CHAPTER 12

The decline of literary painting: improving quality of art criticism, the developing pejorative connotation of "literary."—Conclusion: What happened when people "read" pictures?; various degrees of understanding; the relevance of literary painting to literary history, and its critical usefulness.

At the Royal Academy in 1857 appeared a painting by Millais entitled A Dream of the Past: Sir Isumbras at the Ford (pl. 164). Not since Turner's Venetian pictures of Shylock and Jessica (1830) and Juliet and her nurse (1836) had a literary picture by an eminent artist evoked so much indignation and ridicule. "The change in [Millais's] manner, from the years of 'Ophelia' and 'Mariana' to 1857," said Ruskin in the current edition of Academy Notes, "is not merely Fall—it is Catastrophe." 1

The painting inspired a burst of verbal and graphic satires, jokes, skits in the humorous papers, and serious onslaughts in the reviewing press. "An attempt on the public credulity," said the Saturday Review; "monstrous," said the Athenaeum. 2 Sir John Gilbert summed up the general reaction when, after seeing the painting six years later in the "confused, littery" study of its purchaser, the novelist Charles Reade, he wrote, "I was astonished and offended by the slovenly coarse painting, the badness of the drawing, and the entire vulgarity of the picture." 3

In view of the large number of literary paintings to which the same description might have been applied, it is a little hard to understand at this distance of time what all the fuss was about. But the Turner pictures and this one in 1857 are a useful way of roughly bracketing the great age of literary art, whose tide was in full flow in the 1830s and was showing signs of ebbing in the 1850s. At a time when the debate over the legitimacy and limitations of illustration was growing livelier, it was ironically fitting that Millais's painting, like each of Turner's, was a pseudo-literary piece, untrue to its alleged source. Turner placed Juliet and her nurse in Venice, where Shakespeare had never sent them; his "quotation" from The Merchant of Venice in the Shylock picture did not occur in Shakespeare's text; and though there actually was a metrical romance of Sir Isumbras, of which
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Lewis Carroll's judgment: "Remarkably ugly. . . . There are three people on a horse, but so much smaller than the average human stature, as to be hardly any load at all; an additional gigantic effect is given to the animal by its being partly out of the picture. The Girl's face is earnest, but coarse, and her eyes unnaturally large; the face of the boy behind is lubberley [sic] and wooden to a degree" (Diaries, ed. Green, 1: 114). When the satirical storm broke over this painting, Thackeray put his arm around Millais and said, "Never mind, my boy, go on painting such pictures." When the canvas came back from the exhibition unsold, the artist kicked a hole in it. Presumably it was repaired before Charles Reade acquired it.

several manuscripts survived, the quotation that accompanied Millais's painting was a pastiche written for the occasion by Tom Taylor. The association with literature was, once again, indirect and contrived.

From the sixties onward, the frail and inconstant assumptions on which the literary painting had rested even in the years of its greatest popularity were exposed, and critics came to agree, for a variety of reasons, that it was a blight on contemporary art.

The incidence of paintings from literary sources decreased year by year. In 1865, the usual exhibitions included twenty-five pictures from Shakespeare, ten from Tennyson, four from Moore, two each from Milton and Southey, and one each from Wordsworth, Scott, Thomson, Byron, Spenser, Burns, and Mrs. Browning—a precipitous decline from the days when more than 100 such paintings were produced each year, but still much larger than the yearly average of such pictures exhibited in the fourteen summer shows (1877–90) of Sir Coutts Lindsay's Grosvenor Gallery, the headquarters of the aesthetic movement in art and hence of one flank of the avant garde. There were only seven pictures from Romeo and Juliet, three Ophelias, and one picture each from half a dozen other Shakespeare plays; two or three from Tennyson; three from Spenser; four from William Morris; one each from Rossetti, Swinburne, Milton, Scott, Browning, Keats, and FitzGerald (and, incongruously, two atavistic subjects from the first days of literary painting, The Seasons and Ossian). The exhibitions of the New English Art Club, formed in 1886 as another sector of the avant garde, were almost totally devoid of literary pictures except for a few by J. E. Christie.

No longer did wealthy patrons of the arts, members of a generation quite separate from that of Vernon and Sheepshanks, commission or buy literary paintings as their predecessors had done in such numbers between 1820 and 1850. The magnates of the Midlands and the North chose instead to distribute their largesse among Pre-Raphaelites like Rossetti and Millais, who seldom turned out literary pictures for them; the new
school of classical art represented by Poynter, Leighton, and Alma-Tadema; and such purveyors of escapist dreams and vague, virtuous allegories as Burne-Jones and Watts.

Moreover, the market for cheap original paintings of literary subjects was severely affected by the proliferating editions of the English classics, which, thanks to various technical improvements, were cheaper, more replete with illustrations, and better calculated to appeal to mass taste.* The so-called golden age of book illustration in the 1860s, now generally agreed to have been the art's high-water mark, was the very time when the popularity of painted literary illustrations began to decline. The artistic distinction of many of the books produced in that decade enabled men and women possessing a certain amount of taste to discern the inferiority of the illustrations then being offered on canvas.

