Thinking in Pieces: Victorian Notebooks and Notation

by

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Abstract

This dissertation argues for the coherence of the Victorian notebook as a genre, challenging the critical convention that treats writers’ notes as rudimentary preparations for published works. Instead of reading authors’ papers as meaningful only when they are located in a developmental timeline leading to a novel, poem, or essay—that is, instead of reading notebooks teleologically—“Thinking in Pieces” approaches them as an archive with collective resemblances. If we suspend our commitment to the “ends” to which authors may or may not have put their notes, what kinds of fantasies and concerns emerge from these scrappy documents, and how might attending to them in this way expand our definition of literary form? What would happen, in other words, if we took notes as notes? What emerges, I argue, is a genre in which writers inhabit states of open-endedness, making minimalist descriptive documents that do not have to lead anywhere or cohere systematically: thinking in pieces. I present the notebook as a shelter for inconsequence. By “inconsequence” I mean that which is apparently useless, and (in the older sense of the word) that which foregoes order, arrangement, or sequence. I show how Charles Darwin, Oscar Wilde, George Gissing, and Gerard Manley Hopkins take note of seemingly insignificant, fleeting, and useless subjects and phenomena, without having designs upon these documents’ future redemption in other literary forms. As such, note-taking represents
an ethical position that values containment and preservation over total synthesis and systematic explanation. I will also propose that in their refusal of telos and their resistance to holistic synthesis, notebooks present a style of queer thought.
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Never suppose the atoms had a plan,
Nor with a wise intelligence imposed
An order on themselves, nor in some pact
Agreed what movements each should generate.

Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*
Introduction: Open Ends

This dissertation argues for the coherence of the Victorian writer’s notebook as a genre, challenging the critical tendency that treats writers’ notes as rudimentary preparations for published works. Instead of reading authors’ papers as meaningful only when they are located in a timeline that leads to a novel, poem, or essay—that is, instead of reading notebooks teleologically—“Thinking in Pieces” treats them as an archive with collective resemblances. If we suspend our commitment to the “ends” to which authors may or may not have put their notes, what kinds of fantasies and concerns emerge from these scrappy documents, and how might attending to them in this way expand our definition of literary form? What would happen, in other words, if we took notes as notes?

What emerges, I argue, is a genre in which writers inhabit states of open-endedness, making minimalist descriptive documents that do not have to lead anywhere or cohere systematically: thinking in pieces. I treat notebooks as containers for inconsequence. By “inconsequence” I mean that which is apparently useless, and (in the older sense of the word), that which foregoes order, arrangement, or sequence. In the chapters that follow, I show how Charles Darwin, Oscar Wilde, George Gissing, and Gerard Manley Hopkins take note of seemingly insignificant, fleeting, and useless subjects and phenomena, without having designs upon these documents’ future redemption in other literary forms. As such, note-taking represents an ethical position that values containment and preservation over total synthesis, discursive explanation, and arrival at a “key to all mythologies.” I will also propose that in their refusal of telos and their resistance to holistic synthesis, notebooks present a style of queer thought.

I want to emphasize immediately, however, that this elevation of the notebook to primary generic status does not entail a diminishment or disregard for published works. In each of the chapters that follow, the notebook is read beside novels, essays, and poems. The readings of
these more established canonical types reveal a continuity between what I understand as the form of the notebook—a container of atomic elements in a state of potential recombination—and the desire these writers reveal in their essays, poems, and novels to shelter experiences and phenomena that strike them as outlying and excessive. Reading the notebooks in this fashion allows me to define the ways in which Victorian writers valued nonteleological social possibilities and sought to take public responsibility for these possibilities in their more widely circulated works. I propose a horizontal rather than a vertical relation between these forms, a lateral relation rather than one of direct descent. In their more publicly adapted works, Darwin, Wilde, Gissing, and Hopkins take responsibility—to different extents and with distinct inflections—for the states of aimlessness, fluctuation, and aesthetic attention legible in their notes. In “Thinking in Pieces,” I foreground supposedly secondary archival materials, pressing them into critical service and revealing new ways in which canonical Victorian figures strayed from the totalizing imperatives of their age.

What is a notebook? The most expansive definition would be any blank codex, a bound book of blank paper serving as a medium for any inscriptions whatsoever, regardless of their content. Your Moleskin, for instance, houses a recipe for biscuits as easily as it does revolutionary theses on the orbit of Jupiter, or a list of potential lovers. The blank book has roots in the products of Medieval stationers, and in the increased sale of books intended for commonplacing and miscellanies in the 15th century, developments coinciding with the increased supply of paper (“Blank”). Yet it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that cheaper paper and bindings enabled the wide circulation of notebooks among diverse social classes (Attar). Just as the mass production of paper and books led to an expanded readership for all forms of literature, so too did it grant a larger segment of the population access to the paraphernalia of authorship.
Certainly blank books were used, and continue to be used, as containers for drafts of works intended for publication. However, the genre I wish to describe in the chapters that follow does not fit into this category, and contains material which is decidedly not directed toward publication. As a genre, then, as opposed to a medium, the notebooks that I am addressing in the chapters that follow descend from—without being identical with—commonplace books and miscellanies which proliferated in the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Georgian periods whose use has been intensely studied primarily by historians of the book and of science. In Ann Blair’s pathfinding work, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information before the Modern Age*, these forms are primarily associated with note-taking as an “art of transmission” for humanistic scholars: “Collections of notes were valued as treasuries or storehouses in which to accumulate information even if they did not serve an immediate purpose” (63). Such activity, in Blair’s view, presupposes no present utility for itself, projecting the “useful” moment somewhere into the future and perhaps even into another person’s hands: “notes were often valued not only by those who took them but by others who hoped to put them to use” (63). The habits of note-takers coincide with practices of collecting which increased in popularity through the Renaissance, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, practices that extend beyond textual materials to include objects and curiosities from the natural and human domains around the world.

For the note-taker copying out extracts or recording impressions of the world, the writing being done might lead nowhere, might lead somewhere, but its value and purpose remain unfixed at the moment of writing. “I know many will call this useless work,” writes Leonardo in the first pages of his own notes (Da Vinci 13). Blair’s image of the collector is apt, especially if we understand the collection as Walter Benjamin does, that is, as a site where “things are liberated

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1 On the longer history of note taking and commonplacing, see Allan, Blair, Dacome, Havens, H. Jackson, Jardine, Rhodes, and Sherman.
from the drudgery of usefulness” (qtd in Arendt 42). (What are the baroque convolutes of The Arcades Project, after all, if not vast notebooks of uncertain purpose?) Blair’s account of note-taking raises questions about the aesthetic nature of the practice. The disinterest and unspecified utility of note-taking as she describes it resembles Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment, which recognizes the purposiveness of an object but that suspends definitions of its actual purpose (Kant 84).

This distinguishes the notebook from the diary, another genre of the blank codex with its own peculiar history. Criticism of the diary tends to emphasize its transparently pragmatic functions, even as its essential diversity is upheld. Its uses, deeply entwined with Christian self-care, include the cultivation of virtue, confession, and monitoring one’s own behavior. The most recent study of the Victorian diary, by Anne-Marie Millim, argues that the form constitutes an instrument for tabulating and economizing an author’s “emotional labor.” Charting emotions as the accountant charts revenues and expenditures, nineteenth-century diarists gain insight into whether their various affective investments generate good or not. For Millim, the diary is principally “goal-directed,” attuned to “the productive exploitation of the emotions and their direction towards worldly and professional goals” (3).

The notebook and the diary, therefore, cannot be distinguished on the basis of their use. To the extent that a difference exists between them, it lies in the degree to which each one acknowledges utility as its goal to begin with. When contrasted with critical histories of the diary, the notebook takes a distinctive shape as a space of free play and the non-utilitarian collection of information, with the former genre playing the role of assisting the subject in her daily life, of helping to ameliorate and improve the self while pursuing “worldly goals.” The diary directs itself toward the telos of self-improvement, of virtuous Bildung. As we will see, the notebook certainly collects information that bears on the author’s position in space and time, but
such notes do not insist upon the self so much as position it within a larger network of agencies (both human and non-human). The diary, which conventionally dates its entries, proposes a certain continuity of the writing self, while the notebook tends not to use dates, suggesting a discontinuous assembly of information.

To the extent that the notebook has an end, it is an end without content, that subjective expression of purposiveness without purpose: style. The earliest definition of the word “style” places it in the context of note-taking, or at least of impermanent inscriptions. This is of course the stylus, an instrument used for inscribing wax tablets. This tool was pointed at one end, with the other end “flat and broad for smoothing the tablet and erasing what is written” (“Style” *OED*). The same double action governs the design of the modern pencil, tipped with an eraser, as well as electronic writing, which we can compose and delete with the same gesture of the hand. An etymological link connects the activity of writing provisionally, of situating ourselves using a tablet of ephemeral textual positions, with our ways or manners of being in the world in the behavioral sense.

It is this connection, perhaps, that Foucault has in mind when, in his late writings, he identifies note-taking as a central “technology of the self” in the pre-Christian world (*Technology* 27). Foucault’s late work turned increasingly to the history of practices governing the care of the self, rather than the disciplining of subjects by institutional and discursive formations. He gave ancient note-taking a privileged place in these late ethical writings. Clearly stating that the hypomnemata (the ancient Greek word for note or memorandum) are “not to be taken for intimate diaries” (*Ethics* 210), he emphasizes the role they play in helping ancient subjects cultivate an “aesthetics of existence,” or what he calls ethopoesis, an ethical—rather than a moral—mode of existing, with the goal of transforming one’s own life into a work of art (209). I examine Foucault’s conception of note-taking with reference to Darwin in Chapter 1.
For Darwin, Wilde, Gissing, and Hopkins, the notebook is a medium for recording and navigating the world as an assembly of fragmented and piecemeal phenomena whose systematic cohesion remains fundamentally out of reach. These authors make such records without pursuing their own moral rectitude or projecting a future form within which their recalcitrant, minimalist documents will cohere. These texts share something with commonplace books, in that they may include extracts from or notes on other writers. Wilde’s notebooks in particular lean more toward this category. Yet they also diverge importantly from this tradition, insofar as they include original descriptions of phenomena, records of natural events and human encounters, and reflections upon fleeting emotions and states of mind. For example, even though Gissing’s notebook, considered in Chapter 3, is labeled a “Commonplace Book,” it does not contain topic headings, nor does it collect any more than a handful of quotations from other authors. The notebook is a genre, one that paradoxically registers the desire to be free of one.

Genetics

Obviously I am not the first scholar to consider writers’ notebooks, and the fact that I have been able to complete the research for this project with visits to only two special collections testifies to the interest critics take in the scribal objects of valued cultural figures. Yet the study of such materials is hindered, I think, by certain metaphors of descent and temporal sequencing that generally resist our seeing notes as anything other than the thematic seedlings for full-grown “mature” objects. This is as true for traditional manuscript studies as for contemporary forms of “genetic” criticism, as I will explain in a moment. Such biases especially inflect Victorian studies, where interest in the handwritten seems to be forever tainted by the sterile shadow of Edward Casaubon and the pains the narrator of Middlemarch undertakes to ensure that we understand his prodigious note-taking as a failure, precisely because it does not “add up” to anything, however sympathetically this judgment is made.
Middlemarch figuratively seals off the notebook from critical consideration: we do not get to see inside Casaubon’s blank books, and receive only mocking second-hand reports of their contents. Their materiality weighs them down. They amount to nothing but a heap of documents indexing “erratic mythical fragments” (47) and the “tossed ruins of the world” (93). From Ladislaw’s perspective, Casaubon’s notes seem nothing more than “helpless embryos,” examples of “long incubation producing no chick” (93). Dorothea—the sign in the novel of vital, fertile possibility—competes with her husband’s notes for attention. Indeed, so much of her spousal effort gets swallowed up by the tending they require. Even after her husband’s death, when she enters his library and the sun shines “on the rows of note-books as it shines on the weary waste planted with huge stones,” she feels compelled to put them into some order, as she believes he would have wanted (430). Through her representation of Casaubon, Eliot stamps note-taking for its own sake with the mark of sterility, uselessness, error, and death. If Casaubon’s notes, queerly sterile as they are, have no future, the novel assures us that Eliot’s own prolific note-taking does, and the proof is her novels themselves.²

This strikes me as an unfortunate legacy which Eliot has left us, one that emblematizes a peculiarly Victorian suspicion of the fragment that marks a barrier between it and the Romantic, Modernist, and nineteenth-century French and American traditions, all of whose canonical writers and critics seem much more intrigued by the ways of knowing made possible by what I am calling “thinking in pieces.” To get a sense of this you need only look at the recent publication by New Directions Press of The Gorgeous Nothings, which reproduces exquisite fascimiles of Emily Dickinson’s handwritten “envelope poems” and which takes the following verse as its epigraph: “One note from / One bird / Is better than / a million words” (82). This

² For a remarkable defense of Casaubon’s “useless” labour and its pertinence for both philologists and literary critics, see Lerer.
isolation of the Victorian canon from cultures of the fragment seems a shame, and not
necessarily an accurate representation of the interests of Victorian Britons as a whole, especially
since nineteenth-century publishers produced numerous editions of notebooks, diaries, journals,
and papers of authors living in earlier periods or who were still living, for example *The Diary of
Samuel Pepys* or *The Grasmere Journals* of Dorothy Wordsworth. This readerly interest might
be related to what I have already described as a surge of production and consumption of
notebooks in the nineteenth century.

*Middlemarch* encourages us to see notes as useful only when they culminate in a
published work, when they escape their status as “helpless embryos.” And one does not have to
stray from Eliot’s reception history to see how this critical attitude plays out, since her own
notebooks always gain coherence by being aimed squarely at the production of novels. The
*Quarry for Middlemarch*, the *Middlemarch Notebooks*, the *Daniel Deronda Notebooks*: the titles
of these edited volumes uphold Eliot’s own ethic of note-taking as always only a means to an
end. In their introduction to the *Middlemarch Notebooks*, editors John Clarke and Victor
Neufeldt recall an incident in which their colleague, Barbara Hardy, questioned the validity of
the project, asking them “of what real value is all this incessant source hunting to an
understanding of George Eliot” (xiii)? The editors respond not by suggesting that Eliot’s notes
might have literary value in themselves, but by insisting that they “offer insight into the life of
her mind during the time she conceived her greatest novel” (xiv). In true Eliotic fashion, their
dition aims to capture a process of *Bildung* which ushered in a “great” novel.

A whole field of contemporary critical discourse takes precisely this attitude toward the
study of an author’s unpublished materials. What originated in France as “genetic criticism”
proceeds by treating an author’s work as a plurality of documents in various states of
development in order to map out the process by which such materials evolved into their widely
recognized forms. Refusing the notion of an authoritative text, genetic critics attend to “the genesis of the literary work” and confront “a published text with all its previous versions” (Van Hulle 3). Eschewing Romantic conceptions of inspiration and genius, genetic critics see the work of literature as a set of documents in a process of ongoing accretion, revision, and excision. They focus on the temporal dimension of composition, by which they refer to an ordered sequence of documentary adjustments that gradually bring a published work into being.

My thinking owes much to the contributions of the genetic critics, in particular to their dogged materialism and commitment to the fundamentally documentary condition of aesthetic literary objects. However, as Jed Deppman, Daniel Ferrer, and Michael Groden point out, while genetic criticism might have emerged “out of a structuralist and poststructuralist notion of ‘text’ as an infinite play of signs,” it nevertheless “accepts a teleological model of textuality” (2). That is, while it views “a novel” as a set of dispersed and contingent inscriptions on paper, these nevertheless all constitute the “avant-textes” of a novel, rather than a form unto themselves. They still conceive of the relation between notes and published works in terms of chronological stages and compositional phases that proceed according to a traceable sequence: “precompositional, compositional, prepublishing, publication” (Van Hulle 5). In the view of Van Hulle, “notes” are a “first draft” which belongs properly to the “precompositional” phase, rather than already suggesting a form of composition themselves. While this may work for the blank books of a George Eliot, its usefulness as an approach wanes when we consider notebooks that did not commit themselves to further development, such as those I consider here.

Why keep a notebook if not to prepare for publication? For Darwin, Gissing, Wilde, and Hopkins, the answer is a resounding “I’m not sure”: they collect information and document

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3 For an array of readings using this methodology, see Deppman, Ferrer, and Groden. On excision as a stylistic development in modernist writing, see Sullivan.
phenomena without a fixed intention underlying these activities. No matter how strong the impulse to understand their notes in light of the works that may or may not have followed, the fact remains that Darwin was not aiming at the publication of *The Origin of Species* when he kept notes, first on the *HMS Beagle*, and then in his alphabetically ordered “Transmutation Notebooks.” Wilde did not know that in his later works he would draw on his excerpts and aphoristic summaries contained in his “Notebook on Philosophy.” Gissing did not keep his “Commonplace Book” for sixteen years with the intention of turning it into *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. And when Hopkins forsook poetry after taking Jesuit orders in 1868, there is no evidence that he saw his continued practice of note-taking as a placeholder for poems to come.

Rather than assume we always know “better” than the notebook, because we know where it was always “truly” headed, we might instead ask the notebook what it has to say about where and what it is. Paradoxically, though, I am arguing that to do this leads precisely to the author’s own lack of intentionality, to an acceptance of not having any single purpose or necessary future achievement, where “authors” appear as agents staging their own non-mastery. Their notebooks enable the cohabitation of disparate ideas and eclectic documents without insisting upon their coalescence. They contain doodles, illegible passages, random thoughts, and occasionally incomprehensible syntax. Pages are missing, torn out, destroyed. They are forms—texts—that emerge by gathering thoughts in “pennyworths,” as George Lichtenberg calls his own process of notation, holding in abeyance the impulse to render these small values integral and comprehensive (106).

Thus, from the perspective of the reader, the notebook certainly seems to be an exemplary text, in the Barthesian sense of a “disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives” (*Image* 159) and as a “tissue of citations” (146) that troubles the hierarchical
relationship between authors, words on a page, and readers. In asserting the value of texts over works, and of “the body writing” (142) over the author, Roland Barthes cautions that his statements should not be taken as carving up the world of print into texts and works. His propositions were not “argumentations but enunciations, ‘touches,’ approaches that consent to remain metaphorical,” (156) and this metaphorical status obviously gave critics for many years the leeway to apply his theories to virtually anything and everything, from coffee cups to the Homeric Hymns. Can’t anything be a text, after all?

Notebooks lend themselves almost too well to being theorized as such. There is virtually no friction between theory and object of inquiry. The form of the notebook literalizes what Barthes suggested was only a dispersed “methodological field,” a set of terms to be deployed metaphorically in any number of interpretations. Strangely, however, this literalization and materialization ends up torqueing what would be a straightforward Barthesian interpretation—for how do we account for conditions of multiplicity and plurality when the writers themselves wish to inhabit them? In the metaphorical sense, “the text” is a hermeneutic frame through which the critic “destabilizes” valued cultural objects (Homer), or elevates derelict materials for critical consideration (coffee cups). When it comes to notebooks, however, we have distinctly verbal productions which reflect and document the desires of the author under study to enter into such states of plurality, deferred signification, and nonteleological being. Wasn’t this author supposed to be under erasure?

To read notebooks in this light, I argue, is not to identify the “free play of signification” which the notebooks put into motion, but to understand them as a technology aimed at cultivating an ethical way of life that assumes discontinuity, nonmastery, and dysteleology as the

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4 Barthes gives Mallarmé and Proust the honor of inhabiting such a position of nonmastery, and one of my goals is to offer a new textual means of connecting the work of French and Modernist avant-gardes with these “masters” of Victorian literature.
conditions of existence. Like Foucault, Barthes’s late work turns to note-taking as both a literal practice and a trope for the kinds of ethical life which navigate a world in which subjective agency assumes a yielding, neutral character that circumvents conflict and assertion in favor of collecting and navigating moments of being for their own sake. That is, as a kind of “writing” which “ceaselessly posits meaning but always in order to evaporate it” (Barthes “Death”). I explore Barthes’s late writings, especially his recently published lectures *Preparation of the Novel*, in Chapter 3.

**Note Time**

In defining such an ethics, and in developing tools for reading notebooks that depart from the timelines governing genetic criticism, I have drawn upon recent strands of queer thought which explore non-teleological epistemologies. The study of manuscripts typically depends on certain assumptions about the “proper” temporal arrangement of documents and published works. Genetic criticism and manuscript study deploy what might be called a “straight” timeline, either moving from a “childhood” phase of the text to a state of “maturity,” or else by seeing manuscripts as “ancestral” with the published forms serving as “descendants.” Many queer theorists, however, have in recent years been committed to questioning ways of knowing the world that seem to depend upon timelines analogous with heterosexual reproduction. Note-taking follows an eccentric temporality—at once episodic and continuous, fragmentary and assembled—that I read as a style of queer thought.

Notebooks are, to begin with, a somewhat queer object choice. While they play a supportive, evidential role in many literary critical endeavors, they have a much higher status as valued objects in archives and special collections, offices of the humanities whose purposes are not identical with those of the literary-critical project, but that preserve scribal objects and enable their connection with other documents, discourses, and people. Occupying a marginal place on
syllabi, relegated to being addressed in footnotes, notebooks constitute a somewhat queer material, encircling primary works but occupying a perpetually “minor” status. Borrowing from the language of John Ruskin, they currently occupy a position of “servile ornament” rather than a potentially “revolutionary ornament” (82).

They can draw the rigorous critic off track, making of her a kind of fetishist of “the body that writes.” Anyone who has touched the handwritten papers of a loved author knows that such an experience carries something of a taboo charge. Handling an author’s notebook can momentarily (or permanently) fracture a veneer of critical distance, leaving one with the simple, sublime fact of touching something that “they” touched. Affective excess accompanies this experience, something not easily rendered in a conference abstract or a dissertation. In the theatre of literary criticism, such excess can feel shameful.

In the basement of the British Library, however, where in a private room you may read Wilde’s copy of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the supervising clerk might nod approvingly as you bounce up and down in your chair. The archive collects the traces of bodies and their affective charges, reminding you of your own body and its emotional weather. Reading a “real” notebook represents this process of entering the emotional space of the archive in microcosm, and as you manipulate it at your reading desk, you wonder how Wilde wrote in the book—at his own desk, in his lap, on the floor, almost seeing the blue china on the mantle. You find yourself in his wake, placing your hands where his hands were. Spaces in which authors’ papers are collected, then, have the aura of an actor’s studio about them, offering powerful but decidedly uncritical opportunities to imagine moving as they did about these props.

Such critically “useless” thoughts arising from improper intimacy find a home in the notebook itself. Consider Charles Darwin’s note on getting too close to a painting in a gallery, recorded in the “M” Notebook: “Aug. 12th When in National Institution & not feeling much
enthusiasm, happened to go closet to one & smelt the peculiar smell of Picture. association with much pleasure immediately thrilled across me” (Transmutation 539). Darwin’s notes, as we will see in Chapter 1, record not only the “facts” about the natural world but the thrills he experiences in his body as he records them. Indeed, all of the notebooks considered here involve a great deal of ludic feeling, repeatedly courting error and wayward thinking.

If queer theory and criticism might begin, not with sexology or psychoanalysis, but “by redirecting our attention toward different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant,” the supposedly minor objects in the literary tradition are surely a strong example of such difference (Ahmed 3). “Minor” and “different” are, of course, adjectives primarily used to describe identities (an issue I will return to shortly) but in this essay the minority in question is a style, a way of thinking, epistemological without being everywhere a fully systematized epistemology. Furthermore, the “minority” of the notebook is not just a classification imposed by the history of interpretation, but is also a state or condition embraced by the writers themselves.

My goal is not, therefore, to recover these objects as necessarily more “useful” than we have previously thought, but to acknowledge what we might call their own “will to uselessness.” Notebooks court sterility. In the early 1830s, Darwin vanishes from the scene of gentlemanly professionalization in order to travel the world and record his impressions in dozens of blank volumes. These Beagle notes, and the “Transmutation Notebooks” that followed get sealed in a trunk for many years before he gleaned them for writing his later works. Wilde’s “Notebook on Philosophy” lay fallow for over a century in private collections before being purchased by the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in 2004 (“UCLA”). Hopkins’s entire body of work—notes and all—hovered in suspended animation (albeit in the care of this friend Robert Bridges) before being circulated publicly in 1918. On occasion, they may eventually become serviceable
as “quarries” for an author’s published work, but once “use” has been made of them they fall back to the recesses of the special collection, having spent their value, supposedly, like an orange rind sucked dry.

Queer identity in the latter nineteenth century has long been associated with that of the antiquarian collector, the usually sterile male figure shut up in his room ranged with bibelots and arcane objets. To wit: Des Esseintes, in A Rebours, surrounded by his jeweled turtles and nautical paraphernalia. If one legacy of queer style is “to gather up…life’s outtakes and waste products,” and to perform the “counter-geneological work of archiving culture’s throwaway objects,” in Elizabeth Freeman’s terms, then it seems to me there is something queer about anyone cruising the back alleys of an author’s handwritten objects that never saw the light of publication in their lifetimes (xxii).

As textual “waste” products (Francis Bacon and Lichtenberg both called their notebooks “waste-books”), their study has often implicitly been seen as somewhat effete, old-fashioned, and sterile when compared with the sublime thoughts of literary theorists eager to detach themselves from bibliography and textual criticism. One of my arguments here is that queer theory enables a rapprochement between these camps, opening a passage through which criticism might address these odd, “minor” writings not as immature scribblings or otiose antiquities but as a relatively unexplored archive awaiting theorization.

Zooming in on the actual writings in notebooks reveals their eccentric temporality, the way in which their piecemeal accretions prolong a moving present rather than plunging headlong into narrative arrangement. They resist what Freeman calls “chrononormativity,” the order of a life around which heteronormative reproduction depends. Chrononormativity construes valuable lives as those which aim steadily at marriage and childbearing, “taking on the direction promised

5 See Dinshaw and Weinberg for studies of this trope.
as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course” (Ahmed 21). For the notebook accedes to no plot. No narrative or argumentative apparatus binds all of its contents together: it is a collection of pieces, condensing on the space of the page the temporal condition of the ephemeral moment that need not lead to any outcome whatsoever. Notebooks offer spaces of and for inconsequence, gathering writing that courts insignificance because it tumbles out without a sequence. “Would I gather erudition for a future life?” writes Gissing, “I have the happiness of the passing moment, and what more can mortal ask?” (Ryecroft 38-39).

But this may already sound too antisocial for some readers, too much of what Jose Munoz would call “a romance of the negative” (11). Lee Edelman, for instance, proposes that “queer” indicates precisely “the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (9). “Queerness attains its ethical value,” he writes, by “accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3). This builds, as many have noted, on Leo Bersani’s account of queer sexuality as a form of “self-shattering” which performs the vital function of undoing one’s own self-image in confrontation with the other. (218). Almost any book or article on queer theory published in the last ten years contains a generic acknowledgement and critique of this version of queerness: in general, critics have taken issue with Edelman for establishing an ideal for queer life that is unattainable without the possession of privileges and security that paradoxically enable one to take an antisocial and defiant position: for the trans woman of color, for example, what might matter more than setting white picket fences on fire would be simply having a home to begin with (Prosser Second Skins).

The relish of potential inconsequence and insignificance that I trace in these gentlemen’s notebooks may seem similarly problematic, mainly because the line-up of authors in the table of
contents suggests that it is only the privilege of Victorian men to enjoy flirting with antisocial vagrancy. After all, with Darwin’s fortune, could he not be as weird as he liked, not really having to worry about “adding up “ to a presentable identity? Why lavish such attention on the detritus of nineteenth-century educated men, when there are evidently other archives with greater purchase on the label “marginal” that could benefit from increased critical attention? There is some truth in this: of the men considered here, three are Oxbridge educated (Darwin, Wilde, Hopkins), while one (Gissing) would likely have gone up to Oxford had he not run into trouble with the law.

Note-taking as I present it certainly has something in common with the homosocial values of Oxford in particular, tracked in rich detail by Linda Dowling. And I have, half-jokingly, referred to this dissertation as “the bathhouse,” because of the preponderance of men, but also—more pertinently—because of the somewhat “cruisy” nature of the notebooks themselves. Despite the ethical reservations I have about Tim Dean’s methods in *Unlimited Intimacy: On the Subculture of Barebacking*, his work does capture the “nonpurposive disposition” that characterizes gay male cruising: “What I find interesting about certain practices of cruising is their aimlessness, their encouraging a centrifugal openness to the other without the necessity of having a particular object of seduction in mind” (210). Notebooks encourage an analogous epistemological promiscuity, yielding a string of disordered and temporary dalliances. These needn’t be seen as straightforwardly negative or positive, and in their textual form I argue that they add up to a style, rather than representing a perpetual refusal.

The notebook may indeed be a trove of potentially insignificant coins, of documents made without a purpose in mind, but this doesn’t make them necessarily dramatic or disruptive: they are decisively less heroic and momentous than the events of “shattering” and “jouissance” that we find in valorizations of queer negativity. Recessive and quotidian, they index the social
dissatisfaction that leads these writers to find consolation in the small. The style we find within
them is what Mark Selzer would call “incremental” (727). Gissing called them “queer little
experiences,” which could be as modest as the way light passes over a wall. The paradox of the
notebook is that it seems to figure the resistance to “social structure and form” that Edelman
claims for the queer. In resisting narrative, it generates form by the accretion of fragmentary acts
of documentation. They add up to what Lauren Berlant calls a genre of “the stretched-out
present” (5) in which authors fashion a “nonspace” for themselves and their thoughts that lacks a
final cause for their emergence (34). Similarly, in D.A. Miller’s more “feminine” account of
queer insignificance, which he develops in readings of Jane Austen’s artifice, style is not merely
insignificance but “the activist materialization of insignificance” (17), something engaged
willfully.

With its quotidian atmosphere and accommodation of the inconsequential, notes will remind certain readers of haiku, which presents the ephemeral flash of a nondramatic, non-
narrative moment whose evaporation is part of its design and that joins up with no plot. As I
explore in the third chapter, for Roland Barthes the haiku represents, in fact, “the exemplary
form of notation,” for it captures a moment of the real without making a story about it, without
being “placed” in a narrative or systematic arrangement. In his manifesto of note-taking, The
Preparation of the Novel, Barthes uses haiku as the paradigm of what, in “The Reality Effect,”
he called “insignificant notation” in the realist novel: documents of the real that have no
functional reference other than to act as guarantors of the real itself:

I don’t want to play down the inconsequentiality of this microtechnique of Notatio: the
notebook, not very thick…Pen: a Biro at the ready (speed: no need to take the lid off):
this isn’t real (weighty, muscular) writing, but that doesn’t matter, because Notula is not
yet writing (91).
Notes have no need of muscle or grist: they aren’t heroic or macho. They weigh lightly on the world, declining the ethical burden of generating total meanings, refusing the requirements of systematic thinking but without needing to claim a radical identity on the basis of this denial.\footnote{This formulation owes much to Anne-Lise Francois and her concept of “recessive action.”}

The notebook makes a garland of indexical gestures.

**Publishing**

As I stated earlier, seeing the notebook on its own, as a genre of potential inconsequence, does not mean that it has nothing to tell us about other literary types and classes, and all of the chapters that follow contain what might seem like surprisingly traditional close readings of novels, poems, essays. The difference in my argument is that it does not use notes to ferret out, for example, Eliot’s source for an epigraph in *Middlemarch*, or to trace Hardy’s narrative episodes back to the newspaper clippings summarized in the *Facts Notebook*. Rather, I have consciously read notebooks without insisting upon their status as incubating novels or poems. In reading them as shelters for insignificance, I read them as sites in which authors stage a withdrawal from social timelines and plots that discomfort them, claiming a faint sovereignty for themselves in the process.

Without a plot to guide us, to assure us of what’s “important” and what’s not, the notebook pictures the world as a flat surface of evenly distributed significance—if everything is insignificant, in other words, then nothing is. Scale is one of its crucial mechanisms, by which I mean that it has the ability to render even the most sublime natural or cultural events in tight, tiny, form. While notes may vary in length, their unifying feature is their brevity. They offer a picture of the world as a series of small documents spread across an even surface. Everything can be rendered as a note: not only the Alps or the evolution of the human species but even a fragile
leaf collected in Italy, as Gissing does, or a top hat, in Oscar Wilde’s philosophy notebook, or the network of foam gathered on the surface of Hopkins’s hot chocolate. It is this utopian principle of accommodation, of admittance, in the notebook—the way it allows for instances of mess, error, play, potential uselessness—that I see carried into these authors’ published works. Those I have selected for analysis here, as we will see, all insist upon accommodating what might seem to be vagrant and marginal.

