

## INTRODUCTION: WRITING AGAINST TIME

IS ART DIFFERENT FROM LIFE? According to an emerging consensus, our experience of a description of a house, person, or landscape in a novel or poem, and our experience of an actual house, person, or landscape, are not essentially different. Critics and philosophers have drawn on recent neuroscientific research to argue that the brain processes the images prompted by literature in much the same way as it processes any other image. Thus Alvin Goldman describes a study in which subjects responded to a verbal description of a beach by robustly enacting vision, manifesting eye movements and neural signals as if they were examining the real thing (“Imagination,” 42). Blakey Vermule and others have argued that we relate to literary characters using the same mechanisms deployed in our negotiation of actual social situations.<sup>1</sup> Timothy Schroeder and Carl Matheson, in a summary of the past two decades’ work on aesthetics, write: “Insofar as the imagination causes the same feelings as the real, it does so by using the same structures in the brain as those used by the real world” (30). An event causes sensory stimulation; various mental representations are formed; signals are sent to affective centers. Thus “fictional stimuli entrain neural consequences similar to [those of] non-fictional stimuli” (28).

To say that our brains process fictional images in much the same way as they process actual images is not, however, to say that there are no differences. Three are particularly salient. First, the experience of a novelistic description

of a thunderstorm, compared with the experience of an actual thunderstorm, requires a different kind of interpretation. The reader draws on various linguistic and cultural competences and assumptions in order to turn the marks on the page into the image he understands the author to intend to project.<sup>2</sup> The second obvious difference between real and literary experiences is that the latter do not typically entail the same kinds of actions as the former. I will not run even from Shirley Jackson's ghosts. This may be, as some speculate, because my belief that an image is fictional severs it from action consequences (running for my life) but not from affective consequences (I shiver, my hair stands on edge).<sup>3</sup> Or my failure to run may be due to the third difference between life and literature: literary images are less vivid than actual images.

This is Elaine Scarry's assumption in her classic study *Dreaming by the Book*, and recent neuroscience supports this intuition by suggesting that the impulses triggered by fictional images are similar, but less robust, than those triggered by actual images.<sup>4</sup> Scarry describes works of literature as containing "set[s] of instructions" for creating images (244). Beset by what Aristotle calls "the feebleness of images," writers struggle to copy those dynamics of actual perception muted by imaginary perception (4). This "counterfactual" drive gives rise to ingenious techniques designed to give literary images something of the vivacity of the flowers, skies, and faces we encounter in everyday life. Scarry illustrates some of these techniques by quoting a passage from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, where Marcel, describing the effect of the magic lantern on his bedroom wall, exclaims that "the anaesthetic effect of habit was destroyed" (11). Scarry comments: "But more fundamental than Proust's philosophical speculation on habit is what he does not openly remark on: the perceptual mimesis of the solidity of the room brought about by the 'impalpable iridescence'" of the magic lantern on the walls (11). A weakly imagined wall together with the equally weak, dreamlike image of magic lantern light combine to create an image of surprising solidity. Proust's "philosophical" ruminations about habit are merely a "distraction," something to draw our attention away from the trick by which two feeble images are folded on top of one another to give the effect of solidity.

Writers want to create vivid images. But is philosophy really so extrinsic to this work? I want to call this assumption into question by first questioning another of Scarry's assumptions. Is it true that everyday perception is vivid? The color of the sky on my way to work, the flowers in my neighbors' yard, my neighbors' faces—is this really what writers seeking vivacity seek to imitate? I don't often have a particularly vivid impression of the sky on my

way to work. I couldn't say what colors my neighbors' flowers are. In fact, I'm not even sure that they have flowers. I will shortly present evidence that the feebleness of everyday perception is not my private tragedy. But if, as Scarry argues, the flowers in books are in constant danger of dying for want of the solidity of real flowers, then what is killing the real flowers? And what is the medicine? The analysts of literary effects from Edmund Burke through Viktor Shklovsky, from Scarry to the latest cognitive critics, have been distracted by formal features, structures, and techniques. The sickness of literary flowers may be a problem for literary technique. The sickness of living flowers is a problem for philosophy. And this philosophy, as I will argue, has been the constant practice of a literature that doesn't want to imitate life, but to transform it.



Time poisons perception. No existing technique has proven effective at inoculating images against time. The problem is familiar. The more we see something, the duller and feebler our experience of it becomes. In a review of recent neuroscientific studies, David Eagleman describes strong evidence for a process that will be intuitively obvious to all readers. The first time we encounter an image, our perceptual experience tends to be richly vivid. Repeated exposure leads to a dramatic drop-off in vivacity. "With repeated presentations of a stimulus, a sharpened representation or a more efficient encoding is achieved in the neural network coding for the object" (132).<sup>5</sup> Once the brain has learned to recognize the image, it no longer requires the high "metabolic costs" of intense sensory engagement.

This efficiency has clear evolutionary advantages, but it means that we are subject to an incessant erasure of perceptual life. No sooner do we catch a glimpse of the shining colors of the world, than they begin to darken. Time's threat to perception may seem less pressing than the death and aging with which time menaces the organism. But from the first reflections on experience, writers have been consumed with how time poisons even the brief life we possess.

