Hap: Uncertainty and the English Novel

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Accessibility
Hap: Uncertainty and the English Novel

A dissertation presented

by

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Hap: Uncertainty and the English Novel

Abstract

This dissertation explores how nineteenth-century novelists envisioned thinking, judging, and acting in conditions of imperfect knowledge. I place novels against historical developments in mathematics, philosophy, psychology, and jurisprudence to argue that William Thackeray, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy generated distinctive aesthetic and affective responses to uncertainty. I anchor these novelists in nineteenth-century intellectual contexts with which they were familiar, including the transition from associationism to an embodied picture of psychology and motivation; the rise of statistical thinking and calculative rationality; the renewal of inductive methods in the sciences; and approaches to probability as a concept whose various senses converge. I spotlight how novels interact with cultural domains of uncertain knowledge, from gambling to weather forecasting to legal decision. Articulating a phenomenology of uncertainty that is shaped by, yet often resistant to, the nascent sciences of prediction and calculation in the period, novels attend to the felt effects, aesthetic repercussions, and emotional tonality of judging and acting without certain knowledge. I argue that they refract their environing contexts with striking consequences for narrative form, aesthetic theory, and generic commitment. And I claim that they deepen their approaches to scientific knowledge and social concern with a focus on what uncertainty looks and feels like as a subjective experience: on speculations that run against the grain of fact (Thackeray); hesitations that almost entirely usurp action (Eliot); legal judgments and verdicts that lack finality and proof (Collins); and forms of repetition and aggregation that we use in everyday inference (Hardy). Affective dimensions of uncertainty mediate between the scales of concept and experience: Thackeray’s counterfactual
imaginary probes the emotional tone of speculations about alternative realities; Eliot’s interest in theories of decision meets with hesitation as a practical attitude and bodily experience; Collins’ exploration of legal uncertainty is shadowed by the psychology of suspicion; and Hardy’s deployment of logical and statistical models consorts with sensation and intuition. Throughout I draw connections between these styles of uncertain thinking and literary reading, offering updated accounts of inference, evidence, and especially probability—as numerical concept, epistemic conundrum, legal tool, and rhetorical protocol.
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Those that held that all things are governed by fortune had not erred, had they not persisted there.

—Thomas Browne, *Religio Medici* (23)
INTRODUCTION
Uncertainty inflects judgments we make each day, so it is no accident that one of its cardinal images concerns the diurnal rhythm. In Thomas Hardy’s first novel, *Desperate Remedies* (1871), the young lovers have just met and between them is “one of those unaccountable sensations which carry home to the heart […] by something stronger than mathematical proof, the conviction, ‘A tie has begun to unite us.’”¹ They part and one is left with “a hopeless sense of loss akin to that which Adam is said by logicians to have felt when he first saw the sun set, and thought, in his inexperience, that it would return no more.”²

The sun’s rising and setting is a stock example in branches of mathematics, philosophy, and rhetoric that deal with forms of probable inference. Historical writers in a variety of fields since the early eighteenth century have used the sun’s rising to think about how to ground judgments under conditions of uncertainty, to gain some measure of predictive knowledge through repeated experiences, and thereby to appraise those utterly novel phenomena for which Adam’s experience is a model. Hardy’s allusion, following on two centuries of sustained reflection about probability and related questions of belief, judgment, and experience, is thus overdetermined.³ Among sources familiar to him, we might point to Joseph Butler, who defends analogical reasoning with the bald statement that “there is no Man can make a Question but that the Sun will rise to morrow.”⁴ Or to David Hume, who takes umbrage and offers a skeptical

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¹ *Desperate Remedies* 32.

² *Desperate Remedies* 33.

³ Hardy’s own work has several iterations of the same problem. In one of his notebooks he jotted down the following: “‘The sun had not shone for days & days’ (begin a poem)” (*Poetical Matter* 63). In the 1880s he took notes from an article on Friedrich Albert Lange, to the effect that materialism and idealism can be reconciled “by deliberately recognising that idealism is idealism […] e.g. ‘the sun rises’ = the sun seems to rise: thus the imagination may have its full poetical scope” (*Literary Notebooks* 1.139).

⁴ *Analogy of Religion* vi.
reflection about the causal assumptions behind such reasoning: “That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than the affirmation that it will rise.” Pierre Simon Laplace frames the problem as a game of chance, setting the odds against the sun’s rising in terms of all previous occurrences of the same. Theologians, philosophers, mathematicians, and writers on logic and rhetoric—from George Campbell’s Philosophy of Rhetoric (1776) to John Stuart Mill’s A System of Logic (1843) and George Boole’s An Investigation of the Laws of Thought (1854)—all have their own take on this problem.

Hardy’s allusion is drawn from a primer on logic he owned and annotated, Samuel Neil’s The Art of Reasoning. Neil’s example focuses on the difference between reason and understanding, geometric certainty and inductive probability, and is itself taken from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Table Talk:

suppose Adam watching the Sun sinking under the horizon for the first time; he is seized with gloom and terror, relieved with scarce a ray of hope of ever seeing the glorious light again. The next evening when it declines, his hopes are stronger, but mixed with fear; and even at the end of 1000 years, all that a man can feel, is hope and an expectation so strong as to preclude anxiety.

In this framing, what had variously been seen as a problem of induction, probability, and experiential knowledge is suffused with affect: “gloom,” “terror,” “anxiety,” and the whimsical “ray of hope.” Like Coleridge, Hardy finds in the sun a quasi-mystical symbol that makes this

5 Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding 24.
6 Essai philosophique sur les probabilités 23: Laplace sets the odds at 1826214 to 1.
7 Campbell, Philosophy of Rhetoric 60; Boole, Laws of Thought 368-70; Mill, System of Logic 1.550-1. See Daston, Classical Probability in the Enlightenment 205-7 for a discussion of the example in Butler and Buffon, and 262-7 on Richard Price’s version.
8 Table Talk 1.244-5 (14 August 1831), quoted with slight differences in Neil, Art of Reasoning 98.
lesson—with its characterization of uncertainty as both affective and epistemic—a generative one for his aesthetics.

This project explores how English novelists in the nineteenth century envisioned how we think, predict, and act in the face of imperfect knowledge or unclear outcome. I argue that William Thackeray, George Eliot, Wilkie Collins, and Thomas Hardy produced distinctive responses to uncertainty as both intellectual and cultural mode, in the process drawing on, contributing to, and often critiquing work on similar topics in scientific and philosophical spheres. Against the emergent frameworks of prediction and decision found in the exact sciences, philosophy, and psychology, these novelists articulated a phenomenology of uncertainty. Their novels attend to the felt effects, aesthetic repercussions, and emotional tonality of judging and acting without certain knowledge. They often represent states of mind and problems of action that do not admit of easy resolution, and instead pay attention to hypotheses, conjectures, hesitations, and alternative paths. Such states may trace their effects in the depictions of characters and their situations, in thematic and philosophical reflections, or in the putative experience of readers and critics. They often engender striking narrative and formal results.

Novels thus discover and delineate a crucial cultural space for thinking through the difficulties of knowledge and judgment where doubt is ineradicably present. In my account literary uncertainty becomes noticeable as a distinct mode, with its own approaches that are often unmoored from contexts that may occasion or inform novelistic reflection. Invoking wide intellectual and cultural resources, and joining ordinary instances of uncertainty to bolder affective states and moral emotions, this project evinces the depth and sophistication of literary models for handling uncertainty. Both in their respective moments and now, novels help us
tackle the problems that stubbornly edge the clearing of certain or demonstrable knowledge, that lurk in that nebulous area beyond what Joseph Conrad, one of the heirs to this nineteenth-century tradition of uncertain thinking, calls the “face of facts.”\textsuperscript{9} My work asks not only how literature’s fascination with other disciplines can shape its narrative patterns and aesthetic commitments but also, conversely, what its formal experiments disclose about issues that we often delimit conceptually and surrender to other disciplines.

This project necessarily draws on a range of non-literary materials to account for shifts in the cultural perception of chance and historical developments in philosophical, mathematical, and psychological fields. Its intellectual parameters thus span the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century, taking in the rise of statistics and the revival of inductive methods in the sciences, the uptake of associationism into a fully embodied psychology, and the convergence of numerical, epistemic, and literary approaches to the concept of probability. Throughout I engage with scientific and philosophical figures known to the novelists I study, such as William Whewell (the historian and philosopher of science who tutored Thackeray), John Stuart Mill (with whose \textit{System of Logic} Eliot was deeply familiar), and John Venn (after whom Hardy named a character). Yet in referring to such materials my project makes a case for literature and its modes of thought and imagination in a world given over to the disciplines of number and precision. \textit{Hap} investigates the human phenomena that several disciplines now term “judgment under uncertainty” and follows these approaches to thinking and acting back to their roots.\textsuperscript{10}

Studying past intellectual enterprises in science and philosophy whose permeable venues stand in

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{Lord Jim} 8.

\textsuperscript{10} Much of this work takes place in branches of psychology and behavioral economics: see the foundational collection edited by Kahneman, Tversky, and Slovic, \textit{Judgment under Uncertainty}, the later collection edited by Gigerenzer and Selten, \textit{Bounded Rationality}, as well as Gigerenzer’s \textit{Rationality for Mortals} and his popular digest, \textit{Gut Feelings}. 
contrast to present disciplinary separations, my work sees the literary as an indispensable form of inquiry that can bridge different domains of knowledge. Deploying work from the history of science and philosophy in literary milieux, I aim to bring out how novels and related literary productions discover overlooked facets of these disciplines. Novels trace the lines along which both expert and demotic knowledge become central to a culture, and they furnish exemplars and surprising paths through still-present problems.

Novels deepen these approaches to scientific knowledge and social concern with their focus on what uncertainty looks and feels like as a subjective experience—on speculations that run against the grain of fact (Thackeray); hesitations that almost entirely usurp action (Eliot); judgments that lack finality and proof (Collins); and forms of repetition and aggregation that we use in everyday inference (Hardy). It is in this spirit of yoking together abstract contexts and concrete estimations—large scales and little, the sun’s rising and all the curious, muddling behavior under the sun—that I have selected *Hap* as the capsule term for this project. It is true that “Hap” is the title of a deeply gloomy poem by Hardy—“why unblooms the best hope ever sown?”—about the secular and so apparently unmeaning experience of a determined world. But this is only one of the term’s mooring points. The cognates of “hap” mark out the basic structure of events, the things that *happen*; they trace the occurrences that drift through human plots in accidental fashion, by *happenstance*; they afford *perhaps* (and occasionally *mayhap*) the most basic grammatical tag for imperfect or unclear knowledge; and they denote that elusive antagonist of uncertain judgments and fraught decisions, *happiness*. The literary writing I study in *Hap* draws on, and often exceeds, models of inquiry at the forefront of science and its allied fields. Yet its central concerns are with what guides us “in the absence of clear and certain

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11 *Collected Poems*, l. 10.
knowledge,” in that “State of Mediocrity and Probationship” that John Locke names the “twilight [...] of Probability.” Blending approaches to uncertainty and probability—as numerical concept, epistemic conundrum, legal tool, and literary protocol—this writing reaches for non-calculative ways of thinking and acting, glimpsing arrangements where human agents might not so exactly be counted or called to account.

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In what follows, I offer an outline of Hap’s principal contexts and resources, briefly tracing their main lines of development as they arrive at the more complex, nineteenth-century articulations that form the proximate framework for my readings. I begin to sketch the interactions between these materials and the literary sphere, in advance of more detailed exploration in the individual chapters. And I suggest how the protocols of different domains of knowledge might inflect categories like judgment, evidence, and probability in their literary manifestations.

Where my opening example looked at a novelist’s appropriation of a logical trope, here I turn to a logician’s critique of a novel. In the early nineteenth century Richard Whately, author of the influential treatises Elements of Logic (1826) and Elements of Rhetoric (1828), took aim at the coincidences that accrue in the plot of Henry Fielding’s Tom Jones. He complained that “several of the events, taken singly, are much against the chances of probability; but the combination of the whole in a connected series, is next to impossible.” He thought the plot, in a blunt summary, “incalculably improbable.” Invoking a graded series of events, the combination

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12 An Essay Concerning Human Understanding 652.

13 “Modern Novels” 356. For comments on Whately’s appraisal of Fielding, see Wess, “The Probable and the Marvelous in Tom Jones.”

14 “Modern Novels” 356.
of which beggars improbability, Whately finds himself (perhaps unconsciously) invoking the modern concept of mathematical probability in order to consider a difficulty with probability in a rhetorical or Aristotelian sense—as what is plausible or credible, the likeness (eikos) that bears some likelihood.  

Whately’s formulation raises several questions. How can an open-ended numerical assessment—considering the “chances of probability”—work to evaluate the preset, effectively determined confines of a fictional world? What, in a literary context, would “incalculably” mean? More broadly, does Whately’s use of a mathematical concept more precise than Aristotle’s description of probability as “not what occurs invariably but only for the most part” mark a change in how literary probability is thought of by the early nineteenth century?

In the century preceding the publication of Tom Jones (1749), and so coextensive with early developments in the novel form as summarized by Ian Watt and Michael McKeon (among many others), the idea of probability acquired its mathematical cast. Alongside numerical investigations into conundrums in games of chance, in large part prompted by an exchange of letters between Blaise Pascal and Pierre Fermat, a wide array of conceptual developments have been identified as emerging concurrently in mathematics as well as in jurisprudence, insurance, economics, and natural theology. In this account, early figures such as Pascal, Fermat,

15 Newsom, A Likely Story 19-20, notes that his Latin translators rendered Aristotle’s phrase for “probability” as verisimilis. For a philological discussion of these terms see Hoffmann, “Concerning Eikos.”

16 Rhetoric 1402b.


18 Butler’s Analogy of Religion (1736) is, in this tradition, the “culmination of the probabilistic tradition of natural theology inaugurated by [Hugo] Grotius and elaborated by John Tillotson, Robert Boyle, and the circle of Royal Society apologists” (Daston, Classical Probability 204-5).
Christian Huygens, Gottfried Leibniz, and the authors of the Port Royal *Logique* (1662) were crucial in providing different formulations of what has become a complex branch of mathematics, with applications that have since defined our heuristic outlooks. In the course of the later seventeenth through the early nineteenth centuries, a range of mathematical innovations—including the work of Jakob Bernoulli, Abraham De Moivre, Thomas Bayes, Pierre Simon Laplace, Siméon-Denis Poisson, and Adolphe Quetelet—along with the wider availability of accurate numerical information about large populations, together yielded the models of probabilistic thinking and statistical inference that became crucial in science as well as statecraft in the nineteenth century and beyond.

Scholars in the history of science and adjacent fields have documented these developments in probability mathematics and statistics, and my work necessarily relies on the accounts of Ian Hacking, Donald MacKenzie, Lorraine Daston, Gerd Gigerenzer, Theodore Porter, Stephen Stigler, and others.\(^{19}\) It is a conceptual innovation, however, that undergirds the continued importance of this material for literary and philosophical history. As Hacking has pointed out, the early emergence of probability in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries fashioned an ambiguous or dual concept, divided between an *aleatory* notion, “concerning itself with stochastic laws of chance processes,” and an *epistemic* one, “dedicated to assessing

reasonable degrees of belief in propositions quite devoid of statistical background.”

In Hacking’s account, advances in the mathematics of probability—and its broader applications in the various fields that, in reciprocal fashion, contributed to its rise—set the stage for the modern, probabilistic notion of inference under conditions of uncertainty, and for its skeptical regress in the problem of induction as inaugurated for posterity by Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739). One famous instance to which Hacking devotes patient and ingenious attention is Pascal’s wager, which he reads as an early version of decision theory. The wager “showed how aleatory arithmetic could be part of a general ‘art of conjecturing’” and “made it possible to understand that the structure of reasoning about games of chance can be transferred to inference that is not founded on any chance set-up.”

Structures of probabilistic reasoning and inference, historically emerging from what we might think of as trivial cultural practices such as gambling, and also through legal and economic institutions, were thus annexed to other discourses concerned with kindred problems. Even in the wake of mathematical probability, epistemic and psychological concerns remain pressing: how much weight we give to experience; how we apportion credit to others’ beliefs and trust our own; how we balance rational information against felt instincts in scenarios of judgment, decision, and action. As probability ceased to mean an appeal to authoritative sources and rather an

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20 Hacking, *Emergence* 12. Aleatory probability is principally numerical, but its chances are re-coded into language, as Hacking notes, in such phrases as the “power” (*potentia*) or “ability” of an event to happen; the “ease” or “facility” (*facilis*) with which it happened; and its “proclivity” to happen (124-5). For criticisms of Hacking’s thesis see Garber and Zabell, “On the Emergence of Probability”*’; Franklin, *Science of Conjecture* 373-383; Patey, *Probability and Literary Form* 266-73; and Newsom, *Likely Story* 43-5. For an assessment of Hacking’s singular place in this field see Daston, “The History of Emergences.”

21 See Milton, “Induction before Hume,” for an account that positions Hume in a longer historical tradition.

22 Hacking, *Emergence* 63; see generally 63-72.
adjudication of numerical evidence, Hacking points out, readers and interpreters became the new authorities or “owner[s] of probability.” 23 Entering in on such questions, literature only lays claim to the *incalculable*—not to mention the “incalculably improbable”—against the background of shifts in calculative rationality.

These conceptual horizons are neither arid backgrounds in a rational reconstruction of scientific progress, nor historical curiosities that we have since superseded. They are rich sources that can illuminate a view of uncertain thinking from earlier moments in scientific, philosophical, psychological, and rhetorical fields. They are precursors to, and can still supplement, our own models of judgment under uncertainty with more supple depictions of felt experience than available to scientific or mathematical method. As individuals and groups we can have appreciable success in thinking and acting under conditions of imperfect knowledge, making conclusive inferences despite evidence that is various and partial, predicting relatively certain outcomes despite significant odds, and correcting (or otherwise re-aligning) our intuitive capacities so that they are less prone to biases, specious heuristics, or stereotypes. We can use the tools often drawn from the modern mathematics of chance to minimize damage and harmful outcomes by modeling risks—calculating providence, as it were, assessing it at a price.

Yet such ways of thinking and acting in the world are inescapably edged by uncertainty. Surrounding the distinct arena of more-or-less certain prediction hovers a penumbra of haze and hesitation, of shaky inferences, unclear evidence, and intermediary states on the way to judgment or decision. Definite actions or outcomes are still shadowed by paths not taken, hazards avoided but still bearing a measure of possibility and so probability. As William James cheekily put it, “for most of our emergencies there is no insurance-company at hand, and fractional solutions are

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23 *Emergence* 82.
impossible. Seldom can we act fractionally.\textsuperscript{24} We may have instruments to aid us in this regard—rules and heuristics to steer our predictions, institutions and practices to manage and shape our uncertainty—but at some deep and abiding level we still “live in the flicker” (Conrad), we “live in the cloud” (John Ruskin).\textsuperscript{25} Calculating chances and risks in order to purchase what a commentator in the nineteenth century called “compulsory providence” (insurance), we find that persistent forms of luck—variously moral, legal, and social—make shipwreck of such assurances.\textsuperscript{26} In our enthusiasm for calculative tools we have sometimes lost sight of strong moral and affective backgrounds that, glimpsed both in the breach and in the observance, do not admit of any numerical character.

Literature—and especially the long-form narratives I study in this project—provides a natural space for evaluating the tenor and tone of uncertainty, for probing the phenomenological states that could be described, on John Keats’ model of “\textit{Negative Capability},” as “being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”\textsuperscript{27} Paying close attention to the texture of this “being in uncertainties” while also reaching after, and drawing on, the history of fact and reason, my analysis performs a balancing act. On one hand, I keep topics like chance, luck, and probability in view as they find thematic, characterological, and narrative homes within literary texts, as they engage readers and critics, and as they spur authors to bring their verbal commodities to market. On the other, I see the literary within a broader nexus that joins such topics to their larger discourses in philosophical and scientific

\textsuperscript{24} \textit{Some Problems of Philosophy} 114 (in an Appendix entitled “Faith and the Right to Believe”).

\textsuperscript{25} Conrad, \textit{Heart of Darkness} 19; Ruskin, \textit{Works} 6.89.

\textsuperscript{26} Edwards, “Compulsory Providence.”

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Selected Letters} 41, to George and Tom Keats, December 1817.
history, sometimes relying on connections that are direct and at other moments tracking resonances that are ambient and allusive.

The Highs and Lows of Number: Mathematics and Probability

From our vantage point of disciplinary specialization, it may seem strange that the domains of words and numbers would be brought together. But we do need to look back to a time when the terrain was more porous and defenses sought to bridge separate areas like mathematics and literature. Early in the century, William Whewell wrote vigorous defenses of mathematics as part of a liberal education. When he wrote the polemic “Literature and Science,” Matthew Arnold included Newton’s *Principia* and Euclid’s *Elements* in the first category.

The developments in probability and statistics to which I have already alluded belong, in large part, to the history of mathematics. The major work of figures from Bernoulli and De Moivre to Laplace and Poisson was published in scientific venues or circulated among like-minded thinkers. Yet this work’s demotic origins in solutions to games and wagers, and its continuing practical applications from to insurance instruments to techniques for assessing witness credibility, ensured a wider audience. As Thomas De Quincey observed, highlighting the utility of practices usually “slighted as inconsiderable arts,” betting and wagering “rose suddenly into a philosophic rank” when these thinkers cast the “light of a high mathematical analysis upon the whole doctrine of Chances.”

Throughout the nineteenth century in Britain, insights from Continental thinkers were reported in newly flourishing scientific societies and periodicals. Augustus De Morgan, Charles

28 *Thoughts on the Study of Mathematics as Part of a Liberal Education* (1835); “Remarks on Mathematical Reasoning and on the Logic of Induction” (1837).

29 “Conversation” 267.
Babbage, John Herschel, Thomas Galloway and later John Stuart Mill, George Boole, and John Venn worked to transmit this work to the British setting. In the process, original contributions sat alongside summaries and reviews. The domestication of the ideas of figures like Laplace and Quetelet sometimes simplified mathematical ideas, pointing out philosophical and intellectual cognates, and aligning mathematics with other areas of intellectual investigation: law, theology, history, and literary criticism. These reviews were often of shorter primers and digests, such as the prefatory materials rather than the technical problems of De Moivre’s *The Doctrine of Chances* (1718, 1738, 1756) and *Annuities Upon Lives* (1724); the brief *Essai philosophique sur les probabilités* (1814) that Laplace condensed from his voluminous *Théorie analytique des probabilités* (1812); and Quetelet’s articles and summaries rather than his larger *Sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés* (1835). Reviews could be content to speak in wide and general terms of “probability” and “statistics” with nary a number in sight.

What has been described as the “rise of statistical thinking” gave this mathematical work, from the early decades of the nineteenth century, even more cultural traction. The regularities and laws inferred by a thinker like Quetelet necessarily involve graspable, public information,

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31 For similar works in the British context see Clark, *The Laws of Chance* (1758); Babbage, *Games of Chance* (1820); Symington, *Considerations on Lots* (1828); Lubbock and Bethune, *On Probability* (1830); De Morgan’s two-part “Theory of Probabilities” (1837) and “On the Structure of the Syllogism” (1847); Galloway, *A Treatise on Probability* (1839); Ellis, “On the Foundations of the Theory of Probabilities” (1842); Edgeworth, “The Philosophy of Chance” (1884); and Proctor, “The Certainties of Chance” (1888).

32 For examples in this discourse see Capes, “Quetelet, *On Probabilities*” (1849) and Herschel, “Quetelet on Probabilities” (1850). For reviews of Buckle see Sanders, “Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England*” (1857); Lord Acton, “Mr. Buckle’s Thesis and Method” and “Mr. Buckle’s Philosophy of History” (1858, in *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History*); Venn, “Science of History” (1862); “Statistical Averages and Human Actions” (1865); and Leslie Stephen, “An Attempted Philosophy of History” (1880).
whether “vital statistics” (rates of birth, development, and death) or “moral statistics” (rates of behavior, criminal or otherwise). His prescriptions about the possibility of “social physics” were thus easy to comprehend, popularize, or challenge. The much-criticized introduction to Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilization* (1857) deployed Quetelet’s work in a vision of statistical determinism. In *Hard Times* (1854) Charles Dickens selects statistics (“stutterings”) and their place in statecraft for his attack on “hard facts,” on the calculative knowledge of the aggregate as against the mysterious, intuitive knowledge of the individual units.33

The multifaceted (not to say confused) reception and dispersal of these materials may explain why historians of science take on literary examples, if at all, in merely instrumental ways.34 A richer and more reciprocal account of literature’s place in the history of uncertainty is possible if we can pay attention to how literature processes materials in what Raymond Williams calls the “dominant,” “residual,” and “emergent” strata of culture. Of particular importance here is the “residual,” that which “has been effectively formed in the past, but […] is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present.”35 The interplay among these levels allows us to see how, in limning the contours of uncertainty, novelists might juxtapose earlier concepts of evidence, probability, or belief with more recent developments. Eliot cites Aristotle’s account of probability even as she

33 See Bayley, “*Hard Times* and Statistics” for the claim that Dickens had no real sense of the science he was attacking.


35 *Marxism and Literature* 122; for these concepts see 121-7.

36 *Daniel Deronda* 505.
draws on the work of Mill, for instance, and Hardy appeals at once to folk notions of fate, chance, and luck while pressing the work of modern probabilists such as Venn and Galton into literary service. Beyond noticing what Matthew Wickman has described as the “recrudescence of mathematical ideas in areas of culture that are not disciplinarily mathematical,” we have to be alert to the residues that do cultural work despite, or even on account of, their obsolescence as scientific knowledge.

In nineteenth-century culture the residual presence of mathematical knowledge consorts with the emergent and dominant, expressed in the rising tide of scientific popularization. In a long tradition beginning with John Arbuthnot’s “An Essay on the Usefulness of Mathematical Learning” (1700) we find ideas about probability in its numerical and logical forms described in textbooks and juvenile works, in newspapers and pamphlet publications. The period saw the publication of many accessible primers like the text that introduced Hardy to the Art of Reasoning, such as James Gilbart’s Logic for the Million (1851) and Logic for the Young (1855) (a digest of Isaac Watts’ popular Logick; or the Right Use of Reasoning [1725]), Alexander Ellis’ Logic for Children (1872), and Alfred Swinbourne’s Picture Logic (1875). In a practical vein there were countless guides to gambling, card-playing, racing, and betting, including Charles Cotton’s The Compleat Gamester (1674) and Edmond Hoyle’s various treatises on games of chance, as well as An Essay Towards Making the Doctrine of Chances Easy to Those who Understand Vulgar Arithmetick Only (1754). There were just as many moral and legal diatribes.

37 “Robert Burns and Big Data” 15, glossing Friedrich Waismann and Arkady Plotnitsky on “mathematical thinking.”

38 On this trend see Lightman, Victorian Popularizers of Science.

39 Arbuthnot is a key figure in the emergence of probability, having translated and expanded Huygens’ De ratiociniis in aleae ludo (1657) as Of the Laws of Chance (1692). He claimed to infer divine providence from statistics (Hacking, Emergence 92-3; 167-8).
against gambling, from Disney’s *The Laws of Gaming* (1806) to a spate of works at the end of the century.\textsuperscript{40} Popular works on calculating probability for practical purposes, such as Campbell’s *A Popular Introduction to the Theory of Probabilities* (1865), were also intended for more prudent applications, such as financial investment and insurance schemes.\textsuperscript{41} The intellectual and institutional history of uncertainty thus covers a broad cultural spectrum, and the literary aspects of these topics have received some inventive treatments.\textsuperscript{42}

Yet beyond the thematic presence of, for instance, games of chance and annuity schemes in novels from the eighteenth through the early twentieth centuries, there is a deeper level at which literature registers the lessons of this mathematical context in its varied manifestations. Novelistic representation works at the cusp between two modes of probability that have jostled for prominence, and still do: *objective* accounts that address the ratios and regularities (“frequencies”) that putatively obtain across long series of events, and can be thought to track properties (or “propensities”) of the physical world; and *subjective* accounts that measure our

\textsuperscript{40} On the history and sociology of gambling, see Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*; Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter*; McKibbin, “Working-Class Gambling in Britain, 1880–1939”; Downes, *Gambling, Work and Leisure*; Itzkowitz, “Fair Enterprise and Extravagant Speculation” and “Victorian Bookmakers and Their Customers”;

\textsuperscript{41} For primary materials on nineteenth-century insurance, see Alborn and Murphy, eds., *Anglo-American Life Insurance, 1800-1914*. For historical accounts see Clark, *Betting on Lives* and Alborn, *Regulated Lives*.

grades of belief, and try to model our assessment of single outcomes by adjusting personal predictions in light of new information.\textsuperscript{43} This distinction took on a more explicit character in the middle years of the nineteenth century, particularly in Britain. Mapping out the events that occur to individuals or contained social groups, novels start their characters (and readers) off in conditions of subjective uncertainty, where inductions are initially compromised and inferences have to be gradually adjusted. Novels also attempt to represent, or at least to refer to, events at greater natural and social scales. We need then to supplement attention to the highs and lows of number in terms of theme, image, and motif with accounts that are sensitive to the narrative and representational tensions that these topics also engender.\textsuperscript{44}

**Probable Causes: Philosophy and Psychology**

Numerical approaches to uncertainty sought to give rational frameworks for inference, whatever their object. In this way mathematical probability came into contact, and occasionally tension, with philosophical models of belief, experience, and judgment. In the course of the eighteenth century the division of objective and subjective probability—or aleatory and epistemic, in Hacking’s terms—was brought together with the doctrine of the association of ideas. This influential model of mind had gained ground since its formulation in the fourth edition of Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1700), although it received its

\textsuperscript{43} See Hacking, *Emergence* 143-53, suggesting that Bernoulli’s *Ars conjectandi* (1713), in framing the first limit theorem of modern probability, also gave form to the subjective/objective distinction. Zabell offers a historical overview, focusing on the nineteenth century, in “The Subjective and the Objective.”

\textsuperscript{44} These distinctions are felt in literary and narrative theory, even where “probability” is taken only to mean “plausibility”: Currie asks how our determinations of likelihood within a story relate to the “dictates of objective probability” (*Narratives and Narrators* 54); Hogan reasons that readerly forecasts “rely on automatic, subjective probability assessments” that may vary from person to person (*Affective Narratology* 88).
most generalized form in Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature*. Associationism presented an aleatory theory of mind. Sensations, emotions, and ideas of all forms could be seen as aggregating together, forming connections and grooving paths according to the logic of habit. Frequencies and regularities out there in the world, in other words, directly shaped the interior material substrate with which we think. As Daston has argued, associationism thus co-opted both objective and subjective probability, merging mathematical views with updated accounts of how we infer, judge, and believe from Locke, De Moivre, and Hume onwards. Many of the key figures in the associationist tradition were also involved in science, such as David Hartley in his *Observations on Man* (1749) and Joseph Priestley, who wrote a digest of Hartley’s *Theory of the Human Mind* (1775). Hartley incorporated mathematical notions into his radical version of the associationist theory of mind, in which he claims that “the human body is composed of the same matter as the external world” and so “its component particles should be subjected to the same subtle laws.”

It was finally Poisson who, in the early nineteenth century, “broke up the classical triumvirate of experience, probability, and belief by separating objective frequencies and subjective beliefs.” Yet associationist psychology and its account of mental function remained influential, and its aleatory underpinnings continued to inform philosophical, psychological, and literary writers through the nineteenth century. Associationist ideas percolated through early

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48 *Observations* 1.64.

Romantic poetics. William Hazlitt thought Wordsworth exemplified “in an eminent degree the power of association,” having “dwelt among pastoral scenes, till each object has become connected with a thousand feelings, a link in the chain of thought, a fibre of his own heart.”

In the Prelude Wordsworth described how nature impressed “Rememberable things” into his mind “By chance collisions and quaint accidents.” He and Coleridge were much taken with Hartley’s ideas, which make their way into the Preface to Lyrical Ballads (1800), even if Coleridge later toned down his enthusiasm in the Biographia Literaria (1817).

Association remained a watchword in the debates between Mill and Whewell about the true nature of scientific inference, whether on the basis of acquired experience or innate powers of intuition. Through the work of writers on psychology from James Mill through to Alexander Bain, these ideas joined forces with burgeoning research into the physiological structures of the brain to yield a more embodied account of mental function. From Wordsworth’s picture of the poet’s mind as formed by “quaint accidents” to Conrad’s comment that a “philosophical mind is

50 Spirit of the Age 89.

51 1805 Prelude, I.616-17.


53 Snyder, Reforming Philosophy offers the most thorough account of the Mill/Whewell debates.

54 Young, Mind and Brain 94-133 gives a thorough account of this shift and underscores the centrality of Bain, whose “analysis of motor phenomena was the first union of the new physiology with a detailed association psychology” and “laid the psychological foundations of a thoroughgoing sensory-motor psychophysiology” (114). For summaries in a literary vein, see Dames, The Physiology of the Novel and Ryan, Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel.
but an accident,” the tradition of uncertain thinking and probable knowledge made its way into literary venues with a psychological as often as a numerical character.

For my purposes, this tradition is important not only for the problems it sets—about induction, prediction, and scientific explanation—but also for its attention to the felt, figurative, and bodily aspects of those problems. Appropriately enough in an intellectual lineage where the sun’s rising and setting makes its continual round, figures for compromised or unclear perception became associated with the felt character of uncertainty. Locke’s view of our partial knowledge in relation to nature, which he vividly names “the twilight […] of Probability,” finds later articulation in Venn’s description of how our beliefs shift in the face of complex evidence, like “those alternations of light and dark in a murky foggy day,” leaving us in a “dim haze of conjecture.” The associationist emphasis on “chains” or “trains” of ideas plays a key role in how uncertain states of mind are produced and extended, as does the corollary investment in how the matter of thinking compels the repetition, aggregation, and blending of sensations, impressions, and ideas. In addition Hume’s work in particular has been invoked in accounts that claim the inauguration and survival of certain ways of thinking—about the “fictionality” of plot and narrative or the “suppositional” nature of character—well into the nineteenth century. Later negotiations with the ideas of Hume and this tradition, as received and restructured in works like Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria*, Mill’s *System of Logic*, and the late-nineteenth-century

55 Chance 10.

56 See Patey, *Probability and Literary Form* 27-34, for a discussion of Locke and probability.


recuperations by T. H. Green and Thomas Huxley, ensured their continuing (if residual) relevance.

Only for the Most Part: Rhetoric, Law, Literature

I have moved out from the reflex concern of one logical reader to a range of occasioning materials that might have informed his sense of probability. Even those discourses that have a native connection to literature—such as treatises on rhetoric, logic, grammar, and literary style—were inflected by the epistemological shift that accompanied the development of mathematical probability. In a number of such works we see an increasing propensity to widen the category of evidence to include numerical markers of uncertainty. Campbell’s *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1776) includes “calculations of chances” alongside the usual sources of evidence from experience, analogy, and testimony.\(^\text{59}\) Bain’s *English Composition and Rhetoric* (1867), surveying the types of proof one might use for persuasion—deductive, inductive, analogical, and probable—refers to numerical proportions and points out that “we do always form some vague estimate of what we consider the force of an inference that is not certain,” even if “exact numbers” are not forthcoming.\(^\text{60}\) Whately’s own *Elements of Rhetoric* tries to clarify how we think of the credibility of witnesses or the probability of a given supposition, and in general worries about “cases in which a the degree of probability is estimated from a calculation of chances.”\(^\text{61}\) A number of the figures in the mathematical, philosophical, and psychological

\(^{59}\) *Philosophy of Rhetoric* 56-8.

\(^{60}\) *English Composition and Rhetoric* 235; see 234-6. In Bain’s *An English Grammar* (1863) there are sections discussing adverbs of belief, certainty, and probability (44-5), and conjunctions that mark suppositional or conditional statements (70-1).

\(^{61}\) *Elements of Rhetoric* 55; see 50-55.
traditions I have been outlining extended their work into treatises of rhetoric, primers on logic, and manuals of grammar. Many of these texts involve literary examples.  

Where rhetorical works included chances in considerations of evidence, the related genre of the legal treatise (especially treatises on evidence) set similar concerns alongside numerical concepts. Barbara Shapiro has discussed at length how these genres participated in the development of categories of knowledge, from mere opinion to graded probability to demonstrable certainty, from the early modern period through the nineteenth century. She notes how legal treatises incorporated elements of empiricist (often associationist) philosophy and were generally skeptical of probable calculations at law, even though at the turn of the century it was “not unusual for a discussion of legal evidence to include or refer to treatises on logic or for general discussions of logic and modes of proof to devote considerable attention to matters relevant to the law.” Between the massive synthetic projects of Jeremy Bentham’s *Rationale of Judicial Evidence* (1827), which contains many reflections on the probable and possible, and John Henry Wigmore’s *Principles of Judicial Proof as Given by Legal, Psychological and General Experience* (1913), many legal treatises worked in this mixed mode, incorporating

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64 “Beyond Reasonable Doubt” and “Probable Cause” 30.
observations from mathematical and rhetorical probability. In both rhetoric and law, then, numerical grades of the probable are added to the culture’s usual modes for assessing credibility and inductive evidence. Indeed, the very concepts that were used to signal such concerns—“fact,” “circumstantial evidence,” “probable cause,” “reasonable doubt,” “moral certainty”—took on, as many scholars have noted, a renovated feel.

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Weaving in resources that are less familiar in literary studies on account of their numerical character, we can thus see the surprising involvement of novelists even with those materials of science and philosophy that are predicated on certainty, exactitude, and abstraction, and also with those that worry about incertitude, vagueness, and the concrete and felt particulars that resist calculation. Using materials from these different areas to read a group of nineteenth-century novels, I will suggest that this procedure in turn might prompt us to renovate literary-critical categories such as judgment, evidence, belief (and the suspension thereof), and probability.

As a critical response and a tactic of representation and generic affiliation, probability is a thorny concept. Calling attention to its fluid and residual senses, and the backgrounds that I began to invoke with Whately, we can begin to separate out different strands and see how the

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66 See Shapiro, “Beyond Reasonable Doubt” and “Probable Cause” and A Culture of Fact; Shapin, A Social History of Truth; Poovey, A History of the Modern Fact; and Welsh, Strong Representations.
literary staging of probability as a spectrum concept may be more interesting than any single
determination. Indeed, the numerical feel of Whately’s comments are far from unusual in
nineteenth-century criticism. The barrister James Fitzjames Stephen, who wrote extensively on
legal evidence and was first cousin of the logician Venn, offers an example of the continuing
reliance on ideas of probable series. In a wide critique of how fictions can only be inadequately
tethered to fact, Stephen argues that even Jane Austen,

whose books convey an impression of reality altogether extraordinary, culls out and
pieces together a succession of small incidents, so contrived as to develop, step by step,
the characters of the persons represented. Each incident, taken by itself, is so exquisitely
natural, and so carefully introduced, that it requires considerable attention to detect the
improbability of the story. That improbability consists in the sequence of the incidents
wanted.\footnote{The Relation of Novels to Modern Life” 166.}

Stephen’s assumptions here fit in with the modern concept of probability: “incidents” are
isolable units of event; a “sequence” arbitrates their overall or aggregate likelihood. Like it or
not, when we appraise literary works using terms that in any measure resemble these we are
drawing on the inherited resources of this mode of knowledge. We rely on its categories of
evidence, styles of inference, and tacit preference for the frequentative “normal” as against the
statistical “deviation.” To think through the problems of judgment under uncertainty is also, then,
to recast literary probability in ways that see it as responsive to models of, or ideas about,
probability drawn from other areas of knowledge.

Probability, of course, can be a marker of taste, decorum, propriety, or class just as much
as a guide to thought, knowledge, action, or sequence. Gérard Genette shows how seventeenth-
century determinations of the verisimilar or probable (vraisemblance) functioned as implicit
references to social codes, to “a body of maxims accepted as true by the public to which the
narrative is addressed.”68 What contravenes probability are actions or events that are both “contrary to good manners, and, at the same time, […] contrary to all reasonable foresight: infraction and accident.”69 Genette describes *vraisemblance* in a manner akin to Hacking’s interpretation of earlier, nonmathematical notions of the probable as what was “approvable” or “worthy of approval,” referred to accepted authorities, canons, or codes.70 Yet in speaking of the “gradation” of *vraisemblance* he too tacitly leans on the modern conception of probability along a spectrum.71

In the nineteenth century what Genette calls “verisimilist criticism” is abundant.72 G. H. Lewes, reviewing *Jane Eyre*, complains of “too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating-library.”73 Margaret Oliphant lauds the perfections and verisimilitudes of Austen but grumbles about whether the events of *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* can be thought likely, or even possible.74 Elizabeth Rigby offers what to us might seem a curious claim about *Vanity Fair* as less a novel than “a history of those average sufferings, pleasures, penalties, and

68 “Vraisemblance and Motivation” 242.

69 “Vraisemblance and Motivation” 240.

70 Hacking, *Emergence* 18-23. This earlier usage is tied to the Latin *probabilis*, which Hacking (relying on the work of Edward Byrne in *Probability and Opinion*) sees as having an evaluative sense, “not evidential support but support from respected people” (23). He suggests that this usage was still current into the eighteenth century (citing Defoe and Gibbon) but that it “began to die out as mathematical probability became more and more successful” (20). For the seventeenth-century French context see Lyons, *The Phantom of Chance*.

71 “Vraisemblance and Motivation” 243.

72 “Vraisemblance and Motivation” 248.

73 “Recent Novels” 692. In *Principles of Success in Literature* Lewes might be seen, like Genette, to follow on a spectrum of *vraisemblance* in writing of the “degree of verisimilitude” in representation (123).

74 Oliphant, “Miss Austen and Miss Mitford” and “The Old Saloon.”
rewards to which various classes of mankind gravitate,” in which Thackeray “has hardly availed himself of the natural average of remarkable events that really do occur in this life” and readers “almost long for a little exaggeration and improbability to relieve us of that sense of dead truthfulness which weighs down our hearts.”

Such responses become more complex when the social codes or ideologies to which such judgments refer include ideas drawn from, say, statistical thinking or the calculations of chance. My point here is that these sorts of determinations based on taste, affect, and intuition are, as epistemic judgments, intimately related to the aleatory side of probability.

Critics like Franco Moretti and Deidre Lynch have prompted us to see literary codes like genre and style shifting along the axes of evolutionary change and the routinized habits of reader reception. It stands to reason that codes of probability might be subject to similar approaches, and as readers and critics trained in the probable (as both epistemic and numerical), we need to be attuned to the fluid nature of such judgments. In general my approach argues for broad conceptions of probability that may include what readers or critics might find to be improbable or unreal at a given historical juncture; in particular, I foreground aspects of novelistic realism as

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75 Rigby, in Critical Heritage 79-80.


the dominant genre of the probable that have been undervalued in criticism. In tandem with the discourses of uncertainty, Genette’s claim that the probable or lifelike works along an ideological spectrum (and he looks ahead to nineteenth-century European realism in this regard) helps to explain how realism declared a central band of this spectrum and moved other genres (romance, gothic, sensation) to the margins. Realism is not necessarily “more probable” than other genres, and the novelists in this project exhibit notable lapses from probabilistic grace: Thackeray’s lapses into joke-cracking and satire, Collins’ lurid sensationalism, Eliot’s gothic moments, and Hardy’s wild coincidences might all be instanced. Yet realist fiction, in aligning itself with the modern dispensation of probability, does come to be the genre adjudicating the proper standards of likeness and likelihood, policing what Fielding termed the “bounds of probability.”

A more flexible account of this jostling among different senses of probability and generic commitments might lead, down the line, to a multifaceted picture of literary inference. Thinkers Whewell, Mill, and Charles Sanders Peirce onwards have provided supple models for inference, explanation, realization, and intuition, and our theories of reading are weak to the extent that they avoid such resources, whether historical or contemporary. We have excellent accounts of such uncertain experiences as suspense, surprise, anticipation, and partial inference, and there is more to be done in seeing how local judgments and assessments work, often in difference from overall

78 “Vraisemblance and Motivation” 247-50.

79 *Tom Jones* 392. For an account of these topics in Fielding, Burney, and Austen see Wickman, “Of Probability, Romance, and the Spatial Dimensions of Eighteenth-Century Narrative.”

80 A statement like Searle’s “From Inference to Insight: A Peircean Model of Literary Reasoning” is unusual for its focus on these topics, in difference from the multitude of studies on “interpretation.”
interpretations. In offering suppler ways of accounting for probability, evidence, and inference in their fluctuating and provisional gradations, I thus seek to bring uncertainty back to critical work. Judgment under uncertainty may not sound like a description of literary-critical practice. But while much of our work rests on readings and interpretations that have the air of finality, it also deploys inferences and intuitions in briefer and more localized ways. Some of the most persuasive work of literary criticism has been, and continues to be, not at the level of methodological positioning or system-building, but in the flicker of appraisal that catches a scene, sense, or sound, registering an impression that may not finally arrive at an argument. The tools we use in such moments are akin to the phenomenology of uncertain thinking and inference that I describe in this project, and such connections can offer us a variety of angles on reading.

Chapter Outlines

As literary realism shakes off earlier providential paradigms, Thackeray inaugurates a startling interest in alternatives to reality as essential for novels that would be true to life. Chapter 1 investigates how these “queer speculations” that saturate his writing: a child that might have lived, an accident that could have been avoided, a war that would have ended otherwise if only…. Thackeray’s counterfactual imaginary matures from occasional stories of the 1840s through Vanity Fair (1847-8), the Roundabout Papers (1860-3), and Lovel the Widower (1860). His conditional thoughts and speculations run the gamut from frenzied anticipation to paralyzing regret, making clear the affective stakes of skepticism. Probing the emotional and tonal modulations of uncertainty, Thackeray’s writing also widens the space of novelistic realism to

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81 See Levine, Serious Pleasures of Suspense; Miller, “Jane Austen’s Ethics and Aesthetics of Surprise”; Tyler, “Feeling for the Future”; Currie, The Unexpected; and Auyoung, “The Sense of Something More in Art and Experience” and “Partial Cues and Narrative Understanding.”
include the non-mimetic, hypothetical, improbable, and open-ended—or what he terms the “might-have-beens.”

Turning to Eliot and the problem of action under uncertainty, Chapter 2 unites several discourses that describe hesitation as a practical attitude and bodily experience: midcentury debates about scientific inference, comparative method, and physiological psychology. Abundant moments of indecision and delay shape Eliot’s last novel Daniel Deronda (1876), which opens on a question, dramatizes one character’s incapacity to decide on her marriage even after it has taken effect, and ponders another’s distracting lack of knowledge about his cultural background. Formal fluctuations and portrayals of mental caprice would seem at cross-purposes with the narrative control and moral coherence typical of Eliot. Yet in discovering a “kinship” between certainty and doubt, Eliot supplements her ethics of sympathy through the resources of hesitation, irresolution, and comparison, and sets store by felt predictive stances like trust and hope.

The Victorian period is often seen as solidifying modern law’s idealization of number and definition. Yet Collins adopts a contrasting instance, the bizarre third verdict (“not proven”) of Scots law, as the basis for a literary experiment. The verdict, which falls between “guilty” and “not guilty” and acts as an acquittal that nonetheless imputes a lack of evidence for conviction, guides the plot of his detective novel The Law and the Lady (1875). Chapter 3 argues that uncertainty inflects both judicial processes and models of reading in Collins. The unsure verdict of “not proven” undercuts the truth claims of binary judgment, throwing into relief the moral psychology of suspicion swirling both inside and outside the court, and offering more flexible visions of social and moral judgment in its stead. In leaving his novel under the sign of “not
proven,” Collins encourages types of inference that value the tentative, hesitant, and processual elements of reading without proving.

Chapter 4 examines two models for predictive thinking in Hardy. I read Hardy’s depiction of repetitive phenomena in *The Return of the Native* (1878) as evoking one renovated account of probability in the period, as an empirical theory about how we judge from series of instances. In the novel’s palpably antiquated rural setting—where characters intuit more than they see, gamble by the light of glowworms on the heath, and infer human plots from long-run traces in the material world—the abstractions of Victorian logic acquire concrete form. By contrast, in Hardy’s urban novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), he condenses serial iterations into images. Hardy designs literary equivalents of Francis Galton’s composite photographs, used to model statistical data. Characters think in overlays, detecting a parent’s face playing over that of a child, designing a future self by laying transparencies over the present, and imagining human plots as grids from high overhead. I track the fortunes of serial and composite representations into Hardy’s “approximative” theory of fiction. In an array of statements from the 1890s onwards he advocates for a novelistic realism tolerant of coincidence, improbability, and the unforeseen.

These chapters are intended as case studies in uncertain thinking, and there is considerable overlap among the different aspects to which they attend. The analysis of counterfactual and hypothetical thinking in Thackeray inflects my account of indecision and alternative paths in Eliot, legal uncertainty in Collins, and the overlay of mental images or composites in Hardy. The assessment of hesitation as a physiological experience in Eliot adds depth to my description of hesitant legal inference in Collins, and her appeals to comparison as a device of sympathetic imagination informs Hardy’s descriptions of serial phenomena. My final
segment on Hardy’s “probable realism” could find analogues in the different generic and representational complexities that Thackeray, Eliot, and Collins add to realism in its modulation by uncertainty.
CHAPTER 1

THINKING OTHERWISE: THACKERAY’S COUNTERFACTUAL IMAGINARY
For someone who would spend most of his life bodying forth and living amidst imaginary scenes, William Thackeray was curiously unsure of the boundary between fictional and factual worlds. His œuvre confronts us with a generic and modal mirage, swerving from satire to sketch, parody to pantomime, critical review to ironic squib, historical romance to the great “Novel without a Hero.” Across his work fictional characters, historical actors, canonical authors, and a veritable stable of narrators and authorial personae congregate. Characters routinely wander in and out of—and crucially around—historical events, and notoriously crop up in different locations beyond a text’s nominal closure. Later novels unexpectedly present themselves as the prequel or sequel of earlier narratives, and one is left with a sense that Thackeray’s is always a “partial sort of [poetic] justice,” subject to later or conditioned by earlier revision.\(^1\) Characters even show up in the real world when Thackeray recognizes them in the gestures and expressions of people he meets. Together with his propensity to chat with (or otherwise imagine himself in the company of) his favorite authors the overall impression is one of porous divisions and worlds ghosting one another indefinitely.\(^2\)

The strong form of this confusion appears here not to state a problem about the metaphysics of fiction that I will promise to solve—here more than usual, madness that way lies—but to commence an inquiry that places modal uncertainty, contingency, and probability at the heart of a distinctive imaginary and representational enterprise. At first Thackeray views the

\(^1\) Vanity Fair 246; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text. References to other Thackeray novels will be, where available, to the critical editions published by Garland or Michigan. Other texts will be cited by volume and page number from The Oxford Thackeray (hereafter OxT), Ray’s edition of Contributions to the Morning Chronicle (hereafter MC), or the original Cornhill versions of the Roundabout Papers. Figures are drawn from the nineteenth-century collected edition published by Smith, Elder.

\(^2\) On the illusion of characters existing outside the fiction as a function of serialization see McMaster, Thackeray 24–9.
success of fictional representation in the creation of characters and entities that can be said to have acquired (or exceeded) the status of historical fact—characters that seem “to have been”:

O wondrous power of genius! Fielding’s men and women are alive, though History’s are not. […] Is not Amelia preparing her husband’s little supper? Is not Miss Snap chastely preventing the crime of Mr. Firebrand? Is not Parson Adams in the midst of his family, and Mr. Wild taking his last bowl of punch with the Newgate Ordinary? Is not every one of them a real substantial have-been personage now? […] For our parts, we will not take upon ourselves to say that they do not exist somewhere else; that the actions attributed to them have not really taken place […].

Parson Adams is at this minute as real a character, and as much loved by us as the old doctor [Johnson] himself. What a noble, divine power this of genius is, which, passing from the poet into his reader’s soul, mingles with it, and there engenders, as it were, real creatures, which is as strong as history, which creates beings that take their place by nature’s own.

The couple [in the text reviewed] have become real living personages in history, like Queen Elizabeth, or Sancho Panza, or Parson Adams, or any other past character who, false or real once, is only imaginary now, and for whose existence we have only the word of a book. And surely to create these realities is the greatest triumph of a fictitious writer—a serious or humorous poet.

In these statements prior to Vanity Fair (1847–8), praising authenticity sets a promissory standard for a brand of realism that will emphasize the centrality of personal experience, the touches of authentic detail or color that could not be obtained by second-order experience, research, or knowledge, and that thereby confer actuality on fictional constructs.

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3 “Caricatures and Lithography in Paris,” The Paris Sketch Book (OxT 2.183–4). For Fielding’s influence on Thackeray see Ray, Uses of Adversity 225–6 (quoting part of this review).

4 “A Box of Novels” (OxT 6.413). This review encompasses several novels, and these comments come in a section on the posterity of Dickens’ works.

5 Reviewing Douglas Jerrold’s Mrs. Caudle’s Curtain Lectures (MC 94–5 [26 December 1845]; also quoted in Ray, Uses 327).

6 Hence the saturation of Thackeray’s world by objects and materials, his interest in catalogues and auctions: see Carey, Prodigal Genius 58–78; Miller, Novels Behind Glass 14–49; McMaster, “Thackeray’s Things” 76–8; Fletcher, “The Dandy and the Fogy” 384. Ray argues
Yet the representational nexus that Thackeray develops is notably populated by visions of a different order from this “preoccupation with the actual”—by unrealities or non-entities that shadow facts, and attain a “might have been” status. If facts are to be distinguished from what we now call “counterfactuals”—a concept whose contours I explain in depth below—then fictions can similarly contain substitutions from their own order of the “might have been.”8 In letters and essays as often as in stories and novels, Thackeray supplements experience with alternatives: an accident that might have happened, a shooting that might have taken place, a child that might have lived, a war that might have been avoided, a republic that could have been proclaimed, a death that might not have occurred.9 The pure form of this pattern for Thackeray—the simple wager: it came up heads, but might have been tails—exhibits fascination with both aleatory phenomena and irrevocable, truly final facts.10

that Thackeray’s Morning Chronicle criticism gives the strongest sense of his theory of fiction (Uses 323–30), but these notions surely modulate as his own fictional writing gets underway.

7 Ray, Uses 394.

8 Or, indeed, from the real and factual world, a “counterfictional” mode that Scarry distinguishes from the literary “counterfactual”: “Like the daydream, the verbal arts are counterfactual: both the daydream and the poem bring into being things not previously existing in the world. But the verbal arts are also counterfictional, displacing the ordinary attributes of imagining—its faintness, two-dimensionality, fleetingness, and dependence on volitional labor—with the vivacity, solidity, persistence, and givenness of the perceptible world” (Dreaming by the Book 38).

9 Drawn respectively from: “A Mississippi Bubble” 756; an early letter offering “no news except that taking a moonlight walk, I fell over head and ears in a ditch opposite Addinbrokes Hospital. I might have drowned with the greatest facility!” (Letters 1.38, to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 5 March 1829); “On Two Roundabout Papers Which I Intended to Write” 379–81; on a failed Chartist rally, where “had it not been for a rainy night and the cowardice of that scoundrel [John] Frost we might have been now the British Republic for what I know” (Letters 1.410–11, to Mrs. Carmichael Smyth, 18 January 1840); “A Gambler’s Death” (The Paris Sketch Book, in OxT 2) and a diary entry for 22 August 1832, discussed below (Letters 1.225–6).

10 The example is drawn from “On Some Late Great Victories” 758–9.
What emerges as Thackeray’s realism converges on two standards. Readers are to be convinced that fictions have attained the status of facts (as often through affective means—sentiment, nostalgia, melancholy—as through the inclusion of raw historical material). And we are lured into acts of counterfactual imagining, speculations about what might have happened both—this qualifying epithet soon becomes idle—in fact and fiction. The latter strategy is predicated on and shades into the former. Once drawn into the realm of counterfact while reading a fiction, it is clear that fiction’s factual or “have been” status has been tacitly granted. It is crucial to mark the complexity of this position, which can appear contradictory:

If we want instruction, we prefer to take it from fact rather than from fiction. We like to hear sermons from his reverence at church; to get our notions of trade, crime, politics, and other national statistics, from the proper papers and figures; but when suddenly, out of the gilt pages of a pretty picture book, a comic moralist rushes forward, and takes occasion to tell us that society is diseased, the laws unjust, the rich ruthless, the poor martyrs, the world lop-sided, and vice versa, persons who wish to lead an easy life are inclined to remonstrate against this literary ambushade.\[11\]

[Accuses real histories of being] mere contemptible catalogues of names and places, that can have no moral effect upon the reader”; “[In this] contemptible science […] the facts are nothing […] the names everything. [By contrast works like The Pickwick Papers, Roderick Random, or Tom Jones present] a better idea of the state and ways of the people, than one could gather from any more pompous or authentic histories.\[12\]

A dialectical irony works to endorse fiction’s authenticity and moral purpose as against the facts and minutiae of real history, and in the same breath to prefer fact’s exactitude over the

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11 Reviewing Lever’s St. Patrick’s Eve (MC 71 [3 April 1845]; quoted in Ray, Uses 327). Rawlins comments on this passage in a discussion attuned to the tension “between the delightful and aesthetically satisfying lie that is romance and the uncomfortable but unquestionably valuable truth that is fact” (Thackeray’s Novels 59; see 53–66).

12 “On Some French Fashionable Novels,” The Paris Sketch Book (OxT 2.93, 98). Compare Henry Esmond: “In a word I would have History familiar rather than heroic: and think that Mr. Hogarth and Mr. Fielding will give our children a much better idea of the manners of the present age in England, than the ‘Court Gazette’ and the Newspapers which we get thence” (4).
productions of fictional moralists whose work is assessed as sham (*gilt pages, pretty book*).\textsuperscript{13}

Value signs are inverted in a pattern that maps a more abstract alternation between fact and counterfact, fiction and counterfiction. Across his work Thackeray speculatively reframes history against the broader horizon of shadowing alternatives and possibilities, where at other moments he broods on the inexorable pressures and melancholy achievements of history and memory. This manner of setting up tensions across present, past, and fictional worlds sharpens the conceptual and affective nexus they share, whether by attempting to imagine what could happen by way of what might have happened, to interrogate future possibility by way of past conditionals or counterfactuals, to trace the emotional flux that occurs when trying to recall how future chances looked at some past time, or to predict what psychic retrospects will feel like at some future moment.

The argument of this chapter has four stages that argue both the constancy of this narrative concern with counterfactuals—with *thinking otherwise*—and the different shapes such thinking takes over time. First I establish how Thackeray’s fictional apprenticeship in his early writing through the 1840s muddles out the terms of these problems, wondering about probability and possibility on absurdly large scales: wagers on life, Faustian bargains, total reversals of fortune. This work establishes a fictional mode I characterize as *demonic*, which allies fiction with extremes of improbable imagination, makes casual use of dreams and demons, familiars and fairies, and discovers gambling as a theme rich in imaginative potential. Thackeray maintains the

\textsuperscript{13} The second move in this dialectic is often achieved by an *occupatio*, a studied refusal to describe what can be imagined, or has been more fully dealt with elsewhere (whether in novels or newspapers): for instance, in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* (*OxT* 4.49, 97) and a review of Disraeli’s *Coningsby* (*MC* 40 [13 May 1844]). Thackeray offers an analysis of his own double irony in *The Snobs of England* (63–6), where across two numbers he both mocks civilians for their judgments on the harshness of corporal punishment in the military, and makes clear how untenable such practices are: the military’s status is sheltered while its actions are excoriated; the civilian’s view preferred while his cant is exposed.
demonic as a ground of fictional possibility well into his late output, even if its early form is marginalized in longer novels and finds expression in minor genres akin to romance, fairy tale, and pantomime. Thus *Vanity Fair*, to which I next turn, domesticates the mode of demonic possibility even as it remains in the penumbra of the plot. Reversals of fortune acquire historical and socioeconomic explanations, and wagering on lives takes the form of speculations on social credit and status. Where the early mode typically involved thinking about the future (and social climbing rather than social ruin), here counterfactual thinking involves an undertow that swings the narrative between risk and regret, speculation and retrospect, uncertainty about the future and unease about the past. Pondering what Thackeray explicitly called the “might-have-beens” links that novel’s two plots even as it sets up tensions between them, and between realism and its others.\(^\text{14}\)

The wholly mnemonic and remorseful mode on offer in *Vanity Fair* is examined in a third section, focusing on occasional writing from the 1860s. Disputing the critical consensus on Thackeray as a novelist of fixed and museal memory, I supplement our view of memory in the large productions like *The History of Pendennis* (1848–50) and *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852) by exploring occasional texts such as the *Roundabout Papers* (1860–3) and a view of recollection shaped by virtuality and instability. Thackeray’s recurrent problem with memory—where do its objects exist?—forms a late version of thinking about fictionality and counterfactuals. Finally, in another foray into the late work, I argue that modal uncertainty usurps narrative attention almost to the exclusion of plot. In *Lovel the Widower* (1861), rather than worrying about concrete manifestations of future or past, Thackeray engages in abstract hypotheses on the conditions of narrative imagination. This late flowering of uncertainty subjects

\(^{14}\) *Letters* 4.154, to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 1 October 1859.
realism to a *reductio*: Thackeray senses that the concrete contents of narrative, guided by canons of mimesis, probability, decorum, and closure, exist only through the allowance of an equally realist commitment to the non-mimetic, improbable, absurd, and open-ended. Thus thinking otherwise arcs from its jaunty early mode that sponsors fantastic plots and gets narrative underway to its jarring later version that turns hypothesis against narrative energy as such.

In trying to establish patterns of uncertain thinking in Thackeray, I follow critics who have found in his work ambivalence, skepticism, and doubt, an aesthetic against closure, linguistic and interpretive instability, irony of the all-embracing post-Romantic and pragmatist varieties, and a fluctuating affective and tonal register that itself constitutes a cognitive and social orientation. In difference from later chapters, contextual materials are here limited to those in Thackeray’s more immediate literary and cultural milieu. This is more an artifact of accident than capacity: if Thackeray squandered his time at Cambridge, where William Whewell was his tutor and he was regularly coached in mathematics alongside moral philosophy, these topics have an odd and oblique way of recurring in his work, not least in characters that may be inversions of the author, like Dobbin, “dull at classical learning, at mathematics […] uncommonly quick.” In the last section I reflect on how Thackeray takes ways of thinking


16 Indeed, Thackeray was among the first to describe the practice of mathematics “coaching” at Cambridge. In his history of mathematical physics at Cambridge, Warwick points to *Vanity Fair* and *Pendennis* (with its character, “Mr. Coacher”) as popularizing the notion of
about chance and the probable away from their natural home in number and series to a domain where the manipulation of events in mental space is more akin to geometry. I reject the view that Thackeray’s “lack of talent for mathematics” is consonant with a “strange incapacity for abstract thought,” and suggest that we take his preference for knowledge that is not avowedly technical as a credo about the proprieties of realist fiction rather than as censuring abstraction as such.\textsuperscript{17}

Although it is true that Thackeray resists the inclusion of “abstract principles” in novels, and “prefer[s] romances which do not treat of algebra, religion, political economy, or other abstract science,” such materials appear in altered forms.\textsuperscript{18} His narratives are built around a “discernible scaffold of hypothesis and inference” that aims at the “discovery of new ways of talking about reality.”\textsuperscript{19} A reflection on his university education—“that subtle reasonings & deep meditations on angles & parallelograms might be much better employed on other subjects”—warrants, for instance, the extension of geometric thinking into some other domain of thought.\textsuperscript{20} Just as Thackeray returns with fervency, especially in later years, to the materials of childhood and public school—floggings, jam-tarts, “the play”—it may be that the more rudimentary tools of abstract reasoning are those that leave the deepest impression on his mind and its consequent modes of representation.

\textsuperscript{17} Ray, \textit{Uses} 117, 99.

\textsuperscript{18} Reviewing Lever’s \textit{St. Patrick’s Eve} and Disraeli’s \textit{Sybil} in 1845 (\textit{MC} 71, 78); compare similar statements in a review of Abbot’s \textit{The Comic Blackstone} and Gore’s \textit{The Snow Storm} (\textit{MC} 101). Sutherland discusses Thackeray’s diligent historical research in \textit{Thackeray at Work} 124–32.

\textsuperscript{19} Fletcher, “The Dandy and the Fogy” 395.

\textsuperscript{20} Letters 1.138–9; quoted in Ray, \textit{Uses} 139.
Demons of Fact

Thackeray’s earliest publications and his first volume, *The Paris Sketch Book* (1840), are full of wagers. On one hand, representations of gambling abound, fables about the terrific swings of fortune or burlesques on the speculations that characterize every level of society. Wagers in a Faustian mode, on the other, anchor without comment tales populated by demons and sprites in society settings. These tales are easily overlooked as issuing from Thackeray as inveterate wag and comic satirist. Yet if this crew of demonic characters might more appropriately grace the pages of *Punch*, they are key to an important Thackeray conceit: the belief that reality’s visible manifest is shadowed by invisible presences, unrealized possibilities that it would be perilous to ignore. The normalization or domestication of these unpredictable demons makes possible the precariously realist fiction of later years. Indeed Thackeray’s lengthier and more serious productions are typically reliant on the defter and more light-hearted understructure that these sketches lay out.21

“A Caution to Travellers” sketches the story of a bagman in the “horrible gambling dens” of Paris, who pretends to be a Captain, falls for a Baroness, and loses money by playing and drinking.22 The tale becomes, under Thackeray’s irony, a two-way critique of class-crossing imposture. The advice (voiced by a generalized Major British) is that bagmen should not be gambling and posturing: “tradesmen, sir, have no business with the amusements of the gentry”—and neither do the gentry.23 The lesson takes more poignant form in “A Gambler’s Death,” based

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21 On the sketch as a key category for Thackeray see Carey, *Prodigal Genius* 34–57, Byerly, *Realism* 62, and “Effortless Art.” On the (positive) qualities of spontaneity, improvisation, and carelessness in the writing process, see generally Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work.*

22 *The Paris Sketch Book* (OxT 2.14)

23 OxT 2.30.
on Thackeray’s experience but so often reworked that it softens the line between fact and fiction.\textsuperscript{24} Indeed, it is because its protagonist Jack Attwood (a schoolfellow who later joins the military) is recalled as a teller of tales “so monstrously improbable that the smallest boy in the school would scout at them” that this sketch seems to generate its own fictional logic.\textsuperscript{25} When found “tripping in facts,” Jack “unblushingly […] admitted his little errors in the score of veracity,” but later in Paris the mentality expressed here—that truth is a wager, a matter of keeping score—takes an unfortunate turn.\textsuperscript{26} Jack mentions “an infallible plan for breaking all the play-banks in Europe” and borrows £5 off Titmarsh (Thackeray’s longest-lasting alter ego), on this occasion returning after a run of luck, on a later committing suicide in a plague of debt.\textsuperscript{27}

The sheer pervasiveness of gambling in Thackeray’s work may explain why so little criticism has taken it into account.\textsuperscript{28} Yet these early instances suggest a pattern that is only solidified from \textit{The Luck of Barry Lyndon} (in its original serial title, 1844) to \textit{Vanity Fair} and beyond, a pattern in which the narrativity of gambling takes priority over, and gives shape to its kindred topics, from the economics of nationalist and imperialist ventures to the exchangeability


\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Paris Sketch Book} (\textit{OxT} 2.116).

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{OxT} 2.116.

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{OxT} 2.118.

\textsuperscript{28} Indeed, his mentions of gambling are so varied that a contemporary work on the mathematics of games takes an epigraph for most of its chapters from Thackeray, on such topics as expectation, house advantage, betting systems, card theory, martingales, and a selection of chance games (Ethier, \textit{Doctrine of Chances}, e.g., 275–77).
of objects (including the textual commodity that Thackeray is so conscious of peddling).\footnote{For these views see Rosdeitcher, who offers a reading of \textit{Barry Lyndon} and gambling ("Empires at Stake" 411–17); Miller, \textit{Novels Behind Glass} 31–40, 46–9; Flavin, \textit{Gambling} 108–11.} One less familiar instance in \textit{The Kickleburys on the Rhine}, a Christmas book of 1850, is instructive as a continuation of this earlier mode given that its scenes allude to those in \textit{Vanity Fair} and its characters (renamed) will anchor the plot of \textit{Lovel the Widower}. 
The scene is Lenoir’s casino in the town of Rougetnoirbourg (probably Homburg), a “queer, fantastic, melancholy place” where “strange fortunes” occur (Figure 1).\textsuperscript{30} Thackeray sketches in the usual array of characters that recur in the casinos of Eliot and Hardy, the winners with “the most anxious faces,” the “poor shabby fellows who have got systems,” and the solitary person (here a Russian Count) who displays high emotion, “not for losing money, but for neglecting to win and play upon a \textit{coup de vingt}, a series in which the red was turned up twenty times running; which series had he but played, it is clear that he might have broken M. Lenoir’s

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{OxT} 10.290.
bank, and shut up the gambling house.” Thwarted possibility makes for narrative continuity, a fact writ large in the account of the historical Belgian operation calling themselves the “Contrebanque” who once descended on the town to challenge the bank with their “infallible system,” in an epic battle that could be seen to allegorize the century’s earlier European wars as a tale of two banks.

Narrative possibilities in the casino present themselves on various scales but also compete with other worlds of possibility and pleasure. Hence Titmarsh offers the consolation that “until I had lost […] I was so feverish, excited, and uneasy, that I had neither delection in reading the most exciting French novels, nor pleasure in seeing pretty landscapes, nor appetite for dinner.” One young Russian participant manages to multitask his pleasures, “a little imp […] who pulled bonbons out of one pocket and napoleons out of the other, and seemed to have quite a diabolical luck at the table.” He provides the plot impetus by which Lady Kicklebury is gradually drawn into play through fascination, until her luck operates against his: “When she played against him, his luck turned; and he began straightway to win.” She loses everything and has to be shipped back by her chagrined family: so ends this story, which Lovel the Widower will years later take up.

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31 OxT 10.273.

32 OxT 10.274; see generally OxT 10.273–6. The “Contrebanque” was instigated by the French novelist Édouard Suau de Varennes, using the martingale system of increasing bets known as the Belgian progression. See Ethier, Doctrine of Chances 310–11, 316 and “Thackeray and the Belgian Progression.” For a discussion of Suau, the “Contrebanque” episode, and his later novel La Roulette (1843), see Kavanagh, “Roulette and the Ancien Régime of Gambling.”

