

ON LINES AND THEIR CROSSING: REFLECTIONS ON THE CONFERENCE CLOSING SESSION

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In her short tale 'The Story of an Hour', first published in *Vogue* in 1894, the American writer Kate Chopin allows her heroine to cross a line only to be subsequently encircled and strangled by it. The story concerns Mrs Louise Mallard, a woman 'afflicted with a heart trouble',¹ over whom 'great care was taken' (p. 137) when it came to telling her of her husband's death. Mr Mallard, she is told, by 'her sister Josephine ... in broken sentences; veiled hints that revealed in half concealing' (p.137), has been killed in a railroad disaster. His widow weeps with 'wild abandonment' before leaving to spend time alone in her room. It is while reflecting on the news that she begins to comprehend a new sense of separation and a 'monstrous joy' as she utters 'over and over under her breath: "free, free, free!"' (p.138). The phrase becomes her mantra, "'Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.' (p.139) Her sense of emotional elation in the discovery of a renewed identity, a coming into consciousness that is focussed on her individuality rather than her conception of selfhood as one smaller player in a marriage of two, revitalises Mrs Mallard's awareness of life as she crosses from one state of classification (wife) to another (widow). Recovering her composure at her sister's insistence, even though she 'was drinking in a very elixir of life', Louise Mallard descends the staircase only to hear the latchkey in the lock as her husband, far from dead, arrives home to the 'piercing cry' of his sister-in-law and the instantaneous death of his wife before him. The doctors' verdict is that she 'died of heart disease – of joy that kills' (p.139).

Chopin's text is three short pages long yet it encapsulates a strange and ethereal sense of the period that was the focus of the 'Crossing the Line: Affinities Before and After 1900' postgraduate conference held at the University of Liverpool in January 2010. A story about a widow who wasn't in 1894 - as opposed to Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* in 1895 - may seem like an odd place to start a discussion on lines and their crossing. Yet Chopin's fragment of a tale, in form and content, context and fashioning, signals precisely those issues of temporality, the episodic, the notion of freedom, individualism, consciousness and interiority, social convention vs. personal liberty, that lie at the core of our perception of the period's changing, vibrant, conflicted and fluctuation sense of values, beliefs, and aesthetic judgements.

This short piece represents the story of a (half) hour feedback and roundtable

¹ Kate Chopin, 'The Story of an Hour' in *Women Who Did: Stories by Men and Women, 1890-1914* ed. Angelique Richardson (London: Penguin, 2002), pp.137-139, p.137. Further page references appear in the text.

session between Professor Regenia Gagnier, the conference keynote, and myself at the end of the event. Roundtables are necessarily responsive, off-the-cuff comments on things heard and considered during the course of the two days. The attempt to capture such reflections is an imprecise mode of writing and there is neither the space nor the memory to represent the range of that discussion or the audience's participation. Instead these pages hopefully offer a flavour of how some of the interconnections and themes of the papers came across to me during the conference, and how these strands might be brought together not to unify our sense of the period but rather to accentuate the very openness of the theme itself to versatility and variety.

The period of literature and culture known as the *fin de siècle* is acknowledged as one of borders, limits, and demarcations. It is a period of conscious transgression over those lines between which classification and uncertainty mix, mingle and metamorphose. The proposition laid down by the 'Crossing the Line' conference was, even if only subconsciously, partly that Virginia Woolf's famous dictum in 1924 that human nature changed on or about December 1910² could itself be backdated to the start of that decade; that a line which was more than temporal, or arbitrarily generated by the chronology of centuries, monarchical reign or any other calendrical device, was crossed. But in what sense is a crossing also a passing over, a dying gesture towards immortality even as it reinforces its own termination and regeneration?

Writing in their well known anthology of 1880s and 1890s source materials, Roger Luckhurst and the late Sally Ledger stated in 2000 that

[t]he Victorian *fin de siècle* was an epoch of endings and beginnings. The collision between the old and the new that characterised the turn of the century marks it as an excitingly volatile and transitional period; a time when British cultural politics were caught between two ages, the Victorian and the Modern; a time fraught with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility.³

The version of literary and cultural narrative here which perceives the 1890s as both fixed between 'two ages' bigger than and more constructed than itself is a compelling one. But as Ledger and Luckhurst and others have since gone on to explore, it is the 'volatil[ity]' of the transition or crossing that demonstrates so much to us about the draw back to the 1890s for contemporary critics. The range of the papers presented at the conference illuminated the ways in which the lines we might perceive in play within the period can be viewed as geographic, temporal, generic, sexualised, gendered, and hybrid. Several papers focused on the relationship between Modernist

² See Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924).

³ Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst eds. *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History, c.1880-1900*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.xiii.

and Victorian texts, often filtered through the classificatory or definitional moments enacted by the *fin de siècle* as a period marking the line – or gap – between these literary movements. Sometimes these relationships are consciously invoked in the forms of writing back or legacy and afterlife that are now part of our own contemporary engagement with the nineteenth century in all its varieties. Such negotiation of a literary and cultural inheritance that is more often unwanted in its inescapability than we might at first suppose centres on that dividing generational line between artistic movements and moments.

Yet instances of transitional influence are often useful in creating a deeper sense of the permeability of lines, their openness to transgression and crossing. The Victorian *fin de siècle* in all its duality as both Victorian and *end-of-Victorian*, modern but *not-yet-Modernist*, adds a sharpness to our sense of cultural connection and division. Lines are chains, linkages, and means of association at the same time as they have the possibility of marking out difference and conflict. Thus it was most refreshing to see the ways in which papers, often in sophisticated ways, enriched our sense of the cross-temporality and epistemological (dis)continuities of periodisation and its (re)fashioning. Kate Hext's (University of Exeter) paper on Walter Pater's 'philosophical aestheticism' provided just such an engagement and worked particularly well with Sarah Townley's (University of Nottingham) paper in the same panel through its invocation of both the theoretical and concrete perception of 'the reader as art' in the work of Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater.

Pater and Woolf had a clear presence over the proceedings throughout, as is appropriate for figures so central to their respective aesthetic modes and periods. They also provided a useful line of canonical connectivity across the broadest understanding of the chronological crossing envisioned by the conference theme, from the 1870s to the 1930s, three decades either side of that 'before and after 1900' subtitle. What was perhaps more surprising at first was the figuration of Charles Dickens (Catherine Malcolmson, University of Leicester), Charlotte Brontë (Andrew Harding, University of Chester) and Elizabeth Gaskell (Emma Karin Brandin, Mid Sweden University) alongside Joseph Conrad (Kayla Walker Edin, Southern Methodist University), E. M. Forster (Brandin), and W. H. Auden (Katarzyna Winiarski, University of Warsaw). Seemingly eclectic in nature these figures all came to represent individual imaginative (re)enactments of these very margins and lines that failed to hold on or around 1900. It was thus fitting to hear deeply engaged accounts of the formation of literary and cultural legacies earlier in the period and to extend the lifetime of influence they generated. Indeed, there seemed to be something of the mortmain or dead hand about elements of the programme that justified that sense in which 'affinities' (another keyword from the conference subtitle) are both enforced upon us and provide a self-electing connection with the past and the future. That bigger question of how conscious and precise our invocation of legacy might be proved a fruitful note in several papers.

In her more recent collection of 1890s materials, Talia Schaffer develops Ledger and Luckhurst's sense of periodic confliction mentioned earlier by focusing on the 'namelessness' that hinders any strict definition of the line's borders or margins:

Everyone who lived through it agreed that the period between the 1870s and 1910s was complex, vital, tumultuous, confusing, and exciting... Yet the period from the 1870s to the 1910s also has a unique problem: It has no widely accepted name. What can we call this era? "The turn of the century"? "The 1890s"? "Late-Victorianism"? "Early modernism"? "The *fin de siècle*" (French for end of the century)? Our nameless era swings up onto the back of the Victorian carriage or clammers onto the running boards of the modernist automobile, tolerated as an extra passenger without being admitted to the full comforts of the vehicle. Its namelessness is not just an inconvenience; it signals something fundamental about the period.⁴

To raise this period into profile by demarcating its beginnings and endings, or to seek to classify its divisive or delectable desires, would be to veer towards safety. The papers at the conference demonstrated how the range of the period and its imprecision act as one of its greatest strengths in relation to the interpretative possibilities for reading into the response to the past, the fixation on the present and the anticipatory mode for what would follow. Such temporal issues, refractions and dilutions, formed the backdrop to many of the conference presentations as cross-currents, cross-influences and cross-references between different writers, artists, and thinkers emerged.

All these issues provided an appropriate range for reflection during the final feedback session of the event. Both Regenia Gagnier and I felt that the range of perspectives, as indicated above, had very usefully complicated our sense of the potential for thinking through the connections to be made on the themes of continuity, change and classification around the period. Discussion therefore centred on the possible ways in which the theme could be taken forward as a means of considering the present relevance of *fin de siècle* cultural issues. As highlighted in Gagnier's keynote lecture at the conference's start, issues of individualism, decadence and their global contexts hold an increasing contemporary relevance. Several papers had picked up on this theme in often oblique ways: the consideration of a 'Pater speaking to Pater' (Kate Hext) or the metacritical approach suggested by Sarah Townley in speaking of the 'artist who writes for the scholar' both underlined the inwardness of the internal lines of engagement. Here, as in Gagnier's argument, questions of the

⁴ Talia Schaffer ed. *Literature and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Pearson Longman, 2006), p.xx.

formalism of genre and style came to the fore and it was noticeable how many papers combined a neat sense of theoretical inflection with a deep appreciation of attentive literary reading and a nuanced awareness of the slipperiness of linguistic constructions of meaning and identity. In this sense, the 'line' adopted both a metaphorical and literal presence: be it in the 'poems in prose' of Oscar Wilde (Jeremiah Mercurio, University of St Andrews – one of the articles in this special issue), the figure of the observing but non-participatory flaneur (Chiung-Ying Huang, University of Bristol), the language of mythology and aesthetic criticism in Ruskin (Cristina Pascu-Tulbure, University of Liverpool) or the figurative line in visual art (Nicola Capon, University of Reading).

