Introduction

Doodling might at first appear to be a strange subject for a scholarly treatise. After all, what could be more trivial, inconsequential, and inscrutable than those bizarre scribbles and sketches that adorn many schoolbooks, notepads, and journals – often signalling their creators' inattention and boredom? Understood in these terms, doodles seem to be fundamentally antithetical to analysis. Rather than intelligible symbols, they suggest more often than not a subconscious resistance to coherent discourse, a protest against the constraints of logic or discipline.

Yet doodles retain the ability to fascinate. We continue to interrogate them for hidden meanings and recognise their talismanic power to spur creation. Numerous popular books seek to harness this potency. Sunni Brown's *The Doodle Revolution: Unlock the Power to Think Differently* (2014) is a good example of this genre. An expansion of her popular TED talk on doodling as a method by which to develop visual literacy and proficiency, Brown's book sees doodles as aids to the construction of meaning – as 'spontaneous marks made to support thinking' (12). With this definition in hand, she cites examples of doodlers like Einstein, Tesla, and Steve Jobs – whose doodling (loosely defined) has 'given society huge, game-changing innovations' – to encourage everyone to 'see the doodle in a positive and functional way and then to capitalize on its magnificent utility' (12). Even skilled artists have alluded to the importance of doodling for the creation of visual art, emphasising the ways in which it 'engages the artist's imagination' (Doherty 2005, 28).

These popular explorations of doodling understand it as a playful and productive impulse. By letting go of inhibitions and embracing visual experimentation, one can discover new ideas and engage with the thoughts of others in ways unavailable through conscious attention and contemplation. While admitting that doodles can be useful tools for ideating, one can still ask what value they have for scholars. Even if the act of doodling can lead its practitioners to an insight or revelation of some sort, the doodles themselves are often unintelligible or highly ambiguous, making them resistant to scholarly interpretation. Like inkblots in a Rorschach test, doodles can also reveal more about the viewers than their creators.

What this Element calls *literary doodling* – the playful verbal and visual creations made by professional authors while engaged in another activity – differs from the more general practice of doodling in that it primarily accompanies the traditional labour of literary production: writing, reading, and note taking.[1] One finds doodles in the manuscripts, notebooks, and personal libraries of a surprising number of professional writers. At least at first glance, these doodles are often as ambiguous as their lay counterparts. Perhaps that is one reason relatively little critical attention has been paid to them, even when their creators are major literary figures such as Percy Bysshe Shelley, the Brontës, Mark Twain, Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, and James Joyce. Although authors such as these were prolific doodlers, their doodling often appears to be indecipherable or unrelated to (albeit collocated with) their traditional literary work. Ultimately, one might appreciate authors' doodles as mute traces of their mental activity while forsaking any hope of making sense of them.

Beyond their general obscurity, doodles figure infrequently in literary analysis because of their putative triviality. Doodles are seemingly unserious creations, and the act of doodling often suggests a goofing off, a delinquency of some sort that simultaneously departs from a more sober activity and undermines it. Think of the distracted doodling of someone in a business meeting. Critical discussions of doodling in relationship to literature, such as they exist, often refer pejoratively to verbal rather than visual forms of trifling. Some critics even use the term to draw distinctions between types of writing within authors' notebooks: between the serious writing found therein and the frivolous scribblings that are unworthy of scholarly attention. Paul J. Ferlazzo (2007) makes just such a distinction in summarising the value of Robert Frost's notebooks: 'Although some passages may appear as literary doodling, other items show the poet thinking and rethinking important ideas and beliefs.'

[1] 'Literary doodling' as a term is rare; however, it typically refers – by analogy to doodlistic sketches – to playful, frivolous, or experimental forms of writing and not to the more specific type of literary activity (verbal or visual) that we seek to define in this Element.

Ferlazzo implicitly defines doodling as unimportant and antithetical to 'thinking and rethinking' (i.e., as the absence of intelligible thought), a distinction that is itself yet another barrier to understanding doodles and their meanings. By placing inscrutability at the centre of their definitions, critics such as Ferlazzo effectively categorise doodles but also pre-empt further analysis. Doodling becomes the thing about which one 'cannot speak' – to borrow a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein's ((1921) 2023) famous ending to the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (68). Doodles either exist beyond language or represent a sort of nonsense language; thus, we are encouraged to observe them mutely and dumbly.