Darwin’s theories have arguably produced highly equivocal social outcomes, ushering in a new era of biology, on the one hand, while underwriting the activity of free market capitalism and the institutionalization of the idea of the “survival of the fittest,” on the other. (Remembering of course that this is Herbert Spencer’s locution.) In Chapter 1, I consider Darwin’s notetaking practices as a form of what Foucault calls “care of the self,” which depends on the activity of note-taking and documentation. Reflecting on Darwin’s sense of himself as socially useless, I explore how his notes consistently reflect upon ephemeral and fleeting pheneomena in nature, as well as the seemingly nonfunctional elements in it, from the male nipple, to the excessive movements that accompany emotional expression, to the vestigial wings of the kiwi or the outer structure of the human ear. Darwin treats seemingly useless things with tenderness and care, and not with the harsh and uncompromising eye you might expect. As I show in my readings of The Origin of Species, his theory of natural selection has inbuilt limits that preserve the sovereignty of useless, value-neutral organs, allowing them to float undestroyed, producing neither beneficial nor injurious consequences. They remain within a supposedly ruthless system that, in a commonplace understanding of the theory, demands and depends on their destruction.

My second chapter, “Social Notes: Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, and Aphorism,” rethinks Oscar Wilde’s aphoristic style in light of the note-taking practices he develops as an undergraduate at Oxford. The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) casts the aphorism as a death-
driven, insidious form, an atom of decadence. Archival materials, however, offer another venue for understanding his use of small, mobile pieces of language. Three large study notebooks Wilde kept at Oxford (1874-78) document his encounter with an eclectic array of information. Wilde’s notes jump between classical and modern philosophy, positivism, poetry, Victorian social science, and other sundry topoi, punctuated with succinct commentary. Based on original, primary research undertaken in the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in Los Angeles, and enlisting the work of Bruno Latour, I argue that Wilde’s trademark style is best understood as a form of what I call “social notation,” whereby pieces of information behave as actors, rather than as facts to be conscripted by existing methodologies. One unpublished source—the “Notebook on Philosophy”—reveals Wilde’s extensive engagement with Francis Bacon, a surprising historical precursor for this aspect of his style. In exploring forms of undirected informational assembly, Wilde’s notebooks also stage the utopian social life he conceives in his later critical writings.

In Chapter 3, “Thinking Pieces: George Gissing, Notes, and the Novel,” I argue that Gissing depicts the liquidation of the “novel of purpose” and its alliance with positivist social practice, playing out the possibilities for the non-purposive collection of information. In New Grub Street, Gissing mocks the novelistic impulses of his character Edwin Reardon, while projecting an arena for unordered realist notations in the imaginary work, “Mr Bailey Grocer,” by the character Harold Biffen. Turning to Roland Barthes’s theories of “insignificant notation” in “The Reality Effect” and his late lecture course The Preparation of the Novel, I show how notes offer Gissing a way of staying tethered to life amid decaying ethical ideals, if only in the drift of the present that may not be headed anywhere and that may not add up to anything. This drift is particularly visible in the “Commonplace Book,” with its rejection of political engagement, and The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, in which Gissing takes public
responsibility for his recessive private writings. Gissing does not refuse narrative arrangement in favor of romantic individualism (nothing could be more anathematic to him), but rather develops a way of “thinking in pieces,” of extracting the often trivial moments out of books or life in order to give them an opportunity to breathe outside the coordinates and determinations of a plot.

In my final chapter, “Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘Idle’ Documents,” I consider the journals Hopkins kept between 1867-1872, when he foreswore writing poetry altogether, yet persisted in describing the natural world in his strange idiolect. His attention falls, for example, on the “green-white tufts of long bleached grass like heads of hair,” or the “morning pale transparent unpacking white-rose cloud soaked in blue.” Taking seriously Hopkins’s rejection of poetry in this period, I depart from the accepted critical understanding of his notes as always already destined to become poems, arguing instead that they represent efforts to compose the social through acts of small-scale, incremental documentation. In his notes, Hopkins develops his famous vocabulary of “inscape,” a term he eventually identifies with the scholastic concept of “haecceity” (“thisness”) which refers to the particular qualities of a thing or group of things that lend it or them distinction. Enlisting the work of Bruno Latour again, and that of the American ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel—who used the “haecceity” concept to oppose the ascendant sociological methods of data aggregation—I show how Hopkins’s notes represent the social as a locally achieved, often fleeting, and tenuous descriptive event. Here, as in the preceding chapters, I trace the latent sociality detectable within a set of “idle” documents, recasting apparently solitary writings as a forum for reimagining collectivity.
1 Charles Darwin’s Styles of Inconsequence

To write by fragments: the fragments are then so many stones on the perimeter of a circle: I spread myself around: my whole little universe in crumbs; at the center, what?

*Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (93)

Why publish someone’s notes? Why read them?

Few writers have had as much unpublished material published as Charles Darwin. By now nearly every extant scrap of blank paper he touched with a pen or pencil has been preserved, transcribed, and made accessible either in print or online. The project of rendering such materials publicly available began early, with the 1933 edition of his *Beagle Diary* by Nora Barlow. In 1960, scholars published many of the alphabetically ordered “Transmutation Notebooks,” one by one. These were collected and supplemented with other unpublished materials in 1987 as *Charles Darwin’s Notebooks, 1836-1844: Geology, Transmutation of Species, Metaphysical Inquiries*. The little pocket books initially inspected by Barlow were eventually published as *Charles Darwin’s Notebooks from the Voyage of the Beagle* in 2009. *Darwin Online*, a massive undertaking tethered to the Darwin collections at Cambridge, makes most of his published and unpublished works available in handwritten as well as in printed form.

There is an obvious rationale for publishing these materials. They are useful for revealing the process that led to the development of the theory of evolution by natural selection. We can track what he read and when he read it, identify the course of his observations and speculations, and in the process perhaps learn about the nature of scientific thought and the development of an intricate theory. From this standpoint, the “tree of life” image from Notebook B becomes a crucial exhibit, and it has been reproduced in myriad publications on Darwin and the history of
evolutionary theory (*Transmutation* 180). Notebook D preserves his reading notes on Thomas Malthus, notes in which the idea of a “struggle for existence” first crystallized (375-6).

Yet beside these “useful” moments in the notebooks, details appear that seem decidedly less significant, at least from a scientific standpoint. We get fragments of text that do not evidently contribute to the *telos* of his theory of evolution by natural selection. His “sublime” feeling watching a frog leap about, for instance, or his impression of the stars, or the way sunlight hits a tree. Furthermore, the digital reproductions of his scribal objects generate material excesses, granting access not only to his textual speculations but also to the grain of the paper, the colour of ink, the size of the handwriting in its Twombly-esque scrawl. His notes offer something more than his scientific footprints or a map of his reading. They reveal Darwin’s practice of putting the world on paper. What kind of writing is it that tarries with illegibility, more concerned with representing the “rush” and “jumble” of sudden images than with the tasking of organizing the stream? And what kind of reading does this form engender? Are we constrained to tracing points of origin for “the theory?” Or is something else possible?

For literary historians, Darwin’s signature contributions concern the direct or indirect influence which his works had on the narrative forms of the nineteenth century, whether novelists actually read these works or not.\(^7\) *The Origin of Species*, especially, models the reflexive “novelistic” energy in Darwin’s thinking, serving either as a source for discourses that influenced Victorian novelists, or else acting as a kind of crypto-novel in its own right: “Reading *The Origin* is an act which involves you in a narrative experience,” writes Gillian Beer in her landmark study (3). As George Levine explains in *Darwin and the Novelists*, the form which Darwin’s theories took had as much of an influence on the fiction of the time as the ideas contained therein: “Science enters most Victorian fiction not so much in the shape of ideas, as,

\(^{7}\) For Victorianists, Gillian Beer’s *Darwin’s Plots* remains the touchstone work in this area, along with George Levine’s *Darwin and the Novelists*. 
quite literally, in the shape of its shape, its form, as well as in the patterns it exploits and
develops, the relationships it allows” (13).

More recent work has engaged Darwin’s influence on Victorian poetry, the history of
affect, the prehistory of structuralist linguistics, and a range of articles and books addressing
Darwin’s discursive imbrication with colonialism. While critics working on the literary
significance of Darwin’s works often invoke his notebooks in support of their arguments,
however, a sustained account of the aesthetic and stylistic dimension of these documents, taken
on their own, remains unwritten. Insofar as scholars take the notes as their subject, they have
been put to use in histories of science or in accounts of Darwin’s biography.

In what follows I address Darwin’s note-taking as an autonomous practice, one whose
meanings are not exhausted by the teleology of his published works. Darwin only kept notebooks
between the years 1831-1844, after which he devised other methods of organizing his
information, primarily using “subject portfolios” (Trans 8). I focus specifically on the collection
of fifteen small notebooks published as Charles Darwin Notebooks from the Voyage of the
Beagle (1831-1836) and the seven alphabetically ordered Transmutation Notebooks (1836-1844).
I argue that in these writings Darwin sustains a style of social inconsequence, collecting
observations without regard to their present usefulness or their future published forms. The
notebooks are instruments that paradoxically resist instrumental thinking, allowing his thought to
drift, remaining in pieces and socially inert. In making this argument, I invoke Michel Foucault’s
late, ethical writings on the care of the self, within which note-taking (which Foucault glosses as
“a practice of the disparate”) plays a central role (Ethics 212). In their contents, as I will show,

8 For Darwin and poetics, see Dawson. For a reading that places The Expression of the Emotions into dialogue with
contemporary theories of affect, see Gross. On The Expression as a prototype of Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of
signification, see Winter. On Darwin’s relationship with the colonial project, see Amigoni and Schmitt.
9 See Hodge on Darwin’s note-taking programme from the perspective of the history of science. For a more general
account of the relationship between note-taking and the history of science, see Daston (2004).
Darwin’s notes reflect his interest in the apparently inconsequential elements within nature, and his blank books serve to document and shelter seemingly inoperative and otiose structures in animal and plant bodies, the “useless organs” (such as the blind eye of a mole) which fulfill no legible function but that are “highly variable” (Origin 149).

The style of variable inconsequentials put forward in the notebooks receives naturalization and theorization in the eventual publication of his theory, in which he defines neutral organs as “neither useful nor injurious,” describing their suspension outside the reach of natural selection. From the notebooks, then, we can assemble a new picture of Darwin, as a man not shackled to a nature “red in tooth in claw,” nor to a similarly bloody methodology, but that acts with tenderness and care toward what seems to serve no purpose and without insisting upon its future redemption. He extends this care, in the final count, to those notes that he did not incorporate into his own arguments in The Origin and The Descent. This essay thus proposes a new, formal method for connecting notes to finished forms, and in so doing illuminates a new way of approaching the question of ethics in Darwin’s thought.

1.2 Practice of the Disparate

In his late work, Foucault diverges from his earlier focus on structures of power in order to interrogate the experience of subjects forming themselves within such structures. Works such as Discipline and Punish and the first volume of The History of Sexuality had understood subjectivity as a product of power relations sustained by multiple, overlapping discourses and institutions. However, in the second and third volumes of History of Sexuality, and in a series of essays, interviews, and lectures which he gave in the years leading up to his death, he began to attend to subjectivity as something generated and produced not only by “outside” forces but also by individuals. Tracing such practices back to classical Europe, Foucault gathers them under the broad term “care of the self,” by which he refers to “an intensification of the relation to oneself”
within which “one constitutes oneself as the subject of one’s acts” (*History* 41). This turn to the subject represents a turn to ethics.

Speaking in several interviews in 1983 and 1984, Foucault all but acknowledges the bind in which his theory places his readers: deadlocked between the limited possibilities of subjective agency and the totalizing force of impersonal systems designed to concentrate power in certain locales. He rehearses a standard account of modern morality which, he argues, has withdrawn a set of reliable and consistent rules by which we can measure our actions. In contemporary social theory “people are not told what they ought to be, what they ought to do, what they ought to believe and think” (*Politics* 50). In other words, critical theory in the late twentieth-century does not propose a normative system of ethics, and in a certain way neglects the question of ethics altogether. “What they [theory and critique] do…is to bring out how up till now social mechanisms had been able to operate, how the forms of repression and constraint had acted” (50). Yet he goes on to note that this critique has not been the final word on the matter: “it seems to me people were left to make up their own minds, to choose, in the light of all this, their own existence” (50). In other words, while critique works to effectively illuminate the systems that hold subjects in place, it does not explain how one’s existence as a subject should be navigated.

He draws on ancient sources for an account of what “the care of the self” might look like. In ancient Greek and Latin writers, such as Cicero, Epictetus, Plutarch, and Epicurus, he traces an ethics which declines universalizing propositions in favor of self-management and self-care, something that amounts to a form of discipline constituting an “aesthetics of existence”: “in our society,” he writes in “On the Geneology of Ethics,” “art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life…But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?” (*Ethics* 261). This idea, he claims, lay at the core of ancient moral experience in the era before Christian teaching focused people’s attention on adherence to abstract and universalizing
rules. In the ancient world, the ethical injunction to “know thyself” was, in Foucault’s argument, *subordinate* to the injunction to “care for thyself.” Thus the studies one undertook were not principally adapted to discovering knowledge that could circulate legibly at a remove from the knower: the whole point of reading, study, and investigation was to furnish the knower with opportunities for self-development, meditation, and reflection.

There is much to debate about the prospect of proposing an ethics based principally on an “aesthetics of existence.”¹⁰ What interests me, however, is the way in which a form of writing takes precedence over a search for generalized knowledge in his ethical apparatus: “My idea is that it’s not at all necessary to relate ethical problems to scientific knowledge” (*Ethics* 261). He places notebooks at the center of this aesthetically-inflected ethics. He refers to such writings as *hypomnemata*, or “aids to memory”: “*hypomnemata* has a very precise meaning: it is a copybook, a notebook. Precisely this type of notebook was coming into vogue in Plato’s time for personal and administrative use. This new technology was as disrupting as the introduction of the computer into private life today” (272). The introduction of the notebook as an instrument carries significant ethical and aesthetic consequences for the ancients, in Foucault’s view, making available a style of existence in which one could record and navigate the world as a series of atomic pieces which one could collect, recombine, and reactivate: “One wrote down quotes in them, extracts from books, examples, and actions one had witnessed or read about, reflections or reasonings that one had heard or that had come to mind” (209). Rather than reading notebooks as the preparations of future works, or as directed toward the stabilization of objective facts, Foucault opens a way of reading them as textual genre in which we can trace an aesthetics of existence—a *style*.

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¹⁰ For more extensive accounts of these debates than I can offer here, see Bernauer, Nealon, and O’Leary.
Notebooks are not diaries. “They do not constitute a ‘narrative of oneself’” (210). It is crucial that he affirm this, since if they were to be considered diaries then they would be easier to dismiss on the grounds that they merely pointed backward to a subjectivity which, he continued to believe, did not exist outside of relations of power. Enlisting the notebook as “a technology of the self” with the potential to evade or at least navigate the discursive formation of “social mechanisms” should not end with the reinstatement of a heroic human individual, he explains. The notebook only serves to capture fragments of reading, observations, and impressions, and through the “recollection of the fragmentary logoi” one fashioned “a relationship of oneself with oneself” (211). Instead of producing a secure, consistent identity, the “writing of the hypomnemata is also (and must remain) a regular and deliberate practice of the disparate. It is a selecting of heterogeneous elements” (212). The person left standing amid the wreckage of subjectivity still has an existence to manage, and notebooks suggest one form this management might take, as collections of piecemeal text that remain in a state of suspension and dispersal but that are also tethered to a body in a continual process of reorientation.

The body is a central component of this “practice of the disparate.”¹¹ This practice is an almost “physical exercise” which Foucault compares to ingestion, to materialization in the body of the writer. “For simply by writing we absorb the thing itself we are thinking about” (Hermeneutics 359), he writes. It “transforms the thing seen or heard ‘into tissue and blood.’” (Ethics 213). In the modern context one can see the very real dimension of this proximity of the notebook and the body. In Darwin’s case, for instance, the small blank books travel with their owner, pressed up against his chests in the inside pockets of his jacket, gripped by his slippery hands on a tropical island. Unlike the blank books kept back on board his ship, ready to receive his expanded (and readable) journal entries, the “small pocket book” received its inscriptions in

¹¹ For an account of Foucault’s late concept of writing and its intense relation with a “sublime body,” see Lee.
something close to real-time, an object that served as a means of capturing scattered impressions in the manner of a portable camera.

Foucault’s late ethics has been the subject of much debate, with some viewing his aesthetic ethics as little more than a call for dandyism, and others viewing it as a mere extension of his work on power from the “middle” period (Faubion 311, Nealon 3). In my view, our assessments of the late interviews and shorter essays are necessarily elaborations and supplements. While the *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* give extended arguments about the possibility of outlining an “aesthetics of existence,” he left only a scattered selection of ideas on the subject of note-taking before his death in 1984. He left us, in other words, select *hypomnemata* from which we can extrapolate possibilities. This is not the place to give a full accounting of his ethics, but what interests me is the opportunity he presents for literary critics trying to understand notebooks in a new light, as reflecting a style of existence. Darwin’s note-taking, I suggest, is turned toward self-cultivation and solitary elaboration; not a practice aimed at establishing a bodiless truth to be experienced socially, but one intimately tied to his own physical being, its movements, habits, desires, and rambling impressions.

The content of his notebooks, of course, differs from that of the Foucauldian *hypomnemata*, which included maxims and utterances directed toward the explicit improvement of moral character and behavior. Darwin was famously intolerant of philosophy of this kind. “The monkey understands the affinities of man, better than the boasted philosopher,” he writes (*Trans* 553-4). Rather than inscribe such boasts into his books, then, he describes zoological and geological phenomena: different rocks, the shape of a wave, the behavior of the “savages.” Yet as I will show, even without the “classical” content of a Ciceronian or Epicurean notebook, for example, Darwin’s notebooks nevertheless index a style of existence, a way of living that perpetuates acts of drift and the collection of the potentially useless note, description, or
excessive thought. Indeed, the lack of classical sources in the notes represents a crucial stylistic gesture in itself. Nature—the world of life—is his library, with its hoard of *principia*, of moments gleaned from a scattered organic world which is decidedly *not* tuned toward a use or purpose, where much that seems to serve no purpose is sheltered and borne on to an undirected future.

In presenting a view of Darwin’s notes as indexing a style of existence, and as being tied directly to his concept of self, this argument makes adjustments to dominant accounts of the ethos underlying scientific epistemology. What is at work in Darwin’s notebooks, as I present them here, is not an expression of “self-annihilation producing knowledge,” or “dying to know” as Levine describes it (*Dying 5*). Nor is it fully explicable by a commitment to the different “ethoi” of objectivity as these have been theorized by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison. Rather my goal is to read Darwin’s notebooks as a surprising instance of commitment to style for its own sake, not as a sacrifice or martyrdom undertaken for the greater good of the world.

1.3 Useless Undertaking

Darwin’s notational style developed when he served aboard the HMS *Beagle* from 1831 until 1836, a voyage that he would later call “the most important event” of his life (*Notebooks 1*). The circumstances surrounding his choice to join the *Beagle* crew indicate what motivations lay behind his decision to join the crew, and what kind of life he was leaving behind. His journey led him away from the course of a “useful,” gentlemanly life as construed by his family and social milieu. It is well known that Darwin was a vagrant student as a child and young man. The education available to a man in his social class, that is, classical education, and the careers that would follow such an education (medicine, scholarship, or the clergy, for instance) failed to seduce him. While at the University of Edinburgh he turned down the standard schedule of lectures and courses in order to pursue whatever he liked, following the course of his own whims
to the consternation of his family, which his sister Susan makes clear in a letter supposedly representing the interests of their father:

I have a message from Papa to give you, which I am afraid you won’t like; he desires me to say that he thinks your plan of picking and chusing what lectures you like to attend, not at all a good one; and as you cannot have enough information to know what may be of use to you, it is quite necessary for you to bear with a good deal of stupid & dry work: but if you do not discontinue your present indulgent way, your course of study will be utterly useless” (“Letter 29”).

In order to avoid being “utterly useless” and to find out “what may be of use,” he is told to accept what his sister’s letter admits to being inane, to endure a series of lectures he found desiccated and tedious.

For Darwin the forms of education available to men in his social class held little appeal; the traditions of humanism seemed to him empty. In his “Recollections” of 1876, he writes of attending Shrewsbury School before Cambridge: “The school as a means of education to me was simply a blank,” he writes, as it was “strictly classical.” The tasks of memorizing Homer and Virgil he calls “utterly useless” (Autobiographies 10). At Cambridge he similarly took very little interest in the classical curriculum. “During the three years which I spent at Cambridge my time was wasted,” he writes, adding the exception of his reading of William Paley’s Natural Theology. Studying Paley’s work, he felt, “was the only part of the Academical Course which, as I then felt and as I still believe, was of the least use to me” (31). He spent much of his time at Cambridge collecting, specifically gathering up samples of different kinds of beetles. Indeed, his passion for taking in the natural world around the campus became literal: he relays an anecdote of having to put a beetle in his mouth because his hands were so full of other samples (33).
Finished his degree, declining the professional trajectories of medicine and the clergy, Darwin was both odd and at odds. It is easy to imagine his father fretting about his future. What was to be done with the boy? An opportunity arose by way of John Henslow, a professor from Cambridge, who introduced Darwin to the possibility of joining the crew of the HMS Beagle under the command of one Captain Fitzroy. His father was afraid the journey would be a “useless undertaking” (Darwin “Letter 110”). His uncle, however, supported the venture, adducing several reasons for Darwin participating in the expedition: “The undertaking would be useless as regards his profession, but looking upon him as a man of enlarged curiosity, it affords him such an opportunity of seeing men and things as happens to few” (“Letter 109”). Darwin’s father would have preferred that his son become a clergyman. Unable to fulfill the terms of a more “useful” life, however, his son declines a particular narrative for how his life might unfold, sailing away from the infrastructures of home with his bundles of blank notebooks in tow, ready to be filled with thoughts his family deemed quite useless.

After departing on the Beagle, the possibility of becoming a clergyman evaporated. Darwin had broken from the plot points set out by the classical system in which he felt himself an outsider. Besides his journals, he took 15 books worth of notes over the course of the journey, each one of which has been subsequently named by editors for the locations he visited when he kept one volume or another: the Falkland Notebook; the Rio Notebook; the Galapagos Notebook. Many of the entries he made in these books were expanded in his journal, which eventually became the basis of The Voyage on the Beagle. By means of these early notebooks he developed a style of attention and observation. “As far as I can judge of myself I worked to the utmost during the voyage from the mere pleasure of investigation,” he wrote later, and the notebooks reflect precisely this pleasure of disorganized investigation and documentation unfolding for its own sake. (45) They were, as Richard Darwin Keynes notes, “his equipment” (Notebooks 4).
But what kinds of tools were they? Early readers of the *Beagle* notes construe them as a source of aesthetic plenitude, a record of scattered affects and descriptions. In 1933, for example, Nora Barlow examined the “eighteen little pocket-books” as part of her research for her edition of the *Beagle Diary*, the first substantial publication of Darwin’s manuscript materials. She notes that these pocket books were his “constant companions on the island expeditions” (vii). Not a journal *per se*, they present a disordered frenzy of script running in all angles across the pages. “The rapid pencil writing is often illegible,” she writes, “and the stream of impressions rushes past, disclosing in its course a jumble of sudden images” (vii). Barlow is obviously charmed, yet she does not dwell on these little books filled with sudden images, turning instead to the more orderly diary in which Darwin expanded the “strictly scientific portions” of the “rough notes” (viii).

She leaves the “rough notes” unaccounted for. How should they be read, in their near-illegibility? The editors of the 2009 edition introduce each notebook by pointing out the rudimentary passages which Darwin later built up in his journal or in his published writings. Alongside these notes with a future, however, we have a kaleidoscopic array of others which do not become significant. In 1933, as a way of introducing her edition of the “strictly scientific” diary, Barlow teases the reader with a few excerpts from the early rough notes, passages that she glosses as “general descriptions.” These are some of her transcriptions:

“Our dinner eggs & rice... Arrived at our sleeping place about 9. Sand & swampy plains & thickets alternating—passed through by a dim moonlight: —the cries of snipe—fireflies—& a few noisy goatsuckers.”

“Started at 5 o'clock: the sky became red & then the stars died away & then the planets....”
“Twiners entwining twiners,—tresses like hair,—beautiful lepidoptera,—silence—hosannah;—Frog habits like toad—slow jumps,—Sublime devotion the prevalent feeling.” (vii)

Interestingly, Barlow mixes notes together which are separated by many pages in the actual notebook. The phrase “sublime devotion the prevalent feeling” appears several pages after he makes his note about the jumping frog (Notebooks 45-6). I read Barlow’s choice to edit the notes in such a way (without indicating that she was doing so) as an indication of her desire to make them serve as evidence for the aesthetic and creative dimension of the notebooks, making of them a rich quarry of impressions which Darwin eventually put to use as theory. They appear at the beginning of the edition as collection of epigraphs, or lyrical poems manqués, Romantic texts more in line with, for example, the notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge or Dorothy Wordsworth.

It is certainly easy to pick out notes from his time on the Beagle that support this reading. The word “sublime,” for instance, notably absent from every edition of The Origin of Species and The Expression of the Emotions, and appearing only once in The Descent of Man, recurs again and again in the Beagle notebooks. It is indeed the “prevalent feeling”:

“View at first leaving Rio sublime, picturesque intense colours blue prevailing tint” (42)

“entered a magnificent forest: sublime.” (44)

“spent the whole morning in thus rambling in the forests. sublime devotion the prevalent feeling: this days delay was owing to Mr Lennon going to visit his estate…” (46)

“delightful walk reflecting how many hundred years has been. how many will be without tree sublime or animal excepting Guanaca” (84)

“the very quietness almost sublime even amongst mud banks & gulls sand hills & solitary Vultures” (145)
All fifteen of the Beagle notebooks sustain affects of sublimity and wonderment that do not eventuate in stable “objective” perspectives on their contents, an effect that colours not only the “lyrical” passages but also the moments of supposedly greater scientific-historical value, as well as the stray descriptions which seem to bear little relation to either category, for instance the detail about “Mr Lennon” above. Darwin’s early note-taking reflects a style centered on the collection of details and descriptions whose usefulness eludes him. Rather than preserving what seems immediately significant or useful, in the manner of the ancient keeper of hypomnemata, he shelters experiences, facts, and feelings which do not announce themselves immediately as being useful, and that might be entirely “useless as regards his profession.”

While the publication of the notebooks seems to invite a reading of them as quasi-lyrics, my intention is not to aestheticize them in the sense of “reading them as poems.” Their aesthetic quality exceeds the stray references to beauty or sublimity: the notebooks model an aesthetic of the stream, of a fragmented and scattered existence, one that does not stop in the pleasures of beauty or sublimity but that just keeps adding items to a pile. His notes flash over a vast archive of details, impressions, and feelings, all of which seem quite “useless” as regards moral or ethical development. Yet he folds them into his books all the same, and their collection represents, I think, its own ethical practice, even if the contents seem to be remote from human affairs. There are precise descriptions of geological phenomena, for example of the “diluvium angular gneiss in red clay” (26). There are large quantities of such facts, observations about the natural world that resemble a rapid collection of photographs or hasty sketches. But among these faint documents we also find Darwin tracking sublime affects, as Barlow noticed.

He is making a collection. While he certainly goes on to “do” something with it (i.e. write and publish journals, theories, autobiographies) the notes as they are hover in a state of potentiality, undecided about their destination. Aestheticizing them by imposing a lyrical frame
merely places them on another teleological textual path, one that is entertaining to think about but that can never be much more than a thought experiment. Rather, these documents reveal the intense desire to keep his findings in a state of potentiality and play, allowing them to fluctuate and hang together without his insisting upon their systematic integration, and without arresting the movement of his mind by stopping at any single point.

If we pan out from one of the “sublime” fragments in the notes, we can see this affect jostling against other supposedly “non-aesthetic” impressions and feelings. He leaps from thing to thing without stopping, piling up a whole assortment of documents. The following is an unedited stream from the Cape de Verds notebook:

No monocotyledon plants
ants nearby 3 feets high 2 thick with a tube at bottom
Lichen, mosses
Terns & Noddy on trees alight
beautiful pink flowers on the top of mountain on trees
vitreous feldspar & tufa alternate & dykes—white soil form bed
Solitude on board enervating heat
comfort: hard to look forward pleasures in prospect: do not wish for cold night delicious sea calm sky not blue (24)

Latin names, insects, beautiful flowers, his feeling of enervation, a lack of optimism: descriptions and subjective reflections jostle up against one another without being marked as separate kinds of thought. Everything runs together for him. The detail about the difficulty he has looking forward to pleasures is significant: while sublime feelings and the experience of the beautiful occur to him on his journey, he is also dealing with the misty emotions incited by the persistent surround of uncharted waters both figurative and literal. In the Beagle notebooks he
records the changing coordinates of the ship—marking their latitude and the longitude as it changes direction or course. The paratactic shifting from a description of a plant, to a feeling, to nautical coordinates exemplifies the rhythm of the notes as whole. They produce a paradoxical sequence of inconsequentiality, of minor details heaped up out of order. They amount not only to a record of an aesthetic consciousness experiencing the beauty of nature but to a “practice of the disparate.”

1.4 Transmutation

After he returned to England in 1836, his note-taking expanded to include more reading notes on the work of other natural historians. In the alphabetically-labeled “Transmutation Notebooks,” which he kept until 1844, his central argument begins to surface in a virtual, emergent sense, like a liquid just beginning to freeze. In Notebook B, he sketches the “tree of life” image that reveals the descent of many species from a common ancestor, as well as the necessity of extinction: “Absolute knowledge that species die & others replace them” (Trans 195). He considers the reason for the existence of death: “Why does individual die, to perpetuate certain peculiarities, (therefore adaptation)” (187). References to “the Creator” still drift in and out of his notes, however, as he tries to determine the laws that govern selection and adaptation: “this might be made very strong, if we believe the Creator creates by any laws, which , I think is shown by the very facts of the Zoological character of these islands [the Galapagos]” (195).

Yet even as the theory begins to take an adumbrated form (though not receiving formulaic expression until much later) his thoughts remained in a state of flux as he sustained a baroque, sprawling style of collection and inquiry. He continues to write in brief fragments of prose aimed “for the drawer” as the editors of the volume put it. Yet the energy of the notes, what Beer calls their “vertiginous freedom,” is enabled by their withdrawal from publicity, their

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12 On the mix of reading notes and observations in scientific notebooks, including Darwin’s, see Daston (2004).
aloofness to the possibility of being read at all. As Darwin reflected later, “I did not care much about the general public” (Auto 46). The editors of these notebooks describe almost all of them as being written “for the drawer” (84), a performance intended for the writer alone, a socially inconsequential endeavor. This willed inconsequentiality does not seem to be explainable simply by virtue of his commitment to accuracy, or to the “refusal of fame” as Levine might describe it, but rather by a desire to keep his thinking in pieces, without assuming a publishable and public form.

The “Transmutation Notebooks” preserve the affects of sublimity, wonder, and awe that textured the rough notes kept on the Beagle. There arise, alongside the notes crucial for the develop of this theory, other impressions and observations that reveal the gleeful state he must have inhabited as he wrote down the world as he saw it. He records strange, haywire incidents: “When in National Institution & not feeling much enthusiasm, happened to go close to one & smelt the peculiar smell of Picture. association with much pleasure immediately thrilled across me” (539). His eccentricity shines through: this man runs through public institutions literally sniffing at artifacts when he got bored of regarding them in the traditional way. It is hard to imagine him finding a way of including such a note in any of his publications, even in The Expression of the Emotions, which directly addresses the question of art and its relationship with biology.

He is constantly ranking the relative wonder of his objects of inquiry. The comparative forms “more” and “less” wonderful often appear in the notebooks: clearly they served him in defining what counted as wonderful and where different elements of the world belonged on the scales of wonder: “I remember my pleasure in Kensington Gardens has often been greatly excited by looking at trees at (i.e. as) great compound animals united by wonderful & mysterious manner” (529). His use of the word “wonder,” however, is not always irenic, and he often
invokes it in comparisons that diminish the significance of the human subject. The following is
only the most explicit statement of this position, and there are many others: “People often talk of
the wonderful event of intellectual Man appearing.--the appearance of insects with other senses
is more wonderful. its mind more different probably & introduction of man” (222-3).

