George Price Boyce’s Godstow Nunnery, Oxfordshire (1862) as Timeline

Caitlin Silberman

The title of George Price Boyce’s (1826-1897) watercolor, Godstow Nunnery, Oxfordshire (1862, Fig. 1), announces that this painting portrays a specific place. As much as an ostensibly mimetic record of a geographic place, however, Boyce uses this resonant location to consider temporality— that is, the state of existing in time and having a relationship with time. Through a multitude of visual cues, Godstow Nunnery (as I will call it throughout) functions as a palimpsest in which the landscape is marked with traces of earlier histories. Three such “ages” are made especially visible. Godstow Nunnery points to the artist’s own capture of a fleeting moment; it also muses on the romantic past of medieval Britain that was particularly evocative for Boyce as an artist sympathetic to the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Finally, the painting also conjures up the long timeline back into what Martin Rudwick named “deep time”: the seemingly endless and unknowable eons of the earth’s prehistory, which by the early nineteenth century were becoming a viable and widely understood alternative to the belief in an earth only a few thousand years old. For the viewer with knowledge of geology, Godstow Nunnery triggers a discourse of an old earth whose history can be read through its geologic layers: the recently developed field of stratigraphy.

Before engaging Boyce’s explorations of time and memory, it is essential to identify the painting’s location and position it within the career of George Price Boyce. What are we looking at, where is it, and what might this site signify to an artist with Boyce’s connections and commitments? After youthful training as an architect, tutelage from the landscape watercolorist
David Cox in 1847 inspired Boyce chose to pursue a career in painting.\(^1\) Though based in London, Boyce traveled widely in search of landscapes to paint and in the late summer of 1862 went to Oxford for this purpose. *Godstow Nunnery* and *At Binsey, Near Oxford* (Fig. 2) resulted from this expedition.\(^2\) Both works were painted *en plein air* (outdoors) in an approach practiced by many members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of young vanguard artists whose style and ethos Boyce began to adopt from the late 1850s.\(^3\) Boyce’s diaries and inscriptions on painting the suggest that *Godstow Nunnery* was painted in either August or in September. While the front of the painting is signed and dated September 1862, an inscription on the reverse states “Godstow Nunnery, near Oxford, G. Boyce, August 1862, 6.15 pm.”\(^4\) On August 18, Boyce recorded a conversation with the daughter of the innkeeper of the Trout Inn near Godstow, who told him that William Holman Hunt had painted *The Hireling Shepherd* (1851) around the nunnery.\(^5\) For a modern painter in the 1860s, Godstow combined the artistic attraction of ruins (long prized for their “picturesque” qualities, though Boyce’s painting does not obey the compositional strictures of the picturesque mode of landscape painting) and an association with a dramatic and rather racy moment in British history. It was also within easy reach of London, where the greatest number of Victorian artists was concentrated and where the major artistic societies and opportunities for exhibition were found.

---

2 Both watercolors were submitted to the Old Water Colour Society and shown at their annual exhibition in 1864, the year in which Boyce was elected an associate member of that body. (*The Eye of a Collector: Works from the Collection of Stanley J. Seeger* [New York: Sotheby's, 2001], 94.)
3 Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 107-9. Allen Staley records that although Boyce had met many members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in the early 1850s and become particularly friendly with Dante Gabriel Rosetti, Boyce did not employ the Brotherhood’s characteristic vivid coloration, preference for bright sunshine, and high degree of detail until late in the decade.
4 *The Eye of a Collector*, 94.
Sited along the Thames or Isis\(^6\) roughly 2.5 miles northwest of Oxford, the Benedictine nunnery at Godstow ("God’s Place") was established in the twelfth century and dedicated to St. Mary and St. John the Baptist (Figs 3, 4). It persisted as a nunnery until 1539, when monastic orders were disbanded under King Henry VIII’s order of dissolution. After centuries in private hands, the site was in ruins by the early eighteenth century.\(^7\) The taller, windowed structure at the right-hand end of the wall in Boyce’s painting corresponds to a chapel, “originally late [fifteenth] century,” in the southeast corner of the nunnery complex.\(^8\) The viewer is thus looking north at the span of the nunnery’s southern wall. To the far left, a house-shaped hayrick straddles the ancient wall of the nunnery; the hayrick’s shape mimics that of a thatch-roofed building beside it. This last must be a modern accretion rather than a part of the ancient nunnery, as the chapel was the only building even partially intact in the nineteenth century.

