

‘Distempered Visions’: Reading Narratives of Specular Mourning in Victorian Fiction

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Abstract

This thesis questions the phenomenological force and function of mourning in the fiction of Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, bringing together models of contemporary visuality with modalities of loss, to emphasise a dialectic of affective pain as intimate vision. While Victorian visual culture has been substantially addressed by recent scholarship, there remains a paucity of investigation into what I read as an optic chiasmus of altered modes of seeing and modes of feeling. With a focus on two of the key novelists of the period, I have selected four novels that are fascinated by the nature of warped vision and blindness, questioning how literature might depict mourning in a world newly crowded by the visual. From this starting point, I examine the ways in which both novelists appropriated optical tropes to articulate the lived experience of a traumatised consciousness. The mourning subject becomes the site of specular, phantasmal inquiry in their works, and thus my own method follows the conditions of this connection. This particularised account of the themes of loss and mourning has not been significantly addressed in the scholarship, despite the fact that all four texts explicitly emphasise subjective trauma. How is the private and intimate altered by the fluid specularity of the new optics of the period?

Weaving together nineteenth-century physics, optics, and visual technologies with changing notions of subjectivity and the experience of consciousness, my work foregrounds the phenomenological depictions of visualised suffering in the novels. Exploring the intersection of the technologized Victorian eye and the feeling, grieving subject, I draw out the transitivity of optical fragmentation that Brontë and Eliot manipulate to extend the textual scope of elegiac representation. By looking closely at the slippage of socio-cultural modes of vision and inner life, I argue that the precarious nature of the visual became a space in which both writers could articulate a phenomenology of loss.

Taking Brontë's fears for her father's encroaching blindness as a point of departure, I begin with *Jane Eyre* (1847), conventionally read as a narrative of resolute visual authority. Through a series of close readings, I draw out the anxiety that shadows the novel's depiction of the eye. I am interested in the ways the biographical meets the socio-cultural in Brontë's discourse of vision, and *Jane Eyre's* theme of blindness is a fruitful place of entry into that query.

Villette (1853) was written after Brontë's visits to London's Great Exhibition and offers a distinct engagement with the Victorian visual culture, employing a more sophisticated and complex imbrication of the private and the social modes of visualised loss. This chapter explores how Brontë's most devastating and final work accommodates the problem of the mourning subject in a hyper-visual sphere.

In the second half of the thesis, I turn to Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859) and *Romola* (1862-3), two works which have traditionally garnered the least amount of critical attention, often described as misplaced in the author's oeuvre. In *The Lifted Veil* the various epistemological crises of the mid-century moment find expression in Eliot's horrifying first-person account of delimited, inescapable sensory experience. Contravening the established critical view of the tale, with an emphasis on the protagonist's preternatural visionary capacities, I focus on Eliot's use of the terms of Victorian lens culture to elucidate the blind spots of this first-person narrative.

In *Romola*, Eliot depicts a heroine who imagines more profoundly than her counterparts what it might mean to live with the endlessness of mourning. Taking up Eliot's exploration of phenomenal embodiment, which contrasts with the empirical, observational aesthetic of traditional realism, I point to the tension that defines the sensory life in the novel.

Through being attentive to the correspondences of mourning and decentralized perspectival geographies, I argue for a closer look at the phenomenally descriptive in its own right as performing a different ontology of radical loss.

Keywords: Mourning, loss, vision, blindness, phenomenology.

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For, without books

Introduction

The Eye / I of Mourning

“The eye made the Victorians particularly verbose.”¹

In his *Lectures on Light*, a series of talks delivered in 1872-3, physicist and philosopher John Tyndall – who delivered popular and highly fashionable lectures during his tenure at London’s Royal Institution – described the new theories of light exciting natural philosophers and non-specialists alike. The real subject of these lectures is the eye, and Tyndall takes a romantic view of what he regards as the most intriguing of human organs. ‘A long list of indictments might indeed be brought against the eye,’ he observes, ‘its opacity, its want of symmetry, its lack of achromatism, its absolute blindness’; indeed, he goes on, the eye was once described by ‘an eminent German philosopher’ as ‘an instrument so full of defects’ that one ‘should send it back with the severest censure’. Tyndall concludes, however, by investing the act of seeing with an enigmatic allure, for ‘the eye is not to be judged from the standpoint of theory. As a practical instrument, and taking the adjustments by which its defects are neutralised into account, it must ever remain a marvel to the reflecting mind.’² Tyndall’s rich verb ‘reflecting’ here captures the transitive power of consciousness, at once mirroring the seen world, and reckoning with the images of everyday encounter. Tyndall’s larger body of work is an indexing of ocular reflections and the interceptions of the eye, and, despite his epistemological rigour, exudes a fascination with the experiential poetics of the act of seeing. He encourages his audience to experiment with their own ocular abilities by manufacturing rudimentary camera obscura models out of domestic materials. Pleasure could be found in

¹ Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain 1800-1910* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2008), 22.

² John Tyndall, *Lectures on Light* (New York: Arno Press, 1980), 17.

creating superimposed images of bent light-waves and the reflections of ‘angular velocity.’³ Implicit in his descriptions is an acknowledgement of the analogue of subjective experience and embodiment that any such home-made device could represent – the capacity for illusion, specular enchantment, and the deceptions that inhere in what appear to be objective properties of space. The aporia of vision is rendered as homely device and the sensations of embodiment are rendered at a remove, but the metaphorical resonance is clear: it is the volatile dialectic between the visible and the invisible, that space of instability, which has become the site of interest.

For John Locke, the philosopher who did most to influence sensationalist theories of perception in eighteenth and nineteenth-century England, the camera obscura was suggestive of the human sensorium:

External and internal sensation are the only passages that I can find of knowledge to the understanding. These alone, as far as I can discover, are the windows by which light is let into this *dark room*. For, methinks, the *understanding* is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little opening left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without; would the pictures coming into such a dark room but stay there and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion it would very much resemble the understanding of man in reference to all objects of sight.⁴

Locke intended the trope to demonstrate the untroubled status of the eye’s perceptive ability. As M. H. Abrams writes, Locke was ‘able to levy upon a long tradition of ready-made parallels in giving definition to his view of the mind in perception as a passive receiver for images

³ Tyndall, *Lectures on Light*, 18-19.

⁴ John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John W. Yolton (London: Dent, 11967), II, XI, 129. Original emphasis.

presented ready-formed from without'.⁵ Descartes claimed that the darkened chamber pierced by an aperture emitting light, represented the soul's transparent translation of what it sees: 'The objects we look at do imprint quite perfect images of themselves on the back of our eyes'.⁶ Like Descartes, Locke believed in the eye's nobility, understanding the etymology of the Enlightenment as the rational illumination of thought.⁷ That kind of untroubled verticality of outer world and inner impressions may perhaps not seem problematic to us, who, as inheritors of an excessively visualised world, are now contracted to the visible via digital technologies that all but eradicate perceptive anomalies. By the early decades of the nineteenth-century, however, any such faith in vision's power to translate the visible world into knowledge was dramatically undermined. This was accompanied by a shift in the representation of psychic metaphors, from the mind as the passively reflective surface of a mirror, to an active projector of images.⁸ The ubiquitous camera obscura model came to symbolise an urgent query: what is the status and function of human perception and how should vision — the primary sensation — be understood as knowledge of the objective world?

This thesis interrogates ocular metaphors as discursive networks of embodied mourning in mid-Victorian fiction. My intention is to explore the conditions that would complicate the widely-used metaphor of the affective mind as a camera obscura (to take one example), which for the nineteenth-century imagination was a figuration of a complex ontological dilemma: of interiority and exteriority, of the inner psyche and the outer casement of the body.

⁵ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, (London: Oxford UP, 1960), 57.

⁶ The camera obscura model of consciousness appears in a range of texts, from Descartes to Newton. In the 'Optics,' (1637) Descartes writes: 'Suppose a chamber is all shut up apart from a single hole, and a glass lens is placed in front of this hole with a white sheet stretched at a certain distance behind it so that the light coming from objects outside forms images on the sheet. Now it is said the chamber represents the eye; the hole, the pupil.' *Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, et. al., (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 63.

⁷ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 84-5.

⁸ Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 57.

Locke's polite phrasing of the mind's occasional pictorial order is suggestive, but ultimately contrary to, the kind of optical dialect which the novels at the heart of this study explore to palpable effect. The neat patterns of the mind's eye become for the Victorian writer, an elusive figment of a nostalgic past. Moreover, the dark room of the psyche is transformed from a utile and transparent rhetorical figure, to a master psychological trope of embodied affect. Haunted by the long shadow of Hume's scepticism — the philosopher who famously consigned metaphysics to the flames, denying the truth of anything beyond the fact of one's perceptive impressions⁹ — the Victorian intellectual was left with the riddles of phenomenal sensation. Kant's chiasmus of sensible impressions, 'we have no knowledge antecedent to experience, and with experience all our knowledge begins'¹⁰, was similarly frustrating for the Victorians. As Felicia Bonaparte points out, the English mind was not satisfied with Kant's attempt to secure phenomenological knowledge: 'what they wanted was knowledge of noumena, the objective truth of reality,'¹¹ what phenomenology would later pursue as a return to the things themselves, the primal essence of matter.¹² But Kant admitted only of reason's *need* to orient itself in the field of objects, 'in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark night.'¹³ Kant's transcendentalism established as forever out of reach the essence of things beyond their subjective appearances. Departing from what he felt to be an erroneous distinction between sensible and intelligible impressions as merely one of logic, Kant claimed of objects instead that '[i]t does not merely concern their [logical] form as being either clear or confused. It concerns their origin and content. It is not that by our

⁹ David Hume, *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Charles W. Hendel (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1957), 173.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 2nd ed., trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: Macmillan and Co., 1934), 25.

¹¹ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Poetics of Poesis: the making of nineteenth-century English Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 57.

¹² To 'return to the things themselves' is Husserl's famous description of the phenomenological method.

¹³ Kant, 'What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?', in *Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.

sensibility we cannot know the nature of things in themselves in any save a confused fashion; we do not apprehend them in any fashion whatsoever.’¹⁴

In this introductory chapter, I illustrate how the shift in what Walter Benjamin describes as an optical (un)conscious¹⁵ that occurred in the early decades of the nineteenth-century, became the dominant idiom for Victorian novelists. The wider thesis will explore these insights in relation to the work of two key novelists, Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) and George Eliot (1819-1880), and this introduction also sketches my approach to their texts. This shift came partly in response to what Martin Jay has described as the ‘visual pollution’ of the mid-nineteenth century, the sudden proliferation in the industrialised urban space of ocular attraction: the sheeted glass of shopfronts; advertisements; artificial lighting; and the resulting fever for daguerreotypes, lithography, and general ‘bric-o-bracomania’: a ‘cult of images,’ to evoke Baudelaire.¹⁶ Kate Flint has shown that the Victorians ‘were fascinated with the act of seeing, with the question of the reliability – or otherwise – of the human eye, and with the problems of interpreting what they saw.’¹⁷ Jonathan Crary argues that nothing short of an epistemological revolution occurred during the nineteenth century, productive of a quintessentially modern observer. Vision was no longer a receptacle, as enforced by the classical model of perception, but was instead an object of knowledge. There was, he writes, ‘an uprooting of vision from the stable and fixed relations’ of the camera obscura model of perception; a ‘new valuation of visual experience’ in which vision was radically abstracted, its

¹⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 56. This is in contradistinction to the phenomenological method, as set out by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who writes: ‘Descartes and particularly Kant *detached* the subject, or consciousness, by showing that I could not possibly apprehend anything as existing unless I first of all experienced myself as existing in the act of apprehending it. They presented consciousness, the absolute certainty of my existence for myself, as the condition of there being anything at all’. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), ix.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin conceives of an ‘optical unconscious,’ unveiled ‘for the first time,’ by the photographic camera. See ‘A Short History of Photography,’ *Screen* 13.1 (March 1972), 7.

¹⁶ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 122. Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis à nu*, cited in Martin Jay, 145.

¹⁷ Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

referents uncertain. ‘It is a moment when the visible escapes from the timeless order of the camera obscura and becomes lodged ... within the unstable physiology and temporality of the human body.’¹⁸ While there are divergences regarding the concept of a nineteenth-century observer, there is unequivocal consensus amongst cultural historians that the flood of visual stimuli worked a profound alteration in subjectivity, reified in what Lindsay Smith terms ‘a poetics of sight,’ reconfiguring the character of literature; vision was suddenly complicated by notions of artificiality and reproduction. There was a ‘reappraisal of the ‘unseen’ as ‘relations between the visible and the invisible, the empirical and the transcendental,’ were brought to public consciousness.¹⁹ Crucially, that alteration was characteristically diverse and heterogeneous. There were of course infinite levels of perception, and as Flint reminds us, the drive to reveal the invisible was not a homogenous urgency, but a contested space. Sally Shuttleworth has shown that Brontë was fascinated and troubled by the line demarcating the visible from the invisible.²⁰ Indeed much Victorian art was conceived as ‘a challenge to the adequacy of representation, to the sufficiency of the visible.’²¹ Much of the new science of optics emerging at mid-century influenced contemporary fiction, spreading into a range of cultural discourses. The fascination with all things ocular was increasingly used as a trope of feeling, and objects that came to be commonplace in modernity, such as spectacles and telescopes, and indeed the eye itself (artificial eyes being a popular item of exotica), acquired significant fetishistic and metaphorical status. Queen Victoria and Lord Alfred Tennyson, two famous sufferers of cataracts, remarked upon meeting one another on “the darkened state of the world’’. ‘[N]either was in any doubt,’ writes Asa Briggs, ‘that seeing or not-seeing and

¹⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992), 14 and 70.

¹⁹ Lindsay Smith, *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry: The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3 and 13.

²⁰ Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

²¹ Flint, *Visual Imagination*, 25.

feeling were closely related.²² The new science of optics had all the excitement pertaining to any novelty, and for Victorians, the eye was undoubtedly the most important organ, attaining a quasi-magical power of penetration and understanding, but imbued too with unmistakable flaws, not least its own fragility and vulnerability to failure. The eye and its burgeoning technological innovations — spectacles, telescopes, microscopes, ophthalmoscopes, kaleidoscopes — were placed within the discursive boundaries of a cultural fixation, which found its way into literary discourse.²³ Terry Castle has shown that, through a series of rhetorical displacements, phantasmagorical spectacle moved from the purely mechanic, the matter of two lanterns, side-by-side, and the screen, lodging itself firmly in the Victorian subjective:

Plunged in darkness and assailed by unearthly sounds, spectators were subjected to an eerie, estranging, and ultimately baffling spectral parade. The illusion was apparently so convincing that surprised audience members sometimes tried to fend off the moving “phantoms” with their hands or fled the room in terror.... Translated into a metaphor for the imagery produced by the mind, the phantasmagoria retained this paradoxical aspect ... indeed, nineteenth-century empiricists frequently figured the mind as a kind of magic lantern, capable of projecting the image-traces of past sensation onto the internal “screen” or backcloth of the memory The mind became a

²² Asa Briggs, *Victorian Things*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 106.

²³ Martin Jay explores in great detail the changes reshaping perspective during this period in his book *Downcast Eyes* (see note 10). ‘[T]he nineteenth-century was among the most visual periods of Western culture, the most given to ideals of precise observation – a spectator-view shared by novelists, painters, scientists...and poets,’ he writes. ‘By the nineteenth-century, what many have called the hegemonic scopic regime of the modern era, Cartesian perspectivalism, was beginning to waver as never before,’ due largely but not solely to ‘the extraordinary changes in our capacity to see wrought by technology’ (113).

phantom-zone – given over, at least potentially, to spectral presences and haunting obsessions.²⁴

Mourning as lived loss

My argument is in two stages: first, to explore the conditions of technologized visuality that I have begun to outline above; second, to argue that this ocular flux became the privileged space in which Brontë and Eliot could narrate the phenomenology of loss and mourning. The history of these intertwined terms stretches to encompass a diverse range of discursive and analytical traditions. Much of the psychoanalytical literature seeks to define separately the respective conditions of loss, mourning and grief, most famously in Freud's essay, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' which I consider in detail in chapter two. While acknowledging the value of Freud's distinction between two states of loss (a binary which Freud destabilised in other writings), this present work is not interested in partitioning the terms of suffering in such a way. It presents a model of diffusive affect in which all three linguistic frames overlap, similar to the optical palimpsests I follow in Brontë and Eliot's texts. In this regard, my working conception of mourning follows the 'pluri-linguistic' model set out by Jennifer Rushworth in her recent study of discourses of mourning, in which she emphasises a movement between the poles of emotion, whereby 'the term mourning ... acts a synonym for grief and the anguish of bereavement ... a generic term for an experience that encompasses both the work of mourning and melancholia.'²⁵ The interchangeability of these terms in my

²⁴ Terry Castle, "Phantasmagoria: Spectral Technology and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (Autumn, 1988), 30.

²⁵ Jennifer Rushworth, *Discourses of Mourning in Dante, Petrarch, and Proust* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 3.

thesis, then, reflects this fluid notion of mourning, a model that I suggest parallels the phenomenology of these emotions as they touch perceptivity and consciousness. Kathleen Woodward also questions the dichotomous formulations of mourning and grief, suggesting that rather than ask what feeling constitutes which term, we should turn our theoretical lens to consider their affectivity. By asserting our mourning, she wonders, ‘do we not also mean that we *feel lost* ourselves, that in our grief we have lost our sense of direction? ... that we *have been lost*?’ Woodward argues for a third sphere, a ‘something in between mourning and melancholia, ... grief that is interminable but not melancholic in the psychoanalytic sense, a grief that is lived in such a way that one is still *in* mourning but no longer *exclusively* devoted to mourning.’²⁶ While Woodward isolates the death of a loved one as the condition of mourning that most interests her, I do not claim for mourning a single cause, but rather a range of objects as catalyst. The novels I read here present mourning as an excess, an assault on the subject that leaves the protagonist with the sensation of feeling lost; to evoke Woodward, an inarticulate, place-less topography that emerges, I suggest, as a meta-discourse of the eye. The ‘space between’ mourning and melancholia, then, can best be understood in the *oeuvres* of Brontë and Eliot as a *visualised* space, in excess, in which the tensions of a variegated suffering are explored.

According to Matthew Ratcliffe the phenomenology of grief is not easily accommodated by the synchronicity of narrative; indeed grief, unlike most or even all other emotional states, is unique in its failure to cohere, to make meaning, to form a narratable whole. ‘Narratives that are formed during profound grief often fail to hang together; they lack a shape that narrated-life more usually has. There is a degree of fragmentation, a sense of having lost one’s way,’ he writes, in terms that echo Woodward’s phrasing. More than this, mourning

²⁶ Kathleen Woodward, ‘Freud and Barthes: Theorising Mourning, Sustaining Grief,’ *Discourse* 13.1 (Autumn-Winter 1990-1), 95-6.

profoundly re-shapes the self's phenomenal engagement with the world, a sense that one is bereft not only of the thing lost, but the very structure in which the presence of the other existed. In other words, it is not only the experience of being that is fragmented in mourning, but the *perception* of the world as a whole.²⁷ The emphasis is on discontinuity and the splitting of phenomenological patterns and ways of being. These terms of description are strikingly similar to those that characterise the conditions pertaining to the technologised eye of early to mid-nineteenth century, making it easier for us to see how and why novelists such as Brontë and Eliot might choose to employ optical metaphors to figure the damaged perceptual phenomenology of grief.

In his book on the fantasm and phenomenology, Peter Schwenger sets out the terms of a constructive critique that is generated from the images of a text, defending what he describes as 'textual visualisation as interpretation,' from those sectors of scholarship that might regard it as irrelevant or hostile to critical work. Schwenger reads and writes criticism by a progressive 'filling-in' of the visual scene, interpreting the text's visual dynamic, which, '[f]or most literary critics was anathema, posing a real threat to any discipline with claims to rigour. The ... objects of study lose their coherence and autonomy, evaporating into impressionistic mist.' There has been, however, a recent turn back to a visual poetics, Schwenger claims, whereby we can read impressions *as impressions* to respond to the fantasmatic images of a work.²⁸ The affectivity that interests Schwenger is, as he writes, not the loss generated by certain objects, 'but of the *representations* by which they are always necessarily mediated ... by the systems of perception. In a move that is parallel to the body's use of multiple senses to apprehend an object,' Schwenger constructs his critique from a range of aesthetic examples, displaying the problem of the image.²⁹ That phenomenological model of literary analysis is my own

²⁷ Matthew Ratcliffe, 'Grief and the Unity of Emotion,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 41.1 (2017), 7.

²⁸ Peter Schwenger, *Fiction and Fantasm: On Textual Envisioning* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 1-2.

²⁹ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 15. Original emphasis.

methodology throughout this thesis, as I attempt to show the ways in which reading and thinking about these novels as impressions, as visualisations, reveals their respective investments in invisible or blind mourning.

To attach grief - made invisible and hidden – to a dialectic of the eye, involves a paradoxical rhetoric of making visible the dense *feel* of the lived experience of loss. I wish to suggest that the alienating otherness of mourning overlaps stereoscopically with the new optics: as the act of vision was made strange, I argue, it was coupled with this haunting phenomenology of the ongoing-ness of mourning. From the general panoply of the spectacle, I refine my focus to a particular language of mournfulness, an imagistic diction of grief, which I find is viscerally at work in these two canonical authors. Their novels stage the traumatic incarnation of the perceptive consciousness at the interface of visual flux and abstracted sensory experience, complicating the borderline demarcating the public and private experiences of psychic crisis. I will take up this claim in greater detail, but I first need to discuss the cultural shift in seeing that occurred in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Victorian optics

Since Crary's now seminal book, *Techniques of the Observer*, which claimed that a modern subject was born in around 1820, emerging out of the profound alterations in the conditions of seeing instigated by a profusion of optical technology, a rich body of criticism has amply proved the effects of the new optics on Victorian aesthetics.³⁰ Scholars such as Flint,

³⁰ Crary's theory of a generalized modern subject is problematic, and I have reservations about designating a moment when such a subject is said to have come into being, a subject moreover possessing a newly homogenised way of seeing. The subjective, volatile nature of the optical faculty renders unstable any attempt to construct an overarching theory of homogenisation. Yet his larger argument of mass visual revolution and its concomitant 'autonomisation of sight' is compelling. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 27.

Tom Gunning, and Helen Groth, have proved the intertwining of Enlightenment scientific ideology and nineteenth-century fiction, detailing the permeable relationship between the various philosophical, physiological and novelistic discourses circulating in the period.³¹ Victorian realism was symptomatic, in fictional terms at least, of the contemporary vogue for an ideal dispassionate observer; the form entailed a quasi-epistemic foundation, a persuasion that through realist narrative the author could reach the truthful, concrete world, oddly laying the burden of verisimilitude upon the realist fictional text. The vagaries of sensory life seem to pose a problem for traditionally realist texts. Writing of Eliot, Summer J. Star has argued that the author's realism strives for a phenomenological depiction of existence, rather than an objective facticity. 'While most accounts of realism have been concerned with its tentative representations of totality ... Eliot's narratives force us to redefine realism from an inverse position, locating her characters' access to reality in moments that specifically defy a totalising vision — in moments of liminal consciousness, of blind spots, of bodily, rather than visual awareness.'³² Taking up Star's observation, I expand the critique of optics out from the questions of realism and language, to investigate a modality of the visual that begins from the inside, out. For the Victorian novelist, phenomenal discursive practices became the mode that richly accommodates the strains of realist representation, an expression of the material without neutering the transcendent. Eliot and Brontë make vivid the way grieving consciousness *feels*, and what it might be to have one's perspectival field disoriented by loss.

Jane Eyre, *Villette* and *The Lifted Veil* are written in the register of the autobiographical voice. The autobiography obviously signposts its preoccupation with the inner life, with

³¹ Tom Gunning, 'Hand and Eye: Excavating a New Technology of the Image in the Victorian Era,' *Victorian Studies* 54.3 (Spring, 2012); Helen Groth, *Moving Images: Nineteenth-Century Reading and Screen Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2013).

³² Summer J. Star, "Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* 80.3 (Autumn, 2013), 840.

precisely the shaping of personhood by the material (or immaterial) conditions of the world outside that slippery construct called the self. Victorian writers accordingly refashioned scientific dialects of sensation and sense perception into metaphors of affect and emotion. Navigating the various spiritual crises of the age, novelists, just as scientists, engaged in hermeneutics, struggling to interpret the mutable substance of experience. As David Carroll observes, interpretation was suddenly an activity ‘in which everyone was inescapably involved’.³³ Alan Spiegel helpfully explains the difference between the conception of the real in an eighteenth-century novel, and its Victorian iteration, as that between a Platonic or idealist notion of reality — that behind the confusion of sensory experience is a knowable world, to be penetrated by the reasonable mind — and the loss of any such stable forms of integrity ‘out there’, accessible through language.³⁴ The question that interests me is this: what happens to the novel, specifically the novel of loss, when the sensual collapses into the epistemological? Devoid of a structural reality to give form to fictional worlds, how does the fraught phenomenological texture of apperception re-shape, even corrupt, the novel form?

‘The nature of those fantasies which a society finds most compelling is very important,’ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi observes.³⁵ It seems appropriate to understand the Victorian culture of the spectacle as a fantasy of the finite self magically attaining the dream of infinity, liberated by the plurality of selves given back to the subject in the glittering panorama of modernity. But that recursive transformation came at an ontological cost, just as our own century’s lust for the digitally imaged and endlessly plastic self has pushed identity into a regressive, vicarious fantasy. My thesis takes as starting point the important critical work on

³³ David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Reading of the Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992), 3.

³⁴ Alan Spiegel, *Fiction and the Camera Eye: Visual consciousness in Film and the Modern Novel* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), 14-15.

³⁵ Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, ‘The Innocent I: Dickens’ Influence on Victorian Autobiography,’ in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977), 59.

the interleaving of scientific and novelistic discourses, and redefines the more general associations with loss that such critiques often implicate. The obsessional optics in the work of Brontë and Eliot, the permeation of specular metaphors through their novels, not only permits, but invites such an analysis. In each of the novels selected here, mourning as I have defined it is at the heart of the story, and in each text it manifests as opacity and obfuscation. Disfigurations of vision as the phantasms of perception, physical or psychic blindness become a means of lending definition to ineffable loss. Vision is also a vehicle for the irresolvable features of mourning, the formlessness and lack of closure that can impede “successful” narrative conclusions. I specifically address the collation of feeling and vision. There remains little investigation of the connections between altered modes of seeing and modes of feeling. Gender and power dynamics have been substantially addressed, but not the subtle, less provocative realm of mournfulness, in the insistently specular mid-Victorian novel. The four novels I treat are fascinated by the nature of sight and blindness and, I suggest, question how literature might depict the private experience of deep loss in a hyper-visualised world. My choice of authors is not only due to their well-documented periods of depression and grief, although that is certainly of significance, but also because their fiction speaks of a dissatisfaction with both the private and social expression of bereavement. That frustration is reified through a distinctly specular aesthetic that works to destabilise notions of integrity and form. Their novels are deeply interested in the ontology of mourning.

I do not read the Eliot or Brontë novel in an effort to decipher its strategies of disempowerment or ocularcentric dynamic, or to police its subversions and/or conservatism, but in the hope of drawing out the immanence of the sensual body, the phenomenal consciousness of the inscribed self, as it is forged in acts of mourning. The entanglement of the grieving self in a specular paradigm — the interface of specular culture and private life — is the problematic nexus of the mourning subject. Produced from a modern urgency to look and

see, the grieving self yet insistently incorporates these same praxes of visuality and perception to reify and verify affect, creating a perplexing, even distressing looping of emotion-as-perception and vice versa. What Brontë describes as the dimly-lit ‘shadow-world’ of the self,³⁶ our private figurations of emotional interiority, are projected as fugitive phantasms of the seeing mind. It is moreover a substance-less projection. In her correspondence, Brontë writes of the blankness of despair: ‘My reserve has its foundation not in design, but in necessity. I am silent because I have literally *nothing to say*. I might indeed repeat over and over again that my life is a pale blank and often a very weary burden ... but what end could be answered by such repetition?’³⁷ Brontë suggests the ‘burden’ of representing the banality of mourning, which she frames as a linguistic barrier: her emotion is made hollow by the rhetorical conventions available to her, which are simply vacant of meaning for her subjective experience of loss; she is left in the paradox of having an intolerable sadness to communicate, yet having *nothing to say*.

Brontë’s metaphor of the ‘pale blank’ leads me to the other strand of my argument on perceptual distortion and affect: the metaphysical blindness peculiar to loss. The substitution of a denuded image for the desired utterance is symptomatic of a larger project of deferral and metonymical exchange in that author’s novels. By choosing a vacant sign to depict her loss, Brontë reinforces the chiasmal relation of idea and signification, both without content; the dissatisfying feedback loop of mourning’s struggle for voicing. In her study of affect and the cinematic image, Eugenie Brinkema describes the curious etymology of blindness as rooted in a question of troubled luminosity. The word blind derives from the ‘bases *bhlendh* (to glimmer indistinctly, to mix, confuse) and *blesti* (to become dark)’. ‘Blindness as an obstruction of sight is a relatively recent usage,’ she explains, ‘but the original sense of confusion, not sightlessness,

³⁶ Brontë, *Villette*, 136.

³⁷ Charlotte Brontë, letter to Ellen Nussey (25 August 1852), in Brontë, *Selected Letters*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 206-7, original emphasis.

is better suited for understanding the eye-dimming consequences of loss.’ Brinkema notes that the history of Western literature is suffused with examples of suffering as a loss of light, from the Bible, to St. Augustine, and Milton, all figuring lamentation as a ‘misery of light’. ‘Mourning’s pain is figured as a matter of waning, dulling luminosity and troubled representation ... sorrow slides between grief and darkness, suffering and blindness, material absence and absolute visual foreclosure.’³⁸ *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe writes her memoirs in the absence of an image, ‘a face from my world taken away, for my eyes lost,’ (545) and the whole textual project can be read as her desperate *looking* for that lost figure, her lover, Monsieur Paul. His secret fate — is he dead? — is the source of troubled representation from which the text emerges, another ‘blank’ picture. ‘Eyes seek (a) being, but they do not see – for *being is no longer there to be seen*’.³⁹

A phenomenology of the eye

The nineteenth-century has been characterised as one marked by a crisis of reason, and a consequent quest to antagonise the processes of knowledge.⁴⁰ Bonaparte describes a triplet of existential shifts: a destabilising of the traditional terms of religious faith, in addition to a reconstitution of epistemological borders, and between these two upheavals, the demotion of reason from its medieval definition: ‘the ability to look at the world and at oneself from the perspective of the deity in the context of the whole universe.’ Denied this totalising perspective,

³⁸ Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects*, 54-5.

³⁹ Brinkema, *Forms*, 54. Original emphasis.

⁴⁰ Felicia Bonaparte, *The Poetics of Poesis: The Making of Nineteenth-Century English Fiction* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 74.

reason became a faculty detached from spiritual foundation, anchored instead to observation.⁴¹ The rationalist desire made itself apparent in philosophy and poetics, and both Brontë and Eliot were fluent in the terms of the debate.⁴² At the centre of this query was the provocative nature and function of perception, a quandary both novelists took up directly in their writing. Brontë had a keen interest in natural science, well-versed in her father's physiological texts. Eliot was a philosopher and literary critic before she turned to writing novels. As Rosemary Dodd points out, Eliot wanted to strengthen the knowledge claims of perception, and this impulse manifested in theoretical eclecticism.⁴³

In looking at a selection of texts produced between 1840 and 1862, I analyse a specific historical context, deliberately prior to celluloid film. It is a time when the stereoscope and other optical entertainments, such as the thaumatrope, kaleidoscope, and the magic lantern, were at the height of popularity, crossing from the laboratory to the domestic sphere with easy vagrancy. While there are obvious and fruitful points of intersection between the camera and the other, perhaps more rudimentary mass-produced optical technologies, this thesis is only tangentially concerned with the photographic image. My argument follows the kinetic, rather than the statically imagistic, whereas the generally unambiguous temporal qualities that are a hallmark of the photograph and its unique (apparent) mimicry of the human eye, bestow a stability of signification. The photograph has been penetratingly analysed by Barthes as stubbornly 'undialectical': '[n]ot only is the photograph never, in essence, a memory,' he writes, but it actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory'.⁴⁴ I look at optical

⁴¹ Bonaparte, *The Poetics*, 75.

⁴² Dodd, *An Intellectual Life*, 11; Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and nineteenth-century medicine and Dames*.

⁴³ Dodd, *An Intellectual Life*, 17. Coleridge writes in his essay 'On Faith,' that 'Reason and the proper objects of reason are wholly alien from sensation. Reason is supersensual.' Quoted in Bonaparte, *The Poetics*, 77.

Bonaparte summarises the general intellectual tenor of the nineteenth-century sceptic versus empiricist debate in England, noting that the English were not satisfied with Kant's attempt to secure phenomenological knowledge: 'what they wanted was knowledge of noumena, the objective truth of reality'. See *The Poetics*, 57.

⁴⁴ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2000), 90-1.

illusion, at the phantasmal and transparent over the frozen; at the images that are in a sense *irrepressibly* dialectical. I chart the aleatory and mercurial specular, particularly those images that exist only transitorily, with the temporality of the body — peering through the binocular lenses of the stereoscope, for example, or watching a magic lantern show — the ephemeral, visceral experiences that signified what Smith describes as a cultural investment and fascination with ‘the intricacies of the sense of sight’.⁴⁵ The Victorians were perplexed and disturbed by the operation of the visual faculty. As Marina Benjamin writes, ‘spectacle and illusion marched hand in hand through these decades – the magic lantern and the stereoscope being perhaps the most popular devices that welded the act of vision to an ethos of deception.’

46

With sight shifted to a new plane, what were the grounds of the body’s awareness? In *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, William A. Cohen claims that, ‘far from valorising the liberal Enlightenment subject ... many Victorian writers challenged and indeed undermined such concepts, and they did so by grappling tenaciously with the material existence of the human body’. There was an ‘emphasis on the body, in all the messiness and particularity of its fleshy existence.’ The writers that Cohen is concerned with, a group that includes Brontë and Eliot, ‘present a fluid exchange between surface and depth, inside and outside – a type of materialism that understands the organs of ... sensation not simply to model but to perform the flow of matter and information between subject and world’.⁴⁷ Cray, on the other hand, claims that modernity demanded a disembodied visual capacity:

the sense of touch had been an integral part of classical theories of vision in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The subsequent

⁴⁵ Smith, *Victorian Photography*, 3.

⁴⁶ Marina Benjamin, “Sliding Scales: Microphotography and the Victorian Obsession with the Minuscule,” in *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*, ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 114.

⁴⁷ William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xii.

dissociation of touch from sight occurs within a pervasive “separation of the senses” ... in the nineteenth century. The loss of touch as a conceptual component of vision meant the unloosening of the eye from the network of referentiality incarnated in tactility and its subjective relation to perceived space.

With the eye ‘unloosened’ and enabled a startling volition, vision becomes fetishised. The act of looking and the relation with the body that observes are a new source of anxiety: a distressing of the terms of visuality that I think is homologous to the ‘unloosening’ tendencies of grieving. Crary uses the stereoscope, Charles Wheatstone’s invention of the late 1830s, as a model for the severance of the tactile and the visual, producing a ‘denial of the body, its pulsings and phantasms,’ as the foundation of vision.⁴⁸ I draw on the stereoscopic image in the following chapters as the exemplary optical apparatus that lucidly brought to life the contiguity of eye and instrument. But unlike Crary, I trace the stereoscopic (by which I denote a bifurcated picture that nonetheless gives an illusion of totality, modelling the binocular structure of the gaze), as an expression of morbid affect in its own right, variously incarnated in narrative. Peering through one of the variety of stereoscopic models, which were designed for domestic use, a viewer has the impression of being pulled into the image. The fallacy of depth is created by the movement of the viewer’s hand: one must turn a knob to collapse together the two images of infinitesimal variance, but the totality of absorption is spooky. Depth and space are prematurely resolved, radically shortened and vertiginous. The body of the spectator seems in the moment of viewing to merge with the object beheld.⁴⁹ It is a quintessentially gothic scene, liminal, aporetic, and inducing a primal haunting that is at once grotesque and seductive. David

⁴⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1990), 19 and 136.

⁴⁹ These are personal reflections of my viewing of stereoscopes in a collection found at Britain’s Tate gallery, in 2015.

Brewster, an early manufacturer of the stereoscope, enthuses about the diverse applications of his model for entertainment purposes, such as in the cosmorama, which exhibits dissolving views:

‘A cathedral in all its architectural beauty may be combined with the same building in the act of being burned to the ground ... one picture gradually disappears, or dissolves, and the second picture gradually appears till the first vanishes and the second occupies its place. A great deal of ingenuity is displayed by the Parisian artists in the composition of these pictures, and the exhibition of them ... never fails to excite admiration.’⁵⁰

The superimposition of two conflicting scenes brings to mind *Villette*’s double ending: by refusing to resolve Monsieur Paul’s fate, both pictures — his happy life with Lucy Snowe, and his drowning at sea on his voyage home to her — can co-exist in a perpetual dis-equilibrium, neither one, nor the other.⁵¹

The specular disenchantment and the aberrations of the perceiving body that are found in the novels of Brontë, Eliot, and their contemporaries, such as Hardy and Dickens, present a discursive dynamic that is insistent in its merging of subjective and objective apprehension of the material world. It is best described as a privileging of the phenomenal, and is more than a mere Romantic pushing back against raw materialism, although that is certainly a factor in play;⁵² it is fundamentally an existential probing of the cleavage between consciousness and external reality, mediated by an authorial subjectivity.

⁵⁰ David Brewster, *The Stereoscope: Its History, Theory, and Construction* (New York: Morgan and Morgan, 1971), 207-8.

⁵¹ In making this comment, I am grateful for Professor Vanessa Smith’s suggestion of the connection with Brontë’s novel.

⁵² See John Skorupski, *English-Language Philosophy 1750-1945* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), 1-31.

In his study of the sensory quality of Victorian novels, Cohen sets out the reasons why many novelists sought metaphors of phenomenal subjectivity:

‘[A]ttending to sense perception serves several purposes. In physiological terms, it provides a mechanism for showing how the world of objects – including other bodies – enters the body of the subject and remakes its interior entities. In psychological terms, because “feelings” lie in a grey zone between physical sensations and emotional response, somatic and affective experiences can switch, blend, or substitute one for another. In a phenomenological sense, attending to sense perception enables embodied subjects to experience themselves as objects, and objects reciprocally to function as subjects, so as to permit a mutual perviousness between self and world. And in a particularly literary register, sensation affords writers a means of concretely representing emotions, desires, and impulses that tend – at least in nineteenth-century literary idioms – to be otherwise unrepresentably abstract or ethereal.’⁵³

Cohen captures both the aptness and the limitations of metaphors of sensation in expressing the un-expressible, such as mournfulness. He invokes the difficulty inherent to realist narrative in particular of rendering with integrity the mercurial nature of the inner life. Peter Brooks summarises the contradiction of the body as it is conceived linguistically: ‘we tend to think of the physical body as precultural and prelinguistic: sensations of pleasure and especially of pain

⁵³ Cohen, *Embodied*, 6.

... are generally held to be outside language'.⁵⁴ Brooks points out a paradox with our entire discursive construct of physicality: sensations essentially give us our language of the body, yet the moment we begin to speak of them, we lose the body; discourse is founded on the absence of the body. How do we bring the outside in and reflect the inside, out? Virginia Woolf, one of the most eloquent writers on the dearth of metaphor for illness, addresses this question in her essay, *On Being Ill*. Woolf questions why disease or despair have not been taken up by the novel as grand themes, in the way that love or heroism appear to be. The sentiment is that desolation is content-less for the novel to consider at length, (Woolf echoes Brontë's sense of grief's linguistic impoverishment) and so 'the assault of fever or the oncome of melancholia' are neglected:

[L]iterature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, and negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours ... the creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife ... [but] of this daily drama of the body there is no record.⁵⁵

To dwell on sorrow is thought to be deadening to the imagination, even, Woolf suggests, dangerous to evolutionary progress ('buildings would cease to rise,' and 'there would be an end to music'), and so we return to the teleology of the successful narrative, the novel of progress.

⁵⁴ Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993), 7-8.

⁵⁵ Virginia Woolf, *On Being Ill* (Ashfield, Mass.: Paris Press, 2002), 4-7.

Woolf omits Brontë's *Villette* (1853), which painstakingly documents the agonies of melancholic suffering, of fever and isolation, of a nobody's story. *Villette* is a meta-narrative about anguish, keenly self-conscious of its aberrational standing as a Victorian novel without a heroine suitable for romance, without a marriage, and even without a plot. Over several hundred pages, Brontë's narrator, Lucy Snowe, dwells on an unnamed grief, while pointing out the inadequacy of her loss, its failure as narrative. Describing how she was driven, as a staunch Protestant, to make a confessional unburdening to a Catholic priest, for example, Lucy explains her act:

'I cannot put the case into words, but, my days and nights were grown intolerable; a cruel sense of desolation pained my mind: a feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me ... I wanted companionship, I wanted friendship, I wanted counsel. I could find none of these in closet, or chamber, so I went and sought them in church in confessional. As to what I said, it was no confidence, no narrative. I have done nothing wrong: my life has not been active enough for any dark deed, either of romance or reality: all I poured out was a dreary, desperate complaint' (V, 219).⁵⁶

Brontë voices through her heroine a fear that her novel could be read as exactly that, 'a dreary, desperate, complaint'; yet she pursues the story of grief's motions, and in doing so, re-writes the terms of what a novel can be. Many critics have indeed criticized Lucy Snowe's obstinate morbidity, but the unmistakable poignancy of her grief has not been lost on readers. Lucy's designation of her utterance as 'no confidence, no narrative,' is an ingenuous ploy to make a

⁵⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin, 2004). All further references use this edition and pagination will be incorporated into the text.

case for the novel of psychic anguish, while at the same time, revealing an anxiety about its textual validity, as though Brontë were purchasing indemnity to speak of pain.

The technologised eye

Describing the proliferation of what were referred to as philosophical toys — the phenakoscope, thaumatrope, and kaleidoscope, among other meta-visual devices — Gunning argues for the production of a new type of image in the nineteenth-century, ‘the technological image,’ which was as much mechanic as it was perceptual. Pointing out the phenomenological effects of these hallucinatory devices, he frames the resulting pictorial union of motion, transformation, and human agency (achieved in manipulating the effects with one’s hand, for example), as a site of play, ‘an inversion of meaning’. By staging a liberation of static representation, he argues, the composite image presented by these toys playfully points up the ‘trick’ inherent in the eye, the binocular perspective that concretises into an apparently monocular picture. Such toys were a self-reflective entertainment that sparked ‘delight’ for the viewer.⁵⁷ Yet the same fantastically unstable properties of these toys, in addition to their embedded self-consciousness, gave rise to a poetic re-figuring of the eye’s hidden flaw, gathering potency as a metaphor of elegy, rather than mere novelty. The experience of ocular illusion is one of antithesis. The mediating power of the instrument exposes the gaze in its suspiciously provisional qualities. A technological image is an abstraction of the real, and its disengagement from the subject mimics the way the body is atomised or made formless in loss. Isobel Armstrong calls the new mass-produced image a ‘lesion’;⁵⁸ this way of seeing replicates,

⁵⁷ Gunning, ‘Hand and Eye,’ 505, 512.

⁵⁸ Isobel Armstrong, ‘The Lady of Shalott,’ Optical Elegy,’ in *Multimedia Histories*, ed. James Lyons, et al., (Exeter UP, 2014, Electronic), 181.

or instances the wound of the subject who looks. The unfixed status of the seen figured in the technological image mimics the unboundedness of personhood in the unmoored optical field.

If I seem at times in this introduction to be folding the visual into the tactile, it is because I wish to mark out a broader synaesthetic geography in studying visuality. At stake in the novels I discuss is a larger questioning of the role of perception in affective life: where does sensation and feeling begin and end? It is difficult to give an accurate picture of the sheer diversity of the materialist discussions occurring across a range of discourses during the nineteenth century. A collection of contemporary texts that captures that spirit of enquiry into the disjointed mysteries of the mind and body can be found in Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth's anthology, *Embodied Selves*. The editors write that they are engaging in a myth-busting exercise, to replace the misconception of Victorian notions of self as rigid and stratified, with an insight into the vigorous, 'endless' discussions of fluid identity which were crucial to the formation of 'deep' personhood at this time, 'debates which expressed a profoundly ambivalent sense of self'.⁵⁹ The work of Herbert Spencer provides a seminal example. A leading figure in materialism, whose major work, *Principles of Biology* (1864), made a distinct impression upon George Eliot, he conceived of sight in tactile terms. Spencer observed that the eye was fashioned from dermal matter, and, as Cohen notes, his 'proposal that eye and skin are fundamentally contiguous' implies that seeing can have the characteristics of direct, tactile contact.⁶⁰ Other polymath intellectuals such as Spencer, George Henry Lewes, Alexander Bain, and James Sully among others, theorised with increasing detail the unique and eccentric conditions pertaining to vision. James Mill classes vision as an emotional category, instructing his reader to 'acquire the habit of reflecting upon his Sensations, as a distinct class of feelings;

⁵⁹ 'Introduction,' *Embodied Selves: an Anthology of Psychological Texts 1830-1890*, eds. Jenny Bourne Taylor and Sally Shuttleworth (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), xiii-xiv.

⁶⁰ 'In both evolutionary and phenomenological terms, an object makes an impression in and on the body of the subject through direct contact with the sense organs, not least the eyes'. Cohen, *Embodied*, 4.

and ... be prepared to mark well the distinction between them and other states of mind'.⁶¹ Bain goes further, describing sensations as 'states of consciousness,' which, nevertheless, do not emerge from within, but are wholly external.⁶² What nineteenth-century physiological and psychological accounts have in common is a determination to classify the senses as distinct impressions that are unfailingly lucid in their cause. 'We never confound a feeling of sight with a feeling of sound, a touch with a smell,' Bain writes, 'the discrimination of them is sure and perfect.'⁶³ At times, however, a synaesthetic quality belies strict causality. In *The Physiology of Common Life*, Lewes concludes his study of the visual sense with a remark on the subjective nature of sight:

We can no longer suppose that we see the objects themselves. Our visual sensations are simply excited states of our sentient organism. Hence it is not more wonderful that a man whose eye was extirpated should perceive, when the other eye was closed, different images, such as light, circles of fire, dancing figures ... floating in front of the eyeless orbit, than that a man whose leg has been amputated should feel distinct prickings in the absent toes.

This, he continues, explains the phenomenon of 'spectral illusions. It is well known that persons suffering from brain disease ... have seen spectral objects with a vividness equal to that of actual vision. A black cat is seen to run up the wall; a person is seen to enter the room; and no assurance of the bystanders to the contrary will persuade the patient that what he sees so vividly is not actually present.'⁶⁴

⁶¹ James Mill, *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, 1869), 2. Electronic.

⁶² Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, (London: J. W. Parker, 1855), electronic book, 119.

⁶³ Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect*, 119.

⁶⁴ George Henry Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1860), 334-5.

The phenomenon of the eidetic after-image that Lewes describes — an object that in its absence lingers as a trace on the retina, sometimes lurid, at other times ghosted — was itself a generator of a succession of rippling images in scientific literature. One of the writers who mined its full subjective implications was Goethe. In his *Theory of Colours* (1810) he outlined numerous experiments and variations on his theme of visual aberration and freaks of perception. Cataloguing ‘morbid and other extraordinary affections of the retina,’ he designates objective and subjective persistent images, which are conditioned by individual pathologies and neuroses. If the retina is excessively impressible, this is considered by Goethe as proof of morbidity, (he notes a horrifying case of an after-image that persisted for ten years). ‘The weaker the organ the longer the impression of the image lasts,’ he concludes, implying an anthropomorphic quality to the eye, a common feature of optical texts of this period, as though that organ were a separate species. ‘The retina does not soon recover itself; and the effect may be considered as a kind of paralysis.’ His list of extraordinary specular events — ‘Büsch relates of himself that the image of an engraving, complete in all its parts, was impressed on the eye for seventeen minutes’ — and his persistent focus on the eccentric workings of the eye of the ill, deranged, or otherwise emotionally fraught, indicate the quasi-mystical force the eye had by this stage acquired, and its embeddedness in a range of violent or traumatic narratives of the dis-eased body.⁶⁵

Charlotte Brontë frequently draws on the metaphor of what is known as persistent vision, the ‘lurid hieroglyphics’ of the mind’s eye. Lucy Snowe’s red-soaked vision upon waking after a nervous collapse (‘The returning sense of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood’ (V, 195)) echoes Goethe’s account of a veil of red on the eyeballs of the ill: ‘Many sick persons, on awaking, see everything ... as if through a red veil,’ a form of pathological

⁶⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1967), 49-52.

colour. ‘The senses,’ he explains, ‘may be so influenced by an unusual state, that the whole nervous system, and particularly the retina, may sink into a kind of inertness,’ producing a vermilion image.⁶⁶ In Goethe’s examples, trauma is dialectically produced as an attack on consciousness, an assault of rampant hues, the self besieged by the hallucinatory properties of the eye. If the lens can fill up like a blood-filled basin, the capacity to see is literalised as a mode of horror: perceiving is an encounter with the malevolent chimeras of being. As Terry Castle observes, through a series of linguistic shifts ‘the [nineteenth-century] mind had become a phantom-zone — given over, at least potentially, to spectral presences and haunting obsessions. A new kind of daemonic possession became possible’. The popular spectre-shows of the period simulated a ‘maddening, irrational perception,’ projecting ghostly scenes that in their uncanniness, rendered precarious their illusionistic quality. This gap was mined by writers for its destabilising potential, drawing upon ‘the phantasmagoria figure precisely as a way of destabilising the ordinary boundaries between inside and outside, mind and world, illusion and reality’⁶⁷: the function of the Gothic. The spectral imagination, projected in various technologies of abstraction, is transmogrified into a capacious symbol of optical disenfranchisement, which, in the novels I look at, figures the peculiar terror of the ungovernable, permeable human body.

The Gothic connotations of Goethe’s veil of red are sympathetic to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s reading of that garment. The ‘attributes of the veil, and of the surface generally,’ she writes, ‘are contagious metonymically, by touch, and a related thematic strain depicts veils, like flesh, as suffused or marked with blood.’⁶⁸ We can trace a homological lineage of the bloodied retinal scene through Brontë’s *Villette* to Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*, which concludes with a sensational depiction of a blood transfusion. Just as Victorian physiologists stressed a

⁶⁶ Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 53.

⁶⁷ Terry Castle, “Phantasmagoria,” 50 and 30.

⁶⁸ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Character in the Veil: Imagery of the Surface in the Gothic Novel,” *PMLA* 96.2 (March, 1981), 256.

nexus of sensory experience and inner states, so too can we track a nexus of the wounded mind-body, the violent perturbations of the specular, and the gothic horrors immanent in ordinary experience.

Lewes recounts a personal experience of persistent sensation, which unfolds with the uncanny qualities of a ghost story. Walking past a familiar shop in a city street, he turned suddenly to look at its front:

I was completely dazzled by the bright reflection of the sun shining on the new brass-plate under the window of the shop, so that for some seconds I could see nothing. As we walked on, I soon observed before me in the air the words 'J. Johnson and Co.,' in blood-red characters, which soon, however, changed to other colours. With an exclamation of surprise I stated the fact, and we turned back to see whether or not this was really the inscription on the brass-plate, and found that it was. The optical account of this was simple enough. The retina had been partly paralysed from the intense light reflected from the plate, but as I had turned with pain from it instantly, the part corresponding to the black letters on the plate had escaped; as I walked on, the red strong light reflected from surrounding objects on this part became contrasted with the darkness, as yet showing itself on all the surrounding parts of the disordered retina.⁶⁹

Besieged by the letters that he must first have unconsciously 'seen', Lewes is haunted despite or even because of his materialist, logical containment of the eeriness of this 'fixed vision'.

⁶⁹ Lewes, *Physiology of Common Life*, vol. 2, 337.

The whole of his lengthy explication on the precise mechanics of the eye, with its emphasis on technical precision and objectivity, its account of tingling nerves, pulses, and dilations (at one point referring to the ‘nervous character of the retina’ [331]), is self-consciously alive to the frisson of the visual. As Peter Garratt observes, the psychological theories of perception in Lewes, Bain, Ruskin and Spencer ‘question the eye exact’:

They deny the clarity of the gaze, and describe the routine unreliability of the sensory foundations of sight; they open up the psychological gap into which memory and association insert contingent mental activity and shape what the viewer sees; and they show how feeling frequently shades into perception in infinitesimal ordinary ways. Above all, their accounts of perception stress the uncertainties latent in the mediating apparatuses of seeing. Such issues were central to empiricism, which had always presupposed a relationship between perception and knowledge.

But a closer look at their work shows that ‘anxieties over irrationalities of the eye, the limits of perception, and threat of visual incoherence, all multiplied the epistemological doubt in the gaze for many nineteenth-century theorists’.⁷⁰

In Brontë’s fiction the after-image resists rationality, as the author manipulates moments of retinal disorder to evoke states that betray categorisation, creating hallucinatory visual scapes that conjure the destabilising effects of emotional trauma. Visual distortion, in other words, does not lose its mysticism in Brontë’s work, but amounts to an opaque sign of

⁷⁰ Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2010), 104.

the haunted psyche. The author had early begun to play with vaporous images which dispersed as though in a dissolving view. In a short story written in 1829, 'An Adventure in Ireland,' the protagonist finds himself in a haunted mansion for a night, where he is beset by visions, seeming to 'discern something white through the darkness which surrounded me.' With the 'help of reason,' however, he masters such 'idle fancies'. Once in bed, though, enclosed by semi-transparent curtains, he is tormented by a series of half-formed images which unfold one into the next, ambivalently registered by the narrator as both illusion and reality.⁷¹ That gothic romance of the juvenilia, with its crude projection of the mind's fears, becomes in the later novels a sophisticated exploration of interiority: the 'lurid hieroglyphics' (142) written across the façade of Thornfield; or Bertha's appearance on the eve of Jane's wedding to Rochester, when the doppelgänger of that forbidden spectre merges ambiguously with the heroine's identity ('I was aware her [Bertha's] lurid visage flamed over mine, and I lost consciousness').⁷²

George Eliot also weights her metaphors of visual abnormality with the fragmentations of the inner life, most famously in the 'disease of the retina' that besets Dorothea Casaubon in St Peter's in *Middlemarch*. Her moment of desolation comes upon her as an 'electric shock' of the imagination, a swirl of images that render affect as imagery. Rome is one open-air museum and its sensuous, ancient ideals

urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas ... Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images

⁷¹ Brontë, 'An Adventure in Ireland,' in *The Brontës, Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal: Selected Writings*, ed. Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 16-17.

⁷² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 284. All references use this edition and pagination will be incorporated into the text.

which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze [...] Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter's ... and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.⁷³

Here Eliot tropes on the shape-shifting pictures of the magic lantern to suggest Dorothea's entrance into mourning; it is not her eye that is diseased, but her idealistic hopes in being the wife of Edward Casaubon, dreams now dying in a city of artefacts. What literary discursive practices of looking as perceiving suggest is the infinitesimal affective properties of the lens; that in containing the visual field, there is a similar containment of subjective states. In other words, there is a kind of mutual sympathy between interiority and exteriority, a synthesis of states, one conditioned by the other. In this phenomenological model of consciousness, the subjective mode extends into the object under perception, as the object wraps round the conscious 'I.' Dorothea's chain of imagery in which forms 'took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations' is akin to Merleau-Ponty's cluster of image substitutions, in which it is our past emotional experience that determines the significance of the present image. If, as Merleau-Ponty argues, 'consciousness [is] defined as sensation, every mode of consciousness will have to derive its clarity from sensation.... Knowledge thus appears as a system of substitutions in which one impression announces others'.⁷⁴ There is both a pleasure and a terror in recognising the boundlessness of perceptivity. A kind of tension is apparent, then, between the various, sometimes competing employment of visual metaphors in this period, and the novelist could

⁷³ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 210.

⁷⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 14-15.

recapitulate the transcendent qualities of the gaze, or conversely, expand the threat of the retina to incorporate the shuddering effects of potent grief.

Woolf's metaphor of the body as a supposedly transparent glassy surface, from which the self must gaze, is particularly germane to my study. For the answer to the problem of the silenced affective body is partially to be found in the labile qualities of light. All of the visual antagonisms that I have pointed to hinge upon the matter of light, being the very substance of sight: 'what light could no longer stamp upon [the] eye,' as Jane describes it (*JE*, 451). When Jane returns to her blind lover, Rochester, she gives an impression not of his blindness, but of what his sightlessness looks like to her; in other words, it is an account of her anguish at witnessing his disability, the beginning of a series of transferences of sight and blindness between the couple, as though they were instancing that phenomenological porousness of subject and object described above by Cohen: '[Rochester] lifted his head and opened his eyelids; gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and towards the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that all to him was void darkness' (*JE*, 431). The 'void darkness' of Jane's translation of his sightlessness tells us something about the 'primal scene' of what is called Newtonianism, the discovery of inverted light-waves emanating as colour, projected through the camera obscura of Newton's darkroom; after Newton's discovery, '[d]arkness is now known through light'.⁷⁵ Brontë re-makes her 'poor, obscure, plain, and little' heroine into an embodiment of that light through which Rochester is taught to 'see' again (*JE*, 253). Jane is the emptied-out vessel of dark loss recast as a light-giving body. The story of light and its polarity shades into the story of the technological image, and the mourning subject; a specular network of reflection, refraction and doubling.

⁷⁵ Armstrong, 'Optical Elegy,' 181.

