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THE ETHICS OF PERCEPTION IN TRANSATLANTIC ROMANTIC
POETRY

by

CHARLES W. ROWE

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

2019

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Charles W. Rowe

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

The Ethics of Perception in Transatlantic Romantic Poetry

by

Charles W. Rowe

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The Ethics of Perception in Transatlantic Romantic Poetry is a report on the ethical significance of British and American Romantic poetry composed between 1785 and 1865. This study focuses on the poems of William Cowper, William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman. Its central claim is that these poets composed a body of work that sought to show readers how their sustained attention to everyday perceptual experience could lead them towards a more empathic way of being.

The first chapter argues that the late-eighteenth century poet William Cowper is the initiator of the ethically-oriented poetry of perception that Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman experimented with and refined in the Romantic era. It shows that the subjective style Cowper mastered in his 1785 *The Task* was influential to these writers because it centered on the distinct perceptual experience of an individuated speaker as he appreciates, questions, and reflects upon his relationship with the living environment of rural England. The second chapter examines the habits of lyrical expression and ethical thought shared between William Cowper and William Wordsworth. Through close readings of shorter poems like “The Idiot Boy” and longer ones like

The Prelude the chapter considers Wordsworth's desire to chart a path to right action through his own reflections upon his perceptual experiences in nature.

The third and fourth chapters make a transatlantic crossing to show how the verse experiments that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman composed in the mid-nineteenth century can be read as complements to Cowper and Wordsworth's work. The third chapter claims that Ralph Waldo Emerson's descriptive nature poems are the first American poems that present everyday perception as a valuable ethical activity and makes a special case for Emerson's undervalued role as a poet. The fourth and final chapter shows how Walt Whitman's free verse experiments in the 1850s and 1860s along with his prose sketches of the horrors of America's Civil War can be read as the most pronounced arguments for the ethical value of perception in the Romantic era.

The Ethics of Perception in Transatlantic Romantic Poetry

Charles W. Rowe

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Introduction

*The eye it cannot chuse but see,
We cannot bid the ear be still;
Our bodies feel, where'er they be
Against, or with our will*

(Wordsworth)¹

The Romantic era poets William Cowper, William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman conceived of perception as a skillful practice that allowed them to live more attentively and empathically. In their verse experiments, these poets sought to teach their readers to recognize what the modern philosopher of perception Alva Noë calls the central fact of perceptual experience, “perception is not something that happens to us or in us. It is something we do” (1). Like Noë, they believed that we are always engaged in the activity of perception, whether we choose to acknowledge this fact or not. Their poems of perception implicitly argue that we have a moral responsibility to accept this fact. In these poems, perception becomes a distinctly ethical activity. Individual perception is the irreducible given—no matter how biased or imperfect—that locates and defines these authors’ speakers and creates the firmest ground available to them as they attempt to chart a path to right action.

¹ Expostulation and Reply, 16-20. All references to William Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*, including its appendices, are to the Oxford *Lyrical Ballads, 1789 and 1802*.

A central claim of my study is that the ethically-oriented poetry of perception that rose to prominence in the Romantic era begins with the late-eighteenth century poet William Cowper's work. In his 1785 poem *The Task*, William Cowper initiates a new poetic voice that, as Tim Fulford aptly claims, "spoke from a position of vulnerable retirement" (216) rather than a position of gentlemanly dominion over the land. The notion that any person, whether a natural scientist, a politician, or an artist, could command authoritative ownership of a landscape seemed to Cowper not only an untenable but an unethical proposition. In his verse, Cowper argues that both the poet and their readers should relinquish their selfish desires to usurp the landscapes they encounter. A person who regularly becomes "absorbed in that immensity I see" (87) learns that they dwell in an ecosystem of living things much larger than their narrow perspectives can account for. Rather than theorizing the landscape as if it were a static object, the poet should look and listen to the landscape as if it were a living friend with a life of its own. Besides a few human companions, Cowper's closest friends were the trees, the hares, the lambs, the cucumber-plants, and the myriad of natural objects with which he communed daily in Olney, England from 1767 to 1800. Cowper's poetic landscapes represent an ongoing conversation between him and this living environment. This conversational style introduced a poetic voice that speaks as a receptive witness-participant who is continually involved in what Cowper calls "the task of new discoveries" (1.218). It situates itself in a continuum of experience that is notable in its presentation of the "task" of perception as a single temporally extended activity, rather than a fractured series of disparate mental wanderings. This poetic voice can be digressive, hesitant, self-contesting, and often fragmented, yet it maintains a singularity of perspective because it is rooted in the distinct perceptual experience of an individuated speaker.

In focusing on the “task of new discoveries” in their verse, the poets considered in this study never claim to profess an ethical system or to have the final word on categories of right or wrong action. Instead they present themselves to be continually charting a path towards right action with no articulable endpoint. In his 1856 poem, “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” Walt Whitman best expresses the poetry of perception’s experimental nature, “I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can” (32). Whitman and the other poets of perception discussed in this study see an opportunity in the limitations of their own subjectivities. Cowper believes that each perceptual experience presents a new chance to communicate with his distant God; Wordsworth trusts that his memories of nature’s “beauteous forms” created in single acts of perceptual awareness, can produce that “blessed mood / In which the burthen of the mystery” of a world that is informed by human pain is temporarily “lightened” (“Tintern Abbey” 23, 38-39, 42) or restored in single acts of perceptual awareness; Emerson affirms his sense of kinship between the subjective self and the natural world through poems that describe and reflect upon moments in which Emerson feels a particularly intense connection to the living environment of the New England woods; and Whitman attempts to allow natural objects to speak for themselves by holding these objects in the intransigent flow of his free verse. Since “not a single object” will present itself in the same way it did today than it will tomorrow, each new poem offers a distinct opportunity to explore the kinetic process of perception. This study analyzes how these explorations unfold and reflects upon what is ethically at stake in their unfolding.

The first chapter positions William Cowper as the first ethically-oriented poet of perception in the Romantic era. Critics will continue to debate whether or not Cowper’s verse marks the endpoint of the eighteenth-century loco-descriptive tradition or the starting point for

the Romantic valuation of subjectivity and authorial consciousness. This study suggests that it is more important for scholars to read his poetry attentively than to concern ourselves with Cowper's periodization.² The closer we look at his poetry of perception, the more we find an original, idiosyncratic voice immersed in the spiritual labor of composing what Virginia Woolf called "some finer vision" (145) of human agency. The chapter begins with readings of Cowper's contributions to the 1779 *Olney Hymns* and his 1782 poem "Retirement" and concludes with a close study of signal moments of perception in his 1785 poem *The Task*. In his hymns and his early poems Cowper is constantly looking for God and frequently unable to find him. Cowper discovers in his verse that the only way he can approximate contact with his hidden God is through the composition of poetry that narrates and contemplates his perceptual experiences. For Cowper and the ethically-oriented poets who follow him, perceptual poetry is a prayer-like activity that regularly allows them to feel an intimate connection between themselves and their living environments. In *The Task*, Cowper's primary concern is to show that "Scenes must be beautiful which daily view'd / Please daily" (1.177-178). Perception is a daily practice that allows a poet to regularly sharpen their responsiveness to familiar and local scenes. Cowper felt strongly that his readers were unable to appreciate the living world the way he did. Consequently, his poems seek to teach these readers how to become active participants rather than disinterested spectators.

² Recent scholarship, in particular Kevis Goodman's 2004 *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* and Neil Curry's 2015 biography *William Cowper: A Reevaluation*, has advanced the critical conversation about Cowper beyond questions of periodization, instead returning readers to the aesthetic achievements of his poetry of perception. Goodman is interested in Cowper's "affective consciousness" (90) as it relates to late eighteenth-century British colonial expansion, while Curry focuses on the religious roots of Cowper's lyric "I" through close readings of his hymns in conjunction with *The Task*. What these scholars' work have in common is a disinterest in periodization and a preference for reading Cowper on his own terms. This study has gained great encouragement from these scholars' approaches to Cowper.

The second chapter puts Cowper's poetry in conversation with Wordsworth, who is one of Cowper's most sensitive readers. The chapter argues that rather than claiming Cowper as Wordsworth's idiosyncratic predecessor, as Romantic criticism often has, we should instead examine their shared interest in poeticizing the ways that everyday perceptual experience shapes their ethical perspectives.³ Cowper and Wordsworth both sought to tell the story of an embodied poet in the process of attuning their distinct human perception to their environment. Like Cowper, Wordsworth believed that his poetic experiment in environmental attunement had an ethical orientation. Wordsworth wanted to show that a poet's role was "to rectify man's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane and pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature" (318). In the *Lyrical Ballad* poems and moments from the 1805 *Prelude* that I analyze, Wordsworth's focus on the experience of dwelling in an environment rather than theorizing one or looking at one from afar, affords him the aesthetic means to make "new compositions of feeling." In these scenes his speakers are continually impelled to acknowledge that they are not, as Emerson later says in *Nature*, "alone and unacknowledged" (11). The desire for contact with God that Cowper seeks in his poetry of perception becomes in Wordsworth's verse a desire to achieve a momentary "hour of feeling" ("Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House" 24) in which he senses he is acting rightly and in accordance with the self-regulating heart of his "moral being" ("Tintern Abbey" 111). Like the moments of environmental and affective awareness he recounts in poems like "Tintern Abbey" and throughout *The Prelude*, these moments are tentative, and infused both with grief

³ At the outset of chapter two, I present an overview of Romantic readings of the Cowper-Wordsworth relationship, which, beginning with William Hazlitt in the Romantic era and continuing through contemporary scholarship, have mostly argued that Cowper was Wordsworth's idiosyncratic predecessor who at best should be thought of as an accidental Romantic. This chapter eschews this argument in favor of examining Cowper and Wordsworth's shared habits of expression and thought.

and hope, but they have enough moral pith to propel Wordsworth's continued process of immersion and discovery. Read together, Wordsworth and Cowper's poetries of perception ask their audiences to give up the life of the "inattentive man" (*The Task* 6.114) who everyday fails to acknowledge and appreciate their living environment and instead learn how to look, listen, and identify with the natural world as Cowper and Wordsworth have.

From Cowper and Wordsworth, this study takes a transatlantic crossing to the complementary poetries of perception composed in America by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman in the mid-nineteenth century. In an effort to extend Angus Fletcher's central claim in *A New Theory for American Poetry* that the influence of eighteenth-century descriptive poetry lingers in both British and American Romantic poetry, my analysis of Emerson and Whitman is guided by my view that the generic thread of descriptive verse unites all of these poets' work.⁴ It is no doubt true that Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman's poetic projects are more concerned with questions about imagination and creativity than Cowper's poetry is. But it is also true that a signal feature of all of these poets' verse is a rootedness in the activity of outward-directed environmental description. The Wordsworthian and transatlantic Romantic scholar Richard Gravil claims in his *Romantic Dialogues* that "in numerous respects the situation of idealistic Americans in 1823-1862...involved preoccupations and expectations strangely parallel to those of England in the period 1789-1819" (xiii). Gravil rightly emphasizes that this transatlantic continuity in the culture of Romanticism is rooted in the post-Revolutionary politics of England and America but gives less attention to aesthetic and ethical crosscurrents.⁵ My study claims that

⁴ Fletcher's clearest expression of this claim is that "understanding *the common* as a function of poetic form and language—the subject of Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—requires an ecologically detailed accounting for its expression, which is only one of many reasons why a criticism that fails to recognize the descriptive tradition and its influx into the Romantic cannot possibly succeed" (25).

⁵ Gravil's narration of a fully developed cultural history composed of aesthetic and ideological exchanges between Romantic authors on both sides of the Atlantic remains a central point of reference in transatlantic Romantic

along with the political concerns shared by Romantic poets on both sides of the Atlantic Rim, one of the most salient of their shared “preoccupations” is their desire to experimentally compose a new picture of ethical agency rooted in the attentive description of and reflection upon perceptual experience.

The third chapter turns to Ralph Waldo Emerson, who I argue is America’s first poet of perception. Rather than examining his poetic prose—itsself an achievement in the aesthetics of perception—I discuss a group of poems Emerson composed between 1834-1842 that can be interpreted as extensions of the line of perceptual experimentation initiated by Cowper and Wordsworth. Emerson uses his poetry as an aesthetic space in which to rethink and iterate upon the central ideas in his essays concerning the relationship between the subjective self and the natural world. He presents his poems to be a “vehicular and transitive” (“The Poet” 463) record of his attempts to craft a meaningful human existence rooted in his appreciation of the fluxional process of nature. I argue that Emerson’s poems take two distinct paths of exploration. In poems like his 1834 “The Each and the All,” Emerson’s speakers play the role of a witness-participant as they immerse themselves in their living environments. These poems are particularly notable for the Wordsworthian alternations between self-contesting hesitation and joyful appreciation. In later poems like his “Woodnotes II,” and “Threnody,” Emerson forges a new approach in the poetry of perception by giving imaginative voice to natural objects. In these poems Emerson practices his own ethic of forbearance by attempting to take himself out of the scene and let natural objects like pine-trees speak for themselves. I suggest that the combined effect of these

scholarship. One of his most potent arguments is that American Romanticism is “a delayed variation upon the literary awakening occasioned in England by the loss of America” (21). While my project does not directly address Romantic politics, it is rooted in the idea that Cowper, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman can be read together as representatives of a “literary awakening” that argued for this newly capacious ethical viewpoint rooted in individual perception.

two methods of perceptual poetry is particularly ethical; the poems impel their readers to see the natural world not as a static entity but as a living environment that deserves their care.

The fourth and final chapter presents Walt Whitman as the most vocal proponent for the ethical value of perception in the Romantic era. From his earliest writing experiences as a journalist for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* through the mature verse of his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman urges his readers to linger in and reflect upon their daily perceptual experiences. He argues that the “moral identity” (959) of American poetry can only be found through an immersive poetry of attention that takes empathic notice of all American life, no matter how seemingly insignificant or inconsequential. He attempts to carry out this aesthetic task through his distinct use of intransigent constructions that leave the reader perpetually adrift. Through this technique, the living details of the scene take precedence over the speaker’s ability to reflect upon or draw meaning from the it. These scenes of directionless immersion suggest that perceptual experience is a destination in itself that should be appreciated for its own good. Whitman’s aesthetics of intransigence also approximates the experience of human finitude; as he claims in “As I Ebb’d With the Ocean of Life,” the entirety of our lived experience may ultimately be reduced to nothing more than “a little wash’d up drift” (22). In the concluding section of this chapter, I explore how Whitman’s method of intransigence moves the poetry of perception in a new direction by transforming into a poetry of death. In “Song of Myself” the speaker boldly claims, “Has anyone supposed it is lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die and I know it” (131-132). As this phrase makes evident, Whitman’s poetic project is guided by his desire to integrate death into his accounts of perceptual experience. In particular, the poetic sketches in his 1875 *Memoranda During the War* bear acute witness to the experiences of the wounded, dying, and dead he encountered in and near Union

Army hospitals in and around Washington, D.C during the Civil War. I argue that these sketches are his most eloquent claims for the moral value of mere attention. In them, the world of suffering and despair around Whitman grows increasingly loud as he reduces the volume of his own voice. Emerson is arguably the first American writer who attempted to teach his readers how to live. By contrast, Whitman's poetry of death urges its readers to build their lives with the fullest acceptance of human finitude they are capable of and, by doing so, it teaches his readers how to die.

I attempt to capture the poets in this study as they try to provide answers to the question: how can my attention to my perceptual experience allow me to live a more meaningful life? In the context of our fragmented attentional landscapes, this question might seem naïve or jejune. Yet it is arguably more important now than ever to remind ourselves that our perception is the activity that is most our own. We chose what to perceive and in a very real way, what we chose to perceive determines what matters most to us in the course of a life. This project argues that a search for cohesion through attentive reflections on perceptual experience is a worthy human activity. In their distinct ways, Cowper, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman, learned that their sustained attention to perception allowed them to inhabit an ethos equally committed to self-reflection and environmental awareness. They all perceived that they were fluxional, living beings immersed in a fluxional, living world. Their only certainty was their self, which was also the most ready example of the cohesion of their lives. They discovered what Maurice Merleau-Ponty would later theorize in his *Phenomenology of Perception*; the act of perception may be in fact the only meaning-making activity that can allow an individual to feel that they are a united whole. This moment at the end of the *Phenomenology of Perception* is particularly important in this regard:

I am not a series of physical acts nor for that matter a central I who gather them together in a synthetic unity, but rather a single experience that is inseparable from itself, a single ‘cohesion of a life,’ a single temporality that unfolds itself [s’explicite] from its birth and confirms this birth in each present (430).⁶

The cohesion of a life is the distinct, idiosyncratic feeling of one’s individual identity. Merleau-Ponty wisely notes that this identity is always undergoing modification and adaptation as it participates in the kinetic experience of being. Knowledge of this fact should authorize us to shun the production-oriented picture of human agency that suggests we carry out our daily actions in order to produce a desired end. Under this view, human action is no more than a species of production. If we think of ourselves not as producers but instead as idiosyncratic individual subjects who see our lives as a “single temporality that unfolds itself” from the moment of birth to the end of life, we place less teleological pressure on our daily doings. The unfolding experience of perception is the “single experience” of our lives; we are always involved in it and our awareness of it allows us to reflect upon our own concerns and the concerns of other living things. Cohesion is not a destination or a product but a single experience we are in the process of navigating every day.

We might say that what Merleau-Ponty calls “a single experience that is inseparable from itself” is what Cowper, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman would call a “soul” or an “identity.” Whitman’s statement in his 1875 *Democratic Vistas* that the “thought of identity” is the “most spiritual and vaguest of earth’s dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all

⁶ According to Donald A. Landes, the editor of the 2014 Routledge edition of *Phenomenology* from which I quote, the phrase “cohesion of a life” is Merleau-Ponty’s own translation of Martin Heidegger’s phrase “Zusammenhang des Lebens” (388 in “Seit und Zeit.” *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 8, 1927, 1-438), which the Joan Stambaugh English translation of *Being and Time* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010) calls “connection of a life” (356). I stick to the term “coherence” here in order to stay faithful to Merleau-Ponty’s phrase. See Landes’ translation notes on pages 557-558 for more information.

facts” (984) seems to me a fitting complement to Merleau-Ponty’s “single temporality.”

Individual perception is both a hard fact and spiritual, vague, or ineffable because the “thought of identity” will always be a moving target. The poets studied here are firmly aware of these alternating concerns, and in their attempts to describe their distinct lived experiences, they present distinct pictures of what a given self can be and what it can make of itself during the brief interlude on earth that Wordsworth memorably calls our “few short years of useful life” (13.428).

By placing their attention on the activity of perception, these poets make a moral argument that is rooted in a contemplative, and anti-deontological view of ethical action.⁷ This view of ethical action centers around the idea that a contemplative view of human action is distinctly valuable because it allows humans to increase their dispositions towards goodness, and thus to increase their agency without the impediment of moral duties and laws. Like perception, right action is an activity that we are continuously attempting to carry out, reformulating our approaches as we go along. The virtue ethicist Talbot Brewer aptly summarizes the tenor of this view when he writes, “One of the proper activities of the self is to arrive at a conception of its defining capacity for agency in light of which it can impart a sensible shape to its own deeds, and with respect to which it can understand how those deeds add up over time to a properly human life” (10). The desire for a “properly human life” is at the heart of these poet’s work and they go to considerable aesthetic lengths to compose the potential contours of what this life might look like by reinvigorating and reimagining the purposes of poetic expression.

⁷ This view has origins in Ancient ethics, particularly in Plato and Aristotle, and has been most recently explored in the philosophical field of virtue ethics by Elizabeth Anscombe in “Modern Moral Philosophy” (1958), Iris Murdoch in *The Sovereignty of Good* (1970), Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (1981), and Talbot Brewer in *The Retrieval of Ethics* (2011).

It may seem to some readers that assigning such an ethical tenor to these poets' work puts too much moral pressure on their art. Yet all of these poets clearly conceived of their work in ethical terms and wanted the moral tang of their poetry to be appreciated by their readers. As I hope this study shows, moral action is a capacious category that emphasizes the importance of self-reflection, environmental care, and the empathic concern for the lives of other living people and things. The poems of the authors under discussion here teach us how to live more ethically primarily by teaching us how to attend more skillfully and steadfastly to ourselves, our surroundings, and to others.

1

William Cowper and the Labor of Retirement

*Fast by the banks of the slow-winding Ouse,
Content, if thus sequester'd I may raise
A monitor's, though not a poet's praise,
And while I teach an art too little known,
To close life wisely, may not waste my own.*

(William Cowper)⁸

Cowper's Individuated Voice

The distinct, first-person voice that William Cowper develops in his major poems of retirement—his 1782 “Retirement” and his 1785 *The Task*—marks an achievement in eighteenth-century nature poetry. The strength of Cowper’s descriptive poetry is its power of individuation, its ability to tell us “how it is” for him in his specific place and time, the southeastern rural village of Olney, England in the late eighteenth-century.⁹ Cowper’s power of individuation arose from his discovery that his best poetic subject was himself. When he was 32, he suffered a debilitating depressive episode that led to his Evangelical conversion and presaged his retreat to the confines of Olney. In retreat, he wrote verse to express his religious feelings in the 1779 *Olney Hymns*, then in his 1782 *Poems* he wrote to moralize about the “Babylon” of London from which he claimed to have escaped, but eventually his verse focused intently on his everyday retired experience, culminating in his 1785 masterpiece *The Task*. Despite his eventual

⁸ From “Retirement” (804-808). All references to William Cowper’s poetry are to *The Poems of William Cowper*.

⁹ I borrow this phrase “how it is here” from John Barrell in his *The Idea of Landscape and a Sense of Place*, “descriptive poetry has the power of individuation, the power to tell us ‘this is how it is here’” (131).

fame, Cowper told his friends that his poetry was no more than a private recreation among other recreations, like gardening, walking, and raising hares.¹⁰ Poetry was, as Cowper tells Thomas Park near the end of his life, “a whim that has served me longest and best, and which will probably be my last” (4:26).¹¹ He followed this “whim” to divert himself from depression and to approximate a feeling of contact with a God by whom, he believed, he was always in danger of being abandoned. In doing so, he created a distinct poetic voice that made him the most popular English poet of his era. Though he is now obscured by the Romantics who admired him—Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Austen—and by Romantic critics who have faulted him for his supposed inability to conceive of poetry as a social or political activity, his poetry remains vivid and engaging.¹²

Cowper’s best verse remains vivid because it presents the varied features of his natural landscape like apple-trees, cucumber plants, and hares not as visual ornaments but as distinct phenomena with lives of their own. Through his earthly approach, Cowper helps to deflate the

¹⁰ Cowper’s collected poems were most likely the most popular text in middle-class British households of the 1780s and 1790s. For the most complete evidence of Cowper’s popularity in his era see pages 155-157 in Davidoff and Hall’s statistical research in *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850*.

¹¹ All citations from letters are from *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*.

¹² Scott Hess is the most recent critic to take this position about Cowper’s verse. In his 2005 *Authoring the Self*, Hess claims that Cowper lacked “any clear sense of grounding poetic function or identity” (22) and thus fails to “construct a strong version of authorial identity or an autonomous self” (164) as Wordsworth does in *The Prelude* and as other audience-oriented Romantic poets do in their work. In claiming that Cowper is an ineffective public poet because he does not employ his art as a means of obtaining autonomy or a site through which to create a “strong version of authorial identity,” Hess continues a line of attack initiated by writers like Hazlitt, who claims Cowper “does not care whether he completes his work or not; and in whatever he does, is evidently more solicitous to please himself than the public” (*Lectures on English Poets* 180). In my view, such judgments of Cowper are misguided. While it is true that Cowper was ambivalent about his public role as a poet, two interrelated facts stand in the way of such an interpretation of Cowper: Cowper’s *The Task*, as even Hess acknowledges, was one of the “most popular, influential, and frequently reprinted poems of the era” (10), and the reading public were drawn to his poetry because of what they believed was the authenticity of his voice. Whether he wished to construct a “strong version of authorial identity” or not, his poetry was popular because it presented a relatable view of Cowper’s identity. Beginning with James King’s 1986 biography of Cowper, *William Cowper*, which illustrated in great detail how Cowper’s letters demonstrate his active engagements with the social, political, and artistic concerns of his day, and running through Kevis Goodman’s recent explorations of the effect of Cowper’s “news addiction” on his work in her 2004 *Georgic Modernity*, a more complete view of Cowper has emerged. As their studies show, and as my study seeks to show, Cowper is best read on his peculiar terms rather than as a “not-quite” Romantic.

theory, made popular in the work of eighteenth-century poets like Alexander Pope and James Thomson, that through the composition of landscape poetry, a writer can obtain heightened dominion over nature.¹³ Rather than commanding over his landscapes from the safety of a prospect view, Cowper writes a landscape poetry that explores how an author's absorption within a scene allows them to express more aptly the intertwined relationship between humans and their natural surroundings. In *The Task* Cowper claims that only a poet who embeds himself in nature, "like a "flow'r" in a "native bed" (4.659-670) can achieve his spiritual purpose: "'Tis there alone His faculties expanded in full bloom / Shine out, there only reach their proper use (4.659-662). Through the simile of the poet as a flower that enjoys the most propitious conditions for a "full bloom" in the safety of a "native bed," Cowper summarizes the local, domestic tenor of his poetic project. In his verse, he positions himself within a teeming natural world, but is careful to remind his readers that no matter how far he wanders, he always returns to the safety of his country house to reflect upon and record his experiences.

When Cowper left London after his first serious depressive episode, he initially viewed rural retirement as a way to retreat from his troubled life in the city.¹⁴ Over a period of roughly fifteen years—1767 through 1782—he formulated a distinct view of what he called "the proper use of the opportunities [retirement] affords for the cultivation of Man's best interest" (1:440). In

¹³ In his 1996 *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority*, Tim Fulford has made the strongest argument for Cowper's transformational role in eighteenth-century landscape aesthetics, particularly how Cowper's "critical stance changed the poetry of retirement" (53), replacing Pope's "urbanity," and Thomson's classical "wistfulness" with a more realistic and direct picture of the relationship between the poet and the landscape. Fulford's analysis echoes Norman Nicholson's claim in his 1960 biography *William Cowper* that Cowper had "little sympathy with the fashion for the picturesque and got closer to the reality behind the view than did the connoisseurs of the picturesque" (23).

¹⁴ According to his conversion narrative, *Adelphi*, in 1763, beset by anxiety about his burgeoning law career and his uncertainty about his marriage prospects, Cowper attempted to kill himself three times—by poison, by drowning, and by hanging—all of which failed. After being sent to St. Alban's "madhouse," Cowper one day chanced upon a Bible opened at the narrative of Lazarus, a story of "so much benevolence, mercy, so much goodness and sympathy with miserable mankind in our Saviour's conduct as melted my heart, and I almost shed tears after the relation. Little did I think that it was an exact type of the mercy which Jesus was upon the point of extending towards myself" (*Letters* 1:38). After this, he left St. Alban's and moved to Olney to live with his friends the Unwins for the rest of his life.

its “proper use” retirement should lead to a change in personal character, as he writes in his 1782 poem “Retirement,” “whatever hopes a change of scene inspires, / Must change her nature, or in vain retires” (679-80). As an Evangelical Christian, Cowper believed that “Man’s best interest” was to serve his God faithfully. We might then interpret his imperative “must change her nature” to mean one must convert or else live one’s life in vain.¹⁵ Yet his claim that rural retirement is a space for transformative self-reflection instead of amusement opens itself to a more capacious interpretation. In Cowper criticism the word “virtue” or “virtuous” is frequently used to describe his view of retirement but rarely defined beyond the context of Cowper’s faith.¹⁶ Cowper often makes it difficult for us to interpret “virtue” in non-religious terms because he frequently castigates his audience to acknowledge their sinfulness and impels them to act in accordance with categories of rightness—a faithful submission to God’s will—and wrongness—sin. Yet the strength of Cowper’s poetry is its ability to, as Virginia Woolf observes in an essay on Cowper in her *Second Common Reader*, stray beyond “the prosaic fabric” of “moralizing and didacticism” to present “some finer vision” (145) of human action. In presenting this “finer vision” Cowper composes a view of virtue more concerned with the pursuit of moral goodness rather than the delineation of categories of right or wrong action. When he abandons his didactic appeals to his

¹⁵ Given the fact that Cowper’s religious conversion and his embrace of rural retreat are chronologically intertwined it is difficult to interpret these lines in any other way. Yet much of Cowper’s verse strays away from direct religious exhortation. His power to suggest the “mysterious ways” of God’s intervention in human life rather than to convert his readers into Evangelical belief allows, I think, for the more capacious interpretation of Cowperian virtue I offer here. Further, given Cowper’s anxieties about his faith, best described by James King as Cowper’s unwavering belief in “God’s extreme and incomprehensible animosity toward him” (57) it is even arguable that we are on firmer interpretive ground if we do not assume that Cowper seeks to convert his readers to a faith that caused him perhaps more pain than pleasure.

¹⁶ A sampling from recent Cowper criticism gives a rough outline of this approach to the term “virtue”: James King praises Cowper’s ability to “call up the virtues of retirement” (114) as an act of Christian piety that merges “the worlds of God and man” (114); Scott Hess argues that Cowper writes poetry primarily to show that his pious, “virtuous exercise of his body and mind” (192) is but one among many “middle-class consumer comforts” Cowper celebrates in *The Task*; and, in his 2015 *William Cowper: A Reevaluation*, Neil Curry claims that Cowper tells his readers the “only intellectual pursuits worth following are those which led to virtue” (173) and increased religious faith.

reader's moral duties—telling them what they ought to do or not do to align their actions with divine law—Cowper often transforms his poetry into a space through which he can ameliorate his ongoing sense of spiritual crisis and momentarily apprehend what he believes may be the benevolent goodness of God.

Cowper's contributions to the 1779 *Olney Hymns* give us a useful entry point for interpreting his distinct approach to virtuous contemplation. Cowper wrote his hymns with his friend the Reverend John Newton, the former slave-trader most famous for writing “Amazing Grace” and his involvement in the abolition movement. Cowper's hymns stand out in the collection because, rather than enjoining a community of worshippers to praise God together, as Newton's hymns do, they often isolate an individual voice that feels its connection to God and community fading. In “Walking with God,” Cowper tells us a story of a person who, after converting has already lost their sense of closeness to God:

Oh for a closer walk with God,
 A calm and heav'nly Frame.
 A Light to shine upon the Road
 That leads me to the Lamb!
 Where is the Blessedness I knew
 When first I saw the Lord?
 Where is the Soul-refreshing View
 Of Jesus in his word? (1-8)

This hymn is part of a cluster of hymns with Biblical verse headings, in this case, Genesis 5.24, which recounts the death of Enoch but also, by suggestion, Genesis 3:8, when Adam and Eve

hear God walking in the garden and hide in the trees from fear.¹⁷ These references, with their valences of sin and death, might have been the occasion for another hymnist to warn the congregation of the mortal dangers their souls face, yet Cowper resists going in this direction. Instead he focuses on the inner struggle of the congregant who seeks a “closer walk” with God; the “blessedness,” the “soul-refreshing view” that his first sight of God occasioned are now out of his reach. It is significant that the activity of “walking” dominates this hymn. Walking is a metaphor for moving *towards* virtue without the expectation of finding virtue. The speaker wishes to be “with God,” to maintain the “soul-refreshing view” that God’s inner presence allows, yet he seems to acknowledge that such a state-of-being is impossible to sustain.

In his most famous hymn, “Light Shining out of Darkness,” Cowper invents the phrase “God moves in a mysterious way” and suggests in the hymn that faith requires God’s worshippers to accept uncertainty. He urges them to be patient with their mysterious God, “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense / But trust him for his Grace, / Behind a frowning Providence / He hides a Smiling face” (13-16) and to accept his obscure ways, “God is his own Interpreter / And he will make it plain” (23-24). The paradox of a God who both moves in “a mysterious way” and who will “make it plain” creates an unsettling tension in the hymn that mirrors Cowper’s own spiritual confusion. Theologically, the speaker’s unfulfilled but animating longing to walk with a “mysterious” God refers to the Evangelical belief that revelation must be indirect and concealed. This view has its roots in Martin Luther’s doctrine of *deus absconditus*—the hidden God—which claims that since we live in a fallen condition, we cannot see God face to face but rather only in fleeting revelations of his grace. Luther articulates this view most clearly in his 1518 *Heidelberg*

¹⁷ Genesis 5:24: “And Enoch walked with God; and he was not; for God took him” and Genesis 3:8: “And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden.”

Disputation when he claims, “those who did not honor God as manifested in his works should honor him as he is hidden in his suffering” (22). Only through our trust in his grace, can we understand and appreciate his “mysterious ways.”¹⁸ Cowper suggests that the speaker must remain ready and receptive for future moments of graceful intervention while at the same time accepting the uncertainty of never knowing when the next moment of grace might arise.

Philosophically Cowper’s conception of a desiring activity that has no propositional outcome in mind also aligns his thinking with a more ancient view of human agency that gives priority to contemplative action. In centering his life on the contemplation of God’s presence, Cowper makes the object of his devotion what the virtue ethicist Talbot Brewer describes as “not a state of affairs to be brought about, but a luminous being already wholly present if not wholly appreciated” (58). The goal of this form of contemplation is the appreciation of the activity of contemplation itself, rather than any discrete outcome. In valuing virtue-inducing contemplation as a method of living, Cowper’s view of ethical agency aligns with a similar, contemplative, and anti-deontological view of virtue advanced in the 20th century by Elizabeth Anscombe, in her 1958 “Modern Moral Philosophy,” Alasdair MacIntyre, in his 1981 *After Virtue*, and Talbot Brewer in his 2009 *The Retrieval of Ethics*, that emphasizes that virtuous human action cannot be accounted for by ethical theories that seek to provide accounts of right or wrong action. These philosophers claim, with varying emphases, that a contemplative view of human action is valuable because it allows humans to increase their dispositions towards goodness, and thus to increase their agency without the impediment of moral duties and laws. Virtue, in this sense, is

¹⁸ Luther’s central claim is that revelation can only be viewed through the human nature of Christ—his suffering and his weakness—as he says in his exposition of the *Disputation*’s twentieth thesis, “true theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ” (22), a recognition which the faithful by their fallen nature have highly restricted access to. To be faithful is to accept that God, as Isaiah 45:15 states, “art a God who hidest thyself,” and to seek out his revealed glory where it seems it should not be. References to Luther’s writings are from *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*.

an activity that we are continuously attempting to carry out, reformulating our approaches as we go along. Brewer aptly summarizes the tenor of this view when he writes, “One of the proper activities of the self is to arrive at a conception of its defining capacity for agency in light of which it can impart a sensible shape to its own deeds, and with respect to which it can understand how those deeds add up over time to a properly human life” (10). Indeed, Cowper has no “project” but instead uses his poetry to approximate a space through which he can more firmly grasp the luminous presence of his God.

There is also a dark side to Cowper’s religious longing. Beginning with his mental breakdown in 1763 until his death in 1800, Cowper believed that no matter how vigorous his spiritual efforts were, he could never obtain God’s love. He longed for a closer walk with God because he was convinced that God did not want to walk with him. His hymn “A Contrite Heart” introduces the tone of this struggling voice. The drama of this hymn rises through the speaker’s building inability to answer the hymn’s central question: “is mine / A contrite heart or no?” (4). What strikes the reader of this hymn is how un-hymn-like it is. Rather than enjoining a spiritual community to join in worship it is a hymn of personal crisis. Thus the “I” in this hymn is not generalized but idiosyncratic:

I hear, but seem to hear in vain,

Insensible as steel;

If ought is felt, ‘tis only pain,

To find I cannot feel.

I sometimes think myself inclin’d

To love thee, if I could;

But often feel another mind,

Averse to all that's good.
 My best desires are faint and few,
 I fain would strive for more;
 But when I cry, 'My strength renew,'
 Seem weaker than before. (5-16)

In each verse the speaker builds tension by deflating their desires as speedily as they announce them. The speaker hears “but seem[s] to hear in vain” (5) and they “sometimes” think they are “inclin'd / to love thee” (9-10) if they could. But the speaker cannot quiet the feeling that they possess another “mind” that is not only incapable of accepting God's love but “averse” to it. With each cry for renewed strength, the speaker “seem[s] weaker” than they were before their conversion. The speaker of this hymn seems convinced that they will not be capable of maintaining their commitment to God. In addressing the question the hymn seeks to answer, “is mine / a contrite heart, or no?” (4), the speaker affirms their contrition yet their guilt is not the guilt of a reformed sinner; it is the guilt of someone unable to uphold their spiritual commitments.

