Reframing Romantic Nature: Towards a Social Ecocriticism

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Reframing Romantic Nature: Towards a Social Ecocriticism

by

Matthew Rowney

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

The City University of New York

2015
This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English to satisfy the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

Reframing Romantic Nature: Towards a Social Ecocriticism

by

Matthew Rowney

Adviser: Alan Vardy

Reframing Romantic Nature: Towards a Social Ecocriticism is an attempt to offer a new way of thinking about ecological approaches to literature. Rather than separate ecology from the movement of history, or support an anthropocentric historicism, my approach aims to merge the interests of both environmental and historical criticism in order to provide a more interdisciplinary view of conceptions of the natural and the social. The process of history owes much more to the non-human than has been generally allowed, especially in the face of contemporary ecocrisis.

In the more than two hundred years since the advent of Romanticism in Britain, figures such as William Wordsworth have become icons, their work celebrated as defining intrinsic elements of cultural identity and history. Yet this same period has seen greater environmental destruction than any other in human existence. The poet who announces the renewal of nature does so at the dawn of the anthropocene, and it is no longer possible to treat these phenomena as entirely
Looking back at the Romantics from our own era of ecocrisis evokes an ambivalence towards Romantic constructions of the natural world. This thesis is an attempt to address this complex ambivalence.

The thesis advances these concerns through the reading of texts in various genres by five Romantic authors. The first chapter explores a foundational work of Romanticism, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters from Denmark, Norway and Sweden*, in terms of how various landscape descriptions are interrupted by both outside forces and internal states, and how these interruptions are emblematic of the irruptive force of capital. This work, though celebrated on its publication for the beauty of its landscape descriptions, is full of a tumultuous and often vexed sense of place. The second chapter addresses the history of deforestation in terms of William Wordsworth’s poem “The Ruined Cottage.” The sense of dearth that poem evokes is, I argue, directly related to the drastic deforestation of England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The next chapter examines the acoustic ecology of John Clare as exemplified in his poem “The Fallen Elm.” How the sounds of the natural world appear as both subjects in his poetry and as influential on the formation of his own patterning of sound is explored, as well as the ideological significance of different types of soundscapes. The focus of the fourth chapter is the urban and suburban landscapes of Thomas De Quincey. Here I examine the appearance of urban sprawl in a variety of works by De Quincey and the way in which the addicted body and the sprawling city become darkly symbolic of each other. The thesis concludes with a reading of Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, a novel about the end of humanity written at the end of the Romantic era. Here I consider how changing thought about the relationship of humanity to
deity, along with the panic of 1825, which marked an important recognition of the global reach of capitalism, inform a broader revision of earlier Romantic idealism and anticipate later existential thought.
Acknowledgements

This dissertation would never have been written had it not been for the compelling instruction and patient guidance of Professor Alan Vardy. The underlying focus on landscape here is heavily influenced by his wide-ranging knowledge and critical insight into this topic. My still-developing interest in ecocriticism owes much to Professor Alexander Schlutz, who has brought so much to my attention during the writing process that my debt to him is immeasurable. Professor Schlutz has in addition been a very generous source of intellectual and emotional support and encouragement throughout the writing process. Professor Joshua Wilner and Professor Nancy Yousef have contributed a great deal to this project, as three of the five chapters here were inspired by work done in their seminars, courses which have left a lasting impression on my thinking and general critical awareness. I wish to warmly thank all of these mentors for providing such a rich and varied academic experience, one to which this document can only poorly attest.

Another person without whom this project would never have left the ground is my wife, Seirin Nagano. Her unflagging support, understanding and heroic patience have been a gift that I can never value highly enough, and I count myself lucky for every day I spend in her company. I would also like to thank my mother for her ongoing support and the confidence she has always instilled in me. And, of course, my fellow students at the Graduate Center have provided, in addition to engaging conversation, an empathy and companionship that I continue to hold dear.
Finally, to my late father, who passed away at the outset of this project, I dedicate the words herein.
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Introduction

Man sallies forth into nature…to discover the original of the forms presented to him in his own intellect…he learns at last that what he seeks he has left behind. – S.T.C.

After De Quincey had taken possession of Dove Cottage in 1809, one of the ways he marked the space as his own was to cut down the Wordsworths’ cherished trees. The rest of the Wordsworth circle was horrified. Dorothy vows never to see him again, Mary Hutchinson is said to cancel a possible walking tour to Wales, and Sara Hutchinson is positively livid:

What do you say to de Q's having polled the Ash Tree & cut down the hedge all round the orchard every Holly, Heckberry, Hazel, & every twig that skreened it & all for the sake of the Apple trees that he may have a few more Apples […] D.[orothy] is so hurt and angry that she can never speak to him more : & truly it was a most unfeeling thing when he knew how much store they set by that orchard. (36-37)

Though cutting down trees to obtain a clearer prospect had been a common practice in England for centuries, De Quincey’s motivation appears financial rather than aesthetic. A good crop of apples could pay the rent,¹ and De Quincey’s increasingly desperate finances (of which the Wordsworth circle knew nothing) were likely a central motivation.² Yet his act cannot help but suggest the much broader transformation of the landscape under intensified methods of agriculture and industry that had transformed the appearance of England. In this sense De Quincey represents the urban-centered effort to make the land more “productive” (i.e.

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¹ As John Clare knew; his family depended for many years on the revenue the apple trees on their rented property brought in.
² Six months before Sara’s 1811 letter, De Quincey had written to his brother apologizing for the request of the return of a two-pound loan: “my present income is so limited that every shilling is important to me.” (qtd. in Jordan 220).
profitable), regardless of the human, aesthetic, or natural cost, and thus offends the sensibilities of his rural-minded friends. Sara’s description of De Quincey’s motivation “that he may have a few more Apples,” indicates how moral imperatives are undermined by financial interest. The status of the natural object, how it is valued in alternately aesthetic and financial terms, is a conflict at the heart of Romantic (and contemporary) conceptions of the natural world. And social relations, as this episode demonstrates, directly tie to attitudes towards the object of nature.

De Quincey’s embarrassed finances and the Wordsworth circle’s personal relationship with particular natural objects epitomizes a conflict over the status of the object of nature within an increasingly capitalistic society. This conflict is, at base, much older than Romanticism, but it is during the Romantic period that it becomes codified into opposed economic and aesthetic categories. Though supposedly antagonistic, these categories actually share a common goal in creating a standard of value. As Marc Shell has noted, faith and credit are not only necessary to the project of capitalism, they also involve “the ground of aesthetic experience” (73). This wasn’t the only ground shared. According to David Kaufmann, “the rapid growth and institutional consolidation of commercial capitalism in the eighteenth century created a demand for new descriptions of and apologias for the economy, the state, morality, and citizenship, a demand that was taken up by…both the field of political economy and the novel” (169). There is

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3 De Quincey’s supposedly base motivation of “a few more apples” is suggestive of the popular 1964 film “For a Few Dollars More.” A satirist with little shame might parody the conflict between the two parties with the title “For a Few Apples More,” or, in reference to the earlier film, “A Fistful of Apples.” In fairness to De Quincey, who is cast as the desperado here, his side of this story was not recorded. This episode was part of a growing estrangement between De Quincey and Wordsworth that resulted in a final split upon De Quincey’s marriage to Margaret Simpson in 1816 (see Jordan, Ch.3, for a detailed account).
no need, I argue, to limit this observation to the novel, as various other genres fulfilled the same role. Indeed, many types of literature made capitalistic enterprise possible. As Alexander Dick writes, “the Romantics helped invent ‘commercial society’ by incorporating notions of value, affect, and genre into a new idea of a standard that would measure a field of varying and often independent discourses that existed alongside and around it” (18). In ecological terms, the Romantics help invent a particular type of landscape and way of incorporating the objects within it. On the one hand this fosters an immediate self-identification and a reverence for the rural object of nature (“there is a spirit in the woods”), and on the other, it appears to provide an urban audience with nostalgia for that which it destroys at a distance, a cult of nature that sacrifices its object with ritualistic devotion.

The texts chosen here reflect the ambivalence expressed towards the development of capitalism in various types of literature from the late-eighteenth century to the mid-nineteen hundreds. The first chapter, on Mary Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian letters, examines the paradoxical situation of critiquing commercialism while being an agent of that same system of exchange, a problem that would vex Romantics throughout the period. Wordsworth’s *The Ruined Cottage* is the subject of the second chapter, which considers how the long history of deforestation leaves a legacy upon the earth that is erased through a process of renaturalization, yet precariously retained through a poetics of loss. Similarly, John Clare’s poem *The Fallen Elm*, reflects the loss not only of the object of nature, but through that loss, the end of a way of life and of linguistic expression. Chapter four takes up the work of Thomas De Quincey, and studies the formation of an urban consciousness that would come to redefine the urban/rural divide by infecting all spaces
with a particularly urban point of view. This spread is also analyzed in terms of the last chapter, on Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, which contemplates the end of humanity at the end of an era, darkly reflecting on the success of the global spread of capitalist enterprise.

The Romantic poetics of loss no longer merely address an immanent presence; they bear witness to over two hundred years of environmental destruction and degradation in the service of global capitalism, recording what Walter Benjamin refers to as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage” (257). Yet the rise of Romanticism as a middle-class ideology that reifies the individual is also what has contributed to the institutionalizing of the conception of the natural world as a passive extension of the body to be exploited in the service of a catastrophic transcendence. As Benjamin explains, “a storm is blowing in from Paradise…This storm is what we call progress” (257-58). Modernity is expressed in a language that corrodes the object of its aspiration; it speaks of endless voyages while it dreams only of shipwreck. During the Romantic period, the natural world, more than a custodian of fundamental truths, became an endlessly exploitable resource, a site of both revelation and disaster.

When Benjamin evokes the angel of history, he does so to point to a cycle of recurring oppression in the service of a notion of historical progress. It is not merely the fact of oppression, but its historical erasure, which enables it to continue unabated: “even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (255). This cycle is also apparent in the history of humanity’s treatment and use of the natural world – the wreckage the angel views is also the wreckage of environmental degradation. And this wreckage has been routinely covered over in
discussions of Romantic conceptions of the natural world. This study attempts to contribute to what Benjamin sees as “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past” (263) by evoking the protest voiced by Romantic authors on behalf of the object of nature.

There is an ongoing need to reconceive what we talk about when we talk about nature, to reconsider the forces motivating and entering into Romantic conceptions of the natural world. One helpful way to do this is to move away from a monolithic “Nature” and towards a more social form of ecocriticism that begins with the understanding that nature and culture have never been distinct entities, that there is no such thing called “nature” that is not at the same time in some way something called “culture.” As Scott Hess has recently argued “The meaning of nature…is deeply implicated in, even foundational to, the same modern social and economic systems that we often invoke such a nature to oppose” (3). Our social and economic structures are underpinned by conceptions of nature that often remain invisible. Nature and culture have become inextricable, and as Timothy Morton claims, “To write about ecology is to write about society” (17). Raymond Williams had already suggested this concept in 1980: “What is often being argued…in the idea of nature is the idea of man; and this not only generally, or in ultimate ways, but the idea of man in society, indeed the ideas of kinds of societies” (70-71). Lawrence Buell indicates how this broader idea might apply to literary criticism: “Literature-and-environment studies must develop a ‘social ecocriticism’ that takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as ‘natural’ landscapes” (22). This study will attempt to take this delimited notion of landscape as its central subject, and examine the ways in which economy and ecology are everywhere intertwined in Romantic writing. As capitalism transforms the basic
fabric of nature/culture, it plays an essential role in the formation of Romantic subjects and Romantic subjectivity. Part of what the Romantics demonstrate, I argue, is that physical changes to the landscape are inherently tied to what Louis Althusser refers to as the interpellation of the subject. That is, what is always already is not only social, it is the inherent condition of the interrelation between living things.

The relation between culture and nature, from an ecological perspective, might be described by what Barry Commoner has called the first law of ecology: “Everything is related to everything else.” A useful concept for considering the relationship between the material and the figural is the cognate, a term that can mean both “blood relation” and “derived from the same root.” This not only points to the material basis of cultural productions, but also the possibility of considering ecology beyond its basis in material processes. Thinking in terms of the cognate seeks to address particular problems in the history of epistemology that continue to haunt contemporary discourse. In the words of Gregory Bateson, “The major problems in the world are the result of the difference between how nature works and the way people think.” 4 This difference, or division, in ways of constructing knowledge is addressed by Raymond Williams in terms of economy and ecology: “It will be ironic if one of the last forms of the separation between abstracted Man and abstracted Nature is an intellectual separation between economics and ecology. It will be a sign that we are beginning to think in some necessary ways when we can conceive these becoming, as they ought to become, a single discipline” (84). Economy and ecology belong together as they derive from the same root, the Greek оίκος, meaning home or

household. The cognate therefore is central to my methodology, as it illustrates, in conceptual form, the practical approach I will be applying to the relationship between material history and cultural production.

Because environmental concerns cannot be addressed without also considering social concerns, it will be necessary for this study of Romantic literature to also address the economic developments that co-define the natural world during the period. The field of new economic criticism, that attempts to both challenge neo-classical models of economics, and expand upon traditional Marxian notions of economy, will be particularly useful in this effort. And because this study intends to explore the underlying ecological conditions of social relations, the field of natural history will be of equal importance. What kinds of ecological relationships existed and how they were instrumental in subject-formation will be a central concern throughout. The ramifications of the ways in which economics and ecology interact in the context of culture (e.g. how plant becomes cloth becomes rag becomes paper) will form the bulk of what this dissertation investigates, with the hope of demonstrating how the unexpected qualities inhering in familiar objects suggest a way of rethinking the culture/nature divide. And of course, the particular historical developments which shape and are shaped by both the economic and the ecological will provide the necessary context to this discussion. How imperialism, for instance, is driven by particular economic forces, and how these shape colonial landscapes, will be of interest here. Advances in the sciences will also come into the broader conversation, not only because these advances are what allowed for a rapid and more complete exploitation of the earth,
but because of the ways they informed Romantic conceptions of the natural world and the ethics of humanity’s place within it.

Definitions of Romanticism generally focus on a particular type of interaction with the natural world. Yet there is a tendency to assume that there is no need to question what “nature” is. Nature is something unchanging, something given, something out there: an object under the gaze of a subject. Modern capitalist societies continue to operate under such assumptions, which are at the root of the current global ecocrisis. The confusion regarding complex new financial instruments parallels a similar controversy in regards to aesthetic formations, and attitudes expressed in both of these fields bears directly on how the object of nature was valued during the period. The prominent political economist Henry Thorton, in his 1802 *Paper Credit*, attempts to defend the Bank of England’s monetary policies, including the suspension of specie in 1797. Despite this support, Thorton has to recognize the difficulty that more complex financial tools create, namely the introduction of an instability into standards of value: “to determine what bills are fictitious and what are real, is often a point of difficulty” (89). This difficulty is similarly noted by the artist William Marshall Craig in terms of mimesis. Critiquing the approaches of Reynolds and Gilpin towards the concept of “general nature” he writes: “It appears a matter of some difficulty to ascertain what is meant by general nature, and consequently, how it is to be imitated” (7). Though both economics and aesthetics attempt to provide a system of value, and thus form a basis for social and cultural subjectivity, the two fields are supposedly developed in opposition to one another. Thus discourse comes to define itself by something it lacks, and as knowledge becomes increasingly specialized it increasingly points to this epistemological gap.
This divide between financial and aesthetic value points to a profound contradiction at the intersection of art and commerce that continues to go unresolved today.

The supposed divide between the pursuit of financial gain and the production of Romantic art is suggestive of the development of a host of distinct disciplines during the Romantic period. This fragmentation of approaches towards knowledge, or ways of defining the object of knowledge, implies a social division, a split in the greater consciousness of a culture. This dissertation attempts to bring to light inherent links between conceptions of the social and the natural, categories that have for far too long, and to our ever-increasing detriment, been treated in isolation. Romanticism is the necessary point from which to consider these links, as modern notions of the natural world were being formed at the same time as humans were beginning to have a detrimental effect on various ecosystems, marking the outset of the anthropocene. This project attempts to bring together studies in natural history and political economy, and recent critical commentary on the nature/culture division, with the simultaneous purpose of challenging disciplinary barriers and reframing the discussion around the relationship between the human and non-human.

Interdisciplinary questions arise in each chapter of the dissertation. To understand the picturesque and sublime rock formations of Mary Wollstonecraft’s Scandinavian journey, for example, it becomes necessary to think about the burgeoning fields of geology and paleontology and how knowledge of the earth affected notions of human telos. Noah Heringman’s important survey of the rise of geology in the Romantic period will be a useful starting point here. The
precious metals mined from the earth that make capitalist growth possible (Wollstonecraft is chasing stolen silver) make the historical conditions of mining inherent in what is described. The notion of the earth as a resource and a tool, so necessary to capitalist growth, must also be considered if the portentous rocks are to reveal their significance. And it is not only mining, but a host of other industries that everywhere invade the peaceful countryside of Wollstonecraft’s letters, interrupting picturesque landscape descriptions, and thus interrogating particular historical and aesthetic formations of the landscape. Wollstonecraft repeatedly communicates a desire to be physically close to the natural world, to experience a shared physicality. The nearly carnal relationship Wollstonecraft establishes with the land, the way in which its surface becomes a sensitive skin, develops a unique sympathy with the material objects of nature that stands in direct opposition to her vexed relationship with Imlay. This relationship is similar to that which forms the basis of contemporary ecological thinking, while at the same time suggesting an alternative approach to economics, akin to the intensity of exchange that Jean-Francois Lyotard would later call a “libidinal economy.” The diversification of knowledge occurs as the material of the natural world undergoes various processes and transformations. As the natural object is shaped so are the social structures which inform subjectivity, for they were never separate to begin with.

For Wordsworth, this becomes particularly evident in his use of tree imagery amidst the widespread deforestation of England. The grotesque figures Robert desperately carves upon sticks in The Ruined Cottage signify the effects of the long history of the decimation of England’s woods upon the land and upon social relations. The vast open plain the traveler must
cross, its poor and unproductive soil, is suggestive of the effects of deforestation upon the land, and the use of this wood, in part, to build fleets of ships for a growing empire. In this way the poverty of the land represents the moral poverty of the grasping for territories overseas and the buying and selling of human bodies. The turbulence and sublimated violence that appears in much of Wordsworth’s early work can be seen to reflect the history of environmental degradation in the service of an expanding empire. The tree is central both to the growth of capitalism and to the growth of the poet’s mind. In the first it must be cut down and in the second it must be continually made anew in the mind of the reader. Though this suggests a distance between discourse and practice, it is one rapidly closing: by the time we read “objects are closer than they appear” it may already be too late. The past two hundred years, which have seen the lionization of Wordsworth’s poetry and the construction of Wordsworth as cultural icon, have also produced greater environmental destruction than any other period in human existence. The poet who announces the renewal of nature does so at the dawn of the anthropocene, and it is no longer possible to treat these phenomena as entirely distinct. As Kate Rigby explains, this “romantic reframing…has once again acquired a new, and ambivalent significance in the contemporary era of ecocrisis” (11). This ambivalence is reflected in the contradictory signification of the object of nature, conceived as either financial or aesthetic, when in fact these distinctions can only partially represent the object’s complex range of signification.

This last point is particularly relevant to considering the poetry of John Clare, for whom the natural object was not only a source of aesthetic contemplation, but a daily companion. The closeness of his poetry to the material of his surroundings can be heard in the way his middle-
period work synthesizes the sounds of his environment with the structures of poetry. The way Clare allows human and natural sounds to cohabitate and intermingle is particularly relevant to this project’s attempt to illustrate what is problematic about the nature/culture divide.

Throughout Clare’s poetry, the sounds of his environment, whether folk song or birdsong, human or non-human, are celebrated in their unbound and unframed state. Clare’s unique perspective as a laboring class poet shaped his aesthetic productions, and challenged increasingly dominant bourgeois attitudes towards the nature of art and the nature of nature. Rather than the commanding perspective that dominates western art from the Renaissance forward, Clare puts himself into the picture, as an object among objects. While the detail of his visual constructions has received significant attention, little has been written about his close attention to the sounds of his environment. The work of R. Murray Shafer and his colleague Barry Truax in theorizing the “soundscape,” along with Jacques Attali’s consideration of the political economy of music, will be central to investigating the context of Clare’s complex employment of the sounds of his environment. In various works, but particularly in “The Fallen Elm,” Clare presents an acoustic ecology which demonstrates the way that sound is not only shaped by its surroundings, but actively takes part in giving space its distinctive presence. In doing so, Clare not only records a vanishing way of life, but anticipates later twentieth century artists who attempted to challenge the hegemony of the visual by acoustic means, and demonstrates a strategy of sonic resistance to the cold and distant power structures of the metropolitan center.

Thomas De Quincey documents the irresistible growth of the city through the architectural ambience that structures his narratives. In comparing the city to a creature that spreads out its
“vast tentacula,” De Quincey figures the urban center as an insatiable force, swallowing up all in its path. This is true of his childhood home in Greenhay, outside Manchester (the scene of his sister’s death), as well as the home in Everton, outside Liverpool, where De Quincey has a kind of archetypal opium experience. That Manchester and Liverpool were leading centers of England’s industrial and colonial expansion is particularly significant to the kind of psychic drama that De Quincey unfolds in both his autobiographical work and in his fiction. Swallowing was also a habit of the author, and his opiated body becomes a symbol for both the pleasures and the pains of the ever-expanding city. The architectural features of the city become associated with the body, as De Quincey becomes, in the words of Tim Fulford, “completely commodified.” The city increasingly would define the nature of national cultural development, including how the natural world would be conceived and made use of. In this sense the “tentacula” also draw together the various studies in this dissertation, as all phenomena come to be interpreted through the lens of metropolitan culture. The notion of progress, like the gradually ascending line of a bullish stockmarket chart, resembles a staircase, an ascending motion towards some unidentified and forever unreachable transcendent. De Quincey’s constant return to the stair as an element of the urban and suburban landscape denotes something of a disastrous transcendence. Like Milton’s description of Jacob’s Ladder, “each stair was mysteriously meant,” and De Quincey’s figuring of the stair as a site of violence reflects not only the autobiographical site of trauma, but also the uncontrollable growth of the city and its markets. Interestingly, De Quincey appears to prefigure the status of the stair in the age of the elevator as a site of inner-urban violence and implied emergency.
John Barrell’s “The Infection of Thomas De Quincey,” an important contribution to the contemporary understanding of De Quincey’s work, suggests the subject of the final chapter, a total infection that wipes out the human race. In Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, we meet a sibylline narrator who describes the development of an irresistible global condition. That Shelley writes at a time when capitalism was itself becoming a global condition is no accident. The Panic of 1825, in which many investors lost fortunes in the mines of South America, is widely cited as marking the global reach of capitalist enterprise. Writing after the deaths of Byron, Percy, and Keats, Shelley’s novel about the end of human society and culture reflects the end of an era. She presents a dark ecology which exposes a split between human activity and the natural world, and the disastrous results which this brings. The emptying out of the object of nature of its cultural and historical associations is parodied in the emptying out of humanity from the earth. Rather than a “One Life” uniting humanity and nature in a Spinozan continuum, Shelley presents a “one death” that marks an irremediable division between the human and the natural. Yet she does so in a way that is suggestive of the power of communicability to affect drastic change, what Antonin Artaud would call a “redeeming scourge.” In a newly capitalist world, the implied function of art is to infect the infection, to spread, and to transform its subjects and therefore a society that seems forever closed from that original energy of the Romantic movement that made so much seem possible. Though Shelley appears to offer a eulogy, a laying to rest, in effect her novel is an attempt to raise Romanticism’s ghosts back into the world of the living, to trouble the peaceful sleep of her bourgeois audience.
It is important to keep the question of what the object of nature signifies an active one. It is not enough to conclude that this object remains passively unknowable, because it is a part of who we are and how we interact with one another. The object has a being that must be spoken for. And because Romantic period literature looks so closely at the question of being and its historical situatedness, this literature is particularly useful in reminding us of the urgency of the question. Wordsworth is right when he says “there is a spirit in the woods,” whatever animistic or Spinozan thinking this implies. Yet it is also true that the spirit of capital walks in the woods, speculating as to net worth and the contingencies of the market. Our own historical moment, in which fewer and fewer people have access to, or experience of “the woods,” is a testament to which spirit has been allowed to take precedence over the other.
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Wollstonecraft, Mary. Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and

Chapter 1

“The Bones of the World”: The Social Geology of Landscape in Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*.

Approaching the frontiers, consequently the sea, nature resumed an aspect ruder and ruder, or rather seemed the bones of the world waiting to be clothed with every thing necessary to give life and beauty. Still it was sublime.

- Letter V

In Chapter four of Noah Heringman’s seminal work on aesthetic geology in the Romantic period, he points to the way in which an aesthetic appreciation of rocks merges with an economic appreciation of their value as mineral resource:

the rocky landforms of Romantic poetry…famously resist reading, generating images that articulate the otherness of the physical through the literal and metaphorical opacity of the rock. This aesthetic response to the materiality of rocks and landforms is, however, inseparable from the emerging economic category of natural resources. (161)

Before *Mont Blanc* or Simplon Pass became representative of Romantic attitudes towards rock formations, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* took them as a central preoccupation. These rocks, rather than an impenetrable other, are everywhere active and inhabited, and it is this sympathy with human activity that brings to the surface Wollstonecraft’s own multifaceted preoccupations. The bones of the world are everywhere social, and rather than a contrast with human environments, provide recognition of their shared inherent structures. Just as money represents both debt and wealth, so the landscape is both a barren waste and a natural resource. Wollstonecraft’s unique representations appear to recognize the developing economic situation of Britain at the time she
writes, describing “a prosperity founded precariously—both improbably and imperialistically—on debt” (Brantlinger 49).

The bare and unadorned stone of Scandinavia is both a raw material and a skin, a blank page and a sensitive surface that floods the narrator’s consciousness and gives her pause, that draws her thoughts towards sublime expanses of time and human possibility and also leaves her alone in the crisis of a barren and confining present. As the narrator, in the above epigraph, approaches the frontiers, and consequently the undifferentiated liquid mass of the sea, boundaries between the natural and the social, between object and subject, self and other, become blurred and uncertain. The various moments throughout the Letters of interruption, digression, and disappointment reveal the bones of the world, the fundament underlying the aesthetics and economics of the landscape beginning to show through its outer covering.

These bones would become a preoccupation of Romanticism in general, reminding the reader of how natural and social relations are interfused. The Letters provide an early example of the environmental effects of industrial capitalism, effects which would become increasingly dire, as John Clare’s The Lament of Swordy Well attests:

And me, they turned me inside out
For sand and grit and stones
And turned my old green hills about
And picked my very bones    (61-64)

The bones of the earth also evoke the “skin and bone” of the impoverished, which William Cobbett would repeatedly call attention to in his Rural Rides: “what a hellish system it must be,
to make those who raise it skin and bone and nakedness” (375). The rural poor and the landscape come to resemble one another in various ways, their bodies shaped by the power structures of an increasingly industrial and urban society. This is also illustrated by Wordsworth’s description of the discharged soldier: “you might almost think / That his bones wounded him” (44-45). In Scandinavia, where much of the land she travels through is undeveloped by human hand, Wollstonecraft’s narrator finds landscapes that escape attempts at domestication, their rawness and sharp contrasts raising implications for the ways in which capital’s irruptive force complicates aesthetic formations of the natural world and the forms of subjectivity upon which these are based. This chapter will first briefly explore the way Wollstonecraft addresses a particular aesthetic and economic tradition before examining specific passages in the *Letters*. How these passages illustrate the way material history enters into aesthetic formations will be central to my attempt to show how the social and the natural are far more interwoven than Romantic criticism has generally allowed.

Speculative Investments

The act of looking at the object of nature no longer means the same thing at the end of the eighteenth century as it did at its beginning, either for the object, the viewer, or what takes place between them. Speculation, originally “the faculty or power of seeing” (OED) now had a newly minted financial meaning that would increasingly colonize its philosophical and scientific

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5 Cobbett also describes a landscape as deprived of sustenance that parallels in several ways Wollstonecraft’s descriptions: “Their hilliness, bleakness, roughness of roads, render them unpleasant to the luxurious, effeminate, tax-eating crew, who never come near them, and who have pared them down to the very bone” (134).
forbears, destabilizing inherited forms of knowledge and causing a re-evaluation of foundational relationships between the self, society, and nature. It is in this context that Wollstonecraft shapes her acts of looking, and her challenge to aesthetic tradition has significant implications for a reconsideration of the parallel formations of commercial society and Romantic nature.

Seeing and establishing value have a long history of interconnection that is particularly relevant to Romantic conceptions of nature. According to Claude Levi-Strauss,

> It is this avid and ambitious desire to take possession of the object for the benefit of the owner or even the spectator which seems to me to constitute one of the outstandingly original features of the art of Western civilization. (qtd. in Berger 84)

John Berger has traced this desire in the development of oil painting in the sixteenth century, and the way in which the viewer takes metaphorical possession of the objects displayed. This would be true of eighteenth century landscape painting as well, particularly the picturesque tradition, which offered an unobstructed view over a vast expanse of land, suggestive of both national pride and imperial possession. The function of representation as itself an act of imperialism is discussed at length by Patrick Brantlinger, who suggests

> representation may be inherently imperialistic, because it seems to always involve an attempt to “master” some aspect of the external world. From this perspective, all forms of representation appear to be intrinsically irrational and violent, based on a will to power that is simultaneously infantilizing and imperializing. (8)

Though somewhat broad when applied to all forms of representation, as it assumes a limited type of relationship, Bratlinger’s comments are particularly relevant to Western societies from the
Renaissance forward. The problematic relationship between viewing and possessing lies at the heart of Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*. This is true in both the aesthetic of landscape description she employs and the fact that she presents the reader with various views while on a mission to regain lost possessions. Yet her subtle undermining of the aesthetic tradition of landscape depiction, as well as her acts of critical self-fashioning, are also ways of resisting the inherent cultural imperialism of representation.

Though she uses some of the methods and techniques of the aesthetic tradition that connects viewing with possessing (indeed, it is hard to imagine how she would describe landscape otherwise), she at the same time imports a subtle critique of this tradition. Rather than viewing the landscape as merely a locus of individual affective response, Wollstonecraft recognizes the geological, agricultural, and economic importance of thinking about embodied space. According to Elizabeth Bohls, “She weaves…seemingly disparate elements together in a sophisticated texture, one whose binding threads is a subtly but insistently revisionist presentation of aesthetic experience” (149). This critique both resists an increasing tendency to value the objects of nature in primarily economic terms, and paradoxically takes part in a broader project that makes this very tendency possible. As Alexander Dick writes, “the Romantics helped invent ‘commercial society’ by incorporating notions of value, affect, and genre into a new idea of a standard that would measure a field of varying and often independent discourses that existed alongside and around it” (18). As Wollstonecraft draws together various discourses in her depiction of various views, she also contributes to this project of creating a standard of value.

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*6 One need only think of Browning’s “My Last Duchess” to understand how male control of the art object becomes a metaphor for an unlimited violence upon the female body, for example.*
Under the quiet and sparsely populated landscapes Wollstonecraft describes is a rising crescendo of commodity noise that troubles the viewer in search of the beautiful and the picturesque. In the same way, the commodity is haunted by the earth, a parentage it conceals in vain. As Marx writes “A commodity appears at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties” (776). Wollstonecraft recognizes such subtleties: “Before I came here I could scarcely have imagined that a simple object…could have admitted of so many interesting combinations” (107). Her *Letters* similarly form interesting combinations that draw her readers into the queerness of the objects she investigates.

These objects, as Marx recognized, drive the formation of modern societies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, gold and silver largely dug from the mines of colonial South America make possible the expansive growth in European markets. The birth of geology in the Romantic period marked an epistemological shift that took place given discoveries about the age of the earth and the extinction of species. Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* would provide the groundwork for Darwin’s theory of evolution\(^7\) and in the mid-nineteenth century, coal would become the driving force of industrialization. The “vast shadows of the rocks” hang over the narrative of Wollstonecraft’s journey as well as traditional notions of human telos in the face of the vast expansion of capitalist markets.

\(^7\) According to Darwin, “I always feel as if my books came half out of Lyell’s brains” (55).
The most common rock type of Sweden and Norway is gneiss, which is a metamorphic rock often characterized by dark and lighter colored bands. These bands are usually formed by conditions of high pressure and temperature which stretch the rock like plastic (Marshak 177). Rather than an impenetrable monolith, these foliations present the rock as many-layered and complex. The most common process of the formation of these bands in the rock is known as “compositional layering” (Marshak 181) and it is interesting to consider this process in terms of the compositional organization of Wollstonecraft’s *Letters*. In this sense, each letter represents a band in a larger formation, marking the diverse and turbulent forces which formed it, each band containing the concept of the larger whole. These bands are also sometimes formed by a chemical process known as “metamorphic differentiation,” and we might also read the *Letters* as a metamorphic process in which varying tendencies become distinct and solidified, recrystallized by the action of a kind of affective chemistry. The foliated rock “represents the earth simultaneously as the substance and the text of history, generating a materiality located precisely between the two materialities recently competing for the objects of Romanticism, that of the letter and that of history” (Herrington 162). The stone is important both historically in terms of the raw material, or natural resource, it represents for the increasingly voracious market, and linguistically, like the raw material of the disarticulated words in a dictionary, holding a strange power in their singularity and potential. The silence of the stone sinks into Wollstonecraft’s narrative and informs the complex structures she creates.

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8 Of which Thomas Thomson, in his *Travels in Sweden* in 1812 notes: “The great rock of which it [i.e. Sweden] is almost wholly composed, is gneiss” (399). And as Robert Bremner writes of Norway in 1840, “The most abundant rock is gneiss” (107). The word comes from a Middle High German verb meaning “to spark.”

