ON SEEING AND BEING SEEN: BEHOLDING CLASS IN FORD MADOX BROWN'S *WORK*

The main focus of this essay will be the work of the mid nineteenth-century painter Ford Madox Brown, but we will start with a mid twentieth-century account of seeing and of feeling oneself to be seen. The story is well-known: the episode in Jacques Lacan's Seminar XI (1964) in which the author recalled seeing a sardine can floating in the sea. '[I]n my early twenties or thereabouts, being a young intellectual, I wanted desperately to get away, see something different, throw myself into something practical, something physical, in the country say, or at the sea.'[1] Thus it was that he set sail with a family of fishermen from a 'small port' in Brittany, embarking in the kind of 'small boat' that, he suggested, was common before the advent of industrial trawlers: 'The fisherman went out in his frail craft at his own risk. It was this risk, this danger, that I loved to share.'[2]

What follows makes clear, of course, that Lacan was in fact far from sharing in the vicissitudes of the fishermen's lives, however strong his wish to identify with them might have been:

> [A]n individual named Petit-Jean, that's what we called him – like all his family, he died very young from tuberculosis, which at that time was a constant threat to the whole of that social class – this Petit-Jean pointed out to me something floating on the surface of the waves. It was a small can, a sardine can. It floated there in the sun, a witness to the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply. It glittered in the sun. And Petit-Jean said to me – *You see that can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!*
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> He found this incident highly amusing – I less so. . . . [I]f what Petit-Jean said to me, namely, that the can did not see me, had any meaning, it was because in a sense, it was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the

[1] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Karnak, 2004), p. 95.

[2] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p. 95.

> point at which everything that looks at me is situated – and I am not speaking metaphorically.
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> The point of this little story, as it had occurred to my partner, the fact that he found it so funny and I less so, derives from the fact that, if I am told a story like that one, it is because I, at that moment – as I appeared to those fellows who were earning their livings with great difficulty, in the struggle with what for them was a pitiless nature – looked like nothing on earth. In short, I was rather out of place in the picture. And it was because I felt this that I was not terribly amused at hearing myself addressed in this humorous, ironical way.[3]

Looking back on the incident some forty years later, Lacan initially translates Petit-Jean's observation about the can's blindness into the language of the rest of Seminar XI: immediately before recounting the events of the fishing trip he had been arguing that we are all caught in light's web, that both our eye and our body are captured by light that pours forth from every point around us – a rather poetic expression of the idea that the world sees us and that we are constituted by this impersonal gaze. But as Lacan continues it becomes clear that he recognizes that something else had been at stake in his exchange with the young fisherman.

From the moment Petit-Jean is mentioned his class is emphatically foregrounded: in the condescending diminutive of his nickname (note also the belittling repetition of 'small': small port, small boat); in the quasi-sociological note on his early death (consumption being a constant threat to 'that social class'); and in the apparent concern over the difficulty with which he and his comrades earned their daily bread. And whilst Lacan writes that he had dreamt of sharing, if only for a day or two, the fishermen's way of life (note the repeated use of 'we': 'that's what we called him'; 'the canning industry, which we, in fact, were supposed to supply'), the disjunction between their class and his own had at the same time made him uneasy. In the gaze of Petit-Jean and his comrades he had sensed their working-class look of incomprehension at the odd specimen sitting in their boat. They knew he did not belong, and their gaze allowed him to know this too. Which is to say that if in 1964

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[3] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 95-96. Original emphasis.

Lacan recalled finding himself out of place in the scene, this was not because (or not solely because) sunlight had glinted off a floating tin can; it was, rather, because in the early 1920s (as, indeed, at any other time) the young intellectual did not belong with those who plied the sea in search of a hard-won living.

We could say more about this passage and about the phase of Lacan's life it evokes – a time when his passing allegiance to Charles Maurras's reactionary Action Française movement presumably lent added political resonance to the fantasy of identification with the common man.[4] For our purposes, however, the fact that Lacan twinned a consideration of the gaze with an awareness, however oblique, of the divisive nature of class relations is the significant point. This is a question that has perhaps not received the attention it merits: to focus on the role played by class in this passage is to read Lacan's text somewhat against the grain of how it has generally made its way into art history. As often as not – feminist art historical responses to Lacan being the great exception[5] – it has been the more abstract idea of a gaze emanating from the world around us that has captured the art historian's attention, and not without reason. Lacan himself frequently discussed the gaze in these terms, and his elaboration of what is typically referred to as the sardine can episode (thus occluding questions of social class: it could as easily be called the Petit-Jean episode) raises important questions about perspective and representation that have been highly productive in art-historical considerations of the nature of the image and its relation to the beholder. Lacan himself would have wanted it thus: he titled this section of the seminar 'What is a picture'. But to read Lacan only in this way is – as the feminist history of art has long understood – to lose sight of what he himself had felt keenly as he sat in the fishing boat: that the gaze is also that of other people who occupy specific social locations in the world around us.

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[4] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 372, n. 143.

[5] Any partial listing of the extensive feminist engagement with Lacan's writing is necessarily invidious, but it is worth signaling some key texts: Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (London: Routledge, 1996); Griselda Pollock, 'The "View from Elsewhere": Extracts from a Semi-Public Correspondence about the Visibility of Desire,' in *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, ed. Bradford R. Collins (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 278-313; and Joan Copjec, *Read my Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994).

This insight, I would suggest, offers a fruitful point of entry into Brown's *Work* (Fig. 1), an image that raises in historically specific ways the question of what it is to feel oneself to see and to be seen. Our experience as we stand before the painting is, I will be arguing, one of sensing ourselves to be looked at by individuals whose gaze positions us – in every sense – in the world. The questions raised by Lacan's account – who belongs in the picture, how might one identify (or not) with those one surveys – are fully at play in Brown's picture. Its invocation of diverse gazes, both of the beholder and of the figures within the depicted scene, revolves around the divisions inherent in class (class understood as a more or less stable marker of identity both externally perceived and personally lived): the way that class separates one person from another; the way it encourages regards of either mutual understanding or incomprehension and alienation; the way that an exchange of glances can leave one feeling out of place in the picture.

In making this argument I will draw on Lacan and also on a figure with whom he was in dialogue in the early 1960s, Jean-Paul Sartre, who offered an equally compelling account of the role played by the regard of others in the constitution of the subject. But in paying attention to class my argument will move beyond these writers, neither of whom gave much thought to the relationship between class and the gaze (the Petit-Jean episode is a rare exception), to offer an examination of the concrete and embodied nature of the look that stands in closer relation to the exploration of the social nature of the gaze addressed in feminist art histories. Indeed, as we shall see, the divisions pictured in *Work* have to do with gender (and also with ethnicity) as well as with class, though it is primarily to the latter that we will be attending here.[6] An examination of classed looking in Brown's image will allow us to complicate the standard account that sees it either as a Christian Socialist paean to the values of honest toil or as a quasi-documentary image of life in mid-century London

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[6] On *Work*'s relation to Victorian ideas about masculinity, see Tim Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 21-81; and Martin Danahay, *Gender at Work in Victorian Culture: Literature, Art and Masculinity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 92-93. The ways in which Victorian assumptions about ethnicity complicate the politics of Brown's picture (most notably via the inclusion of Irish migrant labourers) will be explored at length in the book project of which the material presented here is a part. On Brown's depiction of the Irish, see Joel A. Hollander, 'Ford Madox Brown's *Work* (1865): The Irish Question, Carlyle, and the Great Famine,' *New Hibernia Review*, Vol. 1, no. 1, Spring 1997, pp. 100-119.

with all its tensions and discomforts.[7] The painting is to some degree each of these things, but the picture it offers of class and, more importantly, the place it affords the beholder are both more complex and more contradictory than has hitherto been recognized. Thinking about Lacan and Sartre will help us to see this. But equally, Brown's painting will allow us to see in a new light certain aspects of their work and of its utility for the discipline of art history.

