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PAINTING THE SOUL: A COMPLEX LEGACY OF ROMANTICISM IN EDITH JOHNSTONE'S NEW WOMAN NOVEL, *A SUNLESS HEART* (1894)

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade of the twentieth century, the scholarly consensus was that genius was incompatible with what Lyn Pykett terms the "proper feminine." This incompatibility makes the "New Woman" artist-protagonist the exemplar of a genre known for self-conflicted, introspective protagonists. Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart* (1894) has been peripheral to this scholarship because Johnstone relegates her artist to the sidelines of a second protagonist's life. Most New Woman authors recall the narrow brand of Romanticism that reverberates through nineteenth-century poetics—the poet's lyrical turn inwards to (in John Stuart Mill's words) "paint the human soul truly." When Johnstone presents lyricism as an interchange between two people, she seizes what would be an otherwise missed opportunity in New Woman fiction: a portrait of the artist's struggle not to transpose her subjectivity onto another individual. Johnstone's portrait of an artist will be compared to that of other fin de siècle writers, including Wilde, to show that even these writers, keen to portray human subjectivity in new ways, cannot see that the "artist-as-genius" construct obscures the politics of representation. Johnstone invokes a more complex legacy of Romanticism so as to question the degree to which the artist can paint another human soul.

In July of 1894, the young Irish author Edith Johnstone published her novel, *A Sunless Heart* with the London firm of Ward, Lock, & Bowden. *A Sunless Heart* features the interrelated lives of two young women, an aspiring artist (Gasparine O'Neill) and a lecturer at a prestigious girl's school (Lotus Grace, or "Lo"). Lo is beautiful, wealthy, and surrounded by a circle of admiring disciples, but Gasparine eventually sees what no one else does—Lo's unhappiness. Because of Gasparine's perceptiveness, Lo begins to confide in Gasparine, eventually sharing the corrosive secret that she believes has left her incapable of experiencing love. Lo had been seduced at twelve years of age by her grown sister's lover, a physically abusive man who had rejected her some four years later when she became pregnant. Spurned by her family, Lotus had fled from home to pursue a new life. Gasparine is moved

by Lo's story and struggles to paint her "soul," a word that Johnstone associates with Lotus's ineffable spirit as well as the experiences that have shaped her "thought-life."¹ The novel concludes with a detailed portrayal of Gasparine's portrait, now complete. In this portrait, Gasparine layers colors and symbols in such a way that viewers glimpse from a cloud of light Lo's "mystic face, with its expression of crucifixion and patience," and then, after closer scrutiny, the painful events that have shaped her life:

Only after looking longer one saw in the shadows of the cloud, and round the dark head, phantoms of things, like the suggestions of horrors; an infant, in a shroud, the grey-blue hem drifting into the purple of a mass of violets; a cross on a dim hill, and blood-red leaves near; a swamp, across which spectral birds flew; dim roads, far hills, and weary wastes, powerfully suggested, though hardly outlined, expressions rather than forms, in the distances of the exquisite perspective of the picture.

Johnstone is clear that the portrait is intended to express the complexity and beauty of Lotus's interior life:

It was, said the critics, the most powerful presentation of the thought-life, of the subjective, that had ever yet been given, in form or colour; for in the eyes of the strange face one seemed to see all that the cloud could tell (198).

A Sunless Heart was reviewed eleven times between July and November of that year, and the well-known journalist and political activist W.T. Stead praised it in "The Novel of the Modern Woman."² While critics disagreed about the novel's artistic merits (some characterized it as powerful and even beautiful; others found it maudlin³), they all associated it with a new subgenre called "New Woman" fiction.

The phrase "New Woman" was first used by Sarah Grand in March of 1894 in her article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question."⁴ According to Grand, this "New Woman" is contemplative and observant of the world around her; she critiques the social system and its underlying hypocrisies, such as the sexual double standard. Grand's phrase put words to a structure of feeling that was already reshaping fiction and that other writers were also seeking to define, including, as this essay argues, Johnstone herself.

While women were the primary contributors to New Woman fiction, men (e.g. Thomas Hardy, George Gissing) also contributed. New Woman writers did not necessarily follow Grand's lead and group themselves together—nor did they all share the same definition of "feminism" (or even identify as feminist at all).⁵ Still, scholars have identified enough patterns to present New Woman fiction as a category. New Woman fiction famously illuminates women's fractured sense of self, and in such a way that illustrates how social mores and expectations shape subjectivity. The female artist is an ideal protagonist in New Woman novels, as is generally shown by scholarship of the 1990s. According to Penny Boumelha, the New Woman artist possesses

