I am profoundly excited by music,” Edgar Allan Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell in 1844. “Music is the perfection of the soul, or idea, of Poetry. The vagueness of exultation aroused by a sweet air (which should be strictly indefinite and never too strongly suggestive) is precisely what we should aim at in poetry.”

Music expresses more because its meanings are vague. If the melody is to articulate “indefinite” emotions, the notation must be strict and the articulation controlled. Our vagueness, the imprecise impression, derives from the constructively vague method. The Latin *vagus* means “strolling,” “wandering,” and “uncertain”—a *flâneur* of a word and condition. In the Germanic cognates, the boulevardier is a sot. The Old High German *winkan* means to “wave,” “stagger,” or “wink,” the Old English *wincian*, to “nod.” A nudge, an innuendo-crazed Monty Python character says, is as good as a wink to a blind bat. In art, as on the *grands boulevards*, allusiveness tends towards eroticism, a frisson of one profound excitement leading to a bit of the other. “In the same way, you were happy in spring,/ With the half-colors of quarter-things,” Wallace Stevens wrote in “The Motive for Metaphor” (1947).
English writers and French painters exulted in the metaphorical potential of vagueness. “Fog everywhere,” Dickens wrote in the opening page of *Bleak House* (1852–53). “Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river, where it rolls defiled among the tiers of shipping and the waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city.” Fog everywhere in Monet’s visions from the fifth floor of the Savoy Hotel. Fog natural and unnatural on the river defiled by the smokestacks in his *Waterloo Bridge with Sunlight Effect with Smoke* (1903), where the polluted sunlight lands in the river like photochemical fire. Fog refined and elevated in *Waterloo Bridge: The Sun in a Fog* (1903), in which Monet, back at Giverny, deletes the factories and chimneys, but retains their resonant effect as industrial *japonisme*, what he called the “ghostly magnificence of London.”

In 1896, three years before Monet came to London, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, grand boulevardier and compulsive winker, left his ground-floor apartment and garden on the Rue de Bac for a top-floor suite at the Savoy. His wife, Beatrix, was dying of cancer. “We are very, very bad,” he wrote to Walter Sickert. In the lithograph *By the Balcony* (1896), “Trixie” sleeps on a daybed by the open window, but her twisting posture betrays the discomfiting fogs of pain and painkillers. Waterloo Bridge, the factories, and the smoke are boxed into the upper-right corner by the balcony and a curtain. The light outside is weak, the shadow over Trixie’s head like a dark ectoplasm. In *The Savoy Pigeons* (1896), the birds perch on the balcony, one sheltering in the other’s feathers, and look westward up the river, past the bare trees of the new Embankment Gardens to the misty towers of the Houses of Parliament. Again, the balcony divides the dying room from the world beyond.
Whistler had always excelled at generating misty beauties from the transition between land and water, but in his Savoy lithographs, these transitions become explicit. The critic Théodore Duret
called *The Thames* (1896) a “demi-nocturne.” Dusk is drawing down, but residual luminosity marks the margin between land and sea, the stone boundary between the strips of garden and roadway beneath the Savoy and the wide gray river. Though the shore of departure is clear, the farther shore is indeterminate in shadow and the smoke of waterside pollutions. It is as though Charon is refusing his task because of fog in the channel.

“Nature contains the elements, in color and form, of all pictures,” Whistler said in the “Ten O’Clock” lecture (1885). “But the artist is born to pick and choose, and group with science, these elements . . . until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony.” As a late-career advertisement, the “Ten O’Clock” lecture is little more reliable than Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” (1846), which identified the death of “a beautiful woman” as “unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world,” or the posthumously published “The Poetic Principle” (1850), in which Poe, as he gave up the ghost of writing for money, insisted that the poet should write “for the poem’s sake.”

Whistler’s loud and entertaining insistence on “art for art’s sake,” with its modish and unhealthy implication that Art and Nature were as inimical as the aesthete and the hearty, occluded the origins and method of his mists and vagaries. “Whistler and Nature,” now on view at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, takes the Whistlerian approach to the matter by sidestepping the nocturnal fireworks of the major oils and concentrating instead on minor watercolors, sketches, and lithographs. In these, Whistler’s line is as firm, graceful, and visible as the Savoy’s metal balcony.