Rather than ending the hymn with a reaffirmation of their commitment to God, demonstrating their ultimate ability to assuage their doubts through the activity of singing the hymn, the speaker cedes all agency to God. They call to God:

O make this heart rejoice, or ache;
 Decide this doubt for me;
 And if it be not broken, break,
 And heal it, if it be. (21-24)

This is a confused conclusion; they want God to “decide this doubt” (22) for them by either breaking their heart if it will lead to the proper amount of contrition required for spiritual renewal or to heal it if instead that it is what their spirit requires to find its faith again. As Neil Curry rightly notes, this is most likely not a hymn that the lace-worker congregants of Olney would have sung.¹⁹ Even if they had, it is arguable that the congregants may have grown as uncertain about their faith as the speaker of this hymn seems to be. We might say that “A Contrite Heart,” is a confessional poem more than it is a hymn. Indeed, Cowper may have discovered in the composition of this poem that his sense of spiritual marginality, no matter how personally debilitating, could be a guiding subject for his verse.

Cowper suffered frequent fears that his heart could never be contrite yet eventually these doubts allowed him to transform his sense of spiritual frailty into a means through which to celebrate the rural landscape of Olney; his sense of marginality allowed him to make himself small and the landscape large in aesthetically profitable ways. In one of the most affirmative sequences in *The Task*, the speaker heralds the poetic liberty that is available to the subject who is willing to become spiritually “rich” by ceasing to usurp the land for himself. This figure is one who:

looks abroad into the varied field
of Nature, and though poor perhaps, compared
With those whose mansions glitter in his sight,

¹⁹ Neil Curry claims that Cowper’s hymns are best read as his “apprenticeship as a poet” (93), noting that very few of Olney’s citizens, most of whom were illiterate laborers in the local lace-making factory, would actually have sung Cowper’s hymns. Whether the hymns were popular with the citizens of Olney or not, they were, and to some degree remain, popular with Evangelicals in England and America. The *Olney Hymns* were published in 1779 and by 1837, there were 37 recorded editions.

Calls the delightful scen'ry all his own" (5.738-741).

To be alert in this way is to be "abroad" and open to variety because one has accepted that this landscape is not "his" but rather God's. Here Cowper invokes the Christian book of nature discourse; through his daily experimental observations of "the delightful scen'ry all his own," he seeks to chart a path leading from nature to God.²⁰ Cowper learned how to read the written word of God in his inner thoughts and his natural surroundings by daily carrying out the devotional practice that his friend John Newton calls, "meditation...a disposition of mind to observe carefully what passes within us and around us; what we see, hear, and feel; and to apply all for the illustration and confirmation of the written word to us" (1.115). Cowper's acceptance of his small place in the natural world arises from his daily practice of seeking clues of God's presence by "see[ing]," "hear[ing]," and "feel[ing]" his inner reflections about and the outer movements of his environment. He presents himself as spiritually "rich" because instead of building glittering mansions he has cultivated techniques for dwelling in, writing about, and reading for gestures of God's presence in his "delightful scen'ry." In accepting that the scenery is not his but God's, his descriptive power of individuation flourishes.

To acknowledge his spiritual comfort in the life of retreat, he claims that no matter how rich and powerful a person is, they cannot experience:

A liberty like his, who unimpeach'd

²⁰ The history of the Christian Book of Nature discourse is almost as long and varied as the history of Christianity. For the purposes of interpreting Cowper's poetry, it bears noting that by 1785, priests and scientists, both Catholic and Protestant, from Origen to Augustine to Galileo to Newton had long been involved in an interpretive project that sought to reconcile the Holy Scriptures of the Bible with the "text" of the natural world. In his authoritative 1992 study, *The Book of Nature* historian Olaf Pedersen notes that the metaphor of the Book of Nature was "on the lip of both lay and learned in the century of the Enlightenment" (5) largely because the metaphor meant "that something about God could be read in the Book of Nature in a way that is not clearly indicated and, therefore, has to be explored" (28). See also Peter Harrison's *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* for a sensitive analysis of the Book of Nature exegetical tradition.

Of usurpation and to no man's wrong,
 Appropriates nature as his father's work,
 And has a richer use of yours, than you.
 He is indeed a freeman. (5.759-763)

This “freeman’s” acts of appropriation are only spiritual. He has “richer use” than the appropriators because he does not strive to have dominion over the land; it is sufficient for him to dwell within the landscape from the “unimpeach’d” perspective of one who refuses to base his authority on his ability to usurp it. This is not just poetic license for Cowper. Though accustomed to the material comforts of country life, Cowper himself was never a landowner and relied upon the financial generosity of friends and family for most of his retired life. Cowper knew personally that he could never possess the landscape except as a poet, and even then, he remained ambivalent about the prospect of poetic possession.²¹ Cowper’s “I” turns towards the prospect of a dimly recognizable goodness lying just out of his reach in his landscape and allows himself to become absorbed in it. He asserts that he is confident in his ability to dwell in the landscape without any desire to possess it spiritually or aesthetically, thus rendering a delicate view of human agency that positions as a virtue one’s ability to relinquish any desires for full control over one’s life.

He best expresses his tentative view of poetic authority as an ethical aspiration to become absorbed in his landscape. Perhaps his most emblematic expression of this aspiration is in “Retirement,” when the speaker addresses God’s creation of natural beauty and argues that the purpose of his “poet’s flame” (85) is to first reveal that, “these are thy glorious works, thou

²¹ James King shows that Cowper lived his adult life relying on the financial assistance of others, including Joseph Hill, Mary Unwin, Lady Austen and the Throckmortons. King closely looks at Cowper’s financial records to find that he had almost no income until his poems began to sell in the mid 1780s. See pages 55-67.

source of good / How dimly seen, how faintly understood!” (87-88) and then, in response, to become “Absorbed in that immensity I see, / I shrink abased, and yet aspire to thee (93-94). He begins in Miltonic certitude. He possesses the “poet’s flame” and has the righteous feeling that his sight is not as dim or faint as others who claim to understand God’s “glorious works” and his radiance “of good.” He will allow nature’s immensity to engross him in hopes that it will no longer be “dimly seen” or “faintly understood.” Yet absorption elicits an immediate retraction of certitude. He is abased, made small, unable to maintain the lucidity of the poet’s flame for more than a single line. He stands back, tries again, and repeats the process in hopes of nearing the “source of good” that nature holds for him. The outcome is not certain and Cowper does not expect it to be. He can only direct us towards his reflections of this unfolding process.

Still Life with Cowper

Embedding himself in the “low vale of life,” Cowper conveys a personal sense of place in his vivid descriptions of his daily walks through Olney. After twenty years of attending to this familiar environment, Cowper felt confident enough about his ability to apprehend his landscape aesthetically that he tells William Unwin, “My descriptions are all from Nature. Not one of them second-handed. My delineations of the heart are from my own experience. Not one of them borrowed from books, or in the least degree conjectural” (2:285). Cowper’s poetry of retirement is “borrowed from books” in that it is indebted to the georgic tradition, yet the persistence of his individual presence in his descriptive verse moves Cowper beyond this tradition.²² As Norman

²² Cowper’s invocation of the georgic—in particular its thematic celebration of rural labor—in “Retirement” and *The Task* shows that he is actively engaging with, and in turn subverting an ancient literary tradition. His modifications of the georgic are a focus of Kevis Goodman’s recent work on Cowper in her *Georgic Modernity* and have been a focal point of Cowper studies. See in particular Richard Feingold’s *Nature and Society, Later Eighteenth-Century Uses of Pastoral and Georgic* and Martin Priestman’s *Cowper’s Task, Structure and Influence*. Cowper draws upon his readers’ familiarity with what Rachel Crawford calls, in her *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape*, “the illusion of subjective freedom provided by the ever-expanding visual world” (31) of the

Nicholson aptly notes, Cowper “can scarcely write a couple of lines of what is intended to be purely factual description without showing his characteristic honesty and hesitation” (20) and thus his landscapes always represent a conversation between him and his environment. Cowper’s conversational style reminds us that conversation is a capacious activity; its meaning in Middle English translates to the “act of living with” (*OED*). By Cowper’s lights, his “first-handed” natural description is only meaningful if it faithfully represents his “act of living with” the ecology of brooks, oaks, hares, goldfinches, friends, gardens and all other living things that populate his environment. His sustained attention to his own experience of living within this landscape and his desire to present these descriptions as conversations between himself and his landscape are the composite parts of his distinct poetry of retirement.

The Task’s opening lines tell us a great deal about the kind of poet William Cowper is. With Virgilian (“I sing”) and Miltonic (“with a trembling hand”) resonances, he writes:

I sing the SOFA. I who lately sang
 Truth, Hope and Charity, and touch’d with awe
 The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,
 Escap’d with pain from that advent’rous flight,
 Now seek repose upon an humbler theme;
 The theme though humble, yet august and proud
 Th’ occasion—for the Fair commands the song. (1.1-7)

georgic to subvert their expectations. Rather than strictly adhering to the conventions of what Crawford calls the “English georgic,” in which “a single center of the world could be represented and nationalized” (25), Cowper poeticizes his actual “subjective freedom” in *The Task*, which by no means represents a unified ideological point of view.

Combining an epic tone with the “humbler theme” of the sofa, Cowper surprises his readers in the first four words of the poem, “I sing the SOFA.” Like the opening of Whitman’s 1855 “Song of Myself,” which begins, “I celebrate myself” (1) and is quickly followed by the speaker’s humbling of his subject matter to “a spear of summer grass” (5), Cowper cleverly deflates his audience’s expectations for a heroic epic. Besides disarming his readers with humor, these lines invite us into an ongoing conversation. By using “I” twice in the first line—“I sing” and “I who lately sang”—he assumes we know who he is and what he has been singing about before we meet him. His “I” comes even nearer to his readers by distancing himself from the abstractions of “Truth, Hope and Charity” and settling upon the theme of a humbler, tangible object. He takes us into his confidence and establishes a tone of conversational familiarity that will guide us through the six books of *The Task*.

Fluent, engaging conversation requires both the speaker and the audience to attend to each other in hopes of arriving at a fuller appreciation or understanding of the subjects being discussed. In *The Task*, Cowper shows us how we might more aptly extend our attention towards ourselves and our surroundings. It is significant that the word “inattentive” is among the many words the first usage of which the *OED* attributes to Cowper.²³ The context in which he first uses this word is instructive. In book six of *The Task*, he critiques Enlightenment scientists and philosophers by arguing that the majority of them spend their time mired in the pursuit of “knowledge, a rude unprofitable mass” (6.92) that wastes all of their intellectual and spiritual energy on “the insupportable fatigue of thought” (6.106). As an antidote, he turns his audience towards the emerging sights and sounds of spring in nature. The bare truth of the bleating of

²³ According to the *OED*, Cowper is the 34th most quoted source in the *OED*, with a total of 5924 citations (1772 from *The Task* alone), 94 quotations providing evidence of a first word, and 501 quotations providing evidence of a word’s particular meaning. This puts him well behind Shakespeare (#2) and Milton (#7) but ahead of Pope (#42), Johnson (#47), Swift (#52), and Coleridge (#57).

lambs, primroses peeping through snowy moss, and the sound of a tiny rivulet defying the “check of winter,” can “deceive no student” (6.114):

Wisdom there, and truth,
 Not shy as in the world, and to be won
 By slow solicitation, seize at once
 The roving thought, and fix it on themselves.
 What prodigies can pow’r divine perform
 More grand, than it produces year by year,
 And all in sight of inattentive man? (6.114-120, emphasis mine)

The “inattentive man” is so consumed by the “fatigue of thought,” that he loses access to the spiritual wisdom and truth that can seize his “roving thoughts” and direct him towards the divine presences that reveal themselves in nature. Cowper devalues the fact-finding mission of this disinterested, rational man by framing his process as a “slow solicitation,” a wasteful habit of gathering and deliberating upon new knowledge in hopes of finding first causes, and gives priority to “wisdom’s” and “truth’s” abilities to briefly and potently “seize / at once” the grace inherent in the coming of spring.²⁴ By devoting his intellectual energy to the compilation of facts, man has rendered himself “inattentive;” he has forgotten how to perform the activity of attentive contemplation.

²⁴ Cowper nevertheless was keenly interested in the developments of the new science of his day. He read and highly praised Sir Isaac Newton in *The Task*—“Newton, childlike sage! / Sagacious reader of the works of God” (3.252-253), studied microscopes by reading Henry Baker’s popular *The Microscope Made Easy* (1.272-273), and closely followed William Herschel’s astronomic adventures, referring to Herschel’s discovery of Uranus in *The Task* (3.230-232). Yet he also attacked the Earl of Shaftesbury’s deism in in book five of *The Task*, calling his writings a “rant and rhapsody” (5.677) that “cannot charm / Th’ eclipse that intercepts truth’s heav’nly beam” (5.682-683) and decried Hume’s popularity in a letter to John Newton, “he is the Pope of thousands as blind and as presumptuous as himself. God certainly infatuates those who will not see” (2: 110). His critiques of Enlightenment thinkers are best understood not as a refutation of the findings of their epistemological projects but of the un-Christian “presumptuous[ness]” by which he believed Shaftesbury’s and Hume’s projects were guided.

Attention for Cowper is not just a mental procedure but a metaphor for being. In her *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century*, Margaret Koehler makes the potent claim that *The Task* can profitably be interpreted as a participatory poem of attention in which Cowper “invites the reader to learn and participate in...the task of attention” (181). Koehler makes the compelling claim that *The Task* has a “teacherly orientation” (181) through which Cowper employs his own attention to show his readers how to hone their abilities to sustain states of willed attention.²⁵ Yet by employing a psychoanalytic framework to interpret Cowper’s poetry of attention, Koehler elides the important relationship between faith and attention in Cowper’s work.²⁶ In his letters Cowper claims that his interest in crafting a poetry of sustained attention arose primarily from his desire to avoid his “dejection of spirits”: “which I suppose may have prevented many a man from becoming an Author...I find constant employment necessary, and therefore take care to be constantly employ’d. Manual occupation does not engage the mind sufficiently...but Composition, especially of verse, absorbs it wholly” (2:382-383). One can only make sufficient use of the mind if one is “wholly” absorbed in the process of composition. But for Cowper, to be “wholly” absorbed is to be spiritually absorbed. Despite his wavering sense of religious purpose,

²⁵ The question of the role of audience in Cowper’s work has generated some controversy. While most scholars agree that *The Task* has the teacherly orientation Koehler assigns it, others, like Scott Hess, claims that because Cowper’s conversational, associational style offers no “coherent role for his readers” (194) it can be read as nothing more than the “venting of a parlor prophet” (194). Kevis Goodman argues that Cowper does write for an audience but that his constant need to connect with his audience can also be interpreted, particularly in long moralizing passages, as a “desperate attempt to keep up the conversation—any conversation” (86). Hess and Goodman are right to point out the excesses of Cowper’s conversational strategy, yet despite its flaws, this conversational style is what distinguishes Cowper from his contemporaries. Norman Nicholson’s summation, in his 1951 *William Cowper*, remains apt, “*The Task* is not a philosophical poem, not a reflective, not even an autobiographical poem. It is discursive, a conversation recorded, a correspondence preserved” (90).

²⁶ Koehler brings together Theodore Reik’s concept of “diffuse attention” and Karen Horney’s concept of “unlimited receptivity” to show that Cowper’s attention is not strictly “selective” but instead “diffuse” because it continually seeks multiple attractors rather than a unitary point of focus. Koehler makes the fruitful claim, to which my study of Cowper is indebted, that the strength of Cowper’s poetry of attention is its ability to continually defer the immediate selection of attractors in favor of priming the “remote nodes” (186) of his landscape by cataloging and lingering over them before reflecting on them, and in turn, teaching us how to sustain our own similar states of “unlimited receptivity” as his readers.

his poetry frequently seeks to make his readers aware of the not-yet appreciated yet wholly present luminous being that radiates his landscapes. In order to do so, Cowper asks himself and his readers to submit to the premise that the “freeman whom the truth makes free” (6.733) is the person who looks “abroad into the varied field / Of Nature” (6.738-739) and increases their joy and their attentional fluency—a heightened ability to at once apprehend near and remote attractors and to reflect upon one’s own embodied experience of attending to these attractors—by accepting that the word of God dwells in nature. A person capable of accepting God’s authorship is a person who, “with filial confidence inspired / Can lift to heav’n an unpresumptuous eye, / And smiling say-my father made them all” (6.745-747). Joy, confidence, and poetic authority arise from the poet’s submission to a world that moves in an intractable and “mysterious” way in which we are to trust for its grace. Cowper’s attention is always directed towards skillfully naming and noticing the natural details—from the obvious to the fringe—through which he believes God’s presence reveals itself.

We can more closely link Cowper’s attention and his spiritual longings if we think of his sustained attempts to closely observe his surroundings from the fluid standpoint of a subjective participant as his poetic version of what William James calls “the prayerful life.” As James points out in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, there is a strain in Christianity that posits believers must use prayer to enhance their abilities to carry out a “led” (423) existence rather than relying upon a petitional form of prayer that encourages a “beggarlike fashion” (423) of living. A “led” existence in James’s view is one that engages in “experimental religion and the prayerful life” (417) through which “we seem ourselves to be the actors, and to act, not in a play, but in a very serious reality” (417). To use prayer as an organizing practice through which they build connections between spiritual feeling and conative ability, the prayerful person is

“experimental” in that they seek new expressions of meaning in nature that allow them conceive more fluently of the breadth of God’s presence. Prayer, by his lights, is a daily practice that cultivates “the continuous sense of our connection with the power that made things as they are” (424) and tempers us “more towardly for their reception” (424). We can think of Cowper’s poetry of attention as prayerful in this “experimental” way because he seeks to position himself as more “towardly” or receptive to what he believes is a “continuous sense of connection” between himself and the luminous presence that shapes his world. Turned towards this dimly recognizable presence, he entreats us to participate in his intimate interchanges with it, to feel ourselves among the material and spiritual presences he believes compose the “very serious reality” of his prayerful life.

For Cowper, God’s presence was more often a burden than a source of joy. Yet he seemed to believe, especially in his most optimistic poetry, that he carried out a “led” life in the way that James characterizes it—an experimental life that sought to harness enough inner strength so that it could align itself with the fluid fluctuations of the world rather than a petitional life engaged in a one-way conversation with God. James’s alignment of “the prayerful life” with “attention” resonates both with Simone Weil’s concept that attention is a prayer-like faculty that one builds up through a sustained, willful effort and Iris Murdoch’s characterization of the term “attention,” which she claims to borrow from Weil, as “the idea of a just and loving gaze directed upon an individual reality” (327). James, Weil, and Murdoch have in common their suggestions that attention is a habit built through prayerful practice and that this prayerful practice increases moral agency. Though Cowper’s faith wavered, his habit of fixing his “just and loving gaze” on his inner life remained the central activity of his life.

Cowper makes perception the central focus in this process of attending to the “very serious reality” of lived religious experience. Cowper is acutely aware that the activity of perception informs his experience of being. In fact, the nearest he comes to employing an organizational strategy in *The Task* is to follow the undulations of the activity of his perception as he walks, gardens, makes a fire, reads the newspaper, or converses with friends and family. The closer we look at Cowper’s poetry of perception, the more it seems that his poetry validates what Alva Noë and other recent philosophers of perception claim is the central fact of perceptual experience, “perception is not something that happens to us or in us. It is something we do” (1). In *Action in Perception*, Noë argues that perception is best characterized as a “skillful bodily activity” (2) because in everyday experience we are continually aware of the effects of movement on our sensory stimulation to the extent that in reality our embodiment is not just a supplement to our perception but actually constitutes perception. One of Noë’s most fruitful claims is that it may be impossible to posit the existence of an inert perceiver, because even in the most extreme cases, like in paralyzed patients who still rely on small but potent applications of sensorimotor knowledge—the blink of an eye or the lifting of a finger—sensation still constitutes experience: “To imagine a truly inert perceiver is to imagine someone without the sensorimotor knowledge needed to enact perceptual content” (17).²⁷ This “truly inert perceiver,” in his view, is a rarity. The majority of us are engaged in the activity of perception every day, whether we are consciously aware of this or not.

²⁷ In my view, Noë’s work is distinctive, and thus worth bringing into my analysis, because of its explicit engagement with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s efforts to insert bodily experience into phenomenology in his 1945 *Phenomenology of Perception*. In the context of Cowper’s work, it is worth briefly quoting Merleau-Ponty, whose frequent lyricism may prove a better match for Cowper than the current discourse offers, “my field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my clearly perceived world, yet which I nonetheless immediately ‘place’ in the world, without ever confusing them with my dreams” (xi *Phenomenology of Perception*).

Cowper's method of guiding readers through his personal landscapes of perception gives us an intimate view of, to borrow Noë's phrase, how "we do" perception. One of his earliest critics, Samuel Badcock of the *Monthly Review*, felt Cowper's subjective framing destabilized *The Task* and complained that the poem is "composed of reflections that seem independent of one another; and there is no *particular* subject either discussed or aimed at" (416). But Cowper unifies his "reflections" around the single fact that they are his own. Such a digressive plan may have seemed odd to his contemporaries, but it was, in Cowper's view, a plan nonetheless, which he describes to William Unwin in 1784, "if the work cannot boast a regular plan...it may yet boast that the reflections are naturally suggested always by the preceding passage" (2:285). The key words in this passage are "naturally suggested." His plan is "irregular" because his perceptual experiences themselves do not follow a strict pattern; the poem invites the reader to expect digression will be its operating procedure.

Though Cowper attempts to distill his organizational method in his chronological lists of subjects in the "argument" headings that precede each book, it is the digressive ease with which Cowper guides us through his reflections, not his varying subject matter, that vivifies *The Task*. For example, in "The Argument of the Fourth Book," he writes, "The post comes in.—The news-paper is read.—The world contemplated at a distance.—Address to Winter.—The amusements of a rural winter evening compared with the fashionable ones.—Address to evening.—A brown study." While this sequence of subjects gives an acceptable overview of the beginning of book four, it does not account for the subtle shifts in the speaker's consciousness through which we encounter these subjects. Thus in this sequence the post does not just "come in" and the newspaper is read. But rather "the herald of a noisy world /with splattered boots" (4.5-6) drops the post, whistles, the sound of which impels the speaker to wonder if the postman

is a messenger of grief or joy, which then leads him to ruminate about opium, and Indian independence, and finally to silence his speculations by getting up to stir the fire and close his shutters in order to begin reading the newspaper. Here and throughout *The Task*, the poet-speaker's sequence of perceiving follows the singular path of what he calls "the task of new discoveries" (1.218). Cowper situates himself in a continuum of experience that is notable in its presentation of his own perception as a single temporally extended activity, rather than a fractured series of disparate mental wanderings.²⁸ In perceptually probing and reflecting upon his experience of probing his surroundings, he provides a model of how the ongoing activity of perception—the fact that we are never "inert perceivers"—structures the intricate ways in which the world presents itself as meaningful to us.

To seize his "roving thoughts" actively while walking, gardening, and talking, the speaker of *The Task* habitually "stills" his surroundings.²⁹ An exemplary use of this rhetorical technique comes early in the poem. After leaving the sofa to take a vigorous walk to a prospect view, he observes that his "relish of fair prospect" has not diminished with age: "scenes that sooth'd / Or charm'd me young, no longer young, I find / *Still* soothing and of power to charm me *still*" (1.141-143 emphasis mine). Rhetorically, his repetition of "still" at the beginning and end of the final quoted verse employs *symploce*, which produces the effect of parallel

²⁸ It is tempting to interpret Cowper's associational method as a shorthand for what neuroscientist's call the mind's "default network," or its supposed "resting state," which neuroimaging has shown is almost as active—by carrying out the mental processes of prospection and retrospection—as our goal-oriented, or executive functioning, states of mind. See Randy Buckner discussion of his and his colleague's work in the 2008 article "The Brain's Default Network: Anatomy, Function, and Relevance to Disease." Marshall Brown offers the strongest argument in *Preromanticism* when he claims that, that through this associational method Cowper unwittingly unearthed a map of the "subrational mind" (69) best interpreted as "a waking dream, a long string of loosely connected, flickering images" (69). This interpretive frame may be applicable to the rare moments in *The Task* when Cowper lets his mind wander but as an overall theory, it falls short by failing to account for Cowper's outward-directed attention.

²⁹ To my knowledge only one Cowper critic, John Mee in his 2011 *Conversable Worlds*, has made any notice of this "stilling" technique, and in doing so he seeks to emphasize this technique's influence on Coleridge's similar oxymoronic repetitions of the word "still" to create a sense of "expansion to the universal point of stillness" (181) in his conversation poems. Giving the frequency with which Cowper employs the technique and its apparent influence on Coleridge (and perhaps Wordsworth), it is strange that so few critics have made any notice of it.

elaboration. This scene has soothed and charmed him in the past and it still soothes and charms him now; through *symploce* he posits a phenomenological equivalence between the speaker's past and present experiences of this scene. Yet this parallel elaboration has a physiological twist. By making himself the object of stillness' charming power in the phrase, "of power to charm me still," the speaker also presents himself as a physical body at rest. His perception of the scene's beauty is the result of both his repeated ventures into the scene and his skillful ability to take a break from his walking to calmly contemplate his scene. The speaker is at once perceptually in motion and entirely "still," alternately relaxing and contracting his attention to his surroundings in an oscillating pattern that mirrors the beating heart. His "stilling" is an activity that increases his embodied awareness of the scene as vigorously as his walking through it does.

Through this strategy of temporally and physiologically "stilling" himself within his scenes, the speaker plants his perceptual experience of the scene into it, making himself receptive to the elements just as the scene itself. He feels the wind yet he is "scare conscious that it blew" (1.156) because he is instead focused on an "admiration feeding at the eye" (1.157), a feeling that the scene is blessing him with heightened awareness as much as he is bestowing his heightened awareness upon it.³⁰ In this moment, Cowper inserts himself as an element as vital as the natural phenomena in the scene he is describing. With his increased awareness, the speaker's visual acuity increases as he fills in a detail-rich and widely distributed view of a rural landscape brimming with activity. We are impelled to stretch our perceptual resources as he allows the scene to rapidly "conduct the eye" (1.165) from his view of a the continual motion of a slow-moving plough and cattle so distant that they seem to be "sprinkled" (1.164) into the horizon, to

³⁰ Margaret Koehler offers the most apt reading of this moment by arguing that Cowper breaks away from the visio-centric model of the disinterested prospect view by performing a transfer between subject and scene that dissolves aesthetic boundaries traditionally separating subjects from scenes so that "eye and scene...blend, exchange capacities, and collaborate eagerly" (184).

a “never overlook’d” (1.167) and thus visually dominant grove of elms surrounding a herdsman’s hut, to a softly-focused image in which “the sloping land recedes into the clouds” (1.171) impelling him to follow the sloping horizon to the sound and sight of a “tall spire, from which the sound of cheerful bells / Just undulates upon the list’ning ear” (1.174-175). By regularly shifting focus from diffuse to sharp details, he “stills” the scene and, in turn, increases our own ability to apprehend it in greater detail. After many years of practice, he and his companion can make themselves “still” enough to “still” unveil the affective power of this scene. Thus he writes in the tag that concludes this scene, “Scenes must be beautiful which daily view’d / Please daily” (1.177-178). This skillful practice of diffuse attention affords him the “daily” dose of beauty present in this scene and thus sustains his desire to again seek the scene’s “admiration” and continue to sharpen his responsiveness to it.

Doses of visual attention in *The Task* are frequently accompanied by intervals of auditory attention. To remind us of his rhetorical presence, in the verse-paragraph that follows this prospect view, Cowper interjects a potent claim: “nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds / exhilarate the spirit, and restore / the tone of languid Nature” (1.181-183). It seems that the process of widening his perceptual range in the previous scene has afforded him increased fluency through which to render the scene; no matter how skillfully he portrays his visual experiences, without the insertion of “rural sounds” the scene will lack the kinetic energy he encounters in his daily walks.³¹ The speaker demonstrates how one might more accurately listen

³¹We can also read the phrase “nor rural sights alone / but rural sounds” (1.181-182) as a critique of the disinterested visiocentrism of his day. By seeking to integrate the subjective processes of seeing and hearing into his landscapes, he makes the experience of attending to a scene, as Tim Fulford best puts it, “more delicate, more uncertain, but more deeply human than was the case in earlier eighteenth-century landscape-description” (61). To render a scene more delicately and more “deeply human” Cowper knew that he had to more fully incorporate the “listen’ing ear” into the scene than any of his predecessors.

to one's environment through an extended meditation on his experience of hearing his landscape. He is drawn in by the sound of:

Mighty winds

That sweep the skirt of some far-spreading wood
Of ancient growth, make music not unlike
The dash of ocean on his winding shore,
And lull the spirit while they fill the mind (1.183-187).

The “mighty winds” activate the speaker’s heightened auditory attention; by listening for the effects of these winds he hears the swaying foliage of an old-growth forest and the music of sea water spraying on a winding shore. Because Cowper seeks to “restore the tone of languid Nature,” he imbues these sounds with the resonances of God’s presence. The “mighty winds” first “exhilarate the spirit” by jolting the speaker to attend to the rural sounds that reveal God. Then after his attention is fixed upon these sounds long enough, his spirit is “lull[ed]” into a calm acceptance of the living Word surrounding him. Now instead of reading the book of nature through “rural sights alone” the speaker is listening to the book’s animating voice. In this receptive state, the speaker allows sounds to “fill the mind” and to submit himself to the variegated sounds of the scene. Cowper’s use of the word “lull” is an auditory variation of his “still[ing].” The promise of an interval of quiet inactivity draws us into a scene of heightened perception. Yet the scene is anything but quiet; it is animated by both the sounds themselves and the speaker’s attention to the ways in which the sounds “fill the mind.”

In this receptive state, he attunes himself to sounds softer than the “mighty wind,” like the “softer voice”:

Of neighb’ring fountain, or of rills that slip

Through the cleft rock, and, chiming as they fall
 Upon loose pebbles, lose themselves at length
 In matted grass, that with a livelier green
 Betrays the secret of their silent course. (1.192-195)

The speaker's auditory focus shifts in the order in which he becomes aware of these sounds. As his focus shifts, the scales of sounds shift; the fountain, compared with the "mighty wind" is a "softer voice," while the "slipping" of rills over a rock is nearly inaudible, but the sound of the rill "falling" upon "loose pebbles" is a chime. Finally, the speaker perceives all sounds issuing into the blended visual and auditory event he calls "the livelier green." The result is a scene that does not feel constructed by Cowper but rather apprehended through the perceptual activity of the speaker's shifting auditory focus from the middle, to the near, to the distant. Cowper's ability to render this scene as a natural, casual occurrence is particularly dependent on the music of his verse. We vividly apprehend this scene because Cowper invites us to sound it out for ourselves; the rills "slip," the "loose pebbles," lose themselves, the matted grass contains the "secret" of a "silent course." Through the shifting auditory focus and musical language of this sequence, Cowper presents the speaker's perceptual experience as a relational ecology of distinct sound events.³² The "distant flood," like the "mighty wind," impels the speaker to associate with it a seeming opposite—the modest, soft voice of a "neighb'ring" man-made fountain. With his attention now alert to an interconnected web of "softer voices," the speaker hears a polyphony of "rills," small, calm channels of water that first "slip," then "chime," as they fall upon "loose

³² In referring to the notion of sound as a "distinct sound event" I am glossing a position that the philosopher of perception, Casey O'Callaghan's voices in his *Sounds: A Philosophical Theory*: "particular sounds are events of oscillating or interacting bodies disturbing or setting a surrounding medium into wave motion" (60). That is, audition on O'Callaghan's view is "a spatial perceptual modality" (29); sounds must be studied and made sense of phenomenally as particular events in time and space.

pebbles.” This oscillation between faint “slip[ing]” and resonant “chime[ing]” impels us to perceive seemingly minuscule sounds as readily as we perceive louder sounds—“mighty winds”—that more easily command our attention. Even the absence of sound becomes a dynamic sound event here, as the “rills” “lose themselves” in “matted grass,” and can only be described in visual terms—“a livelier green.”³³

Through apprehending all of these sounds the poet is led to a proposition: “Nature inanimate employs sweet sounds, / But animated Nature sweeter still / To sooth and satisfy the human ear” (1.196-198). He again incorporates his “still[ing]” technique so that “sweeter still” means both “even more sweet” but also “sweeter” when momentarily rendered “still” enough for a perceiver to behold the unfolding web of both external natural activity and his own perceptual process of registering this natural activity. “Inanimate nature” in and of itself—the raw elements of “rural nature” that we, the readers, take for granted—contains all that we might behold as vivid, and thus sweet, but we fail to hear it because we are unable to enact the propitious conditions through which nature reveals itself as “animate.” We can only perceive it as animate when we make ourselves still enough to attend to our dynamic sound environment.

In “still[ing]” landscapes so that they can more vividly unfold to us, Cowper carries out what he calls the “silent task” (3.378) of the retired poet. Unlike busy professionals toiling in the city, he makes his occupation the “silent task” of transposing his subjective apprehensions of

³³ I have gleaned a possible interpretation of this sudden flash of color from Noë’s *Action in Perception*. He argues that we can describe sounds as “color-like” and “sound perception like color perception” because “colors are *visually salient* ways *objects* affect their environment” and “Sounds, in comparison, are *audibly salient* ways in which *events* affect their environment” (161). Following Noë’s logic, the close proximity of “audible salience” and “visual salience” in this sequence correlates these two perceptual processes with each other—his perception of the “livelier green’s” “visual salience” seems to be no different phenomenally than Cowper’s perception of the “audible salience” of the “fountains” and “rills.” On this view, Cowper seems to suggest that we see the livelier green and hear the “rills” in much the same way.

nature into vivifying verse. Rehearsing an argument he makes frequently in his letters and poems, he claims that this “silent task” should be desired and carried out by everyone:

He that attends to his interior self,
 That has a heart and keeps it; has a mind
 That hungers and supplies it; and who seeks
 A social, not a dissipated life,
 Has business. Feels himself engaged t’achieve
 No unimportant, though a silent task. (3.374-378).

Attending to his “interior self” is no simple task for Cowper. Yet he makes it his “business” to listen and respond to his own reflections about his daily doings because it maintains his connectedness to the world, rather than drawing him away from it. A dissipated life is a scattered, unfocused life, while a social life is a life of engagement with friends, readers, and one’s sentient surroundings.³⁴ In his view, the task of living such a life is “silent” both because it draws little attention to itself and because it requires the retired person to experience long intervals of quiet stillness.

To demonstrate the perceptual acuity which he has honed through his repeated practice of returning to scenes that “please daily,” the speaker opens book six with a return to the landscape he guides us through in book one. It is now late winter instead of fall. The promise of spring looms in the distance as the speaker apprehends the sounds of the same church bells he hears in

³⁴ See in *The Task*: “a task that bids defiance to the united powers / Of fashion, dissipation, taverns, stews” (2.770). The *OED* cites this as a quotation providing the first evidence of dissipation meaning, “Waste of the moral and physical powers by undue or vicious indulgence in pleasure; intemperate, dissolute, or vicious mode of living” (“dissipation” Entry 6). Thus Cowper may also be implying “moral waste” here.

book one. He claims that souls have “a sympathy with sounds” (6.1) and guides us through his experience of perceiving the reverberations of these bells:

Falling at intervals upon the ear
 In cadence sweet! now dying all away,
 Now pealing loud again and louder still,
 Clear and sonorous as the gale comes on.
 With easy force it opens all the cells
 Where mem’ry slept. (6.7-12).

It is not the “clear and sonorous” sound of the bell alone that awakens his memory of the first prospect, to which he decides to bring us as a result of this listening experience in the following section, but his apprehension of the intervals between relative quietness and relative noisiness. The “cadence sweet” created by the loud and quiet modulations is this passage’s perceptual center. He renders these modulations, or cadences, “sweet” by drawing out its intervals in real time. It is “now dying,” then “pealing loud again” and finally “louder still,” as if it the most seemingly still when it is reverberating the loudest.

