

## IMAGINING THE PAST OF THE PRESENT

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*Some objects we value because they afford a felt connection with people, events or places connected with their past. Visiting Canterbury cathedral, you encounter the place where, in 1170, Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered by four knights of Henry II. Knowing that you are standing in the very place where Becket's blood was spilled gives the past event a sense of tangible reality. One feels 'in touch with' the past; history seems to 'come alive'. In this paper, I propose an explanation for the phenomenology of such experiences in terms of an imaginative activity that represents what an object is historically connected with as part of the object in the present. One imagines of the site of Becket's murder Becket being murdered. According to my account, objects that embody their histories are representations in Kendall Walton's sense: they have the function of serving as props in games of make-believe.*

**Keywords:** imagination, make-believe, experience of history, experience of the past, phenomenology, genuineness, authenticity.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Some objects we value because they afford a felt connection with people, events or places connected with their past. Visiting Canterbury cathedral, you encounter the place where, in 1170, Archbishop Thomas Becket was murdered by four knights of Henry II. Knowing that you are standing in the very place where Becket's blood was spilled gives the past event a sense of tangible reality. One feels 'in touch with' the past; history seems to 'come alive'. The same felt connection also occurs with new items and items of only personal significance. In Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, Mr Peggotty describes the tender feelings he has towards the belongings of his beloved niece, Emily:

'Now I tell you. When I go a looking and looking about that their pritty house of our Em'ly's, I'm—I'm Gormed', said Mr Peggotty, with sudden emphasis—'theer! I can't say more—if I don't feel as if the littlest things was her, a'most. I takes 'em up and I put 'em down, and I touches of 'em as delicate as if they was our Em'ly. So 'tis with her little bonnets and that. I couldn't see one on 'em rough used a purpose—not fur the whole wureld. There's a babby fur you, in the form of a great Sea Porkypine!' (2004: 456–7)

This phenomenon is a pervasive feature of our individual and collective lives. Holy relics are commonly revered for evoking the ‘living presence’ of the individuals they are historically connected with. In this respect, the recurring miracle of the blood of Saint Januarius, the patron saint of Naples, which is regularly witnessed to liquify when it is brought out on Januarius’s feast day, makes explicit what is generally true of relics on an experiential level. We are often attracted to see houses where famous people lived. Visitors to the Rubens House in Antwerp, one of the city’s most popular tourist attractions, are promised the opportunity to ‘meet Rubens himself’ (Visit Antwerpen 2023) as they enter the spaces where he lived and worked. People pay large sums of money for objects that once belonged to famous people, such as John F. Kennedy’s tape-measure that sold at auction for nearly \$50,000. Psychologists account for this behaviour in terms of a ‘contagion’ effect: the feeling that objects carry the ‘essence’ of individuals they have been in contact with (Rozin *et al.* 1989; Newman, Diesendruck and Bloom 2011).

My aim in this paper is to provide an account of the phenomenology of these experiences. In a recent body of work, Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008a, 2008b, 2012, 2016, 2019) has developed an account of such experiences in terms of a property of genuineness. My strategy will be to argue against Korsmeyer’s account and, in doing so, arrive at a better explanation of the phenomenon. I will argue that experiences of objects that embody the presence of something connected with their past are best understood in terms of an imaginative activity that represents what an object is historically connected with as part of the object in the present. One imagines of the site of Becket’s murder Becket being murdered; Mr Peggotty imagines of Emily’s bonnet Emily wearing her bonnet. According to my account, objects that embody their histories are representations in Kendall Walton’s (1990) sense: they have the function of serving as props in games of make-believe. What makes these objects distinctive *qua* props is that their historical properties prompt and support an imaginative activity in which one imagines of an object its past in the present.

In Section II, I clarify the phenomenon to be explained. In Section III, I establish what is key to explaining the phenomenon: explaining how belief about an object’s history manifests in one’s experience of the object. I then consider and reject two possible ways of explaining how this happens: one in terms of an emotion felt towards the object, the other the explanation that Korsmeyer proposes in terms of the cognitive penetration of perceptual experience. Neither, I argue, can explain the phenomenological complexity of the experiences in question. However, seeing how Korsmeyer’s proposal falls short lights the way to a better explanation in terms of imagination, which I develop in Section IV. Finally, in Section V, I respond to an anticipated objection: namely, that the account I propose cannot explain the phenomenological difference between the experience of genuine objects and reproductions.

## II. THE PHENOMENON

The first task is to clarify the phenomenon to be explained. I have spoken of objects that afford a felt connection with something connected with their past. What an object affords a sense of connection with may be an event (Becket's murder), a person (Emily), a place (for instance, a sample of soil that embodies a connection to one's homeland) or some combination of these. Note that 'object' is being used liberally here. The site of Becket's murder is not a discrete physical entity in the way that Emily's bonnet is. Unlike the latter, it has no definite spatial extension. Even so, one experiences the site *as* a material feature of Canterbury cathedral.

The phenomenon that Korsmeyer describes as one of genuineness closely, if not precisely, aligns with that which I aim to account for. Since Korsmeyer's work on this topic is the most fully developed account of the phenomenon that has been offered and my strategy will be to argue against her account, it will be helpful to consider the way that she delimits the cases that she aims to explain.