genius, and genius was not considered a feminine property.⁶ When the artist is a woman, her purposeful talent conflicts with what Lyn Pykett calls the “proper feminine,” associated with duty and sacrifice. To be a female artist was thus to be a man, a monster, or—in New Woman fiction—deeply conflicted.⁷ New Woman fiction, these critics show, anticipates modernist experiments with point of view.⁸ As will be shown, *A Sunless Heart* is a troublesome case to this scholarship (and indeed has been mostly neglected by it⁹). Johnstone is clear that her artist-protagonist possesses the great gift of originality. But Johnstone provides only an abbreviated study of Gasparine’s struggles and for much of the novel actually relegates her to the sidelines of Lo’s life. By structuring her novel in this unusual way, Johnstone bypasses the “portraits of artists” that are more typical of the genre. Instead, she discerns what would otherwise be a missed opportunity in New Woman fiction: a portrait of the artist’s struggle not to transpose her subjectivity on another human subject.

Johnstone’s portrait brings to the surface of the novel what would otherwise be a habitual oversight in New Woman fiction: the politics of perspective and, specifically, what the artist or writer should aspire to convey when portraying another human subject. This question preoccupied nineteenth-century writers and artists from the Romantic period onward. Johnstone, like other New Woman authors, is conversant with two prominent responses that bracket the Victorian period: Romantic lyricism and *fin de siècle* aestheticism. Romantic lyricism is the idea that poet’s keen sensibility enables him to reveal via others’ experiences timeless truths. Aestheticism, as it came to be associated with Oscar Wilde and the decadence of “art for art’s sake,” turns the artist’s keen gaze back onto himself and to the fluctuations of his ever-changing subjectivity. Johnstone draws from both of these responses to convey a dynamic interrelationship between artist and subject. There are two steps to this argument. First, Johnstone’s portrait will be compared to other *fin de siècle* artist-portraits, including Wilde’s in “The Critic as Artist,” to show that for writers keen on portraying human subjectivity in new ways, the Romantic artist-as-genius construct obscures the politics of representation. Second, Johnstone will be shown to question the politics of genius and to present Romantic lyricism as a political aesthetic and a teachable practice.

A mode rather than a genre, Romantic lyricism was memorialized in the Victorian period as *above* politics, and the poet himself as a conduit for the transcendent in art. Romantic lyricism, as it came to be defined, reflects what Sarah Zimmerman has called the “eloquence” of John Stuart Mill’s influential 1833 essay, “On Poetry.”¹⁰ There, Mill makes a persuasive case for what poetry is and for the nature of the poet. In Mill’s reading, the poet, solitary and reflecting on his emotion in tranquility, turns away from his potential audience. This inward turn allows the poet to “paint the human soul truly.”¹¹

Zimmerman argues that Mill overlooks the ways in which lyricism allows Romantic-era writers to identify with others and to engage social and political questions. The features usually thought to excuse the poet from active engagement in social and political life (the poet's introspection; his turn from his audience) actually create opportunities for precisely this kind of engagement.¹² Even Wordsworth, impugned by Keats and Hazlitt for his egotism,¹³ treats lyricism as an opportunity to explore subjectivities and socio-economic conditions other than his own.¹⁴ Marion Thain argues that Mill's version of lyricism reverberates through Victorian poetics, both as an echo and as a point of departure, e.g. Robert Browning's critique of the lyric as a solipsistic mode, and his correction, the dramatic monologue.¹⁵

Like Elizabeth Barrett Browning before her, Johnstone challenges a Romantic poetics that juxtaposes timeless truths with the narrowness of women's lives. Marian Erle's prosaic story assists Aurora Leigh in finding her lyrical voice.¹⁶ Pushing this point further, Johnstone shows that Gasparine is taught, via a lyrical interchange between artist and subject, how to portray Lo's story. Lo's account of childhood abuse and statutory rape is a provocative revision to the fallen woman motif. In presenting the lyrical mode as an interchange between two people rather than an artist's solitary reflections, Johnstone shifts the subject of her novel from one woman's painful story to the question of how that story should be represented in art. While Boumelha, Pykett, and others have shown that New Woman fiction anticipates modernism, Johnstone's novel suggests that New Woman authors were *also* writing literary history by looking back to a broader Romanticism than the poet's lyrical turn inwards. In his recent study of the lyric, Jonathan Culler challenges scholars to cross period divides, suggesting that failure to do so risks producing only partial truths.¹⁷ We cannot say that Johnstone read Romanticism raw, and her access to it would have been mediated by Victorian critics. But she takes up the idea that the poet can tell the truth of the human soul, with the added perspective that the artist's perspective is political in the sense that the artist runs the risk of transposing her own subjectivity on her subject.

