Among the last words that normally would come to mind when thinking of restoration is the term ‘loss’. After all, conservators are the protectors of the cultural heritage, not their destroyers, and the restoration of stained glass should be no exception to this rule. Like all the other conservation specialisms, its methods aim to be non-interventionist. But life is not as straightforward as that, and the reality is often very different from the clear-cut theory, when, under pressure from a client’s demand or the common convention, historic windows are turned into ‘contemporary’ glass. Without intending to, in these cases we lose more than we aim to gain, and while the result may be aesthetically pleasing, ethically it can be a disaster.

So what does constitute loss in conservation? There are several levels at which loss may occur, the easiest to define being the material loss, or is it? The corrosion crust contains original material, not least in the ever elusive gel-layer. Can we therefore carry out cleaning, however gentle, without the risk of removing original or historically important material? Secondly, there is the authenticity of the window, which is under threat when restoration is due. Loss of authenticity can easily be covered up, and has in the past occurred more often than most people assume. And last but not least, there is the history of the window, the scars of which one might or might not wish to remove, a decision which is often extremely difficult to make.

How easy by comparison does the life of the 19th-century restorer appear to us today. After centuries of neglect, there was a growing demand to restore the crumbling windows, but the restoration undertaken seldom complied with the strict meaning of the word, which after all is to bring back a lost image based on the knowledge of what had been there originally. For the 19th-century restorers, it was more important to restore the role the window had to play as part of a whole. Paramount was the revival of an impression rather than a faithful reconstruction.

Canterbury Cathedral is a prime example of this 19th-century desire to resurrect the lost splendour of ancient buildings, and to put a few things ‘right’ along the way. This attitude was, of course, not confined to stained glass. In 1832, the fabric lost one of the few remaining parts of the Norman cathedral, the north tower of the west front, which was replaced with a copy of the south tower. The surviving 12th-century stained glass was re-arranged in the same spirit, affecting single panels and entire windows alike. Panels such as the one depicting the story of Adam the Forester, which looked fragmented in a watercolour of 1841, had changed considerably in an illustration showing its condition in 1897. Following the latest restoration by Samuel Caldwell Junior in 1920, this panel now gives an impression of medieval authenticity which is thoroughly misleading.

Entire windows ‘re-grew’ at the same time. In 1861, the three westernmost windows on the north side of the Trinity Chapel were almost bare of any stained glass. By the 1890s, much stained glass had returned to the windows, not out of some mysterious storing places, as Samuel Caldwell had claimed in the case of the figure of Thomas Becket, but assembled from a mix of medieval and modern glass. Today, the window supposedly containing the medieval figure of Canterbury’s famous Saint, is ‘complete’ again, and Thomas Becket can be found depicted in many publications as an original early 13th-century panel, which in fact it is not.

Caldwell Junior and his predecessors at Canterbury were children of their time, and there is no point in accusing them of wrongdoing. Fritz Geiges in Freiburg, for example, or Eduard Hosch in Lausanne did the same within this prevailing ‘Zeitgeist’. Hosch and his predecessors turned the fragmented rose window of Lausanne Cathedral into something very pleasing to the eye. But at the same time this rose is now at least in parts misleading, a fate that only a few other windows in this category escaped. The Dean’s Eye at Lincoln comes to mind here as one of the exceptions, and a comparison between the two rose windows raises the question whether the price paid for the 19th-century restoration was not too high. Is the loss of authenticity sustained in Lausanne justified by the gain in terms of aesthetics and the possibility to ‘read’ and interpret, or often misinterpret, the windows?

Be that as it may, the bold approach of the 19th century has sensitized us to the danger of reconstructions, and today we aim for a restoration which is based on facts rather than on conjecture. But is not even this restricted approach already going too far? To answer this question, it is necessary to start with the most basic level of restoration, the vandalized church window. Here we are faced with windows which until the fateful event had been fully intact, but now lie in ruins. If the window was medieval, there would be no doubt that all fragments would be glued together again and that the glass would be returned, bearing the scars but still integral.

However – there is no point in pretending otherwise – there is a lamentable difference in the perception of loss between medieval and more modern glass. The story is different with 19th or 20th-century windows. With 19th-century glass reversing the effects of vandalism is, after all, merely a formality covered by an insurance claim, and
the client is expecting replacement like with like. So restorers produce faithful copies of the damaged pieces, duly signed and dated, and the window looks like new on its return — which in fact it is. A window restored in this way is indeed an early 21st-century window of contemporary stained glass based on a 19th-century design. Aesthetically a gain, there is no doubt, but does it make sense to go that far? Does this gain justify the loss of original material? To date, there are many answers to this seemingly straightforward question.

This ambiguity continues on the next level with a restoration technique which is less informative but no means less problematic. It is a technique called back-plating, which first and foremost provides the conservator with the means to support a badly shattered glass by fitting clear glass to the back of a re-assembled piece. But a back-plate has more to offer, it provides also the means to re-introduce lost paint lines, since the repainting and firing of an original piece is not advisable for many good reasons. By painting the pigments onto a separate plate and placing it at the back of the original the lost areas do indeed come back, which is a fully reversible process if the outcome were found disagreeable. The problem here is, how far can and should one go in this reconstruction.