Korsmeyer uses several metaphors to describe the kind of experience we are interested in, including of objects that afford a sense of being 'in touch with the past', 'bring the past into presence', 'embody their history' and 'bring history alive' (2019: 12,162). Although Korsmeyer's main interest is in objects notable for their age, she is explicit that she thinks the phenomenon of 'genuineness pertains to new things as well'. The 'same phenomenon', she writes, occurs 'with singular or rare artifacts or with those that were used (and touched) by certain people and under special circumstances' (2019: 163). Thus, Korsmeyer accommodates items of only personal significance, such as Emily's belongings have for Mr Peggotty. One charming example she offers she borrows from Jane Austen's *Emma*. Harriet Smith is smitten with Mr Elton. Visiting Emma and Harriet one day, Mr Elton carelessly discards a used pencil stub, which Harriet secretly retrieves and keeps in a box labelled 'Most precious treasures' (Austen 1896: 304; Korsmeyer 2019: 62–3). As well as artefacts, Korsmeyer also allows that natural objects can afford encounters with the past. She recalls a news report about how, after a meteor explosion over Chelyabinsk in Russia in 2013, many people scavenged to find fragments of meteorite, 'desiring to hold in their hand something that came from outer space' (2019: 28).

It is not clear that all these cases can aptly be described as affording experiences of being 'in touch with the past'. Presumably, Harriet's pencil stub affords her a feeling of being 'in touch with' Mr Elton as he is in the present, not as he was in the past. Nevertheless, all the examples can be understood as affording a felt connection with something absent in virtue of their past.

It is also not clear whether Korsmeyer intends to limit the phenomenon of genuineness to objects that are valuable because they put one 'in touch with' something valuable. In the quote above, she says that genuineness pertains

to artefacts that are ‘singular or rare’. One example she discusses that does not obviously afford an encounter with something connected with its past is *Encephalartos woodii*: a kind of cycad discovered in South Africa and brought to Kew Gardens, London, in 1899. It is the only specimen of its kind to have been found in the wild (Korsmeyer 2021: 273). One could say that the cycad embodies the remarkable intercontinental journey that it took over a century ago. However, this is not the feature that Korsmeyer has in mind when she singles it out. Rather, it is its being the last of its kind known to exist in the wild that makes *E. woodii* so special. Objects such as this, like four-leaf clovers or expensive gemstones, may, in virtue of their rarity or singularity, evoke similar feelings of wonder or awe as objects that put one ‘in touch with’ something special. The important point to recognise here is that they are not instances of the same phenomenon.

In a recent response to Korsmeyer, Joshua Lewis Thomas (2023) has helpfully distinguished a kind of value that is relevant for our purposes: what he calls ‘contact value’. According to Thomas, an object possesses contact value just in case it puts one in contact with something that one values. In Thomas’s words, objects that possess contact value are those ‘we treasure... because of the people, events, and things they can (metaphorically) *put us in touch with*’ (2023: 436). Distinguishing this from other values is crucial if we are to get a proper handle on the phenomenon to be explained. The site of Becket’s murder would be historically valuable whether or not it afforded valuable encounters with the past. And of course, the site is valuable under descriptions other than that of being the site of Becket’s murder. It is valuable, for instance, simply in virtue of being part of the fabric of Canterbury cathedral. Indeed, the discrepancy between values can be especially pronounced in some cases, particularly in the case of valuable art works. Vermeer’s *The Art of Painting* is highly valuable *qua* painting. In so far as it affords a felt connection with Vermeer, it also has contact value. This value, however, the painting shares with Vermeer’s paintbrushes or palette (if such survive).

What kinds of objects can possess contact value? What kinds of entities can those objects afford a sense of connection with? And what kinds of relation can there be between these? Call bearers of contact value *carriers* and that which they afford a feeling of connection with *targets*. The examples surveyed so far suggest that the carrier, target and the relation between these all must in some important sense be physical. The paradigm cases of the phenomenon we are interested in are objects that physically embody the presence of that which they have been in contact with. A sample of soil from one’s homeland puts one ‘in touch’ not only with an abstract concept of national identity. The soil is, or rather was, in a literal sense, a little piece of one’s homeland. To this extent, then, it is different from a flag or other national symbol.

Thomas embraces a much more liberal view, however. He allows that carriers can possess contact value in virtue of ‘connecting us to *anything*, provided

we appreciate that connection' (2023: 436). Moreover, he allows for different kinds of relation between carriers and targets, although he acknowledges that 'not every relational property is suitable to confer contact value' (2023: 437). Three types of relations he discusses that he thinks are suitable to confer contact value are *causal*, *teleological* and *symbolic*. Causal relations are paradigmatic. All the above examples involve some physical, causal connection between an object and what it puts one 'in touch with'. A teleological connection could involve an object intended for a special person, for instance, a cot for a yet-to-be born baby. In the category of symbolic relations, Thomas includes conventional symbols, such as flags, as well as pictorial representations, such as portraits.

Surely Thomas is right that not only causal relations have the capacity to confer contact value. We commonly value portraits for putting us 'in touch with' their sitters; expectant parents are likely to feel there is something special about a cot bought for their yet-to-be-born baby. At the same time, however, it seems that a portrait does not embody the presence of its sitter to the same extent, or at least not in the same way, as it evokes the hand of its maker. It seems that there is something special about the capacity of objects to evoke the presence of that which they are causally related to; but neither is there any sharp cut off between causal and other kinds of relations in terms of their capacity to confer contact value. Thomas draws a blank on why some relational properties are more apt to confer contact value than others. Providing an explanation for this is a desideratum of the account that follows. Going forward, I will focus on paradigm cases of objects that are physically and causally related to what they evoke. I will return to the question of non-causal relations in Section V.

