

“An infusion of the modern spirit into the ancient form”: Textual Objects and Historical Consciousness in George Eliot’s *Romola*

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Abstract: In George Eliot’s *Romola*, manuscripts represent the ability of objects to embody the past. Through various characters’ interactions with manuscripts, Eliot explores competing ways of using and valuing history, from Bardo’s obsessive collecting to Savonarola’s ideological co-optation. As the story progresses, however, manuscripts all but disappear and are replaced by printed texts. Through this depiction of technological change, Eliot advances her case for a particular kind of historical consciousness, one that engages critically—rather than fetishistically or opportunistically—with the past. Print, Eliot suggests, allows history to become widely accessible for public consumption, thereby weakening the aura of the past and allowing readers to simultaneously recognize its alterity and its intimate relationship to the present. Eliot suggests that the role of history is to guide and advance the interests of humanity in the present; as such, she uses Renaissance anxieties over the movement from manuscript to print to interrogate Victorian concerns surrounding the proliferation of inexpensive printed materials.

Since *Romola* was first published, critics have noted that George Eliot’s purportedly historical novel seems to be more about mid-nineteenth-century England than Renaissance Italy, despite the extensive research that informed its composition. In an otherwise complimentary discussion of the 1863 three-volume edition, *The Westminster Review* faulted Eliot for subordinating historical realism to moral and philosophical reflection: “this long and elaborate disquisition on the relations between the sexes as a moral question is set forth too much in the colors of the nineteenth century. . . . We cannot escape from the feeling that the chief interest of ‘Romola’ reposes on ideas of moral duty and of right which are of very modern growth, and that they would have been more appropriately displayed on a modern stage” (MacCormack 848). Although Eliot has often been accused of merely projecting the concerns of her own day onto the

past, I argue that *Romola* is in fact a self-conscious reflection on Victorian England's intellectual and commercial engagement with history.

Various characters' interactions with manuscripts in the novel become emblematic of how they conceptualize the value of history itself, thereby allowing Eliot to interrogate the relative use of those value systems for her own day. In the first half of this essay, I examine each of these possibilities in turn, beginning with the fetishism of history represented by Bardo's manuscript collection. Walter Benjamin argues in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that the technological reproducibility of art results in the loss of "aura"—the artifact's ability to impress upon the viewer a sense of its own uniqueness and distance. Benjamin draws a distinction between two different ways of valuing art, cultism and exhibitionism. The former supports the existence of aura while the latter "emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual" and substitutes instead an emphasis on the work's exhibition value (224). The characters in *Romola* are in varying degrees of thrall to the aura of manuscripts; however, as the novel progresses, printed texts gain in prominence and manuscripts all but disappear (despite the historical fact that print did not *replace* manuscript culture). As the mechanical reproducibility of print objects threatens the aura of the manuscript, Bardo attempts to restore that aura through collecting. His bibliomania is one way of coping with anxiety over the proliferation of textual objects made possible by new technologies of reproduction and distribution.

Other characters respond differently to this moment of historical and technological change. As I demonstrate later in the essay, Tito, Dino, and Savonarola also interact with Bardo's library, offering different models for engaging with history, all of which *Romola* ultimately rejects. In their place she develops a new kind of presentist historical sensibility that engages critically, rather than fetishistically or opportunistically, with the past. Eliot advocates a study of history that simultaneously recognizes both the past's alterity and its intimate relationship to the present. *Romola* is an exercise in this kind of historical sensibility. Eliot uses fifteenth-century hysteria over the emergence of the printing press and the rise of literacy as a tool for thinking through Victorian anxieties over the spread of inexpensive printed materials. Placing her own moment in conversation with the past in order to better understand the history of changes in information technology, Eliot ultimately suggests the futility of contemporary critiques of the popular press. Furthermore, she reveals her purpose, as a serious writer, in working through

popular channels: to be an exhibitionist, rather than a cultist, of history.

In the discussion that follows, I am most interested in manuscripts and printed objects as things rather than as texts; therefore, I will most often refer to them as *textual objects* to maintain focus on their materiality. Following the work of Leah Price, I hope to better understand the discourses that surround reading technologies by studying the multiple forms of meaning and value that accrue to textual objects in the Victorian novel, especially those that emerge when characters are *not* reading—that is, when they treat books as things rather than as texts. In *Romola*, these textual objects facilitate an exploration of the unique challenges of imbuing things with the weight of history.