Artist-portraits

As early feminists working in the direct shadow of Romanticism, New Woman writers tried to reshape what seemed possible, although their vision was circumscribed by their own day's conventions. The artist-protagonists that are considered to be exemplars of the genre are those where the artist is portrayed as a special type of person, e.g. Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* (1897), and Mina Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage* (1899). These protagonists (a pianist, and two writers) are artists less for what they do than for who they innately are. Because they are artists, these women see the world differently from

other people; each woman is, moreover, significantly misunderstood by the people in her life. Since a frequent subject is the artist's failure to thrive, the novels appear as a sort of meta-commentary on the possibilities and limitations of New Woman fiction. An important component of this argument has been that novelists enter into *fin de siècle* debate about art and its purpose to portray "novels with a purpose" as art. As Ann Heilmann has recently argued, New Woman authors take up the personal as political and write a feminist aesthetic that directly counters the professed amorality of "art for art's sake."¹⁸ Herein lies the irony. New Woman fiction was intended to persuade a wide readership of feminist politics, as Heilmann persuasively argues.¹⁹ And yet the very same novels that are designed to appeal to *many* women are also about one extraordinary woman whose genius elevates her above the rest.

Sarah Grand's *Ideala* (1888) is an early and important example of how the artist-as-genius construct creates a blind spot for writers invested in representing female subjectivity in new ways. *Ideala* is beautiful, young, wealthy, and charitable; she is also unhappily married. The novel is told as if in the artist, Lord Dawne's, point of view. Dawne says very little about himself. Instead, he writes up a study of *Ideala*'s state of mind as she negotiates the central crisis of her life (*Ideala* falls in love with another man and considers leaving her husband for him).

Molly Youngkin argues that Dawne's perspective does not always match *Ideala*'s and that readers are thus encouraged to question his point of view.²⁰ Yet, I would add that while Grand does not ignore the vexing question of the artist's perspective, her attention to it is minimal. Dawne and his sister Claudia sometimes differ in their opinions on *Ideala*'s state of mind, and Claudia's perspective at these times provides a corrective to Dawne's. But Dawne's story, as told, includes these corrections; readers always know when brother and sister disagree. Presented both in a journalistic style as well as in part conjecture, Dawne's perspective is generally valorized throughout even as he remains a marginal character.

Grand's conceit of the male artist who writes up a narrative about a woman's inner life reappears in later novels by Grand and Caird but as the female artist's *self*-study. Scholars treat Beth's decision to abandon her career as a writer to become a public speaker for the feminist cause as an exemplary moment in the subgenre. Pykett (partially revising Elaine Showalter's argument) regards Beth's retreat from a career as an artist as an example of the power of the "proper feminine" to shape New Woman narratives—and as an indication that this ideology is not all-encompassing. The novel is neither simply "a positive turn to the practical and political" nor "a turning back to a self-sacrificial conception of the feminine."²¹ Heilmann suggests instead that Beth's public speaking broadens the definition of artist and, as such, illuminates a new ethics for art.²²

But Heillman does not fully account for Beth's hesitation and notable lack of joy in taking up her new vocation. Grand is clear that Beth's sense of vocation is in fact a product of the innate sensibility that has defined her character from her early childhood. She has always possessed the ability to speak powerfully and imaginatively, and to persuade—even entrance—her audience. Early in the novel, this talent brings Beth joy and a sense of power, but later Beth feels drained by the intensity of her speech, which seems to come forth unbidden. Genius, presented from the start of the novel as raw creativity and insight, a quality that could manifest itself in any creative activity, is now channeled toward the greater good, which Grand presents as in this world and of this moment. And yet, Grand does not seem to entirely endorse Beth's choice of vocation—it chooses her, and in such a way that indicates New Woman authors might prefer to write about something else. This may be something more “artistic” in the “art for art's sake” sense of the phrase (defined by Tim Barringer as “a self-contained art that does not need to refer to the debates and issues or even the appearance of the outside world”²³). Caird implies as much when Hadria murmurs near the end of a four-hundred plus page novel featuring her own increasingly agonized self-study: “Don't you think that sometimes people grow egoistic through having to fight incessantly for existence—I mean for individual existence?”²⁴

For Caird, and, as suggested, in a more qualified sense, Grand, introspection (and becoming mired in the politics of the everyday) is a painful duty. The artist-as-genius construct closes off certain possibilities, both aesthetic and political, even while opening up others, as it does for Wilde in “The Critic as Artist.” Wilde playfully revises the lyric poet's self-study, showing that “truths” painted by the artist are contingent and highly subjective. This revision lays the groundwork for the radical egoism of his ideal artist:

That is what the highest criticism really is, the record of one's own soul . . . It is the only civilized form of autobiography as it deals not with the events, but with the thoughts of one's life; not with life's physical accidents of deed or circumstance, but with the spiritual moods and imaginative passions of the mind.²⁵

Aestheticism, as associated with Walter Pater and later, Wilde, is a joyous account of the beauty in each fleeting moment, and of the artist's effort to remain acutely open to the new possibilities of every experience, a state that is difficult for most to attain because of the pervasive force of “habit.”²⁶ Many New Woman authors are committed to conscientious questioning of habitual frames of mind, and Johnstone joins Wilde, as well as New Woman authors like Grand and Caird, in producing artists' studies of interiority. But only Johnstone provides a portrait of the artist's *struggle* to convey another human being's “thought-life.”

