An image of the Chelsea pier at night, a Nocturne (figure 2) in misty blurs of gray, is so small—only 8 by 10 inches—that it demands that viewers approach closely; yet even close scrutiny offers little definitive pictorial information. No objects or landmarks are discernible, and the dock’s edges, if indeed that is what they are, are only hinted at with specks of red amid the field of silvery blue. There is modulation in the color; the image is interesting and complex, but it defies viewers’ attempts at interpretation. A drypoint from 1861 adopts a different pictorial vocabulary, eschewing the blurred diffuseness of the Nocturne in favor of black hatches of color, but achieves a similarly unwelcoming effect (figure 1). It depicts a solitary male figure with his back to the viewer. He faces a window, its six panes divided by heavy black lines, the central mullion cutting into the middle of his head. He sits in a ladder-back chair; its horizontal slats are barely discernible in the print. Driving toward him are all directions of scratchings, each line bearing the burred, inky edges of Whistler’s drypoint technique.

Neither of these works by Whistler is particularly inviting. The Nocturne is unfocused and foggy, and its content is explicitly and emphatically muddy. The figure in the drypoint refuses the viewer’s attempt to interpret or engage through his position (his face turned away in the image) and through elements of the composition that intrude between the man and audience. The cross-hatching common to all etching here mimics and amplifies the barriers between subject and viewer, barriers that include the ladder-back chair, the window mullions, the edges of the table and bench, and the beams that line the ceiling—all of these elements simultaneously point to the figure and block him from view.

Learning to See
Whistler’s Visual Aversions

CHAPTER 4
These two images—one a landscape and the other of a single subject—distance their audience with visual obstacles.

In another category of Whistler’s oeuvre, group scenes depict individuals with barriers between them, as opposed to or in addition to the interpretive barriers between viewer and image. Here are people sharing a space, a room, a conversation, a family, a moment. And yet Whistler’s pictorial strategies insist on the subjects’ disconnection, even alienation, from one another, all without undermining artistic verisimilitude. Through this insistence, Whistler accomplishes a feat parallel to that of the realist authors: he depicts images of people that are profoundly moving, yet profoundly unreachable, all the while emphasizing through form the necessity of connection. This chapter focuses on three of Whistler’s earliest canvases—At the Piano (1858), Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room (1861), and Wapping (1860–64)—to explore two of Whistler’s techniques for capturing these moments of disconnection, fixing them permanently on the canvas: the use of profile and deliberate obfuscation via pictorial cluttering. These techniques form part of the repertoire of Whistler’s painterly methodology and philosophy.

I shift to Whistler’s painting as a means of demonstrating the trend in nineteenth-century realism to emphasize the unbridgeable alterity of the human other. In doing so, I anticipate one vociferous objection: Whistler’s work has little in common with realist painting, much less with realist fiction. Indeed, Whistler’s diffuse, idiosyncratic style might appear to reject the tenets of realism espoused by his contemporaries or the authors addressed in this study; the techniques of alienation Whistler adopts in his painting actively and expressly resist, for example, narrativizing. And yet, Whistler’s very resistance to narrative links his works to those of the realist authors. His painting emphasizes the formal aspects, the painterly qualities of painting that make the work of art a spectacle, while frequently resisting the spectacularization of the human subject. The visual aversions that could seem only to alienate the viewer are actually quite productive; his paintings, much like Hardy’s novels, draw a clear and unmistakable line between the work of art itself, which is knowable, and those figures depicted within those works, who are not knowable to one another. In addition to that distinction, Whistler develops an intricate visual language, with which he depicts interpersonal dissention, discomfort, or alienation. The insistent disconnectedness of those depicted within his paintings signals a fundamental lesson of Victorian realism: even in gatherings of intimates, the human other remains always ultimately unknowable.

Whistler may present viewers with images of inscrutability, but his canvases invite analysis, focusing the gaze of the viewer on his method
of representation. It is a distinction Whistler himself insists on. One may not be able to identify the exact location from which Whistler painted the Chelsea pier; one may not be able to discern what time of day or night a scene occurs; one may not know who—as in the case of the etching—a figure represents. But by eliding identifiable markers of content, Whistler shifts the weight of his works onto their form. When viewers jettison anxieties associated with content labeling, the modulations of color, technique of paint application, even the size of the canvas, all readily discernible qualities, move to the foreground. Those knowable qualities remain in tension with the murkiness of the scenes or relationships depicted. His titles reflect a will to obscure; his mid-career decision to title or retitle his paintings using musical terms was surely influenced by Aesthetic and Symbolist trends, but at its base was less an act of fidelity to an artistic movement than a means to deflect viewers’ attempts to narrate the images he paints. Perhaps more than the other realists addressed in this study, Whistler is alive to the fact that letting go of expectations of comprehensive certainty is difficult for readers or viewers, and his attempts to manipulate viewers’ expectations with regard to both form and content may be felt as perverse.