Sixteen centuries ago Augustine, in the first phenomenology of human time, describes time as introducing a fatal distortion into experience. Man is "stretched" between past and future; temporal succession means that we are denied the fullness of the present moment. "A person singing or listening to a song he knows well suffers a distension or stretching in feeling and in sense per-

ception from the expectation of future sounds and the memory of past sound” (245).<sup>6</sup> The familiar object has become a cognitive whole practically sealed off from direct perceptual contact. Familiarity thins out sensory engagement nearly to the point of evaporation. The “stretching” of memory and anticipation replaces listening, seeing, touching. We are buried alive in time. “Who can lay hold of the heart and give it fixity,” Augustine cries, “so that for some little moment it may be stable, and for a fraction of time may grasp the splendor of a constant eternity?” (228) Augustine does not long for the inorganic eternity of the statue or pyramid. He prays for the splendor of a heart stopped but not dead, for a “fraction of time” lifted out of succession.

But if humans lack the power to stop time, we can slow it. Time seems to slow when we perceive something for the first time. The moment of perception swells; the “fraction of time” expands. “Subjective duration,” writes Eagleman, “mirrors the amount of neural energy used to encode a stimulus”. The “first appearance” of an image seems to last out of all proportion to chronological time; a gap opens between the time of the clock and neurobiological time. “These dilations of perceived duration have been called a subjective expansion of time” (132). In such moments we get a glimpse of the splendor of eternal life, of unfading color, uneraser sensation. But these dilations don’t last. What if they could?

In his sonnet “Bright Star,” Keats expresses the desire for the complete arrest of neurobiological time with the paradox its illogic demands.

Bright Star! Would I were stedfast as thou art!  
 Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,  
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,  
 Like nature’s patient, sleepless Eremite[ . . . ]  
 No—yet still stedfast, still unchangeable  
 Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast,  
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,  
 Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
 Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
 And so live ever—or else swoon to death—(338)

The poem’s stark fusion of geologic and organic time scarcely mitigates the unimaginability of the desired state. How can one picture the stasis of the star fused with the beating of a living heart? The “soft swell and fall” of breath, the rhythm of circulation, the tingle of sensation: life is intertwined with time. To

try to imagine disentangling them, to try to imagine introducing the stillness of the star into a living heart, is like trying to imagine a melody of one note.

Like Augustine's image of a hand laying hold of a heart, Keats's desired state is supernatural not just because its achievement seems beyond any technology known to him or to us. It is supernatural because it seems to require some greater mental force to make what is desired comprehensible. How can a heart be stopped without killing it? The beat is life itself. How can a heart be stopped without stopping? Such a state is unimaginable at every level. How can you even want to "feel for ever" the "soft swell and fall" of your lover's breast? Wouldn't your neck start to ache? Wouldn't you get bored? Wouldn't you soon simply stop noticing that regular rise and fall and start to daydream?

I doubt anyone reading this will claim never to have thought of some experience, "I wish this would last forever." But we seem to know instinctively this is a desire that does not bear reflection. If a genie suddenly appeared, ready to grant our wish, we would be wise, remembering the fate of the oracle, not to wish this. Would anyone really want any moment to last forever? But then what do we wish for when we wish it?

In the absence of clarity about what is wanted, Keats's wish for endless life collapses at the touch of a thought. But the desire for immortality is by no means condemned to the difficulties it faces in this sonnet. The history of religion shows the concept of a kind of consciousness that might slip free of the body to be a great help in fashioning comprehensible and attractive images of immortality. But Keats rigorously identifies consciousness with bodily sensation. To be "awake" is to "feel" and to "hear." Life is perception.

Keats wants a sensation that is exactly like the sensation of resting his head upon his lover's rising, falling breast. This ideal sensation is just like the actual sensation in every way but one: It is timeless. It is static. It is "unchangeable." What does this ideal sensation look like? The poem has no answer. The star and heart are not ultimately fused; they break up against each other. There is no object of desire here, no image for what is wanted. The poem ends in despair. Despair of life: What I most want I cannot have. And despair of thought and of language: I cannot even say what it is I want. This is the problem time represents for writing. Technique is powerless to solve it.

But perhaps this is going too far. Surely not all writers frame the problem of time in the extreme terms of this sonnet. In fact, we can't even take the paradoxes of this sonnet as representative of Keats's poetry. Several of the odes, for

example, express confidence in the power of art to renew, prolong, and intensify life. Perhaps “Bright Star,” like “When I Have Fears That I May Cease to Be,” is emblematic less of art’s relation to time than of the slowly dying Keats’s mental state. No one can deny that some art successfully changes life and defeats time. What about Shakespeare?

“So long as men can breathe or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee” (19). Shakespeare’s Sonnet 18, expressive of an abundantly justified confidence in the power of artistic form over time, is the antithesis of Keats’s sonnet, and represents a tradition of artistic immortality that runs counter to the Romantic tradition explored by this book. As Aaron Kunin has shown, Shakespeare’s sonnets are the central examples in English literature of the ancient tradition of the artwork as technology for defeating time. The poet creates a beautiful form. Its beauty is the hook that attracts generations of breathing, seeing readers, and the poem passes through them like a virus, its immortality parasitic on the mortal taste for beauty.