33 OxT 10.279.

34 OxT 10.295.

35 OxT 10.296.
In Thackeray’s second mode, the Faustian bargain, yet wider extremes of contingency (swings of fortune) and necessity (death sentences) announce the powers of fictionality. Several instances confirm that Thackeray’s Romantic idealist vision of art as expressed in *The Newcomes*—revealing splendors that are unseen by others, the “hidden spirits of Beauty”—is from the outset ghosted by a darker vision, from the very early “The Devil’s Wager” to *The Rose and the Ring* (1855), a grotesque pantomime that would rival anything by the Brothers Grimm.36

In “The Devil’s Wager,” we are introduced to Mercurius, a demonic messenger, who chauffeurs the condemned soul of Sir Roger de Rollo as he wonders whether his living family will utter the prayers that might allow him to escape hell.37 “Aves with them are rarae aves” quips Mercurius, and so they lay a wager on whether anyone will comply.38 They visit a number of family members who do not, but Roger is able to trick his brother Ignatius (a prior who also turns out to be bonded to the devil) into saying an *ave*, thereby freeing himself and condemning the latter to hell.39

Thackeray recasts this tale in a more elaborate story that appears in the same volume, entitled “The Painter’s Bargain.”40 The wife of a painter, Simon Gambouge, pawns their

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36 *The Newcomes* 112, on the youthful talents of J. J. Ridley. On this vision of art and Thackeray’s art criticism see Canham, “Art and the Illustrations” 50–2, and Fasick, “Thackeray’s Treatment of Writing and Painting” 73–8, contrasting the idealization in *The Newcomes* with Thackeray’s broader skepticism about the morality of writing.

37 The tale was first published in *The National Standard*, August 10 and 24, 1833, and later in *The Paris Sketch Book*. Thackeray may be mocking the historical Sir Roger de Coverley, mentioned in “A Box of Novels” (*OxT* 6.413).

38 *OxT* 2.214.

39 *OxT* 2.221–3.

40 The tale first appeared in *Fraser’s Magazine*, December 1838, and later in *The Paris Sketch Book*. 

possessions, takes to drinking, and becomes debased and bitter. While working, he falls into a
reverie and imagines a way out. Invoking the devil’s help, Simon is confronted by a creature
named Diabolus who emerges from a tube of crimson lake and addresses him:

I ask the easiest interest in the world; old Mordecai, the usurer, has made you pay twice
as heavily before now: nothing but the signature of a bond, which is a mere ceremony,
and the transfer of an article which, in itself, is a supposition—a valueless, windy,
uncertain property of yours, called, by some poet of your own, I think, an animula,
vagula, blandula; bah! there is no use beating about the bush—I mean a soul.41

He makes a deal whereby the devil will furnish any desire for seven years—natural desires
invisibly, those “out of the course of nature” by appearing in person—in exchange for his soul.42
Simon requests a meal, steals and sells the silver plate on which it is served, and takes his
proceeds to a gambling-house, wishing for “half the money that is now on the table upstairs.”43
He places five napoleons on double zero:

It is a dangerous spot, that 0 0, or double zero; but to Simon it was more lucky than to the
rest of the world. The ball went spinning round—in ‘its predestined circle rolled,’ as
Shelley has it, after Goethe—and plumped down at last in the double zero. […] ‘Oh
Diabolus!’ cried he, ‘now it is that I begin to believe in thee! Don’t talk about merit,” he
cried; ‘talk about fortune. Tell me not about heroes for the future—tell me of zeroes.’44

That the satisfaction of this wish does not count as unnatural (Diabolus does not appear) marks
the beginning of Thackeray’s naturalization of this demonic mode in the service of realist
narrative. In this story of intensified fortune, the painter becomes a “capitalist” and hence an
“altered man,” then repents and turns “abundantly moral,” but is still vexed by his wife’s

41 OxT 2.65.
42 OxT 2.66
43 OxT 2.68.
44 OxT 2.68
behavior.\footnote{OxT 2.69, 70.} He turns the wager back to Diabolus, challenging him to live with his wife for the remaining six months, an idea so frightful that the devil dissolves the contract—and Simon awakes from the reverie, having squeezed crimson lake over himself.\footnote{OxT 2.77.} It is as though, having dispensed with the world of dreams and demons, wagers and wild speculations, Thackeray the artist is now ready to paint.

These elements are more subdued in the work that \textit{Vanity Fair} inaugurates, but their continuing vitality can be seen in a three-part story that forms one of the \textit{Roundabout Papers}. “The Notch on the Axe” opens on a discussion of Milton’s “Millions of spiritual creatures walk the earth, / Unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep.”\footnote{“Notch I” 508, quoting \textit{Paradise Lost} IV.680–4.} After stressing that “the Unseen Ones are round about us” in all manner of representations (writing, painting), the story proves its own conceit by morphing into a fantastical tale about a being named Pinto, part Mephistopheles, part Bluebeard, who accompanies the narrator on several adventures.\footnote{“Notch I” 508. Dawson connects the story to spiritualism and the contemporaneous \textit{séance} fad that Thackeray ushered into the \textit{Cornhill} both as editor and in the \textit{Roundabout Papers} (“Stranger than Fiction” 232–5).} On a visit to a curiosity shop where they see a guillotine, Pinto’s alliance with the author of fictions is confirmed as he conjures “a ghost—an \textit{eidolon}—a form—\textbf{A HEADLESS MAN} seated, with his head in his lap, which wore and expression of piteous surprise.”\footnote{“Notch I” 512.} Late in his career Thackeray still relies on the
energy and uncertainty of the mode that begins with “The Devil’s Wager”: “Is life a dream? Are
dreams facts? Is sleeping being really awake?”

If the novelist’s duty is to ponder, reflect on, and give convincing shape to such
presences, it may also be his curse to wonder whether these are phantoms of madness,
confusions of actual and invented worlds. This belief is well documented in another of the
Roundabout Papers (“De Finibus”: of ends, endings) where Thackeray notes that “Madmen […]
see visions, hold conversations with, even draw the likeness of, people invisible to you and me.
Is this making people out of fancy madness? and are novel-writers at all entitled to strait-
waistcoats?” The belief that fictional characters can acquire the same status as historical actors
becomes in extremis a confusion of powers and orders of experience. Thackeray reflects on what
he terms the “afflatted style” where the author appears as oracular vehicle or diviner:

I have been surprised at the observations made by some of my characters. It seems as if
an occult Power was moving the pen. The personage does or says something, and I ask,
how the Dickens did he come to think of that? Every man has remarked, in dreams, the
vast dramatic power which is sometimes evinced […] But those strange characters you
meet make instant observations of which you never can have thought previously. In like
manner, the imagination foretells things. […] They used to call the good Sir Walter the
‘Wizard of the North.’ What if some writer should appear who can write so enchantingly
that he shall be able to call into actual life the people whom he invents? What if Mignon,
and Margaret, and Goetz von Berlichingen are alive now (though I don’t say they are
visible), and Dugald Dalgetty and Ivanhoe were to step in at that open window by the
little garden yonder? Suppose Uncas and our noble old Leather Stocking were to glide
silent in? Suppose Athos, Porthos, and Aramis should enter with a noiseless swagger,
curling their mustachios? […] I say to you, I look rather wistfully towards the window,
musing upon these people.

50 “Notch I” 511. Other instances of the demonic include “Bluebeard’s Ghost” (OxT 6)
51 “De Finibus” 283.
52 “De Finibus” 287.
53 “De Finibus” 288.
What begins as a reflection on possibility—along with a joke about authorial control: Dickens is prolific enough to write your novel, too!—becomes an incantatory desire for “these people,” as Thackeray at once cannot believe his eyes and hopes that what the mind’s eye saw were true.54

Variations on both forms of possibility—material risk-taking and virtual speculation, real sketches and unreal imaginings—preoccupy Thackeray throughout his career.55 Moments that invoke spirits, dreams, and demons occur from the 1840s to the 1860s, where the *Roundabout Papers* in particular feature the ghosts of novelists past. Narratives that occasionally rely on such fantastical elements also double as gambling exploits, as in *The Great Hoggarty Diamond* (1841) with its magical ring motivating the otherwise ordinary ups and downs of an insurance company, and *The Diary of Jeames de la Pluche, Esq.* (1845), its protagonist making his railroad fortune then losing it to end up managing a public-house called the “Wheel of Fortune.”56 Creating the sense that fictions have the status of facts in that they *could* happen, Thackeray’s techniques of visualization and imagination find generic acceptability for such wild fancies in the form of Faustian narrative. He thus generates a praxis of fictional representation that confers vivacity on characters—writing about demons and devils is only a mawkish way of describing any creature

54 Ferris emphasizes this essay’s chaotic structure and fact/fiction blur, showing how Thackeray “invokes and inverts realist analogies [and so] destroys the stability of analogical direction,” “contaminates history with fiction […] to open up categories, to question distinctions, to […] remain in process” (“Realism and the Discord of Ending” 302); see generally 300–2.

55 Harden writes of the “continuous nature” of Thackeray’s project (*Thackeray the Writer* 127). In both *Thackeray the Writer* and *The Emergence of Thackeray’s Serial Fiction*, Harden examines the early work as an adumbration of the later satirist.

56 In a related sense, it is of interest that “Spec” is the name of the correspondent narrator of *Sketches and Travels in London* (*OxT* 8, serialized in *Punch*, 1847–50). When later narratives turn on reversals of fortune this early mode is recalled: in *The Adventures of Philip* an incredible restitution of fortune occurs by means of a will discovered in a carriage—or “FAIRY CHARIOT”—accident (515).
of imagination—and establishes wagering as thematic premise that joins this early fantastical mode of fairy-tale and romance to the more abstract speculations on fortune.

**Thinking Up and Down: Counterfactuals in *Vanity Fair***

*What queer speculations the ‘might have beens’ are!*"\(^{57}\)

—Thackeray, letter to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth

In this section I turn from fictional possibility to the related mode of uncertain thinking we now call “counterfactual”—from the “have been” to the “might have been.” Where Thackeray’s earlier forays into (and reflections on) fictionality worried the boundary between actual and imagined worlds, the writing of *Vanity Fair* generates a counterfactual imaginary that establishes a brighter line between narratives on the edge and their broadly realist center. With growing sophistication, Thackeray digresses to register (and reflect on the status of) alternatives surrounding action, and to dwell on the returns of memory as a way to charge the present with possibility. *Vanity Fair* operates as a way-stage in his fictional development, balancing thoughts about what might happen against what might have been, open-ended futures against historical record, predictive and speculative modes against nostalgia and remorse.

In famously siding with history’s “non-combatants” (293) and focusing on what war chroniclers omit, the novel’s attention to domestic minutiae can be seen to give shape to the world that history obstructs from view."\(^{58}\) Yet the counterfactual mode into which *Vanity Fair* slides is built on historical thinking. The novel is parasitic on the characteristic reflexes of historical writing even as it enlivens such notional “might have beens” with a fuller affective and

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58 The same phrasing occurs in an earlier review of Lever (*MC* 74) and in *The Four Georges*, where Thackeray would prefer to be “with the mob in the crowd, not with the great folks in the procession” (“The Four Georges. I.—George the First” 17).
tonal register than history supplies. After outlining work on counterfactuals in their historical and psychological significance, I consider their shifting narrative role in *Vanity Fair* and track the novel’s growing bifurcation between speculative and remorseful orientations. I conclude by reflecting on the connections among the poised uncertainty of this novel, its manipulation of expectation and retrospect in serial reading, and a paradigmatic modern instance of disquiet about factual information.

The relationship between literary imagination and counterfactual thinking has found renewed interest in the work of Catherine Gallagher and Andrew Miller, who have examined various categories that play off and enrich fictional representation proper, and realism in particular.\(^{59}\) Gallagher surveys the function of historical reference in diverse genres of writing—her example is the signifier “Napoleon”—and claims a “commonality of referent” across historical, fictional, and counterfactual deployments.\(^{60}\) The object of this investigation is the type of counterfactual writing that generates “alternate histories.” Gallagher’s assertion of the difference between such counter-histories and “normal fictions” affords a reflection on fictional hypothesis.\(^{61}\) In the case of novelistic characters, she argues in pragmatic vein, “we do not take the information we get as a continuous and systematic set of counterfactual hypothetical conjectures”: if realist novels “tend to dwell on the unactualized possibilities in a character’s

\(^{59}\) Much important work on this topic in Russian literature was undertaken in Morson’s tremendous *Narrative and Freedom* (not cited in recent discussions). Other important work includes Dannenberg’s narratological study, *Coincidence and Counterfactuality*. Dannenberg comments on a moment in *Vanity Fair* that reverses antecedent and consequent: “O Vanity Fair, Vanity Fair!—this might have been but for you a cheery lass” (86, quoted in *Coincidence and Counterfactuality* 124).

\(^{60}\) “What Would Napoleon Do?” 316.

history,” these remain within the “specified traits” given in the text.\textsuperscript{62} Miller picks up on these unactualized strata, focusing on the modes of cognitive and affective operation that earn the label “optative”: thoughts or emotions that stress the contingency of present arrangements as always enironed by the counterfactual and the unrealized.\textsuperscript{63} He deftly shows how such experiences of “lives unled”—in which the self appears as doubled: “at once unique and typical,” “self-present and contingent”—are vital to realist representation.\textsuperscript{64}

These discussions shift attention away from the technical character of counterfactuals in philosophy (whence the concept originates) and its focus on modal logic and semantics.\textsuperscript{65} Departing too from the metaphysical work of “possible worlds” theory—and related musings on the ontological status of fiction—they return us to familiar terrain and ordinary thought processes.\textsuperscript{66} In some respects Thackeray fits straightforwardly into these rubrics. He is plainly intrigued by the chief protagonist in alternate histories (Napoleon crops up routinely in \textit{The Paris Sketch Book}), and familiar with one entry in this vein, Richard Whately’s satirical \textit{Historic

\textsuperscript{62} “What Would Napoleon Do?” 330.

\textsuperscript{63} The “optative” concept Miller borrows from the philosopher Stuart Hampshire. See “Lives Unled in Victorian Fiction” 120–1; “‘A Case of Metaphysics’” 774–5, 778–80; and “For All You Know.”

\textsuperscript{64} “‘A Case of Metaphysics’” 778, 784; see 781–4 for discussion, and “Lives Unled” 122.

\textsuperscript{65} Classic discussions include Nelson Goodman, \textit{Fact, Fiction, and Forecast} and David Lewis, \textit{Counterfactuals}.

\textsuperscript{66} Gallagher dismisses Lubomír Doležel’s arguments for the “uniform fictionality of characters in novels” that would assert a different between the “historical Somebody” and “fictional Nobody,” and doubts the utility of possible-worlds semantics in analyzing fictionality (“What Would Napoleon Do?” 318, 319, 331–4). Possible worlds theory naturally includes counterfactual claims, but often in aid of more fully furnished worlds. Consider Pavel, \textit{Fictional Worlds} 35–6, 86–8; Doležel, \textit{Possible Worlds of Fiction and History} 101–26 and briefer comments in \textit{Heterocosmica} 14, 56; and Ryan, \textit{Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory} 48–61, who outlines a useful “principle of minimal departure” in thinking about the imagined distance between possible worlds and actuality.
Doubts Relative to Napoleon Bonaparte (1819). After the statements defending the reality of fictional characters I cited earlier, Thackeray notes that “we are inclined to believe in them both as historical personages, and to canvass gravely the circumstances of their lives.” “Why should we not?” he goes on: “Have we not their portraits? Are they not sufficient proofs? If not, we must discredit Napoleon (as Archbishop Whately teaches), for about his figure and himself we have no more authentic testimony.”

Similarly the particulars of Thackeray’s life—persistent professional anxiety, a suspended marriage, an infant lost—make him a case study in what Miller sees as the optative’s locations in social and career mobility, marriage and its others, and the death of children. Yet Thackeray’s counterfactual mode is materialized in a reflex more diminutive and insistent in recurrence than the large-scale experiments of the alternate history or the life unled. Thackeray’s fictionality is precarious, his counterfactuals erratic and often baffling, distinct from the bold visions of possible lives in Dickens and the sophisticated, even overwrought alternatives on offer in Eliot or James. Participating in optative or virtual modes, Thackeray’s writing is less sure of unfettering itself from historical fact, less confident than realist fiction that “tests its own

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67 Whately’s short tract is not strictly an alternate history, but it mines the counterfactual vein in order to claim that Napoleon’s exploits are more improbable than the miracles of Christ, and so to legitimate events recorded in scripture.

68 “Caricatures and Lithography,” in The Paris Sketch Book (OxT 2.184).


70 These authors are key to Miller’s accounts in “Lives Unled” and “‘A Case of Metaphysics.’” Compare Farina’s discussion of the related “as if” gesture in Dickens, which “conceptualize[s] reality itself as virtual, as the abstract depth of a character,” where by contrast Thackeray’s “grammar of virtual reality” is “diffuse” (“Analogy and Victorian Virtual Reality” 433, 434).
“Lives Unled” 122.

For theoretical discussions see Ferguson’s Virtual History 1–90 (limiting counterfactual history to “only those alternatives which we can show on the basis of contemporary evidence that contemporaries actually considered” [86, emphases deleted]); Bunzl, “Counterfactual History: A User’s Guide”; and Mordhorst, “From Counterfactual History to Counternarrative History.” For samples of such historical writing see Ferguson, Virtual History and Macintyre and Scalmer, What If?

73 See Chang, Is Water $\text{H}_2\text{O}$? 62–5; Radick, “Introduction: Why What If?” 458–9. Chang’s is the more radical among these approaches: his program of “complementary science” attempts to intervene in the history of science by concretely exploring untaken paths, failed theories, and experiments. See also Bowler’s meditation on a history of biology without Darwin’s contribution (Darwin Deleted).

74 Chang, Is Water $\text{H}_2\text{O}$? 62; Change is summarizing Hawthorn’s discussion in Plausible Worlds 1–37, itself an excellent reflection on the explanatory power of counterfactuals in the social sciences. Miller mentions the link between causality and counterfactuals in “‘A Case of Metaphysics’” 773–4.
past circumstances might have differed. They are unsettling in a more radical sense, distressing
the threads of causation that grow from prior conditions into the fabric of later states.

Thackeray’s investment in fictional worlds trucks with this approach to history
reimagined from a distinct turning point, as evidenced by the titles of his own historical musings,
such as *The Second Funeral of Napoleon*, “The History of the Next French Revolution,” and “A
Hundred Years Hence” (a title drawn from Gibbon).^75^ The more local Thackerayan gesture of
briefly adjusting historical actors and events is a frequent move in the historical writing he
admired, including Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume’s essays and *The
History of England*, its continuation in Tobias Smollett’s *A Complete History of England*, and
Thomas Macaulay’s vivid and magisterial *History of England*.^76^ In so many of these works the
counterfactual tic covers an affective range—from urbane irony to plaintive melancholy—that is
typical in Thackeray’s approach.^77^

More striking, however, is his turn from the life unled to the work unwritten. This genre
of hypothesis muses on the reality of inexistent writings and returns to contingency those
productions that have seen the light of day. Macaulay gives shape to the idea in an essay on John
Dryden, which turns to the conditioning of noted intellects by their social milieux: “We extol

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^75^ Gibbon, *Memoirs of My Life* 171. The phrase also occurs in “On Some French
Fashionable Novels” (*OxT* 2.98).

^76^ Thackeray owned sets, often complete, of all these works (see *Catalogue*). He penned a
brief, laudatory review of Macaulay’s *Critical and Historical Essays* (1843), “narratives not less
exciting than the best fictions of the novelist” (*OxT* 6.315), and of Burton’s *Life and
Correspondence of David Hume* in 1846 (*MC* 113–18). Sutherland discusses the similarities
between Thackeray’s method and Macaulay’s (*Thackeray at Work* 130–2), and Ray notes his
reading of histories generally (*Uses* 119).

^77^ Gibbon’s writing offers the best versions of the dry counterfactual. He comments on
medieval Syracuse besieged by Arabs that the “place might have been relieved, if the mariners of
the Imperial fleet had not been detained at Constantinople in building a church to the Virgin
Mary” (*Decline and Fall*, quoted in Clive, *Not by Fact Alone* 60).
Bacon, and sneer at Aquinas. But, if their situations had been changed, Bacon might have been
the Angelical Doctor, the most subtle Aristotelian of the schools; the Dominican might have led
forth the sciences from their house of bondage.”

Warming up to his theme with similar reflections on Luther, Voltaire, and Pascal, Macaulay muses on what would have been Dryden’s reputation had he died mid-career and concludes by reflecting on “those [works] which he might possibly have written.” Ever conscious of being not-Dickens, Thackeray’s work is recurrently haunted by this problem, visible in the continued rewriting of narratives under the same narrator, the cross-population of his fictions with duplicate or quasi-identical characters, and the interest in prequels and sequels to his own and others’ fiction (witness his proposal and brief execution of a “continuation” of Scott’s *Ivanhoe*). These larger explorations of fictional paths untaken are matched within his writings by shorter glimpses of historical and characterological “might have beens.”

If historical thought experiments compass the wider field of event and outcome, psychological interest in counterfactuals considers their smaller-scale cognitive and affective ramifications. Research since Kahneman and Miller’s “norm theory”—which hypothesized that

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78 “John Dryden” 184 (originally in the *Edinburgh Review*, January 1828).

79 “John Dryden” 221–2, 231. Clive discusses Macaulay’s vivid imagination as key to his factual exactitude in *Not by Fact Alone* 66–73. In respect of this shared technique Macaulay is surely unfair on Thackeray as historian, remarking of his lecture on Steele, “the truth is that Thackeray knows little of those times, & his audience generally less” (quoted in Millgate, “History versus Fiction” 48n9). Barnaby uses the same anecdote to discuss Thackeray’s lectures as marketing history for entertainment even as they share with his novels the critique of historiography (“Thackeray as Metahistorian” 50–2).

80 See “Proposals for a Continuation of *Ivanhoe*” (originally in *Fraser’s Magazine*, August and September 1846) and *Rebecca and Rowena: Or, Romance Upon Romance* (1849) (both in *OxT* 10.459–572). Not insignificantly, the “proposal” is aired as a letter to Alexandre Dumas, yet another individual who penned a work on *Napoléon Bonaparte* (a six-act drama) (1831).
psychological norms could be seen as retrospective constructs rather than preset schemata—has usefully explored and taxonomized such reflexes. Studies have probed the affective direction of counterfactuals (classified as downward, upward, or neutral: whether things might have been better, worse, or unchanged) and the difference between simulations that take the form of adding to, and subtracting from, reality. This work sharpens our sense of how counterfactuals participate in causal thinking, aid in the construction of meaning and the perception of benefits, and generate scripts for (adjusted) actions in the future. Above all they announce counterfactuals as linked to (perhaps constitutive of) affective responses like disappointment and surprise, regret and relief. Contrary to expectation, engaging counterfactuals can manipulate

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81 “Norm Theory: Comparing Reality to its Alternatives.” Much recent research is summarized in Byrne, *The Rational Imagination*.


our sense of likelihood: we may ascribe a higher probability to events that almost happened but did not (“close-call” counterfactuals), or recognize the improbability of events that occurred.\textsuperscript{85} What is often described as the “mental undoing” of past events can, ironically, ossify present outcomes as fated and minimize our sense of contingency.\textsuperscript{86}

Had such researchers set up stall in Trinity College’s Great Court in the 1830s, Thackeray would have been first in the queue. His letters and diaries offer examples that follow the terms of modern studies, as in this neat instance of examination regret, where an upward counterfactual is felt as affectively adverse but positive in terms of future intentions. “[H]ad I not lost this fortnight,” he wrote to his mother, “I might have held a better place—but it must pass—next year my name will I trust stand a hundred places higher than it does this.”\textsuperscript{87} Yet the densest form in which elements of thinking up and down, adding to and subtracting from the world, are brought together is in Thackeray’s notorious predilection for gambling:

I mentioned that I had been to Frascati’s—but for what went I? to gain? No—It was a sight [which] I perhaps might never have another opportunity of seeing, […] it has shewn me that I could not, (as few could) resist the temptation of gambling, & it therefore has taught me—to keep away from it—The same motive which would have led me to a Theatre led me to Frascati’s—I was obliged if I went to stake my ten francs at the table

\textsuperscript{85} Teigen, “When the Unreal is More Likely than the Real” and “The Proximity Heuristic of Accident Probabilities”; Kray et al., “From What Might Have Been to What Must Have Been.”

\textsuperscript{86} Kray et al., “From What Might Have Been to What Must Have Been.” This result concerns typical subjects; one intriguing study found that, among professional historians, this type of thinking heightened a sense of the past’s contingency (Tetlock and Lebow, “Poking Counterfactual Holes in Covering Laws”).

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{Letters} 1.83, to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 3 June 1829. The pattern is described in one among several studies that take success or failure in examinations as their model: Roese, “The Functional Basis of Counterfactual Thinking.”
instead of paying at the door—If I had not done so I should never have arrived at a piece of self knowledge, which I can conscientiously thank God for giving me. I might have thought […] that it was a pleasant play, into which men merely entered for amusement and gain—I should not have know that it was only for the latter. I might at another time [have] been induced to enter a gaming-house with more money than I had then in my pocket & I should have as certainly staked it—I have learnt the full extent of the evil.  

A few years later card-sharpers at Cambridge fleeced Thackeray out of 1500 pounds, a loss that (along with his soon-to-vanish inheritance) he would spend two decades writing to recoup.  

Experiences like these underwrite the conditionals of, for instance, “A Gambler’s Death,” where “except in the fact of his poverty and desperation, was [Jack Attwood] worse than any of us, his companions, who had shared his debauches and marched with him up to the very brink of the grave?” Our own counterfactual query in this regard—but for gambling and misfortune, would we have had Thackeray?—serves only to underline the primacy of this imaginative mode and its allying of fiction, wagering, and speculation.  

Three years later, days after breaking his vow not to gamble, Thackeray confided to his diary that the “excitement of metaphysics must equal almost that of gambling” as he reflected on his reading of Victor Cousin’s *Cours de philosophie*. “I found myself,” he continues, “giving utterance to a great number of fine speeches and imagining many wild theories [which] I found it impossible to express on paper,” and the diary

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89 On the failure of the Indian agency-houses that gave rise to this loss see Ray, *Uses* 162–3.  

90 *OxT* 2.124.  

91 On the themes of inheritance loss and cyclical fortune in the fiction see Miller, *Novels Behind Glass* 27–8. At the end of his life, on an MS page found in the endpapers of the incomplete novel *Denis Duval*, Thackeray ponders the primal scene of temptation and counterfact, the Fall: “No tree, no temptation, it might have been; had Wisdom not ordained otherwise” (quoted in Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work* 123).
entry jars into a report on the death of a family friend in terms that rotate counterfactual thinking in the direction of regret: “had I consented to have gone with my father to Scotland this valuable man might have been spared to his family—What very trifling events settle destinies & take away lives.”

Scales of causation from the sweep of historical event to the slight inattention that snatches a life; the spectrum of affect from rage against past wrongs to twinges of regret at former follies—these are the historical and psychological resources which Thackeray’s counterfactual thinking draws on and extends.

History motivates the main reflection on counterfactuals in *Vanity Fair*, but they take narrative shape through oblique formal and affective manifestations that set the stage. In what has been judged a clumsy excuse for the demands of serialization, Thackeray writes that, “Our history is destined in this chapter to go backwards and forwards in a very irresolute manner seemingly, and having conducted our story to to-morrow presently, we shall immediately again have occasion to step back to yesterday, so that the whole of the tale may get a hearing” (246). Loosening the plot’s temporal threads encourages reflections that shift in tense and modality, but only on a small scale. If *Vanity Fair* reveals temporal inconsistencies and anachronisms—what G. H. Lewes called its “confusion of periods”—it nevertheless does not veer wildly back and forth. Likewise Thackeray’s digression in Chapter 6 (removed in later editions) that muses on generic options—“We might have treated this subject in the genteel or in the romantic or in the facetious manner” (49)—only maintains such alternatives in the wings of realist possibility.

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93 Lewes, “[Rev. of] *Vanity Fair: A Novel Without a Hero*” 794. For an analysis of the novel’s imprecisions in chronology see Sutherland, *Thackeray at Work* 35–44.
Thackeray may prompt us to “Suppose” and “Fancy” his as a Newgate or silver fork novel (49–52) and underline “how this story might have been written, if the author had but a mind,” but the gesture retreats to moderation: “we must if you please preserve our middle course modestly amidst those scenes and personages” (52). The via media between extremes is a noted tactic of satire, and has been interpreted as Thackeray’s approach not only to realist representation charting between generic options, but also to fictional depiction navigating through different approaches to history, and to the dialectical shifting between positions characteristic of post-Romantic or pragmatist irony. The path between the Scylla and Charybdis of Thackeray’s own representational styles at once calls forth and marginalizes those narrative possibilities I discussed in the previous section. As a counterfactual reflex, it fits Thackeray’s uneasy marketplace persona and development as a writer of serial fiction. The early presentation of what is available generically (and so also in terms of narrative style, character action, or moral message) allows for later readjustment. In the nautical figure of the middle

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94 On the range of genres appealed to but refuted (including dramatic action, sentimental romance, apologue, fable, sermon, and satire) see Rawlins, Thackeray’s Novels 1–35.

95 Barnaby gives an account of the via media in a broader argument that sees Thackeray moderating between two models of historiography, subjective (Carlyle) and objective (Langlois and others of the French school) (“Thackeray as Metahistorian” 41–2, 33–4); and Fletcher accounts for Thackeray’s irony in these terms (“The Dandy and the Fogy”). Relatedly, Scarry describes Thackeray’s tendency to bridge opposite extremes at the level of sentence and concept, a “balancing act coordinating critical judgment with sympathetic participation” (“Enemy and Father” 145). McMaster describes the strategy as “making his characters lifelike” by “show[ing] them striking poses that are fiction-like” (Thackeray 32; see 31–6). On Thackeray and history see Douglas, “Thackeray and the Uses of History.”

96 My argument thus opposes Ermarth’s claim that Vanity Fair shares the providentialism of other pre-1850 novels, where “narrative sequence” is “primarily rhetorical, not historical,” and has “no open-ended possibilities, no alternative outcomes,” “no priority on […] complex causalities” (English Novel in History 4; see 17–27).

97 Thackeray’s place as a contributor, author, and editor in the cutthroat marketplace of Victorian publishing has been amply catalogued by Sutherland, Thackeray at Work, Harden, The
way, Thackeray thus imagines the shadows to the side of narrative as sirens and demons—both widely imaged in the novel’s illustrations and initial capitals—and maintains them as orienting beacons that may be glimpsed but not narrated.98

These reflections set up a scalar connection between narrative parts, causally yoking together marginal episode and foreground event. “Are there not little chapters in every body’s life,” the narrator wonders, “that seem to be nothing and yet affect all the rest of the history?” (52).99 And indeed the novel’s many diminutive episodes join larger events on a historical scale. Jos Sedley’s comic conditionality is often a source of such thoughts. His inability to propose to Becky is the novel’s condition of existence—“If he had had the courage […] this work would never have been written” (34)—and is recognized as such by other characters (52, 61). It recurs as a possibility in Brussels where he sees Becky again: “There is no knowing what declarations of love and ardour the tumultuous passions of Mr. Joseph might have led him, if Isidor the valet had not made his re-appearance at this minute” (308). The rack punch that Jos insists on at the Vauxhall party is the “cause of all this history” and “influence[d] the fates of all the principal characters in this Novel without a hero […] although most of them did not taste a drop of it”

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98 A cancelled MS passage makes clear that the narrator’s function would be to steer the narrative in this way, seeing the reader as an “unwary mariner” (83n9). Sutherland discusses its deletion, along with several others in this chapter, and the jettisoning of a “moral cartographer” role in the context of Thackeray’s provisional writing process (Thackeray at Work 25–31, 29). Fisher links the sirens to the passion-swaying painting of artists like Michelangelo and Poussin, about whom Thackeray wrote in related terms (“Aesthetic of the Mediocre” 71). Exploring the gaps noted by many, Schad argues that the novel’s approach to history is less a “Grand Tour” than a “grand detour” as though there were “a conspicuous absence to circumvent” (“Reading the Long Way Round” 25).

99 Compare Henry Esmond: “a gnat often plays a greater part than an elephant, and a mole hill […] can upset an empire” (69).
Such trivialities need not be real to prompt causal reflections. Mr. Wenham, Lord Steyne’s second for the duel threatened by Rawdon Crawley, offers sham evidence of a dinner invitation from Becky for the crucial night when her husband caught her at home with Steyne, a ruse that asserts the virtuality of events: “Here’s the note of invitation—stop—no, this is another paper—I thought I had it, but it’s of no consequence, and I pledge you my word of honour as a gentleman to the fact. If we had come […] and you had returned home, there would have been no quarrel, no insult, no suspicion” (553).

Hangovers and headaches are familiar and small-scale instances of reasoning about alternatives. They arrive at a broader horizon in the novel’s elision of history. Referring to “historians on our side,” Thackeray gives a narrative of how Napoleon “might have returned and reigned unmolested”: “Those who like to lay down the History-book, and to speculate upon what might have happened in the world, but for the fatal occurrence of what actually did take place (a most puzzling, amusing, ingenious, and profitable kind of meditation) have no doubt often thought to themselves what a specially bad time Napoleon took to come back from Elba” (277). On one level, this is a simple exercise in revisionist history for which we have no end of

100 Miller mentions this micro-causality in discussing “the paradoxical feeling […] that objects are simultaneously important and insignificant” (Novels Behind Glass 32–33).

101 Victorian reviewers saw the counterfactual point but thought it more puzzling than amusing: Rigby grumbles that the novel’s Waterloo “brings about only one death, and one bankruptcy, which might either of them have happened in a hundred other ways” (Critical Heritage 79; originally in the Quarterly Review, December 1848). Gallagher takes this moment as instancing the way that “novelistic fictions often mime counterfactualism” even though “their personae’s ontological lack persists” (“What Would Napoleon Do?” 331).
answers: what would have happened had Napoleon delayed until the brewing hostilities among European powers took their probable course, leaving the field open?102

Yet the reflection has a wider existential feel. For one thing, it allusively refutes each point of Hamlet’s soliloquy (“How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of this world”), as if Thackeray were twisting the august query about existence that occurs later in Shakespeare’s play into a conditional mode: To have been, or not to have been. While this digression opens out the resources of fiction against history, the former able to imagine what the latter is by definition precluded from recording, it nonetheless ties the novel to one particular historical nexus: “But what would have become of our story and all our friends, then? If all the drops in it were dried up, what would become of the sea?” (277). This is less a causal than a classificatory conundrum: can there be a sea without (drops of) water? Musing on how the sea forms an entity out of which we can conjure discrete drops, even if we would not typically think of it as constituted by them, we collude in a thought experiment that seems at once to unsettle and cement the congruence between narrative wholes and parts—little chapters, drops of punch, a touch of headache. Naturally the exercise only works if the locus of reflection—this metafictional passage—remains in proportion, keeps to modest splashing in the surf without venturing further out.103 If Carlyle’s problem with the writing of history was, notoriously, that

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102 Of Henry Esmond, Bonaparte suggests that Thackeray dismisses history as progressive in favor of the “subtext […] of a history manqué, history as it might have been, even as it should have been” (“Written in Invisible Ink” 148).

103 Hammond argues that the passage places the reader in a “semantic grip” between history, ironically undercut, and speculation, compromised by its commercial sense, and offers that “sea” emphasizes a changing narrative rather than fact (“Thackeray’s Waterloo” 35, 36).
“Narrative is linear, Action is solid,” Thackeray’s digression offers that narrative can be recursive, better to capture action’s fluid nature.\(^\text{104}\)

In this respect Thackeray’s counterfactual experiment colludes with the novel’s stated interest in war memorials for the ordinary and hence forgotten soldier, which he elsewhere engages in the travel sketch “Waterloo” and an unpublished fragment (probably from the 1840s) entitled “An Essay on Pumpernickel.”\(^\text{105}\) The latter’s lament for how “History chooses to forget as too trivial the persons engaged in glorious struggles” is couched in a clearly conditional mode.\(^\text{106}\) In terms that evoke Vanity Fair’s language, Thackeray asks us to imagine “if a history-book entirely beside the question—made up completely of episodes like Hamlet with the part of Hamlet omitted—could be written: it would be a good book to read in, I think, and productive of much moral cogitation.”\(^\text{107}\) In a history like this “the cause of the war might be omitted altogether,” he continues: “What I would have told would be what actuated Smith, how Brown died, what induced Coddlins to go to war [and] by the above plan [military glory] would be

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\(^{105}\) Little Roadside Travels and Sketches III, “Waterloo” (\textit{OxT} 6) (originally in Fraser’s Magazine, January 1845). On the first see Heffernan, “Lying Epitaphs” 34–7, arguing that the sketch’s unmasking of patriotism can be traced in Vanity Fair’s repeated circling back to George’s battlefield memorial. On the second as a “proposal for truthful chronicles of war” that would include “a roster of the sordid deaths of many ordinary men” see Oram, “Essay on Pumpernickel” 127, 129.

\(^{106}\) “Essay on Pumpernickel” 132; these quotes are drawn from Oram’s transcription.

\(^{107}\) “Essay on Pumpernickel” 132 (emphasis added).
represented more truly than it hitherto has been in the classical works whereof the authors hand us only the results of history, without deigning to trouble themselves with the multiplied little facts of which the results are composed.”

In its more overt engagement with thinking otherwise, then, *Vanity Fair* veers in modality, entertains hypotheses about plot and looks back to prior conditions, reflects on ways it might have been written and registers that variety in tonal oscillation, and sees the course of its events affected by alternatives small and large. In its broadest form in the plots of its two female protagonists—Becky (and the Crawley family) and Amelia (and the Sedley and Osborne families)—this movement can be glimpsed at the level of epithet. The novel insistently mines the figurative nexus of demon and angel. Wherever characters appear in Thackeray who are to be invested with some sense of possibility—primarily social—the demonic theme is not far off, but in the case of Becky Sharp the metaphor moves into overdrive. The narrator’s report of her early self-description—“‘I’m no angel’—and to say the truth she certainly was not” (10)—introduces us to this “dauntless worldling” (308), a “perfect performer” (64) who is “unsurpassable in lies” (524). Almost every character in the novel has some demonic moniker for Becky: Miss Pinkerton sets the tone, seeing her variously as a “viper” (14), “rebel,” “monster,” “serpent,” and “firebrand” who laughs “with a horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter” (15); Jos thinks her “dev’lish” (26); Rawdon remarks, as she snubs George Osborne, “She’d beat the devil, by Jove!” (148); Sir Pitt, duped into proposing to an already-married Becky, wonders in disbelief, “Who’d ha’ thought it! what a sly little devil! what a little fox it waws!” (155); and Lord Steyne marvels likewise, “What an accomplished little devil it is!” (524). The most memorable version of this

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108 “Essay on Pumpernickel” 133.

109 On Becky’s demonic character read in terms of female sexuality, as against Amelia’s domestic love, see DiBattista, “Triumph of Clytemnestra” 832–3. Fraser compares her to
figure triangulates Becky with Napoleon and Satan by recording the “greatest blasphemy Rebecca had as yet uttered” at Miss Pinkerton’s, for “in those days, in England to say ‘Long live Bonaparte,’ was as much as to say ‘Long live Lucifer’” (10). By including a fictional character in a matrix that includes a cultural emblem for infinite potentiality and multiformity (Lucifer) and a historical actor often thought about in the terms of alternative history (Napoleon), this remark establishes Becky as the site of Vanity Fair’s musing on the puzzles of fictional, historical, and counterfactual imagination.111

The “devil” is a surrogate for imaginative potential, and its opposing epithet—repeatedly attached to Amelia, “the most angelical of young women” (183)—for potential thwarted or occluded: the former is associated with vivacity, energy, and uncertainty in forward propulsion, where the latter already assumes a position after life, in melancholy retrospect. Thackeray even indulges in the fairy-tale logic more typical of his pantomimes and Christmas books to underline this distinction. Amelia’s “kind thoughts” are imagined traveling to her fiancé “as if they were angels and had wings,” yet they arrive at George’s barracks and cannot get in, “so that the poor

Milton’s Satan (“Pernicious Casuistry” 144). On the varied allegorical functions of the siren as artifice, theatricality, and marketplace lure, in contrast to domestic purity, see Fisher, “Siren and Artist.” There are several general discussions of these tropes: Jadwin, “The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in Vanity Fair”; Dobson, “‘An Insuperable Repugnance to Hearing Vice Called by Its Proper Name.’”

110 Rigby’s review also makes use of this topos, and calls Becky “a near connexion of Satan’s” (Critical Heritage 81).

little white-robed Angel could not hear the songs those young fellows were roaring over the whiskey-punch” (127). As is clear from Thackeray’s demonic images of omniscience in the early works, Becky’s thoughts would have no such problem.112 Indeed, as a “superior bad angel” (455) she is able to mimic other forms. Becky’s sham confession to Jos suffices for the inference “that if ever there was a white-robed angel escaped from heaven to be subject to the infernal machinations and villainy of fiends here below, that spotless being—that miserable unsullied martyr—was present on the bed before Jos” (655), the repeated descriptions driving the irony home.

The narrative effect of this figurative register is that, in Becky’s plot, thinking otherwise is routinely directed towards potentiality. The aptly named Miss Sharp is ever predicting, speculating, moving forward and upward, and her few reflections on paths untaken typically assess causes only in service of refining future plans. The thought experiments described above could even be said to emerge as a control on the exigencies of Becky’s plot. An early counterfactual episode clarifies the origins and obliquities of this narrative mode. When Becky refuses Sir Pitt Crawley’s proposal of marriage on account of being already married to his younger son Rawdon, the baronet’s sister Miss Crawley muses on how Becky “would have made a good Lady Crawley, after all, […] and she would have held her own amongst those pompous stupid Hampshire people much better than that unfortunate ironmonger’s daughter [the second Lady Crawley, Rose Dawson]” (156). She engages in “conjectures” (156) about these events with the busybody Miss Briggs, who tries “to console [Becky] and prattle about the offer, and the refusal, and the cause thereof” (157). The narrative then focalizes Becky’s thoughts:

112 Paris discusses the paradoxes whereby Becky appears as a likeable monster, “chief representative of the antagonistic value system, but a protagonist in much of the action” (“Psychic Structure” 398).
And now she was left alone to think over the sudden and wonderful events of the day, and of what had been and what might have been. What think you were the private feelings of Miss, no, (begging her pardon) of Mrs. Rebecca? If, a few pages back, the present writer claimed the privilege of peeping into Miss Amelia Sedley’s bed-room, and understanding with the omniscience of the novelist all the gentle pains and passions which were tossing upon that innocent pillow, why should he not declare himself to be Rebecca’s confidante too, master of her secrets, and seal-keeper of that young woman’s conscience? (158).

It’s an oddly anxious assertion of omniscience: if the present writer knew everything about $X$, why indeed would he not know about $Y$? The narrator expresses sympathy with the “regrets” and “disappointment” probably felt by Becky at her necessary refusal of “marvellous good fortune” (158), but does not yet answer his own question by peering into her mind. Rather, the narrator proceeds to a reflexive assessment of the reader’s mental state: regret is the “natural emotion every properly regulated mind will certainly share” (is it not?); dejection “deserves and will command every sympathy” (will it not?) (158). Attempting at once to solidify these claims and establish referential stability on a par with Becky’s character, the narrator suddenly intrudes into the scene. “I remember one night being in the Fair myself,” he muses, and reflects on a similar lost opportunity as the “cause” of “obsequiousness” shown by one frequenter of Vanity Fair to another (158). A juxtaposition of alternatives—the “mere chance of becoming a baronet’s daughter” and having “lost the opportunity” of the same—brings us back, finally, to Becky’s similar thought process, as though only by inference and personal reminiscence could narrative direction be recaptured.\(^{113}\)

This detour, seeming to set narrator and character against one another in ontological combat, could be an emblem of how the resources of counterfactual thinking are divided in

\(^{113}\) This process thus extends what Garrett-Goodyear describes as the process whereby Thackeray “often composes his characters from stereotypes” then represents them “with surprising expressive intensity and in ways which suggest the force of profound emotional compulsions in determining their actions” (“Stylized Emotions, Unrealized Selves” 174).
**Vanity Fair.** Becky’s plot jettisons thinking otherwise about the past in favor of present possibilities, and the narrator’s opposing interests in Amelia’s plot, laden as it is with retrospect and remorse, only exists through the energy of Becky’s forward movement. We have a capsule version of this tension in the narrator’s defense of the appropriately “very sincere and touching regrets” (158) as an affective response that collides with Becky’s circumscription of such thinking:

> Who would have dreamed of Lady Crawley dying so soon? She was one of those sickly women that might have lasted these ten years—Rebecca thought to herself, in all the woes of repentance—and I might have been her lady! I might have led that old man whither I would. I might have thanked Mrs. Bute for her patronage, and Mr. Pitt for his insufferable condescension. I would have had the town-house newly furnished and decorated. I would have had the handsomest carriage in London, and a box at the Opera; and I would have been presented next season. All this might have been; but now—now all was doubt and mystery.

> But Rebecca was a young lady of too much resolution and energy of character to permit herself much useless and unseemly sorrow for the irrevocable past; so, having devoted only the proper portion of regret to it, she wisely turned her whole attention towards the future, which was now vastly more important to her. And she surveyed her position, and its hopes, doubts, and chances [...] (158–9)

It has been said that an agent adopting a “rational plan” of life would not experience regret. A similar logic is at work here—in the thought that regret befits the “properly regulated mind” but only in a “proper portion”—and it has narrative repercussions. Counterfactual thinking, in this sense, befits properly regulated narrative only in a measure that keeps attention trained

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115 Thackeray may be drawing on an eighteenth-century text that he owned in an 1824 update, Isaac Watts’ *Logic; or, the Right Use of Reason*, which indeed aims “to lay a foundation for those rules which may guide and regulate our conceptions of things” (75); on Watts and Thackeray see Colby, *Thackeray’s Canvass of Humanity* 17–22. Elsewhere in *Vanity Fair* the narrator worries that Amelia “had not a well regulated mind” (122), and the sentiment is repeated by George’s sister, Miss Osbourne, in commenting on how she will have to accept the veto against marrying George (225). The narrator also mocks, by contrast, the judgment of society women like Lady Bareacres, Lady Tufto, and Mrs. Bute Crawley that Becky is an “extremely ill-regulated personage” (473). A “well-constituted mind” (501) is seen as naturally liking vanity.
forward—to “hopes, doubts, and chances”; in the serial phrase that Thackeray likes to mock, “to our next.”

Events may be subjected to such mental manipulation but only in service of a renewed course of action. Whatever might have obtained otherwise, Becky’s marriage is thus “a great fact,” and pondering how to break the news to Miss Crawley, she turns from potentiality to necessity: “At all events, what use was there in delaying? the die was thrown, and now or tomorrow the issue must be the same” (159). The process and its moral is repeated in the letter Becky pens to Rawdon, which follows the same pattern of alternatives entertained and certainty restored: “need we fear anything beyond a momentary anger? I think not: I am sure not. […] something tells me we shall conquer” (159, 160; emphases in original).

This sequence belies the narrator’s claim to omniscience, briefly dislodging him as the “master of […] secrets” in respect of Becky and even of those whose psyches have otherwise been open: even of Amelia he will later ask “how do we know what her thoughts were?” (282). This bounded omniscience has a visual correlative in the initial capital to the Chapter I have been discussing, where a devil or imp is framed in voyeuristic surveillance of a weeping figure by formal exclusion from the world enclosed by the curved letter (Figure 2).

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116 For instance, Letters 2.633, to John Douglas Cook, 8 January 1850.

117 That this early sections plays a genetic role in the novel’s composition is confirmed by the disappearance of epistolary elements in later parts. Sutherland suggests that this is because Thackeray had to “oust [Becky] altogether as a narrator” (Thackeray at Work 32–3), and that her “co-authorial relationship” had to be revised to produce “a more sophisticated telling and a broader frame of reference” (“The Expanding Narrative of Vanity Fair” 152, 154).

118 It seems stranger than the general pattern whereby Thackeray “frequently moves toward an act of psychological exploration […] only to invite us to witness how quickly he then moves away from it” in a “ facetious leap back to […] social surface” (Scarry, “Enemy and Father” 153). For a related criticism of the view (Geoffrey Tillotson’s) that Thackeray’s narrator is a “historian,” aiming at “truth,” or properly “omniscient,” see Wilkinson, “The Tomeavesian Way of Knowing the World” 374–6.
In similar fashion, Thackeray’s authorial dissociation from Becky’s point of view, epistolary voice, and social judgments runs parallel with the more expansive tendency to judge, demonize, and otherwise cast aspersions on her scheming social mobility. The partition between her point of view and that of the narrator takes a literal form at the opera in Brussels. A scene in General Tufto’s box sees him with the “opera-glass […] pretend[ing] to examine the house” while Becky and George talk. She sees “that his disengaged eye was working round in her direction” and as she goes over to the opposite box and visits with the Sedleys and O’Dowds, 

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119 Hagan assesses the arguments about Thackeray’s characterization of Becky, dealing with views that it is inconsistent, ambiguous, or sympathetic in order to renew the negative view (“Becky Brought to Book Again”). Martin similarly summarizes confusions about her guilt (or otherwise) in the Steyne affair, arguing that Thackeray is “noncommittal” (“Narrative Ambivalence” 37).
she does so “in full view of the jealous opera-glass opposite” (285). Becky uses a telescope at one point (252) and appears carrying that instrument in the initial capital that depicts her as Napoleon.

Henceforth in the novel Becky looks overwhelmingly forward, like the titular rogue of *Barry Lyndon* who changes his name and social status from chapter to chapter and lives for the future. She competes with the narrator’s counterfactual mode. On the matter of their dealings with the wealthy Miss Crawley, Becky judges that if she “did not forgive them at present, she might at least relent on a future day” (253), whereas the narrator rationalizes the same issue in different terms: “[Becky and Rawdon] might have gone down on their knees before the old spinster, avowed all, and been forgiven in a twinkling. But that good chance was denied to the young couple, doubtless in order that this story might be written” (163).

Becky’s “superior prudence and foresight” (256) is trained on “visions of the future”; her “castles in the air” (92) are built as monuments to ceaseless social ascent. Retrospective thinking could only hamper her projects. On the morning of Waterloo, she sees Rawdon off with “Spartan equanimity,” “[k]nowing how useless regrets are, and how the indulgence of sentiment only serves to make people more miserable” (295), and likewise “conjure[s] away these moods of melancholy” (296) in her husband. Further, “she fell to thinking what she should do if—if anything happened to poor good Rawdon, and what a great piece of luck it was that he had left

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120 It is a performance that Dobbin sees through (285–6). Note that this is confessed, very late in the novel, to have been one model of narrative sight, as when Dobbin and Amelia are seen at a concert in Pumpernickel: “we saw them from the stalls” (625). On the theatrical framing of this scene see Byerly, *Realism* 80.

121 Rosdeitcher, “Empires at Stake” 412, 420.

122 On the opportunism and calculation behind Becky’s amorous exploits and gambling ventures see Miller, *Novels Behind Glass* 39–40.
his horses behind” (324), the real possibility of his death in battle marked by only the briefest syntactic hiatus.

With the war behind them, Becky becomes a “good economist” (348) for her family in Paris. She speculates on and uses the credit of Miss Crawley’s name “to get an entrée into Paris society” (349); sees that gambling cannot work “as an income itself” (365); realizes that “nosegays could not be laid by as a provision for future years”; and generally “felt the frivolity of pleasure” in the face of “more substantial benefits” (365). She pays off Rawdon’s debts at a fraction of their value to allow him to return to London unpressed, and counsels him “to trust himself to her guidance for the future” (369, 375). In one of her more notorious exercises in speculative living, Becky bases their London existence on credit alone. In the house of Mr. Raggles, who will be ruined by her deceptions, they are masters “not in money, but in produce and labour” (372): they have current possession without real property, and live on the promise of future payment or equivalent recompense, just as Becky studied at Miss Pinkerton’s only in exchange for future services.\footnote{Rawlins points out that the Raggle’s incident is exceptional in the novel for its lack of moral ambiguity (\textit{Thackeray’s Novels} 19–20).}

“While there is life, there is hope” could stand as Becky’s motto (374), and at one revealing moment it is shown as a hope against the past. Attempting to ingratiate herself with her mother-in-law Lady Southdown, having done so with her sister-in-law, she uses information gleaned from the latter about the former’s overweening medical advice. Where Lady Jane says of her mother’s medical knowledge, “I often think we should all be better without it” (417), Becky agrees and cannily reverses the statement to flatter Lady Southdown, declaring that “her own little boy was saved, actually saved, by calomel, freely administered, when all the physicians in Paris had given the dear child up” and reflecting more widely “how her views were very much
changed by circumstances and misfortunes; and how she hoped that a past life spent in
worldliness and error might not incapacitate her from more serious thought for the future” (417).

This calculating effort to live in the future allows Becky, it seems, not to age. Rawdon
becomes a “torpid, submissive, middle-aged, stout gentleman” (456), Amelia has “a silver hair or
two marking the progress of time on her head” (459), and Dobbin is in “old-fellow-hood,” with
“grizzled” hair and “many a passion and feeling of his youth […] grown grey” (578), but
Becky’s “complexion could bear any sunshine as yet” (476). As their troubles mount, a brief
glimpse indicates how insistently she keeps up the façade, even against narrative itself: her
dozing husband cannot “see the face opposite to him, haggard, and weary, and terrible; it lighted
up with fresh candid smiles when he woke” (527). Reflecting on her past only in reference to
future chances, Becky sheds or distances herself from prior selves. “I could not go back,” she
thinks of her childhood days, “and consort with those people now, whom I used to meet in my
father’s studio” (422).124 She turns the counterfactual mode against Rawdon, asking “where you
would have been now, and in what sort of a position in society, if I had not looked after you?”
(523). Towards the end of the novel, revealing that she has kept Jos Sedley’s portrait in her
possession, she rejects a return to past possibility—“why speak,—why think,—why look back?
It is too late now!” (676)—and, seeing Lord Steyne again in Europe, is taken by the prospect of
renewed conquest: “A hundred such touching hopes, fears, and memories palpitated in her little
heart” (649).

124 The alternative to Vanity Fair discussed by Lougy, memories of childhood and
transport to a less artificial time of life, is denied her (“Vision and Satire” 263–6). Scarry points
to how Becky’s only version of memory is the recollection of prophecy, called up only to be
replaced by further predictions (“Enemy and Father” 148). McMaster notes her “independence of
the past” that only guards objects for “future usefulness” (“Thackeray’s Things” 82, 83).
Although Thackeray sometimes rotates Becky’s reflections in the latter third of the novel, especially after the climactic confrontation when Rawdon returns from the spunging house, the move seems less convincing after long experience of Becky on the make. It is hard not to detect sham in her suicidal thoughts given how they are played up as an allusion to Hamlet: “She thought of her long past life, and all the dismal incidents of it. Ah, how dreary it seemed, how miserable, lonely, and profitless!” (534–5). An exception to this moratorium on looking back proves the rule. In a vault to the future Thackeray gives us a Becky who “has often spoken in subsequent years of this season of her life” and who, after her rendezvous with King George IV, “has owned since that there too was Vanity” (503). On one level adumbrating the perplexing narrative voice of Henry Esmond and the similar closural fantasy of The Newcomes, this move differs in assuring us of Becky’s continuance beyond the boundaries of the novel that might now be seen as just one more stage in her career.

After describing Becky’s desire for upward mobility and financial security, the narrator offers a moralizing lament:

It may, perhaps, have struck her that to have been honest and humble, to have done her duty, and to have marched straightforward on her way, would have brought her as near happiness as that path by which she was striving to attain it. But […] if ever Becky had these thoughts, she was accustomed to walk round them—or at least she was committed to the other path from which retreat was now impossible. And for my part I believe that remorse is the least active of all a man’s moral senses—the very easiest to be deadened when wakened: and in some never wakened at all. (423)

It is around George Osborne that the novel’s other mode—backward-looking, nostalgic, remorseful—takes shape, finding its place after his early death on the battlefield in the sadness

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125 Thus Hagan finds that by the conclusion she has “no moral self-awareness and [has] suffered no remorse” (“Becky Brought to Book Again” 487).

126 Ferris, “Realism and the Discord of Ending” 297–300 argues that Thackeray thus attempts to resist temporality and death. Jadwin discusses the closural ambivalence of Vanity Fair in “Clytemnestra Rewarded.”
and mortal regret of Amelia and the syncopated mourning of his father. Counterfactual thinking anchors this perennial hindsight in the affective context of gambling, which shapes George’s relationship to his betrothed. Toying with her affections brings on a “fit of remorse,” and he confides in Dobbin that “I should have been done but for you. [...] But you see there’s no fun in winning a thing unless you play for it” (125). After the collapse of her father’s finances, it is unclear to George whether “his generous heart warmed to [Amelia] at the prospect of misfortune: or that the idea of losing the dear little prize made him value it more” (134). His “remorse and shame” (185) at this juncture are not recalled when, at the (“historical”) Brussels ball given by the Duchess of Richmond on the 15 June 1815, he commences a “desperate flirtation” with Becky (287).

Warnings against gambling are likewise dismissed when the mutual recognition of George’s gambit for Becky—secreting a note in a bouquet of flowers—presses him to extravagance at play. Quickly this betting frenzy gives way as the marching orders for Waterloo arrive and the graph of his emotions curves down from elation to agent-regret:

Away went George, his nerves quivering with excitement at the news so long looked for, so sudden when it came. What were love and intrigue now? He thought about a thousand things but these in his rapid walk to his quarters—his past life and future chances—the fate which might be before him—the wife, the child perhaps, from whom unseen he might be about to part. Oh, how he wished that night’s work undone! and that with a clear conscience at least he might say farewell to the tender and guileless being by whose love he had set such little store! (292)

Where George’s nascent thoughts for the future are pulled back by regret, Rawdon’s similar concerns move in the opposite direction as “he cursed his past follies and extravagances, and bemoaned his vast outlying debts above all,” and we already sense the hollowness in the thought

127 The notion of “mortal regret” is discussed by Geerken (referring to Emily Brontë) as a phenomenon distinct “from the fixation of melancholy by its emphasis on restoration” (“‘The Dead Are Not Annihilated’” 376). It usefully separates out Amelia’s state from the agent-regret of Mr. Osborne, more concerned with his actions in respect of his son prior to death.
that they “must remain for ever as obstacles to prevent his wife’s advancement in the world” (296).

George goes to his death, all this is to say, with his thoughts cast backward, and Dobbin later recollects how his friend only once “alluded” to his involvement with Becky “evidently with remorse on his mind” (663). This mood of anticipatory dole conditions everyone involved with George well before his demise. Amelia’s courtship is fraught with omens: the claret-bell announcing dinner she takes as “mysterious and presentimental” (133); her nerves about Mr. Osborne’s disapproval lead to a heart “overflowing with tenderness, but it still foreboded evil” (136); and the news of John Sedley’s ruin is “only the confirmation of the dark presages which had long gone before” (181). Mr. Osborne’s letter vetoing the marriage is “the mere reading of the sentence—of the crime she had long ago been guilty—the crime of loving wrongly, too violently, against reason” (181).

Even prior to her marriage Amelia mourns the death of a relationship and its object. She returns George’s gifts but keeps his letters. Subsequently she “lived in her past life—every letter seemed to recall some circumstance of it,” recollects the “relics and remembrances of dead affection, and “the business of her life, [was] to watch the corpse of Love” (182). Marriage makes a difference in scale but not direction: “What a gulf lay between her and that past life. She could look back to it from her present standing-place, and contemplate, almost as another being, the young unmarried girl absorbed in her love, having no eyes but for one special object” (260). In sharing the melancholy fate “[a]lready to be looking sadly and vaguely back: always to be pining for something which, when obtained, brought doubt and sadness rather than pleasure,” these two selves are more coherent than they might seem. They match a third, jealous self, into

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128 On the reticence involved in such remorse see Redwine, “The Uses of Memento Mori” 660–1.
which “old, old times, griefs, pangs, remembrances, rushed back” when she sees Becky at Pumpernickel, where the “wound which years had scarcely cicatrised bled afresh” (665).129

Such unrelenting (and I am not the first to say insipid) dejection does make for narrative possibility, particularly late in the novel when Dobbin’s devotion, long in the making, becomes the object of inference. When Amelia reflects on why Dobbin reacts so strongly to her affection for the piano that George took credit for giving her, she recursively does “not note the circumstance at the time, nor take heed of the very dismal expression which honest Dobbin’s countenance assumed; but she thought of it afterwards. And then it struck her” (595). Where the narrative focalizes Becky almost without recollection, in Amelia’s case we are always eddying back, here to the “memory of [Dobbin’s] almost countless services, and lofty and affectionate regard, [which] now presented itself to her, and rebuked her day and night” (677). It is to a Dobbin from the past that she finally consents, a fact underlined when she and Georgy are awaiting Dobbin’s crossing to Ostend and, looking through her son’s “dandy telescope” at the approaching steamer, she “could make nothing of it” and “only saw a black eclipse” (682). Her acceptance of Dobbin is thus a contradictory affair: Amelia’s statement on the impossibility of loving another—“George is my husband, here and in heaven. How could I love any other but him?”—blurs into the possibility implied by thinking otherwise: “Had you come a few months sooner perhaps you might have spared me that—that dreadful parting” (596).130

If Amelia can come to meet the eyes of Dobbin rather than George as she gazes at the past, as when looking out of the latter’s childhood room and effectively seeing her way to “the

129 Miller calls her attitude “reminiscent eroticism” (Novels Behind Glass 40).

130 Amelia is thus one of those characters in Thackeray “too ready to translate situations into incompatible alternatives or intolerable extremes,” which Garrett-Goodyear sees as confirming “ambivalent passions and contradictory emotional drives” as key to Thackeray’s view of human nature” (“Stylized Emotions, Unrealized Selves” 179).
man who had been her constant protector” (612), Mr. Osborne finds a similar solace in his grandson. After George’s death he “stood on the other side of the gulf impassable, haunting his parent with sad eyes” (352), yet the child Georgy has “the eyes of George who was gone” (358). Adopting him the older man “would start at some hereditary feature or tone unconsciously used by the little lad, and fancy that George’s father was again before him” (566). In later fiction Thackeray overburdens such retrospects, whether in *Pendennis*’s fictional autobiography, which has been read according to the controlling logic of associationist memory and as a product of stasis; in *Henry Esmond*, with its antiquated historical setting and much-remarked narrative voice from beyond death; or in *The Newcomes*, which sets an epitaphic limit on the imaginative enterprise. In this respect *Vanity Fair* is properly a way-stage where the imaginative potential I’ve labeled demonic migrates into remorse-laden memorials.

This latter preoccupation, as I qualify below, is importantly seasoned by counterfactual thinking. It may have much to do with our habit of reading novels *in toto* that allows Becky Sharp’s plot to overcome the tonal and affective energy of *Vanity Fair*, even as the regretful and retrospective may seem to overcharge novels from *Pendennis* through to *Lovel*, and that further creates a “Thackeray” segmented over large chunks rather than smaller packages of narrative information. To adopt the terms of Thackeray’s digression on the history of what might have been, *Vanity Fair* cannot be taken in whole, as a sea, but comes piecemeal, dropwise.

Understood and re-imagined as a novel of serial experience in two directions, as it were—past

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131 For an account of the voice of *Henry Esmond* in relation to autobiographical memory see Dames, *Amnesiac Selves* 157–64. Bonaparte offers a different view of *Henry Esmond* as a “metahistorical” novel that undermines historical record and offers a “disquieting aggregate of ways in which the past is lost” (139), particularly through uncertainties of memory (“Written in Invisible Ink” 136, 139, 145–6).
and future—*Vanity Fair* can be more clearly seen as a marginal entry in a key experience of modern uncertainty: war.

Thackeray opens a homology between novel reading and the information economy of wartime:

after the announcement of the victories came the list of the wounded and the slain. Who can tell the dread with which that catalogue was opened and read! [...] Anybody who will take the trouble of looking back to a file of the newspapers of the time, must, even now, feel at second-hand this breathless pause of expectation. The lists of casualties are carried on from day to day: you stop in the midst as in a story which is to be continued in our next. (351)

Rumor, belated news, and lagging information shape both wartime and reading. Mary Favret has amply catalogued these aspects of wartime as a modern experience, and presents the hearth as its locus of expectancy, uncertainty, and dilated temporality. Thackeray is in keeping with this tacit tradition. In one of the *Roundabout Papers* he later asks us to “depict ten thousand, a hundred thousand homes in England saddened by the thought of the coming calamity, and oppressed by the pervading gloom. [...] By firesides modest and splendid, all over the three kingdoms, that sorrow is keeping watch, and myriads of hearts beating with that thought, ‘Will they give up the men?’” Likewise *Vanity Fair* looks back to the Napoleonic Wars when “there were many anxious hearts beating through England [...] and mothers’ prayers and tears flowing...”

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132 A classic statement on this matter is Bloch’s “Réflexions d’un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre” (1921). Given rumor’s structural conditioning of war and wartime experience, it is no accident that the modern study of its psychology began during World War II and explicitly addressed problems of information in wartime: see Knapp, “A Psychology of Rumor,” and Allport and Postman, *Psychology of Rumor*.

133 “Half a Loaf” 252.
in many homesteads” (238). In another passage, temporal markers carry us insistently forward even though they note, out of order, events that occurred months apart:

when war was raging all over Europe, and Empires were being staked—when the ‘Courier’ newspaper had tens of thousands of subscribers—when one day brought you a Battle of Vittoria, another a Burning of Moscow, or a newsman’s horn blowing down Russell Square about dinner time announced such a fact as “Battle of Leipsic, six hundred thousand men engaged, total defeat of the French, two hundred thousand killed.”

(120)

The paradigm of information here— all news is old news— forges a global fear of alternative outcomes. Historically these theaters of conflict fostered terror in England at the threat of French invasion from the 1790s onwards. From the aptly named novel The Invasion, or What Might Have Been (1798) to Vanity Fair’s recollection of the anticipatory militias formed in England “to resist the French invasion” (48) to an article in the 1860s under Thackeray’s editorship of the Cornhill comparing the “Invasion Panics” of the 1850s to earlier ones, the disjunction between real-time events and unpunctual reports necessarily fosters counterfactual thinking, alternative histories and narratives. In the novel’s panicked Brussels, people “rode along the level chaussée, to be in advance of any intelligence from the army,” everyone asks

134 Although Thackeray partakes in the mythical construction of the “Napoleonic Wars,” Favret has questioned the cogency of this label for summarizing these complex and protracted military events (“Napoleonic Wars”).

135 This claim is related to Heffernan’s that the “arch-historical phenomenon of war appears as a given without retrievable cause” (“Lying Epitaphs” 26), and Schad’s suggestion that the novel compels a model of circuitous or roundabout reading as both a “going nowhere” and a “failure to arrive” (“Reading the Long Way Round” 29). On the contradictory discourses of war in the novel, including rumor, see also Camus, “Waterloo in Vanity Fair” 456–9.

136 The anonymous novel describes “the invasion of southern England by a nameless foreign power in an unspecified present” (Grenby, Anti-Jacobin Novel 29), using counterfactual history as the vehicle for a romance plot in which an English officer joins the invaders and captures the town where a woman he had been pursuing lives. Compare a shorter, also anonymous work, A History of the Sudden and Terrible Invasion of England by the French, in the Month of May, 1852 (1851). See Higgins, “Invasion Panics.”
after “news,” and soon the “prophecies of the French partisans began to pass for facts” (312).

Various rumors jostle until the “official announcement” of an English victory at Quatre Bras (321). Repeatedly across his work Thackeray uses this topos to ridiculous effect, mocking the Belgian newspapers that were not aware of the battle on their soil until they received word from London, or the French who persist in believing that several disastrous campaigns against the Spanish and English were in fact won by them, so that the “real state of things” is “as if it had never been.”

But for some individuals the tyranny of old news continues. Dobbin reports to Amelia “that the action was over, and that her husband was unhurt and well” (323), yet a brief space later his death is mutely relayed.

Wartime’s information lag underscores the counterfactual links between different narrative scales, as I outlined above, where large events play down into smaller. John Sedley’s misfortunes, for example, take part in the “great roaring war tempest” where “Napoleon is flinging his last stake, and poor little [Amelia] Sedley’s happiness forms, somehow, part of it” (178). The “domestic comedy,” Thackeray makes clear, “would never have been enacted without the intervention of this august mute personage [Napoleon]” (184). Yet it is striking that the actual battle of Waterloo in latter part of day is consigned to the historical past, which manages to involve the perspective of both sides, the prediction of future alternations on the same fields:

137 War in the novel is a matter of “jokes, songs, distant noises” in Carey’s phrase (Prodigal Genius 194). On rumor’s perplexing function in the novel see Wilkinson, “The Tomeavesian Way of Knowing the World.”


139 On the relation between unconfirmed information and financial uncertainty pre-Waterloo, and the similar instability of the 1840s, see Hammond, “Thackeray’s Waterloo” 25–6.
All of us have read of what occurred during that interval. The tale is in every Englishman’s mouth; and you and I, who were children when the great battle was won and lost, are never tired of hearing and recounting the history of that famous action. Its remembrance rankles still in the bosoms of millions of the countrymen of those brave men who lost the day. They pant for an opportunity of revenging that humiliation; and if a contest, ending in a victory on their part, should ensue, elating them in their turn, and leaving its cursed legacy of hatred and rage behind to us, there is no end to the so-called glory and shame, and to the alternations of successful and unsuccessful murder, in which two high-spirited nations might engage. Centuries hence, we Frenchmen and Englishmen might be boasting and killing each other still, carrying out bravely the Devil’s code of honour. (326)

The narrative possibility of the “Devil’s code” here acquires a darker tint. Thackeray deliberately upstages the expectations of a reader some three decades after Waterloo, who has that story memorized, and gives a bleaker sense to the notion of “our next.”

