

**“There are yet other kinds of work which may be done”: Aesthetic History and the
Representation of the Italian Past, 1850-1935**

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores a number of interdisciplinary writings on the Italian past by later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artistically minded critics and cultural commentators, with a view to recovering their historiographical importance. Beginning with an exploration of the parameters and scope of a genre defined as ‘aesthetic history’, along with some theoretical work grounded in current debates about the nature of historical representation, this thesis goes on to offer in-depth discussion of texts on the Italian past by John Ruskin, Walter Pater, Vernon Lee, Henry James, D. H. Lawrence and Adrian Stokes. By offering a critical reconstruction of each author’s thinking about the past, along with the cogent and ill-explored engagements they make with historiographical study, this thesis affords the reader a better understanding of some of the tensions present in historical writing – tensions surrounding issues of epistemology, visuality, psychology and materiality – during what were decades of great change in historical thinking. Moreover, this thesis offers a detailed investigation into the important role played by the Italian past in the aesthetic-historical canon, which in turn produces a more complicated picture of the connections between literature, aesthetics and historiography during this period.

For Mom and Dad.

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Abbreviations

Throughout this thesis, the following abbreviations are used for primary texts, and refer to the editions in the 'List of Works Cited':

Ren. *The Renaissance – Studies in Art and Poetry*

Euph. *Euphorion*

I.H. *Italian Hours*

Ren. Fanc. *Renaissance Fancies*

E.P. *Sketches of Etruscan Places*

T.I. *Twilight in Italy*

Q.C. *The Quattro Cento*

Satan *Satan the Waster*

Spirit. *The Spirit of Rome*

S.R. *The Stones of Rimini*

Sunrise *Sunrise in the West*

S.B.A. *Southern Baroque Art*

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Chapter 1

Aesthetic History: The Spaces Between, or Clio Bemused

Where is the historian who can unite the beauty and purity of form that belongs in every genre to the Ancients, with the depth of research imposed on the moderns, and should we hope for him in the future?¹

Nudge Clio

she's apt to be musing.

Slap her and make her extol

all or nothing.²

In her memoir, *A Backward Glance*, Edith Wharton reflects almost disapprovingly on the relish with which she and other aesthetically-minded *litterateurs* consumed the Italian writings of figures like Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds and Vernon Lee. From the vantage point of 1934, the educational and historical frailties of these works must have been all too readily noticeable – after several decades of professional research, which produced histories whose accuracy and detail was unparalleled, such works could all too easily be dismissed as merely “agreeable volumes of travel and art-criticism of the cultured dilettante type” that “represented a high but unspecialised standard of culture.” For Wharton, only with the more discerning eye of Bernard Berenson, who preached in his volumes on Italian

¹ Sainte-Beuve, “Réflexions sur les lettres,” in *Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue Française* (Maroc, 1957), III: 516.

² David Jones, *The Anathemata* (London, 1972), 88.

painting that a combination of aesthetic receptivity and “the sternest scientific accuracy” was the correct way to discourse on the Italian artistic past, were any rigorous standards introduced into that field (Wharton 1934: 140-41). On the whole, Wharton is here probably effecting a critical distance between the newly developed, rather more specialised studies of Italian art and history and the apparent amateurish connoisseurship of these slight volumes (to which she of course contributed with her *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904) and *Italian Backgrounds* (1905)), justifying their improprieties with verifiable truth by way of their quaint antiquarianism. Indeed, a key strain in the critical work of the early decades of the twentieth century concerned itself with undoing the harm done by those delicately-refined minds of the nineteenth in eager pursuit of any heightened aesthetic experience.³ What is of more interest to us here, however, is Wharton’s “unspecialised” label for these texts. Classifying them as history is difficult, but a label of ‘travel writing’ is clearly not sufficient either – indeed, several were written without recourse to travel at all.

Almost all of the works of this type were reviewed if not negatively, then very often with bemusement. Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* attracted a (by now well-explored) barrage of criticism that resulted in significant changes to the title and body of his work for re-publication four years later, whilst Vernon Lee’s readers really did not know how to respond to her “rather scatterbrained declamations” about eighteenth-century Italian history.⁴ Even later works which followed in this “cultured dilettante” tradition drew similar criticisms – D. H. Lawrence’s *Sketches of Etruscan Places* was a magnet for some rather admonishing remarks from the *New Statesman and Nation*, and the *Observer*, the former criticising Lawrence for “mix[ing] knowledge, presumption, and wild conjecture into a

³ T. S. Eliot’s thoroughgoing critique of Pater in ‘Arnold and Pater’, or Wyndham Lewis’ unabashed contempt for “Bourgeois Victorian gushing” are two of countless examples. (See Eliot 1999: 312-20; Lewis 1983: 18).

⁴ *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1885: 225.

phantasmagoric [...] whole,” while his *Twilight in Italy* was met with sharp reprimands from the *Observer* for deviation from historical fact, producing an impression of a “strange volcanic country [...] unlike any Italy known to history”, with the reviewer finally coming to the conclusion that “what [Lawrence] needs is education.”⁵ Adrian Stokes’ lack of clarity and historical accuracy also attracted comment. D. S. Meldrum, writing in the *Burlington Magazine*, found that the main theme in Stokes’ *The Quattro Cento* “is never defined,” and that the reader “must look nowhere for definitions. Many of [the work’s] generalisations appear rash and some of them even ridiculous. And its expression, elaborate, involved, sometimes beautiful, and sometimes tortuous, does not contrive to make itself clear” (Meldrum 1932: 238). Unspecified, unclear, ill-defined and unscholarly, these volumes elicited comments bordering on scorn and ridicule from a variety of reviewers in a range of publications. Today, they are (with the exception of Pater, perhaps) hardly read at all; in the case of canonical writers such as D. H. Lawrence and Henry James, their Italian writings only ever serve as a footnote to their greater fictional achievements, whilst the less familiar authors have all but disappeared from critical view. When they are read, they remain only as a marginal class of literary history, or included as rather subjective ‘sources’ for a history of mentalities and ideas. That this should be the case is interesting in itself, and it is a subject to which I will return intermittently during the course of this thesis. But what is interesting about most of this criticism is that it does not concern issues of aesthetic style, nor taste, nor indeed connoisseurship, but is in fact clustered around accusations of poor scholarly methodology and deviation from historical fact. What appear to Edith Wharton to be rather “agreeable volumes” were in many ways highly contested representations of an Italian past, often eliciting anything other than an agreeable reception. Why this should be the case is, at face

⁵ *New Statesman and Nation*, 22nd October 1932: 492; *Observer*, 25th June 1916: 24, 26.

value, difficult to explain. Readers of any of these texts today would hardly turn the pages expecting to find a satisfactory outline of Italian history, laden with chronologies, footnotes and bibliographies. But we can be very sure that those readers a century ago did not go to these works written by aesthetes, novelists and philosophers for their Italian history either, when they had perfectly adequate Mommsens and Burckhardts and Michelets on the shelves. And a Baedeker guide was of infinitely more use when strolling around one of the great Italian cities than a volume by Pater, Lee or Stokes. Why then chastise the lack of an objective history offered by them?

Perhaps most of the disparagement can be ascribed to the difficulty critics and commentators found in defining the genre and purpose of these texts. Very often, the arguments presented depended equally upon fiction and historical fact, drew upon dubious sources and professional authority in equal measure and with little distinction between them, and very often came to wide-ranging conclusions that simply could not be supported by evidence. But, in invoking the objects and events of the past *for their pastness*, these works deliberately enter into an historical matrix, and judged against the prevailing contemporary notions about the practice of history, they fall quite a way short of the mark. Replete with generalisations, psychological and aesthetic impressions, and flights of fancy, they offer speculation in place of falsifiable proof, scattered references in place of rigorous documentation and fragmentary sketches in place of historical continuity. In this sense, then, the reaction against them is entirely justified – they are poor approximations of scientific historical scholarship.

We might be persuaded to leave it there, were it not for the consistent and demonstrable negotiations each of these authors makes with the received ideas of history, along with a new appreciation for marginalized and novel historical approaches. What seems to have been glossed-over is (in Nietzschean terms) the *attitude* such works take towards the past.⁶ The prevailing assumption, in the criticisms briefly outlined above, is that these works actually obtain to a scientific history, to a rational and deterministic treatment of the past. Conjecture, abstraction, diversion and generalisation are thus seen as deviations from the ‘truth’ of history, and antiquarian connoisseurship and “cultural dilettantism” are taken as imperfect approximations to the scientific method. If such writing is taken on its own terms, however, as a specific kind of relationship to the past, much more valuable insight can be garnered about the relationship between the aesthetic and historical approach, and about the ‘historical-mindedness’ of the period more generally. This “art-criticism of a cultured dilettante type” flourished in the spaces between a professional, academic history that had relinquished all interest in the haphazard practices of men and women of letters and a modern artistic arena declaiming loudly its rejection of the aesthetic and historical principles of its forbears. And if there has been a prevailing tendency to gauge this style of writing against one or other of these poles of history and aesthetics, then it may well be that the only conceivable way of adequately classifying such a body of work is in terms of an alternative historiography.

In recent decades there have been a number of attempts to better conceptualise the role of history in the aesthetic practices of some canonical literary figures and cultural critics of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century. Carolyn Williams, for one, has attempted to reconcile the twin pulls of history and aesthetics in Walter Pater’s work – particularly *in The*

⁶ For Nietzsche, the historical ‘attitude’ that one brought to the study of the past necessarily determined what it was possible to say, but more importantly, it was representative of the cultural ‘need’ for history dominant during different periods of time. I discuss Nietzsche more fully below.

Renaissance and *Marius the Epicurean* – by suggesting the mutual interplay of artistic and social impulses in his work. At a broader level, James Longenbach's *Modernist Poetics of History* (1987) was perhaps the first sustained attempt to trace the systematic engagement with historical ideas across the broad literary period, dealing as it does with the historical realm in Pater, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In a cogent analysis of a number of aestheticist and modernist texts, Longenbach explores the avoidance of “the construction of large-scale patterns for history and [the] focus on the problematic relationship of the interpreter and the past” (Longenbach 1987: x). Offering much evidence that Pater, Yeats, Pound and Eliot were concerned not only with some abstracted concept of history, but were actively exploring the consequences of applying to their own works the methods of a wide range of historians and philosophers, from Burckhardt and Nietzsche to Croce and F. H. Bradley, Longenbach begins to hint at the depth of the interest in historical theory, but he does not go as far as to suggest that they do anything other than use history as an elaborate conceit for an exploration of the human condition. Longenbach quotes Paul de Man's assertion in *Blindness and Insight*, that the age of cultural modernity was imbued with “a desire to wipe out whatever came earlier”, and of course the idea is still a powerful idea today, but the intimation is that the period rejects historical ideas out of hand (de Man 1983: 150) – thus, Longenbach can characterise modernity “not as an historical period, but as an antihistorical state of mind” (Longenbach 1987: 7).

Louise Blakeney Williams' *Modernism and the Ideology of History* (2002) traces out an engagement with history in five canonical modernists: W. B. Yeats, Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme and D. H. Lawrence. Arguing against “some observers [who] may judge the Modernists' critical writings and their uses of history as superficial and naïve”, Williams

suggests that it was precisely for this group that “the idea of progress died and a different concept of history was born.” (Williams 2002: 3, 2). Careful to note the importance of contemporary political anxieties, imperial policies and concerns over the role of art in social life in the uptake of historical ideas, this study charts the development of a new, vitalist engagement with history that was filled to some degree with hope, in the face of the failure of the grand narrative of progress with the onset of war:

The [...] views of history invented by the literary Modernists to provide a sense of order and control in the “curious drama” of Edwardian Britain may seem farfetched to many people today. But they did provide some of the most creative writers of the twentieth century with confidence and optimism. They allowed them to expand the horizons of Western art beyond contemporary Europe and accept the influence of widely different cultures. (Williams 2002: 212)

In essence, though, Williams follows a trajectory familiar to most students of modernist aesthetics – the rejection (in these writers) of British liberal democratic politics and teleological progressivism, with its attendant Whiggish modes of reading the past, in favour of radicalism and non-Western ways of viewing history. Williams’ approach is limited in scope; the central organising argument is a rather monochromatic opposition of “linear” or “progressive” academic history against “cyclical” or “spiral” histories in the works of these five writers. Of course, these mythic frames of reference are certainly distinguishing principles of the later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century understanding of man’s place in relation to his forbears, and to society more generally, and there is no doubt that this way of interpreting historical pattern is an important facet in the literary and aesthetic connection with the past during the period. Both Williams and Longenbach are quite correct to find in

Eliot's exploration of Eastern or primitive models of history, Pound's invocation of the concept of *aion* (ancient Greek mythic time) in *The Cantos*, and Yeats' mystical sense of the past a reflection of wider attempts to return to ancient, classical or primitive models for an understanding of history. The Apollonian and Dionysian impulses that run in Nietzsche's body of historical work, the widely debated oscillation between Classicism and Romanticism as two ways to conceive of man's relationship to his society and his history, and the rise of a cultural anthropology interested in ritual and myth are all examples of a commitment to dealing with conceptions of time and models of historical development that were alien in the Western *logos*. Moreover all of this is demonstrated by the sheer popularity of works that afforded new vistas on the past based on 'long' time (James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* might be the best example). At the same time, however, it is also quite demonstrable that the discipline of *history* was pulling in the opposite direction, from the mythic to the rational, from macro to micro and from speculative anthropology to documentary socio-economic. What is noticeable about both Williams and Longenbach's studies is that although they move away from the rather dated idea that literary and aesthetic criticism isolated itself from a commitment to historical thinking during its aestheticist and modernist high points, invariably they find only an engagement with an escapist tangent of historical study. There is a noticeable desire to privilege the mythic structures writers drew upon to the detriment of any analysis of the negotiations these writers made with contemporary, mainstream historical scholarship. Not only does this homogenise the spectrum of historiographical approaches to the past in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, but it also does not sufficiently recognise the diverse influences on these and other writers of the period. To suggest that the trends in academic history are ignored or rejected out of hand by 'aesthetic' historians is to ignore the cogent and nuanced negotiations they made with that field.

Walter Pater, Vernon Lee and D. H. Lawrence and Adrian Stokes, for example, were all more than well read in historical thought, demonstrating not only a sound knowledge of recent scholarship on both history and Italy, but a level of commitment to looking at the past with an awareness of the academic methods laid down for doing so. The texts produced in these instances occupy a fertile area between history and aesthetics, where the artistic, cultural or even imagined past is painted against a landscape of ‘real’ historical change. In other cases, there is a fuzzier use of historical methodology; in John Ruskin, Henry James and George Gissing, the attentiveness to the actualities of history – whatever meaning that concept has – is diverted through other concerns, be they polemical, political or religious. Such approaches might be said to lie in the zone between systematic thought and imagination, but nevertheless form an important part of the canon of aesthetic history writing on Italy because of the alternative historiographical approaches they make in interpreting the remnants of the past. The blurring of the lines between fact and fiction, ‘real’ pasts and their imagined corollaries – in other words between the disciplines bounded by professional discourses of positivism, rationality and teleology and those delimited less rigorously by the parameters of aesthetic ‘value’, sensation and affect – has the effect of bringing into relief the practices banished from academic history.

My contention here is that a number of texts written on Italian history in the seventy-five years or so that cross the turn of the twentieth century, expose a number of until now under-recognised and under-theorised manifestations of the historical impulse. What the works of Pater, Lee, Lawrence or Stokes exemplifies, I argue, is a distinct but critically largely unrecognised genre of ‘aesthetic history’, the term as I use it here both reflecting the subject

matter of this type of writing (the aesthetic, material or imaginative past) and denoting a different way of *conceiving* history, using a wide range of alternative historical methodologies and invoking a number of new tropes so as to better capture elements of the past that are often inaccessible to the documentary historian. “An aesthete,” according to David Carrier, “is someone deeply engaged with painting and sculpture who sees the world in terms usually associated with viewing art, giving special value to the visual world for its own sake; and who brings this way of thinking to experience outside of art” (Carrier 1997: 6). An aesthetic approach to history based on this definition would thus be distinct from *connoisseurship*, which fetishizes the art object, nor would it be undertaken on the same principles as *art history*, the study of art in relation to itself and the socio-economic factors of its production. *Aesthetic history* offers its scopic, visual and imaginative strategies in order to delineate a new relationship to the past that stresses the shaping force of art on wider culture and experience, and the importance of the individual interpretation. All of the writers explored in this thesis are aesthetic historians in this sense, for whom it is not that the world of fact offers a poor representation of the past, but that an understanding of history demands a connection with the past through its art-historical, literary and cultural remnants and a philosophical consideration of the merits of so doing. The elucidation of the principles and strategies of this ‘aesthetic history’ is the aim of this thesis.

The significance of the Italian landscape within their oeuvres is central; no other spatial-temporal site offering the same types of access to the past. But my exploration of these figures’ aesthetic preoccupation with things Italian during the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries does not amount to a survey of the literature available.⁷ Nor do I seek to

⁷ Kenneth Churchill (1980) provides a survey with as much detail as the subject will ever deserve, complemented by Fraser (1992) and Bullen (1994).

explain the fullness of the treatment of Italy in the Anglo-American consciousness during that period. Rather, I want to explore the nexus of aesthetic criticism, history and Anglophone writing on Italy in John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, Walter Pater's *The Renaissance*, Vernon Lee's *Euphorion*, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* and *The Spirit of Rome*, Henry James' *Italian Hours*, D. H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* and *Etruscan Places*, George Gissing's *By the Ionian Sea* (briefly), and Adrian Stokes' *The Quattro Cento* and *The Stones of Rimini*, in order to demonstrate the specific historiographical techniques that these writers choose, and how an awareness of these can inform our understanding of the 'aesthetic' approach to history. If it is true that this genre seeks to reflect quite deeply and knowingly on historical practice, then its metahistorical emplotments are worthy of the attention they have not hitherto been afforded.

A number of things should be achieved in the study of these inherently interdisciplinary writings. Firstly, it becomes evident that the engagement made with history by a number of writers who are typically far more familiar to literature and art historical scholars has been consistently under-theorised, even in the few places it has been noted. The prime explanation put forward for this is the supposed antithetical nature of aestheticist and historicist paradigms. The typical aestheticist strategies employed in the representation of some cultural object involve separating it from its historical, political and material adjuncts, in order to better explore the sensations and impressions it induces. This process of "aesthetic detachment" is a well-recorded one. Writing a review of David Carrier's recent collection of the autobiographical and semi-autobiographical works of Pater, Ruskin and Stokes, Geoffrey Newman declares that "many art historians would consider that the aesthete disregards contexts of production, reception and function as well as historical determinants of style", but

notes that “the aesthete’s stance presupposes the grounding of aesthetic experience in the processes of life” and “is less likely to separate ‘art’ from ‘life’ than the professional art historian or critic” (Newman 1998: 627). In other words, the holistic nature of the aesthetic experience has no room within it for historical and historicist contemplation, the aesthete not able to find sufficient detachment from the subject of his study to separate his experience from the ‘facts’ of the object under scrutiny.

Even in critical discourse about aestheticism there is very little study of the logic of this relationship to the objects of the past. Post-New Historical thinking has severely undermined the model of a one-way discourse between critic and art-object (be that a painting, a sculpture or a book), stressing rather the historical embeddedness of the critic and the difficulties inherent in determining one stable meaning for the art object. What this means is that the New Historicist paradigm posits that the familiar aestheticist indifference to the notions of historical ‘weight’ is not as straightforward as it seems to be. This thesis treats works of aesthetic history in a broadly historicist manner, plotting in a continuum the cultural events and objects of the Italian past, the intellectual engagement with them in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the study of those works at a moment where the parameters for legitimate historiographical study have been widened. The purpose of the following sections of this introductory chapter, therefore, is to illuminate some of the key strands of historical thinking during the three-quarters of a century after 1850, in order to better situate ‘aesthetic history’ in relation to historiographical, art historical and literary debate in the period, to outline the key principles of the aesthetic-historical approach, to begin to suggest why the Italian past in particular held a specific power over the British aesthetic

consciousness, and to suggest some of the ways in which more recent historiographical scholarship has opened up some doors for fruitful studies in this genre.

In 1965, Maurice Mandelbaum drew attention to the “rather strange fact” that “those who have concerned themselves with the general problems of historiographical method have rarely discussed the question of how the methods of ‘special histories,’ such as histories of philosophy, or of art [...] are related to what they regard as paradigmatic cases of historiographical practice” (Mandelbaum 1965: 42). It is a subject which philosophers of history have only begun to think through in the last half-century. These “special histories” often exist on the margins of historiographical thinking, making constant negotiations between the authorised practices of historical source-work and the rather ‘difficult-to-handle’ materials of their topic (for instance, works of art, or philosophical ideas in flux). They are, for Mandelbaum, never on very steady ground – and are of interest precisely because of that fact. But Mandelbaum was not the first to notice the difficulty inherent in some historical texts – the idea probably stretches back to Plato’s division of history and myth, the latter taking on extra-historical elements in its presentation of a quasi-real past, full of imaginations and eternal truths, but certainly the issue became more complicated during the high-period of historical thinking, the nineteenth century.

Stephen Bann identifies the ‘rise of history’ with the early decades of the nineteenth century, noting that “from being a literary genre whose ‘borders’ were open to other forms of literature, history became over half a century or so the paradigmatic form of knowledge to

which all others aspired” (Bann 1995: 4), and several other historiographers have noted the power that historical thought wielded not just in an academic, but within a socio-cultural context during the nineteenth century.⁸ As Bann argues,

Foucault’s dialectical model of loss and retrieval helps to account for the fact that 19th-century man did not simply discover history: he needed to discover history, or, as it were, to remake history on his own terms. It is this overriding cultural need [...] which can be shown to be common both to Ranke’s deeply motivated objectification of the protocols of historical reconstruction, and to Carlyle’s passionate evocation of subjective response to the past. (Bann 1989: 102-3)

In other words, the impulse to history and the socio-psychology of the later nineteenth century are intimately connected. This ‘cult of the historical’ manifested itself in a number of ways, ranging from the presence of the historical subject in art forms (the historical novel of the age of Sir Walter Scott, the *genre historique* that developed alongside traditional modes of painting around the same time) to the increasing pervasiveness of the historical subject in wider culture, the representation of history being the mainstay of new modes of popular spectacle, such as the historical museum. The “historical-mindedness” (Bann 1995: xi) of the long nineteenth-century has often been considered its defining trait. And any number of historiographies centred around the history of ideas find that period, beginning with the death of Kant and ending with the First World War, predominantly historical in its ways of coming to understand itself, its strategies of representation and its outlook.⁹

⁸ See Breisach (1983), 303-318; Dray (1995), 21-27; and Bann (1995), 3-10

⁹ See for instance Breisach (1983), Clark (2004), White (1973).

The nineteenth century was also marked by a number of revolutions in historical methodology. The school of thinking originating with Leopold von Ranke in Germany, with its firm belief in rigorous scholarship and extensive use of archive materials, spread quickly across the continent. A new type of historian evolved, one committed to gaining a knowledge of history by knowing the sum of its contents. One of the consequences of the revolution in history associated with Ranke was the increased marginalisation of social and, in particular, cultural history. For even if Ranke himself actually wrote with sustained recourse to the history of art, literature and culture, his underlying methodology, associated as it was with the rigorous examination of archival sources, was taken up by European historians in the formation of new historical paradigms which relegated practitioners of cultural history to the role of *dilettanti*. The historical journals formed in the middle and later decades of the nineteenth century, for example, shifted noticeably in focus towards professional reportage of political and constitutional history. The articles contained in the early volumes of the *Historische Zeitschrift* (founded in 1856), the *Revue Historique* (1876) and the *English Historical Review* (1886) concentrate markedly on the history of political events – the preface of the first volume of the *English Historical Review* dedicated the journal to the events of “States and Politics.”¹⁰ Along with this new focus, a new type of history, concerning itself with exploring the moral content of the past, flourished. And as soon as historical narrative became less about evoking the past and more firmly centred on drawing moral, ethical and intellectual lessons from it, then a recourse to the images and artistic remnants of that past was going to be less important than the historical exegesis practiced by documentary historians. By the end of the century the professionalisation of the disciplines at institutions of higher

¹⁰ *English Historical Review*, I (1886), vi.

education across the civilised world rendered any work which did not comply to those exacting, professional standards redundant as history.

But to characterise the historiographical field of the second half of the nineteenth century by the exploits of only its most politically- and constitutionally-minded practitioners, as so many historiographers have done, is to silence the diversity of historical thinking in the period. If nineteenth- and early-twentieth century historiographical thinking is to be properly understood as the diverse set of accepted and marginalized practices it was, then the concept of the historiographical *spectrum* must be introduced. The discourses of a rigorously empirical history formed simply one extreme of the spectrum of historiographic approaches to the study of the past operating in the nineteenth century. The field of cultural history still thrived; Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet at the Collège de France and Jacob Burckhardt at Basle were producing innovative – and very popular – histories of the Renaissance founded less on the political actions of warring Italian states than on the interactions of religion, art and culture. Michelet's *Histoire de France* might be described as a form of prosopography, describing as it did “the history of those who have suffered, declined and died without being able to describe their sufferings” (Michelet, 1980: 88). Burckhardt's historical approach, too, was founded on the express belief that “real history writing requires that one live in that fine intellectual fluid which emanates to the searcher from all kinds of monuments, from art and poetry as much as from the historians proper” (Burckhardt 1965: 217). I explore in more detail the impact of both writers' works in Chapters Two and Three. And Michelet's and Burckhardt's cultural forays into the past were not the only departures from an increasingly homogenised political-historical field. Texts such as Fustel de Coulanges *The Ancient City* focussed on the history of religion and morality, while economic history thrived, Peter Burke

noting that, of all alternative historiographies in the period, the ‘economic historians were perhaps the best organised dissenters from political history’ (Burke 2004: 8).

The field of the philosophy of history, which we shall naturally see a lot more of in each of the following chapters, was punctuated by a number of key works that had cross-disciplinary resonance. A crucial leap forward in the conception of historical consciousness is found in the work of Friedrich Nietzsche. From the publication of *The Use and Abuse of History for Life*, Nietzsche’s thought was shaped by the consideration of the individual’s relation to the past. Nietzsche’s early work was becoming increasingly familiar in Britain by the late 1870s, and his influence is manifest in historical thinking from that time.¹¹ His now well-known formulation of the three impulses that man has towards history (the “monumental”, the “antiquarian” and the “critical”) offered late nineteenth-century historians an awareness of some of the basic tenets of their art. For Nietzsche, the historiographical process (fact-gathering, narrative construction, and so on) is ultimately shaped by the *attitude* to the past adopted by the historian, and the historian’s age more generally. History, he asserts, “is the work of the dramatist: to think one thing with another, and weave the elements into a single whole, with the presumption that the unity of plan must be put into the objects if it is not already there” (Nietzsche 1957: 37-38). The monumental compulsion to the past is perhaps the most acutely nineteenth-century in its scope; for Nietzsche, this type of historical attitude is “is necessary above all to the man of action and power who fights a great fight and needs examples, teachers, and comforters; he cannot find them among his contemporaries” (Nietzsche 1957: 16).

¹¹ See Bridgewater (1999) for a fuller understanding of how Nietzsche’s ideas were transmitted during the 1870s and 1880s.

Another of the great de-mythologisers of the period, Sigmund Freud, in his work, invokes history and historicist study at almost every level. Unjustly discarded as an historical thinker, Freud, in his exploration of human mental process and cognition, utilises techniques for recovering memory and significant images, techniques certainly not alien to the historian. In his own classics of a version of psychohistory, works such as *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), Freud demonstrates how terms invented to describe psychic processes and mental structures can be applied to history. His belief that all human memory was recoverable led to his study of myth in a systematic way, in the belief that it would lead to significant insight into the past.¹² As Patrick H. Hutton observes “[o]ne cannot help but notice the affinities between [Freud’s] interests and those of students of memory [...] Though Freud was a scientist, there was something in his method akin to that of the magi of the Renaissance.” (Hutton 1993: 61). For Freud, in an explanatory gesture pregnant with a later Benjaminian sense of the relation of dialectical images to the (semi-mythic) past, images conjured up by the memory, or images that seem surprising to the viewer or dreamer, contain mnemonic codes for a personal and (more importantly here) an historical understanding of their significance. And for Benjamin, this conception clearly feeds into a cogent philosophy of history – “history decays into images, not into stories” (Benjamin 2002: 476).

In rendering legitimate the identification of the self in the past, Freudian psychohistory offered the aesthetic historian new tools for the conceiving of the past. Firstly, there is a distinct widening of the perimeter of what can be considered historical ‘data’. The importance

¹² Of course this is not a new suggestion by Freud: Giambattista Vico’s approach to the past, which held a significant appeal to a number of writers and thinkers of the period, was founded on an analysis of representation in the early mythologies of civilisations. See Mali (1992) and Miller (1995) for Vico’s contribution to ‘mythic history’ and its take up in the nineteenth- and twentieth centuries.

of the image as a non-narrative, non-teleological trope is confirmed by Freud's historical reading of aboriginal and primitive totemic practices, early-Jewish historiography and human culture more generally. As a unit of cultural currency (what might later be described as a *meme*), the image might offer the historian recourse to different explanatory strategies; for instance, histories organised around memory, personal experience and impression. It might also authorise a new form of history founded not on agrarian data, inoculation records and gross domestic product, but rather on image-making and wider cultural practices. Secondly, and perhaps most pertinently, we can begin to chart a line connecting personal experience and the past. Freud's form of psychohistory, which developed into a genre of its own throughout the twentieth century, suggests that the relationship between the reader (or perhaps *viewer*) of history and the materials of the past is a fertile one.¹³

In one sense, all of these fluctuations in historical thinking are remnants of the debates about whether history could be considered primarily a scientific or an artistic discipline (a topic I return to in Chapter Three). It is only very recently that this issue has been resolved with any consensus, as theorists have taken up the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century dissatisfactions with history and rendered them a subject worthy of study in their own right. For if the period I discuss in this thesis is, as I have shown, characterised by a separation of literary and historiographical exploits along epistemological lines, then the contemporary philosophy of history has challenged that separation, through examination of the ways in which, in writing history, the historian relies on a spectrum of processes, some purely factual and others less so, some linguistic and others visual. Across the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a number of historians and philosophers of history have engaged with the wider

¹³ See Albin (1980) for a more rounded exploration of the discipline of psychohistory.

movements in critical theory (deconstruction, the linguistic turn, postmodernism and 'post-theory' more generally) to reflect on the practices of their own discipline. As Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow summarise,

Among the assumptions of epistemology [that deconstructive historians] question are: the epistemological principle of empiricism whereby content (the past) must always determine its narrative shape (form); the existence of discoverable emplotment (that the story exists in the action/intentions of historical agents), and that the ontological separation of knower (historian/being) and known (past/history) leads to objectivity. (Jenkins and Munslow 2004: 12)

The result of such reflection has not only been a more rigorous and systematic study of the modes of writing history, and a heightened sense of the 'literariness' of history but, increasingly, an awareness of the possibility that "we may have come to the end of history in all of its current manifestations; that our 'postmodern condition' can perhaps produce its own, non-historical acts of the imagination for us to live by which do not figure in its number any sort of recognisable history at all" (Jenkins and Munslow (ed.) 2004: 2). The historian's chosen narrative of a history emerging triumphant from the seductions of literature, to be reborn as a scientific discipline dependent upon observations of fact and transparent narratives constructed around those observations, is all but irreconcilable with the observations of figures such as Hayden White or Dominick LaCapra.

White's is perhaps the most important contribution towards a more sophisticated understanding of the rhetoric of history, bringing the study of history, literature and aesthetics closer together, developing a mode of thinking which focuses on the constructedness of historical writing, and isolating a number of shared concerns for historians, philosophers and

literary critics alike. What White demonstrates quite clearly, in a body of work including *Metahistory* (1973) *Tropics of Discourse* (1986), *The Content of the Form* (1990) and *Figural Realism* (1999), is that “history is not only an object we can study, [...] it is also and even primarily a certain kind of relationship to ‘the past’ mediated by a distinctive kind of written discourse” (White 1999: 46). *Metahistory* (1973) outlines the emplotment strategies employed by historical texts. White delineates four primary modes of ‘telling’ the facts, in plots that are either Romantic, Comic, Tragic or Satirical and presents four different rhetorical strategies for the achievement of these plots; metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy and irony. White’s thesis, in drawing attention to the metahistorical elements of history, is to examine more closely the second-level structures of behind historical texts, and to reintegrate them back inside history, making those seemingly unhistorical elements suitable for historiographical study. The relevance of this for my purpose here cannot be overemphasised; the theoretically-enhanced arguments put forward by White and a number of contemporaneous philosophers of history extend a much earlier awareness about the construction of the stories of history. White’s argument, clearly informed by the developments in structuralist critical thinking, is in actuality a reincarnation of one that had arisen much earlier. Bernard Berenson, for example, reiterating a number of lines of argument that he developed throughout the early twentieth century, draws distinct parallels between the practices of the *litterateur* and historian in *Aesthetics and History*.¹⁴ The chapter devoted to “Art History and Art Practice” demonstrates quite clear thinking about the constructedness of the representations of the past. He says that “History is a narrative that facts cannot disprove”, a discipline marked as much by “the presentation of the facts in a narrative as much as the facts themselves” (Berenson 1950: 229).

¹⁴ *Aesthetics and History*, published in 1950, is in actuality a distillation of a number of ideas that had permeated Berenson’s work in the early decades of the twentieth century. See, for instance, his *Venetian Painters of the Renaissance* (1894), *The Drawings of the Florentine Painters* (1903) and his much later *Seeing and Knowing* (1953) – particularly as discusses the epistemological basis of knowing the past.

White's argument is significant for us for what it implies as much as for what it articulates. If the larger scale structures of history-writing are as much concerned with artistic or literary devices as they are with historical verifiability, then surely it is possible to conceive of a sliding scale where histories are either more or less dependent upon their historiographical frames. A history that very much depends on, say, the economic data of the Irish potato famine may be at one end of the scale, while an impressionist reaction to the changing styles of Venice might be at the other. In both instances, White would argue, the narrative presentation dominates the 'truth' of each history, but in one which was far less reliant on 'facts' for its thesis, the form that the argument takes might draw more attention than the content. In the case of those great nineteenth-century historians that White analyses, the progressive, teleological narrative form – in one of its tropes – often dominates the historical material, seeking to overlay the 'facts' of the past with a guiding storyline that leads seamlessly towards the present.¹⁵ But if we were to apply the same methodology to, say, Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, or Lee's *Euphorion*, where there is a dearth of historical 'evidence', then our attention may be drawn to the experimental, alternative tropes for conceptualising the past, where one coherent narrative simply cannot hold the diversity of the story being told.

We can therefore extrapolate from White's thesis in *Metahistory*: If narrative (with its teleological, often eschatological form) is a particularly pertinent trope to those historians fed on a diet of the historical novel in an age of stable European progressivism, then by the 1870s, the burgeoning crisis in historicism and aesthetic experimentalism began to find different

¹⁵ This is certainly the case in White's analysis of Michelet, Ranke, Toqueville and Burckhardt. See White (1973): 133-264.

tropes more suitable as vehicles for historical description. White does describe what he terms “The Modernist Event” in history (one that shares much with its literary counterpart) that results in the “collapse of the trinity of event, character and plot” (White 1999: 66). Despite the terminological slippages here (‘Modernism’ for the historian, whilst occurring at much the same time as its literary counterpart, means more or less a turn towards science, rationalism and technical vocabulary, its foremost practitioners Louis Namier, Herbert Butterfield and the Cambridge historians of the early decades of the twentieth century¹⁶), it is clear that there is some overlap between the realisation that the historical event is, largely, inscrutable and the drive to find new ways of trying to capture some of its historicity. As we shall see, the “dissolution of the event” is imbued with particular power as an historicist device in aesthetic histories. The imaginative reconstruction of incidents and the celebration of the accidental occurrence, staple techniques of the writers I go on to explore here, are cited in many cases as a wilful evasion of the factuality of the past, but that evasion is most often a *considered* one – that is, a rendering of the past without recourse to all of the ‘facts’, but with a clear and demonstrable knowledge of them.