The 16th-century East Window in the Holy Chapel at All Saints, Bisham, suffers extensively from enamel loss, a common phenomenon as the enamels have a different expansion rate to the base glass, resulting in their shelving off leaving areas of reduced legibility behind. When we removed the glass for conservation in 2002, one of the provisos made by the Council for the Care of Churches (CCC) was that the re-introduction of lost enamels should be kept to a reasonable limit. Of course, this term can be stretched as far as one dares to go, and we have probably gone farther than the CCC would have wanted us to. We have tried to define thresholds, by asking case by case whether the result justifies the intervention. It is now for others to judge whether we have done the window justice (COLOUR PLATES 112, 113), but there is no doubt in my mind that fellow conservators would have drawn different lines. I, for my part, hope that the result is regarded as a gain; but we must be aware that what we see now is not the true face of the window, but what the conservators made of it in the 21st century — contemporary glass, if you like.

Back-plating can be even more problematic when the restorer gets the reconstruction wrong. In 1999, my studio restored the Great East Window at Gloucester Cathedral, the main thrust of the work being in situ cleaning and consolidation. One of the few panels we had to remove from the stonework for more intensive conservation had, as it turned out, been re-leaded in the 1970s. On analysing the panel, we realized that the surviving background foliage had been back-plated by the restorer with a design only remotely resembling the original, despite the fact that, on close inspection, the tracelines of the original design could still be detected. This enabled us to 'correct' the design based on facts, so this time gain without loss — or are we playing charade, fooling the spectator into believing that what can now be seen is the original work of art?

Again, the answer will probably be as multi-faceted as there are spectators, but to make matters even more difficult what about restorations without direct evidence of what had been in the place now void of any depiction? Is this justifiable under certain circumstances, or should it be avoided at all cost? Can a work of art function in a mutilated state? The tracery of the early 17th-century van Linge window at Lydiard Tregoze, Wiltshire, was left until 1999 with one of its four angel heads missing. The surviving heads had one intriguing fact in common which led us to hazard a reconstruction. Instead of looking straight back at the spectator, they all look to the left of the centre axis, exactly to the point where the monument of the donor of this window is positioned. The fourth angel must have done the same, so we gave him his head back, and unless this angel was the one who was blinking, we should have got it right. The tracery is complete again, but not authentic. Loss?

But Lydiard Tregoze is an exception to the rule. Normally, we would not allow such far-reaching reconstructions to happen, not only because of missing information, but also in respect of the history of a window, the third aspect I mentioned at the beginning of my paper. Several panels in the Great East Window of Gloucester Cathedral, on their restoration in around 1865, had been provided with similar 'blobby' faces as the one at Lydiard Tregoze. Why Willement, who was in charge of the restoration, had done so, is impossible to tell. As we have seen previously, the norm was quite different in the 19th century. As a result, these faces stand out quite clearly, and calls to do something about them are often heard. We were intrigued to see what the outcome would be if we were to heed the calls, and we produced a front-plate copied from a head further up the window (COLOUR PLATES 114, 115). With the new head, the figure undoubtedly came to life again, but indeed transformed so much that in the end I regretted having helped to visualize what this window could be if we were to turn parts of it into a late 20th-century window. In the end, we resisted the calls to put in reversible front-plates, so as to preserve these parts as an in situ document of the restoration history of this window.

As a final example of the dilemma, an extreme intervention should be listed here, which stained glass conservation cannot do without if it is to fulfill its duties. It means carrying coal to Newcastle if I were to explain the reasons why we have to introduce appropriate preservation measures to prevent windows deteriorating further. This protection, which is commonly subsumed in the term 'isothermal glazing', has one ethical problem. By introducing a separate protective layer, a severe intervention in the original setting takes place, fully reversible, but still severe from a certain point of view. We move the historic glass slightly inwards, away from the original framework to create space for the protective components to go in its place. This is something I personally can live with, but others already regard as loss in respect of the ethics, not the material.

However, there is indeed on occasions material loss involved, when the masonry has to be cut back to make room for a new sub-frame. Quite rightly, the question here is whether the loss in historic material, namely the stone, justifies the gain without which the other historic material, the glass, would not stand a chance of surviving much longer. But even if we do not go that far, and apply a method by which the historic glass is held in bespoke bronze frames which in turn are tagged onto the mullions, we are being
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accused of perforating our churches. This so-called ‘damage’, together with the above-mentioned separation of historic material, is regarded as unacceptable loss, and therefore fought hard against by many architects in the UK. I appreciate that some perceive the results of protection as a loss, but I find it acceptable compared with the gain, the more so as the process is fully reversible.

Gain without Loss? I think that all the examples have shown that there is always a degree of loss involved, regardless of the degree of intervention. One fact can be learned in conservation more than anywhere else – it is impossible to achieve an improvement in one aspect without adversely affecting another. However, what constitutes loss is very much determined by our very personal attitude towards the object, its age and its monetary value. Hence, this is a dilemma which cannot be ultimately resolved and always will be looked upon differently according to the prevailing Zeitgeist.

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