"Of That Transfigured World" : Realism and Fantasy in Victorian Literature

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“Of That Transfigured World”: Realism and Fantasy in Victorian Literature

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

To Erika, who continually transfigures my world.
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Abstract

“Of That Transfigured Word: Realism and Fantasy in Victorian Literature

identifies a generally unremarked upon mode of nineteenth-century literature that intermingles realism and fantasy in order to address particular epistemological problems. The works of Charles Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Walter Pater, and Oscar Wilde maintain a realist core overlaid by fantastic elements that come from the language used to characterize the core narrative or from metatexts or paratexts (for instance stories that characters tell). The fantastic in this way becomes a mode of interpretation in texts concerned with the problems of representation and the ability of literature to produce knowledge. Paradoxically, each of these authors relies on the fantastic in order to reach the kinds of meaning nineteenth-century realism strives for.

My critical framework, established in chapter one, is derived from the two interrelated discourses of sacred space theology and cultural geography, focusing primarily on the terms topos and chora which I figure as parallel to realism and fantasy. These terms, gleaned from Aristotle and Plato, function to express two interweaving concepts of space that together construct our sense of place. Topos, as defined by theologian Belden C. Lane, refers to “a mere location, a measurable, quantifiable point, neutral and indifferent” whereas chora refers to place as “an energizing force, suggestive to the imagination, drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives” (39). In
the narratives I examine, meaning is constructed via the fantastic interpretations (*chora*) of realistically portrayed events (*topos*). The writers I engage with use this dynamic to address strategically pressing epistemological concerns relating to the purpose of art and its relationship to truth.

Dickens, the subject of chapter two, uses choric elements in order to more expediently demonstrate the moral connections that realism seeks to locate. I examine this dynamic in *A Christmas Carol*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Bleak House*. Of these texts *Bleak House* provides Dickens’s most sustained example of this dynamic as he shapes mundane phenomena such as fog and smoke into conduits of cosmological significance. Stories that characters tell, such as that of the Ghost Walk at Chesney Wold, are used to shape readerly interpretation of events, and prompt particular moral judgments regarding the necessity of social responsibility. Employing this fantastic hermeneutic allows Dickens to link together the diverse social strata of Victorian Britain in a cosmological way which is unwarranted in a strictly realist text. I argue that in doing so, Dickens fulfills the purpose of realism as defined by Ioan Williams: to present the world as organically unified, by relying on a non-realistic strategy.

*Chora*, for both Charlotte and Emily Brontë (the subjects of chapter three) operates as a product of particular characters’ psychological states. Whereas in Dickens *chora* stems from the author’s investment of a particular topos with choric significance—a significance that is then recognized or ignored by characters—for the Brontës *chora* is related directly to the individual narrator’s act of narration. I begin by examining how Charlotte’s novel *Villette* uses this choric overlay in order to represent trauma that is unrepresentable in realist terms. This perspective places trauma as the center of the text,
focused in a specific though unnamed event referred to only in metaphor, present primarily in its absence. Drawing on recent discourses related to the problems of representing trauma (by Cathy Caruth, Ann Kaplan, and Jill L. Matus), I argue that Lucy Snowe’s traumatic experience finds expression in the fantastic (choric) imagery of personified storms as well as the image of the ghostly nun. Chapter three also interrogates the narrative structure of Wuthering Heights and the underlying choric hermeneutic behind a number of prominent readings of the novel. Further, I argue that the novel uses *chora* as a means to interrogate the process of reading and interpretation, particularly when readings support ideological responses.

Like Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Walter Pater, whose work I focus on in chapter four, dramatizes the process of choric meaning-making. Pater’s aesthetics, as presented in *The Renaissance*, are intensely choric, privileging a fantastic subjective experience and championing a transfiguration of the world through art and artifice. *Marius the Epicurean* is a text that is mediated by *chora*: descriptions of the actual world of the novel are filtered through fantastic associations drawn from the protagonist’s evolving religious and philosophical positions. This relationship between *topos* and *chora* finds a corollary in Pater’s art criticism. His praise of Da Vinci, for example, is based primarily upon the artist’s usage of religious and classical motifs to express something entirely different from those motifs. I contend that the *chora*, an element in the painting that its Biblical subject matter does not suggest, is what Pater celebrates.

Analysis of *The Renaissance* and Pater’s novel *Marius the Epicurean* points to the intensely important role chora plays in his work, a role that will only intensify in Oscar Wilde’s oeuvre. In chapter five I look at Wilde’s play *Salome* and show how the play’s
fantastic verbal imagery creates a highly problematic linguistic chaos. While what occurs on the stage is firmly in the realm of realism or *topos*, it is a *topos* filtered through the near hallucinatory decadence of fantastic imagery. Through his destructive mapping of *chora* onto *topos* in *Dorian Gray*, Wilde serves as a precursor to critics such as Jean Baudrillard who suggest that modern Western culture has replaced the signified with the sign. Baudrillard’s arguments regarding over-signification and the creation of simulacra are, to place his position in my terms, objections to *choric* narrative elaborated upon *topos*. Contrary to this anxiety, *The Importance of Being Earnest* extends the possibility that those choric uses can also be creative and liberating. In this Wilde has understood both the destructive potential for *chora* when linked to identity, but also its creative potential, pre-figuring Judith Butler’s feminist critique of Baudrillard. For Butler, Baudrillard’s formulation ignores the role that performance plays in identity, and it is this performance that is at the heart of Wilde’s theories of identity.

“*Of That Transfigured World*” argues for a closer understanding of the hermeneutic and epistemological workings of several major British authors. My dissertation offers a paradigm through which to view these writers that connects them to the on-going Victorian discourses of realism while also pointing to the critical sophistication of their positions in seeking to relate truth to art. My identification of the tensions between what I term *topos* and *chora* in these works illuminates the relationship between the creation of meaning and the hermeneutics used to direct the reader to that particular meaning. It further points to the important, yet sometimes troubling, role that imagination plays in the epistemologies at the center of that crowning Victorian achievement, the Realist novel.
Chapter One:
Transfiguring the World

Charles Dickens begins the first three-volume edition of *Bleak House* with a preface defending the novel’s realism on two fronts: his representation of chancery, and the presentation of Spontaneous Human Combustion. The controversy regarding this latter point is well-documented. During *Bleak House*’s original serialized run Dickens and G.H. Lewes engaged in a fair bit of good natured sparring over the scientific validity of the phenomenon across several publications and in private correspondence. Lewes argued that the phenomena strained credulity and that no scientific authorities would vouch for the factual authenticity of such a scene. Dickens writes in the preface, in response to Lewes

"Before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject. There are about thirty cases on record, of which the most famous, that of the Countess Cornelia de Bandi Cesenate was minutely investigated and described by Giuseppe Bianchini, a prebendary of Verona, otherwise distinguished in letters, who published an account of it at Verona, in 1731, which he afterwards republished at Rome. The appearances beyond all rational doubt observed in that case, are the appearances observed in Mr. Krook’s case." (6)
Dickens cites several other cases, and the possible scientific support for the phenomena, which he says will not lead him to disregard the possibility of Spontaneous Human Combustion “until there shall have been a considerable Spontaneous Combustion of the testimony on which human occurrences are usually received” (7).

The debate between the two cultural figures is fascinating in and of itself; it is also instructive for readers of the novel, for it demonstrates the lengths to which Dickens will go to defend the plausibility of his narrative. Yet it also instructive in another way, for while Dickens attests to the realism of the phenomenon (and describes the scene with grisly attention to detail), the meaning his narrator overlays on the event is itself fantastic. Having established the plausibility of a character spontaneously combusting with his preface, Dickens then allows his narrator to comment upon it, attributing the phenomena to a non-scientific moral cause. Dickens’s narrator tells us that Krook’s death was “inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself” (519). That is of course Krook’s vicious body, a body that we’ve already been prepared to see burst into flames, for “He was short, cadaverous, and withered, with his head sunk sideways between his shoulders and the breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth as if he were on fire within” (68). While Dickens might argue that Krook’s death is an accurate depiction of Spontaneous Human Combustion, as far as “appearances” go, Dickens’s third-person narrator glosses the event in a way which is far from scientific and far from realistic. As Garrett Stewart remarks, death in Bleak House is “rigorously stylized” (“New Morality” 446) and it is the third-person narrator who stylizes Krook’s death. The purpose for this stylization is clearly moral as Stewart again notes:
In fiction, unlike in life, death is never entirely an accident, and Dickens works tirelessly in *Bleak House* to convert authorial providence into psychological or spiritual inevitability. Death is inbred, and the subsequent third death of a character involved in Chancery, that of Krook, is a blatant allegory to this effect. . . Inherent deterioration is what, more than any novelist before him, Dickens had the symbolic powers to explore, demonstrating in his pages that adjusted realism in which death is rarely a discrete, externally derived event but an inward eventuation, a metaphor before and after it is a fact, not contingent so much as spiritually indigenous-the explicative death, like Gridley’s or especially Krook’s, that needs no naturalistic explanation. (“New Morality” 461-2)

Dickens’s gloss on Krook’s death tends towards the fantastic, creating from the phenomena that he goes to great pains to assure us is realistic, a kind of magical, moralized phenomena that turns Krook’s end into a function of his own ignorance and moral bankruptcy.

Dickens is not the lone Victorian who mingles realism and fantasy, or overlays the fantastic on top of a realist narrative. I take this dissertation’s title from an essay by Walter Pater, the subject of chapter four, who writes, “Greek poetry, medieval or modern poetry, projects, above the realities of its time, a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or ‘earthly paradise.’” (“Aesthetic Poetry,” 520). Art for Pater, projects upon the realities of the world something more fantastic that, as is often the case throughout the works studied here,
overwhelms the real world. It is an artificial, world, a note which is important, for each of
the writers discussed here this transfiguration of the world is a linguistic endeavor
embedded in the hermeneutic practices that they use to construct and critique meaning.

The purpose of this dissertation is to identify a facet of nineteenth-century fiction
not commonly identified, across a number of writers and in several different genres.
Bringing together writers as varied as Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Walter Pater,
and Oscar Wilde, I interrogate the dual stylistic poles of realism and fantasy. My
discussion thus spans from mid-century with Dickens and the Brontës to the fin de siècle
with Pater and Wilde. In examining these figures I make no claims as to their levels of
influence on one another, with perhaps the exception of Pater and Wilde.¹ Rather what I
am interested in are certain epistemological questions which I believe all of the writers I
survey address in similar (though still diverse ways). These questions relate to the
purpose of art and its relationship to truth. They all struggle with the problems of
representation and the ability of literature to produce knowledge. And as these questions
are far from closed, it may be useful at times to draw from more contemporary
discussions of these aesthetic problems (as in chapter six’s discussion of Wilde in light of
Baudrillard and his critics.)

The incident of Krook’s death in Bleak House illustrates the two different levels
of narrative that I will be focusing on. One level is that of the realism at the heart of Bleak
House, a realism that Dickens defends in his preface. The other is that of fantastic
narratives and interpretations surrounding those events. Taking Dickens at his word, the
manner of Krook’s death is natural and realistic. The description of the scene is

¹. It is certain that Charlotte Brontë read at least the early numbers of Bleak House as it ran
serially and more than likely while she was working on Villette. However, it seems both impossible and
pointless to find a direct causal relationship.
methodical in its attention to realistic detail: “Here is a small burnt patch of flooring; here is the tinder from a little bundle of burnt paper, but not so light as usual, seeming to be steeped in something; and here is - is it the cinder of a small charred and broken log of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or is it coal?” (519). It is the interpretation of this death, Dickens’s seeking the root cause in Krook’s corruption, that is fantastic.

The critical framework that I have found most useful for thinking about this relationship in Dickens as well as the other writers I examine is something I have adapted from the connected subject areas of sacred space theology and cultural geography. These subject areas focus extensively on the relationship between the physical world and human understanding, including the way in which humans construct meaning through the use of narrative. Drawing from these discourses can help us understand and account for this layering of fantastic hermeneutics. Writing about the way in which we construct a sense of place, theologian Belden C. Lane employs two terms gleaned from Aristotle and Plato respectively, *topos* and *chora*. *Topos*, Lane explains, refers to “a mere location, a measurable, quantifiable point, neutral and indifferent” whereas *chora* refers to place as “an energizing force, suggestive to the imagination, drawing intimate connections to everything else in our lives” (39). Our sense of place is constructed through the interweaving of these two levels or understandings of space.

In *The Physics* Aristotle examines place through a paradigm which is probably most familiar to contemporary readers. Place as *topos*, for Aristotle, is defined by its dimensions and location. *Topos* itself is empty of being. It is mere location, defined by its geographic features only through necessity (*The Physics*, 409a). Max Jammer points out that in *The Physics* Aristotle does not actually engage with space at all, at least not as we
commonly think about it: “strictly speaking the Physics does not advance a theory of space at all, but only a theory of place or a theory of positions in space” (17). The confusion that Jammer’s use of “place” and “space” might create out of context aside, it is clear that Aristotle’s usage of topos functions as space itself, un-interpreted or “undifferentiated” (to borrow from Mircea Eliade) by human relationship.

Chora on the other hand may be read as space in relationship. Plato establishes the term in Timaeus a dialogue focused on the creation of the cosmos at the hands of a demiurge. Timaeus initially describes two kinds of cosmos, the unchanging world of the Forms and the terrestrial realm which imitates the Forms. However, his invocation of chora complicates this, as the dialogue acknowledges:

> Let the new starting point of our account of the universe be a fuller division than the previous; we then distinguished two kinds - we must now point to a third. Two were enough at an earlier stage when we postulated one kind for the intelligible and unchanging model and another for the imitation of the model which comes into being and is visible. We did not distinguish a third kind, considering two would be enough; but now the argument seems to compel us to try to bring to light in words a kind that is difficult and obscure. What must we suppose its powers and natures to be? Most of all something like this: it is the receptacle, and as it were, the nurse of all becoming. (48e-49a)

This receptacle is referred to as chora (χώρα) which is commonly (and inadequately) translated as “space” (52a).² Chora “provides a seat for everything that comes to be”

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²For an excellent examination of this problem of translation see John Sallis’s Chorology 113-124. In particular Sallis points to the way in which this leads to the conflation of Aristotle’s topos with Plato’s
and thus in its role as receptacle and nurse is a mediating force. It has no being of its own, but creates a relationship that makes being possible. It is space in relationship.

For Lane, this conception of space as mediated focuses on the meaning of place in relationship to human understanding and interpretation. Narrative, and the ritual that adds narrative significance, is what allows the relationship between place and the people who inhabit or interact with it. A place receives its meaning from this kind of interaction. This is characterized by historian of religion Mircea Eliade who points to the centrality of a choric understanding of space, as opposed to one based around *topos*: “It must be said at once that the religious experience of the nonhomogeneity of space is a primordial experience, homologizable to a founding of the world” (*Sacred and the Profane* 20-1). The experience at the beginning of all meaning-making, according to Eliade is the differentiation of space. Religious conceptions are built around the shift from a homogenous space (akin to Aristotle’s *topos*) to a differentiated space, which “founds the world,” providing meaning. This distinction is, for Eliade, the distinction between sacred space and profane space. Profane space “is homogenous and neutral; no break qualitatively differentiates the various parts of its mass. Geometrical space can be cut and delimited in any direction; but no qualitative differentiation and, hence, no orientation are given by virtue of its inherent structure” (*Sacred and the Profane* 22). Sacred space provides significance: an orientation.

That significance and orientation is heavily related to narrative through the medium of myth. While it is theophany, the interpenetration of the sacred into the realm of the profane, which creates the sacred space and the opportunity to recognize it, this

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*chora*. It is also important to note that the distinction between these terms and their employment varies throughout Greek literature.
theophany is perpetuated by narrative, by the story of the theophany. But this differentiation of space, from profane to sacred, *topos* to *chora*, does not have to be explicitly religious, as Lane shows us:

> Participation in deliberate ritual activity is what invariably occasions the transition from experience a place as *topos* to encountering a place as *chora*. For most people in the United States, for instance, a McDonald’s offers a classic example of *topos*, a place without any distinctive sense of presence. “If you’ve seen one you’ve seen them all.” But if you have proposed to someone you love in a particular McDonald’s or experienced a life-changing conversion in another, that *topos* suddenly becomes a *chora*, intimately a part of your life. (39)

Phillip Sheldrake, another theologian, sums the ideas up succinctly stating “the concept of place refers not simply to geographical location but to a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative” (1). *Topos* is the physical space, while *chora* is the significance of that place through human narrative. This relationship between human understanding and narrative may be further characterized in the epistemological relationship between *mythos* and *logos*. Scholars of religion such as Eliade have consistently argued that each of these terms is intended to reach for a different kind of knowledge or understanding.³

My own project and those of the sacred space theologians find common ground in their interests in the construction of meaning through hermeneutics. It is this interest in interpretive frameworks as the means through which meaning and the transmission of

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³ In addition to *The Sacred and the Profane* see Eliade’s *Myth and Reality*; and *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. 

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knowledge are achieved that makes the terms of *topos* and *chora* so applicable to the narrative structures I am interrogating. These terms are significant for the works that I examine, primarily because they are texts that construct meaning not simply through a straightforward telling, but rather through various interpretive practices that tend towards the fantastic. Just as the person in Lane’s example imbues the mundanity of a McDonald’s with significance, so do characters (including narrators) in the works I examine imbue places and events in their narratives with a kind of fantastic significance. Krook’s death is morally significant only as glossed by Dickens’s third-person narrator. These narratives, which often take the form of stories told by characters have, as I will demonstrate, significant hermeneutic weight in our interpretations of these works.4

While my usage of the term *chora* relies primarily on Lane’s employment of it, Julia Kristeva’s account of the term serves the important function of placing *chora* within the realm of signification and linking it with *mythos* (discussed below). Also drawing from *Timaeus*, Kristeva posits *chora* as a “pre-verbal domain which erupts as a disturbance of ordered language” (West-Pavlov 42). Kristeva’s early work *Revolution in Poetic Language*, posits an opposition between this pre-verbal domain and ordered rational language. As West-Pavlov puts it “The central concept of Kristeva’s major thesis . . . was that of a turbulent and sensual pre-linguistic regime of not-quite-meaning (the Semiotic) which is subsequently organized, disciplined, coded and repressed by the societal rules of language and propositional meaning (the Symbolic or what Kristeva also calls the Thetic)” (38).

4. It is true that on a strictly literal level a text can never be *topos* as (even if it is non-fiction) it is already a part of human narrative. I do not think this prevents us from using the terms conceptually to highlight the way in which interpretation may be built into a text as a kind of choric mapping on the *topos* of the plot.
Kristeva writes,

The *chora* is not yet a position that represents something for someone (i.e. it is not a sign); nor is it a *position* that represents someone for another position (i.e. it is not yet a signifier either); it is, however, generated in order to attain to this signifying position. Neither model nor copy, the *chora* precedes and underlies figuration and thus specularization, and is analogous only to vocal or kinetic rhythm. (26)

The *chora* is the space which makes signification possible, the pre-significant origin from which meaning can unfold. While Kristeva’s formulation differs from mine significantly, it is important. In my formulation, drawing from Lane, *chora* becomes a hermeneutic through which a *topos* is viewed. However, Kristeva’s work serves the purpose of pointing out the connection between *chora* and non-rational or pre-rational discourse. This squarely places *chora* in the realm of *mythos*. In Kristeva the Semiotic (in her terms) functions on the level of *mythos*, while the Symbolic which subjugates the Semiotic to order can be linked directly to *logos*.

The term *logos* carries with it a great deal of theoretical baggage. It is not my intention in using the terms to wade far into these muddied waters, but to confine myself to the narrow definitional shoals derived from the term’s interaction with *mythos* and its use to describe a particular kind of language. As Jean Pépin has noted the term “has acquired, over the course of time, a large number of different meanings, which only with difficulty can be drawn into a simple unity” (5500). Because of this it is important to define precisely the way in which this term functions in my discussion of *topos* and *chora*, realism and fantasy.
Both *logos* and *mythos* (or *muthos*) have their origins as terms denoting “word” or “speech.” However, these English translations miss the general difference inherent in each term. *Logos* carries with it the connotation that it is speech “that elicits discussion or an argument” (Bolle 6359). *Logos* is identified with the ability to argue from a rational basis, whereas *mythos* is focused on speech (or stories) that are non-rational. *Mythos*’s status as non-rational, however, does not preclude it from making truth claims. In *The Republic* *mythos* in fact functions as a kind of *logos*, despite its deviance from literal truth, as Penelope Murray points out: “Problematic truth status is here presented as a defining characteristic of myth. And myth is by implication contrasted with a form of discourse that is true. But *mythos*, we should note, is nevertheless a kind of *logos*” (251).

Plato’s designation here of *mythos* as a subset of *logos* is important, for it points to its usefulness in understanding the world, and education which is the one of the primary concerns of *The Republic*. Plato’s usage of the terms in this way is important because of the epistemological heft it gives to *mythos*. *Mythos* here has an epistemological role to play, one which becomes quite specific when examined in light of the contrast between the two terms. The two terms are connected (as Plato seeks to point out) in that they function to produce knowledge, but the level on which they do so, and the types of knowledge produced are distinct. *Logos*’ primary designation (according to its epistemological function) as “reason” is both essential and far from uncomplicated.

However, for the purposes of this dissertation, *logos* may be viewed as analogous in our

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5. In Book II Plato advocates for the use of both *logos* and *mythos* (including *psuedos*, outright fictions or lies) didactically. While *The Republic* famously develops a series of regulations needed to make sure that *mythos* advance the moral purposes of the ideal state, he views the form as a way of delivering some kind of truth.

6. For a concise overview of the thorny issue of *logos* see Jean Pépin “Logos” in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. 
framework to *topos*, or realism; whereas *mythos* may be seen as analogous to *chora* and fantasy. Each functions on a different epistemological level in order to approach different forms of knowledge.

Danish philosopher and theologian Johannes Sloek’s work on the epistemology of *logos* and *mythos* makes these distinctions (as well as their inter-relations) clear. Following a familiar post-structuralist line of thought that examines the privileging of *logos* in both its guise as reason and its presumption to coherently unite signifier and signified, Sloek argues for the significance of *mythos* in order to create humanistic meaning. Drawing from phenomenology, Sloek points to what he sees as a misconception regarding interpretations of reality. While rational language (*logos*) seeks to represent reality, what it represents are actually objects. Reality itself is phenomenological, built from experiences and interpretations. Reality, from an epistemological standpoint is constructed by phenomena perceived. Each perception is itself dependent on the interrelated tensions between three things, the perception itself, the one who perceives, and that which is perceived. *Logos*, Sloeck argues, provides a false transcendence of the interconnectedness, pointing to separate external and internal existences for the perceiver and the perceived respectively: “The rocks of perdition are the assumption that reality doesn’t consist of phenomena, but of objects, and quite specifically, it is language which leads you into perdition” (29). This false transcendence ignores the fact that each perceiver and perceived is inextricably bound up in the perception and could not exist without it (1-6).

The function of *logos*, like the function of *topos*, is intended to orient us to the everyday rational world. It allows us to move beyond the confined space of the
perception itself, and recognize that which is outside of ourselves and that which is internal to ourselves. Logos carries with it a necessarily internal coherence: “the truth which logos must, at least, always pretend to possess is a truth in the sense of correspondence - or, perhaps, in the sense of coherence. Logos is true in so far as it corresponds to what it is logos about” (69). However, in doing so it fails to acknowledge how intertwined these two things are with the perception. As Sloeck puts it “rational language monopolizes all language, and reality is reduced into matter” (59). Mythic language functions differently, providing ways of speaking about non-material realities: “The truth of the myth is always a truth of ephiphany” (71). While logos is useful it functions as a different register of language from mythos one with separate epistemological commitments.

To repeat what I have said above, topos and realism may be viewed, in my estimation, as playing on the level of logos. They are rational, and address the rational. This is the realm of Dickens’s preface wherein he defends the rational probability of Spontaneous Human Combustion. Chora and the fantasy on the other hand are in the register of mythos. They function to express that which cannot be expressed (at least with the kind of necessary power) in the language of logos.

The terminology I have chosen, topos and chora as opposed to the terms logos and mythos are important because they join together several different levels of discourse that the latter terms do not. Topos and chora direct us towards the relationship between the act of narration (the act of mapping to again use the spatial metaphor) while also linking us back to the epistemological problems at the heart of this inquiry. In narratological terms it allows us to think about the connection between what Mieke Bal
refers to as “narrative agents” and the events they narrate. These terms give the critic a vocabulary that can address the relationship between the events and the hermeneutic frameworks authors use to present them. Narratologists have long focused on the distinction between the story and the “story-as-discoursed” to use Seymour Chatman’s terms (43). My terminology bridges the gap between these two sets of understandings, a narratological one examining the relationship between story and “story-as-discoursed” and an epistemological one examining the relationship between these elements and concepts of truth and mimetic reality.

To put it one further way, topos and chora may be seen as bridging the gap between writerly intent and readerly expectation, and the possibility of establishing some kind of actual truth. What I mean by this is that these terms, focused as they are on the construction of meaning, allow an examination of the tension between the writer’s presentation of truth on the level of mythos and the reader’s possible construction of that truth. This tension, and the authorial acknowledgement and understanding of this tension, is part and parcel to the nineteenth-century novel as Garrett Stewart has pointed out: “In the encounter with classic fiction, you reader, are therefore part of the script, though the stage directions are not always forthcoming” (Dear Reader, 6). My terminology allows us to view the author’s hermeneutic strategies as they seek to influence the reader’s construction of meaning, while still linking that meaning to the epistemological discourses of knowledge or truth.

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7. For a full account of the term and its contexts see Mieke Bal’s Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.

The spatial metaphor provides a way to focus on a fixed point of realism while also seeing that realism in relation to the fantastic. Lane’s McDonald’s will always be a McDonald’s just as Dickens’s London is anchored in the actual reality of London. However, our understandings of both are changed by the narratives we map on top of them. We are able, through the medium of topos and chora, to view the narrative agents (in this case Lane’s hypothetical spouse and Dickens’s third-person narrator) in relation to what they narrate about. We might say that topos and chora capture the process of mythologization and allow us to view it as a narrative strategy. The two terms relationships to logos and mythos allow us at the same time to see these strategies as epistemological strategies, designed to engage in the vexed relationship between literature and truth. The terms thus allow us to look at the narrative dynamics of a text and talk about them in relation to truth claims and the construction of meaning. In the same way that the meaning of a particular place is dependent upon both its actual geography and the role it plays within human experience, the meaning of these texts comes from the relationship between the realist narrative and the interweaving interpretations of various characters and the novel’s narrators themselves. In speaking of this it is helpful to identify a choric hermeneutic or interpretive framework. The usage of topos and chora allows us to view narrative as a process of meaning-making, akin to the processes Jerome Bruner describes when he writes that “we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on” (4). To return to Dickens and once again apply this to Krook’s death by conflagration, we might say that the narrative events

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9. One just has to look at Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor to see Dickens’s fidelity to urban life.
(if we are to take Dickens at his word from the preface) occur on the level of topos, realism, while the significance of those events are layered on top of that realist core--the moral judgment passed on Krook--function as chora.

While I contend that these two elements of topos and chora are intertwined as the layered levels of realism and the fantastic in the works which I will examine, a further definition of the terms fantasy and realism is necessary in order to place my discussion within the context of contemporary literary study, and to pin-down exactly what I mean when I refer to the “realist core” of a text, or the fantastic hermeneutic a work proposes. As any scholar of the nineteenth-century novel will recognize, realism is a vexed term, and anyone familiar with the broad umbrella category of the fantastic (fantastic as mode rather than genre) will know the terms fantasy and the fantastic are often used with a variety of meanings.

In his influential *The Realist Novel in England: A Study in Development*, Ioan Williams contends that the defining characteristic of Victorian realism is “a vision of contemporary life as organically unified” (116). This vision of an organic unified whole that encompasses both internal subjective coherence and the objective world is evidence, Williams argues, that we “associate mid-Victorian literature with a naïve confidence that Reality consisted in the material and social world around them. There is no doubt that the mid-Victorian novel rested on a massive confidence as to what the nature of reality actually was, and that although it could not be identified with matter itself, it certainly lay in the material world” (x).

Williams’s classic (though much contested) formulation is right about the intention of the realist novel, (and one of the primary motivations of the Victorian novel
as a whole), though not in his claim about Victorian assumptions. As a corrective I offer George Levine’s arguments that in fact the project of the realist novel is to create this epistemological coherence because the authors understand that it is ultimately lacking. Thus it is the primary project of realism to create “a vision of contemporary life as organically unified,” but not because they believe that such a vision is without epistemological problems. Levine’s more sophisticated response to these arguments views the realist authors as aware of the problems of representation and attempting to bridge this epistemological gap through language and “the shared consciousness of a community of readers” (18).

One only has to turn to such an arch-realist as George Eliot to see the naivety in Williams’s accusations of naivety. The famous opening of chapter 17 in *Adam Bede* clearly points to a recognition of the limits of language and perception (as all of her fiction seems to point):

> But it happens, on the contrary, that my strongest effort is to avoid any such arbitrary picture, and to give a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective, the outlines will sometimes be disturbed, the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you as precisely as I can what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box, narrating my experience on oath. (159)

The famous pier-glass scene in *Middlemarch*, also emphasizes the ways in which our mind shapes perceptions. Eliot writes
Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! the scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. It is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. These things are a parable. The scratches are events, and the candle is the egoism of any person now absent. (248).

As the scene points out, the kind of coherence which Williams says realism strives for is an illusion, the product of interpretations of events, and Eliot and other novelists such as Thackeray and Dickens are aware of this.  

Levine formulates his approach to realism as one based on a striving for coherence. It is the self-conscious attempt to bridge the unbridgeable gap of representation. As Levine himself writes “Realism, as a literary method, can in these terms be defined as a self-conscious effort, usually in the name of some moral enterprise of truth-telling and extending the limits of human sympathy, to make literature appear to be describing directly not some other language but reality itself (whatever that may be taken to be.)” Realism according to Levine’s perspective, attempts to break out of the cycle of referentiality whilst demonstrating a paradoxical awareness of its impossibility: “No major Victorian novelists were deluded into believing that they were in fact offering

10. D.A. Miller has convincingly argued that the pier-glass scene does not spare Eliot’s third-person narrator from criticism either. See Narrative and its Discontents: Problems of Closure in the Traditional Novel 157.
unmediated reality, but all of them struggled to make contact with the world out there” (8). This is far from Williams’s account of Victorian naivety.

While I have here sought to dismantle Williams’s characterization of realism as “naïve,” I do not want entirely to do away with his vision of the realist project as one which seeks to represent reality as organically unified. As my references to Levine are intended to show, the tendency of the realist mode is to create such an understanding of the universe out of a larger fractured understanding of it. It is in fact this urge to represent coherence in the face of its lack that has led to a number of more recent dismissals of the form from writers such as Leo Bersani, and Catherine Belsey. As Belsey writes

Classic realism, still the dominant popular mode in literature, film and television drama, roughly coincides chronologically with the epoch of industrial capitalism. It performs, I wish to suggest, the work of ideology, not only in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, but also in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding. (56)

Belsey condemns realism for the very sins for which Levine champions it. Or to relate back to Williams, realism is not problematic because it is naïve, but because it is successful and thus does the ideological work of capitalism. Though even critics like Belsey, who adamantly oppose the ideological work they see as realism’s goal (that is creating illusory coherence in a world made impossibly incoherent by capitalism) have trouble creating a coherent definition of what realism actually is. Belsey’s category
includes such diverse works as *Bleak House* and the poetry of Robert Browning and begs its own questions of coherence.

Due to these problematic attempts to precisely define the term, a firmer anchoring of realism as it is used in my dissertation is necessary in order to place it relation to *topos* and in fact can bring us back around to Sloek’s discussion of *logos*. This will rely primarily on Nancy Armstrong’s discussion of realism, and her pragmatic critical statement that “everyone knew what realism was; authors wrote in relation to it, and readers read with a standard in mind based on the fidelity of language to visual evidence” (10). This definition, focused on visual (or perceptual) evidence tightly aligns our understanding of realism with Sloek’s description of rational language which takes the perceived as evidence of both an external and internal reality connected by the act of perception. Throughout this dissertation realism will primarily function in this manner as work on the level of the perception. I will, however, continue to address the ideological implications of realism as presented by Williams and others.

Armstrong’s definition works especially well when paired with Brian Attebery’s pragmatic definition of fantasy as “Any narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law” (2). This definition, drawn from Attebery’s *The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature*, as well as his argument in *Strategies of Fantasy*, that the fantastic as a mode (or as a genre) relies on the mimetic in order to maintain sense. While *The Fantasy Tradition* is exclusively a study of American fantasy ranging from Washington Irving to more contemporary fiction, it has specific theoretical implications for my project. *The Fantasy Tradition* points to a number of authors whose works lead to “the elevation of wordplay and
symbolism into mythlike narratives” (vii). Attebery’s reading of Hawthorne in particular, provides an interesting mirror to my own interests in the mingling of realism and fantasy. This argument regarding the way in which the fantastic is imbued into the very language used to relate narrative has particular bearing for my own, as does Attebery’s contention that “Fantasy invokes wonder by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange” (3).

In *The Fantasy Tradition*, Attebery points to the seeming liminality of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. Attebery reads the novel as a kind of synthesis of two modes in Hawthorne’s work, the social novel and the fantasy:

Everyone is familiar with the daylight events that make up one half of *The Scarlet Letter*: an offstage act of adultery, the birth of an illegitimate child, a trial, a meeting of the guilty lovers, a cuckold’s intricate revenge, a public confession—all operating under a primary theme of guilt, contrition, and forgiveness. The same theme dominates the fantastic side of the story, but the events in it are, in comparison, wild and exotic. (48)

Attebery then reads Hawthorne’s presentation of the letter as a kind of magical sigil. Focusing on the story’s invocation of legend and Protestant beliefs regarding the devil and the Black Man in the novel, Attebery posits a reading wherein Hester becomes a witch, her husband a demon set on not just her earthly ruination but her damnation.

Attebery concludes this reading of the night-time side of Hawthorne’s novel writing “Not a bad fantasy, well supported by legend, and with a clear fairytale movement of isolation, trial, and return. But as fantasy it is slight . . . *The Scarlet Letter* should not be judged by the criteria of fantasy any more than by those of the English domestic novel” (51). The
significance of this narrative strain is the power that it gives Hawthorne in deploying his narrative:

By juggling two patterns of narrative [the social novel and the fantasy], Hawthorne can, at will, focus on the interior or exterior phenomena: on the play of values commanded by the metaphor of magic or on subtleties of behavior that evade simpler methods of moral analysis. He can set two simultaneous currents of action going in opposite directions . . . Or he can move his two plots in parallel. (51)

This deployment of two different strains of narrative that compliment or contrast with one another is similar to what I see occurring in the texts I examine, and the Hawthorne of Attebery’s analysis can be perhaps viewed as an American counterpoint to the writers I survey. However, my emphasis is on the interpretive frameworks that are overlaid that urge us to read the mundane fantastically, as this is where the heart of these works lies, in the usage of such hermeneutics to create meaning. Dickens, for instance, does not so much as juggle the social novel and the fantasy, as he turns the social novel into a fantasy through his hermeneutic frameworks, through the implementation of a layer of *chora*.

Attebery is, as most other writers on the fantastic are, heavily influenced by the work of Tzvetan Todorov. While many no longer ascribe to the structuralism of his approach, Todorov provides an important critical vocabulary employed in various ways by scholars from many ideological positions. Todorov’s use of the term “the fantastic” refers specifically to the uncertainty surrounding unexplained events that occur in a text. When protagonists are faced with an event that appears to violate the laws of nature or logic they are confronted with an uncertainty about its origin. There are, according to
Todorov, two options: either the event is illusory or somehow explainable, or it is real and something supernatural has occurred. Todorov writes that “the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). Todorov’s primary example (and perhaps the only example) of a text which maintains its fantastic character to the end is Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, where the haunting is not resolved in either direction. The helpfulness of Todorov’s theories will be demonstrated most especially in chapter three’s discussion of *Wuthering Heights*.

Fantasy, like realism, is not without ideological and epistemological interests. As a primary concern of this dissertation is the way in which authors use fantastic narratives to respond to problems of meaning and knowledge, it is important to examine the relationship of fantasy to these terms. Farah Mendlesohn contends that “fantasy seeks to make the world understandable in moral terms” (233). That is

Fantasy, unlike science fiction, relies on a moral universe: it is less an argument with the universe than a sermon on the way things should be, a belief that the universe should yield to moral precepts. This belief is most true of the portal-quest narratives, and of the intrusion fantasies. But if intrusion fantasies are structured around punishment and the danger of transgression, the portal-quest fantasies are structured around reward and the straight and narrow path. The epic and the traveler’s tale are closed narratives. Each demands that we accept the interpretation of the narrator,
and the interpretive position of the hero. The hero may argue with the gods, or with the rules of the utopia, but it is assumed that we will accept the paradigms of his argument. (5)

This contention is especially intriguing when examined in relation to the texts I will look at. Neither portal-quest fantasies nor intrusion fantasies these texts keep a commitment to realism on one level while also attempting to use fantastic elements to support or make apparent truths that are often moral in nature.

If the portal-quest fantasy or the intrusion fantasy is not the primary mode of Victorian fiction, the impulse Mendlesohn finds behind them is certainly not foreign to the period. This impulse squares perfectly with Victorian artistic interests in general, and Victorian realism in particular. As I have already argued, following Levine, the realist novel seeks to create the kind of coherence which it understands is lacking in the world. This kind of coherence is necessary if art can say anything about the world. It is clear that whether we agree with that vision of the reality or not, Victorians were especially interested in the relationship between the world on the page and the world outside of the front door in social, ethical, and moral ways. The emergence of the Victorian novel in general and the social problem novel in particular in the 1840’s keenly demonstrates the relationship between politics, ideology, and moral concern that is part of the writing of the period. Raymond Williams anchors the social engagement of the Victorian novel in the interrelated development of a broader reading culture and “the crisis of society” created by rapid industrialization and democratization: “More and more people felt the need for this kind of knowledge and experience, as customary ways broke down or receded” (The English Novel 11). Part and parcel to the novel’s development during this
period is the assumption that it can reflect truth and that perhaps it has a certain duty to instruct.

The emergence of a specific children’s literature also points to the didacticism inherent in many works of the period. While didactic children’s literature may be traced in some form back to at least the late-eighteenth century, it is the Victorian era that it fully becomes the genre that we know today. As F.J. Harvey Darton points out, children’s texts from the period engage with and opine on subjects ranging from slavery to animal cruelty. (156-98). While Dickens would publically quarrel with George Cruickshank about the morals Cruickshank imposed on fairy-stories, there is a definite relationship between the impulse towards instruction that informed Victorian children’s literature and the broader interests of a socially-committed literature of which Dickens and many others were a part.

While Dickens is obviously the most socially engaged of the figures I examine, the other writers I treat operate within this context as well to one degree or another. It can easily be noted that *Wuthering Heights* has been read as a social problem novel by Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, and a number of others. While Pater’s work is without the kind of social vision found within his precursor (and chief foil) Ruskin, it remains socially charged even if that charge is diffused into primarily aesthetic concerns. And even (and especially) Wilde, whose objection to didacticism is often quoted, is deeply committed to radical societal reform. Mendlesohn’s contention that fantasy is linked directly towards creating a morally interpretable world certainly has considerable bearing on the writers examined here.
Mendesohn’s closest category to the works I discuss is what she terms *liminal fantasy* and the related category of *slipstream*. The defining characteristic of liminal fantasy is a dialectical relationship between irony and *equipoise* as defined by John Clute in his essay “Beyond the Pale.” Clute’s concept of equipoise is a re-working of Todorov’s fantastic. He argues that “if we focus upon ‘hesitation’ (his [Todorov’s] term) or equipoise, we can expand his version of the fantastic into a description of something storytellers do in time” (424). Clute applies this outside the realm of traditional fantasy to works which he views as inhabiting the state of equipoise. A main text in Clute’s argument is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* which like *The Turn of the Screw* is “built upon sustained narrative negotiations of uncertainty, without coming to any necessary decision about what is real” (424). Clute goes on to further point out the general problem with critical understandings of the fantastic, that there is a necessity for resolution into one category or another (categories dictated by scholarly positions and interests as much as by textual evidence):

The ultimate problem with Todorov is the problem of twentieth century critics in general: their unspoken assumption that the fantastic cannot be told as a given, that it is a moral/aesthetic/cultural hot potato requiring decisive action, that equipoise is obscurely untruthful. The heartwood indeterminacy of “Heart of Darkness” has seemed invisible to them . . . because they have been only able to conceive of Conrad’s active, unresolved (and perhaps unresolvable) equipoise between the fantastic and the mundane in terms of *vacillation*: as a wobbling between the inadmissible and mimesis, between subliterary genres of adventure and
mature renderings of the “seeable” world, with a not exactly hidden rider that the choice between the fantastic and the real is in the first necessary, and in the second constitutes a choice between recidivism and progress.

(424)

Mendlesohn uses Clute’s explication of equipoise to establish her own concept of liminal fantasy. Liminal fantasy employs equipoise in order to create possible fantastic hermeneutics. It “creates possible readings. In Roz Kaveny’s phrase, it ‘makes readings available’ (183). Liminal fantasy relies intently on the interaction of writer and reader: “Although the dialectic between reader and author is always central to the process of interpretation, in the liminal fantasy, it is central to the construction of the fantasy” (185). Liminal fantasy is thus highly dependent on the writer suggesting a hermeneutic of the fantastic.

Mendlesohn’s category of liminal fantasy provides a worthwhile starting point for my discussion. Liminal fantasy creates possible readings, something that I believe the mapping of chora onto topos does. However, and here is where this category fails to suit our needs, those readings of liminal fantasy appear to be mutually exclusive of one another: they do not fit together in a kind of coherence. As Clute argues, it is the lack of resolution into either the categories of the mundane or the fantastic that characterizes equipoise. The hybrid realist/fantastical works I am examining have no such problems. In fact the novels, short stories, and plays that I examine here are interested in creating possible readings, but they are readings that are enhanced by the integration of the fantastic into the realist. The usage of topos and chora as conceptual terms allows us to
view these texts as coherent by examining the relationship between these two layers of discourse.