The diminishing demand for literary art was due as well to the sheer exhaustion of the subjects selected. From early in the century, critics had deplored the triteness of certain literary themes in art; and as the years passed, the number of those urgently recommended for retirement increased. In 1869, a writer in the Contemporary Review was wishing it were impossible "even to attempt universally-painted subjects any more"—the Vicar of Wakefield, Swift, Sterne, Malvolio, Dr. Johnson.7

By the 1870s, also, the quality of English art criticism was beginning to improve. Belatedly, jocularity posing as judgment was fading from fashion. Reviewers were becoming more judicious and responsible. On the whole, the new men were better equipped for their job and so were more

* An excellent example of the competition offered by a lavishly illustrated book was the volume, complete with blue and gilt binding, gilt edges, and ornamental head­ings, called Pictures from English Literature, by John Francis Waller, LL.D., published by Cassell in 1870. The letterpress consisted of eight- to ten-page essays pegged on specially commissioned illustrations by many of the day's leading artists. The volume constituted a veritable anthology of banal literary subjects: Griselda, Una, Falstaff, the Lady in Comus, Sir Roger de Coverley, Sophia Western, John Gilpin, Tam o'Shanter, Jeannie Deans, the Ancient Mariner, Gertrude of Wyoming, Haidee, Nydia (in The Last Days of Pompeii), and Colonel Newcome. Only Dick Dowlass (from Colman's play The Heir-at-Law, 1797), Sheridan's Lydia Languish, and Dickens's Pecksniff and Dora were newcomers to the all too familiar list.
effective in cultivating intelligent public interest in art. Here the influence of the magisterial Ruskin was decisive, as Sidney Colvin, one of the best of the breed, asserted in 1879, after deploring the low state of the profession down to that time (see chapter 10, above): "It has come to pass from a variety of causes, and not least from the stimulating power exercised by a master of letters, Mr. Ruskin, that a greater amount of intelligent interest is now directed to the works of art in England than was ever directed before." The public now expected more of reviewers, and among the things it learned from them were reasons why literary pictures were passé. The fact that no new talents had arrived to reanimate the genre with fresh subjects and modes of treatment was a minor, circumstantial reason compared with the general tendency of criticism itself, which, finally rejecting whatever vestiges of *ut pictura poesis* survived, broadened to reject also the whole principle of illustration.

Though the undiscriminating public still demanded them, pictures that told stories, or captured a moment in a story, were coming into severe disrepute among critics who instead were beginning to promote the aesthetic values at the center of the art for art’s sake movement. The formal
properties of a painting, its composition, color, tone, texture, now re-
placed moral edification, sentimental indulgence, and humorous anec-
dote as the artist's legitimate concerns. No longer, after a century in which
the assumption was almost universally shared by the people who wrote
about art and bought it, was it believed that paintings had to be “about”
something.

In 1869, an appropriate year for stocktaking because it saw the Royal
Academy’s migration from its former quarters in a wing of the National
Gallery to its present home in Burlington House, Edward Poynter, later
president of the Academy as well as director of the National Gallery,
declared:

Most of our popular art depends for its success almost entirely on the facts

167. Edward James Poynter, The Ides of
March (RA 1883) (City Art Gallery, Man-
chester). The literary allusion in this pic-
ture was made explicit in the quotation
from Julius Caesar (2. 2) that accompanied
it: “Yet Caesar shall go forth; for these
predictions/ Are to the world in general as
to Caesar.”
represented in the pictures and not on the art which is expended in the painting of them; a certain amount of technical skill is required no doubt by the more knowing of the public, but very little of it will go a long way. The public generally not being very profoundly instructed on the point of art, but perfectly understanding the point of a scene from Shakespeare or one of Scott’s novels, the artist whose only desire is to make a popular success, does his best to amuse the public with what they can appreciate, and represents his subject without regard to the more important and nobler truths of Nature, which he knows would be thrown away upon the ignorant, only looking for just enough of reality as is sufficient to make his point obvious to them.9

Three years later (Notes sur l’Angleterre, 1872), the critic Hippolyte Taine reported an impression of the work of the most popular British artists that he had formed during several extended visits to the country beginning in 1858:

The essence . . . is the anecdote, the story, the literary attribute, the representation of some aspect of mores which they have chosen as a subject. The pleasure of the eye, harmony, and beauty of line and colour are all relegated to secondary roles; such is the case in the work of Maclise, Leslie, Hunt, and one of the most famous, Mulready. . . . Never has so much effort been expended in trying to address the mind by way of the senses, illustrate an idea or a truth, or in collecting a greater mass of psychological observations onto a surface twelve inches square. What patient and penetrating criticisms! What clever contrivance, and what aptitude in rendering moral values into physical terms! And what admirable vignettes these artists might have drawn to illustrate an edition of Sterne, Goldsmith, Crabbe, Thackeray or Eliot! . . . But what a pity it is that these artists, instead of writing, took to painting!

In the prodigious effort they have made to concentrate their entire attention on man’s moral aspect, their optical sensibility has become both distorted and blunted. I do not believe that pictures so very disagreeable to look at have ever been painted. Impossible to imagine cruder effects, colour more brutal or exaggerated, more violent and gaudy discords, harder or falser juxtapositions of tones. . . .10 (Emphasis added.)
Reviewing the Academy exhibition of 1877, Henry James joined the mounting attack on bourgeois art:

You immediately perceive . . . that [the pictures on display] are subjects addressed to a taste of a particularly unimaginative and unaesthetic order—to the taste of the British merchant and paterfamilias and his excellently regulated family. What this taste appears to demand of a picture is that it shall have a taking title, like a three-volume novel or an article in a magazine; that it shall embody in its lower flights some comfortable incident in the daily life of our period, suggestive more especially of its gentilities and proprieties and familiar moralities, and in its loftier scope some picturesque episode of history or fiction which may be substantiated by a long explanatory extract in the catalogue.\footnote{11}