Godstow’s fame rests on its being known as the burial place of a king’s mistress. The beautiful Rosamund Clifford (or “Fair Rosamund”) incurred the wrath of King Henry II’s jealous wife, Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. Though hidden in a labyrinth by the rightfully concerned King Henry, she was tracked down in Henry’s absence by Queen Eleanor, who offered her a choice of a dagger or poison. Rosamund chose the poison. Some legends have Rosamund interred at Godstow after this murder, while others claim that she retired here as a nun and died a natural death. In either event a number of legends sprang up of roses blooming, trees blossoming, and sweet smells emanating from her at tomb at Godstow, though by Boyce’s time the precise location of her burial was not known.\(^9\)

---

\(^6\) In the environs of Oxford, the river Thames is called the Isis.
\(^7\) Alan Crossley et al., "Wolvercote: Site and Remains of Godstow Abbey," *A History of the County of Oxford* 12, Wootton Hundred (South) including Woodstock (1990), 311-313.
\(^8\) Alan Crossley et al., "Wolvercote: Site and Remains of Godstow Abbey," 311-313.
\(^9\) An extensive collection of writings on Rosamund and Godstow Nunnery are collected at the “Godstow Nunnery” page of John Eade’s website *Where the Thames Smooth Waters Glide* <http://thames.me.uk/s01860.htm>. 
In Boyce’s painting, the passage of time weighs heavily on the nunnery, the long, low bulk of which is overgrown with ivy and towered over by more recent trees, some of which must be growing within the nunnery walls. The stretch of the nunnery walls also provides a contrast to the more modern lock that cuts through the foreground. First built in 1790, Godstow Lock allows boats to bypass the fast-moving weir that makes up the main body of the Thames in this vicinity.\textsuperscript{10} The lock gate serves to regulate the level of water in the lock; descent through this gate leads the boater to a lower water level. This is what the two men in the painting must have just done; their bright caps peep and boat pole out from the sunken lock. They are traveling downstream, towards Oxford. Continuing in the direction of their travel, a young child with a switch or pole dawdles on the riverbank. He, too, wears a cap, and the passage from youth to adult may be conjured up by this visual rhyme. The small white object between the child and the boaters on the far bank is a hitching post; if traveling upstream, one could tie one’s boat to it while opening the lock gate, which was operated manually.

All these incidental details— and the inscription on the painting’s reverse, indicating even the time of the scene— point to a moment frozen in time, historically particular and empirically observed. Certainly contemporaries took Boyce’s landscape paintings as accurate transcriptions of the scenes he viewed: an Art Journal critic in 1864 opined, “Mr Boyce[...] cherishes a single eye for simple nature, which, in the reverence of deep feeling, he ventures not to alter, or even to compose. The art of this artist[...] is artless.”\textsuperscript{11} This and other critics were mistaken, however; Boyce has altered the geographic features of Godstow significantly. A composite image from Google Earth (Fig. 3) and Victorian photographs by Henry Taunt (Figs 5,

\textsuperscript{10} The right side of the Google Earth image (Fig. 3) shows one point at which the fast-moving weir and the slower, gate-regulated lock are separated by a barrier. Today’s lock gate is further downstream.

6) show that the river runs roughly parallel to the eastern wall of the nunnery; it swings west slightly once downstream from the ruined chapel, but stays east of the nunnery complex for some distance downstream. Boyce’s painting, though, gives the impression that the river runs in front of, rather than east of, the southern wall that he paints. Comparing Figure 1, Boyce’s painting, to a photograph taken in 1885 (Fig. 6), shows the extent of the change. The south wall and ruined nunnery are seen in an identically frontal view, but in Boyce’s painting the river runs in a far more east-westerly direction. For compositional purposes, he has rerouted the river to flow at a shallow angle to, if not quite parallel to, the southern wall. The purposes that adjustment might serve will be explored in the final section of this essay.