Throughout this section, I have been leaning on metaphors to describe the kind of experience that objects afford of what is absent, above all, that of being 'in touch with'. The task now is to find out what this being 'in touch with' really amounts to.

### III. HOW CAN ONE EXPERIENCE AN OBJECT'S PAST?

The initial puzzle that motivated Korsmeyer's account is that people are attracted to see genuine historical objects more than reproductions, even if they are perceptually indistinguishable. When, in 2009, to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln, the Library of Congress put on display to the public the earliest draft of the Gettysburg Address, many people queued to see it. When they displayed an exact reproduction of the Address indistinguishable to the naked eye from the original, no queue formed (Korsmeyer 2019: 21–2).

Cases of indiscernibles help bring the question we need to answer into focus. The people who queued to see the original Gettysburg Address did so because they wanted to see the first draft of the famous speech penned by Lincoln. Indiscernibles show that an object's historical properties, such as *having been penned by Lincoln for his address at Gettysburg*, are not perceptible. Therefore, the attraction of seeing the original Gettysburg Address cannot be explained in terms of the object's perceptible qualities. At the same time, the people who queued to see the Address did want to *see* the Address. What were they there to see, exactly? It seems the experience of the original Address has something special that the experience of the facsimile of the Address does not have. We need to find out what this difference consists in.

While indiscernibles help bring the right question into focus, the contrast between genuine objects and reproductions or fakes also poses a risk that we might mistake the contrary of 'reproduction' or 'fake' as the positive phenomenon to be explained. This is just the wrong turn that Korsmeyer takes. That is, according to Korsmeyer, when one appreciates the Gettysburg Address, what one appreciates is its *genuineness* (Korsmeyer 2008a: 117–8, 2019: 35). I have developed a critique of this central claim of Korsmeyer elsewhere (Windsor 2023). Suffice it to say that the salient difference between the original Gettysburg Address and its facsimile is that the former was penned by Lincoln and the latter was not. Genuineness is incidental. If one says that one appreciates the Gettysburg Address for its *genuinely* having been penned by Lincoln, it is evident that the addition of 'genuinely' is redundant. Genuineness has no explanatory role in characterising the historical features of objects that we value for putting us 'in touch with' something connected with their past. The question we need to ask is not: How does one's belief that an object is genuine manifest in one's experience of the object? The question we need to ask is: How does one's knowledge about an object's history manifest in one's experience of the object?

Perhaps the simplest way to answer this question is to say that one's belief about an object's history causes one to feel an emotion towards the object. Knowing that the bonnet in Emily's house is Emily's bonnet, Mr Peggotty *feels towards* the bonnet in a way that he would not if he knew that it was not hers. According to Peter Goldie's account of emotions, feeling an emotion towards an object involves thinking of the object with feeling (Goldie 2000: 19). *Thinking of* the object means thinking of the object as having certain salient features, and thinking of the object *with feeling* involves directing one's feelings towards the object in such a way that 'colours' its phenomenal appearance. In the case of Emily's belongings, Mr Peggotty thinks of the objects' historical connection with Emily, and this is what makes them, for him, objects of tenderness and affection. Thus, according to this proposal, Mr Peggotty feels tenderly towards Emily's possessions in the same kind of way that he feels tenderly towards Emily. (This is not meant to imply that the emotion type

is the same in both cases, but rather that the mechanism of feeling towards the objects is the same.) Since the emotion depends on one's belief about the object's identity, perceptual indiscernibility poses no especial difficulty here. Perfect reproductions are no more an obstacle to explaining the phenomenology of objects that embody their past than doppelgangers are to explaining romantic attachments (see De Sousa 1987: ch. 5).

This account has several merits. It has the virtue of simplicity. It is theoretically non-controversial (although there is much debate in philosophy of emotion about whether emotions are essentially intentional, which is to say, object-directed, states, it is virtually universally agreed upon that emotions *can* be brought about by cognitive states and directed at objects). Most importantly, it offers an explanation of how belief about an object's history can manifest in one's experience of the object. Indeed, this account *does* appear to be sufficient to explain the experience of objects that are 'merely' singular or rare: objects, such as expensive gemstones or four-leaf clovers, that, in virtue of their rarity or singularity, evoke feelings of wonder or awe. Part of the attraction of seeing the original Gettysburg Address can be explained in terms of the object's simple 'wow factor', generated by one's belief about its historical properties, independently of any felt connection it affords to Lincoln or his famous address. However, though this may be part of the story, it does not explain the phenomenon we are interested in. For there is a fundamental disanalogy between the tender feelings one has for one's beloved and the experience of an object that embodies the presence of something connected with its past. Only in the latter case does one have an experience of an object *as if* something that it is not. And this is just the phenomenon that we are trying to explain: objects that put us 'in touch with' or 'bring to life' something that is absent. Recall Mr Peggotty. What 'gorms' him when he encounters Emily's belongings is that he feels '*as if* the littlest things was her; a'most' (my emphasis). Feeling towards cannot explain this all important 'as if': thinking of an object as having an historical connection with a special person, event or place cannot explain how one experiences the object *as if* it possessed properties that belong only to that person, event or place. In other words, the explanation in terms of emotion arrives too late. We first need to understand *why* Mr Peggotty feels as if the littlest of Emily's things 'was her a'most', before we say something about his feeling tenderly towards those things.