Although one might discount this observation as a mere expression of James's characteristic fastidiousness, it also manifested the way in which commentators on art in general were putting more distance between themselves and the exhibition-attending public. Their predecessors had tended to keep a foot in both the critical and the popular camps, openly sharing the public's taste even as they derided it. Now there was a sharper division, exacerbated by the steady degeneration of genre painting. Popular demand was running more and more toward triviality, toward subjects laden with vapid sentimentality or a facetiousness more appropriate to the music hall and illustrated comic papers. (It was no accident that most of the humorous adaptations of literary titles and subjects and misapplications of literary tags mentioned in the Introduction and chapter 9 occurred after the middle of the century.) The restrained realism that marked the best early Victorian genre art had given way to superficial prettiness. For this degeneration, the critics held artists as culpable as their customers. The feeling grew that art has been commercialized on a new low level of subject and treatment; that painters, more attentive to market demands than ever before, were cynically prostituting their talents in pursuit of the quick and lucrative sale.

The comfortable notion that paintings, including those from literature, were made to be "lived with," was confronted by the older doctrine that art was created for a higher purpose than interior decoration. In 1888, the critic Frederic Harrison denied that, as had often been fondly claimed, art of the kind produced for household consumption would remain companionable throughout the years:

A picture . . . acquires or creates a certain genus loci, and becomes therefore part of the instinctive life of those who dwell in its presence. We cannot shut up a picture and put it away in our shelves, as we do a book; we cannot play it over and over again as the mood takes us, just as we can with a piece of music. There it stands for ever opposite to us like a Palace or Cathedral, continually reiterating the same impression. For this reason, drollery, riddles, anecdotes, novelties, sentimentalities on canvas, are so horribly irritating. Does the painter of "Two of a Pair," "Her Favourite Flower," "How happy I could be with either" [from The Beggar's Opera], "Sterne and the dead Jackass," "Bugs in a Rug," "Satan addressing the Fallen Spirits in Pandemonium," "The Drunkard's Home," "Pharaoh's Daughter at Five o'Clock Tea"—do the authors of these very quaint, moral, tearful or learned compositions ever ask themselves this question,—"When the Exhibition is over, will the buyer like to sit down day by day and listen to the same jest, the same story, the same bit of sapient morality, or curious bit of learning?" A slight tale, a good anecdote, an odd incident, are all very well once in a way; in a book, over the dinner-table, in an idle hour. But to have them eternally dinned into us is maddening. "Evil communications corrupt good manners" is a grand and true saying. But who could bear to have it
always staring at one over the fireplace, or shouted into our ears by the public bellman? Falstaff himself would drive one crazy, if we had to listen to Henry IV every time we took a seat at a dinner-table.\textsuperscript{12}

Unconsciously echoing Taine's assertion that the painters of literary pictures might have done better as writers, Harrison denounced the typical subject painter of the day:

He seems to imagine that his duty is to compose a mild original sonnet, a snippety original novel, or a watery anecdote, grave or gay. Now painters are not poets, romancers, nor literary craftsmen. . . . How can painters suppose that cultivated men and women care for their japes, their puns, their snippings from stale \textit{Elegant Extracts}, or for their own poetical and moral maunderings on canvas? . . . Almost all the anecdotes which fill half a page of the Academy catalogues, as subjects of so-called historical pictures, scandal about Queen Elizabeth, the gallantries of some Stuart prince (understanding \textit{gallantry} in all its various senses), the oddities of Swift, Johnson, or Walter Scott, anecdotes of the Reign of Terror, etc., are either quite unauthentic or utterly trivial; nay, not seldom they are grossly libellous and horribly mean. So long as a subject offers a medium for sheeny stuffs, quaint costume, and Wardour-Street bric-a-brac, none seem to be too silly, too scurrilous, or too petty for some painters. It is not the business of painters to become very minor poets and tenth-rate serial novelists.\textsuperscript{13}

As the assaults continued on all pictures that aspired to do nothing but tell a story (the very term "literary painting" acquired a deprecatory connotation that it still retains, a century later), painting and literature steadily moved apart. Harrison, it will be noted, included several literary subjects as random examples in his diatribe; and in other commentary on the vulgarization of popular subject art, literary pictures hovered in the background even if they were not specifically mentioned. Indeed, literary subjects were the most vulnerable of all branches of currently practiced art. The awareness grew—in the past forty years it had been articulated only in reviewers' throw-away remarks—that the illustration of literary themes had been encouraged on what now appeared to be fallacious grounds. In the surge of enthusiasm for deriving artistic subjects from poetry, the limitations of the exchange had been overlooked, though these had earlier been made obvious when Lessing and his disciples had denied, or at least severely trimmed down, the pretensions of \textit{ut pictura poesis}. There were built-in barriers to the full sisterhood of the arts. If poetry and painting could never be regarded as twins or even as siblings, it was because one could exist in the dimension of time, whereas the other could not, and because, furthermore, one depended on imagined imagery, conveyed through print or the spoken word, whereas the other froze a definite picture before the beholder's eyes, with no allowance for the expanding, enriching, and interpreting functions of the inward eye.