The intensified present of wartime condenses both forward and backward movement, hypothetical and counterfactual modes, thoughts that risk and venture and reflections that regret and look back, the expectation of the next narrative and the (often horrific) realization that the last number has already been written. This condensation occurs at a brief juncture in Thackeray’s œuvre, but it should be recalled as a counterweight to the descriptions of speculation above and the account of memory below. It is from inside this narrative and temporal logic that we can see how Thackeray’s work is more invested in that particular uncertainty that comes from being on

140 DiBattista addresses this passage as “pristinely classical in its pessimism” (“Triumph of Clytemnestra” 833). Barnaby offers similar statements in Henry Esmond as critical of historiography’s ideological complicity (“Thackeray as Metahistorian” 48). For different accounts of Thackeray’s relation to war and its cultural uses see Carey, Prodigal Genius 99–100, Hammond, “Thackeray’s Waterloo” (on the discourse and ideological practices of commemoration in the 1840s) Heffernan, “Lying Epitaphs” (similarly on war memorials and battlefield tourism, and how the novel “stag[es] an ironic and elegiac meditation on the powers of commemoration” [27]); Norton, “The Ex-Collector” 128–9; and Schad, “Reading the Long Way Round” (arguing that the later Peterloo massacre of 1819, in which several officers from the earlier battle participated, shadows the novel).

141 O’Brien points out that the Waterloo section mentions the ages of what he terms “invoked readers” more often than elsewhere in the novel, in a generation born roughly 1795–1815 (“Invoked Readers” 83).
the cusp of change, the point of convertibility between just past and almost future states where
the difference between the two is malleable, can be held open in mind. The narrative labors the
fact of war as a game: “What a fierce excitement of doubt, hope, and pleasure! What tremendous
hazards of loss or gain! What were all the games of chance he had ever played compared to this
one?” (301).\(^{142}\) Conflict is both the source and target of Thackeray’s statements on moral luck
and the contingencies of fortune, the “mysterious and often unaccountable […] lottery of life
which gives to this man the purple and fine linen, and sends to the other rags for garments and
dogs for comforters” (569).\(^{143}\) Against its accidents he counsels us to be “gentle with those who
are less lucky, if not more deserving” (570), given that any individual fate may wander, like
George Osborne, out of bounds into virtuality:

> Our luck may fail: our powers forsake us: our place on the boards be taken by better and
younger mimes—the chance of life roll away and leave us shattered and stranded. Then
men will walk across the road when they meet you […]. If quacks prosper as often as
they go to the wall—if zanies succeed and knaves arrive at fortune, and, vice versâ,
sharing ill luck and prosperity for all the world like the ablest and most honest amongst
us—I say, brother, the gifts and pleasures of Vanity Fair cannot be held of any great
account, and that it is probable . . . but we are wandering out of the domain of the story.
(385)

To meander into the zone of counterfact is to trespass a limit more fundamental even than
Fielding’s “bounds of probability.” It is to threaten realist narrative with a countervailing power
that it cannot wholly comprehend on its own terms—“who can calculate the might-have-beens?”—even if it is constitutively punctuated by such speculations.\(^{144}\)

\(^{142}\) For Rosdeitcher the link between war and gambling underlines the tension between
economics and national identity (“Empires at Stake” 416, 421–6).

\(^{143}\) Compare: “Look at these unequal lots in the fortunes of men, and see how completely
circumstance (of personal disposition or outward fortune) masters all—and one begins to think
of Vice and Virtue as here practised, with profound scorn or else with bitter humiliation and
debasement” (Letters 1.402; quoted in Ray, Uses 217)

\(^{144}\) Letters 4.154, to Mrs. Carmichael-Smyth, 1 October 1859.
Credite Posteri! Memory’s Roundabout

The remorseful aspects of *Vanity Fair*’s later sections have been linked to Thackeray’s “reminiscential” aesthetic and its sense of time as cyclical or reiterative. The lessons of counterfactual thinking, however—its effect on aesthetic and narrative textures, and especially its interest for causal inquiry—spotlight a different aspect of Thackeray’s account of memory. If imagination, in the absence of something like recollection or consciousness as the ground of prior experience, would seem to have less warrant for alternatives and might-have-beens, memory would appear to be its key guarantor. Yet memory hereby emerges as subject to the hypotheticals it makes possible. Memory fades, is circular, conjures materially unlocatable objects.

In what follows I read several of Thackeray’s so-called Roundabout Papers, brief essays published in the *Cornhill* in 1860–1 when he was the magazine’s editor, often alongside the later novels in serial form, *Lovel the Widower* and *The Adventures of Philip* (1861–2). Adopting a thin narrative persona (Mr. Roundabout), these eclectic and occasional performances have (when noticed at all) been slotted into a late mode proper to an author who “loves to remember very much more than to prophesy,” who “would rather remember” individuals than “be in love over again,” and strikes what one critic calls the “low note [that] sounds with a haunting

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dominance.” Yet Thackeray’s divagations are buoyed by speculations that place history and fact, memory and age, success and defeat, even the project of fiction and imagination, into the counterfactual crucible. The very terms in which Thackeray entertains the conundrums of memory—vaulting imaginatively through tenses and modalities—neutralize the threat by replicating the imaginary powers at stake, even as the motions of this mental exercise show how vital are the powers that could be lost. Read as a group and with *Vanity Fair’s* experiments in mind, these marginal entries constitute a provocative vision of Thackeray’s melancholy as a mode of prophecy or hope for action. “It is only hope which is real,” his reflections on the continuation of Scott’s *Ivanhoe* run. These pieces take the truths of recollected disappointment and vanished youth—that “reality is a bitterness and a lie”—and put them in service of an admonishment that looks forward as well as back.

What is perhaps most striking about the conditional possibilities of the *Roundabout Papers* is their range, undergirded by an abstract sense of how standards of probability and credibility do not helpfully demarcate fictional from factual worlds. “On Some Late Great Victories” follows meandering thoughts on historical victories with a general reflection: “it has been asserted that Fortune has a good deal to do with the making of heroes; and thus hinted for the consolation of those who don’t happen to be engaged in any stupendous victories, that, had opportunity so served, they might have been heroes too.” The narrator shifts from military

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146 “On a Joke I Once Heard from the Late Thomas Hood” 752; “On the Benefits of Being a Fogy” (*The Proser, OxT* 8.358; originally in *Punch*, 18 May 1850); McMaster, *Thackeray* 35.

147 “Proposals for a Continuation of *Ivanhoe*” (*OxT* 10.469).

148 *OxT* 10.469.

149 “On Some Late Great Victories” 758.
victories to those of the *Cornhill* itself, imagining himself riding in a chariot alongside the editor (Thackeray himself) and saluting Fortune: “we might have fought bravely, and *not* won. We might have cast the coin, calling ‘Head,’ and, lo! Tail might have come uppermost.”

This metareflection on the lucky conditions that keep the *Cornhill* running continues in “Thorns in the Cushion,” which likens the magazine to a ship navigating the “dangers of storm and rock […] and the certain risk of the venture.”

Buoyed by these victories as both editor and author, perhaps, Thackeray cheekily entertains the converse possibility in “On Two Roundabout Papers Which I Intended to Write,” the first of which concerns the topic of good thoughts, diverted by the possibility of bad thoughts: “some of the best actions we have all of us committed in our lives have been committed in fancy.” Thus begins a dizzying counterfactual exercise in which we read around both the topic and its abstract moral: “if you could but read some of the unwritten Roundabout Papers” the narrator whimsically offers, “I catch you saying, ‘Well, then, I wish this was unwritten with all my heart!’” Thackeray’s aim is to preface a striking instance of fiction taking over fact by an excess of indirection, in the same way as his journalistic pieces on executions never arrive at the object they set out to document.“Have you ever killed any one

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150 “On Some Late Great Victories” 758–9.

151 “Thorns in the Cushion” 122. The success of the *Cornhill* finally reverses a negative experience of risky publishing, the *Constitutional* that Thackeray ventured on with his father-in-law, which went under in the panic of 1837; see Ray, *Uses* 190–1.

152 “On Two Roundabout Papers” 377.

153 “On Two Roundabout Papers” 379.

154 See “Going to See a Man Hanged” and “The Case of Peytel” (both in *The Paris Sketch Book*). The former, as Robles points out, is “as much a ‘going’ as it is a ‘hanging’” since Thackeray misses the event and examines more the crowds en route (*Novel as Event* 115).
in your thoughts?” he asks: “Has your heart compassed any man’s death?”155 The unwritable event in question happened in London, when a client walking into a bank office was confronted by a man shooting a pistol at the wall.156 Without narration, Thackeray compares this absurd event to the new phenomenon to be found on the boards and in novels: “What a sensation drama this is! What have people been flocking to see at the Adelphi Theatre for the last hundred and fifty nights? […] What is this compared to the real life drama […]?”157 The story is fodder for a counterfactual moral—“It might have happened to you and to me”—but, more crucially, for a defense of fictional standards as against factual: “After this, what is the use of being squeamish about the probabilities and possibilities in the writing of fiction? […] After this, what is not possible?”158

The tendency of these essays to merge into hypothetical reflections and fictional modes turns on memory’s virtuality. Often in the Roundabout Papers the possibility of a memory that truly takes the self back to an earlier period depends on powers of representation. Someone looking at a coin minted in George IV’s reign “may conjure back his life there” in the same way as after gazing on a painting by Van der Helst “you have lived in the year 1648, and celebrated the treaty of Munster.”159 Both experiences are mediated by an image and sponsor an effet de

155 “On Two Roundabout Papers” 381.

156 As reported by several newspapers, the event took place on Northumberland Street on 12 July 1861 (Annotations 2.490).

157 “On Two Roundabout Papers” 379.

158 “On Two Roundabout Papers” 380.

159 “De Juventute” 502; “A Roundabout Journey” 637. These moments exemplify another mnemonic pattern that Dames identifies, whereby “pivotal moments of private biography” are solidified through “public facts about the famous” (“Brushes with Fame” 46; see 46–8). Compare Little Roadside Travels and Sketches I, “Antwerp” (OxT 6.476–7) and Thackeray’s comment in “A Roundabout Journey” about being “[b]odily […] in 1860 […] but in the spirit I
réel, despite the obvious disjunct in historical possibility. Thackeray uses the precarity of memory to muse on the ontological instability of the past as such. “We who have lived before railways were made, belong to another world,” he writes, a world that “has passed into limbo and vanished from under us. I tell you it was firm under our feet once, and not long ago. […] Try and catch yesterday. Where is it? Here is a Times newspaper dated Monday 26th, and this is Tuesday, 27th. Suppose you deny there was such a day as yesterday?” Recalling similar laments in Vanity Fair, where to the “beloved reader’s children […] stagecoaches will have become romances,” these anxious queries call out to the future in a forlorn bid for existential ratification, for recognition tomorrow of yesterday’s reality, even though the readers of these papers have (as with Whately’s Napoleon) little but textual representations by which to judge. An allusion to Horace intensifies the thought into an imperative mode: “Credite posteri”: believe me, you who come after. Thus the essay in which these thoughts appear—“De Juventute,” on youth—works against its stated topic even as it tries to secure confirmation for its existence. Thackeray finally gives in. Day passes to night, youth to age. But a formal trick may hold out hope:

It is night now: and here is home. Gathered under the quiet roof, elders and children lie alike at rest. In the midst of a great peace and calm, the stars look out from the heavens.

am walking about in 1828” (645), which Dawson reads in the context of spiritualism (“Stranger than Fiction” 230).

160 The mediating character of the coin is intensified by Thackeray’s many jibes at the emptiness of George IV, mocked in Vanity Fair (473-4) and derided as a “great simulacrum” in The Four Georges (“IV.—George the Fourth” 386). See Barnaby, “Thackeray as Metahistorian” 52–3.


162 “De Juventute” 506, recalling Odes II.xix.
The silence is peopled with the past; sorrowful remorses for sins and short-comings—memories of passionate joys and griefs rise out of their graves, both now alike calm and sad. Eyes, as I shut mine, look at me, that have long ceased to shine."\(^{163}\)

The last sentence encapsulates in its knotted grammar the virtuality of remembering in the *Roundabout Papers*, its combination of present vivacity and pained attenuation. Hovering uncertain and disembodied, the eyes are precluded from meeting their object’s gaze as his “shut” before they can “look,” but are somehow allowed to reach the present to “look” before the disqualifying “ceased to shine.” The unstable relative clause—associating both “eyes” and “me” with “long ceased to shine”—completes this vaulting movement between reality and interior, present and past. It is striking that Thackeray, in the guise of Mr. Roundabout, here thinks back on his own youth in the exact terms—even with the same formal lag—as Mr. Osborne in *Vanity Fair* faces his son George, who “stood on the other side of the gulf impassable, haunting his parent with sad eyes,” and his grandson Georgy, who has “the eyes of George who was gone” (352, 358).\(^{164}\) A similar moment in *Henry Esmond* reflects at length on the eyes of its heroine Beatrix in comparison to diamonds only to ask: “Where are those jewels now that beamed under Cleopatra’s forehead, or shone in the sockets of Helen?" The querulous *ubi sunt* is thus

\(^{163}\) “De Juventute” 512.

\(^{164}\) The almost Teutonic syntax of these sentences may indicate a German pattern in the background. Thackeray was fond of quoting the dedication to *Faust*, where likewise “many dear familiar shades emerge [manche liebe Schatten steigen auf] (Faust 1): see MC 179–80, reviewing *The Poetical Works* of Horace Smith. He also cites these similar lines from William Cowper: “The meek intelligence of those dear eyes / (Bless’d be the art that can immortalize— / The art that baffles Time’s tyrannic claim / To quench it) here shines on me still the same” (“About a Christmas Book,” OxT 6.543). The trope recurs in simpler, even insipid ways: in “Mr. Brown’s Letters to his Nephew” Thackeray recalls a vanished lover: “I can hear her still—the stars of those calm nights still shine in my memory” (II, in OxT 8.342); on a letter from Clive in *The Newcomes*, the narrator asks “who has not disinterred mementoes like these—from which the past smiles at you so sadly, shimmering out of Hades an instant but to sink back again into the cold shades […]?” (263).

\(^{165}\) *Henry Esmond* 182.
addressed to personal recollections (eyes one has known) and to the memory of written productions (eyes one has made).

An inherent momentum in the pattern of Thackeray’s memory, I am suggesting, defies even as it participates in the negation that underwrites the “where are they?” addressed to past objects. The sense that melancholy has an upswing allows Thackeray to take risks. He can subject the main trope of counterfactual thinking to this sort of questioning, as he did in musing about the Lenoir establishment in *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*: “Where are the gamblers whom we have read of? Where are the card players whom we can remember in our early days?” He can turn the thought on his own productions, the “old pages” that proffer “anything but elation of mind” upon recollection: “Oh, the cares, the *ennui*, the squabbles, the repetitions, the old conversations over and over again! But now and again a kind thought is recalled, and now and again a dear memory. Yet a few chapters more, and then the last: after which, behold Finis itself come to an end, and the Infinite begun.” From a position cannily beyond the *finis* that closes out his text, Thackeray subtly recommences: the infinite nonetheless begins somewhere and the finite can be stretched beyond its end. In like fashion the close and coda of *The Newcomes* undercuts its own logic of closure, and one of the papers in this sequence, “The Last Sketch,” asks: “If the Has Been, why not the Might Have Been?” The momentum of *roundabout*...
memory, in this sense, emphasizes (as though Thackeray were rewriting himself as Scheherazade) at once the end and the “yet a few chapters more,” the actuality of what has been written by his hand and the virtuality of what might have issued from the same pen.\(^\text{170}\)

The paper most invested in memory and forgetting, “On Some Carp at Sans Souci,” operates by tacit counterfactuals.\(^\text{171}\) Prompted by meeting a ninety-year-old woman, Goody Twoshoes, who has been in the workhouse a quarter-century, Thackeray imagines the century she must have witnessed—its writers, intellects, events. Chastened by the realization that she registers little of this and lives under present hardship, the reflection jumps through an analogy to the long-lived creatures of the title. “Some which Frederick the Great fed at Sans Souci are there now […] and they could tell all sorts of queer stories, if they chose to speak—but they are very silent, carps are—of their nature \textit{peu communicatives}. Oh! what has been thy long life, old Goody, but a dole of bread and water and a perch on a cage; a dreary swim round and round a Lethe of a pond?”\(^\text{172}\) In an access of astonishment at creaturely oblivion, Thackeray turns through conditional refrains—“If I were eighty”; “If you were in her place”—in praise of

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\(^\text{170}\) Thackeray was obsessed with the \textit{Arabian Nights}. He owned two different editions (see \textit{Catalogue}), and in the guise of Major Gahagan (as translator) wrote a tale in two parts called “Sultan Stork. Being the One Thousand and Second Night” in \textit{Ainsworth’s Magazine} in 1842 (\textit{OxT} 4.181–98). Schad mentions Scheherazade in his argument for \textit{Vanity Fair} and reading as the “studied circumvention of a private sadness,” a detour “around death” (“Reading the Long Way Round” 30, 31); DiBattista, calling these tales the “primary text of childhood” for Thackeray, links Becky to Scheherazade and the “sexual subjugation of women” (“Triumph of Clytemnestra” 837n6). In many novels, similarly, “Thackeray’s endings function in effect as questions about ending” (Ferris, “Realism and the Discord of Ending” 292).

\(^\text{171}\) On this essay see Oram, “Time, Memory, and Repetition” 158–9.

\(^\text{172}\) “On Some Carp at Sans Souci” 129. It may be that Thackeray has his wife Isabella in mind in the person of the old woman: by this moment she had been two decades in an asylum, where she would remain a further three decades after Thackeray’s death.
memory, its possibilities, its sudden invigorations.\textsuperscript{173} “We may grow old,” he writes,” but to us some stories never are old. On a sudden they rise up, not dead, but living—not forgotten, but freshly remembered.”\textsuperscript{174} In an exercise of sympathetic imagination that works to justify the trade-off between memory and present oblivion, history and \textit{sans souci}, the familiar characters of counterfact walk up to the surface of forgetting: “Those eyes [the carp’s] may have goggled beneath the weeds at Napoleon’s jack-boots: they have seen Frederick’s lean shanks reflected in their pool; and perhaps Monsieur de Voltaire has fed them.”\textsuperscript{175}

One might object that there are places in these writings where the relationship to memory is simple. On one level, these musings are taken from experience, and “have for subjects some little event which happens at the preacher’s own gate, or which falls under his peculiar cognizance.”\textsuperscript{176} They bear out the truth of an address to the writer: “Your sensibility is your livelihood […]. You feel a pang of pleasure or pain? It is noted in your memory, and some day or other makes its appearance in your manuscript.” Yet even in more open reminiscences, an imaginative manipulation is at work—as in the advice just quoted, which happens to be voiced by the ghost of Laurence Sterne with whom Mr. Roundabout is chatting. Arguing for the \textit{Roundabout Papers} as espousing a cyclical philosophy of time, Richard Oram cites a remark of Thackeray’s that “we all hold on by love to the past, and by just a little turn of the circle, it

\textsuperscript{173} “On Some Carp at Sans Souci” 129, 130.

\textsuperscript{174} “On Some Carp at Sans Souci” 130.

\textsuperscript{175} “On Some Carp at Sans Souci” 130. Our easy recognition of these names surely has something to do with their “celebrity,” a concept whose centrality in Thackeray has been underscored by Dames. Of interest here is that celebrity “as a rhetorical and cultural figure becomes a sign for reality itself” and that celebrities like these are “more real than any objects, details, or private facts” (“Brushes with Fame” 49, 51).

\textsuperscript{176} “On a Pear-Tree” 715.
becomes the future,” so that the “have been is eternal, as well as the will be. We are not only elderly men, but young men, boys, children.” Still this movement is only guaranteed by the capacity to think otherwise—to place the “have been” adjacent to the “will be”—which suggests that this is no straightforward repetition.

A more developed argument about the reminiscential vision of Thackeray offers a more interesting case in point. In its more manicured forms in *Pendennis* and *Henry Esmond*, as Nicholas Dames demonstrates, memory becomes museal: bounded, controlled, edited according to the protocols of midcentury associationist psychology. Yet even within these confines counterfactuals run riot. *Pendennis* is saturated with musings on the unhappened, from Thackeray’s framing dedication to Dr. John Elliotson without whom, “in all probability, I never should have risen [from his sickbed] but for your constant watchfulness and skill”; to the thoughts that Pen might have been a solicitor or military man, which culminate in his confrontation (in a chapter fitly titled “Fiat Justitia”) with Major Pendennis over the latter’s knowledge of Blanche Amory’s comprised heritage, which has “cursed my career when it might have been—when it might have been so different but for you!”; and finally to the comment on the novel’s nested fiction, George Warrington’s *Leaves from the Life-book of Walter Lorraine*, which “would never have been written but for Arthur Pendennis’s own private griefs, passions, and follies.”

To focus on fictional autobiography as Dames does necessarily omits a recurrent mode of Thackerayean memory: epistemologically riddling, ontologically unlocatable, at once the

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179 *Pendennis* Dedication (n.p.), 2.319, 2.24.
conditional ground of, and yet vulnerable to counterfactual manipulations. If one needs a memory of what was in order to assess what might have been, this makes real memory open to censure or revision even as it declares the space of counterfactual imagination to be similar to the no-place of real memories. It is not accidental that these meandering visions of memory are penned in venues that remain episodic and ephemeral—periodical reviews, “roundabout” essays, “fugitive literature”\textsuperscript{180}—rather than the achieved vehicles of Pendennis and Henry Esmond, the serial appearance of the first belied by its autobiographical character, the second (as Dames stresses) published first as a volume set.

If Thackeray participates in “the generally amnesiac character of mid-Victorian selfhood, a selfhood that continually converts memory into action, remembrance into prediction, the past into promise,”\textsuperscript{181} the Roundabout Papers serve the same end by their hypermnesc character, pressing memory into frenzy. Both styles of memory and its deficiencies need to be recognized. Indeed the final paper in the series disparages the habit of “go[ing] through life passionately deploiring the irrevocable, and allow[ing] yesterday’s transactions to embitter the cheerfulness of to-day and to-morrow.”\textsuperscript{182} The mnemonic puzzles here are vital to Thackeray’s fictional thinking and its ethical import. That the renewed prophecy I have been gleaning from the Roundabout Papers maintains a melancholy only adds to the force of its warning to the reader in late Thackeray: use the “might have been” to imagine what might be, to prophesy, to live and love again, in the more deeply registered knowledge that there is no “again.”

\textsuperscript{180} The phrase is used in “A Brother of the Press on the History of a Literary Man, Laman Blanchard, and the Chances of the Literary Profession” (\textit{OxT} 6.549).

\textsuperscript{181} Dames, \textit{Amnesiac Selves} 166.

\textsuperscript{182} “Autour de Mon Chapeau” 266.
Open Portals: Hypothesis and Late Style

So far I have elaborated an argument that could follow a chronological trajectory—from the devilish imaginary of youth to the melancholy recollection of age—that maps onto Gordon Ray’s influential picture of Thackeray as shifting from acerbic satire (in works like The Snobs of England [1846–7]) to measured moral wisdom (in Vanity Fair and beyond). Yet in the 1860s period discernible as Thackeray’s late moment, hypothetical thinking has a curious way of breaking through recollection, forcing an openness despite the irrevocable certainties on offer in the Roundabout Papers, and finding a strand of hope behind the vanitas refrain. In this final section I read the conditional and hypothetical moments suffusing Thackeray’s late novel Lovel the Widower, which sees the almost total annexation of narrative by thinking otherwise, and reflect on why hypotheses both conceptual and visual come to dominate Thackeray’s late style. Adapted from a play never performed in public, The Wolves and the Lamb (possibly 1854), and tracing the later history of the characters in his Christmas tale The Kickleburys on the Rhine (1850), Lovel owes its riddling openness to the narrator, one Charles Batchelor, whose erratic tone, wavering attention, and fluctuating self-assessment command most of the novel’s psychological space. The sketchy plot, taking place at the residence of Batchelor’s college friend Fred Lovel, builds out of minor intrigues in the widower’s domestic life—contretemps

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183 Ray tracks the contrast in tone between Thackeray’s 1837–9 journalism and that of the period 1844–7, leading into Vanity Fair (Uses 318).

184 Originally in the Cornhill, January to June 1860. Parenthetical citations are to the version in OxT 17.

185 McMaster notes that by this novel tone has “taken precedence over narrative,” just as the Roundabout Papers are “all tone and no narrative” (Thackeray 4). Kurnick, Empty Houses 56–66, offers an ingenious account of this feature of Lovel the Widower as a failed play, whose “melancholic relation to the lost possibility of performance” leads to “novelistic interiority […] as a container for unaccommodated theatricality” (32).
between his mother and mother-in-law, scuffles among jealous servants, outrages committed by his miscreant children—that Batchelor records in passing. His meandering deferral of the novel’s marriage plot—glimpsed only at the conclusion—affords Batchelor time to observe, comment, and speculate.

In this respect the novel marks its connection to the demonic mode of early Thackeray. Its “scene is in the parlour, and the region beneath the parlour”—the servants’ downstairs taking on an infernal quality—and Batchelor charts a middle course in an address to readers that underlines the allusion: “We are no heroes nor angels; neither are we fiends from abodes unmentionable, black assassins, treacherous Iagos, familiar with stabbing and poison—murder our amusement, daggers our playthings, arsenic our daily bread, lies our conversation, and forgery our common handwriting” (57, 58). The only dagger here is the one “used for the cutting open of reviews and magazines” (158), but Batchelor’s disavowal emphasizes how he is a thoroughly domestic devil, more given to eavesdropping and casual voyeurism than concerted villainy. He fashions himself as “another Diable Boiteux, [who] had the roofs of a pretty number of the Shrublands[‘] rooms taken off for me” (107). The conceit refers to Alain René Le Sage’s novel Le diable boiteux (1707)—later a play and ballet—where the hero takes a tour with a devil (Asmodeus) who removes the roofs of buildings that their contents might be narrated without a sense of preceding or following events. Thackeray elsewhere deploys this cipher for mobile

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186 Thackeray may have encountered the translation of Le Sage’s novel now established as Tobias Smollett’s, The Devil Upon Crutches (1750, revised 1759), and may also be taking a swipe at Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s Asmodeus at Large. Thackeray mentions Le Sage in the same breath as Fielding in “A Box of Novels” (OxT 6.413). Samuel Bevan recalled Thackeray at Rome in similar terms: “he appeared to amuse himself like Asmodeus, with peering into the studios of his countrymen, and while he rummaged over their dusty portfolios, or critically scanned their pictures on the wall, would unconsciously read their secret thoughts, and penetrate, as it were, the arcana of their pockets” (quoted in Ray, Uses 298). On the Asmodeus tradition see Hendrix.
omniscience (as do Dickens and Carlyle) to ratify narrative possibility from above, appropriately enough given his self-fashioning as the “Manager of the Performance,” an inveterate arranger of novelistic puppet shows and pantomimes. Yet Batchelor’s case is bewilderingly self-reflexive: peering into other lives, he takes the roof off his own. That his “observation […] can see as far into the mill-stones of life as most folks’” further interiorizes the image (107). His putative access to the cogs driving action reveals less about the mechanics of others’ motivation and prompts us to look into his schemes for illicit insight.

_Lovel the Widower_ has two interconnected moments of psychological density (both episodes of thwarted love) that are striking for being framed and followed by hypothetical reflections. Batchelor recollects the first on a visit to his former lodgings at Beak Street in London. He remembers that after his heartbreak at the hands of a woman named Glorvina O’Dowd (née Mulligan), the young daughter of his landlady stepped in to offer sympathy. Batchelor’s solipsism at this moment occluded the fact that his confidante Bessy Prior was suffering from a parallel situation, having been jilted by a Captain who had run off to India. Reflecting on these events, he rejects the notion that his confessions gave rise to deeper feelings: “In my case, if a heart is broke, it’s broke: if a flower is withered, it’s withered. If I choose to put my grief in a ridiculous light, why not? why do you suppose I am going to make a tragedy of such an old, used-up, battered, stale, vulgar, trivial, every-day subject as a jilt […]?” (84).

This failure of sympathetic communion in the past nonetheless brings Bessy and Batchelor into a nexus of mutuality—the spurning lovers remain peripheral—that funds later

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187 See _Pendennis_ 1.291, and _The Adventures of Philip_ 280. On Asmodeus as a nineteenth-century conceit for comprehensive social vision see Arac, _Commissioned Spirits_ 17–23, 85–6 111–13; and as a type of narrator see Jaffe, who notes the figure as a model for _Household Words_ and other flexible narrators in Dickens, “remaining present in their narratives but often, effectively, invisible, gaining the advantages but not the limitations of characterological status” (“Omniscience” 95).
possibilities. The intervening narrative time is saturated with reflections on alternate outcomes and images of convertibility. Batchelor significantly recalls this episode after visiting Beak Street and having his likeness taken—“for old time’s sake, I went upstairs, and ‘ad it done’” (82)—by a photographer who had moved into the old lodgings. Where the more usual experience in Thackeray would begin with a youthful keepsake as a talisman for reflecting on the intervening years, Batchelor weirdly reverses this logic and wonders whether his former admirer would want the image to “be reminded of a man whom she knew in life’s prime” (82). Just as at Shrublands the eyes of Cecilia’s portrait (the deceased wife of the titular widower) “followed you about, as portraits’ eyes so painted will” (128) and Batchelor senses a “ghost flitting about the place” in the “grey of the gloaming” (129), in his former lodgings he is confronted by “ghosts” of children who used to live there and “a heap of memories” (82, 83).

The point here is not that this episode gives rise to anything concrete or even conscious, but that it generates a cloud or “heap” of possibilities in excess of the narrative’s capacities to substantiate them. Batchelor’s reflections are intensified versions of the counterfactuals of *Vanity Fair*. He wonders why he did not say to Bessy: “We who are initiated, know the members of our Community of Sorrow,” and an influx of hypotheticals—“She would have…,” “We would have…,” “It would have been better than this dingy loneliness”—accompany his thoughts (101). It is notable that Bessy’s family name is “Prior” (one of the few unchanged in the passage from play to novel): each mention of Miss Prior counteracts the narrative’s forward movement with a pun about precursors and anterior states; the chapter “Miss Prior is Kept at the Door” plays up the tautology, the “prior” always being that which is on the point of entering. While Batchelor’s hypotheticals move in one direction into past possibilities, they also follow to their exact

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188 For instance, a pencil-case with a mechanical calendar in “Tunbridge Toys.”
contraries. Enjoying his small pleasures of bachelorhood, he reflects (“Suppose” becomes a repeated tag) that he might have gained his lover and been unhappy, been kept away from the club, been father to a screaming infant, and so on (104). This tension is only a more complex version of the insistent qualifications, contradictions, and negations that critics have commented on in Batchelor’s narration, where every assertion seems to come with a tacit disclaimer: this may or may not have happened.

While the first episode with Bessy obstructs the novel’s movement in a bewildering way, the second episode adopts an accessible comic mode. The narrative has skipped some years and we find ourselves at Lovel’s home, where Bessy earlier became a governess on the recommendation of Batchelor. She has attracted considerable male interest: from Drencher, the local doctor; Bedford, the butler; and the erstwhile Batchelor. As his narrative voice muddles towards self-recognition with respect to the feelings disavowed earlier, Batchelor is amused and incipiently threatened by Bedford’s interest, and then dismayed by the news that Bessy is engaged to Drencher. When the latter engagement is confessed to be a sham—merely in aid of Bessy’s respectability in Lovel’s household—Batchelor is prompted to press his awkward suit.

Just as the first episode foundered on an absence of sympathy, the second collapses in a farcical avoidance of action. Batchelor’s confession sees Bessy removing her spectacles to

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189 We might recall Dobbin’s comedown with regard to his idealized Amelia, towards the end of *Vanity Fair*: “and suppose I had won her, should I not have been disenchanted the day after my victory?” (677).

190 Ferris notes how everything is “hedged in by qualifications and by negative definitions that abandon the categories they set up and so fail to function as genuine definitions” (“Breakdown” 45); Sedgwick how the “treatment of the romantic possibilities [...] has a tendency to dematerialize them almost before they present themselves” (*Epistemology of the Closet* 191).

191 Ferris notes how the scene is “permeated with false starts, failed modes, confused ironies” (“Breakdown” 38).
think things through, at which moment she is vulnerable to recognition by Clarence Baker, the alcoholic brother of Cecilia whose “pallid countenance told of Finishes and Casinos” (131) and who knew her as a dancer in London. Walking into the morning-room where she is alone, Clarence addresses her by her former stage name. In the ensuing ruckus—Clarence becomes aggressive, Bessy punches him, and Bedford comes to her aid—Batchelor slinks away from the French windows and enters the room belatedly, “arriving like Fortinbras in Hamlet, when everybody is dead and sprawling, you know, and the whole business is done” (157). This sudden access of action does little to stall the narrative’s hypothetical mode. The sequence begins with Batchelor’s reflections on what he would have done, if Clarence had run at Bessy or “offered her other personal indignity” (151). He watches while others usurp his possible role, and in place of “heroic speeches” we have excuses entered on his own behalf—“In a strait so odious, sudden, and humiliating, what should I, what could I, what did I do?”—and apostrophes to the reader—“What would you have done? Would you have liked to have such a sudden suspicion thrown over the being of your affection?” (152, 154, 153).

As earlier, Batchelor’s hesitation is driven not from “want of courage”—as Bessy assumes, having noticed him sneaking away—but “error in judgment” (152). The jealousy resulting from Clarence’s recognition is a logical operation, based in “cogent and honourable reasons” (152), which arranges and draws a conclusion from the “antecedents”—or priors—of Bessy’s “history [that] passed through my mind” (153). These manipulations take place in imagination, as Batchelor draws on other generic conventions to describe his dilemma—“a sudden thought made me drop my (figurative) point: a sudden idea made me rein in my galloping...”

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192 McMaster describes the pattern of hesitation and action in the successive personas (Titmarsh, Touchit, Batchelor) and compares it generally to other characters (Dobbin, Warrington, Esmond) who obsess over a woman won by another man (Thackeray 53–6).
(metaphorical) steed” (152)—and similarly weighs competing possibilities. “Suppose I had gone in?” he wonders: “But for that sudden precaution, there might have been a Mrs. Batchelor” (152). These thoughts form a chiasmus with the earlier set: “jealous doubt” about whether Bessy would be a good mother of “many possible little Batchelors” (160) takes hold first, and more hopeful musings about the future follow (164–5).

While the narrative lurches forward in time, then, these patterns establish conjectural eddies—where possibilities are raised, entertained, and rejected—and introduce a circular format into the imagined sideshadows of novelistic space. For Ferris, Thackeray deploys fiction as an “existential assertion” against temporality in this novel: his “main target is sequence; his primary strategy, obfuscation.”193 As the oddities of Batchelor’s narration become more abstract, aspects of the novel concretize them more vividly. Thackeray’s illustration of an otherwise insignificant event, for instance, seems to be shadowed by opposed possibilities. “Where the Sugar Goes” (Figure 3) is initially meant to capture the petty theft of Bessy’s venal mother, Mrs. Prior, caught pilfering dessert by Mr. Bedford. The mirror that reflects them, however, seems to model an inverted case: the female figure stands erect, in portrait, accusatory; the male apparently turning as if discovered. Shadowy quasi-reflections, etched with vertical lines, show us what a mirror could not reflect (Mrs. Prior’s bonnet shields her eyes from the mirror, but they nonetheless have a presence there), and perhaps allude to Bedford’s secretly held love for Bessy, for which reason he is compelled to turn a blind eye to this theft. More crucially, at the end of a long *mise en abyme* of Thackerayan mirrors, this reflection makes visible the recursions that shadow

193 “Realism and the Discord of Ending” 297. The novel takes to an extreme the patterns of earlier novels, with their “blend of inquiry and provisional assertion, heuristic in their project to reassess the significance of human action” (Fletcher, “The Dandy and the Fogy” 385).
narration.\textsuperscript{194} It is a version in space of the jostling temporalities of a novel where present or “epilogue” time—“I dine at Lovel’s still” (61); “All the house has been altered” (193)—continually ruptures into past narrative moments.\textsuperscript{195}

\textsuperscript{194} The frequent topos of a mirror in Thackeray is summarized and given a penetrating analysis in Brink-Roby, “Psyche: Mirror and Mind in \textit{Vanity Fair}.”

\textsuperscript{195} The term “epilogue time” is drawn from Morson, who discusses its Russian manifestations in \textit{Narrative and Freedom} 190–8.
Recasting these patterns of Batchelor’s narration as cycles of counterfactual thinking makes it possible to circumvent critical frustration. Elizabeth Gaskell wondered whether she was “stupid” for feeling that the novel was “a little confusing on account of its discursiveness,”¹⁹⁶ and

¹⁹⁶ Letters 596, to George Smith, 21 December [1859].
critics have followed in attempts to explain away Batchelor’s shifts and feints in ways that fix him in psychological “breakdown,” “fragmentation,” or “instability.” What is striking about this line on Batchelor’s narration as uncertain and disunified in terms of form (including tonal variation, generic or modal unclarity, allusions to other discourses) is how it settles for unity, coherence, and stability in one aspect of content: Batchelor, once and always a bachelor. Following Kurnick’s convincing claim that failure encodes longing in Thackeray, running formal uncertainty through its suppositions and hypotheticals makes clear how this narration could always underwrite another content. If *Lovel the Widower* would be more accurately titled *Batchelor the Unloved*, given the intensity of the narrator’s focalization and the marginality of the titular plot, the value reversal that takes us to the possibility of a sequel novel (or play) entitled *Lovel Married* could be shadowed by parallel possibilities: *Batchelor in Love* or, more in tune with the modal grammar I have been outlining, *Batchelor the Lovable*.

Reframing the novel this way is to take seriously, not always ironically, statements like: “That heart may have had its griefs, but is yet susceptible of enjoyment and consolation. That bosom may have been lacerated, but is not therefore and henceforward a stranger to comfort” (103). It is to recognize that assertions of dejection, belatedness, or finality—as when Batchelor reads fragments of Bessy’s letter to Drencher: “I might have made a woman happy: I think I

197 Ferris, the most astute of these commentators, best describes Batchelor’s diffuse, hesitant, uncertain style, but draws an unneeded extrapolation to the actual fragmentation of the self and language, arguing that Thackeray cannot disentangle himself from a narratorial surrogate: “technique has opened up the self for investigation and found nothing there” and that “Despair vitiates the explorative potential of the late narratives” (“Breakdown” 52). Fisher more generally comments on the aesthetic lassitude of Thackeray’s late work, blaming it on the corrupting influence of market demands (“Siren and Artist”). Both James and Horn liken *Lovel* to the *Roundabout Papers* (“Story and Substance,” “Farcical Process”), the latter also connecting it to Victorian farce and popular theatrical culture.

should” (138)—are turns in a cycle. If after the eventful day he “lay amidst shattered capitals, broken shafts of the tumbled palace which I had built in imagination […] the ruins of my own happiness” (175), this is to recall the earlier thought that although “my heart may be a ruin—a Persepolis, sir—a perfect Tadmor” there is yet hope: “May not a traveller rest under its shattered columns?” (98). Much has been made of the narrator’s assumed name in the context of nineteenth-century sexual categories. But the same “batchelor” connotes (whether in chivalry or at university) a stage of inexperience or juniority, underlining the hopeful possibility. At breakfast the day after the tumult in the morning-room, Batchelor seems to be at an end like that of Henry Esmond’s narrator: “I am dead. I feel as if I am underground, and buried. […] I don’t belong to the world any more. I have done with it. I am shelved away” (175–6). Still to be “shelved away” is to bear the possibility of a future reading or adaptation. Unlike Cecilia’s portrait, which stares mutely and is “removed from the post of honour” when the new wife accedes to her place, Batchelor’s novel bears his “spirit [that] returns and flitters through the world” (193, 176), itself participating in and assuring the continuity of Thackerayan narrative, precisely through the mysteries of fiction’s suppositional or counterfactual status that three decades of writing had not dispelled.

Lovel the Widower confirms the porous nature of Thackeray’s fictional world, which selectively admits data in from the range of discrete texts that compose it, as well as from the written record of history and reality. The novel is not only a global transformation of the play The Wolves and the Lamb, but a small-scale reprisal of other fictional worlds. The Glorvina O’Dowd who jilts Batchelor here stands in a curious relationship to the woman of the same name

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199 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet 189–95, reading the novel in the context of “male homosexual panic” in the period; Hampson, “Chance and the Secret Life” 117–21; and Kurnick, Empty Houses 60.
in *Vanity Fair* who, “[u]ndismayed by forty or fifty previous defeats,” stages a campaign for the heart of Dobbin.  

In several details *Lovel* continues the Christmas books that are written around *Vanity Fair*, from *Mrs. Perkins’s Ball* onwards. *Our Street* has its inveterate snooper (Miss Clapperclaw) with her “eye-glasses ready to spy,” and its miserly landlady (Mrs. Cammysole), whose daughter (Flora) the narrator regrets not having approached. Like Batchelor, Titmarsh occupies a second-floor apartment, from which “little nook […] I and a fellow-lodger and friend of mine cynically observe” the street. *The Kickleburys on the Rhine*, a clearer prequel to the events of this novel, similarly has Titmarsh plagued by self-accusations and “I would have” clauses in respect of the young Fanny Kicklebury, but also taken by the same hopes: “the sorrows and aspirations of the wounded spirit, stricken and sad, yet not quite despairing; still knowing that the hope-plant lurked in its crushed ruins.”

The earlier tale of the “bachelor condition” displays the narrative desire that *Lovel* takes to an extreme, that of being “a chronicle of feelings and characters, not of events and places.”

The circular or chiasmic potential I have been reading here—arcing from hopeful hypotheses to chagrined counterfactuals and *vice versa*—takes in the trajectory of Thackeray’s career. Illustration gives this potential an uncanny visual form. The first episode of hypothesis above is accompanied by an image, “Bessy’s Spectacles,” which freezes the moment of

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200 *Vanity Fair* 433.

201 Discussing the stages of *Lovel’s* composition, Harden points out that the MS has Pendennis as the planned narrator, which can only add a further layer to this condensate (*Emergence* 220–40). Ferris comments on the recurrence of characters as a “preference for the openness of continuity over the closural notion of meaning” (“Realism and the Discord of Ending” 300) and notes this feature of *Lovel* (“The Breakdown of Thackeray’s Narrator” 40).

202 *OxT* 10.244.

203 *OxT* 10.249.
connection between her and Batchelor (Figure 4). The lenses figure a pure form that matches their extraneous function in the plot (certainly Bessy does not need them, other than as a dowdy cover for her recognizable visage). Blank against the surrounding crosshatching, they run orthogonal to, and cut the sightlines of the two persons illustrated. Their tain frames a stereoscopic space of possibility, invite us into narrative alternatives and out the other side. Where Batchelor was figured as an Asmodeus looking in through open roofs at the goings-on of characters, this image delineates the opposite view: looking out or up through blank portals, at an open sky of possibility.
Figure 4. Bessy’s Spectacles. From *Lovel the Widower*, facing 177. ChM 1885.10.9, Child Memorial Library, Harvard University.
Such images of gazing through open portals, the alluring inverse of mirrors, crop up often: children looking into a diorama in *Vanity Fair*; a scene of recitation and absorption in the *Roundabout Papers*; initial capitals “O” like hoops thrown from text to text (Figures 5 to 12). Like the gambler’s *double zéro*, these images solicit future readers to risks of imagination.²⁰⁴

![Figure 5. Chapter 20, Initial Capital. From *Vanity Fair*, 1.210. ChM 1885.10.18, Child Memorial Library, Harvard University.](image)

![Figure 6. “On a Joke I Once Heard from the Late Thomas Hood,” Initial Capital. From *Roundabout Papers*, 87. ChM 1885.10.17, Child Memorial Library, Harvard University.](image)

Significantly these circles recall Thackeray’s iconic signature adopted early in his career—spectacles inverted and crossed—as though his means of seeing and sketching now rise to the content of representation.²⁰⁵ That Thackeray’s spectacles might have been definitively removed

²⁰⁴ These scenes exemplify what Byerly, using Fried’s terms, sees as Thackeray’s preference for “absorption” over “theatricality” (*Realism* 60–2).

²⁰⁵ Relatedly, these images represent what Miller describes as the “planar space” of *Vanity Fair*, which houses the novel’s objects in an “insistent movement towards abstraction [that] evacuates the area of the novel, flattens its domain” (*Novels Behind Glass* 50–1). See Dames, *Physiology of the Novel* 73–123 for an account of Thackeray’s representations of reading as “distracted reverie” (122).
has a melancholy feel, as though he had finally shed the portals through which he saw the world, perhaps intimated in *Vanity Fair’s* self-portrait where he appears without his mask (or *persona*), its darkened eyelets the reverse of these empty circles. All these images fit the sentiment of that novel, that the “best ink for Vanity Fair use would be one that faded utterly in a couple of days, and left the paper clean and blank, so that you might write on it to somebody else” (192).

Figure 7. Chapter 46, Initial Capital (detail). From *Vanity Fair*, 2.94. ChM 1885.10.18, Child Memorial Library, Harvard

Figure 8. Chapter 49, Initial Capital. From *Vanity Fair*, 2.115. ChM 1885.10.18, Child Memorial Library, Harvard University.


Given this emphasis on openness, it seems fitting that Thackeray left off in the middle of things. *Lovel the Widower* was one of the last works published serially and in volume form in his lifetime, but he was in process with *Denis Duval* when, to borrow Batchelor’s words, “the fugacious years […] lapsed, my Posthumus!”\(^{206}\) Four of its projected eight numbers appeared in the *Cornhill* after his death.\(^ {207}\) Henry James later recalled this partial production: “If, moreover, it after a few months broke short off, that really gave it something as well as took something away. It might have been as true of works of art as of men and women, that if the gods loved them they died young. ‘Denis Duval’ was at any rate beautiful, and was beautiful again on reperusal at a later time.”\(^ {208}\) With characteristic exactness James praises incompletion using statements of neither present assertion (*is true*) nor supposition (*might be true*) but the tense of counterfact.\(^ {209}\) He discerns how an iterative beauty resides in the openness to being otherwise, and registers this novel as “overflowing with possibilities of character” in a manner that could describe a broader swathe of Thackeray’s imaginative output.

It is finally the living potentiality in Thackeray that presses on, against the unavoidable finality that one wishes were more given to contingent or counterfactual tones. It is striking to observe Thackeray in his letters offering his sympathies for another’s loss in terms identical to those I have been exploring: “I have kept back writing, knowing the powerlessness of

\(^{206}\) *OxT* 17.138.

\(^{207}\) From March to June, 1864.

\(^{208}\) “Winchilsea, Rye, and *Denis Duval*” 44; partly quoted in Lund, *Reading Thackeray* 129, discussing unfinishedness in the serial format. Sutherland comments on how there is “nothing tired about [*Denis Duval*], it promises in fact a recovery in age of the powers of youth” (*Thackeray at Work* 110).

\(^{209}\) James is himself, of course, adept in the vagaries of counterfactual thinking: see Miller, “Lives Unled” 127–32.
consolation, and having, I don’t know what vague hopes that your brother and Miss Bronson might have been spared.”210 The gesture is strange but characteristic: a condolence that restores to contingency the very event whose irrevocable necessity it would assuage. Thinking about that “certain (albeit uncertain) morrow […] about which all of us must some day or other be speculating” establishes, in the words of the (yet) living, a modal kinship with the dead.211 “I know Papa was tired & that he did not want to live except for us,” wrote Anne Thackeray in 1864: “yet my heart sickens & aches & I feel that he might have been with us now.”212

210 Letters 3.399, to William Bradford Reed, 8 November 1854.

211 Vanity Fair 190.

CHAPTER 2

INDECISION THEORY: ELIOT’S HESITATIONS
“Who can be wise, amazed, temperate and furious, / Loyal and neutral, in a moment?” In her last novel, George Eliot takes the “rhetoric” of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (2.3.109–10) to task and unmask its claim “about the impossibility of being many opposite things in the same moment” as a statement about the “clumsy necessities of action” rather than the “subtler possibilities of feeling.”¹ Her own rhetoric, one might say, elevates complex interiority over action’s mere externality, inner purpose over outward manifestation. “Acting is slow and poor to what we go through within,” a character solemnly intones (647). Eliot’s ways of delimiting felt interior from active exterior are less spatial than modal. Action lacks grace insofar as its “necessities” obviate all but one of the “possibilities” shadowed in thought; it is impoverished in giving vent to just one agent out of the plural “we” of hypothetical selves nested “within.”

Doubtless Eliot has a “problem with action,” as one critic puts it.² Yet to face the myriad uncertainties in and about *Daniel Deronda* (1876) is to recognize its forestalling of categories about which a cogent problem might arise at all. Before it comes to action, the novel presses another unsettling thought from *Macbeth* about the misalignment between understanding and being conscious of action: “To know my deed, ’twere best not to know myself.” With one character who knows neither himself nor his prospective deed, another whose vain self-knowledge is subjected to an evacuating hesitancy, *Daniel Deronda* contours the problem of action from the inside out.³ The novel expends its attention on the priors of action—

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¹ *Daniel Deronda* 42; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

² Markovits, *Crisis of Action* 87–128. This account takes the “nature and potential of action”—in the Aristotelian sense involving ethics and poetics—as the novel’s topic (89). Markovits focuses on how attitudes towards action cross genre lines: the novel’s “two kinds of activity” map onto its realist and romance plots (108–9).

³ Compare Rodensky, *Crime in Mind* 85, for a similar comment about Eliot’s representation of criminal impulse.
prediction, comparison, hesitation—as they blur across settings and pit characters against different versions of themselves.

In this chapter I argue that the novel’s cardinal topic is the recursive problem of being under uncertainty, of shuttling between thought and action, and develop a multifaceted approach to the range of contexts that Eliot both repurposes and critiques. I consider Gwendolen Harleth’s self-centered mode of appraising chance—which I call *inductive vanity*—as a category of uncertainty wider than the gambler’s fallacy its initial setting implies. This willfully individualist mode of ignoring aggregate pattern ramifies in two opposing directions in the novel: as a practical attitude that collapses into hesitancy and irresolution (in Gwendolen’s plot); and as a reformulation of Eliot’s longstanding commitment to *comparison* as an intellectual and moral value (in Daniel Deronda’s plot). I first investigate Gwendolen’s decision to marry as a case study in a literary theory of hesitation, drawing on but modeled largely against philosophical accounts of action. Illuminating an unfamiliar aspect of Eliot’s engagement with the physiological psychology of the time, I use her shared interest in the will as an embodied category to offer a reading of Gwendolen’s dilated process of decision, and to recharacterize critical diagnoses of her character (above all as a “hysteric”) within the more inclusive terms of the will as a feature and failing of the body. I then offer a capsule account of Eliot’s engagement with nineteenth-century “comparative method,” asserting its primacy for her theory of sympathy. Taking comparison as an intellectual injunction that matches the affective, physiological non-injunction that is hesitation, I examine the redirection of these topics in Deronda’s wide capacity for comparison and his rational model of action as subservient towards an end.

Within the horizon of uncertainty, the career of Gwendolen moves from certainty to doubt, from a self-satisfied vanity that allows her to engage expressly in risking and doing “what
is unlikely,” to an uncomfortable but productive form of hesitant self-distrust. Deronda moves from doubt to certainty as he sheds his self-questioning humility, undertaking a historical inquiry that requires finding a foundation for trust and resolve. His emerging decision about a future role in Jewish life is framed by, and draws energy from, his longstanding experience of uncertainty about his background, even as his origins come to a revelatory clarity. The individualist career of the first character, invested in the uncertain fortunes of the marriage market, seems to be trumped by what might be termed the communitarian trajectory of the other, aligned with the certainties of prophetic thinking and the matrilineal fortunes of a cultural community.

This chiasm of epistemic stances maps intersecting rather than opposed approaches to imperfect knowledge. In exploring what Eliot terms the “kinship” (67) between certainty and doubt, I resist the critical tradition’s overstatement of the novel’s bifurcated plot and accompanying binaries of theme, characterization, and intellectual concern, which tends to predicate readings on one “half” of the novel. From early defenses that found Eliot’s sympathetic representations of Jewish culture marred by the mundane marriage plot of a self-indulgent woman through to F. R. Leavis’s suggested excision of a novel to be retitled *Gwendolen Harleth*, critical evaluation has followed the fault lines internal to the narrative. Since Eliot’s own criticisms of gambling and its kindred modes of thinking and acting—self-centered inference;

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express defiance of luck; rashness—are often voiced through her titular character, the impression that she turns away from Gwendolen and directs moral attention to the Deronda plot fosters the sense that the latter is engaged in supervision of the former. Likewise it encourages a critical interest in diagnoses that would fix the legibility of one plot while unmooring the other in the service of utopian, cosmopolitan, and collectivist projects.\(^5\)

The contexts mapped by Eliot’s late work are invested in precisely the kind of legibility that she is also concerned to resist. Problems and solutions shade together: to the vanity of induction Eliot offers the solution of a comparison related to, but finally exceeding the statistical notion of “intercomparison”; to the difficulties of choice she presents a hesitant will as both a pathological state and a potential fail-safe, a fault in action that may be mobilized in service of newly moral ends; and to the general problem of determinism and the aggregate’s curtailment of individual lives, she offers the affective stances of trust, hope, and prophecy that eclipse probabilistic calculation and make the limits of knowledge grounds for a new social dispensation. Eliot develops an ambivalent response to cultural shifts of which her own literary and intellectual work were both type and sponsor: prevailing uncertainty in matters of religion; insecurities in structures of social regulation, including marriage and gendered inheritance; and skepticism in light of the probabilistic ungrounding of scientific laws. She is sanguine about large-scale probable knowledge yet also wants to question the compulsion on human action and decision exerted by the disciplines of social control—the pressure to weigh options and reduce

\(^5\) For instance: Tucker, *A Probable State*, taking the novel’s open ending as a model of utopian reading; Anderson, *Powers of Distance* 9–16, 119–46, on its anti-particularist cosmopolitanism; and Kurnick, *Empty Houses* 94–104, on Eliot’s “theatrical desire,” imagining the novel’s characters as a “cast” that together express a counterfactual yearning for shared sociality. Any such reading has to reckon with how the novel leaves its politics in an optimistic realm, implying that its conclusion as such is a solution (see Fisher, *Making Up Society* 204–7).
choices to two alternatives; to commit to one path out of a probable array; to accept one’s status as just one agent among millions.

In bridging territories of Eliot criticism that engage with her interests in scientific, epistemological, and political questions, I enlist uncertainty as a unifying topic that is as much a matter of action and inaction as of thought and knowledge. In threatening the poles of critical organization with indistinction, the hesitancy of Daniel Deronda prompts us to revise our view of Eliot’s stern moral strictures and to see her, instead, as troubled by—because attracted to—a spacious moral view characterized by the processual, incomplete, “unfolding” qualities that she championed in her presentation of life. Fluctuation or alternation are formal qualities in a novel that begins with a question and dramatizes the complexity of being in two minds, and we need to ask why Eliot returns with such insistence to figures of cognitive, psychological, and gestural uncertainty apparently at cross-purposes with narrative control, moral coherence, and consistency across the arc of an intellectual career.

The Vanity of Induction

*Because curiosity is delight, therefore also all novelty is so, but especially that novelty from which a man conceiveth an opinion true or false of bettering his own estate. For in such case they stand affected with the hope that all gamesters have while the cards are shuffling.*

—Thomas Hobbes, *Elements of Law*

*One is always liable to mistake prejudices for sufficient inductions [...]. [T]he relations are too subtle and intricate to be detected, and only shallowness is confident.*

—Eliot to Dante Gabriel Rossetti

6 *Elements of Law* 46.

7 *The George Eliot Letters* 5.79; February 1870. Letters are hereafter cited from the Haight edition as *GEL*; journal entries from the Harris and Johnston edition as *GEJ*. 
Vanity traces a fault line in Gwendolen Harleth’s character. Combining a tendency to rate herself superior while deriding what is correspondingly seen as average, her “personal pre-eminence” and “éclat” (273) do not deign to fall into the paths grooved by common lives: “so exceptional a person as herself could hardly remain in ordinary circumstances or in a social position less than advantageous” (23–4). Gwendolen’s desire not to end up like other people, “being and doing nothing remarkable” (29), is materially compromised by her family’s loss of financial and social position through the failed speculations of Grapnell & Co. This misfortune prompts her to greater assertions of her “spontaneous sense of capability” (40), which amounts to a tautological decisiveness in default of concrete decisions—“I must decide for myself”; “My life is my own affair” (235)—and encourages others to react based on a “decision of will which made itself felt in her graceful movements and clear unhesitating tones” (41).

Yet the shadow of the average dogs this fiery self-possession. Gwendolen feels compromised by what she recalls as a youth with an “irksome lack of distinction and superfluity of sisters” (441), her four siblings being “all of a girlish average that made four units utterly unimportant, and yet from her earliest days an obtrusive influential fact in her life” (32). Similar dismissals are leveled against Juliet Fenn, “a girl as middling as mid-day market in everything but archery [in which she bests Gwendolen] and her plainness” (114). In this dislike of the average—and its pressures on a life—Eliot conceals the premises on which Gwendolen’s plot works: she could hardly opt for a “Mr. Middleton” with a “Rex” or “Grandcourt” in the offing; by contrast Deronda, “content with [his] middlingness” (411), is ruled out in advance.

When others show her up as average, Gwendolen feels her vanity piqued, and is by turns obdurately unaffected and almost viscerally damaged by criticism. The musician Klesmer’s judgment of her “mediocrity”—an assessment of “measuring probabilities” (259)—presents an
exemplary “vision of herself on the common level” (262). Her self-regard is insistently
delusional on this front. Prior to meeting with Klesmer, she had been “disposed to think approval
more trustworthy than objection” (53), privileging inexpert flattery; seeking a considered
opinion, she “somehow had the conviction that now she made this serious appeal the truth would
be favourable” (253); and after his dismissal, her “wounded egoism” is “tempted to think that his
judgment was not only fallible but biassed” (50, 257). Klesmer represents “part of that
unmanageable world which was independent of her wishes” (251), his judgment especially
grating given Gwendolen’s annoyance about the plain Catherine Arrowpoint, who lures Klesmer
into marriage through her musical and “mental superiority” (52).8

This episode serves as an early obstacle undermining Gwendolen’s decisiveness, a
realization that she is “not remarkable enough to command fortune by force of will and merit”
(290). With respect to her ambitions after her family’s fall, “there was not a single direction in
which probability seemed to flatter her wishes” (272) as she anticipates humiliating mediocrity
as an actress or submission as a governess. Viewed in the context of averages and aggregates,
probability and prediction, this complex of attitudes—inductive vanity—hampers inference. The
dogma of personal superiority becomes a belief in one’s inherent luck and unpredictability—
having the air of “l’imprévu” (162)—even as a contempt for the average yields a belief that
chance outcomes will, more often than not, fall out in one’s favor.

Gwendolen is thus set in satirical opposition to familiar Eliot doxa. In Adam Bede (1859),
she defends the average life in commenting on how the Reverend Irwine treats his sisters—
“quite superfluous existences”—with sympathy: “the existence of insignificant people has very

8 Thackeray’s inversion of La Rochefoucauld’s maxim about the pleasures of others’
misfortunes may be in Eliot’s view here. Sometimes “their good fortune is disagreeable. If ’tis
hard for a man to bear his own good luck, ’tis harder still for his friends to bear it for him; and
but few of them ordinarily can stand that trial” (Henry Esmond 168).
important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish, and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life.”9 Just as in *Felix Holt* (1866) “there is no private life which has not been determined by a wider public life,”10 so this public represents an aggregate of individuals in *Daniel Deronda* even if they are, like Gwendolen’s sisters, imagined to “excel in ignorance” (48).11 “Human beings are always forecasting their lives,” Eliot’s life-partner G. H. Lewes writes, “and always finding every episode *unlike* what had been forecast.” An “eager imagination” that fails to make the “future plastic to its wishes,” he considers—in what could be a character sketch of Gwendolen—will typically find itself confronting the riddle of the aggregate: “we foresee events in the *mass*, but they reach us in *detail.*”12

Vain induction has its first showing at roulette in the much-discussed opening of the novel in a Leubronn casino, with Gwendolen imagining herself an “empress of luck” (156).13 Eliot reconstructs, in a more sophisticated tenor, the fallacies and specious views about chance summarized by Richard Proctor’s “Gambling Superstitions” (1872), Andrew Steinmetz’s *The

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9 *Adam Bede* 63.

10 *Felix Holt* 45.

11 For figures of aggregate phenomena see Coovadia, “George Eliot’s Realism and Adam Smith.”

12 “Suicide in Life and Literature” 64, 66. Gwendolen’s “inadequate imagination clothes itself in individual cases” and she has to be drawn out from “particularized sympathy” (Hardy, *Novels* 125).

13 For readings of the casino scene see Marshall, *Figure of Theater* 197; Litvak, *Caught in the Act* 164–66; Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy* 146–7. Cottom summarizes: “[Gwendolen] believes she can conduct her entire life as she conducts herself in the casino, trusting that the dubiety of the laws and objects opposed to her desires will not take any form so definite as to dethrone her from her imaginary sovereignty in life” (*Social Figures* 176).
Gwendolen, for whom gambling is to be defended as a “refuge from dulness” (411), has no comprehension of long-run patterns—only the shorter view in which the “chances of roulette had not adjusted themselves to her aims” (236)—and sets down winning not to chance but personal luck. She wins, in Sir Hugo Mallinger’s appraisal, “as coolly as if she had known it all beforehand” (161).

Her self-conviction in the face of chance carries into other areas that combine risk and skill, the more usual settings for gambling and betting in Eliot. An accomplished rider, Gwendolen on a horse “felt as secure as an immortal goddess, having, if she had thought of risk, a core of confidence that no ill luck would happen to her” (72). A skilled archer, “full of joyous belief in herself” (102), she is able to bring about success by “believing in her own good fortune even more than in her skill” (104). Yet this fortune that favors her in particular and colludes with her self-possessed unpredictability—a special fortune, by analogy with special providence—is malleable to external influence. At the first archery meeting, while “imaginative betting” (100) goes on in the minds of the younger audience, the arrival of Grandcourt marks a fortunate turn: “the certainty that he was there made a distinct thread in her consciousness” and her shooting “gained in precision” (106). His virtual sway contrasts that of Klesmer, in whose presence

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14 Proctor’s article draws on Steinmetz. For Tylor’s account of “survivals” in games see *Primitive Culture* 70–5. Irwin plausibly suggests that Eliot read Proctor by accident while looking into Robert Edward Francillon’s serialized *Pearl and Emerald* in the same issue of the *Cornhill*, a segment focusing on a Jewish pawn-broker and other concerns similar to hers. Irwin notes Francillon’s favorable review of *Daniel Deronda* in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1876 (George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda Notebooks* 280). Further quotations are abbreviated as *Notebooks* and follow Irwin’s pagination for the Berg (B) and Pforzheimer (Pf) notebooks. For a rich reading of these materials see Rosenthal, “Large Novel and the Law of Large Numbers.”

15 *Middlemarch* spotlights a similar malleability in settings that include others’ predictions. Playing billiards in the Green Dragon, as “the bets were dropping round him,” Lydgate looks to the “probable gain which might double the sum he was saving from his horse,” “began to bet on his own play, and won again and again” (658–9). With the arrival of young Hawley, who “began to bet against Lydgate’s strokes,” the latter’s energy—his “nerves”—are
Gwendolen feels “crushed” (103), and of Daniel, who exerts an “inward compulsion” (330) in the casino that she experiences as “superstitious dread” (329). Indeed, these approaches to fortune are superstitions in the sense given by the narrator, “an intense feeling about ourselves which makes the evening star shine at us with a threat and the blessing of a beggar encourage us,” the prophetic images mapping onto characters (evening star: Deronda; beggar: Grandcourt) and forecasting how “superstitions carry consequences which often verify their hope or their foreboding” (329–30).

From gambling, riding, and archery to her general air in society, Gwendolen cultivates unlikely conduct even to the point of owning the mercurial patterns of chance. Spoilt and over-attended, “she naturally found it difficult to think her own pleasure less important than others made it” and when thwarted in her desires is given to “one of those passionate acts which look like a contradiction of habitual tendencies” (25). She would “differ from everybody,” judging it “so stupid to agree” (46), and hopes to set her singularity against all patterns of forecasting.

When Rex speaks of his cousin Anna’s predictions about Gwendolen, the latter formulates her views thus:

“I can’t tell what I shall do till I get there. Clairvoyantes are often wrong: they foresee what is likely. I am not fond of what is likely; it is always dull. I do what is unlikely.”

“So you would have come round to a likelihood of your own sort. I shall be able to calculate on you. You couldn’t surprise me. […] You see you can’t escape some sort of likelihood. And contradictoriness makes the strongest likelihood of all. You must give up a plan.” (69)

This faulty effort at guarding an improbable individuality receives a more general critique: “a great deal of what passes for likelihood in the world is simply the reflex of a wish” (98). The statement unmasks predictions based only on desire—it mocks how those at Offendene infer “changed from simple confidence in his own movements to defying another person’s doubt in them” (661), and he loses.
Grandcourt as a likely suitor precisely because no one else has yet succeeded—and points to the link between prediction and volition that acquires interest as the novel proceeds. “The most obstinate beliefs that mortals entertain about themselves,” the narrator opines, “are such as they have no evidence for beyond a constant, spontaneous pulsing of their self-satisfaction—as it were a hidden seed of madness, a confidence that they can move the world without precise notion of standing-place or lever” (250; cf. 238), an image that has already served to rate Gwendolen’s knowledge of the world at virtually nil (39). This idle subjectivism about probability—borne of the “habitual lazy combinations begotten by our wishes” (238)—also undermines, at first, any form of hypothetical thinking in Gwendolen, “the other worlds with which she was conversant being constructed with a sense of fitness that arranged her own future agreeably” (267).  

**The Physiology of Hesitation**

*Instinct, like Chance, is one of the words under which men conceal their ignorance from themselves.*

—G. H. Lewes, *Physiology of Common Life*

*One cannot give a recipe for wise judgment: it resembles appropriate muscular action, which is attained by the myriad lessons in nicety of balance and of aim that only practice can give.*  

—Eliot, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*

Moments after accepting Grandcourt’s proposal, Gwendolen entertains the last probabilistic thought in the stream that leads to her decision (and unwittingly skewers many a Victorian marriage plot). “Really,” she muses, “he was likely to be the least disagreeable of

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16 A glancing allusion may be heard to Proctor’s *Other Worlds than Ours* (1870), a popular science work about life elsewhere in the universe.

17 *Physiology of Common Life* 2.91; *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* 105.
husbands” (305). Yet her nominal consent to the union hardly concludes the train of hesitations to which the first third of the novel is devoted. Decision actually intensifies irresolution, prompting a succession of mental states that gradually unbalance her, setting prideful vanity against an internal pressure of remorse at the wrongdoing of Grandcourt’s former mistress, Lydia Glasher. The novel broadens the rubric of inductive vanity—taking oneself as a model predictor while spurning aggregate knowledge—to include more general categories in the philosophy and psychology of action. Gwendolen’s gambling is just the first in a set of tensions in this character possessed of decisiveness in some areas, and sensitivity amounting to an inability to take ownership of a self, in others. The novel’s representations of decision—particularly as an afterimage of choice and as liable to coercion—can only be understood within the framework of hesitation as a literary-philosophical category that has key links to the nineteenth-century physiological recasting of the will.

In canonical accounts of action, hesitation is a way-stage. A momentary version of more durable reluctance, hesitation appears as a brief lull in the forward flow of action. It is conceptually riddling for models of practical rationality that emphasize what Edward McClennen terms “resolute choice,” or what Michael Bratman sees as the “intention stability” required for “planning agency.”

consciousness,” Paul Ricoeur outlines how choice takes place against a variable continuum of willing, and marks out three aspects of completed decisions undermined by hesitation: the project or goal, the self as the subject of choice, and the driving motives. Hesitation swerves the grammar of action into a “conditional mode”: goals appear tentative, projects “held-up,” intentions “disembodied” in relation to agency’s normal movement; one struggles to adopt a deciding persona, testing selves in an “inchoate consciousness which has not yet adopted its sphere of responsibility”; and motives lose their ground, remaining not quite absent nor in definite conflict, but indefinitely “in suspension.” Hesitation pulls in different directions as “a choice being sought”: both a “falling short of choice” and an “attempt at choosing,” even though the choice in question is “conceived as absent, impossible, desired, delayed, or feared.” The tension between faltering and fixity is replicated in the etymology of hesitation, which blurs intransitive actions connoting stasis (clinging, attaching, lingering) with those that default on movement (stalling, petrifying, being at a loss) or flicker between movement and stasis. A moving statue is hesitation’s exemplary representation.

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20 Ricoeur, *Freedom* 139–40, 142.

21 Ricoeur, *Freedom* 137.

22 *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. “haereō,” “haesitō,” and “haesitātiō,” the latter noun as both “faltering action” and mental “irresolution.” Compare Shulman, *Pale Cast* 62–3. Copying out biblical Hebrew words, Eliot noted verb forms for “to fear, to tremble” and “to shake, hesitate” (Baker, *Some George Eliot Notebooks* 1.122f). The latter form is given by her source, J. W. Gibbs’s *A Manual Hebrew and English Lexicon*, as “to move or be moved,” “to shake, tremble; to be giddy, stagger” (142) so “hesitate” is Eliot’s addition. In a more active form, the verb means “to cause to rove or wander” or “to cause to stand, though in a tottering manner” (142); in modern Hebrew the verb means “to motivate” or “to propel,” and its derived noun means “engine.”
What Ricoeur describes as the experience of having a “will which is and yet is not yet” has analogues in narrative theory.\(^\text{23}\) A process that distends time, emphasizing the temporal interplay between voluntary and involuntary, attentive and distracted aspects at work in ordinary decision might describe the psycho-physiology of reading or narrative suspense discussed by Nicholas Dames and Caroline Levine.\(^\text{24}\) What Joseph Vogl sees as the narrative anomalies and hypothetical forms of hesitation—“[u]nsettled possibilities, blocked determinations, incompossible elements and suspended attributes”—are not unlike what Gary Morson categorizes as “sideshadowing” (positing lateral alternatives or worlds that branch out from a literary plot) or what Andrew Miller calls the “optative” (a counterfactual tense for describing a narrative of paths not taken, “lives unled”).\(^\text{25}\)

Applying the category of hesitation to literary thinking, Vogl argues that there is a generalized “system” of hesitation that follows from the form of a will tarrying with a “choice that is undecided between choosing and not-choosing.”\(^\text{26}\) Hesitation marks ellipses in action

\(^{23}\) Ricoeur, *Freedom* 142.