The integration of these two elements--this mapping of *chora* on to *topos*--can be viewed on a spectrum. In none of the texts that I examine is *chora* unimportant. Dickens, as I have briefly introduced here and further examine in chapter two, uses choric elements in order to more expediently demonstrate the moral connections that realism seeks to locate. In Dickens the hermeneutic overlay provides us with further insight into the realism it modifies. Chapter three explores the work of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, examining how Charlotte’s novel *Villette* uses this choric overlay in order to represent trauma that is unrepresentable in realist terms. Chapter three also interrogates the narrative structure of *Wuthering Heights* and focuses on the underlying choric hermeneutic behind a number of prominent readings of the novel. These readings depend primarily upon the liminality of fantastic elements, that is their ambiguous epistemological positions, the suspension of judgment at the heart of the Todorovian concept of the fantastic. Heathcliff is only “a ghoul or a vampire” in as much as the novel’s narrative framework allows that question to be asked of him. Further, I argue that the novel uses *chora* as a means to interrogate the process of reading and interpretation, particularly when readings support ideological responses.

Like Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Walter Pater, whose work I focus on in chapter four, dramatizes the process of choric meaning-making. Pater’s aesthetics, as presented in *The Renaissance*, are intensely choric, privileging a fantastic subjective experience and championing a transfiguration of the world through art and artifice. *Marius the Epicurean*, is a text that is mediated by *chora*: descriptions of the actual world of the
novel are filtered through fantastic associations drawn from the protagonist’s evolving religious and philosophical positions. This relationship between *topos* and *chora* finds a corollary in Pater’s art criticism. His praise of Da Vinci, for example, is based primarily upon the artist’s usage of religious and classical motifs to express something entirely different from those motifs. I contend that the *chora*, an element in the painting that its Biblical subject matter does not suggest, is what Pater celebrates. In Pater *chora* plays a significant role in shaping the perception of the world, a role that will only intensify in Oscar Wilde’s work. Wilde, at the furthest end of the spectrum, is the subject of my last chapter. Throughout his work radical choric mapping privileges the fantastic/choric over realism/*topos*. Chapter five locates this impulse in relation to Wilde’s aesthetics and points to Wilde’s anticipation of both Baudrillard and his critics in response to problems of signification.

In *The Critic as Artist* (a Wildean variation of the Socratic dialogue), Wilde privileges the choric interpretation of Walter Pater over the *topos* of Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa*:

> Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied, but whenever I pass the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre and stand before that strange figure . . . I murmur to myself ‘She is older than the rocks. . .’ and so the picture becomes more wonderful than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing. (366-7)
The work itself is changed by Pater’s criticism of it, which functions as *chora*. Wilde can no longer examine the *topos* of the painting without seeing it through the narrative which Walter Pater has woven around it. The actual relationship between that narrative and the painting itself, the relationship between the *chora* and *topos*, is irrelevant to Wilde. *Chora* in much of Wilde’s work has a tendency to swallow up or replace *topos*. For Wilde this is a source of both profound liberation and also danger. Wilde’s literary ventures and his critical works demonstrate a profound understanding of the epistemological and hermeneutic controversies that characterize much twentieth and twenty-first century theory. The works I explore, from Dickens, to the Brontës, to Pater and Wilde demonstrate the sophisticated responses the nineteenth-century produced when confronted with the epistemological problems of realism, and genuine commitment to creating meaning in the face of those problems.
Chapter Two

Romantic and Familiar: Dickens on Topos and Chora

i. *A Christmas Carol*: Fantasy and the Function of Realism

For Ioan Williams, Charles Dickens is the first writer to fully achieve his definition of realism, that is Dickens “conceive[s] and attempt[s] the creation of a vision of contemporary life as organically unified, and to face the technical and structural problems which were involved in this” (116). This is despite the fact that Dickens’s most well-known work is a self-described “ghost story.” Williams’s contention regarding Dickens might strike us as odd, considering the very unrealistic representations throughout Dickens’s work. And yet, examining Williams’s claim it is hard not to agree that the purpose of much of Dickens’s vast corpus was to examine the unification of his social world, and that his fictions dwell on the coherent moral connections between disparate parts of an interrelated whole.

What are we to make of these two seemingly contradictory impulses? On the one hand Dickens is a champion of the project of realism, while on the other, as the invocation of Spontaneous Human Combustion has already sought to demonstrate, Dickens flies far-afield from fact, defying realism in favor of fantasy. As before, George Levine’s discussion of realism is helpful. Levine points to the impossibility of straightforward realist literature to represent the kind of coherence that Williams uses to
define realism. So-called realist writers are in fact writing against that impossibility. Dickens did seek to create “a vision of contemporary life as organically unified.” However, he solved the “technical and structural problems” primarily through the use of the fantastic. Dickens does this while simultaneously maintaining the commitment to a core realist narrative.

A commitment to fantasy is, it seems, part and parcel to solving these problems and exploring questions of morality and social responsibility. Dickens’s admiration and interest in the fairy-tale is evident throughout his work in fiction and in reviews. Most famously, Dickens lambasted his friend George Cruikshank in the pages of Household Words for “editing” fairy stories in order to serve an agenda of “Total Abstinence, Prohibition of the sale of spirituous liquors, Free Trade, and Popular Education” (“Frauds,” 567). Rather fairy stories serve, when unaltered by propagandists, to teach “Forbearance, courtesy, consideration of the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force” (566). Dickens is clearly an admirer of the genre and the imaginative possibilities it provides yet, as Harry Stone points out “Dickens’ debt to the invisible world is deceptive. For one thing, his storybook effects are usually part of a captivating and compelling realism. Like a master magician--and Dickens was an accomplished magician--he conceals in order to reveal” (Dickens xi). Stone seeks to examine the way in which several of Dickens’s major works, including Dombey and Son and David Copperfield relate to the fairy-tale. Stone’s work is an important touchstone for this study of Dickens and is a precursor to a number of more recent critics who follow.
It is this fantastic overlay, this kind of integrated dual narrative, which urges the reader to view the realist topos through the interpretive lens of chora which has resulted in some recent and varied responses to Dickens. Over the last decade a number of critics have sought to re-examine Dickens’s style as it relates to debates and discussions of realism. Carl Freedman has noted what he considers elements of science fiction in the depiction of London in Little Dorrit, while Grahame Smith attempts to find some of the answers for the startling quality of Dickens’s prose in the intertwined developments of post-Industrial urbanization and visual entertainments. The most recent scholar to address this issue is John R. Reed in Dickens’s Hyperrealism. Reed argues that Dickens’s work, primarily on the level of style is not realist, but rather hyperreal in a sense which he derives from Umberto Eco. The critical projects of these three critics, who follow in the footsteps of Stone as well as Garrett Stewart, demonstrate the currency of this question of Dickens’s literary style. And while I argue that each approaches the problems in helpful ways, none are entirely satisfying.

Freedman’s work focuses on the alienating effect of London which is the product of an alienating capitalist society. Dickens represents this fantastically, but it is not beyond cognitive understanding so it is, in Freedman’s schema, science fictional rather than purely fantasy.¹ This is a tendency throughout Dickens’s texts, which grapple with the fractured nature of capitalist existence. The nature of Victorian capitalism, with London as its locus, makes it impossible for Dickens to represent the city in wholly material terms. According to Freedman, Dickens uses metaphor and metonymy to further represent this fractured world. Thus in the metaphorical structure of the novel “the three

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¹ For Freedman, it is the fantastic’s relationship to cognition which separates science fiction from pure fantasy. Dickens’s London is not beyond cognition, therefore it falls primarily into the realm of science fiction. For more on Freedman’s view of the distinction see Critical Theory and Science Fiction.
principle loci of the action--the Marshalsea, the Circumlocution Office, and Bleeding Heart Yard--acquire a symbolic function (as the names of the last two indicate) that results in the partial reduction of the complex interconnectedness of London to a few metaphorical and metaphysical signifiers” (“London” 258). While I agree with Freedman that the alienating effect of capitalism is a major issue in Dickens, it is primarily a problem he is attempting to solve. From this perspective Dickens’s metaphorical structure, as Freedman terms it, may be viewed not as a reduction of the connectedness of London, but a more explicit attempt to connect these disparate places. Dickens’s fantasy seeks to expand the symbolic function to encompass more connections.² Dickens does not reduce the scope or scale of London and its connections; rather the connections themselves render London closer.

While Freedman identifies Dickens’s use of metonymy and metaphor as the locus of the fantastic, Grahame Smith points to Dickens’s visuality as the origin of his startling prose style. This treatment of images suggests, in Smith’s estimation, the visual vocabulary of film: “If we look at Dickens’s work in the light of the form that followed--and of which he of course knew nothing--then it is possible to trace what might be called proto-filmic elements in his writing” (7). Dickens, for Smith, functions as a camera, an all-seeing “I” which gives his work the quality of heightened realism:

His writing has seemed to many critics to have precisely this dreamlike quality, a heightening and exaggeration of reality which has the effect of making books appear to be more real than reality itself. In other words, the vividness and detail of Dickens’s writing can create a response akin to that

². As I demonstrate below, this strategy of connection is especially evident in Bleak House.
of leaving the cinema only to find the outside world as flat and colourless.

(63)

Smith’s interest in visuality is important, because so much of Dickens’s style relies on the visual, and as I argue, the fantastic is continually bound up in Dickens’s style. At the same time Smith’s work, while providing insight into one aspect of this style, does not address other non-visual aspects, such as those of metaphor and metonymy suggested by Freedman.

Reed is probably the closest to a more coherent and comprehensive account of the stylistic elements in Dickens. His monograph focuses on the visual as well as Dickens’s use of metaphor and metonymy. Hyperrealism, for Reed, “refers to Dickens’s ability to convey a sense of the everyday world while at the same time almost magically transforming it. I don’t mean the kind of magic associated with magical realism, but something much more insidious that is rooted in style, not content” (4). In the pages which follow Reed examines elements of Dickens’s style which move his work outside of the realm of realism into the paradigm of hyperrealism. Each chapter focuses on a specific stylistic element. For example, Dickens’s use of the present tense is placed as problematic from the realist standpoint as this form of narration is accompanied by a “radical uncertainty” (25). Reed examines in turn other qualities of Dickens’s literary style including his naming of characters, use of metonymy, extraordinary personification, and redundancy—a surplus of necessary information. Reed argues that “Dickens was in full command of his narrative, so much so that he wanted both to assist his readers in interpreting it correctly and to contain control of the mode of that interpretation, impulses that go against the ambitions of realism” (85).
Freedman, Smith, and Reed, are all, I would argue, picking up on the narrative dynamic I have identified as choric mapping in which *chora* is mapped onto *topos*, thus complicating realism. These critics are correct in pointing to non-realist elements in Dickens and the fundamental role they play; however, these elements need to be more coherently identified and their implications more thoroughly examined. The problem with Reed’s work, in particular, is that it does not ultimately provide a rationale for Dickens’s use of hyperrealism. Reed’s account, though often insightful, is primarily descriptive of elements within Dickens. It does not focus on the implications of those elements or in their relationship to the meanings Dickens is constructing. Reed, further, is correct in regards to Dickens’s attempt to assist (and perhaps enforce) particular readings of his work. *Chora*, as I have sought to argue, is primarily an interpretive layering, a hermeneutic filter through which events are made meaningful. Dickens uses *chora* in various ways to maintain hermeneutic control of his work in order to point out the proper way of reading his texts. In this aspect *chora* functions similarly to Reed’s hyperrealism, though I contend that *chora* allows us to better examine these elements in relation to the text’s construction of meaning. Reed’s hyperrealism gives us a descriptive category for Dickens’s style, but it fails to connect that style cogently to the construction of meaning. Nor does it allow us to examine the relationship between elements of realism and non-realist elements. For Reed there appears to be only the hyperreal. Alternatively, examining Dickens through the lens of *topos* and *chora* allows us to see how these fantastic elements function to create meaning in the narrative. It also allows us to see Dickens’s unique style in conversation with other works from the period. As I have sought to point out, Dickens is not alone in mingling realism and fantasy and it will be
fruitful to apply a vocabulary that is clear, but also elastic enough to place Dickens in relation to other writers.

A pressing question regarding Dickens’s use of this dual fantastic/realist style is its rationale. Dickens’s employment of *topos* and *chora* is significant because it allows him to represent kinds of moral truth unavailable to him in strictly realist terms. It expands the social connection beyond moral bounds and allows Dickens to make these connections in explicitly moral terms. This moral imperative and its fantastic element is apparent in Dickens’s most famous and unabashedly fantastic work, *A Christmas Carol*.

*A Christmas Carol* is a fantastic story. Its matter is made up of ghosts and visions of the past and future. Despite its fantastic character, however, it is a story strongly engaged with the tension between *topos* and *chora*. Dickens uses these fantastic means primarily in order to achieve the goals of realism as defined by Williams. *A Christmas Carol* does nothing if it does not establish “a vision of contemporary life as organically unified” (116). Like many realist works of the period, *A Christmas Carol* is interested in the moral connections that unify contemporary life. Scrooge begins the story as blind to these interrelationships. His journey to moral maturation is one which teaches him to recognize and understand his place the larger social web. Scrooge’s primary failing is his inability to understand the world through *chora*, the imaginative lens that makes moral connection possible.

Scrooge’s realization or “conversion” as Steven Prickett terms it, provides the central problem of the text. Prickett connects this interest in social redemption or conversion to realist novelists such as George Eliot and Leo Tolstoy who voice similar concerns and explore similar territory. What is so impressive about Dickens’s work here
is his expedient use of the fantastic in order to achieve Scrooge’s “conversion.” George Eliot spends hundreds of pages (as will Dickens of course in other works) attempting to trace the moral development of her characters. As Prickett points out “Elsewhere this was to be a theme demanding some of the most lengthy and subtle analyses of realistic fiction; here the new medium, constituting what Thackeray called a ‘prose poem,’ enabled Dickens to work by a hitherto impossible concentration and compression by a series of powerful and emotionally compelling images” (54).

Prickett points to the number of iconic scenes that *A Christmas Carol* uses to build towards Scrooge’s conversion. The story is primarily a story about images, scenes, and vignettes. The mechanism that puts forwards those scenes is fantastic, the story of the ghosts and the visions they provide. The medium of the fantastic allows Dickens to compress time, taking the moral work of a lifetime and concentrating it. “The spirits have done it all in one night” Scrooge exclaims at the end of the story (112).

Scrooge’s primary problem throughout *A Christmas Carol*, a problem the ghosts ultimately help him remedy, is that he lives too much in the world I define as the world of *topos*. Scrooge is a man of business, and business in Dickens is almost exclusively opposed to the imagination. Further, it is continually presented in Dickens that imagination is a necessary component in empathy and the connection between people. Scrooge is “Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster” (34).

Scrooge’s most famous ejaculation of “Bah humbug,” used primarily in reference to Christmas, in its original context meant nonsense or deception. As he elaborates to his nephew: “What’s Christmas time to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time
for finding yourself a year older, and not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books and having every item in ‘em through a round dozen of months presented dead again you?’ Scrooge’s invocation of the calendar as an item of business with little connotation outside of the keeping of accounts is directly contrasted with Fred’s investment of the calendar withchoric significance:

But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it has come round--apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging to it can apart from that--as a good time: a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time: the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. (36)

Fred sees Christmas on a larger (and more sophisticated) level of meaning than Scrooge, whose lack of imagination cannot expand beyond his own narrow interest in business.

Scrooge’s commitment to his own narrow world of topos, a world defined by the measuring of accounts, is apparent in his well-known rationalization of the visit of Marley’s ghost: “You may be an undigested bit of beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of cheese, a fragment of an underdone potato. There’s more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are!” (45). This commitment to the mundane is an essential part of Scrooge, as is Dickens’s insistence that it is a misplaced allegiance. From the novel’s beginning we have been instructed as to how to read the scene. We know from the first line “Marley was dead to begin with.” Dickens is of course, not satisfied with this
description, but proceeds to elaborate in great detail, the actual degree of Marley’s deadness:

Old Marley was dead as a door-nail . . . This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. If we were not perfectly convinced that Hamlet’s Father died before the play began, there would be nothing more remarkable in his taking a stroll at night, in an easterly wind, upon his own ramparts, than there would be in any other middle-aged gentleman rashly turning out after dark in a breezy spot--say Saint Paul’s Churchyard for instance--literally to astonish his son’s weak mind. (34)

With this assured foreknowledge we are armed against Scrooge’s mundane explanations, while also firmly invested in the reality of Marley’s deadness. Attebery has argued that the fantastic is always dependent upon the mundane (Fantasy Tradition 3), and this moment points to this relationship. We cannot understand the fantastic implications of Marley’s ghost, unless we understand the reality of Marley’s death. In emphasizing this Dickens instructs us on how to read the story and its significance.

Imagination is of primary importance for Dickens. It is through choric imagination that the project of realism as defined by Williams can occur. Stone points to the tremendous importance of the Fairy-Story. Stone writes: “What Dickens most valued in that literature was its ability to nurture the imagination. Without imagination (or ‘fancy,’ as Dickens often called it) human beings could not truly be human” (Dickens 3). Garrett Stewart also points to its significance, not just in regards to the therapeutic value of fancy, but also on ethical grounds. As Stewart writes “it is usually the case that the
most damning accusations he makes in the novels about oppressive social structures have to do with their crippling effect on the human spirit, on our capacities for love and wonder” (Dickens xx). Throughout Dickens the antidote for this loss of capacity for love and wonder is the imagination, the ability to find significance that transcends topos.  

Further if choric imagination provides a way of understanding the world as morally connected, it also provides a means for connecting with other people. It is choric imagination that allows for empathy. For this, Suzanne Keen’s recent work on the novel is instructive.

Keen’s work addresses the relationship between the novel and the production of empathy in readers as well as the possible pitfalls of that process. Her study is important for two aspects: first the historical discussion of empathy and its relationship to social problems in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and her discussion of the relationship between empathy and the imagination. While Keen notes the difficulty in most cases of determining what role an individual’s novel reading had on actual responses to social problems, there is little doubt that such an understanding of literature was central to the concerns of the Victorian novel:

That sympathy, specifically sympathy evoked by the situations of fictional characters, was at the center of novelistic practice few contemporaries

3. Stewart’s primary argument in Dickens and the Trials of Imagination is that the author’s work is best understood as a continual attempt to reintroduce the imaginative into literature to counteract the malaise caused by an increasingly institutionalized Britain. As he writes: “Dickens remains the great writer of modern industrial society. Page by page, his fertile language created the idiom need to describe the new society, while the antic contrivance of his fancy, its dauntless power and caprice, kept a viable way out” (225).

4. Keen notes that the word empathy comes into English usage fairly late, and that its function is one of the wider range of functions encompassed by the word sympathy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For a full description of how the term empathy (not employed during most of the nineteenth-century) came into use, see chapter two in Keen.
would have disputed. The term “sympathy” appears with predictable frequency in reviews of Victorian fiction (as well as in the novels themselves,) and novelists’ success or failure in rendering characters that could invoke sympathetic reactions played a significant role in reviewers’ responses. (53)

It might be noted that at least some kind of understanding of a cognitive process similar to empathy is at the heart of both Ioan Williams’s claims that the purpose of the realist novel is to represent the world as organically unified, as well as Catherine Belsey’s similar argument that realism creates coherence where there is none. When Belsey writes that realism “performs . . . the work of ideology, not only in its representation of a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action, but also in offering the reader, as the position from which the text is most readily intelligible, the position of subject as the origin both of understanding and of action in accordance with that understanding” she is objecting to a connection that the reader is intended to make with the world of the text (Belsey 56).

Dickens’s work is certainly part of this milieu, though Dickens further dramatizes the production of empathy. His works do not only attempt to create empathy in the reader, but to actually represent the creation of a consciousness capable of empathy. This kind of consciousness is linked directly to the imagination, as Scrooge’s transformation demonstrates. Keen’s survey of work by psychologists suggests the important connection between empathy and imagination.5 While it would be anachronistic to claim that Dickens is a precursor of the psychologists Keen cites, it is not anachronistic to point to the role that both imagination and empathy play in his work. It is, for Dickens,

5. For instance, see Keen’s summary of Marjorie Taylor’s study on 126-7.
imagination that allows us to move beyond the day to day world and begin to understand our connections to others.

The connections and their moral implications that are so important to *A Christmas Carol* are also at the heart of *Dombey and Son*, a novel that maps a choric significance onto *topos* in order to address the intertwined concerns of mercantilism, progress, and the failure of imagination a life devoted only to business entails. The problems with these intertwined discourses all carry human costs, with emotional neglect, destruction of homes, and even death.

**ii. The Train and the Sea: Imagination and Empathy in *Dombey and Son***

Andrew Sanders writes in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *Dombey and Son* that “Despite its being set firmly in the railway age, and despite its commercial sounding title, *Dombey and Son* is less a critique of the social and economic condition of the 1840s than an exploration of emotional deprivation and emotional fulfillment” (xi). Sanders is right to turn the focus upon the familial life of the Dombeys; however, the title patriarch’s involvement in the social and economic life of the period provides the framework wherein the family dysfunction occurs. Dombey runs his family like he runs his business and presumably runs his business like he runs his family. Further, the novel’s critique of “progress” through the fantastic representation of the railroad provides further ties to the novel’s social implications.6 This single-minded focus on business at the expense of the human is a theme Dickens returns to over and over again. In *Dombey and Son* this dynamic unfolds through fantasy which transforms locations and events out of

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6. The novel’s much lauded unity is evident in the parallel between Dombey’s single-minded obsession with business with no consideration for its emotional cost and the railroad’s path through the novel, a progress that leaves destruction in its wake.
the realm of mere *topos* and into the realm of *chora*. This, as in much of Dickens’s work, finds expression initially through a depiction of space in relation to the less than concrete sources of urban fantasy.

The London of *Dombey and Son* is, as in *Bleak House*, a mythologized London. The title firm is itself set amongst the romantic associations which so fascinated Dickens: “the offices of Dombey and Son were within the liberties of the city of London, and were within hearing of Bow Bells, when their clashing voices were not drowned by the uproar in the streets” (46). This opening passage, with its reference to the Bow Bells serves to anchor key sites in the text, the firm of Dombey and Son and the Wooden Midshipman, in the real, physical space of London. It is in a locatable point in space, literally a *topos*, indicated by the references to landmarks, and especially the reference to the Bow Bells. The Bow Bells refer to the bells of St. Mary-le-Bow a central landmark from which distances along the road from London to Lewes were measured. The church is a further marker of London identity, as its bells function as the demarcation of the Cockney:

*A Cockney was someone who was born within the sound of the bell of St. Mary-le-Bow, in Cheapside, which, according to John Stow was “more famous than any other Parish Church of the whole Cittie or suburbs”*. Fynes Morrison, in 1617 announced that “Londiners, and all within the sound of Bow-Bell, are in reproach called Cocknies, and eaters of buttered tostes”. Bruce R. Smith has suggested that “cockney” in fact derives from the “cock-shaped weathervane” which once surmounted the belfry of St. Mary-le-Bow and that Londoners’ identification with the sound came from their own “loud loquaciousness” or “boastfulness”. (Ackroyd 72)
This reference to St. Mary-le-Bow clearly anchors these two settings in the real London, the London of *topos*. The Bow Bells function as a signifier of London specificity, even as they mark that specificity within social relationship.\(^7\) Dickens’s catalog of these specified references continues as the passage goes on, yet their significance changes:

yet were there hints of adventurous and romantic story to be observed in some of the adjacent objects. Gog and Magog held their state within ten minutes walk: the Royal Exchange was close at hand; the Bank of England with its vaults of gold and silver ‘down among the dead men’ underground, was their magnificent neighbor. Just round the corner stood the rich East India House, teeming with suggestions of precious stuffs and stones, tigers, elephants, howdahs, hookahs, umbrellas, palm trees, palanquins, and gorgeous princes of a brown complexion sitting on carpets with their slippers very much turned up at the toes. (46)

These references clearly do similar work to the reference to Mary-le-Bow: they set the scene and place the two businesses within the confines of London proper. But they also do something else, as Dickens’s “yet” indicates. We have here *chora* being mapped on top of *topos*, as London is placed within a mythologized context. “Gog and Magog” are real place markers, the two Biblical giants were statues placed within the Guildhall, London’s administrative center. However, Dickens’s invocation of the statues and their close association with the city carries deeper significance. In British and particularly London mythology the two figures are, despite their negative Biblical association, the “tutelary deities of London” (Ackroyd 662) and still figure in the city’s pageantry

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7. It can be argued that even here Dickens invocation slips into the realm of *chora*, as the demarcation of the Cockney is a social construction.
surrounding the mayoral office. Dickens’s reference here does double or perhaps triple duty. It serves as another place marker, indicating the nearness of the Guildhall to the sites described. It also invokes London’s folkloric significance, and finally it also points to the negative connotations attached to the political authority of the Guildhall and its commerce. While Gog and Magog might be tutelary spirits and protectors of London, they are also figured in Revelation as fighting on the side of Satan (Rev. 20.7-10). As Dombey and Son is a novel with a significant interest in commerce and its exploitative impact, such ambiguous figures of Gog and Magog should not be ignored.

Commerce remains the subject as the passage continues. The Exchange, the Bank, and the East India company are all points of reference for the location of the Dombey and Son firm. These too carry with them their associations of the “romantic.” The Bank of England’s vaults are the equivalent of tombs as though the dead lay alongside the nation’s riches. The East India company is not simply the bureaucratic mercantile concern that its home office is expected to be, but rather it is a local container of all the riches (and perhaps dangers--note the tigers) of Empire. As F.S. Schwarzbach writes, “This is the capital of an Empire, and a palpable smell of Imperial power pervades the city” (105).

As Kathleen Tillotson argued half-a-century ago, the social implications of Dombey and Son are dispersed across the mercantile institutions here invoked and mythologized. Tillotson characterizes the novel as Dickens’s “first in which a pervasive

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8. See information on The Lord Mayor’s Show at http://lordmayorshow.org/history/gogmagog.


10. Schwarzbach points out that the London of Dombey and Son is London as “global emporium” the heart of emerging industrial capitalism and the international economy (104).
uneasiness about contemporary society takes the place of an intermittent concern with specific social wrongs” (157). While Sanders may be right to focus our reading of the novel on familial relationship, such a focus is only possible because of the dispersal of Dickens’s critique across institutions. If Sanders is correct that “As the first chapters of the novel develop . . . readers become aware that they have learnt very little about what exactly the esteemed firm of Dombey and Son actually does trade in” (xi), chapter four points out the environment in which Dombey and Son trades (as well as the environment in which the Wooden Midshipman fails to trade). This environment is given meaning not just by its physical location, but by its relationship to imagination. The London represented here is not just space, but rather the product of the “dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative” (Sheldrake 1).

This early chapter begins with an invocation of London as both topos and chora. Dickens locates two primary areas of the novel’s interest--the firm of Dombey and Son, and the Wooden Midshipman--in relation to London landmarks, literal and figurative. Through the fantastic allusions to London mythology which Dickens makes handy use of, he suggests that commerce in the city, and by extension Dombey’s commerce, is not morally uncomplicated. The statues of the giants, the mausoleum-like vaults, the invocation of Empire, all point to Dickens’s critique of the devaluing product of unrestrained mercantilism.

The problems associated with unrestrained mercantilism, as well as the single-minded devotion to business that Dombey exemplifies, find their mirror in the railroad. Dickens’s uses chora to give complex depths of significance to the railroad, in a way similar to its usage to characterize London in the passages cited above. James M. Brown
argues that “these two contrasting attitudes—of thrilling triumph and fear—stand side by side in the same novel” (34). Brown reads this ambiguity (or paradox as he calls it) as confusion and uncertainty regarding industrialization and progress; however, a more sympathetic reading might point to the complexity this depiction of the railway allows for. Tillotson notes that

Across the social picture are ruled the ruthless lines of the new order, symbolized by the railway. It links high and low, devastates Camden Town, uproots Staggs’s Gardens, provides employment for Mr. Toodle, bears Mr. Dombey from grim past to grimmer future, and finally obliterates Carker. Its appearance on each of the four carefully placed occasions is emphasized by a volcanic upsurge in style, by description overflowing its narrative function. In these descriptions may be discerned the fascination of the new as well as the horror of the strange; but the tone is mainly that of dread. (200)

This representation of the railroad is complex, filled with both positive and negative associations. Much of this complexity comes from a choric representation of the railroad, one which uses the fantastic in order to more fully represent the impact of the emerging technology and its implications. Tillotson keenly recognizes this “description overflowing its narrative function” as what charges the railroad with much of its significance in the novel.

The seismic power of the locomotive is evident from its first introduction in the novel, though Dickens presents it in a characteristically disorienting way. At the beginning of chapter six Richards, Polly, Florence, and the young Paul take a trip to
Staggs’s Gardens the home of the Toodles in Camden Town. Our introduction to the place, (once again Dickens, conscientious about locality, pinpoints it for us) happens thus: “The first shock of a great earthquake had, just at that period, rent the whole neighborhood to its centre” (78-9). This great earthquake, which has torn through Camden Town has left destruction in its wake and has devastated the town. Debris liters the streets, rubble blocks paths. It is a scene out of a disaster film or a war movie:11 “Everywhere were bridges that led nowhere, thoroughfares that were wholly impassable; Babel towers of chimneys, wanting half their height” (79). Over the course of a long paragraph, nearly a page, Dickens catalogs the destruction. Finally after ranging far and wide with his descriptive powers, Dickens comes to the real cause of the tumult: “In short, the yet unfinished and unopened Railroad was in progress; and, from the very core of all this dire disorder, trailed smoothly away, upon its mighty course of civilization and improvement” (79).

The structuring of this passage, with its disaster-laden introduction leading upon further investigation to its cause achieves several things. First, it portrays the significance of the railroad as a technological innovation: it is literally earth-shattering. Second, it creates an ironic juxtaposition between the chaos and destruction evident in the construction of the railroad (located here in the slums of Camden) and the “mighty course of civilization and improvement” which it will pursue, presumably elsewhere. These two points, especially this latter one, depend on the original representation of the construction as something other than a construction project, or at least something in addition to a

11. Graham Smith, argues that we can view this scene through a cinematic lens, pointing to the visual potential and emphasis of the scene: “The passage resembles, anticipates even, one of those colossal scenes that are such a marked feature of silent cinema in its advanced phase while, at the same time it could equally be the set of such a scene, an ordered chaos littered with the machinery that will bring it illusory life on the screen” (95).
construction project. The structure of this account prompts the reader to view the railroad as a disaster first, to read it through a hermeneutic quite different from one wherein the cause of the devastation is listed first. In such a case the reader would read the destruction through the lens of the railroad, while Dickens’s choric hermeneutic demands that we read the railroad through the lens of the destruction. It should further be noted that the destruction caused by the railroad is mirrored by the domestic disruption caused by Florence’s separation from the group and subsequent kidnapping by Mrs. Brown. The result of this kidnapping is the dismissal of Richards, which is at least thematically linked to Paul’s decline and death, and the meeting between Florence and Walter. The meeting between Florence and Walter also positions this sequence as a central part of the novel’s unity alongside the railroad itself. The results of this meeting, however, are far off and in the moment all that can be gleaned from the excursion is domestic strife.

The powerful destructive potential of the railroad reaches its climax with the death of Carker the Manager. James Carker is himself a proper subject for discussions of realism and fantasy, because he also participates in both spheres. His nature, in typical Dickensian fashion, is represented physically:

Mr Carker was a gentleman thirty-eight or forty years old, of a florid complexion, and with two unbroken rows of glistening teeth, whose regularity and whiteness were quite distressing. It was impossible to escape the observation of them, for he showed them whenever he spoke; and bore so wide a smile upon his countenance (a smile, however, very rarely, indeed, extending beyond his mouth), that there was something in it like the snarl of a cat. (194-5)
There is something fantastic in Carker’s description with his “so many” teeth (202) that are constantly referenced. But the most fantastic moment in Carker’s existence occurs upon his exit from it.

Carker’s final days are presented in a fragmented blur, fueled by alcohol, insomnia, and the exhaustion of his flight. He takes a train from the English coast and alights at an inn to await the express train. The reoccurring image of the train literally “haunt[s]” him through the night. This episode is a pursuit--Carker is fleeing Dombey--yet it is also a pursuit wherein the mode of escape--the train--is the actual visible pursuer. Carker cannot escape the railroad which both fascinates and repels him: “The ground shook, the house rattled, the fierce impetuous rush was in the air! He felt it come up, and go darting by; and even when he had hurried to the window, and saw what it was, he stood, shrinking from it, as if it were not safe to look” (839). Here and elsewhere Carker characterizes the train as a “devil” and on the following page he further personifies it, turning it into a monster: “A trembling of the ground, and quick vibration in his ears; a distant shriek; a dull light advancing, quickly changed to two red eyes, and a fierce fire, dropping glowing coals; an irresistible bearing on of a great roaring and dilating mass; a high wind, and a rattle--another come and gone, and he holding onto a gate, as if to save himself!” (840). Dickens’s use of semicolons here mirrors the way fragmentary effect of the train as it courses through the novel.

This fragmentation continues through the episode up to its conclusion, where Carker in his overwrought state falls into the path of the oncoming train, the train which

12. In his study of dark and disturbing elements in Dickens, Harry Stone identifies Carker as the locus of Dickens’s cannibal motif in *Dombey and Son*: “The devil Carker--now a watching cat, now a hypnotizing snake, now a ravening wolf, now simply two rows of glistening teeth--is always a rapacious predator” (*Night Side*, 200).
was to take him to safety. Dickens’s narrative reaches a fever pitch at this moment as it invokes Carker’s previous visions of the oncoming train. The earlier personification is once again invoked as Carker is torn apart by the “fiery devil” in a way which is itself fantastic:

He heard a shout—another—saw the face change from its vindictive passion to a faint sickness and terror—felt the earth tremble—knew in a moment that the rush was come—uttered a shriek—looked round—saw the red eyes, bleared and dim, in the daylight, close upon him—was beaten down, caught up, and whirled away upon a jagged mill, that spun him round and round, and struck him limb from limb, and licked his stream of life up with its fiery heat, and cast his mutilated fragments into the air. (842)

Carker’s death here is not dismembering: it is a near sundering of all his matter into non-existence. Dickens entirely removes identity in the end. Carker’s unknown, unnamable fragments are gathered up but are only presented as “something covered, that lay heavy and still, upon a board, between four men.” His last remnant, his blood, is soaked up “with a train of ashes.” Carker has not been killed, he has been annihilated. This extreme fragmentation and sundering is evident in the passage’s style as well. Here Dickens dispenses with his afore mentioned and oft-used semicolons, punctuation which serves to link together ideas while separating them into discrete parts. The use of the dash, particularly interesting when examined in relation to the semicolons from the passage cited from page 840, breaks the event itself into pieces.

This disintegration is, as Stone points out, an authorial judgment: “We witness how each earthly perturbation makes the cosmos tremble. Carker’s death is both earthly
accident and transcendental fall” (Dickens, 157). Stone’s comment points out two important things here. First, it astutely observes that Carker’s death is both mundane and fantastic. We can understand the passage on the level of topos and realism as an accident caused by Carker’s carelessness and overwrought emotional state. Yet like Krook’s death in Bleak House Dickens utilizes the accidental to make his moral point. The second thing that Stone points out here is the way the train is larger than itself. This passage echoes our first introduction to the train in Staggs’s Gardens, that extraordinary passage quoted above. And it is important to note that our reading of the train and its destructive power are initiated at that point. The earlier moment, where the train appears to have literally ripped its way out of the fiery bowels of the earth sets the stage for Carker’s final encounter with it.

The train’s seeming single-minded pursuit of Carker, (which mirrors Dombey in pursuit of Carker) is analogous to Dombey’s single-minded pursuit of businesses. Both of course have human costs. This is a parallel only available on the level of chora, which allows Dickens to anthropomorphize the train and turn it into an active participant in Carker’s flight and ultimately his death. Similarly, it is through chora that Dickens can represent the firm of Dombey and Son not simply as a topos, but as a place filled with meaning that goes beyond its physical location. The firm is bound up in the complex and not entirely positive mercantile web symbolized by figures such as Gog and Magog. In this way chora points to levels of meaning available to the imagination and urges the reader to view the narrative on both levels. As I have argued, the novel intertwines all of these discourses, connecting the family business with the family. The primary function of chora in the novel is to make these connections, as well as to point to the importance of
imagination and its relationship to empathy, which Dickens represents as the primary solution to these problems. The most fully wrought usage of this intertwining of imagination and empathy in the novel is evident in the recurrent motif of the speaking waves.

Dickens first introduces the repetitious image of the speaking waves in chapter eight, through the perspective of young Paul Dombey. Paul upon waking inquires of Florence “The sea Floy, what is it that it keeps on saying?” Florence’s response should puncture Paul’s fancy, for she invokes the logical truth: “She told him it was only the noise of the rolling waves” (128). However, Paul refuses to read the waves only on the level of topos: “‘Yes, yes,’ he said ‘but I know they are always saying something. Always the same thing’ . . . Very often afterwards, in the midst of their talk, he would break off, to try to understand what it was that the waves were always saying; and would rise up in his couch to look towards the invisible region far away” (128-9). This passage displays, in miniature, Dickens’s choric interest. Paul asks a question which proposes a non-realist understanding of the world, a realist explanation is offered, and it is found inadequate. And just as Paul reads the waves chorically, Dickens prompts the reader to do the same, invoking the waves continually over the next chapters until we reach chapter sixteen, “What the Waves Were Always Saying.” It is in this chapter that Paul dies, and the foreshadowing Dickens has used in the speaking waves is understood.

Paul’s ability to read the waves, and ultimately communicate that ability to Florence is especially important, as it is allied against the stifling mentality that his father presents. Paul’s discourse with Dombey on the importance of wealth is only the most

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13. I think it is again important to refer to Stewart’s argument in Dickens and the Trials of Imagination regarding fancy as a way of reinvigorating individuals in the face of society that increasingly devalues human relationships.
specific indicator of this clash of values. In chapter eight Paul asks Dombey “what is money,” and then “what can it do?” His speculations become theological, reproducing the problem of evil in relation to money rather than God “‘If it’s a good thing, and can do anything,’ said the little fellow thoughtfully, as he looked back at the fire, ‘I wonder why it didn’t save me my mama’” (111). Dombey here attempts to demonstrate to Paul the virtues of money; however, it is clear that the values the two hold are incompatible. The conversation ends with Dombey “so astonished, and so uncomfortable, and so perfectly at a loss how to pursue the conversation, that he could only sit looking at his son by the light of the fire” (112).

Dickens presses the significance of the waves later in the novel, beginning with chapter forty-one “New Voices in the Waves.” As the title suggests, the chapter begins with the sea: “All is going on as it was wont. The waves are hoarse with repetition of their mystery; the dust lies piled upon the shore; the sea-birds soar and hover; the winds and clouds go forth upon their trackless flight; the white arms beckon, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away” (626). The waves in this chapter again foreshadow a death: this time Mrs. Skewton’s. The waves again function on the level of chora, as Dickens prompts the reader to read them through an imaginative hermeneutic that imparts to them greater significance. In doing so Dickens places the reader in the position of characters in the novel who have begun to read chorically, primarily Florence, but also the affectionate Mr. Toots. Dickens closes the chapter, after Mrs. Skewton’s death, in the wake of her mourners’ various recoveries, with the following reflection from Edith:

So Edith’s mother lies unmentioned of her dear friends, who are deaf to the waves that are hoarse with repetition of their mystery, and blind to the
dust that is piled upon the shore, and to the white arms that are beckoning, in the moonlight, to the invisible country far away. But all goes on, as it was wont, upon the margin of the unknown sea; and Edith standing there alone, and listening to its waves, has dank weed cast up at her feet, to strew her path in life withal. (637)

The waves in both of these instances become emblems of grief. But Dickens also uses the waves to tie together the figures of Walter and Paul. The chapter detailing Florence and Walter’s wedding concludes with the two staring at the sea as Florence ruminates on her two loves, one lost and one returned to her: “Of Paul and Walter. And the voices in the waves are always whispering to Florence, in their ceaseless murmuring, of love—of love, eternal and illimitable, not bounded by the confines of this world, or by the end of time, but ranging still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away!” (876). This passage functions to connect Paul and Walter, emphasizing the interconnectedness of their lives. Paul’s death, with its emphasis on the distant invisible country turns Walter’s return into a kind of rebirth. This is hinted at earlier by the nomenclature of the ship Walter takes, the *Son and Heir*. Dombey and Son becomes, Dombey and Son-In-Law. And it is important to note that Dickens allows us to make these connections through Florence, who has learned from Paul, how to properly read the waves.

The importance of understanding what the waves are saying, which I would argue is the importance of choric imagination, the kind of imagination which allows for empathy as I have noted from Stewart and Keen, is presented quite explicitly in the original ending of Dickens’s serial. In the serial run the waves make a final appearance at
the novel’s conclusion. Whereas the 1848 single volume concludes with Dombey’s response to little Florence, the original serial included this final passage:

The voices in the waves speak low to him of Florence, day and night—plainest when he, his blooming daughter, and her husband, beside them in the evening, or sit at an open window, listening to their roar. They speak to him of Florence and his altered heart; of Florence and their ceaseless murmuring to her of the love, eternal and illimitable, extending still, beyond the sea, beyond the sky, to the invisible country far away.

