

# Corelli's Caliban in a Glass: Realism, Antirealism, and *The Sorrows of Satan*

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IN 1890, AUTHORS Walter Besant, Eliza Lynn Linton, and Thomas Hardy took part in a *New Review* symposium on the subject of contemporary literature entitled “Candour in English Fiction.” The question at hand was just how truthfully fiction could delineate life—especially relations between the sexes—before it ran afoul of the moral expectations of its audience. What, in short, were the limits of realism in the contemporary age? As all three contributors agreed, the issue was inextricable from the workings of the literary marketplace. If a story were too racy, it would fail to be picked up by the middle-class outlets, dooming it to commercial failure. In Besant’s phrasing, the bounds of fiction are “assigned by an authority known as Average Opinion,” and “Average Opinion cannot be resisted. The circulating libraries refuse to distribute such books.”<sup>1</sup> Hardy’s contribution also stressed a related point: the person considered most vulnerable to candid literature was the female reader, especially the daughter of the family. He deplored that fiction was being written with this reader, her feminine innocence, in mind: “[A]ll fiction should not be shackled by conventions concerning budding womanhood.”<sup>2</sup> Like the others, Linton wondered about the implications for serious literary art. “Must men go without meat,” she asked, “because the babes must be fed with milk?” Some solution must be found to protect English fiction from such “emasculat[i]on,” for presently it was “the weakest of all, the most insincere, the most jejune.... It is wholly wanting in dignity, in grandeur, in the essential spirit of immortality.”<sup>3</sup>

The *New Review* discussion exemplifies a larger debate at this time about what fiction should, or practically could, represent. A main cause of this debate was the *fin-de-siècle* development of a new type of English realism, also called the “new fiction.” This was an unsparing mode, comparable, some said, to the naturalism of figures such as

Émile Zola. In contrast to the more cautious, discreet realism of earlier Victorian writers such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Eliot, the new realism was committed to the stark analysis of social facts, including (most controversially) indecent sexual circumstances. At stake in discussions of this fiction were thus not only definitions of great art—as distinct from the commercial demands of the masses—but also the acceptable moral range of literature. The latter issue became inseparable from considerations of gender, indeed giving rise to a common epithet, used by both proponents and opponents of the new fiction: at the heart of the debate was the “Young Person” or the “Young Reader,” meaning the young female reader specifically.<sup>4</sup>

Best-selling author Marie Corelli participated energetically in these conversations, as for example through the plot of her 1895 novel *The Sorrows of Satan*. In this retelling of the Faust legend, the devil, disguised as a handsome and debonair prince named Lucio Rimânez, attempts to lure the protagonist, Geoffrey Tempest, into a soul-wasting life. Lucio encourages Geoffrey to use his suddenly inherited wealth to buy a great beauty of London society, Lady Sibyl Elton, from her father in the marriage market; but during their engagement, Geoffrey makes a terrible discovery: Sibyl has been brought up on “fashionable novel-reading,” which has made her by her own account a “contaminated creature, trained to perfection in the lax morals and prurient literature of my day.”<sup>5</sup> Hence her disturbing sangfroid during their first meeting at the theater while viewing a play about a fallen woman, a “realistic study of modern social life.”<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey is further staggered by his fiancée’s sexual knowingness through literature when he finds her reading what she describes as just one of many highly reviewed novels that teach “girls ... all about marriage before they enter upon it, in order that they may do so with their eyes wide open—*very* wide open!”<sup>7</sup> After their marriage, he is horrified to catch her throwing herself at Lucio; when rebuffed in her advances she takes her own life. Sibyl’s suicide note again blames contemporary fiction for her wantonness: as a mere adolescent, she recalls, she encountered a critically praised novel whose “vulgarity” she at first hardly comprehended, but “little by little the insidious abomination of it filtered into my mind and *stayed there*.”<sup>8</sup> In this shameful coming-of-age tale, *The Sorrows of Satan* decisively enters the debate about the new fiction, here by adopting that debate’s conceits: Sibyl Elton is plainly Corelli’s version of the corruptible Young Person.<sup>9</sup>

Focusing on *The Sorrows of Satan* this article aims to parse this author's response to contemporary realist trends and in the process to add to our understanding of her position within the late-Victorian literary field. Corelli's vocal defense of her preferred genre, the romance, has made her antirealism a virtual scholarly given. Certainly the matter seems clear-cut in her essay "The Vanishing Gift," in which the gift is imagination. Deploring the modern overvaluing of the material things of this world, Corelli fears that "the last touch of idealistic fancy" will soon have been "crushed out of us, and only the dry husks of realism [be] left to feed swine withal."<sup>10</sup> Yet the presumption of this author's antirealism (often summarily grouped with her anti-Decadence) has forestalled an analysis of the intricacies and complications of her take on realism, especially within *The Sorrows of Satan*.<sup>11</sup> In this novel as in her essay work, Corelli engaged directly with the views that circulated within discussions of the new fiction, including both the trope of the young female novel consumer and realist advocates' masculinist literary standard of aesthetic quality. Moreover, *The Sorrows of Satan* is preoccupied throughout with the larger question the realism debate brought to the fore about the moral responsibility of literature. Sibyl's account of her readerly education is only the most obvious part of this novel to contemplate the effects of fictive representations on their audience.

Another objective here is to draw attention to how Corelli's antirealism unexpectedly shades into its antithesis. In the first place, in its tale of Geoffrey Tempest's authorial career *The Sorrows of Satan* itself oddly tracks the same grim level of social and bodily particularities found in the new fiction Corelli otherwise resisted. The similarity suggests that she did not so much dismiss realism outright as try to negotiate with it—to reconcile (with varying degrees of success) her imaginative tendencies with her own goals of representing life truthfully, in this case of depicting what she saw as the ills of the contemporary publishing world. A second, quite different way in which *The Sorrows of Satan* negotiates with realism involves the novel's repeated gestures toward "Reality" within plot events Corelli plainly meant to instruct both Geoffrey and the reader. Importantly, though, in this case "Reality" refers not to the material world but instead to a spiritual plane of existence, represented by Satan. In other words, Corelli, expressly invested in the fictional project of recording reality for her reader's consumption, develops a highly idiosyncratic form of realism, favoring it over contemporary movements: she instills her own realism with a

moral sensibility she regards as lacking in the candid new fiction. Further, Corelli demonstrates the capacities of this revisionary mode—and conversely the inadequacies of acknowledging only material phenomena—by manipulating a by then well established symbol of realism’s mimetic qualities, the mirror.

Tracing these generic priorities helps, finally, to elucidate Corelli’s stance vis-à-vis another major movement on the *fin-de-siècle* literary scene, Aestheticism, as championed by Oscar Wilde.<sup>12</sup> *The Sorrows of Satan* offers a sustained rebuttal to Wilde’s artistic pronouncements, and this rebuttal both mediates and is mediated by Corelli’s perspective on realism. On the one hand, Corelli shared Wilde’s artistic tendencies insofar as both decried the lack of fancy in the studiously exacting new fiction. “The Decay of Lying” (1889) takes aim at specifically *fin-de-siècle* realism when Vivian tells Cyril that “the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction. The Blue-Book is rapidly becoming his ideal both for method and manner. He has his tedious *document humain*, his miserable little *coin de la création*, into which he peers with his microscope.”<sup>13</sup> The French allusions to Zola, like the references to the parliamentary report and the microscope, imply the drearily mundane, quasi-scientific depths to which Wilde felt contemporary fiction had sunk. But on the other hand, Corelli’s didacticism meant that she profoundly disagreed with Wilde’s prioritizing of aesthetic form (or “manner”) over content. In particular she could hardly concur with Wilde’s manifesto in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which demeans the artist’s “ethical sympathies,” prizing instead the artwork’s beautiful form, as this is or is not appreciated by the individual “spectator”: “Those who find ugly meanings in beautiful things are corrupt without being charming. This is a fault. Those who find beautiful meanings in beautiful things are the cultivated. For these there is hope.”<sup>14</sup> *The Sorrows of Satan* talks back to this philosophy of art for art’s sake, and to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Corelli draws on characters and imagery in Wilde’s own tale of Faustian deal-making, yet systematically reformulates them in order to repudiate an aesthetic escapism from moral frames of reference and, further, to argue for an altogether different relationship between beautiful forms and their reception. At the same time, Corelli is deploying her audience’s foreknowledge of Wilde’s novel—mining a vocabulary of figures from it—to accentuate the moral dangers of the new fiction. In her view, this fiction pales in comparison with that of prior realist authors who, so far from promoting high artistic detachment, recognized

their responsibility to virtuous representation and to the reading public as much as she does herself.

