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Touching Time: Forms of Romantic Temporality

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TOUCHING TIME:
FORMS OF ROMANTIC TEMPORALITY

by

LEILA WALKER

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 in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

TOUCHING TIME: FORMS OF ROMANTIC TEMPORALITY

by

Leila Walker

Adviser: Professor Nancy Yousef

The sense of touch has largely been neglected in the study of Romantic literature. While recent histories of the senses hold that sight and touch became disarticulated toward the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, these studies tend to emphasize the elevation of sight as a more advanced mode of perception, suitable for observing experiments or appreciating art, over the more base sense of touch. Questions of tactility tend to be absorbed into histories of materiality or the body, and this terminological slippage becomes particularly apparent as these histories enter the Romantic period. However, when we attend to the sense of touch, an alternative aesthetic history emerges that emphasizes engagement rather than, or in
tension with, observation. *Touching Time* argues that British Romantic literature develops a new approach to tactility, a way of engaging with the world physically in the present in order to introduce new possibilities for the future. While the field of vision is experienced linearly as we attach narrative structure to the organization of visible objects within that field, the sense of touch resists such linearity. Rather, the touch exists in the fleeting moment that opens up the possibility of both past and future for a totality beyond the human capacity for narrative.

Through my readings of William Godwin, George Colman the Younger, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas De Quincey, and Mary Shelley, I uncover a radical Romantic aesthetic that critiques the politics of witness and privileges the politics of social implication. We are accustomed to thinking of Romantic literature as representing a new way of seeing, and it does. But by focusing on touch rather than sight, I am able to emphasize the more social and interactive aspects of this literature.
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INTRODUCTION
TOUCHING AND TIME

The sense of touch has largely been neglected in the study of British Romantic literature. While recent histories of the senses hold that sight and touch became disarticulated toward the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, these studies tend to emphasize the elevation of sight as a more advanced mode of perception, suitable for observing experiments or appreciating art, over the more base sense of touch.\(^1\) Questions of tactility tend to be absorbed into histories of materiality or the body, and this terminological slippage becomes particularly

\(^1\) Constance Classen, for example, takes it almost as a given that by the nineteenth century “the notion that ‘high’ culture requires the suppression of the ‘lower’ senses was formalized. Touch was typed by the scholars of the day as a crude and uncivilized mode of perception” (xii). Jonathan Crary was perhaps the first scholar to suggest that the change in the way we see, which was formerly attributed to the development of the camera at the end of the nineteenth century, in fact dated to the end of the previous century; he explicitly connects this change to the separation of the previously yoked senses of sight and touch.
apparent as these histories enter the Romantic period. However, when we attend to the sense of touch, an alternative aesthetic history emerges that emphasizes engagement rather than, or in tension with, observation. This dissertation argues that British Romantic literature develops a new approach to tactility, a way of engaging with the world physically in the present in order to introduce new possibilities for the future. We are accustomed to thinking of Romantic literature as representing a new way of seeing, and it does. But by focusing on touch rather than sight, I am able to emphasize the more social and interactive aspects of this literature. What emerges is a Romanticism that critiques the politics of witness and instead privileges the politics of social implication.

At key moments in British Romantic literature, the act of touch—whether violent or loving or both—offers a sudden and unexpected intrusion of intimacy that provides a narrative jolt, a crucial interruption that transgresses the boundary between self and other. These encounters result in transformations so profound that they force a dramatic reconsideration of what has been and what might be, transformations so complete that they alter the narrative that led them to that point. Let us consider, for example, Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner, who holds the Wedding-Guest with his “skinny hand,” physically detaining him until he has related a tale that leaves the wedding guest “like one that hath been stunned/And of sense forlorn” (“Rime” 9, 622-623). The Wedding-Guest is touched both literally and figuratively by the Mariner and by the

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2 For example, Hilary Fraser recently responded to Crary’s emphasis on sight by setting out to “offer a new articulation of ‘corporealized vision’ in the nineteenth century that pays proper attention to the neglected matter of touch,” but her argument collapses tactility into both material culture and the field of vision, and the text that follows focuses not on touch itself but on specific material objects (xiv). Classen similarly shifts her emphasis from tactility as such to a more generalized consideration of the body during her brief treatment of the Romantic period, returning to the tactile only with the lush fabric interior spaces of the Victorian period.
Mariner’s tale. The encounter with the Mariner comes as an unexpected and unwelcome interruption in the guest’s anticipated movement toward the wedding, and it is an interruption that the guest cannot overcome: even after the Mariner “[i]s gone,” leaving the guest free to continue on his way, the guest turns “from the bridegroom’s door,” abandoning his prior expectations of future action (620, 621). The Mariner’s interruption is not just a momentary inconvenience, but a literal turning point at which the guest chooses to turn away, in some small manner, from his anticipated future self, the future self whose actions would have been continuous with the intentions of his prior self, the future self who would have walked through the bridegroom’s door. The Mariner’s touch precipitates a social experience that is deeply nonconsensual but that nonetheless results in a transformation that appears to have been a choice after the fact. As this example demonstrates, a focus on touch enables us to reconsider some of the foundational questions that underpin philosophical inquiry: what is the relationship between my past and future being, and to what extent is the continuity or discontinuity of my own being determined by the interference of another? What possibilities emerge when we allow for the unexpected and unwelcome interruption in our continuous narrative? How might these touching, intimate, and disturbing encounters with the other be retrospectively integrated into the conception of a unified narrative self? And what pertains in the interval between past and future understanding, in the moment of transformative contact itself?

But let us begin at the beginning, in the earliest moments of human consciousness. What is the sensory process by which we understand the existence of others in relation to ourselves? Following Lacan and Winnicott, philosophers and psychologists have emphasized the visual experience of the infant who looks into her mother’s eyes and sees the reflection of herself seeing, framed by the responsive face of the mother looking back. But the Scottish philosopher
and poet Thomas Brown offers an alternative model in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820). Like more familiar philosophers, he invokes the image of the mother holding the newborn in her loving gaze, but unlike these philosophers he does not assume that the infant either gazes himself or is aware of his mother’s gaze. Instead, Brown provides two contradictory accounts of this first meeting that combine to give an impression of the distinct sensory unease with which we encounter the other.

Thomas Brown (1778-1820), an unorthodox philosopher steeped in the Scottish tradition, has received little scholarly attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, probably because his ideas fall outside the prevailing narrative of philosophical history. But in his time, Brown was considered by contemporary reviewers to be a “candid antagonist” to more canonical philosophers such as Erasmus Darwin, David Hume, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart, who taught Brown at the University of Edinburgh (*Monthly Review*, June 1799). Brown was involved in founding the *Edinburgh Review*, although he contributed little material of his own. His works of philosophy include *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1792), *De somno* (1803), *Sketch of a System of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1820), and the posthumous *Lectures on the Philosophy of the Human Mind*, edited by his biographer and student, David Welsh. While he receives relatively little attention today, he was well known as a thinker and lecturer in the nineteenth century, and the *Lectures* went through twenty editions between 1820 and 1860. 3 His ideas provide a framework for an alternative strain of Romantic philosophy, and by attending to

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his research we are able to identify and explore a more nuanced engagement with the physical other in British Romantic literature.

Brown begins by imagining the infant’s neonatal experiences. The sense of touch, he holds, “must have been exercised long before birth, and is probably the very feeling with which sentient life commences.” To the infant, the act of birth “is a series of feelings of this class,” beginning with the feeling of an unpleasant change in temperature. At this moment, the moment that will begin the child’s “life of sunshine and society,” a moment “of which no vestige is afterwards to remain in the memory,” the infant’s primary awareness comes through his sense of touch. Yet, according to Brown, the infant does not feel the warm embrace of his mother holding his tiny body any more than he feels held by her loving gaze; instead, “Pain, the companion of human life, receives him on the first step of his journey, and embraces him in his iron arms” (133). The infant is held—embraced—by his own feeling. His introduction to society is thus framed as an introduction to the uncomfortable society of the self and sensation. It is only later, in retrospect, that this unpleasant introduction will transform into social experience.

From his introduction to the infant’s sensation of the pain of birth, Brown shifts perspective without warning to look back on this moment as if it were with the knowledge of the infant’s future history; or, rather, with the transmission of maternal memory that will take the place of the absent infant memory. Our knowledge of the relationship that will form between mother and child, of the love that the mother feels and that the child will come to know, imbues the scene with a retrospective tenderness that the “little stranger” cannot feel in the moment. We see the infant as he will come to see himself through the lens of his future relationship with his mother (Brown takes as a given the presence of a mother who is not just good enough, but good):
It is at this moment so painful to himself, that he is affording to another bosom, perhaps, the purest delight of which our nature is capable, and has already kindled in a heart, of the existence of which he is as ignorant as of the love which he excites in it, that warmth of affection, which is never, but in the grave, to be cold to him, and to which, in the many miseries that may await him,—in sorrow, in sickness, in poverty,—and perhaps, too, in the penitence of guilt itself,—when there is no other eye, to whose kindness he can venture to look, he is still to turn with the confidence he has yet, even on earth, one friend who will not abandon him,—and who will still think of that innocent being, whose eye, before it was conscious of light, seemed to look to her for the love and protection which were ready to receive him (133).

In this crucial moment when the mother looks on her child with the eye of love, the infant only seems to look to her in response. The mother perceives a mutual affection that will exist in the future and that will owe its existence in part to its fictive origins in this moment. The mother looks at her infant and feels that they share a loving connection even if the infant cannot be conscious of such perception. This feeling, based though it is on misinterpretation, a crossing of the senses (her vision of him, his feeling of himself), will come to be real, and will come to have been real in this moment.

We begin our social life, according to Brown, with a moment of fundamental misunderstanding, but this misunderstanding does not make the intimacy of the encounter any less profound. Rather, it reveals a form of intimacy rooted in our inability to know the feelings of the other. This intimacy, therefore, takes us beyond the traditional limits of sympathy, which Adam Smith sets at the boundary between felt and imagined experience. When we sympathize with another, according to Smith, we imagine a “change of situation” that approaches but cannot
reproduce our friend’s point of view on the world (28). When Smith’s “spectator…endeavour[s]…to put himself in the situation of the other,” that is, to adopt the perspective of his companion on his own life and misfortunes as he would adopt the perspective of his companion on a landscape, he does so only in imagination, and therefore his sympathetic perspective is an incomplete and “momentary” approximation of his companion’s. Our sympathy approaches the experience of the sublime terror of nature perceived from a position of safety, as “[t]he thought of their own safety, the thought that they themselves are not really the sufferers, continually intrudes itself upon” Smith’s spectators (28). The spectators’ knowledge that they sympathize with the other only in the imagination and never in feeling, “though it does not hinder them from conceiving a passion somewhat analogous to what is felt by the sufferer, hinders them from conceiving any thing that approaches to the same degree of violence” (28). For this reason, Smith holds, we cannot sympathize with but are instead disgusted by another’s expression of physical desires or pleasures, such as ravenous hunger or sexual urges. “It is indecent,” he writes, “to express any strong degree of those passions which arise from a certain situation or disposition of the body; because the company, not being in the same disposition, cannot be expected to sympathize with them” (35). The limits of social decency and the limits of sympathetic feeling, for Smith, converge on the body.

Smith defines the sociality of the passions by the ability of a spectator to sympathize with our feeling of them; that is, for Smith, sociality lies not in the interaction between people, but in the imaginative affinity between people. Smith’s sociality extends only to the limits of our ability to know, or believe that we can know or understand, the other, and while we can imagine ourselves standing with our friend looking out at the world that surrounds him, occupying his point of view, we cannot occupy his physical body. “We do not view” our friend’s misfortunes,
desires, pains, and appetites, Smith writes, “from the same station, as we do a picture, or a poem, or a system of philosophy” (27). We can share the experience of looking together; even if we are not physically in the same space, we can imagine taking our friend’s view because we have visual memories and because we are capable of recombining visual memories in fancy to create images that never, to us, existed. Not so, Smith claims, for the sense of touch. We can neither remember with the full force of experience the sensations of pain or pleasure, heat or cold, transmitted through the skin, nor can we use tactile memory to imagine the experience of the other. For Smith, the limits of our physical experience describe the limits of our capacity for intimate understanding.

For Brown, on the other hand, understanding of the other comes not through an extension or projection of our understanding of the self, but through an interruption in the understanding of the self. Like so many other scholars, Brown attributes the infant’s discovery of the other to his discovery of the mother, but he imagines this discovery arising through the sense of touch. The infant, according to Brown, who stretches out his arms for the first time comes to learn the feeling of his own muscles extending and contracting. He repeats the motion and feels the same muscular action and comes to understand the basic predictability of his new world: “what has been as an antecedent, will be followed by what has been as a consequent” (150). He first knows his body as adhering to a consistent, simple narrative structure: extend this muscle, and the arm moves like this; contract it, and it moves like that. But, Brown continues, “[a]t length he stretches out his arm again, and, instead of the accustomed progression, there arises, in the resistance of some object opposed to him, a feeling of a very different kind” (150). Until this moment, the infant has understood the law of cause and effect, but he has been aware only of causes originating in himself. This first encounter with resistance in his accustomed movement,
therefore, “we may, without any absurdity, suppose to astonish the little reasoner” (150). The astonished infant, whose thwarted activity recalls the now obsolete definition of astonishment as “paralysis, numbness, deadness,” seeks to understand the cause of this resistance.⁴ “In the case at present supposed, however, the infant, who as yet knows nothing but himself, is conscious of no previous difference; and the feeling of resistance seems to him, therefore, something unknown, which has its cause in something that is not himself” (150). The infant first encounters the other as the cause of an astonishing interruption in the self’s free movement through space.

The sense of touch, according to Brown, is the first sense through which we come to experience a sense of exteriority. In his examination of the other four senses, Brown embarks upon a thought experiment that asks us to imagine how we would perceive the world if we had access to it through just the one sense. He finds that in each case, if we had but one sense, we would be unable to distinguish between those perceptions that had their origins outside of us and those that originated within us. Scent, for example. If we were able only to smell, the passing scents of a rose, a dog, or New York in the summer would seem akin to our internally originating feelings of joy, sorrow, and annoyance; we would not consider smell a property of an external object that we had no other means of perceiving. Brown makes similar claims for taste, sound, and sight. It is only through the resistance we encounter through the sense of touch that we are able to connect the perceptions of the other senses to external objects.⁵

⁴ For Godwin, too, “astonishment” retains an afterimage of its old meaning as he uses the term to describe feelings of such intension confusion that they momentarily disrupt one’s accustomed narrative consistency. See Chapter Two.

⁵ Brown does not address the sense of proprioception, or body-awareness, directly in his account of the senses, but this sense is implicit in his description of the child extending and contracting his arms, and it is surely the sense of proprioception rather than touch to which Brown attributes our first, prenatal sense of self. This most innate sense of the physical body as our own is only
Following his description of the infant’s first encounter, through touch, with the other, Brown returns to the feelings of the infant held by his mother and held by her gaze in his interpretation of a passage he takes, with minor modifications, from Erasmus Darwin’s *The Botanic Garden*:  

So,--when the mother, bending o’er his charms
Clasps her fair nurseling in delighted arms:--
With sparkling eye the blameless plunderer owns
Her soft embraces and endearing tones,
Seeks the salubrious fount with opening lips,

_Spreads his inquiring hands_, and smiles, and sips (151).

Brown emphasizes the infant’s tactile exploration of the mother’s breast as an example of “the manifest results of his little inductions, in those acquisitions of knowledge which show occasionally and only recently included in lists of the senses; historically it has been yoked either to the sense of touch or sight. If Brown had considered this sense, he might have considered it as the sense of touching-the-self by which we understand the difference of touching-the-other. For an accessible, narrative discussion of proprioception—what Charles Scott Sherrington calls “our secret sense, our sixth sense”—see Oliver Sacks, “The Disembodied Lady,” *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 43-54. For a cognitive approach to proprioception in art, see Barbara Montero, “Proprioception as an Aesthetic Sense,” _The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism_ 64.2 (Spring 2006), 231-242.

Brown liberally incorporates poetic material, both contemporary and classical, into his _Lectures_, following a practice relatively common to natural scientists of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, including Darwin, who used the form of poetry to express scientific ideas in _The Botanic Garden_, and Elizabeth Kent, a respected botanist whose _Flora Botanica_ and _Sylvan Sketches_ described both the physical and cultural properties of plants with illustrations from contemporary and classical poetry.

Brown omits a couplet and adds emphasis. In _The Botanic Garden_, the passage reads: “So when the Mother, bending o’er his charms,/ Clasps her fair nurseling in delighted arms;/ Throws the thin kerchief from her neck of snow,/ And half unveils the pearly orbs below;/ With sparkling eye the blameless Plunderer owns/ Her soft embraces, and endearing tones,/ Seeks the salubrious font with opening lips,/ Spreads his inquiring hands, and smiles, and sips” (Canto III, 373-380).
themselves in the actions, and, I may say, almost in the very looks of the little reasoner” (150).

What the mother sees, that is, when she seems to see her infant seeing her seeing him with love is in fact, to Brown, an expression of the infant’s tactile rather than visual investigation of his world. His expression, which seems to be comprehending of his mother’s love, Brown reinterprets as an expression of delighted uncomprehension, or attempt at comprehension, of a world that is both unknown and potentially unknowable.

Brown’s emphasis on the importance of touch in revealing the “something unknown” of the world contrasts starkly with our accustomed view of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century philosophy as emerging out of an Enlightenment tradition that portrayed the world as potentially knowable through observation. Tactility provides an alternative model for understanding our relationship to the world and to the other, an understanding that is mutable rather than repeatable. Through tactility, we first encounter our companions as fundamentally different and ultimately strange. The foundation of our relationship to the other in this model thus diverges from Smith’s emphasis on our potential to sympathetically experience the world with the other. Instead, tactility allows us the potential to simply experience the other as other.

While Brown’s philosophy might seem at odds with our traditional scholarly understanding of the Romantic approach to sympathy and the senses, his work resonated with contemporary strains of radical philosophy that similarly rejected the overemphasis on observable proof in favor of a more tactile grounding in felt experience. Responses to Edmund Burke’s derogatory epithet for the agitated masses, “the Swinish Multitude,” asserted the authority of touch in countering the establishment view of history and political reality. Burke had warned, in his Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790), that if revolutionaries dismantled the nobility and the clergy—traditional defenders of nothing less than “our manners, our
civilization, and all the good things which are connected with manners, and with civilization”—
learning itself would soon follow suit and “be cast into the mire, and trodden down under the
hoofs of a swinish multitude” (78-79). The epithet was soon adopted by the radical press as a sort
of collective pseudonym attached to responses from the swine themselves in pamphlets like An
Address to the Hon. Edmund Burke from the Svinish Multitude and periodicals like Hog’s Wash
and Pigs’ Meat. Burke had touched a nerve.

Burke’s coinage gained traction because it so concisely captured the dismissive and
degrading attitude that the disempowered classes felt from the empowered and entitled. Burke
defends the rigid social hierarchy by attributing culture to biological causes, and in his choice of
phrase, Darren Howard observes, “Burke offends because he implies that the disempowered are
like animals and ought to be treated like animals” (161). Burke’s swine are overly embodied,
incapable of speech or higher-order thinking. He reduces the multitudes to animal bodies so fully
corporeal that they manage to physically trample the most abstract of concepts. Burke himself,
on the other hand, was accused by his detractors of disengaging his ideas too much from the
sensible world. John Barrell notes that “Burke’s Reflections was written in a language regarded
by its critics as elaborately—and dangerously—figurative” (Imagining 9). The distinction
between king and man, man and animal, and Burke and the swinish multitude is embedded in a
rhetoric of bodies and tactile experience.

The radical poet Robert Thompson responded by embracing the authority of tactile
experience in his 1794 satire To the Public, alias “The Svinish Multitude,” which opens by
addressing the “swine” themselves:

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8 See Roland Bartel, “Shelley and Burke’s Svinish Multitude,” Keats-Shelley Journal 18 (1969),
4-9; Darren Howard, “The ‘Svinish Multitude’ and the Rights of Man,” Studies in Romanticism
47.2 (Summer 2008), 161-178.
O ye factious, seditious, and discontented crew, will you never believe that you are
happy, when no more than a bare belief is requisite to make you so?—Infatuated mortals!
are you determined, like Lovegold, to “feel, feel, feel, and touch, touch, touch,” before
you will allow your happiness to be real? Dreadful obstinacy! how unacquainted are you
with the wonder-working powers of imagination!—Can you not believe that your hunger,
and thirst, are gratified, unless you eat and drink? Can you not believe that you are
clothed and warm, unless you are covered from the inclemency of the season?—O, what
political unbelief is this!—To what then must your wise legislators have recourse? they
have bawled to you till their lungs are jaded: they have written to you till words are
exhausted, and ye still obstinately continue to be unhappy (n.p.).

Thompson’s satirical response to Burke emphasizes and embraces the “Swinish Multitude’s”
reliance on touch to judge the state of their being. What else, his tone begs, might we use to
judge reality? But Thompson’s insistence on touch as the true measure of happiness goes against
the prevailing narrative, which holds, in Jonathan Crary’s words, that “[i]n the nineteenth
century, for the first time, observable proof became needed in order to demonstrate that
happiness and equality had in fact been attained. Happiness had to be ‘measurable in terms of
objects and signs,’ something that would be evident to the eye in terms of ‘visible criteria’” (11).
The dominant sensual trend emerging out of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on observable
and reproducible experimentation, might privilege the visible, but Thompson’s satire indicates a
counter-narrative challenging the singular authority of observable and reproducible experience.
The perceived reality of the suffering individual is no less real if it cannot be reproduced in the
perceived reality of the privileged authority. “Seeing’s believing, but feeling’s the truth,” as the
saying goes, and the “Swinish Multitude” insist on the felt truth of their experience. They demand, obstinately, “to ‘feel, feel, feel, and touch, touch, touch,’ before [they] will allow [their] happiness to be real.” “Allow” takes a double sense here: the multitude must touch before they will accept the existence of happiness, but they must also touch in order to permit the reality of happiness to come into being. Touch is therefore both confirmation of and response to “things as they are,” the means of both experiencing and altering the world.

Twenty-five years later, Henry Hunt adopted Thompson’s satire for the opening article in the first issue of his short-lived radical periodical The Medusa. Hunt changed the title to address the “ignorantly-impatient Multitude” rather than Burke’s “Swinish Multitude,” updated the contents of the satire to focus on over-taxation of the poor rather than abuses of the military, and omitted all mention of the king. But he retained the opening paragraph verbatim. The specific policy complaints of the public might have changed, but the importance of tactility in assessing the emotional state of the public had not.

It would be too much to say that we understand the world through touch. But like Brown, Thompson and Hunt assert touch as the means by which the individual comes to understand his relationship to the world. It is a troubled and often painful relationship fraught with misunderstanding, but it also offers the radical possibility that misunderstanding might after all provide a more productive approach to the other than the assumption of mutual understanding. A philosophy rooted in touch accounts for the astonishment we feel upon encountering the

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10 For a lengthy explanation of the contemporary laws that would have made Hunt reluctant to criticize the king in print, see John Barrell, Imagining the King’s Death: Figurative Treason, Fantasies of Regicide, 1793-1796. New York: Oxford UP, 2000.
unknown, and for the potential that the astonishment of touch affords us to reconceive of ourselves, our history, and our previous understanding of cause and effect with the other in mind. This dissertation argues that tactility was in fact a central concern in the literature of the Romantic period, which uses touch to express both the immediacy of affective relations in the present and the possibility of radical change from present circumstances. This focus on touch reveals a Romantic literature that is immediate, intimate, social, and nonlinear. It calls for a new consideration of the social possibility encoded in immediacy and intimacy, a form of tactile temporality that provides an alternative to the linear distances typically associated with Romantic historicities.

*Touch is immediate.* Recent histories of the senses hold that the philosophical understanding of sight and touch diverged during the British Romantic period, and a cursory glance at the history of sensory philosophy bears up this assertion: while David Hume describes sight and touch as working in tandem to develop our understanding of concepts like extension, Brown labors to demonstrate that the sense of touch alone provides such understanding, and that it is only in retrospect that we attribute the concept to sight.¹¹ Scholars typically portray this historic division of the senses as accompanying more social divisions: between public and private spaces, between subjective and objective knowledge, and between the early modern period and the earliest days of industrialized modernity. Thus, social history is written on the body as sensory history. Constance Classen argues that this division did not entail a turning away from touch, but rather a reeducation of the body to use touch, like sight, at a distance. Crary similarly argues that

¹¹ Hume writes, “The idea of space is convey’d to the mind by two senses, the sight and touch; nor does any thing ever appear extended, that is not either visible or tangible” (*Treatise* 30).
as vision came detached from the sense of touch, the optical technologies developed in the early
nineteenth paradoxically resulted in more embodied ways of seeing: as the “juridical model of
the camera obscura” fell away, “vision became located in the empirical immediacy of the
observer’s body” (24). The troubled relationship between sight and touch is thus portrayed as
rooted in a shifting sense of the boundaries of the subject and the distance between subject and
surroundings as the field of vision comes to be understand as a network of relationship between
points in space and, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty puts it, “a central perspective—our body”
(Unpublished 5). The body becomes “our point of view on the world,” perceived as “the visible
form of our intentions,” rather than “an object in the world” (Unpublished 5). Through this logic,
the body comes to be understood as an agent of vision that radiates our position in the visible
world, and vision becomes entangled with proprioception.

Once vision is entangled with proprioception, forms perceived through this yoked sense
expand beyond physical boundaries to encompass the “system of possible movements” that
“radiates” from the form to the surrounding space (Merleau-Ponty Unpublished 5). The form is
seen not only as what and where it is, but as what and where it might be; the visible form is
motion and the potential for motion. Vision anticipates; vision cannot help but anticipate. The
visible present always mixes a little with the past and the future. The fuzzy time of the visible
allows us to say, with Merleau-Ponty, that “the matter of perception” is “pregnant with its form”
(Primacy 15). It is this sense of the visible encompassing somehow more than the visible that
allows me to consider both the side of the lamp that faces toward me and the side that faces away
as continuous parts of the same visible object.

The still image calls out to us for the kinetic system that visuality requires of form: thus
the impulse toward ekphrasis. When we look at the paintings that inspire works of ekphrasis, the
real trompe l’oeil is not the illusion that a flat object has depth, but the illusion that a still figure still radiates potential movement. The tension between the stillness of the representational object and our ocular expectation of motion comes to the fore in the frustrated momentum of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” which laments that though the painted figures seem on the verge of kissing, their potential kiss will never come to be. As the poet imagines the world progressing and decaying around the still object, he finally translates the object’s kinetic potential into speech in the poem’s concluding couplet. We typically understand ekphrasis as the poetic form in which the author’s gaze becomes the object’s voice, but we rarely consider why sight manifests as speech in the ekphrastic poem. When we consider sight as only one possible sense through which an author might perceive an object, however, we are able to articulate the particularity of sight and its attendant temporalities (as opposed to touch and its particular temporalities): as the poet sees the potential action radiating from the still object, speech erupts as an outlet for the pent-up kinetic expectations of the gaze. Still objects are “moved to speak” in ekphrastic poetry because they cannot otherwise be moved in the manner required or desired by the gaze.

Touch, on the other hand, provides a model for contact with the other that does not impose visuality’s anticipation on its object. As I argue in Chapter Four, Percy Bysshe Shelley explores the possibility of a non-anticipatory encounter in his poem “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” (1819), which uses the form of ekphrasis to undermine ekphrastic expectations. As previous scholars have noted, the “gazer” central to this poem about the mythical Medusa cannot be definitively identified: Perseus, the author, the reader, and even Medusa herself are all possibilities. Thus when grace “turns the gazer’s spirit into stone,” we cannot say with certainty

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who it is that undergoes this transformation. The transformed “gazer” can offer no clarity, for once he or she is turned to stone, “thought no more can trace” the history that led to this moment. Like Brown’s infant who, when grown, will be unable to remember who he was before he understood the external causes revealed through touch, the “gazer” in Shelley’s poem has experienced a collapse of personal identity so profound that it leaves no “trace” of who or what existed before this moment. Nor can we anticipate what is to come: neither the painting nor the gorgon are moved to speak by the momentum of Shelley’s poem. Instead, we are arrested in the moment of transformation, in a present tense that exists without reference to past or future, in which personal identity condenses to the purely tactile experience of being materially present with or through (or both with and through) the other.

If we assign the sense of kinetic potential to vision along with proprioception, what is left to touch is not the movement of my hand to yours, but only the moment of contact. Touch is never halfway there, dividing infinitude with Zeno’s arrow. Touch is only there. It is through touch that “the perceiving subject undergoes a continued birth; at each instant it is something new” (Unpublished 6). Touch is always the present.

*Touch is intimate.* Touch is simultaneously “immediate and embodied” and “metaphorical, the alternative emotional connotation of ‘touching’” (Paterson 2). In touch, the physical and emotional collapse into affect as the subject makes herself vulnerable to both physical and psychological disintegration: we cannot touch without being touched; in the moment of touch, as

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13 In defining a “haptic” system to oppose the optic, Mark Paterson proposes yoking touch rather than sight to the bodily senses such as proprioception, kinesthesia, and the vestibular sense (4). In this dissertation, I define the sense of touch narrowly because I seek to investigate as far as possible touch as itself rather than touch as a part of a system (although of course I will also discuss touch as it interacts with and relates to other senses and sensory systems).
in the moment of transformation in Shelley’s “On the Medusa,” we are both subject and object, and neither.

Touch closes the distance between intention and contact. Touch is limited by the proximal boundaries of the body in space. We might glimpse another from afar, but we must be in arm’s reach to take her hand in violence or desire. Touch brings us closer to the objects of our devotion or interest—in the Middle Ages, people might touch the relics of a saint to feel closer to that saint; in the Romantic period, museum-goers would touch and even tear upholstery from Napoleon’s carriage to enhance the intimacy of the experience (Pascoe 109). The act of touch literally and figuratively brings us closer to close friends and distant celebrities.

But the intimacy of touch terrifies because it brings the object of desire and the object of revulsion into equal proximity; there is always the danger that we might, at a key moment, fail to distinguish between the two. As I argue in Chapter Six, Mary Shelley exposes the horrific intimacy of touch in several episodes hinging on misdirected or nonconsensual contact. At key moments in both Frankenstein (1818) and The Last Man (1826), the main character’s invitation to touch a family member is intercepted by a moment of forced intimacy with someone horrifyingly strange. In Frankenstein, Victor wakes from a dream in which his bride transforms into his mother’s corpse at the touch of his kiss, and he finds himself facing, for the first time, his living creation. The creature holds up the curtain on Victor’s bed and stretches out his hand, silently intercepting the intimacy Victor had intended for Elizabeth. Similarly, in The Last Man,

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14 Classen relates the demotion of touch from a “master sense” to a “lower” sense, a transition that she traces from its origins at the end of the Middle Ages to its formalization in the nineteenth century, to a historicized fear of such intimacy. Classen attributes what she sees as “the gradual displacement [of touch] from social centrality” largely to the effects of the Plague: “The bodies of plague victims,” she writes, “had been ‘anti-relics,’ radiating disease instead of holy vitality and serving as objects of tactile avoidance rather than tactile desire.”
Verney is rushing to his sick child’s bedside when he takes a wrong turn and feels his “leg clasped” by a “negro” plague victim who winds his “naked festering arms” around Verney and pulls him so close that Verney feels “his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals.” Verney is momentarily “overcome” by the experience; when he recovers enough to throw the “wretch” aside and enter the room occupied by his family, he finds that his son has already died, and the tiny mouth he finally kisses is already cold. In these scenes, the forced intimacy of unwanted contact comes as an interruption in which the object of desire is suddenly replaced by an object of revulsion. The feeling is not mutual, and the touch is not consensual. To call the plague victim’s assault an “embrace,” as Anne K. Mellor does, is to imagine a responsive reciprocity not in evidence in the text. This episode is not about the transcendent power of love. It is about the horror of conflicting desire revealed through the intimacy of the touch.

Touch opens us to intimacy as it leaves us physically and emotionally vulnerable. Sight is voluntary—we see only what we choose to look at; the child watching a horrifying scene has only to close her eyes to shut out the fearful images. But touch is both voluntary and involuntary: I might choose to touch your hand, but it does not follow that you choose to be touched by me.

*Touch is social.* Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, argues that the limits of human sympathy are expansive enough to include even the dead. Yet he cautions that “it is the impressions of our own senses only” that we copy when we sympathetically imagine the joy or suffering of others (13). According to Smith, we cannot feel as another, but we can feel with another—that is, we can feel alongside one another, separately. You feel your feelings, and I feel the subdued repetition of feelings I have felt before in similar situations. We never intersect except with our own pasts. But the sense of touch allows us to feel with another in the most
profound sense: we do not have to imagine the feeling of the other because, as Brown argues, we understand the other as the cause of our own feelings. When we touch, we empathize and communicate; we create a social bond based on mutuality and reciprocity of feeling (Paterson 13). Merleau-Ponty argues that “knowledge and the communication with others which it presupposes not only are original formations with respect to the perceptual life but also they preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it” (Unpublished 7). To touch another is to communicate something of our own perceptual experience through the skin. When we touch another meaningfully, we create, preserve, and transform our capacity for perception. In this way, touch embraces both the specificity of the individual experience and the transcendence of the social encounter.

By emphasizing touch—the act, the sense, and the feeling—I distinguish this project from recent work on material culture and things in the nineteenth century. Although Arjun Appadurai has suggested that things have a “social life,” his concern is for the “things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (5). That is, his interest is in the role of things in circuits of exchange, not for the tactile experience of social engagement with the thing itself. My concern is not for material production and circulation, but for the social relationships experienced, preserved, and transformed through contact.

The distinction between the “social life” of material objects and the social relationships enacted through material contact centers on issues of agency and narrative control. As I argue in Chapter Five, Thomas De Quincey seeks to contain the abundant possibility of human social contact by transforming past acquaintances into objects of material exchange. While De Quincey famously compares human memory to a “palimpsest”—an ancient manuscript on which text had been repeatedly written, erased, and written over as it was handed down through generations
before contemporary science discovered a means of resurrecting previous inscriptions—he also invites us to consider the material object of the palimpsest in relation to the human body, especially the child’s body, which literally embodies the collective time of human generation. These children’s bodies represent, for De Quincey, narratives that can neither be completed nor revised. When he imagines, in Suspiria de Profundis (1845), the bodies of the children of Savannah-la-Mar “asleep through five generations” in the underwater ruins of a destroyed Jamaican city, De Quincey contains the overabundance of palimpsestuous narrative (165).

Similarly, in his little-studied translation and adaptation of “The Spanish Military Nun” (1847), De Quincey refuses to conclude the sixteenth-century nun’s tale, and instead ends his essay by imagining all the multitudinous portraits of the nun that might have been passed down through generations. In this way, De Quincey preserves the possibility of future social potential while containing this potential within the safety of material objects. The narratives of these and other girl-children solidify into material objects at the moment De Quincey comes into contact with them, thus preserving the integrity of an encounter that might otherwise be transformed through future encounters.

Bill Brown notes the “suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power: you cut your finger on a sheet of paper, you trip over some toy, you get bopped on the head by a falling nut” (3-4). But the suddenness in his examples arises not from the thingness of the things, but from the interruption of a thing making contact, like the unknown thing that interrupts the infant’s accustomed motions in Thomas Brown’s philosophy, initiating an interaction. Bill Brown makes the things grammatical objects in his examples, but we might more properly give them the power of subjects: the sheet of paper cut your finger, the toy tripped
you, the falling nut bopped you on the head. At the moment of contact, the relationship is reciprocal even if it is not mutual.

*Touch is nonlinear.* When we look, we arrange the world narratively. We might not recognize the subtle motion of our eyes as we scan the room, but the motion nonetheless structures the experience of seeing: we look from the table to the stack of books to the photographs to the window in linear progression. We see over time. And as we do so, we create a story, the story of what we see and how we see it and of the relationships that develop through our seeing. John Berger writes, “We never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are” (*Ways* 9).15 Sight is the first, inarticulate draft of our life story.

When we touch, on the other hand, we sense in fragments. The relationships created through touch are fleeting, connected only after they have been integrated into the narrative developing through the more temporally continuous (or fuzzy) senses of sight and proprioception. And like the “Swinish Multitude” who insist on the authority of their felt experience rather than observable “reality” of conservative political thinkers, the authors who focus on tactile engagement reveal the radical potential of alternative narrative structures.

Narrative histories based on touch rather than sight, as I argue in Chapter Two, opened up new possibilities for the future that fundamentally threatened the status quo. When William Merleau-Ponty uses the same language to describe the experience of embodied sight: “Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing. But because it moves and sees, it holds things in a circle around itself” (*Eye and Mind* 163).
Godwin made the seemingly innocuous proposal, in his 1809 “Essay on Sepulchres,” that we should memorialize the “Illustrious Dead” with simple white wooden crosses, conservative reviewers balked at the radical implications of his choice of materials. Common materials, these reviewers argued, were suitable only for common men. The truly great deserved ponderous monuments in immovable stone—expensive projects to awe succeeding generations. These reviews recognized the radical rejection of historical authority implicit in Godwin’s plan.

Wooden memorials require care and maintenance in the present if they are to survive into the future, and therefore Godwin’s memorials would be certain to decay into fragments, allowing future generations to actively choose to renew their relationships with the dead by repairing the crosses—or not. Rejecting the one-way structure of Burke’s conservative historicism, in which present and future are bound by respectful awe to the changeless dictates of the past, Godwin suggests a continual and active engagement with the past through physical intervention with their material remains. The “Illustrious Dead,” he argues, are useful to the present not just for what they did, but for what they might have done. Mortality makes human achievement a fragment of human potential, and Godwin therefore suggests that we might compensate in part for this fault by extending human engagement beyond the human lifetime. When Godwin visits the graves of the “Illustrious Dead,” he feels them “whisper” to him “things unfelt before.” Godwin’s interactions with the dead are not just reflections on the past. They produce new thoughts and feelings. Out of the productive communion between past and present, facilitated by the narrative interruption of physical contact, emerges a future with progressive potential.

The possibilities of a past made contingent through physical contact that Godwin developed in 1809 percolated through his earlier writing. In Caleb Williams (1794), a form of open-ended sociability emerges at the end of the novel as Caleb, jolted into “infinite
astonishment” by Falkland’s unexpected embrace, addresses his final lines to the Falkland who might have inspired greatness in other circumstances (275). Thus through Caleb’s intervention, which fractures Falkland’s history and begins their relationship as if it were anew, Falkland’s potential usefulness is realized. Caleb has not forgotten the Falkland who persecuted him, but he has remembered what he never knew: the history of what might have been and the future that it might have become.

In the gap between touch and interpretation lies the possibility for organizational structures other than the linearly narrative. Classen writes that the history of touch is an “inferred history” that “must move sideways from a suggestive phrase to a characteristic practice to an informative artifact or site, and even inward to one’s own distinctive yet shared corporeal experience, rather than in a linear fashion from narrative to narrative, event to event” (xvii). The sense of touch that suffuses Romantic literature similarly moves “sideways,” interrupting and disrupting otherwise linear narratives. We search for evidence of touch both in the description of sensual experience and in the structure and form that warps to make room for such experience.