In the first half of the novel, anxieties about the past coalesce around the production, collection, and circulation of manuscripts. By the time of *Romola*'s publication in the 1860s, Londoners had developed a mania for old manuscripts. Contemporary periodicals reveal that Eliot lived in a world that fetishized and commoditized these items. An advertisement in an April 1851 edition of the *Daily News*, called "Novelties in the British Museum," lists all the Museum's acquisitions for the past year by department. The descriptions of manuscripts emphasize their age, rarity, worth, and oddity: from "very ancient Syriac manuscripts" to "a copy of a scarce volume" to "a collection of valuable Spanish papers (chiefly originals)" to "an extensive and very curious collection of Stammbucher." Similarly, a May 1861 issue of the *Athenaeum* includes an advertisement for "A CATALOGUE of a PARTICULARLY CHOICE, VALUABLE and INTERESTING COLLECTION of RARE, CURIOUS and USEFUL BOOKS. . . including Splendid Books of Prints and Illustrated Works, beautifully Illuminated Manuscripts, on vellum, &c, NOW ON SALE." Eliot's discussion of manuscripts in the novel, then, is a way to engage with her own society's fascination with them and negotiate the implications of their commercialization. Manuscripts are the items through which her novel explores competing valuations of history because, for her Renaissance protagonists and Victorian readers alike, these objects were compelling embodiments of the past.

The character in *Romola* who has the most obviously over-determined relationship to textual objects is Romola's father, Bardo. Having spent his life collecting, correcting, and recopying ancient manuscripts to preserve classical wisdom for future generations, Bardo is blind and no longer able to pursue his passion. He has become fixated on guaranteeing that his library

will be preserved in its entirety and under his name. Although his pursuit is single-minded, Bardo's relationship to his library is not simple: he is aware of his manuscripts as an intellectual legacy connecting him to past and future scholars, as saleable commodities that he must protect from the market, and as sentimental objects that recall his own personal past. In recognizing their multiple forms of value, Bardo develops a kind of fetishism unique to the collector, who unites multiple perspectives on the object within a single obsession.

Bardo denies the material value of his collection by imagining it instead in terms of *social* capital. He insists on retaining ownership and credit for his collection, refusing to circulate his manuscripts for fear that a dishonest printer will take credit for his annotations (53); yet, he refuses to admit any economic motivations for his concerns. He tells Romola:

'If even Florence only is to remember me, it can but be on the same ground that it will remember Niccolò Niccoli—because I forsook the vulgar pursuit of wealth in commerce that I might devote myself to collecting the precious remains of ancient art and wisdom, and leave them, after the example of the munificent Romans, for an everlasting possession to my fellow-citizens. . . . Lorenzo's untimely death has raised a new difficulty. I had his promise—I should have had his bond—that my collection should always bear my name and should never be sold.' (51)

Even in a speech designed to distance his library from its value as a commodity, Bardo repeatedly invokes the specter of the economic. He brags that he abandoned "vulgar" commerce, thereby revealing that he was once a businessman and opening up the possibility that his scholarship represents another manifestation of acquisitiveness. He refers to the library that he will leave to his fellow Florentines as their "possession." Finally, he laments that he never received Lorenzo di Medici's "bond," suggesting the language of contractual obligation that is in tension with his supposedly benevolent desire to leave his collection to future generations. The imperative that the manuscript books not be sold positions them as commodities even as it denies the possibility. Later, Bardo imagines his intellectual successors in explicitly economic terms: "It is but little to ask . . . that my name should be over the door—that men should own themselves debtors to the Bardi library in Florence" (55). For the collector, the personal value of objects always bears a complex and troubled relationship to their market value. In his essay "Unpacking my Library," Benjamin crystalizes the interplay between commercial and sentimental value that characterizes

the fetishism of the collector: “I might never have acquired a library extensive enough to be worthy of the name if there had not been an inflation. Suddenly the emphasis shifted; books acquired real value, or, at any rate, were difficult to attain” (62). Elsewhere in the essay, Benjamin describes his book collecting as a deeply sentimental and idiosyncratic practice, yet this passage reveals that even such an individualistic collection takes some of its value from market forces.

While Benjamin sees the collecting impulse beginning with an awareness of economic value, others argue that it originates in the subject’s desire to see itself reflected in the outside world. Jean Baudrillard argues that collecting is rooted in estrangement from one’s surroundings: “It is because he feels himself alienated or at least lost within a social discourse whose rules he cannot fathom that the collector is drawn to construct an alternative discourse that is for him entirely amenable, in so far as he is the only one who dictates its signifiers—the ultimate signified being, in the final analysis, none other than himself” (24). The relationship between self and world that Baudrillard locates in collecting is similar to that of fetishism as theorized by Auguste Comte in the 1850s and subsequently adapted by Matthew Arnold and Edward B. Tylor in the 1860s and ’70s. Prior to the economic and psychological theories of fetishism now associated with Marx and Freud, Comte’s ideas about culture and its opposite were popularized by the London intellectual elite, including Eliot’s partner George Lewes (Logan 41-42). According to Peter Logan, Comte and his successors viewed fetishism as the practice of “uncultured people explaining the unintelligible ‘outside’ in terms of themselves. . . . The Victorian fetishist projects feeling, desire, and belief onto the world, but does so unawares. Then those projections are reflected back in alienated form, as though originating in the external world” (3). Thus, Eliot’s depiction of Bardo’s collecting seems to draw on the idea of the primitive fetishist as it circulated in her own intellectual milieu.