9 “[B]anding in some gneiss develops by an incompletely understood process called metamorphic differentiation. During this process chemical reactions segregate different minerals into different layers” (Marshak 181).
Wollstonecraft’s evocation of and attitudes towards these rocks are complicated and at times seemingly contradictory, suggesting the uncertain ontological place of the natural object within an increasingly secularized and commodified society, as well as the way “capitalist practices of representation construct various, and often conflicting, versions of subjectivity” (Woodmansee 19). The “bare,” “blind,” “naked,” “shivering” rocks can represent the abject state of a purely instrumental nature, while their “immense,” “grand,” “fantastic,” “iron-sinewed” qualities exude power and sublimity. The way that a lake is “embosomed,” the body is “sheltered,” and that a “bulwark” or “barrier” is formed by the rocks suggests their protective and comforting power, while how they “menaced” the clouds, threatened to sink the careless boat, or left the individual “bastilled by nature” communicates a sense of confinement and impending destruction. These sometimes contradictory significations are reflected in Wollstonecraft’s own attack on the blind pursuit of material wealth as she travels through the landscape as an agent of commerce.

Speculation and Disappointment

At the opening of “Letter VIII,” Wollstonecraft describes a favorite haunt, a ruined fort on a mountain near the entrance of a bay:

Here I have frequently strayed, sovereign of the waste, I seldom met any human creature; and sometimes, reclining on the mossy down, under the shelter of a rock, the prattling of the sea amongst the pebbles has lulled me to sleep—no fear of any rude satyr’s approaching to interrupt my repose. (73)

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10 Of the four months of Wollstonecraft’s journey, the longest residence, three weeks, was spent in the Norwegian town of Tonsberg. Letters six through nine describe her observations, experiences, and reflections while residing there.
Both Prospero and Miranda, the narrator commands the scene and is potentially vulnerable within it. Like the picturesque viewer, she controls nature, and unlike this viewer, she places herself in the scene. The prattling of the pebbles suggests childish language and Wollstonecraft’s identity as a parent (as the pebbles are smaller forms of the larger sheltering rock); the lullaby they perform puts her also in the place of the child. By ascribing to herself the roles of both imperial spectator and object of speculation (both sovereign and infant), Wollstonecraft meaningfully interrogates the act of mastery involved in representation. Yet at the same time she turns the self into the object that is visually possessed, as the Letters themselves, in their fashioning for the market, commodify the public figure of the author.

11 Though this passage does not cite The Tempest, Wollstonecraft references the play elsewhere in the Letters. “Shakespeare’s magic island” is evoked to describe the Norwegian landscape in Letter Eleven, and the play is quoted in Letter Nineteen.

12 This description, in many of its details, is similar to one appearing in the highly autobiographical Maria: A Fiction:

…it was situated on the brow of one of the mountains and commanded a view of the sea…When her mother frowned, and her friend looked cool, she would steal to this retirement, where human foot seldom trod…it seemed the Temple of Solitude; yet paradoxical as the assertion may appear, when the foot sounded on the rock, it terrified the intruder, and inspired a strange feeling, as if the rightful sovereign was dislodged. In this retreat she read Thomson’s Seasons, Young’s Night Thoughts, and Paradise Lost. (88–89)

Like the later description in the Letters, the spot is solitary, on a mountain, near a ruin, overlooking the sea. Here the protagonist is a child, and the site offers retreat and protection, a place where she can escape the coldness of her social surroundings and warmly commune with her favorite authors. This passage and others demonstrate a connection for Wollstonecraft between the landscapes of Scandinavia and childhood memory, particularly the most stable period of her childhood in Beverley, Yorkshire, where Wollstonecraft spent six years, from the age of 9 to 15. Emily Sunstein describes Wollstonecraft’s lifelong attachment: “Her associations with Beverley were deep and lasting; she thought of herself as a Yorkshire-woman for many years.” And when looking for the words to communicate affection, Wollstonecraft remembers the northern dialect: “when my heart is warm I must use my Yorkshire phrase…pop come the expressions of childhood into my head” (34). As Moira Ferguson and Janet Todd point out, nature “occupied a central spot in her Yorkshire and Welsh childhood days. Now she refers to this childhood, for the Scandinavian tour reminds her of these earlier affinities” (93). As several passages in the Letters illustrate, there are various connections between what she finds in the Scandinavian landscape and what she experienced as a child in Yorkshire.
As the description of the scene continues, the speaker becomes identified with the natural surroundings, “my very soul diffused itself in the scene.” While this identification can demonstrate the essential interconnection of the social and the natural, and therefore an ecological awareness of the interdependence of a variety of complex and overlapping systems, it at the same time turns the natural world into the object of representation, now subject to an unlimited domination. The Romantic identification of the self with nature uncovers important truths about human experience at the same time as it makes possible a view of nature as an endlessly exploitable extension of the body.

This is another way of coming to the conclusion, as Graham Harman has, that “nature is not natural.” The attempt to naturalize it has largely resulted in its destruction, along with the creation of numerous social ills. Wollstonecraft was well aware of how discourses around the “natural” were used to enforce social disparity. As she makes clear in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a language of cultivation is used to naturalize a socially created form of slavery. Yet rather than merely denounce this language, Wollstonecraft turns it on its head, substituting a language of enlightened growth for one of luxuriant decay (George 209). This informs what Mark Canuel calls “a certain uneasiness that Wollstonecraft has with the conventional discourse of cultivation that crops up intermittently throughout [the *Letters*]” (140). In this latter work, Wollstonecraft further complicates the use of the language of cultivation, inserting it into picturesque description and economic observation in such a way as to raise questions about how notions of value arise from forms of social organization, and how these...
forms both influence and are influenced by the material objects of nature. This demonstrates the way in which Wollstonecraft’s earlier philosophical work informs the *Letters*, providing, as Nancy Yousef explains, “an instantiation and elaboration of preoccupations central to that work” (538). That much of the space Wollstonecraft describes is uncultivated land, paradoxical “fields of rocks,” is particularly appropriate to her approach towards the language of cultivation and its social ramifications.

Agriculture is frequently a subject of discussion in the *Letters*, and it frequently enters into descriptions of landscape. In “Letter V” it does so in a way that not only disrupts the picturesque description of which it is a part, but causes visceral disgust.

I was particularly impressed by the beauty of the situation. The road was on the declivity of a rocky mountain, slightly covered with a mossy herbage and vagrant firs. At the bottom, a river, straggling amongst the recesses of stone, was hastening forward to the ocean and its grey rocks, of which we had a prospect on the left, whilst on the right it stole peacefully forward into the meadows, losing itself in a thickly wooded rising ground. As we drew near, the loveliest banks of wild flowers variegated the prospect, and promised to exhale odours to add to the sweetness of the air, the purity of which you could almost see, alas! not smell, for the purifying herrings, which they use as manure, after the oil has been extracted, spread over the patches of earth, claimed by cultivation, destroyed every other.

It was intolerable, and entered with us into the inn, which was in other respects a charming retreat. (40)

The sentimental language of picturesque description rises artfully to a climax only to meet a shocking rebuff at the moment the greatest aesthetic pleasure is expected.¹³ Though manure is generally not known to be sweet-smelling, the way in which this particular variety suffuses the

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¹³ A similar motif is present in Rousseau’s Seventh Walk (in *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker*). Wandering through a wood, Rousseau imagines himself as lord of an undiscovered land before he hears a strange noise and, entering a clearing, finds a stocking factory.
atmosphere, even following the party into the inn, invades the elaborate act of picturesque viewing and the class assumptions underlying this aesthetic. The passage further asks where the source of aesthetic pleasure is to be located. As Bohls has argued, Wollstonecraft critiques Burkean and Kantian modes of “disinterested contemplation by destroying the distance between perceiver and a statically framed scene” (151). The centrality of the body here and throughout the Letters, suggests an alternate aesthetic that is “anchored in and arising from” the body’s needs and desires (165). The atmosphere these herring create, reappears within, and nearly hovers over the narrative that runs through the Letters, (as it follows the travelers into the otherwise “charming retreat”) and is reminiscent of the colonizing force of capital, that suffuses all objects of discourse. There is a further historical importance to this particular fish to the growth of British economic and naval power, which also hangs in the air, an important context to Wollstonecraft’s experience and her work.

Roger L’Estrange, writing in the seventeenth century, comments on the role of the herring in British colonial endeavor: “the only common nursery of seamen is this [i.e. herring] fishery, where every buss brings up (it may be) six, eight, or ten new men every year, so that our fishery is just as necessary to our navigation as to our safety and well being” (qtd in The Treasuries of the Deep 168). What is often described as the origin of the modern British Navy, Cromwell’s Navigation Act of 1651, is prompted by issues related to herring fishing. According to Arthur Michael Samuel, the Act was “one of the foundation stones upon which the commercial prosperity” of England was built (113), and was conspicuous in that it “arose from disputes based upon the visits of foreign vessels in search for herrings” (114-15). Succinctly describing
the importance of the fish in the expansion of empire, the French naturalist Bernard Germain de Lacépède writes, at around the same time Wollstonecraft is composing her *Letters*: “Le hareng est une de ces production naturelles dont l’emploi decide de la destinee des empires” (qtd. in “Herring and the Herring Fisheries” 378). And Georges Cuvier writes “The greatest statesmen, the most intelligent political economists, have looked on the herring fishery as he most important of maritime expeditions” (378). The herring provided an important source of food, especially for the laboring classes, and was exported in great quantities in the late eighteenth century to feed slaves on British plantations in the West Indies (Samuel 134, 142).

The interruption of Wollstonecraft’s picturesque description takes on new significance when considering the herring in its historical context. Though the roots of the word are not entirely certain, one possible source is the Old High German, “heri” or “army, host” (OED). The sudden presence of the herring not only evokes the irruptive violence of empire but a critique of that empire, a return of the repressed upon the underlying foundations of a dominant aesthetic. Because the herring can cheaply feed large numbers, and provides a training ground for a growing sea-going nation, it proves, as Lacépède notes, an essential tool of empire. Its presence here, used up and squeezed out, its bones spread across the earth, acts as a sign pointing back to the significance of its historical context.

Wollstonecraft’s constructions of interrupted landscape descriptions are suggestive of the irruptive force of capital upon cultural practice. At times, rather than commercial forces interrupting aesthetic appreciation, the two poles come to look very much like the same thing.
The following passage, from “Letter XXIV,” contemplates a view of the Elbe and its surroundings:

The moving picture, consisting of large vessels and small-craft, which are continually changing their position with the tide, renders this noble river, the vital stream of Hamburg, very interesting; and the windings have sometimes a very fine effect, two or three turns being visible, at once, intersecting the flat meadows: a sudden bend often increasing the magnitude of the river; and the silvery expanse, scarcely gliding, though bearing on its bosom so much treasure, looks for a moment, like a tranquil lake.

Nothing can be stronger than the contrast which this flat country and strand afford, compared with the mountains, and rocky coast, I have lately dwelt so much among. In fancy I return to a favourite spot, where I seemed to have retired from man and wretchedness; but the din of trade drags me back to all the care I left behind, when lost in sublime emotions. Rocks aspiring towards the heavens, and, as it were, shutting out sorrow, surrounded me, whilst peace appeared to steal along the lake to calm my bosom, modulating the wind that agitated the neighbouring poplars. Now I hear only an account of the tricks of trade, or listen to the distressful tale of some victim of ambition.

Despite the interest throughout the *Letters* in landscape and its aesthetic value, we are reminded, as Mary Favret contends, that the letters “remain, first and foremost, letters written within and against the demands of ‘business’” (97). That is, even as the author repeatedly laments the depredations of commerce, she takes part in commercial activity as both Imlay’s agent and later, through the act of fashioning the letters for publication. She molds her own experience into a commercial object just as the object of nature is fashioned into a vehicle for profit by commerce. As she contemplates the beauty and tranquility of the Elbe, she does so in a way that also highlights the commercial activity in which it is involved. The “vital stream” of commercial Hamburg is in one sense, the capital exchanged there. The vessels, both large and small, represent the necessary tools of trade, and their constant movement with the tide is akin to the restless activity of the market, and to Wollstonecraft’s own mobility throughout the *Letters* as an
agent of commerce. The “very fine effect” produced by the winding course of the river is akin to
the profit produced by the market, that “silvery expanse” that bears “so much treasure” with
which the paragraph closes.

This treasure, resting on the “bosom” of the water, recalls other passages in the Letters where
Wollstonecraft insists on an embodied aesthetic sensibility and the vulnerability such an aesthetic
creates. It also evokes the several passages in which the narrator’s daughter rests on her bosom
both literally and in the imagination. The use of “bosom” a few lines later in the recollection of
the peace offered by “a favourite spot” (perhaps the spot at Tonsberg mentioned above) further
reinforces this comparison. In this way landscape becomes simultaneously the site of both an
embodied aesthetic pleasure and an abstracted commercial activity. There is a recognition that
the object of nature performs a dual role, both as talisman through which sublime experience is
attained, and as basis of economic value, which can be modulated, abstracted, and speculated
upon. The juxtaposition of these roles initiates a conflict within the self and society, between
freedom and necessity. The sound of the wind through the poplars and the sound of disappointed
ambition are relevant here not in the supposed contrast they construct, but in the recognition
created by a necessarily conflicted attitude towards the natural world.

In the same letter, Wollstonecraft relates another way that commercial and somatic concerns
become entwined through the experience of landscape. This example is similar to that of the
interruptive experience of the smell of herring in the otherwise picturesque landscape.
The views of the Elbe, in the vicinity of the town, are pleasant, particularly as the prospects here afford so little variety. I attempted to descend, and walk close to the water edge; but there was no path; and the smell of glue, hanging to dry, an extensive manufactory of which is carried on close to the beach, I found extremely disagreeable. But to commerce every thing must give way; profit and profit are the only speculations—"double—double, toil and trouble." I have seldom entered a shady walk without being soon obliged to turn aside to make room for the rope-makers. (191)

Here Wollstonecraft depicts, rather than an interruption of the aesthetic contemplation of nature, a foreclosure of it altogether, a sign of her increasingly hostile attitude towards commerce as the letters progress. Yet this apparent conflict is complicated by the fact that Wollstonecraft’s letters themselves partake in the same commercial enterprise. Wollstonecraft’s narrative, and the complex form it takes, appears to register the nature of this paradox. Here aesthetic appreciation of a “natural” scene is twice prevented, first by a smell, then by workers’ use of a space for manufacture that might otherwise foster quiet contemplation. Her wish to be “close” to the landscape, to break down the distance of the typical picturesque observer is blocked; the industrial environment offers no path. The smell of a glue factory, caused by the boiling down of various animal parts, usually the refuse of tanneries, is notoriously strong and unpleasant. The visceral reaction against it is aligned here with an attitude towards commerce in general. Shakespeare’s witches’ famous refrain has itself a double meaning, signifying both the activity of the glue factory and the profit-seeking ambition of the factory owners, which implicitly will come to a bad end (and therefore punning on prophet/profit). “Profit and profit are the only speculations” also in a double sense. They are the only objects within the frame of vision on the one hand, and they are shorn of the association of speculation with philosophical thought on the

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14 Tanneries were a major industry in Beverley (the poll books of 1774 indicate that 31 people, or 4.6 % of the population, were involved in tanning – Bagg et al). Because glue works were generally built adjacent to tanneries, it is likely this was not the first time Wollstonecraft had experienced this smell.

15 I’d like to thank Kristina Huan for this observation.
other. The sense of speculation as a risky investment has its roots in the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{16} and its history demonstrates the way in which ownership and seeing were increasingly conflated in the development of Western art and culture.\textsuperscript{17}

The very paper on which Wollstonecraft writes and on which her edited letters will be printed is itself a product of the industrial methods that played such a large role in the growth and spread of capitalism. The process by which paper was made was undergoing transformation during the eighteenth century. For centuries the rags used for paper manufacture were beaten with hammers in the early stages of the process. A machine known as the Hollander was quickly replacing the hammer. Alfred Shorter explains: “During the second half of the eighteenth century the engine replaced the older stamping method of beating the materials, and by 1800 there were very few English paper mills where the hammer and mortars were still in use” (40). The second half of the eighteenth century also saw increasing conflict between paper-mill owners and workers, which in the 1790s caused vast stoppages of work and in 1796 (the year the Letters are published) brought about a largely ineffective Act of Parliament to prevent workers from organizing (Shorter 96-97). Paper production as transformed by industrialization, and thereby a site of social conflict, reveals the many-layered nature of commodity form.

\textsuperscript{16} Beginning with the disastrous Darien scheme, which caused Scotland such tremendous losses that it was a significant factor in the Act of Union in 1707. The South Sea bubble is perhaps the most famous failed speculation of the century, memorialized by Swift in “The Bubble.” The first citation for “speculation” in the OED is 1774.

\textsuperscript{17} This relationship between sight and culture is also apparent in the cognates theory and theater, which have their root in the Greek theorein (to watch, see).
Materials present in the *Letters* also are important in the manufacture of the paper on which they are written. Gelatin, obtained from the refuse of tanneries, was used in the process of paper production in order to provide a more efficient writing surface and to protect the paper from deterioration. Alum, which appears in another passage in the *Letters* and is discussed below, was often mixed with gelatin as it helped the gelatin bond to the paper more readily (Balston, Appendix 1). The discussion of particular clothes and fashions in the letters is appropriate here in terms of the rags these clothes would eventually provide for paper-making factories.\(^{18}\) There is a sense that the text is something quite close to the body, both historically and in the nearly carnal relationship Wollstonecraft establishes with the landscape.

This relationship of text to the animal body is also evident in the history of ink manufacture. In ancient Greece and Rome, animal glue was an important ingredient in ink, and as late as the nineteenth century, burnt animal bones were being used to produce the ink used in copperplate printing:

> The ink used for Copper-plate printing, is a composition made of stones of peaches and apricots, the bones of sheep, and ivory, all well burnt; and, as the best which is used in this business, comes from Frankfort on the Main, it is known by the name of Frankfort-black. It comes over in cakes, and being mixed with nut-oil, that has been well boiled, it is ground by the printer on a marble, after the same manner as painters do their colours. *(The Young Tradesman* 120-121)

Though Wollstonecraft’s work was not printed on copperplate, it is significant that the increasingly popular works which depicted landscape were. Though regular printing ink does

\(^{18}\) In fact, this could be quite literally true, as Britain could not provide the quantity of rags necessary for its printing trade, and “in 1800 it was estimated that Great Britain’s expenditure on foreign rags was nearly £200,000 per annum” (Shorter 41).
not appear to have used animal parts (though glue was used in the rollers of the press to prevent ink waste – Plant, 322), when lampblack, an essential component of printer’s ink, became expensive in the nineteenth century, various other pigments served as substitutes, including “bituminous shale and schists (1856), aniline by-product (1859)...bone oil (1866), oxides of iron heated with carbonized peat (1868), and the tannin black from leather waste (1881)” (Plant 323).

The animal body informs the text in more ways than one, and the very stone Wollstonecraft so interestingly describes would literally form the material presence of words on the page.

The status of this animal body becomes a metaphor for a moral and social condition. “Letter XXIII” devotes considerable space to lamenting the narrowness of mind produced by commercial activity and the overall harm caused by living primarily for gain. She meets the author John Dickinson, who shares her concerns.

…we compared notes respecting the characteristics of the Hamburgers. “Why madam,” said he to me one day, “you will not meet with a man who has any calf to his leg; body and soul, muscles and heart, are equally shriveled up by a thirst of gain.” (189)

Wollstonecraft not merely reports an interesting conversation, but directly confronts the letter’s ostensible addressee for his perceived single-minded devotion to commerce. The image of the shriveling up of muscle, heart, and soul is suggestive of something being left out in the air to face the elements. It is interesting to note that this shriveling was a problem for agriculture, particularly as the distances products traveled increased. The agricultural term for the loss of product as it moves through the market system is “shrinkage.” The disappearance of recognizably human traits is linked directly to the activity of the market, one which transformed
the nature of the products it dealt in due to the demands made upon it. As Wollstonecraft said of this transforming capacity: “the character of the man is lost in the Hamburger”\(^\text{19}\) (186). Confined to a few mercenary interests, individual character is stifled. Despite the obvious anachronism, the statement also holds true when considered in its contemporary sense. The modern individual is similarly “lost” in a world of commodity. The processes which bring this about are also involved in a parallel loss of character in the natural world, a situation which may be beyond all repair.\(^\text{20}\)

Our own disappointment at the loss of ecological complexity and natural habitat is directly tied to various methods of speculation. When translated into the realm of capitalist finance, however, disappointment becomes as essential an aspect of speculation as bust is to boom, or bear is to bull. The way Wollstonecraft works disappointment into landscape description offers a subtle yet powerful critique of the imperial perspective of the viewer so necessary to the development of capitalist enterprise. In “Letter V,” the bear and bull are brought imaginatively into the picturesque landscape:

> The rocks tossed their fantastic heads so high were often covered with pines and firs, varied in the most picturesque manner. Little woods filled up with recesses, when forests did not darken the scene; and vallies and glens, cleared of the trees, displayed a dazzling verdure which contrasted with the gloom of the shading pines. The eye stole into many a covert where tranquility seemed to have taken up her abode, and the number of little lakes that continually presented themselves added to the peaceful composure of the scenery. The little cultivation which appeared did not break the enchantment, nor did castles rear their turrets aloft to crush the cottages, and prove that man is more savage

\(^{19}\)In a recent sign of character, the city of Hamburg has announced plans to eliminate vehicular traffic within its city limits by 2034, setting an invaluable example for the rest of the urban world.

\(^{20}\)The vast industry of beef production for the fast food industry continues to decimate invaluable South American rainforests to grow corn for cattle. The modern individual is “lost in the Hamburger” in more ways than one.
than the natives of the woods. I heard of the bears, but never saw them stalk forth, which I was sorry for; I wished to have seen one in its wild state. In the winter, I am told, they sometimes catch a stray cow, which is a heavy loss to the owner. (42-43)

As the narrator describes the landscape, she takes imaginative possession of it, she creates, “in the most picturesque manner” a landscape that is perfectly composed, harmoniously balanced, and passively available to the pilfering gaze. The narrator asserts the viewer’s command over its objects, and their subjugation to the construction of the larger scene. The “little woods,” “little lakes,” and “little cultivation,” are all suggestive of Edmund Burke’s theory of the small, soft, and feminine as qualities of beauty. The cottages, also necessarily small, and in proportion to the other objects of the scene, are fundamentally picturesque. Yet something happens to this enchanting landscape at the end of the paragraph when a bear suddenly stalks forth into the imagination. We are quite strikingly reminded of the wildness underlying this picturesque description, and the potential violence that lies within the peaceful scene. There is a chain of association between the notion of the castle, for Wollstonecraft a symbol of despotism, and the savagery of the bear. The heavy loss in this context appears to be equally applicable to that caused by aristocratic and monarchical systems of government as to the capture of a stray cow.

Rather than calling up associations with Elizabethan bull and bear baiting, however, the bull and the bear were already fast becoming icons of “capitalist religiosity” (Lyotard 5). Thomas Mortimer is credited as being the first to use the animals as symbolic of the action of the market in 1761. His *Every Man his Own Broker* would run to fourteen editions over the next forty years. He defines these terms in a cheerfully satirical vein:
A BULL is the name by which the gentlemen of ‘Change Alley, chuse to call all persons, who contract to buy any quantity of government securities, without an intention or ability to pay for it; and who consequently are obliged to sell it again, either at a profit, or a loss, before the time comes, when they have contracted to take it…(45)

A BEAR, in the language of ‘Change Alley, is a person who has agreed to sell any quantity of the public funds, more than he is possessed of, and often without being possessed of any at all, but which nevertheless he is obliged to deliver against a certain time; before this time arrives, he is continually going up and down seeking whom, or which is the same thing, whose property he can devour…He is easily distinguished from the Bull, who is sulky and heavy, and sits in some corner in a gloomy melancholy posture. (47-48)

The Bull contracts to buy, the Bear to sell, both without the ability or intent to actually do either. The absence of substance is ironically based on a certain way of valuing that substance, a certain faith in the insubstantiality of this value. The bear and the bull do not actually appear in Wollstonecraft’s landscapes, but are speculatively placed there, not as an act of faith, however, but in order to raise a doubt as to the methods used in creating a standard of value. Like many other places in the Letters, the animal body interrupts and disables a picturesque narrative. In this case, its violence is not elided by its absence, but only called forth all the more strongly because of its suggestive power.

The form of secular faith that public debt creates, in the face of waning religious cultural influence, finds in the social science of economics the foundational discourse of modernity. The standard of value is built upon a sign that is emptied of all substance. The individual, searching for meaning in this void, is much like the narrator at the Letters’ opening, arriving in speculation and a related disappointment:
My attention was particularly directed to the light-house; and you can scarcely imagine with what anxiety I watched two long hours for a boat to emancipate me—still no one appeared. Every cloud that flitted on the horizon was hailed as a liberator, till approaching nearer, like most of the prospects sketched by hope, it dissolved under the eye of disappointment. (7-8)

The way the clouds become transformed into potential liberators and emancipators is similar to the hope that financial markets create out of the airy notion of debt. Though Wollstonecraft recognizes the evanescence of “prospects sketched by hope,” she will spend much of the *Letters* sketching various prospects, demonstrating her own part in the system of financial transactions. Rather than providing merely a popular picturesque travelogue, however, Wollstonecraft’s sketches look more deeply into the landscape and provide prospects that will resist dissolution even as they navigate a continual and ongoing disappointment.

The cultural value of text similarly becomes subject to the same sort of reification as does money. Though Wollstonecraft’s words are made public and conspicuous, like the ship’s signal flag, there is no way of knowing if the message will be received, if the subject will be moved, if the debt to the author will be repaid. The constant movement of the narrator, the uncertainty as

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21 There is little coincidence that Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* similarly evokes the lighthouse to symbolize the unattainable, and the opening pages of that novel similarly navigate hope, speculation, and disappointment.

22 Wollstonecraft’s waiting is suggestive in other ways. In *Second Sex*, De Beauvoir narrates a similar sense of suspension in the development of the adolescent female. Margaret George points to the following passage as particularly pertinent to the young Wollstonecraft: “While the adolescent boy makes his way actively toward adulthood, the young girl awaits the opening of this new unforeseeable period…[Her] youth is consumed in waiting…her destiny is outside her, scattered in cities already built, on the faces of men already marked by life, she makes contact, she relishes with passion and yet in a manner more detached, more free, than that of a young man” (35). As noted above, Wollstonecraft’s experience in Scandinavia in some ways recalls memories of her youth in Yorkshire, and one is reminded here of the long wandering walks through the countryside that were common to both. In this sense the letters, through all their restless motion and air of mystery, maintain this sense of waiting, of being “consumed in waiting,” which simultaneously describes the central situation of debt in European economies, as value is always being approached but never arrived at.
to what motivates her movements, and above all, the ambiguity of the “you” which the letters address all contribute to a sense of suspension that is comparable to the situation of the text itself as it enters into the world.

The linguistic and embodied contexts that flow into one another throughout the letters might most readily be considered in the concept of the cognate. The OED defines cognate as both a relationship between words and between bodies, that is, either “descended from the same original language” (adj.) or “blood relation” (n.). These definitions also appear to have a cognate relationship as they appear to descend from the same origin, language something multiplying and spreading as humanity populates the world. This relates to disappointment in the *Letters* both in terms of the broken familial relationships depicted (between Wollstonecraft and Imlay, Imlay and his daughter, and Queen Mathilda and Struensee), and in the sense that though linguistic relationships can be traced, it does not mean they effectively communicate what that relationship suggests. An example of this is Wollstonecraft’s repeated and disparaging reference to “brandy.” Wollstonecraft saw the alcohol as a type of opiate of the masses, its free and easy use demoralizing the Swedes, and keeping them from improving their condition. The state had been trying “since 1775 to gain a monopoly on brandy production and sales as a means of raising

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23 Thus the Malthusian fears that appear in the passage discussed below are related both to population and to language. The linguistic aspect might be described as a fear that the word and its referent were somehow growing more distant from each other as objects multiplied and value became increasingly abstract.

24 Coincidentally, the relationship between Mathilda and Struensee comes about due to the 1768 meeting of Christian VII and Struensee in Altona, Wollstonecraft’s last residence in the *Letters*. 
revenue” (Boli 156) and thus encouraged consumption. Wollstonecraft saw a double evil therefore, in both government abuse of its authority and in individual degradation.

The English word “brandy” is a cognate of the Swedish “brännvin” yet the words do not refer to the same object. Rather than a product distilled from wine, “brännvin” is distilled from grain or potatoes, and falls within the category of vodka. This type of false cognate is a problem of translation in general, both in the specific sense of rendering one language into another, and in the more general sense of rendering experience into linguistic expression. The source of a word’s meaning could become infected by the material process through which the referent undergoes, and it becomes increasingly difficult, as these material transformations increase in number and across borders, to be certain that one is always talking about the same thing, or that its meaning continues to derive from the same source. The “rude materials of creation” relatively unshaped by human hands, that “forcibly struck” Wollstonecraft, therefore suggest the bases of social conditions, a fundament that both asserts a material basis for language as well as making apparent the problem of the increasingly diverse uses to which that language was being put.

Brandy first appears in the Letters closely followed by another substance highly regulated in late eighteenth century Sweden: coffee.

Fish, milk, butter, and cheese, and I am sorry to add, brandy, the bane of this country, were spread on the board. After we had dined, hospitality made them, with some degree

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25 This situation changed shortly after Wollstonecraft’s journey. In 1801 home distillation was completely freed (see Boli 156).
of mystery, bring us some excellent coffee. I did not know then that it was prohibited. (11-12)

This prohibition was largely due to Gustav III’s belief that coffee consumption was a threat to public health. A cognate relationship becomes particularly important to Gustav’s attempts to prove his belief:

A pair of monozygotic twins had been sentenced to death for murder. Gustaf III commuted their death sentences to life imprisonment on the condition that one twin drank a large bowl of tea three times a day and that the other twin drank coffee. The twin who drank tea died first, aged 83—a remarkable age for the time. (Breimer 1539)

These identical twins point to the fact that the cognate can represent not only a relation to a source, but a self-similarity. Rather than a false cognate which highlights the confusion created by a world of expanding meanings, this experiment draws attention to the methods used to produce those meanings. The debate between empirical and speculative approaches to the formation of knowledge was at its height in the Romantic period, and it is attitudes towards these methods that also were central to the way in which a standard of value was formed. The rather bizarre experiment would for many of Wollstonecraft’s contemporaries have illustrated what was wrong with an over-reliance on empirical evidence at the expense of speculative thought. Yet it is the empirical, once removed of its claim to scientific objectivity, or its need to conform to established aesthetic norms, that proves a useful guide to Wollstonecraft’s speculative acts of the mind.

Though coffee was a prized commodity, the relatively under-stimulated condition of the populace is a constant source of annoyance for Wollstonecraft. The reason given for the lack of
the appearance of a pilot at the *Letters*’ opening is an economic system which discourages industry. An essential element to the growth of commerce was the rapid increase in the pace with which natural materials were harvested for various types of product. This rapid increase was also accompanied by industrial methods that made the collection of these resources more profitable. In “Letter XIII,” Wollstonecraft describes one of these industrial methods and its outcomes, again in terms of landscape description. The passage begins with a typically picturesque framing: “my eyes were charmed with the view of an extensive undulated valley, stretching out under the shelter of a noble amphitheatre of pine-covered mountains.” Amidst this charming description Wollstonecraft inserts the following passage:

> The view, immediately on the left, as we drove down the mountain, was almost spoilt by the depredations committed on the rocks to make alum.\(^{26}\) I do not know the process.—I only saw that the rocks looked red after they had been burnt; and regretted that the operation should leave a quantity of rubbish, to introduce an image of human industry in the shape of destruction. (118-119)

It is worth speculating how Wollstonecraft would have treated this landscape description differently if she had known the process by which alum was made. Large amounts of human urine provided the ammonia necessary in the chemical process. This gives a slightly different aspect to “the depredations committed on the rocks,” and also makes this scene appear similar to the passage in which the smell of herring interrupts the aesthetic spectacle offered by the

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\(^{26}\) Alum is a chemical compound that is crystalline in form that was primarily used in England in the textile industry as a fixative for dyes (see Balston, Appendix 1). It also was used in cosmetic, culinary, medical, and other applications. One use in England was as an additive to bread to make it appear whiter. Food additives were a major problem in England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What William Cobbett writes, in *Cottage Economy*, was generally the case for all sorts of consumables: “scarcely a week passes without witnessing the detection of some greedy wretch who has used, in making or in doctoring his beer, drugs forbidden by the law” (46). The poor (especially the urban poor), of course, had little recourse or mechanism of complaint, and regularly consumed various dangerous substances. Coincidentally, in the paragraph immediately following the one quoted above, Wollstonecraft describes a riot caused by the high price of grain.
landscape, or the irruptive smell, in “Letter XXIV,” of the glue factory at Altona. However, the need to immediately and flatly deny knowledge of the process here, followed by the pause and the “I only saw” are suggestive that the author might know more than she lets on. At the very least, she knew that alum, along with soap, were products Imlay and his business associates were importing into France. She teases him in a letter of September 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 1794: “Well, you will say this is trifling – shall I talk about alum or soap?” (Collected Letters 263). Alum production was a major industry in England from the Reformation to the Victorian period, and urine was regularly collected from London and other major cities to meet the necessary supply. The “rubbish” and “destruction” left behind by the chemical process would have been visible in Wollstonecraft’s day in North Yorkshire, where the cliffs were eaten into, the forests cut down for the required charcoal, and the land left bare and stained. Having spent her formative years in Yorkshire,\textsuperscript{27} it is a distinct possibility that Wollstonecraft could have known something about the industry before meeting Imlay.