While acknowledging the limits inherent to analysing doodles, this Element nonetheless challenges the notion that little or nothing can be said about them and seeks instead to provide a critical foundation for the study of doodling. Despite their semantic complications, doodles are a distinct form of verbo-pictorial expression that possesses a grammar, an historical reality, and what in phenomenology might be called an horizon – that is, a context through which they can achieve meaningful representation. Those horizons – to channel Hans-Georg Gadamer – and those of their creators can be fused with the horizons of their interpreters to glean, create, and reshape the meaning of doodles.[2] That is to say, this study sets itself a goal of developing an interpretative framework for doodles that is flexible, self-reflective, and attuned to its own critical limitations; it engages and negotiates with the various horizons of specific doodles and doodlers, employing mixed methodologies – for example, biographical, historicist, formalist, materialist, and psychoanalytic – to understand them. Doodles speak with their perceivers in ways that require complex dialogic relationships, and this Element strives both to enact such relationships and to establish a framework for further scholarly interrogation and exploration. Recognising doodles as slippery subjects, this study also deploys some forms of post-structuralist and post-critical hermeneutics. Doodles themselves are rich with dialetheias: they are verbal and visual, squiggle and symbol, complete and incomplete, helpmeet and daemon. They require

[2] For a concise explanation of the concept of horizon in phenomenology and Gadamer's notion of the 'fusion of horizons', see Lawn and Keane 2011, 51–53.

complex methodologies for interpretation but also entice scholars to embrace them as evidence of other forms of reading, writing, and pleasure.

Ultimately, this Element recommends a more active, playful, and to some degree subjective interpretive approach than literary scholarship typically embodies, not only because doodles demand such an approach but also because doodling reminds us that meaning is always tentative, fragile, and relational. It unveils the pretence of objectivity that still garbs much criticism. It rejuvenates the joy and wonder of readerly discovery. Of course, there are dangers in this as well: doodles could become reduced to Rorschach tests, reflecting only the critic's preconceptions, or they could become unmoored from their original contexts and drift in a sea of overinterpretation. Yet here doodles also have surprising defence mechanisms – their difficulty and their embarrassing nature. Their contextual complexity (psychological, social, material, visual, etc.) resists easy interpretation and hence accentuates the ridiculousness of blithe attempts to assign unambiguous meaning to them such as Michael Watts's *Doodle Interpretation: A Beginner's Guide* (2000), in which he asserts, for example, that doodles of 'hearts that are sharply pointed at the base' indicate 'a highly judgemental person with a jealous streak' (17). Meanwhile, doodles' seeming silliness and inconsequential levity embarrass critics who take themselves and their theories too seriously, and so these critics tend to avoid doodles altogether. The most fruitful doodle criticism will thus be one that maintains a stance of fallibilistic play, aware of its own limitations and shortcomings but not afraid to risk looking foolish while playing with doodles. It will also play with all of the toys in the critical toy chest, trying out any lens that might unlock a new insight but handling these methodologies lightly, not becoming beholden or self-serious about any one approach.

In this Element, we have focused our attention on anglophone authors of the long nineteenth century, although doodling is present across many literary and linguistic cultures. We have done so not only because that is where our own scholarly expertise lies but also because it is the period during which industrial, commercial, literary, and artistic trends seeded the ground for the modern manifestation of doodling that would acquire its name in the early twentieth century. This era also featured ongoing and

earnest debate about the role of levity in culture and education, making it an unsurprising time for doodling to appear in various contexts. Striving to be taken seriously at this time and beyond, women authors could not embrace doodling to the same degree as their male counterparts, and our study consequently draws on examples from primarily male authors; nonetheless, the doodling of the Brontës, Stevie Smith, and other authors provides rich counterexamples to this general trend.

We argue the case for the uniqueness of the long nineteenth century as a kind of golden age of doodling more fully in our forthcoming monograph on *Literary Doodling in Britain, 1789–1930*, in which we trace the longer history of doodling and its development through technological, cultural, and aesthetic shifts across human civilisation. This first Element thus explores the various definitions of doodling (especially in the context of literary production and reception) and tries to draw generic boundaries between it and related artistic-literary forms such as sketching, caricaturing, illustrating, nonsense, and the grotesque. It further investigates literary doodling from a functional perspective, considering it as a transgeneric impulse or mode, theorising its relationship to other texts and activities, and emphasising its status as a spectral, liminal, and ludic form. This more synchronic approach is complemented by the more diachronic approach of our subsequent Element, where we show how the impulse to doodle has been a constant companion to the literary imagination even as its forms, functions, and materials have changed over time.

By taking literary doodling seriously, yet still playfully, as a subject of scholarly inquiry, this two-Element project aims to open various avenues for approaching doodles that others can follow and further refine, to highlight the interpenetration of the verbal and the visual in the imagination, and to expand our understanding of the creative process. It is an invitation to look beyond the polish of the published page and to enter the unruly yet playfully revealing realm of literary doodles.

