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## "A Density of Meaning": Literary Representations of the British Museum, 1818-1929

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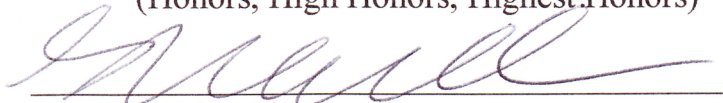
“A Density of Meaning”: Literary Representations of the British Museum, 1818-1929

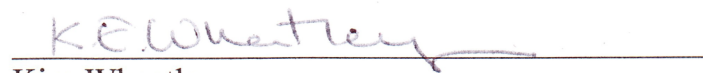
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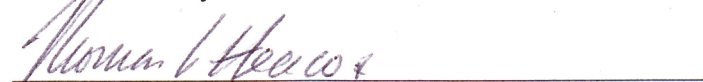
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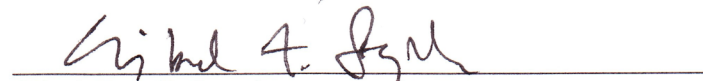
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“When a man wants to write a book full of unassailable facts, he always goes to the British Museum”: Introduction

As a place, London seems to always be in a state of flux. The tide of the Thames goes in and out, vehicles and pedestrians ebb and flow across the streets and sidewalks, scaffolding goes from building to building, and the wave of glass and steel towers rises higher and higher. Yet, despite the progression of time, certain structures stand firm, challenging the ephemerality of the city. In the courtyard of the new Grange City Hotel stands the original Roman wall, Christopher Wren’s famous dome still defines the skyline of the city, and Parliament stands defiant as it points to the sky. Tucked away in Bloomsbury stands another of these structures, the British Museum. From Great Russell Street its neoclassical façade looks out at the shifting nebulous city before it, offering an image of stability and solidity. Within, statues, pots, books, various artifacts, works of art, and natural specimens have been saved from the oblivion of history, and shored up behind glass so that they seem eternal. The Museum allows its visitors to experience the past in the present, bringing what was once lost into the world again. The British Museum turns time against itself, meshing the past and the present into an inseparable body.

As visitors enter the British Museum, Gaston Bachelard’s idea that the “house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace” (Bachelard 6) comes to life. Within its protective walls, individuals are free to interact with the place and its contents, and “dream” about what they mean. Throughout the history of the British Museum, writers have taken it up as a subject in their writing, an act that may uphold or challenge what it stands for, an act that changes the Museum both metaphorically and literally. These works reveal the British Museum for what it really is. It is just as nebulous as the city before it; rather than a concrete solid building it is a process, a process built out of melded past

and present moments, ideas, individuals, and objects, one that is constantly being reworked and rethought by its visitors.

When the British Museum is understood as a fluid process, its inherent tension becomes visible, as various aspects of the Museum can shift from one meaning to the next. Writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker reinforce the conservative, nationalistic nature of the British Museum, while simultaneously exposing it as a radical revolutionary force, capable of unsettling British society. The Reading Room of the Library, envisioned as an egalitarian place of cultural production by the Museum's charter and policies, is transformed into a dark, dreary, and oppressive workhouse by Washington Irving, George Gissing, and Virginia Woolf. Woolf also finds, along with Thomas Hardy, that the exhibits do not expose the individual to other cultures, as the Museum believes, but rather are intense, intimate, personalized encounters between the object and the viewer. Time itself becomes a free anarchic force for Percy Shelley, Hardy, William Empson, and Dante Rossetti when they step within the walls of the Museum, turning the present into a defeated ruin. In responding to the British Museum in these different ways, these writers reveal the Museum as the conflict and tension filled process it actually is. Within this paper, I will attempt to tease out all the conflicting complexities in writers' responses to the Museum from the early nineteenth to the early twentieth century, providing a new vision of the British Museum.

### The British Museum: A Potted History

It is necessary to have some understanding of the history behind the British Museum before one can engage in an informed dialogue with it. The original Royal Charter of the British Museum, enacted January 11, 1753, establishes the Museum with the general public in mind.

The Cotton Library, Harleian manuscripts, and the personal collection of Sir Hans Sloane (Harris 53) were brought together to “be kept for the Use and Benefit of the Public, with free Access to view and pursue” (Charter 333) them. In this wording, there is no attempt to exclude individuals based on economic grounds, for the Museum is “free.” Indeed, this democratic policy becomes more pronounced with the Charter’s claim that the Museum is “not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the learned and the curious, but for the general Use and Benefit of the Public” (Charter 333). Even the incredibly rare “Manuscripts, written Books, Papers, Parchments, Records, and other Memorials in most Languages” (Charter 334) of the Cotton Library were to be made “for...reading and using” (Charter 334), so that they might be “useful to the Public” (Charter 334). Instead of setting aside these works for the serious-minded intellectual, they were to be opened up to Britain in general. According to the Charter, the British Museum is not just a place for the intellectual; the everyday man is not only welcome, but specifically invited in.

The British Museum’s original conception of the collection’s function helps to illuminate the reasons behind this democratic language. The Trustees believed “Discoveries in Natural Philosophy and other Branches of speculative Knowledge, for the Advancement and Improvement whereof the said Museum or Collection was intended, do and may in many Instances give Help and Success to the most useful Experiments and Inventions” (Charter 333). As an interdisciplinary institution, the Museum could provide a variety of resources to “the learned and the curious,” meaning it could be a valuable resource in facilitating “the most useful Experiments and Inventions,” leading to new innovations for the “Public.” In short, the Museum was to act as a silent partner transforming Britain; it provided the resources to help the scholars so that the general populace’s condition might be bettered. The “useful Experiments and Inventions” were not just to improve the lot of a select few, but were meant to make every

Briton's life better, improving lives across the entire nation. The function of the library part of the Museum differs slightly, for the various books were made available for the "great Use and Service for the Knowledge and Preservation of our Constitution both in Church and State" (Charter 334). The Museum's library is there to serve a nationalistic function, upholding both the state and the Anglican Church by providing books to the British people. Armed with the knowledge obtained in the Museum, the British people would be adequately prepared to uphold the principles of the nation.

From the Cotton Library, Harleian manuscripts, and Sloane collection, the Museum brought together a motley collection of objects that spanned a variety of intellectual interests. To get some idea of the scope of the collection, it is useful to look to the minutes of the first meeting of the newly formed Board of Trustees, which took place January 22, 1754, when they made an inspection of Sloane's collection. Some of the objects included: thirty-nine volumes in folios and ten volumes in quartos, hortus siccus, insects, large birds and other animals, books of drawings, forty-one cabinets, horns of different animals with Indian weapons, skeletons, various antiquities, medals and coins, and "things in spirits of wine" (General Meeting Minutes Vol. I, 3-7). Judging from this list, the British Museum collection originally covered a range of fields, including medicine, botany, zoology, art, and of course history.

Given the large number of texts that made up the founding collection, the British Museum functioned as a library as well. It had many rare books in its collection, like the Codex Alexandrinus (Harris 55), so it became a place where the public could come and have access to them. Rather than create two separate institutions, the British Library and the British Museum, the charter made them one. The individual in charge of the Museum was even designated the

“principal Librarian” (Charter 340), making it clear the upkeep of the national library was an integral part of the British Museum’s function.

Originally the Museum operated out of Sloan’s old house in Chelsea (Charter 332), but the Trustees decided January 26, 1754 they needed to acquire their own building (General Meeting Minutes Vol. I, 8), and chose the Montegu house in Bloomsbury (General Meeting Minutes Vol. I, 11-13), giving the Museum a permanent location that it holds to this very day. As the Museum began the process of moving the collection to its new home, the Trustees received the first acquisition that profoundly changed the Museum. King George II “had been graciously pleased to give orders for a Bill, to be prepared for his Royal Signature...for a Donation to the Trustees of the British Museum of...his Royal Library” (General Meeting Minutes Vol. I, 180-181). While the books themselves were a great addition to the collection, “the most valuable gift...was the right of Copyright deposit” (Harris 57) that came with the library. Now, publishers were required by law to send a copy of every book they printed to the British Museum, an invaluable right that allowed the library to grow much faster than it could by purchasing alone.

Leaving this key acquisition aside, the Museum’s collection initially grew slowly, often through gifts and donations from wealthy individuals, such as a collection of Egyptian artifacts given by Mr. Lethieullier noted at the General Meeting of June 2, 1758 (General Meeting Minutes Vol. II, 440). However, as time went on the Museum began to make more landmark additions to its collection, particularly after the dawn of the nineteenth century. In 1801, Napoleon was defeated in Egypt by Britain and her allies. Part of the surrender agreement, the so-called “Capitulation of Alexandria,” stipulated “all collections of marbles, manuscripts, and other antiquities, together with the specimens of natural history and drawings...become subject to the disposal of the generals of the allied army” (Edwards 363), making all the Egyptian

artifacts the French had obtained the property of the British. These objects found their way to the British Museum by 1802, making important pieces like the Rosetta Stone part of the Museum's collection when the Trustees received the "Egyptian antiquities taken from the French in Alexandria" (General Meeting Minutes Vol. VIII, 2225).

Probably the Museum's most famous acquisition took place in 1816, when they obtained the sculptures from the Parthenon, also known as the Elgin Marbles. While serving as an ambassador to Turkey in 1800, Lord Elgin was in Greece and witnessed the destruction of the sculptures for souvenirs. Visitors to Greece would be "avid for even the smallest piece by the hand of Phidias" (St. Clair 62), which either the occupying Turks would provide for them by breaking off pieces of the marbles, or they would remove themselves. Originally there just to make drawings and plaster casts of the sculptures (St. Clair 66), Lord Elgin decided "to remove as much of the original sculpture" (Select Committee 41) as he could, and shipped the pieces to Britain from 1803 until 1812 (Ellis 3). After some debate, the state agreed to purchase the sculptures on behalf of the British Museum, making them a part of its collection on August 8, 1816 (St. Clair 261), an aspect of the Museum that is still hotly contested even today.

With the growth of the Museum's collection, the old Montegu house was no longer adequate to house these objects. Both the Egyptian artifacts (General Meeting Minutes Vol. VIII, 2226) and the Parthenon sculptures (St. Clair 255) had to be stored in makeshift wooden sheds in the Museum's garden, hardly a suitable location for such significant pieces. There was also an ever-growing overcrowding of readers in the Reading Room (Esdaile 79), meaning the Museum needed both more exhibiting and working space. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Museum was continuously being reconstructed, first under the direction of the architect Sir Robert Smirke, and later Sydney Smirke. Sir Robert's primary contribution was the construction

of the Museum's neoclassical façade and galleries, roughly finished in the 1840s (Crook 146). His younger brother, Sydney Smirke, was responsible for building the round Reading Room (Crook 175) in 1857, based on the Principal Librarian Antonio Panizzi's design (Crook 163), creating with his brother spaces that shaped the modern Museum.

### Heterotopias: Doorways in Time

The universal archive the British Museum strived to create is not possible without actively obtaining objects and texts from around the globe. From all over the world, these objects came together and filled the Museum's space, ready for the consumption of the viewer. The meeting between these objects and the viewer offers an example of the fluidity that characterizes the British Museum. The British Museum can be thought of as an example of what Michel Foucault has called a "heterotopia;" a place where there is a bending of time, a meshing of the past and the present into a single moment. Heterotopias are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 24), meaning heterotopias are dynamic places where one's present reality is constantly being reworked and rethought. Within the space of a heterotopia, individuals are transported to a "site" where they are not, and then returned to their original "site," changed because of their experience. Foucault's example of looking in a mirror helps clarify this concept somewhat, for "the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position I occupy" (Foucault 24), offering a moment of traveling back and forth between "sites." As Foucault says

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed towards me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side

of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself where I am (Foucault 24).

Within the heterotopia, one bounces back and forth between some other “site” and the “site” that is currently occupied, allowing one the possibility to form new perspectives and observations about the two.

As heterotopias are places that bring together different “sites” into one building, enabling “me to see myself where I am absent” (Foucault 24), different heterotopias offer different “sites.” Museums define “sites” as different times and places. Within the space of the British Museum, one is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 25), meaning someone can be transported back into the past. For example, a mid-nineteenth century Londoner can walk into the Egyptian gallery and enter into the time and place of thirteenth century BCE, despite the fact he or she clearly does not actually live there. Within the space of a heterotopia, the barriers between the past and present imposed by linear time are torn down, and instead the visitor gets to experience the past and present simultaneously. Because of this melding, it is possible for the viewer to begin to learn about and understand the various cultures and objects that are before him or her. By taking on the role of a heterotopia, the British Museum has established a fluid process that allows it to bring the past into modern London, and out of its designated place in space and time.

Thomas Hardy’s “In a Museum” offers a clear example of the melding between the past and present found in a heterotopic museum space. The speaker, presumably Hardy, sees the “mould of a musical bird long passed from light” (Hardy 1) in a museum. While the speaker looks at the bird, he recalls “a contralto voice I heard last night” (Hardy 3), something firmly grounded in the present. Acting as the hinge between the “musical bird... / Which over the earth before man came was winging;” (Hardy 1-2) and the “contralto voice... / That lodges with me



still with its sweet singing” (Hardy 3-4) is a semicolon, an indicator that these are complementary, yet separate concepts. The second stanza undermines this assertion however, as it is one sentence that brings the past and present together, the speaker finding “the coo of this ancient bird / Has perished not, but is blent... / with the voice I heard” (Hardy 5-7). Instead of the balancing semicolon, there is one long sentence, only punctuated by commas. The museum has opened up a gateway in time that brings the past into the present, bridging “visionless wilds of space” (Hardy 7) so that the “mould of a musical bird” may join with the “contralto voice,” forming one song. The gateway is not limited to the “contralto voice.” Thanks to the museum, the song of the long dead bird joins “In the full-fugued song of the universe unending” (Hardy 8), making Hardy realize “Such a dream is Time” (Hardy 5). Within the confines of the Museum, Hardy is able to “dream” like Bachelard says, and achieve a revelation about the fluid nature of time. The limitations of linear temporality are abolished by the museum, bringing this long-lost bird into every moment in time, merging the past with every present and future moment. Hardy’s poem makes it clear that the heterotopia is not just an obscure intellectual idea that has no basis in reality, but actually describes a real phenomenon, one that can be experienced within the walls of a museum.

Unfortunately, the gateway to the heterotopia itself is not as fluid as the experience of time within. It is not possible to enter the Museum’s heterotopia freely. As Foucault points out, heterotopias “always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates and makes them penetrable” (Foucault 26). In order to enter the heterotopia, or “open” it, “one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures” (Foucault 26), or conform to certain rules and rituals. If I fail to abide by these practices, I become excluded from the heterotopia, making it “closed” to me. By enacting these very rules, the heterotopia “isolates” itself from other spaces.

Foucault, in the great French philosophical tradition, uses a sexual example to describe this process, that of the “honeymoon trip” (Foucault 24). The criteria for “opening” a honeymoon are to be newly married and away from the home. “The young women’s deflowering could then take place ‘nowhere’ ” (Foucault 24), isolating it in a “site” away from home. The nature of these rituals lends a form of authority to the heterotopic space. In order to enter the heterotopia, we must submit to its demands, whatever they may be. To enter the “honeymoon,” I must accept the various rituals associated it, namely marriage and sex, submitting a part of myself so that I may experience the heterotopia.