This struggle is largely absent from Mina Cholmondeley's *Red Pottage*, a novel that otherwise portrays the hurdles that Hester must surmount if she

is to thrive, both a woman and as an artist. As Ann Ardis points out, Hester writes two New Woman novels about the life of her friend, Rachel,²⁷ but I would add that Cholmondeley pairs Hester's story with Rachel's to better highlight what precisely makes the artist special. It is her imagination, which fuels her with an endless capacity for sympathy. Though born wealthy, Rachel had lived in poverty for some time, and she had become better for it. Notes Hester: "You are the kind of woman who, if you had been married comfortably, might have... never under[stood] any feelings beyond [your] own microscopic ones."²⁸ Hester needs no such education and, as such, is the quintessentially Romantic artist, as represented by Mill onwards.

Mill's narrow definition of the lyrical mode has obscured the ways in which writers use lyricism to identify with readers and to engage social and political questions, both in the Romantic era but also in the *fin de siècle* decade itself (as Marion Thain argues of the aesthetes²⁹). Johnstone's sharpest contribution to New Woman fiction occurs precisely at the moment when she departs from other New Woman authors. Gasparine's perceptiveness, capacity for emotion, and original mind make her a typical New Woman artist. More unusual is the way in which she maintains a strong presence, even while retreating to the sidelines of the narrative, becoming the audience for Lotus's narration of her story. Gasparine eventually paints Lo's story into art, but when Lo tells her story, she narrates it *for herself*, becoming the lyrical poet for the duration of its telling.

Romantic lyricism as a teachable practice and a political aesthetic

A Sunless Heart is divided into two books (Book One is set primarily in London; in Book Two, Gasparine moves north to Stirling). Aside from Gasparine's fierce love for her consumptive twin brother, the most profound relationships in this novel are between women; Gasparine intensely loves Lo, as does Lo's beautiful pupil, Mona Lefcadio. Lo, as mentioned, claims to love no one. Whereas Gasparine is a constant presence throughout the novel, Lotus is mostly confined to Book Two where she eventually dies in a train wreck (and in Mona's arms).

Lo's story is so intense that it is easy to lose sight of the effort that Johnstone takes early in the novel to develop Gasparine's character. In Book One, a portrait of an industrious, practical, passionate girl comes into focus. This first book is mostly set in London and introduces readers to the art student, Gasparine, as well as to her musical twin brother, Gaspar. Like Grand's "heavenly twins," Gaspar and Gasparine's fierce connection to each other leaves them dependent only on each other. But whereas Grand's twins are born into luxury, Johnstone's are poor. From their childhood

onward, Gasparine is the “dreamer,” weaving stories about their future prosperity and entrancing both herself and her brother (43, 47) Gasparine also protects their brother (who is ill with tuberculosis) from their drunken, impecunious father.

Johnstone’s portrait of Gasparine, comparable to artist-portrait’s in novels like Caird’s and Grand’s, exposes some of the particular tensions faced by the female artist. Conflict is often *intrapersonal*. When Gasparine catches a painter, Mr. Leon Smith, gazing at her intensely, she fashions he is in love, and her own heart catches fire. She thinks of him for weeks and finally approaches him. The story that follows is one of disillusionment. Gasparine is humiliated when the painter scorns her, and yet she also discomfits Smith by casting him a scornful glance after she realizes the truth—he had stolen the idea conveyed by a set of her pictures for his most recent (and as many of his friends, think, his best) work of art. Johnstone is clear that Gasparine’s technique is amateurish. It is her vision that captures Smith’s attention: “He recognized at once, in the crude immature work, an originality and beauty deeper and stronger than anything he had ever produced himself, successful as he was” (48). The paintings in question are of two figures, a young man and a girl with wings, figured as love; in the first picture, love reaches out to the young man, but he is too distracted to see; in the second picture, the young man turns toward love but she is flying away. Gasparine stops short when she sees the man’s “masterly execution” of her own idea: “it is very beautiful[...]but it is very sad for me ... It is a death-blow to my belief in my own originality” (52). When, years later, Gasparine first envisions the portrait she would most like to paint, she recalls Leon Smith: “I saw, in my vision, the life of a soul ... If I can paint it! If I can only paint what will express all that! Ah! What a face of mystery! ... No Leon Smith will take this idea from me” (145).

