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Effortless Art:
The Sketch in Nineteenth-Century Painting and Literature

A crucial motivation behind the deliberate invocation of the sister art of painting by literary artists of the nineteenth century, as well as of painterly allusions to themes and techniques from literature, was the desire to reinforce the material and cultural status of each art. The imposition of multiple frames of reference diffused the burden of representation; it elided the question of a work’s relation to reality by judging it according to its success in reproducing another form of art. The very gap between the two arts could thus be used to emphasize the material reality of each, while their shared themes achieved a cultural authority that neither could attain on its own. The nineteenth-century exploitation of this dual relation can be seen in the literary appropriation of the style and subject matter of the sketch.

The ostentatiously unpretentious mode of the visual “sketch” informs every aspect of literary sketches such as Dickens’s Sketches by Boz and Thackeray’s Irish Sketch-Book, Paris Sketch-Book, and, although I will not be discussing it here, Vanity Fair: Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society. The literary use of the term hinged on its primary artistic meaning: a rapidly drawn picture that sacrifices aesthetic finish for a sense of spontaneity. The sketch embraces a certain ease or even disdain; the artist could draw a detailed portrait if he wished, but chooses to give a rapid impression of certain elements of the scene rather than elaborate them into a complete picture.

The provisional status that visual sketches originally occupied as the rough drafts of professional artists was to some extent retained by amateur sketches that abrogated the responsibility of completion. Ironically, this highly professional activity was so widely imitated among the fashionable
that it became an emblem of upper-class leisure. Dickens and Thackeray, I will argue, appropriated the style and subject matter of the visual sketch in order to cast themselves in the role of the casual artist, the type of dilettantish observer, or flâneur, that Walter Benjamin analyzes in his essay on Baudelaire. By emphasizing the process, rather than the product, of artistic creation, they attempted to disguise the economic necessity that engendered their production of these pieces.

The sketches of Dickens and Thackeray deliberately evoke certain characteristics of visual art in order to reinforce the vividness and authenticity of their depictions. But the sketches also unconsciously replicate the tension between material and aesthetic value that was embodied in the form of the visual sketch. Verbal sketches, like visual sketches, gesture toward an exterior object that is the site of value. This object might be the prior experience that the sketch purports to reproduce, or it might be the future artwork that the sketch is presumably evolving toward. This outward gesture tends to efface the commodified nature of the sketch itself. The sketch, as we will see, was valued precisely because of its tendency to deny its own material value.

The visual sketch was commonly considered mere preparation for the completed work, a private aide-mémoire rather than a public commodity. In fact, the sketch anticipated photography in its attempt not simply to interpret or render a scene but to reproduce it. The sketch was a material replacement for the scene itself. Its apparent freedom from economic imperatives was an illusion, as we will see. But this illusion was a powerful one, and useful to the writer who found himself uneasily situated between the roles of poet and hack journalist. By labelling his works “sketches,” he was able to emphasize his artistry rather than his professionalism. Dickens and Thackeray, I will suggest, fully understood the unique capacity of the sketch-artist to mediate between reality and art, rendering the “real” more artistic and palatable while rendering “art” more realistic and marketable. Their use of this form is part of the larger Victorian movement toward integrating real life into art. At the same time, their reliance on the sketch betrays their uncertainty about that project, as they struggled to come to terms with the economic motives underlying their aesthetic productions.

The Visual Sketch

The role of the sketch prior to the nineteenth century was largely utilitarian: an artist’s sketchbook was a kind of technical manual, filled with exercises and reproductions of famous paintings that the artist would accumulate for “personal reference.”1 It might include detail studies of specific poses and accessories for later incorporation into finished works, or merely “record instantaneous thoughts and observations” the artist wished to
preserve. Such sketches were seldom exhibited, and indeed were not regarded as “artworks” in their own right. Sketching was a characteristically professional activity, a necessary chore that any competent artist would need to perform.