Despite this rich fodder for analysis, his oeuvre has remained until very recently remarkably underanalyzed and undertheorized. As recently as the 1990s, critics bemoaned the lack of critical attention received by Whistler’s work in comparison to the wealth of attention devoted to his biography. One reason for the omission is that his life story is easily as interesting as his work; he was equally provocative in both, his highly idiosyncratic behavior matching the unicity of his artwork. One recent critic breezily summarizes the public Whistler as follows: “a pugnacious but dandified American expatriate aesthete, precocious champion of Japonisme, quick-witted and sharp-tongued battler of the press, painter of ‘Nocturnes,’ ‘Symphonies,’ and ‘Arrangements,’ beyond whose surface lie barely perceptible traces of recognizable motifs.” The Whistler of this description—Aesthete, dandy, rabble-rouser—is but a cartoon version of the real, complicated artist, but a cartoon so compelling that even the very reductive biographical sketch often overwhelms consideration of his art. Some of the blame for that reductive portrait must fall on Whistler himself, who was not always savvy—or was perhaps too savvy—about the attention he sought. Whistler’s self-promotion reached what some regard as an apotheosis in his broadly publicized 1878 libel trial against John Ruskin. Whistler published his account of the trial in a volume titled *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*; the title alone shows the artist’s wry disdain for his critics. This moment, and the style of
Whistler’s painting that was at the heart of the civil action, becomes the touchstone for Whistler’s oeuvre.

Given the idiosyncrasies of his life and self-promotion, it is not surprising that when recent scholars turn their attention to Whistler, they turn to his later works, works in the style that inspired Ruskin’s sharpest criticism. There are two results of this focus: first, by emphasizing his later, London-based work, such criticism encourages a portrait of Whistler defined within and against a strongly British art environment. Second, because the criticism emphasizes Whistler’s later (British) work to the exclusion of his earlier work, Whistler’s oeuvre appears to have more in common with that of Albert Moore and Frederic Leighton than with the works of French realists or with the artists described by Tim Barringer as “Hogarthian barbarians of mid-Victorian art”: William Holman Hunt, William Powell Firth, and Ford Madox Brown. Whistler emerges, in contrast to those moralistic painters who valued verisimilitude in representation, as an Aesthete. Elizabeth Prettejohn—writing in what might rightfully be considered a definitive text on Aesthetic art—acknowledges the painter’s ambivalent position within the Aesthetic movement, noting that Whistler was not “a spokesman, self-appointed or otherwise, for an artistic movement that might be united under” the “art for art’s sake” slogan, conceding that his work, and the theory to which his work contributes, “is nonetheless exemplary for the range of practices that explored the question of what art might be, if it were for the sake of anything else.” Ultimately, though, she situates his eccentric, nonnarrative work firmly within the Aesthetic tradition, citing with approval Colvin’s description of the works of Whistler, Leighton, and Moore as “beauty without realism.” Even those reevaluating Whistler’s work cannot escape the claim of Aestheticism: Rachel Teukolsky makes the case that Whistler’s Aesthetic drive links his work to the modernism that follows, but does not engage the earlier link in that chain, the French realist tradition in which Whistler trained.

Whistler’s prominence within the critical literature on Aestheticism ensures that his place in the development of realist iconography is overshadowed by French painters. Michael Fried rightly includes Whistler among the “Generation of 1863” in his Manet’s Modernism, but his is a lonely voice; no work of Whistler’s appears in Linda Nochlin’s seminal (and heavily French) Realism, which focuses on France during the period of Whistler’s tenure there. That the artist’s biography precludes a stable identification, national or otherwise, contributes to the issue. Born in America, Whistler traveled extensively, trained in France, and settled in London with his sister and brother-in-law. Unlike Mary Cas-
satt, for example, who left the United States but firmly inserted herself into the French art scene, where she longed to stay, and did indeed stay, Whistler was peripatetic. Moreover, his timing was odd: he moved from France to Britain at a time when French art was exploding in new directions and British art was, by comparison, conservative if not reactionary. Whistler and his art seem to fit comfortably into neither the French nor the British art-historical traditions. While he was in France, Courbet was his teacher, and it is in Courbet’s realist tradition that Whistler cultivated his early treatment of figures and developed his unique pictorial language. He might later have rejected the influence of Courbet on his work (“il n’y en a pas eu, et on n’en trouvera pas dans mes toiles,” he writes to Fantin-Latour in the late 1860s) but the resonances are evident. Whistler was grounded within an existent and emerging movement; the variations in representational strategies that would define his artistic individuation from that movement were influenced by and manifested in response to a uniquely French realist tradition, which he in turn influenced.

Whistler’s contribution to that realist tradition exhibits a movement out of and away from the perceived teleology of Western art—his style (and, unlike many of his realist contemporaries, his life) extends past high realism into the twentieth century, when his refusal to engage in narrative painting does align him in some way with those anti-realist Aesthetes. His later work, especially, seems to fall out of that juggernaut of ever-increasing verisimilitude, driving always to eliminate “those obstacles which impede the reproduction” of an external, universal reality. The assumption that art drives always to greater verisimilitude has long been assailed by art historians, just as its literary complement has been assailed by literary critics, yet it remains remarkably resilient, and any consideration of realism in text or images must still be divorced from claims of objectivity. Whistler’s realism resides not in the objectivity of his images but rather in what he chooses to represent and how he does so, and foremost among his contributions to realist iconography is his pictorial insistence on the surface of the painting, his refusal to encourage narration of images, his depiction of interpersonal discord, and his use of a variety of techniques to obscure access to the individuals represented in his paintings. It is precisely these modes of representation, techniques that might feel alienating to a viewer accustomed to more conventional (Victorian) paintings with more conventional (Victorian) messages, that form the central focus of this study.