Blindness and the phantasmal

There is apparent in these novels a primacy of the visual, and yet in staging various moments of impaired or denied seeing — Rochester’s maimed sight in *Jane Eyre*; Latimer’s childhood blindness in *The Lifted Veil*; Lucy Snowe’s refusal to reveal her past in *Villette*; Romola’s father’s blind grief for his lost son in *Romola*— these texts illustrate a hyper-awareness of the conditions of embodiment that structure optics. Both Eliot and Brontë present a problem of the seeing subject, one that is unresolved and without resolution, manifest in a confusion of abstruse sensory data. The conflictual sensory dynamic that I explore is then best understood in its shifts from the visual, to the tactile and auditory, to smell and taste, and beyond, to the sensory life of other characters. I suggest that these novels invoke a sensory unconscious, reified in the convergence of modes of grieving and ways of seeing. While much of my analysis does focus on a visual dialect, I resist reinstating a hierarchy of the senses.

In Diderot’s extraordinary *An Essay on Blindness* (1773), he recounts his conversation with a blind man, a mathematician, for whom tactility is visuality. According to Diderot, the man discusses sight with more perspicacity than Descartes, revealing an obsession with looking glasses, which he has known only by touch:

‘This blind man has no other object, but by the touch. He knows, by the account of others, that objects are known by means of the sight, as to him by the touch ... he further knows, that there is no seeing one’s own face, though it may be touched. He must therefore conclude sight to be a kind of touch, reaching only to objects different from our face,

and at a distance from us. The touch gives him an idea only of relief:
“therefore,” adds he, “a looking-glass is a machine representing us in
relief out of ourselves.”⁷⁶

Diderot’s privileging of tactility over visuality indicates an anti-Enlightenment challenge to the epistemological certainties of vision. He indicates that only through simulated blindness can a sighted man even begin to understand what it means to see, and that the blind have an instinctive, pre-visual knowledge of apprehending, which the sighted person can only ever appropriate; blindness becomes a sixth sense. In Eliot’s portrait of the blind scholar Bardo, in *Romola*, we see the same substitution of the tactile for the visual, but Eliot is far more sceptical as to Bardo’s acuity than is Diderot towards his subject. Bardo’s touch is misleading and in some instances, a cruel mismatching of perception and reality. Rochester’s blindness in *Jane Eyre* is altogether different; his voided sight represents his neo-vitalism, his awakening to knowledge. In both cases though, we find an expansion of the visual by the tactile. I think that these novels share the anti-visual impulse that Diderot expressed, himself an avowed materialist. They appreciate a kind of perceptiveness that is as much tactile as it is visual. The metaphors in frequent use insist on their assimilation: *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe, for instance, grieves with both eyes and hands upon waking up in her simulated bedroom in Bretton, her vision aching as she beholds her childhood needlework, which she finished ‘stroke by stroke and touch by touch’ (V, 197).

Unlike Crary and other scholars in this field, I do not interpret the literary appropriation of scientific rhetoric in Foucauldian terms as illustrative of the nefarious operations of power and the making of the modern, traumatised subject-observer of spectacle. In other words, while

⁷⁶ Denis Diderot, *An Essay on Blindness*, Eighteenth-Century Collections online, 7-8.

I am interested in the self-regulatory gaze, I do not embed it within a totalitarian scopic regime. Such arguments are often skilfully articulated and persuasive, but the casualty of focusing attention on institutionalised dynamics of power is precisely the valences of subjectivity that such critiques intend to reinstitute. Studying the body in this manner strikes me (in certain instances) as utilitarian, neglecting the somatic sensitivities of lived experience. In other words, the quiet life of the sensitised, feeling body, the mourner's body, is further silenced in pursuit of a more abstract and generalised acquaintance with loss. Thus my readings of Brontë's *Villette*, for example, resituate the text in a perspectival field that highlights the novel's drive to resist, yet at the same time articulate, unspeakable grief.

This thesis is deeply invested in the phenomenological character of the novels and the transitive powers of grief. The vein of phenomenology that I think is most suggestive for a reading of Victorian fictions of sensuality is the twentieth-century continental philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, and its literary-critical incarnation in Bachelard. A philosophical movement rather than a distinct theoretical discipline, its proponents can essentially be grouped in their 'commitment to thick, contextualised descriptions of lived experience and of the world as we encounter and understand it from a first-person point of view.'⁷⁷ This descriptive subjective is antecedent to objective categorisation and reductionist theory. Phenomenology finds its most lucid interpretation in the work of Merleau-Ponty:

[T]he relationship between human beings and things is no longer one of distance and mastery such as that which obtained between the sovereign mind and the piece of wax in Descartes' famous description. Rather, the relationship is less clear-cut: vertiginous proximity prevents us both from apprehending ourselves as a pure intellect separate from

⁷⁷ Taylor Carman, 'Phenomenology,' in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology*, eds. Herman Cappelen, et al. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 2. Electronic.

things and from defining things as pure objects lacking in all human attributes.⁷⁸

That ‘vertiginous proximity’ of things, the transference of emotional qualities into synthetic experience and vice-versa, is palpably figured in Victorian fiction, so enthralled as it is by materiality of both persons and objects. The fusion of the world of things, what Kate E. Brown theorises as ‘beloved objects’,⁷⁹ and the peculiar, even disturbing ways they vitalise immaterial substance is crucial to the intimacy of mourning and visuality. Brontë’s extant belongings, the siblings’ collection of ‘little books’, and the mourning jewellery and other tokens in remembrance of Emily and Anne, for instance, powerfully model the dynamics of embodied loss that I have outlined. A visitor to the Brontë Parsonage Museum is struck by the sheer materiality of both Brontë’s compositional process and the haunting microscopic forms in which she stored her writing. To take one of the miniature books in hand is to feel the gossamer lightness of the wafer-like paper, minuscule prose lining the pages, illegible to the naked, untrained eye; Brontë had an abiding fascination with questions of representation and the self, and the miniature represents for her a mode both of articulating and safely containing her interiority. The tactility of the mourning jewellery, with samples of her sisters’ hair, entwined and encased in various clasps, and their special relationship with the wearer’s body, sustaining the body of the dead, is another potent act of corporeal mourning as preservation: ‘it projects an eternalised future-past upon the subject’.⁸⁰ The preciousness that inheres in wearing a fragment of the other upon the surface of the skin, as much tactile as it is a visual token, is

⁷⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver Davis (London: Routledge, 2008), 50-1.

⁷⁹ Kate E. Brown, ‘Beloved Objects: Mourning, Materiality, and Charlotte Brontë’s “Never-Ending Story,”’ *ELH* 65.2 (1998). I return to Brown’s hypothesis in detail in chapter two, on Villette; briefly, Brown argues that in both Brontë’s representation of material things, we can detect a pattern of disavowal, not repudiation, amounting to a preservation of mourning for the lost beloved.

⁸⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 126.

evocative of many such phenomenological moments in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. All of which is to say that Charlotte Brontë early on sought a modality of loss that was indelibly somatic, inscribing her interior life upon the surface of the page, doubling as the dermal surfaces of her own body. There is a mutability between the ontological condition of the body and that of the text that is richly suggestive for the critic interested in the phantasmic properties of the material. The seeing body, the visualised body is a locus for grief's transitive currents: the mourning tokens are objects that demand the gaze, an insistence of the dead beloved's image.

Spinozan optics

The second half of this thesis introduces the effects of Spinozism, in sudden vogue in Victorian England. Spinoza, as I show, is crucial to understanding Eliot's conception of the grieving imagination. Eliot was a dedicated scholar of Spinoza, translating both his major works in the 1840s. Along with her husband, George Henry Lewes, they formed a coterie of Spinoza devotees, a growing group of English intellectuals who championed Spinoza's geometric and notoriously difficult philosophy, even as its influence was then languishing on the continent.⁸¹ As Rick Rylance notes, Spinoza was regarded as a 'crucial figure' in the mid-1850's, recognised as instituting the 'First Crisis in Modern Philosophy,' by shifting the burden of argument from ontological to psychological grounds'.⁸² In a piece written for *The Fortnightly Review* (one of several he wrote on Spinoza), Lewes describes the paucity of information on the man whom he described as '[g]reat, among the greatest as a Thinker,' there

⁸¹ As Valerie A. Dodd recounts, after Coleridge's Romantic paean to Spinoza in his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), and Froude's essay, Spinoza's philosophy had dwindled in England, and what sparse commentary there was took the form of critique of its limitations rather than enthusiasm. See Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 250.

⁸² Rylance, *Victorian Psychology*, 195.

being no English translation of Spinoza's works. There was, at the time when his interest was first ignited, 'nothing but vague denunciation or absurd misrepresentation ... [and] I happened to be hungering for some knowledge of this theological pariah – partly, no doubt because he was an outcast, for ... I was then suffering the social persecution which embitters all departure from accepted creeds'.⁸³ In a symmetry between Eliot and her husband, both writers turned to Spinoza at a period of immense personal trauma, no doubt finding in his mathematical fashioning of affect a meditative quality. In his recent biography of the author, Philip Davis points to the resonant sadness that Eliot found in Spinoza's life and works, which, along with her own experiences of anguish, she threaded into her novels. 'Always Spinoza stressed the damage, the diminution of the life of the self that sadness not only caused but itself constituted,' he writes, a description that recalls Ratcliffe's account of the rupturing effects of grief. Through Spinoza's work:

'[Eliot] learnt to know how suffering was not some martyr-like good ... but was, as Spinoza said, a subtraction and diminishment of her capacity for life. ... Her reading of Spinoza was therefore not just another apprenticeship step in becoming 'a novelist of ideas'. What she found were notes towards the act of mental self-transformation. ... What Spinoza offered was not cold inhuman reason but an implicitly passionate act of analysis, emotion taken up into thought of itself, into the capacity to think.'⁸⁴

Spinoza holds that grief is 'directly evil,' an affect that makes itself felt as a corporeal, psychic frailty. The body's 'power of acting is absolutely diminished or restrained,' he argues, which, in the context of Spinoza's monistic structure, implies nothing less than the defeat of one's

⁸³ Lewes, 'Spinoza,' in 'The Fortnightly Review,' April 1, 1866 4.22, 387-88.

⁸⁴ Philip Davis, *The Transferred Life of George Eliot: the Biography of a Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2017), 125-6.

purposive being (E, IV, P41, 138). There is no creative wellspring at the heart of suffering, as appears in other discourses of mourning;⁸⁵ it is pure bondage, enslavement to a set of images that have lodged in the psyche.

The impact of Spinozism is one of the under-examined features of the history of phenomenology, in both its nascent or prophetic presence in Victorian theories of consciousness, and in later developments. Two divergent strains open up in the legacy of Spinozism, one that accommodates the embedded-ness of the self in the world and the other that regards Spinoza's staunch rationalism as a barrier to the potential solipsistic drive of phenomenological thinking. These threads are important for the argument I present in following chapters. Spinoza is not often paired with histories of Victorian visuality. Yet the links are undeniably fruitful; Spinoza was a lens-maker, and a friend of Christiaan Huygens (1629-1695), the Dutch physicist and optical inventor. As Simon During observes, this relationship is particularly interesting because Huygens produced a series of sketches that could be considered as the first conception of the magic lantern, of which he was certainly the world's first manufacturer. During notes that, while Spinoza makes no explicit reference to his friend's apparatus, the magic lantern was 'potentially a danger to his philosophical system'.⁸⁶ Spinoza conceived of Nature as a perfect materialisation of God's substance, operating by mechanically symbiotic laws. Where there is deviance and aberration it is a product of the human mind's delusional weakness. The matter of our imagination, writes During (paraphrasing Spinoza), belongs to the domain of signs, and 'forms the matter of mutable history'. The apparatuses of optical illusion provide a potential threat to Spinoza's rationalist processes because they

⁸⁵ Kathleen Woodward has written at length on major contemporary discourses of grief and mourning (which, in her analysis, she distinctly separates as two different emotions). Woodward favours those psychoanalytical models of affect that, unlike the dominant Freudian model, emphasise the creative and/or productive powers of suffering, such as those found in Melanie Klein, and Julia Kristeva's works. See Woodward, 'Grief-work in Contemporary American Cultural Criticism,' *Discourse* 15.2 (Special Issue, Winter 1992-3), 94-112.

⁸⁶ Simon During, *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2002), 262-3.

‘technologise the imagination and confer a material membrane on images ... [and] it hinders the kind of inspection which resolves the world into adequate ideas’.⁸⁷ While I shall go on in later chapters to contest this all-too familiar categorisation of Spinoza’s theory of the imagination as a resolutely fearsome thing, his referencing of Huygens is valuable as a means of drawing parallels between the content of Spinoza’s philosophy and his professional involvement with the materials of image-creation.⁸⁸ Hegel, distrustful of the promise of transparency held by glass, nevertheless wrote admiringly of Spinoza’s lens-grinding.

Unlike During, I do not believe that the models of optical entertainments are oppositional to Spinozistic reason; on the contrary, as I argue in chapters three and four, the mind-body image becomes in the *Ethics* a compound synonymous with affect itself. The phenomenal is *not* opposed to the logical in Spinoza’s theory of the body’s power of acting, or the potential attainment of reason. Indeed, the imagistic, affective consciousness is the seed of rational introspection. One of the best examples of this can be found in Spinoza’s analogy of the sunlight’s reflection, in the *Ethics*. As he writes:

‘An imagination is an idea which indicates the present constitution of the human body more than the nature of an external body – not distinctly of course, but confusedly. ... [W]hen we look at the sun, we imagine it to be about two hundred feet away from us. In this we are deceived so long as we are ignorant of its true distance; but when its distance is known, the error is removed, *not the imagination*, that is, the idea of the sun, which explains its nature only so far as the body is affected by it. And so, although we come to know the true distance, we shall nevertheless imagine it as near us.’

⁸⁷ During, *ibid.*, 265.

⁸⁸ Hegel, while distrustful of the promise of transparency held by glass, nevertheless wrote admiringly of Spinoza’s lens-grinding: ‘It was no arbitrary choice that led him to occupy himself with light’. G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, cited in Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, II.

Thus, he concludes, ‘when the rays of the sun, falling on the surface of the water, are reflected to our eyes, we imagine it as if it were in the water, even if we know its true place.’ (*E*, IV, P1).⁸⁹ George Eliot translates his conclusions thus: ‘And so other imaginations by which the mind is deceived, whether they indicate the natural constitution of the body or an increase or diminution of its powers of action, are not contrary to the truth, and do not vanish in its presence.’⁹⁰ The only means by which an imagination vanishes is by the imposition of another, stronger image presented to our mind’s eye, an endlessly palimpsestic process. In my reading Spinoza addresses the primacy and immediacy of the imagistic imagination, as well as the imbrication of consciousness and material substance characteristic of nineteenth-century visuality. My interest in Spinoza is exclusively centred upon his major work, the *Ethics* (1677), specifically the human subject’s affective enslavement to the distortions of the visual realm. In Spinoza’s theory of perception, I argue, Eliot found a corollary of her culture’s contemporary preoccupation with the imagistic, affective consciousness. I draw on Spinoza, then, in the service of my larger preoccupation with Victorian specularity and phenomenology, uniting the two to pursue an alternative critique of Eliot’s two most problematic works.

Some twentieth-century French phenomenologists, such as Husserl, identified in Spinozism a verification for the imagistic associationism that grounded their notion of a person’s identification with the world. In his history of the reception and fate of Spinozism in twentieth-century France, Knox Peden notes the countervailing antagonism that grew up against the supposed irrationalities of continental phenomenology, whereby the figure of

⁸⁹ Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Edwin Curley (London: Penguin, 1996), 117-18. I have followed the conventional reference system for Spinoza’s work, whereby *E* is for *Ethics*; I-V for its parts; and Prop. for Proposition; Schol. for Scholium; Pref. for Preface; and Post. for postulate. Unless otherwise stated, all further references to this work refer to this edition and will be incorporated within the body of the text.

⁹⁰ Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. George Eliot, ed. Thomas Deegan (Salzburg: Insitut für Anglistik und Amerikanistic, 1981), 159.

Spinoza was enlisted not as a vitalist, but as a severe rationalist opposed to the very notion of the self necessary to phenomenological thought. A ‘Spinozist rationalism, by contrast,’ Peden writes, ‘refused the notion of a “subject” – the *cogito* of Descartes’ immortal phrase “I think therefore I am” – as the starting point for philosophy.’⁹¹ Of most interest to me are the specular networks that originate in and out of the self, however we may define that term, that confronts the world. How is that self constituted and destabilised, or even nullified, by the vagaries of optical experiment and error? A through-line can be drawn from Spinoza’s lens-making, his concept of the fertility and dangers of our mental images, particularly those that bind us to what Spinoza understands as the destructive inertness of grief, to the optics that permeate Eliot’s fiction. Each node of that network interrogates the material life of emotions of loss.

My readings of Eliot’s fiction are founded on the supposition that in her novels Eliot infused Spinozistic principles of the imagination. Moira Gatens has defined Eliot’s fiction as ‘attempts to practice philosophy in an alternative key,’⁹² and it was Spinoza’s methodical ethics that provided a moral, and as I argue, aesthetic framework for works such as *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola*. The material body, particularly the tactile body, is the surface upon which the existential dynamic is played out. Like Hume, Eliot famously renounced metaphysics, committing universal ideals to the flames, as it were, in her essay ‘The Future of German Philosophy’. To isolate the universal from experience, and to base upon such Platonic ideals a theory of knowledge, ‘is an attempt to poise the universe on one’s head, and no wonder dizziness and delusion are the consequence’.⁹³ Even here, Eliot employs a characteristic metaphor of sensory impressions, driving further her point that any ontology needs to accommodate the individual body. As in her fiction, the emphasis is firmly upon the details of

⁹¹ Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavallès to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2014), electronic.

⁹² Moira Gatens, “The Art and Philosophy of George Eliot,” *Philosophy and Literature* 33 (2009), 74.

⁹³ Eliot, “The Future of German Philosophy,” in *George Eliot: Selected Critical Works*, ed. Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 135.

experience, rather than the object apprehended. In her work, argues Peter Garratt, Eliot unsettled the distinction between imagining the world and truly seeing it, giving much space to doubting ‘the notion that the human eye was capable of accessing the physical world transparently ... or of reading the world so transparently’.⁹⁴

I begin with *Jane Eyre* (1847), perhaps the exemplary Victorian novel of assured individualism, offering a heroine of fiery independence who outmanoeuvres various villains and Rochester’s mad wife, to triumph as a wealthy, beloved wife. It is conventionally read as a story of grief overcome, but in this chapter I suggest an alternative reading that emphasizes Jane’s skilful concealing of the loss that powers her story, a mournfulness that resides in the text’s blind-spots. As narrator and author, Jane attempts to efface from her autobiography the scourge of mourning that threatens her narrative. Like Flint I am interested in studying the unseen and invisible,⁹⁵ the underside of the legible, so as to trace the subtleties of Brontë’s highly nuanced depiction of the space between sight and knowledge and, what is more, the importance of what is not seen, pushed into the margins of the visible. I argue that in *Jane Eyre* sight comes to stand in a metonymic relation with the metaphysical, and chiefly states of mournfulness. The eye becomes a certain type of object, one among many objects crucial to the notion of Victorian selfhood, which means that it carries the inevitable association or threat of loss inherent in any form of possession.

In chapter 2, I turn to Brontë’s final and most sombre novel, *Villette* (1851), in which the opacity of content merges with form. Unlike the earlier novel, *Villette* is consciously

⁹⁴ Peter Garratt, *Victorian Empiricism: Self, Knowledge, and Reality in Ruskin, Bain, Lewes, Spencer, and George Eliot* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2010), 103.

⁹⁵ Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 20. ‘This challenge to the adequacy of representation, to the sufficiency of the visible, was expressed in a range of ways by the Victorians’, 25. Although I am indebted to Flint’s study, my argument differs from her own panoptic reading of *Jane Eyre*.

elegiac, presenting a heroine obstinate in her largely hidden sorrows, who ‘assay[s] that corroding pain of long attent – that rude agony of rupture at the close, that mute, mortal wretch, which, in at once uprooting hope and doubt, shakes life’ (V, 567). Lucy Snowe’s narrative is compelled by a paradoxical optics that tropes on invisibility. By mining the specular drama, I draw attention to Lucy’s hidden affective life in an effort to compassionate with a heroine who has often been dismissed as valetudinarian, and unsatisfactory as a romantic subject. *Villette*’s manifest engagement with optics has attracted some fine criticism, yet here too we find an emphasis on the gaze as subject, rather than object, on the functional power or disempowerment of the act of looking, neglecting the scopic field as a space of deeply individualised mourning.⁹⁶ By continually staging moments of aggrieved, usually fractured sight, Brontë’s novel is pointing to its own visual preoccupation with in-articulable loss, which becomes a form of especial haunting. In Brontë’s novels, as I argue, the grieving subject is refracted through the ambivalences of the lens. Brontë develops in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* a compulsive referencing of specular indeterminacy, in which emotional crises are mapped onto the transmogrifications of sensory life.

In *Villette* mourning is not something supplementary to the body, but synonymous with the nature of the specular, like the mourning jewellery Charlotte wove. ‘I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate to the real truth,’ recalls Lucy Snowe, ‘to handle the veil’ and ‘dare the dread glance’ (552). She does indeed see through various nefarious disguises but discovers only a ‘network reticulated with holes’ (531), one in which, through her love for Monsieur Paul, she is intractably bound. Lucy’s prison is not that of the malignant state, but a glass prison of sorrow, out of which she does stage a transitory ‘prison break,’⁹⁷ finding her

⁹⁶ See, for example, Joseph A. Boone, “Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of “Heretic Narrative,” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26.1 (Autumn, 1992); Joseph Litvak, “Charlotte Brontë and the Scene of Instruction: Authority and Subversion in *Villette*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 42.4 (March, 1988). I engage more fully with both of these essays in chapter two.

⁹⁷ Kate Millett writes that ‘*Villette* reads like one long meditation on a prison break’. Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1970), 146.

walls dissolve: ‘I wonder at the strange ease with which this prison has been forced. It seems as if I had been pioneered invisibly, as if some dissolving force had gone before me; for myself, I have scarce made an effort’ (536). Lucy briefly embodies the transparency of the spectral, a fantasy of losing her materiality that is one of her most abiding desires. ‘Villette is one blaze, one broad illumination,’ she cries at her most exultant (536), and her greatest yearning is to be a part of that luminescence. For a woman who assiduously conceals her image in the shadows, her story is enthralled by the luminous, to ‘a land of enchantment ... a forest with sparks of purple and ruby and golden fire ... a region, not of trees and shadow,’ but of ‘lustre’ (537).

The phantasms of the ocular are not evocative only of the blatantly dysmorphic, but were of a subtly pervasive quality, too. In her poetic telling of the story of Victorian glass and lens culture, Armstrong emphasises the distancing and isolatory powers of a newly-glassed world, of which the Great Exhibition’s Crystal Palace of 1851 was the exemplar. Armstrong describes the confusion of responses ‘to the new production of mass-produced transparency, in which one’s body can be glancingly, inadvertently reflected back from the environment, belonging to the urban phantasmagoria outside one’s control.’⁹⁸ For Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Joseph Paxton’s Crystal Palace introduced the visitor to a novel experience of utter ‘evanescence’. ‘The uniform quality of the light and the absence of light-shadow contrasts disorient[ed] perceptual faculties used to those contrasts,’ he writes, finding it analogous to the way that train travel distorted the experience of speed and space.⁹⁹ Both these examples, the vitreous architectural edifice of ‘pure abstract light-space’ and the experience of ‘abstracted, *pure* motion’ induced by mechanised travel (which finds its counterpart in the disorienting spatial reconfigurations of optical technologies), come together in my analysis. There is scarce

⁹⁸ Armstrong, “Transparency,” 124.

⁹⁹ Schivelbusch elaborates on this analogy, continuing thus: ‘The motion of the railway, proceeding uniformly and in a straight line, is experienced as abstract, *pure* motion, dissociated from the space in which it occurs. Analogously, the space of ferro-vitreous architecture appears as pure abstract light-space ... a space without qualities and contrasts.’ See Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*, trans. Anselm Hollo (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 53.

appreciation of Brontë as a phenomenological writer, of her granular portrayals of the sensory nature of being. The elegiac nature of Brontë's exploration of vision, specifically the affinity between diminished or obscured sight and loss, has, to my knowledge, not been critically examined.

In chapter 3 I turn to George Eliot, beginning with her most problematic text, *The Lifted Veil* (1859), a Gothic horror story of supra-sensory prophetic powers, in which the representation of loss is mediated through the malevolence of the lens, while the authorial consciousness fractures at the interface of a narratorial drive to manipulate the structure of temporality. Driven to madness by his 'diseased participation in other people's consciousness' (17), the narrator-protagonist Latimer finds that a world unveiled of its mysteries is torturously transparent; or, so it seems. Endowed with prophetic abilities, he is plagued most by the irrepressibly present, by 'the living and the loved,' rather than the 'mere ideas' of his visions (21). In the depiction of an all-seeing, yet emotionally stunted narrator, Eliot creates an aperture, in which the author fuses magic-lantern optics and repressed grief in a picture of disenchanting illumination. While in Brontë's novels we find the blurred, kaleidoscopic image of memory, 'the curious illusion of vision' (V, 430), *The Lifted Veil* enacts the spectacle of the image as a nascent, unformed substance, 'like the new images in a dissolving view, or the growing distinctness of the landscape as the sun lifts up the veil of the morning mist.'¹⁰⁰ Questions of representation lie at the core of this novella, pursued in the dramatic inversion of conventional patterns of textual unfolding, for in Latimer's projections the world appears *before* it is so, the signified brings into being the signifier; at least according to the resentfully suffering protagonist. The terms of the gothic are turned on their head: the seen is the ultimate

¹⁰⁰ George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 10. All further references use this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

horror, much more terrifying than the concealed: ‘no matter how empty the adytum, so that the veil be thick enough’ (*LV*, 29).

The final chapter discusses Eliot’s least read, and often derided historical novel, *Romola* (1861-2). *Romola* is a strangely conflicted text, a very painful novel for its author to write, as it is a difficult text to read. If *Villette* is a sharp howl, then *Romola* is a plaintive whimper – a slowly progressing descent into the resignation of unending loss. In this chapter I have attempted to account for some of the novel’s sophisticated representation of visualised mourning. *Romola* is the most fitting novel on which to conclude, because in its depiction of a network of conflicting interpersonal losses, it comes closest to symbolising in its very form the coalescent body of mourning, an organic system of conflictual pain.

The novel opens with visual indeterminacy, as two men, later revealed as Tito and Bratti, have ‘their eyes fixed on each other’ in misrecognition and confusion, the latter a man who makes his living selling fragments of glass.¹⁰¹ The commodification of the (glass) image is beautifully captured in Bratti’s occupation, the coloured pieces functioning as capital. Before Tito is named, it is his ring (which the seller contemplates stealing for sale) that defines his unexplained presence in Florence, and his status as outsider: ‘Young man,’ [Bratti] said, pointing to a ring on the finger of the reclining figure, ‘when your chin has got a stiffer crop on it, you’ll know better than to take your nap in street corners with a ring like that on your forefinger’ (*R*, 11). The ring makes Tito strange, marks him as foreign other, and throughout the text, characters struggle to place this enigmatic figure, always emphasising his alien heritage. He is a fallen angel, ‘with the face of Messer San Michele,’ sleeping on a street corner. As image without worldly antecedent, Tito’s form invokes trouble. Opening thus with an

¹⁰¹ George Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Dorothea Barrett (London: Penguin, 2005), II. All further references are to this edition and pagination will be incorporated into the text.

invisible history — the beautiful stranger with the unknowable past — Eliot introduces a more concrete epistemological paradigm: scholarly knowledge. Fleeting images must be committed to paper, argues Bardo, unless one has the (masculine) faculty of retaining them on the mind's eye. Bardo categorises Romola's perceptive faculty as faulty: 'I marvel at the capriciousness of my daughter's memory, which grasps certain objects with tenacity and lets fall all those minutiae whereon depends accuracy' (64). Bardo's unintentional irony points up his daughter's vital role in seeing for them both, and her accession into mourning is marked visually by a vivid interplay of blindness and sight.

I have attempted to bring out the submerged grief in the novels of two canonical female authors, a grief often sacrificed, in narrative terms, to the more exigent imperatives of Victorian literary form and the constraints of rhetorical structures. I have tried to bring to the surface the occluded sensory lives of these texts, and their ensnarement in the paradoxes of visualised mourning, to reassess their participation in mid-Victorian optics as coded not with the operations of power, but with the phantasms of loss.

‘My inward dimness of vision’: *Jane Eyre* and the phenomenology of loss

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless...¹⁰²

In the summer of 1846, after the publication and commercial failure of her joint collection of poems, and when the completion of her first novel, *The Professor*, had met with only silence from publishers, Charlotte Brontë was burdened with another, more pressing grief: her father Patrick’s imminent blindness. As her brother Branwell descended into premature death, catalysed by his married lover’s betrayal, and hurried along by alcoholism, Charlotte was also contending with her father’s increasing incapacity, forced to watch the encroaching failure of his eyesight through cataract, a disease that was seemingly unstoppable. Elizabeth Gaskell describes the parson’s predicament as a tragic diminishing of his authority and capacities: ‘He could grope his way about, and recognise the figures of those he knew well, when they were placed against a strong light; but he could no longer see to read.’ He continued to preach, however, undaunted by his diseased vision: ‘I have heard that he was led up into the pulpit, and that his sermons were never so effective as when he stood there, a grey, sightless old man, his blind eyes looking out straight before him’.¹⁰³ Charlotte’s own description paints a more sombre picture, writing of her ‘mournful days – when papa’s vision was wholly obscured – when he could do nothing for himself and sat all day-long in darkness and inertion.’¹⁰⁴ In an effort to prevent ensuing disaster, Charlotte procured the assistance of a

¹⁰² John Milton, ‘When I consider how my light is spent,’ in Milton, *Selected Poetry*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg and Stephen Orgel (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 56.

¹⁰³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (London: Penguin, 1997), 229.

¹⁰⁴ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës*, 2nd ed. (London: Abacus, 2010), 597.

highly regarded eye surgeon, William James Wilson, which led to a visit to Manchester in the hope that Patrick might be cured of his condition. Her anxious and detailed letters of the time evince a palpable distress, full of solicitude for her father, mixed with a quick knowledge of optical science, and a keen interest in the precise details of the operation. ‘What would I not give to have you here!’ she writes to Ellen Nussey, ‘[o]ne is forced, step by step, to get experience in the world; but the learning is so disagreeable’¹⁰⁵; and there is this description of the surgical procedure, which she witnessed:

The operation is over ... Mr Wilson says he considers it quite successful but papa cannot yet see anything – The affair lasted precisely a quarter of an hour – it was not the simple operation of couching Mr Carr described but the more complicated one of extracting the cataract – Mr Wilson entirely disapproves of couching.

Papa displayed extraordinary patience and firmness ... I was in the room all the time, as it was his wish that I should be there – of course I neither spoke nor moved till the thing was done – papa is now confined to his bed in a dark room and is not to be stirred for four days.¹⁰⁶

In the days following Patrick’s operation, Brontë describes a surreal scene of waiting, her nervous watching of her father’s still-voided sight, his face wrapped in bandages, forced to lie in a darkened room, evocative of Locke’s *camera obscura*. This period of suspended hopes – suspended on the wavering fragility of sight – was not, however, an unproductive period for his daughter; indeed, it was during her fraught days in Manchester, ‘with time on her hands,’¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Gaskell, *The Life of Brontë*, 230.

¹⁰⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Selected Letters*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 78-9. Patrick endured the operation without the aid of anaesthetic, taking in the whole a typically observational interest, befitting his amateur studies in medicine, later recording the precise details of his treatment. See Barker, *The Brontës*, 599.

¹⁰⁷ Barker, *The Brontës*, 600.

that Brontë began to write a new story. This story, *Jane Eyre*, would take the trope of blindness, and the suffering human sensorium as its thematic heart, culminating in a young woman's ministering to her blind husband's needs.

Gaskell weaves together her description of Charlotte nursing her sightless father in a darkened room with observations on her subject's own short-sightedness, attributable no doubt in some degree to her eccentric writing habits. Charlotte persisted in writing 'in a minute hand, holding each [scrap of paper] against a piece of board, such as is used in binding books This plan was necessary for one so short-sighted as she was'.¹⁰⁸ Foregrounding sight in this way, Gaskell implies a hereditary perspectival lack, as though unseeing-ness were discursively formed. Gaskell explicitly links the act of writing (which, in Brontë's case, is especially enigmatic for its miniature-ness), and optical degradation: through the physical mechanics of writing, vision is literally eroded. A transposition takes place, from witnessing blindness to writing blindness, with emotional peril as the connective tissue. 'An imperilled eye can charge the act of vision with special urgencies,' writes Alan Spiegel,¹⁰⁹ and it is the eye as the site of subjective distress for Charlotte Brontë that this chapter investigates.

Once back at home in Haworth, watching daily as her father's sight oscillated between dark and light, Charlotte turned in earnest to write her new novel, which from that point progressed in a rapid flow for several weeks. These parallel events in Brontë's life, then — Patrick's depleted eyesight and the seeding and growth of a new novel — are, I suggest, associated, not in a relationship of causality, but certainly one of influence; for woven through *Jane Eyre* is a dialogue of vision that is contoured by a distinctly ocular anxiety. The energy of Brontë's ocularcentric prose arises from a visceral horror of darkness, a darkness that I argue is denotative of mourning. Taking blindness— physical, psychological, and spatial — as a point

¹⁰⁸ Gaskell, *The Life of Brontë*, 234.

¹⁰⁹ Spiegel, *Visual Consciousness*, 4.

of origin, this chapter will illustrate the novel's aesthetics of loss. The specular in *Jane Eyre* is fretted with an elegy of sightlessness, variations on a theme of perception that have profound implications for the way in which the novel contends with issues of perspective, intuition, and memory, with a sensitivity to the emotive modalities of vision.

Jane Eyre engages with a contemporary preoccupation with the metaphoricity of the eye, entering into the Victorian obsession with all things ocular. In her study of visuality in nineteenth-century England, Kate Flint outlines the complex network of dialectical and rhetorical strands evoked by the notion of sight. For the Victorians, '[t]he slipperiness of the borderline between the visible and the invisible and the questions which it throws up about subjectivity, perception and point of view' had remarkable currency.¹¹⁰ In this chapter I seek to bring Flint's insight into conversation with Brontë's engagement with states of loss. Using the physical senses as a marker raises questions about the patterns that loss intrudes upon the narrative consciousness, manifest in *Jane Eyre* in a prose that mimics the phenomenon of re-perception, Philip Fisher's 'awkward term' for a state of perception that registers 'a slippage in confidence and certainty about seeing itself.'¹¹¹ This movement from the eye to the body, specifically the grieving body, is borne out in Brontë's novels, an ideational progression from materiality to metaphysics. This is not a homogenous discourse, but a multivalent one, coursed with contradictory voices. In his history of vision, Martin Jay points out how 'ineluctable the modality of the visual actually is ... in our linguistic practice,' a cultural permeation that became ever more complex in the nineteenth-century, with the sudden capacity to amplify

¹¹⁰ Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, 2.

¹¹¹ Philip Fisher, 'City Matters: City Minds,' in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, ed. Jerome H. Buckley (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1977), 374-5. Fisher uses this term in a specific sense, applicable to mid-Victorian narratives of the city, but I think it is a flexible notion and easily transportable to Brontë's fictions – fictions that situate themselves against, if not within the city. 'The stance of re-perception is within the city, not across it,' he writes. Deliberately it is off balance, as though possession of the world and self-possession – health, sanity, objectivity – were always simultaneously at stake' 376.

naked sight into infinitude.¹¹² What I am suggesting is that loss becomes, in Brontë's novels, a 'structure of consciousness,' inherent in the very modality of its presentation.¹¹³

Brontë's visual instinct was, as I have suggested, intensified by a personal resonance that intersects with her contemporaries' aesthetic use of sight, pushing notions of perception into a subjectively fraught sphere for her protagonists, one that has less to do with power, as is typically argued, than it does with powerlessness. Brontë conditions a larger cultural phenomenon to her own narrative purposes, turning questions of sight to reflect the intimate, for, as John Kucich puts it, 'her angle of vision always returns to the personal'.¹¹⁴ Reversing Brontë's specular prose, whereby to see is to know and possess, or to resist objectification, forces us to re-think her forging of unshakeable perspective and ruthless subjectivity, as being troubled by the instability and speciousness of vision.

Jane Eyre is most often conceived as a narrative of arrow-like decipherment, a heroine whose obstinate will uncovers the mystery at the crux of her world, banishing in the act of demystification Thornfield's history of silenced suffering. The author's preface to the second edition of the novel sets up just such a reception of the text, as Brontë, writing in the hand of Currer Bell, outlines her authorial objective 'to scrutinise and expose - to rase [sic] the gilding, and show base metal under it - to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics'.¹¹⁵ With emphatic verbs of revelation and exposure, Brontë retrospectively writes into her novel a premising of visibility, of a resolute drive toward clarity, that, in fact, is not borne out in the story to come. Sally Shuttleworth argues that Brontë's 'sexualised rhetoric of unveiling,' catching the spirit of the French Revolution, is the warp and weft of *Jane Eyre*.¹¹⁶ The novel's

¹¹² Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 1-3.

¹¹³ The quote is taken from Philip Fisher, *City Matters*, 377.

¹¹⁴ John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 39.

¹¹⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 4. All further references to the novel are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text in parentheses.

¹¹⁶ Shuttleworth, *Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 149-50.

visual aesthetic has been examined in this light, as encoded with operations of power, morality, and gender, the monopoly of the gaze broken down into discrete acts of empowerment or subjugation. There seems to be, though, a certain clinical narrowness to such readings, a myopic determination to understand the novel's visuality as an assertion of the dynamics of the gaze. Peter Brooks writes that 'it is sight, with its accompanying imagery of light, unveiling, and fixation by the gaze, that traditionally represents knowing, and even rationality itself ... the gaze appears to be a crucial element in any epistemological project.'¹¹⁷ Such scholarship takes for granted the correlation between acts of looking and a replete subjectivity, or at least one that exercises self-command and control, taking in, as it were, the whole picture. Yet this slippage between seeing and selfhood was not quite so solid for the Victorian writer;¹¹⁸ indeed, some of the most crucial crises in *Jane Eyre* reveal quite the opposite, dramatising a rent in the subjective experience of visuality, leaving the heroine in a dangerously destabilised visual void, in which any specular ontology is radically in flux. In my reading of *Jane Eyre*, I uncouple the seemingly untroubled link between visuality and power, and in so doing, expand the critical focus towards a recognition of Brontë's phenomenological and arguably proto-cinematic aesthetic.¹¹⁹ As we will see, the novel is not a clarion visual (re)formation (as retrospective telling) of an integrated subjectivity, but is instead premised upon visual deferral and emotional disavowal, reading more as a project of purification of Jane's psyche from emotional shock. The sensory impulse becomes, in the process, disfigured by anxious control, revealing a carefully assembled narrative arc which nevertheless retains in its structural folds the inscriptions of loss it would erase. Reimagining blindness as an affect, Eugenie Brinkema writes that, if 'redescribed as [such], it would be the affect of a stricken disorientation.'¹²⁰ Jane

¹¹⁷ Brooks, *Body Work*, 9.

¹¹⁸ Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 21.

¹¹⁹ David J. Jones notes that there is an increasing recognition that 'Charlotte Brontë's novels draw extensively upon pre-cinematic media.' See Jones, *Sexuality and the Gothic Magic Lantern: Desire, Eroticism and Literary Visibilities from Byron to Bram Stoker* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 109.

¹²⁰ Brinkema, *Forms*, 55.

Eyre's peripatetic narrative is one of continual stricken disorientation, of an increasingly confident attempt to cohere vision, turning her gaze in the process from object to object in an attempt to locate an untroubled point of reference. The deceptive quality of Jane's perceptions, however, alters the ostensible equilibrium of the novel, like an afterimage that persists in the mind's eye.¹²¹

Nicholas Dames has expressed dissatisfaction with 'anachronistic' readings of Brontë's oeuvre that take as their origin the privileging of hidden depths familiar in filmic theory. As he explains, the critical assumption that the gaze in the Victorian novel is weighted with objectification ignores the 'implications of a science of seeing that Brontë, among others in her society, took seriously and that she employed consistently.' Dames is interested in the phrenological gaze in Brontë's fiction, a gaze that he argues is evacuated of mnemonic matter. In this reading, memory is absent in Charlotte's fiction, effaced by a visual imperative that privileges the visible over all other forms. Where memory should be there is only an empty space, rather than repression or trauma:

By dispensing with certain mental functions, most notably those functions which cannot be visualised by an observer, phrenology lends an almost untrammelled power to sight. In Brontë's novels we see this cultural emphasis on sight vividly dramatized, and we see as well as what is missing when the body speaks for the mind She therefore provides us with a particularly clear example of a significant Victorian

¹²¹ Crary discusses at length the phenomenon of the afterimage, tracing its importance for nineteenth-century optics via Goethe's *Theory of Colours*. The retinal afterimage attains during the early decades of the century 'the status of optical "truth". They are no longer deceptions that obscure a "true" perception; rather they begin to constitute an irreducible component of human vision.' Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 97.

psychological theory at work – a theory that was wedded to sight, and the triumph of the visible over the invisible.¹²²

Brontë's novels are indeed fixated on the surface, and the 'visual ... is akin to an obsession,' but if we follow Dames's argument, where all that is legible accrues value by virtue of its exteriority, we fail to fully account for, if not diminish altogether, the blind spots of vision in a novel such as *Jane Eyre*, or *Villette*. What of the irruption of memory in the novel, for instance, that in Dames's reading is neatly and successfully excised from the specular psyche? Or the paradoxical schema which foregrounds visibility, while the narrative work of the text strives to un-do such visibility? Brontë's fascination with the science of phrenology undoubtedly informs her limning of characters and notions of personality; yet surely there is more to Brontë's formulation of subjectivity than a phrenologically driven depiction of sight? While I agree with Dames that *Jane Eyre* evinces its author's seduction by this pseudo-science of the body, I would question whether the gaze is in such an unproblematic relation to knowledge. Vision in Brontë's novels is volatile and far from crystalline, as her fiction explicitly questions the efficacy of perception; and nor is it avowedly clinical.¹²³ The narrative, too, is riddled with traces of sensory atomisation that resist the totalising force of perspective. My focus on the ocular materials of Victorian modernity, such as glass and its light-bending capacities, illustrates that Brontë's specular dialectic 'offers a subject in difficulties, rather than a smooth transitivity.'¹²⁴ There is no immunity of the sensorium to the ravages of loss.

Dames argues, too, for the importance of accommodating 'different model[s] of visuality' that attend to the surface of novelistic things,¹²⁵ leaving a space for a further model

¹²² Nicholas Dames, *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, And British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 81-2.

¹²³ John Berger writes, '[t]he relation between what we see and what we know is never settled...the knowledge, the explanation, never quite fits the sight.' *Ways of Seeing*.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 14.

¹²⁵ Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 86.

of visuality that I take up below, one that darkens the narrative eye, and which can be read as an analogue of feeling. There is indeed a ‘science of seeing,’ yet it is as rich in affective reach as it is concerned with epistemology, a manifold scopic regime of human feeling. The importance of attending to this other, phenomenological paradigm of perception in *Jane Eyre* is two-fold. First, it allows for a sensitive reading of the narrator’s history of loss, one that reassesses Brontë’s visual language by recuperating the lingering loss that has troubled critics of the novel. Second, the practice of reading that I follow responds to the determined manner in which the novel is deliberately calling attention to the emotional vulnerability immanent in the visual faculty, if not indeed all perceptive faculties. Brontë’s well-documented interest in the sciences and in quasi-scientific theories such as phrenology, are more than curious points in her biography; rather, her engagement with the ocular sciences creeps into her tropes of human grief, figuring sight *as* elegy.¹²⁶

Jane Eyre cannily reminds her reader that her story is not to be a ‘regular autobiography’. Her careful logic of telling, one in which she is not bound to recount every event, allowing her to pass over eight years ‘almost in silence’, does not accord with the volatile will of memory; bound only to show pictures of her past that promise interest to her reader, Jane explains that ‘a few lines only are necessary to keep up the links of connection’ (83). In what follows, I will establish the visual praxis of these lines of memory, which can productively be thought of as sight-lines that function as a critical mode of making meaning in the novel. ‘Where conditions of experience alter suddenly,’ writes Fisher, ‘the making and unmaking of the senses becomes in itself a crisis available to consciousness.’¹²⁷ Brontë’s novels are interested in the crisis of consciousness at the intersection of modernity and visual culture.

¹²⁶ This kind of transposition or sublimation could be described as a mode of repression, but that is not a feature that I wish to pursue. A large amount of compelling work has been written on the repressive techniques in not only Charlotte’s work, but in that of her siblings. See Kucich, for example, who argues that, in Brontë’s novels, ‘self-negating, potentially fusional libidinal impulses are reformulated as exclusively inward experience.’ *Repression*, 39.

¹²⁷ Fisher, ‘City Matters: City Minds,’ 371.

I

A sensory mourning

Jane Eyre begins with troubled perception. Seeking solace in a quiet corner of her Aunt Reed's mansion, Gateshead, the child Jane mounts 'into the window seat ... and having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close [is] shrined in double retirement.' This careful implication of a gap through which the outcast child can still peek is symptomatic of the way Jane likes to see. 'Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day' (*JE*, 7-8). The doubleness of glass is here at work, the 'creation of internal contradiction,' immanent in a substance that situates Jane both within and without.¹²⁸ The fabric of the curtain, its thickness and vivid colour, 'fold' Jane's sight in a single hue, like the solipsism of her world view. This is a psychic space of deep intimacy, yet not a scene of quietude.¹²⁹ Red appears throughout the text as a disturbingly ambiguous tint, at one point turning in upon Jane to haunt her perception in frighteningly lurid tones when she wakes from her red-room fainting fit.¹³⁰ In her study of Victorian glass culture, Isobel Armstrong writes that 'red ... dominates this century,' recalling Ruskin's descriptions of 'passional redness'. Armstrong argues that colour and the image are entangled, dialectically, in any consideration of sight: 'colour makes strange but yet ties us into the world.'¹³¹ Such a notion is manifest in Brontë's palette, in the ambivalence of her crimson hue, its figuration as at once a tint of grief and imminent pain, as well as its seductive allure (Thornfield's interior is awash in redness). The enveloping red moreen is a distinct contrast to

¹²⁸ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 14.

¹²⁹ Gilbert and Gubar's reading of the window nook emphasises its psychic resonance, identifying Jane's dilemma in this instant as 'whether to stay in, behind the oppressively scarlet curtain, or to go out into the cold of a loveless world.' *Madwoman*, 340.

¹³⁰ I return to this last scene in greater detail below. Many critics have noted the prominence of the colours red and white in the novel, attributing them various symbolic inferences.

¹³¹ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 272 and 275.

the scene outside the window, which offers ‘a pale blank of mist and cloud’: a split image, between interior and exterior, the mind as it is and the mind as it could be. The complexity of Jane’s embodied perception, heightened by the tactility of Bewick images resting in her lap¹³², can be gleaned from pausing a moment as the narrative asks us to do, and lingering on the sombre pictures under her observation. As Jane remembers it, her interest in Bewick is desultory: ‘the letter press I cared little for’, and yet, she admits, ‘there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank’. The nature of these pages are ‘those that treat of the haunts of sea-fowl; of the solitary rocks and promontories by them only inhabited’; turning the leaves, Jane sees ‘forlorn regions of dreary space, - that reservoir of frost and snow Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own; shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive’ (8). Jane’s eyes shuttle from window to page to window once again, figuring the fractured texture of her mind-scape. This set of images in Bewick will return in elaborate form later in the novel, captured vividly in the sketches that lure Rochester to the darkness of Jane’s imagination, but they also clearly associate image and feeling, emphasising a specular psychology, furthered by Jane’s sliding gaze from illustration to the view through the window frame. This association is the beginning of a pattern illustrative of Brontë’s ontology, in which Jane’s selfhood is ensnared in the images before her, her sense of being sliding into the scenes in Bewick, merging now with the dreary view outside the window; selfhood abstracted through the pictorial and losing itself in a groundless play of images, in a manner similar to the merging of discrete pictures through the lens of a stereoscope. The scenes at Gateshead are punctuated by several such ‘window-moments’ (Armstrong’s phrase), the

¹³² There is a rich tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth-century texts which include seminal scenes of reading, many of which are instrumental to the emotive drive or dynamic of the story. Adela Pinch describes the variations of ‘literary excitement’ available to readers in the long nineteenth-century, and the very real dangers posed to readers of fiction if they identified too strongly with the affective life of characters. Words could be ‘the messengers of pain,’ if the ‘affective nature of reading’ took too strong a hold. See Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 86-87.

most notable being Jane's obscured view from a frost covered window onto a frigid garden, where she spies Mr Brocklehurst's carriage – a picture of the outside world that will now absorb her in a new sphere of grief and suffering: 'just as I had dissolved so much of the silver-white foliage veiling the panes, as left room to look out, I saw the gates thrown open and a carriage roll through' (30). Such moments establish formal portals, framing perception as the grounds of subjective experience and story. Jane's views, however, are always constricted in some way. As Armstrong writes, the ontological nuance of glass was a 'knowledge immanent in nineteenth-century consciousness'; most glass of the period was blown by human breath, and thus 'glass was the spectre' of the glassblower's breath.¹³³ Jane breathing on the breath-blown glass – this doubling of substances ('a substance invoking matter and spirit, and the tension between them'¹³⁴) – awakens us to the depth of meaning invoked in Brontë's image, a phenomenology of the window. There is a fusion of matter and emotional life, literalised in the uncertain transparency of the glass panel: for Jane, a sense of futurity, yet thwarted by the smudge of the glass.

Rather than understanding this first paradigmatic scene in Lacanian terms as does Peter J. Bellis, who describes a jealously guarded feminine interior, hidden from the prying eyes of masculine objectivity, I read a very different sort of gazing, one that is no less oppressive.¹³⁵ Grief is 'a confusion of faculties' in *Jane Eyre*, and such confusion is generally signalled by conflicting sensory experience. Bewick's 'Book of Birds' proves to be a violent object, when it is claimed by John Reed ('Now I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they are mine,' [11]), turned upon Jane as a weapon, hurled at her head, drawing blood. The red blood of her wound recalls the false haven of the red moreen fabric, which becomes, abruptly, the terror chamber of the 'red-room,' the most significant space in the novel. Locked within, Jane's

¹³³ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 4-5.

¹³⁴ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 4-5.

¹³⁵ Bellis argues that Jane 'is punished for asserting her visual independence'. Bellis, "In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*," *ELH* 54.3 (Autumn 1987), 641.

vision acquires a new spatial awareness, as this is the first moment of elaborate spatial depiction. The red-room is both an architectural and psycho-space that is hauntingly reconstructed at multiple points throughout the novel, a liminal chamber that offers a clear delineation of the imbrication of specularity and loss. The spatial texture of Jane's visual modality, what Henri Lefebvre describes as 'logico-epistemological space,' that is, 'the space occupied by sensory phenomena,' can be traced to this point of origin, the primal darkness of the red-room.¹³⁶ Once Jane crosses the threshold of the door, she enters a place of suspended mourning, a topsy-turvy world of distorted phantasmagoria and broken images, one that recurs with increasing sophistication as the narrative drives onward.¹³⁷ The solipsistic function of the room is emphasised by the fact that any view to the outside is blocked by red drapery, so the space hovers uneasily out of time. Hidden away in a drawer in the wardrobe (the first of a series of hermetic spaces) is a miniature of Mr Reed, Jane's uncle, and herein 'lies the secret of the red-room.' Mr Reed died here and the room's memory of his corpse is a non-presence, to which Jane's senses are all too alive. Her oddly angled vision at this point, pulled askew by the threat of her uncle's haunting, blurs all correspondences into one indomitable image. Following Lefebvre's form of spatiality, we might say that in this instance, it is Jane's body, her phenomenal body reeling from endemic emotional pain, that generates a particularised, excessively visualised space.¹³⁸ The narrative voice moves from internal reflection to an

¹³⁶ In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre calls for a theory of space that expresses a unity of the psychic and the physical, one that could house, among other elements, 'the products of the imagination ... its symbols and utopias'. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 11-12.

¹³⁷ Terry Castle describes the phantasmagorical metaphors put in play by Thomas Carlyle, in his *French Revolution*, an obsessive figuring of 'the bloody spectacle of civil insurrection as a kind of spectral drama – a nightmarish magic-lantern show playing on without respite'. I suggest that Brontë enacts a similar visual aesthetic, utilising specular tropes weighted with emotion and memory as is Carlyle's prose, 'a spectral drama' of the modern mourning subject. Castle, "Phantasmagoria," 26.

¹³⁸ Drawing on Leibniz's understanding of space as that which must be *occupied*, rather than a form in itself, Lefebvre questions what it is that occupies space. 'A body – not bodies in general, nor corporeality, but a specific body, a body capable ... of demarcating and orienting space.' For, as Lefebvre points out, 'space is not a pre-existing void,' (contrary to Spinoza's view that space is an absolute, filled by the presence of God, or Nature), not 'a container waiting to be filled by a content,' but a producer of space.' *The Production of Space*, 169-70.

abundantly ocular focus, as Jane becomes an eye, ‘riveted’ as a succession of objects rises before her:

A bed supported on massive pillars of mahogany, hung with curtains of deep red damask, stood out like a tabernacle in the centre; the two large windows, with their blinds always drawn down, were half shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery; the carpet was red; the table at the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth; the walls were a soft fawn colour, with a blush of pink in it; the wardrobe, the toilet-table, the chairs were of darkly polished old mahogany. Out of these deep surrounding shades rose high, and glared white, the piled-up mattresses and pillows of the bed, spread with a snowy Marseilles counterpane. Scarcely less prominent was an ample, cushioned easy-chair near the head of the bed, also white, with a footstool before it; and looking ... like a pale throne (13-14).

The funereal bed that stands out ‘like a tabernacle in the centre’ is an obstinate symbol of mourning; it is a dwelling place, constituting a space of its own, like the tabernacle in Lucy Snowe’s heart in which she stores her dead love for Dr John in *Villette*. Jane’s uncle Reed was the only person from whom she received tenderness, and his death marked her complete alienation from familial care. The bed demands Jane’s gaze, emphasised by the two large windows against which it is set, ‘with their blinds always drawn down [and] half-shrouded in festoons and falls of similar drapery’ (13). Like two eyes with heavy lids, these frames which deny their function of transparency are also figures of mourning, richly textured and veiled as a Victorian mourning habit. This is unmistakably a death shroud. Shroud in fact has a complex

and intriguing etymology, being at once an item of clothing associated with mourning habit, as well as a token of death, and the sheet, traditionally white, that cloaks the corpse.¹³⁹

The room is a surfeit of red which, by force of repetition attains a certain contagiousness, as if Jane's visions paints the colour, spreading as it does from object to object. The carpet is red, so too the walls and bed-side table, and '[o]ut of these deep surrounding shades' arises the bed, which 'glare[s] white,' the language of sight slipping from subjective faculty to the object perceived. From where Jane sits she is caught in a series of 'broken reflections,' which ripple the surface of the wardrobe mirror on one side of her, and are blocked out by the voided windows on her other side; between them is 'a great looking-glass' which 'repeat[s] the vacant majesty of the bed and room' (14). Jane is thus caught in a claustrophobic series of empty images, images that promise plenitude ('vacant majesty') but are translated through the medium of glass into a disquieting emptiness. She is trapped in a recursive network of reflexive surfaces, a *mise-en-abyme* that repeats the non-presence of mourning: the absence that is the corpse of Mr Reed. Crossing before the mirror, Jane compulsively peers at it against her will:

my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality; and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with ... glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit (14)

Bellis describes Jane's mirror moment as a failed ocular portal ('Her only visual outlet is illusory, the merely apparent "depth" of a "great looking glass"').¹⁴⁰ Jane finds not a shallow mirage, however, but a *depthless-ness*, a space with no bottom, and her recognition is fearful

¹³⁹ See the definition of 'shroud' in the Oxford English Dictionary.

<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/view/Entry/178930?rskey=ttcsyN&result=1#eid>

¹⁴⁰ Bellis, "In the Window-Seat," 641. Although I differ from Bellis's Lacanian reading of *Jane Eyre*, I share his interest in the keenness of visual perception of the narrative eye/I.

precisely because she intuits her entanglement in the ‘broken reflections’ of the glass panels. A view is ‘a double-sided thing,’ writes Armstrong, ‘intimating the unstable nature of seeing and the thing seen.’¹⁴¹ The catatonic stillness of the reflection is placed into relief by Jane’s luminescent eye, a disembodied, kinetic eye, her gaze is the object of her vision, repeating itself in a manner that does not conceal the alienation of self-perception undergone in this moment: this is ‘seeing as perceiving’ in Asa Briggs’s terms.¹⁴² For Jane’s image here is ghosted and entirely other, her body momentarily a cytosure of the ‘cold,’ ‘dark’ ‘hollow’ of the reflection, her figure just another object (a ‘heterogeneous thing’ in her own assessment [15]) in the vacant space of the room. There is nothing stable about the picture that Jane sees: she is doubled and shorn of concrete individuality. The importance of this spectral moment lies in the fact that Jane does not stay to contemplate her body’s dark depth: ‘I returned to my stool,’ immediately closing up the image (14). A cleavage in the perspectival field, which culminates in Jane’s loss of consciousness at the end of the chapter, renders Jane aloof from her self projected as somatic spectacle; or, as Merleau-Ponty would describe it, a disenfranchisement of the actual body from its virtual representation in the mirror. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty describes an experiment in which a subject is positioned before a mirror:

At first the mirror image presents him with a room differently canted, which means that the subject is not at home with the utensils it contains, he does not inhabit it, and does not share it with the man he sees walking to and fro. After a few minutes, provided that he does not strengthen his initial anchorage by glancing away from the mirror, the reflected room miraculously calls up a subject capable of living in it.