In exposing us to a sound event that returns him to the first landscape scene of the poem, he reminds us to keep his assertion “nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds / exhilarate the spirit, and restore / the tone of languid Nature” (1.181-183) at hand as we again explore this scene. The echoing bells continue to reverberate—“I again perceive / the soothing influence of the wafted strains” (6.67)—as he walks, providing a point of contrast to the sheltered, quiet path that the “outspread branches” (6.71) of oaks and elms have provided. It is not silent but it is still and conducive to intensified perceptual awareness, “No noise is here, or none that hinders thought” (6.76). In a brief sequence, he listens to the slight warbles of a robin, notes that the bird seems

content in receiving only “flitting light” (6.79) as he jumps from branch to branch, in turn forcing drops of melting ice to fall and “tinkle” in the “wither’d leaves below” (6.83). He attends not just to the bird’s song but to the environment in which it seems to flourish despite the exigencies of winter. It has shelter to survive and bursts of heat to stay warm. In turn, the melting water that tinkles down to the ground helps to keep the trees that support the red breast sheltered and alive.

The speaker intertwines the fortitude and inner strength of nature with the intrinsic goodness of rural quiet. Nature itself seems to be involved in a “silent task” at all times—it thrives but in ways that do not make themselves readily known to those unable or unwilling to explore the ways in which it thrives. Thus the speaker observes: “Stillness accompanied with sounds so soft / Charms more than silence. Meditation here / May think down hours to moments” (6.83-85). As Cowper has sought to show throughout *The Task*, “stillness” is never static; it is always “accompanied” by the concomitant motion of our perceptual experience. Such moments of stillness, unlike bare silence, allow the speaker to meditate within his surroundings, to hear himself thinking within a dynamic environment—not cutting himself off from it, yielding an ability to “think down hours to moments.” These “still[ings]” may last for an hour, but poetically they are reduced to a few lines of verse. Such bursts of perceptual experience are distillations of similar such bursts that the speaker presents himself to be in the continuous process of exploring. The work of thinking hours down to moments is thus hard-earned because it never ceases.³⁵

A lesson Cowper impels us to take from *The Task* is that if we attend carefully to these small, still moments, we can enlarge our perceptual fields, which, in turn will make us feel less

³⁵ As proof of his ongoing practice of “thinking down hours,” in a 1780 letter to John Newton, Cowper writes, “if every human being upon earth could think for one quarter of an hour, as I have done for many years, there might perhaps be many unconverted miserable men among them, but not an unawakened one would be found from the Arctic to the Antarctic circle” (1:335).

“dissipated.”³⁶ Cowper best describes the result of this activity as the continuous feeling of enlargement: “now with a pleasant pace, a cleanlier road / I mean to tread. I feel myself at large, / Courageous, and refresh’d for future toil. (3.18-20). What is striking about this statement is that Cowper claims he “feels” himself “at large” though in this moment in the poem he has simply walked out from his house to his small vegetable garden. He is by no means “at large” on the “open road” in the Whitmanic sense; he is within a manageable and familiar space. Yet turned towards the garden, he feels himself to be receptive to a diffuse field of attractors and confident in his ability to “toil” through the process of uncovering the intricate ways in which these attractors make themselves present in his field of perception. The “cleanlier road” he is capable of treading covers a physically small space that is nevertheless teeming with possibility. He only requires that he *feels* at large in order to widen his perceptual field.

Even when he presents himself as silent or still Cowper always emphasizes the active element of perception. This is in part because he fears that too much stillness will lead to spiritual and mental discord, as he tells John Newton in 1780, “the meshes of that fine network, the brain, are composed of such mere spinners’ threads in me, that when a long thought finds its way into them, it buzzes, and twangs, and bustles at such a rate as seems to threaten the whole contexture” (1:367). From reading James Beattie’s *Dissertations Moral and Critical*, he was aware of a distinction between “attention,” which gives us “command of our thoughts, and enables us at all times to act readily” (28) and “reverie,” in which the mind merely wanders, seeming “all along to be passive, and to exert as little authority over its thoughts, as the eye does

³⁶ In my view, this is what Coleridge means when he praises Cowper in *Biographia Literaria* for being “the first who combined natural thoughts with natural diction; the first who reconciled the heart with the head” (168-9) and, why Wordsworth claims in an 1814 letter that, “I assure you that, with the exception of Burns and Cowper, there is very little of recent verse, however much it may interest me, that sticks to my memory (*I mean which I get by heart*)” (3:180). Getting Cowper “by heart” for Coleridge and Wordsworth meant absorbing both his conversational style and his abilities to align perceptual acuity with ethical agency.

over the persons who pass before it in the street” (114). As we have seen, Cowper much prefers “attention,” because it seems to keep him out of the “buzzes, and twangs, and bustles” that might threaten to destabilize his frequently delicate mental state. Thus in “Retirement” he refers to reveries as “those flimsy webs that break as soon as wrought” (639) and devotes most of his verse in *The Task* to his explorations of controlled but diffuse attentional landscapes. We might say that Cowper distrusts reverie because he fears that his mind will wander to territories so dark that he might not return from them.

Yet, one of the most frequently discussed passages in *The Task* is a brief moment in which the speaker drifts into a half-sleeping state by the fire and allows his mind to wander (4.273-307). The moment that draws the most critical notice is the speaker’s claims that we all momentarily feel “a stupor” (4.283) of an “unthinking mind” (4.279) as we engage in occasional reveries. Staring at the fire he feels himself:

creating what I saw.

Nor less amused have I quiescent watch’d
 The sooty films that play upon the bars
 Pendulous, and foreboding in the view
 Of superstition prophesying still
 Though still deceived, some stranger’s near approach.
 ‘tis thus the understanding takes repose
 In indolent vacuity of thought,
 And sleeps and is refresh’d. (4.290-297)

It is hard not to read this as a pre-Coleridgean scene of indolent mind wandering. Indeed, following Coleridge’s example—whom he argues uses this passage as his model for “Frost at

Midnight”—Marshall Brown views this moment as a Romantic, “epochal innovation” that values “the divorce of consciousness from attention” (69) and allows poetry to become a space for the autonomous free play of the imagination. While Brown is right to suggest that in this passage Cowper gives precedence to the power of the imagination, or what he calls his “indolent vacuity of thought” (3.297), in my view this is too exceptional a moment in Cowper’s verse to occasion such a sweeping conclusion.

Kevis Goodman more accurately assesses this scene by claiming that Cowper never achieves, nor seeks to achieve, autonomy. Rather, what is striking about his “vacuity of thought” is that it is “acutely open to context, so that the affective consciousness represented is not a recess or retreat but an aperture, a medium—a loophole—through which the world’s strangeness enters” (90). Goodman is right to draw attention to Cowper’s porousness here; Cowper is always “acutely open to context” in *The Task*. Here, the context shifts from the material world in which he dwells towards the context of his interior world. He may not be describing his experience of a prospect but he is still attending closely to what happens to him when the “understanding takes repose.” His attention is directed to the context of his unthinking mind, and as such he only allows this drift to go so far. Thus while he is drawn in here by the “sooty film,” he is quick to react to his reveries about its potentially auspicious meaning as “superstition.” By the end, he claims that the “indolent vacuity” of thought is not a destination but a stopping place that allows for perceptual refreshment. To signal this, he quickly transitions from the fireside to his account of his earlier experience that evening looking at the “variegated show” (4.311) of the woods at sunset hours before he dozes at the fire. Cowper’s quick movement back to concrete description suggests that he views his momentary reverie to be situated in the context of his continuous

perceptual explorations; his “stupor” has simply reinvigorated his aptitude for describing his perceptual experiences.

Retirement Re-Figured

Even in this scene of apparently joyful indolence, Cowper is acutely aware that he risks charges of acedic waste and labors to present his indolence as an engagement with the world rather than an apathetic turn away from it.³⁷ Cowper presents his indolence as an unfortunate but unalterable fact of spiritual life. Similar to the desert monks who initiated the discourse of acedia, Cowper’s somnolence represents what Siegfried Wenzel calls the “thought process” (14) of acedia through which a monk activates a “spiritual fight” (14) between his spiritual restlessness and his desire to fix his attention on God.³⁸ Cowper is in fact anxious enough about portraying himself in a state of lethargy in this scene that he quickly turns our perspective to a view of how he might look to his companion: “Meanwhile the face / Conceals the mood lethargic with a mask of deep deliberation, as the man / Were task’d to his full strength, absorb’d and lost” (4.300-303). He may be reveling in the “mood lethargic,” but from the outside, he believes, he

³⁷ Kevis Goodman argues that this scene may have created the conditions for a “semantic shift” that allows for the Romantic notion of indolence as a space for the “play of aesthetic perception” (72), but unlike his Romantic descendants Cowper is, in my view, uncomfortable aesthetically lingering in indolence. It is possible that, as Goodman claims, he is a transitional figure between an eighteenth-century de-valuation of indolence and a Romantic revaluation of indolence, “at the position of pivot between the emptiness of *acedia* and the fullness of aesthetic experience” (106). Yet as Willard Spiegelman argues in his 1995 *Majestic Indolence*, Romantics like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats, to differing degrees, developed a “program for both spiritual and aesthetic sensitivity” (18) centered on their shared view that these spiritual and aesthetic sensitivities were most potent when resulting from sustained states of indolence. Given how infrequently Cowper explores his “indolent vacuities of thought,” at best we might say that he played a minor role in affecting this “semantic shift.”

³⁸ In his authoritative analysis of acedia, *The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature*, Wenzel neatly summarizes acedia as sin that requires spiritual and physical combat. Egyptian desert monks like Thomas Evagrius (36-399) were in constant fear of either succumbing to a pleasurable sleep, “dangerous because it opens the door to many other temptations,” including the temptation to leave the religious life altogether. The only response is “to practice endurance and patience” through prayer, reading, recitation of psalms, and “work by hand, the great remedy practiced and taught by all the experienced fathers” (6). Cowper’s fixations on prayer, reading, walking, and working by hand clearly take part in this Christian monastic tradition of actively combating acedia, best summarized in Cowper’s phrase in *The Task* “his warfare is within” (6.935).

appears to be deep in thought. He playfully masks his indolence as a form of “deep deliberation,” suggesting his discomfort in being perceived, even momentarily, as indolent. In his view, it is the “inattentive” urban citizens where real indolence dwells: “How various his employments, whom the world / Calls idle, and who justly in return / Esteems that busy world an idler too!” (3.352-354). Unlike those dwelling mindlessly in the world, he is at work cultivating his perceptual awareness, his vegetable gardens, and his relationships with his loved ones. Indolence may provide a momentary delight when enjoyed in the warmth of the fire among friends, but it is not a destination.

Indolence, in Cowper’s view, also leads to an untenable solitude, which is an attendant danger in the life of retreat. In the fireside scene he is embedded within the material and social comforts of his home. His companions are there, his books are there, his newspapers are there, his musical instruments are there—the world is with him. He admires the idea of solitary retreat, but only as an idea. In book one of *The Task*, he comes upon what he calls a peasant’s nest. This small shelter is at first an idealized site of retreat, a “peaceful covert” (1.233) and a “poet’s treasure” (1.235) yet the more he describes the scene the more it presents itself as a site of privation to him:

the dweller in that still retreat

Dearly obtains the refuge it affords.

Its elevated scite forbids the wretch

To drink sweet waters of the chrystal well;

He dips his bowl into the weedy ditch,

And heavy-laden brings his bev’rage home

Far-fetch’d and little worth; nor seldom waits,

Dependent on the baker's punctual call,
 To hear his creaking panniers at the door,
 Angry and sad and his last crust consumed.
 So farewell envy of the peasant's nest (1.237-247)

The speaker passes this cabin regularly on his walks, admires it briefly as an idea, and then, upon imagining how this person “dearly obtains” their refuge, admits that to envy such a scene betrays a naïve and “vain” (1.237) outlook. Unlike a Wordsworthian scene of encounter, Cowper assigns no agency to the “peasant” who ostensibly dwells here; this scene of privation is only symbolic and meant to disabuse his readers of any idealized illusions they have about a solitary life in the country. This figure has no well and must daily walk to a “weedy ditch” to fetch his water; he often has nothing but crumbs or stale bread to eat because the baker is too far away from him to call; and he is often “angry and sad” rather than “peaceful.”³⁹ Remarkably, Cowper does not just admonish his readers for nurturing the fantasy of solitary retreat here but he admonishes himself too. He admits that he also entertained this romanticized view but that his reflections upon the reality of the “peasant's nest” have led him to relinquish this fantasy. Cowper does not empathize with this figure, yet he uses this scene as an occasion for self-criticism and, in turn, humanizes our view of this scene.

We can read Cowper's self-criticism in this moment as a direct response to the eighteenth-century fashion of the disinterested prospect view made popular in the poetry of Alexander Pope and James Thomson and the “improving” landscape architecture of Lancelot

³⁹ In “Retirement,” Cowper best summarizes the communal impulse of his poetry, “how sweet, how passing sweet is solitude! / But grant me still a friend in my retreat, / Whom I may whisper, solitude is sweet” (740-743). Solitude is only sweet when it is passing. In addition, Cowper was personally realistic about his required material conditions for rural retreat. In a letter to Lady Hesketh he writes, “You must always understand, my Dear, that when poets talk of Cottages, hermitages, and such like matter, they mean a house with 6 sashes in front, two comfortable parlours, a smart stair-case, and three bed-chambers of convenient dimensions: in short, exactly such a house as this” (2:599).

“Capability” Brown. Though by no means a settled theoretical standpoint in Cowper’s day, it exerted a strong influence on eighteenth-century landscape poetry; its central claim that rural retirement was a means through which upper class gentlemen could extend their political and economic authority by aligning their aesthetic tastes along a shared standard of disinterest.⁴⁰ In “Retirement” Cowper provides salient criticisms of this fashion for what he claims is an illusory outlook towards rural retreat. Criticizing those who expect their experiences in the country to mirror the experiences they read about in “Thomson’s song,” “Cobham’s groves,” and Pope’s “green retreats” (570-571), he argues that they are half-hearted retirees: “He likes the country, but in truth must own, / Most likes it, when he studies it in town” (573-574). Those who travel to their rural retreats in search of scenes created by Thomson, Cobham, and Pope will not find what they are seeking, because in his view they do not wish to. They like it most because they can study it through the indirect views created by these “town” artists without having to leave the comfort of their sofas.

Cowper illustrates this point further with the example of a statesman who leaves the city in search of the vigorous perceptual stimulation he is accustomed to in the city. This person wishes to be entertained at all times and expects his rural retreat to provide the perfect location. With such illusory and undisciplined expectations, he becomes bored:

The spot he loved has lost the pow’r to please;

To cross his ambling poney day by day,

⁴⁰The clearest analysis of this fashion for disinterest in eighteenth-century British landscape aesthetics, which in fact was by no means “disinterested,” remains Tim Fulford’s *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority*, especially the introduction (1-17). Anne Bermingham’s 1986 *Landscape and Ideology* also remains a potent guide through the ways in which “disinterested” prospect views came to represent cultural and aesthetic talismans for a British upper class that felt it was losing its economic grip on the landscape. Her claim that “Precisely when the countryside—or at least large portions of it—was becoming unrecognizable, and dramatically marked by historical change, it was offered as the image of the homely, the stable, the ahistorical” (9) is in apt summary of the dominant approach to landscape aesthetics that Cowper is in part subverting in this scene.

Seems at the best, but dreaming a life away,
 The prospect, such as might enchant despair,
 He views it not, or sees no beauty there,
 With aching heart and discontented looks,
 Returns at noon, to billiards or to books
 But feels while grasping at his faded joys,
 A secret thirst of his renounced employs (466-474)

And thus this statesman “blames his own indolence” (477) and returns to the city to kneel, kiss hands, and attend to other important duties of the state. This is a humorous portrait with a powerful message. The statesman is so dependent upon novelty as a source of pleasure—riding a horse in the country, new prospect views, billiards, or new books—that he is unable to attune himself to the slow, cyclic rhythms of retirement. He fails to transform retirement into a virtuous activity. If he had attempted to carry out the practice of virtuous retirement than he would have been able to return to the “spot he loved” every day and continually unveil new “powers to please” from it, as Cowper shows us he is capable of doing in *The Task*. The statesman then associates indolence with the slowness of rural life and tries to absolve himself of any blame for his failure to enjoy retirement. Yet Cowper shows that the statesman’s lack of curiosity is the reason for his return to the city, not the slowed pace of rural life. Thus the statesman brings his indolence with him back to the city as rural nature continues to flourish.

Through the example of the statesman, Cowper seeks to show that the majority of his contemporaries fail to approach rural retreat as employed leisure. He summarizes this view most clearly in “Retirement” when he claims: “few what court Retirement, are aware / Of half the toils they must encounter there” (609-610). In *The Task*, he is at pains to portray himself at work,

whether reading the newspaper, tending to the difficult process of growing cucumbers, or carrying out the craft of finely attuning himself to his natural surroundings. Cowper may have known that “retirement” was first a military term meaning “falling back or retreating from a place or position” (*OED*) when in battle. In conceiving of retirement as a public activity—something he theorized about and explored through widely read poems—he seems to have at least partially thought of his retirement as a tactical move. In doing so, he could keep himself “in play,” by providing a model of a more engaged, virtuous, and sensitive retirement to those who still lived in the world he claims to have fled.

Cowper presents writing in particular as one of the most rewarding and difficult “toils” of retirement. In what may be the closest thing we have to a Cowperian “defense of poetry,” Cowper claims that the activity of making “verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic...is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake” (*Letters* 2:10). A signal reason for his poetic success in his day was the seeming natural ease through which he shaped his verse into the “language of prose.” Yet doing so, as he says privately, is an “arduous task.” He wants his audience to know about this difficulty too. In book two of *The Task* he gives us access to “a pleasure in poetic pains / which only poets know” (2.285-286) in which his goal is:

T’arrest the fleeting images that fill
 The mirror of the mind, and hold them fast,
 And force them sit, ‘till he has pencil’d off
 A faithful likeness of the forms he views;
 Then to dispose his copies with such art
 That each may find its most propitious light,
 And shine by situation, hardly less,

Than by labor and the skill it cost,
 Are occupations of the poet's mind (2.290-298).

Active verbs dominate his description. He “arrests” and “holds” fleeting images; he “forces them sit” until they are “pencil’d off;” he “disposes” his impressions so that they “shine” situated within their most “propitious light.” All of this activity is a result of the “labor” and “skill” required by his “occupation.” The process is laborious because it requires the poet to sustain his responsiveness to the “forms he views” over an extended period, from his initial experience of encountering a scene, to holding his perceptions of it in his memory, to copying it into verse so that it appears on the page as faithfully to him as it appeared in his first experience. This is an apt description of the creative process because it emphasizes the notion that perceptual experiences find their most “propitious light” when they “shine by situation.” The work of the poet is not merely to create copies of nature but to situate himself within the dynamic ecology of his surroundings.

Directly following this passage, Cowper punctuates his valuation of poetic labor with a characterization of what he believes will be the audience’s disregard for his poetic pains. He laments:

But ah! not such,
 Or seldom such, the hearers of his song.
 Fastidious, or else listless, or perhaps
 Aware of nothing arduous in a task
 They never undertook, they little note
 His dangers or escapes (2.304-309).

The words “dangers” and “escapes” suggest that Cowper is criticizing his own lament, as if to suggest that his poetic endeavors are not as brave as he claims they are. Yet Cowper voices a valid concern about how poetic work can be undervalued or wrongly interpreted. The “fastidious” readers fault thematic and organizational diversions from tradition and the “listless” readers are inattentive to the perceptual precision and persistent self-reflexivity that composes Cowper’s verse. It is significant that just after the moment in which he lays bare the “pain” of his poetic labors he immediately predicts almost no one will appreciate the products of his labor. This passage speaks to a larger theme of Cowper’s work. He is involved in a laborious battle for his soul that may very well gain the attention of no one, including the God who he believes forsakes him. Though he maintains a convivial, humorous tone here, the passage contains the tang of despair that first emerged in his verse in the *Olney Hymns*.

As Cowper refigures it, retirement is a means of maintaining communication with the world. Cowper scholars tend to frame this salient feature of his work through what they perceive to be its considerable effect on his audience. Tim Fulford claims that Cowper radically redefines irresolution as “not simply a reflection of a readership’s indecision over social and political issues but a token of an inner warfare waged by Cowper on its behalf” (64). Building on this view, Kevis Goodman claims that Cowper created a generative “loophole of retreat” in his poetry “used for both communication with and fortification against the outside world” (69). This is to say that his poetry of retirement looks inwards but always does so with one eye turned towards its readers. John Mee best summarizes this feature of Cowper’s by pointing out that his popularity among middle class readers represented a kind of social protest against what they believed to be a morally and politically corrupt upper class:

Cowper's conversable poetry offered those families who gathered to hear his poetry read aloud, as Jane Austen's did, a sense of an ongoing community of conversation beyond the empty talk of the town. In their daily lives many of these listeners may have been caught up in a world of trade, but gathered together to read from Cowper they could congratulate themselves on not being the showy talkers of London. Their domestic lives could be imagined—as his poetry imagined his own—as a space where moral perspective oriented to higher things could be articulated. (170)

This scene of morally-oriented communal reading fittingly represents the powerful effect Cowper's poetry had on his readership.⁴¹ Most importantly this scene illuminates both Cowper's and his audience's desires to talk about, imagine, and describe what a “moral perspective oriented towards higher things” might be. In crafting a poetry that makes a virtue of his individualized attempts to seek out more propitious conditions for this moral perspective rather than crafting poetry that exhorts its readers to “be moral!,” Cowper helped create a “communicable” discourse through which writers like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Austen found footing to voice their own distinct moral perspectives.

These critical views rightly emphasize Cowper's desire for communicability; he shows that a sequestered life is only worth living if the carrying out of such a life allows for open lines of communication with the outside world. Yet Scott Hess's claim that Cowper's poetry was accidental and that “Cowper wrote his poetry not primarily to construct his identity as a ‘poet,’ but for his own private health and sanity” (162) has a ring of truth that should not be dismissed.

⁴¹ A perhaps even better distillation of Cowper's effect on his audience comes from Neil Curry: “Readers were conscious of being addressed by a particular individual, one of their own kind who told them about things they knew but perhaps did not sufficiently appreciate” (192).

Though it is clear that he wished to communicate to an audience, this does not rule out the possibility that the primary purpose of his poetry was to create a space through which he could struggle to come nearer to a God he believed had forsaken him. His personal voice develops in the hymns through his attempts to directly reach out to an indifferent but luminous God, his work in “Retirement” seeks to demonstrate how the practice of retirement allows us to be more receptive to God’s presence, *The Task* elucidates “Retirement’s” claims in greater detail, ending with a devotional crescendo in which he claims the entire poem was written “in his hand whose praise I seek” (6.1017), and his later verse lingers in the fear that despite his efforts to come nearer to God he remains, as he writes in “On the Receipt of My Mother’s Picture,” “always from port withheld, always distressed” (101). His experiences of teetering on the brink of certitude and failure become a procedure of being in his poetry.

This tension between his desire to reach an audience and to reach his God culminates in a quiet climax at the end of *The Task*. As the poem closes, the speaker authoritatively asserts that he has “rov’d far and gather’d much” (6.1012) yet he amends this declaration by suggesting that his capacious roving and gatherings are nothing more than the “idle tinkling of a minstrel’s lyre” (6.1021). In reminding us that in the poem he has roved far—from his couch to his prospects to London and beyond—and gathered much—thousands of discrete descriptions of his embodied experiences in nature and of his intense inner life—he recapitulates his poetic ambition. Yet in the image of an idly tinkling lyre, Cowper also reaffirms his view that making poetry is a transient practice; at best it yields meanings that idly linger with its readers. In part, Cowper’s reticent assessment of his poetry squares with Anne-Lise François’s claim in *Open Secrets* that we can find a literature of “open secrets” that releases itself from ethical imperatives to act upon knowledge. Her proposal that there is a valuable aesthetic tendency in Romantic

literature to impart knowledge “such that it cannot be claimed and acted on” (1) can be extended to Cowper’s work in that his poetry of self-reflection can be read as purely private and personal and concertedly lacking a desideratum. By François’s lights, we might interpret the “idle tinkling of a minstrel’s lyre” (6.1021) as a poetic product that is left open to us to be interpreted as a literature of open secrets should be interpreted; in “the full range of gratuitous” (12), capable of meaning at once “freely bestowed: granted without claim or merit; provided without payment or return; costing nothing to the recipient; free” (*OED*).

Yet while the tenor of François’s argument about Romantic text seems potentially right for Cowper in its emphasis on the ways in which the open secret, “as a gesture of self-canceling revelation permits a release from the ethical imperative to *act* upon knowledge” (3), her frame cannot sufficiently account for the religious undercurrent of Cowper’s work. Cowper sought God so that he could be good. He explores what François calls “self-canceling revelations” in provocative ways but he always does so in hopes of obtaining a firmer grip on what he considered to be the contours of a virtuous, Christian life. He wishes to act upon ethical knowledge and uses poetry as space through which forms of ethical knowledge might be more clearly apprehended. To seek goodness in this sense does not require that the seeker emerge with the “product” of a fuller apprehension of reasons and causes for being. Cowper is clear throughout his work that God is the only cause and only reason for his being. Adhering to this belief allowed him access to a prayerful attentiveness to the appearances of value and virtue that structured his experiences. This attentional activity appears in his verse to be continuous; he invites us in to his self-unveiling process of apprehending meaning in his world *in medias res* and never claims that this process will arrive at a definitive endpoint or settle his spiritual doubts. In doing so, Cowper creates a poetry in which this form of reflective human action is valuable

not because of its “functionality” or its “propositional” alignment to a triggering desire but because of its ability to maintain an open, in François’s sense of “unsettled,” line of contact between one’s concerns and one’s reflective scrutiny.

It is all the more significant that Cowper never seems to view himself as having a value or function in the world. He tried to be a lawyer and failed; he tried to be a strictly religious evangelical and, by his standards, failed; and he tried, after his success with *The Task*, to become a modern Milton by translating Homer and in doing so became again disillusioned about his role in the world. As he lay dying, he uttered these final recorded words, “But what can it signify?” (*Hayley* 2:220). But his poetry is populated with a teeming world of meaning. In attempting to “pencil out” the details of this world he gave a powerful record of how a person might more fluently align themselves with all the ways in which experience is “signif[ied].” His record of these attempts left a large influence on his Romantic contemporaries who were more at ease letting go of the religious pressures he put himself under in crafting their own poetries of retirement. Wordsworth and Coleridge, in particular, understood from Cowper that landscape poetry’s built-in celebration of retreat is its strength and its inherent weakness, so that only in the most reflective and attentive hands can a poetry of retirement move beyond charges of escapism and instead represent a record of engagement between the poet and their world.

2

Wordsworth, Cowper, and the Ethics of Attention

People in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing...a great Poet ought to do more than this, he ought to a certain degree to rectify man's feelings, to give them new compositions of feeling, to render their feelings more sane pure and permanent, in short, more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things.

(William Wordsworth)⁴²

Must Change Her Nature

William Cowper and William Wordsworth's poetry share thematic and stylistic affinities that merit closer critical attention. While scholars have sporadically examined the relationship between Cowper and Wordsworth's verse, they have largely done so with the purpose of presenting Cowper as Wordsworth's idiosyncratic predecessor.⁴³ A more incisive approach to the relationship between Cowper and Wordsworth should emphasize their shared interest in examining the distinct ways that everyday perceptual experience shapes their ethical

⁴² From Wordsworth's "Letter to John Wilson, 7 June 1802."

⁴³ As noted in chapter one, this view of Cowper as an accidental Romantic was first presented in the Romantic era by William Hazlitt and has been largely unchallenged. Some of the more salient arguments for this view of Cowper can be found in M.H. Abrams's 1965 "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," W.J.B Owen's 1972 "Literary Echoes in *The Prelude*," Marshall Brown's 1991 *Preromanticism*, and Scott Hess's 2005 *Authoring the Self*. Recent arguments that have begun to challenge this view can be found in Tim Fulford's 1996 *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority*, and Kevis Goodman's 2004 *Georgic Modernity*.

perspectives. Cowper and Wordsworth's attention to the distinct relationship between an individual subject and the small piece of earth they inhabit functions as a moral directive to their readers: you too can change your own nature if every day you stop, even for a brief moment, to look steadily at the active universe in which you find yourself. The central argument of this chapter is that Wordsworth acutely took to heart Cowper's claim that "Whatever hopes a change of scene inspires / Must change her nature, or in vain retires" ("Retirement" 679-680)⁴⁴ by crafting a poetry with affinitive interests in the primacy of subjective experience, the centrality of place, and the ethical value of attention.

Moral Pith and Nervous Force

Wordsworth's self-conscious poetry of experience gleans much of its ethical orientation from eighteenth-century landscape poetry. As William Ulmer claims, Wordsworth "was shaped profoundly by the conventions of eighteenth-century English landscape poetry" (27).⁴⁵ From this poetic tradition he learned that though religious doctrine and philosophy offer important guidance for an individual seeking meaning in the world, neither is as ethically potent as a poetry that seeks to examine the dynamic relationship between an individual and their natural habitation. The story of Wordsworth's engagement with eighteenth-century landscape poetry, and its influence on his ethical thinking is more complex than can be told here.⁴⁶ For the purposes

⁴⁴ My claim is supported and inspired by these two salient arguments: Tim Fulford's claim in his *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority* that, "it was...Cowper's relocation of authority in inner struggle and doubt that drew the attention of Wordsworth and Coleridge" (65), and James King's assertion that "Cowper's willingness to make his own humble life of retirement the occasion of sublimity helped to legitimize Wordsworth's recreation of the intensely felt 'spots of time' from his childhood, adolescence, and young manhood" (156 in *William Cowper: A Biography*).

⁴⁵ Ulmer is echoing Hoxie Neal Fairchild's claim in his *Religious Trends in English Poetry* that Wordsworth "derived his most characteristic philosophical and religious ideas largely, though of course, not entirely, from poetry" (3.185).

⁴⁶ For this study, the two most influential interpretations of the ethics of Wordsworth's engagement with eighteenth-century landscape poetry are Tim Fulford's *Landscape, Liberty, and Authority* and William Ulmer's 2001 *The*

of this study, it will suffice to say that the shaping power of eighteenth-century landscape poetry upon Wordsworth was both aesthetic and moral; Wordsworth learned to interrogate his relationship to his landscapes by reading and responding to this poetic discourse. In my estimation, William Cowper's rendering of his daily attempts to live a virtuous life through the activity of rural retirement presented a particularly powerful eighteenth-century model for Wordsworth.

It is significant that Wordsworth's contemporary readers immediately noticed a convergence between his poetry and Cowper's.⁴⁷ In an 1801 review of the *Lyrical Ballads*, a critic argued that in Wordsworth, "there is all the moral pith and nervous force of Cowper...without any semblance of imitation" (*The Monthly Mirror* 389).⁴⁸ The reviewer rightly assumes his readers are familiar enough with Cowper's self-reflexive moral poetry to understand this claim. Cowper and Wordsworth's shared "nervous force" is their habit of dynamically probing their environments and themselves. They train a steady gaze across a landscape in search of meaningful attractors, then their attention darts back to the self to question and contemplate what they have witnessed. Their poetry is marked by its kinetic energy and its self-contesting conditionality. Their shared "moral pith" is a concentrated and suggestive moral power of

Christian Wordsworth. Fulford persuasively argues that Wordsworth's contributions to the *Lyrical Ballads* can be read as self-questioning attempts to resolve the ethical dilemmas posed by the eighteenth-century aesthetics of gentlemanly disinterest—an aesthetic discourse that often seemed to legitimate wealthy landowners' social and economic exploitation of the poor. Ulmer enhances this picture of Wordsworth's poetic ethics by showing how Wordsworth's creation of a poetry of "spiritual imagination" (27)—a poetry that seeks a spiritual presence in nature, that has a deeply rooted predisposition for love, and that seeks to find a path to right action—was influenced by eighteenth-century nature poetry's Christian orientation, particularly the trope of the contemplative speaker who "discovers divinity immanent in the natural world" (3).

⁴⁷ It bears noting that eighteenth-century reader, unlike us, would have noticed these convergences more than they would have noticed connections to Milton, Spinoza, Coleridge, or Dorothy Wordsworth (to name a few of the focal points of influence on which contemporary studies of Wordsworth have focused).

⁴⁸ This reviewer makes an equally intriguing prediction that, "if Mr. W. should proceed to poetic flights of equal altitude, and should soar as long upon the wing, we doubt not that he will obtain a niche near the author of *The Task*" (392). It is a fascinating feature of literary history that in the *Lyrical Ballads* poems he sees no evidence that Wordsworth will surpass Cowper's achievements. Rather, at best he will obtain "a niche near" Cowper.

observation that explores how even the most seemingly insignificant details of experience can be rendered meaningful. A distinct subject who looks steadily and listens intently to the world is necessarily opening themselves to an interior “nervous force” that drives them to seek out brief but potent examples of moral knowledge.

Critics were not the only ones to notice these points of convergence; to some degree Wordsworth explicitly aligned his poetic concerns with Cowper’s. Most of Wordsworth’s references to Cowper can be found in his discussion of the virtues and limitations of Cowper’s innovative blank verse.⁴⁹ Yet Wordsworth also aligned himself with Cowper on at least one moral point. In Wordsworth’s estimation, Cowper understood that poetry, rather than religion or philosophy, has the unique power to unsettle the reading public’s stagnant moral views. Wordsworth makes this most clear in his 1802 letter to John Wilson, whose critique of the “Idiot Boy” impelled Wordsworth to clarify his position on poetry’s distinct moral power, by appealing to Cowper as a stylistic and moral authority. In his letter, John Wilson uses Adam Smith as an authority on moral action; Wordsworth, in response, says that only Cowper has come close to describing morality along the lines that Wordsworth and Coleridge have attempted to in the *Lyrical Ballads*.

In this exchange between Wilson and Wordsworth, the moral and aesthetic focus is centered on Wordsworth’s poem “The Idiot Boy.” Noting what he claims to be the poem’s incongruence with contemporary moral theory, Wilson levels his criticism at Wordsworth’s portrayal of Betty Foy’s empathy for her son Johnny Foy, the “idiot boy,” by claiming:

⁴⁹ The most common focal points have been Wordsworth’s praise of Cowper’s ability to compose poetry in “such natural language so naturally connected with metre” (301) in his 1802 Appendix on Poetic Diction and his claim in his 1815 Preface to *Poems* that *The Task* is an excellent example of a “composite species” (628) of poetry, composed of three classes of poem: idyllium, didactic, and philosophical satire.

it appears almost unnatural, that a person in a state of complete idiotism should excite the warmest feelings of attachment in the breast even of his mother... This inability to receive pleasure from descriptions such as that of *The Idiot Boy*, is I am convinced, founded upon established feelings of human nature, and the principle of it constitutes, as I daresay you recollect, the leading feature of Smith's theory of moral sentiments. I therefore think that in the choice of this subject you have committed an error. (314)

What Wilson thinks is “unnatural” about the moral relationship between Betty and Johnny Foy is that Johnny is incapable of remunerating his mother's moral efforts. She can do good for him but he cannot do good for her. Wilson appears to be paraphrasing one of Adam Smith's central claims about moral action in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, “action must appear to deserve reward, which appears to be the proper and approved subject of gratitude...to reward is to recompense, to remunerate, to return good for good received” (68). The giver of moral attention must decide how much feeling they are willing to give so that the receiver of moral attention can, in turn, calculate the correct amount to reward back to the giver. On this view, what makes humans moral beings is their distinct ability to negotiate their own sentiments with the sentiments of others through equitable affective exchanges. In citing Smith, Wilson seems to be saying that Wordsworth has committed “an error” because he has built the moral action of his poem around the conceit that Betty Foy and Johnny Foy have a reciprocal affective relationship with each other despite the fact that Johnny appears to be a “person in a state of complete idiotism.” Wilson says he is unable to receive pleasure from reading the poem because he cannot square Smith's moral theory with Wordsworth's depiction of Betty Foy's empathy for Johnny.

