

Feeling, Affect, Melancholy, Loss: Millais's *Autumn Leaves* and the Siege of Sebastopol

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John Everett Millais's *Autumn Leaves* has long been a painting explicitly associated with feeling (Fig. 1). When it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1856, one of the most positive reviews came from Joanna Boyce — painter, critic, and friend of the Pre-Raphaelites — writing in the *Saturday Review*. She celebrated the painting for communicating 'depth of feeling' rather than 'depth of thought' — for its emotional, rather than its intellectual power.¹

This very familiar work provides a highly useful starting place when it comes to approaching the topic of feeling in relation to art. I am primarily concerned with three major questions. First, the location of feeling — do we see feeling as residing within the artist, and/or within the subject matter, and/or the mode of representation, and/or the spectator? Second, I quite emphatically position and consider *Autumn Leaves* in the context of the mid-1850s, and ask that we think about the historicization of feeling: how best do we assess the terms that were available to describe it or understand it when it was first exhibited. I then ask — how does the nature of the feelings expressed in relation to a work of art shift over time, and how do the means of recognizing and naming these feelings change? How might feeling be produced or intensified by specific circumstances? Third — and coming out of this second line of approach — I consider the role played by medium specificity when it comes to sparking feeling. I'm interested both in the implications of the style of this particular work, and also in the broader issues of what, if anything, are distinct about the feelings produced by a painting and by a photograph.

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¹ [Joanna Boyce], 'The Royal Academy', *Saturday Review*, 10 May 1856, pp. 31–32 (p. 32).



Fig. 1: John Everett Millais, *Autumn Leaves*, 1856, Manchester Art Gallery.
Wikimedia Commons.

Prefacing all of this are a number of questions that are common to any consideration of the arts and feeling — not least, the ontological problem of how to *define* feeling. How do we distinguish it — assuming that we wish to — from emotion and from affect? I have a hard time drawing a clean-cut line between emotion and feeling — although I'll venture that emotions can be identified with some certainty: love, hate, jealousy, and so on. Feelings are perhaps more nebulous, more indefinite — regret, enthusiasm, interest, nostalgia, melancholia. All the same, I will be using 'feelings' and 'emotions' relatively interchangeably in what follows: I'm not looking to make any fine and nuanced discrimination between them. Affect, however, is — to my understanding (and a good starting point for its definition is provided by the materials gathered together in Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth's *Affect Theory Reader*) somewhat distinct from the concept of emotion *or* feeling: it is that which it is hard to put a name to, recognizable when one knows that one is having some kind of somatic reaction as a result of one's contact with something outside of oneself, but that whatever is happening is not necessarily taking place at a conscious level.² In all cases, one's emotions, feelings, or perception of affect are not subject to volitional control. We may be able to explain or rationalize them retrospectively, but such rationalization generally carries with it a sense of inadequacy, of being supplemental to these sensations, and finding that language can never be entirely adequate in conveying that original impression. I share Richard Wollheim's position that 'emotions are attitudes we construct in order to make sense of shifts in our senses of pleasure or of pain'.³ We show ourselves to be expressive subjects when we write or speak of feelings, but we also engage in a complex process of mediation, whether we choose to try and clarify and explain our sensations, or to find a verbal equivalency whereby we might hope to re-evoke in our readers the feelings that have been stimulated by an artwork. That is, we find ourselves, in talking of feeling, balancing that critical position that prioritizes our stance as rational, thinking beings with the potential — borrowing Charles Altieri's neat formulation — of taking on 'what might be called the role of operatic subject, where we proclaim passion-based identities' (p. 612).

The second assumption, or declaration, with which I begin is that feelings produced by art are in many ways of the same order as those produced by events or objects in the real, or non-representational world. This is, of course, putting myself rather firmly in one camp around this aesthetic crux: against the Kantian viewpoint that aesthetic experience differs from

² Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

³ This is Charles Altieri's formulation, in his review of Rei Terada's *Feeling in Theory: Emotion after the Death of the Subject*, 'Constructing Emotion in Deconstruction', *Contemporary Literature*, 43 (2002), 606–14 (p. 612).

ordinary experience because it demands that disinterested attention be paid to the aesthetic object. My stance is much closer to that articulated by the pragmatic philosopher John Dewey, who argues in *Art as Experience* that aesthetic experience only differs from ordinary or practical experience — and hence from the feelings that accompany this — because the affective and perceptual elements of ordinary experience are unified in an artwork in ways that we do not ordinarily find them. A painting, in other words, may have a combinatory and concentrated power that allows it to convey and produce emotion. Damien Freeman, in his recent *Art's Emotions*, builds on Dewey when he maintains that art is ‘continuous with the other emotional experiences because it incorporates them into a single experience’, and that is very much the stance that I’ll be taking in what follows.⁴

Then third: I want, nonetheless, to acknowledge a particular form of affect that belongs to aesthetic objects, and that is one’s own sense of affinity with certain works. I’ll freely admit that *Autumn Leaves* has long, long been one of my own — what’s the right word? — most loved paintings. I bought a poster of it during my first couple of days as a student, and hung it in all of my undergraduate and graduate bedrooms; indeed, I still have a postcard of it on a board in my office. Even in reproduction — let alone visiting it in person in the Manchester Art Gallery — I feel a sense of private, intimate companionship with Millais’s work: an elective affinity. This sense of intimacy is deep-rooted: certainly, when I first encountered the painting, in Timothy Hilton’s *The Pre-Raphaelites* (1970), the image spoke to the self-indulgent melancholia of my teens, fed by Villon’s *Aubade*, Yeats’s ‘Ephemera’ (1894), with its tortured lovers at the end of a relationship —

Autumn was over him: and now they stood
On the lone border of the lake once more:
Turning, he saw that she had thrust dead leaves
Gathered in silence, dewy as her eyes
In bosom and hair,

and the later books of *The Idylls of the King*.⁵

I’ll be returning to Tennyson — but the point I want to make here is that there are occasions — as scholars are starting to admit more openly — when we need to acknowledge the presence of personal feeling and experiences in our research, our chosen objects of study, and in our aesthetic responses. Back in 1976 Nelson Goodman was complaining about the tendency to draw a complete dichotomy between the cognitive and the emotive that, he said, ‘pretty effectively keeps us from seeing that in aesthetic

⁴ Damien Freeman, *Art's Emotions: Ethics, Expression, and Aesthetic Experience* (Durham: Acumen, 2012), p. 4.