While the sketch had at one time seemed clearly inferior to a finished work, it gradually came to acquire a merit of its own. Its spontaneity set it apart from more elaborate works, and seemed to give it a special kind of authenticity. Diderot comments in his Salon of 1765: “A sketch is generally more spirited than a picture. It is the artist’s work when he is full of inspiration and ardour, when reflection has toned down nothing, it is the artist’s soul expressing itself freely.”

The sketch was credited not only with expressive freedom but also with unmediated accuracy of representation. Both the content and the form of the sketch seemed to place it closer to reality than more formal artistic productions. At a time when landscape painting was just beginning to compete with history painting and aristocratic portraiture, sketches depicted neither carefully composed landscapes nor heroic tableaux, but ordinary rural figures or lively urban scenes. These sketches embodied a new sense of appropriate professional training. Many artists of the early nineteenth century were more interested in recording the scenes of real life they encountered in their travels than in copying the works of old masters from the walls of museums. When Gericault, for example, travelled to Rome in 1817, he did not, like earlier artists, spend all of his time copying paintings in the museums, but instead “filled his sketchbooks with finds from his rambles in Roman streets” and used these observations as material for many pictures.

The impromptu nature of the sketch, the apparent arbitrariness of its subject matter, contribute to its realism. Human figures typically seem unaware that they are being captured by the artist; to use Michael Fried’s terminology, they manifest “absorption” rather than “theatricality.” Degas’s sketches of ballet dancers rehearsing or jockeys preparing for a race, for example, were eventually assembled into paintings that, while carefully contrived, maintain the feeling that we are accidentally glimpsing a momentary event. Landscape sketches such as Constable’s often focus on scenes that are of personal, rather than historical or even purely aesthetic, significance.

But while the sketch seemed to be a spontaneous, almost unconscious, record of the artist’s passing interest, in fact sketch subjects were often chosen according to the interests of an anticipated buyer. Turner, always a canny businessman, drew sketches that functioned as prospectuses for his patrons. Turner’s sketches of Yorkshire concentrate on subjects in and around Farnley Hall, home of his enthusiastic patron Walter Fawkes.
Sometimes Fawkes gave Turner free rein in his commissions; other times, the two walked about the grounds together and worked out the subjects. Although Turner disliked shooting, he did a number of sporting sketches in preparation for watercolors on that subject that Fawkes presumably requested. The wider range of Yorkshire sketches Turner produced in the summer of 1816 were preparation for a commission to provide 120 drawings of Yorkshire for "A General History of the County of York." In 1808 Turner filled three or four sketchbooks with pictures of Tabley Hall, in Cheshire, in order to prepare for two paintings commissioned by Sir John Leicester.

In his Petworth sketchbook, containing pictures of the seat of Lord Egremont, Turner "gave the house and park much the same treatment as he had given Tabley"; as Gerald Wilkinson suggests, "this may have been in the terms of the contract." Turner appreciated Lord Egremont's generous hospitality, but, Patrick Youngblood claims, did not much care for the exterior of the house and surrounding grounds, preferring to spend his time perusing Lord Egremont's own art collection. When Lord Egremont commissioned a painting of Cockermouth Castle, he required Turner to submit a "finished rough" of this conventional subject. Clearly, the artistic freedom these sketches convey is partly an illusion.

Even sketches that were not produced by professional artists seeking commissions had a material as well as an aesthetic value. The popularization of picturesque landscape in the eighteenth century greatly increased interest in amateur sketching. While wealthy travelers had at one time returned from foreign travels with paintings purchased as souvenirs of the sublime scenery they had viewed, the more intimate aesthetic principles of the picturesque encouraged people to memorialize their favorite spots in their own sketches. Pencil and watercolor sketching was required of accomplished young ladies, and young men making the Grand Tour often returned with sketches that functioned as tokens of the places they had visited. The sketch became deeply implicated in the life of leisure led by the upper middle class: sketches were material evidence both of the abundant free time that permitted the acquisition of artistic skill, and the money that was needed to visit exotic and picturesque locales.