Korsmeyer proposes a more promising explanation in terms of the *cognitive penetration* of perceptual experience. The existence of cognitive penetration is somewhat controversial, yet many hold some account of it to be true (see Zeimbekis and Raftopoulos 2015), and it is commonly adverted to in aesthetics to explain the way that historical features of art works manifest in aesthetic experience (e.g. Hopkins 2005; Wollheim 2012; Nanay 2015). Korsmeyer draws upon the two-step, indirect model of cognitive penetration proposed by Fiona Macpherson (2012) to outline an explanation of how objects can evoke



the presence of something connected with their past. Applying Macpherson's model, Korsmeyer asks us to 'Suppose that the nonperceptual cognitive state of believing an object to be genuine has a particular phenomenal character, and that character penetrates the perceptual experience of that object, occasioning the aesthetic encounter and giving rise to a thrilling experience' (2019: 55). Now, we have already seen that believing an object to be genuine is not what is at issue. However, Korsmeyer's proposal can easily be amended to accommodate this. We simply swap 'believing an object to be genuine' for 'believing an object to have the historical properties that make it special'. Does this do the job that we need it to?

There are (at least) two good reasons for rejecting what Korsmeyer asks us to suppose. First, it requires a commitment to the contentious view that cognitive states, such as beliefs, can have phenomenological character. Is there anything that the belief that, say, an object was penned by Lincoln for his address at Gettysburg *feels* like? Many deny this possibility (see Bayne and Montague 2014).<sup>1</sup> But what is remarkable here is that Macpherson's two-step model of cognitive penetration purposefully avoids any such commitment to cognitive phenomenology.<sup>2</sup> (This point will be important in the next section.) According to Macpherson, cognitive penetration occurs when a cognitive state brings into being a non-perceptual imaginative state or process with phenomenal character (step 1), and this imaginative state or process affects the phenomenal character and content of perceptual experience (step 2) (2012: 50–5). That, according to Macpherson, cognitive penetration occurs via a *non-perceptual imaginative state or process* is crucial. For no one denies that there are non-perceptual imaginative states or processes that have phenomenal character (consider dreams), or that such states or processes can be brought into being by cognitive states (consider dreaming about a person who you encountered during the day). What remains reasonably controversial about Macpherson's account is whether a non-perceptual imaginative state or process can influence the phenomenal character of perceptual experience. Nevertheless, this is much less to sign up to than what Korsmeyer asks of us.

Korsmeyer can of course simply put in the important step from Macpherson's model that is missing. Doing so, however, will not circumvent the second difficulty: namely, that cognitive penetration is not able to explain the richness of the content of experiences of objects that evoke the presence of something

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that most accounts of cognitive penetration do not require that the penetrating mental state has conscious phenomenological character.

<sup>2</sup> In a footnote, Korsmeyer acknowledges that she is 'considerably simplifying' Macpherson's account (2019: 55 n.76). Why would Korsmeyer not only simplify Macpherson's account so considerably but do so in a way that jettisons its main selling feature? Korsmeyer expresses a worry the phenomenon she is interested in will be treated by sceptics as a 'mere' projection of the imagination (2019: 51–2). It seems likely that this is what motivated Korsmeyer to suppress the crucial step in Macpherson's model involving imagination. I address this worry in Section V.



connected with their past. The putative phenomenon that cognitive penetration describes is one where the phenomenal content and character of perceptual experience is *influenced* by a cognitive state. The primary cases that Macpherson uses to support the existence of the phenomenon involve apparent changes in colour perception. Empirical studies appear to show that subjects perceive objects associated with a certain colour to be more *of* that colour than objects of the same hue not associated with the colour. For instance, an orange-coloured apple shape appears redder than an oval shape of the same hue (Delk and Fillenbaum 1965; for more up-to-date studies, see Hansen *et al.* 2006; Witzel *et al.* 2011). Now, whether or not these studies support the existence of cognitive penetration in the way that Macpherson argues they do (see Zeimbekis 2012), one can easily grasp the kind of phenomenal change in perception that purportedly takes place. But what kind of phenomenal change is supposed to take place with the kinds of objects that we are interested in? Visiting Canterbury cathedral, you turn a corner between the north aisle of the nave and the choir and encounter a small, modern altar with a metal sculpture suspended above it representing four swords. It is then that you learn that you are standing in the place where Becket was murdered in 1170. How is the site of Becket's murder supposed to *look* different once you discover that it *is* the site of Becket's murder?

Not redder, presumably. More plausibly, one might say that the site takes on the appearance of being 'grisly' or 'hallowed'. However, it is not clear that the phenomenal character of one's perception of the site *can* take on such qualities. Whether one thinks this is possible depends on whether one thinks that such higher-order properties as *grisly* or *hallowed* can be represented in perception (see Siegel 2006). But even if we grant that they can, this still does not secure a level of phenomenological complexity that is required to satisfactorily explain the content of experiences we have been describing using metaphors of being 'in touch with' the past and the past 'coming to life'. The past that 'comes to life' when one encounters the site of Becket's murder is a complex historical event. Even granting the most liberal view of cognitive penetration, there is a limit as to how much content the perceptual experience of a static object can plausibly take on. That the site of Becket's murder has the appearance of being 'grisly' or 'hallowed' can only explain how the site appears in the now knowing what happened there in the past. It cannot explain how the site takes on qualities of what happened there in the past *as if* they were happening in the now.

In short, we need something more if we are to do justice to the sense in which objects bring their past 'into presence'. The suggestion for a better explanation can, ironically, be found in the very step in Macpherson's account that Korsmeyer elides.