¹⁴¹ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 272. ‘It was a crisis for nineteenth-century modernism,’ she writes, ‘as different accounts of the meaning of viewing ... were violently fought out’.

¹⁴² Briggs, *Victorian Things*, 10.

This virtual body ousts the real one to such an extent that the subject no longer has the feeling of being in the world where he actually is, and that instead of his real legs and arms, he feels that he has the legs and arms he would need to walk and act in the reflected room: he inhabits the spectacle.¹⁴³

Jane breaks the illusion of merging with the mirrored image by looking away, resisting the lure of the spectacle, only half-inhabiting it.

In this primarily visual reconstruction of experience, the medium of sight overwhelms subjectivity as the objects of the room, the spectral light, the coalescence of dominating red, all collude in a sensory overload of phenomena that renders subjectivity in peril. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar rightly point out that this mirror is ‘a sort of chamber, a mysterious enclosure in which images of the self are trapped,’ yet I disagree with their assessment of Jane’s recognition that her mirrored self is an image of her double imprisonment in a patriarchal order.¹⁴⁴ Brontë is self-reflexively questioning the veracity of perception, questioning too the source of that sensory disorder, issuing from mind, from body, from the world outside Jane’s red-covered room? – that makes the narrative possible. Jane’s phantom appearance, her disorientating glimpse of self as other (an image repeated in Lucy Snowe’s failure to recognise her mirror image), inaugurates a brokenness that her subsequent narrative works to de-couple from her augmenting subjectivity, in the way of *bildungsroman*; yet the story, indeed Jane’s written self, is constituted around this very moment. As she admits later, the shock of her imprisonment in the room never leaves her (*JE*, 20). To again invoke Merleau-Ponty, Jane glimpses her self in the mirror as incarnate subject ‘through which an object perceived

¹⁴³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 250.

¹⁴⁴ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000), 340-341.

concentrate[s] in itself a whole scene or becomes the imago of a whole segment of life'; yet by resisting the image in fright, she disavows her body as a subject of perception, denaturalising her experience of subjectivity.¹⁴⁵ The red-room scene is, as Gilbert and Gubar write, 'the most metaphorically vibrant of all [Jane's] childhood experiences,' one that Brontë 'consciously intended ... to serve as a paradigm of the larger drama that occupies the entire book'.¹⁴⁶ Rather than 'a patriarchal death chamber,' I understand the space as primarily a psychic representation of mourning that is far less concrete in its associations. Its seminal position in the story, in the pattern of remembrances of the writing narrator from which all else flows, establishes a template of visual paradox, occurring at the level of sensory consciousness. It is a space that should be charming, or at least homely, but is *unheimlich*, exiling Jane into self-estrangement.¹⁴⁷ The contents of the red room and the sadness that it represents are diffused throughout the text, uncannily reworked, we shall see, later in the text, when Jane returns to Mrs Reed's deathbed.

What occurs next is crucial in considering Brontë's aesthetics of visualised mourning: Jane is startled by a light that emanates from no obvious origin, gleaming on the wall. 'While I gazed, [the light] glided up to the ceiling and quivered over my head' (17). This 'drama of light'¹⁴⁸ concentrates in Jane all her preconceived terror, appearing to be the harbinger of Mr Reed's ghost, a figure of longing and repulsion, so that the room at once contracts: 'My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings: something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down –' precipitating her into a loss of consciousness (*JE*, 17).¹⁴⁹ Perspective is formed as a concretised

¹⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 52 and 206.

¹⁴⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 341.

¹⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Penguin Freud Library* 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 345. I return to this essay and the theme of the uncanny in detail in chapter 3.

¹⁴⁸ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 273.

¹⁴⁹ The image of the light returns to Jane's memory in a later dream: 'I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light that long ago struck

totality, as Alan Spiegel describes it, personhood emerging from an exposition of visual elements. The colour red, the windows, the peculiar light sliding across the room, the deathly bed, the claustrophobic space collate in the reader's mind as a rubric of how Jane sees. All of these ideational visualisations make up the character of the heroine, connoting the complex nature of her suffering.¹⁵⁰ Brontë's visual composition is one of material embedded-ness, an aesthetic that reinforces an unstable ontology of the image. Jane's sight is produced out of spatio-temporal moments, rather than a static, stable mode of perception, so that affect becomes relational and diffuse.

The horror in the red-room brings together a formative crisis of consciousness that is figured phenomenologically, showing us a subjectivity terrorised by the tumult of the senses, manifest in the panting syntax and impressions that are rapid as flashing light. The 'terrible red glare crossed with thick black bars' which cross her sight upon waking recall the red afterimages described and catalogued by David Brewster, the Victorian inventor of the stereoscope (whom Brontë would enjoy meeting in 1851, receiving from him a personal guided tour of the Grand Exhibition).¹⁵¹ 'I heard voices, too, speaking with a hollow sound, and as if muffled by a rush of wind or water'. The hellish dreamscape of Jane's memory gathers around half-remembered images that put into doubt the content of the memory itself. By collapsing the tumultuous sensory data with Jane's psychic struggle, and the true cause of her distress, which has the tenor of an austere cinematic footnote ('unconsciousness closed the scene'), this seminal experience resists incorporation in the narrator's rigid scheme of telling. What *did* happen in the Red Room? Jane's reader never knows for certain, echoing as it does amidst the narrator's 'confused faculties,' (18) which from her retrospective temporal moment constitute

me into syncope, recalled in this vision, seemed glidingly to mount the wall, and tremblingly to pause in the centre of the obscured ceiling' (319).

¹⁵⁰ These comments are influenced by Spiegel's analysis of the Flaubertian novel in *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, 20-21.

¹⁵¹ On Brontë's meeting with Brewster, see Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 273.

the grief itself. What does such distorted remembering imply for the self's restitution? The sharp pang of light destroys the definition of Jane's subjective experience, the 'I' of the individual so thoroughly decentred in an aporetic sensory shock.¹⁵² Intervening in the recollection of subjective occurrence and knowledge, then, is the terrible loss of sensate 'truth', failing to bridge between the I/eye of remembering and the moment as it was.

II

Lowood

Jane's deliverance from Gateshead is marked textually by a drama of light, the chief properties of which are bewilderment and indistinctness. The scene of entrance into Lowood has all the aesthetic qualities of a nineteenth-century lantern show:

[G]athering my faculties, I looked about me. Rain, wind, and darkness filled the air; nevertheless, I dimly discerned a wall before me and a door open in it; through this door I passed with my new guide: she shut and locked it behind her. There was now visible a house or houses ... with many windows, and lights burning in some round wall (42-3).

Arriving in darkness, Jane's first knowledge of her new home is constructed by the brilliancy of a swarm of artificial light, an alien luminosity that disbars sight, rather than aiding it. In its architecture of imprisonment, Lowood obstructs seeing. Inside, the 'uncertain light from the hearth showed by intervals papered walls, carpet, curtains, shining mahogany furniture,' a

¹⁵² I apply the term aporetic to the dimension of phenomenal perception after the manner of Julian Wolfreys, in his study of Dickens's phenomenology of the city. Wolfreys's invigorating readings of Dickens's sense-drunk narration has had an influence on my own work. See Wolfreys, *Dickens's London: perception, subjectivity, and phenomenal urban multiplicity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012).

sequence of flickering imagery. ‘Seen by the dim light of the dips,’ the building is lent a certain imperviousness, all aspects of the few spaces that Jane is led through conspiring to overwhelm her. Jane’s sense of self is for the first time threatened with a uniformity to which she must submit, as now she must enter into the group of indistinct girls, ‘a congregation ... [of which] their number to me appeared countless’ (43). From this flux of impressions will emerge several sharply defined sensations: hunger, terror, shame, and loss. Every sense is sharpened by starvation, which shocks Jane by its irrepressibility, and the attenuation of human bonds even amidst a sea of other bodies (most of which, aside from Helen Burns and Miss Temple, do not acquire explicit form in Jane’s re-telling), is a variation of that hunger. Lowood is about a movement into an ugly sensory experience, a phenomenology of terror, but also, a movement into a corporeality of indistinctness, an experience of interiority that is shaped (or misshaped) by the propinquity of other bodies forced into sameness. The young girls, all ‘uniformly dressed in brown stuff frocks of quaint fashion, and long Holland pinafores,’ move as one amorphous body to the refrain of the school’s ‘indefatigable bell,’ ‘marshalled and marched’ from one cold and inhospitable room to another, a formalistic illustration of affective rigidity.¹⁵³ This sense of psychic enclosure is doubled by Lowood’s circumscribed borders,¹⁵⁴ with high, spiked walls to deny any sight beyond its confines: ‘The garden was a wide enclosure, surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect ... broad walks bordered a middle space divided into scores of little [garden] beds.’ Each bed is assigned an owner, little allotments of personhood that are brown with ‘decay’ (48). If we consider this image in formalistic terms, the symmetry of the garden beds and those in the bedroom (‘I glanced at the long row of beds, each of which was quickly filled with two occupants’ [45]), within the formal unity of the

¹⁵³ I have in mind here Caroline Levine’s expansion of the formal capacities of a reading of *Jane Eyre* (just one example in her study), whereby the structural and aesthetic dimensions of a text are linked to or inherent within larger social aspects of the novel’s content. ‘What are Lowood’s shapes and arrangements – its semicircles, timed durations, and ladders of achievement – if not themselves kinds of *form*?’ she asks. See Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 1-2.

¹⁵⁴ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 38.

school grounds, captures something of the enforced perspectival uniformity of Lowood; a space scored with equal divisions, like a grid, but abject and un-individuated.¹⁵⁵ Subjectivity becomes doubled, as each girl moves in a pair, yet perversely neutered of the capacity for growth, symbolised by the image of the dying flowers. Once again, a perspective of grief is formed visually, the architectural aspects of space merging with the images of the garden beds / dorm-beds, to emphasise a resigned sadness that Brontë articulates as a visual teleology and patterning.

Disgust delineates Jane's personhood and her body's edges, coming upon her like an affective assault when breakfast is served; un-ambivalent revulsion is a practice of self-assertion through the senses.¹⁵⁶ Breakfast is 'a nauseous mess [of] burnt porridge' that overpowers even the most potent hunger, arising in 'a universal manifestation of discontent,' as the smell of the food 'met the nostrils of those destined to swallow it' (45-6). Jane's positioning in the space, her recreation of the image of the breakfast room for instance, is, however, conspicuous in her placement as *outside* the formalistic patterns she reconstructs for her reader; she resists the totalisation of the self that Lowood's rigorously enforced hierarchy implements, even as her body is caught up in the power of the ritualistic obedience of the school day. This is explicitly represented in the scene in which Jane's slate smashes on the floor, rent in two by her inability to merge fluidly into the group. Another window moment, too, is crucial to Jane's displaced figure:

when I passed the windows, I now and then lifted a blind and looked out; it snowed fast, a drift was already forming against the lower panes; putting my ear close to the window, I could distinguish through the gleeful tumult within, the disconsolate moan of the wind outside ... I

¹⁵⁵ Levine, *Forms*.

¹⁵⁶ In Sianne Ngai's essay on disgust, she writes that this affect is particular in the way it strengthens and polices [the] boundary' between subject and object. See *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 2005), 335.

wished the wind to howl more wildly, the gloom to deepen to darkness,
and the confusion to rise to clamour (54-5)

Here the experience of interiority is again pushed to a crisis, reified through the exigent distinction between inside and outside. Certainty of personhood can only come through a willed-for heightening of aural and visual awareness. Indeed, the mind's vision substitutes the body's wants. Extreme hunger is satiated by the vividness of Jane's imaginings, as upon going to bed, she forgets 'to prepare in imagination the Barmecide supper of hot roast potatoes, or white bread and new milk, with which I was wont to amuse my inward cravings: I feasted instead on the spectacle of ideal drawings, which I saw in the dark' (74-5). These pictures of the mind, 'all the work of my own hands, freely pencilled,' along with her sketches, are images of miniaturised harmony and protection ('wrens' nests enclosing pearl-like eggs') and constitute Jane's attempt to wrestle control over the visual, approximating a means of ordering the imagery that most soothes her inner eye, making the darkness her own cocoon of interiority.

Jane's experience at Lowood is the experience of deprivation, and her rebellion is felt at the level of her sensory life, pitched at an extreme of want. The loss of bodily warmth is one of the most intolerable, indeed deadly, instances of feeling in these chapters. Jane is 'ready to perish with cold' (52), the water in the pitchers having frozen over with the onset of winter. Over time existence is accordingly whittled down to the confines of Lowood and its stubborn 'rules and systems' that constitute a world unto itself. The formalism described above masters sensory amplitude, and sensual impoverishment becomes the norm. The violence of un-individuated space, those lines and shapes of homogenous existence, is contrary to a distinctive sensory life, one that could offer hope. The view from the window over the school grounds, for example, optically reinforces that incarceration: '[t]here were the two wings of the building; there was the garden; there were the skirts of Lowood; there was the hilly horizon. My eye

passed over all objects to rest on those most remote, the blue peaks ... all within their bounds seemed prison ground, exile limits.' Beyond that lies a 'varied field [of] sensations,' unseen, exceeding vision (85). The horizon line here takes on a specifically phenomenological quality, as Jane's vision is replete with the possibility of perception in a Husserlian sense,¹⁵⁷ a futurity of feeling, in which the loss she feels (brought into stark relief by the marriage and departure of her beloved Miss Temple) is metonymically figured in a yearning for new perceptions, other modes of experience. Subject and object merge in the view of the 'white road winding round the base of one mountain and vanishing in a gorge between two' (85). The white arching line is a symbol of Jane's past ('I recalled the time when I had travelled that very road in a coach') and a future (as visual field) that feels impossibly distant: a static spatiality and a notion of temporality 'that is inseparable from the visual,' as John Berger describes it.¹⁵⁸ Jane's desire for sensory newness is a quest of self-definition against the impossibility that this white line, in its curve away from her vision, represents. We can read a dialectic of desire met with the staunch opposition of a flat image that ultimately refuses the eye; the fathomlessness of the line implies that her future will be an endless continuation of 'school-rules, school-duties, school-habits and notions, and voices, and faces, and phrases, and costumes,' successive images of banality that have denied all temporality of experience. What converges at the point of sight in this instance, then, is a feeling of loss, the consciousness of eight years swallowed up in an exile of displacement. '[D]olore,' writes Eugenie Brinkema, 'dampens the optic possibilities of a sensual encounter with a present existent world, like an affective cataract.'¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Flint writes that, in accordance with the principles of the horizon as conceived by Husserl, 'the idea of the horizon is infused with the sense of possibility.' See *The Visual Imagination*, 307.

¹⁵⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), 18.

¹⁵⁹ Brinkema, *The Form of the Affects*, 55.

A double illumination

Jane's movement to Thornfield marks a significant shift in the narrative. Not only is it the beginning of independence and adulthood, it is an introduction to an interior that is suspiciously luxurious, its Gothic splendour beyond anything she has expected to encounter. Bachelard describes the truly phenomenological image thus: 'the real beginnings of images will give concrete evidence of the values of inhabited space, to the non-I that protects the I.'¹⁶⁰ When the narrative moves to Thornfield, the psychology of visualised space drives the pattern and action of memory, determining the text's imagery. The house is an analogue for Mr Rochester's mind, and Jane is exposed to its hidden chambers in a way that precludes the roundness of perspective: all is thinned out — the light, the passing of time — eclipsed by a sensorial erotics that relies upon Jane's not-knowing, indeed upon her blindness.

It is during her time as governess in Mr Rochester's mansion that Jane is sensually reacquainted with an essence of horror reminiscent of her feelings in the Red Room, as the spatial character of Thornfield, its deceptiveness, acts upon her with furious energy. From her first entrance into the house, the new epoch in the narrative is marked by a sudden blinding, recalling her arrival at Lowood: '[the room] whose double illumination of fire and candle at first dazzled me, contrasting as it did with the darkness to which my eyes had been for two hours inured' (95). 'When [she] could see,' the scene before her appears almost too charming, 'a beau ideal of domestic comfort', soon belied by her introduction to the rest of the house, and the crepuscular gloom of her new home. We find the same shock of 'imperfect light' when Jane tours the upper stories, peering out from Thornfield's roof:

¹⁶⁰ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 5.

‘I surveyed the grounds laid out like a map: the bright and velvet lawn closely girdling the grey base of the mansion ... the horizon bounded by a propitious sky, azure, marbled with pearly white When I turned from it and repassed the trap-door, I could scarcely see my way down the ladder: the attic seemed black as a vault compared with that arch of blue air (106)

The pain imminently to close over Jane’s small world is registered at the level of retinal confusion, of fleeting visual bewilderment that punctuates her movements through the long galleries of the house. The metaphor is striking enough in its suggestion of Jane’s constricted view and the myopia of longing and subsequent loss that will afflict her in her love affair with Rochester. The horizon that is the focal point of the view over the grounds functions as the dividing line of Jane’s splitting perception, the too-sharp contrast of hope-filled blue and impenetrable darkness; the horizon, an ‘ideal trope through which to examine Victorian attitudes towards the visual, towards the practice of seeing,’¹⁶¹ offers up to Jane an idea of vastness, one which accords here with her deep desire to belong. Yet that same azure arc is no more than an ever-receding desire, ‘indivisible from [one’s] individual physical and conceptual faculties,’ as Flint writes, and this particular moment stages the limits of perception (as *Jane Eyre* consistently repeats), of the futurity of the blue sky denied and re-contained by the dense black of the attic room: ‘I, by dint of groping, found the outlet from the attic, and proceeded to descend the narrow garret staircase. I lingered in the long passage ... narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end’ (106-7). Once in her own room, she is able to gaze ‘leisurely round, and in some measure efface the eerier impression made by that wide hall, that dark and spacious staircase’ (98). The adjustment to sight, the pupil dilating and contracting

¹⁶¹ Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 287.

according with Jane's exposure to light, corresponds with a retraction or intensification of 'mental anxiety' (98), and the prose is responsive to such a wave-like motion, opening out with the vastness of the blue sky, and receding ('groping') with the dimming of the retinal light. The acknowledgement of the shocking secret of Bertha Mason's imprisonment is subtly registered at the ocular, syntactical level, while the narrator, writing retrospectively, refuses knowledge of the truth at the level of discourse. A splitting is at work, then, between discourse and image.

When Jane turns from the image of sublimity, the horizon of futurity, her vision is immediately sacrificed to the darkness of the house; her sight shifts from the potentiality of future desires, to the petrification of wants. There is a deathliness to the 'vault' space of the attic that corresponds to the shrinking of subjective horizons; the eclipsing of her inner life by the claustrophobic space. She feels her interiority more oppressively in this enclosure, trapped within the bounds of the shell of Thornfield. History is suspension: Thornfield 'is a home of the past: a shrine of memory' (106). Jane's narrative exudes a yearning for a type of freedom that Thornfield, as the opposition to that visual drive, makes unavailable to her. Jane acknowledges as much in her description of her feeling at re-entering the property: '[it is] to slip again over my faculties the fetters of an uniform and too still existence (116)'; Thornfield *resists* sight, and by way of Jane's pattern of associating visuality with a replete sense of personhood, the house denies inner plenitude. This is concisely represented in the following passage, as Jane stands upon the threshold of Thornfield:

I lingered at the gates ... I paced backwards and forwards on the pavement: the shutters of the glass door were closed; I could not see into the interior; and both my eyes and spirit seemed drawn from the gloomy house – from the grey hollow filled with rayless cells, as it appeared to me – to that sky expanded before me, - a blue sea absolved from taint of cloud (116)

As in the passage quoted earlier, in which Jane stood at the window of the schoolroom at Lowood watching the storm, the liminal positioning of the spectator is dramatised as a psychic fracture. Jane aligns her ‘eyes and spirit,’ and the juxtaposition between the obdurately obscure house with its ‘rayless cells’ and the open vista above her is deliberately stark; inner life is felt as a blindness (‘I could not see into the interior’). Her mode of seeing is working prophetically, as a proleptic warning of the threat that Thornfield symbolises, yet its complete comprehension eludes the heroine here. The glassed room prevents Jane’s seeing, the darkness an apt figuring of the secret shut up in the house: that of Bertha, imprisoned in the third story.¹⁶² The evocation of carceral space in the description also gestures towards the atemporal nature of lived experience at Thornfield, a space in which, before she begins to see herself in accordance with her longing for Rochester, Jane’s sensuality is eroded, her visual acuity made redundant by the darkness. This last image of the sky delimited ‘in its fathomless depth and measureless distance,’ is a projection of a desired mode of being. I must disagree with Elaine Freedgood’s claim that, in *Jane Eyre*, ‘subjectivity has no limits or boundaries’;¹⁶³ the novel stages such borders continually. The house, its windows, its architectural shaping of Jane’s being, acts as a framework of limitation.

The opposition could not be more distinct: the expansion and filling out of subjectivity instanced in the presence of unnavigable space, juxtaposed against the visual indigence of the interior. ‘A very chill and vault-like air pervade[s]’ the house, ‘suggesting cheerless ideas of space and solitude’ (97). In order to ameliorate such spatial vacancy with its attendant loneliness, Jane’s eye falls upon *things*, cataloguing interior objects (‘*Jane Eyre*,’ quips

¹⁶² There are moments when Jane’s view from the interior to the exterior is occluded, too, as when, for instance, she peers from a window, ‘but nothing was to be seen thence: twilight and snowflakes together thickened the air...’ (118-9).

¹⁶³ Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive meaning in the Victorian novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 39.

Freedgood, 'is a work about interior decoration').¹⁶⁴ As Susan Stewart writes, elaborate descriptions are a textual 'procedure by which description multiplies in detail ... analogous to and mimetic of the process whereby space becomes significance'.¹⁶⁵ In this 'multiplication of spatial significance,' the loss inherent in Thornfield is transformed or at least transmuted, the observer gaining a temporary respite in a haven of things, to find intimacy in the impersonality of the estranging visual space. An accumulation of detail fills up space that would otherwise remain menacingly other, a revision of the bourgeois tyranny of things in the Red Room, in which Jane lost all control in her function as seeing, grief-stricken eye. Thornfield, in its architectural and spatial dimensions, induces in Jane a retrogressive personhood; the movement indoors parallels a certain psychic regression, a retreat into a shrunken interiority. Locked within this shrine of memory, Jane's only recourse is to locate the horizon. When this feeling builds towards its nadir (as it often does in the early stages of her career as Adele's governess), Jane creates images. She turns to the imaginary to restore subjectivity, allowing her 'mind's eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it'; this visual restorative is a loosening of constricted senses, a perceptual expansion. To illustrate these pictures is 'a tale ... [of] all incident, life, fire, feeling,' (109) gesturing toward both a sense of endlessness and delimitation, which is the yearning within *Jane Eyre* – a vision unimpeded, which, however, coils up in response to the inexorability of Thornfield's secrets. The novel's consciousness is haunted by an unseen space, the chamber from which echoes Bertha's tragic laugh. Jane abstracts her sense of self through her creation of projected interior images, or daydreams, in which she can possess a vision that 'might overpass' the 'dim skyline' (109) that defines her view from the building.

¹⁶⁴ Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things*, 31.

¹⁶⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing*, 47.

Sharon Marcus's argument about the paradoxes of abstraction and subjectivity in *Jane Eyre* is useful in considering this point. Like Marcus, I read multiple moments of self-atomisation in this text, yet these are not (as is Marcus's focus) centred chiefly on printed matter — texts and advertisements, but occur via a mode of visual perception premised upon dispersion and the fracturing of personhood. *Jane Eyre* suggests, argues Marcus, that 'the split subject and the imperialist-capitalist subject may be equivalent'. 'Jane's and Brontë's subjectivities emerge most strongly during moments of abstraction and alienation,' she continues, and 'writing ... provides Jane with a medium for the successful transfer of her own embodiment.'¹⁶⁶ Marcus is interested chiefly in the egregious paradox of the female author of the 1840s, who, in order to write was forced to advertise, yet 'the necessary self-promotion of advertising collided with the self-effacement demanded of them' (213). This chapter has traced a different form of invisibility in Brontë's novel, one not socially codified and enforced, but willed, and particularised, rather than gesturing to a general condition. While I share Marcus's wish to read against the dominant narrative of *Jane Eyre* as a heroine of fulfilment, I do not understand Jane's multiplicity as a means of acquiring agency; on the contrary Jane's habit of self-duplication is revelatory of the patterns of navigating her sense of grief. It is the place of abstraction in the novel's structure of loss that is of most interest for my purposes. Reading the visual structures of the novel, in this case the materiality of written texts, and placing Jane within an iniquitous economy of embodied desire, in which the only way to achieve a sense of personhood is through disembodiment, still leaves unquestioned the assumption that such moments of crisis are textually ameliorative. I would argue that the text does *not* come to terms with its series of displacements and transferrals; the sensory substitution from Jane to Rochester, for example, that I have begun to sketch out is, in my reading, a narrative haunting

¹⁶⁶ Sharon Marcus, "The Profession of the Author: Abstraction, Advertising, and Jane Eyre," *PMLA* 110.2 (March 1995), 209 and 207.

that has no easy accommodation in Jane's writing self. Marcus's explanation for the heroine's alienation still does not attempt to address her fraught relationship with the sensory body, the incarnated gaze as existing outside the limiting framework of political and material commodification: in other words, it does not come to terms with Jane's intimate life. Translating the heroine's entanglement in a specular economy premised on objectification and market value does not recuperate Jane's phenomenal body and its relationship with private loss.¹⁶⁷

Jane has a longing for the bustle of a city (79), for an experience of distracted abstraction, in which as Susan Stewart describes it, 'distance is collapsed into partiality, perception becomes fragmentary'.¹⁶⁸ This need for distraction, most fully and poignantly realised in Brontë's *Villette*, points to a larger thematic that I wish to take up: that Brontë's phenomenology of loss is caught in a visual field of obsessive specular symbolism, which reveals a desire for dispersion or concealment; it is a loss that *does not want to be seen*.¹⁶⁹ This is the paradox of Brontë's fiction: a yearning, indeed an urgency for visibility, for acknowledgement (both within and through the act of writing), for a reciprocal face-to-face encounter,¹⁷⁰ yet also shame, what is really a terror of grief made irrevocably exposed and particular. Jane's decision, for example, to refuse disclosure in her conversations with the blinded Rochester, much later in the novel, a dialogue that for Jane constitutes one endless conversation: 'We talk, I believe, all day long: to talk to each other is but a more animated and

¹⁶⁷ Marcus argues that 'Jane uses the medium of written advertisement to negotiate between absolute self-effacement, represented by Helen Burns, and spectacular, Bryronic embodiment, personified by Rochester.' The article in its entirety is richly rewarding. "Abstraction", 209.

¹⁶⁸ Stewart, *On Longing*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ My phrasing here and the argument I develop in this section are influenced by Stanley Cavell's essay on King Lear, in which he analyses at length the play's topoi of blindness and insight. 'Given [the] notion that recognising a person depends upon allowing oneself to be recognised by him, the question becomes: Why is it Gloucester whose recognition Lear is first able to bear? The obvious answer is: Because Gloucester is blind. Therefore one can be, can only be, *recognised by him without being seen*, without having to bear eyes upon oneself.' Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love," 279. There are useful and obvious parallels (given Brontë's Shakespearian influence) to Jane's relation with Rochester.

¹⁷⁰ 'Is not the face given to vision?' asks Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, 187.

an audible thinking' (451), could be understood as her denial of the recuperative effects of revelation.¹⁷¹ By the end of Jane's text, she has transferred the particularity of her pain to that experienced by her husband, surrendering it to the silence of a mutual bond that must, it seems, absolve any need for vocally expressing the loss of her past.

One query I want to raise at this point is the symbolic nature of Rochester's blinding. Critics who point to its symbolism are not wrong to do so, but if we put aside the Oedipal overtures, another compelling meaning emerges: is Brontë's blinding of Rochester in fact in the service of concealing Jane's psychic wound? Is the troubled sensory perception of the text transferred to his maimed and destroyed faculties because grief *cannot* be seen, cannot be decoupled from blindness? For the lovers are now, by Jane's admission, of one flesh: 'No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh (450)'. Jane's visuality is sanctified in her new role of seer for her husband, endowed with a surety that could only come with seeing *for* another. Letting go of her singularity at last is a relief for Jane, because with it comes the subsuming of psychic pain in the other, the beloved other, who can adopt her loss all the more satisfactorily because it remains unknown (unseen). The decoupling of the pricking particularity of that grief from an isolate subjectivity is complete. This is, however, a very different process from that described earlier by Dames, in which a subject's interior is stripped of its mnemonic matter, its symptoms, and exposed in an ungenerous language of surface. The ruthlessness of *making visible*, of unveiling the self, as I have attempted to show, is far more ambiguous.¹⁷² Indeed, it no longer seems

¹⁷¹ Carla Kaplan writes extensively on the complexities and contradictoriness of conversation in *Jane Eyre*. Most pertinent to my point here is her observation that 'Jane tells her story not [as feminist criticism would have it] because she is a heroine of "fulfilment," but rather because she is still looking for a "fit listener," still longing for an ideal or at least apt interlocutor. Writing, in this sense, is ... a call for a response, a gesture, an invitation, one that cannot know what will follow, that cannot be sure of its outcomes.' Kaplan, "Girl Talk: Jane Eyre and the Romance of Women's Narration," *NOVEL*, 30.1 (Autumn, 1996), 23.

¹⁷² Dames writes that '[w]hen the self is unveiled as it is in Brontë's work, we can see that it faces resolutely forward.' *Amnesiac Selves*, 87.

correct to assert that any project of ‘unveiling’ of Brontë’s heroines takes place; it is more a change of costume, exchanging one cloak for another, in an unbroken performance of loss.

The crucial factor in Jane’s reticence and disavowal of grief is shame; she is ‘the heroine of shame,’ according to one provocative critique.¹⁷³ I wish to look at this idea in more detail by turning to a scene often disregarded in the criticism, Mrs Reed’s deathbed scene. Aunt Reed’s rejection of Jane consistently manifests in a cold, flint-like gaze, while her niece continually, even in adulthood, ‘seeks her image’. Returning to her childhood home as her aunt lies dying, Jane’s supplicating eyes are once more answered by ungoverned contempt:

Well did I remember Mrs Reed’s face, and I eagerly sought the familiar image.... I had left this woman in bitterness and hate, and I came back to her now with no other emotion than a sort of ruth for her great sufferings [and] to be reconciled.... The well-known face was there: stern, relentless as ever – there was that peculiar eye which nothing could melt; ... the recollection of childhood’s terrors and sorrows revived as I traced its harsh line now!’
(230)

The opacity of Mrs Reed’s eye is nonetheless a mirror for Jane, the lines of the face recalling her mourning. The impression is of obstructed transparency: Mrs Reed turns her face away from Jane’s, regarding her ‘icily,’ ‘her stony eye – opaque to tenderness, indissoluble to tears,’ ‘unchanged and unchangeable’ (231). Mrs Reed’s face will only ever reflect back the pain of the past, unremitting of the present, and the shame of Jane’s alienation. Silvan Tompkins describes shame as ‘the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction

¹⁷³ Ashly Bennett argues that Jane’s primary emotion is shame, and it is this affect that drives the diegetic and formalistic aspects of the text. Bennett’s argument is in the service of a feminist account, claiming Jane’s overwhelming sense of shame as grounds for her feminism. See Bennett, “Shameful Signification: Narrative and Feeling in *Jane Eyre*,” *Narrative* 18.3 (October, 2010), 300.

between the subject and object of shame is lost. Why is shame so close to the experienced self?’ he asks. ‘It is because the self lives in the face.’ For Tompkins, the affect of shame is most recognisable in the movements of the face, particularly the sufferer’s refusal to gaze, or unwillingness to be recognised. The person can in this way ‘call a halt to looking’.¹⁷⁴ Jane’s image in this scene is doubly denied by her aunt’s stubborn and inexplicable refusal to recognise her: “‘Aunt!’” she repeated. “‘Who calls me Aunt? You are not one of the Gibsons; and yet I know you – that face, and the eyes ... why, you are like Jane Eyre!’ ‘Yet,’ she continues, ‘I am afraid it is a mistake: my thoughts deceive me ... I fancy a likeness where none exists’” (238). Cruelly disabled of her own image, Jane is forced to avow her identity, to prove her likeness to the image of her self; to reclaim that image means only to reclaim herself as the object of hatred. There is a petrification of loss in these final scenes at Gateshead; despite the ‘living things alter[ing] past recognition,’ (228) Jane is mired again in a pain impervious to the amelioration of time. Seeing is here imbued with an entire history, one woman’s face reflecting and then splitting in two Jane’s person-hood; the mourning of love scorned is there still, immutably present in the lines of Mrs Reed’s face. Vision is thus implicated – explicitly so – in a nexus of temporality that governs Jane’s experience of subjectivity. The present becomes past through an endless and unchanging confrontation with Aunt Reed’s unmitigated disavowal, ‘temporality and vision become inseparable,’ as Jonathan Crary writes.¹⁷⁵ Seeing is thus imbricated with Jane’s burden of loss, as the adult Jane is still the child yearning for tenderness, yet dispossessed by non-recognition. Charlotte Brontë thereby asserts the

¹⁷⁴ For Tompkins, shame is the affect (grouped in a combinatory affect named ‘shame-humiliation’) that is uniquely inherent, an ‘inner torment’ that ‘strikes deepest into the heart of man.’ See *Shame and its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 133 and 136.

¹⁷⁵ I have taken Crary’s description out of context, as he is referring not to Charlotte Brontë’s novel, but to a general shift in ideas of sight that took place during the early nineteenth century, when the body is increasingly anchored to observation, and ‘[t]he shifting processes of one’s own subjectivity experienced in time became synonymous with the act of seeing’. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 98.

emotional gravity, indeed the emotive capaciousness, of the specular, the antagonistic field of perception.

The largeness of Thornfield is belied by Jane's description of its series of close chambers, or of rooms so heavy with objects that ensure a sense of crowded proximity. In her conversations with Rochester, Jane's body becomes another chamber of secrets, an untarnished imaginary space in which he can store his 'sullied' memories (135). In Rochester's gaze, Jane is a body without content and, as he believes (yet fails to enquire) her perception is without the 'infection' of troubled images. Etiolated perspective is soon replaced, however, by Rochester's image, the face that becomes the 'object' she best likes to see; for it is he who projects to Jane all the variety of scenes and sensations that she longs to see: 'I had a keen delight in receiving the new ideas he offered, in imaging the new pictures he portrayed' (146). Rochester's remembered images are akin to a virtual after-image ('the presence of sensation in the absence of a stimulus,')¹⁷⁶ that provides Jane with an imagined plenitude, substituting and refracting the role of her vivid imagination. Rochester's past is a filter for Jane's imagined, longed-for potentiality, and the origin of her love is here, in the vicarious visions he delivers to her eye, an ocular history that becomes her own in the translation. Rochester's body is a point round which Jane can position her own in a field of desire; as the foundation of metonymy, in Susan's Stewart's elegant formulation, the other's body, specifically the lover's body, becomes a contact with a sensory richness otherwise inaccessible. 'We can see the body as taking the place of origin for our understanding of metonymy (the incorporated bodies of self and lover) and metaphor,' Stewart writes. 'It is this very desire of part for whole which both animates narrative and ... creates the illusion of the real.'¹⁷⁷ 'So happy, so gratified did I become,' Jane

¹⁷⁶ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 98.

¹⁷⁷ Stewart, *On Longing*, xii.

recalls, [that] my thin crescent-destiny seemed to enlarge; the blanks of existence were filled up' (146). In such descriptions, 'imaging' another's memories has the seductive aura of representing a whole. A new dialectic of the eye accompanies the lovers' growing mutual obsession, a heightened sensitivity to the nuances of the eye's movements. Brontë writes a dialogue of visual exchange; all of Jane's visual energies become directed toward *seeing* the walled-up grief hidden in Rochester's body. Walking together in the gardens of Thornfield, Jane observes that Rochester's eye glints with a 'glare such as I never saw before Pain, shame, ire – impatience, disgust, detestation – seemed momentarily to hold a quivering conflict in the large pupil dilating under his ebon eyebrow.' Rochester is tormented by the sight of 'writ[ing] in the air,' a script of 'lurid hieroglyphics' that runs across the battlements (142). The gulf between the pair's respective modes of seeing forms the matter and urgency of their desire, as well as its vulnerability: for this is a 'quivering' dialogue, tremulous in its patterns, wishing to graft one sight upon the other's in cohesion. Jane's view is necessarily defined by this threat of the unseen, of the impossibility of scopic transcendence. I want to suggest that Jane's narrative becomes one in which vision, problematised from the first, undergoes a process of abstraction, quickened by her growing erotic awareness, at last becoming transfixed upon the blind eyes of Rochester. *Jane Eyre* stages a manipulation of images, duplicating, fracturing, and at times excising textual pictures, that process of imagistic refraction eventually degenerating into a reciprocal blinding. By the end of the narrative Jane's vision is in the service of Rochester's voided sight, a disturbing literalising of those earlier descriptions of Jane re-seeing her 'master's' remembrances.¹⁷⁸

Rochester's desire is sparked by Jane's eerie water-colours, scenes of drowned corpses, of murky depths, of sea and sky merging at the point of horizon. Fascinated by these pictures,

¹⁷⁸ I return to the subject of Rochester's blinding and Jane's devoted assistance of him in detail below. Jane habitually refers to Rochester as her master.

Rochester's fingers trace the pattern of Jane's vision,¹⁷⁹ the contiguity of tactility and visuality charged with the symbolism of the lovers' sensory porousness, which constitutes erotic exchange. Jane's aesthetic is impressionistic, the figures appearing 'as through the suffusion of vapour.' The final image Rochester touches is the most illuminating, however, depicting a face, as bleached as the veil that covers it, with 'an eye hollow and fixed, blank of meaning but for the glassiness of despair' (126). The metaphors of reflection ('On the neck lay a pale reflection like moonlight; the same faint lustre touched the train of thin clouds', and 'a drowned corpse glanced through the green water' [125]) create the impression of a shadowy pool in which Rochester glimpses something of himself, perhaps an intuition of a shared history of loss. We can begin to recognise the complexity of the imagistic web that grows up between the lovers, the threads of which are borrowed visions, like half-remembered dreams. Notably, Rochester at once dismisses the artworks from his presence, handing them to Adele, in a gesture that suggests their excision from his preferred fantasy of Jane, that of the 'little girl,' whose 'memory without blot or contamination [is] an inexhaustible source of pure refreshment' (135). Indeed, these watercolours do not reappear in the narrative; they are instead substituted by Jane's precisely limned portrait of Rochester, which she creates almost mechanically in an unconscious, trance-like manner. It manifests from Jane's habit of sketching any scene that appears 'momentarily to shape itself in the ever-shifting kaleidoscope of the imagination.' Jane reproduces her lover's face, and its features are a mirror for her, an idealised self-representation. The reciprocal gaze that she yearns for is contained in the eyes, their 'irids lustrous and large.' Indeed so faithful is the likeness that in this instance, Rochester's troublesome figure is possessed as simulacra with remarkable firmness. 'I had a friend's face under my gaze ... I looked at it; I smiled at the speaking likeness: I was absorbed and content'

¹⁷⁹ 'Inasmuch as the movement of the hand that touches traverses the "nothing" of space, touch resembles vision,' writes Levinas. *Totality and Infinity*, 189.

(234). Transformed into a miniature ('If the miniature is a kind of mirror, it is a mirror of requited love,')¹⁸⁰ he is utterly, illusively hers: she has authored his image, designing and controlling his gaze, so that a convergence of sight occurs (the fidelity of this illusion cannot be sundered in such an autoerotic act). The one moment of visual reciprocity, then, is based on the *absence* of the other, more akin to a mirror image than a true encounter with another's accommodating gaze. Susan Stewart describes the face as text: '[t]he face reveals a depth and profundity which the body itself is not capable of ... because the eyes [are] openings into fathomlessness. [...] The face is a type of "deep" text, whose meaning is complicated by change and by a constant series of alterations between a reader and an author who is strangely disembodied, neither present nor absent, but in fact, *created* by this reading.'¹⁸¹ Jane's portrait acts as a veil for her pain in this moment, temporarily blotting out the present — the cold rejection of her love from her cousins Eliza and Georgiana Reed.

¹⁸⁰ Stewart, *On Longing*, 126.

¹⁸¹ Stewart, *On Longing*, 127.

III

A rent in the veil

In loving Rochester, Jane's perspective brims with his image, 'as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun' (274). The eeriness of this simile is notable: the subject thrown into preternatural dark by the shaded sun, one body closing over another, for a moment absolutely; another image of totality that is close to self-negation. When that idolised picture is muddied by the revelation of his lies and betrayal, Jane's entire phenomenology of being implodes. The fault, Brontë suggests, is one of misapprehension: 'How blind had been my eyes!' The lucid vision of the heroine, until now assuredly loved and soon to be wed, spirals out into a maniacal, kaleidoscopic (a word used throughout the novel) perceptive haze: 'My eyes were covered and closed: eddying darkness seemed to swim round me, and reflection came in as black and confused a flow.' These rings of grief pool round Jane, as she is beset by a vision that now '*sees* nothing,'¹⁸² eventually dragging her down into a 'torrent' of darkened water, rendering her in an ontological oblivion: 'The whole consciousness of my life lorn, my love lost, my hope quenched, my faith death-struck, swayed full and mighty above me in one sullen mass' (296). Mourning the death of her past self, her possible selves, is staged as a blacking out of her specular capacity, with Jane at the centre of uncontrollable concentric circles of selfhood. The reader is left with a discomfiting enigma, one that places in doubt the totality of Jane's scopic power, her narrative eye: is not the whole of what has come before this moment now in peril? If Jane's scopic omniscience is flawed, what is the status of her

¹⁸² In her book on the affectivity of vision, Brinkema invokes Milton's *Paradise Lost* to draw out the writer's distinctive use of visual figures, describing the way he intuited 'a vision that *sees nothing*...' "From those flames / No light, but rather darkness visible." Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke UP, 2014), 54.

narrative? What other failures of recognition lie buried within her text? It is not only Jane, therefore, but the narrative entire that faces a nightmare of subjectivity and alienation. The critical emphasis on *Jane Eyre*'s self-actualisation begins to seem unstable if we reconceive the novel's visual authoritarianism as the workings of anxiety.

This is a crucial nexus that brings to light the affective power of Bronte's narration: the symbiosis of states of loss and a rhetoric of vision, the two twined so extensively that modes of seeing become shorthand for grieving. Notably, Jane's vanquished hopes entail a vision of her future and past selves — the virginal young woman soon to embark on a new life as Mrs Rochester, the excited young girl in her plain stuff gown — now embodied in an image of frozen corpses; in other words, ontologically girded by these stabilising, hope-filled images on the one hand, Jane is cruelly undone in an instant by a toxic picture of mortified flesh. Her 'hopes are dead,' which entails the death of several selves, lined up now in her mind's eye as infants whose bodies are beyond revivification. 'I looked on my cherished wishes, yesterday so blooming and glowing; they lay stark, chill, livid corpses ... I looked at my love: that feeling which he had created; it shivered in my heart' (295-6). The object of her love, too, is unalterably tarnished ('the attribute of stainless truth was gone from his idea'). The narrative can continue only under a new visual modality, an adjustment of luminosity; the revivification of Jane's loved and loving self, the brightness of Rochester's image, must be dimmed. When hope is restored at Marsh End, in the form of Rochester's desperate voice carried on the wind (the hollowed-out auralty a symbol of his attenuated force upon her inner eye), it is the shadow of a man that she returns to love. As Garrett Stewart writes, Jane 'must dispossess her imagination' of the force of erotic energy, and 'Rochester himself must be dimmed [and]

purged, burnt away.’¹⁸³ Charlotte Brontë wrote to ‘quell the otherness of loss.’¹⁸⁴ To achieve a plot of fulfilment, the text must embrace a shroud, figured as the dark dell that is Ferndean, a quasi-crypt in which the ecstatic textures of desire can be safely buried. In the scenes of hyperbolic romance at Thornfield, Rochester’s solidity, his very material being had been suspiciously pushed against; to his declarative of “‘I am substantial enough: — touch me,’” Jane responds, only half-ironically, “‘You, sir, are the most phantom-like of all: you are a mere dream.” He held out his hand ... placing it close to my eyes ... “Yes, though I touch it, it is a dream,” said I, as I put it down from before my face’ (279). Rochester’s flesh is still in doubt, his body alarmingly spectral, as Jane’s faith in her sensory capacity begins to splinter after a series of nightmares. His return to the narrative as a living ghost, his re-enclosure in the loop of the speaker’s desire, is simply the logical end of his phantom presence; Jane can only assent to this whittled down version of selfhood, her perspective eclipsed now not by the brightness of her devotion, but by the deeply-cast shadows of her newly embodied subject-hood.

Ferndean appears at first to be impenetrable to Jane’s entrance; no aperture is visible, only a dense verdancy. ‘Even within a very short distance of the manor-house, you could see nothing of it; so thick and dark grew the timber of the gloomy wood about it.’ Inside the gates, though, Jane finds herself in ‘the twilight of close-ranked trees,’ and walking ‘between hoar and knotty shafts and under branched arches,’ she is led along a seemingly endless path, ‘it wound far and farther: no sign of habitation or grounds was visible.’ Jane seeks a portal, a break in the enclosing forest walls; ‘[t]here was none: all was interwoven stem, columnar trunk, dense, summer foliage – no opening anywhere (430). A dim light at last leads her to a decayed house, a desolate grounds, enclosed by a wood that creeps away into a semi-circle. This is the

¹⁸³ Garrett Stewart, *Dear Reader: The Conscripted Audience in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1996), 273. Stewart argues, rightly I believe, that in order for the novel to reach its final point of contentment, the plot must be arranged so that Rochester’s ‘overweening’ desire meets Jane’s disappointed love, a kind of mutual chastening.

¹⁸⁴ Stewart, *Dear Reader*, 273.

chosen ground of Brontë's romance: a house so damaged, a grounds so unkempt, that no locks are necessary, a place 'where sound falls dull, and dies unreverberating' (447). So isolated is the spot, that the outside world has no longer any concreteness. Jane has entered a 'portal' of ravaged fecundity, and re-constructs her self (her story) visually and spatially in the last moments of her autobiography. Suitably, the aesthetic becomes one of obsessive visuality, as figures and metaphors of sight and blindness, of blackness and light, follow with such rapid successiveness that the contours of this new narrative world are defined by a perceptive myopia, with all vision contained in the figure of Rochester. Jane's sensory identity is abstracted out into the beloved other, hypersensitive in its awareness of any quiver of his body. Invisibility now is a wondrous disguise, indeed a joy, for if Rochester cannot *see* her with his physical eye, then Jane can remain unrecognised to herself. For Gilbert and Gubar, such mutual diminishment is a necessary condition of any kind of equality for the lovers; '[w]hen both were physically whole they could not, in a sense, *see* each other because of the social disguises – master/servant, prince/Cinderella'.¹⁸⁵ There is indeed an affecting mutuality in their lovers' dialogue of shared senses:

"Can you tell when there is a good fire?"

"Yes, with the right eye I see a glow – a ruddy haze."

"And you see the candles?"

"Very dimly – each is a luminous cloud."

"Can you see me?"

"No, my fairy: but I am only too thankful to hear and feel you."

"I am hungry: so are you, I dare say, only you forget." (436)

¹⁸⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 368. They continue thus: '[B]ut now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh.'

The correspondence of their banter, in its synchronised clipped phrasing, emphasises a stability in their relationship. Sight has become distanced perspective, a ‘luminous cloud’, a hazy surface; zooming out from the particularised and granular, this is the kind of visuality Jane’s narrative can most easily accept.

As Marcus observes, Jane’s service to Rochester is yet another form of abstraction: ‘Jane appears to adopt — rather than triumph over — her husband’s bodily fragmentation by transforming herself into a prosthetic part,’ transforming herself into a writing instrument as substitute for his crippled right hand.¹⁸⁶ Yet it is not simply a tactile service that she offers, but instead one that canvases the whole sensorium, and particularly as in the example above, of sight; the dimmed sight is not Jane’s own in this instance, transferred instead to Rochester. His enfeebled perception is the condition of her own sharpening of the visual instinct, divorced from her subjective history of loss. Visuality is merely instrumental, refined to a practical function and shared goal, and arising out of a paradoxical logic: seeing for another, one for whom she is invisible. Jane’s fractious, obstructed apperceptive abilities are reformulated as Rochester’s physical blindness, relegating loss to a shared sensation of overcoming impairment, which returns us to Brontë’s nursing of her father.

Yet I would argue that Brontë’s blinding of Rochester is not simply another working of the familiar trope of spiritual insight through physical blindness, as Gilbert and Gubar claim. There is a doubleness alive in many of the structural metaphors of this novel, and his disability seems a comment on the tyrannous nature of the visible world. His and Jane’s respective psychic trauma can remain hidden, as if a bind has been severed in the death of Rochester’s vision; a memory cord snapped in blinding him (the past now is unnecessary, yet the present

¹⁸⁶ Marcus, “Abstraction,” 213.

is too banal to narrate, and so the narrative must naturally conclude rather abruptly). There is no danger of visible non-recognition (no cold, flinty gazes to reflect Jane's shame), rather, the narrator is known by touch and by the sound of her body's movements, her material presence an elixir for Rochester's wounded perception.

St John's crazed pursuit of her hand in marriage gave rise in Jane to a very different feeling, which was, though, no less a demand for acquiescence to his person. His belief of her 'invaluable' assistance in his chosen life of a missionary in India penetrated Jane's 'iron shroud,' which 'contracted round' her like a noose. 'Shut my eyes as I would, these last words of [St John's] succeeded in making the way, which had seemed blocked up, comparatively clear. My work, which had appeared so vague, so hopelessly diffuse, condensed itself as he proceeded, and assumed a definite form under his shaping hand' (404). These words recall Jane's earlier metaphor of integrity in describing an earlier conversation with St John, when, after he reveals that he is in fact her cousin, that she is bonded to him by a tie that places her within a structure of belonging, her longings are 'embodied' in something solid. 'Circumstances knit themselves, fitted themselves, shot into order: the chain that had been lying hitherto a formless lump of links, was drawn out straight, — every ring was perfect, the connection complete' (384). *Jane Eyre* is the search for harmonious form, a form constructed centrifugally, from the inside out, and the plot's vacillations are the movements of subjective contraction and expansion. St John offers Jane a perfection of 'bloodless,' fleshless form (he is himself an embodiment of harmonious beauty and purity of spirit) but his 'hardness' of body and eye, the implacability of him, at last breaks her resolve to accompany him. The 'veil f[alls]' from his image, and Jane cannot solder her body to this marble figure, vampiric in his desireless wanting of her, for whom her body is no more than a vessel of his needs. Despotism is rejected, then, for uncertain shapelessness in Ferndean, a deathly dell in a hidden forest, where Jane's body is supremely necessary for the happiness of another. 'The eye itself, pure vision,

becomes tired of looking at solids,' writes Bachelard, 'it needs to dream of deforming.'¹⁸⁷ Ferndean is a dream of deforming, in which the heroine can live out a fantasy of immateriality (in the capacity of a 'fairy' or ethereal sprite for Rochester); yet it seems to me that the narrative, in all its kineticism, has merely circled in upon itself, its spatiality receding ever more narrowly to a contented blindness. 'Frustration and lack, the haunted sense of lost opportunity, and finally the willed sacrifice of achieved desire – these are the propulsive drives of Jane's lifelong internal romance,' concludes Garrett Stewart.¹⁸⁸ 'The pressure of fantasised desire' has mangled Jane's intuitive correspondence to her world, vulnerable as it was; for what of the longing experienced at the sight of the horizon?¹⁸⁹ Is this the conclusion to that wondrous line across the earth, that vision of endlessness and possibility? Ferndean is the starkest reversal of horizontal space; it is arguably the death of space. And Jane and Rochester are the revenants haunting their past selves in a cage of knotted trees, where visibility is at last neutralised of its affective rub. 'The self lives where it exposes itself and where it receives similar exposure from others ... the mouth talks, the eyes perceive; [these movements] are uniquely related to one's experienced affects and to the affects transmitted to others,' writes Tompkins.¹⁹⁰ Ferndean, a symbolic shroud, poses no threat of exposure; it is sealed off contextually and narratively just like a photographic still, or a glassy Wardian case.¹⁹¹ The cataract of the eye with which we

¹⁸⁷ Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: the Pegasus Foundation, 1994), 106.

¹⁸⁸ Stewart, *Dear Reader*, 272.

¹⁸⁹ The quote is taken from Stewart, in *Dear Reader*, 273.

¹⁹⁰ Tompkins, *Shame and its Sisters*, 137.

¹⁹¹ The nineteenth century experienced a craze, indeed a mania, for ferns, which exploded after the introduction of Nathaniel Ward's glass case (the Wardian case). The vogue for ferns contained in glass and kept in the home was such that it gave rise to the term 'Pteridomania' ('an extravagant enthusiasm for ferns,' as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary). Gilbert and Gubar understand Brontë's Ferndean as a suggestion of freedom, implying a place 'without artifice' (*Madwoman in the Attic*, 370). Yet I'm persuaded by Yoshiaki Shirai's comprehensive study of Charlotte Brontë's interest in ferns and awareness of pteridomania. For Shirai, Ferndean is a benign Wardian case, an 'ideal space,' which 'encloses Jane and Rochester' in a protective enclosure. To understand Ferndean as a glass case is, I think, utterly compelling, particularly in light of the imagery I've studied throughout this chapter; yet, as I have argued above, in no way do I see it as either free from artifice or benign in its protective qualities. See Shirai, "Ferndean: Charlotte Brontë in the Age of Pteridomania," *Brontë Studies*, vol. 28 (July 2003), 129.

began and its iteration in Rochester's blindness becomes, in Brontë's *Villette*, the novel that I now turn to, a more insidious, because invisible, cataract of the mind.

‘I sealed my eyes’: Visions of loss in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

All wondering why I write with my eyes shut – Charlotte Brontë¹⁹²

‘Certain junctures of our lives must always be difficult of recall to memory,’ writes Lucy Snowe, the narrator of Charlotte Brontë’s final and most desolate novel, *Villette* (1853). ‘Certain points, crises ... griefs ... when reviewed, must strike us as things wildered and whirling, *dim as a wheel fast spun*’.¹⁹³ Lucy here draws upon a vivid metaphor, a picture of a wheel, recalling the estranging effects of nineteenth-century phantasmagorical displays, so as to evoke the bewildered reappraisal of a life, figuring lived experience as a kaleidoscopic haze, and coupling grief with blurred perception. The blurred image, the indecipherable moment: these two aspects are integral to Lucy’s story, alluding metonymically to the confusion of grief that the novel contests. The Victorian desire to look back at past forms, a flight from death that emerged as a seeking out of patterns of continuity, was a yearning that found expression in the nascent technology of photography.¹⁹⁴ This turn to the past manifests in *Villette* in ways that push notions of personhood and history into crises of remembering.

In my introduction I described the veritable tide of images that swept over Victorian society, particularly during early to mid-century, and the startling subjective effects this provoked. Not only were there the thrill and terrors of photography, but also radically new

¹⁹² Charlotte Brontë, undated entry, “Roe Head Journal,” in *The Brontës: Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal*, 165.

¹⁹³ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin, 2012), 576-7. All further references are to this edition and will be incorporated into the text as *V*.

¹⁹⁴ Groth, *Victorian Photography*, 10-11. Groth describes a general historicist impulse that characterised the Victorian sensibility, one that moved indiscriminately throughout cultural life. She attributes it partly to the pressures of modernity, and the need to slow down the present moment.

means of viewing the world: stereoscopes, mirrors, spectacles, glass shopfronts, electric light. A reflective, disconcerting staging of representations that could enfold the spectator became a newly persistent feature of the urban environment, an irrepressible phenomenon that powerfully altered the ontological and epistemological nature of the seen and unseen world. *Villette* was a direct product of that cultural ocularphilia and explicitly engages with modes of perception, linguistically and structurally imbued with a visual dialectic. As Joseph Boone notes, ‘eyes are everywhere’ in *Villette*’s ‘theatre of intercepted gazes’.¹⁹⁵ Born from the heady visions of the glittering spectacle that was the Great Exhibition, *Villette* explores the gradations of visual experience. As I noted in the introduction, criticism on the specular aesthetic of the novel has tended to be characterised by a Foucauldian emphasis on the gaze as surveillance, embedded within the workings of institutional power and subjugation, often read against feminist strategies of ocular empowerment. In Shuttleworth’s study of Brontë’s impressive knowledge of contemporary scientific and medical literature, actively engaging with such discourses of vision, we find this claim: ‘*Villette*, with its obsessional concern with surveillance, fits almost too perfectly into the paradigm of nineteenth-century social control as outlined by Foucault The ideal of Bentham’s Panopticon ... might describe the underlying nightmare of *Villette* from which Lucy is forever trying to escape.’¹⁹⁶ Shuttleworth reads the novel’s visual discourse as an investigation into the neurotic mind, and understands the nervous, shivering quality of its pictorial narrative as a rendering of psychological disorder. Boone similarly utilises Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* to illustrate *Villette*’s challenge to an authoritarian, eroticised masculine gaze, describing the means by which Brontë ‘casts Lucy’s narration ... so that it dodges the circuit of surveillance and counter-surveillance that constructs her world’; and Joseph Litvak finds in *Villette* ‘the irreversible entanglement of a

¹⁹⁵ Boone, “Depolicing *Villette*,” 26.