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Before going any further we should look more closely at the picture itself. Brown painted the setting – Hampstead's The Mount and, snaking away to the right, Heath Street – direct from the motif in July and August of 1852, making use of an improvised 'apparatus' to provide a measure of privacy: a costermonger's barrow with curtains hung on a rack that could be rotated to shield the artist and his picture from public view.[8] He then populated the setting with the innumerable figures who fill the breadth and height of the painted surface: from the pedestrians carefully picking their way past the excavations on the left to the pair of watchful figures on the right, and from the dogs who anchor the picture's lower edge to the male horseman whose top hat forms a dark silhouette against the distant chimney pots and the rich blue of the sky.

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[7] For a good overview of the subject matter and significance of the painting, see Mary Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown: A Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), vol. 1, pp. 136-43. For an extended critical commentary on the scholarly tendency to view *Work* as a celebration of the Protestant work ethic, see Paul Barlow, 'The Ordering and Disordering of *Work*,' *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 15, no. 3, November 2014, esp. pp. 261-63. For an analysis of the role played by vision in *Work* that reaches very different conclusions to my own, see Colin Trodd, 'The Laboured Vision and the Realm of Value: Articulation of Identity in Ford Madox Brown's *Work*,' in Ellen Harding, ed., *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites: Historical and Theoretical Essays* (Aldershot: Scolar, 1996), pp. 61-80.

[8] Brown mentioned the 'apparatus' when catching up with his diary in 1854. See Virginia Surtees, ed., *The Diary of Ford Madox Brown* (New Haven: Yale University Press/Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, 1981), p. 78 (entry for 16 August 1854). The mechanism is described in William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), vol. 2, pp. 96-97.

The proliferation of characters and episodes scattered across the picture's densely filled surface make *Work* Brown's most typically Victorian image – if by Victorian we mean narrative-driven and detailed – and demands a high level of visual acuity on the part of the beholder. (For this reason many of the illustrations to follow will be details: this is a painting that asks its viewer to alternate between standing back to take in the whole scene and moving in close to examine specific elements, an experience that can only partly be recreated via reproductions.) Consider, for example, the diminutive oranges tumbling in mid-air at the right-hand edge of the picture (Fig. 2) and the remarkable detail of the lumps of soil that are forever suspended between the shovel and the pile of dirt at its centre (Fig. 3). These small-scale but precisely rendered details indicate that we are looking at a specific point in time, one that is an instant – in another second the oranges will be strewn on the floor and the soil will have arrived at its destination – but also a month and a year: the posters pasted to the left-hand wall announce events taking place in the coming week and thus locate the image squarely in its historical moment (again the painting demands a keen eye willing to take the time to discern such details).

The clothes and occupations of the assorted figures are equally of their moment, and they allow the painting to be as specific about social class – class as it is recognized by visible attributes of body, dress and activity – as it is about time. *Work* presents in close proximity with one another the diverse economic and cultural strata of the capital: to the left, an indigent flower-seller, two middle-class young ladies, and a pastry-chef's delivery boy (his tray lists the proprietor's name as 'R. Puff', as in puff pastry: as we shall see, humour and punning are not insignificant elements in the picture[9]); in the centre, a group of working-class navvies, a beer-seller, and four motherless children; and to the right, catching a moment's rest on the sloping ground or feeding their young child, a loose-knit assembly of unemployed migrant labourers. The labourers are half-hidden behind the pair of standing gentlemen who are themselves types – Brown would identify them as 'brainworkers' in the description of

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[9] On humour in *Work*, see Kenneth Bendiner, *The Art of Ford Madox Brown* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), pp. 25-26, 33; Gerard Curtis, 'Ford Madox Brown's *Work*: An Iconographic Analysis,' *Art Bulletin*, Vol. 74, no. 4, December 1992, p. 632; and E. B. H. Johnson, 'The Making of Ford Madox Brown's *Work*,' in Ira B. Nagel and F. S. Schwarzbach, eds, *Victorian Artists and the City: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1979), pp. 144-45.

the painting that accompanied his great 1865 retrospective – and at the same time specific individuals: Thomas Carlyle and the Reverend F. D. Maurice.[10] The background affords glimpses of an equally varied set of characters, from the equestrian and his daughter beyond the navvies to the assorted 'idlers' seen on the distant curve of Heath Street who have been paid to carry the sandwich-boards of the fictional politician Bobus Higgins, a disreputable manufacturer of horse-meat sausages who featured in Carlyle's *Past and Present* (Fig. 4).

It takes time and a fair degree of patience to pick out all of these details, and the attentive gaze thus demanded (and rewarded) by the picture echoes the visual alertness of the characters it depicts. This is very much an image about seeing and being seen: witness the web of looks and exchanged glances that bind the scene together. Sometimes these looks are humourous, as with the canine confrontation in the foreground. An elegant red-jacketed greyhound, out for a walk with one of the ladies on the left, is stopped in its tracks by the stare of a bull-pup belonging (probably) to one of the navvies. This confrontation – shot through with intimations of class antagonism – is in turn observed with interest by the mongrel that accompanies the children, in Brown's words 'evidently of the same outcast sort as themselves' and wearing a garland of wood-shavings in contrast to the greyhound's jeweled choker.[11] At other times the exchange of looks suggests less light-hearted goings-on: the index finger of one of the women carrying a billboard extends in an ambiguous gesture that some have interpreted as a signal to the dark-suited man leaning against the tree in the shadows beyond the navvies; he, in turn, is sometimes said to be keeping an eye on the policeman and ready to tip the wink to the shoeless flower-seller at the painting's left who may, according to this reading, have been involved in the highway robbery announced in the poster beside him.[12]

This last suggestion is probably not right. Whilst it is true that all here seem cagily mindful of those around them, watching from the corner of their eye or studiously ignoring those with whom they share the space of the street, the glance of

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[10] Ford Madox Brown, *The Exhibition of Work, and Other Paintings by Ford Madox Brown*, exh. cat. (London: The Gallery, 191 Piccadilly, 1865), p. 28.

[11] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 29.

[12] On the poster and the range of possible suspects in Brown's picture, see Curtis, 'Ford Madox Brown's *Work*,' pp. 633-35.

the flower-seller seems innocently wary rather than guilty (as Brown would write in 1865, 'with his restless gleaming eyes, he doubts and despairs of every one'[13]). Other aspects of the image would tend to confirm that Brown was not inclined to side against the less well-off amongst his cast of characters. The depiction of the navvies, in particular, suggests an admiration for, even an identification with, the labourers (more on this in a moment). And other details indicate a disdain not for the poor but for the privileges enjoyed by the better-off. The delivery boy, the artist would write in 1865, carries a 'pastry-cook's tray the symbol of superfluity. . . . It is peculiarly English: I never saw it abroad that I remember, though something of the kind must be used. For some years after returning to England I could never quite get over a certain socialistic twinge on seeing it pass.'[14]

Consider, in this light, one of the two well-dressed ladies towards the left edge of the picture, both of whom Brown included with 'the rich, who have no need to work' (in fact women do little paid work in the picture, for Brown presents a typically Victorian vision of the sexual division of labour: one of these ladies takes care of her child; under the tree another woman feeds her baby; and the only woman we understand to be paid is engaged in the unworthy employ of Bobus as a sandwich-board carrier). The artist urged the lady directly behind the flower-seller to think less about her own appearance and more about the noble efforts of the oldest of the motherless children in the foreground to take care of her siblings.[15] Here, as with other figures, the depicted gaze is important. The young woman's face is shaded by her parasol, with the result that her eyes, which in any case are looking down (which is to say, paying no heed either to the labour beside her or to the hardship of the children), are indistinctly delineated: they are to some degree unseen but also, we infer, unseeing (Fig. 5). Rather than observing she is observed, explicitly described by the artist as the object of 'our' (understood to be male) gaze: her 'only business in life as yet is to dress and look beautiful for our benefit.'[16]

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[13] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 27.