Paintings from literary sources had additional limitations because of the special nature of literary subject matter. They could deal only with surfaces: with appearances, situations, and actions (but with only an instant of an action). They could not fathom or represent the true depth and complexity of a literary work or even of a moment from that work, except by the sacrifice of its context, of its dependence on all that had preceded. They could not represent the special effects of language, formal structure, developing characterization, ongoing narrative. They could not reproduce dialogue. They could not represent ideas, except those that could be simplified and conveyed by a single image or set of
Augustus Egg, *Esmond Returns after the Battle of Wynendel* (RA 1857) (Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool). A mid-Victorian domestication of the high-art theme of the hero’s return (cf. Othello, pl. 105). The scene is not actually in Thackeray’s *Henry Esmond* (when Esmond returns, it is Lady Castlewood who kneels to him, not Beatrix [bk. 3, chap. 2]), but reviewers readily assumed that it was: a tribute, perhaps, to the persuasive power of Egg’s sympathetic imagination. See pl. 356.

Images. In short, they could only isolate, from the totality of a literary work’s artistic and substantive qualities, those few that could be depicted visually and statically.

This inherent disability of the visual medium, as we have seen, was always conspicuous in the case of Shakespeare. Artists were rendered increasingly impotent as the body of nineteenth-century Shakespeare criticism grew, with its endless probings into character and motivation. The inadequacy of paint to represent what was more and more the central concern of literature from the Romantic period onward, its account of the inner life of men and women, became further evident as fiction supplied so many subjects to artists and as the psychological element in older fiction commanded the attention of critics. When artists drew from a novel, the only overt guide they had was the author’s verbal description of a character’s appearance and—impossible to transfer to paint—his or her speech. Beyond that lay what was the novelist’s exclusive province, the whole story of the character’s psychological experience, complex makeup, and interaction with other figures. As the *Times* said when describing Augustus Egg’s *Esmond Returns after the Battle of Wynendel* (pl. 169), “Who could paint that mixture of fiend and fairy, of demon and Delilah, Beatrix? . . . If the writer had been under the same matter-of-fact necessity of outward embodiment which lies upon the painter, Mr. Thackeray, courageous as he is, and consummate workman, would scarcely have managed to bring the tale to its present termination.”

The truth was that from the beginning, the painter and the author he drew from had been linked in what was an inherently unequal partnership. The vocabulary of art, though it could in its own fashion enrich the literary subject, was inadequate to translate the full meaning of the words on the printed page. The painter had at his disposal the conventional or inventive language of posture and gesture, but the writer had the limitless, flexible language of words. To artists working in what had become, by the late Victorian era, a century-old vein of subject painting, and one dominated for most of its career by the critics’ insistence that the
painter be faithful to his source, the struggle against loaded odds must have seemed—if they paused to examine their professional consciences—hardly worth the expense of time and talent. Their task was unavoidably reductive, and the means at their disposal insufficient. It is conceivable that some such awareness turned the more sensitive members of the art-loving public away from literary pictures. Schooled by literary critics, they demanded more depth and subtlety in paintings from literature than, in the nature of things, artists could offer.

But how many prospective buyers of literary art were so sophisticated? At first glance, much evidence suggests that most of those who attended the annual exhibitions were equipped to understand, appreciate, and respond to a painting from a reasonably well-known literary source. The assumption was implicit in the frequency with which artists chose literary subjects and in the wide distribution of literary texts among the picture-buying public. But the premise was nevertheless open to question. The "common reader" was not all that common, even in respect to the works we assume to have been the customary possession of the literate Victorian. The pristine condition of the expensive sets of "standard authors" still to be seen in the libraries of great country houses (where many literary paintings were hung) suggests that there, at any rate, the classic English authors were not much read, though such sets may have been bought for ostentation rather than use, and other, less expensive copies served for everyday purposes. Even in less affluent households, those sets may have been put on the shelves as a form of cultural affectation rather than as a ready source of leisure-time pleasure. Reviewers sometimes expressed their doubts. One, writing of a picture from Addison's Spectator in 1844, remarked, "We are afraid that in these fickle days, the lucubrations of 'the short-faced gentleman' are oftener referred to than read." Some years later (1858), Walter Bagehot observed, "Even standard authors exercise but slender influence on the susceptible minds of a rising generation; they are become 'papa's books'; the walls of the library are adorned with their regular volumes; but no hand touches them. Their fame is itself half an obstacle to their popularity; a delicate fancy shrinks from employing so great a celebrity as the companion of an idle hour." Such comments make it clear that former high estimates of the literary knowledge possessed by art buyers were too optimistic, and that the incidence of such knowledge was declining, partly because the social composition of the art clientele was changing (the educated patron giving way to the unschooled one) and partly because the prestige of literature itself was fading as the values of Matthew Arnold's Philistines gained wider credence. By the 1880s, the failure of the new policy of compulsory elementary education to add perceptibly to the culturally receptive and prepared population had intensified the conviction, always widespread though not always voiced in public, that most men and women in Britain were content to read on no higher a level than that of the sensational Sunday papers and froth mass-produced for the servant-girl class, and that even art lovers could not be depended upon to respond to any but the most familiar handful of literary subjects. Robert Gordon's Lady Castlewood Visiting Henry Esmond (New Gallery 1889) evoked this skeptical comment from the Times:

*"Always" at that time, perhaps, but the point was seldom "disputed" in the heyday of literary pictures.
trated is one that has stamped itself upon the knowledge of a whole generation or of a whole country, like some scenes from Scott or Shakespeare, few would say that an artist might not spend the most elaborate pains in illustrating it. Perhaps the central scenes of "Esmond" have attained to this classical position, and if so, then Mr. Gordon's picture may be allowed as one that tells its own story clearly enough to be comprehended by educated Englishmen.  