Johnstone is not the only New Woman author to suggest that male writers might be capitalizing on (or even stealing) women’s original work.³⁰ But in the Leon Smith episode, Johnstone subtly suggests that Gasparine’s early art originates with ideas that are not in fact her own. Gasparine is so primed for the idealized (and heterosexual) love she has read about in novels and in poetry that when she catches Smith gazing at her, she imagines her entire life has changed. She waits for him to approach him, and when she can stand it no longer, she pursues him at his studio. He is aloof and she is humiliated, but she blames herself for having been mistaken. When she discovers the truth, Gasparine recognizes that her sex and her poverty make her vulnerable to men like Smith.

In Book Two, Lo’s story takes center stage. In particular, Lo interacts with two devoted admirers (Lo’s pupil, Mona, and an Oxford professor, Mr. Raymond); she also strives to keep her “foster-daughter,” Ladybird, at a distance (a well-kept secret, Lo does not even tell Ladybird that she is her own daughter). Though Gasparine remains present throughout most of these

scenes, primarily as an observer, her perspective does not impinge on what readers see. Johnstone achieves this unusual effect through a third person, limited omniscient voice. Only Gasparine's thoughts are presented, usually directly but occasionally through free indirect discourse. Dialogue is framed by brief description, allowing readers to discern for themselves what Johnstone intends them to see. As illustrated in the scene below, while Gasparine's plainness starkly contrasts Mona's beauty, there is no question of who is jealous of whom:

[Mona] scowled, as Gasparine crossed her path. Then, with frank displeasure, she said, —'Good-evening. I suppose you are going to see Lo.'

Yes.

You go very often?

Yes.

How do you know she can be bothered with you?

I don't know.

H'm, I shouldn't like to be so. ...

Miss O'Neill, you think perhaps you will get to be Lo's best friend?

I have no opinion to give.

A grunt of contempt came from Mona ... She looked Gasparine up and down; it was an unmistakable look, full of contempt and disgust. With her noble and haughty head thrown back, and only her heavy eyelids moving, she seemed to take in the plain, black frock, collar and cuffs, and the thin, sad face, and strained, brushed hair. Gasparine felt stung but did not wince.³¹

Johnstone prompts readers to see Gasparine as an accurate judge of what she sees and hears, albeit one important exception.

Gasparine initially sees Lo as everyone else does: beautiful, self-possessed, beloved. But as Gasparine observes Lo more closely, she senses sadness beneath the vivacity: "a questioning wonder came into Gasparine's heart. Who or what was this being of manifold aspects?" (124). Lo's large expressive eyes gaze forward calmly when she is with Mona or other admirers. Only with Gasparine does Lo let down her guard. Her face becomes a source of inspiration for the young artist:

To Gasparine it soon became the most beautiful face, save one, that she had ever seen. The changes in it; the fleeting, strange smiles; the depth of sadness; the self-mockery in the eyes. Like a barren and mournful landscape, from which the traveller turns with aversion, seeing no beauty in it, but which, to the poetic soul dwelling on its borders, is full of a mystery and beauty, waste and wild. (126)

Gasparine is agonized when Lo confesses that she only pretends to love others and that she lives a "counterfeit" life (131). Lo's confession marks a beginning point in her relationship with Gasparine, who learns to see her friend differently. Johnstone is clear that at first, Gasparine can only align what she hears

and sees with what she believes she already knows. As responsive as she was earlier to Lo's face, she becomes for some time unable to register Lo's expressions. For example, Gasparine is quick to claim that she is now able to accurately see her friend ("Oh, Lo, Lo, now I understand that look in your face, stranger than any face I ever saw!"), but Gasparine does not see what Johnstone makes clear to readers: when Gasparine speaks in this manner, Lo "sneers" or smiles "peculiarly" (131–132). Gasparine's education will be an ongoing process, something that which she does not initially understand.

Gasparine's struggle to see Lo as she represents herself can be usefully compared to Hardy's portrayal of Angel Clare in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Both authors challenge conventional portrayals of "fallen" women and in such a way that blends lyricism with aestheticism. As Angel first sees her, Tess is first and foremost a *person*, defined, like he, by her subjective experiences:

Upon her sensations the whole world depended to Tess; through her existence all her fellow-creatures existed, to her. The universe itself only came into being for Tess on the particular day in the particular year in which she was born ... How, then, should he look upon her as of less consequence than himself.³²

But when Tess tells Angel about her past, he cannot relinquish his idealized view of her. Hardy's sympathy is with Tess, and yet to explain Angel's behavior, he recalls Shelley's "Alastor," the poet who languishes and then dies after discovering his vision of perfect love was simply that, a vision: "Clare's love was doubtless ethereal to a fault, imaginative to impracticability. With these natures, corporeal presence is something less appealing than corporeal absence."³³ The gendered politics of Clare's gaze are both due to and yet oddly excused by his Romantic sensibility. Both before and after Tess tells Clare her story about her past, his perception of her is fixed.