Siegfried Kracauer, too, drew attention to the connections between historical truth and the utilisation of metahistorical devices to fabricate notions of unity. Asking whether “the unity he [the historian] looks for is discovered or imposed?” Kracauer ultimately decides that the narrative frame for the historical event is at least as interesting as that which can be garnered from the event alone (Kracauer 1969: 166), and goes so far as to suggest that,

¹⁶ Michael Bentley deals with these terminological issues, and the relationship between modernism and postmodernism in historical studies. See Bentley (2005): 194-218.

No doubt the general historian's foremost concern is the unruly *content* of his narrative. Perhaps the most conspicuous device to bring it in line consists in the adaptation to the historical medium of one or another of the several great philosophical ideas which pretend to cover and explain the whole historical process [...]. The air is impregnated with these ideas, so that they may appear to him as something given and self-evident. He may not recognise them as the speculative abstractions they are. (Kracauer 1969: 169)

Going on to discuss a number of different "abstractions", and the "false narratives" they induce, Kracauer asserts that it is the study of the metahistorical field which "brings the age-old controversy about the relations between history and art into focus" (169,175).

We might, after Kracauer and White, take our cue from Benedetto Croce, writing several decades earlier. Croce intimates that the tendency in history-writing is towards an illusion of flow, substituting "aesthetic coherence of representation for the logical coherence unobtainable" (Croce 1960: 35). If it is possible to imagine aesthetic and logical coherence as twin magnetic pulls in the writing of history, it is the excess of the former which distinguishes the genre outlined here, and which contributes to the lines of criticism that I began this chapter with. But, as we have seen, this reliance on aesthetic coherence cannot simply be equated with ahistorical sophistry; on the contrary, a willingness to forgo logical and accurate progression in favour of aesthetic unity in the study of history serves to bring to the fore some often silent historical concerns regarding the legitimacy of historical 'fact', the relative validity of historical sources and, vitally, the purpose of history.

There are, therefore, some useful points to take forward from the narrativist work done on historiography during the course of the last thirty years or so; we can do a bit more justice to

the often highly embellished and embroidered accounts of the past if a fuller account of the historian's relationship to narrative form is better understood. But there are even more constructive advances in historiographical thought that offer some better ways to think about aesthetic history, outside of the remit of narrative analysis. Indeed, philosophers of history have recently questioned the monochromic characterisation of 'history as text'. Frank Ankersmit has posited, in a sustained argument over the course of the last fifteen years, that there are alternative tropologies at work in the writing of history different to the literary ones Hayden White describes. Ankersmit argues that "whenever philosophy of history in the past appealed to visual and pictural metaphors, its concern was with the question of truth, the reliability, or the adequacy of the historical text," and he likens the historian's aim to tell the truth in his text to the creation of "a picture of the past, just as the figurative painting aims to be a correct representation of a landscape or of a person sitting for a portrait" (Ankersmit and Kellner, 1995: 213-4). Drawing on Goodman's philosophy regarding the difference in the capacity to transmit meaning between words and pictures, Ankersmit outlines a new historiographical trope – that of the visual. The historian who *sees* his material must needs utilise a different methodology to capture its meaning.¹⁷ If White's suggestion that the literariness of history is demonstrable by narrative strategies, emplotment and literary tropes, then the proposal that an alternative history, predicated on images and impressions – quite clearly aesthetic practices – means that we have the theoretical tools to treat a genre that bases most of its analysis on the visual remnants of history a little differently. For Ankersmit, the historian who relies on pictures and art objects to tell his story is doing something manifestly different to the historian who spends his days in the archives.

¹⁷ Ankersmit's argument is long and complex, and there is no room to go into it here. See Ankersmit and Kellner (1995): 212-40.

Michael Ann Holly provides one framework for the consideration of this visual approach in *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (1996), in which she reads the art works which subsequently function as the ‘historical data’ in a number of cultural histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as symbiotic with the stories told about them in those texts. Discussing a number of works in the field of art history, Holly argues “by way of specific historical examples that representational practices encoded in works of art continue to be encoded in their commentaries” (xiii). In a similar way, Francis Haskell, in *History and Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (1993), suggests that issues about artistic materials (and the often non-objective interpretations offered about them) have been ever present in historical thinking. Arguing that by the nineteenth century, “serious historians showed themselves to be increasingly reluctant to use the evidence offered by art and artefacts when trying to interpret the past,” Haskell goes on to explore the marginalized approach of antiquarians and connoisseurs to the study of the past. Stephen Bann’s work on history, art and image, too, has been most enlightening with regards to the relationship between them. In a series of works, such as *The Clothing of Clio* (1984), *The Inventions of History* (1990) and *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (1995), Bann consistently argues for the historicity of images and artefacts, and the historiographical depth of the work written about them. Suggesting that ‘history’ covers a whole gamut of responses to the past, Bann argues persuasively for a re-appreciation of works that have so often been sidelined for their difficult and problematic historiography. Thus, in *The Inventions of History*, Bann offers up to the reader a demonstration of the silences in historical thinking, and a way of formulating a better understanding of the spaces between the cracks of historiography. Likewise, he pre-emptly our conceptualisation of the form of aesthetic history as being tied closely to the art objects it describes. Suggesting that the antiquarian impulse in history is essentially a

“psychoanalytic counterpart to the fetishistic appropriation of objects”, he goes some way towards what we shall see as an obsession with the depths of historicity in Italian fragments and art objects – certainly in Vernon Lee, D. H. Lawrence and Adrian Stokes (Bann 1990: 120).

It is Paul Crowther who perhaps most forcefully proposes a path out of the poststructuralist quagmire left by the narrativists. Suggesting that art history has evolved into an increasingly constricted set of practices which elide some important questions about the status of art works and the critical responses evoked by them, Crowther seeks to re-orientate the historical study of art towards questions of “art’s normative significance”, and incorporate what have been marginal concerns back inside the arena of legitimate historiographical debate. (Crowther 2002: 2). One result of a narrowly-conceived discipline of art history, he argues, has been a focus on the social and economic function of art to the detriment of any analysis of art’s intrinsic value. In the field of study today, “art’s very existence is reduced to the original context of its production and reception”, a result of which is a set of academic practices that fail to negotiate the “key connections between the artistic image and the very possibility of self-consciousness, and between the semantic and syntactic structure of the pictorial image and the horizon of diachronic history” (Crowther 2002: 2).

Crowther’s tactic is to collapse the distinction between the historical data of aesthetic practices (such as a work of art’s socio-economic or production history) and what have been categorised as ahistorical aspects (for instance, its transformative power), by proposing that art forms are “transhistorical”; that is, images and artefacts contain fundamental characteristics that remain outside of the avenues of exploration of social and economic art

criticism. The approach that Crowther chastises is a direct result of the impact of empirical historicism on the study of the aesthetic materials of the past, an impact that (as we have seen) began with the separation of the study of the humanities into disciplines and the take-up of scientific models for the practice of history. What was elided from these sanitised histories of art produced from the late-nineteenth century onwards – and what is present in abundance in the aesthetic histories I focus on here – is a consistent engagement with art’s transhistorical elements; that is, the ability of those past artistic objects to carry meaning in the present not dependent upon their historicity. In other words, a successful history of the materials of the past should focus on something other than their ‘pastness’. In tracing out this line of enquiry, Crowther implicitly suggests that the dialogue between the aesthetic past and the art critic in the present is more complicated even than the relationship between documentary past and historian – the level of signification and transformative potential in a work of art means that a socio-economic study can only ever reveal one dimension of its totality. In other words, a history founded primarily on an analysis of aesthetic materials is a special case, one that has (at least in part) to bear witness to art’s “transcendent functions” (3). What this means for us here is that the dialogic approach so often used in these aesthetic histories – making the images, artefacts and art objects of the past speak through the intellectually-engaged viewer in the present – is a legitimate historiographical approach after all.

Concepts of empathy, aesthetic sensibility, taste and *mentalité*, all emblematic of the dialogic approach, are frequently present in works of ‘aesthetic history’, although typically afforded scant critical comment. Previously, due consideration was forthcoming. Erwin Panofsky, for example, was well aware of the difference between the artistic and historical source, and his view of the relation of art to history is crucial to our understanding of the

strategies that aesthetic historians use to incorporate significant artistic material into representations of the past. For Panofsky, writing in 1920, the historical existence of the art object is clearly a complicated one:

The work of art is a work of art and not just any arbitrary historical object. And with this emerges for the consideration of art the demand – which is satisfied in philosophical realms by a theory of knowledge – that an explanatory principle can be found, on the basis of which the artistic phenomenon not only can be comprehended through ever more extensive references to other phenomena in its existence but can also be perceived by a consciousness which plunges below the sphere of its empirical being into the very conditions of its existence.¹⁸

What is suggested here is that the best possible “explanatory principle” for describing the artistic remains of the past is one which draws on historical data (the “other phenomena in its existence”) whilst also remaining attentive to art’s signifying capacity and its transcendental function. And, once again, it is easy to detect some form of dialogic connection between the object in the past and the perceiving consciousness in the present.

This brief overview of the critical field of historiography over the past century demonstrates not only the need for a more complex theoretical understanding of the interrelations between art, literature and historiography, but also that the particular insights of a postmodern attitude to history provide the tools to reassess the epistemologies of past historiographical processes, to see the negotiations made between different genres of historical writing. What this all gives us is a more thoughtful appreciation of how a history founded more on the aesthetic, archaeological and architectural materials of the past than on

¹⁸ Quoted in Michael Ann Holly (1984): 81.

documentary fact functions historiographically. The better understood notions of historical narrative construction, the importance of visual elements and tropes in the representation of history and a much clearer comprehension of how those material remains of the past – remains very often containing multiple layers of signification – relate to other forms of historical data, all substantially enrich a reading of the works I discuss in this thesis. If our historiographic lens is re-focused in this way, the production of the aesthetic histories with which I concern myself here become less an anomaly in a field abundant with academic, professional histories written in the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and more a sustained engagement with the past founded on a revised conception of ‘evidence’, a new narrative (or non-narrative) approach to telling and a purpose which lies beyond the aims of recording history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. Aesthetic history, this thesis will demonstrate, functions at the crossroads of aesthetic and historical writing. What ultimately might prove the useful bridge between philosophy and aesthetics is Nietzsche’s conception of the “antiquarian” drive for historical knowledge. As Stephen Bann notes,

All too often, the term ‘antiquarian’ has been associated with a kind of failure to achieve the level of true, ‘scientific’ historiography; and the embodied antiquarian has been portrayed as a pathetic enthusiast, liable to be led astray by absurd and fanciful conjectures. [...] The issue changes, so it seems to me, if we no longer view ‘antiquarianism’ as the disreputable ‘other face’ of scientific history, and place it within the context which Nietzsche has provided. (Bann 1990: 102)

We might readily associate our aesthetic histories of Italy with Bann’s conception of Nietzsche’s antiquarian type – less dependent on seeking out what happened to the great and the good, or to “judge and condemn” the events of history, this urge for knowledge is

motivated by a desire to achieve an organic relationship to the past largely through the art objects that remain of it. And, in no place else was this drive so great as in Italy.

The complexity of attitudes to history (and visual history in particular) in the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century is nowhere better apparent than in the representation of the Italian past; rich, varied and deeply resonant, it is an arena where the documentary source jostles next to material or visual remnant, where provable ‘fact’ sits uneasily next to imaginative reconstruction, and where history and aesthetics compete as the primary methods for understanding. The difficulty in doing justice to the breadth and depth of the Italian past, with its heavy mythic function in the Western consciousness, is far more pronounced than it is with the conception of any other nation or time period. Indeed, I suggest that it is exactly this difficulty with adequate representation that helps to pre-empt an interdisciplinary engagement with Italian history, which blends history with aesthetic sensibility, impression with idea, and fact with fiction, in the creation of a more vital and responsive historical depiction. As Henry James remarks in *Italian Hours*, it is the “*fusion* of human history and mortal passion with the elements of earth and air, or colour, composition and form, that constitutes [Italy’s] appeal and gives it the supreme heroic grace” (*IH*: 26). I don’t want to dwell on the relevance of Italy to this genre of aesthetic history for too long here, as individual examples demonstrate the connectedness much more succinctly, but it is worth talking briefly about the reasons that Italy provoked the response it did.

Of course two periods dominate Italian history, both of which are held up by Western culture as examples of political, imperial and artistic excellence, whilst also figuring as decadent and bloody cultures of excess: Ancient Rome and the Renaissance. The Roman past has often been fought over by competing European nations as a somewhat imperfect mirror to their nationalistic and colonial exploits. Thus while the *Times* could, in 1878, celebrate a ‘Roman peace’ in India¹⁹, yet other commentators were using Rome as an explanatory paradigm for the loss of British identity, raising the question as to whether the *pax romana* presented an embodiment of the benevolent power wielded by the most perfect of empires, or ultimately the means for a dilution of national characteristics.²⁰ The Renaissance, too, has been variously reported in modern European intellectual history as the high-point of civilisation, embodying the perfect harmony between civic, cultural and aesthetic energies, and a period of bloodlust, intrigue and immorality. The importance of these two periods is discussed at greater length in the ensuing chapters, but Italy’s past also had other layers of signification relevant to our purposes. Before the Romans were the Etruscans, a lost civilisation to all but the most materially- and archaeologically-minded of historians. Even before the Etruscans, the Italian landscape was home to the outlying territories of classical Greece (a past described by Gissing in *By the Ionian Sea*). Eighteenth century Italy, moreover, interested Vernon Lee, who found in its exuberant, fleshly aesthetic practices an alternative way of charting the development of art to the familiar classical-romantic duality. It has been elsewhere argued that nineteenth-century society was marked by the need to validate itself in relation to past historical epochs – certainly ancient Greece and Rome, certainly the Renaissance – in order to define itself. The periods of comparison, those high points in the

¹⁹ See Read (1979): 193.

²⁰ Javed Majeed suggests as much. See Edwards (ed.) (1999), 88-109.

classical or Renaissance past where democracy, or culture, or art prospered, were being literally and figuratively uncovered at a faster rate than ever before.

Recent work has provided more nuanced ways of figuring the study of the Italian Renaissance in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹ The importance of that period to a whole series of thinkers from the 1840s and 1850s onwards is only just being uncovered. Indeed, it has been persuasively argued that the attraction of the Italian Renaissance (and particularly Renaissance visual art) in nineteenth century European history and criticism was fostered by religious discourses. In France, the sympathies for Renaissance art – particularly for pictures and images of the Virgin and the saints – depend quite markedly on the championing of Gothic art by the Catholic ascendancy. Likewise, German and Swiss interest in the cultural economy of the Renaissance is founded in no small part on the politics of religion during the middle of the century, particularly centred at Basle, where Jacob Burckhardt was based at that time. Indeed, Warren Boucher reads the visit to Italy as not simply a re-enactment of the aesthetic experience of those first travellers to Rome from Germany, Switzerland, France and England, but as a “form of revolutionary *historical sensibility*, a quasi-religious substitute for Christianity whose sacred artefacts are to be found in museums of culture” (Boucher 2005: 216). The nature of Renaissance historiography shall be more fully treated in Chapters Two and Three.

The stories about the Italian past that intrigued Ruskin, Lee, Lawrence, and Stokes (above all else), were not ones that lead in an orderly fashion to the present, nor ones of eternally-recurring events (though both types were important to the historiography of Italy in the later

²¹ See Bullen (1991), Bullen (1994) Fraser (1992), Law and Østermark-Johansen (2005).

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries), but rather one of historical and material accretion.²² The prime sites of a visual record of history in Italy, the ruins, museums and architectural splendours, all represented millennia of accumulations. What is also important is that the establishment of a set of parameters for the study of cultural forms and objects, such as I have outlined above, coincided with the development of fresh relationships, both real and imaginary, between a politically dominant North and a fiscally-poor but artistically-rich South. It is also crucial to remember that Italy, even a past Italy, was becoming something new in the years after 1860. *Risorgimento*, culminating with the capture of Rome in 1870, changed the cultural and artistic nature of the nation to no lesser extent than it did the political and religious landscape; much more of the artistic remains of the great cities were open to the public, *palazzo* here and church there. For the first time, the true palimpsest of each city could be seen. When Henry James visited Rome in the late 1860s, most of the magnificent houses were closed and much of the Vatican was off limits. His return visit in 1872 (on which most of the Roman sections from *Italian Hours* is based) allowed him unprecedented access to most of the areas he was unable to see before.²³ And a similar story could be told about, say, D. H. Lawrence, who was travelling to some of the remains of Etruria which had only been discovered and properly excavated in the few years prior to his visit. Vernon Lee, too, was intimately involved in the archaeology going on in the Forum at Rome, seeing material as it was literally hewn from the ground. The Italy being documented in these histories, then, was just as much new as it was old, a curious mix of the always-already present and the exiting new find. Some of the issues surrounding this ongoing literal and metaphorical mining of the Italian past will be examined in Chapters Four and Five.

²² See my discussion of Whig historiography and the role of Nietzsche on late nineteenth century thinking in Chapter Three.

²³ See 'Introduction' to *Italian Hours* (1995): xiv-xxi, and MacDonald (1990): 3

The visit to Italy was an important aesthetic event in the lives of most of these writers. Jonah Siegel suggests that southern Europe, and Italy in particular, offered writers in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries not simply a backdrop against which to set narratives, but as a site of an ambivalent desire for both art and a heightened sense of reality (Siegel 2005: x). Siegel argues that Italy offered both “desire and artifice” and he re-inscribes these ‘pulls’ towards past Italian culture as both conscious and unconscious desire for both. For Siegel, “the engagement with the place of art was always an engagement with a prior fantasy” (Siegel 2005: xiii); Italy was both the site of a “promised access to the place of creative origin [and] the site of the related but equally fallacious promise of the experience of unmediated reality” (Siegel 2005: xiv). The visit to Italy – real or imagined – is in other words always-already infused with an expectation of what one will find there. Siegel defines these expectations as fantasies which reinforce a particular aesthetic inflection in writing on the South (something he terms “art romance” writing). The freedom of expression which many aesthetically-minded explorers in Italy discovered is naturally connected to this. The artistic possibilities that Italy offered were far beyond those of England (or the rest of northern Europe, for that matter). Thomas Uwins, a painter of Italian scenes, gestured towards this:

In England a painter must invent everything, so much in opposition do the refinements of modern dress and the discoveries of modern science stand to those manners and those times which he is constantly called upon to represent. In Italy, on the contrary, the thing is half made up to his hand. (Uwins 1858: 272-3)

There was also a tendency to seek not only aesthetic freedom but also intellectual sanctuary in the Italian past; historians and philosophers alike found both literal and cerebral

refuge in Italy. For instance, Jacob Burckhardt's flight to the museums of Italy in 1846-47 was predicated by the religious and political factionalism at Basle. A 'retreat' to Italy thus often meant exactly that; a turning away from the highly politicised concerns of the present to the cultural and artistic concerns of the past. Such a turning away by the 'true' historian (as one commentator terms Burckhardt's withdrawal from the political immediacy of mid-century Basle, in "flight from the present"²⁴) is nearly always reported to be accompanied by a psychological change from vigour to languor, from vitality to lethargy, from action to contemplation. And to the vigorous, vital and active academy of nineteenth-century northern Europe, such a change could only be one for the worse. Burckhardt was notably chastised by his friend Herman Schauenberg for taking off in search of "southern debauchery" at a time when the continental academy was taken over by intellectual debates about the role of the professors in the political arena (quoted in Schorske 1998: 59).

The bewildering number of sites to see, each one recording a layer of the cultural past so integral to the lives of its visitors made the Italian townscape a dazzling experience. The sheer variety of different types of experience made Italy not only palimpsestic but also kaleidoscopic; as a 1911 review of several books on the cities of Italy states:

Italy is well suited for such a series of histories; there have been so many States, independent yet important, each developing in its own way; and some of them have had an important part in wider history. How truly each was itself even the traveller can see, who passes from Venice to Verona, from Pisa to Florence. Their characters are shown in their buildings; they are shown no less in the men that were born in them, now in literature, now in art, or again in politics. (W. H. D. R 1911: 122)

²⁴ See Schorske (1998): 56-70.

Italy thus functioned in a complicated way in the northern European consciousness; taking up not one stable role but multiple ones, it offered almost endless significations. The potency of its aesthetic contents resulted in almost every historical site causing excitement at the artistic possibilities available there. In each of the ensuing sections, the Italy visited, be that Ancient Rome, mediaeval Venice or *settecento* Naples, provoked a reaction in the aesthetic and historical sensibilities of the visitor.

Armed with the conceptual tools to better get to grips with the genre of ‘aesthetic history’, we are now in a position to recognise and explore the depth of the historical engagement made in such works, and to reclaim the unconventional methodologies and alternative historiographies they present from the backwaters of the discipline of history. Beginning in the following chapter with a brief discussion of John Ruskin and the role played in the aesthetic-historical consciousness by *The Stones of Venice*, my aim is to reconstruct a number of the core concerns of aesthetic history writing on Italy, and to suggest that works on the same subject as late as the 1930s drew methodological inspiration from Ruskin’s work. Chapter Three focuses on Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, and attempts to circumscribe a field of philosophical and historiographical approaches informing Pater’s strange attempt at a history of early-modern Italian culture. In tracing out a debt not only to the more familiarly cited Hegel and Comte, but also to a later historicist tradition in 1860s Germany, and a relativist historical tradition in England, Pater’s text can be read as a locus for a number of competing historical ideas of the time, and the inventiveness of his

historiographical approach to the Italian Renaissance can in turn be fully appreciated. Chapter Four presents a comparative analysis of Vernon Lee's *Studies in the Eighteenth Century in Italy* and *Euphorion*, both effectively intellectual histories, and *The Spirit of Rome*, a more directly observational account of classical, Renaissance and Baroque Rome. I also consider briefly Henry James' travel sketches in *Italian Hours* through an historical lens; in particular, it is his sketches on Venice and Rome that draw attention – the former for their revisions of Ruskinian cultural historiography, and the latter for their awareness of the materiality of that city. In Chapter Five I turn to some of the writings on topics other than the Grand Tour cities; the chapter focuses on D. H. Lawrence's *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, with a very brief foray into George Gissing's *By the Ionian Sea*. Lawrence's text is considered in the light of the work on Etrurian history, particularly in J. J. Bachofen and Theodor Mommsen, and Lawrence's historical mentality is linked, if only ideationally, with R. G. Collingwood's developing theses. Chapter Six examines the work of Adrian Stokes on Italy in the late-1920s and 1930s, centring on Stokes' interpretation of the *quattrocento* as an historical period, and the historical methodology he employs in its conception. Finally, in a brief coda, I offer some suggestions as to the impulse of writing aesthetic history; if the inclination to write history during the highpoint of the Victorian and modernist periods was not only to express a (fairly secure) knowledge of the past but also to ruminate on that past with concerns of morality, teleology, and the evolution of civilised humanity in mind, then what purpose could these rather incomplete offerings on particular cultural or artistic practices serve?

I want to end this introductory chapter by a return to its start. Carl E. Schorske's monograph *Thinking with History* (1998) traces out two paths that the academic discipline of history followed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the historicism of the

nineteenth century ('Clio Ascendant'), and a later, modernist engagement with the historical dimension ('Clio Eclipsed'). The title of this chapter takes its lead from Schorske's divisions, to articulate a type of history in which Clio was neither ascendant nor eclipsed, but must have been very confused about the line of her work. Her authority was being shaken up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by the thoroughgoing reconsideration of the purpose of history and questioning of its methods, and her tired exegesis of the story of history was attracting criticism from some quarters.²⁵ But the fertile application of new standpoints to the study of history were simultaneously re-animating her as an aesthetic muse, one with less of an interest in the intrigues of politics and war and more in the ebb and flow of the artistic impulse.²⁶

²⁵ For instance, Vernon Lee's vitriolic diatribe against Clio in *Satan the Waster* (1920).

²⁶ Stephen Bann gives an interesting description of the use of Clio as a symbol for history. See Bann (1990): 100-121.

Chapter Two

John Ruskin and the Historiography of Italy

On the 8th September 1849, John Ruskin stood in the Louvre, in front of Veronese's painting, *Wedding Feast at Cana*. "The first distinct impression," he remarked, "which fixed itself on one was that of the entire superiority of Painting to Literature as a test, expression, and record of human intellect, and of the enormously greater quantity of Intellect which might be forced into a picture – and read there – compared with that which might be expressed in words [...] I felt that painting had never yet been understood as it is, an Interpretation of Humanity" (Ruskin 1956-59: II, 427). Such a claim, that art contains within it kernels of a history lost to the world of narrative, would dominate the evolution of Ruskin's aesthetic over the course of a career. And in many senses he was correct – painting (or the arts more generally) had never been fully understood as another historical 'object', or as a succession of styles that might offer something to the historiographer as well as the historian of art. The genealogies of art and lives of the artists, from at least as early as Vasari, offered nothing by way of reflection on what it meant to construct a history of aesthetic practices to explain human volition and action more fully. As late as 1884, nearly forty years into the publication of a body of work which defined his attitude to art, Ruskin still held a firm belief in the unique relationship between art and historical record:

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts: the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others; but of the three, the only quite trustworthy one is the last. (Ruskin 1903-12, XXIV, 203).

The work that looms over the rest of Ruskin's oeuvre, *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), was in many senses an amplification of this very point. For Ruskin, the sculptural and pictorial realm of the Gothic and Renaissance periods in Venice held within them clues to the nature and composition of the societies which created them. More than that, the artistic and architectural remains in Venice reflected more fully the moral and ethical character of their creators than any narrative text could. Ruskin was amongst the first historians – along with, perhaps, Jacob Burckhardt and Hippolyte Taine – to make use of the historical aspects of the arts and to think more closely about the use of art as historical evidence. All three men made what would turn out to be very significant visits to Italy during the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s, and what struck each of them was the quality of the remains of those past civilisations that had nurtured the modern spirit. Burckhardt's seminal study of the Renaissance, while it does not depend on the visual arts for its narrative, nevertheless is coloured by a keen eye for the artistic elements of the past – John Easton Law notes that it was Burckhardt's "passionate study of art that [...] provided him rather with a series of concepts which, transmuted from the sphere of art to that of politics or culture in its widest sense, [which] enabled him to approach all the central issues that most concerned him" (Law 2005: 147). Taine, too, was deeply affected by what he saw in Italy and recorded his experiences in *Voyage en Italie* (1866). His work was enormously influential, and his work on some of the religious iconography in Rome and Florence "provide the most effective evidence of his declared intent to reconstruct history exclusively on the basis of the visual arts" (Haskell 1993: 358).

We might also add to this list John Addington Symonds, whose own history of the Renaissance in the multiple volume, *Renaissance in Italy*, was well-received, if less

influential, in Britain. Symonds' work appeared in the ten years after Pater's *Renaissance*, being published in seven volumes between 1875 and 1886, but its content and line of argument looked backwards rather than forwards. "[R]eally the last and overblown fruit of eighteenth century thinking" (Pemble 1987: 199), it has been read as "boyish idealism" (Bullen 1994: 252) and as anti-ascetic propaganda. Symonds' thesis throughout these volumes is relatively straightforward; tracing out the artistic impulse to the celebration of the (male) body in Greece, he attributes the decline of aesthetic sensibility in the Middle Ages to the domination of a narrowly ascetic, dogmatic and mystical Christianity. The Renaissance, the flowering of that same stifled classical spirit, was founded on the bold artistic tendencies of the Italian people and their paganised "standards of moral and aesthetic taste" (Symonds 1899, ii, 52). But, John Pemble is quite correct when he asserts that "*Renaissance in Italy* was old fashioned even as it came from the press, because its basic premise had already been overtaken. Since the early 1830s taste had been changing; and with the changes had come a major reassessment of the role of [...] the history of art" (Pemble 1987: 200).

However, it is on Ruskin that I want to focus, and his critique of the effects of the Renaissance on Venice; his work more than anyone else's held the imagination of a generation, as far as Italian art and art history was concerned. Moreover, it was his work that issued forth a whole series of heavily-aestheticised attempts to get to grips with history, and Italian history more generally. I want to begin with a brief description of the approaches made to understanding the Italian past by him in order to demonstrate more clearly the origins of an aesthetic conceptualisation of history. Ruskin's historical-mindedness, though perhaps not as developed and self-reflexive as those who followed him, is explicitly tied to his experiences in Italy. What he found there, in Venice and elsewhere, was almost an historical paradox; the

past existed there in the present, albeit in a state of seemingly unending decomposition, the city itself a palimpsest of ruined Gothic and decadent Renaissance architecture clothed in the dirty, grimy ephemera of modern life. It was not a *written*, or *narrative* past – it was a *visual* and *material* one. His responses to it ranged from euphoric to disillusioned, joyous to irate, each different opinion based on the visual stimuli of history. Ruskin did not meditate for very long about the historical or historiographical processes he was enacting in his study of the artistic past of Venice (and in his writings on other Italian cities too), but many of those who followed him did, and their ruminations are the central spine of my exploration here. But it was through Ruskin more than anyone else that a consistent *attitude* to the aesthetic past developed. A new or revitalised awareness of the ‘historicalness’ of visual-material remains in Ruskin’s work demanded an innovative historical method. How exactly was the aesthetic critic supposed to frame his experiences? What evidentiary material should he go after? The lives of the artists, or the successions of styles, were the stuff of the art historians – what was left for the connoisseur? And it is not too difficult to see that Italy provides perhaps the only site where such questions could be answered. If England had increasingly disassociated itself from the past – and Ruskin believed that it had – then Italy simply could not. No number of chimneys, train lines or “gas lamps in grand new iron posts of the last Birmingham fashion” could obscure all of the art and architecture of Venice or the great cities of Tuscany (Shapiro 1972: 198). And the description of that aesthetic past was already, as Thomas Uwins had said, “half made up to [the] hand” (Uwins 1858: 273). For Ruskin, as for Vernon Lee, Henry James and D. H. Lawrence after him, the diachronic reach of the past into the present was what attracted the sensitive-minded explorer to Italy in the first place. The evidence was all there, on display, in the largest open-air museum in the world.

Francis Haskell suggests persuasively that while “it was from conventional narrative history that Ruskin derived his initial ideas regarding the period when Venice began to decline,” he was dissatisfied with the nature of the sources he relied on, preferring the “‘frequent and irrefragable’ evidence drawn from the arts” (Haskell 1993: 314-15). And his distrust of the written record is manifest – when he read in Pierre Daru’s *Histoire de la République de Venise* (1819) that in 1382 Carlo Zaro had been passed over for the dogeship by Michele Morosini, Ruskin felt that the face of the statue on Morosini’s tomb, ‘resolute, thoughtful, serene, and full of beauty’, provided an outright refutation of such a claim (Ruskin 1903-12, IX, 21).¹ For Ruskin, the gap between art and history was narrow, art not simply reflecting history but being a crucial part of it. What Ruskin was looking for in Venice in the 1840s was the visual-historical record of a city-state in a seemingly ongoing decline. *The Stones of Venice* is, broadly, an attempt to describe and explain the demise of the Venetian state through the early modern period, attributable in Ruskin’s eyes to “the pestilent art of the Renaissance” (Ruskin 1903-1912, XI: 47). Ruskin’s story is recounted in terms almost akin to a biblical fall, with Venice playing the role of Eve fallen. The demise of the great cultural states was an abiding theme of Victorian criticism, and Ruskin’s visit in 1849 coincided with the fall of Venice into Austrian hands, after only a year as an independent republic. But Venice was unique in that the evolution (or descent, in Ruskin’s eyes) from Medieval to Renaissance to Modern city was so immediately visible. Francis Haskell suggests as much:

Nowhere else in the world was it possible to see a more conspicuous display of splendid monuments erected to the glory of God and of man which ranged in time from the early (although not the earliest) Christians until Napoleon: and to many art lovers and antiquarians of the middle of the nineteenth century the abundance of mediaeval architecture more than

¹ For more on Ruskin’s distrust of the written records on Venetian history. see Haskell 1993: 314-317

compensated for the lack of those ruins of classical antiquity which still survived in Rome. Churches and private palaces and government offices in the closest proximity were decorated in a wide variety of styles, and because none of these dominated the others [...] a rich, but confused ‘history of Venice based on examples of its arts drawn from every period’ [...] could be visualised. (Haskell 1993: 310)

The Venice which Ruskin admired was, however, only part of the visual-historical record of that city. Jostling amongst the mediaeval, Gothic architecture were the sensuous palazzo of the Renaissance, complete with “trickling fountain and slumberous shades; the spacious hall and lengthened corridor for the summer heat; the well closed windows and perfect fittings and furniture [...] and the soft picture, and frescoed wall and roof, covered with the last lasciviousness of Paganism” (Ruskin 1903-12, XI: 76). It was not simply that the Renaissance style was an ill-fitting heir to the glories of ascetic mediaevalism; the Renaissance was the degenerate other of its predecessor, celebrating perfection and standardisation over uniqueness and artisanship. He goes on to outline the spread of Renaissance ideology and a “return to pagan systems”, in a passage worth quoting in its entirety:

Instant degradation followed in every direction,- a flood of folly and hypocrisy. Mythologies ill understood at first, then perverted into feeble sensualities, take the place of the representations of Christian subjects, which had become blasphemous under the treatment of men like the Caracci. Gods without power, satyrs without rusticity, nymphs without innocence, men without humanity, gather into idiot groups upon the polluted canvas, and scenic affectations encumber the streets with preposterous marble. Lower and lower declines the level of abused intellect; the base school of landscape gradually usurps the place of the historical painting, which had sunk into prurient pedantry,- the Alsatian sublimities of Salvator, the confectionary idealities of

Claude, the dull manufacture of Gaspar and Canaletto, south of the Alps, and on the north the patient devotion of besotted lives to delineation of bricks and fogs, fat cattle and ditchwater. And thus, Christianity and morality, courage, and intellect, and art all crumbling together in one wreck, we are hurried on to the fall of Italy, the revolution in France, and the condition of art in England (saved by her Protestantism from severer penalty) in the time of George II. (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 45)

The patient construction of the Venetian state, founded on piety and ascetic ideas and outlined in the first two volumes of *The Stones of Venice*, gives way to the runaway train of paganism and immorality, seemingly gaining momentum as each clause turns into the next, so much so that three or four hundred years of history pass by in two lines. For Ruskin, the ascent to the Gothic arts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is the culmination of a long march towards what J. B. Bullen calls “medieval wholeism,” (Bullen 1994: 148) a painstaking effort on the parts of men and institutions to suppress their rationalist and anti-pagan impulses to create a pure, healthy, vital art, but the descent into a sensual, decadent paganism spreads quickly like a cancer through the old ideology – “All the Gothics in existence, southern or northern, were corrupted at once” (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 44). The foreshortening of time, the collapse of centuries into sentence fragments is interesting in itself as an aesthetic-historical device, and one which certainly plays an important role in the aesthetic histories of Italy that take up the remainder of this thesis. But what is most interesting is that the effects of the ideological shift that Ruskin conceptualises for us are not so much marked in the narrative histories about Venice – there are no such accounts in, say, Sismondi’s *Histoire des républiques italiennes du moyen âge* or in Pierre Daru’s *Histoire de la République de Venise*

– as they are in the art and architecture of the period.² In other words, Ruskin offers up, for the first time in cultural criticism, art as the most marked measure of cultural and spiritual development (and regression). He finds gradual disappearance of spiritual wonder and imaginative expression in the degenerating art of the tombs in Venice and Verona, in the sarcophagi of the Doges in the later fifteenth-century and in the architecture of SS Giovanni e Paolo, where he described the “great conspicuousness” of the images of the Virtues, which “marks the increase of the boastful feeling in the treatment of monuments; the tombs [having] meaningless figures in Roman armour at the angles” (Ruskin 1903-12, XI: 102). It is not simply that the arts are degrading; it is that society is in freefall, damned by the aesthetic evidence it left behind.