Whistler’s insistence on the formal qualities of painted images, including the habit of referring to his paintings as “arrangements,” confounds the viewer and art historian. About the portrait of his mother,
Prettejohn summarizes this reaction: “we are forbidden, apparently, to speculate on the character, biography or feelings of the sitter, and told peremptorily to consider her merely as an ‘arrangement.’” Though Prettejohn notes the upside to Whistler’s instruction—that in describing the painting as an arrangement, the artist frees the viewer from the influence of his own emotions, predilections, or expectations—she does not quite consider what happens when we do regard Whistler’s paintings as arrangements. What do the arrangements tell us—the bifurcated scenes, the solid verticals cutting up the interiors, the emphatic verticals breaking up the spaces between the paintings’ subjects? In objecting to a traditional moralizing, Whistler opened up the way for something else—a means of painting that explicitly depicts its subjects as unique individuals, insistently making those subjects unknowable to the others who share the canvas. And through that depiction, the artist shatters the viewer’s access to the safety of a unifying narrative, and offers instead a meditation on the fiction of understanding the other.

**Realist Bona Fides**

Early in 2009 an exhibition of the domestic scenes of Nabis painter Pierre Bonnard opened at the Metropolitan Museum in New York. Bonnard’s intimate spaces, often centered on a dining table or a window, frequently feature human figures who appear coldly at odds, a curious effect considering the warm tonal glow of what look like cozy spaces. Drawn mostly from Bonnard’s late period from the mid-1920s through the 1940s, the images seem, as some critics have noted, to engage stylistically much more with the artistic past than with the period during which they were painted. Bonnard’s artistic style feels more comfortable among earlier Vuillards, Cézannes, or Gauguins than it does among his late contemporaries Picasso or Matisse. What then locates his works in the Modernist tendencies of his period are his scenes of interpersonal alienation, what Christopher Benfey calls “domestic disturbance, isolation, and sadness.” Still, the sense of shared discomfort that does appear thoroughly contemporary has its roots in a realist—a nineteenth-century—past. This mode of representation, as Benfey accedes, places Bonnard’s interior scenes among the works of Ibsen or Henry James. Through that earlier realist genealogy—from Gauguin and Cézanne backward to Manet and Courbet—one can locate the genesis of the temperament communicated in Bonnard’s uncomfortable, though beautiful, interiors. In particular, the depiction of discomfort between people within their everyday milieu
must be located in a realist ancestry. And one essential component of that French family tree is Whistler.

Among the novel choices deployed in French realist paintings was the representation of disharmony, and one way to depict misunderstanding was through seemingly alienated subjects; communal scenes were one trope representing nonidealized, ostensibly nonposed, rural life. Illustrating community is not as simple as depicting a group, a problem regularly explored in Courbet’s works. Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans* (1849–50), for example, includes some forty-five figures, seemingly representing an entire community. Despite its size (over 10’ x 20’) and breadth of subject choice, it does not depict communal unity, but rather “internal tensions and ambiguities,” and what T. J. Clark called “collective distraction.” This depiction of a crowd that seems comprehensive, cutting across class boundaries, attending an event that might be regarding as unifying (a burial), appears instead as a scene of people mired in their separation and well aware of their differences from one another.

Even outside of large-scale communal scenes, subjects with disparate body positions, effaced from one another or the viewer, can denote miscommunication. Édouard Manet was Whistler’s cotemporary, and in his oeuvre the trope is prevalent, and is, indeed, regarded as a hallmark of his style. That Manet is among the most analyzed artists of the period makes him an interesting complement to Whistler. Manet’s *Le Chemin de Fer*, for example, features a woman and child, and while the woman is situated directly facing the viewer, the young girl’s back is turned toward both the woman and the viewer. The woman’s dog is unconcerned with the viewer as well. That one subject does gaze directly out of the image negates the reading that the subjects were captured unawares or spontaneously (as often happens in, for example, Degas’ works). Such paintings suggest a world in which the subject may seem to be aware of his viewer and may seem even to acknowledge his viewer instead of his companion. *Le Balcon* (1869) is another example of such an image in Manet’s oeuvre, as are *Argenteuil, Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863), *Olympia* (1863), *Nana* (1877), and so on. That those people depicted within the immediacy of the frame of a painting should somehow miss each other is much like the situations within the examined novels, where proximity never guarantees connection. The representational tropes that these canvases share, defying as they did conventional iconography, did not ingratiate their viewers, and a negative critical response should, perhaps, have been expected.