In addition to projecting his or her own subjectivity onto the external world, the collector may seek to consolidate that subjectivity by controlling its relationship to time. Eliot first describes Bardo as “a man with a deep-veined hand cramped by much copying of manuscripts . . . who sat amongst his books and his marble fragments of the past, and saw them only by the light of those far-off younger days” (45). As the novel repeatedly points out, he preserves them in the order they took when he first lost his sight, imbuing them sentimental value. Bardo does not only

cling to his own past; he also seeks to live within the ancient past his books represent: ““even when I could see,” Bardo tells Romola, ““it was with the great dead that I lived; while the living often seemed to me mere spectres”” (49). Susan Stewart argues that collecting is an attempt to constitute the collector’s identity by destroying the object’s original context; she further relates this desire to historical awareness, arguing that the juxtaposition of objects within a collection makes all time synchronic and places time at the service of the collection—and ultimately, therefore, at the service of the collector’s identity (151). Through the collection, the collector transcends the limitations of history: “To arrange the objects according to time is to juxtapose personal time with social time, autobiography with history, and thus to create a fiction of the individual life, a time of the individual subject both transcendent to and parallel to historical time” (154). Bardo’s desire to place his name on the library is certainly an effort to constitute himself as “the ultimate signified being,” and this desire seems to come from a sense of alienation within the present. Bardo’s collection allows him to constitute his identity outside the strictures of his own moment, in which the manuscripts he cherishes are being replaced by printed books. His alienation stems from living during the rise of the mechanically reproducible text, and he compensates by collecting the objects of the past as a hedge against the present.

Yet collecting is not only about living in the past; paradoxically, it is also about novelty. Benjamin expresses this contradiction succinctly when he notes: “To renew the *old* world—that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire *new* things” (“Unpacking” 61; emphasis added). So, despite his obsession with the past-ness of his artifacts, Bardo is described as wishing always to have the newest, the “freshest,” the most correct manuscripts. At the same time that he must imagine the existence of many more manuscripts in order to believe in the possibility of the humanist enterprise of renewing the classical past, he must also believe in the uniqueness of his own contribution to that enterprise.

Bardo’s collecting is presented not only as fetishism but also as a sign of ill health: the narrator notes Romola’s “dread lest a paroxysm of the collector’s mania should seize her father” (69). Thus, Eliot seems to imagine the practice as a form of mental illness. In his dissertation “Boffin’s Books and Darwin’s Finches: Victorian Cultures of Collecting,” Michael William Hancock details the mid-Victorian discourses surrounding collecting, including book collecting. Beginning in 1809, when the Reverend Dibdin published his work detailing the symptoms and

signs of bibliomania, the practice was often portrayed as pathological (130). Yet antiquarian obsessions were responsible for the creation of national libraries as well as museums and were therefore recognized as being potentially beneficial to society as a whole (131). Through readings of Humphreys's *Stories by an Archaeologist and His Friends* (1856), Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), and Collins's *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Hancock demonstrates that "[t]he continuing ambivalence toward bibliomania as both a dissipating speculative force and a conservative cultural force was reflected at mid-century in its depiction in Victorian fiction" (132). In all three of these books, Hancock observes, collectors of manuscripts and antiquities claim to have altruistic purposes, even as their mania overtakes their ability to act as father figures (175).

While Hancock does not discuss *Romola*, the story of Bardo follows the same pattern and reflects the same concerns. Thus, it seems obvious that Bardo di Bardi is not a model scholar, antiquarian, or curator of historical objects. Eliot sees her project of freezing the past and displaying it for the reader's consumption as being in some way different from what Bardo does when he collects and displays artifacts and manuscripts. And yet they may initially seem quite similar: the very elements of Renaissance scholarship that Eliot critiques are reflected in her own work. For instance, when she comments on "that laborious erudition, at once minute and copious, which was the chief intellectual task of the age" (115), it is difficult not to think about the many critiques of *Romola* as belabored, erudite, and overly researched. It is equally hard to deny that *Romola* is like a museum; it is a novel in which Eliot assembles and displays fragments of the past, seeded with the fruits of her research in the British Library on the historical personages and places that she describes in loving (even exhausting) detail. If, as Baudrillard and Benjamin suggest, the desire to collect has to do with a desire to inhabit another time or discourse, then a historical novel is the perfect form for a collection to take.