As the British Museum is a heterotopia, it has its own system of “opening and closing.” In order to become a visitor at the British Museum, one has to follow its own codes and laws, placing the individual under the Museum’s control. Despite the open democratic language of the charter, by 1780 the distribution of tickets was done in such a way that only certain individuals could gain admittance, as outlined in the pamphlet “Directions to such as apply for Tickets to see the British Museum.” The very word “apply” presumes a vetting process, a ritual that must be followed before the Museum may be “opened.” The application itself calls for the group of visitors to “deliver a List...containing Christian and Surnames of each Person, together with their Titles, Rank, Profession, or Trade, and their several Places of Abode.” (Directions 1) By requesting the “several Places of Abode,” the Museum is preemptively screening those who are requesting admittance. Based on the places and “Titles, Rank, Profession, or Trade” listed, it would be possible for the Museum staff to gain some idea of the applicants’ various socio-economic statuses, and possibly make a refusal on the basis of class. They would be able to exclude lower members of society from the Museum if they wished, working to “isolate and close” (Foucault 26) it.

To reinforce this point, the hours of the institution were “from Nine o’Clock till Three every Day” (Directions 1), excluding weekends and holidays. These hours clearly exclude a sizable percentage of the population, namely the working, and even middle classes, that have to ply their trade during these times. Along the same lines, the garden that was part of Montegu house was just as big an attraction as the Museum itself in the eighteenth century. In order to protect it, the Trustees established a set procedure for viewing it, deciding “No person or persons be admitted to the garden, except by particular leave of the Committee, unless they are accompanied during their continuance therein by a Trustee” (General Meeting Minutes Vol I, 205). The creation of this rule “both isolates and makes [the garden] penetrable” (Foucault 26): individuals are separated from the garden, but have the potential to “penetrate” it if the Trustees give leave.

By the Victorian era, the British Museum was more accessible to the general public, but controlling rules and rituals remained, albeit in a simplified form. In order to obtain a pass for the Reading Room, one had to get the recommendation of someone who already possessed a pass. If one were to break the rules of the library, however, the heterotopia of the Museum would be “closed,” as seen in the actions taken by the Board of Trustees against readers. In the late nineteenth century, any infraction, no matter how small, could result in the revocation of the offender’s reading ticket. In the Board of Trustees’ Minutes from May 11, 1895, Mr. James Price’s and Mr. William Whitehead’s “admission was forthwith suspended” because of their “offensive state of uncleanliness” (General Meeting Minutes Vol XLVII, 19688). Mr. Basil Cooper was evicted as well, as he was “found smoking in the lavatory of the Reading Room” (General Meeting Minutes Vol XL, 15946). Perhaps the best example of individual control found in the minutes is a short, one sentence proclamation from June 15, 1895 saying “The Trustees

directed that Mr. Oscar Wilde...sentenced at the Central Criminal Court on 25<sup>th</sup> May to two years imprisonment with hard labour, be excluded from future use of the Museum Reading Room” (General Meeting Minutes Vol XLVII, 19413). Clearly, as seen in the imprisonment of Wilde, British society objected to homosexuality, and the British Museum wanted to make its position clear. Despite the fact that Wilde was an important writer who would have good reason to use the Reading Room, the Museum sided with the state, permanently banning him for his sexuality. The Museum has gone back to its original charter, seeking the “Preservation of our Constitution both in Church and State” (Charter 334) by backing the government’s position on homosexuality.

#### Upholding Tradition or a Force for Revolution

The barring of Wilde by the British Museum allies it with the state, and British society as a whole, defending British culture. The works of Doyle, Stoker, and Forster reflect this aspect of the Museum, but also present another interpretation of its function. The British Museum can act as a breeder of revolutionaries, providing individuals with the opportunity to challenge Britain, thus undermining the very state it champions.

Many detective fictions reflect the allegiance between the Museum and the state: there are countless examples of the British Museum offering the means to solve the crime or catch the criminal. Sherlock Holmes is generally pictured as a naturally intelligent and brilliant detective, using logic and analytic thinking to catch the criminal. However, in “The Musgrave Ritual,” published in 1893, Doyle reveals that Sherlock Holmes is an effective detective in part due to the British Museum’s influence, for “When I first came up to London I had rooms in Montague Street, just round the corner from the British Museum, and there I waited, filling my too

abundant leisure time by studying all those branches of science which might make me more efficient” (Doyle 387). Before he ever begins work as a detective, Holmes first learns all he can in the Museum, showing it is fulfilling its charge to be “useful to the Public” (Charter 334). By properly equipping Holmes with the knowledge needed to capture criminals, or those disobeying the state, the Museum is upholding the state’s authority, just as it did when it permanently revoked Wilde’s ticket.

There is a slightly questionable side to Holmes’ education, however, as it makes him an agent of the British Museum itself, rather than of the state. By capturing criminals, Holmes is upholding the state and British society, but he is doing it as an independent detective. Holmes does not work for the police, and in fact at times works against them, undermining their cases and exonerating those they have accused. In this sense, his work as an agent of the Museum undermines the authority of the state, making the Museum a breeder of revolutionaries, instead of preservers “of our Constitution both in Church and State” (Charter 334). Holmes feels free to work on his own, without the authority of the state, because he has the authority of the British Museum supporting him. By training Sherlock Holmes, the British Museum is both upholding and undermining Britain, aiding two contradictory causes simultaneously.

In “The Adventure of Wisteria Lodge” (1908) for example, the Museum’s training influences Holmes. While investigating the murder of Aloysius Garcia, Holmes and Watson come across a bizarre collection of objects in the kitchen of Wisteria Lodge. Holmes is able to figure what “The torn bird, the pail of blood, the charred bones, [and] all the mystery of that weird kitchen” (Doyle 887) mean because he “spent a morning in the British Museum reading up on that” (Doyle 887). His analysis is not an objective stating of the facts however, as is expected from Holmes. Instead, Holmes makes a strong imperialist judgment about the cook, the man who

performed the voodoo ritual that produced these remains, and his cultural background. The cook is described as “our savage friend” (Doyle 887), and Holmes dismisses his religious beliefs as “grotesque...[with there being] one step from the grotesque to the horrible” (887-8). Yes, it is important that he was able to use the Museum to help solve an aspect of the mystery, and in fact his research helped to clear the cook of any suspicion (Doyle 887). Yet Holmes’ decision to call the cook a “savage,” and to describe his religious practices as “grotesque” and nearly “horrible,” clearly shows a disdain and derision for both the man and his beliefs, a disdain based in imperialism. These opinions have seemingly come from the text he cites, “Eckermann’s *Voodooism and the Negroid Religions*” (Doyle 887), which comes from the British Museum. The British Museum, by providing Holmes with the text, is established as an agent of imperialism that promotes the inferiority of other cultures. As an agent of the Museum, Holmes can be seen as taking up the attitude and perception towards voodoo and its practitioners found in the British Museum, instead of formulating his own judgment on the man. He has fallen under the control of the British Museum, using its judgments to form his own. In this instance, the British Museum, and therefore Holmes, is upholding the activities of the state, reinforcing the imperialist policies that existed at the time. The same character, Holmes, that was a force acting against the state earlier is now working for it, lending his credence, and the Museum’s as well, to imperialism.

The protection and undermining of Britain by the British Museum can be further explored by examining the different ways the foreign other is treated by the Museum. The act of displaying another culture creates a tension between exposing viewers to the other, and dominating the other. The other has been contained within the small space of a museum, so the viewer may experience it in a controlled environment. Through the heterotopic space of the

museum, the viewer may see what the other is like, becoming educated about the foreign. At the same time, the other is trapped by the museum, held and dominated so that viewers can consume it. Additionally, by placing the foreign other in the spectacle of the exhibition, the museum forces a comparison between the other and the host, a comparison that often becomes unfavorable. For example, as a British viewer within the Museum, one can see the marvelous neoclassical building, full of wonders from around the world, and know that outside is vibrant, energetic, metropolitan London. The other, however, exists only in the object, trapping the culture of the other in the heterotopic other “site.” The culture of Britain becomes celebrated when compared to the artifacts on display, emphasizing the superiority of Britain over the foreign.

An analysis of some of the Museum’s artifacts shows this tension in action. For example, as noted above, the Egyptian artifacts that arrived in 1801 were the spoils of war, for they were a negotiated part of the surrender of France in Egypt (Edwards 363). The militaristic background behind these pieces’ arrival makes them just as much a part of France as Egypt. Britain, in defeating Napoleon, has taken the treasures of France’s empire, absorbing them into the British national culture. When these Egyptian artifacts are displayed, they show the defeat of France at the hand of Britain, confirming Britain’s superiority to France. On December 10, 1814, the Board of Trustees authorized the purchase of a set of Napoleon medals (Vol. IX 2584). This is only a few months after the defeat of Napoleon by Britain and her allies, and his subsequent exile to Elba (Morris 352), so I believe it is fair to see this purchase as an exercise of power and dominance over France and its newly deposed ruler. The Trustees of the Museum want to join in the victory celebrations, so they keep Napoleon down by exhibiting him. Clearly, these medals do hold historical merit; in the future it will be important to see the artifacts from this great

European war. In this moment, however, there is a tension between education and domination.

Two years later, July 13, 1816, the Trustees provided cabinet space to display French and Papal medals (Vol. X 2636). Once again, the Museum is displaying the other in order to exert influence and control over it.

This display as control over the foreign other naturally lends itself to imperialism. As the British Empire grew, so too did the Museum's collection. In 1879, the Museum took in objects from the Indian Museum, including "certain Indian sculptures, gold objects, bronze and stone figurines" (General Meeting Minutes Vol. XXXVIII 14771). Like the treasures of the French Empire, these pieces of India are absorbed into British culture, reflecting the control of India by Britain. This control is taken even further in a mandate sent to India by the Museum in 1900, "representing claims of the British Museum to a share of any specimens of Indians antiquities" (General Meeting Minutes Vol. XLIX 1103). India's history does not belong to India; it belongs to Britain instead. Africa was affected as well, for in 1905 the Museum received a gift of African artifacts from the Rhodes Trustees (General Meeting Minutes Vol. LII 2159). These artifacts were presumably property of Cecil Rhodes, the man who played such a key role in British expansion in Africa. As a token of gratitude, the Trustees sent Sir Lewis Michell, the Secretary of the British South Africa Company, a copy of the Museum publication "Antiquities from Benin" (General Meeting Minutes Vol. LII 2159). Here, the Museum is collaborating with groups heavily invested in imperialistic expansion, making it a supporter of and participant in British imperialism.

Taming the foreign other through the power of the British Museum is a concept explored in Bram Stoker's 1897 novel *Dracula*. Stoker's treatment of the Museum's power over the foreign other continues the theme of simultaneously upholding and undermining Britain found in



the other works discussed so far. Before Jonathan Harker leaves for the Count's castle, he "visited the British Museum, and made search among the books and maps in the library regarding Transylvania" (Stoker 27). There is a measure of common sense here, for it is simply good practice to research the place you are about to visit. Jonathan mentions this himself, stating "it had struck me that some foreknowledge of the country could hardly fail to have some importance in dealing with a noble of that country" (Stoker 27). The sentence also suggests Jonathan's desire to establish himself as the dominant force in the forthcoming clash of cultures. Armed with the "foreknowledge" he might find in the Museum, he has the possibility to tame the "noble of that country." Another of these darker moments appears as he searches the maps for the location of the Count's castle, remarking "there are no maps of this country as yet to compare with our own Ordnance Survey maps" (Stoker 27), leaving it one of "the wildest and least known portions of Europe" (Stoker 27). Here, Transylvania is distinctly othered, and portrayed as an inferior culture that lags far behind Britain. Its maps pale in comparison with those made by Britain's military engineers, leaving it a "wild" and exotic place. By placing Transylvania in this inferior position, Britain, through the power of the British Museum, is established as superior, controlling the other and making Jonathan feel more secure in traveling to Transylvania. There is not a complete assertion of authority, however, for Transylvania is left outside the control of the Museum, and consequently Britain. It is one of the last holdouts against the empire on which the sun never sets, leaving it one of "the wildest and least known portions of Europe." The same maps that Jonathan uses to establish Britain's control over Transylvania work to undermine Britain's authority by that showing parts of the world are outside Britain's control, and possibly able to pose a threat.

However, while at the Count's castle, Jonathan encounters another library that allows him to control the foreign other, making himself comfortable in Transylvania. The Count warns Jonathan: "We are in Transylvania; and Transylvania is not England. Our ways are not your ways, and there shall be to you many strange things" (Stoker 46), a fact Jonathan already knows from his terrifying ride to the castle. He feels "there is something so strange about this place and all in it I cannot help but feel uneasy" (Stoker 49). The fact that Dracula is a vampire accounts for some of this feeling, but there is something about this foreign "place" that upsets Jonathan. Carmen Maria Andras explains that to the Victorians, "the Westerner's journey to Transylvania is equivalent to crossing the threshold from Western civilization ('Christian,' democratic, ruled by the light of reason and order) to the Oriental, ('pagan,' sunk into the darkness of superstitions and lack of culture, the realm of the unconscious)" (Andras 40). Jonathan has entered into a new kind of world in Transylvania, one that, to him, runs counter to his beliefs. His comfort comes from the "sort of library" (Stoker 44) that is next to his room in the castle. There, "I found, to my great delight, a vast number of English books, whole shelves of them, and bound volumes of magazines and newspapers" (Stoker 44). It is not the availability of reading material itself that soothes him, it is the fact that it is a library of "English" literature, containing "history, geography, politics, political economy, botany, geology, law – all relating to England and English life and customs and manners" (Stoker 44). Jonathan's emphasis on the Englishness of the literature shows how he is grasping his English identity firmly; to him, these books are the reminders of his culture's superiority that he can lean on in the face of foreign Transylvania. Even the reference books, particularly "the Law List" (Stoker 44), move him. Taken all together, this "sort of library" acts as a satellite British Museum. Here, Jonathan can experience British, particularly English, culture through his reading. He can be transported to the other "site" of

England while in the foreign land so long as he has these texts. Armed with this contact with England, he once more can face one of “the wildest and least known portions of Europe” (Stoker 27), believing in his superiority over the other.

In order to move to Britain, Dracula, like Jonathan, must educate himself about what he views as foreign, in his case England. So, he does the same thing Jonathan does; “For some years past...ever since [he] had the idea of going to London” (Stoker 45) he reads literature “relating to England and English life and customs and manners” (Stoker 44) in “a sort of library” (Stoker 44). This action mirrors Jonathan’s trip to the British Museum at the beginning of the novel. When Jonathan meets the Count in the castle’s library, Dracula himself acknowledges how his reading has helped him come to understand England. He says ““These friends’ – and he laid his hand on some of the books – ‘have been good friends to me, and for some years past, ever since I had the idea of going to London, have given me many, many hours of pleasure. Through them I have come to know your great England; and to know her is to love her.” (Stoker 45). By reading these specifically English texts, Dracula, like Jonathan, is transported to the other “sites” of London and England, allowing him to “come to know” her through the heterotopia of the library. In his mirror image British Museum, which functions as a heterotopia just like the one in London, Dracula is able to educate himself about a different culture that is far removed from him; he is able to “see [himself] there where [he is] absent” (Foucault 24) and understand England while still in Transylvania. This is a shadow image of the British Museum, a “sort of library,” however, that plays on the image of a vampire victim, making his study in it alarming. Once someone is bitten by Dracula, they become the “Un-dead” (Stoker 209) and under his control. He can then use them to further his own ends. By biting, as it were, the British Museum, Dracula has gained his own “sort of library” that he may use to come to understand England.