Touch provides the authors in my study a new way of approaching time and their relationship to time. Touch interrupts social encounters and historical movements—it interrupts the closed system of the infant’s self-knowledge and it interrupts the authoritative rhetoric of observable systems imposed upon the “Swinish Multitudes” by political leaders who refuse to accept the reality of their suffering. Through these interruptions, touch allows for transformations of the self and society that would be unthinkable from the linearly narrative construction of time required by visuality.
We are accustomed to thinking of time as a progression that might be plotted spatially, a fourth dimension conceptualized as a two-dimensional projection. The persistent representation of time as a series of what Berber Bevernage calls “now-points” establishes an orderly relationship between past, present, and future—we will never confuse now with any other time. As the White Queen told Alice, “to-day isn’t any other day,” but today is always defined in relation to other days (Carroll 97). The field of temporality radiates from the perspective of today as the field of visuality radiates from the perspective of the body, holding the surrounding history in a circle around us, never seeing just one now-point but always the relationship between them.

In this spatial/visual conception of time, the eyewitness occupies a privileged position of narrative authority. Yet as Reinhart Koselleck has argued, by the Romantic period the distance between the historical event, the eyewitness, and the historian had shifted. On the one hand, new media, new currents of exchange, and a scientific emphasis on repeatable experiments led to a contraction almost to the point of identification between eyewitness and historian. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer describe a “technology of virtual witnessing” which involves “the production in the reader’s mind of such an image of an experimental scene as obviates the necessity for either direct witness or replication” (had they written in the era of lolcats and YouTube, they might have termed this technology viral rather than virtual). This construction collapses the distance between the eyewitness to the experimental event and the reader who might report the history of the event as if she were herself a witness. “Through virtual witnessing,” according to Shapin and Schaffer, “the multiplication of witnesses could be, in principle, unlimited. It was therefore the most powerful technology for constituting matters of
fact” (60). Through these witnesses, the events recalled gained credence with each repetition, creating a history that, in the words of Ian Baucom, “is tautological, is that which proves itself by appealing to the accumulated sequence of testimonies to itself” (330). For Shapin and Schaffer as well as for Baucom, the present reality of the Romantic period was assembled by repeatedly bringing the past into the proximity of the present for verification. History takes on what Kevis Goodman (building on Raymond Williams) terms “presentness” as opposed to the immediacy of presence: like a tactile object, historical presentness has an annoying tendency to interrupt as “unpleasurable feeling;” it might be perceived as “sensory discomfort” or “disturbance in affect and related phenomena” (3). Like the falling nut bopping you on the head, historical presentness makes its proximity known with intrusive force.

Yet as Baucom, Goodman, Fredric Jameson, and Mary Favret have argued, temporality in the Romantic period was also mediated through unprecedented distance—the distance between Britain and colonial labor and the distance between deployed soldiers and their families was geographic, but it was also experienced temporally in the gap between an event and its report and in the difference between the companion who left and the companion who returns years later or fails to return at all. Favret writes that “we turn to temporal structures to discover

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16 Shapin and Schaffer take after Hume in considering how we might establish “matters of fact,” which Hume distinguishes from “Relations of Ideas” that describe abstract mathematical concepts (related by signs of equality or inequality) that “are discoverable by the mere operation of thought.” Matters of fact, on the other hand, are those that we typically validate through “the present testimony of our senses, or the records of our memory.” Hume argues that our senses and memories are insufficient to establish the persistent veracity of “matters of fact,” however, because our minds so readily conceive of “contrary” facts without contradiction—we can as easily imagine the sun not rising as we can imagine the sun rising. The “Law of Cause and Effect,” which we understand through “observation and experience,” according to Hume, provides the relation necessary to establish matters of fact. Matters of fact gain more authority, therefore, the more they are observed or known to have been observed. See An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, Section IV.
our relationship to distant spaces” (n.p.), and this was especially true during the Romantic period, when the development of the marine chronometer allowed British subjects to carry Greenwich Mean Time with them to the farthest reaches of the globe, and the increasing availability and accuracy of the personal watch simultaneously brought the public measurement of time into the closest domestic spaces. Increasing temporal uniformity mediates “a world of expanding distances,” as Favret puts it, but it also invites the observation of perspectival differences: far-flung British subjects might keep track of Greenwich Mean Time, only to notice again and again its jarring difference from the local time of daily living; the different measures of time provided by my watch, your watch, the town clock, the sun’s motion, and the sand’s slow descent through the hour-glass all serve to indicate a relationship between times that fail to align more often than not. As a result, while the measurement of time creates the illusion of collapsing distance, it simultaneously isolates the individual experiencing subjective time. Uniform time, even as it is brought ever closer to the physical person through the popularization of pocket watches, is experienced at a distance.

Temporal misalignment might manifest as a physical isolation that thwarts the radical possibilities of touch, as in George Colman the Younger’s The Iron Chest (1796). As I argue in Chapter Three, in this reactionary adaptation of Godwin’s Caleb Williams, Colman empties the novel of its political vigor by replacing the radical potential of transformative temporality with the interminable stasis of the wait. The resulting play was so dull that the show had to be interrupted twice during opening night for a public apology and entreaty for calm from the

vocally dissatisfied audience. As Barry Sutcliffe has noted, the theater was one of few places large crowds of people from all classes regularly gathered together in London in the 1790s. There was real anxiety that a faithful rendering of *Caleb Williams* might leave the masses “all unhappy together,” as one review defending Colman’s adaptation put it. Colman therefore had ample reason to replace Godwin’s politics of human contact with a politics of deferral. As characters obsessively measure the time that passes around them—in the opening lines alone, a boy uses a clock, an hourglass, and the sun’s position in the sky to measure the time he has spent waiting—they become increasingly isolated from the physical and social spaces in which measured time is perceived as advancing. Waiting is the sense that the falling nut can bop you and prompt your next move (yelling at the nut, eating the nut, taking the nut home to make a necklace, or merely noting the nut’s presence and moving on), but it is also the frustration that comes from knowing that you have little power to initiate contact. Waiting is the absence of—or infinitely deferred anticipation of—the social reciprocity of touch. Favret describes the meantime of waiting as “a hole in history, a sense of evacuating the lived present.” Yet it is also the overdetermination of a present that we cannot move to escape. To wait is to live within the evacuated present.

The temporal deferral and physical distance that isolates individuals from personal interaction plays out in a larger scale in historicity’s increasing dissociation from present experience in the wake of the French Revolution. As Nicholas Roe notes, the ongoing violence prevented radical Romantics “from supplying the millennial sequel to the apocalypse of revolution; when Coleridge anticipated a ‘blest future’ in ‘Religious Musings,’ he was

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welcoming a promised conclusion already rapidly receding into the future” (88). In Roe’s curious construction, the future performs an act we associate with the past: it recedes into the distance, leaving the present increasingly isolated from either past or future in a persistent state of (post-)apocalypse. It is this isolated present experienced almost as a hole in history that emerges in the work of scholars such as Rei Terada, Jacques Khalip, and Jonathan Sachs, who have emphasized a Romantic interest in bearing or enduring the worst through a “dark time” of catastrophe. Terada compares this endurance through loss to “a substance weathering erosion” (“Hegel’s Bearings” 14): a climate of catastrophe gradually transforms this substance from structure to ruin, but the substance persists. In Terada’s construction, the enduring figure takes the form of the ruin, as if the present might persist by prematurely calcifying in a monument to the soon-to-be-past. Yet as Godwin’s interactive memorials demonstrate, the ephemeral structure that does not “weather erosion” but instead invites perpetual intervention that might provide an alternative model for transforming rather than enduring in these “dark times.”

Terada builds on the well-established tradition holding that the aesthetic of fragment, fracture, and ruin was a particularly Romantic preoccupation. Earlier eras had treated ruin as emblematic of a knowledge that must be painstakingly acquired, according to Brian Dillon, by “piecing together a sundered past” (1). By the late eighteenth century, however, the loss of the completed object was emphasized less than what Nina Dubin calls the act of “imaginative

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completion” invited by the ruin or fragment (5, 177). From this perspective, the impossibility
of “piecing together” a lost whole from the missing limbs of a ruined statue or the missing
stanzas of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” freed the imagination from the limitations of sense. The
impossibility of completeness allowed for the perpetual renewal of the collective impulse toward
completion. In this reading of fragmentation in Romantic literature, absence is a necessary
precondition for imaginative creation, whether the imagined whole is a figure of past greatness
or future decline. While Dillon, Dubin, and Angela Esterhammer emphasize a Romantic literary
tradition that embraced the “forward-looking, re-creative potential” of the ruin (Esterhammer
31), they, like Terada, emphasize the fixity of the ruined past as structuring (however
incompletely) things as they are and things as they might be imagined to become. However, none
of these scholars have fully explored the moments of human intervention in the present that
provide relief from catastrophe without anticipating the form of a better future.

My project adds to this conversation by identifying moments that deviate from the
accepted model of Romantic ruin and fragment. Through my readings of work by William
Godwin, George Colman the Younger, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas
De Quincey, and Mary Shelley, I trace an alternative Romantic response to the catastrophic
present in which substances persist by not bearing up against catastrophe. In a radical Romantic
approach to temporality, the past is not just a fixed yet incomplete record of a former present as a
figure of ruin. Rather, like the future, the past is a perpetual emergence that may never be
knowable. Touching Time argues that in an era of frustrated revolution, this sense of the past as
malleable where it touches the present opens up the possibility of a future that is more than just a

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20 Angela Esterhammer makes a similar claim in “Translating the Elgin Marbles: Byron,
Hemans, Keats,” Wordsworth Circle 40.1 (Winter 2009), 29-36.
future past and more than just a continuation of current catastrophe. As the temporal transforms from linear to emergent, the position or perspective of the subject becomes radically destabilized. The transformation of time manifests as the transformative potential of human contact—the touch—in the present.
CHAPTER TWO

SILENCE AND STILLNESS:
ASTONISHMENT AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO NARRATIVE
IN WILLIAM GODWIN’S CALEB WILLIAMS

Silence and stillness: two characteristics of the dead. We are not accustomed to thinking of them as sociable affects, but neither are we accustomed to thinking of the dead as sociable beings. The social life of the dead, the still, and the silent might easily be overlooked in a world brimming with the activity of the living, the moving, and the vocal all vying for our attention. But we have much to gain by attending to the communicative potential of silence and stillness. While often interpreted as states of lack—silence as the absence of speech, stillness as arrested motion—these states, taken as themselves, provide an opportunity to relinquish the narrative momentum of anticipated activity. They allow us to see ourselves, and the other, not as we have been and might be, but as we are, now, in the present.

The silences of our interlocutor, as Nancy Yousef has argued, might function as invitations to response or as “tolerable punctuations of intercourse, to be borne or indulged because of a history of speaking with and to one another” (117). But those silences that fall
beyond the accustomed patterns of conversational intimacy, the stillnesses that mark neither advance nor withdrawal, provide more than a gap in speech and more than a reprieve from the activity of the world. They offer, instead, a freedom from the accretion of boredom, indulgence, annoyance, tolerance, frustration, and desire that makes up our history of speaking together. They offer a means of moving beyond the limits of the known and the knowable, a way to engage socially beyond the span of a human lifetime. In the works of William Godwin that I will address in this chapter, the inarticulable potential of silence and stillness find expression in physical contact and tactile engagement. The touch marks the immediacy of a present moment unmarked by speech or motion. Touch provides a form of engagement in which we might acknowledge and accede to the disruptions of silence and stillness without reverting to our established patterns of narrative.

William Godwin relies on the social potential of silence and stillness when he argues, in his *Essay on Sepulchres* (1809), that we must cultivate a sociable community that includes the dead as well as the living if society is ever to advance. A dead man, according to Godwin, “had accumulated, it may be, great stores of learning; by long exercise he had refined his taste; he had collated facts; he had drawn the most curious conclusions. You might converse with this man incessantly for a year, and might learn something from him every day” (8). When this man dies, his conversation ends unfinished. We can only speculate as to what good he might have inspired in the future. “It is owing to this calamity of death,” Godwin writes, “that the world for ever is, and in some degree for ever must be, in its infancy” (8). Mortality constrains mankind’s perfectibility by limiting social relations to mere fragments of what could be. Godwin suggests that we might struggle to advance past this infancy by keeping alive the conversations of the
dead. But “to him who is of a mind rightly framed,” Godwin writes, these dead “are still with us, in their stories, in their words, in their writings, in the consequences that do not cease to flow fresh from what they did: they still have their place, where we may visit them, and where, if we dwell in a composed and quiet spirit, we shall not fail to be conscious of their presence” (23). When he visits the graves of such “Illustrious Dead” as Milton, Shakespeare, Bacon, and Sidney, Godwin imagines that they “whisper” to him “things unfelt before” (22). Godwin’s interactions with the dead are not just reflections on the past. They produce new thoughts and new feelings. Out of the productive communion between past and present emerges a future with progressive potential.

Godwin suggests that we affirm the continuing relationship between past and present by memorializing the dead with simple grave markers, such as white wooden crosses. These structures would not only mark the resting place of what he calls the “Illustrious Dead,” but they would also create a specific and physical relationship between the dead and the living that demands perpetual renewal. Unlike cenotaphs or pyramids, unlike the wreck of Ozymandias or the monastery graveyards leveled by Henry VIII, these wooden crosses would never crumble into the picturesque ruins so popular during the Romantic period. Godwin proposes an aesthetic not of ruin, but of decay. While ruins might remind future centuries and future civilizations of a greatness that came before, the response they elicit tends toward passive awe: reflection on a past now silent, anticipation of our own silences now to come. An aesthetic of decay, however, is an activist aesthetic. A decaying structure requires maintenance and care in the present if it is to leave any trace for the future. It asks each generation to affirm a continuous relationship with the past through the renewal of a physical bond. Godwin’s wooden crosses, that is, would symbolize not only the dead but also the ongoing relationship between the dead and the living.
Godwin hastens to add that he would not advocate the removal of any standing memorials, nor encourage any law regulating the memorials living families might erect for their dead. But he laments that “ordinary tombstones are removed much after the manner, that the farmer removes the stubble of this year’s crop that he may make room for the seed of the next” (14). The cycle of the ruin, unlike the cycle of planting and harvest, cannot be coaxed into productivity through human intervention. The farmer of the dead reaps a harvest of waste. Although made of permanent materials, ordinary tombstones inspire only impermanent relationships, and might easily be replaced with fresher monuments that may for a season inspire sentiment in grieving survivors. Godwin’s proposal “does not seek perpetuity, as ancient Egypt, in the massiness and immoveableness of the pyramid; it aims at better security, in keeping for ever alive the spirit that first put the project into action” (18). For Godwin, the ritual act of memory is a more secure monument than architectural grandeur.

In conceiving of a memorial action rather than a memorial edifice, Godwin re-imagines what we remember when we remember the dead: not the narrative closure of a life history, but the continuing potential of a communicative relationship. Walking on the ruins of a monastic cemetery dating to the twelfth century, Godwin muses that “[p]onderous monuments, graced with sculptures, and diversified with copious sepulchral inscriptions, once marked” the graves of the ancient earls and dukes of Norfolk (15-6). Now, grassy overgrowth obscured the tombs of great and lowly dead alike, and “[a]ll now was speechless” (15). The dead have been deprived of their physical link to the living as embodied in marked graves, and so the living have been deprived of their communicative connection to the past. The true tragedy of death, for Godwin, is the inability to communicate, and the loss of a grave compounds this tragedy.
Although Godwin opposes massive stone monuments to the dead, he insists on the physicality of the relationship between dead and living. Godwin anticipates his reader’s objection that the physical body was the mere material through which a person’s thoughts and feelings and virtues were once conveyed to the world, but once the immaterial person has ceased to be, the material form must have no value. But Godwin contends that the body and relics of a friend, once dead, continue to convey social meaning to the living through physical memory:

I cannot love my friend, without loving his person. It is in this way that every thing which practically has been associated with my friend, acquires a value from that consideration; his ring, his watch, his books, and his habitation. The value of these as having been his, is not merely fictitious; they have an empire over my mind; they can make me happy or unhappy; they can torture, and they can tranquillise; they can purify my sentiments, and make me similar to the man I love; they possess the virtue which the Indian is said to attribute to the spoils of him he kills, and inspires me with the powers, the feelings and the heart of their preceding master (8).

The physical effects of a dead loved one evoke two kinds of memory—material and narrative—that, combined, constitute not the history of a person, but the imprint of a communicative relationship. For Godwin, the dead, like the living, are both immaterial and material. Their social relevance persists in the convergence of these two modes of existence, the immaterial thoughts that might be read and the material resting place that might be visited. We might consider Godwin as he sits by the grave of ancients communing with the dead as experiencing two forms of time simultaneously: affective time rooted in material experience and characterological time rooted in narrative experience. Their intersection allows for a dynamically social and communicative experience of time. In preserving the materiality of the dead, Godwin’s
memorials would advance an understanding of temporality as sociability. Just as “my acquaintance with the thoughts and virtues of my friend, has been made through my eyes and my ears” (8), so, for Godwin, is the affective power of history better appreciated through physical contact with material relics than through “the cold and uncertain record of words formed upon paper” (21). In a sociable construction of history, the past does not simply persist into the present but promotes societal development toward the future through sensory interactions in the present. Situating the present within a history that is both narrative and material allows for a sociably political intervention, a responsiveness and a responsibility between past, present, and future that is built on the feeling of the social relationship.

Most reviews of Godwin’s “Essay on Sepulchres” were positive even in generally hostile publications, probably because the essay appeared uncharacteristically apolitical. The European Magazine and Literary Review, however, criticized Godwin’s proposed building materials as too common, comparing them unfavorably to cheap monuments in Europe that “were, and are too common to stand as the examples of talents and of virtues” (49). Common materials, the review suggests, should be reserved for common men. The Illustrious Dead call for “the most perfect architectural designs, and the most beautiful sculptured groupes”—monuments to rival the “classic vestiges” of ancient architecture “to this hour revered” and the “graceful models” of decorated tombs and cenotaphs “still adored” (50). A monument, according to this view, should reflect the achievements of the dead. More than that: a monument establishes the value of the dead, and the elaborate construction and costly materials of the monument should prescribe as well as describe the nature our feelings toward the dead. The costliness of a monument announces its relative affective values and declares the emotional “price” we are expected to pay in affective display. Commemoration becomes a form of commodity. The review argues that
without these durable monuments to establish the esteem shown to these dead in the historical record, we might have no knowledge of them at all:

Had the illustrious dead been only commemorated by wooden crosses, numbers of persons, whose names, preserved in elegantly sculptured brass and marble, will be recorded to the latest time, would have become, with the monuments on which they were engraved, a prey to dust and worms, and mouldering have sunk into IRRETRIEVABLE OBLIVION (50).

I include this review, which seems to deliberately miss Godwin’s points, in order to demonstrate the political message attendant upon the aesthetics of decay and of ruin. Although this and many other reviews treated Godwin’s Essay on Sepulchres as nonpolitical writing, the European Magazine and Literary Review’s response exposes Godwin’s activist approach to memory as a direct challenge to traditional models of authority in determining the meaning of the historical record. That is, the review suggests that the determination of which dead are worthy of remembering should be a decision made at the time of death by those contemporaries who are elite enough and entitled enough to commission permanent memorials, rather than a decision that emerges over time through the intervention of individuals who might be “common” themselves. This is cultural memory constructed as a top-down operation. The memorials advocated by the European Magazine and Literary Review would embody Edmund Burke’s conception of the social contract as made in the past yet binding the future, rather than as an agreement renewed or revised over time as each generation is given the opportunity to bind its own futures.

Moreover, the review prescribes a specific, one-way affective relationship between past and present: the unrequited love of the unimportant for the important. The review praises those ancient monuments that are “adored” and “revered,” monuments that record names but
communicate nothing more than their own importance. These dead do not whisper new thoughts or feelings, and the living cannot think with them to create new societies or social movements. Instead, the antisocial dead silently demand the worshipful awe of a conservative society for a past that cannot be changed. The emotional response of the living for the unresponsive dead ensures continued societal stability and continuity between a strong foundation of the past and a predictable trajectory for the future. However, Godwin’s seemingly innocuous proposal for the treatment of the dead radically rejects the linear narration of history by a single authority and embraces the fragmentary and polyvocal construction of a conversation. This conversation might break off, jump ahead, and circle back, devolve into tangents or dissolve into side-talk, but we can always pick back up again where we left off because we are always leaving off. In the European Magazine and Literary Review’s formulation, the ancestral authorities who built monuments to their dead get the last word, but in Godwin’s construction no one will ever have the last word. Every conversation, like every life, is a fragment that holds the potential for further development.

The struggle to articulate the relationship between past, present, and future in the material metaphors of fragment, fracture, and ruin was a particularly Romantic preoccupation. While earlier eras had emphasized the importance of carefully acquiring and reconstructing the shattered remnants of the past, Romantic poets and artists embraced the fragmentary as an invitation to imagine the whole (see Introduction, p. 30). Godwin himself alludes to this transition in his “Essay on History and Romance,” in which he unfavorably compares the task of the historian, who sifts through the shards of history to construct a narrative devoid of conjecture and therefore devoid of human feeling, to the task of the novelist, who imagines the whole of human nature and selects the fragments that best suggest to the reader this imaginary whole. We
might then see the review’s response to Godwin’s “Essay on Sepulchres” as pushing back against the transition to Romanticism’s more progressive attitude toward the past, against an emergent literary tendency to look at what Godwin calls “the scattered ruins of evidence” and imagine not only what was, but what might have been and might yet be (“History” 297).

Godwin’s wooden crosses replicate in material form the acts of imaginative creation prompted by the fragment. Because they will certainly decay, the memorials by design become increasingly incomplete and in need of human intervention for repair. Yet every attempted completion would decay into fragment again. This perpetual process of fragmentation and recreation structurally mirrors the conversations Godwin imagines with the Illustrious Dead. The body of work left by a dead luminary must be seen as an incomplete representation of the dead’s potential before we can see each new “conversation” with the living as tending toward yet never accomplishing the completion of this fragment. Each new conversation recreates the fracture. This repeated fragmentation creates space in the historical narrative for progress based on but not limited by the past. Decay creates the space for another story to be told.

**Fragments without a Whole**

In Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* (1794), I argue, the repeated decay of dialogue into silence and fragment creates space for an inarticulate yet meaningful alternative narrative in which the deterministic link between past and future might be productively severed. In the moments when language breaks down into fragmentary utterances or fails to come at all, when the disconcerted characters forget what they were saying or forget themselves entirely, we are able to glimpse the complex interaction between memory and sociability that makes up the figure we consider the self. These interactions might also serve as the catalyst for personal and societal transition into a
more perfect future, yet characters frequently turn away from this potential by returning to
language and the resuming the familiar patterns of social interaction that make up their expected
narrative trajectory. We will first examine several scenes in which characters encounter gaps in
their knowledge of self and other. These gaps are initially marked by silence but quickly filled
with narrative explanations that obscure the fundamental strangeness of an other that is unknown
and potentially unknowable. By the end of Caleb Williams, however, the novel offers touch as an
alternative to the habitual when characters respond to inarticulate pauses. While Thomas
Brown’s rhetorical infant functions as a means of imaginatively exploring a human’s first
experiences of the world and how we come to know the things we cannot remember not knowing
(see Chapter 1), Godwin’s novel models a process of un-knowing that might allow us to
experience the other as other again. We will first examine the failure of habitual interactions to
allow for human development in Caleb Williams before turning to the importance of touch at the
end of the novel.

Before Caleb Williams suspects that his moody benefactor, later persecutor, has
committed murder, Caleb perceives something beyond his ability to articulate in Falkland’s
physical presence. Our first acquaintance with Falkland comes, as Godwin reminds us in Essay
on Sepulchres that all acquaintances come, through the eyes and ears. Caleb observes:

I found Mr Falkland a man of small stature, with an extreme delicacy of form and
appearance. In place of the hard-favoured and inflexible visages I had been accustomed
to observe, every muscle and petty line of his countenance seemed to be in an
inconceivable degree pregnant with meaning (6).

We encounter Falkland not just as a physical being, but as a physical being on the verge of
speech, on the verge of intimate revelation. Caleb cannot interpret Falkland’s countenance, and
so he interprets it as not yet interpretable. Like a figure in a painting that seems to pause mid-step, waiting for the poetic intervention of ekphrasis to prompt him back into motion, Falkland is portrayed as waiting for Caleb’s intervention to move his narrative forward from a state of pregnant anticipation to meaningful interaction. And, in fact, it is Caleb’s quest to assign meaning to Falkland’s countenance that drives the ensuing plot.

Beginning with the first interaction between Caleb and Falkland, conversation breaks apart as Caleb finds himself at a loss for words. Caleb approaches Falkland’s library believing it empty; as he opens the door he hears “the lid of a chest hastily shut, and the noise as of fastening a lock” (8). Realizing that Falkland must be inside the room, Caleb prepares to leave, when “a voice that seemed supernaturally tremendous exclaimed, Who is there? The voice was Mr Falkland’s. The sound of it thrilled my very vitals. I endeavoured to answer, but my speech failed” (8). Asked by a disembodied voice to identify himself, Caleb can answer only with silence. As he steps forward into the room, he sees that Falkland’s face betrays “strong symptoms of confusion” that quickly give way to rage (8). “Villain, cried he, what has brought you here?” (8). Again Caleb cannot answer, and instead he “hesitated a confused and irresolute answer” (8). With no speech recorded but Falkland’s, we must take the hesitation itself as Caleb’s reply. Falkland supplies Caleb’s lines for him, identifying him as a “villain” here to “ruin me” and assigning Caleb a role in his life story based on anticipated speech that never comes (8). Caleb does not know in any articulate sense his intentions or even identity at this moment; he cannot be known even to himself; but in seeking to make Caleb knowable, Falkland creates an enmity that will come to be real, and that will come to have been real in this moment. When Falkland looks on Caleb with the eye of rage and confusion, Caleb seems to “watch” him in return (8), and Falkland perceives a mutual antagonism that will exist in the future and that
will owe its existence in part to its fictive origins in this moment. This fundamental misinterpretation forms the basis of their all-consuming relationship.

Falkland echoes Caleb’s speechlessness the next night, when Caleb observes that Falkland cannot find the “words” to “disburthen” his mind (8). Caleb remains unable to articulate his feelings; he does not speak, but looks at Falkland “with anxiety and affection” (8). Falkland responds physically to Caleb’s expression. He made “shook his head, and then, putting five guineas into my hand, pressed it in a manner that I could feel proceeded from a mind pregnant with various emotions, though I could not interpret them” (8). Falkland makes the motions of attempted communication, but the interaction fails: Whatever as-yet-unspeakable emotions Falkland feels are observable in his expression but cannot yet be placed within the narrative structure of verbal interpretation. These emotions, whatever they might have become, are never given voice; they never develop beyond their “pregnancy” into an articulated fact of Falkland’s narrative self. And before his expression can speak for itself, Falkland seemed “immediately to recollect himself, and to take refuge in the usual distance and solemnity of his manner” (8). Falkland assumes once more the countenance of the character Caleb has come to expect.

In these two encounters, Caleb and Falkland temporarily lose track of themselves. In the first, Caleb cannot give voice to his own identity, and in the second, Caleb observes that Falkland “recollect[s]” a self that had been momentarily forgotten. To lose the sense of self in this way is akin to losing your train of thought mid-sentence: you start suddenly into silence as you strain to recall both what you just said and what you were about to say. It is to lose the sense of a unified self over time; it is to lose the certainty that when we respond to another we respond as ourselves. When we say, “I forget what I was saying,” we divide the self in two: the self who
was saying and the self who forgets. Certainly this condition is similar to the condition that identifies me as a self-aware subject able simultaneously to speak and to perceive myself as a person who speaks, to perceive and to perceive myself perceiving. Yet in the moment of forgetfulness, the self-referential circuit of apperception breaks: where I expect to perceive myself speaking, I encounter silence. It is only with considerable effort that I pick up a lost train of thought and continue on with my story. A friend might prompt me back on track, gently guiding me to the words that she expects based on what I just said, what I have said to her in the past, and the context of my personal history. My friend, after all, knows me, and knows my conversational habits. Philosopher David Cockburn writes, “We learn about another through the patterns in her speech. Perhaps better: learning about, coming to know, another is coming to see the patterns in her speech” (133). Thus the expression for friends so close they finish each other’s sentences, and thus the feeling of betrayal when a friend’s unexpected behavior reveals that she is not the person we thought we knew. Our investment in a friend’s predictability is an investment in our co-creation of her identity.

In Caleb Williams, characters are repeatedly enjoined to remain knowable, to maintain their expected patterns, to recollect themselves and continue their expected narrative trajectory. These characters frequently warn one another against losing the narrative self—the self as it is perceived through time, as the present custodian of past histories and future narrator of the present. Throughout the narrative Caleb presents of Falkland’s life, characters urge each other to maintain consistency in this self, and they reject change in order to preserve their own narrative consistency. They demonstrate concern for their responsibility in the present not only to their future selves, who might suffer the consequences of present actions, but also to their past selves, whose legacies they are responsible for stewarding. For example, when oafish Tyrrel veers from
his habitual mildness toward a young dependent and threatens to force her into an ill-matched marriage, the girl anxiously implores, “You have not forgot all the kindness you once had for me?” (58 n. 332). She portrays Tyrrel’s change in demeanor as a form of forgetfulness, and the narrator concurs in his assessment that Tyrrel “occasionally forgot the gentleness with which he had been accustomed to treat his good-natured cousin” (48). Forgetfulness is implicitly defined as the failure to repeat past action. By corollary, memory is construed as an active force maintained through its reiteration in the present, not just in words but in deed. Narrative consistency anchors the present self between past and future, providing a structure that is reinforced as it is followed, and this consistency is confirmed by the responding judgment of the other: *I know those patterns; I know it is you*. The insistent presence of an outside observer evaluating consistency—as Miss Melville and the narrator evaluate Tyrrel’s—gives each episode the properties of a fragment perpetually compared against a known whole. Truth is judged not in the degree to which the whole accounts for its parts, but in the degree to which the parts align with the whole—indeed, Caleb asserts at the beginning of his tale that his readers would be able to recognize its truth by its consistency.

The narrative self both describes and creates the self that is narrated, and the consistency of the self over time is confirmed by the consistency of the self’s narrative. The narrative consistency of an autobiography affirms the consistent identity of the narrative agent, the self. This narrative is not retrospective of action, but often determines action. Philosopher J. David Velleman argues that “human self-narrators” will often perform actions in order to make the

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1 This exchange, in which Emily accuses Tyrrel of forgetting his kindness toward her and Tyrrel insists that he has not—“Forgot! No, no. how can you ask such a question? You shall be my dear Emily still!”—is a later addition that does not appear in the first published version of the novel in 1794. Godwin’s slight alteration of the text emphasizes the importance of memory as a figure for the consistency of identities as they are tied to the predictability of human social relationships.
truth accord with the story they have already begun to tell “whenever they make promises or other verbal commitments, which may be as trivial as ‘I’m heading for the closet’” (Self to Self 213). Velleman’s elaboration clarifies how the self-narrator narrates the self into being:

As you putter around the office at the end of the day, you finally say, “I’m going home,” not because you were already about to leave, but because saying so will prompt you to leave. As your hand hovers indecisively over the candy dish, you say, “No, I won’t,” not because you weren’t about to take a candy, but because saying so may stop you from taking one. These utterances are issued as commitments, in the understanding that they will feed back into your behavior. Hence you do understand that your running autobiography not only reflects but is also reflected in what you do (Self to Self 213-214).

Our actions reflect our running autobiographies, and, I would add, our friends participate in maintaining this reflection. When I watch television and a fictional character does or says something I know he would never do, I blame the writers for not “knowing” the fictional character’s consistent traits. Similarly, when I do something out of character, my friends might intervene to improve my self-writing. Narrative truth and self-consistency are therefore epistemologically circular: we know what is true about a friend’s character because her character is consistent because she has maintained narrative consistency in order for her narrative to be true. Caleb Williams relies on this circular epistemology to establish the truth of his narrative when he declares in the novel’s opening paragraph, “My story will at least appear to have that consistency, which is seldom attendant but upon truth” (5). Given all that befalls him in the coming narrative, it is difficult to conclude that the truth borne of consistency is a truth worth maintaining.
The deterministic model for evaluating truth that develops through this self-narrative, the model advocated by Miss Melville and the narrator of *Caleb Williams*, leaves little room for progress. Indeed, such a system imagines a life structured by the implicit promises of repetitive activity. Godwin considers promises to be impediments to individual and collective progress, Angela Esterhammer and Ian Balfour have noted, because they would prevent a promise-maker from changing course based on new information. For Godwin, promises “ultimately work against the improvement of society because they institutionalize error, protect existing abuses, and prevent reform” (Esterhammer “Suspicion” 557). They are in essence contracts between the present self and the future self requiring the future self—who cannot, by definition, be party to the initial agreement—to behave in a manner consistent with the partial understanding of a now past self.\(^2\) Godwin’s suspicion of promises manifests in *Caleb Williams* as a suspicion of narrative consistency. In rejecting promises as limiting human growth, Godwin conceives of a self that progresses toward perfectibility only because it is perpetually incomplete. The self is a fragment that will never be whole.

Godwin portrays the systematic insistence on a consistent self as a problem both socially and as it is codified in law. When Caleb convinces the philosopher thief Raymond of the error of his ways, Raymond sadly replies that the knowledge has come “too late” (236). Laws that hold a man responsible for mistakes long past “leave no room for amendment, and seem to have a brutal delight in confounding the demerits of the offenders. It signifies not what is the character of the individual at the hour of trial. How changed, how spotless, and how useful, avails him

\(^2\) As Andrew Franta has pointed out, Godwin’s understanding of promises as retarding progress sets the foundation for his philosophical opposition to constitutional contracts as oppressive not only to future *generations* but even to the future incarnations of the very individuals party to such a contract. Godwin diverges from both Burke and Paine in rejecting contracts broadly considered.
nothing” (236). The law brings to court a man as he is now, but tries a man who no longer exists. “What then,” Raymond asks, “can I do? Am I not compelled to go on in folly, having once begun?” (236). A child who is already grounded for stealing candy might be freed from the restrictions imposed on his behavior by the threat of grounding, and shrugging say, “Might as well steal more candy!” But Raymond is not shrugging, and he is continuing his life of folly not because he is free to, but because he is compelled. The law, that is, restricts his behavior, but not by compelling him to behave in a particular way in order to avoid punishment. Rather, the law compels him to behave in a consistent way; it restricts him not by punishing him, but by classifying him as someone who will be punished. The legal system that conflates a man-as-he-is with a man-as-he-was depends on the same temporal worldview as the system of contractual promises that conflates a man-as-he-is with a man-as-he-might-be. Both the justice system and the contract system inhibit progress by insisting on the fiction of a consistent self.

In *Political Justice*, Godwin describes promises as an “evil” that might occasionally be “necessary.” But he cautions that “we should never suffer ourselves, by their temporary utility to be induced to forget their intrinsic nature, and the demerits which adhere to them independently of any peculiar concurrence of circumstances” (I, 200-202).³ That is, while remembering a promise we should take care not to forget the stultifying effects of clinging to the past. Here Godwin hints at an alternative to the enforced repetition of Caleb and Miss Melville’s system of personal memory. To truly recall, Godwin suggests, is not to jealously guard the frail coherence of a consistent self; not to forcibly conform the future to the mold of the past, but rather to remember that our information—about ourselves and about the world—is forever incomplete.

³ This quote does not appear in the first edition of the *Enquiry*—it is one of the many changes Godwin made to his philosophical work when he released later editions after the publication of *Caleb Williams*. 49
Godwin might direct us to do more than simply hoard relics of potential future interest when he writes, “Do not fear to remember too much; only be upon your guard not to forget anything that is worthy to be remembered” (“Sepulchres” 28). He also hints that we must be on our guard not to forget what we don’t know. Faced, like Godwin’s historian, with “the broken fragments, and the scattered ruins of evidence” that make up a personal narrative, we must struggle to resist the impulse toward imaginative completion that would obscure the unknown (“History”). We must be conscious of maintaining the integrity of epistemological absence, the fragmentary nature of the narrative fragment. In conversations, this looks like silence.

**Infinite Astonishment**

The narrative flow of *Caleb Williams* proceeds with such smooth sureness of purpose that the interruptions in its course take on a heightened sense of personal disconcertedness. Most dialogue is recorded without narrative intervention—rarely does so much as “he said” or “she said” stand between speaker and reader. Instead, large blocks of dialogue pass seamlessly between characters able to fluently and fluidly say what they mean. When the narrator does intervene, it is almost invariably to comment on the quality (usually poor) of the characters’ ability to speak, as when Falkland struggles to respond to the wise and dying poet Clare’s insistence that although Falkland should take care not to underestimate Tyrrel, he should make no promises. The narrator records that Falkland’s “sense of the generous attention of Mr Clare at such a moment, was so great as almost to deprive him of utterance. He spoke in short sentences, and with visible effort” (37). This narration certainly serves to slow the reader down, to create pauses in the dialogue. But the fracture it creates in the otherwise seamless progression of
dialogue also calls attention to the unspoken intercourse between characters that is legible only through silence, the affective response that resists crystallization into verbal description.

In *Caleb Williams*, the affective response of unresponsiveness is usually termed “astonishment”—a “loss of presence of mind” that recalls the word’s obsolete meaning of “paralysis, numbness, deadness” (*OED*). The loss of mental presence manifests as a verbal paralysis. Astonishment checks a speaker mid-thought, as when Miss Melville is “for a moment silent with astonishment” at Tyrrel’s “unexpected” proposal that Mr. Grimes should be her husband (54). Astonishment describes the pause we take when the sudden introduction of the unfamiliar interrupts our train of thought. It casts us outside of ourselves, momentarily disrupting our self-narrative.

For Burke, astonishment is the affective response to the most powerful operations of the sublime, and it is distinguished by “that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror” (*Enquiry* 100). When we are suspended in a state of Burkean astonishment, our mind is so filled with the sublime object that no room remains for any other thought; no room remains even for the motions of reason working on the object of our astonishment. The external sources Burke identifies for the sublime seem remarkably similar to their internal effects: objects tend toward the Burkean sublime the more they appear vast, uninterrupted, and obscure. The source of Burke’s sublime has no identifiable alterations that might indicate the “termination of one idea and the beginning of another,” no snags on which the imagination might catch (*Enquiry* 116). Similarly, the mind astonished by this sublime cannot

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4 Godwin’s use of terms whose definitions were in flux at the time of his writing *Caleb Williams*, while never treated generally, has been noted by previous scholars as it applies to specific words or concepts. Family, character, and the social meaning of the handshake in particular have been identified as terms in transition by Gavin Edwards and Andrew Franta.
perform the mental operation that would separate the thinking self from its object. The sublime
tends toward a chimerical infinite; astonishment is the momentary experience of the self as
chimerical and infinite, a self that cannot be reduced to language or narrative that would compel
a specific perspective or point of view on the world.

Burke largely limits his discussion to the sublime as it is found in nature. Sublimity in
*Caleb Williams* however, as Monika Fludernik has argued, is associated with moral relationships
rather than natural landscapes, and Godwin “rescues the notion of the sublime” from Burke’s
patriarchal terror “by infusing it with the workings of sympathy” (886). I would add to
Fludernik’s argument that in fact Godwin finds the unity of sympathy and the sublime in the
state of astonishment.