In the notes he refuses the ideal of a sovereign subject of the Enlightenment with the
same tenor of a Foucault. Even the wonder of a mind such as Isaac Newton’s is not safe: “That
the embryo the thousandth of inch should produce a Newton is often thought wonderful. it is part
of same class of facts that the skin grown over a wound” (372). In these notes he sustains his
resistance to the humanism which had been foisted upon him by his social position, and writes in
a style which declines absorption by that environment and subjection to its priorities. “When we
talk of high orders, we should always say, intellectually higher.—But who with the face of the
earth covered with the most beautiful savannahs & forests dare to say that intellectuality is only
aim in this world” (233).

Darwin does not take notes in order to produce another fold of humanist traditions. He
seeks an ethical way of life that takes nature’s book as its primary source for citation and
reference. Darwin’s notes dwell in a state deemed “useless” by his family. Under that banner he
produces a log of myriad facts and impressions that he encounters on a global circumnavigation
with no immediately transparent payoff. His attention spins without settling, streams without
freezing. The aesthetic of the notebook is one of fluctuation and variability without a clearly
defined use. As I will show now, he naturalizes this condition in the Beagle Notebooks and the
Transmutation Notebooks, taking great interest in those variable and inconsequential organs in
plants and animals that he calls “useless.” Things that find themselves with this label were never
far from his mind.

1.5 Useless Organs
The social inconsequence of his writing style echoes the intensity with which the notes dwell upon uselessness as a natural-historical subject. Darwin puzzles over those organs within plant and animal bodies that apparently contribute nothing whatsoever to their parent organisms, neither harmful nor beneficial: the wings of flightless birds, for example, or the human appendix. They fluctuate and vary in a state of play, illegible to conventional forms of natural historical explanation. The notes document his defense of such useless organs against those writers who would deny their neutral character. The natural theologians—ancestors of present-day intelligent design advocates—simply produce their own commonplace to answer the question of the presence of useless bits and pieces: “nature does nothing in vain.” The Transmutation Notebooks, by contrast, represent a stylization not only of Darwin’s own life as a gentleman naturalist without much need for social approval, but also a stylization of the natural world as a sublime archive of organs, not all of which have a particular function. Many survive in spite of this, since nature as Darwin theorized it had no guiding purpose directing its movements.

His interest in such “useless organs” began on the Beagle, in August 1833. In the middle of the Falkland notebook, Darwin records an encounter with a strange creature while he made one of his sallies to the island. The onomatopoeically named “tuco-tuco” or “toco-toco,” a small mammal related to the mole, burrows underground and makes a sound that he described as “distinct louder sonorous, like distant cutting of small tree more peculiar noise [sic].” He notes that the tuco-tuco is “said to have no tail (?) and blind (?)” (122). His “rough” note on the matter ends there.

In two subsequent meditations, however, he returned to the subject of the tuco-tuco, with its rudiment of a tail and its strange eyes that seemed to serve no other purpose than getting injured as the small animal burrowed through the ground. The first is taken from Darwin’s Animal Notes, and the second from the Voyage of the Beagle:
Considering the subterranean habits of the tuco-tuco, the blindness, though so frequent, cannot be a very serious evil. Yet it appears odd that an animal should possess an organ constantly subject to injury” (“Animal Notes”).

In the tuco-tuco, which I believe never comes to the surface of the ground, the eye is rather larger, but often rendered blind and useless, though without apparently causing any inconvenience to the animal” (47)

The first entry employs moral vocabulary (“serious evil”), but such language disappears in the next instantiation of the thought, which includes the less severe adjective “useless.” As he uses it, the word does not connote moral judgment, which we can discern because of his clarification that follows: the blind eye does not cause much inconvenience at all. In his descriptions of the blind eye of the tuco-tuco, Darwin reveals his ethical stance on the question of inutility, a stance very different from the one we might expect from a man who seems on the surface committed to “the survival of the fittest,” whether it takes the form of written notes or the eye of a subterranean creature that does not see.13

The uselessness of the tuco-tuco’s eye extends metonymically to the landscape of South America itself. Reflecting on this landscape, he frequently mentions the “sterile wastes” of the country. He addresses this fascination, the hold that useless landscapes have on his mind and memory. The plains of Patagonia, for instance, are “pronounced by all most wretched and useless” and yet they are the “images of the past” that “most frequently cross before [his] eyes” (Voyage 450). He notes that the more fertile landscapes experienced fail to produce the same effect, that their imaginative incitements falls short. Something about the sterility, the waste of these landscapes takes hold of his faculties. They are, he remarks hyperbolically, “the last boundaries to human knowledge.” Why do these and not other memories compel him?

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13 For an account of the relation of grace and inconsequence, see Francois.
suggests that his fascination with useless territory is caused by “the free scope given to the imagination.” What is not serviceable for humanity excites the activity of the imagination. The “free scope” of thought arises as a consolation in the absence of usefulness, a trade-off that Darwin might have appreciated, having traded in his own “social usefulness” to drift on the seas.

The *Transmutation Notebooks*, for their part, serve as a shelter, an ark, not only for his own socially useless thoughts but also for the numerous elements in human, animal, and plant bodies that seem to serve no purpose, which are “abortive.” “What is abortive? when it does not perform that function which *experience* shows us it was for.—Most important,” he writes at D59 (352). Examples of abortive organs which find a place in the notebooks are male nipples, the fused wings of certain beetles, snakes’ teeth which have perforations for poison without being poisonous, the genitals of mules, muscular ticks in a horse’s ear, the ability of some people to move their ears without touching them, sighs (“abortive groans”), the emotional expressions of a baby, a female flower on a male plant, the spiracles of a plant, and the wing of an apteryx (192, 309, 434, 542, 555, 556, 589, 211). Such items are identified without trying to fit them into a functional system, without appealing to some unknown use that a “divine” creator knows about but that we do not:

> When one sees nipple of man’s breast. one does not say some use, but no sex not having been determined.—so with useless wings under elytra of beetles.—born from beetles with wings. &modified.—if simple creation, surely would have been born without them (192)

Such organs are, in general, vestiges of organs that once served a function for their possessors; or else they are the incipient versions of structures that do not yet have a use for themselves. This second possibility only occurs to him much later.
Among the unifying principles that defined natural history before Darwin came on the scene was the doctrine “nature does nothing in vain.” Darwin cites this commonplace as it appears in Thomas Browne’s Latin text at E54: “‘Natura nihil agit frustra’, as Sir Thomas Browne says ‘is the only indisputable axiom in Philosophy’ Religio Medici Vol. II Sir T Browne’s Works p 20” (350). Every natural thing is tuned toward nature, or God’s purposes, according to Browne and nearly every natural historian. Each organ and part of an animal, plant, or other form of life is attuned to the organic unity of the whole of which it forms a part, with no excess or extraneous material left over. Darwin’s reading continues: “There are no grotesques in nature; not anything framed to fill up empty cantons, & unnecessary spaces” p23 “for Nature is the art of God” (350). Nothing is wasted; nature runs like a perfectly oiled machine in which everything has a place. Darwin dissents from this position strongly. “Here there is some error,” he writes. Refuting Browne’s commonplace, he rehearses a debate about why certain clams have “eye points” (tiny rudiments of eyes) while others do not: “Macleay then answered, because nature leaves vestiges of what she does—does not move per saltum—yet does nothing in vain!!” (351). Darwin rejects the notion that nature is incapable of acting in vain. He saw the world everywhere generating useless elements that did not produce deleterious effects.\(^{14}\)

\(^{14}\) While most natural historians affirmed the commonplace that “nature does nothing in vain,” one of Darwin’s British antecedents took a slightly different view of the subject. I have already mentioned the great debt that Darwin owed to William Paley, a debt acknowledged in the former’s autobiography. In Paley’s *Natural Theology*, he presents the famous “watchmaker analogy” in which he argues that no rational thinker can consider the productions of nature without also assuming the existence of a designer behind them. Just as a person coming across a watch in nature could never believe that it had come into being without a maker, so too, Paley argued, can we not look upon organic forms and believe them to have emerged without design. This argument became a popular defense of natural theology in the early nineteenth century, and it is one that Darwin of course opposed.

One of the curious features of *Natural Theology*, however, is its account of apparently useless organs. It is likely within this text that Darwin first encountered the notion during his time at Cambridge. T.H. Huxley noted this connection: “Has not…Paley told [Darwin] that that seemingly useless organ, the spleen, is beautifully adjusted as so much packing between the other organs” (4)? Huxley is describing Paley’s eccentric explanation for the presence of useless organs, which he acknowledges but whose “uselessness” he describes as a mere appearance which we can dispel by further research. Significant, however, is the neutral description of such organs that Paley offers: “If by chance [the anatomist] come at a part of which he knows not the use, the most he can say is, that it is useless, no one ever suspects that it is put there to incommode, to annoy, or to torment” (243). Thus the spleen, as Huxley notes, performs the curiously inert function of “stuffing”: “It is possible that the spleen may be merely a stuffing, a soft
Alongside nature’s useful creations there is a great deal of material that apparently performs no functional operation, that is not inclined toward progression or improvement for itself or its possessor but remains inert. Through his writings on the eye of the tuco-tuco, his engagement with other natural historians on the subject, and his intense memories of useless landscapes, the inoperative becomes an oddly valuable category for his work. Through his notes he develops a strategy for containing these curiosities, enjoying the wonder and mystery they presented but without putting faith in a deity as the only agency that could ultimately explain what these things were for. Like Darwin himself on the HMS Beagle, quartered on a vessel drifting without a clear goal in mind, these vagrant nipples and vestigial teeth find accommodation within his notebooks, where their uselessness is not a liability, but even, as we’ll see, a virtue in his argument.

In 1844, toward the end of his intense note-taking period, Darwin stacked the “Transmutation Notebooks” into a box and left them there for over a decade, not showing them to anybody, not elaborating on their specific contents. He turned instead to a long study of barnacles that occupied him for seven years while his revolutionary theory remained in pieces in the notebooks, tucked away from view until he drew them out and began the arduous process of transforming them into The Origin of Species. This book was only published, finally, in 1859. There are numerous theories as to why Darwin “withheld” his theory for so long: that he was ashamed of its materialistic view of the world, that his wife, Emma Darwin, had religious views which he did not want to offend, that he wanted to continue to amass evidence so that there would be no question about the legitimacy of his proposal. All of these—and probably more—cushion to fill up a vacancy or hollow, which unless occupied, would leave the package loose and unsteady” (105). Paley assigns an aesthetic value to the useless organ—it acts as a supportive balance in the organism to keep it from toppling over or collapsing. As we’ll see, Darwin opposed such an argument vigorously, yet Paley does offer the possibility of a value-neutral explanation of useless parts.
reasons are likely all right in their way. It seems to me that one’s reasons for holding on to such work change from year to year and even day to day. However, by taking seriously his note-taking as a style of social inconsequence, it is plausible that he was never aiming at the production of a work that would circulate in public. The telos of his notations was not necessarily the production of a legible and shareable account of nature, but rather a way of managing his own existence. After the 1840s, he stopped using notebooks altogether.

1.5 What Survives

Of course, eventually Darwin did eventually open the chest where the notebooks lay fallow and unused, turning them into a quarry as he composed his works in the late 1850s. What had been a relatively asocial undertaking became a most significant monument of Victorian achievement; what had developed as a style of eschewing the life of a sovereign human subject became the best example of what rational scientific thinking could accomplish. The style of free play and vagrant writing cultivated in the notes, I argue, informs the heterodox values associated with useless organs in *The Origin*. Thus, I propose a different way of reading the connection between notes and a published work by revealing the way in which the formal qualities of the former inflect the content of the latter. We are accustomed to thinking that Darwin’s theory promotes a merciless, punishing ideology of nature as a system of laws that eliminate what serves no purpose while elevating the most successful, strong, and deft members of a body or a community. Such is the ideological interpretation of his theory which takes the form of Social Darwinism, which sees the agency of natural selection as a totalizing force bent on annihilating what is not robust enough to survive.

Such a view however, is only partially supported by Darwin’s writings, which direct a tolerance, even tenderness, toward those organic structures that have no use but that embody values of variability and fluctuation. The argument for natural selection in the first edition of *The
Origin makes this quite clear, and yet this has been consistently overlooked by many of those producing arguments about Darwin’s cultural and social influence. He builds a place for objects of neutral value into the very structure of his laws: “The preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection. Variations neither useful nor injurious would not be affected by natural selection, and would be left a fluctuating element” (81, italics added). The first sentence has become canonical; the second not at all. He narrates a world in which everything is not necessarily useful or harmful, in which a grey area of existence cannot be accounted for by our usual metrics of value, or indeed by the grand law he had discovered. A great deal of matter simply hangs around, proliferating variations that remain neutral in the struggle for survival. Uselessness is not evil; it is simply there, buoyed up by mysterious forces.¹⁵

Useless organs do not serve any functional purpose but they do “fluctuate.” Later in the text he expands on what this means: “Rudimentary parts are apt to be highly variable.” While every organ and individual, according to his theory, is subject to variation, rudiments or vestiges possess this quality in abundance. It is in a sense all that they do: “their variability seems to be owing to their uselessness, and therefore to natural selection having no power to check deviations in their structure. Thus rudimentary parts are left to the free play of the various laws of growth” (149-150). There are echoes here of the imaginative “free scope” which Darwin associated with the “sterile wastes” of the South American landscape. Natural selection chips away at the useful and expels the harmful, leaving untouched a mercurial collection of materials which hover beyond the reach of its power. Play and uselessness become inextricable in this formulation; playful uselessness is folded out from the interior of the human subject and materialized as an ontological property of the organic world.

¹⁵ Other critics have proposed ways of reading Darwin as a theorist of variable plenitude instead of ruthless competition. See Grosz, Deleuze, Bergson.
Most children with appendicitis receive the usual explanation for why such body parts remain with us. They are vestiges, leftover materials from bygone ancestors for whom they served some purpose, but that are now useless to us. Eventually, the conventional wisdom tells us, the appendix will shrink and eventually disappear as our bodies continue to “develop.” Yet Darwin suspected that this view was not entirely correct: “[W]hat tendency can there be,” he asks, “for abortive organ ever disappearing?” (373). There is not necessarily a causal relationship, in his view, between an organ being useless and its disappearing once and for all. Rather than merely vanishing, on the one hand, or assisting the organism in a direct and calculable way, on the other, useless parts continue change shape by means of forces other than utility.

Calling them “inert” would be imprecise. They fluctuate constantly according to a principle of high variability. Thus utility and variability operate in an inverse ratio: the closer an organ comes to evolving a useful function for its parent organism, the greater the tendency toward uniformity among different instantiations of that organ. The further an organ strays from the point of its usefulness (whether that moment be in the past or the future) the more various will its generations become. Notebook D shows that Darwin takes the principle of the inverse ratio of utility and variation from William Sharp MacLeay, who sketches the idea in his *Invertebratae* of 1838. “In the same way that a knife which has to cut all sorts of things may be of almost any shape; whilst a tool for some particular object had better be of some particular shape” (*Origin* 149). Uselessness emerges, therefore, as the other of natural selection, outside of the selecting process that amplifies the serviceable qualities generated by the species and diminishes the harmful ones. To be outside the rules of selection is to be “variable” with all the meanings that attend this word: mercurial, unstable, inconsistent, playful, changeable, *inconsequent*. What generates this changefulness, however, remained unknown to him.
Extrapolating ethical meanings from Darwin’s theory of natural selection was as difficult for his nineteenth-century readers as it is for us. But by reading his discussion of useless organs in the *Origin* alongside the “practice of the disparate” found in the notebooks, a different way of understanding the ethical meanings of his work comes to light which does not depend upon functional explanations. For many years after sketching the broad outlines of his theory in his notebooks, he let them sit without converting them into a publicly usable shape, into a “particular shape.” Using the metaphor he eventually employs, it is as though he was making a knife that, serving no definitive purpose, did not have to assume a single, final, recognizable outline. With no calculable payoff for the general public, at least as far as he could see, why stop the kaleidoscope from turning? Why not just leave it in its sprawling, errant fragments? His thoughts remained in pieces, resisting integration. I have already listed some of the motivations for his withholding the theory from publication, but perhaps it was not even a question of withholding. If he regarded his theory as having no particular function for other people, perhaps he wanted to keep it in a state of energetic variability rather than decisively landing on a meaning for it.

Even when Darwin stages his “long argument” in *The Origin*, he refuses to let natural selection have the final word on every aspect of the natural world. He effectively limits the sphere of its influence. It is as though he smuggles in the “fluctuating element” of the useless organs into the margins of a work primarily focused on defending his argument about natural selection. Not that many people interested in the possibility of a Darwinian ethics take much notice of this. Natural selection became the entire focus of those interested in the ethical consequences of what he was saying. Posterity has probably confirmed some of his fears about assuming a form that circulates publicly, that becomes socially instrumental. The processes of natural selection fell much too easily in line with the dictates of a ruthless, competitive picture of capitalism, underwriting an almost fundamentalist utilitarian viewpoint of how society should
operate. At the most extreme, the theory has been used as moral justification for horrifying eugenic policies—the knife sharpened.\(^{16}\)

Another Victorian master of inconsequence, Oscar Wilde, attempts to introduce this view of Darwin into the public sphere, in key passages of the dialogue “The Critic as Artist” and in the introduction of “The Soul of Man” essay. In each of these texts, Darwin serves Wilde as an example of an intelligence possessing “the free play of the mind” that successfully detached itself from social pressures in order to unfold a style of individualistic self-expression. “[A] great man of science, like Darwin,” Wilde writes, “has been able to isolate himself, to keep himself out of reach of the clamorous claims of others, to stand ‘under the shelter of the wall’, as Plato puts it” (19). Wilde’s anarcho-socialist vision of society centers on what we have already seen Foucault describe as an “art of existence.” They both picture a world in which the quest for knowledge is subordinated to the care of the self. Of course Wilde did not read Darwin’s notebooks, but they serve as the best emblem for the kind of thinking he wishes to praise. The notebook furnishes a way of circulating and transitioning through moments and ephemerides without settling, yet in such a way that affords the subject protocols and forms of containment for these experiences, and that allows us to form selves that do not coincide with settled social identities. The fluctuations of the notes illuminate Darwin’s significant contribution to the genre, and also give us a way to read against the grain of commonplace interpretations of his theory.

Useless organs are not merely vestigial remnants without a future: they do not necessarily disappear. They may not “progress” and “develop” in the manner of an organ sharpened to a particular purpose, but they are nevertheless carried forward in time in their state of rapid

\(^{16}\) Compare Leonardo’s fears about his own findings in the notebooks: “How by a certain machine many may stay some time under water. And how and wherefore I do not describe my method of remaining under water and how long I can remain without eating. And I do not publish nor divulge these, by reason of the evil nature of men, who would use them for assassinations at the bottom of the sea by destroying ships, and sinking them, together with the men in them” (Da Vinci 11).
transmutation. In the sixth edition of the *The Origin* (1871), Darwin devotes more attention than he had in the first edition to the problem of what future possibilities exist for presently useless organs. There may, the inference goes, be nascent potentials within the appendix or the spleen. New functions may supplant old or existing ones, either after a long period of the organ’s inaction or in a more sudden about-face: “an organ rendered, through changed habits of life, useless for one purpose, might be modified and used for another purpose” (607). Thus he introduces the germ of what Stephen Jay Gould would eventually codify as “exaptation,” the process by which organs that evolved to sustain one function may abandon it for a better one. The classic example is that of feathers, whose structure first evolved to regulate temperature only to become essential to flight later.

I have argued that Darwin kept the theory in a state of fragmentation because of his resistance to its being put to social purposes of the future, to having its meaning fixed and arrested. One of the features of Darwin’s published writings which has frustrated interpreters is precisely his resistance to spelling out the ethical consequences of his work, of intentionally evading the problem of what should be done with theory in the future, especially given the fact that the theory curtails the visions of the future afforded by religion or even by a progressivist notion of society. We are left with the same problem of deciphering ethical meanings from what seems to be an innately amoral system. Many would say this is the wrong approach: that human ethics should not be considered in relation to evolutionary processes, that our goal should be, in effect, to resist the urge to graft the intentionality of natural selection onto our own ethical choices (Dawkins *Selfish*).

His note-taking, however, allows for the extrapolation of a Darwinian ethics that has little to do with a nature “red in tooth and claw,” reflecting instead a mode of documentation and containment that resists the urge to make everything “useful.” By turning to those sidelined
elements of Darwin’s works that remain obscure to popular as well as learned interpretations of
his works, we may “exapt,” to borrow Gould’s word, new futures for those works. As Walter
Benjamin puts the matter in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “the attempt must be
made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.” What I
have been offering here is an “exaptation” of Darwin’s notebooks—reading them as a trace of
Darwin’s own self-care in the face of a culture that branded his own activity “useless.” While
many of them may have been put to the service of his one long argument, others index a very
different attitude toward the natural world and toward his own acts of contemplation. He makes,
in the final count, uncanny provisions for treating his notes as something more than the footprints
leading up to the theory of evolution by natural selection to the exclusion of other meanings and
possibilities.

1.6 The “Old and Useless Notes”

While the notebooks remained sealed up for many years, Darwin eventually turned to
them in order to extract those portions which he found serviceable for making his argument,
leaving the rest behind. He embodies the process of selection vis-à-vis his own documents,
slicing into his collection of myriad bits and pieces of information in order to carve out the most
pertinent, “useful” elements. Notebooks B, C, D, E, M, and N bear the traces of these selections.
He made notes in the first pages of some of the books indicating which pages he removed. The
first note on the inside front cover of B, for instance, is “all useful pages cut out Dec 7 1856 (&
again looked through April 21 1873)” (170). At the back of the Red Notebook he writes
“Nothing For any Purpose” (81). On the front cover of A he writes “Nothing on any Subject”
(85). In the early 1870s, after rendering his arguments in The Origin, the Descent, and the
Expression, he gathers up forty-two pieces of miscellaneous bits of paper of different sizes,
either pieces of loose-leaf, or cut-outs torn out of other notebooks, and bundled them together
with the label “Old and USELESS notes about the moral sense & some metaphysical points
written about the year 1837 & Earlier.”

The notebooks held, as I have argued, a particular value for him as he kept them in the
1830s and early 1840s. But now that ship had sailed, as it were, and now their value was
principally measured by their serviceability for assisting him in making his argument. When
Gavin de Beer published the first of these notebooks in 1959, they appeared in the Bulletin of the
British Museum without the excerpts that Darwin had cut out for use in his publications. Soon
afterward, others published these missing pieces, but it was not until 1987 and the publication of
these notes in book form that the notebooks were entirely reassembled as they had been before
Darwin cut them up. In keeping with his ethics of treating “useless organs” as neutral rather than
injurious, he did not destroy any of his notebooks once they were ransacked. His labeling them
“Old and USELESS notes” indicates something beyond neutral tolerance, suggesting that he
took care to preserve those documents which served no purpose in the construction of his
argument, pushing them forward into unfinished time.

The “Old and Useless Notes” are a set of energetic and thrilling fragments on an eclectic
range of topics: moral sensibility, ethics, aesthetics, as well as tragic acting, the role of the will in
guiding human action, and speculations about the dreams of dogs. Consider the following note,
taken down in a furious, barely legible hand, then consigned years later to the bundle of
preserved “waste”: “I grant that the thrill, which runs through every fibre, when one behold the
last rays of & or grand chorus are utterly inexplicable—I cannot admit think reason sufficient
to give up my theory—(599).” In this passage Darwin takes note of the emotions stirred by
beautiful sensory experiences: the sunset, or musical chorus. Such things have no explanation, he
says, and although he doesn’t mention God outright that would seem to be the explanation he is
trying to avoid. Instead he notes the shivers such experiences produce in his body, and leaves the
matter there. Taken in 1837, this note already hints at his having a “theory” that he saw as being at odds with the “thrills” he experienced in response to nature or art. While beauty would seem to be the prevalent feeling in this passage, I take the references to bodily thrills as the reason for their inclusion among the “useless.” One can see his thinking slipping away from his body like a garment as it becomes public knowledge.

In the analysis of the Beagle Notebooks and the Transmutation Notebooks above, I showed how Darwin uses his notebooks as an instrument for collecting socially inconsequential experiences of wonder and sublimity. In the “Old and Useless Notes” there are several instances in which he meditates on the same issues: “Infinity eternity. darkness, power. being associated with God. these phenomena we (feel & ?) call sublime—” (604). Among the useless notes we find the same kind of play and wanderlust of the other notebooks. In the “Old and Useless Notes” the sublime returns as an emotional category that we wrongly direct toward a divine entity: “It appears to me, that we may often trace the source of this ‘inward glorying’ to the greatness of an object itself or to the ideas excited & associated with it. as the idea of Deity” (604-5). These thoughts are in accord with the materialist account of habit and emotion that he gives elsewhere, and they may not contribute anything new or vital to his theory, and yet this is no reason for not keeping the documents he makes on these subjects. “What is matter? the whole a mystery!” he writes (617).

As a literary and cultural critic, it is difficult not to notice the surplus of humanistic writers included in the “Old and Useless Notes.” Gotthold Lessing, Joshua Reynolds, lesser-known writers on our aesthetic and moral capacities—he gathers these writers under the same label he serves for describing male nipples or the abortive genitals of mules. These scraps of humanist endeavor simply hover in the margins of his thought, certainly not harmful to the theory, but not really of much use to it either. “How strange it, that Nature should have so little to
do with art [sic]” (602). Fluctuating at a remove from the mainstreams of evolutionary theory, certain pieces of information nevertheless remain, unabsorbed but unvanquished.

Darwin has many “old and useless” questions about art and aesthetics: “What is beauty?—it is an ideal standard, by which real objects are judged; & how obtained.—implanted in our bosoms—how comes it there” (606). You can almost hear his excited frenzy when he considers his own responses to beautiful things in the world: “Why flower beautiful? even to children” (603). Theoretical transitions between facts are even more paratactic than they are in the other notebooks: “I suspect conscience, an hereditary compound passion, like avarice” (600). Indeed, his topics of interest run right off the rails: “How are my ideas of a general notion of everything applicable to the high idea in Tragic Acting” (602)? Tragic acting, beauty, choral singing: the Old and Useless Notes present some of the most affectively charged passages in the entire archive of Darwin’s papers.

Consider the question of how his “general notion of everything” might apply to tragic acting. It is a funny question, and you can see why Darwin thought it a useless one to pose and so left it to the side of his main argument. Why, after all, should evolutionary theory have anything to tell us about Tragic Acting, or, by extension, anything about the humanities? The answer to the question is probably “it shouldn’t,” even though there are many philosophers, biologists, and even literary critics of a certain inclination who are not satisfied with this answer, who insist on accounting for certain aesthetic and ethical practices by means of a functionalist account of evolution, even when such experiments seem dubious at best.17 Seeking evolutionary-psychological explanations for things like tragic acting seems to rely too easily on the idea that Darwinian explanation can be turned to any subject whatsoever, when these notes suggest that even Darwin did not believe that it could. Like the reconstructed “Transmutation Notebooks”

17 See in particular Dennis Dutton, *The Art Instinct.*
and the Beagle Notebooks, the “Old and Useless Notes” reveal that Darwin enjoyed the ludic exercise of pairing different phenomena with his theory to see what would result, but without necessarily assuming that such accounting would yield instrumental results. Surprisingly, this reading of “Old and Useless Notes” suggests that Darwin himself seems to criticize the notion that his theory would be useful in accounting for questions that face philosophers, literary critics, or art historians. It seems he did not believe that we could adequately explain humanistic questions by means of his theory of natural selection.

It is perhaps most telling that Darwin chooses not to burn or otherwise destroy his notes after he uses them, as so many writers have done. Indeed, I can find no evidence of Darwin ever destroying his papers. He simply labels them “Old and Useless,” a charming phrase coming from a man who, as I have shown, took a great deal of interest in supposedly useless phenomena, whether the fleeting experience of beauty in nature or the excessive physical gestures that accompany displays of joy (Expression 196).

In his discussion of useless organs of the body, Darwin argues that such things are not merely the leftovers of bygone eras, the mere trace of a lapsed usefulness, but that such things are carried forward into the future. Natural selection does not tailor them to more and more refined uses—rather they just float along in a state of fluctuation and variation without settling down into a particular shape. One day in the future, however, through some unforeseen coordination of environment and organism, these parts might find some new use for themselves. The case is similar with the notes, which bob alongside Darwin’s essential arguments and have been primarily valued only as the traces of the development of that argument. In this chapter, I have argued that Darwin’s unpublished writings may be the best place to go if we wish to generate ethical consequences for his works that do not underwrite combative human activities and a spirit of cutthroat competition.
“A Computer Program Called ‘Wilde’”: Aphorism as Social Notation

Does Oscar Wilde write aphorisms, epigrams, witticisms, phrases, adages, philosophies, or maxims? Critics and anthologists disagree, depending on their definition of these terms and how they value Wilde’s writings. W.H. Auden and Louis Kronenberger introduce their collection by drawing a strict line between aphorism and epigram:

This anthology is devoted to aphoristic writing, not to epigram. An epigram need only be true of a single case…for example, *Foxhunting is the pursuit of the uneatable by the unspeakable*, which is an admirable remark when made in a country house in the Shires, but a cheap one if addressed to a society of intellectuals who have never known the pleasures of hunting. An aphorism, on the other hand, must convince every reader that it is either universally true or true of every member of the class to which it refers, irrespective of the reader’s convictions…Aphorisms are essentially an aristocratic genre of writing. (1)

Supposedly distinguishing particularity from generality, these anthologists also uphold an ostensible class system of short phrases. Different social spheres (the “country house,” “a society of intellectuals,” the aristocracy) are more or less suitable for different witty phrases. Watch out for aspirant epigrams, they seem to warn. They include twenty-five by Wilde. M.J. Cohen, by contrast, introducing *The Penguin Dictionary of Epigrams*, claims Wilde as “the emperor of the epigram” and essentially divides the history of its practitioners into those who come before and after him. (4)

Not everyone is charmed. Gary Saul Morson tries to sort out the matter of definition for us: “Vagueness serves the anthologizer,” (“Aphorism” 409) he writes, but proceeds to argue that distinguishing between different kinds of short expressions remains an important project since
“genres are carriers of worldviews” (Long 429). He excludes Wilde’s worldview from his collection, however, for it is essentially “witticism” and not aphorism: “it appears as if there were a computer program called ‘Wilde’” which produces “useless twits who have nothing better to do than sound like Wilde” (85-97). Morson’s opprobrium echoes an 1891 unsigned review of Intentions appearing in the Pall Mall Gazette. Calling the book a “Paradise of Dainty Paradoxes,” the reviewer describes them as

    turned out by machinery…the result of a facile formula, a process of word-shuffling, rather than genuine insight into the facts of art and life…M. Jules Lemaire has given an ingenious recipe—‘Every Man his own Larochefoucauld’ he might have called it—by which the veriest dullard can concoct epigrammatic maxims in any quantity. (qtd. in Beckson 90)

Wilde becomes a dangerous machine, offering a system for proliferating identities in a network of formulaic short phrases (“Every Man his own Larochefoucauld”), producing a hodgepodge of evanescent “flowers” that amount to nothing. I have drawn attention to these negative appraisals to reveal the hierarchies that seem to be at stake when distinguishing aphorism from its less vaunted cousins. Part of the threat, as Eco suggests, is Wilde’s refusal to clearly mark the differences between his short sayings: he gives “phrases” and “philosophies” the same status. Critics and anthologists uphold a figurative class structure of different terse statements. Indeed, Wilde seems quite happy to use the different terms interchangeably, titling one publication “Phrases and Philosophers for the Use of the Young,” and another, in the same year, “Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated.” His other works self-reflexively refer to aphorism, epigram, or paradox. In Intentions, which includes the dialogues “The Decay of Lying” and “The Critic as Artist,” Wilde uses “aphorism” twice, “epigram” not at all, and “phrase” ten times. This
suggests that he was less interested in demarcating the difference between these terms than he was in experimenting with the effects of brief, ephemeral language.

In what follows I take Wilde’s suggestion and use these short phrases interchangeably. Since our culture has become saturated with tweets, blog-posts, ‘status updates,’ and texts, we need more ways of speaking about how these forms organize—and disorganize—our attention. It has become something of a cliché to associate Wilde’s style with new media and to view him as a kind of ancestral Tweeter.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, Twitter is filled with various ‘Oscar Wildes’ rehashing and remixing his aphorisms.\textsuperscript{19} The association, however, is more than superficial. In \textit{Dorian Gray} (1890), as I will show, we can already see the beginnings of a reaction against epigrammatic media, casting them in fundamentally negative and solipsistic terms. Rather than turning to the ‘The Decay of Lying’ or ‘The Critic as Artist’ to recover a more positive account of aphorism, however, I turn to the notebooks Wilde kept at Oxford, in which he develops a style that I am calling ‘social notation’, a form of writing that treats pieces of information as actors rather than functional facts in methodological arguments.