[14] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 28.

[15] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 29.

[16] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 29. Brown suggests that she is watching her greyhound but her gaze appears decidedly unengaged with what lies before it.

If Brown in this instance aligns his work with conventional Victorian notions of the role of young women in public, other aspects of the picture suggest that the inability to see is determined less by gender than by class. For the elegant woman is not the only one who is blind, at least in part, to what lies around her. Note that the gentleman equestrian – another of the rich who need not work – wears a monocle. This is on one level simply a shorthand sign of class: who but the wealthy affected this aid to vision at mid-century. But it also brings with it the implication of short-sightedness. And for Brown it had more specific meaning still. When painting the landscape *The Brent at Hendon* in the autumn of 1854 (when *Work* sat unfinished in his studio) he wrote despairingly of the difficulty of capturing what he saw before him: 'nature that at first sight appears so lovely is on consideration almost always incomplete, moreover there is no painting intertangled foliage without lossing [sic] half its beauties. If imitated exactly it can only be done as seen from one eye & quite flat & confused therefore.'[17] Monocularity, that is to say, was for the artist the figure of visual uncertainty. Like the young lady, we surmise, the rider does not see clearly.

Brown's 'socialistic twinge' suggests that it is not safe to assume – as many have – that *Work* is an expression of Carlyle's values.[18] Labour was indeed an almost sacred virtue for Carlyle, but the writer was added to the picture only at the insistence of Thomas Plint, a Leeds businessman deeply involved in the evangelical church who in 1856 advanced Brown money for the as-yet-unfinished painting. The same is true of the brainworker beside Carlyle (though Maurice was not Plint's first choice: the patron asked for a different Christian Socialist, Charles Kingsley, to be depicted alongside Carlyle), of the references to Bobus, and of the Biblical quotes on the picture's frame.[19] This is not to say that Carlyle's opinions were entirely out of line

[17] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 88 (entry for 1 September 1854).

[18] For a summary of Carlylean readings of the painting, see Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 138. Not all have accepted that *Work* dutifully follows Carlyle's precepts: see Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, pp. 92-93; and Barringer, who aligns Brown in part with Carlyle (both men's 'understanding of work,' he suggests, 'was deeply conditioned by religion') but notes that the artist's interest in physical labour was at odds with Carlyle's celebration of mental labour (Barringer, *Men at Work*, 28-29, 73-75).

[19] Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 138. For discussion of Plint's impact on *Work*'s iconography and politics, see Teresa Newman and Raymond Watkinson, *Ford Madox Brown and the Pre-*

with Brown's own views: the artist apparently owned a well-thumbed copy of *Past and Present*.[20] However, as Gregory Dart has convincingly argued, the increasingly authoritarian and reactionary tone of Carlyle's pronouncements (particularly in his *Latter-Day Pamphlets*, published in 1850) was at odds with Brown's politics.[21] It is perhaps not surprising, then, that even as the artist acquiesced to Plint's request, the picture signals its distance from the writer in various ways. Note, first, how the addition of a sneer makes his face less attractive than in the photograph from which Brown was forced to work having failed to persuade him to pose (Fig. 6).[22] Note also how Carlyle is placed in close proximity to the migrant labourers whose quietly unobtrusive behaviour and well-cared-for implements (witness the rope carefully wound around the scythe) belie his viciously expressed views on the threat of disorder and unruly vagrancy associated with Irish immigrants. Brown, I would suggest, presented this juxtaposition deliberately to refute Carlyle's views on Ireland (it was perhaps in part for this reason that he refused Plint's request for Kingsley to be represented, for Kingsley had infamously described Irish migrants as "white chimpanzees"[23]).

Consider, too, the picture's attention to the material facts of labour and to the class divisions by which those facts were structured. This owes less to Carlyle (even though he was not averse to criticizing the idle rich) than to Maurice's Christian Socialist (with an emphasis on the Socialist) examination of labour and inequality.

Raphaelite Circle (London: Chatto and Windus, 1991), p. 122; and Gregory Dart, 'The Reworking of *Work*,' *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27, no. 1, March 1999, pp. 79, 85.

[20] Ford Madox Hueffer, *Ford Madox Brown, a Record of his Life and Work* (London: Longman, 1896), p. 195.

[21] Dart, 'The Reworking of *Work*,' pp. 80-82.

[22] On Carlyle's unflattering portrayal, see Barringer, *Men at Work*, 75. Trodd argues in contrast that Carlyle's face expresses 'energy' (Trodd, 'The Laboured Vision,' p. 73) and that the writer's depicted gaze sets the interpretive tone for the painting, encouraging the beholder to see the scene in terms of Carlylean paternalism (Trodd, 'The Laboured Vision,' pp. 69-75). On Brown's use of figures who observe the action within his pictures, see Colin Cruise, 'Composing Meanings: Space and Invention in Ford Madox Brown's Paintings, 1843-59,' *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 15, no. 3, November 2014, p. 342.

[23] Quoted in L. Perry Curtis, *Anglo-Saxons and Celts: A Study of Anti-Irish Prejudice in Victorian England* (New York: New York University Press, 1968), p. 84.

Brown underscored his allegiance to Maurice by including on the wall to the left, half-hidden behind the flower-seller's head, an advertisement (Fig. 7) for The Working Men's College, founded by Maurice in 1854 (Brown himself would work there briefly in 1858). The picture's oft-noted debt to Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* of 1851 is equally telling in this regard. Like Maurice, Mayhew was attuned to the difficulties faced by the capital's working classes. He reported, for example, the harassment of street sellers 'bandied about' by police officers and forced to 'move on' even though the sale of fruit on the public thoroughfare was legal, a problem Brown surely had in mind when showing the unkind policeman's shove on the orange-seller.[24] Mayhew also described with much sympathy the hard life of the 'Groundsel Man,' often cited as the model for Brown's seller of wild flowers.[25]

Brown's allegiance to the working class is figured most clearly, of course, in the central group of navvies. These men he saw as contemporary heroes: 'seeing and studying daily as I did the British excavator, or *navvy*, as he designates himself, in the full swing of his activity (with his manly and picturesque costume, and with the rich glow of colour, which exercise under a hot sun will impart), it seemed to me that he was at least as worthy of the powers of an English painter, as the fisherman of the Adriatic, the peasant of the Campagna, or the Neapolitan lazzarone.'[26] Caught fully by the light of the July sun, the navvies are presented as magnificent types, in particular the worker standing erect to the left, described by the artist in 1865 as a

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[24] Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor: The Condition and Earnings of those that will Work, cannot Work, and will not Work*, 3 vols (London: C. Griffin, 1864), vol. 2., p. 3. Barlow suggests that the woman's act of placing her basket on a bollard meant that technically she was setting up shop rather than hawking – hence the policeman's insistence she move – and observes astutely that the policeman is in effect trying to push the woman out of the image: another form, one might suggest, of being 'out of place in the picture'. See Barlow, 'Ordering and Disordering,' p. 265.

[25] Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 139. Studies for *Work* show a man holding a dog rather than the flower-seller. Brown's decision to remove this figure confirms his desire to have the poor appear blameless: the original figure suggested a character up to no good, as per the poster on the wall beside him detailing a violent robbery committed by men accompanied by a bull-terrier.

