# Becoming Modern: English Identity at the End of an Age

By Jennifer Fleming

There is a certain idea of the Victorians that paints them as the dowager aunt of history, eternally associated with prudishness and austerity. For the Queen who gave her name to an age, there is a sort of backhanded compliment in your society reaching a level of cultural ascendency that it becomes an adjective that can stand on its own. Sitting at the heart of a huge, industrial empire, it is plainly impossible that the Victorians were really as victorian as we imagine. Certainly there were some very proud moralists, men and women who believed it was their sacred duty to instruct the ethically impoverished, but that makes up for only a small, if very vocal, segment of the Victorian whole. Queen Victoria reigned for almost 64 years, meaning that the group we refer to as Victorian was comprised of several generations—imagine applying such homogenizing logic to a period of similar length in the twentieth century. The years 1837-1901 saw dramatic changes in the (western) world. This was the age of modernity, of industrialization, of positivism, of global imperialism. The end of Victoria's reign could not be any more different from the beginning. This was a dynamic age that could not help but produce a dynamic society. This was one of the first completely modern societies, which does much to explain why their sense of modernity and what it meant has been so muddled.

What is clear is that for the people who lived through them, the end of the nineteenth century and the beginnings of the twentieth brought with it the kind of transformations that had to be dealt with. In a thousand infinitesimal ways, the entire pace of human existence was changing. It is no surprise then, that the traces of an on-going psychological reckoning can be found in any and all of the cultural artifacts produced by the Victorians. Modernity was proving

to be a blessing and a curse, bringing with it not only the potential for astounding prosperity and innovation, but also unprecedented violence and degradation. At the same time that the great fin-de-siecle thinkers across Europe were engaged with untangling what they considered to be anti-modern modes of thinking, they were also increasingly forced to confront all of the attendant issues of modernity itself—take for example the complicated relationship that exists between industrialization and the individual, which is at once symbiotic and contradictory. The most interesting art, philosophy, politics, literature, etc. of the age was that which directly entered into this conversation, whatever attitude they took to modernity, precisely because these individuals were grappling with the heart of their society. Unpacking these often contradictory responses is essential for understanding the particular societies that produced them, which in turn provides us with valuable insight into the ways in which modernization continues to affect human experience. One of the most useful places to consider this problem is the exact place in which they must have seemed especially urgent: Great Britain in general and England in particular during the latter portion of the nineteenth century.

The English[1] experience is an especially important topic of study in terms of understanding how national identity has functioned in the modern era—which is itself an urgent question given that the story of the twentieth century could be told largely in terms of the dangers of nationalistic excess. As far as nation building goes, the English story is made up of the same basic parts as the other Western powers, though pitched at a much higher key. In very

[1] I am being very intentional here by using the term "English" as opposed to "British", a distinction that is crucially important in any study of identity. It is hard to say, at any moment, how a resident of the British Isles might define themselves, but arguably the distinction between English or British was particularly blurred during the period of my study. (The general theory is that it was the disintegration of the Empire that made it necessary to begin untangling the intersecting identities of the British Isles.) However, I have chosen to focus on the English due to the historical traditions I am most interested in exploring, in which the points of reference that the late Victorians were interested in exploring were specifically coded, though sometimes in a very implicit way, as English traditions.

general terms, a hopeful nation needs to first discover for itself an origin point and, ideally, someone to define themselves against. It might be said that the English people, in as much as they exist, have been overly blessed in that regard. And in fact, a great deal can be learned about an Englishman precisely by where he begins his history and who he felt he was not: does he emphasize Romano-British roots, his germanic Anglo-Saxon forbears, or the very French Angevins? To what degree does this theoretical chap feel kinship with the other inhabitants of the British Isles? In a period of unavoidable contact with the outside world due to industrialization and imperialism, eternally shifting power dynamics within Europe, and violent debates over nationalism at home, aligning oneself with any of Briton's conquerors would have been read as having very real political or philosophical meaning.

This is, of course, not a new problem. For nearly the entirety of its history, England has struggled with deciding how "European" it wanted to be. The most prevalent understanding of English and British identity of the last few years, backed largely by the work of Linda Colley[2], has been to highlight the anti-French sentiment of the eighteenth century as the single most important identity-forming moment. It one accepts this premise, it becomes easier to understand the rejection of typical fin-de-siecle artistic practice and politics, which were *very* continental in nature. For this reason, I believe there is much to be learned by studying issues of English identity in the second half of the 1800s in England. The relationship between the United

[2] The most defining of Colley's works was *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992). Her work has been the touchstone for all studies of national identity in Great Britain. More recent work on the subject includes: Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999);Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2002); Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire, and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003); Peter Mandler, *The English National Character: The History of an Idea from Edmund Burke to Tony Blair* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Simon Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth Century Popular Culture and the Forming of English Identity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

Kingdom and the Continent was as ambiguous and fluid as ever, a fact which only furthered the fault lines within the British Isles. Given recent events in Europe, it seems increasingly important that we understand the traditional relations of the major European powers that continue to shape EU and Global politics. Further, it seems fairly clear that the same anxieties that plagued the people about modernity in the nineteenth century remain largely unresolved. Just as the Victorians found some solace in their own form of Medievalism based off of Sir Walter Scott, we too have sunk untold hours into imagining the more vaguely Medieval worlds of Tolkien or George R.R. Martin. The technology may have advanced, the alienation remains the same.

The nineteenth century was clearly an interesting one for the English. Great Britain had been radically changed by industrialization. By the end of the century, a sense of pride—though not necessarily security—in the Empire was as strong as it would ever be, bolstered by Victoria's late-in-life popularity. From this perspective the English were the most advanced, the most modern people in the world; a fact that the Victorians were very much aware of. Perhaps paradoxically, they were also a people preoccupied with the past, especially as it helped to validate their future.[3] It was this intensely historical mindset that resulted in an understanding of a modern England which seemed determined to resist many of the cultural signifiers of modernity. For the late modern era, artistic production is an easy way to estimate a culture's modern sensibilities and while they may have been living in the most industrial nation in the world, they remained stubbornly conservative in their art, particularly in relation to contemporary developments on the continent. This was a direct consequence of a very specific understanding of English history and identity. It is a fairly common assertion at this point to

[3] Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff, *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations, and Revisions*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 3.

connect conservatism with Englishness—and in fact has been a source of pride for certain kinds of Englishmen for centuries—but this stodginess seems particularly strange when it is occurring precisely at the moment when England had the best reasons to celebrate its modernity. In a fantastically schizophrenic fashion, the English did not so much reject modernity as they constructed a type of modernity whose primary feature was to disavow itself.

In terms of pre-existing literature on this period, it is certainly not a question of their being a lack of research, but more that it has not been as consolidated as I believe it should be. As already mentioned, there has been no lack of studies on Englishness. Scholars following in the wake of Colley locate or track the development of British/English identity beginning with the eighteenth century. However, just as important is scholarship—which the Victorians would have agreed with—that takes a much earlier perspective.[4]Victorian Studies largely came into existence in the 1950s, when the era finally achieved enough distance to become romantic and has remained popular (take the recent Sherlock Holmes boom or the fascination with everything steampunk).[5] While pioneers indicated from very early on the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to the Victorian Era, though it took some time for this lesson to be absorbed.

Despite the significant advances made in this area, I would argue that there is still the tendency to view this era in a piecemeal fashion. A stunning amount of work has been done on Victorian historiography, which has proven fruitful ground for the reasons previously mentioned,

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[4] One of the most important scholars in this respect was the welsh historian Rees Davies, who focused on locating a historical beginning for English dominance within the Isles. A collection of his thoughts on the subject can be found in *The First English Empire: Power and Identities in the British Isles 1093-1343*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). More recent work that build of this include: Kathy Lavezzo, *Imagining a Medieval English Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Andrea Ruddick, *English Identity and Political Culture in the Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press 2013).

[5] John Kucich and Dianne F. Sadoff, *Victorian Afterlife: Postmodern Culture Rewrites the Nineteenth Century* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); Miles Taylor and Michael Wolff, *The Victorians Since 1901: Histories, Representations, and Revisions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

yet historians are continuously left in isolation from other fields.[6] Victorian Painting has become an increasingly popular topic, especially as Art History moves away from a modernist narrative that exclusively privileges the avant-garde modernist canon.[7] While these overviews have begun to reevaluate these artists' aesthetic merits, it is still somewhat difficult to find those that discuss it in conjunction with the politics of the age, focusing on more well-known moralizing aspects of the era. Similarly, books on English Socialism are common enough, but are more pre-occupied with the activists' political lives.[8] William Morris, for instance, was one of the most prominent English socialists of the age and also one of the most influential figures in the art world. These two sides of him have not been brought into nearly enough conversation, especially shocking in light of how socialism informed European art practice in general.[9]

My project, then, is less a question of putting forth radically new ideas, but rather seeks to bring several disparate strands into concert with each other. How does the history influence the art influence the politics influence the history. Or, as is sometimes the case, how do these spheres fail to connect, when they were so effectively synced in other parts of Europe. In other instances, I would like to take pre-existing scholarship further, to take political historians like G.R. Searle[10] or Paul Ward[11] and place them with direct conversations with Art Historians like

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[6] A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985); David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change*. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997); Billie Melman, *The Culture of History English Uses of the Past, 1800-1953*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[7] William Gaunt, *The Restless Century: Painting in Britain, 1800-1900*, (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1978); Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1999); Luke Herrmann, *Nineteenth Century British Painting*, (London: Giles de la Mare, 2000); David H. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[8] A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918*, (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1966.); Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881-1924*, (Rochester, NY: Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 1998).

[9] E. P. Thompson, a socialist-scholar and artist himself, came the closest in *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

[10] G. R. Searle, *A New England?: Peace and War, 1886-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

Elizabeth Prettejohn[12], with the historiography of Stefan Collini[13] and the Social History of David Newsome[14]. I am interested in explaining and how multiple facets of life were all intimately bound up in how the English understood themselves and the rest of Europe. Crucially, I seek to demonstrate the ways in which these developments are not merely running parallel with each other, but are by necessity inter-mingling in complex, fascinating ways.

Thus my project is inherently interdisciplinary, dependent upon some historiography as well as art history and traditional political history. In this paper I use a handful of key Victorian historians—particularly the Whig Macaulay, but also figures like Carlyle and Ruskin—to first establish how the English understood themselves and their place in history in the nineteenth century. Of particular interest is the ways in which these historians described the various foreigners who have invaded the British Isles (are they claiming descent from the Britons, the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Angevins). Using the aesthetic ideals of John Ruskin, which he based on his understanding of Art History, I then transition to a discussion on Victorian Art. I intend to look at a few key pieces of art, primarily from the last gasp of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, to demonstrate the kind of past that was being longed for in the industrial age (tying back into the historiographical discussion). John William Waterhouse is a particularly important figure in this regard, considering he painted some of his most important works in the Pre-Raphaelite style almost forty years after that group had dispersed. I intend to spend a considerable amount of time on his *The Lady of Shalott* (1888), a painting whose heavily

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[11] Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Rochester, NY: Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 1998).
[12] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).
[13] Stefan Collini, *English Pasts Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
[14] David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

Arthurian content acts as an important nod back to the Medieval Era as a source of national pride. I also spend some time on formal analysis of the art, since it is clearly relevant that, precisely at the moment in which avant-garde French, German, and Russian painters were becoming increasingly experimental with form, English painters were still more-or-less painting in an academic style. I am reading this tendency as specifically anti-modern and anti-continent.

Finally, I end with a discussion of English socialism, precisely because its origins were read as very continental at the time of its introduction and was only successfully imported in those cases where it could be made safely English. As hinted, William Morris is a key figure in this study as he usefully inhabits the intersection of art and politics as a firm believer in the importance of art as activism. Thus my paper will be loosely structured around three large spheres—history, art, and the radical politics of the Late Victorian Era—that is further organized around key figures and movements. For both the art and politics special attention will be paid to the broader European trends since one of my primary goals is to demonstrate the degree to which England's difference—fed by and acting as confirmation of England's sense of its own exceptionalism—was real or no. This tripartite scheme should not be taken as a "natural" division between the history, art, and politics of the late nineteenth century. The point, in fact, is to demonstrate the opposite. It is my assertion that it is only by looking at all three that the true extent of England's anti-modern modernity becomes clear.