⁵ ‘Ephemera’, in *Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, ed. by Richard J. Finneran, 2nd and rev. edn (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 15.

experience, the *emotions function cognitively*.⁶ More recently, as Patricia Clough has pointed out, the so-called ‘turn to affect’ of the early to mid-1990s ‘returned critical theory and cultural criticism to bodily matter’,⁷ rather than leaving feeling and emotion circulating in a rhetorically dominated sphere — yet the realm of personal feeling remains a somewhat uneasy area of aesthetic criticism. All the same, we need to ask how far, on occasion, one is influenced, limited, even blinded, by one’s own feelings when it comes to one’s scholarly analysis. However much my sense of veneration and responsibility towards *Autumn Leaves* may be shared by others reading this article, I experience my connection to it in terms of curiously intimate, and not readily nameable, affect. If this particular painting does not work on you in this way, doubtless you recognize that affinity in relation to some other work. Yet if we acknowledge that there is likely to be more than one of us feeling this very private sense of connection with a piece of art, this points to the way in which emotional responses to individual artworks can bind us in an affective community, silent or otherwise.⁸

What’s more, if considering feeling in relation to the arts compels us to consider the personal and the subjective, we also need to weigh this alongside the ways that responses are generated within specific cultural conditions. However much I may have that illusion that *Autumn Leaves* is exquisitely my own, perennially repeating, in some way, that initial shock of recognition, I have to allow that I first encountered it (and admittedly in reproduction) at a time when the Pre-Raphaelites were on the ascendant. What if I’d been looking at it in the immediate wake of Roger Fry’s condemnation of Pre-Raphaelite painting as ‘archaistic bric-à-brac’?⁹ Could I have been so open to its designs upon me? Would I have had to repress my enthusiasm, class it among guilty pleasures? How far are those responses which seem so very personal in fact moulded by prevalent tastes?

So with these questions on the table, let us look at *Autumn Leaves* and, familiar though it is, remind ourselves of some basic ground. Millais started to paint the picture in the autumn of 1855, after he returned from his honeymoon with Effie Gray, whom he married in July of that year. The setting is the couple’s garden at Annat Lodge, on the outskirts of Perth, just above the Gray family home of Bowerswell. Perth itself is hidden in the

⁶ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 2nd edn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), p. 249, emphasis in original.

⁷ Patricia T. Clough, ‘The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25.1 (2008), 1–22 (p. 1).

⁸ The idea that ‘loving’ a cultural artefact, the object of our study, not only has a part to play in contemporary inquiry, but also has a history, is valuably explored in relation to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literary texts in Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

⁹ Roger Fry, *Reflections on British Painting* (London: Faber and Faber, 1934), p. 108.

evening gloom, although the fifteenth-century bell tower of St John's Kirk is just visible. Behind, what Millais himself described as 'the mountains of the Highlands blue black against a sunset every evening'.¹⁰ The two girls on the left are Effie's sisters: Alice, who was ten at the time, and Sophie, twelve or thirteen (her birthday was on 28 October). On the right, two local girls, Matilda Proudfoot, with the rake, and Isabella Nicol with the apple (both also posed for *The Blind Girl* (1856) (Fig. 2) and Isabella for another painting shown at the 1856 Royal Academy, *L'Enfant du Régiment*). Although they came from a far less socially elevated background, as is suggested by the fabric of their dresses, as Paul Barlow has explained, 'class is only identified sufficiently to indicate that the social distinctions between the children, though real, are suspended by their situation and their actions.'¹¹ All four are linked by a solemnity, and by the condition of mortality that, despite their youth, is prefigured in the heap of fallen leaves.

Begun just a couple of months after Millais's marriage, it is hard to see the painting as an externalization of personal melancholy in any immediate sense, although Malcolm Warner reads into it regret at the disintegration of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, and the distance the artist felt from his London friends.¹² In any case, one would do well to bear in mind the comment made by the critic Philip Gilbert Hamerton in 1887, in a chapter on 'Images Evoked by Feeling' in his *Imagination in Landscape Painting*, that what is usually put onto a canvas is 'secondary', 'half-feigned or half-remembered emotion', rather than 'a state of real immediate emotion', for 'in a state of real emotion the artist would hardly be able to attend to the necessary technical conditions of his craft'.¹³ According to the explanation Millais himself gave to the critic Frederic George Stephens, it was designed 'to awaken by its solemnity the deepest religious reflection' — in other words, to prompt highly personal introspection, even if the artist did not consider himself especially religious, and decided against including a passage from the Psalms when the painting was exhibited for 'fear that it would be considered an affectation and obscure' (quoted in Warner, p. 127). Effie, in turn, described it as carrying out Millais's desire to paint a canvas 'full of beauty and without a subject';¹⁴ and Millais, again, in terms

¹⁰ Quoted in Jason Rosenfeld, *John Everett Millais* (London: Phaidon Press, 2012), p. 92.

¹¹ Paul Barlow, *Time Present and Time Past: The Art of John Everett Millais* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 71.

¹² Malcolm Warner, 'John Everett Millais's "Autumn Leaves": "a picture full of beauty and without subject"', in *Pre-Raphaelite Papers*, ed. by Leslie Parris (London: Tate Gallery, 1984), pp. 126–42.