Not too far into *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin explicitly extends his archaeological history into a historiographical metaphor.

All European architecture, bad and good, old and new, is derived from Greece through Rome, and coloured and perfected from the East. The history of architecture is nothing but the tracing of the various modes and directions of this derivation. Understand this, once for all: if you hold fast this great connecting clue, you may string all the types of successive architectural invention upon it like so many beads. (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 34)

The “great connecting clue” of architectural style is a sort of diachronic thread, meandering through the course of history, rearing its head from time to time. The Classical style, with Gothic (and Eastern) elements was for Ruskin the highest achievement of architecture – and

² For more on Ruskin’s scorn of the many histories of Venice available to him, see Haskell 1993: 309-26.

he found the prime example of it at the Doge's Palace in Venice. But, given Ruskin's predilection for associating the movements of art and architecture very closely with the moral and spiritual condition of their creators, it is hardly much of a leap to suggest that that site becomes a cipher through which to explain the history of the city. Indeed, by 1852, he was possessed of a pretty solid historiographical base for the remaining volumes of *The Stones of Venice*, explaining to his father that:

The fact is the whole book will be a kind of great 'moral of the Ducal Palace of Venice' and all its minor information will concentrate itself on the Ducal Palace and its meaning [...] I shall give many a scattered description of a moulding here and an arch there, but they will be mere notes to the account of the Rise and Fall of the Ducal Palace, and that account itself will be subservient to the showing of the causes and consequences of the rise and fall of art in Europe. (Ruskin 1955: 262-3)

Such a realisation, that the history of Venice, and perhaps the history of early-modern civilisation itself, could only be adequately explained through recourse to the development of the arts dawned quickly on Ruskin. He arrived at the conclusion that "every date" in the history of that city "was determinable only by internal evidence; and it became necessary for me to examine not only every one of the older palaces, stone by stone, but every fragment throughout the city which afforded any clue to the formation of its styles" (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 4).

Broadly speaking, he did just that. Constantly searching around the city, in the years prior to the publication of the first volume of *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin astounded his own friends and the inhabitants of the city with his industriousness in examining close up the

disintegrating architecture. “He climbed ladders to examine the most minute details of the capitals and mouldings of St Mark’s and other buildings, and lay flat on the ground to study the bases of their column” (Fraser 2000: 88). It is perhaps this element of Ruskin’s historicism that goes unnoticed, for it is his relationship to his sources, the stones above his head and below his feet, that colour the resultant history. His relationship with the physical remains of the past, be they visual or physical ones, certainly extends beyond that of an historian to his archive source. What both deeply disturbed and excited him was the frail and ephemeral nature of the remains that historic Venice had left to posterity. The constant concern, in much of his work on Italy and in his letters home, is less to do with restoring than recording and documenting. By the end of his collations that paved the way for *The Stones of Venice*, and after he had traced, sketched or painted most of the major landmarks of the city, he had the raw materials for a deep understanding of Venice’s history.

What is often not described adequately, however, in the study of Ruskin’s work on Venice (and on the other, mainly Tuscan, cities which would attract his attention in the ensuing years) is his sensitivity to decay. Rome was already dead:

The Capitol is a melancholy rubbishy square of average Palladian – modern; the Forum, a good group of smashed columns, just what, if it were got up, as it might easily be, at Virginia Water, we should call a piece of humbug – the kind of thing that one is always sick to death of in ‘compositions’; the Coliseum I have always considered a public nuisance [...] and the rest of the ruins are mere mountains of shattered, shapeless bricks, covering miles of ground with a Babylon-like weight of red tiles. (Ruskin 1903-12, I, 381)

Venice, however, was in that exquisite state of deterioration. Nor readily noted is Ruskin's manifest pleasure at recording the evidence of that decay; some of the most remarkable prose passages in *The Stones of Venice*, and indeed in some of his letters home to his parents, contain vivid, aesthetic responses to the ruins of the great Italian cities. Mixed with the indignation at both the continued destruction and attempted renovation of those sites is a pleasure at seeing the processes of a visual history unfold. Of Lucca, he writes:

Such sorrow as I have had this morning in examining the marble work on the fronts of the churches. Eaten away by the salt winds from the sea, splintered by frost getting under the mosaics, rent open by the roots of weeds [...] fallen down from the rusting of the iron bolts that hold them, cut open to make room for brick vaultings and modern chapels, plastered over in restorations, fired at by the French, nothing but wrecks remaining - & those wrecks - so beautiful. (Shapiro 1972: 52)³

The latent historical content of those crumbling buildings, fading frescos and ill-cared-for masterpieces overflows in Ruskin's text into a sensual, emotional response to the Italian Past. In some senses, the Italy which so enthralls him *has* to be in ill-repair – otherwise it would not excite his aesthetic sensibility, nor his socio-cultural conscience. An important part of Ruskin's aesthetic demanded some action preventing the further crumbling of the buildings of Venice – a point made very clear in his correspondence – but, equally, he was fascinated by the processes of decay. Of course, he berates the Venetians for not looking after the precious examples of the fine arts that they insisted on living among, and for the modernisations that happen throughout the city – in a letter of 1842 he mournfully remarks that:

³ From a letter dated 3rd September 1844 from Ruskin to his mother and father.

Italy is quite killing now for any one who cares about it; the destruction I saw last year gave me a good idea of the extent of it, but none of its *pace*. The rate at which Venice is going down is about that of a lump of sugar in hot tea. It is the same everywhere – one roar of ‘Down with it – rase it – rase it, even to the ground. (Ruskin 1903-12, XXXVI, 63)

But his delight at finding sites that were fast fading is noticeable. As late as 1879, when he was working on the mosaics in St. Mark’s, attempting to record their features before the “savage and brutal” restoration work was completed, he is quite clearly carried away by his interaction with history. “My hand trembles with the excitement of the thoughts I have to deal with. Must do a little geology to calm me down” (Unrau 1984: 204, 206). Description of what amounts to a fantasia on stone and surfaces, complemented by an often euphoric regard for the buildings and sculptures of Venice, dominate the more memorable passages of Ruskin’s enormous study, and anticipate the sensitivity and receptiveness of the writings of the aesthetic historians who followed. There was clearly a highly personal interaction between the Ruskin and the architecture and stone of Venice; the descriptions of either those buildings or sculptures that pleased him or those that filled him with horror are usually coloured by a language that betrays a deeper commitment to those objects. Denis Cosgrove argues that Ruskin wrote of Venice “with a passion which betrays more than an intellectual interest” (Cosgrove 1982: 164). Here is an extended passage of Ruskin’s emergence from the passages of Venice into the Piazza:

[B]eyond those troops of ordered arches there rises a vision out of the earth, and all the great square seems to have opened from it in a kind of awe, that we may see it far away; - a multitude of pillars and white domes, clustered into a long low pyramid of coloured light; a treasure heap, it seems, partly of gold, and partly of opal and mother-of-pearl, hollowed beneath into five great

vaulted porches, ceiled with fair mosaic, and beset with sculpture of alabaster, clear as amber and delicate as ivory, - sculpture fantastic and involved, of palm leaves and lilies, and grapes and pomegranates [...] and in the midst of it, the solemn forms of angels, sceptred, and robed to the feet, and leaning to each other across the gates, their figures indistinct among the gleaming of the golden ground through the leaves beside them, interrupted and dim, like the morning light as it faded back among the branches of Eden, when first its gates were angel-guarded long ago. And round the walls of the porches there are set pillars of variegated stones, jasper and porphyry, and deep-green serpentine spotted with flakes of snow, and marbles, that half refuse and half yield to the sunshine, Cleopatra-like 'their bluest veins to kiss' (Ruskin 1903-12: X, 82-83)

The organic, natural and heavenly metaphors sit alongside those sensuous and opulent responses to the delicacy of the stone. The Piazza, rising like "a vision out of the earth" evokes a response in Ruskin that is almost rapturous. His connection to the materials of his history elicits a sequence of hypnotic intensity, and the length of the sentences suggests an almost dream-like experience. And, in turn, these are consistent features of the aesthetic approach to history; receptive sensitivity, half-imagined fragments and fantasies on paintings, sculptures and buildings fill the pages of Pater's *Renaissance*, Lee's histories of Italy and Adrian Stokes' conception of *quattrocento* Rimini alike. This combination of exuberant style and heightened receptiveness to form and content in art, mixed with a dependence on the aesthetic for 'fact' and 'truth' is ever present in *The Stones of Venice*. Indeed, J. B. Bullen suggests that Ruskin's conception of the Renaissance is "far more complex and rich than anything [else] in the historiography of the period. It is a kaleidoscopic matrix of history, art history, and architectural history, which plunges vertiginously onward, constantly shifting direction and focus" (Bullen 1994: 146).

Indeed, it is less the content of Ruskin's argument, than his methods for going about presenting it that attract historiographic attention. What is so striking about the three-volume work, for our purpose here at least, are the negotiations it makes with the historical narratives, records and material remains of Venice. The claims that Ruskin makes for Venice, that she is "the source of the Renaissance" and "the centre of the Renaissance system" do not tally with the many histories written on that topic (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 47; XI: 82). Indeed, J. B. Bullen says of the claim that it "is as startling as bizarre. The notion that Venice rather than Florence or Rome was the 'source' of the Renaissance is entirely unsupported by the evidence of previous or subsequent histories" (Bullen 1994: 147). Thus Ruskin can find in the artistic record evidence that is almost the opposite of received wisdom about the Renaissance. Whilst most histories of that period find that the growth of experimentation in the physical sciences had a liberatory effect on expression in the arts, Ruskin argues the reverse: "For one effect of knowledge," he says, "is to deaden the force of the imagination and the original energy of the whole man: under the weight of his knowledge he cannot move so lightly as in the days of his simplicity" (Ruskin 1903-12, XI: 65). The material history of Gothic and Renaissance Venice, therefore, offered Ruskin an alternative source of data through which to construct his story of the city. What it produced was certainly something new and something he was never to repeat; he never again attempted to "construct so (relatively) coherent a historical synthesis of past civilisation" (Haskell 1993: 330).

It is probably fair to say that while Ruskin's work on the Italian aesthetic past constitutes a weighty and influential place in the lineage of aesthetic-historical writing outlined here, his ruminations on the nature of historical understanding seem slight by comparison with Pater, Lee or Stokes. Certainly in the 1840s and 1850s, when his world-view was securely a religious one, he had little reason to speculate on the philosophical adjuncts of his activities. Nor did he care much for the value of writing history *per se*. In his 1853 lecture on 'Pre-Raphaelitism', he declaimed that:

Of all the wastes of time and sense which Modernism has invented and they are many – none are so ridiculous as this endeavour to represent past history. What do you suppose our descendants will care for our imaginations of the events of former days? [...] What do we care, they will say, what those nineteenth-century people fancied about Greek and Roman history!
(Ruskin 1903-12, XII, 151-2)

Though he is clearly contemptuous of the same nineteenth-century historical-mindedness that Nietzsche was twenty-years later to examine more fully, the historiographical elements of *The Stones of Venice* are still poorly explored today. What is abundantly clear from that work is the importance of historicist process that Ruskin enacted. His solution to the problem of gaining historical knowledge about the aesthetic past was not merely to discover the provenance of art works or the dates when architectural wonders were built and set that data against a wider historical narrative; rather, his approach is one of comparison and correlation, setting each visual or material fragment next to another, offering a synthesis of some often disparate material. Ruskin's combination of both the diachronic and synchronic systems of historical description in his accounts of the past cultural landscape of Italy (that is, a firm belief in the significance of the visual and material presence of the past, as well as a

correlative approach designed to bring into constellation distinct elements of that past) is a vital feature of aesthetic-historical work more generally. And Italian material and visual history seemed almost designed for this approach; the past, ever mingling with the present – however horrifically modern that might be – and the present seemingly echoing the past. Ruskin clearly felt himself in touch with Venice’s past despite the depravity of its current citizens; seeing the “spiritless” Venetians “lounge away their evenings all summer long” recalled images of Dante’s conception of hell to him:

If Dante had seen these people, he would assuredly have added another scene to the *Inferno* – a Venetian corner, with a central tower of St. Mark’s with red-hot stairs, up which the indolent Venetians would have been continually driven at full speed, and dropped from the parapet into a lagoon of hot café noir. (Clayden 1889: 305-6)

He clearly also found a diachronic extension of the excesses of Renaissance Venice in nineteenth-century England. The social impulse of *The Stones of Venice* is made clear from the outset, in the comparison of Britain and her empire with the Venetian republic on the brink of a fall, in the first line of the first volume. Indeed, the work is hung on a religious framework that owes much of its moralising to the fear that England was going to go the way of the pagan Venetians, a country ruined by its own decadence. This text was not the only place he had made such comparisons – he made similar ones in his other documentary writing too, and he must have felt that the similarity needed some further explanation, because he offered it in *Fors Clavigera*:

You thought, I suppose, that in writing those numbers of *Fors* last year from Venice and Verona, I was idling, or digressing? Nothing of the kind. The business of *Fors* is to tell you of

Venice and Verona; and many things of them. You don't care about Venice or Verona? Of course not. Who does? And I beg you to observe that the day is coming when, exactly in the same sense, active working men will say to any antiquarian who purposes to tell them something of England, 'We don't care about England.'[...] That England deserves little care from any man nowadays, is fatally true; that in a century or more she will be – where Venice is – among the dead of nations, is far more than probable. And yet – that you do not care for dead Venice, is the sign of your own ruin. (Ruskin 1903-12, XXVIII: 91-92)

As we have seen, his work had as much to do with the plight of nineteenth-century art and architecture, and the workers and artisans who produced it, as had with mediaeval Venice. For our purposes here, however, the elements of Ruskin's comparative analysis of fifteenth-century Venice and Victorian England are less interesting than the manner in which they are achieved. The comparison of the "three thrones [...] of Tyre, Venice, and England" would hardly work at all in a socio-economic historical context (Ruskin 1903-12, IX: 17). It is only the connection of a body of artwork and architecture on the cusp of decline that links them in Ruskin's mind. Thus, in a famous section of the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*, in 'On the Nature of Gothic', he turns from criticising the lack of inventiveness and originality in Renaissance art, which had taken away the individual and expressive element in mediaeval art, back to his contemporary audience. "And now, reader," he says, "look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often," and see there only the "accurate mouldings" and "perfect polishings" that so readily demonstrate the culmination of the Renaissance perfectionism (Ruskin 1903-12, X: 193). Ruskin's great chain of art linked some ages and not others – it was not a progressive narrative, explaining the state of current art through gradual steps towards the present, but rather a series of imaginative jumps from one style to the next. In other words, if Ruskin's historical thinking was slightly skewed from a

rather narrow, narrative perspective, it made sense in its own way, since the evidence of the links between different ages was Ruskin's own interpretation of the art materials he saw.

What is also interesting for our current focus is the influence that Ruskin's approach held over the aesthetic explorers of Italy in the later decades of the nineteenth century, and even well into the twentieth. In many ways, the role which Ruskin is made to play by later aesthetic critics on Italy is the same one that John Lewis Burckhardt took in Sir Richard Burton's *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, and Charles Doughty took for T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – all were so strongly associated with specific geographical and temporal spaces that later writers wrote sometimes less about the peoples and landscape that they were seeing than against their predecessors. Pater, as we shall see, wrote very much with an awareness of Ruskin's presence, and even as late as the 1930s, a work like Adrian Stokes' *The Stones of Rimini*, with its homage to its predecessor's work self-evident, sought to utilise the same methodology that Ruskin employs – making one building the aesthetic centrepiece of essentially the same artistic period (the Tempio Malatestiana, rather than the Doge's Palace). Ruskin set the standard to follow, his opinions about art (expressed in *Modern Painters*) and the architectural and sculptural realm having a consistent influence for the entire span of the period under focus here.

Ruskin's work in the 1850s on Italy burdens us with more questions than answers. His often naïve approach to his subject matter – seeking to make pictures and artefacts, buildings and sculptures, the material for history, but mostly ignoring the fullness of their historicity – leads us into a grey area. In *The Stones of Venice*, the claims of the text go beyond art history, as we have seen. But into what? Could there develop a more cogent and theoretically secure

practice of aesthetic history, grounded in some of the debates about history during the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but functioning as a discipline still open to artistic sensibility and personal interpretation, out of Ruskin's work? Ruskin's aim, in *The Stones of Venice*, is to bring into focus some examples of architecture and a number of art works and sculptures in order to explain the fall of Venice. What shines through that work more than anything else is his capacity to *see* his evidence in the vistas of decaying, crumbling and fading remains. This sensitivity to the material remains of Italy, and the resultant deep understanding of their historicity, marks the historical methodologies of many of the writers I go on to explore here. The historical accumulations in Italy, constantly resisting regeneration or deletion, confirmed to him that its major cities were the repositories of a deep and fertile past, and his highly personal relationship to that past masks an often hidden historiographical complexity.

Ruskin was to claim to J. A. Froude, in 1864 – after his loss of faith, and after the great influence that *On the Origin of Species* was to exert had taken its hold on him – that “there is no law of history any more than of a kaleidoscope” (Ruskin 1903-12, XXXVI: 465). The choice of comparative is, I think, a telling one, whether or not Ruskin meant anything by it; for what is the vision a kaleidoscope offers but a temporary snapshot, a bringing into focus of a number of different visual, colourful phenomena. Change the focus of the lens, and the impression recedes and transforms seamlessly into something else. The same is probably true of all historical research, but especially affects the more aesthetic responses to the past. Not only is the shape of the work wholly dependent upon the choice of evidence the aesthetic historian makes, but the relative inscrutability of the art or architectural object compared with the written source means that the writer's interpretation of his or her evidence very often

dominates an analysis of their work. (Thus, say, Pater's *Renaissance* has drawn much attention from its inclusion of chapters on twelfth-century France and the eighteenth-century Winckelmann, and its refusal to discuss any number of significant high-Renaissance works of art and literature).⁴ Couple this with the latent, uncontained historicity of images and artefacts – as has been demonstrated by Pfau (2005), Bann (1990,1995) and Crowther (2002) among others – and the aesthetic histories written on the artistic remains of the past cause us to pause and examine the historical methodologies they use. Ruskin's work on Venetian history, with its dependence on the visual realm for evidence, its sensitive, symbiotic relationship to its material sources and the constant presence of a filtering consciousness alive to every nuance and shade, sets the pattern for the types of *attitude* that were available to the aesthetic critic writing on the past. The issues surrounding visual history will dominate the course of our inquiry; how far is it possible to make laws about an aesthetic history of images and artefacts? Can such a history ever be 'true to the facts', or do they always remain clouded with speculation? What are the epistemological grounds on which they make their claims to truth? So, instead of concentrating on the individual impressions that the kaleidoscope makes, or the significance of any one focus above another, my study rather seeks to look a bit more at that kaleidoscope's mechanism.

⁴ Pater's choice of evidence and his response to it is explored more fully in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three

Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* and the 'Crisis in historicism'

What we have to do is to be for ever curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions, never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy, of Comte, or of Hegel, or of our own.¹

In mentioning both Comte and Hegel here, in his 'Conclusion' to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, Walter Pater is confirming that the "orthodoxy" he wishes to warn his readers against is essentially an historicist one. These two men, with the later addition of a number of continental historians, were at the backbone of theories of history and practices of historiography in Victorian Britain. Auguste Comte's work, which included sociological treatises and philosophical works, developed a positivist methodology to interpret culture, society and history based on the principles of universal laws and actions. Hegel's historical thinking, distilled in his *Philosophy of History* (first published in 1837) was centred on the progression of the spirit and "the divine Idea" towards absolute enlightenment (Hegel 2005: 171). Both were, in essence, deterministic – one with a firm belief in the universality of human action and societal development, the other equally sure that "world history exhibits nothing other than the plan of providence" (Hegel 2005: 79). These two approaches are perhaps the best examples of the twin 'pulls' on historical thinking in Britain during the

¹ Pater, 'Conclusion', *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), reprinted as 'Conclusion' in Pater. *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry – The 1893 text*, ed. Donald L. Hill (London: University of California Press, 1980), 189 (hereafter cited parenthetically as *Ren.*). The Hill edition includes all of the variants of the text from its initial publication in 1873, and I use it as evidence of Pater's thinking in the early 1870s.

middle decades of the nineteenth-century – science and religion. If Comte was taken up in England in a tradition that would include John Stuart Mill's early work, *Logic* (1843) and Henry Buckle's *History of Civilisation in England* (1857), then Hegel was adopted by the 'Oxford Idealists,' who included Edward Caird, T. H. Green, F. H. Bradley amongst others. And, with very few exceptions, these two paths dominated the course of British historical thinking until the twentieth century. All of which makes Pater's assertion, that both approaches represent a compromise of sorts, more interesting from an historiographical point of view. Coming at the end of a cultural and artistic history of the Italian Renaissance, where impression is privileged over fact, images and unsubstantiated stories take pride of place over historical narrative and there is hardly a footnote in sight, the warning not to fall into a "facile orthodoxy" acts not simply as a justification for an experimental aestheticism, but rather to stress the validity of the alternative *historical* methodology employed.

What I want to suggest here is that Pater's engagement with the issues vexing historians and philosophers of history alike in the 1860s and 1870s, issues concerning the epistemology of history and accepted methodologies, is a productive one. Pater imbibed not only the some key philosophical and historiographical problems of his time; he responded to them with his own historiographic position, an aesthetically inflected storytelling founded not only on imaginative construction, but on a new form of data – the sense impression. The Italian Renaissance offered the ripest historical field through which to explore these issues – it was replete with a peculiar zeitgeist that was in one sense timeless, and consisted (for Pater at least) of a body of art-work that contained the same tensions Pater was to explore in his history; between the individual and society, between impression and idea and between form and content. Moreover, the 'data' that Pater selects are the art works of that period, and his

analysis of them shows not only the power of images and art-techniques to carry historical meaning, but also demonstrates the multiplicity of signification that such data possesses and, in turn, hints at a more complicated role for the historian in the production of historical meaning. The first part of this chapter, therefore, will outline some of the key philosophical and historical ideas roughly concurrent with Pater's *Renaissance*, and the negotiations that Pater makes with each of them, while the second half will offer an explication of Pater's historical method in *The Renaissance*, in order to demonstrate the type of historiographical approach employed.

I have spoken already at length about the defining trends in European historical thought that made themselves increasingly felt in Britain, but it is worth lingering briefly on the nature of the 'historical-mindedness' of Britain during the middle of the nineteenth century in order that we might chart some of the negotiations that Pater makes with the concerns that dominate the period. Perhaps the main reason for the obsession with history in Victorian Britain was that its rhetoric seemed to offer such a powerful discourse to theorise the movement from inferior forms of social organisation to the creation of a powerful nation. This sense of development through to an ideal condition was pervasive throughout the nation-states of Europe; in a lineage extending from Hegel through to Jules Michelet, most European historians of the first half of the nineteenth-century viewed the idea of a nation as changeless and eternal, a unitary principle that made civilisations "a something rather than an anything" (White 1973: 172). Hayden White notes that the German historian Leopold von Ranke, the prime exponent of the "historical method" in nineteenth century Europe, "made [...] the reality of his own time the ideal for all time," privileging existing conditions and reflecting on

the future as an indefinite extension of the present (White 1973: 172). It is noticeable that both Comte's and Hegel's philosophy of history have the same teleology at heart, too – a desire to root contemporary action within an historical framework of progress. And, of course, progress' obverse side also played a part in history and cultural criticism, particularly towards the end of the century, in degenerationism, eugenics and imperial strategy. Comte's positivism was ultimately a dead-end in British history by 1860, and the reaction against his works and those of his followers is well documented.² The importation of an essentially Hegelian mode of thinking and writing history into Britain has been explored by numerous commentators too, but its appeal as a satisfactory explanation of the seemingly self-evident progressivism of British society and culture meant that it was pervasive until at least the turn of the century, kept alive after the Oxford Hegelian set by neo-Hegelians in Cambridge, such as James McTaggart.³ The teleology that Hegel outlined for the historical process, along with its inclusion within a totalising development towards reason and the Idea, was clearly an appealing explanation of the rational, enlightened Victorian critical mind and the self-realisation of the British state in an increasingly global context. In addition, it reconciled itself easily with the conviction, well known and documented in Victorian historical studies, that certain individuals transcend their historical circumstances in order to enable great cultural transformations. For Hegel, this process was self-evident – the idea is prominent in both his *Philosophy of History* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).⁴ And the histories of great men (and on occasion, women) that so dominated the discipline until well into the twentieth century, with the rise of socio-economic history on a grand scale, are clear evidence of this belief.

² See, Parker (1990), 20-40.

³ For a complete discussion of Hegel's importance in British history and historiography, see Gillespie (1984) and Robbins (1982).

⁴ See *Philosophy of History*, 79-81 and *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 26-36.

Hegelian historicism was also very readily coupled with a form of religious and moralist thinking in Britain in a way that was not adopted on the continent. The introduction of Hegel into British philosophical thinking happened at an Oxford dominated by theological issues and moral philosophy; Benjamin Jowett, Master of Balliol and widely recognised as the instigator of Hegelianism in Britain, thought seriously about the reconciliation of Hegel's idea of a progressive spirit with the existence of a deity, and his disciples at Oxford, particularly T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet and Edward Caird, built their historical methodologies on the self-evident realization of the *geist*. F. H. Bradley, who attended T. H. Green's lectures on history in 1867 and 1868, noted the morally- and theologically-enriched Hegelianism that Green preached – in his notes he quoted Green as saying that “the intuitions of a people exactly represent their state of mind, are the exact expression of their thought, and that as thought is reasonable its progress is generally right. Thus moral philosophy is history reduced to abstract formulae; and history is moral philosophy objectified.”⁵

In fact, this approach to the study of history was dominant in Britain when Pater's *Renaissance* was published. Green, introducing an edition of Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1874, neatly paraphrased the historiographical principles of a generation of historical thinkers, in a passage that is worth offering in its entirety:

There is a view of the history of mankind, by this time familiarised to Englishmen, which detaches from the chaos of events a connected series of ruling actions and beliefs – the achievement of great men and epochs, and assigns to these in a special sense the term ‘historical’. According to this theory – which indeed, if there is to be a theory of History at all,

⁵ See editor's note in Green (1997), IV: 12.

alone gives the needful simplification – the mass of nations must be regarded as left in swamps of human development. They have either not come within the reach of the hopes and institutions which make history a progress instead of a cycle, or they have stiffened these into a dead body of ceremony and caste, or at some epoch they have failed to discern the sign of the times and rejected the counsel of God against themselves. Thus permanently or for generations they have trodden the old round of war, trade, and faction, adding nothing to the spiritual heritage of man. It would seem that the historian need not trouble himself with them, except so far as relation to them determines the activity of the progressive nations. (Green 1885: 1)

The collocation here of divine providence, Hegelian progressivism and national pride demonstrates just how bound up these issues were in the historical thought of the period. Historical study, for its high-Victorian exponents, was largely based on justifying imperial, moral and political decisions. The purpose of history was an understanding of the diachronic progress of civilisation, always coded in a rhetoric of the maintenance of moral rectitude. J. A. Froude notes that it was:

[i]n the struggle, ever failing, yet ever renewed, to carry truth and justice into the administration of human society; in the establishment of states and in the overthrow of tyrannies; in the rise and fall of creeds; in the world of ideas; in the character and deeds of the great actors in the drama of life; where good and evil fight out their everlasting battle, now ranged in opposite camps, now and more often in the heart, both of them, of each living man – that the true human interest of history resides.⁶

⁶ Quoted in Dunn (1961): I, 37.

Not only this, but just a conceptual leap away was an ethical affirmation that humanity was following the correct course: Lord Acton, in one of his lectures on history delivered in the last decade of the nineteenth century, hints quite clearly at this:

And it is by the combined efforts of the weak, made under compulsion, to resist the reign of force and constant wrong, that, in the rapid change but slow progress of four hundred years, liberty has been preserved, and secured, and extended, and finally understood. (Acton 1960: 60)

What is important here is that there is clearly an aspect of history and the historical in the nineteenth century that takes leave of the material form of which it is constituted and stretches to the spiritual, ideational and moral world. The historical subject was itself assigned with a positive or negative significance with regard to its deviation from a value system of progress, liberty and rationalism; in other words, the “system of historical interpretation functioned as more than a purely historical datum,” rather acting as a way of narrating the past through the values of the present (White 1973: 172). The semantics of historical representation became blurred by both this perceived perfection of the Hegelian ‘Idea’ through history, represented in the concept of the nation, and the attendant moral judgments that went alongside it. Could such an historical world-view ever encompass the events of the past other than to force them into fitting a rigidly defined narrative of progress? Was it possible to attend to the ‘truth’ of the past if the frame was always-already constructed? Such questions seem rather obvious to us now, but this historiography was not challenged systematically until at least the spread of Nietzsche’s work into English during the later-1880s and early-1890s.

The other fascination in British history during the middle years of the nineteenth-century was with Ranke's practices. Ranke, developing the Hegelian dialectic, utilised an historiographical structure that was predominantly evolutionary and which was dependent upon the close scrutiny of archive sources⁷. It is not difficult to see why such a system was so conducive to the British intellectual temperament either; the gradualism and stress upon individual agency of Whiggish historicism, a mode of writing history that had been sustained in Britain since the Glorious Revolution, seemed to ally itself with Rankean principles. The acute shift between the histories of Macaulay and Carlyle and those of people like Caird, Green and Buckle manifested itself in a new set of rigorous parameters for the historical subject, which had the effect of diminishing the distance between historical study and the methodologies of science, and which were to dominate historicist thinking until the twentieth century – indeed, in 1902, when J. B. Bury succeeded Lord Acton to the Regius Professorship at Cambridge, he delivered an inaugural lecture on 'The Science of History', in which he claimed that "it has not yet become superfluous to insist that history is a science, no less and no more" (Bury 1903, 7).

The valorisation of data within the field of historical study during the middle of the nineteenth century was mirrored in the accumulation of factual historical knowledge during this period. The Public Record Office Act of 1838 brought together files from fifty-six different repositories across London and in the publication of various 'Lists and Indexes' by that office, along with the production of the *Calendars of State Papers Domestic*, the minutiae

⁷ Leopold von Ranke has in a sense become symbolic of the profound changes in historical scholarship during the course of the century. His *Latin and Teutonic Nations* (1824) outlined the new critical parameters for historical study.

of British history became thoroughly accessible.⁸ Such a wealth of archived information provided a new generation of scientific historians with unequivocal empirical data. Within such data, there had to be patterns. Thus in a work like *History of Civilisation in England*, Henry Thomas Buckle wished to:

[a]ccomplish for the history of man something equivalent, or at all events analogous, to what has been effected by other inquirers for the different branches of natural science. In regard to nature, events apparently the most irregular and capricious have been explained, and have been shown to be in accordance with certain fixed and universal laws.⁹

This powerful new language of historical study, both an ideology and a methodology for crystallizing the approach made by historians to the past, began to move history out of the hands of the men of letters and into those of the professional historian.¹⁰

The changes to the nature of historical study made by these developments ultimately pushed historical study into a position where it had to radically question its own epistemology. If history was the examination of the 'facts' and the exhibition of these facts in ordered narratives with self-evident teleological and progressive properties, then it tended towards the realm of science. But, for a number of continental thinkers, there was a limit to the convergence of historical narrative and scientific methodology. In one sense, it is in the attendant philosophical issues that accompany this attempt to transform history from an

⁸ The Calendars began to be produced in 1856 with the first volume of Edward VI's reign. For more on this centralisation and increased accessibility of British historical archives and sources, see Kenyon (1993): 88-100.

⁹ Buckle, *History of Civilisation*, I, 19. Quoted in Kenyon (1993): 91

¹⁰ A move mirrored in nearly all of the 'disciplines' during the nineteenth century. See Guy and Small (1993): 38-55; Kenyon (1993): 148-208; and more generally, Burrow (1983) and Jackson (ed.) (1970).

amateur to a professional discipline that engender a 'crisis in historicism.' The transition of history into a positivist science was not a smooth one. History, as a discipline, was never attended by the sort of conceptual revolution that accompanied transformations in the scientific disciplines – the historian should certainly try to be 'scientific' in his investigation of documents and his attempts to determine exactly what happened in the past, but he always had to 'present' this research in some narrative order. The fictionality, or perhaps 'literariness', of historical narrative started to become interesting for philosophers of history. It was the dizzying number of ways that the past was represented that crystallized the belief that the methods for writing history might be philosophically unsound. Towards the end of the century, history as both an academic practice and an epistemological construct, came under closer scrutiny.

In Europe, many intellectuals began to express the concern that excessive preoccupation with the methods and objects of historical research was leading to a degeneration of historicist practice. Allan Megill lists two such degenerations as "a relativism destructive of absolute (or at least of prevailing) values, and a focus on the past destructive of commitment to the tasks of the present" (Megill 1997: 416). In a sense, the problem lay with Rankean principles; Ranke's commitment to history *wie es eigentlich gewesen* seems to assume that moving from an issue of historical representation to the empiricist procedures of archival research is a logical step, that both are tied neatly together. In other words, Ranke seems to show that analysing history 'as it actually happened' was merely a function of the research procedure of using primary sources, that the narration was simply a product of analysing the facts. This narrator-gap, this dependence upon a transparent, objective hermeneutic arranger of the data, lies at the very heart of the predicament facing historians by the later nineteenth-century. That no such

narrator could feasibly exist began to be an important consideration in the writings of historians and philosophers of history, such as J. G. Droysen and Wilhelm Dilthey. For both of these men, the role the historian played in the construction of history was one example of the problematic nature of the ‘past-as-scientific-evidence’ school of thought, and became a key consideration of a number of thinkers, certainly including Friedrich Nietzsche and Benedetto Croce, during an ensuing crisis in historical thinking.

Most commentators ascribe this ‘crisis in historicism’ to a growing awareness on the part of philosophers of history of “the limitations of human knowledge and the subjective character of all cognition in regard to human behaviour and social processes” (Iggers 1983: 124). The concern was that the aims and subject matter of history were simply not conducive to the methods of positivistic science. By 1873, the date of the first publication of Pater’s essays on Renaissance art and history as a collection, the debate concerning the nature of historical inquiry and historiographical reflection, particularly on the continent, was becoming clouded by methodological issues. Neither the rather deterministic positivism of Comte, nor the materialist history of Ranke, seemed to function coherently as methodological discourses capable of controlling the types of information and factual data they utilised. In 1868, J. G. Droysen’s study of the methodology of historical research, *Historik: Vorlesungen über Enzyklopädie und Methodologie der Geschichte*, appeared in print, though much of his argument had been in circulation during the previous decade, particularly through his lectures on *Historik* (a methodology for history). In it, he gave a brief review of the second volume of Henry Thomas Buckle’s *History of Civilisation in England* and had found the theoretical basis for that text unsound, objecting to the transformation of the family and the state into

natural phenomena, depriving them of any moral value or rationale.¹¹ For Droysen, neither Ranke's historiographical approach, nor the positivism of Comte or Buckle, was adequate at a theoretical level. He saw all historical work as a creative and critically-ordered representation of the past from the vantage point of the present, and a "reconstruction that assumed a static past, testified to by remains, was possible neither by Ranke's method, nor by the positivists" (Breisach 1983: 279). What Droysen suggests, in other words, is that the historian necessarily gives a partial and fragmentary account of the past, because the modes of access to that past available to the historian depend upon an interpretative effort.