Manet’s thwarted and problematic connections with his audience are another trait he shared with Whistler. Manet’s tortuous relationship with
the Salon judges, his critics, and his public attests to the power of his signifiers being interpreted in ways he did not expect. The audience’s insistence on narrativizing the images he painted was one source for their hyperbolic reactions, as the narratives (as opposed to the paintings themselves) provided the basis for many of the objectives. The public furor over *Olympia* (1863) demonstrates this idea, and certainly Whistler, working and exhibiting at the same time, experienced the risks of this kind of painting and the pitfalls associated with the narratives provided by viewers and critics. Manet’s painting was thrust into a world that constructed meaning out of readable markers, and class seems to be inscribed in the trappings of the image, including the title: “*Olympe,*” Nancy Locke writes, “was a pseudonym in use among nineteenth-century prostitutes.”20 Just as nature’s syntax may be read on the face of a perfect beauty, it may also, the argument goes, be read on the face of the prostitute. T. J. Clark argues that the most readable aspect of *Olympia* is her nakedness, though critics were unable to deal with this fact because of the “lures” of the image that detract attention away from the body: “the cat, the Negress, the orchid, the bunch of flowers, the slippers, the pearl earrings, the choker, the screen, the shawl—they were all lures, they all meant nothing, or nothing in particular,”21 a fact that did not stop critics from interpreting those red herrings innumerable ways. If one accepts Clark’s argument that the objects in the image signify nothing, that lack of signification was itself provocative. *Olympia* refuses, in a sense, to be read within the comfortable confines of art criticism or social drama.22

Whistler’s *The White Girl* (1862; later renamed *Symphony in White No. 1*), a rare case of his painting a woman in full face, was displayed in the 1863 Salon des Refusés with Manet’s *Déjeuner sur l’herbe.* Like *Olympia,* *The White Girl* goaded critics not to supply a narrative, a challenge they failed miserably.23 Yet unlike Manet’s works of the same period that have received near constant critical attention, *The White Girl,* “no less ambiguous than Manet’s [works], has remained relatively undiscussed.”24 The prettiness of Whistler’s canvases distinguishes his work from Manet’s, but he shares with Manet the knack for creating images that resist narration.

**The Trouble with Reading**

From the French realist tradition Whistler gained appreciation for images of discord and a potentially antagonistic bent for disappointing spec-
tators’ desire for the comfort of narrative certainty. French realism also
provides example after example of images that, after initial critical deri-
sion or apathy, went on to be hailed as exemplary if not genius works—
and as Whistler would outlive many of his realist cohort by decades, this
trend bolstered his willingness to persist stubbornly against naysayers.
Whistler had, by the 1860s, moved to England, where the general tenor
of the visual arts remained moralizing and narrative-based, rather than
embracing the French trends toward a new visual vocabulary defined
by Courbet, Manet, and others. Pamela Fletcher notes that “a test of
aesthetic success” of any painting was its “ability to arouse emotion in
its viewers,” and the proper result of the desired emotional response
was a movement toward moral edification if not direct altruistic action.25
Viewers, as Whistler wrote, seemed to confound beauty “with virtue,”
asking before paintings, “What good shall it do?”26

Whistler had good reason to critique that conflation of morality with
aesthetic judgment. While in France even the academic establishment
was by this time beginning to embrace the possibilities of representing
images outside of narrative and outside of communion, in Britain the
Academy was still rewarding paintings that implied narrative as well
as morals. In fact, there seemed to be a causal relationship between an
implied story and an implied moral; see, for example, Millais’s The Order
of Release, Hunt’s The Awakening Conscience, or any of the biblically or
mythologically inspired works of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. The
libel trial against Ruskin solidified the position of Whistler’s works
within a binary conflict “between literary, moralizing art identified with
Victorianism and the purely pictorial, self-referential aesthetics associ-
ated with nascent modernism.”27 But the struggle began long before
the trial. Augustus Leopold Egg’s Past and Present triptych (1858) is one
work typical of “literary, moralizing art identified with Victorianism.”
Egg illustrates three scenes that Ruskin understood as the unraveling of
a marriage ruined by a wife’s infidelity. In each, the symbols for marital
disharmony are so obvious that they nearly cease to be symbols.28 The
first, hung in the center, depicts a woman prostrate on the floor in front
of a man, wringing her hands. Two young girls sit in front of a collapsing
house of cards, which had been built upon a novel by Balzac (of course).
An apple is sliced in two: one half sits on a table next to the husband and
is stabbed by a knife. The other half is on the floor, lying next to the wife.
To Ruskin, these images spelled out a narrative with utter certainty; he
summed up the narrative told by the other two canvases of the triptych
in his exhibition review: “the husband discovers his wife’s infidelity; he
dies five years afterwards. The two lateral pictures represent the same
moment of night a fortnight after his death. The same little cloud is under the moon. The two children see it from the chamber in which they are praying for their lost mother, and their mother, from behind a boat under the vault of the river shore.”

Even outside of the specificity of Ruskin’s supplied narrative, the paintings unmistakably represent misery, and the title *Past and Present* suggests a causal relationship between events depicted in the first canvas and the sadness that permeates the second and third. It is perhaps not too great of a leap to conclude that Egg intended to communicate a moral: adultery will be punished by misery for all involved. In reading this story into and onto the image, Whistler believed, the qualities of the image are ignored. Little riled the artist more.

In *Ten O’Clock*, an 1885 lecture that was later printed, Whistler defined the problem with this approach—often prescribed by the mediating critic—to “reading” paintings:

> For some time past, the unattached writer has become the middle-man in this matter of Art, and his influence, while it has widened the gulf between the people and the painter, has brought about the most complete misunderstanding as to the aim of the picture. For him a picture is more or less a hieroglyph or symbol of a story. Apart from a few technical terms, for the display of which he finds an occasion, the work is considered absolutely from a literary point of view; indeed, from what other can he consider it? And in his essays he deals with it as with a novel—a history—or an anecdote. He fails entirely and most naturally to see its excellences, or demerits—artistic—and so degrades Art, by supposing it a method of bringing about a literary climax. It thus, in his hands, becomes merely a means of perpetuating something further, and its mission is made a secondary one, even as a means is second to an end.