¹⁹⁶ Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, 222.

disciplinary theatricality with a transgressive or potentially feminist theatricality.¹⁹⁷ Each of these interpretations, and the many others in this vein, are valuable, and skilfully argued and I have no intention to dismiss them. Yet, defining the complex trauma of the text solely through a prism of subjugation and ocular disempowerment/empowerment seems to me unsatisfactory; strangely impervious to the mournful weight of a narrative described as ‘perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written.’¹⁹⁸ *Villette* was written rather extraordinarily in the shadow of the consecutive deaths of Brontë’s three remaining siblings, and is itself so marked by loss that it is (in Harriet Martineau’s words) “almost intolerably painful to read.”¹⁹⁹ *Villette* progresses through a *refusal* to depict the very events that drive the narrative. The novel’s plot is famously elliptical, powered by subterfuge and concealment, as Lucy searches in memory for a vista uncomplicated by loss, finding that she can only suspend herself ‘in catalepsy and a dead trance’ (V 126). The images of *Villette* are bound up in the anxieties of a Victorian dialectic of reflections and surfaces, tainted by Brontë’s anxieties about the alienating consequences of an ocular culture.²⁰⁰ As such, Lucy’s pictures are hauntingly opaque and placeless, longing for the coherence that transparency promises.

In this chapter I read the text’s explicit taking up of visual discourse as a means of expressing affective states, specifically the visceral grief suffered by Lucy. I trace patterns of light and darkness, and leitmotifs of blindness and sight, to unravel the narrator’s complex figuring of loss and death. What might lie outside of Lucy’s line of sight, the aspects of the world that she cannot or will not see? *Villette* is heavy with the darkness of grief and in what follows I will argue that its ocular syntax is inflected with trauma.²⁰¹ By coupling modes of

¹⁹⁷ Boone, “Depolicing Villette,” 22; Joseph Litvak, “Charlotte Brontë and the Scene of Instruction: Authority and Subversion in *Villette*,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 42.4 (March, 1988), 470.

¹⁹⁸ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 400.

¹⁹⁹ Kate E. Brown, “Catastrophe and the City: Charlotte Brontë as Urban Novelist,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57.3 (Dec., 2002), 351.

²⁰⁰ Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds*, 249-50. Armstrong points out the ways in which Brontë both participated in and maintained fears about a specular culture.

²⁰¹ The word grief derives from *grever* (afflict, burden), which is from the Latin *gravare* (to make heavy), ‘hence, the etymological intimacy of *grief* and *gravity*, both from *gravis* (weighty)’, writes Brinkema, who

seeing with modes of feeling, we can better appreciate the emotional force of *Villette*, and its querying of the nature of suffering. Brontë's scopophilia is ineluctably tinged with sadness and regret.

Helen Groth has demonstrated the affective context of photographic discourse in Victorian literature, detailing the extent to which writers explored the nexus of word and image, challenging the contours of memory and temporality.²⁰² Victorian literature was infused with a new aesthetic, manifesting a yearning to hold still the swirl of sensory impulses, and suspend, with the indulgence of nostalgia, a given moment.²⁰³ Brontë writes a layered, contradictory nostalgia in *Villette*. Lucy's narrative is riven by contrary impulses, the retrieval of the past leading to a recursive nightmare of images that resist coherence, the burnished light of nostalgia too often distorted by subsequent loss. In what follows I shall argue that the novel presents the specular as a space of dissent, seeking the solidity of memory, whilst cognisant of the fragility of a subjectivity entangled in the visible. For in Victorian society, as Asa Briggs points out, there was no doubt 'that seeing or not-seeing and feeling were closely related.'²⁰⁴

I depart from Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's seminal work on Charlotte Brontë's novels, and their reading of *Villette* as essentially a discourse constrained by the conditions of patriarchy from which it emerged. In this reading, Lucy has internalised the structures of patriarchy, and can survive only by retreating into 'submission and silence'. 'Brontë explores,' they state, 'the mundane facts of homelessness, poverty, physical unattractiveness, and sexual discrimination ... that impose self-burial on women.'²⁰⁵ There is a

argues that this older conception of the particular heaviness of grief has been superseded by its contemporary usage. We must remember the weighty affect of grief's suffocating burden, she states. See *Forms*, 73. Lucy repeatedly draws upon this trope, emphasising the crushing weight of her anguish: 'I had a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight,' (V, 189).

²⁰² Groth, *Victorian Photography*.

²⁰³ Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 34.

²⁰⁴ Briggs, *Victorian Things*, 106.

²⁰⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman*, 400 and 402. Kate Millet's influential reading of *Villette* is also in this vein of feminist criticism, seeking the source of Lucy's bitter pathology in gender constraints. 'In Lucy,' she writes, 'one may perceive what effects her life in a male-supremacist society has upon the psyche of a woman.' Millet, *Sexual Politics*, 140.

humanity to Brontë's project, though, that exceeds the fraught tensions of gender strictures and a contracting political sphere. Whilst *Villette*'s heroine is generally dismissed as altogether unsatisfactory, her dispassion symptomatic of erotic repression, few critics have chosen to investigate the sensuality of a character who does indeed profess to feel as little as possible, priding herself upon her 'natural cruel insensibility' (565).²⁰⁶ Kucich writes that the Brontëan heroine expresses passion as a means of expressive diversion and masking, 'not some kind of privileged relation to interiority made possible by expression, and denied by reticence. Passionate expression distances others; it is not a pressure toward union.' This assumes, however, that the character recognises a space in which such passional articulation would be welcome, a notion that Lucy Snowe explicitly rejects as impossible in the social contract of her world. *Villette*'s narrative is warped by the distorted perspective of grief and suspended mourning; and despite Lucy's frigidity, her voice resonates with tenderness and feeling. Indeed, the novel is an attempt to validate seemingly illusive grief, to expose the inner vicissitudes of psychic pain, or to locate a language of loss that might unite the tangible with the metaphysical. 'Countless times it had been my lot to watch apprehended sorrow close darkly in' (485). The surveillance of *Villette*, the policing and network of entrapment, is the shrewd observation of the grieving consciousness. Lucy labours under a cataract of despair.

Chris Otter laments that much of the scholarship on nineteenth-century visual culture is defined by an ironic myopism, grouped into two hegemonic theoretical trends: discipline, embodied in the Foucauldian gaze as a nefarious instrument of control; and capital, the emblematic figure of which is the flâneur, whose indifferent gaze renders him aloof from the burgeoning spectacle of modern life.²⁰⁷ While acknowledging the impressive value of such

²⁰⁶ Mary Jacobus, for example, reads *Villette* as a drama of the repressed, haunted by its unsatisfactory burial of Romantic and Gothic impulses. Lucy becomes the 'absent centre [that] exerts a centripetal force on the other characters, making them all facets of the [her] consciousness.' This flattens out Lucy, ignoring her substantial selfhood and depth of feeling. See "The Buried Letter: Feminism and Romanticism in *Villette*," in *Women Writing and Writing about Women*, ed. Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 50.

²⁰⁷ Otter, *The Victorian Eye*, 2.

scholarship, Otter argues that these broad characterisations of vision and power are unsatisfactory and in need of reappraisal. He intriguingly gestures, albeit briefly, at the importance of an understanding of vision that might account for its emotional modalities, that ‘has less to do with power than with emotional and affective experience,’ but makes clear that such an account is not within the purview of his own work.²⁰⁸ I want to take up Otter’s reference to a subtler and more intuitive, though no less integral experience of perception, and its discursive effects in *Villette*. There is, I will argue, an ocular diction structuring the novel in which the discontinuity and fragmentation characteristic of modern vision intersects with the kineticism of emotional turbulence.²⁰⁹ I understand the novel as a visual exegesis of grief, of the bifurcation and lapses of the grieving subject. I intend to consider *Villette* as a pictorial study of the vicissitudes of loss and aloneness, quite as if Brontë were querying how literature might depict entrenched isolation and lovelessness in a world newly crowded by the visual.

²⁰⁸ Otter’s *The Victorian Eye* is a fascinating book on the burgeoning technologies of light in Victorian England and the corresponding rise of a specifically liberal political subject.

²⁰⁹ The literature on vision and modernity as it took shape in the early to mid-nineteenth century is vast, and a very small sample would include Crary’s book and those cited earlier by Flint; Smith; and Groth. See also *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, ed. Carol T. Christ and John O. Jordan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). The reference to a modern conception of perception alludes to the generally held argument that vision during the Victorian era was profoundly altered, not least due to the birth of photographic and cinematic technologies, but also due to the diverse range of optical instruments and gadgetry that pervaded popular culture. Vision was in the process changed from a Renaissance and unitary perspective to a binocular model, dramatised to great effect in the stereoscope. As Carol Mavor writes, it was the revelation of binocular perspective that emphasised the ‘queerness of seeing’, and ‘the body’s own doubleness’. Mavor, *Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden* (Durham: Duke University Press: 1999), 109.

I

The dimness of mourning

From the very first moments of *Villette*, the primacy of visual perception — here, the eye: the ‘piercing’ blue eyes of the young Graham Bretton — is brought into focus, contrasted with the black eyes of his mother, Louisa (V, 3). It is not only the eye, but the ‘clear wide windows’ of the ‘handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton,’ that is first described in Lucy Snowe’s autobiographical reflections; from behind their glass, Lucy, then a young woman, can ‘look down on a fine antique street, where Sundays and holidays seem always to abide,’ a view ‘so clean,’ so harmonious, that now, decades later, the narrator chooses to place it at the foreground of her memoir. An icon of framed perception, there is to be a profusion of such ‘window moments’ in the narrative. This is the reader’s entrance into Lucy’s painful memoirs, the clean symmetrical lines of the glass apertures and the ‘clearness’ of her kinfolks’ eyes forming the symbols of a neatness of life for which Lucy longs. ‘Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother’s side; not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river ... I liked peace so well, and sought stimulus so little, that when the latter came I almost felt it a disturbance and wished rather it had still held aloof’ (4). Lucy emphasises the calmness of linear form temporally and metaphorically, her language conveying a sense of suspension, encased in the pleasures of an idealised quiescence. Such formal integrity is precarious, however, even as it is imposed. Lucy hints at imminent tragedy; an ‘unsettled sadness’ that had forced her removal from her original home, the herald of ‘events ... whose very shadow I scarce guessed’ (2). The Bretton household is the idyll of exile, with Lucy’s mysterious origins relegated to the outside of the narrative frame. What is simply too painful, too erosive of psychic composure, is obscured and secreted into the margins of the

text, a pattern of suspended enigma that is maintained throughout the careful (un)disclosure of her history.

The crispness of domestic order is punctured by the arrival of the child Paulina Home, an uncannily tiny ‘creature,’ ‘a mere doll ... delicate as wax’ (6), whose arrival is first signalled spatially by the addition of several artefacts of furniture, displacing Lucy’s own. Interrupting the privacy of her own space, with its bed in a ‘shady recess’, is the addition of a crib, ‘draped with white’; so too does a ‘rosewood’ chest contrast with Lucy’s mahogany set. ‘Of what are these things the signs and tokens?’ asks Lucy (4). From now on, Lucy will no longer be ‘made much of’ (3), supplanted by a delicate, pretty child, whose colours of white and rosewood contrast sharply with the darkness of Lucy’s objects. The contrast of light and dark is interpolated throughout *Villette*, dimness and shadow Lucy’s chosen associations:

In beholding this diaphanous and snowy mass, I well remember feeling myself to be a mere shadowy spot on a field of light; the courage was not in me to put on a transparent white dress (152)

When I vanished — it was into darkness; ... thinking ... my own thoughts, living my own life in my own still, shadow-world (136)

I was no bright lady’s shadow — not Miss de Bassompierre’s (353)

Overcast enough it was my nature often to be ... but the *dimness and depression* must both be voluntary (353) [my emphasis]

In the penultimate example, the pairing of grief with darkness is more than just rhetorical, hinting at the traditional coupling in Western theological and epistemological thought of mourning with obscured vision. Brinkema describes the ways in which psychic suffering has over the centuries been figured as darkness and blindness, a persistent trope in the Bible, for instance, and in Milton, texts with which Brontë, as the daughter of a clergyman, was thoroughly acquainted. 'It is not a matter of the elimination of seeing,' she explains, 'but, rather, the muting of light's approach to the eye in favour of a visibility based in and of darkness, a vision that now *sees nothing*.'²¹⁰ This homology is crucial for understanding the poetics of loss in *Villette*, in which disoriented perception, grief, and darkness intersect in a triadic structure that substitutes for the explicit telling of the mysterious loss at the narrative centre, the disaster that the narrator *cannot* name.

The confusion of pain inherent in mourning plagues Freud's account of the phenomenon, blurring the dichotomy so that each feeling partakes of the other. Freud was baffled by mourning throughout his life, treating of it cautiously in his essay of 1916, 'On Transience,' and then again, more extensively, in 'Mourning and Melancholia' (although his essential focus in that essay is melancholy). He figured mourning as the original mystery, 'one of those phenomena that one does not explain oneself, but to which other obscurities may be traced back,'²¹¹ evoking the strange, circular vortex of the feeling. While Freud was perplexed by the peculiarly intense pain of mourning, he was not in doubt that it always came to its natural end, extinguishing itself when the object of mourning is renounced and replaced. One year later, in his essay of 1917, mourning becomes the light-casting condition: 'we shall now attempt to cast some light on the nature of melancholia by comparing it to the normal affect of mourning'.²¹² Yet, as Brinkema argues, the slipperiness of the oppositional terms mourning and

²¹⁰ Brinkema, *Forms*, 54.

²¹¹ Freud, 'On Transience,' in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2005), 198.

²¹² Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia,' in *On Murder*, 203.

melancholia continued throughout Freud's writings; mourning remained 'the blind spot' of psychoanalysis, and its organising principle, 'increasingly shrouded in peculiar darkness'.²¹³ *Villette* stages the vicissitudes of grief as a failure of representation.

Lucy signals her pain visually, using certain leitmotifs, such as darkness and light, veiling, objects, and constricted interior spaces to intimate emotional suffering. Polly's arrival, for instance, recalling that of the smuggled foundling Heathcliff's unveiling on the hearth of *Wuthering Heights*, and no less cataclysmic, is emphatically a spectacle of threat and suspension, the mysterious 'bundle,' swathed in a shawl, which methodically discards the 'clumsy wrapping,' becoming tangled in the too heavy and large 'drapery'. There are two things to notice here. The first is the image of Polly's smuggled arrival, which does not signal, as in the case of Catherine Earnshaw, the beginning of self, but rather the estrangement, for this child shall come to symbolise the affection and the belonging that Lucy can never attain, provoking in Lucy both tenderness and pain. Crucially Polly is veiled, and that veil signifies linguistically as well as imagistically: the word mourning has a heterogeneous definition and can describe the garments, traditionally black in Western culture, that attend the death of another person, garments worn upon the body, or draped across windows, shrouding buildings; thus to mourn means to veil, to cover and even to obscure (furthermore, Polly is dressed in a mourning frock [15]).²¹⁴ Cloaked and obscured, Polly is associated with the imagery of veiling that will become synonymous with loss as the novel unfolds.

Second, Polly is the immediate recipient of tenderness, as Mrs Bretton, 'not generally a caressing woman,' is absorbed in the diminutive, 'most unchildlike' girl, stroking and kissing her (6-8). Lucy too is transfixed by the spectacle of Polly, who is now the essential focus of the narrative eye, usurping Lucy's place of privilege: 'I did take notice,' she admits, 'I watched

²¹³ Brinkema, *Forms of the Affects*, 64.

²¹⁴ See the entry under 'Mourning' in the OED:

<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy1.library.usyd.edu.au/view/Entry/122947?rskey=fyaNP8&result=1#eid>

Polly ... I observed her.’ It is Polly’s womanly grief that is the most salient piece of her portraiture, her ‘monomaniacal’ yearning for her absent father the point upon which her image centres. ‘Other children in grief or pain cry aloud, without shame or restraint; but this being wept’ (7). Belatedly, Polly’s attention turns to Lucy, ‘I saw her eye seek me,’ subjecting Lucy to ‘some minutes silent scrutiny.’ Lucy is in effect entrapped in the umbra of the child’s luminous preciousness, whose image arrests the gaze, in contrast to the ‘inoffensive shadow’ of Lucy’s presence (375). The disembodied eye, an object of fetish throughout, is like a spotlight upon its object, destabilising Lucy and her fortress against sadness. Polly’s image gives life to the narrative, and her presence will become ever more synonymous with light.²¹⁵ I want to pause here to consider the binding of light and the pain of mourning, turning again to Brinkema, who argues that grief is fundamentally a problem of luminosity, and can be traced through configurations of ‘troubled light’. Sorrow ‘interrupts and confuses illumination and enlightenment’.²¹⁶ There is a phenomenology of illumination and shadow in *Villette* that is shaped by the opacity of Lucy’s grief. Lucy’s eschewal of light masks her yearning: ‘I saw ... those harvest moons, and I almost wished to be covered in with earth and turf, deep out of their influence; for I could not live in their light, nor make them comrades.’ She is bereft of that spirit empowered ‘to gladden daylight and embalm darkness’ (186).

Polly’s representation is marked by disturbance: ‘an object less conducive to comfort ... than she presented, it was scarcely possible to have before one’s eyes’. It is the unboundedness of the girl’s sadness, its ‘angular vagaries,’ which so discomfits, and threatens integrity of form, the explosive, expansive potential of her ‘agony’ a spectacle that urges Lucy to act, to ‘check’ any such overflow, as is emphasised repeatedly with spatial metaphors of ‘borders’ and ‘bounds’. The child is transmogrified by her longing, and the narration monitors

²¹⁵ See for example p. 537, in the chapter entitled ‘Cloud’.

²¹⁶ Brinkema, *Forms*, 56.

the patterns of her 'intolerable' sadness (23): 'no furrowed face of adult exile ... ever bore more legibly the signs of homesickness than did her infant visage. She seemed growing old and unearthly,' and 'worn and quiet' (11, 23). To Lucy's febrile mind the mourning figure of the child becomes a ghostly presence: 'whenever, opening a room-door, I found her seated in a corner alone ... that room seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted'. Polly, who is left to 'contend with an intolerable feeling,' (23) is a study in the isolation of grief. The potency and propinquity of the child's suffering that haunts Lucy, and she retrospectively recreates a disjointed set of images that are tinged by the sadness of her own life. In memory, Polly is a receptacle of Lucy's own suffering, the picture of her 'womanly' grief a tormenting omen of the imminent catastrophe awaiting the narrator.

While Lucy professes the necessity of guarding herself against such 'sudden, dangerous natures,' she is nevertheless utterly absorbed by the image of Polly, and indeed ceases to find her of interest when she is quiet (24). She cannot resist watching the heady moment of reunion between Mr Home and his daughter:

My eye being fixed on hers – I witnessed in its irid and pupil a startling transfiguration. The fixed and heavy gaze swum, trembled, then glittered in fire It was not a noisy, not a wordy scene: for that I was thankful; but it was a scene too brimful, and which, because the cup did not foam up high or furiously overflow, only oppressed one the more.

Polly's eye is given in precise, fetishistic detail, yet the narrative eye 'sees' opaquely, in fragments which refuse synthesis, a paradox that reflexively points to the irony of the visual in *Villette*, where the ostensible work of Lucy's inscription — to show, to tell — is undone by her own damaged visual instincts. As Terry Eagleton points out, even Polly remains throughout

essentially opaque to the narrator.²¹⁷ Polly's scene of 'vehement, unrestrained expansion' is 'burdensome' to Lucy: 'I wished she would utter some hysterical cry, so that I might get relief' (12-13). The disconcerting, eroticised image pulls at Lucy's prose, stretching her syntax in concord with the dilating pupil, as the spectre of Polly's overripe feelings undermines the stability of representation. Such emotional vicissitudes pervert the even, if constricted, shapes in which Lucy cloisters her emotions. Moreover, the elision of sight and feeling occurs as the intense visualisation of Polly's eye slips to her 'nature,' establishing a metonymic affiliation: the liquidity of the eye ('gaze swum') matches that of an emotion 'too brimful'. John Hughes reads this passage as staging the estrangement of reflection: Lucy's sedulous and clinical looking chiefly an introspective examination; Polly a surrogate in whom she seeks 'the vibration of her own affective habits'. Lucy's 'attention appears less as an act of solicitude than as a fascination with the involuntary betrayal of obsession on the part of another.'²¹⁸ While I resist the claim that Polly functions primarily as an abstraction of Lucy's ego, the notion of reflection is helpful in considering the visual dynamic at work in this instance. Polly's visible torments are at once repulsive and exotic for Lucy, threatening to pull her into the greediness of feeling. Yet the irrevocable need to watch enlivens plot, propels it even, in contrast to the equilibrium that the narrator insistently works to maintain. Polly runs 'mad' into the street to greet her father, while Lucy 'watches calmly from the window' (12), the image mediated by the glass. Lucy's affective engagement is split in this moment, for she is both safely within yet also apart, the window frame a barrier that might ward off the perils of attachment and loss.²¹⁹

²¹⁷ Polly's eyes are a spectacle, and Lucy frequently describes them with wonderment, exulting in 'the tender depth of her eyes ... her eye-lashes, her full irids, and large mobile pupils.' V, 369. Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, 2nd ed. (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1988), 63.

²¹⁸ John Hughes, "The Affective World of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 40.4 (Autumn, 2000), 713. Eagleton similarly regards Lucy's interest in Polly, yet with a decidedly more sinister tone: 'a sort of malice is rationalised as a briskly commonsensical taking in hand.... Lucy projects herself into Polly and then coolly disassociates herself from that self-image'. See *Myths of Power*, 62-3. Eagleton does not consider Lucy's ambivalence towards Polly as arising from her anguish at such propinquity of grief.

²¹⁹ I am indebted to Isobel Armstrong's poetics of window moments, by which this analysis and indeed my reading of *Villette* is influenced. See *Victorian Glassworlds*, 126-132.

The seemingly uniform surface of glass masks Lucy's losses, and the next chapter opens with this rhetorical play: she asks the reader to picture her, 'for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass' (38). The language of glass facilitates Lucy's efforts to preserve her vulnerable self in a cocoon-like shell, while paradoxically increasing her aloneness, as is evident in her later confession that her relationship with Graham Bretton is mediated by an 'invisible, but a cold something, very slight, very transparent, but very chill: a sort of screen of ice had hitherto, all through our two lives, glazed the medium through which we exchanged intercourse'. Indeed, as Isobel Armstrong writes, Lucy's name (*luce*, or light) recalls the contemporary usage of 'lights' for windows, just as Frost (the name Brontë temporarily assigned her heroine)²²⁰ 'signals the nature of glass as frozen liquid. She becomes a window on glass culture.'²²¹ A 'frail frost-work of reserve' divides the pair and, despite Lucy's assurance that 'it gave note of dissolution,' she never achieves with Graham the intimacy for which she longs (227-8). The sheen of glass here allows Lucy to intimate a notion of subjectivity curtailed by a persistent divisibility, a sense of her cruel distance from other bodies.

A dialectic of glass suffuses Brontë's juvenilia, too, and her fictional world of 'Glasstown' plays with glassy textures of longing. The juvenilia stories dream, in the young Charlotte's words, of a 'perfect transparency' and 'crystalline clearness.'²²² Her characters gaze out of windows, and Lucy, like Jane Eyre, is tempted too by that transparent portal. It is a view

²²⁰ In a letter to her publisher in 1852, Brontë made the following request: 'As to the name of the heroine – I can hardly express what subtlety of thought made me decide upon giving her a cold name'; but – at first – I called her "Lucy Snowe" which I afterward changed to "Frost". Subsequently – I rather regretted the change and wished it "Snowe" again: if not too late – I should like the alteration to be made now throughout the manuscript. A *cold* name she must have' [author's emphasis]. Brontë, *Selected Letters*, ed. Smith, 210.

²²¹ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 240.

²²² Brontë, "The Adventures of Ernest Alembert," in *The Tales of the Islanders, in An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë*, vol. I, ed. Christine Alexander (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 158.

that 'is ambiguously liberating and emptying out,' suggesting that in fact these characters gaze only into a limitless emptiness.²²³

Importantly Polly's grief is easily succoured, as her father's presence restores her happiness: she seemed 'to be in a trance of content,' wonders Lucy, her deprivation immediately forgotten. There is no such relief for Lucy, perhaps explaining her 'system of feeling,' a determination to preserve the veneer of the unrifled surface. In order for life to be 'better regulated,' advises Lucy, one must quell 'Feeling': all will thus be 'quieter on the surface; and it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall. As to what lies below, leave that with God' (212). With the arrival home of Graham, the 'circle' of which Lucy is a part, is sundered: 'Graham ... broke it up,' (15). Lucy does not so much omit herself, as she is displaced from the narrative focus by two familial pairs, the Bretton mother and son, and Polly and her adoring 'papa,' Mr Home. As the asymmetrical figure on this 'stage,' Lucy is pushed out from the frame, cast instead as observer, a position that she will formally adopt as 'the watcher of sorrow' in her care of Miss Marchmont. From these examples, then, we can see that visual representation in *Villette* is at once far more textured than any one ideological position can allow. It is a composite of conflicting, intersecting acts of observation. *Villette* is 'an autobiography of seeing,' a record of the visible and invisible traces of loss, and its pattern of specular displacement.²²⁴ As Carol Mavor reminds us, 'invisible pain is often the most impossible to reconcile.'²²⁵

²²³ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 127-8. I return to this idea below, studying a number of such 'window moments' in *Villette*, most notably those that occur at the Pensionnat.

²²⁴ Briggs, *Victorian Things*, 107. Briggs does not mention Brontë or her novels in this description, but refers to the broader genre of visual memoir, such as Ruskin's work.

²²⁵ Mavor, *Black and Blue*, 15.

II

The blindness of grief

The blind figure of grief is explicitly offered in an extraordinary scene that occurs between Lucy and Polly/Paulina, much later in the novel, which distils the sense of imagistic mourning that I have described.²²⁶ Lucy is implored by Paulina to comment on the beauty of her now-lover, Dr John Graham Bretton, provoking the following exchange:

‘Do other people see him with my eyes? Do *you* admire him?’

‘I’ll tell you what I do, Paulina,’ was once my answer to her many questions. ‘*I never see him*. I looked at him twice or thrice about a year ago, before he recognised me, and then I shut my eyes; and if he were to cross their balls twelve times between each day’s sunset and sunrise, except from memory, I should hardly know what shape had gone by [emphasis original].’

‘Lucy, what do you mean?’ said she, under her breath.

‘I mean that I value vision, and dread being struck stone blind’ (505)

Utilising the trope of blindness that had such currency for Victorian writers,²²⁷ Lucy explicitly aligns her profound sense of loss at her unrequited love for Graham Bretton, with a strategy of

²²⁶ The naming of characters is one of *Villette*’s most eccentric features, and each character (excepting the narrator) holds a set of names, indicating perhaps the fluctuation of physical presence and identity as it appears to Lucy. Nothing in the world of *Villette* holds still, and Graham’s name is the most mutable (see V, 319 for example). I will follow Lucy’s choice in this scene to use Paulina.

²²⁷ Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 64.

visual mastery that she implies works to nullify pain. Her statement could be read merely as perversity: Francesca Kazan describes her words as ‘sinister’ and ‘chilling’, stating that Lucy ‘sees clearly provided she remains “unseen.” ‘Graham has the power to blind her through his brilliance,’ she writes, ‘perhaps even to petrify her should he, Medusa-like, catch her eye. ... Her closed eyes in no way represent an impotency – quite the opposite.’²²⁸ There is a far greater threat than Graham’s beauty, however, (which Lucy admires with a relishing pleasure). Kazan neglects to consider Lucy’s ‘unalterable passion of silent desolation’ (V 533). Nor is Lucy’s strategy the exposure of the visible in order to master it, but rather a deliberate attempt to remain impervious to the volition of the present, of that which would force itself upon her consciousness. Despite her continued friendship with Graham (his presence dominates the novel’s first half, and much of Lucy’s narration tends towards him; he is her ‘refuge’, she admits: ‘His eye shot no morose shafts that went cold and rusty and venomous through’ one’s heart; ‘beside him was rest and refuge – around him, fostering sunshine’ [264]), she nonetheless claims that ‘*I never see him*’. She pursues a way of seeing that obscures the burden of bereft subjectivity. This is the blind spot of grief. If there is power in the denial of seeing, however, it is inefficacious. As I noted in chapter 1, Brinkema has described blindness as ‘the affect of a stricken disorientation.’ The confusion of imagery in Lucy’s language would seem to support this; the image is not only frayed, but seemingly erased by the elisions of a grief-stricken perspective. In *Villette* Lucy transcribes experiences of a drastically confused and darkened perception, an ontological disorientation poisoned by abiding grief.²²⁹ Lucy’s ‘dread’ of ‘being struck stone blind’ is the terror of debilitating psychic pain, which, if she succumbs, leaves her flailing for control. For her, inner vision is preferable, an image of past encounters that can remain in stasis.

²²⁸ Francesca Kazan, “Heresy, the Image, and Description; or, Picturing the Invisible: Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 32.4 (Winter, 1990), 552.

²²⁹ Brinkema, *Forms*, 54-55.

Lucy's statement also displays a peculiar relation of memory to sight as an epistemology. As Flint notes, the trope of blindness called upon 'the powerful forces of imagination and memory. Such an idea was one of the most powerful legacies of the early Romantic writers on Victorian sensibilities,' along with a consideration of 'the importance not so much of perception, but of the memory of perception'.²³⁰ In Lucy's qualifying clause, 'except from memory,' she suggests that remembrance is both preferable to the reality of Graham's body, and also tyrannous, like an after-image lodged in her visual consciousness. There is a relentlessness to memory: Graham, and Lucy's futile desire for him, is stamped upon her gaze, her retinal perception impressed irrevocably, no matter how strenuously she shuts her eyes. It is an image of loss that is fixed upon the surface of the eye, in a process that suggests the photographic imprinting of an image in light, or as Sally B. Palmer suggests, the dissolving pictures of a stereopticon.²³¹ The exigency of the image meets the exigency of pain: Lucy's insistent denial of seeing is a denial of feeling; grief and vision are tautological in Lucy's perspective, and once again mourning is predicated upon visual stimuli, fluctuating with the confusion of her psychic state. Brontë's typographical stressing of Lucy's claim ('*I never see him*') invites the reader to pause. As Lindsay Smith notes, visual metaphors are embedded in our language, in our very notion of reflection, enabling the imaginative capacity to embody disjunct temporal and spatial states. Lucy's metaphor is both figurative and literal, weighted

²³⁰ Flint, *Visual Imagination*, 23. Flint recounts the story of George Eliot's similar response to a photograph of her dead lover, George Lewes. 'Memory,' Flint writes, 'may certainly prove preferable to an image which, through its function as simulacrum, signifies loss more powerfully than presence'. Contemplating the portrait of Lewes, Eliot wrote that "*Himself as he was* is what I see inwardly, and I am afraid of outward images lest they should corrupt the inward" (23).

²³¹ Sally B. Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze: The Magic Lantern, Cultural Discipline, and *Villette*", *Victorian Review* 32.1 (2006), 34. Palmer argues a comparison of the Victorian slideshow, or stereopticon, and the narrative techniques of *Villette*, an idea that I take up in this essay. Palmer's argument, however, is heavily influenced by Foucault's 'prison' metaphor, whereas I align the magic lantern show with Brontë's representation of loss and attitudes towards sight.

with an understanding of the physiological grounding of personhood. Lucy implies that optical agency governs psychic wellbeing.²³²

III

Sequestered suffering

Lucy's position as 'the watcher of suffering' almost brings the narrative to a premature end at various junctures, for instance in her care for the invalid Miss Marchmont.²³³ The details of Lucy's great loss — the deaths of her family members — are deliberately omitted, opaquely hinted at in the image of her reflection 'in the glass, in my mourning dress,' (40) but secreted in conversations or asides that occur outside of narrative time, a strategy that shapes narrative tension in *Villette*. The absence of light substitutes the details of her trauma; her suffering in a place with 'neither sun nor stars', wracked and torn by tempests. Exiled from the idyll of Bretton ('[o]f Mrs Bretton, I had long lost sight' [38]), Lucy, now 'a worn-out creature' in her mourning dress, 'a faded, hollow-eyed vision,' (40) resigns herself to a small and smothered existence with her new mistress, removed entirely from the outside world:

Two hot, close rooms thus became my world; and a crippled old woman ... my all. Her service was my duty – her pain, my suffering – her relief, my hope – her anger, my punishment – her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers ... [and] an ever-

²³² Smith, *Victorian Photography*, 4-5. I take the concept of 'optical agency' from Smith's account of Ruskin's theories of vision, which were 'characterised by a new desire to manipulate the object in the visual field and to recognise the positioning of the body of the subject in acts of visual perception.' Lucy suggests that she can create or suppress her emotional state by virtue of her position as spectator, re-framing the images that form her world.

²³³ John Hughes has written that *Villette* is destabilised by moments of radical 'contingency ... so extreme at times that it seems as if the text might cease to find the means to continue'. While his argument is dedicated to such scenes of a hallucinatory or otherwise bizarre nature, I also find his description germane to Lucy's more mundane, domestic encounters. See "The Affective World of *Villette*," 716.

changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber; I
was almost content to forget it. All within me became narrowed to my
lot (41)

Mourning has extinguished her own illumination of being, reflecting the coldness of her patient's imminent death. She shackles herself to the aggressive regime of her patient's needs, embodying Marchmont's historical agonies (the loss of her lover as a young woman) and her fury at her fate. At stake in Lucy's quiet masochism is an implicit acknowledgement of shame, and a reactive impulsion toward self-punishment, even self-loathing. The room, with its geometry of sadness and repression, is sepulchral and Lucy's personhood is accordingly 'narrowed', whittled down to mirror the wasted patient who shares her life. Her language, too, has been lulled into the echoes of conformity, individuality sliding into the rhythms of mimicry in the repetitive couplets ('her pain, my suffering'), the characteristic dash that attends Lucy's voice in moments of despair flattening out her voice. This is how Lucy must encounter tenderness, through a terrible ossification of existence, purely to secure a 'little morsel of human affection, which I prized as if it were a solid pearl' (41).

The upheavals of a sudden confession of trauma kill Miss Marchmont, who asphyxiated by the utterance. As Gretchen Braun notes, Lucy is witness to the paradoxical nature of unburdening personal pain, 'acknowledging both its urgency and its potential damage.' In re-living one's trauma, there is a dramatic confrontation with the self, an encounter that can produce a 'damaging self-knowledge' and 'can end in total self-negation,' and death.²³⁴ It is the potency of Marchmont's mnemonic images, those 'scenes' that she is able to convoke with 'singular vividness,' which engulf her (43). With the severing of 'the thread of an existence so long fretted by affliction,' (46) Lucy's mistress is swiftly despatched, as it were, with the abrupt

²³⁴ Gretchen Braun, "'A Great Break in the Common Course of Confession': Narrating Loss in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *ELH*, 78.1 (Spring, 2011), 201.

close of the chapter, as though she has exhausted her function as a grieving agent for Lucy's buried pain. The most important feature of Marchmont's existence is that she has suffered, an agony that is abstracted and which, growing cancerously, extinguishes her. If Lucy grieves for this fresh loss, it is denied expression in the text.

That erasure of imagery, or the blank of pain, occurs at other, seminal moments of urgent grief. Lucy, her body and mind abraded by the torments of extreme isolation, collapses in a Vilette street, as her surrounds 'turned black and vanished from my eyes ... I seemed to pitch headlong down an abyss. I remember no more (192)'. This moment abruptly closes the first volume. Later, as Lucy watches the forced departure of Monsieur Paul, whom she has grown to love, several minutes of suffering are unrepresentable: 'There seems, to my memory, an entire darkness and distraction,' she writes, 'a grief inexpressible over a loss unendurable (528)'. The fade to black, the obscured perception: both narrative techniques enact the obliqueness of grief, a further indication of psychic pain that simply defies representation, yet which, paradoxically, *must* be communicated, if only through a neutered image. The psychic pain so particular to grief inverts the image, unmakes it.

There are moments when Lucy is offered the chance to confess her anguish; for instance, on the occasion when Paul implores her to confide in him, 'attempts necessarily unavailing,' laments Lucy, 'because I *could* not talk' (276). As Braun notes, '[n]ot only does the intensity of her grief render her inarticulate, but her losses have diminished her' such that she exists 'at the bare edge of ... social intelligibility and empathetic range'.²³⁵ Kate E. Brown concurs with the dearth of social restitution in *Vilette*, arguing that Brontë 'insists on both the necessity to mourn and the impossibility of doing so in the absence of a responsive social world.'²³⁶ Indeed, Lucy repeatedly emphasises the unique isolation of her state, precluding the

²³⁵ Braun, 'Narrating Loss,' 189.

²³⁶ Brown, 'Catastrophe and the City,' 352.

comprehension of any listener: ‘Mine was a state of mind out of their experience,’ she explains (269), therefore ‘[t]he half-drowned life-boat man keeps his own counsel, and spins no yarns’ (214).

It is the tyranny of ‘Reason’ that more immediately presses upon Lucy, haunting her with a violent inner dialogue of abstracted symbols of self-alienation.²³⁷ The ruthless voice that whispers to Lucy, issuing masochistic demands, is an interior song of madness, strangling her ability to tell. Anne A. Cheng argues that Lucy’s refusal to divulge her great sorrow is strategic: Lucy ‘self-present[s] as ... a pathological figure,’ she claims.²³⁸ Yet the harrowing tenor of Reason’s dictums and Lucy’s helpless resistance points to a consciousness wholly gripped by grief, incapable of the self-possession that strategy requires. Instead, Lucy resists, with a wrenching futility, the nefarious whims of a cruel psychic chant:

Hope no delight of heart – no indulgence of intellect: grant no expression to feeling – give holiday to no single faculty: dally with no friendly exchange: foster no genial intercommunion...’ [...] ‘But if I feel, may I *never* express?’ ‘*Never!*’ declared Reason. I groaned under her bitter sternness. Never – never – oh, hard word! This hag, this Reason, would not let me look up, or smile, or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed, cowed, broken-in, and broken-down
(272)

Reason draws from her ‘insufferable tears which weep away life itself,’ a ‘deadly weariness,’ and ‘paralysed despair’ (273). This extraordinary evocation of pain akin to madness is just one moment of textual vulnerability, or ‘ventriloquism’ as Cheng describes it, in which the dialogue

²³⁷ For an alternative reading of the character of ‘Reason’ in *Villette*, see Jacobus, *The Buried Letter*; she understands Reason’s strangling hold as the the realist imperatives. ‘The narrative and representational conventions of Victorian realism are constantly threatened by an incompletely repressed Romanticism.’ 42.

²³⁸ Anne A. Cheng, “Reading Lucy Snowe’s Cryptology: Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* and Suspended Mourning,” *Qui Parle*, 4.2 (Spring, 1991), 76.

wanders into a space of strangeness, signalled by the use of dashes. At such moments the encroachment of despair seems to collapse temporal distance, so that the particularities of the pain Lucy describes now, decades later, reorientate perspective, seamlessly overcoming the present. Grief becomes the single point of narrative view, accounting for the aleatory style; Lucy is not able ‘to look up,’ her perspective etiolated by a pain that she implies is extrinsic to the self. The volition of mourning and its insurgency into the temporal and structural dynamic of the text indicate the rhythms of what I can only describe as grief-time, coalescing in the undialectical image of loss, the enigma of the heroine’s past.²³⁹ Even now, from such a distance in narrative time, Lucy’s mourning, as Freud conceived of it, has not been overcome, its work completed and put aside.²⁴⁰ Mourning suspended, its image undisclosed, is mourning that is stubbornly enduring.

The novel anxiously enacts the communication of psychic pain. Lucy shuns the well-lit hall where Graham Bretton awaits her, not wishing him ‘to see that ‘the water stood in my eyes,’ for his was too kind a nature ever to be needlessly shown *such signs of sorrow*’ [emphasis added] (270). Here Lucy reveals two crucial anxieties: the shame of visible sadness, the impossibility of communicating distress (her tears speak a language, but it is an inadequate language). Graham, she notes, cannot heal her pain, he cannot comprehend her inner wounds and bruised mind. Lucy’s infrequent speech, which is often abrasive and non-revelatory, is, according to the pernicious voice of Reason, a disguise for her psychic torment. ‘Talk for you

²³⁹ I take the concept of the undialectical image from Brinkema. Roland Barthes describes the same conundrum in the diaries written in the months following his mother’s death, shocked by the non-narratability of ‘pure mourning’. ‘There is a time when death is an *event* ... and as such mobilizes, interests, activates ... And then one day it is no longer an event, it is another *duration*, compressed, insignificant, not narrated, grim, without recourse: true mourning not susceptible to any narrative dialectic.’ See Barthes, *Mourning Diary*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 50.

²⁴⁰ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*. In mourning, theorises Freud, it is generally the case that ‘respect for reality carries the day. But its task cannot be accomplished immediately. It is now carried out at great expenditure of time and investment of energy,’ but ‘the mourning-work is completed,’ 204-205. Freud’s dichotomy would situate Lucy as pathological, her failed mourning degenerating into melancholia. Lucy, however, “fits” into neither category as neatly as such a formula might suggest, and a number of critics have pointed out the unsatisfactory application of the schema to Brontë’s heroine. See for example Brown; Braun; and Cheng.

is good discipline. You converse imperfectly. While you speak [to Graham], there can be no oblivion of inferiority – no encouragement to delusion: pain, privation, penury stamp your language ...’ (271). Lucy counters that ‘where the bodily presence is weak and the speech contemptible, surely there cannot be error in making written language the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve?’ But Reason only warns that she must never attempt to put emotion into her writing. This is a crucial exchange between the warring factions of Lucy’s psyche, and works metonymically to expand the novel’s major concern: the communication of mournfulness. For Lucy discourse dies within her: ‘speech, brittle and unmalleable, and cold as ice, dissolved or shivered in the effort’ to communicate (577). Speech shares its qualities of deathliness with glass, ‘dead matter reflecting dead matter,’ refusing the shape of Lucy’s affect, just as her optical perspective resists solid impressions.²⁴¹ Thus we see Lucy’s so-called manipulative telling (or refusal to tell) anew: the novel is an attempt to express what is forbidden her. While the novel proceeds under Lucy’s scrupulous policing of her language, moments of textual looseness and vulnerability, where the strangled words fray, serve as counterpoint. And ironically, her very obduracy and obstinate silence do indeed communicate, even illuminate, the magnitude of her suffering.

We can also detect in Lucy’s hoarding of pain, and her desperate need to preserve it from spying eyes, a fear that her grief will be violated, thereby losing its sacredness. But to protect is also to preserve, even, curiously, to nurture. The enigma of the narrator’s sorrow is intensified in her secret confession to the Catholic priest, Père Silas, in whom she seeks relief from what she describes as ‘a pressure of affliction on my mind of which it would hardly any longer endure the weight.’ She clothes her confession in habitual obscurity, ‘show[ing] him the mere outline of [my] experience’ (189). The details of her losses are limned in scanty outline, entirely content-less for the reader. The portal of the confession booth remains closed for all

²⁴¹ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 242.

but her priestly listener. She determines the visual and emotional borders, always shying away from satisfactory revelation, so that her readers are permitted to see only so much, no more. Despite her precise depiction of ‘optics’ (243), her fixation on the eye and its mutations, Lucy rejects for herself the wholeness of circular forms. For her, the roundness of the pupil is a shape most elusive, for ‘the orb of [my] life is not to be so rounded ... the crescent-phase must suffice (431)’.

The body as reflected image

Lucy searches for the succour of any other image but her own; those moments of contemplation of her physical reflection are invariably ones of displeasure, if not shame. As Kate Millett writes, ‘Lucy is subject to a compulsive mirror obsession, whereby each time she looks in the glass she denies her existence – she does not appear in the mirror’.²⁴² Those few occasions when her own body is given back to her, usually when prompted by the shock of an unexpected refraction, are moments of alienation, which settle instantly into bitter apathy. Lucy is estranged from the projected image of self, experiencing her physicality as degradation. The woman who meets her under the chandelier in the luxury of the concert hall is a stranger, until Lucy realises it is her own corporeal presence that haunts the scene:

I noted them all – the third person as well as the other two – and for a fraction of a moment, believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror, filling a compartment between two pillars, dispelled it: the party was our own party. Thus for the first, and perhaps the only time

²⁴² Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 146.

in my life, I [saw] ... myself as others see me ... It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret (248).

For a brief moment, an alternative perspective is given us, caught in the mirror image, existing (almost) outside of the narrative control. We meet three figures, including a woman ‘in a pink dress and black lace mantle,’ standing under the dazzling splendour of a ‘rock-crystal ... sparkling ... ablaze with stars, and gorgeously tinged with dews of gems dissolved,’ and glimpse the germ of another Lucy, one whose story might have unfolded as Paulina’s does, illumined with the fullness of being. Reflections, by nature, are always a ‘missed encounter,’ images of matter emptied out and depthless.²⁴³ We share in the speaker’s shock when, suddenly, the two disparate self-images fold together, collapsed. Lucy enacts the otherness of the mirror-gaze, but what it delivers her is not an entrance into narcissism; rather an intimate staging of the inherent strangeness of the image as stereoscopic. That fleeting ‘impartial impression,’ ‘hardly felt and not fixed’ is how she might perceive herself from a perspective plane were she to shift outside of the penumbra of subjectivity; that aperture into a second visual frame makes strange her habitual mode of seeing. Her visual experiments force the reader continually to readjust; just when we think Lucy is in our vision, she steps to the side.

Lucy’s perspective is so collared by sadness that the spectre of grief in another is inevitably a mirroring of her own state. In one sense this is the detection of shared suffering, a sign of the piquancy of her affect, which seems to inflame her senses. In another, though, it is a marker of the self-reflexive nature of Lucy’s manner of seeing. While I am mindful of collapsing those others into mere dispersions of the narrator’s multitudinous selves, there is an obsessional quality to Lucy’s fixation on paragons of suffering that begins with her scrutiny of Polly’s grief. Upon the Labassecourean king’s visage, for instance, Lucy reads the ‘strong hieroglyphs graven as with iron stilet on his brow,’ interpreting these characters as the marks of a fellow

²⁴³ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 96.

‘silent sufferer – a nervous, melancholy man. Those eyes had looked on the visits of a certain ghost The Queen, his wife, knew this: it seemed to me, the reflection of her husband’s grief lay, a subduing shadow’ on her own face. ‘Full mournful and significant was that spectacle! [Yet] ... its peculiarity seemed to be wholly invisible: I could not discover that one soul present was either struck or touched’ (253). Whose grief does Lucy witness in this scene? In a circuit of observation, she mediates an indistinct grief that ‘beclouds the light in [the king’s] eyes’. He seems to reflect the expression of her silenced story, an image that draws to itself only deeper obscurity, suggesting the porosity and transferability of her affective state. The sublation of Lucy’s own affect emerges as curiosity for another’s, both reflecting and intensifying her feeling, whilst creating a certain distance as observer, as if watching one’s self *as* another. Lucy’s grief is held in the mercurial patterns of transitive sight, seemingly unbounded, mingling with the malleability of reflections.

V

The mirror of memory

Following Lucy's return to consciousness after her psychic and bodily breakdown in the streets of Villette, she describes the renewal of life surging through her in visual terms:

Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell. Whatever she saw
... she kept her own secret; never whispering word to Memory, and
baffling Imagination by an indissoluble silence... The returning sense
of sight came upon me, red, as if it swam in blood...[and]
consciousness revived in fear (195)

There is a distinctly sinister ambience to Lucy's re-emergence into subjectivity. The text that follows unfolds in shifting simulacra, where sight shudders and will not seem to hold still. This dialectic of stillness and kineticism is analogous to movements of literary discourse itself, as Palmer reminds us.²⁴⁴ The suturing of images inevitably involves elisions of what is seen, what is remembered, so that the resulting palimpsest ostensibly forgets what is extraneous; but the refuse of discarded images linger as loss, which exert disruptive force.

The world into which Lucy awakes is foreign to her, and her estrangement is augmented by exhaustive looking at the objects placed round her, all of which plunge her deeper into memory; seeing has the tinge of a narcotic. It is as if Lucy is waking from the dead, and her 'sense of sight' is the first to besiege her, 'red' and bloody. 'At first I knew nothing I looked on ... all my eyes rested on struck it as spectral,' and one notes the peculiar volition she attributes to that faculty: the slippage of eye/ 'I' rhetorically signalling the disembodiment of her state. The text has strayed into a curious vulnerability, as if it were staging yet another beginning, where all must be visually reconstructed. Yet almost simultaneously Lucy recognises the appearance of familiar surroundings: 'I gazed at the blue arm-chair, it appeared

²⁴⁴ Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze," 32.

to grow familiar Strange to say, old acquaintance were all about me, and “auld lang syne” smiled out of every nook’ (196). Not only is this scene an elaborate visualisation of the past, it is framed and mediated by symbols of sight: ‘a gilded mirror filled up the space between two windows, curtained amply with blue damask. In this mirror I saw myself’ (196); ‘ten years ago shone reflected in that mirror’ (200). Lucy is ‘obliged to know’ and ‘compelled to recognise’ the drawing room of Bretton, the one place that has resembled home for her in the narrative. Yet one can clearly see the unanchored topography of this room, divorced as it is from England, floating phantasmagorically in a maze of reflections, a field of vision defined by mirroring surfaces. The mirror reflects only an alien face (‘I looked spectral; my eyes larger and more hollow’ [196]), relaying a recursive image of loss and displacement, recalling that other, equally surreal moment of alienation that Jane Eyre experiences in the red-room, in which Jane, caught between ‘broken reflections,’ is shocked by her image: ‘all looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow’ (14).²⁴⁵ Both mirror-moments are precipitated by a trauma – Jane is imprisoned in the red room after fighting with John Reed, while Lucy is recovering after her nervous collapse – and both present a space that could be one of belonging, but is rather a surreal place of disenfranchisement. Lucy’s blood-red vision evokes the superabundant red of that earlier room, too, although in this instance the colour is an illusion of Lucy’s grief, as though the horrifying hue of the red-room’s interior is, in *Villette*, internalised: the visible has been assimilated into the protagonist’s psyche to such a degree that it taints the retina.

Intense scrutiny is coupled with a return of subjectivity, of a past that will not correspond with Lucy’s present, the lonely existence and exile of a foreigner. ‘[W]hy did Bretton and my fourteenth year haunt me thus? Why ... did they not return complete?’ (200).

²⁴⁵ Armstrong makes a strong case for the origin of Brontë’s seminal mirror – the so-called Sutherland mirror, created by one William Potts for the Duchess of Sutherland, whom Brontë met in her time in London in 1851. Charlotte viewed the mirror, which was included in the Grand Exhibition, on at least five occasions. The similarities between the real mirror, as pictured in the Catalogue, and that in the Bretton house, are indeed striking. See *Glassworlds*, 234-240.

While most critics read this scene as a brief interlude of comfort and safety, I want to suggest that this richly detailed interior, replete with objects that only partially satiate Lucy's yearning to possess and inhabit a sense of belonging, is one defined by loss.²⁴⁶ Eva Badowska argues that the bedroom's objects are 'an axis around which Lucy's subjectivity gets reconstituted,' that despite their fluctuating status, it is 'material object[s] that enable her ... to recall herself'.²⁴⁷ Yet, it is precisely the fact that Lucy's 'relation to [the objects] fluctuates' that renders this moment as one of specular displacement, rather than assertion. The return of a provisional self, it seems to me, emerges from the act of seeing, rather than predominantly from the objects of Lucy's gaze. Moreover, the promise of these objects cannot be met and, as Lucy fears, there is indeed a falsity to what she perceives, not least the fact that these very things have been transplanted from their original interior setting of Bretton to Villette. In fact, she implicitly recognises this threat of lack in her wish that 'the room had not been so well lighted, that I might not so clearly have seen the little pictures, the ornaments, the screens'. Whilst I concur with Badowska's emphasis on the fetishistic items of display Brontë unveils, I would place the emphasis on the novel's lament at the contingency of an interiority garnered from bourgeois 'things'; there is apparent a yearning for such a self, one attached to the referents of belonging and home, but a distinctly painful recognition that, for Lucy, any such self must be an illusion. Lucy's nostalgia is compromised by an origin that cannot be named. As Badowska notes, the representation of commodities in *Villette* is paradoxical, yet I must disagree with her statement that the novel 'fears and scorns the thingness of things';²⁴⁸ instead, Brontë writes a fantasy of things— ribbons, dresses, silks, and furniture. These function as images of

²⁴⁶ This scene has been the subject of considerable attention, and there is space only to point to a few notable examples. Eva Badowska's "Choseville: Brontë's *Villette* and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority," *PMLA* 120.5 (2005), see 1514-17; Palmer, "Projecting the Gaze," who interprets it as staging a stereoscopic show; and Francesca Kazan, "Heresy, the Image, and Description; or Picturing the Invisible: Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 32.4 (Winter, 1990), who argues that the passage functions as a mode of description that relishes in display and 'textual filigree' (548-9). My interest in loss shapes my reading of this scene in contrast to these examples, in which mourning does not enter into the exegesis.

²⁴⁷ Badowska, "Choseville," 1516.

²⁴⁸ Badowska, "Choseville," 1513.

ornamental seductiveness, sparkling with luxury. Icons of a lost past, they are also tokens of mourning: the cigar case that Lucy refuses to relinquish recalls Graham, and the letters Paul sends her from Guadeloupe, which she has kept long after his disappearance. All the items in the subaqueous room are remnants of a past occluded from the narrative view, a childhood almost completely obscured; the objects are ‘phantoms’ and ‘wraiths’ (210). It is another example of a textual blind spot, out of which emerges an incomplete, elusive self, extracted from the crucible of buried memory, mnemonic fragments that fall outside Lucy’s chosen perspective. The vision of the past fails to cohere. In his essay, ‘The Rhetoric of Blindness,’ Paul de Man sets out a model of interpretative blindness, in which the reader-as-critic fails to see the generative irony of his critical insight, unintentionally producing a contrary meaning out of an analytical blind spot. As de Man argues, ‘the blindness of the subject to its own duplicity has psychological roots since the unwillingness to see the mechanism of self-deception is protective’.²⁴⁹ The paradoxical dialect that de Man points to is, I think, suggestive for the type of affective blindness found in *Villette*. Lucy’s habit of discriminatory seeing is comparable to the critic’s self-reflexive gesture of immunisation against recognising those things that one does not wish to see; while at the same time, significant for the insight such a mechanism produces. Lucy is, after all, an interpreter, her retrospective narrative a hermeneutic project, parsing the mechanics of loss that still elude her textual strategies.

Everything in the intriguing parlour, Lucy writes, is ‘precisely the same, in every minutest detail, with those I so well remembered, and with which I had been so thoroughly intimate’ (200). Yet this is qualified by the observation that the apartment is ‘of different proportions and dimensions,’: the interior is wildly disjunct from its spatial context, displaced temporally and geographically, suggestive of the condition that has haunted Lucy’s retelling.

²⁴⁹ Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 113.

The Past is no home, just another exile, a fractured frame. This scene cannot be read otherwise than as unfolding in the shadow of loss: it is a place of beauty mourned, as a possible self free from pain resides in that abundance of luxurious things, a cushioned embrace. The past is grafted onto these displaced, anachronistic objects. Lucy notices a ‘pair of hand screens, with elaborate pencil drawings finished like line-engravings; these, my very eyes ached at beholding again, recalling hours when they had followed, stroke by stroke and touch by touch, a tedious ... finical, school-girl pencil held in these fingers, now so skeleton-like’ (197). As Badowska writes, it is ‘as though touching could heal’ Lucy’s disoriented vision.²⁵⁰ The solidity that *Villette* longs for, nostalgically figured in this scene, inheres in the sanctity of touch, because tactility reaffirms a sense of home and shields the self, however briefly, from isolation. The ache of her eyes is a symptom of the visual assimilation of psychic agony, figuratively normalised in her uncanny expression, responding to her historical (child’s) body with her now emaciated frame. It is a poignantly sensual and sensory reproduction of past images, of distinct impressions embossed upon a surface that even Lucy’s body recalls. This last tangible remnant of childhood, the handscreens – the tactility of pencil-mark, or engraving –strikes her most. Lucy is in effect recalled to herself; her adult, grieving self, partnered suddenly with another, younger, nurtured subjectivity. It is inevitable, though, that Lucy cannot remain here long, and indeed, soon the room and its nostalgic collection come to seem oppressively ‘confining’ and she ‘long[s] for a change’ of atmosphere (203). ‘How it was that what charmed so much, could at the same time so keenly pain?’ (202). The topography of the charming interior is burdensome, impregnated with undisclosed sorrow. The charming objects taunt Lucy with an impossible dream of possession.

Lucy’s grief-tinged vision has two elements that must be distinguished in order to appreciate the whole: on one level, there is the past time that is the subject of narration, the

²⁵⁰ Badowska, “Choseville,” 1516.

