"Fits of Vulgar Joy": Play Anxiety in the Romantic Poets

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“Fits of Vulgar Joy”: Play Anxiety in the Romantic Poets

by

Alison W. Powell

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

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Abstract

“Fits of Vulgar Joy”: Play Anxiety in the Romantic Poets

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Alison W. Powell

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“Fits of Vulgar Joy”: Play Anxiety in the Romantic Poets considers the crucial but neglected role of play as a component of the imaginative faculty and as related to the development of moral sensibility in the Romantic era. It examines the Spieltrieb (“play drive”) in the works of Coleridge, Rousseau, Wordsworth, Shelley, and John Clare to explore the tension between what is explicitly stated about the relationship between play, intersubjectivity, and aesthetics, and how play is actually depicted in the poetry and essays of the Romantic era. It works to identify how and with what objective the Romantics differentiated so minutely between play, fancy, imagination, and art, investigating the gravity with which the authors worked to parse these variances. Although the Romantics generally emphasized the influence of childhood on the development of poetic sensibility and heralded the role of “free play” in the imagination, I demonstrate that representations of ludic activity in Wordsworth’s Prelude (1805), for example, indicates a deep ambivalence about the spontaneous, chaotic creative impulse typically called “play.”

The approach I use is fundamentally interdisciplinary and utilizes play theory, object relations, and the work of Kant, Gadamer, Plato, and Schiller. I also draw from a myriad of primary texts: in addition to readings of The Prelude (1805) and Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation,” for example, I examine Rousseau’s Emile, in which the destructive potential of play originates in childish vanity—a paradigm which eerily parallels the English response to Rousseau’s infamous reputation. Child’s play within nature is acted out in John Clare’s “The
Progress of Ryhme” and Wordsworth’s Boy of Winander through the mimicry of nightingale song and owls' hoots, respectively. Wordsworth uses the eventual death of the boy to mark the end of play and the beginning of poetry. In Clare’s work, the poet is paralyzed in grief over his inability to retain that undirected creativity, that harmonious existence within the Helpston fields which marked his childhood. Finally, Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” offers a departure from these more perplexed examples. Maddalo’s daughter reveals the profundity of silent play, but to the comparative denigration of poetics.

The Romantic paradox of play reveals itself in patterns in which effortless frivolity gives way to something more subversive or melancholy. Most often the ludic is inextricably tied to the adult poet’s acknowledgement of his exile from nature and his own former, creative, aimless self. These changes are depicted as necessarily accompanying maturation, making possible one’s entrance into society and the development of responsible citizenship. The Romantic texts which preoccupy this project collapse those elements which are determined antithetical to the process of maturation — that which is hedonistic, chaotic, selfish, myopic, excessive— and deliver it to the reader in the form of child’s play.
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Introduction

Playing Romantically: Mimicry, Thievery, Destruction

Thus, often in those fits of vulgar joy
Which, through all seasons, on a child’s pursuits
Are prompt attendants, ’mid that giddy bliss
Which, like a tempest, works along the blood
And is forgotten; even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield; the earth
And common face of Nature . . . .

What does it mean to play Romantically? How does play manifest in Romantic poetry, and what might we learn about its appearance in eighteenth century writing on the imagination? How might we understand the tension between what is explicitly stated about the relationship between play, morality and aesthetics, and how play is actually used or depicted in the poetry and essays of the era? For despite their heralding of the importance of childhood in the development of the poetic imagination, when the Romantic poets actually represent play in markedly ambivalent terms. This project explores the significance of that paradox—an explicit heralding of the potential of “free play” troubled by ambivalent representations of it—by examining patterns of peripherality and exile where play is often only momentarily engaged before being circumvented, qualified, or mourned. It also considers the role of play as related to the management of the child’s imagination and development of poetic sensibility in works by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and John Clare, and in Rousseau’s educational novel Emile. Searching for the Spieltrieb (“the play drive”) in the works of these authors in order to unearth the relationship between play and the cultivation of sympathy especially, I identify a recurrent anxiety about the subversive potential of play.

In other words, below its surface frivolity play is frequently, if tacitly, represented as an irritant in the Romantic trajectory of the aesthetic experience as developing moral sensibility. A primary aim Romantic criticism has been to trace the ways that German philosophers of the post-Enlightenment influenced the British Romantic poets, especially in their articulation that

art and poetry is integral to the development of moral sensibility; for Kant, as for Schiller, the imaginative faculty also helps balance reason and emotion. Recent theorists have focused on seeming contradictions in Romantic adherence to the imagination: for there are tremendous anxieties in major Romantic writings about the effects of the imagination on the mind. After all, a world which posits imagination as central to ethics is a world which invites illusion into morality, a troubling provocation to the Enlightenment’s establishment of reason as the antidote to the anarchic powers of the imagination. As Alexander Schlutz argues, though Kant believed the imagination was crucial to “secure the unity of the transcendental system, ultimately, for him as for Coleridge, ‘Imagination is inseparable... from the threat of madness and the irrational’” (81). Expanding upon such recent criticism, I examine the related but discrete aspects of play in Romantic texts, incorporating contemporary play theory to trouble the traditional configuration of play as an expression of freedom and sociability. The incriminating underbelly of play—that which is unpredictable, spontaneous, violent, or trivial— is largely suppressed as antithetical to a larger aesthetic project which prioritizes the ordered and poetic, and claims poetry for moral edification.