### Corelli Versus the “Strong” Book

Returning to Sibyl Elton gives a useful starting point for approaching *The Sorrows of Satan*'s stance on the new fiction, as this is triangulated with the novel's Wildean motifs. Corelli's fallen heroine tentatively fuses two characters from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Sibyl Vane and Dorian Gray: Sibyl Vane, like Corelli's Sibyl, kills herself by poison (taken in her dressing area); and Dorian is a precursor of Corelli's young, beautiful, pliable—in short, feminine—and ultimately fallen reader. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'s preface avers art's amorality—“There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all”<sup>16</sup>—and this is seconded within the novel when Lord Henry Wotton dismisses his protégé's attempt to blame his own sins on the “yellow book” Lord Henry once gave him. Dorian tragically accuses, “you poisoned me with a book once,” but this notion Lord Henry roundly rejects: “As for being poisoned by a book, there is no such thing as that. Art has no influence upon action.... It is superbly sterile.”<sup>17</sup> *The Sorrows of Satan*, on the other hand, rewrites *The Picture of Dorian Gray* so to as erase that novel's ambiguity about the source of vice, particularly about vice's connection to literary consumption.<sup>18</sup> We are meant to value Sibyl Elton's perspective when, schooled by experience, she condemns “books full of pernicious and poisonous suggestion,” which “contaminate ... minds that have hitherto been clean and undiseased.”<sup>19</sup> Put another way, we are meant to take her death by poisoning as the natural, literalizing effect of her reading history.

Corelli was just as interested as Wilde in the question of influence vis-à-vis art and morality. She simply came to opposite conclusions. These are forcefully articulated in her essay “The ‘Strong’ Book of the Ishbosheth”: “the impression of a ‘strong’ book ... lasts, and sometimes leaves tracks of indelible mischief on minds which, but for its loathsome influence, would have remained upright and innocent. Thought creates action. An idea is the mainspring of an epoch.”<sup>20</sup> Corelli clarifies that the word “strong,” often used in press plaudits, would seem to mean a book with a “powerful style, a vigorous grip, a brilliant way of telling a captivating and noble story,” but that duped readers ultimately discover that actually “a ‘strong’ book means a nasty subject indelicately treated.”<sup>21</sup> “It is true,” she grants, that readers “will prob-

ably chance upon no worse or more revolting circumstances of human life than are dished up for the general Improvement of Public Morals in our halfpenny dailies,” but “whereas the divorce court and police cases in the newspaper are very soon forgotten,” the sleaziness of the “strong” book retains its influence.<sup>22</sup> (Recall Sibyl Elton on the novel that “filtered into [her] mind and *stayed there*.”) Corelli’s comparison to the lewd stories retailed in the papers is a first clue that her “strong” book” means specifically the documentary realist novel. In fact in dismissing the comparison to contemporary journalism as a justification for immoral excesses in literature, she implicitly refutes the sort of argument made in “Candour in English Fiction”—that to have one kind of thing in the papers but then disallow it in literature is a hypocrisy. Linton had observed that despite the “excessive scrupulosity in fiction we publish the most revolting details in the daily Press,”<sup>23</sup> and Hardy, similarly, that an honest narrative about “ruling passions” is precluded in “imaginative works ... though it is extensively welcomed in the form of newspaper reports.”<sup>24</sup>

That Corelli’s essay targets realism is also evident in her digression (laced with *schadenfreude*) about the fittingly “prosy and ‘realistic’ manner” of Zola’s death—by toxic fumes from a defective chimney—as well as in her thinly veiled, biting reference to Hardy in noting the “narrative of a betrayed milkmaid who enters into all the precise details of her wrongs with a more than pernicious gusto.”<sup>25</sup> “The ‘Strong’ Book of the Ishbosheth” cries out for an end, too, to novels about “‘twins’ earthly or heavenly,” unmistakably alluding to Sarah Grand’s *The Heavenly Twins* (1893).<sup>26</sup> The allusion underscores Corelli’s animus toward New Woman fiction, born out of the more traditional strains of her gender philosophy;<sup>27</sup> but more significant for this discussion is that the New Woman novel—with its detailed accounts of unfulfilling marriages, sexual desire, and the difficulties of maternity, not to mention gritty plot elements such as venereal disease—was commonly classed together with frank late-Victorian realist forms and is therefore integral to the category of the “strong” book as Corelli conceived it.<sup>28</sup> Likewise when Sibyl Elton pinpoints the novel that initiated her into viciousness as a female-authored one, and when Geoffrey catches her reading one of the many “prurient novels that have been lately written by women to degrade and shame their sex,”<sup>29</sup> these references to the New Woman novel participate in *The Sorrows of Satan*’s general assault on the new fiction.

Literary phenomena like New Woman novels meant that by century's end the new fiction had come to seem coextensive with women's writing and with plots focused on women—a frustrating development for many who had hoped that this fiction would cure English literature of its effeminacy (an effeminacy linked to “Average Opinion” or mass culture, and particularly attached to popular romances like Corelli's).<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, in “The ‘Strong’ Book of the Ishbosheth” Corelli seems still responsive to, and annoyed by, the conjunction of realism with masculinity—or rather, in her view, with a masculinity selectively defined by the literary establishment as machismo. This response is already implied in her title, which satirically offers “strong” as the buzzword of a corps of reviewers ridiculously wedded to the idea of realism's sheer brute force. “[I]mmodesty of thought,” she asserts,

fulfills its mission in the “strong” book, which alone succeeds in winning the applause of that “Exclusive Set of Degenerates” known as the E.S.D. under the Masonic Scriptural sign of ISHBOSHETH (laying particular emphasis on the syllable between the “Ish” and the “eth”), who manage to obtain ... posts on the ever-changeful twirling treadmill of the daily press.... Hence the “strong” cult, also the “virile.” This last excellent and expressive word has become seriously maltreated in the hands of the Ishbosheth, and is now made answerable for many sins which it did not originally represent.... Applied to certain books ... by the Ishbosheth it will be found by the discerning public to mean coarse—rough—with a literary “style” obtained by sprinkling several pages of prose with the lowest tavern-oaths, together with the name of God, pronounced “Gawd.” Anything written in that fashion is at once pronounced “virile” and commands wide admiration from the Ishbosheth, particularly if it should be a story in which women are depicted at the lowest kickable depth of drab-ism to which men can drag them, while men are represented as the suffering victims of their wickedness.<sup>31</sup>

As distorted by realism's reviewers, “virility” is boorish and overweening, appropriate to the kind of man who swears and demeans women or who blames them for his own shared degradedness. In likening these reviewers to a secret fraternal order, Corelli also suggests the exclusivity of the predominantly male literary establishment—but this is exclusivity of a “degenerate” sort, because devoted to realism's raw immorality. Hence each of its members bears the biblical name of the Ishbosheth, the “man of shame.”