The way in which the site of alum manufacture is like a sore on the body of the landscape is similar to the way the functions of the body interrupted the progress of the mind for Wollstonecraft. According to Emily Sunstein: “Mary’s reaction to her body’s functions, even as late as…her thirties, was one of shame and revulsion” (25). There are several passages in the \textit{Letters}, however, that demonstrate Wollstonecraft as moving away from these attitudes and expressing a greater sense of comfort with her body. The landscape description brings attitudes

\textsuperscript{27} A major influence on Wollstonecraft’s letters was Laurence Sterne’s \textit{A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy}, which was published the same year that Wollstonecraft’s family moved to Yorkshire. Incidentally, one of Sterne’s friends, and fellow member of the “Demoniacs” club, Zachary Moore, inherited, and subsequently dissipated, a substantial fortune that was earned through the alum industry.
towards the body into contact with fears regarding the uncontrolled growth of industry, placing both within the context of a natural world both resilient and fragile. The close relationship Wollstonecraft often draws between the body and the landscape presents a foil to the relationship between alum production and the functions of the body. The way alum manufacture produces a sore or scar upon the landscape suggests the essential ecological relationship between the body and its environment, and the resulting ramifications of abuse and neglect. Wollstonecraft reports a scarring that is a prelude to a much more violent and ongoing historical dismemberment.

While Wollstonecraft often decries the damage done to the natural world, there are moments in which she appears to encourage it. In “Letter VII,” Wollstonecraft blames “the want of mechanical and chemical knowledge” for the lack of productivity of Norwegian mines. Surely these mines would produce “depredations…upon the rocks” similar to, if not worse than, those produced by alum manufacture. On the one hand, notions of enlightened progress require the subjugation and taming of the land and its resources; on the other, actual instances of this taming and subjugation appear intrinsically troubling to Wollstonecraft. In “Letter XV,” she “did not like to see a number of saw-mills crowded together close to the cataracts; they destroyed the harmony of the prospect” (133) and in “Letter XVII,” describing the building of a canal, she “could not help regretting that such a noble scene had not been left in its solitary sublimity” (143). Just how progress is to be attained without disturbing the landscape or the enlightened traveler appears to be something of a conundrum.
This can be at least partly explained in terms of the context in which these contradictory thoughts are expressed. In “Letter VII,” Wollstonecraft deals almost entirely with social, historical and political concerns, and unlike the majority of the Letters, there is almost no landscape description. She therefore approaches her topic from a completely different perspective, one much more attuned to notions of general and widespread progress. In the other letters mentioned, Wollstonecraft is engaged in highly detailed landscape description, and her concerns are more specific to the scene under observation, and more narrowly aesthetic in nature. It is also worth reiterating that Wollstonecraft grows increasingly critical of commercial activity as the letters progress, perhaps reaching a climax in Letter Twenty Four, where its practitioners are “locusts” spreading a “pestilence” who “never smell on their money the blood by which it has been gained” (193). It is hard to imagine, in this light, that she would make the same comments on mining toward the end of her letters as she had made toward their beginning.

Wollstonecraft does appear to address the tension between a belief in the continual progression of humanity and the seemingly detrimental effects of the advance of commerce and industry in “Letter XI,” where she grieves for a perfected humanity, again in the context of a landscape description:

The view of this wild coast, as we sailed along it, afforded me a continual subject for meditation. I anticipated the future improvement of the world, and observed how much man had still to do, to obtain of the earth all it could yield. I even carried my speculations so far as to advance a million or two of years to the moment when the earth would perhaps be so perfectly cultivated, and so completely peopled, as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes; these bleak shores. Imagination went still farther, and pictured the state of man when the earth could no longer support him. Where was he to fly from universal famine? Do not smile: I really became distressed for these fellow
creatures, yet unborn. The images fastened on me, and the world appeared a vast prison. (102)

This passage is remarkable, not only in anticipating Malthusian fears about population, but in imagining an earth that “could no longer support” human life, it can be read as foreseeing the effects of industrial development upon the environment. The philosophical problem of futurity the passage raises is left tellingly unresolved. Is Wollstonecraft here exposing the limitations of Enlightenment thought, and thus anticipating later existential critique, or is she merely performing an imaginative experiment that reveals her own class-based fears and anxieties? A celebration of the very purpose of the improvement of humanity becomes suddenly a terrifyingly inescapable vision. “The images fastened on me” in a similar way that she fastens her own meditations upon the landscape. A world in which people are everywhere becomes “a vast prison” from which there is no escape, something not too distant from Sartre’s “No Exit” in which hell is the inability to escape the construction of one’s self through the eyes of the other.

Another factor to consider in reading this passage is the business that Wollstonecraft is about to complete. In Rusoer, the place she is arriving, she is to confront Peter Ellefsen, the man reputedly responsible for the theft of the silver on board Imlay’s ship, which was also missing. Her mission was to seek some kind of settlement with Ellefsen, and thus avoid a long and costly court battle (Nystrom 25). It is thus possible that the commercial endeavor on which Wollstonecraft was engaged, and which was about to reach its climax, to some extent informs the climactic anxiety of the above passage. The language of possession, to “obtain from the earth all it could yield,” the ambiguous figure of “speculation” and the huge quantity considered
“a million or two,” are suggestive of unhindered and unregulated commercial activity. As Dick observes, “political economists and Romantics alike imagined futures and the dispositions needed to survive them. It is in the way these fields engaged each other that the modern standard [of value] came to exist” (13). Romanticism, often thought to establish itself in reaction against commercial society, appears to be instrumental to its development.

Wollstonecraft’s attitude stresses the need to consider landscape outside the immediate moment, and as subject to change over time. This is also true of contemporary theories of the economics of landscape, in which the valuation of landscape involves “assessing not only present human response to a landscape, but how that response, and the landscape itself, may evolve through time” (Price 316). Both aesthetic and economic discourse address a similar process. Yet the tendency in contemporary economic valuations of landscape is to reduce the importance of future events in such estimates, what is generally known as “discounting the future.” This is the opposite of what Wollstonecraft does here, as she metaphorically “invests” herself in the future, and in turn asks the reader to consider what a truly sustainable relationship with the natural world might look like in the face of an inherent contradiction between an aesthetic ideal and an economic reality.

When Wollstonecraft finally returns to England, it is not with relief or pleasure, but rather, with something like disgust. As she prepares to leave Dover she writes “I have been wandering round this dirty place, literally speaking, to kill time” (196). There is a sense of exhaustion, anticlimax, and purposelessness that animates her words. As she waits to leave for London, the financial
epicenter of Europe, she cannot but feel an intensification of the dismay she felt when faced with 
the commercial minded citizens of Hamburg. The heart of this darkness lies not in the obscure 
and distant landscapes of the periphery, but precisely within the imperial center. The fetish is not 
some distant tribal superstition, but, as Marx indicates, is located inside bourgeois consciousness. 
Yet the Letters, in their sense of constant, mysterious motion, continue to suggest travel yet to be 
undertaken. They remain in transit, and the traveler still in motion. Like Prospero at the play’s 
close, the narrator is shorn of illusion: “Now my charms are all o’erthrown / And what strength I 
have’s mine own.” The seemingly unfinished, fragmented, or disjointed narrative signifies a 
process that resists closure, just as it resists the seeming finality with which capitalism spreads 
into all forms of discourse.
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Chapter 2

Broken Arbour: “The Ruined Cottage” and Deforestation

‘Fell it!’ exclaimed the yeoman, ‘I had rather fall on my knees and worship it.’ 28

At the opening of Act Five Scene Three, Macbeth replies disdainfully to alarming reports of the enemy’s advance.

      Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:
      Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,
      I cannot taint with fear.          (5.3.1-3)

Yet Macbeth cannot turn so easily from the pressing encroachment of events. In scene five a messenger reports:

      As I did stand my watch upon the hill,
      I look’d toward Birnam, and anon, methought,
      The wood began to move.          (5.5.34-36)

The oracular messenger says more than he can know: the wood was indeed beginning to move. The branch cutting of Malcolm’s men reflects the accelerating destruction of the woodlands of Britain from the late sixteenth century onward. A 1608 tree census of six of England’s royal forests showed 232,011 trees standing. A 1783 survey of the same forests found few more than 50,000 trees remaining. 29 “The Ruined Cottage,” long recognized as a depopulation narrative,

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28 From Wordsworth’s note to his sonnet “On the Projected Kendal and Windermere Railway” composed in 1844 (Poetical Works 282). The preceding lines of the note provide the relevant context:

    The degree and kind of attachment which many of the yeomanry feel to their small inheritances can scarcely be over-rated. Near the house of one of them stands a magnificent tree, which a neighbour of the owner advised him to fell for profit’s sake.

29 The following comparison by forest is given in House of Commons Journal (1792): 350:
also registers the cultural and environmental effects of deforestation,\textsuperscript{30} effects especially relevant to the Romantic era, since at its outset England had become one of the most deforested nations in the world.\textsuperscript{31}

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<td>Whittlewood</td>
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<td>Salcey</td>
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<td>Sherwood</td>
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\textsuperscript{30} The term “deforestation” was not used until the late nineteenth century. Most of the words used to describe the process of cutting down trees did not carry a negative prefix. The legal term from the sixteenth century forward was “to assart” and the land thus cleared was also known as an “assart.” Various other terms, such as rid, stub, clot, grub, stock, extirpate, and shrub all generally meant to clear a wooded area. Samuel Johnson provides the verb “averruncate” (OED 2) which he defines as “to root up; to tear up by the roots.” The language suggests a local attitude rather than a consciousness of the practice as a national ecological phenomenon. The terms “disforest” or “disafforest” were also used, but these generally meant to disestablish a particular area as legally defined forest, and not necessarily to cut down trees. A “forest” for most of modern English history did not imply thickly wooded landscape, but a mixed-use area that included some wooded land. As E.P Thompson memorably describes Windsor Forest during the eighteenth-century: “Some part of this forest was made up of parkland and of widely spaced mature oaks, intersected by straight rides; other parts were enclosed arable and meadow land; on other parts were thick coppices, bushes and man-high bracken in which a deer could hide or shake off a dog; and yet other parts were moorland, on the edges of which squatters had settled” (28).

\textsuperscript{31} The complex, multilayered, and at times contentious history of the deforestation of the four nations can only be addressed here by a very general overview. In the modern period, the suppression of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the late 1530s marks the first major inroad into the nations’ wood. As Robert Albion explains “Most of the religious houses owned woodlands, and the oaks were one of the most readily negotiable parts of the confiscated property” (122). According to John Bellamy Foster, this phenomenon was in great part responsible for the origins of the Poor Laws: “With the seizure of church lands, innumerable peasants were driven out. So great was the increase in pauperization that Queen Elizabeth was forced to acknowledge it directly by the introduction of the poor rate—the beginning of the Poor Laws” (171). The rise in iron and copper forges under Elizabeth marks the next major stage (John Perlin [175-180] provides a historical overview of this development). Various depredations under James and Charles for the purpose of raising money further diminish the woods (Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1603-1640; Victoria County History [various]: see Albion 124-27). Cromwell’s reign did little to abate this process, as formerly royal forests, as well as woods on royalist property became a ready source of revenue for the new state (Acts and Ordinances 2. 785). War, the increase in British mercantile and colonial interests, and the growth of industry, all accelerated the process of deforestation throughout the eighteenth century. Planting was sporadic and piecemeal and did little to abate the general and continuous destruction of woodlands from the late sixteenth century onward, which was not only generally recognized, but came to be viewed by certain factions with an air of triumphalism: “The Scarcity of Timber ought never to be regretted, for it is a certain proof of National Improvement; and for Royal Navies, Countries yet barbarous are the right and only proper nurseries” (Dr. Thomas Preston, House of Commons Journal (1792): 343, qtd. Albion 119).
The tree is central both to the growth of capitalism and to the growth of the poet’s mind. In the first it must be cut down and in the second it must be continually made anew in the mind of the reader. Though this suggests a distance between discourse and practice, it is one rapidly closing: by the time we read “objects are closer than they appear” it may already be too late. The past two hundred years, which have seen the lionization of Wordsworth’s poetry and the construction of Wordsworth as cultural icon, have also produced greater environmental destruction than any other period in human existence. The poet who announces the renewal of nature does so at the dawn of the anthropocene, and it is no longer possible to treat these phenomena as entirely distinct. As Kate Rigby explains, this “romantic reframing…has once again acquired a new, and ambivalent significance in the contemporary era of ecocrisis” (11). I hope to address here a small corner of this complex and ambivalent relationship: “The Ruined Cottage” and deforestation.

As Scott Hess has recently argued “The meaning of nature…is deeply implicated in, even foundational to, the same modern social and economic systems that we often invoke such a nature to oppose” (3). Our social and economic structures are underpinned by conceptions of nature that often remain invisible. Nature and culture have become inextricable, and as Timothy Morton claims, “To write about ecology is to write about society” (17). Laurence Buell indicates a more specific way this broader idea might apply to literary criticism: “Literature-and-environment studies must develop a ‘social ecocriticism’ that takes urban and degraded landscapes just as seriously as ‘natural’ landscapes” (22). In the context of Wordsworth and deforestation, I hope to address this need by exploring how the urban-centered structures of
capitalist exchange transform everything they touch, especially concepts of nature. The neoliberal tendency to hold on to the idea of a permanent and unchanging nature that is endlessly yielding and available increasingly appears like a desperate attempt to cling to the remains of a shipwreck.

Yet these remains, removed of idealization, reveal another story. Through a careful examination of the material and cultural history of these objects, something of the nature of Wordsworth’s original protest emerges. Deforestation underlies both the spread of global capitalism as well as the sense of loss and dearth that permeates much of Wordsworth’s poetry. In order to address the place of ecological thought in this poetry it is necessary to consider the economic system from which ecological thought emerges. Deforestation as a phenomenon that marks the outset of global capitalism is the necessary juncture for such a discussion.

My procedure in this essay will take “The Ruined Cottage” as its guide. I will start with the barren plain, move into the stand of elms, and then into the tale of Robert’s enlistment and its ramifications. The first section: “Across a Bare Wide Common,” will discuss the significance of the natural history of Dorset and Somerset and its influence on Wordsworth’s poetry of the 1790s, particularly “The Ruined Cottage.” In the next section “Beneath These Trees,” I will be interested in the importance of the tree as a symbol in Wordsworth’s poetry and in the broader culture of his time. The third section, “To a Distant Land” will focus on the deforestation of colonized nations and the response to environmental degradation in the poetry of these nations. These poets record the disastrous effects of colonization on the environment and evoke a pre-
colonial landscape in defining national identity. Alan Bewell has pointed out how essential the consideration of colonization is to British formulations of home during this era. Such a consideration is also made necessary by the global nature of deforestation and its relation to the advance of capital, a relationship that serves as the background to this paper as a whole.

“Across a Bare Wide Common”

The uncanny nature of the vacant and huge space that spreads around the traveler in “The Ruined Cottage,” and surrounds the elms in which Armytage narrates Margaret’s story, illustrates a profound historical and ecological transformation, a vast taming of the land prior to that effected by the Enclosure Acts. The traveler finds himself at the end of a development that has permanently transformed the physical environment and the culture on which it is based. His fatigue and discomfort disrupt the pastoral frame, and his restless solitude compounds the sense of being uprooted from a sustaining community and its memory of its past. In this sense his condition announces an alienation symptomatic of modernity: he travels through what Antonin Artaud describes as “this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it” (32). What the traveler lacks in terms of bodily needs, the landscape finds missing from its own body; his physical exhaustion mirrors the exhausted soil, while his mental suffering conveys a historical turbulence, erasing and redrawing identity in unexpected ways. Just as the deforested land, transformed by man, will again come to be viewed as natural, so too must the figures of the

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32 In Romanticism and Colonial Disease, Bewell describes the depredations of colonialism as essential to Romantic formations of subjectivity and nationhood.

33 Artaud’s comment addresses the effects of capitalist modes of production on art and cultural practice. In the current context, the deforestation of Britain was often a gradual, piecemeal, and therefore unnoted phenomenon.
poem attempt to re-invent themselves in now unfamiliar circumstances. In this as in other such spaces in Wordsworth (the Salisbury Plain poems in particular) both the landscape and the subject are uprooted from their pasts and reinscribed upon an alien present, performing a dark parody of the pastoral plot, strangers to themselves and to each other.

This process questions not only where nature ends and the human begins, but posits that categories of experience thought of as either human or non-human do not always agree to remain distinct. Armytage first appears merged with his surroundings, “His eyes were shut; / The shadows of the breezy elms above / Dappled his face” (46-48). At the poem’s opening, the surface of the landscape is also described as dappled: “…and all the northern downs / In clearer air ascending shewed far off / Their surfaces dappled o’er” (3-5). This not only identifies Armytage’s face with the contours of the landscape, but allows us to view the landscape also as like him, its surface a placid face it presents to the world.34 Embedded within this mirrored structure lies the traveler’s restless journey, suggesting that the figure of Armytage provides a solution to the traveler’s ontological dilemma, a putting to rest of doubts and fears about the nature of the relationship between the human and the natural that have a broad historical and philosophical context. Marx suggests that “Nature is man’s inorganic body”35 (Early Writings 328), positing a close identification of the natural and the human. And Spinoza, in the Ethics,

34 Such conflation of landscape with the human face is a common device in Wordsworth’s poetry, and though apparent examples of the pathetic fallacy, offer a sense of intense connectivity between the human and the natural which recent ecological thinking supports.
35 This inorganic body might also be thought of in terms of the “body without organs” first proposed by Artaud and later theorized by Deleuze, a body freed from mechanistic functioning to become a source, a point of origin.
proposes a “facies totius Universi” or “face of the whole universe.” In a way, it is in the recognition of the figure of Armytage, rather than the traveler’s reaction to the story he tells, where one finds the poem’s crucial moment.

Yet the story’s affective resonance inevitably disrupts any attempt to reach an encompassing awareness removed from its particular historical context. Both social memory and material culture are transformed into an uncanny likeness of their former selves. The practices of the rural peasantry, formed over centuries in close communion with the objects of nature, would become unsettled by new methods of agricultural and industrial production. When Armytage conjures the practice of a collective memory, “The Poets in their elegies and songs / Lamenting the departed call the groves” (73-74), he avoids calling the groves himself, not simply out of a sense of decorum, or Calvinist conviction, but because the groves are to a great extent no longer there. Something disrupts the way generic forms appeal to particular cultural significations, and war and crop failure come to represent a darker witness, one intrinsically tied to the process of environmental degradation. Extensive deforestation leads to soil erosion and mineral depletion, eventually creating a poor soil that will not support agricultural crops. According to the Victoria County History, “wholesale clearance and sale of timber turned many wooded parts of England into stretches of barren moor and heathy waste” (Hampshire ii, 429). The connection

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36 Spinoza, 919. Another way this is described in reference to Spinoza’s work is as a “mediate infinite mode,” of extension, that is “mediate” in the way it represents a system of dependence and logical necessity (as between Armytage and the tree, the ground and the clouds), and “infinite” in the sense that it represents a relationship between motion and rest that remains consistent throughout the universe. Another way of putting this, perhaps, is that the way that particular finite objects come into being and pass away (Armytage, the landscape) demonstrates the relation between motion and rest that is an infinite mode of extension (the universe).

37 For a concise yet thorough scientific study, see Vitousek.
to war is perhaps even simpler. As Arthur Standish put it in 1611, “No wood, no kingdome.”

In the eighteenth and well into the nineteenth century, Britain both imported wood from Baltic states and harvested it from its colonies in order to build and maintain a growing empire. The need to control the flow of natural resources led inevitably to conflict, a cycle which is all too familiar today. When Armytage describes “Two blighting seasons when the fields were left / With half a harvest” and “A worse affliction in the plague of war” he describes a blight and a plague both ecological and ideological that to some degree finds its basis of communicability in the slow violence of deforestation.

Two studies of the region in which “The Ruined Cottage” is set demonstrate the plight of the landscape in stark terms. John Billingsley, in A General View of the Agriculture in the County of Somerset, 1795, counts 20,000 acres out of a total of one million to be “woods or plantations,” a total of two percent. Billingsley feels even this to be excessive, and suggests that the forest of Exmoor be transformed from a “useless, and void space” into “a fair a prospect as the surrounding country” (174). “A fair…prospect” references an eighteenth-century aesthetic appreciation of “landscape” or “view,” but also evokes notions of speculation. An aesthetic that valued a smooth and bare landscape was particularly convenient, considering the vast selling off

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38 What Sir Walter Raleigh says of trade is also particularly apt: “Hee that commaunds the sea, commaunds the trade, and hee that is Lord of the Trade is Lord of the wealth of the worlde” (qtd. in Williams, 134).
39 See Macpherson; Graham; Knight; Crimmin.
40 Several actions, including the Battle of Camperdown, were fought in the 1790s to protect British trade routes to the Baltic, which supplied wood and other resources necessary to a large and widely active British navy. Today, the control of dwindling natural resources is the single most prevalent cause of war.
41 See Nixon, who persuasively argues for the need to address slowly unfolding historical processes in opposition to spectacular and sensational events.
of woodlands that took place over the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, to which the
“surrounding country” inevitably attests.⁴²

In A General View of the Agriculture in the County of Dorset, 1793, John Claridge estimates that
of 775,000 acres, only about 9,000 acres, or a little more than one percent, are wooded (5). The
two counties of Somerset and Dorset, an area that gave birth to much foundational British
Romantic poetry, appear as one of the most thoroughly deforested regions in England.
According to Claridge, “the county finds a serious want of wood and it would be well worth the
attention of those who have land proper for it to apply it to that purpose” (151). Both the land
and its inhabitants have been rent of resource, and in the process lost something of their original
class and purpose:

It is a melancholy fact that, without any particular habits of oppression on the part
of the farmers, or dissoluteness on the part of the poor, the labourers of many
parts of this county, and particularly of South Wiltshire, may be truly said to be at
this time in a wretched situation.
The dearness of provision, the scarcity of fuel, and, above all, the failure of
spinning work for the women and children, have put it almost out of the power of
the village poor to live by their industry; and have, unfortunately, broken that
independant spirit which in a very peculiar degree, formerly kept a Wiltshire
labourer from the parish books. (Claridge 155)

“The Ruined Cottage” narrates just such a breaking of “that independant spirit” that Claridge
describes. Robert carves “uncouth figures on the heads of sticks” (165), illustrating not only his
alienation from his labor, but the alienation of nature from its use by culture. The evidence of
the trees that once blanketed the landscape is held in Robert’s hand as a grotesque symbol of his
own descent from industry into idleness. This absence is a result of both crop failure and the

⁴² The intrinsic connection between economic and agricultural development and landscape aesthetics is thoroughly
and compellingly discussed by Ann Bermingham.
“failure of spinning work,” and there is little coincidence that the industrial and commercial forces that accelerated deforestation are also responsible for the fall in demand for hand-spun textiles. As Brian Inglis relates,

The wives of agricultural labourers or coal-miners might be employed in spinning wool or cotton, and they were seriously affected by the spinning-jenny, which reduced the number of spinners needed to sustain a weaver. In 1790, for example, a magistrate in Somerset was called to protect spinning machinery ‘from the Depredations of a lawless Banditi of colliers and their wives, for the wives had lost their work to spinning engines’ (430).

It is important to note that the type of household spinning described in “The Ruined Cottage” (and other Wordsworth poems) had been long established in rural England, so that its disruption was not merely a matter of lost income, but an upheaval of customary communal and hereditary practice. Rather than a marauding band of “lawless Banditi,” the group and others like it were attempting to assert the law of custom in the face of a historically unprecedented assault.43

Claridge’s mention of the “scarcity of fuel” in Dorset appears to be a direct result of the extensive deforestation of the county, and therefore the plight of the poor, as described in Goody Blake and Harry Gill. Goody, an elderly woman living alone, goes out one winter night to collect wood in order to warm her cottage. Not finding any fallen wood at hand, she approaches a neighboring farmer’s hedge in order to break off a few sticks.

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43 What E.P. Thompson writes of those accused under the Black Act also rings true here: “If this is a ‘criminal subculture’ then the whole of plebian England falls within the category” (194).
Describing an 1842 article by Karl Marx for the *Rheinische Zeitung*, John Bellamy Foster writes: “In taking up the issue of the theft of wood Marx was not addressing a minor issue” (66).\(^{44}\)

“Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood” was the first published work in which Marx took up the cause of the poor, and the first in which he discussed the relationship between the poor and the natural environment. In pointing out the injustice of criminalizing the gathering of fallen wood, he writes:

> The gathering of fallen wood and the theft of wood are therefore essentially different things…But, in spite of this essential difference, you call both of them theft and punish both of them as theft…The law is not exempt from the general obligation to tell the truth. It is doubly obliged to do so, for it is the universal and authentic exponent of the legal nature of things. Hence the legal nature of things cannot be regulated according to the law; on the contrary, the law must be regulated according to the legal nature of things. But if the law applies the term theft to an action that is scarcely even a violation of forest regulations, then the law *lies*, and the poor are sacrificed to a legal lie. (qtd. Trevino 129)

*Goody Blake and Harry Gill* similarly takes up the question of common rights and the situation of the poor. Yet the poem goes further than Marx does here. Goody does not gather fallen wood but takes wood from a living hedge, something that was increasingly seen by landowners and farmers as an act of theft. Thomas Batchelor, in *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Bedford* (1813), reports:

> There are always a considerable number in every parish whose firing consists entirely of broken hedges, which are conveyed home in dark nights, and such as have large families generally carry on the trade with impunity, as the farmers are not fond of providing entirely for a family of young children. (609-610)

\(^{44}\) Foster continues: “Five-sixths of all prosecutions in Prussia during this period had to do with wood, and in the Rhineland the proportion was even higher.” Thompson notes that Marx’s article turns “upon many of the same issues disclosed also in the English forests of the eighteenth century” (241n1).
The firing got from broken hedges carried home under darkness fits the poem’s description, and demonstrates the increasing vigilance with which landowners attacked the customary rights of the poor. Batchelor mentions “providing for a family,” because after the head of the household was sent to prison or transported, the children would fall on the parish for support, thus raising the farmer’s rates. This would also be in addition to whatever the farmer would have to pay to prosecute the case, a factor that likely prevented many prosecutions in the first place.

Batchelor implies, however archly, that the poor obtained some economic benefit in the theft, because they “carry on the trade with impunity” when it seems likely that many who gathered from hedges did so in winter, like Goody, with the more banal goal of survival. Not only is Goody miraculously delivered from punishment, it is the farmer who is struck down for daring to assert his ownership of the wood. Such a radical attack on property was dangerous in 1798, and likely influenced the subtitle “A True Story” and the emphatic insistence, in the original “Advertisement” to Lyrical Ballads, that the poem was “founded on a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire.” The poem was, after all, one of many in the collection based in fact.

The poem justifies Goody’s act against modern notions of private property in the name of an older tradition, something closer to what Marx calls “the legal nature of things.” It is this “legal

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45 According to Thompson, “The rights and claims of the poor, if inquired into at all, received more perfunctory compensation, smeared over with condescension and poisoned with charity. Very often they were simply redefined as crimes: poaching, wood-theft, trespass” (241).
46 See King (12-13; 170) for the growth in imprisonment and transportation as punishments for petty crimes in the eighteenth century.
47 The rising poor rates and the increasing number of the dependent poor is taken up in David Davies’ widely read 1795 account Case of the Labourers in Husbandry.
48 The costs of bringing a case before a magistrate in the eighteenth century fell upon the individual prosecuting the case.
nature,” this system of organization within the natural world (that sounds precipitous of a
Darwinian web of relationships) that appears to mitigate against Harry, the purported owner of
the hedge, and in favor of Goody, who claims no ownership, but merely the right to be warm.
And it is the attempt to regulate this basic right through “the law” which the poem
demonstrates as a crime not only against the poor, but as one against humanity and the larger
ecosystem in general.

Claridge’s mention of the “scarcity of fuel” in Dorset appears to be a direct result of the
extensive deforestation of the county, and therefore Goody’s plight:

> Yet never had she, well or sick,
> As every man who knew her says,
> A pile before-hand, wood or stick,
> Enough to warm her for three days.  (49-52)

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49 From its enactment in 1723, through the last case tried under it in 1814, the Black Act made the cutting down of
trees a crime punishable by hanging (see Thompson 22-23; 255). Other attempts to legislate notions of common use
include the enclosures of the commons under the Enclosure Acts, which deprived the poor, among other things,
from access to the collection of fallen wood (Snell 179).

50 The situation of the poor, customary rights, and the imperial motivations of deforestation are similarly addressed
in Keats’ Robin Hood. Marian and Margaret “weep” for their irreplaceable loss, and Robin’s “craze” is not unlike
Robert’s:

> And if Robin should be cast
> Sudden from his turfed grave,
> And if Marian should have
> Once again her forest days,
> She would weep, and he would craze:
> He would swear, for all his oaks,
> Fall’n beneath the dockyard strokes,
> Have rotted on the briny seas;
> She would weep that her wild bees
> Sang not to her—strange! that honey
> Can’t be got without hard money!  (38-48)
The wood becomes the silent witness\(^5\) to the story of Goody’s suffering and Harry Gill’s greed. A sympathy between Goody and the wood is created by describing them both as familiarly “old,” (and therefore living testaments of a place and its history), by Goody’s “shaking” bones resembling the limbs of a tree in the cold wind, and in the act of Goody “kneeling on the sticks” to deliver Harry’s curse.\(^5\) The wood becomes the medium through which the tale builds its tension and manifests its conclusion, on one hand a basic need, like air or water, necessary to support life, on the other, a commodity whose price is increasingly dictated by the urban-centered market and which is increasingly regulated by the urban-centered legislature.\(^5\)

Goody’s notion of economy differs in important ways from that of Harry’s. She is the type of figure Alan Everitt has in mind when writing in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*:

“Almost every living thing in the parish, however insignificant, could be turned to some good use by the frugal peasant-labourer” (2. 405). Thus economy and ecology meet in the essential interconnection between the operation of the individual home and “Almost every living thing in

\(^5\) Something similar can be said of the tree-stump in Simon Lee. The speaker’s grief at the end of the poem is involved in the act of grubbing up the stump, and illustrates a broader growing inability in the culture to see the connection between humans and between humans and the objects of nature.

\(^5\) The sticks appearing to participate in Goody’s curse reflects a historical tendency to ascribe magical qualities to wood. Samuel Pepys describes a drinking game which involved “kneeling on a faggot” to drink the King’s health, a “strange frolique” in celebration of the Coronation of Charles II. Goody’s kneeling is also interesting in that it mirrors that of the thief appealing for mercy: “The wretched thief begging on his knees for forgiveness is not a literary conceit, but a reality described in many legal dispositions” (Hay 41).

\(^5\) As Douglas Hay observes of the latter eighteenth century: “As the decades passed, the maturing trade, commerce and industry of England spawned more laws to protect particular kinds of property” (21). When it comes to trees, of course, “protect” is highly ironic, in that it is not the living object that is protected but its market value. This trend is further evidenced in twentieth century U.S. law that sanctioned the patenting of living things (the Plant Patent Act of 1930 and the Plant Variety Protection Act of 1970 allowed particular plants to be patented, and the 1980 Supreme Court case, Diamond vs. Chakrabarty allowed patents on genetically modified organisms).
The modern sense of “economy” as a system of purely financial exchange was just beginning to take shape in direct contradistinction to this ethos. As Thompson puts it, “non-monetary use-rights were being reified into capitalist property rights, by the mediation of the courts of law” (244). It is this mediation that enables the “denaturalization” of domestic economy.

An example of this development might be seen in the way the objects of nature were themselves abstracted into newly minted financial terms, a process the poem in many ways addresses. “Hedge” would become a term of financial speculation, so that today a “hedge fund” remains an abstraction of (etymologically pulled [tract] from [ab]) a hedge. The abstracting of economy from its roots in the household transforms the natural object into a site of social conflict. Harry’s action in grabbing Goody insists (a la Burke) on property as the foundation for civil society, and is inevitably involved in a tradition of treating women as male property. Though Harry places Goody under arrest, and liable to prosecution for trespass and theft, he becomes subject to an

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54 Thus economy and ecology share the same Greek root, “oikos” or “home.” When the term “ecology” was coined by Ernst Haeckl in 1866, it is unsurprising that he defines it as “the economy of nature” (qtd. Bate 36).

55 Margaret Schabas, writing of “the denaturalization of the economic order” (2), details the ways in which economic considerations had, up until the late eighteenth century, remained rooted in natural history, and how our modern notions of economics arise from the alienation of economy from nature.

56 “Hedge” is an Old English word, dating from before the composition of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “A row of bushes or low trees (e.g. hawthorn, or privet) planted closely to form a boundary between pieces of land or at the sides of a road: the usual form of fence in England” (1a). The word came to be used metaphorically to refer to any barrier or defense; the OED’s first citation for this use is from the fourteenth century (4). The word is later found widely in the context of betting, as numerous examples from the late seventeenth through the late nineteenth centuries demonstrate (n.5, v.8). A relevant, and revealing example from the Romantic period comes from the orator William Windham, speaking in Parliament in 1805: “What, in the sporting language was called ‘a hedge’, the effect of which was, that there was a chance the Right Honourable Gentleman would at all events win” (5). The earliest citation for the word as a term of market speculation is in the twentieth century, as in this representative example by Albert William Atwood in Exchanges and Speculation (1917): “Hedging…consists in making a purchase or sale for future delivery to offset and protect an actual merchandising transaction” (v.8c).
arrest of an altogether other kind. As what Lukacs calls the “phantom objectivity” of commodity-based social relations fades away, the wood mysteriously takes part in Harry’s affliction, as if some sudden but unshakeable recognition of its significance would leave him bare and skeleton-like against the wind, much like a solitary winter tree.