The next year, the same critic raised a related question in writing of W. B. Richmond's realization of a six-line passage from Shelley's "Epipsychidion":  

. . . As it stands, the picture, like so many other works of English painters, is too complex—too much a confusion of the literary and the artistic motives; in a word, too great a tax upon the literary knowledge of the spectator. Everybody would have understood it if the poet in the corner had been painted out and if, instead of the lines from the poem, we had had a title like "An Allegory of Spring." But what is the percentage, even among educated persons, who have read "Epipsychidion"? And, among them, what is the percentage of those who understand it?  

One by one, the fetishes and taboos that had prejudiced criticism of literary painting throughout the Victorian era were demolished, overripe victims of a new climate of opinion. No longer could artists be held strictly accountable for their obedience to the literary text. When paintings came to be judged on their own merits as exercises in pictorial beauty, fidelity to their received subject was a tiresome and pedantic irrelevance.  

In the 1870s, an equally tiresome grievance, that artists sacrificed Shakespeare in admitting to their pictures the distracting and degrading influence of the stage, came to a head and was finally disposed of in Shakespeare's favor. To the *Saturday Review*, an undistinguished painting from *The Merchant of Venice*, shown at the Royal Academy in 1872, once more proved "what by this time should be only too well known, that Shakspeare is at once the most easy and the most difficult of authors for a painter to deal with; easy because every character may be borrowed and appropriated from the theatre as if it were a stage property, and difficult because we have a right to expect from a picture more than from the stage; difficult also because Shakspeare, like nature herself, can seldom, if ever, receive full justice or adequate illustration." Four years later (1876), a writer in the *Quarterly Review* settled the matter once and for all when he put into a nutshell the doctrine that had often been bandied about but seldom stated so forthrightly:  

Widely as the resources of the theatre have been enlarged in our time, there is a world beyond the reach of scenic contrivance; and it is in this world that we desire to see the painters, who would illustrate our great national poet, moving with freedom and creative power. . . . We are disposed to think that the artist who desires to illustrate Shakespeare will be safest when he visits the theatre seldom, and devotes himself to a profound and independent study of the immortal text. There are touches that defy the player's arts; there are tints of natural colour, and gleams of poetic light, that rouge and tinsel cannot simulate.  

By now this sage counsel was hardly necessary, because fewer and fewer painters were choosing Shakespearean subjects.  

The attached literary tag also exhausted critics' patience. Within a few weeks in 1875, two different voices were raised against the old abomination and the crutch it provided to artists whose productions were at best incomplete and at worst incomprehensible without it. The *Spectator*, com-
menting on Mrs. E. M. Ward’s picture at the Royal Academy of the “Ettrick Shepherd’s” (James Hogg’s) first love, said flatly that it “shares with most pictures of its kind the quality of being unintelligible without a long quotation, and superfluous after reading it”; and in a report to an American paper on the same exhibition, Henry James circuitously made the same point. The pictures of Burne-Jones, Rossetti, and Leighton, he said, “always seem as if, to be complete, they needed to have a learned sonnet, of an explanatory sort, affixed to the frame; and if, in the absence of the sonnet, the critical observer ventures to improvise one, as effective as his learning will allow, and to be pleased or displeased according as the picture corresponds to it, there is a certain justification for his temerity.”

By the later 1880s, a consensus had been arrived at. As Frederic Harrison put it, “All pictures should be exhibited under a simple title: every word of poetry, extract, Diodorus Siculus, Macaulay’s History, puns, sentiments, and ejaculations, should be strictly forbidden, as at Paris.” But the Royal Academy was not yet ready to emulate the Salon. As late as the 1940s its exhibitors were still being offered space in the catalogue for a “quotation,” even though few availed themselves of the ancient privilege. The best known and most successful practitioners of subject art largely moved out of literary painting. Orchardson, Millais, and Pettie turned to portraiture, which once again was where the real money lay. Leighton, Alma-Tadema, Poynter, Watts, and Burne-Jones revived old classical themes in marmoreal unreality or immersed themselves in pretentious allegory. By 1900, the painting from English literature was a decided anachronism, a relic of a kind of art irreparably tainted by its association with what were now regarded in enlightened circles as the affectations, the intellectual vacuity, the clumsy moralism, the sheer lack of aesthetic imagination and taste that undermined the work of the most popular genre artists. In only two significant but isolated ways did the literary picture survive for a while in the new century. Some artists who could loosely be considered descendants of the Pre-Raphaelites—Waterhouse, Meteyard, Strudwick, Spencer Stanhope, Walter Crane, Byam Shaw*—continued to draw upon literary sources, particularly Tennyson, whose Lady of Shalott, as Christopher Wood has observed, remained “almost a cult subject.” There was also Edwin Abbey, who, like his fellow-American Charles Robert Leslie at the beginning of the century, had acquired his taste for English literature while involved in the book business, as an employee of the Harper publishing firm. In his time—he came to England in 1878 and remained there for the rest of his life, though retaining his American citizenship—he was a prolific illustrator of Shakespeare; and several of his paintings, especially his Hamlet and Lear, attracted much attention at the Royal Academy at the turn of the century. But as a Shakespearean painter, he was almost the last of his kind, for in the new century only Charles Ricketts and one or two others occasionally painted from that supreme source of literary art.