Corelli's Ishbosheth, with its linkages of realism to male shamefulness and clandestine insularity, is prefigured in *The Sorrows of Satan's* depiction of the late-Victorian publishing world. While still poor and shopping around a piously “earnest” romance manuscript, Geoffrey is

advised by a publisher to write instead something “slightly *risqué*—even a little more than *risqué*,” for “[w]hat goes down with [the critics] and with the public is a bit of sensational realism told in terse newspaper English.”<sup>32</sup> This advice is wrong about the public, as Geoffrey intuitively—and as the popular success of the spiritually elevating author Mavis Clare bears out later—but not about the critics. After he becomes rich and finances his own publication, Geoffrey learns that to become a great name he must get in with the main critics, an all-controlling, thoroughly crooked in-group. “There are only six leading men who do the reviews,” his publisher tells him, “and between them they cover all the English magazines and some of the American too, as well as the London papers,” and apparently the most important of these men takes bribes. Lucio gets to the heart of the matter in calling this a “comfortable little fraternal union.”<sup>33</sup> Naturally it is through him that Geoffrey pays off the kingpin, after which Geoffrey’s book is “boomed”—puffed up by cronies and lackeys—in all the reviews. Satan’s mediation reinforces the sinfulness of an ilk “The ‘Strong’ Book” frames as influential in the extreme: “Binding as the union of the Printers is all over the world, I suppose they cannot take arms against the Ishbosheth and decline to print anything under this Masonic sign?”<sup>34</sup>

### ***The Sorrows of Satan’s Accidental New Realism***

However, Corelli’s objection to the Ishbosheth entails more than their sinfulness, as one of her anecdotes illustrates well:

A certain literary aspirant hovering on the verge of the circle of the Ishbosheth, complained the other day of a great omission in the biography of one of his dead comrades of the pen. “They should have mentioned,” he said, “that he allowed his body to *swarm with vermin!*” This is true Ishbosheth art. Suppress the fact that the dead man had good in him, that he might have been famous had he lived, that he had some notably strong points in his character, but *don’t* forget, for Heaven’s sake, to mention the “vermin”! For the Ishbosheth “cult” see nothing in a sunset, but much in a flea.<sup>35</sup>

Here Corelli is on the same ground as when she sees in Zola’s ignoble death-by-chimney an existential compensation for his authorial obsession with mundane things: “From the dust-hole of the frail world’s ignorance and crime he selected his olla-podrida of dirty scrapings, potato-peelings, candle-ends, rank fat, and cabbage water.”<sup>36</sup> Despite her mention of crime, what galls her most about Zola’s work in this essay is not so much its immorality as its artistic leanings toward the basely material and the repugnantly ordinary. Similarly, “true Ish-

bosheth art” ignores the grandeur of life and death to chase after the vermin. The image of this “cult” turning away from a sunset to inspect a flea subtly mocks, moreover, realists’ overattention to the minutiae of life, to empirical detail.

Corelli’s distaste for foul, commonplace realism makes surprising, then, certain elements redolent of this mode in *The Sorrows of Satan*. Indeed, the novel’s descriptions of Geoffrey’s experiences of the publishing world resemble one of the decade’s most prominent realist productions, *New Grub Street* (1891), George Gissing’s blunt look at the late-Victorian literary marketplace and the miserable writers who toiled within it. *The Sorrows of Satan* opens by dwelling on Geoffrey’s struggles as an author living in poverty, described in seedy detail as a matter of “threadbare” clothes, a scarcity of “clean linen,” “the gnawing pain, the sick faintness, the deadly stupor, the insatiable animal craving for mere food.”<sup>37</sup> Even once Geoffrey inherits a fortune and escapes that life, much of the novel is spent dissecting a crass system of socio-economic opportunism among publishers and critics.

What is most interesting about these realist elements in *The Sorrows of Satan* is how generically contorted Corelli’s romance must become to accommodate them. It as if the novel is pulled forcibly out of the romance mode by actualities that in her view absolutely demand to be recorded. Satan’s supernatural manipulations, the idealized battle of good and evil, the grand scale of Geoffrey’s metaphysical adventures—all get reduced to the low substance of fictional wares and consumption. And *The Sorrows of Satan*’s seemingly realist interruptions are all the more ironic for the light they seek to shine on the despicable *fin-de-siècle* preference for realism, within both Geoffrey’s aspiring-author plot and Sibyl’s fallen-woman plot. Of course readers may decide that much fancy has gone into these representations. But Corelli at least meant them as earnest documents of reality. That documentary zeal is most vivid in two footnotes appended to depictions of the cronyism, bribes, and booming by which Geoffrey learns the press operates. The first reads simply: “A fact”; the second: “The author has Mr Knowles’s own written authority for this fact.”<sup>38</sup> These footnotes are virtually anomalous (there are only two others in the whole novel) and awkwardly inserted, with their awkwardness pointing to the incongruity of pronouncing “facts” within a romance as well as of footnotes within a novel.

In an 1895 piece in *Review of Reviews*, W. T. Stead recognizes the disjointedness of *The Sorrows of Satan*’s artistic agenda. Corelli’s ver-

sion of Satan is “magnificent” and much of the book “really a very powerful piece of work”; but it should be renamed “The Sorrows of Satan and Marie Corelli,” for the “littleness of the woman” is “thrust in every chapter before the attention of the reader”: “If you could imagine Milton’s ‘Paradise Lost’ served up by its author with every other page devoted to a plaintive wheeze over the draughtiness of his lodgings, or the smokiness of his chimneys, or the tastelessness of his porridge, you could imagine somewhat of the general effect of Marie Corelli’s latest book.”<sup>39</sup> It is remarkable how similar the terms of Stead’s criticism are to Corelli’s of Zola (down to the smoky chimney). For Stead her carping about her place in the literary marketplace clogs her work in petty, materialist detail, at cross-purposes with her far-reaching imaginative achievement.

Stead is also one of the earliest critics to read Mavis Clare as Corelli’s flattering self-depiction as a best-selling but critically dismissed woman author. This character is reportedly “Marie Corelli’s ideal of what she would like to be, but isn’t, what in her more exalted moments she imagines herself to be,” so much so that the novel’s “principles of good and evil are the Devil on one side and Marie Corelli [i.e., Mavis Clare] on the other.”<sup>40</sup> Indisputably Corelli presents Mavis as a writer with a “thinker’s brain and an angel’s soul”;<sup>41</sup> and on this basis modern critics have generally agreed with Stead’s conception of Mavis as an idealized, patiently sanctified figure. For Martin Hipsky, her character is thus important to *The Sorrows of Satan*’s genre—to the roots of Corelli’s romance in the moral binaries of melodrama; Mavis “so unambiguously represents goodness and virtue in the novel as to embody ... its melodramatic register.”<sup>42</sup> But what such readings fail to notice is the actual moral muddiness of Mavis’s character. For it is untrue that, as Stead says, “Mavis Clare did not care a straw about reviewers; the more she was slated the more gaily she laughed; the most venomous review, or the most persistent boycott, never ruffled the smooth serenity of her angelic soul.”<sup>43</sup> Mavis does announce that “literary people take themselves far too seriously” and that she is “totally indifferent to opinion.”<sup>44</sup> But her actions belie her: besides giving her press notices to her Yorkshire terrier to rip to pieces, she keeps a flock of male doves named each after a leading periodical, dubbing a new bird every time she gets a bad review and then teasing it for its belligerent, false sagacity.

