Perspectives
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This book assumes as context the nineteenth century’s well-documented interchanges among the sister arts and new technologies. Photographers “illustrated” poems; poets wrote about painters and paintings; painters drew heavily on literature for their subject matter and composed poems to be displayed with their paintings; prose writers incorporated new visual literacies into their thematics and form. As crucial components of a history of nineteenth-century visual and verbal literacies, the manifold interactions I examine here help to illuminate aesthetic theories and practices: dominant, emergent, and residual, currently being pieced together and rethought by cultural critics.1

During a time of increasing cultural debates about vision, realism, and the status of representation, artists across disciplines experimented freshly with optical clarity and obfuscation, and with double and multiple points of view, both within texts and between texts presented together. They questioned a stable relationship between subject and object and often resisted the era’s growing scientific rationalism through composite art, combination printing, dramatic lyrics, mirror photography, multiply narrated or focalized novels, and montage.2 By testing both visual and verbal boundaries, such formal innovations not only introduced new ways of beholding “reality” but also affected the way their beholders saw and knew themselves.
In short, the art forms I examine here placed new responsibilities on the observer-reader through self-reflexive modes of presentation. Sometimes exposed to a play of subjective and objective views in dialogic relation, this reader/viewer is, at other times, confronted with a confusion or fragmentation of views that similarly tests his interpretive capacities. The dramatic monologue and related forms, by way of example, especially those by Browning and Tennyson, challenge the Cartesian dualism of self and other (see Martin; I. Armstrong 1993; and Slinn 1991). Reconciliation, wholeness, and transcendence are replaced by a process of exchange in which one perspective is tested, altered, or replaced by another.

Such innovative forms are at odds with the epistemology of classic realism and push its boundaries. When Jennifer Green-Lewis notes that realism is an “ostensibly consensual mode of representation, since to objectify a world . . . requires a shared agreement, a complicity in what the object status of the world might be,” her ostensibly carries much weight. The epistemology of classical perspective, stressing third-person omniscience and mastery, whether offered in painting, photography, or literature, is itself illusionary. Classical perspective is not only troubled by subjective vision—rather than supplanted by it, as Jonathan Crary tends to argue in his genealogical argument—but it is also, in fact, intertwined with it in a relationship of hybridity. Each term is constitutive of the other rather than oppositional, but does not resolve to a third term. It is this very unresolvable hybridity that is explored by the art forms of the period.

John Ruskin’s writings on vision and perception, especially his formulation of the gothic, developed in Modern Painters (1843–60) and The Stones of Venice (1851–53), dramatically influenced the forms of his era’s poetry and painting. Crucially, Ruskin’s theory of the gothic validates a way of seeing, reading, and knowing that is based on gaps or inconsistencies, rather than grounded in notions of right perspective or unity and which was a shaping force in aesthetics, both visual and verbal. This chapter takes up examples by Turner, Dyce, the dramatic monologue, and Morris as it builds a case inductively, across media and genres, for innovative nineteenth-century treatments of space and time, light, seeing, and multiple perspectives.

THE EXAMPLE OF J. M. W. TURNER

J. M. W. Turner, deeply schooled in art, music, and poetry of the eigh-
teenth century, still often departed from tradition in his choice of content, handling of space, and uses of color as he sought to elevate landscape to the level of history painting. Moreover, his late art goes so far as to demand a new kind of viewer. From one of Turner’s very first pencil and watercolors, *The Chancel and Crossing of Tintern Abbey, Looking towards the East Window* (1794), in which he reconfigures space and light and shrinks figures in size, we can see his departure from traditional drawing methods of both architecture and landscape. His 1829 *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer’s Odyssey*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in that year and in 1842, however, was rightly called by Ruskin “the central picture in Turner’s career.” This makes it one of the most important paintings of the nineteenth century. The large (52 ¼ x 80 in. [132.5 x 203 cm]) scene, now in the National Gallery, London, was first sketched by Turner in the Wey, Guildford Sketchbook of 1807. In conception and exhibitions, it spans the major part of his career. Based on a section of Book IX from Homer’s *Odyssey*, it pushes both the visual and verbal boundaries of a classical tradition of representation.

Although Turner bases his painting on a specific narrative moment in the *Odyssey*, he fits the classical myth of Ulysses into a larger interpretation of nature that goes far beyond any capturing of a classical antecedent. J. Hillis Miller has noted that “many of Turner’s most celebrated paintings are illustrations of preexisting verbal documents,” and, in this instance, art critic John Gage has stressed the painting’s fidelity to Alexander Pope’s translation. Yet Turner’s painting does not encourage the reading/viewing of a linear, teleological narrative. By the time he finished *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus—Homer’s Odyssey*, the painter had come to rely less on classical texts and forms. Through the many sea and sky pictures of his career to that point, he had frequently erased the vanishing point in light, as he does here, a technique he learned from Claude Lorrain. Yet he had also begun to develop the vortex as an organizational principle, which is evident in the handling of the clouds swirling around Polyphemus in this painting.