The descent into extinction of a form of painting that had flourished in Britain for over a hundred years was due, then, to a variety of causes, all having to do with the gradual replacement of Victorian aesthetic and cultural values by the spirit of modernism. But behind them all was the changing status of English literature itself, both the heritage and the creative presence. The disappearance of literary paintings from the exhi-

*Byam Shaw, to be sure, exhibited no fewer than thirty-nine small paintings from literature at a dealer’s in May 1899; but the quantity is less significant than the spirit indicated by their collective title: Thoughts Suggested by Some Passages from British Poets (six from Clough, three from Christina Rossetti, four from Shakespeare, and the rest from a miscellany of poets ranging from Suckling to the Brownings, Tennyson, and Scott). As with “ideal” paintings, the literary sources provided only the departure point for exercises in lightweight pictorial philosophizing. This was the only vestigial usefulness that literature retained for artists in the early twentieth century.
bitions marked more than a momentous transition in British art. It sug-
ggested that literature, for whatever reasons, was no longer one of the
central concerns of the increasingly complex culture that determined the
content of art.

In the course of the 140 years we have traversed, English literature and
art slowly came into conjunction, reached their maximum contact in the
ey and mid-Victorian eras, and then drifted apart to almost total sepa-
ration by the end of the nineteenth century. The process, with all its
intermediate shifts of direction, was part of the much larger movement,
still uncompleted, from language to image that has marked the history of
modern popular culture. Eventually the history of the visual part of En-
glish literary culture will have to be fitted into that broader pattern.

Meanwhile, the story told in these pages raises many questions, some of
which may possibly be answered through more intensive research while
others, in the absence of relevant documents, must remain material for
speculation. Foremost among them is the tantalizing, truly unanswerable
question of what really happened when a man, woman, or child was
brought face to face with a picture that purported to represent a character
or scene in a familiar book. Such mentions of exhibited paintings as we
find in the letters, memoirs, and recorded conversations of the seasonal
habitues of the exhibition rooms, like Victorian readers' private notes of
their reaction to newly read books, are so brief and unparticularized as to
be almost without value as historical evidence. But we do know that their
approach to paintings and engravings with dramatic or narrative content
took the recommended form of "reading"—that is, of methodically scru-
inizing the details of the design in quest of its full meaning. Hogarth's
"graphic representations," wrote Lamb, "are indeed books; and they
have the teeming, fruitful, suggestive meaning of words. Other pictures
we look at,—his prints we read." This seminal remark occurred at the
beginning of Lamb's enthusiastic essay "On the Genius and Character of
Hogarth" in which he demonstrated the art of reading a picture closely.
An even more stimulating practical demonstration was to occur in
Hazlitt's "On the Works of Hogarth" (significantly, one of a series on "the
Comic Writers, Etc., of Great Britain," delivered in November 1818—Janu-
ary 1819).

Between them, Lamb and Hazlitt—and even more influentially in the
next generation, Ruskin—spread far and wide this concept of what, in
twentieth-century literary criticism, would be called explication de texte—in
this case, the text consisting of painted significant details that were fitted
into a single design as words constituted a single poem. Although none of
the popular Victorian genre painters even approached the Hogarthian
extreme in loading their canvases with symbolic or ironic detail, they
recognized and catered to the growing expectation that their pictures
could be read like a book; and so, in their very different way, did the Pre-
Raphaelites with their emphasis on emblems, which in many cases re-
quired of the beholder a considerable knowledge of religious symbolism
and typology. Purposeful visitors to the annual exhibitions, as distinct
from casual loungers, moved from painting to painting with eyes that
sought out every meaningful detail, usually, to be sure, to the neglect of
the whole composition.

We can be sure, then, that typical genre scenes from literature—from
Shakespeare or Scott or Goldsmith—were approached, fittingly enough, as exercises in "reading." But beyond that, our knowledge of individual spectators' responses must remain entirely hypothetical. In the nature of the case, an infinite number of possibilities were offered by the simultaneous presence of two large variables. One was the wide range of literary subjects treated, from the instantly comprehensible—often "modern instances" that were in the open stock of conventional themes, the literary reference serving as a mere embellishment—to the kind that were absolutely unintelligible without knowledge of their source or the aid of a lengthy explanation or epigraph in the catalogue. Between these two extremes lay what were probably the majority of literary pictures, those which were superficially comprehensible at first examination but whose context and nuances would have been lost on those who were unacquainted with the source.

Matching this spectrum of intelligibility was the varying degree of literary knowledge, if any, that spectators brought to a painting. The facts, as we have seen, are impossible to establish. Some spectators would have been vaguely aware of the announced subject and source; others would have been so well versed in the play or novel as to appreciate every touch the artist introduced into his conception of the scene. Assuming that most fell somewhere in the middle range, bringing to a painting from a reasonably familiar literary source at least some acquaintance with its subject, their "reading" would have involved, to begin with, a recollection or vicarious repetition of their prior experience with the book, whether dim or still vivid in memory. Embedded in their minds were preconceptions that were immediately brought into play as they were confronted with a pictorial version of a scene or character they had once, or many times, met in print. Like the reviewers, the people who paid their shillings at the door of the gallery carried inside their individual expectations of what a painting from Spenser or Tennyson should be like.