Dracula's library through the looking glass is a threatening force, a starting point for the Count's planned domination of England. This fact introduces an element of tension between the Museum and the other. By "to know your great England," Dracula has come "to love her" (Stoker 45). From a normal human being, this sentiment might be positive: reading has brought two distinct cultures together into mutual understanding and love. However, Dracula is a supernatural vampire, which makes his statement of love full of underlying malice. Those the Count loves become like him, as seen in the near attack on Jonathan later in the castle. The "three young women" (Stoker 61) appear, and oblivious Jonathan fails to realize they are vampires, despite the fact they possess "two sharp teeth" (Stoker 62). As he is about to be bitten, the Count appears and saves him, prompting one of the women to cry "You yourself never loved; you never love!" (Stoker 62). Dracula, however, reminds her "Yes, I too can love; you yourselves can tell it from the past" (Stoker 62), the implication being that Dracula loved these women and that is why they are now his Un-Dead vampire slaves. By saying he has come to love England, Dracula is affirming that he plans to attack her, as he did these three women, and force her to be subservient. His gendering of England as female emphasizes this point, showing his desire to make England his next victim.

The impending love affair between Dracula and England is terrifying for another reason as well, for the English cultural identity is under threat. Count Dracula, as a Transylvanian and a supernatural vampire, acts as the embodiment of the foreign other. The critic John Allen Stevenson explains, "the vampire...[is] someone who threatens and terrifies precisely because he is an outsider" (Stevenson 139). Dracula is the enemy because he is the other, and therefore a threat to Britain. Critics have understood the threat of Dracula in a variety of ways, which Nicholas Daly nicely summarizes.

Count Dracula has appeared as the embodiment of fears about degeneration, the influx of eastern European Jews into late Victorian England, a subversive female sexuality, reverse colonization, nascent media culture, male homoeroticism and monopoly capital, among other things. (Daly 34).

It is not necessary to pin down which of these interpretations of the Count is correct. Rather, we must understand the “apparent diversity of critical conclusions masks a broad consensus that Stoker’s text reflects certain anxieties, be they late Victorian or universal” (Daly 34). Dracula plays on the fears and “anxieties” of the time, namely that the fabric of British culture and society could be torn apart by the threatening other, whether that other be an “eastern European Jew” or “reverse colonization.”

It is through reading in his library that the Count is able to assume his dominant position over England, a fact that turns the British Museum’s control of the other around. Instead of Britain using the Museum to master the other, Dracula, the embodiment of the threatening other, is able to use the Museum’s processes to “come to know your great England.” By knowing her, Dracula is able to gain power over her, which allows him to target England as his next victim. The British Museum’s control of the other, a tangible force as seen in Jonathan’s actions in the novel, has been inverted, allowing the foreign other to assert himself as the dominant one in the relationship. Instead of working to protect Britain, the Museum has opened up Britain to the supernatural threat of the foreign vampire, a threat that could not be realized without the tools of the British Museum.

The shift between the conservation and the reimagination of Britain found in Forster’s *Maurice* focuses on the potential consequences of allowing the past to become one with the present. Written in 1914, but unpublished until 1971, *Maurice* is a homosexual love story. In the wake of Maurice and Alec’s night of passion, Maurice is concerned Alec will attempt to blackmail him for being a homosexual. In order to forestall this, he arranges a meeting with Alec

at the British Museum. It is while in this specific place that Maurice realizes he loves Alec, and is willing to confess it. As the two of them discuss the particulars of their situation, Alec “caught sight of a [pair of] winged Assyrian bull[s]” (Forster 222), or lamassu, two objects that bring the past into the present. Barbara J. Black believes these objects represent a “masculinity, [and] virility” (Black 123), as seen in Maurice’s realization that “this one has five legs” (Forster 222). Alec realizes the statue before him has five legs as well, “A



Figure 1: Assyrian lamassu in British Museum with “five legs.” Source: Author.

curious idea” (Forster 222). Black believes this pair of masculine statues indicates a “sensuality that is Eastern and heterodox” (Black 123). As these are a pair of male, or “five legged,” statues, I understand the heterodox sensuality Black speaks of to be a male homosexuality, a concept that runs counter to the ideas of the Museum. Homosexuality was not tolerated by the institution, as seen in Wilde’s banishment from the Museum. Instead of tolerating homosexuality, the Museum and society shut it out. These two statues, however, provide a gateway for sanctioned homosexuality to become a part of the present. In the Assyrian culture, lamassu were generally placed “at the entrances of temples and palaces as ‘guardians of the gate’” (Parrot 27), meaning Maurice and Alec are standing before a literal door. It is not just a door into the physical space of the Museum, but it also opens to time, using the heterotopia of the Museum to bring the ancient toleration, and even celebration, of homosexuality into the present. These two statues stand guard over the door to the past, acting as the gatekeepers that allow toleration of homosexuality free

passage into the present. The heterotopic melding of the past and the present, the very basis of the Museum's function, has allowed what is ostracized to become accessible.

However, Black fails to go further in her analysis of Maurice and Alec's reactions to the statues, and consequently misses the unforeseen effects of the past joining with the present. After looking at the statues, the two men "standing each by his monster...looked at each other, and smiled" (Forster 222). They have a moment drawing them closer together and reaching some kind of unspoken understanding. Maurice and Alec both recognize the homosexual concept found in the "sensuality that is Eastern and heterodox" from the past. The statues' inherent homosexuality makes them "monster[s]" (Forster 222) instead of the "bull[s]" they were earlier, as homosexuality was outside the norms of the 1910s. This monstrousness does not repel Maurice and Alec though. Instead, they take ownership of this long lost acceptance of homosexuality, each of them recognizing the statue as "his." The two realize they share a deep connection with the "monsters" before them, and in turn acknowledge their own connection as "they looked at each other, and smiled" (Forster 222). By experiencing the homosexual love in the past in the form of the statues, Maurice and Alec can experience their own homosexual love in the present. The past and present have become one single unified whole, as the present reflects the past, and the past reflects the present. The heterotopic space of the British Museum has acted as the conduit for this moment of clarity, despite the fact that Britain stands in opposition to homosexuality.

Later in the scene Maurice and Alec end up in the ancient Greece galleries, and Maurice finally openly confesses his love to Alec, a moment that reveals the inherent contradictions that constitute the Museum. Maurice, speaking to Alec, tells him "I should have known by that time that I loved you. Too late...everything's always too late" (Forster 225). The Museum physically

responds to this declaration when its “rows of old statues totter.” (Forster 255). To explain this reaction, Ruth Hoberman claims “Forster uses the museum setting to evoke...the oppression of the state and outmoded values” (Hoberman 120). The British Museum, as an influential institution at times allied with the state, can be seen as the embodiment of the conservative values associated with late Edwardian Britain. Maurice’s declaration of love for another man runs counter to these beliefs, causing “the rows of old statues [to] totter” (Forster 225) in shock. The collection, the very foundation of the Museum, cannot believe what has just taken place and is physically shaken by the declaration of love. This moment of weakness does not last, however, for Maurice tells Alec immediately afterwards “come outside, we can’t talk here” (Forster 225) and “they left the enormous and overheated building” (Forster 225). In order to properly understand their mutual love, to know “the greatest triumph ordinary man can win” (Forster 226), they must leave the Museum, an overbearing, uncomfortable place that stifles the two men. Despite the moment of “tottering,” the Museum is upholding the ideology of Britain expressed in Wilde’s exile, and turning its back on the free enjoyment and understanding of homosexual love in the past that Maurice and Alec had earlier.

However, the other explanation for the “tottering” Hoberman offers runs counter to the reading of the Museum as a pillar of Edwardian values. The “tottering” could also be a reflection of “a potential queerness embedded in the stones themselves” (Hoberman 120). Like the moment with the Assyrian lamassu, these ancient Greek statues offer a return to a past where homosexuality was not condemned. The Apostles of Cambridge, of which Forster was a member, looked to ancient Greece as a time when homosexuality was celebrated. They “interpreted from [Plato’s *Symposium*] and other Greek texts their own discourse of male sexuality that competed with a dominant repressive and homophobic culture” (Taddo 202),



making it feasible to argue the Greek statues possess some “queerness embedded” in them. Maurice, experiencing this “potential queerness” of the past within the British Museum, is able to finally acknowledge his love for another man. This intense expression of passion that existed in the Greek statue’s own time, stirs the statues to life. They are roused, or even aroused, to life, physically moving and “tottering.” This multifaceted meaning of “tottering” is a reflection of the British Museum itself. By allowing aspects of the past, in this case homosexuality, to merge with the present, it has gone against the policies of the state. In a single moment it can take on a variety of meanings that both work to uphold and undermine its ideological meaning, acting as both the oppressor of homosexual love and its enabler.

The ability of the British Museum to both support and attack Britain comes from the fact it is a collection of objects housed in a building. On its own, this collection cannot do anything; without someone in the library using them, the maps of *Dracula* cannot control or liberate the foreign other. It is the individuals that “dream” (Bachelard 6) within the Museum that decide how it relates to Britain. They must decide whether or not to access the toleration of homosexuality found in the Assyrian lamassu or Greek statues, whether to agree with the police or try to overturn their conviction. The British Museum merely provides the tools and resources; it is left up to the individual to decide how to use them.

#### “The Valley of the Shadow of Books”: The Meaning of the British Museum’s Reading Room

The British Museum is somewhat unique in that its country’s national library was a part of its collection. In order to allow visitors access to the texts, the Museum designated several Reading Rooms over the years. Within these spaces would assemble an assortment of individuals engaged in contrasting tasks, calling the function of the Reading Room and its texts into

question. While writing about the Reading Room, writers investigate those who use the space in an attempt to understand what the Reading Room is. Through an examination of the policies and rhetoric surrounding the Reading Room, it is clear that there was an effort to establish it as an egalitarian place of learning, where meaningful intellectual works could be made, building up British culture. In practice, however, this conception of the Reading Room as a serious place of study proved to be elusive. The writings of Washington Irving, George Gissing, and Virginia Woolf are all preoccupied with the work done in the Reading Room, exploring the tension between serious and idle work. These writers, roughly from the Romantic, Victorian, and Modern eras respectively, bring out the fluidity associated with the British Museum in their efforts to discern what sort of space the Reading Room is.

Mr. R. Hannay, the author of *The History of the Representation of England* who spoke to the Parliamentary committee investigating the Museum in 1835 (Cowtan 207), summarizes the inherent tension the British Museum faces: “the Parliament and the Trustees of the Museum have two duties to perform; the one to preserve its treasures, the other to offer them to the public so far as safety will admit” (Select Committee 5133). The works must be “preserved” so that they can be used by those who have a real need or use for them, like serious academicians. At the same time, “the public,” the same “public” mentioned in the charter, should have access to the national collection for their “benefit” (Charter 333). An analysis of the Reading Room’s admissions policies throughout its history shows a balance between establishing itself as a space of serious academic learning and being available to the common man. The first tickets were issued in 1774 to eight men “nearly all Fellows of the Royal Society or the Society of Antiquities” (Esdaile 51). Throughout the eighteenth century, the number of readers slowly increased, as “the most learned members of the time” (Esdaile 52) were granted tickets, including Thomas Gray and Dr. Johnson

(Esdaile 52). By granting admittance to these kinds of individuals, the British Museum was setting aside its library as a place for the serious intellectual. It was a room for well-established intellectual figures to have access to important and rare texts so that they might produce influential texts of their own for the “benefit of the public” (Charter 333). Despite this mainstream intellectual bias in admission, it was occasionally possible for intellectual outsiders, such as Lady Mary Carr and Lady Ann Monson in 1762 (Esdaile 53), to gain access, opening up the Reading Room to the “public.” While these individuals are clearly not commoners, they do not have the same intellectual status as Thomas Gray and Dr. Johnson, making the Reading Room a place for both types of readers.

In 1803, the Trustees decided to make it easier to apply for Reading Room tickets. Prior to this date, one had to have a recommendation from one of the Museum’s Trustees or officers, a very select group of individuals, including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Principal Librarian of the British Museum, the Lord Chancellor, and Speaker of the House of Commons (Miller 48). Clearly one had to be well connected to get a recommendation from the Board, limiting the scope of individuals that could gain access. With the passage of the Regulations of 1803, admission was opened to those who had references from “any two or more outside persons of known and approved character” (Esdaile 82), making the admissions pool much larger. Now individuals not directly connected with the high intellectual elite, or not part of the aristocracy, could gain admission, making the Reading Room a more egalitarian space. This policy of liberality did not last long, however, as the Board reinstated the old admission system in 1812, seemingly out of fear for the collection (Esdaile 82). Eventually the admission system eased up again, first through the actions of the Principal Librarian Joseph Planta throughout the late 1810s and early 1820s (Edwards 520), and second, of the Principal Librarian Antonio Panizzi in the

1850s (Edwards 598-599), allowing many individuals the opportunity to gain access.

Unfortunately, this led to overcrowding, and in 1862, Watts, the Superintendent of the Reading Room at the time, suggested an increase of the age limit. Before, it had been eighteen, but in order “to preserve to the uses of those best entitled to them the advantages and facilities afforded by the Library and Reading Room of the British Museum” the Trustees were “compelled to raise the limit of age at which persons shall be admissible...to twenty-one years” (General Meeting Minutes Vol. XXIX 10146). To allow serious scholarship to continue in the Reading Room, the Board deemed it necessary to close it off from some members of the public, limiting who could enter. However, if someone under twenty-one had a serious reason for working in the Reading Room, producing literature that would contribute to the growth of British culture, the Trustees allowed them to apply for admission, like, for example, Mr. Maurice H. Hewlett in 1879 (General Meeting Minutes Vol. XXXVIII 14587), who went on to become a successful novelist. The Museum was willing to bend its own rules, providing it brought in serious scholars.

Principal Librarian Antonio Panizzi’s iconic round Reading Room can be seen as the embodiment of the Reading Room’s complex negotiation of the relationship between equality and serious study. Antonio Panizzi was an Italian who immigrated to Great Britain in 1823 to avoid his execution, a sentence he was handed for fighting for Italian unification (Edwards 546-547). In 1831 he joined the British Museum, working in the Department of Printed Books (Miller 545-546), and eventually rising to the highest office of the British Museum, the Principal Librarian, in 1856 (Edwards 362). Given his revolutionary background, it makes sense that Panizzi pushed for more openness in the Library, declaring to the Parliament Committee investigating the Museum in 1835:

I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming

the most intricate inquiry as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that the Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect (Select Committee 4795).

Rather than balancing the extremes of serious study and public access seen so far, Panizzi pushes for an openness that allows “students,” regardless of their class, access to the Library.