\(^{24}\) Dames, *Physiology of the Novel* 3–15, 25–70 (proffering an account of physiological novel theory in the Victorian period), and 123–64 on the relationship between the temporality of reading and elements of musical (especially Wagnerian) form such as “lastingness, elongation, and duration” (149); Levine, *Serious Pleasures* 1–17, and 101–60 for readings of *Adam Bede*, *The Lifted Veil*, and *Romola*.

\(^{25}\) Vogl, *Tarrying* 55. See Morson, *Narrative and Freedom* 117–72; Miller, “Lives Unled.” Hardy suggests that “possibility” as both category and craft is always present in Eliot, and is strongest in *Daniel Deronda* (*Novels* 148–54); Ermarth addresses the sense that alternative possibilities seem shadowed by fatalism, by redefining Eliot’s idea of a morally “undeviating law” according to an anti-teleological definition of “law” that takes shape in particular embodiments (“Incarnations”).

\(^{26}\) Vogl, *Tarrying* 99. Vogl’s operative term is Zaudern: “In contrast to such cognates as indecisiveness, indolence, perplexity, weakness of will or sheer idleness, tarrying [Zaudern] is not a stable or instable system of balances; rather, it has metastable properties as it continuously initiates, precipitates and blocks conflicting impulses” (*Tarrying* 17).
“manifest not in its execution but in its inception.” In retarding the forward movement of action it reveals the contingency of plots, the aesthetic centrality of pauses and narrative counter-rhythms, and the historical importance of what is counter to fact and intuition (having a memory of future possibilities or a recollection of unoccurred pasts). The literary archetypes of uncertainty in action join reflective and gestural faltering in what Theodore Ziolkowski terms the “hesitant hero”: Orestes wavering before killing Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *The Libation Bearers*; Aeneas staying his hand before slaying Turnus at the end of the *Aeneid*; Hamlet vacillating before Claudius at prayer. Epic or dramatic indecision thus offers a fluctuating index from which one might read off cultural divisions or uncertainties—between regnant models and rebel dispensations in the conception of social arrangements, judicial norms, or standards of knowledge.

Since logic “knows nothing of hesitation or doubt” in the same way as geometric demonstrations are said to be “irresistible,” Eliot’s deployment of hesitation aligns her with a

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27 Vogl, *Tarrying* 36.


30 Vogl draws symbolic connections between hesitation and crises “in the conception of the world and its order” (*Tarrying* 32). Similarly, Ziolkowski sees in the *Oresteia* a cultural conflict between old and new models of justice, civil society, and control of violence, and in *Hamlet* an uncertainty that undercuts belief systems (*Hesitant* 49, 88–91, 93–5). Eliot’s Duke Silva in *The Spanish Gypsy* seems a model of such cultural shifts as a “nature half-transformed”: “both the lion and the man; / First hesitating shrank, then fiercely sprang, / Or having sprung, turned pallid at his deed / And loosed the prize, paying his blood for nought” (ll. 1528, 1524–7). Shulman relates decision and hesitation in Renaissance epic to Aristotle’s *proairesis*, or deliberative choice (*Pale Cast* 13–22).

31 Venn, *Logic of Chance* 216, distinguishing the certain conclusions of logic from the trickier inductions of probability. A copy of this work (2nd ed., 1876) was in the Eliot/Lewes library (Baker, *The George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Library*).
vision of progress as the result of a “sceptical, hesitating, incredulous temper,”\textsuperscript{32} in Alexander Bain’s words, a corrective anti-rationalism that matches her feeling that reductive explanation could never be a “determiner of motives.”\textsuperscript{33} As new models of rational decision (or what Eliot might call “mastery of calculation”: statistical laws and determinisms) threatened to usurp the place formerly accorded to fate, thereby altering the place of individual agency, the vagaries of human will took on new significance.\textsuperscript{34} Eliot’s picture of hesitation draws on and extends this distinctive nineteenth-century discourse of the will, which rethinks the inherited picture of voluntary action and decision—and so also of indecision, irresolution, and non-commitment—in psycho-physiological terms. William Carpenter sketches the development of this discourse to include Charles Bell’s redescription of the nervous system into “sensory” and “motor” functions in the 1820s, the subsequent recognition of the central nervous system as independently located in the brain stem and spinal cord, Marshall Hall’s account of reflex action in 1833, and the

\textsuperscript{32} Emotions and the Will 583. For Bain, belief in the early stages of individuals and cultures is linked with action and only later associated with growth of intelligence and knowledge (583).

\textsuperscript{33} GEL 6.99; to the Hon. Mrs. Henry Frederick Ponsonby, 10 December 1874. She here writes that “the consideration of molecular physics is not the direct ground of human love and moral action.” Markovits notes that Eliot’s sense of progress “seems to have been much more about the human potential to will the right things than about the human potential to do the right things” (Crisis of Action 90). On determinism in Eliot see Paris, Experiments in Life; Levine, “Determinism and Responsibility”; and Bonaparte, Will and Destiny 48–62.

\textsuperscript{34} The phrase is drawn from the short essay, “A Fine Excess. Feeling is Energy” in Essays and Leaves from a Note-Book 382. As Daston puts it, “volition became closely identified with chance in the epistemic interpretation of probability” after Laplace, Quetelet, and De Morgan (“Theory of Will” 93). For a wide-ranging overview of these matters see Reed, Victorian Will.
program of inquiry into the spectrum of voluntary and involuntary, conscious and automatic processes and actions in the body.\textsuperscript{35}

Eliot had varying degrees of close connection, partly through Lewes, with these experimental and medical psychologists and the psycho-physiological writers who continued their work in the 1870s (including Carpenter, Herbert Spencer, Bain, Thomas Laycock, Henry Maudsley, and Thomas Huxley) and reported much of it in the general periodicals.\textsuperscript{36} These thinkers purveyed a range of views, but the consensus was that the locus of will would have to involve a description of how voluntary processes variously rely on, mobilize, direct, and come habitually to resemble the involuntary or automatic substrates that had long been acknowledged.\textsuperscript{37} These writers forged a belief in a “discrete power or faculty of willing,”

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\item\textsuperscript{35} Carpenter, “On the Doctrine of Human Automatism” 398–402. Compare Lewes, \textit{Physiology of Common Life} 2.25–33, 165–91. Berrios notes that Bain brought this physiological will back to the terrain of “introspective analysis” (\textit{History of Mental Symptoms} 355). In philosophy, Berrios points to the Scottish school, particularly Thomas Reid’s essay on the will, and to the French “voluntarism” of figures like Maine de Biran and Victor Cousin (353–4). For excellent overviews of these developments in nineteenth-century science see Smith, “Physiology of the Will,” on what was at once a “public discourse about science” and an investigation of “central moral questions of human identity and agency” (81); and Daston, “Theory of Will.” For broader overviews of these developments see Young, \textit{Mind, Brain, and Adaptation in the Nineteenth Century}; Smith, “The Background of Physiological Psychology in Natural Philosophy”; Daston, “British Responses to Psycho-Physiology, 1860–1900”; Danziger, “Mid-Nineteenth-Century British Psycho-Physiology”; Jacyna, “The Physiology of Mind,” “Somatic Theories of Mind,” and \textit{Lost Words}; and Jacyna and Clarke, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Origins of Neuroscientific Concepts} (especially on reflex action, 101–56).


\item\textsuperscript{37} Among the central works, voluntary and involuntary actions are discussed in Carpenter’s \textit{Principles of Human Physiology} (1842), “The Physiology of the Will” 193–5, “Mind and Will in Nature” 749, 752, “Doctrine of Human Automatism,” especially 412–13, \textit{Principles of Mental Physiology} (1874); Bain’s \textit{The Senses and the Intellect} and \textit{The Emotions and the Will}, and “The Feelings and the Will Viewed Physiologically” (1866), a text in the \textit{Fortnightly Review} under Lewes’s editorship; Maudsley’s \textit{The Physiology and Pathology of Mind} (1867), the
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sometimes framed in terms of the emerging accounts of energy and force in physics, which
wrested the moral burden of the will from prior views that linked human action to the intellect
and the emotions in different measures.\textsuperscript{38}

This psycho-physiology of the will—a discourse that rethought the will and its penumbra
in unwilled processes—reveals a recursive movement whereby the resistance to an emerging
determinism of social and personal action becomes a source of cultural anxiety. As a power of
the body, the will is lauded and suspected, the object of pathological classification and cultural
vigilance. If a “completely-fashioned will,” Maudsley cites Friedrich Novalis as saying, was the
“true mark of a strong mind,” its incomplete formation or unraveling characterized the
pathologically weak.\textsuperscript{39} Pathologies came with the terrain of seeing the will as reliant on
physiological processes: both the conserving of a human “power” beyond mere mechanism, one
which “can utilize the Automatic agencies to work out its own purposes,” and the “abnormal
conditions in which the controlling power of the Will is in abeyance,” were intertwined.\textsuperscript{40}

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lectures \textit{Body and Mind} (1870), and \textit{Body and Will} (1883); Thomas Laycock’s \textit{Mind and Brain};
Lewes’s \textit{Physiology of Common Life}, 2.197–225, and the three installments of \textit{Problems of Life and Mind}. Much of this work fended off provocations from the determinist side: Thomas
Huxley, “On the Physical Basis of Life,” “The Hypothesis that Animals are Automata”; and W.
K. Clifford, “Body and Mind.”
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\textsuperscript{38} Berrios, \textit{History of Mental Symptoms} 354. On the discourse of “reassurance,” that new
knowledge about the brain’s physiology would not shift religious, moral, or social values see
Smith, “Physiology of the Will” 90–8. The concept of a physiological will is later attacked and re-psychologized by William James in \textit{Principles of Psychology} (1891), and by the ensuing
trends of experimentalism, psychoanalysis, and behaviorism (Berrios, \textit{History of Mental
Symptoms} 351–2, 355–6). For reflections on the literary devaluation of the will as an attribute of
experience see Fisher, “Torn Space” 683.

\textsuperscript{39} “The Theory of Vitality,” Appendix to \textit{Body and Mind} 187.

\textsuperscript{40} Carpenter, “Physiology” 192–3.
Naturally the “hesitating Dane” whom Eliot labels “speculative and irresolute,” became a litmus test for these concerns. In an essay originally in the *Westminster Review* in 1865, Maudsley discusses Hamlet’s hesitation within a physiological framework. He adumbrates claims similar to those put forward in his *Body and Mind* (1870) lectures, where the tendency of automatic reflexes to become habitual—yielding similar motor responses whether by external stimulation or internal impulse—suggests how widely volition is subtended by “automatic agency,” less a unitary will than a sequence of volitional acts. For Maudsley, “reflective indecision” represents a “stage of development through which minds of a certain character pass before they consciously acquire by exercise a habit of willing,” the will being an artifact paradoxically “built up by successive acts of volition.” Maudsley’s argument is similar to Carpenter’s on the moral importance of directing our will to control the automatism on which it

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41 “A College Breakfast-Party” l. 1 (in *Complete Shorter Poetry*); *Mill on the Floss* 353.

42 “Hamlet.” Eliot was also given to physiological specifics. Commenting on a photograph of Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s *Hamlet*, she praises all but one detail: “I feel sure that ‘Hamlet’ had a square anterior lobe” (*GEL* 5.79; February 1870).

43 *Body and Mind*, 12, 21–3. On reflexes and “secondary automatic acts,” see 6–17. Maudsley clearly keeps Hamlet in mind as a case: he ends this lecture by musing, “there are many more things in the reciprocal action of mind and organic element than are yet dreamt of in our philosophy” (39), and his second on mental and nervous disorders by noting the “tyranny” of physiological factors that “unconsciously and irresistibly shape [our] ends” (75). Both *Body and Mind* and *The Physiology of Mind* (1876), the first half of the third edition of an earlier work, were in the Eliot/Lewes library. In the latter Eliot makes a note to a section (208–9) where Maudsley offers examples of involuntary reactions to pain and mimetic imitations of sound (Baker, *The George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Library*). Maudsley’s work has an extended discussion of the will (*Physiology of Mind* 409–62), expanded in the later *Body and Will* (1883).

44 “Hamlet” 74. Maudsley is ostensibly reviewing (but never mentions) John Conolly’s *A Study of Hamlet* (1863), one of several medico-psychological analyses of the play (compare J. C. Bucknill’s cruder portrait in *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare* [1867] 48–143). On Maudsley’s centrality to English psychiatry, as a successor of Conolly see Showalter, *Female Malady* 101–20. For a reading of Hamlet’s hesitation see Ziolkowski 74–95, who points out that critical concern with Hamlet’s indecision is largely due to A. C. Bradley’s *Shakespearean Tragedy*, despite the many discussions that predate it, including Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s.
necessarily relies: “From the time when the human being first becomes conscious that he has a power within himself of determining the succession of his mental states, from that time does he begin to be a free agent; and in proportion as he acquires the power of self-control, does he become capable of emancipating himself from the domination of his automatic tendencies, and of turning his faculties to the most advantageous use.”

Daniel Deronda evinces some striking connections to the literary tradition of hesitation and its nineteenth-century renewal, in what can be seen as another instantiation of Eliot’s familiar concern with the “individual lot” as against the general law. Adrian Poole has described Hamlet as the period’s model for having an “autonomous selfhood,” and the play is a constant background model for Deronda in his intellectual width, his “reflective hesitation” (180), his orphaned suspicion of familial connections, and his gendered mode of moralizing. Gwendolen finally attains the “self-knowledge prompting such self-accusation as Hamlet’s” (795), even though she has been indecisive all along. Mordecai, too, is characterized in an

45 “Physiology” 207–8. On the importance of habit in Eliot, its exertion of (positive and negative) control over action, tendency to usurp the place of volition, and difficulties for an account of progress, see Markovits, Crisis of Action 93–5.

46 Indeed, Eliot’s use of Hamlet as the prime example of “character is destiny” turns, via hesitation, into a vision of hypothetical paths that utterly undermine the initial proposition. Hardy claims that Eliot would have written Hamlet with an eye to such alternatives, maintaining “a ghostly presence within the actuality of event” (Novels 135). Zemka sees the novel as Eliot’s differing reponse to how modern time shapes the will: in Deronda “the will surrenders to the direction of ancestral life”; in Gwendolen it “disintegrates under the pressure of speed” (Time 147).

47 Shakespeare and the Victorians 123; on the interest of Hamlet for Deronda and Gwendolen see 133–5.

48 Markovits comments on the strange connection to Hamlet (Crisis of Action 207n109). This is not to discount Ophelia, especially given her centrality for psychiatry in the period (see Showalter, Female Malady 10–11, 90–1), but the specific diagnoses attached to her character are less applicable to Gwendolen. Eliot and Lewes saw a version of Hamlet in 1861 (GEJ 98). In his
allusion to Goethe’s description of Hamlet in *Wilhelm Meister*, his body a “breaking pot of earth around the fruit-bearing tree, whose seed might make the desert rejoice” (497). Aeschylus’ trilogy was also of longstanding interest for Eliot, having played a crucial role in *Adam Bede* and its conception of “Nemesis.” Yet Deronda’s connection to Orestes—mentioned as a reference point along with the hesitant Rinaldo of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata* (205)—seems to shed its attachment to the drastic elements of the *Oresteia* trilogy.

The architecture of hesitation takes hold from the opening sentence of *Daniel Deronda*—“Was she beautiful or not beautiful?”—which reads as a sly allusion to those more famous dramatic queries of hesitation—“To be or not to be?” (*Hamlet* 3.1.56); “Did she do it or did she not?” (*The Libation Bearers*, l. 1009)—that become the real matter of uncertainty in a novel that saves one character from suicide and acquits another of the will to murder, while nonetheless review Lewes praises the actor’s “vacillation” and notes the “physiological qualities which give the force of animal passion demanded by tragedy” (“Fechter” 746).

49 In Goethe’s version: “An oak tree planted in a precious pot which should only have held delicate flowers. The roots spread out; the vessel is shattered” (*Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* 146). Eliot’s engagement with Goethe was longstanding, and reinforced by Lewes and his *Life of Goethe*. She read *Wilhelm Meister* in the 1850s, defended it in “The Morality of *Wilhelm Meister*” (1855), and reread it in the 1870s (*GEJ* 33–6, 141). See Ashton, *The German Idea* and “Mixed and Erring Humanity”; Schaffer, “George Eliot and Goethe”; Cave, *Retrospectives* 172–4; and Mack 168–92.

50 In 1857–8 she read Aeschylus’ trilogy while composing *Adam Bede* (*GEJ* 70–1, 73); and a second time in 1865, as she begins to write *Felix Holt* (*GEJ* 124–5). On Orestes see Ziolkowski *Hesitant Hero* 34–53, Vogl *Tarrying* 23–38.

51 The novel also recalls a legendary figure of strategic hesitation, Fabius, who conquered the Carthaginians through delay and earned the name *Cunctator* (“delay”). Eliot uses Thomas Browne’s paraphrase of the Latin *festina lente* in a chapter motto: “celerity should be contempered with cunctation” (156). While reviewing William Lecky’s *History of European Morals*, Eliot copies out a maxim from Ennius, which notes of Fabius how “One man among us, by delaying, restored the state; for he did not privilege rumors over its security/safety” (*Some George Eliot Notebooks*, 2, Pf 708, 41f). Eliot’s review is critical: “The writer frequently impresses us as being in a state of hesitation concerning his own standing-point, which may form a desirable stage in private meditation but not in published exposition” (54).
opening out dark alternatives and narrative sideshadows in which these outcomes are easily imaginable. Indeed, Eliot’s amendment of *Macbeth*, above, in defending affect’s subtlety against action’s crudeness, reads like a sketch of the suspended moment that cannot house mutually exclusive actions—“we cannot kill and not kill in the same moment”—even if it contains “room wide enough […] for the outlash of a murderous thought and the sharp backward stroke of repentance” (42). 52 The opening establishes the rubric of what Barbara Hardy terms “divided sensibility” as a quality “less demonstrable in action.” 53 A narrative that begins in the mode of “unrest,” hesitant about its own fabricated setting out, glances back to a philosophical touchstone in giving one protagonist, and the opening in general, a “dynamic quality.” 54 Eliot’s publisher stumbled over this newfangled word, but his sense that “dynamic” must have a scientific feel 55 distracts from its deeper root in Aristotle’s term for potentiality (*dynamis*), the capacity that allows entities to be (or not), persons to do (or not), a modal undercurrent that is the condition for action and the idling engine of hesitation. 56

52 *OED* cites this for the rare “outlash.”

53 Hardy, *Novels* 58.


55 He calls it “a dictionary word to so many people” (*GEL* 6.183; John Blackwood to Eliot, 10 November 1875). Hutton and James also criticized the word in their respective reviews; see Beer, *Darwin’s Plots* 139. Markovits connects its use to Comte’s terms “static” and “dynamic,” “fitted to act” and “actually acting” (*Crisis of Action* 111). Eliot had used “dynamic” in *Middlemarch*, so perhaps its place in the first sentence was the issue.

56 Agamben has pressed the negative character of *dynamis* in Aristotle’s *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, the sense that “potentiality” is inseparably “impotentiality.” To the latter he also gives the term “contingency,” in reference to Leibniz’s modal categories (possibility,
The formal and physiological properties of hesitation dictate—and exceed—the novel’s prurient representations of gambling, with its distraction tantamount to physical stasis and its temporal suspensions prising open the continuum of sensation. The novel includes a range of disapproving positions on gambling, from Sir Hugo’s description of a “monotonous” activity that “knits the brain up into meshes” (161) to Deronda’s own moralizing view of a “disease,” a “besetting kind of taste” that reproduces the vices of social inequity against which it should be a warning, there being “enough inevitable turns of fortune which force us to see that our gain is another’s loss” (337). Both these positions approach Eliot’s frequently expressed distaste.

Still, the arch tone of these statements only indexes the pathological aspects of a mental state that also bears salutary possibilities. Even when the narrator frames a standard physiological view of the “gambling appetite” as “more absolutely dominant than bodily hunger,” her description is undercut by a floating parenthesis that makes room for a less exclusionary state in the “passion impossibility, potentiality, contingency); see Potentialities 177–84, 243–71. Following Agamben and Gilles Deleuze, Vogl reads Orestes’ raised hand as a representation of potentiality (Tarrying 27). Ricoeur alludes to the classical category in seeing hesitation as an interplay between power and incapacity: “in the chaos of my intentions lurks the conviction of my powerlessness,” but also that “indecisive fecundity which always remains this side of choice” (Freedom 138).

This claim is a disanalogy in roulette, since winning cannot coherently be seen as compromising another’s play. The game may be, as Gallagher shows, a realm of “pure exchange” that is “mystified, abstracted, and grotesquely passive,” but it cannot exactly be a “war of all against all” (“The Prostitute and the Jewish Question” 48).

Notably in her account of the hellish Kursaal in Homburg: “Burglary is heroic compared with [gambling]. I get some satisfaction in looking on from the sense that the thing is going to be put down. Hell is the only right name for such places” (GEL 5.312; to Mrs. William Cross, [25 September 1872]; cf. GEL 5.314). These comments are made at the time Eliot is finishing the “Finale” to Middlemarch. Cottom argues that gambling in Eliot represents the fragmentation of modern social structure and satirizes human action in a lawless world (Social Figures 175–8). On gambling in Eliot see Bonaparte, Will and Destiny 16–22; Hardy, Novels 133–4; Carpenter, Landscape of Time 138–9; Shaffer, Fall of Jerusalem 282; Fisher, Making Up Society 211–12; Gallagher, “The Prostitute and the Jewish Question” 48; Franklin, “Victorian Discourse of Gambling”; Flavin, Gambling 125–45; Stone, “Play of Chance”; and Rosenthal, “Large Novel and the Law of Large Numbers.”
for watching chances—the habitual suspensive poise of the mind in actual or imaginary play—
[that] nullifies the susceptibility to other excitation” (773).59

My account of inductive vanity widened the context of attitudes towards uncertain outcomes in showing a misprision of probability as both mathematical and epistemic commitment—both gambler’s fallacy and derailment of inductive logic. This portrait of hesitation recasts these vain stances—including the novel’s gambling behaviors—within a physiological paradigm. Recent work in psychology and economics has stressed the enduring appeal of gambling as a model for motivational dysfunction. Jon Elster’s accounts of addiction have suggested the deep congruence between rational decision and irrational motivation.60 Don Ross’s experimental work on gambling takes it as the formal paradigm for all other addictions, since what lures addictive gamblers—the uncertainty between play and result—engages neurochemical reactions no different from those in expectation of stimulants. Gambling’s “midbrain mutiny” in the brain’s reward-circuit is, in the work of Ross and others, a model for weakness of will.61 Finally, George Ainslie’s account of how people engage in “hyperbolic discounting” in relation to future rewards—preferring smaller, more immediate rewards over larger, later ones despite subsequent regret—has raised a provocative vision of the self as a

59 In *Middlemarch*, an analogous division is observed: Fred Vincy is said not to have “that specific disease in which the suspension of the whole nervous energy on a chance or risk becomes as necessary as the dram to the drunkard,” but “only the tendency to that diffusive form of gambling which has no alcoholic intensity, but is carried on with the healthiest chyle-fed blood, keeping up a joyous imaginative activity which fashions events according to desire” (231).

60 See *Ulysses and the Sirens*, “Gambling and Addiction,” and *Strong Feelings*.

61 Ross, “Economic Models of Addiction”; see also the essays in Sharp et al., *Midbrain Mutiny*. 
“population” of agents with conflicting interests over time. In this “motivational marketplace,” interests bargain with or against one another, often entering into complex arrangements of “partial cooperation” or “limited warfare” for survival. For Ainslie the will just is this intertemporal, game-theoretic model of cooperation, the “recursive process that bets the expected value of your future self-control against each of your successive temptations” and makes consistent behavior possible by outlining its “rankable goals and its procedures for consciously auditing your internal bookkeeping process.”

This work inherits some aspects of Victorian psycho-physiology, and in addition to flummoxing philosophical accounts of rational resolve, intentional stability, and temporal planning, it erodes the emphasis on utility in the motivations of economic agents. Two examples from Eliot will serve to show the confluence of factors joining gambling and hesitation as paradigms for uncertain motivation. The first concerns Lapidoth, the wayward father of

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62 Breakdown of Will 39–44.

63 Breakdown of Will 70, 90–104.

64 Breakdown of Will 89, 99. On “intertemporal bargaining,” see generally 73–140.

65 Ainslie mentions Victorian writers, for example when surveying willpower and personal maxims in Bain, Sully, and James (Breakdown of Will 79–80). In this reading I will remain agnostic about the related, metaphysical question of freedom and determinism in matters of the will.

66 Ainslie’s account of motivational states, rejecting an equivalence between reward and pleasure (Breakdown of Will 58–61), marks a difference between my reading and Gallagher’s assessment of Eliot’s “models of motivation” according to Bain’s pleasure/pain calculus (Body Economic 120–3, 130–51). Gallagher’s contextual use of Jevons’s marginal utility curve, which describes the having of a commodity up to a point of surfeit (121–22), runs counter to my use of Ainslie’s hyperbolic discount curve, which describes the not-having of an object of want up to the point of promptly gratifiable impulse. Indeed, Jevons inaugurated the utility maximization that Ainslie debunks as an account of human motivation, even though he first framed discounting in proportional terms: “all future events […] should act upon us with the same force as if they were present, allowance being made for their uncertainty” (Theory of Political Economy 76).
Mordecai and Mirah, whose brief appearance in *Daniel Deronda* signals the return of gambling as a theme, rounding out a novel that spends a good deal of time away from its vivid primal scene in Leubronn. Lapidoth is most striking for the quick portrait Eliot gives of his temptation, restraint, and reflex resolve in stealing from Deronda. While he entertains alternately a “forecast” and “prospective regret” about how much money to solicit from Deronda, the prospect of a larger and later reward evaporates in those “airy conditions preparatory to a receipt which remained indefinite” (789), when he notices Deronda’s ring out in the open and “by no distinct change of resolution, rather by a dominance of desire” (790) almost accidentally absconds with it. In this small-scale vision of the self at odds with itself—a self in expectation supervened upon by a self instantly to be gratified—Lapidoth’s impulsivity usurps his longer-term desires.

The second example is from *Middlemarch*, and concerns that hapless youth and case study in hyperbolic discounting, Fred Vincy. When challenged about the way he has raised expectations about Featherstone’s probable bequest, Fred is swayed by the prospect of a close reward, it being “almost harder to part with the immediate prospect of bank-notes than with the more distant prospect of the land.” In his sequence of moralized mistakes, Fred consistently discounts future states to satiate present desires, whether by talking up an uncertain inheritance to assuage his debtors or purchasing a horse in a speculative attempt to recoup assets. Prior to being handed less money than he expected to receive from Featherstone, he lets his “hopeful disposition” get the better of him:

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67 Compare Maudsley, *Body and Mind*: “actions for a definite end, having indeed the semblance of predesigning consciousness and will, may be quite unconscious and automatic” (9).

68 Lapidoth gives in to reward not pleasure, in what *Middlemarch* calls “that pleasureless yielding to the small solicitations of circumstance” (772).

69 *Middlemarch* 108.
When Fred got into debt, it always seemed to him highly probable that something or other—he did not necessarily conceive what—would come to pass enabling him to pay in due time. And now that the providential occurrence was apparently close at hand, it would have been sheer absurdity to think that the supply would be short of the need: as absurd as a faith that believed in half a miracle for want of strength to believe in a whole one.\textsuperscript{70}

Yet he also, perhaps unwittingly, recognizes the ravages of his self-defeating acts and erects an external safeguard or what Ainslie classes as a personal rule, giving most of the money to his mother and so “tak[ing] some security against his own liability.”\textsuperscript{71} If \textit{Middlemarch} is less engaged with the perplexing type of hesitation that \textit{Daniel Deronda} will unleash, the novel nonetheless models an uncertain, fluctuating population of selves. Fred’s self-rule involves a difference between his “inner self” and its momentary others; Lydgate bears “two selves within him,” which “must learn to accommodate each other and bear reciprocal impediments” as though bargaining across time.\textsuperscript{72}

Where \textit{Middlemarch} muses on how “some of us, with quick alternate vision, see beyond our infatuations, and even while we rave on the heights, behold the wide plain where our persistent self pauses and awaits us,” \textit{Daniel Deronda} declares no such Nebo of normative consistency.\textsuperscript{73} Its heroine’s terror of wide spaces makes clear that no meta-self awaits her: Eliot goes far beyond undermining the realist “conception of a unified, integrated character.”\textsuperscript{74} The labyrinthine picture of decision in Gwendolen’s case evades even the more sophisticated

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Middlemarch} 131.

\textsuperscript{71} \textit{Middlemarch} 138.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Middlemarch} 133, 150.

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Middlemarch} 151.

\textsuperscript{74} Shuttleworth, “Language of Science” 289; see also Bonaparte, \textit{Will and Destiny} 51–3, on the self as a collection of accidents.
descriptions of hesitation, which still assume resistance in a single direction: Ricoeur speaks of
the process from hesitation to choice; Vogl of the “vestibule of acting.” Her choice does not
resolve “antecedent indetermination” into a “univocal project.” “Men, like planets, have both a
visible and an invisible history,” we read: if narration were akin to astronomy one “would have
to thread the hidden pathways of feeling and thought which lead up to every moment of action,
and to those moments of intense suffering which take the quality of action” (164). Such analyses
of motive, Neil Hertz reasons, blur agency and passivity, and here it is odd that action should
be described in terms that join etymologically with passivity (from Latin patiri, “to suffer,” “to
undergo”). Eliot’s dynamic, temporally looping hesitation moves beyond even this. Hesitation
disorients the cohesion of single projects and unidirectional action, following the “secret
windings and recesses” of inner life (420) to open out a strange picture of action as less a discrete
quantity than a condensation of intensities along a continuum. Inductive vanity models an inept
rapidity of prediction and action, to which hesitation offers corrective method in its slow time of
potentiality and its maze of delay. Hesitation is our failsafe in providing, so to speak, neither the
will nor the way.

75 Vogl, Tarrying 32.
76 Ricoeur, Freedom 164.
77 George Eliot’s Pulse 135–6. Markovits notes Eliot’s presentation of “suffering as a
form of activity” (Crisis of Action 99).
78 Hesitation is thus distinct from inaction or the inconsequential states of “uncounted
experience” that François calls “recessive action” (Open Secrets 1–65).
Hesitant Decisions

You see I have two minds, and both are foolish.
Sometimes a torrent rushing through my soul
Escapes in wild strange wishes [...] .

—Eliot, The Spanish Gypsy

Distrust thyself even to the day of thy death.

—Talmud, Pirkei Avot

Several facets of Gwendolen’s fluctuating psyche make up the “iridescence of her character” (42): her blend of exceptionalism and distrust of the average, of unpredictability and distaste for the limitations of probability; her alternations between self-confident petulance and outbreaks of terror; and her ignorant outlook, a result of her uprooted childhood and the absence of an anchoring point for adult experience. In sketching these facets, Eliot ponders the advantage of the painter, unconstrained “to represent the truth of change” and tasked “only to give stability to one beautiful moment” (117), as she tracks, over fully a third of the novel, the stages of Gwendolen’s decision to marry. The features of radical hesitation outlined above overpower—even as they rely on—Gwendolen’s substratum of will and resolve. The first stage of decision, taking as its model the felt and fluttering states of inductive vanity, demonstrates how choice is paralyzed so that only what I term a proxy decision—one that depends on the wills of third parties—seems possible. The second, achieved stage of decision turns to figures of action as dynamic process, yet decision here is still undermined by a hesitation that continues beyond the moment of choice. After evaluating the one-sided power dynamic of the marriage to Grandcourt,

79 The Spanish Gypsy ll. 2196–8.
80 Quoted in Notebooks (Pf 707 28).
I consider the high-water mark of hesitant consciousness to be Gwendolen’s intentions prior to her husband’s fatal accident.

Given Gwendolen’s propensity to anxious inference, it is significant that her early assessment of Grandcourt as a suitor blends reflections on degrees of likelihood with flights of caprice, abstract comparisons with temerities felt as sensations. Her first sight of him sees Eliot resorting to an odd narrative device, perhaps taking literally her epigraphic comment that the “beginning of an acquaintance whether with persons or things is to get a definite outline for our ignorance” (111). Fashioning a cutout within which details will later emerge, Eliot has Gwendolen’s thoughts reported in a series of parenthetical jump-cuts: “Pause, during which she imagined various degrees and modes of opinion about herself that might be entertained” (112). Thus Gwendolen is envisioned “having taken a rapid observation […] [and] made a brief graphic description of [Grandcourt] to an indefinite hearer” as she variously “recalled,” “decided,” “wondered,” “reflected” and “speculated on the probability that the men of coldest manners were the most adventurous, and felt the strength of her own insight, supposing the question had to be decided” (112).

This mode of conversational description—termed “psychological notation” by Leavis—has a number of functions. Apparently proffering access to the workings of Gwendolen’s mind, the formulaic pauses satirize what might be gained by such a commentary; separate out the putative lovers and their appraisals, even in the act of bringing them together for the first time; and set in motion the pattern of staccato suppositions that accompanies the narrative through to

81 Great Tradition 102–3. John Blackwood thought the scene to be “like what passes through the mind after each move at a game” (GEL 6.182; to Eliot, 10 November 1875). Tucker sees the scene as “compositional notes for the conventional realist novel [Eliot] can no longer bring herself to write” since it focuses on Gwendolen’s own belief in the autonomy of her own interior, later questioned (Probable State 80, 115–17).
the nominal decision and beyond. The scene is shaded in a corporeal tone, from the breathtaking shock that attends Gwendolen’s first view of Grandcourt to the persistence of an “unwonted flush in her cheeks and the sense of surprise which made her feel less mistress of herself than usual” (114). Grandcourt’s glancing proposition is registered in two bodily temporalities: her dilated time of sensation—“first blushing, and then turning pale”—as she listens; and his more languid “rate of judgment” (133). In these early stages, Gwendolen is beset by an “uneasy consciousness of divided impulses which threatened her with repentance of her own acts” (133–4), as though judging the present from the standpoint of the future perfect. Her interactions compel physiological responses. She is given to speaking “rather nervously” (135) and “hesitatingly” (136), with “excitement and changefulness” (138) in her expression, even though, in her own mistaken view, this does not adumbrate “any subjugation of her will” (132). Her uncertainties are registered from within—“I am in doubt myself” (139)—and from without, Grandcourt asking whether she is “as uncertain about yourself as you make others about you” (135).82

In addition to its physiological agitations, her desire is beset by probabilistic calculations, typically in inverted terms. She has the thought that “after all she was not going to accept Grandcourt” (113) barely moments after an introduction to him. Later in the evening while dancing a quadrille and sensing his particular attentions, “it began to appear probable that she would have it in her power to reject him”—the implied proposal becoming visible only as an occasion for rejection—“whence there was a pleasure in reckoning up the advantages which

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82 Shuttleworth points to physiological psychology and related theories of language in suggesting that Eliot departs from the period’s model of a rational actor in fashioning Gwendolen, relying on materials drawn from Lewes and Sully (“Language and Science” 282–3, 289–92; George Eliot 184–9).
would make her rejection splendid, and in giving Mr Grandcourt his utmost value” (121). She says she wants to be “at liberty” to risk as she catches herself unwittingly “risking something,” the “possibility of finally checking Grandcourt’s advances” (133).

Gwendolen’s hesitations—in bodily reaction and mental operation—show her gradual lapse from the vain self-possession that needs “everyone to understand that she was going to do just as she liked, and that they had better not calculate on her pleasing them” (132). Yet her own intentions undermine her, and the grammar of her reported thoughts tracks an indecisive, iterative sequence: “on the whole she wished to marry him; he suited her purpose; her prevailing, deliberate intention was, to accept him. [...] But was she going to fulfil her deliberate intention? She began to be afraid of herself, and to find out a certain difficulty in doing as she liked” (138). Engulfed by the paradox of weighing a choice that would remove her freedom of choice—a de-liberation—she is caught by a radically hesitant consciousness:84

Even in Gwendolen’s mind that result was one of two likelihoods that presented themselves alternately, one of two decisions toward which she was being precipitated, as if they were two sides of a boundary-line, and she did not know on which she should fall. This subjection to a possible self, a self not to be absolutely predicted about, caused her some astonishment and terror; her favorite key of life—doing as she liked—seemed to fail her, and she could not foresee what at a given moment she might like to do. (136)

The structure of hesitation—entertaining a “possible self,” an unsettling future landscape of motivation—is yoked to an image of Gwendolen as an object uncertainly cast, as though in an

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83 Quadrille also refers, significantly, to a card game characterized (in Charles Lamb’s words) by “chance-started, capricious, and ever fluctuating alliances” (“Mrs. Battle’s Opinions on Whist” 33–4). Mirah is seen reading Lamb’s essays in the novel.

84 This august pun is notably put in Hobbes’s account of deliberation, where the usual Latin etymology about the weighing of choices (librare) is turned to questions of freedom and power (liberare). Hobbes remains a provocative voice on the will, which he sees as merely the final appetite (or fear) preceding a concrete volitional act. See Skinner, Hobbes and Republican Liberty 20–6, 90–1.
experiment or game of geometric probability.\textsuperscript{85} Her “perspicacity” fails on account of her inability to invoke definite standards of comparison for thinking about her future selves and options. Since “ignorance gives one a large range of probabilities,” as the narrator drolly observes, Gwendolen is left hamstrung by two probabilities whose value she cannot tilt towards one outcome or other.\textsuperscript{86}

Her difficulties are compounded by the incalculability of Grandcourt, an abstract character who has raised the hypotheticals of his life situation—anticipating bequests as the “almost certain baronet, the probable peer” (140)—into a \textit{modus vivendi}. His passions are “of the intermittent, flickering kind” (156) and in the “slowly-churning chances of his mind” thoughts are “like the circlets one sees in a dark pool continually dying out and continually started again by some impulse from below the surface” (319).\textsuperscript{87} His valet of fifteen years, Lush, has difficulty in assessing him: the “probable effect” of general information is “quite incalculable” given his inscrutability in any “particular case” (281). Even the narrator abjures certainty about such a “mind made up of moods”: “How trace the why and wherefore in a mind reduced to the

\textsuperscript{85} The image may be drawn from Proctor’s “Gambling Superstitions,” which describes an experiment analogous to urn-drawing or coin-tossing that involves tossing objects through parallel rods or slats, to observe the resulting distribution. On this problem see Seneta, Parshall, and Jongmans, “Nineteenth-Century Developments in Geometric Probability.”

\textsuperscript{86} Several critics have noted the extent of this volitional collapse: David, \textit{Fictions of Resolution} 138–9; Thurschwell describes Gwendolen’s “crises of motivation” (“George Eliot’s Prophecies”); Goldberg points to her “radical insecurity” (\textit{Agents and Lives} 130); Markovits assesses her failures of effective agency, partly in terms of gender constraints (\textit{Crisis of Action} 111–18); Gallagher describes the character system as “organized around the problem of impaired motivation,” pointing to the resulting “uncertainty about the novel’s sources of propulsion” and emphasizing Gwendolen’s “incapacity of the will” (\textit{Body Economic} 132). Eliot’s last novel forms a counter to her treatment of motivation elsewhere, which Bayley describes as “a matter of laborious but essentially feasible reconstruction” (“Pastoral of Intellect” 206).

\textsuperscript{87} Shuttleworth links this image to Lewes’s metaphor of the mind as a lake (“Language of Science” 289). Zemka points to his “hedonistic immersion in momentary consciousness” as a type of modern temporality (\textit{Time} 166).
barrenness of a fastidious egoism, in which all direct desires are dulled, and have dwindled from motives into a vacillating expectation of motives [?]” (278). Grandcourt’s meditations throw up endless hypotheticals, drawing on “a state of the inward world […] where the need for action lapses into a mere image of what has been, is, and may or might be; […] pausing in rejection even of a shadowy fulfilment” (319). In one of several reptilian figures, he appears as “some lizard of a hitherto unknown species” (137), and Deronda’s “imagination was as much astray about Grandcourt as it would have been about an unexplored continent where all the species were peculiar” (412–13).

Grandcourt’s “tendency to harden under beseeching” (341) brings difficulties for another who “depended on his will” (343), his former mistress Lydia Glasher. It leads him to a hesitation that is the inverse of Gwendolen’s, predicated on certainty rather than doubt:

He had never admitted to himself that Gwendolen might refuse him, but—heaven help us all!—we are often unable to act on our certainties; our objection to a contrary issue (were it possible) is so strong that it rises like a spectral illusion between us and our certainty; we are rationally sure that the blind worm can not bite us mortally, but it would be so intolerable to be bitten, and the creature has a biting look—we decline to handle it. (130)

He does not follow the innuendoes of flirtation and refuses to act on a hint “which the change in her manner made apparently decisive of her favourable intention” (148), because he “would not make his offer in any way that could place him definitely in the position of being rejected” (133). Nonetheless, he “wanted to have done with the uncertainty that belonged to his not having spoken. As to any further uncertainty—well, it was something without any reasonable basis,

88 Gallagher takes these shifts to “indicate a suspension of the sequencing necessary for the accomplishment of any goal,” in reading Grandcourt as a surfeited consumer (Body Economic 135).

89 Grandcourt is thus type of an unknown in natural history, for which comparison will be offered as the corrective in Impressions of Theophrastus Such (104–5). See Fisher, Making Up Society 217–24, on the various forms of “negation” which his character adopts throughout life, and even in death when “he is not rescued” (221).
some quality in the air which acted as an irritant to his wishes” (131–2). “The gain of knowing you,” he drawls, “makes me feel the time I lose in uncertainty,” yet he does not press Gwendolen in the direction of clear intentions but back into an opaque zone of equivocal interaction. “Do you like uncertainty?” (147) he asks, to which she responds in perplexity, “There is more in it” (148).

Two extremes of choice compel this vacillating state of affairs. Gwendolen will only give herself over to a recursive decision—a choice that retains the pure form of choice, the potential for unrestricted future options—that would secure the “power of doing a great deal of what she liked to do” (137). In default of concrete goals, she takes it for granted that her marriage will vaguely confer “dignities” and “luxuries” (137). The continuing capacity to choose is paramount, given her view of marriage as a “dreary state, in which a woman could not do what she liked” (39). Grandcourt, by contrast, seeks the pure form of restricting choice.90 He looks to be the “master of a woman who would have liked to master him” (320) and refrains from explicit coercion—as he later avoids overt violence in his marriage—only because “his will must impose itself without trouble” (350).91 His treatment contorts her person into an instrument, his deception takes her goals as mere means to his ends since he keeps from her his awareness of the

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90 This attitude is more extreme, because more abstract, than the observation that Grandcourt’s “sated condition has concentrated his remaining pleasurable sensations in the exercise of willing alone” (Gallagher, *Body Economic* 135); see 134–40 for their dynamic. Mintz recognizes that the issue the “granting or denial of personal liberty” (*Novel of Vocation* 153); Bonaparte focuses on the tension between egoism and irrational will in their relation, *Will and Destiny* 97–102. On Grandcourt as an embodiment of evil see Raina, McCobb, McCarron, and Myers, *Teaching* 176–82.

91 Their interaction resembles a “tissue of covert coercions, of violences cloaked, transmuted and internalised” (Reilly, *Shadowtime* 123) Caron sees Grandcourt as a mesmerist or diviner (2–3); Levine as a corrupt foil to Mordecai, both as “daemonic agents” (“Marriage of Allegory and Realism” 424). See also Thale, *Novels* 125–30; Goldberg, *Agents and Lives* 117–21.
knowledge—principally about his former mistress—that Gwendolen might use as a lever for her own just causes.92 These attitudes are replicated in narration. Where the narrator suggests that Gwendolen “would willingly have had weights hung on her own caprice” (139), as though trying to bring her to a concrete decision, it seems clear that she would only submit in such a way if limitless possibilities would be thereby guaranteed. At the archery meeting, the intense expectation that Grandcourt will arrive is indirectly recorded as Gwendolen’s resistance—that “he was not to have the slightest power over her”—which the narrator undercuts by claiming that the “desire to conquer is itself a sort of subjection” (106).

Whatever the internal state of affairs between these two forbearing characters, the external picture their comportment suggests is clear. Grandcourt’s calculated strategies create an “assurance” in public opinion that, in the mind of its representative—Mr. Gascoigne, Rector of Offendene and Gwendolen’s uncle—“converted itself into a resolution to do his duty by his niece” (130). In pressuring his niece into a decision by proxy, Mr. Gascoigne exploits her propensity to rely on others’ opinions.93 Her experience with Klesmer gradually unsettles her self-possession from being a “blissful gift of intuition” to the state of feeling “consciously in need of another person’s opinion” (251). If Gwendolen could formerly find “external testimony” (251) by looking at her reflection in a mirror, she increasingly finds that to “consider what ‘anybody’ would say, was to be released from the difficulty of judging where everything was

92 I lean here on the Kantian reading of consent and coercion in O’Neill, “Between Consenting Adults”: “Even the most autonomous cannot genuinely consent to proposals about which they are deceived or with which they are compelled to comply” (259). On deception in the novel, and its alliance to art, see Fisher, Making Up Society 215–16.

93 This complex has received various descriptions: “paternal admonition” (Tanner, Adultery 225–31); “hero as mentor” (Hardy, Novels 57); “mentor-lover” (Menon 163–87); “avuncularism” (Cleere 152, 157–9). See also Chase, Eros & Psyche 175–6; Poole, “Hidden Affinities” 299–302.
obscure to her when feeling had ceased to be decisive.” The “verdict of ‘anybody’” (298) comes to be more pressing than her own. Her talent for archery is matched by an opposing incompetence in decision: she finds herself in the “unstrung condition” (621) of suspense, drawing the string of action, only to await another to loose the arrow. Her position alternates between proxy consent, a model of deciding for those who are not (yet) capable of their own decisions, and the type of constrained choice that Bernard Williams shows may be congruent with natural necessity.94

When her mother reports that Gwendolen is “in some uncertainty about her own mind, but inclined on the whole to acceptance,” her uncle intervenes. His mental outlook is the opposite of hers, the product of “a firm mind, grasping its first judgments tenaciously and acting on them promptly, whence counter-judgments were no more for him than shadows fleeting across the solid ground to which he adjusted himself” (140). If “some of his experience had petrified into maxims and quotations” (157), such a criticism still confirms the stability of his mental tenor. His “mode of speech always conveyed a thrill of authority, as a word of command: it seemed to take for granted that there could be no wavering in the audience, and that every one was going to be rationally obedient” (141).

Mr. Gascoigne’s dissuasive influence is modeled when he prises apart a nascent connection between his son Rex and Gwendolen, coercing by saying that “my experience gives me some power of judging for you” (86–7). Gwendolen promises to be less susceptible than Rex

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94 For consent “by proxy” in the case of children and the mentally impaired see Wellman, An Approach to Rights, 97–104; Feinberg, Rights, Justice, and the Bounds of Liberty, 163. Williams: “When someone is constrained actually to do something, the typical situation is […] that there is an imposed choice. […] This too the Greeks called anangkē […] so far as the restriction of the agent’s alternatives is concerned, the threatening intentions of another agent are only a special case of something more general. An unpleasant choice may equally be imposed by nature” (Shame and Necessity 152–3).
and often expresses a resistance to her uncle’s “control” (97, 31). But her own hesitations about Grandcourt bring about new motives and vulnerabilities, a hesitation “without grounds” that the Rector taps to bring her round: “Gwendolen became pallid as she listened to this admonitory speech. The ideas it raised had the force of sensations. Her resistant courage would not help her here, because her uncle was not urging her against her own resolve; he was pressing upon her the motives of dread which she already felt; he was making her more conscious of the risks that lay within herself” (142). Her accepting response—however temporary—makes her feel “as if she were reinforcing herself by speaking with this decisiveness” (143).

The model of decision by external pressure is reflected, in a more insidious way, by the “peremptory will” (127) of Grandcourt himself. His negative, amorphous, undemonstrative character creates a force of its own, his overall “languor of intention” (150) exerting a magnetism that brings anyone around him into a “lotos-eater’s stupor” (135). The sheer emptiness of his motivation—seeing in every act merely another indulgence, “another gratification of mere will, sublimely independent of definite motive” (150)—proves alluring. Yet Gwendolen still needs her uncle’s presence to guarantee a decision. Looking forward to the next archery meeting, she “foresaw [Grandcourt] making slow conversational approaches to a declaration, and foresaw herself awaiting and encouraging it according to the rational conclusion she had expressed” under Mr. Gascoigne’s instruction, yet when he is detained “decision in itself began to be formidable” (145, 146).

At the end of the first stage of this process, no external pressure is more efficacious than Lydia’s letter urging Gwendolen to meet with her and intimating that if she is “in doubt” about accepting Grandcourt, she will discover “something to decide her” (149). The transitive formulation makes Gwendolen the object of a decision rather than a deliberating subject and
does lead to a brief resolution: “If I am to be miserable, let it be by my own choice” (155). Her formerly “indistinct grounds of hesitation” disappear in a “final repulsion” (297), undermining the Rector’s earlier machinations. She acts with a “force of impulse” (297), fleeing the site of decision and making her way to Europe. Narrative itself mimics her shifting attitude: the gambling scene bracketing the early scenes of indecisive courtship actually follows them in temporal sequence, so that the implication that a gambling frenzy might be antecedent to dispassionate marital forecasting is overturned, since the latter precipitates the former scenes at Leubronn.

The title of the subsequent book glosses, in an ominously passive phrase, the second stage of decision that follows the Davilow misfortunes: “Gwendolen Gets Her Choice.” With the knowledge of Grandcourt’s mistress and brood of children, she has reason enough against the match and is left in a state of “sick motivelessness” (274). The narrowing of financial options changes the stakes, and “against the imperious lot which left her no choice” as well as Klesmer’s unwelcome reminder of her typicality, she views Grandcourt’s letter renewing his interest “with hopeless inward rebellion” as a choice opens out from the “inescapable path of repulsive monotony” (292). She is thrown back in his direction, drifted into a new disposition: “Where was the good of choice coming again? What did she wish? Anything different? No! and yet in the dark seed-growths of consciousness a new wish was forming itself” (292). In merely responding to the letter, Gwendolen feels anew the need for proxy aids: the “contradictory desire to be hastened,” since “hurry would save her from deliberate choice” (293), gives her a “reason for
keeping away from an absolute decision” and “leav[ing] open as many issues as possible” (294).  

The motto of the chapter in which her decision occurs generalizes the issue of a vacillating will, changing the figure from chance alternations to the dynamics of volition:

Desire has trimmed the sails, and Circumstance  
Brings but the breeze to fill them. (296)

Alluding to a classical image for action, Eliot offers a physics of the will, elsewhere clarified in the idea small details are “continually entering with cumulative force into a mood until it gets the mass and momentum of a theory or a motive” (228). Eliot also updates that key instance of fluid decision-making governing a character of “perverse resolve” in The Mill on the Floss (1860).  

In a pivotal chapter entitled “Borne Along by the Tide,” Maggie Tulliver finds herself boating with Stephen Guest, consenting passively and carried “by this stronger present that seemed to bear her along without any act of her own will, like the added self which comes with the sudden exalting influence of a strong tonic” (407). As they drift along, the two are shrouded by an “enchanted haze” in which Stephen’s rowing occurs “idly, half automatically” (407), and when he relies on these conditions to press his suit, she responds: “You have wanted to deprive me of any choice” (409). Yet even after identifying her loss of agency, Maggie finds “an unspeakable charm in being told what to do, and having everything decided for her” (410), and is “hardly

95 Leavis praises these moments for depicting “the inner movement of impulse, the play of motive that issues in speech and act and underlies formed thought and conscious will” (Great Tradition 102).

96 Variously individual (in the myth of Odysseus and the Sirens) and political (in the “ship of state” figure in Plato’s Republic VI [488a-489d] and Aristotle’s Politics III [1276b20–27]).

97 Markovits draws this connection only to argue that the proposal scene is properly one of “inaction rather than action” (Crisis of Action 115).
conscious of having said or done anything decisive” (410). Dramatizing the psycho-
physiological states subtending action and inaction, this floating stupor might also characterize
the courtship of Grandcourt and Gwendolen: “All yielding is attended with a less vivid
consciousness than resistance; it is the partial sleep of thought; it is the submergence of our own
personality by another” (410).98

In *Daniel Deronda*, the elements of a similar scenario are diffused across several stages
of the narrative rather than clustering around an iconic event. Having steeled herself against
Grandcourt, Gwendolen now experiences “perpetually alternating images and arguments for and
against the possibility” of marriage but her former resolve is “no more a part of quivering life
than the ‘God’s will be done’ of one who is eagerly watching chances” (297). The image of
fluctuating consideration, formerly represented in the circular motion of the roulette wheel, now
appears as an experience of vertigo, as though Gwendolen were aboard a ship whose prow
breaks the horizon, “the alternate dip of counterbalancing thoughts begotten of counterbalancing
desires [bringing] her into a state in which no conclusion could look fixed” (297). As on a craft
steered by another’s will, Gwendolen “only drifted towards the tremendous decision:—but
drifting depends on something besides the currents, when the sails have been set beforehand”
(303).99 Her decision, then, comes as a clear reversal of her prior resistance to such instrumental

98 The figuration of temptation as “drift” (Hardy, *Novels* 145) has repercussions for
models of reading. See Gettelman, “Reading Ahead in George Eliot” on reading as reverie or
“imagining ahead” (31); Kurnick, “Abstraction and the Subject of Novel Reading,” on reading as
“drifting”; and Gallagher’s suggestion that readers are left “floating […] in unattached narrative
space” (*Body Economic* 151). Preyer claims that Eliot resists, in life and art, the “will’s attempt
to direct the flow of sympathetic consciousness” (“Beyond the Liberal Imagination” 36).

99 Gallagher notes that Gwendolen’s motivating energy “has backed up like a faulty
hydraulic system” so that she “tends towards stasis and inactivity” (*Body Economic* 139). On the
novel’s nautical imagery see Levine, “Marriage of Allegory and Realism” 436 and Fisher,
*Making Up Society* 209.
roles: “Other people allowed themselves to be made slaves of,” she had scoffed, “and to have their lives blown hither and thither like empty ships in which no will was present,” whereas she would “make the very best of the chances that life offered her, and conquer circumstance by her exceptional cleverness” (39). The one side of inductive vanity’s pendulum swinging into prominence, she accepts Grandcourt and “gets her choice.”

The character “who had been used to feel sure of herself, and ready to manage others,” the narrative summarizes, “had just taken a decisive step which she had beforehand thought that she would not take” (311). Yet even on her wedding day Gwendolen is caught amid “all this yeasty mingling of dimly understood facts with vague but deep impressions, and with images half real, half fantastic” (354). On one hand, she can imagine that her prior “agitating experience” has been set aside, so that she need not fear a “losing destiny” and can instead look forward to “a fuller power of managing circumstance” (355). On the other, “some dim forecast, the insistent penetration of suppressed experience” blends the “expectation of a triumph with the dread of a crisis” and “exultation inevitably carries an infusion of dread” (357). Where before she had a definite object of fearful conjecture in front of her, she now experiences what has been described as the rearguard attack of anxiety.101 From her wedding day on, “her resolution was dogged by the shadow of that previous resolve [about Lydia Glasher] which had at first come as the undoubting movement of her whole being” (311). This “uncertain shadow” (430) sees actions as inexorably trailed:

100 On reading the acceptance scene, Blackwood reported being “uncertain up to the last moment as to whether [Gwendolen’s answer] was to be Yes or No” (GEL 6.186; to Eliot, 17 November 1875). For Leavis, Eliot creates a “system of pressures so intolerable […] and so enclosing, that [Gwendolen’s] final acceptance of Grandcourt seems to issue, not from her will, but from them” (Great Tradition 99).

101 Goldstein, The Organism 230.
Deeds are the pulse of Time, his beating life,
And righteous or unrighteous, being done,
Must throb in after-throbs till Time itself
Be laid in stillness, and the universe
Quiver and breathe upon no mirror more. (698)

There is no bright line of decision without pulsing shadows or dazzling afterimages of hesitation, akin to what Vogl calls the “phantom” of action, the latency or residual “state of suspension […] in every actualization and realization.” Where Gwendolen formerly allegorized herself by turns as “Lady Certainty” and “Lady Perhaps” (356), she now contends with personae not of her own fashioning—the “two pale phantoms” Eliot names “Temptation” and “Dread” (674)—and the broader couple she would previously have judged unimaginable, paired in a poem of Heinrich Heine’s that Eliot gives as a motto: “Das Glück” and “Frau Unglück” (736).

One feature of her continued hesitancy is a hypothetical mode oriented towards alternative futures and counterfactual pasts: “if only things could have been a little otherwise then, so as to have been greatly otherwise after!” (68). The narrator dismisses this “futile sort of wishing” (68), yet such thinking does constitute a mode of comparative judgment—“comparison between what might have been” and “what actually was” (429)—that opens out an ethical stance for Gwendolen. She is now struck with the “amazed perception of her former ignorance about the possible mental attitude of a man towards the woman he sought in marriage” (425). In proportion as remorse takes hold, Gwendolen’s “disposition to dominate” (669) ebbs from her, the result of a “self-discontent which could be satisfied only by genuine change” (673) that she cannot yet envision in concrete form.

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103 Compare *Adam Bede*, on Lisbeth: “To the feminine mind in some of its moods, all things that might be, receive a temporary charm from comparison with what is” (133).
Even as she turns towards a new stance of responsibility, Gwendolen’s continuing uncertainty about her agential options within marriage still carry, in a different form, the patterns and images of external decision. One model for renewed purpose she adopts is that of imagining herself as a rider in order to secure “a determination to do as she would do as if she had started on horseback” (313), a classical analogy for the will that had recently been updated along physiological lines. But just as this activity was linked to a surrendered agency before her decision, here Gwendolen finds that things are “as if she had consented to mount a chariot where another held the reins” (328), Eliot’s more direct allusion to Plato’s image for the interplay between will, mind, and desire making clear the fact of wider subjection. Again, where she had previously felt drawn to Deronda, after her marriage he “in some mysterious way […] was becoming part of her conscience” (415). Her “precipitancy of confidence towards him, in contrast with her habitual resolute concealment” (445) yields more occasions on which she defers to his judgment—“It is you who will decide” (563)—and he becomes almost the only prop for her vertiginous will, “like the firmness of the earth, the only condition of her walking” (796).

Gwendolen’s renewed hesitancy is prompted not only by her growing remorse but also by Grandcourt’s callous foreclosure of her choices. After the decision she has a “sense of freedom” (303) that rapidly passes to a “sense of inferiority” (547). Her marriage, she finds out,

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104 As a rider’s will only spurs movement by proxy, in the horse’s muscular motions, so volition only takes effect through the automatic processes it enlists (Carpenter, “Physiology” 199; “On the Doctrine” 398). For Eliot’s equestrian images see Hardy, Novels 227–9; David, Fictions of Resolution 194–5; and Shuttleworth, “Language of Science” 286–7, who points to another instance in Carpenter’s Principles of Mental Physiology but suggests that Lewes and Eliot reject the image and its implied social theory.

105 The allegory of the soul as a charioteer and horses is framed in the Phaedrus (246a-257b).
is her “last great gambling loss” (441) where the “losing was not simply a *minus*, but a terrible *plus* that had never entered into her reckoning” (598). Grandcourt may have entered marriage with a “vacillating whim” (584) but he hardly wavers in finding “new objects to exert his will upon” (585). In what soon becomes an “empire of fear” (425), Grandcourt’s neutrality evacuates the relationship to a purely formal contest of will, where Gwendolen is incapable of contradictory impulse and he becomes “a blank uncertainty to her in everything but this, that he would do just what he willed, and that she had neither devices at her command to determine his will, nor any rational means of escaping it” (426).

When she surreptitiously receives Deronda at home, Grandcourt returns suddenly to make clear that “she had not deceived him” (611). Having deceived her into sharing the *telos* of her compromised agency, he evaporates the grounds of her motivation. There are no “reasons for her belief” on any given matter—such as Deronda’s relationship to Mirah—that are not “suffocated and shrivelled up under her husband’s breath” (593). Eliot’s depiction of the marriage turns repeatedly to these figures of suffocation, the arid vestiges of volition: Gwendolen lives in a “painted gilded prison” (590); Grandcourt governs her “with bit and bridle” (680); his “words had the power of thumbscrews and the cold touch of the rack” (680), and so forth. The figures previously given for his languid allure now show their dangerous aspect: his “will [is] like that of a crab or a boa-constrictor” (423).

Gwendolen “no longer felt inclined to kiss her fortunate image in the glass” (423) and lives in “practical submission” (604). Her “suppressed struggle of desperate rebellion” is seen by Grandcourt to the exclusion of other facets of her psyche, through a “mistake of proportions” that amounts to an optical error in comparison in “his judgments concerning this wife who was governed by many shadowy powers, to him non-existent” (555). Hence he cannot track the “bent
of her inferences” with regard to Lush as the architect of her meeting with Lydia, seeing the pride but not the remorse motivating her mental state (596). He gets Lush to explain his will and its provisions for Lydia, and to disclose that he was aware of Gwendolen’s knowledge before the marriage, a post facto revelation of the deception that has turned Gwendolen into a thing, a means to his ends, living in “thraldom” (601).

The “power of tyranny” in Grandcourt “seemed a power of living in the presence of any wish that he should die” (606). But the motto to one chapter—channeling Machiavelli on Caesar Borgia, who prepared for all contingencies following his father’s death save only the prospect of his own (584)—gives the lie to this power. The narrator proleptically aligns herself with Gwendolen’s continuing “wish” that her husband meet his demise. This sustained issue of how to characterize—and hold responsible—a mere volition frames these sequences late in the novel.

The motto to the pivotal chapter in which the sailboat accident occurs—from Shelley: “The unwilling brain / Feigns often what it would not” (668)—emphasizes the aleatory tensions held under a single caption (“willing”) and conceals “those fatal meshes which are woven within more closely than without” (668).

The events that lead the couple to Genoa recapitulate the figures of Grandcourt’s authoritarian control, the “dreamy do-nothing absolutism” (668) of yachting around the Mediterranean underlining his sovereign hold by subjecting Gwendolen’s agency to no activity at all. On the smaller sailboat, the two surrender their control in a fashion similar to horse-riding except that they are joined in responsibility for one craft (680). As in their courtship, the externals of the setting are at odds with Gwendolen’s internal state. In her “irritable, fluctuating stages of despair, gleams of hope came in the form of some possible accident” as she entertains an “imaginary annihilation of the detested object” (673). These “plans of evil” haunt her and
make her “afraid of her own wishes,” as they circumvent conscious control to take “shapes possible and impossible, like a cloud of demon-faces,” “furies preparing the deed that they would straightway avenge” (681). The vacillations that follow on her marriage take a darker cast, since the outcomes supposed by her hesitation all involve getting rid of her husband.

Recollecting this mental struggle between “two creatures” to Deronda, she notes, in a confession that repeats the paratactic style of her first meeting with Grandcourt: “I felt beforehand I had done something dreadful, unalterable—that would make me like an evil spirit” (691); “I fancied impossible ways of—”; “I did kill him in my thoughts” (695). The experience of future intentions, impossible fancies, and mentally rehearsed murder culminate in an expression of confusion that recalls the structure of decision by proxy: “I know nothing—I only know that I saw my wish outside me” (696). Where a series of male figures—Gascoigne, Klesmer, Grandcourt, and Deronda—actively tried to have their wishes eventuate in the person of Gwendolen, she now passively records her wishes as they suddenly manifest in a scenario to which she has not causally contributed.

Deronda’s view that Grandcourt’s death was an “accident that [Gwendolen] could not have hindered” (690) unduly normalizes her psychic complexity. Her malice aforethought, in his view, was precisely restricted to a mental domain—it has “gone on only in your thought” (692)—and his considered legal assessment is that it is “almost certain that her murderous thought had had no outward effect” (696). Yet this is no straightforward matter given a picture

106 Beebe joins this motif of “seeing one’s self outside oneself” to the Bildungsroman tradition (169); Christ categorizes deaths that occur as the “magical fulfillment of a wish” (131) as providential devices that Eliot deploys to short-circuit aggression. Markovits notes that the scene involves “a will unaccompanied by any doing” (Crisis of Action 117).

107 Zemka reads the drowning scene along temporal lines: Gwendolen’s experience of shock and the pressures of the instant foreclose deliberation (Time 170–2). This typifies a broader sense that the instant is “inhospitable to ethical agency” in Eliot (Time 147).
of psychology wherein, as Lewes notes, “To imagine an act is to rehearse it mentally. By such mental rehearsal the motor organs are [...] disposed to respond in act. Hence it is that a long-meditated crime becomes at last an irresistible criminal impulse.”

Deronda’s analysis leads to contention with Gwendolen, who confesses to a single concrete action—“I did one act—and I never undid it” (691)—that she fears as evidence of criminal intentions. Her action—procuring a dagger that she then locks in a drawer, throwing the key overboard—is a paradigm of tarrying, at once leasing and retracting a potential for harm. Unlike Eliot’s character Caterina in “Mr Gilfil’s Love Story,” who is carrying a dagger when she happens upon the body of the man she wanted to kill, there is no effective ambiguity about Gwendolen’s hand in the accident.

To adapt the legal terms current at the time, what may be styled an “attempt”—intentionally securing the means or tools for violent action—is invalidated by the lack of a causal link.

Deronda’s final assessment, taking on the distinctive voice of Eliot as moralizer, tries to deflect Gwendolen from worries about criminal imputability to a sublimation of her guilty energy in moral action:

108 Problems of Life and Mind, Third Series 459. Vrettos quotes Lewes to emphasize that, realizing the “tenuous boundaries between her fantasies and actions, [Gwendolen] assumes full moral responsibility for the crime” (Somatic Fictions 74). On the imagined rehearsal of this crime, and the thought/deed distinction on which it is predicated, see Rodensky, Crime in Mind 166–7, and Tucker, Probable State 116–17.

109 The action is a literalization of what Kurnick calls the “black box of agency,” discussing the similar scene of Lydgate’s former lover in Middlemarch, an actress who kills her husband on stage (Empty Houses 93).

110 Christ notes the connection to Eliot’s short story (131–2), but I disagree with her claim that this detail appears as an “afterthought” or “rationalization” meant to recast Gwendolen’s “intense revulsion” as murderous forethought (133). Eliot only uses the word “dagger” in this story and in Romola; Gwendolen admits to an object “small and sharp” (687).

111 See Austin, Lectures on Jurisprudence 215; Austin’s wider discussion of commission and omission seems to have a deep connection with the novel. Eliot owned the text but probably read it in earnest only after Daniel Deronda, when she took notes (Notebooks 229, and Pf 707).
That momentary murderous will cannot, I think, have altered the course of events. Its effect is confined to the motives in your own breast. Within ourselves our evil will is momentous, and sooner or later it works its way outside us—it may be in the vitiation that breeds evil acts, but also it may be in the self-abhorrence that stings us into better striving. (699)

His advice is to “find our duties in what comes to us, not in what we imagine might have been” (701), attempting to curtail the train of hesitations and suppositions that have hounded Gwendolen through her unfortunate marriage, dismissing counterfact in favor of concrete restitution to Lydia Glasher and her children. Her sense that Deronda’s outlook could give her a “new footing,” an “inward safeguard” (430) parallels the substance of his advice. “Turn your fear into a safeguard” he offers, as though keeping on the right track were like looking around for a handrail on a precipice: “Try to take hold of your sensibility, and use it as if it were a faculty” (452). This disembodied advice—which makes “self-judgment” into “comparative activity” (451)—bears a structural similarity to writers on the physiology of mind and will who recognized that, regarding “temptations to immoral action,” the will to repress such thoughts or feelings would only fuel them further, whereas a shift in attention to a “wholesome and useful pursuit” could form the ground of a new moral life.112 The more radical version of such advice occurs in the novel’s summary epigraph:

Let thy chief terror be of thine own soul:  
There, ‘mid the throng of hurrying desires  
That trample on the dead to seize their spoil,  
Lurks vengeance [...].

In one sense, the counsel to be afraid of one’s own terrible capacities matches Deronda’s statements. But for a hesitant moment, the genitive flirts with another option: allow your “chief terror” to belong to you alone. Gwendolen remains in a “state of unconscious reliance and

112 Carpenter, “Physiology” 215. This counsel has modern form in the notion of personal “mental rules,” criticized by Ainslie in Breakdown of Will.
expectation” towards Deronda, in a more benign form of proxy action that the narrator adapts into a maxim: “We diffuse our feeling over others, and count on their acting from our motives” (771). Yet her hesitation is ineradicable, and she may be focused less on taking her self-fear as a “safeguard” than on cultivating a more powerful form of autonomy: to have a fear of her own.

**Pathologies of the Will**

*The health of the mind consists in that state in which the will is free and can exercise its function without obstacle. Any state in which this does not obtain can be considered as a disorder of the mind.*

—Solomon Maimon, Introduction to *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1792)

I began by viewing Gwendolen’s hesitancy as a fault of character—a pathology connected to her incompetence in matters of probability and prediction—that ended in assisting her to a transformed moral resolve. Hesitancy does double duty as a pathological state and a moral safeguard, but many critical assessments of her character focus only on the first. Asking whether Gwendolen’s pathology has a name, or indeed whether her experience falls under the rubric of pathology at all, I argue that the critical hypostasis of Gwendolen as a “case” or “diagnosis” obscures the value of hesitancy as a practical attitude, and the social configurations for which it offers an object lesson.

Gwendolen’s rational life is interwoven with reverie. She finds herself acting without conscious reason, as when she refuses to put on her burnous when it is offered by the odious Lush, but submits to Grandcourt, having “had no design in this action” and “simply following her antipathy and inclination, confiding in them as she did in the more reflective judgments into which they entered as sap into leafage” (124). A singular instance of this nervous undercurrent swelling into force in the overall structure of Gwendolen’s actions occurs during the *tableau*

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113 Quoted in Berrios, *History of Mental Symptoms* 357.
vivant of a scene from The Winter’s Tale, staged by her siblings. During the performance, the painted image of a dead face—which had earlier been discovered behind a panel in the Offendene residence—is suddenly disclosed. Gwendolen freezes, screams, falls to her knees, covers her face. This episode becomes a “brief remembered madness, an unexplained exception from her normal life” (63) that confirms a psychological pattern.114 “What she unwillingly recognised, and would have been glad for others to be unaware of,” we are informed, “was that liability of hers to fits of spiritual dread” (63). This precarious balance in her psyche becomes, after this event, an anxiety about what might happen if she were to recall “her tremor on suddenly feeling herself alone” (63).