For Droysen, it is not that history itself is a fiction, but that the exposition of the 'facts' is an abstraction from the basic plot structures of literary tradition. He classified histories into four types – the Biographical, the Monographic, the Catastrophic and the Pragmatic – and Hayden White, as we have seen, was to later associate each with a story form (respectively, Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire).¹² This nature of history as narrative, as a shaping strategy, is vital. The interruption of the historian between his reader and his subject matter becomes of prime importance – for Droysen, in the ideal form of history, the attempt should be made to "set forth the results of investigation as a course of events in imitation of its actual development. It takes the results [of historical investigation] and shapes them into an image of the genesis of the historical facts upon which the investigation has been at work" (Droysen 1868 [1893]: 52). This is not mimesis; there can be no mere reproduction of past events, nor can the events be made to speak for themselves – Droysen insists that "without the narrator to make them speak, they would be dumb" (52). He goes on to say that it is not "objectivity

¹¹ Droysen (1868[1893]): 1-22.

¹² White (1973): 273

which is the historian's best glory. His justness consists in seeking to understand" (52). There is therefore a shift in the paradigms of history in Droysen – from the search and exposition of historical fact to an attempt to interpret and make sense, through the perceiving consciousness of the historian, of past sources in the present.

Whether Pater was familiar with Droysen's work is unclear; that he read widely in German history and criticism is certain, and the reverberations of Droysen's *Historik* were widely felt, certainly by 1863.¹³ We do know, however, that Pater's reading in German historical thought was sufficiently developed in the early 1860s to read Hegel in the original language, and his reading in the most recent developments in the philosophy of history is demonstrable, thanks to Billie Andrew Inman's research into his readings.¹⁴ It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that if such ideas were becoming known in Germany during the early 1860s, Pater would probably have picked up on them. Droysen's work pre-empted some of the problems that would arise in the study of history over the coming decades. His concern with demonstrating the narrative strategies at work in the creation of any historical work clearly has relevance to Pater's aesthetic.

This is all necessary before we plunge into Pater's historiographical negotiations in *The Renaissance* for a number of reasons. It is not unjust to label Hegel as the predominant influence on historical thinking in Britain in the 1850s and 1860s, and the negotiations that Pater makes with Hegel's thought in *The Renaissance*, when set amid the developments in historical thinking in the later 1860s and 1870s that for many constitute a 'crisis in historicism', inform an historicist reading of his text. But, there are some issues about the

¹³ Bridgewater discusses the state of German historical thought and its reception in Britain in the 1870s and 1880s – see particularly Bridgewater (1999): 6-9.

¹⁴ See Inman (1981): 46-75.

value and *purpose* of historical work that need to be considered. Pater's *Renaissance* enters into an historical climate narrowly constrained not only in terms of research methodology but at an ideational level too, and what the Italian Renaissance offers to Pater is a cultural framework to begin to tentatively reconsider the purpose of thinking historiographically. The publication of *The Renaissance*, in 1873, occurs in the midst of the first serious consideration of the historian's practice. Hayden White characterises the later decades of the nineteenth century as a burgeoning "rebirth of the philosophy of history" (White 1973: 267), a making explicit some of the explanatory and narrative strategies that remain implicit in the day-to-day work of the historian. The differing approaches made to tell 'historical truth' by historians as diverse as Michelet, Ranke, Tocqueville, and Burckhardt, along with the diversity of their interpretations of the same sets of historical events, suggested that there could be other ways to approach historical research, that "a different universe of discourse for the characterization of the historical field might well be conceivable" (White 1973: 277).

We might therefore best characterise this 'crisis in historicism' not through metaphysical ontology but through epistemology, fraught not with the deconstructionist questions being asked of history by historians more recently, but by issues surrounding the nature of historical data and the constructive attempts to make that data mean something. The basic question, Kantian in nature, concerned itself with the conditions under which knowledge is possible in a universe of flux. Even more compelling was an axiological adjunct – how are any universal and objective values possible under conditions of flux? In a sense, this inherently philosophical debate antedated its application to the theories of history and historiography in the decades to come – both are in essence the same collection of problems. Reclaiming *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* within the parameters of the philosophy of history is

certainly possible. Pater was, first and foremost, a philosophy lecturer, and to approach his negotiations of aestheticism, literature, art objects and historical methodology in his collection of Renaissance essays through the models afforded to us by philosophical inquiry is not as perverse as it at first sounds. Richard Wollheim reads most of Pater's *œuvre* through his attachment to philosophical scepticism – indeed, Pater himself later confirmed that he fell under the influence of “the wholesome scepticism of Hume or Mill” as a young academic at Oxford (Pater 1893: 31). Wolfgang Iser traces out the development of Paterian scepticism as “an active force whose dual effect is to counter the absolute spirit and to open up the mind to experience” (Iser 1960: 16) – in other words opposed to any notion of the philosophical absolute. As early as ‘Coleridge's Writings’ in the *Westminster Review* of January 1866, Pater was already describing himself as a defender of the “relative” as against the “absolute” spirit, asserting that “to the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions” (Pater 1986: 68-9), and his treatise on the nature of beauty in the first pages of *The Renaissance* grounds itself quite firmly within what Peter Allan Dale calls “the most important philosophical debate being carried on by the nation's intellectual leaders during the period 1860-1870”; that of the relativity of human knowledge (Dale 1977: 175).

Reading Pater's description of a past Italian cultural landscape through a lens of historical thought and study, in *The Renaissance*, may offer the reader recourse to site Pater within a different tradition than the familiar aestheticist one. The types of concern he has with the philosophy of history and its adjuncts – namely of the inscrutability of the art object, of the role of the critical hermeneutic faculty in interpreting historical events and data, and of the very conditions upon which that critical faculty can function in a universe of flux and relativism – demonstrates a concern that mirrors those of both the historians working through

the problems of the ‘crisis in historicism’ in the decades leading up to the First World War and the Modernist thinkers and writers concerning themselves with a literary and cultural nexus that strove at once in two directions – to reformulate an historical basis for understanding the world, whilst also pulling in the opposite direction, to work completely outside of the parameters of history.¹⁵ Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* contains several of the disunited strands of historical thought present in Britain towards the end of the nineteenth century, and in his presentation of the Italian Renaissance there exist dualities that test the parameters of history as a discipline. In his constantly mobile, transitory approach to his subject matter and his juxtaposition of various historicist methodologies, the reader can tease out various tensions in Pater’s *Renaissance* – those between empiricism and scepticism, and between present and past.

Of course, an approach through aestheticist lines is perfectly valid. That Pater demonstrates the familiar aestheticist engagement with and dissociation from ideas, opinions and art works alike has been said before; Carolyn Williams finds Pater’s transitory approach towards any fixed system of valuation to be characteristic of an aestheticist poetics (Williams 1989: 26-37) and Wolfgang Iser argues that Pater’s grasping after impressions manifests itself as an attempt to transplant them “into new context of heightened life. For Pater, the transplanting and the heightening are the two vital functions of art, which can thereby transcend the fleeting experience and offer its devotee a feeling of detachment from the ravages of time” (Iser 1987: 31). More interesting for our present purposes, in addition to the patently philosophical approach to the epistemological basis of his Renaissance essays, and the exploration of rather

¹⁵ The term ‘crisis in historicism’ has long been used by historians, gaining currency largely through the theologian Ernst Troeltsch, who detailed in 1922 what had long been felt by historians – see Troeltsch (1922): 572-90. For more on this problem see for instance White (1973): 280; Megill (1997): 416-423; and Breisach (1983): 268-271.

abstract ideas ('beauty', 'pleasure', 'delicacy') from first principles, is Pater's less obvious engagement with the philosophical adjuncts of the study of history, which corresponded to wider trends in Britain and on the continent to explore fully the ramifications of a materialist or positivist approach to historical research.

The depiction of the Italian Renaissance, and Italian artists, sculptors and writers in Pater's *Studies in the History of The Renaissance* is rather more challenging from a historiographical point of view than has hitherto been argued. There is a highly evolved historical dimension to this set of essays, and one which has been ill-explored. For Pater, the relationship between a present aesthetic and one located in the past is extremely close, and to appreciate one, one must have a full understanding of the other. Even further beyond this, Pater demonstrates a concern for the epistemological nature of historical enquiry, as early as the "Coleridge" essay¹⁶ of 1866 at least, but probably back to his undergraduate readings of Hegel.¹⁷ In *The Renaissance*, the curious blending of ideology and methodology can become overwhelming for the commentator to tease out, but it is precisely this interplay that points towards Pater's purpose. It is not simply that Pater adopted a radical scepticism towards historical discourse, nor that he rejects historicist positivism out of hand; rather, there is a sense in which the refusal to commit to any doctrine, the desire to be "never acquiescing in a facile orthodoxy," that lies at the heart of Pater's historicist objective. I want here to relate Pater's 'historical sense' within a matrix that not only includes Hegel and John Stuart Mill, but perhaps more importantly the historians of the 'crisis in historicism' – in particular Wilhelm Dilthey. I also

¹⁶ Several commentators have suggested that Pater leans towards a nihilistic relativist historiography in this essay, especially with the comment, "[t]o the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions," (especially Iser) but Carolyn Williams is probably closer to the essence of Paterian relativism when she suggests that he is searching for a new "faculty for truth" (Williams (1989), 51)

¹⁷ See Inman (1981), 148-57.

want to glance at some of the philosophical adjuncts of the issues in historical thinking, and especially art-historical thinking – namely the inscrutability of the art object as an historical source and the role of the individual in interpreting the visual evidence of the past. What results from a focus on these topics is an understanding of what I would like to call Pater’s *phenomenological historicism*; that is, his steady belief, in the examination of the art materials of the Italian past, in a form of historical knowledge about them that embraces an imperfect approximation of their ‘truth’, knowingly offering not a description of what an object *is*, nor of the meanings it is supposed to have, but of something more nearly explaining his attachment to them.

It is within the debates about historical and philosophical knowledge that Pater makes his engagement with Hegel and Mill. The intellectual climate at Oxford in the 1850s and 1860s, when Pater was an undergraduate and a young fellow, could probably be best characterised as being heavily dependent upon the writings of both men. If the main concerns of empiricist philosophy during the middle of the nineteenth century were related to the capacity of the human mind to achieve objective knowledge, then they were concretised by Mill, whose *Logic* had by the 1850s infiltrated Oxford even at the level of curriculum. However, it was probably his later *Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy* of 1865 that had most effect upon Pater; here he eschewed philosophies of the absolute in favour of a specifically empiricist outlook which held at its centre a belief in the relativity of all knowledge.¹⁸ An object thus becomes “to us nothing else than that which affects our senses in a certain manner,” with Mill going on to say that “our knowledge of objects, and even our fancies

¹⁸ Peter Allan Dale (1977): 174-179, argues as much, though I want here to highlight the effects such a philosophical position has upon the realm of history.

about objects, consist of nothing but the sensations which they excite, or which we imagine them exciting in ourselves”(Mill 1867: 6). There are of course sub-species of this empiricism, ranging from the idealists and sceptics who believed that the world of sensation was all that we had, to the more restrained, moderate form held by Hamilton himself, along with Mill and a tradition of British empiricist thinkers back to Locke and Bentham, who thought that there existed a world of reality, but our only knowledge of such a world lay in sensory perception of it. Whilst the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance* seems to side with the former sceptical philosophy, in most of the other essays, Pater espouses the more muted strain of what could be called phenomenological thought. Indeed, Peter Allan Dale believes that Pater “manages to adopt each of the various understandings of the doctrine of relativity that Mill enumerates” at different points of his career (Dale 1977: 176). In a sense, it doesn’t matter – the point is that he shares with Mill a commitment to the doctrine of relativity and, inherent within such a position, is the rejection of an abstract absolutism. Further than this, however, is Pater’s understanding of the critical faculty needed to process the flux of infinite, empirical impressions. Pater begins to answer some of the concerns of the ‘crisis in historicism’; whether or not there exists some objective truth is irrelevant – for Pater it is the establishment of the non-objective truth, determined by the engagement of past historical moments and artefacts with the critical mind in the present. It is, therefore, perhaps less a commitment to a metaphysical scepticism that concerns Pater in these Renaissance essays, but rather that he wishes to engage with the tangible effects of such a philosophy upon the study of history. With this in mind, it is precisely the role he ascribes to the historian-critic that becomes most interesting about the presentation of art objects offered in *The Renaissance*.

The effect that Hegel's work had on the young Pater is already well-explored. Richard Wollheim declares that the "single most important influence upon Walter Pater – it is evident throughout his work from broad tendencies of thought to many, many turns of phrase – is Hegel" (Wollheim 1995: 24). So too, for Anthony Ward – in "his thinking about history [...] Pater is clearly under Hegel's spell" (Ward 1966: 53). Edmund Gosse, writing much earlier in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, found Pater to be "a confirmed Hegelian."¹⁹ There is little doubt that these commentators are correct in inscribing an Hegelian vision within Pater's universe. In the 'Winckelmann' essay in particular, there is clearly a huge debt owed to Hegel's evolution of art forms and the progression of the 'idea' through history. It is clear that in the years before Pater's *Renaissance* appeared, he was very closely associated with the Hegelian idealist set at Oxford, and Hegelian thought was widespread at the university. This taking up of Hegel manifested itself in a plethora of ways. Most relevant to my aim here is to demonstrate the taking up of the Hegelian dialectic as historical method. The evolution of society and culture through the dialectic on its way to an absolute knowledge of the spirit found in Hegel clearly has a relation to the type of history British historians were trying to write in the middle of the nineteenth century, the type I have categorised as Whig gradualism. Primarily, historical change becomes organic and teleological, and each historical period begins to demonstrate more and more explicitly a closeness to the spirit of the absolute. Pater himself learned German in the long vacation of 1859, read and indeed translated Hegel, and clearly demonstrates an awareness of both Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and his *Aesthetics*, particularly in the essay on Winckelmann in *The Renaissance*. There are huge similarities between this Hegelian model and the process of Renaissance that Pater describes. Pater, for instance, adopts the Hegelian schematic of the development of art towards self-

¹⁹ Gosse. 'Pater', *Dictionary of National Biography*, 459. Cited in Ward (1966): 62.

knowledge. For Hegel, there were three stages of art; the first is symbolic, where evidence of an engagement with the absolute spirit is not present, the second is classical, where the subject matter is most often the human form and where, although there is a sense in which the art begins to approach something beyond itself, it descends towards sensuality, and finally romantic art, the most highly developed of the three, where through the medium of art, the artist achieves self-realisation and self-knowledge. The evolutionary aspects of this model are quite clearly adhered to by Pater. Indeed, even as late as *Plato and Platonism* (1893), Pater would offer a meditation on Hegel's discussion of the evolution of the geist as an explanatory paradigm for both the development of the planet and of the human race:

Our terrestrial planer is in constant increase by meteoric dust, moving to it through endless time out of infinite space. The Alps drift down the rivers into plains, as still loftier mountains found their level there ages ago. The granite kernel of the earth, it is said, is ever changing in its very substance, its molecular constitution, by the passage through it of electrical currents. And the Darwinian theory – that “species,” the identifying forms of animal and vegetable life, immutable though they seem now, as of old in the Garden of Eden, are fashioned by slow development, while perhaps millions of years go by [...] Political constitutions, again, as we see now so clearly, are “not made,” cannot be made, but “grow.” Races, laws, arts, have their origins and end, are themselves ripples only on the great river of organic life; and language is changing on our very lips. (Pater 1893: 14-15)

More specifically still, Hegel's belief in a hierarchical development of the arts through architecture, sculpture, painting, music to poetry is mirrored in the essay on Winckelmann. There, Pater describes the “grand but subtle change” in the nature of the arts, “from those

which express that which is without” towards more abstract forms which express subjectivity (*Ren.* 172).

What is important, however, are the subtle revisions he makes to Hegel’s historical frame. For Pater, Hegel’s classical art is where balance is achieved – Greek art found the “lordship of the soul” at its vital centre, and Pater goes on to say:

But just there Greek thought finds its happy limit; it has not yet become too inward; the mind has not yet learned to boast its independence of the flesh [...] It has indeed committed itself to a train of reflexion which must end in defiance of form, of all that is outward, in an exaggerated idealism. (*Ren.*: 170)

For Pater, the highlights of history become not the moments where the dialectic swings into operation, but the periods of stasis in human thought. He bemoans the loss of the Hellenic balance, in a rather anti-Hegelian way:

The longer we contemplate that Hellenic ideal, in which man is at unity with himself, with his physical nature, with the outward world, the more we may be inclined to regret that he should ever have passed beyond it, to contend for a perfection that makes the blood turbid, and frets the flesh. (*Ren.*: 177)

Secondly, there is a sense that for Pater the self-realizing spirit unfolding in this lineage of art that Hegel outlines is not an abstract nor an absolute one, but human and individual. He doesn’t view the self as ethereal substance, but as clay-like material, being perpetually moulded by the interplay of layers of past art. This becomes even more obvious when one

considers the value given to art by both men. Hegel saw European art as “no longer the highest means in which the actuality of truth is possessed” and he also said that “Art in its specific form has ceased to meet the highest requirements of spiritual life” (Hegel 2005: 71, 67). Art merely functions, for Hegel, as the means by which the spirit attains self-knowledge – it can no longer serve any other purpose. Pater, on the other hand, saw art as the highest reality, and each of the stages in the development of the arts as progressive attempts to represent the transformation of the world by the human subject. Consequently, the history of art becomes an explanation of the different ways in which the mind has achieved, or at least sought, unity with itself and the world. So, Pater adopts the overall pattern of Hegel’s teleological movement of history and art being brought to consciousness, but that is as far as Hegel goes for Pater. There are quite clear signs that Pater’s reliance upon either the Hegelian dialectic for the movement of history, or Hegel’s hierarchy of the arts and their place within society, is a partial one at best.

It becomes clear that Pater flirts with both Mill’s relativism and Hegel’s evolutionary progression through the dialectic, engaging with neither fully, but coming out of the encounter with a firm belief in the subjectivity of historical knowledge and in a teleology of artistic development. The most important legacy from this encounter was a new awareness of the importance of the critic. It was, after all, the mind of an historically-aware critic that was in the process of self-realisation in his engagement with the art objects of history, and it was precisely the aesthetic sensibility of that critic that provided an insight into the past. History becomes not merely the inquiry into the events of the past, but is rather more immediate in its effects upon the criticising mind. As Pater says in the Winckelmann essay:

The proper instinct of self-culture cares not so much to reap all that those various forms of genius can give, as to find in them its own strength. The demand of the intellect is to feel itself alive. It must see into the laws, the operation, the intellectual reward of every divided form of culture; but only that it may measure the relation between itself and them. It struggles with those forms till its secret is won from each, and then lets each fall back into its place, in the supreme, artistic view of life. (*Ren.*: 183)

Essentially, this concept of self-culture becomes for Pater equivalent to the historical process. The phases of different cultures reflect the subject's own inner development, and art records the different phases of the individual's struggle for unity with himself and the world.

So, it is clear that Pater makes negotiations between philosophical relativism and Hegel's historiographical world-view. He departs from the encounter with both men with an abiding belief that the way to interpret *historically* is founded on perception more than interpretation. But he also thought long and hard about how his evidence, that of direct observation of paintings, sculptures and interpretation of literature, could be made to speak historically. Dilthey's differentiation between the *Naturwissenschaften*, the search for an explanatory method based on fundamental laws, in the natural sciences, and the *Geisteswissenschaften*, the search for a rather more critical, hermeneutic understanding in the historical sciences, though conceived in the years after *The Renaissance* was first published, clearly has its adjuncts in Pater's enterprise. Pater hints at a critical world, with an accompanying methodological apparatus, that exists beyond the nomothetic, or law-oriented methodologies of positivist

understanding of the physical world. Within this world, the “primary data” (*Ren.*: xx) are the effects that the impression and the sensation have upon the individual mind of the critic:

What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a book, to *me*?

What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure? and if so, what sort or degree of pleasure? How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?

(*Ren.*: xix-xx)

In one way, this attempt by Pater to outline a methodology that makes itself available to the aesthetic critic, in the ‘Preface’, could be construed as an effort to ‘scientise’ the aesthetic act; he talks of privileging the “concrete” over the “abstract,” relying on the “primary data” of experience as the building blocks of any wider theoretical stance and noting ones findings “as a chemist note[s] some natural element” (*Ren.*, xxi). He even suggests a teleology to an aesthetic experience that most aesthetic critics would see as non-ending by definition:

His end [the aesthetic critic’s] is reached when he has disengaged that virtue [...] and the rule for those who would reach this end is stated with great exactness in the words of a recent critique of Sainte-Beuve: - *De se borner à connaître de près les belles choses, et à s’en nourrir en exquis amateurs, en humanistes accomplis* (*Ren.*: xxi).²⁰

²⁰ This quotation in French is from Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, and Donald L. Hill translates the passage it is taken from: “Let us allow ourselves to imagine what it was like to be a friend of Racine or Fénelon, a M. de Tréville, a M. de Valincour, one of those well bred people who did not aim at being authors. but who confined themselves to reading, to knowing beautiful things at first hand, and to nourishing themselves on these things as discriminating amateurs, as accomplished humanists” (*Ren.*: 298) Pater’s use of the word ‘critique’ is an emendation made by Hill; in some other editions (most notably in the original 1873 publication) ‘critic’ is used instead.

However, at a deeper level, Pater's cloaking of the aesthetic act within the robes of scientific methodology doesn't really function to give it the weight of *wissenschaft*. Rather, his suggestion seems to be that, as for Dilthey, the realm of the purely empirical (in the truest sense of that word, meaning from direct 'experience' rather than evidentiary outcome) lies somewhere beyond the universe of observable effects, accessible only through a particularly acute critical mind. In this sense, Pater's pursuit of the sensation in *The Renaissance* becomes less equated to extreme empiricism or solipsism, but highlights an increasing dependence upon the individual hermeneutic faculty to engage both with moments in the present and artefacts from the past. His form of history thus becomes less relativist but more non-objective; his remark in the Coleridge essay – “[t]o the modern spirit nothing is, or can be rightly known, except relatively and under conditions” – does not mean that there are no historical 'truths', but rather suggests a re-positioning of those truths (Pater 1986: 129). In this way, Pater asserts the difference between a relativism destructive of the absolute and a reformulation of 'truth' along non-objective lines.

The significance of Pater's subject matter also meant that he was to be making important negotiations with other writers of the period. The use of the Italian Renaissance as a trope in Victorian literature and criticism has been well documented, as we have already seen in previous chapters. J. B. Bullen's schematic study of the writers that concerned themselves with the period reads like a who's who of revolutionary thinkers and radical historians; Michelet, Quinet, Burckhardt, Gautier, Symonds and Pater. It is indeed some coincidence that several of the more challenging histories of the later decades of the nineteenth century

concern themselves with the same historical period, its art and culture and its adjuncts in philosophy, ethics and history. Renaissance Italy seemed to offer not only a subject matter conducive to the exploration of history itself as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century but, more importantly, provided a mode of thinking and a system of representation which allowed writers to test the margins of historical discourse and its foundations.

The concept of the Renaissance as we know it today was in formation when Pater was publishing his essays on the topic. The works of art and poetry of fifteenth and sixteenth century Italy were of course known to both erudite and popular audiences throughout the entire nineteenth century, both in England and on the continent, but the formulation of the period as having some extraneous, metonymical existence began in earnest with Jules Michelet's and Jacob Burckhardt's historical works. Throughout the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries, the Renaissance had meant little more than a period of pride, bloodlust and dramatic intrigue and its leading players were "not Columbus and Galileo, but Machiavelli and Cesare Borgia" (Culler 1985: 250). With the publication in 1855 of Michelet's seventh volume of *Histoire de France*, titled *Renaissance*, came an awareness that the art and architecture originating from Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was in fact symptomatic of a shift in view, a different way of understanding man's relation to the world around him. J. B. Bullen finds the idea of 'Renaissance' during the decade preceding the publication of *The Renaissance* "historiographically unstable" and "its status as historical myth extremely problematic" (Bullen 1991: 155), largely because of the nature of its conception – was it a period that could be understood better through an accretion of art objects, or through an awareness of a new world view? How precisely did it relate to Victorian culture? In a sense, therefore, Pater embeds himself at the heart of a highly-

polemicised debate. By 1873, the idea of the Renaissance had certainly taken on this enlarged sense and Pater himself was acutely aware of this:

The word *Renaissance*, indeed, is now generally used to denote not merely the revival of classical antiquity which took place in the fifteenth century, and to which the word was first applied, but a whole complex movement, of which that revival of classical antiquity was but one element or symptom. (*Ren.*: 1)

Pater's choice of the Renaissance as a period worthy of study is vitally important in understanding the kind of intellectual historicism he is undertaking. Certainly, Pater's *Renaissance* was an attempt, at some level at least, to initiate the same types of intellectual inquiry that Matthew Arnold did with fifth century Greece and John Ruskin did with the Middle Ages. That Pater wants to site the positions of his contemporaries, and expressly in comparison with his own, is clear from the "Preface": his use of Arnold's phrase, "To see the object as in itself it really is" (*Ren.*: xix), itself reverberating Ranke's desire to read the historical moment *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, situates both Ranke and Arnold in a continuum leading towards his own position. In the very next sentence of the 'Preface', there is a subversion of Arnold's overriding hope, expressed in his lecture on "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," that criticism as an academic discipline should be steered away from individualism and subjectivism: Pater goes on to say that:

and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing one's object as it really is, is to know one's own impression as it really is. (*Ren.*: xix)

Here, there is an implicit confirmation that Arnold's desire to penetrate to a pure reality is impossible. Effectively, in blurring the distance between subject and object by inserting the critic into that dialectic, Pater collapses Arnold's rigid conception of what is without and what is within, which in turn initiates a new hermeneutic function for the aesthetic critic. In a similar way, Pater implies a revision of Ruskin's aesthetics by maintaining that beauty in art is not simply grounded in certain periods, but is present in all art, by definition.²¹ Aesthetic beauty, for Pater if not for Ruskin, is not historically-dependent; because all periods of history create different forms of beauty, the aesthetic critic must be sensitive to the nature of that beauty, the historical peculiarity of it. For Ruskin, as we have already seen, beauty was tied only to those art-making epochs in which certain, 'pleasing' styles were dominant.

Two things become clear in this positioning of Pater's authorial self relative to Arnold and Ruskin. Firstly, the difficulty Pater has with both men lies in the positioning of the critic; in Arnold, the relationship between object and subject, usually the relationship between a past culture and Victorian England, becomes complicated by the presence of a mediator insisting on discerning the nature of that object, and in Ruskin, he finds difficult the concept of beauty being historically-based. Secondly, there is a sense in which Pater fixes both men's intellectual positions in an historical past he has constructed himself. Pater's aesthetic historicism is established through the act of historicizing his own chief influences. He makes his own place in the English critical tradition by taking a perspective on Ruskin and Arnold. By subsuming their positions in his own and differentiating himself from them, he establishes his voice as more comprehensive, diversified, and therefore modern. Therefore, his choice to

²¹ Kenneth Daley (2001) deals with the moves in Pater's intellectual position relative to those Ruskin was making at the same time, but throughout Ruskin's career, his conception of beauty remained in the abstract.

explore the period of the Italian Renaissance must itself also be considered an *historiographical* act.

I want, finally, to explore a bit more fully my earlier conception of Pater's *phenomenological historicism*. As we have seen, Pater's historical position, taking from a deep consideration of a number of diverse sources, is concerned with making the art objects of the past mean something in the present. It thus depends on both *historical* inquiry – in other words, an explanation of how these art objects came about at a certain time – and *aesthetic* analysis. The relationship between historicism and aestheticism in *The Renaissance* is extremely complex and has been ably treated elsewhere.²² What concerns me here is how Pater's historical sense and his aesthetic treatment of the art object join together. The aestheticist world-view could clearly not be allied to the rather rigid, diachronic, essentially positivist view of history I have outlined as characterising the nineteenth-century study of history *per se*, but as we have already seen, the study of the visual realm, and the use of art as historical evidence, was a special case. The aestheticist conception of the world, with its characteristic rhythm of identification and disengagement becomes especially complicated, and especially effective, when the object under consideration is a historical object.

It is precisely the ease with which Pater shifts between aesthetic and historical discussion that forms the basis of much of the criticism levelled at the book on its publication. The outcry against the hedonistic 'Conclusion' and its subsequent removal by Pater has been documented fully and every Pater scholar is aware of it, but perhaps the more telling reaction

²² Carolyn Williams (1989) discusses this relationship in remarkable detail.

was the position taken by Mrs. Mark Pattison on the title of Pater's study; calling it 'misleading', she wrote that "[t]he historical element is precisely that which is wanting, and its absence makes the weak place of the whole book [...] the work is in no wise a contribution to the history of the Renaissance" (Pattison 1873: 640). Likewise, Margaret Oliphant explicitly rejects what we can now recognise as a typically Paterian interplay between historical fact and imaginative fiction. Discussing specifically Pater's description of the *Madonna of the Magnificat*, she writes:

This is surely the very madness of fantastic modernism trying to foist its own refinements into the primitive mind and age used to no such wire-drawing. The same mixture of sense and nonsense, of real discrimination and downright want of understanding, runs through the whole book. (Oliphant, 1873: 606)²³

The constant sliding from the aesthetic to the historical position was of course the result of Pater's subject matter, that most difficult of historical objects, the work of art. The role of the historian, for Mrs. Mark Pattison and the entire British historical tradition, was to construct an objectivity, an academic distance between what is and what was, in order that the true nature of the historical past is not clouded by present, internalised, partisan judgement. For Pater's subject, such a distance was impossible; any work of art exists in a dialectic of its aesthetic characteristics and its historical elements, its obvious status as aesthetically 'made' joining with a sense that its historical difference is already 'given'. It exists in two worlds as such, in the past as an object of historical significance and in the present as something to excite

²³ Oliphant admonishes Pater for his discussion of this painting elsewhere too, in *The Making of Florence: Dante, Giotto, Savonarola and their City* (London: Macmillan, 1888 [1876]), 352.

aesthetic sensibility. And, as Pater outlines in his description of aesthetic criticism in the opening paragraphs of the ‘Preface’ to *The Renaissance*:

the function of the aesthetic critic is to distinguish, to analyse, and separate from its adjuncts, the virtue by which a picture, a landscape [...] produces this special impression of beauty or pleasure. (*Ren.*: xx-xxi)

In a sense, Pater’s aesthetic critic has to discriminate the aesthetic object and to distinguish it from its corollaries, yet simultaneously to collapse this objective distance and connect with it in order to determine how one’s “nature [is] modified by its presence, and under its influence” (*Ren.*, xx). Pater utilises the husk of sceptical scientific empiricism in order to authorise a distinctly relative understanding of the art object, an understanding that can only arise in its passing through the perceiving consciousness. Cultural historicism therefore depends, in Pater, upon a revised sense of historical truth – neither the art object, nor its position in relation to other objects, can tell the critic anything valuable until it has passed through this membrane of aesthetic sensibility. Thus, his relativism in the “Conclusion” is not akin to, say, Nietzschean relativism – rather there is a new hermeneutic faculty being proposed for the historical critic.

The difficulty in truly separating a discussion of the art object’s historical elements from its aesthetic ones is manifest throughout *The Renaissance*. The immediacy of the Renaissance in the art that represents it serves often to confuse Pater’s tense in his prose. There are several passages where Pater deliberately confuses the past and present in his syntactical structure – for instance (with my highlights):

Filled as *our* culture is with the classical spirit, *we* can hardly imagine how deeply the human mind was moved, when, at the Renaissance, in the midst of a frozen world, the buried fire of ancient art rose up from under the soil. Winckelmann here reproduces for *us* the earlier sentiment of the Renaissance. On a sudden, the imagination feels itself free. How facile and direct, it seems to say, is this life of the senses and the understanding when once *we* have apprehended it! Here is that more liberal mode of life *we* have been seeking so long, so near to *us* all the while. How mistaken and round-about have been *our* efforts to reach it by mystic passion, and monastic reverie. (*Ren.*: 146)

The collective ‘we’ or ‘our’ becomes quite difficult to locate as this passage goes on; indeed it is hard to disentangle the different layers of the past, be they Renaissance, the eighteenth-century of Winckelmann, or the world of the reader. But Pater’s constant conflation of history and aesthetics, and of the shifting of different layers of the past into one present does not detract from his historical sophistication – in fact it enhances it. As we have seen, the moment of historical inquiry begins, in Pater, not with the collection of historical material, but with the passing of that material through a perceiving consciousness alert to certain aesthetic essences. In this sense, Pater’s historical consciousness was phenomenological.

The concept of *historical phenomenology* is a useful one for Pater’s conception of the Italian Renaissance. Phenomenology is broadly the study of essences and appearances, and the attempts made to describe them. For Husserl, the progenitor of the term, phenomenology was the attempt to “find a nonpsychological ground for philosophy” (Melville 1998: 144). He suggests that such a ground could be found in the close description and analysis of neither “objects in their independence nor of subjects in theirs but only of objects as they appear in the only place that they do in fact appear – in consciousness” (Melville 1998: 144). This is a

useful framework in which to finally place Pater's work in *The Renaissance*. We have already ascertained that his work depends so greatly on the presence of a perceiving, sensitive consciousness, sited between the world that is always-already there, and an impression that is fostered through contact with it. But why Pater's assertion is so important is that it finds that the prime site of historical expression is located there as well – to gain anything from a history of the Italian Renaissance, one has to internalise the evidence of the past in order to find its phenomenological essence. As such, this process becomes akin to a methodology for Pater. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty argues, phenomenology is:

the search for a philosophy which shall be a 'rigorous science', but also offers an account of space, time, and the world as we live them. It tries to give a direct description of our existence as it is, without taking account of its psychological origin and the causal explanations which the scientist, the historian, or the sociologist may provide. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: vii)

In this way, Pater's attempts at conveying the historicity of the objects of his study does not simply tread the fine line between empirical observation and solipsism, but is rather the sustained attempt to produce a new type of historical knowledge founded on the evidence of the sense-impression. As Stephen Melville intimates, phenomenology understood in this way is "less a method than a commitment to the careful description of things as they show themselves in our experience of them; such description unfolds towards interpretation on grounds significantly different from those of traditional art history, where interpretation seeks its justification through notions of objectivity" (Melville 1998: 146). Pater's descriptions of the art objects of the Italian Renaissance amounts to just that – the constant, heavy presence of Pater's consciousness in the text, mediating both the historical and aesthetic elements into one

complex impression is what was both so frustrating for his original reviewers and is of so much interest to us.

It becomes clear that Pater demonstrates, in his *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, a taking up of these historicist concerns and explores them in new ways. His scepticism manifests itself not in the realm of idealist philosophy, nor in the reduction of all experience to decadent sensuousness, but rather in an historical sense, pertaining to an exploration of new categories of 'truth'. In addition, his temporary, hesitant taking up of an Hegelian model for development of the *geist* towards self-realisation, outlined by Wolfgang Iser, functions as a model for a mirrored development of the human mind, which finds its highest expression in a cultural continuity through time.²⁴

That Pater's *Renaissance* is a reaction against the positivist histories of the middle of the nineteenth century is clear; I think whether or not Pater maintained a belief in the gradual changes of history that both the Comtean vision of Henry Buckle and the Hegelian Ranke seemed to take as given, is essentially irrelevant. For Pater, history became much more than that – he draws attention to the individual interpreter of history, the aesthetic critic who does not stand removed from the past but is connected to it by a general consciousness. This general consciousness is not akin to Hegel's abstract Spirit – rather it is a matrix established by the continuities of language and culture. In this sense, the past is always a force in the

²⁴ See Iser (1960 [1987]). 71-76

present, and its art objects become palimpsests, ready to be decoded by the sensitive interpreter in the present.