The round shape of Panizzi’s Reading Room, based on designs he made personally,

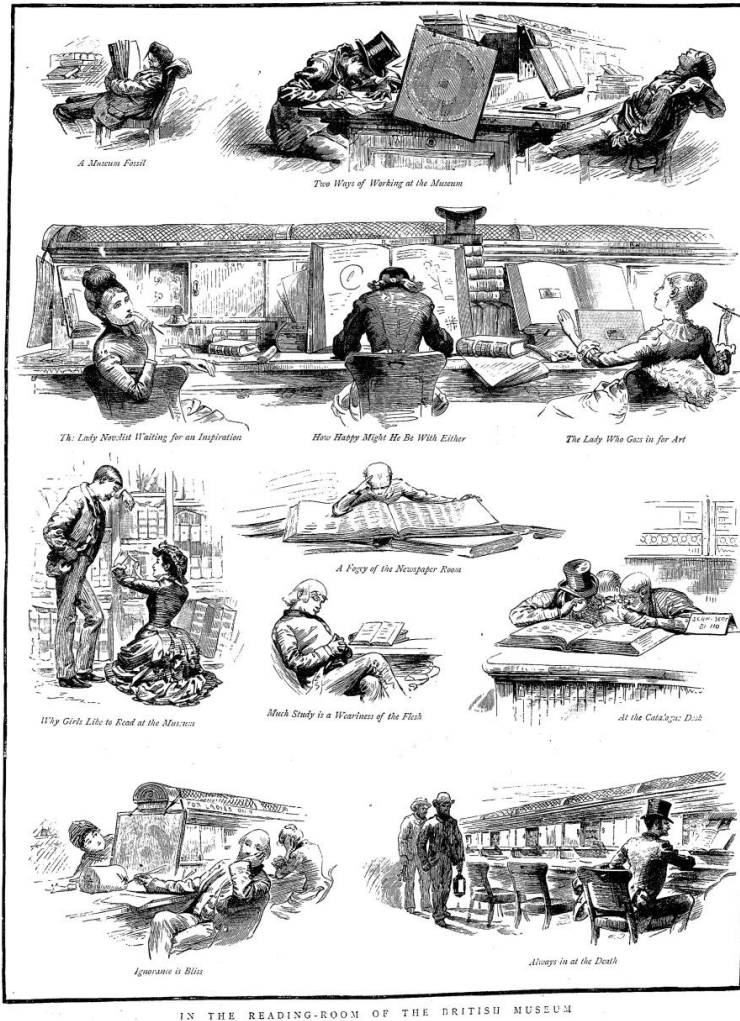


Figure 2: “In the Reading-Room of the British Museum.”  
Source: *The Graphic* (15 January 1887): 57.

introduces an egalitarian element to the space. Every seat is part of a cohesive whole, making sure no reader is more elevated or valued than another. Therefore, it was possible to find a diverse assortment of readers seated together, as an illustration from *The Graphic* shows. Printed in 1887, it offers examples of the mixing of pursuits found in Panizzi’s equalizing space. At one table, there are two men, one hunched over hard at work, while

the other leans back napping in his chair, demonstrating “Two

Ways of Working at the Museum.” Another has two women working, one “The Lady Novelist waiting for an Inspiration” and the other “The Lady Who Goes in for Art,” while a man is seated between them buried in a book. “Why Girls Like to Read at the Museum” shows the reading

Room as a social space that facilitates flirtation between the sexes. These individuals all have divergent aims in working in the Reading Room, and not all of them are serious academic workers. In this round space, they are all welcome and free to pursue whatever they want, even if it involves a nap.

Various critics have used the shape of the Reading Room as the basis for their understandings of its function, often coming up with contradictory interpretations. Susan Bernstein gets at the equalizing nature of the Reading Room by seeing its shape as a way to “promote...exteriority...that facilitated networking and imaginative speculation” (Bernstein 16). According to her interpretation, the circular shape allowed a reader to perform research in a visible public place, leading to recognition and networking opportunities. It offered a theater in the round of sorts where anyone can become a player, working hard and creating valuable relationships. Gerard Curtis takes the opposite approach to the round shape of the Reading Room, seeing it as a kind of panopticon, a manifestation of authority and control. In the very center of the room is the Superintendent’s desk, with the readers “radiated out in spokes to the drum of knowledge” (Curtis 211). There is an element of equality in this idea, in so far as the readers are all equally under the oppression of the Superintendent, but this is hardly the equality Panizzi called for. Instead of debating which of these two readings is the right one, I feel it is more productive to note that the same space can take on two completely different meanings. The layout of the space is the same for both Bernstein and Curtis, but from their separate perspectives it can either be a networking site or a prison, a space of positive or negative visibility. Neither one is the wrong interpretation; rather these arguments typify the variation in meaning associated with the Reading Room.

“The Art of Book-Making” from Washington Irving’s 1819 *The Sketch-Book*, explores the work done in the British Museum’s Reading Room. In the story, the Reading Room is initially understood as a place where important texts of British culture come into being. While wandering through the British Museum, Irving finds himself in the Library Reading Room, “a spacious chamber, surrounded with great cases of books...[and] a great number of black-looking portraits of ancient authors” (Irving 77). Filling the space were “long tables, with stands for reading and writing, at which sat many pale, studious personages, poring intently over dusty volumes, rummaging among mouldy manuscripts, and taking copious notes of their contents” (Irving 77). This description represents the Reading Room as a place of industrious, serious study geared toward producing significant texts, for Irving realizes these men were “principally authors, and in the very act of manufacturing books” (Irving 78). Understood in this way, the Reading Room is “preserving” and “offering” texts to those of serious intellectual pursuits so they can create important texts of their own.

As Irving examines the individuals working in the Reading Room more closely, this understanding begins to fall apart, forcing us to question what exactly these individuals are doing. One man, a “lean, bilious-looking wight” (Irving 78) is searching through “the most worm-eaten volumes, printed in black-letter. He was evidently constructing some work of profound erudition” (Irving 78). He is not writing, but “constructing,” taking parts from these various old books to build up a work of his own “that would be purchased by every man who wished to be thought learned” (Irving 78). There is no attempt at original thought on the part of the “wight;” instead he steals from the past and tries to pass it off as his own brilliance. Yes, he is producing something “of profound erudition,” meaning his theft from the past might bring

worthwhile ideas to light, but he is not producing new culture. He is just going to the well of past authors and using their work.

Even more offensive is the “dapper little gentleman in bright colored cloths...on good terms with his bookseller” (Irving 78). Unlike the “lean, bilious-looking wight,” this man is the model of a wealthy, and therefore successful, author with his fancy and fashionable outfit. His success is not due to his own intellectual and literary skill, but is built on the work of those that have come before him. He is only able to wear his “bright colored cloths” because he is “dipping into various books...taking a morsel out of one, a morsel out of another ‘line upon line, precept upon precept, here a little and there a little’” (Irving 79). He is no better than a grave robber decking himself in the golden finery of some ancient king whose tomb he has plundered. His collection of stolen pieces is so diverse, Irving sees it as “as heterogeneous as those of the witches’ cauldron in Macbeth” (Irving 79). This observation makes the wealthy author one of the witches, a supernatural figure. Rather than a place of rational, intellectual study, this room is where the “witches” gather together, creating their books through a mystical, supernatural process, resembling “a body of magi, deeply engaged in the study of the occult sciences” (Irving 77). Having cast the readers as magicians, Irving has called their intellectual capacities into doubt, as a magician must rely on an outside force for his power. They lack the rationality and intellectual fortitude required to be “the most learned members of the time” (Esdaile 52), so must resort to theft and magic in order to make up for their intellectual failings.

While studying these figures in the Reading Room, Irving falls asleep and has a dream that more explicitly explores the relationship between the thieving present and the past. In his dream the Reading Room is transformed, as “the long tables had disappeared, and, in place of the sage magi, I beheld a ragged, threadbare, throng” (Irving 80). Any pretense of original thought



has vanished with the disappearance of the tables, and the workers are stripped of their outward gilding. Irving's vision of their "ragged, threadbare" state points to their lack of intellectual originality. In order to disguise their inadequacies, each man "seized upon a book...[and] it turned into a garment of foreign or antique fashion, with which they proceeded to equip themselves" (Irving 80). The past is up for grabs, in the form of the old books, and the readers are self-fashioning by taking it for themselves. There is no system behind their dressing, however, as "no one pretended to clothe himself from any particular suit, but took a sleeve from one, a cape from another, a skirt from a third, thus decking himself out piecemeal" (Irving 80). The producers of books are simply taking whatever they can from the past so that they might look impressive. One man "had trimmed himself magnificently from an illuminated manuscript, had stuck a nosegay in his bosom, culled from "The Paradise of Daintie Devices," and...put Sir Philip Sidney's hat on one side of his head" (Irving 81) while another "had decked himself in wreaths and ribbons from the old pastoral poets and...went about with a fantastical lack-a-daisical air 'babbling about green fields'" (Irving 81-81). J. Crook calls the Reading Room of the story a "quaint world" (Crook 153), but there is nothing "quaint" about this scene. These men are no more than common thieves, using the resources of the Reading Room to steal ideas that they can use to fashion themselves as great men.

However, not every person in Irving's dream is a thief, showing there are those who use the room properly. Some are "well-dressed gentlemen...who only helped themselves to a gem or so, which sparkled among their own ornaments, without eclipsing them" (Irving 81). These individuals are the true intellectuals; they are already "well-dressed" because they possess worthwhile thoughts of their own. Their theft is more along the lines of Newton's statement "If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants" (Newton 416). They use ideas from

the past, hence “a gem or so,” but only to complement and complete their outfit, to reaffirm and further their own ideas. The other proper users are those that “seemed to contemplate the costumes of the old writers, merely to imbibe their principles of taste, and to catch their air and spirit” (Irving 81). For people like this, the Reading Room is a place where one can come to know the writers of the past, learning from them in order to better one’s own writing.

Unfortunately, “too many were apt to array themselves from top to toe in the patchwork manner” (Irving 81), making the Reading Room a place for theft and self-fashioning, where those who are lacking can disguise themselves behind the splendor of the past.

As these events are taking place within a dream, the past has a way to retaliate. The “great number of black-looking portraits of ancient authors” (Irving 77) come to life. Irving sees the “old authors thrust out...and descend with fury in their eyes, to claim their rifled property” (Irving 82). It is a comic moment where “Beaumont and Fletcher raged round the field like Castor and Pollux, and sturdy Ben Jonson enacted more wonders than when a volunteer with the army in Flanders” (Irving 82). The thieves are stripped by the writers of the past, left “with scarce a rag to cover their nakedness” (Irving 82). Irving’s dream vision Reading Room punishes the thieves, exposing them for the intellectual hacks they are and allowing the past to reclaim what rightfully belongs to it.

The sheer comedy of the scene makes Irving laugh, an action that awakens him and makes him realize his dream is impossible. He finds “nothing of the dream had been real but my burst of laughter, a sound never before heard in that grave sanctuary, and so abhorrent to the ears of wisdom, as to electrify the fraternity” (Irving 82). The thieves are momentarily distracted from their “production” of books, and react in anger. The librarian “demanded whether I had a card of admission” (Irving 83), which Irving does not. He is promptly thrown out of the Reading Room,

as it “was a kind of literary ‘preserve,’ subject to game-laws, and...I stood convicted of being an arrant poacher” (Irving 83). By comparing the Library to a game-preserve, Irving is making it clear there are no works of cultural significance being produced in it at all. The writers are nothing more than gamesmen, hunting through old texts for pieces they might capture and use for their own benefit. There is a predatory, animalistic nature about them. When Irving leaves, he fears he “should have a whole pack of authors set loose upon me” (Irving 83). The thieves hard at work making books are beastly hunters, not serious intellectuals, a fact that runs counter to the Museum’s rhetoric. The men allowed into the “game-preserve” are those that hunt and steal from the past. In order to gain admittance, one must be one of these hacks, just concerned with making oneself appear intelligent rather than with actually producing anything of merit.

George Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, from 1891, provides a late-Victorian portrait of the Reading Room, one that exposes the darkness of the place by looking at the individuals who work there. Gissing explores their motives, methods of working, the literature they produce, and society’s reception of their material in order to get at the Museum’s place in the modern world. One of Gissing’s readers is Jasper Milvain, a self-proclaimed pragmatist who is trying to leap his way to the head of literary society. In order to further his career, he treats the Reading Room as if he were one of Irving’s thieves. For him, the Reading Room is not a place of serious academic scholarship and research, it is just a way to acquire wealth. While Milvain is trying to climb the literary ladder, he spends his time “studying” (Gissing 5) in the Reading Room, “collecting ideas, and ideas that are convertible into coin of the realm” (Gissing 47). His only reason for being in the Reading Room is economic gain, as he hopes to take various ideas from literary history and rework them so they will cater to the masses. Instead of producing serious work, he focuses on writing that will have mass appeal, and therefore make him wealthy. Like the men in

Irving's dream, he is grabbing old texts and clothing himself with their ideas, all for the sake of money. His contempt for the Reading Room is best seen in his nickname for the space, the "valley of the shadow of books" (Gissing 9), a reference to the famous Bible verse "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4 KJV). By switching "death" for "books," Milvain is equating the two as the same thing. In his mind, these texts are just dead objects, waiting for him to come along and pull the best bits out and convert them into "coin of the realm."

Marian Yule works in the Reading Room as the research assistant for her father, a respected, if struggling, literary figure. Despite this background, her writing is just as grounded in the modern literary world as Milvain's. Robert Selig points out "Gissing's writers live in a late-Victorian world of large-scale industry and machines" (Selig 189), but writing is still "partly a handicraft" (Selig 190). In order to adapt to the new modern world, Marian, along with the other workers in the Reading Room, must imagine herself as a "literary machine" (Gissing 293), no longer writing but "manufacturing" (Gissing 175) articles. Her whole day is spent going through different works and pulling the necessary pieces together in order to create "a commodity for today's market" (Gissing 67). Marian's understanding of her work as a commodity allows her to imagine the Museum becoming "a trackless desert of print" (Gissing 67), providing a glimpse into the Museum's future. Due to the copyright privilege the British Museum held, all these empty "manufactured" (Gissing 175) pieces of contemporary literature would become part of the Museum's collection, as the publishers are required to send a copy to the Museum. Over time, this commoditized literature will build up, contaminating the Library to the point that it will be overwhelmed by these meaningless pieces. It will be a "desert" of commercialized literature, lacking any substance or meaning. Those working in the Reading

Room, including Marian, are contributing to the desertification of the Museum by forgoing important forms of writing and instead only listening to the demands of the marketplace.

Even when something worthwhile is produced in the Museum, society rejects it, forcing us to question if the Museum's goal of serious intellectualism is even worth it. According to the critic Jacob Korg, a Gissing novel acts as "a social experiment in which an individual and an environment are brought together, and the results fairly recorded" (Korg 196). In this case, the "individual" is Reardon, a literary writer of some talent, and the "environment" late-Victorian Britain. Reardon goes to the Reading Room to research and write a scholarly article on Diogenese Laertius. When Reardon tries to get the piece published, none of the major journals of his "environment" will take it. *The Current*, the new popular publication Milvain is associated with, turns him down. Instead, he must go to *The Wayside* (Gissing 97), a journal whose name denotes its standing in modern society. Modern Britain has no time for the serious work Reardon publishes, so it tosses his article to the side. Society needs the "commodity" (Gissing 67) specifically tailored to its taste. The factory feeding the masses the drivel they crave is the British Museum, a place where literature has been put on the assembly line, to be manufactured in readymade forms by those who work in the Reading Room.

In *Jacob's Room*, Virginia Woolf also challenges the idea that the Reading Room is a place of serious intellectual and artistic production. According to Woolf the British Museum is a place constructed of the greatest minds in history, which are present in the texts and objects that make up the Museum's collection. All these brilliant minds are brought together into one space, giving the Museum a unification and wholeness. This unified basis serves to keep individuals out; readers cannot penetrate the wholeness that constitutes the Museum.