Although earlier passages of the *Odyssey* are presupposed in Turner’s painting, Turner here mocks visual narratives that rely on a preexisting narrative, as well as linguistic meanings that rely on preconceived understandings. It is highly significant that Turner illustrates neither the attack on the Cyclops, nor Odysseus’ taunting of the monster—saying “Nobody”—when the Cyclops asks who blinded him. Instead, Turner illustrates a later episode when Odysseus, having returned to his ship with his surviving men, and now sailing away, boastfully identifies himself by shouting out his real name to the giant, “Nobody didn’t
hurt you, Odysseus did!” In Turner’s rendition, the sail states the Greek hero’s name for anyone who can see it and read it, thus calling attention again to Polyphemus’ limitations and calling upon the viewer to exercise sharp eyes. Odysseus’ declaration of his identity provokes Polyphemus’ father, the god Poseidon, to condemn the Greek mariner to a state of further wandering. Turner sets off this narrative moment of disastrous self-assertion into a purposely grand panorama of ships, figures, and natural phenomena, where the giant, enveloped in dark clouds, can barely be seen, and the relatively small figure of Odysseus faces away from the viewer towards the dawn and exit passage he is about to take in the distance.

Turner’s scene thus ironizes the very moment of the epic hero’s revelation of identity. Odysseus, thinking he has power over Polyphemus and assuming that he has secured smooth sailing, overreaches himself. Moreover, apparently Odysseus does not see a giant rock (also looking like a cloud) that the monster has hurled towards his ship with a flip of his arm. The canvas plays up ironies about breakdowns in visual communication. There is a shade or retina over the eye of the dawning sun, as if to suggest that Polyphemus is not the only blinded “I/EYE” here. Odysseus too is metaphorically blinded by hubris and, consequently, diminished. Turner takes the great hero Odysseus and robes him in red, the color to which Turner says the eye moves first, only to mock him. Reducing Odysseus to a speck in the giant natural universe portrayed in the picture, as he has done in many prior pictures with figures, Turner makes him positively puny compared to the equally diminished Polyphemus. It is perhaps not too fanciful to think of Odysseus here as a modern “Where’s Waldo?” figure, dressed in red and almost lost in a swirl of other colors and images; actual viewers in front of the painting must puzzle it out. Turner picks up on Homer’s own ironizing of Odysseus and maximizes it, enveloping the hero in a huge scene of volcanic fury, sunrise, numerous mariners, other ships, rocks, a mountain, smoke, Turner-invented Nereids, and, as Ruskin put it in Modern Painters V, a sky “the colour of blood” (7.438n).

Yet Turner’s irony is further layered. The painter’s self-identification with Odysseus as the blinder of a monstrous monocularity attests to his self-conscious awareness of the power of a large universe in which he is but one voice. His lonely, artistic authority is compromised by overwhelming external conditions. On the other hand, he calls attention, all the more, to the odds against which he fights and the visual markers with which he asserts himself.10

Turner also reaches out to ironize the entire classical tradition—not
only in literature but also in painting, not only in content, but also in form, not only in art, but also in nineteenth-century viewing and interpreting of art. Blindness as metaphor also extends to the viewer. The blinded, one-eyed Polyphemus, whom Odysseus taunts, also acts as an equivalent of the thwarted expectations of all those Philistine consumers, Turner’s eyeless public, who had misread his art. Ruskin himself picks up on this connection between the Cyclops and the audience when he chooses this key painting to bemoan Turner’s public “destiny” (Turner, The Works of Ruskin 13: 136) to be underappreciated by “the one-eyed people” who derided the painter’s early work.

Even in their responses to this painting, critics complained about being victimized by the intensity of colors and stagelike setting. The Literary Gazette of May 9, 1829 states: “Although the Grecian hero has just put out the eye of the furious Cyclops, that is really no reason why Mr. Turner should put out both the eyes of us, harmless critics. . . .” Odysseus may deride Polyphemus, but The Morning Herald (5 May 1829) derided the painting as “a specimen of colouring run mad—positive vermillion—positive indigo, and all the most glaring tints of green, yellow, and purple contend for mastery of the canvas, with all the vehement contrasts of a kaleidoscope or Persian carpet” (as quoted in Turner 1775–1851, 133; emphasis in original). The reactions are correct: Turner’s colors do indeed blind or disorient the viewer, as do the multiple sources of light (sun, fire, reflections, gleaming Nereids), intense coloring, and various points of focus. Most critics other than Ruskin, though, were reluctant to accept that Turner creates questions about how to view, where to look, and what a viewer sees. As the Herald plaintively remarked, “mastery” was not easy for a contemporary viewer of this painting. Yet mastery of this type was not often Turner’s aim—as an examination of Turner’s art up to this date illustrates, in both watercolors and oils, finished and unfinished, he often exploits odd vantage points, relies on multiple sources of light, and floods vanishing points with light.