A point of clarification is necessary before fully exploring issues of national identity in fin-de-siecle England, namely what is meant by the terms "modern" and "modernity" within this paper.[15] The term itself seems almost self-evident—we are creatures of modernity after all—and

[15] For a fuller discussion on issues of modernity and the Late Modern Era see the following: Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982); Matei Călinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham:

therefore can often go unexplained. There is the initial linguistic problem based upon the fact that the word "modern" comes from the latin phrase *modo* that signified something had happened just now. Any moment experienced as a present is, strictly speaking, modern relative to person experiencing it. Thus, we see examples throughout history of societies staking a claim for being the definitive turning point in history at which the past becomes the future. For further proof, consider the confusing interchangeability of the words 'modern' and 'contemporary'. The concept of "modernity," however, has roots in the mid-nineteenth century found in the works of authors such as Baudelaire, who, used the term in specific relation to a discussion on art.[16] In this usage modernity refers to the psycho-cultural experience of those living in the modern era, which has been defined by the advent of industrialization. When the modern era exactly begins (and whether or not it has ended) largely depends on the question being asked. For the political historian, the obvious choice is the Age of Revolution, with the French Revolution getting the lion's share of attention—a notion that we will see is complicated in an English context. An economic or social historian would probably be far more interested in the Industrial Revolution. Considering both the emphasis on culture for this paper and the choice of England as a topic, it is the latter that will be used here, though, as I hope to demonstrate, there are actually many different ways of locating modernity, something the English displayed a particular talent for.

This kind of cultural modernity is thus specifically situated with the nineteenth century, particularly in the latter half—Baudelaire, for instance, wrote the essay credited with developing the term in 1864. Placing it later in the century allows for the necessary settling of ideas that

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Duke University Press, 1987); Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991).

[16] Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," in *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader* ed. Schwartz, Vanessa R. Schwartz and Jeannene M. Przyblyski (New York: Routledge, 2004).

allowed the abstracted philosophies of the Enlightenment along with the new material reality of an industrialized society to cement into a new psycho-cultural order.[17] One thing must be made clear: the industrial component is key. Modernity as it was understood in the nineteenth century was an exclusively urban phenomenon and, at least as far as Baudelaire is concerned, a Parisian one at that. The modern experience was one predicated on recognizably new ways of organizing lives, on individual and municipal levels, and new technologies, both of which had sweeping ramifications for how people conceptualize their relationship to the world at large. This takes on a special significance in the context of the rising nation-state, which had certainly established itself as the dominant form of political organization by the middle of the 1800s.[18] At the exact same moment in which national identities were being reified as a major avenue for self-expression, so too was the cultural condition of being modern. The potential for mutual re-enforcement was one readily seized upon, so that it became fairly essential for a nation, as a conceptual framework, to reckon with notions of modernity. Hence, it became not just a question of what it meant to be a citizen, but what it meant to be a citizen in a modern world.[19]

As mentioned, at least in terms of industrialization, Great Britain was in a particularly strong position in terms of experiencing modernity.[20] Undeniably the heart of the Industrial

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[17] Terry Smith, "Modernity," *Grover Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* (Oxford University Press, 2009), http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T058788

[18] And in fact there is a rich debate over the relationship between modernity and nationalism, particularly on whether the former is a necessary precondition for the latter. One of the most important voices in this debate was the late Ernest Gellner, who was particularly emphatic about the industrial basis of the nation-state in *Nations and Nationalism*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[19] For further discussions of the intersection of modernity and nationalism see: Mike Featherstone, *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization, and Modernity : a Theory, Culture & Society Special Issue* (London: Sage Publications, 1990); Liah Greenfield. *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Phillip E. Wegner, *Imaginary Communities: Utopia, the Nation, and the Spatial Histories of Modernity* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2002); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity: The British, French, and American Enlightenments* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

[20] H. C. G. Matthew, *The Nineteenth Century: The British Isles, 1815-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

Revolution as well as being undeniably one of the most successful Imperial powers, Britain also had an additional blessing in the form of its own (rather self-satisfied) history. Having largely side-stepped the political instability that plagued other European nations throughout the nineteenth-century by conveniently having its revolution a century before France—the famously, or rather mythically bloodless Glorious Revolution of 1688—the Victorians proudly imagined continuity where others may have still been struggling with self-definition.[21] And while, as we will see, there was a fair amount of disagreement as to the genesis of the English, both in an ultimate and modern sense, there was a very firm sense that there was a history there, possibly one that dated as far back as before Julius Caesar. Based upon this historical narrative, place became essential. Unlike Continental Europe, an island status meant a permanent sense of borders.[22] The ultimate result is identities that were particularly bound up in place. Noticing a strong tendency towards localism as the English attempted to reckon with their position in the nineteenth century, literary scholar Ian Baucom observed that "localist discourse identified English place, rather than English blood, as the one thing that could preserve the nation's memory and, in preserving its memory, secure England's continuous national identity."[23] It was this very identity that was threatened first by revolutionary (French) Enlightenment and then by (French) urban modernity. It is for this reason that England is such a compelling case study as it required no small amount of imagination to bring all of the at times very contradictory elements of Englishness together in ways that also allowed for the possibility of contemporary

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[21] Billie Melman, *The Culture of History English Uses of the Past, 1800-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[22] The existence of contentious internal borders hardly needs mentioning, however, with the considerable exception of Ireland, relations between the constituent parts of the British Isles could be said to have reached an equilibrium by the nineteenth century.

[23] Ian Baucom, *Out of Place: Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999) 16.

understandings of modernity. To illustrate this it is first necessary to examine how the English constructed their history during this period. Though there were multiple approaches to English history, one particularly strong tendency was towards the xenophobia that the English have been particularly famous for.

It is more than simple vanity on the part of the historian to assert the importance of the historical process. In a very real way, history in one of the fundamental spaces in which people come to understand themselves. It is a living process in which the collective act of remembering becomes a way to write and therefor imagine a people into being. Any cursory historiographical analysis will prove the genre's inherent malleability, changing in both form and content to suit the needs of its audience, and its connections to more literary conventions has become well trodden ground by now.[24] English historiography presents additional layers of interest, since, as a general rule, the English have never done a particularly good job in hiding the reasons for which their various histories are constructed, arguably something they were not wholly interested in doing to begin with.[25] In this section I demonstrate how the Victorians used their history to reaffirm their sense of their true selves as a simple, basically agrarian folk, which at once rejected modernity, while also validating the accomplishments that created the conditions they believed necessary for its arrival in England. I focus on two works written during the middle of the century: Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843) and Thomas Babington Macaulay's *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848). Though written in the early-

[24] Hayden V. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).
[25] Stefan, Collini, *English Pasts Essays in History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

to mid-Victorian Era, their influence was extensive enough to justify their presence in this study. Carlyle specifically used his understanding of a glorified medieval past to chastise the present, while Macaulay's whiggishness perfectly demonstrates the ways in which the past can co-opted for political ends.

The Victorians, a group of people which in many ways seem to epitomize all those cultural tics that we read as English, have received a great deal of attention as both active participants in the professionalization of history and as the epitome of bias in the discipline.[26] The fact that Victorian historical works have often been relegated to the literature section reveals a great deal about both the priorities for Victorian historians as well as our own modern understanding of the discipline. To state it plainly: Victorian history, judged by its participants was proudly readable and profoundly literary. Whereas the twentieth century saw a valorization of those parts of history that played off of the discipline's positivist roots, the Victorians took no particular pains to hide history-as-narrative, and often a skewed one. Victorian history was thus as much an artistic and philosophical enterprise as scientific. Consequently, Victorian history is especially suited to serve as a window into the hearts and minds of its practitioners and readers. G. M. Trevelyan (1876-1962) was one of the last standard-bearers of a true whig interpretation of history, almost to the point of seeming anachronism. Significantly, the 'M' in his name stood for Macaulay, his Great Uncle and the aforementioned great Whig. Though he lived to see both world wars, in his historical practice he was fundamentally a child of the Victorian Era. It was this background which informed his understanding of bias as something more than just inevitable, but also necessary. It was a disciplinary argument he carried with him to his grave.

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[26] J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985).

Well into the twentieth century and with the sort of poetic flourishes one should expect from someone of this tradition, he argued that "Clio should not always be cold, aloof, impartial. Sometimes the maid should come down from yonder mountain height, the Judge descend from the judgment seat, and the historian share the passions of the past, provided they are not a false reflection of some modern dogma or prejudice."[27] This passion is precisely the reason why Victorian history is such a powerful cultural signifier, revealing the conscious and unconscious preoccupations of their age.

Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), writing a century prior, similarly believed that proper history should be conceived as something vital, with direct consequences for the present. In fact, history can and should be used as a panacea for the societal ills. In the opening of *Past and Present* (1843), he wrote that "The condition of England, on which many pamphlets are now in the course of publication, and many thoughts unpublished are going on in every reflective head, is justly regarded as one of the most ominous, and withal one of the strangest, ever seen in this world."[28] The "condition" which Carlyle was referring to was the condition of workers, a problem that, as he said, must surely occupy the mind of any (English)man living in the mid-nineteenth century. By definition, history must be fundamentally backwards-looking. But for authors such as Carlyle, history can and should be the means by which the heroic is recovered and worshiped, and the present understood and perfected. Speaking to this greater calling of history Carlyle opened his work on Oliver Cromwell (1845) with a denunciation of the fictional historian 'Dryasdust', who first appeared in the novels of Sir Walter Scott:

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[27] G. M. Trevelayn, "Bias in History," *History* 32, no. 115 (1947): 11, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24402089.

[28] Thomas Carlyle, *Past and Present*, First American ed. (Boston: Little Brown 1843), 1, http://www.ajdrake.com/etexts/texts/Carlyle/Works/past_1843_little_brown.pdf.

> To Dryasdust, who wishes merely to compile torpedo Histories of the philosophical or other sorts, and gain immortal laurels for himself by writing about it and about it, all this is sport; but to us who struggle piously, passionately, to behold, but in glimpses, the faces of our vanished Fathers, it is death![29]

This quote, along with its connection to Scott, at least suggests that there was a strong understanding of a vital, heroic history of the great thinkers of the first half of the nineteenth century. This is particularly significant given the unquestionable influence Carlyle had on authors, artists, historians, activists, and philosophers in the latter half.[30]

It is necessary to explore *Past and Present* further to gain a better understanding of what Carlyle saw in the English past. Carlyle has become primarily associated with the 'Great Man Theory' and so it should come as no surprise that his work his preoccupied with heroes. However, heroes within the *Past and Present* are perhaps more complexly constructed than one might expect. Playing into a long history that associates England with the earthy and pastoral, Carlyle spoke grandly of the invisible heroes of England.

> The hands of forgotten brave men have made it a World for us; they,—honour to them; they, in spite of the idle and the dastard. This English Land, here and now, is the summary of what was found of wise, and noble, and accordant with God's Truth… Our English Speech is speakable because there were Hero-Poets of our blood and lineage… This Land of England has its conquerors, possessors, which change from epoch to epoch, from day to day; but its real conquerors, creators, and eternal proprietors are these following, and their representatives if you can find them: All the Heroic souls that ever were in England, each in their degree; all the men that ever cut a thistle, drained a puddle out of England, contrived a wise scheme in England, did or said a true and valiant thing in England.[31]

Though there is a certain irony in the fact that he wrote *Past and Present* partly as a way to take a break from his work on Oliver Cromwell, his description of the unknown masses are undeniably affecting and rife with signs of Carlyle's attitudes to England and the world at large. As understood here, the heroism of the English is inextricably linked to land, which seems to be

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[29] Thomas Carlyle, *Oliver Cromwell's Letters and Speeches with Elucidations*, (New York: Wiley & Putnam 1845) 5.
[30] John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, (Hamden: Archon Books, 1962).
[31] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 131.

both the condition and result of English greatness. Though it is not entirely explicit, there was a very real class issue at stake for Carlyle. The "idle and the dastard" primarily refers to a specific kind of "unworking" aristocrat, towards which an entire chapter was devoted to attacking. Just as England was falling victim to a "Gospel of Dilettantism"[32] it was also prey to the "Gospel of Mammonism."[33] Carlyle was deeply troubled by laissez-faire capitalism, which he saw as not only dangerous for the workers, but ultimately self-defeating in the long run. The cure could be found in a proudly English past.