Pater's conception of a "general consciousness"²⁵ underlying artistic endeavour, one constructed through the accretion of stages of aesthetic response to the world, is opposed to the ideas of Arnold and Ruskin in one major sense. For Arnold, or Ruskin for that matter, both of whom attempted to relate all historical periods to an abstract zeitgeist that lived and died once and once only, much of the power of an historical period, be it fifth century Greece or Mediaeval Europe, lies in the pessimism that such an age will never return; the abstract nature of each period becomes synonymous for everything good that has now faded. Thus their historiographical principles are very much concerned with charting rise and decline. The Paterian conception of renaissance (the small 'r' denoting a type of attitude to the world, rather than a distinct historical period) exists at many points in history, in a matrix of past cultural and aesthetic achievements. And it is this accretion of aesthetic beauty over the ages that frames Pater's historiography. For him, the effect of the accumulation of the artistic attempts to understand the past reads more like a metempsychosis for the individual mind, which must consolidate this collection of moments of being, imbibing one influence after the other. Indeed, it is using precisely this idea that Pater describes the 'general consciousness' in *Plato and Platonism*: "It is humanity itself now – abstract humanity – that figures as the transmigrating soul, accumulating into its "colossal manhood" the experience of the ages; making use of, and casting aside in its march, the souls of countless individuals, as Pythagoras supposed the individual soul to cast aside again and again its outworn body" (Pater 1893: 63-4). The trends I have outlined, in the burgeoning field of the philosophy of history and

²⁵ Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism*, (London: Macmillan, 1893, rpt. 1899), 135

historiographical thought during the later decades of the nineteenth-century, contain clear antecedents of Pater's relativism and historical methodology within them. The reaction to positivist history that characterised not only the crisis in historicism but also later work by historians on the continent has been traced to the 1880s at the earliest. However, there are certainly elements of these developing ideas about historical study that can be found in Pater. It is precisely his conception of renaissance as process rather than period, his awareness of the historical inscrutability of the aesthetic object, his very understanding of the way in which past moments engage with each other and, in turn, are interpreted in the present, that sets him out as an historian fully engaged with the philosophical adjuncts of historical research. What Pater's *Renaissance* turns out to be is less a disorganised collection of often-unrelated figures and schools of art, and more a reflection on the phenomenological nature of history, an attempt to fully understand the historicist dimensions of the art objects of the past by uniting their aesthetic and historical existences in the moment of the present.

Chapter Four

“Not only all roads in space, but all roads across Time, converge hither”: Imaginative,

Visual and Material History in Vernon Lee and Henry James on Rome.¹

“Roma, non basta una vita”

After discussing very briefly the role of the historian in the art of history, Vernon Lee declares at the beginning of *Euphorion: Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance* (1884), that “[t]here are yet other kinds of work which may be done” (*Euph*, I:9). Such a statement points to her own kind of aesthetic historicism; outside of the academy, this “other” historical work has often been taken as subjective and emotive, evoking rather than reporting the past. The approaches made to the study of the past by writers like Lee centre very often on antiquarianism and cultural anthropology, a study of detail and particularity in place of historical pattern and social trend and a heavy reliance upon visual impression and imagination as empirical research. But, as we have seen so far, a highly aesthetic approach often masks a more vigorous and systematic exploration of the limits of historicity. If the last chapter was concerned with outlining the philosophical precursors of a Paterian phenomenological historicism that grounded itself specifically on the Italian Renaissance, this one will suggest that in studying the ‘impression’ and the ‘image’ in aesthetic-historical writing on Rome, it becomes apparent that there is a symbiotic connection between a specifically Roman history and the deployment of largely visual historical concepts to make sense of that city, the historical content of which, I argue, has hitherto been under-theorised.

¹ Vernon Lee, *The Spirit of Rome*. 103.

In this chapter I explore Lee's critical writings on Rome as a form of history writing proper, dependent upon aesthetic and emotive responses to the past but grounded firmly in the debates about the writing of histories of the ancient world during the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. These debates centred around the materiality of the Roman past (its architecture, its archaeology and its art), the legitimacy of archaeological and visual data in the construction of 'history' and the increased mental or imaginative role the investigator must play in writing histories of such distant periods. I begin with some context on Vernon Lee's early histories of eighteenth-century and Renaissance Italy, in order to better understand the development of her historiographical approach and strategies and to try to position her aesthetic-history writing amidst that of her contemporaries. I then look at the significance of Rome in aesthetic-history writing, and how the modes of representation it demands are often alien to history-writing proper, before offering a more detailed study of her writings on Rome, principally *The Spirit of Rome* (1906), with a brief aside exploring some of the same issues in Henry James' *Italian Hours* (1909). In looking at the historical methodologies of Lee and James, I suggest, we can isolate a number of alternative historiographical tropes (only now being adequately theorised) that provide a very different understanding of Rome's history and importance to the Western world from the standard histories on the subject.

Vernon Lee began writing on Italian history at a very early age. Born in France in 1856, she was fluent in four languages by her teens. Precocious to an extreme, her first book *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy* (1880) – published when she was just twenty-four – was followed during the course of the next thirty years by others on the Italian Renaissance and on Rome. Henry James first visited Italy a decade before Lee. His earliest sketches of Italian

places (later published in revised form as *Italian Hours* in 1909) were written from as early as 1871, and detailed his experiences in a number of essays not only on Rome, Venice and Florence, but other Tuscan cities and Naples. The pervasiveness of the Italian milieu in James' fictional works often functions to obscure his critical writing, which offers learned and cogent considerations of the Italian past. If Florence, Venice and Rome offer James-as-novelist a landscape full of imaginative power to set carefully constructed psychologies against, then similar sites offer James-as-aesthetic historian an access point to a past full of deep resonance and signifying power. In systematically tracing out the historical methodologies of Lee and James, it is clear that their representations of Rome are symbiotic with their development as historicist thinkers. Their Italian experiences were in many ways similar. Exploring a new, post-Unification Italy increasingly opened up by modern travel and a Rome freed from all the strictures that went along with papal control, both were visiting architectural and religious wonders that only a few years previously were out of bounds to the intrepid cultural commentator. For both, moreover, the use of specifically visual and archaeological data in the representation of the past is a common strategy. Recent philosophical scholarship on these forms of empirical knowledge has shed light on their previously unrecognised historicity, and such developments allow us here to theorise more broadly about Lee's and James' historical value. I maintain that, in their development of an ill-explored genre of *genius loci* writing, Lee and James engaged with major currents in the philosophy of history at the turn of the century through an impressionist form conducive to a very self conscious and reflexive interrogation of the materials of historical inquiry.

Italy's Roman and Renaissance past dominates Lee's historical imagination from her earliest writings. Clearly drawing on Pater, Symonds and Michelet, she presented in *Euphorion* (1884) an Italian Renaissance "cut off pitilessly at its prime; denied even an hour to repent and amend; hurried off before the tribunal of posterity" (*Euph*, I: 54). The metaphor of an historical period remaining incomplete is certainly a constituent part of nineteenth-century aesthetic-historical philosophy; the grand movements in art, from initial conception (be that of eighth- or seventh-century BCE Hellenistic sculpture, or of later-thirteenth century 'pre-humanist' art) through what are often framed as hasty terminations (Roman decadence, or Mannerist painting, in these examples) attracted later nineteenth-century historiographers who saw something of themselves in those periods, vacillating between civilised progress and decadence and degeneration.² Yet Lee's historiography repeatedly draws attention to the mythic status the Renaissance had acquired since the very beginning of the nineteenth century, castigating in her essay "The Italy of the Elizabethan Dramatists", for example, the character imposed on the period by any number of English writers during the early years of the nineteenth century:

The Italy of the Renaissance was, of all things that have ever existed or ever could exist the most utterly unlike the nightmare visions of men such as Webster and Ford, Marston and Tourneur [...] These frightful Brachianos and Annabellas and Ferdinands and Corombonas and Vindicis and Pieros [...] are mere fantastic horrors, as false as the Counts of Udolpho, the Spalatos, the Zastrozzis, and all their grotesquely ghastly pseudo-Italian brethren of eighty years ago. (*Euph.*, I: 80-81)

² For a discussion of these rather passionate mirrorings, see Culler (1985).

On the other hand she nevertheless demanded that historical writing should be more than the sum of facts, critiquing the “laborious bookworms” who found nothing in the study of historical sources other than pedantic detail (Lee 1907: xii), and declaring in *Euphorion* that the ‘scientised’ explication of the bare facts of the past rendered history “so utterly dead as to be fit only for the scalpel and the microscope” (*Euph.*, 1: 12). To Lee’s mind, the nineteenth century was ill-equipped to successfully conceptualise the “apparent anomaly” of the Italian Renaissance, or the “picture of a people moving on towards civilisation and towards chaos” (*Euph.*, I, 29). Adamant that Ruskin’s conflation of the development of art with that of moral culture could only act as a bar to full appreciation of the achievements of the Renaissance, she endeavoured to redress the balance by taking the period on its own terms, her narratives about it almost completely devoid of ethical judgment. In many ways, her historiography of the Renaissance is very different from Pater’s too. Rather than dealing with the Italian Renaissance as a series of leaps forward in the individual and collective mind that, for the first time, the nineteenth century was able to make sense of, Lee ultimately denies the link between the two periods, suggesting rather that “the moral atmosphere of those days is as impossible for us to breathe as would be the physical atmosphere of the moon; could we, for a moment, penetrate into it, we should die of asphyxia” (*Euph.*, I: 22). Already, then, in *Euphorion*, Lee was willing to question the possibility of an encounter with a real past, especially in Italy. For in Italy, more than anywhere else, she writes, “we are subjected to receiving impressions of the past so startlingly life-like as to get quite interwoven with our impressions in the present” (*Euph* I: 21). The blurring of the past and the present is a familiar technique in this genre of history writing. Lee, however, only entertains it so far. For Lee, the relative standpoint of the observer becomes an important conceit in any historical representation. In her constant questioning of the verifiability of ‘what happened’, she is ever aware of Burckhardt’s

acknowledgement that “our historical pictures are for the most part pure constructions [...] mere reflections of ourselves” (Burckhardt 1979: 35), the effect of which Walter Benjamin would later describe as the “telescoping of the past through the present” (Benjamin 2002: 471). “Is not what we think of the past,” Lee herself reflected in *Hortus Vitae*, “a mere creation of our own?” (Lee 1904:196).

A consequence of her suspicion of the space between individual events and narratives about them was that Lee herself offered no real conception of the Renaissance as having an inherent meaning, or a goal to which it attained. If it was immediately apparent that Lee was ‘historically-minded’ in most of her work, it was thus perhaps less readily so that she was a serious historical thinker. Although one prescient reviewer praised *Euphorion* for its “fresh and original” approach to historical scholarship, much of her historical writing, although reviewed quite positively on publication, was nevertheless in the main considered inferior to Ruskin, Symonds and Pater, and denigrated for its sentimentality, subjectivity and lack of consistent argument.³ Indeed if, as we have seen, Pater’s *Renaissance* was criticised for its lack of objectivity and confusion of fact and fiction, then reviews of Lee’s *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, written by contributors who did not know her sex, were filled with similar criticisms. The *Times* described her as a “worthy disciple” of Pater’s, but noted that she “has not the polish which endeared Pater to his readers”, whilst the *Saturday Review* considered *Euphorion* deficient in almost every way to Symonds’ *Renaissance in Italy*, castigating Lee for admitting to not having read that work.⁴ Max Bräm, writing in 1932, similarly found fault in Lee’s reluctance to offer any cogent representation of the

³ *Spectator*, 12th July 1884: 216-18.

⁴ *Times*, 13th December 1895: 13; *Saturday Review*, 6th September 1884: 318.

Renaissance as an organic whole, as for him Symonds and Pater did.⁵ When praise for her work was forthcoming, it was for its aesthetic charm more than its academic content. Her highly subjective approach, however, led to the accusation by the *Saturday Review* that she “confus[ed] impressions with ideas”, while Virginia Woolf, reviewing *Laurus Nobilis* in 1909, complained that “the very qualities of her style get in the way of any clear sight of the matter which she discusses; images and symbols, unless they spring from a profound understanding, illustrate not the object but the writer.”⁶

The suggestion that Lee was a writer who privileged style over substance simply does not tally with the rich variety of philosophical and historical sources in her books and essays. She was a key disseminator of continental ideas into English aesthetic-historical discourse, perhaps even in a more significant way than Bernard Berenson, and her work demonstrates a profound knowledge of not only the familiar landmarks of historical work on Italy (be that Pater, Ruskin and Symonds, or Burckhardt, Michelet and Croce) but also significant contemporary developments in literature, philosophy, psychology and historiography, infused with a philosophy of history developed from Nietzsche, and by a deep engagement with Freud.⁷ Whilst most critical assessments of Lee’s oeuvre have concentrated on her gothic writings and interest in the supernatural, a number of recent revaluations have gone some way to salvaging the historical aspects of her work. Bonnie G. Smith, for example, argues for Lee’s inclusion in a canon of women historiographers whose lasting impact is less on the realm of political and constitutional history than on “antiquarian studies (often neglected by male historians) as well as biography, prosopography, and universal histories” (Smith 1984:

⁵ Max Bräm. *Die italienische Renaissance in dem englischen Geistesleben des 19. Jahrhunderts, im besonderen bei John Ruskin, John Addington Symonds und Vernon Lee* (Zurich: Brugg, 1932) – cited in Zorn (2003): 36.

⁶ *Saturday Review*, 6th September 1884: 317; *Times Literary Supplement*, 5th August 1909: 284.

⁷ See Brown (2005): 193-196

711). Smith argues that recourse to different aspects of the past helped form a fertile and productive niche for women historians, outside of the concerns of their male counterparts:

Exploring the churches and palaces of the ancient city-states, these women found a luxuriant artistic past in need of restoration. In some ways, their work parallels and even duplicates the concerns of archaeologically and anthropologically minded scholars. (Smith 1984: 724)

Rohan Maitzen similarly suggests that a loose affiliation (certainly not amounting to a ‘canon’) of women historians offered crucial developments in history writing that continue through the present day:

Participants in the ongoing discussion [concerning the nature of historical scholarship] aligned or attempted to establish definitive distinctions between possible configurations of gender, genre, and history [...] The result was not coherence and hegemony but incoherence, discord, even some confusion – and a tremendous expansion of possibility as the definition and the face of history changed and changed again to fit different conceptions of what a story of the past should look like, aesthetically, formally, and substantially. (Maitzen 1998: 26)

Arguing that women historians “could take advantage of instabilities in existing models of history,” Maitzen places writers like Lee at the vanguard of schools of historiography which had their beginnings in the early decades of the twentieth century and would flourish in the later ones (Maitzen 1998: xiii). Two other recent attempts to reconsider Lee’s approach to historical writing, Hilary Fraser’s *The Victorians and Renaissance Italy* (1992) and Christa Zorn’s *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History and the Victorian Female Intellectual* (2003), again explicitly link her historical practices to issues of authority and gender. Fraser focuses on

Lee's attempt "to confront questions relating to cultural and historical relativism which many of her male contemporaries chose to ignore," while Zorn finds in her dismissive attitude to "the worship of facts" (Fraser 1992: 229; Zorn 2003: 27) a rejection of the dualism between objectivity and subjectivity, identifying in Lee a historiographic power derived from a tradition of women historians who emphasised a social and cultural as opposed to political history of the Italian past. Carving out a role for Lee as empathetic interpreter of the past, Zorn finds in Pater an important precursor for Lee's methodology, his suggestion (in *The Renaissance* and elsewhere) that any response to the past is to some degree imaginary and personal, giving her "the justification to explore history individually, through her own impressions of the past gathered when she was growing up among the relics of Italian history" (Zorn 2003: 38). Lee is dependent upon a material connection with Italy in order to write historically, Zorn notes, quoting this passage from *Euphorion*:

Impressions are not derived from description, and thoughts are not suggested by books. You find everywhere your facts without opening a book. The explanation which I have tried to give of the exact manner in which medieval art was influenced by the remains of antiquity, came like a flash during a rainy morning in the Pisan Campo Santo; the working out and testing of that explanation in its details was a matter of going from one church or gallery to the other.
(*Euphorion* I: 19)

For Zorn, Lee's "historical argument" here and elsewhere, "ties in with innovative trends in historical scholarship from the second half of the twentieth century" (Zorn 2003: 31).

Both of these accounts try to reclaim the type of history that Lee writes within a body of female writers all doing the same thing. Coding as female the desire to represent an 'other'

history outside of the political and constitutional domain of male historians, they suggest that Lee's 'otherness' is a product of her womanhood. The problem for us here is that aesthetic-history itself, as a genre, has always been coded 'female'. If the commentators above suggest that the female historical voice produces a form of *kultur-* or *kunstgeschichte*, then as early as the late-nineteenth century, any philosophical approach which relied on something other than objective fact was consistently coded 'female', regardless of a writer's sex. Georg Simmel, for example, notes as much:

[E]xpressions of the male nature claim normative significance on the ground that they exhibit the objective truth and rectitude that are equally valid for everyone, male or female. The fact that the masculine is absolutized in this way as the objective simpliciter and the impartial standard of authority applies not only to the empirically given actuality of the masculine. On the contrary, it also has the result that the ideas [...] that develop both from and for the masculine acquire the status of trans-sexual absolutes. (Simmel 2004: 104)

The authorial voices we hear in aesthetic history, the voices which blend imagination and fact, impression with idea and artistic feeling with empirical data, do not display "objective truth and rectitude" – and are certainly far less than 'male' in this sense. And Vernon Lee, at the forefront of the breaking up of historical objectivity into relative viewpoints and favouring a descriptive, aesthetic approach over normative ones, is one such voice. It is not so much that I want to sidestep the question of the gender of history writing, then, as reformulate it. My aim is not simply to suggest that a continuity exists between the techniques and methodologies of all women historians of the nineteenth century, but rather to demonstrate that the types of data and approach that historians like Lee relied upon demanded an alternative, aesthetic-historical technique. Though it is clearly important to construct a lineage of female historians working

without the legitimacy that an increasingly male academic and professionalised field offered, what is missing from the critical reassessment of Lee's historical writings is an analysis of the tropes she uses to represent the past. To fully grasp what in Lee amounts to a sensitive critique of the artistic remains of the past, we need to be fully aware of the historicist aspects of her methodology. For us here, that means a more cogent and theorised understanding of the visual and material world as historical evidence. I have touched on this issue in the previous two chapters, but Lee reflects more deeply on the issue of using visual and material evidence to understand the past.

Even in her historiography of the Renaissance, which was as we have seen more of a history of ideas than of objects, Lee was certainly interested in the material properties of art and in constructing an historiography around them. Realising that the artistic and spiritual power of the Renaissance is carried on the rather mundane but hardly trivial facts of "the opening up of quarries, the discovery of metallic alloys, the necessity of roofing larger spaces, the demand for sedentary amusement", Lee allots significantly more time to discussing these precursory conditions than Pater or Symonds (*Ren. Fanc.*: 37). In an altogether different sense, the objects of the Renaissance figure prominently in Lee's work; the material past of the Renaissance functions as a site of potentiality for the historical imagination in *Euphorion*. In a way that will be taken up in the later *The Spirit of Rome*, the artistic remnants of the Italian *quattrocento* offer Lee a chance to outline not only a nuanced artistic continuity between past and present, but to voice suspicion about the historical 'content' of those material remains. She talks, in *Euphorion*, about how contact with the art of the Renaissance leads to a bewildering mix of sensation and historical impression:

It seems as if all were astoundingly real, as if, by some magic, we were actually going to mix in the life of the past. But it is in reality but a mere delusion, a deceit like those dioramas which we have all been into as children [...] We can see, or think we see, most plainly the streets and paths, the faces and movements of that Renaissance world; but when we try to penetrate into it, we shall find that there is but a slip of solid ground beneath us, that all around us is but canvas and painted walls, perspectived and lit up by our fancy; and that when we try to approach to touch one of those seemingly so real men and women, our eyes find only daubs of paint, our hands meet only flat and chilly stucco. Turn we to our books, and seek therein the spell whereby to make this simulacrum real; and I think the plaster will still remain plaster, the stones still remain stone. (*Euph.* I, 21)

We are, of course, reminded here of Ruskin's fantasies on stone, the material remains provoking the perceptive and sensitive consciousness to fabricate past events, the product being an interplay of the self and history. But we also sense a self-consciousness about blurring fact and fiction and a hesitance to go as far as Ruskin does. Lee remains aware of the temptation to confuse the reality of the past with the impression that the receptive mind perceives. As a consequence, she does not allow herself free rein to imbue life into the past – if Ruskin shows, at times, a wilful disregard for the boundaries between imagination and fact, Lee will not follow her predecessor so far; that “slip of solid ground” seemingly represents the limits to historicity. The blurring of past and present is a fertile device only to a certain extent in *Euphorion*, beyond which speculation and imagination breach the walls of historical possibility.

In her later work on Rome however, Lee's reflection on the relationship of the aesthetic, visual and material realm to history becomes even more pronounced. In part, this is because

of Rome's visual and material history refuses to be consigned to the past, constantly irrupting as it does into the present. I want to explore next the specific aspects of the Roman past which make it, more than any other historical site, ripe for speculation about the trustworthiness of the visual image for garnering an understanding of history, in order that we might progress towards the end of the chapter to looking at how Lee and James, utilising as they do mainly scopic strategies to understand Rome, negotiate with these issues of historicity.

Rome is a unique example of a space functioning equally as an archaeological wonder, a site of aesthetic longing and one of the first stepping-stones towards an understanding of modern civilisation. If a knowledge of Athens and classical Greece was predicated, in the nineteenth-century at least, on an understanding of a changeless and ageless body of philosophers and philosophy, the world of ancient Rome was both historically and materially recoverable, in the accounts of wars, conquests and emperors in the writings of its historians (Pliny, Tacitus, Suetonius), and in the persistence of its artefacts and remains within the Roman historical landscape. In a very physical sense, the Roman past was there for all to see. It did not have to be uncovered for it to be looked at. Of course, knowledge about the Roman past could be acquired in any of the major histories of the city, but this was combined in Rome with a physical presence that was not offered at any other site in the world.

As a result, visual and material strategies for exploring and making sense of the Roman past in the nineteenth-century sat next to the more familiar historical practices of data collection and source work. As Norman Vance notes, from the eighteenth-century onwards

there was a desire to *see* ancient Rome, and to record Roman sites in paintings, etchings and, later, photographs.⁸ Indeed, because of such ready imagery, the first visit to Rome for many visitors recalled an already familiar material landscape. Augustus Hare, for example, notes as much in his *Walks in Rome*, commenting on the effect of finally visiting the Coliseum, having been confident of its image since childhood:

An arrival in Rome is very different to that in any other town in Europe. It is coming to a place new and yet most familiar, strange and yet so well known. When travellers arrive at Verona, for instance, or at Arles, they generally go to the amphitheatres with a curiosity to know what they are like; but when they arrive at Rome and go to the Coliseum, it is to visit an object whose appearance has been familiar to them from childhood, and long ere it is reached, from the heights of the distant Capitol they can recognise the well-known form. (Hare 1871: 1)

Vance rightly argues that the materiality of the past Roman landscape was (and indeed still is) its most democratic feature:

The survival of Rome as metaphor and imaginative substance for the nineteenth century might seem to be a purely literary and intellectual matter. But the ruins of ancient Rome were plain for all to see, in paintings and engravings if not at first hand, and Rome, unlike Athens, was not impossibly remote from Britain. (Vance 1997: 18)

However, at the same time, the promised availability of a solid, physical and familiar history is undermined. Duncan F. Kennedy, in drawing attention to Rome's distinctive geological

⁸ Norman Vance. *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*, 18-22.

landscape, reminds us “that a city of seven hills can afford a variety of prospects, none of which is self-evidently superior to the rest” (Kennedy 1999: 19, 21). Recalling the simultaneous back- and forward-looking in the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas stands with Evander on the site of a future Rome, he also suggests that “a phenomenon gains historical shape, order and meaning only when it can be viewed from the vantage point, the *coup d’oeil*, of the point deemed to be its end, where ‘End’ may be figured principally as a moment of fulfilment” (Kennedy 1999: 25). The physical *presence* of the ruins of Ancient Rome in contemporary Rome means that the historicity of the city is always contentious. In Pater’s *Marius the Epicurean*, the writer cannot pull himself away from the potency of the image of the ruins of Rome, so he has his protagonist imagine a future with them – it is only amongst the ruins of the city that Pater can imagine the action of ancient Rome occurring. For Marius, that most sensitive interpreter of the significance of events, the landscape of the future ruin of Rome surrounds its greatest historical moments:

The grandeur of the ruins of Rome, - heroism in ruin: it was under the influence of an imaginative anticipation of this, that he [Marcus Aurelius] appeared to be speaking [...] Marius for one, as he listened, seemed to foresee a grass-grown Forum, the broken ways of the Capitol, and the Palatine hill itself in humble occupation (Pater 1898: 147).

Even Marius, who could not have possibly foreseen the ruins of Rome, expects them, because otherwise the signification of that city is lost. Rome, then, has a difficult material existence – the age of its past means that its ruins have been a permanent feature of the Western historical consciousness, but to try to understand Rome as it was, those ruins must be re-built. The problem is that the visual metaphor of Rome in ruin is such a potent one, that the aesthetic-history writing on the city cannot simply blot those ruins out. What results, as we see in

Duncan Kennedy and in Walter Pater alike, is that Rome functions on a sliding scale of 'pastness,' its historicity difficult to fully grasp. In fact, Lee herself describes Roman history in terms of a palimpsest, too:

As a matter of fact Rome has never been so much Rome, never expressed its full meaning so completely, as nowadays. This change and desecration, this inroad of modernity, merely completes its eternity. Goethe has an epigram of a Chinese he met here; but a Chinese of the eighteenth century completed Rome less than an American of the nineteenth. Not only all roads in space, but all roads across Time, converge hither (SR: 103)

Lee's and James' aesthetic criticism on the subject of Rome at the *fin de siècle*, I suggest, produces an advancement of the 'historical sense' outlined through the reading of Pater in the last chapter. For if Pater points towards the links between phenomenological sense and historical fact, organised around the art objects of the Italian Renaissance, Lee and James go one step further, hinting at a conflation of the two centred on the historical elements of one specific place, in which the sense-impression and the data of historical knowledge become one and the same. The aesthetic and psychological importance of the materiality of ancient Rome has, as a subject, been broached only occasionally. But if what Catharine Edwards says is true, that "Rome's seemingly boundless capacity for multiple, indeed conflicting, signification makes it an extraordinarily fertile paradigm for making sense of – and also for destabilising – history" (Edwards, 1999: 3), then its visual materiality lies at the heart of this capacity. Stephen Bann goes as far as to suggest that "pictorial representations of the past might not be secondary and inessential accompaniments to the grand protocol of historical narrative, but primary evidence for what Lord Acton called 'historical-mindedness,'" and asks "whether the received notion of 'ancient Rome' may not be understood as a rhetorical

construct specially, though not exclusively, intelligible in visual terms” (Bann 1999: 37). I want to look a little more closely now at how one specific manifestation of the visual and material remains of Rome – the archaeological realm – functions in relation to history, in order to begin to suggest some points of connection between a consideration of the aesthetic qualities of the remains, and their historicity.

The practice of archaeology is, in many ways, the best analogous metaphor for the new nineteenth-century science of history. “Archaeology was born of modernity,” says Gavin Lucas. “Indeed, it helped shape it.” (Lucas 2004: 109) A science founded almost wholly on empirical study and materialist methodologies, the cult of the archaeological flourished during the early years of the twentieth century. Ruled over by the new inventions that helped material out of the ground and into the museums, “amateur and professional archaeologists were committed to a futurology that either elevated objects outside of space and time into a realm of transcultural and transhistorical beauty (the cult of the masterpiece) and/or subordinated them within grand evolutionary schemes and narratives in the service of higher law (progress, science, nationhood, humanity and God) (Schnapp et al. 2004: 4). More than that, the practice itself is one founded on notions of evolutionary teleology; the archaeologist must, by necessity, be more advanced mentally and spiritually than that which he is excavating, and able to securely locate the objects brought up from under the ground into the narratives of human history. On the one hand, then, archaeology offered the historian another methodology to go about his business of telling the stories of the past.

Yet the process of excavation and archaeology was also a powerful trope within the later nineteenth century for other reasons. As Gavin Lucas (2004) suggests, the “uncontained historicity” of the objects being exhumed, coupled with the depth of their ‘pastness’, means that they are not readily securable in terms of their signification:

Prehistory was not just a new past, it was also a lost past – lost to traditional forms of memory, whether written or spoken. For the new historical consciousness, prehistory was perhaps the greatest challenge and yet perhaps its greatest asset; on the one hand, it was a past which tradition has forgotten, and no amount of critical analysis of traditional texts would recover it. On the other, precisely for this reason, it was a past purified of all taint of tradition. [...] Prehistory is also about the ontological priority of material culture before text. (Lucas 2004: 110-111)

Any number of writers during the half-century after Lee and James found this principle both liberating and bewildering. George Bataille’s *Lascaux, ou la naissance de l’art* (Lascaux, or the Birth of Art) relies, as Carrie Noland has shown, almost entirely upon a visual cognisance of the material remnants of ancient civilisation to produce meaning and for Noland, Bataille’s difficult negotiation with the cave paintings he observed during the writing of his study is staggeringly similar to Lee’s experiences in Rome:

the Lascaux book anchors Bataille’s conceptual apparatus – patchwork as it is – in a specific viewing experience. Bataille *looks* at the walls of the cave and this act of vision does not support a “coherent interpretation” of discrete figures, but instead leaves him bewildered before a confusing tableau of tangled and superimposed lines. (Noland 2004: 126)

Compare Lee's sense of bewilderment and exasperation in her description of an excavated carving in Acqua Marcia. "Chaos, chaos," she exclaims, "and all these things moving, writhing, making fearful efforts, in a way living, all about nothing and in nothing" (SR: 18)

Clearly, this new science of artefacts and objects did not simply share the same teleological narrative structures that defined its sister art, history. Indeed, implicit in recent discourse on the philosophy of archaeology is the distinction made between the archaeologist's practice and that of the historian. The historian, in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century, had a relatively simple task – to make sense of the past by examining the sources. No further work was to be needed. The sources would speak for themselves. If this was heavily problematised by the onset of a distinctly post-modern historicism (everywhere evident from the 1950s onwards), it was not without its detractors in a much earlier period. Archaeology, on the other hand, had a more opaque look into the past. Accessing the past through a systematic study of its materiality is an alternative historiography. Yes, the archaeological object existed in a way that a written record, a piece of numerical data did not, but it was essentially mute. It had to be made to speak. The archaeological metaphor has received increasing attention since the 1970s and 1980s, specifically through Foucault's archaeologies of knowledge, Derrida's 'trace' and the rediscovery of Walter Benjamin's archaeological tropes.⁹ In 2004 the journal *Modernism/Modernity* devoted a special issue to the theoretical consideration of archaeological tropes and practice in modernity, which helped to detail further the complex negotiations that the archaeological realm makes with history, and how it informs an aesthetics of irruption in modernist art.¹⁰ And, even more recently, Thomas Pfau has

⁹ See for instance Foucault. *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Derrida, *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*.

¹⁰ *Modernism/Modernity*: 11.1 (2004).

suggested that the modernist material image contains latent energies that resist the ordering impulse of narrative (Pfau 2005: 171).

I want to pick up on Pfau's terminology to suggest that Lee was perfectly aware of the danger at the heart of the type of history formed on visual and archaeological data. In *The Spirit of Rome*, she demonstrates an awareness of the difference that documentary and visual/material history provide. For Lee, the archaeological impulse came readily. She was close friends with Eugenié Sellers Strong, Assistant Director of the British School at Rome and perhaps the best known of a number of women archaeologists working in and around Rome at the fin de siècle.¹¹ In light of such connections, Lee's recourse to archaeological tropes to better make sense of Roman history is arguably not just an aesthete's instinctive pull towards the artistic fragments and artefacts of the past, but a strategic methodology informed by a backdrop of solidly gained knowledge on the topic. What I want to suggest here is that the twin strategies of looking as a method of gaining meaning and of employing the trope of archaeology and excavation to meditate on and extrapolate from the cultural achievements of the past are broadly aligned with an aestheticist agenda for a privileging of the material objects of the past over documentary and quantitative sources and evidence.

The Spirit of Rome, subtitled 'Leaves from a Diary', is presented as a series of fragments, recorded by Lee on travelling around the city, in which everywhere the sense-impression functions as empirical data, and the everyday mingles seamlessly with the still present monuments and artefacts of an ancient Rome. Reviews were mixed, and typically bewildered, the *Times Literary Supplement* declaring admonishingly that it offered an

¹¹ Letter from Vernon Lee to Henry Brewster in Rome, 3rd May 1896, cited in Brown (2005), 200; Sellers Strong co-wrote *Schliemann's Excavations: An Archaeological and Historical Study* with C. Schuchhardt (London: Macmillan, 1891).

unrefined “200 pages of scattered adjectives and convulsed interjections,” while the *Academy* decided more favourably that “the essence of and spirit of Rome breathes in these disconnected and scattered leaves from an old diary. Each word is exactly the right and vivid one.”¹²

Without a doubt, the historical dimension of the book is enriched by the descriptions of the archaeology of Rome. The excavations and archaeological finds in Rome during the later nineteenth-century, specifically in the Forum, extended the visibility of, and accessibility to, its ancient and unique past, and Lee was on hand to see many of the digs at close quarters. And Rome more than anywhere else had a different relationship to its viewers than anywhere else. “Rome” she says, “is utterly different from anything else, and ... we are therefore in different relations to it” (*SR*: 9). On her trips to Rome she kept abreast of the archaeological developments in the Forum. Meeting with Boni to examine the excavations on February 27th 1902, for example, she was shown, in the Director’s ‘shed’,

a “Campionario,” literally patterned sheets of the various strata of excavation; bits of crock, stone, tile, iron, little earthenware spoons for putting sacrificial salt in the fire, even what looked like a set of false teeth. Time represented thus in space. And similarly with the excavations themselves: century under century, each also represented by little more than footprints, bases of gone columns, foundations of rough edifices. (*SR*: 141)

To her mind, the collection of objects is at once aesthetically-pleasing and historically-confusing. The historicity of each object differs from the collection as a whole. She goes on:

¹² *Times Literary Supplement*, 13th October 1905: 339; *Academy*, 14th October 1905: 1073-4.