Stalwart defender of laws of perspective that he was, Ruskin also recognized when such rules needed to be broken. In praising the 1829 painting, he has it both ways. Ruskin coyly noted: “I think we may not unwarrantably inquire how our Professor supposed that that Cyclops could ever have got into that cave” (Ruskin, Turner, The Works of Ruskin, 13: 138; emphasis in original). Ruskin implicitly linked Turner’s work to that of the Pre-Raphaelites he had defended in public; they too had been excoriated for violating “perspective law.” As Ruskin publicized them, both Turner and the Pre-Raphaelite newcomers were aiming at a different kind of vision.
If *Ulysses Deriding Polyphemus*—Homer’s *Odyssey* is, in so many ways, a watershed turning point of J. M. W. Turner’s career and predicts trends yet to come, his pendant paintings *Shade and Darkness—The Evening Before the Deluge* and *Light and Colour* (*Goethe’s Theory*)—*The Morning After the Deluge—Moses Writing the Book of Genesis*, presented to the public in 1843 at the Royal Academy, even more explicitly defied classical perspective and narrative (for *Light and Colour*, see the cover). As pendants, they nullify a single point of view by establishing a dialectical relationship and calling on interpretive methods which read them in relation to each other. Even more, they mark dramatically the mounting change in styles of representation that over years had taken place in visual and verbal arts, on the edge of the dominant forms, from Blake onwards.

The impact of a shift from single, geometric, Renaissance perspective and classical subjects to nonrepresentational forms, bordering here on the abstract, would have far-reaching effects, cross-culturally in Europe as well as affecting other media in Britain. An historically provocative and theoretically exemplary instance of innovation, Turner’s late career experiments with darkness, light, color, depth, and line, as evident in this pair of celebrated paintings, represent not only a revaluation of color theory but also a change in understandings of vision (see Douma).

Art historians argue that the fusion of the eye of the viewer with the circular moon and sun in these paintings marks a shift, within art, in conceptions about reality—from that which is external and passively received by the eye to that which the viewer creates. Perhaps this is nowhere more obvious than in animal forms represented in *The Evening Before the Deluge*, forms made far more abstract than in Turner’s prior (rejected) painting on the same subject. From one angle, animal heads look like alligators, from another angle like horses. The viewer half-creates the forms depending on the angle from which viewing occurs. One moves back and forth in front of the painting to figure out what is actually being represented, as representational forms slide into each other.

Turner’s color theory and its relationship to Goethe’s *Zür Farbenlehre*, on the study or science of color, translated into English by Turner’s friend Sir Charles Eastlake and referenced in the title of the second painting, animates this pair of quasi-Biblical paintings. As the sun sets in *The Evening Before the Deluge*, the spectrum of colors moves through Goethe’s negative colors of green, purple, and blue; with the sun fully risen in *The Morning After the Deluge* the colors are positive—red, yellow, orange. Yet as critics have noted, by mixing and blending his colors, Turner challenges Goethe’s theory, which stresses the reading of colors.
as if they were signs. Rather, Turner believes that all color comes from light. Turner’s art aligns pigments of color that can result in an “optical fusion,” or a trick of the eye which makes a new color.

In other words, instead of representing nature, Turner tries, following Blake, to substitute an optical effect for the light and colors of nature. He creates paintings which invite the eye not only to behold but to create color and imitate light. Notably, contemporaries who visited his gallery at home compared his watercolors and oils to opals for their continuous play of blue, green, and red. Just as his Moses stands in the sun and the “I/eye” of God, so does Turner now place the viewer in a prophet-like position that allows not a godlike mastery of a view, but its co-creation. In an ironic rewriting of Genesis, Turner positions the viewer as the co-creator of the book documenting God’s creation of the world. It is significant that Turner’s pendant paintings were exhibited in the same year as the publication of volume I of John Ruskin’s highly influential Modern Painters—a book that would go on, in a subsequent volume, to defend the painter from his persistent critics, precisely because, for the approving Ruskin, the artist had passed through a stage of realistic representation and moved well beyond it.

Yet we also need to note that, by choosing to paint the deluge and its aftermath as pendants, Turner also moved beyond his 1829 painting of the Odyssey to assert a Hebraic over a Hellenistic mode of representation. Here he collapses time and space realms in his evocation of beginnings: the destruction of history in the Noahitic flood, the creation told in Genesis, the writing of the Torah by Moses at Mount Sinai, and, with the signs of serpent and of the shepherd’s crook, the crucifixion of and redemption by Jesus Christ.

By juxtaposing and blending time and space realms, Turner now questions linear perspective—verbal and visual perspective—even more radically than in his ironic rendering of Ulysses and Polyphemus when he blinds monocularity. In The Morning After, Moses is the sun in God’s eye/I. He sits in the sun or on top of a sun-bathed Mount Sinai, in total radiance, with stylus writing the Torah/Old Testament. Turner refashions visually the history of painting, perspective, creation, and narrative by enabling the viewer to look at Moses in God’s dazzling brightness with the stylus that will/did/does inaugurate a new order, as Moses and the viewer become the amanuensis-seer of the Divine.