¹³ Philip Gilbert Hamerton, *Imagination in Landscape Painting*, new edn (London: Seeley, 1896), p. 77, emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Effie Millais, writing in her journal, quoted in *The Pre-Raphaelites*, ed. by E. O. Parrott (London: Tate Gallery and Penguin, 1984), p. 141.



Fig. 2: John Everett Millais, *The Blind Girl*, 1856, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Wikimedia Commons.

that aren't crystal clear, wrote to his friend Charles Collins about the challenge that he faced: 'nature is too variable in itself to give more than a transient feeling of pleasure. Aspect, is the great secret. The *prospect of the aspect*' (quoted in Warner, pp. 137–38, emphasis in original). 'Aspect', however, as in portion of a whole, or as in point of view? 'Prospect' as in angle of vision, or as in something to which one looks forward? These glosses fit both the sense of a moment caught, and of girls anticipating womanhood.

For, as critics have frequently remarked, this is a painting that embodies various forms of transience, and of transition. Millais painted a moment suspended: solidified the rising grey smoke; caught the stray leaf momentarily resting on the edge of the tilted basket. The scene is set in twilight, as day slides into night. It depicts the time of year that is 'the transitional period between Nature radiant and Nature quiescent', as described in a 1902 piece in the *Western Times* entitled 'Autumn Leaves', which celebrated Millais's painting as 'one of the finest of modern works'.¹⁵ But there was, as we will see, a long time between the initial exhibition of this canvas and such widespread celebration. The two older girls are poised on the edge of puberty, and the fact that throughout his career Millais reworked the theme of girlhood's ephemerality in different guises forms part of the broader context in which we interpret *Autumn Leaves*. In *Spring* (1856–59), for example, the apparently idyllic orchard picnic party is overshadowed by the ominous presence of that scythe in the right-hand bottom corner. *Autumn Leaves* is proleptically elegiac, and this is brought home by William Holman Hunt's recollection of Millais asking — four years before he began the painting —

Is there any sensation more delicious than that awakened by the odour of burning leaves? To me nothing brings back sweeter memories of the days that are gone; it is the incense offered by departing summer to the sky, and it brings one a happy conviction that Time puts a peaceful seal on all that has gone.¹⁶

This is a consolatory version of time's passing. On the other hand, it seems to collapse the girls' lifespans, using their youth as a screen onto which to project ageing and recollection — suggesting, however, the form of emotional identification that Millais hopes to instil in the spectator. Note, too, the way in which for the artist, the visual is a prompt for the olfactory.

In the background of *Autumn Leaves*, we can just make out a figure, lost in the gloaming: apparently, a gardener raking up the leaves. His obscurity, his almost invisible labour, points to the other form of transition

¹⁵ 'Autumn Leaves', *Western Times*, 1 October 1902, p. 2.

¹⁶ William Holman Hunt, *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1905), 1, 286.

that *Autumn Leaves* exemplifies: a stylistic one. The shift in Millais's style that took place in the mid-1850s was chiefly responsible for those contemporary critics who had difficulty in understanding the point of the image. The *Times*'s reviewer was the most sympathetic, grateful for what he termed the 'advance' in Millais's style, inviting us to

compare the leaves with the straw in the Ark of several years ago. There every straw was painted with a minuteness which it was painful to follow; here the leaves are given with great truth and force, but the treatment is much more general and the work more rapid.¹⁷

On the other hand, there was the *Morning Post*'s reviewer, saying that 'as an example of the merest mechanism of laying on colour, it is, beyond all question, of the lowest order'.¹⁸ The *Examiner* did touch on the topic of feeling, but sneeringly: 'if any one [. . .] can feel before the *Autumn Leaves* of Mr. Millais any sentiment stronger than a desire than it might be done in worsted, we envy him the acuteness of his perception.'¹⁹ John Ruskin, despite claiming to admire the work when it was first exhibited, came to deplore what he termed its 'slovenliness and imperfection'.²⁰

To the dismay of many critics, *Autumn Leaves* did not tell a story. Compared to the other most frequently praised paintings on show at the Royal Academy that year, it referenced no biblical scene, unlike Holman Hunt's startling *Scapegoat*; it was not full of drama and pathos and the obvious horror of loss, unlike Clarkson Stanfield's *Abandoned*; it did not have the meticulous detail of David Roberts's *Christmas Day in St Peter's, at Rome, 1854*; it did not tap into the domestic sentimentalism of Thomas Faed's *Home and the Homeless*; it did not share in the in-your-face charitable appeal of Edwin Landseer's *Saved!*, dedicated to the Humane Society. Both of these last works depend upon a notion of the power of sentimentalism that reaches back to the eighteenth century, a belief that stirring human compassion is a provocation to charitable or reformist action. *Autumn Leaves* was not replete with references that could be unpacked and decoded, unlike two of the other paintings that Millais exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1856, *The Blind Girl* and *Peace Concluded, 1856* (Fig. 3): the former with its indication of sensory compensations for the loss of sight, like music and the scent of rain on summer grass, and the religious connotations of rainbow, butterfly, and birds of the field; the latter with its exact

¹⁷ 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy — Private View', *The Times*, 3 May 1856, pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ 'The Royal Academy: Third Notice', *Morning Post*, 22 May 1856, p. 3.

¹⁹ 'The Fine Arts: Royal Academy', *Examiner*, 3 May 1856, p. 6.

²⁰ 'Academy Notes, 1857', in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, Library Edition, 39 vols (London: Allen; New York: Longmans, Green, 1903–12), xiv: *Academy Notes, 1855–1888* (1904), pp. 89–143 (p. 107).