On the basis of such scenes, many critics have considered Gwendolen as a hysteric.115 Her unpredictable propensities have been compared to what James Paget called “nervous mimicry,” a category of hypochondria used to describe how the nervous system intensifies the

114 Poole reads the motif of immobility through to the Gothic topoi of “animated statue” and “haunted portrait” (“Hidden Affinities” 299). Pace suggests that Gwendolen’s terror is partly at the panel’s representation of “stasis” overlaying an “ongoing action,” since her character is an “emblem for existence as an ongoing state of potentiality” (41, 44). For other accounts of the Hermione scene see Marshall, Figure of Theater 198–201; Witemeyer, George Eliot and the Visual Arts 93–4; Litvak, Caught in the Act 183–88; Marshall, Actresses 80–3; Voskuil, Acting Naturally 104–110; Stokes, “Rachel’s ‘Terrible Beauty’: An Actress Among the Novelists.”

115 Rose calls her the “original literary hysteric” (Sexuality in the Field of Vision 116). See also Wood, Passion and Pathology 158 (on the “rhetoric of hysterical neurosis”) and 141–62 for a substantial discussion of the novel and physiological psychology; Stone, “‘The Case-History of Gwendolen H’” 57 (on Eliot’s “clinical acuity”); David, Fictions of Resolution 143–4, 190–7; Tromp, “Gwendolen’s Madness” 452; Showalter, Hystories 91–2; Ender, Sexing the Mind; Flint, “George Eliot and Gender”; and the paired psychoanalytic readings of Waddell and Rotenberg. Jacobus uses Eliot’s “The Lifted Veil” to draw parallels between a pathologized “double consciousness” and the “artist-hysteric” of Daniel Deronda, Alcharisi (Reading Woman 272–4). By contrast, Vrettos offers a thorough account of nervous disease in the novel (Somatic Fictions 48–80), arguing the Eliot’s depiction drew on scientific developments (via Lewes) and literary models, and is careful to note that “hysteria” is less a diagnosis than a loose term covering a range of nervous symptoms (197n4). Zimmerman and Demaria draw connections between Gwendolen and Eliza Lynn Linton’s “The Girl of the Period” series.
experience of illness by imitating it. In a description of the ordinary “neuromimesis” of egotism, which Eliot jotted into a notebook and uses in the image of rising sap, Paget writes that the malady “has its keenest life at & about the supposed seat of disease” and “seems always in an undercurrent, rising at every interval between the distractions of work or play.”

Others have proffered more targeted diagnoses in the terms of the period: Simon During develops the category of “monomania,” used in the novel to describe Mordechai (494, 510). David Trotter suggests agoraphobia in reading Gwendolen’s fear of unbounded spaces, her sensitive reactions to changes of light, and her “dialectic of outward triumph and inward helplessness.”

These readings offer a number of windows on Gwendolen’s substance, but in adverting to the same vague descriptors—marking out her sensibility as “peculiar” or “unusual” (25, 58)—they traffic in a conceptual specificity that is out of place. If Gwendolen reacts with “nervous shock” and “hysterical violence” to Lydia’s letter, (359), the discourse of hysteria offers at best

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116 Trotter acknowledges that Paget distinguishes his topic from hysteria (“Invention of Agoraphobia” 467). Vrettos takes Middlemarch as a key example for Paget’s neuromimesis (Somatic Fictions 105–10) and discusses its later repercussions for theories of “suggestibility” (83–7, 96–9). She points out that Paget was concerned with how the will might be exercised against nervous mimicry (87).

117 Notebooks Pf 711 94a; originally in The Lancet, reprinted in Clinical Essays (1875), a copy of which was presented to Lewes by Paget, who was the attending physician to the Leweses in the 1870s (Irwin 352). Imitative phenomena are discussed more generally in Lewes, “Suicide” where he considers whether sometimes “imitation is like a contagion” in producing motives (73); and Problems of Life and Mind, Third Series, 459–60.

118 Esquirol originated the notion of “monomania,” trying to make symptoms grouped under “melancholy” more precise; Baillarger later offers different types. Monomania, pace Simon During’s inventive argument, has its moment in the 1840s and loses traction thereafter to become an imprecise, even tautological category by the 1850s (Berrios, History of Mental Symptoms 142–3, 425–6).

119 Trotter, “Invention of Agoraphobia” 468; see generally 466–9. Vrettos links Gwendolen’s obsession with figures of containment and expanse: “while locked spaces set tangible boundaries, expansive vistas threaten to disperse her immediate sense of self” (63).
partial answers. Hysterical women were seen as rebellious, “exhibiting more than usual force and
decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger, bold riders, having plenty of what
is termed nerve,” as F. C. Skey’s 1866 lectures put it, which means that a figure like Gwendolen
has both the symptoms and their opposites. Alternating diagnoses—alternation as diagnosis—
seem warranted. Why not “mental alienation” (493), another category mentioned in the novel? If
agoraphobia (or what its first describer calls peur des espaces) takes hold of Gwendolen, why not
the related category of “persecution-madness” (délire des persécutions), which could capture the
“self-dread which urged her to flee from the pursuing images wrought by her pent-up impulse”
(673)?

Surely her nature has an anthropological underpinning, since the narrator gleefully sees
her as primitive and her “streak of superstition” as a survival: “a superstition which lingers in an
intense personality even in spite of theory and science; any dread or hope for self being stronger
than all reasons for or against it” (276)? Her specious views about chance, which have much in
common with those described in Tylor’s Primitive Culture, give rise to an incompetence in a
world she little understands, confusing financial speculation as mere “improvidence with our
money” (233).

120 Quoted in Showalter, Female Malady 132. On the discourse of hysteria in the period
(1870 onwards) during which it became central to psychiatry’s project see 129–34. Eliot
similarly sees hysteria as “constantly creating illusory maladies” (GEL 4.198, to Caroline
Hennell Bray, 1865). Still, a brief experience early in life led her to write of “that most wretched
and unpitied of afflictions, hystera” (GEL 1.41, to Maria Lewis, [13 March 1840]).

121 Trotter, “Invention of Agoraphobia” 464. An overview of Du Saulle’s concept
appeared in the Saturday Review in 1872, linking it to Pinel’s melancholy, Esquirol’s lypemania,
and Baillarger’s moody class of monomania (“Du Saulle on Persecution Madness”). An earlier
review, “The Habit of Fear,” suggests a state on the way to monomania, living in “perpetual
presence of dread” (572).

122 Tylor sees archery as a sporting survival of hunting, and games of chance as survivals
of divination (Primitive Culture 66, 70–5). Tylor’s term for recasting superstition as a cultural
“survival” is mentioned (at one point in scare quotes) in the novel (95, 393).
Presented with such a range of diagnoses, it is worth recalling that the novel includes advance warning about specific categorizations. Its titular character’s nature is “too large, too ready to conceive regions beyond his own experience, to rest at once in the easy explanation, ‘madness’” (494) when confronted with Mordecai. On Eliot’s guidelines we should avoid the fixity of what medical historian Charles Rosenberg calls “disease specificity,” and instead recognize the more flexible category of “pathology of the will.” As German Berrios suggests, the terrain of mental psychopathology in the nineteenth century included a range of blurred dysfunctions—from melancholia, monomania and mental alienation to pathologized versions of akrasia or weakness of will, including aboulia (lack of will-power), agoraphobia (incapacity of will in open spaces), and folie du doute (excessive hesitancy). These disorders blended into one another and prompted offshoot categories. Maudsley makes akrasia a typical symptom of hysteria and describes a “quasi-hysterical melancholia” characterizing adolescence by indefinite spirituality, vague fears, and “morbid fancies.” In Lewes’ review of suicidal motives, he includes mental alienation and monomania under the category “uncontrollableness,” and points

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123 Such circumspection about character recalls Eliot’s admonition about Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*, that we want to be told “her history, which is a thing hardly to be predicted even from the completest knowledge of characteristics” (352).

124 Rosenberg defines this as the “notion that diseases can and should be thought of as entities existing outside their unique manifestations,” entities “defined and legitimated in terms of characteristic somatic mechanisms” (“Contested Boundaries” 412, 409). See also Rosenberg, “Introduction” to *Framing Disease*, xiii-xvi.

125 Berrios, *History of Mental Symptoms* 357–64, 428; see also Vogl, *Tarrying* 63. Ribot’s *Les maladies de la volonté* (1883) became the most influential psycho-physiological account of the will and its pathologies; he had earlier introduced the French to British empirical psychology in *La psychologie anglaise contemporaine* (1875) (Berrios, *History of Mental Symptoms* 338).

to literary representations that involve some “passion of vehement sudden afflux.” In his view monomania blurs into anxiety, with its “intensity of apprehensiveness” borne of the “diseased activity of the imagination in picturing consequences.” In *Daniel Deronda*, different shades similarly join forces. Gwendolen’s is the “will of a creature with a large discourse of imaginative fears: a shadow would have been enough to relax its hold” (423): the penumbra of terrors both past and future erode the will on whose physiology they are dependent. What Trotter reads as agoraphobia in Gwendolen’s imagined and recollected fear of “any wide scene,” and of “immeasurable existence” generally, still implies a default of volition, for when she recovers it is to the “usual world in which her will was of some avail” (63, 64).129

These diagnostic tags recapitulate the psycho-physiology of hesitation as it embroils individuals (where inhibition and hierarchical control of volition may be out of joint) and a wider culture in thrall to rational models of decision.130 The most characteristic of Gwendolen’s “hysterical” moments draws from the representational history of hesitation: playing a scene in which a statue comes alive, she starts like “a statue into which a soul of Fear had entered,” an

127 “Suicide” 57.

128 “Suicide” 67. The definitions of hysteria Eliot might have found in Lewes’s library relate to this wider diagnostic hinterland. Lewes owned Robert Brudenell Carter, *On the Pathology and Treatment of Hysteria*, which relies on Carpenter’s distinction between “ideo-motor” and willed actions (63–4); and Moritz Romberg, *A Manual of the Nervous Diseases of Man*, which includes many categories as causes or ends of nervous disorder.

129 Hardy notes that the imagery of wide space joins the two plots: Deronda reacts differently to such scenes and is mentored by one whose “thought went on in wide spaces” (*Novels* 230–1; quoting *Daniel Deronda* 470).

130 As Vogl argues, “the more systemic action is divorced from the reasoning and the impulses of individuals, the more motivation, cause and reason for acting become individual problems” (*Tarrying* 64). Vogl places this shift later in the century (61–4), referring to Ribot’s work. On inhibition see Ziolkowski, 3, 22–6, relying on Smith’s *Inhibition.*
archetype of action *in potentia*, neither fully still nor in motion.\(^{131}\) Rather than hypostatizing Gwendolen’s character, we can generalize these diagnoses—and the situations or conditions into which she enters with others—under the less stable rubric of the pathology of the will. This move has two advantages. It captures a wider sense of the psychology of character and situation underway in the novel, referring to different brands of mental pathology without settling on firm diagnoses. And it allows for reflections on a compromised—not necessarily diseased—volition in light of categories that, treated too exclusively, risk anachronism, thus bridging critical readings that would otherwise be opposed.

If hesitancy dilates the time of decision but operates through narrative seizures, we can accept the novel as anti-epiphanic, as Sue Zemka and Irene Tucker do, while also registering its interest in suddenness, shock, and instinct, as Jill Matus sees it.\(^{132}\) By turns the novel might appear as valorizing willfulness, decision, and resolve while also holding true to what Miller has described as its akrasia, just as its engulfing dilemmas of action, deliberation, and motivation (in the views of Pamela Thurschwell, Stefanie Markovits, and Catherine Gallagher) appear as coextensive with the novel’s “cultivation of detachment” (Amanda Anderson) and commitment to the “omnipotence of thought” (Adela Pinch).\(^{133}\) Athena Vrettos’s claim that Gwendolen’s state

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\(^{131}\) For accounts of the iconography of a moving statue in Shakespeare’s play, along with discussions of the classical tradition, see Gross, *Dream of the Moving Statue* 92–109; Egan, *Drama Within Drama* 79–87; Barkan, “‘Living Sculptures’”; Gurr, “The Bear, the Statue, and Hysteria in *The Winter’s Tale*.”

\(^{132}\) Zemka defines “anti-epiphanies” as moments which “detach their receivers from their surroundings and attach them to ancient inheritances and future responsibilities” (*Time* 150; see 148–55 for a reading that centers on Deronda); Tucker, *Probable State* 86–8; Matus, “Historicizing Trauma.”

forms a “counternarrative” that is “not fully explained in or contained by the text’s dominant narrative structure,” undermining narrative closure and carrying irresolution beyond the text, need not disturb the sense that her narrative comes to a resting point as she is abandoned by Daniel and Mirah, pilgrims for Zion.\textsuperscript{134} As a critical practice, hesitancy respects the impulses of symptomatic reading while flattening symptoms as such.\textsuperscript{135} Advancing connections and shuttling between the moral psychology of individual mental states and dysfunctions, and the larger aggregates of cases in matters of chance events, probable outcomes, and statistical populations, hesitation elevates the pause into an interpretive attitude with a quiet moral force.

\textbf{Comparison, Our Precious Guide}

Gwendolen’s blithe avoidance of principles for inductive thinking is corrected, at the level of affect and physiology, by the hesitancies and volitional pathology I have described. Her character constitutes one of the more sustained failures to cultivate an aptitude that was central to Eliot’s visions of sympathy and social progress, and which comes to fruition in the Deronda plot: “comparison.” In earlier novels, comparative standards alternately describe characters and appeal to readers. The chapter “Hetty’s World,” in \textit{Adam Bede}, informs us that her “sphere of comparison was not large,” which judgment has to be recalled on occasions where we are exhorted, as readers of \textit{Middlemarch} say, “to use your power of comparison a little more effectively,” or cautioned against “arriving at conclusions without comparison” in \textit{Daniel

\textsuperscript{134} Vrettos, \textit{Somatic Fictions} 69, 77–9.

\textsuperscript{135} Compare Ngai’s notion of “the interesting” as an aesthetic category that dilates time, keeps aesthetic judgment in operation (“Merely Interesting”). Dames reads the novel as an “exercise for extending the attention span” (\textit{Physiology} 158); Tucker sees serial publication as fostering unhurried reading and an investment in both plots (\textit{Probable State} 74–5); Zemka emphasizes dilatoriness in the novel’s theme of “vast time” (\textit{Time} 147–55).
In Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879), this stance is more self-consciously adopted as a personification, “our precious guide Comparison,” that “would teach us in the first place by likeness, and our clue to further knowledge would be resemblance to what we already know,” so that observation is used as a “clue or lantern” to detect congruence between oneself and others.

The interplay between ignorance and knowledge in Daniel Deronda highlights how comparative method alone draws us from the former to the latter. A long motto acknowledging the “power of Ignorance” can clearly be grasped only by a mind honed by—or straining after Eliot’s high ideal of—comparison and inferential expansiveness:

looking at life parcel-wise, in the growth of a single lot, who having a practised vision may not see that ignorance of the true bond between events, and false conceit of means whereby sequences may be compelled—like that falsity of eyesight which overlooks the gradations of distance, seeing that which is afar off as if it were within a step or a grasp—precipitates the mistaken soul on destruction?

From the outset of her intellectual career, Eliot was familiar with comparison as a cardinal feature of the inductive method in the sciences and social sciences, which drew on eighteenth-century natural history and was differently articulated in Auguste Comte’s “comparative method,” William Whewell’s history of scientific induction, John Stuart Mill’s “methods” of inductive logic, and Spencer’s social evolutionism. Eliot’s familiarity with Mill’s System of...
Logic (1843), where attribution as such is described as “relation,” is key: the example of distance as a mistaken perception is Mill’s. In the 1860s and 1870s, the comparative method spurred a shift of intellectual approach in philology, history, law, politics, anthropology, and religion. Graver has shown, through a reading of “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), how Eliot appealed to comparison to enable readers “to perceive contrasts and similarities between social life in the past and present, to make connections between their own lives and the ones portrayed in the novels,” to learn how to contribute to progress, and “to correct the conventional responses that inhibit tolerance and fellow-feeling.” Anderson has similarly assessed what I take to be an

(Some George Eliot Notebooks). She had begun Comte’s System of Positive Polity during the writing of Daniel Deronda (GEL 6.126).

140 System of Logic 1.7–8; on “relation” (and its subtype “resemblance”) see 1.42–4, 1.67–72, 1.120.


142 George Eliot and Community 47, 70. See generally 66–71 and, on Daniel Deronda, 298–300. Reading three unpublished notebook items, Collins points to Eliot’s background in, and skepticism of social evolutionism and its comparative attempts to conjecture uniform origins (“Questions of Method” 392–405). In the first of these pieces, Eliot criticizes talk of origins that sees “all resemblances between the mythologies & legends of different peoples as a result of tradition or identity of descent” and takes cultural likenesses as broadly “analogical” (389).
analogue to comparison in reading the dialectic between “cultivated detachment” and engagement as a crucial node in Eliot’s ethical sensibility.\(^1\)

Eliot mines comparison as philosophical analysis and imaginative example. In her early review of R. M. Mackay’s *The Progress of the Intellect* (1851), she describes “that wide comparison which is a requisite for all true, scientific generalization” and reuses the phrase in *The Mill on the Floss*, in the narrator’s mockery of the shallow Tom Tulliver: “it is only by a wide comparison of facts that the wisest full-grown man can distinguish well-rolled barrels from more supernal thunder.”\(^2\) Her sense of comparison as a method broadens its reach beyond given intellectual disciplines: reading John Lubbock’s *Pre-Historic Times* (1865) alongside “that semi-savage poem” the *Iliad*, she quips that “our religious oracles would do well to study savage ideas by a method of comparison with their own.”\(^3\) Wryly advising that comparative method adopt a self-reflexive lens, Eliot makes visible the surprising shifts in temporal perspective and generic classification (Homer as “semi-savage”) that unceasing comparison might produce.\(^4\) Her bravura epigraph to *Daniel Deronda*, which draws a parallel between science and poetry as both finding themselves *in medias res* and so departing from the “make-believe of a beginning,” is an exercise in comparison that theorizes this move from synchronic categories and classes to

\(^1\) *Powers of Distance* 3–4, 9–16.

\(^2\) “Rev. of *The Progress of the Intellect*” 360; *Mill on the Floss* 118.

\(^3\) *GEL* 4.424; to Sara Hennell, 22 March 1868.

\(^4\) This widening of comparison to include more classes may suggest Galton’s “Statistics by Intercomparison” (1875). Eliot grasps the importance of comparison for statistics in describing the rumors about Lydgate’s medical style in *Middlemarch*: “some of the particulars being of that impressive order of which the significance is entirely hidden, like a statistical amount without a standard of comparison” (435). The term is first attested in Müller’s *Lectures*, where he speaks of “comparative grammar” as an “intercomparison of the grammatical forms of languages” (*OED*).
temporal contingency. The epigraph challenges “inductive certitude,” yet Eliot’s concern is primarily to unmoor the markers and units that would ground such a method. Comparison being an affair of measurement and likeness, the epigraph cautions us against reading without recalibrating the way we gauge and liken, by questioning how we calibrate in the first place.

In Eliot’s fiction, comparison shuttles between the level of individual capacities for inference and judgment and social abilities to comprehend difference. Both in characters and readers, comparison is sympathy’s mode of instruction. If Eliot often identifies sympathy as key for her brand of realism, fashioning it as an expansive, diffusive, widening power, that reach is possible only on the basis of comparison. Comparison expands the sympathetic project in both temporal and categorical directions. As in other intellectual disciplines, where data from the present are remapped according to diachronic stages, so Eliot’s comparison rethinks present categories in temporal terms, and turns historical epochs into synchronic categories for analysis. In *Daniel Deronda*, it works at some moments as an admonition not to take fictional description at face value, since knowledge of a person (and so of a character) “must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances” (111), and at others as an appeal to look for a wider class of instances, as when the notion that Mrs. Arrowpoint’s characteristics must have some “essential connection” is dispelled, since a “little comparison would have shown that

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148 This is a canny anticipation of what is known as the “problem of nomic measurement,” the difficulty of measuring or calibrating one empirical quantity in terms of another: see Chang, *Inventing Temperature* 57–60, 89–92.

149 Graver claims that the “positivist principles of observation, description, and comparison work to separate fact from value” and that Eliot needed realism’s facticity to sponsor sympathy’s value (38–9). But Eliot knew, following Mill and Venn, that fact typically involves inference and construction, so these poles can be brought together (*System of Logic* 1.7–8; *Logic of Chance* 125–7, *Characteristics of Belief* 11–14). On the ambivalence of Eliot’s Comtean positivism see Preyer, “Beyond the Liberal Imagination” 38–9.
all these points are to be found apart” (44). In the optical figures already introduced, comparison should provide the “lantern” and fortify the vision so that such classes are beheld in proportion.

Yet temporal errors also suggest how accurate judgment as well as responsible representation are matters of time, of what Eliot called in *Middlemarch* “a process and an unfolding.” The “magic of quick comparison” describes Deronda’s first, mistaken inferences about his past; Gwendolen lacks the “confidence of thorough knowledge” to obviate Klesmer’s withering assessment of her musical prowess (167, 52; emphases mine). Categorical blindness is attacked frequently on matters of religion: “corrective comparison” stalls prejudice against the people Deronda meets in the Judengasse in Frankfort, precluding his “falling into unfairness” (367).

Both characters are hindered in their categorical knowledge by their lack of clear origins, their own “make-believe” beginnings: Gwendolen is uprooted in childhood, and Deronda is unaware of his Jewish ancestry. They lack the foundation that grants “a familiar unmistakable difference amidst the future widening of knowledge” and makes affection a “blessed persistence” or “sweet habit of the blood” (22). Inductive vanity is the initial result of such a state of affairs for Gwendolen, brooking no time for comparison in willful decisions that ignore wider classes of example. What allows comparison to take root in affectivity—in her character and, in a more complex sense, in the form of the narrative as such—is the productive state that gradually blooms out of her impatience. Hesitation opens a chasm between inference

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150 *Middlemarch* 146.

151 In her essay “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” the European attitude towards Jews exemplifies the “prevalence of that grosser mental sloth which makes people dull to the most ordinary prompting of comparison—the bringing things together because of their likeness” (*Impressions* 143; compare 148). See Henry, *George Eliot and the British Empire* 82. Eliot specifies that her goal was “to rouse the imagination of men and women to a vision of human claims in those races of their fellow-men who most differ from them in customs and beliefs” (*GEL* 6.301, to Harriet Beecher Stowe; emphasis mine).
(however erroneous) and action, providing the felt energies that allow the mental stance of
comparison to take effect not as an abstract position but as a full-blooded habit.

**Hope, Trust, Hesitation**

“[T]here’s a deal in a man’s inward life as you can’t measure by the square [...].”

—Eliot, *Adam Bede*

Gwendolen’s plot thus generates events that offer correctives—comparison of cases,
supplemented by hesitancy in action—to her prevailing attitudes. The parallel plot, initially
marked by deep uncertainty in relation to Deronda’s past circumstances, puts forward an
orthogonal case. Through what could be seen as an excess of comparison—in his permeable
sympathy, reflective indecision, and resistance to adopting merely one life path—Deronda’s
uncertainty is at first immobilizing. Just as indecision makes visible the energies of hesitation in
Gwendolen’s world, so Deronda is drawn out into action by the affective relations of hope and
trust in his relations with Mirah and her brother Mordecai. In the latter Deronda has the
experience of a proxy relationship more radical than the social supervision found in
Gwendolen’s case. Blending two persons into aspects of an organic self and submerging that self
into an aggregate will, a persisting physiological inheritance, the relationship between Deronda
and Mordecai presents a different model of coming-to-decision.

Deronda’s uncertainty models Gwendolen’s anxiety in reverse. The lack of clarity in his
world concerns past rather than future states: “he had no certainty how things really had been,
and […] had been making conjectures about his own history”(168). Unclear about the lives of his
parents and gradually suspicious of the orphan narrative peddled by his uncle, Deronda lives
from adolescence onwards in a state of “vapourous conjecture” (177). He views the past as a

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152 *Adam Bede* 170.
locus of suspicion, haunted by the hypothetical retrospect of “dimly-conjected, dreaded revelations,” yet avoiding an investigation that might entail “a mean prying after what he was not meant to know” (167, 168).

This scenario, all too familiar to the Victorian novel with its pressing pasts and unexpected reconnections of kin, takes on a complex suppositional structure in Eliot. It involves, first, subjecting the narrative to a recursive structure as more information comes to light. For Deronda the sense that his father may have been wicked is “already a cutting thought,” principally because “such knowledge might be in other minds,” and a stray comment that he takes after his mother is a “small incident [that] became information: it was to be reasoned on” (170). In such retrospective inferences “the main lines of character are often laid down” (171), Eliot claims, yet in forgoing discovery in favor of hypothetical visions of past selves, Deronda is engaged in a backward-facing version of Gwendolen’s hesitant forecasting. Aware that “in some unaccountable way it might be that his conjectures were all wrong,” Deronda multiplies the options rather than fix on what definitely took place: “While he was busying his mind in the construction of possibilities, it became plain to him that there must be possibilities of which he knew nothing” (173). Alternative selves are posited in the past and not the future, and one of the striking thought-experiments of the Deronda plot is to posit that uncertainty about past states of affairs is not essentially different from conjecture about the future. To speak of a hypothetical past is not an oxymoron for a character whom Eliot compares to Leibniz, the philosopher of possible worlds, even though he yearns to ape active men like Pericles or Washington (173).

This expansive attitude that subjects the past to probability has repercussions for Deronda’s character. If his uncertain construal of origins gives “a bias to his conscience, a sympathy with certain ills, and a tension of resolve in certain directions” (175), it is notable how
these figures only incline or orient him towards action, in default of concrete deeds. Abandoning plans to read mathematics at Cambridge, his study of law emerges as an “apparent decision [that] had been without other result than to deepen the roots of indecision” (185). After Mirah and Mordecai have entered his life, this unclarity about origins conflicts with action: “when it seemed right that he should exert his will in the choice of a destination, the passion of his nature had got more and more locked by this uncertainty” (468).

Deronda exhibits wide talents for comparison that are almost wholly intellectual: “reflective” is the unifying term that turns what should be a capacious, “plenteous, flexible sympathy” into a mode of “reflective analysis which tends to neutralise sympathy” (364). ¹⁵³ Eliot makes clear that her realist creed has an immobilizing extreme, a “too reflective and diffusive sympathy” that might “paralys[e] in him that indignation against wrong and that selectness of fellowship which are the conditions of moral force” (364). It is as though Deronda has taken the lessons of comparison too far, his “sense of union with what is remote” (366) fostering a capacity for statistical compassion that seems inhuman. ¹⁵⁴ From Eliot’s time through ours, assessments of his character have cycled through the lexical options for vacuity: R. H. Hutton called him a “moral mist” and a modern critic finds him “inconcrete to the point of vapidity.” ¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ James commented that the “absence of spontaneity” and the “excess of reflection” marred her work (“The Life of George Eliot” 671).

¹⁵⁴ Carroll sees this impartiality as a “disease of sympathy” (“Unity of Daniel Deronda” 373). Other accounts include Welsh, George Eliot and Blackmail, 302–5; Stewart, Dear Reader 305–22; Lisabeth During, “The Concept of Dread”; Jaffe, Scenes of Sympathy 130–3; Markovits, Crisis of Action 121–22; Toker, Ethics of Form 120–5; Cleere, Avuncularism 165–9; and Mack, Spinoza 174–80. Pace offers a different view that fleshes out Eliot’s debt to Keats, taking Deronda’s “imaginative diffidence” as negative capability, a way of preserving potentiality and avoiding “falsifying the essential multiplicity of experience” (“Who Killed Gwendolen Harleth?” 37, 36).

Eliot’s studied assurances that her character is “ardent” and “affectionate” cannot body forth a more solidly felt personage, and at other moments she belies even this effort: two crucial chapters later in the novel begin with a locution that insists on the mental alone: “Imagine the conflict in a mind like Deronda’s”; “Imagine the difference in Deronda’s state of mind” (509, 744).

Deronda’s lack of concretion describes a universalism that his political calling—Jewish nationalism—will both draw on and correct.\textsuperscript{156} Where Gwendolen held to her own particularity and scorned the average, his sense of personal injury is framed against an impersonal aggregate, “merely reckoned in an average of accidents” (170). Gwendolen regards the average as a superfluity that offsets her own \textit{sui generis} brilliance, but Deronda’s anticipatory dislike of being “turned out in the same mould as every other youngster” (183) is less a revolt against generic sameness than a complaint against being merely \textit{one} case picked out from a broader range. His feel for the aggregate makes Deronda adept in hypothesis, in the convertibility of cases. Commenting on the “self-enclosed unreasonableness” of youth’s early revolts, the narrator’s critique of Gwendolen doubles as a confirmation of Deronda’s worldview: “What passion seems more absurd, when we have got outside it and looked at calamity as a collective risk, than this amazed anguish that I and not Thou, He, or She, should be just the smitten one?” (289).

Where Gwendolen had to rise into comparison by way of an affective energy conferred through hesitation, Deronda is thus faced with lowering himself from an abstract comparison into particular projects. He is similarly in need of emotional resonance and external guides, being one

of those minds overburdened by imagination, which “balance possibilities with so great a subtlety, that there is no resultant force of will.”\textsuperscript{157} Unable to select a course out of impartiality, Deronda lacks precisely the dynamism that would carry him from potential to actual, compromised as he is by “spiritual sloth, an unwillingness resolutely to seek out and risk a course of action that is consonant with his nature.”\textsuperscript{158} He lacks the felt tensions of hesitation, along with the affect that would suffuse any particular love or hate. It remains perplexing how a novel that mounts a passionate case for a particular people features a protagonist whose openness to Jews is as straightforward and automatic as his casual and received anti-Semitism, as though his abstract expansiveness could hew to both positions without difficulty.\textsuperscript{159}

When faced with the first event that jolts his life course away from abstraction into particularity (saving Mirah from suicide in Kew Gardens) Deronda’s initial action might be interpreted less as saving another person from certain death than as preserving her in potentiality. Mirah’s “look of immovable, statue-like despair” (187) before the water forms a figurative conduit to Gwendolen’s “statuesque pose” in the failed \textit{tableau vivant}, and it is significant that Deronda’s attitude towards both women seems to maintain them in the pregnant moment just

\textsuperscript{157} \textit{“Hamlet” 84}

\textsuperscript{158} Preyer, \textit{“Beyond the Liberal Imagination” 50. Compare Menon 183–4 on the paralysis brought about by impartiality.}

prior to action, familiar from the Laocoön tradition. Yet even this prevention of forward motion tilts Deronda’s uncertainty from past to future orientation. He had been “occupied chiefly with uncertainties about his own course; but those uncertainties, being much at their leisure, were wont to have such wide-sweeping connections with all life and history that the new image of helpless sorrow easily blent itself” with his resistance to settling into one career path (188). When faced with Mirah, Deronda’s narrative impulse to hypothesize about the past—considering the “probable romance that lay behind that loneliness and the look of desolation” (188)—is displaced into a future mode. Recollecting the incident, he is charged by “possibilities of what had been and what might be,” in reflections that are now suffused “with the warm blood of passionate hope and fear” (205). At moments, his experience verges on Gwendolen’s psychic life, with “vague visions of the future” that deposit “their influence in an anxiety stronger than any motive he could give for it” (207).

Listening to Mirah’s story of escape from her exploitative father, Deronda catches some of the “fever of hope” (221) that took hold of her. Although his friend Hans Meyrick—Mirah’s suitor manqué—charges Deronda with not knowing the meaning of hope, on account of his “supreme reasonableness, and self-nullification, and preparation for the worst” (643), he at least moves into hope’s affective terrain. Deronda draws on Mirah’s habit of preferring intuited over reasoned grounds for action. She may not have had “enough reason for [her] suspicions” of her father, but this lack of objective warrant meant little given that her “mind had been lit up, and all that might be stood out clear and sharp” (219). He adopts this almost prophetic mode of thinking, entertaining “rapid images of what might be” (207) and conjuring “consciously Utopian pictures of his own future” (324). Thinking in particular images forces Deronda’s openness to contingency into one necessary course. His sense that anyone else might have saved Mirah is
disparaged by her and by Mrs. Meyrick: “Saint Anybody,” she notes, “is a bad saint to pray to” (370), upbraiding Deronda who has worshipped at this shrine for years.

His experience with Mirah primes Deronda—and those following his plot—to credit the outlandish coincidences that drive the final two-thirds of the novel.\(^{160}\) Initially the random discovery of a bookshop with the significant name “Ezra Cohen” on its awning makes Deronda wary, and he falls back on legal reasoning to “convince himself that there was not the slightest warrantable presumption of this Ezra being Mirah’s brother” (382–3). This line falters when he asks Mrs. Cohen whether she has a daughter, and her reaction provides an “unwelcome bit of circumstantial evidence” (391). He comes to experience “a hesitation which proved how, in a man much given to reasoning, a bare possibility may weigh more than the best-clad likelihood” (385). He is compelled to a trusting acceptance of this narrative pathway, his usual sense “that more knowledge might nullify the evidence” turning him against the “inclination to rest in uncertainty” (391). Habituation to the affective structure of hope allows Deronda to accept the next phase in his plot, which operates by means of trust and prophetic certainty. Adjusting himself against a “desponding view of probability” that takes wishes as “ominous,” Deronda comes to see in them “good and sufficient security for all kinds of fulfilment” (382). He is hence prepared to accept Mordecai’s prophetic outlook not as a set of spiritual truths but as a trusting surrender to particularity, and accepts the chain of events that lead him to the elder man as “plainly discernible links” (514).

\(^{160}\) On coincidence in the novel, and the sense that chance events recur to some invisible but representable causal system, see Bonaparte, *Will and Destiny* 36–8, 40–1; Levine, “Determinism and Responsibility”; and Vargish, *Providential Aesthetic* 241–3.
Mordecai quickly becomes a mentor to Deronda, holding him “spellbound” in a way that parallels the controlling figures in Gwendolen’s plot.\footnote{There are notable connections between them. Simon During sees that they are both figured as monomaniacs, although Mordecai’s vague mental pathology draws on a discernible somatic condition where Gwendolen’s is more complex (“The Strange Case of Monomania” 95–100). See also McCarron 5–6, Thurschwell, “George Eliot’s Prophecies” 94–8, Claggett 855–61.} In this case, however, the lines between mentor and apprentice, prophet and proxy are blurred by a emotive, even physiological form of identification whereby Mordecai’s object appears as an already-familiar entity:

the long-contemplated figure had come as an emotional sequence of Mordecai’s firmest theoretic convictions; it had been wrought from the imagery of his most passionate life; and it inevitably reappeared—reappeared in a more specific self-asserting form than ever. Deronda had that sort of resemblance to the preconceived type which a finely individual bust or portrait has to the more generalized copy left in our minds after a long interval: we renew our memory with delight, but we hardly know with how much correction.

This odd alignment of a prior model (“the preconceived type”) and a generic afterimage (“the more generalized copy”) begins Eliot’s striking defense of prophetic logic, or “second sight.” Mordecai is classed among those whose mental, emotional, and volitional life works through “images which have a foreshadowing power” (471). Such representations relocate actions and outcomes in an imaginative recess, where hypotheses are dominant: “the deed they would do starts up before them in complete shape, making a coercive type” (471); “a wise estimate of consequences is fused in the fires of that passionate belief which determines the consequences it believes in” (513). Eliot’s descriptions of Mordecai link prophecy and scientific experiment, as George Levine has shown.\footnote{“George Eliot’s Hypothesis of Reality.”}

Yet Eliot’s articulation of a “forecasting ardor” that supplements “even strictly-measuring science” carries further into the territory of “human motives and actions, [where] passionate belief has a fuller efficacy” (513). Several descriptions of Mordecai’s psyche (and Deronda’s
musings about it) recast inductive vanity—the notion that “enthusiasm may have the validity of proof” (513)—in a higher key. Eliot redesigns the noncalculative obstinacy for which Gwendolen was censured—as ignorant, headstrong, vain—into a fully positive view of “emotional intellect” against the cold rationalism of a “mathematical dreamland” (514). Where Gwendolen was mocked for her ignorance of numerical reason, in the case of Mordecai mathematical thinking receives a dressing-down that could have been taken from Mill’s *System of Logic*, with its primacy of induction over deduction: “Men may dream in demonstrations, and cut out an illusory world in the shape of axioms, definitions, and propositions, with a final exclusion of fact signed Q.E.D. No formulas for thinking will save us mortals from mistake in our imperfect apprehension of the matter to be thought about” (1.514).

When the novel’s philosophical outlooks are examined in parallel, Eliot seems to adopt opposing attitudes. But their affective tonalities are less divergent: both operate along the axes of certainty and uncertainty. Deronda, for instance, “felt nothing that could be called a belief in the validity of Mordecai’s impressions concerning him or in the probability of any greatly effective issue,” but rather a “profound sensibility to a cry from the depths of another soul” (496). Mordecai’s position stalls Deronda’s usual tendencies to conjecture, suffusing him with the felt aspects of belief in advance of any intellectual commitment. “Your doubts lie as light as dust on my belief,” he says (502), and his “energetic certitude” and “fervent trust” (509) shake Deronda’s uncertainty and open him to an “instreaming of confidence” (506) and ultimately to the “agitating moment of uncertainty which is close upon decision” (623). Just as the influence of Mirah checked Deronda’s rationalizing tendencies, so Mordecai’s prediction of a Jewish mother—a prophecy about the past—forms part of a system whereby Deronda’s “life-long
Beyond turning Deronda away from his abstract, comparative reasoning, Mordecai more radically transfers his belief to his young protégé. The latter is to be “a soul—believing my belief—being moved by my reasons—hoping my hope” (499), the mentor no longer directing his proxy but rather allowing him to take the reins of a single self. Hence Eliot’s quiet use of a term from the psychological literature on the mind’s hierarchical function, making Deronda the “executive self” (473, 510) of Mordecai—his will. Mordecai looks forward to the “blent transmission” (751) that will bring their souls together, and thereafter join Deronda to a long heritage that is discussed in the scene that forms the conceptual center of the latter half of the novel: the debate at the Hand and Banner tavern. Eliot essentially inserts a dialogue on politics involving thinly characterized participants, which Jesse Rosenthal has helpfully mined for its interest in statistical matters, including the state of the Jewish population and patterns of social development across time. Changes on an abstract and systemic level—concerning social qualities—are seen as taking visceral shape in bodies, tissues, and nerves across generations in a way that reintroduces the physiology of will as a reference point. Discussing statistics and the “law of progress,” one character draws a social analogue to scientific “laws of development” and expresses a determinism that Deronda resists by declaring that the “degrees of inevitableness in

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163 Prophecy’s relation to history is a defining characteristic of the biblical book of Daniel. Eliot copied out notes from Abraham Kuenen’s scholarship on this text, which declared the author “the first who grasped the history of the world, so far as he knew it, as one great whole, a drama which moves onward at the will of the Eternal One” (Pf 710 14). The excerpt continues to discuss prophecy as “retrospective history” (Notebooks 406n1).

164 On the abstraction of this heritage and social vision, and its incarnation in the trunk given to Deronda late in the novel, see Fisher, Making Up Society 212–14.

165 “Large Novel and the Law of Large Numbers.”
relation to our own will and acts” leave room for contingent resistance (526). Mordecai offers a more emphatic version of this argument, noting that the “strongest principle of growth lies in human choice” (538).

It may seem that this anti-statistical line allows Deronda to shed his own universalism and learn the terms of Meyrick’s mocking charge, that “Any blockhead can cite generalities, but the master-mind discerns the particular cases they represent” (643).166 Yet for all the emphasis on choice, Deronda learns that his life is the unintentional fulfillment of his grandfather’s wishes: “Every Jew should rear his family as if he hoped that a Deliverer might spring from it” (662).167 His coming to decision is thus an uncanny recursion to another fount of certainty in the past, in the person of Daniel Charisi, whose control over his daughter’s musical career parallels the other controlling mentors of the novel. A “grand” persona “with an iron will” (631), Charisi is no hesitant hero; Joseph Kalonymos, his trustee-at-large, reports his epigrammatic credo, “Better a wrong will than a wavering” (724). The solidity of Deronda’s acceptance of his Jewish heritage and potential destiny as a nation-builder is oddly guaranteed not by his own will, but by an “inherited yearning” (750), as though a Lamarckism of volition.168

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166 In this view, Meyrick becomes Lewes’s voice in the novel, the latter having criticized “uncritical statistics” as the “copious resources of blockheads” (“Suicide” 70).

167 Deronda’s actions negate his mother’s resistances to her own father’s will (David, Fictions of Resolution 147). In Eliot the social web, the actions of others, and our pasts constrain action and limit choice, even though she expresses a firm belief in free will (Markovits, Crisis of Action 90–3).

168 Compare Eliot’s description of musical skill in The Spanish Gypsy as partly “heritage / From treasure stored by generations past / In winding chambers of receptive sense” (ll. 1218–20). In “Hereditary Influence,” Lewes offers examples of how “instinctive peculiarities” or “acquired habits” may be inherited, including a penchant for gambling (143). On Eliot’s Lamarckism see Roberts, George Eliot 46–9. On Deronda’s hereditary identity see Bonaparte, Will and Destiny 74–77.
Hence his phrases for decision are both tautological—he gives a “decisive acknowledgment of his love,” a “definite expression of his resolve”—and express “new state of decision” (745) in terms that exceed one human life: “an epoch in resolve” (725). Where Gwendolen experiences a vertiginous uncertainty, Deronda’s coming to certainty is milder on account of its historical grounding: the “certitude of ties that altered the poise of hopes and fears” (683) merely skews his abstract outlook in one direction through a “release of all the energy which had long been spent in self-checking and suppression because of doubtful conditions” (745). His formerly indecisive will is submerged in an aggregate will that allows personal choice only on its own terms. Deronda thus belongs to what Mordecai calls a “multitude whose will moves in obedience to the laws of justice and love” (749), wherein the “effects prepared by generations are likely to triumph over a contrivance which would bend them all to the satisfaction of self” (663).169

The trajectory of Deronda’s plot is doubly recursive: he moves from an abstract sympathy into a particular commitment that turns out to draw energy from generational laws; his indecision finds its way to a choice that was made decades earlier by someone else; he acquires a will only by sourcing volition from another person and blending in with a historical population of wills; and his past hypotheticals incline towards future hopes that can only succeed by trusting specific narratives about the past. In short, his life follows a hesitant structure that takes a transpersonal form. The utopian ending of Deronda’s plot ultimately has more to do with Gwendolen’s than at first appears. Deronda’s insipid advice to her—“care about something in

169 These pronouncements echo a shared acknowledgment by Eliot and Lewes in their late work that the “mind is at once individual and an integral part of the general mind” (Collins, “G. H. Lewes Revised” 479). Mintz has discussed how Deronda’s “messianic calling” involves his externalization of self in a larger role, ultimately placing him beyond vocation as such (Novel of Vocation 159–60, 163).
this vast world besides the gratification of small selfish desires [...] something that is good apart from the accidents of your own lot” (446)—believes how his global vision can only makes sense in terms of the individual lots on which it is parasitic. He is called to a “higher” life that “holds an enthusiasm for something more than our own appetites and vanities” (451), but such a life only takes shape in a world where those diminutive passions remain a ground to be transcended, which may be why her final letter to him is aired just before he departs from England and from the pages before us.  

The final equilibrium of the Gwendolen and Deronda plotlines leaves her with a renewed uncertainty, whereas he leaves for the East with a fragile certainty as his guide. This opposition matters less than the “kinship” (67) that has been established between the states of certainty and doubt, which blur across the novel’s settings and maintain its origin and outcome under a hesitant, hypothetical sign. “If we read a novel in order to clarify our minds about human character,” V. S. Pritchett writes, “to pass judgment on the effect of character on the world outside itself, and to estimate the ideas people have lived by, then George Eliot is one of the first to give such an intellectual direction to the English novel. She is the first of the simplifiers,” he continues in sardonic fashion, “one of the first to cut moral paths through the picturesque maze of human motive.”  

This chapter has tried to show how, in cutting through the maze as she surely does, Eliot is prompted to take measure of its complexity—of the intricacy of human motive in relation to the lines drawn out into action, and back into possibility. Her success in the one linear direction—with Deronda, who escapes the “mazes of impartial sympathy” (745)—is

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170 Leavis is critical of Eliot’s endorsement of Deronda, a “paragon of virtue, generosity, intelligence, and disinterestedness [who] has no ‘troubles’ he needs a refuge from” (Great Tradition 84).

171 The Living Novel 91.
necessarily shadowed by the mesh of motives from which he is purportedly disentangled, and by
the sense that for others caught, like Gwendolen, in the “labyrinth of reflection” (602), there may
be no Ariadne’s thread out.
CHAPTER 3

HESITANT VERDICTS: COLLINS AND LEGAL UNCERTAINTY
[The Scot] has no falterings of self-suspicion. Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half-intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions, have no place in his brain, or vocabulary. The twilight of dubiety never falls upon him. [...] Between the affirmative and the negative there is no border-land with him. You cannot hover with him upon the confines of truth, or wander in the maze of a probable argument. He always keeps the path.

—Charles Lamb, “Imperfect Sympathies”

Anomalous indeed!—but in this possession I am not singular. Anomaly enters into the composition of us all; impar sibi is the biography of every created being, and I have proved no exception to the rule.

—Thomas Love Peacock, Miserrimus

Historians and legal theorists have shown how the emergence of modern systems of law inaugurated what could be thought of as a mathematical jurisprudence anchored in notions of number and degree. The specific number of witnesses required to establish evidentiary categories or bring about a verdict; the classification of degrees of infraction and corresponding grades of proof; and the more recent use of mathematical methods to assess testimony or place defendants in statistical reference classes—all express modern law’s idealization of the numerical and the definite. Given the law’s foundational place in the emergence of modern tactics of thinking under uncertainty, the attitude that has been cautioned against as “trial by

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1 “Imperfect Sympathies” 60.

2 Miserrimus 23.

3 On early probability concepts drawn from the law, especially from the notion of partial or fractional proofs, see Hacking, Emergence 85–91; Daston, Classical Probability in the Enlightenment 33–47; Shapiro, Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England; and “Beyond Reasonable Doubt” 116–18, 196–8, 253–5, noting that in the Roman-canon system the judge was “essentially an accountant who totaled the proof fractions” (3); Eggleston, “Beyond Reasonable Doubt”; Tribe, “Trial by Mathematics” 1329–30.
mathematics” and “actuarial justice” could not but become more prevalent as models of probabilistic inference came to reign over ever wider areas of social experience.\(^4\)

Yet the law’s own process of judgment under uncertainty has never attained the rigor of those models to which it historically gave rise. Legal theory finds itself, in a riddling historical irony, resorting to theories of subjective probability or explanatory inference drawn from other disciplines in order to establish what might be meant in the law by notions of “proof,” “probability,” “reasonable doubt,” “moral certainty,” and so on.\(^5\) Still, these intricate genealogies can often produce concepts that are subtler than numerical approaches. The law of Scotland, which will be my focus here, has long relied on a category of verdict that undermines the numerical ideal by refusing the binary options for a trial’s outcome. The so-called Scotch Verdict, neither guilty nor not guilty but “not proven,” imputes a lack of evidence for conviction but has the force of an acquittal. Derided for its illogical coexistence with the presumption of innocence, defended for its essential clemency in contrast to sterner binary models, “not proven” is still on the books today and is returned in about a third of criminal cases. As an official verdict of hesitation, “not proven” reinscribes uncertainty into the process of legal decision, calls into question the patterns of inference that lead to binary verdicts, and ratifies what is, outside the

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\(^4\) Tribe, “Trial by Mathematics” (on both “the use of mathematical tools in the actual conduct of a particular trial” and “in the design of the trial system as a whole” [1330]); Feeley and Simon, “Actuarial Justice.”

\(^5\) Scholars such as David Schum and David Kaye invoke the mathematics of subjective (Bayesian) probability; see Friedman’s review of such work in “Assessing Evidence.” Others such as Ronald Allen, John Josephson, and Paul Thagard invoke inference to the best explanation (IBE), a concept drawn from the philosophy of science, as a model for legal decision-making. I rely here on Laudan’s critique of this trend in “Strange Bedfellows.” The deployment of mathematical tools from areas of probability, and from game and decision theory, has seen an enormous growth since roughly the 1960s; the institutional continuity of these approaches is indicated in journals like *Law, Probability and Risk*. For historical perspective see Waldman, “The Origins of the Legal Doctrine of Beyond Reasonable Doubt” and Shapiro, “Beyond Reasonable Doubt” and “Probable Cause” 1–41, 170–1.
law, a penumbra of stigma and suspicion that often has little to do with a court’s final say. Such hesitant verdicts are more attuned to the asymmetric moral psychology whereby a verdict may not track the patterns of blame, recrimination, and suspicion that swirl in the court of public opinion, and thus call attention to the social function of decision in which novels with a legal bent often invest.

In what follows I examine Wilkie Collins’ novel *The Law and the Lady* (1875), which offers the narrative of a young woman-turned-detective, Valeria Brinton, as she seeks to overturn the “not proven” verdict handed down to her husband, Eustace Macallan, for the murder of his first wife. The verdict shapes the novel’s mechanics of narrative alternation, its numerical and additive turns of phrase, and its representations of reasoning, conjecture, and inference under uncertainty, and thereby transforms patterns of detection familiar to the genre that Collins is credited with inventing in novels like *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). After an account of the Scotch Verdict’s history and contextual pressure on Collins’ milieu, I track its presence in the novel through the stages of Valeria’s search, report of the trial, and investigation.

The novel deflects the handling of uncertainty from the legal sphere to the social terrain on which judicial decisions have their effect. In this manner it has been thought to level a reformist critique at the notion of “not proven,” but the verdict’s narrative and representational presence undermines any such critique. On the strength of novels like *No Name* (1862) and *Man and Wife* (1870), which undertake overt critiques of legal oddities such as unfair inheritance provisions for illegitimate children and irregular marriages, Collins has been claimed as a novelist for legal reform in company with figures like his friend Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope, Charlotte Yonge, and Thomas Hardy, all adept in
mining what one critic calls the “poetics of wrongful accusation,” another the “show-trial” that embodies the novelistic tendency to “love to hate the law.” Reframing The Law and the Lady as a novel more consonant with the legal principle it supposedly criticizes could allow a more shaded picture of Collins’ status as a novelist of legal purpose, and clarify the role of uncertainty in novelists whose work on legal fronts has been seen in similarly categorical terms. The arch-novelist of sensation, Collins has rightly been seen as offering a “rich phenomenology of the various ways in which people perceive and deal with the problem of chance in everyday life.”

The Law and the Lady illuminates the felt problems of uncertainty and probability at the hazy border between fact and fiction, law and literature, bringing chance back into the legal territory that defines itself by keeping chance at bay.

That Caledonian Medium Quid

I begin with an account of the Scotch verdict that takes fuller account of its status as a legal instrument than is typical in critical discussions on Collins and the law, which have recently made the verdict and its accompanying legal regime the object of ethnonationalist or postcolonial critique. The accidental history and usage of the verdict down to Collins’ time, most notably in the trial of Madeleine Smith for poisoning her (first) husband (1857), provides a context that is salient for its legal interest quite apart from debates about the divisive identities of post-Union Scotland and England. Further, this historical sketch shows how the nineteenth-century context fashions a jurisprudential genealogy that we can trace to the verdict’s controversial influence.

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6 Schramm, “Towards a Poetics of Wrongful Accusation,” on the familiar acquittal structure in Victorian fiction: “a wrongful accusation is made, evidence of innocence must be uncovered,” and “providential paradigms […] ensure that the accusation is shown to be unfounded at the point of narrative closure” (194); Schor, “Show-Trials” 179. On legal reform, see generally Schramm, Testimony and Advocacy, Dolin, Fiction and the Law, and Davis, Thomas Hardy and the Law.

7 Kent, “Probability, Reality, and Sensation” 265.
today. That current arguments for and against “not proven” invoke the same reasoning—indeed, often the same sources and rhetoric—as in Collins’ moment underlines the novel’s continuing vitality for thinking about legal uncertainty. Considering moments where the verdict is explicitly dealt with in the novel, and uncovering sources for Collins’ legal knowledge, I argue that his apparent critique of the Scottish trial process needs to be distinguished from his presentation of the “not proven” verdict as a legal instrument with social effects and considerable psychological utility.

According to its modern exponents,\(^8\) the verdict of “not proven” emerges by historical attrition: it has “no common law or statutory definition.”\(^9\) As Ian Willock explains, Scots juries initially decided on the familiar general verdicts, turning on guilt or not-guilt. During the seventeenth century, the combination of complex, multipart indictments and ambient political threats resulted in a concentration on verdicts that governed facts alone. Jurors become responsible for finding facts “proven” or “not proven,” leaving the subsequent legal ascriptions of “guilty” or “not guilty” to the judge.\(^10\) After some flux into the early eighteenth century, “proven” merged with “guilty,” where the opposite “not proven” remained at a distance from

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\(^10\) Arnot makes this argument about the reign of Charles II in *A Collection and Abridgement of Celebrated Criminal Trials in Scotland* (1785), 174–5; Willock, *Origins* 219, sees this as overstating the historical case.
“not guilty,” so that three verdicts were available to jurors from 1728.\(^\text{11}\) By the early nineteenth century “not proven” existed as a general verdict not restricted to facts and connoting insufficient evidence to convict, where “not guilty” was reserved for a true finding of innocence.\(^\text{12}\)

Functioning as an acquittal that permits no retrial, regardless of new evidence forthcoming, “not proven” was, in the words of a nineteenth-century commentator, “retained as a useful and fitting expedient.”\(^\text{13}\)

The verdict has historically attracted two charges of conceptual confusion that remain on record today. As an acquittal that does not exonerate, “not proven” seems to compromise the presumption of innocence doctrine.\(^\text{14}\) As a verdict pronounced by a jury structure that does not require unanimity but only a bare majority (at minimum, eight to seven), it seems to attenuate the beyond reasonable doubt standard on which criminal law rests.\(^\text{15}\) Yet the verdict’s defenders

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\(^\text{11}\) [“R. S.”], “The Scotch Verdict” 190. As late as 1800, however, Hume still declares that “the fact is the undoubted and exclusive province of the jury” (*Commentaries on the Law of Scotland* 2.323); on “general” and “special” verdicts, see 2.288–91.


\(^\text{13}\) “Scotch Verdict” 187. This article mostly coincides with Willock and Duff, offering a historical account of the verdict’s inception as a “compromise between irresponsible power, constitutional duty, and conscientious conviction, which administered legal authority, while at the same time it left the juror’s mind void of offence” (184).

\(^\text{14}\) For a historical account of the connected notions that are meant to safeguard this doctrine, see Shapiro, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* and *Probable Cause* 1–41.

\(^\text{15}\) Scottish juries settled at fifteen individuals in the sixteenth century (*Willock, Origins* 184–90, 226–33). Duff argues for the verdict as safeguarding beyond reasonable doubt and summarizes the various arguments (“Scottish Criminal Jury” 173, 190–5); Maher points out that the English system, which can result in a hung jury, may present its own difficulties for the beyond reasonable doubt standard, but nonetheless considers that “not proven” should be eliminated (“Verdict of the Jury” 45–9, 50–1).
point to its utility in cases where the jury is not fully convinced of innocence, and its clemency in cases where the conviction of guilt may need moderation.\textsuperscript{16} Such proposals often reverse the charges on Anglo-American law, arguing that a standard two-verdict system neither guarantees the presumption of innocence nor “prevents social stigma for unproven charges,” since reasonable doubt implies that some “not guilty” verdicts are given through insufficient evidence.\textsuperscript{17}

When jurists in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took up these questions, even authoritative digests of criminal law seem to anticipate the paradoxical character of the verdict. In \textit{A Summary of the Powers and Duties of Juries in Criminal Trials in Scotland} (1833), William Steele qualifies that the “phrase \textit{not proven} is usually employed to mark a deficiency only of the full measure of evidence to convict the pannel [viz. the accused]; and that of \textit{not guilty} to convey the jury’s opinion of his innocence of the charge.”\textsuperscript{18} Similar statements are made by David Hume (the philosopher’s nephew and historical authority on Scots law) and Archibald Alison.\textsuperscript{19} Yet by far the most prominent and longstanding view of the verdict sweeps

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Duff describes the latter as a “subtle way of ‘nullifying’ the law” (“Scottish Criminal Jury” 195). These defenses have received empirical backing, in studies suggesting that jurors would opt for “not proven” when possible (Hope et al., “Third Verdict”), and theoretical support (Bray, “Not Proven” 1301–2, 1315–20). Both hypothesize more acquittals as a result of what decision theory calls a “compromise effect” (Hope et al., “Third Verdict” 243; Bray, “Not Proven” 1314–15).
\item \textsuperscript{17} Bray, “Not Proven” 1300. Assessing the reformist proposal of adopting “not proven” into English law, one nineteenth-century commentator notes the “severe and unrelaxing alternative” of binary models (“Scotch Verdict” 182). For a further discussion that entertain “not proven” for Anglo-American systems, see Barbato, “Scotland’s Bastard Verdict.”
\item \textsuperscript{18} Steele, \textit{Summary} 211. Where “pannel” more familiarly refers to the jury, in Scots law the term designates the trial and/or the individual indicted or brought to trial (see \textit{OED}, “panel, \textit{n.1},” def. 14a., 15).
\item \textsuperscript{19} Hume, \textit{Commentaries} 2.244–331; Alison, \textit{Practice of the Criminal Law of Scotland} 2.631–50, both on what is formally termed the “verdict of assize” (i.e., of the trial proceedings).
\end{itemize}
such jurisprudential demurral aside to reveal a primal scene encapsulating the tension between
the Scotch verdict and the presumption of innocence:

At Court, and waited to see the poisoning woman. She is clearly guilty, but as one or two
witnesses said the poor wench hinted an intention to poison herself, the jury gave that
bastard verdict, Not proven. I hate that Caledonian medium quid. One who is not proven
guilty is innocent in the eye of the law.\(^{20}\)

Walter Scott’s cantankerous epithet has had staying power since its publication in Lockhart’s
Life. Yet his oddly unstable description, jumping to label the accused “clearly guilty” without
quite remembering whether “one or two witnesses” were responsible for the reported hint, richly
enacts the type of proof by indication or tendency (proof by “presumption”) that “not proven”
came to guard against.\(^{21}\)

Similar divisions between reasonable jurisprudes and melodramatic commentators
continued through midcentury and beyond, after an 1848 statute (11 & 12 Vict. c. 79) simplified
the judicial process in Scotland.\(^{22}\) One of Collins’ sources for the novel, J. H. Burton’s
Narratives from Criminal Trials in Scotland (1852), summarizes the debate in a discussion of

\(^{20}\) *Journal of Sir Walter Scott* 1.361 (20 February 1827). Scott also mentions “not proven”
in the introduction to *Rob Roy*, where it is found in exoneration of Rob’s two sons for the charge
of accessory to murder (41).

\(^{21}\) “Scotch Verdict” 185–6; Willock, *Origins* 201–2. On “presumption” in law, see
Shapiro, *Beyond Reasonable Doubt* and *Probable Cause* 200–41, and Welsh, *Strong
Representations* 2–42.

\(^{22}\) Discussing the statute, one commentator challenges Scott’s dismissal: “the respect and
submissive deference with which [Scottish] criminal prosecutions are regarded […]; the frequent
use of the verdict by the jury […]; and the uncomplaining spirit in which it is uniformly received
by the conscious persons whom it at once acquits and stigmatizes, testify most powerfully to its
convenience and radical justice” (“Scotch Verdict” 195). In 1848 the verdict absorbed the related
mechanisms of “alleviation” and “exculpation” (192–4).
poisoning cases, thus recapitulating Scott’s original paradigms of forensic and moral uncertainty (poisoning and suicide).\textsuperscript{23}

This middle finding is peculiar to Scotland. Some have held it to be a valuable institution, as leaving a stigma of suspicion where there is not sufficient evidence to convict—a stigma which never leaves its object if he is guilty, and is easily removable if any event should occur enabling him to explain suspicious facts and make his innocence apparent. On the other hand, this form has been objected to as a too accessible resting-place for jurors unwilling to incur the responsibility of finding guilty, and unable to reconcile their consciences to a finding of not guilty.\textsuperscript{24}

Sources close to Collins were hardly so measured, especially in the wake of the high-profile trial of Madeleine Smith, reviews of which only ramified the conceptual indistinction.\textsuperscript{25} An anonymous report of the trial in \textit{The Law Times} sees it as a “negative salve for the consciences of scrupulous men.”\textsuperscript{26} In Dickens’ \textit{All the Year Round}, in the issue following the final installment of \textit{No Name} in 1863, a contributor discusses the Maclachlan case (note the nominal proximity to “Macallan,” the indicted husband in Collins’ novel), where a Scotch verdict is overturned by the royal prerogative of mercy.\textsuperscript{27} Lamenting the “effete forms” and “antique freaks and extravagances of Scotch procedure,” the article declares that “the country of Scott and Burns lies overrun with the brambles and underwood of a detestable jargon and mediæval procedure.”\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Burton, \textit{Narratives} 2.1–78. See Taylor, Introduction xix. On the emergence of more secretive methods of poisoning from midcentury onwards, and the rise of modern toxicology and medical jurisprudence, see Burney, \textit{Poison, Detection, and the Victorian Imagination}.
\item Burton, \textit{Narratives} 2.61n.
\item Forsyth, “Criminal Procedure.” On the trial generally, see Hartman, “Murder for Respectability”; Helfield, “Poisonous Plots” 163–70.
\item “Not Proven” 211.
\item \textit{The Woman in White} had been serialized here in 1860, and Collins was a frequent contributor.
\item “Home-Office Inspiration” 465, 466 (\textit{All the Year Round}, 24 January 1863). Similar charges were leveled at the English system: Arthur Hallam, in \textit{The Middle Ages} (1872) calls the
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
a letter to the *Pall Mall Gazette* in 1872, Collins’s friend Charles Reade uses Scott’s epithet to fume in similar tones about the Diblanc trial, where the defendant did not receive a Scotch verdict but was found guilty even though the jury recommended mercy. This travesty, in Reade’s view, represented a “bastard verdict which says ‘Yes’ with a trumpet and ‘No’ with a penny whistle.”

Contrary to critical assumption, *The Law and the Lady* does not so much articulate a single position on the Scotch verdict as allude to this range of views, as though adopting the mantra of the Scotch jury when it speaks not unanimously but in majority, “by a plurality of voices.” The moderate explanation of the verdict is offered to Valeria by Major Fitz-David (whose name embodies a pun on the “bastard verdict”: the prefix “Fitz-,” “son of,” was a byword for the illegitimate children of royal princes):

> There is a verdict allowed by the Scotch law, which (so far as I know) is not permitted by the laws of any other civilized country on the face of the earth. When the jury are in doubt whether to condemn or acquit the prisoner brought before them, they are permitted, in Scotland, to express that doubt by a form of compromise. If there is not evidence enough, on the one hand, to justify them in finding a prisoner guilty, and not evidence enough, on the other hand, to thoroughly convince them that a prisoner is innocent, they extricate themselves from the difficulty by finding a verdict of Not Proven. (101)

Although his comments are suggestive on the matter of Scottish backwardness, Fitz-David accurately depicts a half-measure expressed by the jury, a “doubt” that remains “on public requirement of jury unanimity “that preposterous relic of barbarism” (2.406; quoted in Willock, *Origins* 226).

29 “The Legal Vocabulary” 261. In his *Life*, Thomas Hardy lampoons a Mellstock fiddler as “a man who speaks neither truth nor lies, but a sort of Not Proven compound which is very relishable” (99). Collins corresponded with Reade during the composition and serial run of the novel, sending him proofs at a later stage (*Letters* 3.59, 62, 72).

30 For instance, in verdicts recorded by Hume, *Commentaries* 2.326, 328, 330.
Valeria (channeling her inner Scott or Reade) chooses to hear only one facet of this definition, and reacts by promising to “change that underhand Scotch Verdict of Not Proven, into an honest English verdict of Not Guilty” (116). (The ethnic identity of a Guilty verdict remains leadingly tacit.)

Critics have naturally jumped on this statement to cast aspersions on the novel’s representations of Scottish institutions working in service of an English civilizing process. Those critics who move beyond seeing the Scotch verdict as a marker of uncertainty take it to signal such a critique. This approach can be traced back to Dougald MacEachen, who first drew attention to the Madeleine Smith trial as a source for Collins and argued that he took a reformist attitude towards the Scotch verdict. MacEachen claims that the novel prosecutes an “attack” on the verdict while paradoxically suggesting that the weakness of Eustace’s character makes it difficult to discern “any great injustice” being done. Mapping internal fractures in Scotland onto similar divisions in England’s cultural identity, Anne Longmuir interprets the

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31 As Traver also notes, calling attention to the verdict’s use as an avoidance tactic by the jury (“The Law and the Nation” 70–1).

32 Harrington calls Valeria’s outburst a “patriotic appeal and mission statement” (“From the Lady and the Law” 26).

33 Reed discusses the pervasive ambiguity and shame that the verdict installs (“Law and Narrative Strategy” 218–22).


verdict as a “disruptive element” and marker of “epistemological uncertainty” that threatens national unity with irrational elements.\textsuperscript{36} Repeating the terms of an assault on Scots law, Teresa Traver finds Collins representing it as “incapable, weak, and uncivilized to the extent that it deviates from the English system,” and Mary Husemann sees in the verdict “a vehicle for criticizing [Collins’] northern neighbors,” the former argument underlining a reformist critique of Scotland’s national identity in service of a new vision of Union, the latter preferring the terms of English colonial control.\textsuperscript{37}

If these arguments hinge on understanding the “Scottishness of the verdict,”\textsuperscript{38} pressing the legal context reveals aspects of what could be termed its “verdictness,” the oddity of truth-telling (from Latin \textit{verum, dicere}) that makes visible a type of truth independent of the establishment of fact. When Valeria writes to Eustace of her plans to investigate the verdict, she tells him that she has checked a definition in a standard Victorian authority whose name would nevertheless seem to underline the colonial and ethnic \textit{topoi}. “In plain English,” she notes, “I have looked into Ogilvie’s Imperial Dictionary; and Ogilvie tells me: ‘A verdict of Not Proven only indicates that, in the opinion of the Jury, there is a deficiency in the evidence to convict the prisoner. A verdict of Not Guilty imports the Jury’s opinion that the prisoner is innocent’” (116). The formula aligning semantic plainness with legal candor recurs when Valeria scorns the “uncouth language” (125) of the trial report she is forced to reproduce. It is again “plain English”

\textsuperscript{36} Longmuir, “The Scotch Verdict” 170.

\textsuperscript{37} “The Law and the Nation” 68; “Irregular and Not Proven” 67. Traver and Husemann usefully survey the development of the Scots legal system: Traver notes that the verdict allows for jury uncertainty (71–3); Husemann points to the greater power invested in judges, the importance of judging by principles of reason rather than precedent, and Scots law’s corollary reliance on legal authorities (69–71). See generally Husemann 73–9.

\textsuperscript{38} Traver, “The Law and the Nation” 70.
to which she appeals in stating that “the Jury who tried my husband declined to express their opinion, positively and publicly, that he was innocent” (239).

It is probably just as well, then, that this quotation cannot be from the source advertised, and not only because consulting a Scottish expansion of Noah Webster’s original authority on “plain English” (as declared on the title page of that dictionary) hardly sits well with the jingoism just mentioned. Editions of *The Imperial Dictionary* Collins could have consulted do not clarify the verdict. The text Valeria appears to draw on, William Bell’s *A Dictionary and Digest of the Law of Scotland* (1838), is more measured in describing the ideal function of “not proven”: “A verdict of *not guilty* imports the jury’s opinion that the panel is innocent. A verdict of *not proven* only indicates that, in the opinion of the jury, there is a deficiency in the evidence to convict him.”

By tacitly or even unwittingly having his lady detective quote not from a friendly, illustrated source that would underline the superiority of English over Scot, but rather from a formidable technical source replete with references to the main authorities on Scots law, such as Hume, Alison, and Steele, Collins is quietly arming his heroine with the tools of an

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40 The 1851 edition (identical to larger-format reissues through 1859) only mentions the fact/law and general/special discriminations under “verdict” (2.1165), and under “jury” offers only special cases in which Scots juries must decide unanimously (2.16). The verdict is briefly alluded to under “proven” (2.485), where in a later edition that entry describes it (at the polar opposite of Valeria’s sense) as “a verdict given by a jury in a criminal case when, although there is a deficiency of evidence to convict the prisoner, there is sufficient to warrant grave suspicion of his guilt” (1883 ed., 3.556–7).

41 Bell, *Dictionary and Digest* 590.
overwhelmingly masculine profession and giving her (and readers) the resources to valorize Scots law between the lines.\textsuperscript{42}

Collins’ critique of pragmatic aspects of the Scottish legal and trial system need to be distinguished from the way the novel encodes the Scotch Verdict’s logical form.\textsuperscript{43} His refraction of these contexts holds more than historical interest, since the terms in which he understands the verdict map discussions that continue through the late nineteenth century to the present.\textsuperscript{44} In an 1877 case about fraud and forgery, recalled by the defender Edward Clarke, the language of Collins’ novel makes a bizarre appearance at the Old Bailey (an English court where “not proven” cannot apply).\textsuperscript{45} Clarke appealed to the jury to release the defendant “not with some bastard verdict of Not Proven, to hang round his neck for the rest of his life the irremovable stigma of suspicion and crime; but with the straightforward honest Not Guilty.”\textsuperscript{46} By contrast, Arthur Conan Doyle prefaces an account of a criminal case by emphasizing the presumption of innocence and benefit of the doubt: “It cannot be doubted that if the Scotch verdict of ‘Not

\textsuperscript{42} Bell’s definition cites Alison and Steele, and owes some of its phrasing to Hume: “not uncommonly, the phrase \textit{not proven}, has been employed to mark a deficiency only of lawful evidence to convict the pannel, and that of \textit{not guilty}, to convey the jury’s opinion of his innocence of the charge” (\textit{Commentaries} 2.291).