Evoking the imagination of John Milton in Paradise Lost, Turner presents both a realm that is a “darkness visible” (I.62) and a “pendant world” (II.1052), hanging like an earring from a heaven of pure light. As an illustrator and an avid reader of Milton’s epic, Turner wants us to
remember that Milton was blind, like the prior great epic poet Homer, whose ironies he had adopted for his own purposes in the Polyphemus painting. Milton had claimed that, as epic writer, he would exceed Homer by becoming a second Moses, an inspired interpreter of a light unseen by the eyeballs of normal men and women. Turner’s pendant paintings evoke precisely such a visual rendition of Miltonic imagination, what Samuel Taylor Coleridge had called in his 1817 Biographia Literaria the creative emulation of the infinite I AM (304).

Turner’s painting, then, can be aligned with the verbal experimentations of a Romantic poetry that had steadily dramatized the interchange between a subject and an object. Literary Romanticism, too, I would argue, is a departure in ways of conceptualizing subject and object, not the source of or equivalent to that cultural shift. Whether reacting to another human being or to nature or to a mythic figure or even to an art object, the Romantic poets conferred relevance on these others and obtained relevance from them in both one-way and reciprocal exchanges. William Wordsworth’s poetry establishes a new relationship between subject and object in the history of poetry. He characteristically takes an “I” (or a Traveler or a Poet) and shows a subject/object relation that he then transforms so that the subject loses itself into the object but does not abandon reflective consciousness that allows for recollection.

Thus Wordworth’s poems dramatize the processes of the human mind in relation to that outside the self. Samuel Taylor Coleridge in chapter 15 of Biographia Literaria, where he discusses Shakespeare and Milton, explains two types of union of subject and object that can be found in mixture, usually with one dominant, in all Romantic poetry. Shakespeare, he argues, is a protean subject/“I” who passes into all forms of character and passion in a chameleonlike fashion; Milton, he suggests, is an egotistical subject/“I” that attracts all forms and things to himself. In contrast, Romantic poetry also is a poetry about otherness, a Presence, a Being, God, gods, or a universal Mind or Unity. The realm of mystery is central because it means that Romantic poetry, for all its doubt, is grounded in a world of belief.

For their nineteenth-century successors in all media, however, this type of dynamic interaction of subject and object, in a context of belief and doubt, became more difficult, as did reliance on an authoritative and uncompromised lyric sensibility. The fortunes of the lyric “I” and its influence altered. The forceful shaping “I” of Wordsworth, which had itself become somewhat more tentative in poems such as “Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle” (1805) and “The Excur-
sion” (1814), would become, in the work of successors such as Shelley and Keats, Browning and Tennyson, even more elusive and eliding.

WILLIAM DYCE AND THE DRAMATIC MONOLOGUE

The dramatic monologue, a genre invented by the Victorians out of the Romantic conversation poem, dramatizes lyric expressivity by placing it into narrative or historical context. This plot against the lyric “I”—its authority and context—may be said to be true of many art forms in the period. Put another way, much Victorian poetry follows the dramatic monologue in that it “demystifies the relationship between subject and object, and does not assume a primal unity on the part of the perceiving mind.” If the Romantic poets had celebrated and studied fusions and separations between subject and object, the Victorians confronted an inherited reality in which relations became even more difficult, not just relations between human beings, but relations to God and to a meaningful universe in which every creature, every “I,” had a (formerly) special place. A painting such as Pegwell Bay—Recollection of October 5, 1858 by the Scottish artist William Dyce illustrates the reach of this new precariousness felt by many, not only artists or writers. What is more, it offers reasons for that new sense of precariousness.

In the painting of a popular seaside resort in Kent, a dozen human figures are scattered throughout the painting in an arrangement dominated by the cliffs. Four appear in the foreground: a child stares to the left bottom foreground outside of the frame, not engaging with the viewer, but seemingly struck by some sight parallel to or behind the viewer. Two women look down for seashells, or fossils, or perhaps for oysters. A third on the extreme right looks towards the viewer from beyond the midpoint. Engagement between figures and viewer is not established, but, in fact, refused. In the distance there are more figures, mostly male. To the right there is a single figure, referred to by the Tate commentary online as an artist (this figure is, by the way, often cut off or sliced in half in online reproductions). Men in a group with donkeys to the right of midpoint testify to the mode of transport then popular for coastal tourism. But the position of all the figures is helter-skelter, arbitrary, as if they had all been caught momentarily on varying walks in different directions. None interact with others. Color and light are essential in this painting; the mood struck by the use of browns and yellows is half sickly, even nightmarish, and, at the same time, reminiscent of sepia photography. The humans’ aloneness is given meaning by the very
cliffs that dwarf them. For the rocks expose geological strata of calcified creatures who lived millions of years before in waters and pools such as the ones through which these later creatures, now dressed in nineteenth-century garb, are wading. The humans are mere objects here, puppets on a seashore, like that described by Matthew Arnold in “Dover Beach,” during a time when the new science was questioning theocentrism and the timetable of Genesis. The ‘objective’ view offered by science could not only contextualize, but could also obliterate the importance of any individual perspective.