Mieke Bal suggests that narratives share a structural similarity with collections: "I can imagine seeing collecting as a process consisting of the confrontation between objects and subjective agency informed by an attitude. Objects, subjective agency, confrontations as events: such a working definition makes for a narrative" (100). If the "attitude" in question is fetishism, then it seems possible that the narrative collection becomes a realist novel. Logan argues that realism is inherently fetishistic because it asks the reader to believe in the world brought to life

within its pages. Along with Eliot's Baldassarre, the reader must learn to see letters not as "black-weather marks on a wall" but as "the magic signs that conjure up a world" (*Romola* 318). Logan claims that Eliot's realism relies on the reader to be a kind of fetishist even as it attempts to warn him or her away from that way of thinking:

While fetishism in Eliot's fiction regularly serves as a negative sign—as when indicating a character's immaturity—it also holds a positive place in her critical essays on the mechanics of realism. Her realism necessarily relies on fetishism to accomplish its anti-fetishistic goals. This paradox can be understood as a basic conflict between form and content; while realist literary form relies on illusion, its content seeks to undo illusion. By recognizing this distinction, we can see the way in which her novels comment on themselves, in an ongoing dialogue between anti-fetishist content and fetishist form. (69)

Thus, Eliot appeals to the same tendency—Logan's "primitive fetishism"—that she seeks to reform; the readers who are willing to believe in her created worlds, that is, are the very ones in need of the novels' lessons. I agree that Eliot seems to be doing something very like what Bardo does in collecting and displaying the remnants of the past, imbuing them with a kind of magical ability to transform the present. Yet there is a fundamental difference that Eliot highlights and that I will explore later in this essay: while Bardo seeks to restrict the use of his library to elite Florentine scholars, Eliot circulates her novel through popular channels. If *Romola* is a collection, it is not a hoard.

Other characters' engagements with Bardo's library reveal alternate approaches to history; Tito, Savonarola, and Dino each offer *Romola* models for interacting with the past through objects. Like Bardo, Tito seems at first to be a kind of collector: "Tito could not arrange life at all to his mind without a considerable sum of money. And that problem of arranging life to his mind had been the source of all his misdoing" (263-64). Thus Tito, like Bardo, is a curator, but Tito curates only his own material comfort. In that sense, he is like the Victorian fetishist of bourgeois materialism, a kind of collecting that effaces the past of objects in service to a crass and spiritually empty present. When Tito arrives in Florence, he intends to sell Baldassarre's gems and manuscripts in order to raise money to free his father from slavery (94). He soon decides to part with them, however, in order to embrace the wealth they represent rather than

their use value (freeing his father) or their sentimental value (reminding him of his father). Given the narrator's criticisms of Bardo, Tito might at first appear to offer a viable alternative; if Bardo is overly attached to his possessions, then perhaps attachment is inherently wrong. Yet any sense that Tito is a positive model of engagement with historical objects is disrupted by his thought process as he attempts to justify selling his father's ring:

[I]f he had been wiser and had sold it, he might perhaps have escaped that identification by Fra Luca. It was true that it had been taken from Baldassarre's finger and put on his as soon as his young hand had grown to the needful size; but there was really no valid good to anybody in those superstitious scruples about inanimate objects. The ring had helped towards the recognition of him. Tito had begun to dislike recognition, which was a claim from the past. (136)

Certainly, a "superstitious" attitude towards objects is worthy of censure in Eliot's work, but to apply the label of "superstitious" to a set of "scruples" is to confuse an ethical engagement with the past with an uncritical attachment to it.

The conflict between Romola and Tito over the sale of Bardo's library further dramatizes the difficulty of drawing a limit around the rightful claims of history. After Bardo's death, Romola assumes that she and Tito will continue to pursue her father's goal of setting up a library to carry on his legacy. Having rejected sentimentalism towards his own belongings, Tito is impatient with Romola's desire to respect her father's request: "the tenacious adherence to Bardo's wishes about the library had become under existing difficulties a piece of sentimental folly, which deprived himself and Romola of substantial advantages" (263). Again, Tito's argument appears persuasive; if it is a choice between the material well-being of the living and the egotistical desires of the dead, we are inclined to side with the former. Furthermore, Eliot has already taught us to reject Bardo's way of relating to the past so that any opposing viewpoint appears attractive. Yet Tito's initially convincing reasoning reveals itself, once again, as a justification for his materialism: under "the pressure of a new motive and the outlet of a rare opportunity. . . . he had brought himself to resolve on using his legal right to sell the library before the great opportunity offered by French and Milanese bidders slipped through his fingers" (263). The repetition of the word "opportunity" suggests that Tito and Romola do not really need the money; rather, Tito is seizing greedily on a deal that presents itself to him. This is not so