Yet in citing Smith, Wilson misrepresents Smith's complex moral philosophy. H.B. de Groot convincingly argues that Wilson, who at the time of writing this letter was an undergraduate at Glasgow University, had only a cursory understanding of Smith's moral philosophy and thus: "Wilson's appeal to Adam Smith's argument is...entirely spurious. He disliked the 'Idiot Boy' and found (or thought that he found) in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* an argument that he could use as a rationalization of that dislike" (44).⁵⁰ De Groot argues that a careful reader of Smith's moral philosophy will find that Smith's account of the laws and limits of sympathy is more capacious than Wilson claims it is. In particular de Groot notes that the fact that Smith concludes the first chapter of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* with a discussion about the ways in which humans "sympathize even with the dead" (8) shows that Smith was at least partially interested in examining how we are able to sympathize with entities seemingly locked into worlds of their own, like Johnny Foy. Smith himself argues that sympathy with the dead is "one of the most important principles in human nature" (8) because the complex affective interchange between the living and the dead—who cannot remunerate the livings' sentiments—guides all subsequent acts of sympathy for the living.⁵¹ In "The Idiot Boy," it is a morally vexing problem that Johnny Foy seems incapable of returning Betty's love in ways that were

⁵⁰ De Groot also unfairly claims that Wilson never developed into a serious thinker. In de Groot's words, Wilson was "totally unqualified" (1) to be the Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh, and as a professor he "made up for his lack of knowledge by his eloquence—one recognizes the type" (1). Perhaps in 1802 Wordsworth himself reacted to "the type" that Wilson seemed to represent—long on rhetoric, short on analysis—as he composed his forceful response. Yet in fact Wilson was elected Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh by the burghers of Edinburgh and was revered by his students and friends, including Thomas De Quincey, for the breadth of his philosophical knowledge

⁵¹ In Smith's moral theory, these sympathetic interchanges between the living and the dead, characterized mostly by dread, serve as the imaginative glue that holds a society together, as Smith claims, "while it afflicts and mortifies the individual, [it] guards and protects the society" (9). In his 2007 *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era*, Robert Mitchell argues that Smith's discussion of the dead deserves more critical attention. In his view, because Smith's moral sentimentalism is focused on "the recursive nature of imaginative social dynamics, and the relationship of those dynamics to both intersubjectivity and exchange" (76), Smith's thinking about how sympathy for the dead guarantees social circulations of sympathy is not cursory, as most critics have argued, but central to his moral philosophy. See chapter two (especially 79-92).

recognizable to readers like Wilson. Johnny Foy in this sense is closer to the dead than the living. Given Smith's interest in how our sympathy with the living is informed by how we mourn for and imagine the experiences of the dead, it seems that Smith would not have dismissed the sympathetic exchange between Betty and Johnny as readily as Wilson does.

Wordsworth's response to Wilson is famous for the eloquent justifications Wordsworth makes about the moral symbolism of Betty Foy's love for Johnny.⁵² In his letter to Wilson, Wordsworth argues that the fact that Betty and Johnny can have a loving relationship with each other is not an aberration from common sense morality but rather an example of moral behavior that Wilson has overlooked. One of his sharpest rebukes is his reminder to Wilson that, "people in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same" (318). By Wordsworth's lights this "sad mistake" is a severe ethical error because it homogenizes the field of ethical inquiry. If you exclude Betty Foy's moral sentiments and the constellation of moral sentiments "among cottages and fields and among children" (318) you are limited to thinking about the moral behavior of "gentlemen, persons of fortune, professional men, ladies, persons who can afford to buy or procure books" (318). From the vantage of this narrow view of human nature, it is not a surprise that "The Idiot Boy" would be incomprehensible.⁵³ In order to identify with the

⁵² Wordsworth received this letter from the Glasgow student John Wilson on 24 May 1802 and wrote his long reply on 7 June 1802. Stephen Gill claims in the Oxford edition of Wordsworth's *Major Works* that Wordsworth's response to Wilson is "one of his most important letters" (739). Other scholars have long agreed, and, as such the letter has remained an appendix in modern versions of *Lyrical Ballads* and collected editions of Wordsworth's poetry.

⁵³ I derive this interpretation of Wordsworth's response to Wilson from David Bromwich's claim that Wilson, and to some degree Adam Smith, represented to Wordsworth a "prudent commercial morality" (40) against which Wordsworth positions the moral explorations of the *Lyrical Ballads*. On Bromwich's view, Wordsworth is "so sure that the humanizing power of sympathy has nothing to do with reciprocal feelings that he takes no interest in the inward state" (40) of characters like Johnny Foy or the Old Cumberland Beggar. The signal problem of Bromwich's reading of Wilson's letter is that he minimizes the complexity of Smith's moral philosophy to a "prudent commercial morality." As I discuss above, Smith's thinking, especially about sympathetic exchanges between the living and the dead, is more complex than Bromwich suggests.

drama of affective recognition in the poem, one must exercise one's powers of moral imagination; one must stretch and recompose the relationship between thinking and feeling in order to receive the kind of pleasure that Wordsworth hopes his audience might receive from the poem.

To remind Wilson how stifling this narrow view of human nature is, Wordsworth turns not to moral philosophy but to two images from Cowper's *The Task*. In Wordsworth's view, Cowper deserves Wilson's attention because he writes about the moral significance of natural occurrences that have wrongly been viewed as aberrant to people in their "rank in life." As he shows in this letter, Wordsworth's poetic project is centered on his belief that poetry alone is capable of taking on the ambitious task of changing his readers' moral natures. His argument is that Cowper was on the right path when he employed poetry to give his audience a more comprehensive view of the ways humans encounter their environment. By aligning himself with a poet rather than a moral theorist, Wordsworth is telling Wilson that a close reading of the *Lyrical Ballads* should show that the spontaneous scene of encounter—its hesitations, its intersubjective engagements, its impermanence—offers a more honest picture of how sympathetic exchanges between subjects and their environments unfold than a well-argued moral theory can.

Wordsworth first brings to Wilson's attention the fact that Cowper has a distinct habit of attending not to natural sights alone but also to natural sounds. And in particular Cowper turns his readers' attention to sights and sounds that they might find discordant, dangerous, or ugly. Wordsworth uses the fact that Cowper has to qualify his appreciation of such sights and sounds, "even the boding owl / That hails the rising moon has charms for me" (1.205 italics Wordsworth's), to demonstrate how stultifying the contemporary moral and aesthetic

conventions are. Anyone who has attended to the sounds of nature knows that the boding owl has a distinct and “charm[ing]” sound, so why must Cowper hesitate to point out that it is a “marvelous thing that he could connect pleasure with the cry of the owl” (319)?⁵⁴ In fact, if Wordsworth would have quoted more from this passage in *The Task*, he would have also found that Cowper trains his auditory attention on a diverse group of sounds, from the soothing sounds of warblers to the caws of rooks and screams of hawks, in order to show his readers that nature’s sounds are much more vivid—and potentially disquieting—than eighteenth-century landscape poets had previously presented them to be.

But in Wordsworth’s view, Cowper presents his most important moral point when he makes the “amiable boast” that he finds pleasure in the sight of a “prickly gorse” (1.526), a densely branched spiny shrub that poets often presented as an inhospitable feature of nature.⁵⁵ In Wordsworth’s estimation this “prickly gorse” represents the aesthetic “aversions” of “people of our rank in life” (318). It is a plant-variant of Johnny Foy, the Old Cumberland Beggar, Martha Ray, and other subjects of encounter in the *Lyrical Ballads* previously unknown to Wordsworth’s audience as subjects of intense moral attention. In the passage Wordsworth cites, Cowper employs the gorse to quarrel with his reading public’s mindless desire for familiar pictures of nature. Cowper encounters the gorse as a result of repeatedly seeking out “less familiar scenes” (1.512) in his familiar environment. Because Cowper spends his days in Olney skillfully

⁵⁴ In the letter, Wordsworth argues that Cowper’s ability to register the beauty of an owl’s song instead of nightingale’s is a step in the right direction but not a marvelous gesture on its own. Instead, Wordsworth’s claims that a poet more “consonant...to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things” (318)—a poet like Wordsworth or Coleridge—would not need to qualify his enjoyment of any natural object. He does not seem to blame Cowper but the age in which Cowper lived, which placed too much faith in “false notions” of natural objects to the point that poets and readers alike suffered from baseless “aversions” to nature as it actually appears. As I have shown in the previous chapter, Cowper too was frustrated with delicacy and worn-out tropes and attempted in his verse to present descriptions that were “all from Nature. Not one of them second-handed” (*Letters* 2:285)

⁵⁵ Shakespeare’s depiction of the gorse as a weapon used by Ariel in *The Tempest* seems to have set this tone: “So I charm’d their ears / That calf-like they my lowing follow’d through / Toothed briars, sharp furzes, prickling gorse, and thorns, / Which ent’red their frail shins.” (4.1.178-180).

adjusting his embodied responsiveness to his environment through his repeated ventures out, he finds himself continuously encountering new sources of poetic inspiration from objects that a newcomer might ignore or miss. The intimate details Cowper attends to in these scenes, particularly the “prickly” elements in them, are wrongly undervalued by Wordsworth’s audience. This is a central point to which Wordsworth alludes through his invocation of Cowper. In his view, readers fail to seek out scenes in which:

The common overgrown with fern, and rough
 With prickly gorse, that shapeless and deform
 And dang’rous to the touch, has yet its bloom
 And decks itself with ornaments of gold (*The Task* 1.526-529)

In this overgrown landscape, Cowper’s narrator is first confronted with signifiers of hazard and ambiguity. The “prickly gorse” is “rough,” “shapeless,” “deform[ed],” and “dang’rous to the touch.” It will not only pierce one’s hand at the touch but because it does not have a pleasing shape or form, it induces anxiety.⁵⁶ But to define this plant by its supposed “deform[ities]” is to judge it without deliberation. If one takes the time to look steadily and habitually at the gorse and does not turn away from it despite its rough-hewn edges, one might find that its bloom of gold defines its being as much as its prickliness does. One might also notice, as Cowper’s narrator has, that the gorse has a life of its own outside of human representations of it—it “decks itself with ornaments of gold”—it cares for itself both by growing its prickly, protective spines and by attracting pollinators with its yellow flowers.

⁵⁶ It is certainly possible that this is a picturesque image; the thorniness represents the tension of the sublime and the flowers represent the ease of the beautiful. But Wordsworth uses Cowper not to invoke picturesque aesthetics but to remind Wilson that writers like Cowper, who was “passionately fond of natural objects” (319), came nearest to rendering nature as it actually is.

In noting these affinities between the prickly gorse and Johnny Foy, Wordsworth argues that we must strive to attend habitually to unfamiliar natural objects and moral scenes on their own terms. We must orient our approach to contemplating these phenomena outside of the theoretical confines created by moral sentimentalism. We must attempt to listen to, watch, and describe these natural occurrences in a spirit consonant with their own nature. We can only begin this process of apprehension when we attempt to enter the scene as if we were Betty Foy. Central to the *Lyrical Ballads* project is Wordsworth's claim that the poetry he and Coleridge have composed—unlike in the poetry of the current day in which the action and situation give importance to the feeling—is a poetry in which feeling gives importance to the action and situation.⁵⁷

Wordsworth reimagines moral relations in “The Idiot Boy” by emphasizing Betty Foy's empathic openness to Johnny's vivid presence as she searches for him. She begins her search for her lost Johnny in a state of increasing disorientation; everywhere she looks she feels Johnny's presence but not the boy himself, “In tree and tower was Johnny seen, / In bush and brake, in black and green / ‘Twas Johnny, Johnny, every where” (219-220). She feels Johnny everywhere but finds him nowhere. Yet as her search progresses, still feeling Johnny's presence, she learns to calm herself enough to recall the trusting relationship between Johnny and his horse and to feel with Johnny. She is finally able to surmise that Johnny and the horse have gone to a favorite spot by a thundering waterfall. Upon encountering Johnny there, her receptivity to Johnny's joyful idleness increases, and her joy mirrors his joy: “She's happy here, she's happy there, / She is uneasy every where; / Her limbs are all alive with joy” (399-401). Like Johnny she is overcome

⁵⁷ He makes this claim most directly in the 1802 preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, “it is proper that I should mention one other circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action, and not the action and situation to the feeling” (99).

with mute excitement and is united in feeling with the horse and her son through their shared ability to become “idle all for very joy.”

Wordsworth’s depiction of Johnny, in turn, provides a distinct view of ethical agency that was new enough to readers to occasion objections like John Wilson’s. Not only is Johnny an “idiot” but he happily allows himself to wander aimlessly rather than attempting to exert control over his environment. In the poem, to be “idle all for very joy” means to expose one’s self to the elements for an entire night; to observe and feel the rhythms of the natural world and to seek no effect through these actions. In this aspect, Johnny himself is a type of the poet Wordsworth seeks to be. He receives joy from idle wandering and comfort in being still. In return, he emerges from his wanderings and stillness with an original poetic utterance: “The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, / And the sun did shine so cold” (460-461). A night of contemplation yields two lines of evocative metaphorical language. By Wordsworth’s lights, this version of the poet produces in himself a skillful readiness to negotiate between the dynamic rhythms of his shifting human and natural environments by seeking out the approximate conditions in which he might become momentarily “idle all for very joy.” By immersing himself in a state of absorption, the poet strengthens his attentional resources, and, in turn, his ethical awareness. David Bromwich rightly claims that Wordsworth discovered that “mere attention as an ethical act—attention in a sense that precedes reflection or solidarity” (15) could be a guiding feature of his poetic thinking while composing his contributions to the 1798 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*. Wordsworth’s dramas of mere attention seek to simplify the process of making and reading poetry; what can be more direct and genuine than human attention?

The Hour of Feeling

Central to the task of attention as an ethical act is the temporal locus Wordsworth calls, in his spring-celebration poem, “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House” “the hour of feeling” (24). The hour of feeling is a variant of Johnny Foy’s midnight journey. It is an interim of meaningful wandering that deserves to be sought out, enjoyed for its own sake, and attempted to be made comprehensible through the composition of poetry. It is a pause from practical activity in which one takes up the Cowperian task of ambling around one’s familiar natural surroundings. If one allows these hours of feeling to compose the contours of meaning in one’s life, one creates what Wordsworth’s autobiographical speaker calls “our living Calendar” (18), a self-composed register of events through which one might refine one’s sense of how best to live.

“Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House” is notable for its Cowperian celebration of the virtuous labor of rural retirement. In particular the idea of “the hour of feeling” expresses Wordsworth’s conviction that if one regularly puts down one’s books, relinquishes one’s practical duties, and goes forth to feel the sun, one can foster a habit of receptivity that provides ethical guidance. Wordsworth’s speaker expresses this view by proclaiming:

One moment now may give us more
 Than fifty years of reason;
 Our minds shall drink at every pore
 The spirit of the season.
 Some silent laws our hearts may make,
 Which they shall long obey;
 We for the year to come may take
 Our temper from to-day (25-32)

What is striking about this passage is its suggestion that a single lived experience may be capable of providing a lifetime of moral guidance. In Wordsworth's view, this single experience is potent because it allows the activity of feeling to blend seamlessly with the activity of thinking. To demonstrate his point, he employs the intriguing metaphor of the drinking mind—"our minds shall drink at every pore." The drinking mind is implicitly opposed to the rational or mechanical mind posited by "fifty years of reason[ing]" about the human subject. The drinking mind does not seek to interrogate, explain, or theorize; instead it attends to its lived environment guided by a spirit of openness. It is receptive, imbibing, "at every pore," the "spirit" that vivifies this first mild day of March. Instead of drinking in a landscape from a distance, Dorothy and William seek to dwell *within* their environment. In doing so, they seek to absorb all the perceptual phenomena that are available to them by allowing themselves to be immersed in them as if they were "grass in the green field" (8). The intensity of this absorption is similar to the intensity of attentive concentration. "To pore" also means to think intently; in this sense we can think of "every pore" as a discrete attentional effort.⁵⁸ To "drink at every pore," also means to become increasingly receptive to one's lived environment through each successive moment of attentional effort.

Wordsworth then claims that if both he and Dorothy's minds are capable of this intensity of environmental and affective absorption, their hearts can find the most propitious conditions for disclosing to themselves "silent laws," that will serve as their moral guides in the "year to come." As Adam Potkay notes, this image of "silent laws," is an early picture of "self-legislation as heart legislation" (157), in which the affective resonances of earlier "hour(s) of feeling" are

⁵⁸ I am creatively reading "pore[ing]" as a verb here; the standard construction is "to pore." Though the *OED* notes usages of "pore" as a noun in this sense, "I shall have many a good pore over it" (first used in 1871), the usage of "pore[ing]" I am suggesting here is rare. Nevertheless, it seems to me that Wordsworth at least hints at the central meaning of "to pore" as a fixed attentive effort, by juxtaposing "pore[ing]" with "fifty years of reason" and giving preference to "pore[ing]" over reasoning. Wordsworth seems to be suggesting that while "pore[ing]" and reasoning can both be characterized as effortful intellectual activities, "pore[ing]" is preferred because of the ample room it makes for the affections.

the guideposts of Wordsworth's "periodically renewable" (157), shifting visions of right moral action. Rather than submitting to external appeals to duty, the speaker obeys the spontaneous laws of his individual sensible heart.⁵⁹ But the spontaneous conditions through which Wordsworth's "heart-legislation" can be properly enacted are difficult to grasp in this poem; rather than maxims or rules, the speaker provides only the emotional contours through which these "silent laws" emerge. In the periodic interludes the speaker marks with the refrain "this one day we'll give to idleness" (15-16 and 39-40), he and his sister allows themselves to be propelled by their shared sensation of a "blessing in the air" (5). They will attempt to extend their grasp of the blessings that surround them; they will devote their attentional resources to whatever attractors they perceive to be most emotionally resonant in this distinct time and place.⁶⁰ They will then mark their affective experiences of this single day as focal points that in the future will help them periodically rejuvenate their devotion to the "silent laws" of their hearts. In this sense, the term "obey" seems to mean "to act according to (to be actuated by)" (*OED*). The poet-speaker and his sister think of themselves as "actuated by" their feeling hearts and feeling minds as they go about their daily business of walking, writing, reading, and conversing. They are the stewards of these "silent laws." The interior adjustments they each make in the process of apprehending resonances of the "blessing in the air" they encountered in early spring are often so finite that they are impossible to communicate. The authoritative power of these "silent laws"

⁵⁹ Here Wordsworth is aligning himself with the moral sentimentalism of his day by positing that emotions and desires play a leading role in the practice and anatomy of morality. Moral sentimentalists like Hutcheson, Smith, and Hume focused on the primacy of the feeling heart in determining right moral action over the principles of duty. Though he would later become more familiar with Kant's deontological moral philosophy and employ Kant's version of duty-based ethics to his moral thinking in a poem like his 1807 "Ode to Duty," in this poem he seems most focused on the virtues of individual sentimental freedom. For an excellent discussion on the trajectory of Wordsworth's thinking about the concept of duty see "Independence and Interdependence" (150-172) in Potkay's *Wordsworth's Ethics*.

⁶⁰ According to Wordsworth, the setting of this poem is outside of their Alfoxden home in March of 1798.

seems to be derived from the individual subject's ability to believe that such laws exist and that they can be obeyed.

It is important to notice that the potential success of Wordsworth's hopeful strategy for developing a porous mind and self-obedient heart is dependent upon his and Dorothy's ability to accept gratefully the gift that "one moment" may provide. This moment gives them more "than fifty years of reason" because it shows that with each successive marking of time, a new opportunity arises to attend to one's environment and to make sense of one's place in it. As Cowper claims in *The Task*, the activity of making his attention more porous allows him to "think hours down to moments /there the heart / may give an useful lesson to the head" (6.85-86). To linger with the moment, he and Dorothy may learn, as Cowper did, how to gratefully accept the wisdom any moment may bring. Raimonda Modiano notes that by acknowledging the moral importance of maintaining steadfast concentration upon "one moment," in his verse, Wordsworth suggests, "the activity of thinking is itself a manifestation of gratitude, and has as much to do with the heart as the mind" (439).⁶¹ For Wordsworth, poetry offers the ideal space for grateful thinking, because it provides a space for him to hold this fragment of time up to reflective scrutiny and shape it into a meaningful presence in the "living Calendar" of verse.

This passage from "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House" is speculative. It is an early record of what Wordsworth hopes his focus on ethical attention might provide him, Dorothy, and a community of readers. It is only with "Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey" that Wordsworth begins to present his most distinct argument for the life-shaping power

⁶¹ Here I summarize Modiano's incisive argument in her 2015 essay "Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry," that links Martin Heidegger's ideas about the etymological entanglements between the Old English words *thencan* (to think) and *thancian* (to thank) (in his 1952 essay "What is Called Thinking?") with Wordsworth's views about the interconnections between thinking and feeling (particularly as he presents them in his prefaces to the *Lyrical Ballads* and his letter to John Wilson).

that sustained attention to the hour of feeling may provide. While critics have rightly interrogated the evasiveness of Wordsworth's moral vision in this poem, in my view the poem's complex picture of the human desire to carry out a good life remains one of Wordsworth's most distinct poetic achievements.⁶² Taking stock of his life in the five years that have intervened since his last visit to a prospect view above the Wye Valley, he recounts how his memories of this scene's natural beauty have provided him spiritual and aesthetic sustenance while he was away from it, amidst the chaos of "towns and cities" (27) and solitude of "lonely rooms" (26):

I have owed to them,
 In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
 Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart,
 And passing even into my purer mind
 With tranquil restoration (27-31)

The speaker gives us a sharper picture of the porous mind than the one Wordsworth sketches in "Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House." Under the influence of the isolating environment of urban life, he has nearly lost his access to his receptivity. But he assures himself that he knows he is still able to remain obedient to the silent laws his heart has made if he can recall the "forms of beauty" he remembers being absorbed by in the Wye Valley. Because he has

⁶² Perhaps the most notable critique of Wordsworth's evasiveness in the poem is Marjorie Levinson's argument in her 1986 *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* that Wordsworth "'sees into the life of things' by narrowing and skewing his field of vision," and by excluding "certain conflictual sighs and meanings—roughly the *life* of things" (24-5). This claim has been more recently echoed by critics like Scott Hess who in his 2012 *William Wordsworth and the Ecology of Authorship* asserts that the poem's ecological vision is hindered by its pictorialized nature, "instead of immersing himself in his environment as inhabitant" the narrator places himself in "an exclusively visual relationship with a landscape he does not even physically enter" (38). Perhaps the most prominent response to those arguments is Johnathan Bate's 2000 claim in his *Song of the Earth* that the poem is distinct from the picturesque tradition in that the poet "is written out, or rather absorbed into the scene" (145). In my view, Wordsworth's continued efforts at self-abnegation in the poem suggest that Bate is right to claim that Wordsworth seeks to become absorbed within his scene. This is, in my view not uncoincidentally, much the same way that Cowper attempts to become absorbed in his landscape throughout *The Task*.

created laws of the heart, he feels their authority through a physiological process of remembrance: sensations sweet infuse his blood, trigger his heart to recognize his silent commitment to obey its self-legislating laws, finally awakening his “purer mind” to restore its habit of porous receptivity. In these liminal moments between past pleasure and present isolation, he becomes acutely aware of the hour of feeling’s orienting power. When isolation threatens to overcome his desire for the sweet sensation of participating in the good, he must return his focus to his heart’s silent laws and their animating affect on his moral being.

But it is a striking feature of this poem that the speaker gives more moral significance to what he calls “feelings of unremembered pleasure” (32) than he gives to any distinct, coherent memories. It is not specific memories that matter to him but:

feelings too

Of unremembered pleasure; such, perhaps,
As may have had no trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man’s life;
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love. (31-36)

In these lines, we find a fascinating calculation of what “a good man’s life” might be to the speaker. A good man’s life has a “best portion” in which acts of kindness and love, either committed by him or by others to him have their strongest effect and remain remembered only by the giver and receiver, if at all. These are throwaway acts: “little, nameless, unremembered.” The details of each act—who bestowed what upon whom, and when and why this bestowal occurred—do not matter; it is the feeling of “unremembered pleasure” that he associates with these acts that are most important. For the poet-speaker, these “unremembered acts” are in fact

better left “unremembered” if they are to be sources of moral energy. When the speaker acutely feels the resonances of kindness and love he associates with these forgotten acts, he again beholds the regulating pulse of his law-giving heart. The speaker’s focus on the tension between the seeming inconsequence of such “unremembered acts” and their formative power helps to compose the poem’s moral center. In calling attention to the unrecognized centrality of small acts of human kindness in daily life, Wordsworth exhibits what Anne-Lise François calls, “an ethos of attending to unobserved, not-for-profit experience rather than results entered on the public record, of defining action as a matter of timing and form rather than consequence” (22). These little and nameless acts have not been “entered on the public record” because their meaningful presences have been privately felt by the speaker alone. A tallying of these acts is not needed: what is needed instead is an evocation of the affective conditions that can make it possible for a person to acknowledge that “the best portion of a good man’s life” is measured by their willingness to act in accordance with the “silent laws” of their self-governing hearts. What the speaker puts on the public record are not the “little, nameless” acts themselves but rather an intimate view of his ongoing attempt to shape a picture of right moral action for himself. He guides us through his nimble and discerning evaluative outlook as he remembers, affirms, hesitates, laments, judges, and desires. In the process, he renders a picture of human agency in which the desideratum is an attempt to fine-tune one’s ability to be receptive—or what François calls the “matter of timing and form rather than consequence.”

Noticing the “unobserved, not-for-profit experiences” that have shaped his sense of right action gives him the stimulus to recognize later in the poem that he must attempt to act in the world as a “moral being” (111). A moral being recognizes that kindness and love are more powerful than often recognized. A moral being also attempts to listen to “the still, sad music of

humanity” (92) when reflecting on their place in the natural world. Most important, though, the moral being that Wordsworth presents in this poem is one who recognizes that he cannot positively assert what a properly conceived good life is. He can only approximate the “many recognitions dim and faint” (60) of what it feels like to weigh out an apt course for right action in the face of his predicament as a fragmentary creature. The fact that “Tintern Abbey” has rightly occasioned such a variety of critical responses suggests the very reality of his fragmentation; in this poem he is only able to apprehend himself in bits rather than as a wholehearted agent. Yet by placing his dim and faint recognitions of goodness on the record and subjecting them to reflective scrutiny, he gives his audience a fertile portrait of how one can recognize the conditions that might allow one to become a more moral being.

Through “Tintern Abbey” Wordsworth attempts to arrive at a coherent picture of his place in the world by making a series of philosophical and meditative maneuvers. Yet he is careful to show that this process also yields a picture of a highly contingent being. Wordsworth controls the poem’s revelations in ebbing and flowing bursts of insight, regret, and hope, all of which create a path through which he comes nearer to a feeling of wholeness while never arriving at a settled articulation of wholeness. This attempt to articulate his desire for a “good man’s life” (34) cannot yield a finished product. Rather, as the ethicist Talbot Brewer claims, “by articulating the intimations of goodness or value that are partly constitutive of one’s desires, one cultivates one’s capacity for apprehending the good by extending its reach and increasing its nuance and complexity” (52). Wordsworth is not closing the book on the story of a “good man’s life” but rather extending its capaciousness by articulating and reflecting upon the fragments of goodness and value that he recognizes in himself, his sister, and his landscape.

The poet-speaker's act of moral extension is also dependent upon his sister's presence, who is both a figure of his former self and a poetic version of Dorothy Wordsworth. Whether his turn to his sister in the final verse paragraph is, as Geoffrey Harman claims, "a vow, a prayer, an inscription for Dorothy's heart, an intimation of how this moment can survive the speaker's death" (*Wordsworth's Poetry* 28) or a "decidedly feeble gesture towards externality" (38), as Marjorie Levinson claims, the speaker's attention to his sister is motivated by a spirit of inclusion rather than solipsism. Though the figure of his sister seems to represent primarily the speaker's former self, she is nevertheless a real person of flesh and blood, whose "wild eyes" (120) gaze back at him while he affirms their shared joyful experience of this moment. "Thou are with me, here, upon the banks / of this fair river" (115-116) says the speaker, and, because you are here I now have a firmer grasp on the blessings in the air that I can only feel when you are near me. Through this petition to Dorothy, Wordsworth suggests that the ethical feeling of a good life is dependent upon the bond created by their shared experiences of participating in it together.⁶³ The laws that their hearts make in "Lines Written at a Small Distance from my House," are plural—"some laws our hearts may make"—because Wordsworth and Dorothy are joined together by the bond they created in sharing the hour of feeling together. By acknowledging the moral importance of human interdependence, Wordsworth suggests that one cannot extend one's sense of right moral action alone.

⁶³ Wordsworth's turn to Dorothy remains perhaps the most controversial issue of the poem. Though I do not wish to weigh in any further on this long-argued-about passage (one could get an overview of many of the critical positions held by Romantic critics from Abrams to the present moment just by analyzing the last verse-paragraph of "Tintern Abbey's" interpretive history), I make note of the turn to Dorothy to emphasize that Wordsworth's view of ethical agency is relational, not radically autonomous. In making this claim, my thinking is most influenced by James Soderholm's 1995 essay, "Dorothy Wordsworth's Return to Tintern Abbey" in which he seeks to "return" Dorothy's presence to the poem by looking closely at echoes from "Tintern" he finds in Dorothy's poem "Thoughts on my sick bed" that bespeak the close creative relationship William and Dorothy shared, and also by James Castell's analysis of Wordsworth's competing desires to recognize his rootedness and to seek transcendence in the poem in his 2005 essay "Wordsworth and the Life of Things."

Yet, his sister is also a present embodiment of the speaker's former self. In her image he sees more clearly how he came to understand himself as a moral being and how, in the future, he might continue to shape his moral being. In contrast to the dislocations and hesitations the speaker raises in this poem—"if this / be but a vain belief" (51-52), "nor perchance / if I were not thus taught" (113-114)—his sister's image reflects back to him a stabilizing joy that he has felt in the past and that he feels now. If in this moment he can fleetingly "catch" (117) the language of his "former heart" (118) by listening to her voice, he will be able to again reawaken his capacity for speaking his own heart-language whenever he is near her. The poem concludes with his hopeful affirmation that their shared joy will survive beyond him through the vehicle of his verse and through the "dwelling-place" (142) of his sister's memory. This gesture shows, as Wordsworth later explores in rich detail in *The Prelude*, that the human ability to remember can function as a renewable source of moral energy. In my view, the affirmations of this poem linger with the reader because they are hard won. The poems show that the activity of participating in the good requires a strenuous effort to seek out new landscapes for moral reflection like the one Wordsworth creates in "Tintern Abbey." In creating such a landscape, Wordsworth provides what "nineteenth-century readers found so attractive about his work: its power to reveal good in the universe and the joy that humans feel participating in that good" (Potkay 680).⁶⁴

Wordsworth's skill at revealing the joy that humans feel in participating in the good is in large

⁶⁴ A central argument of Potkay's *Wordsworth's Ethics* (which he summarizes in his 2015 essay "Wordsworth's Ethical Thinking" in *The Oxford Handbook of William Wordsworth* and to which I refer in this citation) is that nineteenth-century readers viewed Wordsworth primarily as an ethical poet, with mostly good reason. In his view, modern scholars, who are acutely aware of the "painful contradictions of nineteenth-century political and labor history, and the fact of Wordsworth's own focus on dispossession, poverty, vagrancy, war, and disillusionment with the French Revolution" (680) tend to ignore the appeal of Wordsworth's cosmic optimism and in doing so rule out an important feature of Wordsworth's poetry. On this point, my focus on Wordsworth's ethics is in line with Potkay's interest in Wordsworth's appealing ability to dramatize the feeling of participating in the good.

part a result of his progressive attempts—undeniably incomplete attempts but notable nonetheless for their sustained vigor—to understand what an ethical life feels like.

Our Bodies Feel, Wher'er They Be

Like Cowper, Wordsworth emphasizes that perception is the most important and most readily accessible meaning-making human activity available to us. As Wordsworth writes in “Expostulation and Reply,” “The eye it cannot chuse but see, / We cannot bid the ear be still; / Our bodies feel, where'er they be / Against, or with our will” (16-20). Any attempt to omit sight, sound, and feeling from the human perspective is futile; perception happens with or against our will. Wordsworth’s fertile suggestion is that our capacities for perception and action are not separate. We are always engaged in the activity of perception, whether we chose to acknowledge this reality or not. An important concern of Wordsworth’s poetry is to encourage his readers to acknowledge the reality that our perceptual experiences are forever shaping our apprehensions of meaning. If we accept this ontological certainty—“our bodies feel, where'er they be”—we can better attune ourselves to the world as it is, a world which is populated by a “mighty sum / of things for ever speaking” (25-26). Through this orientation we do not stand outside looking in but instead start from a point of entanglement in this sum of forever speaking things.

In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth claims that this process of skillful bodily attunement begins in the earliest moments of infancy. He argues that even in its first few days of life, the “blessed babe” is dimly aware that he is an active perceiver:

An inmate of this *active* universe;
 From nature largely he receives; nor so
 Is satisfied, but largely gives again,

For feeling has to him imparted strength,
 And powerful in all sentiments of grief,
 Of exultation, fear, and joy, his mind,
 Even as an agent of the one great mind,
 Creates, creator and receiver both,
 Working but in alliance with the works
 Which it beholds.—Such, verily, is the first
 Poetic spirit of our human life (2.266-276)⁶⁵

Wordsworth's "blessed babe" is proof that an alliance between passive reception and active responsiveness begins at birth. The newborn child passively receives sustenance and care from his mother but at the same time is "prompt and watchful" (2.247) as he develops his increasingly apt responsiveness to the expressions of care which he receives from his mother.⁶⁶ Through his process of attuning himself to the environmental nuances of his "active universe," he becomes more "tenacious of the forms which it receives" (2.254) and thus more capable of igniting in himself a skillful practice of attending to his environment. He is bound within the active universe, an agent of "the one great mind," and accepts that he exists "in alliance" with the natural world he beholds. His developing awareness of nature's influence on him becomes an attentional resource that will provide him with creative sustenance in his life as a poet. In

⁶⁵ All references to William Wordsworth's 1805 are to *The Prelude from William Wordsworth: The Prelude, The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*.

⁶⁶ Critical interpretations of this passage are too numerous to acknowledge with authority here. Though my interpretation focuses on the role of perception in relation to receptivity, in the background of my thinking is William Ulmer's claim in his *The Christian Wordsworth* that the infant-mother relationship in this passage represents a religious phenomenon, "Wordsworth's humanizing of the One Life in the Blessed Babe lines makes the child's mind a reduplicative agent of the mind of God" (79), and can also represent a locus of trauma in *The Prelude* that Wordsworth is trying to grapple with throughout the poem, as Geoffrey Hartman claims in *Unremarkable Wordsworth*, this "passage anticipates a central argument of the entire *Prelude*: our ability to make a transition from the first (and lost) love object to object love" (20).

embracing his “blessed-babeness”—the first “poetic spirit of our human life”—he gains creative power and moral strength.

At the center of this passage is its assertion of receptivity’s distinctly ethical value. The first “poetic spirit of our human life” is a spirit of receptivity. The “blessed babe’s” first activity is not to assert their control but to use their developing senses to respond to the influences of an active universe. In turn, they witness their mother giving emotional and physical sustenance to them. In Wordsworth’s account, the mother teaches the value of selfless acts of giving from the earliest moments of a child’s life. The poetic spirit that develops from these experiences is one that views receptivity as a strength rather than a weakness. Through giving and receiving, we learn a discipline of feeling—grief, exultation, fear, joy—that checks our desire to impose our wills on the world. We are agents of “the one great mind” and thus err when we look at nature and see only ourselves, rather than apprehending the presence of a teeming natural world. As Wordsworth shows through his infusions of his self, Dorothy, and his environment in “Lines Written at a Small Distance from My House” and “Tintern Abbey,” ethical agency is a way of being in which the agent works “in alliance” with all that it beholds. Wordsworth’s argument that receptivity is strengthening and empowering directly challenges the production-oriented view of human agency that was ascendant in Wordsworth’s day, a view with which he himself grapples in *The Prelude*.⁶⁷ Rather than gaining strength and power through asserting one’s influence on the world—as a politician, a scientist, a banker—one gains strength by giving one’s self to the active universe. Through this difficult activity, to which Wordsworth dedicates his life, one finds

⁶⁷ Throughout *The Prelude*, Wordsworth seeks to understand his place in the “active universe” from the anxious perspective of someone both driven and troubled by his poetic ambitions. Perhaps his most prominent concern is that he is “like a false steward who hath much received / And renders nothing back.” (1.269-271). He seeks to find some form of significance for his poetic project in response to the pervasive ontological pressure of the parable of the talents—render something back!—which he acknowledges is impossible to escape in cultures committed both to the concept of God-given capital and to the production-oriented view of human agency bestowed by the Enlightenment.

that perhaps the only “product” that can emerge from human activity is a more comprehensive picture of what it is like to live a human life.