The sense of human puniness, captured by Dyce, is magnified by another element in the painting besides the spatialization of time handled through the cliffs. The day memorialized, October 5, 1858, was when Donati’s comet streaked through the sky at its brightest. It is in the painting on its fall—but barely seen above the clouds on the horizon. The fact that it is nearly invisible reinforces the painting’s emphasis, an emphasis markedly different even from the cosmic drama we have seen in a Turner painting. No longer do meteors or comets come to humans as warnings from the gods. This comet is as indifferent to the human shell collectors as they are to each other and to it. Only the artist figure might be said to notice it. Moving at a speed exceeding the figures, they now seem in slow motion, groping, preparing to be fossils themselves, when scaled against the vastness of sidereal space and geological time. The relationship of subject and object set up by Dyce’s painting is but one mark of a dramatic change from a pre-revolutionary, eighteenth-century mindset to Victorian sensibilities, a change that is psychological, cultural, social, scientific, and aesthetic. Dyce asks the viewer to take in the whole scene, to register kinds of change more fully and deeply than as just a holiday observer of husks of being, and to accept the coexistence of differing and irreconcilable perspectives.

In contrast to Turner’s sky/sea/ship drama that diminishes Homer’s epic hero and his monstrous other, the ironies offered by Dyce’s vision of a comet against cliffs and shallow waters are more subtle and more far-reaching. Not only is the hero a Nobody as in Turner, but nobody, in the Dyce, is remotely heroic. Nothing is at stake but sea creatures and shells. No divinity is present, ancient or modern. The most significant and unusual event, Donati’s comet, goes barely noticed. While a sole figure we take to be an artist figure looks up at the sky, there is no Moses to interpret or make meaning of this cosmic event. The sickly color of a yellow nightmare rather than golden sunlight stays with the viewer of the painting, as it asks: is your face down, too, or do you take notice of the comet? Is there anything to be made of it?
In Victorian poems the terms of self and other prove unstable. Problems of agency, consciousness, power, labor, and representation are foregrounded.\textsuperscript{18} By way of brief example, “Tithonus,” a special form of dramatic monologue called mask lyric, by Alfred Tennyson, sets into relief and even parodies the traffic between subject and object.\textsuperscript{19} In addition “Tithonus,” like the Dyce painting, foregrounds the loss of external, reliable sources of authority by featuring a goddess, but one we aren’t even sure is listening, much less related in any other way to the “I,” despite his calls and protestations.

Certainly if there is a relationship, it is a profoundly disappointed and negative one. The self mentioned in line 5 is an object, not a subject: “Me only cruel immortality / consumes” establishes the speaker as devoured, eternally, by an implacable universal authority. Yet the clause following in juxtaposition, “I wither slowly in thine arms,” defines this same self in terms of a more subjective and intimate—and killing—relationship. The split and sliding of I/Me is already prepared for in the first line aurally with a mournful “Ay me. Ay me” retained from the original 1833 poem “Tithonus” until the 1864 version of “Tithonus.” The sound Ay recalls “I” and is yet just a sound, even as Tithonus is just a voice doomed to mourning a formerly whole self defined in terms of youth and masculine vigor.

When Arthur Hallam reviewed Tennyson’s poems, he noted that his friend was writing a new “species of poetry, a graft of the lyric on the dramatic, and Mr. Tennyson deserves the laurel of an inventor, an enlarger of our modes of knowledge and power.”\textsuperscript{20} In “Tithonus,” for instance, a poem perhaps surprisingly ‘typical’ of many others, two concurrent poems exist with the same words: a lyric expression and that lyric expression as an object of critique, when read as drama. The distance injected into the mask lyric and the related form of the dramatic monologue create a gap for critique of the speaker as not only subject but also object of the gaze and knowledge of a reader. This gap signals a plot against the lyric voice or pure expressivity, making it dependent on and answerable to larger forces, whether of history, society, contingency, or fate.

\textbf{WILLIAM MORRIS AT AMIENS CATHEDRAL AND “THE HAYSTACK IN THE FLOODS”}

While D. G. Rossetti, whom I take up in some detail in the next chapter, was perhaps the greatest immediate disciple of Ruskin, William Morris’s
early poems and prose pieces prove dramatically shaped by Ruskin’s theory of the gothic. At twenty-four, Morris published one of the most original poetry books of the middle decades of the century: *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems* (1858). His intimacy with the poetry of John Keats and Alfred Tennyson, with Sir Walter Scott’s fiction, and with the paintings of D. G. Rossetti, augmented by his readings in Sir Thomas Malory, Jean Froissart, and Geoffrey Chaucer, might have led him to compose imitative poems, replete with the mystery, beauty, and heroism he associated with the Middle Ages. Moreover, Scott’s novels, *Ruskin’s Modern Painters* (1843–60), and Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* (1843), politicizing the aesthetic, had already established the Middle Ages as an historical foil and analogue for the moral and sociopolitical questions raised by an age marked by industrial capitalism and consumption. But the novelty of Morris’s poetic experiments derived from other, additional sources. His own immersion in the gothic aesthetic from the age of eight, his apprenticeship with the architect G. E. Street in 1856 (the greatest Gothic revivalist of his day), and his fascination with the dramatic monologues of Robert Browning honed his ability to write poems that were simultaneously edgy, optically adventurous, and individualistic.