Woolf sees the British Museum as “an enormous mind. Consider that Plato is there cheek by jowl with Aristotle; and Shakespeare with Marlowe” (Woolf 86). The critic Kate Flint picks up on this idea, describing the British Museum as a “composite ‘enormous mind’...containing Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Marlowe” (Flint 367). These important intellectual figures are the very basis for the Museum; it exists as an entity because of the work these individuals have done. Within these walls they may continue to live on, as “Plato continues imperturbable. And Hamlet utters his soliloquy” (Woolf 87). The round Reading Room serves as the embodiment of the “mind” of the Museum, as its shape mimics that of a human head, an image used by Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*. As she enters the Reading Room, she calls the dome a “huge bald forehead” (Woolf, AROOO 26). The crown upon this head is the collection of gilt author names that “stretched in an unbroken file round the dome of the British Museum” (Woolf *Jacob’s Room* 83), linking the physical room itself with these great writers of the past. Within this room the texts are “together in a ring round the dome...Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Shakespeare; the literatures of Rome, Greece, China, India, Persia” (Woolf 85). These various minds are packed together: “one leaf of poetry was pressed flat against another leaf, one burnished letter laid smooth against another in a density of meaning” (Woolf 85).

However, the very “density of meaning” that brings the Museum into being is what keeps individuals from being able to access it; the “great mind is hoarded beyond the power of any single mind to possess it” (Woolf 86). Alex Zwerdling points out that Woolf’s narrative style makes it “impossible for the reader to sympathize fully with the character. We are, in effect, told to keep our distance...[creating the] sense of a wide gap” (Zwerdling 902), which I believe applies to the Museum as well. There is simply too much in the Museum for any one individual to grapple with it on equal terms. It is “unbroken,” like the list of names, keeping the individual

out and creating the “sense of a wide gap.” The vast collection is “sheeted with stone; and each compartment...was safe and dry” (Woolf 86). Like a tomb, the Museum protects what is inside from the outside, keeping the intellectual greatness of the past safe from the prying present that seeks to uncover it. In the face of the impenetrable structure of the Museum, the individual working in the Museum ends up feeling like “the woman battering at the door and crying, “Let me in!”” (Woolf 87). While it is relevant, for the moment we will put aside the question of gender Woolf has introduced. Instead, at this point it is enough to understand that readers are locked outside the Museum, and unable to access or equal what has come before.

Not realizing that they are trapped outside the “density of meaning,” the readers believe that “one might come with a notebook, sit at a desk, and read it all through” (Woolf 86). Woolf’s portrait gallery of readers makes it clear that the various pursuits taken up by the readers are futile, a futility that cannot compete with the insurmountable wholeness of the Museum. First, there is “Miss Marchmont...seeking through millions of pages...to confirm her philosophy that colour is sound – or perhaps, it has something to do with music” (Woolf 83). Despite all her work, “she could never quite say” (Woolf 83) what her philosophy is. In comparison with the philosophical work of “Plato [and] Aristotle” (Woolf 85) that make up the Museum, her work is undirected, just a collection of “vagueness” (Woolf 84) recorded in fleeting “pamphlets” (Woolf 84). In the end, her work collapses just like “her pile of books...[that] fell over” (Woolf 84), an image of instability that wilts in the face of the Museum’s firm “density of meaning.” Another reader, “Fraser, the atheist...abhorred vagueness” (Woolf 84). His work is no more substantive than Miss Marchmont’s, however, as he works “to destroy religion” (Woolf 84). His plan of attack is to leave “his children unbaptized...supporting blasphemers, [and] distributing leaflets” (Woolf 84), all fleeting, insubstantial actions. His wife baptizes his children “secretly in the

washing basin” (Woolf 84), undermining his mission, and pamphlets are temporary publications that are quickly tossed aside. Despite his dislike of Miss Marchmont’s “vagueness,” his work is just as inconsequential when compared with the texts that make up the Museum. His own “pile of books” might as well fall over too.

Julia Hedge is another of these portraits, and as a “feminist” (Woolf 84), she pushes the Museum and its users further apart. As she “reads [the names] all round the dome” (Woolf 84), she asks “why didn’t they leave room for an Eliot or a Brontë?” (Woolf 84). Her question genders the Museum as masculine, a fact emphasized by Woolf in her choice of intellectual figures that make up the Museum. “Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, and Shakespeare” (Woolf 85) are not only intimidating intellectuals, but they are also all men. Expanding on Flint’s earlier point, we find “the composite ‘enormous mind’ of the British Museum, containing Plato, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Marlowe, contains no officially sanctioned women’s thought” (Flint 367). The inherent masculinity of the Museum, seen in its male “bald forehead” (Woolf, AROOO 26), keeps women more divided than men from the “density of meaning” that all readers struggle with; it is why it is a “woman battering at the door and crying, ‘Let me in!’” (Woolf 87).

Women readers must fight against the Museum’s masculinity, in addition to the naturally impregnable intellectualism that all readers face. Unfortunately, this is a battle Julia loses. Her work is just as misguided and futile as every other reader’s. She spends her time “study[ing] statistics” (Woolf 84), believing “there are more women than men, Yes; but if you let women work as men work, they’ll die off much quicker. They’ll become extinct. That was her argument” (Woolf 84). While this “argument” is no more preposterous than the ones taken up by Miss Marchmont and Fraser, she fails to realize she disproves it herself. The “death and gall and bitter dust were on her pen-tip” (Woolf 84) because that is what she is writing through her



argument, but “as the afternoon wore on, red had worked into her cheek-bones and a light was in her eyes” (Woolf 84). By working in the library, Julia is becoming more lifelike, full of a “red” vitality and the “light” of life. Her work in the Reading Room is understood as a futile pursuit because “her argument” is wrong. If she were to convince others that “if you let women work as men work, they’ll die off much quicker,” she will cut women off from work, the very thing that can bring them to life.

The final portrait in the gallery is the titular character Jacob. As he is a university-educated scholar, he seemingly stands the best chance of penetrating the Museum’s “enormous mind...sheeted with stone.” He is translating the works of Marlowe as part of his idea that one “must collate editions in the British Museum” (Woolf 85) in order to “build a better” (Woolf 85) world. Instead of taking things out of hand, from “the Victorians...or...the living” (Woolf 85), “one must do the thing oneself” (Woolf 85), a creed Jacob follows in doing his own translation work. Jacob and his friends, as they work to “build a better” world, believe the “flesh and blood of the future depends entirely upon six young men” (Woolf 85), or themselves. At this moment the irony of the situation is made clear, and it is revealed that Jacob’s work is just as vain as every other reader’s. While it is commendable that he wants to read and understand Marlowe himself, clearly these translations are going to do nothing to “build a better” world for the “flesh and blood of the future.” The “density of meaning” that repels everyone else holds Jacob off as well, keeping him locked outside with the masses.

The way Jacob works in the Reading Room further emphasizes the futility of his work. Believing himself to be the one on whom the future depends, he “looked a little regal and pompous as he turned his page” (Woolf 85). The exteriority Bernstein claims the Reading Room provides is reversed by Jacob’s behavior. Rather than the Reading Room acting as a place that

“facilitated networking and imaginative speculation” (Bernstein 16), it is a place of performance for Jacob. In this space, he is just playing a part, not working in a serious manner. His performance does not last long, however, as “a pudding-faced man pushed a note towards Jacob” (Woolf 85). This momentary distraction allows Jacob to relax, as he “lean[s] back in his chair, [and] began an uneasy conversation” (Woolf 85). The balance between work and socialization tips in socialization’s favor when “they went off together...and laughed aloud” (Woolf 85). Jacob is no longer concerned with his pursuit of “building a better world;” he would rather just converse with a friend of his in the hall. His work is the last thing on his mind and he “came back only in time to return his books” (Woolf 85). His translation is going to do nothing to change the world, nor will it penetrate the “density of meaning” that makes up the Museum. The wholeness of the Museum is too much for readers and visitors to breach; there are no cracks or flaws in its structure to be exploited, leaving an irreconcilable difference between individuals and the institution.

As the texts of the library are a part of the Museum, they are just as much artifacts as the various antiquities the Museum is famous for. Those individuals working in the Reading Room are studying these texts, and Irving, Gissing, and Woolf are studying those working, creating the landscape of the Reading Room in their fiction. Each of them is responding to their own specific historical time in their imaginings of the Reading Room’s function. Irving’s focus on the growth of parasitic readers is a reflection of the increased commercialization of the book trade in the late 1810s, while Gissing’s “literary machines” are a manifestation of the increasingly mechanized and industrial Victorian world. Woolf’s idea of an impenetrable “density of meaning” possibly stems from her frustration at being kept outside the male-dominated intellectual world. As I study these writers and find their interpretations of the Reading Room, I replicate their work. Just

as they studied the Reading Room and its readers, I study their texts in order to get an understanding of both their individual attitudes and the overall attitude of their contemporary culture towards the Museum's Reading Room.

“What do you see in that time-touched stone”: The Shifting Nature of Museum Objects

A key component of the British Museum is the objects and artifacts that make up its collection. As seen earlier, it is these objects that open the heterotopic gateways in time that allow members of the public to experience the cultures of the past. By opening up a path to the past, artifacts can tell us about the culture they represent, giving us a way to come to understand what has been lost. The notion that each individual experiences the past pushes against this assumption, however, for every person's experience has the potential to be unique. The Museum works “for the general use and benefit of the public” (Charter 333), which means it generally allows a wide spectrum of individuals to enter. These different visitors, with their varying cultural and social backgrounds, bring their own preconceptions and ideas to the Museum, making each individual's experience of the past different. If we assume that the experiences and understandings of the past vary from individual to individual, it becomes clear that the meaning of objects is not necessarily inherent in the objects. Rather, objects can reflect the thoughts of each individual who views them.

The dual-nature of artifacts can be understood in *Jacob's Room* by focusing on the character Jacob himself. Despite being the titular figure, Jacob is characterized by his absence. We generally only know him through those he has interacted with, as well as through specific objects left behind after he is gone. We are left with the “sense of a wide gap” (Zwerdling 902), unable to connect directly with Jacob. This narrative structure means we, as readers, have to use

both the objects of Jacob's life, as well as individualized perceptions to come to understand him. His objects are able to tell a story on their own in Jacob's absence, just like artifacts in a museum.

Jacob's absence is most keenly felt following his death fighting in World War I. After receiving the news of Jacob's demise, Bonamy, one of his friends, visits Jacob's apartment to make sure everything is in order. He finds Jacob "left everything just as it was" (Woolf 143), meaning all Jacob's possessions still remain behind. These objects serve as a testament to the life of Jacob, making them function as relics. Keeping this in mind, Bonamy can be seen as a sort-of archeologist, going through Jacob's letters. He finds "a bill for a hunting-crop...Sandra's letters. Mrs. Durrant was taking a party to Greenwich. Lady Rocksbeer hoped for the pleasure" (Woolf 143), which are all evidence of Jacob's lost daily life. This evidence brings Jacob alive once more despite his absence, allowing us to come to know and understand Jacob. This moment of knowing makes Jacob become a material presence once again, for "One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there" (Woolf 143). When we read Jacob's old letters along with Bonamy, Jacob is actually in the room with us, despite his recent death. Bonamy realizes this, and cries "Jacob! Jacob!" (Woolf 143) when he feels the presence of his old friend once more, as we do. Jacob's letters functioning as relics are able to bring what was lost into the present, merging the past and present into one and making what was once absent alive and understood.

Jacob's relics become individualized when his mother enters the room holding "out a pair of Jacob's old shoes" (Woolf 143). They still can function as they did earlier, making what was lost present, but in this moment his shoes serve to make his absence more keenly felt. Zwerdling traces this image of the empty shoes to "an anecdote about Woolf recalled by one of her friends" (Zwerdling 911), Frances Marshall. She says "The only other remark I remember from that

afternoon was when [Virginia] was talking about the mystery of ‘missing’ someone. When Leonard went away, she said, she didn’t miss him *at all*. Then suddenly she caught a pair of his empty shoes, which had kept the position and shape of his feet – and she was ready to dissolve into tears instantly” (Marshall 76). When Woolf saw her husband’s shoes, they did not bring him back to her. Rather, they reminded her he was gone by stressing his lack of presence. The same process occurs with regards to “Jacob’s old shoes.” They come to be a symbol of Jacob’s absence, not so much a testament to his life as a marker of his death. Jacob’s shoes are empty in his mother’s hands, evoking a sense of loss in us as readers.

This individualization can be taken even further by looking at Woolf’s biography, and the context of the novel’s publication. It has been suggested by some critics that the novel acts as a memorial for Woolf’s brother Thoby Woolf, who died of typhoid while traveling in Greece. John Mepham even goes so far as to call the novel an “epitaph for her brother Thoby” (Mepham 142). In light of this reading, I think it is possible to see the empty shoes as standing in for Woolf’s lost brother. Additionally, we can see the “old shoes” another way, as a symbol for all those who died as a consequence of World War I. If we were readers when the novel was first published in 1922, the pain of World War I would still be fresh in our hearts, and it would not be difficult to see the death of Jacob Flanders as the death of every young man who went off to fight but never returned. Joan Bennett’s comment that “Jacob remains a nebulous young man, indeed almost any young man” (Bennett 109) adds credence to this reading. These different forms of individualization have transformed an objective object, the “old shoes,” into a multi-faceted and subjective object brimming over with different interpretations and meanings.

In regards to the British Museum, this individualization of objects makes an appearance in *Jacob's Room* when Fanny Elmer looks at the statue of Ulysses<sup>1</sup>. Fanny was modeling for an artist when she met Jacob and became attracted to him. While Jacob is on his trip to Greece, Fanny continues to think of him, until her “idea of Jacob was more statuesque, noble, and eyeless than ever” (Woolf 137). Her rendering of Jacob as a classical sculpture makes her visit “the British Museum, where, keeping her eyes downcast until she was alongside the battered Ulysses, she opened them and got a fresh shock of Jacob’s presence” (Woolf 137). Her visits are probably the most extreme case of individualization of objects possible. Instead of seeing an object that brings ancient Rome alive for her, that makes “One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creak, though no one sits there,” Fanny sees what she wants to see, namely Jacob. Her own thoughts are imposed upon the statue, giving it its special meaning for her. No one else could have this experience; seeing Jacob in the statue is something only she can do because of her strong desire to have him back.

Thomas Hardy’s “In the British Museum” shows the meaning of objects is both in the object and the imagination of the viewer. Hardy is famous for his never-ending revision process (Gibson xxxvi), so it is important to note that the version of the poem I am using is from the 1914 manuscript in the Dorset County Museum, reproduced in Gibson’s *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy*. “In the British Museum” juxtaposes the object against personal individualization by staging two speakers in dialogue with one another. The first speaker treats the object as it is, highlighting objects’ ability to bestow knowledge about the past. The object is “only the base of a pillar, they’ll tell you, / That came to us / From a far old hill men used to name / Areopagus” (Hardy 9-12). The “they” refers to the Museum itself, the owner of the knowledge that the

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf is probably thinking of the Parthenon marbles, for there is no actual statue of Ulysses in the British Museum.

column came from “Areopagus.” This fact is only known because of the object itself. Having an understanding of the objective facts found in the object, the first speaker is questioning the second speaker, asking “what do you see in that time-touched stone / When nothing is there” (Hardy 1-2). Besides the history of the piece, the speaker believes there is no other meaning to the object. It is just a piece of stone composed of “ashen blankness” (Hardy 3), and he believes there is no reason for the second speaker to fix it with “A rigid stare” (Hardy 4).