“Beneath these Trees”

As the natural and social history of trees sheds light on Wordsworth’s poetry, so his poetry offers insight into natural and social history. The symbolic importance of the tree for Wordsworth communicates something about the significance of a more general loss. Geoffrey Hartman opens The Unremarkable Wordsworth with the sentence: “When Wordsworth was fourteen, the ordinary sight of boughs silhouetted against a bright evening sky left so vivid an impression on his mind that it marked the beginning of his career as a poet” (3). In Book Four of The Excursion, Wordsworth describes a similar scene, in which the tree is a metaphor for an innate faculty:

Within the soul a faculty abides,
That with interpositions, which would hide
And darken, so can deal that they become
Contingencies of pomp; and serve to exalt
Her native brightness. As the ample moon,
In the deep stillness of a summer even
Rising behind a thick and lofty grove,
Burns, like an unconsuming fire of light,
In the green trees; and, kindling on all sides
Their leafy umbrage, turns the dusky veil
Into a substance glorious as her own,
Yea, with her own incorporated, by power
Capacious and serene. Like power abides

57 I am grateful to Joshua Wilner for pointing out the relevance of this passage.
In man's celestial spirit. (1058-1071)

The tree, burning unconsumed and therefore endlessly symbolic, provides the setting for and enhances the experience of an essential light, a celestial spirit that like a mirror receives and reflects back the image of itself in the world. The dusky veil acts as a receiver and a frame, as the material body through which an incorporation of the spirit occurs. What is dark and obfuscating, the apparent barriers to transformative vision, are precisely what make such vision possible. Humans are also such an interposition in the world of nature, as receivers and framers of experience, offering a similar possibility of incorporation. Though they often act as to “hide / And darken,” they also “so can deal that they become / Contingencies of pomp.” There is a sense of both longing and belonging, of being and becoming, as if the incorporation the passage describes closes a distance and blurs lines of distinction. The tree narrates something of the life of the soul.

This identification with the tree is also apparent in *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth remembers his days at Cambridge in terms of time spent alone: “Oft have I stood / Foot-bound, uplooking at this lovely Tree / Beneath a frosty moon” (6.100-103). In repeatedly standing thus, the viewer becomes like the tree itself: solitary, foot-bound, imaginatively branching:

- But scarcely Spenser’s self
- Could have more tranquil visions in his youth,
- More bright appearances could scarcely see
- Of human Forms and superhuman Powers,
- Than I beheld, standing on winter nights
- Alone, beneath this fairy work of earth. (6.104-109)
The verticality of the gaze, the open sky and quiet darkness evoke the transcendent imagery, anchored from below by the generic roots which Spenser represents, and from which the poet hopes to offer a new growth. The ash offers an imposition between Wordsworth and an ethereal light that is intrinsically linked to his incipient conception of the form poetry should take in the world.

Wordsworth asserts the tree is “no doubt yet standing there” (6.91), and this appears to have been true as he wrote this line, as Dorothy “found out William’s ashtree” on her visit to Cambridge in 1810. Yet as the years went by, and Wordsworth continued to return to The Prelude, the certainty of its continued presence must have dimmed. The ash would eventually disappear, and his words, like the tree of the “Intimations Ode,” would come to speak of “something that is gone.” This is true of many other important trees in Wordsworth’s life. The grove at the north end of Grasmere Lake in which he composed “The Brothers” (in which Leonard sits in a grove at the poem’s climax) was “in a great measure destroyed.” The grove of fir trees known as “John’s Grove” was also cut down, disturbing everyone in the Wordsworth circle. In 1802 Dorothy reports on the environs of Grasmere: “They are making sad ravages in the woods – Benson’s Wood is going & the wood above the River” (74). In “The Brothers,” Leonard notes “Strange alteration wrought on every side” and at the close of “Michael” the narrator explains: “Great changes have been wrought / In all the neighbourhood” (487-8).

58 “The Ash Tree in St. John’s Cottage.” This essay gives an account of the trees at Cambridge mentioned by Wordsworth.
59 Wordsworth did what he could to save what was left: “This poem was composed in a grove at the north-eastern end of Grasmere Lake, which grove was in a great measure destroyed by turning the high-road along the side of the water. The few trees that are left were spared at my intercession” (Fenwick Notes 52).
60 John, on learning of the destruction of the grove, wrote Mary Hutchinson in 1801: “I wish I had the monster that cut them down in my ship, & I would give him a tight flogging” (qtd. Rand 30).
Memory is linked to the process of deforestation as a type of forgetting. New methods and structures dismantle the old ways as they dismantle the physical surroundings. Deforestation might be said to mark the outset of the anthropocene, highlighting the overall significance of humanity’s effect on earth’s ecosystems. The effect is not only on the biosphere, however. Culture, broadly defined as human discourse and practice, is significantly implicated and altered in the process, both contributing to and affected by biological change. A consideration of some of the cultural significations of specific trees will help to demonstrate this process and provide another dimension to the meaning of Wordsworth’s use of the tree in “The Ruined Cottage.”

The ash tree in the above passage is immediately preceded by a group of elms, which like those of “The Ruined Cottage,” offer shelter to the weary and distracted traveler:

Lofty elms,
Inviting shades of opportune recess,
Did give composure to a neighbourhood
Unpeaceful in itself. (87-90)

“Inviting shades” offer both a welcome retreat as well as suggesting a movement to a nether-region where one might communicate with the dead. The welcome “cool shade” offered by the elms of “The Ruined Cottage” soon becomes a “heartfelt chillness” when the traveler learns the tale of its former inhabitants. Elms are often associated with death in myth, being placed on the tombs of dead soldiers in the Iliad, and found near the entrance to the underworld in the Aeneid. The connection with funerary rites is most apparent in the widespread use of elms in coffins. As R.H. Richens writes, “The association of elm with burial has become irrevocable” (102). Yet by
the Romantic period, elm was no longer the common material for coffin building, illustrating a growing class divide. As Richens relates, “In medieval times elm was used for coffins at any social level...In the centuries that followed elm lost out on both ends of the social spectrum” being replaced in the upper classes by oak and in the laboring classes, when a coffin could be afforded, by pine (101-2). It is the shades of trees, rather than those of the venerable institution, that give composure to the place and suggest a connection to the past. Yet, as Laurence Buell explains, place is “constituted simultaneously by subjective perception and by institutionalized social arrangements” (71). The “neighbourhood” that is unquiet is mind as much as place, and is descriptive of the way in which the mind creates atmosphere within particular spaces.

In *The Ruined Cottage*, elms provide the locus for the tale’s events and the telling of the tale. Elms are repeatedly referred to in the poem, drawing the line of vision upwards in distinct contrast to the horizontal plain on which the events of the poem unfold. Elms are also a regular sight in pastoral verse, offering shade for shepherds to sing beneath, as in the first Idyll of Theocritus:

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But, Thyrsis, thou canst sing of Daphnis' woes;  
High is thy name for woodland minstrelsy:  
Then rest we in the shadow of the elm  
Fronting Priapus and the Fountain-nymphs
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The association of the elm with fertility is a tradition continued into European and English culture. According to Stephen Daniels, elms “were most closely tied to the working countryside” and “were used to signify farming interests” (50).
In ancient Ireland elms were classified as one of seven “Peasant trees” in terms of fines levied for unlawful felling.\textsuperscript{61} Wordsworth also identifies them as tied to the peasantry and ancient fertility ritual in \textit{The Excursion}:

\begin{quote}
A wide-spread elm  
Stands in our valley, named THE JOYFUL TREE;  
From dateless usage which our peasants hold  
Of giving welcome to the first of May  
By dances round its trunk. (6. 831-5)
\end{quote}

Elms first appear in “The Ruined Cottage” as “clustering elms that sprang from the same root” (32), similarly identified in terms of generation and community, reminding us of a way of life in which an elm tree was more than resource or commodity, more than aesthetic object, but something like the vine the ancients trained to grow around the elm, intertwined with human existence through habitual practice. The close association of this tradition with the May festivals Wordsworth witnessed and took part in during his trip to France in the 1790s evokes the “Tree of Liberty,” one of the most prominent symbols of the revolution. The customs that surround the May Day festival involved carnivalesque practices, which, according to David Collings, register a “ritual assertion of communal counterpower” (48), asserting the peasantry as both an originary and a regulatory political and cultural force.\textsuperscript{62} The depiction of the elm grove as a locus of

\textsuperscript{61} “…under Brehon Law…trees were divided into four categories with a scale of fines for their unlawful felling that diminished in severity according to the category” (Graves 202). The four categories, in order of importance, are given as Chieftan Trees, Peasant Trees, Shrub Trees, and Bramble Trees.

\textsuperscript{62} The history of May Day stretches back to early Celtic rites and forward to the working-class struggle for the eight-hour day. Anne Ross explains the origins of the practice:

\begin{quote}
The classics tell of a chief druid, while Caesar states that all the druids met together in assembly…in the tribal territory of the Carnutes, which was regarded as the centre of all Gaul. The Irish druids likewise had a chief druid…They used to assemble at Uisneach, in modern County Westmeath. The Assembly of Uisnech, which was regarded as the ‘navel’ of Ireland, was held on Beltain, 1 May…The whole druidic system would seem to have been common to all the Celts. (428)
\end{quote}
disastrous loss, suggests a break down in a historical reciprocity that describes what is absent, a distant aristocracy, “determined and unmoved” regardless of the disaster unfolding on its hereditary lands. Yet the intertwining of the elm with the fundamental human endeavors of planting and harvesting suggests an underlying possibility of renewal and regeneration, a turning again of the earth’s course, a revolutionary energy.

The group of shade-giving elms offers a stark contrast to the imagined and solitary “huge oak” of line 12. The solitariness of the oak prefigures the traveler’s own solitude, as its ghostly presence prefigures the haunted tale. The number of symbolic associations of oak in English culture has been the subject of full-length studies, and I will not attempt to provide a comprehensive discussion of these here, but rather point to some of the most prominent associations as they relate to the poem.

An oak of several hundred years provides a sense of interconnectedness between events and practices within a given place, a kind of living memorial to the inhabitants of its locality. Robert Albion, in *Forests and Sea Power*, considers this interconnectedness in terms of family: “It

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Beltain was a spring festival that involved fertility rites thought to be associated with a sun god, and celebrated with ritual fires meant to purify and protect crops and livestock: “The calendar festivals and the great assemblies which accompanied them were fundamental to Celtic social life, when the people met not as tribes but as a nation” (Ross 437). During the middle ages, May Day festivals across Europe adopted some of the customs common to charivari, and this was when the phallic maypole was introduced. There were various attempts to suppress the practice of May Day in the modern period, which were never entirely successful. John Evelyn, the seventeenth century author of a seminal work on trees, *Sylva*, demonstrates this resistance to May Day ritual:

And here we cannot but persistinge those Rioutous Assemblies of idle people, who under pretence of going a maying (as they term it) do oftentimes cut down, and carry away fine straight trees, to set up before some Ale-house, or traveling-place, where they keep their drunken Baccanalias… (qtd. Bushaway 212)
required a large amount of patience and self-restraint to wait the hundred years, more or less, required for an oak to reach its prime; and a grove of full-grown oaks represented the English spirit of family continuity at its best” (112-13). When the narrator of “The Ruined Cottage” reveals the oak to be imaginary, he not only suggests a lack of patience and self-restraint among landowners of the period, but the resulting breakdown of family continuity that the poem proceeds to narrate. According to Daniels, the oak was considered “venerable, patriarchal [and] stately,” and was often associated with landed families. Burke describes the English aristocracy as “the great oaks which shade a country” (377). The oak appears to become increasingly iconic as it disappears from the landscape, and Wordsworth’s illusory oak, “whose aged branches make a twilight of their own,” whose “impending branches” make the scene “more soft, / More soft and distant” might describe not only the fading sense of responsibility and growing distance of the aristocracy towards the abject and struggling poor at the calamitous time the poem was being written, but also something slightly unsettling in their “impending” quality, a sense that their “aged branches” of ancient lineage may not be quite so secure after all. The revelation of the illusory nature of the icon suggests that the power traditionally held by the ruling class is based upon a naturalized structure that is likewise illusory. Cultural and ecological inheritances are both imbued with a sense of loss that struggles to name its object.

63 In Ireland, the oak also suggests an aristocratic absenteeism, but with different implications. The word for oak in Irish can also mean “chief” and it is widely thought that the dispossession of the native land-owning gentry in Ireland was instrumental to the breakdown in the structure of Gaelic culture and the retreat of Irish Gaelic as the national tongue. Trees where rebels were hung in Ireland often served as commemorative sites, and as Guy Beiner relates “Even when the trees were cut down, they continued to survive in the imaginary landscape of social memory” (216).
The oak also features prominently in the opening of the 1805 *Prelude* in a way that helps further illustrate the importance of its absence at the opening of “The Ruined Cottage.” Here the traveler reclines “on the genial pillow of the earth” in stark contrast to the comfortless “brown earth” on which the traveler of “The Ruined Cottage” fitfully attempts to rest. And rather than the “tedious noise / Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round” the traveler of *The Prelude* hears the intermittent falling of acorns, that “Fell audibly, and with a startling sound.” “Audibly” and “sound” repeat their sense, emphasizing the sharp accent of their sounds. The stress pattern (fell AUDibly and WITH a STARTling SOUND) and final alliteration, as well as the position at the end of the verse paragraph all further the impression. If the acorns here might be said to symbolize the genesis of poetic composition, the “fair seed time” of the soul, then the crackling gorse of “The Ruined Cottage” signifies a disturbance that threatens the independence of the psyche. In 1805, acorns mean more oaks, and therefore a symbolic continuity of British hegemony. In 1797, gorse only means more gorse, its exploding dehiscence testifying to the tension of war, catastrophic inflation, the fears of invasion, and to the agriculturally barren and morally bereft space of the open plain.

As with many other such Romantic disappearances, the absence of the object intensifies our feeling for what is left behind. The figures of the elms and of Armytage represent for the traveler a reconnection, through a living history, to a circulation of communal memory. The oral passing down of this memory from one generation to the next reflects Armytage’s cyclical “way-wandering” movements through the landscape and is representative of the continuity of a particular form of social organization. Yet this continuity is expressed within a tale of calamity.
The traveler’s opening dismay is reflected in Margaret’s despondent wandering, uneasily framing Armytage’s circulation, positing a recognition of culture’s repetitive and ongoing foundation in the ashes of its own destruction. In this sense the poem dramatizes an aspect of Hegel’s negative dialectic, which, as Marx understood it: “…includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction” (Capital 103). All the figures in the poem appear to be strangers in the landscape, even the seemingly at home Armytage, who as a pedlar is one of a group disappearing from the landscape as the poem is being written, as the increasing regulation of the distribution of goods turned pedlars from welcome aids to commerce into suspect and potentially nefarious characters who operated outside the laws of trade. The tale, like the landscape itself, narrates a removal and an emptying out that creates a present that is then reinscribed and renaturalized, that is “silvered o’er,” camouflaging the act of its transformation. The monotony of the landscape conceals its past, and as Armytage explains, “Even of the good is no memorial left.” The tale functions, through its framing and reinscription upon the landscape, as a memorial to this very fact.

Armytage opens Part Two of the poem with a justification for continuing his tale. Rather than directly appeal to underlying forces of conflict or ecological imbalance, Armytage insists on the local and the familiar: “‘Tis a common tale, / By moving accidents uncharactered.” However, moving accidents are precisely what undergird the tale, and the ambiguity of the phrase and its allusion to Othello suggest an underlying reference to broader historical developments (echoing, in this context, the “moving grove” of Act Five of Macbeth). The word “uncharactered” can also be read as ambiguous here, meaning not only “having no distinctive sign” (OED 1), but also...
“destitute of moral character” (OED 2). War and crop failure have removed not only the means of sustenance, but have gradually undone the moral character of Robert and Margaret. In a historical irony, the Oxford English Dictionary’s first citation for this sense of “uncharactered” is from the military man, MP, essayist, and social reformer T.P. Thompson, a contemporary of Wordsworth’s who was relieved from the governorship of Sierra Leone for his strong opposition to slavery there, himself uncharactered by forces blind and deaf to the suffering of the historically marginalized. Language, of course, is also made up of characters, and Armytage’s common tale and its pastoral frame are alike in danger of coming undone. The prominent linguistic theories of Wordsworth’s day often described language in organic terms, as to some extent influenced by the sounds of the natural world, the “sap that enlivens the roots of language” (Herder 135). One might well ask, given these perspectives, what happens to the roots when the sap stops flowing. This danger finds itself reflected in the knowledge that writing in itself was a potentially dangerous act, particularly in the 1790s. Just a few years before, a God and King mob had broken into Dr. Priestley’s house and burned manuscripts of work in progress, along with his home, laboratory, and church, due to the perceived threat of his radical sympathies. It was not only the forest leaves that were threatened, and the example of Dr. Priestley is only one of many such acts of repression, submersion, and erasure enacted throughout the period.

64 Thompson’s biographer, Leonard George Johnson, gives this memorable portrait: “His ideal for Sierra Leone was a colony of free settlers owning and cultivating lands of their own, justly secured to them. For this ideal the headstrong Governor worked himself nearly to death. Time and again he was stuck down with fever. Once a report got about that he was dead and a procession of native women came to ‘keen’ him. He was dosed with calomel to such an extent that all his front teeth fell out” (54-55).
65 For an excellent overview of these theories and their relation to theories of cognition, see Alan Richardson, ch. 2.
66 Iain McCalman and Nicholas Roe both provide invaluable accounts of radical Romanticism that trace these developments in great detail.
“To a Distant Land”

Thompson’s experience in Sierra Leone is not merely coincidental to Wordsworth’s poem; it evokes Britain’s involvement abroad and Robert’s deployment “to a distant land.” Since Said has considered the many ways colonialism informs aesthetic production, it has been essential to consider the relationships between a perceived metropolitan “center” and colonial “periphery.”

In praising the work of Raymond Williams, Said makes an important proviso: “I sense a limitation in his feeling that English literature is mainly about England” (14). Alan Bewell has convincingly demonstrated how the colonized landscape reflects back upon the native English countryside. Yet little work has been done in Romantic literary studies on the relevance of colonial environmental degradation. By exploring poetry that responds to this degradation, I hope to show how transformed landscapes play an important role in the way poets construct a national identity that recognizes the ecological and economic underpinnings of physical oppression.

Deforestation in the colonial world between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries was driven by European commercialism and transformed the land and the cultures on which it was based. Of this there are numerous examples. Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert and David Schecter describe the deforesting of Mexico by Spanish colonists: “By scouring the landscape of trees, mining set the stage for the development of colonial forms of land-use, especially the spread of agriculture and pastoralism, and the establishment of a new colonial society of indigenous, Afro-Mexican,
and Iberian settlers” (105). Portuguese mining operations created similar conditions in Brazil. Eduardo Galeano records the effects on the native population: “Of every ten that went up into the freezing wilderness, seven never returned” (51). J.R. McNeill details the far-ranging effects of deforestation in the Caribbean:

> Broad areas were cleared for cane, for other crops, and for grazing. Sugar boiling consumed yet more forest…Many local species dependent on the forest went extinct, while new plants and animals, suited to the emerging environment, prospered. Soil erosion and nutrient depletion accelerated rapidly with clearance and cultivation. (27)

This process changed the face of the cultural practices of nations just as it changed the relationship to the land. What Studnicki-Gizbert and Schecter say of New Spain is largely true of various colonies of this period: “the combination of deforestation, agricultural extension, and the development of colonial society marked the end of native peoples and life-ways” (112). Like many of the subjects of Wordsworth’s poetry, “They were the last of all their race.”

One way this is apparent in the poetry of the period is in “The Solitary Reaper.” The main figure of the poem, “Reaping and singing by herself” demonstrates the cultural evisceration characteristic of colonialism. Her melancholy song evokes the failed Jacobite rebellion of 1745 and the often brutal measures taken to pacify the region. Her singing and its setting reproduce a cultural loss, a communal memory that is now solitary and divided from its source. The Highland Clearances, in which thousands of tenants were forcefully cleared off their land to make way for more profitable imported sheep, left the Highlands (an area the size of Holland)

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67 Colonial mining also provided Europe the gold and silver that “not only stimulated Europe’s economic development; one may say that they have made it possible” (Galeano 33).
68 McNeill further argues that deforestation contributed to loss of insectivorous birds, and created new swampy areas, perfect conditions for the breeding of mosquitoes carrying malaria and yellow fever (48; 55).
one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe. Regrettably, the area is often referred to as a “natural wilderness” today, de-historicized and re-naturalized; it is perhaps a recognition of the broader treatment of land and landscape of which the Clearances forms an important part that provides the uncanny quality to the vast plains of Wordsworth’s poetry.

“The Solitary Reaper” reflects this disturbance within its very structure. Lines one and three, ending in “field” and “herself,” and lines 25 and 27, ending in “sang” and “work,” are the only unrhymed lines of the poem. In part, these lines serve to break up the monotony of the rhyme, as singing breaks up the monotony of work, or the figure breaks up the monotony of the landscape. But they also signify the greater lack of integrated experience the poem describes. This lack is discernible in the unrhymed words: both in what she sang and in the depopulated (and quite possibly deforested) field in which she does her work. “Natural sorrow” is not only social and cultural, but insinuates a reaction of the land itself at its transformation.

Deforestation reduced the habitat of bird species, and the absence of trees in the landscape contribute to the sense of the reaper’s song as being under threat of disappearance. The poem insists on the absence of birds (“No Nightingale” and no “Cuckoo-bird”) as enhancing the resonating pathos of the song. As the song leaves its listener without closure, so too birdsong “has no ending in this sense, as also certain types of human feeling and memory that will not come to closure” (Prynne 87). Yet birdsong and memory are quite directly affected by the changing landscape. Without a song post, there is no song, and the fragment the poem presents is indicative of the fragility of both cultural memory and natural habitat.
Attitudes towards land and peoples that produced solitary reapers were mirrored elsewhere in the period. A little more than a year before Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared Haiti a free republic, Wordsworth was writing “To Toussaint L’Overture.” The sonnet equates L’Overture’s legacy with the objects of nature, “air, earth, and skies,” reminding the reader that his memory would long outlive his imprisonment. Yet the poem remains quietist in its political thrust, stressing “patience” and urging the sufferer to find “comfort” in his distress. A generation later Ignace Nau, in “Dessalines,” imagines, in contrast, a Haiti rejuvenated by revolution:

L’oiseau nous chantera des chants d’amour encore,
La voix de nos forêts redeviendra sonore,
Et nos fleuves taris jailliront en torrents,
Et nos lacs rouleront des flots plus transparents,
Et toi, peuple héroïque, et toi, mon beau génie,
Demain vous saluerez une ère d’harmonie!...

The birds once more shall sing of love; the trees
Shall fill our forests with deep harmonies.
Our arid riverbeds shall gush and pour;
Our lakes shall, crystalline, shine shore to shore.
And you, heroic folk, and you, my pen,
Shall hail an era, blessèd once again!…

The restoration of a natural heritage represents a future social unity brought about by revolutionary struggle. The insistent future tense points to the current reality: no birds sing, the voice of the forests no longer resounds, the arid riverbeds do not gush. The process of colonization is also a process of desertification, one that can still be read in the landscape of Haiti today. As McNeill explains, the forests of the Caribbean were cleared by colonists partially for the profit-motivated purpose of growing sugar, but also in part out of aesthetic and health concerns:
Settlers on these and other islands cleared far more land than they intended to use for sugarcane. They tried to recreate the open vistas of the British Isles (or France or Spain) for aesthetic reasons. They needed room for their livestock to roam. And they thought that cleared land would be less conducive to disease because it had less in the way of rotting vegetation, humidity, and other factors thought to create "miasmas," from which fevers emanated (30).

Deforestation led not only to soil erosion, but to the extinction of local species.69 Nau’s birdsong, like the song of the reaper, or, indeed the Gaelic in which she sings, exists as an ungraspable haunting of the landscape for the listener who lacks the necessary historical and cultural experience, while for the singer it represents the memory of a shared inheritance of a natural history that forms an essential basis of a sense of community and identity.

In 1928 Aldous Huxley imagined “Wordsworth in the Tropics,” claiming that had Wordsworth experienced a more raw and less tamed form of nature, he could never have formalized the universalizing “great recompense” so essential to the inception of Romanticism. When one gets past the rather broad nature of Huxley’s point, it becomes increasingly obvious that his various characterizations of the “tropics” and its natives are disquietingly colonialist. In order to begin to imagine Wordsworth in the tropics, one would first need to imagine the “tropics” as an area consisting of many nations, each of which formed unique notions of nationality based in the unique physical surroundings in which it was based. The process by which cultural formations produce national identity comes to look, from this perspective, quite similar to the one described by Wordsworth.

69 Of Barbados, one of the first islands to be deforested by colonization, McNeill writes: “In 1631, Sir Henry Colt noted ‘diuers sorts of birds’ including blackbirds, turtle doves, pigeons, and pelicans. Ligon (1657: 60-1) recounted a dozen or more species, and allowed there were more he could not name. But a visitor in 1652, Heinrich von Utcheritz, claimed ‘one hears no birds’” (28n32).
The destruction of woodlands caused by European colonial expansion is, like in Haiti, also apparent in the British attempts in Jamaica to defeat the Maroons, who used forest cover and terrain to their advantage in a strikingly successful resistance to British empire. For the maroons, the forest was home, and therefore represents a space of resistance to colonial hegemony. As Robert Charles Dallas reports in 1803: “All internal danger…arises from gradual collections of fugitives, their flying to the recesses of the woods, and becoming a rallying point for the discontented.” Dallas proposes to solve this resistance in a way typical of the colonial mindset: “The grand object, then, of the inhabitants of Jamaica, should be the settlement of white people in the interior of the island” (457).

Frustrated by the inability to penetrate into the thick woods inland, the British eventually enlisted savage methods to finally overcome over a century of Maroon resistance. Honor Ford Smith’s recent lines from “A Message from Ni” are especially pertinent:

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Blinded by a future
I could not vision, my old words meaningless,
choked to silence in a forest of trees
I had no names for, I fell and fell,
was lost, bled, marooned in a landscape
that grew stranger with each discovery I made.
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The future, rather than the subject of vision or a looking forward, becomes instead a blinding and choking smoke. The words relive a long and painful struggle. “I fell and fell” recalls the many

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70 In the Second Maroon War of 1795, bloodhounds were brought from Cuba in order to terrorize the maroon population. Upon discovery, George III ordered that such methods be put to an end immediately. His order was received too late to matter. (Campbell 229-233). A drawing of one of these dogs with his trainer amongst a picturesque landscape provides the frontispiece for Dallas’s *The History of the Maroons.*
who died in the struggle for independence, and the “landscape / that grew stranger” describes the gradual and painul changes made to the natural world under British occupation. The “old words” of Smith’s poem suggest a dispossession of language went hand in hand with a dispossession of land, and trees appear to become much like these words in the way they establish or undermine a sense of social belonging. The trees are “uncharactered” here, a former basis for understanding the world that now there are “no names for.”

In Ireland a language shift is also taking place at this time, in a way also directly related to the destruction of the forests for both the profit of English landlords and the prevention of guerrilla resistance. That Wordsworth was sympathetic in the early 1790s to the cause of Irish self-rule is implied in a letter of June, 1794 to his friend William Matthews, with whom he was planning the production of a radical journal. Writing about this language shift, Stephen Behrendt argues: “That the apparent watershed moment of this language shift (and submersion) lies precisely within the Romantic period should interest us more than it historically has done, given the

71 Wordsworth writes:

We must then look for protection entirely amongst the dispassionate advocates of liberty and discussion. These, whether male or female, we must either amuse or instruct; nor will our end be fully obtained unless we do both. The clergy of the Church of England are a body from which periodical publications derive great patronage: they however will turn from us. At the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, amongst the young men, we shall not look in vain for encouragement The dissenters, in general, are not rich; but in every town of any size there are some who would receive a work like ours with pleasure. I entirely approve of what you say on the subject of Ireland and think it very proper that an agent should be appointed in Dublin to disseminate the impression. It would be well if either of you have any friends there, to whom you could write soliciting their recommendation. Indeed it would be very desirable to endeavour to have, in each considerable town of Great Britain and Ireland, a person to introduce the publication into notice. To this purpose, when it is further advanced, I shall exert myself amongst all my friends.

Precisely what Matthews had to say on the subject of Ireland is unknown as his letter is lost, but the content could hardly have been unsympathetic to the Irish cause of independence given the radical nature of Matthews’ beliefs and the general and universal attitude towards liberty espoused by early supporters of the French Revolution.
critical and cultural interest in the rise and flowering of all aspects of nationalism...during these years” (209-10). It is likely no coincidence that deforestation in Ireland appears to occur simultaneously with the enforced disappearing of the Irish language. Letters in the old Irish alphabet known as Ogham are named for trees: *alim*, meaning “elm”; *beith*, “birch”; *coll*, “hazel”; *dair*, “oak”; and so on. The letters are collectively known as “feda” or singularly as “fid” meaning “wood” or “tree.”

The poem *Cill Chais* (Kilcash), written near the turn of the nineteenth century, laments a cultural disappearance that is intrinsically tied to the loss of trees:

> Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmad?  
> Tá deireadh na gcoillte ar lár…

> Níl ceol binn milis na n-éan ann  
> le hamharc an lae a dhul uainn,  
> ná an chuachchín i mbarra na ngéag ann,  
> ós í chuirfeadh an saol chun suain.

> Now what will we do for timber,  
> With the last of the woods laid low…

> No birdsong there, sweet and delightful,  
> As we watch the sun go down,  
> Nor cuckoo\(^22\) on top of the branches  
> Settling the world to rest. (trans. Thomas Kinsella)

It is worth noting here, in considering the importance of song to these encounters with absence, that “By its very nature, Cill Chaise was intended to be sung” (Flood 85). This links the poem to the song of the solitary reaper, and to the importance of birdsong in many accounts of place-
identity. If Ireland lost its woods, the poem or the song serves as a reminder of this lost heritage, a precarious monument to the invisible in a society ever more focused on the visibility of commodity form.

The felling of trees represented the imposition of a mass forgetting, both of a pre-colonial culture and the history of resistance to colonization. John Perlin relates “Although once a great source of timber for England, Ireland had so little wood left by the eighteenth century that Irish tanners had to rely on Great Britain for bark” (329). The English language came alongside the bark, and by 1800 Gaelic was no longer the dominant tongue in Ireland, pushed to remote rural areas (much like in the Scottish Highlands). The loss of language becomes representative of a collective consciousness robbed of its very basis in the land itself. The violence of an enforced cultural amnesia is buried in the deforested landscape, and the ground upon which the traveler of “The Ruined Cottage” inarticulately suffers can be read as representing a sense of loss transcending borders and nationalities.

Various attempts, including Wordsworth’s own (in later revisions), at ameliorating the tragedy of the tale through either a transcendent nature or through religious belief seem inevitably unsatisfying. What has been done cannot be undone, and the effects, like deforestation, cannot

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73 This echoes an earlier situation described by a planter in the Caribbean: “at the Barbadoes all the trees are destroyed, so that wanting wood to boyle their sugar, they are forced to send for coales from England” (qtd. in McNeill, 27-28).
be elided, as “silvered o’er” as they may be. This is even more true in our own time than it was in Wordsworth’s. Nature is the sign under which capital has transformed the earth. It is like the tree in that haunting song at the close of Orwell’s 1984:

\[
\begin{align*}
    & \text{Under the spreading chestnut tree} \\
    & \text{I sold you and you sold me –}
\end{align*}
\]

If the tragedy cannot become catharsis, it is possible to recognize, in the failure of society that *The Ruined Cottage* narrates, and the utter devastation that it presents, the necessity of finding new ways to conceive of social and natural arrangements that depart from prevalent attitudes and inherited notions. Armytage’s final recollection of Margaret is based on what others observe in his absence, blurring and dislocating received conceptions of authority. The “tedious years / She lingered in unquiet widowhood” recalls the “tedious noise of seeds of bursting gorse,” and the psychic disturbance of the exhausted traveler on the plain. The progressive process of deforestation lies at the heart of the desperate scene: “I have heard, my friend, / That in that broken arbour she would sit / The idle length of half a sabbath day” (449-51). The ministry offered by the natural world is now idle, and the broken arbour illustrates the broken bond between the human and the natural, reflected in Margaret’s anguished attempt to remember and reshape the past. In a way the reader and the traveler alike are a late-returning husband, turning towards a group of trees that are ever disappearing, repeating the words that crack with the senseless sound of grief.
Work Cited


Chapter 3

Music in the Noise: The Acoustic Ecology of John Clare

I believe that the use of noise to make music will continue to increase... – John Cage

For there is music in the noise – John Clare

Voice is not only a human characteristic. Everything that moves, from the extremely high frequencies of the vibrating atom (Gustafsson et al) to the extremely low ones of the earth itself (Ardhuin et al), creates sound. Our current ecological moment makes apparent that non-human voices have for too long gone unnoticed and underappreciated, and that the anthropocene can at least be partially defined as the successful transduction of non-human sound into background music. Clare’s poetry offers a way of understanding how the acoustic experience of landscape challenges received ideological structures, and provides a way of thinking anew about what the natural world and our place in it might be.

Despite Clare’s careful attention to the sounds of his immediate environment, the acoustic has not received significant attention in critical responses to his work. Some notable exceptions include recent essays by Sam Ward (2010), who discusses Clare’s work in terms of R. Murray Schaffer’s theorization of the “soundscape” and Stephanie Weiner (2009), who in “Listening with John Clare” provides great insight into the importance of the acoustic both as subject of Clare’s poetry and instrument of his poetics. I hope to build on these contributions by examining
the material and ideological function of sound, both human and non-human, as conceived by Clare, and the importance of this conception in historical terms.

Sound is mediated by the spaces in which, and out of which, it is emitted, and these spaces, both physical and historical, shape the way sound is heard. Yet it is also possible to consider sound as itself a quality that shapes these spaces, that contributes to their character. Clare takes particular pleasure in the way sound interprets his rural experience of the world, as is particularly evident in his poem “The Fallen Elm.” Poetry, of course, is also sound, and is also shaped by, and potentially gives shape to, its environment. Clare’s poetry provides an aural history of place that captures a vanishing way of life, its sounds ever fading as Clare’s own way of speaking has all but disappeared. As Clare eulogizes the loss of the object of nature, he also narrates the loss of a particular way of living in the world. This essay will first address the importance of place for Clare, then consider the importance of what Roman Jakobson refers to as “the sound shape of language” in terms of this discussion of place, and finally consider both of these elements through a reading of “The Fallen Elm.”