Such a picture requires an author’s commitment to presenting themselves as participants rather than as spectators. On this point, Wordsworth and Cowper’s poetries of perception acutely converge. A signal feature of their verse is the voice of a speaker who is willing to “fuse” himself with his environment or the voice of a speaker who wishes to see how his ontological orientation can meaningfully shift if he presents himself to be in the middle of things rather than to be viewing the flow of human action from the distant perspective of a disinterested viewing subject. We tend to take this feature of Wordsworth’s work as a given. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth reflects on how a distinct place and an individual creative spirit become interconnected over the course of a life. Yet one can, as I have attempted to in the previous chapter, make the same assertion about *The Task*. Perhaps more than anything else, *The Task* is a poem about a shifting subjective relationship between an individual and a distinct place and time. The editors of the newest edition of *The Prelude*, James Engell and Michael D. Raymond, acknowledge this point when they claim that, “aside from some passages in William Cowper’s *The Task*, a poem Wordsworth knew well, *The Prelude* is the first longer poem to fuse and reconcile individual human perception and feeling with external objects of experience and their representation in language” (xi). Though the authors do not bother to cite these passages from *The Task* or offer evidence of Wordsworth’s familiarity with Cowper, they rightly note that Cowper and Wordsworth both sought to tell the story of an embodied poet in the process of attuning his distinct human perception to his environment.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ I refer to their new illustrated edition, entitled *The Prelude 1805*. Engell and Raymond’s claim is that in whatever way Cowper deserves our critical attention it is the degree to which he is or is not Wordsworthian (or Coleridgean). I cite their cursory reference to Cowper because it is a high-profile example of the “idiosyncratic forerunner” approach to Cowper that continues to minimize the achievements of Cowper’s poetry in the service of lauding

A focal point of this convergence is the only passage in *The Prelude* that clearly alludes to Cowper. In book four, as Wordsworth recounts the series of events that led him to accept the “new-born feeling” (4.233) of becoming a poet he recalls a joyful moment in which he feels especially receptive to the active component of nature. Amidst the trees, mountains, brooks, and stars that Wordsworth believes share this “new-born feeling” with him—the feeling is in fact *only* recognizable to him as a co-presence shared between him and his landscape—Wordsworth remembers himself to have been:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
 Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
 Of a still water, solacing himself
 With such discoveries as his eye can make (4.247-250 emphasis mine)

Jonathan Wordsworth rightly claims that Wordsworth here is employing “an epic simile in the tradition of Virgil and Milton, but modelled in fact on Cowper” (575). Wordsworth seems to have the opening passage from book three of *The Task* in mind:

As one who long in thickets and in brakes
 Entangled, winds now this way and now that
 His devious course uncertain, seeking home...
 ...I feel myself at large,
 Courageous, and refresh'd for future toil,

Wordsworth’s genius. From this narrow perspective of Cowper, readers of *The Prelude* have very little impetus to seek out Cowper’s work. It bears noting too that their claim that Cowper and Wordsworth *both* “fuse” and “reconcile” human perception *and* feeling with external nature through their distinct poetic languages is problematic. While I think it is right to suggest that Cowper and Wordsworth “fuse” their poetic persona’s perceptions with their environments, I am not so sure that they “reconcile” the difficult relationship between an individual subject and their perceived environment in their work.

If toil awaits me, or if dangers new. (3.1-3, 18-20 emphasis mine)

Wordsworth not only imitates Cowper's "as one who" simile but he also employs it for a corresponding purpose; in both passages, the speakers present themselves to be in the process of an ongoing, deepening immersion in their scene. Either as "down-bending" or "entangled," each speaker is in the flow of things rather than observing the flow from afar.

Wordsworth may have learned from Cowper that to convey this sense of embodied immersion, one must suspend the reader's expectations for grammatical parallelism. Wordsworth opens his verse-paragraph with "as one who" and then builds an increasingly elaborate dependent clause that describes the phenomenon of hanging—"hangs down-bending," "upon the breast of a still water," "often is perplexed" "now is crossed by gleam," "are sent he knows not whence"(4.247-261)—and makes the independent clause, "Such pleasant office have we long pursued" (4.262), seem insignificant under the weight of the thirteen-line dependent clause that precedes it. Cowper too opens book three of *The Task* with "as one who" and then crafts a ten-line dependent clause that elaborates his experience of being "entangled" in nature—"in thickets and in brakes," "plunging, and half despairing of escape," "winds his way with pleasure and with ease" (3.1-10)—which also makes the four-line independent clause that states, "So I...have rambled wide" (3.11-14) seem less important than the circuitous description of entanglement that precedes it. The experience of bending over the side of a boat or rambling in the woods is not a process that yields a neatly quantifiable result; these experiences are best approximated through digressive dependent clauses punctuated by awkwardly skewed independent clauses.

By using a long series of qualifying clauses to immerse themselves in their scenes, the speakers of both passages momentarily suspend their authority as first person-narrators. In the passages above, Cowper's "I" emerges after ten-lines of digressive verbal exploration and, more

extremely, after nearly thirty-lines of metaphorical hanging Wordsworth's "I" emerges. Tim Fulford argues that both Cowper and Wordsworth tend "to dramatize an 'I' whose authority was displaced into subordinate and qualifying clauses, secondary subjects and complex syntactical relations" (178). Their grammatical choices seem to mirror a shared interest in maintaining an open, receptive line of communication between their landscapes and their speakers. If this line is to remain open it follows that their patterns of discourse must also remain fluid and shifting. The task of the poet of perception is to create the maximum amount of tension in scenes of apparent ease.

In this boat-hanging scene Wordsworth presents his task as a pleasurable struggle to dwell porously in his lived environment. In the midst of the vacation mood of summer, the speaker embraces the stillness of the afternoon and begins to compose a loco-description of the underwater world. Attempting to attend to the bare face of things he sees beneath him, he notes the presence of "weeds, fishes, flowers, / Grots, pebbles, roots of trees" (4.252-253) and signals his desire to maintain his outward-directed attention even though he is growing increasingly perplexed. The more he looks steadily at this underwater scene, the less he is able to ignore the co-presence of his own being. He wishes to view these natural objects as phenomena with distinct lives of their own yet he "cannot part / The shadow from the substance" (4.254-255). This shadow is the presence of his searching being. His growing desire to understand the relationship between these objects and himself momentarily casts a figurative and literal shadow over his ability to see these objects clearly. The shadow is feint—he calls it a "gleam / of his own image" (4.258-259)—but persistent. He learns in this moment that it cannot be ignored.

It is significant that he claims he is engaged in a receptive activity of struggling to remain porous enough to the things themselves, "the things which there abide / in their true dwelling"

(4.257-258) while negotiating his desire to ascribe distinct meanings to how these things fit into his perceptual picture of existence. In a continuation of his allusion to Cowper, Wordsworth calls this receptive activity a process of grappling with “impediments that make his task more sweet” (4.261).⁶⁹ The shadow does not cast an unremitting darkness on his process of discovery. It instead provides a pleasant point of tension that allows him to direct his attention more meaningfully. He begins this passage with a wandering eye, “solacing himself / with such discoveries as his eye can make” (4.249-250), but by the end he has begun to determine that his digressive vision can be ascribed a “task” that would “demand / some skill” (4.286-287). The work of training one’s receptivity is “more sweet” because it is potentially more meaningful than what he later calls the “vague heartless chace / of trivial pleasures”(4.305-306). He is accepting here that the objects themselves and his perceptions of these objects—even if his perceptions are shadowed by his subjective prejudices—are co-presences that he should strive to account for in his verse.

This spirit of acceptance frames Wordsworth’s exclamation in the following verse-paragraph that he will devote himself to the profession of poetry. After the boat-hanging scene, Wordsworth recalls walking home early in the morning from a party that same summer when, in a moment of sudden happiness, he feels his calling as a poet:

I made no vows, but vows
 Were then made for me; bond unknown to me
 Was given, that I should be, else sinning greatly,
 A dedicated Spirit. On I walked

⁶⁹ Cowper concludes the opening verse-paragraph of book three of *The Task* with a similar spirit of rejuvenation and will: “but now with pleasant pace, a cleaner road / I mean to tread. I feel myself at large, / Courageous, and refresh’d for future toil” (3.18-20).

In blessedness, which even yet remains. (4.341-345)

This climactic moment is the result of Wordsworth's acceptance that the task of the poet involves a dedicated continuation of the process of navigating co-presences that he attempts while hanging from the boat. This is work but it is pleasant work. And it is work that an exterior force has called upon him to do. His willingness to allow his scene to absorb him creates the most propitious conditions for him to accept his calling. Maintaining a Cowperian style, he emphasizes his commitment to absorption by employing a passive construction and an overburdened dependent clause. The poet becomes the poet not because he initiates action but because "vows were / then made for me" and an unknown bond "was given." The natural forces to which he has become acutely receptive in his youth impose their pleasant pressures on him until he becomes confident enough to respond as "a dedicated Spirit." After allowing the weight of the sentence's revelations to affect him, he is now able to again take a commanding perspective, "On I walked / in blessedness, which yet even remains" and move forward in search of more scenes of receptivity.⁷⁰

The prevalence of religious language in this passage offers us a vantage through which to discuss the Christian resemblances between Cowper and Wordsworth. Particularly in modern Romantic scholarship the line of communication between Cowper and the Romantics has largely been severed because of the supposed discrepancy between his religious commitments and the Romantics' secular ones. As recent studies have reasserted, however, whether one's critical

⁷⁰ Though I have been emphasizing affinities between Cowper and Wordsworth here, I am not doing so to suggest that Wordsworth's peripatetic poetics are primarily Cowperian. Here, the phrase "on I walked" is emblematic of Wordsworth's incorporation of William Gilpin's picturesque tourism (against which Wordsworth sharply turned but was sharply influenced by as well) into his own distinct descriptive aesthetics. As Janice Hewlitt Koelb claims in her 2006 *The Poetics of Description*, "Wordsworth learned about the picturesque primarily from Gilpin" (99), deriving his own ideas about how to encounter a landscape through the activities of touring, remembering, and recomposing the landscape through writing.

disposition is secular or religious, the process of interpreting Romantic texts has always required acute awareness of these texts' religious valences.⁷¹ If we orient our interpretation of Wordsworth from a religious perspective, we find that his poetry articulates a spiritual vision of human experience surprisingly similar to Cowper's in its focus on the primacy of everyday perceptual experience's role in shaping a meaningful picture of being, or what David Leigh has recently called their shared interest in "the sacred moment of perception." In Leigh's view, both Cowper and Wordsworth are religious poets because the subject of their major poems is "the entire process of reaching this moment of sacred perception" (63) when a narrator is "both fascinated by nature's revelatory beauty and fearful of the consequences of a transcendent imagination" (66).

Leigh rightly draws our attention to the significance of "sacred perception" in both authors' work. But in invoking a strictly Christian frame to do so, he positions these moments of "sacred perception" as rare moments of grace that are solely directed towards each poets' spiritual awakening. The problem with such an interpretation is that it emphasizes the product over the process. Leigh continually describes *The Prelude* as a poem of spiritual quest and *The Task* as a poem about a narrator's progress towards spiritual completion. While such an interpretation of *The Prelude* is of course valid—it is a poem about "the growth of the poet's mind" and seems to have been always conceived of in more or less teleological terms for

⁷¹ M.H. Abrams's claim in *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973) that the British Romantics were best understood as secularizers of Protestant theology has been more or less the critical commonplace on the relationship between religion and Romanticism. However, recent criticism has begun to prove that the Romantics were more religious than Abrams thought, as Ian Balfour shows through a rhetorical, deconstructive lens in his 2002 *The Rhetoric of Romantic Prophecy* and J. Robert Barth shows through a theological lens in his 2003 *Romanticism and Transcendence: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the Religious Imagination*. Though Balfour's theoretical approach significantly differs from Barth's "faithful" approach (Barth was a Romanticist and a Jesuit priest), both studies are notable in their insistence on exploring the complexity of the role of religion in Romanticism. For a good overview of these books and others see David P. Haney's 2005 essay "Recent Work in Romanticism and Religion: From Witness to Critique."

Wordsworth—it does not accurately account for the cyclical, non-terminal nature of *The Task* and it also diminishes the force of Wordsworth’s poetry of the everyday in *The Prelude*.⁷² In my view, what links these authors’ sacred perception is not a shared focus on privileged moments of metaphysical revelation—The Arve, Simplon Pass, and the ascent of Snowdon for Wordsworth, and the closing section of book six of *The Task* for Cowper—but a shared ability to linger, to seek out what is meaningful in nature for the sake of seeking alone.

This is to say that readers of both *The Task* and *The Prelude* do not find themselves charting a narrator’s increasing skill in describing their perceptual experiences in order to prove that by the end of each work, the authors have arrived at the height of their perceptual powers. If this were the case, then all earlier perceptual experiences would have to seem less skillfully rendered than the final ones. In Cowper, book one is not eclipsed by book six; and in Wordsworth, book one is not eclipsed by book thirteen. In fact, what is striking about both works is the clarity of perceptual awareness with which each author renders their landscapes right from the beginning of the poem. In doing so, they set patterns of “sacred perception” that control much of the action of their long poems. It is their shared interests in a process of sacred perception that links their work. Cowper sets this pattern early in book one of *The Task*. As he notes, “Scenes must be beautiful which daily view’d / Please daily” (1.177-178). He presents himself as a being in the world immersed in his skillful practice of perception. The early childhood spots of time in the first two books of *The Prelude* have a similar ability to portray

⁷² There is another problem with this interpretation, too, in that Leigh claims that Wordsworth and Cowper can be linked through their Evangelical sympathies. Though Wordsworth had some Evangelical sympathies, he was as Ulmer states, by and large an Anglican. In particular he found Evangelicalism too chaste for him and too focused on regulating human action. Further, Cowper’s Evangelicalism by the time of writing *The Task* had waned significantly.

Wordsworth as immersed in a process of sacred perception, none more so than the ice-skating scene in book one.

This scene is a masterful rendering of childhood play. Ice-skating under the stars on the frozen River Derwent, Wordsworth skates away from his friends and feels a distinct power in the hills and the stars that lead him to remember this moment as a “time of rapture” (1.457) in which he is drawn out of himself through his awareness of presences larger than his own. In its clarity of perceptual description, this is a spot of time. But because the scene is so masterfully composed, we tend to forget that Wordsworth frames it as one moment among many similar moments. He is careful to claim that such moments were not rare occurrences in his youth, “*Not seldom* from the uproar I retired / Into a silent bay” (1.474-475 emphasis mine). Echoing his claim in book 2, “thus daily were my sympathies enlarged” (2.181), Wordsworth establishes that this scene represents his ongoing process of perceptual attunement. He demonstrates the sharpness of his receptivity as he sets the scene through visual and auditory events. He sees at once both the fading light of the setting sun and the radiant inner light glowing out of cottage windows, the sight of which he captures in the phrase “the twilight blazed” (1.454). Like in the beginning of book six of *The Task*, the toll of the village clock presages Wordsworth’s notation of a series of sound events: the “hiss” of ice skates on the polished ice; the children’s playful imitations of the rabbit hunter’s horn; the bellowing sounds of their voices bouncing off the surrounding precipices; the bare trees and icy crags that “tinkled like iron” (1.467); all of which are punctuated by an ineffable “alien sound” in the distant hills that draws Wordsworth away from his friends.

Away from the “tumultuous throng” (1.476) of his friends, the young Wordsworth becomes more absorbed in his environment. First he playfully cuts across the reflection of a star

on the ice but the star's reflection is only momentarily assailable by his "cut." He is in the midst of physical presences more powerful than his own. Rather than asserting himself upon this environment, as he first attempts to do, he recalls that he and his friends would let the wind overcome their bodies:

And oftentimes

When we had given our bodies to the wind,
 And all the shadowy banks, on either side,
 Came sweeping through the darkness, spinning still
 The rapid line of motion (1.478-482)

They willingly give themselves to the wind and, in turn, it takes charge of their bodies. Wordsworth perceives them to be as unwilling as the natural matter being swept across the river or onto the shadowy banks by the wind's "rapid line of motion." Absorbed in the rapid circular motion of the wind that holds them in place, together they are "spinning still." This use of the Cowperian technique of stilling allows Wordsworth to compose a dynamic tension between the motion of the natural world and the skaters' seeming stillness. In the final sequence of this scene, he builds on this tension by recalling the moment when he suddenly stops this circular motion by leaning the heels of his skates into the ice. In this lull from the action, he notices that the world continues to move without him: "yet still the solitary Cliffs / Wheeled by me, even as if the earth had rolled / with visible motion her diurnal round" (1.484-486). The visible motion of earth's diurnal round can be seen in the constancy of the solitary cliffs. They are solitary markers of the indubitable existence of things, which have distinct lives of their own that seem to "wheel" by him as he perceives them with wonder.

In Wordsworth's emphasis on his embodied receptivity to the "visible motion" of the earth, Wordsworth presents a picture of perception here that aligns with what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the art of "lived experience" (14). Especially in his essay on Cezanne's still lives, "Cezanne's Doubt," Merleau-Ponty gives special precedence to art that remains "faithful to the phenomena" (14) it seeks to portray. To Merleau-Ponty this means art that allows us to apprehend a swelling world of phenomena that seems to organize itself before us. In his view, artists like Cezanne show us that "the world is a mass without gaps, a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed" (15). Merleau-Ponty's concept of vibration is crucial. In a poetry of lived experience, the presence of a dimly apprehensible line of force holds the perceptual experience together as the surrounding phenomena begin to organize themselves. In this scene, the wind's "rapid line of motion" allows us to momentarily perceive the world as a "mass without gaps" bound together through its shared diurnal force. Wordsworth shows perception to be immersive and ongoing and thus rendered most faithfully when presented as a process of apprehending rather than imposing. One must be aware of one's distinct presence as an individual perceiver but one must maintain a capacious, receptive position that allows the phenomena to reveal themselves. In seeking to maintain this position, Wordsworth finds a distinct perspective through which a binding "visible motion" can momentarily be apprehended and studied.

A Few Short Years of Useful Life

In the final verse-paragraph of the 1805 *Prelude*, Wordsworth affirms both the validity of his vocation and of his poetic project. He believes that he has not erred in becoming a “dedicated spirit.” The poetic project of describing the growth of a poet’s mind has the power to teach new generations of readers to look steadily at their relationships with their environment, at their relationships with their fellow humans, and at their inner lives. At the very least, the completion of this project is self-affirmatory. Wordsworth believes that he can now move forward to compose the larger, philosophical poem he has promised Coleridge, *The Recluse*. The activity of composition itself has given him strength in the face of adversity—Coleridge’s sickness and departure, his brother’s death—and has helped him to clarify for himself his poetic purpose. Addressing Coleridge in these final lines he claims, “what we have loved / others will love; and we may teach them how” (13.444-445). Above all, he and Coleridge have invited their readers to experience what they “have loved” and this love may be contagious enough to inspire similar, morally imaginative forms of love in their readers. This conclusion strikes a hopeful note in its affirmation of the ethical value of truth, knowledge, happiness, redemption, imagination, and the world’s “fabric more divine” (13.452). Wordsworth seems to be answering the charge of false stewardship that he gives himself in the beginning of *The Prelude* with a resonant “not so.”

Yet as in almost all Wordsworthian affirmations, this affirmation is conditional. It begins by reducing the textured human life that he has described over the course of the poem to “a few short years of useful life” (13.428) momentarily raised to glory in his poem, but which could very well fade from glory because of the lingering presence of an “old idolatry” threatening to betray the ideals of his project.⁷³ Though he hopes that his poem will be more meaningful to

⁷³ This “old idolatry” most likely refers to what he perceives to have been weak English responses to rising French imperialism. But it also seems to me to lament the possibility that people will continue to operate, despite his best efforts, with the detrimentally narrow view of human nature he discussed in his letter to John Wilson.

readers than as a record of a few short, useful years, he is willing to allow that this hope may be but a vain belief. If the poem finds no audience, he will take refuge in the fact that “we shall still / Find solace in the knowledge which we have” (13.435-436). He has dedicated himself to his distinct project of knowing to such a degree that perhaps the only remaining record of it will be his memories of his process of seeking knowledge. Perhaps only his subjective memory, the self-knowledge which he has, will suffice as his signal human achievement.

Wordsworth has not been a false steward but he knows that the product of his labor is necessarily ephemeral and potentially unprofitable. The solace of knowledge is enough for him—so he says—because it may indeed be the only return he will receive on his poetic investments. In my view, this is why the final lines of the poem should be read not as an apotheosis of humanism but rather as an assertion of Wordsworth’s acceptance of his human limitations—the notion that he is an “agent of the one great mind” rather than merely a “great mind” who:

may teach them how;
 Instruct them how the mind of man becomes
 A thousand times more beautiful than earth
 On which he dwells, above this Frame of things
 (Which, ‘mid all revolutions in the hopes
 And fears of men, doth still remain unchanged)
 In beauty exalted, as it is itself
 Of substance and of fabric more divine. (13.445-452)

This is not merely an act of poetic fiat seeking to affirm Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s desired prophetic status. The mind of man only becomes “a thousand times more beautiful than earth”

because the mind shares with nature God's animating presence. The mind is "more divine" than other substances because it is distinctly capable of adjusting to the "Frame of things" so that it can more aptly perceive the co-presences of self and world. This "mind of man" is both self-affirming and self-limiting. Its power is best recognized as a creatively receptive one; it can both compose a distinct picture of the world and can allow the world to distinctly compose it. It acts upon the world while the world acts upon it.

It is instructive that Wordsworth argues at the end of *The Prelude* that he believes ethical agency can be taught. Cowper distanced himself from eighteenth-century didacticism, though there is hardly a passage in *The Task* that does not somehow feel instructional. Wordsworth too largely avoids didacticism though his teacherly presence always lingers. Here, Wordsworth directly calls himself a moral teacher but a moral teacher who teaches only by example. He and Coleridge will teach their readers about love by presenting a capacious picture of the activity of love not through maxims on "how to love." In this passage, then, the word "how" is never followed by "to." "How" means a subjective description of the complex ways in which we love—Betty Foy's love for the "Idiot Boy," the unremembered acts of love—whereas "how to" implies instructions and implementations. Howness is the world as the poet finds it and renders it back. It is up to the reader to behold these renderings and implement them in their own distinct ways. The ethics that Wordsworth teaches is not a communicable expertise. In this sense it is not a kind of activity that produces findings which, if learned, a future generation will not have to engage in themselves because knowledge about this activity has become settled. The kind of learning that Wordsworth suggests his audience can engage in as a result of reading his poems is an activity of unsettling one's assumptions about the world, of seeking new places through which natural objects present themselves as meaningful, of learning how to look steadily at the averse,

of learning how to be co-present rather than present, and of embracing uncertainty. This is no easy task. But judging by the effects Wordsworth has had on his readers, it is worth the trouble.

3

The Ethics of Forbearance in Ralph Waldo Emerson's Poetry

I am a born poet, of a low class without doubt yet a poet. That is my nature and vocation...I am a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter, & specially of the correspondences between these & those.

(Ralph Waldo Emerson)⁷⁴

A Poet in the Sense of a Perceiver

In the previous chapters on Cowper and Wordsworth, I have argued that their poetics of perception have a distinctly ethical orientation. Cowper and Wordsworth both make the fertile suggestion that the course to right action can be charted through a subjective individual's descriptions of and reflections upon their daily perceptual experiences. This chapter argues that the first American poet to continue Cowper and Wordsworth's line of perceptual poetry is Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson's poetry is an experimental space through which he tests out his kinetic ideas about the affinitive relationship between human agents and the agent power of nature. Like Cowper and Wordsworth, but in a new American idiom, the question Emerson's poetry of perception continuously explores is: how can an individual widen their circle of significant life, thus sketching a more meaningful picture of how they fit within this circle?

⁷⁴ From Emerson's letter to Lydia Jackson, 1 February 1835 (1.435). All references to Emerson's letters are to *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

From an early age, Emerson felt that he had a poetic temperament. As a student at Harvard Divinity School, he wrote in his journal that he had “a strong imagination & consequently a keen relish for the beauties of poetry” (2.238) which made theological and philosophical systems difficult for him to fully grasp.⁷⁵ His first wife, Ellen Tucker, wrote poetry and they both talked of becoming poets. When she died in 1831, Emerson began to develop his intimate, lyric voice by writing hundreds of elegies for her in his notebooks.⁷⁶ As he deepened his explorations of natural science, philosophy, and religion, Emerson maintained his belief that he saw himself primarily as a poet, telling his second wife-to-be, Lydia Jackson, on February 1, 1835 that:

I am a born poet...that is my nature & vocation...a poet in the sense of a perceiver & dear lover of the harmonies that are in the soul & in matter, & specially of the correspondences between these & those. A sunset, a forest, a snow storm, a certain river view, are more to me than many friends & do ordinarily divide my day with my books. (1.435)

By his lights, what makes him a “born poet” is his ability to identify harmonies between his feeling heart and material nature through a poetic practice rooted in the activity of perception. In every attempt to render poetically his experience of “a sunset, a snow storm, a certain review,” he gains a new opportunity to spot a harmony or correspondence between himself and his environment.

⁷⁵ All references to Emerson’s journal entries are to *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

⁷⁶ All of his “Ellen” poems have been finally printed in one place in the new *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Poetry*. For an excellent analysis of the poetry they wrote while together, and the poems Emerson wrote after Ellen’s death see Henry F. Pommer’s 1967 study *Emerson’s First Marriage*.

It is important to notice that Emerson claims poetry is his “nature & vocation.” In this letter he does not see himself as a minister, a public lecturer, or a man of letters, but primarily as one who has embraced the vocation of poetry. In the various forms his poetic vocation takes—both in prose and poetry—it is always rooted in what Richard Poirier calls Emerson’s workman-like belief that “literature is a metaphor for work with language, work which just might possibly *begin* to help change existing realities, and only then if the work is carried on endlessly” (95). Emerson attempted to carry on his work “endlessly” through his essays and lectures, but he was equally dedicated to the work of poetry. From his boyhood to the end of his life, Emerson dedicated himself to the practice of making poems. In his journals and notebooks, he composed thousands of lines of original verse and published what he considered to be the best of these poems in journals, newspapers, and eventually in his two collections of verse, the 1847 *Poems* and the 1867 *May-Day and Other Pieces*.⁷⁷ As Albert von Frank’s recent reassessment of Emerson’s poetry in his 2011 *Emerson’s Poems: A Variorum Edition* shows, Emerson used his poetry as a space through which to rethink the concepts he explores in his essays and lectures. Through his compilation of a variorum edition of Emerson’s hundreds of poems, von Frank rightly asks us to look at these poems as records of a dynamic, experimental process that seek to represent “the importance of the process and of what was at stake in its conduct” (xxx).⁷⁸

⁷⁷ The 2011 *Poems: A Variorum Edition* makes it abundantly clear that there are no editions of any of Emerson’s published poems that do not exist in multiple, complete drafts. In addition, his publications were prolific; from 1838 through the late 1870s, he published hundreds of poems in *The Western Messenger*, *The Dial*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

⁷⁸ Von Frank, along with Joseph M. Thomas in his 2006 “Poverty and Power: Revisiting Emerson’s Poetics” both focus their scholarship on Emerson’s workaday poetic practice as a corrective to the received critical view of Emerson as what Thomas aptly calls “the poet of oracular passivity” (216). Von Frank and Thomas have rightly emphasized that though Emerson sometimes liked to portray himself as a poetic diviner, he was always writing and revising even his most mystical poems, like “The Sphinx” or “Hamatreya.” Their critical reevaluation of his poetry seems to me an important corrective to the still prevalent view that Emerson’s poetry is always secondary to his prose. This view was initiated by Matthew Arnold in the late 19th century—in an 1885 lecture in Boston, Arnold claimed that while Emerson’s poetry is “interesting [and] makes one think” it is “not the poetry of one of the born poets” (153)—and has persisted well through the 21st century—most recently evident in Dan Chiasson’s unfavorable review in the *New Yorker* of the 2015 collection *Ralph Waldo Emerson: The Major Poetry*, in which he claims that

Because poetry is, as Emerson writes in “The Poet,” “vehicular and transitive,” and “good as ferries and horses are, for conveyance, not as farms and houses are, for homestead” (463), it can never offer a final truth about or complete rendering of human experience.⁷⁹ Through his continual shaping and reshaping of experience into verse, Emerson seeks to show that a meaningful human existence should be rooted in an appreciation of a living process rather than in the desire for an expected product.

This chapter proposes that a group of poems Emerson wrote between 1834 and 1842—“Each and All,” “The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower?,” “The Snow-Storm,” “Woodnotes II,” and “Threnody”—can be interpreted as extensions of the line of perceptual experimentation initiated by Cowper and Wordsworth in a new American setting. Like Cowper and Wordsworth’s poetries of perception, Emerson’s poetry dramatizes the prayer-like activity of beholding the day and letting it go—taking the scene as if drawing a long conscientious breath, and then letting go of the scene, through a long exhalation of resolution, satisfied that as long as he is breathing, the process will continue. This is what Stanley Cavell calls Emerson’s distinct ability to prioritize, “the letting be of something as opposed to the positing or putting together of something” (13). By striving to let the ecosystem of his own environment *be* in his poetry, Emerson notably focuses his verse on an observed scene rather than a scene’s observer. My analysis of his poems of perception follow two interrelated paths. The first traverses a group of Emerson’s poems written from the perspective of a witness-participant. The second considers two poems that give an imaginative voice to natural objects. My analysis will look closely at

Emerson’s verse is “listless” and that Emerson’s ideas were “obviously badly served by the rickety verse structures he built for them.” For Arnold’s lecture on Emerson’s poetry see “Emerson” in *Discourses in America*, and for Chiasson’s complete review of Emerson’s poetry see “Ecstasy of Influence: Ralph Waldo Emerson’s American Poetry” in the *New Yorker*.

⁷⁹ All references to Emerson’s essays are to *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*.

how these poems resonate with each other, with Emerson's thought, and with the theoretical claims about ethics and perception I have so far explored in Cowper and Wordsworth's poetry.

Again I Saw, Again I Heard

Emerson's first perceptual poem is his 1834 "Each and All." The poem charts the poet-speaker's gradual acknowledgement that their impulse to dissect nature into parts must be tempered by their poetic imagination's ability to render the dissected parts as composite pieces of what Emerson calls in *Nature* "the perfection of the whole" (28). One day walking in the woods, the speaker is arrested by the song of a sparrow—"I thought the sparrow's note from heaven" (13)—and is so moved that they bring the sparrow and the nest home.⁸⁰ The sparrow is not pleased to be removed from her home. Her notes are no longer heavenly to the speaker when heard outside of the of the environment in which the speaker first heard the sparrow's song. The poet realizes that just because they brought the sparrow home, they "did not bring home the river and the sky" (17). This failure reminds the speaker of another attempt to bring nature home with him:

The delicate shells lay on the shore;
 The bubbles of the latest wave;
 Fresh pearls to their enamel gave;
 And the bellowing of the savage sea
 Greeted their safe escape to me.
 I wiped away the weeds and foam,

⁸⁰ All references to Emerson's verse are to *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Volume 9, Poems: A Variorum Edition*.

I fetched my sea-born treasures home;
 But the poor, unsightly, noisome things
 Had left their beauty on the shore,
 With the sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar. (19-28)

In their view, taking the shells from the shore is not a transgressive action. They have not stolen these shells but instead have helped them escape from danger. The shells' delicate beauty was covered by "weeds and foam," blushing unseen to the world. The poet needed to liberate them from their dangerous environment so that others could apprehend their hidden beauty too. Yet once the shells have vanished from the scene in which they had been previously embedded, their beauty does not follow them. They become, "poor, unsightly, noisome things" because the poet has attempted to appropriate the shells for their own pleasure alone. The shells radiate no wonder because they've lost their wonder-radiating conditions. At the end of this sequence, the speaker presents the shells as agents: they "left their beauty on the shore." Their identities are concurrent with the "sun, and the sand, and the wild uproar." The poet-speaker cannot recreate this ecosystem at home; the shells and their environment must be left alone if they are to be appreciated as a part of the "all."

What is the "each" and what is the "all" to Emerson? Emerson's life and work can be understood as a continuous series of original and eloquent answers to this question. As Robert D. Richardson shows in his biography of Emerson, *Mind on Fire*, in all of his phases of thinking and writing, Emerson strives to hold the central metaphysical view that "what is beyond nature is revealed to us through nature, that the miraculous is revealed through the scientific and natural, and that the inner life is revealed through the life of the senses" (185). The "each" can never be adequately considered without marking its "all" revealing power. Language is the ideal marker

of this natural reality, for every new expression of the “each” in the “all” or the “all” in the “each” offers a new space to attempt to chart more adequately an original relationship between the individual consciousness and the natural world in which it is immersed. Stealing a finch’s nest or some sea-shells to bring home will not suffice. This raises the important point that for Emerson “nature” means the subjective experience of nature. Through his lifelong study of natural science, Emerson maintained a material interest in nature. Taxonomic lists, natural specimens, and scientific instruments often lead us towards deeper knowledge of nature. Yet too narrow a focus on the description and definitions of the “each” can become a distraction. As Cowper faults pedantic natural scientists in *The Task* for attempting to “win” nature through the “slow solicitation” (6.116) of taxonomy and as Wordsworth renounces the need to dismantle things in order to know them in “The Tables Turned,” “Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things; / —We murder to dissect” (26-28), Emerson too views poetry as a tool aptly suited for countering the scientific impulse to sever and analyze. In Emerson’s view, both positions are important. Ideally both dissection and poetry can work together to craft a more capacious description of nature, as Emerson claims in reference to Wordsworth in his 1834 lecture “The Naturalist,” “I fully believe in both, in the poetry and in the dissection” (1.79).⁸¹ In this sense, “Each and All” dramatizes the speaker’s process of accepting the coexistence of the dissection and the poetry.

This is why at the end of “Each and All,” the speaker is so distressed by his meager attempts to understand nature by stealing material objects from it, he suddenly exclaims, “I covet truth” (37). The speaker is self-aware enough to notice that collecting specimens can only bring them so far in their search for truth. Like young Wordsworth in *The Prelude*, the poet is greedy

⁸¹ All references to Emerson’s lectures are to *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*.

in their pursuit of knowledge and experience. But his covetousness is why he has so far failed in his endeavors. He must curb his desire to capture nature and instead strive to let his environment be. Once the poet-speaker immerses himself in his scene, he begins to discover that it is alive just as he is:

beneath my feet

The ground-pine curled its pretty wreath,

I inhaled the violet's breath;

Around me stood the oaks and firs;

Pine-cones and acorns lay on the ground;

Over me soared the eternal sky,

Full of light and of deity;

Again I saw, again I heard,

The rolling river, the morning bird;—

Beauty through my senses stole;

I yielded myself to the perfect whole. (40-51)

The poet-speaker arrives at a sense of peace and belonging by perceiving himself to be in the middle of things rather than an outsider looking in. Like Cowper entangled in thickets and brakes in *The Task* and Wordsworth hanging down-bending on a slow-moving boat in *The Prelude*, Emerson momentarily suspend his speaker's authority as a first-person narrator to emphasize their increased receptivity to his environment. The phrases "around me," "over me," "through my senses," and the image of the ground-pine that seems to curl its wreath around his feet all create a sense of increasing enclosure. The poet seems to be happily trapped in the forest. He is no longer rambling across the woods but instead perceiving himself to be a part of it. His only

actions are sensual and receptive: “I inhaled,” “I saw,” “I heard,” “I yielded.” The ground-pines, the trees that drop their pinecones and acorns to secure their continued existences, the violet that “breathes,” and the sun that provides its radiant sustenance all communicate their agencies to the poet. As they communicate, the poet attempts to respond as aptly as he can through his senses. The poet comes to appreciate the scene by taking nothing away from it except its smells, images, and sounds. Rather than taking objects from the “perfect whole” of nature, he yields himself to it.

This halting moment of aesthetic appreciation is punctuated by the phrase “beauty through my senses stole.” Like “nature,” beauty is a dynamic term in Emerson’s thinking. The theory of beauty he expresses in *Nature* offers a particularly important context for “Each and All,” which he wrote while composing *Nature* in the mid-1830s. In *Nature*, Emerson gives a tripartite definition of beauty: first it is “the simple perception of natural forms” (14); second it is the presence of “high and divine” (16) beauty in virtuous human action; and finally it is “the creation of beauty” (18) through art. Like Cowper and Wordsworth’s naturalized concepts of beauty, Emerson’s first definition is rooted in the subjective experience of a country landscape. While naturally beautiful forms are ostensibly everywhere, they are most beautiful when experienced “out of the din and craft of the street” (14). A closer proximity to a rural landscape means a closer proximity to beauty. In Emerson’s estimation, if one can perceive the beauty in a rural landscape then one can also more clearly see the beauty of right action. As he claims, “Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue” (17). Beauty is not just in the natural forms of the landscape but also in the virtuous actions of those who dwell in this landscape.

