Perspectives
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The narrator of *Middlemarch*, the syncretic masterpiece that George Eliot published in 1871–72, derides our tendency to read—and interpret—cultural productions as isolated in “box-like partitions without vital connection” (157). Indeed, this same narrator had opened her rich “Study of Provincial Life” by immediately yoking visual and literary coordinates. She shapes our initial perception of Dorothea Brooke’s dignified appearance by alluding both to the “Italian painters” who depicted “The Blessed Virgin” as well as to “a fine quotation from the Bible—or from one of our elder poets,—in a paragraph of today’s newspapers” (5). George Eliot’s readers thus are promptly schooled: only by responding to multiple perspectives, can they adopt the desirable elasticity of a “mind flexible with constant comparison” (157).

Written for a series of short books intending to provoke debate, *Perspectives* contends that only the flexibility of a cross-generic approach can allow us to appreciate the full importance of the formal innovations that took place in Victorian England from the 1830s to the 1870s. The case studies I present—of paintings and poems, of photographs and novels, as well as nonfictional essays—offer side-by-side visual and textual readings that should substantiate my contention that perspective became a dominant issue in early-nineteenth-century cultural sites, across different genres and media. My analyses of works by Turner, Dyce, Tennyson, Browning, Morris, D. G. Rossetti, Robinson, Hawarden, Collins, and George Eliot thus should be read as partial soundings within a much larger narrative of connections among the literary and visual arts. The layerings of perception in Romantic poetry and the earliest uses of free
indirect discourse in the novel at the end of the eighteenth century had innovatively linked consciousness to form. But the Victorians, who lived in a type-filled, text-filled era, in which print and art reproductions multiplied at an increasing pace, were responsible for converting perspective into a prime metaphor not only for epistemology but for a highly self-conscious hermeneutics.

In handling the large topic of perspective, I have made specific delimiting choices. Instead of selecting objects for study that were unusual or unknown, I have purposely chosen well-known texts with the aim of teasing out complications of perspective and point of view. I have also purposely resisted current notions linking formalism to cultural studies that label literary or aesthetic form as the same as or inferior to other cultural forms (Rooney 35; Levine 2006, 635). Although I intervene in scholarly debates about epistemology, art history, form and cultural politics, optics, and the importance of technology, I have resisted weighting down a slim book with theoretical freight. Instead of extending my analyses to empire and colony, I have resolutely concentrated on the metropole. My emphasis has been preeminently dialogical. I am interested in dialogue within a text, across and between paired texts, and between the text or art object and an interpellated reader-viewer. Here the dramatic monologue of the 1830s, a form original to the Victorians, which threw into new relief the drama of subjectivity by stressing contradiction, revision, and incompleteness, provided me with the perfect mental springboard for my readings of other forms.

A much longer and more historically grounded book has yet to be written that will combat the still prevalent rupture theory of Modernism by building on the case studies I discuss. But I am less interested here in constructing the Victorians as protomodernists or postmodernists than in promoting the interdisciplinary and intergeneric approach that allowed me to locate a fundamental element common to the works I discuss, while maintaining the distinctive linguistic and imagistic qualities among very different kinds of aesthetic, cultural constructions. The self-consciousness, hybridity, and multiplicity of Victorian forms that so persistently enact a variety of perspective paradigms call upon varieties of interpretive strategies from their viewer-readers. In treating poetry, fictional and nonfictional prose, photography, and painting, I here write against the firm divisions maintained so often by historicist and formalist critics and insist that the shape of the nineteenth-century cultural field and the contours of developing media and genres must be appreciated across divisions. At the same time, I have attempted not to deny or collapse the crucial, salient differences among individual art works.