Never from the mighty sea may voices rise too late, to come between us and the unseen region on the other shore! Better, far better, that they whispered of that region in our childish ears, and the swift river hurried us away! (996 n.1)

This passage suggests an imaginative connection between the waves and Florence’s capacity for love and empathy, a connection Dombey is now able to see and understand. The value of that love was not available to him when he was mired in the world of commerce, embroiled in the mercantile institutions of his firm. But this final passage reveals Dombey’s ability to understand the world through imagination. Like Florence who was initiated into the mystery of the speaking waves by Paul, Dombey has learned to see the world on a level other than mere *topos*. 
iii. “What Connection Can there Be?”: Bleak House

Both A Christmas Carol and Dombey and Son are texts that utilize the dynamics of topos and chora in order to present the importance of the imagination and its ability to make connections between individuals. These imaginative abilities are opposed to the stultifying effects that an all-consuming devotion to profit engenders. In Bleak House Dickens uses chora in significantly similar ways, connecting imagination to moral connections between individuals, while also using it to create a web of responsibility that links disparate social classes and points to the ramifications of actions by discrete individuals and institutions onto one another. Bleak House is perhaps the example of this dynamic at its most extended: the whole of London and beyond are implicated in the choric web that unites the disparate locales.

Nothing truly fantastic ever happens in the novel. Dickens goes to great pains to convince the reader that the narrative’s events are plausible. He presents the fantastic elements primarily through imaginative figurative language (in the case of his third-person narrator who consistently relies on linguistic tricks from similes to the subjunctive) and the stories told by characters within the two narratives.14 Bleak House is a novel that plunges to the heart of the realist project by asking us “what connection can there be?” It may be surprising then that these connections, morally and epistemologically, are expressed through this relationship between the realist and the fantastic narratives. These fantastic narratives forge connections that interweave and connect Bleak House’s entire cosmology so that everyone is implicated in the web of relations which spread like the fog across London and beyond.

Robert Newsom’s important study *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition*, examines similar territory. He ably argues that Dickens’s narrative contains a dual perspective that holds the two poles of the romantic and familiar simultaneously in view. Newsom writes that Dickens’s “fascination is for the interplay generated by his own profound conflict about” the romantic and the familiar (9). While Newsom seeks to examine these relationships as expressed by various instances of trance, waking dreams, and reverie throughout the text, emphasizing Dickens’s interest in such phenomena, I wish to show how Dickens employs this strategy of dual perspective, and how he constructs it around narration and imaginative interpretation. That is, I argue that this dual perspective champions an imaginative reading of the world in opposition to one which is strictly in the realm of *topos*. Examining the dynamics of these two poles from a position that links the narratological significance of these different levels of narrative to epistemological significance allows us to understand the text as one which uses the fantastic to achieve the primary aim of the “realist novel,” that is to demonstrate the web of moral connections and responsibilities in ways impossible without employing such fantastic narratives. At the same time Dickens juxtaposes these fantastic narratives that are full of life and meaning against the cold and pointless tangle of documents at the heart of Chancery, and the callous pursuit of self-interest embodied in Tulkinghorn.

The first chapter of the novel immediately establishes the relationship between the realist narrative and the fantastic mapped on top of it. Dickens’s begins his novel in true journalistic fashion: “LONDON. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln’s Inn Hall. Implacable November weather.” However, this short factual
style gives way instantly to a more robust and imaginative description, still maintaining a related tone, but one which invokes figurative devices, metaphor and simile: “As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long, or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill” (13). Newsom articulates the dual position of the novel’s opening quite elegantly: “here we can say that Dickens is in the most obvious sense dwelling upon ‘the romantic side of familiar things.’ But the ‘romantic’ and the ‘familiar’ perspectives are not paradoxical or puzzling inasmuch as the perspectives here are quite plainly those of the real eye and the mind’s eye” (16). This relationship between the “real eye” and the “mind’s eye,” as Newsome terms these two registers of Dickens’s narrative, is best understood through a dynamic of meaning-making. This is where the relationship between chora and topos is once again conceptually helpful. A full understanding of the novel events and their significance, that is the novel’s meaning as it were, is a product of the interweaving of these two narrative layers.15

Dickens invokes in a beautifully wrought series of paragraphs the London fog, a real yet ephemeral substance that in the narrative imagination spreads throughout the city isolating figures, creating a dirty dullness that in later chapters will come to join with the smoke from chimneys and gaslight to form “witch-ointment” which coats the cemetery gates (180). This fog blots out lights which shine “haggard” in the thick blankets. The fog connects all of London under its troubling mist, and Dickens assures us, “hard by Temple Bar, in Lincoln’s Inn Hall, at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery” (14). Here we have topos the spatial location of Chancery.

15. This dual perspective should not be confused with the two narrators, the unnamed third-person narrator and Esther Summerson the first-person narrator. That is, Esther is not topos and the other chora. Esther rather can be seen as a figure who has learned to read chorically, as I will seek to demonstrate.
At the same time we are presented with the court’s position in regards to *chora*: it is situated at the heart of the fog, a fog which has significance beyond mere *topos*. As the fog emanating from Chancery touches everything, so does Chancery touch everything, expelling its own kind of witch-ointment:

This is the Court of Chancery, which has its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire, which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse and its dead in every churchyard, which has its ruined suitor with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress borrowing and begging through the round of every man’s acquaintance, which gives to monied might the means abundantly of wearying out the right, which so exhausts finances, patience, courage, hope, so overthrows the brain and breaks the heart, that there is not an honourable man among its practitioners who would not give—who does not often give—the warning, “Suffer any wrong that can be done you rather than come here!” (15)

Dickens continues to use these fantastic narratives which modify and interpret events in fabulous and fanciful ways to express his concept of moral connection. Thus shortly after this passage we are introduced to the character we will come to know as Miss Flite, “a little mad old woman in a squeezed bonnet, who is always in court, from its sitting to its rising, and always expecting some incomprehensible judgment to be given in her favor. Some say she really is, or was, a party to a suit; but no one knows for certain, because no one cares” (15). Flite’s madness conflates the system of Chancery with the eternal adjudication expected at the End Times: Flite tells Esther, Richard, and Ada, “I expect a judgment. Shortly. On the Day of Judgment. I have discovered that the sixth seal
mentioned in Revelations is the Great Seal. It has been open a long time!” (47). Flite’s apocalyptic confusion of the seal mentioned in Revelations and Seal of the Chancellor’s office constructs Chancery not simply as a *topos*, but rather constructs it as a *chora*, a place that has resonance and meaning throughout the text beyond its literal level.

Flite’s continual refrain of expectant judgment throughout the text has several implications. This religious equivocation elevates the Court of Chancery into a cosmological position where its decisions (or lack thereof) function in lieu of God’s. From this vantage point Chancery itself does govern all. Chancery becomes the all-encompassing cage in which Flite, Richard, Ada and nearly all characters are trapped, mirrors to Flite’s caged birds. At the novel’s end a judgment of sorts has come and in its wake it leaves Richard dead and Flite’s birds free. This apocalyptic discussion is of course also meant to ironize Chancery. By comparing it to the divine concepts of justice Dickens clearly intends the reader to see the imperfections of the system. At the same time, if we view the apocalypse as distant event, equating the court of Chancery’s decision with the final judgment stresses just how inert the system itself is.

However, it is nothing explicit in the narrative itself that gives us the apocalyptic formulation, but rather it is Flite’s interpretation of events colored by a madness that reveals certain moral patterns of connections. It is her consistent refrain that pulls the events into revelatory shape. Flite’s mapping of the cosmological struggle depicted in Revelation and the final unfolding of the great mysteries of Christianity again prods the reader towards this unification. This possible unification is an important point, for as Chris R. Vanden Bossche argues, “Insofar as it favors the abolition of aristocratic privilege, *Bleak House* affirms the narrative of the rise of the middle class, but at the
same time it strategically draws on radical discourse to reject the related triadic mapping of class that excludes people from agency” (15). If we accept Vanden Bossche’s argument then Miss Flite’s picture of a future after judgment, where the hegemonic tools of Chancery and Parliament are no longer needed, might be one place where the unification of classes has its full scope.

That Flite’s choric framework here is a product of madness should not push us to dismiss the insights it give us. As J. Hillis Miller writes, Flite is the one character who envisions a way out of Chancery’s tangle of documents: “Miss Flite, mad as she is, is close to the truth about Chancery . . . The only escape from the circle of signs would be the end of the world or death, that ‘beginning the world’ which Richard undertakes at the moment he dies” (194-5). Flite’s madness does suggest something about the choric imagination, however, just as Paul Dombey’s age does. It points to its opposition to the world of rational adulthood. However, Flite’s madness seems morally preferable to the callousness of Tulkinghorn, who, as we shall see, becomes a victim of his own inability to read chorically. We can easily contrast her empathy, in part born from her eschatological understanding of the world of the novel, with the heartless rationality of the lawyer. We must also remember that Flite’s madness, an obsession with documents and a conflation of the Court of Chancery with the cosmic court of God, is a product of her experiences in Chancery. Her madness flows from Chancery just as the fogs and smokes and other vile vapors do.

Flite provides Dickens with a way to make the moral connections most explicit. The implications become more pointed when we consider that Flite’s dementia is presented as a product of Chancery itself. These moral connections are also strangely
visible by the wide-ranging noxious elements in the novel which acquire, through the interpretive efforts of narrators and characters, moral significance as one links onto the other. Flite connects all of the novel’s characters by placing them within an eschatological framework; the third-person narrator forges these links through the intertwining webs of fog, smoke, and disease.

This eschatological framework functions, like these intertwining networks of filth and foulness, to connect discrete locations. While a number of the major spaces in the novel operate separately in the realm of *topos*, each containing their own characters and concerns, they are linked together by *chora* in the form of smoke and fog, and Miss Flite’s hope of judgment. The kind of cosmological connection that Flite provides is intensely important for the novel. As Alice Van Buren Kelley notes,

> The society of Victorian England, then, is the bleak house which Dickens is intent on describing; and he builds his description with a series of physically and spiritually desolate houses, presenting Chesney Wold as the crumbling fortress of the aristocracy, Tom-all-Alone’s as the tenement for the poor, and interspersing in between the houses of other members of that society which represent its many wrongs. (254)

In order to more fully examine this aspect of the novel we must focus on the discrete locations represented through *topos* and the way that they relate to the larger choric web of meaning that gives the novel its moral force.

In a recent article Elana Gomel argues that the spaces in *Bleak House* should be read through Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope, which seeks to examine spatial and temporal relationships in literature. Gomel writes that
these spaces are not geographically separate but overlapping, superimposed upon each other in a kind of quantum indeterminacy. What creates a distinction between them is their topological axis: vertical for the reformer’s view, horizontal for the flâneur’s. And I will argue that these different narrative geometries correspond to two different forms of psycho-social investment in the city. (297)

For Gomel, it is the perspectives that place these spaces in separate spheres, and her artificial distinction between Dickens the “flâneur” and Dickens the “reformer.” Contrary to her claims, these locales are socially and geographically separate, with their own sets of inhabitants. What connects them are the perspectives that chora offers, and several characters who learn to read the world chorically.

Raymond Williams in his influential The Country and the City argues that Dickens creates a kind of consciousness of the city, that is not geographic, but rather imaginative and relational: “It does not matter which we way put it: the experience of the city is the fictional method; or the fictional method is the experience of the city. What matters is that the vision—no single vision either, but a continual dramatisation—is the form of the writing” (154). This functions as a “creation of consciousness—of recognitions and relationships” that is Dickens’s primary aim. I argue that the concurrent mapping of chora onto topos creates this consciousness, while still allowing Dickens to point to discrete locations. Chancery is a real institution, a choric reading of which provides us with the moral connections between it and the rest of London (and what the rest of London represents). One of the important things that a dynamic of topos and chora does is point to both the fantastic and the real aspects of actual events and places.
Dickens’s London, here as well as in *Dombey and Son*, is both of these things. These are geographically specific places. Chancery is real, and its institutional cruelty is real; one of the strengths of Dickens’s work is that his fantasy sharpens rather than blunts his realism. Dickens’s anchorage is always to that real institution, and in this way the city does not slip its moorings and become allegory.

Aside from Chancery, whose foggy tendrils and documentary tentacles do indeed seem to clutch at everything and everyone, there are a number of other spaces that seem disparate except when viewed through the lens of *chora*. And it is important to note that there are several discrete locations in the direct environs of Chancery: Tulkinghorn’s residence in Lincoln’s Inn, and Krook’s rag and bottle shop, which houses both Miss Flite and Nemo. The locations of Krook and Tulkinghorn in relation to one another is interesting. Krook the illiterate “Chancellor” might at first seem to be the antithesis of the erudite lawyer, yet both are figures with questionable reading habits. Krook’s illiteracy prevents him from seeing the key to Jarndyce and Jarndyce is in his possession, while as I demonstrate Tulkinghorn’s inability to read on a level deeper than *topos* ultimately leads to his death. The representation of the two places makes a similar connection, while also distancing them. Krook’s shop is filled with the detritus of the legal profession, the carcass-like remains of Chancery’s predations:

A little way within the shop door, lay heaps of old cracked parchment scrolls, and discoloured and dog’s-eared law-papers. I could have fancied that all the rusty keys, of which there must have been hundreds of huddled together as old iron, had once belonged to doors of rooms or strong chests in lawyers’ offices. The litter of rags tumbled partly into and partly out of
a one-legged wooden scale, hanging without any counterpoise from a beam, might have been counsellors’ bands and gowns torn up. One had only to fancy, as Richard whispered to Ada and me while we all stood looking in, that yonder bones in a corner, piled together and picked very clean, were the bones of clients, to make the picture complete. (68)\(^{16}\)

Krook’s shop is interesting when placed next to Tulkinghorn’s chambers. While Tulkinghorn is of the “old school,” (23) that signifier is used to denote the archaism of his manner rather than fastidiousness, and his rooms demonstrate this:

Like as he is to look at, so is his apartment in the disk of the present afternoon. Rusty, out of date, withdrawing from attention, able to afford it. Heavy broad-backed old-fashioned mahogany and horse-hair chairs, not easily lifted, obsolete tables with spindle-legs and dusty baize covers, presentation prints of the holders of great titles in the last generation, or the last but one, environ him. A thick and dingy Turkey-carpet muffles the floor where he sits, attended by two candles in old-fashioned silver candlesticks, that give a very insufficient light to his larger room. The titles on the backs of his books have retired into the binding; everything that can have a lock has got one; no key is visible. Very few loose papers are about. (159)

Following from this description we can view Krook’s shop as a version of Tulkinghorn’s chambers run-to-seed. They are both filled with archaic instruments of the law, and one

\(^{16}\) It is worth noting that Richard, who by the novel’s end will be a literal casualty of Chancery, is the one who makes the remark about “the bones of clients.” Richard’s choric statement, surely made in jest seems to suggest a truth that he does not recognize.
seems to supply what the other lacks. Krook has the loose papers and the keys, Tulkinghorn has the locked boxes.\textsuperscript{17} These descriptions also serve to unify the two figures and create coherent sense of location that can be placed in geographical and social relationship with distinct others. The concerns of Chancery and all that surround it, is law and its implications, (implications presciently if flippantly noted by Richard.) On the level of the \textit{topos} there is little relationship between Chancery and its environs and the rest of the places the novel examines, however on the level of \textit{chora} Chancery is connected to everything, from slum to country house.

Dickens represents the slums of London through his thorough examination of Tom-All-Alone’s. Tom-All-Alone’s is a black, dilapidated street, avoided by all decent people, where the crazy houses were seized upon, when their decay was far advanced, by some bold vagrants who after establishing their own possession took to letting them out in lodgings. Now, these tumbling tenements contain, by night, a swarm of misery. As on the ruined human wretch vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever. (256-7)

Tom-All-Alone’s is distant from Chancery and yet it is “in Chancery,” the language of the lawsuit confusing spatiality.\textsuperscript{18} Yet for all of its confusing spatiality it is a distinct

\textsuperscript{17} This lock-box and key dynamic mirrors Tulkinghorn and Krook’s relationship in regards to the plot. Tulkinghorn has the question; Krook has the answer.

\textsuperscript{18} It is also linked to Tulkinghorn’s chambers in Lincoln’s Inn by the use of metaphor. The “maggot numbers” of Tom-All-Alone’s echoes the opening description of Tulkinghorn’s house: “Here, in a
place, firmly anchored within London proper. The nomenclature itself hints at a strange history, bound up itself in the legal machinations around which the novel is centered:

Whether “Tom” is the popular representative of the original plaintiff or defendant in Jarndyce and Jarndyce; or, whether Tom lived here when the suit had laid the street waste, all alone, until other settlers came to join him; or whether the traditional title is a comprehensive name for a retreat cut off from honest company and put out of the pale of hope; perhaps nobody knows.” (257)

This passage is curious, for it at once allows Tom-All-Alone’s to be a distinct place with its own peculiar history, while leaving that history in essence blank. Still this connection to even an unknown history localizes the slum, the absence of history allows multiple possible histories to flourish. Further, while Dickens’s descriptions are choric there is a clear topos here: these slums were a major part of London life. As Dickens’s own journalism and the work of writers such as Henry Mayhew and social problem novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell make abundantly clear, Tom-All-Alone’s does not stray far from realism.

Outside of the city, miles from the mire of Tom-All-Alone’s is Chesney Wold. It too is location with its own history, its own folklore, and its own inhabitants. And yet the scene here is just as bleak:

The weather for many a day and night has been so wet that the trees seem wet through, and the soft loppings and prunings of the woodman’s axe can make no crash or crackle as they fall. The deer, looking soaked, leave

large house of state, lives Mr. Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now; and in those shrunken fragments of greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts” (158).
quagmires where they pass. The shot of a rifle loses its sharpness in the moist air, and its smoke moves in a tardy little cloud towards the green rise, coppice-topped, that makes a background for the falling rain. . . . On Sundays the little church in the park is mouldy; the oaken pulpit breaks out into a cold sweat; and there is a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves. (20-1)

The description of the weather here links Chesney Wold to the other places mentioned. It is as Alice van Buren Kelley describes an “atmosphere of a dead past, and a future stagnation” (254). The gloom of Chesney Wold is reflected in its inhabitants, whose inward conditions mirror the outward. As van Buren Kelley notes, “Those who live within the great house are limited in their vision by fog or total night and cannot see how the rain-soaked world about them reflects their own inward decay” (255).

These locations serve in part to designate the social worlds of their inhabitants, dramatizing the distinctions between separate spheres of people. These worlds are separate yet are linked together and as J. Hillis Miller has influentially argued, the novel’s goal is to create in the reader that realization through hermeneutic negotiation: “The novel must be understood according to correspondences within the text between one character and another, one scene and another, one figurative expression and another . . . the reader is invited to perform a constant interpretative dance or lateral movement of cross-references as she makes her way through the text” (183). Thus distant scenes recall one another, as Krook’s shop and Tulkinghorn’s chambers appear to correspond. However, this dynamic goes further, because it moves into the realm of imagination and the fantastic, turning the natural processes of fog, the manufactured product of smoke,
and the contagion of disease into one miasma. Chesney Wold is worlds away from Tom-All-Alone’s and its discourse of disease, but *chora* links them together, suggesting the moral culpability of the former for the latter.

Beginning with the fog we can trace the foulness through the air. Upon Nemo’s death and burial it shifts into the image of disease and is mingled together with the smoke coming from the chimneys of the squalid Tom-All-Alone’s. The burial description is rife with pestilent images as Nemo is laid to rest in “a beastly scrap of ground which a Turk would reject as a savage abomination, and a Caffre would shudder at.” The graveyard here hovers, through the use of the conditional, between the two conceptual spaces of *topos* and *chora*. It is neither in the London, nor in Asia. From the “pestiferous and obscene” graveyard “where malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed” comes illness personified as an “avenging ghost” (named “Tom” after its environs), the product of the corruption in which he has been bred, born, and died. Dickens concludes this passage with an invocation which echoes both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Macbeth*: “Come night, come darkness, for you cannot come too soon, or stay too long, by such a place as this!” He summons the night, and calls the “flame of gas burning so sullenly above the iron gate, on which the poisoned air deposits its witch-ointment slimy to the touch” (180). Here the smoke from the lamps mingles with the pestilence and the fog from the first chapter to create a foul miasma. And yet, Dickens’s description leads us to forget that this is not the literal case. The smoke and disease do not combine in any literal way. Here is Dickens’s choric description at work.
John O. Jordan reads this passage as an inter-layering of science and Biblical pestilence which cannot help but have a political dimension: “The passage combines scientific and medical discourse with biblical rhetoric and metaphors of violent insurrection (‘plunder,’ ‘spoil’). Tom, the people’s ghost, is a force that the barriers of class cannot restrain” (136). The combination of the fog, with its origin in Chancery, with the disease creates connections of both responsibility, and vulnerability. The fog which has its origins in the social institutions on an imaginative level is what breeds the pestilence, that pestilence then becomes death the “great leveler” as institutions such as Chancery reap what they have sown. Jordan, however, is right that as much as this depends upon burgeoning sciences of epidemiology and studies of public health, it also relies heavily on fantastic allusion, invocations of Biblical plagues, and pestilence. Chora allows Dickens to push this beyond the point of mere outrage and condemnation; the personification of Tom as avenging ghost literally lays the blame for these unsanitary conditions at the feet of Britain’s most powerful institutions.

The “avenging ghost” is recalled later when Bucket takes Snagsby on his tour of Tom-All-Alone’s. As they walk Bucket pauses as a palanquin passes with a body presumably under the sheet. However, Bucket states that it is “the fever coming up the street!” The fever itself is personified, as the carrier remains nameless and sightless, an “unseen wretch” (358). We learn in this chapter of the ravaging toll this epidemic has on the inhabitants of Tom-All-Alone’s, and we must recall its origin in Nemo’s corrupted grave, carried by the dark ointment outwards. The putrescent “witch-ointment” coating the gate returns later in the form of the air-borne detritus, the filthy by-product of Krook’s internal inferno. As Guppy and Jobling await Krook they notice a substance in the air
which coats the window-sills of Krook’s shop: “A thick, yellow liquor defiles them, which is offensive to the touch and sight, and more offensive to the smell. A stagnant, sickening oil, with some natural repulsion in it that makes them both shudder” (516). The grisly discovery of Krook makes it clear that his smoldering body has added to the novel’s intertwining layers of miasma.

We can thus follow the progress of the fog emanating from Chancery in the first chapter through the death of Nemo and his placement in the corrupt churchyard, which functions as a counterpoint to Chancery. Both are origins of the noxious atmosphere that consumes London. From the churchyard Dickens traces the pestilences rampant progress throughout Tom-All-Alone’s and connects it through the fantastic atmospheric effects of his narrative with the death of Krook. Here Dickens use of the fantastic allows him to trace moral connections between these different figures, showing the origin of Krook’s death in the squalor of Tom-All-Alone’s and the graveyard which parallels Chancery. Or to put it another way, Dickens’s use of the imaginative eye here allows him to collapse the discrete realities of Chancery, of the graveyard and Tom-All-Alone’s, and of Krook’s shop. They become one in the same. On the narrative level of *topos* we understand them as separate places, just as we understand that the fog, and the disease and Krook’s “foetid effluvia” must all be separate, yet Dickens insists that we read them through the lens of his narrators’ fantastic mind’s eye. Again the meaning of the situation can only be truly located when the interdependence of reality and fantasy are recognized, when we read the *chora* as well as the *topos*. We cannot understand Tom-All-Alone’s without the contagion it breeds, nor can we understand Chancery without its all-consuming
fogginess, and we cannot understand either of these without the fantastic connections Dickens forges between the two.

Like the fog, the Ghost’s Walk functions as an imaginative linkage between different contexts, with a focus of dispersing responsibility across social institutions. We first learn of the Ghost’s Walk in chapter seven, which begins strangely: “While Esther sleeps, and while Esther wakes, it is still wet wet weather down at the place in Lincolnshire” (103). This curious opening is one of the few moments in the text where the unnamed narrator makes reference to Esther’s narrative. It also positions what is to follow within the context of Esther’s sleep and waking. While I do not wish to suggest that the unnamed narrator or the story of the Ghost’s Walk are products of Esther’s dreaming (though Chiara Briganti makes an interesting case for reading the third-person narrator as an unconscious expression of Esther), this positioning does give the story a dreamlike feeling. It also suggests the resonant linkage between Esther and the Ghost’s Walk, a connection that the novel will eventually make clear. Like the fantastic representation of the fog, fantasy here serves to forge connections between separate characters and locations.

Dickens begins with an invocation of a dream-like state, yet almost immediately denies that imagination is at play. He tells the reader, “Not that there is any superabundant life of imagination on the spot, for Sir Leicester is not here (and, truly, even if he were, would not do much for it in that particular).” He goes on to examine the potential for “motions of fancy among the lower animals of Chesney Wold” (103), tracing from horses to dogs the flickering possibilities of an imaginative world. He invests the animals with their own grievances, social institutions, and interests. He then
punctures his fanciful portrait: “Be this as it may, there is not much fancy otherwise stirring at Chesney Wold. If there be a little at any odd moment, it goes, like a little noise in that echoing place, a long way, and usually leads off to ghosts and mystery” (105). Here in a series of well-constructed paragraphs Dickens both anchors his Gothic Chesney Wold in a kind of realism, denying the imagination, and proceeds to map onto it his imagined vision of the animal world. In closing this discussion he then sets his stage for the ghost story he is to tell, leaving us unsure exactly how to read it. Dickens’s hermeneutic here seeks to enforce this kind of ambiguity in order to open up the possibilities of reading both on the level of topos and chora. The ambiguous status of “fancy” in this chapter leads the reader to question, not the literal veracity of the story Mrs. Rouncewell will tell, but perhaps its existence as only story, that is story divorced from the rest of the events of the novel.

Rosa introduces the Ghost Walk in a passage that demonstrates Dickens’s ability to negotiate topos and chora. She is in the midst of leading Guppy through the house commenting on portraits, and rooms, and other fixtures, and she concludes the tour with a description “which is always this.” The narrative implies that each time she gives this tour of the house she concludes by telling the guests “The terrace below is much admired. It is called, from an old story in the family, ‘The Ghost’s Walk’” (111). The place is referenced twice before this, once in chapter 2, where the narrator describes how “the heavy drops fall, drip, drip, drip, upon the broad flagged pavement, called, from old time, the Ghost’s Walk, all night” (21) and in nearly the exact same terms at the beginning of chapter 7 (103). These earlier references to the Ghost’s Walk present it as topos, divorced from story. In this aspect it is a topos, a geographic space that exists alongside Lady
Dedlock’s chambers and the long drawing-room. While in Rosa’s account it is introduced foremost as a geographic place, through the medium of a tour of Chesney Wold. The context of the tour also situates it in the framework of a narrative. And Rouncewell’s recounting of the tale modifies this further: it is a space that is constructed in part, as the name given to it suggests, of narrative. Place here, like the novel’s tension between realism and fantasy, is to recall Sheldrake, a product of “a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative.”

The story that shapes the meaning of the Ghost Walk is a tale of family tragedy and vengeance that has implications for the narrative as a whole. The story centers on one of the Dedlock ancestors and the English Civil War. Sir Morbury Dedlock and his wife find themselves on opposite sides during the conflict, and the animosity ultimately leads to this Lady Dedlock’s betrayal (she lames the estate’s horses in order to prevent them from aiding the royalists). She is in the process lamed herself, and begins to pine away, still plodding about the house with a tremendous limp. As she dies on the Ghost’s Walk she offers a curse to the Dedlock family: “I will die here, where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity or disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!” (113). This narrative resonates throughout the text. The unnamed Lady Dedlock becomes an emblem of disgrace and betrayal. Her story serves to foreshadow the tragedy of the novel’s climax, Lady Dedlock dropped in front of the cemetery gates, like her predecessor “drop[ped] upon the pavement” of the Ghost’s Walk.

The Ghost’s Walk unites space as previously mentioned, but it also serves to connect past and present, pointing to the entrenched institutional problems the nation has.
As John O. Jordan writes, “Foundational in the history of the Dedlock family, it is also foundational in the history of England” (120). In this reading, the Ghost’s Walk represents national trauma, one which is still felt through its spectral manifestations:

The fall and injury to the first Lady Dedlock’s body are the physical mark of a rift between husband and wife but also the antagonism between their social classes and political parties. The curse of the first Lady Dedlock is thus the sign of an unhealed wound, a wound dating from two centuries earlier (the 1640s) that still insists on being heard in the Victorian age (the 1840s). (121)

Jordan’s reading of the Ghost’s Walk in this way serves to point out how the fantastic element diffuses the problems of history into the present. Without the *chora* the story is history, specific to one point in time, a curiosity but distant from the present. However, once we allow for the imaginative possibility that ghosts indeed do walk the Ghost’s Walk, then suddenly history is not so dead. The past, to steal from Faulkner, “isn’t even past.” As Jordan writes, “To read the ghost story of chapter 7 as an allegory of the English national past and the family ghost of Chesney Wold as a specter haunting the house of England is to turn from figurative and biographical ghosts to historical ones” (122-3). Here Jordan has hit on an interesting paradox, one which informs Dickens’s use of the fantastic: the fantasy of the ghost allows us to read the particular story of the first Lady Dedlock as a story about more than just the first Lady Dedlock, a story which resonates with the broader experience of English history. The Ghost’s Walk thus becomes more “real” the more fantastic it is.

Dickens returns to the merged *chora* and *topos* of the Ghost’s Walk at various points throughout the novel, and it becomes a touchstone of sorts for any discussion of
Lady Dedlock’s relation to Esther (even when that relationship is unknown to the reader.) Mrs. Rouncewell, for instance, detects the foreboding footstep while Lady Dedlock takes on the guise of Hortense to visit Nemo’s grave (264). The Ghost’s Walk is again invoked when Lady Dedlock considers love. After ascertaining that Rosa is in love with Watt Rouncewell, Lady Dedlock sits by the fire. While Dickens’s narrator shows a characteristic inability to fully enter her consciousness it is suggested that she is contemplating her past relationship with Nemo/Hawdon. The Ghost’s Walk with all of its echoes of disgrace returns, shaping Lady Dedlock’s reminiscences: “Or does she listen to the Ghost’s Walk and think what step does it most resemble? A man’s? A woman’s? The pattering of a little child’s feet, ever coming on—on—on? Some melancholy influence is upon her, or why should so proud a lady close the doors and sit alone upon the hearth so desolate?” (457).

Esther dwells upon the story at length when she learns the secret of her nativity. She walks Chesney Wold at nightfall, the landscape shrouded in Gothic darkness and comes across a sight which again links the present Lady Dedlock with the family ghost story: “I turned with the turning of the path, to the south front; and there, above me, were the balustrades of the Ghost’s Walk, and one lighted window that might be my mother’s” (586). Esther further confirms this parallel, the current real events read through the hermeneutic of the ghost story which gives them a new meaning:

The way was paved here, like the terrace overhead, and my footsteps from being noiseless made an echoing sound upon the flags. Stopping to look at nothing, but seeing all I did see as I went, I was passing quickly on, and in a few moments should have passed the lighted window when my echoing
footsteps brought it suddenly into my mind that there was a dreadful truth in the legend of the Ghost’s walk; that it was I, who was to bring calamity upon the stately house; and my warning feet were haunting it even then.

(586)

This prophecy is indeed fulfilled, as we are assured it will be. Tulkinghorn’s discovery of Esther’s parentage is part of the multi-plot framework that concludes the novel. Upon the confrontation between Tulkinghorn and Lady Dedlock, we learn that Lady Dedlock is “followed by the faithful step on the Ghost’s Walk” (660), and Rouncewell invokes it a number of times as the novel begins to work towards it climax. The most resonant moment is when she tells George that “the step on the Ghost’s Walk will walk my Lady down, George; it has been many a day behind her, and now it will pass her and go on” (889).

The story of the Ghost’s Walk, invoked to presage Lady Dedlock’s downfall also continues Dickens’s agenda of elucidating moral connections. While Tulkinghorn may be directly responsible for Lady Dedlock’s flight and subsequent death and the novel certainly condemns his manipulative cruelty, the connection with the Ghost’s Walk serves to make one further connection. Through the medium of the family ghost story, the whole aristocratic line stretching back to the English Civil war becomes implicated in the tragedy. Lady Dedlock is replaying a historical moment, one which has its origins and institutionalization in the Dedlock family. Again here Vanden Bossche’s work is helpful, for he points to how entrenched the Dedlock family history is within Britain’s institutional history (19). And yet the disgraced woman is nothing new, but is in some ways a consequence of the institutional system itself.
But if Dickens uses story to presage Lady Dedlock’s fall from grace, he uses imagination to redeem her also. At the end of the novel Lady Dedlock is dead, and there is little that can be done in the earthly realm to restore her. Yet Dickens is able to express his moral judgment through again returning to the realm of the fantastic. In the last chapter of the novel Dickens’s third-person narrator returns to Chesney Wold. There are rumors about Lady Dedlock’s death, but they have generally subsided. The narrator tells us “Lady Dedlock lies in the mausoleum in the park” and that “some of her old friends . . . did once occasionally say, when the World assembled together, that they wondered the ashes of the Dedlocks, entombed in the mausoleum, never rose against the profanation of her company. But the dead-and-gone Dedlocks take it very calmly, and have never been known to object” (981). Not only has Sir Leicester shown his devotion to her and his acceptance of her as his wife through the burial, Dickens uses the possibilities of fantastic narrative to suggest that she is like the rest of the Dedlocks, and that her disgrace is not truly disgraceful. Again chora allows Dickens to express a moral judgment that is unavailable through the means of topos. The reader learns from this passage that Lady Dedlock is redeemed, or perhaps not ever in need of absolution, thus this merging of topos and chora performs an epistemological function here. While it is possible to read Lady Dedlock’s death and burial as purely corporeal and outside of our discussions of chora, it is important to note the way that the relationship of topos and chora is constructed. Lady Dedlock may be personally outside of the realm of chora, but the memory of her is not. The story of the Ghost’s Walk demonstrates that the dead do survive chorically beyond their corporeal state if only in the fantastic stories we construct around them.\footnote{19. I must acknowledge Jordan’s interesting coda here. In the appendix to his recent monograph,}
One of Dickens’s primary strategies in *Bleak House* is to employ these fantastic (choric) elements on top of the realist *topos* of the novel’s plot through the device of imagination and storytelling. If, as I have sought to demonstrate, Dickens constructs much of the intended meaning of his text through this strategy—creating further complex webs of moral connection and responsibility between characters and situations—then it is also instructive to look at several characters who do not, or are unable to approach the moral lessons found within imagination and imaginative stories. This ultimately corresponds with the curious narrative structure of Dickens’s novel. *Bleak House* is told from two perspectives, the quasi-omniscient third-person narrator already mentioned and Esther Summerson, the novel’s first-person narrator. If the third-person narrator invites us to read fantastically, it is Esther who gives us an example of what effect that might have. If, as I have sought to argue, the main thrust of Dickens’s choric commentary or hermeneutic demand is to point to the moral connections between the disparate spectrums of London’s inhabitants, connections that a narrative on the level of *topos* has difficulty sustaining, then it is Esther Summerson who puts these hermeneutics into practice. Esther, who reads her situation fantastically throughout the novel is at the center of the moral questions. The heart of all ethical discussion in *Bleak House* centers on the question of (as a professor of mine once put it) “what would Esther do.”

Jordan muses about the possibility of a ghost in the final illustration of the mausoleum in *Bleak House*. Jordan is himself only half convinced about the status of various blurs in various versions of the illustration. The existence of such an image would open up a number of interpretive questions regarding the relationship of the illustration to the text, and of course the ghost to the resolution of the plot and the posthumous moral judgment I now posit. But what Jordan’s interesting discussion does most of all is again return us to the startling quality of *Bleak House* and its relationship to the imagination, something Jordan calls “The *Bleak House* effect, which is ‘the novel’s way of luring its characters (and readers) to imagine things that might have been but never were or that exist only in their minds’” (147).

20. While outside of the scope of the present examination there is an interesting case to be made regarding Esther’s imaginative development, including the interaction we have between herself and her childhood friend, her doll. Such an analysis might further link her with Miss Flite who’s choric
Esther to the two sets of characters that Dickens presents us who explicitly fail to read fantastically, the Smallweed clan and Mr. Tulkinghorn respectively, we can see the moral difference that comes in reading fantastically.

After a protracted discussion of the practicality of using the fantastic to forge these moral connections it should not surprise us that some of Bleak House’s most morally reprehensible characters fail to do precisely what Dickens would like us to do, that is discover within the fantastic devices of story a connection to the moral world. Dickens presents us with two sets of characters who explicitly fail to see the value of stories. Both the Smallweed family as a collective, and Mr. Tulkinghorn as an individual have no recourse to the fantastic, and certainly in Tulkinghorn’s case this lack of connection proves fatal as he disregards the warning given to him by the figure of Allegory.

The Smallweed clan is a group whose entire lives are bound up in making money. They are a set of people that in the midst of their business have forgotten, or never learned, Jacob Marley’s moral revelation that “Mankind was my business.” Dickens informs us that their devotion to the “God of Compound Interest” has caused them to shrink from all but the most serious mercantile instruction. Tales of fantasy that might help the Smallweeds learn the larger truths at the heart of Dickens’s novel are expressly forbidden:

During the whole time consumed in the slow growth of this family tree, the house of Smallweed, always early to go out and late to marry, has strengthened itself in its practical character, has discarded all amusements,
discountenanced all story-books, fairy-tales, fictions, and fables, and banished all levities whatsoever. Hence the gratifying fact that it has had no child born to it and that the complete little men and women whom it has produced have been observed to bear a likeness to old monkeys with something depressing on their minds. (333)

The Smallweeds have denied themselves the very things that make us human, and without the power of story they resemble little more than morose animals.

Tulkinghorn is another figure who cannot grasp the truth of story. He is aligned, like the Smallweeds, with both pre-redemption Dombey and Scrooge. Just as Scrooge is “secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster,” Tulkinghorn is “an Oyster of the old school, whom nobody can open” (158). As his interactions with the painted Allegory demonstrate he is unable to read beyond the level of topos to his detriment.

The stolid lawyer spends his life “beneath the painted ceiling, with foreshortened Allegory staring down at his intrusion as if it meant to swoop upon him, and he cutting it dead.” This figure of Allegory re-appears throughout the text, always pointing towards the place Tulkinghorn sits, before the window: “From the ceiling, foreshortened Allegory, in the person of one impossible Roman upside down, points with the arm of Samson (out of joint, and an odd one) obtrusively toward the window. Why should Mr. Tulkinghorn, for such no-reason, look out of window? Is the hand not always pointing there? So he does not look out of window” (259). Tulkinghorn fails to read Allegory as anything other than a painting on the ceiling. He cannot admit to the possibility that the painting has something important to tell him. Yet we know that in the world of the novel, this place where fantastic story meets hard brutal fact, Allegory does point to significant
things. Indeed the figure of Allegory points out the places of connection, moral and otherwise. Allegory doesn’t shift, yet a proper imaginative interpretation sees the world shift around Allegory, and indeed Allegory’s final role in the narrative is presaged by its first description.

If Tulkinghorn could only read Allegory correctly, and look out the window of his study, he might begin to realize these moral connections and perhaps realize his responsibility to them. However, he doesn’t, and ultimately Allegory becomes a symbol of his own doom. The final description of Tulkinghorn’s death and discovery is one of Dickens’s many virtuoso performances:

He is pointing at a table with a bottle (nearly full of wine) and a glass upon it and two candles that were blown out suddenly soon after being lighted. He is pointing at an empty chair and at a stain upon the ground before it that might be almost covered with a hand. These objects lie directly within his range. An excited imagination might suppose that there was something in them so terrific as to drive the rest of the composition, not only the attendant big-legged boys, but the clouds and flowers and pillars too—in short, the very body and soul of Allegory, and all the brains it has—stark mad. It happens surely that every one who comes into the darkened room and looks at these things looks up at the Roman and that he is invested in all eyes with mystery and awe, as if he were a paralysed dumb witness. (750-1)

Allegory continues to point at the spot where Tulkinghorn lies. And while it is posited that “the Roman has some new meaning in him” (750), it is towards this that the Roman
has been pointing since his first appearance. Dickens here returns back to fantastic story, demonstrating in the final paragraphs of the chapter that the meaning glossed upon Allegory through narrative has wisdom in it:

So it shall happen surely, through many years to come, that ghostly stories shall be told of the stain upon the floor, so easy to be covered, so hard to be got out, and that the Roman, pointing from the ceiling shall point, so long as dust and damp and spiders spare him, with far greater significance than he ever had in Mr. Tulkinghorn’s time, and with a deadly meaning.

(752)

If Tulkinghorn had been more attuned to reading on the level of *hora*, rather than simply the realist level of *topos*, perhaps he would have understood the connections between himself and the others which surround him and ultimately the circumstances that lead to his death.

In the cases of both Tulkinghorn and the Smallweed clan Dickens seems to be saying that meaning is created through fantastic understandings. We are able to forge moral connections through the imagination. These characters all fail to understand the way in which meaning is constructed and as a result are morally bankrupt.

It is these moral connections and the ability to see them, that gives rise to empathy. As a narrative device this mingling of the fantastic and the realist, the “romantic” with the “familiar” allows Dickens to trace the moral connections between individuals across his cosmologically linked Britain. The fact that Dickens uses meta-narratives and modes of interpretation to present this fantastic level demonstrates that he is keenly aware of the role that storytelling plays in the construction of meaning. Through
the use of these fantastic narratives Dickens maintains a commitment to a realism wherein the mire that is Tom-All-Alone’s may not be denied, while prompting the reader to construct a fantastic meaning that concretely links that mire to the real institutions of Victorian Britain. It allows him to foreshadow and enact Lady Dedlock’s disgrace as recognized by social institutions, but also allows him to have her judged from beyond the grave. Dickens is able to achieve this seemingly paradoxical goal by allowing imaginative interpretation and fantastic storytelling to construct the meaning of the realist events he narrates.