\textsuperscript{43} For an account of the former critique, see Traver, “The Law and the Nation” 73–4. I resist Husemann’s sense that Collins’ critique is uninformed (“Irregular and Not Proven” 77), and would suggest that he formally confirms the verdict as “dynamic” and entailing “a broader range of accountability” (79), which she rejects.

\textsuperscript{44} This reading also undercuts the sense of a cultural attack perpetrated by Collins on the dour and benighted people north of the border: Valeria’s reflections on the so-called “Scotch Sunday” identify that tradition with “the most stolid, stern and joyless people on the face of the earth,” while also upholding that “no people more cheerful, more companionable, more hospitable, more liberal in their ideas, [are] to be found on the face of the civilized globe” (272).

\textsuperscript{45} Incidentally, Clarke was later defense counsel in the celebrated Adelaide Bartlett poisoning case.

\textsuperscript{46} “The Detective Case” 382.
proven,’’ which neither condemns nor acquits, had been permissible in England it would have been the outcome of many a case which, under our sterner law, has ended upon the scaffold.”⁴⁷ These examples typify the verdict’s floating ideological valence. Detached from any concrete use of “not proven” for rhetorical purposes, they proffer the verdict as an embodiment of unjust stigma or just clemency without realizing how the verdict’s flexibility—resulting from the “difference between a legal and moral acquittal” that was “unknown” in the English system—unstably supports either side of any argument.⁴⁸

**Styles of Search and Detection**

On the way to assessing the pressure of this legal material in *The Law and the Lady*, a brief plot summary may be in order. Our feisty heroine Valeria Brinton marries a man she takes to be called Eustace Woodville. After a series of coincidences, including a chance meeting with her husband’s mother who does not recognize her last name, Valeria realizes that she’s been married under false pretenses. Her husband was not only married before, under the name of Macallan, but was also charged with the poisoning of his first wife Sara and released under the Scotch verdict. Unable to bear such shameful circumstances, he abandons Valeria and is seen only intermittently until the conclusion. She, by contrast, undertakes a full-scale investigation to establish Eustace’s innocence, accompanied by a cadre of zany characters: her father’s former clerk, Benjamin, who is usefully obsessed with solving newspaper puzzles; an accommodating Scotch lawyer named Playmore (possibly an allusion to Scott’s lawyer Pleydell, in *Guy Mannering*); an aging pimp named Major Fitz-David; and a wheelchair-using figure named

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⁴⁷ “Strange Studies from Life III” 483.

⁴⁸ “Scotch Verdict” 183.
Miserrimus Dexter, who subsists on truffles and burgundy and adds a twist of gothic sensation to an otherwise pedestrian narrative.

The Scotch verdict contorts the novel in myriad ways, from local details to larger inferential and narrative structures, as Collins variously tries to enact the definiteness that the verdict undermines. Its simplest effect involves numerical and repetitive tags (typically twos that expand into threes and subsequent multiples), alongside either/or patterns and fallacies, an overextension of what Tzvetan Todorov calls the “geometric architecture” of detective fiction.49

The opening reader’s note establishes this pattern in connection to the novel’s prevailing interest in the irrational, atypical, and unlikely facets of experience. Collins distresses the thread between “natural” and “probable” by reminding us:

(First): that the actions of human beings are not invariably governed by the laws of pure reason. (Secondly): that we are by no means always in the habit (especially when we happen to be women) of bestowing our love on the objects which are the most deserving of it, in the opinions of our friends. (Thirdly and Lastly): that Characters which may not have appeared, and Events which may not have taken place, within the limits of our own individual experience, may nevertheless be perfectly natural Characters and perfectly probable Events, for all that.50

Likewise the many binary chapter titles, nested within an earlier partition in the three-volume edition (“Paradise Lost,” “Paradise Regained”), send the novel along an iterative track of thinking, searching, discovering, miscalculating, and correcting: “The Bride’s Mistake,” “The Bride’s Thoughts”; “The Landlady’s Discovery,” “My Own Discovery”; “In the Dark,” “In the

49 “The Typology of Detective Fiction” 45.

50 The Examiner’s review dubbed this “as arrant a preface as ever was prefixed” (“[Rev. of] The Law and the Lady” 414); Dupeyron-Lafay points to its mélange of gothic and rational elements (“The Paradox of Gothic Detection” 143). Collins’ prefatory comments often mused on matters ordinary and extraordinary. The preface to Armadale, for instance, suggests that the novel “oversteps […] the narrow limits within which they [viz. readers] are disposed to restrict the development of modern fiction” (5). Such views can be traced back to the preface to Basil, as Martin notes (189–90), which constitutes what Kent calls a “sensationalist manifesto” hinging on “probability as subjective belief” (“Probability, Reality, and Sensation” 264).
When Valeria is led to infer that the truth of her husband’s past is lodged somewhere in Major Fitz-David’s library, her search embodies these patterns in its methodical enumeration. She maps the room and classifies every object into multiples of two or three before combing through them all: starting with “two shorter walls,” she hones in on the doorway abutted by two card-tables and two china bowls (76), then moves on to “two corners” with “two little chairs” (77), and ends with the opposite wall, where three window compartments are bracketed by two antique cabinets, each with six drawers (77–8). The effect of this exhaustive catalogue is to set up an investigation that works on an additive model. Although any number of these details would suffice for the inferential flights of a detective like Edgar Allan Poe’s Dupin or Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes—to wit: “a passport, a set of luggage labels, a broken silver snuff-box, two cigar-cases, and a torn map of Rome” (78)—Valeria ignores such inferentially laden clues and assesses anything that might count as circumstantial evidence. It would be hard to overstate the strangeness of this methodical approach, in its spurning of not only the subjective probability assessments of figures like Dupin, Holmes, or Collins’ own Sergeant Cuff, but also of any folk model of inference whatever.

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51 Reed suggests that these titles seem to issue from a different voice than first-person narrator (“Law and Narrative Strategy” 223).

52 Valeria contrasts with Collins’ several detectives possessed of inferential acumen, from Inspector Cuff in The Moonstone to Old Sharon in My Lady’s Money (1878). Cavallaro notes the difference from Holmes (“Solution to Dissolution” 12–14). An early review of the novel (panning while praising Collins’ ability to “form a puzzle”) complains that the search takes too long to yield “matters of interest indeed, but not of interest to [Valeria]” (“[Rev. of] The Law and the Lady,” Saturday Review, 357).

53 On these detectives as relying on subjective probability measures that would only be formalized later, see Kadane’s brief reflection, “Bayesian Thought in Early Modern Detective Stories.” A related tradition of seeing detection along the lines of what C. S. Peirce called...
Collins frames this search as a way of teaching Valeria to detect by considering alternatives and uncovering causal sequences. But her real discoveries are oddly accidental. Two findings rise to salience: “fragments of a broken vase” (78), and a photograph of Eustace with another woman, which falls out of an album of Fitz-David’s romances that Valeria locates in the last of the bookcase compartments (86). A second look reveals an inscription that chains these details together, confirming the significance of Fitz-David’s stolen glance at the bookcase and so “connecting the vase and the bookcase as twin landmarks on the way that led to discovery” (82): “To Major Fitz-David, with two vases. From his friends, S. and E. M.” (89).

Although these details in duplicate clearly stand as a model of investigation into causes and patterns—Valeria naturally wonders about the “accident” that broke the vase (81)—they do not promote any corresponding inference. It is as though Valeria is engaged in a version of what Mill terms “induction improperly so called,” wherein a generalization inferred from specific propositions does not add anything that was not contained in those propositions: she can make no leap that is is not already evident in the information she has collected. Any inference is blurred under the pressure of jealousy, as Valeria absurdly resists the conclusion that the photograph shows Eustace with his first wife (S. and E. M. are their initials, perhaps doubling as an open

―abduction‖ (often taken as the forebear of inference to the best explanation) is detailed in the essays in Eco and Sebeok, The Sign of Three.

54 As Ashley points out, in Collins’ earlier story “The Diary of Anne Rodway,” the (female) investigator also “accomplishes more by chance and by perseverance than by the exercise of any particular detective skill” (“Wilkie Collins and Detective Fiction” 50). Miller offers a similar claim about The Moonstone (“From roman policier to roman-police” 159).

55 System of Logic 1.288–90. On Mill and improper inductions, as a rejection of Whewell’s “colligation” and “discoverers’ induction,” see Snyder, Reforming Philosophy 102–3.
acrostic on the Greek word for sign: *seme*). She also seems oblivious to the connection between the vases mentioned and those she has found in the library.

Finally aided by the Major’s current prima-donna, Miss Highty, who confesses that she broke the vase by hurling a book to displace the nosegay of a competitor for Fitz-David’s affections, Valeria happens upon the full report of the trial of Eustace Macallan. Symbolic connection trumps number and causation. Three elements that initially seem related (vase, photograph, book of trials) are only trivially linked by cause, whereas their figurative relations stitch them together: the photograph indexes two individuals who translate into three initials; these are the benefactors of two vases, one of which is broken by a book that contains the narrative explanation for the metaphoric sundering of which the shattered vase is both sign and memorial. Valeria, herself “a person who fails to strike the ordinary observer at first sight; but who gains in general estimation, on a second, and sometimes even on a third, view” (11), thus conducts a search that reveals her own person as an embodiment of the Scotch verdict’s uncertainty—“neither maid, wife, nor widow” (40).

The search inaugurates the novel’s larger tension between an additive logic of information and an aleatory pattern of discovery. In the first mode, Valeria will resist Playmore’s concern for economy, “not in the least impressed by that solemn appeal to the unseen powers of arithmetic and money,” and prefer “being fed with more information” (355). At the same time, the second mode has her feeling, late in the text, that “what I had done, I had, so to speak, done blindfold,” since the “merest accident might have altered the whole course of later events” (396).

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56 John Grote defines “seme” as an atom of meaning, linguistic or otherwise, that might join other such units in “quasi-writing or exhibition to the eye by other than vocal elements,” a fair description of Valeria’s search (*OED*). Allan offers that Valeria’s detection here works by “engaging the differential play between signifiers” in a process she terms “sensational detection” (“A Lock Without a Key” 47, 50).
This alternating structure undercuts the critical assessment of her detective skills, typically seen as supplementing rational approaches with what critics have variously termed “feminine,” “gothic,” or “sensate” detection. The presentiments that bring Valeria within sight of key evidence or conjecture often forestall correct inferences, and her success owes more to qualities of perseverance—“curiosity” (54), “native obstinacy” (314), “prodigious tenacity of purpose” (69)—than to the pressure of the irrational in a revamped model of detection.

Co-extensive with this search-by-numbers is the explanatory desire that Collins produces in the early stages of the novel, through a coy use of counterfactual thoughts, unaccounted-for sensations, and glaring improbabilities. When Valeria signs her married and not her maiden name into the register at the outset, her aunt’s superstitious reaction is coupled with a counterfactual hope—“it may turn out that you have chosen well” (9)—that creates a cloud of narrative possibilities. After Eustace’s mother does not respond to the mention of Valeria’s last name as Woodville, the latter is puzzled and offers a similarly paradoxical reflection—“If I had only myself to think of, I believe I should have provoked an explanation on the spot” (27)—that demonstrates how explanation is made impossible by a condition (not having “only myself to think of”) that generates the desire for explanation in the first place. “What was the secret of her despising him, and pitying me?” she wonders. “Where was the explanation of her incomprehensible apathy when my name was twice pronounced in her hearing?” (30).

See, respectively, Harrington, “From the Lady and the Law” 21, 29; Dupeyron-Lafay, “The Paradox of Gothic Detection” 142; Johnston, “Sensate Detection”; Craig and Cadogan, The Lady Investigates 22, pointing to Valeria’s “step-by-step deduction”; and Maynard, “Telling the Truth” 194, on her use of “imaginative identification, not just inductive reasoning.” A parallel conundrum occurs in accounts of The Moonstone. As Duncan notes, the novel claimed by T. S. Eliot, Dorothy Sayers, and P. D. James as the exemplary detective fiction shows Ezra Jennings solving the case “through sympathy and sheer luck as much as through scientific ratiocination” (301).
These proliferating secrets and briefly glimpsed alternatives send Valeria into regular lapses: “a certain uneasy sensation in my mind” (9); a “sudden sense of misgiving” (32); “hopeless confusion” (37); “unendurable doubt” (46). At the same time they flatter readerly and critical judgments that take a position above uncertainty and retroactively praise the intuitive power of such unthinking intuition. Our sifting of information allows us to see through Valeria’s frantic hostility to inference: for instance, when she refuses to take “every one of these monstrous improbabilities [Eustace’s mother’s actions]” as “facts that had actually happened” (34). Yet we are nonetheless lured into the novel’s larger encouragement of hypothesis. Collins proffers a kind of reading less indebted to discovery and more focused on the diligent aggregation of detail that, from some final point of view, will make all clear in retrospect. If The Moonstone (1868) has been critiqued for offering multiple points of view on a single case that solidify into “monological narration” and “ideological closure,”58 the single narrative strand of The Law and the Lady could be said to create a polyvocal text that resists the hardening of probability into fact, of alternatives into single outcomes, and, in a broader sense to which I return below, of human variety and “deviance” into normality.59 A moral conundrum runs athwart the novel’s presentation of detective capabilities. Acuity of inference may require a “narrow-minded” approach that runs into ethical quagmires, where the broadness or “many-

58 Miller, “From roman policier to roman-police,” especially 167–70. Duncan critiques Miller’s reading of detection as a “double gesture of epistemological totalization and ideological closure” (302). Contrast Heller, on Collins’ many-voiced “aesthetics of multiplicity,” and the gendered “double voice” of The Moonstone (Dead Secrets 37, 151–6).

59 Reed draws connections to The Woman in White and The Moonstone on the topics of amateur investigation and an embedded trial report (“Law and Narrative Strategy” 221–2).
sidedness” of mind that characterizes a wide ethical approach may not get to the heart of the matter.

**Unproven at Trial**

Having unearthed the report, Valeria proceeds to retell the trial as a digest, focusing on the three questions that concern the means, agent, and motive of Sara’s death. The questions adopt a pattern whereby supposition and character assassination—all manner of “loose and unreliable evidence” (128)—is followed by material findings, as if the evidence is meant to confirm the shaky inferences that preceded it instead of acting as data from which conclusions could then be drawn. Assessing Collins’ debt to nineteenth-century trial reports from the French Causes Célèbres to its English transplants, Bernadette Meyler has shown this reading as displaying “an awareness of the limits of the text’s or the trial’s ability to convey an unmediated truth,” using a “retrospective standpoint” to lever circumstantial evidence in a manner that parallels contemporary trial collections. Collins writes broadly in concert with the skepticism at midcentury “that crime would invariably uncover itself.” That questions and interruptions are oddly unvoiced in Valeria’s condensed record (e.g., 130–1) further underlines the sense that the trial multiplies inferential possibilities in default of establishing actual occurrences. She “frames the trial in such a way as to render the legal advocates and decision-makers themselves a subject

60 I draw this notion from Thomas, *Cultivating Victorians* 3–48, where it describes the logic of Victorian liberalism.

61 A review dryly noted “a far greater laxity in admitting evidence than we know of south of the Tweed” (“[Rev. of] The Law and the Lady,” *Saturday Review*, 357).


of inquiry” in a way that is “procedurally subversive.” It might not be a stretch to see Valeria overturning the entire “adversarial” logic of the English trial system in favor of an “inquisitorial” French approach, with herself as primary investigator.

On the question of whether Sara was poisoned, we are treated to a rambling testimony by the nurse who attended her during the final illness, calling attention to Eustace’s two opportunities for delivering the poison (132–3). Valeria’s reflections on this testimony stand for a larger pattern in noting how the prosecution “led the Jury to infer that the prisoner had taken those opportunities to rid himself of an ugly and jealous wife” (139). Instead of countermanding such character assassination and broadly inadmissible evidence, the defense grants it emotive sway by conceding to the same terrain of motive rather than fact (139–40). Its cross-examination objects to evidence only on “technical” grounds (143, 147) and focuses on character claims: “Was this the sort of woman who would exasperate a man into poisoning her? And was this the sort of man who would be capable of poisoning his wife?” (140–1). The entire first question is sidelined by a cache of medical testimony. The two doctors originally attending, backed up by the post-mortem surgeon, and two “analytical chemists” produce the “irresistible” and “overwhelming testimony” of poisoning by arsenic, actually displaying the compound that was

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64 Meyler, “Wilkie Collins’s Law Books” 140; Cavallaro, “Solution to Dissolution” 8.

65 On the two systems of trial procedure, see Damaska, “Evidentiary Barriers to Conviction and Two Models of Criminal Procedure: A Comparative Study.”

66 This line of questioning echoes nineteenth-century Anglo-American adultery trials, where character consistency (even of a novelistic sort) was central to cases for the defense. See Korobkin, Criminal Conversations 11–14.
found in the body “in a quantity admittedly sufficient to have killed two persons instead of one” (141).67

Similarly, the question of the poisoner casts a shadow over Eustace, in order to frame circumstantial evidence found at the scene.68 The official investigator murkily describes how charges arose against Eustace—“certain discoveries which were reported” to the Procurator-Fiscal resulted in an arrest warrant (142)—and the sheriff’s officer reports how a search of Eustace’s residence Gleninch discovered a small screw of paper with some white grains and a chemist’s label. Two Edinburgh druggists have signed records of Eustace’s purchase of arsenic, for domestic purposes (killing insects and rats) that his respective household authorities (the cook and gardener) testify to having no knowledge of (146–8),69 which allows the prosecution to “prove” in a faux-syllogism “(1) that Eustace had bought the poison; (2) that the reason which he had given to the druggists for buying the poison was not the true reason; (3) that he had had two opportunities of secretly administering poison to his wife” (152).

The final question uses the “silent evidence” (156) of Sara’s letters and excerpts from Eustace’s diary to underline her marital unhappiness and his apparent intentions both homicidal and suicidal, given the double-bind of being compelled to marry a woman he dislikes while

67 In the Smith case, the numbers vary but the sense is that the poisoning took several attempts, with enough arsenic to kill anywhere from fifty to a hundred (Hartman, “Murder for Respectability” 398). Burney, Poison, Detection, and the Victorian Imagination 80–2, notes that this chemical technique was highly convincing both for toxicologists and theorists of evidence.

68 The investigation reveals a difference in English and Scottish systems also present in the Smith trial. Where the English system uses coroners to investigate unexplained death (fact), the Scottish, in which there is no coroner, deploys the Procurator Fiscal to investigate alleged crimes (guilt) (Forsyth, “Criminal Procedure” 349–52): the former “proceeds from the facts to the person of the criminal,” the latter “from the suspected person to the facts” (350).

69 A detail Collins draws from Burton, who comments on the “vulgar criminal poisoner” who “goes to the nearest chemist to buy arsenic for destroying imaginary rats” (Narratives 2.1).
hankering after another who is married and beyond his ken (157–65). This assessment of motive involves the entire backstory of Eustace and Sara’s accidental marriage (153–6), even though much of this (including Eustace’s supposed attachment to his married cousin, Helena Beauly) is acknowledged as hearsay. The chance occasion that led to their marriage (Sara visited Eustace and was found in his bedroom) was, like the trial, a matter of “motives […] misinterpreted in the vilest manner” (155). Eustace’s note-to-self recognizing “how irresistible temptation can be, and how easily, sometimes, crime may follow it” (161), may appear damning but is only another conjectural item to add to the prosecution’s “chain of hostile evidence” (147). Alluding to the wider sense of the term “libel” as denoting any criminal charge whatever, Collins has Eustace’s mother reject the diary as a “libel on his character,” no less so because that libel is “written by himself” (168), and Dexter agrees that a diary is “nothing but an expression of the weakest side in the character of the person who keeps it” (174).

When the trial gives us facts, it thus foregrounds evidence I have been characterizing as numerical: two arsenic purchases, two occasions for poisoning, three letters, five medical witnesses, six diary excerpts. There is enough here for several trials. These iterations read as a tautological satire on the requirement, particularly stringent in Scots law, for the corroboration of evidence (if one fact does not suffice, another identical one surely will), and they generally burlesque Alexander Welsh’s argument about evidentiary narratives having turned away from

70 Compare G. H. Lewes’ statement on imitative behavior: “To imagine an act is to rehearse it mentally. By such mental rehearsal the motor organs are […] disposed to respond in act. Hence it is that a long-meditated crime becomes at last an irresistible criminal impulse” (Problems of Life and Mind III 459).

71 The conceit of a damning diary is used to greater self-conscious effect in the case of Lydia Gwilt in Armadale, also charged with murder-by-poison in echoes of the Smith and other trials. See Kent, “Probability, Reality, and Sensation” 272–3, 276.
witness testimony to circumstantial evidence from the eighteenth into the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{72}

Many of the hypotheticals introduced here on the model of so-called similar fact evidence, as in the Madeleine Smith trial, use probable patterns (former purchases of arsenic, previous illnesses after a beverage offered by the accused) to figure a causal chain that may have no basis in reality.\textsuperscript{73}

Thus when the trial departs from fact into its main mode, conjecture, a bizarre reversal of conditional probability holds sway.\textsuperscript{74} Typically a trial holds one referential fact stable—say, that a murder has taken place—and reasons back to means and motives by way of concrete evidence. Here that reasoning alternates in a probabilistic manner that runs the chronology in the wrong direction: is this piece of evidence more likely (it queries) in relation to a murder, or in connection with some other state of affairs?\textsuperscript{75} This way of stating the problem is contemporary, but it captures an aspect of poisoning cases as paradigmatically uncertain, as I mentioned in the


\textsuperscript{73} Forsyth, “Criminal Procedure” 370–2, noting that such evidence in the Smith trial would have been inadmissible in an English setting. On similar fact evidence, Walker notes that it “might be admissible if a systematic course of conduct had to be established or intention rather than accident had to be proved or the accused’s state of mind had to be established” (\textit{Legal History of Scotland} 507).

\textsuperscript{74} Conditional probability denotes the probability of one event (X), given the probability of another (Y), written P(X|Y). It forms a key element in applications of Bayes’ Theorem to legal decision theory.

\textsuperscript{75} This type of backwards reasoning about conditional probabilities tends to be criticized in discussions of mathematical applications to the law. Stated abstractly, the Bayesian logic here concerns what is termed the “likelihood ratio” (how much more or less likely is the evidence E given a hypothesis H, as against the likelihood of E given not-H). See Friedman, “Assessing Evidence” 1812–16, 1828–35; Tribe, “Trial by Mathematics”; Lempert, “Modeling Relevance.”
case of Scott above, and as Collins—an adept of the poisoning plot since *The Woman in White* \(^{76}\)—may have developed from the following generalization in Burton:

> In all charges of this nature the main substantial fact, to which all others are secondary, is, that the death has been caused by poison. It is not necessary that its presence should be actually detected—it may be shown that it has existed though it exist no longer, and it may be proved [...] that poison was actually consumed by the deceased. Having separately and as an independent fact proved the death by poison, we have a safe position whence, from the conduct and motives of parties, we may alight on those who have committed the crime. \(^{77}\)

Having emphatically demonstrated the primary fact, the trial in Collins’ representation mocks this apparently secure position for inference by means of “conduct and motives,” and through its many conjectures and loose threads raises the specter of another type of death (suicide) as an explanatory framework for the “facts” presented.

Valeria’s reading of the trial places the conjectural above the factual because her own investigation aims less to disprove an evidentiary sequence leading to a guilty verdict (such a sequence having shown itself inconclusive) than to find an alternative chain of probabilities—to depart from what Meyler calls “forms of reading that legislate for closure.” \(^{78}\) Since she has to “construct a theory that excludes [Eustace] as the perpetrator of the crime” and to set up a “surrogate trial designed to supplant the original,” Valeria needs a different construal of those facts that admit of interpretation (including circumstantial detail, character aspersions, and hearsay evidence). \(^{79}\) Her approach to this problem is to call into question not only the evidence

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\(^{76}\) Sutherland, “Wilkie Collins and the Origins of the Sensation Novel” 256.

\(^{77}\) Burton, *Narratives* 2.49, discussing a 1765 case in which a laird (another “Ogelvie”) was allegedly poisoned by his younger brother, who had been carrying on with the elder’s young wife.

\(^{78}\) Maynard, “Telling the Truth” 193.

\(^{79}\) Reed, “Law and Narrative Strategy” 222, 224.
she has read and recast, but the ideas about reasoning undergirding that evidence. She derides the prosecution’s concluding statement, which reminds the jury that they “must be satisfied with the best circumstantial evidence” while admonishing them “against being too ready to trust it! ‘You must have evidence satisfactory and convincing to your own minds,’ he said; ‘in which you find no conjectures—but only irresistible and just inferences.’ Who is to decide what is a just inference? And what does circumstantial evidence rest on, but conjecture?” (181). This assault on conjecture is likewise directed at the defense’s main theory, that Sara used arsenic as a cosmetic tool and died of an accidental overdose, which rests on assertions about Sara’s prior awareness of arsenic as a cosmetic remedy (she had even acquired a book on the practice) despite negative answers to leading questions in this vein (149–50, 167–72).80 “No direct evidence anywhere! Nothing but conjecture!” (178) Valeria scoffs, agreeing with the prosecution’s characterization of the defense as “a clumsy subterfuge, in which no reasonable being could discern the smallest fragment of probability” (184).

Valeria’s way of reading the trial is predicated, by contrast, on innocence. Before reading, she has already resolved against the logic of the inquiry: “I want no reason! I believe, in spite of the Verdict” (104). Her view again typifies an inverse reasoning that underwrites the trial with counterfactuals: “Evidence in your favour, that might have been found, has not been found. Suspicious circumstances have not been investigated. Crafty people have not been watched” (107)—and, one might add, books about arsenic’s cosmetic uses have not been read. Her model of reading acquires a critical element, but its undertow of naivety generally cuts against the

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80 Briefel develops an engaging reading of the novels’ interest in cosmetics and the “cosmetic masquerade” of identity (“Cosmetic Tragedies”). See Burney, *Poison, Detection, and the Victorian Imagination* 64–70 for the problem of arsenic’s several uses in the period.
“professional” readers who have failed thus far. So “firmly settled in [her] mind” is the “conviction of some dreadful oversight” (107) that her entire approach could be seen as an attempt to underline, again and again, the presumption of innocence from which any case should proceed and which “not proven” automatically disputes. “We know he is innocent” is her mantra: “Why is his innocence not proved? It ought to be, it must be, it shall be! If the Trial tells me it can’t be done, I refuse to believe the Trial” (109). This incantatory repetition goes so far as to redact the trial’s occasioning element. In what could be seen as an effort to suppress evidence, Valeria refuses to restate the charge or copy the indictment: “The less there is of that false and hateful Indictment on this page, the better and truer the page will look, to my eyes” (125).

A, B, C and 1, 2, 3: Investigation Made Easy

For all her resistance to the trial’s “not proven” character, as her own investigation gets underway Valeria adopts an approach that uncannily returns to the verdict’s structure. She decides that there can be “no half-confidences” and “no such refuge as a middle course” (236), but finds herself saddled between two possible suspects, the fascinating Dexter and Helena Beauly, who were respectively implicated with Sara and Eustace in interlinked love triangles. The investigation constantly runs aground, I contend, because Valeria pursues various additive or numerical approaches that do not make for sound inference. That her inquiry is curated by Dexter, whose trial testimony she records and whom she pursues all the way to his home in the seedy suburbs of London, makes such approaches inevitable. In name, this figure unstably embodies the numerical logic of the verdict. His first name is a Latin superlative (miserrimus: most unhappy), hence the third term in a comparative structure. His surname means “right”


82 Anderman argues that Dexter’s “imagination controls the narrative and shapes detection” (“Interpreting the Work of Art” 136).
(dexter) but his character at once invokes its more natural Latin antonym for “left” (sinister) and the name surely alludes to a legal term for “one who plays both sides” (ambidexter), that is “a juror who takes money for his verdict.”83 Confected of duplicate and triplicate structures, Dexter is also physically divided, “half a man” congenitally missing the lower half of the body. Under his tutelage Valeria tries to undo “not proven” by means of halves, doubles, and multiples of fact.

In the various parties to the Macallan case, it is Helena who first draws Valeria’s jealous attention, sanctioned by what she dubiously sees as “the inevitable result of reading the evidence” (185). She decides that Helena must have administered the second dose of poison and offers backwards reasoning just as specious as the prosecution’s: “Admit this, and the inference follows that she also gave the first dose in the early morning” (187). A set of conjectures inform her suspicion: Helena is in love with and recently free to pursue the unhappily married Eustace; has been exposed to the idea of arsenic; was overheard in conspiratorial conversation with Eustace; and can show no alibi for the key window of time when Sara was alone in her bedroom. Dexter encourages Valeria in this suspicion, making her guess the person he has in mind by infantilizing her detective capacities to a rudimentary level—“What is the first letter of her name? Is it one of the first three letters of the alphabet?” (250)—and then similarly slandering his object according to “degrees of comparison”: “I am positively cunning; the devil is comparatively cunning; Mrs Beauly is superlatively cunning” (252). Dexter’s retelling of the fatal evening on which he had been observing Helena (252–7) summarizes the options for her passage through the house at a crucial moment: “First room, the little study, mentioned in the

83 Bell, Dictionary and Digest 43. Compare “a juror who takes money from both parties for giving his verdict” (Imperial Dictionary, 1851 ed., 1.63). OED gives this legal sense as the earliest. At one point Dexter is true to the allusion, suggesting that Valeria bribe Helena’s maid and that the case is “a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence” (258).
nurse’s evidence. Second room, Mrs. Eustace Macallan’s bedchamber. Third room, her husband’s bedchamber” (254). That his inference about Helena’s presence and activity in the house would be compromised by having the “worst possible opinion of Mrs Beauly” (255) is not seen by Valeria, who is taken in by a narrative that frames inference as a numerical sum:

Where could she be? Certainly in the house, somewhere. Where? I had made sure of the other rooms; the field of search was exhausted. She could only be in Mrs Macallan’s room—the one room which had baffled my investigations; the only room which had not lent itself to examination. Add to this, that the key of the door in the study, communicating with Mrs Macallan’s room, was stated in the nurse’s evidence to be missing; and don’t forget that the dearest object of Mrs Beauly’s life (on the showing of her own letter, read at the Trial) was to be Eustace Macallan’s happy wife. Put these things together in your own mind, and you will know what my thoughts were, as I sat waiting for events in my chair, without my telling you. (256)

It is only once she has a different account of that night’s events from Helena’s maid that Valeria sees how this additive logic—“Add to this,” “don’t forget,” “Put these things together”—only produces “circumstances” and “discoveries” that can be aggregated or disproved in other combinations (257). “I could now see that I had been trebly in the wrong,” another of her triple-decker realizations runs, “wrong in hastily and cruelly suspecting an innocent woman; wrong in communicating my suspicions (without an attempt to verify them previously) to another person; wrong in accepting the flighty inferences and conclusions of Miserrimus Dexter as if they had been solid truths” (269).

Having suspected Helena on account of Dexter’s attempt to frame “a perfectly reasonable and perfectly probable motive” (340) for her as murderer, Valeria likewise entertains Playmore’s charges against Dexter, for interfering with the police in order to suppress some evidence and allow other details to come to light, and for generally acting in a suspicious manner at Gleninch. Again she falls prey to an additive logic, which Playmore deploys on the matter of Dexter’s having made copies of two keys (to Eustace’s diary and the drawer where it was kept): “Add to this information Dexter’s incomprehensible knowledge of the contents of your husband’s Diary;
and the product is—that the wax models sent to the old iron shop in Caldershaws, were models taken by theft from the key of the Diary and the key of the table-drawer in which it was kept” (356).\textsuperscript{84} Playmore’s view of Valeria’s conversation with Dexter is that she has “accidentally” illuminated aspects of the case that the “whole machinery of the Law” could not, largely through tenacity: in his view she is “a Lady who refuses to listen to reason and who insists on having her own way” (277). It is Playmore’s “strong persuasion that, if you succeed in discovering the nature of this communication [between Dexter and Sara], in all human likelihood you prove your husband’s innocence by the discovery of the truth” (316).

After these alternations and accidents, the inquiry appears as a “darkly-doubtful game which was neither quite for me, nor quite against me, as the chances now stood” (319). Persistently finding herself between options despite her attempts to carve certainty out of the case, Valeria has to face a different dilemma when Eustace, who in the interim has gone on an unfathomable jaunt to a war in Spain and, true to character, been wounded by a stray bullet, recovers and is transplanted to France. There are now “two cruel alternatives”—rejecting him to pursue the investigation or returning without the necessary proof of innocence—and she rejects both: “Those two agreeable fiends, Prevarication and Deceit, took me as it were softly by the hand: ‘Don’t commit yourself either way, my dear’” (362).

\noindent\textbf{The Puzzle to a Solution}

The case’s explanation emerges through Dexter’s confession, partly recorded in shorthand by Benjamin, which offers a narrative “told in disguise” on a topic “full of snares for the narrator” (337). Dexter reveals that he tried to destroy Sara Macallan’s suicide note to protect her memory (as well as his own responsibility for her death). It is recovered, however

\textsuperscript{84} I have corrected the Oxford edition (“theft” instead of “the”) against the 1875 edition (3.222).
improbably, from the Gleninch dust-heap and pieced together by Benjamin according to a model of inference that has hampered every mistaken hypothesis in the novel thus far: “Only get a central bit of it right, and the rest of the Puzzle falls into its place” (370). The fragments of paper found stuck to a gum-bottle (conveniently discarded in the same bin) materialize the kind of aleatory evidence that appeared in Valeria’s search of Fitz-David’s library, but here the randomly dispersed pieces connect back to a signifying whole: “The fragments accidentally stuck together, would, in all probability, be found to fit each other, and would certainly (in any case) be the easiest fragments to reconstruct, as a centre to start from” (380).85

This forensic discovery is as irreproachable as the medical evidence that reproduced the fatal arsenic at the trial. In the end it is no model of inference at all, and merely recapitulates the kind of aggregation seen in Valeria’s search, the “improper” induction that Mill dismisses in an uncannily apt passage:

Suppose that a phenomenon consists of parts, and that these parts are only capable of being observed separately, and as it were piecemeal. When the observations have been made, there is a convenience […] in obtaining a representation of the phenomenon as a whole, by combining, or as we may say, piecing these detached fragments together. […] But is there anything of the nature of an induction in this process?86

The discovery allows a construction of the “plainest circumstantial evidence” to confirm it as “identical with the letter which Miserrimus Dexter had suppressed until the Trial was over, and had then destroyed by tearing it up” (381).

By this point it will not be a shock to learn that Sara’s suicide note is actually two letters: the first an exposé of Dexter’s romantic approaches; the second a set of time stamped updates as

85 As Briefel notes, the vase as symbolic object (with its image of a woman’s face) is not reconstructed, whereas the letter as textual confession is in a figurative “recreation of Sara’s body” (“Cosmetic Tragedies” 477).

86 System of Logic 1.292. For a discussion of Collins in relation to Mill’s logic and midcentury liberalism, see Hensley, “Armadale and the Logic of Liberalism.”
she reports live on the effects of arsenic, surely Collins’ attempt to forestall the radical uncertainty of a “confession” of suicide. The novel ends as a not proven case in several senses. Its solution is a crime (suicide) that notoriously resists the definition of crime: unexplained deaths in the period often resulted in an inquest where a coroner could only register an “open verdict.” Its clinching evidence (the reconstructed letter and the corroborating statements of Benjamin and Valeria as to its circumstantial relevance) is sealed up in an envelope (405) and thus puts any feeling of Q.E.D. in abeyance. Eustace’s legal innocence is left in suspension even if his moral probity is (somewhat) assured, since a retrial is technically disallowed (one cannot be tried twice for the same crime even after “not proven”) and Playmore is opaque on how a “new legal inquiry,” presumably a civil case somehow entailing the same facts that underpinned the criminal one, might be undertaken (385). As in the investigation, there is a tension between “legal evidence” and “moral certainty” (251) that surely signals Valeria’s failure on the former front, since by her own assessment “nothing will persuade Eustace that I think him worthy to be the guide and companion of my life— but the proof of his innocence, set before the

87 According to a now-familiar logic about the aporia of testimony in extreme states, where witnessing and narrating cannot occupy the same temporal instant. See Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*; Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony.*


89 *The Moonstone* similarly seals up Ezra Jennings’ papers, left to Franklin Blake (456).
Jury which doubts it, and the public which doubts it, to this day” (241). Legal exoneration or “public vindication” (412) may prove standards too exacting for Eustace, whose own mother thinks him “one of the weakest of living mortals” (196), and a private trial holds out more hope. “I must destroy at its root his motive for leaving me,” Valeria decides, noting that her belief in his innocence is less important than proving how “his position towards me has become the position of an innocent man” (311), a category subtle in its difference from a verdict of “not guilty.” If detective fiction is typically marked by a “narrative reconstruction [that] restores the disrupted social order and reaffirms the validity of the system of norms,” this novel neither wholly restores nor entirely ratified such an order.

Valeria’s hard-won investigative prowess is finally trumped by evidence that comes about by accident, or through fictional retelling, or both. “All my ingenuity—as after events showed me—was wasted on speculations not one of which even approached the truth” (243). If Collins has been enacting, through his main character, the definiteness undermined by the Scotch verdict, the failure of this very enactment is telling. It suggests how legal uncertainty is worked out on a social terrain less tolerant of binary assessments of human action. It allows a critique of a legal system dubiously organized by numerical exactness and epistemological precision: in this probabilistic territory, anyone can get the mathematics wrong or put the wrong puzzle together.

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90 The category is also in evidence for Dexter: Playmore can be “morally convinced” of Dexter’s guilt without the “plain evidence which alone can justify anything like a public assertion” (279).

91 Several critics assess the ambivalence of the letter, which both exonerates and condemns: Briefel, “Cosmetic Tragedies” 466; Allan, “A Lock Without a Key” 54; Harrington, “From the Law and the Lady” 28; Mangum, “Wilkie Collins” 303.

92 Huhn, “The Detective as Reader” 452. Cavallaro offers the contrasting claim that the novel reconstitutes norms initially criticized (“Solution to Dissolution” 4–25).
And it cautions us against hasty and additive inferences, when circumstances might always tell another story, or no story at all.

**Reading Without Proving**

What might the literary vehicle of the hesitant verdict reveal about the wider terrain of law-inflected novels in the period? Jan-Melissa Schramm has argued that fiction’s “close attention to the law’s ideological and semiotic weaknesses” allows an exploration of “what lies outside the law; [...] a forum for the representation of repressed or excluded material, of that which exceeds restrictive legal taxonomies.” Yet Collins’ novel strains against the reform-minded humanism of Victorian fiction and its interest in the “right recognition of the innocence of the wrongfully accused,” just as the Scotch Verdict undermines what Schramm elsewhere describes as the trend towards certainty in nineteenth-century legal standards.93 Both novel and verdict traffic in uncertain and unrestrictive taxonomies that emphasize the half, the double, the middle, the compromise, undoing what has been theorized as the “operational closure” of law from its environing social systems.94 Yet turning over legal decision to “extrajuridical and fully ordinary agencies”95 does not serve to justify law as a social code but rather to confront both legal and social orders with mutual and ineradicable elements of openness or incompleteness.

In this respect Collins’ text joins other representations of legal indeterminacy that may be seen to counter the norm of correcting wrongful accusations in aid of certainty and closure. I have in mind works such as Trollope’s *Orley Farm* (1862), with its framing topic of forgery and the instabilities that attend surmising, presuming, or prejudging innocence, despite the known

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93 “Towards a Poetics of Wrongful Accusation” 207; *Testimony and Advocacy* 192.

94 Luhmann, *Law as a Social System* 76–141.

95 Miller, “From roman policier to roman-police” 165.
guilt of the accused; and Braddon’s several poisoning plots, among them An Open Verdict (1878), which maintains the conjectural suspense of its plot through an unexplained death that is finally revealed as suicide. What the law cannot contain, explain, or decide is sent back for social adjudication in a manner that reveals the epistemological mirage on which sociolegal structures—as often held together as riven apart by uncertain forces, unproven claims—depend. Hearsay evidence might be inadmissible in courts of law: in courts of public opinion such evidence is ever in vogue.

Legal uncertainty in literature thus holds its interest for what it reveals about the wider mechanics of social knowledge. In Collins it draws law and literature together under the sign of a dark pragmatism about human nature, neatly captured in a question that the novel poses and leaves uncertain:

Is there a common fund of wickedness in us all? Is the suppression or the development of that wickedness a mere question of training and temptation? And is there something in our deeper sympathies which mutely acknowledges this, when we feel for the wicked; when we crowd to a criminal trial; when we shake hands at parting (if we happen to be present officially) with the vilest monster that ever swung on a gallows? It is not for me to decide.96 (329–30)

Where many fictional representations of law in the nineteenth century could be subsumed under the category of “novels of purpose,” the reformism expressed here is diffuse, uncertain, purposive without concrete purpose.97 The reflection puts under uncertainty both a generalized critique of the assumptions governing the criminal law, and a quietist acceptance of business as usual (“if we happen to be present officially”), unsettling us into further reflection. Beyond the

96 Compare Playmore’s statement, which adopts statistical terms: “There are degrees in all wickedness. Dexter was wicked enough to suppress the letter, which wounded his vanity by revealing him as an object for loathing and contempt—but he was not wicked enough deliberately to let an innocent man perish on the scaffold” (402).

97 See generally Amanda Claybaugh, The Novel of Purpose.
stance of moral openness and hesitant judgment, then, the inquiry in Collins’ novel doubles as a model of reading. Within the framework of a long-form narrative is lodged a type of readerly inference that thrives on hesitancy and endorses the possibility of having knowledge without proof—of knowing despite being unable to reach a verdict. Indeed, reading without proving should appeal to our sense of methodological pluralism, given its similarity to recent positions about the way we read: what Caroline Levine calls “narrative doubt” in its productive relation to suspense; Sianne Ngai the “merely interesting”; Sharon Marcus “just reading” or “surface reading”; and Heather Love the interpretive touch that is “close but not deep.” Hesitant reading makes time for further evidence and inquiry, stays the sentencing hand in order to avoid the moral opprobrium attendant on declaring a person’s guilt or fixing a text’s meaning. It opens counterfactual possibilities not in the service of “undecidability,” as some have suggested, but in aid of a more careful logic of deciding against an ineradicable horizon of indecision.

Resisting attempts to stratify verdicts into binaries, The Law and the Lady finally undercuts clean definitions of the “normal” or “average” human subject in its generally valorizing and engaging portrayal of the marginal and disabled, Dexter as well as his androgyne

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98 Levine suggests that suspense “teach[es] us to take pleasure in the activity of stopping to doubt our most entrenched beliefs, waiting for the world to reveal its surprises, its full unyielding otherness,” and is thus “the form of the acquisition of knowledge—and specifically of a skeptical epistemology that insists on testing authoritative claims to truth” (*Serious Pleasures* 10, 60; see generally 1–17, 37–61). Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*. Marcus’ “just reading” “attends to what texts make manifest on their surface,” “strives to be adequate to a text conceived as complex and ample rather than as diminished by, or reduced to, what it has to repress,” and “accounts for what is in the text without construing presence as absence or affirmation as negation” (*Between Women* 3, 75); for “surface reading,” see Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading” and Love, “Close But Not Deep.” Levine elsewhere offers a reading of the generative “middle” of The Woman in White (“An Anatomy of Suspense”); compare Tondre, “‘The Interval of Expectation.’”

cousin-servant Ariel. If disability studies and queer theory have, in different ways, prompted us to think of our categories as more open and flexible, they meet an intriguing analogue in the “not proven” verdict. Collins’s novel, and the Scots law tradition that it invokes, stand as a caution against trends formalized in the nineteenth century and consolidated since then: attempts to standardize witnesses and corroborate testimony by mathematical means, thus producing what could be thought of as a “normal” witness and an “average” testimony, as debated in the work of logicians like Charles Babbage, George Boole, and John Venn; attempts to standardize jurors by the strategic elimination of prejudice, bias, or any peculiarity at all through the vetting process known as _voir dire_, which Scottish law prohibits in the service of accepting juries as randomly representative of the citizenry; attempts to normalize criminals into categories by means of statistical reference classes, so that judgment or sentencing guidelines can take into account not an individual but a statistical group into which this individual could be deemed to fit. These trends are wider than the notion of “trial by mathematics,” but they variously partake of a logic that has only become more entrenched in legal and social decision-making. Against their

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101 Davis, _Enforcing Normalcy_ 23–49.


103 See Colyvan, Regan, and Ferson, “Is it a Crime to Belong to a Reference Class?”; Colyvan and Regan, “Legal Decisions and the Reference Class Problem”; and for a philosophical critique of this sort of thinking, Hájek, “The Reference Class Problem is Your Problem Too.” The idea of reference classes was invented in conjunction with nineteenth-century probability (John Venn originates the “problem” of determining the reference class) and criminology.
dominance, it seems worth renovating a critique that is more attuned, in virtue of its illogical ground, to the uncertainty that plagues so many accounts of human action and the moral psychology underpinning it. In what we might call (following the famed Victorian barrister James Fitzjames Stephen) “trial by literature,” the jury’s still out.  

104 Stephen’s cantankerous review of novelists writing about the law, including Dickens, Reader, and Gaskell, accuses the last of assuming “that it is a part of the high commission of literature to try offences which elude the repression of the law” (“The License of Modern Novelists” 156).
CHAPTER 4

SERIAL AND COMPOSITE THINKING: HARDY’S PROBABLE REALISM
There are some truly dog-eared books in the novels of Thomas Hardy. The heroine of *Far From the Madding Crowd* uses one to try her luck at romantic forecasting, its “leaves, drab with age, being quite worn away at much-read verses by the forefingers of unpractised readers in former days where they were moved along under the line as an aid to vision.” Bathsheba Everdene finds her verse in the book of Ruth, the page marked by a “rusty patch […] caused by previous pressure of an iron substance thereon,” where long-vanished predictors placed a key to fulfill the necessary but hardly sufficient conditions for an accurate prophecy.\(^1\) In *A Laodicean*, William Dare’s copy of Abraham De Moivre’s *Doctrine of Chances* is “as well thumbed as the minister’s Bible”\(^2\) and Tess Durbeyfield’s *Complete Fortune-Teller* is similarly “so worn by pocketing that the margins had reached the edge of the type.”\(^3\)

Whether these objects are used to make predictions based on superstition (in the pre-arranged, flexible categories of fortune-telling), on a blend of scripture and sorcery (in the suppositional prophecies of the biblical verse), or on rational expectation and mathematical probability, their physical alteration signals the long continuance of similar practices. In each case knowledge arises not only by way of a mental grasp of graphic marks and their intentional content, but also through the material registration of a physiology of reading and handling. These books record how embodied persons have used and altered them, where and for what reasons. They have been worn by constant, customary usage, their material substrate changed both in the negative form of attrition (pages thumbed, passages fingered and polished) and in the positive guise of accretion (a verse marked by an eroded, elemental trace). In the physical practice of

\(^{1}\) *Far from the Madding Crowd* 84.

\(^{2}\) *A Laodicean* 139.

\(^{3}\) *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* 23.
reading, their users reenact broader experiences of making inferences from repeated series of events or traces in the material world.

Yet at the same time these readers engage in a distinct mental activity, constructing images of the future, visualizing possible paths, and weighing outcomes in a fashion that departs from the physical grounds of their surroundings. As in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, where a letter’s revelation causes Henchard to consider “the paper as if it were a window-pane through which he saw for miles,” the activity of reading for predictive purposes rapidly becomes visual or abstract. Pages become windows, pictures supplant words, and characters manipulate mental images in a way that mimics the initial overlay of virtual percept and material prop. They engage in counterfactual or suppositional thinking, comparing images of possible futures, overlaying the tenses of their lives, recognizing the spectral trace of the past in the present and beyond.

In this chapter, I argue that the phenomena we might categorize as probable in Hardy’s novels fall into two modes of representation, which I term *serial* and *composite*. In examining how Hardy represents thought and judgment about uncertain futures, and imagination by turns visual and counterfactual, I contend that conscious, rational judgment in his novels is typically inflected and shadowed by broader modes of intuitive or reflex judgment—by thinking unaware. I read serial and composite thinking as consonant with—and sometimes relying on—developments in nineteenth-century science, mathematics, and philosophy with which Hardy was, to differing extents, familiar. Yet in showing how predictive thinking operates and goes awry—through a range of faults including inattention to material evidence and misguided subjectivism—Hardy’s representations are more fluid and flexible than the models that might be taken to ground his intuitions. Further, we can use his representations of predictive knowledge

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*The Mayor of Casterbridge* 123.
and judgment to evaluate his generic affiliations. What I call Hardy’s *probable realism* emerges as a coherent project when these facets are brought into an analysis of his commitment to—and his own statements about—the problem of genre.

*The Return of the Native* (1878) is Hardy’s signal effort at examining *serial thinking*, a form of representation and mental operation that takes into account long series of events, or large classes of instances. Vivid images for such series emerge from Hardy’s natural setting (in the details of Egdon Heath that record the end situation of long historical processes), but are also seen in the intuitive knowledge held by individuals (from their own inductive experience), handed down by groups (through family tradition, rural cultures and folkways), and indexed in the human body through its natural friction with, and gradual attrition by the world. In this novel, games of chance reflect many features of such series. Hardy’s descriptions of such phenomena draw on—yet vividly surpass—the renovated accounts of inferential and probabilistic thinking in his time, including John Stuart Mill’s circumscribed account of induction and John Venn’s evolutionary vision of chance as a class of outcomes making up a mutable series. Predictive thinking is split into different modes across a number of characters in the novel, including the setting against which events take place.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) presents a different array of predictive approaches, its characters’ emphases shifted on account of differences in setting and a sharpened plot structure. Where Hardy’s rural plots more naturally emphasize knowledge drawn from long-range structures or repetitions, this novel values prediction in abstract social and economic contexts. The novel’s main antagonists crystallize differences between rational and intuitive, calculative and felt knowledge, but we also find a shorter-range model of prediction that displaces thought from the material to a virtual plane—from habitual modes of repetition and aggregation to keenly
anti-habitual modes of visualization, supposition, and the mental manipulation of images. Such *composite thinking*, in its emphasis on a small class of instances, either disaggregated in time or condensed into an image, evokes the visual analogues of statistical groups produced by Francis Galton in his composite photographs. In the character of Elizabeth-Jane, Hardy offers an alternative to serial thinking that becomes important for his late work.

Serial and composite thinking are Hardy’s responses to the realist problem of selection—of what counts for inclusion in the dialectical operations by which novelists fashion a “real” world. Offering descriptions that call attention to repetition, aggregation, and process, Hardy selects for representation a worn and dated world, a setting that arranges from the sequence of life both events that occur to human persons and the longer-run series of events in the time of bedrock and heath, atmosphere and sky. Giving representations of thought or realization that involve the composition of images, he makes transparencies of the world in order to allow memories and mental states, suppositions and “sideshadows” to enter into a mimetic view.5 Hardy’s own statements on fiction-writing and representation double as an account of his probable realism.

The two models I adduce for representation by aggregate and overlay are in turn concerned with selection: Venn’s with establishing a class of instances from which to make probability judgments, Galton’s with choosing the right number of images and exposures to produce a coherent composite. I have selected them, in part, because their flexible and faceted approaches form an abstract understructure for other scientific and philosophical developments we know Hardy to have encountered. Venn, a philosopher and mathematician who provides an account of probability, inductive thinking, and evidence, models his own thinking on Darwin and

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5 For a discussion of “sideshadowing,” Morson’s conceptual framework in *Narrative and Freedom*, see the chapter on Thackeray above.
Mill. Galton, a statistician, psychologist, meteorologist, and inveterate measurer, took it upon himself to render mathematical the discoveries which Darwin (his cousin) and Huxley brought to biological and hereditary thinking. Adopting these tangential models, I hope to discover structures that recharacterize Hardy’s borrowings from, and connections to more familiar thinkers. The varied influences of figures like Comte, Mill, Darwin, Huxley, Newman, Arnold and Stephen often involve observations on probability and prediction, uncertainty and imperfect knowledge. In finding more vivid traces of such thinking in Hardy, I recast his influences within the wider purview of probable knowledge and thus intersect with the large literature on Hardy, science, and philosophy. Yet more centrally, I update topoi familiar to Hardy criticism—repetition and haunting, fate and determinism—to reveal, through an emphasis on the probable, what is still misconceived in our sense of Hardy’s representational project.

I. AGGREGATE: PREDICTION AND SERIALITY IN THE RETURN OF THE NATIVE

When James Murray, the lead editor of the Oxford English Dictionary, asked Hardy to clarify his use of the term “pair-royal” to refer to a triple throw of dice rather than cards, the latter offered instead an anecdote about his childhood experience in a raffle.

Being but a child, & the rest adults, I was made to throw first (the first thrower being deemed least likely to win). But to the consternation of all I threw a ‘pair-royal,’ & won the bird [a cottage hen]—to my great inconvenience as I did not know what to do with it.

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6 For work on Hardy in relation to chance in a variety of scientific contexts (setting aside the persistent, contextually ungrounded reference to chance as a theme) see Ebbatson, Evolutionary Self 15–16; Beer, Darwin’s Plots 236–58 and “The Reader’s Wager”; Robinson, “Hardy and Darwin”; Morrell, “Hardy, Darwin and Nature”; Wickens, “Literature and Science”; Richardson, “Hardy and Biology” and “Hardy and Science.” Hardy’s interest is enduring: in 1926 he admires Shaw’s idea of Darwinian evolution as a “chapter of accidents” (Richardson, “Hardy and Science” 159).
The event was considered such a direct attempt of the devil to lead one of tender years to ruin that I was forbidden to gamble any more—and as a matter of fact, never did.\(^7\)

His disinterested pose, in this and other letters, befits one whose first foray into gaming was so uncannily successful. He elsewhere disdains its psychological allure, declaring that “if I had won 100 louis at Monte Carlo I should drop the game before losing them,” adding the qualification that “games of chance never interest me, so perhaps I speak in too cold blooded a manner.”\(^8\)

A more elaborate account belies these disavowals. Writing to his friend and collaborator Florence Henniker, in the year before his novel-writing came to a close with the volume publication of *The Well-Beloved* (1897), Hardy reports that he made the acquaintance of a “veritable gambler […] & for the first time really perceived what it is to be possessed of the gaming fever.” This Englishman “won largely at the tables yesterday before dinner, & at dinner time I persuaded him to leave off; but he would not, & returned to the rooms in the evening. I saw him in the morning looking wild, & he said he had lost everything, except enough to pay his fare to England. The curious thing is that he fully believes in his ultimate success by means of a system, & is going to Monte Carlo in November to retrieve all his losses!”\(^9\) The experience had enough purchase on Hardy for him to offer a version of it in the *Life*, with the same bemused concern for faltering humanity. He laments that the gambler “believes thoroughly in his ‘system,’” which “appears to be that of watching for numbers which have not turned up for a long time” and recording the results, and “yet, inconsistently, believes in luck: e.g., 36 came into his head as he was walking down the street towards the Casino today; and it made him back it,

\(^7\) The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy 3.69–70; to James Murray, 9 July 1903; hereafter cited as Collected Letters.

\(^8\) Collected Letters 1.189; to Lady Grove, 9 April 1898.

\(^9\) Collected Letters 2.130; to Florence Henniker, 24 September 1896.
and he won.”\textsuperscript{10} He might be the last of Hardy’s hounded and ill-fated characters, appearing on the morning after his ruin “by comparison with the previous night like a tree that has suddenly lost its leaves.”\textsuperscript{11}

Hardy may have forsworn raffles and roulette in life, but games of chance held a longstanding fascination for his imagination: in their philosophical and mathematical underpinnings, apparent disruption of natural laws, social analogies, suppleness as plot devices, and the fluctuating fates they sponsor. Indeed, these recollections enact the mode of Hardy’s continual return to chance as \textit{topos} and formal tool—as a node joining reasoned belief and folk superstition, a force that rises into awareness from unconscious strata of personal and communal experience, an instrument of comic possibility and moral derailment.

I here offer a reading of \textit{The Return of the Native} along the axes of prediction and probable knowledge, taking seriously the fact that one of the novel’s key characters shares a name with the Victorian logician John Venn. Venn’s work shadows the figurative and narrative aspects of his novelistic namesake, allowing him to stand as a condensation and critique of other modes of thinking in the novel. Hardy’s articulation of probable knowledge is deeply enmeshed with structures of habit and repetition, intuition and perceptual acuity. Yet finally these representations of serial thinking concede that personal views can never attain to the completeness of a statistical panorama: even a theory of chance grounded in the operations of the physical world founders on the limits of individual knowledge.

\textsuperscript{10} The \textit{Life and Work of Thomas Hardy} 300; hereafter \textit{Life}. The details echo a text Hardy owned, John Polson’s \textit{Monaco and its Gaming Tables} (1862), which describes a gambling Englishman and his servant who takes a register of the patterns of play (37). Richardson comments on the anecdote (“Hardy and Science” 178n25).

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Life} 300.
Keep on Watching: Experiential Probability

As phenomena from births to bank robberies, deaths to dead letters were shown to fall into regular patterns, mathematicians in the early nineteenth century retooled accounts of probability in order to make sense of the mass of statistical data. The so-called *frequency* theory of probability, given various early formulations in the work of John Stuart Mill, Robert Leslie Ellis, Antoine Cournot, and Jakob Fries, held that an event’s probability expresses the limit of its frequency of occurrence across a large number of instances. For instance, the probability of throwing a given number with a die expresses the limiting frequency of that outcome—$1/6$—across a large number of throws; it is not a predictive statement, but describes an emerging pattern.¹²

When the mathematician and logician John Venn came to contribute to this field, his elaboration of the frequency theory (which he is credited with formalizing) sought to correct a bias. Venn decoupled the science of probability from any pretense to objectivity, and criticized the cultural penchant for statistical laws and determinism given notorious form in the introduction to Henry Buckle’s *History of Civilization in England* (1857–61).¹³ Probability for Venn was to be seen not as a mathematical field dealing in stable truths but as “a branch of the


¹³ See Eden, *John Venn’s Evolutionary Logic of Chance* 2–5, particularly on the notion that frequentism relied on *universals* like species, genus, kind, and class. Eden also surveys Venn’s article critique of Buckle, part of which is included in the *Logic*, and links his views to those of Mill and James Fitzjames and Leslie Stephen, his cousins (9–11). On Buckle, and the debates over statistical determinism and freedom of will that followed on his work, see Porter, *Rise of Statistical Thinking* 60–70, 164–7, 174–5.
general science of evidence which happens to make much use of mathematics,”

drawing on experience and material evidence rather than logical inference alone. I here survey the features of Venn’s theory, articulated in his influential *The Logic of Chance* (1866) and his later lectures *On Some of the Characteristics of Belief, Scientific and Religious* (1870), to sketch a view of serial thinking that joins the numerical abstractions of games of chance to more concrete, material modes of repetition and aggregation. Venn’s work was widely reviewed in both the first and second (1876) editions, in the periodicals which Hardy was combing for intellectual materials while drafting *The Return of the Native*, and these reviews typically summarize the points I outline here.

The key feature of Venn’s theory rests in the term *series*. The proper aim of probability, he insists on several occasions, is to establish a series—a group or class of instances, not necessarily taken as a succession in time—that on the whole “combines individual irregularity with aggregate regularity.” Given such a group, we will find in its *frequency* or “long

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14 *Logic* vii.

15 Venn’s work came at a significant moment in the history of mathematics, first published just after his friend and fellow mathematician, Issac Todhunter, had completed his survey *History of the Mathematical Theory of Probability from the Time of Pascal to that of Laplace* (1865). Venn was instrumental in bringing probability into the Moral Sciences Tripos at Cambridge, hence more broadly into the academic establishment. For more on Venn and Cambridge see Wall, “John Venn, James Ward, and the Chair of Mental Philosophy and Logic at the University of Cambridge.”

16 The first edition was noted in 1866 by the *Saturday Review*, and a year later by the *Westminster Review*, *The Athenæum*, and *The Reader*. The *Saturday Review* includes a notice of the second edition in 1876, and there are lengthier assessments in the *London Quarterly Review*, which connects Venn to Butler and Newman (“[Rev. of] Venn’s *The Logic of Chance*” 510), the *British Quarterly Review*, and the *Westminster Review*. *The Athenæum* called the Hulsean Lectures “eminently suggestive” (“[Rev. of] *Some of the Characteristics of Belief, Scientific and Religious*” 80). See “Literary Notes I” and the “1867 Notebook” in Hardy’s *Literary Notebooks*.

17 *Logic* 4.
succession of instances [...] a numerical proportion, not indeed fixed and accurate at first, but
which tends in the long run to become so.”

The patterns of this frequency form the materials
for drawing inferences about this particular series.

In prior examples of the so-called law of large numbers—from Pierre Simon Laplace’s
calculations on the probability of sunrise to the statistical mensuration of social phenomena
conducted by Adolphe Quetelet and Siméon-Denis Poisson—the tendency of events to fall into
regular, frequency patterns was taken to imply that they conformed to a force that was fixed—to
a law—and could thus be identified as stable, objective types. Venn would seem to begin in the
same vein, taking Tennyson’s lines about nature from In Memoriam as his epigraph—“So careful
of the type she seems, / So careless of the single life.” Yet his account departs from fixed types
and objective laws, and introduces an argument for serial patterning as forming changeable
types. The “uniformity which is found in the long run, and which presents so great a contrast to
the individual disorder,” he points out, “though durable is not everlasting. Keep on watching it
long enough, and it will be found almost invariably to fluctuate, and in time may prove as utterly
irreducible to rule, and therefore as incapable of prediction, as the individual cases

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18 Logic 5.

19 See generally Laplace, Essai philosophique sur les probabilités, Quetelet, Sur l’homme et le développement de ses facultés, and Poisson, Recherches sur la probabilité des jugements. Laplace saw chance as the “fortuitous production of patterns through the interaction of a multitude of independent causes”; Quetelet “pursued a numerical social science of laws, not just of facts” (Porter, Rise of Statistical Thinking 72, 41). On Quetelet, his concept of “statistical law,” and its enthusiastic reception in Britain see Porter, Rise of Statistical Thinking 5–6, 40–70, 100–9. Eden notes Venn’s rejection of Bernoulli’s theorem (which had been hailed and adapted by Laplace and Poisson) since it posits a “link between the probability of a single event and limiting frequencies,” and is thus a realist account (Evolutionary Logic 23).

20 Major Works, Section LV, ll. 7–8. Small observes that Hardy alludes to this part of the poem in the cliffhanger scene of A Pair of Blue Eyes (“Hardy’s Tennyson” 359).
themselves.” Just as the average length of human life has fluctuated in the past and may continue to do so, moral and social phenomena may exhibit similar transformations. Neither in the natural world nor in the social realm can regularities become “persistent and invariable,” yielding types “possessing any real permanence and fixity.”

Venn’s “evolutionary” logic emphasizes the shifting, mutable nature of chance series for two reasons. First, he stresses that our knowledge, even in the domain of probability, must rely on experience—“our sole guide”—and thus dismisses earlier views of probability as a stable feature of the physical world, on which we calculate in advance. He critiques those in the framework of what Lorraine Daston calls “classical” probability, from Jakob Bernoulli through Laplace, who take the science as deductive and objective and proceed from a priori principles, and more recent thinkers who modeled natural and social phenomena after the “ideal series” of games of chance. Second, Venn’s empirical account meshes with his view of logic as a material science that takes cognizance “of laws of things and not of the laws of our own minds in thinking.

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21 Logic 13–14.

22 Logic 14–16.

23 Logic 16, 48.

24 Logic 74. See generally 74–95.

25 Classical Probability and the Enlightenment 33–6, 49–111, 218–23, on the European thinkers who worked to reduce uncertainty to a calculus, “a mathematical rendering of pragmatic rationality” (108), according to the classical “creed” wherein “all events are necessary, so probabilities measure the partial certainty upon which we ill-formed mortals must ground rational belief and action” (35).

26 Logic 95.
about things,” setting him apart from other logical treatises in the period, such as Augustus De Morgan’s *Formal Logic* (1847) and George Boole’s *The Laws of Thought* (1854). Within this view of probability as an empirical discipline, Venn emphasizes the “physical foundations” that give rise to irregularity in individual cases and tend to (fluctuating) regularity in the mass. He points to the “influence of agencies” operating as causes that come to exert a serializing pressure on human activities, including natural forces, which in turn interact with human volition, so that social averages “fluctuate in a way which […] shows none of the permanent uniformity which is characteristic of games of chance,” their underlying causes being “in reality numerous, indeterminate, and fluctuating.” Here lies the crux of Venn’s thinking: in stressing experience as the ground of probable knowledge, he has to explain not only “natural uniformities” but also those “uniformities afforded by games of chance,” where numerical regularities seem to be unassailably stable. The latter “seem to show no trace of secular fluctuation,” but he suggests that their “fixity […] may not be as absolute as is commonly supposed.”

27 *Logic* x.  
28 *Logic* x. He calls these accounts formal or conceptualist, since they see probability as being about “formal inferences in which the premises are entertained with a conviction short of absolute certainty” (*Logic* ix). The latter category also applied to William Hamilton and H. L. Mansel, as several reviews note ( “[Rev. of] Venn’s *The Logic of Chance*” 508; “Philosophy,” *Westminster Review* 241).  
29 *Logic* 40.  
30 *Logic* 54, 63–4.  
31 *Logic* 93, 94.  
32 *Logic* 16.  
33 *Logic* 16.
In fact, Venn asserts that physical conditions need to be kept in mind even in games. A result “is produced or affected by so many involuntary agencies that it owes its characteristic properties to these. The turning up [...] of a particular face of a die is the result of voluntary agency, but it is not an immediate result. There has been an intermediate chaos of conflicting agencies, which no one can calculate before or distinguish afterwards.” Abjuring prediction in advance and explanation in hindsight, Venn insists that games issue from material causes and acknowledges that they are hidden from view. We may not typically advert to experience in these cases, preferring to reason *a priori* for convenience, in order to avoid wrestling with the “enormous number of combinations” that issue from so limited a set of possibilities. But as a matter of principle, Venn claims that even where “we appear to reason directly from the determining conditions, or possible variety of the events, rather than from actual observation of their occurrence,” our thinking operates by a “tacit assumption which can never be determined otherwise than by direct experience.”

For all his criticism of probability when viewed as an objective discipline, Venn hardly swings back to a view of probability as *subjective*. He is against the view that our beliefs under uncertainty could be assigned a numerical ratio with any accuracy, and so undercuts the notion of “partial belief” as quantifiable.” To the contrary, we cannot accurately measure belief. Our

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34 Logic 67.

35 Logic 76.

36 Logic 76.

37 Logic 140. See generally 119–66 for his criticism of subjective probability and measurement of belief in the work of De Morgan and William Donkin. For similar reasons, Venn resists the notion of inverse probability (179–86), as discussed by De Morgan, observing that where in nature we refer to rules and regularities, in the artificial situations of inverse probability—drawing balls from an urn and predicting future draws—we are in the dark. In a section new in 1888, he mocks Laplace’s example on the odds of sunrise and De Morgan’s on a
“belief-meter” is susceptible to confusion by the passions—those “distorting media of hope and fears.”\textsuperscript{38} Adumbrating his later thinking on evidence as “multiform,”\textsuperscript{39} Venn fashions a nuanced phenomenology of belief, arguing that

our conviction generally rests upon a sort of chaotic basis composed of an infinite number of inferences and analogies of every description, and these moreover distorted by our state of feeling at the time, dimmed by the degree of recollection of them afterwards, and probably received from time to time with varying force according to the way in which they happen to combine in our consciousness at the moment.\textsuperscript{40}

The chaos of coming to belief matches the chaos of causes that give rise to serial fluctuations, indicating how the similar complexities that exist both outside and inside our minds still cannot help any one mind to sift through the disarray and account for what only the many might reveal. Venn does offer the intriguing thought that on the basis of sympathy, an “enlarged fellow-feeling,” we might come to include the predictions of others in our own sense of odds for or against an outcome, as long as we fit into the reference group and can conceivably use “evidence drawn from that class.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{38} Logic 125, 156.

\textsuperscript{39} On Some of Characteristics of Belief, Scientific and Religious 11.

\textsuperscript{40} Logic 126–7.

\textsuperscript{41} Logic 149. Venn’s views abstractly parallel discussions of what has come to be called “statistical compassion” in medicine and public health. In this period, those terms were united in the person of Florence Nightingale, widely held as the first medical figure to make serious use of statistical tools: see her Notes on Hospitals (1863). For discussion see Kopf, “Florence Nightingale as Statistician”; Speigenhalter, “Surgical Audit: Statistical Lessons from Nightingale and Codman”; Diamond and Stone, “Nightingale on Quetelet.”
In summary, where the work of his predecessors assumed that natural and even social frequencies tended to deterministic laws, Venn saw only the appearance of law-like regularities in a specified series; where they saw stable types in an emerging taxonomy of the world, Venn saw flexible types that evolved, however imperceptibly, as more instances came into view; and where the prevailing view cordoned off probability as a mathematical and logical discipline, Venn sought to characterize it as part of the wider consideration of evidence, keeping his view firmly between the objective and subjective poles. His supple account of serial thinking emphasizes how inference can only be based on frequency. It shows how our evidentiary attitudes are prone to emotional bias, our views flickering “without any conscious alteration of the evidence” like “those alternations of light and dark in a murky foggy day.”

Venn’s phenomenology of belief has striking parallels with Hardy’s perceptual universe. If coming to conviction is—in a figure that would not be out of place in Edmund Burke, an important source for Hardy—“like being dazzled by a strong light; the impression still remains, but begins almost immediately to fade away,” it is also like trying to perceive shapes in a dark room and later realizing that “a little more light or a more careful inspection has altogether transformed what we were inclined to call our facts.” More broadly, Venn’s work on series offers an abstract lattice within which to place one of Hardy’s more characteristic tactics of

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42 Venn, Characteristics 6. For emotions influencing and forming grounds of belief see 18–19, 67–9.