Of great significance for this current study are the strands of national sentiment that run throughout the above excerpt and the work in general. In his first section, Carlyle gestured to England's long and complicated history of being conquered. In terms of whether Carlyle considered the Modern English as the descendents of the Romano-British, the Teutonic Anglo-Saxons, or the Norman/Angevins, this work is unclear. Though rife with classical allusions—the first section is referred to as a "Proem" and its opening chapter called "Midas"—this could just as easily be an indication of the West's broad association with the classical, tempting as it may be to read something Trojan into the line about "Hero-Poets of our blood and lineage". Significantly, it may even be that it does not even matter. As Carlyle made clear, the true "eternal proprietors" were "All the Heroic souls that ever were in England". He is not concerned by the tedious and sometimes meaningless exchange of power, so much as the continuity of an English people who lived and died on English soil. There is the implication, intended or not, that anyone could be English so long as they were able to absorb the almost magical properties of the land, which contains the essence of all previous generations of

[32] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 188.
[33] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 181.

Englishmen. Again, there is very reciprocal relationship between land and people, for "The inarticulate worth and truth that is in England goes down yet to the Foundations." In one of the few instances in which he used the term "British,"[34] Carlyle declared his true intention, his "hope of awakening here and there a British man to know himself for a man and divine soul."[35] It was divine both in the sense that all men are blessed with an immortal soul, but also in the sense that the English have been broadly blessed—as they live "in accordance with God's Truth".

Above "Foundations" referred to the almost mystical power of the land, but it can be taken in another way: the English past. *Past and Present* was divided into four books that were respectively called: I, Proem; II, The Ancient Monk; III, The Modern Worker; IV, Horoscope. As these indicate, this work was specifically meant to function didactically. It was the embodied process which connects the past, present, and future into a seamless chain of lessons. Proving himself to be a historian through and through, the longest of the books is "The Ancient Monk," as it was the recently published twelfth century *Chronicles of the Abbey of Saint Edmund's Bury* written by Jocelin of Brakelond that inspired Carlyle's work. Though he was broadly critical of the medieval denizens mentioned in the *Chronicles*, Carlyle still found in them a useful lesson revolving around discernment in choosing one's leaders (a quality the modern English seemed to have lost). In a turn that is eminently familiar, Carlyle emphasizes the fundamental authenticness of the people of the past:

> Behold therefore, this England of the Year 1200 was no chimerical vacuity or dreamland… but a green solid place, that grew corn and several other things. The Sun shone on it; the vicissitude of seasons and human fortunes. Cloth was woven and worn; ditches were dug, furrowfields ploughed, and houses built. Day by day all men and cattle rose to labour, and night by night returned home weary to their several lairs.

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[34] Significantly, Carlyle, though Scottish himself, overwhelmingly preferred to use 'England' and 'English' instead of British. 'England' appears in the work a total of 149 times, compared to 1 for 'Britain'. Similarly, there were 98 instances of 'English' to 7 'British'. Scotland comes up, but specifically with reference to it becoming "a part of England" (12) and as a contrast to the violence of Ireland. The Welsh are mentioned on a single page (103).

[35] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 269.

> In wondrous Dualism, then as now, lived nations of breathing men: alternating, in all ways, between Light and Dark; between joy and sorrow, between rest and toil,—between hope, hope reaching high as Heaven, and fear deep as very Hell.[36]

I would not want to take this too far. In this quote at least, Carlyle is not fully indicating a wish to return to this life. In many ways his point the same as his challenge to Dryasdust in *Oliver Cromwell*: that the past was a vibrant place and that it is the task of the historian to draw their readers attention to this fact. However, he does clearly believe that the people that there was something about that "green solid place" that granted the "England of the Year 1200" access to the full range of human experience. He was generally severe on his own time, but I believe his hope was for more of a synthesis than a complete resetting of the clock. The ultimate goal was that "By degrees we shall again have a Society with something of Heroism in it" which will allow England to reclaim this former breadth of possibility, and the more correct use of her resources.[37] There is little doubt that the "Society" he was referring to was the very same England of 1200. Just like his contemporaries—it cannot be accident that he drew on Sir Walter Scott—he was prey to the same medievalism that had infected nearly the whole of Victorian England.

Carlye as presented in *Past and Present*, reflects one final crucial piece of Victorian society. Carlyle's textual relationship with the Continent is ambiguous at best. He is nothing if not consistent in his use and invocation of England and Englishness. There can be no doubt in his belief of positive English exceptionalism, even if believed something had gone a little wrong in the English spirit. However, he did make a handful of gestures to a kind of Europeanism, or at least a general sense of the West. Displaying a depressingly unsurprising racism, Carlyle

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[36] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 43-44.
[37] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 269.

declares that by abandoning money-worship, "Ye [english capitalists] shall cease wholly to be barbarous, vulturous Chactaws, and become noble European Nineteenth-Century Men."[38] It is an interesting, somewhat incongruous sentence in light of an English-heavy work. However, if read in light of the long-standing connection between the Western powers and modernity it makes more sense, especially in its borrowing of colonial tropes. This reading gains more credence if one remembers that Carlyle stresses either England's past or her eternal qualities. England is in a somehow timeless state, free to borrow from whomever and whenever she chooses. Further, though I would argue for a generally benign attitude towards Germany,[39] his references to France were not as kind. With reference to "poor struggling convulsed Europe"—of which England may or may not be a part—he felt that "Huge French Revolutions, Napoleonisms, then Bourbonisms with their corollary of Three Days, finishing in very unfinal Louis-Phillipisms: all this ought to be didactic!"[40] In an earlier section, he also referred to the French Revolutions and American Independence as "The physiognomy of a world now verging towards dissolution, reduced now to spasms and death-throes."[41] Thus, it is clear that Carlyle had a mostly unflattering view of recent French history, though not necessarily the French in general. One of the works for which he is most famous for is his three-volume *The French Revolution: A History*. As he indicated in later in *Past and Present*, he chose the Revolution for its instructional value as a cautionary tale. However the work is considered surprisingly fair, especially for its time.[42] There were perhaps some bad ideas, but not bad people.

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[38] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 273.

[39] Carlyle makes occasional references to "my german friend", though never specifies on the identity. However, he credits the friend with quotes that come out of his older novel *Sartor Resartus*, which centers on a fictional German Transcendentalist. Further, within *Past and Present*, he is clearly enamored with Goethe.

[40] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 241.

[41] Carlyle, *Past and Present*, 85.

[42] John Holloway, *The Victorian Sage: Studies in Argument*, 58.

Within Carlyle's work there is a deep sense of destiny. Carlyle's didacticism was not about learning from the past in a general, neutral sense. The past was not an open book from which there were several possible interpretations, but the repository of specific lessons that would help (English)men become who they were meant to be. As a reminder, he merely wanted the "British man to know himself", or, more properly, to rediscover his true self. There is something distinctly spiritual about his understanding of history. He could perhaps be read as anti-modern, but only in the limited sense that he considered something to have been lost in industrialization and longed for a more authentic form of life that had existed in the past, both of which were common responses and could probably even be considered standard signifiers of modernity (if not humanity itself).

Another key type of Victorian historical practitioner were the Whigs, who, especially as exemplified by Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), were not particularly mystical and definitely not anti-capitalist. If Carlyle believed that destiny would eventually lead to England's old-new way of life, Macaulay was confident that destiny had already arrived.[43] From this point, England could expect to become increasingly more perfect. At the broadest level, Carlyle and Macaulay's trajectories and even reasons for writing could be said to be near identical, the difference lies in direction. Fundamentally, Macaulay's Whig version of English history was highly institutional, relatively secular, and generally democratic. Even more importantly it was intensely patriotic, based on the inherent superiority of the English. Confirming all of the things the Victorians hoped were true about themselves, Macaulay's work was as immensely popular in its time as it is condemned in ours.

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[43] Rosemary Jann, *The Art and Science of Victorian History*, 66.

The criticism of Whig History began with the 1931 publication of Herbert Butterfield's *The Whig Interpretation of History* and has not really stopped since.[44] Politically this is for the best—dismantling the intellectual scaffolding of imperialism was a necessary step in taking apart the real thing, and it should come as no surprise that Butterfield's work came out of post-WWI fatigue—but it adds a certain challenge to judging the Whig interpretation with any sort of critical distance. From a historian's perspective, the true problem with Macaulay's work is not the politics per se, but the belief in a destiny so strong it almost robs the entirety of any agency. At no moment is there any sense that Macaulay has not used the present to anchor the past. Though his major work, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second*, was primarily concerned with the brief period from the beginning of James II's reign up to William of Orange's death, he felt obliged to give a brief summary of the centuries leading up to 1685. Beginning his brief discussion of Rome, Macaulay asserted that "Nothing in the early existence of Britain indicated the greatness which she was destined to attain."[45] Though it is not impossible to imagine a somewhat similar sentiment being conveyed in a twenty-first century history, it is hard to imagine it with this phrasing, or with the underlying assumption that the reader should only be interested in the Ancient Britain because it will make what is inevitably to come seem all the more triumphant. Or as he described it several lines later: "At length the darkness begins to break; and the country which had been lost to view as Britain reappears as England."[46] The crucial change that prompted this mini-enlightenment is the introduction of Christianity to the Saxons. For Macaulay, English history temporarily ended with the Norman invasion and resumes

[44] Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, (New York: Norton, 1965).
[45] Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848), (New York: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1953) 3.
[46] Macaulay, 5.

only upon the bad Kingship of John, who is so terrible that racial distinctions between Norman and Saxon disappear. Their permanent friendship is forever solidified in The Great Charter. This is not, however, the (re)beginning of English History, but the beginning of the English nation itself.

> it is there that we must seek for the origin of our freedom, our prosperity, and our glory. Then it was that the great English people was formed, that the national character began to exhibit those peculiarities which it has ever since retained, and that our fathers became emphatically islanders, islanders not merely in geographical position, but in their politics, their feelings, and their manners. Then first appeared with distinctness that constitution which has ever since, through all changes, preserved its identity; that constitution of which all the other free constitutions in the world are copies, and which, in spite of some defects, deserves to be regarded as the best under which any great society has ever yet existed during many ages. Then it was that the House of Commons, the archetype of all the representative assemblies which now meet, either in the old or in the new world, held its first sittings. Then it was that the common law rose to the dignity of a science, and rapidly became a not unworthy rival of the imperial jurisprudence… Then was formed that language, less musical indeed than the languages of the south, but in force, in richness, in aptitude for all the highest purposes of the poet, the philosopher, and the orator, inferior to the tongue of Greece alone.[47]

Here we see England at its most spectacularly, almost defiantly exceptional and insular. Specifically, the English were born from the land, speaking in a "less musical", but powerful tongue. In fact, that simplicity, which translates here as "directness," was the exact quality necessary for the development of the English's greatest achievement: Common Law and the House of Commons. From this simple beginning, arose something that the entire world ought to envy. Whatever it meant to be modernly English, its foundation resolutely lay in the twelfth century. From here until Macaulay's present day, this "people inferior to none existing in the world... formed by the mixture of three branches of the great Teutonic family with each other, and with the aboriginal Britons" would go on to conquer the world.[48] How could there be any other possible result?

[47] Macaulay, 12-13.
[48] Macaulay, 14.