Fig. 3: John Everett Millais, *Peace Concluded*, 1856, 1856, Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Wikimedia Commons.

rendering of the page in *The Times* for 31 March 1856 that records events leading up to the signing of the Treaty of Paris that brought the Crimean War to an end, the toy animals representing the warring powers, and the little girl holding up a dove of peace (symbolism that, in turn, harks back to Frederic George Stephens's unfinished canvas of 1854, where the presence

of the toy lion and the galloping red-coated tin cavalryman leave one in no doubt about the nature of the devastating news that the boy's mother has just received).²¹ Yes, in *Autumn Leaves*, we could point out that no apple is ever innocent, especially when held by a young girl, but as we have seen, this is a painting designed to invoke mood, not suggest a narrative. The *Daily News* picked up on the overall 'sentiment', as the reviewer termed it, but wished for a far clearer visual explanatory system: surely it would be far more natural for children engaged in sweeping up leaves to be much more cheerful, and then the 'meaning would have been suggested much more forcibly, and contrast obtained, if a very old man had been introduced mournfully contemplating the children's thoughtless mirth'.²²

So how did nineteenth-century critics who were not turned off by the lack of narrative or glibly identifiable sentiment write about the feelings that this painting provoked? They seemed to have found them difficult to name, even as they recognized that something was going on: it was as though leaves turning into smoke, the solid becoming the evanescent, stood for a hard-to-negotiate shift between the material and the conceptual. In a satiric rather than sympathetic tone, the *Art Journal* pondered:

In what vein of mystic poetry will the picture be read? [. . .]
The work is got up for the new transcendentalism, its essences are intensity and simplicity, and those who yield not to the penetration are insensible to fine Art [. . .]. We are curious to learn the mystic interpretation that will be put upon this composition.²³

Invoking poetry was, indeed, perhaps the most common way of both praising the painting, and acknowledging, in a rather vague way, that it makes demands on the spectator's emotions. In his *Academy Notes*, Ruskin, despite

²¹ See Kate Flint, 'Blindness and Insight: Millais's *The Blind Girl* and the Limits of Representation', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 1 (1996), 1–15; and Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 83–84.

²² 'Fine Arts: Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *London Daily News*, 8 May 1856, p. 2. A 'very old man', in another Scottish autumnal setting (Bridge of Earn, Perthshire) and in the company of two very apprehensive looking children, appears in Millais's 1857 *A Dream of the Past: Sir Isumbras at the Ford* (Lady Lever Art Gallery, Port Sunlight). A better comparison might be made with Frederick Sandys's *Autumn* (1860, Norwich Castle Museum and Gallery) in which an old man, wearing the uniform and medals of the West Norfolk Militia Battalion of the 9th Infantry Regiment, which fought in the Punjab wars of the 1840s, is seen in the company of a woman and child. I am grateful to Victoria Hepburn for drawing this parallel to my attention.

²³ 'The Royal Academy: Exhibition the Eighty-Eighth: 1856', *Art Journal*, June 1856, pp. 161–74 (p. 171).

For if we're thinking about what might happen as young girls grow more experienced, we should recollect that the music for Edward Lear's adaptation of this song lies on the floor of Holman Hunt's 1853–54 painting, *The Awakening Conscience*. Apprehension, as well as nostalgia, appears as a further possible feeling that may be attached to the picture.

Warner's discussion of how *Autumn Leaves* relies on the poetic associations that a spectator may well bring with them is rooted in the 1850s, but connecting the painting with the *idea* of the poetic was a move of critical rhetoric that continued to be made throughout the century. To take just two examples: on the occasion of *Autumn Leaves* being exhibited at the Fine Arts Society in 1881, Leonora Lang says that it 'tells no particular story' — not a troublesome accusation, by this date — 'though it conveys strong emotion [. . .]. Its undefined intensity of sentiment is a complete reply to those who deny a poetic imagination to its author';²⁸ and — travelling across the Atlantic — in a long survey of Millais's life's work in *Scribner's Magazine*, Cosmo Monkhouse called the work a 'painted "song without words"', the painting producing 'a vague emotion like that aroused by a low chant heard in the distance. It was suggested by no poem, but it might well suggest not one but many.'²⁹ Indeed, *Autumn Leaves* even *inspired* at least one poem, published by Richard Garnett, best known for his work with the British Museum Library, in an 1859 volume. Garnett describes the different coloured leaves of 'stain'd October',

How children, void of care or ruth,
Piled them for fire, I next beheld:
'Tis ever so', I said, 'that youth
Treads out the smouldering ash of eld.'

Stray'd from some old forgotten year
Yet seem'd those russet girls to be;
Thine, Autumn, their array austere,
And thine their sweet solemnity.

And so the rather languorous poem continues, playing with the conceit that he, the speaker, is gazing on a real landscape, and envies a painter's talents:

The isled clouds, the lonely trees,
The relic gold that hemm'd the blue
In utmost west — I saw all these —
But O to see and paint them, too!³⁰

²⁸ Quoted in Leonora Lang, *Sir Frederick Leighton: His Life and Work* (London: Art Journal, 1884), p. 30.

²⁹ Cosmo Monkhouse, 'Sir John Millais, Bart., P.R.A.', *Scribner's Magazine*, 20 December 1896, pp. 669–70.