43 Logic 127.

44 Venn, Characteristics 14.
representation: descriptions of objects, surfaces, and persons that notice attrition and other outcomes of repetitive or habitual action.\textsuperscript{45}

To illustrate both what Venn’s theory militates against and why Hardy’s representations in \textit{The Return of the Native} might follow him in revising earlier models, consider a gambling scene from Hardy’s \textit{A Laodicean} (1881). In Monaco a strange character, appropriately named Dare, tries out a system for roulette—“my theory of chances and recurrences”—that he has concocted from an early textbook of probability, De Moivre’s \textit{The Doctrine of Chances} (1717).\textsuperscript{46} He loses steadily and begs one of the novel’s central characters, George Somerset, for money, claiming that his “certainty” of winning is “almost mathematical,” and that the hundreds of times he has already lost can be treated as a “vast foundation of waste chances” that will eventually “recoup” his expenditure.\textsuperscript{47} Although his theory minimally refers to De Moivre’s definition of the expected value of a chance game,\textsuperscript{48} Dare’s notion that the “mathematical expectation of six times at least” is somehow interlaced with his previous losses—that his “waste chances” are \textit{investments}—is clearly absurd.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{45} See Scarry, \textit{Resisting Representation} 49–90; Ward, “The Woodlanders and the Cultivation of Realism,” offers a reading of material attrition as a dialectic between nature and culture (or the “cultivated”).

\textsuperscript{46} \textit{A Laodicean} 286. Richardson, “Hardy and Science,” comments on \textit{A Laodicean} and its use of De Moivre against the background of probability in Victorian science, and notes that the novel “repeatedly draws an analogy between sexual relationships and games” (160). In the \textit{Oxford Reader’s Companion to Hardy} (ed. Vance), s.v. “astronomy,” Robinson claims that Hardy drew Dare’s ideas of chance partly from works by Richard Proctor and Venn that “linked astronomy, mathematics, and games of chance,” but offers no evidence for this claim.

\textsuperscript{47} \textit{A Laodicean} 286–7.

\textsuperscript{48} “If upon the happening of an Event, I be entitled to a Sum of Money, my Expectation of obtaining that Sum has a determinate value before the happening of the Event” (\textit{Doctrine of Chances} 2).

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{A Laodicean} 287.
Somerset, the architect whom many have seen as one of Hardy’s more autobiographical characters, makes clear the wrongheadedness of Dare’s view: “You might persevere for a twelvemonth, and still not get the better of your reverses. Time tells in favour of the bank. Just imagine for the sake of argument that all the people who have ever placed a stake upon a certain number to be one person playing continuously. Has that imaginary person won? The existence of the bank is a sufficient answer.” Hardy’s critique of the gambling frenzy in this “phantasmagoria” of a casino, through a character who draws his (faulty) system from a deliberately antiquated textbook, confirms that his dismissal of chance games hinges on our tendency to see them in purely abstract, numerical terms. The notion of an “imaginary person,” too, offers a version of Venn’s expansive sympathy approach to any individual’s understanding of serial frequencies. When viewed in Venn’s empirical terms the gambler’s “system” looks foundationally problematic since it assumes that the numerical divisions of roulette give stable, prior probabilities for each number. Dare ignores experience and trusts in number. In what follows, I show how Hardy’s vision of chance matches Venn’s in its material and empirical character. His version of serial thinking and representation—yoked to the complexities of ordinary ways of appraising and predicting on the basis of fluctuating evidence—joins diminutive examples of chance to the wider concerns of probable knowledge in the perceptual, character, and narrative structures of Hardy’s world.

50 See Gatewood’s “Introduction” to A Laodicean. In this regard, it is a striking contrast to Hardy’s letters that the “centuries-old impersonality Gaming, rather than games and gamesters,” is said to have a “suggestive charm” for Somerset (A Laodicean 283).

51 A Laodicean 287.

52 A Laodicean 283.

53 For a reading of the scene in light of Georg Simmel’s theory of money, particularly its tendency to equalize and remove personality, see Ebbatson, Heidegger’s Bicycle 53–5.
Chance Materialized

Turning from the green baize tables of Monte Carlo to the brown furze of Egdon Heath, a different sequence of chance events anchors the plot of *The Return of the Native*. Things begin when Mrs. Yeobright trusts the fearful Christian Cantle with one hundred guineas to be divided between her son and niece, Clym and Thomasin Yeobright, wedding gifts despite their both having married against her better counsel. Christian is sidelined by a raffle at the inn, which he agrees to attend only “if there’s nothing of the black art in it, and if a man may look on without cost or getting into any dangerous wrangle” (279). His fear turns to fascination, and he is lured by the promoter who judges that he “might almost be sure” of winning, and by communal encouragement, since he will “anyhow have the same chance as the rest of us” and “the extra luck of being the last comer” (281). He wins—throwing a “pair-royal”—in a reprisal of Hardy’s childhood victory. Imagining that he has unearthed a seam of luck Christian keeps the dice, alternately seeing them as sympathetic and volitional bearers of luck—“magical machines” (284), “powerful rulers of us all, and yet at my command” (281)—and as vehicles of his former fear, “devil’s playthings” (284). In confiding his newly-found desire of “multiplying money” (282) to Wildeve—whom Mrs. Yeobright did not trust with her gift—Christian reveals his secret consignment. Wildeve lures him to further play, enticing him with stories of gambling that turn on fantastic winnings from low stakes, or massive swings from ruin to success (284–5).

The game functions as a control against which subsequent extremes will be measured. On the one hand, it fluctuates above and below an even narrative line, an “average [that] was in Wildeve’s favour” (286), and makes clear—in his dismissal of the dice as “only cut out by some lad with a knife” (282)—the physical conditions in which this numerical narrative occurs. On the

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54 Beer makes much of the tacit erotics of the term “pair-royal,” and reads Christian’s revelation of his secret charge as a symbolic expenditure ("Reader’s Wager" 118–19).
other, it frames Wildeve’s changing intentions to suggest how chance might be wrenched into line by a will unaware of its own aims, “drawn from […] intentions even in the course of carrying them out,” so that “it was extremely doubtful […] whether Wildeve was conscious of any other intention than that of winning for his own personal benefit” (287). In such a mood Wildeve is confronted by Diggory Venn, the itinerant figure who has been watching the whole scene from the shadows and replaces Christian in this rudimentary casino.

Venn materializes the aggregate regularities of his namesake’s theory. His frequent contact with reddle, the substance of his trade in dying sheep, has gradually marked his aspect. He is “not temporarily overlaid” but “permeated” to a overall “lurid red” (58). Memorably described as a ghost “dipped in blood” (77) and as one of those “Mephistophelian visitants” (131) that haunt the communal imaginary, Venn is a changeable type, the embodiment of serial repetition and accretion. At one with Hardy’s wild setting, the prehistoric heath where changes are registered in glacial time and manmade structures are “almost crystallized to natural products by long continuance” (54), Venn is often a figure of methodical, iterative action in the novel, as when we see him darning (130) or find that he has reread a letter from Thomasin many times, “to judge from the hinge-like character” of the “worn folds” (133) on its packet. He is both exemplar and ground of a mode of knowledge—serial thinking—that takes note of aggregate regularities rather than isolated instances.

It is significant that when Venn replaces Christian he bets with sovereigns—coins in circulation—where Wildeve found himself with Mrs. Yeobright’s “spade-guineas” (271), historically out of production and circulation since the late eighteenth century, hence both “unworn” (278) and obsolete.55 The resumption of the game sees Damon Wildeve—his name

55 *OED*, s.v. “guinea.”
sonically akin to William Dare—in an extreme gambling frenzy. Where Wildeve is “nervous and excitable,” his movements emphatic and the “beating of his heart […] almost audible,” Venn’s gambling practice is stately and machinelike. He sits “with lips impassively closed and eyes reduced to a pair of unimportant twinkles,” like “an automaton” or “a red-sandstone statue but for the motion of his arm with the dice-box” (290). His “facial muscles betrayed nothing at all” (292). His later victory in this game suggests that, in Hardy’s world, the proper mode of entering into the vagaries of chance operations is to spurn the individual viewpoint—to discard wild hope and vain belief, to slough off conscious action and minimize perception—to imagine oneself a gaming automaton, a composite “imaginary person,” an impartial spectator.

This game initially proceeds as before—it “fluctuated, now in favour of one, now in favour of the other, without any great advantage on the side of either”—but then undergoes a passive shift: “a change had come over the game” (290). Venn turns to steady, continual series of wins, throwing higher than Wildeve up to the maximum “triplet of sixes” (291). This angers his opponent, who mimics his vacillating fortunes at an affective level, throwing the dice and box away in anger but then affirming that he means “to have another chance yet” (291). The game

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56 Gaming “automata” were popular in the Victorian period. Ruskin, for example, tried his hand at a chess automaton installed at the Crystal Palace (Hilton, John Ruskin 2.551).

57 The novel offers further reflection on the notion of automatic action. Earlier, little Johnny feeds the bonfire under Eustacia’s direction and “seemed a mere automaton, galvanized into moving and speaking by the wayward Eustacia’s will” (110–11). Hardy’s reference to the “brass statue which Albertus Magnus is said to have animated just so far as to make it chatter, and move, and be his servant” (111) was drawn from a notebook entry (Literary Notebooks 1.63). Venn is close to Giles Winterbourne in The Woodlanders, who cuts wood “like an automaton” (224), and like the bride in the poem “Honeymoon Time at an Inn,” “Unwitting as an automaton what she did” (Collected Poems l. 28). The emphasis on unconscious action is close to Walter Benjamin’s later insistence, in “Die glückliche Hand” and “Über einige Motive bei Baudelaire,” that the best gamblers abjure conscious decision.

58 A number with a satanic feel, as Bailey notes (“Hardy’s ‘Mephistophelian Visitants’” 1154).
continues despite bizarre events and strange details of setting: heath-croppers wander in as though to kibitz, a kamikaze moth kills their candle and they are forced to go on by the light of exactly “thirteen glowworms” (292). Ensconced in obscure conditions and playing with a single die, Wildeve proposes changing the game so that “the lowest point shall win the stake” (293). But Venn’s luck holds in this direction too, the physical world conspiring to have him throw lower than an ace—nothing, a blank:

[T]he die was seen to be lying in two pieces, the cleft sides uppermost.
“‘I’ve thrown nothing at all,’” he said.
“‘Serves me right—I split the die with my teeth. Here—take your money. Blank is less than one.’” (294)

The sequence of events in this chapter—“A New Force Disturbs the Current”—is more complex than has usually been thought. Even critics who have noticed the nominal homage to John Venn have not taken into account its main thrust. Gillian Beer has argued that Diggory’s win is a “fore-ordained recuperation” that obtains by “magic repetition” as the satirical inverse outcome of Wildeve’s tales about gambling, suggesting that “a half-assurance has been proffered to the reader that Venn must win” and that the “whole is determined.” She articulates a moral view of this outcome, suggesting that Diggory wins “by virtue of his virtue: the cards connive, under the ordering hand of the writer.” She uses John Venn’s work to show that the scene exemplifies her notion of reading as a wager. Following this account, Helen Small thinks that

59 Consider how Bailey points to the die as broken by a “natural cause,” yet still insists that the event needs to be read against a supernatural determinism, seeing Venn as the “natural means through which the supernatural works” (“Hardy’s ‘Mephistophelian Visitants’” 1155n46). For another reading see Langbaum, Thomas Hardy in Our Time 100–2.

60 Beer, “Reader’s Wager” 120, 121.

61 Beer, “Reader’s Wager” 121.

62 Beer’s broader argument posits gambling and reading as “acts of desire whose longing is to possess and settle the future, but whose pleasure is in active uncertainty” (“Reader’s Wager”
Venn’s ideas are visible in Diggory as “an objective quasi-statistical observer” whom Hardy compromises by having him interfere in the plot. She agrees with Beer in reading the gambling scene as a mock of probability theory that hinges on the reader:

Unlike John Venn’s ideal observer, the reddleman does not permit the objects of his story to ‘work out their proper courses undisturbed by any interference.’ […] And what of the reader? There is nothing in the laws of chance to say that Wildeve’s win against the hapless Christian Cantle and then Venn’s against Wildeve are impossible, but the inevitable non-neutrality of plot puts the scene outside the reader’s sense of what is probable. For the sake of the narrative, Venn needs to win.

These readings illuminate much about the discourse of uncertainty and its pressures on the novel, but they are strictly tangential to the philosophical view they invoke (and criticize). Beer draws her example of readerly uncertainty from a section in which Venn explicitly sidelines subjective probability and invokes a determinism—foreordination—that his work was against. Small helpfully shows how John Venn’s neutrality is satirized by Hardy, but she conflates neutrality with objectivity and speaks of laws of chance that the Logic never sanctions. In emphasizing the narrative stakes of this scene, both rely on probability in what Hacking terms its epistemic sense.

111). In the more specific context of the later nineteenth century, Beer points to “conflicts between ideas of strict causal sequence and the preoccupation with hazard, or chance” in a range of sciences (112). She comments on a section of Venn’s Logic and places him in the context of scientific popularizers, particularly Proctor (105–6, 112–13). See 118–22 for her full account of The Return of the Native.


64 Small, “Chances Are” 80.

65 Small, “Chances Are” 80–1.

66 See Small, “Chances Are” 70–1, for a critique of Venn’s devaluing of psychology in thinking about probability. Small here speaks of Venn’s “insistence on objectivity,” yet Venn is clear that there is “really nothing which we can with propriety call an objective probability” (Logic 91).
To be sure, the scene might be read as parody, as though Hardy mocked up a fictional response to de Moivre’s framing example—“[W]e may suppose two Men at Play throwing a Die, each in their Turns, and that he is to be reputed the Winner who shall first throw an Ace”—or took the first problem in the Doctrine of Chances—“To find the Probability of throwing an Ace in two throws of one Die”—as a trick question. But the scene ends, importantly, in a way that recalls Venn’s insistence that even games depend on physical conditions whose outcomes cannot be determined objectively, a priori, but only by experience, even if their uniformities did seem more fixed than the aggregate regularities of natural or social series. Hardy’s fractured die—thrown by a character who materializes repetition on the surface of his body—is a vivid image for this material substrate. The cleft die both alters and abolishes numerical odds, dispensing with both objective mathematics and subjective predictions. Instead of writing the highs and lows of number as he saw them in Monte Carlo, Hardy materializes chance—and then literally breaks the bank.

Diggory’s Countermoves and the “Limits of the Probable”

To follow John Venn’s theory into a reading of the novel more broadly is not, I contend, to complain about how such chains of event signal the plot’s departures from credibility or neutrality, nor to belabor what is predetermined by Hardy. Such views seem no more immune than others to Anthony Trollope’s dismissal of those who privilege telos over process in reading or criticism: “take the third volume if you please—learn from the last pages all the results of our troubled story, and the story shall have lost none of its interest.” It is, rather, to track Hardy’s dramatization of prediction and probable knowledge at the level of small-scale narrative

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67 Doctrine of Chances vii, 9.

68 Barchester Towers 143–4.
mechanics, to recognize that what converges in this dimly-lit scene is present in even dimmer lighting elsewhere in the novel, and that the repetitions we see in description and characterization form an interlocking series with this bravura vignette.

Venn’s machinations in the plot accrue significance only in aggregate. He is invested in a longer, more regular game than other characters—including perhaps himself—can see, and his strategies often involve a dogged, mindless repetition that continues even after early results come in. A fuller account of Venn’s character follows, in relation to his suppleness as a predictor, focusing on his perceptual acuity, his attention to patterns and figure/ground relations, and his reliance on many instances or examples. I also offer a view of his darker participation in surveillance and social manipulation.

As a surrogate for the devilish, Venn has what Hardy calls, in *The Hand of Ethelberta*, “the subversive Mephistophelian endowment, brains.” He also has significant powers of perception. His eye is “keen as that of a bird of prey” (59) and his general acuity allows him to make fine-grained discriminations. He can discern different qualities of light in a dark landscape, to the distance of a few hundred yards (433), and needs only the briefest sound to infer that Eustacia, dressed in silk, has passed by his van (432). His first appearance as an exemplary predictor mobilizes these capacities. He scans the landscape as though it were a graphical display, a “gradual series” of elevations and depressions against the pattern of which his eye is

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69 *The Hand of Ethelberta* 2.54. Bailey offers a summary analysis of Diggory in relation to other outsider figures in Hardy who wear red and are figures for Satanic tricksters, interfering with plots. Among them he includes the “witch” Elizabeth Endorfield in *Under the Greenwood Tree*; Troy in *Far From the Madding Crowd*; Dare in *A Laodicean*; both Newson and Farfrae in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*; and Fitzpiers as a Faustian visitor (“Hardy’s ‘Mephistophelian Visitants’” 1156–65). The qualities of such Mephistophelians include deception, mockery, skepticism, and obsession with games and chance (1176–7).

70 On Hardy’s attentiveness to the senses in this novel see Coombs, “Reading in the Dark.”
drawn to the “noteworthy object” that turns out to be Eustacia silhouetted on the barrow (62).

Watching her outline, which forms a “unity” with, and “obvious justification” for the dark formation, Venn’s inference about a significant feature in the landscape transfers into the realm of social judgment. Perceiving an unexpected movement—a “discontinuance of immobility,” a “strange phenomenon”—as Eustacia moves off and is replaced by a sequence—“a third, a fourth, a fifth”—of heathfolk who ascend the barrow, Venn singles her out as “more likely to have a history worth knowing” (63).

This model of detecting a departure from habitual or expected patterns and drawing probable conclusions is a persistent dimension of Venn’s watchful judging. When Venn later describes Wildeve leaving Eustacia, Hardy gives us not a mere perception but a probabilistic cutout from a class of possible events, his character’s “keen eye” having seen what was “within the limits of the probable” (327).71 That Hardy offers such scenes through intense visualization—compelling us to watch and replace images as though we have stopped reading—suggests he aligns reading with Venn’s mode of pattern recognition and figure/ground perception, as though we are to alternate reading graphical marks and the fibres they overlay. A striking image encourages just this view, showing the handwriting of Thomasin’s letter to Venn as resembling “twigs of a winter hedge against a vermilion sunset” (133), encouraging readers to discern a reddish hue on our own pages while sublimating the material text into a signifying mental landscape.

In order to have a reasonable class of instances from which to extract a model series, discern a pattern, or make a judgment, Venn needs to have a store of repeated observations, a

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71 This is a more abstract version of what elsewhere appears in Hardy as an evolutionary statement: Boldwood’s age is described thus: “Thirty-five and fifty were his limits of variation: he might have been either, or anywhere in between” (Far from the Madding Crowd 81).
background that has acquired a convenient stasis. He undertakes a concerted surveillance operation near Rainbarrow, where Wildeve and Eustacia meet in secret, and is not put off by an initial lack of success, “look[ing] upon a certain mass of disappointment as the natural preface to all realizations” (135). His vigil continues for six days, and then meets with success on the seventh. We infer that he has been keeping up this regular watch in the background of the narrative, reporting to Eustacia (on a later occasion) that Wildeve waited while she was off pursuing a newfound infatuation with Clym (207). Similarly, it is “not by accident” that Venn shadows Wildeve and Thomasin to the church where they are finally married, and makes sure to bring Eustacia along, having “with the thoroughness which was part of his character […] determined to see the end of the episode” (220).

Requiring more than one instance to corroborate a judgment, Diggory alternates an almost inhuman fixity with energetic persistence. When he decides to “reconnoitre” along the road leading from Wildeve’s home to Clym’s (329) he lingers in the dark like a signpost or milestone; when he waits to return the guineas to Thomasin, he stands “fixed for nearly half an hour” (295). By contrast, trying to persuade Eustacia to leave off with Wildeve, he uses several lines of attack and then “play[s] the card of truth” (145). His methodical nature is later turned to his own account when, after the Maypole dance, he looks for a glove he knows to be Thomasin’s, borrowed and lost by one of the maids. He searches by moonlight, “walking in zigzags right and left till he should have passed over every foot of the ground” (455). Still, this predictive diligence hardly amounts to an objective or omniscient view. Hardy is careful to suture details together to maintain some partiality to Venn’s information. Crucially, he emerges from the background in the gambling scene after Christian has stated that the guineas are a
shared trust, and when Wildeve says that the first guinea is not his own Venn mistakenly infers that they are all destined for Thomasin (295–6).

Venn operates, then, by “strategy,” “scheme,” “method,” “system” (135, 143, 148). When one route fails he turns to whichever “channel remain[s] untried” (150). Naturally this sets him in alliance with or opposition to other characters, depending on their place in his designs. What to Wildeve appear as interfering “countermoves” (328) are to Mrs. Yeobright a “providential countermove” (333) in the matter of her guineas. Venn typically appears as an isolated figure, often invisible to others’ notice. During the raffle, he sits outside the circuit of men in a “receding seat,” “absolutely unobserved” (283), a fact he recalls in symbolic terms after the tragic events at the weir, recognizing that, “of all the circle, he himself was the only one whose situation had not materially changed” (441). As a spectator he remains covert, lurking in the shadows or embedding himself in the landscape, covering himself with turves in order to watch at closer range. It is from a collective position that the narrator voices this detail—“isolated he was mostly seen to be” (132)—and often points to Venn’s peculiarity as a character. In a novel where every principal character is described as singular at least once, Venn receives the appellation a number of times (143, 208), as though he were a series or assemblage of

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72 His is a “patience continuously sustained by energy and enterprise” (Gregor, *Great Web* 106).

73 The term “countermove” was recent in the period (1858), and is taken from chess (*OED*). Hardy uses it in *Two on a Tower* (43).

74 Clym’s face is “singular” (194) as a result of his thoughtful bent; sense with such a person that he “must be invading some region of singularity” (226); Wildeve’s “grace of […] movement was singular” (93).
singularities, *sui generis* across many different classes or groups, bearing in his face the “groundwork of the singular” (132).  

If such methodical scheming has benign and comic ends—preventing infidelity and orchestrating a happy marriage—it often adopts malign means. In macabre moments the novel slips into a melodrama more characteristic of Hardy’s “Novels of Ingenuity,” and Venn appears as a *diabolus ex machina.* He sets a warning tripwire for Wildeve, which the latter identifies with him on account of its red tinge (330) and a trap that apparently triggers gunshots. This “system of menace” and “rough coercion” (332) is likened to a form of vigilante justice that belongs with other “mockeries of law”: Hardy refers us to Lynch’s “short way with the scamps of Virginia” (332). More chillingly, when Venn refers to his method as the “silent system” (334) the term alludes to a mode of correctional enforcement in Victorian penitentiaries that prevented

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75 Singular figures associated with Venn include the devil, Mephistopheles, and the first murderer, since reddle “stamps unmistakably, as with the mark of Cain, any person who has handled it” (131); he is also likened to the last of an extinct species (the dodo). Other figures in Hardy who are the sole representatives of their occupation are often ominous, like the hangman in “The Three Strangers.”

76 The problem of how to read Diggory’s generally cheery character against these darker moments exercises a number of critics. Garson describes his operations as “canny bungling,” for instance (*Hardy’s Fables of Integrity* 59), where Langbaum sees his “unfailing competence” and “shrewd thwarting of […] intrigues” (*Thomas Hardy in Our Time* 98). Dalziel, reading Arthur Hopkins’ illustrations to the *Belgravia* serialization, sees Venn as selfless, sympathetic, and chivalrous in a way that includes a feminine side, although it seems significant—Dalziel does not comment—that the letters “DV” on Venn’s sacks mark him as a Mephistophelian figure in that particular image (“Anxieties of Representation” 107–9). Many of these contradictions are owing to revisions that Hardy made, as Paterson’s accounts of the varying manuscripts attests (*Making of The Return of the Native*).

77 In a reading of the heath’s disciplinary structures—observation, social judgment, rumor—Malton comments on Venn’s involvement in its “covert surveillance” and “regulatory structure” (“The Woman Shall Bear Her Iniquity”’ 153).
spoken communication among prisoners.\textsuperscript{78} This detail—itself almost inaudible in the text—ominously reprises the depiction of the heath as exhibiting the sublimity one expects in the “façade of a prison” (54) and gives a darker cast to Venn’s reminding Eustacia that she has found the heath a “jail” (146).

**Some Versions of Subjectivism**

Venn’s acuity serves as a foil for subjective prediction in Hardy’s novel. He trumps the excessive subjectivism of Wildeve—who is impatient with the dictates of probability and dreams of lucky futures unrelated to the present—and his companion in probable knowledge, Eustacia. Wildeve, who “threw away his chance” (73) of being an engineer to manage the Quiet Woman Inn on the heath, is drawn as a volatile and sentimental figure, always “yearning for the difficult” and “weary of that offered,” “car[ing] for the remote” while “dislik[ing] the near” (274). Thomasin notes that he “cannot bear the sight of pain in even an insect, or any disagreeable sound, or unpleasant smell even” (96), and this rejection of present facts and conditions on account of being “cursed with sensitiveness” opposes him to Venn, since he is haunted by “blue demons” (95) not red.

Wildeve’s actions are magnified dramatically by his emotional life. When talking to Eustacia, his voice is a “careful equipoise between imminent extremes” (113), but he often gives way to these affective poles. His reversals are cast in mathematical terms, Eustacia’s “preciousness in his eyes […] increasing in geometrical progression with each new incident that reminded him of their hopeless division” (294). Akin to Sergeant Troy in *Far From the Madding*

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\textsuperscript{78} See the summary in Henry Mayhew and John Binny, *The Criminal Prisons of London* 100–102. For comments on this model, widely known as the Auburn model, as an instrument of moral rehabilitation, see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 237–8.
Crowd—“a man to whom memories were an encumbrance, and anticipations a superfluity”79—Wildeve loses money betting on horses and is given to gambling only with a view to the next throw.80 When he does anticipate the future, he rapidly converts his predictions into apathy. Before the crisis at Shadwater Weir in which he loses his life, he senses the “anticipated futility” of either lover obeying their own wills “in the face of a mutual wish that they should throw in their lot together” and so does not “dwell long upon these conjectures, maxims, and hopes” (435).

Like Wildeve, Eustacia’s finally “unpractical mind” (420) is a romantic jumble in which we see “juxtaposed the strangest assortment of ideas, from old time and from new,” leaving her with “no middle distance in her perspective” (120). Her obsession with the world out of immediate view prompts her to wander the heath with a telescope (106), thus cutting an artificial path through physical distance to objects of her desire.81 Yet she turns such technological framing to her own emotional life, her “colourless inner world” becoming “as animated as water under a microscope” (164) after eavesdropping on Clym. Every quality in her affective range emphasizes fluctuation: she is “petulant” (111) and “perfervid” (174), her sighs have a “spasmodic abandonment” (106), and she swings from “anxiety” and “impatience” to “triumphant pleasure” (112) and “celestial imperiousness” (119).

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79 Far from the Madding Crowd 145.

80 D. H. Lawrence memorably describes his character as an “eternal assumption” (Study of Thomas Hardy 24).

81 In Eustacia, Hardy conveys the “impatient sense of the distance in past recollections or future hopes, and the consequent reversal of what is near and what is far” just as her telescope “frames the distance, converts it instantly into a near but unattainable foreground, and […] carves through the circular space of the Egdon of the heathfolk a single straight line from herself to the far distance” (Barrell, “Geographies of Hardy’s Wessex” 106). Hornback comments on her telescope and hourglass as signifying “a combination of intensification and measurement” (Metaphor of Chance 28).
Eustacia lives in a world where imperfect knowledge is fleshed out by romance. She is aware “by prevision what most women learn only by experience,” that “love was but a doleful joy” (122),\(^82\) that it has no “continuance” and will “evaporate like a spirit” (255). This leads her both to forecast the future as a self-fulfilling prophecy and to disregard past information. Her belief in the need to love Clym, having just met him, prompts an analogy to those “who have dreamed that they were to die on a certain day, and by stress of morbid imagination have actually brought about that event” (199). Conversely when she begins the romance the past is suddenly a “blank” (245), both an empty form and a losing ticket to be discarded.\(^83\) This *carpe diem* philosophy (265) is formulated (to Clym) in the following terms: “Only I dread to think of anything beyond the present. What is, we know. We are together now, and it is unknown how long we shall be so: the unknown always fills my mind with terrible possibilities” (258).

Hardy’s ironic appeal to the language of certainty underlines the flaw in exchanging unknown futures for those one has dreamed up in advance. Had Eustacia “calculated to such a degree on the probability of success” in her scheme to persuade Clym to move to Paris, she might have taken into account his careful protests to the contrary before settling on this plan “in all likelihood” (300). Her impetuous dislike for waiting forms another contrast to Diggory’s methodical observation. Looking down at the Yeobright household to catch a glimpse of the native returned, she “inferred that the guest had not yet come” and leaves after a matter of minutes (171). As impatient are her attempts to bring about a coincidental meeting with Clym: she walks the heath on five occasions, and it is only after she gives up that the providential “opportunity” (175) arises for meeting him, by a ruse, at his family’s Christmas party.

\(^82\) Hardy’s story “The Imaginative Woman” contains a similar image (380).

\(^83\) *OED*, s.v. “blank,” def. 4; this sense is earlier than those denoting vacancy.
Predictive incompetence follows on the fact that the only attrition known by Wildeve and Eustacia attaches to cultivation, whether in his inheritance of land redeemed from the heath (87) or her “exquisite finish” (319). When they dance, the “hard beaten surface of the sod, when viewed aslant towards the moonlight, shone like a polished table” (322). As a mode of attrition, polish creates a surface that casts back the image of the world, and becomes a tool of distortion and admiring self-reflection rather than prudent self-preservation. In consequence, neither can understand Venn’s long con strategy, hatched in emotional detachment and requiring regularity of execution: it is seen by Eustacia as a bizarre “disinterestedness” (209), a “strange sort of love, to be entirely free from […] selfishness” (208), and by Wildeve as running “counter to [Venn’s] own interests” (210). It is not accidental that both meet their demise beneath a reflective surface.

Venn’s serial thinking is more congruent with the measured probabilism of Mrs. Yeobright, whose intuition is uncanny but prone to errors of limited information. She has the “well-formed features of the type usually found where perspicacity is the chief quality enthroned within” (83) and is described as “far too thoughtful a woman to be content with ready definitions” (234). She is “not disinclined to philosophize” (338), and disbelieves the “old superstitions” (216) of the heath. Her sensible character sees through Wildeve’s “hardly credible” ruse to carry the guineas to Thomasin himself, and to press for the truth when Christian’s confused answers about their fate does not mesh with the “one-half of his story [that] had been corroborated” by Thomasin’s note of receipt (301).

Hardy’s term for Mrs. Yeobright’s predictive skill—“intuition,” having a “singular insight into life, considering that she had never mixed with it”—draws on a philosophical

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84 In reading material attrition in The Woodlanders, Ward links images of polishing, finishing, and varnishing to the topic of cultivation, suggesting that “effacement is always on the other side of polish” (“Cultivation of Realism” 874), that whatever improvement is wrought by cultivation might easily rub away.
tradition surrounding the problem of knowledge apart from perceptual experience (248). Drawing allusions from Burke, Hardy links Mrs. Yeobright to historical figures who were blind from an early age, like Blacklock and Sanderson, and others who “can watch a world which they never saw, and estimate forces of which they have only heard” (248). Hence intuition operates as another form of probabilistic knowledge, different from Venn’s visualization of aggregate regularities and frequencies in its manner of inferring unseen forces, just as one infers the vibrations of particles driving movements of dust. “What was the great world to Mrs. Yeobright?” Hardy asks:

A multitude whose tendencies could be perceived, though not its essences. Communities were seen by her as from a distance; she saw them as we see the throngs which cover the canvases of Sallaert, Van Alsloot, and others of that school—vast masses of beings, jostling, zigzagging, and processioning in definite directions, but whose features are indistinguishable by the very comprehensiveness of the view. (248)

Intuition thus involves a visualizing and foreshortening capacity, turning human agents into particles, vectors of movement. Mrs. Yeobright is said to see “issues from a Nebo denied to others around,” significantly like Moses on Mt. Pisgah contemplating the Promised Land from which he is debarred (83). Yet the distance that gives her predictive power its edge impairs its details, compelling her to supplement what she cannot see by engaging in a mode of prophecy

85 A friend of Newton and De Moivre, Sanderson was also a nascent figure in the side of probability concerned with subjective judgments, which usually draws its name from the later mathematician Thomas Bayes. See Stigler, “Who Discovered Bayes’s Theorem?” Johnson, “Hardy and Burke’s ‘Sublime,’” points out that these names are drawn from Burke’s Enquiry, which Hardy had earlier mined for stylistic purposes (58–60).

86 The same Dutch painters are mentioned in a scene in Tess of the d’Urbervilles, there blurring human and animal life as she looks down at fields “speckled as thickly with cows as a canvas by Van Alsloot or Sallaert with burghers” (102).

87 The image of Nebo may be drawn from Ruskin’s Modern Painters III, which includes details about the changed countenance of medieval people (Works 5.248–62). For a summary of the notion of a “Pisgah sight” in the Victorian period see Landow, Victorian Types, Victorian Shadows 201–31.
that is both temporal and spatial.  On the morning of her son’s wedding, her gaze is “listlessly directed towards the open door,” through which we follow her across miles to a “domestic drama” that is “but little less vividly present to her eyes than if enacted before her,” as her “excited fancy clove the hills” (275) between her and the event that she imagines—and that we envision along with her. Her outlook matches a note on creativity Hardy penned in 1866, where he muses that a “widely appreciative mind mostly fails to achieve a great work from pure far-sightedness,” since the “very clearness with which he discerns remote possibilities is, from its nature, scarcely ever co-existent with the microscopic vision demanded for tracing the narrow path that leads to them.”

Mrs Yeobright adopts Diggory’s own strategic predictions in trying to keep Wildeve from interfering with a possible relation between Thomasin and the reddleman. In conversation with her presumptive nephew-in-law, she takes Venn’s stated “chance of winning [Thomasin] round” as a hedging bet against Wildeve’s “backward and forward play” (151), trying to divert him by declaring that “upon the whole the probabilities are in favour of her accepting [Venn] in time” (153). Yet her unwitting collusion with Venn does not preclude failures in their forecasts. Just as Venn does not foresee the chaotic possibilities of Wildeve’s irrationality—“that the tendency of his action would be to divert Wildeve’s movement rather than to stop it” (333)—so

Prophecy along spatial or geographical lines is a concept articulated by John Berger; for a theoretical view see Soja, Postmodern Geographies 21–4.

Life 56. Compare Hardy’s recollection of Emma Gifford in 1871, speaking of “that rapid instinct which serves women in such good stead, and may almost be called preternatural vision” (Life 89). Noting Mrs. Yeobright’s “wide scope of vision the other characters lack,” Miller points out that her way of seeing matches Hardy’s elsewhere, in the “Foescene” to The Dynasts: “The accurate, comprehensive view is even more remorselessly punished than Eustacia’s eager expectation. It is the supreme Prometheus temerity of claiming the sun’s wide, inclusive vision of things. Such vision is, in fact, its own punishment, since it is blind to the distinct features of things that make them seem uniquely valuable and uniquely desirable. The wide vision sees things as all equal in their featurelessness” (Topographies 38, 43).
Mrs. Yeobright’s strategy takes its “greatest effect […] in a quarter quite outside her view when arranging it” (154), since it sends Wildeve hankering after Eustacia. She does not recognize—or take fully into predictive account—that the scorching day on which she fatally wanders out onto the heath, in order to visit Clym and repair their relationship, is “one of a series” of similar days (337). Clym recognizes that “[f]rom every provident point of view his mother was so undoubtedly right” (247–8) about his plans—that he has little “possible chance” (261) of succeeding as a schoolmaster in the overcrowded market of Budmouth—and sees that finally “events had borne out the accuracy of her judgment” (473). Yet the wider wisdom of both her predictions and Venn’s are still edged by the omniscient view from which they are occluded—from certain links in the series of interlocking events whose probable outcomes could not be known in advance from any single view.

**An Obsolescent Face**

*The Return of the Native* thus condenses different views of probable knowledge, from the patient regularities and acute perceptions of Venn, the exemplar of serial thinking, to the engulfing romanticism of Eustacia and Wildeve, to the foreshortened intuition of Mrs. Yeobright. The novel’s famous setting operates in tandem with seriality in providing a slowly mutable background for events, blurring temporalities on a number of scales, and furnishing the treacherous epistemological conditions that render narration an inescapably inferential task.

Egdon Heath is seen not as a landscape on which events take place, but as a surface altered however imperceptibly by events in a series. The “vast tract of unenclosed wild” already declares its agency from the opening of the novel, where it “embrowned itself moment

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by moment” (53) as if arrogating the causality of the fading twilight to itself, becoming an “instalment of night” out of diurnal sequence while “day stood distinct in the sky” (53). In this manner it forces its own brazen reorientation of that long-held paradigm of predictive continuance and topographical location—the sun. At the winter solstice, heathfolk can no longer trust to the sun’s regularity and must “unlearn [their] experience of the sky as a dial” (161). Time is thus a mutable concept in the setting for this plot. There is “no absolute hour” on the heath, since the “time at any moment was a number of varying doctrines professed by the different hamlets” (186).

The perceptual and epistemological conditions of the heath—it necessitates heightened perception and encourages both surveillance and a deliberate slowness of movement—are attuned to Venn’s qualities. On Egdon, human actions take place “musingly, and by small degrees,” to match the “protracted and halting dubiousness” that was “not the repose of actual stagnation, but the apparent repose of incredible slowness” (62). Human structures are “almost

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91 Given the heath’s satanic representative, it is significant that the first use of this term occurs in Milton: “The unpierce’t shade / Imround the noontide Bowrs” (Paradise Lost IV; quoted in OED).

92 Arguing that the novel’s blurring of human body and landscape erodes an “incorporeal idea of human subjectivity,” Cohen stresses that the description of the heath is a “subjective impression that posits an apperceptive, embodied human presence” when a furze-cutter is inserted into the scene, as though hypothetically, so that the “setting is already predicated on human sensation” (“Faciality and Sensation” 446–7).

93 The heathfolk are, further, unaware of a uniform time against which their perspectival times might be defined, so their native knowledge is “not knowledge elsewhere” (Barrell, “Geographies of Hardy’s Wessex” 101). Hornback suggests that the “intensified time” of the setting enlarges the “dramatic size” of the characters and justifies its coincidences, even as it returns them to “microscopic insignificance” (Metaphor of Chance 23). See also Henchman, “Hardy’s Cliffhanger and Narrative Time.” Lawrence may have given the most striking version of this thought, darkly observing that the novel’s characters are merely “one year’s accidental crop” of the “withering heath,” which “will bear many more crops beside this” (Study of Thomas Hardy 25).
crystallized to natural products by long continuance” (56). Similarly, the heath “could best be felt when it could not clearly be seen” (53), and Venn’s operations collude with its “watchful intentness” (54), with the “solitude [that] seemed to look out of its countenance” (55). It is—in a figure J. Hillis Miller has read as a “perpetually reversing metalepsis”—a face, an “imperturbable countenance [...] which, having defied the cataclysmal onsets of centuries, reduced to insignificance by its seamed and antique features the wildest turmoil of a single man” (388). The face of this landscape looks upward, and to follow its expressions is to adopt what might be thought of as a heath’s-eye view, the serial corollary to composite views from above, the bird’s-eye view seen elsewhere in Hardy. The character most attuned to the predictive possibilities of the heath might seem to be Clym, who takes up furze-cutting and thus tends to the face of the land, “fretting its surface in his daily labour as a moth frets a garment” (339). When

94 He embodies the heath’s “obscure watchfulness” as well as the novel’s motif of “peripheral watching” (Miller, Topographies 33, 44).

95 Miller, Topographies 21. Miller notes the perplexing reversals here, where the real landscape is an “extratextual ground” and “referential reality,” both the “causer and caused” of the imagined landscape, and vice versa (21). He further notes that the blending of figures for character and landscape make the heath’s personification—the novel’s “generative prosopopoieia”—“no more than an unfolding of one basic catachresis for topographical features” (24, 28). Adumbrating these comments, Fleishman notes that the heath exhibits “vital reflexes, human apparel, and personal physiognomy” (Fiction and the Ways of Knowing 113), and that it is “one of the principal agents of the action, a protagonist in the classical sense of the dramatic actor” (114), yet suggests that it undermines “personification” as a category in blurring animate and inanimate (114–15).

96 Indeed, the heath invokes the thematic of “an animate (or once-animate) being dormant in the earth,” as Fleishman suggests, pointing to the folkloric instances of Maiden Castle and the Cerne Abbas giant, and showing other instances in Hardy where the earth is seen as an organism, a “composite being” (Fiction and the Ways of Knowing 111, 113).

97 For general comments on the interaction of these views see Lodge, “Thomas Hardy and Cinematographic Form”; Alcorn, The Nature Novel, on the overhead view and its corollary extreme in microscopic attention, typified by the scale of insect life (9–11); and Gregor, on the novel’s “bifocal” conflation of distanced heath and claustrophobic human interaction (Great Web 108).
young, Clym was “inwoven with the heath” (226), but the returning native has cut a caesura between his present life and his past. Having been in the diamond trade in Paris, handling the “especial symbols of self-indulgence and vainglory” (227) that resist natural alteration above all, his division from the heath is ironically measured by how close he finds himself to its surface after reading blinds him and he is forced to manual work. Clym looks at the heath; Venn looks out.

Venn’s viewpoint appears to overlap with the narrator’s, in that both underline the limited and conditional nature of observation in this dark environment. The counterfactual tenses of Hardy’s narrative view (“might have,” “would have”), compounded with an inferential language of appearance and guesswork, underline the narrator’s connection with Diggory on a formal level. Hence we meet the “natural query of an observer” (59), an “imaginative stranger” (62), an “unimpassioned spectator” (440), a “looker-on” (65), an “eye” on or above the scene (93, 325), “a listener” (105), and “a traveller” (141). Our view is framed by qualifications, assuring us of

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98 Again, Hardy relies on Milton, one of the first users of this compound: “The roofe / Of thickest covert was inwoven shade” (Paradise Lost IV; quoted in OED).

99 In his account of Hardy’s “geographies as modes of cognition,” Barrell points out that the heath’s “sense of place” is an experience of having “no clear sense of relations of difference or similarity between the place one knows—the only place—and other places; and thus no sense of a place as belonging by such relations to a definable geographical or geological or economic region” (“Geographies of Hardy’s Wessex” 99, 101). Clym clearly has such an internal division in his knowledge although critics are unwilling to concede that this is always the case. Johnson suggests that Clym’s modernity is not in tension with the heath, given that the latter’s representation relies on a modern understanding of the past (True Correspondence 57–60); Barrell notes that Clym’s “knowledge of elsewhere is a disguise which falls from him” (106). Compare Bullen’s account of the heath as a “mental geography” (“Imaginative Geography” 27).

100 Miller sees the heath as an extension and “covert manifestation of the ubiquitous presence of the narrator’s consciousness,” that “cool, effaced, ironic looking-on” personality, and again applies the figure of metalepsis to show how the narrator is also the heath’s representative or voice, “as though the heath were telling one of the innumerable stories that had been enacted on its surface” (Topographies 27).
what “attentive observation […] would have revealed” (78), a “keen observer might have been inclined to think” (132), or what a scene “would gradually disclose […] when silently watched awhile” (249). The narrator transfers the inferential work to a mass array of readers, noting that “one would have hazarded the guess” (132) and that the “chances are that he would not have been perceived” (136), and so forth. This mode of probable view can even take hold of characters, as when Eustacia, just before she meets her end, can “take a standing-point outside herself, observe herself as a disinterested spectator” (405). It is partly this quality of narration—at once disclosing serial thinking and attempting to replicate it in readers—that I include in Hardy’s “probable realism,” and discuss in further detail later.

The novel’s action takes place against this background that keeps obtruding its face into the foreground—against its incremental changes and serial attrition; its mutable temporality; its blurring of past and present into a placeless obsolescence that casts a shadow on thinking; its dark conditions for perceiving, supposing, and knowing beyond a small ring of firelight. The gambling scene offers a vision of how subjective predictions are subsumed into the fluctuating series typified by the heath and its mysterious visitant, Diggory Venn. The coins at stake materially represent every character—their judgments, hopes, and desires—struggling and failing to maintain a fragile 50/50 balance. As both a character and a condensation of the natural

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101 This technique forms one part of what Gregor calls the “continual dialectic of feeling that is operative between the narrator and his narrative” (Great Web 29). Barrell suggests that this feature compels a mental feat in readers—to suspend “general knowledge to discover the local”—and offers a suggestive reading of the “disjunction” in the narrative’s oscillation between an observer figure and a “conditional mode, as if searching for a viewer who might combine the possibility of knowing both the local and the general without appropriating either to the other” (“Geographies of Hardy’s Wessex” 114, 115). Grossman comments on this conditional narrative technique, offering Hardy’s own passivity and detachment in life as a parallel to his “real self-consciousness about his presence on the scene” in narrative (“Thomas Hardy and the Role of Observer” 619, 636). Compare Bayley on how “Hardy’s vulnerability within his own novel, is that of a private man in a public place, a shy man in a salon, anxious to learn how it goes, and conform to its manners while taking his own observations” (An Essay on Hardy 6).
frequencies that conspire against human agents,\textsuperscript{102} winning out against sentimental luck and frenzied speculation, Venn usurps the narrator’s position and probable outlooks.

The eventual victory of this statuesque automaton whom even Hardy called “weird” suggests that predictions need to account for series of events that change as they accumulate “in succession under our notice.”\textsuperscript{103} In a famous note added to the novel in 1912, Hardy declared that in his “original conception,” Venn was “to have disappeared mysteriously from the heath” (464n), as though even his final resting position as a character were subject to fluctuation.\textsuperscript{104} Hardy frames the predictions of individual agents as hapless in the face of incalculable outcomes, those that cause “more misfortune than treble the loss in money value could have done” (295). Just as Venn’s namesake had criticized Mill for thinking probability might be used to forecast human actions, Hardy brings our subjective views into a clearing only to show how probable knowledge is always edged by uncertainty. In a novel of strange events and singular outcomes, against the impersonal heath that flattens persons into points, he showcases both the pathos and the vanity of any theory of chance that would stake certain meaning in the “devil’s playthings” as they split and scatter in the dark.

\textsuperscript{102} Bailey reads Venn as “symbolic,” “typifying a force” (“Hardy’s ‘Mephistophilian Visitants’” 1150–5). For Cohen, he represents the “collapse of external world and sensate individual” (“Faciality and Sensation” 448).

\textsuperscript{103} Logic 8.

\textsuperscript{104} This note has received much commentary. Many take it to register a familiar sense of Hardy’s vexed relationship to serial publication, his “genuine uncertainty about what does constitute the appropriate ending” (Gregor, Great Web 105) or his “continuing disturbance” over how much he had conceded to serial demands (Dalziel, “Anxieties of Representation” 110).
II. OVERLAY: THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE

In the previous section, I suggested that *The Return of the Native* shows us a number of predictive modes—the short-range, sentimental intuition of Wildeve and Eustacia; the prudent, longer-range forecasting of Mrs. Yeobright; and the probabilism of Venn—that find success in proportion as they are attentive to the novel’s setting. As in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Woodlanders*, the perceptual conditions of the setting govern the availability and utility of probable knowledge. I called *serial thinking* the features of representation in narrative, character, and description that were tied to predictions on such a model.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, the shift of setting corresponds to a revaluation of how probable knowledge operates. This *urbs in rure* separates the market town from its environs, lessening the emphasis on knowledge inferred from long-range structures of repetition and displacing prediction to styles of inference that are important for social and interpersonal, agricultural and economic affairs. In what follows, I first pattern the conflict between the novel’s two antagonists as an account of predictive thinking that would seem to set rational calculation over felt knowledge. In so doing, I highlight how Hardy raises the profile of evidence that seems abstract, invisible, and ungraspable. I then deflect attention from this somewhat static (and familiar) opposition between Henchard and Farfrae, and argue that the novel finally privileges not a long-range seriality, but a shorter-range model that relies on images and their mental manipulation. Calling this mode *composite thinking*, I uncover its facility in the character of Elizabeth-Jane and analyze its features and commitments, and its successes in working through partial or virtual evidence that requires imaginative reconstruction to be understood.

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105 Vigar comments on the blended rural-urban setting (*Novels* 147–9) as allowing the representation of both an “‘exceptional’ individual” in “his immediate social environment” and the “solid and credulous background” of rural folk, of which Henchard is an instance (147).
Coarse Rivalry, Smooth Ciphering

Henchard and Farfrae condense a version of the distinction between intuitive and calculative judgment.¹⁰⁶ Henchard senses that “judgment and knowledge” keep a business going, but he is “bad at science […] bad at figures—a rule o’ thumb sort of man” (48). His status as a “man of strong impulses” (64) and “headstrong faculties” (112), with “no moderation in his requests and impulses” (75), tells on his features and in his bearing. In relating his story to Farfrae he attempts to hide his forehead but cannot quite cover the “marks of introspective inflexibility on his features” (76). Similarly in his judicial role his “rough and ready perceptions, his sledge-hammer directness, had often served him better than nice legal knowledge” (198).

Inference for such a character is a blunt affair. The morning following the disastrous escalation that ends in the sale of his wife, Henchard considers two items of evidence (the money given in the sale, and the ring that indexes her disappearance) that aggregate to confirm what has happened. “A confused picture of the events of the previous evening seemed to come back to him,” at first, followed by the “second verification of his dim memories” (15). Hardy’s emphasis on this blunt evidentiary logic—“seconding” in Fielding’s terms—is not only opposed to the finer-tuned instruments of a Farfrae (or Venn).¹⁰⁷ Its duplicate structure also recalls the parts of proof in Roman law,¹⁰⁸ not inappropriately in a novel whose protagonist is a cantankerous Justice of the Peace in a town that “announced old Rome in every street, alley, and precinct” (68). Susan’s decision to renew contact with Henchard replicates this simple, folk probabilism, where two parts furnish a whole proof: “What had brought her to this determination were chiefly

¹⁰⁶ Their relationship is “a clash of the moody and unpredictable with the rational and consistent” (Vigar, Novels 153).

¹⁰⁷ Fielding, Tom Jones 611.

two things. He had been described as a lonely widower; and he had expressed shame for a past transaction of his life. There was promise in both” (58).

Abjuring details and discernment, then, Henchard assesses future probabilities with as little accuracy in personal affairs as in economic ones, noting of his proposal to Lucetta that “if she would run the risk of Susan being alive (very slight as I believed)” then they should marry (77), that “certain risk” (114) having been acknowledged by her too. His assessments are shown to be false and Henchard’s inflexibility and lack of predictive suppleness compel him towards “a course of strict mechanical rightness towards this woman of prior claim” (80). His mode of hesitation and decision is as blunt as his tools for thinking about the future.¹⁰⁹ When trying to bring Elizabeth-Jane to his side after Susan’s death, Henchard’s “mind began vibrating between the wish to reveal himself to her, and the policy of leaving well alone, till he could no longer sit still” (119), flattening out all moderate compromise in entertaining only extreme courses of action. His realizations are often stark and thoroughly renovate his outlook. When reading Susan’s confessional letter, which disabuses him of the notion that he is Elizabeth-Jane’s father, Henchard “regarded the paper as if it were a window-pane” (123), just as his inability to reckon with Lucetta’s missive from Jersey is “looked at as at a picture, a vision, a vista of past enactments,” even if its contents are an “unimportant finale to conjecture” (114). These figures for realization and changed knowledge, emphasizing as they do the sudden capacity for vision and inferential reach, meet an exactly converse figure in the sudden recognition of facts that have always been staring one in the face—that his blond-haired charge cannot possibly be his daughter, a fact he registers in watching her sleep and recognizing her true lineage in her facial features.

¹⁰⁹ He is “tetchy, grasping, […] indifferent to any consequences beyond the immediate present” (Gregor, Great Web 131).
For Henchard, data is either imperceptible or obstructed by a screen emblematicized in the novel’s several images of mist and fog, of obscured vision and epistemological haze. Henchard contemplates Farfrae with a “dim dread” (100) as he begins to be set against him, and is similarly clumsy in judgment of Lucetta’s feelings for the Scot, since he can only sense a rivalry by feeling it “in the air,” as a vague “antagonistic force,” detecting it “in the turn of her pen” or in the way that “when he had tried to hang near her he seemed standing in a refluent current” (179). Her behavior in the presence of Farfrae consists in “little fidgets and flutters, which increased Henchard’s suspicions without affording any special proof of their correctness” (180). The legal framework here—“special proof” denotes an evidentiary requirement that can occur in cases where the saliency of facts is under dispute 110—continues in Henchard’s judgment, which casts his state of suspicion in the novel’s juridical terms, as well as in the agricultural terms of measure and weight: he has “a ton of conjecture, though without a grain of proof” (181). Having admired but pitied Farfrae’s interest in the “finildn details” of his accounts (74), he here misses particulars of a different kind, being “constructed upon too large a scale to discern such minutæ as these by an evening light, which to him were as the notes of a grasshopper that lie above the compass of the human ear” (181). Inferentially comprised even at a sensory level (unable to see by what John Locke calls the “twilight […] of Probability,” to hear the high tones of human intrigue), Henchard registers the threat of Farfrae only as an “occult rivalry” that adds an undefined injury to the “coarse materiality” of their “palpable rivalry” in trade (181). 111 His general inability to parse natural sequences of events—that that “had developed naturally”—comes to the fore for

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110 See Bentham, “Decision without External Evidence,” which considers “special proof” as a right given facts whose “notoriety” is in question (Rationale 1.256); and compare Treatise 46.

111 Locke, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding 652.
the “superstitious” Henchard when, after realizing that Elizabeth-Jane is not the daughter he abandoned two decades prior, “he could not help thinking that the concatenation of events [...] was the scheme of some sinister intelligence bent on punishing him” (124). He can see only an “ironical sequence of things,” an “impish trick from a fellow-creature” (124), recapitulating the folk notion of the devil as interfering in chance sequences, as in The Return of the Native above.¹¹²

In sum, Henchard’s evidentiary tools are blunt, his assessments of risk and the future simplistic, his manner of deliberation binary, his realizations sudden and all-encompassing, and his contractual language clear-cut (‘yea’ or ‘nay’). Precluded by his inbuilt qualities from fine inferences or causal attributions, he is quick to see rude instruments of ironic reversal, superstitious agency, and fetishistic diversions. Towards the end, Henchard’s “original make” is “denaturalized” (299) by his sensitivity to Elizabeth-Jane’s judgments, although his character flaws overwhelm this moderation regularly, as when his “jealous grief” (300) at the resumption of her interest in Farfrae prompts yet another bizarre thought explicitly associated with the devil. With “such a possibility impending,” he cannot find “content with the prospect as now depicted,” and a chance thought—revealing that she is “legally, nobody’s child”—comes to his mind, in that “outer chamber of the brain in which thoughts unowned, unsolicited, and of noxious kind, are sometimes allowed to wander for a moment prior to being sent off whence they came” (301). Henchard is routinely at the mercy of such associative randomness, but he never able to aggregate his perceptions into a sound basis for judgment.

¹¹² For Dessner what is at issue in such reflections is Hardy’s creation of sequences of events that make characters suspect supernatural maleficence (“Space, Time, and Coincidence” 166–7).
Farfrae, in thorough contrast, relies on his “native sagacity” (112) and operates with “insight, briskness, and rapidity” (297). His qualities are most visible in his efficiency at trade. When he becomes the manager for Henchard, who “had used to reckon his sacks by chalk strokes all in a row like garden-palings, measure his ricks by stretching with his arms, weigh his trusses by a lift, judge his hay by a ‘chaw,’ and settle the price with a curse,” Farfrae institutes a new regime of “smooth ciphering, and machines, and mensuration” (104). Later, when Henchard has relieved him and rehired Jopp, they consider how to outclass the Scot and lament that “he must have some glass that he sees next year in” (182), misgauging the source of his long-range predictions as a prophetic instrument. Seeing Farfrae as “deep beyond all honest men’s discerning,” they do not see that his is a calculative knowledge, often based in knowledge of recent developments in agricultural technology,113 neither a contrivance nor an acquired habit or gut feeling that might give him his “knack of making everything bring him fortune” (182). Thus when Farfrae takes over Henchard’s failed concern, “scales and steelyards began to be busy where guess-work had formerly been the rule” (219), a modus operandi that must have appealed to Hardy, the architect and autodidact who proudly recalls making his way through a range of practical scientific manuals.114

Farfrae is not, however, wholly superior for being scientific. If sophisticated in matters agricultural and commercial, he misses certain features of the world around him. A detail in Henchard’s story is a “complication so far beyond the degree of his simple experiences” (77). His relative lack of intuitive sense occasions disaster when Henchard tries to get him back to the

113 Franklin, “‘Market-Faces’ and Market Forces” 59.

114 Life 29. These textbooks included Thomas Tate, Mechanics and the Steam Engine, for Beginners, Anthony Nesbitt, A Treatise on Practical Mensuration, and Francis Walkingame’s popular Arithmetic (usually titled The Tutor’s Assistant).
ill Lucetta and realizes, in a surprising moment of sensitivity, how the younger man must suspect this report. Henchard can “almost feel this view of things in course of passage through Farfrae’s mind” as trust implodes, for Farfrae “did distrust him utterly” and the former Mayor’s “treachery was more credible than his story” (282). This situation typifies what Annette Baier has usefully grouped under the rubric of “pathologies of trust,” situations in which the undeclarative mode of normal trust is compromised by injunctions, reminders, and “danger signals” that suggest that trust been “confused with reliance on threats” or similar coercion. The dramatic impasse is an example of a “too calculative weighing of the costs of untrustworthiness,” in this case after the kind of betrayal that, in Baier’s account, can lead to a “lasting inability to partake of” any “trust-dependent good.” Farfrae fails to construe the possible explanations for Henchard’s having made his way to him at great speed, and is generally foreclosed from taking the fact of Henchard’s relaying this information as, in itself, a good reason for believing him. He returns “in a state bordering on distraction at his misconception” (284), which culminates in Lucetta’s death.

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115 These intuitions modulate, depending on their object. When Elizabeth-Jane is involved, Farfrae is suddenly “one of those men upon whom an incident is never absolutely lost. He revised impressions from a subsequent point of view, and the impulsive judgment of the moment was not always his permanent one. The vision of Elizabeth’s earnest face in the rimy dawn came back to him several times during the day. Knowing the solidity of her character he did not treat her hints altogether as idle sounds” (238).

116 “Trust” 117. Compare “Trust and Anti-Trust” and “Trusting People” (in Moral Prejudices).

117 Baier, “Trust” 113.

118 Baier, “Trust” 112, 130.

119 I rely here on Lipton’s claims about taking testimonial knowledge on the model of “inference to the best explanation” (“Alien Abduction”).
Something in the Air: Weather and Prediction

These disjunctive modes in matters personal, political, and economic are shown most vividly in the matter of forecasting the weather. Henchard and Farfrae crystallize the changing dispensation from what Katharine Anderson has called “weather prophecy” to modern methods of observing, recording, and predicting the state of the atmosphere.\(^\text{120}\) The founding of the Meteorological Office in 1854, and continued interest on the part of figures like Robert FitzRoy and Galton, made the science of the air institutional and standardized methods of collecting weather information. In this historical but also in a vivid figurative sense, weather condenses aspects of predictive thinking. Both a system of iterated events that, when studied in aggregate, yield regularities or at least regularly shifting irregularities (“periodicities,” in Herschel’s coinage),\(^\text{121}\) and a domain of phenomena that admit of felt estimations and inferences, weather opens out onto both rational knowledge and intuitive judgments registered by the body. Both modes are only too susceptible to the error and subjectivity of humans: “vain weather-cocks” in Emily Brontë’s phrase.\(^\text{122}\) In their reliance on a mode of ethereal and often invisible particulars, weather determinations are paradigmatic for inferences that are protean and unpredictable:

\(^{120}\) Anderson comments on “weather wisdom,” in particular the “visual epistemology associated with popular forms of weather knowledge” and the conflict between such modes and formal scientific knowledge gathered by way of observatories and instruments (“Looking at the Sky” 305–8, 301). More generally see Anderson, *Predicting the Weather*.

\(^{121}\) *OED*, s.v. “periodicity.” Herschel was a significant popularizer of weather (and other) knowledge: see “The Weather, and Weather Prophets,” and “Celestial Measurings and Weighings.”

\(^{122}\) *Wuthering Heights* 33. Consider also Brontë’s account of the “atmospheric tumult” to which Wuthering Heights is subject, the “bracing ventilation” traceable only by inference: “one may guess the power of the north wind blowing over the edge, by the excessive slant of a few stunted firs at the end of the house; and by a range of gaunt thorns all stretching their limbs one way, as if craving alms of the sun” (4).
simple observations or complex intellectual currents (ideas carried “in the air” in Arnold’s phrase),

Hardy’s knowledge about weather more broadly condenses many of the views in popular science accounts and periodical pieces, in particular the statements of the science writer Andrew Steinmetz, whose *A Manual of Weathercasts* (1866) he owned and seems to have annotated. This work falls neatly between the axes of prophecy and prediction, commonplace and meteorological knowledge, providing information that “can lay claim to the authority of general experience or the sanction of science” (xi). Steinmetz emphasizes intuition and science as two sources of foresight, the former felt by the body in the “feeling of [one’s] own instruments” (8), the latter involving calculations that take into account the “varying degree of probability of the occurrence of any conceivable event in nature” (32). Where felt knowledge has a wider compass in the natural world, as in the registrations of animals, birds, and plants, as well as humans

123 “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time” 261.

124 Weather predictions are often linked to other models of compromised information or inference. See Favret on the relationship between weather and war news in the Romantic period (*War at a Distance* 119–144).

125 Steinmetz was the first to use this conflation of “weather” and “forecast” in English (*OED*); Robert FitzRoy had earlier coined “forecast” in 1863, to change the tenor of prediction away from the superstitious terms “prophecy” and “prognostication” (Anderson, “Looking at the Sky” 329). Anderson, *Predicting the Weather* 175–7, surveys some of the details I examine from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as well as *Far From the Madding Crowd*, mentioning in passing a different work by Steinmetz. Elsewhere, she notes the presence and success of intuitive, traditional forms of weather prophecy in the same two novels, suggesting that such wisdom is akin to what Hardy calls a “flesh-barometer”: “As a practical, instant and genuine knowledge […] weather wisdom operated as a kind of standard for scientific weather prediction—not only for its accuracy, but also as a statement of the way in which useful knowledge emerged from observation” (“Looking at the Sky” 307). Weather is a background detail in much Hardy criticism, typically dealt with in passing: Vigar points to the “insidious connection between the atmospheric conditions and the corn-trade” (*Novels* 152) crystallized in the image of rain as meal, and the various images of frost and mist, moist and clammy air (152–3); Lorentzen points to Oak’s reading of weather signs as an instance of what he terms “rural epistemologies” (8); and see also Miller, *Distance and Desire* 50, 78–87.
working closely with them (shepherds as the primary example), “natural tokens” need not be “superstitious signs” (23) and what Steinmetz calls “practical meteorology” (128) holds more often than the thin weather lore of those with a narrow ambit of experience (22–3, 108–14). An entry from Chambers’ Cyclopaedia, which Steinmetz cites in part (without acknowledgment), provides a thought to which Hardy often returns:

> What vast, yet regular alterations, a little turn of weather makes, in a tube filled with mercury, or spirit of wine, or in a piece of string, &c. everybody knows, in the common instance of barometers, thermometers, hygrometers, &c. and it is owing partly to our inattention, and partly to our unequal, intemperate course of living, that we do not feel as great and as regular ones in the tubes, chords, and fibres, of our own bodies [...]. [A] great part of the brute creation have a sensibility, and sagacity this way, [but] their vessels are regular barometers [...] affected only from one external principle, viz. the disposition of the atmosphere; whereas ours are acted on by divers from within, as well as without; some of which check, impede, and prevent the action of others. (s.v. “Weather”)

Resituating meteorological technologies within the sensory sphere—for the shepherd all things comprise a “weather-gauge” (22) and those closest to nature are most in tune with its “signals and telegrams” (108)—Steinmetz laments that most humans only become “animated barometers” (109) through bodily damage (scars, rheumatism).

Henchard experiences two iterations of what might be called weather regret. First, rain and poor planning scupper his plans for Casterbridge’s holiday, and he merely “wished he had not been quite so sure about the continuance of a fair season” (102). His more disastrous run is preaced by the narrator’s reflection on the relationship between weather and rural economics:

> as from the earliest ages, the wheat quotations from month to month depended entirely upon the home harvest. A bad harvest, or the prospect of one, would double the price of...

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126 Hardy is familiar with this sentiment from another source, John Rowan’s The Emigrant and Sportsman in Canada (1876), from which he copied the following: “The best human judges of the weather are the Indians. [...] [they] take lessons from the wild animals, & in weather-wisdom these exceed domestic animals as much as the red man exceeds the white [man]” (290, quoted in Literary Notebooks 1.100). Rowan contrasts such predictions with the difficulty of reading the “capriciousness” of English weather (290). Björk notes that another allusion to this work later describes Henchard’s confused circumambulating (Notebooks 341n).
corn in a few weeks; and the promise of a good yield would lower it as rapidly. Prices were like the roads of the period, steep in gradient, reflecting in their phases the local conditions, without engineering, levellings, or averages.

The farmer’s income was ruled by the wheat-crop within his own horizon, and the wheat-crop by the weather. Thus in person, he became a sort of flesh-barometer, with feelers always directed to the sky and wind around him. The local atmosphere was everything to him; the atmospheres of other countries a matter of indifference. The people, too, who were not farmers, the rural multitude, saw in the god of the weather a more important personage than they do now. Indeed, the feeling of the peasantry in this matter was so intense as to be almost unrealizable in these equable days. Their impulse was well-nigh to prostrate themselves in lamentation before untimely rains and tempests.\textsuperscript{127} (183)

Reprising Steinmetz’s image, Hardy makes the farmer at once instrument and insect, attuned to local phenomena and prone to superstition on matters of weather. Naturally Henchard “read a disastrous garnering, and resolved to base his strategy against Farfrae upon that reading,” and yet he curiously stalls before his decision and “before acting he wished – what so many have wished – that he could know for certain what was at present only strong probability” (184). He attempts to confirm his hunch by turning to the man known as Fall, who has a “curious repute as a forecaster or weather-prophet” (184)—although inhabitants of Casterbridge dismiss him publicly “with full assurance on the surface of their faces, very few of them were unbelievers in their secret hearts” (184) and Fall “was sometimes astonished that men could profess so little and believe so much at his house, when at church they professed so much and believed so little” (185). Yet Henchard ignores even the terms of the possible prophecy—that it might be done with “labour and time”—by paying for an instant reading, even though he does not “altogether believe in forecasts” (187). He ignores Fall’s hedging as to certainty “in a world where all’s unsure,” and

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\textsuperscript{127} Such detailed apprehension of the weather is present from Hardy’s earliest work: in \textit{Desperate Remedies} Manston asks of Mr. Springrove “how the farmer’s barometer stood, and when it was probable that the wind might change” (290). Compare Fitzpiers on other side of this claim: “the misery of remote country life is that your neighbors have no toleration for difference of opinion and habit. My neighbors think I am an atheist, except those who think I am a Roman Catholic; and when I speak disrespectfully of the weather or the crops they think I am a blasphemer” (\textit{Woodlanders} 190).
\end{flushright}
proceeds to buy “grain to such an enormous extent that there was quite a talk about his purchases”—his speculation produces speculation—and then the weather turns so that “an excellent harvest was almost a certainty; and as a consequence prices rushed down” (187). As he sells, the weather turns again in a cruel mockery of his decisions, which Hardy notably recasts as a foolhardy gamble—he “backed bad weather, and apparently lost” (188). This disparagement typifies the wider culture’s suspicion of futures speculations of this kind (as opposed to investments in sound concerns), which abstract the traded material from its material substrate, as well as the scientific community’s distrust of immediacy in weather forecasting. Henchard “had never seen” most of the corn on which he speculates, since “it had not even been moved from the ricks in which it lay stacked miles away” (188). His experiences of awful weather are transposed indoors, so that where “numerical fogs” (74) had to be cleared away from his accounts by Farfrae, Henchard now faces “gloomy transactions” (188) at the bank in the form of similar abstract equivalents. It is “rumoured […] that much real property, as well as vast stores of produce […] which had stood in Henchard’s name, was actually the property of his bankers” (188). He dismisses Jopp for not having skeptically posed the conclusion he should have seen from the first, that one “can never be sure of weather till ’tis past” (189). Given that the

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128 MacKenzie, *An Engine Not a Camera* 12–15. The novel has attracted a number of readings along economic lines. Gregor observes that the later repeal of the Corn Laws replaced local conditions (including the weather) with global fluctuations as governing market movements (*Great Web* 131–3). See also Moses, “Agon in the Marketplace”; Abravanel, “Hardy’s Transatlantic Wessex”; Franklin, “‘Market-Faces’ and Market Forces.”

129 Scientists resisted quick readings from maps, charts, graphs, and diagrams, since “observatories and their instruments offered meaning in a decade (perhaps two), and then only after ‘discussion’ of immense quantities of unappealing figures by the experts” (Anderson, “Looking at the Sky” 310).

130 Vigar comments on such images as compounding the elements of deception and incomprehension in their relationship (*Novels* 151, 154–5). Compare Bonica 852 on fog and similar imagery in *Tess*. 
“momentum of his character knew no patience” (190), Henchard can only cast around with blunt instruments, learning little from these events and registering only that since the arrival of his wife, “there had been something in the air which had changed his luck” (133).131

Hardy sets these blunders against straightforwardly successful predictions, not only in Farfrae’s calculative moderation but also in intuitive forecasts by groups of townsfolk, as on the bright morning of Casterbridge’s royal visit when “all perceived (for they were practised in weather-lore) that there was permanence in the glow” (260). This choral prediction matches other moments in Hardy where similar groups concur, as when “twenty pairs of eyes stretched to the sky to forecast the weather for the day” each morning in *The Woodlanders*, where they are well ahead of nature’s meteorologists, making predictions “before a single bird had untucked his head.”132 If intuition, then, cannot attain (or surpass) the level of animal sensitivity, these instances seem to suggest, it may be well to follow the wisdom of the aggregate.133

**Urban Attrition and the View from Above**

I have outlined two models of coming to judgment: Henchard’s reliance on obdurate intuition, firm binaries, and simple degrees of probability, which makes discerning calculations or forecasts unavailable to him at the level of the sensed and felt; Farfrae’s sophisticated, calculative, far-seeing mode, which abjures the intuitive and so falters when a question of

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131 Compare the conversation between Bathsheba and Troy in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, where the latter has lost money on horse-racing on account of the weather, which “altered all the chances” and erased any possibility of prediction: “all judgment from a fellow’s experience went for nothing” (226).