_Godstow Nunnery_ reveals Boyce implementing certain qualities of paintings by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Although his early work reproduced the picturesque compositions, strong contrast of light and dark (chiaroscuro) and sketchy execution of his first painting master, David Cox, Boyce’s friendliness with many artists in the Pre-Raphaelite circles (particularly the Brotherhood’s co-founder, Dante Gabriel Rossetti) came to affect his style by the late 1850s. Boyce’s friendship with the influential art critic John Ruskin further cemented Boyce’s ties to the doctrine of “truth to nature”: that is, Ruskin’s imperative in his manifesto on the state of British art, _Modern Painters_ (1843). In a call heeded by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of young avant garde artists, Ruskin urged artists to eschew the tradition of learning to paint the outdoors from imitating the Old Masters and rather to “go to Nature in all singleness of heart[…] rejecting

---

12 The lock gate in Taunt’s 1885 photograph (Fig. 6) may or may not be in the same location as in Boyce’s 1862 painting; Parliamentary reports indicate that the Godstow lock gate was replaced in 1872, but not whether the location was altered. (“General Report of the Proceedings of the Conservators of the River Thames, from the 1st January to the 31st December 1874[…]” _Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons_ 19 [1875], 413.) Certainly, though, the river was not rerouted.

nothing, selecting nothing, and scorning nothing.”¹⁴ In *Godstow Nunnery*, Boyce’s minute attention to detail and the use of strong, bright colors in a sun-drenched atmosphere—abandoning *chiaroscuro*—are the clearest markers of Ruskinian and Pre-Raphaelite influence. Newall and Egerton also attribute Boyce’s choice of “countrified” landscapes, populated with “timeworn buildings and landscapes seen in the very process of elemental decay and reconstitution,” to Ruskin’s art manual, *The Elements of Drawing* (1857), which advocated such scenes as subjects.¹⁵

The emphasis on the foreground, without a clear recession into a distant background, is similarly Pre-Raphaelite, but taken to an extreme by Boyce. Comparing *Godstow Nunnery* to *Near Binsey, Oxford* (Fig. 2) demonstrates that on his Oxford trip, Boyce eschewed deep perspective and used saturated color throughout his scenes. There is none of the atmospheric perspective that makes colors in the distance look to the human eye paler and more blue-gray. This flattens the scenes’ depth, making them look shallow in comparison to more traditional, ie Claudean landscapes; that is, those composed according to the still-dominant landscape tradition of the French artist Claude Lorrain (c.1600-1682). Some hallmarks of the Victorian landscape vocabulary with a lineage back to Claude can be found in *The Harvest Moon* (1855, Fig. 8) by John Linnell, an artist a generation older than Boyce. In this image, clearly defined paths lead the viewer’s eye from the foreground into the background. Atmospheric perspective contributes to the sense of a deep space, while framing elements at the sides of the image (*repoussoirs*) further restrain a wandering eye and keep the foreground dim in comparison to the middle and far distances.

¹⁵ Newall and Egerton, *George Price Boyce*, 21. The subject of the ruin as an ideal subject for landscape has a long history in British art, notably arising from the aesthetic doctrines of the picturesque and the sublime in the eighteenth century.
While a number of writers have remarked on the shallow depth and confusing perspective of many of Boyce’s landscapes, I have not found any who note their remarkably horizontality.\textsuperscript{16} From the late 1850s on, however, Boyce often adopted a strongly horizontal format for his watercolors, for instance *Farm Buildings near Streatley, with a Meadow and Mowers* (c1859), *The Mill on the Thames at Mapledurham* (1860), *Tull’s Farm, Southridge, Near Streatley* (1863), and *Ancient Tithe- Barn and Farm Buildings near Bradford-on-Avon, Wiltshire* (Fig. 9, 1878). The lack of paths into the background (as featured in Linnell’s painting) denies these works depth. Buildings, fences, trees, bushes, and fields are oriented parallel or nearly parallel to the picture plane. These paintings lack the Claudean “framing” foreground elements that create a shadowy foreground leading to a lighter, but less saturated background. Even the paper Boyce chooses is long and narrow, emphasizing the horizontality of the compositions.

While Boyce is known for his association with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, his landscape style is more closely linked to that of Ford Madox Brown in the 1850s and 1860s, a fact noted by Allen Staley.\textsuperscript{17} Charles Allston Collins’ *May, in the Regent’s Park* (Fig. 10, 1851) can be added to Brown’s foreground-dominating, shallow, and horizontal landscapes such as *Carrying Corn* (1854-5, Fig. 11), *The Pretty Baa-Lambs* (1851-9, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery), and *Hampstead from my Window* (1857, Delaware Art Museum). These paintings also share with Boyce’s a saturated palette unmodulated by atmospheric perspective or the dictates of contemporary taste, which could find such intensity garish. It is notable that these paintings are often dated (even in the title, in Collins’ work) and abound with further incidental details that make claims for empirical reality even as they are difficult to parse visually: people caught mid-