Unbeknownst to the first speaker, the individual perspective of the second speaker has changed the meaning of the object, effecting a transformation of its history. The pillar base has objective “blankness” according to the first speaker, an image that recalls a painter’s canvas. This description makes the pillar a canvas on which the second speaker may paint his own individualized vision of the artifact’s history. Despite his claim he “know[s] no art” (Hardy 13), by “view[ing] / A stone from a wall” (Hardy 13-14) he is able to create his own understanding of the object, acting as a sort-of artist. While the second speaker views the pillar base, he is “thinking that stone has echoed / The voice of Paul” (Hardy 15-16), a thought that has no basis in the object itself. Instead of accepting the objective history that it is just a piece of a pillar “from some far old hill,” the second speaker has applied his own personalized perception to the artifact. The process behind his viewing is played out in the speaker’s description of Paul’s preaching. Paul calls out “words that in all their intimate accents / Patterned upon / That marble front” (Hardy 25-27). By speaking, Paul has “patterned” the pillar, changed it in some way. It no longer looks how it did before he spoke. This change is a temporary one, in the mind of the second speaker at least, as the words “were wide reflected, / And then were gone” (Hardy 27-28). According to the second speaker’s version of the pillar’s history, the transformation of objects brought about by words is only a temporary one.

Since it is Paul's speaking that produces the "patterned" effect on the stone, his speech acts as a reflection of the artistic transformation brought about by the second speaker. By telling his personal vision of the artifact's history to the first speaker, the second speaker has "patterned" the pillar as well. The speaker's own thoughts are now a part of the object, changing its meaning and history by disguised the object's "far old hill" history behind the painterly swaths of his own vision. He "can't help thinking that stone once echoed / The voice of Paul" (Hardy 31-32), and changes the artifact to reflect that, making it "patterned" with his own thoughts. This transformation is not temporary like Paul's, however. In writing the poem, Hardy has made this personal vision concrete and tied down. It will not be "wide reflected, / And then... gone," but will linger and persist because Hardy has recorded and published the poem. Because it is recorded, the second speaker's vision has become a part of the artifact in a way. As we read the poem, we share in the speaker's vision, making it no longer individualized. Instead, anyone who can read can imagine "that stone once echoed / The voice of Paul," just as if it was a fact derived from the artifact. The distinction between the artifact itself and the personal vision has been bridged; they are no longer competing notions, but layered atop each other through the efforts of the speaker's and the poet's imagination.

The role of the imagination in the British Museum becomes even more important when we try to find the actual "base of a pillar... / From a far old hill men used to name / Areopagus." It turns out there is no such object in the Museum's collection. However, there is a print called "Paulus praedicans in Areopago," an eighteenth century print by Nicolas Dorigny depicting St Paul preaching to a crowd at the Areopagus in Athens (British Museum Collection Online). Given the similarity between the scenes depicted in the poem and the print, as well their connection to the British Museum, I believe it is fair to think that Hardy saw this object in the



Museum, and used it as the basis for his poem. However, rather than simply talk about the print, he decided to create a fictional artifact, the “base of a pillar” that features in the poem. Not content with just the imagined artifact, Hardy also created fictional speakers who

provide a personalized view of the object. The multi-level personal visions of Hardy and the speaker

cast the Museum as a playground for the imagination, with its artifacts as the playthings of the mind. Hardy has toyed with Dorigny’s print, using his own personal thoughts upon seeing it to first transform the print into a physical artifact, armed with its own objective history, and then transform it into the poem, where the objective and the personal may merge together.

Within the space of the Museum, no objects are fixed, for the imagination can always change them, providing new personal visions that alter the artifacts’ meaning. This shifting in the meaning of artifacts expands the collection beyond the physical objects themselves and into the minds of the visitors. So long as there are Fanny Elmers and Thomas Hardys engaging in this imaginative process, the British Museum is not limited to a physical structure. Instead, it can leave the restraints of Great Russell Street behind, becoming something that exists in the imagination. The British Museum is no longer a specific place, but a mode of thought. It is those speculative imaginings that ignore the reality of objects, instead creating a new vision and



Figure 3: “Paulus praedicans in Areopago,” Nicolas Dorigny, after Raphael. Source: British Museum Collection Online.

understanding of them based on our own personal fancies. Provided we are engaging in this process, we are depositing our own imaginings into the Museum's collection, helping it to continue to grow.

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”: Time in the Museum

As seen earlier, it is the aforementioned heterotopic nature of a museum that allows visitors to experience and learn about the past. These doorways in time bring the past and present together into a single moment, providing a direct connection with the past. This melding is not always a clean connection, however, as there are instances of the heterotopic control of time falling apart and time being given free rein. Within the space of the museum, time has the possibility of becoming an anarchic force that obliterates any clear, firm meanings or beliefs, making it possible to create new understandings of the past and the present. This chaotic melding ends up undermining the present, warning the reader of the modern world's eventual collapse and transformation into a ruin like the past.

Percy Shelley, in his sonnet “Ozymandias,” takes up this question of time, seemingly in the specific setting of the British Museum. It has become engrained in the public mind that Shelley wrote this poem after seeing the Younger Memnon statue in the British Museum<sup>2</sup>, so much so that the Museum's placard for the statue has the complete poem on it. However, research shows Shelley in all likelihood never even saw the statue, for when the piece was written, December 1817, the head was “either stored on a ship in the harbor at Valetta or somewhere at sea” (Rodenbeck 126). Despite Rodenbeck's position, I believe it is still fair to

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<sup>2</sup> The scholars Duncan Wu, Richard Holmes, and Christopher Woodward, among others, all state that Shelley wrote the sonnet after seeing the actual statue.

consider the poem a piece of British Museum literature. Eric Gidal believes the statue within Shelley’s poem to be a part of a “figurative museum” (Gidal 229). I propose to go further, and understand the “figurative museum” as the British Museum itself. Since 1816, the public had known the collection of Egyptian artifacts, including the colossal head, was going to arrive in Britain (Rodenbeck 125), and the objects were always going to be deposited in the British Museum. In fact, Leigh Hunt published the poem quickly to “capitalize on the public excitement in anticipation of the arrival of [the Egyptian] collection at the British Museum” (Rodenbeck 127). There were accounts of the head circulating as well (Rodenbeck 126), which could have been in Shelley’s mind when he and Horace Smith had their sonnet-writing contest based on the



Figure 4: Younger Memnon statue.  
Source: Author.

ancient historian Diodorus Siculus’ line

“Ozymandias, the King of Kings” (Rodenbeck 123).

This colossal statue is a depiction of the Egyptian emperor Ramesses II that the Museum acquired in 1817 (British Museum Collection Online), and put on display in 1818. The piece is a single carved piece of granite, showing the head

and torso of the pharaoh (British Museum Collection Online). In the poem, Shelley imagines the statue in

its future location, the British Museum. Once the statue is in this setting, time is allowed to run free, creating a confusion of the past and present that ends up challenging the difference between the two.

Shelley starts by speaking of meeting a “traveller from an antique land” (Shelley 1-2), an ambiguous statement that serves as an introduction to the confusion of time in the piece. Many critics have argued about whom this “traveller” is; John Rodenbeck, operating from the position that the poem has nothing to do with the Younger Memnon statue, believes the “traveller” is a collection of literary sources describing Egypt, including the aforementioned Diodorus Siculus history (127), Volney’s *Les Ruines* (130), and the accounts of Egypt by Dominique Vivant (133). H. M. Richmond thinks Shelley read Dr. Pococke’s account of Egypt, complete with illustrations of Ramesses II’s tomb (Richmond 68). It is doubtful Shelley had any particular “traveller” in mind. What does matter is that this imaginary “traveller” can describe the past and present of the statue at once. By imagining the statue in the British Museum, it has been placed in a heterotopia, allowing the freeplay between the past and present typical of these spaces. This imaginative process is nothing new when it comes to the Younger Memnon statue. Anne Janowitz shows how the accounts of the statue Shelley might have been exposed to exhibit “an increasing reliance on the creative imagination to make sense and meaning of the Egyptian detritus” (Janowitz 482). Shelley is simply taking this process further by imagining the statue in its future home.

As the “traveller” tells his story, we are introduced to the dramatic shifts in time that take place within the Museum. The “traveller” “said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand, / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies” (Shelley 2-4). The Museum only has the torso and head of the colossal statue; its lower body and legs are “lost” (British Museum Collection Online), presumably still somewhere in the Egyptian desert. Therefore, the fact that “two vast and trunkless legs of stone / Stand in the desert” points to this part of the speaker’s description being rooted in the modern present. In the world of nineteenth

century London, the “trunkless legs” do actually “stand in the desert” somewhere. However, after Shelley’s ellipses, we find out “near [the legs], on the sand, / Half sunk, a shattered visage lies,” a situation that clearly does not fit with the modern present, as the “shattered visage” is not in the desert, but in London. In light of this change, it appears the speaker has transported us back into the past, a time before the statue had been moved. The “...” within the line acts as the marker of a shift in time, taking us from the modern present into the past. It is a past that is actually being experienced as the present, as one would expect in a heterotopia, for the “shattered visage lies” there; rather than having lain in the past, it now “lies” in the present.

Like all museum space heterotopias, this blending of the past and present allows us to learn about the past, and change our preconceived notions of it. While we are a part of the past, we see the statue as a work of art, for a “sculptor” (Shelley 6) made it. To us, this is not particularly special, but in the early nineteenth century, the only ancient artifacts considered art were those of Greece and Rome. Everything else, particularly objects from the Near East and Egypt, was not “Fine Art,” just relics of a long-lost civilization (Miller 199). By focusing on the “sculptor” of the Younger Memnon statue, Shelley has called attention to the artfulness of this statue, elevating it to the same level as the sculptures of Greece and Rome. Furthermore, Shelley has written a poem about this statue, applying his own art to that of the ancients and making him a “sculptor” of sorts. This recognition of an Egyptian artifact as art can be thought of as a revolutionary move on his part. Rather than accept the conventional view that took only the work of Greece and Rome as art, he has attempted to expand ancient art’s definition, making the Museum’s Egyptian galleries not just a place of history, but a place of art as well.

The statue’s presence in the Museum has unexpected consequences though, consequences not typically associated with how heterotopias work. With the arrival of this

merger of the past and present, we are left unsure which is which, creating a lasting confusion that affects how we view the world. The “sculptor well those passions read / Which yet survive stamped on these lifeless things” (Shelley 6-7), a statement that is ambiguously both in the past and the present. In the past, the “sculptor” of the statue “read” the face of Ramesses II and carved it into the “lifeless things” of the stone. Paradoxically, the stone is not “lifeless” because the “passions... / ...survive” in it, giving it the long-lost life of Ramesses II. On top of all that, there are the actions of Shelley in the present to consider. He too “well those passions read” in imagining the statue in the Museum, and then “stamped [them] on these lifeless things” of his poem. The poem is nothing more than a collection of letters on a page, an object that itself is “lifeless,” yet the statue still lives on in his words, making the poem alive. In speaking of both the statue and his poem at once with the phrase “these lifeless things,” Shelley has superimposed the past “sculptor” upon the present poet, creating a confusion of time that will carry into the British Museum itself.

The “traveller” tells that “round the decay / Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away” (Shelley 12-14), a statement depicting an incomprehensible mixture of the Egyptian past and the modern British Museum. As seen earlier, in the past the “colossal wreck” of the Younger Memnon statue was in “the lone and level sands” of the “desert,” placing it in an Egyptian past. In the modern present, the “lone and level sands” change, however, for the “colossal wreck” is no longer in the Egyptian “desert.” Instead, the statue has been taken to London, and resides in the British Museum, meaning it is now the Museum that is “the lone and level sands.” By placing “the decay / Of that colossal wreck” in the museum-space, and consequently opening a heterotopic doorway to the past, the “decay” of the past has merged with the present, changing its very fabric. The British Museum is no longer a

repository of artifacts being kept alive for future generations, but is a monument to the “decay” of the past. All the past has to keep itself alive are objects like the Younger Memnon statue, artifacts that remind us “nothing beside remains” (Shelley 12). The Museum, filled with all its pieces of history, has been rendered “boundless and bare,” transformed into “lone and level sands” that remind of the past’s “decay.”

It is not just the viewers of artifacts who bring the separation of the past and present crashing down and change the meaning of the British Museum. In “Christmas in the Elgin Room,” Thomas Hardy has the artifacts themselves reacting to the British Museum when they are exposed to the present. Written in 1905 and revised up till 1926, (Gibson 928) the poem is set in the “British Museum: Early Last Century,” when the Parthenon sculptures first arrived at the Museum. These sculptures, as objects of the past, experience the present with terror and a lamentation of their present condition, creating a new vision of the British Museum in the process.

The present for the sculptures is terrifying because they know they do not belong in the Museum. The marbles offer a summary of their history, saying “Pheidias knew / How to shape us / And bedrape us / And to set us in Athena’s temple for men’s view” (Hardy 12-15), the “temple” in the past being their home. They “would [they] were still / Radiant as on Athenai’s Hill” (Hardy 21-22), still living in their past location where they feel they belong. The forces of the present have not let them be, however, as they have forcibly abducted the statues. “Christmas overthrew” (Hardy 11) the ancient world, “Christmas” representing modern Western civilization, and treated its treasures like captured prisoners, bringing them back to modern London, “to the gloom / Of this gaunt room / Which sunlight shuns” (Hardy 18-20). The radiance of “Athenai’s Hill” has been replaced with the cold, wet, darkness of London, a drastic shift in climate that

underscores just how out of place these ancient statues are in the present. They belong in the hot Mediterranean sun, not the cloud-draped shadowy English sun.

In their lamentation, the statues stress the coercive nature of their arrival, transforming the Museum into a prison for the past. “The watchman” (Hardy 4), instead of protecting the statues, acts as a prison guard, “who walks this hall that blears us captive with its blight” (Hardy 5). The statues do not think of themselves as preserved for posterity. Instead, they are horrified at their current captivity in the present, and yearn for their past state back home “on Athenai’s Hill.” For them, the past is home and they are currently in “exile” (Hardy 10) in the Museum. Acting as an officer of the prison, Lord Elgin has imposed a forced exile on the sculptures, cutting them off from their home and leaving them as “captives,” desperate to return to their glorious past.

The removal of the sculptures from their home is explicitly brutal, as the violence implied in “Christmas overthrow” is made manifest. Some of the statues in the Museum are incomplete, just “torsos... / Of deities fair” (Hardy 28-29) lacking their “limbs” (Hardy 30) or heads. These extremities do not seem to be lost due to the natural progression of time, but instead were left behind as “shards beneath some Acropolitan clod” (Hardy 30), an image of violent dismemberment. The past is not



Figure 5: “The torsos there / Of deities fair” (Hardy 28-29), “Figure of Iris from west pediment of the Parthenon” (British Museum Collection Online). Source: Author.



preserved or protected by the Museum, but is destroyed, torn apart in the covetous scramble for treasures of the ancient world. The “limbs” (Hardy 30) were hacked away, and then crushed into “shards,” the ultimate form of destruction of sculpture. The work done by “Pheidias” is forever lost, for his efforts “to shape us / And to bedrape us” are erased from the stone in this moment of violence. Literally cut off from a part of themselves, these “torsos” serve as a physical representation of the lost connection to the past felt by the statues. A key part of them has been left behind, ground into “shards beneath some Acropolitan clod,” whose loss they now mourn in their “gaunt room” of a prison cell.