Johnstone uses lyricism to question the degree to which any person's soul can be painted "truly." As Gasparine comes to know Lo better, she envisions the portrait she longs to paint: "a face of mystery!" (145).

Later, when Lo tells Gasparine her story, Johnstone shows, by way of an interactive dynamic between speaker and observer, that Gasparine's portrait will reflect her keen awareness of what Lo has suffered—as well as what she has learned about herself and her art through their interaction. Gasparine listens and reacts to Lo's story, and Johnstone shows that Gasparine's reaction is as important as Lo's own narration. Lo's intense emotion, her frequent breaks in her narrative, and her recourse to the past and to memory all render its telling lyrical. As will be argued, the lyrical quality persists in between the lines, in the interaction between the artist and her subject. As Sharon Cameron argues, the lyric mode, in contrast to narrative, collapses sequential time, layering a single moment with complexity.³⁴ Lo speaks for almost six complete pages without interruption, and yet the reciprocity of

the exchange is accounted for in several ways. First, at the start of Lo's story all the necessary information (Lo is the victim in a common story; Gasparine will be an active and sympathetic listener to her story) is given in an abbreviated fashion:

One hears so often of wrongs—so often of that ... great wrong.

Suddenly she bent towards Gasparine. She spoke rapidly and low, her breath came quick, her eyes were terrible.

A man once ...

Over Gasparine's face came a look of indescribable horror. Sometimes as she listened, she gave a cry. (149)

As Lo tells her story, it is as if the outside world does not exist: Ladybird does not come searching for Lo, Mona does not interrupt, and there is no reference to any detail outside of the interchange and each woman's reaction to the other. Though the episode is lengthy, and Lo speaks directly, often for paragraphs at a time, through section breaks and fragments readers see what Gasparine feels and experiences: "Gasparine looked at the face, then turned in agony from the unspoken horror written there" (151); "Across [Lotus's] colorless cheek went a strange streak of red. Gasparine watched it die away, too choked to speak" (153); "The yearning pressed on Gasparine's heart like a physical weight. She longed to go and kneel at Lo's feet and say some word of comfort" (156).

Lo "coldly" remarks after her disclosure: "Why did I tell you? [... .] If I loved you, could love, these are things I would hide" (159). And yet, for Gasparine, "that year in the white cottage was the golden year of her life; deep marked, never to be forgotten. For after that she grew old" (164-5). After Lo's death, narrative time flashes forward. Gasparine marries, indifferently, one of her father's clerks and they have several children. Though Lo is dead, and Gasparine will never know exactly what came of her, readers know that Lo saw in Gasparine some sort of salvation: "I go in search of something else ... and yet I do not know. I may come ... and *if I do, it is because I think that you can heal me*" (189).

Lo never did share her story with Mona, even when given the opportunity in her final moments,³⁵ and perhaps this means (recalling her cold remark to Gasparine) that she loved her. But whereas Constance Harsh suggests that the most compelling part of Johnstone's novel is the intense (and likely romantic) relationship between Lo and Mona,³⁶ it is important to add that throughout the novel, Johnstone emphasizes Mona's snobbishness and narrow point of view. Mona—beautiful, charming, and careless—is not Lo's equal. Lo says as much after Raymond forsakes her for Mona: "Will he, perhaps in the future, find which love would have been best? And of whom his ideal,

Mona, is only an echo? Or is he, like all other men, in love with the *woman*, not the soul?" (186).

By Lotus's final assessment, Raymond is not unlike Grand's Lord Dawne. Both are fascinated with female beauty—or imbue their subject with their own desires and ideals. When Dawne tries to paint an allegorical portrait of what Ideala symbolizes for him (a mother, nursing the "Infant Goodness of the race"), he fails. Ideala does not recognize herself in the portrait and, more telling, she deems it bad art: "What a gaunt creature! and that baby weighs at least twelve stone!"³⁷ But there is a second picture, lingering at the margins of the novel. This picture is Ideala, as Dawne perceives her in his mind's eye, a picture that Dawne cannot fully censor, though he makes an effort to keep his attention to Ideala's good deeds and to her impact on other people. Dawne allows himself a sketch here and there:

I have some pictures of her as she was then, dressed in a gown of some quaint blue and white Japanese material, with her white throat bare—I was just going to catalogue her charms, but it seems indelicate to describe a woman, point by point, like a horse that is for sale.³⁸

Dawne censors himself, but the imagine lingers, almost as if the man cannot help himself. At several points in the novel, Dawne traces Ideala's body with his eyes, and luxuriating a little in his description, lingers longer over the lines of her body than strictly necessary:

