissistic, Eliot shows Latimer becoming less egotistical and more sympathetic as a direct

result of his susceptible involvement in others' minds: "As I saw into the desolation of my

father's heart, I felt . . . the first deep compassion I had ever felt" (27–28).[31] The "love" he feels

for his dying father builds into a sweeping experience of fellow-feeling: "In the first moments

when we come away from the presence of death, every other relation to the living is merged, to

our feeling, in the great relation of a common nature and a common destiny" (31).

The advent of Latimer's compassion coincides with a newfound *willingness* to

experience insight in his father's presence, and this alters our understanding of his

characterization of others' thoughts as unpleasant intruders into his mind. Formerly, the

"antipathy between [his and his father's] natures had made [Latimer's] insight into [his father's]

inner self an affliction," and Latimer consequently avoided his father's presence (27). Through

sympathy, however, he finds that "a new element . . . blended [him and his father] as [they] had

never been blent before" (27–28). His father's thoughts and feelings, earlier compared to grating,

inarticulate sounds, no longer register as painful occupants of Latimer's consciousness; a

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[31] Albrecht claims that "[t]he collapse in *The Lifted Veil* of any tenable distinction between sympathy and egotism is an indictment of sympathy as implicitly narcissistic" ("Sympathy," 455).

sympathetic posture toward the other removes all the displeasure of insight into their thoughts (13). We can speculate, retrospectively, that his susceptibility to others was disagreeable in proportion to his antipathy for them, or put more broadly, to his resistance to their salience in his mind. It is for this reason that the novella *forces* Latimer (against any Bainian will) to experience a rigorous regimen of other people's perspectives. He would never volunteer himself for this, and yet susceptibility is a mechanism, Eliot suggests, by which his egotistic preference not to be burdened by others can be first circumvented and then changed. By means that short-circuit the will, he can become a willing sympathizer.

While Latimer fails to graduate entirely from his self-focused way of thinking—he despises Bertha to the end—*The Lifted Veil* gives an early formulation of this moral task, central in Eliot's fiction. And his traversal of the long distance between the antonyms antipathy and sympathy indicates the power of susceptibility as a catalyst. Notably, *The Lifted Veil* focuses on the *hard-won* sympathy Latimer comes to feel for his father. To sympathize with those whom one likes is inconsequential in the novella: Charles Meunier alludes in passing to the "sympathy" that existed between them as boys, and Latimer describes their friendship as a "community of feeling" (8). Neither is very noteworthy. Eliot is far more interested—in this book, and obsessively in her later ones—in how a character learns, through entanglement in others' experiences, to sympathize with those unlikable others to whom one is bound by early ties.

4. Wheat and Tares in *The Mill on the Floss*

The Mill on the Floss recasts the figure of poison—specifically its temporality of pre-evaluative attachment—as a developmental feature of protagonist Maggie Tulliver. Whereas *The Lifted Veil* deploys a supernatural device to arrange circumstances under which an *adult* character can form

an unchosen attachment, *The Mill on the Floss* depicts susceptibility as constitutive of attachments that children form early in life, before they are equipped to judge another's suitability. The novel evokes this through the Biblical Parable of the Tares, representing the young, susceptible self as a field planted with two different but entangled crops. The parable tells the story of a "man which sowed good seed in his field" (Matt. 13:24). While he slept, however,

> his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. (Matt. 13:24–30)

Book Fifth of Eliot's novel, titled "Wheat and Tares," characterizes Maggie as a field of wheat in which her overbearing brother Tom, on whom she is deeply dependent, has secretly planted tares. The tares in the Biblical parable would have been darnel, "a poisonous weed organically related to wheat and difficult to distinguish from wheat in the early stages of its growth."[32] Not until after the roots of the plants had become thoroughly interwoven could the nutritious plant be distinguished from the poisonous one, at which point the weed could not be extracted "lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them." Maggie's ability to remain tied to anyone at all might require the unchosen tie to her toxic brother to remain intact.

The Mill on the Floss tells the story of Maggie's early life at Dorlcote Mill, describing her deep but vexed attachments to her brother and father, and later her consternation when those susceptible ties obstruct her romantic prospects. Maggie's suitor Philip Wakem—son of the man with whom her father carries on a protracted feud, and later the object of Tom's hatred when he

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[32] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 386.

inherits his father's antagonism—loses the competition with her earliest attachments. Constant discord between them notwithstanding, Maggie and Tom die in each other's arms in a symbolic return to their primal bond.

Writing about the objects that surrounded Maggie in childhood—chairs and other furnishings that in retrospect may appear "commonplace, even ugly"—Eliot observes that "our affections," like roots, have "a trick of twining round those old inferior things" (*Mill* 160). Recalling the preemptive nature of susceptibility, she writes that our intense feelings are due to the fact that such things "became dear to us before we had known the labour of choice" (160). These "deep immovable roots" swaddle not just unchosen objects but certain other people— perhaps also "inferior"—for whom we feel "the primitive love which knits us to the beings who have been nearest to us" (160; 210). Though the image here shifts to how susceptible characters become "knitted" to others, Eliot preserves the underlying figure of an affective network from which, later in life, Maggie cannot disentangle herself without damage. Such metaphors prefigure an image central to Eliot's later fiction, the web of communal ties.

Drafted contemporaneously with *The Lifted Veil*, *The Mill on the Floss* asks again how to sympathize with a poisonous infiltrator into the latticework of one's closest ties. The 1860 novel complicates Eliot's representation of susceptibility in a multitude of ways, particularly in terms of gender. Reversing the gendered directionality of the poison plot—it is a female protagonist who finds that her affections have been unwillingly occupied by a male character—*The Mill on the Floss* comes to associate susceptibility closely with femininity.

I focus on a particular gendered distinction that Eliot underlines repeatedly, examining its surprising resonance with the larger ethics of Eliot's realist project as laid out in "The Natural History of German Life." The training that Eliot grants Maggie via her disposition proves

strikingly similar to the mechanism by which Eliot's fiction proposes to extend the sympathies of its readers, while at the same time diverging in some critical respects. As Maggie's self-love is eroded through her susceptible exposure to the experiences of others, so readers (Eliot hoped) might develop their capacity for sympathy through imaginative inhabitation by a varied cast of characters.

The novel contrasts Tom's egoistic model of feeling with Maggie's more other-regarding one, specifically in terms of their experience of suffering and joy as unadulterated or interblended, respectively. The unsusceptible Tom aspires to dominance over others, evincing from a young age a "desire for mastery over the inferior animals wild and domestic, including cockchafers, neighbors' dogs, and small sisters" (98). In this condition of emotional isolation, he sustains himself entirely on "boyish self-satisfaction," and consequently suffers "unmixed pain" whenever he is made to feel helpless, whether by a stronger male character (such as his teacher Mr. Stelling) or by "evils over which he can make no conquest" (273; 149).[33] Maggie knows happiness and distress as a "mingled" experience (371).[34] As she remarks in a charged exchange with Philip Wakem, "I have always had so much pain mingled with [loving]" (430). In an irony that hints at deep symbiosis, it is the bully Tom who, exploiting her dependence on him, habituates her to "evils over which [she] can make no conquest."

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[33] When his teacher Mr. Stelling asserts his intellectual dominance, Tom becomes "more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before"; the quashing of "his boyish self-satisfaction . . . gave him something of the girl's susceptibility" (148–49). Within moments, however, Tom is imagining that he is wrestling with his playmate Spouncer, and that he is "in a condition of superiority" (150). His susceptibility lasts only seconds.

[34] In a sequence of sonnets Eliot composed with her brother Isaac in mind, she wrote that "His sorrow was my sorrow, and his joy / Sent little leaps and laughs through all my frame" (George Eliot, "Brother and Sister Sonnets," in *Selected Essays, Poems, and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren [New York: Penguin Books, 1990], 431). Her sharing in his sorrow and his joy resulted from their "two spirits [being] mingled / Like scents from varying roses that remain / One sweetness, nor can evermore be singled" (432).

Notably, the inverse of her statement to Philip holds as well, as Maggie discovers that pain increases her capacity to sympathize. Of course, sympathy is not the same as "loving," and her fellow-feeling for Philip fails to translate into romantic intimacy. Susceptible participation in the suffering of others *does* serve to deepen her sympathy, however. In a critical scene, Maggie demonstrates her dispositional ability to form a bridge from dislike to sympathy. Her father having taken a devastating fall from his horse, Maggie rushes to Tom's school to fetch him. As they are leaving, the teacher's wife hands Maggie a basket of food, saying,

> "Do remember to eat something on the way, dear." Maggie's heart went out towards this woman whom she had never liked, and she kissed her silently. It was the first sign within the poor child of that new sense which is the gift of sorrow—that susceptibility to the bare offices of humanity which raises them into a bond of loving fellowship. (201)

"[W]ith all her keen susceptibility," Maggie senses that that "sorrow"—specifically, her participation in her father's losses—"made larger room for her love to flow in" (273). Through a characteristic mixture of grief and comfort, susceptibility facilitates the transmutation of dislike into sympathy's "bond of loving fellowship."

Just as Tom's suffering stems from his isolation, Maggie's experiences of intermingled sorrow and joy derive from her susceptible inhabitation by others. Eliot pauses the narrative at one point to reflect on the causal relationship between a field-like mingling of self with other and Maggie's checkered fate: "mingled seed must bear a mingled crop," the narrator remarks (371). "Apparently the mingled thread in the web of their life was so curiously twisted together that there could be no joy without a sorrow coming close upon it" (371). Recalling *The Lifted Veil*, Maggie's preemptive "occupation" by a noxious other serves as agonizing preparation for the daunting moral task Eliot sets her: to expand the circle of her sympathy so widely as to include

even those who would do her harm, and thus to cultivate "fellow-feeling with all that is human" (518).

The Mill on the Floss complicates the necessity of leaving one's network of root-like ties undisturbed through another pre-text, Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ.* A "strange thrill of awe passe[s] through Maggie" as she reads Thomas's commands of self-abnegation: "[T]he love of thyself doth hurt thee more than anything in the world. . . . Forsake thyself. . . . [I]f thou wilt have inward peace, . . . thou must set out courageously, and lay the axe to the root, that thou mayst pluck up and destroy that hidden inordinate inclination to thyself" (301–02). Thomas's zeal leads to an arrestingly violent image that recalls the roots in the Parable of the Tares: she who desires entrance into heaven must "lay the axe to the root"—here, the root of her self-love. However, while in some ways Matthew and Thomas's texts give opposing instructions, both seek, by violent means, to rectify egoism, the defining moral error of Eliot's fiction. When Maggie adopts a posture of martyrdom toward Tom's unkindness, the narrator remarks that Maggie "took Tom's rebuke as one of her outward crosses. Tom was very hard to her, . . . [and] she strove to be contented with that hardness, and to require nothing. That is the path we all like when we set out on our abandonment of egoism" (305).

With Matthew and Thomas ambivalently reinforcing each other in this way, it falls to Philip to extract a (secular) moral from the tangle of advice. While Maggie prefers to flee egoism through "martyrdom and endurance," he would urge her to take "the steep highway of tolerance" (305). Her path leads her "where the palm-branches grow," suggesting that martyrdom is partly a show, veiling a desire for triumph (305). Philip's recommendation is more moderate, despite being founded on an emotional experience similar to Maggie's.

Represented in a way that would, forty years later, suggest homosexuality, Philip is the only male character consistently described as susceptible. In a stereotypical depiction of gender inversion, Eliot writes that his "nervous susceptibility" made his "nerves . . . sensitive as a woman's" (437; 444). Unlike Maggie, however, he accepts his disposition, and appears to learn its lesson of mingled experience, whereas she continues to "pant[] for happiness" and "wish [she] could make a world outside [pain], as men do" (303; 430). Implicitly citing Matthew and Thomas, Philip corrects her: "You want to find out a mode of renunciation that will be an escape from pain. I tell you again, there is no such escape possible except by perverting or mutilating one's nature" (430). The violence of this emotional self-mutilation cites Thomas's enjoinment to "cut[] [self-love] by the root out of thy heart."[35] Rejecting Thomas, Philip's advice recapitulates the lesson of the Parable of the Tares, reminding Maggie that her happiness will always be infused with pain, and that to rid oneself of the latter would be to uproot the wheat along with the tares. Rather than denying this fact, Philip (and the novel) would have Maggie redirect her egoistic zeal for self-renunciation toward acceptance of the self's composition by a community of others, a community that, the closing chapter demonstrates astutely, can include toxic members.

The moral insight built into susceptibility—voiced here by Philip—is arrestingly congruent with Eliot's description of how fiction can affect its readers, suggesting that Eliot wants her readers, too, to absorb the moral Philip articulates. As Thomas Albrecht notes with respect to *The Lifted Veil*, "Latimer's clairvoyance can be read as an implicit figure for realist art as Eliot defines it, because it gives Latimer access to the thoughts and feelings of a large number of different people" ("Sympathy" 439). Scholars have frequently pointed out that the projects of

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[35] Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs and Co., 1885), 16.

sympathy and realist fiction were, for Eliot and earlier novelists, conjoined.[36] *The Mill on the Floss*, however, seeks to simulate in its readers the experience not of sympathy but of susceptibility, and in that way to lead them along "the steep highway of tolerance" that its author associated with far-reaching sympathy.[37]

Exposure to experiences beyond one's own is the key step, according to Eliot, in instilling sympathy. In an oft-cited passage from her 1856 essay "The Natural History of German Life," she represents egoistic confinement within "the bounds of our personal lot" as the primary obstacle to sympathy.[38] Thus, the best method of promoting sympathy involved "extending our contact with our fellow-men" (110). Via the "amplif[ied] experience" offered by realist fiction, an individual reader could reduce her egoism through exposure to the subjectivities of others (110). The implicit ethics of susceptibility, however, proves distinct from (and occasionally antagonistic to) the relatively benign model of fellow-feeling articulated in the essay.

Perhaps with Britain's expanding franchise in mind, in that essay Eliot focuses primarily on misrepresentation of the working classes in both fiction and nonfiction: "How little the real characteristics of the working-classes are known to those who are outside them, how little their natural history has been studied, is sufficiently disclosed by our Art as well as by our political and social theories" (108). In her view, "the unreality of their representations is a grave evil" because generalized or idealized depictions of others evoke only a "ready-made" sympathy, whereas "a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the

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[36] See for example Rae Greiner, "Thinking of Me Thinking of You: Sympathy Versus Empathy in the Realist Novel," *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 417–26.

[37] Eliot associates sympathy and tolerance when she writes that only a mind "susceptib[le] to the pleasure . . . of mastering a remote form of thought . . . can possess the ready sympathy, or the tolerance, which characterizes a truly philosophic culture" (Eliot, "Mackay's *Progress*," 354).

[38] George Eliot, "The Natural History of German Life," in *Selected Essays, Poems and Other Writings*, ed. A. S. Byatt and Nicholas Warren (New York: Penguin, 1990), 110.

selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material

of moral sentiment" (110).

Eliot urges in particular the realistic portrayal of "psychological character," including

others' "conceptions of life, and their emotions" (111). Without an accurate understanding of

someone's emotions, we will be unable to feel with them, as "we need a true conception of the

popular character to guide our sympathies rightly" (111). Attention to and involvement in the

interiorities of others—which Eliot thinks properly realist fiction can spark—are precisely what

susceptible characters experience as an inborn dimension of consciousness. Psychically inhabited

by others from their earliest years, Maggie and Philip are endowed dispositionally with "the raw

material of moral sentiment" that readers may acquire through novels like Eliot's.

Ultimately, it is Philip and not Maggie who achieves a sympathetic apotheosis. He writes

to her that "[t]he new life I have found in caring for your joy and sorrow more than for what is

directly my own, has transformed the spirit of rebellious murmuring into that willing endurance

which is the birth of strong sympathy" (*Mill* 523). Eliot complicates Bain's view of the relation

between susceptibility and sympathy; Philip learns to *will* the latter. He goes on: only "love . . .

could have initiated me into that enlarged life which grows and grows by appropriating the life of

others; for before, I was always dragged back from it by ever-present painful self-consciousness.

I even think sometimes that this gift of transferred life which has come to me in loving you, may

be a new power to me" (523).

If Maggie's experience is "enlarged" through the gift of another's "transferred life," it is

not Philip's but Tom's. As such, she embodies a form of susceptibility that diverges from both

broad sympathy and romantic intimacy. Having rejected the latter from Philip and the alluring

Stephen Guest alike, Maggie ends her life instead in the arms of her brother, washed away in the

flooding of a river the Tulliver mill was evocatively unable to harness. While "The Natural History of German Life" articulates a broad conception of sympathy, and suggests that realist fiction can approximate an involvement (like Philip's) in the lives of others, the essay does not contemplate the enormous challenge it presents to Maggie, and, which, importantly, it does not present to Philip. Mingled from her earliest years with a toxic but beloved intruder, Maggie's susceptible life ultimately affirms not an expansive sympathy but the power and primacy of unchosen ties, even and especially those which hurt or constrain.

Maggie's decision to return to an abusive man—as well as similar decisions by women in other works by Eliot, including "Janet's Repentance" (1857)—may appear to represent *admired* acts of female self-abjection. And if Eliot had in fact endorsed this view, as some contend, her ethics would likely be repugnant to modern readers. By my reading, however, these cases constitute an incomplete (and therefore somewhat distorted) form of that ethics.

Eliot places a tremendous burden of responsibility on her female characters, and on top of that frequently tortures them through male family members; as a result, these women are sometimes unable to complete the monumental task she sets them. Maggie's end does not illustrate a *proper* outcome of susceptibility, then, but a measure of the difficulty to enact Eliot's code in a world so oppressive to women. Failing to accomplish the ethical reform given to her and her alone, Maggie becomes a testament to the enormity, in Eliot's eyes, of the problem of selfishness.

Ironically, susceptibility becomes ethically disabling when only partially realized. Unable fully to shed her self-oriented outlook—as her final feelings of "self-despair" suggest—and expand the circle of her sympathy to include all others, Maggie is left stranded between the imperfect forms of pleasure available to an egoist and the supposed higher rewards offered via

susceptibility (536). She forgoes the former without compensation by the latter. Thus, read in isolation, the novel could seem to glorify Maggie's fidelity to Tom as enlightened self-destruction. In the context of Eliot's later works, however, she comes to look like a sad casualty of an attempted remedy that Eliot considered harsh but necessary. *The Mill on the Floss* gives an early example of the disposition that, in the later fiction, would find its expression in characters who would have more luck surviving Eliot's affective regimen and putting its hard-earned lessons to use.