The point is not to reiterate Corelli’s intense preoccupation with her critical notoriety and with the misogyny of the literary world (a misogyny summed up in Geoffrey’s petulant attack on Mavis’s work). Rather

it is to show that as the victim of these prejudices, Mavis forms part of Corelli's bid to reveal the late-Victorian literary world as it really is and that, as such, this character further undercuts *The Sorrows of Satan's* generic commitments, here to a melodramatic battle between virtue and vice. If, given the critics' scathing reviews, Mavis cannot maintain the equanimity she purports to possess, this only makes her more realistic. It makes her human, flawed, even a little repugnant. She may laugh winsomely in presenting her animals, but a twisted spite simmers beneath the way she uses them. This is the same aggression that leads her to joke about writing "literary reminiscences" that will identify by name all those who have undervalued her, so that they "go down to posterity as Dante's enemies went down to Dante's hell!"<sup>45</sup> These lurking emotions, and the frustrations that inspire them, are uncomfortably akin to the pitilessly true, socially contingent character portraits of the new fiction Mavis's career is supposed to be elevated above.

### Surface, Depth, & the Realist Mirror

Corelli's concerns for the state of fiction and authorship lead her to her own painstaking depictions of the contemporary world. Yet it is useful to cordon off these inadvertent realist effects, heuristically separating them from her declared rejection of the new fiction. Focusing again on that rejection helps us to see the cohesiveness of her stated views of *fin-de-siècle* literary developments, including not only the new fiction but Aestheticism as well.

Besides pronouncing art distinct from the sphere of moral action ("superbly sterile"), the preface of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* trumpets the high value of art's beautiful form. Wilde privileges this form over content, manner over matter, surface over depth: "All art is once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril."<sup>46</sup> There is no point and even a disadvantage to probing beneath beautiful form, since doing so leads only to message, and potentially an ugly (punitively moralistic) message at that. For all the antirealism presented in works such as "The Decay of Lying," Corelli seems to have identified a similarity between the Wildean viewpoint and the new realism based on what she judged as their shared surface-ism, as we might call it. For her, both were hyperattentive to the material surface—to the world of the senses—and inversely both were sorely inattentive to any moral or spiritual content that might lie beneath that surface. In

*The Sorrows of Satan*, Sibyl characterizes the new fiction as grossly attuned to the physical, as “filled with ... sensual and materialistic views of life and its responsibilities,” and this materialism is aligned with a scientifically Godless *Zeitgeist*: “We are persistently taught that we are animals and nothing more.... Animalism and atheism are approved by the scientists ... —and the clergy are powerless to enforce the faith they preach.”<sup>47</sup> As *The Sorrows of Satan* goes on to intimate, there is a continuity between the narrowly empiricist gaze of the new fiction and the Aesthetes’ hedonistic love of sensual form. This is why when Sibyl recounts her reading history she can move so quickly from Zola to Swinburne. Sibyl says she has been especially “poisoned” by reading Swinburne’s “Before a Crucifix,” which, in representing Christ, voids all spiritual content, reducing him merely to a body, a “thing” on a cross, a “carrion crucified.” Simultaneously the poem seduces with its mellifluous style: Sibyl remembers her “pleasure in the musical swing and jangle of rhythm” and the poem’s “ornate language and persuasive rhymes.”<sup>48</sup>

Once we recognize how pointedly Corelli repudiated Aesthetic and new realist surface-ism, we can also recognize how seriously she took the authorial task of defying literary trends by trying to communicate a deeper spiritual reality to her readers. What emerges in *The Sorrows of Satan* is a perspective that points up a *real* reality, so to speak, beyond the usual reach of the sensory world.<sup>49</sup> This perspective underlies all of the novel’s depictions of good and evil but is most explicit in the climactic scene in which Lucio discloses his Satanic identity to Geoffrey. On a yacht ride into mystical regions, Lucio reveals a landscape peopled by damned souls, including the man who bequeathed Geoffrey his wealth, now “liv[ing] again in a new and much more *realistic* phase of existence.” The importance of this lesson is reinforced when Lucio commands Geoffrey: “know from henceforth that the Supernatural Universe in and around the Natural is no lie—but the chief Reality, inasmuch as God surroundeth all!” Geoffrey comes away reformed by his “unprecedented experience of the awful Reality of the Spirit-world around us,”<sup>50</sup> as Corelli no doubt meant for her readers to be as well.

Counterintuitive as it may seem, Corelli offers a romance as a way to grasp “Reality.” Yet this seems less counterintuitive once we consider that the romance opens up an opportunity to imagine, and thus conceptualize, an existence unperceivable beyond life’s material façade. It is because imagination possesses, then, both artistic and divinely elevating potential that Corelli laments its decline in the modern age.

Her essay “The Vanishing Gift” affirms that imagination lies “[a]part from the pleasures of the material senses which we share in common with our friends and fellows of the brute creation”: it is a “wonderful spiritual faculty” and (here she quotes an Eastern adage) “the Sun-dial of the Soul on which God flashes the true time of day.” When Corelli remarks that “the things we call ‘imaginative’ are often far more real than what we call ‘realism,’” despite the fact that “[a]ll that we touch, taste, and see, we call ‘real,’” she provides a brief for her own fanciful, spiritualized type of realism.<sup>51</sup>

This realism, together with its distinction from the materialist variety she censured as *fin-de-siècle* fashion, percolates through *The Sorrows of Satan* more subtly in the figure of the mirror. In the nineteenth century the mirror was a frequent metaphor for realism due to its capacity to represent life mimetically. Perhaps the best known example of this usage is George Eliot’s excursus in chapter seventeen of *Adam Bede* (1859), when the intrusive narrator rejects idealized representations of life, opting instead for a “faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind. The mirror is doubtless defective; the outlines will sometimes be disturbed; the reflection faint or confused; but I feel as much bound to tell you, as precisely as I can, what that reflection is, as if I were in the witness-box narrating my experience on oath.”<sup>52</sup> Likewise, a more or less figurative mirror motif runs through *The Sorrows of Satan*. On the one hand, this motif is used to again criticize contemporary realism. Sibyl describes the “new’ fiction” as “literature [that] is supposed to reflect the time we live in ... we are compelled to accept and study it as the mirror of the age.”<sup>53</sup> Her gloss on what this fiction is “supposed” to do hints at the actual shallow falsity of its reflection.

On the other hand, Corelli elsewhere uses the image of the mirror to accentuate moments in which her characters glimpse the deeper spiritual plane of life (“Reality”). Hence *The Sorrows of Satan* works its mirror symbolism on two levels: both to critique a false, materialist realism and to carry out a true, transcendental realism. One instance of the latter occurs in that yachting scene, when Geoffrey sees the faces of the damned. Looking on them he realizes that with his own history of wealthy self-indulgences, he could easily be one of them, and this realization is rendered as a mirroring: “as they stared upon me I beheld another spectral thing—the image of Myself! ... every detail of my life was suddenly presented to me as in a magic mirror, and I read my own chronicle of paltry intellectual pride, vulgar ambition,

and vulgarer ostentation....”<sup>54</sup> Another instance of transcendently true mirroring involves the scene of Sibyl’s death. As the narrative repeatedly notes, her last moments were spent gazing at her “face in the glass,” where she saw herself become gruesomely altered.<sup>55</sup> When Geoffrey finds her dead body, her features are so misshapen that—in a distinct echo from the conclusion of the story of another facially distorted character, Dorian Gray (on whom, again, Corelli partially patterns her Sibyl)—Geoffrey has to “stud[y] every ring upon” her hand, as if for a “clue to [her] identity.”<sup>56</sup> Previously, the face of Sibyl’s mother, another sexually sinful woman, has been similarly altered after a mysterious tête-à-tête with Lucio. When Sibyl then tries to seduce him, he taunts her with her mother’s transformation—“her face in her last days was the reflex of her soul”—and tells her likewise, “your mirror shows you a pleasing image—but your mirror lies!—as admirably as you do! You see within it not the reflection of yourself, for that would cause you to recoil in horror.... Your beauty! I see none of it—I see YOU!” Sibyl’s suicide note implies that in the throes of death she likewise glimpsed her eternal punishment; thus her corpse as Geoffrey finds it, “grinning hideously at her own mirrored ghastliness,” confirms Satan’s message by confirming her real self: its real ugliness and existential destiny.<sup>57</sup>