The predominant ones ordinarily would have come from the reader's own imaginative constructs, formed from the printed page itself—his instinctive notion of what the author had meant to convey by way of a picture, whether sketched in with but a few words or merely implied, as in the ivory miniatures of Jane Austen, or expansively delineated, as in the broad canvases of Mrs. Radcliffe or Scott. But if the text (Shakespeare, Milton, The Seasons) had been accompanied by illustrations, these would have affected the developing mental image of scene and character to a greater or smaller extent, depending on how impressionable—or, on the other hand, temperamentally resistant to such suggestion—the reader was. (One wonders how many readers of Dickens found themselves at odds with the strongly idiosyncratic pictorial extensions of the text provided by his original illustrators.) Furthermore, the mental conception the reader had was affected by his general visual orientation, apart from whatever book illustrations or separate previous treatments of the subject he had seen. The contents of his imagistic storehouse had been influenced not only by all his previous firsthand observation of people and places but by all his experience of pictorial art. The paintings and engravings he had seen of subjects more or less resembling that in a certain literary picture would have subtly provided some of the notions of facial features, postures, groupings, and settings that had been absorbed into the final expectation with which he approached a new picture.
The neatness or looseness of the fit when the artist’s version was superimposed on the spectator’s preconceived one determined the nature of the latter’s imaginative experience. If the artist had, as Leslie was alleged to have done, realized in paint the very character that the author had contributed to the reader’s imagination, in addition to the pleasant shock of recognition there would have been the delight that came from the inventive addition of appropriate details of expression, costume, and setting to the mental picture already formed. Expectation would have been gratified and knowledge enlarged. If, on the other hand, the pictorial realization conflicted with the settled idea, the experience was less predictable. The viewer might, like the typical critic, summarily reject the painting as inconsistent with the author’s spirit and intent as he chose to interpret it, and thus dismiss it from consideration, the settled notion still intact and ready to do battle with the next challenge to be painted. But it was just as possible that the artist’s deviant interpretation, his independent view of character and scene, might engage the viewer’s imagination and lead him to revise his mental image. The effect of a picture would have been drastically altered if the artist happened to be one who was determined to paint in the style of a revered master—a Titian, a Poussin, a Teniers—in which case his allegiance would have been split between the book represented and the artistic mode adopted, and the viewer forced to reconcile the two in his own mind.

The literary work now meant more, and perhaps quite different, things to him than it had when confined to print; it affected him not only through its language but now, also, through its pictorial representation. And if he then returned to the book, his reading of the picture would prove to have enlarged, modified, possibly even basically altered, his former conceptions. The pervasiveness of painted and engraved illustrations certainly affected, if it did not signal enrich, readers’ subsequent experience of books. If not many could say, with the poet Southey, that Fuseli’s pictures “doubled the pleasure I derived from Milton,” their experience in the interplay of visual and verbal impressions would at least have made them more responsive to the cues to the picture-making imagination they found in the next novels or poems they read.

From the private experience of viewers, it is only a short distance to larger questions of the literary taste their preferences in art reflect. Few if any existing studies of the critical fortunes, popularity, and influence of English writers recognize the significance of their record in art. Except for a small handful of specialized accounts of book illustration, it has been the printed testimony of literary critics, and sometimes of readers confiding their views in private letters, that has determined our idea of what constitutes the “critical heritage” of a writer and his works.

Parts Two and Three of this book (“Images from Shakespeare” and “The Rest of the Gallery”) gather materials that will point out the right direction for whoever wishes to use a literary work’s record in art for historical or critical purposes. Questions abound, and, within the limitations imposed by the chancy survival of the visual documents, may, in time, be cautiously answered. What correlation, if any, prevailed at a given moment between the critical standing of a work and its popularity as a subject for representation? To what extent are literary pictures, whose reflection of contemporary taste in art is obvious, also dependable indicators of changes in literary taste as regarded both the “standard” and
contemporary authors? How influential were they in determining which part of an author’s canon would be most “visible” (this time in a figurative sense) and/or highly regarded in succeeding generations? Did the fact that certain works rather than others were frequently used in art, and thus became more familiar, mean that they were ranked higher; that is, did they assist in fixing the hierarchy within the canon? Or, on the other hand, did they merely reflect an order already established by critics and popular taste, thus following a trend rather than leading it?

There is also the intriguing problem of the role that literary art played in widening and sharpening the public’s interest in literature. Such paintings when exhibited constituted, after all, a well publicized and constantly restocked showcase for books. They performed in their particular manner the popularizing function of writers-about-books like Lamb, Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt and the shoal of lesser “appreciative” critics who followed in their Victorian wake. Essayists and artists in effect collaborated to advertise the attractions of books to a public of indifferently educated

170. Arthur Hughes, *The Tryst* (ca. 1860) (Tate Gallery, London). Knowledge of its literary source may cause a picture to be reinterpreted; without it, the painting may seem an unremarkable repetition of a banal subject. “Trysts” were common enough in Victorian sentimental art, although the strained expressions of the man and woman in this painting are not typical of the usual lovers’ rendezvous scenes. But the fact, established a century after the picture was painted, that Hughes’s source was Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel in verse, *Aurora Leigh*, clarifies the situation: “Far from being the scene of adolescent love it appears to be, the girl is furious with the boy for criticizing her Greek verse, and he is offended by her refusal of him” (Graham Reynolds [2], p. 68). The identification was made by Rosalie Mander in *Apollo* 79 (1964): 221-23.
but potentially educable men and women. How many persons whose curiosity was whetted by paintings and engravings were included in the market served by the proliferating cheap editions of literary classics?