³⁰ Richard Garnett, 'Autumn Leaves', in *Io in Egypt, and Other Poems* (London: Bell

This repeated invocation of the poetic, and its association with intensity of feeling, is inseparable, in relation to *Autumn Leaves*, to the sentiment of nostalgia. In his recent study of the artist, Jason Rosenfeld describes *Autumn Leaves* as representing

Millais's finest early foray into a theme that would obsess him, twinned with the recurrent concept of mortality, for the remainder of his career. It is nostalgia, and it is something that connoted both the personal and the modern in his art. (p. 96)

Nostalgia: a sentiment that, as Svetlana Boym reminds us, is not just a quintessentially modern feeling of loss and displacement, but is 'a romance with one's own phantasy'. It is something that may appear to be 'a longing for a place but is actually a yearning for a different time — the time of our childhood, the slower rhythm of our dreams. In a broader sense', Boym says, 'nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.'³¹ Both acutely personal, it is also experienced as a social emotion, a form of zeitgeist. It is a theme that Millais continued to tap, whether in his adoption of the *vanitas* tradition in *Bubbles* (1886) — he can hardly be held responsible for how its commercial appropriation turned this into the gold standard for Victorian kitsch sentimentality — or in his later paintings that represent the year's decline. These, unlike *Autumn Leaves*, diminish individual figures against the background of decaying vegetation — as in *Lingering Autumn* (1890) or *Glen Birnam* (1890–91) — or do away with them altogether, as with the dark moodiness of *Chill October* (1870) (*Fig. 4*). On occasion, Millais reinforces the elegiac atmosphere of these late works with quotations. Thus *Winter Fuel* (1873) misquotes Shakespeare by inserting the line 'Bare ruined choirs, where once the sweet birds sang' in the Royal Academy catalogue for 1874 — relying on the spectator's own memory of Sonnet 73, which equates age with autumn —

That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,

and sends one back, through association, to *Autumn Leaves* in its equation of a day's end and the conclusion of a human lifetime:

In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.³²

and Daldy, 1859), pp. 35, 36.

³¹ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. xiii–xv.

³² Sonnet 73, in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones, Arden Shakespeare (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p. 73.



Fig. 4: John Everett Millais, *Chill October*, 1870, Private Collection. Wikimedia Commons.

Furthermore, these late landscapes develop from the style that Millais is beginning to try out with *Autumn Leaves*: one of fluid brushstrokes that create atmosphere through suggestion and obscurity, rather than reverentially painting each leaf in detail. It's a style that draws attention to the materiality of the paint itself, rather than deploying it for neatly representational ends. While these late works of Millais's were to appeal to young artists, like Vincent Van Gogh, looking for new expressive turns in art, the idea that brushwork and colour, as well as subject matter, was responsible for stimulating an affective response was not readily understood in the mid-1850s. These are works that answer David Peters Corbett's apparently rhetorical question near the beginning of *The World in Paint*: 'can paint instruct us, tell us truths about the world because, in some manner, it can inquire into reality and thus enlighten us in ways other forms of knowledge cannot?'³³ — ways, I would add, that have a good deal to do with an appeal to our feelings that it can be rather hard to translate tidily into verbal language.

If considering the manipulation of paint's textures offers one avenue of approach to Millais's formal experimentation, his deployment of space

³³ David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), p. 12.

and colour affords another. The pyramid of leaves is bizarrely rigid. Sophie is lifting up leaves from the basket that Alice holds, dropping them onto the pile, and this action helps to create another triangular shape (or heart, or leaf shape, containing the lighter green of the grass behind as well as some more fading leaves) that is anatomically and spatially troubling as the eye moves from hands to leaf pile to empty basket and back again. Like the clarity with which certain lighter leaves are painted, making them stand out from autumnal deadness and echoing the shades of grass and sky, we see Millais's mapping out of shapes and colours: this is a visual economy that makes sense in terms of arranging colour on a two-dimensional surface in a way that — like the half-circle of the girls' faces — keeps the eye in motion around the canvas, reinforcing the painting's tension between mobility and stasis.³⁴

But there are other approaches that we might adopt when it comes to considering how *Autumn Leaves* stirs up feelings — indeed, how it takes feeling itself as its subject matter. Anne Helmreich very illuminatingly places the painting and its reception in the context of 'the nascent field of psychology', drawing our attention to mid-century theories of associationism, or the processes by which the mind linked ideas, and the growing interest in physiological aesthetics, including, most relevantly, the relationship between vision and cognition.³⁵ She points to Alexander Bain's *Senses and the Intellect* (1855), in which the philosopher explores the links between body and mind, including 'the emotional effects of the visual sensations of objects'.³⁶

I want to turn, however, to a different approach: one that thickens the available contexts for critical and emotional understanding in 1856; one that considers mortality and loss, and the means by which they may be conveyed visually, and that situates them with a precise topicality. One particular context for the painting and reception of *Autumn Leaves* has been completely overlooked: the potential dialogue that this painting holds with the Crimean War. The war ended in March 1856, as *Peace Concluded, 1856* commemorated — but when Millais began painting *Autumn Leaves*, the Siege of Sebastopol had only just concluded in early September, after the French victory at the Battle of Malakoff, and the English victory at the Battle of the Great Redan. As is made clear in William Howard Russell's despatches, published in *The Times*, this was not a time for celebration, but for mourning; for considering the cost of war; for reflecting on the human horror that was exemplified in the 'heartrending and revolting' scenes of

³⁴ My thanks to Hollis Clayson for making me think more closely about the strangeness of this leaf pile.

³⁵ Anne Helmreich, *Nature's Truth: Photography, Painting and Science in Victorian Britain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016), p. 87.

³⁶ Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: Parker, 1855), p. 246.



Fig. 5: Wood engraving after an original drawing by Edward A. Goodall, showing the Hospital in Sebastopol with Dr Durgan attending to the wounded, *Illustrated London News*, 6 October 1855, p. 404.

the hospital at Sebastopol. The *Illustrated London News's* visual depiction of the chaotic, miserable, and unsanitary conditions in the hospital distances them through architectural perspective (*Fig. 5*), in a way that looks controlled and orderly when compared with Russell's descriptions that force the reader into close proximity with the 'rotten and festering corpses of the soldiers' — both dead and dying, writhing 'on wretched trestles and bedsteads or pallets of straw, sopped and saturated with blood which oozed and trickled through upon the floor' — and worse. Outside, on the Great Redan, human blood ran among the utensils in the cookhouses; the ditch was full of scorched, blackened, lacerated English bodies. Descending from the Malakoff, all was ruin:

We came upon a suburb of ruined houses open to the sea — it was filled with dead. The Russians had crept away into holes and corners in every house, to die like poisoned rats; artillery horses, with their entrails torn open by shot, were stretched all over the place at the back of the Malakoff [. . .]. Every house, the church, some public buildings, sentry boxes — all alike were broken and riddled by cannon and mortar.³⁷

³⁷ William Howard Russell, *Despatches from the Crimea* (London: Frontline Books, 2008), pp. 263–64.