I argue that Wilde’s small pieces of language are best read as notes, analogous to the pieces of information gathered in a notebook. Through his writings, public lectures, and conversations, Wilde communicated with the expectation that his words would be recorded, circulated, written down, memorized, liked, loved, and hated in numerous different contexts. He writes in order to be collected and preserved by others, suggesting that the notebook is an ideal figure for capturing Wilde’s unique sociality. The actual notebooks he kept at Magdalen College, Oxford, help us to see how this disposition emerges within the context of a classical Victorian...

\textsuperscript{18} See “Please RT,” and Hasan.

\textsuperscript{19} @Wit_of_Wilde, for instance, currently has 950 tweets and 57,913 followers. Stephen Fry, who explicitly assumes Wildean attitudes in his public persona, is an avid and popular tweeter. He currently has approximately 6,200,000 followers.
curriculum recently renovated and expanded to include new materials from diverse disciplines. His notebooks read like a methodological gala, in which data particular to various disciplines commingle on the same page. Wilde’s ultimate success in his *Literae Humaniores* program (he took a rare “double first” in 1878) indicates that his aphoristic notations were actually a suitable and even exemplary outcome of a liberal education, rather than a subversion of it, as one might expect. The notebooks also reveal an unexpected “friend” for Wilde—Francis Bacon—whose works were among those recent additions to the Greats curriculum and whose own theory and use of aphorism as a social technology holds out democratic possibilities for his reader. While critics have attended assiduously to the presence of Greek thought and Victorian science in Wilde’s notebooks, this chapter is to my knowledge the first attempt to account for Bacon’s substantial presence therein, and the first sustained engagement with the 300-page “Notebook on Philosophy.”

2.2 ‘A Novel without a Plot’

What are the social effects of aphoristic speech? Whether traduced by homophobic Victorian periodicals or celebrated by queer theorists in recent years, the aphoristic wit of *Dorian Gray* has long been seen as negative, a refusal of decency (for the early reviewers) or of identity-based politics (for theorists). Ignoring the moral outcomes of the novel, the Victorian press took Lord Henry’s perspective as dominant, criticizing the novel for harboring “a mob of courtier epigrams…all forced to premature growth in the hothouse of a somewhat sickly fancy” (Beckson 81). It spills over with “effeminate frivolity” and “flippant philosophisings” (71). *Punch* magazine, responding to the independently published “Preface” to *Dorian Gray*, calls it a “literary flower-bed” and “a little flower show” (37). Wilde’s style is not only mechanical, as the *Pall Mall* review suggested, it is too feminine, too perverted. The message is that such writing is sterile and dangerous.
Nearly a century later, criticism from gay and lesbian studies, on the one hand, and queer theorists, on the other, leverage this “uselessness” for the tactical advantages it affords those seeking a form of social life that circumvents heterosexual teloi. A paradigmatic point of divergence for gay studies and queer theory, Wilde’s style—especially as it came forward at the trials—is respectively associated with the advent of a public homosexual identity or, conversely, with a refusal to consent to identity at all (Cohen; Sinfield). While Jonathan Dollimore, for instance, links the rhetorical dissidence of the epigram to Wilde’s biographical “sexual dissidence,” Christopher Craft sees him as “writing against all essentialist notions of being, inverted or otherwise,” and refusing “to identify subjectivity and sexuality, insisting on the irreducible difference between” (110). Certainly many critics have expressed dissatisfaction with reading twentieth-century gay narratives back into Wilde’s writings and biography, 20 but the queer readings form a part of a larger theoretical preoccupation with negativity and a general condition of refusal that has generated substantial debate, and is not so easily dismissed. 21

Refusals, however, can be generative, and style itself may be an outcome of social withdrawal. D.A. Miller, writing on Jane Austen, argues that style is in fact “the production of insignificance” (37). Austen (rather like Wilde) sets off flares of wit and escapes through the stage door. No “personal content” suggesting a “real” author remains in her novels. Instead what we acquire is a way of being, a manner of describing action without a specifiable content of its own. Wilde’s aphorisms—often impersonal but highly stylized—bear out Miller’s definition. They would also seem at first to function as emblems for the kind of death-driven jouissance associated with queerness by Lee Edelman, who argues in No Future that queers should embrace

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20 For an overview of such how such dissatisfactions play out in the critical literature, see Bristow (1997).
21 For the most infamous articulations of “negative thesis,” see Edelman, Bersani, and Dean. For a clear statement of the debates surrounding the “antisocial” thesis, see Caserio. Responses to these authors, particularly Edelman, are at this point quite extensive. See especially Halberstam, Stockton, Snediker, Munoz, and Freeman.
the negative position society has imposed on them, yielding to the present so as to neutralize heterosexual claims on the future and binding the influence of “straight” timelines. The fact remains, however, that *Dorian Gray* has a plot, one that seems incapable of generating a supportive venue for epigram. This fact might explain why, between the 1890 and 1891 editions of the novel, Wilde composed a separate preface comprising amoral aphorisms on art, withdrawing his stylistic powers from the purely negative logic of his own story.

The relationship between Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray allegorizes the threat posed to society by aphoristic style. “You cut life to pieces with your epigrams,” says Dorian to Henry Wotton after the former’s marriage to Sybil Vane (251). And again, later: “you would sacrifice anybody, Harry, for the sake of an epigram” (342). The accusations link the short phrase with death. Henry’s gem-like words had once enchanted and entranced him, but after a good deal of momentary bliss Dorian condemns the frothy epigrammatic rhythms of the novel as harshly as its reviewers did. The threat diagnosed by Dorian and the reviewers alike is that people will live recklessly in fleeting moments of narcissistic experience and consumption that come to nothing but “a novel without a plot” (274): every person suspended in his or her own yellow book, withdrawing from a framework that extends human lives forward in a progressive narrative. In contemporary queer-theoretical terms, Lord Henry’s style would seem to represent an anti-social form that refuses futurity in favor of explosive, ephemeral *jouissance*.

While the question of art’s influence upon action remains, throughout the novel, a matter open to interpretation, there can be little doubt of the pernicious effect of Henry’s speech upon Dorian. It is Henry’s words, as much as the portrait, that throw Dorian into a vortex of self-obsession, narcissism, over-consumption to the point of absurdity, and ultimately his own death. Ensnared by Lord Henry’s public performance, he in turn becomes a consumer of momentary
pleasures, holding no opinions or theories but merely using himself as a vehicle for sensation without analysis.

The critical tendency is to see Basil’s painting of Dorian as the catalyst for the latter’s fatal wish, but Henry is a crucial part of the mechanism. Through epigrammatic enchantment he fixes Dorian as an object among objects, a product among products who does not exercise reflective or critical powers but who simply consumes. Presented with Basil Hayward’s unfinished painting of Dorian, Lord Henry calls him “a Narcissus […] a brainless, beautiful creature, who should be always here in winter when we have no flowers to look at” (170). While Dorian sits for the picture, suspended in the moment of his own representation, a feed of epigrammatic commentary flows from Lord Henry’s mouth into his ears. The following infamous passage emphasizes individual feeling as a force to compete with the systems and laws that supposedly deaden the mind:

The only way to get rid of temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful. It has been said that the great events of the world take place in the brain. It is in the brain, and the brain only, that the great sins of the world take place also. You, Mr Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, day-dreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame—

‘Stop!’ (183-4)

Dorian cuts him off. Words pile up after the famous ‘temptation’ epigram, twisting commonplace logic, overwhelming Dorian’s psyche. He is left bewildered.

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22 On Dorian’s wish as an ‘inculcation of desire’ for ‘a beautiful social identity’ enabled by visualization and spectatorship, see Jaffe.
The “few words” Lord Henry has spoken “with willful paradox in them” strike “some secret chord” in Dorian “that had never been touched before, but that he felt was now vibrating and throbbing to curious pulses.” He compares Henry’s language to music:

Music had stirred him like that. Music had troubled him many times. But music was not articulate. It was not a new world, but rather another chaos, that it created in us. Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give a plastic form to formless things, and to have a music of their own as sweet as that of viol or of lute” (184).

This scene is, of course, an echo chamber for many of Walter Pater’s writings, and particularly audible here is Pater’s elevation of music as the paradigmatic art form in his essay “The School of Giorgione.” This essay culminates in an uncharacteristically aphoristic statement, perhaps Pater’s most famous thesis: “All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music” (106). Music is paradigmatic because it “obliterates” the difference between subject matter and form, fusing content and medium. Pater’s aphorism might thus be read as anticipating Marshall McLuhan’s: “the medium is the message” (7).

The allusion to Pater suggests that Lord Henry’s epigrammatic interference poses a problem of mediation. Certainly the content of Lord Henry’s language awakens Dorian’s latent homosexual desires. The “secret chord” he touches corresponds to sexual urges that have as yet gone unfulfilled, as many have pointed out. Yet the real trouble lies in the form through which these ideas are transmitted. We cannot ignore the explicit content (hedonism and abandonment to pleasure) or the possibility of encrypted queer content, but the fact that he uses the aphorism to convey this message is just as important as the message itself. Lord Henry’s style is the medium
that pushes Dorian toward his strange wish: “If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old” (189)!

The insidious aphoristic performance recurs at Aunt Agatha’s luncheon. After light repartee, the group turns to the subject of paradox, the standard form of the Wildean epigram. A Mr Erskine says “the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them” (202). Lord Henry loves such acrobatics, and Wilde suspends the dialogue in order to describe Lord Henry’s verbal action as though it were a physical one. His ideas take on their power by a process of ornamentation and aesthetic manipulation:

He played with the idea, and grew willful; tossed it into the air and transformed it; let it escape and recaptured it; made it iridescent with fancy, and winged it with paradox. The praise of folly, as he went on, soared into a philosophy, and Philosophy herself became young (204-5)

Wearing wings and covered in glitter, language becomes a circus performer. Philosophy, once an old woman, turns young. “Facts fled before her like frightened forest things” (205). Aphorism keeps knowledge youthful, swinging on the trapeze and poised on the tightrope. Meanwhile, “Dorian Gray never took his gaze off him, but sat like one under a spell” (205). Once again the hypnotic effect of Lord Henry’s “few words” lulls Dorian into a dangerous stupor. His wish to trade places with the art object is mediated by these “few words,” by the aphoristic commentary through which Henry relays the work to him. He forces the painting to be subject to ‘monstrous laws’ like a ‘puppet’ while he flickers fitfully outside these processes. Dorian does not only want to be art, he wants to live aphoristically, forever in boyhood, unfinished, and in play.

Dorian Gray suggests that such wordplay can only result in death. The “poisonous book” Lord Henry gives to Dorian bodies forth the social anxieties stemming from the prospect of
treating information as an aesthetic collectible rather than something to be used in the formation of a plot or theory. The book turns Dorian into a sequence of momentary phenomena: “it was to teach man to concentrate himself upon the moments of a life that is itself but a moment” (279). It is “a novel without a plot,” and it “fascinates” Dorian, goading him to indulge every passing whim. Indeed, it is unclear whether the novel lacks a plot or whether Dorian simply refuses to read for one, having been trained by Henry to extract only the most explosive fragments and to carry them out of their context in his “search for sensations that would be at once new and delightful” (280). Unable to sympathize with the parts of the book that relate to the hero’s downfall (he reads these parts “with an almost cruel joy”), Dorian brackets off other sections (such as Chapter Seven, bearing on the decadent Roman emperors) to reread them again and again in a fragmented way.

The book propels Dorian to collect innumerable luxuries, not the least of which is information itself: just as “he collected together from all parts of the world the strangest instruments that could be found,” he also inhabits intellectual theories temporarily and provisionally: “he never fell into the error of arresting his intellectual development by any formal acceptance of creed or system, or of mistaking, for a house in which to live, an inn that is but suitable for the sojourn of a night” (280). Thus he studies Darwinism ‘for a season’ for the “curious pleasure” it gives him, before moving on to the next thought. The prose of the volume (which we do not actually get to read) produces musical effects in line with Henry’s own style: “The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it was of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced in the mind of the lad, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie” (274-5). An individual—Dorian—has been

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23 Wilde is inconsistent in his responses to queries about the identity of the book that Henry gives to Dorian. Sometimes (most famously in his trial) he states that it is meant to reference Joris-Karl Huysmans’s *A Rebours*, while at other moments he claims that the book is a complete fabrication. For a full account of the relationship between *A Rebours* and *Dorian Gray*, see Wilde, *Picture*, pages 362-364 and 394.
successfully transformed into a dream of hypnotizing, repetitive moments, a transformation which leads directly to his confrontation with Henry about the threat posed by his epigrammatic style and to the strange act of self-destruction that concludes the story.

With its moral conclusiveness and narrative closure, *Dorian Gray* is among Wilde’s most conservative productions, and it is curious that his longest prose narrative condemns epigrammatic play as if the former mode were essentially opposed to the latter. However, when critics attacked the shorter, 1890 edition of the novel for its perversity and indecency, Wilde rebuffed them by taking the side of aphorism, as it were, publishing an impersonal sequence of sentences on art and morality that went on to become the preface to the expanded 1891 edition. This gesture points to his frustration with the moral structure of narrative itself, and his refusal to identify straightforwardly with an authorial persona. Josephine Guy and Ian Small take the view that Wilde struggled to produce longer prose narratives, that his predilection for small texts represents a shortcoming, so to speak (Guy and Small). Yet it might be more fruitful to see his preference for aphorism and other brief products as a desire for a new relationship between language and the public sphere, for a kind of writing that remains social even as it eludes existing formats for the circulation of personae and declines the narrative sequences that bind them. What is Wilde trying to call into being that his own novel cannot abide?

2.3 The Oxford Notebooks

One way to answer this question would be to consider the conditions under which he learned to value aphorism. The notebooks he kept at Oxford between 1874 and 1878 have long been acknowledged as important matrices of his style.24 We have three major manuscripts from this period: the “Commonplace Book,” the “Notebook Kept at Oxford,” and the “Notebook on

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24 While it is clear that Wilde opened these notebooks at Oxford, it is possible he made entries into the 1880s. For other critical accounts of the notebooks, see Smith and Helfand, *Oscar Wilde’s Oxford Notebooks*; Smith, “Wilde”; Dowling; Gagnier, “Wilde”; Brown; Ross.
Philosophy.” These documents all reflect Wilde’s studies with the Literae Humaniores (Greats) curriculum, which one commentator calls “one of the noblest monuments of Victorian education,” a paradigmatic classical program (Jenkyns 513). Wilde entered Oxford at a moment of curricular change and institutional uncertainty; F.T. Palgrave referred to the years around 1870 as a “plastic period” when “radical changes are possible” (qtd in Brock 3). Greats, which began in 1800 with a strictly philological, classical focus, “was increasingly supplemented by the reading of modern books” (Walsh 317). Another significant trend (with important internal resistances) was the turn away from religious education and toward a secularized curriculum (Brock 18-19). While Linda Dowling argues that Wilde’s notebooks anticipate the “personae and that movement of free play which was so brilliantly to characterize the movement of his critical dialogues,” (119) I would suggest that their “free play” also reflects the state of Greats at this moment, with its fluctuating content, porous boundaries and uncertain purposes.

The recent surge of scholarly interest in historical commonplace books has yet to extend to the notational practices of Victorian Oxford directly, yet it is clear that such information structures were still pertinent in the latter nineteenth century. An 1860 guide-book for students of Greats (authored by one Montagu Burrows) gives some clues as to the value that was placed on notation. Burrows explains the need for good notes: “We want something which we can grasp at once, yet something that will give us all we care to reproduce” (43). Using the tools of “abstract,” “summary,” and “epitomizing,” the good note taker will produce cogent encapsulations of texts and arguments and create opportunities for connection and association. The “management of the space left for remarks” on this or that text is equally crucial, and Burrows calls for a lot of empty space to be left on facing pages and around the quotations in order to include “in the briefest form everything bearing on the abstract which we have been able

25 My references to the Commonplace Book and the Notebook Kept at Oxford refer to the page numbers in Smith and Helfand’s edition. The references to the “Notebook on Philosophy” refer to my own transcription.
to extract from our other sources of information” (46). In this way an “atmosphere of light” will surround the different epitomes (46). While these notebooks are supposedly directed toward the end of the examinations, Burrows emphasizes that they may in fact be the true product of one’s education: “the note-book remains when the examination is over” as a “true friend” and “a library in itself” (48).

How, then, might our reading of Wilde’s aphoristic style change if we took seriously the possibility that it emerged as a kind of notation with its own institutional history? To read the notebooks in this light suggests that Wilde employed notation as a medium for processing information in a state of methodological uncertainty—Literae Humaniiores in the 1870s—and that Wilde’s aphoristic talents were actually a suitable and even an exemplary reflection of his educational situation, rather than a quixotic subversion of conventions. The notebook, with its aphoristic fragments, becomes a medium for responding to an overload of methodological information and an uncertain future for liberal education. Wilde maintains a skeptical distance from his materials while enabling information from vastly different sources to assemble. Aphorisms, as polished notes, do not reflect an anti-social, “inverted” attitude to the world, as the plot of Dorian Gray would have us believe, but rather a way of imagining sociality as an informational event.26

My suggestion is that we view Wilde’s aphorisms as forms of social notes tending toward circulation and recombination, and that they are best understood as part of a notational style. They are therefore less like advertising slogans or deconstructive paradoxes, but rather behave like individuals, actors, appearing in different works and voiced by different characters.27 We

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26 For a different take on how to ‘re-ethicize’ aphoristic speech through readings of the social comedies, see Anderson.

27 On Wilde, the history of advertising, and consumption, see Bowlby. On paradox as an anticipation of deconstruction, see Dollimore.
know that Wilde composed many of his aphorisms apart from any particular context and then plugged them into various works, assigning the same lines to different characters. They are also actors in any given scene or text, gathering together differing constellations of people, professions, and frames of reference around them. The human actor, the audience, the other lines in the script, Wilde’s persona and brand, his class position (which seems as once aspirant and slummy), the content of classical education all reach out to one another from changing angles. While there is little doubt that Wilde enjoyed parrying the values of middle-class Victorians, his witty phrases are compelling for the way in which they skip between different verbal registers. They are exemplary cases of his ability, described by Regenia Gagnier, to hail heterogeneous publics and reveal their imbrication. Reassembly and re-association happen around his words.

In arguing that we rethink Wilde’s writings as assemblages of “social” notes, I am veering away from explanations based on “social context” and “social factors” and toward Bruno Latour’s redefinition of the social as “a trail of associations between heterogeneous elements” (Reassembling 5). Over the past decade, Latour has challenged uses of the word “social” that designate a specific domain within which human actions proceed and by appeal to which those actions can be exhaustively explained. This has been the dominant strategy of critique in the social sciences and humanities for decades, he argues, and it has become “useless,” because of changes in strategy on the side of the right and smug stagnation on the left. The target of critique has moved, or at least Latour thinks it should move. Critics arrogate to themselves exclusive powers of demystification and explanation, guaranteeing their own knowingness while projecting a plenum of “normal” people “out there” who toil away in ignorance of the true social forces that determine every aspect of their life and being, forces that only we can see.

Critics should, Latour argues, avoid reproducing robotic gestures (“Look! It’s ideology! Look! It’s fetishism!”) ad infinitum. In language that could have been drawn from “The Critic as
Artist,” he suggests instead that “[t]he critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of the naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (“Why” 246). Here, criticism sounds like keeping a notebook or a scrapbook, and Latour invokes the notebook as a trope for the kinds of “risky” scholarship he values (Reassembling 134-5). Wilde’s writings have long been associated with the gesture of “debunking,” with satire, spotlighting hypocrisy, contradiction, and paradox. I would argue that these effects are actually the result of a more primary action of drawing together distinct kinds of information in a space of socialization.28

Certainly Wilde toys with lines of propriety. Boundaries have been crossed or toyed with. Members of the audience are clutching their pearls or rolling their eyes. And yet a feature of his work worth attending to—evident in the handwritten apparatus of the notebook—is that numerous actors are welcome in the game.

In a 2011 issue of New Literary History devoted to “Context,” Rita Felski asks—in terms relevant to the reading of Dorian Gray just rehearsed—how we can rethink the relationship between historical context and form in our discussions of aesthetic objects without devolving into “die-hard aesthetes mumbling into their sherry glasses” (573). Taking her cue from Bruno Latour, Felski describes a way of approaching “artworks as non-human actors” (581) whose capacities for producing consequences cannot always be reduced to an “already established scheme” or existing conceptual apparatus, namely the literary-historical period. “Everything conspires,” Felski writes, “to reinforce the idea that the original historical meaning of a text is its salient meaning and to devalue the credentials of scholars who wander across several periods rather than settling down in one” (581). The call is not for some ahistorical utopia, but in fact a

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28 On the turn to relationality as a response to the constriction of critique, see Felski. The link Felski draws between the refusal of periodization and sociality places her in league with many other critics trying to generate sociality out of broken methodologies. Compare Sedgwick’s notion of “reparative reading” and A. Miller’s call for “implicative criticism” and a “critical free indirect discourse” (84-91).
more critical assessment of how aesthetic interest in literary objects reconfigures what we mean by context. It becomes a category that can float a bit, and refers to “a text’s capacity to signify across time, to trigger unexpected echoes in new places” (580).

Rather than putting aesthetic judgments in one corner and social connections in the other, Felski wants us to consider how aesthetic autonomy actually *generates* forms of sociality: “Artworks can only survive and thrive by making friends, creating allies, attracting disciples, inciting attachments, latching on to receptive hosts” (583). Thus, while artworks may be said to refute or seek to escape historical imprisonment, vanishing into their own presence like so many little Dorian Grays, Felski’s and Latour’s accounts help to describe that withdrawal as a potentially generative event.29 Wilde understood such matters, and in the “Commonplace Book” offers his sense of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and friendship: “ερος [eros] the impassioned search after truth, as well the romantic side of that friendship so necessary for philosophy. because *discussion* was the primitive method. From the love of the beautiful object we rise to the ideal ερος” (147). Thus for Wilde, the experience of aesthetic forms illuminates new pathways for social connectivity.30

The notebooks socialize information by encapsulating scholarly information in axioms, commonplaces, and summaries and allowing these notes to inflect one another. Facts and quotations keep their distinctiveness while conversing, alongside many small drawings of actual faces, which are rampant in the Trinity College Notebook (from Wilde’s Dublin adolescence) but

29 Felski’s argument, while attempting to avoid “aesthetic idealism,” actually returns us to a crucial moment of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, in which he describes the subjective withdrawal of aesthetic judgment as, paradoxically, a demand for universal assent. Social connectivity—even consensus—can arise by means of something other than evidence, other than facts judged in relation to concepts. See §6, §20, §22 in *Critique of Judgment*.

30 cf. “The Portrait of Mr. W.H.” in which literary theory and emotional attachments overlap. On how this story casts love as an emotion capable of binding us to theoretical investments regardless of their truth, see Ablow. On eros and education, see Dowling.
attenuate as verbal information takes over at Oxford (“Trinity”). The “Notebook on Philosophy” comments on its own form: “We can extricate ourselves from details: summarize our knowledge. We can abbreviate our thinking: we think in shorthand and can transmit our knowledge in a portable sense” (14). The “Commonplace Book,” with its myriad headings, casts a wide net over different subjects: Metre; Thought; Nonconformists; Metaphysics; Whistler; Future of Science; Sociology; Method; The Protoplasmic Hierarchy; Law; English Thought from Bacon; Slavery; Agriculture; Thought: like Digestion. Most commonplace books exhibit eclecticism, but noteworthy here is the way in which entire methods or disciplines (metaphysics, law, agriculture, science) are themselves epitomized, vying for space with Whistler or other categories. Method itself comes under scrutiny, and the topic recurs throughout in the “Notebook on Philosophy.” Wilde values the inclusion of so much disparate information in one space over the exhaustion of one subject.31 Dowling describes Wilde’s talent for translating “the conceptual language of one author or thinker into the intellectual system of another—so Darwin is brought to bear on Hegel, and Plato is made to confront Herbert Spencer” (119). Yet the singularity of Wilde’s notational ability has less to do with the eclecticism of the subject matter (which was a feature of the curriculum at this time) and more to do with his mode of tracing relations between these materials.

Bits of language reach out from their original context to confer with others across vast stretches of time, or across disciplinary protocols. He traces commonalities between the paradoxes of different fields: “Matter often behaves paradoxically and so does mind: that two cold liquids mixed together should become boiling hot, is as strange as the fact that severe laws do not decrease crime” (Oscar 113). He attends to methodological differentiation while

31 On how the “eclectic” Victorian personality “risks the integrity of his or her knowledge” for an “expansive vision” of democratic possibility, see Christine Bolus-Reichert, The Age of Eclecticism: Literature and Culture in Britain 1815-1885.
simultaneously refusing to respect it: “The division of Labour, the differentiation of function, the evolution of organisms can be illustrated from History as clearly as from the microscope.”

Humour spills over, as under the heading ‘Survival of Fittest in thought’ he writes “Nature kills off all those who do not believe in the Uniformity of Nature and the Law of Causation.”

Considerations of time and space exert a minimal impact on Wilde’s thought, thus Euripides “perhaps of all the Greeks had the most share of the modern vague spiritualistic tendency—the tendency of Werther, and Rene, and Faust—the morbid analyzing faculty.” He represents the “Furies of Orestes […] with a sort of Pre-Raphaelite frankness of detail” (Oscar 137).

In the “Notebook on Philosophy,” Wilde shows how collection and notation counteract methodological rigidity, particularly that of the human sciences. He is convinced that any one school of thought, discipline, or method is insufficient in trying to account for the world.

Consider, for instance, the nearly illegible first page of the Philosophy Notebook:

Philosophy passes into religion because it cannot answer its own question: the highest truth of philosophy is rational and self conscious poetry, the highest poetry is natural and unconscious philosophy. (1)

The first sentence of the notebook is an aphoristic statement calling our attention to the limits of any single method, whether merely critical (philosophy), theological (religion), or aesthetic (poetry). This thought appears in almost exactly the same form in the “Commonplace Book” under the heading “Mysticism” (163). Mingling methods yields aphorism.

Wilde is particularly distressed by social scientific methodology. Any attempt to exhaustively explain the social sphere leaves many phenomena unaccounted for: “in fact the

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32 Other critics have elegantly addressed the way in which Wilde’s interest in collections extends from his utopianism, and that this interest is not reducible to a fully commodified capitalist order. Carolyn Lesjak reads Wilde’s celebration of “collection” as a desire for use that is detached from “use-value,” taking her lead from Walter Benjamin. Elisha Cohn tracks Wilde’s interest in the early neurosciences, arguing that he treats brain cells (in this period still invisible) as aesthetic objects that retain their autonomy even as they assemble in the minds of individuals.
question is what does social science not include,” he writes (“Notebook on Philosophy” 4-6). When Latour—himself a sociologist—criticizes accounts of the “social” that continually reproduce identical interpretations, he is rehearsing an argument Wilde grasped a long time ago: “The danger of thought is to imagine too great a correspondence between our abstract notions got by analysis and externalities: ‘subject and object’ for instance, ‘cause and effect,’ ‘form and matter’: we can look at a thing in many different ways” (4-6). What he is after, instead, is a way of allowing all the individual actors (pieces of information) to retain their integrity, which enables association rather than terminal explanation. This atomic view of information is something he considers in the notebooks, namely in his discussion of the relationship between small “bits” or “units” (parts) and the way they do or do not find resolution in theories (wholes). Thus “history is the account of the mutual attraction and repulsion of primitive political atoms. The atomic theory is a valuable hypothesis not merely in physics but in politics as well” (117).

Under the heading “Method” he paraphrases Herbert Spencer on this score: “Every aggregate of units is determined by the properties of its units. man is the unit of society” (109).

The notebook thus dramatizes this political possibility by treating notes as so many citizens of a collective, and where information of a potentially useful quality sits amidst more futile tangents, all brought into the web of Wilde’s spidery handwriting. There are next to no cross-outs in these notebooks, a fact that helps to distinguish the form of the notebook from “manuscripts” and “drafts” intended for wider publication: misspellings and malapropisms stay just where they are, leading one to wonder how many times Wilde was thinking of something other than what he wrote down. Such is the condition of the inquiries underway in these volumes which avoid “the conscious straining after a result” and that can accommodate even those inert bits of organic matter that so captivated Darwin: “Useless Organs: Mole’s eyes: the appendix verimformis in man and the external of the human ear. The navicula of the oyster which causes
the extraordinary mortality among young oysters” (97). Units of error or biological sterility remain a part of the “organism,” not in the sense of being “uncancelled” or “absent and present” like a Derridean trace, but taking up as much space on the page as other kinds of material.

In their edition of the “Commonplace Book” and the “Notebook Kept at Oxford,” Philip K. Smith and Michael Helfand claim that these documents represent a synthesis of Victorian evolutionary thought and philosophical idealism: the notes attempt to reconcile Spencer and Hegel. Rather than dismissing the notebooks “as an interesting jumble of seemingly unrelated entries,” they “argue that they have coherence and importance within the historical context of the philosophical, scientific, and literary movements that Wilde followed at the time” (5). What this reading misses, however, is the potential that lies in the ‘interesting jumble’ as an interesting jumble, as a collection of individuals and face-offs—a notebook—in which extraction, quotation, and aphoristic summary work to assemble disparate materials in one space of contemplation. Perhaps “interesting” is itself a better aesthetic category than “beautiful” for discussing the notes; as Sianne Ngai describes it, the interesting “seems to be a way of creating relays between affect-based judgment and concept-based explanation in a manner that binds heterogeneous agencies together and enables movement across disciplinary domains” (118). Smith and Helfand make Wilde a kind of Casaubon grasping after The Key to All Mythologies. It is more useful, I would argue, to see the notes enabling provisional and temporary alliances between different methods and different historical periods, an effect achieved by the mediation of scholarly materials into small, mobile bits.

Wilde’s second-order method—the distillation of available knowledge into smooth verbal capsules—imbues pieces of information with the individualistic potential he normally reserves for people in “The Soul of Man,” De Profundis, and his other critical writings. Usually we think of Wilde as being hostile to unassembled bits of data, viewing his entire project as a deflation of
the Victorian “fact,” a position forcefully articulated by Vivian in “The Decay of Lying”: “Certainly we are a degraded race, and have sold our birthright for a mess of facts” (*Historical* 83). The argument holds that “facts” are particles of narrowly utilitarian thinking put to the service of an impoverished realism. “Don’t degrade me into the position of giving you useful information,” says Gilbert in “The Critic as Artist” (136). At the same time, Wilde wants to secure for human individuals the right to “useless” development, to unique elaboration of personality free from labor. Such is the essence of Wilde’s anarcho-socialist utopia defined in “The Soul of Man”: “The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful” (246). In Wilde’s utopia people are not beholden to the mundane facts of life, nor are they reduced to being “facts” themselves, subordinated to the social sciences. Instead their basic needs are met, allowing them to subordinate “reality” to their own autotelic purposes: they can become works of art, beautiful objects in a collection rather than useful cogs in a system. In his notes and aphorisms (a kind of perfected note), information assembles in an analogous manner. His treatment of information is a mode of sociality modeling the human community he wishes to call into being, that is, a virtual realization of a collection of invulnerable individuals. His famous aphorism, “it is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information” may be stronger claim than has previously been thought (*Complete* 1242).

At an historical moment when the methodologies available to the Oxford undergraduate were compounding rapidly, and when the strength of traditional classical education was beginning to wane, Wilde uses his notes to demonstrate how the sheer socialization of data from vastly different spheres overtakes the evidential functions it performs for any single system of knowledge. The “Notebook on Philosophy” generates aphorisms that reference and also dramatize this process:

So the more we discover the emptier are our definitions (16)
In fact the qualifications are so numerous they destroy the rules (12)

Society marches on and leaves definitions high and dry (22)

Wilde’s critique of method surveys and summarizes a staggering range of authors: Plato, Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Auguste Comte, David Hume, Adam Smith, and Herbert Spencer are among those directly confronted. In one of the recent additions to the Greats curriculum, however, Wilde finds a surprising ally, a textual “friend,” to use Felski’s phrase, who helps him to imagine processing information in such a way that evades the deductive force of existing methods, and who furthermore theorizes the use of a felicitous medium (rather than a method in the traditional sense) in which social notation may transpire.