\textsuperscript{17} Staley, *The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape*, 109.
action, unusually abrupt cropping of elements at the edges of the canvas, and the presence of fleeting effects like rainbows, shadows over the sun, tides, and so on. Compare these paintings these again to Linnell’s *Harvest Moon*, whose artful composition guides the eye from element to element. While the traditional framing/guiding elements are gone, Brown’s *Carrying Corn* and Boyce’s *Godstow Nunnery* retain a foreground figure who observes the scene. Yet while in Linnell’s painting the foreground figures usher the viewer into a deep space, in Collins’, Brown’s, and Boyce’s paintings the figures do not serve this purpose; they are cut off by horizontal landscape features such rows of trees or foliage or hay, fences, and buildings.

As his style shared qualities of color and composition with the avant-garde Pre-Raphaelites and similarly anti-establishment artists such as Ford Madox Brown, it is not surprising that critics could find Boyce’s work a challenge to appraise. The *Art Journal*, at least, took Boyce’s rejection of standard patterns of composition as a sign of “artlessness” or of a determination to elevate unpromising sites to the status of art through his handling of paint: "Mr Boyce is singular in the choice of his subjects, inasmuch as he loves to plant his sketching stool just where there is no subject. Yet does he manage to make out of the most unpromising of materials a picture which for the most part is clever and satisfactory."\(^{18}\) Calling Boyce’s settings “no settings” and “the most unpromising of materials” highlights one final similarity between Brown’s and Allston’s landscapes and the bulk of Boyce’s (though *Godstow Nunnery* is rather an exception): the familiarity of their subjects, which critics could sometimes take as banality and even as ugliness. The *Art Journal’s* reaction to Boyce’s “unpromising” setting was, however, much kinder than Ruskin’s alleged response to Ford Madox Brown’s *An English Autumn*

---

Afternoon, Hampstead—Scenery in 1853 (1852-4, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery).

Brown’s diary records that Ruskin asked:

What made you take such a very ugly subject, it was a pitty [sic] for there was some nice painting in it. I […] replied contemptuously “Because it lay out of a back window” & turning on my heel took my hat & wished [Dante] Gabriel [Rossetti] goodbuy [sic].

It was, at least in part, the ordinariness of the London suburb of Hampstead which made Brown’s painting so ugly to Ruskin and made this type of modern landscape seem to many critics scarcely to qualify as “art” at all.

If the perspective, color palette, and composition of Boyce’s paintings were and still are perceptibly unusual for c.1860, his choice of scenery in Godstow Nunnery links both Pre-Raphaelite and popular tastes for depictions of the British past. Medieval and mythical Britain formed a rich source of subjects for artists, and Godstow’s ruined walls call to mind a dramatic episode of British history of the sort much beloved not only by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood but by the Victorians more generally. The choice of a site linked to Rosamund, however, was likely influenced by a fad for her story among Pre-Raphaelites and their friends in the early 1860s. Rossetti completed a painting of Rosamund in 1861 (Fig. 12). Another of Rossetti’s friends, Edward Coley Burne-Jones, painted a number of Rosamunds at this time; Fair Rosamund and Queen Eleanor (Fig. 13, 1862) dramatizes the moment when the queen finds her prey. Finally, Algernon Charles Swinburne, a writer in the Pre-Raphaelite circle and a good friend of Rossetti’s, wrote a verse play called Rosamond in 1860. Any and all of these works may have had a bearing on Boyce’s choice of location in 1862.

---

20 The model for Rosamund in this painting is Fanny Cornforth, a frequent model for Rossetti with whom Boyce likely had a relationship in the 1850s (Newall and Edgerton, George Price Boyce, 18).
Artists and their audiences would likely also have recognized and appreciated the frisson of non-normative gender and sexuality implicit in the Rosamund narrative that *Godstow Nunnery* invokes. Henry and Rosamund’s adultery is of course forbidden, and Eleanor’s murder demonstrates a cruelty and passion considered unnatural for women by to the widely understood norms of feminine behavior. The extreme actions of Henry and Eleanor were prompted by passion in excess, respectively carnal and vengeful. In contrast, the nuns of Godstow represent another non-normative and even extreme form of femininity, one that refuses the mandate to marry and produce children. Ideally the nun also rejected any sort of sexual activity whatsoever, although a wide audience was receptive to fantasies of nuns who did not fulfill this ideal.  