While it is remarkably easy to get caught up in the sheer grandness of Macaulay's claims, it is important to remember them in context of their time. The fact that the main thrust of his work is on the Glorious Revolution was not accidental. Rather, the entire work functioned as a celebration of reform, of a fundamentally English method of progress. This was consciously conceived of as being in direct opposition of any sort of French understanding of the political process or modernity. He derided certain scholars as being "in truth as narrow-minded as any monk of the dark ages, and whose habit was to apply to all events in the history of the world the standard received in the Parisian society of the eighteenth century."[49] The French Revolution, which has often been used as the starting point of Modern European history, was simply the dark foil for England's Glorious (non-)Revolution of the previous century. Though Macaulay said " the origin of our freedom" in the above excerpt, it is hard not to read "our" as actually referring to humanity in general, just as the English legal practice is the source from "which all the other free constitutions in the world are copies, and which, in spite of some defects, deserves to be regarded as the best under which any great society has ever yet existed during many ages." Propagandist as it may be, this is a work designed for a people who were in desperate need of comfort, prompted by breathless levels of uncertainty. Its goal was to make the process of modernization safe: the happy, inevitable ending to a familiar journey. With the Whig reputation of archetypical English conservatism, it is crucial to remember that this was an important form of modern history of its time, one which prioritized the idea of forward momentum above all else. Progress, after all, is nothing but "change" colored in a positive light. Even more than Carlyle, Macaulay attempted to turn history, ever oriented towards the past, into something that was

[49] Macaulay, 5.

meant to be actively experienced in the present. It was as modern a response to the changes of the nineteenth century as anything else, whatever the seemingly quaint trappings may imply.

As hinted at earlier, Victorians engaged in the past in another highly significant way: a vibrant culture of romantic medievalism that has, in many ways, survived to this day. Crucially, medievalism differs from the previously discussed medieval scholarship produced by Carlyle and Macaulay, though the two certainly fed off of each other. Medievalism describes a cultural interest in the medieval period that may be completely divorced from any true historicity. Thus it exists only in the realm of art, popular culture, social practice.[50] The Victorians have become particularly infamous for their medievalism, though it should be noted that they were neither the first nor the only people to become enamored with the Middle Ages. Perhaps what separates them was their fervor: while the eighteenth century enacted their interest in Gothic revival, the Victorians celebrated their past by literally recreating the pageantry of the bygone age.[51] A study of Victorian medievalism is particularly important for showing one of the more popular ways in which people at all levels of society were able to engage with history.[52] With some alteration, medievalism could be used for play or protest; made a tool of the conservatives or the radicals; read by the increasingly literate masses or enacted by the Queen herself.

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[50]Ute Berns and Andrew James Johnston, "Medievalism: a Very Short Introduction," *European Journal Of English Studies* 15, no. 2 (August 2011): 97-100. Within the scholarly realm, Medievalism becomes the study of this body of cultural practice and (re)production.

[51] Helene E. Roberts, "Victorian Medievalism: Revival or Masquerade?" *Browning Institute Studies* 8 (1980): 11–44.

[52] Michael Alexander, Medievalism: The Middle Ages in Modern England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

It is important to note that there was no single kind of Victorian medievalism or even common agreement on what constituted the medieval. As a trend it was ushered in around the 1830s under the guidance of figures like Walter Scott. Flowering over the entirety of the nineteenth century, this form of nostalgia was expressed in many different forms, but was invariably the result of negative feelings towards the modern era.[53] As has already been shown, English history has no shortage of possible origin stories and therefore different places to locate the medieval, which for the Victorians had come to represent a source of authenticity rather than any kind of Dark Age. Modern scholar A. Dwight Culler has identified at least three different medievalisms, based chiefly on the practitioners politics: Whig medievalists focussed on the Anglo-Saxons, conservatives on Norman feudalism, and radicals on a supposed golden age between the feudal order and the commercial one.[54] There can be nothing definitive stated about how the Victorians used the era as each Victorian found something different in it to celebrate. The interest was in a more timeless feeling, rather than an actual specific group of events; as Chandler suggested in her title, it was a "dream of order."[55] Chivalry, religious devotion, strict hierarchy, pageantry, costume—that is what it meant to be medieval among the Victorians. Medieval was anti-modern, and seemed barely connected to nineteenth century life. It was specifically designed as a refuge from the dominant forces of the age, an ideal image against which modernity must struggle to measure up to.[56]

A fascinating piece of medievalism was a statue commissioned by the Queen of the Royal Couple (fig. 1). It was commissioned sometime after Albert's death and was purchased no

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[53] Alice Chandler, *A Dream of Order: The Medieval Ideal in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970).
[54] A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) 155.
[55] Chandler, *A Dream of Order*.
[56] Culler, 159.

later than 1867. The figures are life-size, though appear monumental with the aid of a large pedestal. The inscription reads "Allured to brighter worlds, and led the way" and was taken from an 18th century poem by Oliver Goldsmith. Albert is to the Queen's right (viewer's left), with his foot forward and his hand pointed upward, as if to suggest it is time to begin his journey to "the brighter worlds" alluded to in the inscription. With his sword at his feet, it is clear that Albert's noble fight is at an end. With typical medieval accoutrements, including a tunic embroidered with crosses and the lover's initials, Albert is a textbook chivalric hero paying is final courtesy to his queen. Victoria herself is the doting wife that she often portrayed herself as, yet her clothes, in contrast, are decorated with symbols of the nation or of the crown. This piece was one of the first commissioned during Victoria's long mourning and was clearly meant to help establish the legacy of Albert and Victoria as a couple. Victoria's choice of the medieval was a significant one for a piece that is meant for a present and future audience. In a move that should be familiar in light of the discussion of Victorian historians, this portrait located the strength of her reign exclusively in the past.[57]

That medievalism had nationalistic use almost goes without saying. It is in this realm more than any other that the Teutonic Anglo-Saxon heritage would have the most imaginative sway, which has important consequences for England's relationship with Continental Europe. To go back to the Victoria and Albert statue, it is important to remember that though Victoria was fairly successful at embodying her distinct Englishness, Albert was obviously non-English, something which the Queen had to actively address in her propaganda.[58] A celebration of a

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[57] David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997) 190.

[58] Elizabeth Langland, *Telling Tales: Gender and Narrative Form in Victorian Literature and Culture*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002) 114.

common ancestry between the English and Germans may very well have been the goal of showing the royal couple in specifically Anglo-Saxon garb.[59] The fact that it was Victoria's daughter—Victoria, Princess Royal, Queen of Prussia and German Empress—who suggested the design certainly adds credence to the idea. In point of fact, Germany had very similar medievalist tendencies, which had been nurtured by the Romantic movement. Modernist art in Germany reached its zenith in early twentieth century Expressionism, which envisioned pre-industrial society as a socialist utopia to which humanity ought to return. Woodblock prints became particularly popular specifically because they seemed to evoke the aesthetics of the medieval.[60] For some medieval enthusiasts as Edward Augustus Freeman, it was the Teutonic nature of the Anglo-Saxons that made them particularly disposed to democracy.[61] Thus, Victorian and Albert as Anglo-Saxons had the potential to be a uniquely powerful symbol. Crucially, art provided an easy method for Victoria to convey this image. Like in Germany, medievalism found a home for itself in English art, whether this was in the academy or with artists that comprised England's closest approximation to an avant-garde. Considering the high degree to which costume factored into Victorian imaginings of the medieval painting became a powerful tool for bringing the past to life.

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[59] Roy C. Strong, *Painting the Past: The Victorian Painter and British History* (London: Pimlico, 2004) 120.

[60] For a full discussion of Modern German Art see Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1991); Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany, 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

[61] J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 159.

As mentioned, the first use of the term 'modernity' came out of an artistic context. Baudelaire, among other things, was attempting to establish a new set of rules for modern art, rules which played a significant role in establishing the backbone of the Realist and Impressionist movements. What this indicates, again, was that there was a very strong French aspect to modernity in general and modern art in particular. This has had serious ramifications not only for art, but even more significantly for art historical scholarship, to the point where Richard Brettell argued that "modern art is in a sense modern French art"[62]. While there has been a great deal of course correction in more recent scholarship, including Brettell's book, a general bias towards art that was not specifically avant-garde (beginning the occasionally tedious, seemingly endless chain of '-isms') has been hard to uproot.[63] The limiting factor of this cannot be overstated. Culture defines art defines culture. It should be fairly obvious that there could never have been one single way to express modernity, any more than there was one single way to be modern. As a closer look at Victorian art will reveal, it is entirely possible to conceive of modern art that does not express itself in formal experimentation. The only relevant criteria for whether a piece of art can be considered modern should properly be the degree to which it responds to issues of modernity. In this section I first chart out the general English art scene of the latter half of the nineteenth century, with a particular emphasis on the aesthetic theories of

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[62] Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art, 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 3.

[63] To be clear, this work is definitely happening. Feminist scholarship was particularly useful in breaking down the typical modernist paradigm, which had a habit of prioritizing singular, male genius. The concept of modern art, separate from mid-twentieth century Modernism, has come into increasing question. For more recent conceptualizations of modern art see: Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *Modern Art and Popular Culture: Readings in High & Low* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1990); Robert Storr, *Modern Art Despite Modernism* (New York: Museum of Modern Art 2000); Jason Gaiger, *Frameworks for Modern Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2003); David Cottington, *Modern Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005);Pam Meecham and Julie Sheldon, *Modern Art: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2005).

John Ruskin. I then move to the specific career of John William Waterhouse, a late Victorian painter who borrowed from a variety of possible artistic sources to construct his own kind of modern art.

In the case of England, there were two or three significant artistic tracks that offered sometimes complementary, sometimes oppositional alternatives to the typical model of modern, avant-garde artistic achievement. There was, first and foremost, the Royal Academy (RA). Founded in the mid-eighteenth century under the protection of the monarchy, it was artist led and, as typical for Academies, existed for the specific purpose of creating national artistic standards. While it was the RA that dominated the art scene in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has been the ideologically related Pre-Raphaelite, Aesthetic, and Arts and Crafts Movements, which have enjoyed the greater legacy, largely in part because it more closely conformed to the avant-garde model.[64] These ideas do a disservice to both artistic traditions: it both ignores the argument put forth by Colin Trodd that the "the RA [was] an organic space emerging from the localizing character of a national culture that celebrates variation and differentiation in custom, convention, genre and style"[65] and somewhat dismisses the Aesthetes as being England's closest approximation of truly modern art.

To understand why English art of the nineteenth century took the course that it did, one must look at the critical theories of John Ruskin, easily one of the most important art critics of

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[64] For work on the PRB see: Terri Hardin, *The Pre-Raphaelites: Inspiration from the Past* (New York: Todtri, 1996); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). For work on aestheticism see: Lionel Lambourne, *The Aesthetic Movement* (London: Phaidon, 1996); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *After the Pre-Raphaelites: Art and Aestheticism in Victorian England* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1999); Elizabeth Prettejohn, *Art for Art's Sake: Aestheticism in Victorian Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press for The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 2007); for Arts and Crafts see: Imogen Hart, *Arts and Crafts Objects* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).

[65] Colin Trodd, "Academic cultures : the Royal Academy and the commerce of discourse in Victorian London" in *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 180.

the age, especially for artists operating outside of the Academy. Ruskin, hardly alone in this study, defies easy categorization. Social thinker, art critic, philanthropist, patron, draughtsman, he was as formative for certain English artists as Baudelaire was for the French. The work which ushered his rise to prominence, *Modern Painters*, was first published in 1843 with four more volumes published by 1860. He continued to exert influence throughout the nineteenth century (he died in 1900), through a signature blend of art criticism and moralizing that seems to conform to the worst Victorian stereotypes. *Modern Painters* was initially written as a kind of valorization of J. M. W. Turner and the Romantic landscape. In his preface for the first edition he wrote:

> But when *public* taste seems plunging deeper and deeper into degradation day by day, and when the press universally exerts such power as it possesses to direct the feeling of the nation more completely to all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art; while it vents its ribald buffooneries on the most exalted truth, and the highest ideal of landscape, that this or any other age has ever witnessed, it becomes the imperative duty of all who have any perception or knowledge of what is really great in art, and any desire for its advancement in England, to come fearlessly forward, regardless of such individual interests as are likely to be injured by the knowledge of what is good and right, to declare and demonstrate, wherever they exist, the essence and the authority of the Beautiful and the True.[66]

In this selection we can see several key aspects of art for Ruskin. First, proving his Romantic sensibilities, there is the emphasis on the landscape and nature in its ability to convey truth. Considering the importance of land and place to English conceptions of identity, Ruskin's attachment to the Romantics, an artistic movement which in both its literary and plastic incarnations lent itself to nationalism,  makes a great deal of sense.[67] It seems significant that when writing about his first meeting with Turner in a much later work Ruskin recalled that the artist was "a somewhat eccentric, keen-mannered, matter-of-fact, English-minded-gentleman"[68]

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[66] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1843), x.