[26] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 27. Brown had himself painted an Italian fisherman in an early figure study: the 1837 *Italian Fisher Boy* (rep. Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 11).

'young navvy in the pride of manly health and beauty.'[27] The hod-carrier towards the back of the group with tankard raised to his lips is presented in equally positive fashion: a 'strong fully developed navvy who does his work and loves his beer.'[28] That his taste for ale is given tacit approval is confirmed by yet another significant detail: the second of the two ladies to the left, just in front of the pastry-chef's boy, is distributing a leaflet ('The Hodman's Haven') that promotes abstention from alcohol, one of which drifts apparently unnoticed down towards the ground. It is in fact ignored by its intended recipient ('he scorns it, but with good nature'[29]), a not seeing of which, one suspects, Brown in this case approved.

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It seems fair to say, then, that the picture takes sides. Like certain details of the artist's later written account, it is critical of the unthinking and unseeing lady of fashion and of the luxury represented by the pastry boy's wares, and sympathetic, in contrast, to the plight of street-sellers and motherless children. This should not surprise us, given what is known of the artist's political outlook.[30] He was generally caustic about the country's ruling classes and inclined to side with the common man – for example in passages in his diary from 1854 in which he lambasts the aristocracy's baleful influence.[31]

What it meant to take sides was, however, not at all straightforward.[32] With whom one felt kinship, with whose interests one felt oneself to be aligned, was – as

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[27] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 27.

[28] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 27.

[29] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 28.

[30] On Brown's politics, see Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, pp. 87-89.

[31] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, pp. 98-99 (entry for 5 October 1854).

[32] Scholars have for the most part seen Brown as an unequivocal celebration of the navvies. The best recent example of this line of interpretation is found in Barringer, *Men at Work*, 37-39. He reads the painting as a celebration of the virtue of manly work and as being in the main aligned with Carlyle and Kingsley's (and also John Ruskin's) views on labour (Barringer, *Men at Work*, esp. 73-75) and with their promotion of Christian Socialism, with the emphasis on Christian (Barringer, *Men at Work*, esp. 56-63).

for Lacan as he sat in the fishing boat – no simple matter. Brown's picture, I want now to argue, exhibits an ambivalence about class that is at odds with its overall attitude of sympathy for the less well-off. To see how, we must examine more closely two aspects of the picture: first, the place given to the navvies; second, our implied relation to them – i.e. the specific look that the picture demands of the beholder.

The navvies sit at the heart of a scene that seems impossibly crowded. Figures are jammed together in tense proximity, with some having barely space to move (the red-header youth and pipe-smoking labourer at the back of the group of navvies, most notably). As the anonymous reviewer for *The Reader* noted, the painting 'has no breathing space; the figures, so to speak, stick together.'[33] Neither does the image appear to cohere, its endlessly multiplying details making it hard for the beholder to perceive its underlying structure. (Even Brown's grandson worried about this aspect: 'when one stands before the picture it is difficult for the eye to find a point on which to settle.'[34]) This disjointed agglomeration of different classes, it has been argued, offered a visual analogy for the tensions that marked mid-century society. Chris Brooks, for example, has compellingly suggested that 'the wholesale subversion of visual unity is an aesthetic analogue to Brown's sense of social disorganisation.'[35] This seems about right: Brown was, as we have noted, clearly interested in the divisions that fractured the London suburb. But the picture is not all disunity. Rather it is structured quite carefully around a central area occupied by the navvies and bounded to the right by the handrail; to the rear by the barrier marking the edge of the excavations; and to the left by the flower-seller and strolling ladies (separated from the central group both in their motion and in their demeanour).

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[33] ''Work' and other Pictures, by Mr. Ford Madox Brown,' *The Reader*, 1 April 1865, p. 378; rpt. Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1., p. 146.

[34] Hueffer, *Ford Madox Brown*, p. 414.

[35] Chris Brooks, *Signs for the Times: Symbolic Realism in the Mid-Victorian World* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), p. 137. Trodd cites Brooks's argument and likewise suggests that the endless detail fragments the image and thus undoes the supposed message of 'social integration' (Trodd, 'The Laboured Vision,' p. 64), though as noted above he sees Carlyle's gaze as bringing the picture together. For discussion of early critical responses to the disjunctive aspect of the painting, see Dart, 'The Reworking of *Work*,' p. 92; and Colin Trodd and Julie Sheldon, 'Introduction: Ford Madox Brown and the Victorian Imagination,' *Visual Culture in Britain*, Vol. 15, no. 3, November 2014, pp. 233-34.

This arrangement puts the workers squarely centre stage. It also allows them to stand in implicit opposition to those around them: they ignore the unheeded tract distributor, as we have seen, but more importantly they block the two figures beyond the excavation whose passage they obstruct. The equestrians – a 'swell', as Brown cuttingly labelled him in his diary, and his daughter – find their path barred by the make-shift wooden fence that delimits the work-site.[36] (Their dog, its panting mouth agape, is similarly impeded both physically and visually: the pile of excavated soil appears to block its view of the canine goings-on in the foreground.) Perhaps concerned that the viewer might miss the meaning of the riders' placement, in 1865 the artist called attention to this confrontation between labour and the leisured class: 'the daughter says we must go back, papa, round the other way.'[37] It is a significant moment, shot through by a keen sense of mid-century social entitlement. The swell sits proudly erect: he is, the painting asks us to imagine, unwilling to yield, taken aback that a man of his position should be thus inconvenienced by those he considers his inferiors. It falls to his daughter, hand caringly on her horse's side, to suggest to him that maybe this time he cannot have his own way.

This confrontation, in which a man seated high on a horse and in shadow is prevented from moving towards the beholder by sunlit bodies, echoes the structure of one of Brown's most important early pictures, *The Body of Harold brought before William the Conqueror* (Fig. 8), first painted in 1844 but still in his studio when he designed *Work*. I have argued elsewhere that Brown's image of the Norman conqueror astride his steed, gazing down in arrogant triumph upon the body of the slain Saxon king, resonated with the nineteenth century Radical view of 1066: namely, that the oppression of the indigenous Anglo-Saxons by an incoming Norman aristocracy began in that year and continued to the present day.[38] By allowing *Work* to recall *Harold*, I would suggest, Brown effectively evoked this idea of a deep-rooted and ongoing class war, but here with a different outcome. In place of the dead Harold

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[36] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 198 (entry for 17 January 1858). For perceptive comments on the picture's construction around opposed binaries (worker/equestrian, light/shade, etc.), see Barlow, 'Ordering and Disordering,' p. 272.

[37] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 30.

[38] Alastair Ian Wright, 'Ford Madox Brown's *The Body of Harold*: Representing England at Mid-Century,' *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, Vol. 6, no. 2, Autumn 2007.

we witness a resurrection: honest Saxons rising up to take control of the national stage; in place of the victorious William we see the gentleman equestrian – according to the tenets of mid-century Radicalism in all likelihood a descendant of one of William's henchmen – at last repulsed.[39] Thrown into relief by the strong sunlight, the navvies dominate the scene, pushing their alleged betters back into the shadows. Which is to say that despite the patron's insistence on the introduction of Carlyle, which allows the image's connotations to drift somewhat towards a Carlylean veneration of labour, an entirely un-Carlylean interest in the overturning of class hierarchies remains central to the picture's meaning.