_Bleak House_ may be seen as the culmination of a strategy that Dickens had been developing in earlier works such as _A Christmas Carol_ and _Dombey and Son_. In _A Christmas Carol_ Dickens focuses on one of the projected goals of realism, examining moral revelation, while utilizing fantasy as a framework to do so. _Dombey and Son_ further elaborates upon this theme, providing the reader with a longer, more substantial meditation on the role that choric imagination plays on empathy. Empathy, as kindled into life by the choric imagination that allows one to see the moral connections between disparate things leads to Dombey’s redemption. In _Bleak House_ Dickens pushes _chora_ even further, using it to connect disparate peoples and locations, creating a web of moral responsibility that is a clarion call to humanitarian arms by those who have choric eyes to see. Dickens rhetorically asks “what connection can there be?” and gives us Esther Summerson as an example to follow.
Chapter Three

Composing Chora: Dramatizing Meaning Making in Charlotte and Emily Bronte

Like Dickens, Charlotte and Emily Brontë encourage the reader to interpret their texts through a choric lens. The two texts examined in this chapter are united not just by the familial relationship of their authors, but also by their reliance on layers of narration. While *Bleak House* also relies in part on a first-person narrator, the two novels under consideration here, Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, are both texts whose fantastic interpretive hermeneutic is bound up entirely in their statuses as first-person accounts and the narrative frameworks built around those accounts. *Chora*, for both of the Brontës operates as a product of particular characters’ psychological states. Whereas in Dickens *chora* stems from the author’s investment of a particular *topos* with choric significance—a significance that is then recognized or ignored by characters—for the Brontës *chora* is related directly to the individual narrator’s act of narration.
i. Snowe Amidst the Tempest: Storm and the Fantastic Representation of Trauma in *Villette*

Robert Newsome has noted that *Bleak House* and *Villette* share a concern with gender, and to some extent undermine traditional Victorian gender roles. While it is doubtful that the two writers were aware of these similarities, it is difficult from a reader’s perspective not to notice them. Charlotte Brontë read at least the first number of *Bleak House*, and commented quite critically on it, writing in a letter to her publisher George Smith: “Is the 1st number of ‘Bleak House’ generally admired? I liked the Chancery part—but where it passes into the autobiographic form and the young woman who announces that she is not ‘bright’ begins her history—it seems to me too often weak and twaddling—an amiable nature caricatured—not faithfully rendered in Miss Esther Sumerson” (*Letters*, 27).

It is intriguing that Charlotte Brontë would make such a comment regarding Esther, a figure whose self-deference appears to be the product of neglect and abuse. Her analysis that Esther is a “caricature” offers some very interesting possibilities, and points to both the similarities and differences between *Villette*, which she was writing when *Bleak House* began its serial run, and Dickens’s masterpiece. Both novels take as their subject matter a traumatized woman, but Brontë’s novel is a much darker vision of trauma: Lucy Snowe is a figure for whom Esther Summerson could easily stand as a kind of caricature (though one would be hard pressed to describe Lucy as amiable.) Both novels also use the fantastic as means to express what is not available rationally, though these usages serve distinct purposes. In Dickens, as I have sought to show, the choric interpretive framework allows Dickens to construct a moral universe and solve the

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1. See “*Villette and Bleak House*: Authorizing Women.”
systematic problems of realism. *Villette* uses *chora* in order to represent that which is unrepresentable in realist terms, Lucy Snowe’s experience of trauma. Both texts then, use *chora* in order to solve specific problems of realism, though those problems stem from very different concerns.

Lucy’s trauma is first represented through the extended metaphor of a shipwreck, an image which both conceals and reveals the events. In representing her years after leaving the Brettons, Lucy invokes the images of the sea in order to both mask and express the traumatic experience of her life:

> Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbor still as glass— the steersman stretched on the little deck his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest? (35)

This imagery is curious, for while Lucy asks the reader to imagine this image in order not to imagine whatever trauma has occurred, the trauma itself peeks out, winking from the language and allusions our narrator uses to mask it. Her reference to “a harbor still as glass” is a direct recollection of Coleridge’s *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The line “The harbor-bay was clear as glass” comes the end of Book 6 of the work, and while descriptive of a part of the Mariner’s redemption, it only occurs after he has suffered his curse and the traumatic experiences shipboard. “The steersman stretched on the little deck his face up to heaven, his eyes closed” may also in this context recall the corpses of the Mariner’s fellow sailors strewn across the ship’s deck. And the steersman is not lost
in prayer, or deep in prayer, he is *buried* in prayer. These halcyon days seem far less halcyon; the figure of death seems to gleam through this thin veneer, before it is explicitly broken by Lucy’s next admission.

Lucy goes on to discuss that if she was indeed happy at some point it ended, though she does not inform us how. She writes

> I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have somehow been a wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared, we cast with our own hands the tackling out of the ship; a heavy tempest lay on us; all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (35)

This passage makes obvious what underlies the initial use of the metaphor in the previous paragraph. The extended metaphor here also relates to the extended descriptions of the possible shipwreck and drowning of M. Paul at the novel’s end. Storms in *Villette* follow a curiously choric trajectory, beginning with this metaphorical storm and developing into actual storms interpreted through this metaphorical lens. Further these storms couple with other Gothic images such as the ghostly nun, which are not robbed of their power even when they are proven to be fraudulent. This unspecified, yet specific, trauma haunts Lucy in the form of nightmares, and later in the novel we do get such nightmares. In chapter fifteen, for instance, Lucy recounts such a nightmare where “the well-loved dead, who
had loved me well in life, met me elsewhere” (160). While masking the tragedy, this passage expresses the extent to which it still haunts our narrator.

In order to clarify precisely why Lucy relies on the metaphor of the shipwreck and a choric hermeneutic to express the *topos* of trauma, we can turn to recent developments in the field of trauma theory in order to explore the relationship between trauma and representation. Trauma theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Jill L. Matus, and Ann Kaplan all focus on the epistemological problems inherent in traumatic experience and the difficulty of representing those experiences. Caruth writes of Freud’s literary bent, “If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (3). This is clearly a central focus of *Villette*, and is heavily represented by what is both present and absent in the text.

In examining *Villette* through the lens of trauma theory I wish to strike a necessary balance between the application of a generic and universal (dare I say Platonic) form of “trauma” drawing from Freudian and post-Freudian psychology and a more historically specified understanding of the subject. Jill L. Matus in her recent monograph *Shock, Memory, and the Unconscious in Victorian Fiction*, comments on the problematic nature of trauma as a generic theoretical paradigm, especially when applied retroactively to a period whose concepts of mind do not wholly square with our own:

A recent trend in literary criticism deploying trauma theory is the retrospective diagnosis of anguished fictional subjects as suffering from trauma, as if trauma were a timeless and historically transcendent category. It is seldom that critics invoking the concept of trauma reflect on
the history of its discursive development and provenance or attempt to read Victorian novels in the context of nineteenth-century theories of psychic shock or wound. (8)

Matus is rightly critical of the application of contemporary (far from unvexed) theories of trauma to Victorian works. However, I would argue that this is an issue of balancing different conceptual terms. While Charlotte Brontë predates Freud, Lacan, and of course Caruth, it is important to note that her works are filled with the elements which Freud, Lacan, and Caruth would label as traumatic. There are two important things that must be remembered regarding the applications of these terms to periods which predate them, and that is both their basis in actual lived human experience, and the influence of literature itself in the formation of such terms. Matus herself emphasizes the importance of the relationship between Victorian concepts of mind and the post-Freudian concepts that in some ways seek to elide them. Matus’s primary terminology, drawing from the literature of the period, is that of the shock, and she emphasizes the important relationship between the shock as physical and the shock as psychical. She notes that Freud’s concept of

2. The first of these two points is made clear in the case of Charlotte Brontë, by the numerous biographical readings of her work. For much of their critical history, Brontë’s narratives have been read through this particular paradigm, as Tromley noted in 1982: “what is lacking in most Brontë criticism is a willingness to read the novels as coherent fictions without recourse to what we know or think we know of their creator” (9). While I would like to think that the dearth of non-biographical criticism has been remedied in the three decades since Tromley wrote, such an emphasis on Charlotte Brontë’s life does demonstrate her work’s relationship to her own experiences of trauma. While I am less concerned with relating Villette to the biographical events that impact it—the Brontës’ lives in Brussels, and the deaths of her siblings shortly before the novel’s composition—these relationships point to the origins of literary representations in lived experience.

The second point, that psychological theory is deeply intertwined with literature in general, is evident throughout the field of psychology. While Matus argues that this relationship has been inadequately explored (and is indeed part of her project) one cannot examine Freud without becoming aware of the multitude of literary references throughout. Matus emphasizes this point as well: “It is an increasingly disputed assumption that literature simply follows or reflects what medical science makes available conceptually. As the work of Gillian Beer, George Levine and many others has shown, literature is not just a passive receptor of scientific ideas, but a participatory agent in their formation” (12). My argument from this is simple: that our contemporary usages of trauma theory are worthwhile up to the point when they are not, and that it is important to note that these concepts were not available to the writers we examine. Indeed the writers we examine helped in some ways to shape these concepts.
trauma inhabits a liminal space between these two positions, but post-Freudian conceptions tend to set the physical and the mental in opposition to one another and divide them based on period. Physicality is relegated to modernity, while mental trauma is seen as its post-modern successor. This severing of the relationship between the physical and mental conceptions is problematic, as Matus notes:

opposing shock and trauma has the effect of rewriting the tensions within the two concepts . . . Similarly a distinction between shock as pointing to the world or the collective order, and trauma to the subject or individual, erases the complex interactions and dependencies between world and subject. Furthermore, the psychical effects of shock, and the relation between the psychic and the physiological, are the subject of increasing scrutiny and competing formulation in the period under consideration. (4)

Matus’s points here are important for they illustrate the relationship between the subject and the external world, and the impossibility of severing the two. She further anchors the emergence of concepts of trauma in relation to the psychological as well as the physical. Again while Charlotte Brontë pre-dates Freud, Freud finds his metaphorical footing in these developing conceptions of mind.

Within Lucy Snowe’s elided narrative of trauma there is an event which also inhabits “a borderland concept between the physical and psychical” (Matus 4). The shipwreck metaphor carries with it both physical danger of drowning–represented with intense physicality despite the episode’s overt status as metaphor–and the psychological damage of loss. As this chapter points out, a number of Lucy’s expressions of her trauma are both physically and psychologically resonant
Following some of the basic understandings of trauma from Caruth, with Matus’s caveats in mind, it should not surprise us that Lucy does not give a straightforward account of the event that has traumatized her. Nor should her narrative’s lack of a distinct event lead us to believe that her trauma is a more generalized one of womanhood or authorship. We should, rather, view Lucy’s trauma as unspecified yet specific. While the novel is interested in the precarious position of women, Lucy herself offers a specific case with a specific, and indeed peculiar, focus. Focusing on the narrative form that traumatic events take, Caruth points out that the traumatic event itself is unrepresentable:

The experience of trauma, the fact of latency, would thus seem to consist, not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in an inherent latency within the experience itself. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. (17)

The trauma creates a rupture which makes direct representation of the experience impossible. Caruth’s usage of latency, following Freud, is especially important, as it points to the way in which the unrepresentable becomes represented in its effects. Trauma, by its very nature does not go away, existing in a kind of liminal state that is represented only elliptically.³ Ann Kaplan has further revised the assertions surrounding

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³ This claim regarding trauma and its creation of a rupture is not uncontroversial. Caruth’s work has been criticized for the problems of memory. In Caruth’s formulation traumatic events somehow bypass memory formation, hence the inability to represent them. A number of critics have objected to this treatment of the subject and the neurobiological data that Caruth uses to support it (see Ruth Leys, Susannah Radstone, and Sigrid Weigel.) While these objections to Caruth’s emphasis on dissociation are important, many of them risk ignoring the issue altogether. As Ann Kaplan notes “What seems wrong in the way criticisms have been formulated is the apparent dismissal of the phenomena of both dissociation and generational transmission of trauma. Many have written movingly about the experience of dissociation
dissociation, providing a more nuanced view of the phenomena and pointing to the problems of classifying trauma singularly. In her formulation trauma may work in multiple ways, both psychologically and physiologically (38). Epistemological disruption remains at the heart of Kaplan’s reformulation. This includes rendering traumatic experience difficult or impossible to represent. For my purposes it is unnecessary to wade further into this debate, whether the model for trauma is a dissociative one like the one Caruth advocates or a more multi-faceted one Kaplan formulates, what is important is that this disruption problematizes representation.

Lucy’s representation of trauma fits this pattern exceptionally well, because while the event itself defies description, its effects manifest themselves concretely. From this perspective there is a causal relationship between the trauma represented in chapter four and the “perversity” which Lucy manifests. Caruth makes this kind of connection clear: “Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). The recurring imagery of water and storm and Lucy’s actions throughout are thus best read through this lens of repetition.

Because the traumatic experience is so problematic to represent in rational, realist terms, Lucy makes uses of fantasy, including supernatural storms and ghostly nuns, to represent the experience. These choric overlays urge us to read the central topos of the

(once they become aware that such splitting has occurred)” (37). Critics who ignore dissociation altogether fail to acknowledge the actual lived experiences of trauma victims.

4. Lucy continually refers to herself as “perversion.” A telling instance occurs following a conversation with Dr. John, when she states “There is a perverse mood of mind which is rather soothed then irritated by misconception” (99). The particulars of this moment (Lucy denying herself the gratification of Dr. John’s attentions) suggest what much of the rest of the text bears out: the perversity that Lucy continually references is best understood as a kind of sadomasochism.
text as overly significant. Lucy urges us to read the numerous literal storms throughout the text through the metaphoric storm from chapter four, as her traumatic experience reverberates through the rest of the novel. Likewise, Lucy prompts us to view the ghostly nun as a supernatural apparition, obscuring the knowledge that she as narrator has, that the nun is merely a ruse.

It is curious that a discussion of trauma in *Villette* has not received more attention. Critics commonly focus on Lucy Snowe’s enigmatic identity and her role as narrator, as Annette Tromley summarizes: “paradoxically, it is by examining Lucy’s disguise—the contours of her self-portrait—that we can begin to establish the identity of the person who hides beneath the cloak and hood” (62). Yet, in examining Lucy’s narrative for signs of the woman who crafts it, many critics fail to emphasize the specific trauma and its representation which clearly have shaped Lucy. As Beverly Forsyth, one of the few critics to delve significantly into Lucy’s trauma as a specific event, states, “Unless the reader is willing to look into the face of pain there is no way to know the real Lucy Snowe . . . Lucy’s fiery heart lies imprisoned beneath years of frozen pain” (17-8). In order to establish the identity that Tromly and others search for the reader and critic must confront Lucy as a victim of trauma.

While many critics neglect any evidence of trauma in the novel, others fail to focus on the trauma as a specified event, thus diffusing trauma across the novel, and I argue, missing a critical aspect of Brontë’s narrative. The influential account by Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, for instance, reaches away from the specificity of Lucy’s individual trauma towards a more generalized one, ultimately de-emphasizing Lucy’s own fashioning of her trauma into narrative. Writing of Lucy’s breakdown in the church,
the two critics state, “It is amazing, however, how mysterious Lucy’s complaint remains. Indeed, unless one interprets backwards from the breakdown, it is almost incomprehensible: Lucy’s conflicts are hidden because . . . she represents them through the activity of other people” (416). Gilbert and Gubar see the cause of Lucy’s breakdown as the symptom of the psychodrama they hold *Villette* (as well as Charlotte Brontë’s other works) to be, which is ultimately an expression of the trauma of womanhood in general, and more specifically, the woman writer. Thus Lucy’s complaint is mysterious not because it stems from some specific traumatic instance both represented and hidden by the text, but because of a trauma inherent in the social position of the woman writer. For the two critics Lucy’s self-division and her subsequent breakdowns originate in her position as a woman with no means of expression. As she does not fit any socially acceptable category (and has seen the devouring potential of creative production in *Vashti*) she has no space in which to move. She is incarcerated within herself. This is part of Gilbert and Gubar’s larger complex surrounding “the anxiety of authorship.” Women who seek expression are rendered monsters, as *Vashti* is.

That a number of critics have sought to focus on a more generalized trauma centered around gender (as Gilbert and Gubar do) is, I think, due to both the critical interest in Charlotte Brontë as a proto-feminist, and the skillful way in which Brontë’s protagonist conceals these traumatic events. I don’t wish to reject this position entirely, for *Villette* clearly has an interest in representing the precarious position of women,

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5. Beyond Gilbert and Gubar, the role of trauma (generalized or specified) in *Villette* has been little acknowledged. Psychoanalytic readings of the novel tend to follow Gilbert and Gubar’s interest in psychodrama, or dwell on instances of surveillance and Gothic doubling as Mark M. Henneley Jr. does. Such readings are valuable, especially considering that there is potential to incorporate some of their elements into a fuller account of trauma throughout the novel. Lucie Armitt’s “Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” for instance, seeks to account for the novel’s uncanniness through a psychologization of trauma, which, from Armitt’s perspective, results in a kind of arrested development.
particularly women without social status; nor do I wish to totally dismiss the reading of other characters as expressions of Lucy’s own desires. However, I do want to re-center the discussion of Lucy Snowe to focus on her particularized trauma, as it is alluded to and elided by Lucy as narrator. While Gilbert and Gubar focus on this trauma broadly, it is important to point out that Lucy does not seem to be representative of any general class of woman. She is fiercely individual and her narrative resists generalization. She states in the midst of the trauma metaphor, “A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in that fashion; why not I with the rest?” (35). This statement serves to differentiate her from other women. Even if she began her days aligned with the world’s Ginevras, her trauma has displaced her. This trauma, described through the metaphor of the shipwreck in the fourth chapter, allows the reader to trace the thread of storm throughout the novel to its very end. Further I would argue that Lucy’s trauma creates in her a sadomasochistic complex of desires which is further exemplified in the storm’s imagery, in particular in the novel’s closing moments.

In Forsyth’s reading of Villette as an investigation into how trauma becomes an undeniable part of an individual, Lucy, if not quite transcending her pain, at least comes to terms with it through her relationship with M. Paul:

Both Lucy and M. Paul have been confined and repressed by their environment. Although M. Paul and Lucy have serious problems, the unfolding relationship between the two lays a solid foundation for their love: because M Paul accepts Lucy for the woman she is. Lucy finds the love she so desperately craves which ultimately leads to her own self-acceptance. (18)
While I agree with a number of Forsyth’s points, I am not convinced by her interpretation of the novel’s ending. While Forsyth believes that if M. Paul had not perished on his return voyage Lucy might have progressed beyond her present sadomasochistic state, I contend that Lucy Snowe’s trauma is ultimately too much for her, even with the acceptance of M. Paul. Lucy’s “perversity,” best figured as sadomasochistic behavior, is exemplified in the storm imagery which is presented throughout the novel, and finally consumes M. Paul in the novel’s final chapter. While this storm can and more than likely should be read literally, that does not prevent it from also encapsulating the emotional state of our narrator recounting it. It is in fact, in some sense, the very “perversity” that Forsyth says M. Paul is helping Lucy to overcome that drowns him.

It is paradoxical that Gilbert and Gubar’s reading of *Villette* as a novel focused on “the anxiety of authorship,” leads them to de-emphasize one of the novel’s chief authorial moments, that of Lucy Snowe’s trauma narrative. For the two critics the passages cited above simply becomes another in a long litany of deprivation: “The terrors of her childhood, the loss of her parents, the unreturned love she feels for Dr. John, and the dread of her nightmares during the long vacation are recounted in a curiously elusive way. Instead of describing the actual events, for instance, Lucy frequently uses water imagery to express her feelings of anguish at these moments of suffering” (416). Gilbert and Gubar’s reading here diffuses trauma across Lucy’s existence, failing to allow for closer relationship between events. And while Lucy continually uses images of water and storms throughout the text, no passage (with perhaps the exception of the final moments of the novel) is such a fully wrought image as that in chapter four, nor is there an image that conceals as fully as that one. From a chronological perspective the metaphorical
shipwreck of chapter four appears to be the pivotal moment of trauma, and is the storm from which all the others take their power. The fact that this storm is a metaphor and not a literal storm makes it even more intriguing.

This metaphor is not the only storm in chapter four. There is a literal storm as well, the first of a series of them which take on a greater significance than their mere topos suggests. This storm occurs in the midst of Miss Marchmont’s illness and begins, not as a storm but as a voice: “One February night—I remember it well—there came a voice near Miss Marchmont’s house, heard by every inmate, but translated perhaps only by one.” This voice, that of a spring storm, is revealed in the howling wind: “it had wailed all day; but, as night deepened, it took a new tone—an accent keen, piercing, almost articulate to the ear, a plaint, piteous and disconsolate to the nerves, trilled in every gust” (38).

Lucy listens to the wind and reads it through the choric lens of her trauma, the metaphorical storm becoming the means to interpret the literal storm:

“Oh, hush! Hush!” I said in my disturbed mind, dropping my work, and making a vain effort to stop my ears against that subtle, searching cry. I had heard that voice ere this, and compulsory observation had forced on me a theory as to what it boded. Three times in the course of my life, events had taught me that these strange accents in the storm—this restless, hopeless cry—denote a coming state of the atmosphere unpropitious to life. Epidemic diseases, I believed, were often heralded by a gasping sobbing, tormented, long-lamenting east wind. Hence, I inferred, arose the legend of the Banshee. I fancied, too, I had noticed—but was not philosopher

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6. It is important to note the language of nerves here, which unites the physical and psychical as Matus contends.
enough to know whether there was any connection between the circumstances—that we often at the same time hear of volcanic action in distant parts of the world; of rivers suddenly rushing above their banks; and of strange high tides flowing furiously in our low sea-coasts. “Our globe,” I had said to myself, “seems at such periods torn and disordered; the feeble amongst us wither in her distempered breath, rushing hot from steaming volcanoes.” (38-9)

There are several important things to note in this passage. On the level of *topos* we have the storm, something not uncharacteristic for the season. On top of this Lucy has mapped layers upon layers of *chora*, fantastic understandings of the storm that link it to folklore, disease, natural disaster, and general catastrophe. The storm becomes almost Dickensian in its production of connections across the globe. And yet Lucy returns to the concrete *topos*: She has been “taught” by the specific trauma of her past (the reference to three times points to events) to read the storm this way, and this seems to be edging toward literalizing of the initial shipwreck metaphor that will become fully literalized at the end of the novel. But we must also read this as a way in which Lucy can express that experience of trauma, trauma which is unrepresentable in its true state. This is suggested not only by the hermeneutic through which she reads the storm, but also by her characterization of her mind as “disturbed.” As further examples will make clear, these storms are linked not only to the trauma itself but the effects of that trauma on Lucy, particularly what she will term her “perversity.”

The storm leads to a strange fit of high spirits from Lucy’s charge. In the midst of the gale Miss Marchmont tells a story which seems to be quite prescient of Lucy’s. She
describes an idyllic time when she was happy with her lover. For a year her “heart lived with Frank’s heart” (39). But a tragedy as violently presented as the storm which ends the novel took Frank after that short time. Miss Marchmont asks “For what crime was I condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow?” (40). Still, despite all the pain that has been caused her, Miss Marchmont acknowledges that in some sense it has been worth it: “if few women have suffered as I did in his loss, few have enjoyed what I did in his love” (40). After relating this story, Miss Marchmont dies of a stroke. Again, we have trauma represented in relation to the storm, the storm which Lucy imbues with choric significance.

Another significant storm finds Lucy again mapping a *chora* built from trauma and representing her “perversity.” In the midst of a violent storm everyone but Lucy panics, for she is affected in a quite different way: “As for me, the tempest took hold of me with tyranny.” Lucy leaves the fearful who are inside praying and goes out into the storm. She then relates that “I did long, achingly, then for four-and-twenty hours afterwards, for something to fetch me out of my present existence, and lead me upwards and onwards” (109). Lucy then describes her act of repression which she figures violently. She casts herself in the role of Jael, the Biblical heroine who drove nails through the skull of the warrior Sisera, whom she figures as her desires. However this only will prompt a more violent outburst for “unlike Sisera, they did not die: they were but transiently stunned, and at intervals would turn on the nail with a rebellious wrench; then did the temples bleed, and the brain thrill to its core” (110). Forsyth rightly interprets this through the sadomasochistic dynamic. She writes that “Lucy identifies with both Jael, the slayer, and Sisera, the slain . . . By repressing herself, she receives pleasure from
inflicting as well as receiving mental anguish” (18). Returning to the point made earlier about the relationship between the physical and the psychological which Matus argues is an important feature of trauma, Brontë’s metaphor is one of brutal physicality. And again it is important to note that it is the storm in this scene which seems to be the catalyst as well as representative of Lucy’s feelings. If it was the metaphorical storm which brought sorrow into Lucy’s life, then it is the literal storm which allows her to express that trauma through her sadomasochistic behavior. Further this revelry in the storm is itself a masochistic enterprise. If storm and shipwreck provide the key metaphors for Lucy’s trauma as represented in chapter four, then Lucy’s excitement and agitation is a way of recapturing and reliving this trauma.

This storm is followed by several more three chapters later. The school’s long vacation is punctuated by a series of tempests that coincide with Lucy’s illness: “the Indian summer closed and the equinoctial storms began; and for nine dark and wet days, of which the Hours rushed on all turbulent, deaf, disheveled—bewildered with sounding hurricane—I lay in a strange fever of the nerves and blood” (159). As in the previous passage this storm is related to Lucy’s psyche. The phenomena of Lucy’s illness (again with physical and mental components) and the storm are so closely aligned that the passage seems to unite their time spans. The storm further makes its way into her traumatized mental life, where her trauma chorically shapes it into the drowning imagery of chapter four. Lucy characterizes (but does not describe) the dreams thus: “Between twelve and one that night a cup was forced to my lips, black, strong, strange drawn from no well, but filled up seething from a bottomless and boundless sea” (159). Here again the drowning metaphor becomes the prevalent way to describe painful experience. The
metaphor here stands in for the content of the dream which is only represented in a small fragment: “Amidst the horrors of that dream I think the worst lay here. Methought the well-loved dead, who had loved me well in life, met me elsewhere, alienated” (160).

The structure of this sequence is curious. Before Lucy recounts the “worst” horror from her dream she frames the experience of the dream (though not the content) in relation to the imagery of the ocean. This is an image of drowning, as the cup is “forced” to her lips and she must drink the “seething” sea water. Then after a description of her waking and some reflections on her state of mind we are given that solitary glimpse into the content of the dream. This once again serves to demonstrate the failure of realist rational language to provide an account of trauma. It is filtered again through metaphor, to the point that even dreams stemming from it must be insulated.

These storms are in most of these cases literal. But Lucy reads them through the paradigm of her trauma, mapping a chora that expresses the way in which her life has been damaged by trauma. The repetition of the chora is the product of trauma, the latent essence of the trauma that must find expression. At the novel’s end this storm imagery seems to literalize, consuming M. Paul in Villette’s famously ambiguous ending.

At the beginning of chapter 42 Lucy describes her fear at M. Paul’s impending departure: “Those years of absence! How had I sickened over their anticipation! The woe they must bring seemed certain as death” (493). She invokes the image of the Juggernaut pressing towards her: “I, the prostrate votary—felt beforehand the annihilating craunch.” But it turns out that her fears were unfounded, and M. Paul’s absence was not so terrible: “that anticipatory craunch proved all—yes—nearly all the torture.” Rather, despite her predictions and despite what logic might say, these years are anything but sorrowful.
Lucy writes, “M. Emmanuel was away three years. Reader, they were the three happiest years of my life. Do you scout the paradox?” This language recalls in some ways Miss Marchmont’s recollection of the happiest year of her life, the one in which Fred was present; however the very issue here is exactly that. Lucy’s happiest years are those not in which her lover is present, but rather when the supposed source of her happiness is distant, reachable only through letters. She tells us, I suspect, so that we do not doubt the sincerity of her feelings for her betrothed, that her happiness is not based upon only hope. She writes,

Do not think that this genial flame sustained itself, or lived wholly on a bequeathed hope or parting promise. A generous provider supplied bounteous fuel. I was spared all chill, all stint; I was not suffered to fear penury; I was not tried with suspense. By every vessel he wrote; he wrote as he gave and as he loved, in full-handed, full-hearted plentitude. He wrote because he liked to write; he did not abridge because he cared not to abridge. He sat down, he took pen and paper, because he loved Lucy and had much to say to her; because he was faithful and thoughtful, because he was tender and true. There was no sham and no cheat, and no hollow unreal in him. Apology never dropped her slippery oil on his lips—never proffered by his pen, her coward feints and paltry nullities: he would give neither a stone, nor an excuse—neither a scorpion, nor a disappointment; his letters were real food that nourished, living water that refreshed. (494)

It is through these letters that the two have their honest discourse, a discourse that they have never had while in each other’s presences. He is, it seems, more present through his
letters than he has ever been physically. According to Lucy there is none of the petty pedantry he expresses towards her throughout the novel. And we get very little suggestion of her written intercourse with him. It is curious that these letters are mediated through Lucy in the manner they are. She does not quote them the way she often presents conversation, or other correspondence, but rather summarizes their emotional impact. Lucy is only able, it seems, to have a happy relationship with one who is absent. In that individual’s presence her sadomasochistic impulse is to turn away, as she had been doing with those that she desires from the first. Lucy’s happiest years are just an extension of her perversity.

The storm at the end of the novel is tied directly back to the metaphoric storm of chapter four, through which Lucy presents and encloses her traumatic past. It further signifies that trauma’s continued effect on Lucy. The novel’s culmination in shipwreck is thus rendered as the fulfillment of a sadomasochistic prophecy that has been playing out throughout the text as Lucy retreats from what she desires. While the storm and shipwreck here is most likely literal, in the realm of *topos*, Lucy’s representation of it is clearly choric. It becomes a locus of choric significance that intertwines with the previous storm imagery all the way back to the initial metaphor in chapter four. And given Lucy’s penchant to deny herself gratification, it is significant that this climactic moment occurs just after she has seemed to find closure. Just after her rumination on “happiest years of my life” Lucy begins to narrate the novel’s penultimate drowning. With a page break the narrative changes from past to present tense. Lucy writes,

The sun passes the equinox; the days shorten, the leaves grow sere; but he—is coming.
Frosts appear at night; November has sent his fogs in advance; the wind takes its autumn moan; but—he is coming

This brief refrain of “he is coming” ties his journey to the paragraphs which follows directly “The sky hangs full and dark—a rack sails from the west” (495). It is this strongly developed sense of foreboding that is of interest here. Brontë uses a flowing, almost poetic prose style, which moves across the events of the sea shifting (and in the process linking) from the sky hanging full and dark to the ships sailing from the west to the signs of storm which Lucy interprets. Lucy is herself able to read the language in the sky: “I know some signs of the sky; I have noted them ever since childhood.” This brings us back to the highly developed metaphor of the shipwreck earlier in the novel. From this vantage point the ship’s impending wreck is not necessarily a wreck at all, or possibly it is more than just a shipwreck. The narrative linkage of Lucy’s experience reading the signs of tragedy (much like the way she reads the howl of wind on the night Miss Marchmont dies) moves the storm which destroys M. Paul’s ship into the realm of chora. She knows the signs of tragedy from the traumatic events of her childhood, yet those were not the literal signs in the sky, for we must remember that the shipwreck at the novel’s beginning was a metaphor. The foreboding becomes no longer based around Lucy’s fear that Paul will drown in a shipwreck, but rather it becomes another expression of her perversity, the dread that M. Paul will actually return. “Do you scout the paradox?” she asks the reader, acknowledging the strangeness of her position and demonstrating an understanding of how her happiness has been created by her lover’s absence. This acknowledgement is much like the various retrospective acknowledgements of her
perversity throughout the text. It is then with the foreboding dread of the storm that she can await her lover’s arrival and the possible end to her happiness.

A letter Brontë wrote in 1853 touches on the question of the storm’s significance and what the storm means for the narrative. In response to readers who didn’t find the ending satisfactory, Brontë sent the following letter to her publisher George Smith:

> With regard to the momentous point – M. Paul’s fate- in case any one in future should request to be enlightened thereon – they may be told that it was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself, according to the quality of his disposition, the tender or remorseful impulse of his nature. Drowning and Matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The Merciful – like Miss Mulock, Mr. Williams, Lady Harriet St Clair and Mr Alexander Frazer- will of course choose the former and milder doom- drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will on the contrary pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma – marrying him without ruth or compunction to that – that- that- individual – Lucy Snow. (Letters 142)

While Brontë’s answer is flippant, it does speak to this issue of the storm. In some sense it doesn’t matter whether M. Paul drowns or not: either way he is doomed. Either way the novel’s outcome is one in which Lucy cannot overcome the storm in her past in order to live a happy life. While she may look back at those years as the three happiest years of her life, it is unlikely that she feels the same way that Miss Marchmont felt about her twelve months.
Ultimately the use of the shipwreck to link the present trauma to the trauma of Lucy’s past suggests that Lucy is still terribly affected by her trauma. In some sense it is this trauma that has swallowed up M. Paul, just as it continues to devour any chance that Lucy has of happiness. M. Paul may or may not have drowned, but the tempest inside of Lucy as represented by these many exterior tempests continues to live. “Do you scout the paradox,” Lucy asks the reader, demonstrating that she is quite aware of the perversity inherent in her position.

Throughout Villette, Lucy Snowe frustrates her own desires, retreating from her wants and withholding gratification from herself and those she cares about. This sadomasochistic dynamic is a product of her past trauma, the unnamed tragedy represented by the novel’s first shipwreck. The tempest imagery, the only way this event may be represented, links this tragedy to the current of “perversity” running throughout the text, rooting it firmly in a repression created by trauma. Lucy is unable to find healthy gratification because she cannot escape from the haunting presence of her past. Her relationships provide venues for the sadomasochistic dynamic, thus she hides herself from Dr. John, and plays dark and sometimes painful flirting “games” with M. Paul throughout their involvement. At the end of the novel, the foreboding that our narrator builds surrounding her lover’s return from the West Indies reveals more about her own psychic apprehensions than it necessarily does about his fate. What we are given with the ambiguous picture at the end of the novel is a suggestion that Lucy has been unable to overcome or reconcile her past traumas. The only relationship she may maintain is one in which her lover is absent. In the end, in the face of her lover’s return there are only two
possibilities. M. Paul must, as Brontë suggests, either drown, or return to a relationship in which his lover must continually turn away.

Ignês Sodré points to the slippery way in which the storm imagery manifests and locates its origin in the novel’s final moments:

The old Lucy is describing her traumatic experiences between the ages of fourteen and twenty-two through the use of metaphors created from her adult traumatic experiences, of reliving through identification her lover’s death by drowning. The imagery that belongs to the more recent past is cast backwards to convey symbolically an emotional childhood experience. The reader can only understand that on rereading the novel; but again we have an instance of having to reflect on Lucy’s rather than Charlotte’s use of language. (Byatt and Sodré 47)

Sodre’s point is well-made and it directs us to look at what I believe to be the most fascinating characteristic of the novel, Lucy’s mapping of other experience onto her childhood trauma. Further, following Lucy’s choric presentation of the novel’s progression this kind of choric imagination ties all of the traumatic events together, placing them in a connected lineage. In this way Lucy’s narrative is like a Möbius strip, its storm imagery endlessly turning back on itself.

Further, this chora begins to infect the text outside of the storm imagery, as the language of the storm is continually used to describe various characters and attitudes. It provides a continual pattern that draws us back to the earlier metaphor, so that Dr. John harangues the coach driver in a “storm of French” upon Lucy’s arrival in Villette (62), and her first pupils are described as “a row of eyes and brows that threatened stormy
weather” (79). This latter instance is interesting, since the description of the pupils as “stormy” is followed by a clarification: “eyes full of insolent light, and brows hard and unblushing as marble.” This passage is compelling because it points to the extraneousness, in this instance, of the storm imagery. The metaphor of stormy weather requires further clarification, demonstrating that it doesn’t fully do the work of signification expected. This in turn seems to suggest another purpose for the reference, again relating to the continual surfacing a resurfacing of Lucy’s initial trauma.

This pattern of storm as descriptor is most often applied to M. Paul, so that he “might storm, might rage” (138), or pause in his tangents like a “stormy apostrophe” (143). Even his moments of calm seem to belie the tempest within him: “He quelled, he kept down when he could; and when he could not, he fumed like a bottled storm” (154). His rages, in and out of the classroom, are consistently represented through the language of violent weather (240).

The storm imagery in these instances serves several important functions. It serves as a continual reminder of Lucy’s position as narrator. Even at moments when Lucy’s perspective seems irrelevant to the action at hand, the descriptors point back to Lucy’s status as narrator and the hermeneutic through which she views the world. This hermeneutic is one colored by the choric representations of her trauma. The metaphoric storm becomes a primary way in which she approaches her circumstances. This demonstrates how deeply ingrained her experience of trauma is and how it runs through her daily engagement with the world. The storm imagery throughout also serves the structural and stylistic function of providing narrative unity. It ties the novel’s ending to
the novel’s early stages, and the language then provides a continual intertwining thread throughout.

The novel’s storms are the most obvious and important aspects of Lucy’s traumatic experiences, but the novel’s other choric elements are also bound up in this discussion of trauma. The novel’s Gothic elements (elements with which the storm also seems to resonate) also function as expressions of Lucy’s trauma, and it is their choric nature, the way in which Lucy as narrator presents them to us as fantastic, that makes these elements particularly resonant. The ghostly nun, the most Gothic of these Gothic conventions, serves to characterize Lucy’s frozen emotional state, giving further depth to her “perversity” the result of her trauma.

Madame Beck’s school, a former convent, is an obvious place for a ghost, particularly a ghost which echoes backwards to M.G. Lewis’s anti-Catholic fantasia *The Monk*. “The legend went,” Lucy tells us, “unconfirmed and unaccredited, but still propagated, that this was the portal of a vault, imprisoning deep beneath the ground, on whose surface grass grew and flowers bloomed, the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow” (106). Lucy’s skepticism about the story aside, it provides us with a curious image, and the unnamed sin is, of course, tantalizing. Lucie Armitt, whose analysis of the novel’s uncanny elements is quite excellent, argues that “In effect, Brontë’s ghosts are narrative decoys, distractions deflecting attention from something else and, in a variety of contexts, this ‘something else’ corresponds to a ‘shadowing’ of the other” (218). However, I believe the nun has a certain importance beyond its employment as a decoy: not only is the nun an easy image of both Catholic hypocrisy (the nun’s transgression against her
vows) and brutal repression (her entombment), but it also serves as an apt signifier for Lucy herself. Lucy as a narrator is herself an entombed figure, as Tromley’s metaphor of narrative concealment suggests and as Forsythe notes in the previously quoted passage “Lucy’s fiery heart lies imprisoned beneath years of frozen pain” (17-8). While the nun herself is ultimately revealed to be a red-herring, Lucy’s experience of it, and the tales told about it, carry narrative significances that eclipse its mere *topos*.

Lucy’s representation of the ghostly nun is suitably sensational as she recounts her experience in a passage which would make Mrs. Henry Wood proud:

> Something in that vast solitary garret sounded strangely. Most surely and certainly I heard, as it seemed, a stealthy foot on that floor: a sort of gliding out from the direction of the black recess haunted by the malefactor cloaks. I turned: my light was dim; the room was long—but as I live! I saw in the middle of that ghostly chamber a figure all black or white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white.

> Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed; this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN. (245)

The ambiguity of this passage is important. “Something” makes a sound. She “heard, *as it seemed* . . . *a sort of* gliding.” The figure is “all black *or* white.” The description circles around the object until it is revealed as something “like” the ghostly nun. Further Lucy offers (if defiantly) a rationalization for the experience rooted in nervous excitement or madness. The reader of course, has already seen Lucy in states of agitation and so it does
not take much to follow Lucy’s suggestion. This linkage with Lucy’s bouts of mental imbalance seems to present the fantastic image of the ghost as another expression of her trauma, one which not only comments on her past, but on her present in specific ways: Lucy’s emotional life is entombed but not silent; buried but not still.

Lucy of course, could at any time reveal to the reader that the nun is Count De Hamel. Yet she maintains the mystery, pointing us towards readings of the novel that take the nun into both rational and supernatural account. Further, the revelation of the nun’s identity does not necessarily deflate Lucy’s own strange experience. The sequence in the attic remains ambiguous.

It is also important to note, as Beth Torgerson does, the linkage between Lucy’s psychological state and the appearance of the nun. Dr. John, who immediately sees Lucy after the aforementioned encounter sees the nun as hallucination. As Torgerson writes, “Because Lucy knows she has seen a physical being, not just a hallucination, she tends to discount Dr. John’s theories since they are not complex enough to capture reality as she has experienced it . . . However, we should not so easily discount his reading of her bodily symptoms of hysteria” (70). Lucy’s experience of the nun remains ambiguous, and because she refuses to resolve it one way or the other, it becomes choric. It thus must be read as a reflection (conscious or not) of her mental state. It is important to note here the role of chora as a hermeneutic, as a way of narration. Lucy’s narrative’s elisions create the ambiguity that allows us to interpret the nun as possibly supernatural, and thus a more resonant feature.

Armitt argues that Lucy’s mental state is one of arrested development, caused by trauma. She specifically points to the relationship between age and uncanny phenomena
such as ghosts and clairvoyance. This arrested development stops Lucy at about the age of fourteen when she leaves her Godmother’s house and places Lucy in an uncomfortable liminal position:

Fourteen is also, of course, a year in which puberty frequently strikes, and though nothing so corporeal is ever mentioned in this text, instead of adolescence opening up a world to Lucy, puberty seems to set a limit to Lucy’s horizons. This is also, of course, the age at which Victorian theosophy claimed clairvoyancy (believed to be particularly acute in girl children) started to wane. Lucy’s inability to fully leave this phase of her life behind enables her to retain an ongoing ‘feel’ for the uncanny, but restricts her access to fully-fledged adult sexuality. (219-20)

In placing Lucy in this arrested development phase, and linking it to the uncanny, she is in a sense, diffusing the uncanny across the text, not anchoring it in traditional bearers of the uncanny, such as ghosts. This diffusion seems to be similar to what John O. Jordan refers to as “the Bleak House effect” in regards to Dickens’s text. This I would argue is part of the larger choric overlay, which Brontë uses to express the way in which the unnamed childhood trauma is reflected throughout Lucy’s life.