[67] For a discussion on the connections between Romanticism and Nationalism in a specifically English context see: Alan Richardson and Sonia Hofkosh, *Romanticism, Race, and Imperial Culture, 1780-1834*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[68] John Ruskin, "Selections from *Praeterita*" in *England and Its Aesthetes: Biography and Taste*, ed. David Carrier, (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997) 47.

The very artist that Ruskin was championing as the hero whose work could undo the "degradation" of the misled masses and who, along with Ruskin as critic, would help "[art's] advancement in England", was thankfully a paragon of Englishness in person as well as in art.

Perennially popular, the first volume of *Modern Painters* achieved a tenth and final edition in 1888, though Ruskin was not exactly thrilled by his success. Disappointed by what he perceived as failure on the part of his readership to perceive the more moral quality of his aesthetic theories and becoming somewhat disillusioned by the later work of his heroes he tempered himself in subsequent editions. Though that did not stop him from saying in the third edition that:

> On the continent all landscape art has been utterly annihilated by them, and with it all sense of the power of nature. We in England have only done better because our artists have had strength of mind enough to form a school withdrawn from their influence.[69]

Ruskin's artistic theories were thus specifically predicated on English exceptionalism and, implicitly, provincialism. Afterall, it was decadence and theatricality that degrades art. An obvious remedy for this would be the simple, unaffected Englishness that our historians traced into the very land that Ruskin wanted to see worshiped in paint.

In terms of what Ruskin did contribute to English art, his vindication of "the Beautiful and the True" are essential. Drawing a sharp distinction between mere imitation and truth, it was the first that he was condemning as "all that is theatrical, affected, and false in art" in the preface to his first edition. Imitation, which is to say pictorial illusionism, was merely the product of craftsman like skill that can easily awe the audience into forgetting that the painting lacks any true content. They will be so stunned by faithfully rendered details that it does not

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[69] John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., 1843), xlvi.

even matter that there may be no substance.[70] While he absolutely believed the best art should truthfully render "the power of nature,"[71] truth went further than simple illusionism, but also managed to convey emotional or ideological content. It was this exact trait that the final significant English artistic movement of the nineteenth century capitalized on. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, openly Ruskinian, painted in a way that was illusionistic, but was meant to transport the viewer to some transcendent state. By calling themselves Pre-Raphaelite, they were not rejecting the Renaissance master's technical skill, but the perfect, but lifeless posturing of art that operated in the classical mode.[72] The result was art that looked nothing like the avant-garde works being produced in France and Germany, but that was modern based on the terms established by Ruskin.

There is also one final point to consider when thinking about art in modern England, namely from a reception angle. In a survey of Modern Art, Richard R. Brettell chose to start his book with the Great Exhibition of 1851, enthusiastically organized by Prince Albert. Though he chose this as a starting point because of his wish to decenter Paris in discussions of modernism, he also pointed out that "the sheer modernity of the exhibition itself justifies its position as the point of opening."[73] This points to the possibility that given the complex reciprocal relationship between the work and the way it is displayed, and that between the artist

[70] Incidentally, it is this exact argument that has been levelled against Academic art, which is often been characterized as nothing more than slavish reproductions of tropes that are designed to reinforce the status quo, making academic work essentially anti-art in the avant-garde model. For an argument against this see *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[71] Ruskin, xlvi.

[72] Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*.

[73] Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art, 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation*, 2.

and the viewer, perhaps all it takes is a modern attitude to make something modern art. Modernity is thus conceived as being highly contextual.

Art provides an invaluable space for working out a culture's demons. The self-conscious artist can be an invaluable tool for understanding a society, which I intend to demonstrate by examining a crucial painting by John William Waterhouse, a late-Victorian, Academy certified painter, who succeeded in synthesizing all the disparate strands of his time into singular visions of haunting beauty. The specific painting that I am looking at is *The Lady of Shalott* of 1888 (fig. 2), the first of three attempts at bringing Tennyson's tragic heroine to life. In this single painting, one can find the poetic intensity of a Pre-Raphaelite Brother, the painterly sensibility of an Impressionist, the heady romanticism of a Symbolist, and the technical proficiency of an Academician. The overall effect is dreamy, melancholic, but still somewhat hopeful—perfectly encapsulating his own time's complex relationship with itself.

Compared to the other great Western Powers of the nineteenth century—namely France and Germany—little has been said about English painting in this period or in any other. I do not wish to take this too far. The last thirty years have seen a huge expansion of scholarship on Victorian art as a whole, rather than just the few "radical" movements mentioned earlier.[74] This opening up of Art History again reflects the degree to which traditional art canons are being

[74] See more recent examples of broad overviews of Victorian Art: Paula Gillett, *Worlds of Art: Painters in Victorian Society* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Richard Jenkyns, *Dignity and Decadence: Victorian Art and the Classical Inheritance* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1992); Julian Treuherz, *Victorian Painting* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993); Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Problem Pictures: Women and Men in Victorian Painting* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Scolar Press, 1995); Malcolm Warner, Anne Helmreich, and Charles Brock, *The Victorians: British Painting, 1837-1901* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1996); Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999); Spike Bucklow, Sally Woodcock, Mark Bills, and John Gilbert, *Sir John Gilbert: Art and Imagination in the Victorian Age* (Burlington, VT: Lund Humphries, 2011). In addition to this list there are the emerging special topics which have emerged in Victorian Art History, which cover individual movements, art making practices, or social issues like race and gender.

problematized, not to mention the expansion of Victorian Studies in general. Nevertheless, there has been an historical lack of interest in Victorian artists. This is not entirely due to the whims of scholarship, as an impartial observer is forced to admit that in terms of the traditional way in which the visual arts have been received, the English have not done nearly as much to recommend themselves as they have in, say, the sister field of literature. The issue is twofold. First, there have been few unified movements within English Art History, meaning there has been no convenient way to group artists or, in some cases notice patterns. Second, modernist Art History has been exclusively interested in the exceptional and the innovative. At a basic level, history's role has always been to explain change over time, and is thus preoccupied with those moments and figures which facilitate or constiture change. In the most general terms, England has produced few (some might argue no) artists who were "great" in the sense that they played a crucial role in advancing our understanding of art—that role as largely been left to the Manet and Monets of the world.

There is the related issue of art's long standing interest, at least in modern era, in the avant-garde. Victorian Art was primarily of the landscape, portrait, and genre variety and painted according to academic conventions—a type of art that does not necessarily lend itself to the avant-garde. That being said, excellent work has been written on these exact types of artistic production.[75] There are a few exceptions to this general trend, the most prominent of which is probably the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group that has achieved enough studies to gain the exalted status of being obviously significance. Though even then there still seemed to be the

[75] Charlotte Klonk, *Science and the Perception of Nature: British Landscape Art in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries*, (New Haven: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 1996); Rafael Cardoso Denis and Colin Trodd, *Art and the Academy in the Nineteenth Century* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000); Hardy George, *Artist As Narrator: Nineteenth Century Narrative Art in England and France*, (Oklahoma City, Okla: Oklahoma City Museum of Art, 2005).

implicit assumption that there was something pedestrian about PRB when compared to more successful attempts at avant-garde movements. Again, this way of thinking is being phased out so that it is becoming increasingly common for serious attention being devoted to English art of the nineteenth century. The last decades have not only seen books specifically dedicated to Victorian painting and art production, but also significant studies of the kind of painters that usually only receive attention on postcards. John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) is one such artists, and has benefited immensely from this shift, culminating in the highly popular academician finally receiving a book of his own in 2005 by Peter Trippi.[76] While there is still the faint traces of a specialist studying his very niche topic, there is also much reason to be hopeful about this new turn.

The question of who Waterhouse was and why he matters, must first be addressed through his relationship to the PRB. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood formed in 1848 around three giants of English art: William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The specific aims of the PRB can be somewhat misleading based on their name alone. As their naturalistic style demonstrates, the Brotherhood was not interested in rejecting the technical perfection achieved by the Renaissance master, but merely the needless posturing, the over-perfection of the Italian masters. Rossetti, writing in 1895, described the aims of the Brotherhood as:

> One. To have genuine ideas to express; Two. To study Nature attentively, so as to know how to express them; Three. To sympathise with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is convention and self-parading and learnt by rote; and Four. Most indispensable of all, to produce thoroughly good pictures and statues.[77]

[76] Peter Trippi, *J.W. Waterhouse*, (London: Phaidon, 2002).
[77] Dante Gabriel Rossetti in Lionel Lambourne, *Victorian Painting*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1999) 231.

This description is significant in that it does not differ too radically from any of the other modern art movements of the the late nineteenth century. The Realists and the Impressionists were engaged in artistic programs that, they hoped, would convey something true in as "real" a manner as possible. Whereas the Impressionists, for example, were interested in recreating the actual experience of vision[78] or the Realists[79] were attempting to point to the painting as a painting, the Pre-Raphaelites were looking for truth in the sense of authenticity. They painted with deep feeling in a naturalistic manner in the hopes of recreating scenes of great emotion from a lost past. That their subjects were ultimately medieval is not surprising in light of both the medievalism specific to the Victorians or the general interest in the Medieval Era that was affecting all of Western Europe.

First and foremost, it must be understood that J.W. Waterhouse was not a member of the Brotherhood. He was, in fact, born the very same year as their first exhibition. Strictly speaking, he rose to prominence almost thirty years after their official dissolution. Not that the break up of the group meant much in terms of the actual production of art, as the members all continued to explore issues raised in *The Germ*—the PRB periodical— and the term "Pre-Raphaelite' was still being applied to new artists some fifty years after the Brotherhood dissolved.[80] In fact, much of what is interesting about Waterhouse is based on his fascination with a movement that was nominally dead. Waterhouse discovered the Pre-Raphaelites sometime in the mid-1880s, signifying a dramatic shift in his subject matter towards the romantic and away from his former predilection towards the classical. *The Lady of Shalott* (image 1) was the painting that announced

[78] Richard R. Brettell, *Modern Art, 1851-1929: Capitalism and Representation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 16.
[79] Brettell, 13.
[80] Luke Herrmann, *Nineteenth Century British Painting*, (London: Giles de la Mare, 2000) 241.

this shift. It is hard to imagine something more Pre-Raphaelite than this Tennyson fueled re-imagining of Arthurian legend. Waterhouse, who had already demonstrated a strong affinity for mystical women, was hardly the first artist to succumb to the charms of this tragically beautiful figure.

Tennyson wrote two versions of "The Lady of Shalott", first in 1833 and then again in 1842. Like the rest of his Arthurian work, these ballads were only loosely based on medieval sources and had an almost instant hold on the public. The story is a tragic one, based around the unnamed Lady of Shalott. The Lady had been placed under an unexplained curse, which forced her to endlessly weave tapestries, the moment she stopped she would die. Cloistered at the top of a tall tower, the Lady's only access to life in the world below is a mirror which reflects the river that runs by her home and the merchants and wanderers who travel by it to Camelot. After years of this, the Lady began to grow bored though she continued to weave. It was only after she caught the reflection of Sir Lancelot, dressed in his finest livery, that she puts down her work and leaves the tower. She immediately went to the banks of a river where she happened upon a boat. The poem followed her final journey to Camelot, ending with a gathering of all the Lords and Ladies of Camelot gathering around her body. The final words are Lancelot's who says simply "She has a lovely face/God in his mercy lend her grace/The Lady of Shalott."[81] This mournful ballad was an immediately popular subject amongst the general public and artists, who specifically saw in it a powerful combination of tragedy, mysticism, and moral ambiguity.[82]

There is a strange tension in Waterhouse's vision, namely between the intense, otherworldly vividness of the Lady and her hazy, naturally wild surroundings. She herself glows

[81] Alfred Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott," (1842).
[82] Peter Trippi, *J.W. Waterhouse*, (London: Phaidon, 2002), 89.

in her pearly white gown, emphasized by the red of her hair, her crying eyes, her sensual lips, and the tapestries that she put away in her madness. She stands out as the sharp focal point against a backdrop of mangled reeds, literally being carried away by her visions. The Lady of Shalott was a hugely popular subject for the Victorians, especially when she was used in moralistic tones. In this model she was the wayward woman, led astray by her erotic impulses. There was thus often a sense of sad justice in seeing the Lady in her boat, which was both a symbol and the vehicle of her death—consider that boat have long sense represented the journey from one state of being to another in the Western mind.[83] This is present in Waterhouse's painting, in everything from the entranced expression of her face, to the small fallen leaf in her lap, which mars the otherwise pure whiteness of her skirt and suggests, as dead leaves always do, her mortality. There is the contrast too, of her wild hair—lose and red like the Pre-Raphaelites favored—with the restraint of her black girdle, a woman at cross-purposes. Yet Waterhouse seems to have felt some sympathy for her. In the catalogue he reprinted three lines from Tennyson's poem "And down the river's dim expanse,/like some bold seer in a trance,/The broad stream bore her far away", purposefully admitting the line "Seeing all his own mischance"[84], which had been used and sometimes expanded upon to underscore the Lady's fault in turning away from her duty. The three candles at the front of the boat, in danger of blowing out as she is dying, were, according to Waterhouse himself, possible signs of her religious devotion.[85] The crucifix and rosary certainly were. In addition the two accompanying swallows at the bottom, bring with them the promise of resurrection and spring. All in all, there seems to be far more

[83] Trippi, 90.
[84] Trippi, 90.
[85] Trippi, 91.

reason to hope that the Lady will be transcending upward, rather than the punishment that some had envisioned for her.