One of the ways Corelli’s novel is in dialogue with *The Picture of Dorian Gray* involves her transformation of Wilde’s own use of the mirror as a figure for realism. In his preface, Wilde focuses a pair of epigrams on Caliban, the monstrous character of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, as Caliban looks at himself in a mirror. These epigrams are Wilde’s sardonic reaction to *fin-de-siècle* realism and the debates around it; he is conveying his disdain for this fiction in the first place, plus taking a jab at the narcissism of the bourgeois reading public, here represented by Caliban: “The nineteenth century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass. The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.”<sup>58</sup> The first epigram points to the contemporary penchant for realism and to the reading public’s moralistic repulsion (“rage”) at the candid, base, and ugly pictures of themselves that it reflects. The second picks up on the narcissism implied in the first but represents that narcissism from another angle: the reading public are equally unhappy with romance simply because as nonmimetic it fails to give them back their own image. The two epigrams together form a paradox, in that the reading public simultaneously craves and maligns the realism of the age. Wilde is an author known for his love of paradox, and this one

is replicated in his novel's plot itself. We glimpse Caliban's contradictory attraction to and repulsion from the mirror in Dorian's vain but also horrified relationship to the painting's rendering of himself.

The name of Corelli's protagonist, Geoffrey Tempest, already suggests her play on the Caliban epigrams, and her mirror theme also explores her contemporaries' narcissistic resistance to negative self-reflections. In *The Sorrows of Satan*, narcissism is tightly allied with excessive attachment to material gratifications—for example the wealthy pleasures, including Sibyl's purchased "love," in which Geoffrey wallows before his yacht-ride epiphany.<sup>59</sup> "[S]ensual egotism," Satan authoritatively states, is the "chief crime of the age."<sup>60</sup> Fundamentally, though, Corelli's own take on mirroring and self-love rebukes Wilde's Aesthetic epigrams by castigating the preference for shallow beauty over deep content. Repeatedly in *The Sorrows of Satan* we are given characters who gaze at images of themselves that they find self-gratifyingly attractive when in fact, according to a transcendent moral standard, these images are revolting. We glimpse a simpler case of this motif in Sibyl's death scene, in her initial sensual pleasure at her mirrored self—"How beautiful I am!"<sup>61</sup>—a pleasure that becomes terror as the mirror begins to reflect what Satan has warned her is her inner state. But elsewhere Corelli offers more complicated cases in which there is no physical change of the kind Sibyl sees: the reflection remains stable, and yet the reader is supposed to comprehend it on two levels. That is, the mirror returns only one image, but an image that is simultaneously beautiful and ugly, because simultaneously shallow and deep, illusory and true, real and Real. The result is a paradox of Corelli's own invention, one that operates on a model of surface versus depth.

Take once more the episode wherein Geoffrey finds Sibyl's corpse, focusing this time on him. Still stung by her play for Lucio, Geoffrey mocks his dead wife for her disfiguration: "Now Sibyl ... we are alone, you and I—alone with our own reflected images—you dead, and I living! You have no terrors for me in your present condition—your beauty has gone. Your smile, your eyes, your touch cannot stir me to a throb of the passion you craved, yet wearied of!" This behavior, rooted in his hurt pride (and of a piece with his egotism—an "arrogant and confident trust in myself"), is ugly in the extreme.<sup>62</sup> What Corelli also implies in juxtaposing Geoffrey with Sibyl in front of the mirror is that his self-satisfaction prevents him from seeing either this ugliness or his own sinfulness—including the tendency for sensual self-indulgence that prompted him to marry Sibyl in the first place—which is equally as

reprehensible as hers. Corelli underlines this meaning in the similarity of their physical position and of their gaze in front of the mirror: "I sat back for a moment in my chair, almost as rigid as the corpse beside me—I stared again, as the corpse stared always, into the mirror which pictured us both, we 'twain as one,' as the sentimentalists aver of wedded folk, though in truth it often happens that there are no two creatures in the world more widely separated than husband and wife."<sup>63</sup> Secure in his self-image, Geoffrey asserts a strong separation, including a moral separation from his adulterous wife. But their twin reflections hint at the reality of his own moral hideousness.

The idea of the dual-level reflection is also key to the novel's characterization of Satan: he is a living mirror. As he ultimately confesses to Geoffrey, "I come in the shape [men's] pride or vice demands, and am as one with all. Self finds in me another Ego."<sup>64</sup> In his guise of Lucio Rimánez, a charismatic, handsome, and wealthy prince, Satan embodies Geoffrey's vain ambitions for erotic mastery and social renown in an especially beautiful form, concealing their actual ugliness. Moreover, Satan's very behavior with Geoffrey is an attitudinal mimicry, or mirroring, designed to reflect back Geoffrey's sense of self. In other words, the most conspicuous element in their relationship is Satan's ostensible sympathy, his "infinite compassion." Geoffrey tells his new companion: "I find you most sympathetic to my disposition, and I consider myself most fortunate in knowing you." Satan seems for instance to share in Geoffrey's pain after Sibyl's near-cuckolding and death: "You have been thinking of your wife?" he queried softly and, as I thought, sympathetically." But the retrospectively narrating Geoffrey's "as I thought" clarifies the error of his earlier days. Satan's is always only an "apparent sympathy," a diabolical reinforcement of Geoffrey's egoistic emotions and desires, in this case his self-pity. There is indeed often a frequent scornful derision just beneath Satan's talk of Geoffrey's privileges, ambitions, and self-pity. At times Geoffrey picks up on this "ironical tone" and is vaguely "vexed" by it, but then abandons all doubts: "I felt he was sorry for me despite his love of satire."<sup>65</sup> Satan reflects what his companion most wants to perceive. The other, truer, contemptible image also given back by this glass incarnate is one Geoffrey chooses not to dwell on.

But *The Sorrows of Satan's* most vivid illustration of shallow-cum-deep mirroring involves the extravagant engagement party Lucio throws for Geoffrey and Sibyl. As entertainment for hundreds of rich guests, Satan sets up a miniature theater on which are staged a series

of tableaux vivants, all clearly representations of immoral tendencies in high society—a wealthy woman ignoring a poor beggar, a palace of self-“absorbed” rich folk ignoring the “wistful” gaze of an angel poised above them, and (of course) a young girl idling on a couch reading a smutty novel. This is more of Satan’s mirror work: the tableaux display the vice and hedonism of the very people at the engagement gala. But while at moments disconcerted, the gala’s guests more often than not fail to take these ugly self-images seriously, instead acclaiming their cleverness and strange aesthetic magnificence. Viewing the one called “His Latest Purchase,” which depicts a brutish man and his newly bought bride miserably adorned by gold and gems, one guest blithely observes: “A capital type of most fashionable marriages!” Only Sibyl, always half-jaded, half tragically self-aware, looks wan at recognizing the story of her own marriage, just as the tableau of the smutty novel reader has made her exclaim: “That is a *true* picture!... Geoffrey, it is painfully true!”<sup>66</sup> On one level, Satan’s tableaux depict the short-sighted, selfish habits of the party’s guests as mere tableaux, as fictional, the stuff of the theater. Yet on another level, the tableaux really are, as Sibyl gleans, *vivant*—living and true—because they mirror the moral content of their viewers’ lives, a content that will be inescapable in the afterlife. As the narrating Geoffrey remarks thinking back on this divertingly “gorgeous dream” of a gala, the future “will prove all the more a terrible Reality in proportion to the extent of our presumption in daring to doubt its truth.”<sup>67</sup>

The tableaux vivants episode encapsulates well Corelli’s consciousness of Oscar Wilde, for the scene represents her quarrel not only with his prizing of the artistic surface, but also with his assertions on artistic spectatorship. On the curtain of Lucio’s stage are printed the Shakespearean lines: “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players”; these lines are important enough to the scene that Corelli repeats them twice, pages apart, proffering them as a pithy aphorism or epigram. In fact they function as an epigrammatic retort to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’s preface, counteracting Wilde’s misguided love of the unreal surface—the stage and its actors—as opposed to the spiritual reality that always lies beneath. At the same time, the tableaux scene responds to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*’s avowal of the subjective nature of artistic spectatorship. In alleging that “It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors,” Wilde denies the artwork’s objectively realistic content and insists on art’s variable perception from individual to individual. The tableaux vivants in *The Sorrows*

of *Satan* do mirror back their spectators, but in a way that undoes the Aesthetic fetishization of the subjective gaze. In reflecting the moral selves of the audience, the tableaux capture an unequivocal reality, independent of what the spectators themselves recognize.