Boyce, however, does something very different from Rossetti and Burne-Jones. Boyce’s scene may call to mind a romantic history of Britain (at least, if the viewer has access to the story attached to Godstow Nunnery), but his landscape is calm or even sleepy, not suffused with passion. Boyce does not create a figurative or narrative scene, but instead embeds the ruins of Rosamund’s burial place in a modern landscape. It is a sign of the past, but it seems to bear little trace of the upheavals that took place there. Godstow, here, is analogous to the geological features that are so prominent in many mid-Victorian paintings. A number of authors over the course of modern nineteenth-century art scholarship have addressed the geological in the visual. Taking up themes pioneered by Marcia Pointon’s writings on William Dyce’s 1858 oil painting *Kent—a Recollection of October 6, 1858* (1978, 1997), Rebecca Bedell (2001, 2009) analyzes the participation of painters in the popular preoccupation with geology and the earth’s history in nineteenth-century America and Britain, while Christopher Newall's essay "Understanding the Landscape" (2004) focuses on the geologic leanings of the Pre-Raphaelites in particular. Michael  

---

21 The expressions of Victorian thoughts on nuns are vast and complex; for some of the range of Victorian imagination around the female religious, see Susan Casteras, “Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists’ Portrayal of Nuns and Novices,” *Victorian Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1981), 157-184.
Freeman, writing on *The Victorians and the Prehistoric* (2004), also touches on artistic representation.

First noted by Marcia Pointon in 1978, the painting that is often singled out as embedding geologic “deep time” in a modern moment is William Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay* (Fig. 14). In the background of this painting the White Cliffs of Dover predominate, while in the foreground, figures engage in the popular pastime of hunting for shells and other baubles on the seashore. While not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Dyce was sympathetic to their project and shared the meticulousness of their style, if not always their vivid coloration. Boyce’s *Godstow Nunnery* and Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay* share the stylistic and compositional choices of close, detailed delineation that does not lessen even in the distance, an all-over lighting rather than strong chiaroscuro, a long, low bulk of ancient rock in the background, and foreground figures who take no notice of the ancient edifice. Indeed, in both paintings, the modern figures in the foreground are separated from the background not only by an interval of space but by a physical barrier (horizontal again) that marks a separation between modern specificity and a more “timeless” deep past. For Dyce, this barrier is a mass of mossy foliage and a wooden fence; for Boyce, the deep cut of the river Isis. Although it does not feature a natural rock formation as in *Pegwell Bay*, *Godstow Nunnery* also “portrays a concept of geological time in opposition to human, daily time, and does so primarily though pictorial means.”

The geologic imperative in Dyce’s and other paintings, in which the physiognomy of rocks signals the long history of the earth, is in part indebted to Ruskin. In Volume I of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin praises the etching of Turner’s *Upper Fall of the Tees, Yorkshire* (original watercolor c.1825, Tate Gallery) for its accurate depiction of banded rock strata alongside a
waterfall, so accurate that “with this drawing before him, a geologist could give a lecture upon the whole system of aqueous erosion, and speculate [...] safely upon the past and future states of this very spot [...]” 

Younger Pre-Raphaelites such as John Brett took up this call to embark upon incredibly detailed studies like the one seen here, *The Glacier of Rosenlaui* of 1856 (Fig. 15), and another of the paintings in the Chazen’s exhibition: Alfred William Hunt’s *Devil’s Bridge, St Gotthard Pass* (Fig. 16, c. 1859). Both artists, un-coincidentally, were also in close communication with Ruskin at the time they painted their images. And yet one can gesture to “the past and future states” of a location without depicting every strata, as Dyce, Brett, and Hunt have done; and it is my argument that the horizontal bands of space in Boyce’s painting—foreground, river, mid-ground, abbey—metaphorically model bands of time. Its very format, so strongly horizontal, suggests a timeline, while its banded quality metaphorically suggests the strata that are portrayed literally in *Pegwell Bay, The Glacier of Rosenlaui*, and *The Devil’s Bridge*.