The Place of Sound

The restless cuckoo absent long
And twittering swallows chimney song
And hedge row crickets notes that run
From every bank that fronts the sun
And swathy bees about the grass
That stops wi every bloom they pass
And every minute every hour
Keep teasing weeds that wear a flower
And toil and childhoods humming joys
For there is music in the noise  (3-12)

There are various passages in Clare’s poetry, such as this one from “May,” that create a particular sense of place through a close attention to sound. This passage, and others like it, might be thought of as sound sculptures in the sense that the sounds in them shape the reader’s understanding of a particular space. The single poetic sentence, its tetrameter couplet form, lack of punctuation, and repeating “and,” create a sense of the words hurrying along in order to catch everything that is happening in the scene. The sounds of birds, insects, human labor and childhood play are woven together as are the fields, meadows and homes where this sound reverberates. There is even a sort of master rhythm in “every minute every hour” that describes a lasting sound, like the enduring nature of the poetry itself. Clare’s acoustic sensibility both reaches back to an immemorial relationship with the landscape and forward to modernist treatments of sound. He illustrates Murray Shafer’s observation that “the definition of space by acoustic means is much more ancient than the establishment of property lines and fences” (33). And in radically addressing the cultural dominance of the visual, what Wordsworth called the “tyranny” of the eye (The Prelude 1805. XI.179), he anticipates later sound figures, such as the “Sculpture Musical,” a work by Marcel Duchamp that consists of this single sentence: “Sons durant et partant de différent points et formant une sculpture sonore qui dure” (“Sounds lasting and leaving from different places and forming a sounding sculpture that lasts”).\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in Lotringer.
As mentioned above, sound both determines and is determined by the spaces in which it occurs. For this reason, it has inherent ideological properties. “In the soundscape, structure includes not only the elements of the sound environment and their relationships, but also the pragmatic level of the context within which all of it occurs, and without which it cannot be interpreted” (Truax 48). The sound in Clare’s landscapes was shaped by a number of influences, some geographical, such as the flat, fenny nature of the area around Helpston, some involving historical processes, such as enclosure\textsuperscript{75} and the associated draining of the fens for agricultural use. Furthermore, because different types of place hold different connotations for listeners, the sounds heard are coloured by these associations with place. Cultural and aesthetic considerations thus also form part of the “context” which Truax insists must be considered in order to understand particular soundscapes.

John Barrell’s foundational work on Clare investigates how he departs from a tradition based in eighteenth century landscape painting and epitomized by the poetry of Thompson. Rather than the linear process that this aesthetic described, in which the eye is led through a series of planes towards a vanishing point, Clare’s landscapes are structured around a pattern that is based in the circular rhythms of parish life before enclosure created a grid that made these older practices impossible. These circular rhythms are evident in the layout of the roads in the town of Helpston. Quoting Dion, Barrell explains how these roads began as

\textsuperscript{75} The enclosure of Helpston is a major influence upon, and subject of, Clare’s middle-period poetry. Land that had formerly been of free and common use to the residents of the village was now becoming fenced in and “improved” in order to produce more profit for its owners, who were vastly successful in manipulating the law surrounding common use rights to their own purposes. For a detailed account of the Enclosure Acts and their importance to Clare’s poetry, see \textit{The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place} by John Barrell.
‘amenages pour la circulation des troupeaux’, and the word circulation there can be taken in its root-meaning; the cattle move around the circle of the parish as they graze in turn the fallows, the commons, the meadows, the stubble, the fallows again. (103)

The historical form of these rhythms is quite similar to how Jacques Attali describes the historical progress of music:

Like the cattle herd of the Nuer discussed by Girard, a herd that is the mirror and double of the people, music runs parallel to human society, is structured like it, and changes when it does. It does not evolve in a linear fashion, but is caught up in the complexity and circularity of the movements of history. (10)

The rhythms of the open-field system are both metaphorical, representing the interconnected labor of the people of Helpston, and literal, comprising the actual daily sounds of the place.

Though Barrell does not refer specifically to the importance of the acoustic to Clare’s work, his identification of Clare’s reaction against a dominant aesthetic of landscape description is useful in thinking about how the acoustic appears in the poetry, particularly in his discussion of the boundless spaces of Clare’s poems.

Barrell’s point might be pushed further in thinking about a longer tradition of art history in which certain aesthetic configurations are reified and others dismissed through a process of identifying the former with positions of power and the latter with subject positions perceived as abject.

Svetlana Alpers’ landmark essay comparing Italian and Dutch painting is particularly insightful on this topic. Alpers explains how the Italian model, which relied on a grid as an aid to creating a commanding perspective, differs essentially from the Dutch model, which presents its subject as if “visual phenomena are present without the intervention of a human maker” (187). She goes on to identify the “Italian concern with the representation of the human body and the Northern

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76 I am grateful to Alexander Schlutz for drawing my attention to Alpers’ work.
concern with representing everything else in nature, exactly and unselectively” (194). The similarity to Clare’s presentation of the world becomes even clearer when she states: “It is the world, not the maker or viewer, which has priority” (187). The Italian dismissal of the Dutch landscape as “feminine” and primarily of interest to women, should also recall the dismissal of Clare’s work by many critics for its class-based assumptions. In concisely pointing out the ways art history, despite its supposed scholarly objectivity, comes to exclude certain aesthetic forms, Alpers provides a useful context for considering Clare’s poetry and its reception. Yet even more importantly, she provides the opportunity to view Clare as rejecting a rigid, grid-based aesthetic that favors a commanding subject position, in favor of a notion of boundless nature, perceived “exactly and unselectively” and in which the subject is often merged with and indistinguishable from its object.

The act of exclusion was a constantly recurring problem for Clare in the process of seeing his work through the press. There were pressures from his patrons and his editor to cut or alter material thought to be too rough, idiosyncratic, or potentially offensive. A particular case in point demonstrates how this attitude towards text also reflected an attitude towards the natural world. Lord Radstock applied so much pressure to have certain lines of “Helpston” repressed, that Clare’s editor eventually removed them from the fourth edition of Poems Descriptive, much to Clare’s dismay.

77 Particularly relevant in this vein is Clare’s use of dialect, which McKusick claims was seen as a “dire threat to the established order” (qtd. in Cooper 437) as it was a sign of the opening up of literary production to what had previously the realm of a select wealthy few. It has long been recognized that Clare’s use of dialect was strategic and not simply a result of his not knowing the “proper” terms.

78 Issues of textuality in Clare are complex and multifaceted, changing over the course of his career. I simply wish to point to a tension that always existed for Clare in this regard.
Accursed Wealth! o’er-bounding human laws,
Of every evil thou remain’st the cause:
 Victims of want, those wretches such as me,
 Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee:
 Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed,
 And thine our loss of labour and of bread;
 Thou art the cause that levels every tree,
 And woods bow down to clear a way for thee. (111-118)

Both the trees and the lines of Clare’s poem are removed, cleared away to provide a more
(ideologically) pleasing prospect for the commanding viewer. Yet this view would not remain a
site of aesthetic recompense for long, and the forces which deforested the landscape would
increasingly leave bare land and poor soil behind, as the landscape of poems such as
Wordsworth’s “Salisbury Plain” and “The Ruined Cottage” attests. The alienation of the traveler
expressed in these poems has various historical analogues pertinent to the ideological conception
of place in Clare’s poetry.

As Barrell records, flat, wide-open spaces were often alienating to those traveling through them.
People like the Reverend Tyley appear “to feel threatened in some way – by wide tracts of land
unmarked by hedges” (32). Arthur Young, traveling through Orleans describes “One universal
flat, unenclosed, uninteresting, and even tedious” (75). James Thomson describes “vast
savannas, where the wandering eye, / Unflict, is in a verdant ocean lost” (“Summer” 692-93).
This sense of alienation was not limited to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The French
modernist Jules Supervielle, traveling through the pampa in Uruguay, describes the way
boundless space becomes imprisoning:
Precisely because of too much riding and too much freedom, and of the unchanging horizon, in spite of our desperate galloping, the pampa assumed the aspect of a prison for me, a prison that was bigger than the others. (qtd. in Bachelard 221)

This is quite the opposite in the poetry of Clare, in which the enclosing of these spaces is what creates a prison:

Fence now meets fence in owners’ little bounds
Of field and meadow, large as garden grounds,
In little parcels little minds to please
With men and flocks imprisoned, ill at ease. (“The Moors”)

It is the dividing up and domesticating of a formerly wild and “unbounded” landscape that restricts the viewer (and listener) from “paths to freedom and to childhood dear,” and therefore divides the subject from himself and his sense of community. “Fence now meets fence” suggests that it is now the artificial divisions of the land which ironically “meet,” rather than the “meeting plains” at the poem’s beginning, or the parceled off inhabitants. Owners’ bounds are “little” because they define a perspective that is incapable of imagining the relevance of the larger unenclosed space, and the boundless possibility such a space presents to the creative imagination. The little parcels literally divide minds from one another, as the notice “no road here” upsets the habitual and immemorial movement through the parish, and the imagined wholeness of the community is fragmented.

What caused Clare to take up such a different perspective towards the boundless landscape than his near contemporaries of the late eighteenth century, or later modernist writers? Part of the answer has to do with class, and the way a particular bourgeois attitude towards landscape developed in the late eighteenth century in response to the events of the French Revolution. As
Ann Bermingham explains, “If the Whigs of Addison’s generation recognized that institutionalizing a discourse of freedom and imagination in the landscape garden went along with legitimizing a new form of economic power, the anti-Jacobin Whigs and Tories of the 1790s understood that reformulating that discourse was now a necessary step to maintaining that power” (85).

Boundless landscapes and level horizons therefore became associated for many with the sweeping changes brought about by the French Revolution and its leveling influence.

Another part of the answer, as Bermingham suggests, may be found in considering how Clare draws on an earlier tradition of considering the boundless, and modifies it to suit his particular purposes. Writing in 1712, Joseph Addison equates this type of landscape with liberty in terms similar to those Clare employs:

> A spacious Horizon is an Image of Liberty, where the Eye has Room to range abroad, to expiate at large on the Immensity of its Views, and to lose it self amidst the Variety of objects that offer themselves to its Observation. Such wide and undetermined Prospects are as pleasing to the Fancy, as the Speculations of Eternity or Infinitude are to the Understanding” (qtd. in Bermingham 84).

Infinitude, immensity, liberty, and the sense of getting lost are all central to Clare’s depiction of the landscape in “The Moors.” Yet Clare departs from Addison in significant ways. In Addison, it is the “eye” that is lost, while the “I” remains self-contained. In Clare, however, the sense of getting lost is far more radical, and implies a departure from normative formations of subjectivity. The liberty that Addison finds in this type of landscape is vexed for Clare, as “scared freedom bade good bye” in the face of enclosure. And the rather secular way Addison
associates the landscape with infinity is described as an intensely spiritual experience for Clare. Addison’s “spacious Horizon” is described by Clare as “the blue mist the orisons edge surrounds,” conflating a kind of mysticality in the contemplation of vanishing limits with the notion of prayer and the sense of its overflowing the bounds of language in its communion with divinity.

What Clare does then, in bringing back older associations of wide-open spaces, is to conservatively evoke the language of tradition and a system of value based in the land itself, but without the connotations of dominance, possession, and ownership that were an intrinsic aspect of this earlier aesthetic. Rather than the confident possession of the object by the viewer central to a dominant cultural aesthetic, the viewer expresses an experience of once being possessed, and now violently dispossessed, of a free communication. This is of paramount importance to Clare’s treatment of sound, for as the land became enclosed, so too did the soundscape.

As Ursula Franklin comments, “What we are hearing, I feel, is very much the privatization of the soundscape, in the same manner in which, in Britain, the enclosure laws destroyed the commons of old” (16). Sound, rather than being somehow outside the frame of ideology, is entirely bound up in it. In fact, the soundscape is likely much more privatized than Franklin suggests at the time she is speaking. Jacques Attali’s tracing of the commodification of music is also relevant to a consideration of the soundscape, as sounds are subject to the same market forces. And as modern technology separates sound from its source and makes it endlessly repeatable, sound becomes treated as a product like any other. The language of protest that is threaded through the body of
Clare’s work marks the changes in the soundscape caused by “progress,” and anticipates these later developments in important and useful ways.

The divisions created by enclosure would obviously have a great effect upon the soundscape. The draining of the fens would dramatically diminish the variety of animal life, the creation of borders would curtail human vocal interaction, and sounds of all types would find themselves more limited by the boundaries they would come up against. Spaces became defined and signposted, indicating what kind of activities might be carried out there. What types of sound one could expect in a given place were increasingly defined by the nature of the borders of that space, just as music was now increasingly moved indoors, away from the public festival and communal celebration and into the concert halls and private homes of those who could afford its purchase. The sense of imprisonment recorded in poems like “The Moors” and in the later asylum poetry is like the situation of modern musicians in respect to the historical moment in which they create. Attali, tracing the kind of minute control to which J.S. Bach was subject, through to the more subtle and abstract control that musicians were subject to within bourgeois culture, concludes that these musicians, rather than merely reflecting an ideological system, comment directly upon it: “They are, and remain, witnesses to the impossible imprisonment of the visionary by power” (18). That is, this imprisonment can be heard in the very structure of their compositions as well as seen in the form of the spaces in which these compositions are performed.
The way places shape sounds and sounds shape our understanding of place is not only true on the macrocosmic level, it also applies to what Paracelsus defined as the microcosm, the human body. The way in which sound and language are related in Clare’s poetry, and how this relationship demonstrates a radical understanding of the place of the individual in society is the subject of the next section.

The Sound-Shape of Language

For the attempt to make language an object of speculation and investigation so thoroughly conflates subject with object—and means with ends—that the possibility of fixed objects of knowledge and fixed knowing subjects disappears.

- Frances Ferguson

Clare’s conflation of subject with object is observable not only in the way his poetry often merges the narrator with the landscape (“The Lament of Swordy Well” is a particularly strong example), it is also observable through what Stephanie Weiner calls the “technique for blending the sounds of the natural world and those of his own words into a single utterance” (384). This blending takes its cue from the intermingling of human and natural sounds in the area around Helpston. The following passage from his “Autobiographical Fragments” illustrates this intermingling particularly well:

I thought I was up sooner then usual and before morning was on the stir out of doors but I am pleasantly disappointed by the whistle of the ploughboy past the window making himself merry and trying to make the dull weather dance to a very pleasant tune which I know well and yet cannot recollect the song but there are hundreds of these pleasant tunes familiar to the plough and the splashing steam and the little fields of spring that have lain out the brown rest of winter and green into mirth with the sprouting grain the songs of the sky lark and the old
songs and ballads that ever accompany field happiness in following the plough – but neither heard known or noticed by all the world beside  \(\text{(By Himself 43)}\)

The ploughboy’s whistle and the weather, the folk tune and the stream, the songs of the skylark and the old ballads are all presented as parallel aspects of the rural laborer’s experience, and are situated in such a way as to imply an equivalent aesthetic value. This way of valuing sound and thinking about the musical are at the root of Clare’s aesthetic, in which lines of communication are opened through an acoustic relationship between living things. Clare not only collected folk music, he could also readily identify the calls and songs of over one hundred birds. His particular sensitivity to sound, the way it is made, how it travels, and how it is received is particularly observable in what’s been called “the most accurate transcription of a birdsong from the whole of the nineteenth century” (Rothenberg 14). The level of detail attained in this transcription, hardly a pathetic fallacy in which the object of nature is anthropomorphized (a common complaint leveled at Romantic poetry), rather represents an attempt to be as empirically accurate as possible, to capture, as nearly as language and context would allow, the actual sound. I quote the transcription in full because of the radical attitude towards the conception of language that it appears to offer:

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Chee chew chee chew chee
chew--cheer cheer cheer
chee chwew whee chwew
chee--up cheer up cheer up
tweeet tweeet tweeet jjug jjug jug

wew wew wew--chur chur
woo it too it tweeet tweeet
tweeet jjug jjug jug

tee rew tee rew tee rew—gur
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There are two elements of the above transcription that are of particular interest in terms of Clare’s use of sound. The first is the way in which Clare versifies bird song. The creation of phonemes and distinct “words” for the bird’s song, the use of dashes to indicate the relationship between sounds, and the verse division to imply units of meaning, all show a close attention both to the way the birdsong operates and the way the forms of poetry produce meaning. Clare creates the possibility of thinking about the larynx and syrinx as both functioning to contribute to a wider sound-making community.79 By giving center stage to the moment of performance, rather than a Wordsworthian process of reflection, Clare attempts to blur the line between the literary and the performative. The phoneme is not merely a linguistic sign, in the Saussurean sense of a unit of meaning, but an ecological act, creating and recreating a particular attitude.

79 It is worth noting that there are similarities in how birds and humans produce sound: “It seems that, just like humans, birds use their vocal tract as a selective filter to modify the final sound” (Catchpole and Slater 28).
towards what is given. As Merleau-Ponty has suggested, “words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world” (187).

The second manner in which the transcription is of interest is the way in which it can be seen to influence Clare’s own poetic formations. Onomatopoeia is the most obvious way in which this influence can be seen. But the above versification appears to go beyond onomatopoeia and into the realm of acoustic biomorphism. In this, Clare appears to not only anticipate the movement towards biomorphism in early twentieth-century art, he also appears to be composing with the sounds he finds in the world around him, anticipating a practice within twentieth century art and composition. What John Cage says in this regard sounds like it might have come from Clare: “I love sounds just as they are and I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are” (Listening). Weiner notes the particular way in which Clare’s middle-period poetry demonstrates the influence of such experiments as the above transcription, in which the sub-semantic becomes as important an element of composition as any overtly expressed intent. In Weiner’s discussion of “The Progress of Rhyme,” she notes:

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80 The movement back and forth between the linguistic and the material is addressed from a historical perspective by Jakobson and Waugh:

Just as in antiquity the term STOICHEION, used originally for linguistic elemental units, was extended to the physical world, in a similar way, but reversely, linguistic theory of the last one hundred years in its quest for the ultimate constituents has appealed in turn to the model of atomic physics. (10)

81 From Matisse’s seminal Bonheur de Vivre to the architecture of Gaudi, biomorphism is a term generally used to describe “the use in painting or sculpture of abstract forms derived from or suggesting biological organisms” (OED 2).
Breaking down patterns into repeated and varied elements, Clare praises the bird’s virtuosic range as well as the artistry of her return to certain key notes: “Each note seemed sweeter than before / & aye so different was the strain / She’d scarce repeat the note again” (240-42). His own poem enacts—and draws attention to enacting—these principles in repeating sounds, words, and whole phrases, often within a single line.

The rhythms of language as they reverberate between and within the speaker and listener are demonstrated by Clare to be akin to the rhythms of the natural environment. This is not only true of articulated sounds, but of the rhythms of the body itself. Besides the sound of the heartbeat, there are other biological producers of rhythm, such as the Central Pattern Generator, located in the lumbar region of the spinal chord, which is thought to send rhythmic patterned outputs to the body in order to direct various functions, such as respiration rhythmogenesis and coordinated bodily movement (Tenore). These internal sounds play an important part in the regulation of bodily activity, just as external sounds play an important part in regulating ecological and social activity. This gives new meaning to the comments made by critics that Clare merges “the voices of the poet and his subject” (Cooper 445), or that in his work “the distinctions between man and nature, between nature and culture, have dissolved…He is the natural world” (Kovesi 140).

Clare recognizes the confluent pathways of human and natural activity. One might be reminded here of Clare’s fascination with snail shells, in Latin, **cochlea**, that give their name to the auditory portion of the inner ear.

For all of this, it would be naïve to assume that there was no distinction between the natural and the human for Clare, or that he did not recognize layers of mediation between the experience of the natural world and the production of poetry. As Paul Chirico points out, “Even for the admired
rural poet the natural world is always mediated, textual, and this natural connection between
word and world extends beyond objects to the processes which sustain them” (19). Sound is
obviously one of these sustaining processes through which the word and world are connected. It
is not so much that the poet and the natural world become one, but that the categories of the
human and the natural become destabilized, causing their boundaries to dissolve and intermingle,
and the body and the landscape each become able to represent the other. This has particular
relevance to considering how the effects of industrialization upon the landscape are also effects
upon language: that is, as the music of the objects of nature is silenced, so too disappears the
particular dialect of the rural poet.

The Fallen Elm

At the opening of “The Fallen Elm,” Clare describes the sound of the wind through an elm tree
as heard through the chimney of his cottage: “Old elm that murmured in our chimney top / The
sweetest anthem autumn ever made.” “Old” identifies the elm as a familiar companion and (with
“our”) as a site of communal memory. The experience of the tree is wrapped up in the many
events which occurred in its presence, providing a kind of marker or gathering point of a
communal history. The meter contributes to this sense, the spondee “Old elm” setting the phrase
apart from the iambic pattern, strengthening the connection between the age of the tree and its
singular importance. The agency given to the natural world here is typical of Clare, and
anticipates later ecological thought. The way this nature is bound up in culture is communicated
by the word “anthem,” which in Clare’s day meant a religious type of music closely related to
the antiphon, or call and reply singing that originated in the medieval church. Joseph Priestley
comments: “the method of singing by antiphony or anthem…is said to have been introduced
about the middle of the fourth century” (186). The type of universalizing consciousness that the
stretch and power of the medieval church created is resituated here to describe a relationship
with the natural world. The varying winds through the trees act as both call and reply; in another
sense it is the interaction between the imagination and the sound that take on the role of call and
reply. The line “The sweetest anthem autumn ever made” is particularly musical in itself, the
open vowel sound pattern in “anthem autumn ever,” framed by the long vowels in “sweetest”
and “made” evoke the held vowels of song, a process mirrored in the sound pouring through the
open throat of the chimney. The alliterated “em” sound of the first two lines creates a kind of
humming, or inner vibration that evokes an empathy with the movement of the tree. In the same
text quoted above (A History of the Corruptions of Christianity), Pri
estley describes another
element associated with antiphon singing: “In the fifth century it was the custom in some places
to keep up the exercises of singing both day and night, different sets of persons continually
relieving each other” (186). The unending quality of this song, and the nature of its call and
reply, is something like how Clare perceived the world around him, as an omnipresent song of
human and natural action.82

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82 It is interesting to note the number of times song is interrupted in The Shepherd’s Calendar in this regard. “The
foddering boy forgets his song” (February), the ploughmen “often stop their songs to clean their ploughs” (March),
the maiden “forgets her song” (August), and “boys in fear stop short their song” (September). These examples all
contribute to the sense of song as an ongoing and ever-present element of village life and practice.
The opening of “The Fallen Elm” demonstrates Clare’s thinking about the way in which sounds are physically produced, how they travel, and to what end. The phrase “that murmured in our chimney top” importantly identifies the elm not as within our sight, but as sound that enters the chimney, the space connecting the inside to the outside world. In this sense the chimney acts something like an ear, collecting the sound and delivering it to the eardrum, where it produces vibrations then communicated to the brain via electric signal. Before sound enters the ear, it is altered by its environment. According to Barry Truax: “the sound arriving at the ear is the analogue of the current state of the physical environment, because as the wave travels, it is charged by each interaction with the environment” (15). Sound is shaped physically and ideologically by its particular historical environment.

Besides an ear, another way the chimney can be thought of is as a throat, in which a column of air vibrating across vocal cords produces sound. The way the vocal tract modifies sound is comparable to the way it is modified by its passage through the chimney. Thus the sound can be identified with the human mechanism for producing and receiving sound, with the simple act of inhaling or exhaling, with call and response, with poet and audience. In Clare’s description of sound in the poem, his whole body becomes a listening ear. The sound of the wind in the elms heard through the chimney is something like the sound of the poem entering its listeners without the presence of the poet who speaks. We imagine the presence of the elm through its sound, like the images and feelings of the poem enter our minds through its words. The word “our” further diminishes the individual ego and establishes a communal response to the elm. The murmur that

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83 Stephanie Weiner draws attention to several Clare poems which evoke “listening without seeing” and compares these to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” and Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (2009: 383-84).
we hear is like that found throughout Romantic verse, identifying the sounds of nature with that of poetry; yet contained within this murmur is a Miltonic one: the sense of complaint towards a higher power that murmur contains will, as the poem develops, burst upon this calm.

For Clare, sound is always caught up in embodied presence. The sound image, in “The Fallen Elm,” of the tree in the wind as heard through the chimney of the cottage, is itself a metaphor for presence, for indwelling. The poem relates the condition of inhabiting, of being inhabited by voice, of the physical production of sound which is the origin of language. The poem is not only the memory of a song, but a contemplation of and a dwelling on the process and function of sound itself. This is why, in the pre-industrial landscape, there is little concept of noise, and for Clare “every sound that meets the ear is love” (“A Spring Morning”). When Clare comes to condemn a sound it seems only when words are spoken insincerely, or with hypocrisy, as in the “bawl” of the trees’ owner, or the “cant terms” that “cheat plain honesty.” Even the sound of the axe hacking at the tree’s root is not criticized, while the “bark of freedom” of the tree’s owner is unbearable. This is singing badly, the notes are false, because they are not made for pleasure but for profit.

That music was becoming increasingly commodified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is particularly relevant to Clare’s depiction of sound. In this respect, the removal of the elm is similar to the uprooting of the traditional place of music in society, which Attali describes as “a rootedness in the world, an attempt to conceive of human creation as being in conformity with nature” (61). As music moved into the concert hall and away from the popular festival, it
became more entwined with the principles of capitalist expansion. With the rise of the bourgeoisie “Music became involved with money. The concert hall performance replaced the popular festival and the private concert at court” (47). In “The Fallen Elm” Clare gives witness to this change and its outcomes. The silence which replaces the melody of the trees is akin to that dominating the audience of the concert hall. As Attali writes, citing a famous painting by Brueghel: “Carnival is fading into Lent and silence is setting in everywhere” (121). The murmur of the elm in the chimney is an emblem of this fading music, a recognition that these sounds will no longer hold the same aesthetic or social significance.

Attali points out that once the worker is made the instrument of capital, the music that we hear changes, as well as the way in which we listen to and value music. It is through the language of Clare’s poem that we are privileged to hear something of the original significance of this transformation. Clare’s enjoining syntax connects together the various clauses of the first ten lines, just as the many experiences of the tree draw together and help to define the communal experience its presence witnesses. The song is entwined with the words of the poem, threaded into the other various descriptions: the “mellow whispering calms,” produced by the rain, the “dark tempests,” and the winds which “upbraid thy strength” are gathered up into this song as the sentence rises towards its climax. The tree’s ability to resist the tempest, even though it “rocked thee like a cradle to thy root” is particularly important in that it offers the poet-laborer also the opportunity to resist the forces which everywhere hedge him in. The lines which end the first sentence, “How did I love to hear the winds upbraid / Thy strength without—while all within was mute” also offer a satisfying comparison between the quiet of the cottage and the muteness
of the tree’s interiority, both of which signify and proffer a sense of dwelling, an inwardness that remains intact though rocked to its root. This silence, internal and contained, is starkly contrasted by the vast invasive silence left by the trees’ absence. It is this latter, deathly silence that the poet hears prophesied in the rhetoric of improvement used to justify the cutting down of the trees.

The rising passion indicated by the increasingly violent weather depicted in the first ten lines indicates an increasing intensity of emotion in the speaker, and the mental image of the stability of the tree offers an inner ability to resist the temptation to completely give way to anger or to grief, and thus becomes both a social and a psychological site of stability. In the next lines the sense of the tree as maintaining subjectivity is further extended:

We felt thy kind protection like a friend
And edged our chairs up closer to the fire,
Enjoying comforts that was never penned.

The “kind protection” described here is in practical terms a result of the wind-breaking and insulating function of the tree. It is also, however, a recognition of the affective and aesthetic aspects of a particular relationship developed over time. This is not only true of the individual historical experience, it applies in a broader sense to the immemorial pleasure offered through the experience of a mediated nature that goes back to the origins of human civilization. In this way, Clare defines a link to a broader human inheritance and situates it within his own moment. Of course, all of this is communicated through the sound of the wind in the tree. This sound is an essential element of its identity. As Clare knew, each species of tree, when blown by the
wind, produced its own particular sound. In fact, all objects of nature are conceived to have a voice that contributes to a larger omnipresent song.

In this way the sound of the tree is itself a sheltering. Unlike the shelter provided by the tree in poems such as “Sudden Shower” and “The Hollow Tree,” the shelter is here provided by the tree’s sound, which both signifies and activates presence. This is often the way other sound objects operate in Clare, where a shape is defined not by its visual dimensions, but by an aural outline, the tree suggesting a shape through the way in which the sound is perceived. This shelter provides a place to think and to dream. What Gaston Bachelard says of the house is for Clare also true of the tree: “Each one of its nooks and corners was a resting-place for daydreaming” (15). Sound provides a sense of dwelling, as do the words of poetry, which like all words are at first sounds taking part in a community of sounds.

The objects described in the poem are connected to the tree by a relationship of synecdoche, which also applies to the sounds these objects make, illustrating important ways in which the natural object informs and influences the practices of human culture. The cradle, chairs, fire, and the sticks with which the children play all demonstrate the way the tree partakes in all aspects of human activity, from cradle to casket a constant companion and reminder of an intricate bond. We can image the rhythmic sound of the rocking cradle, the creaking and shifting of chairs, the soft crackle and whir of the fire, and the sound of stick on stick combining to create a kind of

84 Or as Clare memorably records in “Winter”:

Where haply such uncomfortable days
synecdochic music, each sound representative of the tree and its melody, as well as the intrinsic bond between nature and culture. These are “comforts that was never penned,” but perhaps they are here recorded by the laborer’s pencil, and in this way might be seen to contribute to and complete the metonymic circle.

The song with which the poem begins, the music of the tree and its effect on its listeners, is again recalled at the poem’s turning point:

    Thou owned a language by which hearts are stirred
    Deeper than by a feeling clothed in words,
    And speakest now what’s known of every tongue,
    Language of pity and the force of wrong.

There is a sharp turn here in tone and content from the comfortable domestic scene to a language of indignation, pain, and anger. This shift occurs elsewhere in Clare’s work, and has often been read as a weakness in overall form. Recent critics, however, point to the importance of dissonance within Clare’s syntax as being intentional for producing a unique musical effect. This dissonance can be thought to apply to shifts in content as well. John Barrell, an otherwise deeply insightful reader of Clare, when commenting on “Lamentation of Round Oak Waters” complains of this shift in tone:

    It is the landscape as itself, where it was, that is being regretted here; and from here onward the poem leaves Clare’s melancholy behind, and becomes more like a direct political statement against the enclosure. And so the poem, as it gets better, falls in half. (116)

Alan Vardy has suggested that “Barrell’s conclusion depends on a Wordsworthian version of the aesthetic use of the elegiac voice” (40). This dependence is what creates the above sense of the
poetry breaking into two, and what doesn’t allow for the consideration that the break is symbolic of what the poetry attempts to convey. The place of harmony and dissonance in the history of music is a useful reference here. Attali details the ways in which harmony became a political and economic concept used to enforce a bourgeois notion of social order. Clare can be seen to use dissonance as a strategy that resists this notion of a hierarchical order for the more spread out and egalitarian model he sees and hears presented in the natural world. The silence that lies at the heart of the poem can also be read in the break formed by this dissonance. And as John Cage commented after experiencing an anechoic chamber, “Silence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around” (1991). “The Fallen Elm” can then be read as an example of how the mid-period poetry of Clare re-envisions both elegy and the language of protest by positioning them in terms of a necessary turn that has both aesthetic and political implications.

The syntax of the above lines reinforces this point. The conflict between tenses in the first line reveals the fault line at the poem’s central joint. Hearts “are stirred” in the present by a language that exists only in the past. As if to intensify this seeming contradiction, the question of what ownership signifies is here presciently interrogated, focusing on the essential qualities of the tree, rather than the financial prospect it offers to the “knave” (and others like him) that would cut it down. As elsewhere in Clare, “own” is closer to the sense of that which defines particular things and is intrinsic to them, rather than that associated with property that may be bought and sold. Besides its general sense of possession, “owned” here also carries the various senses of testament.

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85 “We may hazard the hypothesis that the emplacement of the musical paradigm and its dynamic foreshadowed the mutation that ushered in social representation as a whole. More precisely, it foreshadowed the mutation in exchange, which accompanied representation and affected the entire economy, particularly in the way in which the search for harmony as a substitute for conflict and as simulacrum of the scapegoat would come to dominate it” (59).
and communal recognition, meanings that coexist here peacefully, unlike the eventual narrowing of focus, under the rise of industrial capitalism, on ownership as symbol of status and command. Even though what stirs the heart is the memory of a lost music, it “speakest now,” paradoxically through the music of the poem, as if the elm has come to inhabit, or “own” the poet’s words, with an urgency that conveys a “deeper” meaning, that unlike language “clothed in words,” cannot be turned against its listeners to become a “sanction to the song” of oppression, the counter to the tree’s music. This distinction between the meanings of familiar terms and forms of expression points to a gap between Clare’s own methods of attributing value and those who seek to “improve” the landscape. And the opposite process, in which seemingly separate and distinct objects and concepts are brought together as part of an imagined whole demonstrates the way Clare feels a unity in the pre-enclosed state of the land. The repeated rhyme of “shower(s)” with “power(s)” demonstrates the way in which a physical phenomenon and an abstract idea can represent different versions of the same basic concept. Both are depicted as coming down from above, and both regulate the status of their respective spheres, making possible either a fructifying growth, or a disastrous desertification. But this very similarity directs the reader’s attention to a gross disparity. The rain, supposedly disinterested in human affairs, appears more inherently sympathetic to the plight of the individual than the all too human aspect of those who reign. The tree provides shelter, while the holder of political power can provide only cant. Clare here, and through the remainder of the poem, demonstrates an acute awareness of the ways in which language, especially of the meta-conceptual variety, can be used by as a means of social influence and political control.