First, Whistler critiques the act of looking for an invented unknown beyond the image instead of regarding the surface of the painting. Far from proposing a theory of art that depends on a pure superficiality, that is, an art that lacks *depth*, he is countering the Ruskinian tendency to compose extended narratives that usurp the primacy of the image. Whistler refocuses on the surfaces of the canvas so that it resumes its position as fundamental and not secondary to the story it purportedly tells; the canvas must not be appropriated by moral claims, and it should not function merely as a vehicle for a lesson. Whistler is not arguing against analysis or interpretation, but against the unnecessarily and
formulaic pasting of a narrative onto what is expressly not a narrative.\(^{31}\)

That Whistler’s rejection of Ruskinian tendencies focuses on the approach to appreciating a work of art rather than on the content, per se, of a painting becomes clear when we consider Ruskin’s adoration of Turner. Turner’s later work has much in common with Whistler’s—the diffuse and suggestive landscapes, the lushly imprecise depiction of natural elements—but while Ruskin wholeheartedly champions Turner’s works, he routinely denigrates Whistler’s. On one level, the distinction is due, as David Craven writes, to Ruskin’s perception of the “vulgar commercialization” attributable to Whistler’s “willful deletion of associative values” in an attempt to gain wealth “without contributing to the betterment of society.”\(^{32}\) Yet even when Ruskin praises Turner on seemingly purely visual or formal terms (as opposed to narrative, commercial, or moral ones), it is because Turner’s works inspire “associative thinking,”\(^{33}\) making demands on the interpretative powers of the viewers. Ruskin felt, as Elizabeth Helsinger describes, that Turner’s canvases made “greater demands on his viewers” while at the same time providing explicit direction. To the extent that Ruskin recalls the “familiar romantic interest in the unfinished or incomplete,” he praises Turner because of the “precise directions for imaginative activity” that his paintings provide.\(^{34}\) Whistler’s refusal to offer instruction through titles (where a great contrast between Whistler and Turner’s work can be drawn) and his statements about art and criticism seem to foreclose all interpretative acts.

Curiously, in his effort to distinguish his images from narrative, Whistler nevertheless outlines an approach to art that is analogous to that of the realist writers. Whistler proposes in his own work a means to counter the symbolic and chronological pictorial elements that seem to compel narrative readings of images. It is not a new critical approach as much as it is a new compositional approach.

One consequence of Whistler’s admitted distaste for the moralizing aspect of much conventional Victorian visual art is that he is, as I have noted above, too often aligned with others who spoke loudly against the conventional—the Aesthetes. Despite his adherence to a belief that art should be regarded (seen) for its own merits and demerits as opposed to its instructive value, his version of rendering art must not be conflated with the Aesthetic dictum “art for art’s sake”; further, it is important to note that he was not universally regarded as an Aesthete even in his own time. Wilde accused him of “[explaining] to the public that the only thing they should cultivate was ugliness, and that on their permanent stupidity rested all the hopes of art in the future,”\(^{35}\) and of loving the
ugly, finding “le beau dans l’horrible.” This particular criticism was not new to realist artists, who since Balzac had been accused exactly of a fascination with or adoration of the ugly and base. For Whistler, the charge sits uneasily because of the very prettiness of his imagery, if nothing else. In fact, that surface beauty allows other critics to charge Whistler with the opposite: rather than fetishizing the ugly, some suggest, Whistler instead “aesthetically and psychologically evade[s] concern for the human dilemmas rife in east London and [. . .] even nullif[ies] these dilemmas by subsuming them into his overriding aestheticism.”

Indeed, much of the scholarship on Whistler and his oeuvre insists on its prettiness, often to the exclusion of analysis of technique or composition. Whistler’s regular and highly idiosyncratic use of the profile in his compositions, for example, garners little attention. In Roy McMullen’s biography of Whistler, the trope earns merely a glancing mention and is explained away as a means to render his subjects in a most flattering position. Describing At the Piano (1858), McMullen includes Whistler’s penchant for the “profile view that idealizes a sitter” among his other traits: “an association with music, a preference for muted light, and a readiness to be pensive.” The idealizing of a subject, preferences for one kind of light, and pensiveness are qualities of the artist, of course, and not necessarily the art, and McMullen’s aim is to construct a biography, not art criticism. In other cases, even the expectation of prettiness can be overwhelming; nearly all discussion of his iconic portrait of his mother, Arrangement in Grey and Black, insists on equating his representational choices with lack of emotion; it is described as “decidedly unsentimental” with colors that “are low key, verging on monochrome” and as a “composition” with “the willful oddity of a harshly cropped Polaroid” when in fact the image simply does not conform to a typically Whistlerian aesthetic of diffuse softness. If the lack of prettiness causes viewers to read more discord in an image that it demands, when images are too pretty, viewers risk overlooking discord altogether.