### Corelli & the Realist Tradition

Satan's stage work at the gala doubles an earlier theatrical scene in the novel, Geoffrey and Sibyl's first encounter as spectators at a scandalous play of social analysis, a "problem" drama à la Henrik Ibsen, an icon of realism in the English *fin-de-siècle* debates.<sup>68</sup> Like the protagonist of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Geoffrey meets his Sibyl at the theater; the progression of *The Sorrows of Satan* from one theatrical scene to another transforms Sibyl Elton from spectator into Sibyl Vane's more vulnerable position as spectacle—or rather collapses the two positions together, as Sibyl Elton sees herself mirrored in the tableaux. Viewing herself through the lens of Satan's transcendent realism allows Sibyl Elton to see her life and its moral stakes in a way she never could as an observer of Ibsenian realism. As another Corelli essay maintains, "In what is called the 'problem' novel or the 'problem' play, the authors manage so to befuddle the brains of their readers, that they hardly know whether virtue is vice or vice virtue. This is putting the power of the pen to unfair and harmful uses."<sup>69</sup>

There is of course a metafictional component to the lesson of Satan's tableaux, pointing back to Corelli's belief that writers are obligated to avoid ethical glibness and instead depict profound moral realities. Her view is categorical—"The Power of the Pen should define Right from Wrong with absolute certainty"—and entails certain presumptions not just about fiction's ethics but its representational capacities as well.<sup>70</sup> A main irony of Corelli's romance as romance is that it is more confident in the "absolute certainty" or objectivity of the fictional mirror of life than were even Victorian works we typically designate as realist. George Levine has shown that the nineteenth century's most noted realist authors were consistently aware of the constraints of the media of language and story.<sup>71</sup> Eliot, for instance, purports to speak as from the "witness-box," but she also acknowledges that this testimony comes down to subjective images, images as "they have mirrored themselves in my mind": the mirror's reflection might well be "defective," "disturbed," "faint or confused."<sup>72</sup> By contrast Corelli has faith not just in a constant spiritual reality, but also in the author's ability to convey it to the reader.<sup>73</sup>

Thinking about Corelli alongside Eliot may look like comparing apples and oranges, but it actually takes a cue from Corelli's own writing on writing, which singles out earlier realist authors as icons of great fiction. Here she is for instance quarreling with the Ishbosheth's perception of "strong" literature: "There are other 'strong' books in the world, thank Heaven—strong books which treat strongly of noble examples of human life, love and endeavour—books like those of Scott and Dickens and Brontë and Eliot—books which make the world all the better for reading them."<sup>74</sup> Remarkably, and despite our sense of her as a die-hard romancer, Corelli's benchmarks are authors focused not on fantasy but on human experience in socially complex worlds. Yet as she sees it, this experience ennobles characters rather than simply dragging them through the muck of existence in plots that appall and sicken the reader.

In many respects Corelli's transcendental realism is a nostalgic return to earlier-nineteenth-century British forms of realism, which she mourns have been displaced by the new fiction of the *fin de siècle*. One of the features of realism that the new fiction jettisoned was its compatibility with the fanciful or imaginative. As Stephen Arata notes, the new fiction's critics denounced the influence of French realism (Zola and others) in part by denigrating grimy and pedestrian detail and, inversely, glorifying a homegrown tradition known for its "leavening of idealism (or, alternately, of romanticism)," as for instance in Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853), whose preface promises an exploration of "the romantic side of familiar things."<sup>75</sup> It is just this sort of hybridization that, to take another example, makes it difficult to categorize Charlotte Brontë's principal works, to know whether to call them realist or Gothic. Corelli's fiction takes advantage of similar continuities, even if in her case the weight falls more obviously on the "romantic side."<sup>76</sup> Just as central to her reminiscence of prior English realism is the fact that her representation of reality is guided by a staunch moral framework. Earlier authors may have differed in the particularities of their own frameworks—with Dickens or Brontë tending to Christianity, while Eliot embraced an agnostic humanism—yet they nonetheless treated them as delimitations, evident in their works' temperateness and didactic consciousness of the audience. These limits set them apart from the putatively louche terrain of the new fiction, again thankfully in the opinion of detractors.<sup>77</sup>

The moral bent of earlier-nineteenth-century realism stemmed from a sense of the author's shared concerns or worldview with his or her

audience. But this basic sense, a community between authors, readers, as well as characters was said to be absent from the new fiction. Here was another major transformation, according to this fiction's opponents: its observational rigor made for a more distanced, matter-of-fact mode, in contrast to the compassionate and concerned tone of previous novels; the "turn away from sympathy was perceived by many as the defining feature of the late-Victorian realism."<sup>78</sup> This was another change Corelli would have strongly disapproved of, given how she exalted her own relationship to her readers. Corelli often protested that the opinion of the public, who bought her books in droves, was more trustworthy than the dismissive opinion of the critics. It is tempting to take this claim as self-serving (as well as an obstinate reversal of the valuation of "Average Opinion" offered within the new fiction debates). Probably there was something of that nature in it, but evidently she also genuinely treasured what she saw as her connection to her audience and esteemed it as a measure of good and powerful literature. A main ingredient of "The Happy Life" of the author, as she labels it in an essay thus titled, is "the love and sympathy of unknown thousands of one's fellow-creatures which it brings." Nor, she tells us in "The Power of the Pen," would she ever write merely for money on "schemes and subjects with which I have no sympathy."<sup>79</sup> We need to understand how essential the idea of an affective community was to Corelli's mode of writing, with that writing's purpose of communicating overlooked spiritual realities to readers.