## IV. IMAGINING THE PAST OF THE PRESENT

Let us take stock. We have established that the key question we need to answer is how a person, event or place causally connected with an object's past can manifest in one's experience of an object. Cases of indiscernibles show that the experience cannot be an experience of an object's perceptible qualities; it must be brought about by one's belief about an object's history. We have rejected two possible explanations for how this happens: that the belief causes one to feel an emotion towards the object and that the belief influences the phenomenal character of one's perception of the object. Neither is sufficient to explain the phenomenological complexity of the experiences we are interested in. How can one experience the site of Becket's murder such that it is apt to describe the experience as one where Becket's murder 'comes to life'? How is it that Mr Peggotty experiences interacting with Emily's belongings as if they 'was her, a'most'?

Recall the first step of Macpherson's model of cognitive penetration: a cognitive state brings into being a non-perceptual imaginative state or process with phenomenal character.<sup>3</sup> This, I propose, is what happens in the cases we are interested in. Belief about an object's history brings about an imaginative process that represents what an object is historically connected with and that makes the object special. However, instead of influencing the phenomenal character of one's perception of the object, this imaginative process is mentally directed at the object. One imagines *of* the object its past in the present. One imagines of the site of Becket's murder Becket being murdered. Mr Peggotty imagines of Emily's belongings Emily using her belongings. One imagines of the Rubens House Rubens living and working in his house. One imagines of the Gettysburg Address Lincoln penning the Address. One imagines of a fragment of meteorite it travelling through outer space. The crucial difference between this explanation and one using Macpherson's model of cognitive penetration is that the phenomenological content of the imaginative process is not limited by the possible contents of one's perception of the object.

We can now make literal sense of the metaphors of 'bringing to life' and being 'in touch with'. Imagination explains the sense in which the past 'comes to life'. By imagining of the site of Becket's murder Becket being murdered, one imagines Becket's murder taking place in the here and now. Imagination explains how one feels 'in touch with' what is absent. By touching the bonnet he imagines Emily wearing, Mr Peggotty imagines he is touching Emily.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> It is worth noting that Macpherson's indirect model using imagination is a highly non-standard view of how cognitive penetration works. Most accounts posit a more direct input from beliefs or desires to perceptual processing (see Raftopoulos and Zeimbekis 2015: 27–32).

<sup>4</sup> There is a literal sense in which by touching the clothes that someone is wearing, one is touching, albeit indirectly or 'distally', the person (see Fulkerson 2012).

According to the account I propose, objects that embody the presence of something connected with their past are representation in Kendall Walton's (1990) sense: they have the function of serving as props in games of make-believe. The key insight that Walton develops in his theory is that the way we interact with and respond to representations can be understood on the same model as children's games of make-believe. Although the primary cases he aims to account for are representational works of art, his theory has been applied to representations in many domains, including, perhaps most pertinently here, given the overlap with relics, religious practices and artefacts (Griffioen 2016). Walton's theory of representations offers an elegant and perspicuous model for explaining how we interact with and respond to objects that evoke the presence of something connected with their past. The best explanation for why Mr Peggotty interacts with Emily's belongings in the way that he does—picking them up and touching them as delicately as if they were his Emily—is that he is participating in a game of make-believe in which the objects function as props.

I will briefly outline the main features of Walton's theory that are relevant, before showing how they can be used to explain the cases we are interested in.

I have said that representations, for Walton, are objects that have the function of props. What does it mean to use something as a prop? Principally, it means having imaginings about the object.<sup>5</sup> For instance, I imagine of a toy truck that it is a truck. The imaginings one has in relation to a prop must be authorised in the game of make-believe. I *can* imagine that a toy truck is a sports car, or almost anything else, but doing so would go beyond the rules of the game. Toy trucks mandate that one imagines they are trucks, not that they are sports cars. Nevertheless, one may devise a game of make-believe in which one imagines that toy trucks are sports cars. If Tom and Finn have a surfeit of toy trucks to play with, but no toy sports cars, they may stipulate a rule that says they will imagine of red toy trucks and only red toy trucks that they are sports cars.

What determines whether something has the function of a prop? Objects need not have been made with the intention that they function as props. Rather, that function can also be acquired through tradition or common practice. Ursa Major has acquired the function of a prop since it is common practice to imagine of Ursa Major that it is a great bear (Walton 1990: 52). As in

<sup>5</sup> According to Walton, imagining *de re* necessarily involves imagining *de se*. This may be fairly unproblematic in the minimal sense that Walton stipulates, which simply involves 'being aware of whatever else it is that one imagines' (Walton 1990: 29). But Walton also posits much more complex episodes of *de se* imagining that are problematic. For instance, according to Walton's account, when I see a toy truck that I imagine is a truck, I also imagine *of my seeing* the toy truck that I am seeing a truck (Walton 1990: 293–6). It is not evident, however, that it is possible to imagine of one's sensory experience of one thing that it is an experience of another thing (see Nanay 2021). I avoid here any commitment to such putative imaginative episodes.

the case of Tom and Finn, objects can also acquire the function of props in the context of private games of make-believe.

Being the object of imaginings is not the only function that props have. Props also frequently have the function of *prompting* imaginings (Walton 1990: 21–4). Seeing a toy truck prompts me to imagine that it is a truck. For Tom and Finn, seeing a red toy truck prompts them to imagine that it is a sports car.