Repeatedly, though people share the frame, they do not seem to share an experience. Compared with others’ works, the difference in Whistler’s group depictions is stark. Consider again Egg’s Past and Present; it too depicts discord, but while its subjects might not share a gaze, they certainly are actors within the same space, responding to the same events—a posture that is not frequently discernible in Whistler’s works. A more salient comparison might be one made by Elizabeth Prettejohn, who compares Leighton’s Spanish Dancing Girl (1867), Moore’s A Musician (1867), and Whistler’s Symphony in White #3 (1865–87) to illustrate their shared traits. In Leighton’s and Moore’s paintings, there are mul-
tiple subjects; in Leighton’s, as the title indicates, a Spanish girl (later, the painting was renamed *Greek Girl Dancing*) dances while three onlookers clap, and in Moore’s, two lounging women listen to a man playing a lyre. The settings of both paintings seem to be classical—all subjects wear the loosely draped clothes of the ancients, and in both paintings all of the subjects are sharing the experience of listening to the music produced within the painting. One might safely assume that the Spanish (or Greek) girl is dancing to music supplied by someone outside of the images, and at the very least the clapping of the three people watching her would provide a rhythm; in Leighton’s, there can be no doubt that the man is playing the lyre. Other than the title, there is no indication of music within Whistler’s *Symphony in White #3*. Moreover, Whistler’s painting clearly depicts women in contemporary dress—it is a scene influenced by the japonisme that Whistler encouraged in his interior design; it is a Victorian scene. Here, as elsewhere, the choice of title is not intended to give the viewer insight into what is happening within the scene; we are not meant to view the painting as a scene of two women sharing the experience of listening, for example, to a symphony. Further, the two women in Whistler’s painting, though sharing a space, are posed in direct contraposition. The woman on the divan leans with her back to the sitter on the floor, her legs forming a vertical barrier between the two. Though their arms reach out toward one another, they do not touch. It is, in other words, a scene of disconnection, of averted gazes, and of physical dissimilarity. Prettejohn collapses these distinctions to claim that the three paintings are of a piece, are all examples of high Aestheticism. I would suggest that despite their superficial similarities—similar color tones, a similar softness of rendering—the three paintings reflect the fundamental difference between Whistler’s work and that of the Aesthetes: his painting depicts contemporary subjects, resists on every level a narrative, and gestures toward the interminable alienation between people.

**At the Piano: *Family in Profile***

In this earliest of Whistler’s successful canvases he sets down the artistic vocabulary that will define his oeuvre: the use of elements of the scene to separate subjects from one another and the depiction of subjects in profile. The visual space of *At the Piano* (figure 3) is defined in stark geometrics: the bisected bottom halves of two frames split the upper half of the image and are themselves split. This break is continued through the
dual black piano legs. These vertical elements create a central separation that separates mother from daughter.\textsuperscript{41} Echoing the upper horizon of the piano is that most Victorian of decorative elements, the wallpaper dado. Just as the two frames break the image up into two parallel columns, coinciding with the two figures, this horizontal similarly breaks the visual plane into upper and lower sections: the sitters’ heads are severed from their bodies. The result is a grid of four quadrants, balanced via opposition or repetition in shape and color: the mother’s black triangular body to the daughters’ white triangular body, the larger frame picture behind the smaller girl, and the smaller framed picture behind the larger mother. Even the girl’s shoes repeat the bracketing-off—their black straps crisscross against her white tights. Visually, it appears as a sort of mathematic equation, and on both sides are appropriate Victorian versions of mourning.\textsuperscript{42}

Breaking the plane this way ensures that a viewer realizes the spatial distance between the two figures as well as the figurative distance between them. It also mimics the spatial separation of the stereoscope, what Jonathan Crary calls “the most significant form of visual imagery in the nineteenth century.”\textsuperscript{43} In what was then a popular diversion, two subtly different images are blended via the prismatic lenses of the stereoscopic viewer to give the viewer the illusion of a three-dimensional vista. Without that technology to blend the images, to mimic the human eye’s depth perception, a viewer can focus on only one of the images at a time, the left or the right, but not both simultaneously. Whistler’s manipulation of this two-halved image insists on the lack of depth in his picture space. There is an emphatic lack of blurring, lack of mingling possible. Contributing to this effect of flat space is his use of expanses of color: the mahogany of the piano, the white of the girl’s dress, the black of the mother’s dress, the green that is repeated in the dado on the wall and the shadow of the seemingly empty frames.

As McMullen notes, Whistler employs the profile for both women, yet the organization resists McMullen’s reading that the arrangement flatters; rather, it obscures. Further, though they face each other, the subjects are not looking at each other, as might be expected in such a composition: the viewer regards the right side of the mother’s face and the left side of the daughter’s—they are placed facing each other; the mother plays the piano, the daughter ostensibly listens. And yet even that connection, one playing what the other hears, is not at all obvious. The mother’s head is turned downward and inclined slightly to the right, and her focus seems to be the keys beneath her fingers. The child faces straight ahead and yet, because she leans against the piano at its bend, is not directly across from
her mother and cannot be looking directly at her. Also separating the figures from one another are the markedly different techniques and styles used on their faces, contrasts that echo the other contextual juxtapositions of the image. The crisp, reflective surface of the piano’s top contrasts with the softened, nearly muddled rendering of the girl’s face. Warm-toned and fresh, she lacks the pictorial specificity of the older woman’s features, whose wrinkled face and double chin render her features discernible and readable in comparison.