For Godwin, astonishment is more than a reaction to the sublime that circumvents
conscious reasoning. In *Caleb Williams*, astonishment takes the form of a nonverbal expression
of a disconcertedness—the “affective disorientation” that Sianne Ngai describes as a feeling not
just of confusion, but “a meta-feeling in which one feels confused about what one is feeling”
(14)—that finds a responding disconcertedness in our companion. The intersubjective
disorientation of astonishment informs Caleb’s response when Falkland discovers him at an
unplanned yet secret meeting with Forester. He begins with a general remark that foreshadows
Falkland’s inexplicable and uncharacteristic behavior: “The conduct of the same man in different
circumstances is often so various as to render it very difficult to be accounted for” (135).
Falkland responds unexpectedly—*because*, as we shortly learn, the unexpected encounter has
thrown him into a state of astonishment:

Mr Falkland, in this to him terrible crisis, did not seem to be in any degree hurried away
by his passions. For a moment he was dumb, his eyes glared with astonishment; and the
next moment as it were, he had the most perfect calmness and self-command. Had it been otherwise I have no doubt that I should instantly have entered into an explanation, the ingenuousness and consistency of which could not but have been in some degree attended with a favourable event. But as it was, I suffered myself to be overcome; I yielded as in a former instance to the discomfiting influence of surprise. I dared scarcely breathe; I observed the appearances with anxiety and wonder. Mr Falkland quietly ordered me to return home, and take along with me the groom he had brought with him. I obeyed in silence (135).

This scene repeats in many of its details the “former instance” when Caleb first startled Falkland in the library. Each character is astonished by the other’s astonishment and struck momentarily dumb; Falkland recovers by reverting to a familiar (and false) narrative thread that would cast Caleb as the “villain” here to “ruin” him. Caleb’s astonishment upon being discovered with Forester increases and manifests as prolonged silence while Falkland responds to his silence as if it conveyed the expected narrative information.

The recovery from astonishment reasserts narrative determinism—the dominance of a narrative that is interpretable through reference to past events and future expectations. Much as the *European Magazine and Literary Review*’s response to Godwin’s “Essay on Sepulchres” insisted on the privilege of past luminaries to construct a consistent collective memory, so does the post-astonishment re-absorption of the unfamiliar into a familiar narrative frame ensure the perpetuation of “things as they are.” But the intersubjective disconcertedness of astonishment, if maintained, can be productive of change. When Caleb finally determines to confront Falkland before a judge, he receives a great “shock” at his adversary’s vulnerable appearance (271). Caleb, jarred into pity for the dying man, regrets his decision to provide evidence of Falkland’s
crime, but concludes that “the mistake I had committed was now gone past all power of recall,” and in a voice that “was suffocated with agony” he proceeds to tell his tale (272). “Recall” takes a double meaning here: Caleb cannot take back the past, but neither can he remember the past in the way that he remembered it before he was aware of Falkland’s vulnerability. Instead, he must reinterpret his old knowledge of Falkland’s crimes through the lens of his new understanding of Falkland’s humanity, creating a past that accords with knowledge lately gained. Rather than binding the future to the promise of consistency with the past, Caleb binds the past to the possibilities of the present. That is, he invents the past that would have led consistently to his present understanding of Falkland as a potentially good man.

When Caleb concludes his tale, “[e]very one that heard me was petrified with astonishment” (275). Even Falkland is so moved by Caleb’s “grief and compunction” that “he could no longer resist” (275). The verb lacks an object, as if the act of relinquishing resistance dissolved the object being resisted as he submits to the sympathetic sublime. Falkland’s resistance in this confrontation entangles feelings with meta-feelings, confusing perspective—Falkland resisted Caleb and resisted his own emotional response to Caleb because only by maintaining a consistent knowledge of Caleb’s character could Falkland maintain his consistency of response. Finally, Caleb reports, Falkland “rose from his seat, supported by the attendants, and – to my infinite astonishment – threw himself into my arms!” (275). Up until this point, moments of astonishment had been resolved by a forcible return to form. But finally, as Falkland and Caleb astonish each other and fail to recover, we are presented with an alternative resolution.

We are accustomed to thinking of an embrace as a kind of mutual affirmation, an expression of intimacy, friendship, or love. This embrace, however, while it expresses all of that tenderness, is a gesture of mutual ruin. Falkland submits to “the disappointment of my only
remaining hope, the destruction of that for the sake of which alone I consented to exist,” and survives only three days more (276). Caleb lives, but he has submitted to a loss of self; he writes, “I began these memoirs with the idea of vindicating my character. I have now no character that I wish to vindicate” (277). While he began by insisting, “My story will, at least, appear to have that consistency which is seldom attendant but upon the truth,” by the conclusion of the narrative Caleb seems to have discarded consistency as the hallmark of truth (5). It was, after all, only through fragment and inconsistency, through the self-loss of astonishment and the mutual ruin of physical contact, that Caleb transformed his personal history from a “half-told and mangled tale” into a contribution to posterity that might better enable future readers to think with the now-departed Falkland.

We might productively consider the concept of “infinite astonishment” through Brian Massumi’s riff on a Bergsonian response to Zeno’s Paradox of the arrow that “gets swallowed up in the transitional infinity” of points between bow and target, effectively immobilizing the arrow (6). Massumi responds that the arrow moved “because it was never in any point. It was in passage across them all” (6). It is only “retrospectively” that we can consider its flight as composed of infinite possible endpoints. Applying this idea to social relations, Massumi distinguishes between retrospective possibility—which engenders an expectation of repetition, encoding the “possible” trajectory as a defining characteristic of the arrow—we might call this normative set of possibilities “things as they are”—and potential, which is “unprescripted. It feeds forward, unfolding toward the registering of an event: bull’s-eye. Possibility is a variation implicit in what a thing can be said to be when it is on target. Potential is the immanence of a thing to its still indeterminate variation, under way” (9). This “field of emergence is not presocial. It is open-endedly social,” composed not of interactions as they are expected to occur,
but of “interaction[s]-in-the-making” (9). “Infinite astonishment” is the affective interaction that
never arrives at the expected target, never gets folded back into a deterministic feedback loop—it
is a state of transformation that looks like silence or stillness because, as Massumi says, the
“continuity of movement is of an order of reality other than the measurable” (6). Call it the
emergence theory of perfectibility.

**Continuing Conversations**

A form of open-ended sociability emerges at the end of the novel as Caleb thinks with the dead
himself. While the first paragraph describes the novel to come as “my story,” in looking back he
redefines the narrative as “thy story” (5, 277). This change in pronoun alters not only the
“owner” of the tale, but also its implied audience. By directing his final words to Falkland, he
conjures not just the memory of Falkland, but Falkland as a social being who might be
addressed. As Caleb contemplates Falkland’s “figure,” which “is ever in imagination before me,”
he is able to think beyond his own circumstances (276). He finds that in other circumstances,
Falkland’s “talents and sentiments” would have developed to the benefit of human society (276).
But “[a]ll that in a happier field and a purer air would expand into virtue and germinate into
usefulness” is “converted into henbane and deadly nightshade” by the poisoned soil of corrupt
society (276). Now, Caleb cultivates Falkland’s potential. Caleb imagines Falkland as he might
have been, and it is to this hypothetical Falkland that Caleb addresses his final confessions. Thus
through Caleb’s intervention, which fractures Falkland’s history and begins their relationship as
if it were anew, Falkland’s potential usefulness is realized. Caleb has not forgotten the Falkland
who was, the Falkland who tormented him. But he has remembered what he never knew: the
history that Falkland might have had in other circumstances. Through these conversations with the dead, Caleb is inspired by new feelings of sympathy and self-accusation to action.

At its conclusion, then, *Caleb Williams* comes to resemble the kind of memorial Godwin proposes in his *Essay on Sepulchres*, a way of tending toward yet never accomplishing a more complete history than that contained in Falkland’s very coffin-like trunk. Tilottama Rajan has suggested that the “tendency” but not the moral of the novel “serve[s] the purposes of political justice” because it relies on its readers to continue a project of revolution and reconciliation that is left incomplete (242). I argue, however, that Caleb himself models the novel’s “tendency” by demonstrating how we might productively engage with incomplete narratives—indeed, how incompleteness must be perpetuated in order for history to progress.

This reading allows us to reconsider the relationship between the published ending discussed above and the original ending first brought to scholarly attention by D. Gilbert Dumas in 1966. In the original ending, Caleb’s courtroom confrontation with Falkland fails. The magistrate dismisses Caleb’s impassioned accusation as yet more evidence of his perversity. Falkland’s health improves as Caleb is once again imprisoned, demonstrating “that persecution and tyranny can never die” (271 n. 349). In the final section of this alternate ending, an ill and agitated Caleb writes to Collins in disjointed fragments set off by dashes. Even visually, the narrative breaks apart. These fragmentary statements resemble the stumbling speech pattern used throughout the novel to by characters struggling against astonishment or the temporary loss of presence of mind, but Caleb’s use of the pattern is more sustained. The result is a character perpetually at a loss, unable to place himself in time: “So you tell me Mr. Falkland is dead? –

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5 Alternative histories appear with startling regularity in Godwin’s writings, particularly in his *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which Mary Wollstonecraft’s potential histories are narrated alongside her lived history.
Very likely – it was high time – I believe – was it not?” (271 n. 349). Caleb’s hesitance here stands in marked contrast to his vehement reaction, earlier in the original ending, to the news (also hearsay) that Falkland lives. Caleb expresses confusion in both its epistemological and affective senses. This is not just uncertainty in the facts, but uncertainty as to his own feelings about them; Caleb displays his overlapping uncertainties of epistemology, affect, and perspective. Was it “high time” in the sense that an ill and elderly Falkland had lived beyond what might be expected, or “high time” in the sense that slow justice had finally been delivered? In his wavering attempt to sort out both what is true and what he feels about it, Caleb demonstrates a state of affective disorientation similar to astonishment. Unlike in the published ending, however, Caleb’s disorientation in the original ending is not responsive to the disorientation of another; he is responding, instead, to the absence of any other. In a moment of telling forgetfulness, he continues: “They do nothing but tell me over and over again that Mr. Falkland is dead – What is that to me? – Heaven rest his soul! – I wonder who that Mr. Falkland was, for everybody to think so much about him? – Do you know?” (271 n. 349). In his state of sustained fragmentation or disorientation, Caleb comes unmoored. In losing Falkland, he loses his emotional connection to his personal history—and future. Caleb explicitly calls attention to his loss of self when he writes, “If I could once again be thoroughly myself, I should tell such tales!” (271 n. 349). With the bulk of his narrative completed and sent away, what remains of his life is merely “Postscript.” His life as a subject is intimately tied to his ability to tell tales; he cannot tell tales because he is not thoroughly himself, and he is not himself because he tells no tales. What he could do in the future is constrained by what he cannot recall of the past. In such a state, he might not even be considered human. “I sit in a chair in a corner, and never move hand or foot – I am like a log – I know that very well, but I cannot help it! – I wonder which is the
man, I or my chair?” (271 n. 349). Caleb has become more like an inanimate object than a speaking subject. And yet he continues to speak, to narrate his presence if not his past.

In the perpetually floating present tense of the original ending, Caleb frames the narrative not as Falkland’s memorial but as his own when he finally declares, “True happiness lies in being like a stone – Nobody can complain of me – all day long I do nothing – am a stone – a GRAVE-STONE! – an obelisk to tell you, HERE LIES WHAT WAS ONCE A MAN!” (271 n. 349). These are his final words. Like the ruin of Ozymandias, like the cold cenotaphs and pyramids immovable and ponderous, Caleb has become a silent ruin. The stillness, the silence, of the original ending is qualitatively different from that of the published ending: the arrow has stopped, the possibilities have been counted, nothing more will emerge.

In the revised ending, Godwin portrays a sociable alternative to such ruin, a way of acceding to the inevitable decay that is the consequence of human error while still advancing toward perfectibility. Recovering from astonishment by reflecting on past interactions as perpetually renewable fragments offers a productive means of social contact across time that does not depend on the structure of promises. It is in the struggle to understand the other—the collision of mind against mind and the collision of possible against potential—that we progress.

Caleb Williams models a form of daily interaction that incorporates the acts of perpetual renewal Godwin suggested as more lasting—more future-oriented—memorials than stony monuments. Today Godwin’s white wooden crosses would be classed as ephemeral memorials, those acts and figures of memory and mourning in which the object created becomes a symbol of its ritual creation. I would like to conclude this chapter by suggesting that, for Godwin, touch enacts what the fragment represents in British Romantic literature: an event that cannot be commemorated except through re-creation. As the Romantic fragment is an interrupted form that
makes its absences available for perpetual re-creation, so the Romantic touch interrupts narrative form, revealing the gaps in our knowledge and allowing us to encounter something truly other. Thomas Brown suggests that touch is the means by which we first encounter the other as other (see Chapter 1), but the retrospective narrative imposes subsequent familiarity onto the event, thus obscuring its true strangeness and enfolding it within a deterministic narrative structure. Godwin describes and seeks to orchestrate encounters that mimic this original astonishment, that use touch and tactile intervention to strip away the accretion of narrative history and make the other other once again.

The astonishment of the physical encounter wordlessly conveys political meaning that manifests as disconcerting affect. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, Caleb Williams loses much of its momentum in the absence of a structuring rhythm of characters advancing toward contact and retreating from its strangeness. When the playwright George Colman the Younger adapted Caleb Williams for the stage as The Iron Chest, he retained the basic elements of the plot, but replaced the social experience of astonishment with the isolation of waiting. In this way, Colman emptied the narrative of much of its political valence. Through Colman’s failed effort to adapt Caleb Williams without retaining Godwin’s emphasis on the transformative potential of social contact that manifests as touch, we can better understand just how critical the aesthetic structure of renewal was to Godwin’s more overt political message.
CHAPTER THREE

WAITING:

THE ISOLATION OF THE PERPETUAL PRESENT

IN GEORGE COLMAN THE YOUNGER’S THE IRON CHEST

It is difficult to pin down what it is we mean exactly when we say we are waiting, all the different ways that we wait and what it is that we are doing when we wait, because what we are certainly not doing is interacting. Ghassan Hage describes waiting as “such a pervasive phenomenon in social life that it can be seen, and indeed has been seen, as almost synonymous to social being” (n.p.). But waiting is an incredibly frustrating social experience. I am thinking about those awkward conversations we have when we are uncomfortably aware that our interlocutor is just waiting for her chance to talk, or when we ourselves are waiting for the other to stop talking. Although we are conversing, we are isolated in our experience of the conversation, absorbed in our own thoughts rather than thinking with the other or allowing the
other to think with us. We are waiting for the pause that indicates our turn to talk. We are waiting for the cue to engage rather than engaging.

Conversely, we might consider those other awkward conversations when we find ourselves at a loss for words, or when our partner stands in uncomfortable silence, refusing to respond. I ask my colleague about her weekend, and she tells me it was fine, and I wait for elaboration that she never provides. Perhaps she is also waiting for me to ask another question or describe my own weekend, but instead we stand in awkward silence. Eventually we both turn away. We are each waiting for an invitation to interaction that never comes, or that we cannot recognize. And while we are waiting for the other to respond, we are absolving ourselves of agential responsibility in our conversation.

We wait to talk, and we wait for a response, and the waiting comes to take the place of talking or response. Waiting is an action that welcomes—even begs for—interaction, but cannot prompt response. When we wait, we are waiting for an interaction that the act of waiting thwarts.

Can there be a politics of waiting? It would have to be a politics of the perpetual present—things as they are.

When George Colman the Younger adapted *Caleb Williams* for the stage as *The Iron Chest* in 1796, he wrote a play in which the main action was waiting. I argue that Colman’s ingenious use of temporal structure to defuse the radical politics of his source material describes an alternative, reactionary approach to the politics of social contact, and by examining the purposeful lack of meaningful social contact in this play we might form a better understanding of the stakes involved in a politics of touch. In expanding *Caleb Williams* to involve a variety of comic characters and subplots, Colman also introduced a variety of different ways to experience waiting. The characters in *The Iron Chest* are impeded in their efforts at interaction by the
syncopated narrative rhythm produced as their various experiences of time fail to align. In Colman’s adaptation, the interactions that make up “things as they are” in eighteenth-century England do not so much resemble an open-ended narrative as a very long wait.

**Mixed Drama**

When *The Iron Chest* first opened, the play failed spectacularly. “From the fame of the author,” one review lamented, “the public expectation was much raised, and perhaps never experienced a greater disappointment; as, from materials so ample, nothing more crude, or less interesting, could have been produced.”¹ Twice on opening night at Drury-Lane the manager was forced to interrupt the performance and plead for calm from the vocally dissatisfied audience. John Kemble, who played the part of Sir Edward Mortimer (Falkland), valiantly attempted to shoulder the blame for the failure: he was suffering from a severe cough that only worsened as the night wore on. But his apology bought only a temporary reprieve from the taunts of the crowd as the play’s five acts dragged on past eleven o’clock. A “wag in the gallery” advised that the actors “might fairly go to bed” if they were capable of nothing better.²

How did a popular playwright transform Godwin’s suspenseful novel into a boring flop? Theater critics struggled to understand how such a promising project had come to such a disappointing end. Colman for his part blamed everyone but himself and reserved particular venom for Kemble in the long, excoriating Preface to the published play. (Colman did, however, condescend to revise and condense the script for future performances.) Few critics treated Colman as generously as he treated himself. After the publication of Colman’s self-justifying

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Preface, one reviewer signing himself “Felo de Se” responded with a succinct “Epigram upon the Catastrophe—To Fretful” (a pet name used by Colman’s detractors):

Why make the crazy, crooked Knight
Extend his rage no further?
Why on the knife vent so much spight?
Thy pen, George, did the murder.³

Colman’s response to his critics had done little to dampen their enthusiastic jeering. Kemble, despite Colman’s vindictive accusations, wisely avoided entering the fray, and suffered comparatively few insults for his role in the debacle. No matter Colman’s protests, public consensus held the playwright responsible for the failure.

Despite the play’s negative reception, Colman revived The Iron Chest for the end of the Haymarket season later that year.⁴ Colman shortened the play and shook up the cast, and a relative newcomer to the stage replaced Kemble in the lead. Perhaps the critics had lost interest in beating a dead horse, or perhaps the Haymarket production really was superior to the Drury-Lane run. Either way, one of the few compassionate, if not exactly glowing, reviews of the play responds to this second run. In addition to praising the changes in the performance, the review in How Do You Do? provides a retrospective explanation for why the play flopped: the

³ Oracle and Public Advertiser (London, England), Thursday, September 1, 1796.

⁴ By law, only three licensed theatres operated in London at this time: Covent Garden and Drury-Lane during the regular season and Haymarket over the summer. Alternative venues found ways to operate outside these restrictions by avoiding spoken drama in favor of musical acts and pantomimes. A primary distinction, then, between the “legitimate” drama produced at the licensed theaters and other theatrical performances was the distinction between silence or song and speech. The loopholes in contemporary censorship of political performances allowed by this distinction are explored at length in David Worrall’s The Politics of Romantic Theatricality, 1787-1832.
“extraordinary system of thinking” presented in *Caleb Williams* was “a subject not easily adapted to the stage.” Colman was a talented author, but he could not “convert iron into gold.” Audiences were disappointed, the review suggests, because they expected to see a faithful dramatic rendering of *Caleb Williams*, but any faithful adaptation would be poor drama, and any dramatic adaptation would be unfaithful. Colman tried to do both, but succeeded at neither.\(^5\)

The *How Do You Do?* review reserved its highest praise (as other reviews reserved their only praise) for the scenes and characters that diverged from the source material. The review analyzes how these alterations attended to the needs of a theatre-going rather than a reading public:

In the play we find scenes of comic humour and pleasantry interspersed. Why? Because although a distinct set of moody men may be found who love a dull day, and are best satisfied when they are brooding over a melancholy story, detailed in three volumes, it is impossible that a mixed audience in a theatre should agree to be sent away “all unhappy together.”

*Caleb Williams* might be a fine novel, but it was written for a more rarefied audience than the mixture of social classes that increasingly attended the London theatre at the end of the eighteenth century. Godwin’s *Political Justice* avoided official censorship because its exorbitant price made it effectively unavailable to the great majority of potential readers, but theatre was priced to attract crowds. Colman, like other contemporary playwrights who depended on ticket sales for their livelihood, responded to a shifting audience by developing dramatic conventions that appealed to a broad popular audience, often breaking with the established conventions of “legitimate” theatre that could be appreciated by a small but “worthy” audience (Sutcliffe).

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\(^5\) *How Do You Do?* (London, England), Saturday, September 10, 1796.
For *The Iron Chest*, Colman tried to draw in this mixed audience by wresting control from his source material, adjusting the personalities of key characters and adding several comic characters whose concerns might better engage the sympathy of the ordinary man. The tragic hero of the tale becomes Mortimer, the character based on Falkland, and his tragedy is offset by the addition of stock characters: Samson Rawbold, a buffooning but lovable drunk who manages to get a domestic position; his sister Barbara, who serves as a love interest for Wilford (the character based on Caleb Williams) and provides the comic ending; and Blanch, another domestic, who serves as a foil to Samson and an excuse for sexual jokes.

Colman had exercised this kind of poetic license before when he similarly deviated from and added to his source material for *Inkle and Yarico* (1787), his well-received fourth play. For his adaptation of the tale popularized by Sir Richard Steele, Colman added new characters and subplots, complicated existing romantic entanglements, and even changed the ending from one of tragic betrayal to happy repentance. In this way, Steele’s stinging indictment of the slave trade became in Colman’s hands something much closer to a sentimental comedy. The result, as Barry Sutcliffe points out, does not quite reach the soaring “emotional temperature” of “what was soon to be called melodrama” (24). But Colman’s rejection of the strict divide between comedy and tragedy hints at the burgeoning popularity of a “mixed drama” for a mixed audience, a genre Colman would help develop over the coming decades.

When Colman wrote *The Iron Chest*, he had not yet developed the formula for an effective “mixed drama,” and the lessons he learned from this production would inform much of his later work. Sutcliffe describes the “humiliating failure of *The Iron Chest*” as a turning point in Colman’s career, after which he “virtually abandoned serious drama in favour of comedy and farce,” but even this attempt at serious drama displays the “style of balancing comic and gothic
within a single play” that Colman popularized at the end of the eighteenth century (50, 31). How Do You Do? responded favorably to the mixed elements evident in The Iron Chest, finding that Colman “has aimed at throwing some lights into this picture” of dark tragedy. The review reserved particular praise for the comic characters Colman added: “Samson and Blanch are extreme pleasant companions, and the tenderness of Barbara, is happily contrived to soften down, what might otherwise appear the too harsh features of forest-breeding.” But the review makes no mention of how the light and dark elements interacted or how the characters responded to one another. Each character, individually, works. As they attempt to interact, however, the play stutters and stalls in a series of missed connections.

The style of “mixed drama” Colman had used to so much success in Inkle and Yarico could not save The Iron Chest. Instead, as Hazlitt noted when he saw a revival in 1815, the comic and tragic elements worked at cross-purposes, resulting in a halting and repetitive play:

The two plots (the serious and the ludicrous) do not seem going on and gaining ground at the same time, but each part is intersected and crossed by the other, and has to set out again in the next scene, after being thwarted in the former one, like a person who has to begin a story over again in which he has been interrupted (343).

The comic and tragic scenes and characters, rather than responding to each other to build toward a dramatic conclusion, operate like two people stuck in a conversation in which each one, rather than interacting with the other, is just waiting for the chance to speak. The start-and-stop rhythm

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6 Although The Iron Chest continued to be performed as late as 1879 and ranked among the most frequently performed plays at the Haymarket between 1801 and 1820, reviewers continued to criticize Colman for forcing the dramatic intricacy of Caleb Williams into the mold of the melodrama. William J. Burling calculates the most popular productions at Haymarket 1801-1820 by number of performances and number of seasons performed (205). The Iron Chest is the tenth most popular play by number of performances. For responses to some later productions, see Davies, 532, and Bagster-Collins, 100-101n.
that results from these interruptions substantially alters both the feel and the politics of the narrative. Hazlitt notes that both “the gradual working up of the curiosity of Caleb Williams with respect to the murder” and “the systematic persecution which he undergoes from his master” have been “very ingeniously left out by Mr. Colman” (343). These alterations concern the tempo as much as the content of the story, and to some extent the tempo is the content. As Damian Walford Davies argues, “One major consequence of Colman’s truncation of Godwin’s portrayal of an ‘incessant goading on’ and a ‘systematic persecution’ is, as might be expected, a marked diminution of the novel’s contemporary political resonance” (532-3). That is, by employing techniques that repeatedly “thwart” the play’s gathering narrative momentum, Colman effectively thwarts the play’s gathering political momentum so artfully portrayed by Godwin in the developing relationship between Caleb and Falkland.

The hecklers that interrupted the opening night performance of *The Iron Chest* demanded of the cast and crew the responsive interactions that the characters on stage never portrayed. Their jeers were an expression of boredom and fatigue, but they were also an attempt to force the kind of pre-political confrontation that Colman’s play so skillfully avoided. The audience was sick of waiting for something to happen.

**Measuring Decay**

The act of waiting is of central importance to *The Iron Chest*. Waiting is not the same as suspense or anticipation, which are both *states* of mind that are oriented toward future events, while waiting is an action that *appears to be* a state. When we wait, we think of ourselves as on the verge of agency—we are waiting for the event that will prompt our next move. As a state, waiting is consistent if not exactly still. We might sit or we might pace, we might suffer under
oppression or live out the sunset years of ill-begotten power. The circumstances are irrelevant to
the wait. The wait is whatever is and is known to be temporary, the constant that will come to a
close but that no action of our own might hasten to conclusion. The ambiguous agency
experienced by the person waiting “emphasises,” according to Ghassan Hage, “a dimension of
life where the problematic of our agency is foregrounded. Is waiting an exercise of agency or a
lack of it?” (n.p.). I would argue that waiting is a state of potential agency that can only be
realized intersubjectively. We are waiting to be acted upon so that we might act in response. We
are aware both of our “own” time—the minutes or hours we have counted since we started
waiting—and we are aware of a time over which we can have no ownership—“the” time, the
external system of time that contains “our” time and the time of our expected companion. It is
uncomfortable, this heightened awareness of time, this waiting. It is uncomfortable to observe
external time flow from one hour to the next, to watch the corroborating sun move with the hours
across the sky, and to feel our own time pendulous, repetitive, an accumulation of beats good for
nothing but counting.

*The Iron Chest* opens on the Rawbold family waiting for their father to return from the
quotidian routine of poaching a meal. Inside the poacher’s cottage, several “squalid and
beggarly” children sleep while a taper burns. Their mother sits by the fire with an older daughter,
Barbara, while Samson, an older son, sings near the front of the stage: “Five times, by the taper’s
light;/The hour-glass I have turn’d tonight” (I.i.1). A child asks, “Where’s father?” and Samson
replies:

He’s gone out to roam:

If he have luck,

He’ll bring a buck,
Upon his lusty shoulders, home.

Home! Home!

He comes not home!

Hark! From the woodland vale below,

The distant clock sounds, dull, and slow!

Bome! Bome! Bome!

The clock bells tell Samson that it is now “[f]ive o’clock, and father not yet returned from New Forest! An he come not shortly, the Sun will rise, and roast the venison on his shoulders” (2). In his first song and opening lines, Samson observes three different systems of measurement in order to convey the amount of time he has spent waiting for his father: the hour-glass, a domestic timer that measures duration by the familial light of the taper; the town clock, which keeps communal time and symbolizes the synchronization of collective enterprise as it indicates the hour; and the sun that provides the circadian cues of night and day for the father who works outside the law.

Each system for measuring time is associated with a specific location, and as he waits, Samson feels the accumulated pressure of these three social spheres as represented in their respective modes of measuring time. Mary Favret describes the meantime of waiting as “a hole in history, a sense of evacuating the lived present” (74). Yet it is also the over-determination of a present that we cannot move to escape. To wait is to exist within the evacuated present, surrounded on all sides by the social experience of time’s passage, which we can observe and measure but from which we are excluded; it is this exclusion that provides us the distance necessary to measure and observe. Samson’s obsessive awareness of time is in some sense a measurement of the distance expanding between the social spaces represented by each system of
measurement: between the home, the working father, and the community. Unlike the band of robbers in *Caleb Williams*, who taught Caleb to be “indifferent to the regular return of the different parts of the day, and in some degree to turn day into night, and night into day” (238), the poachers in *The Iron Chest* are hyper-aware of time’s irregular passage, of their positioning within a syncopated system of temporality’s intersection with spatiality.

We soon learn that the Rawbold family is waiting for more than just their father’s return. They are also waiting for a reversal of the steady “decay” they have endured since a storm destroyed their cottage. Although three years have passed, they have passed in the stasis of memory, and Barbara says, “I never pass the old oak that was shivered that night, in the storm, but I am ready to weep. It remembers me of the time when all our poor family went to ruin” (3). Time did not stop when the Rawbold family went to ruin; as Rei Terada has argued, ruin “is not a state that stops time” (177). But *The Iron Chest* depicts decay as a state that interferes with our ability to experience time as a social dimension. Barbara is aware of the three years that have gone by in the external measure of time. But the family’s repetitive motions of survival have come to seem, like the “shivered” oak, increasingly removed from the passage of time, unchanging as the still object in a time-lapse photograph that anchors us in space in order to make visible the movement over time of surrounding objects. The Rawbolds, like the tree, can be charted in space, but the passage of time records only their stillness.

Since the storm that destroyed the Rawbold cottage, Barbara continues, “Father has grown desperate; all is fallen to decay. We live by pilfering on the Forest—and our poor mother distracted, and unable to look to the house.” The storm that ruined the Rawbold cottage also made Mother Rawbold insensible to the world around her. Her madness makes her an incapable mother and perpetuates the home’s decay. Because she is enclosed within the state of decay, she
cannot intervene to reverse it. Barbara continues, “The rafter, which fell in the storm, struck so heavy upon her brain, I fear me, ‘twill never again be settled” (3). The mother’s mind remains active, but the activity of her mind is restlessly internalized, constantly in motion and never going anywhere. She displays the effects of will operating without agency, without the ability to act upon or to be acted upon another. No external force will ever interrupt her mind’s restless motion; to her, all causes have reverted to those that originate with the self.

Mother Rawbold recognizes her family, but not their situation. The present she experiences has come completely unmoored from any sense of exteriority. Frederic Jameson writes that “time governs the realm of interiority, in which both subjectivity and logic, the private and the epistemological, self-consciousness and desire, are to be found. Space, as the realm of exteriority, includes cities and globalization, but also other people and nature” (“End” 697). For Mother Rawbold, the interiority of time does not make contact with the exteriority of space. In her mind, her family lives and thrives in very different circumstances, and the future that she anticipates is incongruous with the present that they experience. When her husband returns from poaching, she greets him, “O brave husband! Welcome from the court. Thou shalt be made a knight; and I a lady” (3). That is, one of the characteristic features of her madness is the anticipation of a future rooted in a false understanding of the present; her inability to understand herself as inhabiting a state of decay is a symptom of her decaying mind. The time of her present never intersects with the surrounding cacophony of temporality Samson describes in the opening song.

E. P. Thompson famously attributes the division between clock time and natural time to the Industrial Revolution, but Reinhart Koselleck calls for a finer distinction between the “many forms of time superimposed one upon the other,” each with its own “peculiar temporal rhythm.”
In our most intimate social relationships, Koselleck argues, “different spaces of experience overlap and perspectives of the future intersect” (2). That is, even our closest relations cannot reliably inhabit our present—instead, our shared time is contingent and fleeting: our pasts overlap and our futures intersect. But Mother Rawbold, isolated in her present, cannot experience the web of temporalities that make up a social life. Although she experiences time and looks forward to the future, she appears, to the outside observer, as if suspended in a perpetual present, waiting in the state of things as they are.

For Godwin, as we saw in the previous chapter, decay provides an opportunity for progressive social intervention in historical process. A decaying structure marks the site of a collective memory, but it also stands in need of perpetual repair, thus creating opportunities now and in the future for humans to rebuild and renovate the past. Through this process, we are able to maintain a social link across generations beyond the span of a human lifetime without ceding authority over the present to either the past or the future.

But the social life of a decaying object requires the attention and intention of an active subject operating upon the decay from the outside. And in The Iron Chest, the intervention that the Rawbolds await never arrives. Instead, they exist in the meantime between the storm and whatever comes next, measuring their existence by the years of their decay. Mother Rawbold’s children describe her, like the oak, as a constant reminder of the event that changed her. She exists as if arrested at the moment of transformation, a long-durational present that collapses this time with the time of three years ago. In The Iron Chest, this is what decay looks like: a change that does not cease, but interminably waits for intervention that can never arrive.

For the Rawbold family, the storm constitutes a phenomenological event in Françoise Dastur’s sense of the term as that which is “always a surprise, something which takes possession
of us in an unforeseen manner, without warning, and which brings us towards an unanticipated future.” The event “puts the flow of time out of joint and changes its direction;” it “introduces a split between past and future and so allows the appearance of different parts of time as dis-located” (182). We can identify an example of this kind of event in what I identified in the previous chapter as the transformative astonishment at the end of Caleb Williams, when Caleb is so surprised by the sight of a dying Falkland that pity moves him to reinterpret the past, and instead of accusing Falkland of murder, he accuses himself of injustice; Falkland in turn is so moved by Caleb’s “grief and compunction” that he rises from his seat and, to Caleb’s “infinite astonishment,” throws himself into Caleb’s arms (275). The shock of this unexpected embrace opens Caleb to positive new experiences; it dislocates Caleb from his accustomed narrative, allowing him to reevaluate the past and acknowledge Falkland’s inherent potential for good, while also allowing him to develop new ideas in the future that would have been impossible if the past were fixed.

But while Dastur’s “event” can have the positive effect of humanizing us by making us open to new, unanticipated worlds of possibility and by making us open to transformative social encounters, the temporal dislocation effected by the Rawbold’s storm isolates the family in the meantime of the event. We never learn what becomes of Mother Rawbold. She has three lines, all in the first scene, and does not appear again. As Barbara and Samson are absorbed into the main storyline as its romantic and comic foils, the rest of the Rawbold family drops out of the narrative. Their story is interrupted, but their wait is not relieved. It simply moves off stage.
The Isolated Present

I have suggested that Mother Rawbold is isolated in her experience of time because she is unaffected by the multiplicity of coexistent presents that surround her. By this I do not mean simply that the narrative trajectory she experiences does not engage with narrative trajectories of the surrounding characters. Although she is unaware of the reality of her situation and future prospects, although she cannot act in response to narrative developments that never enter her perceptive reality, her unawareness itself affects the action of the people around her. When I talk about multiple co-existent presents, I mean the present as a measurable period of action or inaction that has not yet been completed—the present as a span of purposive time with specific meaning to the individual who perceives it as the present. The “many forms of time” described by Koselleck are not just superimposed but colliding, perpetually coming into contact and moving away again, catching up and falling back. In *The Iron Chest*, the lag time between such fleeting temporal contact expands to an almost unbearable degree. The present becomes the meantime, the wait for contact that is too often deferred, so the play lurches slowly in its peculiar rhythm toward an anticipated but unpredictable future.

The main plot of *The Iron Chest* interrupts the Rawbold’s storyline, and, as Hazlitt noted, similar interruptions shape the remaining narrative as characters routinely define themselves in relation to particular life events in a way that closes them off to the possibility of new experiences in the present. These characters narrate their experience of the present by repeatedly measuring its distance from a transformative moment in the past; like Mother Rawbold’s mind, these personal temporalities never settle. The narrative construction of the self in time thus takes a form that is not linear, but described through a system of oscillations between the observable now and the durational now. For example, comic Winterton, the only servant Mortimer has
retained from his early life, routinely refers to events “[s]ixty years ago, in Queen Elizabeth’s time,” when he was young and spry and libidinous (17). Now his feeble body is a running joke. As he goes to chase pretty Blanch or reaches for his rapier to defend Mortimer’s honor, he is forced to recall his age, though at the moment of action, he says, “I forget I am fourscore” (20).

Winterton is not stuck in the past, but he is stuck in reference to the past—or, rather, he is stuck in reference to his own past. He defines the present by its distance from his prime, ensconcing himself in a version of a long-durational present similar to the detached present of Mother Rawbold’s madness. And as his two failed attempts to make physical contact attest, his self-definition in reference to a purely personal past becomes an impediment to social connections in the present.

Winterton is funny, and I do not want to lose sight of his comic purpose by over-theorizing his experience of time. It is funny when old men fall down chasing after young women. Failure is funny. Physical comedy is funny. And it is funny that Winterton’s disorientation largely manifests as physical comedy.\(^7\) Jameson has suggested a link between the reduction to the present and the reduction to the body, and in The Iron Chest temporal failure is figured as bodily failure. Or, more precisely, the failure to experience time socially manifests as a failure to complete physical acts of social contact. The potentially tragic results of missed connections and misaligned time are relieved as time is embodied as physical comedy.

The darker counterpoint to Winterton’s goofing manifests as Mortimer—the Falkland character—broods in silence over the murder he cannot undo. He is in many ways not the man he

\(^7\) As Colman well knew, physical comedy—fart jokes and falling down—is universally funny. Sutcliffe quotes Colman’s first “poetic effusion” from a 1782 note in a Laurencekirk inn’s visitors’ book: “You would think, for the scent is so pow’rful become,/Your nose was stuff’d up in another man’s bum” (13).
was at the moment of the murder. No longer is he “the gay, the gallant Sir Edward, in Kent” (18). The “two years” that have passed since then, as the audience is constantly reminded, have made “a wond’rous change” (18). “Poor gentleman!” Winterton laments of his transformed employer, “he has shun’d the world ever since. He was once the life of all company—but now!” (21). Now he lives in reference to the man he was at the time of the murder and to the man he will be when his crime is discovered. His effort to define himself in opposition to the past, like Winterton’s effort to define himself in reference to the past, isolates him in the evacuated present.

Both Winterton and Mortimer measure the chronological distance between the present of clock-time and the moment of personal transformation in the past in order to define their personal eras—the increasingly long temporal residence of his present self, as distinguished from past and future selves that he might reflect on more critically. Brian Massumi writes that “implicit in the determination of a thing’s or body’s positionality is a certain set of transformations that can be expected of it by definition and that it can therefore undergo without qualitatively changing enough to warrant a new name” (9). In *The Iron Chest*, characters define their positionality in their own life history—they define *now*, the present self—in reference to past and anticipated transformations. These transformations define the borders of the present self’s reflective capability, and they are crucial to self-identification in time: I am not *now* the same person I was *then*—regretfully (in the case of Winterton, longing but unable to identify his present positionality with his past conquests) or pleadingly (in the case of Mortimer, desperate to excise his murderer-self from the set of possibilities implicit in his being-now).

The definition of the present self, as opposed to a past or future self, establishes the set of possibilities that we can expect of ourselves and that others might fairly expect of us. While
Caleb Williams demonstrates the stultifying effects of enforced narrative consistency as restricting personal growth, in The Iron Chest this consistency is bounded by transitional events. Change is not just part of life. Change provides the narrative distance necessary in order to recognize and organize the consistency—the self-identity—of the present. The complications arising from this understanding of the self as indefinitely temporary take a comic turn when the lovably incorrigible sop Samson talks his way into a domestic position and then gets drunk on stolen wine his second day on the job. When Blanch, a fellow servant more familiar with the expectations of the post, indicates that his employer, Helen, might use such misbehavior as grounds for dismissal, Samson replies, “’Twould not be giving a man a fair trial. How should she know but I intend to be sober for a year after?” (62). Samson expects that his patterns of behavior cannot be predicted except retrospectively. Only with considerable distance could Helen fairly critique the normative set of possibilities for Samson’s present self—indeed, only with distance could she, or even Samson himself, determine the temporal bounds of the “Samson” under evaluation.