“You cannot go amiss with industry in pursuit of good habits of method,” George Washington Whistler wrote to the fourteen-year-old James in January 1849, “and the study of any branch of Education—your natural inclination of taste for the fine arts—if it is not allowed to become too poetical, will certainly be of much service to you in any profession connected with the arts and sciences.”

Three months later, Whistler’s father was dead from cholera, contracted while working as an engineer on the Moscow–St. Petersburg railway. His widow, Anna, returned to America with her sons and, through family connections, General Joseph Swift, the Chief Engineer of the U.S. Army, placed James as an officer cadet at West Point. “Whistler and Nature” emphasizes the influences of Whistler’s scientific background and military training on his style. But the scientific influences—he had an engineer for a father and a budding doctor for a brother—do not seem to have made deep impressions. In 1854, Whistler, like that improbable soldier Poe before him, failed to graduate from West Point. One of his deficiencies was identifying silicon, a matter often found at the border of land and water, as a gas.

The military influence was technical, which is to say, translatable. Whistler was trained in topography and cartography in his first year at West Point. He studied the human figure in his second year, then returned to landscape and watercolor technique in his third year. But these were not his first classes,
and they did not awake a previously dormant talent. His father, who had trained as a topographer in the Artillery Corps, had already fostered his interest in art, giving him Joshua Reynolds’s *Discourses on Art* (1778) for Christmas, and enrolling him at age eleven in lessons at the Imperial Academy in St. Petersburg. At West Point, Whistler practiced his watercolor technique not just on the local landscape, but also on scenes from *The Pickwick Papers* for the entertainment of his fellow cadets.

After West Point, Whistler learned the techniques of etching and engraving in the Drawing Department of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey. He received further instruction from his mother, who counseled “habits of frugality, industry & order” in honor of Major Whistler’s memory. Meanwhile, Whistler doodled Rembrandtesque variations of figures from Henri Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1851) on the margins of the Coast Survey’s plates. After leaving the United States forever in 1855, he took more classes at the École Impériale et Spéciale de Dessin, and studied in the atelier of the Swiss painter Charles Gleyre. It was from Gleyre that Whistler learned the light-on-dark technique that would create the resonant vagueness of the famed *Nocturnes*, using ivory black as a ground, then layering on opaque pigments.

The realism and tonal contrasts of the Paris etching *La Vieille aux Loques* (1858) are those of Rembrandt, not the Coastal and Geodetic Survey. So too the lumpy browns of *La Mère Gérard* (1858–59), a rough assimilation of Courbet exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1861. The *Daily Telegraph*’s critic identified “genius and study” in Whistler’s treatment, but thought the painting “fitter to be hung over the stove in the studio.” Whistler had “all the elements of a great artist in his composition,” but he should “paint cleanly like a gentleman” and “leave off using mud and clay.” The catalogue essay, straining for art historical assonance, traces the mud and clay to “the ploughed field” and not “urban pavements and promenades.” But modern mud was urban. The “mud and mire” of *Bleak House* is a marginal inconvenience compared to the metaphorical “groping and floundering” in the cleaner precincts of Chancery.
Whistler’s Paris and London etchings are *plein air* excursions into the social and geographical borderlands of the unnatural city, where “Nature” becomes a range of atmospheric and man-made effects. Baudelaire, naturally, saw this when the *Thames Set* was exhibited in Paris in 1862. Whistler’s
riverine etchings, Baudelaire wrote, were “as subtle and lively as improvisation . . . a wonderful jumble of rigging, yardarms, and cordage; a chaos of fog, furnaces, and spiraling smoke; the profound and complex poetry of a vast city.” The presences are kinesthetic—the amphibious figures in conversation on the shore in *Millbank* (1861), the masts rocking at anchor in *Billingsgate* (1859). The tide is always dragging the perspective up- or downstream, exposing a rank of pilings at Millbank or stretching the anchored rowboats in *The Little Pool* (1861), and pulling them from the shore as if by erosion.

“Baudelaire waxes poetical about the Thames, but says nothing about my etchings themselves,” Whistler complained to Henri Fantin-Latour. But poetical waxing was the effect of Whistler’s poetical engraving. His problem—his matchless talent for grievance aside—was the assertion of literature over line, and the difficulty of altering the pecking order among the arts. Whistler titled his paintings after music, but he was among the most literary of visual artists.