Thus, the visual sketch encapsulates a number of contradictory characteristics. In theory, the sketch represented the realistic record of the artist's experience. Its value was derived primarily from its faithfulness to that experience, rather than from its technical merit; it presented itself as the offhand work of an amateur or of an artist away from his easel. Its casual style was the hallmark of its irrelevance as an aesthetic object; its true significance lay in the scene it evoked—either the original scene whose ambience it attempted to capture, or the more elaborate painting it pre-
sumably anticipated. The sketch itself evaded the kind of serious aesthetic judgment applied to paintings. In practice, the sketch often represented a tangible record of the artist's economic coercion, its subject matter dictated, not by the artist's own taste and judgment, but by the desires of the buyer he so desperately needed. Far from being an amateur production, the sketch was in fact a professional necessity. Its lack of status as an aesthetic object was compensated for by its value as a material object.

The Literary Sketch

The sketch-artist's dependency on the whims of the buying public was carefully hidden behind the freedom and independence the form itself implies. The dilettantish posture of the sketch-artist was therefore a useful role for a struggling young writer to assume. The writing of short magazine pieces was as much an economic necessity as a creative endeavor for Dickens and Thackeray, who both worked hard to produce pieces they expected to be popular. But they avoided the appearance of pandering to public taste by adopting the mode of the sketch, thus implicitly labelling themselves amateurs and erasing all evidence of effort.

Poetic miscellanies had often gone under the title of "sketches," and the term seems to retain a slight flavor of Romanticism even when it begins to be applied to brief essays. Fragmentary forms are of course characteristic of Romantic art as well as literature—as Marjorie Levinson notes, "the sketch, the torso, the poetic fragment, the beauty, the ruin, and the detached overture or song" so typical of the period are often seen as evidence of a Romantic preoccupation with "imperfection" and "indeterminacy." Levinson suggests that Romantic fragment poems reflect the poets' sense of marginality. "By omitting from his composition (conventional) signs of artifice, the poet communicates not so much his contempt for finish per se . . . as for the labor thereby expressed and the servility thus implied." The fragmentariness of the literary sketch as it developed in the Victorian period also generates a kind of indeterminacy that seems connected to economic and social instability. Kathryn Chittick claims that during the 1830s reading itself became "a fragmentary experience" due to the political upheavals that led to increased readership of "news in its regular bits and pieces." The deliberate fragmentariness of the sketch seemed appropriate to the faster pace of urban life.

The position of the journalistic sketch-artist was first formulated by Washington Irving in The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon (1820). Irving deliberately emphasized his spectatorial stance:

I have wandered through different countries and witnessed many of the shifting scenes of life. I cannot say that I have studied them
with the eye of a philosopher, but rather with the sauntering gaze with which humble lovers of the picturesque stroll from the window of one print shop to another, caught sometimes by the delineations of beauty, sometimes by the distortions of caricature, and sometimes by the loveliness of landscape. As it is the fashion for modern tourists to travel pencil in hand and bring home their portfolios filled with sketches, I am disposed to get up a few for the entertainment of my friends.12

Claiming no greater purpose than simple “entertainment,” and no wider audience than a few friends, Irving forestalls any objections to his informal style by renouncing his professional status altogether. He is not a paid writer, but a mere observer who is generous enough to share his observations.

His “sauntering gaze” makes him a perfect example of Benjamin’s flâneur, who wanders through the city streets, apparently a man of leisure, but in fact, according to Benjamin, a “strolling commodity.”13 His apparent idleness, Benjamin suggests, disguises his essentially bourgeois role: “the man of letters . . . goes to the marketplace as a flâneur, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.”14 He is a professional masquerading as a gentlemanly amateur. Susan Buck-Morss notes that for Benjamin, Baudelaire represented the perfect embodiment of the qualities of the flâneur because of his “acute awareness of his highly ambivalent situation—at once socially rebellious bohemian and producer of commodities for the literary market.”15 Dickens and Thackeray, I will suggest, had a similar awareness of their complicity in the world they appeared to observe from a distance.