And, finally, artistic beauty is any form of art that renders our subjective perceptions of a beautiful experience in nature or of a right action into a concentrated focal point. Emerson’s

description of this aesthetic process in *Nature* is strikingly similar to the process the poet explores in “Each and All”:

Nothing is quite beautiful alone: nothing but is beautiful in the whole. A single object is only so far beautiful as it suggests this universal grace. The poet, the painter, the sculptor, the musician, the architect, seek each to concentrate this radiance of the world on one point, and each in his several work to satisfy the love of beauty which stimulates him to produce. (18)

The work of the artist is to craft an aesthetic space in which the “radiance of the world” is concentrated on “one point” that is beautiful both to the artist and their audience. The beauty that arrests the speaker in “Each and All” represents Emerson’s three variants of beauty. The speaker encounters beauty in a natural landscape, in the process of doing so he recognizes in himself an ability to act more virtuously. Finally, he combines these experiences into the aesthetic product of a poem that approximates the speaker’s experience of perceiving the “radiance of the world on one point.” This moment marks a potential turning point for the speaker. He had not acted rightly when stealing birds and shells. Now he suddenly understands that he may possess the resolve to approach his environment with more sensitivity and awareness. The creation of this poem is a way of keeping this resolve alive.

But it is important to emphasize that this moment of heightened perception in the poem’s final sequence is temporary. Through the poet’s repeated attempts to apprehend “the all” through “the each,” the speaker has arrived at this brief scene of satisfaction that will not last despite the creation of this poem. The cycle of seeking, failing, and briefly apprehending must continue. Yet even the most sensitive interpreter of this poem, Carl Strauch, reads the poem’s conclusion as a celebration, “what gives ‘Each and All’ its grateful and graceful sense of an accomplished

process is the fulfillment of an entirely satisfying sympathy between man and nature” (157). In fact, the poem emphasizes the quicksilver character of “fulfillment.” Throughout the poem the speaker seeks “fulfillment” and never obtains it until the end. The speaker has learned to trust that the process of seeking—not any final sought-after product—is the most worthy destination. In this sense, the poem ends with the speaker’s recognition of human finitude. He yields himself to the perfect whole because he is willing to admit that its wholeness is too large for him to grasp for longer than a brief moment. In this sense, the speaker is not fulfilled or satisfied, but resolved to return again to similar scenes in hopes of arriving at similar moments of heightened perception. We can read the phrase “again I saw, / again I heard” as an expression of the circular dynamics of Emerson’s embodied perception. As in the Cowper and Wordsworth poems discussed in previous chapters, to see and hear again is to continually return to one’s environment in hopes of more aptly seeing and hearing it. In this sense, “again” means “skillful practice.” Through each successive attempt to concentrate a perceptual experience of beauty into a poem, the poet increases their skillful ability to render similar moments into verse in future poems.

In “Each and All” Emerson creates an environment composed both of the speaker’s subjectivity and what Emerson calls in *Nature*, nature’s “inviolable” and “serene order,” the “fixed point whereby we may measure our departure” (42). Emerson’s speaker moves through his environment not as a meditative ego but as an alert consciousness mediating a dynamic relationship between themselves and their environment. Through his emphasis on embodied experience as a poetic subject, Emerson extends the Cowperian and Wordsworthian view of perception as a skillful practice. If indeed, as Cowper claims in the *Task*, “scenes must be beautiful which daily view’d / please daily” (1.177-178), then the daily viewer of these scenes

must always be working to develop their apt responsiveness to their environment. Their poems must attempt to represent this ever-developing responsiveness. As Joan Richardson claims, Emerson's substantial contribution to the "vocabulary of experience" is a body of writing that continually insists that "imagination has to be newly conceived, not simply as repository but as 'participant,' in its successful varieties of linguistic description realized itself as the divine and supernatural light animating all, an instrument continuously tempered by use" (77). Richardson's potent claim that Emerson conceives of the imagination as an "an instrument continuously tempered by use" in my view suggests an important connection between Emerson and Cowper. In Cowper's descriptions of the seasonal cycles of rural life, his imagination is not a destination, as it often is for the speakers of Romantic lyrics, but a well-tempered instrument that he employs to more aptly render into verse his lived experiences. Emerson, like Wordsworth, continues this Cowperian aesthetic through his participatory renderings of his outward-directed attention.

In this regard, Angus Fletcher's central claim in *A New Theory for American Poetry* that the influence of eighteenth-century descriptive poetry lingers in both British and American Romantic poetry provides an important theoretical grounding for my discussion of Emerson's poetry of perception. In the verse of John Clare, Walt Whitman, and John Ashberry, Fletcher signals and affirms forms of descriptive verse that he gathers together under the heading of "low romanticism" (2), a poetry that he claims persisted during the rise of High Romanticism's intense lyrical subjectivity in both Britain and America. He claims that this poetry is rooted in the activity of description and favors the daily rhythms of walking and noticing to imaginative ruminations about questions of being. Though his picture of High Romanticism glosses over important details like Wordsworth's explicit interest in and use of descriptive verse, Fletcher is right to draw attention to the fact that eighteenth-century descriptive poetry's "influx into the

Romantic” (25) has largely been ignored by Romantic critics who have preferred to study problems of authorial consciousness and questions about imagination and creativity that the Romantic lyric presents.⁸² Fletcher is interested in Whitman and Ashberry’s poetry, but his claim that their descriptive techniques are indebted to an eighteenth-century tradition of outward-directed attentiveness applies also to Emerson’s poetry of perception. His desire to give aesthetic primacy to the experience of being *in* an environment rather than looking at it or thematizing it from the outside is the central marker of his connection to the poetic experiment initiated by Cowper.

As he develops his skills as a poet of perception, Emerson gains increasing confidence in his ability to write about the experience of being enveloped by his environment. Two poems of perception written after “Each and All,” “The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower?”—hereafter “The Rhodora”—and “The Snow-Storm” are important examples. “The Rhodora” is a celebration of spring’s emergence as Emerson experienced it in Newton, Massachusetts in May, 1834.⁸³ Sandra Morris notes that a central appeal of the poem “lies in the way it works with the sonnet tradition”(193): its sixteen-line form is sonnet-like; it playfully employs the language of courtly love—the rhodora is nominally the object of the speaker’s unconsummated affection—; and it subverts the flower poem tradition—rather than admiring a rose he celebrates the beauty of a deciduous flowering shrub native to northeastern North

⁸² Though Fletcher does not identify scholars by name in this critique of the criticism of High Romanticism, he may have in mind the same forms of Romantic criticism that tends to devalue Cowper’s poetry for its lack of authorial or autonomous identity. Perhaps Fletcher’s clearest expression of why low romanticism should be more properly accounted for as a “the grounding strategy of the Romantic impulse” (24) is his claim that, “understanding *the common* as a function of poetic form and language—the subject of Wordsworth’s Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*—requires an ecologically detailed accounting for its expression, which is only one of many reasons why a criticism that fails to recognize the descriptive tradition and its influx into the Romantic cannot possibly succeed” (25). More than anything else, Fletcher’s work has urged me to look more closely at the ways in which Cowper, Wordsworth, Emerson, and Whitman craft their “ecologically detailed accounting(s)” of their experiences in their poems of perception.

⁸³ We find the first complete version of this poem in his *Poetry Notebooks*, titled “May, Newton, 1834” (10).

America, the *rhododendron canadense*. In the poem, the speaker recalls a walk in early May in which he finds a freshly blooming rhodora. Suddenly struck by its beauty, the speaker wonders why the rhodora lies hidden in nature wasting its charm “on earth and sky” (10) and ultimately comes to peace with its necessarily hidden beauty. In his attention to the wild-growing rhodora, Emerson poeticizes an American variant of Cowper’s “prickly gorse,” the type of common and “averse” natural object—whether human or non-human—that Wordsworth claimed Cowper’s verse had shown to be rightful subjects of moral attention.⁸⁴ Like Cowper and Wordsworth, Emerson casts an ethical focus on the rhodora; by drawing attention to the forgotten bloom of a rhodora in the wilderness, he enjoins his readers to look more closely at their environments for underappreciated or ignored sources of beauty.

Emerson overlays the poem with the questioning/answering form of the title: “The Rhodora: On Being Asked, Whence is the Flower?” Where does the flower come from? It just is. The rhodora seems to be the answer to the question itself. In this sense, the title is its own poem. The irregular sonnet that follows modulates upon this theme. The poem’s central proposition is a fact that precedes all questioning: one day the speaker noticed and tried to describe the appeal of a rhodora. The speaker describes their attraction to the rhodora largely by beholding the ecosystem in which the rhodora dwells. It is not the rhodora alone that interests the speaker but the environment that allows it to flourish:

I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
 Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
 To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

⁸⁴ For a more sustained discussion of the “prickly gorse” in connection to Wordsworth’s ethics and “The Idiot Boy” see pages 65-68 in chapter two.

The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
 Made the black water with their beauty gay;
 Here might the red-bird come his plumes to cool,
 And court the flower that cheapens his array. (2-8)

With its fresh bloom, the rhodora is a source of aesthetic pleasure both for the speaker and the living things that populate its environment. In this moment, the otherwise “desert and...sluggish brook” has a rare opportunity to enjoy the rhodora’s show. Through its “leafless blooms,” its fallen purple petals add bursts of violet to the dark pool upon which they lay. They even seem to be an object of courtly desire for the red-bird who is attracted to the petals’ vibrant “array” of purple. The speaker apprehends both the rhodora and himself to be in the middle of things, flourishing among the brook, the pool, and the red-bird. The speaker’s acknowledgment of the rhodora’s embeddedness offers an important corrective to the groping poet’s search for specimens in “Each and All.” This speaker will not attempt to disturb his ecosystem by seeking a souvenir. Instead he is content to describe a fleeting experience of their heightened kinship and identification with their perceived environment. In this moment, he perceives himself to be no different than the brook and the birds who are gaining what appears to be pleasure from the rhodora’s presence.

This description of the rhodora makes up the first half of the poem. Like an octave in a Petrarchan sonnet, it seems to describe the situation to which the poet-speaker will respond in the final sestet. The speaker attempts to proffer the best responses he can. He is confused by the rhodora’s seeming lack of purposiveness. Why is it so hidden from view? Why is its charm “wasted on the earth and the sky” (10)? Perhaps only a philosophical claim will suffice: “Beauty is its own excuse for being” (12). Through this claim Emerson suggests that we do ourselves a

wrong when we ask questions about beauty's use value. It is significant enough that we can experience beauty in such seemingly modest experiences as an encounter with a common rhodora. But the "excuse" for beauty can never be fully grasped.

Thus, uncertain that abstraction will help the poet more aptly comprehend their feeling of pleasure, he interrogates his previous lack of curiosity and in the process arrives at a new answer to his initial question:

I never thought to ask, I never knew;

But in my simple ignorance, suppose

The self-same Power that brought me there brought you. (14-16)

This final line anticipates Emerson's claim in *Nature* that "the greatest delight which the fields and woods minister, is the suggestion of an occult relation between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged" (11). Rather than professing to know the answer to his question "whence the rhodora?" the speaker instead "suppose[s]" that his prayer-like attention to this scene has taught them the simple truth that neither humans nor rhodoras are alone and unacknowledged. Though Emerson's Christian faith becomes increasingly unorthodox after his departure from the Unitarian ministry in 1832, his belief in God's presence in nature, albeit a concept of nature deracinated from religious tradition, remains a steady feature of his thinking. David Greenham aptly claims that Emerson's view of an "Artist God, increasingly indistinguishable from Nature, whose creative powers man shares and who is suffused throughout creation" introduced to Americans "a new form of worship, a new mythus with man at the centre and God everywhere" (31). "The Rhodora" displays this "new form of worship" in experimental practice. The poem suggests that rather than seeking answers to metaphysical questions like "whence the rhodora," readers should make themselves more receptive to the

“self-same Power” of a God-infused nature available for their appreciation in the native plants, birds, and brooks surrounding them.

Central to Emerson’s new form of worship is the older trope of rural retreat that Cowper and Wordsworth renovate in their poetries of retirement. When he was only twenty, he celebrated his first move from Boston to rural Roxbury in Cowperian tones, “Good-bye, proud world! I’m going home: / Thou art not my friend, and I’m not thine” (“Good-Bye” 1-2) marking a dominant strand of his thinking that valued the rhythms of rural life over the man-made bustle of the city. His poem “The Snow-Storm” is perhaps his most concentrated meditation on the virtue of rural retreat. The action of the poem is centered around a blizzard that has suddenly made the speaker snow-bound in their home. In uncharacteristic blank verse, Emerson unfolds a lyric conversation between the speaker and the north wind, which he calls the “fierce artificer” (11). Though the poem begins in a fashion strikingly similar to the opening section of Book Four of Cowper’s *The Task*, a section Emerson was fond of, our expectation of an enumeration of the virtues of domesticity are quickly thwarted as the speaker turns their attention to the storm.⁸⁵ While the first nine lines of the poem encircle the speaker in his home: “Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed / In a tumultuous privacy of storm” (8-9), in the rest of the poem’s twenty-eight lines the speaker’s perceptions are directed away from the fireplace as if he is travelling the countryside with the north wind. This clever turn on a domestic theme indicates that the poem will seek to unsettle the readers, to enclose them in the tumultuousness of the storm rather than affirming their lucky, pleasant removal from it.

⁸⁵ Emerson seems to have read Cowper most deeply in his college years (1817-1821). In an 1820 journal entry, Emerson recommends reading Cowper for curing bouts of depression: “one recipe for the terrible void which ruins ever and anon the mind’s peace and is otherwise called Unhappiness” is to read “the finest parts of Cowper’s *Task*...I refer to the home-scenes” (1.44). Later in his life, in March 1846, he seemed to continue to appreciate Cowper, naming him among Milton, Shakespeare, Pope, Burns, Young, and Wordsworth as one of the “very few poets who have contributed to the Bible of existing England & America, sentences of guidance & consolation which are still glowing & effective” (9.367).

Criticism of the “Snow-Storm” has rightly focused on the north wind’s metaphoric representations of Emerson’s aesthetic theories.⁸⁶ To Emerson, the north wind’s ability to shape the snow into organic forms may have seemed to signify other modes of artistic expression, like architecture, music, and poetry. The wind is as solid and ethereal as the air from which great poetry comes. Emerson is certainly playing with the metaphoric suggestions of the figure of a “fierce artificer.” The phrase “artificer” comes from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and refers to Satan’s power of deception, and the speaker’s tallies of the wind’s illusory and “fanciful” (15) creations in the poem suggest that the poem is about aesthetic deception.⁸⁷ The poet, in this sense, is a playful deceiver too in that they are attempting to persuade the wind that they can control it through the creation of their poem. The wind teases the speaker with its power and the poet teases the wind in turn with their own imaginative power. We read the poem, in this sense, as spectators of an intriguing dialogue between the wind and the poet.

The “Snow-Storm” is foremost a descriptive poem that details the perceptual experience of a blizzard as it unfolds before the speaker. The poem can be read as a series of ever-deepening identifications between the speaker and the howling wind. Using his physical stasis to his advantage, the speaker imaginatively becomes wind-like, following the wind’s fits and starts as assiduously as he can. Through these clipped descriptions, sometimes no more than a few words long, the speaker gives us brief but potent glimpses of the north wind’s effects on its landscape:

⁸⁶ This critical perspective begins with Carl F. Strauch’s seminal study “The Year of Emerson’s Poetic Maturity: 1834” and continues through Brian Harding’s interpretation of the poem’s equally concern with poetic creation and natural creation in his 1985 “Frolic Architecture’: Music and Metamorphosis in Emerson’s Poetry,” and in Robert Richardson’s argument in *Mind on Fire* that the “Snow-Storm” is “one of Emerson’s best poems” because it felicitously expresses Emerson’s “fundamental insight” that “the world itself is the great poem, the source of all verbal approximations of itself” (179). These interpretations share in common the view that the chief interest of “The Snow-Storm” is the way that its carefully designed depiction of wild nature aligns with Emerson’s writings about the poet’s unique ability to channel and express nature’s power and beauty.

⁸⁷ In *Paradise Lost*, Milton claims that Satan was the “Artificer of fraud; and was the first / That practiced falsehood under saintly show” (4:21). Through this allusion, Emerson seems at least to be referring to the Miltonic notion of the artist as a Satanic deceiver.

it dabs snow on a “windward stake, or tree, or door” (14); it leaves wreath-like circles on the doors of chicken coops, and then suddenly “fills up the farmer’s lane from wall to wall” (20). The wind moves so quickly that, unlike man-made art, it cares not “for number or proportion” (17). It moves through the landscape on its own terms, and the poet perpetually strives to catch up. The speaker’s only recourse is to extend the reach of his linguistic resources in these brief glimmers of perception.

After attempting to apprehend the north wind’s peregrinations for the majority of the poem, the speaker seems to finally have the deceptive north wind in his grasp. The poet knows he cannot contain the wind but he is now able to at least momentarily align his active perceptions with the active wind’s motions:

And when his hours are numbered, and the world
 Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
 Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
 To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
 Built in an age, the mad wind’s night-work,
 The frolic architecture of the snow. (23-28)

The speedy pace of the north wind’s “frolic” slows to a crawl as it takes its seeming exit. In the dawn, it recognizes its momentary dominion over the world, and is now happy to leave. Yet here the speaker acknowledges that he has shaped our view of the north wind. It is “retiring” as it “were not.” Whether the wind is still there or not, the speaker has impelled us to imagine the north-wind’s not-ness. We sense that the wind must be still be there—the wind never really

retires—yet by experiencing the storm with the speaker we are now momentarily capable of imagining its absence.⁸⁸

Through its perceived presences and absences, the wind always leaves traces of itself. In his receptivity to the north wind's "frolic" power, the speaker seems to heed Emerson's claim in his 1834 lecture "The Naturalist," that: "it is fit that man should look upon Nature with the eyes of the Artist, to learn from the greatest Artist whose blood beats in our veins" (1.73). An honest accounting of the relationship between humans and nature should be centered in the belief that the blood beating in the veins of the poet beats also in the veins of the "greatest Artist." The "Snow-Storm" dramatizes a moment of perceptual awareness in which the poet increases his awareness of a convergence between his creative power and the God-like wind's power. The result is an "astonished Art" that encourages readers to cultivate their own ability to be astonished by the experience of a snow-storm.⁸⁹

Strange Sympathies

"Each and All," "The Rhodora," and "The Snow-Storm," show that the experience of nature can be rendered more vividly when a poet's environment seems to have as much agent power as the poet. But in these poems the human speaker always has the last word. As Emerson

⁸⁸ In my view, the speaker's description of the north wind's simultaneous presence and absence has an affinity with the final line of Wallace Stevens's "The Snow Man," "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (15). At the very least it seems to me that Emerson's "The Snow-Storm," initiated what we might call the "New Englander snow poem," a group of poems that includes John Greenleaf Whittier's "Snow-Bound" (which uses lines 1-9 of "The Snow-Storm" as its epigraph), James Russell Lowell's "The First Snowfall," Robert Frost's "Stopping By the Woods on a Snowy Evening," and Stevens's "The Snow Man."

⁸⁹ In both the poem "The Snow-Storm" and in "The Naturalist" it is not clear if the "greatest Artist" is a designing God or nature itself. In fact this remains an open question in much of Emerson's thought. Though this remains a difficult question to conclusively answer, my view is that Emerson never gives up the idea of a creator God. I have opted to use the term "God-like force" to describe Emerson's capacious conception of a creator God because it seems to at once convey the specificity and the breadth of his conception of God, particularly as he expresses it in the poems I consider in this chapter. I readily admit that "God-like force" is an imperfect term but it is the most pliable term I could conceive of.

further experiments with his poetry, he begins to voice the experience of non-humans from their imagined perspective. Sandra Morris aptly notes that since for Emerson, “the poet is one who can hear the locutions of nature and translate them into verse” it is important for Emerson “to present the speech of natural objects or forces in direct quotation or paraphrase” (224). This rhetorical maneuver is representative of what Emerson calls his “strange sympathy.” After his 1833 visit to the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, Emerson claims in his journal, “I feel the centipede in me—cayman, carp, eagle & fox. I am moved by strange sympathies” (4.200). Emersonian sympathy is temperamentally, and happily, “strange” in that it seeks to identify and affirm affinitive experiences of being between previously unidentified or underrepresented natural entities.

In part, his “strange sympathy” is representative of his devotion to the study of natural history, or what he calls in reference to Wordsworth’s “The Tables Turned,” “the dissection” of nature through scientific inquiry.⁹⁰ Emerson views “dissection” as an important method of inquiry because it gives him a detailed vocabulary through which to affirm, as David M. Robinson notes, “the presence of an intelligible and meaningful universe” (398). In this sense, his “strange sympathy” also represents his desire to keep both the poetry and the dissection. Emerson’s dissections are always performed in the spirit of a poetically conceived kinship between himself and other living beings. To feel “the centipede,” the “cayman, carp, eagle & fox” in himself is a morally imaginative act with a strong family resemblance to Cowper and Wordsworth’s attempts to imagine the lived experience of being a “prickly gorse” or Betty Foy. As Wordsworth claims in his 1802 letter to John Wilson, such unusual acts of moral imagination have the potential to awaken readers from their mistaken habit “of supposing that human nature

⁹⁰ In this same famous journal entry—in fact in the same sentence—Emerson also affirms that from that day on, “I will be a naturalist” (4.200).

and the persons they associate with are one and the same” (318). Emerson too understands that a poetry of “strange sympathy” has a special power to enlarge what he believed were the rigid moral views of antebellum America.

Emerson’s poetic interest in describing the experiences of non-human entities is grounded in his ethics of forbearance, which emphasizes the moral value of an individual subject’s silent appreciation of his environment. His experimental attempts to dwell within an environment rather than mastering or acting upon his environment in “Each and All,” “The Rhodora,” and “The Snow-Storm” are representative of such an ethics. In his eight-line, 1842 poem “Forbearance” he provides an eloquent expression of forbearance’s moral value:

Hast thou named all the birds without a gun?
 Loved the wood-rose, and left it on its stalk?
 At rich men’s tables eaten bread and pulse?
 Unarmed, faced danger with a heart of trust?
 And loved so well a high behavior,
 In man or maid, that thou from speech refrained,
 Nobility more nobly to repay?
 O, be my friend, and teach me to be thine!

The poem presents two complementary definitions of forbearance. The first is forbearance as a “noble” emotional restraint—the bedrock stoicism of self-reliance. The second definition is a variant of this “noble” restraint meaning “to spare, to show mercy” (*OED*). Forbearance is a “high behavior” because through its repeated practice, humans can condition themselves to be more receptive to their world; through forbearance they learn to name birds without guns, to appreciate the “wood-rose” without removing it from its habitat, and to dismantle their

production-oriented concepts of human agency by instead approaching the world “with a heart of trust.” Emerson is careful to note that forbearance requires practice. The temptation to pick flowers will always remain. But if one appreciates that a “wood-rose” is a living entity like us, this temptation diminishes. Forbearance is the practice of letting be.

Emerson’s forbearance also emphasizes the relational nature of ethical agency. The best teacher of forbearance is the “high behavior” of other living entities, whether human or non-human. Properly attended to, this “high behavior” is contagious. These entities become “friend(s)” because they enjoin the speaker to participate in a communal practice of right action. Their presences are daily reminders that the experience of participating in the good is best conceived as a shared experience between living beings. Emerson explicitly makes this claim in *Nature* when he argues that the experience of perceiving a tree outside his window increases his sense of “moral being”: “The waving of the boughs in the storm is new to me and old. It takes me by surprise, and yet is not unknown. Its effect is like that of a higher thought or a better emotion coming over me, when I deemed I was thinking justly or doing right” (11). In the tree’s waving boughs Emerson apprehends a living presence physically separated yet intimately connected to him. His momentary awareness of his ongoing affective relationship with the tree is “new” in that it reminds him of the wonderful strangeness of their bond. Yet at the same time the tree seems “old” to him in its constancy and inviolability. The waving boughs are a locus for both his renewed sense that he is “thinking justly or doing right” and a reminder of previous moments in which he has acutely felt his ethical agency to be operative. Though ancient stoicism, Hinduism, Quakerism, Platonism, and many more influences shape Emerson’s ethical thinking, it is always centered on this experience of outward-directed attention to the “friends”

he is continually cultivating in his natural environment.⁹¹ In this sense, Emerson's attempts to examine moral action outside of the narrow realm of human selves relating to other human selves connects him to Cowper and Wordsworth's similar desires to widen their readers' moral imaginations through environmental poems of perception.

In 1841 Emerson extends the reach of his moral imagination in his poem "Woodnotes II." The poem attempts to present a pine-tree as a social, living being capable of communicating to humans. This is no easy task. In 1793, Cowper was tempted to take a similar approach while writing his final great lyric "Yardley Oak." Yet Cowper decided that speaking trees were a relic of ancient history, "oh couldst thou speak / As in Dodona once the kindred trees / Oracular" (41-43) and composed a poem of witness to the oak's decay. "Woodnotes II" is evidence that Emerson could not accept Cowper's dismissal of the vanished oracular capacity of trees. In his view, trees should be thought of as communicating beings, whether they speak in the high tones of a prophet or through the silent waving of their boughs. Though he sadly did not have at his disposal the research of twenty-first century dendrologists who have discovered definitive evidence that trees are social beings that indeed communicate with each other using olfactory, visual, and electrical signals, Emerson's radically "strange sympathy" with material nature prompted this poetic experiment that enhances the importance of these new scientific findings.⁹²

⁹¹ The most thorough and engaging study I have encountered on Emerson's ethics is David M. Robinson's *Emerson and the Conduct of Life: Pragmatism and Ethical Purpose in the Later Work*. Though Robinson focuses on Emerson's later works, especially *Representative Men* and *The Conduct of Life*, to explore Emerson's increasing interest in ethical choice and practical power, the arguments Robinson makes about Emerson's lifelong interest in the ethical function of aesthetic expression—the fact that he always conceived of his work as a poet, a lecturer, or essayist as a creative variant of a moral philosopher's work—in my view, can be applied to all periods of Emerson's thinking.

⁹² In her recent work on plant behavior and cognition, Monica Gagliano has even done research that suggests trees may "talk" to each other using quiet crackling sounds that only register at the very quiet level of 220hz. Her paper "Toward Understanding Plant Bioacoustics" details the process through which she and her colleagues found that this 220hz sound level prompted all the trees in their experiment to orient their tips towards each other. An excellent synthesis of newer developments in plant life's "social networking" can be found in Peter Wohlleben's 2015 *The Hidden Life of Trees*. In my view, the powerful findings from this body of research make it all the more interesting to return to Emerson's scientifically informed personifications of nature.

For one of Emerson's earliest readers, the abolitionist and reformer Theodore Parker, Emerson's suggestion that it is possible for a poet to channel the voice of a tree, was too strange to take seriously, "a pine-tree which should talk as Emerson's tree talks would deserve to be plucked up and cast into the sea" (238, n.9).⁹³ Parker may have meant: a tree would never sing about itself for 384 lines in rhymed couplets. Yet Emerson believed that trees have stories to tell and that poetry may offer one of the best ways to listen to these stories. While in "Woodnotes II" Emerson crafts a pine-tree that is undoubtedly an arboreal version of Emerson, the fact that he displaces his own voice into a natural figure is nevertheless a striking poetic act. This rhetorical maneuver forces his readers to experiment with our own human-centered stories of being and provokes us to stretch our moral imaginations in the process. Emerson understood that description of the world necessarily involves some variant of personified nature. As Angus Fletcher rightly notes, in the best descriptive verse personification adds a "a higher order of perspective...enfolded into the language of the scene" (54); it gives us a point of contrast to a speaker's tendency to self-reflect, to find themselves everywhere they go.

Emerson never explained why he chose this novel narratorial strategy. Perhaps he was inspired by the "waving boughs" outside his study. Or perhaps he was inspired by his experience of writing his poem "Woodnotes I," in which he explores a forester's attempt to find a peaceful settlement in the wilderness of "unploughed Maine" (75).⁹⁴ A central moment in the poem is the forester's perception of the sound of a falling pine-tree:

⁹³ As quoted in Joel Myerson's *The New England Transcendentalists and the Dial*, Rutherford, N.J. 1980. It bears noting that Myerson also records the positive responses of Margaret Fuller and James Russell Lowell, both of whom were more receptive to the notion of an arboreal narrator.

⁹⁴ Emerson conceived both poems after a trip to the forest north of Bangor, Maine in the summer of 1834. Emerson sent the first "Woodnotes" to Margaret Fuller in April 1840, which she published later that year in *The Dial*. In part prompted by Fuller, Emerson produced "Woodnotes II" the following summer, which was also printed in *The Dial* in 1841. Despite their philosophical depth and aesthetic experimentality, both poems have received shockingly scant critical attention. In my search for commentary on either poem, I could only find one close reading, Carl F. Strauch's "Emerson and the Doctrine of Sympathy." While other volumes refer to lines from both poems, especially

He heard, when in the grove, at intervals,
 With sudden roar the aged pine-tree falls,—
 One crash, the death-hymn of the perfect tree,
 Declares the close of its green century. (85-88)

The seemingly uncontainable wilderness of Maine is punctuated by the distinct existence of a single tree that has survived for a century. To the forester, the pine-tree is “the perfect tree” because it seems to have an individual identity in direct contrast to the forest’s mass of trees. If the tree can survive in the vast woods, thinks the forester, so can I. In this sense, the pine-tree is symbolic. The forester does not describe it in any more detail beyond using the fertile phrase “death-hymn” to describe the sound of its fall. By returning to the pine-tree’s song in “Woodnotes II,” it is as if Emerson decided that the tree deserved a more nuanced and creative rendering of its lived experience than these four lines present.

A “woodnote” is originally a Miltonic figuration meaning “a natural, untrained musical note or song like that of a wild bird in wood” (*OED*).⁹⁵ For Emerson, a woodnote is an apt figure for the combination of sublime excess and beautiful order of his landscape. In this sense Emerson’s use of the woodnote figure recalls Cowper and Wordsworth’s paradoxically orderly descriptive circumscriptions of wild and disordered scenes of accumulation. Yet the environment in which Emerson’s woodnotes emerge is in many regards wilder than the landscapes of Olney and the Lake District. Angus Fletcher aptly summarizes this difference between the British Romantic wilderness and the nineteenth-century American wilderness by noting that for

John Q. Anderson’s 1971 study *The Liberating Gods: Emerson on Poets and Poetry*, I have yet to encounter any sustained study of either “Woodnotes” poems besides von Frank’s assiduously written headnotes in the variorum edition.

⁹⁵ The *OED* records the first usage of the word as “wood-note” in Milton’s *L’Allegro* in *Poems* 36: “If...sweetest Shakespeare fancies childe / Warble his native wood-notes wilde.”

American authors, “a disorder enters into descriptive relationships precisely because of the unprecedentedly large scale of the terrain to be described” (52). For Emerson, natural American disorder is not an aesthetic creation but the environmental situation in which he finds himself each day. A single pine-tree’s song becomes a particularly meaningful locus of attention because of its miniscule size in relation to the breadth of Emerson’s American terrain.

Perhaps in an attempt to broadcast its song to the widest reach of the American wilderness, Emerson tree speaks with the vatic intonations of a prophet. A constant feature of its song is its tone of reprobation. Humans have failed to listen to its song so the pine-tree has enjoined a single auditor to approach it: “Come, lay thee in my soothing shade / And heal the hurts which sin has made / I will teach the bright parable” (276-278). Its parable is the story of environmental growth and change to which it has borne witness while humans have foolishly focused their energy on making the world in their image. Having been on Earth as long as Jove and Adam, the pine-tree has seen nothing but cycles of death and rebirth and will forever watch “o’er the grave of men” (40). The pine-tree’s vatic tone signals that it is less of a tree than it is a figuration of an exhortative God-like force. Though it is ostensibly the song of a talking tree, it is not the song of the contingent pine-tree that the forester hears fall in “Woodnotes I.” It is rooted in our world but not subject to the organic cycle of birth and death. Like Whitman’s poetic persona in “Song of Myself,” the pine-tree presents itself to be “both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it” (30).

In repeated variations throughout its song, the pine-tree exhorts its auditor to become more receptive to the moralizing influence of the natural world. From its privileged vantage point, the tree claims to have detected that the person listening to its song is alienated from their

authentic self. The pine-tree wants to intervene in this person's life in hopes of instilling in them a renewed self-trust:

I see thee in the crowd alone;
 I will be thy companion.
 Quit thy friends as the dead in doom,
 And build to them a final tomb...
 Enough for thee the primal mind
 That flows in streams, that breathes in wind.
 Leave all thy pedant lore apart;
 God hid the whole world in thy heart. (281-284, 293-296)

Alone in the unthinking crowd, the auditor has learned to mistake “pedant lore” for wisdom. The “companion[ship]” of this imaginary pine-tree is the morally corrective force they need. By identifying with the pine-tree as if it were the kind of friend Emerson theorizes in “Forbearance,” the auditor can learn to look at the natural world not as a “pedant” disinterestedly gathering facts but as one whose primary goal is to affirm their kinship with a living world. Emerson's personification of nature as a primal mind emphasizes this point. Through his friendship with the living, thinking “pine-tree,” the auditor can sense that external nature shares his own human nature. Just as humans are thinking beings, nature too seems to be a thinking being. From this vantage, the sense of flow one encounters in the forest—the constant rush of the stream, the persistence of the wind, the sense of trees stretching beyond the knowable horizon—mirrors the flow state of poetic creation. In sensing that the “primal mind” that animates nature has an affinitive relationship with the human mind, the auditor can deepen his sense of belonging within his environment.

This reflective relationship between the mind of nature and the human mind should, as the pine-tree claims, awaken the auditor's feeling heart. The auditor's intellectual recognition of his kinship with the natural world ideally expands his ability to empathize with this world as if it were a close friend. This self-regulating, feeling heart bears a striking resemblance to the silent, "law-making" heart in Wordsworth's "Lines Written At A Small Distance from My House." As I have argued, Wordsworth's figure of the sensible heart conveys his belief, partly influenced by eighteenth-century moral sentimentalism and partly of his own idiosyncratic invention, that the spontaneous laws of the heart provide the path to right action in a way that external appeals to duty cannot.⁹⁶ By seeking out and being receptive to the possibility of moments of affective identification, whether between ourselves and our living environment or between ourselves and others, we continually shape our skillful ability to live by our "law-making" heart. Faced with the scale of the American wilderness, the "law-making" heart becomes the necessary compass guiding the auditor on the path to self-awareness and right action.

The God who hides the "whole world" in the auditor's heart is notably different from Cowper's God who "moves in a mysterious way." Cowper's God is a remote yet omnipotent figure who reveals himself in fleeting moments of grace. Cowper's poetry of perception is a method of approximating this graceful and rare feeling of contact with an almost entirely hidden God. Through the pine-tree's claim that God is hidden in man's heart, Emerson draws on a more capacious understanding of religious experience—rooted especially in New England antinomianism and European Romanticism—than Cowper's evangelical Christian view offers. Through his antinomianism Emerson pushes to the edge the protestant trope of man standing alone before God by removing the authority of Jesus, the priest, and scripture in favor of the

⁹⁶ I provide a longer discussion of Wordsworth's affective ethics on pages 69-79 of chapter two.

direct relationship between humans and God. The most stable authority in this picture of human agency is the self, a picture that is also thoroughly Romantic. As David Greenham argues, “perhaps the most important and foundational idea that Emerson would take from European Romanticism, and which allowed him to ‘make’ and ‘animate’ his own world, was its vision of that world as a creation of the individual self” (x).⁹⁷ The figure of the hidden God in “Woodnotes II” represents the auditor’s dormant capacity to trust in the distinctly human capacity to make one’s own worlds.