These features of Walton's account will help flesh out the proposal that objects that embody the presence of something connected with their past are best understood in terms of games of make-believe. First, however, let me address something that could be a sticking point. It is easy enough to see how toy trucks function as objects of imaginings within games of make-believe. But is it plausible to say this about the cases we are interested in? The site of Becket's murder has the function of serving as a prop in games of make-believe—*really?*

To help assuage any worries one might have about this, let us look more closely at what it means for something to have the function of a prop. According to Walton, for something to have this function, there must be one or more of what he calls 'principles of generation' in effect that mandates imaginings about it. Through common practices, there are principles of generation in effect that prescribe one imagines that toy trucks are trucks and that Ursa Major is a great bear. Principles of generation, however, are rarely explicitly agreed upon, and imaginers need not be consciously aware of them (Walton 1990: 38). Seeing a production of *Hamlet*, you imagine of the man on stage that he is the Prince of Denmark because there are principles of generation in effect that make it appropriate to do so. This should seem fairly obvious, though it is not something you are likely to think about in the auditorium. Things soon get more complicated than this, however. If the actor has red hair, do you imagine that Hamlet also has red hair? What about if the actor is wearing a hearing aid? Once we zoom in on the finer details, we see that things soon start to get murky. As Walton puts it, principles of generation are 'loose, variable, and complex' (1990: 110).

With these two points in mind—that imaginers engaged in games of make-believe need not be aware of the principles of generation governing their imaginings, and the looseness, variability and complexity of these principles—it is easier to see how objects that embody the presence of something connected with their past can be understood as having the function of props. Objects of collective historical significance, such as the site of Becket's murder, are often paired with narratives of the events that make them important. By pairing stories about the past with objects that feature in those stories, museums lead visitors on imaginative 'journeys through time' in which the objects play the role of props. Museums often recreate the experience of past times using dioramas, actors, audio-visual reconstructions and the like. At the Jorvik

Viking Centre in York, visitors are taken on a (literal) ride through ‘the sights, sounds and smells of Viking-age York’ (Visit York 2023). Visitors to the museum also go on an imaginative ‘journey through time’ by experiencing *real* Viking and Anglo-Saxon artefacts. The explicitly fictional operation of the former should not obscure the fictional role that original artefacts also fulfil in mediating experiences of the past.

What about objects that have only personal significance, such as Emily’s belongings have for Mr Peggotty? In so far as Mr Peggotty’s response to Emily’s possessions depends on his personal attachment to Emily, cases such as this might appear to be analogous to the private game of make-believe that Tom and Finn play with red toy trucks. However, unlike in the latter case, the principles of generation responsible for Mr Peggotty’s imaginatively engaging with Emily’s belongings are not ad hoc. Mr Peggotty does not deliberately *choose* to respond to Emily’s belongings in the way that he does. Rather, the principles of generation that explain his doing so are embedded in social practices of how we relate to objects of personal attachment: practices of keepsakes, souvenirs and memorabilia. This is evident in the fact that, if one knows Mr Peggotty’s relation to Emily, there is nothing strange or inappropriate about the way he interacts with and responds to her belongings.

It is time to draw the various threads in this section together. I have argued that to make sense of the phenomenological richness of experiences of objects that embody the presence of something connected with their past—experiences *as of* absent persons, events or places—we need to invoke the imagination. The best explanation, I have proposed, for how we interact with and respond to such objects is that they function as props in games of make-believe. Having laid out the main features of Walton’s account, we can now see what is distinctive about these objects *qua* props. The historical properties of these objects *prompt* and *support* an imaginative activity in which one imagines of an object its past in the present. Knowing the story of Becket’s murder, the site of Becket’s murder prompts one to imagine of the site Becket being murdered. Emily’s belongings prompt Mr Peggotty to imagine of the belongings Emily using them. Moreover, knowing that the objects have the histories that they do supports especially vivid imaginative experiences of those histories. (I will have more to say about this in the next section.)

We can push further on the question of what kinds of imaginings are involved in these cases. A useful distinction to draw here is between imagination and mental imagery. Mental imagery is defined as ‘perceptual representation that is not directly triggered by sensory input’ (Nanay 2023: 4). Many instances of imagination, and certainly all instances of sensory imagination, utilise mental imagery. However, sensory imagination involves something more than perceptual representation that is not directly triggered by sensory input: imagination is a mental activity, it is something that we *do* (Arcangeli 2020). Imagining of the site Becket’s murder Becket’s murder taking place involves forming a

mental image of Becket's murder, but it also involves something more than this: it is something that we do *with* the site.