Irving’s Sketch-Book had been received enthusiastically when it appeared in Britain in 1820, and may well have influenced Dickens when he began writing the short pieces he collected into Sketches by Boz. Dickens’s intention to emphasize the parallel between visual and literary art is clear from the titles he preferred for the book: “Sketches by Boz and Cuts by Cruikshank,” or “Etchings by Boz and Woodcuts by Cruikshank.”16 Dickens was in a difficult financial position at this early stage of his career. He wrote his first pieces, which initially appeared in the Morning Chronicle under the continuing title of “Street Sketches,” while living primarily on his income as a court reporter. His father’s debts had forced him to assume control of the family finances; Dickens mortgaged several weeks of his salary in order to pay for moving his mother and sisters to cheaper lodgings while taking his brother with him into his own unfurnished apartment.17 Dickens’s constant shifting between three periodicals that published his sketches—The Morning Chronicle, The Evening Chronicle, and Bell’s Life
in London—was partly the result of his constant efforts to get the best possible price for his work.18

The sketches themselves, however, seem at first to have been unaffected by these financial strains. Their author has plenty of leisure at his disposal: he merely makes casual observations as he goes out for a "stroll" or "saunter[s] moodily" down the street.19 The author admits: "We have the most extraordinary partiality for lounging about the streets. Whenever we have an hour or two to spare, there is nothing we enjoy more than a little amateur vagrancy." The structure of each piece is apparently dictated by the aimless peregrinations of the narrator. "We were walking leisurely down the Old Bailey . . . [and] we could not help stopping and observing [an old woman and her son]" one story begins.20

Dickens repeatedly emphasizes the accidental origin that is a defining feature of the "picturesque" scene. "We will endeavour to sketch the bar of a large gin-shop . . . on the chance of finding one well-suited to our purpose, we will make for Drury Lane."21 He creates a sense of spontaneity and immediacy by inviting the reader to accompany him on his travels. Like the visual sketch, the literary sketch relies on an apparent absence of intentionality to validate its disinterested truthfulness. The artist has not composed the scene; he has merely stumbled upon it. Dickens's contemporaries clearly accepted his portrayal of himself as a spectator and recorder of the scenes he describes: he was praised not for his inventive descriptions but for his "great powers of observation," and called "an acute observer," "a good observer," and "a close and accurate observer."22

Dickens is often considered a particularly "visual" writer because he delineates character through appearance and gesture. Whereas George Eliot, for example, stresses the possible discrepancy between a person's appearance and his or her inner self, Dickens usually makes his characters' outward appearance in some way emblematic of their true personalities. But while Dickens's novel characters strike some readers as static for this reason, the characters who appear in his sketches are often given life by his sequential depictions of their changed selves. Because the sketch form did not allow for elaborate plots, he embedded narratives in the brief tableaux he presented. Even though his sketches describe isolated moments in time, Dickens made each moment representative of a larger story, much as nineteenth-century artists like William Holman Hunt and Augustus Egg painted "genre" pictures that used emblematic moments to sketch in a whole history.23 John Reed has suggested that while the "primarily descriptive" nature of Dickens's sketches does not lead one to "expect a great deal of moral weight," many of them in fact make powerful statements about sin and punishment.24 This is partly a result of Dickens's insistence on imagining the consequences of the events he witnesses, the future lives of the
people he describes. In this sense, his verbal sketches have an anticipatory quality like that of the visual sketch. They attempt to give a brief impression of how the completed picture might look.

Beneath the smooth surface created by the casual style of Dickens's sketches, however, we can sense an uneasy preoccupation with issues of money, work, and social class that reflects the financial burden that led to their creation. While economic problems would of course be important in his novels as well, they are rendered especially prominent in Dickens' sketches. The descriptive, episodic nature of the form placed a greater burden of meaning on the outward appearance of things, the level at which differences in social class are more immediately apparent than differences in moral character. Arlene Young has pointed out that comic sketches by Dickens and others in the 1830's and '40's contain "a variety of marginal social and occupational types" belonging to the lower middle class.25 One reason for this focus on ridiculous or ineffectual characters who "attempt to imitate middle-class style and manners" may have been the distance an author's humor establishes between himself and his subjects.