In locating their research, many speakers also focussed on geographic or regional specificity. The panel on 'The Modern Metropolis' with papers by Neil Coombs (Liverpool John Moores University), Laura Torrado Marinas (University of Vigo) and Patrick Wright (Manchester Metropolitan University) combined Victorian, Modernist and Surrealist imaginings of the cityscape in a manner that underlined the connections between physical environment and personal character, principally the routes through which individuals crossing into different spaces inevitably encounter diverse notions of their affinity with others and with the architectural landscape of perception. Here borders are frequently physical lines but also the perceptual or imaginary demarcations in which individuals are trapped, find voice or travel through as spectators such as in the figure of the *flâneur*. The liminality of movement testifies to what Gagnier indicated in her plenary as the global hobo, using the striking image of John Currin's *The Hobo* (1999), the traveller who follows the lines and pathways of an experience unburdened by the constraints of place, space and time yet inextricably initiated within those conceptualisations as they construct identity and individualism.

In this respect, the papers and the roundtable discussion inspired interesting reflections on issues of fixity, proximity, distance and perspective. Opening up the theoretical positioning within so much critical material on the *fin de siècle* period, the discussion charted a different move in the slippage between subjective and collective willed experience. The will here serves that dual function as both determined and bequeathed. The afterlife or aftermath narrative projected by several of the papers throughout the two days provided ample sustenance for the idea that temporal change, the distance engendered by the passing of time, was rather more circulatory in nature than might appear to be the case. Thus the influence of and the influencing by the voices of the Victorians into the 1890s and 1900s and its doubling up through those new narratives into a refracted thread of the nineteenth century in the early decades of the twentieth century, is not solely about continuity. Such affinities might instead be traced to a greater awareness of the bonds of historical kinship, familial and familiar divides, and a deeper perspective on the nature of an individualism asserting itself within the group, the sect or the social collective. As Catherine

Malcolmson put it in her paper in relation to the Dickensian celebrations in the early years of the twentieth century, there is an importance which resides in the cultural negotiations of this period with the question of how to value the Victorian past. These questions are perhaps even more pertinent at the present time given that the conference took place in the year following the bicentenaries of Charles Darwin, William Ewart Gladstone, Alfred Lord Tennyson and the sesquicentennials of *On the Origin of Species* and John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty*; in 2010 even Woolf's comment about human nature changing a century before received a memorial conference in its own right. The 2012 Dickens Bicentenary celebrations will mark a further temporal line of distance but also a crossing back into or revision involving our perception of the relevance or significance of such anniversaries. The early decades of the twenty-first century are likely to be no less marked by their renegotiation of what the Victorian period (and its end) represents to us now than the first decades of the twentieth century.

All these issues were in play in the plenary roundtable's discussion of the continual need to rearticulate and reformulate our own boundaries or lines (crossed or otherwise) with the affinities of this earlier period of transition, change and development. Beneath such concerns lies, one suspects, a nervous relationship with progress and evolution as the limitations of our sense of the Victorian period itself. As the conference as a whole demonstrated, these questions are not new and the responses of the 'before and after' then do not provide us with strict models for such negotiations now. Nor should they. Holbrook Jackson commented in his now almost a century old 1913 'Introduction' to *The Eighteen Nineties* that

Anybody who studies the moods and thoughts of the Eighteen Nineties cannot fail to observe their central characteristic in a widespread concern for the correct – that is, the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous – mode of living. For myself, however, the awakening of the Nineties does not appear to be the realisation of a purpose, but the realisation of a possibility. Life aroused curiosity. People became enthusiastic about the way it should be used. And in proof of sincerity there were opinionated battles – most of them inconclusive. But they were not wasteful on that account, for the very circumstance of idea pitting itself against idea, vision against vision, mood against mood, and, indeed, whim against whim, cleared the way for more definite action when the time ripened.⁵

Jackson published his book at the time when those 'opinionated battles' were about to transmogrify into bloodier conflicts, not necessarily the 'more definite action' he had

⁵ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1939 [first published 1913]), p.12.

in mind here. However, it is in the dictum 'Life aroused curiosity' that we find connection with the conference theme itself. It is the period's own contradictions, slippages and anxieties as much as any conscious affinities that indicate the myriad ways in which we can continue to view, interrogate and negotiate those curious lines of enquiry, crossed or otherwise.