I am always glad to think of her as I used to see her then, coming towards me in one particular grey frock she wore, tight-fitting and perfect, yet with no detail evident.³⁹

She wore a long robe, exquisitely draped, which was loose, but yet clung to her.⁴⁰

From where I sit just now I can see her walking up the avenue ... 'What a beautiful woman!' I think involuntarily.⁴¹

There is enough continuity between Grand's novel and Johnstone's to suggest that Ideala and Dawne reappear, albeit much revised, as Lo and Gasparine. Dawne does, of course, produce a narrative about Ideala's "thought-life." Having sifted through letters and his own recollections, he produces a far more vivid account of Ideala than his allegorical picture. The conceit of Dawne's written narrative could be Grand's implicit endorsement of *fiction* as real art; but given the failure of Dawne's allegorical painting, it could equally be the acknowledgment that poetry or painting should not be burdened by a message. Ardis has argued that instead of exposing the painful realities that talented women face, Johnstone creates a "fantasy of a future where gender does not obtain in aesthetic evaluations."⁴² This essay has provided another way of reading Gasparine's success. Gasparine's portrait of Lotus's soul recalls the question, posed and reposed in nineteenth-century poetics,

of what makes art “transcendent.” Whereas the poet of lyrical Romanticism, as memorialized by Mill, connects human beings across space and time,⁴³ Johnstone’s lyricism does not render perfect connection between the artist and her subject. Instead, Johnstone questions the degree to which any person’s soul can be painted “truly.”

To conclude, I return to Mill as well as the reassessments of lyrical Romanticism that treat his 1833 essay as an influential factor in the formation of canonical Romanticism. In the canonical scholarship on Romanticism (Abrams; Bloom; Frye; Eliot) on which Sarah Zimmerman focuses, Wordsworth presides. There is one more point, however, to be made about Mill’s essay itself. In a second essay published just nine months after “What is Poetry,” Mill contrasts Wordsworth unfavorably to Shelley, suggesting that only the latter possesses a poetic “nature,” which he defines as “those who are so constituted, that emotions are the links of association by which their ideas, both sensuous and spiritual, are connected together” (Mill even goes so far as to portray Wordsworth’s “genius” as fundamentally “unlyrical”⁴⁴). While Mill’s ideal poet is both intensely emotional *and* capable of systematizing his thought (the latter being a quality that he suggests Shelley largely lacks) Mill presents the poet’s intense emotion as a prerequisite for and an index of the seismic change in attitude that revolutionizes society.⁴⁵ As Shelley himself explains, “a man cannot say, “I will compose poetry.”⁴⁶ When Mill represents true poetry as “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude,” he envisions a poet who is deeply connected to the psyche of his age and subject to its inspiration. Johnstone recalls this broader legacy of Romanticism when she portrays lyricism as an emotional exchange between two subjects.

By emphasizing the emotional interchange between her novel’s two protagonists, Johnstone recollects the lyric poet’s capacity to listen attentively to those around her and to forge new relationships between words and experiences.

Gasparine’s portrait of Lo is neither “original” in Johnstone’s earlier sense of the word (conjured by her mind alone) nor mimetic. Instead it is a combination; the artist’s relationship with her lyric subject shapes her vision, because the vision is engendered both by Lo’s painful story and by the intense love that Gasparine comes to feel for her. Johnstone challenges the ideology of genius by portraying art as an activity that can be taught, but she also portrays Gasparine’s vision—“the life of a soul”—as impossible to steal. The mystery of Lo’s life is never reduced to its events because the novel shares with other *fin de siècle* literature the presupposition that human life cannot be so reduced. Only when people follow convention rigidly can their actions be predicted. One of these conventions is the Romantic poet’s turn from politics and toward aesthetics. While other New Woman novels that feature artist-protagonists share this preoccupation, they tend to do so in such a way that upholds a poetics of transcendence, either by

valorizing its axioms or through rejecting it altogether. Johnstone is unusual in her effort to reassess Romantic lyricism as a site of possibility for the politically minded artist.

If Johnstone shares with the more celebrated *fin de siècle* author, Oscar Wilde, the idea that an individual's "thought-life" is unique and worthy of the highest art, she provides a very different portrait than Wilde's in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Dorian's beauty so deeply influences Basil that he believes that his portrait of Dorian reveals "the secret of [his] own soul".⁴⁷ He is wrong, of course, as the painting reflects *Dorian's* soul. Johnstone, for her part, moves past this binary of self/other by portraying art as an intersubjective activity that blurs the line between the artist and her subject.