Despite the unique ability of play to proclaim itself free of consequence, serious attempts to theorize the overlap of ethics and aesthetics typically include a concerted effort to distinguish play from art. One such example is Schiller’s Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1794), one of the first major works to focus entirely on the relationship between play, reason, emotion, and moral action, and to do so with an overwhelmingly affirmative perspective. His Spieltrieb or playdrive, in which the first signs of the free, active, and real determinacy of man makes itself known, is in part a way of transforming conflict into works of art and anticipates the psychoanalytic use of play. Yet despite the widespread reception of Schiller’s work and the increasing sentimentalization of childhood, Romantic poets express trepidation about play in

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2 Schiller, Friedrich. On the Aesthetic Education of Man. Trans. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2005. Schiller was prompted to write his Letters both by Rousseau’s Emile and Kant’s comment that art itself may be considered as a form of play, at least when compared to labor. His play impulse is an elaboration of Kant’s ideas in the Critique of Judgement.
their formal articulations of aesthetic positions and in the relative timidity with which they experimented with language and poetic form. As Donald Wesling points out, Wordsworth’s influential Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* questioned whether one must distinguish between poetry and prose at all—a radical claim at the time—and he and Coleridge experimented with verse: the prose poem, free verse, and sprung rhythm, for example. Still “neither ultimately spelled out a poetics of the attempt to be unprecedented. A more radical theory of prosody was to be worked out fully by later generations of the avant garde” (33). Coleridge’s thoughts on play were ambivalent, and autobiographical writings and poems reveal his fear that playfulness leads to moral slippage (*Coleridge’s Play of Mind* 6). The poet’s experience of the imagination’s unfettered power was far from wholly delightful: though he spent his days articulating how the imagination brings us closer to the divine, but by night his imagination turned on him: he was plagued by terrifying nightmares (Schlutz 5). Playfulness in poetry—whether defined as word play, spontaneity in form, absurd imagistic leaps, puns, riddles or the like—most often struck Wordsworth as unbecoming, indulging those elements of the human imagination which are frivolous or worse: alienating, perverse, or morally stunted. Much of this (as Wesling argues) relates to the Romantic desire to expunge Augustan aesthetic values, especially ornamentation in language, from their poetry. For example, that assertion that the best poetry need not differ from the best prose circumscribes an infinite variety of language play, puns, and verbal paradoxes used not just by the Augustan poets but medieval, Metaphysical, and contemporary poets as well.

Poetic play is one thing, but what about more literal depictions of play—games, child’s play, dress-up, Emile’s cake race? As in life, play and games in Romantic poetry are frequently inscribed with meanings which undermine their frivolity, and if the passage begins in levity it is unlikely to end that way. The boy’s playful mimicry of hooting owls in Wordsworth’s Boy of Winander are later shadowed by his death, and the game of billiard balls at the center of Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” (pub. 1824) is ultimately a metaphorical apex that bears the weight of the poem’s philosophic crisis. The management of children’s games in
Emile reveals the governor to be conniving and self-interested, an adult whose rhetoric belies his manipulations. In Blake and beyond, songs of innocence are modified in meaning by subsequent songs of experience. While this recalls the trope of man’s exile from the Garden of Eden it also indicates what Derrida called the “Platonic repression of play”—that play is something to be “supervised and contained within the safeguards of ethics and politics” (Dissemination 156). Even when these boundaries are implicitly critiqued as corrupt—as in, for example, many of the Songs of Experience—Romantic playfulness is often negated by the subsequent conditions within which it is managed.

One must acknowledge a fundamental difficulty in a project such as this: how do we define “play”? The attempt to define it at all tells us about our need to identify behaviors which are “free,” “spontaneous,” “pleasurable,” or “aimless” (adjectives which in and of themselves elide precise definitions). Gregory Bateson once remarked, “When people talk about play, they tend to say what it is not—‘it is not real’ or ‘it is not serious’—and then the rest of the sentence gets rather vague when the speaker realizes that play is serious. The word ‘not’ is somehow very important in this” (146). He was likely thinking of Freud, who some fifty years before argued that the opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real (“Creative Writers and Day Dreaming,” 436). Derrida sees the difficulty in defining play as being due to that which is unpredictable and untamed about play: “As soon as it comes into being and into language, play erases itself as such. Just as writing must erase itself as such before truth” (Dissemination 156-67). To observe an anxiety about defining play is not to say that play is absent, however. Despite evidence in Romantic poetry of a desire to identify and exile those forms of creativity seen as frivolous, peripheral, or counter-productive to man’s apprehension of the sublime, their emphasis on play arguably dignified it for the first time in Western aesthetic and philosophical criticism.