86 “Own” was used frequently in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to mean both “to confess to be valid, true, or actual; to admit” (OED 5.a.) as well as “to acknowledge as an acquaintance; to recognize as familiar” (3.c.).
Clare interrogates the discourse of freedom as something already separated from its initial purpose, and as thus having become a monstrous version of its former self. It no longer referred to the limitless, to the possible and open-ended, but increasingly was used to refer to an ever more specific set of bourgeois social and economic conditions. Though an unlettered rural laborer, Clare was unusually well read, and understood the power of discourse to shape material circumstances. What may seem like an inordinate passion in his response to the removal of the trees appears differently when one considers the larger impact of the rhetoric of improvement upon the natural landscape and the immemorial traditions of those living within it. The silence left behind in the absence of the trees and the removal of their music-making companionship is typical of the way individual sounds became eliminated from soundscapes as part of this modernizing trend. In this poem and elsewhere, Clare provides a community on the cusp of change, from a long pre-industrial past, to a strange and newly modern present. Barry Truax, in describing the pre-industrial soundscape, explains how

more “smaller” sounds can be heard, more detail can be discerned in those that are heard, and sounds coming from a greater distance form a significant part of the soundscape. In terms of acoustic ecology, one might say that more “populations” of sound exist, and fewer “species” are threatened with extinction. (71)

The elm’s music is just such a “smaller” sound that becomes an endangered “species” due to the broader effects of enclosure. In this way the poem provides an example of a much broader transformation of the soundscape and demonstrates the way in which the same factors that produce environmental degradation also affect the types of sounds available within a given place.
Clare strategically places the song of the tree (represented by the first thirty-four lines), within the context of its removal, and then places the context of this removal within the larger context of the rhetoric of power, which itself is revealed as a basis for the power structures of his society. It is as if Clare seeks to attune the reader to the specific historical conditions in which beauty appears in the world. The relationships established are not of ever-larger containers of meaning, however, but in how one type of knowledge reveals another. The contrast between the flowing lyric intensity and lulling beauty of the tree’s song and the pained and stilted language of loss, unflinchingly demonstrates the place of poetry in an increasingly commodified world. In this way the fallen elm is the poem itself, representing both its continual loss, as its objects are progressively removed or disfigured, and precarious recovery, through memory and language as itself a type of memory, marks that taken together can rebuild our sense of the original tree, albeit a sense inextricably tied to its absence. Clare recognizes that, like the fading of sound, the object of nature cannot be recovered, yet he repeatedly insists that its significance cannot be revoked.

Conclusion: Clare and Cage

The purposefully anachronistic epigraph with which this chapter began was not meant to elide historical and aesthetic differences between two artists, but rather to suggest a way of reading Clare through a history of attitudes towards sound. Noise for Clare was not the same thing as noise for Cage, and it would be folly to assume this to be the case. However, there are characteristic attitudes that these figures share that are particularly suggestive in terms of
thinking about Clare’s legacy today. Cage’s interest in the “organization of sound” (3)\textsuperscript{87} and in “the activity of sounds” (10) bears comparison to Clare’s interest in way non-linguistic sound operates in the world. Cage defines the composer in terms that recall Clare’s recording of the rhythms of labor and the music of the insects, birds, and animals of his immediate environment: “Any sound is acceptable to the composer of percussion music; he explores the academically forbidden ‘non-musical’ field of sound insofar as is manually possible” (5). Clare’s departure from the dominant aesthetic formations of his day involves Clare’s exploration of the soundscape of Helpstone. Cage’s thoughts as to the materiality, uniqueness, and urgency of individual sounds, as “transmissions in all directions from the field’s center” (14) reminds us of something like Clare’s portrayal of each sound as its own center from which it broadcasts itself to the world. And like Clare, Cage recognizes that when we stop discriminating between intentional and non-intentional sound, “the splits, subject-object, art-life, etc., disappear, an identification has been made with the material” (14). Though noise now includes the sounds of industry and technology, this does not make the necessity of identification any less important than it was for Clare. It is this identification and recognition that we continue to stand in so much need of today.

\textsuperscript{87} All the Cage references in this paragraph are from *Silence* (1961).
Work Cited


*Listening*. Miroslav Sebestik, dir. JBA Production, 1992. Film.


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In Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, our eye is immediately drawn to the figure in the background, compelled by the strong light behind him as by the vanishing point of a picturesque landscape painting. And just as that vanishing point suggests the world beyond the painting, so the figure is an agent of that world, simultaneously bringing it in with him and drawing us out into it. According to Foucault, he is “coming in and going out at the same time, like a pendulum caught at the bottom of its swing” (11). His stasis, rather than identifying a reliable subject, marks the unreliability of his presence as an object in the painting. His body forms a central point on axes
of high and low, inside and outside. This is true not only physically, but in terms of Jose Nieto y Velazquez’s social position as the Queen’s chamberlain, who served as an intermediary between the Queen’s “chamber” (high/inside) and the world (low/outside). That Nieto is regularly identified by critics as “the painter’s alter ego” (Minissale 214) is also relevant to considering the significance of his enigmatic presence within the painting’s overall composition.

Like Nieto on the staircase, the narrator in the works of Thomas De Quincey frequently finds himself in a liminal position, his body transfixed at the meeting point of vertical and horizontal axes on which he travels endlessly while remaining frozen in space. For Foucault, Las Meninas marks an epistemic shift from resemblance to representation as the dominant mode of organizing knowledge, and as Patrick Brantlinger explains, “In poststructuralist theories of culture and discourse, debt, fetishism, and empire are often almost synonymous with representation” (8). This development marks a gradual unmooring of the representation from its object, culminating in a division, one which De Quincey, in the words of Tim Fulford “anticipated, and suggested the cause of, a division between country and city and poetry and prose that would dominate the next two hundred years of British culture” (52). Importing the redemptive vision of Wordsworth’s pastoral into the built environment of the urban landscape, De Quincey creates a mode of disastrous transcendence that conflates a psychic and a historical disturbance. This disastrous transcendence is both set in, and reflective of the gradual replacement of former religious identifications with new economic ones: “Thus the economy gains a transcendental

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88 Landscape painting is often said to mark a similar shift. W.J.T. Mitchell observes, “the history of landscape painting is often described as a quest, not just for pure, transparent representation of nature, but as a quest for pure painting” (13).
character (i.e. surpassing all limits) which man formerly sought in religion. It is not belief in the hereafter, but economic activity in the here and now, that opens up modern man’s perspective on eternity” (Binswanger 37). This chapter will examine the “division” Fulford refers to in terms of two separate but interconnected phenomena in De Quincey’s work, the specter of uncontrolled urban and imperial growth, and the regular appearance of the staircase as a symbolic site of traumatic transcendence.

In *Natural Supernaturalism*, M.H. Abrams famously describes the Romantic quest in terms of a spiral, a circular motion back towards a point of origin that transcends that point upon a higher plane. The spiral, Abrams argues, “fuses the idea of the circular return with the idea of linear progress” (184), and provides a model for the Romantic development of the mind. For Hegel, this movement was also the movement of history, the spirit of the world developing itself through each circular iteration. According to Abrams, this circuitous path is not a pursuit of a lost object of nature, but rather an arduous movement towards a higher form of culture: “The typical Romantic ideal, far from being a mode of cultural primitivism, is an ideal of strenuous effort along the hard road of culture and civilization” (185). This insightful point raises the question of just what or whose culture and civilization is intended. This is not only problematic in the way it assumes civilization to be inherently Eurocentric, but in the way it alienates the natural world from culture. For surely, this hard road is also the road of the natural world and of our own “nature,” and the assumption of an inherent division between these natures and culture is at the heart of a problem within Romanticism that becomes increasingly visible as the
disappearance and transformation of the natural object accelerates in the wake of capitalist and imperialist expansion.\textsuperscript{89}

Perhaps this is why the Romantic spiral, in the work of De Quincey, becomes a labyrinthine progression, suggesting a “division” within the self and society that cannot be reconciled. While the British increasingly created a national image that drew on the maritime empires of Carthage, Venice, and Holland, De Quincey, writing from the heart of the empire, creates a labyrinth that would become an identifying image of modernity, elaborated in the Paris, Prague, and Buenos Aires of Baudelaire, Kafka, and Borges. Part of what I’d like to consider here, then, is what happens to this Romantic spiral when considered in terms of the spiraling growth of the city, or how the image of the spiral as a symbol of ordered growth stands in comparison to forces appearing to spiral out of control.\textsuperscript{90} I will do this primarily by considering the notion of “circular return” in terms of the body’s relationship to the built environment in De Quincey, and the figure of “linear progress” in terms of the appearance of the staircase in his work. In considering Lawrence Buell’s call for a “social ecocriticism” that “considers urban and degraded landscapes” as well as more traditional landscapes, I will be interested in the way De Quincey formulates the urban space as a site of infectious return, and a movement, however linear, towards an increasingly profound uncertainty. De Quincey’s formulation is particularly relevant to my larger consideration of Romantic conceptions of nature in that it is increasingly the urban center

\textsuperscript{89} W.J.T. Mitchell describes how the symbolic qualities of landscape “are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself as precisely (and simultaneously) as the expansion of landscape understood as an inevitable, progressive development in history, an expansion of “culture” and “civilization” into a “natural” space in a progress that is itself defined as “natural” (17).

\textsuperscript{90} This contrast is also apparent in the labyrinth, an ancient symbol of order and balance, which would become, in the work of De Quincey and others, a symbol of the condition of alienated modernity.
from which the natural world was culturally defined. As John Barrell and Ann Bermingham have demonstrated, the elements which make up how landscape was understood are based in economic and class structures, and are therefore inherently ideological. And as Raymond Williams has so tellingly shown, the city must be returned to in order to understand ideological constructions of the countryside, and therefore the way in which various tendencies are naturalized.

De Quincey’s attitude towards urbanization is perhaps expressed most directly in his introduction to *Suspiria de Profundis*. Here triumphalism is mixed with fear in the celebration of an industrial growth that at the same time threatens the ability of the individual “to dream magnificently”:

> Already, what by the procession through fifty years of mighty revolutions amongst the kingdoms of the earth, what by the continual development of vast physical agencies,—steam in all its applications, light getting under harness as a slave for man, powers from heaven descending upon education and accelerations of the press, powers from hell (as it might seem, but these also celestial) coming round upon artillery and the forces of destruction,—the eye of the calmest observer is troubled; the brain is haunted by some jealousy of ghostly beings moving among us... (XIII.334)

The introduction demonstrates a strong influence of Wordsworth’s Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, in which “a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind” (599). There is also a Wordsworthian echo at the end of the passage quoted, in which “the brain is haunted by some jealousy of ghostly beings moving among us.” This recalls the lines from Book One of *The Prelude*:

> But huge and mighty Forms that do not move  
> Like living men moved slowly through my mind  
> By day and were the trouble of my dreams. (425-27)
But there are numerous passages in Wordsworth that might be cited that demonstrate a ghostly presence that haunts the mind in its apprehension of the natural world. What is of interest here is that De Quincey uses this type of language to describe the forces, not of nature, but of industry, and not in terms of the individual, but of the collective. Demonstrating to what extent culture was becoming urban-centered and directed, De Quincey turns the Wordsworthian formula on its head: The “huge and mighty Forms” of the “natural” Cumbrian countryside are now the growing and expanding factories, monuments, and grand edifices of the city, objects that also “do not move / Like living men.” This dark irony undermines the optimism and idealism expressed in earlier Romantic works, even as it holds to the notion of industrial and technological growth as a threat to creativity.

In the sentence following the one quoted in the Preface above, Wordsworth describes “the increasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident, which the rapid communication of intelligence hourly gratifies.” De Quincey takes up the effect of this proliferation of information in an amusing anecdote in the essay “Style” which will also serve to introduce his use of the stair. De Quincey begins his account by explaining “Some eight years ago, we had occasion to look for lodgings in a newly-built suburb of London to the south of the Thames. The mistress of the house…was in regular training, it appeared, as a student of newspapers. She had no children; the newspapers were her children” (X.150-51). He goes on to give an account of the peculiar and abominable
effect this had upon her vocabulary. De Quincey becomes so agitated by her conversation, he eventually can stand it no longer:

Finally—(which word it was that settled us: we heard it as we reached the topmost stair on the second floor, and, without further struggle against our instincts, round we wheeled, rushed down forty-five stairs, and exploded from the house with a fury causing us to impinge against an obese or protuberant gentleman, and calling for mutual explanations: a result which nothing could account for but a steel bow, or mustachios on the lip of an elderly woman: meantime the fatal word was),—seventhly, "anteriorly." Concerning which word we solemnly depose and make affidavit that neither from man, woman, nor book, had we ever heard it before this unique rencontre with this abominable woman on the staircase. (X.151)

Though quite funny, this suburban linguistic nightmare describes something about the urbanization of language that forms part of deep underlying concerns for De Quincey. There is a sense of disproportion in the woman’s language that is mirrored in the process of the disproportion caused by the rapid change to the neighborhood that is discussed previous to this quotation. A certain violence is done to language that causes in turn, a violent reaction. As in this example, the appearance of stairs in De Quincey is almost always accompanied by heightened anxiety, an implied or actual act of violence, the strong presence of a female figure, the desire to flee and the experience of exile. This is true in the account of his visit to his dead sister as a child, his narrative of running away from Manchester Grammar School, his near-death experience on the steps in Soho Square, his stay at the home of the shady lawyer Brunell, and occurs as a figure in “Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts” and the stories “The Avengers” and “The Household Wreck.” The figure of the stair takes on the importance of what De Quincey called an “involute.” As he writes in Suspiria (in a passage later transferred to the Autobiographical Sketches): “far more of our deepest thoughts and feelings pass to us through perplexed combination of concrete objects, pass to us as involutes…in compound experiences
incapable of being disentangled, that ever reach us *directly* and in their own abstract shapes” (I.39). The staircase seems to hold a special significance for De Quincey, and its ability to symbolize a complex and interrelated range of phenomena likely contributes to its repeated appearance in his work. The fact that what these phenomena symbolize can never finally be known figures the infinitely restless movement of the spiral as a kind of plotting of the involute, a representation forever reflecting upon and reproducing itself.

The staircase as a concrete object which appears in “perplexed combination” with other objects is a particular attribute of Piranesi’s *Imaginary Prisons*, a work which De Quincey famously discussed with Coleridge.

Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi’s, Antiquities of Rome, Mr. Coleridge, who was standing by, described to me a set of plates by that artist, called his *Dreams*, and which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of them (I describe only from memory of Mr. Coleridge’s account) represented vast Gothic halls, on the floor of which stood all sorts of engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, &c. &c., expressive of enormous power put forth and resistance overcome. Creeping along the sides of the walls you perceived a staircase; and upon it, groping his way upwards, was Piranesi himself: follow the stairs a little further and you perceive it come to a sudden and abrupt termination without any balustrade, and allowing no step onwards to him who had reached the extremity except into the depths below. Whatever is to become of poor Piranesi, you suppose at least that his labours must in some way terminate here. But raise your eyes, and behold a second flight of stairs still higher, on which again Piranesi is perceived, but this time standing on the very brink of the abyss. Again elevate your eye, and a still more aerial flight of stairs is beheld, and again is poor Piranesi busy on his aspiring labours; and so on, until the unfinished stairs and Piranesi both are lost in the upper gloom of the hall. With the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams. In the early stage of my malady the splendours of my dreams were indeed chiefly architectural; and I beheld such pomp of cities and palaces as was never yet beheld by the waking eye unless in the clouds. (*Confessions* 70-71)
The “power of endless growth and self-reproduction” are similarly qualities attributed to money during the period De Quincey is writing. If, as Vincent Scully suggests, Piranesi’s prisons represent “the end of the old, humanist, man-centered world with its fixed values—and the beginning of the mass age of modern history, with its huge environments and rushing communities” (qtd. in Piranesi 13), then De Quincey’s interest in his architecture is not only personal, but reflects an attitude towards history as it is effected by the emergence of capital as the dominant organizational force of social relations. His nightmares are not only a byproduct of opium use, they are explicit portraits of the fractured self wandering amidst the endlessly reproducible world made possible by mechanical processes, the “engines and machinery, wheels, cables, pulleys, levers, catapults, &c. &c.” representative of the vast and complex structures necessary to maintain imperial growth (similar to the mass of increasingly specialized accounting devices to which Krishnan refers to below). Wordsworth’s “contingencies of pomp” which serve to “exalt” the “native brightness” of the soul, here become representative of the endlessly reproducing and multiplying interposition of capital, invading all forms of cultural exchange.

The stairway can be connected to the growth of industrial capitalism in considering the city as itself a stairway that is ever building upon itself. In De Quincey’s translation of the Greek rhetorician Aristides’ description of Rome, he provides such a perspective:

…this city, stretching forth her foundations over areas so vast, is yet not satisfied with those superficial dimensions; that contents her not; but upon one city rearing another of corresponding proportions, and upon that another, pile resting upon pile, houses

91 According to Brantlinger: “Unhinged from a metallic standard, a unit of paper money (or “promissory” notes in various forms, most obviously bank notes) promises only its future redemptions, as Brian Rotman says, through ‘an identical copy of itself’ (5)” (40).
overlaying houses, in aerial succession; so...we may say that here nothing meets our eyes in any direction, but mere Rome! Rome! (I.179)

In a note to the translation, De Quincey writes: “This word...(Romé), on which the rhetorician plays, is the common Greek term for strength.” The transcendent power represented by the symbol of the stairway ascending endlessly to heaven is transferred to the historical realm in the spread of the eternal city and its associated developments. Though the growth of London in De Quincey’s experience was likely more a horizontal sprawl, there was significant building upwards as well. Francis Sheppard notes how the Regency produced “an unprecedentedly large number of contracts for buildings of great size and cost” (96). John Summerson notes the various structures, such as Buckingham Palace, Carlton House Terrace, and the National Gallery, that ascended during the Regency (115). And Francesca Cuojati provides this telling description:

Regency London let itself be noticed in the most traditional way possible, that is aerially, from its head, the caput or cupola; the cityscape, overlooked by Cristopher Wren’s Dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral, was now enriched with other domes, more commercial and rigorously secular, from that...of the Rotunda of the Bank of England, to the smaller ones of the coloured glass skylights of John Soane’s Museum. (82)

De Quincey, then, could find in Aristides a model for the growing empire of Britain, centered in the imperial city of London. And while this growth similarly suggests an irresistible strength, it differs widely from the notion of the classical city as the center of order and harmony. Sanjay Krishnan perceptively relates De Quincey’s description of the physical results of explosive urban development in the Confessions with the maze-like inner workings of commerce and empire:

The “‘knotty problems of alleys’” and “‘sphinx’s riddles of streets without thoroughfares’” suggest the labyrinthine proliferation of complex new institutions and legislation to serve the needs of financial and territorial administration. Here the “‘enigmatical entries’” suggestively pull together several distinct but mutually supporting
activities of imperial Britain: the balance sheets of accountants and reports of colonial officials, as well as the jottings of naval explorers and scholarly cartographers. (208-09)

The incremental and accruing nature of these balance sheets, reports, and jottings within the urban center is suggestive of a spiraling movement upwards and outwards, a kind of ever-expanding labyrinth of the type later to be described by Borges in the “Library of Babel.” The complexity of these documents, the particular expertise needed to decipher their idiosyncratic markings, suggest that no individual would ever be capable of understanding their various meanings. Rather than an eternal city, what increasingly presents itself is a Babel, in which confusion has been sown among the populous in punishment for pride. Yet unlike the biblical narrative, the confusion now inheres within the very structures through which power exercises its control.

Greenhay

After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the “first stairway.” - Bachelard

The earliest staircase that appears in biographical terms in De Quincey is the one at Greenhay, in suburban Manchester. Describing the fate of Greenhay in the Autobiographical Sketches, De Quincey explains how “in after years, Manchester, throwing out the tentacula of its vast expansion, absolutely enveloped Greenhay” (I.68). De Quincey does not explain how this enveloping affected how he saw his childhood, but the phenomenon of urban sprawl is everywhere in the dark and hidden forces that threaten both his waking and dream landscapes,
and we even find De Quincey in London symbolically performing his own urban sprawl on the steps in Soho Square. “Tentacula” generally suggests tentacles, but the word can also refer to stiff hairs situated around the mouth or on the face of many animals (OED). Thus the act of expansion is also one of swallowing, and in this way suggests a relation to De Quincey’s own acts of opium ingestion, producing an irresistible expansion of sensibility and an eternal subjugation of the body, mirroring the expanding and subjugating effects of urban development. The city has classically been compared to the body in order to suggest a sense of proportion and functionality.\textsuperscript{92} Yet the uncontrollable expansion of cities in this period, as they first spilled outside their medieval bounds, appears to belie this comparison. This is why De Quincey’s debilitated, yet prophetic body is able to represent what was changing in the relationship between city and citizen.

Describing that staircase at Greenhay, De Quincey writes, “The house was large; there were two staircases; and by one of these I knew that about mid-day, when all would be quiet… I could steal up into her chamber” (I.38). This stairway, like the ones at Manchester Grammar School, in “The Avengers,” and in “Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts,” is meant to supply a clandestine passage. When the young Thomas leaves his sister’s chambers, it is because he thinks he hears a foot on the stair, another very common device throughout De Quincey’s work: “When I returned to myself, there was a foot (or I fancied so) on the stairs”\textsuperscript{93} upon which

\textsuperscript{92} A theme taken up repeatedly in the \textit{Ten Books on Architecture} by Vitruvius, for example.
\textsuperscript{93} This brings to mind Wollstonecraft’s memory of a particular sound that was aligned with a formative childhood memory: “when the foot sounded on the rock, it terrified the intruder, and inspired a strange feeling, as if the rightful sovereign was dislodged” (qtd. in \textit{Memoirs} 146). The dislodging of a sovereign is precisely what happens here, as J. Hillis Miller attests in \textit{The Disappearance of God}. 
Thomas “slunk, like a guilty thing, with stealthy steps from the room” (I.42). These stealthy steps mirror those with which he had ascended the staircase, and the entire episode becomes associated with an act of contamination. This “first stairway” would stay with De Quincey for the rest of his life, and reappear not only in his opium dreams, but also in his writing, a kind of working through that was ongoing and ceaseless.

The polluted yet eloquent body is aptly represented in a rhyme by Robert Oldham taken from his *Manchester Alphabet* of 1906 (qtd in Mould):

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I is for IRWELL
for IRK
and for INK
But none of these liquids
Is wholesome to drink.
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The lines describe the toxic states of the rivers Irk and Irwell as they flow through Manchester and its surrounding area. The rivers have become so thick with industrial and human waste as to render them impenetrable, a slow-oozing ink. If we consider this rhyme in terms of De Quincey’s own recurrent thematization of the topic of pollution as a personal infection, it is possible to read pollution as both an environmental and a physiological condition, both largely brought about through industrial growth and its effect on social relations. The relation between text (ink) and drug (unwholesome liquid) in De Quincey’s work evokes the concept of the *pharmakon*, both an aid to memory and a way of forgetting. In configuring the urban space as a site of contamination, De Quincey anticipates the kind of pollution that would later effect the
rivers Irk and Irwell, sites of childhood memory, not only enveloped by the metropolis, but polluted by it.

As Barrell suggests, much of the source of this recurrent and exaggerated violence in De Quincey’s writing can be related back to his experience at Greenhay of his visit to his dead sister. His father also died there, and both deaths were thought at the time to have something to do with the damp climate of the area around Manchester. De Quincey himself suffered from fears that he would develop the maladies of his sister (hydrocephalus) and father (tuberculosis). Both internal and environmental pollution is connected with commerce, as it is this very climate that was considered to be a factor in Manchester’s command of the textile industry, the humidity making cotton easier to manipulate (Hartwell 43). De Quincey’s manipulation of the fabric of his own experience for the urban literary marketplace is itself an act of retracing a personal pollution which is later reflected in the industrial pollution of the natural environment.

Manchester

What you owe to Milton is not any knowledge, of which a million separate items are still but a million of advancing steps on the same earthly level; what you owe is power,—that is, exercise and expansion to your own latent capacity of sympathy with the infinite, where every pulse and each separate influx is a step upwards, a step ascending as upon a Jacob’s ladder from earth to mysterious altitudes above the earth. (XI.56)

The step is used here as a metaphor for the experience of reading Milton. Though Miltonic language operates to elevate its reader above the prosaic and earth-bound, De Quincey points back towards the body as the site of this elevation. A stairway immediately suggests physical
exertion, as do the words “pulse,” “influx,” and “step.” Perhaps this is because, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, language articulates “the bond between the flesh and the idea, between the visible and the interior armature which it manifests and which it conceals” (149). In terms of the stairway, this “interior armature” might be thought of as the historical facts, which according to Walter Benjamin, are “congealed in the form of things” (14). And as Merleau-Ponty explains: “the alleged facts, the spatio-temporal individuals, are from the first mounted on the axes, the pivots, the dimensions, the generality of my body, and the ideas are therefore already encrusted in its joints” (114). Jacob’s ladder is the body upon which De Quincey not only ascends into mysterious altitudes, but also descends into mysterious depths. The ladder represents, according to the Midrash, the exile which the Jewish people would suffer before the coming of the Messiah (Paz xviii, n6). At the same time it represents Jesus who says “I am the way.” De Quincey traces the origins of his exile back to his departure from Manchester Grammar School, which he narrates in decidedly Miltonic terms.

The first event described at length in The Confessions of an English-Opium Eater is De Quincey’s clandestine departure from Manchester Grammar School. The description begins dramatically: “The morning came, which was to launch me into the world, and from which my whole succeeding life has, in many important points, taken its coloring” (9). The subject of the sentence, “morning,” is taken out of its daily round and personified. It “launches” a passive self into the world. The relative and dependent clauses of the sentence in which De Quincey invests

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94 This concept is similar to what Marx called a “social hieroglyph,” an object symbolic of the social relations it conceals.
95 Citations of the Confessions are from the Oxford World’s Classics edition. All other citations of De Quincey’s work are taken from David Masson’s Collected Writings.
himself describe him as relative and dependent (a relative and a dependent). He paradoxically opens the narrative with a self-defining act in which the self is acted upon.

At the end of the *Confessions*, De Quincey gives a clue to its beginning. He gestures to *Paradise Lost* to define his troubled dreams, “With dreadful faces thronged and fiery arms” (80). These are the immediately following lines, which complete *Paradise Lost*:

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Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.
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De Quincey’s tears on departing his “pensive citadel,” (10) and his gesture towards these lines at the end of the anecdote: “with Providence my guide” (11), show the opening of his *Confessions* as continuing from its end. As man’s fall in Book Twelve is mirrored in Satan’s fall in Book One, so De Quincey’s fate is mirrored in the beginning and the end of his *Confessions*.

De Quincey gives further evidence of playing a part in a Miltonic tableau in his choice of imagery: “I was firm and immovable in my purpose: but yet agitated by anticipation of uncertain danger and troubles; and, if I could have foreseen the hurricane, and perfect hail-storm of affliction which soon fell upon me, well might I have been agitated” (9). This recalls the “sulphurous hail / Shot after us in storm” (I.171-72) described by Satan, and anticipates De Quincey’s physical suffering in London and the later “pains of opium.” De Quincey also convinces the servants of the headmaster to take his part (“I was a favourite with all the
servants”), much like Satan convinces a third of heaven’s host to revolt against their own
“Archididascalus” (Satan’s repeated justification of his rebellion is that the new Son of God will be giving them new laws to follow). The groom, his chief aid among the servants, is directly compared to Milton’s Beelzebub, Satan’s chief aid: “Of Atlantean shoulders, fit to bear / The weight of mightiest monarchies.” This description of Beelzebub in Paradise Lost occurs just before he proposes the debauch of man, the precursor to De Quincey’s own debauch (through the “fruit” of the poppy). It is further worth noting that the trunk which is placed on the groom’s shoulders is brought down from an “aerial elevation” (10), much like Satan is brought down with his troupe from a great height. When the trunk falls it is with “the noise of twenty devils” (11). Ironically, the trunk likely contains Milton’s epic.96

When De Quincey describes the headmaster as “old and infirm,” and writes “I grieved at the thought of the mortification I should inflict upon him,” (9) his word choice intimates that he may be responsible, if not for the headmaster’s death, then for moving him in that direction. When the groom drops the trunk in front of the headmaster’s door, and the headmaster does not respond, we are again reminded of the man’s infirmity. The groom and De Quincey’s uproarious laughter recall in this context the laughter of Satan’s party in heaven when their cannon confound the heavenly host (6.628-9), and the “blowing up and blasting” of any difficulties the headmaster would propose during Greek lessons (7). The motivation for his act of rebellion, De Quincey’s satanic pride, is represented by his disdain for the headmaster and the general sense

96 I am grateful to Alan Vardy for this last observation.
that the place was below him. Like Satan, he creates his own imaginary lineage, speculating (wrongly, as his mother makes clear to him) as to aristocratic connections.

The mock epic structure of this departure serves to demonstrate, not the ways of God to men, but (through the confessional attitude of its narrator) the ways of De Quincey to his reader. In situating his personal experience in terms of a textual experience, he points to his literary nature, anxious spirituality, and philosophical inclination. This experience parallels that of his earlier experience at Greenhay, describing a locus of transgression and guilt, yet it also differs from that experience significantly, in that it is now a social hierarchy which De Quincey transgresses rather than the body of his sister. It is as if the historical erasure of the site of his experience of childhood guilt serves to magnify, rather than palliate, that guilt as a source of self-identity. Like Satan, he cannot go home, and the past becomes shrouded in a dark and undefined register that finds consonance in the negative capability of the Miltonic epic.

The stairway is symbolic of the ascending and descending motions of the author’s fate as well as the rise and fall of voiced language. The first paragraph of the *Confessions* describes its publication as a “step” (in the sense of an action taken towards a particular outcome) and it is, in a metaphor for the interconnected events of fate, a “series of steps” (III.223) that connects his early youth to his later opium dreams. J. Hillis Miller comments that De Quincey’s musical style is a function of music’s ability to escape the limits of linear time and space, a necessary quality of what De Quincey designates as a “literature of power”: “the sentences in their sequence build upon one another, and each new sentence is another rung in that Jacob’s ladder by which the
literature of power reaches up to heaven” (48). Jacob’s Ladder represents a kind of celestial harmonics towards which the rhythms and cadences of language should be attuned, as well as a metaphor through which to reconcile volition and fate.

Given the Miltonic context of the above narrative, it is important to remember the difference between the biblical and Miltonic appearance of Jacob’s ladder. In Book Three of *Paradise Lost* it is not Jacob, but Satan who views this stairway linking heaven and earth. Also important to De Quincey is the symbolic quality of the stair in Milton: “Each stair mysteriously was meant” (516). The note in the Kerrigan edition gives “mysteriously” as “symbolically, as an allegorical figure.” But perhaps the most telling lines are those which deal with the appearance of the stairway at this particular moment in the epic narrative:

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The stairs were then let down, whether to dare
  The fiend by easy ascent, or aggravate
  His sad exclusion from the doors of bliss.  (523-25)
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The authorial voice here ascribes to divine agency two possible acts that seem to bring that agency into question. To dare or to aggravate sound much closer to Satan’s mission: to dare humankind and to aggravate God. And Satan is not described as either tempted or aggravated by the presence of the stairs. The stairs “then let down” indicate the possibility of a perverse form of revenge on the part of God, inviting the blasphemous thought that the deity might be just as capable of malignity as Satan. Satan’s situation here describes something very much like the one J. Hillis Miller ascribes to De Quincey, as one “who can apprehend, but not possess, the infinite riches which lie within him and without” (32). Each of these “steps of gold” (541) is representative of those riches, steps upon which De Quincey remains stuck in the throes of his
addiction: “I was descending the mighty ladder, stretching to the clouds as it seemed, by which I had imperceptibly attained my giddy altitude—that point from which it seemed equally impossible to go forward or backward” (III.72-3). But this is looking too far ahead, and I will need to first examine some of the developments that leave De Quincey at this juncture.

London

Tu proverai sì come sa di sale
Lo pane altrui, e com’è duro calle
Lo scendere e’l salir per l’altrui scale.

You shall find out how salt is the taste of another man's bread, and how hard is the way up and down another man's stairs. – Dante Alighieri

It is to the “renowned metropolis” that De Quincey would eventually lead his steps, not necessarily to witness the rising sun gild its spires and pinnacles, but primarily in hopes to gild his empty treasury. Waiting for a loan to come through, he becomes a destitute urban wanderer, nearly, according to his own account, expiring on some steps in Soho Square, were it not for the immediate aid of his fellow peripatetic, Ann. His makeshift accommodation in the house on Greek Street is characterized by a gothic upstairs/downstairs drama of class relations and possible parental neglect. The city, as he claims in the Confessions, would supply much of the imagery for his later opium nightmares, and his penniless situation there would, he writes, lead to health problems that he claims to be the direct cause of his later opium addiction.

On Greek Street, De Quincey’s fitful attempts at sleep are accompanied by a repetitive sound on the stairs: “the noise of the rats made a prodigious echoing on the spacious stair-case and hall”
His young female companion, whom De Quincey suspects to be the illegitimate child of his lawyer, interprets these noises as the complaints of ghosts. According to Gio Ponti, staircases at night are “the place for nightmares and fears—deserted stairs—for suicides and vertigo” (117). This association of the staircase with psychosis has a direct relationship to its class associations. Whenever the lawyer made his appearance, the girl “went below stairs, brushed his shoes, coat, &c.; and, except when she was summoned to run an errand, she never emerged from the dismal Tartarus of the kitchens” (17). The stairs become a site of a nightly haunting and of a gothic upstairs/downstairs class relationship between the lawyer and the young girl. Their relationship recalls De Quincey’s account in *Autobiographical Sketches*, of the way the mother of two deaf twins “indulged her dislike for them” and treated them as servants, which also served to remove them “from the notice of strangers” (I.103). De Quincey feels compassion for the girls, and recalls “a spectacle, once real, of visionary twin sisters, moving forever up and down stairs” (I.106). They both die young, and De Quincey’s spectacle recalls Jacob’s vision of the angels ascending and descending an aerial stairway. The social boundaries formed by considerations of what is “out of place” (Sibley 107) have repercussions both within the structure of the middle-class family, and in the broader social structure, as that stair which divides the earth-bound laboring classes from the airy abodes of their wealthy masters.