In the face of this forced abduction, one would hope the British Museum has some redeemable motive behind their questionable actions. The statues, in evaluating the present, make it clear this is not the case, and consequently change our vision of the present as readers. Simply put, the Museum is driven by monetary greed. The statues decry that “we are sold - / We gods! For Borean people’s gold” (Hardy 16-17), the “Borean people” being northern Europeans, for Boreas is the Greek god of the North wind (Smith 501). In the modern Western world that “overthrew” the past, these religious objects have been commoditized, rendered into nothing more than another way to increase wealth. The Museum is not driven to preserve these great objects of the past for future generations. It has no concern for humanity’s history. In the past, the statues had “men’s good will” (Hardy 25), for the ancient Athenians appreciated and understood their worth as based on something more than money. This “good will” is gone, however, for the statues “had” it, implying that the modern present does not offer them any “good will,” for it is too caught up in the economic here and now.

This new vision of the British Museum as a brutal prison driven by commercialism comes about precisely because the statues have lost their direct connection to the past. Unlike the

Younger Memnon statue of “Ozymandias,” these statues cannot make the past alive once again, transporting Ancient Greece into modern London and superimposing the past upon the present. Their forced captivity has left them with just the memory of how things once were, back when they were whole and not just “torsos.” When the present makes itself explicitly known, such as when the noise of Christmas bells “shakes the night” (Hardy 1), the statues feel the loss of their past more keenly. They are acutely aware of the violence of their forced captivity in the present, leaving them “all loth to heed / What the bells sang that night which shook them to the core” (Hardy 34-35). The ringing of Christmas bells signals the birth of Christ and the arrival of Christianity, overthrowing the old pagan world of the Athenian statues, so they try to ignore it. They hear the message of Christmas’s victory in the bells, and are left “shaken” because they recognize their defeat. “Zeus’ high breed” (Hardy 33) understand their captive state in the British Museum, and can only bemoan the loss of the past, the very thing that makes them what they are.

It is not a complete victory for the present, however, for in dominating and controlling the past, the Museum is showing how the present will suffer the same fate. Gayle Holste sees the poem as a critique of religion in the modern world because “Hardy assumed that expanding scientific knowledge would ultimately lead to rejection of religious beliefs by advanced societies” (Holste 189). Despite the ancient religion of Greece being destroyed by Christianity, Christianity itself is under threat, for “the guidance offered by religion is on the wane” (Holste 189) in the poem. Taking this idea further, the poem foreshadows the end of the entire modern western world. Just as “Christmas overthrew” the ancient world, so too will “Christmas” be “overthrown.” In the future the situation Hardy describes will happen once again, only this time the objects will not be of the ancient world, “Zeus’ high breed,” but of “Christmas.” By showing

the pain of the plundered statues in the present, Hardy is offering a glimpse into future, giving a prophetic warning of what is to come for the modern commercial world of “Christmas.”

William Empson continues the tradition laid down by Shelley and Hardy in that he deals with a specific object in the British Museum. His “Homage to the British Museum” from 1929 is a meditation on a French Polynesian sculpture dubbed in the catalog “Carved wooden figure known as A’a” (British Museum Collection Online), in which he explores the unforeseen consequences of exposing the present to the past. According to Empson, this figure invokes all the beliefs of the world, which overwhelm and defeat the present. Once we understand this has happened we are left unsettled in the present, unsure of anything and unable to act.

The figure of A’a, or the “Supreme God in the ethnological section” (Empson 1), is itself empty and meaningless. It is “a hollow toad shape, faced with a blank shield” (Empson 2), meaning the statue itself has nothing that constitutes its being. It is “hollow” and “blank,” two images that give it a lack of specificity. Additionally, A’a has “a hole behind” (Empson 4) it, giving it a waiting emptiness. Rather than being a solid piece of carved wood, the figure is an empty space waiting to be filled with something to provide the figure with meaning. This built-in receptivity makes the carved figure the

manifestation of the British Museum itself. Without the objects that fill its halls, the Museum is “hollow” and “blank.” The artifacts are necessary to give the building a



Figure 6: “Carved Wooden Figure Known as A’a” (British Museum Collection Online). Source: British Museum Collection Online.

meaning and purpose, for without them the Museum is just an empty shell of a building, full of “blank” walls, empty pedestals, and bare cases.

Like the actual Museum, the figure of A’*a* is not completely “blank.” It is covered with various forms that give it meaning. The object is a representation of the entire French Polynesian “Pantheon” for “at the navel, at the points formally stressed, at the organs of sense, / Lice glue themselves, dolls, local deities, / His smooth wood creeps with all the creeds of the world” (Empson 5-7). The eyes, ears, mouth, nose of A’*a* are made of small figures, representations of various aspects of French Polynesian religion. “Inserted through a hole behind” (Empson 4) are twenty-four carved wooden figures that were stored in the “belly” (Empson 3) of the piece (British Museum Collection Online), completing the “Pantheon.” Covered in these various forms, A’*a* represents “all the creeds of the world,” for they express themselves on the statue, and consequently define it. Thanks to the “dolls, [and] local deities,” the figure has a face, with all the necessary “organs of sense;” A’*a* is not a “blank shield,” but a defined body. The life of the statue is stressed in the way his “smooth wood creeps with all the creeds of the world,” for something can only “creep” if it has life. Continuing with the Museum metaphor, this object shows the Museum when it is full of artifacts. The objects open up heterotopic doors to the past, a “hole behind” if you will, and expose us in the present to the past. Within the walls of the Museum, we are exposed to “all the creeds of the world,” helping us to come to know and understand the past, for we may “absorb the cultures of nations” (Empson 8). “All the creeds of the world” become part of us in the Museum, making us a reflection of the figure of A’*a*. Just like it, we have had the “creeds” of the past wash over us as we “absorb” them, allowing them to come to define us.

When we become like A'a by taking on "all the creeds of the world," we end up losing ourselves, and are left directionless, cast adrift in the sea of the past. As individuals exposed to the past in the Museum, we "dissolve into our judgment all their codes" (Empson 9) when we "absorb" the ideas of the past and make them part of our "judgment." This action works to destroy us as individuals, for there is simply too much there for us to properly take in. We are filled with so many competing ideas, we become "clogged with a natural hesitation" (Empson 10). Faced with our dissolution, we cannot filter through "all the creeds of the world," and are filled with "hesitation" in the present. Our inability to act makes us "stand here and admit that we have no road" (Empson 12), for the past has risen up and overthrown the present. By providing unlimited access to the past, the British Museum has allowed the past to bombard the present with "all the creeds of the world" until the present lies broken and impotent.

Having arrived at the startling idea of the past crushing the individual, Empson provides a way to escape this destruction. Instead of fully submitting to "the cultures of nations," we must assert ourselves as beings. He believes "being everything, let us admit that is to be something, / Or give ourselves the benefit of the doubt" (Empson 13-14). When we "dissolve into our judgment all their codes" and are "clogged with a natural hesitation," we are quite literally "being everything," for "all" the aspects of the past are now within us, causing the destruction of the self and subsequent confusion we face. We must counteract this "being everything" by "admit[ting] that is to be something," a recognition that we actually do exist. If we believe that "being everything...is to be something," then we have a basis for our existence, even if it is hardly a personalized existence. Having become "Clogged with a natural hesitation" and knowing "we have no road," we are swept up by the power of the past and cannot find ourselves.

But, if we “give ourselves the benefit of the doubt,” we become “something” again, saving us as individuals from the power of “all the creeds” of the past.

Our victory as individuals is short-lived, for the power of A’s is too strong in the end and we are forced to submit to it. Empson asks us to “offer our pinch of dust all to this God, / And grant his reign over the entire building” (Empson 15-16). John Haffenden believes this phrase works to “register a hint of skepticism towards any supernatural power by means of parodying the proverbial ‘pinch of salt’” (Haffenden 266), a reading I find less than persuasive given the strength of the past in crushing the present. Haffenden has another thought about the “pinch of dust” that is much more valuable, for he links it to the works of Byron, Donne, and Eliot (Haffenden 266-267). Each of these writers uses the “pinch of dust” in connection with death, so when Empson alludes to it in his poem, he is signifying our own destruction. In the face of the all-trampling past within the Museum, we are no more than a “pinch of dust.” It is all we have to offer the “God” as he destroys us and we “grant his reign over the entire building.” We must submit to the British Museum, accepting it as a place of uncertainty and unanswerable questions that destroys the present.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s poem “The Burden of Nineveh” serves as the archetypical piece of British Museum literature, insofar as it touches upon multiple facets of some of the different approaches used to explore this institution. First published in 1856, and later revised and republished in 1870, this piece pulls together the varying ideas of the Museum as a heterotopic space, as an agent of upholding and undermining Britain, the free play of the imagination with artifacts, and, most crucially, the Museum as a place where time is allowed to run free and destroy the present, making the poem one of the most complete explorations of the Museum available. Within the piece, Rossetti sees an ancient Assyrian lamassu from Nineveh being

wheeled into the Museum, providing an occasion for him to launch into an extended meditation. His thoughts show him to be playing with the past, present, and future, both their meanings and their relations to each other. He is broadly concerned with the overarching sweep of history and the mutability of the past, an investigation prompted by the space of the British Museum.

When the poem first starts, Rossetti is “in our Museum galleries” (Rossetti 1), discussing how “to-day I lingered o’er the prize / Dead Greece vouchsafes to living eyes” (Rossetti 2-3). This opening goes back to the ideas explored in Hardy’s “Christmas in the Elgin Room,” for the artifacts of Ancient Greece are a “prize,” making them a trophy of victory, similar to the “captive” (Hardy 5) Parthenon sculptures. While looking at these objects, Rossetti finds Greece’s “Art for ever in fresh wise / From hour to hour rejoicing me” (Rossetti 4-5), a clear sign of a heterotopic experience. These objects are always finding new ways to “rejoice” Rossetti, showing an organic, living process. Initially, Greece is not alive, but is “Dead Greece,” consigned to the ruin of the past. Once Rossetti looks upon Greece’s “Art,” however, it is brought back to life.

This is not a chaotic meeting of the past and present, as seen in other works, but a secure, controlled one. There is no sanctioning of illicit homosexual love by the past, as seen in *Maurice*, or any destruction of the individual in the present as Empson imagined, just a reserved meeting with the past “from hour to hour rejoicing me.” Once he has had his fill, Rossetti is able to leave the Museum, and leave the past behind as he “turned at last to win / Once more the London dirt and din” (Rossetti 6-7). While he is still inside the Museum, the past and present are still clearly separated, ruling out any possibility of there being a runaway heterotopic melding of time; Greece’s “Art for ever in fresh wise” can hardly be mistaken for “the London dirt and din.” Once he steps outside, having “made the swing-door spin / And issued” (Rossetti 8-9), things change,

and the controlled meeting of the past and present experienced while within the walls begins to fall apart with his sight of “a winged beast from Nineveh” (Rossetti 10).

Nineveh, the birthplace of this “winged beast,” was a city in the Fertile Crescent of the



Figure 7: “A winged beast from Nineveh” (Rossetti 10). Source: Author.

Middle East, whose settlement possibly goes as far back as the Halaf culture, sometime between 6100 and 5500 BCE (Saggs 14). It rose to real prominence when the new Assyrian emperor Sennacherib made the city his capital in the seventh century BCE (Saggs 98) and launched an extensive architectural campaign. The city

had “a huge wall around [it], nearly eight miles long with fifteen major gates...new streets, enlarged squares” (Saggs 99), and spectacular gardens, turning Nineveh into a city befitting its status as capital of the greatest empire at the time, Assyria. From the imperial palace in Nineveh, the Assyrian emperors ruled over an empire that stretched from the Persian Gulf and Babylonia in the East, to Egypt in the West, and to modern Turkey in Asia Minor in the North (Saggs 110), much of the known world at the time. This reign was not to last, however, for in 612 BCE Nineveh was sacked by a combined force of Babylonians, Medes, and Scythians, led by Nabopolassar, the king of Babylon (Saggs 117-120). The ruins of the city remained, becoming buried with time and generally forgotten, until the discovery of a wealth of artifacts by Austen Henry Layard in the 1840s at the site (Pollock 13). *Nineveh and Its Remains*, his somewhat



romanticized account of his exploration, was published in 1849, and kindled a public interest in ancient Middle Eastern civilizations. Taking part in this interest, the British Museum acquired Layard's Assyrian artifacts, including the lamassu Rossetti sees, in 1849, and even financed Layard's next dig (*Layard Discoveries 2*) in the hope he would uncover more long lost treasures of Mesopotamia.

When Rossetti initially sees the lamassu, it is a dead object from a dead past, making the past inaccessible in Rossetti's modern present. In his essay "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Burdens of Nineveh," Andrew Stauffer looks at the textual variance between the 1856 and 1870 versions of the poem, and finds Rossetti had accidentally confused the chronology of Assyria and Egypt in the first version, which "can be read as an accidental deepening of the poem's satiric character" (Stauffer 381), for it shows the inability of the present to understand the past. Stauffer fails to discuss Rossetti's deliberate confusion of civilizations when he first sees the lamassu, which shows this inaccessibility more clearly than textual variance alone. When Rossetti sees the statue it "'twas bull, 'twas mitred Minotaur, / A dead disbowelled mystery: / The mummy of a buried faith" (Rossetti 14-16). As "a dead disbowelled mystery," Rossetti shows the statue is lacking life and impossible to understand. His deliberate lack of comprehension is keenly felt in his description of the statue as a "Minotaur." A lamassu is half man and half bull, but unlike the Minotaur of ancient Greece, it has a man's head and a bull's body, the complete opposite of a "Minotaur," in addition to having wings. Yet, according to Rossetti, these two mythological figures from these two distinctly separate cultures are the same, a deliberate move to show the past's inaccessibility in the present. Ancient cultures are further confused by his understanding of the statue as a "mummy of a buried faith." Again, Rossetti is conflating two unique cultures, this time Egypt and Assyria, instead of distinguishing them as

different. While outside the Museum, Rossetti intentionally fails to distinguish between separate ancient cultures. Instead, the statue pulls together aspects of multiple ancient civilizations, creating a confused, distorted whole. To the present, the past is dead, and the statue a symptom of this death, nothing more than a “fossil cerements as might swathe / The very corpse of Nineveh” (Rossetti 19-20).

Even though Rossetti does not experience the past directly, he questions and thinks about the past, an action that works to bring it back to life. He sees the “first rush-wrapping” (Rossetti 21) still on the statue, and asks “what song did the brown maidens sing, / From purple mouths alternating, / When that was woven languidly?” (Rossetti 23-25). He also wants to know “what vows, what rites, what prayers preferr’d / What songs has this strange image heard?” (Rossetti 26-27). In asking these questions, Rossetti is actively curious about the past, craving the sort of intimate understanding that he presently lacks. This questioning ties Rossetti to the “living face [who] looked in to see” (Rossetti 35) at the rediscovery of Nineveh. Like this “living face,” Rossetti is “looking” at the statue in an attempt to “see” what it was like in the past. With this in mind, we can understand Rossetti’s questioning as a force that brings Nineveh back to life in the present. When the “living face looked in to see” the newly excavated Nineveh,

O seemed it not...  
 As though the carven warriors woke,  
 As though the shaft the string forsook,  
 The cymbals clashed, the chariots shook,  
 And there was life in Nineveh (Rossetti 36-40)

as the past springs to life once again. Having been exposed to active seeking and “looking,” the ancient city is no longer a “corpse,” but a site of frenzied energy, where “cymbals clashed, the chariots shook.”