To complicate matters even the most superficial and cursory attempt to define play must engage an interdisciplinary approach; yet each discipline implicitly contains its own ideological
rhetoric. Two disciplines beyond literary criticism are central to my discussion of play: philosophy and object relations. Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960), Plato’s *Republic* (c. 380 BC), and Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). Each of these texts assists me as I explore of the intersection of supposedly spontaneous, undirected creative activity and ethics, and to consider what is historically contingent about the Romantic view of play. I also turn to object relations, in which I draw most on the work of D.W. Winnicott and Christopher Bollas to theorize the relationship between child’s play and destruction. At the same time, any exploration of play must reply upon play theory and its manifestations in anthropology, psychology, and philosophy. Within art theory the so-called “play theory of art” posits that animal and child’s play should be understood as a primitive form of art making and that the work of the artist is a natural outgrowth of that play. It identifies shared qualities in art and play: for example, both behaviors involve degrees of novelty, are pleasure-oriented and / or largely metaphorical. While the accuracy of these supposed similarities and differences is worthy of debate, in them we find articulations of widespread Western beliefs regarding the relationship between creative expression and ethics. For example, the play theory of art often stipulates that because both art and play happen after basic human needs such as shelter, food, and safety are met, the justification for the activity in both cases is found in the activity itself. If we accept the idea that play is (in part) a spontaneous expression of freedom from physical need, we approach it as a creative articulation of excess; to do so is to uncover an unstated relationship between play and ethics.

At the same time, the play theory of art is also invested in identifying differences between them. Play behavior is often viewed by play theorists, psychologists, anthropologists, and others as having a paideic function—as expressing the development of physical, cognitive, and/or emotional skills. In this way, they argue, play differs from art. But few of the Romantics would have viewed educational functionality as rendering play incongruous with art, invested as they

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were in the idea that the creative experience cultivated one’s ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. Two of the most commonly stated variances between art and play, however, are especially useful for this project. Creative play, unlike art, is typically viewed as unscripted or spontaneous, with some element of unpredictability; it is also seen as relational, often involving more than one participant (Nahm 150). That one way of defining play against art is to claim its nature is uniquely spontaneous or unpredictable is reflected in Schiller’s belief that the play impulse is actually a stage in the imagination in which material is formed and made aesthetic: in his work we see a foundational example of the attempt to ascertain how spontaneous play may be modified, ordered and controlled in order to be useful to the imagination. Schiller thus presents a sequence which is commonplace in the play theory of art: play comes first, imagination second. This principle facilitates the simultaneous embrace and release of play into its proper material, which is the work of art.

That the nature of play is supposedly spontaneous has implications for any study of poetry which considers form, for moments of primary play in a poem—spontaneous and unpredictable ruptures in the form—would potentially be viewed as are viewed as regressive eruptions in the developmental progress of the imagination towards art, and perhaps for the Romantics, towards its ethical utility. Spontaneity as a defining element also reminds one of the poststructural emphasis that play maintains its subversive status through that very unpredictability, as a rupture in time which cannot be anticipated and therefore “taken seriously” as an event. This paradox may be considered against Wordsworth’s assertion that poetry should come from the transposition of the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” into writing, once those feelings have been “recollected in tranquility” (Lyrical Ballads 82). The famous statement paradoxically posits that the success of the poem—and how Wordsworth defines “success” is, of course, complexly predicated on its ability to elicit the reader’s moral sympathy—depends on the author’s ability to recreate those feelings which have been separated from their original and unexpected state. If the import of the Romantic poem’s imaginative act is fundamentally tied to its ability to navigate the time lapse between inspiration and recollection,
then we must make sense of the relationship between play and spontaneity to understand the Romantic view of the function of the imagination. Paradoxes of creativity and temporality—how to transform the spontaneous seizure of emotion and imagination in the moment, through careful and deliberate description—is at the heart of the Romantic project.