Boz' studied nonchalance wavers when he describes the misery of many of the people he observes, and he seems particularly affected by the poverty of middle-class people who have fallen on hard times. In his anguished description of a widow and her invalid son in "Our nextdoor neighbor," one may hear echoes of Charles Dickens's own traumatic youth. The narrator befriends the unfortunate couple, whose only income is the "pittance the boy earned, by copying writings, and translating for booksellers."26 His primary sympathies are clearly with the boy as he describes how hard he works, and the pride he is able to maintain in spite of these circumstances. Dickens's well-known bitterness at having himself been forced at the age of twelve to work in support of his family seems to have centered not on the physical privations of his life at the blacking-factory but on the social displacement it entailed. In "Our next-door neighbor," Dickens says little about the boy's physical condition before his death, but focuses instead on his humiliation at having sunk from "better circumstances," and the "unceasing labour" the boy is unfairly forced to perform.

The sketch "Brokers' and Marine-Store Shops" shows a similar preoccupation with the danger of sliding out of one's social class. The narrator points out that the items for sale at a pawnbroker's shop "mark the character of a neighborhood," and proceeds to analyze several such shops in different quarters, imagining sympathetically the "misery and destitution" implied in the sale of clothes whose "make and materials tell of better days."27 A subsequent sketch, "The Pawnbroker's Shop," carries this idea a step further. Dickens presents a series of vignettes involving several female customers which, taken together, form a Hogarthian gallery depicting a
poor woman's descent into vice. We first see a young girl, hardened by want, selling a few trinkets given to her “in better times”; then a gaudily dressed prostitute, whose “practised smile is a wretched mockery of the misery of the heart,” and who looks at the young girl with a faint sense of recognition; and finally a drunken, slovenly woman whom the narrator calls “the lowest of the low.” He goes on to point out that each woman is destined to follow in the others’ footsteps, and that “the last has but two more stages—the hospital and the grave.” The outward appearance of each woman reflects her place in this inexorable progress.

As we have seen, the sketch embodies a contradictory combination of arbitrariness and intentionality: the scene it portrays is supposedly one that has randomly caught the artist’s interest, rather than one he has deliberately sought, yet his decision to record the scene invests even trivial details with meaning. The visual sketch’s focus on a few isolated, yet representative elements of a scene is replicated in Dickens’s sketches, which are all characterized by careful attention to the significance of material objects. One of Dickens’s most famous sketches, “Meditations in Monmouth Street,” creates an elaborate fantasy around some suits of clothes seen at a second hand store. Convinced that a series of different-sized suits had once belonged to the same man, the narrator says that “the man’s whole life [was] written as legibly on those clothes, as if we had his autobiography engrossed on parchment before us.” Dickens then proceeds to read this text, creating what J. Hillis Miller calls “a metonymic progression” by describing first the boy’s school outfit, then the threadbare suit that marked his placement in an office after his father’s death, then the “smart but slovenly” suit that spoke of bad companions, and finally the “coarse round frock” that suggested prison and the gallows. The elaborate scenarios suggested by each outfit describe every stage of the man’s supposed fate in great detail. Dickens animates the clothes, bringing each item to life by fitting it on an imaginary wearer.

The concern with material possessions manifested by these sketches is, Benjamin suggests, typically bourgeois: “the bourgeois . . . [likes] to preserve the traces of his articles and requisites of daily use in perpetuity,” and to remove them “from the profane eyes of nonowners.” Even as Dickens appropriates these objects for his own narrative, we can sense his horror at the idea of being reduced to having one’s most personal possessions—in essence, one’s “autobiography”—on public display. And yet, as a writer, Dickens constantly displayed himself to a public that did, in a sense, own him. Dickens eventually acknowledged this fact by turning not only his books but himself into a valuable commodity; the lucrative reading tours of his later life required his public at least to pay a good price for him.