Samson’s protestations obviously serve as comic relief by taking the temporal organization of the self described by the tragic characters to their logical conclusion. We sympathize with Mortimer, as so many reviewers did, because even as he seeks distance from his murderer-self, he cannot define his present self except in reference to the murder that constitutes the temporal boundary of his present era (even as he conceals the details of his past experience). Clearly, he intended to be a law-abiding citizen for many years to come. His present self occupies the gap between his past and his intention.

The self defined by its distance from a remembered past or an anticipated future, like the waiting self, measures now by the increasing misalignment between the counted beats of the
occupied present—the turns of the hourglass and the years since the storm and since the murder and since Queen Elizabeth’s reign—and the continuous count of chronological time. The event-defined self, like the waiting self, is inert, and the intersubjective contact or activity that would prompt movement into a new temporality is indefinitely deferred. As Colman portrays things, they are in a perpetually extended present. Godwin’s politically radical novel describes a progressive temporality in which the future develops from but is not limited by the past. Yet Colman’s adaptation transforms this progressive temporality into a state of perpetual deferral. Interruption takes the place of connection.

“All Unhappy Together”

As one of the few positive reviews of The Iron Chest, the How Do You Do? review applauded Colman for adding the comic elements that interrupt the progress of the darker narrative; without these elements, the review suggests, Colman might have risked sending the audience away “all unhappy together.” In the politically volatile context of England in the 1790s, it might have seemed particularly prudent for the future Examiner of Plays to avoid provoking an audience united and aware of its unhappiness. Theatre could be a powerful medium for a philosophical message—a point not lost on Godwin, whose four plays, which early scholars cynically dismissed as motivated by purely financial concerns, have increasingly been interpreted as attempts to engage and educate a wider, less literary audience.  

David Worrall argues that drama “fell under government scrutiny and control” in the early 19th century “for the same reasons that state spying dogged radical activism” (“Artisan” 213). Even mild critical discourse of the sort readily found in contemporary print and oration was banned from the stage, and after Colman

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8 See Carlson and O’Shaughnessy.
was named Lord Chamberlain’s Examiner of Plays in 1824 he was personally responsible for keeping potentially incendiary material from being performed. But although the content of performances at the licensed theaters was strictly regulated, the space of the theater itself was widely accepted as a site of public rabble-rousing. In fact, the judge ruling in a 1775 court case involving a theater riot held that the right of the audience to express its opinion “instantaneously” was “unalterable.”

This “art of the crowd,” as Susan Schuyler terms it, found its most extreme expression in the 1809 Old Price (OP) Riots. After Covent Garden burned to the ground in 1808, theater owners—with John Kemble at the helm—took the subsequent reconstruction as an opportunity to allocate more space to costly box seats rather than mid-price seats and to increase ticket prices across the board. The agitation began the night Covent Garden reopened and continued for 67 days, making the Old Price Riots the longest sustained theater protests in English history. Performances continued despite the upheaval, but they were largely drowned out by the raucous audience: OPs, as the rioters were known, would pay “to enter the theatre in order to disrupt rather than view the performance,” occasionally going so far as to stage satirical counter-performances within the theater (Baer 28). As the protests wore on, the reasons for the protests shifted to encompass nationalist opposition to the onstage prominence of the Italian actress Angelica Catalani; anti-Semitic reaction to Kemble’s use of boxers, some of whom were Jewish,

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9 See Worrall, 214, for an example of the material Colman censored. In the mid-1820s, Colman rejected Mary Russell Mitford’s *Charles I* on the grounds that an accurate depiction of the English Civil War would be impermissibly provocative (Elisa Beshero-Bondar, personal correspondence, August 19, 2013. Elisa emailed me about the Mitford-Colman correspondence; it should be added to the Digital Mitford site soon, and I can change the citation then). Like Godwin, Colman saw the potential for radical renewal in revisiting the past—and it terrified him.

to subdue the crowd’s more violence outbursts; and eventually a fair-is-fair indignation when the theater’s door-keeper, James Brandon, arrested an OP leader on false charges. Kemble ultimately issued a public apology and acquiesced to most of the crowd’s demands—including lowering the pit prices and firing Catalani and Brandon. (The increase in the price of box seats was allowed to stand.) On January 4, 1810, the rioters threw a celebratory ball, which Kemble graciously attended.

The OP riots were hardly a solitary event. Instead, as Marc Baer has argued, they were the most visible iteration of a larger “pattern of activist audiences” in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries (60); the most direct antecedent was probably the violent response to Covent Garden’s attempt to raise prices in 1736. The public sense of entitlement to affordable theater spanned generations. The disorganized demands of an enthusiastically xenophobic crowd hardly constitute the sort of “primitive rebellion” liberal advocates of reform would champion. But at their core, these riots were less about any single demand than they were a general assertion of the crowd’s right to access and influence the public space of the theater. The crowd, that is, demanded recognition for its role in the interaction that, even more than the performance, defined the contemporary theater. They demanded the right to define a public sphere that included them as active subjects.

If an “argument” can be discerned in the crowd’s outrage in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, it is an argument Burke might approve. Baer observes that much of the public outcry arose from a perception that “the ancient contract between the providers and consumers of theatre” had been violated (57). The crowd responded to changes in the “social

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11 E.J. Hobsbawm has written the seminal text on the relationship between theatricality and the inarticulate politics of public uprisings in England encompassed in his concept of “primitive rebellion.”
meaning of the English theatre audience,” including the “increased anonymity” of the audience in larger playhouses and the related “decline of informal communication” between actors and audience (54, 48). The crowd was not demanding reform.\textsuperscript{12} Quite the opposite. They were demanding that the implicit promises of theatrical history be kept. The crowd was insisting on their traditional right to speak and be heard at the theater. They were demanding the right to interrupt and alter the performance, to transform the play into an event.

*The Iron Chest* provided scant opportunity for the audience to participate in the performance. Despite Colman’s introduction of comic elements, the plot remained at heart dramatic verging on tragic, especially if we view Mortimer as the true (anti-)hero of the tale, as many contemporary reviewers did. And while we can sympathize with a tragic character, the comic character requires our response. It is not funny that you took a pie to the face unless I see you seeing me (or my on-stage stand-in, your foil) seeing your humiliation. It is not the action but the reaction that makes comedy funny. I see my sister trip on a patch of ice, but I do not laugh until I see her turn back to look at what made her fall, and then turn to me with an expression of disbelief.

The fall-turn-look sequence is a standard trope in physical comedy, and the greater the number of people involved, the funnier the sequence becomes. Laurel and Hardy took this principle and ran with it in “Battle of the Century,” in which poorly aimed pies land on bystanders who, once hit, react by joining the pie fight. The predictable sequence of pie, hit, hit.

\textsuperscript{12} Colman was known for his severity as the Examiner of Plays, yet when he was asked, during the 1832 Select Committee on Dramatic Literature, “In the exercise of your censorship at the present moment, if the word reform should occur, would you strike it out?” Colman responded diplomatically: “No; I should say, -I think you had better omit it; I advise you to do so for your own sakes, or you will have a hubbub” (see Schuyler 3). His response is ambiguous and he seems less concerned that the audience might be swayed in favor of reform than that it might be moved to rowdy opposition.
close-up reaction, and misdirected retaliation is interspersed with cuts to Laurel and Hardy, who, having begun the fight, are now smirking along with the audience. More recently, the viral YouTube video “Guy Laughs at Kids Slipping in Ice” demonstrates the same principle: as the title implies, an unseen amateur videographer parked near a slick patch of ice films kid after kid falling at the same spot. Early in the video, a group of kids notices the amateur filmmaker and his presence increases their delight as they laugh and wave. More and more kids, having fallen on the ice, join the group of spectators waiting to see who will fall next.\(^3\) The now-hackneyed phrase for prolonging a joke comes to mind: “Wait for it…” In physical comedy, we discover a rare opportunity to truly wait with another (although if we wait too long, it stops being funny). At its best, comic timing is that moment of immediate connection between actor and audience, the bond created when we are both in on the joke. No wonder, then, that the “humiliating failure of *The Iron Chest*” marked a turning point in Colman’s career, after which he produced almost exclusively comedy and farce. Comedy supplied the immediate presentness, the participatory event, that *The Iron Chest* lacked.

**Silence and Stillness**

Much as the audience was prevented from participating in the event of the performance, so the characters in *The Iron Chest* are prevented from active participation in the unfolding of their fate. Colman spares Wilford the moral dilemma of a broken promise; although Wilford spends much of the play agonizing over his promise to keep Mortimer’s secret, the secret is ultimately

\(^{13}\) Laurel and Hardy’s “The Battle of the Century” (1927) is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlIXByXcUHw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlIXByXcUHw); the relevant portion begins at 6:51. “Guy Laughs at Kids Slipping in Ice” (2014) is also available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPkJ6I9-oY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPkJ6I9-oY). My thanks to Chuck Hudson for transmitting to me Marcel Marceau’s analysis of the elements of a comic fall.
revealed without Wilford’s intervention. After a relatively brief persecution, Mortimer accuses
Wilford of theft, calling upon a cousin to act as witness. Colman repurposed this scene from one
early in Caleb Williams, in which Falkner brings forward a trunk that he claims Caleb used to
conceal items stolen from his master’s home; the trunk provides the false evidence that
convinces Forester and the authorities of Caleb’s malfeasance. Mortimer anticipates a similar
outcome, but Colman’s Mortimer is far more careless than Godwin’s Falkner. In this
anticlimactic conclusion, Mortimer produces a chest containing hastily concocted evidence of
Wilford’s thievery, but when his cousin digs past the first layer of false evidence he discovers a
deeper layer of evidence: the knife that Mortimer used to commit murder, which Mortimer
inexplicably neglected to remove before inviting his cousin to rummage through the trunk. In
this way, Mortimer is condemned and Wilford is vindicated (and the audience knows what
Godwin’s readers never learned, the contents of the trunk).

The plot of The Iron Chest resolves not with the cathartic astonishment of Caleb
Williams’s embrace, but with a passive accident. By allowing the revelation of Mortimer’s secret
past without compromising Wilford’s character, Colman avoids directly endorsing or
condemning Godwin’s radical rejection of promises as inimical to human progress. Yet neither
does his play model the kind of responsive social interaction traditionally claimed as the right of
the crowd. Instead, The Iron Chest closes with a series of missed connections that prevent its
characters from ending the play “all unhappy together”—or even together at all.

The play concludes as it began: in the state of postponement that precedes activity. At the
end of the play, the central characters await a retelling that the exhausted audience would hardly
need: they wait not for the future, but for the affirmation of the past. Wilford has exposed
Mortimer’s crime and so established a new present-era that requires a new measurement
beginning in the moments just after the event. And yet this new present-era, like the old, is static from its inception.

As Mortimer collapses and the play rushes to its conclusion, a series of characters enter the room in a panic and are each, in turn, dismissed with no more explanation than the promise of future speech. Just after Mortimer collapses, a servant comes to announce that the officers sent to arrest Wilford have arrived. Fitzharding tells the servant to send the officers away because “the boy is innocent,” but refuses to elaborate for the understandably perplexed servant, instead promising, “You shall know more anon” (94). The servant runs off to find help for Mortimer and spread word of Wilford’s innocence.

As the servant exits, Mortimer’s smitten young ward, Helen, enters the room and rushes to Mortimer’s side, unaware that he murdered her uncle. At the sight of her protector lying ill on the ground, she implores, “Speak to me, love. He cannot!” Mortimer attempts to answer, but manages only “Helen—’Twas I that— —” before his speech devolves into stage direction: “he struggles to speak, but appears unable to utter” (95). Fitzharding reinforces Mortimer’s descent into silence with an admonition for Helen: “Say nothing. We must lead him to his chamber. Beseech you to say nothing!” (95). Colman prevented Wilford from violating his promise by implicating Mortimer in murder, and he spared Mortimer a final confession. The consequences of the past are established silently, without the verbal intervention that would provide an opportunity to reinterpret past events in light of new knowledge.

As they Fitzharding and Helen lead Mortimer off in silence, Barbara enters from the opposite side of the stage, overjoyed at the news of her love’s innocence. She asks him for an explanation: “Speak; tell me—How—how was it, dear, dear, Wilford?” But he answers her only to defer: “I cannot tell you now, Barbara. Another time: But it is so.—I cannot speak now.—”
Finally, as a rush of servants clambers onstage to congratulate Wilford, he speaks. He declines, however, to relate the history they all expect, and instead he praises the virtues of silence and stillness. “Peace, peace, I pray you,” he says:

Our master is taken ill: So ill, my fellows, that I fear me he stands in much danger. That you rejoice in my acquittal, I perceive, and thank you. Sir Edward’s brother will explain further to you: I cannot. But believe this:—Heaven, to whose eye the dark movements of guilt are manifest, will ever watch over, and succour the innocent, in their extremity. Clamour not now your congratulations to me, I entreat you: Rather, let the slow, still voice of gratitude be lifted up to Providence, for that care she ever bestows upon those deserving her protection! (95-96).

With that, and a joyful chorus, *The Iron Chest* concludes in praise of deferral. A new era of the present has begun, but before it can even be articulated the moment of transformation has passed. Without human contact, without the astonishment of interaction that might prompt reaction, the present arrives as the anticipation of retrospection. In Colman’s interpretation, the past does not inspire the future, does not whisper new thoughts and feelings. Rather, the future looks back to speak the past. In *The Iron Chest*, the present is never the moment. It is the void of the meantime as we wait for the past to be spoken. In adapting *Caleb Williams* for the stage, Colman emptied the plot of its politics by evacuating the present, creating distance between action and intention, between hero and antihero, that cannot be crossed except through narrative. Colman leaves no room for the astonishment of coming into contact with the unknown. Colman affirms the disruptive potential of meaningful contact by excising all trace from his play, leaving instead a repetitive narrative husk in which the past leads so predictably to the present and future that we cannot even conceive of it until it is past.
CHAPTER FOUR
TRANSFORMATION:
HAIR AND EKPHRASIS
IN THE WORKS OF PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY

The poem that takes a visual work as its subject or inspiration introduces movement into the momentary, turns gaze into story—even if that story, as in that most famously ekphrastic poem of the Romantic period, Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” is one of frustrated momentum. The work of ekphrasis exposes a tension between stillness and motion, anticipation and fulfillment, silence and speech. As the act of seeing is transformed into the act of speaking, as what is seen is interpreted through the filter of narrative form into what is said (and might be said again), the

1 James A. W. Heffernan provides the classic definition of ekphrasis as “the verbal representation of graphic representation” (“Ekphrasis” 299), yet he also describes this verbal representation as “releas[ing] a narrative impulse which graphic art restricts,” “envoicing a silent object” (302), or “turn[ing] graphic or sculptural stasis into process, arrested gesture into movement” (Museum 91); to Mary E. Finn, the ekphrastic poem “animates” “the static object” (177).
ekphrastic poem is constructed in a manner strikingly similar to the act of witness. This similarity makes ekphrasis a particularly appropriate form for critiques of witnessing, especially in works that focus on representations of characters, like Beatrice Cenci and the Medusa, who use the power of the gaze to prevent or transform witnesses.

Ekphrasis, according to James A. W. Heffernan’s classic definition, is “the verbal representation of a graphic representation” (“Ekphrasis” 299). Heffernan stresses that the object ekphrasis represents must be created as a representational object; structures like the Brooklyn Bridge might be invested with symbolism, but because the bridge is not intended to represent anything, Heffernan excludes poetry about the bridge from his definition of ekphrasis (“Ekphrasis” 300). But what exactly does it mean for an object to be representational? Heffernan’s examples are all art objects as traditionally conceived: Achilles’ shield, the Grecian urn, and paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I would argue that during the Romantic period, hair, too—in locks, on the head, and (occasionally) incorporated into hair jewelry or collages—functioned representationally. But while an art object typically represents a static moment perceived visually, a moment that can be prompted into narrative motion through ekphrasis, hair, as we will see, typically represents the social existence of a human being made tangible.²

Percy Bysshe Shelley represents both traditional art objects and hair-as-object in “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci” and The Cenci. By treating these two representational systems

² Hilary Fraser, in her foreword to Illustrations, Optics, and Objects in Nineteenth-Century Visual and Literary Cultures, broadens our understanding of the well-established shift in perception in the nineteenth century to encompass not only new ways of seeing, but also “the equivalently novel conceptualisation of touch in the visual field that might also be said to have begun to emerge in the nineteenth century” (ix). While she does not make explicit reference to hair, its tactility, its propensity toward synesthesias, would surely fall within bounds of her thesis.
simultaneously within the ekphrastic form, Shelley critiques not only representation and
transcendence, two concerns that Heffernan foregrounds in his study of Romantic ekphrasis
(“Ekphrasis” 304; Museum 91–94), but also the politics of witness. Each of these works is
overtly ekphrastic: “On the Medusa” announces its ekphrasis in its title, and the “Preface” to The
Cenci describes at length Shelley’s use of a portrait supposed to be of Beatrice Cenci as a
graphic source for the play. Each of these works considers the visual representation of a woman
who seems to gaze with disturbing animation from the stillness of her portrait. And each of these
works, I argue, draws on the contemporary rhetoric of hair to develop an ekphrastic trajectory
that moves not just from sight to speech, but from the politics of witness to the politics of social
implication. In this way, Shelley uses hair—both a part of a body and a representation of a
person, both a site of control and a site of vulnerability—to engage with the Romantic
philosophy of touch and develop a radically social philosophy of the political self.

**Hair and Art, Hair as Art**

Leigh Hunt, Shelley’s longtime friend and literary collaborator, provides a useful aesthetic
framework for understanding hair as being to poetry what eyes are to art. In his “Criticism on
Female Beauty” (1825), Hunt invokes the differing representational meanings of the eyes and the
hair in contrasting his work as an author to the work of a painter: “Artists, we believe, like to
begin with the eyes. We will begin, like Anacreon, with the hair” (235). For Hunt, poetry has a
memorial function that he contrasts with the immediacy of painting. The temporal perspective
advanced by these two representational forms is reflected in the contemporary rhetoric
surrounding the body part associated with each.
Hunt begins the “Criticism” with an attempt to mimic in words the representational structure of visual art. Hunt hopes that the beauty he “paints” in his criticism should inspire the love that Pygmalion felt for his creation; he hopes that his description of beauty can inspire in him the same passionate sentiment as the beauty it is meant to represent. Hunt imagines holding his pen “as if there were the richest bit of colour in the world at the end of it” and giving direction to a woman sitting for her portrait, but interrupts himself before recording her description (230). “What an expression!” he exclaims, “Raphael,—it is clear to me that you had not the feeling we have: for you could paint such a portrait, and we cannot. We cannot paint after life” (230). His attempt to create a representation of beauty that adequately evokes the sentiment of beauty itself fails before it begins, and his failure to represent life gives proof of his feeling for life. In a twist on Wordsworth’s assertion that poetry originates from “emotion recollected in tranquility,” Hunt complains that poets, unlike painters, can produce their art only in recollection. “It is lucky for the poets,” Hunt writes, “that their mistresses are not obliged to sit to them. They would never write a line” (230). While painters are capable of observing their subjects, poets, Hunt implies, are compelled to interact with their subjects. The sentiment felt by authors in the presence of beauty overwhelms their ability to replicate it; Hunt continues: “We can call to mind, but we cannot copy” (231). The author’s art, according to Hunt, is memorial in a way that the painter’s is not; the poem, the criticism, the most beautiful prose—these are not copies of an original beauty, but “memorandums” with lives and histories of their own (231). They should not evoke the thing, but the feeling of the thing, for the literary work is itself a separate thing impressed not with the recollection of beauty, but the longing to recall.

Hunt views hair, like poetry, as an object that represents by “calling to mind.” He should declare flaxen hair beautiful only if he met a flaxen-haired woman with “kind eyes” and a
“heart,” and after meeting such a woman, he should declare that all women should have flaxen hair (232–33). This categorical declaration lasts only until he meets a woman with auburn hair whose inner beauty similarly shines. For Hunt, a woman is beautiful only to the extent that she recalls to him another woman he loves, and as these social feelings change, his aesthetic sense of beauty changes to accommodate his new longing. We can think of these beautiful women with their distinctive hair as walking versions of Hunt’s poetry, not copies or even variations of an ideal or original beauty, but placeholders meant to absorb the run-off of sentiment when the source of such sentiment is absent.

But if hair is representational, what exactly does it represent? Hair is more than just an object, and the beautiful women Hunt describes certainly saw their own hair as more than just reminders of other women’s hair. Hair functions ambiguously as both a part of the body and an ornamentation of the body, intimately physical yet publicly displayed. It can be controlled, but only to a point. My hair may fly involuntarily into my eyes, but only a rare disorder could cause my hands to do the same. Hair is a product of the body—in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries it was often described as “a sort of Excrement” (Rowland 12)—but it is not a body part in the same way as, say, a hand. Hair can be styled to create an artistic statement: for women in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, hair ornamentation reached a kind of apogee, as “flowers, plumes, fruits, and vegetables joined birdcages and models of fully rigged ships to crown the hairdressers’ masterpieces” (Powell and Roach 84), although such elaborate productions were out of style during the more reserved and naturalistic Romantic period. Hair can be styled as a political statement: especially during the French Revolution, hair might be cut short in back and long in front à la victime in a macabre suggestion of preparedness for the guillotine (Valvo). And hair can be styled as nothing more than a fashion statement: Aileen
Ribeiro notes that fashionable “Incroyables” might mix and match the attire characteristic of multiple contradictory political positions, the “implication” being “that fashion is more important than ideology” (116). Hair is a public display, a “performance” to Margaret K. Powell and Joseph Roach; it signals to others how we wish to be perceived before we say a word.

In the eighteenth century, hairstyles and accessories had often been used to assert the primacy of collective rather than individual identity; as Dror Wahrman notes, “eighteenth-century fashion” “had the distinct effect of blotting out individual character … through impersonal accessories like the wig or hair powder” (183). By the nineteenth century, such wigs and powder were unfashionable; younger men preferred shorter hair and a more natural look, while women’s hair had notably decreased in size. Hair by this time was used less to identify with one’s group than with one’s body. 3

But hair can have a mind of its own, and the natural look could not always be naturally achieved. Not everyone could grow the full head of hair fashionable through most of the Romantic period, and while some people made up for this defect by turning to wigs that at least looked more natural than those of the eighteenth century, others turned to products like Macassar oil that promised to cure baldness. The vogue for curly hair, according to Richard Corson, meant some straight-haired men might resort to crimping irons, while others might leave their hair straight but tame it and shine it with a variety of hair oils—one particularly foul recipe for such oil called for beef marrow, burnt brandy, and flask oil (Corson 400).

3 The fad for a “natural” look was evidenced not only in changing hairstyles, but also in clothes that emphasized the body’s natural form. Geoffrey Squire notes that both “feminine” and “masculine” dress “displayed a natural figure for the first time in about four hundred years” (135).
Hair can be manipulated to perform a public display, but it is also a private part of the self; managing hair is a figural management of the divide between public and private, a way of negotiating intimacy, as becomes clear when we look at the locks of hair exchanged as affectionate gifts. Like the sacred relics of earlier eras (see Chapter One, p. 10), the gift of hair is a tactile gift that enacts the intimacy it represents. But the lock of hair given to a lover represents a very different self than the hairstyle worn publicly, and Leigh Hunt distinguishes between hair as a fashion statement and hair as a body part. He suggests that women of taste should not scruple to resort to artificial hair or wigs later in life—which he defines as thirty-five or forty—if their natural hair is not what it once was. “Hair,” he declares, “is the ornament intended for [the face] by nature,” even if the hair is artificial (236). He adds that the wearer should not try to pass off artificial hair as her own, and that honesty on this point would only add to a woman’s beauty. That is, using artificial hair does not cross into “artifice” until a woman lies about it. Similarly, he advocates using oil on clean hair if necessary for shine. Yet he notes that if a woman is going to give a lock of her hair to a lover, she should make sure that it is clean and unoiled so that the accompanying letter will not be “stained and spotted as if it had wrapped a cheesecake” (237). If women argue that unoiled hair “will not look so glossy in those eyes in which they desire it to shine most,” he writes, “let them own as much to the favoured person, and he will never look at it but their candour shall give it a double lustre” (237). Unlike the fashionable hair worn on the head, which can be adorned or increased to create a stylish self-presentation, a lock of hair should be free of oil, unadorned. Hunt’s directive suggests stripping the hair of all evidence of the self-presentation of the giver to make it an adequate vessel for the projected sentiment of the recipient.4 For Hunt, at least, hair, when given as a gift, is not a representation of the physical

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4 Not everyone adhered to Hunt’s strict standards: Judith Pascoe notes that in George IV’s
self as publicly seen; it is not a representation of the self constructed by the giver. Rather, like
poetry, it memorializes the recipient’s longing toward intimate recollection.

The memorial aspects of hair are often associated with mourning in the popular
imagination. After all, hair jewelry developed out of the tradition of the memento mori; early
examples of hair jewelry often incorporated strands of hair from a deceased loved one into the
macabre formula for medieval mourning jewelry, which might include the image of the skull and
crossbones or a message reflecting the brevity of mortal existence (DeLorme). During the
Romantic period, locks of hair could function as mourning objects, and hair was often valued for
its seeming ability to transcend the death of its owner. Hunt writes effusively of the “sentiment”
expressed by “every bosom that has worn a lock of hair next it, or longed to do so”:

Hair is at once the most delicate and lasting of our materials; and survives us, like love. It
is so light, so gentle, so escaping from the idea of death, that with a lock of hair
belonging to a child or a friend, we may almost look up to heaven, and compare notes
with the angelic nature; may almost say, “I have a piece of thee here, not unworthy of thy
being now.” (“Criticism” 241–42)

Hair, one of the most long-lasting remnants of the human body, escapes the effects of death and
provides a physical object onto which the emotions associated with a dead loved one might be
projected. It symbolizes not so much the survival of the immortal soul, but the survival of human
relationships—particularly loving relationships—beyond time, geography, and death. And it has
an affective power beyond a mere trigger for memories of the beloved: the inspiration for Hunt’s
poetic musing was a single strand of Lucretia Borgia’s hair, stolen for Hunt by Byron. Hair

prodigious collection of women’s hair, discovered upon his death in 1830, some locks still had
powder and pomatum sticking to them (60).
figures as a physical representation of the social self that continues to convey social meaning long after the “self” it represents is gone.

The memorial function of hair during the Romantic period was not limited to mourning or even the collection of celebrity artifacts Eric Eisner has called “Romantic Fandom,” and the boundaries it transgressed were not limited to that between life and death. When removed from the body and presented as a gift, hair as an object functions as a portable representation of the absent self, capable of making contact by proxy when physical contact is otherwise impossible. For example, Mary Shelley notes in her journal that during her estrangement from the Godwin family, she sent a lock of her hair to her older half-sister, Fanny, who had been left behind after Mary and her stepsister, Claire Clairmont (then known as Jane), famously ran off with Percy Bysshe Shelley. Their stepmother was so incensed by the gift that she would not allow Fanny to come to dinner; Fanny was punished for her contact with Mary’s hair as if it constituted contact with the scandalous daughter herself (qtd. in Marshall, Marshall, and Bentley 101). A year later, Mary Shelley sent a rather ample lock of her hair to Jefferson Hogg, seemingly at his request; she closes the accompanying letter, dated 7 January 1815, “Most affectionately yours,” although she suggests that her affection for him is not quite what he would wish. Hair represents affection, but it might also function as a substitution or consolation; at least in the case of Mary Shelley’s gift to Hogg, the hair seems intended to make up for the shortfalls of her actual affection. Mary Shelley writes that her affection “will I think dayly become more so—then what can you have to add to your happiness—I ask but for time.” Here hair functions as a promise that is anxiously deferred, a memorial to a relationship they never created.

This sort of double-time embodied by hair as both a memorial to and promise of affection, whether friendly or sexual, was relatively common during this period. In an autograph
album kept between 1795 and 1834 by Anne Wagner, now known primarily as Felicia Hemans’s aunt, two little locks of hair are found among the album’s exquisite mélange of watercolor sketches, collages, notes from friends and fellow travelers, and scraps of poetry. Each piece of hair is accompanied by a little poem, presumably written into the book by the woman who gave the lock to Wagner. The first, signed Eliza Crooke (Liverpool, 15 June 1795), reads: “Close as this lock of Hair the ribband binds / May friendship’s sacred bonds unite our minds.” This poem looks forward hopefully, anticipating that the lock of hair will memorialize a friendship that exists primarily in the future; the hair represents the illocutionary act of the poem’s declaration. The second poem, signed Elizabeth Venables (Abergele, 27 July 1803), seems to look in two directions at once: “Tho’ time shall change my Tresses hue, / And silv’ry honours o’er them strew, / I, still unchang’d, shall think of you.” This poem implicitly distinguishes between the hair still attached to the giver’s head and the hair given to Wagner—one will change color over time, as Venables ages and her physical self-presentation changes; the other, we know, will remain unchanged, pressed between the pages of Wagner’s autograph album. Venables implicitly compares her future self with this lock of hair—both will remain “unchang’d” even as the hair on her head changes. That is, Venables anticipates a future in which she will perceive herself as unchanged, although she knows she will have physical evidence of change. Her hair represents the perpetuity of the present moment even as it acknowledges the inevitability of transformation; it embodies the paradox of the continuous self living in a system of social exchange.

While the exchange of hair was a relatively common practice in the Romantic period, Leigh Hunt was known as a particularly avid collector. In addition to the strand of Lucretia Borgia’s hair, Hunt’s collection comprised of locks from twenty-one individuals, including
Keats, Wordsworth, the Shelleys, Napoleon, Jonathan Swift, and George Washington. But his most prized lock was from John Milton. Hunt wrote extensively about his hair collection, and he clearly hoped that it would inspire his friends’ poetry as well: he encouraged Walter Savage Landor to write a poem on Lucretia Borgia’s hair, and fairly forcefully demanded that Keats write a poem on Milton’s. Hunt himself wrote three sonnets To Dr. Batty, “On His Giving Me a Lock of Milton’s Hair,” all published in his 1818 volume *Foliage*. The first concentrates on the deep gratitude Hunt feels toward Batty for his “gracious hand” that “gav’st the great lock to me” (5); the third similarly focuses on Batty’s gift as demonstrating the “liberal taste” and “wise gentleness” that “[h]ave ever been the true physician’s bower” (1–2). These sonnets focus, like so much of Hunt’s poetry, on what Jane Stabler calls “moments of social revelation; they focus on the way humans behave to each other” (107). They are incredibly sociable poems that reinforce the connection Hunt felt in his interaction with Batty.

 Only the second poem focuses on the hair itself, and it is unfamiliar enough to warrant reproducing:

\[5\] Milton’s hair, along with the bulk of Hunt’s collection (excluding the strand of Lucretia Borgia’s hair), is now housed at the Harry Ransom Center in Austin, TX. Milton might have been a particularly apt choice for Hunt’s fixation. Stephen B. Dobranski writes on the symbolism of hair in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as marking the shift from their prelapsarian to postlapsarian affection: “in the context of the value Milton assigns the couple’s locks, the gesture of Adam’s dropping the garland also suggests that he and Eve lose the physical and spiritual bond that their hair enacted” before the Fall (350).

\[6\] Erik Gray’s recent essay on Keats’s poem claims that, for Keats, the lock of Milton’s hair represented the “perfect material” to “embody” two time schemes: “the current one, where the past is past and is separated from us by intervening generations; and the ancient one, where the various layers of the past are simultaneously present” (37). Although I will not address Keats’s poem here, Gray’s essay informs my reading of literary hair generally, and suggests the sense of hair as a figuration for duality – particularly temporal duality – extended well beyond the works of Hunt and Shelley that I address in this chapter.
It lies before me there, and my own breath
Stirs its thin outer threads, as though beside
The living head I stood in honoured pride,
Talking of lovely things that conquer death.
Perhaps he pressed it once, or underneath
Ran his fine fingers, when he leant, blank-eyed,
And saw, in fancy, Adam and his bride
With their heaped locks, or his own Delphic wreath.
There seems a love in hair, though it be dead.
It is the gentlest, yet the strongest thread
Of our frail plant,—a blossom from the tree
Surviving the proud trunk;—as if it said,
Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me
Behold affectionate eternity.

This, too, is a social poem, but it is a social poem of a different order from the two focused on Batty. First of all, the social contact being made in this poem is entirely imaginary, although that should not be surprising coming from the author of the “Wishing-cap papers”—the “wishing cap” being the imaginary hat an author dons in order that, by simply wishing, he “in as many seconds, can be in as many parts of the world, and of time” (436–37). It is the wishing, the longing, that propels the author to his work, and to Milton. But this poem is also, somehow, more physical than the two poems that engage the actual, living person of Dr. Batty. Hunt’s breath “stirs” to life a very corporeal Milton, engrossed in his own authorial expedition to the
mythical past, touching his own hair, and, in this touch, making contact through the ages with Hunt’s breath. As the Writer tells the Reader in their dialogue in Hunt’s first Wishing-Cap essay, “We have touched the persons we allude to” (438). For the ever-social Hunt, it is the longing for the physical touch that is embodied in Milton’s hair—and in the craft of writing.

Hunt’s poem exhibits classic traits of Romantic ekphrasis: it conjures narrative motion from a still object, it discovers “eternity” in a fragment, and in the closing couplet it literally gives voice to a silent object. Yet unlike in a typical work of ekphrasis, in Hunt’s poem the object is activated not through the poet’s gaze, but through the touch of his breath. For the poet to “begin, like Anacreon, with the hair,” as Hunt suggests in his “Criticism,” is to begin with the pressing desire for interaction rather than observation. By the end of the poem, however, the potential for interaction is constrained by the conventions of ekphrasis. The poem cannot seem to settle on what representation, exactly, it represents. Through the slippage in pronouns that bleed so readily from one to the next, the poem moves from the “it” of Milton’s lock of hair; through Hunt’s intervention, this lock gives rise to what it represents, the “he” of Milton the man; and finally, Milton the man gives way to a silent, static object that stands in need of envoicing. The “it” of the first stanza returns, but the referent has changed: the “hair” with all its love follows logically from Milton’s hair, but without an article this last “it” is a generalized object. It is hair in general, not Milton’s specific lock, that is given voice in the final couplet. In order to conform

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Heffernan describes the Romantic “belief that visual art has the power to perpetuate a moment, to raise it above time, change, and contingency” as “a child of history. It originates chiefly with the birth of the public museum, which aims at once to preserve the history embedded in works of art and to protect those works from history, from the ravages of time” (Museum 93). That is, the belief in the temporally transcendent power of visual art, and the simultaneous understanding of visual art as constantly at risk of deteriorating into ruin, is a particularly Romantic condition. Hunt’s poem applies these concerns, typically associated with visual art, to hair, implicitly including the body part in the field of representational objects.
to the typical structure of ekphrasis, the hair loses its representational specificity; the “love” ultimately represented is an abstract concept.

Percy Shelley takes up the questions of agency and subject-object relations raised by Hunt’s poem in his fragmentary “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci,” composed in the summer of 1819. By incorporating some of Hunt’s hairier themes into an overtly ekphrastic poem, Shelley forces an aesthetic and political tension to emerge between action and gaze. While Hunt’s poem begins, “It lies before me there,” Shelley’s first line reads, “It lieth,” mimicking Hunt’s opening while omitting—as Shelley will continue to do—the active presence of the author interacting with his subject. While Hunt’s “own breath / Stirs [the] thin outer threads” of Milton’s hair (1–2), in Shelley’s poem, as Carol Jacobs has noted (175), the “vapour” that escapes Medusa’s mouth is her own (36). Medusa’s breath, gone by the end of the poem, animates nothing; it becomes an “ever-shifting mirror”—a reference, certainly, to the mythical Perseus, who used a mirror to slay Medusa, but also a way of further portraying Medusa’s isolation (37). What she sees when she gazes is herself, reflected through herself.

Yet Shelley retains some of hair’s power to transcend death. Hunt describes hair as “a blossom from the tree / Surviving the proud trunk” (11–12), while Shelley describes Medusa as “a trunkless head,” from which “hairs which are vipers” grow “as from one body” (45, 19, 17).8 The vipers:

… curl and flow,

And their long tangles in each other lock,

8 All lines numbered 41 and on come from the additional sixth stanza, which was first brought to scholarly attention by Neville Rogers. Questions remain about Shelley’s intentions for this final stanza, and it is not always included in scholarly editions of the poem, although it is generally accepted as another fragment of the fragmentary poem.
And with unending involutions shew
Their mailed radiance, as if it were to mock
The torture and the death within, and saw
The solid air with many a ragged jaw. (19–24)

Like the “blossoms” that survive the “trunk” in Hunt’s poem, the “hairs which are vipers” live past Medusa’s death in Shelley’s poem. We know that, for Hunt, hair “survives” in the sense that it retains its ability to convey social meaning. Yet Medusa’s hair makes contact only with itself: “their long tangles in each other lock.” As with the vapour that becomes an “ever-shifting mirror,” Medusa’s afterlife seems almost pathologically self-referential. Her hair might continue to convey social meaning, but it seems unable to escape its own tangled involutions and engage with another being.

The pivotal contrast in Hunt’s poem emerges in his final stanza: “There seems a love in hair, though it be dead” (9). Death is not, as we might expect, paralleled with life, but with love. That is, we surpass death not through continuing life, but through the impression of love that carries on. Shelley, on the other hand, returns us to the expected comparison: on Medusa’s feature, “Death has met life, but there is life in death” (46). These poems are clearly in dialogue—but how does the association with the social aspects of hair affect Shelley’s poem, if by the end he has seemingly omitted all social contact? I would like to take a closer look at Shelley’s interpretation of the mythological and political symbol of the Medusa to try to uncover the poem’s sociability, to explain Shelley’s uncharacteristic choice of “life” over “love.” In order to do so, however, we must examine the often contradictory associations that the image of the Medusa had accrued by 1819.
**Medusa, The Medusa, and La Méduse**

The mythological Medusa was a beautiful woman who was transformed into a gorgon as punishment for being raped. In her transformed state, Medusa had serpents for hair and a face so terrifying that it would turn any who looked on it to stone. Perseus beheaded Medusa and took her severed head, which still retained even after her death some power to turn men into stone, as a protective talisman affixed to the shield of Minerva.\(^9\) Prior to 1818, the term “Medusa,” used colloquially, could describe political situations best avoided, or events so surprising that they stop you in your tracks.\(^10\)

The use of the Medusa as a revolutionary symbol peaked between 1818 and 1820, its sudden prevalence resulting in part from the 1818 translation into English of Henry Savigny and Alex Corréard’s memoir of their experience on the shipwreck of the French frigate Méduse (Medusa in the British newspapers) 1816. The following account of the horrors experienced by those aboard the raft of the Medusa derives from the memoirs of Savigny and Corréard, and from *A Concise Description of Monsieur Jerricault’s Great Picture*. After the frigate ran aground, approximately 150 people were loaded onto a hastily constructed raft with limited provisions. The Medusa’s five boats were supposed to tow the raft to safety, but they abandoned it not far from the wreck. For the next thirteen days, the survivors stood with open wounds in several feet of saltwater. Fights broke out over the limited provisions, and the few people

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\(^9\) There are several variations of the Medusa myth; this version is consistent with retellings from the popular press, 1811–1817.