But what exactly is preserved in Sonnet 18? Not Shakespeare’s life, nor the life of his subject.<sup>7</sup> Only that part of living bodies that can withstand translation into an unliving object survives. Simple logic animates this tradition. “That which is only living,” as Eliot puts it, “can only die” (19). Therefore only that which can’t die can be preserved. This tradition, which I will call the classical, is older than the one I explore, and it depends on three assumptions that the writers I study reject. The first is that the most valuable aspect of a person is the object that the person becomes in the public eye. That one’s name shall be remembered, that one’s deeds shall be celebrated: this is the ambition of ancient heroes and poets. Sensation is not subject to preservation. Hannah Arendt is perhaps the most powerful modern theorist of this tradition. “Nothing,” she writes, “is less common and less communicable, and therefore more securely shielded against the visibility and audibility of the public realm, than what goes on within the confines of the body” (*The Human Condition*, 112). The evanescence of sensation is the source of its low value in the tradition. What lasts is valuable.

The second assumption is that lastingness is procured only at the cost of a sacrifice of life. The glorious death of Achilles is the western prototype of a tradition that has not disappeared from our literature. A modernist example, Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium,” gladly exchanges the sensual rhythms of life for “monuments of unaging intellect” (80). “Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing.” The speaker envisions a golden bird

as emblem of an artwork that preserves a version of the self purged of what “Byzantium” calls “the fury and the mire of human veins.”<sup>8</sup>

Roberto Bolano’s fiction is a particularly compelling recent example of and meditation on this tradition. At the end of *By Night in Chile*, the narrator, surveying the human wreckage strewn across his story of Chilean literature during the Pinochet regime, exclaims: “That is how literature is made, that is how the great works of Western literature are made. You better get used to it” (128). When Bolano associates the violence that nurtures literature with “time’s giant meat-grinder,” he makes explicit a dark secret implicit in Arendt (127). The immortality of art is not opposed to time at all. Time is not defeated. Art simply fashions human experience into a lasting form by performing time’s work beforehand. Everything that goes on within the confines of the body is cut out. The action survives, the name, the durable form, the bone beneath the flesh. All else is burned away.

The refining violence that the work performs on human bodies is simply the violence of time itself. Earlier in Bolano’s novel, the narrator relates the parable of the shoemaker who spends his life and fortune constructing an elaborate shrine for the heroes of the empire. Decades later, the soldiers who prize open the shrine’s padlocked gate find the shoemaker’s skeleton inside, “his jaw hanging open, as if he were still laughing after having glimpsed immortality” (48). Bolano’s sense that art is a tomb that preserves a *dead* body finds pointed expression in a joke from the same novel. French archeologists visit the pope in Rome, saying they have good news and bad news. “The good news is that they have discovered the Holy Sepulchre . . . The pope is moved to tears. What’s the bad news? he asks, drying his eyes. Well, inside the Holy Sepulchre we found the body of Christ. The pope passes out” (79).

Bolano’s ambivalence about literary immortality in no way signals its rejection. We find the same ambivalence in the *Iliad*, in Achilles’ hesitation at the prospect of exchanging life for immortality. The preservation art effects is tragic. It is always difficult to say whether the ultimate victor is the being whose name, words, or actions are preserved, or time, which takes everything else. Yeats’s golden bird, after all, survives only as a plaything for “lords and ladies of Byzantium.” Is it better to be an undying toy or a living, breathing, dying animal?

The third assumption of this classical tradition is that the beneficiary of the immortality conferred by art is the author or subject, not the audience. When the audience is visible at all, as in Sonnet 18, it is as the mortal engine that powers

the work's immortality device. The eyes and lips wear out and are replaced; the name they pass on endures. Sylvia Plath's poem "Edge" represents a particularly interesting postwar example.

The woman is perfected.  
 Her dead  
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
 The illusion of a Greek necessity  
 Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
 Her bare  
 Feet seem to be saying:  
 We have come so far, it is over.  
 Each dead child coiled, a white serpent [ . . . ]  
 She has folded  
 Them back into her body as petals  
 Of a rose close (272–73)

The Greek imagery alerts us to the tradition which Plath's vision of deathly perfection develops and revises. But the force with which this poem draws life into lasting form is almost<sup>9</sup> without precedent; the effort requires the effacement of the speaking voice itself, the very essence of lyric. "Her bare/ Feet *seem* to be saying." This concealment of living speech in the "seeming" expressiveness of mute sculpture has as its parallel the poem-statue-woman's fantasy of absolute withdrawal from any dependence on audience. If Shakespeare acknowledges that his sonnets' transcendence of mortality relies on attracting the interest of living generations, Plath imagines an immortality finally free of mortals.

The way Plath explicitly opposes her immortalization project to Shakespeare's first preservation technique—the biological reproduction he urges on the young man in the first sonnets of the sequence—suggests one motive for an interesting feature of the classical tradition's fate in recent English-language writing: its gendering. Women writers, from Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath through Marilynne Robinson and Jennifer Moxley, have dominated the reworking of classical immortality into a vital contemporary literature.<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the male exponents of the Romantic tradition break from the conventional gender association of reproduced life, although, as we will see, not without surprising moments of cross-gender identification.