It is just because this important emotional loop uniting author, text, and reader has been broken—or more exactly never existed—that Geoffrey's book flops in *The Sorrows of Satan*. It is (artificially) successful with the critics but, to his chagrin, has "not touched the heart of the public."<sup>80</sup> The reason is simple: the book expresses spiritual sentiments that Geoffrey himself does not possess—"I, in my present self have no sympathy with it"—and as Lucio in his higher wisdom knows, the public are picking up on this lack of wholeheartedness. "[I]n order to write with intense feeling," Lucio says, "you must first *feel*," but his wealth has deprived Geoffrey of such sensitivity, including any "sympathy" with others' pains, and additionally his faith was already in doubt when he was poor and writing: "you did not believe in God even when you wrote the words that imply His existence.... Therefore the book was not the result of sincere conviction, and that's the key-note of your failure to reach the large audience you desired."<sup>81</sup> The only consolation the devil can offer is that "after all this is a common failing

of modern literature; few authors feel sufficiently themselves to make others feel.”<sup>82</sup> The fate of Geoffrey’s book is in short another document of modern egoistic materialism, and at first he only hazily and querulously comprehends this as his work’s failure to mirror himself: “the book is not Me—it is not a reflex of my feelings at all—and I cannot understand how I came to write it.”<sup>83</sup> Like Lucio as diabolical companion, the book is a false instrument of sympathy, its real intent being to indulge Geoffrey’s pride. By contrast, Mavis Clare reaches out through her writing to others (in the process reflecting the best of them as well as herself); hence her terrific success with the public: “many people love my books, and through my books love me—I feel their love, though I may never see or know them personally. But I am so conscious of their sympathy that I love them in return without the necessity of personal acquaintance. They have hearts which respond to *my* heart—that is all the power I care about.”<sup>84</sup>

Corelli demonstrates, out of all her admiration for earlier realists, a special fondness for Dickens. Here for her is the epitome of an author tightly bonded to his readership. Dickens “‘captured the fancy of the masses’ and lives in the hearts and homes of thousands,” despite (she says) the opprobrium of critics, who belittled him precisely for his popularity.<sup>85</sup> Corelli claims the ridiculousness of “superfine persons” who still dare to find Dickens’s material and mass appeal “vulgar”:

Is love, is pity, is tenderness, is faith “vulgar”? Is kindness to the poor, patience with the suffering, tolerance—for all men and creeds “vulgar”? If so, then, Charles Dickens *was* vulgar! not a doubt of it! Few authors have ever been so blessedly, gloriously “vulgar” as he! What marvellous pictures his “power of the pen” conjures up at once before our eyes!... And when we “go” with such great authors as these—and by this I mean, when we are determined to be one with them—we shall win such victories over our hearts and minds, our passions and desires, as shall make us better and stronger men and women.<sup>86</sup>

The idea of “going” with an author like Dickens is important enough that Corelli elaborates on it a few pages later. What she means is that readers must let themselves be swept away imaginatively: “But to get all the enjoyment out of an author’s imagination, we, who read his books, must ourselves ‘imagine’ with him. We must let him take us where he will.”<sup>87</sup> It is worth pausing over Corelli’s implicit conjunction of readers’ imaginations with their emotional convictions and interest in the fictional world, for this looks very much like nineteenth-century realism as Rae Greiner has recently described it. As she argues, Dickens and others practiced a “sympathetic realism” founded on principles

in Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), according to which sympathy involves not an immediate emotional identification but rather a challenging process of imagination. Smith's sympathy requires that the individual mentally represent or recreate another's circumstances as a precondition for feeling something for him or her; this creative intellection produces fellow feeling, and with it a sense of shared reality—with living people, or with the literary characters and situations we designate as realist. Smith recurs frequently to the expression of “going along with” others, to evoke a notion of sympathy as (in Greiner's words) “imagined mental companionship.”<sup>88</sup> That Corelli uses the same phrasing as Smith is something more than coincidence, in that it reinforces the generic implications of her own use of the term *imagination*. As she advocates it, this term only seems to mean utter romantic fancy or escape from reality. While Corelli's landscapes are fantastical, they are also ones she means the reader to care about and believe in as representations of higher truths. For her as for the Smithian realists, imagination is the route by which readers feel allied with authors through their mutual faith in the existentially meaningful worlds fiction portrays.

As a writer Corelli attended closely to the category of the real, and analyzing her management of this category enhances our understanding of her genre. Further, it points up the organic interconnections between her generic practice and her views on authorial affect, the reading public, and the ethical exigencies of literature. Romance and realism were for her two sides of the same coin, not opposed terms; yet this dual aesthetic was only possible through a revision of each of these modes as carried out by her contemporaries—a revision of Wilde's imaginative yet seemingly cavalier “lying” on the one hand and of the new realists' vile materialism on the other. *The Sorrows of Satan's* own straying into new realist territory only attests to the extremity of Corelli's exasperation at the literary scene, which she felt extolled inferior works while devaluing authors like Mavis Clare, and thus the sine qua non of great fiction: the text as a broad instrument for depicting essential certainties. Corelli pushed back against turn-of-the-century generic developments, rejecting what she saw as “strong” yet merely “vulgar” new fiction. In the process she revised each of those terms as well in order to celebrate literary qualities that others, veering toward an aesthetic of distance, deprecated as feminine—as emotionally invested and overly attuned to reader responsiveness. As she countered, good fiction does not shun but instead embraces this sym-

pathetic, far-reaching concern for the reader as other: at their best, *vulgarity* means popularity, *strength* means moral excellence, and the popular moral romance is a place where author and audience meet to reaffirm spiritual Reality.

## Notes

1. Walter Besant, "Candour in English Fiction," in *Popular Print Media, 1820–1900*, Andrew King and John Plunkett, eds. (London: Routledge, 2004), III: 476–77.
2. Thomas Hardy, "Candour in English Fiction," in *Popular Print Media*, III: 490.
3. Eliza Lynn Linton, "Candour in English Fiction," in *Popular Print Media*, III: 481, 484.
4. For a concise overview of the "new realism," see Stephen Arata, "Realism," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, Gail Marshall, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 169–87.
5. Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, Peter Keating, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 162.
6. *Ibid.*, 71.
7. *Ibid.*, 245.
8. *Ibid.*, 324.
9. Simon James briefly ties Sibyl to 1890s debates over proper literary content and to the Young Person as seen in publications like the "Candour" symposium, comparing Sibyl's experience of noxious literary "influence" to that of other literary figures, including Dorian Gray. See "Marie Corelli and the Value of Literary Self-Consciousness: Popular Fiction, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and the Fin-de-Siècle Canon," *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 18 (2013), 143. Worth emphasizing further is how central ideas of realism were to the type of reader Sibyl represents.
10. Marie Corelli, *Free Opinions Freely Expressed on Certain Phases of Modern Social Life and Conduct* (London: Constable, 1905), 287. All of Corelli's essays henceforth referred to derive from this collection.
11. An exception is Kirsten MacLeod, who notes Corelli's scandalized antirealism through the character of Sibyl in *The Sorrows of Satan*. See "Marie Corelli and Fin-de-Siècle Francophobia: The Absinthe Trail of French Art," *ELT*, 43.1 (2000), 66–82. But MacLeod's main focus is *Wormwood* (1890) and Corelli's reaction to perceived French influences such as Zola and absinthe; see especially 70–71. I am ultimately interested in Corelli's sense of herself as an author vis-à-vis the British *fin-de-siècle* literary field and Britain's own realist tradition.
12. Corelli knew Wilde socially and even contributed an article to his magazine, the *Woman's World*, but their acquaintance was no longer amicable by 1895, the year of *The Sorrows of Satan's* publication (and Wilde's trials). Corelli depicts Wilde as a posturing elephant in her satire on contemporary literary culture, *The Silver Domino* (1892). Some initially took her to be the author of Robert Hichens's anonymously published defamatory fictional portrait of Wilde, *The Green Carnation* (1894). See Angela Kingston, *Oscar Wilde as a Character in Victorian Fiction* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 95–100.
13. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1997), 779.
14. Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Robert Mighall, ed. (London: Penguin, 2000), 3–4.
15. Other critics have stressed Corelli's borrowing of Decadent and sensationalistic elements from Wilde's novel. Annette Federico argues that Corelli appropriates Decadence censoriously yet opportunistically for her bourgeois readership, as in *The Sorrows of Satan's* replay of *The Picture of Dorian Gray's* homoeroticism. See *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 78–83. MacLeod comments on the intimate male-male influence in both novels, also noting that the Sibyl in each is "overly susceptible to the influence of art." See "Marie Corelli and Fin-de-Siècle Francophobia," 81 n. 21.

16. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 3.

17. *Ibid.*, 208.