In this early work, Whistler places two women in close physical proximity. They appear to be family. They appear to mourn a single person. They appear to share a moment of music, one playing and the other listening. And yet the composition insists on representing barriers between the two. These barriers are both physical, like the piano separating the women from each other, and visual, like the hard vertical and horizontal lines defined by the frames images, the dado, and the piano leg. Even the solidity of both women’s skirts seems repellent; all in all, it is an image of shared space but not of shared experience.

Harmony in Green and Rose: *Crowded Scenes and Cross-Purposes*

If *At the Piano* represented an isolated instance of these tropes demonstrating pictorial disconnection, the glosses of gallery notes or biographers might suffice to explain Whistler’s choices. But it is not an isolated instance; the strategies are repeated over and again, comprising the phonemes on which his artistic vocabulary is built. *Harmony in Green and Rose: The Music Room* (1861) (figure 4) features two of the same sitters depicted in *At the Piano*, Whistler’s sister and his niece, and it continues the trend begun in *At the Piano*. *The Music Room* also anticipates the pictorial moves that will come to define those who follow him: the mirror reflects a face effaced—present but not pictured in the primary frame of the image; a mirror does not reflect those figures that do occupy the focal space; visual space is flattened to the degree that the figures appear to be collaged cut-outs from other paintings. The image raises the same questions as *At the Piano*—are these three female figures experiencing the same moment in the same space?

Whistler achieves the effect of separation in a surprisingly cluttered scene. Whereas *At the Piano* was defined by austere horizontal and vertical splits, in *The Music Room* those orthogonal lines persist but are joined
by the effusive floral of window drapes that both reinforce the vertical lines, repeated as they are four times throughout the image, and scatter the cleanly readable right angles that, in the earlier canvas, composed the matrix that defined the pictorial space. And yet, just as the harsh angles of *At the Piano* enforced the rigidity of the separation of the two figures through their solidity and impenetrability, here the tangled mess of flowers (modeled on the actual drapes of the artist’s sister’s London house) contributes to the claustrophobic feeling of the image as a whole.

For *The Music Room* illustrates another version of disconnection, one predicated on too-closeness as opposed to separation or distance. The figures crowd the image, quite literally. The woman in black in the foreground overlaps the young girl reading. Pushed off the canvas on the left would be the figure whose face is reflected in the mirror—she is present, but only via image, her physicality rendered offstage. Those drapes function in this regard as well; not only their print but their placement indicates business and cramped space. They overlap the girl’s dress, their reflection in the mirrors blocks the woman’s reflection (and the reflection of the drapes is in turn blocked by the vase’s reflection), they puddle onto the floor in excess. Whistler’s aesthetic regard (or disregard) for the drapes notwithstanding, their contribution to the scene is essential. Countering the flat spaces of black and white defined by the dresses, the contrast emphasizes both extremes. Whereas in *At the Piano* those monolithic presences of mother’s and daughter’s dresses stood opposed and apart, here the black dress—not the mother’s this time—intrudes onto the space of the daughter’s dress. The curve of the woman’s bustle suggests a further crowding. And the flattening of the space is used to particular effect in the contrast between white and black; there is so little communication between the images, one imagines that they exist in different picture planes.

The effect of crowded disconnection—of people crammed into a tight space and yet utterly unaware of the other or unresponsive toward the other—echoes Courbet’s *Burial at Ornans*. Here Whistler achieves a similar effect: the women who are, ostensibly, facing one another are depicted as looking instead toward the same direction—both look to the left, one with her head inclined backward and the other forward. Splitting the two older women, the girl sits opposing each. She turns her face down, reading. If she were to be looked at, by mother, by visitor, or by viewer, she would not meet the gaze.

The title is important too. Whistler’s penchant for musical names provokes a curious reflection: whereas *At the Piano*, which depicts a
musical scene, does not benefit from a retrospective renaming, *The Music Room* does. It, like *At the Piano*, already evinces musicality in its title, even if there is no pictorial evidence of music in the scene. And yet “Harmony” as his choice—does it indeed call attention to the harmonious mingling of green and rose? Or is the naming ironic, as the image is hardly one of interpersonal harmony. Whatever narratives biographers may assign to the scene—the mourning visitation of a friend to the family, for example—*The Piano* is noisy, cluttered, and features three figures, none of which is seen in communion with any other. What kind of harmony is this?

Depictions of a lack of communication or lack of shared experience, of alienation, are represented by spatial distance but also by the cluttering of bodies, piling one on top of the other, glances effaced. It is as if Whistler insists on the distinctive presence of each figure, even going so far as to depict them in ways that make them appear as if they were not in the same space. Proximity, then, guarantees neither union nor communion.