Dickens’s apprenticeship in the sketch form helped to prepare him for the novel’s packaging of personal experience. The sketch is valuable not
simply as a representation of experience but as a memento of experience, a vivid “sample” of the reality it depicts. When real or imagined experience are woven together into an extended narrative, their meaning rests on the relation between them. But when they are presented as isolated sketches, they generate meaning and value as autonomous objects. The sketch form turns experience itself into a commodity.

William Thackeray’s social position was as problematic as Dickens’s, but while Dickens had to struggle from below to regain his membership in the middle class, Thackeray descended into the middle class from above. Thackeray did not grow up under the taint of poverty, but, on the contrary, was raised in a degree of wealth and gentility that made him ill-prepared to earn his own living. Up until 1833 Thackeray was “a young gentleman of substantial prospects” who could afford not to take the idea of a career very seriously. He spent two years at Cambridge before leaving without a degree; after spending six months in Germany, he then established himself at the Inns of Court in order to pursue legal studies. But he quickly abandoned any real intention of becoming a barrister, and became instead one of a circle of young men who used the Inns as a base for a life of amusement and idleness. His most serious interest was gambling; in February of 1833 he lost £668 in one night. By the end of that year, however, most of the Thackeray estate had been lost in the collapse of the great Indian agency houses. Andrew Miller has suggested that the sudden loss of his inheritance and social position caused Thackeray to develop a “characteristic self-objectification” that allowed him to see himself as a commodity; his position as a writer striving to please the public was like that of a servant, whose “estrangement” from and fascination with material culture he shares.

Thackeray had at one time hoped to become an artist, and spent several months studying painting in London before settling in Paris. The disappearance of his inheritance and the realization that his artistic talents were not great enough to sustain a professional career led him to become involved in a variety of journalistic endeavors. After his marriage in 1836, he returned to England and began to seek work in earnest in order to support his wife and expected child. For the next decade he struggled to earn a living as a freelance contributor to numerous periodicals.

Journalism was still far from a respectable profession at this time, although its status was beginning to improve. Carlyle wrote in 1831, “Magazine work is below street sweeping as a trade . . . even I who have no other am determined to try by all methods whether it is not possible to abandon it.” The fact that Thackeray continued to call himself a “student at law” on official documents long after he had abandoned all interest in that career demonstrates his discomfort at his ambiguous social position.
Thackeray's anxiety about his status as a professional writer was perhaps one reason for the appeal of a writing style centered on the casual observations of the man-about-town. Writing sketches allowed him to adopt a persona that represented the man he used to be and to some extent still was. Now, however, the experiences he recorded were not simply enjoyed for their own sake but marketed to an eager audience. Thackeray's early magazine pieces, particularly those collected into The Paris Sketch-Book (1840) and The Irish Sketch-Book (1843), were valued for their knowledgeable descriptions of life and manners abroad. These literary sketches gave Thackeray's largely middle-class readers access to the privileged world of foreign travel that visual sketches often recorded.

In Thackeray's earliest essays, written under the nom de plume of "Michael Angelo Titmarsh," the type of "realism" that can be achieved by visual art is a constant theme. Thackeray has been accused of preferring mainstream, middle-class genre and landscape paintings, but realistic presentation was more important to him than subject matter. Thackeray does not criticize all historical and neoclassical paintings, only those that he describes as evincing "the bloated, unnatural, stilted, spouting, sham sublime." Nothing could be further from this "sham sublime" than the natural, unpretentious, untheatrical mode of art represented by the sketch.

The Paris Sketch-Book draws many parallels between the writer and the visual artist, but significantly, the thrust of the comparison is usually socioeconomic rather than aesthetic. Thackeray satirically acknowledges the financial importance of his sketches in the story "A Gambler's Death" when he describes a five-pound note he has tucked into his sketch-book as "by far the prettiest drawing . . . in the collection." He comments on the low social standing of British literary men, comparing them to the more highly regarded French painters: "This country," he concludes, "is surely the paradise of painters and penny-a-liners." In a short piece written for Fraser's Magazine in 1838, at the height of his financial difficulties, Thackeray describes the adventures of a poor painter who sells his soul to the devil for fame and fortune. Nothing is said about the quality and aims of the artist's work; his failure seems no different from the failure of any self-employed businessman. Thackeray seems to indulge in wishful thinking when he allows this artist finally to cheat the devil out of his bargain, but he then retroactively frames the entire story as a dream and informs us that the painter "has left the arts, and is footman in a small family." The servile role created by the artist's dependence on public taste is literalized in Thackeray's transformation of this painter into a footman, a performer of miscellaneous errands and visible sign of his owner's social status.