_Villette_ is a novel filled with elements of _topos_ upon which _chora_ is mapped. Storms are transformed from natural phenomena to supernatural events that echo across the globe and echo across psyches. An illicit love affair takes the guise of, and is in a sense, transformed into a ghost story that has a greater resonance beyond its intended

7. While I believe that Dickens and Brontë are both utilizing the dynamics of _topos_ and _chora_ for different purposes, Dickens to make moral connections and facilitate empathy, and Brontë to dramatize the experience of unrepresentable trauma, the extended usage of _chora_ in both creates a similar effect in which the strange and uncanny find wide purchase across the texts.
subterfuge. All of these choric elements are employed in the service of Lucy Snowe’s trauma. They are the reverberating symptoms of a trauma that is unexpressable in the daily terms of *topos*. *Villette* mobilizes these multiple layers of hermeneutics in order to express what cannot be expressed otherwise.

The novel’s storms, including the one which appears to drown M. Paul at work’s conclusion, echo the initial trauma metaphor and Lucy reads them as an expression of that metaphor. They are further attached to the result of that trauma, Lucy’s perversity, her sadomasochistic tendencies. The image of the ghostly nun, too, provides us with an important image of Lucy that extends beyond its *topos*. Like Lucy, the nun is buried alive, beneath what Forsyth calls “years of frozen pain.” Yet her desires will, like the nun, not stay buried. They emerge throughout the text in fits of sadistic glee. As trauma theorists have continued to note, these traumas are inexpressible in rational terms, and so Lucy must call on fantastic storms, and summon phantoms in order to represent the unrepresentable.

**ii. “Is He a Ghoul or a Vampire” : The Choric Layers of *Wuthering Heights***

*Villette* is a novel that is bound up in its first-person narrator and her experience of trauma. Lucy Snowe constructs layers of *chora* on top of layers of *topos*, in order to express what she cannot express in realist terms. *Wuthering Heights*, the work of Brontë’s sister Emily, also presents *chora* as a product of layers of narration. These narrative layers, often at the distance of second and third-hand accounts, create fantastic interpretations of what could easily be identified as mundane events. As in *Bleak House*, nothing fantastic ever occurs in *Wuthering Heights*, or at least we cannot be *sure* that
anything occurs other than the mundane daily lives of a number of eccentric Yorkshiremen. And yet, despite this, the novel is indeed full of ghostly encounters, ghouls, references to heaven, hell, hell-hounds, vampires, and even the devil himself. These are, however, invoked primarily by the novel’s various narrators creating a striking and (from Brontë’s position as author) self-conscious usage of *chora*. These characterizations of the novel’s environs and characters re-shape the intergenerational and interfamilial conflicts of several clans in the Yorkshire moors into something larger and more thematically resonant that has been interpreted variously to represent proto-feminist critiques of patriarchal culture, the shifts from agrarian economy to a capitalist one, and the eclipse of Romantic emotional excess by commonsense Victorian sobriety, amongst myriads of others. In addition to allowing for these readings, Emily Brontë dramatizes the kind of meaning-making that Dickens achieves by mapping *chora* onto *topos*, perhaps offering a critique of choric readings that reduce complex social problems to simple moral solutions. This is a starkly different usage than can be found in Dickens or even in Charlotte Brontë.

*Chora*, I argue, functions in two distinct and seemingly paradoxical ways in *Wuthering Heights*. On the one hand the choric images mapped on top of the novel’s *topos* function to allow for larger thematic readings of the novel. The language of heaven and hell, vampirism, cannibalism, ghosts, and demons, allow for readings that resonate beyond the novel’s *topos*. It should not be surprising that the major critical readings of the novel rightly engage with this choric material as they seek to expand the scope of the novel beyond its matter; the *chora* has provided fertile ground for a number of critical projects. On the other hand *Wuthering Heights* is a novel heavily invested in the
dramatization of choric meaning-making. Its narrative structure is designed to highlight these acts of construction and reveal the problematic nature of these endeavors. All of the novel’s Gothic elements are bound up in these layers of narration turning them very specifically into *chora*, stories told about a *topos* made up of places and events. These further function, as many critics argue from various positions, to serve the personal and ideological agendas of the characters engaged in the telling. In this way Brontë’s novel comments upon the very act of story-telling, and the role that *chora* plays in promoting ideological agendas and silencing other points of view. Brontë’s dramatization of this process demonstrates the way in which morally complex situations may be reduced through acts of mythologization to the simple binaries of good and evil. Ultimately, literary critics as varied as Gilbert and Gubar, Terry Eagleton, Matthew Beaumont, and Beth Torgerson rely on the very same fantastic hermeneutics that Brontë seeks to expose as problematic.

*Wuthering Heights*’s usage of the Gothic is particularly important in these hermeneutic investigations, as they are in many ways the choric structures that both the novel’s characters and its critics use to establish meaning. However these meanings are far from stable, as the novel’s ghosts and vampires, its cannibals and demons are far from fixed figures. They are (like Charlotte Brontë’s ghostly nun) liminal, and heavily

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8. James Hafley argued in his influential “The Villain in *Wuthering Heights*” that Nelly Dean deploys her narrative in pursuit of a personal agenda, one which ultimately sees her triumphing over Heathcliff and Cathy both. Following Hafley’s lead a number of critics have sought to identify the motivations behind the character that Charlotte Brontë called “a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity” (Editor’s Preface lii). While dampening Hafley’s accusations of villainy, Gideon Shunami, for instance, views Nelly Dean’s narrative as personally motivated and thus lacking uncritical credibility: “Nelly Dean is a character possessing a unique personality. She is specifically linked to the narrative pattern of the novel as one of the performers in it when she, like the others, behaves out of motives which are personal and at times even selfish” (453).

9. I wish to note that these critics employ these choric hermeneutics in ways that also seem to coincide with Brontë’s critique, using them as ways to further explore complex moral problems and resisting the simpler moral viewpoints as represented by figures such as Nelly Dean.
dependent on the hermeneutics used to represent them. They are first and foremost elements of narration distinct from what narratologists would call the novel’s *fabula*. In *Narratology* Mieke Bal lays out a concise general taxonomy of narrative relationships:

A *narrative text* is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee (“tells” the reader) a story in a particular medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings, or a combination thereof. A *story* is the content of that text, and produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and “colouring” of a *fabula*; the *fabula* is presented in a certain manner. A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors. (5)

Brontë’s supernatural elements are generally products of story (in Bal’s definition) as related by various characters. The ghosts and devils are not the actual *fabula*, the matter of the novel, but remain in the margins of the text through the narrations of various characters. An important illustration of this point is found in the ghostly imagery associated with Cathy. Even the one moment where the ghost appears as part of the novel’s *fabula*—Lockwood’s vision of the young Cathy—-is presented as ambiguous.

The scene begins when Lockwood is shown to what was Cathy’s room and lies down to rest. He first dreams of a sermon by “the famous Jabes Branderham,” (23) but this transitions, in a way that is not entirely clear, into the scene of the room once again: “Presently the whole chapel resounded with rappings and counter-rappings. Every man’s hand was against his neighbor, and Branderham, unwilling to remain idle, poured forth his zeal in a shower of loud taps on the board of the pulpit, which responded so smartly that, at last to my unspeakable relief, they woke me” (24). It turns out that what woke
Lockwood, echoing into his dream it seems, is the branch of a fir tree on the window. He then goes on in a fashion which makes ambiguous the epistemological frame for what he is about to narrate: “I listened, doubtingly an instant; detected the disturber, then turned and dozed, and dreamt again; if possible, still more disagreeably than before.” This then transitions to either a new dream or a wakefulness in the next line: “This time, I remembered I was lying in the oak closet” (24). This leads to the startling moment to which the narrative has been building. In a desire to stop the noise of the branch Lockwood breaks the glass: “and stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch: instead of which my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice cold hand!” (25). The perspective of this sequence is intentionally ambiguous. It is not clear whether Lockwood is narrating a dream or an actual event, or something that exists between these states. This uncertainty can be said to be a product of the liminal nature of the dream experience, and Brontë’s narrative structure here heightens that liminality. Waking life interpenetrates into dreams (and perhaps vice-versa) as the tapping of the branch echoes in the dream-chapel.

The rapping itself is significant because it invokes the folklore of supernatural rappings, which have a long history in Britain. While most readily associated with the spiritualist movement that emerged in the late 1840s and early 1850s, there are a number of high profile hauntings reported during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that contain rapping, particularly as a form of communication. The rappings

10. A year after Wuthering Heights was published the infamous Fox Sister began to report spirit rappings in their home in upstate New York. This would eventually culminate in the development of spiritualism.

11. R.C. Finucane identifies, for instance, a series of incidents from 1716-17 in Plymouth that ultimately received notoriety because of the involvement of John Wesley’s father Samuel Wesley who “established a rapping code for communication” with “Old Jeffrey” the ghost in question. Finucane also
that echo into the first dream seem to be coming from the branch, but the branch turns out to be echoing the ghostly Cathy.

As the scene proceeds, Lockwood continues to reiterate its ambiguous status. He notes that “the intense horror of nightmare came over me” and wonders why if this is a product of his imagination did the ghost speak of herself as Catherine Linton and not Earnshaw (25). A few moments later Lockwood reports that he “yelled aloud in a frenzy of fright” and then “To my confusion I discovered the yell was not ideal” (26). Again, Lockwood’s confusion must be ours, as we have another ambiguous transition. Was Lockwood asleep or awake? The discovery that he has not broken the window pane further points to the liminality of the situation. The state of sleep has intermingled with the waking state. Lockwood’s environs in Cathy’s room have entered his dream, while the scream he emits in the dream enters the waking world, rousing Heathcliff. Heathcliff’s response does little to resolve the situation, as he fervently entreats Cathy’s ghost to return.¹²

The ambiguity of this scene (and others like it) is primarily a product of the liminality of these experiences. They are not narrative products of a fixed state. Lockwood’s location between sleeping and waking confuses his narrative and makes the epistemological status of his experience unclear. This ambiguity is both the heart of

¹² Heathcliff is clearly not a stable barometer for judging what is real in Wuthering Heights, yet neither are the other characters. While Nelly Dean is often considered the most down-to-earth character in the novel, she proves to be a problematic judge and witness herself (even if we do not consider her intentionally misrepresentative).
Todorov’s concept of the fantastic\textsuperscript{13} and an important element in Brontë’s mapping of \textit{chora} onto \textit{topos}. By creating a kind of Todorovian suspension of judgment Brontë allows for the various supernatural elements to be read as ideas mapped on top of the novel’s realist rendering of place (the Grange, the Heights) and time (Lockwood’s 1801 visit).

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick identifies Lockwood’s dream as the locus of boundary breaking within \textit{Wuthering Heights}, a position that identifies the scene (and the novel as a whole) as situated on a threshold: “the hands battling through the smashed windows are figures for many of the kinds of violated separation we have been calling Gothic. Catherine’s ghost represents the unquiet past that has not found its continuity in the present. The intrusive relationship between past and present is what shapes the novel’s narrative structure” (99). Sedgwick’s comments suggest that the novel’s interest in the troubled relationship between past and present is itself a liminal one, reliant upon a Gothic boundary breaking that maintains its ambiguous status. This ambiguity is constructed by the various characters in the novel, yet Brontë never resolves it entirely either way. Rather it is Heathcliff (and Lockwood to an extent) who read the ambiguous experience as clearly an apparition. It is Heathcliff, wracked with guilt, who constructs the meaning not only of Lockwood’s dream but of his present existence from a ghostly \textit{chora}.

\textsuperscript{13} When protagonists are faced with an event that appears to violate the laws of nature or logic they are confronted with an uncertainty about its origin. There are, according to Todorov, two options: either the event is illusory or somehow explainable, or it is real and something supernatural has occurred. Todorov writes that “the fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25).
The ambiguity of these ghostly images continues throughout the text, with Heathcliff and his obsessive invocation of a phantom Cathy as emblem. A significant scene in this complex of images occurs upon Cathy’s death. Nelly Dean informs Heathcliff of Cathy’s passing. Heathcliff, with the violent passion with which he has become synonymous, demands her supernatural attentions:

“May she wake in torment!” he cried, with frightful vehemence, stamping his foot, and groaning in a sudden paroxysm of ungovernable passion.

“Why, she’s a liar to the end! Where is she? Not there—not in heaven—not perished—where? Oh! you said you cared nothing for my sufferings! And I pray one prayer—I repeat it till my tongue stiffens—Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest as long as I am living; you said I killed you—haunt me, then! The murdered do haunt their murderers, I believe. I know that ghosts have wandered on earth. Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! Oh, God! it is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul!” (169)

The trajectory of this passage is important. It begins with Heathcliff’s plea that Cathy not rest, suggesting that the peaceful heavenly repose promised in scripture is the ultimate separation. The language of haunting becomes a plea to preserve their unified whole from “this abyss, where I cannot find you.” It is a scene that invokes the supernatural, but ultimately seems to fail in creating any supernatural effect, despite Heathcliff’s contention that “the murdered do haunt their murderers.”
As I have already argued, Heathcliff and his ghostly connection to a dead Cathy are a primary emblem of the liminal state that the supernatural elements inhabit in *Wuthering Heights*. If Heathcliff invokes a ghostly Cathy in order to avoid “this abyss, where I cannot find you,” the question stands as to whether he actually ever does find her in the novel. In order to answer this we can return to Lockwood’s dream sequence and its aftermath. Upon hearing of the figure at the window Heathcliff rushes to the bed and opens the casement: “‘Come in! come in!’ he sobbed. ‘Cathy do come. Oh do—once more! Oh my heart’s darling, hear me this time—Catherine at last!’” (28) But Heathcliff’s entreaties, as upon Cathy’s death and presumably many times since, go unanswered: “The spectre showed a spectre’s ordinary caprice; it gave no sign of being; but the snow and wind whirled wildly through, even reaching my station, and blowing out the light” (29). Lockwood withdraws, leaving us with a major image for the novel, a tableau that could encompass many of the novel’s wildly passionate themes, Heathcliff alone in the dark calling in anguished tones and waiting for a voice that never answers. Cathy’s ghost in this way is Heathcliff’s own personal choric construction which he maps onto the *topos* of his existence.

*Wuthering Heights* concludes with an equally ambiguous discussion of ghosts. Nelly closes her portion of the narrative by including a strange sighting by a local boy one evening on the moors. The boy tells her “‘They’s Heathcliff and a woman, yonder’ and he is afraid to pass them. In a single passage Nelly both seeks to dismiss the boy’s fears, while also giving them credence, based on her own choric reading drawn from what she has witnessed and heard about the area: “He probably raised the phantoms from thinking, as he traveled the moors alone, on the nonsense he had heard his parents and
companions repeat—yet still, I don’t like being out in the dark, now—and I don’t like being left by myself in this grim house—I cannot help it, I shall be glad when they leave it, and shift to the Grange!” (336). This passage both invokes the supernatural yet diffuses the sense of unease inherent in it throughout the physical locations of the moors and the Heights. It acknowledges something troubling, while dismissing the specifics of Cathy and Heathcliff’s ghosts.

Interestingly as well, this turns the two lovers (and their story, the one which the reader has been becoming acquainted with over the previous two volumes) into *chora* which re-makes our understanding of a specific *topos*, specifically the moors and the titular Heights. It also reveals what has been in fact going on all along: since the very first pages, this novel has been a story about *chora*, stretching back to Lockwood’s dream-experience which motivates him to learn more. In this way the novel (or at least Nelly’s narrative) has been engaged in constructing the meaning of the specific *topos* of Wuthering Heights through *chora*. The spectral sighting of Heathcliff and Cathy on the moor suggests a final step in this process of meaning-making, as they have now both fully entered into the choric realm: they are now fully the fantastic story used to construct meaning. They are now analogous, in some sense, to the plodding step on the Ghost’s Walk in Dickens, the spectral nun that haunts *Villette*.

The ending continues to play with this tension as Lockwood seems to put the final nail in the two lovers’ shared coffin. He again invokes the seemingly grounded voice of Nelly first, quoting her as stating “I believe the dead are at peace, but it is not right to speak of them with levity.” Much like the previous passage this seems both to deny the power of the supernatural, and yet leave a door open for it. Lockwood concludes the
novel at Heathcliff and Cathy’s graves: “I lingered round them, under that benign sky; watched the moths fluttering among the hearth, and hare-bells; listened to the soft wind breathing through the grass; and wondered how any once could ever imagine unquiet slumbers, for the sleepers in that quiet earth” (337). We should, however, not be too quick to trust Lockwood’s judgment: the Yorkshire world of *Wuthering Heights* continues to be alien to him, despite his confidence in his place in it. And as Sedgwick notes

The disruptive ambitions of Catherine and Heathcliff present themselves to a reader thinking back on the novel not as being defused or healed but rather as being precariously contained. Catherine’s bloody hand plunging through the broken window, pushing aside twenty years’ time and her own death as she tried to push aside Lockwood’s protective wall of books and his ego-protecting layers of dreams, figures a Gothic warning. (118)

Heathcliff and Cathy’s passions, the violence and cruelty presented throughout the novel as “devilish” (174) and “hellish” (177) are too great to rest quietly.

Brontë’s treatment of ghosts is useful for it points to the novel’s linkage of *chora* with psychological states. In *Villette* *chora* proves to be a product of Lucy’s unspecified yet specific trauma. In *Wuthering Heights* *chora* is also tied to psychological states, whether those are the overwrought states of Heathcliff or the child at the novel’s end. Further these psychological states are in a sense infectious, migrating through the novel’s populations in the form of story. The very act of choric meaning-making serves to spread the metaphorical disease. Lockwood catches it from Heathcliff, while Nelly blames the
“nonsense” the boy has heard for his sighting of the two figures on the moor. Nelly herself also lays responsibility for her dislike of the Heights on these circulating stories.

While ghosts are a primary image throughout the novel, Heathcliff is also readily presented as a vampire, but always through the narrations of others. These references are of course ambiguously presented, just as the ghostly imagery had been, through Nelly Dean’s narrative:

“Is he a ghoul or a vampire?” I mused. I had read of such hideous incarnate demons. And then I set myself to reflect how I had tended him in infancy, and watched him grow to youth, and followed him almost through his whole course; and what absurd nonsense it was to yield to that sense of horror.

“But where did he come from, the little dark thing, harboured by a good man to his bane?” muttered Superstition, as I dozed into unconsciousness. And I began, half dreaming, to weary myself with imagining some fit parentage for him; and, repeating my waking meditations, I tracked his existence over again, with grim variations; at last, picturing his death and funeral: of which, all I can remember is, being exceedingly vexed at having the task of dictating an inscription for his monument, and consulting the sexton about it; and, as he had no surname, and we could not tell his age, we were obliged to content ourselves with the single word, “Heathcliff.” That came true: we were. If you enter the kirkyard, you’ll read, on his headstone, only that, and the date of his death.

(330)
This moment is Nelly’s summation of Heathcliff as he lies on his death-bed, and it contains in brief the entirety of the vexing problem of Heathcliff, as well as exposing the ambiguous nature that keeps the choric material ultimately unresolved. Nelly begins with a question, invoking two kinds of monsters, both of which take sustenance from others.\textsuperscript{14} Both images are important to several influential interpretive accounts, as we shall see. However, this question leads Nelly to what should be the reassuring (or at least mundane) matters of Heathcliff’s childhood and growth, the ordinariness of his existence. But that is not stable ground for Nelly either, for Heathcliff has no history before he reaches the Heights. He has no origin, which manifests itself in the headstone which will be carved for him containing no birth-date and no surname. In fact this passage elides one more important point, something which Nelly seems to have forgotten. Heathcliff is also not really Heathcliff’s name. In chapter four Nelly notes that upon Heathcliff’s arrival “they had christened him ‘Heathcliff’: it was the name of a son who died in childhood, and it has served him ever since, both for Christian and surname” (37-8). This passage continually plays with the ambiguity that is Heathcliff. Curiously the reduction of Heathcliff to the bare facts, the facts which should firmly anchor him in the world of \textit{topos}, makes him more fantastic.

This is the only passage in which the term vampire appears, yet the imagery of the vampire is invoked consistently throughout the novel. In volume two, chapter three Heathcliff seeks entrance to the house: “his sharp cannibal teeth, revealed by cold and

\textsuperscript{14} Ghouls enter the Western tradition from Arab culture, primarily from the \textit{Arabian Nights}. According to Ahmed K. Al-Rawi, the Western identification of the ghoul as a figure that feasts upon the flesh of the dead appears to be a product of Antoine Galland’s early 18\textsuperscript{th}-century translation of the work into French. Galland’s horrific flesh-eating ghoul seems to have been the primary influence on the further developments of the figure in the West. For a concise history of the ghoul including its transition to flesh-eater via translation see Al-Rawi’s “The Arabic Ghoul and its Western Transformation,” an article which interestingly enough, concludes with the Brontës.
wrath, gleamed through the dark.” Heathcliff demands entrance to the building, echoing the spectral Cathy’s demands of Lockwood: “Isabella, let me in, or I’ll make you repent” (178). This imagery continues, so that even in death (or perhaps especially in death) Heathcliff remains a vampiric figure. Nelly describes her preparation of the body: “I hasped the window; I combed his black long hair from his forehead; I tried to close his eyes – to extinguish, if possible, that frightful, life-like gaze of exultation, before anyone else beheld it. They would not shut – they seemed to sneer at my attempts, and his parted lips, and sharp white teeth sneered too” (335). The focus here, on the life-like (and still cruel) eyes suggests the undead, as does Nelly’s emphasis on his teeth. The beginning of the passage too references superstition, Nelly closes the window, an action long associated with death and the supernatural.

For all this talk of vampires and ghosts, it is easy to forget that they are not parts of the novel’s fabula but are primarily products of narratives, narratives that have their own limits and vested interests. Heathcliff does not actually drink anyone’s blood, or feast on anyone’s flesh. While he in a sense waxes while Cathy wanes, there need be nothing supernatural about the experience. Further, the novel’s ghosts are, as I’ve sought

15. It is tempting to read this demand to come in through the vampire as well; however this appears to be merely coincidental. While much of vampire literary lore was available to Brontë, most influentially coalescing in John Polidori’s novella “The Vampyre” published in 1819, the association of vampires with invitation appears to be an invention of Stoker. The idea does appear to have a literary and folkloric precedent regarding other diabolical forces. In Goethe’s Faust Mephistopheles appears as a black dog who will not cross Faust’s threshold until invited and later requires repeated invitations. (IV.1147 and VII.1530-40). While this appears to be a coincidental convergence of two interconnected patterns of character representation (Heathcliff as devil and Heathcliff as vampire) it demonstrates just how slippery these representations are.

16. The opening and closing of doors and windows in the presence of the dead has a great deal of superstitious significance. Closing a window is often viewed as an action that impedes the departure of a spirit, though sometimes the closing of the portals also is intended to prevent a departed spirit from returning. For both usages see “DEATH, opening locks/doors and windows frees spirit” in A Dictionary of Superstitions. Boundaries, particularly windows are doors are very significant in Wuthering Heights, and if nothing else this act echoes the locked window from Lockwood’s dream.
to point out, thoroughly ambiguous, haunting the novel as deliberate unanswered questions: Todorov’s “hesitation” (25) informs the entirety of the novel’s hauntings.

Heathcliff’s hunger is for power, or Cathy, or vengeance, a far different hunger than, say that felt by the millions caught up in the Irish potato famine (a connection Eagleton seeks to make in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*.) But these connections are available to Eagleton and others because of the choric nature of Brontë’s text. This vampire imagery focuses critics on discourses of hunger and consumption, and thus Heathcliff becomes a devourer in any number of critical readings. Many of major critical positions on *Wuthering Heights* draw extensively from this choric material.

Torgerson, for instance, links the vampiric representation of Heathcliff to the novel’s medical discourse. The ghostly Cathy is a figure of consumption, while Heathcliff as vampire (and one who perhaps consumes the consumptive) suffers from periods of extreme intemperance (94-5). Further, it is tied to some of the major readings of the novel, particularly those that emphasize Heathcliff’s starvation and the parasitic relationship he has with Cathy.¹⁷

In *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Eagleton builds upon his previous readings of the novel, by suggesting that Heathcliff functions as a figure of the Irish Famine. Eagleton admits that his reading of the novel through a post-colonial Irish framework is speculative, but it is speculation that warrants attention for the issues it illumines.¹⁸

Eagleton writes, “Heathcliff revolts, rather like Ireland against Britain, because of the

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¹⁷ It is important to note, as Torgerson does, that while the two are figured as “Cathy as ghost and Heathcliff as vampire” (97), parasitism is a two-way street and the narrative of the two characters' childhoods is one where a mutual parasitism takes place.

¹⁸ Eagleton’s reading, for one thing, reminds the reader of the Brontë’s Irish heritage, and the influx of Irish immigrants to England during the 1840’s particularly the Industrial North.
barbarous way he is treated; only Catherine will grant him the recognition he demands, and even she, perfidious little Albion that she is, sells him out for Edgar Linton” (18).\footnote{19. Eagleton offers a summary of Heathcliff’s evolving role as Irish peasant to bourgeois landlord on page 19.}

Eagleton draws on Raymond Williams’s contention that the English novels of the 1840’s represent “a world of desire and hunger, of rebellion and pallid convention, the terms of desire and fulfillment and the terms of deprivation profoundly connected to a single dimension experience” \textit{(English Novel, 60)}. For Eagleton, in this meditation at least, “the hunger in \textit{Wuthering Heights} is called Heathcliff” (11). This hunger, an amalgamation of Heathcliff’s seemingly monstrous desires, is tied directly to his representation as something unnatural (as Eagleton acknowledges, citing Nelly Dean’s characterization of Heathcliff as “a creature not of my species”). This hunger, first figurative and then literal as Heathcliff goes on “hunger strike” (Eagleton 11) is best represented through the figure of the vampire. Cathy’s wasting away follows this pattern especially, as she herself seems to become a victim of the vampire.

This “aggressive appetite,” as Matthew Beaumont terms it (140), is figured throughout the text in grotesque ways. Beaumont’s own project examines this all-devouring hunger through the lens of the colonial other, and where Eagleton sees Heathcliff as “a fragment of the Famine” (11), Beaumont sees Heathcliff as “a sliver left over from the slave trade’s economy of consumption” as well (140). This for Beaumont is thematized in the imagery of the cannibal with all of its Gothic resonances. He cites H.L. Malchow’s contention that cannibalism “is such an obviously available trigger for sensational emotion that virtually all gothic literature employs some anthropophagic element, indicating the depth of the fear/disgust response it evokes - from Frankenstein’s
pulling apart of bodies to the soul- and blood-devouring demonism of Dracula” (Malchow 45). Beaumont then points to Wuthering Heights’s position in this timeline of Gothic fiction: “Bronte’s novel - which literary critics have frequently located within this very tradition of nineteenth-century gothic as a well-nigh canonical link between Frankenstein and Dracula — makes far more systematic use of the ‘anthropophagic element’ than either Shelley’s or Stoker’s novels” (139). The evidence of cannibalism is often times the same evidence we have for vampirism, and as Beaumont’s invocation of Malchow makes clear, the two categories are linked.

Heathcliff as devourer has psychic resonances too, and it is the imagery’s choric nature, its elasticity, that allows it to function in this way as well. Lakshmi Krishnan views the vampiric imagery through the lens of psychic or psychological transference, noting the importance in discussion of vampirism of the more intangible mental elements that accompany the transference of fluids. Krishnan writes that

The idea of psychological transference, in which the vampire’s attack destabilizes not only the individual’s physical health, but his or her mental integrity as well, is arguably the least studied aspect of literary vampires. Their capacity to absorb and transfer intangible qualities along with fluids, characteristics that undermine the permanence of the self, can be seen in Gothic literature predating Dracula, especially Wuthering Heights. (4)

We see this psychological vampirism in a sense through the boundary-breaking relationship between Heathcliff and Cathy (it is in fact this relationship which causes the necessity for Heathcliff’s invocation of Cathy’s ghost so that he can remain whole.) As Cathy famously tells Nelly Dean, “I am Heathcliff! He’s always, always in my mind: not
as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself, but as my own being” (82). As Krishnan goes on to write,

> In Brontë’s novel, psychological vampirism is an intensely exploited trope, a metaphor that can scrutinize the borders between selfhood and otherness. The penetration of the self by external agents, an image that was later construed in various ways – foreign invasion, disease transmission, and spreading vice – originates, for Brontë, on an individual level, as the encounter of selves. (4)

Heathcliff mutates, as the ideas surrounding him are seized upon and discarded. He is a ghoul, a cannibal, a vampire, a *psychic* vampire, and then ultimately a ghost.

While these critics often acknowledge and engage with the various layers of narrative that are evident--Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, note the novel’s “concentric circles of narration” (249) and Torgerson acknowledges the metaphorical status of the vampire imagery (97)--the significance of those layers, and what they do to shape a readerly understanding of the novel’s events (including critical interpretations) are often overlooked. Gilbert and Gubar’s construction of the Heights as a Blakean Hell, and Heathcliff as a valorized Satan relies on the constructions of these various layers. Examine Gilbert and Gubar’s discussion of these dynamics:

> Satan, too, however—at least Satan as Milton’s prototypical Byronic hero—has long been considered a participant in *Wuthering Heights*, for “that devil Heathcliff” as both demon lover and ferocious natural force, is a phenomenon critics have always studied. Isabella’s “Is Mr. Heathcliff a man? If so, is he mad? And if not is he the devil?” (chap. 13) summarizes
the traditional Heathcliff problem most succinctly, but Nelly’s “I was inclined to believe . . . that conscience had turned his heart to an earthly hell” (chap. 33) more obviously echoes Paradise Lost. (253)

However, Heathcliff is only a “devil” or “a ghoul or a vampire” in as much as the novel’s narrative framework allows that question to be asked of him. And just as Lockwood closes the novel by dwelling on the boy who “probably raised the phantoms from thinking, as he traveled the moors alone, on the nonsense he had heard his parents and companions repeat” so too does the novel itself raise its phantoms by contemplating the discourses of characters who view the events far from dispassionately, and seek to make meaning out of them.

As previously stated, these Gothic elements are not part of the novel’s fabula; they are products of how that fabula is mediated. It is worthwhile to note just how mediated that fabula actually is, for recognizing the distance between the actual matter of Wuthering Heights and how it is related to the reader demonstrates the scale of the disjunction between chora and topos in the novel. Jeffrey Williams identifies the extent of the narrative layering in Wuthering Heights through a formula, pointing out that the novel begins with the citation “1801,” marking it as a journal entry, a written account of past events rather than a simultaneous narration of those events. The invocation of this date thus defines the time of writing, separate from the specific scenes of his receiving the narrative and his experiences at the Heights, effecting the explanatory function and validating distance of an editorial frame. This relation might be abbreviated as: \( L_J \ (L_H + L_D) \) (Cathy)
+ L_N (N (Heathcliff et al.)), L_J to indicate Lockwood’s journal-writing recording the narration (L_H) of what happens to him at the Heights and his dreamwork (L_D), as well as the scene of Nelly’s narrating, and Nelly’s account (N). Lockwood’s frame thus multiplies, the narrative log rhetorically assuring the distance of his otherwise peculiarly invested account. (137-8)

Williams’s formulation points out how heavily framed the narrative is. The distance between Lockwood’s beginning of the novel in 1801 and Heathcliff’s adoption, for instance, is separated by a gulf not just of years but of the mediation of Nelly and those she quotes. This is particularly interesting when Nelly is citing from letters and other documents, reproducing their contents faithfully or not. Frederick Burwick refers to this structure as “bifurcated” and points to one of its chief effects: “Deciding who, if anyone is morally responsible for this tragic cycle of events is made next to impossible by the novel’s multiplicity of agent-narrators” (70). While, as we saw in the last chapter, Dickens uses chora as a means of enforcing particular readings, readings that amongst other things point to questions of moral responsibility and connection, Brontë dramatizes the production of chora in order to complicate simple ideas of moral culpability.

The other, related, focus of the novel’s interest in narrative framing is the dramatization (and interrogation of) the process of choric meaning-making. As Burwick notes “the bifurcated novel and the twice-told tale not only allow for variations, contradictions, and paradoxical tensions, they also thematize the very act of story-telling” (70). Wuthering Heights is especially concerned with story-telling, as Lockwood’s continually references to the “wholesome medicines” he draws “from Mrs. Dean’s bitter
herbs” (153) demonstrate. The novel uses its ambiguous Gothic elements and the various framings of ghosts and vampires in order to examine how precisely phantoms are raised from the topos of experience.

This is a point which is, while not the focus of Ian Ward’s recent article on Emily Brontë and terrorism, inherent in it, and seems apt considering the way in which this narrative framing occurs. Ward writes that “if terrorism is indeed in large part an imaginative construct, maybe even an imaginary one, then the case for re-examining its canon becomes ever more pressing. And at the heart of this canon, it might be suggested, is *Wuthering Heights*” (528). Terrorism, as Ward points out succinctly, is at least on some level a construct. We create demonized (and overblown) images of the terrorist, imbuing them with the most Gothic of motives, and giving them a kind of imaginative power that is certainly unwarranted. While Ward’s primary interest is the way in which Brontë’s work enacts a kind of literary terrorism, a peripheral point can be made in this respect about Brontë’s usage of *chora*. For much of the novel’s critical history the origin of all that is bad in *Wuthering Heights* has been identified in Heathcliff. He has been, as Ward points out, presented as the locus of the novel’s violence. And yet, as Ward also notes,

violence is pervasive. It saturates the novel. It consumes the Earnshaws, and, in time, the Lintons too . . . The “thought of murder”, as one horrified reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* observed, seems to be “habitual” to all those fated to live amongst the pages of Emily Brontë’s novel. Wives are beaten, children are beaten, servants abused, animals tortured. Drunkenness, Godlessness, licentiousness, myriad forms of
delinquency; all removed from polite conversation in mid-nineteenth century England, but all, rather too obviously, on show in the pages of Wuthering Heights. (528-9)

Violence is a major condition of life in the novel, one which is diffused throughout various characters and situations. But Heathcliff is represented as the locus, the primary container or holder of the terror at the heart of the novel, and this occurs primarily with the help of choric discourses such as Nelly’s. Heathcliff’s cruelty is granted epic form in his various incarnations as devil, ghoul, and vampire, incarnations that we have seen are constructs of the various agent-narrators. This relates directly back to Ward’s discourse regarding terrorism, as the mythologizing of terrorists and terrorist acts (the choric meaning-making) can and does easily serve the purpose of reducing the moral culpability of societies and political regimes for their roles in the creation of the terrorist. Nelly’s choric discourse in Wuthering Heights similarly absolves the social order of any responsibility for the novel’s brutality. Heathcliff is the devil, the agent of violence. The violent authoritarian heaven that Gilbert and Gubar posit and the devaluing class struggle and colonial hubris that Eagleton sees in the novel, are ironically products of choric discourse on one level, and yet contained by it on another. However, this containment is not complete. The novel’s primary mode of story-telling, the thing which creates readerly uncertainty and produces the ambiguity of these Gothic elements, will not allow us to rest comfortably. While Lockwood may take Nelly Dean’s meaning-making at face value, the novel prompts us to be skeptical. It dramatizes the act of choric construction in order to point to its underlying assumptions and ideological underpinnings.
Wuthering Heights, more than any other work I will consider here, is the closest to a Todorovian conception of the fantastic, or perhaps a Clutean concept of “equipoise.” That is, its ghosts are liminal, its supernatural elements could be real, or could just as easily function as products of various narrators. This liminality and uncertainty prompts us to examine the process by which these elements enter into the novel’s discourse. The genius of Emily Brontë’s novel is that it presents an extended dramatization of this process of choric signification. It allows us to penetrate to the heart of the myth and examine the process of meaning-making that endows what Hannah Arendt would refer to as “the banality of evil” with monstrous connotations. Further Brontë’s invocation of chora imbibes the novel with larger resonances, beyond a local conflict regarding property rights. That critics as diverse as Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar, Terry Eagleton, Beth Torgerson, and numerous others rely so heavily on the novel’s chora to form coherent readings of the novel speaks to Brontë’s skillful usage of it to both dramatize meaning-making, while also engaging in it herself.

Charles Dickens, as we saw in the last chapter, employs chora through various means. However, it is generally not a comment upon, or a product of first-person accounts. Even Miss Flite’s choric madness serves the purpose of unifying social worlds, functioning benignly in a narrative that, in a sense, seeks to prove her right. The novels of the Brontës examined here do not offer a kind of Dickensian hope for the power of chora. Whereas in Dickens chora originates with the author and appears to be part of the narrative universe he is creating, chora in the Brontës’ work is represented as a product of first-person narrative and is thus diffused as a product of individual psychology that, particularly in the case of Wuthering Heights, may be ideological motivated. Chora
proves useful for Charlotte Brontë’s Lucy, allowing her to express the unknown trauma of her early years. It is an even more vexed, but fascinating subject for Emily. The transformation of *topos* into *chora* in *Wuthering Heights* allows for the important readings here mentioned: it allows us to see Heathcliff as a Miltonic Satan (filtered through Blake), or as the capitalistic cannibal or vampire with the cape of the bourgeois flaring behind him. However, *Wuthering Heights* also dramatizes this process of meaning-making, demonstrating how Heathcliff becomes “a ghoul, or a vampire,” and the way in which such a transformation elides the important questions of societal responsibility, that many critics of the novel in fact use *chora* to engage with. The very same images of devilry and vampirism which are used by narrators such as Nelly to create a locus for the novel’s violence may be used to identify the hegemonic and patriarchal cruelty visited upon Heathcliff and Cathy.

Both Charlotte and Emily Brontë see the imagination that is capable of producing *chora* as a powerful, but also dangerous thing. It gives shape to Lucy Snowe’s traumatic experience and in doing so it governs her. In *Wuthering Heights* it turns people into vampires and ghosts while simultaneously leaving the demon-haunted world of British social institutions unnamed and un-indicted.
Chapter Four

A Story “Properly Told” : Walter Pater, Aesthetic Subjectivity, and Truth

The trajectory of this study has seen the usage of *chora* as a method for exerting authorial control (as in Dickens) and then as the product of psychological forces, or as a means of dramatizing social or psychological forces (as in the Brontës.) While Dickens uses *chora* to promote a particular reading of his works, the Brontës serve to dramatize the process of choric meaning-making, presenting uneasy choric concepts that are products of first-person narratives. Walter Pater’s interest mirrors Dickens, in that much of Pater’s work champions a kind of choric reading of the ordinary world. However, Pater diverges from Dickens in regards to the weight he is prepared to give the choric experience of the world, and the near total privileging of the *chora* over *topos*. Pater’s aesthetics, primarily as articulated in *The Renaissance* and “Aesthetic Poetry,” rely on a relationship between the subjective experience and the outside world that is best understood through the dynamics I have sought to represent in this study. The subjective experience which Pater maps onto objects ranging from works of art to individual people are *chora* mapped onto *topos*. Art itself, Pater argues extensively, is a fantastic projection,¹ a deeply choric creation that transforms the object upon which it is projected, or in my terms mapped.² While for Dickens imagination provides a choric linkage

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¹ The term projection, as we shall see, is Pater’s own.
between individuals creating, as in *Bleak House*, a web of moral connections, Pater’s work is far more interested in the individual’s subjective aesthetic experience.

In *Marius the Epicurean*, his only novel, Pater puts these aesthetics into practice by representing religious and philosophical experience as primarily an aesthetic experience which consists of choric meaning-making. In *Marius*, a kind of choric engagement with the world, ultimately provided through an aestheticized religiosity, is required in order to live a meaningful life. In this way Pater dramatizes the aesthetic commitments he articulates in *The Renaissance*. These choric commitments also prove responsible for the novel’s curious style, one which was determined to be dangerous by at least one generation of literary observers.

i. “Of That Transfigured World”: Walter Pater’s Choric Aesthetics

In his 1889 essay “Aesthetic Poetry,” Pater writes

> The “aesthetic” poetry is neither a mere reproduction of Greek or medieval poetry, nor only an idealisation of modern life and sentiment. The atmosphere on which its effect depends belongs to no simple form of poetry, no actual form of life. Greek poetry, medieval or modern poetry, projects, above the realities of its time, a world in which the forms of things are transfigured. Of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or “earthly paradise.” It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal. Like some strange second flowering after date, it renews on a more

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2. Oscar Wilde recognized this in Pater and extends it further, to the point that *chora* has the ability in some ways to reshape *topos*. This is the subject of next chapter.
delicate type the poetry of a past age, but must not be confounded with it.
The secret of the enjoyment of it is that inversion of home-sickness known to some, that incurable thirst for the sense of escape, which no actual form of life satisfies, no poetry even, if it be merely simple and spontaneous.

(520)³
We have here, another important iteration of the relationship between *topos* and *chora*. Poetry transforms “the realities of its time” into something else, mapping onto them new meanings. This is in-line with Pater’s general aesthetic commitments as presented throughout his work, where the cultivation of aesthetic appreciation allows one to see even the most mundane things in a new way. Art (in this instance poetry) functions as a way of formalizing that process. We can see in this, (unintentional, I’m sure) echoes of Dickens’s “romantic side of familiar things,” and it should remind us that the fantastic genealogy I am tracing here is not as disconnected as it at first might seem.