much a principled decision as an impulsive one, and as such it privileges the desires of the present over those of the past or the future. Through her portrayal of Tito, Eliot rejects yet another way of interacting with artifacts: stripping them of their history in order to transform them into commodities. She demonstrates that commercialism is just as fetishistic as Bardo's collecting; both place the past in the service of the individual's ego. Just as her scholarship is different from Bardo's, Eliot's exchange of her novels for money is not quite like Tito's sale of his manuscripts.

After her marriage to Tito fails, Romola turns to Girolamo Savonarola for another role model, thereby presenting the reader with yet another possible approach to history. As Romola eventually discovers, Savonarola is as opportunistic as Tito in his own way: he forces the past to conform to his preferred narrative. In an early encounter, he tells her to be like "the believer who . . . beholds the history of the world as the history of a great redemption in which he is himself a fellow-worker" (342). Again, history merely serves the needs of the present, rather than being recognized in conversation with the present. Within Savonarola's grand narrative, only certain types of antiquity are permissible; all others are to be destroyed. Eliot's description of the Bonfire of Vanities explicitly imagines books as commodities: ". . . there were handsome copies of Ovid, Boccaccio, Petrarca, Pulci, and other books of a vain or impure sort . . . at the very summit, there was the unflattering effigy of a Venetian merchant, who was understood to have offered a heavy sum for this collection of marketable abominations" (396). Yet Savonarola's community purchases the Medici library (497), suggesting that he is not as averse to humanist scholarship as his theatrics would suggest. These ideological ruptures lead Romola to become suspicious of Savonarola's view of history, and she forms "new doubts as to the mode in which he looked back at the past" at a crucial phase in her development as an independent thinker (541).

Under Savonarola's guidance, Romola's brother Dino (Fra Luca) rejects the scholarly and commercial realms altogether, withdrawing entirely from the world. In doing so, Dino repudiates his father's attitude toward history; in his conversation with Romola, he calls the antiquities that Bardo studies "dead toys" and "the vain words which record the passions of dead men" (149, 150). Thus, he shares Romola's sense that their father's library is claustrophobic in its obsession with the past. Dino, however, possesses a horror of Bardo's books that Romola does not. He tells her of his vision:

‘[I]nstead of water, I saw written parchment unrolling itself everywhere, and instead of trees and herbage I saw men of bronze and marble springing up and crowding round you. . . . And the bronze and marble figures seemed to mock thee and hold out cups of water, and when thou didst grasp them and put them to my father’s lips, they turned to parchment. And the bronze and marble figures seemed to turn into demons and snatch my father’s body from thee, and the parchments shrivelled up.’ (152-153)

Dino’s vision is almost comical in its extreme horror of manuscripts and antiquities. His intuition that parchment alone cannot quench one’s thirst for knowledge and understanding may be valid. The narrator critiques Dino, however, for becoming caught up in his visions instead of inquiring about Romola’s life: “The prevision that Fra Luca’s words had imparted to Romola had been such as comes from the shadowy region where human souls seek wisdom apart from the human sympathies which are the very life and substance of our wisdom; the revelation that might have come from the simple questions of filial and brotherly affection had been carried into irrevocable silence” (155). Thus, the narrator suggests that Dino misses the point. In rejecting the past as an external source of knowledge, he merely substitutes for it another grand narrative rather than consulting his humanity.

Romola, like Dino, is caught up in the master narratives offered by those around her, but as the novel progresses, she learns to filter each of these systems of belief through her own experiences and sensibilities. This process of growth is reflected in her changing attitude towards things. After she has instinctively rejected Bardo’s fetishism, Tito’s commercialism, and Savonarola’s manipulation of the past, as well as Dino’s total withdrawal from the understanding of history that artifacts can offer, Romola develops her own kind of historical imagination. She learns to understand the past in conversations with the present, which requires her to become aware of the fundamental alterity of the past as well as its intimate connection to the present. As she develops, Romola reflects on “. . . the new vividness that remembered words always have for us when we have learned to give them a new meaning” and contemplates “a sudden impression of the wide distance between her present and her past self” (307, 342). These moments culminate in a passage that occurs near the end of the novel: “In those silent wintry hours when Romola lay resting from her weariness, her mind, travelling back over the past, and gazing across the

undefined distance of the future, saw all objects from a new position” (527). Here, Eliot establishes Romola as a character in the process of discovering a new way to understand history—a perspective that does place the past in subjection to the present’s needs but understands it as the incredibly strange and yet familiar ancestor of the present moment.