The novel's penultimate episode, involving Dr. Kenn's attempt to soften the social disapprobation against Maggie in the aftermath of her overnight boat trip with Stephen, is instructive for thinking about differences between sympathy and susceptibility. The rancor and sheer gratuitousness of condemnation by "the world's wife" make it clear that, in Eliot's eyes, the social body could never serve as an agent of a remedial ethics (509). As scholars have pointed out, "the typically unsympathetic social medium in which Eliot's characters exist" can make the appearance of sympathy "seem almost miraculous."[39] And indeed, sympathy does not materialize generally for Maggie, beyond Dr. Kenn's ultimately unsuccessful efforts; the social forces of St. Ogg's expel her as a scapegoat.[40]

I suggest that Maggie represents both Eliot's early attempt to work out susceptibility as a mechanism of affective reform—via her emotional disposition, as opposed to through social influence—and *also* a scapegoat. Crucially for an understanding of the distinct ethics of

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[39] Ilana M. Blumberg, "Sympathy or Religion? George Eliot and Christian Conversion," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 74, no. 3 (2019): 361. See also Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[40] On ways in which the social body actually exacerbates ethical problems that the fiction is then tasked to resolve, often through obliterative endings, see Christopher Lane, *Hatred & Civility: The Antisocial Life in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 109–29.

susceptibility, Maggie is rejected by a community that falls short not just of its own stated ideals, but, more importantly, of the ethical injunction to *incorporate* those one would censure. Eliot's later novels, including both *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*, build on this early-identified ethical problem of a community's general disinclination to act susceptibly.

5. Universal Susceptibility in *Middlemarch*

In one of *Middlemarch*'s climactic scenes, the townspeople gather to accuse the banker Nicholas Bulstrode of "shameful acts" and force him to resign all public positions, effectively expelling him and his wife from the community (*Middlemarch* 726). Personally, Bulstrode appears conspicuously unsusceptible, animated by a desire for his own advancement and acting in a fashion that suggests an unwavering belief in righteous self-determination. A banker whose great wealth came from stolen goods and a stolen inheritance, and the poisoner of his former partner Raffles, Bulstrode embodies virulent egoism. Privately, a mixture of genuine and casuistical feelings of repentance, as well as tentative moves to set right the disinheritance of Will Ladislaw, complicate a view of him as a thoroughgoing religious hypocrite. However, his practical effect on Middlemarch is aptly summed up by one character's remark that Bulstrode "led a harmful life for gain, and kept others out of their rights by deceit, to get the more for [himself]" (695–96).

Yet in this dramatic scene, late in his life, he displays an excruciating susceptibility to others. In doing so, he reveals that, in *Middlemarch*, characters are not susceptible as a dispositional birthright, or as an accident of childhood experience, but primarily by dint of their manifold connections to community.

Bulstrode is particularly shocked to find himself publicly "dishonoured" because he poisoned Raffles precisely to prevent the exposure of his misdeeds—specifically, the larcenous

source of his fortune and his double-dealing with Will Ladislaw's grandmother (726).

Accustomed to enjoying the impermeable buffer that wealth interposes between himself and

others, Bulstrode is overwhelmed by the novel experience of feeling "unscreened to [their]

triumphant scorn" (726). Eliot's description underscores his susceptibility: "The sudden sense of

exposure after the re-established sense of safety came—not to the coarse organization of a

criminal but—to the susceptible nerve of a man whose intensest being lay in such mastery and

predominance as the conditions of his life had shaped for him" (727). Like Tom Tulliver's,

Bulstrode's "intensest being" resides in "mastery"; to find himself "unscreened" to and

overmastered by others produces in him, as it did in Tom, feelings of intense susceptibility (727).

Resemblances to Bertha Grant's poisoning of Mrs. Archer in *The Lifted Veil* illuminate

poison's aim in Eliot's fiction: to uphold a radically individualistic worldview in which the self

is fully discrete, neither responsible nor vulnerable to others. Like Bertha, Bulstrode poisons

(with brandy, overwhelming the man's already alcoholically "empoisoned system") the one

person who can expose him to his neighbors (688).[41] (In a telling irony that highlights

Bulstrode's hypocrisy, the "scandalous disclosures" Raffles is prepared to make involve the

harm Bulstrode has done to his own relations [738].) His aim is to contain reputation-destroying

information—that is, to prevent its circulation through the web of communal relations. If he

could successfully defend the borders of his reputation, he would be able to go on entertaining

the notion that he is an untied moral agent, able to act exclusively in his own interest with

impunity. Having been able for much of his life to sustain this individualist ethics—through

financial influence, exaggerated piety, and dissimulation—Bulstrode is (with the return of

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[41] The townspeople of Middlemarch also characterize Raffles's death as a poisoning. See Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 738; 743.

Raffles) forced to recognize his involvement with and potential vulnerability to others. When his ethical system shows signs of collapsing, he turns in desperation to poison to reassert it. To poison is perhaps the paradigmatic act of the egoist in Eliot's fiction, a rearguard action meant to shore up a fantasy that one is not embedded in a community of others.[42] However, also like Bertha, he finds out belatedly that this attempt at containment has been preempted; by the time of his poisoning, Raffles had already disclosed the information about Bulstrode's past.

Despite the many differences between them, Bulstrode and Dr. Tertius Lydgate share this experience of discovering later in life that they have misapprehended the self's relation to the community. Not unlike Bulstrode, Lydgate imagines that he can, on the basis of certain personal traits—professionalism, industriousness, and medical skill in his case—act without regard for the opinions and feelings of others, particularly his fellow doctors. He realizes his error late in the novel: "He had meant everything to turn out differently; . . . [but] others had thrust themselves into his life and thwarted his purposes" (737). Defying his male, egoistic understanding of agency, others "thrust themselves" into his life and derail his self-chosen aims.

Given Bulstrode's use of poison, in all the valences of that trope, his unexpected susceptibility is suggestive of the pervasiveness of that disposition in Eliot's novel. Though some characters, such as Dorothea Brooke, have susceptible experiences from an early age and therefore are more closely identified with that mode of affect—as a girl, Dorothea feels intensely for her uncle's tenants, and forms plans to build them more suitable housing—the novel makes it clear that even those who are egregiously egoistic can experience it. Departing from the earlier novels, *Middlemarch* represents susceptibility not primarily as a characteristic of certain

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[42] Given poison's representation of the self's susceptible permeability to others, its literal use by Eliot's egoists can be confusing. Essentially, those characters exploit the literal poisonability of others in order to deny their own affective "poisonability." The tactic succeeds only in revealing the egoist's own affective vulnerability.

individuals, but as an emergent emotional property of interdependence per se. As such, it portrays susceptibility less as a mode of poison-induced attachment than as a condition of relation itself. Middlemarch's inhabitants are susceptible—that is, they find that others are irresistibly present in and constitutive of their experience—simply by virtue of the openness that characterizes membership in a community that is affectively and economically close-knit.

The network of roots that binds Maggie Tulliver subjectively to her brother becomes, in *Middlemarch*, the web of interrelation that is a community's *objective* structure. In the later novel, the manifold ways in which people help and harm one another—regardless of whether a given character (such as Bulstrode) believes that he affects others, or they him—reveal the figure of the web to be a more accurate description of small-town society than the egoistic fantasy of independent agents. Thus, in addition to examples of specific figural "poisons" that permeate the social web—including Bulstrode's tainted fortune, which circulates as funded currency throughout the town—Eliot's representation of the temporality of embeddedness in a community is an extension of her earlier reflections on poison. Literal poisons largely give way to figural ones, and those are subsumed under a condition of preemptive social interdependence.

Eliot represents the susceptible experience of communal interconnectedness as a crucial catalyst and precondition for the development of sympathy. *Middlemarch* shows susceptibility to have two chief benefits: it catalyzes moral advancement (toward sympathy) and it tends to foster the development of traits that facilitate effective cooperation between people. The latter enables a person to act in a way that is guided by the ethics of the former.

The novel depicts two primary (and importantly different) instances in which Dorothea's susceptible traits enable her to perform "active good" in line with her ethics of "human

fellowship" (760; 761). I will address first her redemption of Lydgate's compromising debt to Bulstrode, and then turn to her participation in Will Ladislaw's political activities.

In debt one thousand pounds to Bulstrode—a loan that, through his involvement in Raffles's treatment, appears to have been a bribe to overlook the cause of the man's death—Lydgate finds himself friendless in Middlemarch. Having overestimated his independence from the social web, he suddenly discovers others' power to ostracize him and his wife Rosamond.

Where others are selfishly wary of involving themselves in Lydgate's situation, for fear of being tarred with the same brush, Dorothea's sensitivity to his distress makes her his sole ally. Her council of advisers tries to deter her: "You must not let your ideas run away with you," Mr. Brooke warns, closely echoing Alexander Bain's definition of susceptibility (735). Even the kind vicar Mr. Farebrother concurs with Mr. Brooke's advice, saying "it would be better to wait" until Lydgate had vindicated himself before (as Sir James Chettam puts it) "meddling with this Bulstrode business" (735). But Dorothea is not deterred; her susceptibility to another's suffering overrides, we might say, her will's instinct toward self-conservation and she "venture[s] on . . . [an] effort[] of sympathy" in support of the embattled Lydgate (735).

The novel arranges for Dorothea's unselfishness to be tested even further, as if to demonstrate the moral fortitude bestowed by an intense susceptibility to others' suffering. Given the (misleading) impression that Will Ladislaw, to whom she is attracted, is on too-intimate terms with Rosamond, Dorothea nevertheless takes on Lydgate's debt to Bulstrode. Having walked in on Will holding Rosamond's hands and speaking to her with "low-toned fervour," Dorothea is struck speechless (775). Hurt and feeling betrayed—indeed, thinking she has seen her only prospect of marital happiness vanish—she still sets aside her own feelings and carries out her plan of "active good" that will directly benefit Rosamond (760). She repays Bulstrode on

Lydgate's behalf, symbolically purifying the tainted loan. Representing an ethics of sympathy that acknowledges Middlemarch's web-like structure of interrelated subjectivity, Dorothea is uniquely able to redress the damage that Bulstrode's self-seeking behavior has done to the community.

Dorothea then mobilizes Farebrother, Chettam, and her uncle in support of Lydgate. Unlike Lydgate, whose egoistic tendencies have left him isolated and unable to gather people in his defense, the susceptible Dorothea exercises sway among both intimates and those who know her only by reputation. Backed by the support of a group, she visits Rosamond and conveys their unified faith in her husband: "your husband has warm friends," she tells her, "who have not left off believing in his high character" (794). She comforts Rosamond, and after a long fit of weeping, Rosamond whispers enigmatically, "You are thinking what is not true" (798).

Dorothea's hard-won sympathy, it transpires, fosters more sympathy: her compassionate understanding that Rosamond has suffered as a result of Lydgate's ostracism—"his life [is] bound into one with [hers]," and so "his misfortunes . . . hurt [her]"—elicits from Rosamond a reciprocal sympathy for Dorothea's own susceptibility (795). Expecting the typically selfish Rosamond to deliver "a vindication of . . . herself," Dorothea is surprised to hear her explain that Dorothea misread the earlier scene with Will (795). After long relishing Will's flirtatious attention to herself, Rosamond musters the integrity to tell Dorothea that he had come that day not to flirt, but to say that "no other woman existed for him besides [Dorothea]" (795). This participation in Dorothea's pain enables Rosamond to overcome her self-flattering enjoyment of Will's attentions and alleviate Dorothea's distress, even though it means repeating Will's hurtful statement that "he could never love [Rosamond]" and taking on herself the "blame" for the misunderstanding (798).

Dorothea's marriage to Will—which Rosamond's act of altruism clears the way for—and her involvement in his political activities together offer Eliot an opportunity to develop the wider historical implications of susceptibility. Will becomes "an ardent public man" and "work[s] well in those times when reforms were begun with a young hopefulness of immediate good" (836). Taking place between 1829 and 1832, in the years leading up to the watershed Reform Act of 1832, *Middlemarch* concludes with Dorothea and Will's involvement in a variety of reforms, including the extension of the franchise. Setting aside its conservative intentions, the first Reform Act increased the English electorate by a massive fifty percent.[43] No less relevant, the electorate was expanded again in 1867, while Eliot was writing the novel. The second Reform Act nearly doubled the number of voters, adding almost a million new people, including many working-class men living in smaller cities and towns not unlike Middlemarch.[44] The Britain in which Eliot composed the novel was reeling under these changes, and *Middlemarch*—alongside contemporary attempts by Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin—offered both an analysis of these seismic historical changes and an affective-ethical recommendation for how to respond.

The context of the expanding franchise clarifies a crucial difference between the explanatory emphases of sympathy and susceptibility. Much has been written about Eliot's advocacy for sympathy in connection with parliamentary reform.[45] I want to conclude with the revisionary suggestion that attending to susceptibility in Eliot's fiction reveals her ethical analysis of middle-class psychology under the conditions of an influx of new voters. A focus on

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[43] Eric J. Evans estimates the increase at 49% to be precise (*The Great Reform Act of 1832* [New York: Routledge, 1994], 74). See also Frank O'Gorman, *Voters, Patrons, and Parties: The Unreformed Electoral System of Hanoverian England, 1734–1831* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[44] See Robert Crowcroft and John Cannon, ed., *The Oxford Companion to British History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 138.

[45] On Eliotic sympathy and reform, see for example Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, "George Eliot's Conception of Sympathy," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 40, no. 1 (June 1985), 23–42.

sympathy in the novel might underline Eliot's interest in working-class characters, and interpret it in terms of her urgent point in "The Natural History of German Life" that middle-class readers must be made acquainted with working-class experience and psychology in all its richness and specificity. Without that familiarity, they would be unable to sympathize with their poorer fellow citizens beyond lame, readymade responses to stereotypical figures. Susceptibility, in contrast, speaks to Eliot's understanding of the psychological task being put to the middle classes, and to the nation generally. It formulates an ethical theory of the integration into the social body of an emotionally unwelcome other—the first Reform Act passed only on a third attempt, and over strong resistance—and highlights the mistake of attempting to expel or uproot those new arrivals. In Eliot's (conservative) analogy, the extension of the franchise compels a middle-class "self" to intermingle with a working-class "other."

Morphing from an individual characteristic in the earlier novels to a universal condition of communal interconnection, susceptibility addresses a conservative, middle-class experience of feeling its borders become porous. Eliotic sympathy begins with the typically unpleasant discovery that one's imbrication with others is a *fait accompli*. *Middlemarch* sketches a path by which the egoism that causes that discovery to *be* unpleasant could be eroded, and middle-class sympathies could be deepened, via this mechanism of unchosen occupation. An excruciating openness and responsibility to family, community, and ultimately nation—with the important caveat that hundreds of thousands of women and men remained disenfranchised in 1871—represents Eliot's fundamental description of humankind's ethical situation.

Susceptibility reveals that Eliot thinks sympathy must begin involuntarily. This is not to claim that one's moral development is in the hands of others; rather, as Bain might say, the involuntariness of susceptible attachments involves an overriding of volition, and its exclusive

focus on the self. In Eliot's work, the unchosenness of ties is primarily temporal, taking concrete

form through a character's belated discovery of her subjection to preexisting conditions of

interrelation.[46] If people are not "preempted" by these conditions, what Eliot (echoing Bain) calls

the "self-preserving will" will prevail (*Middlemarch* 727).

 Middlemarch advances sympathy as a general ideal—ascribing that affective posture to

characters engaged in beneficent work—but Eliot's novels depict susceptible inhabitation by

others as a far more sweeping phenomenon. Susceptibility pervades human society and

constitutes the baseline of emotional experience. Beginning with this psychological insight, she

constructs not a benign ethics of pleasant fellow-feeling, but a theory of agonized participation in

others' experiences that speaks at once to intimate familial matters and the kind of "incalculably

diffusive" shift in human perspective occasionally required by historical change (838).

6. Diasporic Susceptibility in *Daniel Deronda*

"[M]uch more than any talents he possessed," notes Eliot's narrator, Daniel Deronda's "early-

wakened susceptibility . . . marked him off from other youths."[47] His "sense of an entailed

disadvantage," like a "deformed foot doubtfully hidden by [a] shoe," leads to his recognition that

his "own frustrated claim . . . [is] one among a myriad," and in consequence his personal "sorrow

takes the form of fellowship" (175). That his "inexorable sorrow" is "entailed," suggesting an

inheritance that constrains and defines him even before birth, evokes the conditions of

susceptible preemption in Eliot's fiction. Like Philip Wakem, recalled here through a

metaphorical "deformity," Daniel's childhood experience produces in him an "early habit of

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[46] More-obvious dramatizations of preemption's temporality (such as we see with Mrs. Archer's and Raffles's preempting disclosures) are exceptional; the rule is that family and society "preempt" one from birth.
[47] George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 175.

thinking himself imaginatively into the experience of others" (511).[48] In this arc from sorrow to

fellowship via identification, *Daniel Deronda* portrays susceptible moral development in

miniature: Daniel converts a "disadvantage" that was initially (and involuntarily) imposed on

him into an ability to sympathize willingly with the distress and plight of others.

Amid manifold sprawling subplots, Eliot's last novel focuses on the stories of the

Englishman Daniel Deronda, who as an adult discovers his Jewish heritage, and Gwendolyn

Harleth, whose marriage to the domineering Henleigh Grandcourt ends in his death by drowning.

The latter plotline taps the association of susceptibility with poison through the "poisoned gems"

that Grandcourt transfers from his abandoned mistress to Gwendolyn (359).[49] Gwendolyn is

distraught to discover that a responsibility to mitigate a past wrong was conferred on her

unawares. Building on both the temporality of poison and *Middlemarch*'s interest in how

susceptibility might facilitate the incorporation of newly enfranchised classes, *Daniel Deronda*

addresses itself to nationalist sentiment and anti-Semitic prejudice in England and abroad.

Despite being deployed in a different context, however, susceptibility is recognizable by its

fundamental features, including a complex (and sometimes-retrograde) gender politics, an

emphasis on the self's preemptive "occupation" by others, and an acknowledgment of the

suffering involved in shedding egoism for more-altruistic concern about the other.

Daniel and Gwendolyn meet over a roulette table in the opening scene, making gambling

a central figure against which the novel defines susceptibility. In gambling, as the self-centered

Gwendolyn eventually recognizes and articulates, one "make[s] [one's] gain out of another's

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[48] Philip has a humped spine as the result of a childhood injury. On the lineage of fictional, proto-homosexual Philips with physical "deformities," see Jeffrey Meyers, Introduction to *The W. Somerset Maugham Reader: Novels, Stories, Travel Writing*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), xxii.