Thackeray recognizes that the money an artist receives is important not only as a means of support but as a token of the value of his art. During
a discussion of Géricault’s “Raft of the Medusa” in his essay “On the French School of Painting” (also part of the Paris Sketch-Book). he notes that Géricault “was a man who possessed a considerable fortune of his own; but pined because no one in his day would purchase his pictures, and so acknowledge his talent. At present, a scrawl from his pencil brings an enormous price.”42 The capriciousness of popular taste is exemplified by the multiple ironies of this statement: during his lifetime, the artist cannot profit from his work, but it earns money for others after his death; furthermore, the reversal of opinion is so complete that while Géricault’s enormous canvasses went unsold, “scrawl[s] from his pencil,” sketches intended for his own private use, become valuable public commodities. The “sketchiness” of Géricault’s work is perhaps one reason it was not, at first, taken seriously by the public: as Michael Fried notes, there was a “lack of contemporary response to Géricault’s fragmented, idiosyncratic, and largely private art.”43

“The Raft of the Medusa” may have seemed to Thackeray a perfect example of the disproportion between the work a professional artist puts into a painting and the meager reward he typically receives. Géricault’s elaborate preparations for painting “The Raft of the Medusa” were legendary; these included building a small model of the raft with wax figurines as well as executing numerous sketches in oil and in pencil of actual corpses and severed limbs he brought into his studio. Géricault’s disappointment at the painting’s reception at the Salon of 1819 led him to arrange for the commercial exhibition of his picture in England by a London showman, William Bullock.44 If he could not garner critical acclaim, he could at least arrange financial compensation. Thackery may have admired Géricault’s open acknowledgment of his desire for financial recognition of his achievement.

Thackeray’s appreciation of the labor that artistic endeavor requires is seen in his comments in another Paris sketch on lithography and wood and steel engraving, which he calls “art done by machinery.” He confesses to “a prejudice in favor of the honest work of hand, in matters of art, [preferring] the rough workmanship of the painter to the smooth copies of his performances which are produced . . . on the wood-block or the steel-plate.”45 Thackeray’s criticism of engraving may seem contradictory, given the fact that even after abandoning the idea of an artistic career, he produced woodcuts and engravings to accompany many of his texts, including The Paris Sketch-Book. But he always preferred his original drawings to the engravings made from them, whether by a professional engraver or by himself; and the lively sketches with which he customarily illustrated his personal letters are generally considered stylistically superior to the engravings that accompany his books.46 The “rough workmanship” that is the signature of
the living artist is, for Thackeray, superior to the mechanical perfection of the reproduction. To use Benjamin's famous term, the copied work loses its "aura," the "authority" it derives from its "unique existence at the place where it happens to be." But, paradoxically, the rough workmanship of the sketch elides, rather than exposes, the labor involved in producing it; the creative process is powerfully visible, but the fact that the process seems incomplete prevents the sketch from becoming an object to be evaluated and forestalls the commodification that would mark it as the product of labor.

Its provisional status gives the sketch a powerful sense of presence; it occupies a space halfway between reality and art. Thackeray says of Daumier's caricatures that while "the figures are very carelessly drawn," the people seem "real," and the scenes "remain imprinted on the brain as if we had absolutely been present at their acting." The carelessness of the style approximates the liveliness and individuality of actual people. Thackeray's narrative style in these sketches strives for a similar effect. He involves the reader in the sketches by narrating some passages in the second person: "About twelve o'clock . . . you perceive, staggering down Thames street, those two hackney-coaches, for the arrival of which you have been praying, trembling, hoping, despairing. . . . Your wife smiles for the first time these ten days; you pass by ship-masts, and forests of steam-chimneys. . . ."