Similar ideas appear elsewhere in Eliot’s work. For example, in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” (1856), Eliot suggests the inadequacy of her contemporaries’ attempts at historical fiction: “But, perhaps, the least readable of silly women’s novels, are the *modern-antique* species . . . those of the modern-antique school have a ponderous, a leaden kind of fatuity, under which we groan” (316). This remark may seem ironic, given that *Romola* has often been accused of containing its own moments of leaden fatuity. Yet beneath Eliot’s aesthetic critique lies a more serious theoretical one: “The finest effort to reanimate the past is of course only approximative—is always more or less an infusion of the modern spirit into the ancient form” (316). In admitting this, she suggests that her contemporaries labor under the delusion that they are bringing the past to life *as it really was*; that is, they mistake their projections for an external reality. This amounts, more or less, to an accusation that they are fetishists and that their realism is unaware of itself as fetish. She foreshadows the project she will later undertake in *Romola* when she remarks: “Admitting that genius which has familiarized itself with all the relics of an ancient period can sometimes, by the force of its sympathetic divination, restore the missing notes in the ‘music of humanity,’ and reconstruct the fragments into a whole which will really bring the remote past nearer to us, and interpret it to our duller apprehension” (317). The task of the historical novelist, then, is not to reconstruct the past accurately; rather, it is to render history comprehensible and useful to us now without subsuming it to the sensibilities of the present.

Eliot’s attitude towards the interpenetration of past and present is perhaps most on display in the Proem of *Romola*. Hilary Fraser relates Eliot’s historicism in the Proem to Comte’s religion of humanity:

George Eliot’s references to what may still be seen of Renaissance Florence at the present day are made in the service of a more complex humanist thesis on the relation of the past to the present, and ‘the broad sameness of the human lot’. . . . [The narrator] points to the continuity within change, and is acutely aware of Florence as the repository of a human history which is still in the making. . . . At

the same time as we are made aware of the historical differences between the thirteenth, the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, they are linked, by the continuity of place, and by the continuity of human nature. . . . the present is ironically linked up with, even shown to be the product of, that past world which she has described so carefully in all its difference. (186-87)

The practice of estranging the past in order to assimilate it into one's identity—this sounds precisely like the process of collecting. The object cannot be assimilated into the self until it is established as something distinct from the self. Again, Eliot practices a kind of fetishism, similar to that of the collector; however, she does so with the kind of critical self-reflexivity that Logan notes as particularly characteristic of her fiction. As David Kurnick explains:

While recounting the Florentine spirit's questions about what has changed in his city over the centuries, Eliot is prompting a similar, obverse set of questions in her contemporary reader. The manifest drama of this shade's reincarnation is thus also, slightly less obviously, a drama of our incarnation as responsible readers, sensitive to markers of cultural and historical difference. The proem thereby accustoms us to *Romola's* peculiar hyper-reflexivity. (492)

This reflexivity allows Eliot to resist the fetishistic tendencies inherent in the practice of realism and the genre of the historical novel. Eliot's novel preserves the past not as a thing with its own magical and separate existence, nor merely as an aspect of the self, nor as the latter disguised as the former, but as a complex interplay between the two. Eliot is aware of the possibility that history, realism, and textual objects are all ripe for fetishism. Just as she sees her presentist historical sensibility as a way to resist the aura of history—because her perspective places the object (the past) in relation to the subject (the present) without destroying the object's strangeness—she represents print as an antidote to the aura of the manuscript because its proliferation exceeds the reader's ability to stabilize and fetishize it.

Eliot draws a parallel between the Renaissance concern over the gradual replacement of manuscripts with printed texts and her own contemporaries' alarm over the proliferation of print. Several moments early in the novel establish the story's location in a crucial moment of transition from manuscript to print culture. The spirit in the Proem recalls having lived through this important change: "he, too, in his prime, had been eager for the most correct manuscripts . . . and

in his old age he had made haste to look at the first sheets of that fine Homer which was among the early glories of the Florentine press” (7). Similarly, Nello’s shop is initially described as a still life that encapsulates the artistic and scholarly spirit of late-fifteenth-century Florence: “the inner room, in which were some benches, a table, with one book in manuscript and one printed in capitals lying open on it, a lute, a few oil-sketches, and a model or two of hands and ancient masks” (33). To mark the transitional moment in the history of information technology, the scene includes both written and printed books.