[49] On poison and the gift, see Margueritte Murphy, "The Ethic of the Gift in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 34, no. 1 (2006): 189–207.

loss" (445). In this late exchange with Daniel, reminiscing on the opening scene, she is speaking

literally, given that others must lose in order for one to win, but she is also thinking remorsefully

of her husband's previous lover Lydia Glasher, whom Gwendolyn has selfishly "thrust out"

(450). In marrying Grandcourt and disinheriting Lydia's children, Gwendolyn has (as she

repeats) "made [her] gain out of their loss" (450). She asks Daniel for moral guidance, and his

reply outlines an ethic that stands in contrast to the zero-sum egoism of gambling:

> Look on other lives besides your own. . . . Try to care about something in this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires. . . . It is the curse of your life—forgive me—of so many lives, that all passion is spent in . . . the small drama of personal desires . . . for want of ideas and sympathies to make a larger home for it. (446; 451)

Gwendolyn is clearly in distress, and Deronda makes a point not to glorify her suffering

in itself—as susceptibility could seem to do—but rather to urge her to endure it insofar as it

increases her awareness of others. "Take the present suffering as a letting in of light," he advises

(452). "You are [now] conscious of more beyond the round of your own inclinations. You know

more of the way in which your life presses on others, and their life on yours" (452). Like

Latimer, beset by the buzzing importunities of those around him, Gwendolyn undergoes the

necessary discomfort of an egoist learning, for the first time, to gauge her effect on others

(particularly Lydia) and to sympathize with their pain.

In addition to crystalizing the role of suffering in Eliot's ethics, and reasserting the way in

which unchosen claims aid in the overriding of egoistic tendencies, *Daniel Deronda* gives a

culminating reformulation of the relationship between susceptibility and community. Eliot

focuses in particular on what Suzanne Graver (channeling John Stuart Mill and T. H. Huxley)

calls a "community of interest," a group organized around a shared vision of "social

regeneration."[50] Diverging from *Middlemarch*'s conception of the disposition as an emergent

property of sociality, Eliot's last novel represents susceptibility as a political mechanism for

producing a community—one that could unite and help settle what the Jewish visionary

Mordecai calls "our dispersed people" (*Deronda* 532).

The novel identifies Daniel's susceptibility with the temporality of his Jewishness.

Groomed from boyhood to be a model Englishman—"You are an English gentleman," his

mother tells him, "I secured you that"—he was also (he discovers belatedly) always already

Jewish (627). This confluence of qualities makes him exactly the political instrument Mordecai

is seeking. The latter voices the preemptive nature of Daniel's identity when they bump into each

other in Chelsea, seemingly by chance. "You knew nothing of my being in Chelsea?" Daniel

asks him (493). "No," replies Mordecai, "but I expected you to come down the river. I have been

waiting for you these five years" (493). Exaggeration though it may seem, Mordecai's estimate is

low, given that Daniel has been unwittingly "designed" from birth to play a role in Jewish

history, but it is also prophetic, in its implication that Daniel was born to be a new Moses.

In its depiction of a character's inhabitation by a community that is widely dispersed,

Daniel Deronda breaks new ground, representing the final turn in Eliot's thinking about

susceptibility. *The Lifted Veil*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch* all associate

susceptibility with proximity. Her earlier protagonists are charged with converting into willing

sympathy an unchosen, poison-like susceptibility to their nearest family, lovers, and neighbors.

They must reconcile themselves to the accidental and immediate community into which they are

born, including those who would harm them. While retaining its emphasis on familial ties

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[50] Graver, *George Eliot and Community*, 8; Thomas H. Huxley, "The Scientific Aspects of Positivism," *Selected Works of Thomas H. Huxley* (New York: John B. Alden, 1886), 474.

(through Daniel's Jewish mother, Leonora Halm-Eberstein), susceptibility in Eliot's last novel becomes telescopic and transgenerational, opening out from family to membership in a global diaspora of unknown others.

The nature of the suffering Daniel hopes to alleviate requires him to *assemble* the group to which he is susceptible. Rather than facilitating assimilation into an existing state, that is, susceptibility in *Daniel Deronda* "work[s]" in Mordecai's words "toward a united nationality" (536). Unlike the British working classes, the Jewish diaspora suffered nearly global persecution that resisted redress through local or national reforms. Mordecai's task, which is "entailed" on Daniel, is to give Judaism "an organic centre," "a republic where there is equality of protection" and one which would offer "the outraged Jew . . . a defense in the court of nations" (535). Preempted not so much by familial claims as by his unchosen involvement in a centuries-long heritage of struggle, Daniel finds that his susceptible participation in the experience of the diaspora spurs him, even more tangibly than Dorothea and Will at the end of *Middlemarch,* to join in the political work of founding a state: "The idea that I am possessed with is that of restoring a political existence to my people, making them a nation again, giving them a national centre" (803).

Eliot's valedictory portrayal of susceptibility recalls the lifelong work to which she felt led by her own dispositional inheritance of a "susceptible soul" (*George Eliot's Life* 3). "Have I not breathed my soul into you?" Mordecai asks Daniel on the novel's last page (*Deronda* 811). The narrator affirms that Mordecai has indeed secured "full presence in [Daniel's] soul" (811). Crucially, Daniel did not choose his role as "host" and spiritual leader any more than he chose his ancestry: Eliot considers this preemption of choice to be an essential feature in the power of susceptibility to alter an otherwise intransigent selfishness.

Galvanized to assemble fictional communities of her own (in ways resembling Daniel), Eliot peopled her readers' imaginations with all kinds of characters, likeable and not, hoping to fashion an under-the-radar training-ground for the Victorian psyche. Egoism represented a profoundly resistant problem—one far more challenging than how to encourage sympathy in willing listeners. She detected the ripples of selfishness in many domains of life, including marital relations, the conditions of the working classes, and the treatment of Jews and other persecuted minorities. Addressing the underlying psychological mechanism, she showed how the unchosen attachments to which her characters are heir—attachments felt initially as invasive, poisonous inhabitations—can, by an agonizing process, erode that native egoism. Acknowledging the psychological and political challenges associated with her aims, she saw in susceptibility an affective ethics that could make even a diverse and often-antagonistic community cohere.

"Wives all, let's enter together!": Impressibility and Evolution
in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders* and *Moments of Vision*

"I am now the only being who / Remembers you / It may be. What a waste that Nature / Grudged soul so dear the art its due!" –Thomas Hardy[1]

1. Introduction

The Woodlanders (1887), Thomas Hardy's most Darwinian novel, tends to frame its myriad

conflicts in evolutionary terms:

> From the . . . window all she could see were more trees, jacketed with lichen and stockinged with moss. . . . Next were more trees close together, wrestling for existence, their branches disfigured with wounds resulting from their mutual rubbings and blows. It was the struggle between these neighbors that she had heard in the night. Beneath them were the rotting stumps of those of the group that had been vanquished long ago.[2]

Humans too, Hardy's narrator suggests, may be "vanquished" by their "neighbors" in a similar

"struggle . . . for existence." The threat of extinction hangs over the novel, especially in light of

The Woodlanders's tendency to represent differences of class and disposition in terms of

speciation.[3] Outcompeted by neighbors of another species, certain trees come to be swaddled

with lichen (a sign that they are sick or dying). Similarly, one "species" or class of person may

destroy another: human social conflict is made continuous with the fight for survival carried on

by plants and nonhuman animals, even as the conflict itself takes other forms. The eventual

decamping or death of every main character (except Marty South) amounts to a figural extinction

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[1] Thomas Hardy, "You Were the Sort that Men Forget," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 435.

[2] Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 280.

[3] Fitzpiers says to Grace, "I do honestly confess to you that I feel as if I belonged to a different species from the people working in that yard" (161). The narrator later seconds the point, though on different grounds: "his [Fitzpiers's affection] differed from the highest affection as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms" (189).

of Little Hintock, the village where the story is set. Like "overcrowded branches in the neighboring wood," the novel's many human forms tend to "rub[] each other into wounds" (15). Whether as rejection, betrayal, or outright violence, several dimensions of conflict converge in eros, but end in death and departure. One character, remarking on the death of a childless friend, declares, "I knowed his father . . . and now I've seen the end of the family, which we can ill afford to lose, wi' such a scanty lot of good folk in Hintock" (293).

This impressionist novel chronicles the complex social dynamics of a small community of characters living in the woodlands of Hardy's Wessex. Although the story opens, significantly, with the spar-maker Marty, it is the return home of Grace Melbury, expensively educated and imbued with the sensibilities of the city, that catalyzes the plot. As part of an influx to the hamlet that includes the eligible doctor Edred Fitzpiers and wealthy widow Felice Charmond, Grace initiates an erotically-charged class conflict when she wavers over an apparent commitment to her childhood sweetheart Giles Winterborne, whose manners and habits she now finds embarrassingly rough. The novel extends Eliot's investigation of the ravages of an invasive species; Grace's father observes that "in the bottom of her heart there pulsed an old simple indigenous feeling favorable to Giles, though it had become overlaid with implanted tastes" (73). After vacillating between her early attachment to Giles and her attraction to Fitzpiers, Grace finally marries the egoistic, philandering doctor, and tensions between them—as well as between Giles and his landlady Mrs. Charmond—lead ultimately to Giles's death and almost every other character's departure from the woodland village.

Marty South, whose unreciprocated affections for Giles partly remove her from the web of erotic contests, represents the most direct continuation of the disposition I have examined in novels by Mackenzie, Brontë, and Eliot. Hardy does not name that disposition, but Brontë's

word "impressible" suits her in light of her resemblance to characters such as Frances Henri and Lucy Snowe.[4] The concept of the impression was important to Hardy's thought in a number of ways. Strongly influenced by impressionist artwork of the 1870s and 80s, he insisted his novels were "impressions" rather than "arguments," a claim corroborated by the painterly first description of Marty, which the narrator calls an "impression-picture."[5] Through identification with Marty, Hardy conceives of her disposition—and ultimately the novel's capabilities—in terms of retained impressions. As in *The Man of Feeling* (1771) and *Villette* (1853), in which characters persist after death via others' impressions, in *The Woodlanders* Marty's impressions of Giles confer a kind of afterlife on him, perhaps one that is as literary as it is mnemonic.[6] As J. Hillis Miller writes, in Hardy, art is an embodied form of memory that has the power to "safeguard the dead."[7]

The term "impressibility" is also meant to register the persistent role and importance of that disposition over the course of the century, despite the undesirable qualities it takes on in Hardy's portrayal. Under the pressures of evolutionary competition and late-century social

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[4] See Chapter 2 on impressibility in Brontë's novels. Varying slightly depending on the edition, Hardy uses the words "impressible" or "impressionable" twice in *The Woodlanders*, describing Fitzpiers and Grace, respectively (221; 267). As I am not writing a history of a word but of a disposition, I ignore these usages in favor of emphasizing Marty's similarities to Brontë's protagonists.

[5] Thomas Hardy, Preface to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), lviii; Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 10. He would reemphasize the point later in life: "I have repeatedly stated in prefaces and elsewhere that the views in [my oeuvre] are . . . provisional impressions only, used for artistic purposes because they represent approximately the impressions of the age. . . . I have no philosophy, merely what I have often explained to be only a confused heap of impressions, like those of a bewildered child at a conjuring show" (Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate [London: The Macmillan Press, 1989], 406; 441).

[6] On the connection between retained impressions and an afterlife, see Chapter 1, in which I discuss Harley's persistence after death via the imprint he leaves on the novel's narrator. Hardy's reference to the long afterlife of childhood feelings also evokes Thomas Carlyle's word "after-shine," which registers that phenomenon in terms of residual religious ideas (*Sartor Resartus* [Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1837], 173). On Hardy's fascination with "the biblical and classical topos of the forgotten dead," including "the perennial lament marked in his Psalter: 'For in death no man remembereth thee,'" see Tim Armstrong, *Haunted Hardy: Poetry, History, Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 90.

[7] J. Hillis Miller, *Thomas Hardy: Distance and Desire* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1970), 237–43.

changes, as this chapter will both show and analyze, impressibility ultimately declines into a range of maladaptive forms, losing much of the social and moral force that earlier novelists had attributed to it. The turn of mind that Brontë and Eliot worked to rehabilitate becomes in some ways decadent, degrading into a mystical filiation with nature and a preoccupation with death and memory. In the beleaguered Marty, the most direct inheritor of this disposition, it manifests itself as a one-sided romantic fixation. Whereas impressible and susceptible characters in earlier fiction helped to mount serious ethical and political campaigns, by the end of the century they are concerned mainly with mere survival.

   The Woodlanders is nevertheless continuous with earlier treatments of impressibility and susceptibility, and Marty's disposition proves to be the linchpin of Hardy's evolutionary ethics. The decline of impressibility marks not an end but a significant turn in the genealogy I have examined. Like Lucy Snowe or Dorothea Brooke, Marty retains others mnemonically long after they have been lost, becoming an embodied record of characters who disappear or die in the working-out of a conflict staged as evolutionary: "If I ever forget your name," she cries out to Giles's grave in the text's last lines, "let me forget home and heaven" (*Woodlanders* 331). Recalling characters in novels by Brontë and Eliot, she exhibits a radical unselfishness in which—to check the damage inflicted by both evolutionary forces and her neighbors—she gives herself over to the accommodation of others in a fashion that resembles the novel's own mode of preserving "impression-picture[s]" of specific individuals (10).[8] I use the word "preservation" to

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[8] Marty's disposition recalls psychologist Alexander Bain's understanding of susceptibility as a characteristic diversion of the will away from its proper aim of self-conservation and toward sympathy. I discuss Bain in Chapter 3. In precisely this spirit, Marty conserves not herself but those around her.

underline the irony that Hardyan impressibility relies on precisely those individuals who vanish in the course of the evolutionary "preservation of favored races," as Darwin's subtitle puts it.[9]

Marty's function in mnemonically preserving others who have been lost represents the novel's response to a twofold threat of annihilation. As I have mentioned, Hardy depicts the systematic disposal of individuals by an evolutionary process that is (in Tennyson's words) "careful" not of "the single life" but "of the type."[10] The novel's conception of "type" or species is flexible, and can be unclear, especially since it is used sometimes as a metaphor for class difference and sometimes in literal descriptions of species difference. My argument focuses on threats posed by newly-arrived landowners to individual members of a class of rural laborers. Despite its critiques of Fitzpiers, the novel replicates aspects of his figuration of class as species (he refers a group of workers as being of a "different species" from himself [161]). *The Woodlanders* pointedly rejects his polygenetic views *as an ethical matter*, but incorporates them as metaphor: the pathos of the story depends on the suggestion that the woodlanders are bound for extinction. They are marked, atavistically, as an endangered "species" of English life. Without the crisis of that class's non-preservation via forces portrayed as evolutionary, the woodlanders' compensatory retention through impressibility would make little sense.

Alongside its interest in this evolutionary threat, *The Woodlanders* tracks a second, overlapping form of disregard for human particularity. Egoistic men such as Fitzpiers subsume multiple women under a category that classifies them according to their availability for sex and procreation. This tendency further complicates the novel's representation of the individual's

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[9] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1869).

[10] Alfred, Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Robert H. Ross (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1973), 34–35. Tennyson goes on to revise the point, noting that nature is not even particularly "careful of the type," given the "thousand types [that] are gone" (35).

relation to groups of which it is a member (including not just class and species, but sex as well). Cynically ascribing his promiscuity to an evolutionary mandate to reproduce, Fitzpiers diminishes the individual particularity of the women of Little Hintock through a willingness to continually exchange one for another. The novel's impressible characters are tasked with retaining, as affective impressions, something of those who are discarded as a result of group-level dynamics, both real and metaphoric.

In a critical scene, Grace Melbury sums up the way in which Fitzpiers's philandering both compounds *and resembles* the evolutionary threat. Standing outside his bedroom alongside two other women with whom he has had sex, Grace declares with cutting irony, "Wives all, let's enter together!" (233). Reflecting a moment later on her "virtuous sarcasm," she adopts a different tone, quoting Psalm 73 and asking herself if she "could . . . in order to please herself the individual—'offend against the generation'" (234). As the rest of the line from which she is quoting makes clear, Grace is referring to the next generation of children—in this case, her husband's potential offspring with herself and the other two women (Suke and Mrs. Charmond).[11] She cannot reconcile her rights as wife with those of his children, whichever woman may carry them. The procreative function of the category she names "wife" threatens to supersede concern for "herself the individual." Fitzpiers commands tremendous power by making his socially sanctioned rights as a man and a husband coincide with the scriptural mandate of generation. The result is the subsumption of Grace and the other women into a group whose members are made interchangeable by "generation."

Since the threat to individual survival comes precisely *from* transpersonal forces of "generation," characters who exempt themselves from such forces can act—as Marty does—as

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[11] Psalm 73:15: "behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children."

pseudo-narrators, and in doing so provide the novel with a model for the conservation of individuals lost in the tide of generation. Rendered symbolically sexless through the cutting of her luxurious hair, the impressible Marty stands largely outside the arena in which social-evolutionary processes decimate the population of Little Hintock. In a number of respects, she acts less like a character—caught up in the novel's action, and occasionally driving it—than as a narrator. From this position, she comes to represent the novel's ability, *at the level of the form*, to act as a record of specific individuals lost in the contest between a traditional community and an invasive, egoistic modern world. Thus, while impressibility deteriorates *as a character trait*, it manifests itself—echoing her role as pseudo-narrator—in the novel's own rearguard effort to stem evolutionary losses through the commemoration of the particular people who populate the village.[12] Depicting not only the personal grief of losing loved ones, as in Brontë, but the wholesale losses of a figural extinction, *The Woodlanders* retains (literary) impressions of Little Hintock's inhabitants on the model of a psychological disposition it portrays as mildly pathological.

Many critics and readers have noted Hardy's reliance on art and memory as offering compensations for loss.[13] Many have also felt some hesitation at the form of idealized remembrance he portrays, given the tendency of those who embody it to languish in unreciprocated desire. What has not been fully understood is the basis of the consolation he proposes. Carrying a century-long history behind it, impressibility provided Hardy with a

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[12] This distinction between form and character trait also applies to the difference between form and plot. There is no contradiction in the novel's form preserving (or aiming to preserve) after death the community whose extinction its plot describes.