Morris’s childhood had been filled with the reading of romances; his boyhood days at Woodford Hall were immersed in the rituals of an earlier England; his college days were spent among Oxford’s spires and medieval, winding ways. Yet it was John Ruskin’s definition of gothic that galvanized his already intense response to the Middle Ages. Even towards the end of his career, his interest in Ruskin’s “*The Nature of Gothic*” did not wane; he printed it at the Kelmscott Press in 1892. Morris’s own youthful essay on Amiens Cathedral, published a mere three years before his first volume of poems, helps to illuminate the Ruskinian underpinnings of “The Haystack in the Floods,” a poem I shall subsequently discuss.

Walking in the literal footsteps of Ruskin in northern France, Morris considers the great Gothic cathedral of Amiens as a Bible to be read. Seeing Gothic face to face (in person and in its vast materiality) allows Morris to train the eyes of his readers to see the stonework come alive in a new way. Ruskin had upheld the social democracy of a community of medieval stoneworkers; Morris, however, entirely collapses the temporal past and present by leading us to “see.” The proper optical attentions would, insists Morris, make the builders themselves live again through a community of Victorian spectators. As with art by Turner or Dyce or with the secrets of public, private, and performative in a dramatic
monologue, however, what we could not see or know also mattered to Morris. Failures of vision or objects murky or masked were as important for Morris as what could be seen clearly. His was the eye of multiple vantage points, but not a totalizing vision.

Morris wrote “The Churches of North France: Shadows of Amiens” (1855) in his co-founded The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine as the first of a series. In the essay he duplicates in form that which he advocates in content: a blending of past and present perspectives in one time and space. Although Morris records the impressions of his second visit to Amiens, he writes at a meeting point of the horizons of past and present: as if seeing the architectural masterpiece for the first time. Longing prompts Morris, he confesses, to return to Amiens and to the other Gothic churches of Normandy. He tells us “how much I loved them” (289). At his second visit, he exults, the wonder for him at the cathedral’s grandeur was still fresh: “I think I felt inclined to shout,” he records, “when I first entered Amiens Cathedral” (293).

If the gothic, according to Ruskin, is to shock us into new ways of seeing in a metaphorical and a social as well as a literal sense, what new vista does Morris’s essay on gothic wish to open? Morris, I argue, wants to reanimate the gothic itself, in its various permutations, in a sense to become it: its narrativizing, physicality, complexity, multiplicity, variety, appreciation of savagery, roughness, and disjunctions. Seeing gothic for Morris is an act of desire, founded on loss and lack. To effect a duplicate effect on the reader/viewer, Morris first invites us into a deep affectual relationship with him. Once in partnership, his “I” leads this reader’s affective engagement with him to the Gothic cathedral creators revived through the Biblical narratives carved in stone through Old to New Testament and medieval figures and stories. In sum, he moves the reader/viewer from personal relationship to a community with past creators to an immersion into the stone creation itself, before bidding farewell to his cathedral.

Morris invites the reader/viewer to “see” by wandering in and out of the cathedral on a walk with him that educates us into the parts and details of Gothic style. Lindsay Smith is right to stress the various vantage points to which Morris refers, which make the essay less about the object of perception than about how and from where we see. Yet “Shadows of Amiens” is also itself a shifting document—an invitation to mutuality in a church aisle, a memory piece, a self-reflexive commentary on memory and fact, a reflection on what we need to see or know in order to love, and a conclusion that resists language or full knowledge or full seeing.
In the essay’s opening, the “I” and the “you” are separated. Morris’s “I” is a guide who positions “you” to see—first as mounting to a town steeple or a house roof west of the cathedral (290). If “you” then looked up, he says, you would see the “mystery” of the rose window (291). The conditional becomes the present. From a lower position, in the “hot Place Royale here,” “you can see nothing but the graceful spire” (291). Asking the reader, now as an intimate co-viewer, to look across, up, down, from far, from near, and from close up, Morris also anthropomorphizes the building—marking its ribs, crown, base, until he climaxes this description with the “mighty army of the buttresses, holding up the weight of the stone roof within with their strong arms forever” (292).

With the building a living thing, “I” and “You” can become a “We” in order to enter the cathedral together as if to be wed—moving first through the dimmed obscurity of shadow into a relatively well-lit and colorful interior and into a continuous present: “We go round under their shadows,” says Morris, to “enter the church” and “we go down the nave” until at the transept “the stained glass in their huge windows burns out on us” (292–93). While Morris may be conducting a tour, he is also marrying the reader/viewer, moving inevitably and directly down the labyrinthine pavement towards the front of the cathedral into the canopied, carved stalls filled with sixteenth-century figures that come alive through jewel-like coloring.