\(^10\) See, for instance, the exclamation “Medusa’s head!!!” used in a 13 November 1817 article in *The Morning Post*, “Napoleon and the Prince of Monaco,” to describe the author’s surprise at seeing Napoleon Bonaparte in 1815.
fortunate enough to have secured stores of wine or liquor guarded them jealously. Some ate sword-belts and linen and cooled their mouths by sucking on pewter. Many resorted to cannibalism. By the time of their rescue, only fifteen survivors remained. They had thrown the sickest overboard to preserve themselves.

The horrific experiences of the survivors resonated with the radical English working class. While the threat of English radicalism had been described in monstrous terms before, in 1819 the Medusa and the gorgon, now associated popularly with an incident in which the powerful literally left the powerless to starve, seemed a particularly apt metaphor not only for the threat of the radical working class, but also for their plight. Two working-class papers, *The Gorgon* and *The Medusa*, in print briefly between 1818 and the passage of the “Gag Acts” at the end of 1819, directly appropriated the symbol of the Medusa as a radical call to action. Although neither paper makes explicit mention of the French frigate, both the timing of their publication and the content of their few issues links the cause of the English working class to the suffering on the raft of the Medusa. It was in the first issue of *The Medusa* that John Hunt ran the updated address “TO THE PUBLIC” discussed in Chapter One. This address, which set the tone for all future issues of the paper, ironically berates the “ignorantly-impatient Multitude” of its readership for demanding to “‘feel, feel, feel and touch, touch, touch, before you will allow

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11 The *Medusa*, as used colloquially in 1819, could also symbolize betrayal more generally. A 13 March 1818 article in the “Private Correspondence” section of *The Times* reported that a man who spoke too vehemently in support of an unpopular amendment was warned, “Take care, Mons. Marshal; you are embarking upon another Medusa, and when you shall have been shipwrecked, your best friends will not be able to save you.”

12 Ashley Cross notes the political message conveyed by the Medusa was ambiguous because both radicals and conservatives used the Medusa to symbolize radical reform.
your happiness to be real” (1). “Can you not believe,” it asks, “that your hunger and thirst are gratified, unless you eat and drink? Can you not believe that you are clothed and warm, unless you are covered from the inclemency of the season?” (1). Under the banner of The Medusa, the “discontented crew” of the English working class is urged to mutiny in order to claim their right to the basic human necessities of food and clothes that they, like those abandoned to the raft of the Medusa, had been denied (1). Yet the address also incorporates elements of the mythical Medusa and her insistent physicality. Her threat lies in her power to make solid, susceptible to touch, the transient glance between oppressor and oppressed; her threat lies in her power to transform thought into object. Like the “ignorantly-impatient Multitude,” she demands recognition for the reality of her suffering.

By 1819, when Shelley composed “On the Medusa,” the Medusa had accrued a complex and often contradictory set of mythological, political, psychological, and aesthetic associations. While Shelley’s description of Medusa’s “hairs which are vipers” growing “as from on body” could be read as referring to the figure’s association with collective labor movements (19, 17), Shelley subsumes such politics within a psychological critique of the nature of the self and its

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13 Like many articles from The Medusa, this is a slightly altered version of an earlier text, published without reference to the original source. In this case, the text is lifted almost wholesale from R. Thompson, To the Public, alias “The Swinish Multitude.” See Chapter One, pp. 12-15.

14 Jonathan Crary writes, “In the nineteenth century, for the first time, observable proof became needed in order to demonstrate that happiness and equality had in face been attained. Happiness had to be ‘measurable in terms of objects and signs,’ something that would be evident to the eye in terms of ‘visible criteria’” (11; quoted material from Jean Baudrillard, La société de consommation [Paris, 1970], 6). But as Fraser notes, Crary neglects the importance of touch, so evident in this passage from The Medusa, in his focus on the visual. See Chapter One, p. 13.

15 Shelley’s poetry has often been associated with collective labor movements both during his lifetime and in his posthumous legacy. See Paul Foot, Red Shelley (London: Sidgwick and Jackson), 1980; and Michael Demson, Masks of Anarchy: The History of a Radical Poem, from Percy Shelley to the Triangle Factory Fire (New York: Verso), 2013.
boundaries. By engaging not only with the multiple and ambiguous significations of the Medusa in 1819, but also with the affective and memorial significations of hair, Shelley demonstrates the potential for a politically radical, and radically altered, construction of the self.

In mythology, Medusa instantly turns to stone, physically, all who gaze upon her. Yet in Shelley’s retelling, Medusa’s powers are slow, spiritual, and affect an ambiguous gazer. Her “grace” “turns the gazer’s spirit into stone; / Whereon the lineaments of that dead face / Are graven till the characters be grown / Into itself, and thought no more can trace” (9–13). Here Shelley slows the Medusan transformation to an extended process of change over time: that the “lineaments” “are graven till” the transformation is complete indicates how gradual the change is. The transformation is so gradual as to be barely perceptible to the transformed gazer, who is changed not in flesh, but in “spirit,” beyond its own ability to recognize. The unclear referents for the “characters” and the “itself” that they grow into suggest that the gazer takes on the impression of Medusa, but leave open the possibility of alternative readings: the gazer could transform internally to mimic his own outward appearance as he reacts to the Medusa. Not only does the Medusa transform the gazer, but we—both gazer and reader—lose the ability to measure the transformation. “Thought no more can trace” the change once it has begun, because thought itself has changed. Once we have lost the distinction between observer and observed, self and other, we cannot turn back; we cannot re-“trace” our steps to find where we lost our sense of self. To the transformed self, the past is unthinkable.

Yet, as Heffernan points out, the syntax of the poem does not even allow the reader to definitively distinguish the “gazer” from Medusa herself (Museum 121). After all, it is Medusa who does most of the active gazing in the poem: in the first line, she is “gazing on the midnight sky,” and in the last, “[g]azing in death on heaven from those wet rocks” (1, 40). We cannot be
sure that the “gazer” transformed in the poem is a different subject from the “gazing” Medusa.\textsuperscript{16} While Heffernan argues that Medusa must therefore be read as both the gazer and the gazed-upon, I would modify his claim slightly: the Medusa cannot be distinguished from either the gazer or the gazed-upon. This is not Freud’s Medusa, threatening castration in her lack and difference.\textsuperscript{17} She more closely resembles Hal Foster’s recent re-reading of the Medusa myth, which finds her terror stemming from “a lack of difference” (183; his emphasis).

As the poem dissolves the boundary between self and other, it demonstrates the creation of a collectively-minded self—a politically powerful move in 1819. We might approach the poem as an allegory for the “viral witnessing” that allowed the living to speak on behalf of the dead.\textsuperscript{18} From this perspective, the poem could be read as extolling the transformative power of narratives (made up of “characters”) to alter reality even after the death of the original narrator, even as it acknowledges that the retelling transforms the narrative and erases all record of the “original.” The painting and poem become a part of this ongoing transformation of the dead and

\textsuperscript{16} Even assuming that the “gazer” is not Medusa, we cannot identify him. Carol Jacobs asks, “Who is the gazer – Perseus, his predecessors, the painter, the poet, the reader? There are no clear-cut answers to these questions although all six stanzas are bent on nothing if not on describing the scene at hand and on situating the observer with respect to it” (167).

\textsuperscript{17} Freud associates the mythological Medusa’s head of snakes and petrifying gaze with castration anxiety in a posthumously published fragment, “Das Medusenhaupt” (1922). Freud’s reading has influenced much scholarly work on literary Medusas, including literary criticism of Shelley’s Medusa. While interrogations of Medusa’s use as a gendered political symbol can be useful, to apply an anachronistic Freudian reading obscures the more specific historical associations attached to the Medusa.

\textsuperscript{18} I use the term “viral witness,” derived from Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s preference for the term “virtual witnessing” over “vicarious experience,” to describe readers and writers who “witnessed” events they might not have actually seen. See Chapter One, pp. 26-27. My thanks to Robert Mitchell for exploring these ideas with me.
the living (the “life in death”), recuperating the losses of the *Raft of the Medusa* and reiterating the power of the activist many united as if by one body, unkillable because unindividuated.

And yet this transformation, this potential for change, seems to have no agent. The Medusa never gazes upon another individual; her gaze is thrown away to the unresponsive Heavens. The “gazer,” if he is not Medusa, seems never to gaze. The social contact of Hunt’s poem becomes, in Shelley’s, a disintegration of the distinctions between self and other that makes such contact possible. While Milton’s hair embodies, for Hunt, the “affectionate eternity” that allows him to imaginatively flit back and forth in time (14), in Shelley’s poem, Medusa and the gazer are trapped in the moment of transformation; the instant cannot be distinguished from the eternal. The fraught tension typical of ekphrasis between stillness and motion, and the tensions embodied in hair between self-presentation and social construction, promise and memorial, collapse in Shelley’s poem. What remains is an inchoate object identified, like the hair of Hunt’s poem, as “it.” Yet this is not the silent, static object in need of envoicing; this is not Milton’s hair activated by Hunt’s projected love. Medusa’s hairs move disturbingly—terrifyingly—on their own. The ekphrastic action lies not in the envoicing of the voiceless object, but in the transformation of the self into an uncontrollable object, a self that stands in need of social contact for animation. “Love,” here, is not an abstract quality; it is an action, a reflexive impulse, that “struggl[es]” toward its own creation.

Heffernan’s definition of ekphrasis safely confines objects in a passive state, accepting the ventriloquist voice of the speaking subject. But Timothy Morton has suggested an alternative tradition of Longinian ekphrasis in which these roles are reversed, and the object, rather than temporarily taking on the attributes of a subject, “unnervingly reveals the ‘subject’ to be an (assemblage of) object(s) that can be acted on physically” (171). In this object-oriented reading,
“the ekphrastic object makes us see ourselves as objects traversed—translated by others” (171).

Shelley’s poem takes this alternative ekphrasis one step further: we are traversed, translated, and transformed; we cannot even recall the untranslated subject.

**Beatrice Cenci’s Hairy Revolution**

As a body part that is only partially under our own control, hair marks a site of vulnerability to outside forces, the point where the self is powerfully exposed to the nonself. For Hunt, locks of hair may convey loving impressions as they pass out of the control of the person from whose body they were removed and into a system of affective exchange, creating moments of sentimental contact displaced from the person the locks represent. But this contact, Shelley demonstrates, is not necessarily loving. The hair attached to the head can also become a site of oppressive patriarchal contact, and of struggle. This figuration of hair as the point where the self loses control of itself in the face of oppression is exemplified in Shelley’s response to a scathing review of *The Revolt of Islam*. The unsigned review for *The Quarterly* (April 1819), now attributed to John Taylor Coleridge (Shelley misattributed it to Robert Southey), attacks not just the poem, but also Shelley’s moral and religious beliefs and personal history. It concludes by arguing that Shelley’s “infidelity and immorality” will ultimately stunt his intellectual growth, and Shelley will use what remains of his limited capabilities to deceive others into following his doomed trajectory:

> Like the Egyptian of old, the wheels of his chariot are broken, the path of “mighty waters” closes in upon him behind, and a still deepening ocean is before him:—for a short time, are seen his impotent struggles against a resistless power, his blasphemous execrations are heard, his despair but poorly assumes the tone of triumph and defiance,
and he calls ineffectually on others to follow him to the same ruin—finally, he sinks “like lead” to the bottom, and is forgotten. (471)

Coleridge imagines Shelley succumbing to “a resistless power” as if to a natural occurrence rather than an active adversary. Shelley “struggles,” but his struggle is against rather than with a God that is inferred but never named.

Shelley was understandably upset by this description of his ignoble death. In a letter to his publishers, Charles and James Ollier, promising the imminent delivery of both *The Cenci* and *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley includes a lengthy response to the criticism. He ends his letter by rewriting the review’s account of his death:

> It describes the result of my battle with their Omnipotent God; his pulling me under the sea by the hair of my head, like Pharaoh; my calling out like the devil, who was *game* to the last, swearing and cursing in all comic and horrid oaths, like a French postilion on Mont Cenis; entreating everybody to drown themselves; pretending not to be drowned myself when I *am* drowned; and, lastly, *being* drowned. (729)

Shelley creates a point of contact absent in Coleridge’s version, so that what had been a passive succumbing becomes an active struggle. While in the review, the waters simply close in and Shelley sinks, in Shelley’s version, God physically pulls him under by the hair. With the introduction of hair as the link between murderer and murdered, oppressor and oppressed, Shelley’s conflict with “their Omnipotent God” comes to resemble the conflicts with tyranny and oppression at the heart of *The Cenci*.

I would like to suggest that in *The Cenci*, written around the same time as “On the Medusa,” Shelley finds revolutionary potential in hair’s dual significations as the site of both loving and oppressive contact, as a marker of change and constancy, and as a figure for life,
death, and the life-in-death. The ekphrastic nature of the play, combined with the play’s well-established emphasis on the gaze, creates an internal tension between eyes and hair—between the politics of witness and the politics of social contact—that we already glimpsed in “On the Medusa.” The play’s tragic heroine, Beatrice, has frequently been compared with Medusa; Stuart Curran, for instance, writes that Shelley found the “embodiment” of the Medusa’s “tempestuous loveliness of terror” in Beatrice Cenci (xiii). And Young-Ok An connects Beatrice’s “anatomizing gaze” to the arresting power of Medusa’s stare (“Beatrice’s Gaze” 27). An focuses on the ekphrastic aspects of the play, particularly Shelley’s description in his Preface of Beatrice’s “vivacious eyes” as portrayed in what was then thought to be a portrait of Beatrice Cenci by Guido Reni (Fig. 3). However, An neglects the remainder of Shelley’s description of the portrait, which continues:

There is a fixed and pale composure upon the features: she seems sad and stricken down in spirit, yet the despair thus expressed is lightened by the patience of gentleness. Her head is bound with folds of white drapery from which the yellow strings of her golden hair escape, and fall about her neck. The moulding of her face is exquisitely delicate; the eyebrows are distinct and arched: the lips have that permanent meaning of imagination and sensibility which suffering has not repressed and which it seems as if death scarcely could extinguish. Her forehead is large and clear; her eyes which we are told were remarkable for their vivacity, are swollen with weeping and lusterless, but beautifully tender and serene. In the whole mien there is a simplicity and dignity which united with her exquisite loveliness and deep sorrow are inexpressibly pathetic. (318)
In this passage, Shelley implicitly draws a connection between Beatrice Cenci’s expression, “lightened by the patience of gentleness,” and the hair given voice to declare, in Hunt’s poem, “Patience and Gentleness is Power. In me / Behold affectionate eternity” (13–14). This is our first clue that Beatrice’s power might ultimately be found more in an affectionate afterlife than in her famous patricide. This gentle power comes into greater focus as we more fully examine her portrait as described by Shelley. He lists the elements of Beatrice’s “features”—which are “fixed” like Medusa’s—and attaches affect to each with a verb of being or having. Beatrice’s features exist in the perpetual present, frozen in the identification between emotion and expression without activating verbs. Even her “swollen” eyes have wept only in a tense so far past that the weeping itself has become a stationary noun. In the entire passage, only one part of Beatrice’s body shows signs of movement: “the yellow strings of her golden hair escape” from the “folds of white drapery” that “b[...]nd” her head (318). Like the vipers of Medusa’s hair that still “curl and flow” with “unending involutions” after Medusa herself has died (19, 21), Beatrice’s hair moves ever so slightly, the only hint of life continuing past her famous death. Even in the historical present of ekphrasis, only Beatrice’s hair can be said to do something, rather than simply evoke something. But what it is, exactly, that hair does in The Cenci vacillates anxiously throughout the play. While in the Preface, Beatrice’s hair, in accordance with the contemporary rhetoric surrounding hair, “escap[es] from the idea of death,” in the play itself that escape is highly contested.

In The Cenci, hair initially serves as an indication of Count Cenci’s hypocritical self-presentation. Throughout the play, characters note Cenci’s white hair as an emblem of fatherhood; it is the visual cue that determines how others relate to him within the patriarchal system of which it is symbolic. Camillo and Beatrice invoke his “snow-white” and “hoary” hair
to remind him of his fatherly duties (1.1.39, 1.1.101), and one would-be murderer pauses when he sees the ghost of his own dead father in Cenci’s “thin grey hair” (4.3.10). Cenci’s hair functions as a metonym, but it is a false metonym, standing for an ideal of fatherhood that he should represent, but does not. Like the wig of eighteenth-century fashion, Cenci’s hair aligns him visually with a collective category, encouraging others to see him—and judge him—as a category rather than an individual. And when the Pope refuses to stay Beatrice’s execution, it is out of fear that “hoary hair” might grow into a “capital” “crime”—that is, that youth will rebel against age—if he shows leniency (5.4.23–24). In a perversion of Kant’s categorical imperative, characters like the Pope, who rely on the “universal law” of patriarchy as embodied in Cenci’s hair to legitimate their own authority, willfully disregard his abuse of power to uphold the visual system of patriarchal power. If we read hair as marking points of active oppression, as in Shelley’s letter to Ollier, we can view even the seemingly passive assumptions of the patriarchal order as, in fact, actively oppressive.

We first begin to suspect an indictment of passive acceptance of patriarchal tyranny in the banquet scene, when the dinner guests function as a horrified audience to Cenci’s dramatic toast. They watch as the Count takes hideous pleasure in his sons’ deaths. They whisper in uncomfortable side conversations as he raises a glass of wine that he compares with his sons’ “mingled blood,” a Satanic “sacrament” (1.3.81–82). Although the guests find Cenci “horrible,” they are compelled to stay to the end (1.3.70). Cenci’s show certainly makes for better drama than Beatrice’s pleading response.\textsuperscript{19} As Curran notes, the stage directions reinforce Cenci’s superior mastery of the action; he literally turns his back on her speech until the end, when

\textsuperscript{19} Margot Harrison treats the entire play as commentary on the politics of public performance.
Beatrice pleads, “Dare no one look on me? / None answer?” (1.3.132–33). Beatrice’s attempt to spur the guests to action backfires, and her shamed audience lowers their collective gaze, shutting out her performance. The Count’s horror, on the other hand, inspires his guests’ obedience not just to his will, but to his worldview: Camillo asks plaintively, “Can we do nothing?” and Colonna answers, “Nothing that I see. / Count Cenci were a dangerous enemy” (1.3.142–43). Cenci’s performance effectively shuts his audience’s eyes to all alternatives.

This performance relies heavily on passive audience participation. As Beatrice pleads with the guests to do something, to act, to break the fourth wall and help her, Cenci directs them to maintain their stony silence. The guests’ posture indicates their allegiance: they cannot return Beatrice’s gaze and acknowledge that they are actors, not audience. Instead, they reassert the distance between Beatrice and themselves by dropping their eyes, hanging their heads in shame. The posture of shame, as Silvan Tomkins describes it, implies the isolating property of hair; Eve Sedgwick paraphrases: “the lowering of the eyelids, the lowering of the eyes, the hanging of the head is the attitude of shame” (20). For anyone with even ear-length hair, such a posture would cause it to swing forward across the cheeks and into the eyes; it is the hair that literally hides the face in shame. This posture allows “escape” from “the ‘real world,’ ostensibly, the ‘responsibility’ of ‘acting’ or ‘performing’ in that world,” yet it is itself a performance—the performance of withdrawal (21). As the dinner guests withdraw, they form an audience-within-a-play, blurring the lines between audience and participant. An compares Beatrice to the Medusa

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20 Crary prefaces his investigation into the shift in the status of the observer in the early nineteenth century with the claim that an observer, “[t]hough obviously one who sees, … is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations” (6). Cenci, in the banquet scene, adroitly manipulates this limiting power of observation.
because of her “anatomizing gaze,” but in the banquet scene, at least, Cenci more closely resembles the mythological Medusa. Cenci’s power to intercept and manipulate his guests’ gaze turns them to stony silence; Beatrice attempts to return them into vocal witnesses.

Beatrice directly criticizes this kind of passive observation in the face of oppression at the end of the play, when she faces execution for patricide. She asks the judge sentencing her, “Will you give up these bodies to be dragged / At horses’ heels, so that our hair should sweep / The footsteps of the vain and senseless crowd[?]” (5.3.34–36). Again hair marks the point of contact where the patriarchal orders of Pope and judge condemn Beatrice, but by her mention of the “crowd,” Beatrice reminds us that those who observe this injustice without interfering are also responsible for her oppression. This recalls the audience-within-a-play of the banquet guests hiding from Beatrice, watching her father’s evil deeds and refusing to act. Beatrice alters our understanding of the observers within (and without) the play from mere witnesses who can choose to withdraw, to witnesses implicated in and responsible for the actions they observe. We as readers and spectators are made uncomfortably aware of our own positioning outside the play; we feel the impotence of inactive judgment. We might not actively drag her by the hair, but visual contact becomes implied in the field of oppressive contact through the imagined crowd’s contact with her imagined hair.

Beatrice’s hair, which “escapes” in the Preface, becomes a figure for her vulnerability to external oppression when she connects it to her imminent execution. In fact, her hair had already been established as a figure for her lack of control earlier in the play when it “escaped” to fly about her face after her offstage rape by her father. Beatrice enters the stage staggering and asks, “How comes this hair undone? / Its wandering strings must be what blind me so, / And yet I tied it fast” (3.1.6–8). Beatrice’s inability to control her hair parallels her inability to control her body
as well as her inability to engage with the world around her—it blinds her. The veil of her hair
cuts her off from the outside world as it marks a change within: behind the shelter of her hair,
Beatrice has lost her sense of self. She muses:

Do you know

I thought I was that wretched Beatrice

Men speak of, whom her father sometimes hales

From hall to hall by the entangled hair. (3.1.42–45)

These lines describe the dissociation experienced by certain rape victims, and yet the double
emphasis on hair—as both defensive shield and point of vulnerability—expands the significance
of these lines beyond mere trauma. Cenci’s habit of dragging Beatrice by the hair (as he will do
repeatedly throughout the play) exposes her inability to control her own body. Beatrice’s failure
to recognize herself in her own memory, at least for the moment, indicates that her
transformation erases all evidence of a transformation having occurred by reflecting the present
sense of self onto the past. Like an inverse of the Medusa who may or may not also be the gazer
undergoing transformation, a transformed Beatrice gazes on her past self as if it were another.
But the transformation is momentary: after recognizing her beloved stepmother, Beatrice
reluctantly recognizes herself. She reasons that if her identification of Lucretia as her mother is
truth, then:

… that other too

Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth,

Linked with each lasting circumstance of life,

Never to change, never to pass away.
Why so it is. This is the Cenci palace;
Thou art Lucretia; I am Beatrice.
I have talked some wild words, but will no more.
Mother, come near me: From this point of time,
I am … (Her voice dies away faintly). (3.1.60–68)

Beatrice and Lucretia are united in mind and memory with each other, and with their circumstance. Their identities are linked, and, to Beatrice’s dismay, changeless. And yet this passage strangely seems, like the hair in Anne Wagner’s autograph album, to mark two time schemes: the unchangeable circumstances of life, truth, and identity which refuse to “pass away” articulate a time in which past and future coexist alarmingly with the present, yet the break at “this point of time” signals the possibility of a time that might progress. Beatrice is positioned awkwardly within both systems, identified twice: once as Beatrice, once in silence. Whatever change she anticipates cannot be articulated. The mute future hangs in the air between Beatrice and her mother. Like the thought that cannot “trace” in “On the Medusa,” Beatrice’s unspoken self-identification suggests the failure of language to express except by absence the continuity of a self that is “the fragment of an uncreated creature.”

The moment of recognition between Beatrice and Lucretia is mirrored in the final lines of the play. In her last act before her execution, Beatrice says, “Here, mother, tie / My girdle for me,

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21 Elisabeth G. Gitter notes the repeated link between hair and speech, between hair and truthful self-presentation, particularly in cases of raped women of literature, that will become particularly evident by the end of the nineteenth century. She mentions, for example, that Marty South of Thomas Hardy’s The Woodlanders (1886–1887) “is a Philomela, unable to speak and unable, bereft of her hair, to show who she really is” (946). We might consider Shelley’s Beatrice an early example of this trope.
and bind up this hair / In any simple knot” (5.4.159–61). This could, like the cheveux à la victime, signal Beatrice’s readiness for death, or it could signal a final act of control over her own being, her own self-presentation. But Beatrice does not tie her own hair back—she asks her mother to do it for her. In her final act, Beatrice transforms her hair—which had been a symbol of her father’s tyranny over her, a symbol of a self that can be manipulated to the point of unrecognition within oppressive systems—and uses it to make a comforting, affectionate gesture, which she expands into an act of reciprocal affection as she continues her final words to Lucretia:

And yours I see is coming down. How often
Have we done this for one another; now
We shall not do it any more. My Lord,
We are quite ready. Well, ‘tis very well. (5.4.162–65)

Beatrice notices Lucretia’s hair coming down, and in so doing compassionately recognizes Lucretia’s fellow humanity. It is a simple but powerful observation that affirms the mutuality of their loving relationship. For the first time in a play that centers so much on sight and visibility, one character truly and simply sees another.

Beatrice’s compassionate way of seeing Lucretia makes a powerful contrast with the passive observation of oppression indicted throughout the play. After Beatrice asks Lucretia to tie her hair back, she addresses the Cardinal directly, calling attention to his role in her death even as she submits to it. Her gesture marks both the point of contact between herself and her oppressors, as well as the point of mutually supportive contact that counters such oppression. These final lines reveal that the groundwork for a new political morality already exists, and is
already practiced daily even within an overtly oppressive system. Beatrice and Lucretia have tied each other’s hair back many times, yet only at the end of the play can we see this action as symbolic of the relationships that form a politically meaningful alternative to injustice.

Beatrice’s final act can be seen as a revolutionary gesture that outlasts her execution. As Shelley states in his dedication, Beatrice’s story is not a dream “of what ought to be, or may be,” but is “sad reality,” the potential for egalitarian revolution embodied and then executed (314). And yet her story has the “capacity of awakening and sustaining the sympathy of men” centuries later, and, through that sympathy, her story might achieve “the highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of drama”: “teaching the human heart … the knowledge of itself” (316). This “heart” is knowable to itself only because it has been transformed through sympathetic contact; it did not exist as such before it was capable of self-knowledge, but once it is known, we might perceive it as having existed.

This complicates the memorial acts embodied in hair, if the act of “calling to mind” alters the sentiment recalled. But for Shelley, this transformation that is also recollection is part of what defines poetry of the highest moral order. He writes in his “Defence of Poetry” that poetry “marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change” (698). It is through this “union” of “irreconcilable things” that poetry “transmutes all that it touches;” it is through the transformation of the familiar into the extraordinary that poetry “compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It creates anew the universe after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration” (698). It is not enough to simply see, to speak. We must touch, both oppressor and oppressed, with violence and with love, in order to create a happiness that is real. In these moments of human contact we begin the revolutionary struggle to transform ourselves and the world, to create fragments of a more
affectionate eternity. Although Beatrice dies, her social importance remains, lingering in the hair that, as Hunt says, “escap[es] from the idea of death.”

Hair, Not Yew

Shelley wrote *The Cenci* in the summer of 1819, shortly after finishing Act III of his *Prometheus Unbound*. Before writing *The Cenci*, Shelley had believed *Prometheus Unbound* complete in only three acts, but after writing *The Cenci* he was compelled to add a fourth. This final act, I argue, expands on the hairy themes Shelley explored in *The Cenci* in order to more fully imagine a more affectionate eternity.

Like the Medusa, the revolutionary figure of Demogorgon in *Prometheus Unbound* might be traced to the radical discourse of 1819: Paul Foot notes that the working class publication “*Gorgon* found its way to Shelley while he was writing the *Prometheus*” and suggests that “[t]he idea of the people as a monster may have come from there,” giving the etymology of Demogorgon as demo- (people) + Gorgon (196). We can therefore approach *Prometheus* as wrestling with issues of radical politics similar to those insinuated in “On the Medusa.”

Yet differences between the two monsters mark Shelley’s developing understanding of the theme. While the ekphrastic “On the Medusa” is tied to the physical experience of viewing, no similar physicality restricts *Prometheus*’s Demogorgon. When the “veil” concealing Demogorgon’s throne falls (2.4.2), Panthea describes the scene:

I see a mighty Darkness

Filling the seat of power; and rays of gloom

Dart round, as light from the meridian sun,

Ungazed upon and shapeless; neither limb,
Nor form, nor outline; yet we feel it is

A living spirit (2.4.2-7).

The falling of the veil should allow clear vision, yet there is nothing to see; Demogorgon is simply felt. In the realm of the people-monster, only a “mighty Darkness” fills “the seat of power,” in direct contrast to the very visible presence of Jupiter, the emblem of tyranny. This is one of our first clues that, in *Prometheus*, we might not be able to see, let alone “feel, feel, feel, and touch, touch, touch,” the forces of revolution.

Indeed, there is something inherently unsettling about embodiment as it is presented in *Prometheus*. Jupiter’s reign, we learn from Asia, derives from hypocrisy made possible through physicality. Asia explains, “Prometheus / Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter, / And with this law alone, ‘Let man be free,’ / Clothed him with the dominion of wide heaven” (2.4.43-6). But the “law” of freedom could not be sustained because it is a law. In Kantian terms, freedom must be rooted in self-legislation; freedom legislated by another cannot truly be freedom.

Furthermore, Prometheus’s “cloth[ing]” of Jupiter with “the dominion of wide heaven” implies a masking, a covering of the true self with the garb of power—a power known by appearance rather than felt as truth. In short, Jupiter reigns in hypocrisy.

Jupiter’s tyrannical reign is “evil” in the Kantian sense of evil as hypocrisy. As Hannah Arendt argues, evil, for Kant, happens when people fail to act in such a way that they would will to become universal law: that is, evil *wills* are not possible in Kant, but evil *deeds* are possible through hypocrisy (17-18). This Kantian hypocrisy is ultimately tied to a veiling of intentions. For Kant, according to Arendt, “morality means being fit to be *seen,*” and Jupiter reigns in appearances not his own (49-50). He can never be “seen” as he is. Yet Shelley complicates this
Kantian connection between morality and sight by portraying mankind’s savior from Jupiter’s hypocritical rule as a creature defined by its inability to be seen.

Demogorgon, a presence felt rather than seen, could from this perspective be understood as a creature incapable of replicating Jupiter’s hypocrisy. When Jupiter threatens to “clothe” Demogorgon in “ever-living limbs,” he threatens to transform Demogorgon into a creature more like himself—that is, the body, described as a type of “clothing,” would allow Demogorgon to mask itself and repeat the hypocrisy of the current order. As long as Demogorgon resists embodiment, it cannot hide behind manipulated perceptions, interpretation and misinterpretation. Unseen, Demogorgon’s truth resonates sympathetically with those who “feel” its presence. Because it provides no visual referent, Demogorgon cannot be completely resolved as a true “other,” and eschews the power relations inherent in the recognition of the other.

Although Demogorgon’s name derives, according to Foot, from the Gorgon, it is not Demogorgon’s power but Jupiter’s that derives from the physically constitutive Gorgonian gaze. When Demogorgon ends Jupiter’s rule, the Spirit of the Hour notes as a sign of the change:

None frowned, none trembled, none with eager fear
Gazed on another’s eye of cold command,
Until the subject of a tyrant’s will
Became, worse fate, the abject of his own,
Which spurred him, like an outspent horse, to death (3.4.137-41).

Under Jupiter’s rule, the relationship between oppressor and oppressed was mutually constructive; the material object created by their intersecting gazes is the unjust world.
Ordinarily, the intersection of gazes indicates the presence of two or more active subjects perceiving one another. Yet in “On the Medusa,” Shelley suggested the possibility of losing oneself in a gaze that erases and transforms the boundary between self and other. While “On the Medusa” described this transformative power as a generally positive force resulting from “grace,” it is also “terr[ifying]” in its suggestion that the revolutionary self might destroy even the memory of the self as we know it. Yet Prometheus implies that we never had a true self to begin with. In “gaz[ing]” on the “eye of cold command,” the laboring masses have already been transformed to such an extent that they cannot distinguish between the tyrant’s will and their own. As on the face of the Medusa, “[d]eath has met life” on their faces, but there is no life in death. Instead, the transformed “wretch crept a vampire among men, / Infecting all with his own hideous ill” (3.4.147-8). Under Jupiter’s reign, there is death in life, and it spreads through human contact. We are already unrecognizable to ourselves.

Demogorgon’s ascension interrupts the reflexive relationship between oppressor and oppressed that creates tyranny. But in order to break this bond without replicating its power dynamics, Demogorgon, in a strange reversal of the Medusa myth, must overcome Jupiter without engaging him physically or visually. Demogorgon arrives unlimbed, unformed, and so completely beyond Jupiter’s expectations that Jupiter cannot even recognize the uncreated creature. Jupiter asks when it appears, “Awful shape, what art thou?” (3.1.51). Demogorgon answers, “Eternity. Demand no direr name” (3.1.52). Jupiter misunderstands Demogorgon’s threat; he cannot conceive of eternity as anything other than the eternal present. Instead, he imagines combating Demogorgon beyond mutual destruction:

Sink with me then,

We two will sink on the wide waves of ruin,
Even as a vulture and a snake outspent
Drop, twisted in inextricable fight,
Into a shoreless sea. Let Hell unlock
Its mounded oceans of tempestuous fire,
And whelm on them into the bottomless void
This desolated world, and thee, and me,
The conqueror and the conquered, and the wreck
Of that for which they combated (3.1.70-79).

Jupiter envisions the revolutionary cycle as a struggle so perpetual it resembles a natural occurrence. This is not just combat. It stretches the moment of contact beyond the vanishing point until all that remains of the contest is the touch. This, for tyrants like Jupiter, is eternity: a history that cannot even repeat, because it cannot break free of its own violent embrace long enough to begin again.

But we can infer from Jupiter’s concluding speech that Demogorgon defeated him without a touch:

The elements obey me not. I sink
Dizzily down, ever, forever, down.
And, like a cloud, mine enemy above
Darkens my fall with victory. Ai, Ai! (3.1.80-83).
The similarity to Coleridge’s description of Shelley succumbing to the waves is striking: Jupiter sinks to a death perpetually deferred in a fall that lasts “forever,” while the unnamed, inactive agent responsible for his demise looks on.

And in an instant, the world changes. But exactly how the world has changed can be measured only in reference to the world before. When the Spirit of the Hour describes the new world, it does so in negatives: Man is now “[s]ceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man: / Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless, / Exempt from awe, worship, degree” (3.4.194-6). This is freedom from, not freedom to—freedom from the old order, from rank and distinction. But the form of the new order, like that of Demogorgon, remains just out of view.

For the first three acts of Prometheus Unbound, Demogorgon’s eternity lies in eternal potential. We can think of Demogorgon as a disembodied yet externalized self-knowledge. Its formlessness directs us to trust ourselves rather than our senses. Like De Quincey’s Dark Interpreter (addressed in the next chapter), which provides “such commentaries, prophetic or looking back…as would or might have occurred to your own meditative heart—had only time been allowed for its motions,” Demogorgon is the thought that sits just on the tip of the tongue, waiting to burst into being. Unseen, Demogorgon’s truth resonates sympathetically with those who “feel” its presence. Demogorgon’s interpretive role is most clearly articulated when Asia tells Demogorgon, just before the hour of its ascension is revealed, that she has “One more demand; and do thou answer me / As my own soul would answer, did it know / That which I ask” (2.4.124-6). To talk to Demogorgon is to talk to another subject only in the sense that recalling one’s past or imagining one’s future is to commune with another self. It is the recognizable self made other as it moves through time. Demogorgon represents the future which, still unformed, we are certain we will recognize once it comes. And so we wait for change to
come, for the thought to reach the tongue, for the tyrant to make his destined plunge.

Demogorgon’s potential contains all these possibilities. But at the end of Act III of Prometheus, all we can see is that the veil has fallen without anyone pulling it away.

When Shelley returned to Prometheus after writing The Cenci, it was with a new appreciation for the human potential for reciprocal transformation through social feelings that might persist beyond the human lifetime. Beatrice died tragically, the victim of patriarchal violence; the jubilant celebration of life in Act IV of Prometheus comes as a welcome relief. And it comes with hair. The “Train of dark Forms and Shadows” that introduce the new world of love and joy as they “bear Time to his tomb in eternity” proscribe strange mourning rituals: “Strew, oh, strew / Hair, not yew! / Wet the dusty pall with tears, not dew!” In this construction, the human body is presented as opposed to—and preferred to—natural objects invested with symbolic meaning. The comparison between tears and dew reveals its meaning readily: dew looks the same as tears, but it does not originate from human feeling. But the comparison between hair and yew requires more explication.

Yew trees were traditionally associated with war, death, and resurrection. They were customarily planted near churches and homes, but contemporary scholars disagreed about exactly why this was customary, as Elizabeth Kent explains in her summary of the plant’s historical and literary significance in her 1825 Sylvan Sketches. One logical reason might be the widespread use of yew in building “the sturdy bows of our warlike ancestors,” but the tree’s prevalence also had symbolic meaning (396). As an evergreen, the yew could, like bay, rosemary, holly, ivy, and mistletoe, be symbolic of eternal life, but Kent argues that unlike these other plants, the yew was not typically used as a Christmas decoration. Instead, it was sometimes used as a replacement for palms on Palm Sunday, and was often used in funeral rites as a symbol.
of immortality in the afterlife. Typically, a churchyard would have only one yew tree, and this fact, combined with its funerary associations, gave the yew a rather unpleasant reputation. The eighteenth-century poet Robert Blair describes the yew as a “cheerless, unsocial plant,” and Wordsworth, even while attempting to entice a bee to rest on the bough of a yew, describes the tree as “far from all human dwelling” (qtd. in Kent, 399, 405). Yew would be an appropriate choice of plant to “strew” in mourning, but Shelley rejects the “unsocial plant” in favor of hair, which was symbolic not just of life after death, but of social feeling after death.

Hair is strewn in mourning for the old order and it is also celebrated as a sign of the new. A chorus of spirits sings that they come “from the mind / Of human kind,” breaking their litany of abstract and allegorical origins only to declare that they also come “From the dim recesses / Of woven caresses, / Where lovers catch ye by your loose tresses” (4.1.93, 105-7). Human mind, wisdom, thought, and science are not enough to bring about revolutionary change—loving social contact, figured as the playful violence of catching a lover by the hair, must be a driving force as well. Beyond the spirits’ “eyes, / The human love lies / Which makes all it gazes on Paradise” (4.1.126-8). Shelley introduces a new tension between visibility and invisibility: love cannot be seen in the way an observable experiment might be seen, but love transforms what and how we see. The moon recognizes that its light is a reflection of the Earth’s, but a reflection that has penetrated the self: “As a lover or chameleon / Grows like what it looks upon” (4.1.483-4). In Act IV, Shelley develops a positive interpretation of Medusa’s power—and Beatrice’s power—to overcome the divide between self and other, and transform.