To clarify how imagining in these cases relates to the object one presently perceives, it will be helpful to consider a comparison. Often, we use imagination for testing real-world possibilities (see Badura and Kind 2021). If one wants to judge where is the best place to hang a picture in one's living room, one can imagine the picture in various positions on one's living room wall. This involves forming a mental image of the picture, but it also involves doing something with the image of the picture in relation to the actual space that one is perceiving. My proposal is that imagination in the cases we are interested in operates analogously. The phenomenon of objects that embody their past should be understood in terms of an imaginative activity that represents (in one or more sense modalities) what an object is historically connected with in relation to the object as one presently perceives it. More specifically, one imaginatively locates the historical person, place or event in relation to the object in one's actual space in a way that approximates its historical relation to the object. One not only imagines Becket being murdered; one imagines him being murdered *in* the place that he *was* murdered in *as* one experiences it in the present. In a similar way that judging where to hang the picture depends on the combined aesthetic effect of the perceived scene and the imagined picture, the phenomenon of objects that embody their past combines the phenomenal effect of the perceived object and the imagined person, place or event, including any emotional responses that each of these elicit. Of course, one can imagine Becket's murder taking place without being present at the site of the martyrdom, just as one can imagine a picture on one's living room wall without looking at one's living room. But just as imagining a picture on one's living room wall without looking at one's living room is less effective for judging where to hang it, so is imagining an object's history without presently experiencing the object less effective for feeling connected with its past. Unlike in the case of the picture, this imaginative activity often happens spontaneously. Nevertheless, it is subject to wilful control in a way that mental imagery often is not.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the determinate content and location of these imaginings will, at least in most cases, be open-ended. Your imagining of Becket's murder is likely to be different from mine. At the same time, the appropriateness of imaginings is constrained by one's knowledge of the object's history. I *can* imagine of the site of Becket's murder Becket successfully fighting off Henry's knights, but doing so would not be to engage appropriately with the history of the site.

<sup>6</sup> Consider, for example, hallucinations or cases of amodal completion. Whereas, upon encountering the site of Becket's murder, one can choose to disengage from the event of Becket's murder and focus on the site as an architectural feature of the cathedral, one cannot help but see the missing sides of the Kanizsa triangle.

Now, the comparison in this section between original artefacts and replicas used in museum settings brings to light an objection to my proposed account. It is to this objection I now turn.

## V. OBJECTION AND REPLY

Is there anything special about the capacity of historical objects to put us ‘in touch with’ their past? Intuitively, it seems that there is. This was just the initial puzzle that motivated Korsmeyer’s account: genuine objects afford a ‘thrill’ or ‘shiver’ of contact that even perfect reproductions fail to deliver (Korsmeyer 2019: 28). It seems, however, that the account I have proposed is committed to rejecting this. Presumably, one can imagine Lincoln penning a facsimile of the Gettysburg Address just as well as one can imagine him penning the actual Address. Therefore, it appears that, according to my account, reproductions are no less able to put us ‘in touch with’ the past than genuine historical objects. But surely this cannot be right. Why else did so many people queue to see the original Address but not its facsimile?

To meet this challenge, we first need to be careful to distinguish the phenomenon I am aiming to explain from other affective experiences that historical objects can afford. The account I have offered leaves open that there may be a categorical phenomenological difference between the experience of genuine historical objects and their reproductions. As we saw in Section II, knowing that an object is rare and highly valuable may elicit an emotional response of wonder or awe that is independent of any phenomenon of contact that it affords with its past. It may be that the original Gettysburg Address has a ‘wow factor’ that even the best reproduction can ever fail to attain. Yet, we also saw that this emotional response, caused by one’s belief about the object’s history, does not explain the feeling of contact that the Address affords with Lincoln or his famous speech. It is just this phenomenological connection with what is absent that I am arguing should be explained in terms of imagination. Nevertheless, it does not seem plausible that reproductions can evoke this felt connection just as well as original historical objects can. Surely the facsimile of the Address does not embody the presence of Lincoln just as well as the actual Address does.

The response to this objection comes in two parts. The first part aims to show that the account in terms of make-believe *does* allow for there being, at least in many cases, a difference between the capacity of genuine objects and replicas to put us ‘in touch with’ the past. The second part aims to undercut the idea that *only* genuine objects can afford these experiences.

The answer to the first part is the point raised above that genuine objects tend to prompt especially vivid imaginative experiences of what they are historically connected with. Walton makes a similar point with respect to



historical fictions. Knowing that a fictional narrative is based on real-life events often enhances the vividness of one's imaginative engagement with the narrative (Walton 1990: 93). Likewise, knowing that an object has an historical connection to people, events or places of special importance is likely to enhance the vividness of one's imagining those people, events or places of the object. However, as intuitive as it is to speak of one imaginative experience being more 'vivid' than another, the notion of imaginative vividness has recently come under fire (Kind 2017). Given the heterogeneity of states and processes that are called 'imaginative', it is likely that more than one factor will be involved in explicating the notion (see Kind 2013; Langkau 2021). For our purposes, a particularly useful way of thinking about this may be in terms of 'immersion'. Susanna Schellenberg characterises imaginative immersion as the degree to which one is not consciously aware that one is imagining (Schellenberg 2013: 507). Knowing that an object has the history that it does facilitates an immersive imaginative experience of that history. In contrast, imaginatively engaging with a reproduction requires more wilful effort, such that one is likely to be more aware of one's own imaginative engagement. Knowing that an object is a reproduction can cause an obstacle to immersion in a similar way that seeing conspicuous wires attached to an actor onstage during a flying routine can cause an obstacle to one's imagining the person flying.

Thus, we have good reason for thinking that original historical objects are especially well suited to support imaginative experiences of being 'in touch with' what they are historically connected with. According to the account I have proposed, the difference between the capacity of genuine historical objects and reproductions to afford a phenomenon of contact with the past is one of degree, not kind, and is one that holds in most, but not all, cases. Therefore, the second part of the reply requires shoring up the suggestion that reproductions can also afford valuable encounters with the past.