The assertion common among play theorists that play is uniquely relational overlaps with the psychoanalytic approach to play developed especially by Christopher Bollas and D.W. Winnicott, which focuses nearly exclusively on children and has come to be known as object relations theory. These psychoanalysts accept—even expect—that the relationality of play is typically metaphorical or allegorical, with a symbolic correspondence between the action or object in play and a dominant, usually parental, figure in the child’s actual life. Psychoanalytic interpretations of child’s play tend to read it as paideic and progress-oriented, an opportunity for ego integration which facilitates imaginative flexibility and the development of cognitive and emotional skills. Object relations can be used to interpret metaphorical relational play through the very structure of Romantic poems, where patterns of tension and release with the other are depicted via the speaker’s interaction with figures within the poem, the reader, manifestations of the self or various and shifting combinations of the three. Bollas’s work on creativity encourages us to consider the co-creational architecture of the analytic space; by doing so, we are able to re-envision Romantic poems which emphasize solitude as an early, poetic variation of the analytic space: a place where the poet and reader alternately take on the position of analysand and analyst, creating together the poem’s narrative. Reading Coleridge’s conversation poems this way, for example, highlights the paradox of aloneness and sociability within their narratives. By focusing on play, we see poetic narratives as fluid and unfixed, with the form, speaker, surrogate figures, and reader as co-creators in the ongoing process of lyric making.

In asking where we see play in Romantic poetry, and whether (and in what ways) playfulness is antithetical to their conceptualization of the imagination, I rely neither solely on the traditional definition of play as a precursor to art, nor on the psychoanalytic view of play as working through conflict with the other, nor on a Derridian view of play as paradox or
disruption of presence. The difficulty with the play theory of art lies in its breadth and
tautological tendency to define what play as what comes first, and art as what comes next.
Psychoanalytic perspectives focus nearly exclusively on play in children, and in assigning an
allegorical function to play (play functions metaphorically to make conflict apparent), it
sidesteps those aspects of play which are integral to its definition in other contexts, such as
nonsense, spontaneity, reverse logic, or play for pleasure’s sake. A poststructuralist approach to
play highlights those very qualities, but is more elusive about our culture’s tendency to associate
play with art, and/or as that produced best (if not only) by children—an emerging conviction of
the Romantics.

In his influential book *The Ambiguity of Play*, Brian Sutton-Smith develops seven
rhetorics of play to help unify the interdisciplinary field of play studies: play as progress, fate,
power, identity, the imaginary, the self, and/or frivolity (vii). Though he intended his rhetorics
to span from the Greeks to present day, Matthew Kaiser recently demonstrated in his recent
book *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept* how useful it can be to tailor them to
a specific era. Kaiser categorizes Victorian rhetorics of play in the following ways: as
competition, drawing on the effect Darwin’s work had on how the Victorians viewed sports and
games; as self-creation, in which play is self-directed and interior; as subversion, seen in satire,
perversion, idleness and parody; as paideia, where playful activities teach various physical,
cognitive or emotional skills; as imaginary, in which play is freeing and illusory; as identity,
linked with theater and pageantry; and finally, as fate. I am indebted to Sutton-Smith and
Kaiser’s models, and in attempting to determine the boundaries of Romantic poetic play I have
followed the latter’s example, focusing on the following seven rhetorics: play as idleness;
illusion; impulsivity; spontaneous natural play; public spectacle; personal spectacle; and
speaker / audience play. I also consider examples of play through the literary criticism about
such texts: “Incessantly Beneath (our) Gaze”: The Spectacle of Vain Rousseau” explores English
public perception of Rousseau at the time of *Emile’s* publication. Both the text and the
reputation of its creator reveal important contradictions, especially when each works to
articulate the ideal relationship between imagination, maturity, impulsivity, and ethics. Criticism of Shelley’s “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” similarly offers a framework through which to read its content: the critical response further multiplies the figures in the poem, ironically adding voices to a text which is about the importance of silent receptivity.

The first chapter examines the well known passages of child’s play in the early books of *The Prelude* (1805) and distinguishes between play and fancy, while articulating the links between them in the Romantic mind. The woodcock, raven’s nest, ice skating, and boat stealing passages are especially indicative of Wordsworth’s ambivalent stance on play, and my focus is on three rhetorics which are especially integral to the *Prelude*: idleness, illusion, and impulsivity. While the play of other children is depicted as gentle, innocuous, humble, and light-hearted, the narrator’s description of his own boyhood play is that of mischief, a “trouble” to the peaceful nature around him. These actions yield a way toward the sublime experience, but the earliest versions of the boy’s scenes of play are equivocal about the harmoniousness of the boy’s actions within nature. As Wordsworth revises the text the boy’s play increasingly becomes a symbol of man’s chaotic, indulgent tendencies, a state in which the individual vacillates between public and private modes of being. The adult poet’s representation of his childhood play is fraught by his desire to incorporate the scenes into an overall account of the development of poetic sensibility. In my reading, Wordsworth’s complex depiction of his own play is burdened by a wistfulness and guilt because the poet recognizes that his depiction of these scenes of play dilutes their ludic spirit and eliminates that spontaneous, transgressive quality which is so integral to child’s play. These evocative scenes are ultimately epitaphic— with the wise temperance of adulthood comes a reduced ecstasy.