Bardo, defender of the manuscript, is strongly opposed to the emergence of print; he rants that ““even these mechanical printers who threaten to make learning a base and vulgar thing— even they must depend on the manuscripts over which we scholars have bent with that insight into the poet’s meaning which is closely akin to the *mens divinator* of the poet himself; unless they would flood the world with grammatical falsities and inexplicable analogies”” (48). Here, Bardo taps into a common complaint about printing in its early days: as the product of multiple hands, a printed book introduces more room for error than a manuscript under the control of a single transcriber, while disseminating these errors more rapidly to a larger number of readers. Of course, such complaints neglect the extent to which manuscript books, also produced by multiple agents, were subject to human error. Still, the new technology was perceived as accelerating the propagation of such flaws.

Nonetheless, Bardo gives voice to many of the anxieties of his time when he explains why he has not loaned out his manuscripts to printers:

‘[E]ven if I were to yield to the wish of Aldo Manuzio when he sets up his press at Venice, and give him the aid of my annotated manuscripts, I know well what would be the result: some other scholar’s name would stand on the title-page of the edition—some scholar who would have fed on my honey and then declared in his preface that he had gathered it all himself fresh from Hymettus. Else, why have I refused the loan of many an annotated codex? why have I refused to make public any of my translations?’ (53-54)

Bardo fears that putting his work into print will cause him to lose control over it. Ultimately, his fear is that a book can be reduced to the information it contains, thereby destroying its magical, fetishistic power to reflect back on its owner.

Manuscripts gradually disappear from the narrative, but print objects loom larger and larger. Near the end of the novel, handbills assume a crucial role in allowing Romola to understand public opinion of Savonarola's trial:

Already handbills were in circulation; some presenting, in large print, the alternative of Justice on the Conspirators or Ruin to the Republic, others in equally large print urging the observance of the Law and the granting of the Appeal. Round these jutting islets of black capitals there were lakes of smaller characters setting forth arguments less necessary to be read; for it was an opinion entertained at that time (in the first flush of triumph at the discovery of printing), that there was no argument more widely convincing than question-begging phrases in large type. (456)

Here the narrator gives voice to the concern that print manipulates the public's perception of the truth: typeface is reduced to a tool for propagandists. Romola, being more sophisticated than the average reader, "cared especially to become acquainted with the arguments in smaller type" (457), but she still purchases and reads any handbills that she can. Her ability to glean valuable information from these mass-produced textual objects might offer a model for Eliot's own reader. The Victorian serial novel, like Renaissance broadsides and pamphlets, was a popular medium available to readers of various classes. *The Cornhill*, in which *Romola* first appeared, was a relatively lavish high literary monthly read primarily by middle-class women, but it was not an elite, scholarly publication. Eliot's reader, like Romola herself, can learn to read critically and find valuable information within popular prints. Here, the information is more important than its materiality; we are a long way from Bardo's fetishism of the manuscript book.

The print object appears, at first, to be as susceptible to fetishization and commodification as the manuscript. When Romola sees Bratti selling pro- and anti-Savonarola handbills alike, still wet from the press, she asks which sells the best. He replies: "'Justice'—'Justice' goes the quickest,—so I raised the price and made it two danari. But then I bethought me the 'Law' was good ware too" (457), and so he raised the price. These remarks suggest, humorously, that Bratti is selling the abstract concepts Justice and Law. His remarks draw attention to the printed textual object's vulnerability to fetishization. Furthermore, the commercialization of print may compromise the integrity of the public debate it fuels. After Savonarola's trial, printed transcripts

are published and immediately suppressed. They are, however, pirated and so remain in circulation: “Of course there were copies accidentally mislaid, and a second edition, *not* by order of the Signoria, was soon in the hands of eager readers” (535). These publications seem to justify Bardo’s worst fears about printers: “Looking at the printed confessions she saw many sentences which bore the stamp of bungling fabrication . . . erasures and interpolations” (538). Yet, despite these flaws, the document has escaped state censorship, and Romola is able to read between the lines once again to glean useful information from the corrupted text. The speed of the press, the multiple agencies involved in the production of a single text, and the financial incentive to print—all of these elements may compromise the integrity of the debate. Alternately, however, an awareness of print as rapid, volatile, and contingent develops the critical abilities of readers. Unlike the manuscript book, which has the aura of infallibility, the printed text is known to be a mechanically reproduced copy, requiring a more active and skeptical engagement.