Being penniless in London led De Quincey to spend much of his time walking the streets and loitering wherever he could find a space to rest. He introduces Ann in terms of one of these resting places: “Many of these women had occasionally taken my part against watchmen who wished to drive me off the steps of houses where I was sitting” (21). “These women” earned
their living as prostitutes, and “one amongst them” was the “noble minded Ann.” On the next page we learn of an incident that takes place on one such set of steps: “Suddenly, as we sate, I grew much worse: I had been leaning my head against her bosom; and all at once I sank from her arms and fell backwards onto the steps” (22). Steps once again form the primary feature of the landscape in formative events in De Quincey’s life, as they had in Greenhay and in Manchester. The iconography of the scene evokes a modern pieta for the global city, the eternally youthful Mary a symbol for the earth that is now, like Anne’s body, bought and sold in service of a bottomless desire. And the figure of De Quincey in this pieta displays the death of the dignity of the human form under a system in which all forms of exchange are made subject to a new monetary deity. One of Christianity’s central mysteries is revealed, in the very stone upon which it is displayed, to have been eviscerated of its claims to a serene spiritual transcendence.

Emptied of its Christian signification, his close physical contact with Ann comes to suggest a Freudian thanatos/eros dialectic, particularly in terms of Freud’s thoughts about stairs in dreams as representing coitus:

The basis for this comparison is not difficult to find; with rhythmical intervals and increasing breathlessness one reaches a height, and may then come down again in a few rapid jumps. Thus the rhythm of coitus is reproduced in climbing stairs. Let us not forget to consider the colloquial usage. This tells us that ‘mounting’ is, without further addition, used as a substitutive designation for the sexual act. In French, the step of a staircase is called la marche; un vieux marcheur corresponds exactly to the German, ein alter Steiger. (472, n2)

Freud might have also mentioned that the ancient Greek word, used to designate ladder or stairway, κλίμαξ, is the root of the English “climax.” De Quincey’s falling back onto the steps in

97 I am grateful to Alan Vardy for pointing out the pieta reference.
this context is suggestive of the “petit mort,” the French euphemism for orgasm. The relation of
these city steps with prostitutes and watchmen designate a connection between a desire tempered
by spectacle and idleness and a voyeurism necessitated by the infrastructure and architecture of
the city itself. Also, it was the vast income generated by the sex industry which provided capital
essential to the building boom of Georgian London. According to Dan Cruikshank, prostitution
at the end of the century

generated a turnover of around £20 million per annum. In the late eighteenth century it
vied in importance with brewing and construction, and the London docks, which in 1792
handled imports and exports worth around £27 million. Consequently, profits from the
sex industry financed the development of whole sections of the city, so that – quite
literally – much of Georgian London was built on the wages of sin. (x)

Thus the steps onto which De Quincey falls are tied to the body and its passions in unexpected
ways. His urban sprawl depicts the desultory passion play of the historical growth of the
economic capital (in both senses) of Europe.

By the time De Quincey is writing the Confessions, London had changed dramatically from his
early experience of it. His relation to his past is affected by the erasure of many of the places
that would have otherwise served as mnemonic devices and sites of sentimental value. One of
the greatest of these upheavals was the redesign of the West End by John Nash, which would
reshape the urban landscape in significant ways. Nash, according to Ann Bermingham, was “A
central figure in the transition from the late eighteenth-century picturesque mode of architectural
and landscape design to the suburban dream of rus in urbe.” The suburb, itself a “utopian
ideological construction” (168) would be brought into the city. And as a utopia, the suburb is a
kind of nowhere, a blankness imported by Nash and others into the urban center to serve as a
green space that would ameliorate the dreary gray of the landscape and, in its strategic placement, camouflage class division and conflict.

This project, carried out under the auspices of the Prince Regent, has been described by Stephen Inwood as “one of the greatest and most comprehensive pieces of town-planning London has ever experienced” (542). When De Quincey laments his and Ann’s “course lay through a part of the town which has now all disappeared” (140) it is directly due to this development. One of the streets that was common to their walks was Swallow Street, largely destroyed to make way for Regent Street. Not only is it significant that Swallow Street is swallowed up like Greenhay by urban development, it is done by the Regent himself. In the sense in which De Quincey is the reified figure of the Confessions, the opium-swaller who is invested with authority through the act of incorporation, he resembles this regent, as head of the church of opium and regent of the realm of the opium dream. The way in which autobiography in general raises questions as to how notions of the individual are structured, De Quincey’s tale of a fragmented self bears further resemblance to the fragmented authority of a Regent who rules while the king yet lives. And it is further relevant that Regent Street served as a social and class boundary (Inwood 543), separating the well to do from artisans and laborers even as it forms a further sign of the writer’s separation from Ann. These forms of separation and exclusion are described by David Sibley as part of a pattern of stigmatization of particular social groups: “Dirt, as Mary Douglas (1966) has noted, is matter out of place. Similarly, the boundaries of society are continually redrawn to distinguish between those who belong and those who, because of some perceived cultural

98 The continual and rapid development of London also appears to consume De Quincey’s celestial druggist, who provided his first dose of opium.
difference, are deemed to be out of place” (107). Dirt, as simply earth, is the necessary element of agriculture, yet is supposedly out of place in the city (though Regency London was hardly lacking in it). The suburb became the place where the middle-classes became particularly dirt-phobic, but it was also, in some cases, the place where dirt was perceived to be a defining characteristic.

As Inwood notes, “Early seventeenth century writers…used the word ‘suburb’ to suggest… ‘a place of inferior, debased and especially licentious habits of life’. But the other meaning…denoting a place of semi-rustic retreat…began to dominate in the eighteenth century, when well-off City families…took suburban villas” (569). Just what a suburb consists of, particularly during a period of rapid urban growth, is an interesting question. The OED reflects this confusion, defining the suburb as “either beyond or just within the city boundaries” (1a). The suburb seems increasingly to represent a kind of liminal space, a boundary or threshold between the urban and the rural. These manifestations of the suburb are illustrated through a particularly vivid opium experience De Quincey has as a young man while staying in a suburb of Liverpool.

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99 If the suburb suggests liminality on the horizontal plane, the stairway presents a vertical liminal space, or threshold between places, designating class divisions as well as a space where the individual psyche and broader cultural (largely middle-class) aspirations meet. Architectural space, as Christian Norberg Shulz claims, “can be defined as a concretization of man’s existential space” (12). This idea is also expressed in the ancient mnemonic technique of *ars memoriae*, in which architectural structures represent the interlocking parts of an argument.
De Quincey’s account of this experience forms what V.A. De Luca calls “the most eloquent expression in De Quincey’s writings of that Wordsworthian faith in a secular and internalized centre of transcendence” (qtd in Leask 207). As noted above, something rather unsettling enters De Quincey’s urban reformulation of the rural Wordsworthian faith. This element is directly related to the spread of the city and its increasing domination of all forms of cultural production and expression, and contrasts strikingly with the calm evoked in the passage:

The town of L------represented the earth, with its sorrows and its graves left behind, yet not out of sight, nor wholly forgotten. The ocean, in everlasting but gently agitation, and brooded over by a dove-like calm, might not unfitly typify the mind and the mood which then swayed it. For it seemed to me as if then first I stood at a distance, and aloof from the uproar of life; as if the tumult, the fever, and the strife, were suspended; a respite granted from the secret burthens of the heart; a Sabbath of repose; a resting from human labours. Here were the hopes which blossom in the paths of life; reconciled with the peace which is in the grave; motions of intellect as unwearied as the heavens, yet for all anxieties a halcyon calm: a tranquility that seemed no product of inertia, but as if resulting from mighty and equal antagonisms; infinite activities, infinite repose. (49)

The conflation of the life of the mind with the calm of the ocean suggests a connection between internal processes and external phenomena that is particularly suggestive of a Wordsworthian perspective. Yet rather than the loco-descriptive mode favored by Wordsworth, the subject is here frozen in space: “I have sate, from sun-set to sun-rise, motionless, and without wishing to move” (48). What De Quincey is looking at and where he sees it from further complicates the notion of what exactly is transcended here. Liverpool was, up until the early nineteenth
century, the center of the British slave trade, “employing 132 ships solely for that purpose in 1792” as well as a major port for Turkish opium “taking in 120lbs” in the same year (Leask 208). Though De Quincey does not mention the fact, Everton became incorporated into Liverpool in 1835, another site swallowed up by the insatiable urban center. The urban landscape, viewed from afar by a reposing subject, that offers the viewer a sense of centeredness and connection with the world, is also that which is advancing to swallow up that immobile, stone-like repose, and the privileged subject as well. The great gulf between De Quincey and the city is what allows him to view it with such composure. The Romantic in the suburbs is offered a protected view of the urban center that gives him a sense of ownership and control. Yet this sense is disrupted by the underlying forces of the urban, and the viewer becomes, as Tim Fulford writes, “thoroughly commodified” (56), and subject to the very forces he appears to command.

100 There appears to be no direct evidence of exactly when this particular reverie took place. Robert Morrison explains that the author spent several months in Everton in 1805, and was back again in 1807, and was likely taking opium there during these periods (114-116). Grevel Lindop says this opium reverie occurred in either 1805 “or in a later year” (135). 1805 was also the year in which De Quincey completed “The Constituents of Happiness,” his essay providing the ingredients he then felt necessary for happiness in the world, and the year he began research into political economy (Eaton 105). Horace Eaton places him there at various times in 1805, 1806, 1807, and “what proved to be his last visit,” in 1808 (117n21). Since slavery was officially outlawed in 1807, there is a possibility that Liverpool was no longer involved in the slave trade at the time De Quincey is enjoying the view. Whatever the case, the profits made from the slave trade, like those made from the sex trade in London, certainly form a historically visible part of what De Quincey describes.
QuickTime™ and a TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor are needed to see this picture.
“The Household Wreck”

The suburb and its relation to the city is taken up in De Quincey’s short story, “The Household Wreck,” a story within which the stairway also plays an important role. The story depicts a quite middle-class family residing in a “quite rural suburb” (XII.173). The narrator of the tale describes Agnes in infantilizing terms: “in perfect womanhood she retained a most childlike expression of countenance,” she is characterized by “childlike innocence,” “sweet feminine timidity,” and “cherub loveliness” (XII.165). All this is in large part intended to create tension with the events which will follow, but it is also typical of male ideals of femininity during the

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period. The suburb where they live is described in direct contrast to the city, which is “overflowing with profligacy, and temptations of every order” (XII.181) leading their servant Hannah’s son to get in with the wrong crowd and be convicted and executed at the age of seventeen for a crime he did not commit. The suburb, of course, was by its very nature under the threat of envelopment during the period, as were all the significant suburbs in De Quincey’s life. The ominous threats that appear throughout the story are related to this knowledge. The family receives a scare from a fortune-teller (“fortune” in its financial sense, is relevant here, and thus the fortune-teller is also something like a financial advisor urging the family to sell while they can) as to Agnes’s fate, but their youthful elasticity and disdain of superstition soon return them to their normal lives. When Agnes fails to return on time from her unchaperoned trip to the city, the narrator grows increasingly unsettled. He worries that “Agnes might have returned by a by-path” which led “through a dangerous and disreputable suburb” (XII.178). This “other” suburb reflects the old idea of the suburb as tainted and debased, and in so doing represents a kind of mirror image to the happy and wholesome suburb from which the narrator reports.

When his son tells him he had just seen his mother, his reaction is sudden: “I sprang forward into the house, up stairs, and in rapid succession into every room where it was likely that she might be found; but everywhere there was a dead silence, disturbed only by myself, for, in my growing confusion of thought, I believe that I rang the bell violently in every room I entered” (XII.178). The “dead” silence foreshadows her fate, the bell almost a funeral toll,104 as if in some way the narrator was complicit in her fate. Perhaps the mystery is not so mysterious: the reason he gives

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104 The bell also functions in this way in “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts.”
for not accompanying his young wife to the profligate and dangerous city is that he “was engaged in a task of writing upon some points of business which could not admit of further delay” (XII.175). The demands of business and the type of writing they require are figured here as contributory factors in the evils which befall Agnes. The narrator’s act of rushing up the stairs resembles what C.G. Jung writes about the behavior of conscience: “Conscience behaves like the man who hearing a suspicious noise in the cellar rushes up to the attic to make sure that there are not thieves and subsequently that the noise was a figment of his imagination. In reality the cautious man hadn’t dared to go down to the cellar” (qtd. in Norberg-Schulz, 31). De Quincey’s story reveals something about what uneasiness resides in the cellars of the aspiring suburban bourgeoisie.

“The Avenger”

The suburb and the staircase come together again in the blood-soaked revenge tale “The Avenger.” Here, rather than a space of serenity and health, the suburb is identified as a racially othered space, a potential threat to the peaceful and ordered lives of the pillars of the urban community. When the murders escalate and the “most accomplished police” are sent to deal with the matter, their first suspicion falls upon “the quality of the miscellaneous population who occupied our large suburb” (XII.261). Later, when we learn Maximilian’s story and motivation, we find that he and his family were forced to stay in a “wretched suburb” (XII.280) reserved for the Jews. The supposed threat the suburb poses is shown, however, to reside within the heart of the city, within the very value system which had allowed Maximilian’s parents to be treated so
cruelly, and which now extols Maximilian’s attributes and accomplishments, and gains him a warm welcome to the city.

In one of the most detailed accounts of the murders, the staircase plays a prominent role. A boarding school run by two elderly women provides the setting, at which two sisters, thirteen and sixteen, are staying through the Christmas holidays due to their distance from home. The youngest girl hears, a day before the murder “the creaking of a foot upon the stairs” (XII.257). She determines that the sound could not have come from anyone currently residing in the building, and concludes that “her ears had been too sensitively awake” (XII.258). Doubts assail her at night, and suspicion is raised anew. The next night as she and her sister are “on their way upstairs” to bed, she retrieves a cloak from a closet in order to stave off the cold and in so doing reveals “a man’s foot and leg” (XII.258). She attempts to return to her sister without giving any sign of her discovery, but her nervous laughter gives her away, and soon the man is upon them: “as they were on the last steps of the landing, they could hear the hard breathing and long strides of the murderer ascending behind them” (XII.259). They rush ahead, but her sister falls on the threshold of the room, and

At that moment the assassin exchanged his stealthy pace for a loud clattering ascent. Already he was on the topmost stair; already he was throwing himself at a bound against the door, when Louisa, having dragged her sister into the room, closed the door and sent the bolt home in the very instant that the murderer’s hand came into contact with the handle. (XII.259)

The two elderly ladies who ran the boarding school were not so lucky and were found “both lying dead at different points on the staircase” (XII.260). If there were any further need for
elaboration of the point, the final murders also feature a body discovered on stairs “floating with blood” (XII.265).

Presumably these bodies are piling up on the stairs in order to demonstrate the victims attempt to flee, and to highlight the unsettling quality of the murders, as staircases are generally not dwelling spaces, but connections between them. As a site which serves primarily as a connecting point, the stairway represents something in the process of change, much like the suburban and urban landscapes. Murder in this sense is representative of the process of urbanization. Murder will out, perhaps, but the murderers always manage to get in, just as the city would overcome any attempt to resist its growth and reach.

The prodigious amount of blood, meant to atone for the cruel deaths of Maximilian’s family members, mirrors another shedding of blood for the sake of atonement, that of Christ on the cross. The traditional Christian reading of Jacob’s ladder, first given by Augustine and then echoed by Luther and Calvin, is as follows: “Christ is the ladder…for he says ‘I am the way.’” Yet this way becomes an eternal repetition for De Quincey, it is eternally regressing, like the vision of the throne of God in Elizabeth’s room, or the figure of Piranesi upon the stairs, always progressing, never attaining. But the divine represented as a stairway must have presented a powerful image, even if that divinity remained at an impossible distance, no matter how many steps one took.
An important biblical reference dealing with a slaughter visited upon the sinful is found in the Book of Ezekiel, followed by a detailed list of measurements for the construction of a temple and the rituals to be carried out there necessary to regaining God’s acceptance. This temple might be thought of as the body, both individual and collective, in need of cleansing:

Now let them put away their whoredom, and the carcasses of their kings, far from me, and I will dwell in the midst of them for ever. Thou son of man, shew the house to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities: and let them measure the pattern. (43:9-10)

The elaborate sacrificial rites prescribed in this chapter of Ezekiel reflect a ritual purification carried out upon the body. The stairs in this sense represent stations, a narrative in a series of steps that map out a historical incarnation, the step registering variously as a material object, a bodily motion, and a metaphorical act. As in the many other passages in both the Hebrew and Christian scripture, in which slipping, stumbling, or sliding are connected with sin, so the step implies a moral act, a moving towards God, and here “his stairs shall look toward the east” (43:17). This “orient”-ation would also become standard in the placement of Christian altars. The fascination and horror that sacrificial rites held for De Quincey, particularly when associated with the orient, is vividly expressed in the account of his own nightmare of crucifixion, which far from saving him or anyone else, appears to subject him to a nightly repetition of the ritual. As in the pieta, the divine is humanized (perhaps partly explaining why the scene of the body’s removal from the cross was a popular subject for Christian altar pieces during the Renaissance), but now the human body is in the position of a Christ–like figure that is beyond redemption.
“On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts”

The account given of the Williams murders in “On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts” has several qualities in common with the previous examples, including the staircase as a central feature of the landscape. The murders all take place in a dangerous part of London, which De Quincey associates with a racial otherness: “Every third man at the least might be set down as a foreigner. Lascars, Chinese, Moors, Negroes, were met at every step.” If this wasn’t explicit enough, in the next sentence he describes “the manifold ruffianism shrouded impenetrably under the mixed hats and turbans of men whose past was untraceable to any European eye” (XIII.76). Yet, of course, the perpetrator of the heinous crimes is recognizably European, if not English born and bred.

In the first murders, of Marr, his wife, their infant, and their male servant, there is a moment of heightened tension as Mary, the servant girl, returns from her fruitless errand to fetch oysters for the family meal. On hearing no response from her ringing and knocking, she begins to become suspicious. Listening carefully and with increasing dread, she finally hears something:

On the stairs—not the stairs that led downwards to the kitchen, but the stairs that led upwards to the single storey of the bedchambers above—was heard a creaking sound. Next was heard more distinctly a footfall: one, two, three, four, five stairs were slowly and distinctly descended. (XIII.88)

As the preceding examples illustrate, the creaking sound of a foot on the stair is more than a simple plot device meant to elevate the dramatic tension. The murderer’s descending of the stairs is related to De Quincey’s own act of descent, from his sister’s room, from grammar
school, and in the vertiginous descents of his opium dreams. The stair is related to the progress of fate, each step irrevocably registered, each act meticulously categorized in the palimpsest of the mind. Though Mary is the only possible figure within hearing of the steps, the sound is received in the passive voice, it “was heard” by a general listener, thus bringing the reader into the scene. The incremental nature of the description here is also suggestive of the record of incremental measurement that De Quincey kept of his opium use, an experience increasingly associated with descents into transfixing scenes of horror.

The second group of murders, involving the Williamson family, similarly involves a staircase as central to the dramatic landscape. Yet now instead of the murderer on the stair, the situation is reversed, and the potential victim descends the stairs towards the murderer:

One step brought him to the head of the stairs; he lowered his head over the balustrade in order to listen; and at that moment ascended from the little parlour this agonizing cry from the woman-servant, “Lord Jesus Christ! we shall all be murdered!”…the poor petrified journeyman, quite unconscious of what he was doing, in blind, passive, self-surrender to panic, absolutely descended both flights of stairs. (XIII.101)

The journeyman freezes towards the bottom of the stairs when he sees Williams in the parlor through an open door. Williams is preoccupied searching for valuables, and doesn’t notice the figure on the stair. The journeyman (a liminal figure), after getting a good look at the killer, collects himself and returns upstairs to begin affecting his escape by tying strips of bed sheets into a makeshift rope. The incremental measurement involved in this process mirrors the counting of steps on the stairs; in fact the journeyman is fashioning his own stairway.

And at this very moment, whilst desperate agitation is nearly paralysing his fingers, he hears the sullen stealthy step of the murderer creeping up through the darkness…The step which he had heard was on the staircase—but upon which stair? He fancied upon the
lowest: and in a movement so slow and cautious, even this might make all the difference; yet might it not have been the tenth, twelfth, or fourteenth stair? (XIII.109)

The uncertainty of the position of the murderer is reflected in the uncertainty of the narrator’s position, and the further uncertainty of the relation of the author to this narrator, who laments, like Wordsworth had, the craving for extraordinary incident that the rapid reporting of things like the Williams murders created. In the public imagination, newspaper headlines have replaced the prophetic voice, and murder becomes a kind of appalling fascination. As Carlyle comments, “the true Church of England, at this moment [1829], lies in the Editors of its Newspapers” (241). The city, formerly the site of order, law, and civilization, “With glistening spires and pinnacles adorned, / Which now the rising sun gilds with his beams” (Paradise Lost 3.550-51), appeared something like the entrance to paradise as viewed by Jacob. Upon more intimate experience, the awesome and amoral driving force of urban growth suggests the crushing of anything laid in its path, including the bodies of its inhabitants, and the entrance to heaven takes on a new ambivalence.

On the Threshold

Having begun with an epigraph of a figure on a stair, I will provide another as a kind of postscript with the intention of providing a historical frame. This figure, of the twentieth century, similarly captures the static representation of motion offered by Nieto. The critic Bradley Bailey links this image to the painting by Velasquez, and infers that the artist may have drawn his inspiration from the enigmatic figure of Nieto. The drawing, entitled Encore a cet
Astre (Once More to this Star), inspired, according to its creator, one of the most iconic works of the twentieth century, *Nude Descending a Staircase*.

The drawing consists of three main figures, a male at the right of the drawing, ascending the stairs and looking through a barred window to his right, a somewhat sexualized female figure floating on the left hand side, and a large central figure brooding over the entire composition in an attitude of melancholic contemplation. That these elements are central to many of the scenes in De Quincey considered here is of interest, as well as Duchamp’s assertion that his aim in *Nude Descending a Staircase* “was a static representation of movement” (qtd in Chipp, 393). Such a static representation might be said to reside in the stairs themselves. This may have some bearing on why Duchamp included the “escalier” (staircase) in the title, when its meaning in French was redundant, in order to point to this very resemblance, to the ghostliness of the figure that the stairway will always suggest.

The way De Quincey portrays the staircase as a locus of anxiety, violence, trauma, and flight is not only relevant in terms of the city of his own time, it also has startling implications in cities today, where the staircase has become relegated to a secondary status, and has become associated with emergency, danger, and certain types of reverie. This is particularly true of public housing projects, where statistics show stairwells to be common areas for loitering, drug use, and robbery (Newman 30-31), in general a “nether world of fear and crime” (Newman 27). Stairways, of course, have been mostly made redundant by elevators, which according to Bachelard “do away with the heroism of stair climbing so that there is no longer any virtue of living up near the sky”
(27). Perhaps we might think of De Quincey’s image of the stair as that which tortuously held out the possibility of a reunion with God, never fulfilled, and that which formed a troubled historical union of subject with empire, as the final passage of the “Dream Fugue” suggests. As De Quincey listens to the thunderous roar of the triumphant metropolis, he becomes that polyvalent roar in all of its violent immediacy, ascending with it into its impossible distances.
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Chapter 5

Imaging Lastness: The Last Man and the Contagion of Modernity

How silent is now Versailles! – The solitary foot, that mounts the sumptuous stair-case, rests on each landing-place, whilst the eye traverses the void. – Mary Wollstonecraft

In the summer of 1814, Mary Godwin and Percy Shelley, fresh from their dramatic departure from London, arrived in Paris for a week’s stay. On visiting the Louvre they found only one painting they admired: “At the Louvre we saw one picture, apparently of the Deluge – which was terribly impressive. It was the only remarkable picture which we had time to observe” (“History of a Six Weeks’ Tour” 213). That Poussin’s famous depiction of the biblical flood held their attention at this moment is significant. As David Collings has argued, the Deluge is also a key
metaphor in Wordsworth’s five book *Prelude*, illustrating that for Wordsworth, “the rainbow covenant no longer wards off the threat of a Biblical flood…making humanity vulnerable once again” (345). This vulnerability and its situation within a post-covenantal world is a persistent theme in Shelley’s *The Last Man*, a novel about the end of human civilization written at the end of the Romantic era. The horrific sublime which Poussin’s painting typifies becomes Shelley’s calling card, questioning the notion that nature can be contained or limited, whether through forms of Malthusian social engineering or high Romantic theories of the power of the sublime to elevate the mind.

The year prior to the publication of Shelley’s novel witnessed an event which puts Poussin’s painting of disastrous loss into a new context. The financial crisis of 1825 caused by a vast speculation in South American mines, resulted in the closure of many of England’s banks, the disruption of its economy and the ruin of scores of investors. Rather than causing the end of speculative investment, however, the crisis merely instigated the centralization of financial systems. The disaster was, in the words of Alexander J. Dick, “the first modern financial crisis” marking “the moment at which capitalism grew from an ideological enterprise into a global condition.” Thinking about the panic of 1825 in terms of Shelley’s novel (and vice versa) demonstrates the way aesthetic and economic discourses meet in the figure of a global condition.

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105 Other elements of the painting parallel Shelley’s novel. The focus on a small group, the bleak coloring, and the way the calmness intensifies the horror of the scene are characteristics apparent throughout the novel. The importance of this painting in the history of art has been well documented, along with its profound influence on the painters Constable and Turner (Verdi 397). What Paul Desjardins finds in *Le Deluge* is something like what the protagonist finds in *The Last Man*: “seulement le vide, l’absence, le refus de répondre” (qtd in Verdi 399). The catastrophe is, for the artist, as much internal event as historical process.
This is even true of the generic conditions through which Shelley seeks to put her work into the marketplace. As Dick comments, “1825 also marks a crucial transition in the publishing industry, the point at which the traditional market for vellum-bound epics and triple-decker novels was eclipsed by cheap reprints and serial publications.” Shelley’s novel, published in three volumes, was just the sort of thing that no longer had currency in a changing market, much like the banks themselves.

Shelley was not the only one thinking about plague in the midst of a financial crisis. Thomas Love Peacock was writing a series of satirical poems in 1825, *Paper Money Lyrics* (though he withheld them from publication until 1837, in the midst of another financial panic). In the preface to that volume, he looks back to the moment of their composition:

> The Lyrics shadow out, in their order, the symptoms of the epidemic in its several stages; the infallible nostrums […] proposed by every variety of that arch class of quacks, who call themselves political economists; the orders, counter-orders, and disorders […] the final patching up of the uncured malady by a series of false palliatives, which only nourished for another eruption of the original disease. (qtd. in Dick)

Peacock’s lyrics present, in part, a merciless caricature of the enthusiasm of the first generation Romantics in the wake of what he reads as a failed national experiment. He essentially accuses Romanticism of failing to pay upon its promissory note. Though full of irreverent hilarity,¹⁰⁶ his satire points to a darker thought that has much in common with that motivating Shelley. What

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¹⁰⁶ As in these lines, imagining Wordsworth’s reaction to the fiscal crisis:

I muse, I muse, for much this news my spirit doth perplex,
But whilst I muse I can’t refuse a pint of double X,
Which Mrs W. brings to me, which she herself did brew,
Oh! doubly sweet is double X from Mistress double U.
Dick writes of Peacock’s satire is equally applicable to *The Last Man*: “what distinguishes [it] is its sense of utter hopelessness. There is no moral alternative here in economic science or in poetry.” Yet, for Shelley, this hopelessness is not merely an end, but also a depiction of another way of being in the Romantic landscape. And what Dick writes of the symbolic significance of Peacock’s work might be even more true of *The Last Man*: “Peacock’s complaint represents the end of what we call Romanticism, associated with high philosophical ideals and nostalgic systems of social value, and the beginning of a new, modern era characterized by hesitant realism and moral skepticism.” Shelley, I argue, has the better claim to represent “the end of what we call Romanticism” as she presents a more nuanced approach which demonstrates an understanding of her place both within and at the end of a particular way of representing the world.

Shelley’s approach to her predecessors displays both a continuation of the Romantic project and a letting go of its aims through the work of mourning. The novel responds, in the tradition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, to what Katey Castellano calls “the disorienting incomprehensibility of modernity,” but not “by attempting to conserve the past in the face of overwhelming, modernizing change” (41) as that earlier work had. It is already too late for that, as the panic of 1825 and its aftermath demonstrate. Rather, her work bears witness to the divergence between what Ranciere describes as “a community art dedicated to restoring the social bond and an art bearing witness to the irremediable catastrophe lying at the very origin of that bond” (130). In Shelley’s novel we are presented with what Timothy Morton has recently termed a “dark ecology” which doesn’t hesitate to explore “negativity and irony, ugliness, and horror” for it is
these qualities that “compel our compassionate coexistence to go beyond condescending pity” (17). Recent interest in *The Last Man* appears to be a recognition of its compelling dark ecology. Its initial critics, however, were either unable or unwilling to understand its urgent plea, which left the novel in a kind of static limbo for over one hundred years.

As the title of Morton Paley’s study observes, *The Last Man* presents an “apocalypse without millennium,” an unredeemed and unmitigated disaster. In discussing the novel’s reception, Paley relates how it “moved almost the entire critical establishment to deny the possibility of imaging Lastness” (5). Initial hostility towards the novel is often expressed in terms that paradoxically validate the novel’s social critique. *The Literary Gazette* waxes biblical: “‘Of that day no man knoweth.’ The imagination penetrates the unknown by dint of its own strong sympathy: and with that terrible future we have nothing in common” (4). The inability of the reviewer to see his own society reflected in the novel is also apparent in his overlooking of the novel’s epigraph, which quotes Adam in Book Eleven of *Paradise Lost* saying something quite similar about prophecy:

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Let no man seek
Henceforth to be foretold what shall befal
Him or his Children.
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One is tempted to think of this “no man” as an Odyssean ruse, under the cover of which Shelley’s sibyl escapes the limited vision of her Cyclopean detractors, suggesting a counter to a patriarchal sublime: a woman will, henceforth, foretell what shall befal her and her children. To
write “we have nothing in common” with a novel that makes commonality its central theme
demonstrates a superficial understanding of the tale. *The Monthly Magazine* imagines a
regenerative linguistic cycle that precludes lastness: “we cannot close the doors of language on
the thousand little beginnings that tread on the heels of the safest conclusion” (2). That we
cannot close the doors on communicability, that it allows no safe conclusion, is precisely what
the unfolding of the narrative demonstrates. To imagine a universal communicability in the form
of plague presents the challenges to the stability and historicity of all forms of culture brought
about by an increasingly imperialist approach to the world and an increasingly industrial and
global economy. The initial reactions to the novel illustrate something like what Oscar Wilde
would say of his own critics: “The nineteenth century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of
Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass” (3). Lastness, despite the critical reaction against it,
lies at the very center of notions of modernity.

The reader arrives at this lastness through a completely delimited communicability that itself
implodes the social and biological structures that make communicability possible. It takes part
in, however critically, the Romantic claim for the universality of art that, in Tolstoy’s words,
“infects all without distinction” (88). It anticipates thinking about art in terms of a redemptive
disaster, described by Antonin Artaud as “an avenging scourge, a redeeming epidemic” (31).
And it makes legible, through the remnants of its destructive force, the binding structure of social
relations. Like the Deluge, which was of particular significance to scientists’ study, from the
Reformation to the Romantic era, of the history of the earth, plague provides a way of thinking
about how communities and cultures create meaning; it reveals the layers of a social
archaeology. As Collings argues, “Materialist discourse…does not simply erase the transcendental but redefines it precisely *as* an infinite material process” (348). If Wordsworth finds, in his passage through the gorge in Book Six of The Prelude, that “chaos is intrinsic to the cosmos” (354), Shelley contemplates specifically the processes intrinsic to the nature of communicability, anticipating a shift later in the century towards aestheticism, in which art replaces nature as the site of a “disastrous transcendence” (The Picture of Dorian Gray, with its phantasmagoric framing, comes to mind). She also anticipates what the theory of evolution would eventually make clear: “The future is only insecurely fastened to the natural. This is peculiarly so in the aftermath of evolutionary theory that insists that no present species will survive into the remote future” (Beer 16). The fructifying and wonderfully diverse forms of life celebrated by Romanticism as a source of imaginative possibility, would, in the knowledge of their fated demise, appear to foreclose upon the dream of humanity and nature unified in a single purpose.

Unlike the early Romantic notion, expressed in “The Aeolian Harp” of a “One Life within us and abroad,” in which the observer finds the self in unison with the outside world, the plague presents a one death that dramatically divides humanity and its culture from nature:

> Where was pain and evil? Not in the calm air or weltering ocean; not in the woods or fertile fields, nor among the birds that made the woods resonant with song, nor the animals that in the midst of plenty basked in the sunshine. Our enemy, like the Calamity of Homer, trod our hearts, and no sound was echoed from her steps. (251)

Nature remains innocent of evil because plague is a particularly human form, associated here
with anthropocentric cultural foundations, and suggesting the communicability of culture in general. The reader may recall the lines from Book One of *The Prelude*, in which the narrator is also pursued by an uncanny and mysterious force, “steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod” (331-2). The difference between “almost…silent” and “no sound” is the distance between symbiotic coexistence and an irrevocable split between nature and humanity. The attempt to grasp a transcendence in nature becomes for Shelley a shadow that grasps in vain, not because Wordsworth and Coleridge are wrong about the nature of the metonymic connection between all things, but because where Coleridge reads a resulting “joyance every where,” she finds a Miltonic “wide-wasting pestilence,” a type of darkness visible.