2.4 Wilde’s Friend

While entries on Aristotle and Plato occupy the most space in the “Notebook on Philosophy,” Francis Bacon is a close third. Benjamin Jowett insisted upon adding the Novum Organum (New Method) (1620) to the Greats curriculum as a part of the process of modernization and secularization described above (Dowling 64). Bacon uses aphorism as a kind of scholarly “anti-method,” the purpose of which is to loosen the hold of existing methodological dogmas and enable an experimental, inductive approach to knowledge. Certainly Wilde’s sources for aphorism are myriad. Jowett’s enthusiasm for Pre-Socratic fragments and aphorisms at this time may have directed Wilde toward the writings of Heraclitus and other ancient practitioners of the form (Walsh 316). We also know that his witty locutions owe much to the modern examples of La Rochefoucauld, Samuel Jonson, George Meredith, and Ouida (Marie Louise de la Ramée) (Schaffer 137-139). The inclusion of so much Baconian material in Wilde’s notebooks, however (he copies out thirty aphorisms from the Novum Organum and references Bacon’s theories continually) allows us to understand his aphoristic style in a new light. Without diminishing the influence that other aphorists and epigrammatists undoubtedly exerted on him,
the Baconian connection allows us to consider Wilde’s epigrammatic production as a pragmatic form of informational assembly, in which distinctions between utility and inutility have yet to be made, and where the social life of information becomes critical to its development.

Bacon presents the *Novum Organum* “not in the form of a regular treatise, but digested, in summary form, into aphorisms” (25). Aphorism is Bacon’s instrument for allowing information to be “noted” elegantly and memorably while retaining a sense of play and mystery. He did not just write aphorisms, but also theorized the form by showing how it competes nimbly with the reigning but outmoded methods of scholasticism.33 The general trend of learned writing, as Bacon observes in *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), tends toward the prolix: “it hath been too much taken into custom, out of a few axioms or observations upon any subject, to make a solemn and formal art, filling it with some discourses, and illustrating it with examples, and digesting it into a sensible Method” (243). The danger of “method” is that it creates a false impression of completeness, of perfection, which in actuality does not exist. This leads to idleness on the part of students and scholars, who have no need to investigate or question the dominant orthodoxies because these “are taught as complete and long perfected in all their parts” (*New* 81).

Aphorism, by contrast, more honestly represents the fragmented, piecemeal way in which the world and its knowers interact: “particulars, being dispersed, do best agree with dispersed directions” (“Advancement” 243). Bacon proceeds by “dispersal” because it encourages original and unexpected encounters. All the usual modes of argument, exegesis, and analysis are suspended so that listeners and readers can ponder statements economically. When it comes to aphorism, “discourse of illustration is cut off: recitals of examples are cut off; discourse of connection and order is cut off; descriptions of practice are cut off. So there remaineth nothing to

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33 For a good, extended reading of Bacon’s use of aphorism, see James Stephens, “Science and the aphorism: Bacon's theory of the philosophical style.” I am indebted to Stephens’ account.
fill the Aphorisms but some good quantity of observation” (243). Crucial here is the way in which methodological commitments can be loosened by privileging an atomic approach to information: the aphorism, a social note, becomes the most critical form of writing because it does not pretend to make more than a small demand on our time and attention. Though it may create an impression of enclosure and boundedness, and its content may be explosive and memorable, it nevertheless reaches out to be assembled with others like it, not in a story or treatise but in a notebook of similar statements. Because, for Bacon, it accurately reflects the always-incomplete status of knowledge, it is a privileged way of pursuing such knowledge, one much more playful, spontaneous, and socially engaged than the available desiccated protocols. The form is participatory: “Aphorisms, representing a knowledge broken, do invite men to inquire farther; whereas Methods, carrying the show of a total, do secure men, as if they were at farthest” (243). Aphorism combats the fantasy of total representation and systematic closure (in this case a fantasy perpetrated by obsolescent organs of knowledge) by encouraging a larger swathe of the population to introduce their own observations into the fold: to take notes together, in other words.

For thinkers at Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century, Bacon was less interesting for his scientific innovations than for his historical and stylistic importance. While Victorian interpreters Jevons and Whewell criticized the inductive method as “the blind heaping up of observed facts,” and “a form of scientific bookkeeping,” (qtd in Smith Fact 19), Pater calls Bacon’s prose “a coloured thing,” and cites it as an example of style that need not be “confined to merely practical purposes” (Appreciations 2). Certainly Wilde shares the view that Bacon’s contributions to science were less significant than his contribution to literary style. He is the only thinker in Wilde’s notebooks explicitly hailed as an aphorist or epigrammatist—and Wilde uses these terms interchangeably when referring to his writings.
Minimizing Bacon’s “invention” of the inductive method, Wilde elevates his other contributions, in particular “his epigrams” (289). Quietly uttered at the end of the “Notebook on Philosophy” (which lay dormant in a private collection until it was purchased by the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library in 2004), we find an additional and unlikely source for Wilde’s style, one that takes us back to the beginnings of a scientific tradition he ostensibly disavows. The point is not that Wilde straightforwardly agrees or disagrees with Bacon’s philosophical arguments. The transmission is stylistic, ethical, and also political. As Wilde writes in the “Commonplace Book,” “[t]he rise of inductive philosophies is democratic” (158). His recognition of Bacon’s epigrammatic innovations leads directly into a reference to Cowley’s “Ode to the Royal Society,” a poem that heralds Bacon as a prophet leading British culture toward utopian possibilities:

Bacon, like Moses, led us forth at last,
The barren wilderness he past,
Did on the very border stand
Of the blest promis’d land,
And from the mountain’s top of his exalted wit
Saw it himself, and shew’d us it.  

Wilde associates Bacon’s epigrams—his preference for short, brief expressions—with anticipatory promise, the faint possibility of a better world.  

Engaging questions of utility, contemplation, inactivity and the proper remit of knowledge, Wilde’s collection of Bacon’s words anticipates many of his own sparkling epigrams bearing on the same questions. This offers us a new context for thinking through Wilde’s celebration of uselessness, apparent in the aphorisms “all art is quite useless” and “it is a very sad thing that there is so little useless information nowadays.” We move away from the disinterested

34 Bacon, like Wilde, had utopian leanings. See Bacon’s “The New Atlantis.”
35 On the ‘small piece’ as a faint, anticipatory promise signaling dissatisfaction with things as they are, see Terada, François, Bloch.
pleasures of aestheticism (articulated by Kant and rehearsed in the French context by authors such as Théophile Gautier) and toward the question of inquiry, the media best suited to it, and the social possibilities these make available. The notebooks and the collections of epigrams analogize social assembly and disassembly simultaneously; they present communities of individuals harboring contrasting and dissenting viewpoints that vie for attention.

While Horkheimer and Adorno begin *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by locating Bacon’s work as the beginning of instrumental reason (1), Bacon actually resists a simplistically utilitarian view of knowledge: “although our ultimate aim is works and the active part of science, still we wait for harvest time and do not try to reap moss and the crop while it is still green” (New 20). In a paradox that surely captured Wilde’s imagination, Bacon recognizes the pragmatism of supposedly useless pursuits: “the hope of further progress in the sciences will be well founded only when natural history shall acquire and accumulate many experiments which in themselves are of no use” (80). Wilde paraphrases those passages in the Philosophy Notebook that imagine science as a path to beautiful, useless experience. For example, Aphorism 81 of the *Novum Organum*:

81. [‘The true and legitimate goal of the sciences is to endow human life with new discoveries and resources’] yet cf. [‘we must look for illuminating, not profitable, experiments’] (p. 151)

Wilde finds passages that emphasize the vital inactivity that underlies proper scientific meditations:

80. Bacon complains that natural philosophy has never found ‘cavantem hominem’ [an empty space for man]: necessity for ὑπέρστολη [rest, leisure] for the philosopher (p. 151)

Private contemplation in Bacon’s view was inferior to public discourse, to the social circulation of information. Yet a few pages later Wilde contorts Bacon’s words to make his own point about
the contemplative life: “the fact of it’s [sic] existence is the reason for its existence. Bacon’s scornful words are it’s [sic] glory—Like a virgin consecrated to God it bears no fruit. its duty is to comprehend the world not make it better” (“Commonplace” 179) While Bacon seemed to think that contemplation led to the kind of anti-sociality we find in Dorian Gray, Wilde realizes that contemplative attitudes might be staged and circulated in public through the medium of aphorism.

Contemplation and comprehension are not, in Wilde’s view, a means of making the world a better place. The forms of experiment and inquiry advocated by Bacon should not be confused with social activism or political intervention on their own (what Wilde will eventually criticize as “philanthropy”). However, this does not mean that the forms of contemplation Wilde values in the notebooks, and that he experiments with in Dorian Gray, “The Critic as Artist,” and elsewhere, should be taken as anti-social refusals directed to his own navel. Instead, they represent a way of declining the standard formats of public discourse in order to socialize with information and culture, to treat extracts, quotations, and aphorisms as agents that can influence and react with one another and with their readers. Wilde’s style is both the example and outcome of precisely this kind of social notation. A cross-temporal reading brought him an unexpected “friend,” and it is plausible that without this encounter he would not have taken ownership of the short pithy phrase in the manner he did.
3 Thinking Pieces: George Gissing, Notes, and the Novel

“What a sensation of freedom it is to feel, as we freed spirits feel, that we are not harnessed up to a system of ends!”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks* (99)

Among Gissing’s papers and paraphernalia at the Berg Collection in the New York Public Library there is a single entry under the heading “Flora”:

Leaf picked by George Gissing and sent to Morley Roberts from Lago Averno [Naples] [1888 Nov. 9] flora (1 item)

The item is a single pale green leaf, a frond of a fern perhaps, about two and half inches long, enclosed in a tiny envelope inscribed with his friend’s address. This fragile scrap competes with items of nobler stature in the collection: the Commonplace Book, the final draft of *New Grub Street*, his diaries. Yet amid these more valuable materials we have this trivial piece of flora preserved for posterity. What kind of document is it?

A fragment of Gissing’s Italian tour, a piece of a day spent walking around Lake Avernus, it is unaccompanied by story or explanation. Taken as a metonym, it might point to any number of possible narratives without affirming any one in particular. Perhaps Gissing intends to convey his dolorous mood by means of a classical reference, since the Romans regarded Avernus as an entrance into the underworld. Alternatively, the leaf could signal the satisfaction of a poor, uncelebrated novelist finally getting to see the Italian landscape. It might be an inside joke shared between Gissing and Roberts, or some other private reference. There is also, however, the possibility that Gissign intends no obvious anecdote, but is merely making a minimal indexical

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36 Morley Roberts was Gissing’s friend, and in 1912 published *The Private Life of Henry Maitland*, a book based on Gissing’s life.
action. “Look, this is the kind of thing that happens” may be all he means to say, to quote the stark realist Harold Biffen of *New Grub Street* (176).

As a novelist, Gissing was more often in the business of situating details and elaborating their significance, not generating fragments with uncertain contexts. Despite having authored some twenty novels by the time of his death at forty-six, however, he was always something of a reluctant fiction writer. The profession was less his vocation than a way of earning a living after a scandal in boarding school squashed any dreams of a scholarly career. (He stole money to support a friend and was caught.)

One of Gissing’s fictional writers, the misbegotten Edwin Reardon of *New Grub Street*, finds himself in similar straights: “if I had had the means, I should have devoted myself to the life of a scholar. That, I quite believe, is my natural life; it’s only the influence of recent circumstances that has made me a writer of novels. A man who can’t journalise, yet must earn his bread by literature, nowadays inevitably turns to fiction, as the Elizabethan men turned to the drama” (118). For both the real and the fictional man, writing novels is a compromise, a consolation for missing out on a different future. In each case high cultural values have to be tempered in order to please the “midcult.” You can often feel the ennui within his novels, when you can’t understand why he is taking so long to describe something, when it feels like the prose idles uselessly on the page. Even generous readers remark on the tedium of his works. “It is sometimes very dull,” writes Virginia Woolf (qtd in Coustillas and Partridge 518). James Joyce was more scathing: “Why are English novels so terribly boring? I think G. has little merit” (533).

Although he wrote fiction prolifically, Gissing was highly ambivalent about the social function of the novel, and the realist novel in particular. He could not say for sure that it did any good for anyone. While admiring the formal achievements of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens

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37 The friend is Nell, apparently a sex worker, whom Gissing later married. The most detailed biographical account can be found in Pierre Coustillas’s recently published biography, *The Heroic Life of George Gissing*. 
or George Eliot, he had serious doubts about the political convictions these authors associated with their representations. As Aaron Matz writes in an essay on Gissing’s “ambivalent” attitude to realism, Gissing experiences “an extended struggle with the predominant conventions and expectations of late-Victorian fiction,” a struggle that Matz documents by turning to Gissing’s own voluminous writings on the subject, both fictional and critical (215).

I consider Gissing’s resistance to realism more generally as an expression of his anti-sociality and nihilism, his persistent conviction that—to put it bluntly—life has no purpose and that social progress is a dead fantasy. Nearly all of his works, with the possible exception of *Workers in the Dawn*, unfold in the wake of his rejection of positivism and what had been its alliance with realistic representation in the novels of the mid-Victorian period. Such novels have often been thought of as having didactic social functions, bringing members of disparate social classes into imaginative relations with one another, either to engender sympathetic reciprocity between them or to do the ideological work of situating them in a capitalist network of exchange. Gissing’s novels often reproduce, with inertial force, the conventions of the “novel of purpose” without being able to endorse such purposes as anything other than a delusion. Normally this is read as a turn to naturalist fiction, a decidedly pessimistic genre that regards cynically any pretense to social amelioration. In the naturalistic calculus, individual characters are caught in a system of biology and economics that promises no escape. Yet Gissing’s relationship with naturalism is no less fraught than his relationship with realism, and while he churns out his plots, he makes incipient gestures toward a new kind of writing, one that could enable his withdrawal from fabricated intrigue of either type.

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38 On the relation between positivism and the social project of literary realism, see Lepenies and Claybaugh. The literature on the social purpose of sympathy is obviously quite vast, but for an account of the novel as a purposive form intended to generate “social harmony” through processes of identification, I am relying specifically Jaffe and Ablow.
In what follows I consider the way in which Gissing uses notes and fantasies of notation as a way of declining the perpetually disappointing narratives he wrote and rewrote throughout his career. Notes, for Gissing, are minimalist documents archived without a view to serving larger ends or theoretical teloi. Since they represent, on this view, a way of writing without a view to a teleological future, they also suggest a way of living without a plot. An expression of his anti-social and anchorite tendencies, they nevertheless offer a way of staying tethered to the world, if only in the drift of the present that may not be headed anywhere and that may not add up to anything. Gissing ultimately rejects both conservative and socialist politics, in the end turning away from ideologies altogether in order to bob among discrete details. This kind of atopic drift does not involve some wholesale rejection of the world in favor of romantic individualism or utopianism (nothing could be more anathematic to Gissing), but rather a way of “thinking in pieces,” of extracting the often trivial moments out of books or life in order to give them an opportunity to breathe outside the coordinates and determinations of a plot.

I track this argument specifically through the Commonplace Book and The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft, which respectively reveal Gissing’s intensely private note taking practices and his paradoxical attempt to make these practices shareable with a larger public. Before turning to these materials, however, I outline the ways in which notation serves Gissing as a figure for “degree zero” realism: a realist practice imagined to be free of plot, storyline, or political ends. New Grub Street, his great metafiction, evaluates the attempts by different writers

39 By “plot” I intend the definition given by Peter Brooks: “the design and intention of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning” (xi).

40 In this regard, my account is in line with what Mark Selzer has recently termed “the incrementalist turn” in the humanities and social sciences. This is a “turn toward the minor and scaled-down...Hence, for example, with respect to the novel, there is a turn to the study of minor characters; with respect to affect, minor feelings; with respect to political forms, little resistances, infantile subjects, minute, therapeutic adjustments; with respect to perception, the decelerated gaze and a prolonged attentiveness; and so on” (727). Perhaps the most robust account of what it means to “scale down” can be found in Cruel Optimism by Lauren Berlant, a work that considers how people learn to live when their fantasies of the good life decay, when the possibility of “adding up to something” seems more and more unlikely. Berlant is interested in how people live through impasse, which she defines as “a space of time lived without a narrative genre.” See also Francois and Terada.
to sustain a writing practice amid the liquidation of the “novel of purpose.” One of these attempts (Harold Biffen’s “Mr Bailey, Grocer”) is a fantasy of pure notation, of a writing practice that refuses to attribute significance to details and instead merely indexes them.

In order to further develop notation as a trope, the midsection of this chapter turns to a lecture course delivered by Roland Barthes at the Collège de France in 1979-80, *The Preparation of the Novel*, in which he describes note taking at length. Ostensibly an account of his own attempt to compose a novel, to found “a new writing practice,” Barthes’ course actually becomes an extended exploration of note taking as an ethical practice of living the present without fictional or explanatory overlay, an *art de vivre* that presents, as he puts it, “the problem of realism.” In the latter half of this chapter, we will see how Gissing develops his own ethics of notation in the Commonplace Book and *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. Barthes and Gissing share a preference for preparatory and minimal acts of registration that needn’t amount to what we generally think of as “finished” forms. Yet rather than viewing these preferences as shortcomings, failures, or solipsistic retreats (both Barthes and Gissing have been subjected to such critiques), I acknowledge the way in which both men make decisive attempts to render their notational practices shareable with the public, suggesting an incipient model for linking members of a social body.41

3.2 Writing for Nothing

We never see inside a book in *New Grub Street*. We get descriptions and information about books, whether Edwin Reardon’s retrograde novels, Alfred Yule’s dusty volumes of criticism, or the codices filling the reading room at the British Museum. Books in this world have no insides to be inspected, evaluated, or even read. Instead we watch their surfaces and the contextual conditions of their circulation. We get data about salaries and legacies, the physical

41 For an account of Barthes’s late work as hedonistic, see Culler. On Gissing’s “decadence,” see Maltz.
health of the writers, their position inside and outside the literary networks of the 1880’s. Yet the books themselves have been glued shut. It is as though we have been trapped inside an exhibit of what Garrett Stewart calls “bookworks,” objects of visual art that employ the book as a material, not to promote the kinds of activities traditionally associated with such objects (i.e. reading) but to invite the onlooker to ponder the kinds of actions the book might incite apart from “mere” reading.

*New Grub Street* represents an exemplary resource for imagining the agency and sociality of books in other terms than those marshaled earlier in the nineteenth century.\(^{42}\) It turns away from the “social” purpose of literature as it had been imagined in the middle of the Victorian period—as a representational system that binds disparate classes together by means of narrative conventions inciting sympathetic identifications—and toward a view of books and literature as capable of producing effects beyond sympathetic reciprocity adding up to a common culture. The result is a feeling—discernable in the central characters—of being exiled from the enriching social promise of plots whose conventions no longer work (if indeed they ever did). The great irony is that Gissing produces such an effect by means of the very form—the triple decker novel—that his narrative logic declares “useless.”

What is the “inside” that has been liquidated? The inhabitants of *New Grub Street* live in “the valley of the shadow of books” in which texts have become “neutered textual shapes” (Stewart *Bookworks* 17). Yet while the imagery of the “book” recurs throughout, it is the form of the novel specifically that is under erasure in the literary marketplace depicted here. Gissing subtly prophesizes the end of the codex, but the triangle of men at the center of the action—Reardon, Milvain, and Biffen—face a reading public that is indifferent to the novel except as a genre competing among others. This is the most significant loss of an “inside.” The “purposeful

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\(^{42}\) For uses of books in the nineteenth century that exceed mere reading, see Price.
novel” is the content whose evacuation presents the greatest social threat to the world of readers and writers at the fin-de-siècle, at least according to this self-conscious narrative. As we will see, Reardon, Biffen, and Milvain distinguish themselves from one another by their relative ability or inability to develop a form of writing in the shipwreck of positivist narrative forms, by their capacity to sustain a relationship to information that does not depend on the coherence and conventions of purposive plots.\footnote{There are surprising but vivid similarities between *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *New Grub Street*: at the center of each book is a male triangle: Basil-Henry-Dorian and Reardon-Milvain-Biffen. Basil and Reardon stubbornly cling to outmoded media (portraiture, the triple decker novel). Henry and Milvain successfully distribute themselves in society through the rampant production of sensational, yummy bits of language. Dorian and Biffen are both collectors, amassing heaps of stuff that just sits there. In Dorian’s case it is actual things, i.e. commodities. In Biffen’s case it is just impressions, pieces of life. In both cases it leads to death. At the center of each novel there is in an imaginary “novel without a plot”: the “yellow book” in the case of *Picture* and “Mr Bailey, Grocer” in *New Grub Street*.}

Gissing began writing novels at a moment in the nineteenth century when the union of social reform and fiction was weakening. Novelists in the mid-nineteenth century drew inspiration and motivation from the endeavors of positivist social reformers. As Amanda Claybaugh writes, both the writers and activists shared an ethic of conscious intervention into the “social” world. Both groups leveraged narrative (be it fictional or factual) to incite sympathetic identifications between readers and characters:

nineteenth-century novels were written, published, read, and reviewed according to expectations learned from social reform. Like reformist writings, the novel of purpose was understood to act on its readers—and, through its readers, the world. This conception of the novel did much to elevate its status. Where the novel had earlier been at best dismissed as frivolous, at worst condemned as sinful, it was now understood to be actively working for the social good (7).

Claybaugh maintains that writers and activists did not merely share an ideology, but also traded narrative conventions that evoked sympathy and understanding, for example, the “investigative
visit” into slums or other marginal social spaces. The point is that for the novelists of the mid-nineteenth century, the “sociality” of novels refers specifically to their ability to provoke sympathetic responses in readers, placing different human agents into a system of affective relation by means of narrative conventions. This is, in Audrey Jaffe’s words, a “model of socialization through spectatorship” (29).

At the beginning of his career as a novelist, in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Gissing studied positivism, devouring the works of Auguste Comte and Harriet Martineau while consciously adapting their worldview in his first fiction, *Workers in the Dawn*. Positivism seeks a “social physics” that would rival the achievements of astronomy, geology, and other sciences (Comte 13). By studiously collecting facts and data about the world and its people, the theory goes, we will be able to develop methods for political and social amelioration. For a brief moment around 1880, therefore, Gissing seems almost optimistic: “just as there is a science of astronomy, and men can predict eclipses etc., just so we believe that there is a science of human life, that the total of the world’s history is already fully planned out, and that we are able to learn sufficient of the rules of this new science to see for some distance into the mists of the future” (* Essays* 14). Of course Gissing’s assiduous study of “human life” did not lead to an endorsement of the human community as it was or as some imagined it could be. No one was further removed from the “Religion of Humanity”: “his adherence to Positivism was nothing more than a stage on the way to the rejection of all creeds, whether religious or politico-social,” as Pierre Coustillas writes in the introduction to the volume that opens with the essay “The Hope of Pessimism” (17). Indeed, Gissing’s entire textual output might be read as an effort to sustain a relationship with society amidst the dilapidation of the positivist fantasy.

44 Others view positivist sociology as an attempt to establish itself as a reconciliation of fictional and scientific practices: “it has oscillated between a scientific orientation which has led it to ape the natural sciences and a hermeneutic attitude which has shifted the discipline towards the realm of literature” (Lepenies).
“The Hope of Pessimism” signals Gissing’s abandonment of positivism and his attempt to develop an ethics driven by a Schopenhauerian belief in the fruitlessness of all action. His attitude in the essay is bleak, existential, fatalistic: “We are shipmates, tossed on the ocean of eternity, and one fate awaits us all” (94). He critiques the views of Conte and Martineau by arguing that a scientific approach to society cannot ultimately answer the needs of its citizens because science cannot resolve the existential suffering in which humans find themselves. By encouraging people to ascend the ladder of empirical learning, a positivist society actually leads its citizens into deeper and deeper certainty about the hopelessness of their situation, while at the same time revoking the nourishing imaginative possibilities that religion had once, perhaps, been able to afford.

Positivist practice, in Gissing’s view, cannot arrest this quest for existential meaning, cannot merely replace tabernacles with microscopes. The only hope to be had is to accentuate the feelings of hopelessness and alienation that people feel as a result of positive science’s inability to guarantee a meaningful plot. What results instead is a series of pessimistic withdrawals by different individuals; meaningful life can only be reassembled from the wreckage of our private hopes. Solace comes from scaling expectations down to almost nothing. In terms recently put forward by Lauren Berlant, Gissing eschews the “cruel optimism” of positivist social science, a fantasy that actually “inhibits flourishing,” and tries to unfold a way of staying tethered to life amid a gutted fantasy (1).

Given the extremity of this position it is hardly surprising that critics and biographers have read Gissing’s life as a steady movement away from the social, as a retreat “into a decadent, Paterian subjectivity in which aesthetic appreciation is contingent on individual memory and fantasy and divorced from social exchange” (Maltz 57). Indeed, in “The Hope of Pessimism” one can see his persistent cynicism about “this scheme of commercial competition tempered by the
police-code, to which we are pleased to give the name of a social order” (*Essays* 90). And of course it is true that his essay lands on voluntary, slow, and total human extinction as the only cure for our woe: “the grave will become a symbol of joy” (97).

Despite his abandonment of positivist teleology, however, Gissing never forsakes its practices of observation and documentation. He continues to watch the world and collect notes about it, without the conviction that this technique will inevitably lead to progress and advancement. In a letter to his brother, he writes that “the world is for me a collection of phenomena… The impulse to regard every juncture as a ‘situation’ becomes stronger and stronger. In the midst of desperate misfortune I can pause to make a note for future use, and the afflictions of others are to me materials for observation” (*Essays* 22). Even as he regularly incorporates these observations into his fictions, Gissing imagines—albeit faintly—a way of living and writing that dwells at this “degree zero” of observation, what Heather Love, in a different context, has referred to as “empirical without being positivist” (“Natural”). *New Grub Street* takes its force by exploring at least three responses to the death of socially purposive narrative. In the case of Reardon, Milvain, and Biffen we find three ways of writing for nothing.

*New Grub Street* projects a literary marketplace obsessed with short forms, an ecology of fleeting prose. While the different characters in the novel take vastly different stances on the issue, no one seems to disagree about “what’s real” in this system: brevity. Alfred Yule puts the matter in the clearest possible terms: “the evil of the time is the multiplication of ephemerides. Hence a demand for essays, descriptive articles, fragments of criticism” (82). Fragments are multiplying out of all proportion, flooding the public sphere with fleeting bits and pieces of text that add up to nothing whatsoever. Jasper Milvain, the venal journalist, capitalizes on these conditions, diligently producing “bits of stories, bits of description, bits of scandal, bits of jokes,
bits of statistics, bits of foolery” all aimed at the railroad and omnibus readers from the class of the “quarter-educated” (447).

Reardon, for his part, is a complete failure when it comes to brief forms of writing. He clings tenaciously and pathetically to the vestigial practice of writing triple-decker novels in the old style. He is, as Jasper explains, “the old type of unpractical artist” who is “behind his age,” and who reproduces with tedious inertia the forms of the past, making a habit of failure (56).

Where Reardon fails as a novelist, Biffen doesn’t even try. Earning small coin as a tutor for workers trying to pass rudimentary literacy exams, he pawns his coat and buys it back depending on the time of the month, living on meat drippings in a garret where he works tirelessly at producing a perfectly unmarketable (and therefore useless) book, “Mr. Bailey, Grocer.” Gissing suggests repeatedly that we are meant to view Jasper as one type of artist (“the literary man of 1882”) and Reardon and Biffen as examples of another (56). In a direct address to the reader the narrator assumes that they occupy the same position in the reader’s mind: “The chances are that you have neither understanding nor sympathy for men such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen. They seem to you inert, flabby, weakly envious, foolishly obstinate” (417-8).

On the level of form, however, Biffen and Milvain have more in common than Reardon has with either one of them. Biffen and Milvain, while taking very different attitudes to the question of profit and public acknowledgment, each find a way of contending with the dissipation of narrative purposes. Reardon tries in vain to reproduce dead narrative forms, remaining loyal to dilapidated fantasies and end products no longer realizable in this environment. “Why will you go cutting your loaf with a razor when you have a serviceable bread-knife?” Biffen asks him (431). But the two characters who occupy the most polarized

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45 For an account of this moment, and how it relates to the novel’s larger effort to interpellate its readers and manipulate their sympathetic identifications, see Stewart, Dear Reader.
positions within the market conditions of the age (Jasper embraces it, Biffen turns away) both develop a strategy for thinking in pieces.

Reardon has no such strategy. While trying to work on his traditional narratives, he finds himself unable to link the different bits together: “his mind looked into a cloudy chaos, a shapeless whirl of nothings” (157). This causes him nothing but anxiety, nothing but suffering. But Jasper and Biffen each produce a way of thinking the “whirl of nothings.” They share a certain gleeful “sensation of freedom” (to use words from Nietzsche’s notebook, quoted in the epigraph to the chapter) about the weakening plots that will not serve as the final cause of their endeavors. Of course they diverge sharply in other ways, specifically in the fact that Milvain “sells off” his notes the moment they are minted, while Biffen hoards his minimal acts of observation into a store of potentials that needn’t bear fruit either on the market or as a story. But, here again, there is consensus about what the “real” amounts to, i.e. nothing but a heap of trivial pieces. The most salient difference between Biffen and Jasper lies in the fact that one tries to turn this apparent fact into an ethical form of subjectivity while the other just uses this situation to exploit people’s desire for instant titillation.

Compare the following two passages, which we might describe as Jasper and Biffen’s respective manifestos. Watch how each one elaborates an aesthetic and social position by focusing on the category of “vulgarity.” First, Jasper:

We talk of literature as a trade, not of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare… I don’t advocate the propagation of vicious literature, only good, coarse, marketable stuff for the world’s vulgar… I maintain that we people of brains are justified in supplying the mob with the food it likes. We are not geniuses, and if we sit down in a spirit of long-eared gravity we shall produce only commonplace stuff. Let us use our wits to earn money… To please the
vulgar you must, one way or another, incarnate the genius of vulgarity. (italics added 60-61)

And here is Biffen:

What I really aim at is an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent. The field, as I understand it, is a new one; I don’t know any writer who has treated ordinary vulgar life with fidelity and seriousness…I want to deal with the essentially unheroic, with the day-to-day life of that vast majority of people who are at the mercy of paltry circumstance…An instance, now. As I came along by Regent’s Park half an hour ago a man and girl were walking close in front of me, love-making; I passed them slowly and heard a good deal of their talk—it was part of the situation that they should pay no heed to a stranger’s proximity. Now, such a love-scene as that has absolutely never been written down; it was entirely decent, yet vulgar to the nth power (italics added 175)

Obviously the motivations underlying their work could not be more different. Jasper has no love for the common people, viewing them as dumb consumers of the scrappy, coarse bits and pieces he issues on a conveyor belt. He produces momentary nuggets to feed the herd that disappear almost instantly, like ice cubes tossed onto summer asphalt. His approach exploits the fact that an ordinary life resembles a mere collection of disconnected, fugitive, and purposeless moments and he renders his literary productions conformable to this rhythm for profit.

Biffen, on the other hand, rather than conforming to this rhythm, or even resisting its terms, seeks to represent it. Rather than viewing it as an opportunity for exploitation, he makes it a starting place to merely note what happens, even, as Gissing mentioned in his letter quoted earlier, in the midst of “desperate circumstances.” If Jasper wants to exploit the reading public at the level of the “momentary,” seizing control of ephemeral experience by means of the sale of fleeting articles, Biffen wants to begin with the ephemeral experiences that the “vulgar” initiate
themselves, and to collect these. Both see the brief, fleeting “present” as an opportunity, a valuable unit of time. Jasper’s work is opportunistically journalistic, but what Biffen does is much stranger, and constitutes what I wish to argue is a fantasy of notational style.

Biffen holds out no hope for securing an entrance into a narrative of comforts and pleasures. When Reardon weakly suggests that he might secure a position for himself, Biffen responds bluntly: “What position? No school would take me; I have neither credentials nor conventional clothing. For the same reason I couldn't get a private tutorship in a rich family. No, no; it's all right. I keep myself alive, and I get on with my work.—By-the-bye, I've decided to write a book called ‘Mr Bailey, Grocer’” (233). Refusing to yield to the trappings of cruel optimism, Biffen simply keeps himself alive, transforming (in the words of Berlant) “adjustment into an accomplishment” (3). “Mr Bailey, Grocer” becomes an element in this strategy of sustaining himself amidst his perpetual and ongoing state of social abjection.