In contrast to the classical effort to preserve the person as object, the Romantic tradition that “Bright Star” represents is concerned with renewing and preserving sensation, and this effort is often described in terms of the effect the work produces on an audience. Nietzsche, for example, writes that art is “an excitation of the animal functions through the images and desires of intensified life;—an enhancement of the feeling of life, a stimulant to it” (422). We have now passed over into consideration of the Romantic tradition, but note that Nietzsche’s statement has none of the doubt that tortures Keats’s sonnet. Art produces excitation, enhancement, stimulation. Art serves a different end than in the classical tradition; these writers reject the effort to ensure the “survival” of a thing across gulfs of chronological time. For Nietzsche, art aims not to preserve an object but to enhance and prolong life. As Georges Poulet writes, in the Romantic vision “eternity is not endlessness.” It is a “full and perfect possession of interminable life” (“Timelessness and Romanticism,” 6). Yet Nietzsche and Poulet share Shakespeare’s confidence in the ability of art to achieve its end. And they are hardly alone in their testimony of art’s power to awaken sleeping senses. In “Richard Wagner and *Tannhäuser* in Paris,” Baudelaire exclaims, “From that very moment, at that first concert . . . I had—or at least it seemed to me that I had—undergone a spiritual operation, a revelation. My thrill of pleasure had been so powerful and terrible that I could not prevent myself from ceaselessly wanting to return to it” (117).

For Baudelaire, the first encounter with Wagner produces a feeling of intensified life. The richness and vividness of the first experience figures prominently in the Romantic tradition. This tradition seeks to counter experiential time, and thus becomes involved in the paradoxes that Keats articulates with such painful clarity. By comparison to the relatively straightforward classical concern with lastingness, the desire to counter time’s negative effects on ineluctably time-bound human experience creates deep conceptual and practical problems. There can be no question of simply cutting life free of time altogether. Rather, in Schiller’s phrase, art’s problem involves “annulling time within time” (97).

Romantic and post-Romantic writers discover in the peculiar temporal structure of first impressions a strategy for pursuing this paradoxical goal. Thus the effort to counter neurobiological time typically finds expression in an effort to achieve two experientially related but conceptually distinct states. The first is the felt slowing or stopping of time that accompanies an intensely vivid perception. The second is the persistence of this perceptual intensity across

chronological time. Since in everyday life the most vivid perception of a thing tends to be the first impression, the persistence of the qualities of the first impression across the second, tenth, and hundredth impressions signals a countering of time's effect on the feeling of life. And in fact, as we shall see, a central criterion for artistic success within this tradition is the extent to which a work produces and preserves the effect of a first impression.

By inventing structures to prolong the first impression, the artists I study attempt to arrest the flow of neurobiological time, the tendency of the brain to reduce sensory engagement with repeated exposure. "Our failure is to form habits," Pater writes. "To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life" (152). Shelley claims that "poetry makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar" (642). Coleridge argues that Wordsworth's poetic aim is "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom and directing it to the loveliness and wonders of the world before us" (313).

The theorists of this tradition typically associate the successful arrest of neurobiological time with specific techniques that, in Shklovsky's famous term, "defamiliarize," restore our perception of things to the vitality of the first sight. The founder of materialist aesthetics, Edmund Burke, invents the template for subsequent criticism. Aesthetic experience for Burke does not simply illustrate the natural workings of the brain but consists in the effort to suspend or override neural tendencies in pursuit of something unnatural.

"Knowledge and acquaintance make the most striking causes affect but little," Burke writes (57). "When we accustom our eyes" to an image, it ceases to affect us. And we become accustomed more rapidly to more clearly delineated images: "A great clearness . . . [is] an enemy to all enthusiasms whatsoever" (56). The introduction of fuzziness, vagueness, or shadow forestalls the familiarization that reduces impact. Thus verbal images are more effective for Burke because they are more obscure. As an ideal description of the encounter with an obscure image, Burke quotes the *Book of Job*: "It stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof; an image was before mine eyes" (58).

Vagueness thus operates to separate the image's affective impact from that aspect of the image—clear delineation of visual shape—that enables familiarity. Burke's aesthetic identifies an aspect of perception abundantly confirmed by recent research—the tendency of the brain to automatize the processing of familiar images—with a view to overcoming this tendency. He then identifies a

particular artistic technique—obscurity—which forestalls familiarization and prolongs intense perceptual experience.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent materialist critics have added to the repertoire of habit-defeating techniques. Shklovsky, for example, alternately points to Tolstoy's use of the perspective of a horse to estrange familiar objects, and to the complexity of futurist poems that prolong and intensify the experience of reading itself (1–14).

But now, given Burke's, Coleridge's, and Shklovsky's confidence in the capacity of the artwork to renew our constantly decaying perceptual life, Keats's sonnet looks like an outlier. Is Keats's sense of the impossibility of freeing feeling from time simply an overly pessimistic, even hysterical view of the problem? Shakespeare promised the survival of an object; the object survives. But can art "lay hold of the heart and give it fixity?" Can art reliably return us to the intense duration of the first impression? This question transfixes Proust, and his reflections will help us decide whether to credit Coleridge's confidence or Keats's despair. Here is Proust's description of Swann's most profound experience of art.