My second chapter builds on this analysis of *The Prelude* (1805), offering a comparative analysis of birdsong mimicry in Wordsworth’s famous “Boy of Winander” and John Clare’s poem “The Progress of Ryhme” (the latter poem is in part a retelling of the former). Gadamer’s understanding of art as a “constantly renewing” dialogic play between the work and its receptive audience is central to my theorizing of the relationship between repetition and spontaneous play.
in these two poems. Drawing on his work and that of Bakhtin, I distinguish between mimesis and aesthetic or dialogical mimesis, reading Wordsworth’s poem as an example of the latter and Clare’s as a tragic example of the former. In both poems the repetition of the birdsong is unmistakably a form of creative play, but only when it is voiced by children: in Clare’s poem the first mimicry is mourned as not replicable, whereas in Wordsworth it is indicative of the imagination in an undeveloped state, before it has progressed to the aesthetic. The second mimicry offered within each poem is the epiphanic revelation of the utility of play, and play’s relationship to time. It is compromised in Clare’s case by the hazards of memory, the limitations of translation, and the poet’s need to assess or create a meaning for that play. In Wordsworth’s text, the poet’s voice emerges triumphant from the interplay between sensual and formal, having gained in the recounting of a child’s mimicry the reassertion of his originality, artistic vitality, strong intellect and rational mind: the death of the boy is requisite for Wordsworth’s cool triumph.

These examples of mimicry, spontaneity, impulse, illusion, and the like, demonstrate the uneasy position of play within the Romantic sensibility. This uneasiness results in its most literal depictions— in games, sports, mimicry, or a child’s imaginative play, for example— being obviously managed by the narrator. What happens when play “grows up” — how does it manifest in the adult world? And what happens when play is writ large, integrated into the narrative voice itself? In my reading of Rousseau’s *Emile*, for example, I identify the public spectacle as a morally ambiguous, adult iteration of play which appears in the guise of May Day festivals, fairs, markets, and the like, and through games orchestrated by the governor for the Emile’s benefit. Literal play and games typically have an obvious paideic function and highlight the oft-remarked upon contradiction in the text between the governor who purports to be following the child’s natural trajectory, and yet carefully manipulates him into the conclusions he desires to impart. A more subtle form of adult play, the private spectacle, is constructed by the narrative voice: play with the speaker’s voice, playful addresses and interrogations of the reader, the taking on of various identities, calling attention to the construction of the tale, etc.—are techniques which
appear frequently in Rousseau’s work. *Emile* shows this latter version most in the play with the speaker’s voice and addresses to the reader. But play is also manifest in the pure enjoyment the narrator appears to experience in calling attention to the construction of the work. Rousseau’s narrator alternates between being antagonistic, defensive, and inviting to his audience, creating within that push-and-pull more room for play. For the Rousseau of *Emile*, imaginative play always carries with it the pitfall of indulgent vanity: the narrator warns is that the untutored child whose imagination is given free reign will indubitably be selfish, unreasonable, ill tempered, flighty, and full of temptations. When a child’s imagination is managed, however, he will be careful, temperate, and able to turn pity into pleasure. The combination of the narration, which frequently comments on the role an individual ego has or should have in creative action, and the governor’s actions, which consistently undermine the narrator’s assertions, overlap in fascinating ways with the opinions which the English public held about Rousseau himself, who was derided as impulsive, dangerous, performative, and vain.

Language—and not just poetic language—is an adult phenomenon in most Romantic depictions of play. In my fourth and final chapter, I consider the significance of Maddalo’s daughter’s silent play in Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation*. The complex work depicts how the exhausting need to be understood, to speak, to communicate, and write, renders one oblivious to the passing of time and subjectivity of another. The child in the poem is especially attuned to those around her because in her play she demonstrates an ability to exist properly within time: a reality which is essentially tied to her status as pre-language and her later reticence to speak. The poem offers the reader two modes of creative expression to compare: the loquacious expression of the adults and the idle, silent play of a child, and what we discover is that poetic expression does not further sympathy and connection. Rather, it gets in the way. The poetry symbolized in the exchange between Julian and Maddalo, and the sheer poetry of the Maniac, actually confound the three men’s ability to understand and make sense of each other and even of their place within time. They are out of sync, temporally and intersubjectively. By contrast, the quiet, directionless play of Maddalo’s daughter—who Julian
plays with at the metaphorical apex of the poem’s philosophical crisis — shows an individual naturally integrated in her temporal experience. Her play with Julian marks not only a welcome suspension in speech but a concomitant slowing of the experience of time. This final chapter also demonstrates how very often— in Plato, Kant, and the Romantics— play and madness are uncomfortably close bedfellows.
Chapter One
“Fits of Vulgar Joy”: Impulse, Illusion and Idleness in the Early Books of *The Prelude* (1805)

The child is a philosopher because we are to learn...from the fact that we are the bearers of our childhood...by recollecting and participating in our own childhoods. These will be philosophical ways of letting childhood go, of bearing childhood as gone, as having become what we are, sharing our fate. Putting aside childish things becomes the achievement of intellect.  