In the “manifesto” quoted above, it appears that the strategy in “Mr Bailey, Grocer” is to flatten and equalize all the incidents of life, the “paltry circumstances” of which “average” people are the victims, and to collect these notations in a structure that has no teleological narrative development, conventions, indeed any fictional effects whatsoever: “I shall never write anything like a dramatic scene,” he says, for “whatever is written for effect is wrong and bad” (176). His technique involves the collection of the fugitive, faint observations, what he calls “trivial incidents.” It is a fantasy of pure data collection, of information contained without a plot. Biffen himself does not even view what he is doing as fiction at all. When Reardon suggests that “there may surely exist such a thing as the art of fiction,” Biffen retorts that “we must have a rest from it” (177). This retirement from narrative involves what Biffen calls “honest reporting,” collecting together “the numberless repulsive features of common decent life.” Focusing on the apparently insignificant and useless details of the world enables a “rest” from the tired fantasies
that Biffen cannot indulge. Dissent would be too strong a word for this practice—it is something more like the documentation of the most insignificant details he can read within life and doing nothing (or next to nothing) with them, except noting them. The point, as he puts it, is simply to say “Look, this is the kind of thing that happens” (176).

“Mr Bailey, Grocer” abandons the novel-of-purpose altogether. It replaces fictional artifice with an aggregative collection of documents loosely tethered to the life of a “real” shopkeeper. Biffen’s attraction for the insignificant is accompanied by a certain “zeal and fire” as Reardon notes (233), a death-driven wonder at the flood of rubbish moments that make up vulgar life in Victorian London, and a desire to produce a collection of such rubbish that is entirely useless, non-teleological, anti-conventional, and simply the result of minimal acts of observation (“Look, this is the kind of thing that happens”). Biffen’s book represents a fantasy of starting again, of finding a place of rest outside of conventional storylines without needing to invent a novel reality. Without denying the fact that there is a terrible system in place that destroys life and forces individuals into terrible situations, Biffen’s production magnifies the tiny fragments within that system, enlarging the given moments of an individual life and arguably distributing attention across such moments evenly. This imaginary form of writing collects bits of “real life” without distributing significance by means of the usual novelistic operations.

3.3 Writing the Present

Biffen’s imaginary book looks like a collection of what Roland Barthes famously calls “insignificant notations.” In “The Reality Effect,” Barthes tried to account for the apparently useless details stuffed in between the more active sequences of literary realism. Following the grain of structuralist analysis that reads different elements of a narrative in terms of their signifying functions, Barthes identifies descriptive details within novels that seem to do nothing, the “notations which no function (not even the most indirect) can justify” (Rustle 141). Examples
include the barometer in Flaubert’s “A Simple Heart,” and the knock at a door in Michelet’s *Histoire de France: Le Revolution*. By not signifying anything, these “notations” come to signify the real itself.\(^{46}\)

With “Mr Bailey, Grocer,” Gissing imagines a “novel” in which anything resembling a plot point has been cut away. Nothing remains but description without action, details without plotted sutures. The most socially functionless character in *New Grub Street*—Biffen—chooses to write in the most functionless style possible, a style of pure description. The barest hint of drama or sensation would leave his work susceptible to consumption, and so he flattens everything, rendering all of his notations as insignificant—and therefore as real—as possible.\(^{47}\) Indeed, it seems almost to parody Gérard Genette’s distinction between “narration” and “description,” in which narration “s’attache à des actions ou des événements considérés comme pur procès, et par là même elle met l’accent sur l’aspect temporel et dramatique du récit; la description au contraire…semble suspendre le cours du temps et contribue à étaler le récit dans l’espace” (59).\(^{48}\) “Mr Bailey, Grocer” remains aloof to the marketplace but also to the supposedly higher aspirations of the novel of purpose. We have instead a heap of notations that cannot be pushed toward articulable political ends, with Biffen nihilistically attempting to make his work as much of a “nothing” as possible.

Citing Barthes’ famous essay is hardly a revelation in a discussion of a realist metafiction. However, his lecture notes from the period of 1978-81 reveal that his interest in the inconsequential “note” and its relation to the novel was a matter of increasing importance to him.

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\(^{46}\) For the relation between “The Reality Effect” and the practice of denotation, see Buurma and Heffernan.

\(^{47}\) On the contemporary critical turn to description over interpretation and surface over depth, see Best and Marcus, *Love “Close but not Deep.”*

\(^{48}\) Translation: “narration is devoted to actions or events as pure process, emphasizing the temporal and dramatic aspects of the story…on the contrary, description suspends the flow of time and works to distribute the story in space.”
later in life. In an interview with Alain Robbe-Grillet from 1978, Barthes addresses some of the gossip about his desire to write a novel:

I really want to write a novel, and every time I read a novel that I like, I want to do the same thing, but I seem to have resisted, up until now, certain operations that are supposedly inherent in the novel. For example, the smooth surface, the continuum. Could a novel be written in aphorisms, in fragments? In what conditions? Isn’t the essence of the novel a certain continuum? I think there’s a resistance here. (Robbe-Grillet 14-15)

So here we have another “reluctant novelist,” yet in this case it is a successful reluctance, since he never actually wrote a novel but invested a great deal of time and energy outlining an imaginary book that could never really come into existence: a novel made purely of notes.

I turn to some of Barthes’s notes for courses delivered at Le Collège de France between 1977 and 1980 because they help to clarify the dialectical relationship between the note and the novel as sketched by Gissing. Understanding the note and the novel in a dialectical relationship, Barthes confesses a preference for notation—particularly insignificant notation—as an ethical form of writing and of living without a narrative genre, even as he supposedly strives to get a grip on what his own novel would be. Barthes prefers preparation, despite the disappointment it causes his audience. I want to argue that the increased preference he shows for fragmentary forms toward the end of his life does not represent, as many have argued, a solipsistic retreat, but instead holds out its own possibilities for a social world unfolding without teloi. I want to explore the possibility that his “failure” to write a novel was no failure at all, but rather an expression of a desire for a structure that can contain numberless discrete notations that hang

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49 Jonathan Culler, among others, takes the view that Barthes’s late work (with its themes of readerly jouissance, the punctum of the photograph, and his experience of Japan as a world of free-floating signifiers) represents a turn to pure pleasure and aestheticized satisfactions.
together without purpose. This involves, we will see, an affective relationship to “the present” as
a weightless unit of time free from an overfull past and a looming future.

Between 1977 and 1980, Barthes was professor at the Collège de France. He delivered
three courses during this period: How to Live Together, The Neutral, and The Preparation of the
Novel. In the Columbia University Press Editions, each carries the subtitled “Notes for a lecture
course and seminar at the Collège de France.” From these notebooks, then, we can assemble
something like a supplement to Barthes, a footnote of about 700 pages written without a view to
publication. In each course Barthes explicitly refuses to advance a unified thesis, staging his
topics in terms of “figures” (also called “twinklings”) that relate to the overall theme. “I’m
merely opening a dossier,” he says, inviting the seminar participants to take ownership of the
subject for themselves (How to Live xxiii). Barthes uses the courses to stage his own desires, his
own fantasies, about how a community might “live together” without a clear purpose or final
cause guiding its actions. This is the central focus of the first lecture course, How to Live
Together. In The Preparation of the Novel, he outlines the writerly analogue to this fantasy of
non-teleological social life. The course is in fact about the process of generating a novel that will
never exist: “I’m at the Fantasy-of-the-novel stage,” he explains, and that is where he remains
(11). The fantasized novel in question is Vita Nova, a title (New Life) that reflects an acute
feeling of ennui with his writing practice in his early sixties, which he views as

repeated material, doomed to repetition, to the lassitude of repetition. ‘What? From now
on until I die I’ll be writing articles, preparing my teaching, giving lectures—or, at least,
writing books—on subjects, which are all that’ll vary (and so little!)?’ Foreclosure of
anything New (=the definition of ‘Doing Time’) (4).

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50 The editors and translators describe how important it was to them that these notes not become “books,” by which
they mean texts smoothed out into a continuous stream and written in a single voice which would really be the
combined effort of various editors. Recordings of all three courses are available at UbuWeb:
http://www.ubu.com/sound/barthes.html
For someone who has devoted his entire life to writing, Barthes explains, a “New Life” can only emerge as a new form of writing, “the discovery of a new writing practice” (5).

*The Preparation of the Novel* does not end with the publication of a novel, but it archives Barthes’ feelings about the genre, his sense of inadequacy and insignificance before it, his suspicion that it will always lie beyond his ken. How disarming to learn that the lover of fragments and the poster boy for *jouissance* longs to produce continuous forms! Yet the novel he desires to write, his “fantasized novel” does not look like anything else in the canon. This is because, simply put, Barthes doesn’t love the same things other people love. And the novel’s genesis, he writes, is nothing but love: “the Novel is fantasized as an ‘act of love,’” he writes, adding a parenthetical blush: “(the expression is unfortunate, it leaves me open to accusations of sentimentality and triteness, but it’s the only one we have, after all, we have to accept language’s limitations)” (14). He goes as far as to say that the whole point of the novel is to “To say whom you love,” (14) drawing on statements by Sade, Tolstoy, and Proust to make this claim.

Whom or what does this man love? Tolstoy and Proust proceed, in his view, by means of their love of the past, wanting to tarry either with historical situations or to float upon the waves of personal memory. But Barthes worries that he cannot live up to this tradition, that he has “a certain constitutive weakness within me, a certain incapacity to write a novel” which he compares to a person who wants to play the piano but cannot because of hands which are too small (14-15). This weakness lies in being disconnected from “memory, the ability to remember.” While he may love novels about the past, he has no love for the past in general:

It’s not that I don’t like my past; it’s rather that I don’t like the past (perhaps because it rends the heart), and my resistance takes the form of…a kind of general resistance to rehearsing, to narrating what will never happen again (the dreaming, the cruising, the life
of the past). The affective link is with the present, my present, in its affective, relational, intellectual dimensions = the material I’m hoping for (cf. “to depict whom I love”). (17)

The present compels him, with its sudden punctures, opportunities for redirection, and Buddhist satori. Thus he poses the rather paradoxical question: “Is it possible to make a Narrative (a Novel) out of the Present?” Yes, he answers. “You can write the Present by noting it” (17).

Notation becomes the trope of and method for writing the present. The Preparation of the Novel offers no guidelines for making characters, settings, actions, and plots. These are the ingredients of the “anamnestic” novel, driven by a recuperation of time past. Rather than learning the tricks of the trade, Barthes seems to be challenging the trade by exposing his queer desires and preferences, then asking where such desires might or might not become shareable with a larger community in the manner of the novel. So while his preparations never culminate in a book that we can call a narrative, he does perhaps manage to find his way through to “a new writing practice,” a self-conscious form of continuous note taking that strategically resists structuration, a way of thinking in pieces.

Barthes does not want to yield up the potentiality of the singular notation to the sutures of a plot. In a bizarre move in a lecture course that is supposedly about novels, he turns to haiku as “the exemplary type of Notation of the Present,” mainly “out of personal preference …to speak of the short form that I love more than any other and that is as it were the very essence of Notation” (italics added, 19). Through his readings and rankings of dozens of haiku, he amasses a list of the values that he finds within notation. These are crucial to our understanding of note taking as a practice that doesn’t simply embody a solipsistic and aestheticized view of the world.

51 Barthes had long been interested in developing a vocabulary for addressing cultures of the present (e.g. Mythologies); his arguments rarely take the form of conventional continuous prose and often appear in short, ruminative, fragmentary forms, and he has always been delighted with the sudden and shattering actions of jouissance and the punctum, events of the present.
but suggests an ethical *art de vivre*. Over the course of his discussion of haiku he makes several points about notation in general. I will list some of the most important. Notation

1. doesn’t “come together as a system”
2. individuates subjective viewpoints
3. differentiates distinct elements of “the real”
4. respects the void
5. relies on “fleeting clarity, fleeting emphasis: a quality of emotion”
6. tries to “set a bell ringing,” to capture the moment of “that’s it!”
7. allows for the “co-presence” of contradictory elements (76-101)

The Barthesian note is a species of haiku, a fleeting moment of clarity that does not require narrative fruition in the Aristotelian sense. Instead a host of other values are highlighted: distinguishing moments of “reality,” refusing the impulse to systematically explain them, allowing for fleeting and inconsequent effects. He takes the haiku as the “exemplary form of notation” in large part because of its graceful acceptance of inconsequence, its lack of pretension. “I don’t want to play down the inconsequentiality of this micro-technique of *Notatio,*” he writes. “It can return to nothingness, having had no effect whatsoever…this isn’t real (weighty, muscular) writing, but that doesn’t matter” (91). It’s impossible to ignore this very strong desire in Barthes’s text (here and elsewhere) for writing that does not matter. But why write at all if it doesn’t matter? What is the difference between recording fugitive, nondramatic experiences and simply not bothering to so?52

Barthes confesses his love of haiku and his love of the note. It goes beyond mere affection, however: he thinks note taking is sacred. It occurs at the juncture between a flow of undifferentiated “life” and our decisions about what matters: “*Notatio* instantly appears at the

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52 See Francois for a discussion of the difference between doing nothing and barely doing something.
problematic intersection between a river of language, of interrupted language—*life*, both a continuous, ongoing, sequenced text and layered text, a histology of cut-up texts, a palimpsest—and sacred gestures: to *mark* life” (18) Phenomena crowd our senses, each moment proffering itself for consideration, for notation, for being “marked.” Then we take our pens to our Moleskins and write down the world, or the pieces of it that compel us most strongly. Notation submits to the idea that there is, in fact, a world out there and that it matters, and that it is also up to us to mark its salient properties. Barthes puts the matter bluntly: “what notation presents is the problem of realism.” It is “a writing practice that willingly submits to the authority of the Reality-Illusion. From this starting point, how to organize, to sustain *Notatio*” (18)? Thus his “affective link” with the present is not a call for momentary, orgasmic self-shattering (i.e. *jouissance*) but a way of organizing and sustaining the “Reality-Illusion,” the notion that there is something out there (right now) to be indexed (Bersani 30). So the notebook becomes the real, a real that we construct with the self-awareness that its constitution involves sustaining the most elemental fantasy: that there is a world we can observe together.

Yielding notes to the novel represents an uncomfortable and ultimately untenable sacrifice for Barthes. Between the note and the novel “it’s as if there were an invisible, insurmountable wall…as if their waters didn’t mix” (88). What is this wall? The transition from one body of water to another presents a “psychostructural” problem: “the transition from the fragment to the nonfragment” (18). It is important to remember that this lecture course is written in a confessional mode: it all stems from Barthes’s putative desire to write a novel. For him the supposedly necessary transformation from notebook into novel is an ethical problem. The issue is lying. Narrativizing “comes down to conceding to lie, to being capable of lying (it can be very difficult, lying)—to telling that second-order and perverse lie that consists in mingling truth and
falsehood—Ultimately, then, the resistance to the novel, the inability to produce a novel (to engage in the practice of writing one), would be a moral resistance” (109).

He says “moral” here, which suggests that he is obeying a mere rule of conduct (“thou shalt not lie”) but I think there is an important sense in which the practice of notation involves an attitude to the world that respects the “reality-illusion” but refuses various myths of progress. To be a realist novelist, here as in *New Grub Street*, does not mean creating imagistic scenes that will enable identifications based on character traits and their movement toward some kind of final reckoning, but rather a way of imagining an aggregative continuity of pieces that do not have to add up to anything. The assembly, gathering, and accretive aggregation of documents make available the more ethical vehicle for sociality.

3.4 “Queer Little Experience”

George Gissing’s master trope, if he has one, is this: living between a world whose tools have become useless and another whose tools remain indistinct. The things, institutions, and people in his works hover between lapsed and emergent functions. The writers in *New Grub Street* gamble on vestigial or emergent genres. The minimally educated women in *The Odd Women* drift along in a society that has no use for their education nor their wifely charms. “We are in a transition stage,” says Henry Ryecroft with irony, “between the bad old time…and the happy future” (48). This happens to be a cliché about the Victorian period generally (“wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born”). It is also increasingly applied to our own “present” (if there is such a thing) in which institutions are either “restructuring” themselves or stand frozen like deer caught in the headlights. Meanwhile we endure the birth pangs of some new way of life. A sense of an overfull past and a loaded future in the middle of which lies a void: such is the “heroic life of George Gissing.”
Rarely viewed as formal innovations, Gissing’s novels tend to repeat the tropes of his predecessors. In the final third of his life, however, he keeps a Commonplace Book, and eventually transforms many of the notes found there into *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, his last published work, a minor though important formal experiment and a rare publishing success for him. In what remains of this chapter I build on Barthes’s account of notation to advance the argument that Gissing uses the notebook as a genre for contending with this sense of a present on its way to nowhere. Unexpectedly, and ironically, this gives Gissing a way of addressing an audience attuned to the circulation of what Alfred Yule calls “fragments of criticism,” thereby bringing together, on a certain level, the journalistic qualities of Milvain and the realism of Biffen. The process animating *Ryecroft* is more like an open archive than a closed narrative: the book is split into numbered sections that could be removed or added to without there being a great effect on the whole. These are not chapters, then, but more like the numbered notes in a critical edition of a writer’s papers. Barthes would likely call them “dossiers.”

The Commonplace Book contains some notes that end up serving as plot points in his conventional novels, but most of those were put to use in *Ryecroft*, where they serve no purpose in terms of narrative advancement. They do contribute to an ethos of writing based not on action but on the taking of notes. This apparent *preparation* for action becomes instead a way of imagining sociality in terms of the production of documents (in this case, notes) that incorporate seemingly insignificant and non-acting elements in the world, and their mere existence, that they are *there*, becomes the point. Rather than an “incondite miscellany” it is a “fragmentary arrangement” (to use the terms of Gissing’s editorial persona) a mode of containment in which documents perform the function of expanding the field of players involved in what we think of as

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53 Jameson relies on Gissing for an account of reused conventions that he calls “ideologemes,” casting Gissing’s works as derivative of Dickens.
the social scene—down to the blades of grass and the wind on the leaves, those “insignificant” data.

The Commonplace Book is a notebook 8” by 6” containing only 65 pages, and is currently housed in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of The New York Public Library. While most of the entries are undated, the few dates that are present indicate that the notebook was opened sometime in 1887 and continued to 1903. This slim book took sixteen years to fill and exceeded the publication of Ryecroft (there is even a note musing on a typo to be found in the published work). Gissing’s writing is exceedingly small and economical—a single page contains as many as 15 entries—and each note is set apart from the others with a thin differentiating line. The label “Commonplace Book” is in the technical sense a misnomer, given that extracts from other writers make up only a portion of the entries, which are mainly Gissing’s own observations about an array of subjects. There are no topoi or subject headings, which traditional commonplace books would usually feature. Each of the notes floats discretely on the page, unbound by any visible catalogical apparatus. The published edition of the Commonplace Book, while immensely valuable for transmitting this work to a wider readership, effaces this aspect of the notebook. The editor, Jacob Korg, introduces topics such as “Literature” and “Lower Classes” to organize the sporadic reflections gathered in the holograph.

Denunciations of the British public recur throughout the text. Three notes (chosen from many available examples) suffice to make the point:

The untaught vulgar are very defective in the senses; they hear, feel, see, taste, smell, very imperfectly (52)

The outcry of ordinary people that they cannot find interest in novels of common life is intelligible enough. The true interest of such books is in their workmanship, of which these readers understand nothing whatever (53)
I do not love the people – true. But my passion of sympathy for the suffering poor (54). The complicated classism and misanthropy are vintage Gissing. The “ordinary people” lack proper training of their senses, he suggests. They are sensibly impoverished. They cannot abide novels about their own circumstances given their lack of respect for craft. Gissing admits to ambivalence about “the people” but insists, in a sentence fragment, on his sympathy with suffering. Society as it is seems quite hopeless—a shipwreck that continues to drift. Novels about the suffering underclass, purposive forms that had once captivated the Victorian public and which Gissing attempted to reproduce, appear to him equally doomed. We are looking out at the world through a lens that washes the world clean of any higher purpose: pessimism. “Life is meaningless,” he said out loud, a remark recorded at the back of the volume in purple ink (along with other stray pieces of conversation) by his partner, Gabrielle Fleury (67).

Yet Gissing issues his negations in the midst of a notational, documentary practice. Despite the futility and hopelessness of social life, Gissing sustains an attachment to the world by recording it in such a way that is quite up front about the potential inconsequentiality of what he is doing. The notebook contains sanguine affects but only about the most fleeting, small experiences. This is perhaps a part of what has been called Gissing’s “despondent verve” about the “commonplace occurrences of life,” as he calls them.54

The thing that most of all it rejoices me to behold is the shadow cast by clear sunlight (22)

The unspeakable gratitude I owe to various persons—strangers—who have at various times played the piano in a room near to mine so that I could hear & enjoy (22)

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54 The phrase “despondent verve” comes from The Paradox of Gissing by David Grylls, who argues that Gissing issues paradoxical dicta: (1) abandon all hope, and (2) work hard.
There is a positive sacredness about the meal of tea. It is prepared with smiles. It marks the end of domestic work—at all events for mistress, &, in simple houses, for all.

Pleasure in hearing *clink* of the teacups. (26).

Small matters of near-inconsequence float apart from any narrative arrangement. He’s not *doing* anything with these events, he merely documents them and stops. (“Look, this is the kind of thing that happens.”) And what is happening is mainly inconsequential: the real *is* insignificance, a state of affairs that Barthes wants us to take very seriously. The sixteen-year period during which he takes the minimal action of documenting these “insignificant” observations suggests a desire to prolong this experience. As Barthes will discover later in the twentieth century, notation keeps one from refusing the world altogether, and allows one to sustain a relation to the present even as it drives at nothing.

Of course, he does eventually “transform” the Commonplace Book into *Ryecroft*, which, one might argue, proves that these supposedly useless activities were put to use in a more conventional narrative. *Ryecroft*, however, introduces only the most minimal fictional adjustments to the kind of writing we find in the notebook. Ryecroft is a fictional character, to be sure, but his backstory parallels Gissing’s closely, making the book more like a quasi-biography than a novel. Furthermore, the text repeatedly draws our attention to the fact that Ryecroft foreshadows narrative forms, a move that his fictional editor (Gissing himself) approves.

If anything, *Ryecroft* amplifies the “notational” aspects of the Commonplace Book. It represents an attempt on Gissing’s part to take responsibility for his non-purposive view of the world that replaces a narrative with a collection of instants. It imagines the transition, in Barthes’s words, from “fragment to the non-fragment” not by means of novelization but by means of a notebook made public. Thus these feelings of inconsequentiality can be shared—the hope of “The Hope of Pessimism.” As I argued in the first part of this chapter, that essay marks
Gissing’s turn away from positivism and toward the conviction that social bonds are only feasible if they spring from mutual acknowledgment of our own futility. Between the Commonplace Book and Ryecroft a form emerges suitable for enabling these connections between individuals: the notebook, whose conventions depend not on the passive identifications with people better or worse off than me (the sympathetic, positivist model of the novel) but rather upon practices of quotation, fragmentary observation, and an open form to which more could have been added and from which readers may take what they want.

_Hoc erat en votis:_ this was my desire. So reads the epigraph loitering on the front steps of Ryecroft. The words anticipate Barthes’s assertion that novel writing reflects one’s preferences in love. Who or what does Gissing desire? In the simplest sense, perhaps, the epigraph refers to Ryecroft’s lucky break. A minimal frame narrative serves to introduce the circumstances of his life, which bear more than a passing resemblance to Gissing’s. He is a beleaguered and world-weary writer, a “struggling man, beset by poverty” whose writing garners neither notoriety nor financial reward. “The name of Henry Ryecroft never became familiar to what is called the reading public,” runs the first sentence of the preface (5). After a life of thankless toil, Ryecroft receives an unexpected, sizeable annuity from a deceased friend. This sum allows him to leave London behind and retire to a cottage in the vicinity of Exeter, to enjoy a life of “tranquility of mind.” Finally able to abandon “hack-work,” Ryecroft “bade farewell to authorship,” hoping “never to write another line for publication.” Yet among his papers Gissing (writing the preface) claims to find a small bundle of notebooks that his late friend kept during the rustication. These contain “a thought, a reminiscence, a bit of reverie, a description of his state of mind, and so on” (8). _Hoc erat en votis:_ I read this not as a wish for world-renunciation but as a wish for a kind of writing that can enable sociality by means other than identification.
In a manuscript passage left out of the published version of the book, Gissing opines that “Ryecroft ought never to have taken to professional authorship at all…He knew that he had mistaken his vocation…Thinking of this, I asked myself whether the irregular diary might not have wider interest than at first appeared” (183-4). Unpublished notes suggest (here as in the case of Barthes and Biffen) a way of life that makes writing a different practice from writing “stories.” Ryecroft’s physical distance from society is also a distance from its privileged art form. He believes the work he had been forced to undertake made him a “slave of the multitude.”

His anti-sociality could not be more emphatic:

The truth is that I have never learnt to regard myself as a “member of society.” For me, there have always been two entities—myself and the world, and the normal relation between these two has been hostile. Am I not still a lonely man, as far as ever from forming part of the social order? (21)

This withdrawal from the social is not that of a Romantic wanderer, nor an idealist, nor does it represent a utopian questing after a desire to “fix” society by means of a strategic exemption. Ryecroft finds it laughable that he once identified with socialism, or “anything…of the revolutionary kind” (72).

Rather like Gissing, he has long ago given up on the possibility of political transformation. He believes that “sympathetic understanding” is basically a useless category, and he calls it “the rarest thing” (44). He summarizes the “real” condition of humanity with the following dictum: “To every man it is decreed: thou shalt live alone.” As we saw with Harold Biffen’s anchorite tendencies in *New Grub Street*, facing the bleak reality of the world requires abandoning the forms of cruel optimism that the positivist novel of purpose demands of us: “The mind which renounces, once and for ever, a futile hope, has its compensation in ever-growing calm” (44). There is something much stranger here than a mere de-conversion from socialist
values, and indeed the early reviewers of the published book received it quite favorably, noting a slightly more affable tone in the prose (qtd in Coustillas and Partridge 409-11). Where does this affability inhere?

In the passages from the Commonplace Book quoted above, animadversions about society are intermixed with tender attitudes toward fleeting, insignificant objects. The same variegation arises in Ryecroft. Having turned away from the possibility of political activism or reactionary political commitments, Ryecroft chooses simply to look at and document the small, fleeting, and insignificant traces of his world: “I have no wide view before me, but what I see is enough—a corner of waste-land, overflowered with poppies and charlock, on the edge of a field of corn. The brilliant red and yellow harmonize with the glory of the day” (73). The sufficiency of mere looking (“what I see is enough”) occurs without the demand for a more general context (“a wide view”) within which to arrange and place these materials. The book is filled with such descriptions of small items, fleeting natural phenomena, and stray quotations from other works, just as the Commonplace Book presents notes that cherish inconsequent phenomena.

According to “The Reality Effect,” description breaks away from the signifying system of interlocking persons, actions, and things. Description is the antithesis of action, and its “insignificant notations” create the effect of being real. In Ryecroft, the often faint, small, or trivial objects described actually do the work of connection and relation. What might seem like mere stuffing or filler in a novel, a kind of scenography whose only purpose is to “seem” like reality, here becomes absolutely central: everything becomes, in an important sense, insignificant. It is all flattened. Any node in the field of observation is as viable as any other as a point of departure for speculation and for thought, and the effect is a paradoxical democratization of experiences in the midst of a protest against social democracy. Readerly interest is engaged by the basic act of documentation, of description, rather than the insertion of these descriptions into
extended narrative forms which require outcomes: the distribution of rewards and punishments, restoration or dissolution of the social life of characters, marriages, funerals, successful employment, exile, and so forth. And this “readerly interest” refers both to the character’s reading habits and to our own: there is a symmetry, or rather a continuity, between what it is that the “author” is doing in this book and what the “reader” might do on her side of the page. This is, of course, what Barthes famously describes as the “writerly” quality of certain texts, but the difference here is that note-taking configures the relations of the writerly text in a literal, material way. It is not just a hermeneutic but an architecture.

Like the Commonplace Book, Rycroft is filled with instances of reading, serving as a model, perhaps, for the kind of habits Gissing would like to see more widely practiced. The model is of reading and writing without heeding a “future life”: “I cannot preserve more than a few fragments of what I read, yet read I shall persistently, rejoicingly. Would I gather erudition for a future life? Indeed, it no longer troubles me that I forget. I have the happiness of the passing moment, and what more can mortal ask” (38-39)? Now this is a very odd thing for someone to record in a notebook (even a fictional one) whose purpose we would assume has something to do with preservation and the retention of information. But here the notebook operates less like a quarry and more like a Lichtenberg figure or a seismograph, an impression of sudden and ongoing moments—a zero-degree Waste Book that will not be put to future uses, but offers a way of sustaining the present. It is like a rock skimming across the water that does not sink nor touch an opposite shore.

In place of stories, Rycroft jumps from moment to moment, beginning with what he refers to as the “queer little experience” (141). This might be the way sunlight strays across a page of his reading or the tempo of the first snowfall. Any small or minor observation might be
the occasion for greater reflection. What is “queer” about these “little experiences?” In the historical sense, simply their oddness. In the anachronistic sense, of course, insofar as they abjure “a future life” and connect Ryecroft and his readers to the abundance of the present, the “queer little experience” can be read as a metonym for writing that has no future and for the privileges and burdens that arise from living in such a state. In the last chapter we saw how The Picture of Dorian Gray reveals the connection between short bits of speech and the death drive in its queer-theoretical formulation, but in the case of Ryecroft the hedonistic abandon of jouissance is less important that the non-teleological ethics, the focus on the present, the “happiness of the passing moment.” While my argument has insisted upon the notebook and notation in opposition to the organization of narrative, I do not wish to say that these represent a formless condition of perpetual shattering, a condition of perpetual jouissance. Indeed, the leaves and snowflakes to which Gissing’s notations draw our attention hardly seem orgasmic.

Rather than being “shattered” at every moment and advocating for the perpetual dissolution of form, Ryecroft turns away from the future in a mode of restful documentation. This is a way of sustaining a purposeless present without yielding to theoretical or narrative schemata. Thus he watches the movement of time without care to direct it, “sitting in utter idleness…viewing the golden sunlight upon the carpet, letting my eye wander from one framed print to another, and along the ranks of my beloved books. Within the house nothing stirs” (12). Nothing is happening, and Ryecroft, like late-Victorian John Cage, makes a record of this nothing. There is simply a purposeless drift of attention and deixis: “There is the rustle of branches in the morning breeze; there is the music of a sunny shower against the window; there is the matin song of birds” (49). The most dramatic thing that happens is the collection of flora.

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55 In *Minima Moralia* Theodore Adorno notes the increasing importance of small “subjective” reflections in the critique of late capitalism (16). His aphorisms are “intended to mark out points of attack or to furnish models for a future exertion of thought” (18). Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch adopted as similar “bottom-up” approach to their work, especially in *One Way Street* and *Traces*, respectively.
“I had cared very little about plants and flowers, but now I found myself eagerly interested in every blossom, in every growth of the wayside…never since have I lost my pleasure in the flowers of the field, and my desire to know them all” (29). To know them all: again a Whitmanesque desire to include every leaf and atom in his representation. Ryecroft models an openness to the nonhuman elements in his world that embodies the spirit of documentation and observation without positivist directives.

This is not a “Paterian withdrawal,” but an expanded definition of community (Maltz 57). The connections and links to be made here are supposed to be surprising, subjective, but also shareable. Ryecroft is puzzled about the way his mind leaps paratactically between topics: “I am reading or thinking, and at a moment, without any association or suggestion that I can discover, there rises before me the vision of a place I know…Sometimes the vision passes, and there an end; sometimes, however, it has successors, the memory working quite independently of my will, and no link appearing between one scene and the next” (111). These paratactical operations of memory reflect the arrangement of a notebook, of which Ryecroft is an amplification. Aleatory, surprising, and unaccountable effects are sought after here—they become the locus of value and generate an atmosphere of potential surprise and refreshment.

Thus Gissing’s late writing imagines something quite different from literary naturalism. Many of his novels, of course, rehearse the naturalistic theses: social and biological conditions determine all of our choices; freedom is possible only insofar as one has money; one’s fate is determined from birth. Human lives are churned out by a system that swallows them whole. Perhaps Ryecroft shares this view to some extent, given that his notational explorations depend for their existence on a comfortable annuity. Yet the privilege he enjoys allows him to make a claim for the value of the insignificant, documenting phenomena without needing to enfold them into theories, providing only a transient apparatus for their containment that departs from the
causal operations of plot and intrigue and proceeds by paratactical and even random linkages.