Erich Hatala Matthes (2018) has persuasively argued in response to Kormeyer that placing an undue emphasis on material genuineness forecloses valuable opportunities for aesthetic experiences of history. We should be cautious of creating a fetish of 'the authentic' (Berger 1972: 19–25). It may be true that, if an original object exists, then, all else being equal, one will tend to prefer to see the original. But when originals have been lost or are inaccessible, we are often happy to engage with reproductions. There are even cases where reproductions may be better suited to support imaginative representations of the past than originals.<sup>7</sup> The refectory of the Benedictine monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice used to house a colossal painting by Veronese, *The Wedding Feast at Cana*, that was commissioned for the space and completed

<sup>7</sup> For empirical support that audiences prefer to see reproductions of art works in some circumstances, see Bertamini and Blakemore (2019).

in 1563. In 1797, the painting was looted by troops of Napoleon, and today it hangs in the Louvre. With no prospects of it being returned, in the early 2000s, the organisation responsible for the care of the monastery commissioned a high-specification reproduction of the painting to be made, which is indistinguishable to the casual observer from the original. The placement of the reproduction at the site the painting was intended for gives it something over the genuine article. The painting in the Louvre is artificially lit and hung in a heavy gilt frame that is too low for its ideal viewing position. In contrast, the reproduction is naturally lit, displayed at the right height and hung without a frame, as the painting was intended. The depicted scene, the wedding feast, cleverly echoes the function of the refectory. What is interesting about this case for the present purposes is that the reproduction is better positioned to support an imaginative experience of the early life of the painting than the original. One encounters the reproduction ‘as if Veronese had just left it to dry’ (Latour and Lowe 2011: 278). Cases such as this highlight that genuine historical artefacts are not always best placed for affording valuable experiences of history.

This nicely brings us back to the issue of borderline cases that I raised in Section II. I identified as paradigm cases objects that bear a physical, causal connection to a person, event or place of special importance whose presence they embody. Now that the account in terms of make-believe is in place, we can better make sense of how objects bearing different kinds of relations to what they put one ‘in touch with’ sit on a continuum in terms of the phenomenological closeness they tend to afford to what they represent. We can cash out this continuum in terms of the degree to which the objects’ histories tend to support immersive imaginative experiences of their past as part of the object in the present.

Consider photographs. It is widely observed that photographs afford a feeling of contact with the objects they depict and, moreover, that this depends on the causal, mind-independent nature of photographic representation (e.g. Walton 1984; Pettersson 2011). Knowing that a photograph is a ‘visible trace’ (Currie 1999) of its depicted object affords a similar feeling of contact as material traces, such as handprints, do. The issue of material genuineness clearly breaks down here. As *visual* traces, photographs can be reproduced without *any* loss to the feeling of connection they afford with their subject matter. That said, it is not evident that photographs afford the same kind of imagining that I have claimed is distinctive of the cases considered up to now. While it may be plausible to say that upon seeing a person depicted in a photograph, one imagines seeing the person face-to-face, it is not so plausible to say that one imagines that the photograph is, or is otherwise physically connected to, the person. This might explain the intuition noted in Section II that portraits and other pictorial representations do not put one ‘in touch’ in

the same way as objects that are physically and causally related to what they evoke.

Another interesting set of cases mentioned above involve teleological connections between an object and the person, event or place that it embodies. What is interesting about these cases in contrast to those we have considered up to now is that they are future-oriented. Consider again a cot for an unborn baby. Clearly, objects such as this can come to embody the presence of a person without having been in contact with the person, and even if the person does not yet exist. According to my account, the expectant parents imagine of the cot their future baby in it. That the account I have offered can accommodate, on the one hand, the phenomenological continuity between the experience of genuine objects and reproductions and, on the other hand, different kinds of relation between objects and the people, events or places that they evoke speaks in favour of its explanatory power.

## VI. CONCLUSION

L. P. Hartley famously wrote that ‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there’ (2000: 5). Commenting on the quote, Matthes observes that there is ‘crucial dimension of our relationship to the past’ that Hartley’s metaphor ‘fails to capture. While we might visit a foreign country’, Matthes continues, ‘we cannot, at least not in the same way, visit the past. But’, Matthes asserts, ‘the past can visit us’ (2013: 62). Alas, the past can no more visit us than we can visit it. Whoever or whatever does the ‘visiting’, this can only be figurative. To make literal sense of the expressions we commonly reach for to describe the way that objects embody the presence of something connected with their past, we need to invoke the imagination. In this paper, I have argued that the best explanation for the way we interact with and respond to these objects is that they serve as props in games of make-believe. In so far as it reduces the phenomenon to imagination, the account I have offered might be seen as deflationary. However, this is not the whole picture. What is peculiar about these objects *qua* props is that their historical properties prompt and support an imaginative activity that represents what an object is historically connected with as part of the object in the present. To the extent that the imaginative activity depends on beliefs about an object’s history, imagining may be correct or mistaken, appropriate or inappropriate. Our interactions with and responses to objects that have histories that make them special are not ad hoc; they are embedded in social practices of how we remember, conserve and relate to the past, individually and collectively.

What is the value of feeling ‘in touch with’ the past? Surely, for most of us, experiencing a felt connection with our personal and collective histories

is important for our psychological well-being. One of the main claims that Korsmeyer aims to defend in her work on this topic is that experiences of being ‘in touch with’ the past have an aesthetic character and value. How one defends this claim will depend on how one thinks it is that one’s knowledge of the objects’ histories manifests experientially. I hope in this paper to have provided a convincing account of how that happens. Without having the space here to elaborate on the aesthetic question, I offer a suggestive comparison. The stories we associate with objects’ histories provide the script, and, through the imagination, the objects themselves assume the role of actors: playing their own parts in a theatre of the past.<sup>8</sup>

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