A link to “bandedness”—that is, characterized by thin horizontal bands piled up vertically—as an indicator of time can be found in the stratigraphic diagrams through which men of science such as James Hutton, Georges Cuvier, and Charles Lyell had begun to map the “deep time” of the earth. Although the study of stratigraphy as providing clues to the earth’s history had begun in the late eighteenth century, in Britain notably with William Smith and James Hutton, the practice had become well-known in Britain in the 1830s through the work of the Scottish geologist Charles Lyell. Lyell’s three-volume *Principles of Geology* (1830-33) popularized the theory of uniformitarianism, in which the earth was shaped by slow, inexorable forces working at a steady rate over time and recorded in the rock strata that are present all

---

around us: above us in cliffs and mountains, and below our feet. Lyell’s own sketches of a British coastline in cross-section, in which each horizontal band represents a stretch of time in which geologic forces laid down a certain kind of rock, describe visually the history of landscapes that might otherwise seem fixed and unchanging. (Fig. 17) Such stratigraphic images proliferated in Lyell’s books and in other texts of the time that dealt with the age of the earth, some of them very popular. Christopher Newall mentions in particular John Phillips’ *Manual of Geology* (1855) as a popular text, while Bernard Lightman records many authors of geological tomes. Lyell’s own heavily illustrated *Principles* went through many editions; his original stratigraphic diagrams were often reproduced, for instance in the 1871 condensed version of the *Principles* entitled *Elements of Geology*. (Fig. 18)

Uniformitarianism principles require long timelines for the earth to take its present form. This theory is opposed to catastrophism, in which the earth’s geologic qualities are explained by sudden upheavals, and in early nineteenth-century practice often attributed to acts of divine intervention such as the Noachic flood. But Lyell’s published diagrams, like his sketch, show *local* history as well as global. They point out that below and alongside us are the clues to the story of our deep past: perhaps they are covered by soil or (in the case of a mountain or hill) by greenery, but they are there, and available to anyone who has a mind to look. This is perhaps most charmingly illustrated in an image of an unconformity (vertical strata that represent a discontinuity in the geologic record) in the Scottish town of Jedburgh (Fig. 19). The image comes from *The Theory of the Earth* (1787) by James Hutton, the father of uniformitarianism;

---

25 Rebecca Bedell, “The History of the Earth: Darwin, Geology and Landscape Art,” in, *Endless Forms: Charles Darwin, Natural Science, and the Visual Arts*, edited by Diana Donald and Jane Munro (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 125. Although the theory of uniformitarianism was proposed in the eighteenth century by James Hutton, Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (3 vols; London: John Murray, 1830-33) popularized the idea and brought it into prominence. The terms “uniformitarianism” and “catastrophism” were coined by William Whewell in 1832.

here, a modern carriage and a man on horseback speed along unaware of the deep history they tread upon. It is important to reemphasize that by the second and third decades of the nineteenth century, the competing theories of uniformitarianism and catastrophism and drawings like Hutton’s and Lyell’s were not confined to the rarified realm of scientists. Rock strata, and more visible products of geologic forces such as glaciers and volcanoes, were topics of discussion not only in scientific circles but in popular culture. By Boyce’s time the idea of an ancient earth, perhaps millions of years old, was less shocking than it once was, and laypersons and artists alike engaged in not only discussion but direct observation.27

If the distinctive appearance of stratigraphic diagrams was a familiar sight and understood as an indicator of deep time, then Godstow Nunnery’s similarities to these diagrams suggest that geologic time as well as human history is here invoked.28 Its horizontally-oriented, banded appearance, the presence of historical “strata” in the long, low nunnery, and modern strata in the recent lock and gate all underscore its similarity to the visual vocabulary of stratigraphy. The progression from child to adult along the river and the contrast between ancient chapel and modern hayrick and lock gate further emphasize the passage of time, here in a daily rather than geologic register. Finally, while it would be too much to say that Boyce or any other contemporary viewer would have consciously recognized this, the negative space created by the nunnery wall peeping through ivy does bear more than a passing resemblance to the cliffs and crags of both paintings and geologic diagrams.

27 Ruskin was deeply devoted to chronicling geologic features, and urged readers to do so in his books, including Modern Painters and The Elements of Drawing. For Ruskin, the study of geology challenged the Evangelical religious teachings of his youth, but this was not the case for many if not most Victorian Christians, for whom the wonders of nature revealed God’s power and who were able to reconcile an ancient Earth with the account(s) in Genesis.  