Ryecroft relishes his new writing practice because it allows him to suspend the claims of theories and narratives without the descent into total nihilism: “No theory of the world which ever came to my knowledge is to me for one moment acceptable; the possibility of an explanation which would set my mind at rest is to me inconceivable; no whit the less am I convinced that there is a Reason for the All” (12). He is a skeptic, but a loving one, who plucks single details from the world and allows them the shimmer with wonder. The gathered herb, the note about piano music, the stray note culled from the Commonplace Book or written for the first time in Ryecroft—all of these reflect the desire (votis) to let “pieces” of information be only that: pieces collected without a view to explanation but whose very collection and assembly presents social possibilities. I wonder if Gissing has the leaf he sent to Morley Roberts in mind when he writes

What! Can I pluck the flower by the wayside, and, as I gaze at it, feel that, if I knew all the teachings of histology, morphology, and so on, with regard to it, I should have exhausted its meaning…Interesting yes, as observation; but, the more interesting, so much the more provocative of wonder and of hopeless questioning. One may gaze and think till the brain whirls—till the little blossom in one’s hand becomes as overwhelming a miracle as the very sun of heaven (110-111)

Here we get some sense, then, of why Gissing would pick a leaf in Italy and mail it to his friend, as a means of provoking and sharing wonder by means of the most trivial and nondramatic notations.

Before the apotheosis of New Grub Street in the canon of English fiction, Ryecroft was actually Gissing’s most popular work, a great irony given that it is a direct adaptation of a Commonplace Book kept privately for sixteen years and given its supposedly anti-social
character. This collection of notes circulated much more widely than any of his novels. Indeed, its popularity extended internationally, with many Japanese critics in the twentieth century citing it as their favorite book (Hojoh 215). Perhaps if Gissing had not died soon after its publication he would have gone on to produce more experiments in this line. But its widespread popularity and far-ranging circulation suggests that Gissing’s late notational style, despite its socially recessive nature, actually generated public connections and interactions with far more felicity than his novels. In place of the “progressive” insistence on sympathetic identifications we have a sketch of an ethical, networked sociality.
4  Gerard Manley Hopkins’s Idle Documents

“My day won’t come until the day after tomorrow. Some people are born posthumously.”

So Friedrich Nietzsche reflects on his own posterity (3). Gerard Manley Hopkins would surely
have condemned the critique of institutionalized Christianity that follows in The Antichrist, but
the aphorism aptly doubles as a description of his own reception history. Hopkins published next
to nothing in his own lifetime, and it was only in 1918, in the middle of the First World War, that
his friend and confidant Robert Bridges brought out the first edition of the Poems. Newly
accustomed to highly experimental poetry, many readers embraced Hopkins as their
contemporary. In 1926, Laura Riding calls him “one of the first modernist poets,” believing that
the thirty-year delay in publication makes him “even more of a modernist poet” (qtd in Roberts
146-148). In the same year, I.A. Richards also saw within these poems an anticipation of
modernist technique: “his most daring innovations have been…attempted independently by later
poets” (qtd in Roberts 142). Some even muse that Hopkins’s poems serve anachronistically as a
commentary on the Great War (Schad 3).

Claims about Hopkins’s untimely but felicitous appearance in the early twentieth century
also work to isolate him from his own historical moment. F.R. Leavis, writing that Hopkins “is
now felt to be a contemporary” describes him as writing “in complete isolation”: “Hopkins has
no relation to Shelley or to any nineteenth-century poet” (qtd in Roberts 192). Hopkins lived a
very private life, as the title of one biography suggests. Thus the narrative of his literary isolation
finds support in his supposed social isolation, his infamously remote life in the highly disciplined
and withdrawn enclosures of the Jesuits. The proleptic aspects of his poetry exacerbate his social
isolation. In these narratives of reclusion and recovery, twentieth-century readers and critics
explicitly position themselves as providers of the sociality he was supposedly missing during his
own lifetime. They are his true audience, the thinking goes, and they can present him with the
community of reception and connection that he lacked in his own time. The suggestion of his modernist readers and the New Critics is that they provide him with the gift of a context.

Hopkins’s notebooks and diaries function as primary exhibits in arguments about his psychological isolation, a trend that begins with the reception of the first edition of the *Notebooks and Papers* in 1937. One reviewer describes the experience of reading these documents as an experience of loneliness:

> We cannot fail to notice, in the Journal…how fundamentally uninterested in people he was…between him and common humanity and the ideas and events of his time, there was a barrier which we feel he had neither the power nor the will to leap (qtd in Roberts 372)

Writing many decades later, J. Hillis Miller confirms this view: “Hopkins’s *Journal* and his greatest poems are the record of experiences of absolute isolation from other people” (306). If Hopkins’s poetry reaches out for an absent literary audience, as these accounts suggest, his journal retreats. Removing any possibility of connection and communication, his notes dwell in descriptions that do not aim at public reception but instead at intense discipline of his own self.

We might ask, however, whether Hopkins really wants our help. Would he accept our ideas about what sociality means, and our own narrative of recovery? By now many studies have put the brakes on the proto-modernist interpretation of his works, situating them firmly within the Victorian period.56 But does either form of contextualization succeed in making sense of his intense individuality? He is alone, we might say simply, and leave the matter there. However, after studying those documents deemed the most antisocial—the notebooks he kept between 1867-1874—I am not persuaded either by arguments suggesting a missing social context or by those that simply deny the need for one. I want to explore the possibility of reading Hopkins as a thinker of collectivity. In what follows, I suggest that Hopkins imagines the world as a social

56 The first major studies restoring Hopkins to his historical location are Johnson, *Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Poet as Victorian*, and Sullaway, *Gerard Manley Hopkins and the Victorian Temper.*
collective in which people play only a minor, supporting role. Turning to those documents generally taken to be the most antisocial—the notebooks kept between 1867-1874—I argue his acts of description and notation actually constitute a form of what I am calling “impersonal sociality.” In the notebooks, Hopkins makes documents of nonhuman entities in the natural world and their movements, including rocks, trees, mountains birds, stars, and ice. Rather than taking these descriptions as evidence of Hopkins’s total isolation, or as “the raw material for future poems,” as one modernist critic understands them, I read his process of documentation as a mode of tracing communities of nonhuman actors (Weiss 3). In the imagined community of the notes, people play only a partial role, and nonhuman objects in the natural world take on agentive force. While Hopkins is usually treated as a thinker of individualities, of the centripetal “thisness” of every object in the world, I show that his documentary practices do not only specify the uniqueness of objects in the world, but also provide a field in which unexpected and often insignificant elements may gather, connect, and associate with one another and with the observer (Hopkins) himself.

This chapter begins by outlining this admittedly eccentric concept of sociality, drawing upon the heterodox sociologies of Harold Garfinkel and Bruno Latour who approach “the social” as a locally-constructed, ongoing achievement available to close reading. Together they make possible a way of reading Hopkins “ethnomethodologically.” I then turn to Hopkins’s “Early Diaries” to trace his increasing dissatisfaction with lyric poetry as a mode of composition. The energy he puts into aesthetic composition becomes, in the Journals, a generalized epistemological outlook: a way of recording the world’s ongoing, atomistic formation as a mode of intrinsically valuable sociality. I conclude with readings of two late poems, “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves,” and “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and on the Comforts of the Resurrection,” which together reveal Hopkins’s retreat from his commitment to the power of
description as a way of forming community, assigning responsibility for interpreting the value of worldly action to a remote God.

4.2 As of Which

Hopkins’s aesthetic of “uniqueness” has long been a matter of debate among critics, who identify his neologism “inscape” as the unifying principle of his poetic output. Hopkins himself associates the term with the medieval scholastic philosopher John Duns Scotus, who developed his own philosophy of individuality or “haecceity.” What is inscape? “The pattern of attributes in a physical object that gives it at once both its individuality and its unity,” is the standard definition (“Inscape”). The most commonly cited examples of this aesthetic principle are several poems composed in 1877: “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” “God’s Grandeur,” and “The Windhover.” The first of these contains lines which embody the principle as critics understand it:

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   Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
   Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
   Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
   Crying What I do is me: for that I came. (5-8)
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Taken in a general sense, these lines both unite and distinguish all the components of the living world: unite them, because every element of the organic world participates in the same basic activity of self-actualization, and distinguishes them, since the form that this takes for each person or other living thing remains entirely its own. The poem celebrates and cherishes difference, illuminating a world humming with an infinite number of subjectivities chiseling themselves into being, each a collection of contents irreducible to systematic representation: “for Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his” (12-13).

The purposes and ends of life present themselves directly, imminently, rather than being projected into a future state unavailable to mortal comprehension: “The world is charged with the grandeur of God. / It will flame out, like shining from shook foil” (1-2). The natural world
comprises an assembly of entities carrying their end within themselves, existing as an ongoing set of intrinsic finalities, which may be entirely fleeting without this reducing their importance at all. Birds are central figures—both metaphors and metonyms—of this ecstatic movement. Birds fly through so many of these poems, suggesting not a permanent, idealized state of affairs but rather something transient and ephemeral.

Critical interpretations of “inscape” have been heavily influenced by Hopkins’s own alignment of the term with the writings of John Duns Scotus. In 1869, Hopkins reads the medieval Scotus’s *Sentences*, texts which advance the notion of “haecceity” or “thisness.” He reflects on this experience in a letter: “It may come to nothing or it may be a mercy from God. But just then when I took in any inscape of the sky or sea I thought of Scotus” (Journals 221).

*Haecceitas* is a noun of Scotus’s invention, derived from the feminine form of the Latin demonstrative pronoun “haec” meaning “this.” The obvious contrast is with the more commonly known “quiddity,” derived from the same demonstrative pronoun in the masculine. While quiddity has traditionally been interpreted as the “whatness” of a being, i.e. what qualities distinguish it from something else, haecceity refers to that almost ineffable difference that allows us to distinguish objects which are almost identical in their empirical characteristics. A classic example would be the difference between “me” and a clone of “me.” We both possess the same empirical characteristics, and yet we are not the same.

Individuality and uniqueness are thus the hallmarks of inscape and haecceity, at least as far as we understand the ecstatic poems of 1877. Understood as a *poetics*, this makes sense, since both commonplace and theoretical understandings of aesthetic objects make particularity a crucial aspect of their being. Yet when we turn to his note-taking practices, in which he developed his vocabulary of “scape,” the word takes on distinctly *plural* resonances. W.H.

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57 The most thorough study of inscape from a theological perspective is James Finn Cotter’s *Inscape: The Christology and Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins.*
Gardner writes that inscape can run through a “group of things” (qtd in “Inscape”). J. Hillis Miller concurs: “an ‘inscape’ need not be a single object,” he writes. “It can be a group of objects which together form a pattern.” (300) It can also refer to “a group of composed objects” (300). While Hopkins would eventually understand the term as the guiding principle animating his own poetry, it is crucial to note that he develops his concept of the term in the context of his refusal of poetry as “not belonging to my profession” (Collected 314). In the notebooks of 1867-1874, as we will see, he expressly understands inscape as a fact about the world, a kind of webbing that draws disparate objects together into collective social relations, but not for the purpose of writing poems about them, or painting them.

Clearly I am using the word “social” in a somewhat eccentric way. In making the argument that his apparently isolated documents constitute, for Hopkins, a form of sociality, I have turned to a non-Scotian account of haecceity, namely that offered by the twentieth-century sociologist Harold Garfinkel. For Garfinkel, haecceity refers to the process by which individuals compose a social world among and for themselves. Arguing against the notion that “the social” refers to a substance in the world that can be indexed consistently, he views haecceity as the ongoing achievement of the social produced by individuals in an open-ended sequence. In turn, one of Garfinkel’s intellectual descendants, Bruno Latour, extends Garfinkel’s methods by developing powerful tools for treating nonhuman actors as social agents, as participants who contribute equally to the ongoing composition of networks in which people make up only part of the relevant population.

Harold Garfinkel founded a heterodox school of sociology that he calls “ethnomethodology,” commonly glossed as “the study of everyday life.” Ethnomethodology scrutinizes definitions of sociological practice that emphasize large-scale, statistical data collection. Its practitioners challenge the existence of a pre-given “social” dimension of
existence whose explanation rests entirely on their work. Instead, Garfinkel and his students propose that “sociology” is itself an everyday phenomenon, something composed by actors themselves in their daily lives. Ethnomet hodologists assume that “the meaningful, patterned, and orderly character of every life is something people must continually work cooperatively to achieve,” and as a discipline it is “the study of the methods people use of producing recognizable social orders” (Rawls 90). This could involve, for instance, the careful study of institutional documents as productive of social order, or the famous “breaching” experiments, in which observers interrupt the processes by which subjects, often without self-awareness, produce social meanings. In the wake of these breaches observers attend to the subject’s efforts to repair the fractured relations.

Thus the purpose of sociology, in this view, is not to use social analysis to solve other problems but simply to account for the formation of the social itself. In terms of literary studies, there is a parallel in the commonplace but crude distinction we make between “politically-oriented” and “formalist” criticism, the former proposing definitive goals linking its practices to forms of activism, while the latter satisfies itself with the elucidation of generic or literary particulars. Both Latour and Garfinkel turn our literary-critical conception of these polarities on its head, by taking “the social” as that which is formed at the local, particular level and which can be accessed by means of the sociological equivalent of close reading.

Garfinkel’s methodological quarrel with mainstream sociology also resonates loudly with contemporary debates between “traditional” literary criticism and the practices of distant, quantitative analysis. For a broad overview of Latour’s influence on Victorian scholarship, see the Winter 2013 edition of Victorian Studies, in particular the introductory essay and that of Buurma and Heffernan.

58 Heather Love, for example, considers the microsociological practices of Erving Goffman for an alternative method of reading which is, as she puts it “close but not deep.” (Love “Close”). I enlist Garfinkel as offering another such example, one for whom “the
social” returns as that which agents are busy creating through a process of documentation, rather than the telos of all explanations. There can ultimately be no final, fixed notion of what “the social” indexes across all contexts; at the macro-level, what ethnomethodology proposes is a teeming network of overlapping conceptions of sociality, what one commentator refers to as “an assemblage of haecceities” (Rawls 92).

For Garfinkel, “haecceity” captures the process by which individuals describe their location within social relations, descriptions that also create those relations. One of his more verbose titles describes what he means: “Evidence for Locally Produced, Naturally Accountable Phenomena of Order, Logic, Reason, Meaning, Method, etc. In and as of the Essential Haecceity of Immortal Ordinary Society.” Like Latour after him, Garfinkel opposes those sociological methods that assume the world is a chaos of disorderly activity (a “plenum”) in need of analytical explanation by sociologists. He found the tendencies of sociology in the latter twentieth century increasingly misguided for thinking that “order” in this world “can only be discovered after, and as a result of, the application of a social scientific method” (Rawls 23). He frames his stance as a revision of Durkheim’s famous aphorism, which states that “the objective reality of social facts is sociology’s fundamental principle.” This is usually understood to mean that it is up to sociology to discover and specify those facts, to mine them out from a plenum of activity crying out to be counted and analyzed. Garfinkel reformulates Durkheim’s aims:

For ethnomethodology the objective reality of social facts, in that and just how it is every society’s locally, endogenously produced, naturally organized, reflexively accountable, ongoing, practical achievement, being everywhere, always, only, exactly and entirely, members’ work, with no time out, and with no possibility of evasion, hiding out, passing postponement, or buy-outs, is thereby sociology’s fundamental phenomenon (103).

59 The original title used “quiddity” rather than haecceity, but Garfinkel later changed this.
Garfinkel notoriously uses bizarre subordinating conjunctions (such as “in that and just how it is” above) and the even more bizarre relative clause “as of which.” Ironically, Garfinkel did not believe that ordinary language was up to the task of describing ordinary life, and he used words strangely as he mapped individuals’ suturing of their worlds. Elements in social networks must always be understood “as of which,” that is, pertaining to particular networks of sense-making. The effect is one of intense defamiliarization—Garfinkel breaches normal ways of using language in order to refresh the way in which we talk about what counts as social.

Ethnomethodology does not dispute the existence of “objective social facts,” rather it respecifies their location. It is not merely sociologists that generate facts about the social; everyone is doing it all the time. When Garfinkel says that the focus should be on “members’ work, with no time out” he means to forestall the idea that synthesis and interpretation are the purview of the scholar alone. Instead, it is the subject’s work of producing the social that must be brought to light, including the work of the sociologist. While Durkheim, for example used statistics to arrive at truth claims about the nature and conditions of suicide, Garfinkel would ask instead how the statistics came into being in the first place, suspending the notion of a “real” state of affairs that could be documented and indexed. Indeed, some view Garfinkel as sociology’s answer to poststructuralism, since he does not take any concept as structurally essential and insists upon the context-specific production of meaning—in this, people have noted his debt to (but not his replication of) the philosophy of Wittgenstein in emphasizing the uses to which words are put, and Husserlian phenomenology in taking seriously the existential conditions within which actors live and the daily processes that give order to their lives (Rawls 90).

In another baroque sentence, Garfinkel sets out to respecify the target of sociology from “analytic methods” (which rely, crucially, on the collection of data and a massive scale) and
toward an ethnomethodological approach. In other words, Garfinkel thinks we should study—by means of interviews, conversation, and documentation—the incremental, slow process by which individuals compose the meaning of “sociality” for themselves:

whereas formal analytic studies focus on aggregated individuals described demographically as enumerated populations, Ethnomethodology proposed instead that the local, endogenous workings of the phenomenon, the Thing, the social fact—freeway traffic jams, walking together, the *exhibited order of service in formatted queues, turn taking in conversation*—exhibits among its other details the coherence of its identifying orderliness as the population that staffs it (*Ethno* 66)

Ethnomethodologists tend to practice a form of “total immersion” in the social contexts whose “patterned orderliness”—haecceity—they wish to record and account for. Their practice often attends to the consideration of particular “scenes” of sociality and not the systems supposedly underlying them.

Readers of Bruno Latour will recognize Garfinkel’s importance to the development of actor-network theory. “It would be fairly accurate to describe ANT as half Garfinkel,” Latour explains (*Reassembling* 54). In his interpretation, Garfinkel “believed sociology could be a science accounting for how society is held together, instead of using society to explain something else or to help solve one of the political questions of the time” (13). Latour’s crucial contribution to this program involves extending Garfinkel’s account of the social to include nonhuman actors, whether this means tools the scientist brings with her into scenes of investigation or the institutional contingencies within which things and people constellate. He explains that social “doesn’t designate a domain of reality or some particular item,” but rather is “an association between entities which are in no way recognizable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together…thus, social, for
ANT, is the name of a type of momentary association which is characterized by the way it
gathers together into new shapes” (64-65). Central to this process is the building of ties and
relationships. If there is no definable place or thing that we can point to as being “the social,”
then, what matters for Latour is the process by which networks form. Thus he redefines sociality
as association, ignoring who or what is being associated. He emphasizes a definition of
collectivity that is ongoing and also ephemeral.

The concept of haecceity, then, comes to mean something very different in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth century from what John Duns Scotus intended. Yet it can still help
us to understand what Hopkins was undertaking in his notebooks, so long as we acknowledge
that his use of the word “scape” is not fully exhausted by the Scotian theology. While Scotus
used the word to index a thing’s irreducible, concrete specificity, its exalted individuality,
Hopkins uses the word to reflect specific contingencies of assemblages and of collectivities.60
What distinguishes Hopkins in particular is his recognition that nonhuman actors may also be
considered as social entities producing patterned order in the world. Furthermore, just as the
ethnomethodologist practices a form of immersion in social worlds—merging and integrating
with the orderliness she wishes to document—so too does Hopkins situate himself as a node in
these networks of connection, however temporarily and provisionally.

4.3 The Early Notebooks

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60 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduce another interpretation of haecceity as “assemblage” that, like
Garfinkel’s, comes closer to what I am arguing Hopkins means by “scape.” In A Thousand Plateaus, haecceity
indexes “a mode of individuation” which is “not defined by the form that determines it nor as a determinate
substance or subject nor by the organs it possesses or the function it fulfills” (287). They “reserve the name
haecceity” for “a mode of individuation very different from that of a person, subject, thing, or substance.” Rather
than specifying an ontological stability already present in things, haecceities “consist entirely of relations of
movement and rest between molecules and particles, capacities to affect and be affected” (288). Haecceity “is the
entire assemblage in its individuated aggregate,” which is to say that it refers to entities “entering into composition”
with others: “the street enters into composition with the horse, just as the dying rat enters into composition with the
air” (289).
The early notebooks, also referred to as the “early diaries,” or C1 and C2, are two identical, small books whose entries begin on September 24, 1863, and continue until January 1866 (Journals 529-530). Editors Humphrey House and Graham Storey list their contents: “every kind of memorandum: time-tables of lectures; notes about money, furniture, breakfast parties, wine parties, books read and books to be read, the uses of words; descriptions and drawings of things seen; notes for poetry and the first drafts of many verses” (vii). Many of these “notes for poetry” are included in the Oxford University Press edition of the collected edition under the heading “Fragments.” Not included in the 1937 House edition or Storey’s 1959 expansion, however, are numerous crossed-out confessions in which Hopkins documented his fits of idleness, depression, proud thoughts, and instances of masturbation and homoerotic desire.

C1 and C2 have thus been subjected to at least two forms of “recovery”: 1) an editorial reconstruction of what are putatively lyrics in gestation, and 2) a biographical narrative of Hopkins’s queer desires. In this section I follow the grain of the notes to read against the narrative of recovery. Rather than interpreting the crossed-out lyrics and confessions in the notebooks as straightforward losses of aesthetic investment (whether of nature or of male beauty), I wish to argue for the possibility that these negations make possible the kinds of writing we find in the notebooks he kept after taking Jesuit orders. In these latter books Hopkins sought to generalize the aesthetic potentials contained both within poetry and his own “sterile” desires, transforming these forms of pleasure and enjoyment into a more generalized epistemological outlook: a way of recording the world’s ongoing, atomistic formation as a mode of intrinsically valuable sociality.

What authorizes editors to isolate bits of writing in the notebook and declare them serviceable as lyric fragments? If Hopkins took the time to burn his early poems, an incident he refers to as “the slaughter of the innocents” why did he leave the notebooks intact, especially
given their rather incriminating contents? When it comes to certain selections, there are clear reasons justifying their selection: they are written in blank verse, for instance, or they have an identifiable rhyme scheme. In other cases, however, things get muddy. Consider the following notes, the bold sections of which were excerpted as lyrics by Norman H. MacKenzie in his 1989 expansion of the Poems:

1.
Saw what was probably a heron:
it settled on a distant elm, was
driven away by two rooks, settled
on a still more distant, the same thing
happened, the rooks pursuing it. It then
flew away across the water, circled about,
and flew Hampsteadwards away.

   the sparky air
Leaps up before my vision.--thou are gone
(Early Poetic Manuscripts 97)

2.
The sky minted into golden sequins.
Star like gold tufts
--- --- golden bees.
--- --- golden rowels.
Sky peak’d with tiny flames.
Stars like tiny spoked wheels of fire.
Lantern of night, pierced in eyelets (or eyelets which avoids ambiguity.)
Altogether peak is a good word. For sunlight through shutter, locks of hair, rays in brass knobs etc. Meadows peaked with flowers.

   His gilded rowels
Now stars of blood.
(Early Poetic Manuscripts 138)

In these two examples, the situation is not so clear-cut as it would be if there were a rhyme scheme or consistent meter. Some of the bolded lines almost get there. For example, “leaps up before my vision – thou art gone,” does scan as iambic pentameter. “The sky minted into golden sequins” has ten syllables, although the scansion does not quite work and the remaining images describing stars do not assume any recognizable metrical pattern.
The decision to mark these sections off as lyric fragments seems to be primarily motivated by a desire to distinguish their activity from the descriptions and commentary that surround them. Before the image of “the sparky air,” for instance, Hopkins is merely describing the behavior of birds chasing one another, without seeking to crystallize these images into something he would have recognized as a “poetic” form, understood as rhyme scheme + meter. In the case of the second passage, the sequence of similes suggests the preparation for another poem, but the commentary on the quality of different words (eyelets, peak) takes him away from the actual act of composition and pushes him to describe words as he had described a heron.

The decision about where the lyric begins and ends in these excerpts thus remains an open question, especially since other editors have made different choices about what constitutes a poetic moment in the notebook and what does not. In 1945, for instance, New Directions published Selections from the Note-Books of Gerard Manley Hopkins, in which the editor Theodore Weiss assembles fragments from the Humphrey House edition that seem to him particularly salient. In this period, New Directions published experimental, modernist verse. Weiss places Hopkins’s journal entries in such company: “No need to stress his work’s relation to Emily Dickinson and the imagists, with their desire for immaculate looking,” he writes (3). And again: “[T]he rarity of [Hopkins’s] pointed patience and unblinking application finds freshest remembrance in such precisionists as Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams” (3).

Weiss has no interest in the sections quoted above, preferring other moments in the notebooks:

Moonlight hanging or dropping on treeptops like blue cobweb.

Note that the beaded oar, dripping, powders or sows the smooth with dry silver drops (Weiss 5).
Depending on who is acting as the rescuer, then, different sections of the notes become poems, while others do not. Change the point of view and the genre changes, from lyric fragment to imagist snapshot, from inconsequential side-note to prose composition.\textsuperscript{61}

My point here is not that the difference between a poem and a non-poem is fundamentally undecidable and ambiguous. My concern is that by trying to ferret out the “true” poem, we lose sight of the notebook in which these writings appear. The comparison with Dickinson is apt, and not only because they are both reclusive poets. Both writers’ reputations depend on acts of textual recovery, and we can never be entirely sure that the restoration this involves represents an adequate response to the motivations of the writings themselves. In “Dickinson Undone,” Virginia Jackson surveys the efforts of contemporary editors and online curators committed to bringing Dickinson’s handwritten materials to the public in a direct, “immediate” way—downplaying the role of editors and transcribers and allowing the scraps of Dickinson’s envelopes or notepapers to “speak for themselves” as it were. Jackson calls this process “unprinting.” While she sees a great deal of potential in these projects, she critiques them for paradoxically reifying the idea of lyric—she is concerned that everything that Dickinson wrote gets subsumed under this category, even when the process of unprinting would seem to generate other possibilities. “How or why do we recognize poems as lyrics?” she asks. “Would we recognize a lyric poem if we saw one” (131)? Jackson argues that when granting more “direct” access to Dickinson’s acts of inscription, we needn’t cast a lyric aura over everything she did; we should instead relinquish the hold of lyric altogether in favor of “something else.” She concludes her essay by asking whether “in this century we can allow Dickinson to have written something other than lyrics, something stranger than what we already know how to read” (148).

\textsuperscript{61} For a reading of the notebooks as prose, see Ravinthiran.
In the case of Hopkins, what seems inconsequential to the genuine activity of composing poetry reveals the care Hopkins lavishes on his descriptions of objects in the natural world, without such descriptions having to produce lyrical outcomes. Even when we do come across something that, due to the objective qualities of rhyme and metre, counts as a “poem” in the traditional sense, these are frequently crossed-out, negated:

The wind, that passes by so fleet,  
Runs his fingers through the wheat,  
And leaves the blades, where’er he will veer  
Tingling between dusk and silver (Journals 9)

For what reason he crossed out these lines, we will never know, but the literal crossing-out of a poem foreshadows his imminent decision to give up poetry, a choice precipitated by his resolution to join the Jesuit order.

Toward the end of C2, another set of inscriptions is negated in the same way: his confessions of desires for boys and men at Oxford. In their respective editions, House and Storey each exclude all of the confessional passages from C1 and C2, including the many confessions documenting the fact that Hopkins experienced homoerotic fantasies regularly. Interestingly, the widespread confirmation of Hopkins’s queerness coincided with the publication of facsimiles of the early notebooks, and their correspondent transcriptions. The “outing” of the manuscripts also “outs” Hopkins, or at least pushes him further “out” than he had been. Beginning on March 25, 1865, he takes up the curious exercise of inscribing sins and moral lapses of all kinds into his notebook, and then crossing them out once he had confessed them face-to-face:

Wicked thoughts have occurred and not been at once driven away (Early 155)  
Looking at a dreadful word in Lexicon (156)  
Looking at a man who tempted me (156)  
Looking at a cart boy from Standen’s shop door (157)  
Looking at boy thro’ window (162)
Looking at a man who tempted me on Port Meadow (168)

Sitting up late. Temptations yielded to. (169)

This eccentric process of inscribing sins and then crossing them out when they had been confessed comes at the advice of Henry Liddon, Hopkins’s confessor, who sought to bring Anglican habits closer to their Catholic counterparts (Higgins).

In a 1979 article “Recovering Hopkins, Recovering Ourselves,” Michael Lynch declares simply that “Hopkins was gay,” adding that “a thoroughgoing homoeroticism” saturates his entire output. For Lynch, working before the refinements of queer theorists in the decades to come, the recovery of Hopkins as a gay poet represents “the way towards recovering the gayness of the whole aesthetic” (112), saying that it is less the recovery of an identity that matters so much as it means recovering “an imagination” (116). The publication of these notebooks created widespread and publicly available evidence of Hopkins’s sexual proclivities, serving as evidence in several arguments bearing on the question of his relationship to other men.

The widespread project of “recovering” queer subjects, of which Lynch’s article serves as a paradigmatic example, presents ethical questions. Do figures from the past want to be rescued? Do they wish to have their interior lives identified with queer lives as they exist in our own time? In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love interrogates and makes strange the instinct to salvage identities from the past. Such forms of interpretation, she argues, are motivated by instrumental concerns: “in a society that is based on use and appropriation, the relation to the past can only be instrumental” (9). However, sometimes the past resists our instrumental gestures: it is very difficult to imagine, for example, Hopkins being happy with the prospect of joining a canon of queer authors. The record includes dark pages of pain, friction, or resistance that cannot be easily transmuted into a contemporary political orientation and methodology: the crossed-out passages cannot simply be uncrossed, nor can the negation this implies be explained, I think, simply by
pointing the finger at a homophobic society that refused to accommodate certain forms of desire.

“Texts or figures that refuse to be redeemed disrupt not only the progress narrative of queer history but also our sense of queer identity in the present,” Love writes (8). Rather than looking at Hopkins’s notebooks, therefore, as the confirmation of his membership in the “queer” club, or as more evidence of the evils of Catholicism, we might ask instead what they are doing as notes. What if we took seriously the possibility that his notes are not just the abortive version of a life unlived, nor the embryos of future poems of works or prose, but something that we don’t already know how to read?

Queer critics have already begun the work of “unrecovering” Hopkins, describing his asceticism as a willful sublimation of desires for other men into what Linda Dowling calls the “spiritual procreancy” of homosocial life such as that made available by the Jesuits. I wish to consider the epistemological leverage that Hopkins gained from declining to direct his writings toward the fixed form of poetry, or by directing his desires toward sexual acts. Instead, Hopkins takes up a consistent notational style during the period of 1866-1872—that is, rather than sliding between verse, reading notes, and confessions, he focuses entirely on documenting phenomena of the observable world, not directing these toward future use in poems. Similarly, his sensuous relation to the world multiplies and ramifies beyond a straightforward object choice, drawing not only human forms but all manner of fleeting or inert objects into the medium of his documents. The consequence is not hermetic withdrawal but a projection of a community, however tenuous and strange. While neglected, wayward, or “outriding” phenomena have long been the subject

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62 Julia Saville, for instance, arguing against the project of recovery, suggests that Hopkins’s queerness represents a kind of masochistic discipline, and that “the rigorous ascesis that Hopkins practiced in both his poetry and his daily life militates against any simple inclusion of him in a homosexual literary subculture of the kind cultivated by his contemporaries” (5). Frederick Roden concurs, reading his “desires for men’s bodies reached the greatest height of Christian sublimation” (83). Joseph Bristow takes a slightly different approach, reading Hopkins’ persistent attention to the working-class male body as a form of devotion to Christ’s body (694).
matter of poetry, Hopkins wants a way of connecting to such things by a conduit other than art as such.

4.4 Community without People

Hopkins makes his last entries in C2 in January 1866, beginning the *Journals* in May of that year. These comprise five larger notebooks. In the first of these, on the verso of the front cover, Hopkins writes “Please not to read” (*Journals* 529). In the third, he records that he “resolved to become a religious,” (165) six days later burning his early poetic manuscripts, an event that he refers to in the journal as the “slaughter of the innocents” (165). Following the figurative cancellation of aesthetic form and queer desire we saw in the last section, materialized as the cross-outs in C1 and C2, comes a process of documenting collectives in the world. The faint effort toward lyric patterning in the early diaries becomes, in the *Journals*, an epistemological outlook aimed at mapping a community of nonhuman agents in the natural world.

These notebooks therefore represent acts of composition, but not in the sense of producing literary works to be read and circulated amongst readers. What they present is, I am arguing, an ethnomethodology, a local and contingent practice of composing a network of nonhuman actors, of objects natural or human made that take on the status of an agentive community. Hopkins creates a neologism, “scape,” which he uses alternately to index an already-present feature of the world that links components of a scene together, and also functions as an action undertaken by Hopkins himself—by describing things and folding them into his notebook he composes groups that have the status of community.