'present' of Lucy's experiences as they occurred; on the other is the aged Lucy remembering those events, from a perspective that has, as she laments, lost some of its precision and depth, yet still reels from the shock of mourning. It is from this temporal anachronism that the volatility of imagery that characterises *Villette* is derived. We cannot apprehend Lucy's mourning other than as a temporal disquietude, the shifting palimpsest of past, present and future push the pictures Lucy shows into a chaos of conflicting time. Lucy's much later re-encounter with Polly, for example, is an uncanny confrontation with images of the past. The scene is remarkably spectral, a play of shimmering appearances at once delusional and accurate. Lucy is startled when seeing a dream-like figure in the mirror of her 'own little sea-green room': 'before the glass, appeared something dressing itself – an airy, fairy thing – small, slight, white ... [w]ith distrustful eye I noted the details of this new vision' (324). There is a semantic hesitation in the build-up of descriptors as the image comes into a partial focus. The first feature that strikes Lucy when the vision turns upon her is 'a large eye, under long lashes, [which] flashed over me ... the lashes were as dark as long, and they softened with their pencilling the orb they guarded' (324). The gaze here is a mnemonic embrace, an ocular intimacy that envelops Lucy in a brief dream of belonging, and of recognition; for in Polly, Lucy believes that she encounters a shared store of memories, an affinity of vision. She demurs that 'I could not quite admit the conviction that *all* the pictures which now crowded upon me were vivid and visible to her (327),' yet gradually accedes to this comforting illusion: 'I wondered to find my thoughts hers: there are certain things in which we so rarely meet with our double that it seems a miracle when that chance befalls' (328). Lucy is the surface through which her 'double,' Polly, sees clearly her past, memories that have an origin and a duration of wholeness, something denied the narrator. Polly's 'eyes were the eyes of one who can remember', exults Lucy: 'she stood opposite, and gazed into me; and as she gazed, her face became more and more expressive ... till at last a dimness quenched her clear vision.' Not

dimmed by grief, Polly's eyes are instead glinting with the pleasures of remembrance. This undermines the unity that Lucy has until now imagined. Polly's memories are her *own*, segregated from Lucy's and undistorted by her traumatic history. Polly is one for whom existence admits of a full perspective, a temporal integrity, one who does 'not take life, loosely and incoherently, in parts,' but rather whose life 'grow[s] in harmony and consistency' (326). Lucy, however, has established for herself 'some imperious rules, prohibiting under deadly penalties all weak retrospect of happiness past; commanding a patient journeying through the wilderness of the present ... [and] hushing' the 'longing' 'for a far-off promised land' (274). Lucy's historical perspective is wounded by the cataclysm of her past, and dismally futureless, whilst Polly's has the luminosity of anticipation. Their encounter is an example of what John Hughes describes as *Villette's* 'peculiar kind of intimacy,' whereby the sharing of experiences operates by a desperate need to locate in the other 'the signs of one's own emotionally reduced predicament.'²⁵¹ In this instance between the two women, that emotional mimicry fails, as Lucy realises her pained consciousness is incontrovertibly isolated. The singularity of Lucy's impressibility, the unique way in which her 'grief' and 'bereavement' have 'stamped [her] mind' (326), is a symbol of her aloneness; no one can share in the pictures that form her phenomenology of suffering.

²⁵¹ Hughes, "The Affective World of *Villette*," 712 and 714.

VI

To bury a grief

In *Villette* Brontë seeks a mode of discourse in which to both express and submerge private pain, to expose and contain, if we understand containment as a means of keeping sacred her losses. As Brown argues, this can be attributed to Lucy's 'refusal to relinquish her sense of loss,' her denial of any substitution, or 'the resistance to mourning *within* mourning'; this refusal is, she continues, 'both grotesque and necessary' in a social network devoid of sympathy.²⁵² This is poignantly illustrated in chapter twenty-six, 'A Burial', in which Lucy stores away her five precious letters from Graham Bretton. It is not so much the content of the letters, as Lucy admits that the words are devoid of desire, but the materiality, the object-ness of them, which gives them the gleam of value.²⁵³ It is in fact the sender's script that attributes the greatest phenomenological value: for Graham's handwriting is synonymous with his touch, his hand upon the surface of Lucy's mind/skin. Significantly, the catalyst for the ritualised burial is a visual violation: Madame Beck's stealthy pilfering of Lucy's letters. The very notion of Madame Beck, this 'passionless' woman, reading 'over documents, in my eyes most sacred,' impels Lucy to sequester them 'out of sight': '[P]eople who have undergone bereavement always jealously gather together and lock away mementos,' she explains, 'it is not supportable to be stabbed to the heart each moment by sharp revival of regret' (348-9).

The letters have, from the first, registered only as betrayal, their gorgeousness undermined by their banality. Their materiality has always been precious, but precarious. Lucy

²⁵² Brown, "Catastrophe and the City," 352.

²⁵³ This point is also made by Brown, "Beloved Objects," 3.

assiduously tests their reality by repeated reading, and indeed, as a result of her obsessive perusal, the missives degenerate into spectrality before her very eyes: the letters, ‘from incessant perusal were losing all sap and significance: my gold was withering to leaves before my eyes, and I was sorrowing over the disillusion’ (317). Lucy must keep the image of the precious objects alive to her, must return again and again so as to retain the image upon her mind’s eye; yet, the very act of doing so destroys their worth. The letters cannot be buried in the *grenier*, as ‘the writing would soon become obliterated by damp’ (349) and the ink, the visual imprint of failed and misapprehended desire, must be preserved. Why? Because, in this ritual of mourning (‘I stood like any other mourner’ [351]) Lucy buries the corpse of her pain not to *forget* it, but to suspend it. The buried letters are the blindness embedded at the heart of the novel.

It is important to note that whilst Lucy does not reveal the letters’ contents (she repeatedly refuses to transcribe them), she does describe in meticulous detail every stage of their embalmmment, enclosing, sealing and burying the prize. There is a double function to this deliberate evasion: the tomb in Lucy’s cherished *alleé défendue* is that single, sacred space so desperately sought, enclosed within the walls of memory, within the casement of the text in its materiality; yet it is also a wound, no less dangerous for being hidden, ‘thrust ... deep in’ the hole of ‘the nun’s pear-tree ... a dryad skeleton, gray, gaunt, and stripped’ (350). The description of the location of the sealed bottle provides a clue to the complexity of this performance of mourning. Firstly, Lucy aligns herself with the nun, reputedly buried alive beneath the tree, itself an image of ossification (a ‘gaunt’ ‘skeleton’). If we allow that the ghostly woman is a projected image of Lucy’s stifled sadness and the reification of her submerged past, we can understand the burial as not only the secreting of an object of pain, but a live burial of Lucy’s grieving self. What I am suggesting is that, whilst Lucy is indeed

ensuring the survival of a 'beloved object',²⁵⁴ she is also attempting to sever from herself an asphyxiating grief. Lucy subsists upon an ambivalent mourning, one that seeks to nurture pain, as Brown argues, but also to *destroy* it, for it is felt as a debilitating weakness: 'I meant ... to bury a grief,' Lucy confides (351). Brown remarks that Lucy's admission reveals that 'the grief *is* the treasure' (3), but I would add that the grief also has a toxicity that its bearer feels acutely. 'I closed the eyes of my dead [and] covered its face' (348), Lucy reveals. The 'dead' is her 'long pain,' a figure here embodied as a corpse, replete with eyes; it is a veritable act of self-blinding: 'I sealed my eyes,' she later affirms (555). This is mourning through a refusal to mourn. The letters remain, assimilated into the folds of remembrance; the mourning continues as the force of the story that the now much older Lucy recalls. Moreover, while this scene imagines a diminution of a grief, locked up in a series of small containers, the narrator carries within her 'a tabernacle':

I kept a place for him [Graham] ... a place of which I never took the measure ... All my life long I carried it folded in the hollow of my hand – yet, released from that hold and constriction, I know not that its innate capacity for expanse might have magnified it into a tabernacle for a host (543).

It is a poignant image of her conception of self, bounded by a loss, kept hidden in the 'hollow' of her hand, 'folded' like the buried letters.

The sealing of sight is again evoked in another scene of letter reading that cruelly reiterates and then rewrites Lucy's experience of being the recipient of Graham Bretton's correspondence. As Lucy recounts Paulina's description of a love letter from Graham, the 'I'

²⁵⁴ Brown, "Beloved Objects," 3.

of the speaking voice slips uncertainly between the two women, a slippage of desire that enacts Lucy's yearning to occupy the position of the loved and loving other:

'[The letter] lay in my lap during breakfast, looking up at me with an inexplicable meaning, making me feel myself *a thing double-existent*... I began to study the outside of the treasure ... The seal was too beautiful to be broken, so I cut round it with my scissors' (446)

[emphasis added].

It is a moment of restrained trauma for Lucy, as Paulina details her own tender ritual staged around the document, which sharply contrasts with Lucy's burial ceremony. Paulina generously describes the particulars of Graham's hand, the 'full, solid, steady drop – a distinct impress: no pointed turns harshly pricking the optic nerve, but a clean, mellow, pleasant manuscript, that soothes you as you read' (446). Brontë's voice is identifiable in this observation, commenting on the novel she could have written — the conventional Victorian marriage plot, with Paulina as heroine — had she chosen to give us a visually palatable text, rather than Lucy's 'harshly pricking' narrative. That erotic viscosity of the letter is textually juxtaposed with Lucy's earlier bitter disappointment upon receiving another letter, seemingly from Graham, but inscribed with the 'pale female scrawl' of her godmother, 'instead of a firm masculine character' (320). Lucy's experiences end in a failure of desire, and she must substitute her erotic longing with vicarious acts of facilitation, assisting her doppelgänger with romantic counsel. Paulina's 'real' missive writes over and erases the merely amicable correspondence in Lucy's possession. Lucy may indeed imbibe the pleasure of the other woman's gift, but only as a translator of the image.

VII

An image without content

Lucy is tortured by her position outside the loving gaze and excluded from the sociality and community that it forges. Her unrelenting aloneness is often figured as empty time; what awaits one who falls through the protective fabric of social networks is a ‘blank’ void, a ‘snow-sepulchre’: ‘[u]nbroken always is this blank’, Lucy laments (314). Her cordial interactions with the Brettons and the de Bassompierres do not offer a robust relationship, and she is accorded only enough interest to satisfy their good natures. Lucy’s greatest fear is to be forgotten, her image displaced in the minds of others. As Shuttleworth points out, ‘[p]erception, in Lucy’s spectral world, is integrally related to the social construction of identity’.²⁵⁵ In the absence of any correspondence from her friends, time atrophies, the duration is ‘as bare as seven sheets of blank paper: no word was written on one of them’ (315). Mourning delimits space and also creates a temporal indistinctness, and the blank void is analogous to a sightless gaze. It is as if vision only has currency in requited acts of gazing, so that, for Lucy, to see is to be seen, and *recognised* in her uniqueness.

Yet she also takes a perverse pleasure in remaining hidden, disguised from view. Whilst this might be seen as a strategy of manipulation (Litvak argues that Lucy ‘sustains a veiled yet watchful subjectivity ... that functions primarily by gathering information about (and withholding it from) other selves,’)²⁵⁶ there is, I suggest, a different emotion at work: grief. Lucy’s infamous withholding of her early recognition of the true identity of Dr John as Graham Bretton is not an example of her jealous assumption of specular power, as it is often conceived,

²⁵⁵ Boone, “Depolicing Villette,” 26; and Litvak, “Charlotte Brontë and the Scene of Instruction,” 479.

²⁵⁶ Litvak, “Scene of Instruction,” 475.

but rather another instance of removing the burden of subjectivity (however illusory that might be), so as to indulge in watching the object of her desire through eyes that do not belong to “Lucy Snowe.” As she admits, ‘Well I knew that to him it could make little difference, were I to come forward and announce, ‘This is Lucy Snowe!’ (207) There is also the shame implicit in the fact that neither Graham, nor, later, Mrs Bretton, recognises Lucy, whilst she clearly recollects them both, a circumstance overlooked in criticism of this scene; they are as close to familial relations as Lucy comes in the course of her narrated history. ‘To *say* anything on the subject [of recognition], to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought,’ she explains. ‘I had preferred to keep the matter to myself’ (207). What is painful to recognise, then, is simply blotted from subjective as well as narrative perspective, and Lucy’s concealment of Graham’s identity is as much from herself as it is from her reader. There is potent hurt in his failure to see her, when her ‘unguardedly fixed attention [on Graham] had drawn ... the mortification of an implied rebuke’ (207). For Lucy to reveal his failure to *see* her, would be to show an irreparable loss. Graham is a figure of her childhood in the transient paradise of Bretton, a past that predates her inexplicable loss of family, home, economic stability, and marriageability. To acknowledge him openly would indeed be a compromise of her ‘system of feeling’ (207), as it would necessarily invoke her hidden grief.

Catastrophe is relayed through the eyes of others in *Villette*, given back to the reader belatedly and obliquely, and often by virtue of another’s perception, as we saw in the complex circuit of watching the Labassecourean king and his wife. But it is Lucy’s relationship with the *Pensionnat*’s English teacher, Monsieur Paul (growing out of a crucible of antagonistic ocular exchanges), which, for the first time, provides her a self-image not marked by alienation: ‘I looked up,’ Lucy records in a description of one of their visual encounters, and ‘two eyes filled the pane of that window; the fixed gaze of those two eyes hit right against my own glance: they were watching me. I had not till that moment known that tears were on my cheek, but I felt

them now' (274). In the violent mirror of Paul's gaze Lucy at once realises her own visibility and the truth of her grief. While the glass disrupts her intimacy with Paul — the gaze becomes a thing apart ('they were watching me') — it gives her a somatic awareness, a (mediated) proximity to her physicality. Paul's eyes interpret Lucy's emotions, revealing to the reader (and to Lucy) what she would conceal.

A peculiar pattern of refracted reflections is at work in *Villette*, Lucy often placing her visual perspicacity in doubt. That dubiousness frequently centres upon her own physical presence, as her image seems insufficient to prove her own sensate ontology. The pattern begins early in the novel, with her deferment to Graham's vaunted judgement. On the night of the concert, mortified in her conspicuous pink dress, it is only Graham's approving gaze that 'calmed at once [her] sense of shame ... since Graham found in it nothing absurd, my own eye consented soon to become reconciled' (246). As her visual entanglement with M. Paul deepens in complexity and sophistication, Paul is able to interpret the marks of suffering that Lucy bears, like stigmata, upon her eyes:

'Well,' said he, after some seconds scrutiny, 'there is no denying that signature: Constancy wrote it; her pen is of iron. Was the record painful?'

'Severely painful,' I said ... Withdraw her hand, monsieur; I can bear its inscribing force no more' (572).

She finds an interlocutor through a relationship forged in the eloquence of visual strategies based not on concealment, but on intimate revelation; on a mutuality of looking that recognises and comprehends what it is to live with psychic pain.

VIII

Performing grief

The aberrant capacity of visual perception is borne out in Vashti's performance. The actor's spectacle of wild grief is like no other in the novel, and it transforms Lucy's visual perspective. She is brought to life, seemingly from nothingness, before Lucy's eyes, her image suddenly 'spread out', as Eve Sedgwick writes, 'to capture Lucy, the suddenly fixed viewer.'²⁵⁷ It is an experience of witnessing 'embodied' 'grief', a sight at which Lucy is both intoxicated and repelled, transfixed by self-recognition. Lucy takes obvious pleasure, mingled with pain, at recalling this scene; what begins as the recollection of a past event in narrative time, quickly slips into the textual present, as the working of grief elides temporal distinctions. Lucy's description evokes a gruesome battle in the conjuring of Vashti, borne by 'evil forces' through the performance of a tragedy. Vashti is 'draped in pale antique folds,' with a 'background ... and flooring of deepest crimson,' womb-like, from which she pours forth. Yet the impression is one of 'Death' (305). At the same time, she is only ever a hollow figure, neither woman nor flesh; her becoming never reaches fruition, for she is always already 'hollow, half-consumed' and then, just as suddenly as her inception, she dissolves, 'wasted like wax in flame' (304). In Vashti, Lucy sees her own vacancy, another creature tormented by decaying forms, of an 'orb perished or perishing,' shapes that lack completeness. Most transfixing, however, is the reification of psychic pain: finally, it seems, a vessel in which to store the immured losses of the past and present, one that Lucy can merely observe, safe in the comfort of the theatre's darkness, a mere spectator. Yet Lucy's place as observer is compromised by her thirst for performance; the lyricism and pulse of the prose hint at Lucy's psychic and somatic investment in Vashti's death-throes: she *feels* every blow. The boundary between watcher and watched

²⁵⁷ Sedgwick, "The Character in the Veil," 267.

falls away as Lucy's subjectivity is engulfed in the spectacle and she is possessed by precisely the same force that impels the actress:

[E]vil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength – for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow....They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask (304).

And:

I have said she does not *resent* her grief. No; the weakness of that word would make it a lie. To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked, worried down, torn in shreds Before calamity she is a tigress; she rends her woes, shivers them in convulsed abhorrence. Pain, for her, has no result in good (305).

Fragments of images of Lucy's own life appear, as though grief were visually contagious. The colour red, for instance, 'the fierce light ... a rushing, red, cometary light' that is 'hot on vision and to sensation,' which strikes Lucy's sight so forcefully, recalls her own bloodied perception in the early moments of her return to consciousness in the Bretton household. The image most strongly evoked, proleptically at this point in the text, is Lucy's attack upon the nun's lifeless garments:

[A]ll the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force ... I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery! And down she fell – down all round me – down in shreds and fragments – and trod upon her (558).

What Lucy undergoes in the presence of Vashti is akin to a second awakening, 'a mighty revelation'. As Vashti's performance hurtles towards its irrevocable combustion, however, Lucy's volition as a spectator begins to unravel; she is powerless to look away. Vashti's writhing pervades the rhythm of Lucy's prose, 'her throes, her gaspings ... [and] panting ... convulsing a perishing mortal frame,' she 'resisted to the latest the rape of every faculty, *would see, would hear, would breathe, would live, up to, within, well nigh beyond the moment*' (308). The rapid build of short clauses is like shallow breaths. As the force of 'the vision of all eyes centred in one point,' on Vashti, the collective watching of her agonies shatters representation: a flame is seen, a conflagration erupts, and Vashti, with her dangerous grief, is swallowed up, the image dissolving just as its delineation is sharpest. The spectacle of Vashti, 'hot on vision,' is so forceful that the intensity of her grief, and of Lucy's own, burns through perspective, threatening the continuity of the narrative itself. Vashti is sacrificed to the greedy affective needs of the audience, to the community of watchers. As spectator, Lucy's singular perspective merges with that of the crowd, and the private nature of her pain is overwhelmed by the shared quality of fascinated horror at witnessing a body out of control. Vashti is *excess*, like grief, and as such she, like Mrs Marchmont, is abruptly re-contained, never to appear again.

IX

‘Through a glass darkly’

The spatial analogue of forbidden mourning is ‘*l’allée défendue*’ in the Rue Fossette, a liminal corridor of privacy that defines Lucy’s spatial map of the *Pensionnat*. This space is striking in a number of ways: it is womb-like, a place of unconscious yearning for origins, where time and specificity of place are rendered immaterial. The forbidden alley is situated between two worlds, Madame Beck’s school, and the boys’ college next door, and between Lucy’s reality and her ‘fancies’. It is a dark, overgrown area, in which ‘neglected shrubs [are] grown very thick and close on each side, weaving overhead a roof of branch and leaf which the sun’s rays penetrated but in rare chequers’ (124), recalling the dank dell that figures Lucy’s sadness. This could be considered as a model for Lucy’s mode of perception: a prescribed space, fallen into abeyance (just as Lucy has laid to waste aspects of her self), thicketed and a little wild; perforated, though, by small tears, fissures in the texture of Lucy’s psychic space. Through the cracks in the ceiling of trees, Lucy spies light, a light that holds the memory of a younger, happier self: ‘Oh, my childhood! I had feelings: passive as I lived, little as I spoke ... when I thought of past days, I *could* feel.’ Covered in as if prematurely buried, Lucy is wrapped in the dimness of the narrow passage, located at the heart of the city.

Lucy exudes a distrust of her visual capacity, eager to find validation of what she sees. *Villette* is shaped by a distinct pattern of revelation and subsequent retraction, providing an image and then destabilising it, so that all of the images are indeterminate. In this way the text establishes itself as an imprint that is simultaneously in danger of disappearing, just as the nun is simply a collection of limp garments, a shell of reality. Tony Tanner points out that Lucy

eschews direct contact with human faces, instead depicting shadowy outlines, or robustly drawn figures.²⁵⁸ It is remarkable that in a novel so rich with perception, we find that the impression of physical attributes is a masterful illusion. There are no bodies in *Villette*, only outlines, such as Madame Walravens, the orchestrator of her suffering, who is ‘a strange mass ... bearing no shape,’ no more than ‘the outline of a face and features,’ the ‘cadaverous’ embodiment of death (546). The ghostly nun haunting the Rue Fossette is the exemplary figure of this tendency, the reification of spectrality. Lucy, too, leaves barely a visual trace, being merely ‘a colourless shadow’ (181). Paulina is equated throughout with light, (she is ‘a lamp chastely lucent, guarding ... a flame vital and vestal’ [326]), casting an entrancing glow. Paul is figured as a diminutive, ‘fierce,’ and ‘testy’ man, identifiable by such markers as a ‘blackness and closeness of cranium,’ and a ‘blueness and fire of glance’ (366). Lucy is able to detect Paul from his physical outline alone: ‘I had already noticed by glimpses, a severe, dark professorial outline, hovering ... in an inner saloon, seen only in vista’ (372). Paul’s body is lost to Lucy in the present narrative time in her position of retrospective writer. As if to emphasise this, Paul’s eyes are often hidden behind his ‘lunettes,’ articles that inspire in Lucy a deep distrust and even terror, which climaxes in her shattering them. Particularity is sacrificed for synecdoche, a marker of the opacity of others in Lucy’s specular world. Christina Crosby argues that Brontë deliberately wrote two-dimensionality into the text, as a counterpoint to the uncharted depths of their opposite, Paul and Lucy. Graham and Paulina are ‘superficial characters, implicitly criticised for their lack of depth ... and complexity, she observes.’²⁵⁹ Palmer paints Lucy as manipulator of her own lantern show, a ‘projectionist [who] assumes the power to “see through” appearances, to capture and “fix” characters in focus for her patron’s gaze.’²⁶⁰ Along with Cheng, I think Lucy’s acts of defacement can be read as a necessary trait of mourning, an

²⁵⁸ Tony Tanner, “Substance and Shadow: Reading Reality in *Villette*,” in *Villette: New Casebooks*, ed. Pauline Nestor, 60-1.

²⁵⁹ Christina Crosby, “Charlotte Brontë’s Haunted Text,” *SEL* 24 (1984), 710.

²⁶⁰ Palmer, “Projecting the Gaze,” 34.

elegiac imperative of ‘re-membering [and] re-figuring’ the lost one(s).²⁶¹ Lucy is ‘ghost-seer,’ (319) and the figures she parades before us are murky with regret, escaping into a place of possibility, of a world and self that *could have been*, but exists now only in the wavering shapes of memory. Lucy is, furthermore, still an isolate, tracing images that have no witness, the necessity of which is persistently emphasised in *Villette*. The text is projected upon a screen of memory, unfolding pictorially within the chamber of Lucy’s aged mind, and, as Brontë wrote to a correspondent, ‘memory is both sad and relentless.’²⁶² Memory ‘needs confirmation,’ Graham notes, it ‘partakes so much of the dim character of a dream ... that the testimony of a witness becomes necessary for corroboration’ (374). Lucy is called upon to provide such a function for Graham, and for Paulina, but is without her own such ally of verification. From the position of narrator, her memories appear to her ‘wilderer,’ an inheritance that cannot be trusted. Lucy exists ‘in expectation of mystery breaking up,’ perceiving the world ‘through a glass darkly’ (550).

The figure of the nun that haunts the Rue Fossette is the embodiment of the urgency of silenced grief and specular betrayal that drive *Villette*. An insistent mnemonic shadow that begs the question of whether or not Lucy’s pain is as real as physical suffering (as definite as the ‘crétin’s,’ for example), the nun is ‘an irresolvable mystery’ that persists despite the banality of the answer to the riddle: it is apparently Ginevra’s lover, Colonel de Hamal, dressed in a nun’s habit, stalking Lucy for his own amusement. The phantom is grief reified: the undisclosed image of past trauma that the text has consistently worked towards yet repeatedly denied, a voiceless, faceless figure that seems to burgeon and attach as a growth to Lucy’s very sight: ‘a ray gleamed even white before me, and a shadow became distinct and marked. I looked more narrowly, to make out the cause of this well-defined contrast appearing ... in the obscure

²⁶¹ Cheng, “Cryptology,” 86.

²⁶² Juliet Barker, *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (London: Viking, 1997), 304.

alley: whiter and blacker it grew upon my eye: it took shape with instantaneous transformation' (352). '[S]able-robed and snowy-veiled' the nun is semantically linked to Lucy Snowe. The image of Lucy as spectre in the milky Sutherland mirror of Bretton is repeated, yet now the ghost is the reflective surface, a picture wrought from both light and darkness impressed upon the retinal surface, both in front of and within the viewer. Despite the apparition's defacement, Lucy says that 'she had eyes, and they viewed me.' The lost image of her displaced past is here materialised, gazing back at her, just as in the encounter with Monsieur Paul above, the importunate eyes of grief's peculiar blindness. Interestingly, out of her 'desperation' comes the instinct to touch, as if to ascertain whether the ghost is a part of herself. In the spectre's third visitation, Paul and Lucy share in the spectacle, 'dispelling any notion,' as Jolene Zigarovich states, 'that she suffers from nervous delusions.'²⁶³ I would suggest, however, that the text is careful to retain the ambivalence of the haunting. Brontë gives us only Lucy's violent vision of the nun rushing upon her ('Never had I seen her so clearly.') What is certain is that M. Paul is similarly haunted by disembodied 'impressions,' and that, like Lucy, he is weighed down by unresolved mourning. In this scene, however, Lucy attains her longed-for witness, an other who can briefly share in the figure of her pain, to whom she entrusts the sacredness of her loss. '[W]e are alike,' Paul claims, 'there is affinity. Do you see it, mademoiselle, when you look in the glass?' (438) Their affinity is built upon a shared vision, though grief-tinted and baffled by obscurity, a bond knitted by threads 'difficult to disentangle'; yet, as Paul warns, 'sudden breaks leave damage in the web'. The unitary scene is broken at once, with the 'rending' of the feathery foliage from which the nun appears. '*Villette* reads like one long meditation of a prison break,' argues Kate Millett. 'Lucy will not marry Paul even after the tyrant has softened. He has been her jailer all through the novel, but the sly and crafty captive in Lucy is bent on

²⁶³ Jolene Zigarovich, *Writing Death and Absence in the Victorian Novel: Engraved Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43.

evading him anyway.’ Lucy *is* immured, but it is not in the stranglehold of a psycho-sexual tyranny.²⁶⁴ The lovers’ web of intimacy is an image too fragile, and in the nun’s visitation, the moment is sundered by the violent images of death and storm (‘the wind rose sobbing; the rain poured wild and cold’). Typically the moment of coherence is founded on a picture that won’t resolve. The image is suspended, just as Paul’s intention to seek the nun (‘I mean to follow up the mystery. I mean –’ [438]) is unfinished, broken from its object of intention.

The world of the Rue Fossette is a web of reflections that serve only to confound and entangle Lucy, immuring her in a transparent prison of suffering. For Isobel Armstrong the *Pensionnat* reproduces the Crystal Palace conservatory, the site where Lucy encounters ‘the painful modern alienations of glass’: ‘[g]lass is frequently non-transitive. It is constantly exclusionary in its refusal to enable seeing ... blocking vision.’ The shifting terms of this glassy space, variously referred to in *Villette* as casement, window, or *croisees*, heighten the surface’s ambiguity.²⁶⁵ The glass doors that lead out into the *berceau* are repeatedly referred to, and Lucy’s phantasmal visions seem to correspond with her stepping through and beyond the glassy threshold (V, 430). As Lucy watches Paul’s signs of distress from the glass room, we can read her body as encapsulated behind the deceptive porosity of her glass cage, enclosed in the invisible walls of her own grief and fear. When Paul moves towards the glass door, Lucy’s spirit ‘pales’ and she flees. The tragic missed encounter between the two incipient lovers that follows, brings for Lucy ‘a dead blank [and] dark doubt’ (458-9); instead of the luminosity of clarity with Paul, she is left to contend only with the emptiness of suspension. As their intimacy deepens, the glass door becomes central to almost all their encounters, the barrier that gestures towards inevitable separation, as if they stand on opposite sides of a mirror.

²⁶⁴ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 146.

²⁶⁵ Armstrong, *Glassworlds*, 242.

Lucy escapes through this door in her drugged, fantastical quest to escape the despair of Paul's departure: 'I wonder at the strange ease with which this prison has been forced. It seems as if I had been *pioneered invisibly, as if some dissolving force* had gone before me' [536].²⁶⁶ Light builds to a frenzied climax in Lucy's narcotic-fuelled expedition during the carnival night of Villette, the city aglow with a fantasy of light, a whirling spectacle of *flambeaux*, the artificial brightness of which at last becomes oppressive. Articulated through the opacity of dreamscape, Lucy's midnight wanderings occur in an unprecedented space of strangeness, delimited by the narrative norms of the realist novel. There is an oneiric quality to the novel's apprehension of things, a shroud of 'disillusion,' (317) where objects hover like mere ideas of things, unsure of their materiality. Only in this fantasy can the text enter into a light-filled interstice of carnival absurdity and shadow play. We draw intensely close to each image — the newly engaged Brettons, for example, haloed by happiness ('the light repeated in *her* [Paulina's] eyes beamed first out of his,') — only for the picture to blur, here the 'floating' 'drapery' of Paulina's garments confused amidst a 'flaming arch of massed stars' (537). Lucy's 'torch-lit perspective' descends into an apparitional filminess: 'On this whole scene,' she says, 'was impressed a dream-like character; every shape was wavering, every movement floating, every voice echo-like — half-mocking, half-uncertain' (538). Indistinctness now explicitly inflects the specular aesthetic, the speciousness of vision imbricated with the distortions of sadness, rendering every object sinisterly nebulous.²⁶⁷

Forced from her prison in the Rue Fossette by Madame Beck's violations of her inner life ('In this house, what grief could be sacred?' [530]), Lucy's night-walk has one purpose: to reach the city's park, at the centre of which is a fountain, holding 'a huge stone-basin ... deep-

²⁶⁶ Emphasis added.

²⁶⁷ I would argue that there are parallels with John Ruskin's theory of the grotesque, which, as Lindsay Smith notes, was 'a paradigm for perceptual aberration'. In Ruskin's notion of the grotesque, he illustrated 'an explicit association with photography and a changing nineteenth-visual discourse'. Smith, *Victorian Photography*, 52-3.

set in the tree-shadows, brimming with cool water [and] clear' (534). As she makes her way to this watery recess, she invokes the image several times, imagining the basin's 'clear depth and green lining ... [It was] of that coolness and verdure I thought, with the passionate thirst of unconscious fever. Amidst the glare ... [I] secretly and chiefly longed to come on that circular mirror of crystal, and surprise the moon glassing therein her pearly front' (539). She never does reach the basin; instead she flees the garish 'illuminations' of the park, grieving anew for what she has misconceived as a love affair between Paul and his young ward, Justine-Marie. *Villette* strays into a dangerous territory of 'elastic' perception, 'of dubious light, now flashing, now fading' (539), which promises at first to palliate Lucy's aching loss, but collapses into shame at her impossible desire for Paul. Suddenly sickened by light, Lucy seeks again the dimness of the Rue Fossette.

X

The undialectical image

Throughout *Villette* I have traced a specular aesthetic founded on betrayals of perception, in an attempt to better understand Charlotte Brontë's refusal to depict Paul's drowning in the closing moments of the novel. The final, most inscrutable vanishing act is Paul's disappearance from the narrative gaze, his death rewritten in the banal rhetoric of the romantic marriage plot, an ending more congenial to that smooth visual aesthetic Brontë punned on earlier: 'There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life,' a scene that conjures Jane Eyre's 'Reader, I married him'. In that earlier novel, Brontë's depiction of the lovers' in conjugal harmony, which, like the marriage of Paulina and Graham, necessitates the swift end to their place in narrative ('My tale draws to its close' [*JE*, 450]), envisions the ending that Lucy dismisses with one generic sweep: 'I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth... No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am ... we are precisely suited in character; perfect concord is the result (*JE*, 451). As we saw in the previous chapter, Jane's union with Rochester instantiates a physical co-opting of her visual faculties: she becomes his eye. In *Villette*, visibility has no such intermediary; Paul is the symbol of the absent image, the face that *will not* be seen. Jane's anxious watching of her husband becomes a source of tragic irony in Lucy's desperation to see proof of Paul's safe return: '[B]ut he is coming,' she maintains, 'he is coming' (585).

In place of the buried image of Paul's obscured fate is a hastily configured set of pictures: 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell' (586). And with that unsatisfying conclusion, the agonies of the narrating voice subside into inscrutability. The

picture of happy union is undermined by the spectre of Paul's absent corpse. I cannot concur with Tanner's claim that the conclusion of the narrative act repairs the derangement of Lucy's rebellious perspective; that in the 'completion of her 'project', [there] is the fulfilment of that "lack" and "need" which marked her original condition'.²⁶⁸ Hughes's description of *Villette*'s aberrant temporality, whereby the 'present is interrupted from within by a habit of unhappiness, by the repeated insistence of grief ... that signals to other times and places,' best captures the ambivalence of Brontë's infamous conclusion.²⁶⁹ The future is experienced as impossible, for it is fractured by the tug of the past, which, as we have seen throughout this chapter, is founded upon undialectical images of trauma. The 'work of mourning' seems to proceed in only one regressive direction. Another tempest 'roared frenzied for seven days,' and 'did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks: it did not lull till the deeps had gorged their full of sustenance'; 'when the sun returned, his light was night to some.' (586) The rush toward revelation precipitates a sudden retreat into non-figuration: 'Here pause, pause at once. There is enough said.' The sinuosity of the narrative closes in over the final image, veiling it in someone else's history, a recursive gesture that confronts the reader with no more than another empty reflection. Perhaps this is best understood as 'a different type of whole', one which stands in a reconfigured relationship to the part, or fragment, made possible by Victorian visual alterations.²⁷⁰ Terry Eagleton categorises the ambiguity of the ending as typical of *Villette*'s confusion as to its status, as romantic valorisation of rebellion, or a conservative upholding of rationalism: 'in the end, *Villette* has neither the courage to be tragic nor to be comic ... it is a kind of middle-ground'.²⁷¹ Brontë's refusal to contain anguish, and delimit mourning is, I suggest, better understood as a mark of the novel's temerity, a bold impulse to deny consolation. In deference to the reader, Brontë offers a choice of contrasting images, or the

²⁶⁸ Tanner, "Substance and Shadow," 66.

²⁶⁹ Hughes, "The Affective World," 713-14.

²⁷⁰ Smith, *Victorian Photography*, 18.

²⁷¹ Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, 73.

illusion of such, for the opposing conclusions in fact converge and abide in sinister proximity. There is, moreover, an elegant gesture towards loss as lived experience. ‘Mourning,’ as Kate Brown reminds us, ‘is never done.’²⁷² Lucy inhabits an eternal present of loss and Brontë suggests narrative cannot yet accommodate that dialectic. Lucy’s is a loss that ultimately refuses visualisation.

²⁷² Brown, ‘Catastrophe and the City,’ 380.

‘A painful want of light’: The uncanniness of darkness
in George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil*

When I look I am seen, so I exist.
D. W Winnicott²⁷³

While Lucy Snowe’s story is predicated on a wilful blindness, George Eliot’s protagonists are often haunted by the vividness of their visual power, aware of the ineluctable arrangement of things, but helpless to alter the picture. Nowhere is this better expressed than in Eliot’s gothic novella, *The Lifted Veil* (1859), a surreal portrait of a protagonist who sees in horrifying detail the content of his imminent suffering and failures. If Lucy Snowe’s loss refuses visualisation, then Latimer’s tragedy reverses this dynamic: he compulsively witnesses his grief, mourning proleptically via the medium of projected images from the future. George Henry Lewes’s description of the ‘spectral illusions’ produced by the suffering brain, which I discussed in the introduction, is here given narrative form in Eliot’s protagonist’s spectral visions, which, as Lewes describes such illusions, have ‘a vividness equal to that of actual vision,’ while ‘no assurance of the bystanders ... will persuade the patient that what he sees so vividly is not actually present.’²⁷⁴

²⁷³ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (England: Pelican Books, 1985), 134.

²⁷⁴ Lewes, *The Physiology of Common Life*, vol.2, 334-5.

The *Lifted Veil* begins where narrative ends: imminent death. Latimer sits alone in his house, the luxurious interior no bulwark against his harrowing psychic struggle. ‘The time of my end approaches,’ he writes, ‘[and] I foresee when I shall die and everything that will happen in my last moments.’ He tells his projected, phantasmal reader that he has precisely one month to live. His encroaching death from *angina pectoris* is plotted with all the care of a novelist, detailing even the sensation of suffocation that will kill him:

On the 20th September 1850, I shall be sitting in this chair, in this study, at ten o’clock at night, longing to die, weary of incessant insight and foresight, without delusions and without hope. Just as I am watching a tongue of blue flame rising in the fire, and my lamp is burning low, the horrible contraction will begin at my chest.²⁷⁵

Latimer is the victim of unbidden mental powers: unrestricted access to the movements of other minds. He hears the thoughts of his father, brother, wife and servants, in all their pusillanimity and pettiness; he has uncanny visions of the future which are realised with exact similitude. His senses are not ‘well wadded with stupidity,’ deaf to the roar of the world;²⁷⁶ instead, Latimer is overwhelmed by the horrifying volubility of simply existing, the ‘insincerities and platitudes’ that assault his senses without relent (30). The veil of the world is lifted and he finds *nothing*. So much of the horror, however, occurs in its imagining. He foresees his death as an enfolding in blackness:

²⁷⁵ George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford UP: Oxford, 2009), 3. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the text use this use edition and pagination will be incorporated into the essay.

²⁷⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 2012), 210.

‘Darkness – darkness – no pain – nothing but darkness: but I am passing on and on through the darkness: my thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward...

Before that time comes I want to use my last hours of ease and strength in telling the strange story of my existence (3) [original ellipses]

Darkness here is a type of veil, doubling as a shroud of grief. The deterioration of subjectivity is figured as gradients of blackness, which could also be the very process of leave-taking from life, adding to the confusing overlap of space and time (‘moving onward’ connoting both aspects). Latimer’s syntax is arresting, too, with two colons punctuating a sentence that has no definite end, only the void of the ellipsis. The sentence is structured by the endlessness of his passage through darkness, ‘on and on’ through and beyond language, to something inarticulate. Eliot writes a distinctive ‘grammar of being’ for her only first-person narrator,²⁷⁷ one that conveys consciousness from the inside out. In *The Lifted Veil* language is a mode of seeing, immanent and embodied. The protean power of Latimer’s metaphors renders flexible the figure of darkness, so that, in a doubling that structures the narrative and its voice, both existing and dying are of the same essence, the same substance – there is ‘nothing but darkness’. Death is a sensual experience – autoerotic, even – in Latimer’s imagining – olfactory, visual, and auditory; and it is the death of the phenomenological body that he anticipates with the sharpest nostalgia: ‘the fresh scent after the rain, the light of the morning through my chamber-window, the warmth of the hearth ... will darkness close over them for ever?’ (3)

²⁷⁷ The phrase is Melissa Raines’s, from her thorough and important analysis of Eliot’s syntactical aesthetic in Eliot’s major novels. Raines, “George Eliot’s Grammar of Being,” *Essays in Criticism* vol. 8.1 (2008), 61.

The phenomenal body constituted in an embryonic space that symbolises both the ‘ongoingness’ of life and death, tells us something about Eliot’s conditions for consciousness in *The Lifted Veil*.²⁷⁸ In this moment, imagination, emotion and a concept of mind or consciousness are combined, in a speaking voice - a subject - which seems to emerge from the spatial quality of darkness. Like her anti-hero, Eliot brings together in this story various binaries – subjectivity and objectivity, consciousness and unconsciousness, reality and illusion – interrogating the polarity of the terms. The author poses a series of questions about aspects of being in the opening scenes: what is it to imagine, or, more specifically, to experience one’s own future death? What is it in Latimer’s pre-experience of death that distinguishes from his ‘real’ death?

Jill L. Matus has shown the extent to which contemporary models of consciousness influenced Eliot’s depiction of cognition and emotion. Drawing on modern trauma theory, Matus frames her analysis through the response of shock, writing that Latimer’s narrative ‘is about excessive exposure and the vulnerable subject’s inability to regulate stimuli and response.’²⁷⁹ While similarly interested in the unregulated flow of qualia, my own interest in Eliot’s exploration of consciousness shifts the emphasis to visuality and the role of the imagination in conceptualising ontology. Contravening the established critical view of *The Lifted Veil*, I shall contend that this is a story not of a man who unwittingly sees too much, but rather one who fails to read the world; whose isolate personhood desiccates under the exigencies and transparencies of Victorian lens culture, undone both by his failure to look back at the world, and to create an alternative language with which to author his self.

Since its anonymous publication in *Blackwood’s*, *The Lifted Veil* has been regarded as a particularly thorny *problem* in George Eliot’s oeuvre. Critical appraisal of the story has

²⁷⁸ This is Neil Hertz’s word in his description of the scene, which nicely captures the striking durational quality of Latimer’s dying. Hertz, *George Eliot’s Pulse* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2003), 59.

²⁷⁹ Jill L. Matus, *Shock, Memory and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009), 122.

hummed with the same general tenor: a strange, if not regrettable, anomaly in Eliot's corpus. Henry James described it as 'woefully sombre,' the incidents of plot quite wonderful in themselves, but being 'in conjunction...rather violent.'²⁸⁰ It has often been understood as a morbid work from the pen of a troubled author. Eliot's usually supportive publisher, John Blackwood, wrote a response to her manuscript that resembled more a letter of condolence – 'There is a painful want of light to the story ... I wish the theme had been a happier one, and I think you must have been worrying and disturbing yourself about something when you wrote.'²⁸¹ Readers have recoiled, too, at the gruesome horror depicted in the blood transfusion scene of the novella's ending, in which all the overtly Gothic elements combine in what Terry Eagleton describes as 'tawdry melodrama'.²⁸²

Biographer Rosemarie Bodenheimer embeds the novella in the context of Eliot's painful estrangement from her family and, most immediately, the death of her sister, Chrissey, who died in March, shortly after Eliot had begun work on *The Lifted Veil*. The story might be understood, she concludes, as 'a sort of dumping ground for feelings...which had to be exorcised before *The Mill on the Floss* could be written.'²⁸³ Most startling, though, was the drastic cynicism of vision in *The Lifted Veil*, when held up for comparison with the later novels, or more specifically, the perceptive incongruities: the story seems to oppose that notion of sight – from the narcissism of myopic self-awareness through the growth of a wider perceptive faculty, symbolic of a social and civic maturation – that was the very foundation of Eliot's realist aesthetic. Latimer's 'diseased vision' – his unwanted prophetic powers of virtually untrammelled access to other minds - has no hope of acquiring the gracious plenitude of

²⁸⁰ Henry James, ' "The Lifted Veil" and "Brother Jacob,"' in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (London: Methuen, 1965), 131.

²⁸¹ 'Introduction' to George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Helen Small (Oxford UP: Oxford, 2009), xi. Unless otherwise stated, all references to the text use this edition and pagination will be incorporated into the essay.

²⁸² Terry Eagleton, "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil,'" *Literature and History* 9.1 (Spring 1983), 58.

²⁸³ Rosemarie Bodenheimer, *The Real Life of Mary Ann Evans: George Eliot, Her Letters and Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 134.

perspective allowed to *Middlemarch*'s Dorothea, for example, whose difficulties are similarly framed as 'a disease of the retina'.²⁸⁴ On the contrary, the singular perspective of Latimer's story is so attenuated as to be confined to the narrow sphere of one man's egotism, where 'vision and insight become mere functions of a disordered brain.'²⁸⁵

Eliot's famous magnification of visual detail, her accrual of everyday relationships as filaments in a wider web of social contiguity, becomes, in *The Lifted Veil*, a horror-filled imagining of 'a superadded consciousness of the actual' (*LV*, 18). Yet what precisely is the source of horror? In *Middlemarch* Dorothea Brooke's moment of inward desolation in St Peter's in Rome, comes upon her as an 'electric shock' of the imagination, a swirl of images that render affect as imagery. Rome is one open-air museum and its sensuous, ancient ideals

urged themselves on her with that ache belonging to a glut of confused ideas ... Forms both pale and glowing took possession of her young sense, and fixed themselves in her memory even when she was not thinking of them, preparing strange associations which remained through her after-years. Our moods are apt to bring with them images which succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze[...]
Dorothea all her life continued to see the vastness of St Peter's ... and the red drapery which was being hung for Christmas spreading itself everywhere like a disease of the retina.²⁸⁶

This passage suggests, as do many of the passages in *The Lifted Veil*, that subjectivity is a matter of spectral forms, impressed upon the retina, preparing a sequence of imagery that constitutes memory. The threat to stability is inherent in *seeing*, at work in the very activity of

²⁸⁴ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 210.

²⁸⁵ 'Introduction' to George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Sally Shuttleworth, xxxi.

²⁸⁶ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 210.

the eye, just as we saw in Brontë's novels. In an age that was 'obsessed with epistemology,' Eliot offers an intuitive, specular, embodied consciousness, that is radically ungrounded and contingent. As U. C. Knoepfelmacher points out, to read *The Lifted Veil*, we must appreciate its author as a philosophical novelist.²⁸⁷ In this chapter, I will attend to the palimpsestic succession of images, or the magic lantern modernism of Eliot's mode of seeing as a structural and thematic antagonism, a tension – between embodied ontology, and epistemological objectivity - that has no easy resolution.

I

TRANSFIGURED LIGHT

The Lifted Veil produces hermeneutic discomfort. The abiding tendency is to situate the story in contemporary scientific discourse, most notably as an argument against materialist positivism and the dissolution of the human body's corporeal and psychological boundaries in a quest for categorisation. Victorian science was abjuring the integrity of the body in its forensic probing of body and psyche alike. *The Lifted Veil* has thus come to represent a theoretical counter-argument in mid-nineteenth-century scientific and novelistic discourse, an intervention in the debate concerning the duality of body and mind, 'whether,' as Flint formulates, 'identical hypotheses and modes of investigation are indeed suitable when it comes to understanding the workings of the mind and of the body.'²⁸⁸ Eliot's tale grapples with those fundamental questions, scouring character interiority – Latimer's damaged and fragmented mind - for the particles of individuated consciousness: what is the source of one's personhood?

²⁸⁷ The quotation in this paragraph is from U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1968), 160.

²⁸⁸ Flint, "Blood, Bodies, and The Lifted Veil," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 51.4 (March, 1997), 457-8.

The Lifted Veil, however, pursues the implications of humanness through narrative, adding another layer of complexity to the equation: of linguistic and intersubjective fashioning of consciousness.

While I too read Eliot's work alongside contemporary science, I want to take up an alternative strand of this imagining of materialism pushed to its furthest unsympathetic conclusion. *The Lifted Veil* queries where grief resides, and yet, there is a risk of neglecting the embodied and specular loss Latimer experiences, not least because its anti-hero construes his narrative along materialist lines. Eliot asks: what is the fate of the subject in darkness? Not simply in a Manichean sense – Eliot's intelligence was too restless for reductionist oppositions of good and evil – but of a symbolism pertinent to her own moment, the peculiar light of consciousness. I will argue that private loss - troped in *the Lifted Veil* as a darkening of the world, or, more broadly, as a question of fraught optics – is in Eliot's fiction a crucible of identity. How is the subject made and unmade by Eliot's heterogeneous figures of darkness and the rhetorical displacements of tropes of disfigured light? What is the process and the implications of internalising darkness? The themes which Eliot addresses, her uses of light and shade, sight and blindness, are the very same that thread through her later novels, such as *The Mill on the Floss*, the writing of which was put on hold so as to work on *The Lifted Veil*, and considered by Adela Pinch as its partner text.²⁸⁹ I propose a reappraisal of this Gothic novella, bringing to attention its critical import as a document of mid-century anxiety about the nature of vision and its role in the textures of individualised remembering. *The Lifted Veil* is a text in dialogue with Charlotte Brontë's traumatised visuality, whose work, along with George Sand, she considered as her favourite.²⁹⁰ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar position *The Lifted Veil*

²⁸⁹ Adela Pinch, "The Mill on the Floss and "The Lifted Veil": Prediction, Prevention, Protection," in *A Companion to George Eliot*, 1st ed., ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 117-128.

²⁹⁰ Gillian Beer, *George Eliot* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1986), 43.

firmly in relation to *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*,²⁹¹ an intertextuality that is evident in both authors' respective use of veil imagery, for example, and their divergent representations of the *femme fatale* figure (not incidentally sharing the name Bertha). Reva Stump rightly argues that Eliot's rhythmic weaving of figures and metaphors 'for the most part derives its tension from the contradictory urges to see and to avoid seeing.'²⁹² I would suggest, though, that Eliot's visuality implicates more than Stump's equation allows, and that Eliot pushes further the very problematics of sight unique to mid-century, situating identity within a fragile specular paradigm that tightly binds consciousness and subjectivity with the phenomenal body. Eliot does so with a resolute focus on the loss inherent not only in the new science of seeing, but through an embeddedness of perceptiveness in textuality. Latimer's conscious crafting of text arises from his singular physicality. In re-reading Eliot's anti-hero as a character grappling with grief, rather than an 'autobiography of a perverted mind that interprets all visions and events through the narrow lens of timid egotism,'²⁹³ while also questioning the veracity of his insight, we find an aesthetic charged with a mid-century phenomenology of dimness as analogue for emotional blindness.²⁹⁴

There were autobiographical factors that also have bearing upon our reading. The writing of the story was a hurried affair, jolted mid-composition by the sudden death of Eliot's estranged sister, Chrissey, and Eliot's own illness.²⁹⁵ In the early stages of writing *The Mill on the Floss*, she mysteriously put it aside (uncharacteristically neglecting to mention this in her

²⁹¹ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 445.

²⁹² Reva Stump, *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959), 3. For Stump, these clusters of vision imagery are in the service of a larger moral frame, which is where she, too, situates her analysis. In contrast the morality of Eliot's imagery is not my explicit concern.

²⁹³ Sally Shuttleworth, 'Introduction' to George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob* (London: Penguin, 2001), xxxi.

²⁹⁴ Eliot is rarely paired with phenomenology. Summer J. Star, however, does write this of Eliot's aesthetic: 'Realism was not so much an empirical but a phenomenological approach to narrative, as Eliot was practicing and developing the genre.' Star, "Feeling Real in *Middlemarch*," *ELH* 80.3 (Fall 2013), 840.

²⁹⁵ In a letter to John Blackwood, dated April 10, 1859, Eliot apologises for her delay in sending her story, writing only that '[t]he story will be ready in a few days – would have been ready now, but for illness of my own and of others, sadly interrupting all work.' See Haight, *The George Eliot Letters*, vol.3, 44.

journal), and, in early 1859 began to write something which, on the surface, appeared utterly distinct from that other, nascent pastoral novel of childhood innocence. By April, the novella was finished, and as Adela Pinch points out, it was the next day that she resumed work on *The Mill*, now intent on re-writing the opening chapters.²⁹⁶ Despite several times dismissing *the Lifted Veil* as a slim ‘nothing’, a work undertaken ‘as a resource when my head was too stupid for more important work,’ (which Knoepfmacher notes was an unusual deprecation of her work)²⁹⁷ the ideas in the novella were obviously insistent and had to find expression.²⁹⁸ The genesis of the tale coincided with an unexpected letter of forgiveness from Chrissy (belatedly recorded in Eliot’s journal three weeks later). Her entry for March 15 is a single italicised line, poignant as a simple capsule of death’s date and time : ‘*Chrissey died this morning, at a quarter to 5.*’²⁹⁹ The urgency that characterised the emergence of this ‘slight tale of an outré kind,’ belying Eliot’s light assessment of it as a ‘*jeu de mélancolie*,’³⁰⁰ is a clue to its unmitigated blackness, brimming with ‘dark emotions’.³⁰¹ Certainly, the author’s personal traumas were many: familial estrangement, recurring anxieties about her authorial identity, and her controversial relationship with Lewes, all of which pressed upon her with such force that, in the words of Bodenheimer, the novella was a means of ‘exorcising’ grief. For Gilbert and Gubar, too, the story is grounded in personal tragedy, but here it is Eliot’s ‘dis-ease with authority,’ and her conflicted investment in Romanticism.³⁰² Any pathological reading of Eliot,

²⁹⁶ Pinch, ‘Prediction, Prevention, Protection,’ 117.

²⁹⁷ Knoepfmacher, *Eliot’s Early Novels*, 131. The ambivalence with which Eliot held her story lends further interest to its themes. Her attitude suggests that she desired to gain some distance from what she had written, which was undoubtedly of a personally painful nature. Knoepfmacher suggests that Eliot’s confused feeling toward the work no doubt contributed to its neglect. Later, Eliot seemed to suppress the story, asking that her publisher not include it in a collection of stories. See Helen Small’s ‘Introduction,’ to Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*, xxix.

²⁹⁸ The first quote is taken from Eliot’s letter of 31 March 1859, to her publisher John Blackwood, collected in Haight’s letters, 207; the second is taken from Eliot’s journal entry of April 26, 1859, in *The Journals of George Eliot*, ed. Margaret Harris and Judith Johnston (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), 77.

²⁹⁹ Eliot, *The Journals of George Eliot*, 77.

³⁰⁰ This is quoted from Eliot’s letter of 31 March 1859, to John Blackwood, in *Selections from George Eliot’s Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 207.

³⁰¹ Pinch, ‘Prediction, Prevention, Protection,’ 118.

³⁰² Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 445.

though, needs to account for the sophistication of her aestheticizing of loss, particularly as, in *The Lifted Veil*, the allegory of grief takes on a dimension stretching to encompass nineteenth-century epistemology, implicating the very nature of being.

II

FANTASYING

Turning back to the opening scene of *The Lifted Veil* and its darkened field of vision in Latimer's previewing of death, I want to look more closely at the network of perceptions that render both consciousness and story. 'My thought stays in the darkness, but always with a sense of moving onward...' Latimer writes, moving swiftly to a recollection of his boyhood, and the beginning of the story proper. Blackness acts as caesura, linguistically marking a shift from being to non-being, and crucially, a quasi-severance of sight from subjectivity - 'my thought stays in the darkness' – the residual pronoun a marker of incomplete separation. The forward movement in space and time paradoxically results in narrative retrieval, for in the next paragraph Latimer takes us back to his infancy. The ellipsis –a proto-cinematic fade-out - thus denotes a passage in memory *and* spools story, symbolising both death and the return to childhood. The voided sight then materialises as a primal darkness of infant blindness (the description of which, crucially, neglects any reference to darkness): 'I had a complaint of the eyes,' he recalls, 'that made me blind for a little while, and [my mother] kept me on her knee from morning till night' (5). His blindness is synonymous with the tenderness of his dead mother's love, a logic that will have disastrous ramifications.

Barbara Hardy, and Stump respectively argue that Eliot's protagonists move from the darkness of self-deception to the clarity of brightly lit space, a movement towards self-

awareness that, in the case of Maggie Tulliver for instance, comes at great cost.³⁰³ In *The Lifted Veil*, however, the binal drama of illumination is changeable, sometimes reversed, or, at times non-existent, light and shadow having no stable oppositional relation: Latimer's involuntary visions, for instance, are cast as 'flash[es] of strange light' between which his 'world remain[s] as dim as ever' (11). *The Lifted Veil* thereby reverses that steady Enlightenment ontology of the subject in an illumined field of vision. The specular, haunting play of shadows and luminescence structures ocularity, a pattern that recurs throughout the story, engendering an experience of vertiginosity that doubles as the disorientating articulation of personhood.

Eliot wrote at a time when the stability of the dichotomy of light and dark was being undermined. As Martin Jay notes, under the influence of philosophers such as Goethe and his theory of colour, a writer with whose work Eliot was intimately familiar— a 'new valorisation of darkness' appeared, 'as a necessary complement [to], even the source of light'.³⁰⁴ Light and dark acquired an essential polarity, as the Enlightenment's privileging of illumination and faith in sight shattered. As I discussed in the introduction, Goethe set out the affective shifts marked by changes in illumination that amounted to a psychological theory, the psychic implications of which were borne out in both *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*'s figuring of optical trauma. Goethe had no doubt as to the contrariness of the coupling of the dark and the luminous: 'The retina, after being acted upon by light or darkness, is found to be in two different states, which are entirely opposed to each other.'³⁰⁵ In *The Lifted Veil* Yixhi Xaio reads a dialectic of Victorian microscopy and ocularcentrism — 'the daunting challenges and the tragic failure of becoming an empirical observer and sympathetic narrator'³⁰⁶ — problems, then, of things coming to light,

³⁰³ Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: a Study in Form* (London: the Athlone Press, 1959), 196; Reva Stump, *Movement and Vision in George Eliot's Novels* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1959).

³⁰⁴ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 106-7.

³⁰⁵ Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 2.

³⁰⁶ Yizhi Xaio, 'Lost in Magnification: Nineteenth-Century Microscopy and *The Lifted Veil*,' *George Eliot -George Henry Lewes Studies* 69.1 (Spring, 2017), 77. While similarly interested in Victorian lens-culture, Yizhi Xaio reads *The Lifted Veil* as an allegory of microscopy and the production of knowledge, embedding the novella in the immediate context of Lewes' scientific experiments. "Eliot translates nineteenth-century microscopy's epistemological struggle with the imperfect observer into a narrative one and experiments with a narrator

illuminated by science. Yet the novella is interested chiefly in the uncanniness of darkness, that was, as Nicholas Royle argues, the real subject of Freud's great essay on the uncanny. The experience of the uncanny, while its meaning is in flux throughout that essay, involves the fear of losing one's eyes, which Freud links to the horror of castration: 'We know from psychoanalytic experience that the fear of damaging or losing one's eyes is a terrible one in children,' he writes. 'Many adults retain their apprehensiveness in this respect, and no physical injury is so much dreaded by them as an injury to the eye.'³⁰⁷ Latimer's condition appears to be the opposite – uncanniness arises out of the horror of a vision too clearly resolved – but I think there are interesting parallels between Freud's account of Nathaniel in the story of the Sand-man (whose visions may or may not be delusional), and Eliot's narrator. Latimer exudes a longing to be robbed of his tormenting insights, but in fact his despair resides in his particular form of blindness: blindness as delusional sight. He has been robbed of the mode of seeing that ensured continuity with the certainty of his mother's love, the infant 'complaint of the eyes' that was felt as a gift, rather than a lack. To return to Brinkema's pairing of sighted blindness and despair, in which the non-existence of the other (here, Latimer's mother) is felt at the retinal level as an affective condition: 'the visual field, in mourning, is reduced entirely to its blind spot.'³⁰⁸

Freud's enigmatic grouping of darkness, sight, and an experience of isolation, argues Royle, suggests that it is the synaesthetic spectrality of this thing called darkness 'which finally haunts his project'. In any case, the terror of the *unheimlich* 'involve[s] a special emphasis on the visual,' on what comes to the eye *out of* the darkness. What emerged out of the dark for Latimer was the 'vanishing' of his mother, a point to which I return below, and the beginning

who takes his visual perceptions at their face value, oblivious of his own limit and bias" (77). For Xiao, Latimer's tragedy is that of the failed epistemologist, whereas I understand his fate as a phenomenological haunting, and attempt to account for his sense of loss.