But Waterhouse's engagement with his subject goes far beyond the moral position of the story, and betrays very modern preoccupations. Most interesting to me are the ways in which he clearly situates himself in relation to the artistic movements to which he is responding too. On the one hand, he was clear in displaying his Pre-Raphaelite legacy. The reeds at the bottom left of the painting are clear references to the other famous floating woman of the Pre-Raphaelites', John Everett Millais's *Ophelia* (fig. 3), completed in 1851-52, which was specifically one of the paintings that sparked Waterhouse's interest in the group. As mentioned, the model herself is painted in the same kind of manner that the Pre-Raphaelites favored, slightly wild and with loose, flaming-red hair. The puffy eyes and the unkempt wilderness around her suggest the same commitment to veracity that was the driving force behind the Brotherhood, meaning that *The Lady of Shalott* is certainly a Pre-Raphaelite painting is subject and tone even if it is not really one in style. In fact, it was in part that very naturalism that led to initial critical disfavor, even if it was more popular amongst the younger painters and was quickly bought by Henry Tate.[86] In style however, it has the strange quality of essentially being vaguely impressionist—particularly in the backing landscape—but brought into order by an Academic sensibility, so that it ends up being painterly and linear at once. In addition, the fascination with vision, demonstrated by the inward, enraptured gaze, picks up from where artists like Rossetti left off while also anticipating Symbolist work. In fact, the popularity of this painting ensured that both the drowning/sleeping woman and altered states of mind remained fruitful artistic subjects.

[86] Trippi, 92.

In terms of politics, the painting does not have much in the way of an obvious message. There is, of course, the possibility that there is a small attempt at subversion by giving the Lady the possibility of redemption. If so, Waterhouse would be very much of the times: boredom with the chivalric ideals of Walter Scott was increasingly common by the end of the nineteenth century.[87] In a similar vein, the Lady's red hair takes on a deeper significance when paired with the vaguely Celtic detailing of the boat. The Arthurian legend has a long, complicated relationship with the issue of English dominance. Essentially, the version of the legend that has been popularized was the invention of Angevin (Anglo-French) writers, who twisted traditional British/Welsh stories into propaganda that bolstered the English. By the time this was painted, bolstered by the then particularly good relationship between the constituent parts of Great Britain, it was not so much radical as it was fashionable to depict Arthurian characters as Celtic. In either event, it is more accurate to say that Waterhouse was acting more of a political mirror than a true trailblazer. This issue gets to the heart of the complications facing an Englishman at the dawning of the twentieth century—here is a painting that used a past that was acknowledged as being fabricated to make points about a dramatically changing present in the hopes of creating a more idyllic future. Much like with the disparate styles and influences, it should not work but it does. A huge tangle of contradictory identities are being blended into something nearly seamless, though not sustainable, almost through sheer willpower alone.

*The Lady of Shalott* is the kind of painting that exists in the details, but is successful through effect. Even as it is melancholic there is a grace to it, a tremulous kind of hope that one can easily imagine being applied to the larger world that Waterhouse lived in. This was painted,

[87] Sandra Martina Schwab, "What is Man?: The Refuting of the Chivalric Ideal at the Turn of the Century" in *Beyond Arthurian Romances: The Reach of Victorian Medievalism*, ed. by Jennifer A. Palmgren and Lorretta M. Holloway, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) 217.

after all at the near height of England's power. Waterhouse was more-or-less an Aesthete, and like his artistic fellows, he clearly had a complicated relationship with modernity, but for all its faults there was also an undeniable promise to this new age. To prove the point, consider his first *Shalott* painting against his last, completed in 1915, entitled *'I am Half-Sick of Shadows,' and the Lady of Shalott* (fig.4). This women is an entirely different person to the one he painted almost thirty years prior. This is the Lady at the moment she stopped weaving, realizing that she is tired of only experiencing life through other people's reflections in a mirror. In short, she is bored and desperate for something more. The date of this painting is of the utmost significance. This is a painting by a Waterhouse now in the midst of the First World War. The idyllic visions of an imagined past would not do. For the last few years of his career, his work focused exclusively on medieval or renaissance subjects, eras important for their patriotic connotations. Specifically, he was interested in women experiencing some kind of revelation, women in the throws of things more real than reality. This is fitting, for a period of which the central ideologies of modernity were being called into horrible, violent question. Just as the first Lady presented thoughts on the modernity of 1888, the last was a crucial reflection of 1915.

This social dimension of his work is not a small thing. Though formal experimentalism is the most obvious signifier of artistic modernity, social or political engagement was another hugely important way in which art could be considered modern, particularly in the initial French strains and later German ones.[88] Considering that modernism, as an artistic position, was

[88] Realism, as practiced by painters such as Gustave Courbet, dedicated itself to painting the world as it really was, in order to make explicit the problems facing the impoverished in society (and therefore aligned with literary

primarily concerned with critiquing older forms of art making, it has obvious political connotations that were available for the artist's use. The degree to which Waterhouse did so is ambiguous, but as will be shown in the following discussion of one of the most prominent socialists and artists, William Morris, in later nineteenth century England. It is in its social dimensions that the work of Waterhouse can make another claim to modernity.

While it is entirely justified to suggest that Waterhouse displayed modernist tendencies, I do not believe you can ascribe to him any sort of fully realized political message save perhaps the oblique social commentary of the moralist in his handling of his female characters.[89] This is perhaps surprising considering the established easy alliance forming between avant-garde art and progressivism elsewhere in Europe at the time. Art and politics were hardly strangers: the initial revolutionary implications of Neoclassicism were lost on no one and, as we have already seen, the English monarchy was adept at using art for propaganda. Arguably, this very type of art we have just been discussing would have been most useful for the conservative forces of England. As shown, medievalism was an overwhelmingly nostalgic process that was of particular use to non-Whigs.[90] However, the last decades of the nineteenth century saw a major shift in the political life of Britain, marked by a resurgence of the radical left prompted by the recent success of the conservative party under Disraeli.[91] Though there we have seen a longstanding connection in the nineteenth century between conservatism, patriotism, and imperialism,[92] beginning in the

realism). This also has something of a basis in Baudelaire. Later, German Expressionists would actively charge their work with their socialist ideals.

[89] Kimberly Rhodes, *Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008).

[90] Culler, 155.

[91] Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism, and the British Left, 1881-1924* (Rochester, NY: Royal Historical Society/Boydell Press, 1998) 19.

[92] For a full discussion see Robert Leach. *Political Ideology in Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

1880s radical dissenters were able to create their own definition of patriotic Englishness. Coinciding with the rise of modern socialism in England, it can be no surprise that socialists were thus always careful to tie their politics to ideas of an authentic England.[93]

A popular labor hymn made the ties between a lost England and the new cause clear. Written in in the early 1880s, "England Arise!" was sung at the first Labor Church service.[94]

> England arise! The long night is over,
> Faint in the east behold the dawn appear,
> Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow
> A-rise O England, for the day is here
>
> … Fourth, then ye heroes, patriots, and lovers!
> Comrades of danger, poverty, and scorn!
> Mighty in faith of freedom your great mother!
> Giants refreshed in joy's new rising morn![95]

As a call to arms this hymn is full of rich imagery. Here the Labor movement has inherited the chivalric role of the hero, honoring the motherland in the same way a knight might have his queen or lady. In a clever inversion, the dark slumber from which these new giants—a possible classical allusion to the pre-Roman inhabitants of the British Isles—must awake was not the dark ages, but the commercial period that came afterward. In fact, it is precisely the so-called "dark ages" they must emulate to do so. Of the three medievalisms identified by Culler, this is representative of the third kind which looked for its antidote to modern travails in a golden age that existed somewhere around the fourteenth and fifteenth century. The difference between the romantic medievalism and this newer form cannot be overstated. H.M. Hyndman(1842-1921) and William Morris(1834-1896), both leading early English socialists, made it clear that it was that very same "splendid chivalry, whose resplendent armour and noble individual prowess have

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[93] Ward, 20.
[94] Ward, 20.
[95] Edward Carpenter, *Chants of Labour: a Song Book of the People* (London : Sonnenschein, 1888).

been the theme of so much glorification" that was the true villain of the era.[96] In fact, the legacy Hyndman and Morris were interested in following was that of the "handicraftsman" and the yeoman. With a foundation in Ruskin, Hyndman and Morris argued that it was these figures that were truly "independent men"; more independent perhaps in England than the people as a body have ever been economically, socially, and politically, at any other period of our history."[97] Not only were these men the defining element of English history, but through their efforts alone were also "secured in that freedom and well-being which made common Englishmen for at least two centuries the envy of Europe."[98] This was a testament to hardy Englishness for "England, far more densely peopled at that time than is generally supposed, was in fact inhabited by perhaps the most vigorous, freedom-loving set of men the world ever saw."[99] Though they allow some achievement on the part of other Northern and Western Europeans—presumably a nod to the shared Teutonic legacy—the ideal world they sought to emulate was decidedly English through and through. The problem, early English socialists argued, was that the nobility of the English had been willfully lost in the pursuit of capital.

William Morris was an interesting figure, who in a single life, managed to combine almost all of the elements of this study. He was an astute political thinker, an artists, and occasionally an historian. Further, he had a clear sense of how to combine these various elements into a single program designed to save England from itself. Near the end of his life Morris was asked to write about his path to socialism, his summary is telling:

> To sum up, then the study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into a hatred of the civilization which, if things were to stop as they are, would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and

[96] H. M. Hyndman and William Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (London: The Modern Press, 1884), 12.
[97] Hyndman and Morris, 12.
[98] Hyndman and Morris, 13.
[99] Hyndman and Morris, 13.

> make art a collection of the curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present.
> But the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me, luckier than many others of artistic perceptions, from crystallizing into a mere railer against "progress" on the one hand, and on the other from wasting time and energy in any of the numerous schemes by which the quasi-artistic of the middle classes hope to make art grow when it has no longer any root, and thus I became a practical Socialist.[100]

The practice of art, which we will see comprised a great deal more for Morris than a traditional definition might imply, was the alpha and omega for Morris. It was the lens through which he viewed the world, the way in which he first discovered the corruption of capital, and often one of the chief means through which the world could be cured. It would be impossible to separate the artist from the socialist, both of which were being heavily informed by history, particularly Carlyle and Ruskin. "The latter… was my master towards the ideal aforesaid… It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization."[101]

Though nowhere near as important as Ruskin in terms of his development, Morris also spent time with and was influenced by another familiar figure, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, co-founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.[102] During the five years he spent under the tutelage of Rossetti, Morris nursed his nascent artistic ability as well as a passion for the medieval that he had felt even as a child growing up near the Epping Forest.[103] Though their association did not survive past the dissolution of the PAB, the younger Morris found a great deal to admire in the bohemian idealism that the Brotherhood represented. After all, he was well

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[100] William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist" (1894), *Justice*, from the *Marxist Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1894/hibs/hibs.htm
[101] Morris, "How I Became A Socialist".
[102] E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) 61.
[103] Thompson, 4.

prepared to be a romantic. Educated at Oxford at a time when it was still so clearly "the Norman city", he found himself predisposed to the medieval aesthetic. Perhaps ironically, it was a trip to France that confirmed his love.