DEMARCATION

1 Definitions

As the introduction argued, doodling is an important but relatively neglected aspect of writing and reading. But what precisely are doodles? And how does literary doodling differ from its more general practice? The introduction partially and implicitly described some of its traits, noting not only doodles' triviality and ambiguity but also their generative capacity. Although hard to decipher, doodles are nonetheless fascinating by-products of the tension between work and play; in the context of authors' doodling, they are indeterminate yet tantalising signals from the noise of literary creation. But what exact kind of artistic or literary phenomenon do they represent, and do they share any formal traits that would allow one consistently to recognise or classify them? How do they fit within a larger taxonomy of drawing and writing?

Starting deductively, one might turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s (*OED*) definition: 'An aimless scrawl made by a person while his mind is more or less otherwise applied.' This description highlights doodles' key attributes of *purposelessness* and *distraction*. The *OED* furthermore defines 'scrawl' as a 'hastily and badly written letter' or 'a careless sketch', adding *haste*, *carelessness*, and *sloppiness* to the doodle's formal traits. In this definition, scrawl is also ambiguously lexical or pictorial (letter or sketch), transferring a similar irresolution between the verbal and visual onto the doodle. Can one apply these criteria – accepting them at least tentatively – to examples of potential doodles to distinguish them from graphically similar forms?

A quick comparison of two sets of drawings that ostensibly share these attributes reveals the limitations of the *OED*'s definition. Oscar Wilde's doodles (Figure 1) on MS p. 116 of his holograph notebook – undated but containing, among other things, drafts for *Poems* (1881) – seemingly possess the traits of roughness, hastiness, imprecision, or incompleteness that define scrawls. This autograph notebook page includes an abstract ornament in the upper right-hand corner, a very lightly sketched profile of a man wearing a monocle, and sketches of two additional figures – at least one of which sports a tonsure or cap – completed in a heavier line than the other sketch. Compared with the formal sketches of a Renaissance master such as

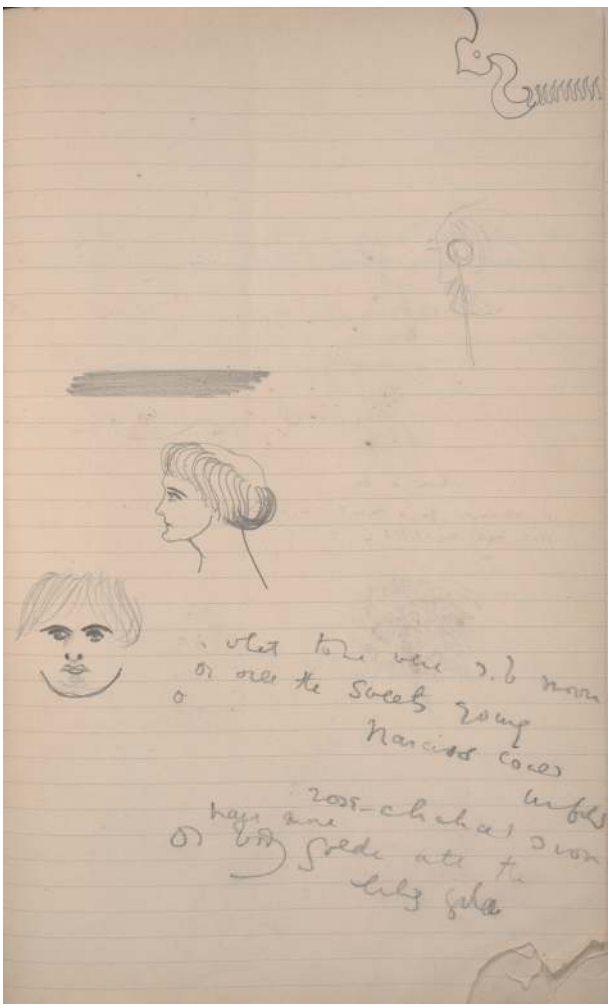

Figure 1 Oscar Wilde, 'Autograph manuscript of many poems, in a notebook illustrated with numerous sketches' (*c.* 1880). Free Library of Philadelphia, rbl0000146, MS page 116/140. Image courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department. Reproduced with kind permission of Merlin Holland. © *Estate of Oscar Wilde*.

Figure 2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Studies of the Heads of Two Warriors* (*c.* 1505). Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest. Public Domain.

Leonardo or, for that matter, any deliberate drawings by a draughtsman or woman with atelier training, these pencil drawings seem imprecise or incomplete; they are fairly minimalistic line drawings as opposed to careful figurative studies with detailed shading and nuanced perspective. Yet one could describe even a work such as Leonardo's *Studies of the Heads of Two Warriors* (*c.* 1505) as in some ways incomplete. This chalk drawing (Figure 2) – a preparatory sketch for Leonardo's planned fresco *The Battle of Anghiari* (1505) – is a *modello*, a life drawing that represents an intermediate stage between final fresco and the most preliminary sketch, the *primo pensiero* (first thought) or *schizzo* (quick sketch) (Culotta 2021).