18. My reading sidesteps many of the complexities, including the ambiguities, of Wilde's own investigation of the relationship between art, morality, and aesthetic consumption in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as I believe Corelli was more concerned with his blanket statements, most significantly in his preface. Likewise Wilde's (and others') Aesthetic antirealism is arguably more politically and ethically engaged than his aphoristic declarations imply and than Corelli's response to them allows. On Aestheticism's compatibility with socialist utopianism, for example, see Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, "William Morris, Print Culture, and the Politics of Aestheticism," *Modernism/modernity*, 15.3 (2008), 477–502.

19. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 162.

20. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 248.

21. *Ibid.*, 245–46.

22. *Ibid.*, 248.

23. Linton, "Candour in English Fiction," 481.

24. Hardy, "Candour in English Fiction," 487.

25. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 249, 248.

26. *Ibid.*, 250.

27. On Corelli's mix of reactionary and progressive views of women, see Janet Galligani Casey, "Marie Corelli and Fin de Siècle Feminism," *ELT*, 35 (1992), 162–78, and Federico, *Idol of Suburbia*, especially 94–127.

28. On New Woman fiction as a species of the new realism, see Ann L. Ardis, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990), and Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 10–38. Also on the fraught place of the New Woman novel in relation to turn-of-the-century ideas of gender, genre, and literary art, see Lyn Pykett, *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995), 54–76.

29. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 245.

30. On this ultimate gender coding of the new realism as feminine, see Miller, *Rebel Women*, and Ardis, *New Women, New Novels*. Mary Hammond explores the late-Victorian dichotomy of masculine realist art and feminine popular romance, with Corelli as a case in point, but also shows how mobile and dependent these terms were on authors' self-representation and on their relationship to the critical establishment. See *Reading, Publishing and the Formation of Literary Taste in England 1880–1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 117–53.

31. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 247–48.

32. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 6–7.

33. *Ibid.*, 81, 83.

34. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 250.

35. *Ibid.*, 249–50.

36. *Ibid.*, 249.

37. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 3, 4. Christine Ferguson also notes the stylistic aberration of the novel's opening Gissing-like touches. See *Language, Science and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 70 n. 22.

38. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 59, 82. Possibly a reference to James Knowles, founder of the magazine *Nineteenth Century*.

39. W. T. Stead, "The Sorrows of Satan—and of Marie Corelli," *Review of Reviews*, 12 (1895), 453.

40. *Ibid.*, 453.

41. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 344.

42. Martin Hipsky, *Modernism and the Women's Popular Romance in Britain, 1885–1925* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011), 81.

43. Stead, "The Sorrows of Satan," 453.
44. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 192.
45. *Ibid.*, 254.
46. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 4.
47. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 163, 249–50.
48. *Ibid.*, 325–27.
49. Critics have sometimes noticed Corelli's effort to depict such a reality but swiftly fold it into her romance mode rather than exploring it on its own terms as a key element of her genre. Julia Kuehn observes that Corelli's *Ardath* (1889) "deconstruct[s]" contemporary materialist realism by privileging the romance's "transcendental and metaphysical" notions of reality, yet draws back from the full implications of these observations to pursue Corelli's romance techniques and claim this author's "unabashed rejection of realism." See *Glorious Vulgarly: Marie Corelli's Feminine Sublime in a Popular Context* (Berlin: Logos, 2004), 23–24, 76. See similarly James, "Marie Corelli and the Value of Literary Self-Consciousness," 148–49. Ferguson suggests that romance is Corelli's favored form for representing a "visionary" reality or "divine *logos*" instinctively understood by the masses but beyond language and embodiment (*Language, Science and Popular Fiction*, 64, 63).
50. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 371 (my emphasis), 378, 381.
51. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 273, 289, 278.
52. George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, Valentine Cunningham, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 175.
53. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 246.
54. *Ibid.*, 379.
55. *Ibid.*, 337.
56. *Ibid.*, 315. Compare: "He was withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage. It was not till [his servants] had examined the rings that they recognized who it was" (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 213).
57. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 292, 290, 339.
58. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 3.
59. In "Rewriting Faust: Marie Corelli's Female Tragedy," *Victorians Institute Journal*, 33 (2005), 149–77, Kristen Guest focuses on the gendering of this egotism, reading Corelli's version of the Faust tragedy as a repudiation of masculine self-assertion in favor of feminine self-sacrifice and emotionalism.
60. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 371–72.
61. *Ibid.*, 333.
62. *Ibid.*, 317, 362.
63. *Ibid.*, 318.
64. *Ibid.*, 378–79.
65. *Ibid.*, 300, 32, 350, 362, 305.
66. *Ibid.*, 223.
67. *Ibid.*, 227–28.
68. On Ibsen's centrality to late-Victorian discussions of realism, see Aaron Matz, *Satire in an Age of Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105–41.
69. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 307.
70. *Ibid.*, 306–307.
71. George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

72. On Eliot's implication of realism's subjective perspective here, see also Rachel Bowlby, foreword, *A Concise Companion to Realism*, Matthew Beaumont, ed., rev. ed. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xix.

73. It is this possibility (implied also in *The Sorrows of Satan's* dual-level reflections) that complicates Ferguson's claim, in comparing characters' differing perceptions of Lucio to the perceptual dynamics in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, that "*Sorrows* puts truth beyond representation. There is no stable point of meaning around which a group of spectators may view together and form a consensus" (*Language, Science and Popular Fiction*, 65).

74. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 250.

75. Arata, "Realism," 173; Dickens quoted on 174.

76. And, parallel to Brontë's case, on the side of the Gothic specifically. For a reading of *The Sorrows of Satan* as a turn-of-the-century updating of the Gothic, see Benjamin F. Fisher, "Marie Corelli's *Barrabas*, *The Sorrows of Satan*, and Generic Tradition," *Women's Writing*, 13.2 (2006), 304–20. On *The Sorrows of Satan* and other Corelli novels' Gothic pastiche of religious concepts, see Elaine M. Hartnell, "Morals and Metaphysics: Marie Corelli, Religion and the Gothic," *Women's Writing*, 13.2 (2006), 284–303.

77. Compare Corelli's response to French realism in her efforts to render absinthe addiction accurately in *Wormwood*: while rejecting Zola's contemporary Naturalism, Corelli imitated what she saw as the "moralized realism" of an earlier Frenchman, Honoré de Balzac, also viewing it as more compatible with melodrama (MacLeod, "Marie Corelli and *Fin-de-Siècle* Francophobia," 73).

78. Arata, "Realism," 178. One way to view this turn is toward the more distancing, acerbic tendencies of satire; see *Satire in an Age of Realism*.

79. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 339, 296. On Corelli's sympathetic connection to readers, see Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 96–97.

80. Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan*, 198.

81. *Ibid.*, 62, 63, 207.

82. *Ibid.*, 82.

83. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

84. *Ibid.*, 277.

85. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 25. Dickens had indeed been known for his intimate authorial mode, which Rachel Ablow suggests invited a reading experience comparable to wifely sympathy. See *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 17–44.

86. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 300. It is possible to read Mavis Clare's naming of her birds as an homage to Miss Flite in *Bleak House* (1852–1853), whose dubbed birds also symbolize frustration and personal injustice (her blighted hopes in Chancery). Corelli evidently knew *Bleak House* well; see her essay "The Decay of Home Life in England," which considers the scene where Mr. Rouncewell wants his future daughter-in-law to leave the Dedlocks' service because of Lady Dedlock's sinful past (*Free Opinions*, 222–24). Interestingly Corelli's reading of the scene fails to notice Dickens's (albeit measured) sympathy for Lady Dedlock. The misreading reinforces that for all Corelli's championing of "tolerance for all men and creeds," her ideal sympathetic community of author, reader, and text was limited to those who shared her sometimes quite conservative moral values.

87. Corelli, *Free Opinions*, 303.

88. Rae Greiner, *Sympathetic Realism in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 16.

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