The year before, at an evening party, he had heard a piece of music played on the piano and violin. At first he had appreciated only the material quality of the sounds which those instruments secreted. And it had been a source of keen pleasure when, below the delicate line of the violin-part, slender but robust, compact and commanding, he had suddenly become aware of the mass of the piano-part beginning to emerge in a sort of liquid rippling of sound, multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea, silvered and charmed into a minor key by the moonlight. But then at a certain moment, without being able to distinguish any clear outline, or to give a name to what was pleasing him, suddenly enraptured, he had tried to grasp the phrase or harmony—he did not know which—that had just been played and that had opened and expanded his soul. . . . Perhaps it was owing to his ignorance of music that he had received so confused an impression, one of those that are none the less the only purely musical impressions. . . . An impression of this order, vanishing in an instant, is, so to speak, *sine materia* . . . impossible to describe, to recollect, to name, ineffable—did not our memory, like a laborer who toils at the laying down of firm foundations beneath the tumult of the waves, by fashioning for us facsimiles of those fugitive phrases, enable us to compare and to contrast them with those that follow . . . when the same impression suddenly returned, it was no longer impossible to grasp. He could picture to himself its extent,

its symmetrical arrangement, its notation, its expressive value; he had before him something that was no longer pure music, but rather design, architecture, thought, and which allowed the actual music to be recalled. (I, 204–5)

The phrase recurs a third time, “bringing him, indeed, a pleasure less profound.” This artwork seems constructed according to the exacting technical specifications of Burke and Shklovsky: it is both obscure and difficult. And at first it does indeed “enrapture” Swann. Yet the work stops working almost at once. As the phrase becomes more familiar, he gradually discovers in it “some disenchantment” (214).<sup>12</sup> At a certain moment, “a phrase or harmony—he did not know which” took ecstatic possession of his senses, of his being. But as the form of the work becomes clear, the magic dies.

Swann has discovered something quite simple: repeated exposure to a work of art operates just like repeated exposure to anything else. The achievement of cognitive mastery over form, the ability to recognize the object, simultaneously causes a precipitous drop-off in sensory intensity. The experience of art is not immune to the relentless erosive force of neurobiological time, but is simply another instance of it. Eventually Swann’s sensory engagement with the phrase drains utterly away; it becomes a “token of his love” for Odette, a love which has the same structure as his experience of art: an initial, mysterious, formless beauty, followed by disenchantment (214). The phrase stands for Odette, who stands for the decay of life and love. Art has become mere meaning. Music has become writing. It has died.

Music, as we shall see, occupies a special place in the tradition that concerns us. But for Proust it is simply the most striking instance of a phenomenon that corrodes all artistic objects, as it corrodes all other objects. Consider, for example, the narrator’s reflections on how the works of his favorite writer, Bergotte, have lost their magic. After long familiarity, Bergotte’s “sentences stood out as clearly before my eyes as my own thoughts, the furniture in my room and the carriages in the street. All the details were easily visible, not perhaps precisely as one has always seen them, but at any rate as one was accustomed to see them now . . . from then onwards I felt less admiration for Bergotte” (II, 603).

Of course not everyone feels as Proust does; not everyone prefers the first time listening to a symphony or reading a poem to the result of further acquaintance, when experience is illuminated by understanding. In fact, one way of determining whether a writer belongs to the particular Romantic tradition considered by this book is to ask how he evaluates the initial experience of a work of art. Contrast the following statement by Winckelmann from 1764 with

the passages from Proust above. “The first view of beautiful statues is . . . like the first glance over the open sea; we gaze on it bewildered, and with undistinguishing eyes, but after we have contemplated it repeatedly the soul becomes more tranquil and the eye more quiet, and capable of separating the whole into its particulars” (Cited by Nehamas, 16).

Interestingly, Proust and Winckelmann do not disagree about the phenomenology of the initial exposure to the work of art; they both compare it to the formless dynamism of the ocean. (To Swann the music is “multiform but indivisible, smooth yet restless, like the deep blue tumult of the sea.”) But whereas Winckelmann values the knowledge of form, the “quiet” eye that accompanies the ability to grasp structure is for Proust precisely the symptom of perception’s sickness that art must counter.

The juxtaposition of Proust and Winckelmann might suggest that the tradition I am describing is roughly coextensive with a period: traditional Romanticism, extended into the modern. But things aren’t so simple. Consider the contemporary philosopher Alva Noe’s description of the phenomenology of music:

You play a record through. The music is unfamiliar, strange; the album exhibits a kind of opacity. As you become familiar with the music, you begin more fully to experience it. Your experience becomes richer. Where the songs were thin and meaningless before, they are now structured, complex and motivated. . . . Without acquaintance with the music itself, you were, in effect, unable to hear it. (“Experience,” 31)<sup>13</sup>

For Noe, as for Winckelmann, the richness of aesthetic experience is bound up with the ability to decipher the relations of the work’s parts. To hear music, for Noe, is to know it. But to say that Noe and Winckelmann value the understanding of the art object while Swann values raw sensation would be wrong. Proust shows Swann straining to understand the “phrase or melody.” Indeed, as the studies surveyed by Eagleman suggest, this straining is precisely what produces the heightened sensory intensity. Winckelmann and Proust pick out two points on a continuum as the ne plus ultra of aesthetic experience, but it is the same continuum, and the points are related as before and after. Proust’s ideal listener is inexorably becoming Winckelmann’s ideal listener.