The picture, again, takes sides, pitting labour against privilege. What, though, of the position it offers the beholder? On which side of this conflict are we placed? At first sight the answer seems clear. We appear to be on the navvies' side, and not only in terms of their representation (both the picture and Brown's description ask us to admire their 'manly' activity, etc.) but also in terms of the spatial logic of the picture. Unlike the gentleman equestrian, separated from the workers by the wooden barrier and the pile of soil, we seem to stand close to the area in which they work, sharing their space, as it were. This sensation is strengthened by the perspectival scheme: we look down at the various objects in the foreground (the barrow, the pile of tools, the top of the greyhound's and mongrel's heads) but up at the beer-drinking navvy and the equestrian, implying a viewing position close to the action.[40] That we are near is underlined by the fact that much of what we see seems to present itself in faultlessly pellucid detail: the lime that falls through the sieve to the left (another sign of the painting's instantaneity); the gleam on the foreground worker's shovel; and the

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[39] In 1865, perhaps keen not to alienate his patron, Brown offered a rather more positive account of the equestrian than the picture itself suggests: 'he looks to me an honest true-hearted gentleman (he was painted from one I know)' (Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, p. 30). For an extended analysis of the ways in which Brown's exhibition catalogue misrepresented his own painting, specifically by downplaying for the most part the image's latent radical content, see Dart, 'The Reworking of *Work*, esp. pp. 88-92.

[40] The sense that everything presses close to us is presumably what made the anonymous reviewer in the *Illustrated London News* write that 'the sense of overcrowding that *pursues one* throughout – an effect increased by the want of the relief of aerial perspective' ('Exhibition of Mr. Madox Brown's Works,' *The Illustrated London News*, 18 March 1865, 266; rpt. Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 145. My emphasis.)

various pieces of rope and twine that hold together lifting tackle and clothing and that bind boots and scythe alike.

And yet: whilst to a large degree the painting asks us to imagine that we share the navvies' space and that we enjoy unrestricted visual access to their labour, it also suggests that our position as beholder is not so straightforward, that perhaps – like the horseman and the young lady to the left – we do not see everything. Sometimes this is hinted at in the smallest of details (meaning that paradoxically it is our visual acuity that tells us about the limits of our own vision). The image makes us mindful, for example, of spaces that we cannot access: between the horseman and his daughter a postman pushes a letter through a closed garden gate, indicating an inaccessible private realm beyond the white wall. The class-specific nature of this domain is emphasized by a panel on the railings above the fashionable women (Fig. 9), whose text announces that 'THIS GENTEEL FAMILY RESIDENCE' is for sale and that it is 'TO BE VIEWED BY CARDS ONLY' – i.e., only the right sort of person will be allowed to see it. (Here again Brown has a little joke: the estate agent's name is William Poster, i.e. Bill Poster, as in the once-familiar sign affixed to British buildings – 'Bill posters will be prosecuted' – to which wags would add, 'Bill posters is innocent!'[41])

Other details introduce a degree of ambiguity into our visual comprehension of the space. A small object in the wheelbarrow (Fig. 10), for example, appears to a quick glance to be a trowel casting its shadow onto the surface below but is in fact a trowel-shaped leaf. What looked to be the shadow is in fact a trowel, which thus sits oddly and flatly against both the interior of the barrow and the surface of the painting itself. A minor detail, but one that renders less secure the stability of the depicted space, causing the interior of the barrow to flatten out into alignment with the canvas. Consider, too, how one of the elements of the picture that plays a central role in mapping the pictorial space – namely the handrail to the right of the navvies, its orthogonal orientation marking out The Mount's recession – itself turns out to be an unreliable index. Its two visible sections – the nearer one upon which Carlyle and Maurice lean and the more distant portion to the right of the horses – seem at first to

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[41] Brown was aware of the practice of hand-written additions to posters: witness the 'Don't' scrawled on the Vote Bobus poster in *Work*'s upper left corner (note also the mud – or worse – spattered across Bobus's name).

be aligned: on the painting's surface they trace a continuous arc, interrupted only by the labourers' bodies. But upon closer inspection we see that the two sections are in fact oriented in different directions within the illusionistic space of the street: the first section leads up and to the left as it recedes; the small section glimpsed in the distance (Fig. 11) leads down and to the right, following the slope of The Mount as it descends to rejoin Heath Street (looking closely at the tops of the posts makes this clear).

Our mistakes – seeing a leaf as a trowel, perceiving divergent directions as parallel – are, I would suggest, no accident. The painting lays its visual traps carefully, allowing us both to fall into error and also to become cognizant of the fact that we have erred. We are subtly informed, that is to say, that like the gentleman equestrian we do not perceive everything clearly. As Brown noted of monocular vision, we see confusedly. Note, in this regard, another almost imperceptible detail: the police notice pasted to the wall includes the words 'one eye' – a clue as to the nature of our experience as beholders? And note how the sheer proliferation of detail across the painting's surface (bemoaned by a critic at Brown's 1865 retrospective as a 'scatteredness of effect'[42]) divides our attention endlessly, meaning that there is no unifying gestalt, no single point of view, that can bring together all that we see. (In this regard the series of details by which this article is illustrated, though driven in part by the fact that even in a good quality full-page reproduction of the picture much of what Brown painted remains illegible, goes some way towards recreating the experience of looking at the work itself.)

If the painting thus hints that like the equestrian we cannot fully grasp what lies before our eyes, the implication is that we are not as securely part of the scene as we might at first think. In this regard what is perhaps another (oblique) clue may be significant. Just to the left of the poster for the Working Men's College we spy in the torn remnants of another poster six legible letters: 'H', 'L', 'W', 'OL', and 'O' (see Fig. 7). That these are an anagram of 'hollow' might, of course, be unintentional. But maybe not. Towards the bottom of the painting, close to the sieve through which the bachelor navvy sifts the lime, a shovel and hand rise into view from below the surface of the street, and below them appears another hand and shovel, half-hidden between the young navvy's legs and partly concealed by the beam from which the

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[42] [Tom Taylor], 'The Pictures of 1865,' *The Shilling Magazine*, 1 May 1865; rpt. Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 147.

pulley is suspended. Noticing these details reinforces the degree to which the ground beneath us has itself been hollowed out.

Given Brown's broadly socialist outlook it is possible that these mostly unnoticed workers were a crude metaphor: we find ourselves standing over – resting as it were literally on the back of – partly unseen and unacknowledged labour. This toil affords us the privilege – the middle-class privilege, one might suggest – of merely watching. But more importantly this device tends to destabilize the beholder's sense of his or her own position. Just as we do not see all clearly, so too our own vantage point is less steady than we at first imagined. The pavement is perhaps hollowed out beneath us (how far the excavation extends is not evident), and as we look more closely we realize that the very surface upon which the picture asks us to imagine we stand may be less than solid: the central worker stands on a plank, presumably to avoid leaving bootprints in the yet-to-set pavement (recently laid, we surmise, by the pipe-smoking navvy in the shadows to the right who mixes liquid cement). Note how gingerly the greyhound steps through the lime: none here – man or beast – can be sure of their footing.