This kind of understanding of *chora* is at the heart of Pater’s aesthetic theories, anchored in the subjective experience of both the viewer of a work of art or the reader of the poem, and the artist or author. Pater’s primary artistic manifesto *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* stages a quiet insurrection against the prevailing objectivity-centric aesthetics of Ruskin and Arnold in favor of a subjective aesthetics that is choric in nature. Pater begins *The Renaissance* with a preface analyzing the role of the critic, in which he quotes and then swiftly modifies Arnold: “‘To see the object as in itself it really

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³ The “Aesthetic Poetry” essay of 1889 is a revised version of his 1868 essay “The Poems of William Morris,” from the *The Westminster Review*. The revised “Aesthetic Poetry” was published in the first edition (1889) of *Appreciations*. He suppressed the essay in the subsequent 1890 second edition. While Pater amplifies the language somewhat in the revised version for *Appreciations*, his major points remain the same. This points to both the consistency of Pater’s thought and the way in which we can see the ideas from the early essay unfold in his subsequent work.
is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever, and in aesthetic
criticism the first step towards seeing the object as it really is, is to know one’s own
impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (xix). Here Pater takes
Arnold’s dictum and immediately undercuts it, pointing to the subjective grounding
necessary to “see the object as in itself it really is” and extending that grounding into a
theoretical framework of its own. As Geoffrey Tillotson writes “Arnold’s phrase, ‘the
object as in itself it really is’ was for rescuing the object from the clutches of the
individual. Pater was for clutching it closer. Arnold had sought to disencumber the object
of any ‘individual fancy,’ but here was Pater exalting temperament, the very hive of such
fancies” (108).

In doing so Pater is objecting not only to Arnold, but the larger aesthetic position
taken by figures such as Ruskin who seek to locate aesthetic experience as related to an
objective reality. Ruskin is interested in an almost Neo-Classical revival of mimetic art
which “concerns itself simply with things as they ARE, and accepts in all of them, alike
the evil and the good” (55). This Neo-Classical mimesis is based upon an ideal vision of
the external world: “For it is to be kept in mind that the naturalist ideal has always in it,
to the full, the power expressed by those two words. It is naturalist, because it is studied
from nature, and it is ideal, because it is mentally arranged in a certain manner” (57). 4
Ruskin’s mimetic model of art is placed in a context that ultimately denies the importance
of the subjective experience. For instance, in his section on the “Pathetic Fallacy” in
Modern Painters Ruskin argues for an objective empirical aesthetic over a subjective
one, while attempting to dismantle both terms altogether. In situating the two terms as

4. This arrangement is more closely aligned with the Neo-Classical theorists who claimed that
“poetry imitates not actual, but selected matters, qualities, tendencies, or forms, which are within or behind
the actual” (Abrams 35), than it is with Pater’s interest in the selection and arraignment of subjects.
they are represented by his straw-man philosophers, Ruskin writes, “And then they agree that the qualities of things which thus depend upon our perception of them, and upon our human nature as affected by them, shall be called Subjective; and the qualities of things which they always have irrespective of any other nature, as roundness or squareness shall be called Objective” (62). Ruskin then goes onto to inveigh against the privileging of subjective experience that this view can lead to:

From these ingenious views the step is very easy to a farther opinion, that it does not much matter what things are in themselves, but only what they are to us; and that the only real truth of them is their appearance to, or effect upon, us. From which position, with a hearty desire for mystification, and much egotism, selfishness, shallowness, and impertinence, a philosopher may easily go so far as to believe, and say, that everything in the world depends upon his seeing or thinking of it, and that nothing, therefore, exists, but what he sees or thinks of. (62)

Any privileging of subjective experience is easily reduced by Ruskin to the product of egotism, shallowness, and impertinence, and it is certainly not the role of the critic (or anyone else for that matter) to value such impressions in themselves or others.  

Pater’s theoretical work is heavily aligned against the objective, or rather against the privileging of the objective over the subjective. In this way Pater is far more interested in *chora* than in *topos*, or at least in the active experience of *chora* rooted in the

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5. Ruskin’s own criteria for “Greatness in Art,” while cloaked in the language of objectivity, still relies heavily on the subjective experience of the viewer. For instance, Ruskin writes: “But I say that the art is greatest which conveys to the mind of the spectator, by any means whatsoever, the greatest number of the greatest ideas” (23). Ruskin would call this understanding objective (based on his work on the pathetic fallacy) as the ideas are part of the “power” of the painting and not products of the sensation of the viewer. However this does not seem as tight as Ruskin believes as he fails to represent or account for how the mind processes or quantifies these “greatest numbers of the greatest ideas.”
observer. These issues inform the very temperament necessary for the critic as well as the questions the critic must ask:

What is the 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? The answer to these questions are the original facts with which the aesthetic critic has to do . . .

What is important, then, is not that the critic should possess a correct abstract definition of beauty for the intellect, but a certain kind of temperament, the power of being deeply moved by the presence of beautiful objects. (xix-xxi)

As this passage demonstrates, what Pater values is primarily the personal experience of art as opposed to its objective meaning. Pater calls the necessary temperament for this “susceptibility” and argues that “Our education becomes complete in proportion as our susceptibility to these impressions increases in depth and variety” (xx). This idea of susceptibility is important, as it informs some of the other issues that must and will be addressed in regards to Pater and his student Wilde, namely that of dangerous influences, and particularly in Wilde, the dangers inherent in aesthetic experience.

In his essay on Leonardo Da Vinci (which I will examine more extensively in a moment) Pater provides a fitting image for his theories of aesthetic susceptibility. Pater describes the Uffizi Medusa originally attributed to Da Vinci but now believed to be by an unknown Flemish artist:
The subject has been treated in various ways; Leonardo alone cuts to its centre; he alone realises it as the head of a corpse, exercising its powers through all the circumstances of death. What may be called the fascination of corruption penetrates in every touch its exquisitely finished beauty. About the dainty lines of the cheek the bat flits unheeded. The delicate snakes seem literally strangling each other in terrified struggle to escape from the Medusa brain. The hue which violent death always brings with it is in the features; features singularly massive and grand, as we catch them inverted, in a dexterous foreshortening, crown foremost, like a great calm stone against which the wave of serpents breaks. (83)

Pater’s emphasis on the dead figure with a petrifying gaze that disarms the susceptible viewer provides an excellent analogy of his aesthetic theory. We can view this as explicitly representing the tension between *topos* and *chora*. The head is representative of *topos* onto which the painter maps, grotesque as it may be, the life and movement of *choric* bats and snakes. This is also a figure for Pater’s understanding of art as it relates to the observer. Like the Medusa’s head, a painting is something dead or lifeless. The artist who painted the work is long gone, but the painting can function like the artist’s phantom limb, a piece strangely imbued with a life of its own despite its form as lifeless matter. The painting is figured then as in some way undead.

And there is a kind of phantom life in art. This figuration works so well for Pater because it presents a particular imaginative danger. “The delicate snakes” which “seem literally strangling each other in terrified struggle to escape the Medusa brain” which break like a wave, present a motion outwards, out of the Medusa’s severed head, and
perhaps out of the frame towards the viewer. As even in death Medusa had the power to petrify, art as the undead is able to astonish us. This lifeless thing penetrates us, streaming its snakes out of the frame towards us, or petrifying us with its stony gaze, unbidden. And yet, these are ultimately constructs of our subjective experience of the work.

These “fancies” as Arnold would call these subjective understandings, are very much focused on the process of imaginative mapping, of overlaying chora onto the objects of experience whether those objects be art objects or the objects of life. Indeed in his famous conclusion to The Renaissance, Pater extends the objects around which one can experience aesthetic rapture almost indefinitely, moving from the shifting “whirlpool” (187) of changes in our endlessly mutable world to art, to the very essence of the human form:

While all melts under out feet, we may well grasp any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and the curious odors, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend. Not to discriminate every moment some passionate attitude in those about us, and in the very brilliancy of their gifts some tragic dividing force on their ways, is, on this short day of frost and sun, to sleep before evening. (189)

Here Pater moves from passion and philosophical speculation to art and the human form, intermingling them. The traditional aesthetic subject of color is interspersed with its more prosaic understanding as a product of dye, and in-turn situated next to the more traditional sensual subject of smell. Linda Dowling views this particular sentiment as “the
most disturbing and invigorating passage of all of his prose” and points to how it constructs the “aesthetic dimension of life . . . as aesthēsis—sensation in all its sharp immediacy and richest variety” (Hellenism 98). The external world in its entirety is ripe for aesthetic appreciation, and as Pater’s own criticism from throughout The Renaissance demonstrates this interplay of the subjective and the objective is particularly choric: all topos is fodder for the more important personal experience of chora.

That this understanding of subjectivity is a specifically choric one is demonstrated throughout Pater’s work. In characterizing Pater’s contributions to aesthetics William Buckler writes, “He was a dedicated student of history and philosophy, but in his valuation of things, they were, though indispensable, ancillary, subordinate in interest and importance to art’s manifestations of the capacity of the human spirit to master its environment by creating for it an ideal form that was rooted in matter but infinitely more significant” (1). The way in which the material may be reshaped through art into forms that are aesthetically ideal, functions for Pater as a kind of chora, and Pater’s dedication to cultivating aesthetic “susceptibility” is a kind of cultivation of a choric seeing. To live as Pater directs his readers to live is to cultivate a manner of seeing which is itself choric. Pater’s aesthetic trajectory encourages his reader to ultimately move from a paradigm where chora is the end product of sight to one where chora is engaged in the actual experience of sight itself.

6. Dowling’s excellent reading of Pater’s “Conclusion” in the context of Plato’s Symposium is outside the scope of this chapter. Her full account may be found in chapter three of Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford.

7. For more on Pater’s attitude towards (and subordination of) philosophy see Gabriel Roberts, “‘Analysis Leaves Off’: The Use and Abuse of Philosophy in Walter Pater’s Renaissance.”

8. This should rightly be extended to all of the senses, not just sight, as Pater’s Conclusion makes clear when he invokes scents and sounds along with visual elements.
Pater’s commitment to *chora* is especially well represented in his chapter on Leonard Da Vinci in *The Renaissance*. Indeed, Pater’s primary interest in Da Vinci’s work stems from his conviction that his art is particularly choric, devoted to his own personal experiences which he maps onto the larger (more socially accepted) subject matters of his work. Pater’s essay on Da Vinci attempts both to account for the extraordinary quality of Da Vinci’s work and to trace the artist’s development. Relying primarily on the biographical work of Vasari, Pater follows Da Vinci’s artistic path from Florence to Milan and ultimately to France. As he does so, Pater seeks to identify the qualities that make the artist’s work so “fascinating,” a word that he uses repeatedly and which is of great importance to him. Pater’s conception of art as a force that impinges upon the observer is in the forefront of his discussion of Leonardo’s works. He locates Da Vinci’s artistic power within the air of mystery at the heart of the paintings, mystery that is still invoked today when a modern observer questions the meaning of the Mona Lisa’s enigmatic smile. At the same time Pater’s chapter also creates its own choric reading of Da Vinci, which imbues him with Pater’s own personal fascinations, and, most importantly, imbues the great artist’s work with a coherence that is not necessarily apparent. Here there is a kind of double-viewing of the work: Da Vinci maps his own choric interests onto the painting, while Pater himself (or any viewer of the painting) also maps their own choric visions.

Pater writes, “it is still by a certain mystery in his work, and something enigmatical beyond the usual measure of great men, that he fascinates, or perhaps half repels” (77). Pater locates this mystery in the tension between curiosity and beauty: “curiosity and the desire of beauty—these are the two elementary forces in Leonardo’s
genius; curiosity often in conflict with the desire of beauty, but generating, in union with it, a type of subtle and curious grace” (86). This mystery is the product not of the subject matter Da Vinci paints, much of which is quite conventional, but rather the subjective *chora* he maps on top of it: “it comes to pass that though he handles sacred subjects continually, he is the most profane of painters; the given person or subject, Saint John in the Desert, or the Virgin on the knees of Saint Anne, is often merely the pretext for a kind of work which carries one altogether beyond the range of its conventional associations” (93-4). Pater goes on a few pages later to characterize this process as “using incidents of sacred story, not for their own sake, or as mere subjects for pictorial realisation, but as a cryptic language for fancies all his own” (97). That is, to use Pater’s own language from “Aesthetic Poetry,” Da Vinci transfigures the traditional subjects projecting upon them his own personal meanings. Or to use my theoretical terms, Da Vinci uses the conventional subjects of art as *topos* on which he maps his own personal *chora*.

Pater finds this choric dynamic in numerous places throughout Da Vinci’s work:

It is so with the so-called *Saint John the Baptist* of the Louvre–one of the few naked figures Leonardo painted–whose delicate brown flesh and woman’s hair no one would go out into the wilderness to seek, and whose treacherous smile would have us understand something far beyond the outward gesture or circumstance . . . We recognise one of those symbolical inventions in which the ostensible subject is used, not as matter for definite pictorial realisation, but as the starting-point of a train of sentiment, subtle and vague as a piece of music. No one ever ruled over
the mere subject in hand more entirely than Leonardo, or bent it more
dexterously to purely artistic ends. (93)

The subject matter here becomes the starting point, from which Leonardo moves beyond
the subject itself and towards something more personal and aesthetically fulfilling.
Pater’s most famous and probably most interesting rendering of this dynamic has to do
with his reading of *La Giocanda*, or *The Mona Lisa*. This painting, now Da Vinci’s most
famous, is despite its nature as a portrait of an actual person, the most expressive of the
artist’s personal *chora*, it is “in the truest sense, Leonardo’s masterpiece, the revealing
instance of his mode of thought and work” (97).

Pater’s discussion of the painting is focused on the strange conjunction of the
actual person of Lisa del Giocando the subject and *topos* of the painting and the fantastic
*chora* of Da Vinci’s ideal: “From childhood we see this image defining itself on the
fabric of his dreams; and but for express historical testimony, we might fancy that this
was but his ideal lady, embodied and beheld at last. What was the relationship of a living
Florentine to this creature of his thought? By what strange affinities had the dream and
the person grown up thus apart, and yet so closely together?” If we did not know the
painting was a portrait we would believe it entirely a product of the artist’s imagination.
Yet Pater is certain to anchor the painting in the “express historical testimony” focusing
on the actual concerns of its composition: “That there is much of mere portraiture in the
picture is attested by the legend that by artificial means, the presence of mimes and flute-
players, that subtle expression was protracted on the face. Again, was it in four years and
by renewed labour never really completed, or in four months and as by stroke of magic,
that the image was projected?” (98).
The genius of the painting seems to be then, this union of the real object and Da Vinci’s fantastic vision. Here we might recall another of Pater’s oft-repeated maxims that “all art constantly aspires to the condition of music” (Renaissance 106) that is, the best art unites as closely as possible form and content. In this case the content, the person of Lisa del Giocando is united with the ideal forms that Da Vinci projects upon her. However, it is important to note that the painting’s value is not the bending of Da Vinci’s “dream” as Pater calls it, to the person sitting for the portrait. Rather, it is the extraordinary conjunction by which the person sitting for the portrait matches the more important aspect of Da Vinci’s dream.9

The painting also provides Pater with an opportunity to map his own chora onto the topos of the painting, the critic here functioning as to the painting as the artist does to the subject. Pater writes,

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all “the ends of the world are come,” and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. Set it for a moment beside one of those white Greek goddesses or beautiful women of antiquity, and how would they be troubled by this beauty, into which the soul with all its maladies has

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9. So far we’ve come across several works whose choric character seems to extend out beyond them. This is what Jordan called “the Bleak House effect” in regards to Dickens’s novel. I’ve also mentioned this tendency in regards to Villette and will be addressing it again with Pater’s Marius the Epicurean. Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa also shares something similar, regarding the numerous debates about the painting’s subject. Despite the general consensus among art historians, numerous other models (including Leonardo himself) have been proposed as a way to somehow explain the painting’s haunting quality.
passed! All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands. (98-9)

Pater here moves beyond Vasari and maps his own fantastic understanding of the painting. Again, his vision is projected upon the painting, placing it in this unchanging yet paradoxically mutable line of women. With his invocation of the vampire, and the many deaths this figure has experienced he points to the intriguing qualities that noted Art Historian E.H. Gombrich will go so far as to call “uncanny” (300).

But the painting does not contain any of these things. While the landscape amongst which Lisa del Giocando sits is strange, it takes our own act of imagination to move beyond that strangeness and find a meaning in it. When Gombrich calls the portrait’s setting a “fantastic dream landscape” (303) he is reading the painting as
chorically as Pater does. Oscar Wilde, Pater’s former student, articulates this dynamic perfectly:

Who, again, cares whether Mr. Pater has put into the portrait of Monna Lisa something that Leonardo never dreamed of? The painter may have been merely the slave of an archaic smile, as some have fancied, but whenever I pass the cool galleries of the Palace of the Louvre and stand before that strange figure . . . I murmur to myself ‘She is older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire she has been dead many times. . .’ and so the picture becomes more wonderful than it really is, and reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing. (“The Critic” 366-7)

As Wilde recognizes here, Pater’s vision of the painting is itself an extension of his own subjective experience of the painting and his own choric meaning-making. Further that chora has, as Wilde articulates, taken over the topos. In this way we might recall the way in which chora overtakes various characters in Wuthering Heights, operating as a kind of infection.  

Pater too is aware of the role this kind of choric meaning-making works. While it is ultimately Wilde who will take chora the furthest, Pater clearly privileges the choric, even while pointing back to the topos on which it is mapped. An explicit example of this occurs when Pater addresses the veracity of one incident that Vasari narrates: “Vasari’s story of an earlier Medusa, painted on a wooden shield, is perhaps an invention; and yet, properly told, has more of the air of truth about it than anything else in the whole legend”

10. Again we can recall the image of the medusa as a figure for art, which petrifies even the unwilling or uninterested observer.
Here, the truth of the incident is immaterial; it contains a choric meaning that depends primarily on the telling of the tale. “Properly told” the story contains a truth that is beyond the topos from which it is fashioned.

What is this truth that Pater is alluding to here? Carolyn Williams points out through the introduction of this “Earlier Medusa” “Pater draws a connection between this legendary childhood prank and the adult Leonardo’s ‘fascination with corruption,’ which Pater finds embodied in the corpselike Medusa of the Uffizi. And within the structure of Pater’s essay, both early and later Medusas prefigure Leonardo’s portrait of La Gioconda” (111). This Williams argues, provides a larger sense of continuity and coherence in Pater’s portrait of Da Vinci:

he tacitly attributes to Leonardo a certain psychological coherence, and that internal coherence, is understood to be reflected in his works over time, as long as they too are read in developmental terms. The arc of continuity projected beyond or above the local invention of each different “phase” is the contribution of the interpreter, who unifies all phases by “ranging them in a series.” (111)

Williams’s usage of the term “projected” here is important and intentional. It recalls the language from Pater’s essay on “Aesthetic Poetry” and speaks to my usage of the terms choric mapping. Pater as author uses the larger narrative he has created to invest Da Vinci with a meaning that extends beyond the works themselves in a way which mirrors his understanding of Leonardo’s artistic practice which creates something different and beyond the subjects he paints. Williams further presents how Pater uses this to construct a
kind of truth unavailable without such an arrangement (a truth that may be aligned with the kind of “secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing” that Wilde writes of):

The embedded, implicit narrative in Pater’s essay on Leonardo creates this sense of an essential coherence that develops over time, the retrospective, aesthetic sense of a story “properly told,” a story that “breathes the air of truth” because the revelation of a last Medusa fulfills the developmental promise of the earlier ones in the series. So too, Pater’s interpretation of her image lends the “air of truth” to his previously expressed “formula” for Leonardo’s genius. (111)

Strangely, this sense of creative coherence brings us back to Ioan Williams’s claims regarding the unified view inherent in Victorian realism. Pater’s work demonstrates that his view of coherence is not in any sense “naïve” as Ioan Williams characterizes such ventures, indeed it is explicitly a product of painstakingly created artifice. Like Dickens, Pater is here creating coherence by creating an imaginary metanarrative, a *chora* that allows for a coherent *topos*.

However, unlike Dickens, whose work demonstrates a larger commitment to the *topos* of daily life, Pater consciously privileges *chora*. His reason for this is readily demonstrated in his only novel *Marius the Epicurean* in which he dramatizes a choric engagement with the world. For Pater this kind of choric engagement inherent in aesthetics and religion, is the only way to live a conceivably meaningful life.
ii. “His own nearer household gods” : The Choric Religions of *Marius the Epicurean*

In chapter four of Walter Pater’s single novel, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, Pater describes the tension his title character experiences between two understandings of the world:

There was meantime, all this: --on one side, the old pagan culture, for us but a fragment, for him an accomplished, yet present fact, still a living, united, organic whole, in the entity of its art, its thought, its religions, its sagacious forms of polity, that so weighty authority it exercised on every point, being in reality only the measure of its charm for every one: on the other side, the actual world. (58)

This statement lays out the central relationship between Marius’s various understandings of religion as they evolve throughout the novel and the actual world around him in a way that is similar to my terms of *chora* and *topos*. The pagan culture, particularly the religious implications of that pagan culture, is represented as *chora* which is throughout the novel always in relationship with “the actual world” of *topos*. The novel’s plot, the tracing of Marius’s philosophical development from rural pagan immersed in the “Religion of Numa” through Epicurean and Stoic philosophies and ultimately to Christianity, demands this kind of dual understanding which allows for the shifting way in which Marius constructs meaning. In representing the process of meaning-making this way, Pater may be participating in the kind of dramatization of *chora* and *topos* in a way similar to Emily Brontë (though with a much different purpose in mind.) Pater’s characterization of these various philosophical and religious modes of being are presented through a choric lens that mingles the literal *topos* of the historical novel with
the fantastic worldviews that many of these positions embrace. The novel is further interspersed with mythological narratives that both inform Marius’s understanding of the world, and serve to presage narrative events. In this way these choric elements shape not only Marius’s mental state but seem to relate to *topos* in an uncannily fantastic way.

In fashioning his narrative of religious conversion as a product of tensions between the fantastic and “actual world” Pater achieves several things. First, he magnifies the importance of *chora* in the lives of his characters, embracing the imaginative possibilities that *chora* allows for and demonstrating its role in the construction of meaning. Second, it unifies religious experience and aesthetic experience, turning the former into a type or instance of the latter. It articulates what Ellis Hanson presents as a kind of Christian humanism, rooted in an aesthetic religiosity where “religious and aesthetic experience are deeply intertwined . . . if not wholly indistinguishable” (202). This is further represented as a function of religion itself, present at all stages of Marius’s conversion trajectory from youthful pagan to mature Christian. Both Pater’s interest in dramatizing the choric construction of meaning and his unification of religious and aesthetic experience find resonance throughout his work, including, as we shall see, his art criticism.

An examination of these layers of *topos* and *chora* in *Marius* as well as in Pater’s other work, does one further thing: it illuminates the works’ startling qualities of style which made it infamous and controversial. *Marius*, like the many books that feature as plot elements in decadent works of fiction, has been viewed (somewhat hysterically) as
an influential or even dangerous book. As Matthew Potolsky states in the introduction to his article on the subject “There has long been a threatening air surrounding accounts of Walter Pater’s influence on his students and disciples. The reserved Oxford don, whose staid but quietly subversive writings set the tone of the English fin de siècle, is regularly credited with destroying lives, undermining morals and contributing to the perversion of countless students” (701). Yet it was not the reserved Pater’s classroom pedagogy or academic tutelage that gained him this reputation. Rather it was the strange and startling quality of his prose. And while objections to Pater have been shown to be at least part of a series of objections to his sexual orientation and personal life, the impact that his prose had cannot be discounted.

W.B. Yeats, arbiter of culture during the early twentieth century, focused on Pater’s influence on his generation in both his autobiographical work and in his introduction to The Oxford Book of Modern Verse. Yeats points to the troubling, indeed dangerous, impact that he sees Marius the Epicurean having on his associates, and indeed himself:

Three or four years ago I re-read Marius the Epicurean expecting to find I cared for it no longer, but it still seemed to me, as I think it seemed to all of us, the only great prose in modern English and yet I began to wonder if it, or the attitude of mind of which it was the noblest expression had not caused the disaster of my friends. It taught us to walk upon a rope, tightly stretched through serene air, and we were left to keep our feet upon a swaying rope in a storm. (The Trembling of the Veil 235)

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Yeats is unclear here as to the direct source of the book’s danger, unsure of whether it is the quality of the writing as “the only great prose in modern English” or the also vague “attitude of mind” that proves to be so troubling. As Potolsky points out “the danger presented by this education centers upon the impact of reading Pater’s novel . . . Indeed, throughout his recollection, he refers repeatedly to ‘its’ effect, and to the ‘attitude of mind’ it embodied, rather than to the effect of Pater himself or of any specific idea he taught. This rather staid and almost plotless novel seems at first to be a surprising source for so much peril” (703). Potolsky locates Yeats’s criticism, and the criticism of those of who follow him, primarily in the mediated narrative relationship Pater presents. Marius offers art (or artifice) in place of direct communication. And in as much as chora is an imaginative construct overlaid on to “the actual world” as Marius terms it, Potolsky is correct. We are rarely given an unmediated representation of the world of topos; rather, that representation is consistently mediated through chora. Stephen Arata refers to this dynamic as “impersonal intimacy” and points to a striking example: the title protagonist has only one actual line of dialogue, upon his friend Flavian’s death. The rest of the novel is indirect discourse (“Impersonal Intimacy” 134). The quality of that indirect discourse reflects the mediating role that chora play as it shapes the representation of the “actual world” of topos.

What is important for our purposes is the way in which that indirect discourse is so consistently narrating chora, filtering our view of Marius and his world through it. The curious “attitude of mind” which Yeats discusses is a product of a novel that continually presents the reader with visions of that topos mediated by the artifice of chora. I’ve mentioned at several moments, particular “effects” that works heavily invested with
chora might have, beginning with John O. Jordan’s vision of a “Bleak House effect,” and floating a similar idea in regards to the uncanniness present in Villette. Perhaps we can also talk of a “Pater effect” or at least a “Marius effect” to describe the seemingly infectious “attitude of mind” it embodies.\(^{12}\)

Pater is aware of the trope of the influential or dangerous book. He uses it himself in Marius in a way which explicitly presents the trajectory of his protagonist’s conversion(s) as a product of choric hermeneutics. Marius’s conversion experiences are primarily engagements with chora as mapped onto topos that stretch back to the early chapters of the novel; however, it is important to note that the pattern of conversion seems to be set down in an influential book. The trope of the influential book is found throughout decadent literature. While in most cases this book is somehow a work of corruption which leads a protagonist to disgrace or doom, the book presented in Marius serves to provide a narrative framework that leads Pater’s protagonist further down the path towards Christian conversion. This book is Apuleius’s The Metamorphoses more commonly known as The Golden Ass, called simply “The Golden Book” in Marius.

Pater introduces Apuleius’s text in a way very similar to the way the “fatal book” is often presented (in a chapter titled “The Tree of Knowledge” no less), highlighting its influence on Marius:

> He was acquiring what it is the chief function of all higher education to impart, the art, namely, of so relieving the ideal or poetic traits, the elements of distinction, in our everyday life—of so exclusively living in them—that the unadorned remainder of it, the mere drift or débris of our

\(^{12}\) My use of the term infectious also serves to recall the discussion of seemingly infectious stories in Wuthering Heights as discussed in chapter three.
days, comes to be as though it were not. And the consciousness of this aim came with the reading of one particular book, then fresh in the world, with which he fell in about this time—a book which awakened the poetic or romantic capacity as perhaps some other book might have done, but was peculiar in giving it a direction emphatically sensuous. It made him, in that visionary reception of every-day life, the seer, more especially, of a revelation in colour and form. (31-2)

The book is instrumental to Marius’s developing aesthetic theories, but it is also significant in regards to its subject matter. Apuleius’s book is, like Pater’s book, a conversion narrative. And as such, in addition to presenting an aesthetic experience through which Marius constructs the world, it also provides him with a narrative model to follow. The fantastic stories in the *Golden Ass* function as a *chora* that informs Marius’s vision of *topos*, the “actual world” he refers to.

Pater summarizes a great amount of *The Golden Ass*, spending half-of a chapter describing it and its effects on Marius and his tutor Flavian. Pater then interposes the story of Cupid and Psyche drawn from Apuleius’s novel, seeking to reproduce the narrative incident that impressed the two young men most:

But set as one of the episodes in the main narrative, a true gem amid its mockeries, its coarse though genuine humanity, its burlesque horrors, came the tale of Cupid and Psyche, full of brilliant, life-like situations, *speciosa locis*, and abounding in lovely visible imagery (one seemed to see and handle the golden hair, the fresh flowers, the precious works of art in it!) yet full also of a gentle idealism, so that you might take it, if you
chose, for an allegory. With a concentration of all his finer literary gifts, Apuleius had gathered into it the floating star-matter of many a delightful old story. (36)

Pater’s characterization here of the story’s “brilliant, life-like situations” could in a less sincere writer be taken for mockery. It is hard to think of very much that is life-like in the story of a nymph forbidden to gaze on the face of the love god she has married. But Pater’s suggestion that the story is “life-like” for Marius and Flavian demonstrates again that this is a fantastic work that they will use to construct the meaning around them.

Indeed, upon concluding his detailed recounting of the story Pater writes,

So the famous story composed itself in the memory of Marius, with an expression changed in some ways from the original and on the whole graver. The petulant, boyish Cupid of Apuleius was become more like that “Lord, of terrible aspect,” who stood at Dante’s bedside and wept, or had at least grown to the manly earnestness of the Erôs of Praxiteles. Set in relief amid the coarser matter of the book, this episode of Cupid and Psyche served to combine many lines of meditation, already familiar to Marius, into the ideal of a perfect imaginative love, centered upon a type of beauty entirely flawless and clean—an ideal which never wholly faded from his thoughts, though he valued it at various times in different degrees. (53)

It is clear from this passage that The Golden Ass, and particularly the incident of Cupid and Psyche, functions as a kind of aesthetic touchstone for Marius, one which shapes his understanding of the world around him. The intertext thus provides us with a
representation of material which Marius directly appropriates and uses to create his choric understanding of the world, changing it and using it to combine “many lines of meditation” into a worldview steeped in aestheticized mythology.

This aestheticized mythology is present throughout the text, emerging as the *chora* mapped onto the *topos* of the antique world. This narrative mapping is exemplified by the narrative’s treatment of dreams, the liminal state of the dream ultimately being overlaid on top of the waking-world. This usage of the dream state as a locus of *chora* also recalls the previous chapter’s discussion of the subject regarding *Wuthering Heights*. Marius’s ancestral country estate, White Nights is characterized as a fantastic place where the *chora* of dream impacts the *topos* of daily life:

*White-nights! so you might interpret its old Latin name. “The red rose came first,” says a quaint German mystic, speaking of “the mystery of so-called white things,” as being “ever an after-thought—the doubles, or seconds, of real things, and themselves but half-real, half-material—the white queen, the white witch, the white mass, which, as the black mass is a travesty of the true mass turned to evil by horrible old witches, is celebrated by young candidates for the priesthood with an unconsecrated host, by way of rehearsal.” So, white-nights, I suppose, after something like the same analogy, should be nights not of quite blank forgetfulness, but passed in continuous dreaming, only half veiled by sleep. Certainly the place was, in such case, true to its fanciful name in this, that you might* 

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13. I am not attempting to argue any kind of conscious reference on Pater’s part. Rather I think this points out how the penetration of the dream into the waking state provides a useful strategy for overlaying *chora* onto *topos*, particularly in narratives which are heavily weighted towards *topos*. 

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very well conceive, in face of it, that dreaming even in the daytime might
come to much there. (9)

Pater’s invocation here of the “white mass” is striking. It is placed in opposition to the
black mass, making the true mass (consecrated, but uncorrupted as in the black mass) a
separate state. The proper mass is not the opposite of the black mass, rather it seems to be
a thing sui generis that cannot be placed in true relationship with either its unconsecrated
or corrupted forms. Rather, the “the white mass” is the opposite of the “black mass” and
as the “white mass” is the mirror of the “black mass,” “white-nights” and by extension
the place called White Nights is the opposite of some kind of “black night,” a night which
Pater defines as “nights of blank forgetfulness.”14 A “white-night” is one spent in a kind
of dream state that somehow pours over into wakefulness as it is “only half-veiled by
sleep.” Pater then aligns the place called White Nights with this particular state of
consciousness as place where “dreaming even in the daytime might come to much.”
Pater’s usage of this unidentified mystic blurs the lines between dreams and waking and
ultimately defines White Nights as a place where that boundary is permeable. This
liminality continues at the temple of Aesculapius where Marius is unsure of what was
dream and what was not, and the interpenetration of Marius’s psychic life and the
physical world he inhabits often punctuates the text.

White Nights is also connected with Marius’s eventual conversion, and his choric
experiences there, we will see, echo forward through the novel. Hanson notes that the
invocation of the “white mass” aligns this space and Marius’s experience in it with the
ultimate trajectory of his conversion: “For Marius, the dream [of White Nights] is of his

14. Apuleius’s influential book may also perhaps be described in this manner. The relationship
between the influential text and the “fatal book” can perhaps be seen as similar to the relationship between
the “white mass” and the “black mass.”
own generative capacity for life. And it is also the dream of a new vocation, his preparation for a priesthood beyond the religion of Numa . . . White-nights is Marius’s ‘church in progress,’ the ghostly and material beginnings of his progression of philosophical conversions, his perpetual spiritual rehearsals” (207). The trajectory of Marius’s conversion ranging from paganism to philosophical discourses of Stoicism and Epicureanism is consistently presented in choric terms. It is linked through this kind of choric understanding of the world to Marius’s previous religious experiences. Vincent A. Lankewish points to the very Hellenic way in which Marius’s experience of Christianity is constructed, focusing on the homoeroticism that underlies the novel’s representation of the aesthetic religious experience throughout: “Although Christ is obviously the companion whom Marius craves, Pater’s construction of Christianity as aesthetic experience reveals Christian males’ marriage to Christ as a trope that, within the tradition of the Early Christian novel, enables homoerotic representation and establishes a strong link between that trope and Hellenism” (264). Lankewish is right in pointing to the aestheticization of Christianity as a major conduit connecting Marius’s pagan religious experiences and his Christian ones.15

The connection between the continuum (as I would describe it) of Marius’s various religious and philosophical positions is a contested one. J. Russell Perkin

15. The linkage between aestheticism and homoeroticism is found throughout Pater’s work. While multiple examples from numerous works could be furnished, the famous moment at the end of The Renaissance will hopefully suffice: “While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the sense, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist’s hands, or the face of one’s friend” (189). The invocation of the “face of one’s friend” generally considered a male friend, placed within the context of this series of aesthetic sensations clearly links the two together. Further, as Pater articulates it throughout his work, these aesthetic experiences are heavily choric. They are the matter of subjective experience mapped onto the external world. To place them again in Marius’s terms this is the relationship between the aesthetics “the old pagan culture” and later Christianity and “the actual world” (58).
summarizes these positions, writing that “although he does not undergo a very definite personal conversion, he is absorbed by a Christian community and from an objective point of view might be said to have become a Christian. From a more subjective point of view, as the title implies, he always remains an Epicurean, just as Pater never renounced the views expressed in the conclusion to *The Renaissance*” (213). From Pater’s aesthetic perspective, a deep personal conversion is unnecessary as Christianity belongs to a similar set of choric paradigms as the religion of Numa and the other systems represented in the text. Like the Religion of Numa, the Christianity represented in *Marius* relies upon an aestheticized *chora* that is mapped on top of the “actual world” and which is the mediating force in Pater’s narrative.

The trajectory that Marius follows is indeed not one which is primarily based around questions of theological truth, but rather in attainment of experiences and larger perceptions. Marius’s transformations (and the routes he takes to reach them) consistently widen in scope, ranging from the backwater (yet still aesthetically lovely) childhood home, to the Temple of Aesculapius, to Rome itself. It is also a trajectory in forward motion from an early form of paganism in the Religion of Numa, to the heart of ancient Roman paganism itself (and its chief if reluctant pontificant, Aurelius), to Christianity the Religion of the future. Even while Marius is martyred a millennium and a half before their creation, one can perceive Pater’s work echoing forward to Da Vinci’s works built upon the bones of Christianity.

Marius’s primary introduction to Christianity comes in his tour of Cecilia’s home chapel and the family tombs associated with it, and it is his contemplation of “Christian superstition” that starts him on his path to conversion. While Marius is aware of
Christianity earlier in the novel, it is at Cecilia’s house that he has his first religio-aesthetic experience, prompted by his feelings in the tomb:

And yet these poignant memorials seemed also to draw him onwards today, as if towards an image of some still more pathetic suffering, in the remote background. Yes! the interest, the expression, of the entire neighbourhood was instinct with it, as with the savour of some priceless incense. Penetrating the whole atmosphere, touching everything around with its peculiar sentiment, it seemed to make all this visible mortality, death’s very self—Ah! lovelier than any fable of old mythology had ever thought to render it, in the utmost limits of fantasy; and this, in simple candour of feeling about a supposed fact. (200)

Marius reads this “peculiar sentiment” through the lens of pagan myth-making, placing it within the same realm of *chora* that previous images of the escape from death inhabit:

“Hercules wrestling with Death for possession of Alcestis, Orpheus taming the wild beasts, the Shepherd with his sheep, the Shepherd carrying the sick lamb upon his shoulders.” In this long-line of images rooted in paganism comes the Christian shepherd. The linkage between the shepherd and Orpheus demonstrates a kind of lineage, placing Christianity at the end of a larger trajectory, one which Pater characterizes as “partly pagan,” when he invokes what he argues is the most apt image of what the tomb represents: “A figure, partly pagan in character, yet most frequently repeated of all these visible parables—the figure of one just escaped from the sea, still clinging as for life to the shore in surprised joy” (200). The religious experience of the tomb is represented here in *choric* terms and is placed in line with the pagan mythological figures.
Marius’s experiences in the tomb complex mirror his early experiences at White-Nights, to the point that Pater begins the passage by quoting the same “mystical German writer” who provided “the mystery of so-called white things” in the White Nights chapter. And as at White Nights, Marius religious contemplations were presented in relation to the dead, so are they in Cecelia’s.

The choric nature of Christianity in the text, and its relationship to the broader picture of religion that Pater paints is evident in discussions of early Christian ritual, a subject which unites for Pater the religious, aesthetic, and human:

Like the institutions of monasticism, like the Gothic style of architecture, the ritual system of the church, as we see it in historic retrospect, ranks as one of the great, conjoint, and (so to term them) necessary, products of human mind. Destined for ages to come, to direct with so deep a fascination men’s religious instincts, it was then already recognisable as a new and precious fact in the sum of things. (211)

This notion of ritual as the “conjoint” product of “human minds” speaks directly to its choric nature. Ritual (as I discussed in regards to Eliade in the first chapter) is a process of choric meaning-making, something which Pater acknowledges here, as well as throughout his text.

This choric understanding of ritual is not reserved for the Christianity of Marius’s ultimate conversion; rather it is an important force throughout the novel beginning with the protagonist’s early devotions and continuing to the representations of Marcus Aurelius. And if the aesthetic and religious experiences Marius has at White Nights prepares him for the on-going conversion that eventually leads him to Christianity, it is
important to note the fantastic way in which his journey begins, and the various interconnected instances of *choric* mapping that occur along the way.

As a young pagan, living at a distance from the capital of Rome, Marius begins his life as devotee of what Pater characterizes as the “Religion of Numa.” As its name suggests, this more primitive religious view veers towards a kind of pantheism containing numerous small gods, and ancestors:

The names of that great populace of “little gods,” dear to the Roman home, which the pontiffs had placed on the sacred list of the *Indigitamenta*, to be invoked, because they can help, on special occasions, were not forgotten in the long litany--Vatican who causes the infant to utter his first cry, Fabulinus who prompts his first word, Cuba who keeps him quiet in his cot, Domiduca especially, for whom Marius had through life a particular memory and devotion, the goddess who watches over one’s safe coming home. The urns of the dead in the family chapel received their due service. They also were now become something divine, a goodly company of friendly and protecting spirits, encamped about the place of their former abode--above all others, the father, dead ten years before, of whom, remembering but a tall, grave figure above him in early childhood, Marius habitually thought as a genius a little cold and severe.

(6-7)

The novel represents these deities through Marius’s perspective as living parts of the world given choric meaning by Marius’s religion. Recalling Roman ancestor worship and the tributes paid, Pater writes: “They loved those who brought them their sustenance; but,
deprived of these services, would be heard wandering through the house, crying sorrowfully in the stillness of the night” (7). The “goodly company of friendly and protecting spirits” are represented as real figures, and it is important to note that through the narratives choric mediation, the reader is presented with them as such.

This antique religion is explicitly choric. To draw from Sheldrake once again, its special aspects are clearly the product of “a dialectical relationship between environment and human narrative” (1). As Pater writes at the very beginning of the novel “A religion of usages and sentiments rather than facts and belief, and attached to very definite things and places—the oak of immemorial age, the rock on the heath fashioned by weather as if by some dim human art, the shadowy grove of ilex, passing into which one exclaimed involuntarily, in consecrated phrase, Deity is in this place! Numen Inest!” (3). This understanding of the “Religion of Numa” that invests the world with divine figures as prime example of the chora at the heart of Pater’s representation of paganism. This is linked directly to not only a numinous belief in a natural divinity, but also in the practices associated with the “nearer household gods” and the ancestors for whom Marius leaves offerings. It is important to note, for instance, that Pater’s first description of Marius explicitly ties these two concepts together: “there was a boy living in an old country-house, half farm, half villa, who for himself, recruited the body of antique traditions by a spontaneous force of religious veneration such as had originally called them into being” (4). Marius’s offerings are motivated by the “Religion of Numa” as Pater characterizes it, and they are related directly back to it by Marius “spontaneous force of religious veneration.”
This viewpoint is again seen in regards to the well at the temple of Aesculapius where the physical space of the well takes on larger significance based on its associations:

Legend told of a visit of Aesculapius to this place, earlier and happier than his first coming to Rome: an inscription around the cupola recorded it in letters of gold. “Being come unto this place the son of God loved it exceedingly:”—*Huc profectus filius Dei maxime amavit hunc locum;*—and it was then that that most intimately human of the gods had given men the well, with all its salutary properties . . . Marius was told many mysterious circumstances concerning it, by one and another of the bystanders:—he who drank often thereof might well think he had tasted of the Homeric lotus, so great became his desire to remain always on that spot: carried to other places, it was almost indefinitely conservative of its fine qualities: nay! a few drops of it would amend other water; and it flowed not only with unvarying abundance but with a volume so oddly rhythmical that the well stood always full to the brim, whatever quantity might be drawn from it, seeming to answer with strange alacrity of service to human needs, like a true creature and pupil of the philanthropic god.