> Less than forty years ago—about thirty—I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages: no words can tell you how it's mingled beauty, history, and romance took hold on me; I can only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it was the greatest pleasure I have ever had: and now it is a pleasure which no one can ever have again: it is lost to the world for ever.[104]

This was not the only time Morris was forced to praise France over England. Comparing the modernized Paris to London, Morris felt that no one could possibly prefer the latter. However this should by no means be taken as a sign of an inherent French superiority, but rather the sheer vulgarity London: "except for a few monuments of art, the buildings in Paris are quite without beauty, and are generally actively ugly. Paris is no longer a beautiful city, but it is delightful compared with London. You can stroll with pleasure in Paris; in London you cannot, unless you are a philosopher or a fool."[105] In any event, it is clear that William Morris made the jump to politics specifically through aesthetics. His absorption of the romantic masters of the earlier half of the nineteenth century meant he was uniquely well-qualified to articulate and develop his vision for a more beautiful England.

Morris's conception of Englishness should be a familiar one. He was a believer in the "Norman Yoke", at least to the degree that the Norman invasion had interfered with the natural progression of English history.

> The development of the country as a Teutonic people was checked and turned aside by this event. Duke William brought, in fact, his Normandy into England, which was thereby changed from a Teutonic people (Old-Norse theod), with the tribal customary law still in use among them, into a province of Romanized Feudal Europe, a piece of France, in short; and though in time she did grow into another England again, she missed

[104] William Morris, "The Aims of Art", *Signs of Change* (1888) from the Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/signs/chapters/chapter5.htm

[105] William Morris, "Ugly London," *Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 September 1888, from the Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/ugly.htm

> forever in her laws, and still more in her language and her literature, the chance of developing into a great homogeneous Teutonic people infused usefully with a mixture of Celtic blood.[106]

The racial terminology in this passage is striking. Like other later medievalists, he saw the Teutonic origin of the English as being essential and somehow connected to ideas of liberty, with the implicit understanding that tyranny is more of a problem from the South. Though in other work he discussed a kind of freedom in Ancient Greece and Rome, which was certainly preferable to Feudal tyranny, it was still nothing compared to the democratic promise of the Teutonic races, especially as it was applied so unevenly across classes.[107] He was even quieter on the ancient Britons, but the reference to Celtic blood here indicates mixed, though generally positive feelings. Though there is no indication on what the Celtic fringe specifically provided in the formation the English spirit, it certainly was not damaging. There can still be no doubt that the ancient Celtic tribes were conceived as something separate. The infusion of Celtic blood was the necessary result of when "our Anglo-Saxon forefathers first conquered Romanised Britain." [108] As a final point, it is entirely believable that as a lover of the decorative arts, Morris would hardly have been able to argue against the elegance of Celtic design. For the other foreign influence, the triumph of Duke William, the only title Morris ever escribes to the Conqueror, may even have been beneficial in the long run. Though it meant that England "was slowly beginning to be mixed up with the affairs of the Continent of Europe, and that not only with the kindred nations of Scandinavia, but with the Romanized countries also", this intermingling and

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[106] William Morris, "Feudal England", *Signs of Change*, (1888) from the *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/signs/chapters/chapter3.htm

[107] William Morris, "Development of Modern Society," *Commonweal*, vol 6, 237, 26 July 1890, from the *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1890/commonweal/devel2.htm

[108] Morris, "Development of Modern Society".

even oppression on the part of the Normans was the means by which the English began to recognize themselves as English.[109]

Englishness for Morris meant the same kind of rustic simplicity that it did elsewhere, a point made clear in his opinion of English art. It is of utmost importance to note that Morris was not much of a painter or a sculptor or practitioner of anything that might be termed as being part of the "higher arts." And while he certainly believed that fine art had a very important role in society—he was severely distressed by the architectural ugliness of London after all—he also believed that by only considering the most non-functional kinds of artistic production, one entirely failed to grasp the key importance of art. During a five part lecture in 1880 on his "Hopes and Fears for Art" Morris offered several eloquent defenses of the decorative arts, declaring in the introduction that "Our subject is that great body of art, by means of which men have at all times more or less striven to beautify the familiar matters of everyday life: a wide subject, a great industry; both a great part of the history of the world, and a most helpful instrument to the study of that history."[110] Essentially, the decorative arts have a claim to being the most important art because it is the way in which the world is made beautiful at a very practical level. This was particularly important within a socialist context. Only the wealthy might have access to fine arts, but the decorative arts would properly access society at all levels.[111] Decoration, by making even the most functional items beautiful, became almost spiritual, even more so than examples of obviously religious high arts:

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[109] William Morris, "Feudal England".

[110] William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art* (London: Ellis and White, 1882), from the Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1882/hopes/index.htm

[111] Though as a point of fact England, more than any other country, could have made a claim for democratizing art in the nineteenth century. Their national exhibitions were expertly staged and well attended. For a discussion on this see Robert Jensen, *Marketing Modernism in Fin-De-Siècle Europe* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994).

> This disease and injury to humanity, also, he thinks is no trifling matter, but a grievous deduction from the happiness of man; for he knows that the all-pervading art of which I have been speaking, and to the possibility of which the Commercialist is blind, is the expression of pleasure in the labour of production; and that, since all persons who are not mere burdens on the community must produce, in some form or another, it follows that under our present system most honest men must lead unhappy lives, since their work, which is the most important part of their lives, is devoid of pleasure.
> Or, to put it very bluntly and shortly, under the present state of society happiness is only possible to artists and thieves.[112]

Art must therefore be a key component of any socialist agenda as a corrective against the brutalities of commercialism. To enjoy the beautiful was for Morris in fact a fundamental right that must be guaranteed in order to fully express one's humanity.

But the decorative arts had another power that the fine arts could not. By definition, the decorative arts must be, at least in part, peasant art. It is inherently home grown and exists for its own sake, making it a much purer expression of spirit.

> For as was the land, such was the art of it while folk yet troubled themselves about such things; it strove little to impress people either by pomp or ingenuity: not unseldom it fell into commonplace, rarely it rose into majesty; yet was it never oppressive, never a slave's nightmare nor an insolent boast: and at its best it had an inventiveness, an individuality that grander styles have never overpassed… never coarse, though often rude enough, sweet, natural and unaffected, an art of peasants… it must be a hard heart, I think, that does not love it: whether a man has been born among it like ourselves, or has come wonderingly on its simplicity from all the grandeur over-seas. A peasant art, I say, and it clung fast to the life of the people… while the big houses were being built 'French and fine': still lived also in many a quaint pattern of loom and printing-block, and embroiderer's needle, while over-seas stupid pomp had extinguished all nature and freedom, and art was become, in France especially, the mere expression of that successful and exultant rascality, which in the flesh no long time afterwards went down into the pit for ever.[113]

It is clear that the art Morris is referring to has a very English quality, even before he actively called out the over-designed quality common to French design. This was an art that matched its people and its land: simple and unassuming. Recognizing the same lack of English Artists in the traditional canon that was discussed previously, Morris turns a lack of notoriety into an overwhelming positive as a way to prove artistic authenticity. Art that manages to be both

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[112] William Morris, "The Socialist Ideal: Art," *New Review*, January 1891, from Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1891/ideal.htm
[113] William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*.

beautiful, but also somehow forgettable is free from vanity. It exists only to please. Again, the class dimension has been highlighted. It is only the slaver, the oppressor who must display their power through a collection of needlessly pretty things. Decadence was the natural enemy of freedom. Just like foreigners have envied England for her democracy, the most enlightened must also come to recognize the simplicity, the wholesome quality of its decorative art.

In terms of translating his idealism into meaningful action, Morris had two phases. First, in 1861 he founded Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co, often referred to as "the Firm".[114] The Firm was designed as an antidote of sorts to commercialization. Instead of mass-production, one could obtain unique products produced as part of an artist collective. Essentially guild-like, it was as much a callback to the medieval era as the designs were. It fed directly into the Arts and Crafts Movement, an artistic legacy that was very self-consciously inspired by the writings of Ruskin and Morris, meaning that it prioritized simplistic beauty, functionality, and had an unavoidably patriotic quality. Whatever success Morris achieved in strictly artistic terms, his increased attraction to politics was undeniable so that by the 1880s he was increasingly preoccupied by his socialist writings.[115] He went on to found a socialist paper, *The Commonweal*, and several socialist organizations as well as helping to revive older forms of print-making.[116] Artistically he is one of England's most significant figures, one who had an indelible effect on subsequent artists and designers both insular and continental. In many ways, he anticipated the

[114] Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: From William Morris to Walter Gropius* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2005) 31.

[115] A poet from an early age, Morris also wrote several popular pieces of socialist literature: songs, novels, poems, etc. The most famous of which and probably one of his best known works was *News From Nowhere* (1890). Similar to his earlier *Dream of John Bell* (1888) in which a time traveller dreams of the 14th century Peasant's Revolt, *News* instead travels forward to a utopian future. His use of literature is both indicative of the long standing English love of words and also bolsters his claim that literature and music ought to be considered as productive forms of art as their visual counterparts.

[116] Pevsner, 31.

exact moves politically minded German artists would take in the first decade and a half of the twentieth century, whether the Expressionists or groups like Deutscher Werkbund.[117] European architects too would take cues from the English Arts and Crafts Movement.[118] If nothing else he provided beautiful defenses for art as a tool for radical politics:

> Art is long and life is short; let us at least do something before we die. We seek perfection, but can find no perfect means to bring it about; let it be enough for us if we can unite with those whose aims are right, and their means honest and feasible. I tell you if we wait for perfection in association in these days of combat we shall die before we can do anything. Help us now, you whom the fortune of your birth has helped to make wise and refined; and as you help us in our work-a-day business toward the success of the cause, instil into us your superior wisdom, your superior refinement, and you in your turn may be helped by the courage and hope of those who are not so completely wise and refined. Remember we have but one weapon against that terrible organization of selfishness which we attack, and that weapon is Union.[119]

Art, especially visual art, as democratic potential that very few mediums could replicate at the end of the nineteenth century.

That the unmistakably English Morris should have had such a wide significance in greater Europe was something of a happy accident. Morris was specifically interested in creating an English vision and, in fact, there is ample reason to believe doing so was necessary for him to achieve any sort of success in an English context. Socialism created an interesting conundrum for the English. Though there is nothing inherently nationalistic about socialism, it has undoubtedly taken on very patriotic qualities wherever it developed. For a population famously distrustful of the foreign, socialism was an undeniably continental prospect. It was necessary to find ways to translate socialism into a specifically English context. Art was the clear means for Morris, but there were other options for the less aesthetically inclined. The key was to dress socialism in as patriotic terms as possible. As indicated earlier, the 1880s was a crucial moment

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[117] Pevsner, 34.
[118] Pevsner, 51.
[119] William Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy" (1884), from the *Marxist Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1883/pluto.htm

for the development of the English radical left. As a point of fact, it was this growing connection between labor and politicized Englishness that helped popularize the Arts and Crafts Movement. [120] As a textbook example of socialism made national consider Robert Blatchford, the author of the hugely popular *Merrie England* (1894) and *Britain for the British* (1902). In the first he declared that the crucial importance of the English people, who were familiarly hardy and intelligent.[121] The second however he was more overtly nationalistic in tone:

> If you as a Briton are proud of your country and your race, if you as a man have any pride of manhood, or as a worker have any pride of class, come over to us and help in the just and wise policy of winning Britain for the British, manhood for *all* men, womanhood for *all* women, and love to-day and hope to-morrow for the children whom Christ loved, but who by many Christians have unhappily been forgotten.[122]

Here Blatchford has cast his net purposefully wide, making appeals to a common sense of religion and nation across gender and class lines. The substitution for British instead of English cannot be accidental. Statements such as Blatchford are the logical terminus of a line of thinking begun for figures like Morris's early partner in socialism H.M. Hyndman in his *England for All* (1881), which conceived of socialism as a mission essentially inherited from the Anglo-Saxons. [123] There can be absolutely no doubt that Hyndman was concerned about appearing as English as possible. His book borrows extensively from Marx's *Kapital*, enough that Hyndman was moved to give thanks in his introduction. "For the ideas and much of the matter contained in Chapters II and III, I am indebted to the work of a great thinker and original writer, which will, I trust, shortly be made accessible to the majority of my countrymen."[124] Marx noticed the slight and in a letter to Friedrich Sorge wrote:

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[120] Peter Stansky, *From William Morris to Sergeant Pepper: Studies in the Radical Domestic* (Palo Alto, Calif: Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1999) 76.
[121] Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England* (London: Clarion 1894).
[122] Robert Blatchford, *Britain for the British* (London: Clarion 1902) 173.
[123] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 2.
[124] H. M. Hyndman, *England for All* (London: Gilbert & Rivington, 1881) vi.