We all know that Act IV of Prometheus Unbound is about the revolutionary power of love. But what I am arguing is that this love, the human relationships that transform the world, were already in place in the oppressive regime that came before. Shelley’s play ultimately
suggests that we cannot self-legislate in any Kantian way, but we can choose the manner in which we reflect, and grow to become, what we see around us. We can choose to embrace for eternity, not in struggle, but in love, and it will not look so very different, but it will change the world.
By its sheer abundance, Thomas De Quincey’s writing—which spans five decades and two literary periods, and ranges in genre from autobiographies to short stories, translations, and essays—resists simple categorization. De Quincey’s work seems not quite to fit with the time in which he lived, and yet, as Alina Clej notes, his literary legacy leaves a “silent influence on European modernism” (v). Add to this De Quincey’s habit of rewriting multiple versions of the same work, most notably his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, and the scholarly attempt to pin down what, exactly, De Quincey was “about” becomes nearly impossible. As a result, one
recent scholarly trend has focused on De Quincey’s uncanny ability to be in two places—or two times—at once.¹

It is fitting, given De Quincey’s unsettling temporality, that he is responsible for expanding the definition of the “palimpsest” through his lengthy comparison between the human brain and an ancient manuscript on which text has been repeatedly written, erased, and written over.² A palimpsest arranges its history simultaneously, although the text was recorded sequentially. Each successive layer was added at a particular moment in time, and yet, once added, each layer occupies the same material space as all other layers. The texts do not simply accumulate; they become an increasingly crowded unity. So, according to De Quincey’s Suspiria de Profundis (1845), does the human brain accumulate the record of a life. He recalls the story of a drowning woman who perceived “within the abyss of death” all the events of her life, “arraying themselves not as a succession, but as parts of a coexistence” (151). Yet this simultaneity is not,

¹ For instance, Joel Faflak describes De Quincey’s autobiographical project as both “terminable and interminable,” as each writing self disrupted the conclusion imagined by the previous writing self (in “De Quincey Terminable and Interminable,” Romantic Psychoanalysis: The Burden of the Mystery, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008, 151); Grevel Lindop suggests that anachronism is a characteristic feature of De Quincey’s work (Works of Thomas De Quincey, 19 volumes [London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000-2003]), while Josephine McDonough argues that “the anachronisms in De Quincey’s work are paradoxically part of a more profound consideration of timeliness” (in “De Quincey, Malthus, and the Anachronism-Effect,” Studies in Romanticism 44.1 [Spring 2005], 63-80); Rei Terada argues that by living with “total ruin,” De Quincey was able to transcend the boundaries of gender and even species (in “Living a Ruined Life: De Quincey beyond the Worst,” European Romantic Review 20.2 [April 2009]: 177-186).

² The Oxford English Dictionary gives the modern definition of “palimpsest” as “[a] parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing” (2a), or “[i]n extended use: a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record” (2b). De Quincey’s Suspiria de Profundis (1845) is cited as the first example of the extended meaning. For a thorough investigation of the shifting philosophical meaning of the “palimpsest” from De Quincey to postmodernity, see Robert Maniquis, “De Quincey, Varieties of the Palimpsest, and the Unconscious,” Romanticism 17.3 (Oct. 2011), 309-318.
for De Quincey, the true point of astonishment. For him, the deeper astonishment “lay in the resurrection itself, and the possibility of resurrection, for what had so long slept in the dust” (151). The palimpsestic brain creates an inside and outside to personal history, flattening all the events, experiences, emotions, and thoughts of our past selves into a single densely packed object that closes the distance between my five-year-old self and my twenty-year-old self. The present self, however, stands apart from this object of history, at enough of a remove to observe and interact with these memories. The unity of the past is not remarkable, but the distance between the past and the present is.

De Quincey’s theory of memory as palimpsestuous places him at odds with philosophers concerned for the continuity of the self. He constructs a third option distinct from the two meanings of “self” identified by the philosopher David Velleman in his analysis of Locke’s “assertion that memory makes a person ‘self to himself’ across time” (Self to Self 192). Velleman argues that the word “self” “connotes both identity and reflexivity” and these meanings are distinguished primarily by the perspective we take in memory. In the first case, I think of my past self as the same as me, my personal identity, at a point in the past; in the second, I take on the first-person perspective of a person in the past. Memory, Velleman argues, makes “a person ‘self to himself’ in the latter sense. When I entertain experiential memories, I have thoughts that present a past individual to me in the notional first-person. Memory thereby recruits past selves for me, by putting them within reach of subjectively reflexive thought” (Self to Self 193). This conjuring up of past selves sounds a bit like the “resurrection” described by De Quincey. But let

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3 I borrow the term “palimpsestuous” from Sarah Dillon, who distinguishes her neologism from palimpsestic: “Where ‘palimpsestic’ refers to the process of layering that produces a palimpsest, ‘palimpsestuous’ describes the structure with which one is presented as a result of that process, and the subsequent reappearance of the underlying script” (244).
us consider the perspective De Quincey assumes in his analogy. If I were to read the text of my personal palimpsest, I would read about the “me” who built a miniature playground for the indifferent neighborhood squirrels and the “me” who climbed Rat Rock in Central Park, but I would not experience the first-person perspective of these plural “mes.” But neither would I necessarily consider those “mes” to be my self-identity: all those past selves appear as a “coexistence,” a wholeness identified with itself but not with the “me” examining the text. The palimpsest is the past, but it is not a past self in either of the senses given by Velleman. The palimpsest, at the moment that we read it, is a past without a self—or, a past without myself. The totality of the self is not inclusive of the present self who perceives its totality.

The ability to recover the totality of our memories, according to De Quincey, is analogous to recent technological advances that allowed scientists to reveal the effaced writing of the ancient world, recorded on palimpsests that had been handed down through generations. Each generation, scorning the knowledge valued by the previous generation, yet valuing the expensive vellum on which it had been recorded, erased the text to re-use the vellum. However, advances in chemistry changed the economic function of the palimpsest as paper became cheaper and ancient texts more valued. Not only the ability, but the desire to uncover the historical strata recorded in the palimpsest is, for De Quincey, related to the palimpsest’s existence as a material object with value in the specific moment of the present. The palimpsest therefore embodies two different historical narratives: the texts recorded and resurrected on its surface tell one story, while the palimpsest’s journey as a material object physically handled by succeeding generations tells another. As Ian Baucom argues, “time accumulate[s] within things” in a “heterochronic mix of the personal time of memory, the collective time of labor, and the long durational time of the phenomenological” (24). Here the metaphor breaks down. If the layers of text on the palimpsest
function as a metaphor for the human brain, we might consider the material object of the palimpsest in relation to the human body. But how can we both access the palimpsest of memory and contain it within the material form of the body? How do we step out of our palimpsests in order to examine them?

This chapter concerns the materiality of time in the works of Thomas De Quincey. It takes a new approach to the problem of De Quinceyan duality and anachronism by focusing on the material histories he records in generational time, particularly in his relationship to childhood and his attempts to arrest time in the body of the girl-child. For De Quincey, children share with the opium eater the ability to transgress the boundaries between then and now, here and not-here. Yet they are also emblematic of time’s passage: they literally embody the collective time of human generation. Like the drowning woman and the opium-eater, they can access information and experiences ordinarily closed to adults, and like the drowning woman and the opium eater, their access is produced through the interplay of contact and communication, touch across the distance of the self.

The Child of the City

In his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821), De Quincey recounts the events of his life that led to his addiction and the pleasures and pains that followed. His autobiographical project explains both the source and results of his addiction; it is the organizing principle of his personal palimpsest. Yet we as readers are given glimpses of other possible organizing principles, or the possibility of no organizing principle at all, through the minor characters whose life stories cannot be so readily divided into past narrative and present narrator. One particular character of this sort joins De Quincey’s narrative when a young De Quincey runs away from school and...
ends up in impoverished in London. He has not yet started eating opium, but he identifies his chronic state of near-starvation during this period as the cause of the stomach problems that drove him to depend on the drug in the coming years. After spending several months homeless, De Quincey is taken in by an attorney who gives him access to a “large unoccupied house” off Oxford Street (20). De Quincey soon realizes that this house, though largely unfurnished, is not actually unoccupied: he shares the space with “one single inmate, a poor friendless child, apparently ten years old” (20). This unnamed child, whom he supposes to be the attorney’s illegitimate daughter, has lived alone in the house for several years, and expresses “great joy” that De Quincey would be her “companion through the hours of darkness” (20). De Quincey, in turn, loves the child as his “partner in wretchedness” (23). Each recognizes the other as a potential comfort, a relief from solitude, an other with whom to be alone. Yet as with so much in De Quincey, the divide between self and other, internal and external, real and unreal, breaks down in the house off Oxford Street.

Each night, De Quincey holds the girl in his arms to warm her as she sleeps. But his physical protection provides only limited relief, for, according to De Quincey, “amidst the real fleshly ills of cold, and, I fear, hunger, the forsaken child had found leisure to suffer still more (it appeared) from the self-created one of ghosts” (20). Although De Quincey promises to protect her from the ghosts, the child, unmoved, stubbornly insists on fearing the house’s supernatural inhabitants.

It is tempting, as a reader, to dismiss the child’s fears as imaginary. But De Quincey discourages such a reading. He never describes the ghosts as “imaginary,” but, instead, as “self-created,” giving them the weight of physical, created objects. De Quincey further emphasizes the material reality of the child’s suffering when he uses similar language to describe the physical
effects he suffers from tumultuous dreams and troubled sleep. He writes that while he stayed in the house off Oxford Street, “a hideous sensation began to haunt me as soon as I fell into a slumber” (21). De Quincey’s body haunts him as the child’s ghosts haunt her: both are sensations self-created in troubled dreams, and both are real.

“Self-created” experiences may be generated by the self, but that self is not always in control of its own generative powers. As De Quincey later explains, the childhood power to paint “all sorts of phantoms” “upon the darkness” is “semi-voluntary” at best (75). De Quincey’s body, as Paul Youngquist has argued, may have “a mind of its own”—but the mind, too, can have a mind of its own (356). For the girl off Oxford Street, these “semi-voluntary” self-creations restrict her mobility, erecting self-created boundaries that she experiences as limiting her physical mobility in the material world. As the only two human inhabitants of the attorney’s home, De Quincey and the child had their choice of apartments, “from the attics to the cellars,” and De Quincey recalls that “we pitched our tent for the night in any spot we chose” (23). Yet the child’s fears limit the freedom suggested by a pitched tent in an unfriendly wilderness. Of all the rooms in the house, the child shuns only the attorney’s study—it is, for her, a “Blue-beard room, which the poor child believed to be haunted” (23). The girl’s inability to control her mental landscape shapes her physical experience of the house’s architecture.

The projection of a mental map onto an architectural space appears frequently in De Quincey’s writing. As Curtis Perry has argued, De Quincey explains the structure of both his mind and of his autobiographical narrative in architectural terms. And yet De Quincey undermines the architectural metaphors he employs; “it is always possible,” Perry writes, that these structures “are merely the projections of an agency beyond their author’s conscious control” (810). Ultimately, Perry concludes, De Quincey’s architectural metaphors reveal an
insistence “that the distinction between autobiography and fiction is finally insupportable” (823). In the case of the girl off Oxford Street, I argue, the “fictional” world of ghosts materially impacts her experienced reality in such a way as to challenge any clear distinction between the two. Moreover, the specificity of the structural limits of the girl’s world as a “Blue-beard room” further compromises traditional narrative boundaries by inverting the chronological logic of the standard tale.

De Quincey’s image of a Blue-beard room likely derived in some form from George Colman the Younger’s 1798 drama *Blue-beard; or, Female Curiosity: A Dramatic Romance*, a far more popular play than *The Iron Chest* although it dealt with similar themes (see Chapter Three). In fact, William Godwin retrospectively cast *Caleb Williams* (the source for *The Iron Chest*) as a variation on “the tale of Bluebeard,” retaining the core elements of the tale: hidden evidence of atrocious crime, fatal curiosity leading to discovery, and an almost fruitless struggle to escape the consequences of discovery.⁴ In Colman’s adaptation, set at a far remove in Turkey despite the folktale’s French origins, the young Fatima is torn away from her betrothed, Selim, by a power-hungry father who would rather marry her off to the wealthy Abomelique (Blue-beard). Abomelique has already married several times, and each wife has mysteriously disappeared. The audience quickly learns that these wives have been executed for their curiosity, and their ghosts now haunt the “Blue Chamber,” a room that appears to be a shrine to marital

⁴ Maria Tatar provides several variants of the tale in *Secrets beyond the Door: The Story of Bluebeard and His Wives*. Colman’s play takes significant liberty with the plot of the folktale; I relate his version rather than Perrault’s classic because Colman’s play was quite popular at the time De Quincey would have been in London. The details Godwin relates in his “Account of the Composition of *Caleb Williams*” (from his Preface to the 1832 “Standard Novels” edition of *Fleetwood*) more closely align with Perrault’s version than with Colman’s, but surely each fed the memory and associations of the other. The major theme of forbidden rooms concealing grisly secrets is central to all versions of the tale.
devotion until a key is turned, revealing skeletons, bloody walls, and gruesome paintings. (Colman’s version, like so many, portrays Blue-beard’s repetitive murders as punishments for female curiosity, leaving the first murder without logical explanation.) Shortly before they are to be married, Abomelique goes on a journey, leaving Fatima a ring of keys to open every room in his castle. Only the “Blue Chamber,” he says, she must not open. Fatima’s sister convinces her to unlock the forbidden door, revealing Abomelique’s bloody secret. Fatima tries to conceal what she has learned, but the charmed key has snapped in half, alerting Abomelique to her disobedience. Abomelique flies into a murderous rage, but Selim arrives just in time to save his love.

In Colman’s play, as in the traditional tale, the bride is forbidden from entering the secret room for reasons that are unknown to her until she succumbs to her curiosity and learns that the taboo concealed the bloody evidence of Blue-beard’s murdered brides. In De Quincey’s Confessions, however, the child shuns the attorney’s study because she thinks she knows it contains ghosts. That is, in the child’s forbidden room, the chronological relationship between knowledge and discovery reverses.

As a psychological metaphor, the tale of Blue-beard, like De Quincey’s palimpsest, demarcates the limits of the known and the knowable. Maria Tatar points out that in the familiar representation of the psyche as a house, Blue-beard’s forbidden room becomes “the perfect site for storing what is unwelcome in public spaces” (50), the psychic space protecting “secret knowledge” (60). It contains and separates evidence of the past that cannot be fully erased. But the child’s “Blue-beard room” in the Confessions lacks this structuring chronological logic. Her present fears, which manifest in architectural terms that are both metaphorical and material, have neither cause nor effect. She fears the “Blue-beard room” because she believes she knows the
haunted past that would be revealed by future action; her historical knowledge is paradoxically anticipatory.

De Quincey’s description of the mind as a “palimpsest” on which the “inscription” of past events “remains for ever” suggests a linear arrangement of personal history (77). But his description of his own mind under the influence of opium more closely resembles the child’s perplexing perception of the present as shape—and limited—by both past and future. In his much-studied passage on a series of illustrations by Piranesi depicting vast “Gothic halls,” De Quincey describes the illustrations as depicting the artist himself creeping up a staircase that comes to an “abrupt termination” (78).\(^5\) “But raise your eyes,” De Quincey writes, “and behold a second flight of stairs still higher,” with a second Piranesi; above, a third; “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 my dreams” (78). As Perry notes, this description “locates the artist within his own imaginative ‘architecture’” while calling “into question the distance established between [De Quincey] and his tale” (812). These endless repetitions, like Blue-beard’s repetitive murders, seem to have no cause and no effect beyond continuing repetition; the repetitions might expand forever and still produce nothing more than a fragment. The girl, like the Piranesi of De Quincey’s imagination (who is also a metaphor for De Quincey the narrator of the *Confessions*), is trapped within the architecture of her own mind. The child’s self-structuring mimics that of the opium-addict.

But the girl, after all, is not the architect of her own story; she is only a character in De Quincey’s infamously unreliable autobiography, and she disappears without a trace. De Quincey

\(^5\) De Quincey never saw the illustrations himself, and based his description on his memory of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge told him about them. Unsurprisingly, his description only loosely resembles Piranesi’s Carceri Plates.
claims to have looked for her years later, without success. “If she is now living,” he writes, “she is probably a mother, with children of her own; but, as I have said, I could never trace her” (23). This coda hints at a life completed outside of De Quincey’s view—and yet the hint itself only calls attention to the girl’s fragmentary tale. She is probably a mother; she might very well be dead. Both her future and her reproductive potential are reduced to contingencies, suspended in a state of possibility that is never actualized. She vanishes from the narrative, but the multiple possible lives she might have led after vanishing cancel each other out. Her life pauses and holds at that moment of potential futures, interminably incomplete, perpetually inaccessible.

**Oriental Childhoods**

The child’s “Blue-beard room” would have had, in the early nineteenth century, distinctly orientalist connotations, putting the girl’s psychic architecture firmly in line with the oriental threats typical to De Quinceyan girl-children. Maria Tatar notes that in the early nineteenth century, popular images of a turbaned Blue-beard created a visual syntax of an orientalized murderer. The Turkish setting of Colman’s play certainly contributed to the popular notion of an orientalized Blue-beard, while serving to paradoxically distance audiences from both villain and hero; many traditional versions of the tale rendered Blue-beard as a menacing foreign threat to domestic security. In De Quincey’s writing, children like the girl with the Blue-beard room often appear as counterpoints highlighting the otherness of the oriental image, but their proximity implicates them in the oriental threat.

De Quincey’s orientalist anxieties, particularly in regard to his self-identification as an *English* opium-eater (as opposed to the more stereotypical Turkish variety), have been well-established as simultaneously patrolling and exposing as inadequate the boundaries between
English and Eastern, self and other. Nigel Leask writes that the duality of De Quincey’s “oriental image[s]” might be explained by imperial ambivalence framed as opium dreams, as “[h]opes about the invigorating effects of imperial expansion on the metropolitan society turn into a nightmare realization that it has become economically dependent on (or addicted to) its subjugated Other” (9). The over-emphasis on the oriental threat could also, as John Barrell has argued in The Infection of Thomas De Quincey, serve to diminish potentially dangerous differences between English classes or European nationalities by portraying these groups as unified in their difference from the oriental Other. Other scholars have approached the oriental threat of De Quincey’s dreams from a more psychological perspective; Thomas H. Schmid suggests that, for De Quincey, the true “pain” of opium is its “horrid inoculation…of incompatible natures” like human and crocodile, the crocodile being a De Quincey’s go-to stand-in for all things horrifyingly oriental (37). Schmid follows Grevel Lindop in pointing out that De Quincey uses “inoculation” in the eighteenth-century sense of the word, meaning “the grafting of one botanical species upon another” (35). That is, the oriental dreams are *grafted* onto the dreamer’s innermost self; they are perceived as simultaneously alien and familiar. Like the child who fears what she thinks she knows about the Blue-beard room, De Quincey fears that the familiar has changed and become strange—or, worse, that the familiar has always been strange.

The link between childhood and orientalism in De Quincey’s writing, according to Barrell, goes back to the De Quinceyan Ur-child: his sister Elizabeth, whose death of hydrocephalus in early childhood profoundly traumatized the author. Barrell describes her death as “a specifically oriental event” (*Infection* 32; his emphasis). The use of oriental imagery as a dual signifier for both the crowds of urban poor and the death of Elizabeth means this imagery crosses the boundary between the terrors of overly public and overly private life. The terror lies
in the juxtaposition between the two, in the suggestion that public and private spaces might actually be one and the same. Without a structuring distance between public and private spheres, there can be no outside position from which to observe and narrate the events of the other position. In this section, I would like to explore the connection between childhood and the oriental threat beyond the trauma of Elizabeth’s death, to illuminate the temporal rifts that appear in these juxtapositions.

In what is perhaps the most famous orientalist image in the *Confessions*, a young girl employed by De Quincey opens the door to find—inexplicably—a Malay. As neither speaks the other’s language, “there seemed to be an impassible gulph fixed between all communication of ideas” between them (62). So the girl delivers the Malay to De Quincey, giving him to understand “that there was a sort of demon below, whom she clearly imagined that [De Quincey’s] art could exorcise from the house” (62). Although this construction makes De Quincey a gatekeeper of Englishness, capable of expelling the infectious Other, it does not make him particularly English. Rather, he exists as an axis mundi between the girl and the Malay, mediating the “impassible gulph” between them through the gift of opium that he eventually uses to send the Malay away.

Yet, when the girl asks De Quincey to “exorcise” this Malay as if he were another “phantom” painted upon the darkness (62, 75), she does not just ask De Quincey to mediate between English and oriental, known and unknown. She simultaneously acts as a mediator

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6 De Quincey’s *Confessions* are notoriously unreliable, and scholars debate the degree to which this episode is based in reality. Leask notes that while Grevel Lindop surmises that the Malay is entirely fictional (in *The Opium Eater: A Life of Thomas De Quincey* [Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985], 218), Leask himself finds “no necessary reason to doubt his reality,” although he suggests that the specifics of the story as related in the *Confessions* might be more reparative than factually accurate (209, 214-5).
herself between De Quincey and the Malay, facilitating their encounter. In asking De Quincey to enforce the boundary between herself and the Malay, she creates the possibility of transgression—by emphasizing the “gulph,” she provides the psychic suggestion of a crossing.7

The episode concludes ambivalently: De Quincey gives the Malay enough opium to “kill three dragoons and their horses,” which the Malay eats “at one mouthful” (63). De Quincey writes that “for some days I felt anxious: but as I never heard of any Malay being found dead, I became convinced that he was used to opium: and that I must have done him the service I designed, by giving him one night of respite from the pains of wandering” (64). Although he had given the Malay more than a fatal dose of opium, De Quincey chooses to assume that the Malay survived the overdose because he lacks information to the contrary. His true end thus obfuscated, De Quincey is free to incorporate the Malay’s image into his own narrative, just as he did with the girl off Oxford Street.

This encounter so terrified De Quincey that images of multiplied Malays running “a-muck” infect his later dreams (64). De Quincey crosses the “gulph” suggested by the girl by absorbing the Malay. If he expels the other, he does so only excrementally, by consuming it as he consumes opium. Years later, the Malay episode is reinterpreted and regurgitated in the form of dreams in which De Quincey is “compelled to live with” the crocodile “for centuries” (82). He sometimes escapes, only to find himself in “Chinese houses” where the furniture dissolves into a thousand repetitions of the hated creature. The solidity of things, of “tables, sofas, &c.,” cannot

7 Humberto Garcia notes of the “law” under which De Quincey assembles everything associated with tropical regions, is more than just an imperialist gesture: “The law is a taboo that prohibits contact with oriental abjection and gross idolatry. However, this taboo law inevitably introduces its own transgression” (71). Like Zizek’s bastardization of Dostoyevsky’s dictum—“If God doesn’t exist, then nothing is permitted”—Garcia’s reading suggests that De Quincey imposes a unifying law precisely in order to create the possibility of violating that law.
be maintained (82). Everything breaks down into something else. Like a perverse palimpsest, these dream-things are never just one thing, but layers of things that resist chronological order.

De Quincey writes that in these oriental dreams, “Over every form, and threat, and punishment, and dim sightless incarceration, brooded a sense of eternity and infinity that drove me into an oppression as of madness” (82). These dreams do not just last for thousands of years, although De Quincey frequently perceives the passage of millennia. These dreams are of the eternal, the allness of time. It might be perceived as sequential, but beneath the sequence lurks the understanding of time as a unified whole, complete and simultaneous. De Quincey perceives in terror crowds of “innumerable faces” surging upward “by thousands, by myriads, by generations, by centuries” (80). Barrell and Leask have focused on the physical crowding in this image, which they see as invoking simultaneously the crowds of London poor and the swarming mass of Asian populations, each of which might, if not properly controlled, “submerge” De Quincey “in the ocean of undifferentiated humanity” (Leask 195). But the dissolution De Quincey fears in these dreams relates not merely to crowding in physical space, but also to a temporal crowding, the pile-up of “generations” and “centuries” in the perceivable present. This is a time that does not pass, but accumulates in the press of human bodies.

The importance of the temporal anxiety in this image becomes clearest when the antidote to these dreams of dissolution appears suddenly and distinctly. In a chronological reversal of the episode in which the English child calls up the oriental image of the Malay that De Quincey sends away with opium, De Quincey’s children banish the oriental dreams summoned by his opium use:

[Many times the very same dream was broken up in the very same way: I heard gentle voices speaking to me (I hear everything when I am sleeping); and instantly I awoke: it
was broad noon; and my children were standing, hand in hand, at my bed-side; come to show me their coloured shoes, or new frocks, or to let me see them dressed for going out. I protest that so awful was the transition from the damned crocodile, and the other unutterable monsters and abortions of my dreams, to the sight of innocent human natures and of infancy, that, in the mighty and sudden revulsion of mind, I wept, and could not forebear it, as I kissed their faces (82-3).

De Quincey’s children resurrect him from the awful infinite to the specific present. It is noon. De Quincey is in bed, surrounded by familiar faces. Time and space are specific. And yet De Quincey’s insistence on his children’s “human natures” (his emphasis) calls their unambiguous humanity into question. Are they human only human, specifically human, here and now? Or do they, like the girl who opened the door to the Malay, simply indicate the point of transgression between self and other, now and eternity? The terror lies in the juxtaposition between the two, in the suggestion that public and private spaces might actually be one and the same. If public and private occupy the same (orientalized) space, if the secret rooms of De Quincey’s brain function with the architecture of a Möbius strip, exposing all they should conceal and concealing all they should expose, then there is outside to which De Quincey might exile these images.

The appearance of De Quincey’s children at such a specific moment—noon—recalls us to that other De Quinceyan noon: the noon of his sister Elizabeth’s childhood death. The specific present represented by children for De Quincey is specifically the infinitely terminal present of death. The life of a child is, by definition, incomplete. The dead Elizabeth, with her “marble lips” (109) and the skull which De Quincey later knows had been laid to “ruins” by the autopsy (111), resembles nothing so much as a fragmented statue. Her life (as represented in her body) is
incomplete both in the sense that it is unfinished, and in the sense that it is destroyed.⁸ Ruin, as Rei Terada says, “is not a state that stops time” (177). But the word itself—ruin—connotes the material presence of an anachronism, trapped and unchanging as time continues around it. For De Quincey, that anachronism materializes in the body of the unchangeable child.

An American Adulthood

One De Quinceyan child breaks this pattern and grows up. In his little-studied story “The Spanish Military Nun” (1847), De Quincey takes the life-story of Catalina de Erauso, a seventeenth-century Spanish nun who escaped the convent and set off to conquer the Americas dressed as a man, and adds details that link her to other De Quinceyan girl-children.⁹ In the process, Erauso’s tale, which already involves secret identities and doppelgangers, becomes further complicated by a flattening of time and doubling of space. Her narrative, like that of so many De Quinceyan girl-children, materializes as ruin.

Like so much of De Quincey’s later writing, “The Spanish Military Nun” originated with another author—or, in this case, with several other authors. Erauso’s memoirs were relatively unknown until they were resurrected, authenticated, and published by Joaquín María Ferrer in 1829 as Historia de la Monja Alférez, Doña Catalina de Erauso, escrita por ella misma. After

⁸ Nina Dubin remarks on the aesthetic link between the unfinished and the ruined in Futures and Ruins: Eighteenth-Century Paris and the Art of Hubert Robert. At the end of the eighteenth century, “‘finished works’ were superseded in preference by incomplete ones—by inchoate objects such as ruins, which invited imaginative completion” (5).

⁹ In his definitive collection, Grevel Lindop reverts to the original title of the story, “The Nautical-Military Nun of Spain,” as it was published in Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine in 1847. I am using the 1854 revision, which was published as “The Spanish Military Nun” in vol. iii of the Collective Edition, as reprinted by David Masson, because I discuss both De Quincey’s 1854 postscript and Masson’s “Appended Note.”
this publication, the autobiography was reworked into multiple adaptations and translations, including Alexis de Valon’s article published (in French) in *Revue des Deux Mondes* in 1847, a little more than two months before De Quincey’s version was published in *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine* as “The Nautico-Military Nun of Spain.” ¹⁰

As David Masson notes, much of De Quincey’s version is a “De Quinceyfied” translation of Valon’s—but the “De Quinceyfications” are telling (245). De Quincey, like Valon, begins with the birth of “Kate,” as he insists on calling Erauso. Unlike his source, however, De Quincey highlights the temporal uncertainty of her birth “[o]n a night in the year 1592 (but which night is a secret liable to 365 answers)” (159). The parenthetical interjection pokes fun at the source material (which opens on “*un beau matin*” in 1592), but it also calls attention to the epistemological problems inherent in “true” stories. Not only do we not know Kate’s birthday—we could give 365 different answers equally likely to be true. The uncertainty surrounding her birth both conceals the truth and multiplies it in a farcical parallel to the multiplied conclusions to the life of the girl off Oxford Street.

De Quincey veers from his source material, which largely excludes Erauso’s early life, to invent a childhood for Kate. He suggests with a pedophilic wink that Catalina’s father initially named her “Pussy,” which becomes Kitty, or Kate, “and *that* in Spanish is Catalina” (162). De Quincey gives a backwards etymology for her name: Catalina surely doesn’t derive from the English word pussy, but De Quincey derives Pussy from Catalina, which becomes Kate, or Kitty,

¹⁰ This textual history relies on the account given by David Masson in his “Appended Note” and Sherry Velasco in *The Lieutenant Nun: Transgenderism, Lesbian Desire, and Catalina de Erauso*, Austin: U of Texas P, 2000. Catalina de Erauso’s narrative has gained scholarly prominence over the past twenty years with the rising interest in early women’s self-writing, particularly when that self-writing can be analyzed from a queer or gender studies perspective, as is the case with Erauso’s.
and that in English is Pussy. The professed virgin-till-death is thus sexualized from birth far more explicitly than is usual for girl children in De Quincey’s writing, as if the knowledge that she survives childhood projects her adult sexuality backward, investing the past with the future. Having thus named her, De Quincey continues with the story of her childhood: in another echo of the Blue-beard room, Kate’s father shuts her up in a nunnery shortly after her birth. Trapped by an orientalized tyrant in a locked room, expecting her life to be “a little inevitable wreck” as she waits to “perish,” Kate’s projected existence is just as stunted as that of all De Quincey’s other girl-children, suspended in eternal childhood (160). But Kate escapes this fate by collapsing the temporal boundaries that constrain her.

Within the convent, Kate’s life is smothered by the same oriental eternal that troubles De Quincey’s other girl-children. In the first few pages of the story, De Quincey uses the term “eternal”—which does not appear in the French original—ten times. For example, in describing Kate’s father’s reasons for abandoning her at a convent, De Quincey explains that her confinement was part of a Spanish plot to maintain aristocratic laziness through the exploitation of both the Americas and the aristocratic daughters: “through eternal successions of nations that had been, and were to be, enslaved” (160). These eternal systems of wealth threatened to make Kate’s life a “little inevitable wreck”—a small sacrifice in comparison to “the magnificent purchase of eternal idleness for an aristocracy so ancient” (160). Young Kate faces a life devoted to this ancient system, and as long as Kate remains in the convent, De Quincey describes her behavior as eternal: she pursues “eternal plots against the peace of the elder nuns … whilst the younger ladies were run off their legs by the eternal wiles, and had their gravity discomposed, even in chapel, by the eternal antics, of this privileged little kitten” (162). Even these playful antics, which might give a positive spin to “eternity,” give the positively uncanny suggestion that
the actions of Kate’s life will never build to anything greater, that she will remain eternally childish. Like the twins in *The Shining*, the “eternal” Kate would play “for ever, and ever.” The only narrative appearance of the word after Kate’s escape connects her to the image of her father as he left her at the convent (187). And then, finally, De Quincey uses the word in an editorial aside in which he criticizes his French source for speaking too harshly of Kate with “that eternal worldliness that freezes too fiercely” (198). In short, in “The Spanish Military Nun,” De Quincey uses “eternal” as a derogatory descriptor for the orientalized tyrants and French biographers that threaten to restrict Kate, to trap her in a stagnant and ruinous atemporality.

De Quincey was not alone in portraying Spain as orientalized and temporally stagnant. In fact, the accumulation of geographic and cultural references that created a Spanish exotic throughout British Romantic writing formed, in the words of Diego Saglia, a “Spanish palimpsest” (14). Persistent emphasis on Spanish-oriental themes and “the removal of Spain to narratives of chivalric and heroic ages” detached this “known country” from the present and attached its image to considerations of past and future history that bore on present politics from a remove (Saglia 23). This literary trope treated Spain as if it were a thing that existed in the present only as an artifact. Like the texts of a palimpsest, Spanish history, represented in Spanish bodies, was recorded sequentially but perceived simultaneously. The last Moorish stronghold in Spain may have fallen in 1492, but the Moorish “taint” persisted in the palimpsestic Spanish body.

Kate escapes the oriental eternal only by absorbing aspects of the British present into her bodily narrative, dressing not just as a man, but as a nineteenth-century British man.  

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11 Barrell reads Kate’s transformation into a De Quinceyan character as a means for him to rework his guilt surrounding his sister’s death, imagining a world in which she did not die, but
Quincey lingers on Kate’s clever escape from the convent, adding motivation and psychological detail to the rather spare description of the event related in his source, and in doing so creates parallels between her escape to the Americas and his escape from school, the first step on his narrative path to opium addiction. De Quincey presents both escapes as turning points that determine the course of the future. Of his own experience, De Quincey writes in his *Confessions*, “The morning came, which was to launch me into the world,” and which would lead him to the unforeseen “hurricane” of the future (12). Of Kate’s, he writes in nearly identical language, “The day is come—the evening is come—when our poor Kate…that henceforth shall hardly find a breathing space between eternal storms, must see her peaceful cell, must see the holy chapel, for the last time” (164). In this way, De Quincey connects Kate’s imminent “storms” to the “hurricane” of his own life. He solidifies this connection in his 1854 postscript, when he suggests three titles for Erauso’s autobiography, all based on titles of his own autobiographical writing: “‘Autobiographic Sketches,’ or ‘Selections Grave and Gay,’ from the military experiences of a Nun, or possibly ‘The Confessions of a Biscayan Fire-Eater’” (Masson 127). Both Kate and De Quincey escaped the confines of limited expectations and found themselves acting out narratives that defy chronological sense, narratives that require the creation of an outside perspective in order to sit still in the past.

After escaping the convent, De Quincey’s Kate transforms her embroidered petticoat into a pair of Wellington trousers that De Quincey points out as anachronistic. As Kate swashbuckles instead merged her life with his. “The confusion of Kate’s sex,” according to Barrell, “seems to allow her to stand for Elizabeth *rediviva* in Thomas” (*Infection* 79). He imagines her narrative as a (mostly) reparative repetition of De Quincey’s personal tragedies. While this is certainly one effect of Kate’s transformation, and a compelling reading given the striking similarities in the language De Quincey uses to describe Kate’s escape from the convent and his own escape from school, it neglects the more political aspects that link her not only to De Quincey, but to English masculinity as a whole.
her way through the Americas in the ensuing narrative, De Quincey repeatedly compares her to Wellington, recalling for his readers the Duke of Wellington’s 1813 victory over Napoleon in the Battle of Vitoria (Spain) in the Peninsular War. This anachronistic vision of the Spanish conquest of the Americas flattens and lays claim to Spanish history, as if British intervention in contemporary Spanish politics implied a simultaneous intrusion upon the Spanish past. This past can be manipulated in the present because it is a ruined past, as becomes clear when Kate has a brief dalliance with a woman of mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry. The palimpsestic Spanish body is apparent in De Quincey’s description of Juana’s father, “a gentleman from Grenada, having in his veins the grandest blood of all this earth—blood of Goths and Vandals, tainted (for which Heaven be thanked!) twice over with blood of Arabs—once through Moors, once through Jews” (210). No ethnic description of the kind exists in the French source; it is De Quincey’s invention, and provides him the opportunity to discuss in a lengthy footnote the Spanish fear of Jewish contamination. Following, as it does, so closely on the heels of De Quincey’s explanation of mestizaje in the Americas, this footnote implies that Spanish identity was always already a mestizo identity. By flattening the generational histories of Spain and the Americas, De Quincey manages to relegate both histories entirely to an impotent past. De Quincey describes the “Indian race” that gave Juana her “beautiful contours of limb” as “a race destined (ah, wherefore?) silently and slowly to fade away from the earth” (211). De Quincey does not conceive of indigenous Americans as inhabiting the same time as he does—he literally denies coevalness.12

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12 Johannes Fabian coined the term “denial of coevalness” to describe “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (31). The term has since been taken up by postcolonial scholars to describe a similar tendency in colonialist and imperialist literature. De Quincey was hardly alone in this denial. British perspectives on Latin America generally imagined indigenous populations as occupying a ruined past, while perceiving modern Latin
By depicting Kate’s adventures as set in a past “destined” to become ruin, he forecloses the possibilities that seemed to open up to her when she escaped Spain. The Spanish-American past she inhabits is a dead past animated only by the possessing spirit of the British interpreter.

Recent scholarship on Catalina de Erauso has focused on the lesbian themes of her memoir, which De Quincey elides by insisting on Kate’s perpetual virginity. But his denial of her reproductive capacity is more complex than a mere white-washing of queer undertones. Kate’s entanglement with Juana, even setting aside the nonreciprocal nature of the relationship as described by De Quincey, lacks the potential for unmediated reproduction both because the relationship is queer, and also because, according to De Quincey, Juana’s “race” is “destined” to “fade away from the earth” (211). The children that they cannot have are denied by a backward-looking present that insists they have no future except as ruin. Their reproductive capacity is triply foreclosed.

Although Kate survives childhood, her tale ends in mystery, without a legible future. After a battle wound forces Kate to reveal her sex to a physician, she returns to Europe as a celebrity. The Pope forgives her and grants her permission to continue wearing those Wellington

America as largely Europeanized. William Bullock’s 1824 exhibit on Ancient and Modern Mexico in the British Museum, for example, “doomed the indigenous and the poor to a temporal no-man’s land outside modernity, separated both from the noble past embodied in the ruins and any present stake in their ownership” (Aguirre 11). While British looters and criollo elites struggled over ownership of pre-Columbian art (some of which was created as late as the 15th century—far more “modern” than the ancient Greek and Egyptian artifacts displayed beside it in the British Museum), indigenous peoples were largely cast aside as living anachronisms. While early, unsuccessful independence movements like the rebellion of Túpac Amaru II (1780) may have had indigenous origins, the successful wars of independence in the early nineteenth century were led by American-born Spaniards, José de San Martín and Simón Bolívar, and other criollos formed the bulk of the revolutions’ supporters. The governments of post-independence Latin America were dominated by criollo nationalists who valorized the pre-Hispanic past while squashing the periodic rebellions of indigenous populations.

See, for instance, Velasco.
trousers De Quincey invented. But despite the warm welcome she receives in Rome as well as Spain, Kate is restless. Spain will never be her home. Her thoughts keep “turning back to the dreadful Andes,” so she signs on to an expedition bound for Spanish America (236). When the ship touches at Veracruz and all the officers jump on shore, Kate, who had been below decks a moment before, is nowhere to be seen. Valon speculates that she might have been eaten by sharks. De Quincey, in typical form, demurs: “Have I never formed a conjecture of my own upon the mysterious fate which thus suddenly enveloped her, and hid her in darkness for ever? Yes, I have. But it is a conjecture too dim and unsteady to be worth repeating” (237). De Quincey does not allow Kate a definitive demise. Although she has survived childhood, the conclusion to her tale, like that of so many other De Quinceyan girl-children, ends in mystery. The only certainty De Quincey offers is a summary of the tale: “This nun sailed from Spain to Peru, and she found no rest for the sole of her foot. This nun sailed back from Peru to Spain, and she found no rest for the agitations of her heart. This nun sailed again from Spain to America, and she found—the rest which all of us find” (237). Only God, who spoke to Kate in the Andes, knows her resting place. The secret of her demise contains the multiplicity of her possibilities.