The term “play” is infamous for its ambiguity and attempts to settle on constraints tend to broaden it so much as to be ultimately meaningless. Much of the difficulty in pinning down exactly what play is is tied to preoccupations about its role in society: is it sportsmanship? Paideia? An early gesture toward art making? A delusive passion? Is play idleness—a form of creative receptivity—or just plain laziness? Is it fancy? Then there is the matter of the vast diversity of actions culturally attributed to “play”—after all, the intent and experience of donning a mask is fundamentally different than a game of catch—and the disciplinary orientation of the person constructing the definition has its influence as well. In *The World in Play: Portraits of a Victorian Concept*, Matthew Kaiser asserts that our approach to play is fundamentally—methodologically, historically, and ideologically—flawed, because we approach it in quantitative rather than qualitative terms, measuring it against work, suffering, and reality in a “quixotic effort to determine who possesses the most play, or enough play (which is very Victorian of us, actually)” (107). In reality everything is potentially intrinsic to the concept of play, and we do better to ask what kind of “playful” were the Victorians. And so Kaiser considers what rhetorics or logics of play are apparent and how they merge with, downplay, or dissolve one another. In adapting these questions to the Romantic era I acknowledge and celebrate the

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4 Stanley Cavell, “Texts of Recovery,” *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994: 73 - 74. In this passage, he addresses Coleridge’s refusal to “try to determine why Wordsworth calls the child a philosopher,” quoting Wordsworth: “Though best Philosopher, who yet dost keep / Thy heritage, ... Haunted for ever by the eternal mind.” He continues, “later the child’s play is described as constituting ‘some fragment form his dream of human life.’ Hence in this respect to participate in the child’s work, in his inspiration toward life, is to recollect the dream of life, as from fragments....”
idiosyncratic, multifaceted nature of each poet’s aesthetic, as it manifests in their depiction and use of play—after all, the virtues and anxieties attributed to play in The Prelude are quite different that what we see in Shelley or Keats. For as each poet’s aesthetic shifts over time so may their use of the ludic: play is quite different in Wordsworth’s later sonnets, for example, than in the Lyrical Ballads. These realities also account for my desire to keep the definitional boundaries of “play” flexible. For example, many scenes of childhood mischief are woven throughout the early books of The Prelude, of course, but play is also present on a narratological level: we might remember Wordsworth’s assertion that throughout his account of the development of his poetic mind, he has “played with times / ... / And accidents as children do with cards” (6. 296-301). Scenes of childhood play thus depict Wordsworth’s initial, troubled identification within the natural world, the immorality and impulsiveness of his boyhood as refracted through the lens of the now socialized, mature poet. The passages often describe theft and destruction, entwining mischief and morality such that one can scarcely be noted without the echo of the next. One might approach the text from a materialist, metaphysical, or psychoanalytic lens, or focus on the autonomy of the creative mind, the Oedipal underpinnings and absence of a love object, or the dynamic relationship between child and pastoral in the face of the industrial revolution. Regardless of the approach, a close reading makes apparent the ways in which the poem overlaps natural and aesthetic screens even as it appears to reify that very division (Yousef 118).

Criticism which focuses on play in the early books of The Prelude often uses the raven’s nest, ice skating, and woodcock scenes as peripheral support for an interpretation which focuses on the stolen boat scene. Most commonly the interpretation concludes with some variation on the theme of the boy’s epiphanic realization of the power of nature to inspire moral conscience.

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despite, or in response to, his dislodging of one of its harbored objects. That the critical
treatment rarely attempts to read Book One solely for its messages about play is
understandable: the stolen boat passage alone has generated an excess of riches in biographical,
materialist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist criticism. To consider play as a whole in the
early books one must make peace with each passage receiving less time than is its due, while
acknowledging the perhaps inevitable redundancies in yet another close reading of these
passages. Still, by attending to three specific characteristics of play—impulse, illusion, and
idleness—I believe we may better understand not only the nature of play as it relates to
Wordsworth’s poetic imagination, but also the ambivalent relationship between the poet’s
memory and his later composition. Play is often described as a vacillation between two defined
concepts (art versus survival; child versus adult; fantasy versus reality), which is especially
helpful for our purposes. In these accounts play is a movement in the space between either ends
of an aesthetic, temporal, psychological, and / or metaphysical scale. A game might be described
as “a state of incessant movement between fearing and hoping,” or the theater as alluring
because of the play of contradictory feelings which it stirs up in the silent spectator (Kant 127).
In D.W. Winnicott’s view play is a motor-based, sensory, formless manifestation of creative
impulse. Within the space of play, upon which “is built the whole of man’s experiential
existence,” we are neither introvert or extrovert, subjective or objective, lodged within an inner
reality or a shared, external world; rather, we exist wholly in intermediate, “transitional
phenomena” (Playing and Reality, 86). This emphasis on movement within play, both literally
(as in sport) and as metaphor for its variability, is integral to the Romantic view of play. For the
Romantics characterized play as distinct from art: specifically as an interchange of ideas and
semblances not yet shaped in form nor processed by the rational mind. Indeed, in Friedrich
Schiller’s On the Aesthetic Education of Man Schiller distinguishes play and art specifically as
freedom versus form, while incorporating a parallel dialectic of sensuality versus rationality. Yet