And yet, with only a little inventiveness, Swann could surely expose himself to a music or noise so utterly devoid of pattern that it would completely frustrate his effort to make sense of it. The absurdity of this suggestion to anyone

familiar with *In Search of Lost Time* shows how little the desired experience consists of raw sensation. Proust's listeners, viewers, and readers seek out recognizable forms in which novelty is in tension with a familiarity that provides some foothold for understanding. No one in this tradition is drawn to cacophony, and they tend not to be drawn to the overwhelming alterity of the objects associated with the sublime.<sup>14</sup> Without seeing how Proust's listener strains toward understanding we will miss the tragic paradox of his conception of artistic experience. The effort to grasp the work's form triggers the intense sensory engagement that the success of that effort destroys.

If the Romantic listener is always being carried from enrapturing intensity towards quiet Winckelmannian comprehension, then all that distinguishes him is the desire, fast turning into nostalgia, for the former state over the latter. And yet even this desire betrays him. Baudelaire, in the passage on Wagner I quoted earlier, supplies an instance. After describing his ecstasy at the first time he hears *Tannhäuser*, he writes: "The experience that I had had doubtless contained much of what Weber and Beethoven had already taught me, but there was also something new which I was incapable of defining, and this incapacity caused me a rage and a curiosity mingled with a strange delight . . . I resolved . . . to transform my pleasure into knowledge" (117). Possessed by this raging curiosity, he roams Paris looking for anyone who will play him some Wagner.

There are two ways of reading this passage. We might say that for Baudelaire the knowledge of the music's form is the antidote to an experience the intensity of which he finds intolerable. The disturbing ecstasy brings a longing for tranquility, and knowledge is the tranquilizer. This sentiment is not hard to sympathize with. Imagine you are suddenly struck with a feeling of intense pleasure. It is likely that a desperate anxiety to know why—did I just have a stroke? did someone slip me something?—would snuff the desire to remain in the mysteriously pleasurable state.

On this reading, Baudelaire's intense joy inspires a longing for soothing knowledge. But there is another interpretation. The passage suggests that Baudelaire's "rage and curiosity" are in fact identical with the "strange delight" the new music inspires. Perhaps the desire for knowledge doesn't succeed the pleasure; perhaps to feel the delight is just to be driven to understand the form. *Intensity of perception is what desire for knowledge feels like.* The prospect of prolonging this intensity introduces another form of Keats's paradox, pitched now in the key of desire. How can one want the feeling of wanting knowledge

without wanting knowledge? How can one even imagine arresting a process that is essentially teleological without destroying what it is?

John Dewey, whose *Art as Experience* remains the most sophisticated account of experiential aesthetics, believes that one cannot, and one should not, arrest this process. In terms very like Proust's, Dewey describes how in the encounter with art "the total overwhelming impression comes first . . . the effect upon us of entrance into a cathedral when dim light, incense, stained glass and majestic proportions fuse in one indistinguishable whole. . . . There is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about" (145). Quoting Delacroix on first seeing a painting, he writes, "Before knowing what the picture represents you are seized by its magical accord" (145).

And yet Dewey warns us not to be seduced by the magic. "Not only, however, is it impossible to prolong this stage of aesthetic experience indefinitely, but it is not desirable to do so" (145). The "impact" is only the first step in the temporal unfolding of the work's form. To wish to prolong it is alien to art, and belongs rather to "such things as narcotics, sexual orgasms, and gambling indulged in for the sake of the immediate excitement of sensation" (124). In artistic experience, as in everyday experience, "a sensory quality is related to other qualities in such ways as to define an object" (124). We want to understand the object, to grasp its parts and their interrelations. This understanding "takes time" (55). He is insistent on this point, writing that some readers may think that he "exaggerate[s] the temporal aspect of perception. . . . But in no case can there be perception of an object except in a process developing in time. Mere excitations, yes" (175).

Yet the dismissal of "mere excitation" conceals an ambiguity in Dewey's account. After all, he writes with feeling and longing of the first impression. Maybe an element of psychological self-protection enters into his theory. Perhaps his belief that prolonging the magical moment of perception is impossible dictates his belief that such a prolongation is also undesirable. As we shall see, other writers will not shrink from an impossible desire, nor will they hesitate to send art to the school of "narcotics, sexual orgasms, and gambling" in hope of achieving it.

But to return to the problem of periodization, the contrast between Noe/Dewey/Winckelmann and Proust/Keats suggests that the period in question is rather small. It is a question of preferring the beginning or the end of a process of aesthetic attention that seems to have neurobiological, rather than historical, determinants. The "classical" writer prefers the end, when knowledge of the

enduring form has been achieved; the “Romantic” prefers the beginning, when subjective time swells and slows, and the senses are enraptured. As support for this view, one might point to the example of a contemporary writer like Bolano, who clearly sees himself extending the classical tradition of literary immortality as the persistence of form across time. At the other end, Arendt’s picture of classical antiquity as indifferent to inner experience has been complicated by the work of Pierre Hadot, who has written persuasively of the effort to intensify the experience of the present moment in ancient philosophy (217–37), and Martha Nussbaum, who has excavated the complex attitudes towards mortality in the Epicurean tradition (192–239). Finally, in *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity*, Andrew Bennet has shown the extent to which the classical concern with the immortality of the text persists in Keats and Shelley, suggesting that both impulses might be found within a single authorship.<sup>15</sup>