De Quincey imagines his reader asking what became of Kate, and then answers rhetorically, “Ah, reader! but, if I answer that question, you will say I have not answered it. If I tell you that secret, you will say that the secret is still hidden” (235-6). The story opens on any one of 365 nights, and ends with an answer that is no answer. And yet these epistemological uncertainties come across as funny rather than, as is so often the case with De Quincey, as uncanny. The difference, I believe, is that the answers, though multiple, are by no means infinite.

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14 In Valon’s account, her reception is less sanguine, and, in fact, women openly mock her on the streets.
Kate could have been born on any one of 365 days, but not one of those days will suddenly turn out to be a crocodile instead of a day, or a century. Kate could have made a second escape and died peacefully in Mexico, or she could have been eaten by sharks (as De Quincey’s source surmises), but she most certainly died, and she most certainly died long ago.

“The Spanish Military Nun” contains its uncertainties in both space and time within a narrative structure that calls attention to itself as a closed system even as it introduces elements of the present into the tale. In fact, the introduction of those elements serves to remove the narrative from cumulative historical time and bring it bodily into the present as an object to be manipulated. Her story can be acted upon by people in the present, but it cannot act upon the present, reversing and neutralizing the laws of cause and effect, much as the inverted Blue-beard room reverses the order of discovery and knowledge.

The flattening of temporalities of cause and effect continues in the postscript that De Quincey, like his source, appends to Erauso’s biography. While Valon rushes into a textual history—“l’histoire de cette histoire”—that valorizes in detail Ferrer’s research into the authenticity of the story, De Quincey begins by meditating on the often hazy boundary between truth and fiction. While novels like The Vicar of Wakefield might be so familiar as to seem nonfictional, narratives like Erauso’s, which describe adventures in unfamiliar lands, might seem fictional. De Quincey reverses this logic, and insists that, even without archival evidence, he should accept Erauso’s story as truthful precisely because of its unfamiliarity. Kate stands at the limits of the known and the knowable; the packaging of her story as palimpsestic allows the unknowable other to be contained, and therefore knowable.

De Quincey literally contains Kate’s tale as an object by focusing on her embodiment in a painting at Aix-la-Chapelle. While Valon mentions this painting briefly, it acquires added
emphasis in De Quincey’s retelling as the final proof of Erauso’s existence. Although Kate’s body disappears at the end of De Quincey’s story, it reappears in the textual history as an object—a framed portrait that literally contains (the image of) her body, and, with it, her story. This material representation provides De Quincey and his readers access to—and ownership of—her life.

De Quincey presents the portrait at Aix-la-Chappelle as one among many portraits that must surely have been painted during her lifetime, imaginatively multiplying this artifact to heighten its impact as an artifact of the past:

It is probable, therefore, that numerous pictures of Kate are yet lurking both in Spain and Italy, but not known as such. For, as the public consideration granted to her had grown out of merits and qualities purely personal, and were kept alive by no local or family memorials rooted in the land, or surviving herself, it was inevitable that, as soon as she herself died, all identification of her portraits would perish: and the portraits would thenceforwards be confounded with the similar memorials, past all numbering, which every year accumulates as the wrecks from household remembrances of generations that are passing or passed, that are fading or faded, that are dying or buried. It is well, therefore, amongst so many irrecoverable ruins, that, in the portrait at Aix-la-Chappelle, we still possess one undoubted representation (and therefore in some degree a means for identifying other representations) of a female so memorably adorned by nature; gifted with capacities so unparalleled both of doing and suffering; who lived a life so stormy, and perished by a fate so unsearchably mysterious (243-4).
De Quincey confines Kate to numerous “ruins” scattered among “wrecks from household
remembrances of generations that are passing or passed”—he confines her to the material culture
of the past as it is handled in the present. Her reduction to ruin without “generations” of her own
allows her life—and, by extension, her experiences, her conquests—to be possessed, both in the
sense that one possesses an object, and in the sense that a spirit (the spirit of the present, the
spirit of De Quincey) possesses a body. She attains adulthood only to condense from atemporal
narrative to material object. Her eternal mystery is destroyed by the imperial technology that
resurrects and makes legible her life history. Her life is preserved, but only as ruin. Like the
horse that Kate rides to the Andes, which De Quincey promises will be “preserved” on one page,
and reveals on the next to be “preserved in as useful a sense as ever apricots were preserved, or
strawberries,” Kate is “preserved” only as a useful object of consumption (192-3).

De Quincey gathers Kate’s past in material form much as he imagines the sloughed
remains of his own past entering into the ordinary circulation of material objects. He described
her escape from the convent in the same language he used to describe his own escape from
school, and in imagining her many portraits as attic junk he bookends her narrative with elements
another episode from his personal history, his second escape from school. In introducing “The
Pains of Opium,” De Quincey advances his narrative from 1804 to 1812 by describing all the
objects left behind in those years:

The years of academic life are now over and gone – almost forgotten: – the student’s cap
no longer presses my temples; if my cap exist at all, it presses those of some youthful
scholar, I trust, as happy as myself, and as passionate a lover of knowledge. My gown is,
by this time, I dare say, in the same condition with many thousands of excellent books in
the Bodleian, viz. diligently perused by certain studious moths and worms: or departed,
however (which is all that I know of its fate), to that great reservoir of *somewhere*, to which all the tea-cups, tea-caddies, tea-pots, tea-kettles, &c. have departed (not to speak of still frier vessels, such as glasses, decanters, bed-makers, &c.) which occasional resemblances in the present generation of tea-cups, &c. remind me of having once possessed, but of whose departure and final fate I, in common with most gownsman of either university, could give, I suspect, but an obscure and conjectural history (56).

The proliferation of objects in De Quincey’s past masks the specific history of specific things. Generations of knickknacks, objects of everyday use, accumulate and pass away, just as generations of students shuffle interchangeably through university. Their pasts become absorbed into the history of things, consumed by people and then by worms. Like the portraits of Kate, one might be used to identify another of its type, but it cannot provide any more than conjectural information about students or tea-caddies once they move on. The realm of these objects is the realm of a perpetually repetitive present, finite for the specific object of student, infinite in the profusion of students and objects that fill it. The individual students or things that might have been subjects become absorbed, at least temporarily, into an aggregate of objects.

Long lists of objects come to resemble, as Timothy Morton has argued, the apocalyptic landscape, narratives like Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (addressed in the next chapter) that “imagine a world free of people” (174). Morton writes, “The more objects tumble forth, the more they fall under an atmosphere, a melancholic mood in which things churn undigested” (174)—a particularly fitting description for De Quincey, whose inability to easily digest food formed the subject of much of his autobiographical musings. Students, portraits, tea-caddies, tea-cups—these objects can be exchanged, passed from generation to generation, but they cannot be broken down, or if they are broken down or destroyed, consumed by human subjects, they leave no
trace. If we can know these objects, it is only as objects, objects that withdraw and circulate. If we can know the past, it is only because the past has withdrawn, curled up into an object held at a legible distance. The past that refuses to withdraw is the past still inhabited by an ambiguous subject, and its secrets might never be known. What terror, then, to find, in dreams, things that will not be still, objects that mutate and move, tables that transform into crocodiles, things that dissolve into uncanny subjectivity. These objects, even as they are known, hint at their unknown halves, a past that does not repeat or accumulate, but mutates and moves on, uncannily, into the present.

The “Palimpsest” at Sea

As we have seen, De Quincey frequently measures time by generations. He describes palimpsests as containing information written by one generation and erased and written over by the next ad infinitum; Kate’s presumed portraits get handed down with other household relics from one generation to the next. In the finale to Part I of Suspiria de Profundis, the children “sleeping” in the ruins of Savannah-la-Mar, a Jamaican city destroyed in a rare combination of earthquake and hurricane, become a testament to God’s power for succeeding generations. As time solidifies into ruin, the materialized past becomes an object engaged with communally. And yet the past itself is never part of this community. The child off Oxford Street is only “probably” a mother, her potential children stranded in perpetual possibility. De Quincey insists on Kate’s virginity; she has no offspring to inherit her portraits. The children of Savannah-la-Mar do not propagate—the succeeding “five generations” they have slept through must be foreign to them (165). De Quincey’s use of familial terms to mark the passage of time, like his use of “sleeping”
as a euphemism for “dead,” conceals the violent encounter that makes the past into an heirloom. Theirs is a ruined time that can neither reproduce nor repeat.

Other scholars have noted the foreclosed reproductive capacity implied in Savannah-la-Mar. Josephine McDonagh, for example, argues that the dead children represent the necessary outcome of Malthusian surplus population. Charles J. Rzepka, in a queer reading of the episode, sees the implication of sodomy in “the infinite deferral of the categorical scandal of reproduction” (“Slavery” 36). He ties this reading to the troubled reproductive politics of Jamaican slavery, concluding, “In the ‘drowned labyrinth’ of Savannah-la-Mar, all forms of deferral—circulation, succession, substitution, exchange—stop dead” (“Slavery” 37). But his compelling argument for a link between the end of reproduction and the end of capitalist forms of exchange based on a slave economy need not rely on the labored logic connecting Savannah-la-Mar to the Biblical ruins of Sodom and the act of sodomy: De Quincey’s emphasis on the ruins of Savannah-la-Mar as a children’s graveyard seems evidence enough of reproduction interrupted in the very act of reproduction. The past that materializes in the corpses of virgins and children is a closed past, doubly incomplete because it is the ruin of something that was never built. Daniel O’Quinn notes that Savannah-la-Mar’s “inhabitants are locked into a futurity that is marked by anticipation” that is endlessly deferred: the containment of their lives as if in suspended animation rather than death prevents contemplation of their lives as a whole by positing the act of memory as lying forever in the future (283).

But De Quincey’s passage on Savannah-la-Mar suggests an imaginative means of circumventing the linear temporality that holds these children in suspended animation. When De Quincey visited the ruins of Savannah-la-Mar in his dreams, accompanied by the Dark Interpreter, the only human inhabitants they encountered were the children, who were all asleep.
in the “silent nurseries,” and who “had been asleep through five generations” (165). Although
the Dark Interpreter describes these children as testament to God’s Leibnizian sacrifice of the
finite present to the infinite future, their persistence as ruins undercuts the Interpreter’s
analysis—the bodies escape philosophical time. The finite moment of their deaths expands to the
infinite. They exist in suspension between the eternal and the singular. De Quincey’s hyperbolic
description of them as sleeping through “five generations” (each generation would have to be 13
years) links these children both to the portraits of Catalina de Erauso that De Quincey imagines
accumulating like “household remembrances of generations that are passing or passed” (243-4)
and to the palimpsest, which records texts that “should be sense for your own generation,
nonsense for the next” (147). That is, they escape time by materializing time, solidifying the
momentary, the potential, remaining as objects at a distance.

And like so many De Quinceyan children, the children of Savannah-la-Mar materialize
time in the face of an orientalized threat of dissolution. In this case, that threat comes in the form
of the “noiseless depths of ocean” (165). For De Quincey, whose sister died of hydrocephalus,
water implies not just death, but orientalized death.\footnote{\textsuperscript{15} Patrick Bridgwater notes that “the marine and submarine imagery is remarkable” throughout De Quincey’s work, and connects the theme both to Gothic images of shipwrecks and ruins, and to “the lower world of hell,” which the ocean floor would suggest to the classicist (83). He further notes the common image of lost books or libraries connected to marine and submarine ruins in De Quincey, implying that the sea, like both the palimpsest and the Blue-beard room, constitutes an archive of loss (83-4).} When describing the nightmares associated
with his opium use, De Quincey found particularly horror in the image of the ocean as “paved
with innumerable faces, upturned to the heavens” (80). The press of these faces overwhelms De
Quincey with the sense that he cannot separate himself from the mass of humanity, a fear linked
both to the crowds of London and the crowds of Asia. Taken in this context, we can see the

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children of Savannah-la-Mar, preserved beneath the ocean, as resisting the unifying eternal, and yet also destroyed by it. They are dead, and yet they appear undead, as if sleeping—like the child with the Blue-beard room, they can be changed by neither life nor death.

The ruin of Savannah-la-Mar is total, and its totality is only heightened by the illusion of life preserved. De Quincey relates these ruined childhoods to his experience with opium in opening *Suspiria de Profundis* with a comparison between the realization that his opium addiction is total and the plot of a contemporary Gothic novel. In this novel, an abbess learns that one of her nuns has been falsely accused of an offense punishable by death. Although the abbess knows that the nun is innocent, she cannot prove her innocence “unless something were made known that cannot be made known” (92). The abbess has a single opportunity to break the nun out of her confinement and save her. The abbess has a key that “will open every door in every corridor,” but this key cannot save her friend: when she opens the door, “she beholds the funeral banner of the Holy Office, and the black robes of its inexorable officials” (93). This story bears a striking resemblance to the story of Blue-beard. Both stories involve concealed knowledge, and in both stories the key meant to unlock that knowledge in fact unlocks death. But while Blue-beard’s final wife escapes certain death, the nun in this story is not so fortunate; her “ruin is understood to be absolute” (93).

De Quincey uses this story to explain his own feeling of absolute ruin upon his realization that his addiction to opium is total. Upon such realization, he says, “The voice perishes; the gestures are frozen; and the spirit of man flies back upon its own centre” (93). Total ruin reunifies the self with itself. Communication is impossible; the future does not exist; all possibility of change has been foreclosed. This ruin is the condition of man in unity with himself.
Only the totality of this ruin can prevent the self-annihilating threat of the eternal, the uncontainable, the unifying all.

But in reality, no ruin is ever complete. De Quincey’s repeated attempts to mark a termination to his own narrative, as Joel Faflak notes, repeatedly fail. And because he must perceive himself as fragmented in order to resurrect his past, he cannot find self-unity in ruin—the self that resurrects must stand outside the ruined self. The narrative structure that presents the child De Quincey as different from the narrating De Quincey functions as De Quincey’s continued attempt to contain his psychic self as if in a palimpsest—and fails. He cannot assert the unity of a self that must be divided to narrate itself. He records his past in two types of time, as he explains in Suspiria de Profundis when explaining his reasons for including his childhood history: “Some of the phenomena developed in my dream-scenery, undoubtedly, do but repeat the experiences of childhood; and others seem likely to have been growths and fructifications from seeds at that time sown” (95). For De Quincey, time both repeats and accumulates. It accumulates palimpsestically, growing into an increasingly crowded unity, and it repeats as this accumulation is semi-voluntarily accessed. Neither type of time can be adequately resurrected, because neither type of time can be ceased—only divided.

We can see De Quincey’s encounters with arrested childhood as an attempt to make these child-lives resurrectable through ruins that he visits in his dreams, accompanied by the “Dark Interpreter,” a piece of De Quincey’s “inner nature” that has been so far exteriorized that he can mix “a little with alien natures” (165, 163). The Dark Interpreter is an internal projection of the exteriorized self. While Jacques Khalip describes him as a “compulsive duplicate of ourselves-as-other,” the duplication that creates him is a duplication-through-division (“Dark Times” 621). Like the worm of childhood lore, that can be divided in half and survives as two worms, and
halved again to create four, this projection is more than just “the dark symbolic mirror for reflecting to the daylight what else must be hidden forever” (163). It takes on the attributes of a separate entity, which not only reproduces, but also “creates or transforms” (164). It functions for De Quincey as a “Greek chorus,” which, while not imparting any new information, mediates and transforms—interprets—information already given (164). It provides “such commentaries, prophetic or looking back…as would or might have occurred to your own meditative heart—had only time been allowed for its motions” (164). The Dark Interpreter projects the self through time, anticipating and recalling aspects of the self and self-knowledge that have perished, or are not yet born. Like Demogorgon (see Chapter Four), the Interpreter represents a potential that exists before it is known, that is actualized as it is recognized. The Interpreter mediates the self to itself through division and exteriorization that allows the self to be interiorized as other. If the palimpsest represents a past conjured by memory, the Dark Interpreter represents the future conjured by anticipation. Velleman develops a philosophical link between personal identity and selfhood by extending Locke’s theory to address “concerns, not about whose past we are remembering, but rather about whose future, if any, we are in a position to anticipate. And addressing these concerns would have required Locke to extend his theory from the past selves who are recruited by memory to the future selves who are recruited by anticipation” (Self to Self 194). For De Quincey, whose recruitment of past and future is, like the child’s creation of phantoms in the dark, at best only semi-voluntary, the logical extension of a textual past leads to the anticipation of a future by which that text by be interpreted. These figures become disarticulated from the present but not necessarily from each other.

16 Dividing a worm in this way does not result in multiple live worms, but in multiple pieces of one dead worm.
The Interpreter hints at his relationship to time when he meditates on the ruins of Savannah-la-Mar. He imagines a Roman water clock filled with one hundred drops of water that each represent one one-hundredth of a second:

Now, count the drops as they race along; and, when the fiftieth of the hundred is passing, behold! forty-nine are not, because already they have perished; and fifty are not, because they are yet to come. You see, therefore, how narrow, how incalculably narrow, is the true and actual present. Of that time which we call the present, hardly a hundredth part but belongs either to a past which has fled, or to a future which is still on the wing. It has perished, or it is not born. It was, or it is not (166).

In this eloquent approximation of Zeno’s Paradox, the Dark Interpreter describes the infinite divisibility of the finite moment. Time can be endlessly bisected but never ceased. No matter how many “layers” we imagine to make up the palimpsest of time, they all ultimately inhabit the same eternal unity, the infinite future that De Quincey describes as God’s present. Each of these infinitely divisible moments of time is inhabited by infinitely divisible stages of the (mortal, finite) individual. De Quincey, in relating his early history, writes, “Man is doubtless one by some subtle nexus that we cannot perceive, extending from the new-born infant to the superannuated dotard: but as regards many affections and passions incident to his nature at different stages, he is not one” (111). The “nature” of man might appear unified, but in fact it can be endlessly bisected into numerous “different stages” of man—different men. This becomes obvious only when we look back from a great distance and notice that we are capable of sympathizing with a past self because we perceive it as other than the self: “An adult sympathizes with himself in childhood because he is the same, and because (being the same) yet he is not the same” (94). This endless bifurcation allows De Quincey to perceive himself as
outside of himself, to observe his past as a not-quite-impartial spectator, to narrate himself through time much as the Dark Interpreter anticipates and recalls aspects of the self beyond the present moment. Khalip describes the hallucinations of the Brocken, which De Quincey uses to introduce the Dark Interpreter, as suggesting “that fantasy productively ruins rather than preserves ‘reference to the world’ by way of imitating rather than resolving catastrophe” (“Dark Times” 622). I would modify Khalip’s statement: the fantasy of the externalized self productively ruins the chronology of that self in order to preserve the narrative unity of the self. This compulsive fragmentation and duplication of the self might be tied up with the autobiographical project that Joel Faflak describes as both “terminable and interminable” (151).

As De Quincey repeatedly wrote and rewrote his own narrative, each writing self disrupted the conclusion imagined by the previous writing self. Each narrator becomes a character in the narrative of the next in an interminable sequence of terminable plots.

This self-division and projection through time mimics the semi-voluntary projections of childhood (in fact, Rzepka cites an unpublished fragment of the Suspiria as directly connecting the Interpreter with the imaginative framework of childhood projections [“Three-Fingered Jack” 117]). De Quincey recalls that when, at the age of six, he stood at the bedside of his dead sister, a very long interval “contracted into a minute” (110). At the end of this suspended present, De Quincey recalls, “I returned to myself” (110). A return necessarily suggests a leave-taking; the reunion of the self with itself suggests a divided self, a projection akin to the Dark Interpreter that accompanies these hypermoments. The sense of a self divided at this particular moment is heightened as De Quincey elongates the moment within the narrative structure of Suspiria de Profundis through repeated intrusions of other moments and other De Quinceys. For six lengthy paragraphs, the young De Quincey stands suspended at Elizabeth’s bedside in a moment so
precise as to be specified: “I knew that about noon, when all would be quiet, I could steal up into her chamber. I imagine that it was exactly high noon when I reached the chamber door” (106). This repetition of “noon” calls our attention to the temporality of the ensuing narrative, to the pauses and interjections that hold the young De Quincey in that moment, in the moment he perceives Elizabeth’s death. The text itself takes on the role of the Dark Interpreter, the self that wanders away into prophecy and recollection while the child stands suspended and uncomprehending. The child functions as the ekphrastic object of Morton’s analysis, “transporting us out of a narrative to linger on a frozen image” (170). She functions as a placeholder or bookmark, a point at which we might resume narrative momentum temporarily suspended in her presence.

The appearance of the child at a specific moment in time, like the appearance of De Quincey’s own children waking him at noon from an opium dream, marks the sudden containment of the uncontainable, the reassertion of the possibility of a singular present. In this way, the image of the child comes to symbolize the unity of the self with itself. Yet this symbolic unity is simultaneously undermined by the threat that there might be no return. De Quincey recalls standing at Elizabeth’s deathbed, hearing the wind blow as he stood “between an open window and a dead body” and recognizing it as an “audible symbol of eternity” (109). He further describes the sound, which he associates with mourning for his sister, as a “vast Aeolian intonation” (109), a reference to Coleridge’s poem “The Eolian Harp” (also known as “Effusion XXXV”), which imagines “the one Life within us and abroad” making passive souls tremble into thought in the same way that the wind’s caresses make an Aeolian harp tremble into sound (26).

Note that “eternity” here retains its orientalist terror; Barrell suggests that the connection between death and the oriental in De Quincey originates in his experiences at Elizabeth’s bedside.
While Coleridge’s poem celebrates the unity of mankind suggested by the “one Life” that infuses us all, for De Quincey, the sound of Aeolian unity signals both death and eternity. This eternal unity, De Quincey understands at his sister’s funeral, marks the loss of Elizabeth’s unity with his image of her: “For here lay the sting of it, viz. in the fatal words—‘We shall be changed.’ How was the unity of my interest in her to be preserved, if she were to be altered, and no longer to reflect in her sweet countenance the traces that were sculptured on my heart?” (113). De Quincey inverts the expected chronological order of original and reflection by implying that Elizabeth reflected the image De Quincey had in his heart, and not the other way around. Elizabeth’s self, while living, had already been divided into her “sweet countenance” and her “traces” in De Quincey’s heart; her “change” (both the heavenly change suggested at the funeral and the physical change effected by her autopsy) would destroy this reflexive identity. She would have no self to return to. If for Shelley’s Jupiter eternity means the eternal embrace of perpetual struggle, the absence of true change in an interaction that will never cease, a unity of the present with the past and future (see Chapter Four), De Quincey fears that eternity means the impossibility of unity between the material and the ideal.

At the conclusion to the Savannah-la-Mar section of the Suspiria, the Dark Interpreter interrupts his meditation on the nature of God’s time and “look[s] solemnly” at De Quincey (167). Charles Rzepka and Daniel O’Quinn have interpreted this glace as indicting De Quincey for his role in West Indian slavery, and thus in the deaths at Savannah-la-Mar. De Quincey’s fortune, such as it was, derived mainly from West Indian slave labor, and although he did write (ambiguously) on the subject of slavery and abolition, De Quincey famously displayed discomfort with any discussion of labor or the laboring classes. O’Quinn links this silence to De Quincey’s identification of his addiction as a type of slavery. The silence of Savannah-la-Mar,
according to O’Quinn, like the Roman *sestertii*, “marks the site of unspoken words and unrecorded history,” and “as an imperial artifact it testifies to the re-subjugation of those briefly emancipated from bondage” (269). I would argue instead that the silent bodies of Savannah-la-Mar mark a history that has been *recorded*, but cannot be *accessed*, or spoken—the imperial artifact becomes a record of the silent record. The bodies of the children, whose “sorrow” is needed for the “mysterious children of the earth,” form the material objects marking in ruin a specific moment, the moment of the earthquake, that is simultaneously a single instant and a part of the infinite future that is God’s present (166-7). If they are palimpsestic, it is only as physical objects that persist through generations; the personal histories recorded in the palimpsests of their brains are beyond access.

I would like to suggest that the Dark Interpreter’s “look” has additional meaning for De Quincey’s exploration of the powers of childhood and the unity of the self. Recall that the Dark Interpreter is both a part of De Quincey and apart from De Quincey, a projection of the self that mixes a bit with “alien natures.” In the solemn look he directs at De Quincey, we must recognize the Interpreter as establishing himself as a distinct being. At this crucial moment, the self is bifurcated. We must picture the Interpreter that returned to De Quincey as akin to the “I” that returned to “myself” when De Quincey stood at Elizabeth’s deathbed. Yet here, the exteriorized self does not reunite with itself; rather, in that solemn look, the self sympathizes with itself. In this moment, two forms of temporality collide: the material temporality of the children, and the textual temporality of De Quincey’s wandering self. The ruined body of the child marks the passage of time without accumulating time, while also serving as a figure for the point of transgression between times. These material anachronisms anchor the fragmented self, allowing the more profound anachronism of the narrative self to develop.
For Godwin, as we saw in Chapter Two, decaying memorials provided a sociable alternative to ruin, a way for future generations to think with the Illustrious Dead. By maintaining and cultivating relationships beyond the span of a human lifetime, mankind in aggregate might move beyond its “infancy” and advance toward perfectibility. For Godwin, decay provides a means of intervening in the past and transforming it into something useful to the future. If Godwin is concerned with how we create the possibility of a future, De Quincey is concerned with how we create the possibility of a present. For De Quincey, ruin provides a means of preserving the integrity of the past while allowing the possibility of a future that might be founded on it. Yet ruin also provides him a means of escape in the present, a way to access the past without being absorbed by it. By allowing the past to be preserved as ruin, De Quincey is able to make a space for the present that is outside both the finitude of what was and the infinitude of what is to come. The space available to the present, as we will see in the next chapter, was similarly important to Mary Shelley, but while De Quincey concerns himself with the space left to himself, Mary Shelley considers how we might contrive to leave space for others.
CHAPTER SIX

A PAUSE:

BODILY CONTACT AND THE CONSENTING DEAD

IN MARY SHELLEY’S THE LAST MAN

Prologue: A Pause

The pause of the outstretched hand is an unmistakable invitation to mutual intimacy. The gesture in itself is incomplete; the outstretched hand requests—demands, even—a reciprocal gesture to complete the act of touch. Like the stillness of the painting or the fragmentary sculpture, the outstretched hand waits for our response, waits for us to resume the narrative. And yet the hand is nothing like the painting, nothing like the fragment. The painting and the fragment both contain their own absences: the halo of potential movement (a temporal absence—the absent future) radiating from the still painting is determined by the bend of the painted knee and the angle of the painted neck; the fragment’s ghostly limbs (a spatial absence—the absent structure) call out for imaginative completion because they are so nearly visible already. The absent future
of the painting, the absent marble of the ruin—these absences are integral to the presentness of the objects themselves. When we complete them, we add nothing to the structure but our own awareness of its present absences. The outstretched hand makes absence available to us. We must acknowledge the objective self-awareness of the person extending her hand if the gesture is to have any meaning. She is a complete subject reaching out with the intention of joining her intentions to ours.¹ She is already complete, but she makes a gesture of incompleteness in order to enjoy the pleasure of completing this act together.

There is an intimacy to observing without interfering, an intimacy related to Winnicott’s paradox of “being alone while someone else is present,” in which the feeling of satisfied solitude is supported by the awareness that another is present and sharing our solitude without making demands of our presence (30). When we observe another without demanding reciprocal attention, we support her in her experience of solitude; we experience—and often enjoy—the intimacy of allowing ourselves to be used in this way. The generative silence of being alone with another in asymmetrical solitude is characteristic of what Nancy Yousef describes as the “relational environment supporting the silent meditations of the romantic lyric poet,” an environment, she argues, that involves the presence of another combined with a self-conscious relaxation of the demand for reciprocity (“Silence” 660). The poet experiences “a suspension of the dialectical dynamic, a relaxation of the ethical drive to arrive at and sustain recognition, a pause in the tempo of intersubjective experience allowing for relational affects (appreciation, thankfulness, gratitude, humility) that exceed the logic of mutuality” (“Silence” 661). Yousef focuses her attention on the experiences and affects of the poet. The relational affects

¹ I derive the concept of intentionality and its relationship to objective self-awareness from the work of J. David Velleman.
experienced by the silent partner cannot be recorded by poetry. For a record of the intimacy felt by the partner who agrees not to interfere, we must turn to other forms of expression.

John Berger observes the intimate pleasure of supporting another who is alone in our presence in Rembrandt’s *Woman Bathing* and *Bathsheba*, two paintings of his lover, Hendrickje Stoffels, “absorbed in her own actions.” The intimacy, Berger writes, “goes beyond words. No other paintings lead so deftly and powerfully to silence” (“And Our Faces” 24). The paintings capture the intimacy of noninterference. They capture the beloved in the gaze of the lover, but in neither painting is the gaze returned: in *Woman Bathing* her gaze tips down toward her own reflection as she stands in the water; in *Bathsheba* she turns half away, staring absently in the direction of the woman washing her feet, apparently lost in thought. The intimacy lies in her inattentiveness to their intimacy, in the asymmetry of their solitude. She is alone in his presence, but he is not alone in hers. Through Rembrandt’s gaze, we “notice and pay attention to” Hendrickje’s personhood as expressed in her ability to lose herself in her task—we share in what J. David Velleman describes as the silent “amazement of love” (“Solitude and Sociality” n.p.).

The intimacy of mutual awareness is altogether different. Berger notes the distinction in Rembrandt’s *Woman in Bed*, in which “there is a complicity between the woman”—Hendrickje again, clearly aware of and enjoying her audience—“and the painter” (“And Our Faces” 24). We do not so much anticipate her next movement as we wait to see her lover’s response. Berger describes the aching mutuality of the painting:

Leaning forward from her pillows, she lifts up the curtain with the back of her hand, for its palm, its face, is already welcoming, already making a gesture which is preparatory to the act of touching his head.
She has not yet slept. Her gaze follows him as he approaches. In her face the two of them are reunited. Impossible now to separate the two images: his image of her in bed, as he remembers her: her image of him as she sees him approaching their bed. It is nighttime ("And Our Faces" 25).

Her outstretched hand is as much an invitation as it is a recognition that the invitation to intimacy is already superfluous. The tension of Rembrandt’s painting lies in that affective gap between the self-obliterating sense of true reciprocity already in evidence on Hendrickje’s face, and the reciprocity of physical contact just out of reach, the unseen body responding to her gesture just beyond the barrier of the curtain that still divides them.

I have always marveled at the similarity between the night evoked in Rembrandt’s painting and the night when Frankenstein first encounters his living creation. Waking from a nightmare in which his beloved Elizabeth transforms into his mother’s decaying corpse at the touch of his kiss, Frankenstein confronts his hideous progeny:

I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed; when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the wretch—the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped, and rushed downstairs (100).

The creature’s gesture toward Frankenstein parallels Hendrickje’s gesture toward her lover, his outstretched hand raising the curtain that divides him from his creator. The two behold each other with wordless intimacy. Frankenstein has only to reach forward to meet the creature’s hand
and make contact, to complete the touching gesture initiated by his creation. But Frankenstein, horrified, leaves the gesture unfulfilled, and, pushing past the creature, flees.

We will not know for many chapters the creature’s response to this rejection, and then only when the text itself enacts the reunification denied in the failed touch. But we can learn something, now, from the way that the touch fails. The outstretched hand, waiting and open, contains both temporal and spatial absence, but it does not proscribe the shapes that might fill those absences. It can offer but not compel mutual intimacy. The outstretched hand does not anticipate. It hopes.

The Scattered Fragments of Futurity

Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man* (1826) in the immediate aftermath of extreme loss: in less than a decade, Shelley had lost her half-sister, three children, a niece, her husband, and two close friends. The novel takes up the tradition of the “last man” narrative that had recently been explored by Byron in “Darkness” (1817), Thomas Campbell in “The Last Man” (1823), and Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville in *The Last Man, or Omegarus and Syderia* (trans. 1806). As reviewers at the time noted, the shared premise—that global disaster has ended the lives of every

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human on earth save the narrator—required the reader to imagine, in defiance of all logic, that
the text they read had no living readers (see Paley “Envisioning Lastness”107-109). Shelley
circumvents this logical pitfall by recasting the last man’s future history as prophecy written on
ancient “Sibylline leaves” discovered by a traveler in an Italian cave in 1818. But the problem of
audience, I argue, is not just an inherited flaw in the genre that Shelley seeks to overcome
through the use of a frame narrative. Rather, the problem of how a subject might bring into being
an affirming companion to support him in both solitude and mutuality is of central concern in
Shelley’s novel. As we saw with Godwin in Chapter Two, Shelley similarly seeks to recognize
the potential of the dead in the community of the living. Unlike Godwin, however, Shelley
addresses the troubling issues of consent, equality, and mutuality involved in forming such a
community.

While Godwin looks to preserve the future’s right to self-legislation, questioning the
ethics of promises that bind the future actions of persons not party to the original agreement,
Shelley asks what our ethical responsibility might be to the past. Can the dead consent to be used
by us when we sit by their graves thinking with them in solitude? If the lives of the dead are truly
fragments of potential lives, do those fragments invite our intervention, or is there something still
inviolable about the personhood of the individual that persists beyond death? Must all
meaningful contact be invited by an individual who consents to make herself incomplete for us,
or can we find value in misdirected or interrupted acts of intimacy? What sort of absence does a
death create: the absence of a ruin or the absence of an outstretched hand?

_The Last Man_ opens with an “Introduction” by a fictitious editor, unnamed and
ungendered, who offers the novel’s organizing conceit. While traveling Italy in 1818, the editor
and a companion come to the entrance to Sibyl’s Cave, but their Neapolitan guide advises that
they might go no farther than the opening. The undaunted travelers proceed alone through a long, narrow passage that eventually leads to a spacious underground cavern lit by sunlight filtered through the vegetation obscuring a small hole in the roof. They find, strewn about the cavern, “leaves, fragments of bark” and other such “substances,” all of which “were traced with written characters” in various languages ancient and modern (5). The travelers understand these leaves as Sibylline prophecy, and they are able to verify the accuracy of the prophecies through writings that describe “detailed relations of events but lately passed” (5). The travelers hastily gather what leaves they can understand, and over the remainder of their stay in Naples they return to the cave frequently to gather more. Their resulting archive is a fragment of a fragment, composed of fragments: the leaves themselves are written on scraps, sole survivors of what must have been a much larger trove, incompletely preserved by chance and earthquake; of these remaining leaves, the travelers collected only the few that happened to be written in a language they understood.

The text that follows, the editor explains, is the result of years of effort deciphering and organizing this partial record of prophecy offered in the Sibylline leaves. Because the leaves “were unintelligible in their pristine condition” (7), the editor has been “obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form” (6). And while the editor assures us that “the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies,” it is a truth transformed through editorial intervention into something altogether different, something reflective of the editorial mind. It has become not just the renewal of something that existed, but something new that the editor needed to exist. The editor owns that the text’s “present form” has been much altered from an original state that can never be known, “As if we should give to another artist, the painted fragments which form the mosaic copy of Raphael’s Transfiguration in St. Peter’s; he would put them together in a form, whose mode would be fashioned by his own peculiar mind
and talent” (6). The renovated mosaic would be made of the same materials as the original (which is itself a reproduction of a painting), but the materials would be fitted together according to the imagination of the renovator, who must imagine not only the assemblage but also the historical character who might have originally assembled the mosaic. That is, the renovator creates a physical object to represent both a formerly ruined object and the lives and personalities of the artists who built the original object. The renovator, like the future generations who might restore Godwin’s wooden crosses (see Chapter Two), renews a relationship to past generations of artists, and in so doing transforms both the relationship and the monument to the relationship.

The editor tells us that the two travelers at first worked together to decipher “these sacred remains,” “but that time is gone; and, with the selected and matchless companion of my toils, their dearest reward is also lost to me” (6). The bulk of the editor’s work was solitary labor performed after the death of this companion. It should not be surprising, then, that the text offered by this editor reflects a feeling of loss and lastness. Like Lionel Verney, protagonist of the ensuing narrative, and like Mary Shelley herself, the editor is a “last man” seeking out the companionship of the dead—or any companionship at all. In this social vacuum, the text itself becomes the editor’s companion, “cheer[ing] long hours of solitude” (7). While “giving form and substance to the frail and attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl” (7), the editor creates from these fragments a memorial mosaic that might, like Godwin’s white wooden crosses, provide a site for productive communion with persons no longer present. Yet although the Sibylline Leaves provide the editor with the raw materials of this memorial, the construction we read is the editor’s creation. The editor connects the fragmentary facts of past prophecy, molding them into a history that is meaningful and intelligible to the editor in the present.
In the editor’s description of the process of selecting and assembling the fragmentary prophecy, the editor’s task bears a striking resemblance to that of Godwin’s historian, who must construct his narrative out of an incomplete record. The historian cannot ask the dead for clarification or compel them to tell the whole truth. Instead, “[h]e must take what they choose to tell, the broken fragments, and the scattered ruins of evidence.” “Profound scholars,” when they study history, turn to this fragmentary record, “the naked and scattered materials” of primary evidence and bare facts, passing over the narrative constructions of previous scholars. “This they do,” Godwin writes, “that they may investigate the story for themselves; or, more accurately speaking, that each man, instead of resting in the inventions of another, may invest his history for himself, and possess his creed as he possesses his property, single and incommunicable.” This is history not as facts, but as the perpetual reinterpretation of facts in the present. The historian’s mind, experiences, needs, and desires, his loneliness and his loves—these are the substance through which history is refracted and transformed into something living, breathing, and profoundly personal. The force of this personality is the “magnetism” that causes the “particulars” of “the materials we have collected abroad” to “start out to view in ourselves, which might otherwise have laid forever undetected.” We study history, Godwin suggests, to better understand (and to make better) the self who studies. We investigate history in order to create a tool necessary to the investigation of the self. Godwin’s profound scholar is a profoundly selfish creature, turning to others only as a means of turning to the self.

Like Godwin’s historian, Shelley’s editor takes “materials…collected abroad” and transforms them into something personal, reflective of the editor’s own loneliness. We might then reconsider the purpose of the ensuing narrative of Lionel Verney, the Last Man: his history is not a prophecy of mankind’s future, but an investigation of the editor’s present. We are
accustomed to making this claim of speculative fiction, that it displaces social or political debates of the present onto an unfamiliar time or terrain in order to investigate and interrogate the underlying assumptions of the present. In fact, scholars have often argued that the first half of The Last Man, which focuses almost exclusively on England’s transition from monarchy to democracy, should be read as this type of utopian thought experiment. But this reading neglects the personal perspective of the present so carefully established in the Preface. The “present” of the novel is not just the year of 1826 or 1818. It is a present inhabited by a living, feeling editor whose needs are not solely political. The editor’s investigation of historical materials collected abroad must be read not only as an investigation of contemporary social and political problems, but as an investigation into the psychological make-up of an individual self.