> Vis-à-vis myself, the fellow wrote stupid letters of excuse, for instance, that "the English don't like to be taught by foreigners," that "my name was so much detested, etc." With all that, his little book – so far as it pilfers the Capital – makes good propaganda, although the man is a "weak" vessel, and very far from having even the patience – the first condition of learning anything – of studying a matter thoroughly.[125]

Marx was clearly unimpressed with Hyndman's excuses and seems to have been unmoved by the potential difficulties of anglicizing socialism. The difficulty was, however, very real. Hyndman's work is only the first in a long legacy of downplaying if not outright denigrating foreign socialisms.[126] Hyndman's refusal to acknowledge the very German origins of his work obviously bolster traditional accusations of English xenophobia, while also indicating the value of something being considered "purely English". To achieve any sort of success, authors had to take incredible pains to make sure their very modern ideas were rooted in Englishness from start to finish.

As this discussion on English socialism indicates, cross-European ties existed whatever the typical English mentality may have wished. There is a huge difference between an idealized isolationism and the reality of being politically or economically isolated. In terms of the latter, England had never achieved that, nor could it have, and certainly not at the end of the nineteenth century. From a purely monarchical standpoint, the royal family, whose name it should be remembered was Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, was as much German as anything else. As the most industrialized nation in the world as well as the capital of a major empire, England happily engaged in foreign trade. And even if socialism or art had to be devested of its continental roots, other intellectual pursuits, particularly in the scientific and technological realm, were allowed a

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[125] Karl Marx, "Marx to Friedrich Adolph Sorge In Hoboken", *Marx-Engels Correspondence 1881*, from the Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1881/letters/81_12_15.htm

[126] Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*, 5.

certain cosmopolitan character, a fact best exemplified by The Great Exhibition.[127] Granted World's Fairs were as much about national pride as international cooperation, there was still an undeniable spirit of pan-European pride at being the cleverest in the world. The question of English exceptionalism is thus one of degrees. The fact that England exists on an island is undeniable. English insularity is true in all senses of the world, and has affected English psychology surely as much as Fernand Braudel suggested the sea and the mountains did for the people of the mediterranean.[128] In many ways, English experience was truly specific to England, but in many important ways it was not.

As has previously been suggested, to be modern is to be anxious. There was not a single person living at the end of the nineteenth century who could have avoided the contradictions and complications that modernity brought. But though the anxiety was universal, manifestations were contingent. To look again at the example of medievalism, there is a very real difference between English medievalism and that of the Germans. When the latter championed the medieval era it was often non-specific, which is to say that while there certainly was an element of nationalism (particularly in the case of the romantics), there was not a specific history being referenced beyond a vague notion of some pre-modern utopia. German medievalism is thus far closer to the general European turn to primitivism than the very internal nostalgia experienced by the English.[129] Though both arise from a similar source of modernist tension, the forms are entirely different. France, coming off of an embarrassing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, was equally desperate to find a source of pride in the past, but unlike England, had easier psychological access to

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[127] The full title of which was 'The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations'.

[128] Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

[129] For more information on German modernism see Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1991.

classical models.[130] Or, alternatively, artists like Paul Gauguin could indulge their primitivist whims by literally removing themselves from modernity and living with the far more "authentic" Tahitian natives—a living example of the complex relationship between modernity, primitivism, exoticism, and racism.[131] In the fine arts at least, England produced very little of this kind of racism, though their material culture proves they were as European as the rest.[132]

The specific problem that English modernity faced was related to the historical relationship between English national identity and provincialism. So long as modernity was philosophically conceived of something that was very French or very German, it would always be a struggle to assimilate into the English consciousness. The best way to demonstrate this is perhaps to consider it in reverse, to find those places in which undeniably fin-de-siecle modernity did exist in England. If we are thinking of individuals, the most obvious answer would be Oscar Wilde, who more than any other nineteenth century Briton fits the mold of the modern hero. However, Wilde was introduced to German and French culture at an incredibly early age and even wrote some of his work in French.[133] Even more obvious, Oscar Wilde was not English, but rather emphatically Irish, calling into question how much he had access to or interest in the conventional identity of an Englishman. Similarly, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, based out of London, very nearly broke through to abstraction in his *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket* (c. 1875).[134] (fig. 5) He was, however, American and like Wilde had extensive

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[130] For more information on Fin-De-Siecle France see Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin-De-Siècle France* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

[131] Stephen F Eisenman, "Triangulating Racism," *The Art Bulletin*, 78, no. 4 (1996): 603-609.

[132] For a fuller discussion on this see Jonathan Arac and Harriet Ritvo, *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991).

[133] Richard Ellmann,. *Oscar Wilde*, (New York: Knopf, 1988) 18.

[134] Famously, Whistler's career was ruined by Ruskin who considered *Nocturne* to be like asking people to pay to get paint thrown in their face. Whistler, sued, won the case, but was awarded such a small amount that he was left bankrupt by the whole affair.Whistler published his account of the story in *The Gentle Art of Making Enemies*

ties to Europe. To take the point even further, there can be no doubt that the conventional understanding of Englishness was describing a white, middle-to-upper class, male. Women have been largely silent in this narrative, despite the fact that there were most certainly English women writing history, producing and consuming art, and very politically active. The latter group is of particular interest since the end of the nineteenth century saw the birth of something we could recognizably call feminism, yet the suffragists did not depend on nationalism as much as one might guess.[135] The question is whether or not these women depended upon their Englishness in their various fields, and while the answer would obviously depend upon the woman, in general the answer was no. As we saw with Waterhouse's *Lady of Shalott*, modernity and Englishness were literally being enacted upon the female body, making it difficult for women to participate in the process. Rather women had to find their own models, largely eschewing the issues inherent in English modernism, even as they were confronting the inherent sexism of both.[136] In either case, it might be possible to suggest that only those who had access to the position of englishman faced these difficulties over modernity.

The point that has been argued here is simply that on top of the universal fear of modernity that was (and continues to be) experienced, the English faced an additional challenge simply because of how they had defined what it meant to be English in their histories. The solutions, as we have seen were often messy, underlining the tension rather than resolving it. This was particularly the case in the socialist example, but the shifting narratives devised by

(1890). This anecdote reveals both the extreme influence Ruskin enjoyed as well as providing a fairly public dismissal of formal experimentalism in England.

[135] Nelson, Carolyn Christensen Nelson, *Literature of the Women's Suffrage Campaign in England* (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2004).

[136] Martha Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Deborah Cherry, *Painting Women: Victorian Women Artists* (London: Routledge, 1993).

English historians hardly indicates a people confident in their identity. The case of modern art in England is more complicated, since more than anything we face what has often been construed as a lack or failure of expected developments. It cannot be overstated that academicism persisted throughout Western Europe. It is not that one would be unable to find art that matched the visual style of the English in other parts of Europe. Rather it is the strange absence of a true avant-garde in England that seems to need explaining. Though there were certainly movements that came close—The Pre-Raphaelites and Aesthetes were all radical in their way—there is nothing of the heroic modernism of Manet, Seurat, or Van Gogh to be found in English Art History. While that narrative of heroism has rightfully come into question, it still seems significant that the people who created it could find little in England to recommend them. Though there are certainly other issues at play here—as the case study of William Morris proved, there is a long legacy of England not investing much power in painting as a medium—I believe the most important factor was modernity's inherently continental nature. Finally, even if the English did not produce an art that could be called inarguably modern in the traditional sense, a re-evaluation of what makes something "modern" (the reliance on formal qualities) may point to an entirely different story.

The other thing that I have attempted to demonstrate is the necessity for considering multiple aspects of society together. As I have demonstrated, the figures embodied English modernity through many different modes of expression. The three areas that I chose partly reflect my own interests, but also those of the people I studied. As William Morris himself wrote, he imagined the world through an artistic lens, he arrived at socialism through art. Ruskin's story is similar, considering his work as a historian was deeply informed by his understanding of art and architecture. If history is a way for a people to (re)discover themselves, then surely art must be

the same process made visual. Politics is nothing less than the attempt to enact that identity, to impose it upon the world. In this way, art and narrative history and politics may all be seen as symptoms of the same phenomenon, or a mentality of an age. So too would literature and even something as seemingly dry as business practice. Thus, by adding on different categories of analysis, it is the same as adding more substance and color to the picture one is trying to recreate. Perhaps even more importantly, as this paper has shown, culture is never one way. It is not enough to say that art and politics and history are all the results of the same thing, because they were clearly all the results of each other. Again to use the two figures that stand on either end of my study, Ruskin and Morris represent the process by which ideas build each other. Because of his background in a long legacy of traditionally minded English historiography, Ruskin came to be the foremost Victorian art critic, one whose influence extended far beyond English borders. His understanding of what modern art ought to look like was the standard by which all English artists produced their work, particularly those with an interest in creating progressive art, such as Waterhouse or the Pre-Raphaelites. It was out of this context that William Morris learned his trade and from this perspective that he began to conceptualize his own political thought. None of these men were every one thing. To understand their work, it is necessary to grapple with the entire intellectual-creative context in which they lived. The final picture that emerges is not of a frightened English people rejecting modernity, but instead of figures actively engaged with some of its most pressing contradictions, borrowing from whatever field they found productive. Fin-de-siecle England was thus as modern as anywhere else in Western Europe, but only after it discovered the trick to doing it in an English way.

Implicit throughout this study has been the understanding that there is a certain malleability in the terms we use to give ourselves definition; there is a certain degree of choice involved when it comes to the identities we wear like masks. For the Englishman who had invested in the very traditional understanding of his country—simple, rustic, old-fashioned—it was necessary to forge a more specialized kind of modernity. That this happened was based only on the fact that both terms had been imbued with seemingly antithetical connotations and attendant ways of being. This was, of course, an process of imagination, though no less real for its origins in the mind only. It is important to keep this in mind as one considers the categories which we use to separate ourselves from one another. There can be a kind of smug, self-satisfaction in belonging to a group, in adopting an identity. It almost goes without saying that this conceit can and does have very real political/social/cultural implications. For that reason, I believe it is necessary to investigate these moments of surety, to examine the assumptions that ground them. In many ways this is an elaborate game of rhetoric, in which semantics suddenly do very much matter. This paper has shown the complicated mental gymnastics that go into building a sense of self, and the tools developed for it can be applied to eras and areas other than England at the end of the nineteenth century. Such work is often tremendously difficult—the very purpose of such analysis is to reveal the often equivocal nature of thing it is attempting to understand—but incredibly important if we are to gain better understanding of the forces that have, do, and will shape us. Culture is neither passive nor neutral, and so its fluidity must be answered by a willingness to be thoughtful in our treatment of it. History lends itself to this practice, which is just a well if it wishes to live up to its central aim of fully comprehending the complexities of our material existence.

Figures



Figure 1. William Theed, *Victoria and Albert in Anglo-Saxon Costume*, 1862-1867, marble, 275.0 x 131.0 x 75.0 cm, Royal Collection, Royal Mausoleum, Windsor.



Figure 2. John William Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*, 1888, oil on canvas, 153 x 200 cm



Figure 3. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 111.8 cm



Figure 4. John William Waterhouse, *'I am Half-Sick of Shadows' and the Lady of Shalott*, 1915, oil on canvas, 100 x 74 cm



Figure 5. James Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Nocturne in Black and Gold – The Falling Rocket*, c. 1872-1877, oil on canvas, 60.3 cm × 46.6 cm

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