[13] Tim Dolin, for example, writes that Hardy's oeuvre includes "numerous . . . lyrics where the poet strives to . . . keep alive in verse all those who survive only in his memory and who will otherwise die with him" ("Life-Lyrics, Autobiography, Poetic Form, and Personal Loss in Hardy's 'Moments of Vision,'" *Victorian Poetry* 50, no. 1 [Spring 2012]: 6).

dispositional model for the sort of posthumous preservation he wanted his fiction to enact. Crucially for his ethics of fiction-writing, suffering occurs *only* at the level of the single life.[14] His novels aim to mitigate the harm caused by an evolutionary uninterest in (individual) suffering, including the distress felt in anticipation of being "forgotten" by large-scale forces that do not register the particulars of one's life and character. His fiction *could*, via the impressible disposition. Handed down from Brontë and Eliot but significantly recast for the purposes of a post-Darwinian tragedy, it became a cornerstone of both his fiction and the ethics his writing aimed to practice.

This chapter marks a significant turning-point in the trajectory of impressibility across the Victorian period. I draw evidence of this inflection from the work of Thomas Hardy not so much because he is exemplary of a broad trend—others, including Oscar Wilde, showed similarly prescient recognition of the change—but because he became a key figure in registering through novels and poetry the dynamics that led to a "decline" in the disposition, with indications as well of where it would lead.

I emphasize Darwinism as a leading cause of the enervation and recasting of impressibility, but a range of other factors also contributed. Though an evolutionary framework cannot account for the full gamut of human activities, in Hardy's hands it could contain and focus the sociopolitical changes involved in the shifting function of this disposition. Those contemporaneous factors were manifold. The decades leading up to the publication of *The Woodlanders* were a watershed period in women's rights, seeing passage of the 1857

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[14] This line of argument responds to Rachel Ablow's *Victorian Pain* (2017), which argues that suffering in *The Woodlanders* is suspended *between* beings, even sometimes between human and plant, as in the scene when Marty hears the crying of the trees rubbing against each other. For Ablow, the pain Hardy portrays is of a pervasive, existential kind that cannot be definitively attached either to Marty or the trees, but "hovers ambiguously between potential sites of consciousness or affect" (*Victorian Pain* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017], 120).

Matrimonial Causes Act (itself figuring prominently in the novel) and the 1882 Married Women's Property Act. Meanwhile, anthropology and late-century psychology altered Victorian conceptions of gender and sexuality. Social anthropologists were demonstrating that established forms of sexual relation were highly contingent, even if sexologists continued to stress congenital fixation, and Hardyan impressibility anticipates core elements of an upending, category-breaking psychoanalytic perspective, including through its emphasis on the psychical components to idealization and introjection.[15]

For Hardy, these aspects of the late-Victorian social context converged in evolutionary questions about extinction and the nature and seeming inevitability of suffering. Evolution dramatically reframed the damage and death inflicted in the course of gender and class conflicts, particularly the cross-class sexual relations that he depicts. Through the role of women vis-à-vis evolution—that is, impressibility—he distilled a wide array of legal, cultural, and scientific developments into a new understanding of this disposition and its role in the Victorian novel.

In this extended reading of *The Woodlanders*, which draws occasionally on Hardy's poems and essays, I bring together the multiple concerns—psychological, ethical, and formal—of his participation in the Victorian preoccupation with impressions. I conclude by turning to poems in *Moments of Vision* (1917) to show how he carried this inherited disposition into the twentieth century, making it the centerpiece of his thought about the endurance and recognition of the loss that pervades his work.

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[15] See for example Elizabeth Fee, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Social Anthropology," in *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 3/4 (Winter-Spring 1973): 24.

2. Marty South as Pseudo-Narrator

The novel's most impressible character, Marty South, bookends *The Woodlanders*, serving as the

focal point of the opening scenes and adopting in the last scene a valedictory tone as she speaks

the book's closing words. In her first description, she is represented as a marginal artist figure,

and the final moment reasserts her artistic ability to retain impressions with the capacity to

preserve, in some measure, a lost homeland. Together, these qualities encapsulate her

impressibility. Hardy implicitly links the two scenes through citations of Psalm 137, "By the

rivers of Babylon." The psalm describes how the Israelites, forcibly carried out of Jerusalem,

refuse to play music when their captors demand it, defiantly throwing their harps up among the

boughs of willow trees. Drawing on the psalm, the two scenes distill the novel's anguished

conflict and the narrative role of impressibility in extenuating it.

A covert allusion to "By the rivers of Babylon" in the novel's opening description of

Marty, and specifically of her right hand, characterizes her as an androgynous artist figure.

Shown cross-dressed in her father's overly large leather apron, pausing amid the "rough man's-

work" of making spars for thatching, Marty shares traits with Hardy himself and, implicitly, the

harp-players who appear in the psalm:

> The young woman laid down the bill-hook for a moment, and examined the palm of her
> right hand, which unlike the other was ungloved. . . . Nothing but a cast of the die of
> Destiny had decided that the girl should handle the tool; and the fingers which clasped
> the heavy ash haft might have skilfully guided the pencil or swept the string. (11; 10)

Under different circumstances, Marty might have "guided the pencil" (like Hardy the architect

and draftsman) or "swept the string[s]" of a musical instrument, like the harp-players in the

psalm. The latter's speaker declares, "If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its

skill" (Psalm 137:5). He carries the ability to play the music of Jerusalem in his right hand, but to

do so under coercion would be, it's implied, to forget and dishonor his homeland. The allusion is so oblique as to be easily overlooked, but we know Hardy knew the psalm well, as he used excerpts from it as chapter headings in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873).[16] In some way, Marty resembles this harp-player, though the similarity is not fleshed out until the novel's final scene.

As scholars have noted, the same psalm informs the book's last words, clarifying the narrator's earlier focus on Marty's artistic right hand.[17] She delivers a wrenching, sentimental speech at Giles's grave:

> "Now, my own own love," she whispered, "you are mine, and only mine, for she [Grace] has forgot 'ee at last, although for her you died. But I—whenever I get up I'll think of 'ee, and whenever I lie down I'll think of 'ee again. . . . If ever I forget your name let me forget home and heaven. . . . But no, no, my love, I never can forget 'ee [. . .]!" (331)

Setting the two scenes alongside each other reveals the connection between remembering a lost homeland (the woodlands of Little Hintock, in Marty's case) and the artist's hand. Forgetting— the charge Marty levels at Grace, and the one thing she promises never to do—bridges the two citations. The psalm identifies a refusal to forget lost places with not "forget[ting]" the musical "skill" in one's "right hand" (Psalm 137:5). Marty's "right hand," as the early scene suggests, could have "skilfully . . . swept the string" just as the exiled Israelite carried memories of Zion in the harp-playing "skill" of *his* right hand. Hardy gives Marty precisely those skills that enable an artist to record, and so in some degree preserve, a lost place and the people who inhabited it.

In a novel preoccupied by the damages incurred in the evolutionary contest for mates, Marty's androgyny partly exempts her from the conflicts that, in one way or another, dispatch

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[16] As Marlene Springer demonstrates, Hardy separates two parts of Psalm 137 and makes them into chapter headings in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873) (*Hardy's Use of Allusion* [London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1983], 44). Thus, although Marty only borrows half the line from the psalm, and does not herself speak the phrase about the right hand's skill, the subtext is present, and further confirmed (as I argue below) by a more explicit quotation in the final scene of *The Woodlanders*.

[17] See Stephan Randall Toms, *Ambivalent Idylls: Hardy, Glasgow, Faulkner, and the Pastoral* (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1997), 508. ProQuest.

those around her. Unlike Grace, whose interest in Giles takes more typical erotic forms, Marty is

virtually asexual, and only comes to "possess" Giles after he joins her in a realm outside Eros

(the narrator himself alludes to *Agape*). The narrator emphasizes her near-asexuality at his

graveside; "the contours of [her] womanhood" are said to be "so undeveloped as to be scarcely

perceptible" (331). In fact, in citing the fifth and sixth lines of the psalm specifically, Marty

assumes the position of a groom relative to him. Following a longstanding tradition, Jewish

grooms speak these words ("If I forget you, Jerusalem . . .") before breaking a glass, an act of

mournful remembrance of the destruction of the Temple. With the closing words of the novel, an

unsexed Marty simultaneously mourns and marries Giles. For impressible characters such as her,

impulses associated with mating are diverted into a desire to preserve their impressions of others.

Marty takes him as her symbolic spouse—"you are mine, and only mine," she tells his grave—

only by retaining him after he's gone.

As I have suggested, and as others have noticed, Hardy seems to identify with Marty, and

he frequently uses her as a mouthpiece.[18] Notably, the two most influential actions she takes in

the novel are both acts of writing.[19] One moment in particular illustrates her role as a stand-in for

the author. Grace and Fitzpiers are lingering by themselves in the woods, talking quietly over the

embers of a fire, when suddenly two quarreling birds fall from a branch and land in the fire.

Singed, they fly away in opposite directions. Marty, whose presence has not been mentioned or

noticed, speaks up from the shadows, and she is not even named in the dialogue tag: "'That's the

end of what is called love,' said some one" (128). Delivering, from the wings, this allegorical

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[18] A. J. Guerard notes that Hardy "identified himself to a degree with his sexless and self-denying heroes," while also criticizing their "habits of renunciation" (*Thomas Hardy: The Novels and Stories* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949], 119).

[19] Marty writes a poem on the wall of Giles's house and later pens a letter to Fitzpiers. Like a writer, she affects events not by acting but by moving information among characters.

commentary on the novel's central theme of combat for and between mates, Marty acts more as a

narrator of others' lives than as a participant in her own.

Bearing traits of an artist and narrator, Marty remains largely apart from the action,

serving in the scenes immediately after her opening description as an intermediary between the

reader and the novel's more participatory characters.[20] As at the scene by the fire, she lingers on

the margin of events, looking in, as the inciting event that will spark the novel's sexual conflicts

is first mentioned. During this critical scene, in which readers learn that George Melbury is

anxiously awaiting the return of his daughter Grace, Marty speaks and acts only in parenthesis:

> "'Tis no use to stay in bed," he said as soon as she [Mrs. Melbury] came up to where he
> was pacing restlessly about. "I can't sleep—I keep thinking of things."
> "What things? [. . .] Not about Grace again?"
> "Yes. 'Tis she."
> (Grace was the speaker's only daughter.)
> "Why worry about her always?" [. . .]
> "Because it is a plan for her to marry that particular person Giles Winterborne, and he is
> poor."
> "Well—it is all right. Love will make up for his want of money. He adores the very
> ground she walks on."
> (Marty South started; and could not tear herself away.) (16–17)

Marty eavesdrops on this pivotal conversation, interposing only silently, like a narrator, to

inform the reader that Grace is Melbury's daughter. The conversation goes on to deliver

narrative exposition, such as Melbury's reason for wanting his daughter to marry Giles, while

Marty oversees the event.

After overhearing that Giles loves another woman, the grieving Marty cuts off her hair in

a symbolic renunciation of her sexuality. Her "abundance" of chestnut-colored hair is the one

feature that marks her as a sexually mature woman, the "provisional curves of her childhood's

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[20] On Marty's "banishment from the plots of other lives," see Robert Kiely, "The Menace of Solitude: The Politics and Aesthetics of Exclusion in *The Woodlanders*" in *The Sense of Sex: Feminist Perspectives on Hardy*, ed. Margaret R. Higonnet (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 199.

face" having reached a "premature finality" (10). She travels into the market town of Sherton

Abbas to deliver her hair to the barber who has brokered its sale to Felice Charmond, one of a

wave of disruptive newcomers to the woodlands. Marty's trek into town coincides suggestively

with Giles's trip there to retrieve the returning Grace, and Marty again acts as quasi-narrator,

watching unseen as the two meet. Marty's spectatorship frames the scene from beginning ("Miss

Melbury, as Marty could see, had not been expected by Giles so early") to end ("There was a

little delay in [Giles and Grace's] setting out from the town, and Marty South took advantage of

it to hasten forward") (34; 36). The novel's perspective is based on, and filtered through, that of

Marty.

Having read Darwin closely, Hardy was probably aware of his interest in the "special

difficulty"—potentially "fatal to [his] whole theory" of natural selection—of "neuters or sterile

females in insect communities" (*Origin* 209). These ants had been observed performing a wide

range of essential functions, and yet, being sterile, were unable to pass on the traits that made

them so valuable to the colony. Darwin defines them as "[i]mperfectly developed females . . .

which perform all the labors of the community" (316). He explains their surprising prevalence as

being the result of group-selection: communities containing some self-sacrificing figures fared

well against those composed entirely of self-interested members. And in *The Descent of Man*

(1871), he extends the point to include humans; self-sacrificing tendencies among some

members of a group confer evolutionary benefits on the collective.[21]

In explicitly aligning the "premature finality" of Marty's sexual development with her

impression-taking role in the symbolic preservation of her community, Hardy evokes this crux of

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[21] As with ants, according to Darwin, human "tribe[s] including many members who . . . were always ready . . . to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes" (*The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* [New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1871], 160).

Darwinism (*Woodlanders* 10). The woodlanders' evolutionary unsuccess, despite her

performance of that role, underscores the irony that they are "preserved" not as evolution

preserves better-adapted species, but in a compensatory form, as affective impressions. In the

analogy of commemoration to survival, Marty represents an analogue of those members of

human and nonhuman communities who—either by sacrificing themselves before "leav[ing] . . .

offspring to inherit [their] noble nature" or through sterility—carry out a specialized task on

which the group's persistence depends (*Descent* 157). While Marty's underdevelopment cannot

be *equated* with either sterility or heroic self-sacrifice, Hardy stresses the extent to which her

self-banishment from sex facilitates her impressibility. I emphasize the Darwinian valence of her

sexuality (rather than, for example, her queerness or her complex role in the hamlet's economy)

to clarify the novel's correlation of evolutionary and impressible preservation.

Marty's way of excluding herself from the plot enacts the connection between a late-

century deterioration of impressibility as a character trait and its movement to the level of form.

She embodies this shift: as a psychological trait, it leads to a prolonged, miserable attachment,

while, via her capacity as artist and narrator, impressibility begins to characterize the aims and

method of the novel itself. Recusing herself, in disappointment, from the town's crushing

competition for mates, she redirects her desires into an almost zealously sexless form of

remembering akin to the harp-player's attachment to Jerusalem.

Unlike the novel's more sexual characters, Marty embodies a mode of preserving lost

things and people that, by its nature, precludes their being used or used up. She observes that the

village's newcomers tend, by contrast, to *consume* the things and people they desire. Mrs.

Charmond wears Marty's hair to attract sexual partners, and Fitzpiers pays Grammer Oliver ten

pounds "to have [her] head as a natomy after [her] death" (46). When Giles's houses revert to

Mrs. Charmond on his father's death, Marty remarks that "[t]hey are going to keep company with [her] hair" (32). She speaks with a narrator's authority about the convergence of economics and sexuality, including the gendered commercialization of women's hair. In particular, her remark highlights the difference between retaining others and using them, their homes, and their bodies. While Mrs. Charmond razes the buildings she has absorbed into her estate, impressibility becomes a storehouse of what's been lost. Like a certain apple tree that survives the leveling of Giles's childhood home, and which "retain[s]" a slant from a gale many years before, Marty preserves something of Giles long after the forces of sex and economics have consigned him to the past (167). The novel's impressible characters bear the artist's self-sacrificing responsibility to commemorate those inhabitants of Little Hintock who will not survive its extinction.

3. Class and Environment

The novel marshals Marty's impressible ability to retain others in response to a threat posed to the individual by evolutionary forces—including sexual desire—that are concerned primarily with the preservation of the species. Gillian Beer, writing about "evolutionary narrative" in Hardy, explains: "Sexual joy is always dangerous . . . because it is linked to *generation*, the law which rides like a juggernaut over and through individual identity and individual life spans."[22] The subtitle of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* (1859) stresses the point: *The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. It is with "races" that evolution concerns itself. Beer continues, "Underlying [Hardy's] emphasis upon the individual is the paradox that even those recuperative energies are there primarily to serve the longer needs of the race and are part of a procreative energy designed to combat extinction, not the death of any

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[22] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 225.

individual" (224). In fact, as *The Woodlanders* insists, that "procreative energy" not only doesn't resist characters' deaths, it often hastens them: Giles pines away for Grace, dying of exposure, and Mrs. Charmond is murdered by a spurned lover. In such moments, Hardy's position conceptually and historically between Darwin and Freud, particularly in terms of the latter's analysis of death drives, becomes salient. The damages caused by "generation" in this novel frequently coincide with self-inflicted wounds.

In both of these deaths, the harm and suffering inflicted stem from a model of male sexual conduct that resembles, and so compounds, evolutionary disregard for individuals.[23] This dual disregard represents, for Hardy, the central danger to the individual: not only will she die or be killed; she will not be remembered. This section examines the alignment of these two threats, including their relation to class, and shows how Hardy's proposed measure to mitigate them emerges from impressibility. That measure, as I discuss later, has marked shortcomings of its own. As Annette Federico argues in her excellent study of late Victorian masculinity, Hardy's impressible men carry their "Christian gentlemanliness to an abnormal extreme," which often has detrimental consequences for the women on whom they fixate.[24] Hardy accepts this somewhat bitter tradeoff, partly because of the benefits of *formal* impressibility, to be distinguished sharply from the personal impressibility exhibited by his overly chivalrous men. He bites the bullet, so to speak, resigning himself to the drawbacks of the disposition in order to derive from it a means to resist a more existential danger.

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[23] This is not to imply that natural section operates on the species as a whole; it operates only on organisms. However, the result of the process is to stave off the death of the species, not any of its members.

[24] Annette Federico, *Masculine Identity in Hardy and Gissing* (Madison, NJ: The Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1991), 68; 58.

In a neat turn on the evolutionary threat, Hardy grounds his idealized form of remembrance, and its potential to dull the sting of loss, in *environment*—specifically, in a particular individual's native place or habitat, and in those impressible people who are identified with it. (Class, especially as upward mobility is represented as detaching characters from their native environment, plays a central role in this process.) Insofar as individual characters do leave physical and mnemonic impressions on a place and its inhabitants, they enjoy a compensatory form of survival, even under evolutionary and masculinist orders that seek their respective ends without consideration for the suffering they cause.