**Wapping: Visual Interference**

In the later *Wapping* (1860–64) (figure 5), however, three figures are represented as sharing in a communal moment. Three figures sit around the table. Titled for the area of the London docks where Whistler was staying, it is a subject that he reproduced numerous times. The hatched lines of the boats’ masts and rigging form a tight web, a confusion of lines that Whistler returned to again and again. In *Wapping*, the mass forms the background for an intimate seated group, pushed to the forward boundary of the frame in the lower right corner. Art historians and biographers alike have named the sitters and provided narratives for the events depicted, usually describing a transaction between one of the men and the woman, a prostitute. What Whistler has painted, however, explicitly illustrates a scene that comprises a number of the elements that defined his earlier sitting-room paintings, all of which resist narrative. Between the woman and the central man are interposed at least seven visual barriers: the five lines of the sail behind, the gray pole (presumably a mast) with a pulley, and the black column supporting the roof; between him and the man on the far right are more sail lines and the heavy, impenetrable frame of a window. Here, as in the refined London parlor, the image contains barriers. And here Whistler’s insistence on the superficiality of the painting is crucial. Considering the image as a
scene from a story, a photograph capturing a moment of everyday life, one could certainly argue that these lines do not separate the sitters, as the rigging, the mast, the column, and the window frame are all behind them and thus do not interfere with their communication. Visually, those elements function as barriers between the subjects. The window frame, for example, is not delineated by line, paint, or color from the blackish blur where the man’s body might be.

Each of the three is painted in a curiously different manner, anticipating wildly different artists and echoing the differing manners of representation that distinguished the two subjects of *At the Piano*. The woman resembles Renoir’s dappled portraits of Valadon, her hair casting a fuzzy reddish halo around her head and her mouth blurring into her face; the central bearded man suggests Manet’s *Le Bon Bock* (1873), with ruddy skin, and clearly delineated lines on his face; and the second man, face suspended on a body cut out of the image, suggests blue-period Picasso, completely flattened, eyes hollow. Though the location has shifted, can we consider this grouping to be fundamentally different from the women in the drawing rooms of a London townhouse in *At the Piano* and *The Music Room*? They too are separated by representational style and by elements of the image that slice through the space they share.

**Looking at, Not Looking through**

Whistler’s artistic philosophy can perhaps best be summarized in the distinction he draws between looking at art and looking through it. For literary critics who privilege interpretation, it might surprise that Whistler comes down firmly on the side of looking at. Yet Whistler’s attitude is not that of the Aesthete; we should not ask that painting “elevate,” but neither should the panel “merely decorate”:

> Hence it is that nobility of action, in this life, is hopelessly linked with the merit of the work that portrays it; and thus the people have acquired the habit of looking, as who should say, not at a picture, but through it, at some human fact, that shall, or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental or moral state. So we have come to hear of the painting that elevates, and of the duty of the painter—of the picture that is full of thought, and of the panel that merely decorates.51

In refusing to provide his audience with stable narratives that rein-
force conventional notions of morality, Whistler forces that audience to encounter images which—through that very refusal—demand new ways of seeing. The artist shatters the viewer’s access to the safety of a unifying narrative; he risks alienating his audience but gains an opportunity to create a new engagement with painting. Flattening the image field, embracing musical titles, gesturing at a sense of presence rather than the instillation of a narrative; these aspects define Whistler’s oeuvre as does, perhaps, warring against the scenes of domestic tranquility that, for example, George Eliot marveled at in Dutch genre painting. Doesn’t the suggestion that his canvases inscribe the similar disconnection on display in realist novels perform the same reduction of image to narrative? Am I not imposing a story—that Whistler seeks to represent difference—where he would instead prefer a response to the canvas as canvas? In fact, it is Whistler’s very insistence, in his technique and composition as much as his statements (which depended constantly on sarcasm, irony, and provocation) on flatness, on the refusal to render images according to the strictures of true perspective and illusionism preferred by the neoclassicists who preceded him, that makes his work such a useful parallel to fiction. He insists adamantly on the artifice of his art, and not only in ways that align him with the Aesthetes. Art for art’s sake is, after all, not the same as art that confines itself to presentation, and not representation. There is no ingratiating beckoning from the eyes of his women, no acknowledgment of the other figures within the frame, much less of those outside of it, that is, those in the viewer’s position. Amplifying the artifice of the paintings, the artist reminds viewers that the thing is simply that: an object that, like the bearskin rug the subject stands on, can be moved, taken off the wall, reframed, or bought for two hundred guineas. It is consumable. Those he represents, however, are not. They are not consumable; they may not be captured or bought—not even in the images themselves; not even by the painter. Whistler’s visual strategies defy the viewer’s desire to see the painting as an instance of alterity. Like Hardy’s fiction, Whistler’s images insist that their subjects, and not the paintings themselves, are instances of the other. We may read his pictorial strategies as resisting interpretation, but in fact they call more attention to the fact of their paintedness. They instruct us to look at the paintings, and in doing so, what we see are images of people who are at odds, who are not looking at one another. Insisting that we look at and not through, he reminds that the painting is a thing.

These are aspects of painting that make it a compelling counterpoint to fiction. The unchangeable, unchallengeable boundary defined by the canvas’s end (a boundary Whistler plays with, as in The Music
Room, reminding us of its presence and that it leaves some out just as it includes others) is analogous to the defined parameters of the novel, its first sentence serving as one boundary and its last sentence as the other. Proximity does not guarantee notice, or understanding, or recognition. Whistler’s paintings depict inscrutability; so if they do mirror reality, they reflect the inscrutability inherent in all others. They show us that disconnection must be recognized and cannot be explained away; they capture dissention and concretize discord, all within and among a style that is unmistakably beautiful.