Perhaps, then, it is better to think of the opposition “classical” and “Romantic,” as I have been referring to these two distinct efforts to defeat time, as attitudes equally present in all periods, roughly analogous to Nietzsche’s “Apollonian” and “Dionysian” dyad. But this would be to distort both the contents of this book—which draws all of its examples from after 1800, and most from after 1900—and the tradition it analyzes. I do not think it can be denied that artistic efforts to stop experiential time multiply exponentially around the dawn of what has been traditionally identified as the Romantic era, even as they expand into the modern and postmodern. But these efforts are by no means definitive of any of these periods. Many, and perhaps most, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers are unconcerned with the obsessions of the tradition I delineate here.

For these reasons, I use the terms *classical* and *Romantic* as pragmatic markers of two distinct ways of thinking about literary immortality. These terms are appropriate because generations of critics have associated the desire to preserve a person’s name and image most strongly with Homer and Horace, while the desire to preserve and intensify sensation has been most strongly linked with the British Romantic poets. But while in the pages that follow I will welcome some additional senses of *Romantic*—its association with excessive claims for the power of literature, its association with virtual, unactualizable form—I do not intend any broad characterization of Romanticism as period or movement, nor any redescription of the work of writers like Orwell or Ashbery as Romantic in any sense other than the orientation to literary immortality they share with writers like Keats and Coleridge.



My reluctance to make broad periodizing claims should not, however, be taken to imply that I think that no significant historical context links the exponents of the Romantic tradition I analyze. The clustering of examples after 1800 undoubtedly has historical causes. Scholars looking for such causes might start with the consolidation of consumer capitalism, the rise of medical science, or the waning of traditional religion in the educated classes along with the version of eternal life it promised.<sup>16</sup> But this book is concerned with describing the key features of the Romantic quest to defeat time, in the hope that its most powerful examples can teach us something new about art and life. While the chapters that follow attend to social, political, and economic contexts when necessary to make sense of a given work's dynamics, this is not a historicist study, and I make no attempt to enumerate and analyze the historical causes of the impulses animating the tradition as a whole. Nor, for the pragmatic reasons I elaborate in my conclusion, do I think such an investigation is especially urgent. At this moment in the history of the disciplines, literary criticism's best opportunity for creating new knowledge lies not in the description of art's embeddedness in contexts recognizable to historians or sociologists, but in the description of the forces by which art attempts to free itself of such contexts and such recognitions.



We have begun to see how art is not immune to the temporality of perceptual experience. What do we make, then, of the confidence expressed by Nietzsche, Shklovsky, Shelley, or Coleridge? These writers celebrate the techniques by which poets, painters, and composers renew our fading senses. But they are not ignorant of the process described by Proust, whereby the perceptual vitality of the first encounter with the work quickly cools into understanding. In fact, the proponents of art's efficacy at renewing and transforming our experience are acutely aware of this problem. The solutions they propose fall into two general categories: reasonable and unreasonable. While I will be primarily interested in the latter, we must first survey the reasonable response to art's entanglement with time.

Proust's unreasonable solution will in part serve as the subject of my first chapter, but he can also be reasonable. Immediately following the passage in which the narrator reflects on his disenchantment with Bergotte, he describes the new writer who has succeeded Bergotte in his admiration. This writer "had recently begun to publish work in which the relations between things were

so different from those that connected them for me that I could understand hardly anything of what he wrote. . . . Only I felt that it was not the sentence that was badly constructed but I myself that lacked the strength and agility necessary to reach the end. I would start afresh, striving tooth and nail to reach the point from which I would see the new relationships between things" (II, 603). Through the process of struggling with the new writer, he discovers "a charm similar to those which I had found long ago in reading Bergotte" (604).

Marcel concludes these reflections by declaring that "Art was in this respect like science" (604). He shifts the burden of renewing our senses from the individual artwork to the history of art, which tirelessly discovers new forms. Even the most powerful works become old. We might discover new significance in our twentieth reading of Macbeth or our thirtieth examination of "View of Delft," but the "magic accord" of the early encounter will have fled. So from Shakespeare we proceed to Ibsen and Beckett, from Vermeer to Monet and Matisse, from Beethoven to Wagner and Debussy. "Art is like science" in its constant invention of new techniques. But art runs to stand still. It is simply the case that to keep our perceptual clock at first sight requires continual innovation. A narrower and more precise analogy might be to the project of countering the tendency of bacteria to develop immunity to antibiotics. Like artists, chemists search for new formulas that will produce the effect the old formulas no longer can.

Many of the strongest theorists of art's experiential value reproduce Marcel's logic. Shklovsky's "Art as Device," for example, also deploys the scientific metaphor, and envisions ceaseless formal innovation as necessary to the project of defamiliarization. Michael Fried, who in "Art and Objecthood" famously praises the "grace" of "presentness" achieved in the viewer's absorption by great art (168), in the trilogy that begins with *Absorption and Theatricality* describes the history of French painting as driven by the inevitable decay of the techniques that produce this absorption. What works for Chardin will no longer work for Courbet, and so the artist must try something new. Even Dewey, who, as we have seen, is more ambivalent about the value of presentness, has a version of the reasonable solution. "Advances in technique occur," he writes, "in connection with efforts to solve problems that are not technical but that grow out of the need for new modes of experience" (141).