Notes

1. Edith Johnstone, *A Sunless Heart*, ed. Constance Harsh (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview P, 2008), p. 198. Subsequent quotations are from this edition and included parenthetically in the text.
2. W. T. Stead, "The Novel of the Modern Woman," *Review of Reviews*, 10 (July 1894): 64–74. *A Sunless Heart* was popular enough for Johnstone's publishers to release a second edition in September of 1894 and a cheaper, one-volume edition in April 1895. The novel fell into obscurity until republished by Broadview in 2008. See Harsh's introduction, 9–25.
3. For contemporary reviews, see Appendix A in *A Sunless Heart*, 199–206.
4. Sarah Grand, "The New Aspect of the Woman Question," *The North American Review*, 158.448 (March 1894): 270–76.
5. Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 8–9.
6. Boumelha, "The Woman of Genius and the Woman of Grub Street: Figures of the Female Writer in British *Fin-de-Siècle* Fiction," *English Literature in Transition*, 40.2 (1997): 164–80 (168–69); also Pykett, "Portraits of the Artist as a Young Woman: Representations of the Female Artist in the New Woman Fiction of the 1890s," *Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question*, ed. Nicola Diane Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 135–50 (141), Heilmann, pp. 155–92.
7. Pykett, *Improper*, pp. 178–79.
8. Pykett, *Improper*, p. 195.
9. But see Harsh, 17–18, Ann Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1990), pp. 135–38, Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader: 1837–1914* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1993), p. 326.
10. Sarah Zimmerman, *Romanticism, Lyricism, and History* (New York: State U of New York P, 1999), pp. 1–32; also p. 75.
11. John Stuart Mill, "On Poetry," *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, ed. Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview P, 2005), pp. 1212–220 (1212).
12. Zimmerman, pp. 29–32.
13. Frederick Garber, "Point of View and the Egotistical Sublime," *English Studies: a Journal of English Language and Literature*, 49 (1968): 409–18 (218).
14. Zimmerman, p. 90.

15. Marion Thain, "Victorian Lyric Pathology and Phenomenology," *The Lyric Poem: Formations and Transformations*, ed. Marion Thain (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013), pp. 156–60.
16. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (Oxford UP, 2008) Book IV, lines 611–1274.
17. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard UP) 2015 (90).
18. Heilmann, pp. 155–57; also pp. 72–76.
19. Heilmann, pp. 8–9.
20. Molly Youngkin, Introduction to *Ideala: A Study from Life*, ed. Molly Youngkin (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), p. xiii.
21. Pykett, *Improper*, p. 185.
22. Heilmann, pp. 189–92. Also Pykett, "Portraits," pp. 146–47.
23. Tim Barringer, *Reading the Pre-Raphaelites* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2012), p. 161.
24. Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Daneus* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1989), p. 421.
25. Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, pp. 1384–404 (1400).
26. Walter Pater, "The Renaissance Studies in Art and Poetry," *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Poetic Theory*, pp. 1349–357 (1353).
27. Ardis, "Retreat with Honour: Mary Cholmondeley's Presentation of the New Woman Artist in Red Pottage," *Writing the Woman Artist: Essays on Poetics, Politics, and Portraiture*, ed. Suzanne W. Jones (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1991), pp. 333–50 (334–35).
28. Mina Cholmondeley, *Red Pottage* (New York: Harper & Brothers P, 1900), p. 135.
29. Thain, pp. 156–74.
30. See Mabel Wotton, "The Fifth Edition," *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the fin de siècle*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New Jersey: Rutgers UP, 1993), pp. 139–64.
31. Johnstone, pp. 142–43.
32. Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (New York: Bantam Books, 1981), p. 123.
33. Hardy, p. 240; also "Alastor; or the Spirit of Solitude," *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), pp. 92–111.
34. Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1979), p. 240.
35. Mona asks Lotus if she had ever learned who Ladybird's mother was. Lotus replies: "Ah yes! The little girl Ladybird? Her mother? No, I do not know ..." 196.
36. Harsh, pp. 22–24; also Ardis, *New Women*, pp. 135–138, Flint, p. 326.
37. Grand, *Ideala*, 187.
38. *Ideala*, 22.
39. *Ideala*, 22.
40. *Ideala*, 165.
41. *Ideala*, 187.
42. Ardis, *New Women*, pp. 175–76.
43. I refer to Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. See *Lyrical Ballads 1798 and 1800: Samuel Taylor Coleridge & William Wordsworth*, ed. Michael Gamer and Dalia Porter (Peterborough: Broadview P, 2008), p. 423.
44. "Two Kinds of Poetry," Mill, pp. 1220–227.

45. As Mill explains, “in an age of revolutions in opinion, the contemporary poets, those at least who deserve the name, those who have any individuality of character, if they are not before their age, are almost sure to be behind it” “Two Kinds of Poetry,” p. 1227.
46. *A Defense of Poetry, Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), p. 697.
47. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Norman Page (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview P, 2005), p. 47.

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