Caught up in the narratives he sees depicted and those he recalls of Biblical stories witnessed on his first visit, Morris begins to share his memories of specific figures with phrases in mixed tenses and with mixed feelings: “I remember,” “I do not remember in the least the order,” “I remember too,” “I wish I remembered,” “I have dim recollection.” While he can’t recall all the details of each aspect, he delights in moving back and forth from a general to a specific view, from a normative to a difficult view, from the horizontal to the vertical view, from the wide to the narrow vantage point. “One can” even, he says “look down through a hole in the vaulting and see the people walking and praying on the pavement below, looking very small from that height and strangely foreshortened” (296). In telescoping or magnifying views, the viewer too becomes a speck or a panoramic eye caught in the imagined return view of that which it sees. Rather than considering the cathedral a geometric conception of space, Morris wants to know how a vast object like a cathedral is made visible, is visually processed and remembered, and, as a result, becomes known and thus felt.

As Morris moves among memory, desire, and present experience, the polychromatic appearance of the choir screen carvings and chapel
tombs, lit by a vast nave and light from high windows, plunge him into a reverie of what the interior must have been like, a multifaceted jewel, when it was “painted from end to end with patterns of flowers & stars and histories” (296). He is intrigued by his own changing positions as a viewer, as well as by how light interacts with space and in the relationships of light to color to metaphor: “The sun was setting, when we were in the roof; and a beam of it, striking through the small window up in the gable fell in blood-red spots on the beams of the great dim roof” (297). Placing himself imaginatively in the cathedral before its large-scale whitewashing in 1771, he suggests erotically that he might have walked there from sunrise to sunset amidst a glow of color all around. Morris may not have known in 1855 that the cathedral’s exterior western façade had also been decorated in multiple hues in the thirteenth century.

Suddenly, Morris returns the reader/viewer to an easy chair, shifting register to comment on the essay he is writing. This section climaxes with the self-reflexive admission that this essay was not written at Amiens. Morris relies, he tells us, on photographs, as well as two sets of memories. Thus the “shadows” in the title of the essay are not only those within the cathedral, or a reference to its height dominance over other Normandy cathedrals, or a signifier for what we will never fathom, but literally refer to the dark bits of the photographs “where the shadows are deep,” areas which “show simply nothing” (297). Despite impressions, memories, and photographs, some things are left unseen, unremembered, unknown, unprocessed.

Morris’s reliance on contrary methods of capturing reality is in dialogue, with one revising the perceptions of the other (photographs capture details we may have forgotten; yet the eye captures color, the photograph does not; the eye gets a sweep of the whole, photographs do not; the eye absorbs impressions of grandeur which the photograph, “square-cut” and “brown” colored, does not). Photographs, while verifying facts or helpful in capturing general effects, may however even “dull” prior embodied impressions (298). Yet neither human perception nor mechanical aids can ultimately illuminate all the “shadows” of Amiens. Morris accepts the lack of a single centered subject or object, geographically, temporally, and experientially. He is not seeking to obtain a totality of perception or unity of object.

Before voicing his farewell to gothic seeing, Morris pauses at the Crucifixion scene to mention the inadequacy of language to capture the “loveliness of some of the figures carved here” (305). In particular a westernmost angel’s female face draws him to emphasize the impossibil-
ity of words. “I am utterly at a loss how to describe it...I cannot say more about it.” The text here foregrounds itself as writing, not authoritative voice, in what E. Warwick Slinn might refer to as “a discourse of self characterized by division and displacement, not harmony” (1991, 1). Like the dramatic monologue of the era, which challenges any easy opposition or knowledge of subject and object or self and other, the prose of gothic seeing ultimately asks the reader/viewer to entertain questions about vision, consciousness, and language. It is up to the reader to evaluate his relationship to both the seer and the seen.

In a final peroration, Morris’s “I” and “eye” disappear into a description that does not locate itself authoritatively in either consciousness or vision. Rather, the I and eye blend into a final, magnificently accretive description. The speaker is both absent from our time frame—taking off, as it were, into all time frames—and yet present through a prevision. Suddenly, Amiens appears in all kinds of weather, August to February, warmed by heat and cooled by cold, bathed in colors and neutral tones and black, in moonlight and sunlight, until the very roses that one knows are carved begin to glow red, as if real, all the while remaining in a mystery of light and shadows.

Morris’s poem “The Haystack in the Floods” (1858) pursues a similar distrust of words and engages in a similar experimentation with optical vision. Yet this poem carries that distrust and experimentation to a new level. Gaps between words now hold a physical and material dialogue on the page and contribute to broken, decapitated meaning. In other words, the poem, which concerns Jehane’s prevision of her English lover Robert’s beheading by his French foes, enacts that loss. It does so first by an overloading of sensual, closely packed, and layered words and images. Although the surface rhetoric of the poem seems to control a reading grounded in content, we must soon look beyond that level to other patterns, pictures, and textual repetitions in order to be shocked into the new perspective of gothic seeing.23 Already at this early date, we find an adumbration of those techniques of structure and repetition that Morris would later perfect in the 1860s as an artist not of the window, but of the “wall and page” (see Helsinger 209).

From its in medias res start, the poem calls attention to itself as a construct, as a dense weaving of words, in order to rip familiar ground from the reader. It opens with two questions.

Had she come all the way for this,
To part at last without a kiss?
Yea, had she borne the dirt and rain
That her own eyes might see him slain
Beside the haystack in the floods?