(21-2)

Here the well, a place described in Elysian terms, expands its importance. Marius’s (and the reader’s) understanding of this Elysian place is inseparable from the stories that are told about it. Pater’s work here, as his work throughout the novel, seeks to dramatize
Marius’s phenomenological experience of the world, and that phenomenological experience is explicitly one of *chora* mapped upon *topos*.

As Pater traces Marius’s development throughout the novel, a striking pattern begins to unfold, one which focuses on the subjective (phenomenological) experience, rendered as fantastic as it is mapped upon the world around it. This includes the instances cited above, where religious devotions move across the liminal space to interact with the “actual world,” but also in regards to Marius’s burgeoning aesthetic interests. Even as the antique religion of his youth becomes “incredible to him” (72), it finds itself replaced by another system of belief that populates the mundane world from the fantastic realm of the subjective experience. In Heraclitus Marius finds a system of philosophy that echoes Pater’s own aesthetics as presented in *The Renaissance*:

> Men are subject to an illusion, he [Heraclitus] protests, regarding matters apparent to sense. What the uncorrected sense gives was a false impression of permanence or fixity in things, which have really changed their nature in the very moment in which we see and touch them. And the radical flaw in the current mode of thinking would lie herein: that, reflecting this false or uncorrected sensation, it attributes to the phenomena of experience a durability which does not really belong to them. Imaging forth from those fluid impressions a world of firmly outlined objects, it leads one to regard as a thing stark and dead what is in reality full of animation, of vigour, of the fire of life—that eternal process of nature, of which at a later time Goethe spoke as the “Living Garment,”
whereby God is seen of us, ever in weaving at the “Loom of Time.”

(Marius 74)

For Heraclitus (as Pater understands him) the source of this illusion is the narrowness of our perceptions. Once these perceptions have been widened we come to see the world as a miraculous fluctuation of elements:

The one true being—that constant subject of all early thought—it was his merit to have conceived, not as sterile and stagnant inaction, but as a perpetual energy, from the restless stream of which, at certain points, some elements detach themselves, and harden into non-entity and death, corresponding, as outward objects, to man’s inward condition of ignorance: that is, to the slowness of his faculties. It is with this paradox of a subtle, perpetual change in all visible things, that the high speculation of Heraclitus begins. (Marius 74-5)

As mentioned previously, Marius’s trajectory is consistently focused on the widening of perceptions. This Heraclitean flux also echoes Pater’s previous discussion of aesthetics, particularly in the conclusion to The Renaissance where he discusses the way in which the “whirlpool” (187) of existence is constantly bringing forth new things as others fade away: “It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analyses leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange perpetual, weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (188).

Pater’s work here captures something very important about Heraclitus, and thus offers insight into Marius: namely Pater’s work points to the subjective nature of the kind of seeing that Heraclitus offers. As previously noted, Pater begins The Renaissance by
quoting and swiftly modifying Matthew Arnold: “‘To see the object as in itself it really is,’ has been justly said to be the aim of all true criticism whatever, and in aesthetic criticism the first step towards seeing the object one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is, to discriminate it, to realize it distinctly” (xix). While Heraclitus would more than likely point to the importance of seeing “the object as in itself it really is”—through widening one’s perception to peer beyond the “illusion” of permanence—it is important to note the implications of Pater’s qualification for Heraclitean ideas of reality. These fancies are, as Pater’s critical work demonstrates, very much focused on the process of imaginative mapping, of overlaying chorá onto the objects whether those objects be art objects or the objects of life. Thus Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa becomes “older than the rocks among which she sits; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her” (The Renaissance 99). As I’ve argued Pater extends this further, pointing to what he sees as Da Vinci’s own kind of private choric mapping. Da Vinci finds in traditional subjects an expression of his own choric perceptions and interests and maps those onto them “using incidents of sacred story, not for their own sake, or as mere subjects for pictorial realization, but as a cryptic language for fancies all his own” (97).

This kind of privileging of chorá—the secret histories behind the works of Da Vinci, or the holy myths mapped onto a landscape—forms Marius’s understanding of even that most literally stoic figure Marcus Aurelius. In chapter 12 Marius witnesses the emperor’s return to Rome and the ceremonies of the Ovation accompanying it. Marius
reads the emperor through the larger choric framework that Pater has been building since
the early chapters at White Nights:

And now, as the emperor, who had not only a vague divinity about his
person, but was actually the chief religious functionary of the state, recited
from time to time the forms of invocation, he needed not the help of the
prompter, or *ceremoniarius*, who then approached, to assist him by
whispering the appointed words in his ear. It was that pontifical
abstraction which then impressed itself on Marius as the leading outward
characteristic of Aurelius; though to him alone, perhaps, in that vast crowd
of observers, it was no strange thing, but a matter he had understood from
of old. (110-11)

Marius recognizes Aurelius in a way which others in the crowd perhaps do not, because
of his own commitment to *chora*. Aurelius and Marius share a similar mythic worldview
one grounded in the Religion of Numa:

For Aurelius, indeed, the old legend of his descent from Numa, from
Numa who had talked with the gods, meant much. Attached in very early
years to the service of the altars, like many another noble youth, he was
“observed to perform all his sacerdotal functions with a constancy and
exactness unusual at that age; was soon a master of the sacred music; and
had all the forms and ceremonies by heart.” (110)

This passage serves to both underline the connection between Aurelius and Marius, while
also investing Aurelius with the sacred story of the Roman Emperor: he is a divine figure.

The importance of this choric dynamic is made even more manifest when we take into

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account that these rituals are primarily, according to Pater (and his Aurelius), public spectacles. Pater opens this chapter by acknowledging this fact: “MARCUS AURELIUS who, though he had little relish for them himself, had ever been willing to humour the taste of his people for magnificent spectacles, was received back to Rome with the lesser honours of the Ovation” (108). The ceremony then, which Marius draws so much from, and which Aurelius puts so much into, is primarily a spectacle. And Pater recognizes that while Aurelius performs the Ovation in order to “humour the taste of his people,” like all spectacles, particularly in the context of the state, the Ovation is charged with choric meaning.¹⁶ Pater represents this meaning in a particularly interesting way:

Some fanciful writers have assigned the origin of these triumphal processions to the mythic pomps of Dionysus, after his conquests in the East; the very word *Triumph* being, according to this supposition, only *Thriambos*--the Dionysiac Hymn. And certainly the younger of the two imperial “brothers,” who, with the effect of a strong contrast, walked beside Aurelius, and shared the honours of the day, might well have reminded people of the delicate Greek god of flowers and wine. (111)

This passage is particularly interesting as it points out the “fanciful” position some writers have taken on the origin of these spectacles, while at the same time providing a

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¹⁶ There are worthwhile parallels to keep in mind between Pater’s representation of spectacle here and the on-going theatricality of his contemporary era. Lynn Voskuil writes that the “Victorians used these many types of spectacle to shape and explain less tangible, more mysterious operations of the ideas and institutions they thought were most authentic: the inner workings of subjectivity, the apparently magical mechanisms of commodity culture, the bonds they believed knit them together organically into a single, indivisible nation” (11). Voskuil’s point here is particularly apt for the discussion of a work like *Marius* wherein *chora* informs epistemological positions that are no less authentic to the individuals involved. It is also worthwhile to point out the imperial parallels between Roman antiquity and Victorian Britain, at least in regards to spectacle. For more on the theatricality involved in Victorian Imperialism see Marty Gould, *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and the Imperial Encounter*. 

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certain aesthetic support, in offering the younger of Aurelius’s consorts as a figure of Dionysius.  

The Ovation sequence points to the importance of *chora* in this kind of religio-aesthetic worldview. The procession is a spectacle, an aesthetic endeavor to please the Roman populous. But its nature as an aesthetic endeavor and the choric significance behind it, endow the Ovation with a greater significance, one which Marius recognizes from his own religious up-bringing. Even ceremony intended to pacify the public’s taste for glory, something Aurelius views as almost perfunctory, carries with it a choric importance.

*Marius the Epicurean* provides an example of *chora* as part of an aesthetic and religious fabric. It functions in the novel to literally give shape to the protagonists understanding of the world. *Chora* provides a means through which the aesthetic and the religious are united. At the same time Pater achieves the kind of strange mediated effect, which according to Yeats and his followers is almost infectious, through *chora*. Throughout Marius we are not often given direct access to Marius’s *topos*. Rather much of the novel is centered around and mediated by *chora*. In this way *chora* is demonstrated as a powerful force at the center of what it is to construct humanistic meaning.

Pater’s aesthetic commitments in his critical writings also demonstrate the importance of *chora*, granting it an immense power. The interplay of our own subjective experience with an object of art, the *chora* we map on top of it at least in some of Pater’s constructions, is a powerful thing. Marius’ conversions enact the continual search for new

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17. It is also interesting to note that the way in which Pater gets at the processions Dionysian lineage is through language, urging us to read the word “triumph” through the hermeneutic of “Thriambos.”
experiences that widen one’s perceptions that Pater champions in *The Renaissance*.

Marius is prepared by his experiences at White Nights to seek broader aesthetic experience which are represented to readers by the mediation of *chora*. As Marius moves from dutiful pagan to aestheticized Christian, Pater’s primary concern is presenting the expansion of opportunity for aesthetic experience. Further, Pater’s own creative mapping has its own kind of infectious quality, as Wilde noted. And it is Wilde who will most thoroughly interrogate both the danger inherent in this kind of choric mapping, as well as the liberating possibilities it provides.
Chapter Five

Art Influencing Life: The Dangerous and Liberating Potential of Wilde’s Aesthetics

If Pater extends interest in the fantastic narrative, at times displacing realist narratives in favor of it, Wilde ultimately privileges the fantastic. His work continually examines meaning as a construction of art and narrative, ultimately allowing for the fantastic (Pater’s “artificial world”) to reshape the “real” world. This is especially detectable in his critical writings which point to the way in which “life imitates art.” Wilde is here not making a claim about the culpability of the artist for the moral effects of his work as is often made out; rather he is making a claim regarding the way in which art shapes our understanding of the world. As he writes in “The Decay of Lying,”

Consider the matter from a scientific or a metaphysical point of view, and you will find that I am right. For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. (312)

This passage recollects the original context from which I have lifted my two terms of *chora* and *topos*, for Wilde is arguing something quite similar to the theologians I have
borrowed from, that the natural world is a product of thought and narrative. Yet, this relationship between thought and narrative extends beyond nature and may be seen as relating to the construction of our worldviews and identities in general. We view nature as a caring mother because we have constructed narratives which portray it as such. Here is, for Wilde, the power of art. It constructs the way we view the world. Or rather, the world is a construction of our perceptions as shaped by our language. Recalling Wilde’s passage from “The Critic as Artist,” regarding Pater and *Mona Lisa*, Pater is an artist because his work constructs how we view the *Mona Lisa*, regardless of Da Vinci’s original intent.

Wilde’s major works express and interrogate this concept of meaning. Both the problematic as well as the creative and productive sides of this choric construction are examined throughout his work as he grapples with the consequences of an aesthetic that is so heavily weighted towards the imaginative and the artificial. My analysis will begin with the way in which Wilde’s fantastic verbal imagery in *Salome* creates a linguistic chaos which is highly problematic. The play’s fever pitch progression is propelled by the lack of fixity of its fantasy images. While what occurs on the stage is firmly in the realm of *topos*, it is a *topos* filtered through the near hallucinatory decadence of fantastic imagery as represented onstage by fantastic language. This creative and destructive power of the word is inherent in the play’s usage of language, a dynamic that is mirrored in Wilde’s most successful works, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*. 

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i. The Voice of the Prophet: *Salome* and the Failure of Language

In the century since its first publication, Oscar Wilde’s *Salome* has produced responses that have ranged from confused to incensed. The history of censorship and the hyperbole surrounding the play and its dangerous influence aside, critics have sought to fit this admittedly curious play in the context of Wilde’s other, more seemingly conventional work.¹ *Salome* is not set amongst the fashionable Georgian townhouses of Grosvenor Square that Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff, or even Dorian Gray, inhabit. Its language, though linked I will argue to the language of Wilde’s social comedies, is just as distant as its setting. Joseph Donahue notes that “it has consistently been viewed as an anomalous work” (85). The problem of squaring *Salome* with Wilde’s other works is enough of a concern that Michael Y. Bennett chose to title his introduction to a collection of essays on the play “*Salome* as Anomaly?” Bennett states, “I think it is time to fully consider *Salome* as a part or an anomaly of Wilde’s oeuvre. What implications can be drawn if *Salome* is put into dialogue with say, his comedies of manners? And what if *Salome* is truly an anomaly? What does *Salome*’s anomalous status say about the limitations of the form of the comedy of manners?” (viii). Bennett concisely points to the important work to be done in evaluating *Salome* as a part of Wilde’s larger work and examining its status in relation to works like the social comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* and the Gothic *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

While it is true that the three works considered in this chapter are very different in regards to style and often substance, they all are extensively engaged in the examination

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¹ I mean conventional in the strict sense of plots and settings. As Sos Eltis points out, the bulk of Wilde’s plays are built upon the bones of conventional theater. Eltis also ably points to the way in which Wilde’s revisions of such models are subversive. See *Revising Wilde: Society and Subversion in the Plays of Oscar Wilde*. 
of the relationship of topos to chora. Wilde’s 1893 play Salome is heavily focused upon the disjunction between what occurs on stage (or in the world of the play) and what the play’s numerous characters represent as occurring. In the last several chapters I have argued that Emily Brontë and Walter Pater both, in a sense, dramatize the process of choric meaning-making. Emily Brontë examines the dynamics of narration and storytelling, while Walter Pater creates a vision of the world that is mediated by chora. However, Salome, as a drama intended to be staged, literally dramatizes chora, allowing the audience to see the topos of onstage action and how it relates to the language that characters speak and the way in which they respond to the surrounding topos. It should be noted that topos in any drama is particularly complicated, as the stage is intended to represent a particular setting and location. Topos on stage, in the way in which this study is examining it, is of course artificial. Topos in a play like Salome is even further complicated as the particularly literal topos of the stage must represent a distant geographical and historical topos, and indeed a series of events in that location drawn from fragmented historical testimonies.

Salome’s complicated textual and theatrical histories are necessary for an understanding of the play’s dynamics of topos and chora. While to some extent all

2. Salome was first scheduled for performance in 1892; however, it was banned by the Lord Chamberlain’s office due to its Biblical subject matter. The work was subsequently published in 1893. While originally written in French, an English translation by Wilde was published with Aubrey Beardsley’s illustrations the following year (though Wilde attributed the translation to Lord Alfred Douglas.) The play was not performed until it was produced in Paris in 1896, after Wilde had been sent to prison. The play did not have a public English premiere until 1931. For a detailed yet concise overview of the play’s performance history see Peter Raby’s introduction to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays.

3. This artificiality is tied also to the general way this study has been using the term. As noted in Chapter One no text (or in this case performance) can ever be topos on a fully literal level, even non-fictional ones. A text is always artificial, and the topos a drama seeks to represent is always an artificial one.
theatrical productions exist in the tension between the written text and its representation on stage, *Salome*’s performance history makes that tension particularly interesting and important. The play was not performed under Wilde’s supervision, the first performance occurring while he was in prison, and it was not performed in English in his lifetime. Further, the play’s singularity of style makes comparisons with the staging of Wilde’s other plays impossible. Therefore it is important to view all productions as specific interpretations of the only production Wilde did supervise, the text itself.\(^4\) However, we cannot simply examine *Salome* as a text without reference to its performance, as it was written with the explicit intention of production. Nor should we ignore the text’s initial English publication with the attendant illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley. Both of these forms illustrate the text’s relationship between *topos* and *chora* in different ways. The best approach in terms of these different forms is a measured one, based on the text and its possible productions, and the text’s effects on those productions.

The best known edition of *Salome* is the 1894 edition published with Beardsley’s illustrations. Beardsley’s work adds another layer of *chora*, as his illustrations draw not just from the *topos* of the play, but heavily from the images that the characters speak about. For instance the first drawing “The Woman in the Moon” depicts the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias cowering at a moon with a face and a flower. The figure in the moon has been interpreted as Wilde (with good reason: the face bears a stylized resemblance, and the flower recalls his usual green carnation), but if it is Wilde it is Wilde as the Woman in the Moon. This image of the Woman in the Moon comes directly from the Page of Herodias’ lines: “Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She

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\(^4\) Again it is important to note that any production is an interpretation of a text, but the case of *Salome* is special in that we ultimately have the play as published text before we have performance.
is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things” (2-4). The illustrations in this instance draw heavily from the descriptive language of the characters. Wilde’s scene description at the beginning of the play reads thus: “A great terrace in the palace of Herod, set above the banqueting-hall. Some soldiers are leaning over the balcony. To the right there is a gigantic staircase, to the left, at the back, an old cistern surrounded by a wall of green bronze. The moon is shining very brightly.”

In this way Beardsley’s illustrations draw from the language of the play in order to create a chora that overtakes the play’s topos. Beardsley’s work in a sense becomes a part of the play’s topos as the choric language of the play is transmuted into the primary visuals associated with the text. We will see a similar collapse of topos and chora in The Importance of Being Earnest, though with very different implications. The lush visuals continue throughout the edition, providing the only accompaniment, overwhelming the set description that is easy to overlook in the face of the strange and striking pictures.

The play’s performance history, too, shows evidence of this kind of choric mapping though the dynamics of such performances function differently. William Tydeman and Steven Price write that “both individual productions and the stage history of the play tend towards a series of uncoordinated impressions which fail to cohere into a graspable whole” (174). Like the Beardsley illustrations, many productions have sought to represent onstage the disconnected choric worlds of various characters, leading to not only a verbal disjuncture, but a larger performative one. It seems notoriously difficult, if impossible, to represent the choric utterances characters make about the world on-stage

5. For an excellent reading of the play as related to the Beardsley illustrations see Elaine Showalter’s Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siecle.
without the production itself descending into the same kind of incoherence the characters themselves are embroiled in. This difficulty is at the heart of Wilde’s play and its interest in *topos* and *chora*. That does not mean that more selective forms of choric mapping cannot be used in order to represent the characters’ choric language as influencing *topos*. For instance, in Max Reinhardt’s Berlin production of 1905 (among the earliest of the play’s European premieres) the director used lighting to highlight the shifting moon and stars: “when Salome addressed the head as if it were a living person, Herod saw this as a crime against some unknown god, and as if in sympathy the stars disappeared and a cloud covered the moon” (Tydeman and Price 37).⁶

It is evident that both the Beardsley illustrations as well as performances, such as the Berlin staging discussed above, are drawing from the linguistic *chora* and not from what we might refer to as the *topos* of the situation, as evident in Wilde’s stage directions and set descriptions. Stage productions, however, have the opportunity to highlight the disjunction between *topos* and *chora* in a way in which the Beardsley illustrations in fact elide. While production such as Reinhardt’s seek to represent the choric language on-stage, the degree to which they do it functions to highlight how far the characters’ utterances are from the reality of the play’s *topos*.⁷

The play uses the tension between *topos* and *chora* in order to interrogate cogently the disjunction between signifier and signified, in a way in which *The Picture of* __________

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6. For an in-depth examination of the play’s performance history see Tydeman and Price. For a larger cultural history of *Salome* including a focus on adaptations see Petra Dierkes-Thrun *Salome’s Modernity: Oscar Wilde and the Aesthetics of Transgression*.

7. I am not arguing that the Beardsley illustrations or the productions mentioned here are bad art because they draw so much from the colliding linguistic fantasies of the characters, just that those elements are present as *chora* in the play, not as *topos*. Rather, I think it is interesting that language is represented in these examples as something infectious (again returning to the metaphor I have used previously in this study) that has overtaken reality.
Dorian Gray elaborates. In a further twist of irony, the context that Wilde places his examination of the failure of the sign is one specifically focused on the idea of the transcendental Word and its silencing: the death of John the Baptist.

The play begins by leading the reader/audience to question the referential value of language. The scene opens with a conversation between the Young Syrian and the Page of Herodias:

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. How beautiful is the princess Salome to-night!

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. Look at the moon. How strange the moon seems! She is like a woman rising from a tomb. She is like a dead woman. One might fancy she was looking for dead things.

THE YOUNG SYRIAN. She has a strange look. She is like a little princess who wears a yellow veil, and whose feet are of silver. She is like a princess who has little white doves for feet. One might fancy she was dancing.

THE PAGE OF HERODIAS. She is like a woman who is dead. She moves very slowly. (1-10)

This exchange is a tangle of uncertainties. While it begins with the invocation of Salome, the Page’s response seems to ignore the Young Syrian’s comment, shifting the attention to the moon. Yet the second half of the Page’s comment could be referring to Salome and not the moon. The same goes for the Young Syrian’s answer: he could be speaking about the moon or about Salome, as could the Page in his reply. The effect of this is to produce an uncertainty as to the object of the speech. They could either be talking at cross-purposes (one talking about the moon, the other Salome), both be talking about Salome,
or both be talking about the moon. This uncertainty collapses the two subjects together, so that the characters are talking about both the moon and Salome, and neither at all.

This is further amplified by the litany of nonsensical similes that the Young Syrian uses. While the Page’s figurative language—despite its uncertain object—remains relatively stable, the Syrian’s evocations shift from one strange image to another. It is not coherent in its attempt to establish meaning. For instance, if he is referring to Salome, who is a princess, what is the purpose of saying she is “like a princess”? At first glance it seems that the Young Syrian must be referring to the moon, responding to the Page’s reference to it. However, the uncertainty builds, because almost all of the Young Syrian’s dialogue in this section seems to be centered on his fixation with Salome. Further, even if this line does reference the moon, it is in direct contrast with the representation offered by the Page. The Young Syrian sees a princess veiled in yellow; the Page sees a dead woman rising from her tomb.

This opening passage also exemplifies the play’s usage of figurative language. Throughout the play the likening of one thing to another via metaphor and simile fails as an act of communication. Metaphors and similes themselves function as choric, in that they take something concrete and in the realm of topos and map another kind of meaning onto it, in order generally to express some non-literal truth about it. However, in Salome figurative language is employed to the detriment of understanding. The Syrian’s simile “like a princess” only seems to be able to point to itself, while the presentation of this princess’s feet as “silver,” and “doves” respectively seems to bear no relationship to a tangible meaning. Further, this usage of metaphor and simile causes characters to misunderstand each other to a startling degree. When Herod dismisses Iokanaan’s speech
it is heavily based on his inability to see metaphorical language as metaphorical. However, Herod’s speech is, like that of so many characters in the play, filled with figurative language. The failure of metaphor in Salome is striking considering how important metaphor has been throughout the works addressed thus far. Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and even Pater rely heavily on the ability of metaphor to communicate non-literal truths. Dickens’s work, as we’ve seen is rife with metaphor. 8

Sharon Marcus has recently argued that the failure of communication in Salome primarily relates to asymmetries between characters that are analogous to the “asymmetries between actor and spectator, star and fan.” She writes that “Part of Salome’s notorious strangeness derives from this disjunctive principle; characters repeatedly speak past one another, oblivious to the utterances of their putative interlocutors. Failed acknowledgment structures the play from its opening lines, which function less as dialogue than as parallel monologues” (1008). While Marcus is correct on the effect, the disjunction between characters, it is not primarily to do with asymmetries of station, at least not in a way that helps us make meaningful sense of the play. Rather, the characters in Salome are locked into their own choric visions, to the solipsistic point that they are no longer engaging with each other. It can be argued that they are like disciples of Pater who are subsumed by his assertion that “the first step towards seeing the object one’s object as it really is, is to know one’s own impression as it really is” and like Pater and the Mona Lisa are caught up in their own choric mapping.

8. Dickens relies heavily on it in order to make specific points about characters and circumstances and to link seemingly disparate ideas together into a larger morally connected whole. Thus, in Bleak House Dickens characterizes Tulkinghorn and his fellow lawyers as maggots: “Here, in a large house of state, lives Mr. Tulkinghorn. It is let off in sets of chambers now; and in those shrunken fragments of greatness, lawyers lie like maggots in nuts” (158) and connects this to the “maggot numbers” forced to find shelter in Tom-All-Alone’s (256).
From the first several lines of *Salome* we are brought into a world where utterance cannot be trusted to establish meaning. The interplay between the Young Syrian and the Page continues throughout the play, blurring the lines of discourse. No stable object is ever established for their conversation: it is always an uncertainty that includes the three possibilities mentioned above. Thus, later in the scene when Salome asks the Young Syrian to bring out the Baptist (something Herod has forbidden) the Page comments, “Oh! How strange the moon looks. Like the hand of the dead woman who is seeking to cover herself with a shroud!” (227-8). The Young Syrian replies, “She has a strange aspect! She is like a little princess, whose eyes are eyes of amber. Through the clouds of muslin she is smiling like a little princess” (229-31). The Young Syrian’s line about smiling through muslin refers back to Salome’s promise that if he brings the Prophet before her she will smile at him through her veil, yet it is said in response to the Page’s comment about the shrouded moon. A number of these lines are referring to visual elements. As I’ve previously mentioned, Wilde’s set description notes that the moon should be viewed onstage, so unless a production chooses to project these linguistic fantasies onto the set, the audience can literally see the disjuncture between the brightly shining moon and the language the Page uses to represent it. The image of the moon on stage also reflects back on the ambiguity of the Young Syrian’s lines, pointing to their lack of fixity. This conflict of discordant meanings continually breaks down any assumptions about the relationship between word and object. Its repetition enforces a meaninglessness of utterance across the universe of the play.⁹

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⁹ S.I. Salamensky has recently argued that *Salome* is heavily influenced by nineteenth-century discourses surrounding female hysteria. While her analysis seeks to elucidate the hysterical quality of the play’s titular heroine in utterance and deed, it fails to place her within the play’s larger linguistic context.
The relationship between signifier and signified is further complicated by the play’s relationship to the Symbolist dramas that clearly influenced it. *Salome* has long been read in various relations to the French Symbolists, which is clearly warranted by Wilde’s choices of subject matter and initial language of composition. However, critics have advanced a number of positions regarding the play’s participation in the dynamics of the Symbolists. These positions have particular and important implications for any consideration of Wilde’s interrogation of *topos* and *chora*.

Symbolism enters into English language discourse primarily through the work Wilde’s contemporary Arthur Symons who writes that the supreme purpose of the movement is in “an establishing of the links which hold the world together, the affirmation of an eternal, minute, intricate, almost invisible life, which runs through the whole universe” (80). Symbolist art thus seeks to offer a real, if hidden, coherence using symbols as a way of tracing that coherence.\(^{10}\)

Donohue argues that *Salome* goes beyond fulfilling this primary goal and is in fact “metasymbolist” in that it further connects to its Symbolist precursors:

In suggesting that the play is a symbolist play in a double, or “metasymbolist” sense, then, I mean to characterize it as both an authentic symbolist play, in the link it strives to establish with the hidden and profound connectedness of a spiritual world beyond the physical, and as a

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\(^{10}\) Symbolism is a slippery movement to define, as Richard Ellmann points out in regards to Symons’s classifications: “Symons does, it is true, use the term ‘symbolism’ rather loosely . . . Symons includes among the symbolists those who reject the world, those who accepts it so totally as to see it with new eyes, and those who regard it under the aspect of eternity” (xiii). Still, a working definition might consist of the interest in a symbolic coherence embedded in, underlying, or perhaps to square the Symbolists with writers such as Pater, projected on the world.
work that articulates meaningful connections with a host of other works, both literary and pictorial, on the same subject or the same style, whether in the same vein or not. (96)

Wilde’s play is clearly engaged with its Symbolist precursors as scholars have ably demonstrated. However, the issue of symbols and their relation to what they symbolize is incredibly fraught and is connected to the general concerns regarding the relation of the signifier to the signified exhibited by the play. This usage of symbols is, as Andrew R. Russ notes, slippery. He argues that the play finds its main purpose in “demonstrating how in turn symbols appear to be empty and unwilling, wonton and loose, and finally grotesque devourers” (37). Wilde’s play is built upon this wantonness of language and symbol. While it references its Symbolist precursors, its engagement with them is one of artful critique. There appears to be little spiritual connectedness in the text’s symbols or language, even when those signs are placed in the mouth of a prophet.

Hanson writes of the paradoxical power these meaningless utterances have in the text, a power that he sees as related to seduction and to the erotic influences found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*:

*Salomé* supposedly re-creates a moment of cultural conversion, a moment of historical decadence, the death rattle of paganism alongside the birth of Christianity. Herod, in his confusion and paranoia, is cast back upon the word, which is now at play, no longer performing its symbolic role as transcendent authority. Wilde has lifted from the Bible a moment in Christian history in which religious instability has obliged a king, under the influence of two lascivious women, a hysterical Christian, and
disputatious Jews and Nazarenes, to look to mere words with new
desperation, only to find they mirror his own crises of meaning. Herod
discovers the seduction of mere words, not only in Salomé’s dance and her
poetic discourse of the body, but also in the hysterical Christian discourse
of Jokanaan. (271)

Wilde’s usage of *chora* here, the extravagant fantastic language which transforms the*
topos* of the play, engages with major theoretical questions, ones which continue to
resonate in contemporary literary debates, particularly the theoretical discourses of Jean
Baudrillard. Baudrillard’s arguments regarding over-signification and the creation of
simulacra are, to place his position in my terms, objections to choric narrative elaborated
upon *topos*: fantastic narratives elaborated upon realism, or as Baudrillard will invoke
“the Real.”

Baudrillard writes of the “murderous capacity of images” and that throughout
Western history the sign had the capability to efface the signified. The only bulwark
against this linguistic chaos was a faith in God preserving the transparency of the sign:
“To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a
visible and intelligible mediation of the Real. All of Western faith and good faith was
engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning,
that a sign could *exchange* for meaning and that something could guarantee this
exchange—God, of course” (5). Without the guarantee of this linguistic transparency
provided by a God, images efface the Real, signs murder the signified, and simulacra are
born. *Salome* dramatizes this problem, depicting a world wherein utterance is
unconnected to “the Real,” and where the certainty of exchange has been reduced. If
there ever was a guarantee (and Wilde’s presentation of the madcap utterances of
Iokanaan cast doubt on this) it is extinguished by the end of the play with the Prophet’s
beheading, when the supposed carrier of the word of God is silenced. Artifice, and
Salome’s language is clearly intended as such, eclipses what Baudrillard will call “the
Real.” What Hanson points to as the power to seduce that the play’s language presents
is precisely what makes such dynamics so troubling for critics such as Baudrillard.

As Hanson rightly points out, the play’s setting at the historical Christian moment
is intensely important. And following Baudrillard, one would expect that the one stable
figure in the play would be Iokanaan, as Wilde names the Baptist. He would seem to be
the one voice that could guarantee the linguistic exchange that Baudrillard writes of, his
words the only possible echoes of coherence. However Iokanaan’s voice is not
understood. The very language which he uses (primarily Biblical) is shown by various
figures to be imprecise and liable for misinterpretation, as the following exchange makes
clear:

THE VOICE OF IOKANAAN. Behold the day is at hand, the day of the
Lord, and I hear upon the mountains the feet of him who shall be
the Savior of the world.

HEROD. What does that mean? The Savior of the world?

11. The artificiality inherent in the play is evident from Wilde’s discussion of its original
composition in French. In an interview with the Pall Mall Gazette Wilde stated, “I have one instrument that
I know I can command, and that is the English language. There was another instrument to which I had
listened all my life, and I wanted once to touch this new instrument to see whether I could make any
beautiful thing out of it . . . Of course, there are modes of expression that a Frenchman of letters would not
have used, but they give a certain relief or color to the play. A great deal of the curious effect that
Maeterlinck produces comes from the fact that he, a Flamand by grace, writes in an alien language. The
same thing is true of Rossetti, who, though he wrote in English, was essentially Latin in temperament”
(“Censure” 2). Wilde’s French composition is clearly intended to reflect an artificial aestheticized vision of
language, as opposed to a natural one.
TIGELLENUS. It is a title that Caesar adopts.

HEROD. But Caesar is not coming into Judaea. Only yesterday I received letters from Rome. They contained nothing concerning the matter. And you Tigellinus, who were at Rome during the winter, you heard nothing concerning this matter, did you?

TIGELLENUS. Sire, I heard nothing concerning the matter. I was explaining the title. It is one of Caesar’s titles.

HEROD. But Caesar cannot come. He is too gouty. They say that his feet are like the feet of an elephant. Also there are reasons of State. He who leaves Rome loses Rome. He will not come. Howbeit, Caesar is lord, he will come if such be his pleasure. Nevertheless, I think he will not come.

FIRST NAZARENE. It was not concerning Caesar that the prophet spake these words, sir.

HEROD. How?—It was not concerning Caesar?

FIRST NAZARENE. No, my Lord.

HEROD. —Concerning whom then did he speak?

FIRST NAZARENE. Concerning Messias who has come.

A JEW. Messias hath not come. (544-566)

While Herod’s misinterpretation is certainly meant to be comical, it does point to the problem of language inherent in the play. Iokanaan is using language that is already overloaded with possible meanings. It is clearly a possibility that one speaking of the “Savior of the world” in the play’s context could be speaking of Caesar. The issue
becomes even more troublesome when the First Nazarene introduces the word messiah. The Jews (all of whom are involved in arguments regarding theological language throughout the play) deny the usage of their term of spiritual designation for Iokanaan’s referent. The problem of proper interpretation moves beyond Herod, to the First Nazarene, who is assailed by the Jew. This becomes even more tangled up in the petty disagreement between the First Nazarene and the Second Nazarene which follows. The First Nazarene says that the messiah “healed two lepers that were seated before the Gate of Capernaum simply by touching them.” The Second Nazarene responds calling the nature of this miracle into question: “Nay, it was blind men that He healed at Capernaum” (574-8). Even amongst those who consider the messiah to have come, there is dispute. Further this dispute obscures the importance behind the story of the miracles and derails any coherent discussion of the messiah.

Iokanaan’s utterances then are not entirely reliable, even if they seem like they should be the most consistent in the play. They are imprecise and obscure, partially reflecting Wilde’s source material of course, for the Gospels evince a great deal of uncertainty about Jesus’s actual nature. Herodias is not far off the mark when she says that “this prophet talks like a drunken man” (663). While the words Wilde places within Iokanaan’s mouth are primarily from the Bible, they resemble in many ways the speech of the Young Syrian in that they are overburdened with obscure allusions and seem to collapse under their own weight. This is the case for most of his utterances, but the following provides an especially apt example: “He shall be seated on this throne. He shall be clothed in scarlet and purple. In his hand he shall bear a golden cup full of his blasphemies. And the angel of the Lord shall smite him. He shall be eaten of worms”
(704-7). This appears to be an elaboration on chapter 12 of Acts which speaks of the death of Herod. Indeed, Herodias interprets it as such, despite her reluctance to believe in omens. Herod, however, interprets it differently stating, “it is not me of which he speaks. He speaks never against me. It is of the King of Cappadocia that he speaks; the King of Cappadocia who is mine enemy” (710-2). The Prophet’s words do not communicate to Herod, because they are a long stream of images, each overlaid with associations none of which is clear. Even the prophet is incoherent, his language overburdened.

If the utterances of Iokanaan should be, from a Christian perspective, the closest thing to coherent word in the play, then even these are destroyed, literarily severed, as the Baptist is decapitated. Salome then puts the Prophet’s mouth to the use that she had intended all along when she kisses it. She herself comments on Iokanaan’s silence, the failure of his words: “And thy tongue, that was like a red snake darting poison, it moves no more, it speaks no words, Iokanaan that scarlet viper that spat its venom at me. It is strange is it not? How is it? that the red viper stirs no longer?” (1017-1020). Whatever revelatory power the Baptist has had is ended, and he is left unable to reproach Salome as he did before.

Wilde’s Iokanaan may be a prophet, yet Salome also casts doubt at the possibility of apprehending such reality. The truth that the Prophet comes to proclaim falls upon a number of deaf ears and often seems to bear more relation to the speech of the Young Syrian than one who speaks of a transcendent reality. At the end of the play both Iokanaan and Salome are dead, and while we are told that Christ is “every place, my lord, but it is hard to find him” (604-5), he seems absent from the Tetrarch’s palace, and his place in Wilde’s world seems ever more uncertain.
Linda Dowling refers to this linguistic dynamic in Wilde as “autonomous language,” and argues that for Wilde “thought is bred of words, not words of thought” ([Language 173]). This dynamic is quite easily seen in the passage quoted earlier regarding nature, though Wilde extends this beyond language itself to broader ideas of artifice. As Hanson notes, “all the characters in the play are decadent poets: they are solipsistic, their language militates against meaning, the repeat themselves with the eerie symbolist music of a Maeterlinck” (272). As we shall see this interest in artifice extends further in Wilde’s work. As Salome demonstrates, Wilde is keenly aware of the problems of signification and disjunction between sign and signified. He is also keenly aware that artifice in a sense unmoors language, allowing for the destructive mapping of chora onto an increasingly irrelevant topos. Herod’s command at the end of the play to “kill that woman!” (1070) can be interpreted in at least one sense as a response to the murder of meaning prompted by the seduction of artifice. However, even this meaning was already in question as the problematic nature of the prophet’s speech points out. The disjunction between signifier and signified and its relationship to topos and chora is a dynamic that Wilde seeks to explore further in his most famous works, interrogating both the destructive side of choric meaning-making as well as its creative and liberating potential in The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Importance of Being Earnest.

12. Dowling argues that much of Wilde’s linguistic ideas are owed to the German philologist (and father of Comparative Religion) Max Müller whose lectures Wilde attended while at Oxford.
ii. Painting Dorian and Christening Jack: Fantasy and Identity in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*

*Salome* is intensely focused on the problematic nature of language, and as I have argued, anticipates theorists such as Jean Baudrillard who are concerned about the eclipse of “the Real” by artifice. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is also concerned with these issues, echoing *Salome*’s warning about the problematic nature of *chora*. However, this understanding of Wilde’s linguistic conception is complicated by *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a text I argue should be (and generally has not been) read in conjunction with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

As *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* may be read as a counterpoint to *Romeo and Juliet*, so may Wilde’s comic *The Importance of Being Earnest* be read against the Gothic tragedy of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Both take as their subjects the alter-ego, products of art and imagination. In Dorian’s case the alter-ego does not begin as his own creative act but is rather that of Basil Hallward, the artist who paints the eponymous picture. Still Dorian takes up the double life in order to indulge his less acceptable urges while retaining the illusion of innocence. In *Earnest*, both Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing have forged out of their own creative faculties alternate lives that also allow them indulge in socially questionable behavior. As the play progresses it is again their acts of creativity that allow them to put behind these roles and enter into relationships with the play’s two heroines. Both *Dorian* and *Earnest* then ultimately address similar themes; however, the genre of the comedy ultimately allows Wilde to examine the creative potential of *chora*, while the Gothic tragedy of *Dorian* allows Wilde to address the dangers inherent in such creativity.
Both *Dorian Gray* and *Earnest* are works focused around conceptions of identity and their formations through fantastic narratives. As I will endeavor to show, the characters in *Earnest* all participate in a kind of choric identity construction that has no grounding in the play’s reality.\(^{13}\) Rather, that reality is performatively rearranged through language so that the impossible or at least the improbable comes to pass. *Dorian Gray* on the other hand offers a world where the narrative of Dorian’s crimes becomes etched on the object. The art object and the reality it represents somehow switch places, confusing the relationship between the signifier, the picture, and Dorian himself, the signified.

Joyce Carol Oates and Nils Clausson both argue that *Dorian Gray* achieves its effects by mixing genres, mapping (in my phrase) the fantastic genre of the Gothic onto the *topos* of a more mundane genre. Clausson writes that the novel “is disjunctively situated between two conflicting genres, each of which is related to one of the two antithetical literary and cultural discourses that the novel engages but cannot successfully integrate: namely self-development (including what we today call ‘sexual liberation’) and Gothic degeneration” (342). Ultimately according to Clausson, the novel is unresolvable because of the inherent conflict between these two genres.

Oates views the novel as positioned between genres as well: “Certainly it possesses a supernatural dimension, and its central image is gothic; yet in other respects it is Restoration comedy, energetically sustained for more than two hundred pages.” This supernatural dimension is both marginal and yet somehow central, and it is certainly

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\(^{13}\) When I talk about the “reality” of the play, I mean that *Earnest* ostensibly takes place in a mimetic world. And while *Earnest* finds its origin in the farce, the thing at the heart of the farce’s comedy is the way in which the rules of the mimetic world are to one degree or another broken. In this way the farce gets its very power from the assumption that the world it operates in mirrors reality, and then by confounding that assumption. We can see a parallel here to Brian Attebery’s arguments in chapter one of *Strategies of Fantasy* that any fantasy narrative relies on a mimetic which it can subvert. Wilde’s play takes this further, as language reshapes what should be taken to be a “real” mimetic world.
opposed to the world that Oates defines as that of Restoration Comedy: “It [the supernatural elements] would be quite ludicrous if introduced to Henry’s drawing room society, and it is really inexplicable given the secular nature of Dorian’s personality. . . The consequences of a Faustian pact with the devil are dramatized, but the devil himself is absent, which suggests that the novel is an elaborate fantasy locating the Fall within the human psyche alone” (424).14

What I think is most significant in these discussions of mixed and hybrid genres is the way in which the Gothic overwhelms and corrupts the other genre, whether it be drawing room social comedy or Paterian development narrative. As Oates notes, “diabolical powers are stirred by Basil’s art, but Basil himself has no awareness of them, apart from a certain uneasiness regarding the morality of his relationship to Dorian” (424). Basil will ultimately be claimed by the Gothic genre when Dorian kills him and disposes of his body in a manner that would make Matthew Lewis and Charles Maturin proud.