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6 The famous boy of Winander passage is the central subject of another chapter; for this reason,
and because my primary focus is Book 1 of the 1805 edition, my treatment of it here will be far
more sparse than the passage demands.
for him the association of play with the sensual and free does not relegate play to a secondary
status, as we might expect. Rather, play fuels aesthetic education, which will in turn offer
humanity an example of the ideal balance between the rational and sensual, demonstrating that
sensuous play is as important as form. Its integrity must be intact: “To watch over these, and
secure for each of these two drives its proper frontiers, is the task of culture.... not simply to
maintain the rational against the sensuous, but the sensuous against the rational too” (87).

Nearly all play theorists view play as the origin of culture: Huizinga’s famous conclusion
in Homo Ludens is that “In the twin union of play and culture, play is primary” (46). As a result,
any examination of play must include that which is historically contingent: in the Victorian era,
for example, the increasing popularity of competitive games can be tied to the publication of The
Origin of the Species and the boom of consumer culture (Kaiser 111). Yet regardless of era,
continuities in Western definitions of play are apparent: they nearly always include, for
example, some nod to biology and anthropology, in which animals and children are perceived as
uniquely attuned to the play impulse. The anthropological influence on the aesthetic and
philosophical interpretations of the role of play in humanity is significant, though not always in
predictable ways: for Schiller it is what distinguishes the human being from his animal nature,
transforming what is physical necessity into the “work of free choice.... into moral
necessity” (11). Huizinga emphasizes the inherent voluntariness and freedom of play, but roots
this aspect in it as the first expression of the non-natural: it is what occurs after primal needs
(food, shelter, reproduction) are met (9). At the same time play involves nature because it is
there that we most easily find tools for expression. An example often used in object relations is
the child who play-acts hunting, a display which psychoanalysts read as playful aggression. We
see this in The Prelude, when the boys who are ice skating are described as “imitative of the
chase” (1.435), their mirth located in the gesture of hunting for the kill. In these renderings play

7 Also see Eugen Fink, “The Oasis of Happiness: Toward an Ontology of Play” in Yale French
Studies: 41 (1968): 19–30. Fink writes,“The immanent purpose of play is not subordinate to the
ultimate purpose served by all other human activity. Play has only internal purpose, unrelated to
anything external to itself. Whenever we play for the sake of physical fitness, military training,
or health, play has been perverted and has become merely a means to an end” (21).
is sensuous, free, and formless, a dynamic flux between subjective and objective experience, hallucination, and shared reality. It is just beyond the natural but before culture; it is both a trespass and the first glimpse of moral order.

The famous scenes of mischief in the early books of *The Prelude* show a boy demonstrating a feeling of sensuous, boundless freedom, which in turn acts as catalyst for his awareness of responsibility to nature and his fellow man. The woodcock, raven’s nest, and boat stealing passages correspondingly posit him as either the disturbance of a staid domestic scene or a stowaway within the transportation of the sublime. The poem is known for its various depictions of passive idleness broken up by the unconstrained impulse. In these scenes, a feeling of grandiosity and solitude actually yields to a sensation of overwhelming insignificance and a social mode of being. If at times play is a metaphor for what is sinister and chaotic about man, at other moments it is an articulation of carefreeness and unbridled creativity. These passages ultimately prefigure, I argue, the later creative work which preoccupies the adult poet. While the children observed at a distance are welcomed by, and easily integrated within nature, Wordsworth’s memories of his own childish diversions are notably more burdened by nostalgia, melancholy, and guilt over his deleterious impulses. Having returned to his home from London he watches the mirthful children on a field at the Grasmere Fair: “How little they, they and their doings, seem,” he remarks, “and yet how great / For all things serve them: them the morning light / Loves....” (8: 51-56). The reciprocal love between the children, the morning light, and the rocks upon which that light glistens belie how slight, how “pitiably dear” their acts are. The children are without presumption: small in body, ego, and action, yet all their needs met by the world around them. The speaker then recounts his own feelings as a young man observing this scene. His diction becomes more elevated and heroic, revealing the feeling of power which he believes nature translated into him: in the city of London he felt passionately the debt that he owed to Nature, his “High thoughts of God and man” which are victorious over “all those loathsome sights / Of wretchedness and vice....” (65-67). Thus what is initially a description of childlike humility and harmoniousness becomes an occasion for judgment, a direct
contradiction to his later assertion that the power of nature was for him the precursor to charitable sympathy.