Are we being placed inside the ongoing present of a woman’s interior monologue, or are we being guided by the indirect discourse of a third-person narrator who is commenting on a set of events after the fact? We don’t know if the speaker addresses a question to herself or to us. We don’t know if “Yea” answers the first question or serves as a bridge word setting up a parallelism between questions. Given the density of all poetry, we must therefore assume it is addressed to both and serves a dual function. Already, consciousnesses are mixed and confused. Only later in the poem will we understand this opening as a prevision; yet we still remain unclear about whether we are meant to regard it solely as a thought or as a thought reported as uttered and heard.

The fact that the central event concerns seeing the death of one’s beloved is almost incidental at first to the problems faced by the reader—When? Who? What? A triple dislocation, of time, person, and event, is further reinforced by the fact that the reader must infer that the context is the Hundred Years War between France and England. Dislocation is intensified all the more by our sense that we exist in a mythic landscape as much as a real one.

The title of the poem, “The Haystack in the Floods,” seems real enough. The title refers to a conical, darkened, yellow stack of hay in a flooded field. It is raining. In the middle of the events of the poem, Jehane will lie down and take a nap, “her head on a wet heap of hay” (120). Yet the word *Floods* and the shape of a conical haystack is disturbing. Though the reader’s imagination might prefer to rest easy with a ritualized scene, something is awry. Alas, the presence of a flood should warn us at the start that this is not an ordinary scene or poem. The conical haystack sits in the flood, like a head in blood—a title and image, then, that carries shock and imaginative horror once one hears in rhymes and once one learns the events in the poem.

Morris is not interested in conceptualization. He expresses a situation of intense longing between lovers who reach out to each other in the horror of their separation through a dreamlike, visionary set of impressions. The haystack draws numerous meanings as a pregnant image. It stands for an agricultural period of history, for the rituals and routines of the natural world, for the vagaries of nature over which we have no control. Its singular, lonely object-like profile, in the middle of a landscape, recalling Robert’s (or any lover’s) severed head, calls up the darker side of medievalism—a near random violence that seemingly ruled the world.
(and Morris’s nineteenth-century mythic view) of the Middle Ages. The poem is about this set of associations, and feelings attached to them, as much as it is “about” Jehane, Robert, or Godmar.

Morris reinforces a hypertextual sense of words serving as objects themselves by filling the poem with gaps after question marks, semicolons, or exclamation marks (see lines 17, 19, 22, and 27, for example). The first gap is produced by the stanza separation after the first five lines, and before the next twenty-five, a gap which also cuts the rhyme by forcefully separating the octosyllabic half-rhyme of floods/woods. An equally deliberate use of literal spaces in caesurae creates a rising tension of separation, trauma, and loss. If the first gap separates her and he, “Far off from her; he had to ride” (17), the four gaps in these ten lines set up a pattern so that the eye traveling down, noting the first word after each gap, reads: he /and/ she /yea. This cluster works together in a countersong to join the very pronouns and people whom the poem will rend apart. A tension is constructed by words in the poem, therefore, which, on the one hand, separate the lovers and, on the other hand, subliminally, subconsciously, unite them again.

In addition to the countersong of a longing for union, there is a consistent prevision of destruction that occurs at the level of word and part of word. Head appears as part of a word or as a word in its own right numerous times before the beheading occurs at the level of poem content. Rain drips on her head (12); he rides ahead (18); she weeps, made giddy in the head (24); they count thirty heads (38); in grief she tries to rend her coif from her head (42); she thinks her forehead bled (78) and turned her head away (79); Godmar’s face turns red chin to head (82); he swears falsely by God’s head (104); she falls asleep with her head on hay (120); at her ‘no,’ his head turns sharply round (126); Godmar bends back Robert’s head (144); his men trample Robert’s head to pieces (151); confronted with Godmar’s promise he will have her drowned, she shook her head (156).

It may strike my reader as overkill to isolate such uses of one word. Yet Morris’s artistry here is multiply tuned. He uses head as an object that is seen, imagined, felt, cut, and beaten. It is both agent and acted on, material object, location of reason, thing. In forcing the reader to see, hear, and read the word in various contexts, Morris sends the reader/viewer into a previsionary mode, purposely dropping clues about the narrative he will not present clearly or straightforwardly. But he also increases the claustrophobia and hallucinatory quality of the poem and of the psyches represented, joining the reader to them, through such relentless repetition.
Morris writes an aural poem, as he tests the visual. It is also a poem longing for haptic perception and one of a forced reliance on eyesight. It is an exhausting poetry about being unable to effect change, even with prevision, in a world uncaring about what one feels, touches, sees, or knows. My brief analysis conveys, I hope, the brilliance of his radical testing of boundaries between reason and madness, truthful words and words that mask, and his refusal to treat either the subject or the object in traditional ways.

Like Jehane, the reader/viewer is asked to turn her head, to view the poem askance. Morris’s protagonist exists in a previsionary stanza that deforms conventional reading and seeing skills. The stanza that heads the poem introduces a narrative that will, like Robert’s head, be fragmented yet remembered.