Other times, the reader is addressed directly, as if he were literally Thackeray's companion on his travels. At the Palais des Beaux Arts, he advises: "Before you take your cane at the door, look for one instant at the statue-room."

Thackeray's sketches have a structural unevenness that reinforces their sense of immediacy by suggesting that they are "unfinished" because of the impromptu circumstances of their production. Thackeray, like Dickens, often organizes his observations around his supposed perambulations and makes no apologies for the arbitrariness and incompleteness of his account. The sketches are in fact self-consciously fragmentary. Many of them purport to be parts of letters or sections of stories: one piece concludes in mid-sentence, with a few dashes followed by the parenthetical explanation that "the editor would insert no more of this letter." Another story ends with the narrator's promise that "the moral of this story will be given in the second edition." Like visual sketches, these verbal sketches present themselves as tokens of the artist's impressions and intentions rather than autonomous, self-contained works. Their value is derived at least partially from the extrapolated value of an imaginary future work of which they appear to be mere samples or prospectuses. This tendency toward extrapolation is so strong that today, Dickens's Sketches by Boz and Thackeray's
Sketch-Books are usually analyzed and evaluated retrospectively, with a view toward uncovering the nascent presence of themes and techniques that appear in later works by the two authors. The fragmentary form of the sketches supports, if it does not promote, this tendency, with its allusion to more finished work that is either withheld or promised in the future.

Both of these authors have been praised, in their own time and ours, for the “realism” of their sketches. It must be acknowledged, however, that this realism does not arise from their unmediated reflection of the world, but from the mediated reflection of established tropes in visual art: the focus on material objects that metonymically represent their owners; the presentation of isolated moments that visually emblematize deeper moral issues; the association of incompleteness with spontaneity and authenticity.

By appropriating the familiar format of the sketch, Dickens, Thackeray, and other Victorian writers encouraged their readers to credit their texts with the reflective realism of visual representation. The illusoriness of the sketch’s spontaneity and freedom did not prevent the representation of those qualities from being effective. The sketches of Dickens and Thackeray acquired material value in the same way that Turner’s and Géricault’s did: by conveying personal experience with a vividness and immediacy that made them available for vicarious consumption. At the same time, Dickens and Thackeray were able to mask—and even, perhaps, assuage—their nervousness about their own economic coercion by stylistically disavowing the strenuous work of literary production.

The status of the literary sketch was not compromised by the fact that it attained its position secondhand, through analogy with another form of art; on the contrary, Dickens’s and Thackeray’s adaptations of a familiar genre provided their readers with an interpretive mechanism that made it easy to see these pieces as being not paid articles crafted by professional writers, but, in Thackeray’s words, sketches “taken from nature” (emphasis added).53 Susan Buck-Morss claims that, in the end, “flânerie was an ideological attempt . . . to give assurance that the individual’s passive observation was adequate for knowledge of social reality.”54 Dickens’s and Thackeray’s use of the sketch form put them in just such a role of spectatorship by emphasizing their status as detached viewers of the scenes they described. But their sketches reveal how much effort this passive pose could cost.

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Notes

2. Ibid., 25.
7. Ibid., 98.
8. Ibid., 16, 101.
10. Ibid., 234 n.12.
14. Ibid., 34.
17. Ibid., 198–100.
20. Ibid., 197.
21. Ibid., 184.
26. Dickens, 45.
27. Ibid., 181.
28. Ibid., 194–95.
29. Ibid., 75.
31. Benjamin, 46.
33. Ibid., 1:157.
39. Ibid., 118.
40. Ibid., 45.
41. Ibid., 77.
42. Ibid., 57.
44. Eitner, 209.
45. Thackeray, 169.
49. Ibid., 3–4.
50. Ibid., 54.
51. Ibid., 41.
52. Ibid., 223.
53. Ibid., 123.