Following Rossetti’s questioning, the lamassu statue regains life of its own, mimicking Nineveh’s return to life. Out in front of the British Museum, “on London stones our sun anew /

The beast's recovered shadow threw" (Rossetti 41-42). Yes, the "shadow" is "recovered" because the statue has finally seen the sun again after having "stood interr'd / For ages" (Rossetti 28-29) underground, but the "recovered" also points to a return of life for the statue and its past. The "shadow" is both the statue's physical shadow, and its history, its time spent living in the past. This "shadow" is not a dead one, however, for Rossetti recognizes that the statue "From [Nineveh's] dead Past thou liv'st alone" (Rossetti 48). Instead of seeing the lamassu as "A dead disbowelled mystery" or a "fossil," Rossetti now understands the statue to "liv'st," due to his intense questioning of it.

Andrew Stauffer sees the shadow as "simultaneously a marker of alienation and of belonging" (Stauffer, "Further Excavations" 51), which proves to be the case. Having a "recovered shadow" and life, the lamassu brings its past into the present, which starts to create confusion between the two. Humans conceive of time in a linear fashion, one where "we keep record" (Rossetti 51) of events in order, so the past is "alienated" in the present. The statue interferes with this method, for by bringing the past into the present with its "recovered shadow" the ordered timeline has been destabilized and the past now "belongs," making it paradoxically both part of and separate from the present. The story of Jonah Rossetti talks about, "whereof we keep record" (Rossetti 51), is in the past for humans, but for the statue it exists in a kind of eternal present outside time when the past and present merge. For the statue, the sun that shone upon Jonah is the same as

This sun (I said) here present, pour'd  
 Even thus this shadow that I see.  
 This shadow has been shed the same  
 From sun and moon, - from lamps which came  
 For prayer (Rossetti 54-58).

The shadow the statue casts in modern London is just like the shadow from all these different times in the past, making the statue's shadow a container for every moment of the statue's

history. This lack of distinction between past and present for the statue means they are one and the same. There is no past or present, there is just a single solid collection of every moment of the statue's existence contained within the "recovered shadow," as the lamassu lives in its eternal present.

This realization that the past and present are indistinguishable leads Rossetti to begin to mix the two together. Rossetti thinks how "within thy shadow, haply, once / Sennacherib has knelt, whose sons / Smote him between the altar-stones" (Rossetti 61-63). "Within [the] shadow," the place where the past and present are melded so closely together, Rossetti has a vision of Nineveh in the past, and is able to see parts of "Sennacherib's" life in a single instant, both the time he "once / ...knelt," and the time his sons "smote" him. He also sees "pale Semiramis [with] her zones / Of gold, [and] her incense brought to thee, / In love for grace, in war for aid" (Rossetti 64-66). By seeing her bring offerings both "In love" and "in war," Rossetti is experiencing a length of time, not a single moment. As in the case of "Sennacherib," Rossetti can see multiple moments of Semiramis' life at once when he is in the presence of the statue. These long-dead individuals have come from the past, leaving Nineveh and taking up residence in modern London along with the lamassu, consequently making the two cities begin to blend together.

Rossetti does not just see ancient history in the statue's shadow, for the recent past, and even the modern world, come through as well. From Semiramis' ancient prayers, Rossetti journeys through time to the modern workmen who "'neath thy shade / ...Last year...knelt and pray'd" (Rossetti 67-69) just like Semiramis. These events separated by thousands of years take place within one moment in the "shade" of the statue. In order to convey this dramatic shift in time, Rossetti uses ellipses just like Shelley, taking us forwards "... (Rossetti 66) and

backwards “...” (Rossetti 67) in time. Rossetti brings the modern present and past together with his thoughts on “those worshippers, / [speaking] in some mythic chain of verse” (Rossetti 81-82). The “chain of verse” is both the prayer of the “worshippers” and Rossetti’s own poem, bringing the past and present so closely together it is difficult to tell them apart.

Having had this revelation about the mutability of the past, Rossetti begins to think about the statue in the context of the past of the entire world, and our own understanding of the past. In the modern world, we have created an orderly systematized view of the past, a view that is put forth by the British Museum. “Within this hall / Where the blank windows blind the wall” (Rossetti 71-72), there is a concentrated effort to control the past and make it fit into specific categories. Those who come to the Museum in “three files compact, / Shall learn to view [the lamassu] as a fact / Connected with that zealous tract: / ROME, -Babylon and Nineveh” (Rossetti 77-80). In Rossetti’s mind, once the lamassu enters “within this hall,” it will cease to exist as a dynamic object, providing the intense experience of the past and present Rossetti has had while outside. Instead, it will be “a fact,” another dead artifact that is part of the succession of “ROME, - Babylon and Nineveh,” another note in “that zealous tract” the Museum writes. Instead of facilitating the free play of the past and present, as seen in Shelley’s and Empson’s perception of the British Museum, Rossetti’s Museum shuts that down, cutting the object off from its eternal present with “blank windows [that] bind the wall / From pedestal to pedestal” (Rossetti 71-73), creating a clear delineated structure of the past that stabilizes time by killing it.

Given the experience Rossetti has had, he wants to question the Museum’s conception of history by examining the relationships between the objects that make up the Museum. Rather than simply accepting history as a “zealous tract,” where each culture acts as part of an essay

written by the British Museum, building on the others to create the modern world, Rossetti wants to investigate these cultures and find out their relationships himself. He asks

Greece, Egypt, Rome, - did any god  
 Before whose feet men knelt unshod  
 Deem that in this unblest abode  
 Another scarce more unknown god  
 Should house with him, from Nineveh? (Rossetti 86-90).

The ancient civilizations of “Greece, Egypt, Rome,” did not know the Assyrian culture, for to them the lamassu is an “unknown god.” The Museum ignores this fact, and instead systematizes the statue, putting it in the Museum’s “unblest abode” and forcing it to fit within the Museum’s notion of history, without considering “what here can testify / ...Unto thy day and Nineveh” (Rossetti 98-100). Rossetti is willing to look at this question, and his answer undercuts the Museum’s “zealous tract.” He grants that “of those mummies in the room / Above, there might indeed have come / One out of Egypt to thy home” (Rossetti 101-103), providing a link between cultures that helps give credence to the Museum’s ordered and structured “tract.” However, Rossetti finds “were not some / Of these thine own “antiquity”” (Rossetti 104-105), creating a confusion of the past and present. In the modern world, all of these ancient cultures are thought of as part of “antiquity.” Yet Rossetti finds that parts of our “antiquity” thought of other antique cultures as part of “antiquity;” ancient civilizations thought of themselves as modern, just like us, and classified other civilizations as ancient, a confusing mixture of terms that works against any form of clear systematization.

Despite this confusion, the Museum has persisted with creating its structured catalogue of “they and their gods and thou / All relics here together” (Rossetti 106-107), which kills the life of these objects. Like those “shards beneath some Acropolitan clod” (Hardy 30), the Museum has killed the past, dismembering it so it will fit its purpose. This dismemberment destroys any chance of seeing ancient civilizations’ true relations to the past and history, for “now / Whose

profit? Whether bull or cow, / Isis or Ibis, who or how, / Whether of Thebes or Nineveh?" (Rossetti 107-110). With the Museum's insistence on creating its "zealous tract," it ignores objects' actual place in history, its "who or how," so the Museum can add to its overarching narrative of "ROME, - Babylon and Nineveh." The objects within, "they and their gods and [the lamassu]" (Rossetti 106) are reduced to being "all relics here together" (Rossetti 107). Their place and status in time is gone, for while they were once "gods," they are now just lifeless "relics." When individuals are in the British Museum, they get a distorted view of the past, one that does not allow them to properly understand these various ancient civilizations.

Understanding that the modern world has distorted the past by imposing order on it, Rossetti calls the entire sweep of time into question, looking at the past, the present, and the future's understanding of the past. Rossetti first builds on the confusion of the past and present by seeing ancient Nineveh and London as one. Rossetti looks away from the statue and "saw the crowds of kerb and rut / Go past as marshaled to the strut / Of ranks of gypsum quaintly cut" (Rossetti 162-164), a description that parallels an earlier description of Nineveh. It too was a place of carved stone, one that "stood firmly 'stablished without fault, / Made proud with pillars of basalt" (Rossetti 123-124). Instead of there being an eternal present just in the shadow of the statue, it has now spread into the modern world as well, making London and Nineveh part of a single whole, "in one same pageantry" (Rossetti 165). They are both places where the statue stands, for "that Bull-god once did stand" (Rossetti 171) at Nineveh, and now "stand[s] again" (Rossetti 176) here in London. By bringing the past into the present, the statue has made the two places one, eliminating the distinction between ancient Nineveh and London.

Rossetti himself becomes a manifestation of the merging of Nineveh and London, for Jonah and he become the same person, prophets offering warnings to Nineveh and London. In

the past, Jonah was under the Middle Eastern sun, and “near [Nineveh’s] city-gates” (Rossetti 51); the same “sun [is] here present” (Rossetti 54) for Rossetti. As Jonah brings a message of warning to Nineveh in the past, telling them “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown” (KJV Jonah 3:4), Rossetti offers one as well, telling of Nineveh’s, and the Assyrian empire’s, destruction. Assyria sits “on thy throne / Thou with a world beneath thee prone” (Rossetti 141-142), a seemingly invincible force. Yet Nineveh does fall, for it is a “kingly conquest” (Rossetti 150), and its treasures are taken away “unto the King” (Rossetti 149). Britain too has engaged in this “kingly conquest,” a taking a piece of the Middle East from Nineveh to London. Rossetti is not just speaking to Nineveh. Britain, as a large powerful empire, sits “on thy throne / Thou with a world beneath thee prone” as well. Like Nineveh, Britain’s treasures will make just as “kingly” a “conquest,” making it a target for future empire-builders. Britain, like Nineveh before it, will eventually fall, and its treasures will be looted, creating another empire “on [its] throne.” The “burden” of empire is passed from culture to culture through time, the warning from the past Rossetti is trying to impart to the present.

If it is possible for the past and the present to become one, then Rossetti realizes the future can misunderstand the present. In the future, “some tribe of the Australian plough / [will] Bear [the statue] afar – a relic now / Of London, not of Nineveh” (Rossetti 178-180). Once again, the statue will be moved from one civilization to another, only this time it goes away from London, rather than to it. The “tribe of the Australian plough” will fail to realize the piece originally came from Nineveh, and will mistakenly believe it represents “London.” Layard himself has a similar thought as he watches the Assyrian artifacts begin their journey to London. He thinks about how “they were now to visit India, to cross the most distant seas of the southern hemisphere, and to be finally placed in a British Museum. Who can venture to foretell how their



strange career will end?” (Layard *Nineveh and its Remains* 2: 86). Like Rossetti, Layard sees the entire sweep of history, acknowledging Britain might lose these objects as they “pass from hand to hand while empires rise and fall” (Stauffer “Burdens of Nineveh” 374).

Alternatively, if the future uses the same ordered view of history that the British Museum does, then it will misunderstand all the objects in it, and come away with the wrong understanding of London. When humanity’s “centuries [are] threescore and ten” (Rossetti 183), people will come to the site of long-lost London, and find “in this desert place / This form” (Rossetti 186-187), the “form” being the lamassu. They will believe the English are “some race / That walked not in Christ’s lowly ways, / But bowed its pride and vowed in praise / Unto the God of Nineveh” (Rossetti 187-190), imposing the past of Nineveh onto the present of London without realizing it. To the future, there will be no difference between the cultures of Assyria and England. They will exist together as one.

The final confusion in the poem comes when Rossetti asks the statue “O Nineveh, was this thy God, - Thine also, mighty Nineveh?” (Rossetti 199-200). Andrew Stauffer understands “thine also” as a reflection of the British Empire. According to him, “London does bow to the same ‘god of Nineveh’ in its devotion to imperialism and its delusional gospels of progress and materialistic opulence dependent on the labor of the oppressed and the colonized” (Stauffer “Burdens of Nineveh” 379), because both Britain and Assyria possess large empires. This insight could have never come to be, however, without the destruction of the barriers of time. By speaking of the god of Nineveh as “thine also,” Rossetti is accepting the past of Nineveh as the present. Instead of Nineveh being kept in the “recovered shadow,” it is now living in modern London. The separation between the two civilizations is gone, allowing Stauffer’s insight on empires to come into focus.

By the end of the poem, all time has become confused, as past and present, Nineveh and London, Jonah and Rossetti, and present and future are all the same. Rossetti has led the reader through a meditation on time and empire, and their eventual ruin. The lamassu, the object that carries the “burden” of empire, has become part of Britain because it has “planted feet which trust the sod” (Rossetti 198). Just as the Assyrian empire fell and its treasures were carried off, so too will Britain. The “burden” is too great to bear forever. While the British Museum puts forth a system of history that obscures this eventual destruction, it still provides a way for it to be discovered. Without the Museum, Rossetti’s imagination would never have been stimulated, and he would have been unable to realize his place as a modern Jonah, offering a warning to the present from the past.

Conclusions: “Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Armed with the various voices from history, this paper has worked to transform our understanding of the British Museum into a place of ever-changing meaning. In the past, the Museum served as a repository of knowledge, where artifacts and books shared a space and the public could come to learn. The Reading Room, with its heat, light, and desks, allowed aspiring scholars to try to work their way up, or provided the tired with a quiet place to close their eyes. This is not the British Museum of the present, however, for the Library is now its own separate entity. It was decided in 1973 that the library should become its own institution, and in 1997 it finally left the haven of Great Russell Street, its home since 1753, changing the British Museum permanently. Rather than being a place of intellectual activity, it is now a tourist destination, a highlight in every “Guide to London” handbook.

This paper has shown that the changing of the Museum has been an ongoing process; it is not limited to single, dramatic events like the removal of the library. Any time someone enters the British Museum, they have the possibility of transforming what it means, whether by experiencing time a certain way, or using its resources for different purposes. While I was researching in the Museum, my traveling companion spent time in the Duveen Gallery drawing the Parthenon sculptures. While she was there, the exhibition space changed. Visitors no longer just paid attention to the marbles. Instead, my companion became just as much a part of the exhibit as the ancient Greek statues. People would stand behind her to watch her work, and even took photos of her drawing, ignoring the sculptures altogether. By drawing in that space, she changed the Museum for those visitors, turning it from an exhibition space into an art studio.

I, as a researcher in, and a writer about, the British Museum, have accessed the Muses that live within it, and added my own small part to the “density of meaning” (Woolf 85) that surrounds the institution. This paper is by no means the end of this process, for in the future writers will continue to interact with the British Museum, providing visions of what it means as a place. The past will enter into new presents through the Museum’s heterotopic gateways, creating challenging new mixtures of the past and present, and individuals will continue to think about artifacts in innovative ways, continuing the process that constitutes the British Museum.

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