Fig. 6: John Dalbiac Luard, *A Welcome Arrival*, 1855, 1857. © National Army Museum, London.

We know how closely Millais followed events in the Crimea. Holman Hunt was travelling in the Middle East at this time, returning from Jerusalem and the Dead Sea via Constantinople (where he received a letter from Millais in December 1855). And Millais's relatively recent, but extremely close friend John Dalbiac Luard (his London room-mate from mid-1854 to late-1859, with whom he had travelled in western Scotland in 1854) went to the Crimea in October 1855, returning in January 1856. In April of that year — just before the Royal Academy exhibition — Millais wrote home to Effie that he was looking at Luard's Crimean sketches. The next year, Luard showed a Crimean-themed painting at the Academy, *A Welcome Arrival* (Fig. 6) (of a tea chest from home containing supplies turning up in a Sebastopol soldiers' hut), and painted *Nearing Home* in 1858 (one suspects intimations of imminent mortality as well as of topography in the title). For his part, Millais showed *News from Home* in 1857 (Fig. 7): a 42nd Royal Highlander reading a letter in the trenches during the Siege of Sebastopol — a painting that Ruskin derided because of the improbably spotless dress, asking if the painter 'imagines that Highlanders at the Crimea had dress portmanteaus as well as knapsacks, and always put on new uniforms to read letters home in?' (*Works*, ed. by Cook and Wedderburn, xiv, 95). And then, of course,



Fig. 7: John Everett Millais, *News from Home*, 1856–57, Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 8: Noel Paton, *Home*, 1855–56, Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA. Wikimedia Commons.

Peace Concluded, 1856 was shown as well as *Autumn Leaves* in 1856 — albeit in a different room, and next to *Saved!*, the only painting that year that commanded a higher sale price.³⁸ Another picture that tied in the Crimean War with its domestic impact, Noel Paton's *Home*, was one of the best received in the 1856 Academy (Fig. 8). It shows a corporal in the Scots Fusilier Guards,

³⁸ For Millais's Crimean paintings, see Rosenfeld, pp. 100–04.

wounded in his head, and minus his left arm. A Crimean medal — awarded by Queen Victoria to all soldiers who fought — is pinned to his uniform; a Russian helmet sits on the floor at his side, and on the table, the open Bible suggests both the family's source of strength, and that Divine Providence has been at work. The sentiments of relief, gratitude, and pride are not at all hard to decipher.

What I am suggesting is a context for the production and exhibition of *Autumn Leaves* that does not separate it from the public events of its time. Indeed, no visitor to the 1856 Royal Academy could fail to have had the war on their mind during the previous couple of years, and they would have found its resonances of struggle, loss, violence, and providentiality echoed at a number of points in the exhibition. Rather than approaching the war in a narrative fashion, through a set of symbols, however, *Autumn Leaves* engages with a prevalent mood of the time through the creation of an expressive atmosphere. Although it has little that is overtly in common with contemporary depictions of the Crimean War, such images would have been part of the visual culture of these years, transmitted, say, in the pages of the *Illustrated London News*. They hence form part of the visual economy into which *Autumn Leaves* was introduced, and which provided the grounds of possibility for its own reception.³⁹ The military context, moreover, had a particular regional significance for Millais. For Perth was the home of the Black Watch, the 42nd (Highland) Regiment, which formed part of the Highland Brigade during the Crimean War. It saw action at the Battle of Alma, at the start of the war, at which forty-one of its men were killed or wounded; and then at the Battle of Balaclava, marching in the evening through the Valley of Death every two or three days, and remaining in the trenches for twenty-four hours. Thirty-nine of its men were killed in combat, and 227 more died of wounds and disease. Military histories record that a number of men from Perth also enrolled in the 93rd Sutherland Regiment that played such a central role at the Battle of Balaclava. The men that remained alive would have participated in the Siege of Sebastopol and experienced the terrible harsh winter: the year's decline, presaging winter, carries recent associations with it.

Although I am not arguing for Millais consciously, deliberately referring to the Crimean War — even obliquely — in *Autumn Leaves*, any more than I am suggesting that the conflict would immediately jump to mind in the response of someone viewing it in 1856, it would hardly be unprecedented to link one of his paintings that was not ostensibly about the

³⁹ For a comprehensive discussion and illustration of this context, see Ulrich Keller, *The Ultimate Spectacle: A Visual History of the Crimean War* (Amsterdam: Overseas Publishers Association, 2001). For photography and the Crimea, see Trudi Tate, 'Sebastopol: On the Fall of a City', 19: *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 20 (2015) <<http://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.720>>.

Crimean War with that conflict. When Millais showed *The Rescue* in 1855, William Michael Rossetti, writing in the *Spectator*, remarked that ‘the best criticism we have heard on [the heroic fireman’s] passionless self-possession was expressed in the phrase “There is the whole battle of Inkerman in that face”’.⁴⁰ I am, however, arguing that to think of transience and mortality in the fall of 1855 was to do so at a time, and, for Millais, in a place, that was suffused with the losses suffered in the Crimea. The mood of *Autumn Leaves* very plausibly reflects the widespread British disillusionment with the war, deriving especially from the mismanagement at the very highest levels of the military command and other accusations of misconduct — or, one might also say, the mood of the public renders this a readily available projection onto the less specific sense of transience and mortality that the image emanates. *Peace Concluded, 1856*, after all, was begun as a critical painting, satirizing the fact that some officers unjustifiably claimed home leave while on active service — and then Millais shifted the emphasis with the end of the war. Young girls in Perth (as elsewhere) might plausibly be thought of as facing a future without fathers, without brothers, and not just the generalized fact of their own ageing and mortality.