In addition to involving social recognition and sanction, as in many nineteenth-century novels, individuality in Hardy's fiction is deeply temporal, depending to a great extent on a character's continuation through time and after death.[25] Including, in different ways, his wife Emma's ghostly return in the *Poems of 1912–13* and Jude Fawley's imagined participation in a multigenerational endeavor ("It takes two or three generations to do what I tried to do in one"), the individuality of Hardy's characters depends largely on different modes of posthumous persistence.[26] *The Woodlanders* frames this tension between individuality and death in evolutionary terms, but the form of compensation for the suffering handed down by processes that exceed a character's lifespan is similar to the consolations offered in those other works. A character acquires the status of individual through being remembered by her place, by impressible others who are of that place, and by artwork such as a psalm or a novel. Percombe the barber and wig-maker gives a tongue-in-cheek expression of this idea, remarking that some

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[25] On individuality and social recognition, see Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719–1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 109.

[26] Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure*, ed. Norman Page (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999), 256.

people are "compensated for neglecting him in their lifetime by patronizing him when they were

dead" (*Woodlanders* 33).

A decade after completing *The Woodlanders*, Hardy published the poem "In a Wood:

Vide 'The Woodlanders'" (1898), which depicts the suffering involved in evolution. The poem's

title explicitly refers readers back to *The Woodlanders*.[27] "In a Wood" tells the story of a man

who flees to the countryside to escape "unrest" in the city, only to find that the trees are "to men

akin— / Combatants all!"[28] The speaker personifies the antagonism between different species of

tree: the sycamore "shoulders" the oak out of its way, and poplars regard neighboring trees as

"rival[s]" in the fight for survival and procreation (64). The poem recalls Giles's romantic rivalry

with Fitzpiers; poplars, when they are "overborne" by a rival, "canker[]" in "despair," just as the

ailing Giles wastes away and dies (64). "In a Wood" stresses that those forces and instincts that

perpetuate the species—including the poplar's "loth[ness]" to stand next to its rival, which spurs

it to resist being "overborne" by trying to overpower that neighbor itself—produce subjective

experiences at the level of the individual. In the case of an outcompeted poplar, that experience is

"despair." Combat benefits the "generation" but metes out devastation to the combatants.

The passage in *The Woodlanders* to which the poem directs us emphasizes a different

aspect of evolutionary competition: the possible "extinction" of a community, figured as a

species. As Giles walks through the woodland, he sees not vigorous competition but enervated

forms of life and the snuffing-out of young trees: "The leaf was deformed, the curve was

crippled, the taper was interrupted; the lichen ate the vigour of the stalk" (48). The "secret energy

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[27] For more on the history of the poem's title, see Carl J. Weber, "Thomas Hardy's 'Song in the Woodlanders,'" *ELH* 2, no. 3 (November 1935): 243.

[28] Thomas Hardy, "In a Wood: *See 'The Woodlanders*,'" in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 64.

which moves both nature and history in their courses through time," an energy Hardy names the "Unfulfilled Intention," drives life on—"[h]ere, as everywhere," "mak[ing] life what it is"—but in Little Hintock the life it produces is stunted and unviable.[29] Saplings are not outcompeted by hardier trees; rather, "the ivy slowly strangle[s] to death the promising sapling" (*Woodlanders* 48). Underlining the individual's excruciating, embodied experience of being strangled, the passage also captures the anguish of anticipating the end of a species.

The symbolic threat, in the possibility of one species destroying another, is that of a class conflict that results in the "extinction" of a particular community. Fitzpiers weaves class into the evolutionary contest for mates: "I feel as if I belonged to a different species from the people who are working in that yard," he says, referring to a group of laborers that includes his romantic rival Giles (161).[30] Fitzpiers holds the polygenist view that humankind has multiple evolutionary origins. Though Grace comes from the same place as the workers, he pays her the compliment that she has been "refined and educated into something quite different," that she has moved beyond her native species (161). That is, she has done so *in his eyes*; Hardy writes probingly about the idealization and transference involved in desire.[31] His later poem "The Well-Beloved," for example, relates a dialogue between a man and the female "sprite" whose "beauty, fame, and deed, and word" he has "transferred" to the woman he desires.[32] Fitzpiers practices a similar transference with Grace, cast here in the language of speciation.

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[29] J. Hillis Miller, Preface to *Thomas Hardy and Distance* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970), xiv; Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 48.

[30] The narrator dryly seconds this point, though on different grounds, saying that Fitzpiers's capacity for love "differed from the highest affections as the lower orders of the animal world differ from advanced organisms" (189).

[31] On the distance necessary to desire in Hardy, see Miller, *Thomas Hardy*, xii.

[32] Thomas Hardy, "The Well-Beloved," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 133–35.

Fitzpiers's comment about Grace's elevation over her kind illuminates a contradiction in the novel's commitments. On the one hand, *The Woodlanders* is a Darwinian tragedy of a changing local environment and the death or transformation of those who had been well-adapted to prior conditions. (That environmental change is the introduction of a lifeform that had evolved elsewhere, under different circumstances.) On the other hand, that plot summary—which the novel seems to endorse by framing the fallout of a class conflict in evolutionary terms—implies an alignment with Fitzpiers's view that class difference can equal a difference between species. The novel is plotted according to the terms of an egoistic classism that it condemns in Fitzpiers.

Ivy in *The Woodlanders* and "In a Wood" represents the class-based, evolutionary danger that Fitzpiers poses to Little Hintock. Shallow-rooted by comparison with the centuries-old trees, and flourishing only by smothering other plants, ivy shares several characteristics with the novel's invasive, wealthier characters. Though not technically parasitical, it depends on trees as scaffolding to climb into the woodland's sunnier understory. For Hardy, the ivy cannot itself be "promising"; it can only cancel the promise of other lives. "In a Wood," referring back to *The Woodlanders*, describes how "[b]ines," a climbing plant, "yoke . . . the slim sapling" ("In a Wood" 64). The verb "yoke" brings together discourses of species, class, and gender difference. Through the sapling's comparison to a yoked ox, the combat between two plants is analogized to the relationship between a landowner and his beast of burden. That hierarchical difference in species aligns with Fitzpiers's feeling that he is not of the same species as the laborers, precisely those men who have deep roots in Little Hintock. Simultaneously, the slim, promising sapling evokes the girlish Grace, whom Fitzpiers will eventually "yoke" in marriage, following the conventional metaphor. Combining classist exploitation and the gendered asymmetries of

marriage, the existential threat that Fitzpiers poses to Little Hintock is distilled into evolutionary terms in which a whole community is at risk of being "overborne" ("In a Wood" 64).

Grace's father echoes Fitzpiers's description of class difference in evolutionary terms and, recognizing his community's precarity, determines to raise his daughter into the ranks of the group he expects to survive. Her romantic choice and its aftermath make for the central plotline: which person—and into which "species" of social order—will she marry? Literalizing the theme of class warfare, Melbury sees Fitzpiers and Charmond as "sophisticated beings, versed in the world's ways, armed with every apparatus for victory[.] In such an encounter the homely timber-dealer felt as inferior as a savage with his bow and arrows to the precise weapons of modern warfare" (*Woodlanders* 193). Out of a desire to save one particular, beloved individual, Melbury tries to game the system that he fears will destroy her—or, failing that, that will rob him of her true economic promise as his explicit "investment." Either way, his "faith in members of long-established families as such, irrespective of their personal condition or character," is a blind spot (144). He has "faith in [the] *members*" of those families purely on the basis of the family's social position, and so he sees no need to examine his future son-in-law's "personal . . . character" (144; my emphasis). The irony of this "faith" in Fitzpiers, who is incorrigibly unfaithful, reveals Melbury's ignorance of how such men pose the very threat from which he, by marrying Grace into a higher social class, was trying to shield her. Fitzpiers replicates and so compounds an evolutionary disregard for her individuality precisely through his unfaithfulness, treating her as merely one woman among multiple, interchangeable others.

The expensive education that was meant to both polish and preserve Grace manifests itself as an increasing detachment from her native environment. This alienation amounts almost to her becoming a new species, as Fitzpiers implies. Specifically, the novel literalizes her upward

mobility as a rising up from the soil of her birthplace. Rootless, wealthier characters from landowning families move from place to place, and Grace, when she comes into contact with them, rises figuratively and literally. Euphoric after meeting with Mrs. Charmond, Grace exhibits "a species of exaltation which saw no environing details" (60). Etymologically, her "exaltation" evokes a rising that marks her, Hardy's language suggests, as a creature no longer embedded in its native environment. Her visceral discomfort in being native to Little Hintock also suggests speciation. When she finds a slug (or, in other editions, a snail) in the salad greens Giles serves her—cabbage being the slug's "native home"—her sensibilities are shocked (72).[33] The scene aligns differences of class with those of species, juxtaposing the well-educated, well-dressed Grace with a species that, though perhaps repulsive as food, shares her place of origin. Although her tight-lipped reaction is understandable, it is notably different from that of her neighbors at the table, who are unbothered.[34] Having retained its connection to the mud and earth of that place, the slug points up Grace's distance from her former "environing details."

Hardy was likely aware of recent discoveries showing that certain animals could undergo dramatic physical metamorphoses, sometimes seemingly bringing about a change in their species, as a result of environmental stimuli during development.[35] Leveling descriptions of conflict among species of vegetation, as in "In a Wood," suggest that Hardy understood humans to be formed and governed by the same forces as other organisms. As he writes in a well-known

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[33] Editions vary about which creature shows up in Grace's salad. Macmillan and Company's 1887 edition opts for a snail, while the Oxford edition used in this chapter, which is based on Hardy's corrected manuscript, places a slug on her plate, highlighting her citified sensibility and magnifying Giles's misstep.

[34] One man who sees the slug remarks, "I don't mind 'em myself," based on the reasoning that since all they eat is cabbage they must be made of cabbage themselves (72).

[35] For example, French and English zoologists discovered in the 1860s that a juvenile aquatic axolotl or salamander could develop (or be made to develop) terrestrial characteristics within a single generation, adapting itself to an entirely different environment. See Frederick B. Churchill, *August Weismann: Development, Heredity, and Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

1909 letter, "evolution . . . revealed that all organic creatures are of one family."[36] Naturally, this does not imply that human behavior in all its complexity, especially the problems of language and interpretation integral to *The Woodlanders*, can be explained by basic evolutionary dynamics, such as scarcity or heritability. Nevertheless, Hardy does occasionally use the idea that "all creatures are of one family" to counter an inflated sense of human exceptionalism. Animal metamorphoses that resulted in disadaptation from an original environment could well have informed the depiction of Grace's transformation.

Hardy's novel organizes questions of nativeness and extinction around impressions made by Grace's feet in the mud of Little Hintock.[37] She is first introduced via the impression of her foot, made the day before she left home for school. In her absence, her father goes frequently "to regard the imprint of a daughter's footstep," which he has preserved for years by covering it with a tile (*Woodlanders* 18). The narrator notes the suffering this attachment is likely to bring: "Melbury perhaps was an unlucky man in having the sentiment which could make him wander out into the night to regard the imprint of a daughter's footstep. Nature does not carry on her government with a view to such feelings" (18–19). The moment reenacts the irony of Hardy's use of environment as the medium of figural preservation. Nature doesn't care about Melbury's pain at the absence of his daughter, yet it's only through nature that he is able to preserve—in memory, and in the earth where she was born—a version of his daughter that never really returns. Newly educated, Grace will find herself suspended "as it were in mid-air between two

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[36] Thomas Hardy, *Thomas Hardy's Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Michael Millgate (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 306.

[37] Footprints and hoofprints are important across Hardy's oeuvre. For the most extended example of this, in which he delves into the hermeneutics of these impressions, see chapter thirty-two in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1895), 247–48.

storeys of society" (195). In rising toward the social position her father wanted for her, she is irreversibly altered, but an impression of her girlhood self remains.

Robert Creedle, the seasoned soldier and worker, observes about Grace's education that "learning is better than housing and lands. But to keep a maid at school till she is taller out of pattens than her mother was in 'em—'tis tempting Providence" (26). Pattens are "a kind of overshoe worn to raise an ordinary shoe above wet or muddy ground."[38] Others echo Creedle's worry that Grace's education will have spoiled her, making her unwilling to touch the ground, and mention that whenever her mother and father "came to a puddle in their walks together he'd take [Grace's mother] up like a halfpenny doll, and put her over without dirting her a speck" (26). Our first glimpse of Grace shows her approaching Giles "on tip-toe through the mud," reluctant to soil her feet (34). The woodlanders worry she will become overly delicate, like her mother, whose "touch upon your hand was like the passing of wind" (26). The two women, it seems, leave no more impression behind them than a breeze does, and the mother's tendency to float (in Melbury's arms) over a patch of mud recurs in the daughter in a climactic scene. Whether raising herself out of the mud in pattens, walking on tip-toe, or riding in a gig whose wheels "silently crush[] delicate-patterned mosses" on the forest floor, Grace enacts her symbolic distancing from the environment of her upbringing (125).

Class-based speciation and separation from environment comes to a head at the novel's climax, when a woodlander (Tim Tangs) sets an iron man-trap to punish Fitzpiers for his affair with the man's fiancée (Suke Damson). The device, formerly used for catching poachers, is "a large spring-type trap with a tread trigger" (345n). When activated by the pressure of a foot, the toothed trap snaps closed, tearing flesh and breaking bone. Fitzpiers, on his way to meet Grace,

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[38] "*patten*, n." OED Online. June 2020. Oxford University Press (accessed May 12, 2020).

with whom he has been gradually renewing his intimacy since their estrangement, strolls along the path where the trap is set. Grace approaches from the opposite direction, the menacing trap laid allegorically between them: "Midway between husband and wife was the diabolical trap, silent, open, ready" (319).

If it is a character's native environment that retains the impressions through which she can be preserved, then Grace's increasing, class-based inability to leave impressions endangers her status as an individual. This danger is of course gendered. As a suggestion that wives bear the brunt of most marital disasters, Grace reaches the man-trap before her husband and steps on the "treading-place" that activates it (317). Having developed the tendency, however, to levitate above the mud—with its suggestive readiness to be imprinted—she makes only a fleeting impression on the spring-loaded step and the trap snaps closed on the train of her dress. The event dramatizes a century-long preoccupation with impressions and their retention: receiving only the faintest impression, the trap fails literally to retain Grace. She escapes unscathed, having lost only some material from her clothes—"the portion of her dress which the gin retained"—but the larger significance of leaving no impression behind constitutes a kind of forgetting that associates her with the novel's deracinated characters (321). Having left an impression on her native environment as a girl, in the form of a footprint in the mud, Grace now leaves none. Education and her consequent elevation in society have eroded the basis on which she might have been remembered after death.

In Hardy's view, extrication from the people and places among which one grew up is also the beginning of a grave ethical error. Grace sustains a profound (though non-physical) injury, and in doing so becomes liable to return that injury against others. If origin is the irreplaceable basis of one's individuality (formed via early attachments), then for Grace to shed or displace it

could set her on a path toward an egoism like her husband's. *The Woodlanders* represents this act of primal forgetting as a tipping-point, after which characters may fall into a damaging form of repetition, trying to substitute an endless series of encounters for broken original ties.

If Grace is threatened on one side with non-remembrance, Fitzpiers's serial infidelity poses a second, surprisingly congruous, danger to her individuality. When word spreads that he has been injured in a fall, his other two lovers rush to Grace's home. Standing at the door to his bedroom, Suke and Felice Charmond insist on being admitted, despite Grace's insistence that he is not there. Her authority as wife has been weakened, though, and she is inclined to let them overrule her. Agreeing to let the two women see for themselves, Grace proclaims, with righteous anger, "Wives all, let's enter together!" (233). Noting that her husband "had never really behaved towards either of them anyhow but selfishly," Grace realizes that he has cared only about satisfying his own sexual and emotional whims, without much regard for the women injured along the way (234). In figuratively taking a second and then a third "wife," Fitzpiers shows a profound insensitivity to the suffering caused by his erosion of Grace's status as the sole occupant of that position.[39] He treats her as generic.

Recalling the seventy-third psalm, Grace stops herself and decides not to speak out further against the other women, as that would be to set the individual (that is, herself) above "generation":

> It was well enough, conventionally, to address either one of them in the wife's regulation terms of virtuous sarcasm, as woman, creature, or thing. . . . She had, like the singer of the Psalm of Asaph, been plagued and chastened all the day long; but could she, by retributive words, in order to please herself the individual, "offend against the generation," as that singer would not? (*Woodlanders* 234)

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[39] For a different reading of the "ravages" of multiple marriages in Hardy, see Maia McAleavey, *The Bigamy Plot* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 141–67.

Grace follows the standard interpretation of the psalm she cites, in which the individual whose

sense of right and wrong has been offended by seeing the wicked prosper decides not to give

voice to indignation. In the psalm, the addressee is God; the psalmist writes that to question

God's justice would be "to offend against the generation of [his] children" (Psalm 73:15).

"Generation" is traditionally understood to emphasize that the unpunished are nevertheless

"God's children," with the word and phrase evoking the book of Genesis and God as the

designated creator of humanity.

The psalm's word "generation" acquires a new valence in a novel so fixated on evolution

and the mechanism of generational inheritance. Recalling Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, and the

emerging evolutionary context in which grief had to be reconceptualized, the tension between

individual and generation takes on a distinctly Victorian import. Writing just a few years before

Hardy, Darwin had marveled at the individual organism's strange relation to generation. "The

germ," he writes, referring to his hypothetical mechanism of inheritance,

> is crowded with invisible characters, proper . . . to a long line of . . . ancestors separated
> by hundreds or even thousands of generations from the present time: and these characters,
> like those written on paper with invisible ink, lie ready to be evolved whenever the
> organization is disturbed by certain known or unknown conditions.[40]

He calls it "a wonderful fact" that "a being should be born resembling in certain characters an

ancestor removed by . . . thousands of generations" (*Variation* 2:25). Grace evokes this

biological sense of generation through her husband's serial philandering and the next "generation

of . . . children" that it may produce (*Woodlanders* 195). Through Fitzpiers's infidelity, the

mandate of generation erodes Grace's particularity, making her evolutionarily interchangeable.

In an act recalling Social Darwinist notions that ground moral license in natural selection,

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[40] Charles Darwin, *The Variation of Animals and Plants Under Domestication* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1900), 2:35.

Fitzpiers claims the right to brutally discard his wife when he no longer wants her—that is to say, when her capacity to impress him has failed.