Despite the exquisitely detailed expressions of the two figures, one profile sketch is more sparsely drawn than the other, and both trail off beyond the highly refined face and neck into greater abstraction. The visible construction lines reveal the method of making 'slight sketches' for which Leonardo advocated in *A Treatise on Painting*. Nevertheless, Leonardo's drawing could hardly be described as an aimless scrawl; it is self-evidently the product of intense concentration and long deliberation – what he called *discorso mentale* (Capra 2013, 3) – and represents a careful study of the figures' dramatic and somewhat grotesque expressions. The more cursory details are deliberately underdeveloped, allowing the focus of the work to be on the precise and meticulous delineation of the faces and providing space for further additions (e.g., hats and helmets) to the finalised fresco.

Leonardo's drawing demonstrates the importance of context and purpose to the classification of doodles. Although Wilde's simple outline sketches appear less refined than Leonardo's, Wilde created the former in a very different context: that of the writer's notebook, which Howard Junker (1995) describes as 'uncertain, ungainly, unliterary'; 'only scribbling' (1). Writers' notebooks are multi-generic, gestational, and (semi-)private; they are a 'compendious literary form' marked by raw content that is 'uncooked sometimes to the point of illegibility' (2–3). As such, one cannot apply benchmarks of completeness and precision to their contents in the same way – at least not without a highly relative and subjective contextual understanding of that content. The truth of this observation is evident when applied to even Leonardo's notebooks, which contain drawings much more raw, indeterminate, playful, and experimental than his more formal sketches. (See Figure 3.) Not only are Wilde's doodles situated in a private and more gestational context, but they are also rendered in a style visually more consistent with the outline drawings of nineteenth-century illustration or caricature than with Italian Renaissance draughtsmanship. The drawings' precision and completeness – their apparent sparseness – are thus factors of those genres' conventions rather than the standards to which Leonardo worked or to some decontextualised measure of virtuosity. The style of Wilde's drawing is also not the result of any artistic limitation. Although less renowned a draughtsman than Leonardo, Wilde was nonetheless a skilled amateur artist, winning multiple school prizes for his drawing (Sturgis 2018, 23, 27). While Wilde's doodles do not by themselves suggest the work of

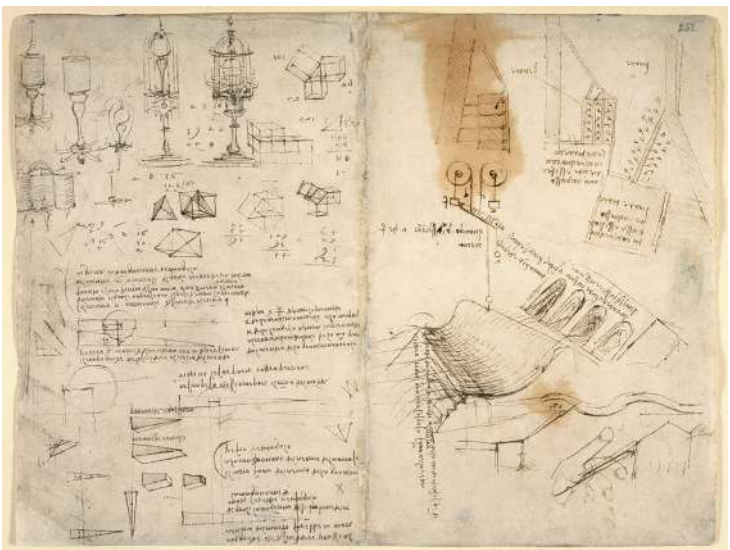

Figure 3 Leonardo da Vinci, notebook ('The Codex Arundel'), early sixteenth century. British Library, Arundel MS 263, ff. 283v, 282. Public domain. Used with permission of the British Library.

a master draughtsman, this biographical knowledge and Wilde's general facility with a pencil leave little doubt that Wilde, had he chosen to, might have created more detailed and complete drawings.

The determination of whether a drawing is a scrawl or not thus depends at least partially on biographical or other contextual information. Even with such information, one needs further details about the scrawls to identify them as doodles. According to the *OED*'s definition, doodles are not just scrawls but aimless scrawls. Absent direct commentary from Wilde on his doodling, one must employ close reading to attempt to understand Wilde's purpose. Yet a close reading of the images provides little indication of their purpose, completeness, or level of precision. The page itself (MS p. 116) lacks an