There is one more indication that Millais had the Crimea on his mind that I want to consider. On 23 October 1855, his friend the caricaturist John Leech wrote to him — Leech was unsparing in his own visual and verbal criticism of the mismanagement of the British military. (‘Well, Jack! Here’s good news from home. We’re to have a medal.’ ‘That’s very kind. Maybe one of these days we’ll have a coat to stick it on.’)⁴¹ Leech tells Millais, pointing to the only respect in which he considered photography’s accurate depiction to be deficient,

You should come to town, if only to see a collection of photographs taken in the Crimea. They are surprisingly good; I don’t think anything ever affected me more. You hardly miss the colour, the truth in other respects is so wonderful.
(J. G. Millais, 1, 270–71)

I have not found any evidence that would suggest that Millais travelled to London that autumn and saw Roger Fenton’s 350 Crimean photographs, nor that he saw those which were shown by James Robertson in London in December of that year — an exhibition that, like Fenton’s work, was subsequently seen on tour in provincial cities — although he would have been highly likely to have seen the photogravures after Fenton’s pictures that appeared in the *Illustrated London News*.⁴² I want, though, to consider

⁴⁰ [William Michael Rossetti], ‘The Royal Academy Exhibition: General Subjects’, *Spectator*, 26 May 1855, p. 554.

⁴¹ Caption to cartoon by John Leech, *Punch*, 10 February 1855, p. 64.

⁴² These are images that, as Thierry Gervais has shown, underwent a fair bit of



Fig. 9: Roger Fenton, The Valley of the Shadow of Death: dirt road in ravine scattered with cannonballs, Library of Congress: LC-USZC4-9217.

just for a moment why Leech might have found the photographs so affecting. Reviews of the Pall Mall exhibition praise the ‘curious and instructive’ portrayal of the war: ‘there can be no mistake in the accuracy of the transcripts, and hence the locality of the war has never hitherto been defined and illustrated with such distinct and irrefragable authority’; Fenton gives us ‘portraits of all the men whose names have been household words in our mouths.’⁴³ These images are praised for their documentary value, not for their emotional impact. Even what was to become his most iconic image (Fig. 9) is described in a laconic fashion by the *Morning Post*’s critic: ‘The dreary appearance of the “Valley of the Shadow of Death”, appropriately embossed with cannon balls, will not escape notice.’⁴⁴

manipulation in their transformation for reproduction. See ‘Witness to War: The Uses of Photography in the Illustrated Press, 1855–1904’, *Journal of Visual Culture*, 9 (2010), 370–84.

⁴³ ‘Photographic Pictures of the Crimea’, *London Standard*, 20 September 1855, p. 3; ‘The Lounger at the Clubs’, *Illustrated Times*, 29 September 1855, p. 11.

⁴⁴ ‘Photographic Pictures Taken in the Crimea — Agnew and Sons, Manchester’, *Morning Post*, 20 September 1855, p. 5.

To be sure, Leech praised the ‘truth’ of these pictures, but his claim that he does not think ‘anything ever affected me more’ suggests an emotional truth as well as fidelity to topography or to faces. Hamerton, a few decades later, might have declared that ‘photography is a purely scientific and unfeeling art’ (p. 88), but Fenton’s images, then and now, embody some of the varieties of expressiveness to be found in photographs. For a start, there is the Barthean melancholy attaching to each individual: someone who was alive at the moment of taking the image but who will inevitably be dead in a greater or shorter length of time. Indeed, especially with these military scenes, the soldiers depicted may well be no more, even by the time that the photographs were first exhibited. The cumbersome nature of photographic equipment in the mid-1850s means that we are not responding to these with the same attention to the questions of trauma and ethics that have dominated late-twentieth and early twenty-first century discussions of photographic reportage of carnage and warfare. What we *do* have, though, are representations of the scale of the operation, and the unforgiving bleakness of the terrain, interspersed with moments of relaxation (*Fig. 10*). While some of the portraits are relatively formal, both the size and scrubby nature of many of the horses, and the tired, or wistful, or anxious, or troubled expressions on many faces also give the lie to war’s grandeur (*Fig. 11*). Seen en masse, these faces, these individual lives also carry an accumulative affect of, indeed, human vulnerability and mortality. At the same time, something



Fig. 10: Roger Fenton, Sebastopol with the Redan, Malakoff, and Mamelon, principal Russian fortifications. Colonel Shadforth seated in the foreground, Library of Congress: LC-USZC4-9279.