None of these details – excavated voids and wet cement, misaligned railings and private gardens – on their own adds up to anything conclusive. But their cumulative effect is to keep us at arm's length, to suggest that we are not fully part of the scene and that, consequently, we are not aligned with the navvies against the gentleman rider and his daughter but rather find ourselves, like the equestrians, somewhat at a remove, close but at a distance. The turned back of the child reinforces this impression, of course, acting as a bodily barrier between us and the artist's heroic workers. But it is perhaps those who face towards us rather than away who contribute most to the feeling of separation. Carlyle's rebarbative gaze, in which something of the immediacy of the photograph upon which it was based still inheres (as Walter Benjamin observed, in early photographs it was as though 'faces in the picture could see *us*'[43]), is repulsive in the literal sense, pushing us back rather than inviting us in. We are surveyed equally intently by the little girl mostly hidden behind her tract-distributing mother (Fig. 12). Her monocular gaze – again, the single eye plays its part in the image – fixes us in silent attention, making us self-conscious, aware of

[43] Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' (1931), in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings* (London: NLB, 1979), 244.

ourselves as beholders before the picture. And in the centre foreground another gaze catches us, makes us sense that we ourselves are seen even as we see: the dark-eyed stare of the baby, unblinking and impassive (Fig. 13). This is Brown's son Arthur, and he died as the artist worked on the painting.[44]

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It will be instructive at this juncture to consider another image of Arthur, one that for all its differences will help us to understand how the gaze operates in *Work*. Begun in 1851 as a bust-length portrait of Brown's second wife, Emma, *Take your son, Sir!* (Fig. 14) remained unsold and probably unfinished in the artist's studio as he began his long labour on *Work* in 1852.[45] When Arthur was born in September 1856 the artist refashioned the picture to show a mother and newborn child, adding sections to the sides and lower edge of the canvas to transform the painting into a full-length figure.[46] To the right he inserted the baby's red cot and its veiled cover, underneath which we spy a woman with snub nose and hair tied up by a lace cap. She is presumably the family's nurse, though what she is doing is unclear: perhaps making up the cot. On the wall behind Emma he added the mirror in which we see reflected a bearded and besuited man, presumably the father. And on the expanse of new canvas beneath the baby he began to outline the woman's voluminous dress – a design that, like the painting itself, remains unfinished, brought to a halt by Arthur's death.

The painting's incompletion means that for all its painterly verisimilitude *Take your son, Sir!* speaks ultimately of absence. Around Arthur and his strangely

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[44] Arthur died of tubercular meningitis on 21 July 1857, two months short of his first birthday. Catching up with his diary early in 1858 Brown recalled using his now-dead son as model: '[D]rew in poor little Arthur's head for the baby & began painting it the day he was taken ill & had to rub out what I had done' (Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 199 (entry for 17 January 1858)). In his 1865 account of the painting the artist stated that the baby's black ribbons signaled mourning for the children's dead mother – i.e. he located death within the fictional narrative of the picture. But the ribbons are surely for Arthur himself.

[45] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 78 (entry for 16 August 1854).

[46] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 194 (entry for 16 March 1857). For details of the alterations to the support, see Anna Southall, *Completing the Picture: Materials and Techniques of Twenty-Six Paintings in the Tate Gallery* (London: Tate, 1982), pp. 46-48.

animated gown (depicted from life whilst he was still in good health) the painting falls to pieces. The collar of Emma's dress, like the great stretch of unpainted white canvas, is a telling index of the difficulty Brown experienced as he strove to finish the work. Traces of pink, blue, and green pigment bear witness to repeated painting campaigns, the design painstakingly filled in before being found wanting by the artist and scraped away. Where the remarkable illusionism of Arthur's body allows us to forget for a moment that what we see here is just a painting, the flat uniformity of the white ground and the remnants of the collar insistently remind us that paint is mere brute matter, that it can never be more than a simulacrum of life. This is painting mortified, painting that acknowledges what all representation at some level wants to deny: that what we see is not the world, not life, but inert pigment suspended in congealed medium, as inanimate as was the by-then dead body of Arthur as Brown struggled, and failed, to finish the picture.

Scholars have for the most part not taken Arthur's death into account when interpreting the image, thinking less about the artist's inability to bring it to completion than about the dramatic encounter the painting stages between its depicted figures and the work's beholder. This is not unreasonable: that encounter is the most striking aspect of the picture. *Take your son, Sir!* has thus most often been read as an image of an unwed mother aggressively thrusting her bastard toward its natural father.[47] The hortatory title might seem to support this interpretation, but the woman's face suggests exhausted contentment rather than accusation and the reflected male figure seems happy enough to accept the child (his upwardly-turned hands are set to receive not to reject). It may be wrong, then, to read our reaction to

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[47] See *inter alia* Arthur S. Marks, 'Brown's 'Take Your Son, Sir!',' *Arts Magazine* vol. 54, January 1980, pp. 135-41; Nina Auerbach, 'The Rise of the Fallen Woman,' *Nineteenth Century Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 1, June 1980, p. 36; Susan P. Casteras, *The Substance or the Shadow: Images of Victorian Womanhood* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982), p. 38; and Jan Marsh, *The Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (New York, 1985), pp. 40-41. Marcia Pointon is one of the few scholars to link the painting to death, though not in relation to Arthur's passing but via a comparison to anatomical images of dissected pregnant women (Marcia Pointon, 'Interior Portraits: Women, Physiology and the Male Artist,' *Feminist Review*, no. 22, Spring 1986, pp. 15-20).

the painting as being tied to a Victorian moral narrative of illicit paternity.[48] But it is nevertheless the case that we tend to feel uneasy before this picture. Not because we find ourselves accused; rather, simply because we find ourselves so insistently looked at, so palpably made the object of the image's twin interpellating gazes. We are held forcefully in place both by the fixity of Arthur's watchful look, his eyes animated by piercing highlights, and by Emma's somewhat more muted regard. The sheen of light reflecting from the baby's softly rounded flesh and from the knuckles of his tightly-clenched fists also seizes us: we feel ourselves captured by the light, as Lacan would say. Thus even though we remain aware that this is merely a painted likeness, our experience is one of discomfort. We respond, that is to say, to some degree as we would to a real gaze.

The feeling is perhaps not unlike that described by one of Lacan's interlocutors, Sartre. In *Being and Nothingness*, a text whose influence on Lacan's theorization of the gaze is well known, Sartre described his experience of being seen by another. This look was most often manifest in 'the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction,' but could as easily be intuited 'when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter, or a light movement of a curtain.'[49] Whatever the cause, the result was a consciousness of being an object in the world for someone else's gaze, a self-awareness that for Sartre bordered always on self-consciousness in the sense of being embarrassed. He emphasized this with a further example. Being caught spying through a keyhole, he wrote, transforms the act of looking from an externally-directed attentiveness to an inwardly-turned consciousness of self: 'I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me.'[50] And with this, for Sartre at least, came an equally self-reflexive shame: 'shame . . . is shame of *self*; it is the *recognition* of the fact that I *am* indeed that object which the Other is looking at and judging.'[51]

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[48] See Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 188. Liz Prettejohn has argued that the meaning of the painting – unwed mother or happy wife – is indeterminate (Elizabeth Prettejohn, *The Art of the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate, 2000), p. 215).

[49] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 257.

[50] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 260. Original emphasis.

[51] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 261. Original emphasis.

For Sartre this insight derived in part from a private obsession: the humiliation of being seen was for him tied to a sense of what he felt to be his own unattractive appearance.[52] But while personal in origin, his insight allowed him to get hold of a general truth about the consciousness of self that necessarily accompanies being looked at. We are, he surmised, necessarily alienated from ourselves, for we are constituted as subjects by the gaze of the other. Furthermore, that gaze always comes at us from a place that is irrecoverably distant: the unknowable mental world of the one who sees us. Which is to say that if the gaze forms us, it is also always the sign of our alienation from others.

Standing before *Take your son, Sir!* the beholder feels something of Sartre's shame (at least to the degree that we feel implicated in the depicted confrontation, if such it is). We also feel the distance that he understood to rest at the heart of being seen. Although the twin gazes of Arthur and Emma seem preternaturally clear and present, we are made insistently aware of the fact that an unbridgeable gap separates us from them. The most obvious sign of this is the expanse of unpainted canvas, a mute and impenetrable barrier that refuses the possibility of connecting the real space in which we stand to the illusionistic realm of the depicted figures. The mirror seen behind Emma's head also plays its part in generating a sense of our separation (Fig. 15). It is true that the male figure that appears in its surface makes it difficult to imagine ourselves at a neutral distance: as Liz Prettejohn has observed, the reflected image locks us into the picture's perspective.[53] Yet the reflection also insists on our absence: first, because it is (of course) not our own image but that of an unknown man whose concrete features displace us from our assumed position before the picture;[54] second, because the convexity of the mirror suggests that we cannot in any case be this reflected figure. The outward curve of the mirror towards its edge means that we see there not what lies directly before the mirror – which is where we take ourselves to stand – but whatever is situated off to the left. Thus whilst our first impression is

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[52] See Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 279-80.