I felt very keenly that the past is only a creation of the present. Boni, a very interesting and ardent mind, poetical and mystical, showed us things not really of this earth, not really laid bare by the spade, but existing in realms of fantastic speculation, shaped by argument, faultlessly cast in logical moulds. Too faultlessly methought [...] Is this not a mere creation, like that of art or of systematic metaphysics? (SR: 142)

Writing several decades later, Walter Benjamin's description of the object's position in an "historical succession" can readily be compared with Lee's suspicion that the objects on the archaeologist's table didn't so much tell as story as represent disparate elements of an undefined past:

If the object of history is to be blasted out of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it. The structure first comes to light in the extracted object itself. And it does so in the form of the historical confrontation that makes up the interior (and, as it were, the bowels) of the historical object, and into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale. It is owing to this monadological structure that the historical object finds represented in its interior its own fore-history and after-history. (Benjamin 2002: 475)

The artefact arrives at the archaeologist's table filled with historicity but devoid of a narrative. Such a definition coincides nicely with Pfau's description of "the image's latent mythic content – a content glossed over by its expressive or speculative deployment in [...] narratives (literary and philosophical)" (Pfau 2005: 159). We find the same latent motifs recurring elsewhere in the genre of aesthetic history in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Walter Pater's attempt to uncover the mental aspects of Greek and Roman culture, for

example, coincides with a very physical digging up and reconstruction of that mental make-up in the pages of *The Renaissance*. As Carolyn Williams notes:

Pater's own age was experiencing a second wave of the classical revival, more "scientific" than the Renaissance and provoked by archaeological findings that graphically demonstrated how much of the cultural past lay hidden beneath the surface of the earth. His modern sense of geographical strata hiding the impressions of the past (fossils of organic life pressed into rock, fragments of ancient sculpture in repose underground) is evident throughout *The Renaissance*. (Williams 1989: 161-62)

The Roman excavations also act as a locus for another set of connections that are relevant here – the metaphorical use of archaeology as a kind of psychical methodology within the arts and sciences of the mind in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century.¹³ The archaeological metaphor pervades psychoanalytical discourse of the late nineteenth century. Sigmund Freud's interest in archaeology was piqued by Rome above anywhere else, and invoked by him as a historical and spatial correlative to the human psyche. "Now let us by a flight of imagination" he says in 'Civilisation and its discontents,'

suppose that Rome is not a human habitation but a psychical entity with a similarly long and copious past – an entity, that is to say, in which nothing that has once come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one.¹⁴

¹³ See Thomas (2004): 28-32 for a good overview.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud (1930) 'Civilisation and its discontents,' in *The Penguin Freud Library*, vol. XII: *Civilisation, Society and Religion*, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 257-8

Freud's analogy is a telling one, for not only does it reflect the synchronicity of Rome and its palimpsestic nature, but in expressly tying the Roman (material) past to the unconscious, he draws attention to the latent, unconscious energies at the heart of it. Freud makes archaeological images double-sided, at once historicised art objects *and* signifiers of a deeper historical resonance. The idea of Roman past as living organism having a psychical existence abounds in Lee's *The Spirit of Rome* too:

One of the fascinations of Rome is undoubtedly the quality of its being a living creature, with unbreakable habits and unanswerable reasons [...] Rome, as perhaps only Venice, is an organic city, almost a living being; its *genius loci* no allegory, but its own real self. (SR: 44)

There are therefore a number of tensions in *The Spirit of Rome* between a desire to read Rome through its fragments, and thus an attempt to structure the relationship between those fragments and Lee's present in a way that disregards the intervening centuries, and a counter-impulse to frame Rome's multi-faceted past within a narrative structure that sees Rome as an organic, evolving organism, and as the beginnings – albeit dim and distant – of modern civilisation. Like Freud or Benjamin, Lee's conception of Roman history is not a simply *materially* palimpsestic one, because the archaeological metaphor in her work similarly extends to the realm of mind and memory. The overwhelming sense-impressions she garners from visiting churches, archaeological sites and out-of-city ruins literally flood into each other, as on her first return to Rome in 1888, when she recalls studying an 'antique sarcophagus serving as a base to a mediæval tomb' somewhere in the Forum, a memory serves to open the floodgates on Roman experiences more generally:

Impressions? Scarcely. My mind seems like an old blotting-book, full of fragments of sentences, of words suggesting something, which refuses to absorb any more ink (SR: 11)

The weight of the fragments of the Roman past – and note in the simile a suggestion that these fragments are visual rather than documentary in nature – literally overwhelms her aesthetic sense. In the end, the scopic strategies she uses to interrogate the Roman past cannot readily assimilate what she sees into a coherent narrative, the elements refusing to cohere in any spatial or temporal way.

Henry James was coming to similar conclusions about the ‘weight’ of human history, concerns which would be taken up more demonstrably by a literary modernism in the years after his death in 1916. In his last, unfinished novel *The Sense of the Past* (1917), his protagonist, Ralph Pendrel, suffers more than any other of James’ protagonists from living in the past. An historian by trade, he writes an essay ‘in aid of the Reading of History.’ The novel certainly does not support the extent of Pendrel’s forays into the past, however, which it ultimately deems retrogressive. Pendrel’s transportation back into the 1820s is a painfully hollow experience for him, and he finds that his commitment to the academic study of the past has been to the detriment of a life in the present. Yet this final novel does demonstrate in James an interest in the role the historian should play in modern life, and the methods by which an interpretation of the past is achieved. As early as “The Art of Fiction” (1884), James had begun to collapse some of the distinctions between historian and creative writer. Both the novelist and the historian, James argues, seek to represent the ‘truth’, what he means by ‘truth’ prefiguring the nuance of later historiographical debates. “The novel is history” (James 1994: 46), James declares, and the novelist’s authority comes from speaking “with assurance,

with the tone of the historian” (46). Of course, James falls on the side of the novel here for its capacity to produce “a direct impression of life” (50), yet nevertheless figures history less as straightforward reportage than as illuminative representation. The historian becomes a model story-constructor in “The Art of Fiction”, who has the capacity to both weave facts into narrative form and reflect intelligently on that weaving process. This concept of illuminated representation, carried into *Italian Hours*, is a useful one because it highlights the metaphorical and metonymical strategies James employs. If the aim of both the historian and the aesthete is to “trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern” (53), then James’ historical writing, I suggest, sidelines empirical methodology in favour of intelligent, psychological insight on some cultural object or event, and does so entirely self-consciously. James does not forgo the practices of academic history lightly or ignorantly, and the shift towards something akin to Lee’s ‘mental’ history is undertaken with critical awareness. In fact (as we saw with Lee), the internalised responses to the past are privileged above the scientific-empirical ones because they do not produce that dead, academic history James undermines in works such as *The Sense of the Past*. Speaking of James’ autobiographical *A Small Boy and Others*, Gert Buelens and Celia Aijmer argue something similar:

It is important to see, however, that the new emphasis on the psychological or personal does not automatically carry with it a reduction of the significance of history as a social or political category. What interests James is rather the complex interweaving of actions in the present moment, the intricate turns of memory, and a past that inevitably conditions us [...] One might say that they [James’ historical/autobiographical works] document the very act of excavating the past, including reminiscences of seemingly unimportant details, visual impressions, and fleeting meetings. (Buelens and Aijmer 2007: 197)

The vitality at the heart of this historicism is hard to miss. The past is not simply the dead events of history or a texture from which to draw neat and tidy examples in the present; it is rather an oscillatory, vibrant presence in the here and now. Such engagement is sufficiently demonstrable for us to reject Terry Eagleton's suggestion that James' "privileged consciousness" renders him "absent from concrete history" (Eagleton 1998: 141). Rather this mental, impressionistic approach to the past actually serves to concretise specific aspects, to suggest that the passage of time is an essential, and affirming, presence in aesthetic existence. In other words, James' history is essentially a pragmatist one – in effect a correlative of a Nietzschean 'critical' position – perpetually drawing significant social energy from the events and objects of the past.¹⁵

In James' *Italian Hours*, the mental engagement with Roman history (and Italian history more generally), is at once produced by and focussed upon a visual logic. Indeed his relief at finally *seeing* the city results in his famous exclamation to his brother – "At last – for the first time – I live!"¹⁶ In part this recourse to the visual is defensive. Rome, with a weight of history impossible to adequately express in its entirety, seems time and again to get the better of him. Repeatedly, in his letters back home, James fails to capture Rome linguistically; thus, "The Coliseum is a thing about which it's *useless to talk*", "that simple and *unutterable* Pantheon", the Capitoline sculptures, "all of them *unspeakably* simple and noble and eloquent" (James 1974: 163, 164, 167; my emphasis). Part of this failure is certainly linked with James' assertion, in those letters, that the best way to understand Rome is to "appreciate, but not express" (James 1974: 163). In addition, these aestheticist attempts to translate the physical

¹⁵ Reading James' historicism through his brother William's pragmatist thought is certainly useful here. See particularly Hocks (1974).

¹⁶ Quoted in Edel (1990): 13.

and emotional effects of the artefacts of history into prose or poetry – in other words, the attempt made at ekphrasis – are, in the words of Stephen Bann, not “without remainder” (Bann 1995: 111). Loss, it seems, is in the act of writing and transcribing. Part of the inability to talk about or describe Rome (after Lyon (1999)) in James stems from the difficulty he has in reconciling the visual pasts he sees.

John Auchard argues that in *Italian Hours* “James was providing more than a pleasant travelogue. He was posing questions about the durability of civilization itself. The knotty irony of Rome with all its past – and in this one aspect the city may stand for all of Italy – is that it seems there is little eternal about it. Virtually nothing in the Eternal City, except on first glance the Pantheon, has been immune to the accumulations of many centuries” (quoted in James 1992: xxiv). It is precisely the *historical* rather than *eternal* aspects of Rome that James valorises, the “thousand palimpsests on every piazza, and each may serve to record the death of a vision that had come before” (Aurchard 1992: xxv). Thus Buelens and Aijmer are quite correct to assert that:

Any reader of James recognizes how historical motifs and settings fuel the plots, lay the ground for moral dilemmas, and set the atmospheric tone. From this perspective, themes related to history are rich in meaning and have wide implications for how we understand James’s art. (Buelens and Aijmer 2007: 192)

That James’ picturing of Rome is less historiographically-aware than Lee’s is essentially beside the point, for he consistently sites what he sees in Rome within an explicitly historicist milieu. James’ visual historical data in *Italian Hours* operates in the same way as Lee’s, but perhaps less self-consciously.

From James' opening account in *Transatlantic Sketches* of the visit he made to Chester, the seamless blending of archaeological and visual metaphors in the reportage suggests a readiness to accept the historicity of the archaeological record at face value (James 1972: 13). Chester was the likeliest starting point on an American tour of European archaeological and historical attractions.¹⁷ It is the immersion into a deep historical past, rather than setting foot on a new continent, that has James waxing lyrical. "The great fact [is that the wall] contains a Roman substructure" – the site is literally "saturated" with historical significance. In *Italian Hours*, the same historical strategies are in operation. The organic materiality of Venice, its ability to soak up the present in the materials of its past, is what is highlighted in James' chapter on that city: "All the Venetian air and the Venetian history," he says "are on the walls and ceilings of the palaces [...] All the history of Venice, all its splendid stately past, glows around you in a strong sealight" (*IH*: 202). Again, in Florence, it is the collocation of objects in a particular milieu which stimulates James' fancy: "Chancing on such a cluster of objects [in the Boboli Gardens in Florence] in Italy – glancing at them in a certain light and in a certain mood – I get (perhaps on too easy terms, you may think) a sense of *history* that takes away my breath" (*IH*: 126). Literally breathtaking, James' historical method is broadly imaginative reconstruction:

Generations of Medici have stood at these closed windows, embroidered and brocaded according to their period, and held fetes champetres and floral games on the greensward, beneath the mouldering hemicycle. And the Medici were great people! But what remains of it

¹⁷ It is, of course, Lambert Strether's first substantial stop – after a brief sojourn in Liverpool – in *The Ambassadors*.

all now is a mere tone in the air, a faint sigh in the breeze, a vague expression in things, a passive accessibility to the yearning guess. (*IH*: 127)

Literally breathtaking, James' historical method is one of imaginative reconstruction through momentary impressionistic immersion in the colour and vibrancy of the past, the traces of which continue to linger over Italy's auratic landscape.

Lee and James' invocation of archaeological and visual strategies for understanding the past have certainly had the effect of negating recognition of the historical value of their historical/travel writings, the primary data of such investigations being the sense-impression, and the conclusions gained from that data subject to aestheticist 'investment' and even solipsism. But as we have seen here, the aesthetic urge to see and interact with the visual materials of the past is also an historical act, and the way in which both writers use visual and material history serves to deepen our understanding of the historicity of those objects. The process of merely looking at the material remains of the past has, until very recently, been treated with the utmost suspicion on the part of the historian. For much of the nineteenth-century, archaeology was a suspect discipline. Certainly, one clear argument for the suggestion that early archaeological practice was in fact retrogressive science is in its reliance on the disruptive artefact and material remains. The problematic nature of the archaeological record as historical evidence is given serious historiographical thought in Vernon Lee's work – especially in her meditations on the material past of Rome. And if we bring to Lee's idiosyncratic representations of the material Roman past a theoretical awareness of some of the issues surrounding the interpretation of such historical evidence, then we can more fully appreciate the complexity of her enterprise in *The Spirit of Rome*. If the historical content of

aesthetic-history writing is, as I have begun to demonstrate here, symbiotic with the aestheticist representational strategies familiar to students of the *fin de siècle*, then these texts become not only exercises in attitude, temperament and taste but rather cogent responses to the past borne out of an alternative historiographical approach.

If Lee and James were intensely interested in the representation of the past, both yet expressed a pronounced dislike for History-as-discipline. In Lee's notes to the 'Prologue' of *Satan The Waster* (1920), for example, perhaps her most sustained philosophical consideration of history, she makes a clear distinction between her love for the past and her contempt for a 'History' that privileges wars and conquests over the cultural, artistic and even quotidian achievements of the ages.¹⁸ In a particularly vitriolic diatribe on 'The Muse of History', she attacks Clio as a "sycophantish partisan; a pretentious, often ignorant, humbug" (*Satan*: 219), who "[i]n our own times [...] has been the nurse of all the artificially incubated Nationalisms and Irredentisms" (*Satan*: 219). "We want the Past, its romance and raciness," Lee observes of the cult of history, "[b]ut for our personal, present use. And Clio provides it" (*Satan*: 225). James hints, too, at the failures of history-writing proper to convey any meaning in the present, and suggests that a commitment to this type of historical analysis leads to a dangerous obsession with the past to the detriment of living in the present (after Nietzsche). James' understanding of some of the finer points of historical representation is less systematic than Lee's, however. In the latter's writing, there is a self-conscious realisation that the kind of history she is promoting results in an entirely new and productive genre.

¹⁸ *Satan the Waster*, 219-28.

Chapter Five

Thinking a pre-Roman Italy with D. H. Lawrence

[t]o my mind there is a great field of science which is as yet quite closed to us. I refer to the science which proceeds in terms of life and is established on data of living experience and of sure intuition. Call it subjective science if you like. Our objective science of modern knowledge concerns itself only with phenomena, and with phenomena as regarded in their cause-and-effect relationship. I have nothing to say against our science. It is perfect as far as it goes. But to regard it as exhausting the whole scope of human possibility in knowledge seems to me just puerile.¹

There can be little doubt that, for D. H. Lawrence, one example of “the objective science of modern knowledge” is the academic study of history. And we can compare his claim in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, that “it is no use approaching the still-vital creations of dead men as if they were so many machine parts which, fitted together, would make a “civilisation”!” (*EP*, 34) with Vernon Lee’s similar declaration that a scientific approach to history rendered the subject “so utterly dead as to be fit only for the scalpel and the microscope” (*Euphorion* 1: 12). For the aesthetic historian, the totality of the past could never be satisfactorily captured by an historical approach that depended on scientific methodology and rejected intuition and imagination. But, as we have seen, if there was one site where the limits of the scientific approach were fully tested, it is the deeper end of the Italian past. The confluence of myth and history, the survival of material remains very often to the exclusion

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, ix.

of documentary ones, and the sheer difference between that past Italy and modern, northern Europe, meant that the aesthetically-minded historian felt at home there, intellectually and very often physically. By 1914, Lawrence was very aware of the difference between England and Italy. “One must love Italy,” he remarked, “if one has lived there. It is so non-moral. It leaves the soul so free. Over these countries, Germany and England, like the grey skies, lies the gloom of the dark moral judgement and condemnation and reservation of the people. Italy does not judge”(Lawrence 1979: 544). Italy, its landscape, people and past, offered Lawrence recourse to an arena untouched by the ephemera of modern life and by intellectual bigotry. He visited Italy a number of times, indeed as early as 1912, when he lived at Lake Garda with Frieda for a number of months. It was a place of intellectual and personal freedom, “providing a sympathetic context for his fast maturing beliefs” (De Filippis 1992: xxii). For George Gissing, who visited Italy in the last years of the nineteenth-century, the feeling was much the same. “I have seriously been meditating a flight to Italy. The familiar land beckons me as I lie awake at night” (Mattheisen et al. 1999: 11). ‘Flight’ and ‘familiarity’ are, as we have seen already in Burckhardt and Freud, recognizable figurations of a desire for Italy – flight from religious, political or personal turmoil, and familiarity through the rich histories imbibed by those sensitive visitors. For both men, Italy was more than a geographical place; it was a state of mind alien to a northern European consciousness.

The historical depth of the Italian past, coupled with the historical-mindedness of both men meant that Italy was not only a place of retreat – it was also an object worthy of study. Lawrence wrote three books ostensibly on the Italian people, *Twilight in Italy* (1916), *Sea and Sardinia* (1921) and *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (published posthumously in 1932), and each is much more than an abstract attempt to capture some essence or ‘spirit of place.’ When read

alongside Lawrence's more theoretical works – such as *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious* – his Italian works exhibit significant insight into his philosophy of knowledge, and its application to modern life. George Gissing spent much of 1897 and 1898 in Italy, to escape ill health and family worries. He was several weeks in the Roman libraries and archives, researching on Italian history and classical myth, but longed for another, more authentic historical experience.² He resolved on a trip to Calabria and The Gulf of Taranto in 1897, but his sojourn was not recreational – indeed, he loathed the habits and customs of the people there, and he left Rome for only a month on his Calabrian tour. But he felt it was necessary to “capture the spirit of the place” (Mattheisen et al. 1999: 121) in order to lend substance to the historical depth of his text. The book produced out of his visit to the boot of Italy, *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), whilst often focussed on the ephemera of a visit into what was for Gissing an uncivilised and ill-developed part of the world (the vagaries of illness, physicians, hotels and food), is also clearly interested in the imaginative aspects of the past in much more than a passing way. Indeed, both Lawrence's and Gissing's Italian experiences were much more than material for travelogues. For Lawrence, the Etruscan past contained within it latencies of a way of life and a belief system lost to modern Western civilisation, and his aim in the text is to uncover them so as to, in Nietzschean fashion, make them vital again. Indeed, his emphasis on tactile sensation and what he would later call “the phallic consciousness” in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* is consistent with his philosophy in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – in a letter of 1928 he expresses his desire, in that novel, to “restore [...] the phallic consciousness, into our lives, because it is the source of all real beauty, and all real gentleness” (Lawrence 1987: 328). For Gissing, Magna Græcia offered a focal point for an exploration of ‘otherness’ whilst enabling him to reflect musingly on the past. It is also

² See Mattheisen, P., Young, A., and Coustillas, P. (eds.) (1999), 117.

not inconceivable that the fiscally-challenged Gissing found something that appealed to him in those poorer areas of Italy that he did not find in the Grand Tour cities.

This chapter is, therefore, not about either Lawrence's or Gissing's experiences in Venice, Florence or Rome. Both men, after spending time in those places, found they did not hold the imagination, and both sought new, authentic experiences in some of the more remote, temporal or spatial, areas of Italy. By the turn of the twentieth century, the railway extended beyond those major cities, right down to Italy's southern tip and deep into her interior, and a number of aesthetically-minded historians decided to continue past the familiar landmarks into a different Italy. And if figures such as Adrian Stokes and Sacheverell Sitwell visited Rimini, Naples and Calabria, when those places were off the beaten track, for the reason of drawing parallels between contemporary art and cultural practices and the *quattrocento* and *settecento* respectively, then any number of intrepid explorers went to the remains of Etruscans, Sabines, Samnites, Umbrians and Græco-Italians, in many cases with the main aim of uniting some of the elements a pre-Roman (and therefore pre-political and pre-imperial) civilisation with their own. Mary Lovett Cameron visited Tuscany in 1908, and met with Vernon Lee at Florence, whilst completing her *Old Etruria and Modern Tuscany* (1909), which, as the title suggests, traced out an Etruscan lineage that extended into the twentieth-century inhabitants of Tuscany. Frederick Seymour's *Up Hill and Down Dale in Ancient Etruria* (1910) was a similar sort of text, exploring the cultural-geographical aspects of Etruria, whilst Norman Douglas went in search of a very different Italy in Catanzaro and Cozenza, and published *Old Calabria* in 1915. In each case, the search for a more authentic Italy was the predominant aim.

If this study has been, so far, centred squarely on the historicist formulations of very well known periods of Italian history, then it is important to pause in order to consider how else the Italian past figured in the British aesthetic-historical consciousness. If 'Italy' very often meant little more than Rome, Venice and Florence (and the wider Tuscan townscape) for those voracious connoisseurs and antiquarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, then by the early-twentieth century a different travel itinerary was in the minds of a select number of aesthetic historians. Where the nineteenth-century had its Romans and its high Renaissance (and the great narratives of Gibbon, Mommsen, Michelet and Burckhardt to reveal all about those periods), the early twentieth century had Etruria, Græco-Italy (Magna Graecia), Baroque and Mannerist art and, wider afield, Polynesia, Egypt and West Africa, all of which were attracting 'professional' interest from figures as diverse as Pericle Ducati, Leo Frobenius and Heinrich Wölfflin. The final two sections of this thesis focus on some representations of different places and times in Italy to metonymically illustrate some changing notions in historiography. The aesthetic-historical works concerning different spatial and temporal locations in Italy outlined below offer up not only new arenas for fruitful study, but handle their historical material in increasingly complex and innovative ways. The concepts explored thus far – visual history, material history, the sense-impression – still prove to be important historiographical tropes, but increasingly, advances in cognate disciplines begin to impinge on the representation of the past in these works. If Walter Pater or Vernon Lee, for all of the sophistication of their historiographical approaches, could allude to the psychological engagement with the past only in terms of the rather vague concepts of aesthetic sensibility or 'empathy', D. H. Lawrence and Adrian Stokes were armed with Freud and a burgeoning field of psychohistory. And if, as we have seen, Vernon Lee's and Henry James' responses to the material Italian past were often hesitant and, very often, unable to

make recourse to authorities in the field, then D. H. Lawrence, writing several decades later, could situate his Italian work against a body of work, large swathes of which he had read, that responded to the human past with ever increasing complexity. By the early decades of the new century, the tangential disciplines that emerged as valid historical enterprises – like anthropology, archaeology and cultural history – were becoming fully authorised practices, with their attendant methodological apparatus and language. The trend to look deeper at less-known or ill-explored periods and cultures was mirrored in the academic historical discipline. It is not too difficult to conceive that if academic history was, by the turn of the twentieth century, increasingly hesitant to adopt those familiarly Whiggish interpretative paradigms that were so appealing to the previous century's historical imagination, it consequently began to look outside of those periods that were made to 'fit' the pattern of the development of civilisation. In addition to the increase in the number of scholarly essays and books on pre-Roman Italy, the burgeoning fields of Assyriology and Egyptology developed exponentially – not only were material findings being better understood, but the previously disparate fields of anthropological, archaeological and cultural research began to coalesce into one arena of legitimate historical work.³

I want to concentrate on D. H. Lawrence's *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1932) – with recourse to some of Lawrence's other writing too – in order to pursue two points. Firstly, the stratigraphy of the Italian past that is consistently mined in most studies of the aesthetic resonance of Italy, invoking as it does only those intellectually- and materially-heavy pasts of

³ A work like James Henry Breasted's *The Dawn of Civilisation* (1933) combined material from cultural anthropologists on the subject of ritual, archaeological results from the latest digs and an analysis of the transition in Egyptian art from a hierarchic geometrical tradition to a sensuous naturalism. I use this text as an example, because both Freud and Karl Abraham used it as the basis of an extrapolative understanding of the function of symbolism in Egypt (another increasingly pronounced nexus of the historical and psychoanalytical spheres).

ancient Rome and the Renaissance, ignores the layers that are marked by absence, erasure and silence. Both Lawrence and Gissing focus on two such layers, finding something more authentically 'Italian' (by now we must be less certain of our ascription of a stable meaning to that term) in these very different regions and periods of Italian history. Secondly, their departure from the more familiar Italian pasts is an *historiographical* act; both men were well-versed in the history and historiography of Italy, and both recognised how the twin cores of Italian history – ancient Rome and the Renaissance – functioned in Western culture, as totemic markers of democracy, imperialism, humanism and progress. Thus, the attempt to retrieve a buried or erased past is bound up with the desire to relate to a different kind of consciousness and along different lines; in both texts, the personal relationship to history and the connection between perceiving consciousness and the past are historiographically productive ones. And, again, my purpose in this chapter is the same as in the last – to demonstrate that there is a thoroughgoing commitment in these works to address contemporary methodologies of understanding history, and to suggest that at the heart of the privileged position that the Italian past holds in the Western imagination of the early twentieth century are unresolved issues surrounding historicity. What Lawrence and Gissing offer is an approach to Italian history which seems to bypass the contemporary constraints for historical work, and as such the historicity of their work is largely ignored. But inherent in both writers' Italian texts are some concrete historical concerns – specifically about the role of imagination in history and the historicity of material remains. It may, in fact, seem strange to read an interest in historiography into a text like *Sketches of Etruscan Places*. The bulk of the work has little to say, explicitly, about history. It is rather a series of 'sketches' about the Etruscans centred on four sites of remains – Cerveteri, Vulci, Tarquinia and Volterra. And at each site, Lawrence discusses the material remains of the past, usually tombs, sarcophagi and

vases. The discussion, however, rises beyond mere description and explanation; Lawrence extrapolates from the remains of Etruria, and moves towards a broad consideration of the relationship between past and present.

Studies of the importance of the Mediterranean and the South in the northern European consciousness perhaps come to bear more on the descriptions of Etruria, Sardinia and Calabria than do studies on Italy, because they have room in them for a consideration of those aspects of southern culture irreconcilable with narratives of classical and Renaissance civilisation. The elided pasts of Italy go hand in hand, in one sense, with those of Moorish Spain, Morocco, non-classical Greek civilisations – either pre-Athenian (Minoan, Mycenaean) or Hellenistic; they retain their exoticism, remaining on the margins of the discourses that made sense of ancient Rome and the Renaissance. Caroline Patey argues that a desire to visit – literally and figuratively – those periods and places in the Mediterranean that remain on the margins is one pregnant with the impulse to escape a narrow academicism:

No, surprise, therefore, if so many [...] artists and intellectuals, precisely to escape the strictures of a Mediterranean turned academic, leave Northern Europe – temporarily – in search of the actual and real Mediterranean, anxious to experience living memory, living Latins and Greeks and the possible raptures of flesh and sun: the other side, in a word, of the urban, industrial and philological coin! (Patey 2006: 12)

The motives behind re-visiting the past become less antiquarian and more vital for the early twentieth-century aesthetically-minded traveller, and the drive to find new forms and new experiences in the Mediterranean is a potent one. Adrian Stokes and Sacheverell Sitwell sought out places in 1930s Italy that were, as we shall see, cultural backwaters in the

nineteenth-century. The Mediterranean for the post-Victorian is tumultuous, aesthetically and politically, no longer offering cultural and artistic objects, curios and museum-pieces for ready consumption. “The Mediterranean,” John Pemble argues, “no longer submitted to being recreated in the image of British longings and aversions, hopes and fears” (Pemble 1987: 274). The journey back into a past deeper than that of Greece and Rome came with a greater freedom about what one could say. There was, for one, less evidence about that past – most of what survived was the symbolic or figurative remains of civilisations (such as tombs or wall art), which presented the historian with licence to discourse a bit more freely. For two, there was a lot less already written about such periods, the more obscure fields being the subject of a few meagre tomes. However, of the myriad reasons for visiting the ‘other’ geographical and temporal Italy, the most pronounced for our purposes here is a desire to formulate a different relationship to the past, less bent on discovering the roots of the modern Western world that lead sequentially to the present than uncovering elements of a historical epoch untouched by the metanarratives of civilisation.

By way of an introduction, I want to talk very briefly about George Gissing’s representation of the ancient Calabrian past first, not to develop a thesis on the elements of his historical inquiry, but rather to demonstrate his keen sense of the importance of the imaginative principle in gaining a more direct understanding of history, and as a way of prefiguring what I am going to say about Lawrence. Gissing’s interest in ancient Italy was a long one, piqued by a study of ancient Latin history at school.⁴ His record of experiences in the Gulf of Taranto and in Calabria, *By the Ionian Sea* (1901), is a difficult text at face value. Part travelogue, part history, part imaginative escapism, Brian Ború Dunne, on hearing of

⁴ Daley (1942): 29.

Gissing's plans for its composition, "felt [it] would be unspeakably dull except to Latin and Greek scholars of the highest academic training" (Mattheisen, Young and Coustillas (eds.) 1999: 119).

Gissing's predilection for a deeper Italian past was bound up in his desire to walk among the dead. "How much more he loved the past and the remains of Greece and old, old Italy, 'Magna Græcia' proves to us almost with tears" says Morley Roberts, referring to *By the Ionian Sea* (Daley 1942: 24) His interest was more than a general sense for the past – well read in a number of languages, his historical research knew no bounds: "I shall," he said, "go through all the standard works on general history: e.g., Thirlwall's *Greece*, Arnold's and Niebuhr's *Rome*, Hallam, Guizot, Buckle, Gibbon." But the connection was always a much more imaginative one than bookish learning could provide. He wrote about his brother, Algernon:

I cannot get him to realise the gloriousness of seeing Italy, Sicily, and Greece, Rome, Athens, the Ionian Islands – countries where every spot of ground gives off as it were an absolute perfume of reminiscences and associations. Think of standing in the Forum, and saying to oneself: "Here on this very spot have Scipio and Sulla, Cicero and Caesar, Virgil and Horace, stood and talked; these very blocks of stone and marble have echoed to the noises of a Roman crowd and beheld the grandest scenes of all history. (Daly 1942: 27)

History was not, for Gissing, the study of fact, but more the effect of the past on the mind in the present. What thinking historically amounted to was a transportation of one's mind back inside the actions of the present – the journey back being a highly personalised one. The ghosts of history are present in *By the Ionian Sea* too:

The stillness of a dead world laid its spell on all that lived. Today seemed an unreality, an idle impertinence; the real was that long-buried past which gave its meaning to all around me, touching the night with infinite pathos. Best of all, one's own being became lost to consciousness; the mind knew only the phantasmal forms it shaped, and was at peace in vision.

(*Ionian*, 12)

Gissing, like Lawrence after him, also recognised the permanence of a non-Roman essence; directing a chapter of his *By the Ionian Sea* to a discussion of the grave of Alaric, the Visigoth king responsible of the sack of Rome in 410 who died en route to Sicily, Gissing remarks that “Rome herself never really subdued those mountain tribes” and that their “spirit lives on” (*Ionian*: 23; 24). The imaginative attempt required to access the “long-buried past” is quite clear in Gissing. The connection between the external past and the internal consciousness is conducted through recourse to the imaginative faculty of dreams (“laid its spell...”, “an unreality...”, “phantasmal forms...”). We shall come full circle to arrive back at the notion of the integration of imaginative and scientific principles in history at the end of the discussion on Lawrence's representation of Etruria.

In 1921, D. H. Lawrence was busy publishing his first book on psychoanalysis, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* and writing his second, *Fantasia of the Unconscious*. In both works, Lawrence associates the deeper historical field with a form of symbolic knowledge lost to modern consciousness. He says in the latter:

I honestly think that the great pagan world of which Egypt and Greece were the last living terms, the great pagan world which preceded our own era once, had a vast and perhaps perfect science of its own, a science in terms of life. In our era this science crumbled into magic and charlatanry [...] some, like Druids or Etruscans or Chaldeans or Amerindians or Chinese, refused to forget, but taught the old wisdom, only in its half-forgotten, symbolic forms. (Lawrence 1922: ix-x)

The disappearance of the real past into a symbolic and mythic order fascinated him. Much of his non-fiction work was concerned with uncovering and interpreting the meaning of archetypal ways of understanding the world.⁵ He found at the heart of them a kernel of ‘truth’ about which no history could write. We can surely surmise that he suspected that some form of lost knowledge about the world was lost with the Etruscans. In a letter to Catherine Carswell, written sometime in early 1921, Lawrence demonstrates a keen interest in learning more about them:

Will you tell me *what* then was the secret of the Etruscans, which you saw written so plainly in the place you went to? Please don’t forget to tell me, as they really do rather puzzle me, the Etruscans. (Lawrence 1987: 105)

This “science of life” that Lawrence suspected the ancient civilisations had is probably equivalent to the secret that the Etruscans possessed. He wished to know the meaning of both. That this “secret” was more than purely a simple way of life is clear. In the excerpt from *Fantasia of the Unconscious* that begins this present chapter, Lawrence quite clearly juxtaposes objective science (and the attempts made to objectivity by history and its cognate

⁵ Texts such as *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation* (1931) offer accounts of the shaping force of religion on Man’s relationship with the world, for instance.

disciplines) with a “subjective science” founded not on the whims of the artistic imagination, but on “the data of living experience”, not on impressionist free-play but on “sure intuition.” If he could get to grips with it, it would offer a new way of conceiving one’s relationship to the world outside, rather than simply offering a retreat into a primitive aesthetic existence.

The desire to have unmediated access to the more primitive forms of consciousness in Man is a familiar one to Lawrence scholars. His entire oeuvre is permeated with the need to uncover the repressed, buried and latent modes of living that are strangled by the mores and values of modern civilisation. The historical adjuncts of this search are also clear – if the vital, innocent past of the pagan world was steamrollered by advancing ‘civilisation’ and all but erased from the documented record – then it is not to the history books and the archives that the search for historical evidence must turn, but rather to deeper past, represented in the record not by documentary evidence but only by fragmentary material. It is not too hard to see how the destruction of Etruscan vitality by the cancerous spread of Roman civilisation, and the erasure of pagan spirit by organised religion, functions as the perfect historical encapsulation of one of Lawrence’s key polemics. In fact, throughout *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, the Manichean duality of the competing Roman and Etruscan way of life is held up as an historiographical organising principle for the opposition of the artificial and natural, the organic and the inorganic, and the primitive and the civilised. Thus, Theodor Mommsen’s refusal to even comment on the Etruscan people condemns him for being an historian only capable of seeking out and interpreting one type of world-view, one which the Romans shared with the imperialist Prussians:

A great scientific historian like Mommsen hardly allows that the Etruscans existed at all. Their existence was antipathetic to him. The Prussian in him was enthralled by the Prussian in the all-conquering Romans. So being a great scientific historian, he almost denies the very existence of the Etruscan people. He didn't like the idea of them. That was enough for a great scientific historian. (EP: 9)

The repeated conflation of scientific historicism and the conquering Prussians in this passage suggests that one was the product of the other for Lawrence. Later on in that same passage, the general privileging of the system of values of the poles of classical Greece and Rome over those nations and cultures that were destroyed and subsumed within them becomes akin to an act of historiographical violence enacted upon the Etruscan people:

Besides, the Etruscans were vicious. We know it, because their enemies and exterminators said so. Just as we knew the unspeakable depths of *our* enemies in the late war. Who isn't vicious, to his enemy? To my detractors, I am an effigy of vice. A la bonne heure! However, those pure, clean-living, sweet-souled Romans, who smashed nation after nation and crushed the free soul in people after people, and were ruled by Messalina and Heliogabalus and such-like snowdrops, they said the Etruscans were vicious. So *basta!* (ER: 9-10)

The juxtaposition of the terms 'Etruscan' and 'Roman' is an important connective device in Lawrence's portrayal of the former. In one sense, the Romans erase the vitality of Etruria in their political-mindedness and imperialism in the construction of a world-view that, for Lawrence, persisted into his own day. Speaking of the Etruscans, Lawrence says:

It is as if the current of some strong different life swept through them, different from our shallow current today: as if they drew their vitality from different depths, that we are denied. Yet in a few centuries they lost their vitality. The Romans took the life out of them. It seems as if the power of resistance to life, self-assertion and overbearing, such as the Romans knew; a power which must needs be moral, or carry morality with it, as a cloak for its inner ugliness; would always succeed in destroying the natural flowering of life. (*EP*: 56)

It is the Roman influence which is to blame, Lawrence would argue, for the change in the Etruscan view of death that manifested itself in the tomb paintings. Pre-Roman paintings, for Lawrence, showed death as “just a natural continuance of life,” as “a pleasant continuance of life, with jewels and wine and flutes playing for the dance [...] Everything was in terms of life, of living” (*EP*: 19). After the fifth-century BC, however, the afterlife was depicted as “a great gloomy, clumsy, rambling sort of underworld, damp and horrid” (*EP*: 74). The Romans, with their moral ideals, instilled virtue and vice into the previously amoral Etruscan world.