Shelley takes an inherited Romantic attitude towards possibility and applies to it the epic sweep of a Miltonic disaster. The existence of the virus, occupying a border between the organic and inorganic, troubles the foundations of accepted categories, and becomes the narrative vehicle through which Shelley can capitalize on the profligacy of a Romantic indeterminacy. Adam Potkay describes this ambiguity in terms of the lines in Wordsworth’s Prelude: “I saw the sentiment of being spread / O’er all that moves”:

> Wordsworth’s style allows for maximal possibilities of interconnection with minimal clarification of who or what is acting or being acted on. He ends his litany to being by subsuming multiplicity into the unity of “one life,” but even that unity remains divided among possible agents: “in all things / I saw one life, and felt that it was a joy” (2.429–30). Life, like being, may spread over the poet or spread outward from him. (397)

On the one hand, there appears to be a kind of intellectual recognition of a shared quality permanently inhering in all things, and on the other, there is a more gradual, sensual realization,
something that is felt “along the blood,” and culminates in the reification of the scene. Not only does this make it unclear where nature ends and the human begins, it also brings into question where sense ends and thought begins. It is the opening up of this space of transcendence, ruled over by a contagious force of being, that is central to Romantic envisionings of the environment and of human inhabitation within it. Shelley exploits the indeterminacy of this transcendence in her darkly envisioned tale.

A comparison of the ways Wordsworth (in his poetry) and Mary Shelley (in her novel) employ the word “spread” provides insight into how Shelley capitalizes on an inherited Romantic sense of an all-embracing nature and applies it to a reflection on the nature of communicability. Both use the word to describe food, the spreading of sails and the branching of trees. Both use it to describe bodies of water, expanses of space, and stretches of landscape, especially when viewed from above. Both use “spread” once in terms of physical violence, and both use it in terms of disease and distress. Yet one of Wordsworth’s most common uses is almost completely absent from The Last Man. Lines like “What pleasure through my veins you spread” (The Waterfall and the Eglantine 26), “With brightest sunshine round me spread” (The Green Linnet 3), “Heaven’s bounteous love through me is spread” (To May 53), and “Of joy in widest commonality spread” (The Recluse 1.1.771) do not find their equivalents in the novel, save for one introductory description of Adrian. Yet this absence suggests an uncanny likeness: “through my veins you spread” in “widest commonality” is precisely the human complaint in the

107 A thinly veiled portrait of an angelicized Percy: “the morning sunbeams tinged with gold his silken hair, and spread light over his beaming countenance” (19).
face of plague. Shelley’s novel can be seen as taking the figure of the transcendent force latent in the natural object, and activating it in terms of the reifying force of the object of commodity. Unity is achieved, not through an individual merging with his environment, but through a global pandemic that bears an uncanny resemblance to the spread of capitalism.

The process of infection is historically apparent in the spread of commodities and their transfiguration of global culture. As Britain’s imperial power grew, it produced greater amounts of commercial goods for export all over the world, which had a profound affect on how people went about their daily lives. The world began to look more and more British:

The typical tough gaucho of the pampas was described thus in 1837 by the British consul in La Plata, Woodbine Parish: “Take his whole equipment—examine everything about him—and what is there not of raw hide that is not British? If his wife has a gown, ten to one it is made in Manchester, the camp-kettle in which he cooks his food, the earthenware he eats from, the knife, his poncho, spurs, bit, are all imported from England.” Argentina even received the stones for its sidewalks from Britain. (Galeano 195-96)

As important as British military power was in expanding empire, commodity made possible a much broader subjugation, turning every body into a potential source of profit. Like the missionaries that had preceded them, soldiers and sailors served as heralds of a new social order. As new industrially produced commodities spread around the world, they transformed the habits and cultural traditions of countless societies, proving to be a force, like Shelley’s plague, both irresistible and insatiable.

Galeano’s description is particularly relevant in terms of the importance of the relationship
between England and South America in the progress of capitalist markets. As previously noted, it was, to a large extent, British interest in the mines of South America that led to the crisis of 1825. Yet it is not a sudden surge of unregulated and enthusiastic speculation, as some commentators have suggested, that is primarily responsible for the crisis. England’s empire building, and that of Europe in general, had long been dependent on the bullion brought from South American mines.¹⁰⁸ Even when these mines were under Spanish or Portuguese control, England siphoned off much of the metal. As Galeano explains: “The Spaniards owned the cow, but others drank the milk…in 1543, sixty-five percent of all the royal revenues went to paying annuities on debts (34). The gold and silver mined by the Portuguese similarly found its way into British coffers: “England and Holland…are said to have illicitly gathered more than half the metal the Portuguese Crown was supposed to get from Brazil in quinto real tax.” The enormous amount of bullion entering Britain from South America through Spain and Portugal made possible the nation’s later expansion: “According to British sources, the gold arriving in London reached £50,000 a week in some periods. Without this tremendous accumulation of gold reserves, Britain would not have been able, later on, to confront Napoleon” (68). With such a history, and with greater wealth and practice in foreign investment, it is little wonder that upon Napoleon’s defeat, many would be eager to invest in the mines from which the raw materials of victory had been drawn.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸ “Between 1503 and 1660, 185,000 kilograms of gold and 16,000,000 of silver arrived at the Spanish port of Sanlucar de Barrameda,” exceeding by three times total European reserves (Galeano 33).

¹⁰⁹ Lust for precious metals and science, would later come together in the discipline known as “economic mineralogy.”
How these mines operated requires some brief consideration in order to better understand their place in British history and the spread of global capitalism that parallels the spread of plague in Shelley’s novel. Both the Spanish and the Portuguese operated mines with the use of what amounted to slave labor. Natives were ruthlessly and pitilessly driven to work long hours with little food or rest, in painful and life-threatening conditions. When miners died, as they often did, they were simply replaced, as if from a supply of infinite spare parts. As Galeano writes, “Of every ten that went up into the freezing wilderness, seven never returned” (51). The gradual dropping of bodies recalls the ever-thinning population of The Last Man, particularly as the group dwindles to a handful on entering the freezing wilderness of the Alps. The operations of capital not only cruelly claim the lives of the helpless, they vastly transfigure the broader ecosystem, transforming the nature of social relations beyond the point of return.

Though investment in South American colonies that were attempting to free themselves from colonial rule was attractive to many in Britain, the government was wary of the republican, and potentially Jacobin tone of these revolutions. It was finally swayed to recognize some of the new nations when it faced the prospect of losing direct access to their imagined wealth. When it was discovered that America was making plans to recognize the fledgling republics, and thus gain the kind of access to these markets that Britain desired, the government laid aside its qualms in favor of its coffers. In The Last Man, Lionel and the young Clara hear a story of an American ship whose name suggests both imagined wealth and inevitable fate, the Fortunatus: “A strange story was rife here. A few days before, a tempest-struck vessel had appeared off the town: the hull was parched-looking and cracked, the sails rent…the shrouds tangled and broken” (157). A lone
survivor apparently walks off the ship and drops dead of the plague, to be “buried deep in the sands; and none could tell more, than that the vessel was American built, and that several months before the Fortunatus had sailed from Philadelphia, of which no tidings were afterwards received” (157-8). The way this event serves to foreshadow the outbreak of plague is akin to the way the recognition of South American republics paved the way for the exorbitant loans that fueled the crisis of 1825. The figure of plague is buried deep, like the ore which Britain so desired, a desire which would come to shape the future economy of the globe.

Mining has another importance to the events described in *The Last Man*. This is in the direct connection between mining and geology, a science coming into being during the Romantic period. It was in mines that most early geological fieldwork was done, and where fossils were discovered which shaped the face of the future discipline. It is also in an underground space where the novel begins. *The Last Man* opens in the cave of the Cumaean Sibyl, both a sacerdotal and a geological space, “convulsed by earthquake and volcano” (3). Findings as to the actual age of the earth and the extinction of various species led to a revolution in thinking about the historical interpretation of the bible and the place of humanity in this newly configured creation. Nature could never again be a constant force in the background of history, as it now had a history of its own, documented in fossils and strata, in which various catastrophic narratives could be read.

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110 And it was there, incidentally, where a young Novalis and Goethe received training in mining operations. Novalis would go on to a brief career as a mine inspector.
For centuries, fossilized remains of sea creatures found on mountainsides were popularly seen as proof of the biblical account of the Deluge. Similarly the text found on leaves and other objects in the cave of the sibyl provides a type of fossilized narrative of another deluge, one which rather than uniting humanity and nature in a single destruction, now singled out the human, leaving nature to continue without any explanation or hope of one, as in Hutton’s famous phrase: “no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end.” But while Hutton would see in deep time the long and gradual story of the transformation of the earth, Shelley would find a Buffon-like catastrophe in the midst of human culture. The leaves as fossils provide the trace, the footprint, and the legible artifact of that catastrophe, one that would decimate humanity but leave nature strangely whole.

The process of the piecing together of the leaves into a narrative suggests, in its geological and paleontological senses, the kind of piecing back together of disinterred fossils to form the skeletons of long extinct creatures, a process carried out in the early nineteenth century by Georges Cuvier using the relatively new method of comparative anatomy. The discovery of the fossilized remains of extinct species, and the wonder, awe, and excitement which such discoveries produced (fig. 1) might be compared, then, to the discovered history the author presents to her audience of the extinction of humanity. More specifically, it was William Buckland’s popular Reliquiae Diluvianae of 1823 that may have influenced the setting of the

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111 The discovery of the fossil depicted in figure one influenced Cuvier’s first speculations on the possibility of animal species going extinct.
narrative’s discovery. Martin Rudwick explains this book’s inspiration: “In 1821 a cave was discovered in Yorkshire with a rich deposit of fragmentary bones. Buckland used Cuvierian comparative anatomy to prove that the animals represented were extinct species” (136), which he then inferred to be the victims of a universal deluge.

fig.4: The discovery of the jaw of a fossil reptile in a cavern at Maestricht, taken from Faujas de St Fond’s Histoire naturelle de la Montagne de Saint-Pierre de Maestricht, Paris, an 7 [1799].

The results of Buckland’s findings and his further explorations of other caves in England and Germany became the material for the completed work. The illustrations to the volume convey the process of this investigation, as well as the close connection between the fields of mining and

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112 Shelley’s long-standing interest in geology is evidenced in a letter to her editor, in which she expresses a desire to write a book on “the changes on the surface of the Earth” adding that the subject has “always been the source of a great interest” (Seymour 403).
those of geology and paleontology (fig.2).

fig.5: The caption reads: “Section of the Cave in the Dream Lead Mine Near Wirksworth, Derbyshire. 1822.” From Reliquiae Diluvinae, Plate 20.

The comparative methods used by Cuvier and Buckland find a parallel in the comparative methods used by Shelley’s narrator in fitting together the pieces of her linguistic puzzle. She collates, translates, and transcribes in order to recuperate the vision of a future written in a distant past. It is this process of re-composition, rather than a recuperation of the self through the experience of a sublime nature, that offers the narrator a sense of transcendence. The contemplation of the vast stretch of human history and culture with the knowledge that in its
entirety this history is only a speck in geological time in which countless species have come into existence and become no more, troubles traditional views about a fixed universe in which every species has its place. The covenant that would supposedly protect humankind from the fate of Buckland’s fossils could no longer be invoked. Just as God does not disappear in the process of secularization, but “endures this process to become alien, disfigured, and utterly unreadable,” (Collings 352), so to the inherited narratives of Christianity become themselves alien and disfigured evidence of this catastrophe, markers that share a metonymic relationship that continues to resonate within secular discourse, leaves that also form an impossible text that is neither past, nor present, nor future.

In the context of this history, we might see the authorial process as a piecing back together of the Tower of Babel, not merely to secularize the context of the theme of man’s pride, but to refigure the Tower as a symbol of diverse forms of communicability. The introduction presents a sense of language as the sum of a multitude of linguistic parts which are also natural objects, reflecting both an ancient and modern attitude toward language:

Just as in Antiquity the term STOICHEION, used originally for linguistic elemental units, was extended to the physical world, in a similar way, but reversely, linguistic theory of the last hundred years in its quest for the ultimate constituents has appealed in turn to the model of atomic physics. (Jakobson 10).

Though Shelley had no model of atomic physics, her knowledge of geology and its historical association with cosmogony would provide her with a particularly rich and suggestive framing for her tale, one which, at least metaphorically, suggests later investigations into the “ultimate
As several commentators have pointed out, Shelley’s cave finds its literary ancestor in Book Six of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: “Deep in a cave the Sibyl makes abode; / Thence full of fate returns, and of the god” (14-15). Yet Shelley makes an important distinction: “it is not indeed exactly as Virgil describes it; but the whole of this land had been so convulsed by earthquake and volcano, that the change was not wonderful” (3). This un-wonderful difference, when taken together with the distinctly un-Virgilian description of “the dim hypaethric cavern” (3) suggests that Shelley is diverging from her source in a subtle, yet important way. What Timothy Ruppert argues about the appearance of sibylline leaves is also pertinent to how the novel interacts with its literary forbears: “By transferring vatic authority from the partriarchal Judeo-Christian scriptures to the matriarchal sibylline leaves, Shelley meaningfully questions the masculine bias in Romantic poetry” (146). Shelley would find another motivation for this symbolic transfer of power in the work of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft.

In an fragment of 1787, entitled “Cave of Fancy,” Wollstonecraft suggestively begins a tale which features a cave, an ambiguous catastrophe, and a grieving child. Though just a few pages, the fragment is highly suggestive of certain elements of Shelley’s novel. The cave is figured as the home of spirits that obey the command of an old sage, who visits the cave nightly:

One side of the hut was supported by the rock, and at midnight, when the sage struck the inclosed part, it yawned wide, and admitted him into a cavern in the very bowels of the earth, where never human foot before had trod; and the various spirits, which inhabit the different
regions of nature, were here obedient to his potent word. The cavern had been formed by the
great inundation of waters, when the approach of a comet forced them from their source…

(1.192)

The cave functions as both retreat and place where power is exercised, much like the retreat
Wollstonecraft describes in her childhood days in Beverley (see ch.1). It significantly
combines both aspects of the Deluge and cosmological event as formative to its structure.
When the sage returns at dawn from a visit to the cave, he finds an all-consuming disaster has
struck down humanity:

…he found that death had been at work during his absence, and terrific marks of a furious
storm still spread horror around. Though / the day was serene, and threw bright rays on eyes
for ever shut, it dawned not for the wretches who hung pendent on the craggy rocks, or were
stretched lifeless on the sand. Some struggling, had dug themselves a grave; others had
resigned their breath before the impetuous surge whirled them on shore. A few, in whom the
vital spark was not so soon dislodged, had clung to loose fragments; it was the grasp of
death; embracing the stone, they stiffened; and the head, no longer erect, rested on the mass
which the arms encircled. It felt not the agonizing gripe, nor heard the sigh that broke the
heart in twain. (1.192-93)

It is almost as if we are reading *The Last Man*, in the style, subject matter, and coloring of the
passage. It is also worth noting that the vivid description here is exactly the type of thing to
which Shelley’s initial critics objected. If Shelley was, to some extent, creating a tribute to her
mother, she is also, through the repositioning of vatic authority, creating a tribute to those
principles that her mother was so famous for delineating, and which also met polemical

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113 In her Scandinavian *Letters*, Wollstonecraft describes herself imaginatively inhabiting caves: “I should rather
chuse, did it admit of a choice, to sleep in some of the caves of these rocks; for I am become better reconciled to
them since I climbed their craggy sides, last night, listening to the finest echoes I ever heard” (106).

114 A comet visible around the time of Shelley’s birth caused her to attach to it a particular significance. In 1823 she
writes: “And thou strange star! Ascendant at my birth, / Which rained, they said, kind influence on the earth” (“The
Choice”).
reaction. As Wollstonecraft’s fragment draws to a close, the sage finds one survivor, a young girl mourning over her dead mother. The description, and the girl’s appeal “Wake her, ah! Wake her […] or the sea will catch us” must have struck Shelley with tremendous pathos. And while the novel has long been recognized as a tribute to the recently fallen figure of Percy, and to a lesser extent, Byron, one might also read Shelley’s description of the cave as an attempt to invoke her mother’s spirit.

Not only is her novel, which she describes in a letter of 1826 as “my Sibylline leaves,” (508) a tribute to and departure from Coleridge’s volume of the same name, the dim hypaethric cavern might also be seen as a refiguration of the Platonic and Virgilian cave into another epic locus of female power, the interlunar cave. The hypaethric cavern is a reference to the function of the cave as a temple in which the movements of the heavens were an important part of the ceremonial rights performed therein. The objects found in the cave also have the potential significance of objects into which celestial influence had been concentrated, as Rudwick indicates about the early modern significance of fossils: “In order to capture and exploit the powerful influences of the heavenly bodies it was necessary to identify the corresponding terrestrial entities in which those powers were concentrated” (20). *The Last Man* contains several significant astronomical events that remind the reader of the setting of a temple open to the sky as the place from which, as it were, the novel is narrated. I will have more to say about

115 It is also worth noting here that Wollstonecraft repeatedly used disease metaphor to describe France before the Revolution. She describes, for example, the “baneful lurking gangrene…spread by luxury and superstition” (5.87). This aligns plague metaphor once more with political economy.

116 The figure of an approaching Deluge famously appears later in Book Five of *The Prelude*. 
these astronomical events later, but first I would like to consider the literary history of the interlunar cave and their relevance to Shelley’s novel.

Dante, in the *Inferno*, refers to a space associated with a dark feminine energy, as the she-wolf edges him back “to where the sun is mute” (1.60). In *Samson Agonistes*, the protagonist describes his blindness in similar terms:

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The sun to me is dark
And silent as the moon,
When she deserts the night
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave. (86-89)
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Rather than these vacant spaces of silent darkness associated with female treachery, Shelley imagines an interlunar cave inhabited by a prophesying voice, and in which darkness, rather than weakness, is a sympathetic strength in its metonymic power to associate all things. She quotes the above passage in her journal to describe her feelings of separation from Percy, and she uses the word “interlunar” twice elsewhere in the journal, also associated with Percy’s presence. In *Prometheus Unbound* the interlunar cave is evoked as a locale where Prometheus retires with Asia to dwell in tranquility, in an apparent reversal of its previous epic associations. And Mary would draw on Percy’s description, at the close of “Ode to the West Wind,” of the leaves that are the subject of her transcription: “Drive my dead thoughts over the universe / Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!” (63-64), leaves described from the outset of that poem as “Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red, / Pestilence-stricken multitudes” (4-5). Rebirth and infection are both envisioned within the space of the Sibyl’s Cave, also a hypaethric temple and
interlunar space, suggestive of an *umbilicus mundi*, a source of female power withdrawn from patriarchal authority over language and art. This perhaps, is also why the project of deciphering the leaves is cooperative, rather than solitary or ego-driven, and why we never learn the gender of the narrator’s companion.

In the opening paragraph of Volume One, the narrator picturesquely describes a world in which England, and by association the narrator, stands at the center:

> When I stood on my native hills, and saw plain and mountain stretch out to the utmost limits of my vision, speckled by the dwellings of my countrymen, and subdued by the fertility of their labours, the earth’s very centre was fixed for me in that spot, and the rest of her orb was as a fable, to have forgotten which would have cost neither my imagination nor understanding an effort. (5)

This prospect invites not only a consideration of nationalism, but the “native hills” of British Romanticism as well, whether the Quantocks or the Cumbrian hills where Wordsworth and Coleridge developed much of their important thought and poetry. Yet beneath this pride of place dwells an impossible nostalgia and a blissful amnesia. The very centeredness of the narrator’s position and the conviction of rooted presence in the world becomes violently unsettled. The “spot” which fixes the inviolable center cannot contain itself within its intended valence, but spreads, like a stain, to infect the areas around it. In a sense, the plague is already virulent at the outset, within the language itself, before it is ever mentioned. The centered nature of national identity depicted here will come to appear as the absolutist force of plague. What is “native” and “utmost” of national identity is eventually “speckled” and “subdued” by plague to become forever “fixed” in its static immobility. The world becomes transformed into the space
of a lost fable, one that, given the context of Lionel’s final recounting of events, is ever waiting to be told. Gibbon describes his inspiration for writing *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* in terms that bear comparison to Lionel’s composition: “It was at Rome on the fifteenth of October 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol while the barefooted fryars were singing Vespers in the temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind” (392). That Lionel also is inspired to create a record of a decline and fall while sitting amidst these ruins situates the novel as specifically foreseeing, within British Empire and its aspirations, the blueprint for another decline and fall.

Cultural nostalgia and amnesia are important poles in *The Last Man*, appearing repeatedly to remind the reader of the conditions in which notions of modernity and nationality are formed. The above opening of the action of the novel can be usefully compared to a later instance in which the remaining survivors of the plague prepare to depart England forever:

> England remained, though England was dead – it was the ghost of merry England that I beheld, under whose greenwood shade passing generations had sported in security and ease. To this painful recognition of familiar places, was added a feeling experienced by all, understood by none – a feeling as if in some state, less visionary than a dream, in some past real existence, I had seen all I saw, with precisely the same feelings as I now beheld them – as if all my sensations were a duplex mirror of a former revelation. (290)

The syntax of these two sentences creates a rhythmic pattern that resists closure and is oddly insistent on its repeated contradictions (remained/was dead, merry/painful, all/none, some/less than, past/now, sensations/revelation). There is an attempt to produce a felt equivalence between opposites in order to reproduce the experience of the uncanny described. This experience that
we now call deja-vu occupied an ambiguous space in the Romantic period between scientific
evidence and supernatural experience, escaping rational explanation while falling outside the
confines of conventional religion. Rather than evoking a monotheistic divinity or a mechanistic
universe, it appears to describe instead a vulnerability, a possibility that things may not be as
they seem and that the narratives offered to explain one’s place in the world, like the opening of
Volume One of the novel, neglected to explain that under the ground on which one walked and
in the landscape one viewed securely from above, was another type of narrative that insistently
unsettled assumptions about the meaning of place and the nature of subjectivity. The above two
passages anticipate what Merleau-Ponty would later theorize: “The perceived world is no longer
an immediate given. The mediation of knowing allows us to retrieve indirectly and in a negative
way the perceived world that anterior idealizations had made us forget” (100). Knowing is a
kind of deja-vu in which the real is suddenly transformed, and the duplex mirror of modernity
“experienced by all,” and a nostalgia for a “merry England” reflect a contagion of un-knowing.
What is “all” and what is “I” merge in the meeting of plague and national identity, experienced
as an uncanny psychic image, or felt sense, of historicity.

As Lionel turns to look back at England, he resembles Orpheus turning to look upon a fading
Eurydice, as the myths which form a basis for national identity themselves fade from view in the
face of plague. Similarly, Shelley’s narrative looks back to earlier Romantic visions and finds in
her narrative an image that is the disfigured reflection of a “former revelation.” When Coleridge
writes, in “The Aeolian Harp”: “Methinks, it should have been impossible / Not to love all things
in a world so fill’d” (30-31), he provides something like this Eurydice to Shelley’s Orpheus. “It
should have been impossible” is precisely how humanity reacts to plague in Shelley’s novel, and in fact, how humanity has always reacted to plague: “Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise” (Camus 34). Plague appears like a long-forgotten memory, like an episode of deja-vu, like the impossibility of modernity itself. And how the world is “fill’d” here is mirrored in the way Shelley defines grief: “as light it fills all things, and like light, it gives its own colours to all” (325). This not only reflects the hectic and pestilential colors of “Ode to the West Wind” but recalls another line from “The Aeolian Harp” in which a mirror is held up: “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light.” In the sounding of the poem, words appear to fill a thing in the same way that Shelley tells us grief fills a thing. Plague, in its metaphoric and metonymic communicability, behaves something like a différance, forming endless chains of connection, while at the same time representing an ultimate other. It reflects the complex and continuous linguistic process of attempting to bridge the distance between thought and representation, the sensible and the intelligible, describing what “should have been impossible,” yet the realization of which can “crash down on our heads from a blue sky” at any moment.

The material and social conditions that herald the onset of global capitalism are the same that announce the spread of Shelley’s universal plague:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East
Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins, signalized the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production (*Capital* 1.3)

This “rosy dawn” that heralds the onset of a global condition finds its equivalent, in Shelley’s novel, in the sudden and spectacular rise of a black sun. The rising of a black sun and the panic this event caused is further comparable to the panic of 1825. This sun is so suggestive that it reappears in varying forms the work of twentieth century artists and critics who appear unaware of its earlier appearance in Shelley’s novel. The place of plague within the formation of notions of modernity, and its peculiar relation to the communicability of the arts is articulated by Antonin Artaud in a way that bears specifically on Shelley’s novel: “In the theater as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the difficult and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element” (30). Julia Kristeva also describes a strange sun in her book on melancholy and especially female melancholy, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, that takes its title from a line in an 1853 poem by Gerard de Nerval (that like Artaud ironically references the performative): “My lone star is dead, and my bespangled lute / Bears the Black Sun of Melancholia” (141). These strange suns find their precedent at the center of Shelley’s novel, at a moment when speculation is rife about a plague that has yet to infect England:

On the twenty-first of June it was said that an hour before noon, a black sun arose: an orb, the size of that luminary but dark, defined, whose beams were shadows, ascended from the west; in about an hour it had reached the meridian, and eclipsed the bright parent of day. Night fell upon every country, night, sudden, rayless, entire. The stars came out, shedding their ineffectual glimmerings on the light-widowed earth. But soon the dim orb passed from over the sun, and lingered down the eastern heaven. As it descended its dusky rays crossed the brilliant ones of the sun, and deadened or devoured them. The shadows of things assumed strange and ghastly shapes. The wild animals in the woods took fright at the unknown shapes figured on the ground. They fled they knew not whither; and the citizens were filled
with great dread, at the convulsion which “shook lions into civil streets.” (162)

The rising of this black sun is indicative of a resurfacing of a forgotten energy, a disruption of normative daily life and the predictable cycle of nature. It makes evident, perhaps like nowhere else in the novel, the post-covenental world the travelers are passing through, illustrating the dark resurgence of a divinity that has been subject to a process of historical erasure and submersion:

“To cancel the divine infinite does not cancel infinitude itself; the latter reappears as a disruptive, uncanny aspect of finitude which undermines or exceeds it from within” (Collings 348). The black sun is a type of the word made flesh, in the sense of its textual versus spoken significance, a word that bursts forth not with the good news, but with all the force of a dark omen. The “strange and ghastly shapes” appear “figured on the ground,” as a type of hieroglyphics which illustrate the process of annihilation as well as a disfigured and unreadable divinity.

The same type of strange anxiety-laden language describing the blotting out of the sun is found in the work of Thomas Malthus:

Clouds of Barbarians seemed to collect from all points of the northern hemisphere. Gathering fresh darkness and terror as they rolled on, the congregated bodies at length obscured the sun of Italy and sunk the whole world in universal night. These tremendous effects, so long and so deeply felt throughout the fairest portions of the earth, may be traced to the simple cause of the superior power of population, to the means of subsistence (22).

It is not difficult to read in this description a conflation of the “clouds of barbarians” that sacked ancient Rome with the citizens of revolutionary France. But the threat invoked here is not merely political, but spiritual as well. The Miltonic ring to Malthus’s rhetoric, as Tim Fulford
has noted, is a strategic maneuver, as the following lines from *Paradise Lost* demonstrate:

A multitude, like which the populous North
Pour’d never from her loins, to pass
Rhene or the Danaw, when her barbarous sons
Came like a deluge on the south, and spread
Beneath Gibraltar to the Lybian sands. (I.351-55)

Malthus, through his use of the Miltonic to demonize the poor, evokes a vengeful God and the concomitant threat of damnation and connects it to a historical moment in which scarcity and revolutionary politics make the poor appear as a growing threat to the ruling classes and those that aspired to climb the social ladder. Yet Malthus’s very posing of this threat admits that the God of the Covenant no longer watches over humanity, and remains only to punish the backsliders who blindly refuse to recognize a new logos, “the power of population” and the austere mathematical commandments this new deity invokes.

What is offered as an inexplicable emblem in Shelley becomes the subject of a moral system in Malthus, where the end of civilization is described as an act of human agency rather than a seemingly arbitrary plague. Malthus imagines a collective poor that in their virulent growth blot out the sun, Shelley an astronomical anomaly that hovers for a few moments as a sign and disappears. Both relocate divine agency, Malthus into a catastrophic mathematics that is entirely cold towards human agency, and Shelley into a disastrous communicability that is all too sympathetic with the human, in which time and consciousness are subject to an eclipse in which

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the moment is obliterated into a thousand pieces, each of which takes “strange and ghastly shapes,” shadows cast by beams that “were shadows” themselves, a circular melancholy reflecting on itself. These “unknown shapes figured on the ground” again remind the reader of the nature of linguistic expression and its similarity to the communicability of plague, figuring Shelley’s critique as not only one of the reification of an increasingly global commercial economy, but as a recognition of the ambivalent place of the arts, and especially literature, in supporting and developing such a system. Through imagining an anti-sun, Shelley also imagines an anti-signifying force that forecloses the power of imagination itself and therefore also complicates any notion of a sublime elevation of the mind.

The date given of this eclipse, the twenty-first of June, is the date on which the summer solstice most regularly falls. “Solstice” is composed of the Latin roots for “sun” and “to stand still,” as the sun appears motionless in the sky, having reached its highest point. The fact that Shelley’s novel is set hundreds of years in the future, yet there are very few discernible technological advances, indicates a way of viewing the Romantic period as a zenith subject to eventual decline, just as plague quickly spreads over the face of the earth quickly following this eclipse. As the sun is blotted out, it is as if a heart had stopped beating; the world is held in arrest and time appears to stand still at the end of history. In one sense this dark zenith foretells a long fall back towards the reflection of himself that Lionel sees at the end of the novel: “What wild-looking, unkempt, half-naked savage was that before me?” (331). Lionel had also referred to himself as a savage at the novel’s outset (9), and this return to a savage-like state radically critiques any notion of human perfectability. The optimistic theory, shared by Percy, Godwin, and Mary
Wollstonecraft, that history presented a progression towards an eventual perfection of humanity, is here answered by a night that is “sudden, rayless, and entire.” Though the black sun sets, it is far from gone; it has become internalized into the body of the plot, mirroring Freud’s diagnosis of melancholy as the incorporation of the lost object into the structure of the ego. The black sun is, in this sense, the novel’s object identification.

One of the realities that the destruction of plague brings about is the lastness of creative production itself: “farewell to poetry and deep philosophy, for man’s imagination is cold, and his enquiring mind can no longer expatiate on the wonders of life” (234). The cultural critique one can read in the novel is echoed variously in the history of nineteenth and twentieth century thought. Theodor Adorno argues in “Cultural Criticism and Society”: ”In the open-air prison which the world is becoming, it is no longer so important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one. All phenomena rigidify, become insignias of the absolute rule of that which is” (34). Though the context and critical concerns of Shelley’s novel are quite different, the way in which the reification of bourgeois culture presages an all-consuming catastrophe posits plague as “that which is,” an absolute communicability in which all phenomena rigidify. Yet plague can also provide a metaphor for the power of art to inspire, as Artaud suggests. The recognition of the ambivalent place of artistic production finds its ultimate illustration towards the end of The Last Man, as the few wearied survivors come across a recital of Haydn’s “New Created World,” an infected youth performing a final farewell to life and to her aged grandparent, mirroring the situational irony of the music’s title and intention:
We stood looking at the pair, forgetting what we heard in the absorbing sight; till, the last chord struck, the peal died away in lessening reverberations. The mighty voice, inorganic we might call it, for we could in no way associate it with mechanism of pipe or key, stilled its sonorous tone… (336)

The notes die away into silence, the hand that played them soon “chilled and stiffened by death” (337), and the party enters the desolate regions of the Alps, in which “vast blocks of ice” (339) present a locus of extinction, in which “all things rigidify.” Adorno’s account of a totalizing reification of European bourgeois culture bears a relation not only to the novel as it moves towards its close, but to another last man who for Nietzsche represents “the extinction of recognizable humanity, precisely through the extinction of the Platonic longing for self-transcendence” (Nussbaum 163). Through this lens, the spread of the plague describes the spread of a materialism that has so infected all levels of discourse as to make even the simplest urges towards beauty akin to the final acts of madness of the infected host. This dystopian vision finds another inheritor in the bleak post-World War Two envisionings of George Orwell, who had originally considered publishing 1984 under the title The Last Man of Europe. Winston Smith, like Lionel, sits down to pen a narrative to he knows not what audience or to what purpose, “to the future or to the past.” (28) The Last Man similarly dispels linear time, positing a narrative simultaneously written in the ruins of Rome in the year 2100 and the Sibyl’s Cave of an antique era.

The nature of plague’s communicability closely resembles the nature of the most basic forms of acculturation. Recalling Artaud’s appeal to consider plague as creating the possibility of new relationships with the world, we might think once more of the Sibyl’s cave from the novel’s
introduction, and the artifacts there discovered: “What we now know as nature is really a set of 
petrified objects, and only a reconstellated, dialectical image will allow it to appear in its 
potential to become a new nature”” (Sandilands 37). The girl and her grandfather seated closely 
together, entwined in musical performance, recall the author and her companion at the novel’s 
outset, involved together in a similarly precarious process of artistic production. And the final 
pair of the novel, Adrian and Clara, who are the last hope of reviving the human race, survive the 
plague only to perish at sea. While this device allows the reader to consider plague as bracketed 
(like the divine) within the novel itself, and therefore capable of being considered as a dialectical 
image, it simultaneously points to an unavoidable truth: *Ubique naufragium est*, in the words of 
Petronius, “shipwreck is everywhere.”
Work Cited


Jakobson, Roman and Linda Waugh, assisted by Martha Taylor. The Sound Shape of