In Eliot’s own moment, the print industry was well established, but it was undergoing a major change that awakened concerns similar to those reflected in *Romola*. The lifting of the paper tax in 1861 led to an explosion in printed materials as paper became cheaper (Schaffer 226). At the same time, paper began to be made from wood-pulp, which was less expensive and more readily available than the rags from which paper had previously been produced. As a result, Eliot was writing during another transformation in information technology that seemed to resonate with the Renaissance moment depicted in *Romola*. Eliot’s use of these moments to reflect one another performs her theory of how history should be used: not as a fetish, a commodity, or a hitching post, but as a complicated mirror-image in which the present can see itself made strange. The historical novel as a form of collection certainly constitutes its collector, creating the illusion of transcendence. Yet Eliot’s novel channels the impulse to collect the fragments of the past into the creation of a widely accessible collection, rather than a private one; as Benjamin suggests, the mechanically reproduced object lends itself not to cultism but to exhibition.

The publication history of *Romola* is itself reflective of this moment in print history, as well as the printed object’s ability to resist fetishism. It was published in monthly installments between July 1862 and August 1863 in *The Cornhill* (Brown 37). This serial was only a few years old and owed its sudden popularity to another technological transformation: the monthly’s

inclusion of high-quality woodblock illustrations helped to launch a “mania” for such engravings in middle-class magazines (Turner 17-18). Over the next two decades, *Romola* was printed in England in numerous forms that appealed to a variety of readerships. For instance, Smith, Elder, & co. put out a triple-decker in 1863, a one-volume Illustrated Edition in 1865, and an expensive, limited-run edition in two volumes in 1880. The best-selling and most frequently reprinted edition, however, was the relatively inexpensive New Edition, first published in 1869 (Brown 38-39). As Andrew Brown, editor of the 1993 Clarendon Edition, points out, Eliot was involved in the proof stages of many (but not all) of these publications and seemed content to allow printers to standardize her spelling, punctuation, and style. Because successive editions drew on earlier ones—which were themselves full of compositors’ changes—today’s editions incorporate thousands of interventions by agents other than Eliot herself. Brown notes that the only version of the text that has never been printed or used as the basis for a critical edition is Eliot’s original manuscript. Yet he defends his own decision to base the Clarendon on the Cornhill serialization rather than the autograph because he sees evidence that Eliot not only supplied authorial changes but also expected and accepted compositorial changes to her text (41). In fact, rather than supplying her own setting copy for Blackwood’s 1877 Cabinet Edition, she marked up a copy of the 1869 New Edition, which in turn contained hundreds of changes that were likely introduced by the printer rather than Eliot herself (Brown 38-39). In short, it seems that Eliot understood the many contingencies involved in the printing process and was not distressed by the mutability of her text.

Romola’s publication history, then, dramatizes print’s ability to undermine the aura of the manuscript, providing instead a copy of a copy, available to be reproduced, distributed, and accessed by a variety of agents. If a manuscript runs the risk of being fetishized, a print object is more susceptible to idol-worship, the phase of cultural development that Comte believed followed fetishism. As Logan explains, the idol is a place-holder for the original: “While a fetish is a god, an idol represents a god; it is the signifier for a god that is not present” (10). Like an idol, the printed text is a copy that never claims to be an original and that therefore resists fetishism. Similarly, Eliot’s self-conscious realism never quite submits to the illusion that it can produce Renaissance Italy for the reader; instead, it remains a visibly imperfect copy, refracted through the lens of Victorian concerns and sensibilities. Just as print exceeds the collector’s

impulse to assemble the past into a stable form that reflects back on the subject as though from the outside, Eliot's not-quite historical realism requires the reader to abandon the fetishism of the past and instead use history as a basis for action in the present.

Finally, in the spirit of Eliot's project, perhaps we can reflect on how to use the Victorian past to understand our own moment's crisis of information technology. Eliot encouraged her contemporaries to recognize transformations in print culture as merely the latest episode in an ongoing struggle to control the form and accessibility of information. In the early twenty-first century, we are witnessing a similar moment of transition, from print to digital forms. The alarmist discourses surrounding this new change are remarkably similar to the ones that have come before: if more people can produce and access media, will the quality of available information diminish? How can we sort through such an abundance of material and determine what is worth reading? Will authors lose control over the form, distribution, and uses of their content? Will errors proliferate faster than they can be corrected? Eliot recognized the fundamental similarity in the way that people of different eras react to changes in information technology. Today, the proliferation of readable material sparks many of the same concerns. Like printed texts, transformative moments in information technology are copies of one another. Often, they do not know their own kinship with other transformative moments, a fact that Eliot seeks to reveal in her novel. Unless we understand the persistence of this anxiety through the ages, she warns, we will continue to engage with it afresh each time it emerges.

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