Art, Hector Berlioz wrote in “On Imitation in Music” (1837), may have no other object than “to reproduce with fidelity, to give a beautiful imitation of Nature.” But music is “sufficient unto itself, and possesses the power to charm without having recourse to any kind of imitation. And though “painting . . . cannot encroach on the domain of music,” music may “act upon the imagination in such a way as to engender sensations analogous to those produced by graphic art.”

The forms of musical reproduction, Berlioz writes, are “direct or physical imitation of the sounds and noises of Nature” and “indirect or emotional imitation” stirring of “the several passions of the heart” by “expression, depiction, or musical metaphors.” Direct imitation by “musical depiction” runs against the “nature” of music. When Handel tried to describe the fall of snow in sound, he risked producing “neither music nor painting—and thus giving up substance for shadow.” Sounds are not “pictures of objects”; they are “images or analogues.” The barcarolle in Rossini’s *William Tell* represents the movement of men rowing because the characters have told us so. All Rossini does is to create an “image of rhythmic straining” by notating *rinforzandos* at regular intervals. If Rossini’s characters had announced the arrival of men propelling a two-man handcar, the notation for “rhythmic straining” could equally announce the arrival of a couple of railroad engineers. If some balalaikas were added, we would infer that the railroad is being built in Russia.

While music struggles to work from metaphor towards concrete representation, Whistler’s art moves quite easily from “direct or physical imitation” towards metaphor. The image stands for an emotional state, and the deliberate vagueness of the image widens the range of emotional association towards the oceanic impressions of music. Whistler’s trouble is that while he attempts to recast his art as painting, literature is recasting his art as illustration. He believes that visual art is superior to literature, hence his irritation at Baudelaire and his willingness to append a Swinburne poem as a physical footnote to *Symphony in White No. 2* (1864). But literature keeps clawing at the autonomy of his images, and partly because he invited it to do so by insisting on explaining himself in print. As
Bunthorne advises in Gilbert & Sullivan’s *Patience* (1881), “If you’re anxious for to shine in the high aesthetic line as a man of culture rare,/ You must get up all the germs of the transcendental terms, and plant them everywhere.”

A metaphor “carries over” meaning and elevates it in translation. Baudelaire translated Poe’s ghost stories into a metaphysic. Théophile Gauthier, Baudelaire’s accomplice in the Club des Hashischins, sought the synesthetic translation of poetry into music. Whistler picked up this French ideal along with the spleen of Courbet’s realism. Perhaps it would have gone differently for Whistler if he had lived in Paris in the 1860s and 1870s, instead of London, where the Pre-Raphaelites willingly subordinated themselves to literature and interior design. Instead, as he appended his images to sounds, others returned them to the realm of words.

Perhaps Whistler, painting his girlfriend Joanna Hiffernan as *The White Girl* (1861–62), had forgotten Gauthier’s poem of 1852, “Symphonie in blanc majeur.” Perhaps he hoped to demonstrate that superior metaphorizing power of paint, as Courbet was to attempt in 1866 with a headless model—perhaps Hiffernan, perhaps the dancer Constance Quéniaux—in *L’Origine du monde*. The realities of commerce, and the relationship between art and literature in a literate society, asserted themselves as soon as the Royal Academy rejected *The White Girl* in 1862. When the gallery owner Matthew Morgan took on the painting, he renamed it *The Woman in White*, to capitalize on the success of Wilkie Collins’s novel of 1859–60, in which the protagonist, Walter Hartright, is a drawing teacher and the Woman in White, Anne Catherick, is illegitimate and committed to an asylum. The literary associations are compounded by Dickens, who, having published Collins’s *Woman in White* in his magazine *All the Year Round*, then introduced his own unhinged woman in white, Miss Havisham, in *Great Expectations* (1860–61).