28 I am not the first to suggest a rather speculative connection between stratigraphic diagrams and non-technical imagery. In the chapter “Darwin’s Diagrams” in Darwin’s Pictures (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), Julia Voss explores the possibility that the visual example of Lyell’s and others’ cross-sections paved the way for Darwin’s evolutionary reconfiguration of history.
Looking back on the past century in his book *Nineteenth Century Art* (1902), the Victorian painter D.S. MacColl wrote of Dyce’s *Pegwell Bay*:

The blue waves, and the goddess-bearing dolphins do not come: only nicely dressed ladies pick their insect steps across the seaweed, and the portent of the comet hangs above this truest of Dyce’s histories. It is as if a man had come to the ugly end of the world, and felt bound to tell.\(^29\)

The artist and the viewer of the painting, occupying a privileged viewing position, “tell” the “truest histories” that reside in the landscape. Those who move through the landscape, “nicely-dressed ladies” in this case, do not—or cannot. For MacColl to compare the ladies to insects suggests that they may be *incapable* of doing so, as they lack humanity (unlike the artist, “a man”). While this judgment is not flattering to the figures in these paintings, it is flattering to the viewers of them. In the case of *Godstow Nunnery* as in *Pegwell Bay*, history is not hidden “below” as rock strata usually are, but visible, like a cliff face or a glacier. And again, in *Godstow Nunnery* the modern foreground figures are caught up in their own moment, unconcerned with the stretches of the past that we, the painting’s viewers, do see. *Godstow Nunnery* is at the last an exhortation to attend to history.

Such attention can be found in the frontispiece to the first volume of Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (Fig. 20, 1830). Illustrating the *Present State of the Temple of Serapis at Puzzuoli*, the image dramatizes one of Lyell’s arguments for uniformitarianism: on the columns of an ancient Roman temple, erosion caused by marine mollusks shows that the water level of the Bay of Baiae has risen and fallen once twenty and once thirty feet.\(^30\) As there is no record of divine flooding or the over the past two millennia, or of the sudden “local movements of the earth’s crust” to which Lyell’s contemporaries attributed the phenomena, such apparently dramatic

---

\(^29\) Dugald Sutherland MacColl, *Nineteenth Century Art* (Glasgow: James Maclehose & Sons, 1902), 115.

\(^30\) Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, 454-459; Rudwick, *Worlds Before Adam*, 299. The “temple” is actually a marketplace, but this was not known in Lyell’s time.
change must rather be natural, continuous, and ongoing. In the engraving, a shadowy figure in the foreground observes the phenomena that the figures in *Pegwell Bay* and *Godstow Nunnery* ignore. Although the image is copied from an Italian antiquarian’s study of the Temple of Serapis from 1820, the reader of *Principles of Geology* might understandably conflate the figure in the frontispiece with Lyell, since the geologist himself had visited the Temple of Serapis and drew the conclusions about the columns. To make a visual study of the history inscribed on the landscape thus yields great rewards.

George Price Boyce in *Godstow Nunnery* partakes of three contemporary modes of visualizing temporality. In using of cutting-edge techniques for landscape painting, abandoning the long-held Claudean vocabulary, Boyce stakes a claim for the immediacy, modernity, and empirical reality of this scene: “it happened at a single moment, and I was there.” Through the inclusion of a historic building that invokes a romantic history, Boyce provides an alternative means of considering Britain’s storied past: alternative, that is, to Rossetti’s and Burne-Jones’ use of figural scenes, which place the characters in continuity with “us,” the presumed contemporary viewers. A ruined, overgrown nunnery beyond a riverbank, in contrast, highlights discontinuity between the contemporary “us” and the past “them.” This discontinuity is heightened by the lack of attention the modern foreground figures pay the abbey: they are separated by space and time, signaled by the horizontal bands that mimic stratigraphic diagrams. In a characteristically modern manner, they go about their business without dwelling on their surroundings. That we, the viewers, take in the whole scene— that our eyes are drawn to the nunnery, and compelled to engage in a dream of the past (historic and prehistoric) that it

---

32 Ibid.
connotes, places us in a position of privilege and of responsibility. Through our consideration, we make restitution for the heedless ways of modernity.
Bibliography


“General Report of the Proceedings of the Conservators of the River Thames, from the 1st January to the 31st December 1874, with Accounts of Moneys Received and Expended by the Conservators of the River Thames, for One Year Ending the 31st December 1874.” *Accounts and Papers of the House of Commons* 19 (1875), 413-414.