[53] Prettejohn, *Art of the Pre-Raphaelites*, p. 215.

[54] Compare the beholder's position vis-à-vis Velazquez's *Las Meninas*, in which a distant mirror reflects two figures not seen in the painting, perhaps the absent king and queen, standing where we imagine ourselves to stand. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), pp. 3-16.

that we see ourselves (or our Victorian stand-in) in the mirror, the laws of optics indicate that this is a second figure and that our own reflection is obscured by Emma's head (or more properly: that we are not reflected at all because Emma's head intervenes between us and the mirror).

The reader might reasonably object that Brown simply fudged the reflection to avoid the distortion of a figure curved by the mirror's convex form and/or to more clearly implicate the beholder. Perhaps so. But whatever Brown's motivations, and despite the fact that we initially feel that we see ourselves reflected, the incongruities in the mirror image (and there are others: note, for example, how the white flower in Emma's hair is easily mistaken for an ornament on the piano) mean that the longer one stands before the picture, the less the reflection allows us a stable sense of our own position in relation to what is depicted. We are displaced, as it were, pushed away from the picture even as the mirror image seems for a moment to hold us before it. Arthur thus seems tangibly close yet contained in a space from which we are irrevocably separate. And his gaze thus speaks not of intimacy but of irreparable distance.

We might note in passing that the association of mirrors with absence was a common Victorian trope. As Isobel Armstrong has demonstrated, writers repeatedly invoked the melancholy inaccessibility of the reflected image. The lament of Tennyson's Lady of Shallot (1832) as she tired of having to make do with the mere reflection of the outside world – 'I am half sick / Of shadows' – was simply the first of many examples, including several penned by Brown's associates.[55] Christina Rossetti's 'A Royal Princess' (1861) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Willowwood' (1868) both describe a face glimpsed in a mirror or in the reflective surface of a body of water in terms of lack: the image remains ungraspable, both spatially and literally, with the apparent immediacy of the reflected image twinned always with the inaccessibility that the mirror's impenetrable surface insists upon. *Take your son, Sir!* shares these resonances, and does so not merely via the depicted mirror and its displacement of the beholder but also by allowing the picture as a whole to suggest inaccessibility, Brown's now-dead child insistently visible but irrecoverably separated from us.

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[55] Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination, 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 111-13.

Observe in this regard that the blank areas of the smoothly primed canvas are gloss rather than matt, making the surface dully reflective. Standing before it one is aware – as one is before a mirror – both of the sheen reflecting from the surface and of the image located in the illusionistic space beyond. (That Brown was interested in the sheen on a mirror's surface is confirmed by a detail that shows precisely this on his convex mirror.) The picture of the artist's wife and (now dead) son thus takes on both the formal and the metaphorical qualities of the mirror; it reads paradoxically both as a surface that blocks our vision and as a transparent screen through which we see Arthur and his mother. Here we might note Lacan's account of a screen that intervenes in vision and that hides from us what he called the Real, by which he meant the traumatic experiences that constitute us as subjects but that are thereafter unavailable to the conscious mind.[56] Death would be one such unthinkable – and unpicturable – event. That *Take Your Son, Sir!* feels in the end like a screen, like a surface that simultaneously presses Arthur forward but also keeps him at an inaccessible distance, suggests that for Brown, too, death introduced a kind of blindness into the gaze.

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Take Your Son, Sir! is an intensely personal picture. But the central device by which it produces its private meaning – Arthur's death figured in a piercing gaze that locates us squarely before the image but also holds us at a remove – could generate public meanings as well as private ones (which is to say that, as for Sartre, a personal trauma could lead to a general truth). If, as I have suggested, the death of his son led Brown to grasp how painting might picture the unbridgeable distance between the living and the dead, in *Work* he would use this insight to signal more prosaic kinds of alienation amongst the living.

We have already noted various gazes that emerge from *Work*: Carlyle's sneer; the monocular scrutiny of the little girl; and, of course, Arthur's impassive stare. But there is another look that emanates from the picture and that fixes us even more forcefully at a distance. The bachelor navvy in the centre seems at first to attend to his work, watching the lime as its falls through the sieve and onto the ground. But if

[56] Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, pp. 53-64.

we attend more carefully we see that he in fact looks out towards us (Fig. 16). It takes some time to become aware of this detail even when standing in front of the picture. Once noticed, however, it is utterly arresting. The labourer is demonstrably aware of our presence, and appears less than pleased that we are watching him. His red-eyed gaze is decidedly unwelcoming, his bloodshot orb framed by a half-seen scowl. (Standing before the painting one has the sense that the elder sister of the motherless family is also watching us, half-glancing over her shoulder towards the beholder. Again, seeing or not seeing is not strictly gendered: well-dressed ladies can be blind, but the poor must keep a wary eye on those around them.)

This detail makes clear that, however much the picture asks us to admire the workers, to feel that we are on their side, it at the same time forces us to recognize our separation from them. This is not a look of identification: as with Lacan's interaction with Petit-Jean, the look is experienced with discomfort.[57] We are made to feel our difference, made to feel the gulf that exists between the viewer of the painting and one of its central characters. This rhymes, in turn, with the sense of visual distance that inflects the image despite our implied proximity. Like the spaces into which we cannot see, like the spatial cues that fail to add up and thus suggest that we do not see clearly what lies before our eyes, the navvy's red-eyed gaze speaks of an unbridgeable gap between the beholder and those who are depicted. The regard of the other – as Sartre sensed – is alienating, always pushing us out of the picture, marking the unbridgeable divide that separates us one and all.

I realize that in saying this I am slipping towards a use of the first person plural that – as I noted when calling attention to Lacan's questionable talk of the 'we' sitting in the fishing boat – does not bear much scrutiny. The 'we' standing before the picture in 2017 is not one ('we is another,' as Arthur Rimbaud didn't quite say eight or so years after Brown finished *Work*[58]); nor can 'we' be presumed to share the position or the outlook of the painting's initial viewers, who were themselves equally multiple. We may be on safer ground if we focus on the artist himself. That the painting suggests a gap between its beholder and the navvies is perhaps the index of

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[57] We might note in passing the coincidence – though it is mere coincidence, nothing more – that in Brown's painting, as in Lacan's text, the sun glints off metallic objects: not a sardine can but the red-eyed navvy's shovel and the base and rim of the beer-drinker's tankard.

[58] 'Je est un autre'; Arthur Rimbaud, letter to Georges Izambard, Charleville, 13 May 1871.

the artist's own recognition of the gulf between his middle-class socialist sympathies (rather different from the populist politics with which Lacan was flirting when he set sail with the Breton fishermen) and the brute reality of labour and labourers. Although financially insecure for much of the 1850s – regularly pawning his belongings and constantly lamenting in his diary the difficulty of making ends meet – Brown remained inalterably middle class in outlook and habit. His poverty was of the most genteel variety: witness his insistence on employing a maid even as his wife Emma herself worked as a domestic servant in Highgate to bring money into the household.