132 *Woodlanders* 23.

133 Even developed meteorological science recognized the import of such intuition. In his *Meteorographica* (1863), Galton’s emphasis on the “glance” was one of the first of many such invocations, with their “implicit comparisons to the powerful nature of popular knowledge” and “an insight different in kind from instrumental or numerical description” (Anderson, “Looking at the Sky” 308).
testimonial trust arises. Neither pays real attention to the versions of serial or accumulated repetition that often ground judgment in the rural settings of novels from *Far From the Madding Crowd* and *The Return of the Native* to *The Woodlanders*. The initial jump over eighteen years from the wife-sale to the present action is registered impersonally. “Change was only to be observed in details,” the narrator intones, using a metonymy for Hardy’s seriality, “but here it was obvious that a long procession of years had passed by” (19). If there is a “textural change” (19) in Susan’s skin, if Henchard is now “thought-marked,” “matured in shape, stiffened in line, exaggerated in traits” (32), these details are seen not by an individual but by an aggregate eye, a passive voice, what Hardy names a “casual observer” (3). A “glance was sufficient to inform the eye” (19) of the relation between Susan and Elizabeth-Jane, we find, the former’s youthful qualities “transferred so dexterously by Time […] that the absence of certain facts within her mother’s knowledge from the girl’s mind would have seemed for the moment, to one reflecting on those facts, to be a curious imperfection in Nature’s powers of continuity” (19–20). The impartial spectatorship of these appeals—“one reflecting” with no individual mind; a “glance” by no human eye—aligns us with the clear-cut view of the aggregate provided from above.

Casterbridge and its environs, we see early on, are separated by a “mathematical line” (27):

> To birds of the more soaring kind Casterbridge must have appeared […] as a mosaic-work of subdued reds, browns, greys, and crystals, held together by a rectangular frame of deep green. To the level eye of humanity it stood as an indistinct mass behind a dense stockade of limes and chestnuts, set in the midst of miles of rotund down and concave field. (27–8)

This elevated view appears later in the image of a “chess-board on a green table-cloth” (88), the faint comparison to the baize of a gaming-table later confirmed when Henchard makes his disastrous wager on the weather and is “reminded of what he had well known before, that a man might gamble upon the square green areas of fields as readily as upon those of a card-room” (188). The clarity of human plots when seen from distance, crystallized into regular patterns, is
nonetheless a crude clarity, set apart from the subtler aggregations that Hardy’s rural characters might find in the horizontal view.

To be sure, there are indications of the attrition seen elsewhere in Hardy’s rural settings. Men at market wear “suits which were historical records of their wearer’s deeds, sun-scorchings, and daily struggles for many years past” (150); the old shepherd holds a crook “polished to silver brightness by the long friction of his hands” (158); and the door to the secret inn down Mixen Lane is “shiny and paintless from the rub of infinite hands and shoulders” (253–4). Yet the most striking alterations join natural and human materials in such a way that the repetitions traceable in the one lose their stability as predictive indices in the other. Take, for instance, the moving example of the bridges that record the natural history of anxiety in their “speaking countenances”:

Every projection in each was worn down to obtuseness, partly by weather, more by friction from generations of loungers, whose toes and heels had from year to year made restless movements against these parapets, as they had stood there meditating on the aspect of affairs. In the case of the more friable bricks and stones even the flat faces were worn into hollows by the same mixed mechanism. (220)

One may be prompted to conclusions about the fates of such lugubrious figures, but the only certitude thrown up by this “mixed mechanism” is that the rates of anxiety in a given population retain an unhappy stability over time. Likewise, the keystone of the arch over the door of Lucetta’s High Place Hall forms an unnatural instance of attrition, a grotesque countenance, a mask with a “comic leer, as could still be discerned” but worn by “generations of Casterbridge boys [who] had thrown stones at the mask, aiming at its open mouth; and the blows thereof had chipped off the lips and jaws as if they had been eaten away by disease” into a “ghastly” appearance (138).\textsuperscript{134} An ornament that literalizes the volleys of social judgment and bridges that

\textsuperscript{134} Casagrande points out the conjunction of living and architectural forms, pointing out that “Henchard” may recall Trenchard Mansion in Dorchester, a building demolished in the
record human sighs in their form together suggest that we have moved away from the dark determinism of the heath.

In the urban scenario, natural attrition colludes with—and often against—the repetitions of human systems. The image on the sign of the King of Prussia changes in the sun by “warping, splitting, fading, and shrinkage,” leaving only an image as a “half invisible film upon the reality of the grain, and knots, and nails,” yet it is still an image that remains (40). The sense that human repetitions are but recent surface changes in recalcitrant matter is reprised to summarize a plot transition, as Farfrae takes over Henchard’s operation and thus his former signpost: “A smear of decisive lead-coloured paint had been laid on to obliterate Henchard’s name, though its letters dimly loomed through like ships in a fog. Over these, in fresh white, spread the name of Farfrae” (219). When attrition and accretion come in the form of signs, a different system is engaged, and the analogy between human events and natural repetitions breaks down. If the royal visit to Casterbridge is “one of those excitements which, when they move a country town, leave permanent mark upon its chronicles, as a warm summer permanently marks the ring in the tree-trunk corresponding to its date” (259; my emphasis), the fact that one might infer dates from tree rings but have to interpret similar traces in a historical account forms one further instance of the discrepancy between different modes of reading the world.

Composites and Counterfactuals

I want now to consider the character of Elizabeth-Jane as constituting a resolution to the impasse in the opposing strategies of Henchard and Farfrae. Lacking, at least initially, an adequate number of events from which to draw conclusions, Elizabeth-Jane develops her thinking towards a rudimentary seriality. Yet in the process she makes visible a mode of thinking 1850s, and showing how the novel’s “antiquarian and commemorating attitude” (184) vies with its scenes of failed restoration (Unity of Hardy’s Novels 183–99).
that forms a tangent to serial thinking, by taking only a few events or instances, and subjecting them to mental manipulations that emphasize supposition and possibility apart from factual circumstances. What I call her **composite thinking** draws inferences not from an actual series, but from combination and overlay. In offering a more thorough account of her mental operations, I want to recover Elizabeth-Jane from a somewhat superficial view of her character in the criticism. She divides critical attention from the outset. An early reviewer calls her “excellent, but rather more than a trifle dull,” whereas William Dean Howells found her “a very beautiful and noble figure” “with her unswerving right-mindedness and her never-failing self-discipline,” the more so because we “see into her pure soul.” These reactions share an appraisal of her surface that does not attend to how her synthetic manner of thinking shifts during the course of the plot. She forms, for my account, a striking corollary to Venn, that impassive predictor in *The Return of the Native.*

At first, Elizabeth-Jane has too little trust in her own intuitions to be aligned with Henchard, too little knowledge to generalize her thoughts like Farfrae. Early on, she hears the name ‘Henchard’ in Casterbridge and is “surprised, but by no means suspecting the whole force of the revelation” (32). She is thoroughly in the dark about her mother’s prior relationship to the

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136 “Editor’s Study” 962.

137 Certain critics have been more perceptive in this regard. Vigar likens her to Marty South in *The Woodlanders*, noting her “quietly judicious perception” (*Novels* 165) as a “detached observer” whom Hardy uses as a vehicle to “comment on [characters’] relationships and predict their fortunes” (164). Grossman treats Elizabeth-Jane as Hardy’s “most objective observer,” seeing her thinking as an “extended metaphor for divining the truth” (619). Her keenness is set off by her “concurrent fragility” and so she keeps out of the way, with a “low-charged insight” that allows her to survive (634). She further likens Elizabeth-Jane to Venn’s “effective observation from a distance,” noting that both have a “perspicacity [that] lies in the ability to calculate what kind of action best suits what they observe” (632).
Mayor, even though Susan’s every behavior seems to give up the game and she is, conversely, so conscious of what she is keeping secret that she can be saddened by the appearance of her daughter “not vaguely, but by logical inference” (26). “The tremors in Susan Henchard’s tone,” the narrator notes of her reaction to Henchard’s name, “might have led any person but one so perfectly unsuspicious of the truth as the girl was, to surmise some closer connection than the admitted simple kinship as a means of accounting for them” (44). This is an inferential degree zero, a kind of sublime faith in surface appearance matched later in the novel when her actual father, Newson, accepts Henchard’s detraction—that Elizabeth-Jane is dead—without question, and simply walks away.

The prior past informing Elizabeth-Jane’s outlook is, like that of Daniel Deronda, one about which she can only have dim knowledge at first: “Her conjectures on that past never went further than faint ones based on things casually heard and seen,” on “mere guesses” (88). She has “unpractised eyes” in judging the strange gestural codes of market men at trade and auction (61), and her assessment of others’ actions—for instance, noticing that Farfrae did not bid her goodbye—are drawn from single premises. This “simple thought, with its latent sense of slight, had moulded itself out of the following little fact: when the Scotchman came out at the door he had by accident glanced up at her, and then he had looked away again without nodding, or smiling, or saying a word” (58). Her early stage of knowledge is characterized by diminutives: it is “faint,” “mere,” “simple,” “little,” “slight.” Elizabeth-Jane’s manner of keeping shyly to her own data—she “seemed to be occupied with an inner chamber of ideas, and to have slight need for visible objects” (93)—is partly described as an emotional stance, one of timidity and “circumspection,” “that field-mouse fear of the coulter of destiny despite fair promise, which is common among the thoughtful who have suffered early from poverty and expression” (85).
Her development and interactions with urban life bring beauty and “bloom” (84) to her aspect, but casting off this anxiety, drawn from young experience, requires breaking through the force of habit. Having been “too early habituated to anxious reasoning to drop the habit suddenly” (85) she is prone to judge “lightheartedness” as “too irrational and inconsequent to be indulged in except as a reckless dram now and then” (84). Constrained by the serial iterations of habit, Elizabeth-Jane’s manner of appraising the world takes its slight cues from the “now and then,” as she slowly reverses habitual anxiety and learns how to discriminate anew—how to draw two distinct perceptions out of what the senses take as one. One condition that allows Elizabeth-Jane to begin acquiring information and making such connections is her—literal—position in Henchard’s home, installed on an upper floor where, from “on high,” she has the “opportunity for accurate observation” (87) and is aligned with the zoomed-out view of the city claimed elsewhere by the narrator. Now able to view events at some distance, as well as to catch gossip that drifts up to her window from the market square, she is better positioned to gather data and remains for much of the novel “out of the game, and out of the group,” able to “observe from afar all things” (180).

Initially, her learning is slow, but rumor begins to ignite her attention. After dancing with Farfrae, “a hint from a nodding acquaintance” implies that she has made a social error, and she is embarrassed “at the dawning of the idea that her manners and tastes were not good enough for her position” (107). When he approaches her, she is open in one sense—thinking “there might be something wrong in this; but did not utter any objection” (107)—but unable to see his allusion in claiming that asking a question of her is a possibility foreclosed to him. Her “conjecturing” of these “enigmatic words” and “occult breathings” cannot come to an inference straight away: she has to recall other events deliberately to make this problem “solvable” (109) by a substitution of
terms, parsing the evidence to find a salient fact—that Farfrae’s relationship with Henchard has soured—and considering whether Farfrae will remain in Casterbridge.

This pattern of seeking a supplementary confirmation, an external crutch for her own conclusion-making, takes a vividly literal form in her enactment of future prospects. In effect, Elizabeth-Jane turns conjecture on the contents of her own mind, leading to a striking form of suppositional thinking. By chance, she catches a draft of a letter in Farfrae’s hand—a material form of the rumors that keep floating her way. She copies and overlays the greeting so that it reads “Dear Elizabeth-Jane,” at the sight of which “a quick red ran up her face and warmed her through, though nobody was there to see what she had done” (109). Instead of isolating herself from the world in timidity, she now develops an “anxiety to know” and can “no longer conceal from herself the cause” (109) of her own emotions. A similar performative experiment shows how her imagination makes conjectures in a fully visual mode:

To solve the problem whether her appearance on the evening of the dance were such as to inspire a fleeting love at first sight, she dressed herself up exactly as she had dressed then—the muslin, the spencer, the sandals, the parasol—and looked in the mirror. The picture glassed back was, in her opinion, precisely of such a kind as to inspire that fleeting regard, and no more. (110)

What is striking about these enactments is that they dramatize forms of counterfactual thinking—what if this letter were addressed to me? what would he think if I wore this dress? what about this one?—that usually take place in the form of abstract, generic images, since not all probable paths can, so to say, be tried on for size. Elizabeth-Jane’s imagination brings suppositions literally onto the scene. When this event is reprised later, when she is living with Lucetta, who laments the difficulty of shopping for clothes since each option fashions a “totally different person” and one “may turn out to be very objectionable” (166), the superficial motive of social
vanity is quietly contrasted with Elizabeth-Jane’s more thoughtful concern about becoming a “different person.”

In the background of a plot that opposes two fairly rigid archetypes for thinking—felt, intuitive, even reflex judgments that privilege the *now*; dispassionate, reasoned, and calculative judgments that emphasize the *then*—Elizabeth-Jane develops a versatile, subtle mode that plays with both. Almost imperceptibly, she acquires the capacity for making careful inferences alongside the aggregated content with which to forge such inferences, whether by way of new information or realizations regarding information she carries in her mind as inert data, facts that are, as it were, unactivated in her own self-description. Her new, outward-facing curiosity brings her up against the opaque edges of other minds around her, which she tries to divine according to her new tools. Consider the strange episode where Elizabeth-Jane and Lucetta walk around the horse-drill that has just arrived in Casterbridge, which the latter calls an “agricultural piano” (166). Henchard ridicules the new emblem of Farfrae’s mechanical efficiency, but holds his tongue on account of Elizabeth-Jane, “probably thinking that the suit [between her and Farfrae] might be progressing” (167). A strangely apparitional scene follows:

> Then something *seemed* to occur which his stepdaughter *fancied* must really be a *hallucination* of hers. A murmur *apparently* came from Henchard’s lips in which she *detected* the words, ‘You refused to see me!’ reproachfully addressed to Lucetta. She *could not believe* that they had been uttered by her stepfather; unless, indeed, they *might have been* spoken to one of the yellow-gaitered farmers near them. Yet Lucetta *seemed* silent; and then all thought of the incident was dissipated by the humming of a song, which *sounded* *as though* from the interior of the machine. (167; emphases mine)

The language of appearance—of what Hardy calls “seeming speech” (169)—is matched by the lexicon of inference: Elizabeth-Jane slowly turns over these odd possibilities in her mind and then, in contrast, comes to a rapid conclusion as to the source of the song, for she “had

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138 Vigar observes that, in selecting a red dress, Lucetta in fact applies a “tacit brand” to her character, entailing a “ritual inevitability” in how Casterbridge judges her (Novels 162).
apprehended the singer in a moment” (168). Where earlier she had to create a material theater for thinking—for forging her own love-letter; dressing up to see the reflection of a previous self—she here, and elsewhere, becomes highly abstract in her imagination. When Henchard enters Farfrae’s employ as a laborer, she likewise worries about a menacing gesture she sees him make—“or fancied she saw, for she had a terror of feeling certain”—and concerns herself with “what this might have meant” (236). She tries to speak to Farfrae, but “felt the difficulty of conveying to his mind the exact aspect of possibilities in her own” (237).

Elizabeth-Jane’s psychological curiosity develops to such an extent that this brand of conjectural processing begins to loom large in her consciousness. She now is capable of “surveying the position of Lucetta between her two lovers—Farfrae and Henchard—from the crystalline sphere of a straightforward mind” (177), a capacity that she entertains by way of imagining the future as a visual display:

A few days afterwards, when her eyes met Lucetta’s as the latter was going out, she somehow knew that Miss Templeman was nourishing a hope of seeing the attractive Scotchman. The fact was printed large all over Lucetta’s cheeks and eyes to any who read her as Elizabeth-Jane was beginning to do. […] A seer’s spirit took command of Elizabeth, impelling her to sit down by the fire, and divine events so surely from data already her own that they could be held as witnessed. She followed Lucetta thus mentally—saw her encounter Donald somewhere as if by chance—saw him wear his special look when meeting women, with an added intensity because this one was Lucetta. She depicted his impassioned manner; beheld the indecision of both between their lothness to separate, and their desire not to be observed; depicted their shaking of hands; how they probably parted with frigidity in their general contour and movement, only in the smaller features showing the spark of passion, thus invisible to all but themselves. This discerning silent witch had not done thinking of these things when Lucetta came noiselessly behind her, and made her start. […] It was all true as she had pictured—she could have sworn it. (170)

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139 Noticeable here is how her mind abuts, even merges with “authorial consciousness of the veiled narrator” (Gregor, Great Web 124). Gregor reads this scene and its surrounding chapter as forging Elizabeth-Jane as a shrewd interpreter with “sympathetic detachment” (125). Hornback suggests that her presence allows Hardy to minimize his editorializing tendencies in narrative (Metaphor of Chance 112–13).
In this sequence, Lucetta begins in the forefront of Elizabeth-Jane’s perceptual field, is held stable in her mental theater, and circles round to emerge behind her in actual space, as though in a prank. It is striking how the straightforward inference from actual vision of the face as a page—“her eyes met”; “The fact was printed large…”—is overshadowed by the intense visualization of what the page reveals. Seeing amounts almost to surveillance here as Elizabeth-Jane not only “saw,” “depicted,” and “beheld” but also “followed,” and allows for a sense of conviction so strong as to acquire a legal standing, “held as witnessed,” “true,” “she could have sworn.”

Hardy imports a reflection that makes visible how Elizabeth-Jane’s role as a character is similar to that of Venn. Her “earthly career” has taught her the “lesson of renunciation,” a mode of experience in which she is now “well practised,” “as familiar with the wreck of each day’s wishes as with the diurnal setting of the sun” (178). In modifying this familiar motif for serial iteration so crucial to the symbolic patterns of The Return of the Native, Hardy shows a model for experience that cuts against linear seriality. Elizabeth-Jane’s “experience had consisted less in a series of pure disappointments than in a series of substitutions,” whereby “it had happened that what she had desired had not been granted her, and that what had been granted her she had not desired” (178). This scene, then, figures at once her short-term losses (Farfrae has preferred Lucetta over her) and the long-con machinery of prediction (she is “not done thinking”) that brings her Farfrae’s hand in the end. Although she considers with “an approach to equanimity the now cancelled days when Donald had been her undeclared lover, and wondered what unwished-for thing Heaven might send her in place of him” (178), her initial losses are only in service of an eventual victory, as in the earlier novel Venn loses at first, then wins one game, then several, and finally the hand of his opponent’s wife.
Elizabeth-Jane’s somewhat dejected but nonetheless lucid outlook is keened by Susan’s illness—“a shock which had been foreseen for some time by Elizabeth, as the box-passenger foresees the approaching jerk from some channel across the highway” (114)—and subsequent death. The experience gives this “subtle-souled girl” a somber occasion for turning away from the disappointments of the present (Farfrae’s preference for Lucetta, Henchard’s fall from grace, her mother’s death) to ask after the causes of her life in almost metaphysical terms: “why things around her had taken the shape they wore in preference to every other possible shape”; “what that chaos called consciousness, which spun in her at this moment like a top, tended to, and began in” (116). This inquiry after first principles primes her mind for retrospective realizations, for Henchard’s proffering of “details which a whole series of slight and unregarded incidents in her past life strangely corroborated” (121) and the reorientation of her life and thought around a “new centre of gravity” (122) about her mother’s former marriage and dealings with Henchard.

There remain aspects of this past vista that cannot be enacted, either literally or in abstract imagining, even if the past still makes itself felt in certain ways. Still, Elizabeth-Jane’s attempts to reposition past knowledge in light of new information resists thought experiments that do not adequately match what she knows. When Henchard earnestly presses a deceptive thought to lure her emotions—“Suppose I had been your real father?”—her response strains after

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140 The pressure of the past is a familiar topos in Hardy criticism. Hornback, *Metaphor of Chance* 87–8, summarizes earlier views on the continuity of the present with history and the deep past and generally emphasizes such repetition as precluding freedom in Hardy’s world (7–8), suggesting of Mayor that it turns the “seeming interference of circumstance” into the symbolic product of character and its “self-determination” (106). Miller renovates the topic in a philosophical way, reading the return of the archetypal past in Henchard’s character (*Distance and Desire* 96–102) and more generally the intersection of temporality and desire, eternal recurrence and individual repetition compulsion (144–50). See also Johnson, *True Correspondence* 76–83, on the relation between tragedy and repetition. A number of critics recast the past’s repetition under the guise of haunting, among them Cooley, Davis, “Comparatively Modern Skeletons in the Garden,” Edmond, Keen, and Wolfeys, “Haunting Casterbridge” and “Haunted Structures.”
the image but rejects it—“I can’t think it […] I can think of no other as my father except my father” (119).

I have traced Elizabeth-Jane’s trajectory from inferential naivety, through a set of experiments that involve learning judgment by comparison and counterfactual imagination, through to her wise prudence towards the end of the novel. A statement made by the narrator—that “a maxim glibly repeated from childhood remains practically unmarked till some mature experience enforces it” (137)—suggests how, through a recursive pattern, Elizabeth-Jane gathers at once the data and the experience on which her perspicacity later operates, so that by the end she has what seems like a narrator’s knowledge of the causal structures underlying coincidences in the plot. She aids Henchard in his terror after seeing the effigy of his own person floating beneath the bridge where he considers ending his life. What he takes as an “appalling miracle” presaging his own death she suspects to have a more rational explanation, so they go back to the water and divine the “natural solution of the mystery” (294). Even the narrator agrees with her manner of judging whether “anything should be called curious in concatenations of phenomena wherein each is known to have its accounting cause” (202). Gradually widening her vista, Elizabeth-Jane comes to see her own life as part of a serial structure, and if in the novel’s final sentence she “class[es] herself among the fortunate” she also

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141 In this, I broadly disagree with critics who see her learning and development as “perfunctory” (Gregor, Great Web 116).

142 Langbaum likens her to a Jamesian “central intelligence” (Thomas Hardy in Our Time 138–40).

143 Dessner reads this passage as confirming Hardy’s view that “no coincidence should be thought improbable as long as each of its coinciding elements have, individually, a known cause” (“Space, Time, and Coincidence in Hardy” 166).
remembers that through modern fortuna one might easily find oneself in a different statistical group through the “persistence of the unforeseen” (322).\(^{144}\)

**Changing Faces**

Elizabeth-Jane typifies one approach to knowledge and prediction, which I have been calling composite thinking for its emphasis on visual and imaginative overlay. I want now to make explicit my figurative model for this mode of representation, which has an arresting image—the sleeping face—in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, thereby concluding my reading of this novel. I draw a number of broader comparisons between serial and composite thinking, in advance of more general reflections on the picture of Hardy’s realism revealed by my readings.

Hardy’s characters routinely have mobile faces. The epithet is seen in other novels of the time,\(^{145}\) but in Hardy’s world the expressive face constitutes a signifying register that often calls forth cultural determinants even as it exceeds them, among these the pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology, and the nascent science of facial expression given shape in Charles Darwin’s 1872 work *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals*.\(^{146}\) Yet Henchard’s realization of Newson’s paternity in the familial traces visible on Elizabeth-Jane’s sleeping face operates on a different plane, taking its evidence from a fully unaware mode of expression. Here Hardy stages a striking claim about waking life as obscuring the hereditary

\(^{144}\) Gregor points to her final mediating function in the narrative, both in Henchard’s will and in the closing reflections (*Great Web* 128–9). Vigar similarly observes how Henchard’s death is “bounded by the sturdy rationality of [her] thoughtful realization, in the face of her own unforeseen happiness, that good fortune is not equally distributed among men” (*Novels* 167).

\(^{145}\) Examples include Brontë’s *Villette* (319, 507), Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (620), and James’ *Roderick Hudson* (170, 175, 196), which Hardy read in the 1870s.

\(^{146}\) For other readings of Hardy on the human face see Bullen, *Expressive Eye* 97–8; Tytler, “‘Know How to Decipher a Countenance’”; Farrell, “‘His Countenance Was Overlaid with Legible Meanings’”; Cohen, “Faciality and Sensation.”
traces built up underneath the facial surface by framing Henchard’s material realization of family lineage with a more general reflection: “In sleep there come to the surface buried genealogical facts, ancestral curves, dead men’s traits, which the mobility of daytime animation screens and overwhelms” (124). Elizabeth-Jane becomes, in her very person, an embodied source of realization for others.  

One source for registering the overabundant signifying character of this sleeping face lies in a set of curious experiments of which Hardy read in the 1880s.  

Starting in the late 1870s, in response to suggestions from Herbert Spencer and his cousin Charles Darwin, the psychologist and statistical thinker Francis Galton developed a technique for projecting photographs of faces onto a single plate, thereby attaining what he called a composite photograph, a “generalised picture […] that represents no man in particular, but portrays an imaginary figure possessing the average features of any given group.”  

Such an “averaged portrait”—an “aggregate result” revealing “typical characteristics”—had clear uses as a normative statistical tool. Since the “amount of blur” in the hazy outlines of composites measured “the tendency of the components [of the face] to deviate from the common type,” in contrast to the “common humanity” made visible in the clearer details, these images could be taken as visualizations of the normal and the deviation in a given group.  

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147 Wolfeys notes of this scene that the “ghostly trace has the ability to disrupt not only the present moment but also any sense of identity” (“Haunting Casterbridge” 156).  

148 Hardy made brief notes on a Spectator review of Galton’s Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development (Literary Notebooks 1.154–5), the text that summarized Galton’s method of composite portraiture (8–19, 354–63), with exemplary images on its frontispiece.  

149 “Composite Portraits” 132–3.  

150 “Composite Portraiture” 140.  

151 “Composite Portraits” 132.
anthropometry suggested controversial uses—defining racial types, predicting criminality and ‘deviance,’ eugenic matchmaking—but more innocuous applications included drawing a “probable likeness” of historical figures and producing more flattering self-portraits.

For Galton, composite photographs could also typify the way the mind works to aggregate sensory data into images and concepts, and thus formed a powerful allegory for inference and concept formation, taken up explicitly by Peirce, Freud, and Wittgenstein, whose notion of “family resemblances” among concepts owes much to his work. Composites worked against the “analytical tendency of the mind,” which “is so strong that out of any tangle of superimposed outlines it persists in dwelling preferably on some one of them, singling it out and taking little heed of the rest.” Conversely, while composites visualized the lessons of statistics—to place the individual as one “unit” in a vaster array—and so corrected our natural fondness for the one unit, they could also correct the mind’s unrigorous tendency towards

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152 “Composite Portraits” 134, 135. Galton thus takes Huxley’s image of man’s simian ancestors, in Evidence as to Man’s Place in Nature, as “blurred copies of himself” and presses it into an ideal, speculative future for biological and social evolution. For more on Galton see Porter, Rise of Statistical Thinking 128–46, and Pearl, About Faces 186–212.

153 “Composite Portraits” 141.

154 Already in the nineteenth century this connection was seen. William Minto, an assistant to Bain, whom he succeeded in the Chair of Logic and English at Glasgow in 1880, distinguished in his Logic: Inductive and Deductive (1893, posth.) between the concept (a name’s “objective reference,” what we all mean when using a name), the conception (the “event or incident in our mental history” occasioned by a concept), and the conceptual or generic image (the “mental picturing” that often attends a conception, but is distinct from that conception) (126–7), suggesting parallels to Galton (129). See also Leask 517.

155 See Ginzburg, “Family Resemblances”; Hookway, “…a sort of composite photograph.”

156 “Composite Portraits” 140.
“generic images” or “blended memories.” Such impressions and opinions formed not “by any process of reasoning” but by “blending together a large number of similar incidents,” in a mental process that Galton saw as occurring without proportion or precision. Aggregate impressions in all the senses would thereby be skewed by more vividly registered “extreme elements,” while more moderate elements were “not present in sufficient number to overpower them.” In this way, “undue consideration is inevitably given […] to all exceptional cases,” to what is “marvellous” and “miraculous,” “fertile sources of superstition and fallacy.”

Hardy came across Galton’s work in a review of his Inquiry from which he took several notes, not related to composite portraits, although this research is summarized in that text. Yet he seems to have relied on these spectral images at a number of moments in the 1880s and following. Consider the story entitled “For Conscience’ Sake” (1891), which condenses this plot arc of The Mayor of Casterbridge. The tale follows one Mr. Millborne who, in order to make good on an “unfulfilled promise” (417) of marriage made to a young woman years earlier, tracks her down and fulfills his vow, in part because she believes that a respectable situation might aid the prospects of their daughter, Frances, who is being wooed by a young curate named Cope.

157 “Generic Images” 158.
158 “Generic Images” 158.
159 “Generic Images” 164.
160 “Generic Images” 167.
161 “Generic Images” 168, 158.
162 Richardson observes that Hardy’s head was read by the phrenologist, Cornelius Donovan—he told him it “would lead him to no good” (Life 43)—who also read Galton’s, and points to his knowledge of phrenologists like James Crichton-Browne and E. Ray Lankester, and his interest in eugenics (“Hardy and Science” 163). See also Ebbatson, Evolutionary Self 25–6, and Richardson, “Heredity,” for more on Hardy’s relationship to this context.
The traces of heredity conspire against them when all four go sailing during a vacation on the Isle of Wight, and the family members’ shared proneness to nausea makes visible their relations:

Nausea in such circumstances, like midnight watching, fatigue, trouble, fright, has this marked effect upon the countenance, that it often brings out strongly the divergences of the individual from the norm of his race, accentuating superficial peculiarities to radical distinctions. Unexpected physiognomies will uncover themselves at these times in well-known faces; the aspect becomes invested with the spectral presence of entombed and forgotten ancestors; and family lineaments of special or exclusive cast, which in ordinary moments are masked by a stereotyped expression and mien, start up with crude insistence to the view. (425)

When the “elemental lines” in the faces of father and daughter are revealed, a “mysterious veil” is lifted for Cope, whose mind proceeds to conclusions and suspicions, to “a strange pantomime of the past” (426). His disinclination to marry prompts Frances to the realization of her parents’ secret history, in terms that match Elizabeth-Jane’s mode of thinking and realizing, where the “evidences pieced themselves together in her acute mind” (428). The form of the realization is more crucial than the matter realized. Where in the latter case normal physiological operations bury the family resemblance that is only revealed in sleep, in the former the composite mask of normality is only temporarily disaggregated by nausea to reveal ghostly backgrounds and deviances. Hardy’s figurative deployments seem to allude to various features of composite photographs: their technological requirements (they could be made by stereotyping); their association with both statistical knowledge (“divergences,” “the norm”) and its relation to the science of heredity (the “individual,” the “race”); and their tendency to yield uncanny effects, to typify heredity as a kind of haunting, which Galton himself recognized in speaking of the “ghosts of stray features.”163 These connections are made thoroughly explicit in Hardy’s later poem, “Heredity”:

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163 “Composite Portraiture” 145. This device can also function in an exactly erroneous way, as in “An Imaginative Woman” (1893). The story focuses on a woman who acts out her own marital dissatisfaction by conjuring a romance with a poet in whose rented beach house she
I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,
Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.\textsuperscript{164}

These faces are quite different from those of Hardy’s earlier novels, which are more evidently \textit{read} for their expressions of emotion or mental activity, and for little else. In \textit{The Return of the Native}, Thomasin’s sleeping face registers “her several thoughts and fractions of thoughts […] exhibited by the light to the utmost nicety” and an “ingenious, transparent life was disclosed; as if the flow of her existence could be seen passing within her” (89).\textsuperscript{165} Mrs. Yeobright’s face, on inquiring after whether her niece is married, is one “in which a strange strife of wishes, for and against, was apparent” (220), and she often has to turn her face from an interlocutor lest she give herself away. Clym’s face is arresting \textit{not} “as a picture” but “as a page; not by what it was, but by what it recorded” (225), and this face “overlaid with legible meanings” at several moments summarizes the “modern type,” in which facial expressions are marked by “mental concern” and her husband are vacationing. The poet commits suicide, having not met an “imaginary woman” who inspired his lyrics—she remains “unrevealed, unmet, unwon” (396)—and she dies in childbirth nine months later. Her husband, Marchmill, considers the newborn child and compares its hair with a lock of the poet’s that Ella had secured by deception, its expression with the poet’s in a photograph where, “By a known but inexplicable trick of Nature there were undoubtedly strong traces of resemblance to the man Ella had never seen” (400).

\textsuperscript{164} \textit{Collected Poems} ll. 1–6. For a discussion of overlay techniques in the period that mentions Hardy’s poem in the context of Galton’s work see Emmott “Parameters of Vibration, Technologies of Capture” 473–77.

\textsuperscript{165} Cohen suggests that this view of Thomasin’s face operates like “time-lapse photography” as Hardy traces “unconscious affect […] embodied in the form of fluid, variable shading” (“Faciality and Sensation” 443).
(225), used by the mind as a “waste tablet whereon to trace its idiosyncrasies” (194).\(^{166}\) An early scene in which the inhabitants of the heath—itself “A Face on Which Time Makes but Little Impression” (53)—cluster round a bonfire shows an uncanny disarrangement of faces similar to Hardy’s other examples. Yet here what is obscured is not history or heredity but a “permanent moral expression” (67), as faces shift, shine, and disappear in the flickering firelight, so that characters “whom Nature had depicted as merely quaint became grotesque, [and] the grotesque became preternatural; for all was in extremity” (68).\(^{167}\) Hardy’s governing model for thinking about faces, prior to Galton’s experiments, is *expression*.\(^{168}\) By contrast, in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and later, the key features of composites—their relationship to conceptual images and thinking in images generally; their visualizing of statistical knowledge and types; and the accidental revelations they make possible—are uppermost in both figure and plot.\(^{169}\) This evolutionary archaeology of facial features typifies the mode of thinking, representation, and

\(^{166}\) Cohen neatly parallels Clym’s face as both legible object and thinking subject, a “palpable surface” of thought, just as the mental is given physiological form in what Hardy terms Clym’s “wrinkled” mind (“Faciality and Sensation” 441, 442).

\(^{167}\) Yeazell reads this scene as Hardy’s “representation of light as the mobile agent of metamorphosis and illusion,” noting that these “hallucinatory effects could only be approximated, perhaps, by moving pictures” (“Lighting Design” 64–5).

\(^{168}\) The distinction I make here holds even when a more sophisticated framework for *expression* is entertained. In his reading of Hardy as exploring a “materialist account of human subjectivity” in relation to Victorian sciences of biology and psychology that stressed the embodied nature of mind, Cohen argues that *The Return of the Native* is most attentive to the face, which it sees as “a screen onto which thoughts and feelings are projected” and “a physiological receptacle for sensory encounters with the world” (“Faciality and Sensation” 437, 438).

\(^{169}\) Perhaps some of this is owing to Hardy’s growing interest in photographs in this decade. A significant part of the plot of *A Laodicean* turns on the police investigation of a photograph of Dare.
realization that I have associated with Elizabeth-Jane: she is at once vehicle and locus of realization. 170

Galton’s work on composite photographs and generic images formed a corollary with his investigations into the thresholds of perceptual discrimination in human subjects—effectively, an early foray into the scientific study of habit that also occupied William James and others. He was interested in how much difference was required between two discrete sensations—or levels of sensation—for a subject to notice the change. Calling the unit of such notice the “just-perceptible difference,” he pointed to how it allowed perceptions of continuity in discrete phenomena (seeing many dots as a continuous line) and how it took a roughly geometric increase in sensation to compel awareness of a shift (detecting a change in a constantly increasing stimulus). 171 I suggested that Elizabeth-Jane’s early approaches to thinking demanded the disaggregation of habit so as to compare perceptions in a fresh manner, to consider the surface of the known past and experiment with perceptions in order to locate a “just-perceptible difference” between them. This visual mode of thinking breaks away from seriality—an eminently habitual type of perceiving and cognizing—in a way that brings psychology against a contemporaneous view of aesthetic volition. As though responding to John Ruskin’s lament that “WE NEVER SEE ANYTHING CLEARLY” and taking seriously Walter Pater’s later valorization of the failure to form

170 The blending effect of faces seen according to the model of composites, rather than expressive surfaces, may be analogous to the “blurring of representation into figuration” that Yeazell sees as part of what she terms the “lighting design” of Hardy’s novels, as he “refuses to separate the psychology of his characters from their optical experience” (“Lighting Design” 68).

171 Compare Nicholas Dames, Physiology of the Novel 166–206, on the “just-noticeable difference” in George Meredith, an account that focuses on the problem of speed in reading and perception. The concepts are similar, though this formulation (now abbreviated as “jnd”) has more longevity than Galton’s.
habits as a critical stance, Hardy writes a character who reveals the possibility of an anti-habitual thinking that proceeds by way of composite pictures, reveries, and counterfactual imagining. Elizabeth-Jane’s composite model for thinking and predicting is at once an accessory and corrective to the serial thinking so prominent in Diggory Venn, and elsewhere in Hardy’s fiction. In the absence of a long-range series traceable in the material world, one snapshot is laid over another, slowly building a composite view in which aggregate impressions are gathered and visualized. I have argued that these two modes trace a historical development in Hardy’s mode of representing cognition, but I want to emphasize that they can operate in tandem, joined by other representational tactics that are noticeable in Hardy’s fiction from Desperate Remedies through Jude the Obscure. Together serial and composite thinking epitomize a dictum found in Hardy’s notebooks: “To make a true portrait, you must turn the successive view into the simultaneous.”

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172 Ruskin, Works 6.75; Pater, Studies in the History of the Renaissance 120.

173 Literary Notebooks 1.162; the statement is drawn from Blanche Leppington’s review, “Amiel’s Journal,” in the Contemporary Review (1885).
Hardy’s Probable Realism

Art is a disproportioning [...] of realities, to show more clearly the features that matter in those realities, which, if merely copied or reported inventorially, might possibly be observed, but would more probably be overlooked. Hence ‘realism’ is not Art.  

—Hardy, Life

I have argued that Hardy’s novels exhibit two related modes of thinking—a serial mode that sees events or instances as the aggregate of a long-run process, registered in a felt, habitual, or passive manner; and a mode that records the image resulting from such processes and so makes visible what is cognitively arresting, novel, and active in composite thinking, whether its mental operation is supposition or surprise. How might these modes of thinking illuminate Hardy’s theoretical views on fiction and genre?

In an array of comments on the nature and function of narrative art, Hardy uses concepts, figures, and examples that coalesce into an account of realism grounded in probability as a central and complex issue for representation. What might be called his “probable realism” has several features: (1) a defense of “improbability” that links fictional representation to actual events or recorded realities, thus unmasking judgments of probability as social codes; (2) a corollary emphasis on fiction’s especial capacity to convert or compose the world so that it becomes, as it were, “too probable”; (3) a synthesis of these positions declaring that what is at stake in fictional representation is neither a real instance nor an imagined replication, but the felt experience of an unstable combination of both in a composite representation, a “series of seemings”; and (4) an updated romanticism that joins the reader’s experience of representation to

\[174\text{Life}\ 239.\]
the author’s conveyed “impressions,” to fleeting and mutable visions that privilege surprise and realization, and only operate given substantial credulity.\textsuperscript{175}

Hardy has been claimed for a number of different genres and modes, and it has been straightforward to find his fiction appealing variously to romance,\textsuperscript{176} pastoral,\textsuperscript{177} and myth; to comedy and tragedy;\textsuperscript{178} to melodrama, sensation, and gothic, and so on.\textsuperscript{179} Those who would defend his realism in a broadly \textit{aesthetic} sense have to account for how he intercalates the more artificial or stylized facets of these modes with straightforward elements of the realist fiction that preceded him. Vigar neatly summarizes this issue in noting Hardy’s creation of a world “uncommon and yet credible”: “distanced from reality, it is more easily imaginable as fact.”\textsuperscript{180}

George Levine assesses Hardy’s “peculiar relation to realism” as both adversarial and

\textsuperscript{175} Naturally the “probable” is a silent predicate in “realism,” so that this term is not widely attested, although the epithet sometimes is: Fowler uses it in discussing the “tensions” between and “intermediate amalgamation” of novel and romance in nineteenth-century fiction (\textit{History} 302); and McKeon in discussing eighteenth-century realism (\textit{Secret History} 451). Its relation, “statistical realism,” is more common: see Puskar, \textit{Accident Society} 219.

\textsuperscript{176} Hyde suggests that Hardy’s novels often partake of “ironic romance,” and relies on Northrop Frye’s categories to read Venn, for instance, as the “‘magician who affects the action he watches over’ and the servant or friend of the hero, who both retains ‘the inscrutability of [his] origin’ and imparts ‘the mysterious rapport with nature that so often marks the central figure of romance’” (“Hardy’s View of Realism” 82).

\textsuperscript{177} Langbaum, “Versions of Pastoral.”

\textsuperscript{178} Kramer, \textit{Thomas Hardy: The Forms of Tragedy}; King, \textit{Tragedy in the Victorian Novel}.

\textsuperscript{179} Pether writes of Hardy’s “generic ferment” (“Sex, Lies and Defamation” 173), Natarajan of “mixed generic drives” (“Pater and the Genealogy of Hardy’s Modernity” 858). When this generic blending is not acknowledged, criticism has to commit to certain novels against others. This is evident in Yeazell’s various readings of Hardy’s realism along pictorial lines, linking his representational aesthetic back to Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. In this account, \textit{Under the Greenwood Tree} is seen as the closest to realism. See \textit{Art of the Everyday} 125–61; “Lighting Design” 59.

\textsuperscript{180} Vigar, \textit{Novels 9}.
recuperative, and attempts to explain why an “aggressively manipulated narrative” in line with romance might also operate an “uneasy but effective conjunction with the traditions of realism.” Elsewhere, Levine meditates further on Hardy’s “transformation of the materials of realism into patterned artifice” and his division of loyalties across schematic “parallels, juxtapositions, crossings, and bitter ironies” and realist features that undercut such patterns.

Chance, coincidence, and the improbable are, as topics and narrative tactics, nested within these aesthetic discussions, since they naturally work differently according to generic expectation. The sheer volume of such critical attention to these areas precludes a sustained discussion, yet it needs to be emphasized at the outset that such critics often fall into the patterns of the English gambler: they believe at once in a system governing chance operations and, inconsistently, in luck. Hornback summarizes the earlier criticism on the way to arguing that coincidence is a “way of expressing, dramatically, the idea of the intensity of experience,” and is related to Hardy’s “manipulation of time-as-history to emphasize and expand the significance of the coincidental event.” Resisting the sense of Hardy as a determinist while pointing out that

181 Realistic Imagination 234, 239.

182 Dying to Know 208, 211. In another aesthetic account, Ward suggests that Hardy revises the linear progress narrative of Victorian realism at midcentury in favor of what she terms a “cultivated realism” that turns on cultivation as a “ceaseless cycle of doing and undoing” (“Cultivation of Realism” 867), a representational technique that blends nature and artifice, the material and the immaterial, to emphasize both “the artificiality of surfaces and the ability of that artificiality to tell us something real” (876). Such a realism is best understood, for Ward, in the context of “making and unmaking, material undone” (878).

183 Vigar thus criticizes those who decry improbability from the standpoint of “orthodox realism” (Novels 8).

184 Some sense of the insistence of these themes, already familiar to critics in Hardy’s time, can be gained by looking at the index pages of early studies—such as Webster, On a Darkling Plain—for headings like “accident and coincidence,” “chance,” “determinism.”

185 Hornback, Metaphor of Chance 4.
past repetitions tend to obstruct freedom, however, Hornback oddly divides coincidences into “chance occurrences” and “causal relationships,” the latter functioning to highlight what he terms “moral coincidence,” where consequences have an ethical aspect. Hornback calls attention to this spurious division into pure coincidence and chance manqué in an image that neatly emphasizes such moments as illuminating the mesh of causes always in operation: “ostentatious use of coincidence is the well-lighted junction where the lines of [Hardy’s] various plots converge.” We accept Hardy’s improbabilities, he suggests, because behind “glaring illogicalities” is a “subtle network of image and reference in which the mundane is continually expressed in fantastic or incongruous terms, and the extreme is shown as ordinary occurrence,” which may be another way of neutralizing these features of Hardy across different generic lenses.

Realism rests on chance naturalized, as do its apologia. Antirealism, however broadly defined, relies on chance denaturalized. What remains striking about the debates over how to classify Hardy’s fiction is the extent to which defenders of realist aesthetics and critics of a realist-humanist ideology converge on topics like chance and probability. From Raymond

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Hornback, Metaphor of Chance 6. This lens does allow for persuasive readings: “The Convergence of the Twain” hinges not on fate (a rhyme-word Hardy avoids) but on moral agency, the poem’s “paths coincident” occurring through decision (9–11), and “The Three Strangers” is framed by a setting where time is collapsed and history foreshortened in order to frame the coincidental ironies of the story, to which Hardy gives aesthetic legitimacy in the image of intersecting footpaths (11–13). Dessner has similarly interpreted Hardy’s idiosyncratic fictional world, where space and time are often contracted so that the “probabilities against disconcerting coincidences decrease because a larger number of chances […] have come under surveillance” (“Space, Time, and Coincidence” 162). Yet he blurs the subjective sense of grades of belief with objective frequencies in claiming that Hardy cannot “discriminate between varying degrees of likelihood” (162). He is not mistaken, of course, in suggesting that conjoined probabilities (the probability of both X and Y) are less than the original ratios, but his coin tossing analogy does not help to explain why individual events would be deemed, as a matter of subjective judgment, improbable in the first place (164–5).

Gregor, Great Web 27, 46.
Williams’ reminders about the conflicts drawn across the linking line of rural and urban, nature and culture, native experience and cultivated education—conflicts that often turn on whether the representation of classes of people should be taken as probable and natural, or unmasked as ideological artifice—to Terry Eagleton, Penny Boumelha, Noorul Hasan, and Peter Widdowson, the disruptive strategies of Hardy’s novels have been held up precisely where they strain against realism as facile probabilism. Widdowson’s is the most thorough of these accounts, explicit in his assessment of how charges against Hardy’s style measure him against a realism largely defined by its commitment to the probable, and how what he sees as Hardy’s improbable anti-realism cuts against the probabilistic discourse where, as he archly observes, “‘plausible’ characters are ‘convincingly’ deployed in relation to the ‘credible’ processes of the ‘real’ natural and social world.”

Tim Dolin summarizes this strain of criticism and suggests that in the wake of such assessments critics value Hardy for his interruptions of realist aesthetics and few defend his realism as such. That critics who have recently focused on Hardy’s politics within practical, reformist settings—thus having little or no need for “realism” as a category—would seem to confirm this sense.

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189 Hardy in History 17–18, 76. Widdowson further shows that Hardy’s own novelistic classification and prefatory comments adapt earlier critics on the topic of probability (49–50), and that his comments on art reject realism (159–64). See generally 70–76, 223–24.

190 Dolin, “Hardy’s Realism, Again” 40–4. Dolin seeks to reissue the claim for a “critical realism” by taking Hardy’s own remarks for realism as a “mode of disenchantment,” a “rejection of the conventionalism that marks cultural verisimilitude” (44). He claims that Hardy rejects the “positivism of the naturalists and the facile literality of consumer realism” (49).

191 Davis sees Hardy’s agitations for legal reform as emerging from more neutral uses of the legal themes for plot purposes (Hardy and the Law 47, 124–5, 164–84). Claybaugh argues for Hardy as a reformer for the New Woman cause and is clear on his not belonging to the tradition of realism (Novel of Purpose 185–214).
In this section I take Hardy’s theory of art as a set of partial statements or angles on realism, a series of reflections that aggregate into the resemblance of a theory, an overlay of observations that constitutes the evolving self-portrait of a novelist. I examine some of his many *aperçus* in the *Life*, composed long after his novel-writing had ceased but incorporating notes written during his novelistic career; his more sustained contributions to the debates on realism and (French) naturalism in the 1880s and 1890s,\(^{192}\) in “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” (1888), “Candour in English Fiction” (1890), and “The Science of Fiction” (1891); his prefaces to novels upon their initial volume publication, as well as the prefaces to the Osgood, McIlvaine edition of 1895–6 and the Wessex Edition of 1912; his editorial instructions and correspondence on matters textual; his letters and recollections; and his hurt responses to both early reviewers and later critical studies. I deliberately offer a more speculative reconstruction of these views, taking Hardy’s own approximative method as a guide to cut across his own thinking.\(^{193}\) In offering an account of generic commitments that examines local narrative mechanics and representations of thought (rather than the genre category of the whole), I attempt to move beyond a critical impasse caused by needed to identify Hardy—and stably winnow out his works—by the dictates of realism *tout court*.\(^{194}\)

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\(^{192}\) See Dolin on Hardy’s critical reflections as shaped by the discourse of the 1880s and 1890s, the prevailing trend against mere factual representation in Meredith, Moore, and Wilde, and naturalist conventions (“Hardy’s Realism, Again” 44–7); and also Newton, “Hardy and the Naturalists.”

\(^{193}\) This approach would be in the spirit of a snippet Hardy copied out from the *Spectator* (26 November 1881): “Thackeray’s philosophy of life is latent in his own pictures of life; but no one was less competent to expound these than himself. In painting them he [& all writers of fiction, one may add] sometimes reached depths & intensity & meaning that were amusingly beyond his own critical powers” (*Literary Notebooks* 1.141).

\(^{194}\) Early interrogations of Hardy’s realism include Chew, *Thomas Hardy, Cecil, Hardy the Novelist*, and Grimsditch, *Character and Environment in the Novels of Thomas Hardy*. 
Defending his work against charges of improbability, Hardy often pointed out that his novels were attached to the life of fact, insisting that events taken as “improbable” or “impossible” by certain readers had a basis in recorded events. He refers to the relevant incidents, places, or people undergirding the probable world of fiction to establish not only their reality as single instances but also the larger class of which they formed a part. Apart from his early life in Dorsetshire, such information and documentary evidence came from wide reading in newspapers and periodicals, from the local *Dorchester County Chronicle* to *The Times*, which gave ballast to Hardy’s ethnographic interest in his native landscape. Thus he suggests of *A Laodicean* that “its incidents may be taken to be fairly well supported by evidence every day forthcoming in most counties,” that *Under the Greenwood Tree* might be taken as “a fairly true picture, at first hand” of village practices, and more generally that he is attentive to fact—especially in matters of local custom and tradition—in an effort “to preserve for my own satisfaction a fairly true record of a vanishing life.”

These comments also hold for the society life of London, in which Hardy made his awkward way. His initial preface for *The Hand of Ethelberta* is an apology undermining those who attacked the novel’s “unexpectedness” (“that unforgivable sin in the critic’s sight”) and Hardy avers that a “high degree of probability was not attempted in the arrangement of the

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195 Summarizing the critical and reception view of Hardy’s fiction as improbable, Dessner suggests that his modes of arguing the case were “obscure” (“Space, Time, and Coincidence” 162).

196 January 1896; August 1896; General Preface (Orel 15, 4, 46).
incidents.” Yet later he adopts a tone of reflective assurance, since changed standards in the early twentieth century would see as “reasonable and interesting pictures of life” what was once “deemed eccentric and almost impossible.” In his historical mode, the emphasis on fact is more central, so that *The Trumpet Major* is described as an account founded on “testimony,” “an unexaggerated reproduction of the recollections of old persons […] who were eye-witnesses,” and similarly *The Dynasts* exhibits—in spite of its formal innovation—a “tolerable fidelity to the facts […] as they are given in ordinary records.” Writing to Lady Grove, who had sent him a “melodramatic” story for appraisal, Hardy generalizes this view, commenting that “it always happens or nearly always, that the unbelievable parts of a story are real incidents.” He wryly twists the Aristotelian line on plausible events as those that “for the most part happen” by referring not to instances of probability in fiction but to what often happens outside fiction in matters of craft.

In *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Hardy’s practice of confirming the source of improbable events in real incidents takes on a more iterative or numerical cast. “It may seem strange to sophisticated minds,” he notes of the wife-sale, “that a sane young matron could believe in the validity of such a transfer; and were there not numerous other instances of the same belief the

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197 December 1895 (Orel 11). Compare the summary comments on this episode in *Life* 111–12.

198 Postscript, August 1912 (Orel 12). Indeed, Hardy reports in the *Life* that Lady Portsmouth went a step further, saying of Ethelberta, “who had been pronounced an impossible person by the reviewers, and the social manners unreal, had attracted her immensely because of her reality and naturalness, acting precisely as such women did or would act in the circumstances; and that the society scenes were just as society was” (173).

199 Preface, October 1895 (Orel 13–14); September 1903 (Orel 40). Hardy states that the problem in such an historical narrative is to find the “true sequence of events indiscriminately recalled” (Orel 14).

200 *Collected Letters* 1.189; to Lady Grove, 18 April 1898.
thing might scarcely be credited.”

He labors the point in a later preface that defends the three actual events that “chanced to range themselves in the order and at or about the intervals of time here given.” Hardy imputes to his readers a conviction in coincidence that would only emerge through repeated instances, records, or statistics—“she was by no means the first or last peasant woman who had religiously adhered to her purchaser, as too many rural records show”—and juxtaposes such unwilling suspicion against Susan’s own phenomenology of belief, a sense of self-binding as strong as any oath that emerges in just one instance. This canny bait was not taken up by some early readers—one reviewer adverted to the wife-safe in calling the novel a “disappointment,” “too improbable,” “fiction stranger than truth”—whereas other readers could be flattered into credulity, qualifiedly praising Hardy’s ingenuity in creating “situations of a complicated nature” that are not “wholly improbable.” It required a perceptive reviewer like William Dean Howells to defend the wife-sale in Hardy’s terms, as “not without possibility, or even precedent.” By pointing to facts—or at least the conceivability of factual precedents—in the background of his work, Hardy makes visible the constructed status of judgments that rely on convention and decorum in winnowing the improbable from the verisimilar.

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201 The Mayor of Casterbridge 4.

202 February 1895 (Orel 18).

203 The Mayor of Casterbridge 4.

204 “Three Novels [Rev. of The Mayor of Casterbridge]” 757.

205 “[Rev. of The Mayor of Casterbridge]” 711.

206 Howells, “Editor’s Study” 961. For general discussions of the legal precedents for such a sale see Davis, Hardy and the Law 106–14, and Suk, “The Moral and Legal Consequences of Wife-Selling in the Mayor of Casterbridge.”
Such repeated emphasis on actuality coincides, particularly in the *Life*, with Hardy’s contradictory reassurance that few incidents are thus drawn and are so intermixed with fictionality as to be safely unidentifiable. His “wilful purpose in his early novels until *Far From the Madding Crowd* appeared,” the *Life* notes, was “to mystify the reader as to their locality, origin, and authorship by various interchanges and inventions.” These comments constitute the other pole of Hardy’s defense against improbability—the notion that fiction comprises a species of holistic plausibility not found in the world as such. “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” declares fiction to be “more true […] than history or nature can be” since in the latter cases there are always inexplicable elements, “hitches in the machinery of existence” and Hardy reprises these terms in a normative vein when he states that to earn the conviction of readers one must realize “why fiction must be more probable than history.” By emphasizing the probable in fiction with reference to actual events or real people as sources, Hardy inverts the terms of the usual charges against him.

The transfer of actual incidents across the porous membrane that separates our world from fictional worlds results in an inversion, an idealization. Whether or not they are drawn from

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207 A dairy-maid Hardy taught in Sunday School becomes Marian in *Tess*, “one of the few portraits from life in his works” (*Life* 30); the Baptist minister in *A Laodicean*, a “recognisable drawing […] though the incidents are invented” (35); and the tranter in *Under the Greenwood Tree* was based on a real person, “though it was not a portrait, nor was the fictitious tranter’s kinship to the other musicians based on fact” (94). Stephen Smith in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is both an “idealization of a pupil whom Hardy found at Mr John Hicks’s” and his father is “drawn from a mason in Hardy’s father’s employ, combined with one near Boscastle” (*Life* 76).

208 *Life* 77.

209 Orel 117; *Collected Letters* 1.190; to Lady Grove, 18 April 1898. To be sure, this is a familiar apology for fiction as more abstract and generalized than a series of historical particulars, more vivid and lifelike than philosophical abstractions, from Aristotle to Sidney to Johnson’s *Rambler* No. 4. Hardy might have found a version in George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (82–5) which he owned and annotated.
referents whose straightforward depiction would be declared improbable by accepted standards of taste, characters emerge as fused aggregates of actual features and imagined additions. They are what Hardy calls “too real to be possible,” as though their plausibility were additive, their vividness so probable as to exceed certainty. And, in a way, so it is, fictional characters existing in some manner across worlds, serially multiplied in the mind of each reader who grants belief. I would suggest that this view of Hardy’s probable realism holds across his novelistic production, even though he was keen to draw his own taxonomy along the fault-lines of probability, stating that where the more celebrated Novels of Character and Environment show “a verisimilitude in general treatment and detail” the Novels of Ingenuity display “a not infrequent disregard of the probable in the chain of events, and depend for their interest on the incidents themselves.”

This claim finds a further body of evidence in Hardy’s repeated use of the composite as a figure for aggregates of actual and imagined events that could seem “too real to be possible.” As he leaves off novels for poetry and finds himself both commenting on and shifting the text of his output in the former genre, his manner of describing the imaginative world of Wessex takes on the terms of overlay and combination that I have shown are key elements of composite thinking. Typically this occurs in comments on place names, after Hardy began retroactively to normalize Wessex as an imaginary world, changing the names of towns in Desperate Remedies, for instance, so that they are referred to “by the names under which they appear...

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210 Orel 118.

211 Orel 44.

212 General Preface (Orel 45).

213 He also, in this period, calls the human mind a “palimpsest” in a 1901 interview with William Archer, who identifies his blended representation as a “sort of composite photograph” (“Real Conversations” 529, 528).
elsewhere.” The “Cliff without a name” in The Pair of Blue Eyes was likewise only “partly suggested” to him by real cliffs. In the preface Hardy cannily demurs in order to maintain the anonymity of the cliff even as he acknowledges a real referent: “Accuracy would require the statement to be that a remarkable cliff which resembles in many points the cliff of the description bears a name that no event has made famous.” In speaking of this romance as an “imaginary history” adjoined to “material circumstances” that, if they could be given precisely, still occupy in representation a “region of dream and mystery,” he later mentions that Endelstow House is “to a large degree really existent” if “several miles south of its supposed site” and so a composite of structure and setting. Likewise, the heath is not only an historical aggregate but a synchronic one, since it “united or typified heaths of various real names, to the number of at least a dozen,” and Hardy later maintains this “bringing together of scattered characteristics” in its representation.

In attempting to communicate revisions for the Indian edition of The Return of

214 February 1896 (Orel 3).

215 Collected Letters 4.210, to Clement Shorter, [3 April 1912?].

216 March 1895 (Orel 7–8).

217 Orel 7.

218 Postscript, June 1912 (Orel 8). These instances could be multiplied: the scene of Two on a Tower is a composite of “two real spots” (July 1895, Orel 17); Overcombe Mill in The Trumpet Major is a “composite picture” of two separate towns, “containing features of both”; Conjuror Trendle in “The Withered Arm” is a “composite figure of two or three who used to be heard of”; and Mrs. Charmond’s house in The Woodlanders should not be mistaken for a referent in the world since it blends more than one (Collected Letters 4.123, 3.285, 3.264, 6.132, to Norah Acland, A. M. Broadley, Hermann Lea, and Florence Henniker, respectively). Although Hardy generally spoke of his “portraiture of fictitiously named towns and villages” as “only suggested by certain real places,” he nonetheless—perhaps out of commercial prudence, keeping an eye on the popularity of Wessex—did not discourage those “keen hunters for the real” who would seek correspondences (General Preface, Orel 47).

219 July 1895 and Postscript, April 1912 (Orel 12, 13). Compare Vigar on the way the heath “surrounds and incorporates all types and degrees of actuality,” so that the “unexpected
the Native, almost half a century after its composition, Hardy actually attempts to rewrite such aggregation into the novel as such, proposing “a combination of some wild tracts” in replacement of the more assertive “a wild tract,” and the evasive phrase, “is founded on Weymouth,” to replace the simpler designation “Weymouth.”

The instances I have adduced are clearly figurative, yet the emphasis on composite portraits and their aggregate elements also makes a more literal appearance in Hardy’s comments on fiction. His very first note on art, recorded after publishing the charming vignette “How I Built Myself a House” in 1865, reflects on representation as a mode of family resemblance: “The form on the canvas which immortalizes the painter is but the last of a series of tentative & abandoned sketches each of which probably contained some particular feature nearer perfection than any part of the finished product.” In “The Profitable Reading of Fiction,” his critique of novels about the more select strata of society hinges on the claim that “social refinement operates upon characters in a way which is oftener than not prejudicial to vigorous portraiture, by making the exteriors of men their screen rather than their index.” Taking only the screen temperature of a face means that the “author’s word has to be taken as to the nerves and muscles of his figures,” where in representations of more common life “they can be seen as in an écorché.”

Detecting what is composite or hereditary in a face becomes Hardy’s cardinal instance of sympathetic realism. Of a poor and illiterate woman whom he heard describe a friend who had and the dreamlike contrast vividly with the real and probable” in a whole that has “no single aspect, but is many things at once” (Novels 127, 128, 130).


221 Life 50.

222 Orel 124.

223 Orel 124–5.
lost a child years earlier as bearing “the ghost of that child in her face even now,” Hardy notes that she had “a power of observation informed by a living heart.”

More generally Hardy states that “characters, even if they have any truth in them at all, are composite, & impossible to dissect for facts.” If they have, as composite images, what Galton called a “surprising air of reality,” having multiplied the sense of recognition for a single face into a fused overabundance of familiarity, this “reality” cannot be disaggregated into the component parts or units to be mined for “facts.” Hardy’s probable realism, then, joins seriality (taking not a single referent but a series, actual incidents spliced with imagined ones) to composition (blending averages or aggregates of the actual and the imagined). He emphasizes both the epistemic status of fiction a plausible transcription of the world—in its aggregate incidents and overlaid images—and a view that deviates from the norm to insist on curiosities and exceptional incidents.

The relationship between these features of probable realism colludes with another key element of Hardy’s account of fiction—the notion of impression. Tess is “an impression, not an argument,” and Jude the Obscure is “an endeavour to give shape and coherence to […] personal impressions.” “Unadjusted impressions have their value,” he avers, “and the road to a true philosophy of life seems to lie in humbly recording diverse readings of its phenomena as they are forced upon us by chance and change.” In the General Preface, Hardy emphasizes “mere

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224 “The Science of Fiction” (Orel 138).

225 Collected Letters 5.297, to Cowley.

226 “Composite Portraits” 133.

227 Preface to Fifth Edition, July 1892, and August 1895 (Orel 27, 32–3).

228 August 1901 (Orel 39).
impressions of the moment” as against a consistent worldview, writing of “fugitive impressions which I have never tried to co-ordinate,” and in the preface to *Jude* dismisses the “question of their consistency or their discordance, of their permanence or their transitoriness.” Commentary on this element of Hardy’s theory of fiction typically calls attention to the notion of impression as a para-Romantic tenet, a notion of the intuited “seemings,” appearances, forays beneath the surface of the real in the spirit of Turner and Ruskin. Yet it is striking how the notion of impression often involves an idea of repeated, disarticulated events. It is famously a “series of seemings” that Hardy sees in *Jude,* just as his *Poems of the Past and Present* offer “a series of feelings and fancies written down in widely differing moods and circumstances.” Such a series needs to be monitored, as Hardy notes elsewhere: “so in life the seer should watch that pattern among general things which his idiosyncrasy moves him to observe, and describe that alone,” in a “going to Nature” that results in “no mere photograph.”

On the one hand, “impressions” leave room for circumstantial detail. Reading for intellectual and moral purposes, one may be interested in “accidents and appendages of

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229 Orel 49, 53, 32–3. This need not preclude approaches to Hardy’s fiction that emphasize thematic and structural kinship across novels: see Casagrande, *Unity in Hardy’s Novels* 1–11 and passim.


231 Orel 32–3.

232 Orel 38–9. Gregor comments on how such descriptions blend the “unfolding process of event” into “a longer perspective, a hint of pattern,” leading to an “always provisional” aesthetic (*Great Web* 33). Levine summarizes this evasive pronouncement thus: “Art is perhaps the most honest response to the empirical: a setting in order of a set of sensations, not an engagement with the material reality beyond” (*Dying to Know* 216).

233 *Life* 158.
narrative,” “trifles of useful knowledge, statistics, queer historic fact.”

The kinship between circumstantial detail and the instances of attrition in Hardy’s novels is brought out by a comment in the life, that observes how in “a work of art it is the accident which charms, not the intention; [...] the amber tones that pervade the folds of drapery in ancient marbles, the deadened polish of the surfaces, and the cracks and the scratches.” However, selecting such detail for reasons of plausibility should not sponsor what Hippolyte Taine calls “detailism” and Ruskin “copyism,” doctrines Hardy mocks by suggesting that scrupulous accuracy with respect to details of place, position, language, or era is merely “photographic curiousness.” It is “trivial,” “ephemeral”—“life garniture.”

Narrative cannot be submitted to “scientific processes,” Hardy writes, one key reason being “the impossibility of reproducing in its entirety the phantasmagoria of experience with infinite and atomic truth, without shadow, relevancy, or subordination.” If “The Science of Fiction” might initially designate a “comprehensive and accurate knowledge of realities” requisite for representation, art—and its pressure on the probable—becomes the operative term once narrative construction gets underway.

On the other hand, impressions can distort in a different direction, as readers find themselves having to suspend disbelief, attempting to find a common view with the author’s vision. Hardy suggests that reading for pleasure requires that an author be “believed in slavishly”

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234 “The Profitable Reading of Fiction” (Orel 112, 113).

235 Life 199.

236 Orel 119. Recalling Meredith’s comments on the manuscript of his first, never-published novel The Poor Man and the Lady, Hardy is gratified that his “naive realism in circumstantial details that were pure inventions” was good enough to convince Macmillan and his readers of its “seeming actuality” (Life 63).

237 Orel 135.

238 Orel 134.
despite “marvelous juxtapositions.” 239 Yet in a more serious mode he clearly values the qualities of readers who deploy inference and guesswork, who “see what the author is aiming at, and by affording full scope to his own insight, catch the vision which the writer has in his eye.” 240 Such mutual harmonizing of agendas for representation also reflects Hardy’s conviction that impressions reveal an accuracy beyond direct sensation, in “the mental tactility that comes from a sympathetic appreciativeness of life in all of its manifestations.” 241

I have suggested that the interaction of serial and composite thinking within Hardy’s account of fiction yields a fresh way of understanding his compelling but often riddling version of realist aesthetics. It may be objected that such an account offers only a rearguard defense for a representational mode too prone to repetition and restatement, coincidence and wild chains of event, self-correction and recomposition—attended, in short, by a “radical disunity.” 242 Hardy himself suggests that his emendations may offer only a way to cope with age and forgetting. Correcting a detail about the old woman in “The Withered Arm,” in the general preface to Wessex Tales, he sees it as “an instance of how our imperfect memories insensibly formalize the fresh originality of living fact—from whose shape they slowly depart, as machine-made castings depart by degrees from the sharp hand-work of the mould.” 243 Yet in so clearly reprising the vivacity of serial repetition or the uncanniness of a composite overlay even as he laments the

239 Orel 111.
240 Orel 117.
241 Orel 137.
242 Bayley, Essay on Hardy 40. Bayley reads “The Darkling Thrush” as an exemplar of Hardy’s method more generally, where “the ways in which we are absorbed into it, moved, delighted, are never co-ordinated, never really unified.”
243 Orel 3.
fading of an original vision, Hardy makes clear that these very figures constitute his vision in its most memorable form. The “living fact” constitutes a blood-red thread that runs through Hardy’s novels—an artery that carries his visceral attention to the life of sensation—but it is braided with curiosities and incidentals, commentaries and composite memories that embody his own “approximative” approach to realism as a genre of the probable beyond the mere transcript of reality. The vision holds stable despite—yet inseparably attached to—gauche additions, digressions, and emendations, just as blood stays red inside a body that incrementally ebbs away from its cast.

Hardy’s thinking expresses, above all, what is intuitive about this probable vision, however it might be tied to statistical aggregates, factual archives, or averaged portraits, for it ultimately replaces the accuracy and objectivity of number with the deeper precision of impressions. Probable realism offers a corrective to what might seem to be the overarching causality or geometry of Hardy’s plots, often seen as governed by sternly deterministic natural forces or supernatural designs. As a counterweight to the causal magnetism of such forces,

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244 Life 226.

245 By what Bayley characterizes as aspects of clumsiness, “hesitancy, passivity, [and] a lack of rigour behind the maintaining of literary appearances” (Essay on Hardy 4–5).

246 The emphasis on fate in Hardy criticism began with the earliest critical writing, and is pronounced in Rutland, Thomas Hardy, and Webster, On a Darkling Plain. For Forster, Hardy “arranges the events with emphasis on causality, the ground plan is a plot, and the characters are ordered to acquiesce in its requirements” (Aspects of the Novel 93). Cecil, Hardy the Novelist 40–1, links fate to the operation of chance. Alcorn notes the “deadening geometrical effect” of the plot of Jude, “constructed around rigorous and elaborate linear parallels and oppositions that seem finally to crush the characters” (Nature Novel 22). Barbara Hardy suggests that he fits the “complexity and contradictoriness of life into a pre-determined dogmatic pattern” (Appropriate Form 2; see 70–3 for discussion of Jude), yet she later corrects this view and notes of Jude that the novel is “too intelligently self-aware for such dogmatic simplification” and as an “anti-Providence novel,” it “parodies,” “overrides” and “avoids” conventions of similar novels (Imagining Imagination 58). Langbaum sees Hardy’s novels as dissolving the “distinction between fate and the characters’ individual unconsciousness” (“Hardy: Versions of Pastoral” 90).
Hardy seems to adapt as a representational dogma the logician’s cautionary words about long-run patterns—“Keep on watching it long enough, and it will be found almost invariably to fluctuate”\textsuperscript{247}—in order to obviate fixed definitions for fiction, dismissing attempts “to set forth [...] in calculable pages” a systematic or philosophical account of fiction, which could only amount “to writ[ing] a whole library of human philosophy, with instructions how to feel.”\textsuperscript{248}

\textsuperscript{247} Venn, Logic 13–14.

\textsuperscript{248} Orel 138.
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