³⁰⁷ Freud, *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990), 352.

³⁰⁸ Brinkema, *Forms*, 54.

of a new form of diseased vision. As Royle concludes, '[b]lindness can be an especially powerful kind of seeing,'³⁰⁹ and Latimer's blind spots are, like Jane's Eyre's or Lucy Snowe's, the agitations in the text that tell us something about the nature of phantasmic mourning. What is perception in Latimer's imagining? What is objectively material, knowable? He exists in a Winnicottian state of fantasizing, a dissociated condition unlike the dream-world, which has a relation to worldly objects; fantasizing remains 'an isolated phenomenon, absorbing energy, but not contributing,' to dream or reality. One can exist almost permanently in such a place.³¹⁰ It seems unwise, at the very least, then, to give our trust to this narrator's ability to tell us – his imagined reader – the truth.

Latimer's question – 'Will darkness close over them for ever?' – in an important sense, is disingenuous. For he has no stable notion of the constitution of shadows, arbitrarily redefining his terms throughout; and furthermore, he *wills* the closing-up of his world, as it is the too-insistent light (of visions) that has compressed his senses into the narrow room of myopic narcissism. The chronology of his memory, though, suggests that the enfeebled space of blindness is the integument of nurture, one symptom of his eagerness to recreate infantile pleasures. The opening scene conveys the plasticity of Eliot's metaphors: light and dark are features of Latimer's very subjectivity, drawing the curtains around the reader so that there is no way out of the narrator's frantic perception – making Latimer the man behind the screen and in control of the phantasmagorical display, denying any other perspective from which to view the scene.

Eliot's dialectic of light and darkness, the central tropes that re-emerge, metamorphose as they are further abstracted from the source of illumination. Eliot's 'scenic method' (in Hardy's term), sharply depicts lens culture and its impermanence, the phantasmagorical,

³⁰⁹ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester, NY: Manchester UP, 2003), 107-111.

³¹⁰ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 31-32.

magic-lantern effect of modernity.³¹¹ For Hardy, ‘the scene [of Eliot’s fiction] is [in *The Lifted Veil*] compressed into an image. The lighted room is the metaphor which stamps the crisis’. ‘It is rather a melodramatic [image],’ she continues, ‘one not very closely in keeping with the actual pressure of the seen world within the story.’³¹² Yet if we read the illuminated scene and its multiple recreations as pointing to something very real about the quality of mid-century experience, we find an image (the eye/I in the darkened room) that is both contracting and expanding, an image under threat: the seen world, the objective world - each of those frames collapse into the other, so that form is ordered through a tragedy of light.

Eliot’s aesthetic in *The Lifted Veil* approximates the volatility of Victorian culture’s specular imaginary, shifting kaleidoscopically, (recalling Lucy Snowe’s nightmare after-images, glowing on her mind’s eye), as if in mimicry of the magic lantern’s resolution and dissolve. Latimer’s previsions – his precipitate, telescopically accurate conjuring of Prague, for example – ‘I could not believe that I had been asleep, for I remembered distinctly the gradual breaking-in of the vision upon me, like the *new images in a dissolving view*’ (LV, 10, emphasis added) - share the volatile qualities of optical technologies. In his study of the cultural psychology of light in this period, Wolfgang Schivelbusch argues that there was a general flight from stark luminescence, driven in part by the increasingly lit space of the nineteenth-century domestic interior. For the bourgeois subject, blunting the aggressiveness of daylight with curtains on all windows, and diffusing the ‘harsh core of light’ effected by gas lighting, ‘unstructured’ in its glow, became a drawing room necessity. The hypnotic aura of candlelight, clustered and pale, was lost, and the dazzling quality of new technologies of lighting robbed the eye of pleasure: ‘To look at [the light] directly was not merely unpleasant, it was impossible.’³¹³ What followed was endless innovation in shading and cloaking the glare of the

³¹¹ Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: The Athlone Press, 1959), 185.

³¹² Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 191.

³¹³ Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Disenchanted Night: The Industrialisation of Light in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Angela Davies (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1988), 166-7.

newly-lit world. This pathology of the lit space gives added resonance to the veil or as I have called it, the screen, that dissolves Latimer's membrane of self-protection, leaving him besieged by the 'naked, skinless complication[s]' of every person he encounters, 'all the struggling chaos of puerilities, meanness, vague capricious memories, and indolent make-shift thoughts, from which human words and deeds emerge like leaflets covering a fermented heap' (*LV*, 14).

III

Magic lantern optics

I began my introduction with Tyndall's poetics of the eye/I, placing his experiments with the camera obscura model within a context of a cultural beguilement at the space between the visible and the invisible. What follows is an excerpt from one of Tyndall's public lectures:

Looking at the dazzling light, you see a globe of light, but entirely fail to see the shape of the coke-points whence the light issues. The cause may be thus made clear: On the screen before you is projected an image of the carbon-points, the *whole* of the lens in front of the camera being employed to form the image. It is not sharp, but surrounded by a halo which nearly obliterates it. This arises from an imperfection of the lens, called its *spherical aberration* ... The human eye labours under a similar defect, and, when you look at the naked light from fifty cells, the blur of light upon the retina [is] sufficient to destroy the definition of the retinal image.³¹⁴

As I have argued, *The Lifted Veil* tropes on a contemporary fascination with light and grafts its complications onto Latimer's subjective visual aberrations. Tyndall's blaze of destructive light meets Latimer's dysmorphic blurred previsions, denaturing the 'definition of the retinal image,' to evoke Tyndall. It is also evocative of the phenomenology of loss at the heart of visual perception, and the two dynamics read together strengthen each other. The inherent

³¹⁴ Tyndall, *Lectures on Light*, 16-17.

defect of the eye that Tyndall refers to is its blind spot, which for Schwenger is the point of loss that is generated by the act of perception itself. Schwenger reminds us of the persistent mournfulness embedded in vision: ‘always falling short of true possession,’ the image seen is inseparable from our own condition, telling us only about the subject.³¹⁵ Latimer’s mode of seeing explicates his loss, revealing little of how the world might actually be – for Eliot leaves ambiguous the status of his visions, which could be delusions – but conveying to the reader, via visual plotting, the trajectory of what Freud might categorise as his failed mourning.

Latimer is characteristically sceptical about the nature of his visionary capacities – ‘Might it not rather be a disease – a sort of intermittent delirium?’ Doubt as to what precisely is occurring within his mind haunts the narrative: ‘I felt a dizzy sense of unreality in what my eye rested on (12)’. It is as though Latimer’s perception endures under the influence of a potent narcotic, recalling Lucy Snowe’s drugged night-walking on the night of the carnival in *Villette*, and anticipating the bewildering haze of the scene of the Italian *fiesta*, in *Romola*. Formally, too, Eliot’s prose mirrors the swift substitution of image for image, as Latimer’s focus bleeds into an overlapping perspective. As he stands transfixed before Giorgione’s painting of Lucrezia Borgia, he feels haunted by ‘its cunning, relentless face, till I felt a strange, poisoned sensation, as if I had long been inhaling a fatal odour, and was just beginning to be conscious of its effects (18-19)’. Later, in the garden, he is aware of the presence, then touch of a woman (both Bertha and Lucrezia), and:

[i]n the same instant a strange intoxicating numbness passed over me, like the continuance or climax of the sensation I was still feeling from the gaze of Lucrezia Borgia. The gardens, the summer sky, the consciousness of Bertha’s arm being within mine, all vanished, and I seemed to be suddenly

³¹⁵ Schwenger, *The Tears of Things*, 4-5.

in darkness, out of which there gradually broke a dim firelight and I felt myself sitting in my father's leather chair in the library at home.

'[I]n darkness' is a metonym for the spatial feel of swiftly passing from one psychic state to another, along the chain of memories; it is the nucleus of sensation, a point of return that is Latimer's default, primal space. But his vision of home is one with an oppressive despair and 'hopeless misery':

'[t]he light became stronger, for Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand – Bertha, my wife, with cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress; every hateful thought within her present to me... 'Madman, idiot! Why don't you kill yourself, then?' It was a moment of hell [...] She was my wife, and we hated each other. Gradually the hearth, the dim library, the candle-light disappeared – seemed to melt away into a background of light, the green serpent with the diamond eyes remaining a dark image on the retina. Then I had a sense of my eyelids quivering, and the living daylight broke in upon me; I saw gardens and heard voices (19-20)

I have quoted at length to better appreciate the syntax of Latimer's thought pattern. The permeation of one sensation-image into another occurs in the grammatical continuity, the first and fourth sentences broken up into shorter clauses with the briefest pause of an apostrophe. The dashes (of which there are eight in these two paragraphs, condensed here), semi-colons and the ellipsis all convey a mind stumbling from form to form: Bertha's body, and then her eye, to the colour green, to the jewels, to the sensation of being the object of hate, to the lucidity of her thoughts, and finally to the melting away of the image. As Melissa Raines demonstrates,

Eliot's punctuation was deliberate and she was highly resistant to editorial change; grammar was assuredly another mode of character development.³¹⁶ Latimer's syntactical character communicates the desperation of a mind trying to *feel* its way to a dim object, the obliqueness of his perception matched in the indirection of his style. Consciousness is a peripatetic, inconsistent visuality, a 'quivering' mass of sensations, felt at the level of the narrative eye, voice and syntactical structure.

The very structure of Latimer's autobiography is a simultaneous flow of parallel images and sensations, occurring both at the level of discourse, and spatio-temporally (his sense of the 'future is brought into the compass of feeling by' his visions [20]). As the scene of Prague breaks in upon his mind's eye, he reveals that, 'while I was conscious of this incipient vision, I was also conscious that Pierre [a servant]' entered the room (10), speaking to him. Spatial and temporal flow moves not with narrative – in which diachronic progression was distorted from the 'beginning-as-end,' nullifying suspense by temporal prolepsis (in Genette's terms),³¹⁷ but rather works in a pattern of inchoate resistance, disorientating the subject. The architecture of Latimer's narration depends in fact on a recursive (re)-creation of imagery. As Hao Li notes, '[j]ust as memory can provide imagery and structure for a new vision ... so vision depends on future recollection to be *reinstated* as reality of the present,' thus 'merging the conscious with the subconscious,' and collapsing temporal frames.³¹⁸ It resonates with Crary's claim in his discussion of afterimages, that 'the presence of sensation in the absence of a stimulus ... posed a theoretical and empirical demonstration of autonomous vision, of an optical experience that was produced by and within the subject'. An implication of this was the realisation of the inseparability of seeing and temporality: 'The shifting processes of one's own subjectivity

³¹⁶ Raines, "George Eliot's Grammar of Being," *Essays in Criticism* vol. 8.1 (2008), 45.

³¹⁷ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980), 67-79. Genette describes such narration as 'anticipat[ing] the most disconcerting proceedings of the modern novel,' 67.

³¹⁸ Hao Li, *Memory and History in George Eliot: Transfiguring the Past* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 2000), 47.

experienced in time became synonymous with the act of seeing'.³¹⁹ Latimer's involuntary visions – often sparked by a single word ('Prague') or an impressible image that causes objects to oscillate, creates a splicing of time, and with that, of space and being. The consequence of a dangerously autonomous perspective is an inability to distinguish the real from the virtual and caught in this nightmare of simulacra is the substance of personhood.

IV

Spinoza and the affective imagination

The dominion of the visual and its emotional geography in *The Lifted Veil* references Spinoza's philosophy of the destructive and nutritive power of the imagination. As I established in my introduction, Spinoza's theories on affect and its grounding in the imagination are powerfully articulated in the novella. It can arguably be read as Eliot's response to Spinoza's theory of the imagination, with its nursery of illusions and fears, if not dangers: a thinking-through of the problem of an ontology founded in pure awareness and the vital contribution of other bodies. Spinoza's thought is evident throughout Eliot's novels, and as Moira Gatens argues, Eliot 'helps us to see that the fundamentals of his philosophy of the body, imagination, affect, place, and time are highly amenable to narrative treatment.'³²⁰ The relationship was a complex one, however, plastic enough for Eliot to offer her own critique of Spinoza's ontology.

³¹⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 98.

³²⁰ Moira Gatens, 'Benedict Spinoza and George Eliot: *Daniel Deronda* as *Heretical Text*,' (Voorschoten: Uitgeverij Spinozahuis, 2015), 8.

Eliot devoted ten years to scholarship on Spinoza, beginning her first translation of his work in 1843, and then, in 1849, turning to his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). Her translation of his *Ethics* (1677), completed in 1856, suffered by a dispute with her publisher and remained unpublished until 1981. Nevertheless, both she and Lewes were steeped in Spinoza's writings for decades. Eliot's translation work became a daily ritual, designated in her diary in the same manner as one might note waking or breakfasting: 'Translated Spinoza' or 'Worked at Spinoza' a shorthand for her habitual engrossment in his philosophy.³²¹

Spinoza's concept of the imagination involves a sequencing of the body's space-object relations and its emotional states: 'the images of things are the very affections of the human body, *or* modes by which the human body is affected,' he writes in the *Ethics* (*E*, III, Prop. 32): a veritable image-affect.³²² As Isobel Armstrong observes, for Spinoza '[i]maging and the imagination are at the core of all affective experience' (and, she adds, we might translate this as all experience).³²³ Spinoza substituted Cartesian dualism for what I would describe as a phenomenology of the affects, which are 'generated in and through the body' (a non-fictional counterpart to Eliot's mode of 'fleshy', embodied realism).³²⁴ Corporeality is the seat of being and knowing: 'the first thing that constitutes the essence of the mind is the idea of an actually existing body,' writes Spinoza, adding that 'the mind is necessarily conscious of itself through ideas of the body's affections' (*E*, III, Props. 9 and 10). There is thus a symbiosis of body and mind, of 'passion' and 'action,' in the *Ethics*, for 'the body and the mind are one and the same thing ... The result is that the order, *or* connection, of things is one, whether nature is conceived now under the attribute of thought, now under the attribute of [physical] extension (*E*, III, Prop. 2, Schol.).'

³²¹ George Eliot, *The Journals of George Eliot*, for example see 38 (any page from the period 1854-1856 will suffice).

³²² Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 171.

³²³ Isobel Armstrong, 'George Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions,' in *A Companion to George Eliot*, 1st ed., ed. Amanda Anderson and Harry E. Shaw (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2013),

³²⁴ Star describes Eliot's aesthetic as 'phenomenal [and] fleshy'. "Feeling Real," 842.

In these statements of affect seeing, feeling and being are synthesized, in a dialectic similar to that which I have emphasised in Latimer's condition, consciousness arising from imagination and bodily perception. Images are the mechanics of consciousness. While the imagination constitutes a type of knowledge - it is the first and primary step toward an individual ontology - it is a defective and necessarily limited knowing; necessarily because imagination is a condition of bodily confusion,³²⁵ (and in this we can see a symptom of the distrust of the image that characterised the Victorian dialectics of seeing). Ideally, one moves beyond instinctive imagining to reason, a process that in Eliot's novella atrophies under the pressures of loss: Latimer's is a radically delimited imagining untamed by reason, including the envisioning of his own destruction.

There is little space for an individual's free will in Spinoza's logic, which emerges from the *Ethics* as a duplicitous illusion under which each person labours. The affects, of which there are only three – sadness, joy, and desire (all other emotions subsequently flow from these primary affects) – are plotted geometrically along lines and planes, not dissimilar from Eliot's aesthetic web of relations. All emotions flow from the three primary affects as modifications of the original. The object of our love, sadness, hate or joy is tainted or augmented by the image of that feeling: 'If we imagine someone to affect with joy a thing we love, we shall be affected with love toward him. If, on the other hand, we imagine him to affect the same thing with sadness, we shall also be affected with hate towards him' (E, III, Prop. 22).³²⁶ Emotion breeds complying emotion – affect engenders and vitalises the corresponding affect – like a mirror, or as Spinoza terms it, an 'imitation'. Latimer voices a similar affective logic when he says that we 'automatically perform the gesture we feel to be wanting in another' (38).

³²⁵ Gatens, *Spinoza's Hard Path to Freedom* (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2011), 11.

Spinoza figures the emotions mnemonically, operating phantasmatically as one feeling is haunted by its pair: 'If the mind has once been affected by two affects at once, then afterwards, when it is affected by one of them, it will also be affected by the other (E, III, P14). A Spinozistic rhetoric of corporeal emotion turns up in Latimer's metaphors: 'I remember – how should I not remember? – ... when the sadness I had felt in Bertha's growing estrangement became a joy that I looked back upon with longing, as a man might look back on the last pains in a paralysed limb' (*LV*, 31). Eliot's phantom consciousness, then, is embedded in Spinoza's tyranny of the imagination, with its proto-Freudian acts of repression, whereby 'the mind avoids imagining those things that diminish or restrain its or the body's power' (E, III, Prop. 13).

We can now bring together the vital strands in Eliot's thinking in *The Lifted Veil* - the visual expression of affect, the phenomenology of doubling, mutating emotions, and consciousness. The fragmentation of the eye/I that characterises Latimer's mode of seeing finds a corresponding threat in Spinoza's palimpsestic imaging: sadness can degrade quickly into hate by virtue of the rigid causality of feelings. 'Hate is increased by being returned,' Spinoza asserts, '[i]f someone imagines that someone like himself is affected with hate toward a thing like himself which he loves, he will hate that [person]' (E, III, Prop. 43 and 45). Grounded in the mind's visualisation, self-compounding affects and passions enslave our freedom. Tangled up with each other, Spinoza's competing images of mind become bound in a confusing overlap (rather like the kinetic quality of a stereoscope), becoming indistinguishable in the imagination. 'It is not for nothing that Spinoza ground lenses,' notes Armstrong. 'The dioptric effects of the image and its exponential intensification to infinity, and the capacity of the lens to bend light and reverse the image must have entered his reckoning.'³²⁷ Eliot's fascination with the psychic

³²⁷ Armstrong, 'Eliot, Spinoza, and the Emotions,' 302.

freight of illumination and imagery were most certainly augmented by her reading of Spinoza, giving added resonance to Latimer's psycho-visual trauma.

In the *Ethics* the mind's image remains stable over time, and thus has a durational constancy. But the imagination distorts the subject's temporal perspective: 'So long as a man is affected by the image of a thing,' Spinoza postulates, 'he will regard the thing as present, even if it does not exist; and he imagines it as past or future only insofar as its image is joined to the image of a past or future time.'³²⁸ The free-floating and flexible image affixed to indiscriminate temporal moments by the thread of the mind sounds rather like a liberation of one's fantasies, but in *The Lifted Veil* Eliot shows the dangers latent in our imaginary. For while constituting a mode of knowing, imagination is always only inadequate knowledge: 'The ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused' (E, II, Prop. 28, 135). However, it is never faulty, for 'the imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves contain no error . . . the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines.' The error lies in the breach between perception and acquisition of freedom; thus, when freedom (a reasoning intellect) is attained, the 'mind's faculty of imagining [is] free' (E, II, Prop. 17). It is this gap that Eliot probes, unsettling Spinoza's certainty in the human mind's superiority of mastering illusion through intellect.

Latimer concedes to a hegemony of his senses, never questing or displaying the level of curiosity sufficient to make that step towards Spinozistic reason, freedom from the bondage of despair and hatred. He becomes trapped in a temporality that is non-present, his perception of affect tied exclusively to past or future projections. In re-encountering his childhood friend, Meunier, in part two (a symbol of a reasoning intellect), for example, he observes with surprise that his friend has reawakened in him an interest in the passing of each moment (37). As Spinoza claims, '[t]he human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by

³²⁸ Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, 164.

which it is, as it were, continually regenerated' (E, II, post. VI). Latimer has no resistance against the sheer force of the passions, which leaves him with no option but to sever himself from the relational web of human contact. Oppressed by the intimacy of other bodies, he refuses to acknowledge that propinquity is in fact his only salvation, his only way to understand the vicissitudes of the sensory, imagistic world.

V

Aqueous haunting

Latimer asks his reader to 'imagine this double consciousness at work within me, flowing on like two parallel streams that never mingle their waters and blend into a common hue' (21). The metaphor chosen here is deliberate in its resonance, evoking an early, highly significant scene, often neglected in the scholarship. If we are to think of memory in *The Lifted Veil* as generating out of an image distinguished essentially by an absent figure - that of Latimer's unnamed mother - the unfolding of successive images of reflection and water are significant in comprehending the retrospective trajectory of his grief. J. Hillis Miller has demonstrated the interconnectedness of Eliot's central metaphors, one of which is the stream, as a motif representing the totality of the realist narrator's vision.³²⁹ In *The Lifted Veil*, though, the permeable nature of matter achieves more sinister connotations, perhaps most neatly symbolised in Bertha's opal ring with its mercurial hues, which 'seems to blush and turn pale

³²⁹ J. Hillis Miller, "Optic and Semiotic in *Middlemarch*," in *The Worlds of Victorian Fiction*, 132.

... changing with changing light of ... woman's eyes (*LV*, 17). Latimer's recollection of his early years, cocooned in his temporary blindness, is couched in the charged language of his first sensual encounter: 'I had a tender mother: even now ... a slight trace of sensation accompanies the remembrance of her caress as she held me on her knee (4-5).' His sightlessness is synonymous with his mother's enveloping affection, imperative as it was for her to keep him constantly within her touch. 'That unequalled love soon vanished out of my life,' he laments, 'and there were no loving eyes looking at me' (5). Twice he describes his mother's loss as a *vanishing* (7), rather than a death, rendering it unstable and spectral. Indeed, the terms of her death are of a visualised *felt* presence (the boy is blind), now disappeared, an absence felt at the ocular level. Her loss is essentially a loss of witnessing – a mourning of the (mother's) eye - an uncanny feeling of existing in a semi-darkness: in the world, but *unseen*, *unwatched*, a sensation of loss that Eliot explores in depth in her portrait of Baldassare's despair at his vanished son, in *Romola*. Her surveying eye is a fulcrum that balanced the child Latimer's perspectival plane, and without her ocular protection, he internalises a specular anxiety that manifests as a hyper-visibility. His sight restored, he now sees only a world devoid of her 'loving eye'.

The isolation in the wake of her death was heightened, he believes, by his sensitivity to his sensory environment, which begins as auditory bombardment, 'the tramping of the horses on the pavement in the echoing stables,' the 'loud resonance' of voices, 'the booming bark' of the dogs (5).³³⁰ Latimer's visual faculty, by virtue of this early severance of his infant body from his mother's gaze (synonymous with her touch), undergoes an inversion, or perversion of transmission (recalling Spinoza's reversal of the light-image, or Tyndall's blurred retinal scene). Blindness becomes the primal state, while seeing (inhering in his mother's 'vanishing')

³³⁰ The auditory similes continue, and Latimer's writes that 'it was like a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others where others find perfect stillness' (18), a precursor to that more famous passage of *Middlemarch*.

incurs a potent association of anguish. His preternatural auditory sensitivity is translated in visual terms – he *sees* his auditory assault in memory – and the successive sensations he describes combine with each other through the act of transcription, much like the heterogeneous flow of matter described by Hillis Miller: ‘flowing water, for Eliot is seen as made up of currents, filaments flowing side by side, intermingling and dividing.’³³¹

The intensely happy few years of the narrator’s Genevan life are often overlooked, yet it is here that Eliot carefully establishes the progression and arc of the tropes of flow, reflection, and light. Afloat on a Genevan lake, Latimer discovers a substitute for his dead mother’s gaze – the eye of water. ‘My least solitary moments,’ he recalls, ‘were when I pushed off in my boat, at evening, towards the centre of the lake; it seemed to me that the sky ... and the wide blue water, surrounded me with a cherishing love such as no human face had shed on me since my mother’s love had vanished out of my life (7)’. Lying in the boat, ‘as Jean-Jacques did,’ he watches as the light departs ‘one mountain-top after the other, as if the prophet’s chariot of fire were passing over them on its way to the home of light,’ leaving only ‘when the white summits were sad and corpse-like’ (7). The deathly drama of light and shadow in this reminiscence is a re-living of his mother’s vanishing. The most insistent reference for this scene is Rousseau’s *Confessions*, a connection that has received fascinating treatment in Neil Hertz’s work.³³² I want to take up a different link in this relationship of influence, however, pointing out the conceptual model of consciousness pictured in Rousseau’s autobiography. The French writer’s impression on Eliot was transformative. In a letter to Sara Hennell, dated from the same period, she writes that Rousseau’s ‘genius has sent that electric thrill through my intellectual and moral frame which has awakened me to new perceptions, which has made man and nature a fresh world of thought and feeling to me’; his writings have ‘quicken’d my faculties’, she continues,

³³¹ Hillis Miller, “Optic and Semiotic,” 132.

³³² Hertz writes at length on the linguistic and structural correspondences between Rousseau and Eliot’s respective texts, looking primarily at the former’s ‘*Rêveries of the Solitary Walker*’. See *George Eliot’s Pulse*, 42-62.

so that she has been able ‘to shape more definitely for myself ideas which had previously dwelt as dim ‘ahnungen’ in my soul,’ concluding that ‘I have been ready to make new combinations.’³³³ These ‘new combinations’ are a strengthening of her distinctive philosophy of consciousness, a merging of ‘thought and feeling’ to better flesh out the material, phenomenal nature of being.

Rousseau’s water is maternal, a return to liqueous origins during the loneliness of exile – ‘Oh nature! O my mother! Here at last I am under your guardianship alone’.³³⁴ Eliot’s water is maternal, too, but with a sinister depth; the ‘corpse-like’ shadows that descend upon the mountain-tops are a prescient threat of premature mortality. Where Rousseau floats happily for hours, seemingly towards the gentle home of birth and beginnings (‘In this way I would drift up to half a league from the shore’),³³⁵ Latimer floats ominously towards a death-like scene. Water imagery takes on an evocation of grief in another of Eliot’s letters from this period, again to Hennell. Long months spent nursing her dying father, coupled with the shock of Chrissey’s sudden death, made her feel at sea, she wrote: ‘My thoughts are all aqueous – they will not crystalise – they are as fleeting as ripples on the sea. I am suffering as acutely as ever I did in my life.’³³⁶ The symbolic and destructive associations of water were very much on Eliot’s mind – *The Mill on the Floss* is structured by the power of water and the dynamics of flowing energies, where the maternal and annihilating force of the river reaches its fullest realisation in the omnipotence of the River Floss. Maggie Tulliver’s final, fatal passage down the Floss is in fact a chiasmic refiguring of Latimer’s brief lake journey, itself a re-writing of Rousseau. In the flood of the novel’s final section, Maggie is borne along the river in a journey home:

³³³ Eliot, letter to Sara Hennell, 9 February, 1849, collected in *The George Eliot Letters*, 276-7.

³³⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, trans. Angela Scholar and ed. Patrick Coleman (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 630.

³³⁵ Rousseau, *The Confessions*, 630.

³³⁶ Eliot, letter to Sara Hennell, Jan., 1849, collected in *The George Eliot Letters*, 274.

‘Oh, how welcome, the widening of that dismal watery level – the gradual uplifting of the cloudy firmament – the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark! ... the river lay before her. She seized an oar and began to paddle the boat forward with the energy of wakening hope: the dawning seemed to advance more swiftly.’³³⁷

Maggie’s watery crossing moves from darkness to the promise of illumination (albeit one that is not maintained), while Latimer’s progress is accompanied by the reverse change in light; unlike Maggie in this moment, he moves from hope to despair.³³⁸

The nocturnal water of the lake with its dying shades is an image that, in Bachelard’s description, has intimate and morbid force. ‘In many narratives, accursed places have at their centre a lake of shadows,’ he writes, ‘water invites death.’³³⁹ Latimer’s explicit association of the water with the maternal gaze demonstrates the psychology of that element, the way in which Latimer has grafted onto its surface the primal image. ‘All water is a kind of [mother’s] milk’, writes Bachelard, a notion that ‘has a tap root that descends into the great, simple unconscious of primitive child life.’ We can see the sedative effect of the water in the narrator’s retaining and re-enactment of the lake imagery in a later scene, in a discussion with Meunier, whose excited talk of future experiments and medical discoveries was ‘mingled confusedly in my thought with glimpses of blue water (8)’. Latimer’s fusing of word and image have been severely damaged, leading to this confused mingling of images – a superimposition that structures or, rather, denatures his notion of perspective. All images are shallow substitutes for the vanishing point of the maternal gaze. Meunier will re-emerge at the story’s climactic scene,

³³⁷ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, (London: David Campbell, 1992), 593.

³³⁸ I return in detail in my conclusion to the flood scenes of *The Mill on the Floss*

³³⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1994), 6 and 101.

when he performs the blood transfusion upon Bertha's murdered maid, Mrs Archer, grotesquely transmogrifying his youthful imagery of water into an altogether different fluid, no less compelled by the maternal and feminine, the two young friends' bond perversely forged by the fluidity of Eliot's metaphors of changeable liquid.³⁴⁰

³⁴⁰ Jules Law writes at length on the social, technological and political import of the confluence of liquids, chiefly milk, blood and water in Eliot's fiction, which he argues is a ubiquitous and symbolic grouping in her early work. See Law, *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2010).

VI

Latimer's mirror

Before the sudden onset of prevision and sclerotic subjectivity, Latimer undergoes assessment by a phrenologist, Mr Letherall, described simply as 'a large man in spectacles,' bringing to mind the optician Coppelius / Coppola in the Sand-man. Just as Nathaniel is terrified by the optician's offer of 'fine eyes,' which turn out to be 'harmless' spectacles,³⁴¹ Eliot's paternal quasi-scientist is most notable for his uncanny spectacles, which are in this scene the object most arousing of Latimer's fascination. Latimer describes the dehumanising process of examination as Letherall 'stared at me with glittering spectacles,' his terror mingled with 'the agitation of my first hatred – hatred of this big spectacled man, who pulled my head about as if he wanted to buy and cheapen it' (6). There is something disturbing about the doubling and mediation of the doctor's gaze, his seeming ability to penetrate Latimer's youthful skull and pronounce its deficiencies 'here,' outlining the boy's eyebrows, and 'here – here is the excess,' gesturing to his temples. Latimer admits that it is the 'sight of the cold human eye' that makes him disavow human relations, despite his hunger for 'human deeds and human emotions,' and, most of all, sympathy (recalling Maggie Tulliver's girlish 'thirst for all knowledge,' her 'blind unconscious yearning for something that would link together the wonderful impressions of this mysterious life').³⁴² As Hao Li points out, Latimer's impoverished subjectivity is partly a consequence of his self-conception as external, his continued separation of consciousness from being,³⁴³ that 'contrast between the outward and

³⁴¹ Freud, 'The Uncanny,' 350.

³⁴² Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 267.

³⁴³ Li, *Memory and History*, 46.

inward' that brings only 'painful collisions,' as Eliot's narrator fatefully intones in *The Mill*.³⁴⁴ We find the same language of self-division in *The Lifted Veil*, of Latimer's 'double constraint' of mind, the existence he must 'live through twice over – through my inner and outward sense' (30). I have suggested that while the veil is lifted from Latimer's vision of the world, exposing it in its harshness, his imposition of a narrative mode of objectivity and disavowal is a shroud in its place. At the textual level, this manifests in his quasi-scientific voice (the naming of symptoms, for example), revealing an instinctive distrust of his perceptions by imposing the order that comes with categorisation and rationalism. His surprising decision in part two of his memoir – to omit recording his private experience (30), (an intention that he nevertheless fails to carry out), is a move prompted by anxiety about the nature of his twinned perception and is yet another instance of disavowal and distance from his own story. Yet what is the source of his dissociation?

The moment of externalisation appears to begin under the examination of Letherall and his spectacles, consolidating that distrust of the ocular triggered by the 'vanishing' of the maternal eye. While undergoing examination, Latimer experiences a 'moment of hatred', his first acquaintance with that sensation, yet it seems to be a feeling that he turns in upon himself, infected by the 'glittering' precision of Leatherall's glasses. This is apparent in his cold, diffident narrative voice. The doctor's alienating doubled gaze obliquely comments on lens culture, containing that thread of disenchantment that I have traced throughout this thesis. The doctor's grasp and look bear no resemblance to the tenderness of the primal sensations associated with his infant blindness – the sensorium in intimacy - a gaze that Latimer could only have imagined, his failed sight translating it into touch, rather like a braille of the emotions.

³⁴⁴ Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, 267.

In his revision of the Lacanian mirror stage, Winnicott theorises that in emotional development, ‘*the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face.*’³⁴⁵ In the barest hours of child-formation, a baby begins to look, directing his or her attention to the mother’s face. ‘What does the baby see there?’ Winnicott asks. The answer, he argues, is one that is essentially pre-verbal, or even unverbalisable: ‘what the baby sees is himself or herself’. In Latimer’s case, however, this is complicated by his infant blindness, although he senses her ‘loving eyes’. Winnicott makes exception for cases such as Latimer’s, stating that ‘[b]lind infants may need to get themselves reflected through other senses than that of sight.’³⁴⁶ In his recollection of his mother’s vanishing (‘there were no loving eyes looking at me as I mounted’), Latimer can mean only that he has translated his mother’s gaze into her touch, which is a constant comfort. There is a void of unresponsiveness in her disappearance from his life. For Winnicott the individual’s ego development is predicated on this maternal looking, which distinguishes the subjective and objective self, the me and the not-me. The capacity to progress to normal object-relations rests on the baby’s achievement of a returned gaze of sameness. When this mirrored image is distorted or denied, that is, when the mother’s face is fixed or absent for too long, the child’s response pattern can be profoundly damaged: the creative capacity ‘begins to atrophy, and in some way or other [infants] look around for other ways of getting something of themselves back from the environment.’

The Lifted Veil’s narrator perceives the maternal absence as a ‘chill’ that has blanketed his world and the chronology of his heightened sensory sensitivity dates to this moment (5). If this maternal lack or loss persists, Winnicott argues, the sighted baby begins to recognise the mother’s face as an objective reality, setting in motion the substitution of apperception for the process of perception: ‘perception takes the place of that which might have been the beginning

³⁴⁵ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 130.

³⁴⁶ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 132.

of a significant exchange with the world, a two-way process in which self-enrichment alternates with the discovery of *meaning in the world of seen things*.³⁴⁷ Understood thus, Latimer's predicament becomes one of a failure at the most primal, pre-verbal level of visual perceptiveness, in which there is no distinguishing between inner and outer forms of reality, no clear development from perception to the more sophisticated process of apperception. A stalled disillusionment – prevented by his mother's early death – pushes the young narrator into an unending irreality. Latimer has arguably been denied the fullness of the weaning process in Winnicottian terms: 'when we talk about the phenomena that cluster round weaning we are assuming the underlying process...by which opportunity for illusion and gradual disillusionment is provided' (*PR*, 15). Taking this reading a step further, the narrative can be read as a transcription of an inexpressible (perhaps for Latimer, unknowable) existence within a 'fantasying' reality, in which the narrator's malformed self futilely seeks representation and recognition in the objects that surround him, remaining caged, however, within his own formlessness. Phenomenological ways of knowing are disfigured, or estranged in Freudian terms, becoming what Latimer describes as 'diseased'. Latimer's imagination has no boundaries, no inbuilt corrections, that might have occurred in the weaning stage, and thus he remains dangerously attached to primal images that are in fact illusory. The 'world of seen things' is imbued not with meaning, but with absurdity.

Latimer's sensory overstimulation is a form of anti-knowledge, an epistemological dead-end. U. C Knoepfelmacher depicts Latimer essentially as a victim of circumstance, as a man 'essentially guiltless,' and 'a captive of his vision'.³⁴⁸ It is important, however, to account for Latimer's control over his own story, indeed his urge to master omnipotence of his narrative. In his autobiographical essay, 'A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis,' Freud

³⁴⁷ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 132. Emphasis added.

³⁴⁸ U. C. Knoepfelmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: The University of California, 1968), 140 and 154.

recounts a trip to the famous historical ruins in Athens, which leads to what he describes as a moment of estrangement, or uncanniness. Standing amongst the Greek site, Freud was suddenly struck with the realisation that the Acropolis *does indeed exist*, certain that he had in the past doubted the truth of its realness, until faced at last with its indubitable presence. As he reflected further, however, he came to recognise in his uncanny sensation a fleeting feeling that, “*What I am seeing there is not real*”.³⁴⁹ This statement of disbelief, his estrangement from the reality of something or from the self, necessitated a defence; in flight from it, he manufactured a past memory – a youthful disbelief in the Acropolis. Freud then goes on to make a fascinating observation on the nature of depersonalisation (which can take two forms: ‘the subject feels that a piece of reality or a piece of his own self has become strange’), which he leaves unresolved: ‘the path from depersonalisation leads to the extremely curious condition of *‘double conscience [double consciousness]*’. ‘This is all still so obscure,’ Freud cautions, that he feels unable to say more on the subject, once more drawing on the visual, the thing unseen or resisting sight.³⁵⁰ It is language that recalls Latimer’s self-description of a ‘double consciousness at work within [him]’ (*LV*, 21). Freud’s gesture towards such a state of uninhibited crossing between the subjective and objective conditions of being enables an insight into Latimer’s impoverished power, fractured upon the vanishing of his mother. He must create and maintain a sense of omnipotence, at least at the level of narrative discourse. Latimer thus conflates his body with his text; that is, to wrestle control over his faculties, he narrativises his symptoms, just another instance of doubleness in *The Lifted Veil*.

During his moments of greatest anguish, he relies on the tropes of the magic lantern. When Latimer’s happy stay in Geneva is brought to a sudden end, for example, by ‘a severe illness, which is partly a blank to me, partly a time of dimly-remembered suffering,’ punctuated

³⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Letter to Romain Rolland: A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis,” in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Adam Phillips (London: Penguin, 2005), 240.

³⁵⁰ Freud, ‘A disturbance of memory,’ 241.

only by rare appearances at his bedside of his partly-estranged father, ‘then came the languid monotony of convalescence, the days gradually breaking into variety and distinctness’ (8). The languorous diction is weighted by the memory of suffering, becoming only a weak outline; grief is mapped onto a lassitude of the eye, evocative of contemporary accounts of the concern surrounding ocular fatigue;³⁵¹ a haunting oneiric quality replaces the crispness of his other remembrances, as his mode of recall is steeped in the destabilising surface of the lens-made image. With an intriguing symmetry, in a letter to Sara Hennell, Eliot described her experience of ‘after-sadness,’ which came upon her after time spent with a friend and designated that anxiety that she felt in separation, worrying over her own ‘false image,’ and the ‘veil that comes between’ people, distance making ‘some pain ... a permanent memory.’³⁵² Eliot’s private pain must have informed her gothic story, and Latimer’s entrenched estrangement and obsession with death are evocative of Eliot’s own isolation from both family and society (after her relationship with Lewes was made public, Eliot was ostracised in certain circles). The death of Chrissey in the wake of their nascent reconciliation haunted her sister.

The stereoscopic imagination in *The Lifted Veil* is one with soporific despair, a sadness indicated by the fleeting presence of his father, no more than an apparition on the screen, withholding love from Latimer in preference for his robust and successful other son, Alfred. The implication is of no stable perspectival relations, no centre point from which Latimer can perceive the space around him, a ‘diseased consciousness’ (14) that highlights some aspects, blurring others. For instance, the characters who people his world are seen in mere outline (much like Lucy Snowe’s descriptions of truncated bodies and synecdochic *pince nez* spectacles). Alfred, and his father are portrayed merely by abstractions of their functions: Alfred, who has come before him ‘as a perfect stranger’ after decades apart, is ‘a handsome,

³⁵¹ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 104.

³⁵² Eliot, letter to Sara Hennell, in *Selections from George Eliot’s Letters*, 214.

self-confident man', worldly, 'good-humoured [and] self-satisfied', and in possession of a 'superficial kindness' (14); his father is symbolised by his possessions – a musical box and 'other purchases rigorously demanded of a rich Englishman' (11) He is also notoriously punctual in his capacity as father and businessman, and his speech is suitably measured and calculated, betraying no alarm at his son's oddities. He extends abstraction to his self-characterisation, admitting that in contrast to his brother's, his own 'half-ghostly' beauty was of the waifish, artistic type (14).

Latimer has no mirror or window moments, conspicuous when we consider that, throughout her novels, Eliot repeatedly places her characters in relation to their reflected image. 'I saw in my face now nothing but the stamp of a morbid organisation, framed for passive suffering,' he laments (14). Searching futilely for his mother's absent face and finding no similarity in the bodies of his father or brother, Latimer's own image is a 'nothing,' a blankness inscribed now with his oscillating sensations of pain. Winnicott argues that '[i]f the mother's face is unresponsive, then a mirror is a thing to be looked at but not to be looked into,' a concept that fits neatly with Latimer's inability or unwillingness to peer deeply into any reflective space.³⁵³ There is no mirroring surface for Latimer and thus he is denied self-knowledge, trapped instead in a hyper-sensory prison.

The mirror that Latimer substitutes, however, is the surface of other minds, rendered no longer opaque to him, but terrifyingly transparent. The veil that nurtures and protects intimacy with others is torn away, but another *replaces* it, a screen illuminated by a continual show of psychic projection; flooded with others' perceptions of him, Latimer loses his ability to regulate external stimuli, a kind of death by imagery – the self has no sovereign ground. 'My self-consciousness was heightened to that pitch of intensity in which our own emotions take the form of a drama which urges itself imperatively on our contemplation,' he says (24). A

³⁵³ Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 132.

spectator, then, in the darkroom of his own psychic projections. Like the phantasmagorical display, Latimer's psychic receptivity increases then dims in the clarity of its imagery, fluctuating arbitrarily, inexorably beyond control. He figures this drama as a dream-like muteness, moving 'dumbly through that stage of the poet's suffering, in which he feels the delicious pang of utterance, and makes an image of his sorrows' (24). A Spinozistic image-affect – the picture of his own suffering – amplifies the certainty of his losses.

VII

The transparent veil

The image of the veil is central to Eliot's fiction, and in this section I will take a closer look at the plurality of shapes it acquires in *The Lifted Veil*. We have seen in the previous chapter on *Villette* the veil's metonymic significance as a symbol of loss, a productive capacity augmented by its textual amorphousness – shifting from garment, to solid structure, to a metaphoric gauze between things or bodies, denoting something impermeable in their relations.³⁵⁴ Eliot's veils are rent in filaments (as we shall also appreciate in the following chapter on *Romola*), finding new pattern in webs, and skeins of correspondence. Sedgwick has shown the metaphoric ambivalence of the gothic veil and its homology of blood, flesh and written word. The gothic veiled woman of *The Lifted Veil* is Bertha, 'a pale, fatal-eyed woman,' a 'Water-Nixie' in her 'pale green dress,' who appears not literally veiled – the whiteness of

³⁵⁴ Gilbert and Gubar point out the significance of the veil as a topos in Eliot's oeuvre, interpreting it primarily as a site of Eliot's authorial struggle between her nostalgia for the Wordsworthian and male tradition of Romanticism and her movement towards female becoming. *Madwoman in the Attic*, 468.

her flesh and sharp, ‘pale grey eyes at once acute’ and mocking, are constantly on display – but psychologically veiled, drawing, through her unique psychological opacity, a sexual enticement that Latimer cannot resist. ‘The veil itself,’ writes Sedgwick, ‘is suffused with sexuality,’ enhanced by an ironic inversion of meaning: ‘the veil that conceals and inhibits sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it, both as a metonym of the thing covered and as a metaphor for the system of prohibitions’ that govern sexual desire.³⁵⁵ Bertha’s paleness exudes an erotic pull, and Latimer’s excessive use of the descriptor suggests an anxiety to portray her shallowness, her lack of spiritual and psychic depth; it also symbolises her paradox – she is in his eyes both dim and illuminated, both faint in appearance while eclipsing all others round her. He is chiefly piqued by her beauty, with her ‘luxuriant blonde hair, arranged in cunning braids’ that belie the sarcastic, violent penetration of her gaze. Every feature is designed to provoke his contempt, it would seem, and her splendour lacks the subtlety of girlish grace, her ‘grey’ eyes like a knife’s point – ‘I felt a painful sensation as if a sharp wind were cutting me’ (11): her very image wounds him. In denuding her of vibrancy (in colour and in psychology), Latimer can more comfortably worship her, project upon her his own lurid imaginings.

Eliot’s *femme fatale* has parallels with *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha Mason, contrasting paleness to the darkness of Rochester’s loathed wife (adding further depth to Eliot’s reversal of any conventional dialect of colour).³⁵⁶ Rochester baptises Jane afresh with a ‘delicate, aërial’ beauty the yearned-for opposite to his wife’s complexion (*JE*, 259). Jane is pliant, an ingénue whose face he desires to ‘cover ... with a priceless veil’. Like Brontë’s Bertha, an ill-used, hidden wife, whose desires run to another man, Eliot’s character is sexually unavailable to Latimer;

³⁵⁵ Sedgwick, “The Character in the Veil,” 256.

³⁵⁶ Gayatri Spivak has looked with far greater penetration at *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha as a character caught up in imperialist ideology. She describes Jane’s voice as ushering the reader into her ‘territorialising individual imagination’. See Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (Autumn, 1985), 259.

first, because she is Alfred's fiancé, and second, because hers is the one mind impervious to his insight (13). Both of these women are denied a voice by the first-person narratives in which they appear, and both provide an existential threat to the men who tell their story. Rochester describes his bewitchment thus:

‘the boast of Spanish Town for her beauty ... I found her a fine woman ... tall, dark and majestic ... She flattered me, and lavishly displayed for my pleasure her charms and accomplishments. I was dazzled, stimulated, my senses were excited; and being ignorant, raw and inexperienced, I thought I loved her’ (*JE*, 305).

Latimer expresses his beguilement with a strikingly similar rhetoric: ‘She made me believe that she loved me. Without ever quitting her tone of *badinage* and playful superiority, she intoxicated me with the sense that I was necessary to her ... It costs a woman so little effort to besot us in this way!’ (29).

Eliot's portrait of the seductive female, however, exudes a nuance that is disabled in Brontë's novel by Jane Eyre's persuasive voice. Bertha Grant's evil seems to reside chiefly in her unattainability – she is an illogical problem of desire (‘a single hypothetical to remain problematic till sunset’ [29]), despite Latimer's insistence that he has no desires (33). When he does at last acquire access to her thoughts, it is the ‘narrow room of her soul’ that is the cause of his repulsion. His description of her beguiling charm – ‘A graceful, brilliant woman’ who smiles her way through social calls and ‘made a figure in ballrooms,’ and who is ‘really pitiable to have such a husband, and so all the world thought’; she was ‘secure of carrying off all sympathy from a husband who was sickly, abstracted, and, as some suggested, crack-brained’: Bertha has ‘the balance ... of pity’ (33). His language continually betrays him, bristling as it

does with envy, undermining his portrayal of the woman whom he establishes as his nemesis. Bertha is cast as double, his antagonist in a competition for sympathy.

Bertha's mind is his 'oasis of mystery in the dreary desert of knowledge (18). Yet her element is swamp-like, her potency that of the water-nymphette waiting to ensnare the careless, innocent on-looker: Latimer fantasises that he *creates* this vision of an imperious willowy beauty from the German lyrics that are just at this moment swimming in his mind - 'this woman ... looked like a birth from some cold, sedgy stream, the daughter of an aged river' (12). His first glimpse of her is a virtual one: she is the content of his second prevision, which comes upon him with abrupt force while he stares out of his window at the 'current of the Rhone, just where it leaves the dark-blue lake,' replaced suddenly by the impossible yet undeniable presence of his father beside Bertha, standing before him in front of a 'folding screen.' The folding screen is another iteration of the veil motif, in this instance a partition between his conscious and unconscious selves. As soon as his father speaks, the illusion vanishes, leaving empty space. Latimer 'grasp[s] the bell convulsively, like one trying to free himself from nightmare,' (12) desperate for a 'real' human presence, for a few utterances 'of simple waking prose' from his servant Pierre. To shake off the heaviness of the vision, he is careful to note that he passes into the next room, as if the movement from one space to another might break the hold of the phantasm. These are the rooms of his tormented psyche, and the passage from one to the other is a futile shifting of place. The space beyond the contours of his mind has evaporated, thus the neat enclosure of one apartment from that adjoining it does not bring the desired effect. Latimer seeks solace in the slow ritual of inhaling eau-de-Cologne, taking 'the cork out very neatly, and then rubbing the reviving spirit over my hands and forehead, drawing a new delight from the scent' because it is not the effect 'of a strange sudden madness' (12). This haptic restorative, however, is only an illusion. Returning to the adjoining *salon*, still luxuriating in the scent, he is confronted with the vision once more: his father, Bertha ... the

forms are the same, although the details of the second vision are abbreviated; his collapse into unconsciousness ends the experience. Firstly, I would suggest that the mind that remains ‘veiled,’ – from both his self and others – is Latimer’s, whose subject-hood is premised on an inner blindness, as well as rhetorically displaced in his oddly distant narrative voice – a style that soothes him (‘clear waking prose’) and observational poise. The displacement or distance from the reality of the image is furthered by his position as narrator, the writing ‘I’ reconstructing the sensory traces of these two folded-together images; he is our optical device, his observing self a reflecting mirror for us, the reader.³⁵⁷ Removed from the immediacy of the scene, Latimer’s vision is the stuff of his imaginary, contingent on re-perception – of sights, of smell, of auditory detail – making such renewed perceptiveness the only logical narrative trace. It is at this level, the level of the perceptive world, that Latimer is made vulnerable, where his taut narrative voice concedes frailty, having no effect on the world as it is happening *to* him. Beyond the flow of sensation, where a view of the Rhone unleashes the sequence of visions, there is nothing tangible, or empirically true about this scene.

Lewes theorised in his *Problems of Life and Mind* (1873) that the operation of vision expands to encompass ‘our stored knowledge of sensations of taste, fragrance, resistance, and so on’.³⁵⁸ While Latimer purports to stand somehow outside past visual experience, giving an analytical recount of what can only be described as a suspension of intellectual being, his memory is torn by competing temporal moments, describing only a phantom view of an already illusionary perception. The contradictory kaleidoscope of sensations leads only to a kind of sensory recursiveness that promises nothing, except text.

The Lifted Veil insistently recognises a notion of direct perceptual experience, a quasi-phenomenology. It is through paradoxical formal means, however, as Latimer’s struggle to

³⁵⁷ These comments are influenced by Julien Wolfreys’s phenomenological study of Dickens’s city writing. See *Dickens’s London: perception, subjectivity, and phenomenological urban multiplicity*, 8.

³⁵⁸ Quoted in Flint, *The Visual Imagination*, 255.

impose order on his inchoate perception is Eliot's gesture towards an alternative way of totalising experience, similar to that described by Merleau-Ponty, in which 'meaning is not free ... but bound, a prisoner of all the signs, or details which reveal it to [the subject]'.³⁵⁹ As Summer J. Star points out, George Lewes was formulating phenomenological arguments decades prior to its formal instigation as philosophy, proposing 'a fundamental principle of relation-perception through a subject's constant, unthought sensing of bodily orientation: a synthesising principle of how we perceive things going together before posing them for contemplation.' It is, she continues, 'a consciousness fundamentally *of* the body.'³⁶⁰ Lewes often uses the example of abstraction to best explain the difference between artistic and scientific methods. The scientist is to 'discover and systematise the abstract *relations* of things,' thus 'allow[ing] the things themselves to drop out of sight'; the poet, however, 'wishes to kindle the emotions by the suggestions of objects themselves and for this purpose he must present images of the objects rather than of any single quality.' The central distinction being that 'the abstraction of the philosopher is meant to keep the object itself, with its perturbing suggestions, out of sight, allowing only one quality to fill the field of vision; whereas the abstraction of the poet is meant to bring the object itself into more vivid relief, to make it visible'.³⁶¹ Latimer strikes us as the scientist, despite his assertion of Romantic sensitiveness, that he has the misfortune of 'possessing the poet's sensibility, without his voice' (7). As I have suggested, his mode of abstraction is borne from pain, perhaps as a means of numbing his Rousseau-like 'lyrical consciousness'.³⁶²

³⁵⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, 71-2.

³⁶⁰ Star, "Feeling Real," 843.

³⁶¹ George Henry Lewes, *The Principles of Success in Literature* (Westmead, England: Gregg International Publishers, 1969), 26.

³⁶² Gillian Beer writes that Latimer is 'anti-scientific...His is essentially a lyrical consciousness.' While I agree with Beer, there is an obvious and problematic disjunction between the early, primal scenes of childhood, and his increasing attempts to analyse with the discourse of science his 'diseased' mind. His relationship and fascination with Meunier is further proof of his attraction to positivist sciences. See Beer, 'Myth and the Single Consciousness: *Middlemarch* and *The Lifted Veil*,' in *This Particular Web: Essays on Middlemarch*, ed. Ian Adam (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975), 92-3. Latimer is, however, far from the crudely analytical Grandcourt in *Daniel Deronda*, in which the coldly observing male consciousness is taken to its ultimate

It is Latimer's forced neutrality that lends to his voice that quality of mechanical observation, and indeed mechanised language characterises some of his reflective moments. When describing the beginning and end of a vision, for example, Latimer feels that 'a stunning clang of metal suddenly thrilled through me,' recalling him to the objects of the room (9); in another instance he experiences a 'sensation of grating metal' in his mouth (14). This conveys something vital about the tropes of nineteenth-century ocular discourse. Nancy Armstrong's work on the nature of the Victorian photographic image points to what was contemporaneously understood as the qualitative difference between the eye and the optical devices flooding the market:

In comparison with the eye,' she writes, 'the modern optical apparatus seemed relatively neutral and impervious to such influences [of subjectivity], as only a machine could be. What is more, the modern camera substituted an image for the object represented, as if to say that an observer could learn more and better from the former than from the latter. That image visualised persons, places, and things inaccessible to the ordinary observer, thus expanding the observer's visual universe.³⁶³

Latimer proceeds towards a paradoxical and deleterious mode of seeing. His longing for the collectedness of 'simple waking prose', that is, his deployment of a language that approximates the optical device's steadiness or veracity, further entrenches the chasm between image and the real (whatever that might be) that we find deepening with the unfolding of the tale. It is as if

logical conclusion. Grandcourt's gaze is 'like vision in the abstract.' Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, ed. Terence Cave (London: Penguin, 1995), 148.

³⁶³ Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1999), 77.

he places a film over the immediacy of his distressing previsions, in a desire to erect a prophylactic screen, or veil, between his eye and 'I'. If the content of his autobiography is the lifting of the veil between self and other, then the narrative mode is an attempt to restore it. We have seen that a complicity with darkness is one materialisation of that drive. Does Latimer resemble the mechanics of an optical device? Is he a Frankensteinian monster of the new optics of the Victorian age?

To answer this, I want to look at a further example of Latimer's uncannily reproducible visuality, a source of suffering for him, and that is, the matching of vision with 'real' image, most notably in Latimer's imagining of an unseen Prague. This is the crucial hinge upon which the 'truth' of his visual aberration turns. Latimer's fragile bulwark against the flow of chatter of other minds crumbles when Bertha's consciousness is suddenly and terribly revealed to him in a prevision, set in motion by the electricity of her gentle pressing upon his wrist. He is transported instantly to a room in his home, a space that contracts with

the hopeless misery pressing on my soul; the light became stronger, for
Bertha was entering with a candle in her hand – Bertha, my wife – with
cruel eyes, with green jewels and green leaves on her white ball-dress;
every hateful thought within her present to me ... (19)

Bertha's mind is likened to a horror-filled source of illumination. 'She came with her candle and stood over me with a bitter smile of contempt,' he repeats, revealing to him her 'barren soul and mean thoughts' (19). His future wife (for at this point, Bertha is affianced to Alfred, though he is soon to be killed in a riding accident) shrouds him in her pestilent thoughts. By illuminating the image with Bertha's candle, Eliot suggests the sense of enforced seeing typical of the narrative, this invading light piercing the membrane of Latimer's circle of self, Bertha's

green and white dazzle forcing him to constrict his sphere of subjectivity, in the same way that the room's delimitations become starker. The prevision recurs with startling precision, throwing him 'into a tumult of mind': 'this hideous vision made me ill ... and it recurred constantly, with all its minutiae, as if they had been burnt into my memory' (20). No longer a transient experience, the image comes with such force that it sears his mind's eye, infinitely reproducing, the very threat that attended the seeming banality of reproducible image that characterised the age. This is grief as ocular pain: '[I] winced as inevitably under every offence as my eye winced from an intruding mote,' Latimer says, opining his inability to alter his fate even in the face of such damning knowledge of futurity.