Yet while Emerson’s conception of God is rooted in a more pluralistic array of sources than Cowper’s, his view of poetry as an aesthetic space marking moments of attentive appreciation shared between a subjective individual and a God-like presence is remarkably similar to Cowper’s prayerful conception of poetry. It bears recalling William James’s argument in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that the activity of prayer is not a beggarly petition for God’s intervention in human affairs but rather the central activity of “experimental religion” (417). Prayer, in his view, is a daily practice that cultivates “the continuous sense of our connection with the power that made things as they are” (424). This is precisely the activity the pine-tree is compelling the auditor to perform: through your prayerful attention, build a “continuous sense” of connection between your perceptual faculties and the God-like power of nature that seems to have made “things as they are.” These acts of attention are finite and experimental. They have no desideratum and they can only be carried out in fits and starts. Yet

⁹⁷ In his study of Emerson’s intellectual engagements with writings of Coleridge, Carlyle, Fichte, and Schelling in *Emerson’s Transatlantic Romanticism*, Greenham provides a rich analysis of Emerson’s reception of Romantic thought. In particular, Greenham emphasizes that Romantic thinkers like Coleridge did not just help Emerson develop his interest in the epistemological significance of the subjective individual but also engendered in his thinking and writing a strongly held belief that poetry, rather than systematic philosophy, could best describe human experience. As Greenham claims “poetry eclipses philosophy in Emerson’s thought; this is one of the things that makes it emphatically Romantic” (xi).

each moment of sustained attention offers the poet a new opportunity to attempt to strengthen this sense of connection with the God-like power of nature.⁹⁸

Because this “continuous sense” of connection is difficult to maintain for long, an element of distance and vagueness will always remain in the relationship between the poet and the God-like force of nature. In Emerson’s view, the only recourse is to trust in individual perception. For Emerson, this self-trust is fundamentally suited to the American situation. Like the forester adrift in the disorienting wilderness, the American individual Emerson theorizes in this poem, and continuously revises in his writings, must seek a stable vantage point from which to determine how to build a coherent and meaningful life. In his *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman summarizes Emerson’s belief in an ethical American democracy centered in the firm ground of individual perception:

There is, in sanest hours, a consciousness, a thought that arises, independent, lifted out from all else, calm, like the stars, shining eternal. This is the thought of identity—yours for your, whoever you are, as mine for me. Miracle of miracles, beyond statement, most spiritual and vaguest of earth’s dreams, yet hardest basic fact, and only entrance to all facts. (984)

For both Whitman and Emerson, there is no “entrance” to any facts at all, to any certitude, without the acceptance that the “thought of identity”—a moving target that one cleaves to as a “shining eternal” but that one can never firmly grasp. Yet they must continually seek to put into practice this “thought of identity” by placing their daily perceptual experiences under reflective scrutiny. From the influence of this talking, primordial pine-tree, its auditor ostensibly learns that

⁹⁸ See pages 28-30 in chapter one, where I connect Cowper’s prayerful attention to James, Simone Weil, and Iris Murdoch’s views of willed attention as an ethical action.

if they accept that their feeling heart has analogues everywhere in the “heart of every creature” then they strengthen their resolve to cultivate their own self-formed thought of identity, regulated by their distinctly human heart, always mirroring the spirit of the stars and creatures around them. You will find your own identity—your place in the forest, your roots—if you recognize and affirm the multitude of identities that surround you.

Furtherance and Pursuing

In his later writing, Emerson admits that this sense of communion between a human and a talking pine-tree would be impossible to sustain. In 1850, Emerson reflects in his journal his arboreal narrator, writing “I praised the rhymes of sun & shade, man & maid in my Woodnotes. But how far that can be carried!” (11.271). He concludes that the poem is merely an attempt to imagine a more direct relationship between humans and nature, it “is only the reflection or rhyme of some truth” (11.271). In part, this statement reflects Emerson’s view that moments of divination in his poetry like this one—when God-like nature speaks through natural objects to humans—are rhetorical performances meant to, as Joseph Thomas claims, challenge what Emerson “considered the paltry and paltering ways in which we inhabit the world” (217). The talking-tree is a self-consciously extravagant figure meant to waken Emerson’s readers. Its performance can only be carried so far, but ideally it leaves a lasting impression. Emerson’s claim that his poetry is “only a reflection of some truth” also bespeaks his acceptance in his later thinking that the experience of nature is always tempered by the limitation of human perception. If we have no choice but to acknowledge, as Emerson claims in “Experience” that “we do not see directly but mediately, and that we have no means of correcting these colored and distorting lenses which we are, or of computing the amount of their errors” (487) then we must accept our

imperfect, mediate vision.⁹⁹ Of course humans should always strive to make themselves more receptive to the meaningful correspondences between themselves and the natural world—the process which leads them to their self-formed identities—but they must also assent to the hard fact that their self-formed identities are reflections and rhymes of “some truth.” They do not find the final Truth but the singular truths of their unique and limited vision.

His acceptance of human finitude is the subject of Emerson’s poignant poem “Threnody.” Written to honor and grapple with the sudden death of his five-year old son Waldo in 1842, “Threnody” presents poetic receptivity as both a vulnerability that could dangerously allow a mourning father’s grief to subsume him and as the only moral strength that can authorize and support his survival. The poem stages a dialogue between a father mourning his young son’s untimely death and the God-like natural force the speaker calls “the deep Heart” of nature. It is curious to notice criticism of this poem has largely focused on the poem’s two seemingly disparate tonal centers. To many readers, the barren, grieving first-person voice in the first half of the poem is out of balance with the vatic voice of “the deep Heart” of nature in the second half of the poem.¹⁰⁰ The argument follows that the first half of the poem’s close, naturalistic, and detailed account of the experience of mourning is left unsolved by the sudden arrival of “the deep Heart” in the second half, who arrives to shake the speaker from his seemingly terminal state of mourning. The interpretive problem is supposedly the poem’s lack of resolution. Any

⁹⁹ This is a mere précis of a complex development in Emerson’s thinking that continues to be explored and questioned in Emerson scholarship. At the very least, it seems in his later work that Emerson’s chastens his earlier optimism through a new focus on human impermanence. In his 1953 *Freedom and Fate*, Stephen Whicher summarizes the tenor of this new focus in Emerson’s work in this way: “for all the unceasing affirmation, at the bottom of the heart, man would remain, as he had always been, confined to the mill-round of his fate” (109). For a more detailed overview of Emerson’s later thought see David Robinson’s essay “Experience, Instinct, and Emerson’s Philosophical Reorientation.”

¹⁰⁰ In her 1999 essay “‘Meter-Making’ Arguments: Emerson’s Poems,” Saundra Morris summarizes this critical view of the poem by noting “the most frequently commented upon, and criticized, feature of ‘Threnody’ is its tonal bifurcation” a view which she rightly claims misses the fact that Emerson’s best work, in prose and poetry, “allows contradictory perspectives to coexist” (229).

close reader of Emerson will of course notice, though, that Emerson is never solely interested in resolution. The very point of a poem that mourns perhaps the most difficult experience of his life could never solve this experience. The divide between problem and solution is purposely left unresolved. The poem is not about a solution but about the ethical practice of *resolution*. The ethical question is no longer, “how to build a life?” but instead “how to maintain this self-formed life?”

In “Threnody” Emerson puts the practice of self-reliance under pressure. The father must attempt to find a path to right action in the face of the disorienting death of his young son. As in the previous poems I have considered, Emerson suggests in “Threnody” that right action can be rooted in poetic practice; the poetic rendering of a speaker’s lived experience, in all of its granular joys and sorrows, creates a substantive picture of how a person might live in accordance with their natural world. As Wordsworth claims in Book Twelve of *The Prelude*, the poet has the special “privilege” of believing that:

a work of mine,
 Proceeding from the depth of untaught things,
 Enduring and creative, might become
 A power like one of Nature’s. (12.309-312)

Emerson shares with Wordsworth this belief that through his poems and his poetic prose he has attempted to compose “enduring and creative” works that share in the generative power of a God-like natural force. Like Wordsworth, he also presents the “privilege” of poetic vocation as a commitment to sustain his attention to the natural world and to the dynamic process of reflecting on how he fits into this world. Only through this poetic life can he approximate “a power like

one of Nature's." The conflict at the heart of "Threnody" is whether or not the grieving speaker can continue with their poetic life.

In "Threnody" grief threatens to eradicate the father's poetic powers. The "deep Heart" of nature has no cause to mourn because it has accepted the young boy's death as it accepts all deaths. It is instead troubled by the "blasphemy of grief" (204) that threatens to subsume the father's desire to make poetry. After listening to the father's barren laments, the "deep Heart" tells the father that he should stop weeping; nature is the very power that gives the father the impetus to write this poem. His skillful ability to translate nature's secrets through poetry comes from the same source as his son's death. The father's laments are blasphemous because they have gravely narrowed his poetic vision. Instead of seeing the dynamic flux of nature—in which the poet should always be a participant—the poet sees empty rooms, barren landscapes, and "the world dishonored" by a young boy's death. Yet at the same time as he listens to the "deep Heart," the father notices on the edges of the view from his window that "my trees repair their boughs" (10). The waving boughs with which he has maintained a friendly affinity are still there despite his son's absence. The line of communication the father has opened through his poetry of perception is still available.

To correct the poet's disorientation in this moment, the "deep Heart" speaks to renew his sense of belonging and identification with his lived environment. He and the "deep Heart" have worked in concert with each other for many years. He has developed his perceptual acuity through his adherence to the ethic of forbearance. He has learned to listen, watch, and feel by conceiving of the natural world as a living being like himself. The "deep Heart" thus reminds him:

I gave thee sight—where is it now?

I taught thy heart beyond the reach
 Of ritual, bible, or of speech...
 Taught thee each private sign to raise,
 Lit by the supersolar blaze. (196-198, 201-202)

Perception and affection are the bedrocks of Emerson's environmental poetics. Sight is an activity of illumination by which all "private signs"—seemingly unknowable details of the natural world—can be given meaning. The illumination of sight creates the propitious conditions for the development of a feeling heart "beyond the reach / of ritual, bible, or of speech." The "deep Heart" is rearticulating Emerson's ethic of forbearance. Silent, still contemplation of the individual's perceptual process allows the development of a skillful ability to identify affectively with the environment. Through Emerson's years of careful perceptual awareness, recorded and reflected upon in his journals, letters, essays, lectures, and poems, he has developed his bond with his life-giving environment. The poet has opened himself to this world and in turn so has the "deep Heart" of nature opened itself to the poet. The "deep Heart" uses Emerson's own discourse to remind the speaker that their authentic commitment should not be abandoned in this moment of grief.

Grief, as Emerson says in the companion essay to this poem, "Experience," can be severely limiting: "the only thing grief has taught me is to know how shallow it is" (472). The "deep Heart" reiterates this view by asking the father if he really wants to "freeze love's tidal flow; / whose streams through nature circling go?" (238-239). The father has lived by a concept of nature as a flow of experience shared by himself and the boughs, the rhodoras, and the wind of his environment. Through his poetic experiments, the father strives to perceive and describe the feeling of being immersed in an enlarging, "tidal flow" of experience. In the negative metaphor

of a frozen “tidal flow,” the “deep Heart” uses Emerson’s own language to remind the poet of the importance of poetic experimentation. In “The Poet,” Emerson claims: “the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze. The poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning, but he makes the same objects exponents of his new thought” (463). As it is portrayed in this poem, grief destroys the poet’s access to the fluxional language of poetry. In grief, everything wears the color of grief. But the poet knows better. The process of making poems keeps the world in flow. It renders the world more vivid and true to his experiences of it. The poet is a maker. He does not “stop” or “rest” in any one “meaning” for long. The “tidal flow” continues and he continues to adjust to its flow. Poems are momentary resting places through which flux can be closely viewed and reflected upon. But the work always continues.

The “deep Heart” urges the father to continue making his poetry of perception. For final inspiration, the “deep Heart,” exhorts the father to “revere the Maker; fetch thine eye / up to his style” (270-271) and then proceeds to give him a lesson on the ethical value of his fluxional poetry. “The Maker” is a variant of the Artist God Emerson considers in his earlier writings. The style of making that the poet should now fetch up his eye to is organic and earthly, not of “adamant and gold” (272). Its style is limber and transitive, like:

a nest of bending reeds,
 Flowering grass, and scented weeds;
 Or like a traveller’s fleeing tent,
 Or bow above the tempest bent;
 Built of tears and sacred flames,
 And virtue reaching to its aims;

Built of furtherance and pursuing,
 Not of spent deeds, but of doing. (274-281)

This generative description of the “Maker’s” style is an argument for the ethical value of poetic utterance. The “deep Heart” calls for the poet to continue in the practice of making in a style that mirrors the “Maker’s” own process. In a sense, the command “revere the Maker” is a call for the father to revere himself as well as the creative God-like force that animates the natural world. If he reveres the activity of making, he never settles with one image or rendering of the world. The “deep Heart’s” search for an apt description of the Maker’s style is a performance of this dynamic process of making. It probes images of creation and renewal, moving from primordial reeds, grass, and weeds, to a traveller’s tent—signifying a human desire for a suitable resting place in the wilderness—, and finally to the image of a ship’s bow sailing through a storm. Through its process of marshalling new aliases for the “Maker’s” poetic style, the “deep Heart” finds a metaphor that seems to be most apt: its style like a traveller in search of a more virtuous way of being amidst a deluge of uncertainty.

Making *is* reaching towards virtue. The poet should fetch his eye to the Maker’s style to renew his commitment to the poetic process that maintains his affective bonds with the “deep Heart” of Nature. This poetic activity reaches towards virtue because it increases the poet’s self-trust. The only certainty the poet has is the hard fact of identity. Fate will bring with it uncontrollable necessities like his son’s death. The only recourse to these events is to find a method by which one is able to perceives one’s self to be, as Talbot Brewer claims, taking “pleasure in one’s active mode of navigating one’s fate” (149). Poetry reaches to virtue because it presents a vehicular and transitive picture of how an individual can momentarily arrive at a sense of ethical agency through their attempts to navigate their own fate. For Emerson, as for

Cowper and Wordsworth, this virtue-seeking poetry is rooted in perceptual experience. Right action, even in a situation as fraught as the one presented in “Threnody,” is deeply rooted in one’s ability to trust that their necessarily biased perception, not the mindless authority of conformity, is their nearest and best guide.

4

Walt Whitman's Earnest Trials

*But what is life but an experiment? And mortality but an exercise?
With reference to results beyond. And so shall my poems be. If
incomplete here, and superfluous there, n'importe—the earnest
trial and persistent exploration shall at least be mine, and other
success failing shall be success enough.*

(Walt Whitman)¹⁰¹

Large Perception

Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first writer to call attention to the boldness of Whitman's poetry of perception. In his famous 1855 letter of congratulations to Whitman—written after reading the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that Whitman sent him—Emerson singles out the breadth of Whitman's perceptual awareness, claiming “I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire” (730).¹⁰² To Emerson, Whitman was profoundly right to celebrate the embodied experience of everyday American life; the scent of “the sniff of green leaves and dry leaves” (“Song of Myself” 24), the sound of “the trippers and askers” (“Song of Myself” 66) in the streets of New York, the intimate sensation of “feeling with the hand / the naked meat of the body” (“I Sing the Body Electric” 156-7), and a view of the American environment, equally urban and rural, “loos'd of limits and imaginary lines” (“Song of the Open Road” 53) needed to be accounted for and celebrated.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ From Whitman's 1872 Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1024). All references to Whitman's prose, unless otherwise noted, are to *Whitman's Poetry and Prose*.

¹⁰² All references to this letter from *Leaves of Grass, Comprehensive Reader's Edition*.

¹⁰³ All references to Whitman's verse are to *Leaves of Grass: A Textual Variorum of the Printed Poems*.

Emerson also astutely noticed the ethical orientation of Whitman's poetry of perception. When Emerson claims that *Leaves of Grass* "has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging" (729), he recognizes that Whitman's poetic renderings of a speaker immersed in the sensory experiences of American life were designed by Whitman to arouse a new participatory enthusiasm in the democratic experiment that Emerson initiated as the "original true Captain" of a "new moral American continent" (1360).¹⁰⁴ Emerson must have recognized in Whitman's verse a kindred desire to bestow upon his readers an invigorating faith in their human agency. Whitman claims in his 1876 preface to *Leaves of Grass* that the aim of his poetry was "to make a type-portrait for living" that could teach his audience to recognize "how vast, how eligible, how joyful, how real, is a human being, himself or herself" (1033). His goal was to provide a vast picture of human eligibility and went to pains to suggest that every life, no matter how private or public, insignificant or consequential, deserved to be given notice. He presented himself with a difficult goal, yet his poetry and verse remain an admirable record of his attempts to encourage his readers to develop an ethically-oriented attentiveness as capacious as his own.

My analysis of Whitman's verse in this chapter is guided by Emerson's discerning early interpretation of Whitman as an experimental poet of perception concerned primarily with persuading his readers to reflect upon their distinct abilities to shape the ethical character of America.¹⁰⁵ I argue that Whitman continues the poetic experiment in ethical perception initiated

¹⁰⁴ These phrases are from Whitman's open letter to Emerson in August, 1856, in which he calls Emerson his "dear Master," and the "original true Captain who put to sea, intuitive, positive, rendering the first report" of American life as it really is and as it really should be.

¹⁰⁵ Whitman is a very famous poet now but as Robert D. Richardson shows in *Mind on Fire*, Emerson was "nearly alone in his admiration for Whitman" (528). After Whitman mailed Emerson the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* Emerson immediately began pushing it on friends like Henry David Thoreau and Bronson Alcott, but for the most part Whitman had few champions besides Emerson until he reached his final years of life. Though revisionist biographies of Whitman like Jerome Loving's *Song of Himself* and David Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* have rightly shown that it was not Emerson alone who presaged the emergence of Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass*—a fact that Emerson himself noticed when he called *Leaves of Grass* a mixture of the Bhagavad Gita and the *New York Herald*—Emerson remained a central influence to Whitman throughout his writing career. Describing the influence

by Cowper's voicings of subjective experience in *The Task*, sharpened in Wordsworth's poems of intense personal experience, and explored in a new American key in Emerson's environment poems. Like his poetic predecessors, Whitman believed that the only way he could chart a path to right action was through immersive descriptions of and reflections upon his perceptual experiences. This chapter puts Whitman's verse in conversation with Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson along these perceptual and ethical lines but it also emphasizes a notable difference between Whitman and these poets. For Whitman, an ethically-oriented poetry of perception had to be a poetry that regularly bears witness to the experience of death. Whitman claims that America needed "great poems of death" (1012) and much of his poetry seeks to integrate death into his accounts of perceptual experience. While Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson write eloquently about death, Whitman is the only poet in this group to have staked his poetic reputation on the newness of his poetic "celebration of death."¹⁰⁶ My readings of Whitman focus on both moments of thematic and stylistic convergence between Whitman and his predecessors and on the new expressions his poetry of death adds to the poetry of perception.

The Physical and Sensuous Self

Whitman was acutely aware of the moral and aesthetic paradox of employing a universalizing "I" in his verse. In *Walt Whitman's America*, David Reynolds convincingly shows

of Emerson on *Leaves of Grass* Whitman famously told his friend John T. Trowbridge that, "my ideas were simmering and simmering. Emerson brought them to a boil" (from "Reminiscences of Walt Whitman") and the creative "boil" that Emerson's writings inspired in Whitman never stopped. Late in life Whitman tells his amanuensis Horace Traubel that, "the wonderful heart and soul of the man, present in all he writes, thinks does, hopes—goes far towards justifying the whole literary business—the whole raft good and bad—the whole system" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* 1:466). For two of the most penetrating analyses of the Emerson/Whitman relationship see Robert D. Richardson's "Whitman" chapter in *Mind on Fire* (526-531) and Jerome Loving's *Emerson, Whitman, and The American Muse*.

¹⁰⁶ Whitman's amanuensis from 1888-1891, Horace Traubel, whose conversations with Whitman fill 9 volumes of material, records himself saying to Whitman in 1890, "if 'Leaves of Grass' is remarkable for anything, it is its celebration of death" to which Whitman responds, "That's what we think but they don't or won't see it" from *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 8:334.

that Whitman's poetic "I" is not an expression of egotism but instead a figure signifying the needed unity that Whitman believed antebellum America required. Reynolds notes, "Whitman's representative 'I' is the antiauthoritarian individual American of the fifties, mistrustful of power structures. He can celebrate himself and announce equality with others because he is attuned to the full range of unifying cultural possibilities" (326) that were available to Americans in the 1850s.¹⁰⁷ Yet as much as Whitman hoped to unify disparate identities through his "representative I," it is also true that Whitman was a champion of the idiosyncratic self. In his *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman argues that he wrote *Leaves of Grass* to show that it "is good to reduce the whole matter to the consideration of a single self, a man, a woman, on permanent grounds" (984) and not to "disproportionately" (984) universalize this single self into a theoretical person, which would "slight or overlay the precious idiocrasy and special nativity and intention" (985) each person contains.¹⁰⁸ Like Emerson, Whitman believed that individual perception was the surest guide for right action and prominently displayed his faith in this view by beginning his 1855 *Leaves of Grass* with "Song of Myself." By placing this poem at the beginning of his book, Whitman indicated that the starting point of any inquiry into human experience must be the embodied experience of an individuated self. When Whitman writes "I celebrate myself," he is in fact celebrating the possibility that his distinctive "precious idiocrasy" could inspire his readers to discover meaningful points of convergence between their own distinct identities and his.

In his biography of Whitman, *Song of Himself*, Jerome Loving makes an apt claim about the most significant difference between Emerson and Whitman when he says *Leaves of Grass*

¹⁰⁷ Among the many opportunities that afforded Whitman firsthand experience of a unifying cultural democracy were: Hicksite Quaker meetings, the inexpensive dramas and operas performed in the Bowery district of Manhattan, Henry Ward Beecher's orations, and populist politics. Reynolds still has the most capacious account of Whitman's cultural life, especially in chapters five and six in *Walt Whitman's America*.

¹⁰⁸ The word "idiocrasy" is a relative of "idiosyncrasy," meaning "a peculiarity of physical or mental constitution" (*OED*).

should be read as “a transcendental book salted down with an actual body instead of an emblem of one” (157).¹⁰⁹ Loving rightly notes that Whitman placed the embodied self in the center of the poetry of perception as “an actual body” moving in time and space. This is primarily because Whitman could not accept the idea of a divided body and mind. In fact he had difficulty accepting divisions of any kind—political, geographical, metaphysical, or aesthetic. Because of his unifying temperament, he claims that the body and mind should not be divided: “body and mind are one; an inexplicable paradox, yet no truth truer” (6:2011-2012).¹¹⁰ For Whitman, the role of the poet is to eloquently account for the “truth” of bodily experience. As he claims in 1876, “the physical and sensuous, in themselves or in their immediate continuations, retain holds upon me which I think are never entirely releas’d; and those holds I have not only denied, but hardly wished ever to weaken” (1030). It is not merely the immediacy of the “physical and sensuous, in themselves” but the atmosphere of thinking and being that embodied experience engenders; these experiences present themselves as “continuations” that grip his attention long after they have occurred because he has attempted to remain receptive to their influence at all times, “those holds I have not only denied, but hardly wished ever to weaken.”

The Method of Intransitivity

Individual identity for Whitman is embodied identity. The “precious idiocracy” of each human life for him is most describable through sensual experience. To describe sensual experience, Whitman situates his poet-speakers in the midst of things with no plans, no map, no outcome in mind. His speakers trust their intuition and celebrate the mere activity of watching

¹⁰⁹ This is not to say that Emerson was repelled or uninterested in the defining human experience of embodied perception. As I argue in my Emerson chapter, Emerson uses his verse to embody or “practice” the theoretical claims of his philosophy by writing about the intense perceptual experiences of subjective speakers immersed in their environments. Whitman differs from Emerson in his sustained attention to the body; there is rarely a moment in his verse in which he is not detailing embodied experience.

¹¹⁰ From *Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts*.

and wondering at their surroundings. This is a central thread that links the poetry of perception; perception alone is a meaning-making activity and is therefore “work” even though to the busy world it seems like idleness. Wordsworth’s lines in “Expostulation and Reply” remain the most apt expression of this actively idle poetry of perception, “The eye it cannot chuse but see, / We cannot bid the ear be still; / Our bodies feel, where’er they be / Against, or with our will” (16-20). Whether lounging on the grass or working studiously at our desks, we are continually engaged in the activity of perception. What we pay attention to and what we ignore in these moments determines what is real for us, what is present in our consciousness. We build our views of moral action in accordance with the imperfect lenses our attentional processes furnish.

To portray the process of embodied immersion through which attention can be conceived of as a moral action, Whitman crafts an intransigent form of poetic expression. Like Cowper and Wordsworth, Whitman understood that his poetry of perception had to approximate the digressive experience of being immersed in a living environment. As I have argued in my Wordsworth chapter, both Cowper and Wordsworth often approximate this immersive experience by suspending their readers’ expectations for grammatical parallelism. In particular they employ the Virgilian and Miltonic epic simile “as one who” to initiate a sequence of deepening entanglement in an environment, like Wordsworth does in this scene in *The Prelude*:

As one who hangs down-bending from the side
 Of a slow-moving Boat, upon the breast
 Of a still water, solacing himself
 With such discoveries as his eye can make (4.247-250)

In this sequence, Wordsworth builds an increasingly long and digressive dependent clause that he attempts to resolve with the awkwardly skewed independent clause “such pleasant office have

we long pursued” (4.262), which seems less aesthetically important than the circuitous description of entanglement that precedes it.¹¹¹ In these poetic structures, the process of immersion *is* the destination in itself. It winds and unfolds around the speaker’s winding and unfolding attentional process.

In his free verse, Whitman amplifies the Cowperian/Wordsworthian strategy by substituting the “as one who” simile with the more direct “as I” phrase. The characteristic strategy of his verse is to delay. His descriptions seem impressionistic because they never seem to have a destination; they seem like mere beginnings. For example, in “As I Ebb’d with the Ocean of Life,” the speaker is perpetually adrift:

As I ebb’d with the ocean of life,

As I wended the shores I know,

As I walk’d where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok (1-3)

Though his free-verse phrasings differ from Cowper and Wordsworth, the aesthetic effect of this passage is remarkably similar.¹¹² We are on a circuitous path with an uncertain destination.

Without the familiar structure of a superordinate and subordinate relationship between the central parts of predication, it seems that we are adrift. How will this series of observations lead us to a resolving statement? Whitman intentionally leaves his audience hanging. As Angus Fletcher claims, “to read Whitman aright, we have to remain perpetually intransitive” (106), a way of reading that bespeaks Whitman’s democratic desire to weaken “the hierarchical stranglehold of

¹¹¹ For a longer discussion of Cowper and Wordsworth’s experiments with this grammatical strategy see pages 83-87 in chapter two.

¹¹² Whitman’s use of free verse marks a distinct stylistic shift from the traditional metrical structures that Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson used to craft their poetic experiments in perception. In particular, the fact that in free verse, the length of each line is determined by feel rather than established pattern allowed Whitman to create a new texture for the aesthetic expression of perception rooted in the intransigent, detached image.

traditional English grammar” (110).¹¹³ Like Emerson, Whitman considered democratic life a great experiment, and only an experimental verse-form rooted in intransigence could approximate this probative way of being.

Much more than his predecessors, though, Whitman projects a near continual sense of confidence in his intransigence. Whitman’s totalizing style of immersion is an act of poetic fiat, an extreme gesture meant to awaken his readers from familiar habits of thinking and being. To do so, Whitman often crafts lengthy scenes of intransigence in which the living details of the scene take precedence over the speaker’s ability to reflect upon or draw meaning from the scene. The living environment seems to be communicating with a speaker who does his best to stay out its way. In an eighty-line sequence from “Song of Myself,” Whitman’s poet-speaker journeys out of the city and finds himself:

Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock, where the otter is
 feeding on fish,
 Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou,
 Where the black bear is searching for roots or honey, where the beaver pats
 the mud with his paddle-shaped tail (722-725)

Only at the end of this sequence does the poet-speaker’s “I” again emerge, modified by an enumeration of present participles:

¹¹³ Fletcher’s chapter about the democratic orientation of Whitman’s grammatical intransigence in his *A New Theory for American Poetry*, “The Whitman Phrase,” astutely shows that Whitman’s poetic project can be read as a response to the new spirit of personal independence that Jacksonian democracy initiated in the 1830s. While previous scholars like Sean Wilentz in his *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* and David Reynolds in his 1995 *Walt Whitman’s America* have assiduously contextualized Whitman’s free verse within the political, religious, economic, and cultural changes of New York City in this historical moment, Fletcher narrows his interpretation to the ways Whitman’s grammar *expresses* these changes: “the only way for a Jacksonian democracy and its refusal of subordination to thrive, in symbolic terms, would be to get rid of the clauses of sentences as much as possible” (110).

Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
 Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,
 I tread all day and nights such roads (795-797)

The further the speaker treads “all day and night such roads,” the more he notices parallel actors treading in their own environments. The rattlesnake suns himself, the otter finds fish, the alligator sleeps in the bayou, the black bear searches for roots and honey, and the beaver builds his home. The world is in flux as the speaker is in flux, “storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning.” The speaker’s own intransigence allows him to strengthen his poetic authority. The poet-speaker is a daily and nightly witness to the doings of the rattlesnakes, the beavers, the people in the city, and whatever other natural phenomenon he might encounter.

This willful readiness to be exposed and immersed is the defining ethical action in Whitman’s verse. The poet, novelist, and critic D.H. Lawrence viewed Whitman as a primarily ethical poet, claiming that Whitman’s poems create a “morality of actual living” by showing “the journey itself, down the open road. Exposed to full contact. On two slow feet. Meeting whatever comes down the open road. In company with those that drift in the same measure along the way” (172). Lawrence’s claim brings attention to two strands of Whitman’s ethics that align him with Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson: his view that a properly-lived human life must be rooted in an individual’s acceptance of a fluxional, ongoing, and unsettled way of being and his ethical desire to be in “full contact,” or communication, with his living world to the best of his abilities. “Actual living” for Whitman means a process of living without a readily definable telos. As Emerson claims in “The Poet,” “the poet did not stop at the color, or the form, but read their meaning; neither may he rest in this meaning” (463). Like his predecessors Whitman attempts to show that the activity of perception itself does not stop or rest just as the living environment

never stops or rests. His poems are momentary enclosures of this dynamic process of being that allow the poet and readers to reflect upon the myriad ways in which the experience of being can be properly understood as the experience of flux.

If one accepts this view of human agency, then one comes to understand that one does not have to be a “doer” to live an ethically significant life. In fact, what Cowper calls “the silent task” of attention (3.378) will always makes one feel that one “has business” (3.377). Whitman learned the value of forbearance as a young journalist in Brooklyn. Many of his daily editorials in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*—for which he was the editor between 1848 and 1849—called on his readers to break from the harried pace of urban life and enjoy the quiet pleasure of a jaunt in a ferry across the east river, a walk in Fort Greene park, or an aimless ride in an omnibus. In a short editorial that anticipates his claim in “Song of Myself” that “what is commonest and cheapest and nearest and easiest is me” (259), Whitman writes in one of his *Daily Eagle* editorials, “many persons overlook some of the pleasantest and wholesomest enjoyments merely because the said enjoyments are near at hand, or because they are cheap. In reality, however, some of the truest pleasures are those that are most easily attainable” (149).¹¹⁴ Whitman wrote these lines from his own experience. As editor of the *Daily Eagle*, he regularly broke from his editorial tasks at noon and spent the rest of his days leisurely strolling the streets of downtown Manhattan and Brooklyn, riding ferries, and taking stage-coach rides to Long Island and back. He reported on his ramblings every day, always noting the inexpensive but “truest” pleasure these activities provided him. From his earliest activities as a public writer, Whitman emphasizes that looking, noticing, and receiving for no particular reason are ethically valuable human activities.

¹¹⁴ All references to Whitman’s journalism from *Gathering of the Forces*.

Just as Whitman values “the journey itself” for the sake of the journey alone, he values the poet’s openness to what Lawrence calls “the company...that drift in the same measure” along the poet’s open road. As if in direct answer to the opening questions of Emerson’s “Forbearance,” “hast thou named all the birds without a gun? / Loved the wood-rose on its stalk?” (1-2), Whitman writes in “Song of Myself,” “I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain’d...they show their relations to me and I accept them” (684, 692). Whitman is always attempting to let living things speak for themselves. Though Whitman is often a vocal advocate for the moral purpose of his poetry, in his preface to the 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, he is careful to argue that “the greatest poet does not moralize or make applications of morals” (13) but rather this poet seeks to present the world as they experience it, “he swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome...what I tell I tell precisely for what it is” (14). A subjective poetry of perception will always have an element of meddling by the author who is attempting to draw meaning from the perceptual experiences they poeticize. Yet often, perhaps more than he is given credit for, Whitman’s poetry can be read as an experiment in forbearance.

Whitman is at his most penetrating when he curbs his hortatory habits and presents the process of his unfolding perceptual awareness in short, impressionistic burst of insight. A group of three shorter poems—“I Sit and Look Out,” “The World Below the Brine,” and “Sparkles from the Wheel”—are particularly notable for their forbearing presentations of attention. In each of these poems, Whitman avoids any direct appeals to his audience and instead models his ethically-oriented attention. It is as if he is saying to his audience, this is how to *be* in an environment without ever telling us as much.

Whitman’s 1856 poem, “I Sit and Look Out” is an account of a speaker’s attention to human suffering composed of a ten-line series of unfinished stories. The speaker sits, looks out,

hears, and sees, and silently bears witness to human suffering without offering any solutions.

When they sit and look out they detect everywhere the affective distress of others:

I hear secret convulsive sobs from young men at anguish with themselves,

remorseful after deeds done,

I see in low life the mother misused by her children, dying, neglected, gaunt,

desperate...

I observe the slights and degradations cast by arrogant persons upon laborers,

the poor, and upon negroes, and the like;

All these—all the meanness and agony without end I sitting look out upon,

See, hear, and am silent. (2-3, 8-10)

Each “I hear,” “I see,” and “I observe” begins a story of despair that neither the poet nor the poem can resolve. The poet displays the disparate subjects of attention. He has heard the “convulsive sobs” of young, remorseful men; he has seen neglected mothers who are dying alone; he has seen the “slights and degradations” imposed by foremen upon laborers; and he will continue to notice scenes like these “without end.” “Without end” in this sense also means that the act of witnessing has no “end” or purpose for this poet of perception. This poet sees, hears, and is silent for no articulable effect. The process of noticing is ethically valuable in itself.

Though the poet may claim their acts of noticing are “without end,” the poem nevertheless affects the reader because it enjoins participation in the poet’s attentional process. By sitting and looking out with the speaker, we have increased our ethical awareness. This is what David Bromwich calls, in the context of Wordsworth’s poetry of witness, “mere attention as an ethical act” (15). Like Wordsworth, Whitman understands that his perception of the moral experiences of others will always be incomplete—Whitman cannot truly know what it is like to

be the dying mother or the maligned laborer as Wordsworth can only approximate the experience of Betty Foy or Martha Ray—but as a poet he can impel his readers to cultivate a habit of giving moral attention to scenes previously ignored. It is significant that by the end of this poem, Whitman minimizes the “I” of the speaker’s voice in the final phrase, “see, hear, and am silent” (9-10).” It is as if his method of first-person witnessing transfers into a command to his readers: you too should see, hear, and be silent so that you can strengthen your bonds with your fellow humans.

Though each line of “I Sit and Look Out,” opens with the “I,” the speaker follows Whitman’s dictum to avoid meddling with the experiences being described. In his 1860 poem “The World Below the Brine” Whitman tests his theory further by writing a poem of perceptual experience in which his narratorial “I” is conspicuously absent. This poem seems to pick up where Wordsworth left off when he grapples with the obfuscating presence of his own reflection as he attempts to look below the surface of a lake in book four of *The Prelude*. As Wordsworth claims, though he desires to observe and appreciate the bare presences of the natural phenomena visible to him just below the lake’s surface, he is unable to escape the “gleam / of his own image” (4.258-259) as it is reflected back to him. In this poem, Whitman attempts to minimize his subjectivity by focusing entirely on the underwater phenomena themselves.