We have already heard that human beings make very few appearances in these pages, that Hopkins “boggled at people” (Weiss 3). When they do appear, humans are usually pictured at a distance, falling into relation with a landscape or the pattern of a larger scene. A stray note reads,
for instance, “in the valley a girl with spindle and distaff tending cows” (179). At one point he compares them explicitly to things: “the composition of the crowd…the short strokes of eyes, nose, mouth, repeated hundreds of times…like those something in effect on the cusp-ends of six-foils in the iron tracery in the choir gates in our chapel” (139-40). Or, watching a musician play “the finger glasses” and sitting back “to watch her fingers flying and at the distance the articulations vanishing, they wave like flakes or fins or leaves of white” (167-8). The effect is to place human movements in a visual continuum with other objects, rather than to isolate them as personalities and identities.

When other people appear as *speakers* he regards them as obstacles to be overcome or avoided as he makes his documents. “Men, he thought, had sprung from slime,” he writes in the “Parminedes Notebook” kept earlier at Oxford (*Journals* 130). Although it is certain that the Catholic Hopkins could hardly have believed that men were slime, the sentiment resonates with the recessive tendencies legible in the notes. “Even with one companion ecstasy is almost banished,” he writes. “You want to be alone and to feel that, and leisure—all pressure taken off” (182). While humans do not play a starring role in these notebooks, the natural world does. He pictures it as alive, a teeming network of agencies, using personification to suggest their vitality:

Green-white tufts of long bleached grass like heads of hair or the crowns of heads of hair, each a whorl of slender curves, on tuft taking up another—however these I might have noticed any day. I saw the inscape though freshly, as if my eye were still growing, though with a companion the eye and the ear are for the most part shut and instress cannot come. (228)

Actual people interfere with his activity of engaging a community peopled by things. While the notes have been treated by critics of so many instances of “selving,” of identifying the individuality of different entities, his personifications take the form of multiples, of groups: “The
mountain ranges, as any series or body of inanimate like things not often seen, have the air of persons and of interrupted activity; they are multitudinous too” (171).63 “They are multitudinous too”: Hopkins attends to groupings of things in the world, clusters of agents, rather than things in isolation. Fantasies of community abound, despite the precision and specificity of the descriptions.64

I am thus proposing a reevaluation of Hopkins’ s neologism “inscape,” generally understood in the limited sense of referring to the aesthetic unity of a single object. Reading the journals, it is clear that “inscape” is the nominative form of what is a much larger and active concept of “scaping.” Following Hopkins’ s own plural use of this term and its derivatives, I propose to uncouple the prefix “in” from “scape” in order to suggest that he uses it primarily in the active sense of tracing connections between things and of revealing their own propensity to create relations amongst themselves. Almost immediately after his renunciation of poetry in 1868, Hopkins takes up the regular use of this term, which is often understood to refer to metaphysical essence. James Cotter defines it as “the hidden law of the universe,” explaining it as the “mark and telos of unity that connected each with everything else. For this controlling and incorporating energy and end, the poet coined the word inscape” (9). This definition suggests a property like a soul, something unique, indomitable and lodged within everything, a pantheistic force. Note that Cotter includes the suggestion of “connection”: inscape refers not only to the intrinsic form of an object but its capacity to join and link up with others.

In my view, “scaping” is better treated as a channel for linking agencies together in a communal space of representation. If it is a kind of beauty, it is the beauty disclosed by ongoing communal assembly. The tendency among critics, focusing on Hopkins’ s later poetics, has been

63 On “selving” and Hopkins, see Ong.

64 In what has become known as “The Communist Letter,” Hopkins writes “horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist” (Collected 210)
to understand “inscape” as a more technical synonym for “beauty,” plain and simple, or, as we saw earlier, to align it with Duns Scotus’s theories of haecceity. Neither of these interpretations, however, captures the range and possibilities with the “scaping” terminology as it appears in the notebooks. Concerned with plural, “multitudinous” groups of mainly nonhuman entities, the inscape concept runs against the Scotian account of haecceity, rather than upholding it. In addition to specifying the unique qualities of a stream or a mountainside, it can also serve to link these together, to yoke apparently separate objects together in a network, in particular those elements of the world that seem negligible, uncountable, or fated to be lost.

Thus it is not the inscape of a single star that interests him, rather it is “a scape of stars” (170): scape is thus a synonym for “group.” Groups of leaves, rather than a single leaf, compel him: “I have a note on elm-leaves, that they sit crisp, dark, glossy, and saddle-shaped along their twigs” (152). Even when discussing uncountable nouns, such as cloud, or flowing water, Hopkins deploys a plural vocabulary invoking networks and constellations of agents: “In the train noticing that strange rotten-woven cloud which shapes in leaf over leaf of wavy or eyebrow textures: it is like fine webs or gossamers held down by many invisible threads” (184). He even has to remind himself to render things in the singular: “It was easy to see the cross-hatched lines of flow in the glaciers below the Goernergrat: they—or it, one should say—”(181). There is thus a plural quality to scaping, and also something ongoing, impermanent, and flexible about the concept. A “scape” is not a fixed object the world, a telos already present that needs to be uncovered by a watchful eye, but is rather an activity of linkage available to things as much as people.

Hopkins uses the word as a verb, something he is doing to the things he looks out on: “Before I had always taken the sunset and the sun as quite out of gauge with each other other, as indeed physically they are…but today I inscaped them together and made the sun the true eye
and ace of the whole” (italics added, 196). Inscape, here, becomes an activity that Hopkins contributes to the scene, rather than an innate quality to be discerned. This is an important redefinition of the term, one that points to the inaccuracy of Cotter’s account, which constructs inscape as a final cause governing the essence of things whether or not anyone is there to look at them. As the passage continues, the prefix “in” falls away, enabling another twist on the root word: “It was all active and tossing out light and started as strongly forward from the field as a long stone or a boss in the knop of the chalice-stem: it is indeed by stalling it so that it falls into scape with the sky” (196). Here “scape” becomes a noun again, apparently synonymous with the word “relation” or perhaps “unity.”

As Anthony Mortimer notes, the journals are filled with images of “webs, nets, meshes, cords, ropes, laces, braids and strands,” whose purpose suggests an activity of “holding in, tying together, preserving form in beings whose natural tendency would otherwise be towards formlessness and dissolution” (11). Included in these networks and meshes are many elements of apparently little consequence. His understanding of “network” seems to be specifically something aleatory and quick to dissipate, for example the texture of the surface of his hot chocolate:

I have been watching clouds this spring and evaporation, for instance over our Lenten chocolate…the film seems to be set with tiny bubbles which gives it a grey and grained look…It would be reasonable then to consider the films as the shell of gas-bubbles and the grain on them as a network of bubbles condensed by the air as the gas rises” (204) Clouds are favored citizens in Hopkins’s world, and across the early and later notebooks he continually sketches the shape of the sky on a given day. Cloud formations are exemplary expressions of connection and linkage. Watching “a long chain of waxen delicately moulded clouds,” he suggests that they resemble “a brain,” with “a network of many cords” (208).
In one of the most often-quoted passages of the journals (a “canonical” note, one might say) he describes snow linking numerous forms like an animal skin: “If you took the skin of a white tiger…and swung it tossing high in the air and then cast it out before you it would fall and so clasp and lap round anything in its way just as this glacier does” (174). The polysyndeton here (even more extensive in the full passage) suggests a piling up, linking activity. Ambiguity arises as to whether this accretive activity is entirely mimetic, reflecting the condition of connectedness of these various elements, or whether the “ands” could simply continue to amass more and more elements of the scene if Hopkins was so inclined. The trope reflects the accretive activity of the notebooks taken as a whole, in the sense of just adding more and more documents into the dossier.

His textual notes take on the quality of musical notes being arranged into different combinations, always with the potential of having elements added, withdrawn, or substituted for one another, and where the result is not an aesthetic production but a grouping, a network. As he watches the world he seems attentive to the variety of possible conjunctions and tonal harmonies made possible by different atomic elements in the world, and the work of scaping is the work of drawing disparate tones and even colours into relation. Describing the appearance of a rainbow in the midst of clouds, he performs the activity of linkage, as though testing how far the scene could be made to accommodate various elements, in this case colours: “Richness of the greens…then the blue-green of the lake, then again the grass-green of the heights beyond, and to add a fourth note the sun coming out accented the forward brows and edges of the Battenalp with a butter-bright lustre” (176). “Note” in this passage slides between the meanings of an element, a musical note forming part of a chord, and also a textual, descriptive note of the kind he is writing.
Yet if this moment seems to reinstate the aesthetic values of scaping as a sketch which renders a traditionally beautiful or sublime scene that could have been painted by J.M.W. Turner, consider the many other moments in which the elements which fall into networked patterns do not accord with the usual subject matter of visual art or poetry in this period. Scaping serves both an accretive and integrative function for collecting experiences, no matter how derelict or abject. Two days before Christmas, in 1869, Hopkins found himself sleepily listening to a Jesuit superior carrying out a discourse about the Apostles for the benefit of the novitiates. Suddenly, in Hopkins’s dreamy mind, there appeared an image of an Apostle constrained by a particular piece of wood, which he remembered seeing “in an outhouse.” Yet in his vision it rises again, demanding his attention: “It is just the things,” he remarks, “which produce dead impressions, which the mind, either because you cannot make them out or because they were perceived across other more engrossing thoughts, has made nothing of and brought into no scaping, that force themselves up in this way afterwards” (194, italics added). Visible here is a proto-Freudian account of the dream as a “day-residue” (Freud 397). Yet the appearance of the piece of outhouse wood seems not to be a form of wish fulfillment; rather it seems to mark scaping as a quasi-ethical practice of linking fragmentary experiences and conserving observations. It is difficult to see how Hopkins could have composed a lyric poem based on his “dead impression” of a piece of wood in an outhouse, yet the notebooks suggest that it is yearning to be brought into connection with a surround.

Thus scaping need not merely refer to the beautiful exactly, but to this integrative, accretive action brought about by documentation, producing a vision of sociality and community. Everything—even the piece of wood in the outhouse—asks to be brought “into scaping.” Those impressions which seem negligible, incountable, or fated to be lost, proffer themselves up as eligible to be folded into the community. In this sense, the activity of scaping may be compared
with what Barthes calls “the reality effect,” in which those “insignificant notations” within a realist novel become paradoxically “significant” as the signs of reality (141) Even dying and the ravages of old age find accommodation within the network: “It is not that inscape does not govern the behavior of things in slack and decay as one can see even in the pining of the skin in the old and even in a skeleton but that horror prepossesses the mind (211). Horror and disgust, brought on by the trifling objects in an outhouse or by objects generally thought ugly or hideous, are no criteria against being incorporated into the system of connections Hopkins imagines in his notes.

When Hopkins takes up poetry again in 1874, the permutations of the small word “scape” fall away, leaving only the form “inscape.” The evidence suggests that he applied this term only to poetry henceforth. The capacity of “scaping” to compose scenes of related elements is lost, and what prevails is the activity of a centripetal “inscape” reflecting the patterned uniqueness of isolable (and, as we will see, increasingly isolated) things in the world.

4.5 Pinned Wings

In the ecstatic poems of the 1870s and 1880s, it is the atoms of the language itself that are networked by the organizing forces of “inscape.” As he writes in a letter to Bridges in early 1879: “what I am in the habit of calling ‘inscape’ is what I above all aim at in poetry” (Collected 334). “Scaping” in its more diffuse sense drops away entirely, and his focus moves from detailing the distributed character of this force in the world to prizing its appearance in verse forms. In his late lecture notes, kept later during his time in Dublin, he writes that “Poetry is in fact speech only employed to carry the inscape of speech for the inscape’s sake” (Journals 289). Before he took up poetry again, he takes notes in a centrifugal, rambling style, interested in every speck of beauty, inconsequence, or ugliness. The notes move like a needle and thread through the fabric of everything, and the sense is one of drawing everything together within the field of his
documents: he is making a world. In this regard, the poems are in some sense less ambitious, moving in the opposite direction, winding themselves up into tightly bound spools of sonic control. The invention of sprung rhythm, his complex metrical system of stressed syllables represented through angled marks on the page reflects a disciplinary approach to verse composition, however eccentric the poems are.

At first this yields works of intense devotional energy, even ecstasy: “for Christ plays in ten thousand places / Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his” (12-13). He consistently represents this play of Christ with the imagery of birds and wings. The poems of 1877, in particular, draw detailed pictures of winged creatures that incarnate divine power: “how he wrung upon the wimpling wing / in his ecstasy!” he writes of the kestrel in “The Windhover” (4). In “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” the bird of the title stands metonymically for the activity of self-fashioning undertaken by “each mortal thing”: “myself it speaks and spells / Crying what I do is me, for that I came” (7-8). Individuality appears in these poems as a great virtue, as the shared expression of common mortals. All the flickering energy once dispersed across everything in the world redounds to birds alone.

This “selving” action, however, carries the obverse possibility of isolation, of imprisonment. Alongside these effusive celebrations of birds, another poem in 1877 pictures the energy of flight bound up, imprisoned. In “The Caged Skylark,” Hopkins places the bird in the cage:

As a dare-gale skylark scanted in a dull cage,
Man’s mounting spirit in his bone-house, mean house, dwells—
That bird beyond the remembering his free fells;
This in drudgery, day-labouring-out life’s age (1-4)

To be scanted means to be made small, diminished, restricted, reduced to a point. Where the windhover had looped through the sky unfettered by a cage, the skylark is enclosed in the sense of being within bars, and in being made to serve as a symbol for the human spiritual condition.
The somewhat clichéd image calls attention to the negative possibilities of describing things within poetic constraints. Thus the cage serves as a symbol for the human body containing an immortal spirit—a common enough image—but also stands as a metonym for the action of the poem itself, confining the patterning efforts that had in the notes extended beyond the production of strictly aesthetic objects. As Hopkins’s poetic compositions progress through the 1880s, however, the bars of the cage close in still further, and his works become increasingly skeptical about the possibility of connection and relation with the objects of this world.

Hopkins spent the last five years of his life (1884-1889) teaching classics at the newly formed University College, Dublin, where he had been sent, against his own wishes, to fulfill the needs of a Catholic university seeking to expand and bolster its academic credentials. “I am in Ireland now; now I am at a third / Remove,” he writes, locating himself a step away from God and then a further step away from his beloved English home (“To Seem” 9-10). In this fallen state he composes what are among his most experimental and depressive poems. In the first year after his arrival, he writes what are variously referred to as the “Terrible Sonnets” or the “Sonnets of Desolation,” characterized by waves of despair and a cold existential void at the heart of the speaker: “O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall / Frightful, sheer, no-man fathomed” (“No Worst” 9-11). No stranger to isolation, Hopkins faced levels of loneliness and withdrawal in Dublin that are indeed difficult to fathom. The long poetic career that began with “The Wreck of the Deutschland” and which included numerous ecstatic poems ended in bleak, institutional acedia. Neither is the world of nature and the nonhuman a source of refuge as it had been.

The earlier poetry was distinguished by its effusive celebrations of the fluctuating presentations of the world. In Dublin, however, Hopkins finds in such phenomena nothing to celebrate, and rather than producing documents that reflect the availability of energetic life in
this world, he tabulates experiences and closes them off from sensuous engagement, as though preparing to deliver them to an accountant who will sort through them with cold, clinical hands. Late in the 1880s he writes two sonnets that exemplify this mentality of tabulation, “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” and “That Nature is Heraclitean Fire and On the Comforts of the Resurrection.” Written at the end of his life, these poems are themselves obsessed with endings and conclusions—on teloi—specifically of the second coming of Christ and the ensuing apocalypse. The ebullient celebrations of flickering wings and fleeting beauty, so prevalent in his previous writings, here collapse in a teleological and eschatological plot.

In this doctrinally Catholic view of the end-times, all individual actions will be flattened and reduced in a totalizing and terrifying metric. “Sibyl” refers, of course, to the prophet of the apocalypse (380):

[…]
Let life, waned, ah
let life wind
Off her once skeined stained veined variety upon, all on two spools;
part, pen, pack
Now her all in two flocks, two folds—black, white; right, wrong; reckon but, reck
but mind
But these two; ware of a world where but these two tell, each off the other; of a
rack
Where, selfwrung, selfstrung, sheathe- and shelterless, thoughts against thoughts
in groans grind. (10-14)

A binary operation overtakes variety, forecloses multiplicity. The repetition of the word “two” is striking, but so is the spatial dimension within which the work takes place. There are “spools” upon which the features of the world will be wound up, sorted, classified. These are “flocks,” “folds,” and also a “rack”: the language suggests a figure turning a mechanical crank conveying a belt of flapping wings into one of two possible containers. If the notes present the blithe and pleasurable activities of the collector, producing a flutter of documents of “whatever is fickle,” “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves” reflects a very different worldview, one in which a finished collection gets channeled toward fixed moral classifications.
Hopkins’s other late sonnet, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire” enacts a similar action, this time taking human action in particular as a collection of fleeting effects to be processed by a remote agency in the future. The title itself indexes a world of flux rendered stable by the terminal resurrection. The poem bears this out:

Man, how fast his fire-dint, his mark on mind is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. O pity and indignation! Man-shape, that shone
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, death blots black out, nor mark
is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time beats level. (11-15)

Both human action and the impression it leaves on the mind turn meaningless at the end of time. Here, the human takes on the characteristics of evanescence and ephemerality that the earlier poems brought to light through specifically avian imagery, from the “finches’ wings” in “Pied Beauty” to “the reign of the wimpling wing” of the falcon in the “The Windhover.” However, unlike these ecstatic poems, “Sibyl’s Leaves” and “Heraclitean Fire” depict events that are not occurring before the speaker’s eyes—these take place in a remote, future time that no one has seen but that is inevitable as the dawn.

In this moment yet to come, the ephemeral stuff of this world loses its capacity to produce significant connections and relations, becoming raw material always-already sorted on divine scales: collections of data to be processed by God’s metrics. J. Hillis Miller argues that these late sonnets register a total withdrawal from God, representing isolation from the divine energy that had sustained Hopkins in other moments of his life. These are poems of dissolution, Miller writes, of “chaos” wherein “every self will be blurred, smeared, inextricably mixed in the other selves” (306). In the extremity of his isolation, the self “discovers that far from sufficient to itself, it is, in its isolation, entirely impotent, as impotent as a eunuch…where time has lengthened out into an endless succession of empty moments” (298). What had been meaningful (“a billion / Times told lovelier”) becomes repetitive and empty, an indistinct smear.
Yet while Miller proposes dissolution as the dominant principle of the late poems, I read them as evidence of Hopkins relinquishing the creative and constructive capacities of writing. While his mode of scribal capture had once contributed something to the process of forming relations between things in the world, he now yields up these documents, these “man-marks” to be processed by a distant agency. This is not, then, the “disappearance of God” as Miller would have it, but rather Hopkins’s reanimation of Him as the remote master of the world’s information, the sovereign interpreter of our collections. This contrasts with his earlier poems (and, in a slightly different way, in his notebooks) where divine power operates within range of the senses. The more intensely Hopkins localizes the effects of inscape within the play of language, the more limited and isolated that play becomes. The effect may be beautiful, but this play of beauty is enclosed rather than being distributed into the field of things in the world. Two aphorisms by Adorno capture the problem: “art stands as a reminder of what does not exist” (240); it is “the ever-broken promise of happiness” (136). If we suspend the teleological reading of Hopkins’s notebook writings, his documentary habits begin to look like an attempt to recompose a world where the harmonizing activity of aesthetic objects is redistributed in the “real” world.

“Sibyl’s Leaves” and “Heraclitean Fire” are densely packed with sonic effects. They are, to be blunt, intensely manic, crammed to bursting with eccentric words composing an emotional landscape at once solemn and wild. Each contains nearly double the number of syllables found in a conventional English sonnet. In a letter to Robert Bridges, Hopkins writes that he has “at last completed but not quite finished the longest sonnet ever made” (Collected 840). Yet for all the rich sprawl of the poems, all of the “outriding” feet spilling over the edges of the lines, their content suggests a foreclosure of excess rather than a praise of it. The teleological drive of the poems runs against their sonic liberty and superfluity, finally reducing everything into “two
spools” in the case of “Sibyl’s Leaves” (good and evil), and into a flat surface in “Heraclitean Fire” (“Death blots black out, nor mark, is any of him at all so stark but vastness blurs and time beats level” [14-15]). Sprung rhythm, acting to accommodate and even encourage multiplicity and redundancy, is rebuffed by the terminal mythology closing it all down.

As a professor in Dublin, Hopkins’s work involved acts of tabulation and interpretive closure. His principal task was not composing verse but marking Greek exams. He copies “Sibyl’s Leaves” into the “Dublin Notebook,” a large and eclectic assemblage of quotations and poems gathered alongside his calculations of grades and “marks” on his students’ exams. He covers page after page of the notebook in little scratches and tiny numbers, his system for totaling the numbers. Counting, marking, tabulation, final exams: when he writes “Spelt From Sibyl’s Leaves” and “Heraclitean Fire” he is little more than a grading machine. It should come as no surprise that his idea of God would, in such a deadening environment, lose something of its prior flair and take on the character of a grumpy schoolmaster forced to tabulate and correct all the wrong marks his students had made.

The standard narrative treats Hopkins’s note-taking as evidence of a stalled poet in a state of religious detention, making preparatory observations and playful sketches that were obviously desperate to “come out” as the poems they truly were, either in his own lifetime or in a modernist future. Yet all the evidence suggests that Hopkins did not keep journals with the secret intention to one day come out as a poet and put his archive of observations to work in aesthetic objects. Taking the notes for notes, as it were, allows us to see his activities of collection and documentation as expressive writing practices—not the purview of God alone—but locally accomplished efforts to trace a multiplicity of relations between worldly actors, efforts that in turn contribute to the dynamism of those relations. For Hopkins, what I have called this sociality refers to the fleeting conjunctions of human and nonhuman actors, something achieved through
slow descriptions of the ephemeral interactions of such agents, without projecting purposes for these interactions or fantasizing their subsumption in a *Deus ex Machina*. Rather than the sped-up, teleological drive in “Sibyl’s Leaves” and “Heraclitean Fire,” or the intensely specific individualism represented in the earlier, ecstatic poems, the notebooks, with their seemingly aimless reports of oak leaves and hot chocolate foam, model a form of social interaction based on incremental description and atomistic collision. “Social data” is an ongoing activity rather than a stable noun.
Conclusion

In the second grade I stole a notebook from school. Our teacher, Mme. Martine, assigned the class an activity to be undertaken in small groups. In the commotion I wandered away from the other children to the back of the classroom, where the supply closet tempted me with its open door and what seemed like vast stores of fresh stationery. The closet was just large enough for one person. Under the impression that no one had noticed me, I slipped inside. Crisp, clean Hillroy cahiers lined the shelves in stacks, with their pale pink, blue, and green covers. Mme. Martine typically distributed these books as needed for our dictation exercises and various assignments, but in that moment, for reasons not entirely clear to me, I wanted one all to myself. I smuggled two under my thin white sweatshirt and stepped back outside.

I was caught at once. Sent to the office. This was relatively common. Sitting behind his massive desk, the principal clicked and unclicked his pen. “Couldn’t you have just asked for one?” he asked, puzzled. This possibility had not occurred to me. I do not remember what I wanted to write down in these books, what kind of information I had that I wanted to write down but not share. These events have replayed in my mind as I have been working on these chapters. Whatever it was that boy wanted to write, his actions suggest a desire to write off the grid, to be illegible, kept apart from the discipline of the classroom. The incident had an ironic conclusion: in order to curb my bad behavior my teacher sent me home to my parents every day with a notebook in which she reported on my comportment, grading it with a sad, happy, or a neutral face. So much for escaping the panopticon.

The notebooks examined in the preceding pages did not find an audience in their own time. The earliest to appear in print were those of Hopkins, in 1937. One of the notebooks, Oscar Wilde’s “Notebook on Philosophy,” remains unpublished, having been looked over by only a few dozen people. Yet this is not a bad thing, to my mind: in fact the lack of a public has been a
decided value in the arguments I have put forward here, allowing authors to recompose a world of relations from the privacy of their closets. If, as Berlant and Warner argue, “every cultural form, be it a novel or an after-hours club or an academic lecture, indexes a virtual social world,” (558), I hope that my analyses have offered some pertinent thoughts about what kind of social world the notebook imagines, even if this world remains available only on the level of fantasy or imagination. At any rate, notebooks are born into posthumous life, reaching forward for a public they may never find. This is either intentional, with an author imagining a future audience for their works, or unintentional, in which case their publication is always tinged with the sense of invasion, of grave robbing.

A prolific note-taker whose works I have not considered reflects on the dual possibilities of posthumous life and posthumous death (the pleonasm makes sense here) in his own notebook:

As no one can say which egg or seed shall come to visible life and in its turn leave issue, so no one can say which of the millions of now visible lives shall enter into the afterlife on death, and which have but so little life as practically not to count. (Butler 363)

Samuel Butler is speaking about reputations of all kinds, but his consideration of the question in his notes is telling, since he must have wondered if any of his pages would be illuminated in a future time, and by which people living in it. Embryonic imagery runs rampant in his notes—seeds, germs, and especially undeveloped eggs receive a great deal of attention. In what future would his notes hatch? How brightly would they burn, and for how long? In any case, he suggests that this is an idle speculation, since “to try to live in posterity is to be like an actor who leaps over the footlights and talks to the orchestra” (360). Haunting his notes, and those of the other lonely men considered here, is always the sense of writing for the grave.

In Butler, once again, we find an uneasy relationship with the apparently inconsequential scrap or stray thought, and the deep compulsion to leave such things undestroyed. “I am alarmed
at the triviality of many of these notes,” he writes. “The ineptitude of many and the obvious untenableness of many that I should have done better to destroy” (215). Saying that they were never meant to be published anyway, he suggests that “the bad ones serve as bread for the jam of the good ones” and that “it was less trouble to let them go than to think whether they ought not be destroyed” (215). Aware that he might displease future readers, he takes some solace in knowing that he will never actually have to confront their audience, since the curtain will rise on his unpublished materials only after the shroud falls over him. In any case, he writes, “I cannot help it.” He holds on to these materials despite their uncertain value, despite the irritation they might give to the future. Or perhaps he holds onto them because they provide this irritation.

Butler was given to utopian thinking and like so many of his contemporaries questioned the increasingly inescapable role that technology played in the lives of the Victorians, what in Erewhon he satirizes as a kind of “rise of the machines.” In his notes he writes toward a different future, or, perhaps, an array of futures.

By writing about notebooks as a genre I have tried to perform as their audience, to speak with them across the footlights, to meet them on their own terms, even when this means accepting that they might not want me there. But I have also been haunted by the feeling that it’s never quite right, that no way of reading them will actually restore whatever needs their authors had while writing them. Historical notebooks, even when they are edited, lovingly compiled, and printed, will always in some sense be projections without a screen, or projections on a screen that is always receding. Any place we decide to stop or stall them will be an arbitrary place, and we risk treating that place as though it was the end point all along. But this is, I hope to have shown, a part of what notes ask of us. They allow for the possibility that any moment might become their end, and any critic’s work their potential telos. Writing about Emily Dickinson’s envelope poems, Marta Werner reads them as in part an effort “to compose a fleeting message for a
stranger from another, unknown world. How can we ever verify the degree of match between what is transmitted and what received?...who knows but one of them is for us” (Werner “Gorgeous”)?

Over the course of the twentieth century the grave of the notebook was consistently and increasingly displayed: we moderns love an open casket. What I have not done here is to offer a complete book-historical account of the blank book, or of the extensive twentieth-century publication context of most of these materials. It is, in the final count, not the Victorians who have made these works available, but rather my twentieth century forebears and my twenty-first century contemporaries. In the future I hope to play out more fully the nature of these crossing temporalities and the tensions they bring to light about the disciplinary arrangement of literary periods. As a part of material culture, tied to bodies that lived and died in other historical moments, the notebook would seem to cry out for historicist interpretation. I hope, however, that this dissertation has gone some way to showing how scrambled its temporality can be.

The twentieth century, for what it’s worth, witnessed not only the large-scale publication of notebooks from earlier historical periods, but also a flourishing trade in published notes, fragments, aphorisms, and other partial or incomplete writings, for which those I have studied form a kind of prehistory. Walter Benjamin’s One Way Street, Theodor Adorno’s Minima Moralia, Lydia Davis’s tiny prose narratives, Robert Walser’s Microscripts, Anne Carson’s Short Talks, E.M. Cioran’s multiple volumes filled with despairing existential aphorisms, the minimalist instructional poems of Yoko Ono and John Cage. Nearly everything Roland Barthes wrote was a kind of public notebook, to say nothing of countless articles and books critics have written addressing the question of fragmentation and the small text in the same period. Modernist and postmodernist readers have enjoyed the trope of fragmentation in myriad languages, forms, and media. In the twenty-first century, the trade in such materials has expanded beyond all
proportion with the rise of digital forms: there are now millions of aspiring aphorists and note-takers eager to have every trifle of their lives circulated.

This project thus has an elegiac side, as though the kinds of writing I have described here are now lost to us. It’s hard to deny, of course, the fact that notebooks as such continue to exist. Beautiful stationery stores carry blank paper products from every corner of the globe, promising to offer a clean slate for you to scribble whatever you like upon them. Moleskin, the Italian notebook producer that advertises itself as having a pedigree that includes Wilde, Hemingway and Picasso, is now a publicly-traded company with a market cap of €260M. Yet the functions of the notebook, even if it is only the “function of functionless,” as I’ve frequently suggested, have in the twenty-first century become activities rendered obsessively public (Adorno Aesthetic 227). Anything we write, even when offline, perhaps especially offline, is tinged with the possibility of being made widely, globally available, literally in seconds. We are constantly bombarded with narratives about the opportunities and dangers faced by readers in the digital age, but the obsessive publication of our stray and potentially useless thoughts presents a change just as important to the way we write and collect thoughts.

“On the Internet everything is notes,” writes Lisa Gitelman (“Holding”). Andrew Piper echoes the sentiment: “We live in a golden age of notes” (73). Moleskin may be a valuable company, but it’s a fraction of the current of value of Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with Facebook (which owns Instagram) currently hovering around $150 billion, Twitter at $27 billion. These companies have garnered enormous amounts of capital precisely by finding a way of rendering note-taking and associated activities publicly accessible. They have created forums that in many ways obviate—or at least substantially alter—the value that we used to place on non-social writings which were never necessarily thought to have any kind of social future, that
were “useless” writings, a term which I hope to have shown to be wholly ambiguous. Consider the narrative that Jack Dorsey tells about the founding of Twitter:

[W]e did a bunch of name-storming, and we came up with the word “twitch,” because the phone kind of vibrates when it moves. But “twitch” is not a good product name because it doesn’t bring up the right imagery. So we looked in the dictionary for words around it, and we came across the word “twitter,” and it was just perfect. The definition was “a short burst of inconsequential information,” and “chirps from birds.” And that’s exactly what the product was. (qtd in Sarno)

“A short burst of inconsequential information”: yet when all of these marginal bits and pieces come together they accrue enormous amounts of value. Users of such media are now in the strange position of having to take their inconsequentiality very seriously. No longer do these bits and pieces have to wait for some distant, posthumous future in order to be received. They become the filaments of community in the present.

Beyond the Twittersphere, digital media in general increasingly offer a venue for distributing authors’ notes as a generically significant form available to our research and classrooms. Every day, it seems, new projects emerge that seek to make these materials available. Chapter 1 made extensive use of the Darwin Online project, and there are many others, for instance the The Walt Whitman Archive, the Emily Dickinson Archive, the Rossetti Archive, and The Newton Project. While I have focused on the Victorian period as the context in which to make my arguments, these digital productions make available a discussion of genre that will extend beyond nineteenth-century Britain to include other countries and other periods: a movement that is decidedly approved by the notebooks themselves, with their eclectic citations from myriad locations, times, and people. These sites make available a discussion of these materials not just as information to be searched and catalogued but also experienced in an
aesthetic sense, or else why would the producers expend so much effort in rendering the handwritten papers themselves in such detail? “Thinking in Pieces” has gone some distance toward articulating some of the possibilities that emerge from thinking about notes in this way. While notebooks and the activity of note-taking have for so long seemed like marginal activities compared with the heroic accomplishments of other kinds of writings, our contemporary media environment makes it clear that these objects have a decisive role to play in the future of literary studies, whatever else it may hold.
Works Cited


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