His fate, he reasons, rests on an as-yet un-encountered view: of the real Prague, the city which he has never visited, which will prove or not the truth of his visions. If the city is as it appeared to him in imagination, then surely, he concludes, his visions are correct. As Latimer insists, he 'had seen no picture of Prague: it lay in my mind as a mere name, with vaguely remembered historical associations – ill-defined memories of imperial grandeur.' His first instinct is to hope it is a picture of his newly-liberated creative powers 'had painted in fiery haste, the colours snatched from lazy memory.' An experiment is duly set, to fix his mind on Venice:

I stimulated my imagination with poetic memories, and strove to feel myself present in Venice, as I had felt myself present in Prague. But in vain. I was only colouring the Caneletto engravings that hung in my old bedroom ... the picture was a shifting one, my mind wandering uncertainly in search of more vivid images; I could see no accident of form or colour without conscious labour after the necessary conditions (10-11).

Bemoaning this 'prosaic' materialisation of the sought-after view, Latimer voices the very paradoxes of the mid-century image, the conditions of which amounted to an inhibiting of the cultural imagination – the viewer became attuned not simply to see the world as lens-produced, but also to *see* in a uniform mode; the contours of what was seen, the 'form or colour' was pre-empted by what had been seen.³⁶⁴ The likening of Latimer to a lens, or a metallic optical instrument, then, is an effect of the text. His mind searches for 'more vivid images' like a roving camera eye and he demands cleaner, ever more lurid reproductions to substitute the real.

Views of Prague were a popular subject of microphotographs, inexplicably tiny pictures mounted on a glass plate, often resembling a small black dot, but in fact containing magnificently detailed, 'fine-grained reproductions'.³⁶⁵ As yet, Latimer's visions are merely restless signifiers, with no temporal referent: 'The future, even when brought into the compass of feeling by a vision that made me shudder, had still no more than the force of an idea' (20). Arriving in Prague under night skies, the moment of revelation is delayed ('I was glad of this, for it seemed like a deferring of a terribly decisive moment, to be in the city for hours without seeing it' [22]), also allowing Latimer to indulge in the fantasy that Bertha returns his love; for if one image finds its correlate in reality, then so too does his envisioning of her hatred for him. He maintains ignorance for another half-day, hiding in Prague's buildings, where, ironically, the architectural decay evokes something of his prevision; surrounded by 'shrunken lights,' he recognises pieces of his pre-imagined Prague. All is confirmed when he reaches the bridge and searches to locate 'a small detail which I remembered with special intensity as part of my

³⁶⁴ Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 27-28. Armstrong's argument is that fiction and photography were mutually influential in creating and then policing the boundaries of what was to be seen, and the manner in which one was to appraise it. While I find her argument fascinating and rich in its applications, I would query whether seeing was quite as homogeneous and authoritarian as her argument contends; there were certainly avenues of visual rebellion: Brontë's *Villette* makes that abundantly clear.

³⁶⁵ Microphotographs were the invention of John Benjamin Dancer, a scientist and optician who found fame elusive, but struck commercial success with his miniature images. As Marina Benjamin writes, 'Precisely how he manufactured his microscopic marvels remains a trade secret, since he never ventured to print on the subject.' Sadly, like many miniaturists, he went blind. See Benjamin, in *Cultural Babbage: Technology, Time and Invention*, ed. Francis Spufford and Jenny Uglow (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 100-101.

vision. There it was – the patch of rainbow light on the pavement transmitted through a lamp in the shape of a star’ (23). This is the novella’s climactic picture – the sealing of Latimer’s fate, as he understands it – and Eliot chooses as its symbol a bent and refracted light, pushed into the shape of a star (an astronomical omen of visual distortion), itself a copy. Latimer misapprehends the image, finding in its mediated rainbow glimmer a link of continuity between past and present, as if the light-chain held together his notion of being. But this light, like all light, is without matter, and thus his revelation, his self-fulfilling prophecy, is substance-less. The image is too insubstantial a surface on which to found a sustainable ontology. Misinterpreting it in a slippage from self to displaced light-image, he internalises the spectral³⁶⁶.

In Eliot’s dialect of seeing as it is expressed in *The Lifted Veil*, the *trompe l’oeil* effect of the micrographia (and phantasmagoria) – the black dot that in fact conceals an entire universe of colour and things – is at work in Latimer’s mode of perception (and we might even stretch this concept to account for his previsionary facility). It is a question of desire, the same drive that compels Latimer to locate the most ‘vivid’ image, an appetite for the picture that will best partner his need. ‘I have often been humiliated,’ he writes, because his imaginings have been ‘disjointed and commonplace,’ mere copies of familiar scenes, ways of seeing that have become ‘common’ and banal. But he knows the trick of the eye involved in the seeming gratification of visual desire; as he admits in one of his rare moments of insight, ‘our sweet illusions are half of them conscious illusions, like effects of colour that we know to be made up of tinsel, broken glass, and rags’ (30). Here the whole, when broken down into its constituent parts, is revealed as sordid in its transparency, mere detritus.

³⁶⁶ Goethe was fascinated with refracted light, particularly those ‘displacements’ that resulted in refractions of colour and devoted a chapter to it in his *Theory of Colours*.

Latimer's mode of seeing takes on new, dangerous sophistication following the Prague visit, changing in substance and visitation. He begins to dream only of decay, and feels himself corroding. Any cruel word from Bertha would 'fall upon [him] like corrosive acid' (24). He has used such figuration throughout, describing the poisonous effects upon him of touch, gaze, or more often, words. He mounts in this second section a turn against language, an assault on the meagre forms of expressing pain that are at his disposal: 'The course of life which I have indicated in the space of a few sentences filled the space of years. So much misery ... may be compressed into a sentence!' He is left to explain via 'this summary medium,' of 'neat syntax' and 'well-selected predicates,' which give no nuance of the agonies of despair (34). Railing at linguistic obliquity, Latimer articulates his dioramic drama in habitual terms of light and dark; but this, too, begins to fail him. Where once his visions put a sliver of space between present and past, now they intrude in to his conversations with Bertha. 'For a moment,' he writes, 'the shadow of my vision [of Bertha's hatred of him] passed between me and the radiant girl,' the vision now 'the object nearest to' him. A past image is lodged in his eye, as if it were a piece of grit, tarnishing what is before his gaze – a slow-forming after-image, creeping, disease-like, into his present (26). Latimer deteriorates into a living corpse, propelled downwards by a diminution in his visionary capacities, which are now dislodged from any referent, free-floating, 'dimmer and fitful'; 'all that was personal in me seemed to be suffering a gradual death' (35). His imaginings become 'external,' alive not to the living but to the 'inanimate' - sights of 'strange cities ... of gigantic ruins, of midnight skies with strange bright constellations,' and other 'mighty shapes,' - weighted down, he says, by a larger presence: scenes of his own imminent death.

It is Meunier, his childhood-friend, now a well-regarded scientist and doctor, who revives Latimer to the 'passing moment'. Meunier is called upon to minister to the dying needs of Mrs Archer, Bertha's maid, who is locked in a mysterious, and bitter power struggle with

her mistress. Mrs Archer, it seems, has been poisoned, dying with a secret of Bertha's left unexpressed, failing in her final, gasping attempts at speech. The deathbed scene marks the revolution of the novella's figuration of eyes, as here it is Mrs Archer's gaze that is the object of greatest terror and crude anxiety. All the horror and violence of the story concentrate in this woman's roving eyes, tracking her victims across the room. The drama of the secret fluctuates with her eyelids' motion: Bertha 'looked round at the ghastly dying face ... when for a moment the eyelids were raised again, and it seemed as if the eyes were looking towards Bertha, but blankly ... [then] the eyelids were lifted no more' (40). The terms of such ocular haunting, the eerie autonomy of Archer's dying eyes, are the distillation of all the moments of looking, all the moments of projection upon which this story has been screened. Fluttering with the susurrations of lips, the eyelids, 'lowered so as almost to conceal the large dark eyes,' make a desperate attempt to speak a language, an ocular dialogue of secrecy and deception; the roar of the world translated as visual imagery in the account of the narrator's childhood is here reversed, as Archer's eyes mutely scan the minds of her witnesses, a dumb dialect. After she is transfused with Meunier's blood, revivifying her for a brief and chilling moment, the dead woman's eyes are startled open, meeting Bertha's 'in full recognition – the recognition of hate'; and, her target sought and found, the words are freed. 'You mean to poison your husband ... the poison is in the black cabinet ... I got it for you' (42). The eye is no longer innocent in the age of spectacle and ocular deception.³⁶⁷

Archer's revivification has inspired critical opprobrium. The sensationalism of the event, however, is fitting when considered as the culmination of the violation that has been Eliot's concern throughout; this is simply violation as spectacle, and on a much more visible stage. As Latimer describes it, 'this scene seemed of one texture with the rest of my existence: horror was my familiar, and this new revelation was like an old pain recurring with new

³⁶⁷ Benjamin, "Sliding Scales," 121.

circumstances' (42). The maid's shocking return to life is 'of one texture' with Latimer's experience in material terms, too. In a moment neglected in the criticism, he describes that 'it was my task at first to keep up the artificial respiration in the body after the transfusion had been affected' (41): thus it was Latimer's breath that restored Mrs Archer's consciousness. Such an exchange of precious substance renders ambiguous the dead woman's words – by whom are they spoken? Latimer's mouth literally gives oxygen to her hate-filled utterance, gives a new, abysmal manifestation of Spinoza's concept of the affects igniting under the pressure of other bodies' affects, and the sustenance generated from the other ('The human body, to be preserved, requires a great many other bodies, by which it is ... regenerated'). The transference of breath that dissolves the boundaries of corporeality strengthens Latimer's fantasies of omnipotence. He has controlled others' speech acts throughout and thus, despite its ghastliness, his puppetry of Mrs Archer is unsurprising.

After the exchange of fluids, the narrative draws swiftly to its end, the vampiric effect turned back upon the story's momentum. Temporal perspectives touch as the narrative time meets the story's present, and the death Latimer foretold at the beginning is now upon him:

It is the 20th of September 1850. I know these figures I have just written, as if they were a long familiar inscription. I have seen them on this page in my desk unnumbered times, when the scene of my dying struggle has opened upon me...

His sentences are contracted, at this critical moment, as if death is merely perfunctory; he is retracing letters already shaped, lending an inevitability to this final horror, which he has envisioned 'continuously,' 'beyond' all other insights (36). In these spare sentences, death is figured as a vision of text, an image of inscription, because Eliot has taken Latimer and her

reader to the very edge of textual experience and expression, and the final act of dying can be only a reflexive one, taking us back to the rehearsal of death with which the story began. It is a dizzying spectral chain in which, as Julian Wolfreys points out, the suspension between the visible and the invisible becomes the sign of that spectrality.³⁶⁸ This is in fact Latimer's moment of greatest calm, resembling in its rhythm of acceptance an 'open[ing]' into transcendence. The ellipsis takes Latimer to an unknowable space, certainly beyond the confines of his text. In a final coup, he stages a charismatic exit, the opening into an undefined space of non-existence setting in motion a haunting of his own story.

Understanding the undulations of specularly in Eliot's aesthetic as the operations of an anguished consciousness, then, reveals a new dimension in considering Latimer's condition, making it rather difficult to dismiss his pain as does Terry Eagleton, for whom the narrator is 'just monstrous ... an uncouthly virile bourgeoisie'.³⁶⁹ Eliot's epistemological ambition in *The Lifted Veil* is far more substantial than an ambivalent skewering of the bourgeoisie. We have seen that Latimer binds his experience of grief to specularly. Constructing himself exclusively from ocular fibres, his body 'finely organised for pain' (24), he is trapped in an ever-shifting web of transparencies, the same predicament of Gwendolen Harleth, caught in a room of reflections that echo only with the chatter emerging from the mind. Gwendolen escapes, and so too does Dorothea, and Maggie Tulliver in an absolving death; Latimer's response, however, is to internalise the spectre of other minds and by 'an irrational instinct, draw the shroud of concealment more closely around' himself, a premature death shroud that suffocates him (38).

³⁶⁸ Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002), 76.

³⁶⁹ Eagleton, "Power and Knowledge in 'The Lifted Veil,'" 55. I do not wish to dismiss in its entirety Eagleton's important argument, but question his view of the narrator-figure. Eagleton's full quote runs thus: 'Latimer has the abnormality of the Lukácsian 'typical', which is never the average: he is a dreadful image of where, given a little extrapolation, the whole of bourgeois knowledge could land up. His monstrousness...reproduces itself daily in the laboratories.' Neil Hertz recognises in Latimer the vestiges of Eliot's sage and omniscient narratorial voice, quipping that he 'does sound rather like the narrator of *Middlemarch*, but often he just sounds like a kvetch.' Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse*, 43.

Stuck at the level of surface, what Eliot describes elsewhere as the choice between reflection and feeling,³⁷⁰ he is unable to read the substratum of the world and its objects. In the words of Terry Castle, it is ‘the luminous figure of thought itself’, not a supernatural suffering, which is in fact the disease most crippling for Eliot’s strange, tormented protagonist.³⁷¹ Intuiting the parallels between Spinoza’s imagistic subjectivity and her contemporary moment’s fixation with the eye as a mode of feeling, Eliot writes a nightmare tale of unbounded specular projections, which, seeding discursively from her translation of the *Ethics*, grows into a unique exploration of the phantasmal power of loss and the articulation of grief in a world wherein the visual and the virtual have permeated ontology.

Eliot pursues the destructive solipsism that can come from ‘drawing the shroud’ of suffering round oneself in the novel that she would begin one year later, in 1860, *Romola*. Yet, unlike Latimer, the heroine of this next novel is able to glean an essential knowledge from the nightmarish visions that threaten her world.

³⁷⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 229. The choice here is Dorothea’s, who was yet to ‘conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects’.

³⁷¹ Castle, “Phantasmagoria,” 61.

Speaking Brokenly: George Eliot's *Romola*

The light can be a curtain as well as the darkness
George Eliot³⁷²

Seeing is a dangerous act
- Jean Starobinski³⁷³

George Eliot's historical romance *Romola* (1862-3) has long been considered a novel of dead things. An ambitious revivification of Renaissance Florence, brimming with historical facts (down to the habit of providing first the Italian and then the English term for items of dress and other uniquely Florentine quirks of tongue or ritual), *Romola* has often been judged by Victorian and modern readers alike as a failure of style and story. Much of the derision has centred on the eponymous heroine, a Madonna-incarnate, in the words of one critic, 'a lifeless paragon of virtue', shallow and 'disengaged'.³⁷⁴ Indeed, some readers have found parts of the novel — most notably Romola's single-handed salvation of a plague-ridden village — as ridiculous, an embarrassing misstep in Eliot's soberly realist project.

One of her most astute readers, Henry James, insisted that the pulse of the story was quashed beneath the weight of scholarship and historicity. 'A twentieth part of the erudition would have sufficed,' he wrote in *The Atlantic Monthly*, 'if there had been more of the breath of the Florentine streets, more of the faculty of optical evocation, a greater saturation of the senses'.³⁷⁵ James concluded that the author 'is deficient in imagination,' that her 'prosaic' characters exert 'no demand upon the imagination of the reader'.³⁷⁶ George Levine is more

³⁷² Eliot, *Romola*, ed. Dorothea Barrett (London: Penguin, 1996). All further references use this edition and pagination will be incorporated parenthetically.

³⁷³ Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1989), 4.

³⁷⁴ Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, 173.

³⁷⁵ Quoted in George Levine, "Romola' as Fable," 78.

³⁷⁶ Henry James, "The Novels of George Eliot," *Atlantic Monthly* 18 (October 1866), in *A Century of George Eliot Criticism*, ed. Haight, 53. *The Saturday Review* similarly remarked on the shallowness of Florentine life in

sympathetic in his reading, but ultimately concurs with James's assessment, concluding that 'the initial and inescapable fact about *Romola* is that of its failure,' quoting James's feeling that the novel "does not seem positively to live."³⁷⁷ R. H Hutton's review in *The Spectator* (to which Eliot famously replied in defence of her heroine), while largely sensitive to the novel's brilliant scope, issued the same charge of affective *lack*: '[Eliot] has Sir Walter Scott's art for revivifying the past, but not Scott's dynamical force in making you plunge into it with as headlong an interest as into the present.'³⁷⁸

The same terms of critique thus reappear: atrophied imaginative power; too contrived. The inference is that intellectual robustness subtracts from the novel's emotive force. Yet *Romola* is rich in imaginative feel: it is crucially, however, an imaginative force defined on other, perhaps unfamiliar ontological terms. Its plot traces the heroine's passage from passionate naïf through her sexual, political, and psychological maturation. Eliot's fiction has long been interpreted as a conflict between Romanticism and intellectualism, and *Romola* seems to epitomise that aesthetic struggle, guided by the sibyllic tones of an omniscient narrator. Yet, as Valerie Dodd points out, this dichotomy is unnecessary and misleading.³⁷⁹ Contrary to most assessments of this heroine as moulded from passive materials, sexless in her saintliness, I suggest that *Romola* is one of the most affectively intelligent of Eliot's fictional

Romola, observing that, though the historical detail was seemingly flawless, 'a lesser hand might have been employed to collect these simple treasures', 21.

³⁷⁷ Levine, "Romola as Fable," in *Critical Essays on George Eliot*, ed. Barbara Hardy (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2016), 78.

³⁷⁸ R. H Hutton, *The Spectator*, 18 July 1863, in *George Eliot and her Readers*, eds. John Holmstrom and Laurence Lerner (London: The Bodley Head, 1966), 57. Lerner adds that '[t]here is a feeling that by setting the story in fifteenth-century Florence, George Eliot hung chains round her own powers. Determined to have in this book the realistic dialogue, the feel of daily life, that are so powerful in her English stories, she is forced to build them up from her reading instead of her memory. The result is a forced spontaneity, an academic recreation of what in the other novels is immediate and genuine' 64.

Eliot's letter to Hutton displays her habitual modesty in discussing her work. 'The psychological causes which prompted me to give such details of Florentine life and history as I have given, are precisely the same as those which determined me in giving the details of English village life [in her pastoral novels] But with regard to [Romola's characterisation] and my whole book, my predominant feeling is – not that I have achieved anything, but – that great, great facts have struggled to find a voice through me, and have only been able to speak brokenly.' See *Selections from George Eliot's Letters*, ed. Haight, 287-8.

³⁷⁹ Valerie A. Dodd, *George Eliot: An Intellectual Life* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 2.

characters.³⁸⁰ She imagines deeper than any of her counterparts what it might mean to live with the endlessness of mourning; further still, she embodies it, expressing through the modality of perception a condition of unending loss, and the demands upon the body and psyche that such a suffering exacts. Denied the absolution (in narrative terms) of either heterosexual love, or the martyrdom of death, Romola, like Lucy Snowe before her, must live with the banal fact of grief, a sacrifice that, in the logic of the text, is demanded of her.

In this chapter I want to draw out the complexity with which Eliot depicts the instability of the optical in *Romola*. In its deployment of versatile visual metaphors, and a structure premised on a struggle to conceal, *Romola* is composed of two major movements: the first half a heady saturation of the senses, and the second, in the wake of cataclysmic losses, a rigid restraint of the sensory. The tension between the two corrupts “successful” narrative drive, culminating in a climax of opposing visual impulses. The project of Victorian empiricism, with its drive toward materialist perfectibility becomes, in *Romola*, a confession of the inherent instability of empirical data derived as sense impressions. Observation, the faculty of realist narrative, is mired in the deep memory of the body, the body that for Spinoza, ‘forgets nothing’.³⁸¹ This novel allowed Eliot the scope to push to its farthest limit the implications of Spinoza’s corporeal imagination; the result is a thrilling portrait of a mind *feeling* itself at work in heightened sensory incarnation.

Romola’s character is inseparable from our sense of her corporeality and her powerful, unsettling consciousness. This heroine gives rise to an exploration of expansive, and destructive intellectual and emotional capacity, and Eliot draws upon Spinoza in crafting its

³⁸⁰ Dianne F Sadoff’s psychoanalytic reading of *Romola*, otherwise fascinating in its Freudian insights, too hastily casts Romola as a passive heroine, who ‘dedicates herself to self-repression,’ accepting the finality of the word of the male-authority figures around her. Sadoff, “*Romola*: Trauma, Memory and Repression,” in *George Eliot*, ed. K. M. Newton (London: Longman, 1991), 138.

³⁸¹ This is Michèle Bertrand’s phrase, quoted in *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present*, by Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd (London: Routledge, 1999), 23.

phenomenological contours. The daily work of translating the *Ethics* that I described in the previous chapter was therapeutic for Eliot, providing ‘a kind of meditation, a support for her mind and feeling and a focus for her attention,’ at a time of trauma and isolation.³⁸² Despite its personal significance, there remains scant attention given to the novelist’s treatment of Spinoza’s theory of the affects, and even less examination of Eliot’s Spinozistic discourse in her Italian novel. Gatens is alone in considering *Romola* at any length through the framework of the Dutch philosopher’s work. As she remarks, it is in this novel that ‘Eliot gives clearest expression to some major themes in Spinoza’s political and ethical philosophy ... offer[ing] us a literary portrait of one who comes to possess knowledge of the third kind [Spinoza’s concept of intuition] and who comes to achieve blessedness’.³⁸³

Romola does indeed attain a higher condition of self-awareness than any of her fictional counterparts. Eliot’s modest judgement, however, that through her pen great ideas were able to speak only ‘brokenly,’ is my own point of departure when considering not only the influence of Spinoza’s thoughts on grief, but the coalescence of loss and vision in the text. Despite the general critical consensus of Romola’s eventual fulfilment and personal maturation, there is an undeniable brokenness to the heroine. Like the other novels examined in this thesis, *Romola* is steeped in personal loss, and this condition radiates out beyond her figure to implicate the narrative’s spatial, temporal and aesthetic structure. Romola’s maturation is essentially a protracted surrender to pain.

We have seen in the preceding chapter the centrality of the mind’s imaging both in Eliot’s aesthetic and Spinoza’s theory of the imagination. In *The Lifted Veil* a phantasmagoric,

³⁸² Elizabeth Deeds Ermath describes the depression that led Eliot to Spinoza’s work, as translator. Having eloped with Lewes, Eliot was sacrificed by family and friends to the strictures of social propriety. Translating the *Ethics* was ‘a kind of meditation, a support for her mind and feeling and a focus for her attention’. Ermath, *George Eliot* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985), 32.

³⁸³ Gatens, ‘George Eliot’s ‘Incarnation of the Divine’ in *Romola* and Benedict de Spinoza’s ‘Blessedness’: A Double Reading,’ *George Eliot – George Henry Lewes Studies*, 52-53 (September 2007), 84.

haunted perception gave rise to a troubled narrative of regressive repetition and despair: Latimer was driven to self-destruction by his inability to regulate and cohere his cognitive and sensual drives. In *Romola* Eliot redeems the senses, granting to them extraordinary palliative capacity, but leavens this treatment with a warning of the inevitable threat of delusion.

I

Revivification and the archive

Romola presents a teleology of character garnered from an experiential reality that resists conventional temporal sequence. The characters must contend with the indefatigable urgency of desires, which are animated by a trans-temporal vitality. Writing of what he reads as the novel's nostalgic project, Nicholas Dames remarks: 'A particularised recovery of the past, the genesis of *Romola*, becomes in its negotiation through narrative a nostalgic retrospect, which eliminates a "useless" past into a present perception and present value'.³⁸⁴ The site of the present, however, is not as smooth as Dames's reading implies; while I agree that the text thematises characters' intellectual impotence in various ways, I am unconvinced that there is a corresponding shucking off of the needless past; or, in any case, that this kind of historical splicing is enacted with any success. To argue that the novel unfolds by forsaking the particular for the symbolic, as Dames does,³⁸⁵ risks missing the problematic dialectic between these two

³⁸⁴ Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 209.

³⁸⁵ Dames argues impressively for a unique strand of 'recognition' at work in *Romola*, 'recognition-as-memory,' which 'achieves a washing-out of the past's specificities Recognition does not merely save the novel and its inhabitants from antiquarian, particularised, painful, or perilously attractive memories; it also opens the novel up to [an] overtly symbolic texture'. *Amnesiac Selves*, 226. While I am critical of certain aspects of his reading, Dames's interpretation of mnemonic function in *Romola* opens up exciting possibilities for scholarship.

terms, one that is never successfully resolved. One of the enigmas of this text is its symbolic play, weighting its objects (Tito's ring, Bardo's books, Dino's crucifix) with accretions of memory that cling to items of precious value. These objects are not so much nostalgic — placed 'in a very general realm of symbolic connotation,'³⁸⁶ — as they are unpalatable reminders of the spectral. It is more useful to diagnose a *failure* of abstraction (the symbol does not function effectively as nostalgic prophylactic): it cannot be neutered of its historical threat; the particular is simply too potent. There are two oppositional strands to this dynamic: in the character of Tito, there is a flight from the painful particular, manifesting in an eschewal of the demands of the visible; yet in the figure of Romola, we can recognise a hunger for the specific, the atoms of experience that invoke a history of pain to which she is oddly attached. Out of this interchange of symbol and detail arises Eliot's investigation into the process of mourning, as a discursively formed visual experience.

The writing of the novel was an anguished process for Eliot. The text bears the marks of its author's incredible labouring after historical veracity, the trauma of research and infinite remembering. 'Reading *Romola*,' Dames observes, 'we are very quickly taught the value of textual transmission ... so much so that critics have not hesitated to accuse Eliot of a Casaubon-like narrowness.'³⁸⁷ That struggle for an impossible fidelity to the past — which as we know from Eliot's letters and journals of the period, entailed a very physical and psychological anguish, poring over texts in Florence as her diaries document, walking the streets of the city in an effort to imagine as deeply as possible what the conditions of life really were — bears obvious and important traces in the portrayal of the heroine's lived torment, her sheer physiological *awareness* of loss. We watch Romola 'straining after something invisible,' (*R*, 178) just as her author peered relentlessly back into a past that often seemed to her helplessly

³⁸⁶ Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 226.

³⁸⁷ Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 210.

distant from her Victorian perspective. David Kurnick astutely remarks on the doubled phenomenology of the reading process, our consciousness of Eliot's excessive reading inescapably informing our own labours.³⁸⁸ That doubleness extends to encompass the transmission, the inheritance, of writer to reader, of a sense of textual regression: the layers of textual history altering the linguistic surface, so the texture becomes one of irreducible depth, built on a structure of inaccessibility. No other novel of Eliot's figures the process of impossible scholarship with the concerted intention of *Romola*. In the novel it is books that are the source of the heroine's greatest anxiety and most pressing grief. The reader of *Romola* does not feel herself in close proximity to the object (the realist device of representation), but looking instead at the world through opaque lenses.

The tremendous effort of casting her mind adrift in an Italian world of 300 years past to order the events of the period into a sequence of meaning was the greatest emotional and intellectual struggle of Eliot's career; no book wrung from her so much energy and despair. 'I began it [*Romola*] as a young woman, — I finished it an old woman,' she famously reported.³⁸⁹ Her journals of 1861-2 are punctuated with repetitions of anxiety and depression. Swamped in ancient texts, she was almost manic in her hunger to imbibe every written account of Italian history that she could, sending Lewes ('a sort of Italian Jackal') on almost daily expeditions to London bookstores in search of 'rare books, and vellum bound unreadabilities in all the second-hand book stalls of London.' 'Mrs Lewes is very well,' Lewes wrote to Blackwood in 1861, 'buried in musty old antiquities, which she will have to vivify.'³⁹⁰ Lewes's choice of verb indicates something pertinent, a process of resurrection, with the hint of a pejorative, that other readers, such as James, have taken as the most salient feature of *Romola*. Resurrection is

³⁸⁸ David Kurnick writes 'one's reading of the text feels continually haunted by the prior reading that has produced it,' noting that 'this novel...is perhaps the most laboriously researched of all Victorian historical fictions'. Kurnick, 'Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading: Drifting through *Romola*,' *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 42.3 (Fall, 2009), 492.

³⁸⁹ Quoted in Haight, *George Eliot: A Biography*, 362.

³⁹⁰ George Henry Lewes, letter to John Blackwood, 9 October 1861, in *The George Eliot Letters*, vol. 3, 457.

precisely the action of this text, not least in its plot twists: a lost brother restored; a father's hopes revived by the hope of producing one last masterpiece of scholarship; Baldassare's reappearance after his supposed death at the hands of slave-traders; and the heroine's futile quest to resurrect all three of these men, before at last undergoing her own process of resurrection. The repeated staging of revivification demonstrates the necessity of it as event, so that Eliot's act of restoring the moribund to life bears a similarity in function to Spinoza's concept of the body's replenishment: the unending passage of one form opening out into another, one desire grafted onto the next, in a monistic vision of subject-hood. The premature aging, the corpse-like figurations of the text as needy of the fresh blood of life; such notions seem to invoke the Gothic vision of *The Lifted Veil*. Most interestingly, it characterises the text's diction of mourning and cryptography. Its production involves a communion with spectres rather than an oxygenised past; a live burial. Unlike her successful pastoral romances, in writing this novel Eliot could not rely on her phenomenal imagination of rural England, yet she persisted in her labours to transfer from archival texts the precise textures of Florentine life.³⁹¹ In other words, representation needed to be extracted from the purely representational, a turning on its head of the terms of Victorian realism.

In a self-reflexive gesture, the suffocation of textual burial is a burden shared by Eliot's Florentine heroine. Romola endures an isolated and confined existence, as assistant to her blind humanistic scholar father, Bardo di Bardi. Oppressiveness, especially of a textual and dialectic kind, is what the novel most powerfully articulates. While Neil Hertz rightly argues that for Eliot, 'representing life ... necessarily involved engaging the proto-novelistic: the expressive, projective, inscriptive, and representational components of life,' there is also in *Romola* a conflictual thrill of aversion to textual knowledge and inscription.³⁹² As I will show, this

³⁹¹ Gordon S. Haight, *George Eliot: A biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 365.

³⁹² Hertz, *George Eliot's Pulse*, 138.

materialises in a flight from the hegemony of a dry hermeneutics to a pre-conscious, pre-verbal purity of sensation. Romola's 'truth of feeling,' fleetingly discovered in the climactic chapters of her sea-drift towards death and her strange waking in a mysterious village, is at least made manifest, given space to emerge; and on grounds other than the books of Bardo's library. It is a phenomenological knowing, an ontology rising out of Romola's carefully refigured imaginative capacity, forged from the matter of mourning.

II

Romola and Spinoza's Ethics

Romola explicitly foregrounds the limits of perception. As I have noted, the model of phenomenal consciousness is Spinozistic in its structure, but in its exploration of sensation the novel goes beyond any formulation found in the *Ethics*. In her portrait of Bardo, Eliot writes her most explicit treatment of physical blindness. There is also the psychic blindness of the novel's other mistreated father, Baldassare, whose great intellectual capacity is crippled by sharply defined sorrow. Any claims to knowledge in *Romola* are derived from phenomenological (re)orientation.

As Gatens has persuasively shown, Spinoza's concept of the imagination has largely been misconstrued, dismissed as a purely inadequate, dangerous form of engaging with the world, a necessary evil that must be passed through on the way to rationality and divine intuition. The extent to which Spinoza held our sense-impressions as purely destructive is a point of contention amongst scholars. Much of the critical opprobrium against the first kind of

knowledge stems from a single claim in the *Ethics*: that sensations are ‘the only cause of falsity’ which pertain ‘to all those ideas which are inadequate and confused’ (*E*, II, P41).

From this proposition Stuart Hampshire provides a portrait of sensory knowledge as irredeemable: ‘In so far as we are not engaged in pure thought, our mental life is a succession of ideas reflecting the successive modifications of the body in its interaction with other bodies, these ideas being logically unrelated to each other. Because such a sequence of ideas is never a logical sequence, sense-perception can never yield genuine knowledge’.³⁹³ Roger Scruton shares a similar view, because, as Spinoza closes the gap between the world as it objectively is, and our confused apprehension of it, most of us remain mired in ignorance: ‘a prime example of inadequacy [in Spinoza’s sense of the word] is sense-perception. . . . The ideas of imagination are the illogical reflections of processes that are inadequately comprehended.’³⁹⁴ Spinoza was emphatic that the affects must be cured and tamed ‘by the mind’s reasoning alone’ (*E*, 1v, 246), but he understood that most, if not all, of a life was lived precisely in the realm of the passions. His theory of knowledge rests upon these illogical impressions of things, which as Spinoza points out, are not in themselves false: ‘the mind does not err from the fact that it imagines’ (words that Eliot underlined in emphasis in her manuscript translation of the *Ethics*).³⁹⁵ One must strive to understand and discipline the senses, however, pursuing an active rather than purely passive engagement with impressions. Romola’s experience suggests that that distinction is not so well-defined as Spinoza’s dichotomy suggests.

The Ethics insists that the mind-body problem is a false schema: there is no such split, for the mind can know itself only through the body and vice versa.³⁹⁶ This new model leads Spinoza to what I suggest is a phenomenological grounding of intellect: ‘The human body does

³⁹³ Hampshire, *Spinoza* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951), 86.

³⁹⁴ Roger Scruton, *Spinoza* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986), 67.

³⁹⁵ Spinoza further adds that ‘the imaginations of the mind, considered in themselves, contain no error,’ *E*, II, P17, 130.

³⁹⁶ ‘The human mind is the idea itself, or knowledge of the human body.’ Spinoza, *The Ethics*, 131.

not know the human body itself, nor does it know that it exists, except through ideas of affections by which the body is affected' (*E*, 11. P19, 131). What both Hampshire and Scruton imply is that on the road to the freedom of reason and intuition, one somehow leaves behind the plight of sensation; instead, the emotional capacity of the body is *essential* to the formation of true ideas, although they are certainly not synonymous.³⁹⁷

By bringing together passion and reason, Spinoza grafted the truest experience to forms of love. For all his geometrical plotting of emotion, feeling is the stuff of Spinoza's metaphysics. Yet the breach between the world and our fallible notion of it is exploited by Eliot, who probes the problematic space between sensation and logic. Eliot's own translation of this part of the *Ethics* provides the firmest evidence of her interpretation of Spinozistic imagination. Her rendering of Spinoza's explanation of the three tiers of knowledge is less abrasive and uncompromising than other translations: she writes, 'it clearly appears we perceive many things and form universal notions: 1. From individual things presented by the senses to the intellect in a mutilated, confused, unorderly manner and such perceptions I call *cognitions from vague experience*'. In Eliot's parsing the next two levels, reason and intuition, are both categorised as cognitions, but different *in kind*: Eliot significantly groups all three modes of apprehension as cognitions, using the word 'unorderly' to better emphasise the vagueness of raw perceptions.³⁹⁸ The implication is that it is in the passage from perception to cognition that a breakage occurs, a disorder of images, resulting in a confusion of referents. The 'fault' then, lies not in the passivity of perception, but in the individual's failure to cohere that quale: a question of matter and form. Her own characters' struggles to synthesise sensory data attest to this, and Eliot's novel can be thought of as an ekphrasis of the mental pictures

³⁹⁷ Spinoza is clear to distinguish between images and ideas, indeed he remarks the common confusion of the two leads to great error. *Ethics*, 148.

³⁹⁸ Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Eliot, ed. Thomas Deegan (Salzburg: Universität Salzburg, 1981), 76.

that in the *Ethics* crowd our subjective reality.³⁹⁹ I do not intend to suggest that in *Romola* we see a clear progression from one stage of knowledge to another; on the contrary, I would argue that Eliot does not depict any such concise stages available to us. I do wish to argue, however, that in her novels it is pain, deep psychic suffering, in which self-forming truths are incarnate. The novelist inverts the philosopher's disciplinary emotions by portraying a character who finds truth in a kind of affective surrender (even a passivity), what David Carroll has described more broadly as the heroine's penetration of a new fictional reality.⁴⁰⁰ Only by giving herself entirely to loss, acceding to a new intimacy with dead things, does Romola acquire affective intuition, or, what is perhaps better described as a state of sensory grace.

I want to draw attention to a related strand of imagination, the dialectic of optical imagery we find in Spinoza that I pursued in the previous chapter, which gives added pathos to the complex interplay of visible and invisible in *Romola*. If Romola does indeed come at last to acquire Spinoza's apotheosis of knowledge, as Gatens argues, it is crucially *only* through an unabated state of loss: Romola's ascension to any reliable interpretation of the treacherous world in which she finds herself is essentially the consequence of refining her sensory faculty, which involves a blunting of her sensations in such a way as to prevent her from drowning (literally and metaphorically), a phenomenal sophistication that tragically eludes Maggie Tulliver, for example.⁴⁰¹ Dorothy Atkins observes that Eliot's 'successful' characters attain Spinoza's ideal of freedom from bondage to the passions, 'only because they understand the source and nature of their emotions'.⁴⁰² Romola's success, if we can indeed call it such, is by virtue of her acceptance of the limits of what she can see, an acknowledgement of the body's

³⁹⁹ I am employing here Thomas C. Connolly's broader definition of ekphrasis, which he argues is the usage now most common. Connolly, "Primitive Passions, Blinding Visions: Arthur Rimbaud's "Mystique" and a Tradition of Mystical Ekphrasis," *PMLA* 132.1 (2017), 105.

⁴⁰⁰ Carroll, *Conflict of Interpretations*, 2.

⁴⁰¹ Gatens, "George Eliot's Incarnation of the Divine," 83.

⁴⁰² Atkins, *George Eliot and Spinoza* (Salzburg: Institut Fur Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1978), 11. Atkins's book is the only monograph on the subject, but, while her work is seminal, she considers *Romola* only in passing.

volatile, 'mutilated' awareness (in Spinoza's term), and a leaning upon that ignorance to form empathetic community with the other. Having once experienced a purity of sensation, she relinquishes its cupola of freedom, choosing instead the bonds of duty and filial memory.

III

Blindness and the mnemonic image

Eliot begins *Romola* with a 'Proem', an imaginative exercise of quasi-mystical dimension. It is 1492, and the reader is enjoined to look back from her Victorian moment, out over the beauty of Florence, a surrogate for our reading self. Seeing through this ghost's eyes, we traverse the River Arno with its bridges, the outline of San Miniato, the sturdy walls of the city that remain unchanged. The images of Florence, too, are the same, the 'sunlight and shadows on the grand walls,' which retain their beauty. The city Eliot conjures is eternal in its imagery, despite the welter of change. The Proem, often ignored altogether in the criticism, clearly establishes the terms of Eliot's experiment of embodiment. First is the expansion of a singular vision into the depth of field of a heterogeneous, encompassing perspective, in which the reader's gaze merges with that of the spectral narrator. In animating the ghostly past with the pulse of the present, Eliot also signals her interest in the state of the individual's sensory condition, our lives as they are *felt* through time. Florence is a symbol, its structural integrity necessary to the author's project of telescoping the particular amidst the abstract, the transient amidst the eternal. Proto-cinematic visual tracking of the city-space is also a psycho-geographic exercise, grounding awareness in the specificities of place. Despite her Comtean positivist inheritance, Eliot here establishes no less than a metaphysical framework, locating the individual in a distinct spatio-temporal sphere, anchoring awareness to finite substance, but also to a vision of transcendence. The reader looks through dead eyes. The Spirit yearns to match remembered images of life with the view of the city as it is now, beginning the leitmotif of imagistic correspondence and dissonance, the ancient partnered with the incipient state of

things. The word image appears countless times in this novel, Eliot continually recurring to it as a touchstone.

The heroine is a beautiful, intellectually precocious young woman, who, after the early death of her mother, and the disappearance of her brother, Dino, lives with her father in the Via de' Bardi. As amanuensis to the blind Bardo, Romola spends her days beside him in the villa's library, transcribing for him, reading to him, seeking out whichever books memory yields up to him. In consequence 'she is in a state of girlish simplicity and ignorance concerning the world outside her father's books' (*R*, 58). Bearing up patiently beneath Bardo's testiness, Romola must soothe his sense of impotence now that blindness has forced him from active scholarship. They live in a state of obsolescence, with little relation to the city outside the decrepit walls of their home. Romola's duty is to maintain for her father the link of connection between the world as he remembers it and as it is: he 'perpetually seek[s] the assurance that the outward fact continued to correspond with the image which lived to the minutest detail in his mind' (*R*, 49). The library of paternal affection and tyranny (they are almost indistinguishable in the text), is the single most important textual space, in which is played out a primal scene of light through darkness.⁴⁰³ Here she must be the spatial and temporal touchstone for her father, compensating for his sightlessness by mapping the geometry of his remembrance through her body's movements around the room as he directs her to this or that book on the shelves (49), the umbilical link between Bardo's cryptographic correspondences and the facticity of the present. It is a dynamic that I pointed to in the final portrait of Jane and the blinded Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, and here retains its psycho-gothic implications.

Portraying father and daughter bent over their books, Eliot crafts an impression of doubleness. Father and daughter are both pale, like every other object in the room, and

⁴⁰³ Isobel Armstrong, "The Lady of Shalott,' Optical Elegy," *Multimedia Histories*, ed. James Lyon, et al., (Exeter UP, 2014), 181.

perpetually fading into indistinctness. To Bardo's vacant eyes, his daughter is a refracted vision, 'a glimmering of something bright when she comes near him' (39), as though she were out of focus. Living in a state of etiolated light, all objects are 'livid with long burial'. Coupled through their occupation and their common loss, they form a similar outline:

The blind father sat with head uplifted and turned a little aside towards his daughter, as if her were looking at her. His delicate paleness ... made all the more perceptible the likeness between his aged features and those of the young maiden ... There was the same refinement of brow and nostril in both, counterbalanced by a full though firm mouth and powerful chin, which gave an expression of proud tenacity and latent impetuosity: an expression carried out in the backward poise of the girl's head, and the grand line of her neck and shoulders. ... The question [of character] must be decided by the eyes ... But the eyes of the father had long been silent, and the eyes of the daughter were bent on the Latin pages of Politian (48-9).

Romola's physical inheritance is matched by the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, but this is of a rigid order. Sightlessness symbolises the mystery of individual consciousness, and the darkened library tropes on what Isobel Armstrong describes as 'the new science of seeing,' referencing Newton's splitting of light out of the lens; the eye, frequently described in Victorian optics as a chamber, is signified by this gloomy space, too.⁴⁰⁴ Romola is afflicted by a type of blindness: her father's voided eyes are equal to her learned myopia, seeing only what he has conditioned her to see. The pair exist in a sphere of mutual anticipation of need (just as Brontë's Jane and Rochester become a single perceptive body), albeit one that is inequitable,

⁴⁰⁴ Armstrong, 'Optical Elegy,' 181-2.

as Bardo is the more dominant corporeal presence, Romola the imitation.⁴⁰⁵ As copy, Romola is repeatedly sketched as mere form and outline: she walks ‘with the queenly step which was the simple action of her tall, finely-wrought frame, without the slightest conscious adjustment of herself’ (49). Fluid as her drapery, her ignorance of her body is a part of her function, for she is no more than shell, her perspective shaped entirely by her role as daughter and replacement son. Romola must strain to be her father’s perceptive translator, in the process nullifying her own sensory individuation. Yet Eliot’s narrator makes clear the unnatural burden of deprivation: while she may look like a vision of immovable, brilliant marble, ‘the most penetrating observer would hardly have divined that this proud pale face, at the slightest touch on the fibres of affection or pity, could become passionate with tenderness’ (58). In her obsessive veiling, Romola signals her father’s blindness, inheriting his non-recognition of her as a refusal to admit subjective projection. This self-abnegation is amplified by the fact that she exists only as a dulled, historical image in her father’s imagination: ‘it seems to me I discern some radiance from thee,’ he cries. ‘Ah! I know how all else looks in this room, but thy form I only guess at. Thou art no longer the little woman six years old, that faded for me into darkness’ (55). With no one to reflect her body, she reneges possession of her image. Bardo tries to read his daughter through touch, discerning her height and figure, but evincing little interest in her thoughts. Romola’s weak glow is a “light to the [blind] mind” which he translates into an anachronistic text of memory, reading her form selfishly in an effort to see the past he has lost.

Swiftly interpreting her father’s memories into movement, Romola’s gestures are like braille, but the objects under her fingers speak only of abeyance: ‘clasping her fingers tightly she looked with a sad dreariness in her young face at the lifeless objects around her – the

⁴⁰⁵ Bardo is highly sensitive to Romola’s presence, as suits their doubling function; he is ‘usually susceptible to Romola’s movements and eager to trace them’. Although he forgets her presence altogether in reminiscing about Dino, ‘too entirely preoccupied by the pain of rankling memories to notice her departure from his side’ (52).

parchment backs, the unchanging mutilated marble, the bits of obsolete bronze and clay' (52).⁴⁰⁶ Made painfully aware of her unsuitability to her father's purposes, she is a victim of his intractable grief: as she kneels to comfort him, Bardo's hand, 'with its massive prophylactic rings, [fell] a little too heavily on the delicate blue-veined back of the girl's right [hand], so she bit her lip to prevent herself from starting' (53). The resonance of masochism is unmistakable.

Romola is a study in haptics: the touch of fingers upon the page (with echoes of Eliot's own hands searching ancient texts), Romola's heightened sensitivity to textures, the synonymy of touch and visual perception, and hands glittering with rings, the novel's most significant symbol. The discretion between tactile and specular loses distinction as each character grapples with the impairment of one or more of the senses, compensating by the creation of a new sensory combination. The result is a plurality of sense-perception, undetermined by traditional categories, functioning as a radar of self-governance. Sensory filtering and organisation become existential, a primary mode of survival.

This is made poignant in the entrance of Tito to the Via de' Bardi, a set-piece of complex tactile-visual associations. Introduced to his new amanuensis, the old man yearns to touch Tito's hand: 'Bardo had stretched out his aged white hand, and Tito immediately placed his dark but delicate and supple fingers within it. Bardo's cramped fingers closed over them, and he held them there for a few minutes in silence.' He progresses to Tito's face and hair, sparking a visual exchange of entreaty between the young man and woman:

'Bardo passed his hand again and again over the long curls and grasped them a little, as if their spiral resistance made his inward vision clearer; then he passed his hand over the brow and cheek, tracing the profile

⁴⁰⁶ Brail books first appeared in England in the 1820s, making their way from the Continent, in the hope that blind readers would now be able to access the same forms of learning – books, periodicals, sermons – as sighted people. For a brief but fascinating introduction to the subject, see Vanessa Warne, "Blindness and Design: *Kneass' Philadelphia Magazine for the Blind* (1899)," *Cahiers victoriens et édourdiens* 84 (Autumn, 2016): I-II.

with the edge of his palm and fourth finger... “He must be very unlike thy brother, Romola: and it is the better. You see no visions, I trust, my friend?’ (71-2).

The scene references that earlier, violent moment of touch between father and daughter, and here, it is physical *difference* that Bardo seeks. With hands that remember the painful memory of his son, he traces an outline that both breaks with and preserves his pain, joining the young incipient lovers together under the aegis of his suffering. It is an encounter of tragic irony: Tito will betray both Romola and Bardo with a callousness that Dino never possessed. Lost in ancient grief, Bardo’s touch misinterprets one body for another, a faulty transmission of the past as present. It is a deceptive braille of the flesh, too, for Tito’s greatest skill (accounting for much of his charm) is his illegibility: his face is repeatedly described as uniformly smooth and pleasant. It is a non-signifying, endlessly malleable face that, as Piero di Cosimo exults, is ripe for the painter’s brush (42). Meechal Hoffman argues that in *Romola* Eliot shifted the stakes of her psychological portraiture, concentrating attention on those moments when the other remains unknowable.⁴⁰⁷ This is one such moment in a series of instances of resistance that mark Tito’s evil, belying any clear pursuit of materialist truth.

Bardo admits that ‘even when I could see, it was with the great dead that I lived; while the living often seemed to me mere spectres – shadows dispossessed of true feeling and intelligence’ (51). Bardo’s language insistently links sight and pain, whereby the terms of the seen are distorted: the living is ghostly, while the dead are potently visible. His learning is his one consolation, his one link to the sightedness he has lost. And Eliot foregrounds a different model of the acquisition of learning, through Bardo’s touch (relayed first through Romola’s fingers). Like Tito’s adopted father, Baldassare, Bardo clings to his intellectual earnings, as a

⁴⁰⁷ Meechal Hoffman, “Her soul cried out for some explanation”: Knowledge and Acknowledgment in George Eliot’s *Romola*, *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*, vol. 68.1 (2016), 45.

buttress against the vertigo of his blindness (51). He is Orpheus, fatefully and irrevocably looking back and unable to direct his gaze to the future: ‘for blindness acts like a dam, sending the streams of thought backward along the already-travelled channels and hindering the course onward’ (52).

This is a curious interweaving — the irresolvable connection of physical sight, and a consciousness of the spectrum of memories and time. Spinoza accounts for this indelible association of ideas in the imagination, whereby the image memory invokes is static and a-temporal, leading one inexorably along the chain of memories that gather round the body’s remembered affect: ‘in this way,’ he writes, ‘each of us will pass from one thought to another, as each one’s association has ordered the images of things in the body.’⁴⁰⁸ Bardo’s blind gaze is forever directed inwards and to the past. The causal chain of imagery is complicated by his visual deficit: with no new images to supplant the line of his plangent mnemonic trajectory, it retains its original, now tautological order.⁴⁰⁹ His head poised ever upwards ‘gave the idea that behind the curtain of his blindness he saw some imaginary’ figure, a gesture of searching and ‘straining for the invisible’. His body manifests the missing object, his loss of sight a signifier of his mourning. It is evocative of Eliot’s plagued writing process, her struggle to create a vivid sensory life out of the archive. The scholar’s portrait begins to look rather like Eliot’s self-conscious wrestling with the realist form itself, an allusion to the inherent failures of writing the world as it truly is (or was). The dissatisfactions in *Romola* suggest that, as George Levine writes, Eliot ‘understood the limits of a naïve representationalism and the carceral implications

⁴⁰⁸ Spinoza furnishes this proposition with the well-known example of a soldier who spies some horse-hoof prints in the sand and thus ‘will immediately pass from the thought of a horse to the thought of a horseman, and from that to the thought of war, and so on’. *Ethics*, II. P18, 131.

⁴⁰⁹ Hume makes some interesting remarks on blindness in passing, in an attempt to refute the objection to his precedence of the senses in the order of thought. ‘If it happens, from a defect of the organ, that a man is not susceptible of any species of sensation, we always find that he is as little susceptible of the correspondent idea. A blind man can form no notion of colours...[but] restore...that sense in which he is deficient by opening this new inlet for the ideas, and he finds no difficulty in conceiving these objects.’ An idea, he continues, ‘can have access to the mind’ only ‘by the actual feeling and sensation’. Bardo would seem to fall in his category of exceptions to this rule, however, being a blind man whose approximation of sight is uncanny. *Inquiry*, 28.

of her narratives.’ Her Italian novel was the first, continues Levine, ‘to face directly, in its form and subject, the crisis of realism.’⁴¹⁰ Levine’s notion of the carceral nicely captures the novel’s multi-faceted figuring of entrapment and resistance, of escape and return.

⁴¹⁰ Levine, ‘Introduction: George Eliot and the art of realism,’ in *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 9-10.

IV

In sympathetic vertigo

The portrait of the city that emerges from Eliot's prose is not realised in pictorial affinity. Its architecture is instead structured entirely by her characters' perceptions. Florence is *felt* rather than objectively drawn, all details assimilated into subjective experience. This sensory aesthetic establishes the terms of embodiment that Eliot is interested in exploring, re-shaping the chaotic urban space as lived experience. Florence is habitually painted in festival costume, so that we rarely see the sky above a city that seems to be in perpetual party mood. The colours of San Giovanni's *fiesta*, for example, are lurid, blue draperies hanging from every window, 'providing another tent than the sky' in a *trompe l'oeil* effect. Every available wall is 'covered, at the height of forty feet or more' with 'this superincumbent blue'.⁴¹¹ The panorama of city-life conspires in a specular tumult of sensory chaos, the collision of colours, sounds, masked faces, and costumes, while identities are chameleonic and unstable. The impression is one of artificiality, a virtual space of screens and reflected light, turned upon the crowd as intoxicating colour. Tito, 'bright in the midst of brightness,' is high above the festival lined passageways, commanding a broad view from the window, his body positioned both in and outside. He is thus ambiguously placed, as is the character of the city-space, wherein 'private and public spaces run into one another'.⁴¹² The dissolution of intrinsic and extrinsic subjective space involves the merging of the interior and exterior in the physical realm too.

⁴¹¹ In chapter 22 we find the same description of the Piazza del Duomo, 'covered in its holiday sky of blue drapery,' with colourful banners on display', marking out a distinct juxtaposition of light where 'the artificial rainbow light of the piazza ceased, and the grey morning fell on the sombre stone' 213.

⁴¹² This is Shona Elizabeth Simpson's description of Eliot's Florence. Simpson, "Mapping *Romola*: Physical Space, Women's Place," in *From Author to Text: Re-reading George Eliot's Romola*, ed. Caroline Levine and Mark W. Turner (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1998), 58.

The new optics of mid-century saw colour as another reflective surface, as unstable as glass.⁴¹³ In this scene, Eliot plays with two of the primary colours of the spectrum of light — red and blue — manipulating the riot of colour into a disorder of the psyche. This draws us back to Goethe’s colour theory and his hypotheses of the eye’s sensitivity to movement. In Goethe’s formulation, colour is a trick of the eye: ‘If we transmit a luminous image through concave glasses, it is dilated,’ he writes, ‘the image appears edged with blue’, a description that captures the homology of eye and colour distortion; both dilate in accordance with light.⁴¹⁴ Piero di Cosimo, often the mouthpiece of wisdom in the novel, lies ‘in wait for the secrets of colour that [are] sometimes to be caught from the floating banners and the chance groupings of the multitude,’ watching ‘the endless play of light and shadow’ (85). That endlessness of immaterial hues is haunting for Tito, who is sickened by ‘those whirling towers, which would soon make me fall from the window in sympathetic vertigo.’ The ‘towers,’ giant circles of hollow wood, are painted with ‘successive circles ... the hollowness having the further advantage that men could stand inside these hyperbolic tapers and whirl them continually, so as to produce a phantasmagoric effect, which, when considering the towers were numerous, must have been calculated to produce dizziness on a truly magnificent scale.’ The ‘hollow’ and ‘hyperbolic’ circles recall Brontë’s carnival phantasmagoria during Lucy Snowe’s drugged night-walk, and here the effect is similarly sinister in its expression of consciousness. The towers are a medieval ‘philosophical toy,’ punning on the Victorian thaumatrope and its class of optical entertainments. Wheatstone’s stereoscope, ‘the most significant form of visual imagery in the nineteenth century,’ introduced depth to the viewer,⁴¹⁵ a hypnotic depthlessness in fact. Tito’s ‘sympathetic vertigo’ pairs him figuratively with the men spinning their hollow devices, as though the visual stimulus merges incontestably with the observer’s experience, in

⁴¹³ Armstrong, ‘Optical Elegy,’ 184.

⁴¹⁴ Goethe, *Theory of Colours*, 130-1.

⁴¹⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 116 and 119.

a stereoscopic perspective. The binocular parallax of the stereoscopic view is inverted, though, pushed back upon Tito as a delusional scene, as the image he observes resists unity. Like Newton's reflexible rays of light, which are turned back upon themselves by the medium upon which they fall,⁴¹⁶ the surface of the world operates as a repressive subjective field for Tito, giving back to him what he yearns to evade. Tito's optical sensitivity is proof, Bonaparte writes, of his inability to live on any other level than the purely empirical, or as Spinoza might describe it, his sinking deeper into the immersive illusions of the imagination.⁴¹⁷ In this transposition of surface and subject, Eliot signals her interest in retinal disorder and its psychic implications, plotting an uneasy synthesis of the optical and affective planes.⁴¹⁸

The circle is the most significant form in the novel, most notably in its appearance as rings worn and exchanged, but also in more abstract appearances. The roundness in the festival scene is repeatedly recreated, and Tito, the character whose very fate in the novel will prove to be horrifyingly circular, whose wearing and then selling of Baldassare's ring motivate the plot proper, is particularly conscious of it as form. Contrived mercurial optics and vertigo betray a weakness in him, the first sign of a flaw in his visible world, frustrating his desire to control his perspectival frame. The immateriality of colour and form make him feel his alien quality (he is uncomfortable about his Greek heritage), and the ungovernable patterns reveal his eye's vulnerability. Something at the margins of vision threatens — the threat of Baldassare's return, whom Tito wishes dead. Baldassare's figure comes to haunt at the corners of every frame as he stalks his son through the streets, the malevolent, yet abstract visual frisson of the *festa* resolving into the older man's form. Tito has 'an unconquerable aversion to anything unpleasant,' and Baldassare's suffering, of which he is keenly aware, is one such distasteful

⁴¹⁶ Isaac Newton, *Opticks* (Canada: Dover, 1952), 3.

⁴¹⁷ Bonaparte, *The Triptych and the Cross*, 50.

⁴¹⁸ The experience of viewing the stereoscopic image, composed of two separate images, one for each eye, is disturbing, yet seductive, and my own impression is of an utterly immersive vision. Isobel Armstrong describes the three-dimensional picture as having a 'preternatural solidity ... we see in, round, beyond and almost behind stereoscopic images'. See 'Optical Elegy,' 186.

association. In his anxiety, Tito spies Tessa, recognising ‘the sweet round blue-eyed face under a white hood — immediately lost in the narrow border of heads, where there was a continual eclipse of round’ features (92). Tessa’s desirability consists in her quality of roundness, which is repeatedly invoked at her every appearance, another figure of the circle pattern that shapes Tito’s fate.