Related to this, the Etrurians also featured in Lawrence’s juxtaposition of the pagan and Christian impulse in history. One of the key tensions in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* is between the pagan spirit and the oppressive, brutish force of organised religion. Both impulses view history and historical progress differently:

Our idea of time as a continuity in an eternal straight line has crippled our consciousness cruelly. The pagan conception of time as moving in cycles is much freer, it allows movement upwards and downwards, and allows for a complete change of the state of mind, at any moment. One cycle finished, we can drop or rise to another level, and be in a new world at

once. But by our time-continuum method, we have to trail wearily on over another ridge.
(Lawrence 1980: 54)

In fact, this alternation functions as an historiographical device, a way of ordering the panorama of the past. Lawrence returns to it at the end of *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, arguing that the Etruscans were the end of a cycle of “human cosmic consciousness different from our own” (*EP*: 176). The two historiographical patterns here for the description of the movement of time are irreconcilable, one founded on notions of an eternal return and the other on an eschatological progress towards a very definite goal. Quite obviously, the pagan ideal is the more attractive pole for Lawrence, and his belief in the cyclical form of history, as Louise Blakeney Williams has demonstrated, coloured his interpretation of various periods of history. He argues in *Apocalypse* that Western modernity is “the end of the Christian cycle” (Lawrence 1980: 93). The removal of the vitality at the heart of human existence is, then a recurring one, a result of the rise of what he calls “the religious or scientific or civilisation expression of a group of people.” (*EP*: 177)

So, it is clear that part of Lawrence’s aim in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* was to situate the Etruscans at the end of a line of civilisations marked by a vitality lost to the hegemony of the religious principle. Comparing the Etruria with those other ancient civilisations he grew to despise, Lawrence hints at what distinguishes the Etruscans from Rome and Greece:

The Greeks sought to make an impression, and Gothic still more seeks to impress the mind. The Etruscans, no. The things they did, in their easy centuries, are as natural and as easy as breathing. They leave the breast breathing freely and pleasantly, with a certain fullness of life.

Even the tombs. And that is the true etruscan quality: ease, naturalness, and an abundance of life, no need to force the mind or soul in any direction. (*EP*: 19)

Again, we could stop here. Lawrence's conception of the Etruscans as a pagan culture, full of the symbolic life that the religious drive has constantly sought to overthrow, clearly allows them to slot neatly into the dualities he constructed to understand the history of the world. They certainly offer up to him, at the ideational level at least, a subject matter upon which to condense a range of tensions in his philosophy. But if he was to make ciphers of the Mexican peasants and the rustic farmers he found in Sardinia, making them stand somewhat monochromatically as examples of the vital spirit of life, his work on the Etruscans seemed to extend beyond simply extolling their natural, organic interaction with the world into a profound engagement with issues concerning their historical representation. Lawrence's engagement with the historicity of the Etruscans stretches beyond a rather idealised use of them for his own aesthetic. He is just as concerned with the modes that we have for representing the past and about the inaccuracy of the narratives that are created out of those representational strategies. One such historical construction that he finds a poor approximation of the 'real' value of the past is the museum space.

Lawrence details the visits to two museums in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* – one to a small museum of Etruscan remains at Volterra, and the other to the museum that houses Etruscan artefacts in Florence. At each, he sees removed tombs as well as funerary art and pottery, and both experiences lead him to explore the concept of the museum further. It remains an ambivalent concept throughout *Sketches of Etruscan Places*. On the one hand, the presentation of a series of unearthed, cleaned artefacts appeals to his *aesthetic* imagination – in fact, it was probably seeing the famous collection of Etruscan urns in the National

Archaeological Museum in Perugia in 1926 that first excited Lawrence about the possibilities offered by Etruscan art for his own aesthetic (see Filippis 1992: xxv). He was “instinctively attracted” to the forms of artistic representation that they employed (*EP*: 9). In the same way, it is only through seeing a large number of examples of Etruscan pottery, housed at the museum in Volterra, that Lawrence is able to construct for the reader a set of defining traits about the symbolic practices of that vanquished people. On the other hand, the artificial nature of the museum experience made him realise that he was not ‘seeing’ the Etruscans here – one could look at the dissociated evidence of an aesthetic past, sanitised and placed neatly into an exhibition arrangement, not really being able to interact with the past on display.

The section on Volterra highlights the elements of Lawrence’s response to the Etruscans very well. Such is Lawrence’s detachment from the objects presented to him, largely a collection of decorated alabaster vases, that he responds to them at an aesthetic level separate from their historical existence. That is, he offers up his thoughts about the artistic qualities of the Etruscan art on display, and how his taste relates to those of his forbears, without responding to their historicity (there is no mention of their age, rather the discussion being taken up with symbolic form and discussion of artistic practice more generally):

What men mean nowadays by “art” it would be hard to say. Even [George] Dennis said that the Etruscans never approached the pure, the sublime, the perfect beauty which Flaxman reached. Today, this makes us laugh: the greekified illustrator of Pope’s Homer! But the same instinct lies at the back of our idea of “art” still. Art is still to us something which has been well cooked – like a plate of spaghetti [...] In Dennis’ day, a broken Greek or Greekish amphora would fetch thousands of crowns in the market, if it was the right “period” etc. These Volterran urns fetched hardly anything. (*EP*: 164)

The chapter pivots on the line “But one is filled with doubt and misgiving” (*EP*: 170), the remainder devoted to Lawrence’s meditation of the value of museums as historical sites. What he objects to is the fact that museum spaces, as a repositories of historical material from different spatial-temporal sites, offer no access to the ‘real’ past, but only to a constructed version of it. He asks of a tomb that had been opened and moved in its entirety to Florence:

Why oh why wasn’t the tomb left intact as it was found, where it was found? The Florence museum is vastly instructive, if you want object-lessons about the Etruscans. But who wants object lessons about vanished races? What one wants is a contact. The Etruscans are not a theory or a thesis. If anything, they are an *experience*. (*EP*: 171)

The collation of Etruscan remains within museum collections destroy the organic relationship of the art object to the historical milieu that it is tied to. And this offends both Lawrence’s *historical* sense (by disrupting any access to a real past in the act of collection and collation) and his *historiographical* sense (by the appropriation of them into narratives about the development of human art and culture):

Museums, museums, museums, object-lessons rigged out to illustrate the unsound theories of archaeologists, crazy attempts to co-ordinate and get into a fixed order that which has no fixed order and will not be coordinated! It is sickening. Why must all experience be systematised? [...] Why can’t incompatible things be left incompatible? [...] If you try to make a grand amalgam of Cerveteri and Tarquinia, Vulci, Vetulonia, Volterra, Chiusi, Veio, then you wont get the essential *Etruscan* as a result, but a cooked up mess which has no life meaning at all. (*EP*: 171)

The organic remains of history, *in situ*, are for Lawrence the only interesting and productive elements of the past. His distress at finding that some of the relics at Tarquinia have been sent to Florence and beyond is palpable:

It is a great mistake to rape everything away from its setting, and huddle it together in the “great centres.” It is all very well to say, the public can then see the things. The public is a hundred-headed ass, and can see nothing. A few intelligent individuals do wander through the splendid etruscan museum in Florence, struggling with the abstraction of many fascinating things from all parts of Etruria confusing the sensitive soul. (*EP*, 34)

If Lawrence’s attitude to the past is dependent on physical remains for its starting point, he is certainly no antiquarian or archaeologist. If Vernon Lee found in the materials of the past a highly problematic historicity, Lawrence is happy to accept that historicity at face-value so as to effect something more vital and meaningful in the present. In *Fantasia and the Unconscious*, Lawrence offers up a good synopsis of the historical methodology later employed in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*:

I believe I am only trying to stammer out the first terms of a forgotten knowledge. But I have no desire to revive dead kings, or dead sages. It is not for me to arrange fossils and decipher hieroglyphic phrases. I couldn’t do it if I wanted to. But then I can do something else. The soul must take the hint from the relics our scientists have so marvellously gathered out of the forgotten past, and from the hint deliver a new living utterance. The spark is from dead wisdom, but the fire is life. (Lawrence 1922: 56)

The past – and notice again that this is a material past that Lawrence is concerned with, one that has been “gathered” from the ground below our feet – functions purely as stimulus here. It’s historicity, the places it belongs in the narratives constructed about the past, hold only a passing interest for Lawrence. He is far less concerned with the “unsound theories of archaeologists” than with the “fire of life” that the exhumed relics of the past ignite (*EP*: 171). The recovered material past holds “a forgotten knowledge,” containing the “spark” of vitality, because it has not yet been incorporated into the systematised story of history. It has not been given any historical-ness by the discourses that seek to make sense of it.

If it is true that Lawrence’s historical awareness is predicated less on the tactile sensation that the material historical object provides (as we saw in Ruskin’s meditations on Venice’s past), it utilises what Vernon Lee saw as the uncontained historicity of the exhumed artefact in order to reflect on the historical meanings stamped on the fruits of the archaeological dig. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, the excavated materials of the past offer a contested historical site, brimming with signification. The status of that which is exhumed remains uncontained until it is allotted its proper significance and position in history. And Lawrence wants to be there at the moment before that happens, when the aesthetic artefacts of the past are still ‘on site’ and not museified. Again, then, Thomas Pfau’s notion that the images of the past are totemic markers in the present is relevant: as he says, “the modernist *bild* is a symbolic form uncontained by narrative” (Pfau 2005: 174). Or we are reminded of Walter Benjamin’s assertion, in the *Arcades Project*, that “In order for a part of the past to be touched by the present instant, there must be no continuity between them” (Benjamin 2002: 470). For Lawrence, the construction of a narrative leading from the past object to the present day refuses all of the possible significations of that object. The power of the truly unclassified

and uncategorized Etruscan objects, such as those at Cerveteri or Tarquinia in the remaining examples of undisturbed tombs and complete painted burial chambers, lies for Lawrence in their undetermined status. In the museums, Lawrence found it impossible to connect with the past in any real way – “a museum,” he says, “is not a first-hand contact: it is an illustrated lecture. And what one wants is the actual vital touch. I don’t want to be ‘instructed’” (*EP*: 171). So, it would seem that the imaginative potential of the past is only stored in those pristine, untouched materials that Lawrence seeks out in Volterra, Tarquinia and Vulci.

The most pleasant historical realisation for Lawrence seems to be that ‘Etruscan’ was an empty signifier. The term was as much an historical construct as the attempts at uniformity in the organisation of the remains in the museum at Volterra. “The Etruscans were not a race,” he maintained, “and they were not a nation. They were not even as much of a people as the Romans” (*EP*: 175). Neither was there really a ‘history’ of Etruria, in any traditional sense of the word, because the act of tracing it out involved at least as much of the imaginative principle as the scientific:

In Etruria there is no starting point. Just as there is no starting-point for England, once we have the courage to look beyond Julius Caesar and 55 B.C. Britain was active and awake and alive long before Caesar saw it. [...] In the dim British days before Julius Caesar, there were dim Italian days too ... where history does not exist. (*EP*: 175-6)

In other words, what we are left with at the end of Lawrence’s extended discussion about material history is his abiding belief in the potency of the uncontained past. The Etruscan’s embody this past – “without history,” they demand interpretation only on the basis of their art

flashing into meaning in the present, and most certainly not their inclusion into the narratives of human cultural development (*EP*: 176).

Hopefully it is clear by now that Lawrence thought long and hard about the Etruscans, and that he was careful not to make of Etruria an empty vessel in which to pour his already distilled philosophy. In fact, he researched the period and people perhaps more than any other subject in his life.⁶ But it was not all that easy to get a foothold, and he had to scout around for material. Etruria, if not a topic inspiring a flurry of historical writing during the nineteenth century, did attract a significant smattering of study. If the best-known work (and certainly the most cited) in the field was George Dennis' *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria* (1848), a number of continental studies less well known to British readers, along with several travelogues formed a moderately sized canon for Lawrence to engage with. Certainly, the paucity of critical attention given to the Etruscan civilisation during the first years of the twentieth century was without a doubt attractive to Lawrence's imagination and excited his curiosity.

Lawrence had a number of works of history, anthropology and archaeology in mind when he began writing on the Etruscans, as well as the first-hand experiences he gained whilst visiting Etrurian remains. Bill T. Tracy includes "Herodotus, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Livy, Theodor Mommsen, David Randal-McIver, Pericle Ducati, and A. L. Milani" as well as obvious debt to George Dennis (Tracy 1977: 437). From his letters on the subject of the

⁶ De Filippis (1992) discusses the extent of Lawrence's research : xxiii-xliii.

Etruscans. it's clear he was also aware, if often indirectly, of Fritz Weege's work.⁷ It is quite clear that because of his reading, coupled with his visits to the museums and archives in Italy, his work had a "semblance of historical accuracy" (Tracy 1977: 437). But it is worth pausing ever so briefly to look at two of Lawrence's sources on Etrurian history that are less well noted, Theodor Mommsen and J. J. Bachofen. These are marginal sources at best – the first, though present in the text never talks about Etruria, whilst the second is absent altogether – but a discussion of them both is necessary to show that Lawrence was an active historiographer, not only imbibing information from his predecessors, but was dynamically defining his position related to them.

What is also interesting about these two sources is that they are in quite clear and manifest opposition to each other during the 1850s. Lionel Gossman (1983) traces out the course of the dispute between Mommsen and Bachofen, and it is immediately clear that it is the same type of dispute that Lawrence was to have with Mommsen, ideologically this time, eighty-years later.⁸ Mommsen was, for Gossman, thought of as "being a leading figure in Germany's liberal and rational tradition," whilst Bachofen is associated with "the forces of irrationalism [and] myth" (Gossman 1983: 6). And it is not too difficult to work out which one Lawrence would fall on the side of. Mommsen was:

In Bachofen's eyes [...] the Caesar of the contemporary academic establishment, the champion and apologist of Imperial Rome, as against the ancient patrician city to which Bachofen was devoted, the man most responsible for institutionalising the study of antiquity and turning it into a mindless industrial enterprise. Even more cruelly than Niebuhr, the rough hands of this

⁷ See de Filippis (1992): xxviii.

⁸ For more on the dispute, see Gossman (1983): 27-37.

northern rationalist had violated and degraded the sanctity of the myths in which Bachofen perceived the fragile remnants of a past more remote, more beautiful, more glorious, and of far vaster significance than the surface history of class and political struggles, to which the critical historians, as he saw it, had reduced ancient Greece and Rome. (Gossman 1983: 21)

Mommsen represented all that Bachofen would despise and fear in the desire to relate historical knowledge and learning into a moral purpose in the present.⁹ Mommsen's *History of Rome to the Death of Caesar* (1854-56), celebrating as it did the centrist power systems in operation in Classical Rome, which succeeded in unifying Italy, served to implicitly confirm the foreign policy and unificatory power systems in Prussia of the 1850s and 1860s. Bachofen's comments on Mommsen's work seem to hint at a knowledge of this dual purpose. "Rome and the Romans are not Mommsen's real concern," he wrote. "The heart of the book is in the application of the latest ideas of the times [...] the apotheosis [in Classical Rome] of the boundless radicalism of the new Prussia" (quoted in Gossman 1983: 29). What Bachofen proffered was a study of myth as a potent historical device in a pre-Roman Italy. His works, such as *Mutterrecht* (1851), focussed on retrieving that past to explore its anthropological connotations in relation to the primitive societies of the rest of the world.

As we have already seen, part of the interest that Etruria holds for Lawrence is that it does not 'fit' with the narratives of civilisation that Mommsen put forward in his works. It held the same sort of interest for Bachofen too. Bachofen extracted a different Italian past; using the funerary sculpture of the pre-Roman civilisations in Italy, he recovered what was for him a pre-political antiquity where law appeared as an expression of the spirit rather than a will to dominate. The same sorts of concept – the "cosmic consciousness" and the "will to power" -

are present in Lawrence's work too. Bachofen's notion of the *mutterrecht* ('the motherright') – the coding of the creative, mythic spirit as feminine – is re-conceptualised in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* as an underlying earth-myth, where "the cosmos was one, and its anima was one" (*EP*: 57). For both Bachofen and Lawrence, part of the appeal of the Etruscan civilisation is its fragmentary nature, its refusal to be made to fit those narratives of development towards Roman civilisation and beyond. This problem, as Lawrence well knew, kept Etruria out of the history books in a major way. He notes Mommsen's omission of the pre-Roman tribes on the first page of the book, but it is only later that we discover what he thinks the true reason for the omission is:

When shall we learn that it is no use approaching the still-vital creations of dead men as if they were so many machine parts which, fitted together, would make a "civilisation"! Oh, the weary, asinine stupidity of man's desire to "see the thing as a whole." There *is* no whole – the wholeness no more exists than the equator exists. It is the dreariest of abstractions. (*EP*, 34)

What the encounter with Mommsen and Bachofen in particular demonstrates is Lawrence's historiographical alertness. His comments on Mommsen were, we can have little doubt, prompted by his exposure in some way to Bachofen's work. Lawrence's construction of the duality of the organic, mythic past and the 'Prussianised' narratives that try to contain it, is being played out at full force in the previous century, with Lawrence siting himself with Bachofen in this historical argument.

It is clear, however, that despite reading the major works about the Etrurian past, Lawrence remained convinced of the problematic nature of that period's historicity. In June

1926, Lawrence wrote to Millicent Beveridge about a book on the Etruscans she had sent to him:

Many thanks for Fell, his book came a few days ago.¹⁰ He's very thorough in washing out once more the few rags of information we have concerning the Etruscans: but not a thing has he to say. It's really disheartening: I shall just have to start in and go ahead, and be damned to all authorities! There really is next to nothing to be said, *scientifically*, about the Etruscans. Must take the imaginative line. (Lawrence 1987: 473)

The line between the imaginative and the scientific was a more widely contested one than even Lawrence could have imagined, and it was to become even more so over the course of the next few decades. To that end, there is also a final layer of historical context that is useful in providing us with a more rigorous framework to set Lawrence's historicism against – that of the philosophy of R. G. Collingwood. If we bring Lawrence's Etrurian writings into 'constellation' with Collingwood's theses on history, we can begin to explore an *historiographical* depth to Lawrence's work that goes beyond mere aesthetic 'resurrection' of the deep past in Italy, but rather stretches into some of the concurrent debates about the 're-enactment' of the past in the present in historical theory more generally. What Collingwood's roughly contemporaneous philosophy of history can yield, therefore, is a more cogent understanding of Lawrence's aim in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*: his desire to lift the mind of the past out of history.

At the same time as Lawrence was reading up on the Etruscans and visiting those sites in Etruria, carrying with him all the time an increasingly deep understanding of the importance

¹⁰ Roland Arthur Lonsdale Fell, *Etruria and Rome* (Cambridge: CUP, 1924).

of history for life, R. G. Collingwood was settling into a career as an historian and philosopher in Oxford. Taking degrees in both subjects, Collingwood was working on the Roman archaeological remains in Britain when Lawrence began his wanderings in Italy, and by the year of Lawrence's death, Collingwood had published a book on Roman Britain, along with ones on religion, the philosophy of art and on the philosophy of history.¹¹ While a contemporary of Lawrence's, there is no reason why the two of them should have met, but his theories about history were disseminated largely by public lectures in Oxford during the 1920s and 1930s and attracted significant comment, not only in academic circles. He is best known today as the writer of *The Idea of History*, published posthumously in 1946, which is a work cobbled together from those lectures and notes by some of his former students at Oxford. Collingwood's most noted idea, broadly, was that history could only be understood through a process of "re-thinking," or a re-imagining of the past in the mind of the historian. If the historian was to understand the past activities of Man in a humanistic way, he must make an attempt to get 'inside' those activities by a mental re-enactment of them. The correlations with Lawrence's approach, which was try to discover the 'secret' of the Etruscans by a process of rethinking their philosophy through careful analysis of their art, are immediately obvious.

Collingwood's newly-conceived methodology, questioned as it was by many contemporary historical thinkers, was to have a profound influence on the shape of history in Britain and the United States during the course of the twentieth century, and its principles were imbibed by both a psycho-historical approach and the 'deconstructionist' historical

¹¹ *Religion and Philosophy* (1916), *Roman Britain* (1923), *Speculum Mentis* (1924) and *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925).

school.¹² He himself declared that his work had no clear antecedents in British historical thinking. W. H. Dray, writing on Collingwood's 'historical imagination' would seem to agree. His "unique style" and belief that "the historian's inquiry requires an exercise of the historian's imagination" are unprecedented (Dray 1995: 190) within the rigorous parameters of historical study during the early part of the twentieth-century. As such, his historical thinking was somewhat maligned by the wider historical community in his time, and it is only in a recent re-evaluation of his oeuvre, at a time when historians and philosophers of history are more comfortable with the realisation that the historian's mind is just as much a hermeneutic tool as the book or the archive, that his true worth has been described.

Collingwood outlines what amounts to the same imaginative connection with the past in visual terms that are, by now, familiar to us. He talks, in his inaugural lecture, 'The Historical Imagination,' about a more vital and purposeful engagement with the past by way of recourse to a specifically visual trope – the "picture of the past."¹³ Collingwood sees the constructive aspect of historical thinking, the collation and presentation of a number of sources, as akin to the creation of a picture. The resulting gamut of historical responses should be judged only on whether they contribute usefully to a "picture of the past," that is, one which is a "coherent and continuous picture, one that makes sense" (Collingwood 1993, 245). This 'picture' is ultimately the work, therefore, of "the historical imagination" (247). In fact, it was this element of his historical world-view that elicited most criticism. In a review of Collingwood's *Roman Britain and the English Settlements*, R. E. M. Wheeler observes that the author "interpolates motives, builds characters, constructs episodes with a liberality or

¹² See Dray (1995): 313-315 and Jenkins and Munslow (eds.) (2004): 305 for some of the ways in which Collingwood's ideas have been integrated into these schools of thought.

¹³ This lecture, from which I will quote some more, is included in Collingwood's posthumously published collection, *The Idea of History*, 220-249.

even licence that is great fun, but is liable to shock the pedant. Fact and speculation stand shoulder to shoulder” (Wheeler 1939: 87). Phillip Bagby also complains about the “extensive flights of the imagination” in all of Collingwood’s work, which are the source of “defects inherent in his theories” (Bagby 1958: 68). Collingwood’s theory was chastised by many of his inheritors in the field of the philosophy of history, too; Louis O. Mink derides the historicity of this approach, suggesting that “if imagination is a criterion of acceptability for historical accounts, surely this destroys the distinction between history and fiction, and legitimises subjectivity and idiosyncrasy” (Mink 1969: 159-60). The parallels with the critical reception of Lawrence’s Italian works are all too clear – it was a criticism of the interruption of the imaginative faculty in historical discourse that commentators most objected to in Lawrence’s work too, as we saw at the beginning of Chapter One. What we see in the comparative analysis of Collingwood’s ideas alongside Lawrence’s is a clear point of crossover between the world of aesthetics and that of history. Both men, working from different ends of the spectrum, were in favour of a historical holism; for each, this meant, as we have seen, a blurring of the boundaries between the subject and object, the observer and the observed. Collingwood does not, as it might first seem, offer an invitation to the historian to be callous with evidence and fact and give favour to unsubstantiated speculation – indeed, he was at pains to preserve the necessity of evidence-based research throughout his treatise on the construction of pictures of the past. Rather he was proposing that the historian use the evidence of history to present a different form of history, one founded not on the simple drawing together of objective facts, but instead relating that data to living experience.

To come full circle then, from the beginning of this chapter, we might argue that Lawrence’s “subjective science” is akin to Collingwood’s “re-enactment” hypothesis – both

realise the importance of the historian drawing something vital and life-enhancing from the ‘facts’ of the past, and both enlarge the role given to the perceiving consciousness in the construction of history. So, what might first appear to be a rather trite extrapolation from the sources in order to enter into a polemic about the virtues of primitivism and myth – an elision of the historicity of the Etruscan past in favour of what it can offer to the present – can be understood, through Collingwood, as a legitimate historical process of summoning up the ‘mind’ of the Etruscans from the material remnants of their civilisation. In other words, we can authorise Lawrence’s methodology in *Sketches of Etruscan Places* by placing it next to Collingwood’s.

The search for an ‘other’ Italy to that of Rome and the Renaissance is, in Lawrence’s *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, and in Gissing’s *By the Ionian Sea*, bound up with issues concerning the nature of historical representation. The pasts that each wanted to exhume and make relevant again had been all but erased from the historical record. What objects do remain of those pasts, whether they are the real pottery or tombs that Lawrence sees, or the imaginary ruins of Tarentum or the mythical Galaesus that Gissing thinks up, serve less as evidence than as departure points for the imaginative historical consciousness. The combination of the imaginative and ‘scientific’ principle is most clear in *Sketches of Etruscan Places*. Each of the chapters in Lawrence’s text, as we have glanced at in some examples, takes on the same format – after examining a particular cemetery, site of remains, ruins or museum, Lawrence extrapolates from the scant evidence at his disposal towards some grander statements about the nature of the Etruscan spirit. In his meditation at Volterra, for instance,

the fragments of painted scenes on pottery come alive in his description of them, which in turn initiates some thoughts regarding the nature of the Etruscan aesthetic impulse:

More interesting [to me] are those scenes from actual life, such as boar-hunts, circus games, processions, departures in covered wagons, ships sailing away, city gates being stormed, sacrifices being performed, girls with open scrolls; [...] then so many really tender fare-well scenes, the dead saying goodbye to his wife, as he goes on the journey, or the chariot bears him off, or the horse waits; then the soul alone, with the death-dealing spirits standing by with their hammers that gave the blow. [...] And I thought again, how much more etruscan than Roman the Italy of today is: sensitive, diffident, craving really for symbols and mysteries, able to be delighted with true delight over small things, violent in spasms, and all together without sternness or natural will-to-power. (*EP*: 166)

We might easily ally this technique to the imaginative principle. Lawrence seeks to get into the mind of the past by allowing the aesthetic objects to generate ‘truths’ about the Etruscan culture in his consciousness. But what is not often clear is the twin pull of the scientific principle. This is because, for Lawrence, the scientific method with which he is keen to explore the aspects of the past hidden from the narrative historian is not equivalent to Mommsen’s “scientific approach” (*EP*: 9). Rather, it brings us back to Lawrence’s hope for a type of human understanding that is founded on “subjective science” (Lawrence 1980: ix). To return to where we started, Lawrence’s belief in a new faculty for understanding the true nature of human existence could extend to the study of the past.

Our objective science of modern knowledge concerns itself only with phenomena, and with phenomena as regarded in their cause-and-effect relationship. I have nothing to say against our

science. It is perfect as far as it goes. But to regard it as exhausting the whole scope of human possibility in knowledge seems to me just puerile.

Lawrence's thick descriptions of the Etruscan past utilise this subjective science – his conception of the Etruscan past as one of the “last glimpses of a human cosmic consciousness” is drawn from its techniques. What I hope to have shown in setting Lawrence's approach to understanding the mind and spirit of Etruscan culture alongside the developing theories of R. G. Collingwood is that the combination of scientific and imaginative techniques for historical understanding is an increasingly legitimate one during the 1930s and beyond. Collingwood's recourse to a process of mental ‘re-enactment,’ combining as it did the both the *evidence* of the past and the historians *interpretation* of that past into an historiographical strategy, finds its correlative in Lawrence.

As we have seen, particularly in Lawrence's reaction against the history-writing of Mommsen, the constant search for wholeness and completeness in historical narrative, to tell the whole story, is rendered illegitimate by a past like that of the Etruscans. There was no centre to that deep Italian past – for Lawrence, “there is no unified and homogenous Etruscan people.” The familiar modernist interest in a fragmentary reality aside, this is also Lawrence's objection to those great, teleological narratives he so abhorred – particularly the ones which tried to make sense of the Italian past in terms of its direct influence on the Western present. Collingwood was aware of the impossibility of reconstructing the large-scale structures of the past too, arguing that “no such thing in its entirety is ever a possible object of historical knowledge” (Collingwood 1993: 327). Collingwood, interested in the tensions between wholeness and individuality, ultimately found that the preservation of the individual event or object in history was paramount in the successful construction of

narratives about the past – indeed his argument against macro-historical approach is formidable and, perhaps, undeniable: “The historian who sketches the economic history of the Roman Empire depicts a state of things which no contemporary saw as a whole.”¹⁴ And Collingwood, himself primarily an investigator of the material past, must have recognised at some level the limits to the macro-historical potential of material remains, as Lawrence did.

Lawrence’s suspicion of the grand narratives of Rome and the Renaissance served as the impetus to look elsewhere for an understanding of Man’s relation to his past. The visual, material and imagined remains of Etruria provides Lawrence with a more direct access to the past and its meaning in the present. He hoped to make sense of the spatial-temporal locations that interested him not by extending the narratives of civilisation backwards into them, but rather by considering each period and place on its own terms. The narrative tropes that explained the history of civilisation from Greece and Rome so neatly were all well and good, but they ignored so much of the past, in the constant quest to see the whole panorama of history fit a prescribed pattern (of imperial conquest, say, or the progress of religion). But, as Lawrence said, “there *is* no whole – the wholeness no more exists than the equator exists. It is the dreariest of abstractions.” (*EP*: 34)

¹⁴ Quoted from Collingwood’s unpublished material in Dray (1995), 215.

Chapter Six

“A Different Conception”: Historiography and the Image in Adrian Stokes’ *The Quattro*

Cento and Stones of Rimini

Adrian Stokes first visited Italy in 1921, aged just nineteen. That country’s artistic remains would dominate his aesthetic career and provide him with the motivations for a new understanding of man’s relationship to the world around him. In his autobiographical *Inside Out*, he explains the impact that this first Italian experience had on his consciousness:

As the train came out of the Mont Cenis tunnel, the sun shone, the sky was a deep, deep, bold blue [...] At once I saw it everywhere, on either side of the train, purple earth, terraces of vine and olive, bright rectangular houses free of atmosphere, of the passage of time, of impediment, of all the qualities which steep and massive roofs connote in the north. The hills belonged to man in this his moment. The two thousand years of Virgilian past that carved and habituated the hillsides, did not oppress: they were gathered in the present aspect. At the stations before Turin, the pure note of the guard's horn but sustained and reinforced the process by which time was here laid out as ever-present space. (Carrier (ed): 81-82)

Unlike anywhere else in the world, the human past seemed to sit so easily on the natural world. That first flash of Italy – “at once I saw it everywhere” – hints at the harmonious relationship between organic nature and the creations of art. But this passage also serves to initiate us into Stokes’ historical vision of Italy; the past, even “the Virgilian past,” was right there in the present. There was no narrative – the images of all Italy’s history were exhibited

simultaneously. This is what Stokes, a decade later, would call the “mass effect” – the “immediate, the instantaneous synthesis that the eye alone of the senses can perform” (*QC*: 85). The stillness of the artistic remains of Italy, so deeply tied to the natural landscape and so immediately receptive of the attentions of the eyes, is also an abiding theme of Stokes’ that we shall return to later on in this discussion. The title of my chapter comes from the subheading of Stokes’ *The Quattro Cento: A Different Conception of the Italian Renaissance*. What Stokes undertakes in that text is a revaluation of Renaissance sculpture through use of new classificatory tools and a new appreciation for some of the forgotten artistic sites of the period. Stokes’ work was “a different conception” of the Renaissance to those offered in the professionalised art histories of the period; there are few dates, there is no discussion of the development or narrative of the progression of Renaissance art, and there is no discussion at all of painting, by far the most written about medium. The style and prose of Stokes’ description of the Renaissance also marks it out as a different type of response to the artistic past.

Stokes’ work is, like most of the works I have described below, difficult to site in the genres of history and art criticism. Being part of neither discipline wholly, his *oeuvre* is still ill-explored today. There is, according to David Carrier, “no full account of his art writing, his place in the tradition of Ruskin and Pater, or his relationship to present day art history” (Carrier 2002: 1). Stokes quite demonstrably fits the mould of the aesthetic historian; cultured, well-read and blessed with an eye for the sublime, his descriptions of Renaissance stonework in Italy are sensitive and extraordinarily perceptive. It is certainly more prudent to think of Stokes, after David Carrier, as “an art historian, not an art critic, in order to identify his distinctive way of thinking about visual art” (Carrier 2002: 2) – whilst he is keen to know

Renaissance architecture and sculpture through direct looking, in place of studious investigation of its context, he remains constantly alert to the historical significance of the styles he valorises. What also marks him out is a unique prose style, both “elliptical and lucid” (Carrier 2002: 8); his often-elusive descriptions of objects and buildings do not enlighten the reader as regards historical context, but offer instead meditations on the nature of what he *sees*, and the impressions he conveys of the Italian past blend into a seamless phantasmagoria on the sculptural arts of the fifteenth-century.

Again, though, following the same issues that have formed the focus of this thesis, it is not so much the content of Stokes’ argument as much as the historiographical structures it leans on and the negotiations it makes with other works in the field that are of most interest to us here. Stokes’ conception of history as it is told through images, and the nature of those images, serve to deepen our understanding of his aesthetic response to the past. In the same way, Stokes’ use of the “still image” (*Sunrise*: 36) and the “mass effect” help unite the art of the past with the modernist experimentation with sculptural forms, effectively foreshortening the temporal gap between the *quattrocento* and the twentieth century. I want this final chapter to do something akin to what the first did; Stokes, like Ruskin, held idiosyncratic opinions about the nature of history and what the past meant for the present day, so I want to trace out the sources of his historical methodology in the works he composed on Italy. I also want to suggest that Stokes thought a lot about the representations of Italy that the generation before him produced, and that it is worthwhile thinking about his historiographical awareness regarding Ruskin’s and Pater’s representation of the Italian past before him. I don’t want to explore the nature of Stokes’ argument in either *The Quattro Cento* or *Stones of Rimini* here, because I am most concerned with his *historiographical* rather than historical awareness.

Adrian Stokes was a poet, painter and art historian who began writing critically in the late 1920's. He was friendly with many figures in the modernist art movement, particularly with Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth. He is possibly best known, if at all, for two texts he wrote in the 1930s, *The Quattro Cento* (1932) and *The Stones of Rimini* (1934), both of which attempted not only to explain the achievements of Renaissance sculpture, but to extrapolate from those achievements to formulate an historiography of art and culture. Stokes' aesthetic was closely linked with his experiences in Italy. By 1924, he had met both Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell, and of the latter he would later claim that "he was the first to open my eyes."¹ (The visual and ocular metaphors abound in the accounts of Stokes' recollections of his time in Italy). He went back to Italy in 1925, as a guest of Osbert Sitwell, and was to spend the next few years travelling around Italy with both brothers. In that milieu, he met both Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence. He was staying with Osbert at Rapallo in 1926 when Ethel Mannin met him. "Probably a genius" she decided, "though no one save Ezra Pound, Max Beerbohm, Evelyn Waugh and the Sitwells appear to have heard of him."²

The particular group of writers, artists and critics, intermittent guests of the Sitwells at Amalfi, Rapallo and Montegufoni,³ constituted a creative and aesthetic locus pretty much unsurpassed by anywhere other than Paris in the 1920s and early 1930s, and it offered Stokes the possibility of exploring Italy further with the best of possible guides. Sacheverell Sitwell,

¹ Quoted in Wollheim (1972): 12.