The passage shows how evolutionary uninterest in individuals can coincide with an egoistic male desire's similar form of disregard. When Grace says "Wives all," she is objecting to what Beer calls the law of generation in a very specific form: an egoistic man who treats women as disposable members of an indefinitely large group. A parallel passage in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) illuminates the suggestion that, for female characters, there are analogues between sex and species. Hardy's narrator describes how the several girls attracted to Angel Clare suffer under "cruel Nature's law" of desire, according to which the "differences which distinguished them as individuals were abstracted by this passion, and each was but portion of one organism called sex."[41] Like Grace in *The Woodlanders*, Angel analogizes the multiplicity of women available to him to a series of wives, remarking, "Three Leahs to get one Rachel" (160).[42] The category mistake in the use of the word "organism"—clearly an intentional one, in which the narrator refers to a collective as one of its constituent members—is used to make an ethical point. From the perspective of "Nature's law," and more concretely from the point of view of certain men, several women can constitute a single "organism."

Fitzpiers too is less concerned with any constituent "Leah" than with the ability of the collective organism "sex" to continue supplying him with partners. Though he is of course only one character himself, he engages in a serial womanizing that mirrors group-level dynamics and that hands down comparable suffering to the women who compose that group. *The Woodlanders*

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[41] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 162.

[42] The book of Genesis describes Jacob's marriage to Rachel's less-desired sister Leah, who is later "supplanted" (to use Hardy's word) by Rachel (*Tess* 161). Immediately after his comment about the three Leahs, Angel describes Tess's three acquaintances as fractional: "Do you know that I have undergone three-quarters of this labour," he asks Tess, "entirely for the sake of the fourth quarter?" (160).

leans on an idealized form of environment-based memory to combat this twin assault on the integrity and survival of individual characters.

4. Scale and Hardy's Evolutionary Ethics

Hardy writes in his preface that *The Woodlanders* is a novel of "matrimonial divergence."[43] Its climax, however, is a catastrophic marital convergence, a coming-together at the man-trap not unlike the kind he portrays in "The Convergence of the Twain" (1912), in which the *Titanic* founders on its "sinister mate," the iceberg.[44] He seems to have had *The Woodlanders* in mind, decades later, when titling that poem. As Grace nears the man-trap, a sentence from her wedding ceremony returns to her: "Whom God hath joined together," she repeats to herself (*Woodlanders* 319). The preceding sentence in the gospel of Mark, the source for this phrase, states that in marriage "the twain shall be one flesh" (Mark 10:8). Hardy represents marriage as a trap designed to mangle those who step into it, and moreover one they are driven into as irresistibly as the *Titanic*, in his poem, is guided toward the iceberg.

Although the novel focuses on the troubles of one specific marriage, it is important to recognize that that case—especially Grace's position in it—is representative. Hardy's larger point is not about one instance of class conflict or marital collapse but rather the wholesale devastation of individuals by forces and institutions that operate at the scale of species and centuries. As we have learned, "Nature does not carry on her government with a view to . . . feelings" of sentimental attachment, much less any human concern or endeavor (*Woodlanders* 19). Again "The Convergence of the Twain" is instructive. The catastrophe in that poem is not

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[43] Thomas Hardy, Preface to *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.
[44] Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 307.

brought about by personal choice but by an impersonal "Immanent Will" that "stirs and urges everything" ("Convergence" 307).[45] Thousands of passengers are guided under its government toward the same terrible end. The ship does not represent a single wife, smashing up against her "sinister mate"; rather, it embodies the collective institution of marriage, which (by Hardy's view) generates casualties on a massive scale. It's for that reason that he compares marriage to the *Titanic* disaster, in which twelve-hundred people died in one fell swoop. Impressibility addresses the ethical stakes for fiction of this discrepancy between the scale at which the Immanent Will operates and the one at which personal experience occurs.

Scale—specifically the jarring juxtaposition of smaller and larger scales—is central to Hardy's evolutionary ethics and its grounding in individual suffering. He writes in the preface to *Two on a Tower* (1882) that that novel "set[s] the emotional history of two infinitesimal lives against the stupendous background of the stellar universe" in order to "impart to readers the sentiment that of these contrasting magnitudes the smaller might be the greater to them as men."[46] His works tend to analyze suffering at the point where the individual scale of experience clashes with the astronomical (as in "Channel Firing," which ends by widening its attention to "starlit Stonehenge"), the geological (as in *Jude the Obscure* [1895]), or the evolutionary.[47]

In lamenting the individual's apparent unimportance on an evolutionary scale, *The Woodlanders* directly engages questions about the status of single organisms. Even if the appropriate units for comprehending evolution are large timespans (centuries, millennia) and

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[45] The "Will" in "Convergence" parallels the "Unfulfilled Intention" in *The Woodlanders* (48).

[46] Thomas Hardy, Preface to *Two on a Tower* (Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010), 5. This novel also underlines Hardy's association of contrast in scale with the impressions left by feet: "They retraced their steps, the tender hoar-frost taking the imprint of their feet, while two stars in the Twins looked down upon their two persons through the trees, as if those two persons could bear some sort of comparison with them" (Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower* [Auckland: The Floating Press, 2010], 62).

[47] Thomas Hardy, "Channel Firing" in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 306.

large groups (species), the suffering that evolution entails is not *felt* on a scale of centuries any more than it is felt by the species *Homo sapiens*. It is the individual creature that suffers, and on the order of weeks, months, and even years, as Hardy shows in his novel. His detailed account of the protracted shame and humiliation Grace experiences as a result of Fitzpiers's infidelity is just one example here among many. Even when thousands suffer as the result of a single cause, as with the *Titanic*, they do so not as a mass but as thousands of individuals. *The Woodlanders* takes one of these instances and meditates over it while at the same time suggesting the existence of many parallel cases, each with its own hardship.

In his essay "The Science of Fiction," Hardy underlines the ethical imperative that art orient itself to the level of the individual suffering. Fiction is not, he writes, about "the paying of a great regard to adventitious externals to the neglect of vital qualities, not a precision about the outside of the platter and an obtuseness to the contents."[48] The accumulation of "external" facts can never add up to the humane insight he thinks art can and should convey. To illustrate, he contrasts two women, one who automatically memorizes the physical details of her surroundings, including furnishings and clothing, and another who has the artist's "sensitiveness to the intrinsic" (263). This second observer, on seeing a "poor and haggard woman who had lost her little son years before," says of her, "You can see the ghost of that child in her face even now" (264). For Hardy, art requires a sensitivity to the feelings, especially the suffering, of individual people, not a serial, accumulative form of interaction. A fiction about the bereaved mother should record her particular distress, as caused by the loss of her child. Crucially, Hardy's example also highlights the way in which people who have died can seem to live on in those who

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[48] Thomas Hardy, "The Science of Fiction," in *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poetry and Non-Fictional Prose*, ed. Peter Widdowson (London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1997), 263.

were close to them. The observing woman displays her artistic temperament by noting the posthumous persistence of this one specific child.

Evolutionary ethics emerged as a domain of thought in the latter half of the century, and *The Woodlanders* intervenes on the basis of Hardyan impressibility. Debates raged in the wake of Darwin's theory. For Herbert Spencer, a leading philosopher and sociologist, and an influence on Hardy (and Darwin himself), evolutionary ethical questions came to be organized around the concepts of egoism and altruism.[49] He predicted that evolution would ultimately effect a "compromise between egoism and altruism"—partly through the tendency of "unduly altruistic" and "unduly egoistic individuals" not to procreate—and believed he saw progress already in that direction.[50] He and Hardy coincide to a significant extent, including Spencer's interest in a certain "exceptional" class of extreme altruists who "feel the moral pain if not the physical pain of another, as keenly as the actual sufferer of it" (*Data of Ethics* 229). Both were intrigued by those for whom the distress of others "arouse[s] . . . a body of feeling . . . equal in amount to the original feeling, if not greater" (229). Ranging across disciplines old and new, from biology to sociology to anthropology, Spencer sought to supply a new, physiological foundation for ethics, insisting that "the moral law of society, like its other laws, originates in some attribute of the human being."[51]

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[49] On Hardy's engagement with Spencer's ideas, see Caroline Sumpter, "On Suffering and Sympathy: *Jude the Obscure*, Evolution, and Ethics," *Victorian Studies* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 674–77.

[50] Herbert Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1884), 238; Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Ethics* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1892), 204. For more on how Spencer's definition of altruism shifts across his three major works, from a broadly religious love for others to a form of action, see Thomas Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism: Making Moral Meanings in Victorian Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[51] Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics, or The Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified, and the First of Them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1851), 18.

For Hardy, as for the earlier novelists whose work I have examined, the physiological "attribute of the human being" from which ethics derives is the ability to take and retain impressions of others. His emphasis on that faculty leads him to differ sharply with Spencer around questions of evolution and scale. Spencer believed that ethical calculations should be made on a timeline extending well into the future. Once it is determined what "kinds of action necessarily tend to produce happiness," he wrote, those actions should be "recognized as laws of conduct, . . . irrespective of *a direct estimation of happiness or misery*" (*Data of Ethics* 57; my emphasis). The reduction of misery in the distant future should outweigh consideration for suffering caused by the program that would bring about that future. For Spencer, evolution was producing happiness on that longer timeline. Unfitness was a source of distress, and so natural selection tended toward pleasure: "as the pains caused by unfitness decrease, sympathy can increase in presence of the pleasures that come from fitness" (*Principles of Ethics* 246). The unfit were "hindrances" to sympathy's maximization, and his optimistic expectation of that result led him to de-emphasize the "direct . . . misery" that evolution and Social Darwinism inflicted on individuals and communities (*Data of Ethics* 57). What Spencer called the altruistic "postponements of self to others" could be extended to periods of time that exceeded an individual lifespan (254).

Spencer espoused a so-called soft eugenics that Hardy's ethics of fiction forcefully rejects.[52] In 1883, just a few years before the publication of *The Woodlanders*, Francis Galton coined the term "eugenics," defining it as "the science of improving stock" by "tak[ing]

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[52] Spencer's eugenicist views are well-documented. Earlier in his career, he writes that "[f]ostering the good-for-nothing at the expense of the good, is an extreme cruelty. It is a deliberate storing-up of miseries for future generations. There is no greater curse to posterity than that of bequeathing to them an increasing population of imbeciles and idlers and criminals" (*The Study of Sociology* [New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1901], 314).

cognizance of all influences that tend . . . to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable."[53] Hardy was familiar with Galton's book, and even showed some interest in the eugenicist idea that novels might be able to encourage marriage at a younger age.[54] It's unclear whether he was appalled by the suggestion.

Hardy's ambiguous, perhaps ambivalent, reaction to eugenics aside, the ethics of his fiction—as his use of scale makes clear—returns our focus to the level of organization and the timescale at which suffering is experienced. His novel acknowledges the "magnitudes" at which evolution operates, only to turn conspicuously away and concern itself with the distress (and occasional pleasure) of individual characters such as Marty and Grace (Preface to *Two on a Tower* 5). Unlike Galton, who was eager to accelerate processes that would eliminate the Martys of the world, Hardy lingers compassionately over their slow eclipse. Hypothetical, future enjoyment does not distract him from the days and hours of actual suffering. Using his fiction to record that anguish and death, he even finds the raw material to lessen it in precisely those people whose "extinction" Galton (and to a lesser extent Spencer) discounted.

Ethical fiction, by Hardy's view, commemorates the kinds of grief to which characters are unfeelingly subjected by group-level dynamics. In a small-scale effort to mitigate the loss of those particular individuals who make up an extinction, an impressible novel insists—sometimes morbidly—on remaining at the scale at which suffering is felt.

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[53] Francis Galton, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1883), 25.

[54] See Angelique Richardson, "Some Science Underlies All Art: The Dramatization of Sexual Selection and Racial Biology in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* and *The Well-Beloved*," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 303.

5. "That particular person Giles": The Impressible Novel's Conservation of Individuals

Edred Fitzpiers's formal introduction in the novel, including the first description of his manor house and the narrative's initial adoption of his perspective as voyeur, analogizes his serial womanizing to the Humean succession of sensory impressions. As Hume puts it in his description of the rapid passage of thoughts through consciousness, "[o]ne . . . chaces [sic] another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell'd in its turn."[55] This early scene externalizes what Jessica Riskin calls "the full transformation of the passive, impressionable mind into each successive impression."[56] From the window of his parlor, the impressionable Fitzpiers entertains himself by watching a series of women pass through a gate still wet from a recent repainting:

> The first that he noticed was a bouncing young woman with her skirts tucked up and her hair wild. Fitzpiers knew her as Suke Damson. . . . The next was a girl with hair cropped short in whom the surgeon recognized the daughter of his late patient the woodman South. . . . Then there came over the green quite a different sort of personage. She walked as delicately as if she had been bred in town. (*Woodlanders* 102–03)

Suke, Marty, and Grace reincarnate the series that egoistic men make of women in earlier novels by Mackenzie and Brontë. Grace finds herself in the position of Jane Eyre, who, after experiencing and revolting from Rochester's attempt at bigamy, tries to become not the next but the last woman in his string of affairs.

Just a few pages later, Fitzpiers completes the analogy involved in an affective impression by comparing women to a series of sensations. Prompted to articulate his feelings about women, he makes explicit how little he cares about differences among them through a

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[55] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1:170. See Chapters 1 and 2 for similarities to the rapid turnover involved in Harley's style of sympathy and Rochester's serial form of desire.

[56] Jessica Riskin, *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 46.

metaphor of visual perception: "Human love is . . . joy accompanied by an idea which we project against any suitable object in the line of our vision, just as the rainbow is projected against an oak, ash, or elm tree indifferently" (106). The variety that interests him lies entirely in his *own* feelings: the fascinating "rainbow" of his own desires disregards the differences among oak, ash, and elm trees. As his analogy suggests, Suke, Grace, and Mrs. Charmond will pass through his bedroom as sensory impressions pass through consciousness, each "draw[ing] after it [another] . . . by which it is expelled in its turn" (*Treatise* 1:170). Fitzpiers's inability to appreciate the differences among trees carries over to the women who live among them.

In this section I consider the ethical and formal implications of two timeframes of attention: Fitzpiers's near-exclusive focus on present sensations that generate only fleeting interest, and a brand of long-remembering impressibility that characterizes not just Marty and Giles but also, here, the novel itself. For Fitzpiers, physical proximity is intoxicating; it overpowers feelings and obligations associated with others who are absent. *The Woodlanders* exhibits a more impressible "memory," one defined against the affective seriality that springs from Fitzpiers's taste for presentness. Like Marty, the novel retains impressions of people, especially those who are no longer furnishing new ones. That retentiveness resists both Fitzpiers's iterative use-and-discarding of women and evolutionary forces of "generation" that are unconcerned with the preservation of individuals. As this broad defiance of generation implies, impressibility involves sublimating the sexual impulse. Describing Marty's appearance in the novel's closing paragraphs, the narrator remarks that she seems to have "rejected . . . sex for the loftier quality of abstract humanism" (331). Whereas for Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond physical closeness can overrule less-immediate commitments, an impressible person yearns and desires in the absence of others, including after their deaths. The process of sublimation by

which Marty diverts sexual desire for Giles into a novelistic mode of remembering culminates in his (and others') preservation in the pages of *The Woodlanders*.

As a cynical rationalization for womanizing, Fitzpiers's affective model depends on a Paterian notion of experience as a flame that needs to be fed with new sensations.[57] "Selfishly," according to his wife, he plies himself with ever-new experiences of women, converting the latter into a procession of pleasing impressions (234). He rushes thoughtlessly—the novel's repeated word is "forthwith"—toward any promising source of stimulation (142; 93). To him, Grace represents "an object of contemplation" who "*for the present* . . . would serve to . . . relieve the monotony of his days" (142; 120–21; my emphasis).

Grace's navigation of the freshly painted gate foreshadows her encounter with the man-trap: "she looked at the gate, picked up a little stick, and using it as a bayonet pushed open the obstacle without touching it at all" (103). As with the man-trap, she passes through unscathed, but that later escape from death (or at least horrific injury) turns out, as I have argued, to stem from traits that ensure her non-preservation in the compensatory form associated with impressibility. By tying herself to a man more interested in extending the series of women who pass through the "gate" of his attention than in the specific women themselves, Grace will be denied the kind of afterlife offered by impressible characters.[58]

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[57] For a counterpoint to this characterization of Pater, see Thomas Albrecht, "'That Free Play of Human Affection': The Humanist Ethics of Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 73, no. 4 (March 2019): 486–521. Albrecht argues that Pater puts forward not an "amoral, asocial hedonism" but an ethics of sympathy (487n.). I agree with the claim, but question that sympathy itself, especially in a spectatorial form that emphasizes the changeable momentariness of impressions.

[58] There is a potential ambiguity here, given the two levels at which preservation can occur. Grace *is* recorded and remembered by the novel—as opposed to by her husband—but only because it mimics Marty's impressibility.

Fitzpiers's style of affective seriality is driven by the forgetfulness Marty abjures in the novel's final lines.[59] He forgets things and people as a matter of course: he forgets his patient, John South, almost instantaneously (92); his "desultory" mind skips continually from one academic interest to the next; and he forgets his brief boyhood infatuation with Felice (later Mrs. Charmond) (170).[60] But it is his repeated "forgetting" of sexual partners that defines his character. One moment distills this propensity. Soon after meeting Grace, he mulls over the nature of his interest in her:

> He paced round his room with a selective tread upon the more prominent blooms of the carpet and murmured, "This phenomenal girl [Grace] will be the light of my life while I am at Hintock; and the special beauty of the situation is that our attitude and relations to each other will be purely casual." (120)

In light of Fitzpiers's philosophical bent, the word "phenomenal" underlines the merely *sensory* aspect of Grace, as if she is only "appearance," perceptible through the senses rather than by reason or intuition. In other words, he is largely unable to represent her to himself when she is physically absent. (Later, during their estrangement, when he is trying to prove that he can be faithful, he has to stoke his own interest repeatedly by stealing glimpses of her on the sly.[61]) His future betrayals are foreshadowed here. As the implied metaphor of a "blooming girl" suggests, the blooms on his carpet—flowers on which he intentionally treads—represent the women he will treat as mere phenomena, useful for maintaining a state of highly stimulated presentness.[62]

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[59] Mrs. Charmond exhibits a comparable capacity to "forget" affective impressions, and a similarly serial posture toward men, as evidenced by her alleged involvement with "others too numerous to name" (211). The difference in the punishments they receive for identical conduct, however, reveals a lethal asymmetry: where Fitzpiers is subjected only to private disapprobation, Mrs. Charmond is murdered by a former lover.

[60] Fitzpiers's meandering "mind was accustomed to pass in a grand solar sweep through all the zodiacal signs of the intellectual heaven. . . . [O]ne month he would be immersed in alchemy, another in poesy; one month in … astrology and astronomy; then in … German literature and metaphysics" (111).