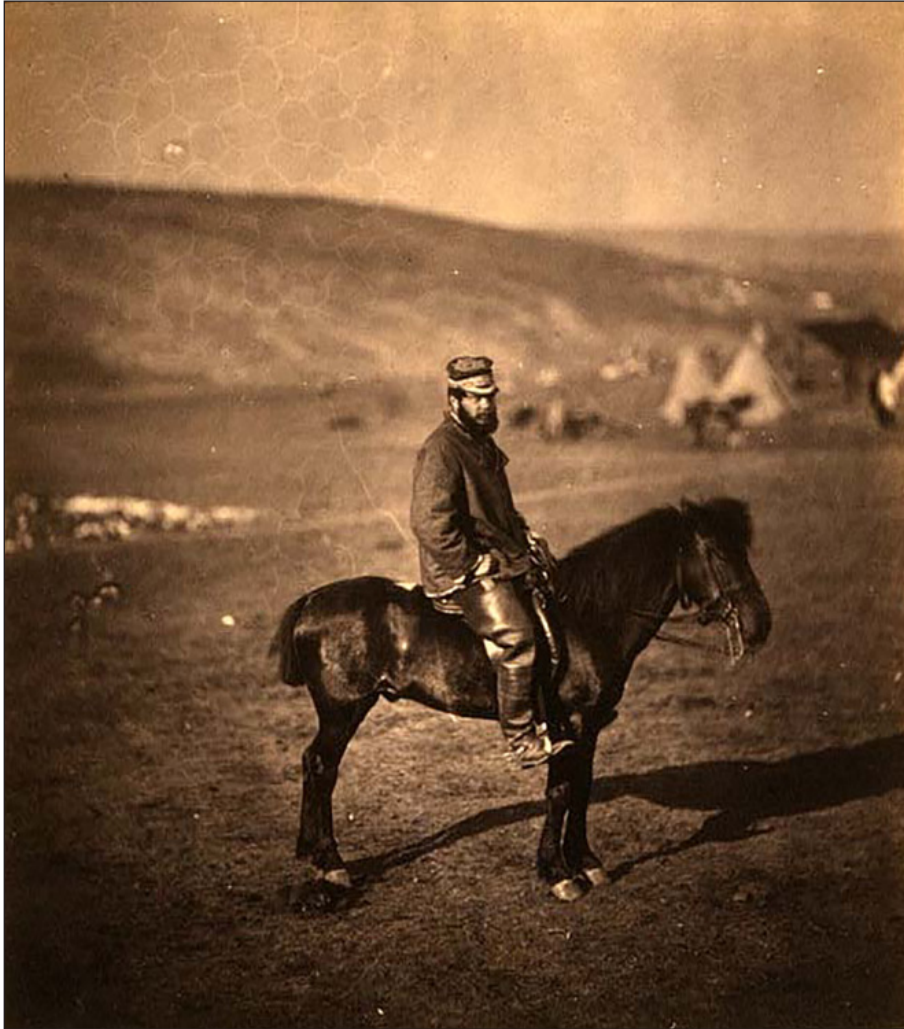


Fig. 11: Roger Fenton, Captain Inglis, 5th Dragoon Guards, Library of Congress: LC-USZC4-9333.

of war's emotional toll is also expressed more metaphorically: through the barrenness of the landscape with its heaps of rocks, its refusal to offer up any relief to the eye, its graveyard, and, indeed, the by-now iconic cannonballs.

The connection between photography and painting in photography's early years has been much written about.⁴⁵ In the context of *Autumn*

⁴⁵ Most recently in Carol Jacobi and Hope Kingsley, *Painting with Light: Art and Photography from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Modern Age* (London: Tate, 2016), accompanying the Tate Britain exhibition of the same name.



Fig. 12: David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, *The Gowan: Margaret and Mary McCandlish*, c. 1845, Collection SFMOMA, Agnes E. Meyer and Elise S. Haas Fund purchase. Wikimedia Commons.

Leaves we might consider, by way of a brief example, a very early salt paper print by David Hill and Robert Adamson, *The Gowan* (c. 1845), that in its treatment of female adolescence and transient nature is clearly kin to Millais's theme, part of a tradition that explores the ephemerality of girlhood (Fig. 12). Its title — 'gowan' is a Scottish word for daisy — makes it a particularly apt point of comparison, since it gives a Scottish specificity not just to the image's makers, but to the young girls themselves. What a comparison with this image brings out, however, is less the thematic resonances that they have in common, but the stylistic similarities that allow for both mediums to be seen as affect-laden. In each, the combination of precision in rendering human individuality, and vagueness and lack of specificity in topographic background, allow the spectator to project thoughts, knowledge, associations, experience, and anxieties onto the image, at the same time that the impress of the image as a whole — composition, texture, coloration — works upon us. While this was to become a commonplace in those aesthetic photographers of the later nineteenth century who valued softer or selective focus, we see it at work as a means of creating a dreamy and melancholic atmosphere from photography's earliest days.

Turning back to the photographic imagery of the Crimean War, we can see that Fenton's is, similarly, a photographic style that has analogies with *Autumn Leaves* in how it achieves its emotional impact: the poignancy of individual faces, set against a terrain that is indistinct enough to work on the spectator who brings their own feelings to the image. To depict the emotional resonance of war, one does not have to show a battlefield strewn with corpses or grieving widows, as American painter Andrew Wyeth recognized when he remarked, 'you don't have to paint tanks and guns to capture war. You should be able to paint it in a dead leaf falling from a tree in autumn.'⁴⁶

In the *Saturday Review* piece with which I opened, Joanna Boyce, after commending Millais for conveying 'depth of feeling' rather than 'depth of thought', locates this feeling entirely within the sensibility of the painter:

He must have felt intensely the solemnity and gorgeousness of autumn twilight; and great must have been his delight in the consciousness of power — won by the painfully careful work of his earlier pictures — to reproduce in so high a degree his impressions. (p. 32)

But what she leaves out (except implicitly, through the eloquent descriptive reading that she goes on to give) is how the painting works upon the feelings of the spectator. For the interplay between image and viewer is a two-way one, dependent on both perception and projection. What is so significant about *Autumn Leaves*, and about a reading that attempts to construct as full a historical context for it as possible, is that it perfectly exemplifies this at a stylistic as well as at a thematic level. If the connection between formal elements and the feelings of the beholder was to become axiomatic within aesthetic criticism later in the century, we here see it manifested through Millais's stylistic experimentalism. This experimentalism is, all the same, very firmly connected to the conditions of interpretative possibility within the visual culture of its moment.

⁴⁶ Richard Meryman, *Andrew Wyeth: A Spoken Self-Portrait* (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2014), p. 30.