In his autobiography *Specimen Days*, Whitman summarizes his lifelong fascination with the sea and the shore when he writes “that spread of waves and gray-white beach, salt, monotonous, senseless—such an entire absence of art, books, talk, elegance—so indescribably comforting” (820). The realness of the sea-shore in contrast with the constructed realities of art and the human realm is what brings him indescribable comfort. In the poem, he seeks to let this living realm exist on its own terms without meddling in its affairs. It is significant that the poem

has no “to be” verbs. It opens with the line, “the world below the brine,” instead of “the world below brine is” or “I see below me the world below the brine.” Instead we are left to infer that the poet will define this world for us by immersing us in it:

The world below the brine,
 Forests at the bottom of the sea, the branches and leaves,
 Sea-lettuce, vast lichens, strange flowers and seeds, the thick tangle, openings,
 and pink turf,
 Different colors, pale gray and green, purple, white, and gold, the play
 of light through the water,
 Dumb swimmers there among the rocks, coral, gluten, grass, rushes, and the
 aliment of the swimmers,
 Sluggish existences grazing there suspended, or slowly crawling close to the
 bottom (1-6)

In his seminal reading of Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the classical philologist Leo Spitzer persuasively argues that the Whitmanic list is not a mere itemization of things but an itemization of things as they *occur* to Whitman.¹¹⁵ In this passage, what might at first seem like a random list is a methodical description of natural phenomena presented in the order they become present to the speaker’s consciousness. At the beginning of each line, the speaker presents a natural fact then implicitly associates this natural fact with its related element. “Forests at the bottom of the sea” are detectable because of their “branches and leaves.” The

¹¹⁵ I am paraphrasing Spitzer’s argument in his 1949 essay “*Explication de Texte Applied to Walt Whitman’s Poem ‘Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking’*” (273-84). The distinction between a “mere list” and a subjectively composed list seems an obvious and important distinction to make. Yet to my knowledge Spitzer was the first critic to explicitly show that Whitman’s list-making is a formal construction centered around the unfolding perceptual experience of a speaker, who is continually attempting to “perpetuate the momentary impressions” they discovered in a given scene.

speaker's use of asyndeton impels readers to add their own conjunctions or verbs that might link "forests at the bottom of the sea" with "branches and leaves." Is it "forests at the bottom of the sea [and] branches and leaves" or is it, "the forest at the bottom of the sea [is signified by] branches and leaves"? Each notation of a natural fact leads us to another notation. We see each phenomenon both on its own and among its relations. The "sea-lettuce" is separated by a comma from "vast lichens," which is separated from "strange flowers and seeds"; they dwell together yet maintain their unique identities.

As is often the case in Whitman's poetry of perception there is no enjambment linking one line of perceptual awareness to the next line. Each individual line is like a poem in itself because it reads as a self-contained burst of perception. The line "different colors, pale gray and green, purple, white, and gold, the play of light through the water" is exemplary. It begins with the generalized statement, "different colors," then with each successive clause it details these colors as they appear to the poet. The poet first notices the "pale gray and green" of the ocean's surface, which becomes purple as his awareness of the effects of light increases, which in turn brings out "white, and gold" to the field of view. The speaker punctuates this brief tour of oceanic hues with the summative thought, "the play of light through the water," as if he is saying, "the play of light through the water has shown these different colors to me." The speaker narrates a process of discovery that mirrors the subjective experience of everyday perception. When looking at the sea-shore, we may say to ourselves, so many colors! Then we may attempt to enumerate these colors to the best of our abilities. Through this process of enumeration, we might say to ourselves, "oh but color is just the visually salient way objects affect their environment" so what we have just called "pale gray and green, purple, white, and gold," is the result of the kinetic "play" of sunlight and the diurnal motion of the waves.

By leaving out conjunctions, connecting verbs, and first-person narration, Whitman compels his readers to become more active. In this sense, Whitman is continuing the teacherly practice of perceptual discovery Cowper begins in *The Task*. Margaret Koehler's apt summary of *The Task* in my view applies also to Whitman, "the poem not only holds readers' interest during its reading but *hones* readers' interest so that they might apply it beyond the poem" (181). A repeated theme in Whitman's poetic theory is his desire to compose a poetry capacious enough to prove that "the Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature" (5). Whitman believes that his poetry can activate in his readers a dormant awareness of their "poetical nature." A poem, as he claims, "is no finish to a man or a woman, but a beginning" (24). A poem like "The World Below the Brine" emphasizes "poetical nature" as a skillful practice, a method of perceiving that the poet has honed over time and is modeling for the reader so they can in turn learn to more skillfully practice this method of knowing.

In "I Sit and Look Out" and "The World Below the Brine," Whitman emphasizes the perceptual acuity of an individual speaker. The poet, in these poems, is a privileged perceiver provoking readers to sharpen their perceptual abilities. The poems seem to say, "this is what I perceive, what about you?" In particular, Whitman aligns his speaking voice with the attentive voice of a child. In "Song of Myself," the speaker presents their attentional awareness to be akin to the openness of a child's curiosity:

A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;

How could I answer the child? . . . I do not know what it is any more than he. (99-100)

The lines that follow the speaker's claim of incomprehension are some of the most memorable in "Song of Myself" because they model the child's diffuse process of discovery. The speaker responds to the child with a series of guesses: "I guess it must be the flag of my disposition," "I

guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,” “I guess the grass itself is a child,” “I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic” (101, 102, 105, 106). With each successive attempt to name the phenomena, the speaker both answers and adds new questions for the child. How can the grass be the Lord’s handkerchief, or “a uniform hieroglyphic” or itself a child? Each answer prompts more questions, emphasizing Whitman’s method of intransigent knowing; poetic utterance represents the ongoing process of discovery begun in childhood.

His 1871 poem “Sparkles from the Wheel” is a testament to his faith in his poetry’s childlike approach to perceptual experience. The poem recounts the speaker’s experience of watching a knife-grinder sharpening his knives in front of a rapt group of children. Whitman transforms this everyday urban scene into a celebration of communal attention. While walking through a crowded street, the speaker pauses from the flow of the crowd to witness the “sparkles” as they emanate from the knife-grinder’s sharpening wheel. The speaker is further drawn to the knife-grinder because the children are intently watching him sharpen his knives. The speaker’s attention to their attention is the occasion of this poem:

The scene and all its belongings, how they seize and affect me,
 The sad sharp-chinn’d old man with worn clothes and broad shoulder-band of
 leather,
 Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here absorb’d
 and arrested,
 The group, (an unminded point set in a vast surrounding,)
 The attentive, quiet children, the loud, proud, restive base of the streets,
 The low horse purr of the whirling stone, the light-press’d blade,
 Diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold,

Sparkles from the wheel (9-15)

“Sparkles” are not just the objects of the speaker’s and the children’s attention but also a verb describing the entirety of the scene; the poet shows how the scene itself “sparkles.”

The scene sparkles because the speaker isolates it from the flow of “the city’s ceaseless crowd” (1). The attentive perceivers and the knife-grinding that they perceive form what the speaker calls “the group” (12), a community separate from the crowd that momentarily exists in an “unminded point set in a vast surrounding” (12). The descriptor “unminded” refers to custodial neglect, as in unminded children, but also suggests the opposite of “mindful” or attentive action. The ceaseless crowd in its daily coming and goings has created this “unminded point” by failing to take the time to notice the scene that has drawn the speaker and the children’s rapt attention. Only the poet and the children are sufficiently receptive enough to care about this scene. This “unminded point” discovered in a “vast surrounding” is an urban variant of the unnoticed scenes of daily rural life that Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson describe in their poetry of perception. It is hidden in plain sight for all citizens to enjoy as he has enjoyed it. Yet because the city’s plethora of attractions is so large, this particular scene might have no pressing claim for the “ceaseless crowd’s” attention unless the poet impels them to notice the scene.

A defining feature of the scenes of perceptual awareness Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson create is their relational or communal character. In moments of heightened awareness, these poets perceive themselves to be in communication with a prickly gorse on a brambly walking path, the stars reflecting on a frozen pond, and a solitary pine-tree in the American wilderness. Through their poems, they approximate this experience of communication by describing their experiences of what Emerson calls “strange sympathy” between themselves and

their living environments.¹¹⁶ In this poem, Whitman's speaker too emphasizes a sense of communicative openness to the living things in their scene. It is significant that the speaker opens the poem by saying "I join a group of children watching." Over the course of the poem, the speaker both physically joins the children by standing with them and attempts to affiliate their attentional impulses with the children's attention. In the final lines, the poet seems to appreciate what the children most appreciate in the scene, "the loud, proud, restive base of the streets, / The low hoarse purr of the whirling stone, the press'd blade, / Diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting, in tiny showers of gold, / Sparkles from the wheel" (13-15). It is not just the shining sparks that have drawn the children to watch the knife-grinder. It is all the perceptual thrills the process affords them; the reverberations of the wheel as they echo in the street where the children stand, the purring hum of the continually spinning sharpening stone, and the kinetic activities of the blade—"diffusing, dropping, sideways-darting" as it makes contact with the grinding stone. The children themselves seem to actually feel that these sounds and sights are communicating with them; the knife-grinder is putting on a show for them.

This activity of identification between the speaker and the children for Whitman has a distinctly public purpose. The speaker is modeling a communicative way of being in which one may empathize with the diverse experiences of all Americans. Particularly in his early verse, Whitman views himself as a unifying remedy for America's sectional rivalries. In much of his pre-Civil War writing, his poetic self habitually merges with the identities of others—"I am the mate and companion of people" (137) "I am he attesting sympathy" (461) "I am the hounded slave" (838). Yet after Whitman bore witness to the carnage of the American Civil War as a nurse to wounded soldiers from 1862-1865, he realized that his poetry alone could not provide

¹¹⁶ For a longer definition and discussion of Emerson's "strange sympathies" see pages 116-128 in chapter three.

the needed aliment for what he called America's "convulsiveness." "Sparkles from the Wheel" was published in 1871 and it indicates that Whitman's faith in the poet's uniting power becomes more subdued and realistic in the post-war era. In this poem, he presents a tentative and subtle method of empathetic joining; perhaps the best the poet can do is to join these children in the activity of looking and appreciating, to participate in their attention, to see this everyday activity with the invigorated view their perspectives afford him.

Great Poems of Death

Cowper, Wordsworth, and Emerson's verse is ethical in its emphasis on compelling its readers to live more attentively; to remind themselves that they are situated in a living environment with which they can regularly commune. Whitman's verse also takes part in this teacherly practice, but more than his predecessors, he compels his readers to accept and celebrate the unavoidable fact of death. From his most optimistic verse to his most realistic, he queries, celebrates, and mourns death. In "Song of Myself" the speaker boldly claims, "Has anyone supposed it is lucky to be born? / I hasten to inform him or her it is just as lucky to die and I know it" (131-132). Whitman understood the boldness of this claim. How could a living person, after all, know with any certainty that it is lucky to die? Yet this question, asked early in "Song of Myself," is one to which he continually returns in his poems and prose until his own death in 1891. In his *Democratic Vistas*, he claims that American poetry must be primarily a poetry of death, "in the future of these States, must arise poets immenser far, and make great poems of death" (1012). Whitman perceived himself to be one of these poets and worked diligently in his poetry of death to describe it without using clichés or established doctrines. Death, for Whitman, is Cowper's prickly gorse, the object of ethical attention that has been incompletely accounted for by previous poets. As Harold Aspiz details in the most detailed book-length study of

Whitman's writings about death, *Whitman's Poetry of Death*, "an unflagging awareness of death colors his treatment of all phases of life" (ix) because Whitman made himself "a sensitive student of death and dying, familiar with disease, anguish, violence, and the displays of fear and courage among the many dying persons he observed" (1). We might say that as Emerson taught his readers how to live, Whitman taught his readers how die.

D.H. Lawrence was the first critic to make notice of the ethical primacy of death in Whitman's verse. In his view, "Whitman would not have been the great poet he is if he had not taken the last steps and looked over into death" (170). In my view, Lawrence is right to claim that Whitman's poetic power is rooted in his willingness to look steadily at death and the experiences of the dying. In his focus on death it is as if Whitman is amplifying Wordsworth's 1802 argument to John Wilson that the poetry of their day had too narrow a picture of moral experience, which failed to acknowledge the complex emotional experiences of people like Betty and Johnny Foy. In his verse, Whitman says, in a similar vein, that when we do not look over into death we greatly limit our field of moral inquiry. And for Whitman, like his fellow poets of perception, the goal of his poetry was to widen this field as much as he could.

Lawrence's phrase "last steps" suggests that Whitman made a later decision to poeticize the experience of death. It is true that his writings composed during and after the Civil War, demonstrate a more subdued and chastened acceptance of death less characteristic of his earlier verse. Yet if we look closer at Whitman's early verse we find that Whitman is often "looking over into death," peering and wondering at, attempting to describe it with empathy and with realistic detail. In his 1855 poem "To Think of Time," Whitman composes a scene of an anonymous unfolding death and its aftermath:

The physician after long putting off gives the silent and terrible look for an

answer,

The children come hurried and weeping, and the brothers and sisters are

sent for,

Medicines stand unused on the shelf, (the camphor-smell has long pervaded

the rooms,)

The faithful hand of the living does not desert the hand of the dying,

The twitching lips press lightly on the forehead of the dying,

The breath ceases and the pulse of the heart ceases,

The corpse stretches on the bend and the living look upon it,

It is palpable as the living are palpable. (15-21)

This person's death is immediately followed by a subtle yet profound shift in the point-of-view of the living:

The living look upon the corpse with their eyesight,

But without eyesight lingers a different living and looks curiously on the

corpse. (22-23)

This sequence is at once vague—the dying person and their visitors have no names, no genders, no distinct identities—and precise in its perceptual details. Whitman attempts to show here that “not a day passes, not a minute or second without a corpse” (12), and thus perhaps names and identities—the stuff of obituaries—matter less than an attentive picture of the actual moment of death.

The power of this scene lies in its attention to the embodied experiences of the living as they attend to the dying person. It is composed of physical gestures, odors, and the palpable sound of silence. The physician gives their “silent and terrible” look for any signs of remaining

life as children, weeping, come and go from the room, a faithful companion holds the dying person's hand and their lips twitch as they kiss this person's forehead for the last time. A kinetic world of human activity encircles the dying person. The glances, the hands touching, the lips quivering are all evidence of the living people's attempts to attune themselves to the dying person's experience of death. The pervading bitter scent of the topical pain-reliever, camphor-oil, serves as an olfactory reminder to everyone in the room that the dying person's pain has ceased. Through their awareness of the smell, perhaps the people in the room begin to accept what has happened; the pain is no longer treatable, it is time to move on. Now the dying person is a "corpse," still as palpable as "the living are palpable."

The moment of altered "eyesight" at the end of this scene is presaged by the living people's new awareness of the division between their living bodies and the dead one in front of them. While the "corpse" is still palpable it lacks "eyesight." There is no talk of the soul here or the afterlife or of any kind of doctrinal religious experience. The speaker instead merely notes an alteration in the corpse's embodied experience. The body still "lives" to the people mourning it; it is right there in front of them. They can touch it, kiss it, and see it.¹¹⁷ Yet because the body is without eyesight there "lingers" within it "a different living"; it is seemingly alive because of its corporeal realness but it is no longer an active participant. The "corpse" is not dead but is now engaged in "a different living." So too are the people who have watched this person die. Their eyesight is forever altered because they have seen this person's death up close. They will ostensibly live differently because they have come so near to death. Perhaps when they think of

¹¹⁷ For an excellent overview of the scientific and cultural contexts of Whitman's poetry of death see Lindsey Tuggle's recent *The Afterlives of Specimens: Science, Mourning, and Whitman's Civil War*. Tuggle looks closely at Whitman's interest in the preservation, exhumation, and exhibition of human remains, to show how Whitman's "death-pictures" like this one from "Song of Myself" can be interpreted as Whitman's ideal poetic figuration—both bodily and ephemeral.

this person—wherever they may be, in a Christian heaven, or in the ground—they will be reminded that in this moment they transitioned themselves into a “different living” that accepts and understands human finitude.¹¹⁸

Beginning with the earthly title of his central book, *Leaves of Grass*, and running through much of his verse, Whitman grounds the experience of death in natural cycles of growth and decay. To Whitman, a printer by education, “leaves” were the printer’s slang for sheets of paper, and “grass” was the extemporaneous material to fill their blank spaces. In this sense the “leaves” of his “grass” are temporary, experimental, and finite. They are missives sent out to his readers, to be learned from but not cleaved to as an ideology or a creed. “Leaves” and “grass” signify cycles of decay and growth, too; the leaves fall, help to fertilize the land so that the grass can grow and the cycle can continue. In this regard, Whitman draws upon the metaphor of falling leaves that signify human finitude from the Bible, “all flesh is grass” (Isiah 40:6), to the epic simile of dead as falling leaves in the *Illiad*, the *Aeneid*, the *Inferno*, *Paradise Lost*, and in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind.”¹¹⁹ But in his use of this trope, Whitman is notably less figural than his predecessors. By drawing our attention to leaves and grass in his poetry he does not attempt to bring us to Hades or Heaven but instead to the muddy earth below our feet. In the poet’s attempts to answer the child’s question “what is the grass?” in “Song of Myself,” their final response is “and now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves” (110). The grass

¹¹⁸ This brings up an intriguing connection between Whitman’s poetry of death and Adam Smith’s claim in his 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments* that “one of the most important principles in human nature” (8) is the fact that we sympathize with the dead even though the dead can no longer remunerate our feelings for them. Though their methods and contexts are quite different, Whitman and Smith both attempt to show their readers that the affective relationship humans have with the dead can help to shape a more empathic society. See my discussion of Smith and Wordsworth on pages 62-65 of chapter two.

¹¹⁹ See *Illiad* 6.170-5, *Aeneid* 6.311-14, *Inferno* 3.91-99, *Paradise Lost* 1.2.295-313, and all of “Ode to the West Wind.” The clear reference in all of these texts is the notion of poetic immortality rather than human immortality.

grows because it is fertilized by the decomposed remains of actual bodies, not emblems of these bodies as signified by the trope of falling leaves.

For Whitman, the story of a living body, properly conceived, has to be experimental, just as his leaves of grass are composed in the spirit of experiment. His claim in his 1872 preface to *Leaves of Grass* is among his most poignant statement in this regard, “but what is life but an experiment? And mortality but an exercise? With reference to results beyond. And so shall my poems be. If incomplete here, and superfluous there, *n’importe*—the earnest trial and persistent exploration shall at least be mine, and other success failing shall be success enough” (1024). His emphasis on “exercise,” “trial,” and “exploration” characterizes his belief in the empowering process of accepting human finitude. Rather than thinking of the human body as an end, he thinks of it as a kind of onward travelling vessel taking part in a series of experimental “exercises.” Each poetic exploration approximates these trials. As trials, they must somehow be “incomplete” or “superfluous.” They are the most apt expressions of his continuous experience of being, intact with all the imperfections in his axis of vision.

This is why only Whitman could write a poem like his 1856 “This Compost,” in which he compels his readers to linger in the sensory experience of a large pile of compost. The delicate imagery of the “beautiful uncut hair of graves” is supplanted in this poem by the muddy process that makes the grass’s growth possible. Looking closely at the compost pile, the speaker tells us to “behold this compost! behold it well” (17):

It grows such sweet things out of such corruptions,

It turns harmless and stainless on its axis, with such endless successions of

diseas’d corpses,

It distills such exquisite winds out of such infused fetor,

It renews with such unwitting looks it prodigal, annual, sumptuous crops (43-46)

The speaker impels their audience to notice this source of life of which they are “unwitting” yet which is continuously making their lives possible. It may contain the remains of diseased or malevolent corpses but this odious fact make no difference to the compost heap; it happily receives all organic matter the same. The compost is direct evidence of a living environment’s agency. Like Emerson, Whitman never solely ascribed a Christian metaphysical agency to the natural world, but he honored environmental processes such as organic fertilization as evidence that humans live a co-present existence with plants, animals, and other living things. Here the compost is the actor as it “turns,” “distills,” and “renews” by helping to decompose and render reusable even the most “diseas’d corpses.” Whitman emphasizes the transformative power of the compost heap in moral terms; the “corruptions” “disease” and “feter” which his readers perceive with aversion and dismay seemingly vanish in the kinetic process of natural renewal. It does its work quietly, “with such unwitting looks,” yet produces visible signs of its process in the cyclical returns of the crops.

In this poem, Whitman emphasizes the rough beauty of this life-giving process. While Emerson looks to the rhodora as a source of hidden beauty lying in the New England woods undetected and unappreciated by his readers, Whitman prefers a heap of mud and rotting human remains. Whitman seems, in this sense, to advance the “prickly gorse” tradition further by attending to more mucky natural objects than gorses, idiot boys, and rhodoras. Yet the desideratum of Whitman’s descriptive verse is similar to his predecessors’ goals; he impels his readers to expand their moral imaginations by finding sources of goodness in aesthetic spaces rarely noticed by previous poets.

The fact that Whitman sought to compose great poems of death shows that to him, the world itself is not inherently good, but that the act of looking steadily at the world is inherently good. Whitman makes perhaps his most eloquent argument for the moral value of mere attention in his *Memoranda During the War*, a short book of prose-sketches in which he bears witness to the experiences of the wounded, dying, and dead he encountered in and near Union Army hospitals in and around Washington, D.C during the war. As recent scholarship has shown, *Memoranda* is not just a journal-like document but a marker of a new aesthetic direction in Whitman's poetry characterized by what Peter Coviello aptly calls a "profound reduction in volume, even as the world around the poet grows unprecedentedly loud" (xxvi).¹²⁰ Confronted daily by death on a scale neither he nor America had seen before, Whitman creates a prose-style that is at once immediate and recalcitrant—the dying young men, their desires to write letters to their families, their desires to be comforted, the circumstances in which they were mortally wounded all speak for themselves and the poet is merely there to notice and record these details.

Memoranda's opening sketch pronounces this formal shift. In it Whitman recounts spending a morning in the Lacy Mansion, a large private estate poised on a hill above the Rappahannock River, which had been transformed after the Battle of Fredericksburg into a Union field hospital. After visiting with wounded soldiers in the mansion's many rooms, Whitman steps outside and provides a new variant of the prospect view not focused on a picturesque landscape but on a civil war's brutal aftermath:

¹²⁰ From Coviello's introduction to *Memoranda During the War*. All references to *Memoranda* from this edition. Along with Coviello's work on *Memoranda* in his introduction and Lindsey Tuggle's previously mentioned *Fine Specimens*, Roy Morris Jr.'s *The Better Angel: Walt Whitman and the Civil War*, and Robert Leigh Davis's *Whitman and the Romance of Medicine* have all given the sustained scholarly attention that *Memoranda During the War* deserves. Before their work, *Memoranda* was read as a supplement to Whitman's war poetry; through their scholarship *Memoranda* can now be better understood as a distinct aesthetic event in Whitman's work.

Out doors, at the foot of a tree, within ten yards of the front of the house, I notice a heap of amputated feet, legs, arms, hands &c., a full load for a one-horse cart. Several bodies lie near, each cover'd with its brown woolen blanket. In the doorway, towards the river, are fresh graves, mostly of officers, their names on pieces of barrel-staves or broken board, stuck in the dirt. (8)

Whitman's detail-rich and widely distributed attention circulates around a view of his rural landscape that is Cowperian in its visual acuity. In the opening sentence each phrasal separation, "out of doors," "at the foot of a tree," "within ten yards," represents a new descriptive glance, a new "take" or blink of the eye as the scene unfolds to Whitman. But rather than a Cowperian scene composed of finely detailed natural sights and sounds, Whitman instead presents a scene populated with amputated limbs, recently deceased bodies, and freshly dug graves. Unlike Cowper and unlike his pre-war verse, Whitman draws almost no attention to his own subjectivity. His first person "I" is nearly removed from the scene, appearing only once in the phrase "I notice." He instead gives precedence to the amputated limbs, bodies, and graves that have transformed this formerly bucolic rural retreat into a scene of war. Once Whitman notices the heap of amputated body parts waiting to be carried away in a one-horse cart, he sees a series of related images, all joined together by his single act of noticing: the bodies covered with woolen blankets in the foreground compel him to notice the freshly dug graves in what had previously been the garden near the front door of the mansion and then to look up at the rickety, makeshift grave markers made out of wood-scrap.

Whitman's acts of attention in *Memoranda* encourage his readers to widen their moral imagination because they do not moralize. They are photographic in their lack of commentary; they invite us to wonder how each scene reflects our own humanity. As Wordsworth asks his

readers to feel *with* Betty Foy while she searches for Johnny Foy, Whitman asks his readers to place themselves in the position of young soldiers as they attempt to survive or as they live out their final moments. We notice that in death, there are no rebels or Union soldiers, just human bodies. Whitman thus attempts to recount the stories of all the dead, not just Union soldiers. He tells a particularly poignant story when he recounts the experience of a wounded rebel with “brains partially exuded” from a shot to the head:

He lived three days, lying on his back on the spot where he first dropt. He dug with his heel in the ground during that time a hole big enough to put in a couple of ordinary knapsacks. He just lay there in the open air, and with little intermission kept his heel going night and day. Some of our soldiers then moved him to a house, but he died in a few minutes. (58)

This sketch creates more questions than it provides answers. Was this man digging his heels into the ground compulsively as a momentary method of survival or was he perhaps digging his own grave? And why did the Union soldiers ultimately move the nearly dead Confederate soldier into a house? Did they feel a particular empathy when they confronted the direness of his situation? Whitman does not say nor does he need to. The image of the hole, “big enough to put in a couple of ordinary knapsacks,” tells a story in itself. It represents the urge to survive, to care for one’s self when no one else will. Perhaps the Union soldiers see their own potential fates unfolding when they are confronted with this soldier’s futile act of survival. In a last moment attempt to act humanely towards their enemy, perhaps they are impelled to at least bring him indoors to die. Whitman seems to be suggesting to his readers that when they are pushed into the hell of war, humans are capable of recognizing their shared humanity, even if in the smallest of ways.

When attempting to summarize his experiences in the war, Whitman emphasizes his unshaken faith in America's democratic spirit. But in his earlier verse, he most often expresses his faith in words suffused with what William James aptly calls "a passionate and mystical ontological emotion" (83) that attempt to show that "men and women, life and death, and all things are divinely good" (83).¹²¹ What binds his most optimistic verse together is his belief that all people want to participate in the good, even if they have not yet discovered their inherent desire to do so. He writes his poems during this period to inspire his readers to discover their previously unrecognized desire to act rightly. But in his Civil War writings, rather than emphasizing each person's potential to act rightly, he emphasizes the fact that what joins all Americans together is the fact of death:

The dead, the dead, the dead—*our* dead, or South or North, our all, (all, all, all,
finally dear to me) or East or West—Atlantic Coast or Mississippi Valley—
Somewhere they crawl'd to die, alone, in bushes, low gulleys, or on the sides of
hills...not only Northern dead leavening Southern soil—thousands, aye many tens
of thousands, Southerners, crumble to-day in Northern earth. (102-103)

His readers may have nothing more in common than their mortality and their shared continent. But even this broad commonality has the potential to unite his readers because it is at least an irreducible given that may allow them to discover their innate human capacity to think in terms of "our" not "my" or "they." His parenthetical claim "all, all, all, finally dear to me" is striking

¹²¹ From William James's chapter "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness" in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James presents Whitman as a prophet of "healthy-minded" optimism who owes his "importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements" (83). Though I think James's sentiment is right, it seems to me difficult to find anything "systematic" in Whitman's work for very long. Nevertheless, James is correct to claim that Whitman habitually sought to see the good side of things as much as he possibly could, whether it be human suffering or happiness.

here because it is bracketed. In his more optimistic verse, this would be the opening statement of a poem: all is finally dear to me and I will show you how. Yet here the phrase is buried among a panorama of dying or decomposing bodies. He is more reticent to make this claim now that he has borne witness to the grim experience of a war founded upon prejudice, greed, and sectional differences. Yet despite his unique closeness to the divisive experience of the war—a closeness that few of his literary contemporaries experienced—he still thinks in terms of inclusion and connection.¹²² It is not “the dead” his country should mourn but “*our* dead.” Whitman makes this claim not through ideological or political terms, as Reconstructionist leaders would when attempting to compromise with former confederate states in the 1870s, but aesthetically. The images of men crawling to their deaths, “alone in bushes, low gulleys, or on the sides of hills,” and the images of their remains “leavening” and “crumbling” in both Northern and Southern soil should lead his readers to contemplate what joins them together rather than what separates them.

A Little Wash'd Up Drift

Whitman concludes the above-mentioned final entry in *Memoranda* by reminding his reader that the most “significant word” of the war is “UNKNOWN” (103). Not only the names of the dead were “unknown” to the people who tried to identify their remains on the battlefield but their inner lives were unknown to the civilians who they fought and died for.¹²³ As Whitman

¹²² Though Whitman did not take up the musket to fight in the Civil War, as the writer Thomas Wentworth Higginson did, Whitman’s actions during the war were wholeheartedly brave and risky. Whitman’s intimate involvement with the aftermath of battles made him quite sick and at least once nearly killed him. As Roy Morris shows in *The Better Angel*, in the process of personally visiting “tens of thousands of hurt, lonely, and scared young men” Whitman “lost forever his own good health, beginning a long decline that would leave him increasingly enfeebled for the rest of his life” (5). This is one reason why Whitman focuses on the war’s unifying lessons; everyone involved in the war—civilians and soldiers alike—suffered, not just the soldiers alone.

¹²³ Unmarked graves were a common sight during the Civil War. In *Memoranda* Whitman makes the claim that “in some of the cemeteries nearly *all* the dead are Unknown. At Salisbury, N.C., for instance, the known are only 85, while the unknown are 12,027, and 11,700 of these are buried in trenches” (103). While Whitman gives no substantiating evidence for this claim, its rhetorical heft is most important. Whitman published *Memoranda During*

claims in the opening to *Memoranda*, the war's "interior history will not only never be written, its practicality, minutia of deeds and passions, will never even be suggested" (7). Whitman claimed that the only aesthetic response he could offer in the face of the vast calamity of the war was "a few stray glimpses" (7) into its interior history. This is an apt summary of Whitman's poetic project. Though his life's work is a sprawling collection of poems that luminously describe and reflect upon the experience of everyday life for him and his fellow Americans in the nineteenth-century, it is remarkably honest in its celebration of the finitude of Whitman's distinct perspective. His poems are "stray glimpses" into his lived experiences, they seem to come at random, whether he is sitting and looking out, walking in the streets, loafing on the grass, or arriving in a scene in the aftermath of a battle. His stray glimpsing is a practice; a way of being that his poetry explores and celebrates. But because it is "stray" and "glimpsing" it is finite, incomplete, and intransigent.

No poem acknowledges, mourns, and celebrates Whitman's commitment to an intransigent vision of human agency more than his 1856 poem "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life." The poem can be read as a more complex and dramatic rendering of the experience of yielding himself to the natural world that Emerson describes at the end of his 1834 poem "The Each and The All." Here Whitman composes a scene of extreme yielding, in which the speaker imagines his body to have merged with the ebbing ocean and the sandy shoreline. He imagines what it would be like to become interminably intransigent as he drifts from the ocean to the shore and then from the shore back to the ocean, repeating the cycle again and again. From the poem's beginning, the speaker holds his audience in a drift-like state:

the War in 1876 to remind his readers of the astounding bravery, suffering, and loss of a war that had ended only a decade earlier. Each unmarked grave in this sense is a reminder of a life cast aside and forgotten during the process of Reconstruction.

As I ebb'd with the ocean of life,
 As I wended the shores I know,
 As I walk'd where the ripples continually wash you Paumanok...
 Held by this electric self out of the pride of which I utter poems,
 Was seized by the spirit that trails in the lines underfoot (1-3, 7-8)

After seven lines of digressive scene-setting, the speaker announces the occasion for a poetic utterance: a moment of creative seizure and inspiration presaged by a walk on the beach. But as evident in this opening, the poem is more interested in approximating the experience of a continually sharpening process of environmental perception than in exploring the speaker's interior life. The poet makes clear his familiarity with this environment. It is a shore he knows and has walked many times; this is why he is "seized by the spirit" of place. He has spent his life practicing perception, walking, marking, wending, and uttering their reflections of these experiences in verse.

Whitman's speaker approaches this environment with "the old thought of likenesses," or the activity of communing and identifying with the natural objects and processes in the environment. The "as I" formulation seems to be given as a response to the natural phenomena that are steadily at work when the poet encounters them; it implies that the environment is offering a parallel series of "as I" phrases to the poet. "As I ebb'd with" you, ocean, you "ebb'd with me." "As I wended," slightly changing the course of my walks each time I visit you, you too seem to have "wended" your environment through your addition of fresh debris—"splinters of wood, weeds, scum...scales from shining rocks, leaves of salt lettuce" (11-12)—to the scene. The poet wishes to meet the sea-shore on its own terms as if it were an old friend. But instead of gaining confidence and a heightened sense of belonging to what Emerson calls "the perfect

whole,” the speaker instead sees himself as a fragment no different than a minute piece of debris: “I too but signify at the utmost a little wash’d up drift / A few sands and dead leaves to gather” (22-23). Compared with the speaker’s claim in “Song of Myself,” “I am large, I contain multitudes” (1326) this is a striking change in tone. The “old thought of likenesses” has led the poet to focus on their insignificance and their smallness. At “utmost” the entirety of their identity may have no better analogue in nature than “a few sands and dead leaves” washed up on the beach.

Yet as we have seen, Whitman’s poetry of death emphasizes that acceptance of our eventual place in the compost heap is central to the activity of living a good life. Knowing that our bodies will eventually become as small as “a few sands and dead leaves” should empower us to accept our finitude. Though the speaker is at first “baffl’d” by the thought that “every word” they have “written” will become no different than the debris at their feet, they are finally heartened by the fact that, “I perceive I have not really understood any thing, not a single object, and that no man ever can” (32). In this line, Whitman echoes Emerson’s later acceptance of the limitations of human perception. “Really” understanding a “single object” is an impossible goal. The poet will always be limited by their subjectivity. What this single object means to one poet will not be the same as what it means to another. And what it means to them today will not be the same as what it means tomorrow. “A single object” is not a static entity to the poet of perception. Through each attentive description of a familiar scene, its identity seems to coruscate and grow, revealing new angles and shades of itself to the poet and their readers.

In the poem’s final sequence, Whitman stretches the limits of the poetry of attention by dissolving the boundary between the perceiver and the things being perceived. He becomes:

Tufts of straw, sands, fragments,

Buoy'd hither from many woods, one contradicting another,
 From the storm, the long calm, the darkness, the swell,
 Musing, pondering, a breath, a briny tear, a dab of liquid or soil...
 We, capricious, brought hither we know not whence, spread out before you,
 You up there walking or sitting,
 Whoever you are, we too lie in drift at your feet. (61-64, 69-71)

Here the poet's body dissolves into an accumulation of natural elements. He accepts the advice he gave himself earlier in the poem—that “no man can ever” understand any one thing—and attempts to describe a feeling of immersion within the environment through enumeration. He is “tufts of straw” spread out at random on the shore. He is the sands, fragmented and granular. He is broken pieces of wood washed up by a storm. Yet he still remains human as he muses, ponders, breathes, and sheds a “briny tear.” The speaker can only momentarily contain this experience in verse. By fragmenting and dispersing himself he has ceded his human agency to the current of the natural world, a power over which humans have less authority than they believe they do.

This extreme form of environmental immersion breaks down what Whitman calls in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” “the simple, compact, well-join'd” (7) self who views themselves to be always an integral actor in the navigation of their fate. They have lost their self-reliant faith and have instead yielded themselves to nature, to their readers, and perhaps to a God-like figure looking down at them. Unlike Emerson's call for “furtherance and pursuing” (280) at the close of “Threnody,” Whitman leaves the speaker in drifts on the sand and asks future readers to draw their own lessons from this scene. “Whoever you are,” the speaker says, their poetic self and the natural elements with which they have merged now “lie in drifts your feet,” and have been left

there for whoever finds these elemental drifts to resuscitate through their own immersion in the method and lessons of Whitman's poetic vision. As we have seen, Whitman has faith in the life-giving power of the soil and seems here to be planting himself in it so the nature processes of decay and rebirth will provide his poetic project continued sustenance. The speaker's last will and testament at the end of "Song of Myself" is the most apt summary of Whitman's vision of a poetic immortality rooted in the dirt: "I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love" (1339).

The speaker's anxiety in "As I Ebb'd With the Ocean of Life" evinces Whitman's lifelong worry that his experimental poetic project would be ignored or deemed a failure by future generations. Yet despite these doubts he persisted in his belief that his poetry would remain inherently valuable to future generations as an extended representation of what he calls "the only reliable identity, the moral and artistic one" (959). This connection between ethics and aesthetics is always at the center of his verse. Like his poetic predecessors, Whitman had little interest in becoming a systematic philosopher. He wanted instead to circumscribe a multitude of paths to right action rooted in his belief that each human being should think of themselves as an "eligible" (1033) participant in the experience of being. Looking back at *Leaves of Grass* in his final years of life, Whitman said that his poems were meant to "add, fuse, complete, extend—and celebrate the immortal and the good" ("L. of G.'s Purport" 2) so that future readers might adopt a similar willingness to enlarge their views of moral action. Through Whitman's additions and extensions, the immortal is an earthly concept rooted in dirt, sand, compost heaps, and the leaves of his poems, and the good is the mere experience of sitting and looking out or noticing a group of children watching a knife-grinder. Like his predecessors, Whitman rightly intuited that

attention is, in a very real way, the thing that is most our own. His poetry remains vital because it continues to teach us how to live attentively and openly.

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