[61] "Would it make you angry to know," he asks Grace, "that I have been along this path [to peer at you] . . . three or four times since our last meeting?" (310).

[62] Fitzpiers "tread[ing]" on these flowers recalls the symbolism around footprints. The scene suggests that, not only are women mistreated by him in this way, they are asked also to retain his impression after he sheds theirs.

In contrast to the emphasis placed on present sensation by Fitzpiers and Mrs. Charmond, impressible characters find themselves awash in "old association" (112). Indeed, memories of the dead and a wealth of local knowledge are pointedly "*present* to the lives of Winterborne, Melbury, and Grace" (112; my emphasis). It is that knowledge and those memories that constitute

> old association—an almost exhaustive biological or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon. [A man] must know all about those invisible ones of the days gone by whose feet have traversed the fields . . .; recall whose creaking plough has turned those sods from time to time; whose hands planted the trees . . . [and] what bygone domestic dramas of love, jealousy, revenge, or disappointment have been enacted[.] (112)

This dispositional tendency to retain and draw sustenance from memories of the dead, and from knowledge of a place's history, is explicitly a quality of certain people. Notably, the passage mentions the "feet [that] have traversed the fields," recalling the relationship between mnemonic preservation and the impressions left by characters' feet.

Despite being attributed to certain characters, however, the knowledge encompassed by "old association" is distinctly novelistic, especially "the bygone domestic dramas of love, jealousy, revenge, or disappointment [that] have been enacted" in some particular place (112). This is a storyteller's knowledge. The "enactment" of such dramas sounds more like the behavior of fictional characters than real people, as the dead would be to those woodlanders who remember them.

Thus, while this cast of mind is ascribed to characters, including Giles and Marty, both of whom lead more limited lives as a result, it is also a quality of the book itself, as the novel's first sentence confirms: "The rambler who for *old association's sake* should trace the forsaken coach-road running . . . from Bristol to the south shore of England, would find himself during the latter

half of his journey, in the vicinity of some extensive woodlands" (5; my emphasis).[63] What

others have "forsaken," this unnamed rambler comes back to, perhaps involuntarily, on the force

of strong associations with that part of the country. His return to the place of those memories

frames the novel's subsequent dramas of love and disappointment as recollections, or at least as

events that will in time be added to that cache of local memories. Originating in and replete with

"old association," *The Woodlanders* records its "confused heap of impressions" of "those

invisible ones of the days gone by."[64]

Hardy's impressible novel accordingly possesses a longer memory than that of its more

forgetful characters. While Fitzpiers's serial pursuit of stimulation reenacts the affective

picaresque, as seen in *The Man of Feeling*, over a hundred years later, by *The Woodlanders* it has

become possible for the novel portraying that disposition not to be structured by it as well, as

was the case with Mackenzie's episodic narrative. Hardy's text has a memory modeled more

closely on its impressible characters. Like them, *The Woodlanders* rarely attends to a single

event or episode exclusively; its moral vision couches the present moment in the past, and

occasionally understands it with respect to the future as well. Instances of foresight, however,

such as when the narrator contradicts Fitzpiers's promise never to deceive Grace—

"Foreknowledge to the distance of a year or so . . . might have spoilt the effect of that pretty

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[63] The following paragraph, which discusses the "physiognomy of a deserted highway," recalls Charlotte Brontë's fiction (*Woodlanders* 5). See Chapter 2 on how the face-like "physiognomy" of a novel's setting relates to an impression-taking cast of mind.

[64] Hardy, *The Life and Work*, 441; Hardy, *Woodlanders*, 112. Rightly observing the connection between eros and extinction, John Hughes argues that "Love lacks futurity in *The Woodlanders*. At best it is a matter of something felt for 'old association's sake' (p. 35), which issues now only in jealousy, regret, misunderstanding, or longing: that is, in futile emotions from which one must painfully disintricate oneself to survive" ("For old association's sake: Narrative, History, and Hardy's *The Woodlanders*," *The Thomas Hardy Journal* 18, no. 2 (May 2002): 57–64. Hughes does not discuss the suggestion, via this key phrase, that a trait which is so perilous for a person may be a desirable characteristic of the novel.

speech"—are actually rooted in memory (119). It is not supernatural foresight that guarantees his future betrayals but an understanding of how short-lived are his affective impressions of others.

More typically, *The Woodlanders* blocks scenes in ways that contrast Fitzpiers's memory with the novel's own much-longer one. During Suke's wedding celebration, for instance, her new husband Tim discovers her lingering interest in Fitzpiers and the mood is dampened: "Tim's face had grown rigid and pale. . . . The former boisterous laughter of the wedding-party at the groomsman's jokes was heard rising between the hedges no more" (305). Fitzpiers and Grace, talking quietly, are passing the wedding party at the moment of Tim's realization. Fitzpiers is wholly focused on winning Grace back after her discovery of his infidelity. "I am most attentive," he tells her, truthfully (305). The novel, however, is attentive to the aftermath of his affair with Suke. The narrative's memory is expressed in the scene's blocking: Fitzpiers conspicuously continues his pattern of chasing present sensation while the newlyweds wrestle with his past intrusion into their engagement. Juxtaposing the destructive shortness of his memory with the length of its own, *The Woodlanders* acknowledges and records the suffering he both causes and disregards.

Enraged with Fitzpiers, Tim supplies the book with its climactic image of death and retention, the man-trap. Triggered in the novel's penultimate chapter, the trap and its role in the novel's climax reveal the extent to which the plot is organized around a *remembering of Fitzpiers's forgetting*. Building to the moment at which the latter is meant to be punished, *The Woodlanders* signals its impressibility by making multiple strands of its plot intersect in this image of remembering a damaging act of forgetfulness.

Ultimately, it is not specific scenes and their demonstrations of long memory but the novel itself—modeled on minds such as Marty's and Giles's—that constitutes a monumental

effort at impressible conservation. Grace, reflecting on Giles's character, compares him to

Horatio, "Hamlet's friend, [who had] borne himself throughout his scathing 'as one, in suffering

all, that suffers nothing'" (198–99). The line she quotes—one alongside which Hardy wrote his

father's name in his copy of *Hamlet*—may seem to refer only to Giles's longsuffering,

uncomplaining nature.[65] But Horatio plays another, more important role. When the poisoned

Hamlet is dying, and his friend expresses a desire to kill himself so as to die with him, Hamlet

replies: "If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart / Absent thee from felicity awhile, / And in this

harsh world draw thy breath in pain, / To tell my story."[66] Horatio's role is to live on after others

have died and to commemorate them in stories.

For all Giles's and Marty's personal abilities to act as memory-keepers and storytellers, it

is *The Woodlanders* that fulfills the responsibility placed on its Horatio-like figures. As *Hamlet*

the play, in telling Hamlet's story, fulfills Horatio's task, so Hardy's novel records and enacts the

memories and old associations that its impressible characters retain. In this way, Marty's

sublimated desire for Giles informs a novelistic mode of remembering that preserves him and

others, particularly the suffering and loss they experience.

Hardy explores a complicating corollary of this mode of preservation in *The Mayor of*

Casterbridge (1886), which tells the story of the unimpressible Michael Henchard. Henchard

reflects aspects of Fitzpiers's posture toward women—first discarding his wife, and later ruining

another woman—and the novel ends with his intriguing request *not* to be remembered. In his

will, he asks that his daughter "be not told of [his] death" and that "no man remember [him]."[67]

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[65] Horatio was an important figure to Hardy. In his autobiography, he writes that "the character of Horatio in *Hamlet* was his father's to a nicety" (*The Life and Work*, 262).

[66] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Robert S. Miola (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 2011), 128.

[67] Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge: A Story of a Man of Character* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, & Rivington, 1887), 430.

Ironically, he records for posterity his desire not to be recorded. Unimpressible male protagonists can redemptively reinforce Hardy's conception of preservation by recusing themselves from it— in its personal form, at least.

Federico's discussion of ascetic Christian masculinity clarifies the difference between personal and formal impressibility in *The Woodlanders*. She argues that Giles is "incapacitate[d]" by his "imaginative renderings of a 'well-beloved'" and by his self-conception as a "romantic rescuer[]" (*Masculine Identity* 58). In this way he bears a surprising, counterintuitive resemblance to Hardy's rakes, including Fitzpiers; like those "less virtuous counterparts," Giles is "unable to conceive any genuine, broadened vision of the sexual other" (58). His "idealizations" of Grace develop into a "watchful possessiveness" that is almost as damaging as her husband's betrayals (58). Impressibility badly impedes Giles's comprehension of his own sexuality, burdening and embarrassing Grace in consequence.

I would add to Federico's analysis an understanding of Hardy's ambivalence about that immature "possessiveness," given the artistic and ethical value it may hold. While she rightly points out Giles's ironic similarity to Fitzpiers—which stresses the point that Giles's extreme form of "chivalry" is not a norm—his tendency to "watch" others and "possess" them as affective impressions represents Hardy's attempt to *formalize* a compensation for losses that Giles does not cause (*Woodlanders* 282). Hardy suggests that personal and formal impressibility can be distinguished. Personally, it can be as confining to an idealized object as it is obstructive to the impressible person himself, while as a property of the novel it does not encumber its objects. Recalling Eliot's figurative use of poison (as a way to indicate the harshness of the "medicine" of susceptibility), Hardy accepts these drawbacks, believing that the damage the impressible disposition is designed to lessen warrants extreme measures.

The temporality of the preservation of the novel's characters, including "that particular person Giles Winterborne," necessarily exceeds a normal human lifespan (17). While Beer is doubtless correct that Hardy's plots take the human life as the appropriate duration for a narrative, his stories frequently portray the disappearance or death of the characters who appear in them. The long-remembering Marty, in surviving Little Hintock's figural extinction, comes to be aligned with the temporality of the book itself, perhaps understood according to the medieval *topos* of the "book of nature."[68] An avid amateur medievalist, Hardy may well have had this concept in mind. A recording angel was often imagined as keeping a record of a man's good deeds, as described in the *Dies Irae*, for example.[69] Hardy's novel represents Marty—and to a lesser extent Giles—as this kind of almost sexless angel who, by physiological and artistic means rather than supernatural ones, records the good deeds of others from outside the boundaries of human time. As if to confirm the allusion, Marty declares in the book's final line that she will always remember the "good things" Giles did in life (331). Her memories of those, including of his devotion to Grace, selfless ability to plan for the well-being of others forty years in advance, and loving stewardship of the land, are recorded in the novel.[70]

There is a wrinkle in this characterization of the novel as *impressible*. As I have noted above, the way in which *The Woodlanders* frames a story about class conflict in evolutionary terms reveals an investment, at least at the level of metaphor, in Fitzpiers's polygenist view of

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[68] On Hardy's medievalist bent, see Shannon L. Rogers, "Medievalism in the Last Novels of Thomas Hardy: New Wine in Old Bottles," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 41, no. 3 (1999): 298–316.

[69] On the book as symbol and how "an angel writes down a man's good deeds," see Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 312–18. According to the *Dies Irae*, human beings are judged on the basis of a book that contains all their deeds: "Liber scriptus proferetur, / In quo totum continetur, / Unde mundus judicetur."

[70] Planting sapling fir trees for future use, Giles orients them so that "most of [their] roots [are] towards the south-west; for, he said, in forty years' time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side" (59).

humankind. The pathos of the story depends on the portrayal of the woodlanders as bound for

extinction; their charming, older way of life marks them atavistically as an endangered species.

Without that crisis of evolutionary non-retention, "preservation" through impressibility would

make little sense. This tension in the novel's ethical commitments, however, is less a

contradiction than a rich ambivalence. *The Woodlanders* speaks from a historical moment at

which the novel form is reckoning with evolutionary science.[71] Hardy's text is an uneasy

composite of the tragedy he saw in evolution and a novel form that he conceives, on the model of

impressibility, as offering a way to mitigate that tragedy.

6. Conclusion: "Afterwards"

Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses (1917), a largely autobiographical collection of

poems that the seventy-seven-year-old Hardy expected to be his last, concludes with the elegiac

lyric "Afterwards."[72] In that poem, the speaker speculates on how—even whether—his

neighbors will remember him after his death. The first stanza recalls Hardy's longstanding

preoccupation with presentness:

> When the Present has latched its postern behind my tremulous stay,
>   And the May month flaps its glad green leaves like wings,
> Delicate-filmed as new-spun silk, will the neighbors say,
>   "He was a man who used to notice such things"?[73]

The opening image makes an analogy between the speaker's life and a house: to be born is to

enter through the front door, after which he lives in the house until the moment he exits via the

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[71] On Hardy as a writer of Darwinian tragedy, see K. M. Newton, "Tragedy and the Novel," in *Thomas Hardy in Context*, ed. Phillip Mallett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 128.
[72] See Dolin, "Life-Lyrics," 7.
[73] Thomas Hardy, "Afterwards," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 553.

back gate—the "postern"—into "nocturnal blackness" (553). Etymologically, the "post-" in "postern" echoes the "after" in "afterwards"; death is a state defined as post-"Present."

In "Afterwards," it is the particularity of the speaker's impressions of the world—his aesthetic disposition—for which he wishes to be remembered. He fantasizes about neighbors observing, through a kind of borrowed influence, "the dewfall-hawk . . . crossing the shades to alight / Upon the wind-warped upland thorn," or "the hedgehog travel[ing] furtively over the lawn" on a "mothy and warm" night, or the way in which "a crossing breeze [can cut] a pause in [the] outrollings" of a bell (553). He wonders if they will say to themselves that he "used to notice such things" (553). Across its five stanzas the poem catalogs five particular impressions the speaker has taken. For Hardy's avatar, the thought that unsettles him is that the cache of his impressions of the world could be abruptly expunged. Thirty years after *The Woodlanders*, "Afterwards" rehearses that novel's fascination with the brevity of human lives alongside its anxiety that, as soon as we depart the present moment of an unimpressible world, we may completely vanish, replaced by others waiting, like more impressions, in series behind us.

The worry expressed in the poem is analogous to Samuel Butler's "instinctive loathing" for some aspects of Darwin's thought. Butler, a Lamarckian, wrote in 1890 that Darwin's vision of the world turns it into "a nightmare of waste and death."[74] He couldn't bear the thought that "habit, effort and intelligence acquired during the experience of any one life goes for nothing" (308).[75] Hardy, too, was perturbed by the idea that all the work involved "in the matter of knowing one's likes and dislikes," as Butler put it, might go utterly unregistered and unused by

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[74] Samuel Butler, "The Deadlock in Darwinism" in *Essays on Life, Art and Science*, ed. R. A. Streatfeild (London: A. C. Fifield, 1908), 308.

[75] Herbert Spencer concurred with Butler. For him, as Kristie M. Allen puts it, "National progress and the evolution of morality . . . depended upon the virtuous and vigorous habits of individuals" ("Habit in George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*," *SEL Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 50, no. 4 [Autumn 2010]: 850n).

evolutionary processes ("Deadlock" 307). As his speaker says in one elegy, "I am now the only

being who / Remembers you. . . . What a waste that Nature / Grudged soul so dear the art its

due!" ("You Were the Sort that Men Forget" 435). However, for Hardy, that aspect of nature

could be used, not least as fodder for art. As the elegy suggests, grief and regret supplied a great

deal of material for his poetry and fiction. Rather than wishing away nature's wasteful discarding

of individual experience, he builds an aesthetic practice rooted in the aptitude for retaining

impressions of others, including their distinctive "likes and dislikes."

Situated at the end of the volume, "Afterwards" answers a question posed by the opening

poem, "Moments of Vision," so returning briefly to that title poem can shed light on the specific

nature of posthumous persistence that "Afterwards" formulates, including through its complex

reliance on impressibility. In conversation with each other, the poems underscore the twofold

nature of the impression as both a way to retain others in their absence and a representative

instance of an individual aesthetic sensibility.

"Moments of Vision" asks a series of questions that turn on the doubleness of "glass" as

it relates to vision. A "glass" can be both reflective (a mirror) and transparent (a window).

Although the word "[g]lassing" doesn't appear until the poem's last line, the first stanza

underlines the ambiguity by rhyming "transparency" and "to see":

> That mirror
> Which makes of men a transparency,
> Who holds that mirror
> And bids us such a breast-bare spectacle to see
> Of you and me?[76]

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[76] Thomas Hardy, "Moments of Vision," in *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 427.

The description of a window being reflected in a mirror places glass (in one sense) face-to-face with glass (in another). The poem's closing question articulates the stakes of this self-reflexivity: "that strange mirror / May catch . . . [a man's] last thoughts, whole life foul or fair, / Glassing it – where?" (427). The mirror "glasses," or reflects, the speaker's "heart" and "mind" by "*glassing him,*" that is, rendering his exterior transparent (427; my emphasis). As the identical rhyme of "mirror" with "mirror"—a rhyme repeated in each stanza—suggests, the scene includes two glasses, two mirrors. The speaker becomes transparent, but he acts also as a kind of mirror, uncannily returning his own gaze and seeing himself being seen.

"Afterwards" reprises this mirrored looking to develop a form of reciprocal impressibility among neighbors. Playing on the doubleness of the impression, Hardy's speaker asks if his neighbors have noticed not just the same things as he did, but self-reflexively *noticed* the way *he* noticed things. He wonders if they have remarked (and will remember) that "[he] was a man who used to notice" the five specific things described in the poem ("Afterwards" 533). The concept of the impression here comprises both a characteristic instance of a sensibility *and* the images of others that are retained in memory. "Moments of Vision" asks where one's "thoughts" and "life" are "glassed"; "Afterwards" answers that that "strange" and "magic" form of mirroring happens in the impressibility of one's neighbors ("Moments of Vision" 427). Whether personally or mediated by art, Hardy suggests that neighbors reciprocally turn their impressibility on one another's impressions, in hopes of their mutual preservation after death.[77]

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[77] Like "Afterwards," *The Woodlanders* starts with an impressionistic depiction of an impressible person. The impressible novel's characterization of the impressible Marty represents a similar kind of mirroring. Both resonate with a biological phenomenon called "reciprocal altruism," which involves organisms of different species "form[ing] mutually beneficial arrangements of *quid pro quo*," a process Daniel Dennett calls "the first step toward human promise-keeping" (*Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* [New York: Touchstone, 1995], 479). Impressibility in "Afterwards" does indeed resemble a form of mutual promise-keeping.