But beyond the elements of Gothic plot, it is the way in which the object itself, the picture upon which Dorian’s age, but also his sins, comes to rest, that confuses the genres and the signifier and signified. Dorian himself, as he fails to age, becomes the fantastic object, as the picture itself becomes the living (and aging) Dorian. Through his destructive mapping of the fantastic onto reality in Dorian Gray, Wilde seems here aligned with Baudrillard and his “murderous capacity of images.” Dorian Gray provides us with a world wherein the guarantee of linguistic exchange does not exist, to tragic results.

14. Perhaps recalling Baudrillard’s absent God.
Stephen Arata argues that the primary purpose of the novel is to destabilize humanist notions of the organic individual. Arata writes, “most notably, Wilde is a key figure in the overturning of humanist ideologies of identity.” Wilde, according to Arata, challenges the “Belief in a deep authentic self, one capable of coherently expressing and revealing its essential nature” (*Fictions* 59). In this way *Dorian Gray* functions as critique of the larger cultural system that views identity as the locus of an immutable character. Sos Eltis has identified Wilde’s conception of identity as “radical individualism,” but this radical individualism is far from the belief in a “deep authentic self” that Arata takes apart. Eltis writes of Wilde’s *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*: “Wilde’s essay proposes the abolition of all restraints on the individual in order that each person may develop their own personality and satisfy their own desires without reference to anyone else” (22). Eltis echoes Arata here, who points out that

over the course of the novel Dorian acquires not a “character,” but a “personality.” Wilde habitually eschews the former term, with its aura of depth and authenticity, for the latter, which by the 1880s had begun to accrue its modern connotations of insincerity, artifice, and theatricality. If, as Wilde tells us, “now and then a complex personality took the place and assumed the office of art” that is in part because both personalities and works of art are created objects. (*Fictions* 60)

This confusion between signifier and signified, artificial and real is of continual concern throughout the novel.

This dynamic finds one anchoring point in discussions of acting. Lord Henry tells Dorian “I love acting. It is so much more real than life” (65). Sybil Vane, the novel’s only
professional actor also holds forth on the artifice of the stage in a way which confuses the relationship between the theatre and life: “‘Dorian, Dorian,’ she cried, ‘before I knew you acting was the one reality of my life. It was only in the theatre that I lived. I thought that it all was true. I was Rosalind one night, and Portia the other. The joy of Beatrice was my joy, and the sorrows of Cordelia were mine also. I believed in everything’” (70). While Sybil paints this as a kind of naïve faith that pales in comparison for her love of (what she takes to be) the real Dorian, she is entirely bound up in art. She goes on to say: “My life, my love, Prince Charming! Prince of Life! I have grown sick of shadows!” (71). Sybil here invokes the cliché of Prince Charming before moving on to the more high-minded but still artificial reference to Tennyson’s “Lady of Shalott” who has grown “half-sick of shadows” (71). Even as she seeks to break her connection with art, and as Dorian dismisses her for trying to do so, she cannot escape the slipperiness of her counterfeit.

Sybil Vane provides an idealized example of what Arata calls “authentic insincerity” a kind of individualism that rejects the humanist ideologies of immutable character that Eltis and Arata both point out. This “authentic insincerity” will reach its apex in The Importance of Being Earnest, when multiple characters ultimately reject immutable identities for ones which they create through imagination, artifice, and performance.

Baudrillard tells us that “signs murder,” and the sign does ultimately murder. Sybil Vane is the first victim of the disjunction between signifier and signified. Dorian rejects her when she has stopped performing as a simulacrum. Hallward and, most significantly, Dorian both die. Dorian’s death is a specific function of the novel’s transposition of signifier and signified as he attacks the picture with the knife he used to murder Hallward. In the famous last paragraph the servants enter the attic where Dorian
kept the picture:

When they entered, they found hanging upon the wall a splendid portrait of their master as they had last seen him, in all the wonder of his exquisite youth and beauty. Lying on the floor was a dead man, in evening dress, with a knife in his heart. He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till they had examined the rings that they recognized who it was. (184)

Dorian’s inability to properly understand his relationship to the painting, as well as his belief that the painting represents an unalterable identity, set in stone (or perhaps fixed in oils) is his primary mistake. As Arata points out Dorian “is punished not for his transgressions against bourgeois morality but because he comes to accept its standards . . . . Dorian endows [the painting] with the power symbolically to body forth his ‘true’ self” (63-4). The simulacrum here takes the place of Dorian as the key holder of identity, an identity that is both immutable and perceived as corrupt.

*Dorian Gray* perhaps represents the danger inherent in artistic production, and the possibility of art to overwhelm and destroy what it represents. This is closely aligned with Baudrillard’s concern about the destructive nature of the sign. However, as both *The Importance of Being Ernest* and his critical writings demonstrate, Wilde also saw the creative potential of artifice and its role in the production of identity. For Baudrillard and the discourse present in both *Salome* and *Dorian Gray* signs murder, choric language and narrative eradicate “the real.” In *Earnest* choric discourses provide the fodder for a shifting reality grounded in identity performance in a way which is liberating. This performativity can be viewed in relation to discourses by J.L. Austin and particularly
Judith Butler, whose work comes into conflict with Baudrillard’s. Butler’s well-known destabilization of identity, through the location of identity formation in the performative, seems particularly suited to Wilde’s own theories of identity. Throughout his work, including *Dorian Gray*, Wilde undercuts notions of stable identity.

Butler’s theories of performance and identity find a significant portion of their origin in J.L. Austin’s work in the philosophy of language. In his highly influential series of lectures collected as *How to Do Things with Words*, Austin establishes the concept of the “performative utterance” using examples such as marriage vows, the Christening of a ship, the reading of a will, and the placing of a bet:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it . . . it may be that the utterance “serves to inform you”—but that is quite different. To name the ship is to say (in appropriate circumstances) the words “I name, &c.” When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., “I do,” I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it. (6)

These usages of words are speech-acts. As Austin points out, these different actions are not informative, though they may ultimately inform; they are performative: they seek to enact something whether it be a marriage or a wager.

Working from Austin’s concept of the “Performative utterance” Butler situates identity within the linguistic. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler points out the reason that hate speech affects us is because we are ourselves bound up in language: “Could language injure us if we were not, in some sense linguistic beings, beings who require language in
order to be” (1-2). As Butler famously contends in *Gender Trouble*, identity is “an effect of discursive practice” (24). She writes in a the 1999 preface to a second edition of *Gender Trouble*,

the view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a set of sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures. (xv)

Butler further develops the understanding of performativity in this fashion in her later works including *Bodies that Matter*.¹⁵ What is important for this particular analysis is how Butler’s work here undercuts the stability of an immutable internally constituted identity (a “character” to again draw on the language of Wilde’s milieu) in favor of a performatively constructed one. This understanding of identity as a fluid construction of discourse, created from performance and performative utterances appears at odds with a Baudrillardian sense of a world of simulacra devoid of relationship to the Real. For Baudrillard artifice kills the Real, the sign murders, while for Butler, artifice is part and parcel to the discursive process.

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¹⁵ In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler extends this understanding of a kind interpolated identity performance. Writing specifically about gender identity she states “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names . . . the regulatory norms of ‘sex’ work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body’s sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of consolidation of the heterosexual imperative” (xii). This performativity, generally part of the ideological web in which Butler argues we are always already interpolated, is primarily how our identity exists (gender and otherwise.) She argues that her formulation necessitates “the understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what he/she names, but rather as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (xii). While this initially does not allow for much in terms of the kind of subversive identity reshaping that is ultimately expressed in Wilde, Butler’s theory as it develops allows for a certain elasticity (though not one that goes as far as Wilde’s use of *chora* suggests).
This discussion of artifice and creativity brings us directly to the performative linguistic fantasia that is *The Importance of Being Earnest*, a work that revolves around identity performance and narratives that change the reality they are mapped on top of. Through the creativity reserved for the artist (or perhaps critic as artist) Jack Worthing and Algernon Moncrieff as well as the play’s witty women, Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew, fashion new identities that through the medium of the play are allowed to usurp their former identities. The fictitious narratives which Jack and Algernon tell about themselves are revealed as a kind of truth, showing a vision of identity that fluidly maps new meanings around objects, creating narratives that overwhelm the facts.

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is a difficult play to get a handle on. It plays fast-and loose with concepts of truth and identity, in a way that makes it particularly problematic. Critics have read it as a critique of the marriage market, a play containing a secret celebration of homosexual desire, a radical re-envisioning of society placed at great depth under a glossy surface, and a play that is only that glossy surface. What many of these different readings center upon (and indeed stumble upon) is the vexed relationship between the words characters speak on stage and the effects they have in the universe of the play. This is then further complicated by the question of the relationship of that staged universe, the place where performative utterances become fact, to what Julia Prewett Brown calls “the circumstantial world in which we live” (91) or, as Baudrillard might invoke, “the real.” These two relationships, between the fantastic

16. Dennis Spininger argues that *Earnest* is primarily about the impossibility of reconciliation and the problematic nature of the Victorian marriage market. Notable queer readings of the text are Alan Sinfield’s “‘Effeminacy’ and ‘Femininity’ : Sexual Politics in Wilde’s Comedies,” Christopher Craft’s “Alias Bunbury: Deisre and Termination in *The Importance of Being Earnest,*” and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Tales of the Avunculate : Queer Tutelage in *The Importance of Being Earnest.*” Sos Eltis argues that the play represents a picture of Wilde’s ideal anarchist state under a palatable bourgeois surface.
narratives the characters in *Earnest* weave and the reshaping of that world in which they weave them (the *chora* and the *topos*), and between the linguistic fantasy that occurs on stage and the world as we understand it off-stage has become the prime area of contention regarding the play and its implications. It is hard to deny that this is fraught territory. Christopher S. Nasaar writes that “the play is absolutely devoid of sober content, and any attempt to find serious meaning in it must of necessity fall wide of the mark” (130). In order to get at this fraught question and unravel the tangled web of language in Wilde’s play it is necessary to examine how Wilde’s comedy both articulates an idealized vision of the world and individual identity within it as presented in Wilde’s critical work and pre-figures the discourse centric theories of Austin and Butler cited above. If *Salome* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are critiques or even cautionary tales about the power of art and artifice, *Earnest* offers another possibility for the power of art, one which Wilde depicts as liberating.

All four of the primary characters in *Earnest* are involved in the weaving of narratives. Jack and Algernon both have created detailed alter-egos with back-stories and attitudes. Cecily has built an entire romance with the fictitious Ernest (an identity that Algernon assumes) while Gwendolyn appears to love Jack only in his bunburrying city guise of Ernest. These narratives, unattached to any seeming reality, are invoked and made real through the medium of story and especially performative acts, including “performative utterances” as Austin calls them. Wilde’s play gives great weight to these utterances, ultimately resolving the play in favor of them and their transformational effects. The final effect of these transformations breaks the boundaries between truth and fiction, fantasy and reality, as the choric narratives that the characters are weaving
overtake and overwhelm the *topos* in which they are created.

The fictionalization of this world has begun even before the play starts. When *The Importance of Being Earnest* opens in Algernon Moncrieff’s flat the audience is quick to discover that both Algernon and his friend Jack Worthing have created fictional narratives, alter-egos that allow them to indulge in less than respectable pursuits while keeping their regular identities free from blame. The discovery of these narratives begins with a cigarette case inscribed to “Uncle Jack” from “little Cecily.” When Jack (posing as Ernest) is confronted with this evidence of a double life by Algernon, he confesses that he is “Ernest in town and Jack in the country” (1.166). He has adopted the name of Ernest in order to protect his ward Cecily from any influence that his less than pristine character might enact:

> When one is placed in the condition of a guardian, one has to adopt a very high moral tone on all subjects. It’s one’s duty to do so. And as a high moral tone can hardly be said to conduce very much to either one’s health or one’s happiness, in order to get up to town I have always pretended to have a younger brother of the name of Ernest, who lives in the Albany, and gets into the most dreadful scrapes. That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth pure and simple. (1.201-8)

Jack has created an alter-ego, a narrative different from and beyond the reality that he wishes to conceal (recalling Dorian’s alter-ego). Understanding the paradox in exposing this duplicity as the truth, and also hinting at the interpenetration of truth and fiction in everyday life, Algernon states, “The truth is rarely pure, and never simple. Modern life
would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!” (1.209-11).

Jack’s admission here and Algernon’s response is important to examine for a moment. Wilde’s perspective here seems in-line with Algernon’s. The truth for Wilde, particularly as it relates to identity is certainly not simple. As numbers of critics have pointed out Wilde’s conception of identity is aligned against an immutable character. Shelton Waldrop, in reference to Wilde’s own personal understanding of identity, writes “Wilde’s subsequent trajectory was not toward some ultimate being—some essential or irreducible self—but the beginning in earnest of a system of becoming, of transformations of self that left any belief that there could be a natural, stable Oscar Wilde in doubt” (xi). Algernon’s statement that “the truth is rarely pure and never simple” points to this more complicated vision of the relationship between identity and performance. Algernon is in essence demonstrating that Jack’s simple identification of himself as Jack with Ernest as “a pretended younger brother” is a fallacy. He is both Jack and Ernest and he will indeed, by virtue of performance and the play’s deus ex machine plot become Ernest.

Algernon goes on to admit that he, too, has created a fictitious persona which aids him in maintaining a respectable public face while indulging in illicit entertainments:

You have invented a very useful younger brother called Ernest, in order that you may be able to come up to town as often as you like. I have invented an invaluable permanent invalid called Bunbury, in order that I may be able to go down into the country whenever I choose. Bunbury is perfectly invaluable. If it wasn’t for Bunbury’s extraordinary bad health,
for instance, I wouldn’t be able to dine with you at Willis’s tonight, for I
have been really engaged to Aunt Augusta for more than a week. (1.220-7)

These performances are creative acts that rely on the power of language and narrative for
their force. They are discursive acts of identity creation that can be related to the
discourses surrounding performance and language discussed above. As the play unfolds
these creations will take on lives of their own, their narratives becoming truth.¹⁷
Algernon’s invented brother Bunbury will be replaced with his real brother Jack, now
Ernest, and Jack’s own alter-ego as Ernest will become his identity as he discovers his
true paternity.

The women, too, have their fictions, which they use to give meaning to their
romantic lives. At the beginning of Act II Cecily and Miss Prism are engaged in a brief
discussion that again demonstrates the interpenetrating world of fiction and reality.
Cecily and Miss Prism have the following exchange:

MISS PRISM. . . . Cecily, I really don’t see why you should keep a diary
at all.

CECILY. I keep a diary in order to enter the wonderful secrets of my life.
If I didn’t write them down I should probably forget all about
them.

MISS PRISM. Memory, my dear Cecily, is the diary that we all carry
about with us.

¹⁷. Again the concept of “truth” here is a complicated. These narratives become truth, at least in
some sense in the play. Jack becomes (or is revealed to be) Ernest on some metaphysical level through a
kind of fantastic transformation (or revelation) or more mundanely, because he is acknowledged as such to
be Ernest by the social circle and the arbiter of that circle, Lady Bracknell. The question of truth as the
universe of the play represents it and its connection to our world is another matter that this chapter also
seeks to address.
CECILY. Yes but it usually chronicles the things that have never happened, and couldn’t possibly have happened. I believe that Memory is responsible for nearly all three-volumed novels that Mudie sends us. (2.36-46)

Cecily’s rationale questions the validity of memory as a measure of objective reality. Memory is in fact as fictitious as the novel. However, as the audience will learn shortly thereafter, Cecily’s own journal is itself a bundle of fancies. In the diary Cecily has creatively elaborated on Jack’s fiction. She too creates a fictitious narrative that extends beyond the reality of her situation.

Cecily’s diary is part of a number of documents that seek to shape reality in Earnest, and it is important to note that the clearly fictitious diary entries are given the same kind of weight as other documents. Neil Sammells examines this documentary paradigm:

To an extent, Wilde is parodying the reliance of the “well-made play,” and indeed his own three previous society dramas, on letters, legal documents, etc. in propelling the plot. Even the principle motor of Wilde’s narrative, Jack’s cigarette case, is a text: “it is a very ungentlemanly thing to read a private cigarette case” (324). Further, each of the main characters is directly associated with a document (or documents) which counters the fictions of others and is used in an attempt to shape and control the fictional world in which they live. (106)

These documents are all presented as equally valid (if competing) tools for validating and ultimately shaping reality. Three-volume novels, fictitious diaries, and army lists are all
presented as shapers of discourse, creating reality discursively. This is true even as various characters (for instance Cecily with her diary) acknowledged their fictitiousness.

Cecily’s fantastic relationship with the fictitious Ernest, whose role Algernon has now taken up, is itself a sharp criticism of Victorian romantic engagements. She takes Jack’s creation and elaborates on it herself:

Well, ever since dear Uncle Jack first confessed to us that he had a younger brother who was very wicked and bad, you of course have formed the chief topic of conversation between myself and Miss Prism. And of course a man who is much talked about is always very attractive. One feels there must be something in him after all. I daresay it was foolish of me, but I fell in love with you Ernest. (2.445-50)

This passage reinforces the play’s emphasis on language and the claims it has to truth.

Further, Cecily has created out of Jack’s fiction, a further layer of the story wherein she is able to play the role of the idealized sought-after woman. She elaborates over the next several moments:

ALGERNON. Darling! And when was the engagement actually settled?

CECILY. On the 14th of February last. Worn out by your entire ignorance of my existence, I determined to end the matter one way or the other, and after a long struggle with myself I accepted you under this dear old tree here. The next day I bought this little ring in your name, and this little bangle with the true lovers’ knot I promised you always to wear.

ALGERNON. Did I give you this? It’s very pretty, isn’t it?
CECILY. Yes you’ve wonderfully good taste, Ernest. It’s the excuse I’ve always given for your leading such a bad life. And this is the box in which I keep all your dear letters. (kneels at table, opens box and produces letters tied up with blue ribbon)

ALGERNON. My letters! But my own sweet Cecily, I have never written you any letters.

CECILY. You need hardly remind me of that, Ernest. I remember only too well that I was forced to write your letters for you. I wrote always three times a week, and sometimes oftener. (2.452-68)

This scene continues, with Cecily chronicling their engagement, then the breaking-off of the engagement (all recorded in her diary) and then the return of their love based upon several letters that Ernest wrote to her.

What is important about this sequence for our purposes is that it in essence melds together the choric narratives that Cecily has created with the *topos* of the situations. Cecily seamlessly moves between her created narrative, and the actual world of the play. Thus she can rhapsodize about the love letters Ernest has sent her, while in the next moment explain that she wrote these letters herself. Algernon, playing the role of Ernest, is caught up by this narrative, too. “You’ll never break off our engagement again, Cecily?” he asks her, to which she replies “I don’t think I could break it off now that I have actually met you. Besides of course, there is the question of your name” (234). By the end of the sequence Algernon and Cecily are for all purposes engaged, and Algernon’s concerns about the name prompt him not to appeal to Cecily’s reason by explaining his true identity, but rather to seek to make Cecily’s fantasy a reality, by
becoming Ernest.

What separates the choric dynamics of *Earnest* from those in *Salome* or *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is primarily in how these dynamics play out and are resolved in-line with the play’s genre. *Salome* as I have sought to show is focused on the disjunction between *chora* and *topos*, the failure of the sign to represent reality. It is in essence a play about the divorce of the signifier from the signified, about signs that murder. The other important separation here is in regards to identity and the role *chora* plays in construction of identity. As Arata notes “Wilde makes clear that his hero is not punished for his transgressions against bourgeois morality, but because he comes to accept its standards . . . Like Edward Hyde, Dorian eventually internalizes the very ethos he claims to repudiate” (63). While Jack and Algernon understand the mutability of identity, its instability and the way in which *chora* reshapes identity, *Dorian* comes to see the painting as the placeholder of an immutable identity.

Algernon embraces the fantastic narrative that Cecily has created in her diary. Jack has a similar choice to make regarding fantasy and reality. In Act I we learn of Gwendolen’s obsession with men named Ernest: “my ideal has always been to love someone of the name of Ernest. There is something in the name that inspires absolute confidence. The moment Algernon first mentioned to me that he had a friend called Ernest, I knew I was destined to love you” (1.381). When Jack presses her, asking whether she might love someone with another name, Gwendolen refuses, happily confirming several times that Jack need not worry, for he is Ernest. Jack’s response, just like Algernon’s, is not to tell Gwendolen the truth but to reconcile himself to his identity as Ernest.
Both Algernon and Jack’s acts are creative ones, something which Wilde skillfully extends further in the play by pointing to the ritual performance used to establish identity. The medium through which both characters seek to make their fictions a reality is that of the socially sanctioned ritual of christening. In Act II both men seek to be christened as Ernest in order to take on their new identities and marry Cecily and Gwendolen. It is, of course ridiculous and quite funny that the two characters truly believe that such a ritual would enact these changes on a metaphysical level, and yet this seems to be what Wilde suggests in “The Decay of Lying,” where he argues that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life” (311), indicating how the aesthetic effects our conceptual models. The aesthetic ritual of baptism reshapes how we think about the individual baptised. The societal function of such a ritual also seems to support such an interpretation, the ritual of baptism is a performance of a particular identity for either family (in the case of a child) or an individual (in the case of an adult).  

Imagination allows for Jack and Algernon to reconcile themselves with their alter-egos and move forwards with Cecily and Gwendolen. The willingness of both to take up the role of Ernest through christening seems to point to this integration, since both are taking up the mantel that they have created to go Bunburying with. Jack has created Ernest for town and Algernon has picked it up for his latest escapade. Algernon acknowledges that the entire experience has been a Bunbury, indeed “the most wonderful Bunbury I have ever had in my life” (2.774-5). Both characters embrace their alter-egos in attempting create themselves as Ernest. At the same time this process of being found out has prevented them from employing those alter-egos in the old fashion:  

18. We can also recall Austin’s usage of the wedding vows as an example of a performative utterance. Extending this points to the performative role of the wedding ceremony, similar in performative power to the baptism ritual.
JACK. Well, the only small satisfaction I have in the whole of this wretched business is that your friend Bunbury is quite exploded. You won’t be able to run down to the country quite so often as you used to do, dear Algy. And a very good thing too.

ALGERNON. Your brother is a little off colour, isn’t he, dear Jack? You won’t be able to disappear to London quite so frequently as your wicked custom was. And not a bad thing either. (2.785-91)

Bunbury has not actually been exploded, however, but actually integrated. Both Jack and Algernon have taken the very “serious” business of Bunburying and have integrated the assumed identity into their real ones. They have fallen in love with Gwendolen and Cecily within the role of their alter-egos while performing the identities. The only way to press forward in their desires for marriage is to enact these identities.

Dennis J. Spinninger has argued that Wilde’s primary mode throughout *Earnest* is one which pits opposites against one another, and does not allow for reconciliation:

Wilde parodies the conventions of comedy even as he uses them, a process which pushes the play beyond the confines of “play” and thrusts his comic mode into a demonstration or evocation of its opposite. And he does this by juxtaposing without reconciling, a thing with its own cancellation—a procedure I would characterize not as a failure to move to some third term of synthesis, which might accomplish the reconciliation, but a deliberate (Wilde would have said “studied”) unwillingness to embrace a theory of reconciliation. (51)
Part of Spinninger’s point relies on how seriously we take Wilde’s foray into the comic genre. As I have argued here, a reconciliation does seem to take place. Bunbury is not so much exploded as integrated. The role Algernon chooses to play, the dissolute Ernest, allows him dramatically to embrace Bunbury (as Ernest is a Bunburying figure), and yet it is while playing this persona that he decides to put aside Bunbury.

Reconciliation with the self, something that I argue this fiction actually allows to happen, becomes the goal and defining moment of the play. Julia Prewitt Brown writes: “being Ernest and being earnest can never coincide because of the relative insincerity required for us to live in society. When the two are brought together the play ends” (88). The play concludes in the moment when fiction becomes reality and through fiction the characters are able to reconcile their alter-egos. The play’s final scene brings the narrative the characters have created to radical life, extending Wilde’s idea of life imitating art to absurdity, yet it is an absurdity that the play itself embraces. It is at the play’s culmination that chora finally and fully eclipses topos, that the stories these characters have been weaving around themselves cease to be fictions. Or perhaps, reality ceases to exist as it all becomes fiction. Sos Eltis points to how the play’s ending complicates and ultimately undermines the social stability promoted by the genre of the farce:

All farce contains an element of anarchy . . . Yet ultimately law, order, and the status-quo are re-established. The disorder is short-lived and the only after-effects are that the errant figures of authority have been led to a more sympathetic understanding of human error. The spirit of anarchy is constantly opposed by the ruling spirit of civilized society, and civilized society eventually achieves an impressive victory. In Wilde’s farce,
however, there is no division between chaos and order, fact and fiction. It
is not a civilized society temporarily disrupted, but a perfect anarchic state
in which the characters live, luxuriating in its benevolent lack of rules,
morals, and principles. (172)

The play’s ending doesn’t resolve back into a world of stable identity, but rather ends
highlighting the power of performance and language.

In the play’s final moments it is revealed by Miss Prism that Jack was misplaced
as a baby and that he is actually Algernon’s elder brother. Upon learning of this fact Jack
examines the Army lists to discover the name of his father, the name that he is meant to
have: “Moncrief! Lieutenant 1840, Captain, Lieutenant Colonel, Colonel, General, 1869,
Christian names, Ernest John” (3.454-5). Wilde’s only stage direction here gives little
indication of how the scene should be played. At the beginning of this sequence Jack
“Rushes to the bookcase and tears the books out” (3. 451-2) and then upon discovering
his Christian name he “Puts book very quietly down and speaks quite calmly” (3.456).

Wilde’s lack of detailed stage directions regarding how this sequence should be
played, allows for several theatrical interpretations. If played straight then Jack really is
Ernest and the play’s strange farcical world is one where the very force of language and
story itself changes reality. Chora, through no other medium than being uttered or
presented has eclipsed topos. The lies they have been telling one another prove to contain
a truth unguessed at by the very artists who fashion them, just as Pater’s interpretation of
the Mona Lisa “reveals to us a secret of which, in truth, it knows nothing.”

However, the scene can and has been played another way. Various productions,
including Oliver Parker’s 2002 film adaptation, treat the scene quite differently. In
Parker’s version Jack, played by Colin Firth, reads the name, and puts the book down hesitantly as an act of concealment. Lady Bracknell picks the book up, and it is revealed to audience through a point of view shot that the name is actually John. In this context Lady Bracknell’s subsequent “My nephew, you seem to be displaying signs of triviality” (3.472) has a slightly accusatory ring, from one co-conspirator to another. There is a theatrical precedent for this reading dating back to Wilde’s own original four act version. In this version the book that Jack may be reading from may not be the Army Lists at all, but a random periodical like the ones that, in this draft, he has showered down upon his fellows (Donohue and Berggren 354).

This second reading has interesting implications for how we think of the play in relation to Wilde’s aesthetics. In the first reading reality is shaped by fantasy, but this turns the play into, in some ways, a farce far removed from any kind of actuality. Indeed this was how many of the play’s contemporary critics saw it. George Bernard Shaw critiqued Wilde’s effort as being an endeavor of style not substance, writing in the *Saturday Review* that “It amused me, of course; but unless comedy touches me as well as amuses me, it leaves me with a sense of having wasted my evening. I go to the theatre to be moved to laughter, not to tickled or bustled into it” (Eltis, 173).

However, Shaw’s reading misses the way in which Wilde’s play comments upon the questions of fiction and its relationship to reality. Fiction plays an important part in the reality of Wilde and his characters. As Eltis notes, in the play “reality itself is infinitely adaptable” (195). In many ways the message of the play may be expressed as the exact opposite of Miss Prism’s briefly stated theory of art. For Prism “The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what fiction means” (273), suggesting that
fiction has little relationship to reality. Wilde’s answer to this question is much different and far more complex. The fictions that the various characters engage in throughout come true, but they come true because they are utilized by the various characters to creatively fashion a new reality.

Both readings of the final scene support Wilde’s oft interpreted contention “that Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life” (“Decay,” 307). In the first reading, wherein Jack’s name really is revealed to be Ernest, it is the universe of the play through the deus ex machina plot that legitimates the characters’ various created identities. The language they use to form themselves becomes a literal reality in the universe of the play. Artifice becomes real in a magical way. The second reading, while nowhere near any kind of realism, calls on the creative powers of Jack as liar to enact the identity he has created.

Cecily’s story about Ernest her suitor is a story she tells herself. It is her way of making meaning about the nature of romance. When Algernon arrives in the guise of Jack’s brother Ernest, the two participate in the creation of a new identity for Algernon. The two are obviously aware of the fictionality of such a construct: Cecily happily points out the fact that she must write all of his love letters to her, because he never sent her any, but they play with this identity and seek to make it true. If we read Jack’s discovery of his name at the end of the play as a performance that hides the truth, then we may see him engaged, as all characters throughout the play are, in a Wildean self-fashioning, an attempt to consciously create identity through performance. The primary question that my reading rests on is the question of authenticity, or sincerity. I have already invoked Stephen Arata’s discussion of “authentic insincerity.” I would argue that Jack, Algernon,
Cecily, and Gwendolyn, are all authentically insincere. However, this authentic insincerity is not something Wilde rejects, but rather something he embraces as an expression of the power and importance of art.

The linguistic play has rightly become the focal point of criticism surrounding *Ernest*. The focus on language and its relationship to reality is the primary problem of the play. Julia Prewitt Brown writes

the surface of language is presented to us as the only reality and the play *appears* to be celebrating the self-sufficiency of language in itself. It could be argued that the characters are mere assemblages of words or witticisms and that the language of the epoch speaks them, not the reverse. For at the same time that nothing is determined by the play’s action—so different from the deployment of action in the Victorian novel—everything here is determined by language. (88-9)

I would modify Brown’s claims slightly to point to the agency of the characters in employing language. The action of the play appears to be a continual reshaping of identity, linguistic employment functioning as the action that drives it. As Brown writes, “For although each character is an assemblage of words, each possesses an *intention*: the intention to marry. Wilde returns playfully to the biological origins of the comic genre in this most cerebral of plays” (89).

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* ends in tragedy because Dorian cannot reconcile his dual-identity, primarily because he is too bound up in the Baudrillardean dynamics of signifier and signified and the misguided (from Wilde’s perspective) belief that identity or character is immutable. Ultimately the crimes that he has committed and which are
deflected upon the painting become too much for him. In the novel’s climax Dorian seeks to destroy his alter-ego, unable to reconcile it with his own deeds:

He looked round, and saw the knife that had stabbed Basil Hallward. He had cleaned it many times, till there was no stain left upon it. It was bright, and glistened. As it had killed the painter, so it would kill the painter’s work, and all that that meant. It would kill the past, and when that was dead he would be free. It would kill this monstrous soul-life, and, without its hideous warnings, he would be at peace. He seized the thing, and stabbed the picture with it. (183)

Dorian’s mistake (besides his volumes of crimes, of course) is that he forgets the relationship between the painting and himself. He forgets that the alter-ego in the painting is himself; indeed what has been written upon it by Dorian’s own actions have made it almost unrecognizable. Since he is unable recognize himself within the painting he is certainly unable to reconcile himself to it. He seeks to kill his double, but his double is a part of himself, and so he dies.

Jack and Algernon, I suggest, or Ernest and Ernest as they will be known, both do reconcile their alter-egos. Through the creative use of the imagination they seek to enact identities which incorporate the two aspects. While Algernon moves from one alter-ego to another, Bunbury to his requisition of Jack’s persona as Ernest, it is ultimately revealed that he in fact does occupy the role of Jack’s brother. Jack himself becomes Ernest with no need of extraneous christening through the sheer act of performance. Identity proves to be a product of the relationship between *topos* and *chora* as well. At the beginning of the third act Gwendolen makes a comment that on one level may be a sharp barb directed
at the social culture of the age, but on another level may be read as important point about
the aesthetic philosophy behind the play: “on matters of grave importance, style, not
sincerity is the vital thing” (3.28-9). Yet, in the world governed by art and performance,
style itself becomes the real. The thing one affects becomes one’s identity. Sincerity
begins to mold itself to style, and the face beneath the mask begins to take the shape of
that which obscures it. This again mirrors both Wilde’s theories of identity and his
theories about the construction of reality through art. As Russell Jackson and Ian Small
write,

There is, however, another—and very different—way of understanding
Wilde’s interest in masks, one which sees masking not in terms of moral
evasion, but rather in terms of self-conscious artifice. In accordance with
his belief that “life imitates art,” Wilde’s adopting of masks can be better
explained in terms of an attempt to present his life in terms which were
appropriate to artifacts, particularly literary artifacts—that is, to present
his life as a kind of text, but a text which he, as sole author, could control
in the same way as he attempted to control his written works. (5)

That Wilde embraces this is evident from close readings of his critical work as well as his
fiction and drama.

At the end of The Importance of Being Earnest we are left with an important
question, how to relate what has happened on stage to real life. Prewitt Brown contends
that Earnest intentionally emphasizes the disconnection between all art and life: “The
abrupt conclusion of the action, in which the pun on ‘being Ernest’ is loudly proclaimed
and the play seems to disappear into the sky like a balloon whose string has been cut,
intensifies our feeling that the play’s language is a labyrinth in which the characters are forever doomed to wander and play, utterly separated from the circumstantial world in which we ourselves live” (91). However, Wilde’s own critical work suggests a connection between art and life that is intimate and powerful, and the farcical actions on stage in that world where utterance creates meaning are intended to find a foothold in the world outside of the play. The “perfect anarchist state” (199) which Eltis says *Earnest* represents a vision of, is constructed from the mutability of identity through the medium of language and performance. As both Austin and Butler have pointed out, language shapes identity and our constructions of reality. Wilde’s play offers an idealized portrait of these actions, ones which he represents as liberating. This idealization of both anarchism and the creative process it takes to get there, is of course utopian, but Wilde himself saw the value of utopias as he writes, “A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias” (“Soul of Man” 269-70).

While Baudrillard’s despair about the failure of linguistic transparency may find a precedent in *Dorian Gray*, a work where fantasy is mapped on top of a mundane reality to disastrous effect, Wilde has also observed the creative potential for this kind of narrative mapping as a means of reshaping identity. This is heavily grounded in Wilde’s interest in the performative, and his insistence that identity is the product of artifice. In this way, Wilde anticipates both Baudrillard and critics such as Judith Butler, who find the possibility of creative subversion in the very simulacra that Baudrillard fears.

In her treatment of *Salome*, Dierkes-Thrun writes “that simply looking at Wilde’s
Salome in the nineteenth-century context disregards the truly innovative, subversive, forward-looking features of the play” (16). Dierkes-Thrun’s statement brings up several points. First, it points to the theoretical sophistication of Salome, a work which pre-figures many of the on-going discourses in contemporary literary study. It also points to the perceived idiosyncrasy of Wilde’s Biblical tragedy. It is true that there is nothing else in Wilde’s corpus quite like Salome: it seems far afield from the domestic comedies for which he is famous, and is certainly at a distance from Wilde’s novel. However, as I have sought to show, Salome’s aesthetic concerns are not so idiosyncratic. Salome, like The Picture of Dorian Gray and The Importance of Being Earnest is interested in interrogating the tension between topos and chora. While their forms are divergent, they are heavily invested in fantasies of language and representation, and seek to examine the consequences of those fantasies.

One final thing is important to recall. While Dierkes-Thrun is primarily interested in aligning Wilde with literary modernism, “the nineteenth-century context” as I have sought to show, is itself a highly sophisticated and theoretical one. Wilde may be an important influence for modernism moving forward, but it also important to note that he is responding to a number of historical pressures looking back. Raymond Williams’s “crisis of society,” the product of the industrial revolution and the alienating effect of capitalism, and Baudrillard’s loss of the “guarantee” that permits semiotic exchange are the forces that gave rise to both the arch-Realist novel, and the work of Dickens, the Brontës, Pater, and Wilde. And while I do not intend to argue a direct influence ranging from Dickens to the Brontës to Pater to Wilde, it would seem neglectful not to point to how Wilde is equally a part of nineteenth-century aesthetic debates.
Conclusion

In “Aesthetic Poetry,” Walter Pater writes, “of that transfigured world this new poetry takes possession, and sublimates beyond it another still fainter and more spectral, which is literally an artificial or ‘earthly paradise.’ It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal” (520). All fictional worlds are of course artificial worlds, no matter how mimetic they might appear. George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* is as much a heterocosm as the Gothic tinged environs of *Villete* or *Wuthering Heights*, or the madcap world that Wilde portrays on stage, or the ekphrastic representation of *The Golden Ass* in *Marius the Epicurean*. The particular transfigured worlds I have examined are notable, for they point to the important way that Victorian writers seek to engage with these transfigured worlds, idealized (as Pater here contends) or not, and use them to reflect that transfiguration back at the “actual world.”

For Dickens the fantastic hermeneutics that I have defined as a relationship between *topos* and *chora* allow him to transfigure the actual world into one where the “familiar” becomes “romantic,” where moral connections are clear, and which encourages the moral imagination necessary for empathy to take root. Paradoxically, it is only through the utilization of art to create an “artificial world” built on fantastic hermeneutics that Dickens is able to achieve what Ioan Williams defined as the prime goal of realism, creating “a vision of contemporary life as organically unified” (116).
Charlotte and Emily Brontë’s transfigurations highlight the subjectivity inherent in representation. Focusing on Lucy Snowe’s traumatic experience and its representation through *chora*, Charlotte Brontë points to the way in which trauma overcomes the basic *topos* of experience and redefines that experience. Emily Brontë’s transfigured world is also focused on the dynamics of subjective narrators. *Chora* in *Wuthering Heights* is a paradox that allows critics to articulate subversive narratives within the novel, while also calling into question the ideological purpose of choric-meaning making.

For Pater, that transfigured world is aesthetic experience and the way our understanding of the “actual world” of *topos* is shaped by it. Pater’s work centers on the aesthetic as a touchstone for all experience, including religious experience. The subjective experience that so troubles and energies the work of the Brontës provides Pater with the key to a meaningful engagement with the world. The transfigured world of art, for Pater, is “extracted” from the real world as an ideal. However, this ideal itself functions to transform our relationship with the “actual world,” as Pater demonstrates in works like *Marius* where his usage of *chora* as a mediating force in his narrative demonstrates the way choric meaning-making engages with reality.

Oscar Wilde’s transfigured world is by far the most radical, for in the end that transfigured world ceases to be artificial, as Wilde disrupts the separation between reality and artifice. *Chora* for Wilde functions as a creative meaning-making that reshapes how we understand the world of *topos* and in doing so reshapes that world itself. Wilde acknowledges the danger in this reshaping: both *Salome* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* are works built around the destructive possibilities of the choric mapping I describe. But Wilde also recognize the extraordinary creative power such mapping also has, and I
contend that he champions this dynamic where life imitates art in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Art for Wilde, literally transfigures the world.

The other significance I hope to have pointed to in this study, beyond the individual writers I examine, is the complexity of Victorian responses to problems of representation and epistemology. In 1981 George Levine cogently responded to the charges of naivety laid against the nineteenth-century novel. He argued that Victorian realism did not lack sophisticated understandings of the problems of representation, but rather that it sought to stare epistemological gaps directly in the face and attempt to bridge them. Levine’s work focused primarily on mimetic realism, and as such did not take into account many of the more fantastic works I have chosen to examine. And, despite the work of scholars such as Levine, there is still too often a tendency to view Victorian writers as at best unsophisticated precursors to the Modernists, and at worst naïve writers of simple mimetic fantasias. I also have sought to place writers of imaginative fiction in the same epistemological context as writers of more mimetic fictions. Just as the Victorian realist novel seeks to kick against the pricks of representation, to acknowledge epistemological gaps and write against them, so too do the writers surveyed here use language in order to try and bridge those gaps. That these writers choose to turn to the fantastic in order to most fully engage with the major epistemological questions of the era, in order in some sense to more fully represent “the real,” demonstrates the commitment they have to the importance of literature. The artificial worlds represented here, invoked through choric hermeneutics, are testaments to the power of literature, the explicitly artificial, to connect with and comment on the very real conditions of “the actual world.”
I have sought in this study to take these writer’s epistemological claims seriously. The terminology I have adapted and applied serves to give weight to the fantastic’s claims to truth while also placing it in relationship to the dynamics of narrative. Topos and chora, applied to literary study, function to place these writers at junction of two discourses, those of the epistemological and those of the literary. It is my hope that this construction has helped to point to how each of these discourses informs and influences each other. I further hope that this conceptual framework allows for these writers to be further understood within the larger ideological and aesthetic discourses of the nineteenth-century and beyond.

I began this study with Dickens, one of the emblematic figures of Victorian literature. I have concluded it with Wilde, another figure synonymous with the era, and yet often seen as transcending it. What I have sought to demonstrate here is the theoretical complexity of imaginative fiction during the nineteenth-century, a subject which sometimes gets short-shrift. By placing this large spectrum of writers in conversation I have sought to demonstrate how their works engage in important questions regarding the relationship of truth to art, the power of literature (as well as the danger of story). These writers are all aligned in this engagement with the dual worlds of reality and artifice. If there is a trajectory to these works it may be seen as one which gradually begins to value chora more highly than topos, so that by the time we reach Wilde we find a world which is theoretically aligned with chora and ultimately seeks to utilize that chora as a way to shape topos.

Wilde is especially important for this study, as it is he who is most often taken as an idiosyncrasy. Dierkes-Thrun writes “that simply looking at Wilde’s Salome in the
nineteenth-century context disregards the truly innovative, subversive, forward-looking features of the play” (16). While I respect Dierkes-Thrun’s excellent work on the play, her sentiment gives me pause, and points to what I see as the critical importance of this project. While Wilde’s work is different from any other writer (Victorian or Modernist), it is still engaged with the same aesthetic and epistemological concerns which Dickens, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë, and Pater are involved in. Each of these writers is seeking to examine the relationship between truth and fiction, art and life. We might for a moment think about the aesthetic connections between Dickens’s “romantic side of familiar things,” the Brontë’s subjective narrative dynamics, and Pater “transfigured world,” and move from there to Wilde’s statement that “life imitates art for more than art imitates life.”
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