These solutions are reasonable because they accept that perceptual vitality, the subjective expansion of the present moment, is a consequence of the mind's attempt to grasp form, and vanishes at the conclusion of that process. So one has two sensible choices. The first option is to seek art's value in un-

derstanding rather than in experience. This has the great advantage of preserving the shelf life of old works, since, as the history of criticism shows, there seems to be no limit to the new *ideas* one can get from writers like Shakespeare or Baudelaire.<sup>17</sup> If, however, you are committed to art as a technology for the renewal of human life, then you are condemned to read new books, see new paintings, listen to new music. Once you have understood one work, you must start over with a new artifact in which the interplay between novelty and familiarity will once again strike the senses with the “magic accord.”

All reasonable criticism holds the tacit belief that the experience of art is subject to the same temporal limits as all other experience. Art is not different from life. Recent work in experiential aesthetics has tended to rely on models drawn from the cognitive sciences to specify these limits. In their different ways, critics like Mark Turner, Lisa Zunshine, Gabrielle Starr, and Blakey Vermule apply scientific models of everyday cognition and perception to describe literature and literary experience.<sup>18</sup> Science tells us what the brain can do, and the critics show how literature does it. Here reasonableness shades into disciplinary modesty. Literary scholars take models from the sciences, but have little to give back. Zunshine, for instance, describes this new work as “applying insights from cognitive science to cultural representations” (*Introduction to Cultural Studies*, 1).

One problem with some of this criticism, as both the critic Jonathan Kramnick and the scientist Paul Bloom have recently pointed out, is that the science applied by these critics is often dated and inaccurate, and the critics represent models as authoritative without acknowledging the scientific debates. But for my immediate purposes a more serious problem is that this critical approach lacks the capacity to describe literature’s unreasonable efforts to do something the brain can’t do. And yet, as I will attempt to show, it is by attending to this effort that a truly interdisciplinary relation between literature and science becomes possible.

This book examines the unreasonable approach to the problem of stopping time. The reasonable Romantics respect the temporal constraints of perception. They transfer the desire to enhance life through art from the individual work to the historical succession of forms. The unreasonable Romantics seek the creation of a work that will permanently arrest perception at the moment of the first encounter.

By now we have some sense of the scale of this problem, enough at least to know that Scarry’s attempt to explain the literary effort to achieve vivacity

by cordoning off philosophical speculation from technical innovation is untenable. To even imagine what a life undimmed by time would look like requires no ordinary philosophy. Literary form can do many things, but it can't do this.<sup>19</sup> The writers I examine invent virtual techniques, imaginary forms for arresting neurobiological time by overcoming the brain's stubborn boundaries.<sup>20</sup> The mode is ekphrastic. These writers create images of more powerful images; they fashion techniques for imagining better techniques. Poems by Keats and Ashbery, novels by Proust, Orwell, and Nabokov are not works so much as workshops in which the shape of an ideal artwork is pieced together from blueprints and models. Fragments of the real world are brought inside and scrutinized for any hint, any insight. Like an airplane designer examining a bird's wing, the artist studies life to overcome its limits.

My hope is that this study, by reading central works of the past two centuries in the light of their shared ambition, will produce a revisionary understanding of some of our most important writing. But I have another aim. These writers, voracious in their appetite for any knowledge that will further their goal, find help in unlikely places. Totalitarian regimes, addiction, and global commodity exchange furnish them with tools and models. By attending to the thinking animated and distorted by literature's extreme ambition, literary criticism might fulfill its ambition to produce new knowledge of its own.

Each chapter considers a different method, a different research strategy for imagining and then constructing the perfect technique. The first chapter, "Imaginary Music," examines the image of ideal, always-new music in Keats and Proust. A neglected dimension of Kant's aesthetics illuminates the mental structures that these virtual melodies are designed to engage. The second chapter, "The Addictive Image," shows how the addictive object provides a model for the effective time-killing image in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* and Nabokov's *Lolita*. This chapter engages with recent neuroscientific research on addiction to test the ability of unreasonable literature to produce scientifically interesting knowledge.

"Big Brother Stops Time," the third chapter, shows how Orwell draws the principle of a total artwork from the historical existence of totalitarian regimes. Shklovsky's "reasonable" aesthetics turns out to provide a useful guide to how permanent defamiliarization operates in Orwell's fictional world. In its exploration of Orwell's mixed reaction to the prospect of a truly effective victory over experiential time, this chapter also identifies a Romantic analogue to the ambiguous characteristic of the classical effort to defeat chronological time. My

fourth chapter, “The Cultured Image,” examines how the line in John Ashbery’s late poetry exploits a previously undiscovered power of the science fiction sentence. The resulting image mimics the form of the global commodity. Curious perceptual properties of the artifact from another culture power a virtual object absolutely resistant to habituation. Finally, in my conclusion I abstract from the procedures of this study to describe a viable place for literary criticism among the knowledges of the twenty-first century.