Notably, the poem renders the speaker's impressions in the present tense even after he has himself moved into the past. While he looks ahead to a time when others will say that "he *was* a man who *used* to notice" certain things, the things he noticed will have persisted into the present: "the May month flaps" its leaves, the "hedgehog travels," and so on ("Afterwards" 533; my emphasis). The impressibility of others has the power to resist nature's consignment of individuals to a forgotten past.

Neighbors are centrally important in Hardy's work. Linda M. Shires observes that, "[u]nlike Tennyson, . . . Hardy does not bother with even a tentative vertical relationship, but firmly stays within the horizontal bounds of human consciousness."[78] As in *The Woodlanders*, it is neighbors who represent both the primary threat and the one hope of surviving it. In the passage with which I began this chapter, Grace Melbury stands at her window and sees "trees close together, wrestling for existence. . . . It was the struggle between these neighbors that she had heard in the night" (*Woodlanders* 280). "Afterwards" represents Hardy's most-direct articulation of the hope that he also vests in the impressibility of neighbors.

Many readers and critics have noted Hardy's emphasis on the idea that art and memory may ease the kind of grief Butler expresses.[79] Many have also felt skeptical of that form of idealized remembrance, given that it often entails pining away in unreciprocated recollection. What has not been fully understood is the basis of the consolation he proposes. Endowed with a rich history by prior generations of Victorian thinkers and novelists, impressibility provided Hardy with a dispositional model of individualized preservation.

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[78] Linda M. Shires, "Hardy's poems and the Reader: The Power of Unmaking," *The Thomas Hardy Journal* 34 (Autumn 2018): 30.

[79] See Dolin, "Life-Lyrics," 6.

This chapter has argued that Hardyan impressibility works to resist the damage inflicted by evolutionary processes and a sexually touristic form of egoism. The latter model of serial affective "forgetfulness" is highly gendered, which *The Woodlanders* highlights by aligning it with impersonal forces that compound the capacity of philandering men to overwrite the individuality of women. Impressibility in *The Woodlanders*, including in characters such as Marty South and in the novel itself, enacts Hardy's evolutionary ethics by focusing attention at the scale of individual pain, especially the suffering of those caught in the gears of group-level dynamics. Hardy revises the ethical function to which impressibility is put in novels by Brontë and Eliot. At the same time, he extends its emphasis on recognizing how serial mistreatment vitiates the individuality of victims. In *The Woodlanders*, as I've suggested, this recognition is possible via retained impressions. By leaving impressions, both figurative and literal, in their native place and in the minds of characters who are identified with it, the inhabitants of Little Hintock enjoy a form of posthumous survival meant to resist their serial discarding by forces uninterested in their particularity. Decades later, *Moments of Vision* reinforces the centrality of impressibility in Hardy's thought. "Afterwards" suggests that death's "nocturnal blackness" can be made less dreadful through a mirroring of one neighbor's retentiveness with another's distinctive way of taking impressions ("Afterwards" 533).

Departing from earlier, more eulogistic depictions, Hardy's work marks a major turning-point in the genealogy of this disposition. The sociopolitical landscape had changed dramatically since Brontë's time, even greatly since the more-recent death of Eliot, and the political promise of a special sensitivity to impressions had changed along with it. As I have argued, Darwinism played a central role in this process, but the evolutionary framework Hardy employs encompasses a great deal of social and psychological complexity. Legal changes in the status of

women—only just beginning to arrive by the end of *The Woodlanders*—and rapidly shifting class dynamics inform the novel's central conflicts. But it is to new problems around evolution that impressibility is oriented. The threat of "generation" to the individual, and especially to women, overrode the ostensibly less-urgent social and political ends to which the disposition had been put by earlier writers. Thus, while impressibility retains its opposition to egoism, in the context of an extinctionary threat that same egoism invited a different strategic response.

In concerted opposition to larger-scale processes and considerations that dwarf and devalue individual experience, Hardy's work embodies impressible traits that, in characters, as we have seen, tend to be debilitating. By the end of the nineteenth century, impressible and susceptible figures no longer represent a vanguard of ethical progress. Hardy portrays it as a profoundly limiting emotional trait, typically leading to unhealthy romantic fixations. It's for this reason that his most impressible characters are conspicuously androgynous, often nearly asexual. Since the threat to individual survival comes precisely *from* transpersonal forces of "generation," those characters who are symbolically exempt from such forces can act, like Marty, as pseudo-narrators, and in doing so provide the novel with a model for the conservation of individuals lost in the tide of generation. Hardy sublates these stunted erotic ties—at once negating, conserving, and transcending them—into a novelistic form of preservation. As the disposition he inherited from Eliot degrades as a quality of individual psychologies, he gives it new life as a characteristic of narration.

The figure of the *impressible* undergoes significant changes in the course of the century examined. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, it shapes the cognitive mechanism underpinning an ideal of romantic constancy. Early Victorian adaptations focus on its role in forcefully reforming an egoistic relation to others, even seemingly undesirable others, and in

doing so articulate an alternative to the catch-all concept of *sympathy*. To the end of the century, the figure retains its emphasis on forms of attachment made possible by the incorporation of another's image. Surveying this genealogy, I would underline the undiminished critical importance of the disposition, its late-century decline notwithstanding. As part of an ongoing critique of sympathy's more-virulent expressions, impressibility represents a fully elaborated, alternative framework for analyzing normative Victorian depictions of emotional ties.

Henry James picks up where Hardy, slightly older, leaves off. The final writer this dissertation engages, James builds on the narrative elements involved in and mobilized by impressibility, stressing the capacity to register the subtlest of impressions as perhaps the defining trait of narratorial perception. For James, the artistic and ethical responsibility of the novel to represent life—especially in its finer shades of meaning—depended centrally on a heightened responsiveness to emotional impressions.

Coda: Impressions in Henry James's Fiction

In "The Art of Fiction" (1884), Henry James tells a story of how an English novelist, "a woman of genius," finds herself congratulated for her portrait of a "French Protestant youth," a character seemingly far from her experience.[1] If "experience consists of impressions," as James asserts in his essay, which urges younger writers to "write from experience, and experience only," how could this Englishwoman draw a Frenchman so convincingly? "Once, in Paris," he explains, "as she ascended a staircase, [she] passed an open door where, in the household of a *pasteur* [clergyman], some of the young Protestants were seated at table round a finished meal. The glimpse made a picture; it lasted only a moment, but that moment was experience. She had got her *direct personal impression*" (389; my emphasis).

Like Charlotte Brontë, whose work was such a strong influence on him, James believed an indelible, portrait-like impression was the raw material of narrative. After giving his advice about writing from impressions, however, he adds a well-known caveat: "Try to be one of the people on whom nothing is lost!" (390). Novelists should (and must) write from their store of impressions, but they should also *maximize* sensitivity to them.

Two decades after his assertions in "The Art of Fiction," James recast this posture toward impressions as a form of susceptibility. As he puts it in the preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1904), the protagonists of his tales, through whom the narrative is filtered, must be "highly susceptible of registration."[2] That entire novel, he claims, "remains subject to the register, ever so closely kept, of the consciousnesses of but two of the characters" (4). Maximal susceptibility to

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[1] Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *Partial Portraits* (New York: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1899), 388.

[2] Henry James, Preface to *The Golden Bowl* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2009), 4.

impressions was nonetheless double-edged for James. If fiction is, as he claimed, "a personal impression of life," it is notable that his narrators so often find themselves dubiously "registering" impressions of the dead (384).

The disposition whose trajectory this dissertation has described and examined, including for its broader cultural and philosophical effects, is, in many ways, specifically Victorian, but it enjoyed a rich afterlife in modernist fiction. Writers such as James and Thomas Hardy, who lived and wrote well into the twentieth century, propagated an intense interest in the psychological implications of the impression, particularly for their narrators. This coda considers two suggestive moments in James's work that, combined, represent a crucial ambivalence in the legacy of susceptibility. I consider the first, from his preface to *The Golden Bowl*, indicative of the aims and theory of his fictional practice at the turn of the new century (as opposed to his remarks in the 1880s). The second moment draws from *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), for how it brings together Gothic-Brontëan influences with a protomodernist rendering of the narrator's consciousness, in all its hypotactic sensitivity. At a critical moment in that novella, the governess—who also acts as narrator of the tale within the tale—reflects on how her susceptibility to impressions constitutes but also impairs her ability to perform that role.

James claims that Prince Amerigo, first narrator of *The Golden Bowl*, embodies a similar doubleness associated with his susceptible cast of mind, supposedly without conflict. On the one hand, the Prince "makes us see the things that most interest us reflected in . . . the clean glass" of his consciousness ("Preface" 4). He can appear to stand aside from the action—a detached observer, like the author. Jamesian psychological realism requires that the Prince be susceptible to the most-fleeting impression, the finest shade of meaning in another's phrase or gesture, so

that the novel can record it: his consciousness *is* the "register" that constitutes the first half of the novel, and the Princess, equally sensitive, performs the same role in the second half.

On the other hand, James's conception of authorial responsibility demands that the Prince and Princess be in "close and sensitive contact" with characters and events around them (3). They must be among the "immersed and more or less bleeding participants" in the action (4). The representation of events without a "deeply involved" conduit would produce only "the mere muffled majesty of *irresponsible* 'authorship'" (4; my emphasis).

An artist, James writes, "can never be responsible *enough*," and that responsibility depends on the narrator's ability to respond sensitively to those around him (4; emphasis in original). That capacity for "responsiveness" and authorial responsibility are closely entwined, as James's preface stresses repeatedly.[3] Yet he claims that the dual and necessary roles of his narrators are reconcilable; the preface simply asserts that the Prince's narrative reveals "not a whit to the prejudice of his being . . . a foredoomed, entangled, embarrassed agent in the general imbroglio" (4).

By contrast, and arguably a major reason for its appeal, *The Turn of the Screw* is deeply interested in the possibility of that prejudice. The novella represents the narratorial susceptibility on which authorial responsibility depends as a "liability."[4] Having just learned from housekeeper Mrs. Grose that the sinister man she ostensibly glimpsed twice on the grounds is Peter Quint, a deceased former valet, the governess abruptly breaks off her narrative. At this crucial juncture in her ability to act as governess and as narrator, she suspends the tale, before beginning a new section: "It took of course more than that particular passage to place us together in presence of

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[3] For a different reading of this interrelation in the context of moral philosophy, see Martha Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsive," *The Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 10 (October 1985): 516–29.
[4] Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Kimberly C. Reed (Toronto: Broadview Editions, 2010), 181.

what we had now to live with as we could, my *dreadful liability to impressions* of the order so

vividly exemplified, and my companion's knowledge . . . of that liability" (181; my emphasis).

Such impressions evidently mark a limit to narratability, as they did for Brontë's fiction.

Most literally, the governess's word "liability" refers to a condition of being likely to *do*

something, but in the context of the children in her care it also connotes legal answerability, with

narration serving as testimony.[5] She is liable to have horrifying "impressions," and, in a sense,

liable *for* what they do. Miles's death at the end underscores this double meaning.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the long-running tension in susceptibility between a

dispositional endowment of uncommon receptiveness and a distortive, emotional excess recurs in

James's fiction. The disposition of the author's "concrete deputy or delegate," as James calls his

narrators, is the basis of her ability to be responsible—directly for her two young charges, but

also indirectly to her readers, as a "clean glass" in which events are mirrored. At the same time,

that disposition is a liability that turns her heightened responsiveness into a threat ("Preface" 4).

Emphasizing the necessary ambivalence of narration, particularly in the context of the novel's

ethical responsibilities, James amplified the Victorian concept of susceptibility as its most-

influential inheritor and arguably one of its most-rigorous interpreters.

Rae Greiner argued recently of nineteenth-century fiction that "[s]ympathy with others

(including other selves) is at the very heart of the realist novel's historical enterprise."[6] Yet as

Ilana M. Blumberg notes of Eliot's novels in particular, "[s]ympathy is so rare and unexpected,

particularly given the typically unsympathetic social medium in which [her] characters exist, that

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[5] "*liability*, n." OED Online. March 2021. Oxford University Press (accessed May 23, 2021).
[6] Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 16.

its appearance can seem almost miraculous."[7] Over the last decade, Greiner, Blumberg, and others have observed "how difficult and unlikely it is that sympathy will flower, given the gap between the sufferer's felt experiences and his or her capacity of expression, and the spectators' degree of willingness to share in pain not their own."[8] Sluggish and rare, sympathy when it *did* "flower" was often little more than a cover for abuses, as Audrey Jaffe and many others have ably shown.[9] By the 1840s, with Brontë's fiction, and through Eliot's work in the decades following, Victorian authors themselves made similar observations about the elusiveness of sympathy—and frequent harmfulness where it did appear—and took steps to fashion and amplify an alternative.

This dissertation has studied the narrative, ethical, and personal psychological effects of that alternative, which Brontë and Eliot named impressibility and susceptibility, respectively. I have argued that the formal and conceptual rethinking of a disposition involving long-retained impressions became central not just to debates about ethics and affect but, just as significant and influential, to the Victorian novel, including its understanding and modeling of early emotional development and its experiments with narrative perspective.

The preceding chapters considered the lasting attachments (and liabilities) characteristic of this disposition chiefly in relation to sympathy, because the latter is still the dominant framework for analyzing affect and ethics in the Victorian novel and beyond, even as its theoretic monopoly has outlived its usefulness, and new models are badly in need.

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[7] Ilana M. Blumberg, "Sympathy or Religion? George Eliot and Christian Conversion," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 74, no. 3 (2019): 361.

[8] Blumberg, "Sympathy," 360. See also Daniel Siegel, *Charity and Condescension: Victorian Literature and the Dilemmas of Philanthropy* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012).

[9] See, for example, Audre Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 8; David Marshall, *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy: Marivaux, Diderot, Rousseau, and Mary Shelley* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 4; Nancy Armstrong, *How Novels Think* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 12.

Susceptibility, I have argued, represents a strong alternative in bringing together a style of attachment widely depicted in the fiction, contemporaneous ethical norms, and a rich practice of narrative experimentation. My readings of works by Henry Mackenzie, Brontë, Eliot, and Hardy demonstrate the usefulness of this disposition to literary analysis, particularly for understanding the filial and erotic ties that by turns drive and impede the plots of these novels.

Mackenzie's work of sentimental fiction, *The Man of Feeling* (1771), initiated interest in the impressible disposition, but did so ambivalently. The novel established a dispositional dichotomy that Victorian authors made central to their understanding of attachment. While supposedly retaining an early impression of Miss Walton, protagonist Harley enjoys all the egoistic pleasures of the *affective picaresque*. His sympathy for the many unfortunate figures he meets on the road takes the form of serial, pleasurable pity. Each spectacle of suffering presents itself briefly for his consumption before it is replaced by the next object in the series of his (and the novel's) episodic mode of attention. Evoking Hume's influential account of consciousness, in which a certain "bundle" of impressions occupies the mind for just a moment, only to be displaced by new impressions in the flowing stream of perception, Harley's style of spectatorship belies his professed attachment to Miss Walton. This last tie, I have argued, became a conceptual prototype for the more durative affective structure that nineteenth-century novels such as *Villette* (1853) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) would develop and dramatize.

Brontë is largely responsible for rehabilitating impressibility as a normative form of other-oriented attachment. This new composite of emotional disposition and ethical code—characterized by an unwavering bond founded on durable affective impressions—defined itself against the rapid, repeated transfer of interest and attention. The latter, which Brontë called *impressionability*, involved a more self-interested posture toward others, with characters such as

Frances Henri developed as its corrective. Crucially, Brontë associated the impressionability of Hunsden and of Dr. John Bretton with *sympathy*; they are rendered as sympathetic men, gallantly charming but ultimately "shallow."[10] For Brontë, impressibility was also a rich source of narrative structures, informing both her plotting and experimentations with form. From the allegorical contest in *Jane Eyre*, in which Jane vies to efface Rochester's earlier affective impression, to the traumatized temporal displacements in *Villette*, which hijack the novel's own attention by forcibly returning it to narrator Lucy Snowe's earliest impressions, impressibility suffuses Brontë's fiction, not least as a rebuke and alternative to sympathy and its plots.

Under the banner of emotional susceptibility, *The Mill on the Floss,* one of Eliot's earliest novels, begins to remake impressibility as a necessary catalyst for turning an egoist into a more sympathetic character. Unlike Brontë, Eliot was less a critic than a strategist of sympathy. She recognized it could be toothless against the egoism that her protagonists and villains alike exhibit. In its emphasis on the childhood formation of *undiscriminating* attachments, often to patently unworthy others, susceptibility laid the groundwork for Eliotic sympathy as radical unselfishness. Generating attachments that precede choice, which therefore do not depend on the judgment of another's worthiness, susceptibility became a training-ground for generating sympathy via self-extension. Pre-evaluative attachment led to anguished participation in others' experiences, particularly their suffering, in ways that could make "larger room for . . . love to flow in."[11] For Eliot, this disposition had broad applicability for social reform. From the context of a newly enfranchised working class in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) to the plight of English Jews

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[10] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 201.
[11] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 273.

in *Daniel Deronda* (1876), susceptibility is marshaled as the unchosen first step in fostering widespread sympathy.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Hardy's fiction represents impressibility as beginning to flag and show signs of enervation, having lost much of the social effectiveness attributed to it by earlier novels. Concerned with the impingement of large-scale processes on individual lives, Hardy reconstructed a disposition designed by his predecessors to address smaller-scale social problems through affective reconditioning. When conceived of as a trait of individuals, impressibility tended toward mere mystical filiation with nature and a preoccupation with mournful remembrance. *The Woodlanders* (1887) depicts how late-century social changes and evolutionary competition drove it from the public sphere to an obscure hamlet in the woods, by this point representative of an obsolescent way of life. Hardy found use for this seemingly undesirable disposition, however, by turning it into a major characteristic of post-Darwinian fiction. As a novel *The Woodlanders* is oriented insistently to an ability to record or "remember" what the damagingly amnesiac philanderer Edred Fitzpiers permits himself to forget. Hardy embeds impressibility structurally in the novel itself, as an aesthetic mechanism for redressing harm inflicted by evolutionary processes and a sexually touristic form of egoism.

In the long arc from Hume to Hardy this dissertation has identified and examined, the emotional disposition to take and retain affective impressions—frequently reworked, renamed, and adjusted to new contexts—remains salient and still underexamined. Impressibility and susceptibility pervade Victorian fiction, most centrally by probing norms of attachment in familial, erotic, and social ties. A corrective to sympathy and its deficiencies, the susceptible disposition presents a compelling framework for thinking about nineteenth-century narrative at the intersection of affect and ethics.

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