All history is in some sense a fragment composed of fragments, but as Sophie Thomas has noted, The Last Man is particularly fragmentary: the raw materials of the history are literally fragments painstakingly pieced together into a whole; the story itself abounds with images of fragmentation; and the novel, which concludes on Verney anticipating his future lonely wanderings, resists closure by failing to either show Verney’s end or return to the frame narrative established in the Preface. This narrative fragmentation has often been read as leaving space for hope that would otherwise be foreclosed. Timothy Ruppert, for example, argues that the fragmentary text disrupts “literary and temporal continuity to show that humankind’s fate, despite history’s myriad nightmares, is never foreordained,” and concludes that The Last Man “is less a doomful prediction of imperial decay than a prophecy of hope justified by the regenerative power of the human imagination.” Ruppert foregrounds the fragment’s potential for reconstruction: the archival absences in The Last Man leave space for various acts of imaginative completion, effectively allowing future generations to fill in the missing pieces with more
positive events and thus to transform the ultimate emphasis of the resulting whole. Through Ruppert’s interpretation, *The Last Man* comes to resemble a rather traditional work of dystopian fiction, in which, according to Lyman Tower Sargent’s definition, a dark “extrapolation from the present” provides a warning and suggests that “alternative modes of behavior” might allow humanity to move toward a more eutopian future (8). But Shelley’s structure resists the dystopian tradition’s orientation toward the future. The editor’s position in the present radiates potential into the past as well as the future. Past and future are both transformed and reconstituted through the needs of the present. The emphasis, then, is not so much on the freedom of future generations to escape the prophesies and promises of the past, but on the ability of the present to project progress into the future in order to sustain an understanding of the present self as meaningfully connected to past and future. The present self resists isolation by imagining the companionship and continuity of past and future others. We imagine the present as incomplete, the epicenter of a fragmentary time, in order to enjoy imagining a future self with whom we might become more complete.

**Presence, Absence, and Hope**

Godwin laments the fragments to which death reduces human life even as he suggests that the act of thinking *with* these fragments could extend the potential usefulness of the Illustrious Dead through generations of active listeners. The individual subject may have died, but his social relevance remains as he continues to whisper “new thoughts and feelings” to the living. In this

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3 Sargent complicates this definition, and offers nuanced interpretations of utopian literature and tradition, by incorporating twentieth-century feminist responses to the homogenizing assumptions of much utopian fiction; this definition is offered as a summary of early approaches to the genre.
most asymmetrical solitude, the dead take on the role of the silent partner supporting the philosophical necrotourist in his mental wanderings. As the dead multiply over the course of *The Last Man*, we might expect the living characters to develop the sort of asymmetrical relationships described by Godwin—and indeed, Shelley directly references her father’s “Essay on Sepulchres” in Verney’s ironic dedication of his manuscript to “The Illustrious Dead.” But Shelley complicates the categories of dead and living, Sophie Thomas points out, as several of the main characters “seem to die, but then live on for a time in an ambiguous afterlife, before finally dying (again)” (26). Thomas reads these half-deaths as introducing an ambiguity into the finality of death, an ambiguity that reflects the novel’s structural resistance to completion. I am more interested, however, in the relationships that develop during these brief half-lives and how they call into question the human potential for mutuality in general.

Thomas identifies a number of episodes in which characters exist in a liminal state between life and death: for example, when Raymond is reported to be dead, then discovered to be alive, only to die (again) almost immediately; both Adrian and Lionel suffer near-fatal illness; and Perdita, devastated by the loss of her husband Raymond, describes herself as already dead before she finally ends her own life. Through these half-lives, Thomas argues, the “finality of death…and the certainty with which it establishes a before and an after, a beginning and an end, becomes increasingly ambiguous” (27). However, Thomas neglects the moment when Verney perceives his silent partner, Idris, as dead, and I argue that this seeming death should turn our attention to the ambiguity of what *seems* like death. Beginning and end are ambiguous, but so is the middle; before and after are ambiguous, but so is the present upon which they converge. The ambiguity arises in the perspective of a present subject that is itself compromised. As Verney lies
awake, mentally wandering the plague-reduced nation, while Idris sleeps beside him, the perceptions of the present self become lost:

[Q]uiet prevailed in the Castle, whose inhabitants were hushed to repose. I was awake, and during the long hours of dead night, my busy thoughts worked in my brain, like ten thousand mill-wheels, rapid, acute, untameable. All slept—all England slept; and from my window, commanding a wide prospect of the star-illumined country, I saw the land stretched out in placid rest. I was awake, alive, while the brother of death possessed my race. What, if the more potent of these fraternal deities should obtain dominion over it? The silence of midnight, to speak truly, though apparently a paradox, rung in my ears. The solitude became intolerable—I placed my hand on the beating heart of Idris, I bent my head to catch the sound of her breath, to assure myself that she still existed—for a moment I doubted whether I should not awake her; so effeminate an horror ran through my frame.—Great God! would it one day be thus? One day all extinct, save myself, should I walk the earth alone? Were these warning voices, whose inarticulate and oracular sense forced belief upon me? (265-6).

This scene recasts the asymmetrical solitude of being alone in the presence of another as a potentially violent inattention to the subjectivity of the other and strikingly contrasts the aloneness of being alone with a sleeping other to the loneliness of being alone among the dead. Structurally this scene closely resembles the scene described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in “The Eolian Harp,” in which the presence of sleeping, “pensive Sara” allows Coleridge to mentally explore the “one Life within us and abroad” before returning to “Peace, and this Cot,
and thee, heart-honored Maid!” But in *The Last Man*, the wandering philosopher’s mental return to his beloved is interrupted by the horrifying possibility that she has transformed, leaving him not alone in her presence, but truly alone. This is more than just obvious foreshadowing. It establishes the question of agency in the experience of solitude—a question that, I argue, is of central importance to the novel. Does Verney need Idris to be a living subject in order to feel supported while alone in her presence? If the answer is no, what does that say about subject relations, about the construction of Verney’s subjecthood? The silence of midnight paradoxically rings in Verney’s ears; he recognizes the silence, but perceives it as sound. Might the absence of the other offer a similarly paradoxical feeling of presence?

Mary Shelley addresses the paradoxical power of absence to produce affective presence in her 1824 short essay “On Ghosts.” She describes the feeling of visiting the home she had shared with Shelley after his death and feeling the loneliness of the deserted rooms that might have been, but were not, occupied by Shelley. His absence emerges as the negated possibility of his presence: “He had been there; his living frame had been caged by those walls, his breath had mingled with that atmosphere, his step had been on those stones, I thought:—the earth is a tomb, the gaudy sky a vault, we but walking corpses” (254). She is alone with the presence of his absence. A sudden wind makes her imagine momentarily that, she says, “I heard, I felt—I know not what,” a physical perception of epistemological uncertainty that leads her ultimately to a new understanding of how absences might be sensibly perceived:

The sun drawing up the vaporous air makes a void, and the wind rushes in to fill it,—thus beyond our soul’s ken there is an empty space; and our hopes and fears, in gentle gales or

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4 Without addressing this specific passage from *The Last Man*, Matthew Rowney has productively read the novel alongside “The Eolian Harp” in order to suggest that Shelley develops a notion of the “one Death.”
terrific whirlwinds, occupy the vacuum; and if it does no more, it bestows on the feeling heart a belief that influences do exist to watch and guard us, though they be impalpable to the coarser faculties (254).

The void of loss creates not just a space but a vacuum that draws in our affective response. The uncertain feeling of presence in an empty building, the ringing of our ears in the silence—these are the human responses that make present and palpable the experience of absence that might otherwise be impalpable. But as Lionel’s experience next to the sleeping Idris demonstrates, it is the perception of absence that generates affective presence; thus the presence of Idris is able to uncannily coexist with the presence of her absence; thus our lives might coexist with our deaths.

*The Last Man* complicates subject relations further by examining the possibilities of a subjective agency that might persist beyond the bounds of human life. For example, the first time that Perdita believes her husband, Raymond, to be dead, she anxiously recalls “how often he had declared that solitude was to him the greatest of all evils, and how death itself was to him more full of fear and pain when he pictured to himself a lonely grave.” Though absent, he still speaks directly, expressing the feelings he had anticipated feeling in the state he now presumably inhabits; Perdita recalls him telling her:

> never again shall I know the misery of finding myself alone. Even if I die before you, my Perdita, treasure up my ashes till yours may mingle with mine. It is a foolish sentiment for one who is not a materialist, yet, methinks, even in that dark cell, I may feel that my inanimate dust mingles with yours, and thus have a companion in decay (169).

Raymond does not expect the material boundaries of personhood to persist beyond his human lifetime, but he does expect the feelings of loneliness and companionship to outlive his subjectivity.
Although Charlotte Sussman observes that “[t]he loneliness of the last man takes up a bare twenty pages of the almost five-hundred-page narrative,” Verney’s lastness is only one among the many forms of loneliness explored throughout *The Last Man* (286). Characters in *The Last Man* consistently express concern for the loneliness of the dead, as if loneliness might be the only feeling to persist beyond the human lifetime. When Raymond dies (again) shortly after being discovered alive, Verney accepts almost as a given the capacity of the dead to feel alone, but imagines that Raymond must not be lonely because he has entered into the companionship of the illustrious dead:

> When the world was in its infancy death must have been terrible, and man left his friends and kindred to dwell, a solitary stranger, in an unknown country. But now, he who dies finds many companions gone before to prepare for his reception. The great of past ages people it, the exalted hero of our own days is counted among its inhabitants, while life becomes doubly ‘the desart and the solitude’ (204).

Verney’s focus on the loneliness or sociability of the dead in this eulogy offers a subtle response to Godwin’s philosophies. Verney uses distinctly Godwinian language when he imagines the experience of death “when the world was in its infancy,” a phrasing that closely parallels Godwin’s assertion that “it is owing to this calamity of death, that the world for ever is, and in some degree for ever must be, in its infancy” (8). However, Verney re-centers the conversation: while Godwin laments how death stunts the progress of the living, Verney wonders how the progress of the living might affect the feelings of the dead; while Godwin worries about rescuing the Illustrious Dead from obscurity, Verney marvels at those dead “who render the dark abode of the obscure grave illustrious by dwelling there” (204). While Burke’s dead command the awed respect of future generations, and Godwin’s dead invite future generations to make use of what
might have been in order to progress toward what might yet be, Verney’s dead seem oddly indifferent to the movement of the living. It is as if they retain, in death, the capacity to be alone, the subjectivity to disregard the presence of the living other, to disregard the living altogether.

We might productively consider the half-lives Thomas identifies throughout *The Last Man* as a means to explore the subjectivity of the dead. Shortly after Raymond’s death, his widow, Perdita, experiences her loneliness in his absence as a form of death. “‘Look on me as dead,’” she directs her companions, “‘and truly if death be a mere change of state, I am dead. This is another world, from that which late I inhabited, from that which is now your home. Here I hold communion only with the has been, and to come. Go you to England, and leave me where alone I can consent to drag out the miserable days which I must still live’” (210). For Perdita, death is defined not as a bodily state, but as a temporal state, and she, trapped in life, is the living dead. Note that, for her, death does not just mean a perpetual past, but also a perpetual future, as death radiates multi-directionally from the fleeting point of the present, and of life. Perdita’s “change of state” transforms her mode of existence; she inhabits the state of potential radiating from the present into the past and future.

Although Perdita describes herself as already dead, she retains enough agency to “consent to drag out the miserable days” remaining to her, and she vigilantly protects her right to determine the mode of her existence. When Verney drugs her, abducts her, and attempts to bring her back to England against her will, she asserts her right to control her living afterlife by committing suicide. In her state of semi-death, Perdita maintains the agency, subjectivity, and will to relieve Raymond’s loneliness. Her sense of herself as a willing subject is intimately tied to her understanding of Raymond as an emotional subject in need of emotional response. He is
incomplete not in the way of a ruined statue or fragmentary poem that invites imaginative completion, but in the way of an incomplete gesture that invites mutual affection.

At the end of *The Last Man*, “the desart and the solitude” foreshadowed in Verney’s eulogy for Raymond has been realized, and Verney is truly alone—alone without the presence of another. Verney contrasts his fate with that of another famously lonely literary character, Robinson Crusoe, and finds that Crusoe “was far happier than I: for he could hope, nor hope in vain—the destined vessel at last arrived, to bear him to countrymen and kindred, where the events of his solitude became a fire-side tale. To none could I ever relate the story of my adversity; no hope had I” (448). Verney equates hope not with rescue, but with companionship. Hope transforms solitude into a fire-side tale of adversity; hope conceives of the present from the perspective of the future; hope holds the present at a distance. It recasts the present experience in expectation of a companion’s reaction, as if only the presence of an attentive other could signal the movement from this time to the next. Hope is the orientation toward the other that makes the present available to the future.

**An Interruption**

The dead and the nearly dead assert their need for human contact forcefully, urgently, interrupting the subtler motion of the living toward the living, with world enough and time. The dead and the nearly dead, finding themselves suddenly incomplete, seek out the assurance of the touch. The touch assures them of their own capacity to traverse the distance between incompleteness and completeness, to open and close like the valves of a heart or the gills of a fish, something struggling to internalize the external, something struggling to stay alive.
Our wariness of touch, according to Constance Classen, derives from our wariness of the dead. Earlier eras held touch sacred and found solace in the fingering of relics (see Chapter One, p. 19); these objects, fragments from the material life of dead saints, might communicate something of their miracles to the living. But during the plague years the bodies of the dead transformed into “anti-relics.” The power of touch still transcended the boundary between the dead and the living, but the portal reversed: to touch these anti-relics no longer brought the miraculous aspects of the dead into the realm of the living, but threatened to pull the living forcibly into the company of the dead. The dead became unpredictable, capable of interrupting. The dead’s capacity for subjectivity no longer offered the assurance of companionable social relations beyond the bounds of the human lifetime, and instead began to suggest a struggle over the terms of subject-object relations. Touch became base, suggestive of unwanted and uncontrollable intimacy.

The plague in The Last Man, as Peter Melville and others have noted, transmits through air rather than touch. Yet characters in the novel maintain a fear of touch and a fear of contracting the plague through touch that defies the logic of its contagion. Many scholars maintain that Verney actually became infected with and developed immunity to the plague when he was grabbed by a dying victim. In this scene, one of the novel’s most haunting (and most frequently analyzed), the forced intimacy of unwanted contact comes as an interruption, a transgression of the boundaries between self and other, family and stranger, English and “negro,”

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5 Siobhan Carroll recently argued that the transmission of both plague and persons through the air in The Last Man (which innovates the balloon as future man’s preferred means of transport) suggests an anxiety about national borders dissolving in the increasingly shared space of the global atmosphere. This compelling argument deepens our understanding of The Last Man as concerned with communication across boundaries in general: between nations, between subjects, and between the living and the dead.
and life and death. The feeling is not mutual, and the touch is not consensual. To call it an “embrace,” as Anne K. Mellor does, is to imagine a responsive reciprocity not in evidence in the text. This episode is not about the transcendent power of love. It is about the horror of conflicting desire.

The scene moves quickly, at the frantic pace of a parent rushing to his child’s bedside, and without the paragraph breaks that might divide one moment from the next. The moment of unwanted contact cannot be isolated from the movement toward desired contact. Verney narrates:

I snatched a light, and rushing up stairs, and hearing a groan, without reflection I threw open the door of the first room that presented itself. It was quite dark; but, as I stept within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms, which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and saw a negro half clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he wound his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. A dim light shewed me Alfred on a couch; Clara trembling, and paler than whitest snow, had raised him on her arm, holding a cup of water to his lips. I saw full well that no spark of life existed in that ruined form, his features were rigid, his eyes glazed, his head had fallen back. I took him from her, I laid him softly down, kissed his cold little mouth, and turned to speak in a vain whisper,
when loudest sound of thunderlike cannon could not have reach him in his immaterial abode (336-7).

As in Frankenstein’s bedside encounter with the creature, this episode hinges on mistaken contact: the plague victim intercepts the intimate contact intended for the dying child. Yet in this scene, the interrupting one does not pause in the moment preparatory to the touch; he does not invite mutuality. He has no expectation that the invitation of an outstretched hand will be met with a reciprocal gesture. His desperate force leaves no space for hope.

If we accept, as Mellor does, that Verney ultimately benefits from this contact—indeed, that his survival depends upon it—we must come to the uncomfortable conclusion that there is benefit to contact that is not only astonishing but horrifying, that there is benefit to relationships that are not only asymmetrical but nonconsensual, and that hopelessness can have an equivalent outcome to hope.

Although Verney’s episode with the “negro” plague victim is the most studied, it is not the only example of horrifying touch in *The Last Man*. Long before the plague victim grabs him, Verney relates the history of “the aged grandmother of one of our servants at the Castle” (287). This woman had already reached one hundred years of age before the plague came; when it reached her village she so feared for her life that she “barred her door, and closed her casement, refusing to communicate with any” (287). For a while, a compassionate son left food for her so she could continue her hermitude without risk of starvation. After this son died, the old woman, growing weaker by the day, scavenged for food while taking “greatest care” to “avoid her fellow creatures” (287). One night, while carrying off loaves from a deserted bakery, she lost her way, her weakness overwhelmed her, and she collapsed in a cornfield. In darkest midnight she awoke to “a rustling near her”:  

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A low moan close to her ear followed, and the rustling increased; she heard a smothered voice breathe out, Water, Water! several times; and then again a sigh heaved from the heart of the sufferer. The old woman shuddered, she contrived at length to sit upright; but her teeth chattered, and her knees knocked together—close, very close, lay a half-naked figure, just discernible in the gloom, and the cry for water and the stifled moan were again uttered. Her motions at length attracted the attention of her unknown companion; her hand was seized with a convulsive violence that made the grasp feel like iron, the fingers like the keen teeth of a trap.—‘At last you are come!’ were the words given forth—but this exertion was the last effort of the dying—the joints relaxed, the figure fell prostrate, one low moan, the last, marked the moment of death. Morning broke; and the old woman saw the corpse, marked with the fatal disease, close to her; her wrist was livid with the hold loosened by death (288).

Afterward, “believing herself infected, she no longer dreaded the association of others” (288). She arrives at the Castle in time to “lament and die” in the presence of her grand-daughter (288). Verney calls into question the old woman’s cause of death: her infection is a matter of belief, and her symptoms present before the moment of supposed transmission. Like Verney, she identifies her moment of infection as a moment of forced intimacy with a plague victim; in both cases, the text leaves the actual cause of infection in doubt. We cannot know for certain if the touch killed the old woman any more than we can know if the touch immunized Verney. What we do know is that in both these episodes, the intervention of the living dead facilitates a transformation in interpersonal relationships among the living: the touch interrupted the old woman’s loneliness as it interrupted Verney’s familial kiss. For the woman, exposure to another man’s dying hopelessness leads to her own fatalism; her hopelessness in turn opens her to the possibility of
human interaction in her last days. Her experience of being alone is interrupted by the dying man’s demand for attention, for recognition of his physical and emotional needs, but his gesture in some crucial sense remains unfulfilled: he makes contact only to die, leaving her alone in the presence of his corpse. It is this experience of waking alone in the presence of another who cannot quite be called an Other that prompts the old woman to seek out human companionship.

Both Verney and the old woman expect their forced encounter with the dying to be complete and overpowering. They expect the effect of the contact to be their own annihilation. We might consider this expected outcome an extreme form of the self-obliteration we experience in moments of profound mutual awareness with another. Berger describes the impossibility of separating the lover from the beloved after Rembrandt and Hendrickje are “reunited” in her face as she welcomes him to bed: he cannot separate his memory of the image of her invitation from the reflection of his preordained response visible in her countenance. The lover perceives the beloved as he perceives her perceiving him, as if enfolding the beloved in the intimate embrace of apperception; when we lose ourselves in these moments, when we lose ourselves in love, it is a loss through multiplication. We become, for a moment, so absorbed in the reflection of desire that we cannot separate the self from the intersection of selves. This mutuality of desire, its sublime reciprocity, is certainly lacking in the two encounters with plague victims. But when Verney describes the experience, he describes himself as momentarily “overcome” as the victim’s “breath, death-laden, entered my vitals.” For a moment the two are united, and for a

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6 As Thomas remarks in her analysis of fragmentation in *The Last Man*, the reduction of the human race “to an implicit nothingness, involves a peculiar *plentitude*. Reduction is, paradoxically, accomplished through multiplication, insofar as there is a potentially infinite reproduction of the very condition that ostensibly ushers in closure” (22-23). The all-annihilating force of the plague multiplies our awareness of others as other subjects; each new subject involved in this awareness multiplies both the fact and the event of the annihilation.
moment Verney is not quite altogether himself. When the plague victim, dying, proclaims “At last you are come!” he marks a unification with the other that goes beyond her specific personhood. The (temporary) effects of the plague enact the unification initiated in this moment, bringing the figures together in an experience beyond either of their individual capacities for perception.

These two episodes raise again the issues of consent and agency addressed in the half-lives of Raymond and Perdita. As the dead and the dying assert their will upon the living, the question reverses: what agency can the living have when confronted with the violent desires of the (nearly) dead? If Verney and the old woman are truly and completely overcome by the annihilating effects of the plague, the answer is, not much. And yet both characters, even as they succumb or seem to succumb to the global epidemic, respond by seeking out human connections, the affirmation of their humanity. We can consent to very little, but we can consent to be transformed. We can invite transformation. We can make ourselves available to the future even if it is not our future.

The Last Man has recently been read as an example of post-human literature for its examination of a human life at the end of humanity. Most of this literature has focused on Verney’s lastness; his life literally continues after the end of humanity, and his life calls into question the possibility of a human subject existing without an Other to confirm his subjectivity. Young Ok-An describes Verney as “the emblem of post-humanity, chronicling the process of dissolution of ego-boundaries and fixed identities. Instead of human agents controlling the story, the plague controls it, as human experiences are cast and recast as its effects” (“Read Your Fall” 586). Yet the dissolution of humanity into generality remains incomplete. In fact, Shelley’s novel suggests that the “post-human” might not be the loss of humanity, but the humanity that remains:
when you are so absorbed in an interaction with another that you lose yourself, what’s left over; after a social interaction passes away, dissipates, what’s left over; after humanity is gone, what’s left over. Like the ringing of silence, like the ghostly feeling of your hand after you pull it away, we perceive what was lost as absences still present to us. The remainder is the capacity to be less than we are in order to become part of something more. Tellingly, in a now-rare definition that lingered through the nineteenth century, “overcome” might mean “that which is left over; a surplus, an excess” (OED). When Verney is “overcome” by the forced intimacy of contact with the dying man, he is expressing both the feeling of being overpowered and the feeling of being in excess of human feeling.

At the end of The Last Man, Verney risks losing his subject status because he has no Other with whom to be alone with. In the final pages, he makes the search for another survivor his defining project as he travels from city to city, leaving graffiti messages that declare his existence. In three languages he writes, “Verney, the last of the race of Englishmen, had taken up his abode in Rome,” then adds, “Friend, come! I wait for thee!” (456), tying his personal and national identity to the possibility of a “friend” who might respond to his invitation and, in responding, confirm his identity. As the dead are capable of feeling loneliness beyond the bounds of the subject, so Verney is capable of feeling longing beyond the demise of the Other.

Godwin’s memorials provide a way for the living to continue thinking with the dead, who become as it were the silent partner whose presence allows us to mentally wander. Verney’s memorial is not a marker but an invitation; the dead do not leave an absence for the living to complete—the living become incomplete in order to join their stories to the stories of the dead. Verney uses Godwinian language to dedicate his book, the fragments of which we now read in edited form:
DEDICATION

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.

SHADOW, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!


Verney offers the text as a means of enacting the intimate reunion of mutual awareness. His dedication invites the dead to “read your fall” as they “behold the history of the last man.” He calls upon the dead to “arise” and join their intentions to his, already joined in the textual gesture that yokes his story to theirs (and ours). Impossible now to separate the two: his invitation and its textual enactment, the circuit that enfolds us as it creates the space to welcome us home.

The space left by the editor’s inherently incomplete reconstruction of an incomplete text is not, as some have claimed, Mary Shelley’s attempt to leave space for future generations to make choices leading to a more eutopian outcome. Rather, the distance left between 1818 and the end of the twenty-first century simply leaves space. The editor’s memorial project offers its absences as invitations to new connections, to the act of connecting past and future in a present that can overwhelm us with its abundance while still radiating potential for more.

Coda: Becoming Ephemera

Ghosts, the newly dead and the nearly dead, and the fleeting space they occupy in the present, might be deemed ephemeral, and indeed Verney describes the human experience of time during the Plague in exactly those terms. During a brief reprieve from the universal death, he writes,

The experience of immemorial time had taught us formerly to count our enjoyments by years, and extend our prospect of life through a lengthened period of progression and
decay; the long road threaded a vast labyrinth, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, in which it terminated, was hid by intervening objects. But an earthquake had changed the scene—under our very feet the earth yawned—deep and precipitous the gulph below opened to receive us, while the hours charioted us towards the chasm. But it was winter now, and months must elapse before we are hurled from our security. We became ephemera, to whom the interval between the rising and setting sun was as a long drawn year of common time. We should never see our children ripen into maturity, nor behold their downy cheeks roughen, their blithe hearts subdued by passion or care; but we had them now—they lived, and we lived—what more could we desire? (274).

The temporality of previous generations accustomed to the human cycle of progression and decay, a cycle to be repeated or carried on by the next generation and the generation after that, has been interrupted by the Plague so that the only perceptible cycles might be those contained, like the rising and setting of the sun, within a single human lifetime. This is to be ephemera: to exist solely for the present.

To modern literary scholars, the term “ephemera” might conjure images of archival materials rescued from the trash heaps of history: those pamphlets, broadsides, receipts, or trading cards that we expect to last a day or two before fading into the oblivion of reuse or disposal. To modern art historians, “ephemera” might bring to mind examples of performance art that can be recreated but never truly repeated. In the first case, the ephemeral describes the lifespan of useful textual objects and realia, articles that were made to be discarded but somehow survived to become precious representatives of a larger lost archive; these ephemerae are, in essence, fragments. In the second case, the ephemeral describes the gesture, a movement or
series of movements that offers meaning and disappears, so that only the memory of the meaning remains; these ephemerae are, in essence, invitations to communication.

But in 1826, when The Last Man was published, the definition of “ephemera” was in flux. The word had not yet accrued its metaphorical extensions into its primary meaning. Contemporary readers would have recognized “ephemera” first as a genus of mayfly (in the literature of the time, the day-fly) that typically lives, reproduces, and dies in a single day. Verney’s lament that humanity “became ephemera,” that is, refers not just to something short-lived or disposable, but specifically to the biological, embodied experience of time. Our accomplishments within this time are reduced to the purely reproductive, yet what is reproduced cannot strictly be called humanity. The experience of time without the promise of future generations progressing and decaying is no longer a human experience of time, and it cannot be revived by human interference.

Let us consider this fleeting existence in relation to the ephemeral characters who evanesced from De Quincey’s life story in the previous chapter; who, trapped in the perpetual present tense like flies trapped in amber, could neither reproduce nor change. The children of Savannah-la-Mar slept through “five generations,” waiting for a time when they might awake

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7 Some indication of the shift in primary meaning between 1826 and the present can be seen in the different results of searches for the term in the OED as opposed to Wikipedia. The OED entry, last updated in 1891, gives the primary definition of ephemera as, “An insect that (in its imago or winged form) lives only for a day. In mod. entomology the name of a genus of pseudo-neuropterous insects belonging to the group Ephemeridae (Day-flies, May-flies);” the secondary definition is a figurative extension of the first: “One who or something which has a transitory existence.” Wikipedia, on the other hand, directs users searching for ephemera to a page describing “any transitory written or printed matter not meant to be retained or preserved;” the entomological definition can be found only through a disambiguation page, and the entry is nothing more than a list of species collected under the genus “ephemera.” Ephemera in the nineteenth century might also refer to a brief or recurring fever; this usage is not reflected in Wikipedia.
and rejoin their personal histories to the collective human narrative. The human ephemera of *The Last Man* will sleep through no generations; they must rely on the text to perform the reunification denied in their biological evanescence. And so the two meanings of ephemera—the short-lived insect and the transitory archive—begin to converge. An examination of the development of the term from the Romantic period to the Victorian will demonstrate how this convergence came to be.

Although the entomological definition of ephemera predominated in the first half of the nineteenth century, the insect had a long history of allegorical treatment, and in the mid-nineteenth century the ephemera’s allegorical and metaphorical associations underwent a significant shift. At the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth, moral tales featuring the ephemera urged readers to reflect on the comparatively transitory nature of human life. In these tales, the ephemera served as a reminder that some parts of our existence should be transitory, and we would be wise to let them pass. Perhaps the most notable of these tales was Benjamin Franklin’s frequently reproduced “The Ephemera, an Emblem of Human Life” (1778), which imagines the soliloquy of an elderly ephemera reflecting on his seven hours’ existence. He worries about the corruption of future generations, the impending end of the ephemeral world, and his legacy in a world that might no longer exist:

My friends would comfort me with the idea of a name, they say, I shall leave behind me; and they tell me I have lived long enough to nature and to glory. But what will fame be to an ephemera that no longer exists? and what will become of all history in the eighteenth hour, when the world itself, even the whole Moulin Joly, shall come to its end, and be buried in universal ruin? (317)
Of course, to those of us who think seven hours an inconceivably short lifespan, the idea that the entire world might only last eighteen hours is absurd, and the ephemera’s worry over his legacy ridiculous. Anna Laetitia Barbauld adapted a version of this tale for her anthology *The Female Speaker*. In “The Ephemera,” attributed to “Freethinker,” another elderly ephemera gathers his friends and descendants for a deathbed speech. He recalls the changes he has observed in the world since his youth—the sun has moved, the world has cooled, and soon, he concludes, “creation will lie buried in darkness” (183). We might consider this a form of anti-last man narrative, highlighting the hubris of assuming that we can foresee the end of a world we cannot understand except from within our own limited perspective. In both these version of the tale, the ephemera is held up as essentially a negative example, a reminder to let go of the things that we perceive as passing away and a reminder that our perception does not encompass totality.

When applied to literary and artistic productions during this period, the term “ephemera” was similarly negative. An 1809 notice in *The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal* used the term in dismissing a recent novel as unworthy of even a negative review: “This production promises to class among the blue-winged ephemera of the year, and we will not seek to impede its feeble flitting among the gentle judges who may be disposed to bestow on it the sunshine of their smiles.”8 Similarly, an 1803 review criticized recent artistic works and monuments in Italy as the product of minds “so occupied with politics, that, amidst the din of arms and the uproar of civil contests, the pencil and the graver lay idle till the return of peace and tranquility.” These temporal preoccupations led, the review finds, to artistic works of only temporary value: “The Forum of Bonaparte that was to have been erected at Milan, and the Triumphal Column in

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honour of General Kray, projected by Lord Bristol, are merely political ephemerae.” 9 And the introduction to the second series of *The Atheneum* holds the resistance to ephemeral productions to be a core principle of the magazine in the face of excessive literary production: “Never has genius and critical acumen been enlisted into more active service, than at the present moment. They stand centinel over the publishing world, encouraging, marshalling and protecting whatever is worthy in morals or in mind, and strangling in embryo the noxious ephemera of literature.” 10 Ephemerae, in these reviews, are not only made to be forgotten—forgetting them is treated as a moral imperative in the promotion of human artistic progress.

While reviews and allegorical tales in the early nineteenth century used “ephemera” as a pejorative, by the middle of the century the term was in the process of rehabilitation. In James Graver Bloom’s 1856 collection of poetry, *Ephemera, Grave and Gay*, the term takes on an air of anticipatory nostalgia, as if the knowledge that these poems might be forgotten in the future gave them added affective value in the present. “‘Trifles light as air,’ like these,” Bloom writes, “can anticipate no claim to notice or duration beyond that allotted to the *Day-Flies* and *Libellulae* of Entomology. May they be permitted to flutter in a little sunshine accordingly!” Bloom presents his poems as if already retrospectively mourning the failure of anticipation. The last lines of first poem in the collection drive this point home: “Ephemera, poor Fly, will have its day / And soon from mem’ry even, pass away!” Readers are encouraged to approach these poems as if they are memories that will evanesce even as they are formed; we are instructed to feel their presence as loss.

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Mid-century collections of ephemera made it their stated goal to recover from this loss by gathering together small, fragile works into more permanent collections. In introducing *The Rag-Bag, a Collection of Ephemera* (1855), which gathered together a selection of previously published magazine articles, N. Parker Willis asserts his desire to preserve materials that might otherwise fade from public memory. These ephemerae, he explains, result from a “change in the taste of the times—literature being more served in small fragments than it used to be” (v).\(^\text{11}\)

Gathering these ephemeral fragments became a recuperative task, as the epigraph to Lord Lyttelton’s *Ephemera* (1865) asserts: “They who cannot weave a uniform web, may at least produce a piece of patchwork.” Lyttelton elaborates on the aims his project:

> Many of the following have been already published, in the course of the last quarter of a century: but for the most part in such a manner as to ensure their being speedily forgotten. I now venture to tie the sticks together—in the hope that the faggot may float a little longer on the surface of the stream of time; and that here and there in the volume passages may be found which some may deem useful or interesting.

These works resist dissipating one by one from public memory by transforming from independent pieces to pieces of a whole. That is, ephemerae survive by becoming fragments.

The shifting associations of the word “ephemera” from the biological to the textual, from the forgettable evanescence to the recoverable fragment, reflect the aesthetic shift I have sought to identify in this dissertation. We began with Godwin’s proposal to seek a renewable relationship with the dead through renewable relationships that associate generations without

\(^{11}\) This is an American source, and my preliminary research indicates that U.S. authors adopted the modern definition of ephemera earlier than their British counterparts. However, as we can see from similar examples culled from British sources, the transition from a negative to a nostalgic connotation was transnational.
restricting them, a proposal that privileges a perception of human life as fragmentary by
distinguishing between the finite textual record of a human life and the infinite potential
embodied in the human form, and we examined the conservative response from Colman that
advocated acquiescence to the antisocial progression of history through extended periods of
stasis rather than fragmentation. We saw how Percy Bysshe Shelley found in the social
significance of hair, the fragment of a human body, the potential for human social gestures to
make us vulnerable to a transformation that will change the meaning of every gesture that came
before. We identified De Quincey’s attempts to arrest narrative transformation in the undead
body of the child as attempts to contain the potential fragmentation of the self. In all these texts,
the decay or preservation of the human body presents an opportunity for meaningful social
contact through narrative fragmentation that extends beyond the bounds of a human lifetime.
There is a tension evident throughout these works between the impulse to memorialize and the
impulse to continue, the impulse to make permanent our social relationships and the impulse to
transform them.

In Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, the textual fragment converges with the human
fragment as the biological figure of the ephemera, an insect that lives only a day, converges upon
the literary form of ephemera, a transitory text that might be recuperated only through its
transformation into a fragment of a whole. At a time when Mary Shelley was actively editing her
late husband’s published and fragmentary poems, prose works, and letters into posthumous
collections, such a convergence should hardly be surprising. Immediately after Shelley drowned
in the Gulf of Spezia in 1822, Mary Shelley began assembling the physical and textual remnants
of her husband’s life. She convinced a reluctant Leigh Hunt to part with Shelley’s heart, which
Edward John Trelawny had removed from Shelley’s funeral pyre when the organ failed to burn.
She asked friends for his effects and likenesses. And she promptly began the long, laborious process of reworking his last literary efforts—those fragments of uncreated creatures—into the published volumes she was determined to produce in order to secure his legacy.\footnote{For a comprehensive treatment of Shelley’s posthumous collections, controversial biographies, and transmission of effects, see Stephen Hebron and Elizabeth C. Denlinger, \textit{Shelley’s Ghost: Reshaping the Image of a Literary Family} (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2010).}

Like the narrator of \textit{The Last Man}, Mary Shelley occupied herself with the editorial project of forming fragments into a whole in order to cheer long hours of sorrow and solitude. The materials left to her presented numerous editorial challenges, as has been noted Stephen Hebron and Elizabeth Denlinger, curators of two of the most impressive Romanticist special collections (123). The “notebooks and loose papers” that made up this archive were not just fragmentary, but nearly palimpsestous “disparate texts and complex layers of revision and correction” (123). In a letter to Edward Moxon, Mary Shelley described the care she took with an archive that “consisted of fragments of paper which in the hands of an indifferent person would never have been decyphered.”\footnote{Mary Shelley to Edward Moxon, 7 December 1838 (\textit{Mary Shelley Letters}, vol. 2, pp. 300-301). Quoted in Hebron and Denlinger, 123.} Smoothing these fragments into the recognizable form of poetry was no easy task, and scholars continue to rely on (and debate the authority of) her reconstructions. The goals of her project were manifold: to raise funds that would sustain her and her son (Sir Timothy Shelley’s threat to withhold all support if Mary Shelley published any of Shelley’s works entirely undermined this effort), to cheer her solitude, and to attain for him in death the fame Shelley never attained in life. In her Preface to the 1824 \textit{Posthumous Poems}, Mary Shelley explained that “The ungrateful world did not feel his loss, and the gap it made...
seemed to close as quickly over his memory as the murderous sea above his living frame.”

Mary Shelley does not seek to repair his loss, but rather to magnify, through the presence of these fragments, the vacuum left in his absence, that the “ungrateful world” might be compelled to fill the empty space with their hopes and fears.

In the practice of memorial editing, ephemera begins to take on both its familiar modern meanings as an archive and a gesture, as a physical artifact and a physical act, in which the memorial is enacted in the gesture that brings the physical record of the memorial into existence. We might then return to Godwin’s white wooden crosses. Today they would be considered representatives of the class of ephemeral memorials, those acts and figures of memory and mourning that are both performative and constructive. These memorials operate in the present-tense of ephemerality, which, Kay Turner argues, “defines the vernacular workings of the phenomenological; it refers us to the fleeting moments in which sociality is actually occurring in experience and performance” (158). These gestures evanescce as they are enacted, but, Turner continues, “tradition saves us from the complete loss of these moments” (158). The repeated enactment of the fleeting memorial—the repair of the decayed cross, the transcription of otherwise illegible poetry—creates the bond between times that allows the ephemeral “its ability to perform change” (157). It marks a transition even as it references continuity. The creation of

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14 Quoted in Hebron and Denlinger, 124. Sir Timothy responded harshly to the publication of Posthumous Poems and induced Mary Shelley to remove all unsold copies from circulation. Although Mary Shelley continued to edit Shelley’s papers and compose biographical fragments, she would not officially publish more of her efforts until Sir Timothy, who steadfastly refused to die, finally agreed to allow The Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley to see print in 1839. Mary Shelley’s memorial editorial practice was continued by her daughter-in-law, Lady Jane Shelley, who expanded the memorial mission to include the construction of physical monuments: she commissioned a dramatic (and highly inaccurate) sculpture of Mary cradling the drowned Shelley, disinterred the remains of Mary Shelley’s parents and relocated them to a site marked (ironically) by a ponderous marble monument, and gathered together the ancestral relics into a “Shelley Sanctum” at Boscombe Manor. See Hebron and Denlinger, pp. 137-159.
ephemeral memorials brings the signs of private, domestic affect into the realm of the public, inviting a shared experience and a shared investment. These memorials, once created, “invite public participation” and “create sites of rare public intimacy” (167). They have a tendency to reproduce as spontaneous gestures become symbolically laden: one flower becomes many, one “Missing” poster becomes a papered city. The ephemeral tends toward excess as it tends toward loss. De Quincey would be horrified.

We engage with the ephemeral, with the annihilating convergence of excess and loss, through the sense of touch. In touch, we make the private bounds of our physical self available to shared physical experience in the public realm. As Mary Shelley demonstrates in The Last Man, the invitation to touch can be a terrifying invitation ephemeral experience. But it is also an invitation to share in a human experience that, as it passes away, transforms and recuperates. It is an invitation to become fragments in order to be made whole.
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