Consider in this light the artist's further thoughts on the navvies, as recorded in the 1865 exhibition catalogue:

> Through this picture I have gained some experience of the navvy class, and I have usually found, that if you can break through the upper crust of *mauvaise honte* [modesty, shyness], which surrounds them in common with most Englishmen, and which, in the case of the navvies, I believe to be the cause of much of their bad language, you will find them serious, intelligent men, and with much to interest in their conversation, which, moreover, contains about the same amount of morality and sentiment that is commonly found among men in the active and hazardous walks of life; for that their career is one of hazard and danger, none should doubt. Many stories might be told of navvies' daring and endurance, were this the place for them. One incident peculiarly connected with this picture is the melancholy fact, that one of the very men who sat for it lost his life by a scaffold accident, before I had yet quite done with him. I remember the poor fellow telling me, among other things, how he never but once felt nervous with his work, and this was, having to trundle barrows of earth over a plank-line crossing a rapid river at a height of *eighty feet* above the water. But it was not the height he complained of, it was the *gliding motion of the water underneath*.[59]

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[59] Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, pp. 30-31; original emphasis.

This passage is clearly meant to deepen the viewer's empathy with the labourers, encouraging the beholder to admire their mental and ethical qualities. But as with Lacan's account of his interaction with Petit-Jean, the distance is also clear. We hear again of the hazards of a living won with difficulty through physical labour and of the early death of the narrator's working-class interlocutor. And Brown lets slip, almost in passing, the difference between the men with whom he sought to connect and his own identity as a middle-class artist. The 'upper crust of *mauvaise honte*' (note how he confuses his metaphors, using a term for the nobility – the upper crust – to mean outer shell) is, we can guess, precisely the gap between the painter and the men who take a break from digging to sit for money in his studio. He wanted to find morality and sentiment but was, we sense, struck equally by their bad language. Though he tries to wave all of this away as a general English trait, as gruffness born of shyness, one suspects that it was rooted in a mutual incomprehension grounded in class difference.[60]

If mention of the 'upper crust' that Brown sought to penetrate unwittingly signals this incomprehension in a text that wanted mostly to believe in communion, the painting itself is similarly divided, trying hard to make the beholder identify with the navvies but at the same time allowing their distance to show. The viewer is asked to sympathize with working class experience but is also forcefully reminded that he or she cannot *know* that experience, that those who live it remain at an unbridgeable remove, looking back at the beholder from a subject position that he or she cannot share. In this regard Brown's now-lost initial sketch for the composition is significant in that it acknowledged more openly than would the finished painting the cultural and economic abyss between artist and worker: in what is probably a later watercolour copy of the sketch (Fig. 17) we see that the figure standing to the right and surveying

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[60] Brown's ambivalence about the working classes is evident in one typically middle-class Victorian anxiety about the labouring classes – specifically their alleged inclination, when idle, towards criminality – that animates his account of the picture even as he dismisses it. In the sonnet with which he opened his 1865 account of the painting Brown suggested that lack of employment would deliver men into the grasp of 'fiends' and turn the motherless children seen in the painting's foreground into 'noisome beggars' or even 'dreaded midnight robbers'; in his prose description he observed that the flower-seller might, '[b]ut for a certain gentleness of disposition . . . have been a burglar!' (Brown, *Exhibition of Work*, 27). See Takashi Nakamura, '*Bleak House* and Brown's *Work*: A Gaze upon the Poor,' *Shiron* 39 (2000): 53-54.

the scene was originally neither Carlyle nor Maurice but the artist himself.[61] Elegantly dressed and balancing a silk hat on a walking stick, he could fairly be labeled a 'swell', as he himself later mockingly branded the monocled equestrian. It is true that he seems lost in thought – pondering, we assume, the social facts before him, empathizing with the labour he witnesses and thus mentally bridging the gap between observer and observed – but his clothes divide him sharply from those he watches.

The finished painting removes the figure of the artist, meaning that the difference between middle-class painter and proletarian worker is not signaled so pointedly in what we see. But the division remains in view: not in what we see but in how we see. We are in effect put in the position of the artist, made to see as he saw (and also could not see) the social panorama before him. His blindness becomes ours; his recognition of the unbridgeable divide between his political sympathies and the reality of the labourers before him – labourers whose language offended him and whose accusatory gaze repulsed him – is one that the picture asks us to share. The picture, that is to say, carefully crafts a position for its beholder to occupy that is complicated – or better, ambivalent – both on the spatial level (close to the action yet held at bay, not seeing clearly) and on the social (empathetic but also alienated). The painting may be clear about the class of those who are surveyed – the external signs are for the most part easily legible – but it allows doubt to permeate the sense of classed selfhood lived by the implied beholder. We (the 'we' that is constituted before the picture, at least in so far as we fall in line with the way of seeing the world that it urges upon us) are made to see as the sympathetic, even Socialist, mid-Victorian saw: scorning the idle rich and their privileges, admiring the noble toil of the navvies and imagining that we are on their side, but at the same time brusquely put in our place, put in the dock, so to speak, by the red-eyed glare of the foremost worker.

Here we might recall that when painting on The Mount in 1852 the artist had hidden behind an apparatus of costermonger's wagon and curtains that divided him

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[61] There is some doubt as to the status of the watercolour. In 1865 Brown described it as the original sketch, drawn in 1852 and subsequently coloured. In 1890, however, he explicitly stated that the watercolour was distinct from the first sketch (though based closely on its design) and that it had been painted in 1864 after *Work* itself was finished. See Bennett, *Ford Madox Brown*, vol. 1, p. 149.

from those with whom he shared the street: working as an artist, it seems, required an aloof distance. He feared, perhaps, a repeat on an episode that took place a year or so earlier whist he was out painting a landscape, an event that indicated as surely as any the irrecoverable distance between the artist and his working-class subjects: 'A labourer came and looked and stuttering fearfully expressed admiration which ended in his supposing he *could not beg half a pint of beer*, one whom I used to look upon as a respectable man. I gave the degraded wretch twopence and scorn.'[62]

Getting to know the poor – getting too close – could, for Brown, be disappointing. Better to shield yourself behind a curtain and offer a heroic image of labour standing tall amidst the diverse and sometimes disreputable figures populating the London street. But even thus protected the truth of class alienation pierces the screen. Caught by the navvy's gaze, the beholder's experience is akin to Sartre's shame when caught looking through the keyhole. Of course, Sartre's meditation on what it is to be seen was part of a wider investigation into the nature of subjectivity in general: his question was what it is to have a sense of self, how the subject is constituted as such. The answer he gave, in common with Lacan, was that one's sense of self comes from outside, from sensing that one is, whether in fact or in imagination, seen. Brown's concerns were less far-reaching. He was no philosopher, but he had a keener sense than either Sartre or Lacan of how one's experience of others (and thus of oneself) might be shot through by class.

As I said at the outset, reading Lacan can help us see Brown's image. But the picture has something to offer in return: the useful reminder that if we are always alienated from ourselves, objectified as we are by the gaze, the embodiment of that gaze in other people is necessarily tied up with a sense of our ability to identify – or not – with the location of the other in the social structures that we all inhabit. *Work* may have been driven by Brown's own personal sense of Britain's mid-century class structures and of his ambiguous place therein, but the picture also offers a more general account of what it is to feel oneself to be separated from others, however physically close at hand they might be. And it reminds us that this has not to do (or not solely to do) with the general human condition but with the divisions between individuals of different social status. Arthur's dead gaze may set the tone of the painting – underlining the sense of unbridgeable separation – but the worker's red-

[62] Surtees, ed., *Diary of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 102 (entry for 13 October 1854).

eyed scowl makes clear that for Brown such division is always also a question of class. Which is to say that if, as Lacan and Sartre affirmed, sensing how we are seen by those around us is fundamental to our constitution as subjects, class is necessarily a central aspect of this experience.