Questions like these carry one toward the borders of what might be called the historical sociology of literature. In another direction, the evidence of literary art can also be used to amplify our understanding of an individual work—a form of comparative criticism that, at least so far as English literature is concerned, has been unaccountably neglected. As Kester Svendsen has said, “the critical history of a great literary work is incomplete unless it incorporates inferences from the interpretation put upon the masterpiece by artists.”

The observation can be carried a step further. It is now commonly accepted that the total work of literary art, as it stands at the present moment, embraces not only the text but the full record of what has been written about it as well as the accreted, though unrecorded, experience of all its individual readers from the day it was published. If this is so, then the history of its interpretation by artists, a graphic form of criticism, also is part of the work as it now exists. The contribution that artistic treatments made to the actual meaning of a work—illustration as illumination—was seldom recognized at the time. One rare instance was the Examiner’s treatment of Maclise’s Malvolio and the Countess (pl. 192). The artist’s portrayal of the cross-gartered, finger-kissing Malvolio, said the reviewer, was “as good as a criticism [of the character] by Charles Lamb,” and in a second notice, a few weeks later, he enlarged the remark. Maclise’s painted interpretation of Shakespeare’s silly and pathetic ass, he said, clarified his own conception:

We have a sympathy for him in the midst of all his high fantasticalness, such as lurks beneath our laughter at the far-famed knight of La Mancha. He who would paint Malvolio as a ludicrous object merely, would paint Don Quixote a buffoon . . . We say to his Malvolio, as Olivia said to hers, “God comfort thee!” He has hit the truth of Shakspeare. In that face of Olivia, where deepest and gentlest pity suppresses the rising smile of wonder, he has written the poet’s thought as it took shape within Olivia’s mind. “I would not have him miscarry for half my dowry.” In the roguish, arch, and sunny face of Maria, we have at the same time all the rich background of this noble comedy . . . Had this picture no other value, it would claim notice as a striking commentary on some characters of Shakspeare, less understood than usual. (Emphasis added.)

In the only intensive study yet made, so far as I am aware, of the usefulness of graphic evidence in the critical history of an individual work (Thomson’s The Seasons), Ralph Cohen has brilliantly demonstrated not only that book illustrations are invaluable as mute supplements, refinements, and clarifications of contemporary printed criticism, but that they often went beyond the critical views of their time. To the extent that they were not habitual readers of literary criticism, artists were unaffected by currently voiced opinions about a given poem or drama, and so could on occasion be strikingly original. From their pictorial point of view, they could perceive emphases and meanings unnoticed by critics. Thus, as Cohen says, “Illustration can function as non-verbal criticism” as well as being “an independent work of art.”

There remains the question of how, and in what ways, the changing tastes in the subject matter of literary paintings symptomized changes in the nineteenth-century social and cultural climate as well. The value of painted iconography in representing the surfaces of life in a past era—physical scene, costume, significant incidental accessories—has long been
recognized by social historians. More recently, literary students have begun to look at paintings for what they can tell us of the intangibles that lie beneath the surface, the attitudes and biases that contributed toward the Victorian temper. But the pictures they have used for evidence are for the most part those without avowed literary connections and therefore simply represent the spirit of the times as refracted through the artist alone. If contemporary attitudes toward love, women, family relationships, childhood, old age and death—many of the concerns that confront any generation—can be more or less simplistically inferred from nonliterary art, they may be inferred with less certainty, but with added depth, from pictures that emanate from both writer and painter. Restating in emblematic form a myth already embodied in a book, the painting may add to it, or subvert or transform it. No necessary identity between the attitude and purpose of the writer and those of the artist can be assumed. If, as has been argued, the occurrence in Dickens's novels of the King Lear theme provides a commentary on "Victorian England's state of the soul," so do the numerous paintings from King Lear that were seen in the exhibitions; but they may prove to tell a somewhat different tale. This is true of many of the traditional subjects of literature that were modified when they passed through the artist's mind and were tinged with contemporary application. (Here the artist's suppression of the author's intended meaning is as significant as his faithful expression of it. If a picture, such as one with an erotic potential, deviates drastically from its source, how far was the Zeitgeist, rather than the artist's conscious decision, responsible?)

Never in the history of British painting from literary sources did the sister arts speak with one voice. The work of art never wholly duplicated the work of literature. We can, if we wish, listen to the voices separately. A poem or a Shakespearean play or a Scott novel had a set of resonances to every reader, a reader who was inescapably a product of his time, thoroughly permeated by its preferences, ideals, prejudices, anxieties. But a painting of that same literary work might have stirred different responses. And in those dissonances between two media, quiet and unobtrusive though they may be, lies the value of the paintings as a new key to the way people thought and felt. The effect produced by a simultaneous awareness of a literary and an artistic treatment of the same subject necessarily resulted in a richer experience on the part of the reader-viewer than was possible if he listened to each voice separately. If we can somehow recreate for ourselves that same effect, we can enter the age's combined verbal and visual imagination and the emotions it governed with an immediacy and authenticity seldom afforded by other means. By putting the pictures side by side with the books, as did the people of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England in literal fact as well as in their assimilative minds, future students may find it possible to reconstruct not only an event that was itself of considerable importance in the history of the popular sensibility but one that tells much about their inner lives even when far removed from books and pictures.