² Quoted in Ziegler (1998): 164-5.

³ Montegufoni was the castle which Sir George Sitwell purchased in 1909, and which became a creative hub for the guests of Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell.

the younger of the Sitwell trio, was certainly a key asset when it came to understanding the aesthetic past of Italy. In 1924, Sitwell published *Southern Baroque Art: A Study of Painting, Architecture and Music in Italy and Spain of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, which was however, with the exception of its title, a slight volume. Nevertheless, it certainly had an effect on Stokes' thinking about the Mediterranean past and how to represent it. Sitwell's volume is composed less of scholarly material than a number of varied impression-pieces that treat the past as something extremely malleable. Though clearly lacking the depth of engagement with issues of historical representation that Stokes was to take up, Sitwell's book was marked with the by now familiar features of a highly-individualised response to art more concerned with communicating the author's sensitivity and taste than any 'truth' about the period. Sitwell's technique in *Southern Baroque Art* certainly bears little resemblance to those other histories of the period, or of southern Italy, or of the Baroque style, that were produced in the early twentieth century.⁴ In Sitwell's book, rather, the characteristics of a number of different art forms are "fused into a phantasmagorical whole in which [...] temporal markers are constantly blurred" (Scuriatti 2006: 330). Indeed, Sitwell states his aim, in the 'Introduction,' to:

soak myself in the emanations of the period, that I can produce, so far as my pen can aid me, the spirit and atmosphere of the time and place, without exposing too much of the creaking joints of the machinery, the iron screws and pins which are birth dates and the death dates of the figures discussed. (Sitwell, 1924: 10)

None of the first three essays which make up Sitwell's *Southern Baroque Art* focus on a particular geographical area; the book consists of chapters called "The Serenade at Caserta,"

⁴ For instance, Martin Shaw Briggs' *In the Heel of Italy* (1924), or Erwin Panofsky's *What is Baroque?* (1934).

“Les Indes Galantes” and “The King and the Nightingale.” The content of each is varied, taking the reader “on a sweeping tour of a few Baroque churches and monuments in Naples and in the Palace of Caserta, to the Baroque villas of Bagheria and Palermo, with long digressions on Venice, Sicily and Puglia” (Scuriatti 2006: 331). Nowhere is there any unity of place or of time. From Sitwell’s book, however, Stokes carried some key ideas into his conception of the Italian past. Firstly, despite the lack of spatial-temporal wholeness in *Southern Baroque Art*, the writer creates a unity of idea that frames the whole work. For Sitwell, ‘Baroque’ was less a type of art than an *attitude* to depicting the world, based on ornamentation and excess. In a similar fashion, Stokes’ later work on Italy was to use the same type of umbrella term (for Stokes this was “Quattro Cento” or “Carving Style”) to describe a precise mode of representation that was not delimited by time. Secondly, Sitwell’s prose style, heavily metaphorical and dense, served by the potent, luxurious sense-impressions of those Baroque sites he was to visit, pre-empts Stokes’ own prose fantasia in both *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini*.

Indeed, Stokes was to try his hand at something similar, what we might call a meditation on aesthetics, two years later, when he published *Sunrise in the West: a Modern Interpretation of Past and Present* (1926), a book “whose heady metaphysics contain the merest hint of the aesthetic obsession that would overtake Stokes’s oeuvre”(Read, 1995: 140). Coupled with an intense style, that Sitwell’s volume had certainly provided the model for (his work being mentioned in the ‘Preface’ to Stokes’ text, as a celebrated example of the genre) were the beginnings of an interest in a deeper understanding of the past and its relationship to the present. The book effectively reads the history of Western civilisation through man’s ideational awareness and the changing nature of the relationship between the individual and

society. The argument is constructed around the Bradleyan dualism of Prose and Poetry, which Stokes interprets as a trope to organise man's development from primitive roots to the present day. It is, from the outset, a difficult text; full of historical allusion and strange metaphors. Richard Read says that Stokes ensured that Lawrence, Pound, Herbert Read and members of the Bloomsbury group read it, and it was "their reaction that led him to disown it", rightfully noting that it is "virtually unread" today (Read 199:140). As a model for understanding 'past and present' it is deficient, and its frailties as a serious philosophical work are demonstrable – a lack of even basic contact with any of the major works on the history of ideas renders the work quite transparent at the historiographical level. It does, however, hold some important precursory ideas that relate to the historical position that Stokes was to take up in *The Quattro Cento* and *The Stones of Rimini*. The notion that certain historical periods possessed a harmony that others do not is an important one. We have already noted something similar in Lawrence's conception of those periods of the past which possessed a mode of consciousness that others did not. It also proposes a duality in the way that man views the world surrounding him, one that played a major role in Stokes' conception of the style of art that dominated the Renaissance. The difference between the imaginative response to the world which is full of wonder, and the "fact-consciousness" of modern life which found nothing surprising, was a key one in his later description of the marvel and delight manifest in *quattrocento* art.

After discussing different "ways of seeing objects", including "standardized" and "impersonal" ones, Stokes reiterates the imaginative historical approach of the Renaissance artist:

It is absurd to conclude that the standardized object is the “real.” It is less personal, may be, but on the other hand, it tends to be impersonal, a mere business arrangement for all necessity. Owing to our great increase in Fact-consciousness, this standardized object has become completely impersonal, without significance except for the purposes for which it is presupposed, the purposes of practical life. [...] The Renaissance artists viewed so little dispassionately, least of all facts and scientific distinction which they were discovering.
(*Sunrise*: xii)

The wonder at discovery was still, for Stokes, manifestly present in Renaissance sculpture. The direct carving techniques, which he was later to explore in *The Quattro Cento* and *The Stones of Rimini* reflect this quality. He argues that Agostino di Duccio’s sculptures in Rimini are examples of “whole-object” representation rather than the “part-object” style that is characteristic of lesser periods.

Traditional history was, he argues in *Sunrise in the West*, ill-equipped to describe the aesthetic achievement of the *quattrocento* because it did not recognise its own dependence on facts. Modern history, for Stokes, represented what he called “fact-consciousness” – that is a concern only for the tangible and falsifiable elements of the past. The Renaissance world-view, which includes the art of the *quattrocento* he was later to praise, did not preserve the ‘facts’ in its art because it did not actively seek them out. He was later to comment, on the subject matter he most admired in the *quattrocento* style, that there was a paucity of historical events and action recorded in the stonework of the period; rather the Renaissance sought its truths not in the here and now but in the eternal and mythic emblems of its philosophy –

especially in the representation of the Muses.⁵ Stokes says in the ‘Preface’ to *Sunrise*, “Facts carry a false weight. Without them, one may be dismissed as a charlatan; for they provide tags with which the professional readers can hit each other over the head in irrelevant connections” (*Sunrise*: xvi).

There are a number of points to note thus far. Firstly, it is valuable to note that we have come almost full circle from Pater’s quasi-Hegelian model for the development of the cultural practices indulged in by man. Returning to a sinusoidal conception of history, with its peaks at points of ‘harmony’ between socio-cultural conditions and artistic practices (such as in the *quattrocento* style) and its troughs when such harmonies are swamped by anti-artistic tendencies (“fact-consciousness revelling in Puritanism” (*Sunrise*, 59)),⁶ Stokes delineates a duality in historiographical thinking of two differing life-principles. *Sunrise in the West* is thus framed on the distinction between ‘prose’ and ‘poetry’ and is further broken down into four chapter-essays, titled ‘poetry’, ‘prose-poetry’, ‘prose’ and ‘prose and poetry’, each congruent with an attitude to different periods of the past. The ‘poetic’ is symptomatic of the most basic and primitive impulse in man, whereas the ‘prose’ impulse is akin to the spread of rationalism and culture. Relatedly, and most salient to a discussion of Stokes’ later writings on Italy in the thirties, is the actual form that the historiography takes. If Pater utilised the husk of an Hegelian dialecticism in order to map what he saw as the progression of the plastic arts towards the mental and abstract ones, (in other words, deploying an essentially social idea to explain artistic development), then Stokes effectively does the opposite, choosing rather to impose artistic criteria upon social change – indeed, his use of the Bradleyan duality of

⁵ The ‘Carving, Modelling and Agostino’ section in *Stones of Rimini* contains a full discussion of the significance of the muse in *quattrocento* art.

⁶ It is interesting, but hardly surprising, that for both Pater and Stokes religious fervour is at odds with heightened and nuanced aesthetic practices

‘prose’ and ‘poetry’ is a pre-cursor to his later historiographical distinction between ‘carving’ and ‘modelling.’ I want to go on to look at Stokes’ two Italian texts now, briefly, to describe the nature of this duality and its relevance for Stokes’ historical consciousness.

Stokes’ methodology in both *The Quattro Cento* and *The Stones of Rimini* is in fact opposed to narrative. David Carrier quite rightly suggests that “Stokes, a dazzling writer, was certainly not a storyteller” (Carrier 2002: 6). In these texts, Stokes is interested in knowing the past, specifically an Italian past, through “looking”, in the main without recourse to the familiar methods of historical inquiry available to him. Ezra Pound, in his review of *The Quattro Cento*, remarked that Stokes had “for a number of years ransacked Italy not as an archaeologist, but as a looker. He has carried his eyes about and made them work. He has very definitely scrutinised the shapes” (Read 1995: 136)

But it is not just any image that interests Stokes in these texts; elsewhere in *Sunrise in the West*, he chooses to see “all the diverse members of the past lie strewn together in a still heap” (*Sunrise*: 152). It is this word ‘still’ that holds interest for us – they are not at all animated in their relationships with one another, nor are they made to dance in the present – they lie still, waiting to be viewed in their physical and temporal location. The stillness of the image, its starkness and its concreteness are the source of their symbolizing capacity, and they remind us of Pound’s “Few Do’s and Don’ts for an Imagist,” which would certainly have had some influence on Stokes:

Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something. Do not use such an expression as 'dim light of peace.' It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the Concrete. It comes from the writer's not realising that the natural object is always the adequate symbol. Go in fear of abstractions....⁷

Holding up sculpture as the paradigm for all the arts, Pound derided what he considered to be the modeller's soft and flaccid way with words, and deplored Pater's pronouncement that all the arts aspire to the condition of music, missing as it did an appreciation of the durability and otherness of a medium. Stokes develops this aesthetic, equally opposed to Pater's pronouncement, but manages to convey an historical depth to his images. Elsewhere, in *Sunrise in the West*, Stokes tells us that "[t]he medium of an artistic expression tends, in its own nature, to be entirely antithetical to that expression. Flying from catgut, wood and brass, the symphony ascends" (13). Whilst, in this musical analogy, form and content jar constantly, in the sculptural bas-relief there is no tension, but rather a harmony. Thus, the antithesis of plastic and abstract art (specifically between sculptural bas-relief and music) becomes a pregnant one for Stokes.

But even the sculptural arts are further divided, into the carving and modelling approach. It is only in the "carvings" of a relief, that most elementary form of art, that form and content have any harmony. The dyad of *carving* and *modelling* is the prime achievement of Stokes' historiographical thought, and where the key to his philosophy of history is held. In *Stones of Rimini* the full extent of the historiographical potentiality of the carving-modelling duality is explored. Here is Stokes' description of the two types of response to material in that book:

In Peter Jones (ed.) (1972): xix.

A figure carved in stone is a fine carving when one feels that not the figure, but the stone through the medium of the figure has come to life. Plastic conception [modelling] on the other hand is uppermost when the material [from which] a figure has been made appears no more than as so much suitable stuff for this creation. (SR: 110)

The carver, as David Carrier argues, “does not approach the medium aggressively; he or she is an attentive lover who woos the stone” (Carrier 2005: 7). And the carved image is harmonious and still. There is a unity in this type of sculpture that is lacking elsewhere. What is most important about this binary opposition is that Stokes extrapolates from this dyad of artistic techniques to use it as a trope for the progress of human cultural achievement throughout the ages. The privileging of the carving values of Agostino di Duccio’s relief sculptures in the Tempio Malatestiana in Rimini become, for Stokes, a way of reading the images that the past has left us. By selecting this one type of art, an art which is at once still and harmonised, and arguing its superiority over the rest, Stokes privileges a type of art object that he sees as “coherent in and of itself” (QC: 79). He calls this unity the “mass effect”, the art object possessing the quality of being immediately captured by the perceiving eye. And it is above all in this effect that he finds perfection in the sculptural arts. It also gives his theory an axis on which to progress *historically* – once he has decided on his key focus when examining the architecture and sculptures of history, he can position himself between other practitioners of art criticism.

Certainly, Stokes wrote himself into a tradition of Italian aesthetic history-writing that contained both Ruskin and Pater. For not only in subject matter is Stokes linked to those two

men. The scope of his two early works on Italy, *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini* is mirrored in Pater's *Renaissance* and Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* respectively. In both cases, Stokes was siting himself in an historical continuum of his predecessors, taking up the considerations of a previous generation and renewing them for his own. A recent collection by David Carrier, collating some of the autobiographical writings on Ruskin, Pater and Stokes, shows a consistent gesturing backwards on the part of Stokes to the aesthetic. That Stokes wrote with the other two very much in mind is certain. In fact, more so than mainstream histories, aesthetic history-writing often feels the anxiety of influence sharply. Not circumscribed by the 'facts' that one can say about the past, and therefore not offering histories that are readily falsifiable in a traditional sense, successful writing in this genre is marked by a need to communicate a sensitivity and taste equal to or greater than that of one's forbears, as well as a keen eye for something that is new, surprising and enlightening in the aesthetic remains of the past. In Italy, a country whose artistic past had been subjected to the greater part of half a millennium of analysis and appreciation, finding something new to say about art that had been seen by countless sensitive souls was not all that easy. It is clear, from the evidence in *Inside Out* (Stokes' autobiographical work) that this anxiety was keenly felt.⁸ Even more than his two predecessors, Stokes was writing in an age of professional art-historical writing too; if Ruskin's aesthetic-historical work had not seemed anything other than a little peculiar to his contemporaries that worked on the art of the past, Stokes' work in the 1930s must have seemed a world away from the new, rigid parameters of the discipline of art history - thus his need to position himself within a continuity that included art-critics rather than art-historians in order to give an authority to his opinion.

⁸ See especially the section on Stokes' first visit to Italy – Carrier (ed.) (1997): 82-96.

Ruskin is referenced only once in *The Quattro Cento* and not at all in *Stones of Rimini*, but his presence is everywhere felt. Much of the former text can be read as a response to *The Stones of Venice*, simultaneously avoiding Venetian history (the book ostensibly contains sections mainly centred on *quattrocento* Florence, Verona, Siena and Rome) but all the time casting long glances back to the importance of the art of that city in the formation of the “Quattro Cento style.” Even in *Stones of Rimini*, when in full flow on the architectural highlights of that aesthetically-sidelined city, Stokes returns to a discussion of Venice, “my constant theme,” and the importance of her stone for the styles of quattrocento sculpture (*SR*: 100). Ruskin found the enormity of Venice’s importance in the history of culture too much for the histories of that city to bear, deriding as he did some of the many attempts at documenting the Venetian past as incomplete and suspect. So, he sought evidence in the visual record of the city. Venice is, too, for Stokes “the one permanent miracle, and the presence of this miracle in the heart of Europe for fifteen hundred years is an historical factor whose influence is too vague and large for its conceiving by historians” (*SR*: 100). Both, too, were convinced of the supremacy of the visual and material evidence of the past over the documentary and archival record.

It is perhaps surprising, given this affinity for Venice, that Ruskin and Stokes should choose opposing styles of architecture worthy of praise. Ruskin loathed the sensuousness and decadence of the Renaissance styles, and the crushing of mediaeval individuality by the demand for perfection and the ornate, but Stokes clearly thought that the Renaissance was liberating in terms of the attitude to stone that it provoked:

Succeeding to the centuries of spiritual torture and enhancement, Renaissance men discovered the concrete world to be satisfying. It is no longer a desire but a compulsion for them to throw life outwards, to make expression definite on the stone. I call *Quattro Cento* the art of the fifteenth century which expresses this compulsion without restraint. The highest achievement in architecture was a mass-effect in which every temporal or flux element was transformed into spatial steadiness [...] My aim [in *The Quattro Cento*] is to distinguish the conventional or stylised modes in the expression of an underlying spirit from expressions which are newly created or direct embodiments of that spirit. (*QC*: 15)

Both men's conception of art's status as historical evidence for the development of humanity, particularly in the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century, lead each on a quest to find sites that encapsulated the story of man's existence during those periods. If Ruskin found the perfect expression of the ascetic life of wonder in the Doge's Palace in Venice, Stokes finds in the bas-reliefs of Agostino di Duccio at the Tempio Malatestiana in Rimini the story of the twin impulses of all of artistic history, those of carving and modelling, and extrapolates from those techniques two very different ways in which man has, throughout history, interacted with his environment. He says of Agostino that:

His virtue will shed new light upon the high imaginative constructions which common fantasy has placed around each of these antithetical processes [i.e., carving and modelling]. Agostino's virtue will illumine afresh the field of visual art. For the distinction between carving and modelling proves to be most suggestive in relation to all visual art. (*SR*: 109)

Ruskin's conception of the past goes into deep time, as far back as the formation of the limestone in the plinths and columns of Venice. In the same way, Stokes meditates on the

formation of the stone that he sees in Rimini and elsewhere, describing as “the perfect mixture of organic and inorganic” (*SR*: 20). And in both cases, the pleasure at interacting not only with the centuries, but with the billions of years of organic history is manifest. Stokes’ own chapter, on ‘The Pleasures of Limestone’ recollects Ruskin’s overflowing excitement at seeing the true history of the materials that composed the buildings of Venice. When William Holman Hunt met Ruskin by chance in Venice in 1869, and accompanied him to the Church of the Salute, he noted that Ruskin’s interest was piqued by the evidence of a far more ancient layer of the past:

On entering the nave of the empty church, observing that the marble pillars of a side altar were rich in embedded shell fossils, Ruskin walked up the steps, and pointed this out as an evidence of the much greater antiquity of the earth than the bible records state.

‘But Ruskin’ I argued, ‘surely this question is not a new one. Most of us considered such facts in our teens.’

But, ignoring my remarks, he continued to urge importance in the argument that this marble, though not of igneous formation, must have been many millenniums anterior to man’s appearance on earth. (Holman Hunt 1905, II: 269)

Ruskin’s almost child-like wonder at the history of stone, and the resultant heightened awareness that it gave him, are mirrored in Stokes’ understanding of the architectural wonders of Rimini. In the chapter subtitled ‘A Geological Melody’, Stokes describes the limestone of the Mediterranean as “a link between the organic and inorganic worlds [which] plays a decisive part in determining the humanistic attitude of man to Mediterranean nature” (*SR*, 76-77).

Stokes' own writings on Venice respond to the architecture of that city in very much the same way as Ruskin's; there is always an acute responsiveness to the combination of water and stone in that city. And in *Stones of Rimini* the cohesion of stone and sea serve the same aesthetic purpose:

The Tempio Malatestiana at Rimini is an ideal quarry whose original organic substances were renewed by the hand of the carver to express the abundant seas collected into stone [...] (SR: 43)

For Ruskin, the nature of the stone that built Venice is forever in his mind. Many of his descriptions, including the one of the Piazza included in Chapter Two, draw attention to the particular qualities of Istrian stone, and its malleability and receptiveness to the blows of the sculptor's hammer. And Stokes dwells on the same limestone more than any other material in *Stones of Rimini*. Indeed, Ruskin could have easily uttered the same words as Stokes does when he suggests that "influence of material upon style is an aspect of art history that is never sufficiently studied, especially in relation to building" (SR: 44).

In the same way that Ruskin was fixated on the decay of the stones of Venice, expressing vacillating horror and pleasure at the damage that the elements did to the architecture, Stokes too finds the effect of the organic process on the art and architecture enthralling. The stone, only lent to the hands of the sculptor, is returned slowly to the sea by weathering action, and the process of destruction is as aesthetically pleasing as is the construction. He writes:

Of all weathering, that of limestone, as a rule, is the most vivid. It is limestone that combines with gases of the air, that is carved by the very breath we breathe out. It is limestone that forms

new skins and poetic efflorescence: above all, limestone is sensitive to the most apparent of sculptural agencies, the rain [...] enough to intimate the sculptural communion between the masonry and the water piercing and renewing its stones. (SR: 49)

If the links to Ruskin are all but self-evident, the ones with Pater might be a little harder to tease out. Both men wrote of a roughly congruent period, though both looked back and forwards from it. The Renaissance to Pater and Stokes was a period of supreme conception in art and architecture. Each wrote on their Italian subjects with a dual conception of the periods on which they were writing; on the one hand, both described the *historical* aspects of their subjects, documenting the histories of their respective ages with considerations of the problems that faced the Renaissance in terms of representation and understanding, whilst also clearly writing with an *historiographical* awareness. Pater, as we have already seen, was keenly aware of the historical status of the collection of artists and writers he included in *The Renaissance*, but in constellation, they represented something beyond the material history of that period, and a line of materially unconnected figures became associated with a similar attitude to the world. And in placing such figures in constellation, Pater was saying something about historiography. In a similar way, Stokes offers the reader an analysis of the materials and artistic products of the *quattrocento*, but extrapolates some of the elements of style and some aesthetic considerations to stand for the artwork of all time. Thus a sculpture, bas-relief or architectural wonder could be '*quattrocento*' without being made or constructed during that time, in the same way as something could, for Pater, be representative of the renaissance spirit, without belonging to the period commonly considered 'Renaissance.' But, Stokes produces a history of the Italian Renaissance in a very different way to Pater. For Pater, the ebb and flow of intellect and the spirit (in Hegel's sense of that word) is mostly what shines through fifteenth century Italian art. In a slight shift of an Hegelian schema, Pater suggests

that art follows the same upward trajectory Hegel had outlined for the Geist; the achievement of complete self-knowledge, mirrored in the path of art through the plastic arts (architecture and sculpture) towards the abstract ones of painting, poetry and, finally music. For Stokes, however, it is the stillness and hardness of the bas-relief that is the prime achievement of the *quattrocento*. There is, in other words, no celebration of the developmental aspects of Renaissance art, as we have already seen, in Stokes' preference of the static, plastic style.

This comparative analysis, of Stokes' *The Quattro Cento* and *Stones of Rimini* with the work of Ruskin and Pater on Italy has, I hope, achieved two things. Firstly, it has demonstrated the closeness of the historical impulse in Stokes' work to that of his two predecessors. Certainly, the desire to use art and architecture as evidence for the developments of history is manifest in Stokes, as it was in Ruskin. The same sensitivity to the materials of the past is demonstrable; Ruskin's excitement at the tactile nature of his evidence is mirrored in Stokes' fantasia on stone. In a similar way, the use of a dyadic historiographical structure to explain the achievements of an age is closely linked with Pater's historical strategy in *The Renaissance*. For Pater, the classical and religious pulls on culture dominate every period of history since at least fifth-century Greece, while for Stokes, the carving and modelling opposition marked in the sculptural activity of each period and nation denote man's attitude to his environment and the human condition. Secondly, in Stokes' careful positioning of his authorial self in relation to both writers (and in relation to the canon of aesthetic writing on Italy more, generally) demonstrates a deeper, *historiographical* awareness about the formation of the canon of English art, and his position is made secure by the fact that he has something new to say, given his radical new organising principle for the stages of art and architecture.

There are, therefore, two historiographical depths to Stokes' historical work. The first is the presence of a constant, dyadic organising principle in his philosophy that sees ages pitted against each other in mental outlook. The artwork that each produces is so closely tied to the mentality of the respective period, that artistic terms (be they 'poetry' and 'prose' or 'carving and modelling') connote not only the type of representative technique dominant in each period, but also a philosophical *attitude* to life more generally. The second level of historiographical awareness is Stokes' own authorial positioning in a continuum of aesthetic writers against which he can speak. His desire for an overt comparison of his two Italian works with those of Ruskin and Pater, in the titles and scope of each volume, demonstrates an historiographical awareness of the canon in aesthetic-historical criticism, and the organising principles he comes to rely on to make distinctions between different periods of time and the art practices associated with them, provide him with a voice that is, aesthetically and historically, his own.

If Hayden White can argue that: "History [...] in its featuring of narrativity as a favoured representational practice, is especially well suited to the production of notions of continuity, wholeness, closure and individuality that every 'civilized' society wishes to see itself as incarnating, against the chaos of a merely 'natural life'" (White 1999: 73), then Stokes' representational strategy in the texts I have discussed is something all together different; it's one that privileges the organic, often chaotic, often lichen-encrusted sculpture and architecture. Likewise, his works presents themselves to us as organic and chaotic history,

history founded upon principles of visual fantasy rather than textual source-work. His opposition to the narrative trope, so clearly outlined in *Sunrise in the West*, forms the basis of his historiographical technique. What I hope to have shown, through looking at the case of Adrian Stokes, is that in reclaiming this genre of aesthetic history into some much more broadly defined parameters for historical writing allows us to think more interestingly about the nature of the historical text proper and its connections with its artistic and cultural cousins. For Stokes, as Michael Ann Holly was to subsequently argue about early modern art, it is as if “past works of art actually work at prefiguring the shape of their subsequent histories” (*Past Looking*, xiii). Their materiality and formal qualities as still image render them in many ways immune to narrative ‘telling’. Rather, in constructing an historiography built around a tension he discovered in the sculptural bas-relief in the fifteenth century, Stokes tells a cultural history on different terms.

Chapter Seven

Coda

The historian turns his back on his own time, and his visionary glance lights up at the sight of the mountaintops of previous generations receding ever more deeply into the past.

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Concept of History*

The aesthetic histories of Italy that I have explored here offer not a coherent body of work with shared aims and objectives, but a sustained attempt to engage with the past in a spectrum of innovative ways. It is, however, possible to outline some shared concerns about an understanding of the past in such texts, in order to more deeply consider the claims of history. My twin aims here, to restate them, were to better demonstrate that a sophisticated commitment to history was present in these texts and to show that the tendencies in recent historical thought towards reclaiming the aesthetic impulses of historical study can offer new insight into the methodologies and historical principles employed by these writers. Moreover, the potency of the Italian past as a device for exploring some of the points of crossover between history, aesthetics and literature, and that past's figuration in a significant number of aesthetic histories of the later nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, are seminally important in the development of the genre.

There are a number of areas of overlap in the premises of each text explored here. Pater's opposition to the "facile orthodoxy" of nineteenth-century historicism, Vernon Lee's suggestion that there are "other kinds of work which may be done", Lawrence's attempts at

“subjective science” founded on “the data of living experience and sure intuition” and Stokes’ belief that “Facts carry a false weight” all share a common dissatisfaction with the results of a history narrowly conceived. What each writer sought was an experience of the past that was more personal and tangible. And each developed a methodology suited to the purpose.

All relied, in some way or other, on the visual and material *presence* of the aesthetic past in Rome, Venice, Florence and beyond. The ‘past-image’ in aestheticist and modernist thinking (be that a cornice stone or a Tintoretto) – as it is so eloquently conceived by Stephen Bann, Paul Crowther and Thomas Pfau amongst others – very often functions as a site of contested historicity, relying upon careful and sensitive appreciation to tease out its historical secrets.¹ Each text examined here is marked by the collection of visual and material evidence, and each offers an interpretation of that evidence, usually highly personal and idiosyncratic. The stylistic features that are common to each – constant time-shifts, digressions and meditations on real or imagined events – are less manipulations of past ‘truths’ than signs of a complicated historical matrix. Such devices convey a sense of immediacy and contemporaneity in the past, where the aesthetic materials of history literally *jump* at the sensitive critic, demanding reflective inquiry. And what is at stake in each is an alternative conception of history, founded on different principles. What each text seeks to find is a more rounded understanding of history that the evidence of documents and facts will not give up.

The monikers ‘cyclic’ or ‘mythic’ do not do justice to the depth of historicist experimentation in these works; as I hope to have shown, none is dependent upon one prevailing current in later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century historical thinking, but each

¹ See Bann (1990) – particularly 100-147, Crowther (2002) – 143-65, and Pfau (2005).

negotiates a place within an historiography of aesthetic writing through the exploitation of both dominant and marginalized discourses in history, art history, archaeology and cultural inquiry. What we are left with, then, are works which (like their subjects) offer multiple levels of signification, demanding at once to be read as ‘true’ accounts of historical evolution and development as well as offering reflection on the legitimacy of such accounts. The application of some of the more recent thinking in historical theory and historiography to these texts can therefore yield a surprising wealth of understanding about the limits of cultural history during a period of intense experimentation in literary and artistic practices. It has hopefully become quite clear that there is no simple elision of history and historical science – all of the writers present here were, without exception, too well versed in the practices of history to conveniently dismiss them out of hand. Nor, as I hope I have shown, is there a convenient retreat into the realm of aesthetics where history functions as a straw dog to overriding concerns of form, style and literary technique. Rather, it is the combination of an aesthetic sensibility and a desire to know the events of history that go together to form the innovative responses to the past.

But what was the *purpose* of the innovation that these texts exhibit? The truth is probably relatively simple – these attempts to better encapsulate the past found the histories of the later-nineteenth and early-twentieth century poor approximations at the real ‘truth’ of some of the periods of history, and that there were clearly some gaps in what the increasingly-professionalised histories of that period chose to report. The spread of a particular type of history, focussed on a rather dry reportage of the facts, eventually came to dominate, to the detriment of a number of other legitimate responses to the past. Michael Bentley is quite correct to argue that “the post-whig sensibility, in trying to crush the tradition of writing great

narratives for a wide audience, merely drove [one type of historical writing] outside academia to the loss of both university and public” (Bentley 2005: 218). The times when history books sold hundreds of thousands of copies, like those of Macauley and Carlyle did, had increasingly given way to specialised accounts of economic or social history with far smaller print runs, and the development of historical research journals that excluded all but the professional contributor and reader. Peter Mandler characterised this time, during the years around the beginning of the twentieth century, as a “drifting away” of history from English national life (Mandler 2002: 47-92).

Perhaps the works I have described here tried to re-align the parameters of legitimate historical inquiry, and sought to attain a vitalist insight that only individual, mental reflection could provide. For Bernard Berenson, “History,” as a way of writing,

[...] should not be a mere chronicle, mere data, mere *res gestae*, mere events as events, no matter what their nature or purpose. Nor yet should history be exploited and abused as cabalistic lore whence to extract justification for the absurdities and passions of the hour. [Rather] it must be life-enhancing, life expanding, life-intensifying [...] History should lead us to recapture the past at those points that we most gladly recall and enjoy, discovering life [as] as universe of magic, mystery, and unlimited possibilities. (Berenson 1950: 229)

This was Nietzsche’s message, and Heidegger’s too; history, if it was not to be a burden to us, and it was not to distract us from the concerns of the present, had to serve us and not us it.

But what value have these aesthetic texts for us today, apart from giving us pleasure with their eloquent prose? It is perhaps their otherness and difference, more than their content, that makes them interesting to us, in the present. It was in the gaps between what those professional histories said that other newly-developing genres flourished, which satisfied the desire for knowledge about the past in ways that constitutional or economic history could not. If the age of the great, popular storytellers of history was at an end, then the time for popular books on the latest archaeological finds, on the anthropology of dim and distant lands, and on the art of the past were at hand.²

Now is the right time to be doing the work on these gaps and silences. A number of areas in contemporary critical theory provide a framework for examining the problematic nature of this genre of aesthetic history – areas which find interest in such gaps and signs of indeterminacy. Indeed, the hybrid and the liminal are privileged terms in recent philosophical thought. (Think of Deleuze and Guattari's discussions of schizophrenic capitalism and 'intermezzo being', or the postcolonial subject who has two cultural traditions to draw on but represents neither, or the 'volatile bodies' of new feminist thought and queer theory, for instance). The philosophy of history, as a discipline, has certainly been touched by this type of thinking. Since the moment of Hayden White's narrativism at least, there have been a number of debates about the nature of historical discourse that have brought the discipline closer to areas that border literary and visual studies. As we have seen, a recent set of ideas about history has allowed us for the first time to conceive of the text's aesthetic *and* historical elements together, rather than attempting to disentangle one from the other. Certainly, the gaps between what is properly the stuff of aesthetics and what belongs to history are ripe for

² See Clark (2005) for more about the diversification of 'historical' texts in the early-twentieth century, especially her chapter on Clifford Geertz and Jacques Derrida: 130-155.

exploration. What is so exciting about these interstitial spaces between disciplines is that they are at the heart of one key postmodernist desire – the desire to re-conceptualise the boundaries between different disciplinary practices, to think outside of the dualisms that otherwise define thought and intellectual possibility. In our own moment, such a desire is produced out of a strong disillusionment with the rigidities inherent in the dominant modes of representation, and the influence of new media on innovation.

Keith Jenkins and Alan Munslow, two historians at the forefront of the philosophical arm of their discipline, include a number of new approaches to the past (in extract form) in their collection, *The Nature of History Reader* (2004). What is abundantly clear is that some of the more aesthetically-motivated ones are first cousins to the type of history that I have centred on here. For instance, Carolyn Steedman's history, *Dust* (2001), is the logical culmination of Pater's questioning of the historical reality. She asks the historian "where exists [...] the real referent? Where exactly is the past thing that historians refer to."³ If Pater arrives at the problem of knowing the historical object by exploring the art object, then Steedman enacts something similar, invoking novels and poems to demonstrate the elusiveness of the signified. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (1997) is a collection of fragments that all shed some light on the year 1926. Thus there are, in a similar fashion to, say, Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, a series of fragment clusters – some of which include "airplanes," "cremation," "six-day races," "roof gardens" – where disparate facts are brought into temporary constellation with one another. (Gumbrecht chooses 1926, incidentally, because "it seems to be one of the very few years in the twentieth century to which no historian has ever attributed specific hermeneutic relevance.")⁴ These fragments are in no

³ Quoted in Jenkins and Munslow (eds.) (2004): 252.

⁴ Quoted in Jenkins and Munslow (eds.) (2004): 171.

particular order because Gumbrecht shuns conventional narrative. And when Jenkins and Munslow write that “these snippets swirl together as though in a kaleidoscope, forming momentary patterns and then dispersing,” we cannot help but be reminded of Vernon Lee’s meditation on the table of excavated objects in Rome, none of which had any special connection with any other except their shared dug-up-ness (Jenkins and Munslow 2004: 171). In fact, reading a page of Gumbrecht’s fragments has a sort of visual-material correlative in the gondola ride in Venice, or the stroll out of the Forum in Rome – if Gumbrecht’s has the effect of a synchronic slice through a historical field connected by age, passing through space in one of the old Italian cities offers a series of diachronic glimpses into disparate periods that by necessity share a physical space.

The same questions that aesthetic-history faced around the turn of the twentieth-century have returned – if indeed they ever went away. What such examples show to us is the closeness of aesthetic, literary and historical enterprises. Where the former two have quite often sought the methods of historical study – in New Historical thinking for instance – history has always sought to demonstrate its difference from them both. As Linda Orr puts it succinctly, in noticeably Joycean tones – “literature is the nightmare from which history is continually trying to wake” (Orr 1986: 2). For Orr, history’s quest to distance itself from fiction is, by definition, a never-ending one; “fiction evokes the other history that history refuses to write, preferring its traditional fictions” (Orr 1986: 19). And she goes on to hint at the duplicity at the heart of the historical approach, arguing that the more that history tries to distance itself from its aesthetic nature, the more it actually draws attention to it (Orr 1986: 1-6). If what Orr says is true, that literature, aesthetics and history become increasingly entangled as they try to distinguish themselves from one another, then the historical energies

at play in the texts discussed here remain an untapped source for exploring the boundaries of those disciplines as they flow freely into one another.

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