Each object in the parade is displaced by another. Spinoza claims that visual impressions act on the mind, forcing the body into a passive condition, in which delusive passions gain precedence. The arbitrary composition of images is the cause of our inadequate and confused ideas, leading us to fall victim to illusions: ‘The human body, being limited, is capable of forming distinctly only a certain number of images at the same time. If that number is exceeded, the images will begin to be confused, and if the number of images the body is capable of forming distinctly in itself at once is greatly exceeded, they will all be completely confused with one another’ (*E*, II, P40, 140). Tito is unable to order the panoply of objects his eye takes in, so that he groups them into one fateful idea: fear, his governing emotion. Tessa’s round loveliness is ‘eclipsed’ by another, more searing impression, the face of a monk peering up at Tito from the crowd and ‘fixing on him a gaze that seemed to have more meaning in it than the ordinary passing observation of a stranger there was a faint suggestion in it’ (86). Once within the mass of people, Tito is assaulted by the recurring image of the friar, ‘whose face had some irrecoverable association for him: Why should a sickly fanatic, worn with fasting, have looked at *him* in particular ... Folly! Such vague memories hang about the mind like cobwebs ... best to sweep them away at a dash’ (94). The friar is in fact Romola’s lost brother, now dying, a man whom Tito has never seen, but whose resemblance to his sister sparks an unconscious recognition. The fleetingly spectral image thus stands in for plot nodes, so that the story gathers a nebulous atmosphere, the portrayal of the concrete dogged by an apparitional volatility.

The pressures wrought upon Tito's senses, his 'oblique view' of things (150) and the physical, spatial, temporal energies that dog him, force him, albeit incompletely, to acknowledge painful sensations. Eliot displays keen awareness of how incendiary sensations function as a vice upon Tito, exerting pressure with each new twist of deceit: 'He must feel the smart and the bruise in spite of himself' (150). Illicitly 'married' to Tessa, he is relieved by her of the pressures of identity, a man without 'detail'. Tessa sees his face as an emblem of abstracted goodness, 'he [is] simply a voice and a face to her, something come from paradise,' not a particular man, with a particular history. Accustomed to harshness, Tessa could be said to give birth to Tito as a remedy for her intense aloneness, an 'imaginary companion ... born of her own lovingness' (107).

As his returned father tracks his every movement through Florence with the tenacity of a starved hunter Tito feels himself prey in the city streets, his paranoia expressed in his visceral spatial alertness. He attempts to narrow his gaze to eliminate the shadows of that threatening figure, but '[o]ur eyes are so constructed ... that they take in a wide angle without asking any leave of our will' (194). This portrait is in stark contrast to the sleek youth who first entered Florence, with his untarnished 'well-opened eyelid with its unwearied breadth of gaze ... perfectly pellucid lenses [and] undimmed dark of a rich brown iris' (102). As Starobinski writes, 'sight opens all space to desire, but desire is not satisfied with seeing. ... The gaze, which enables consciousness to escape from the place occupied by the body, is an *excess* in the strict sense of the word. ... To feel and to see are often the same thing.'⁴¹⁹ Although Tito has 'refused to see more than the shadow of' his guilt, the 'inward image' he would suppress emerges all the more violently as his lines of vision begin to lose their singular track, giving admittance to the ugly facts of his hidden life (96-7). In the days after encountering Baldassare on the steps of the Duomo — a recreation of a primal scene, as the father grabs his son, and

⁴¹⁹ Starobinski, *The Living Eye*, 4. Original emphasis.

Tito is aghast with horror at the sight of the other man's face — his path through the streets is notably encumbered: he lurks, losing all the arrogance of his former posture. While Baldassare 'wants putting into a cage,' (222) it is his son who is prisoner. Tito's city begins to grow strange, alien in its temporality, its indifferent vacancies filled now with renewed images of intimate fears:

It was not a long walk, but, for Tito, it was stretched out like the minutes of our morning dreams: the short spaces of street and piazza held memories, and previsions, and torturing fears, that might have made the history of months. He felt as if a serpent had begun to coil round his limbs. Baldassare living, and in Florence, was a living revenge, which would no more rest than a winding serpent would rest until it had crushed its prey (222)

Once again, we can see the phantasmal narrative, a 'history' of shadowy frames, taking up a nightmarish correspondence with the primary plot events, one story-line haunting the other, just as one face over-writes and eclipses the first. That imbrication is a manifestation of the antagonistic dynamic that structures Eliot's exploration of optics. Tito's negation of the visual signs of his crime, his wilful blindness to his other textual plot, acquires a murderous force, the 'memories and previsions' threatening to extinguish his very life. As he becomes more solipsistically sighted, the city space constricts in metaphors of strangulation. Tito's senses lose their shielding quality (Romola always feels that her husband 'had the power of seeing everything without seeming to see it' [383]), and his world implodes. His navigation of space is suddenly compromised, as the city he has confidently wandered, repeatedly naming the streets he walks each day with careful control, denies his freedom of linear movement. Moments after deciding to sell his father's ring — the greatest symbol of his betrayal — he finds himself 'pushed towards the middle of the piazza and back again, without the power of

determining his own course. In this zigzag way he was carried along to the end of the piazza,' pushed into 'a deep recess formed by an irregularity in the line of houses' (141). From this imprisoning pocket he is forced to look up to gather his bearings, but 'the dim waving lanterns [left] all objects indistinct except when they were seen close under the fitfully moving lights' (141). All elements conspire to enforce the fatality of Tito's choices, the creeping myopia of his perceptions aggravated by his eschewal of duty to his father and his wives. After denying Baldassare on the steps of the Duomo, every facet of Tito's perception communicates fear, a sensation so palpable that he understands it as a 'blighting disease', a 'pain' that lacerates body and mind (223). Tito has 'a face that expresses fear well,' a point brought into focus by Piero di Cosimo's portrait: '[Tito] saw himself ... with his face turned away ... and an expression of such intense fear in the dilated eyes and pallid lips, that he felt a cold stream through his veins, as if he were being thrown into sympathy with his imaged self' (186). That doppelgänger is a *mise-en-abyme*, the effect of which is to heighten almost to exactness the two images — the man and the painted image, for, in beholding it, Tito's face begins to visibly merge with his portrait. The spectre of his past, the symbol of aggressive mourning that Baldassare represents, is continually pressed upon Tito's perception. 'Tito had begun to dislike recognition, which was a claim from the past' (140); likeness is rendered an importunate visual threat. Tito is the novel's blind spot: for Dino he is a man effaced, for the Florentines of his circle, he is slickly beautiful, all surface, and he dies an enigma.

V

The unreturned gaze

Baldassare has returned to seek his beloved adopted son, the ‘helpless child’ whom he fostered, and his grief is revealed to have a long gestation in unrequited love:

‘I was a loving fool ... I watched [Tito] ... to see if he would care for *me* over and above the good he got from me. I would have torn open my breast to warm him with my life-blood if I could only have seen him care a little for the pain of my wound ... Fool! ... And yet I watched till I believed I saw what I watched for. When he was a child he lifted soft eyes towards me, and held my hand willingly: I thought, this boy will surely love me a little: because I give my life to him and strive that he shall know no sorrow, he will care a little when I am thirsty – the drop he lays on my parched lips will be a joy to him ... Curses on him! ... It is all a lie – this world is a lie’ (270).

The terms of Baldassare’s rage are structured by an optically transactional drive, a visual deficit of love to recompense his own surfeit of affection. Verbs of sight work here to fuel the violence of his grief, which ironically has its source in a failed visual reciprocity: Tito *would* not see the father’s pain. His anguish is provoked by his sense of Tito’s disaffection, for his son has failed to deliver on the implicit promise of sacrificial devotion that Baldassare’s solicitude demands. He figures his psychic wounds in biblical proportions, in which love is ‘crushed out’ of life, extracted with all the violence of rage. The tender supplication of the child’s gaze, which held a promise for Baldassare of his son’s continued recognition of love, is now, in the light of Tito’s disavowal, conflated with the son’s blind gaze of indifference. The terms of this optical

mourning are strikingly similar to that of Latimer's vanished maternal gaze in *The Lifted Veil*. A whole history of grief is thus brought together in two contrary actions of vision.

The image of his loss springs from a failed visual encounter: Tito's gaze has not only looked upon him without that requisite love, but with a feigned unrecognition. On the steps of the church, Tito repudiates his father's gaze, rejecting the parent's claim upon him. Baldassare, then, must look elsewhere for the gaze of a loving other, and he finds it in the tragedy of his own mourning image. In a pool of water that he hopes might be a 'mirror for him,' he wishes to 'contemplate himself slowly,' to 'look earnestly at the image of himself,' and detect any traces of imbecility that might explain his son's rejection. The arbitrary amnesia from which he suffers, ravaging his intellectual abilities and much of his memory, has given to his appearance 'a blank confusion ... as of a man suddenly smitten with blindness.' The terms of his affliction are deep indeed, for it is impossible to distinguish between his ontological loss — his identity wasted, his mind 'stunned and bewildered' by a non-recognition of self — and his sense of betrayal. He wants only to 'meet with eyes that will remember me,' to know that 'I am not alone in the world.' His reflection in the pool, the unrecognisable, sorrowing man, merges with 'that self from which his revenge seemed to be a thing apart; and he felt as if the image too heard the silent language of his thought' (270), the image giving a dualistic identity that is then abstracted. His 'primary need and hope' is to 'see a slow revenge,' which must unfold 'under the same sky ... where he himself had been forsaken.' His self-reference becomes impersonal: he is solely 'an undying hate,' a despised body merely, 'which was to be the instrument of a sublime vengeance' upon Tito. The imagistic sequence of uniting one abstract image of self to another creates a substitute personhood, emptied out of all substance other than overriding pain. Premised on another's destruction, de-personalised in the extreme, Baldassare's virtual selfhood is vapidly unaware of anything but the exigencies of the body's needs. He becomes the image of his hate, given back to him in the water's visionless gaze.

Intriguingly, Baldassare's vengeance gathers to its purpose his own parental resentment, in this case a maternal sundering. His mother's lost affection is symbolised by an amulet, given to him as a child. 'He might long ago have thrown it away as a relic of his dead mother's superstition; but he had thought of it as a relic of her love, and had kept it' (271). Now, though, his urge to destroy his son occupies the place where affection once was — 'all piety was transmuted into a just revenge'. That transmutation will be literally enacted, again in the terms of economy: 'He bit and tore [it],' until the little bag is emptied of its prize, a jewel worth the price of a dagger, ripe for pawning. A maternal love becomes a paternal hatred, familial inheritance reduced to objects of monetary value. Yet the gravitational morality of George Eliot's fictional universe blunts Baldassare's dagger at the moment of attempted murder, just as Tito's profiting from the selling of his father's ring instigates his own downfall. It is clear that all suffering is not alike in *Romola*, for Romola's paternal bonds, symbolised in Bardo's vast library, are sold off without her knowledge, and this marks the crucial difference between the contrasted family couples. Romola's love does not inhere solely in those books, despite her father's insistence that her homage must be an intellectual one, forged in the language of the relic. Relics are de-sacralised throughout the novel, most spectacularly in Savanarola's 'bonfire of the vanities.'⁴²⁰

Simone Weil's distinction between suffering and affliction is useful in understanding the various experiences of loss Eliot explores in the novel. 'In the realm of suffering, affliction is something unique, specific and irreducible. It is quite a different thing from simple suffering. It takes possession of the soul and marks it ... with its own particular mark, the mark of slavery'. For Weil, loss is an experience of God, a mechanism that blinds the sufferer,

⁴²⁰ There is much more to be said on the fate of the object as relic in *Romola*, and if here I have hazarded a rather sweeping designation of certain artifacts, it is simply that the focus of my discussion here does not allow for space to pursue this further.

presenting her with a choice of the image or the void, ‘to keep their eyes turned towards God through all the shocks,’ or to look away:

It is not that God’s providence is absent, it is by his Providence that God willed necessity as a blind mechanism. If the mechanism were not blind there would not be any affliction. Affliction is above all anonymous; it deprives its victims of their personality and turns them into things. It is indifferent, and it is the chill of this indifference – a metallic chill – which freezes all those it touches, down to the depth of their soul. They will never find warmth again. They will never again believe that they are anyone.

Weil continues in a dialect of submerged light: ‘Affliction causes God to be absent for a time, more absent than a dead man, more absent than light in the utter darkness of a cell ... During this absence there is nothing to love. What is terrible is that if, in this darkness where there is nothing to love, the soul ceases to love ... The soul has to go on loving in the void, or at least to go on wanting to love’. This description reads uncannily like the conditions of Baldassare’s anguish, symptomatic of affliction, rather than suffering (in Weil’s binary formulation). The darkness recalls Milton’s blindness, yet Milton affirms the creative act despite, or even because of his suffering, while Baldassare rejects all possibility of love, or, following Weil’s description, his soul refuses to go on loving in the silence of affliction. What prevents Romola from falling into murderous affliction? While I will return to Romola’s case in detail, for now it is sufficient to place her in Weil’s category of the sufferer who is prepared to endure mourning, where Baldassare is representative of those ‘plunged into affliction before they are ready to receive it,’ who become ‘killers of souls’.⁴²¹ To ‘accept the existence of affliction as a distance,’ claims Weil, is to survive it; those who listen for God’s voice, which is a vibration

⁴²¹ Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God* (London: Oxford UP, 1968), 170-3.

of silence, and marry that note to a capacity to love, can avoid the self-hatred of the deepest mourning.⁴²² It is only Romola who gives herself up to the silent voice of the world. I do not here wish to fold Eliot's complex explication of psychic agony into Weil's dualistic structure (the elision of general suffering as immaterial is just one problem to note in passing), but to point out a resonance in their respective gestures towards a kind of submissive mourning, which resides in non-resistance, in the subduing of the ego's vanities. For both thinkers, a state of grace is engendered out of an acceptance of distance, although Eliot's heroines are imbued with the author's cognisance of the self-abnegation and masochism implicated in surrender. Gilbert and Gubar interpret Romola's response to Tito's perfidy as unnecessary martyring, transforming her rage into divine submissiveness, and 'enthralment' to male authority. 'Such modern-day Antigones are lonely, ineffective creatures, whose acts of loyalty are invariably suicidal'. They suggest that Baldassare acts out the revenge of which his betrayed wife is too afraid, representing the 'Satanic' extension of Romola's 'angelic passivity'⁴²³

I think the models of mourning that Eliot sets out possess a nuance that is disallowed by that interpretation. Most notable is the tincture of religious eroticism (I am thinking here of Bataille's concept of *erotism*) in Baldassare's lust to assassinate Tito. Any one of his monologues on his unrequited passion shows the complex taboo of their relations: 'His whole soul had been thrilled into immediate unreasoning belief in that eternity of vengeance where he ... might clutch for ever an undying traitor, and hear that fair smiling hardness cry and moan with anguish' (270). Bataille stresses the religious origin of our carnal inner life, and Baldassare's existential passion flirts with transgression and taboo, manifesting incestuous desire (a feature, too, of the proto-Gothic elements in *Romola*).⁴²⁴ In *Romola* notions of sacrifice are complicated by Eliot's explication of a primal wound, the wound particular to being a child

⁴²² Weil, *On Science*, 174-5.

⁴²³ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 494-5.

⁴²⁴ Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

and the obligations attendant on that identity. As I have shown, these are concepts that Brontë also articulates in her portraits of Pauline Home and the child Jane Eyre. To better understand this inherent loss, we need to look more closely at *Romola*'s heroine.

VI

Romola and the ghosts of recognition

Romola's affective life is premised on the imagistic imagination. Just as the sensory life proves dangerously permeable in the novel, so too does individual identity become plural, electrically perceptive to the body. Romola desires Tito because he fills the place of absence left by Dino, restoring to her father and herself the shape of a man loved, yet representing enough difference to make him a safe object of affection. Dino, or Fra Luca as he is now under his new guise as monk, is restored to her, however; briefly resurrected in the narrative for the purposes of imparting a vital warning about the true nature of the man Romola is engaged to marry. Bardo strictly forbids his daughter from seeing her brother, citing his delusional imagination as proof of his loss of clear-sightedness: Dino 'was like a flame fed by some fitful source; showing a disposition from the very first to turn away his eyes from the clear lights of reason and philosophy, and to prostrate himself under the influences of a dim mysticism' (127). Bardo's language is symptomatic of the ocular diction that constitutes much of the dialogue in *Romola*, metaphors that align sight and a restrictive epistemology. Bardo speaks in binary, conventional terms of clear-sightedness and reason, whereas the novel's plot forces its heroine to question the bluntly rational account of sight her father habitually schematises. The

perceptual work of the text is to un-do the blinkered ‘modes of seeing’ and feeling promoted by paternal affection and control (209).

Romola’s voice is confined to a selfless channel, transmuted as an ocular instrument for her father. ‘Thy voice has been to me instead of the light in the years of my blindness’ (128). The heroine, whose ‘self-repressing colourless young life ... had thrown all its passion into sympathy with aged sorrows,’ has never allowed herself to contemplate voicing her own desires, speaking a language that is not borrowed from paternal texts, but is instead a vessel for her body’s expressiveness. Dino’s death under the care of Savonarola shakes to the core her nascent sensuality. Her first glimpse of the dying man strikes her as uncanny in its foreignness: her brother is unrecognisable, emaciated and clutching a crucifix. The light is dim and Romola faintly discerns another monk’s figure in the room. The dissimilarity between memory and present reality is briefly reconciled upon seeing the patient’s eyes: ‘she was absorbed in that pang of recognition which identified this monkish ... form with the image of her fair young brother’ (152).

Dames observes that in *Romola* ‘a past image or field of images is activated in the present simply through perception,’ for the ‘present [is] mirror image of an abstracted, activated past’.⁴²⁵ Yet I think that Eliot’s contemplation of ‘recognition’ exceeds the terms of replication that Dames’s metaphor of the mirror implies. There is always the jolt of dissonance, a particle that resists the integration of past and present pictures. Romola has the empathic depth to accommodate, albeit passingly, the connection of Fra Luca with Dino, but crucially, they are to her eyes *not* the same man. Any coalescence grows out of Romola’s *desire* for that sameness, and her gaze implores him to yield to her the memory she retains. But to no avail:

‘She had no ideas that could render her brother’s course an object of
any other feeling than incurious, indignant contempt. Yet the

⁴²⁵ Dames, *Amnesiac Selves*, 226-7.

lovingness of Romola's soul had clung to that image [of Dino] in the past, and while she stood rigidly aloof, there was a yearning search in her eyes for something too faintly discernible'.

The shade of recognition is too slight, for 'there was no corresponding emotion in the face of the monk': his gaze is unseeing (153). Not so much a mirror, then, as a friction of a past sequence of imagery cathected to something sorely resistant. Fra Luca's dying words are not of personal intimacy, but of abstracted images. What he sees is a vision, a recurring prophecy of Romola's fate in marriage. Crucially, the image stands in for the longed-for utterance. Dino defends his faith in visionary perception in language that invokes Spinoza, for 'in the painful linking together of our waking thoughts we can never be sure that we have not mingled our own error with the light we have prayed for; but in visions and dreams we are passive and our souls are as an instrument in the divine hand' (156).⁴²⁶

What happens next is startling, as Romola submits to the passivity of imagination. At Savonarola's command to kneel, she crumples to the floor and 'in the renunciation of her proud erectness, her mental attitude seemed changed, and she found herself in a new state of passiveness' (157). This is typical of what I will call Eliot's affective parallax: altering the angle of view, here Romola moves from sitting with a view of Savonarola at her left, to kneeling before him, angling her face up towards his. Consciousness clearly adheres in the body and its movements. Relinquishing verticality brings about a swift psychic alteration. In such moments of crisis, the forced adoption of a different physical posture startles the impressible mind-body with a new attitude. Savonarola's hands worked the effect of bringing her to her knees. His face is yet veiled, hidden from her, but his hands exude an awesome power. 'They had a marked physiognomy ... very beautiful and almost of transparent delicacy. Romola's disposition to

⁴²⁶ The language is Spinozistic, the passive perception of dreams and illusions contrasted with the rigorous placing and ordering of experience to reach reasonable thought.

rebel against any command ... would have fixed itself on any repulsive detail as a point of support. But the face was hidden, and the hands seemed to have an appeal in them against all hardness' (156). It appears that, as John Kucich observes, 'the course of Romola's submission to Savonarola is a gradual development of [her] private potential for self-negation.'⁴²⁷ Yet Romola's exquisite susceptibility to the medium of perception is misconstrued as submissiveness. I would classify it as a sensory activity so eagerly interpretative that it is a hyper-*activity*, a capacity for imagination (not in the least hysterical) that leads Romola irresistibly into a chain of feeling. There is an uncanny transmission of personal information, as the private loses its boundaries, merging, frighteningly, in accord with the gestures of the body. In fact, thought acts as a sensation in this encounter, disturbing Spinoza's dichotomous separation of passive and active ideas, or image-affects.⁴²⁸ Savonarola's face is hidden, while his body is abstracted as a tactile gesture, and thus Romola is denied the mark of the particular that she seeks. Yet there is a sinister effect in Savonarola's masking. The elegant hands hypnotise her mind, lulling her into acceptance, and she is thus able to listen to Dino's voice, which begins immediately to speak of his terrible vision.

The substance of Dino's dream is startling in its prophetic picture of Romola's imminent marriage to Tito:

Romola, I saw my father's room – the library – with all the books ...
and I saw you ... And at the *leggio* stood a man whose face I could not
see. I looked, and looked, and it was a blank to me, even as a painting
effaced; and I saw him move and take thee, Romola, by the hand ...
And you stood at the altar in Santa Croce, and the priest who married

⁴²⁷ Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction*, 174. While Kucich is right to highlight the heroine's attraction to self-negation, I disagree with his broader assessment of her as disengaged and lifeless (173).

⁴²⁸ Spinoza distinguishes between the passive sensory world of imagination, the body impressed by random, inchoate images, which need the refining power of reason to order them into active concepts of intellect.

you had the face of death; and the graves opened, and the dead in their shrouds rose and followed you like a bridal train (157).

Romola 'was not one to be assailed by sickly fancies; she had the vivid intellect and the healthy human passion, which are too keenly alive to the constant relations of things to have any morbid craving after the exceptional. Still the images of the vision ... jarred and distressed her like painful and cruel cries' (158). The narrator emphasises that Romola possesses a 'healthy' passion, not a passive and confused idea, yet the imminence of death, the frescoes of suffering on the wall opposite, with 'faces of sorrow,' and the image produced by Dino's vision, combine to assail her 'like a sudden awful apparition from an invisible world.' Her body is acted upon, as Spinoza would say, by the bodies of Dino and Savonarola. The chain of sensation from the friar to Romola, to Dino, who is given space to tell his vision in the first-person, is a communion, albeit a desolate commonality. Romola has never 'known acute suffering — heart-cutting sorrow,' and under its influence she becomes vulnerable to illusion, as the haunting frescoes appear to crowd in upon her, making one image with the dying face in the bed. Does her suffering express anything other than her passive impotence, as Deleuze describes Spinoza's account of trauma? 'In Spinoza,' Deleuze observes, 'the power of suffering expresses nothing positive. In every passive affection there is something imaginary which inhibits it from being real ... [O]ur force of suffering is simply the imperfection ... the limitation of our power of action.'⁴²⁹

Romola's grief is refined sensorily, worked upon by experiential stimulus, and becomes a motivating force for much of her action. Eliot makes clear that pain cannot be geometrically plotted, neatly formulated into a philosophy of stoic order: 'human pain refuses to be settled by equations'.⁴³⁰ She thereby exceeds the structural bounds Spinoza places on violent emotion

⁴²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 224.

⁴³⁰ Suzy Anger, *The Cambridge Companion to George Eliot*, ed. George Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 2.

to vitiate or destroy its source.⁴³¹ Much of the heroine's phenomenal knowledge is derived from her experience of pain, what Brian Fay describes as Eliot's account of 'intuitive perception', contrasted with Spinoza's 'intuitive intellection'.⁴³² The sensory information conveyed in the deathbed scene becomes intriguingly dialectical, as the pitch of grief grows out of and is heightened by the dialogue of imagery in the room, merging and rising with the modulation of voices, climaxing in a sharp wail of grief from the heroine. With her brother's death, Romola's 'empty' cry of his name hits vacant space, the spatial given new structure by the tonal, 'as the certainty broke upon her that the silence of misunderstanding could never be broken' (159). Fra Girolamo urges her to take Dino's crucifix, as 'his eyes behold it no more'. By keeping in sight what is now invisible to her brother, Romola somehow embodies him, translating his vision, the bond between them, now re-forged in loss and clearly identified as issuing from a sensory inheritance. The act of touching the crucifix 'relieve[s] the tension of her mind,' and tears heave forth. 'It seemed to her as if this first vision of death must alter the daylight for her for evermore'. This change, while subtle, is immediately apparent. Romola's spatial and temporal perspective, as well as her apprehension of objects, is undeniably different, as if a 'disease of the retina' afflicts this heroine, too. Her perceptive field is heightened at once, and experience of space is not banal, but hyperreal. Sensation becomes a mode of haunting, and she is beleaguered by 'a dull continuous pain' (311) as the world outside becomes newly oppressive. Not until chapter 68, 'Romola's Waking,' does her sensory life provide her once more with solace.

⁴³¹ In part V of the *Ethics*, Spinoza sets out a clear, step-by-step approach to utilise the mind's power to reason, so as to defeat passive endurance of emotion and sensation, those 'evil' images that crowd out logic.

⁴³² Brian Fay argues for the striking cleavage in Eliot's and Spinoza's respective concepts of morality and perception. His main proposition is that Spinoza's moral system of intuition is built upon 'intuitive intellection,' which renders people as mere essences, denying their particularity and emotional uniqueness. 'In this way, the Spinozan intuiter never really comes to grips directly with the concrete entities around him, but retreats to a realm devoid of the messiness ... [of] the actual world of temporally embodied beings.' While I find Fay's discussion of the dissimilarities between the two writers compelling, I have argued throughout this thesis for Spinoza's phenomenological sensibility. See Fay, "What George Eliot of *Middlemarch* could have taught Spinoza," in *Philosophy and Literature* 41.1 (2017), 125-6.

VII

A requisitioned gaze

Several objects in *Romola*, particularly Dino's crucifix, gather to them complex networks of sensation, facilitated by the dramatic acts of exchange that allow their movement amongst characters. The crucifix, which retains the traces of her brother's touch and recalls to Romola his 'eyes that seemed to look towards [it], and yet not to see it,' and the horrifying vision of her future, haunts her in its obstinate resonance; it refuses the ambivalence of a banal thing. The images of Dino's prophetic dream of Tito with his face erased, 'which [Romola] seemed not only to hear uttered by the low gasping voice, but to live through as if it had been her own dream,' has 'made her more conscious than ever' (174-5). Romola recreates for Tito the scene of her brother's dying, reciting Dino's words, which 'had burnt themselves into her memory as they were spoken. But when she was at the end of the vision, she paused; the rest came too vividly before her to be uttered, and she sat looking at the distance, almost unconscious for the moment that Tito was near her' (176). Her repetition of Dino's words has the potency of joining the living woman with the dead man in a distressing super-sensory mingling of subjective borders. The lapse from Dino's sensory experience to Romola's that began in the death-bed scene proceeds to a new pitch here. She loses her sense of the present, inhabiting two temporal moments — the death scene and its recreation, the morbid walls of the chapter-house searing Romola's vision, transfixing her as if she stood now before it.. The affective senses operate with what amounts to a mystical power, destabilising subjectivity, indeed entirely distorting it. Eliot emphasises that there is no immunity against the impressible

nature of the body, what Spinoza describes as the imprinting upon us of another body's condition.⁴³³

She turns to Tito, gazing at his beauty (175), to resist 'the impressions that will not be shaken off by reason'. Yet the memory of Dino's face has shattered her singleness, her experiences have stretched to incorporate her brother's pain, and she is fatefully encumbered with his words: 'I shall never forget [his death]; it seems as if it would come between me and everything I shall look at.' This memory has transfused her consciousness, transmuting every object; she sees now 'only the pale images of sorrow and death' (177). Her mourning is evoked in confused perceptions, which she can no longer cohere: 'strange, bewildering transition from those pale images of sorrow to [the] bright youthfulness,' of Tito's beauty. How to reconcile the contrary images, and 'make it intelligible that they belonged to the same world?' (178) Romola suddenly 'felt this questioning need like a sudden uneasy dizziness and want of something to grasp' (178).

The indomitable crucifix sets in motion the novel's most complex entanglement of sight metaphors. It is a mode of hypnosis for Romola: '[Dino's] yearning look at the crucifix when he was gasping for breath — I can never forget it. Last night, I looked at the crucifix a long while, and tried to see that it would help him,' and, as the light bends, she catches a glimpse of her own grief (177). Thought and affect are a disequilibrium of being. The mind as a space is implied by Tito's act of shutting up the crucifix in a tabernacle, troping on Descartes analogy of the eye as a locked and darkened chamber.⁴³⁴ The sealed tabernacle, with its repressed object, signifies Romola's optical unconscious: if she cannot see it, proceeds Tito's logic, then she will no longer know it. Tito speaks of Dino's dream as if it were a cross, something that encumbers

⁴³³ Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, P27. 'The images of things are affections of the human body whose ideas represent external bodies as present to us, that is, whose ideas involve the nature of our body and at the same time the present nature of the external body ... [thus] if we imagine someone like us to be affected with some affect, this imagination will express an affection of our body like this affect.' 84.

⁴³⁴ Descartes, quoted in Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 47.

his beloved: ‘And now, my Romola ... you will banish these ghastly thoughts. The vision ... surely has no *weight* with you’ (176 [my emphasis]), a figuration that he uses repeatedly, lending a physical force to the image. Tito wants to ‘dip [Romola] in the soft waters of forgetfulness’ (281), to insulate her mind from any importunate images that threaten his power. To ‘guard’ her thoughts, he devises a tabernacle painted with his own image, ‘which is to hide away from you for ever that remembrancer of sadness. You have done with sadness now; and we will bury all images of it ... He opened the triptych and placed the crucifix within the central space; then closing it again, [took] out the key’. This tabernacle, painted with a portrait of the lovers, is the substituted vision, ‘hidden by these images of youth and joy,’ by ‘their imaged selves’ (198-9). Yet Romola knows the image of her grief ‘is still there – it’s only hidden’ (201). For, as Bachelard notes, all caskets can be opened: Romola’s troublesome interior life cannot be locked away, made an exterior object. The locked object ‘contains the things that are unforgettable ... Here, the past, the present, and the future are condensed,’ rendering the little tomb of secrets ‘a memory of what is immemorial’.⁴³⁵ Metonymically shifting from Dino’s gaze to Romola’s grief, and Tito’s beautiful body, the crucifix is a labile symbol of the conflictual dialect of invisibility and visibility. Tito vows to drown the cross in the Arno, lending to that object an irony of prolepsis, as this will be the very fate to which he succumbs.

The inefficacy of Tito’s manufactured tomb is made apparent during the couple’s wedding procession. As the lovers walk towards the church, a religious procession confronts them. Rising up above them is the foretold figure of Time, with scythe and hour-glass, followed by ‘what looked like a troop of the sheeted dead gliding above blackness ... it seemed as if her brother’s vision, which could never be effaced from her mind,’ is made manifest. The obsessional force of Dino’s death-bed vision, its lingering memory continually invoked, works to counteract the enforced veiling of the heroine, who is for most of the novel enclosed in

⁴³⁵ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 84-5.

domestic spaces, hidden from view, her head or face shrouded by a veil. It disrupts Tito's plot, which relies on relieving Romola of weighted images, for he desires his wife to be psychically weightless, disrobed of her mourning. Characterising her mind as failing to discriminate between fantasy and substance, Tito claims Romola lives 'in misery under the mere imagination of weight' (283). This is his reasoning for breaking apart Bardo's library, selling the books to the highest bidder to relieve his daughter of their heavy bond (283). Tito's greatest betrayal is the attempted appropriation of Romola's losses, his re-shaping of the (visual) terms of her mourning. Romola's eyes are blind, so he 'must see for them, and save my wife' (281), in effect restructuring her visual field.

The breaking-up of Bardo's library is the climax that provokes Romola's revolt against her husband and her city. As her losses compound Romola becomes ever more sympathetic to the sensations of other bodies, palpably vulnerable to Spinoza's imitative affects. Her awareness of her body's movements is transmuted almost entirely into a deep imagining of her father's grief at the destruction of his life's work. 'Instead of shutting her eyes' to the work of the library's destruction, she forces herself to watch as it is disassembled and carried away. The picture is, like the other scenes discussed so far, not visually graphic, but impressionistic, flowing from Romola's sensory experiences. There is a strong flavour of masochism in her faithful adherence to suffering, which she recognises: 'this vivifying of pain and despair about her father's memory was the strongest life left to her affections' (315). She forces herself to watch as the load of books vanishes, 'like a cruel, deliberate fate, carrying away her father's lifelong hope to bury it in an unmarked grave. Romola felt less that she was seeing this herself than that her father was conscious of it ... She stood still even after the load had disappeared, heedless of the cold, and soothed by the gloom which seemed to cover her like a mourning garment' (315). As the passage progresses, this uncanny sensory mimicry graduates into a physical unawareness, or trans-individual embodiment. Romola becomes corpse-like in her

imaginative identification with Bardo's lifeless body. Her response climaxes in a synaesthetic shock of light and sound: 'suddenly the great bell in the palace-tower rang out a mighty peal ... and every other bell in every other tower seemed to catch the vibration and join the chorus. And as the chorus swelled and swelled till the air seemed made of sound — little flames, vibrating too, as if the sound had caught fire ... That sudden clang, that leaping light, fell on Romola like sharp wounds' (316). As Barbara Hardy notes, the 'disenchanted illumination' of this novel is significant in that it forces the heroine to recognise the 'indifferent world outside the self'.⁴³⁶ Romola's sense of self has wasted with the loss of the books, those icons of her inner myth-making and self-reflection, and her only recourse is to cultivate 'rude sensations'. Her white silk wedding clothes are likened to a corpse, and she touches in grief 'the shroud of her dead happiness' (318). The texture of the silk recalls her loving illusions of Tito. Rubbing her hands on the 'coarse roughness' of a nun's tunic, the feel of the serge fabric kindles an awareness of the barren present, 'from which love and delight were gone,' with the effect of inoculating her against sadness. The juxtaposition of the materials, one imbued with the love that the feel of the other arrests in grief, makes her revolt against the interiority of touch. 'She put off her black garment, and as she thrust her soft white arms into the harsh sleeves of the serge mantle and felt the hard girdle of rope hurt her fingers as she tied it, she courted' the abrasive sensations (318). She relishes a feeling that emphasises self-alienation, a severance of affect and sensation. 'That heart-cutting comparison of the present with the past urged itself upon Romola till it even transformed itself into wretched sensations: she seemed benumbed to everything but inward throbbings, and began to feel the need of some hard contact' (321).

There is a perverse eroticism in Romola's ritualised internalisation of violence, reminiscent of Jane Eyre's various acts of self-punishment, and in this reversal of the terms of pleasure, the body must undergo the stigmata of the mind. In the coarseness of textures Romola

⁴³⁶ Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 192.

finds a sensory accomplice to her mourning, a renewal by which the body is shocked out of mortification, so that sensation and the grief become synonymous, one term conditioned by the other. This is, in part, the consequence of her emotional inheritance, mimicking her father in his obstinate grief. Eliot is everywhere interested in ancestral continuity, and inherited affective instincts are of no less interest to the author than those of a pecuniary nature. Yet feeling is unwieldy matter, and Romola's morphing phenomenal history threatens to vitiate the desiring drive forward that narrative feeds upon. Subjectivity becomes tethered to a notion of consciousness as horizontal (thus contingent, at the interface of memory, sensory organs, and other mercurial spectres), rather than the verticality of an epistemological mastery of certain knowable entities. Can fiction accommodate the subversions that phenomenological psychology generates? Or does a pacification of the body need to take place in order for a 'successful' textual conclusion?

Romola's sordid interaction with everyday objects links her with the novel's other bereft character, Baldassare, similarly betrayed by Tito. Baldassare clutches with all the force of his life to his poniard, continually fondling it, 'taking refuge in that sensation from a hopeless blank of thought that seemed to lie like a great gulf between his passion and its aim' (306-7). Once a great scholar, whose intellect is now lost to amnesia, he has etiolated feeling to the point of the merely transactional. Baldassare is a fantastically rich character in the context of literary phenomenology; his consciousness is figured as a slate, scrawled with untranslatable text. Tito's disavowal of him, leaving him to die at the hands of slave traders, has precipitated him into self-alienation, de-ontologised by his fevered grief. Memory is 'little more than the consciousness of something gone' (334), his mind 'a dreary conscious blank' (335). He is the victim of sudden thrusts of rage, which come upon him as vertigo, as when he confronts his son dining with the Florentine elite, and accuses him of treachery: 'the new shock of rage he felt as Tito's lie fell on his ears brought a strange bodily effect with it: a cold stream seemed to

rush over him, and the last words of [Tito's] speech seemed to be drowned by ringing chimes. Thought gave way to a dizzy horror, as if the earth were slipping away from under him' (351). Here, Baldassare's efforts of intellectual recovery are centred on the translation of Homer's text, which, if successful, will also prove his identity; yet the attempt feels to him like wandering through a space that is unmapped, and he can 'form no distinct idea of the details': 'Lost, lost!' (352). In *Romola* Eliot continually stages such moments of psychic anguish, which double as corporeal imbalance and loss of agility. The hold over one's subject-hood is fragile, in a dangerous contingency with the ungovernable sensory body, which makes a mockery of knowledge.

The only sensory organ Baldassare trusts is touch: 'He had clutched and unsheathed his dagger, and for a long while had been feeling its edge, his mind narrowed to one image, and the dream of one sensation' (307). The terms of the suffering are the same as Romola's in the scene above: the intense attraction to sharp, piercing sensations, and the parallel simplification of perspective, so that one idea expands to overwhelm entirely any other image. Baldassare's quest for vengeance consumes him, however; a mode of self-destruction to which Romola does not fall prey. His insatiable drive to kill Tito becomes a 'thirst' so voracious that he can no longer distinguish between the dream of water on his lips and its illusion (307). Like an addict, he hungers continually for the rawness of anger, needing to reaffirm his aliveness by the touch of his steel blade. Sensation becomes externalised in the form of the dagger, and with it the body's pain is abstracted into something concrete. The affect and the sensation become so interchangeable, that 'no thought could thwart his eager thirst.' His past identity is contained in one of his only belongings, a Greek book which once he would have read with ease, and poring over the text, now illegible to him, feeds his anger; the names and symbols on the page, 'all gone into darkness,' are a haunting script of his losses (307). Suffering is rendered as a failure of interpretative power, where Baldassare's lens-like focus on the unfamiliar markings,

his objectivist attempts to return to his now darkened interior world, express a larger concern cautioning against the spectral imaginative terrain mapped out by the new optics. Perhaps the distance between illusion and matter, brought together in Spinoza's metaphysics, the aleatory nature of mental images, operates under the membrane of consciousness — in other words, our optical unconscious betrays the geometry of rational formulations. As Simon During notes, the secular magic of the lantern show presented 'a danger to [Spinoza's] philosophical system'. 'Lenses,' writes During, 'enable that concentration of vision which becomes an analogue not only for "the light of reason" whereby we grasp [Spinoza's theory of] "adequate" ideas, but also for the spiritual "inner light" of Protestantism, which Spinoza presses into the service of his rationalism'.⁴³⁷ What then of the fate of the specular imaginary, the sensorium itself, in the Victorian age of visual distrust and uncertainty, when optical technology is put in the service of illusion, of undermining rationality? *Romola* stages the collision of these two visual strands, and the unresolved paradoxes of the visual are at the heart of the text's air of dissatisfaction.

Baldassare's desire climaxes in what Bataille describes as a 'white heat,' the 'blind moment when eroticism attains its ultimate intensity.'⁴³⁸ Watching as Tito's unconscious body drifts towards the bank of the Arno, Baldassare grasps him with the force that his body has waited in preparedness to exert. Using his own body as a weight (a comment upon Tito's obsession with weightlessness), his manic suffocation of his son ends in his own death, the two bodies interlocked, so stiffened in their embrace that they are inseparable (548). Before the moment of death, Tito's eyes meet his father's, and his last vision is of 'the hideous past hanging over him forever'. The older man gleefully attains his wish — that his son would *see* him, know him once more.

⁴³⁷ During, *Modern Enchantments*, 262-3.

⁴³⁸ Bataille, *Eroticism*, 40.

Romola's second flight from home, culminating in her suicide attempt, is the emotional crisis of the novel. Drifting in a purloined fishing boat, she passes through a cycle of deep sleep to vivid dreaming, until the rising sun wakes her, and the 'darkness was blotted out with light' (550). The watery scene that Eliot describes is Rousseau-like in its maternal resonances, the body of water curving to hold the heroine's body in restfulness, cupped in forgetfulness. This is Eliot's invocation of sublime oblivion and it is, crucially, the cessation of perception for Romola — she drifts in languorous indifference, unaware of what she sees, 'rather feeling simply the presence of peace and beauty'. It is the most sublime moment of the novel, and its gloriousness consists in pure, uncensored feeling, a moment, as the narrator says, of 'mere passive existence 'when the exquisiteness of subtle, indefinite sensation creates a bliss which is without memory and without desire' (550). The prose is free of sharp sensory points, as forms merge in easy harmony. Imminent death is a reversal of the illumination of Romola's long night, as 'the flickering flames of the tapers seemed to get stronger and stronger till the dark scene was blotted out with light' and 'the agitated past had glided away like that dark scene' (550). Phenomenal awareness is equivalent to epistemic reality: 'She did not even *think* that she could rest here forever, she only *felt* that she rested' (551 [emphasis added]). Trusting utterly to her sensory capacities, Romola leans in to an atavistic harmony with the natural world. She yearns to remain in this 'gently lulling cradle' of non-thought, of non-being, in that unmediated phenomenal experience.

Yet Eliot knows she cannot, and 'oblivion [is] troubled' by the returning rush of vision and the sound of a child's piercing cry. Cleansed of her sensory past, albeit briefly, she wakes, however, into perceptive maturation. Rather than drifting ever onward to death, she is confronted with the inexorable solidity of life. Eliot's heroines never relinquish entirely their bonds, no matter how painful, with Maggie Tulliver's experience as perhaps the most tragic

example of that struggle. Building upon Spinoza's associationist theory, Eliot illustrates that there are particular patterns of knowing embedded in corresponding modes of being, which are impossible to disassociate. If we are ever to reach the noumenal, it is through the phenomenal, which, in *Romola* requires living with loss, with the endlessness of mourning. For Romola, certain impressions linger — Tito's betrayal of her father, her uncle's murder — and awareness of pain becomes a shock requisite in feeling alive. Romola embodies the Spinozistic affective imagination, but it is compounded with the truth discovered in a penetrating cognisance of loss, in itself an aspect of the reasoning intellect.

In the fifth part of *The Ethics*, 'Of Human Freedom,' Spinoza clearly sets out the step-by-step process through which one is to 'destroy' the passions that weaken us. We must uncouple the affect from the image of loss, he says, and teach the mind to associate the feeling with images of freedom. To do this we must render the affect pellucid: 'An affect which is a passion ceases to be a passion as soon as we form a clear and distinct idea of it,' for '[t]he more an affect is known to us, then, the more it is in our power, and the less the mind is acted on by it'.⁴³⁹ Eliot shows the power of reason in refining the senses, but this process does not overcome perceptive fracture, nor does it categorise passivity as inutile. By rendering thought as a sensation, Eliot illustrates that integrity of experience *is a kind of brokenness*. Romola cannot drift towards death, so she must surrender the possessive exclusivity of her body and realise the need of the other's body. To visualise her personhood, Romola acknowledges her trans-individuality, evidenced by her return to Florence, and to the head of an unconventional family nucleus.

Romola's trajectory, like that of Tito and Baldassare, is a return to origins, her past elegantly, if lugubriously, meeting her future as she becomes the maternal guide to Tessa and her two children born from her marriage to Tito. 'It is only a poor sort of happiness that could

439 Spinoza, *E*, V, P3, 163.

ever come by caring very much about our own narrow pleasures,' she instructs her adopted children. The greatest happiness, that of understanding the self in relation to the alterity of the other, 'brings so much pain with it, that we can only tell it from pain by its being what we would choose before everything else' — that is, silently enduring suffering. Romola chooses mourning as one would choose a possession. Like Eliot's experience of intellectual and emotional fracture in the composition of *Romola*, her heroine retains all the traces of her loss.

CONCLUSION

Hypnagogia

The endlessness of loss in *Romola* is perhaps the inevitable 'work' of mourning. For Jacques Derrida, for whom mourning became an obsessive point of philosophical return in his later writing, there can be no way of talking about mourning, 'since it cannot become a theme, only another experience of mourning'; for 'whoever works at the work of mourning learns the impossible — that mourning is interminable. Inconsolable. Irreconcilable.' In this thesis I have explored the dilating force (to evoke Derrida) of mourning and loss, or *as* loss, the expansion of the image that represents what it is to talk of this dynamic. For Derrida, when we speak of mourning, '[w]e are speaking of images.' The field of the subject in representing loss to the self is structured by vision, it is a 'reorganisation of space and of visibility,' a 'visibility of the

body ... an orientation of perspectives.’⁴⁴⁰ The pain that resides in the subject is reduced to no more than the image in us, he writes, yet this image is not simply what is seen; ‘the image sees more than it is seen. The image looks at us.’ The self is seen in the space of mourning, then, a mirroring effect that I have noted in the modalities of grief depicted in the novels I have read here. If my critique has seemed at times impressionistic, as Derrida reminds us, to speak of mourning is to re-create it, re-image it. Fictional images have an uncanny tautology, and I have attempted to gain distance from the blind spots of these narratives, in order to listen to what their protagonists have to say about what they see.

There is a story, sometimes thought apocryphal, but included in Juliet Barker’s biography of the Brontës, that Patrick Brontë, long before his cataracts besieged him, enjoined his four remaining children to play a game of masking. As Patrick relates the story, he wished the children to ‘speak with less timidity’ and ‘deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover, I might gain my end – and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand, and speak boldly from under cover of the mask’.⁴⁴¹ I find this anecdote fascinating not in establishing any kind of precedent of sublimation instigated in Charlotte Brontës childhood, but in respect to the novels that she would go on to write as an adult. For the heroines of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* do ‘speak boldly’ of grief, but it is from under cover of a mask, a wanting-to-be-seen that is also paradoxically, a need to remain unseen. In these novels, grief is relayed as hypnagogia – those ‘quasi-hallucinatory images’ that crowd the retina in the immediate moments between falling into sleep or waking, as writers such as Merleau-Ponty, Henri Bergson and Nabokov have defined it; a phenomenal set of imagery, Schwenger writes, ‘generated by something other than the perceiver, who can watch images suspended before the

⁴⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “By Force of Mourning,” trans. Pascale – Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry* 22.2 (Winter, 1996), 172 and 188.

⁴⁴¹ Barker, *The Brontës*, 126.

closed eyes, changing rapidly according to a logic of their very own.⁴⁴² While I do not want to go so far as to claim that these texts have an unconscious (a discussion beyond the purview of this conclusion), I have suggested that representations of grief and mourning in both Brontë and Eliot move to a kinetic rhythm that is like peering in upon a shadowy retinal scene. The autonomous logic and mechanics of their scenes of loss are explicated by the optical technologies of mid-century: ubiquitous tropes that creep into their fiction, consciously or otherwise, and are grafted onto modes of mourning. This thesis has interrogated the metaphoricity of sight in these narratives, to reveal the inextricable logic of seeing and feeling, states of blindness and conditions of mourning and loss. Techniques of visualisation moved beyond their function as rhetorical figurations of mid-century spectacle, to evoke a phenomenology of grief, giving life to a subtler expression of what it means to inhabit a space without correlate: the peculiar dimness of psychic suffering. The cultural is fused with the private in my analysis, as both novelists translated the anxiety about the nature of the image, the very nature of vision, into a codified diction of the intimate sensory life. Were we to read their imagery apart from the social spectacle, I suggest that the phenomenal imperative behind their scenes would be minimised, and certainly changed. When the terms of visualisation alter radically, they filter into the domestic space; they are privatised, made intimate. In our contemporary moment, we can observe the ways in which the excess of the visual creeps into and transforms our very language, our fiction, our mode of inhabiting the world, indeed, our very consciousness.

The un-representable nature of mourning, as I argued in the introductory chapter, yet demands signification. The elision between cultural visual practices and the private sensorium in grieving has offered me a unique means of approaching textual emotional life. One set of visual exigencies opens up and feeds into the aporias of the other, instituting not a causality of

⁴⁴² Schwenger, *Fantasm*, 37.

models of envisioning, but a connection, a contiguity of terms and experiences. The diffusiveness and ambiguity of the Victorian optical dialectic meets the inchoateness of mourning's phenomenal feel and its re-shaping of consciousness.

In her study of Victorian optical entertainments and narrative, Helen Groth describes the way 'nineteenth-century writers explored the psychological aesthetics of moving images produced by new visual media,' drawing upon 'an enduring philosophical tradition of enlisting familiar optical devices to materialise the mechanisms of perception'.⁴⁴³ While Groth's interest tends toward emphasising the educational, didactic nature of the new 'way of seeing images', her focus, like my own, is on the kinetic, volatile image, those of the magic lantern or the kinoscope, for instance, and the alterations in the human sensorium that such optical devices engendered in the observer's subjectivity. The 'newly labile concept of the image,' Groth writes, was manifest in 'the proliferation of optical tropes and metaphors in the work of writers compelled by the aesthetic and psychological effects of a heightened sense of visual contingency that pervaded the cultural landscape'. Most important for this thesis is Groth's highlighting of the currency of these textual images, the way early to mid-century writers such as Eliot, 'reproduced the phenomenology of perception,' projecting psychic images across the space of the textual scene. There was an isomorphic relation between the external, simulated image and the internalised projections of the conscious or unconscious mind, a cross-fertilisation that, as Groth observes, is 'far from a speculative connection.'⁴⁴⁴ Eliot, and Brontë, however, cannot be said to be writing a conventional ocularcentric narrative, and while Groth rightly points to a 'naturalising of the connection between optical devices' and the psyche, I have suggested that their visual poetics are paradoxical, with both novelists simultaneously foregrounding a de-naturalising effect. Eliot and Brontë draw on optical tropes most frequently

⁴⁴³ Groth, *Moving Images*, 2.

⁴⁴⁴ Groth, *Moving Images*, 2-9.

in moments of crises of consciousness, rendering the emotional fracture of the character in terms that emphasise spectrality. The labile image of early to mid-century provided a space to re-think fictionalisations of loss, and Eliot and Brontë attempt to find new perspectives of viewing grief that avoid conventional patterning and consolation, which open out the sensation to evoke the disorientation of suffering, the sense of being unmoored. Yet, by rendering affect in ghostly figures of illumination, projection and oneiric fantasy, a partition is implemented, at times creating distance for the protagonist, as in Lucy Snowe or Jane Eyre's frequent glass-moments, mediating the gaze from the suffering body. The volatility of mourning lends itself to the proto-cinematic, to the 'curious illusion of vision' (V, 430). Lucy describes the fluctuations of her feelings as she realises the strength of M. Paul's affection for her as follows: 'Countless times it had been my lot to watch apprehended sorrow close darkly in; but to see unhopd-for happiness take form, find place, and grow more real as the seconds sped, was indeed a new experience' (V, 485). Brontë casts Lucy's burgeoning joy as imagistic formation, tenuous, yet the outline growing stronger, contrasting with the contractions of sorrow; its reality moves 'as the seconds sped,' with the temporality of a newly-formed projection, more solid with the passing moment. The dramatic phenomenology of this new thing of happiness is abundantly optical, making it all the more fragile.

I want to close by turning to a text that has been a spectral presence in my own work on this thesis, *The Mill on the Floss*, the shadow-text to *The Lifted Veil* and *Romola*. Maggie Tulliver's drowning is a set-piece of envisioned loss, where the heroine is both subject and object in the perspectival field as the oppositions collapse with her death. Drifting alone in the night, desperately hoping to reach her mother and brother at the mill, whose faces she can see 'looking for help into the darkness, and finding none':

She was floating in smooth water now – perhaps far on the over-flooded fields. There was no sense of present danger to check the outgoing of her mind to the old home; and she strained her eyes against the curtain of gloom that she might seize the first sight of her whereabouts – that she might catch some faint suggestion of the spot towards which all her anxieties tended.

Oh, how welcome, the widening of that dismal watery level – the gradual uplifting of the cloudy firmament – the slowly defining blackness of objects above the glassy dark! [...] But now there was a large dark mass in the distance, and near to her Maggie could discern the current of the river. The dark mass must be – yes, it was – St. Ogg's. ... But there was no colour, no shape yet: all was faint and dim (*The Mill*, 593-4).

Eliot strips Maggie's conscious world of colour, as her life moves inevitably toward that final opening out, the river expanding before her, into death. Maggie's passive passage along the water echoes Romola's drifting, and Latimer's Rousseau-like waters, yet to return to *The Mill* is to over-write the sublimity of Romola's accession to pure sensation, as the dawn wakes her to her new life, her new self; Maggie's drifting is sinister and takes place entirely through obscured vision. The slow-forming horror of the final moments before her death, as the river betrays her, and the shapes she longs to see fatally deceive her, is the staged deterioration of seeing. Her visual instinct, so keen throughout the narrative, is broken apart, piece by piece, just as the ravaged machinery of the mill fragments and ultimately destroys her. Maggie's resistance to death is a 'straining of the eyes,' a poignant urgency to see the only forms that could soothe her, which are the very forms that kill her. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe, '[w]hen the waters break, there can be no rebirth for Maggie.'⁴⁴⁵ Eliot's syntax stays

⁴⁴⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, 493.

faithful to her heroine's fitful perception ('the dark mass must be – yes, it was – St Ogg's'), remaining with her at the retinal level of watery confusion, to amplify the futility of her gaze. 'This is George Eliot's dramatic use of scenery,' writes Barbara Hardy, 'often carefully rationalised by the general explanation which makes the visual association appear as the natural act of the character's mind, but at the same time chosen with feeling for the appropriate lights and properties. ... [I]t is a recurring way of presenting character and crisis ... a crisis of disenchantment described in images.'⁴⁴⁶

Some critics have understood Maggie's renunciation of Stephen Guest and her return to the mill and to her brother, as a triumph of passion over conformity, a self-destructive urge, as Dorothea Barrett describes it, 'a masochistic self-repression,' that is also 'self-assertion over male domination.'⁴⁴⁷ Maggie chooses to suffer, then, and there is a transcendence, even a perverse strength in this wilful choice to determine her fate. It is preferable to the life of acquiescence that awaits the heroine if she allows herself the less painful option of marriage to Stephen. In this sense her death, foretold from the beginning, is theoretically harmonious: Maggie chooses death because it is preferable to a life that would be a subjugation to male desire. Yet the wastefulness of Maggie's death and the bleakness with which Eliot watches her move inexorably toward her final act of atonement, complicates this view. What Eliot gives us in *The Mill on the Floss*, as Elizabeth Ermath argues, is the protracted movements and counter-movements of Maggie's 'long suicide'. Through an entrenched habit of 'self-denial' and a yearning for love, Maggie 'learns to distrust her own powers and to develop a fatal sense of the sweetness of submission,' an 'ontological threat' so great that it leads her to death.⁴⁴⁸

The last act of mourning is an end to the seen world, a rejection of the visible, and Eliot takes it up again in *Romola*, pushing her heroine towards the same fate, then suddenly rescuing

⁴⁴⁶ Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, 189.

⁴⁴⁷ Dorothea Barrett, *Vocation and Desire: George Eliot's Heroines* (London: Routledge, 1989), 68-9.

⁴⁴⁸ Elizabeth Ermath, 'Maggie Tulliver's Long Suicide,' *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 14.4 (Autumn, 1974), 587 and 594.

her. When Romola decides to die, it is like Maggie's wish to return home to her child's consciousness, because 'she long[s] for that repose in mere sensation which she had sometimes dreamed of in the sultry afternoons of her early girlhood ... [t]he imagination of herself gliding away ... on the darkening waters was growing more and more into a longing' (*R*, 502-3). Unmooring her boat in the darkness Romola 'was alone now':

She had freed herself from all claims Had she found anything like the dream of her girlhood? No. Memories hung upon her like the weight of broken wings that could never be lifted. ... Romola felt orphaned in those wide spaces of sea and sky. She read no message of love for her [there]. ... She drew the cowl over her head again and covered her face, choosing darkness rather than the light of the stars, which seemed to her like the hard light of eyes that looked at her without seeing her.

Here, too, Romola's disillusioning pain, her mourning for her lost girlhood, her father, her husband, her brother – all this pain is held suspended in the visionless gaze of the world: death would be a sundering of the visual indifference she finds, an anti-optical turn inwards to the darkness of the self. She covers her face, making sight impossible, but her text still speaks of grief: a Brontëan mask, then. Illuminating the affectivity of chiaroscuro effects brings out the nuances of suffering in ways that might otherwise go unseen. Unlike the vividly energetic optics of Charlotte Brontë, Eliot's reflexive imagery in these passages of emotional turbulence is slow-unfolding in rhythm, with an oneiric, quiescent visuality.

If we grant that these novels foreground loss - which I think we should – then it does not implicate a siphoning off of one emotional frame from other, equally present emotions.

Spinoza's organic system of interrelated emotions might serve as analogous to the way I understand mourning in these novels, as an amorphous state that moves between loss and grief, in which there is no distinct separation of these conditions at the experiential level. And why mourning? My interest in psychic pain arose out of the sense that existing critical methods of approach to the Brontëan or Eliot novel were lacking in the full realisation of the emotional heft of the texts, the way they keep coming back to a brokenness and absence felt at the corporeal level of the subject. A common feature of all four texts – and they are not unique in this fashion – is that the narrative shuttles between the visualised social space, and the interiorised, unseen sensorium. In this sense, my own critical practice is analogous to my chosen texts, expanding out to the abstractions of cultural ways of seeing, and drawing in to the deeply felt images of private life, so that there is a doubleness to the spectrality of their imagistic lenses. If I have granted Victorian optical tropes a certain mobility between spheres, it is because the texts themselves deploy this rhetoric in interesting and uniquely autonomous ways. In any case it stimulates a different discussion about how the most painful of human sensations is experienced, produced and conceptualised discursively.

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