As it stands, Hiffernan’s presence in *The White Girl*—a young girl unmoored and isolated—is more evocative of Estella than Miss Havisham. But the image cannot quite escape the vague taint of literary illustration, partly because of Whistler’s characterization, which hints at some Victorian unpleasantness like bastardy or the precipitous loss of virginity. In their 1911 biography of Whistler, Joseph and Elizabeth Pennell add a third variation to the literary theme. They explain Hiffernan’s father as resembling Captain Costigan, the drunken Irishman in Thackeray’s *Pendennis* (1850). This casts Hiffernan, the model with whom Whistler fell in love after coming to London, as Emily Fotheringay, the actress with whom Pendennis falls in love after coming to London. As if to confirm the literary parentage of *The White Girl*, the Pennells also describe Hiffernan’s father as a “teacher of polite chirography,” or calligraphy.

When *The White Girl* was exhibited at Paris in 1863, a French critic, presumably referring to Gauthier’s poem, called the painting a “symphony.” Whistler, taking the opportunity to free his images from the impolite calligraphy of literature, retrospectively titled his three *White* paintings as *Symphonies*. The
titles may not have aided the beautiful imitation of Nature, but they did assist Whistler’s beautiful imitation of metaphorical triumph.

And so, with no money at all and a little more wit, return again to Venice,” Roderigo advises in Othello. In 1879, bankrupted by his libel case against Ruskin, Whistler accepted the
commission for the Venice Set. In Venice, Whistler’s art comes closest to musical translation. The Venice Set, like the London Set, approximates the impression of movement and water, and often movement on water. But the Venice Nocturnes come closer still to Chopin’s compositions—providing that, like the audience at William Tell, we are aware of the craft on the water. Still, the traffic on the lagoon runs from music to painting to literature.

Chopin’s Barcarolle in F-sharp major (1845–46) sustains its vagueness and intimacy by developing a musical narrative without falling into the common structures of a sonata or rondo. Liszt’s student Carl Tausig, attempting to subordinate sound to words, derived a Romantic program from the “two-voiced, or two-souled” melody: “It tells of a love scene in a secret gondola—we might even call it symbolic of lovers’ meetings in general. That is expressed in the thirds and sixths. The dual character of two notes—or two persons—runs through the whole.”

Nietzsche, who placed the Barcarolle at the peak of Chopin’s oeuvre, concentrated on a “blissful moment” in Chopin’s composition—a moment like the one Nietzsche describes in “Gondellied” in Ecce Homo (1888). The solitary traveler is touched by “golden drops” of sound and light from the gloom, but wonders if anyone else heard or saw. In the emergence of line from vagueness, Nietzsche might be describing the subjective topography of Whistler’s Nocturne in Blue and Silver: The Lagoon, Venice (1879–80). Again, while Whistler aims for music—the Romantic gondola song begins in “Venezianisches Gondellied,” one of Mendelssohn’s Songs Without Words (1842)—literature reclaims Whistler. It is Wallace Stevens who best expresses the light of Whistler’s Venetian Nocturnes: “The obscure moon lighting an obscure world/ Of things that would never be quite expressed.”

The “blissful moment” that Nietzsche identifies in Chopin’s Barcarolle is the swooning transition that begins at bar seventy-eight. In the previous five bars, the key center has become vague; we have left A, but without arriving at C-sharp. Chopin marks the six bars after this one dolce sfogato, “sweetly vented.” The extemporization soars and suspends itself on its own breath—the Latin vagus is also cognate with the Old Norse vakka, to “stray” or “hover”—then floats back down towards the restatement of the theme. “Sfogato . . .” Gide wrote, “has any other musician ever used this word, would he have ever had the desire, the need, to indicate the airing, the breath of breeze that, interrupting the rhythm, contrary to all hope, comes freshening and perfuming the middle of his Barcarolle?”
“It’s the fog that gives it its magnificent breadth,” Monet said of his ghostly London. We hear the exultation and horror of scale in the echo that knocks “softly at the shutter” for Poe, and feel it in the “groping and floundering” of Dickens’s pedestrians and the “vagues terreaurs de ces affreuses nuits” in Baudelaire. We see it in flashes in the solitude of Whistler. Rubinstein played the forte passages of the Barcarolle pianissimo, as Chopin is reported to have done in his final recital. When Nature comes in from the margins—as in the leaden tide touched by the last rays in The Riva, Sunset: Red and Gold (1879)—more is less.

1 “Whistler and Nature” opened at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, on January 8 and remains on view through March 17, 2019.

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