So fraught are the actual scenes of play in Book One, so ambiguously haunted by the animating power of nature and its shadowy reprimand, that we are tempted to ask if they are indeed supposed to be fun at all. Yet Wordsworth’s intent to establish a ludic atmosphere is clear. One scene of play leads seamlessly into another, eliciting in the reader the intoxicating and cumulative feeling of youth at liberty in nature. The years “summon” him to “exercise and play” (1: 503-04), a time which is “happy... of rapture,” his play with his schoolmates a mimicry of “woodland pleasures” (455-63). They are a rambunctious and excitable crowd: not a voice is “idle” and with their noise the landscape “tinkle(s) like iron” (469). A disjunctive otherworldliness between physical and psychic experience along with the iconic motif of cliffs, hills, and mountain slopes, unites these passages: he hangs from an icy crag seemingly “suspended” by the wind; he hears what is a paradoxically “undistinguishable” motion, with “low breathings coming” after him; the cliff in the boat stealing passage is a “spectacle.” These sensations reach a feverish pitch in the description of the boy “stopping short” while ice skating, which creates the illusion that he is witnessing in the “solitary cliffs” the earth’s own “diurnal round” (486). When the “nurse’s song” emphasizes the innocent vulnerability of childhood, an ensuing description makes the boy into a “naked savage” (303-05); the echo of the boys’ shouts while ice skating is met with another “alien sound / Of melancholy” while “the orange sky of evening die(s) away” (469 - 73). Yet often enough the reverse is true: the misdeeds of the young are described in terms which undermine their severity: the river tempers the child’s “human waywardness” but does so by shaping his thoughts to have more purpose than their own inherent “infant softness” (284-85). Of stealing woodcocks, he tells his reader sheepishly “twas (his) joy / To wander” among the cliffs and woods. “I was a fell destroyer” (321), he adds, and this combined with the later “Was I a plunderer then” (339) have the tongue-in-cheek feel of affectionate, if self-deprecating, ribs. When he steals the shepherd’s boat his youth and the object of his theft are described in trivializing ways: he is a “schoolboy traveller at the holidays”
who “rambled,” the “little boat” is a “small skiff” (381-91). Even the identity of the boat’s owner undermines the boy’s wrongdoing: for through the rest of the text the poet will emphasize his early kinship and admiration of shepherds [“And Shepherds were the men who pleased me first”(8: 128)]. For every innocent child’s playful act Wordsworth offers the reader a counter-meditation—an after-thought from nature or from within the poet, which focuses our attention on what is chaotic or morally ambiguous about the pleasure to be found in play. Still, every reprimand is offered with a gentle hand.

The revisions of the text increasingly shift play into a transgressive position. Though the overt spirit of frivolity and youthful abandon in the scenes is sustained, Wordsworth progressively edges it from being primarily an expression of freedom which occurs in symbiotic harmony with nature, into a dialectical one in which nature’s response to the boy’s larks furthers the development of his moral conscience. To be sure, “Wordsworth is never quite easy about the glad animal movements of his little pagan selves” (Fry 73). Nature’s ministry in the 1799 text is employed “by the agency of boyish sports” (1799, 1: 192, emphasis mine); by 1805 “agency” is omitted and the line has been changed to read “when Ye through many a year / Haunting me thus among my boyish sports” (1: 494-95). In the earliest version of the woodcock scene this address to nature undermines his “fell” destruction: “Gentle powers, / Who give us happiness and call it peace” (1799, 35-36), yet this is absent from the 1805 edition. Similarly the revisions of the woodcock stealing scene emphasize the triumph of desire over reason in addition to over the bird, in both phrase and line break: “a strong desire / O’erpowered my better reason, and the bird” (325-26). In the earlier text, the boy’s inability to resist his own desire is formulated such that he too becomes its victim: “Sometimes strong desire / Resistless overpowered me, and the bird” (1799, 43-44). While the 1799 version of the passage underlines the boy’s own nervousness and panting heart (1799, 42-43); the later version eliminates this and adds the incriminating lines “I was alone, / And seemed to be a trouble to the peace / That was among them” (323-24). In the later version of the raven’s nest scene “plunderer” replaces the more innocuous “rover,” and the addition of the “mother-bird” gives a sympathetic face to his victim (339). In the boat
stealing scene the addition of specific location and identification of himself as a “Stranger,” a “Traveller, at the Holidays” (376-78) is a sharpened contrast to the boat’s “usual home,” emphasizing his roguery. The addition of “lustily” as an adjective to describe his rowing (401) prepares the reader to see him as seduced by an illusion of mastery over the object, and view his subsequent shame as an appropriate response to what might otherwise seem a rather light-hearted adventure. These shifts elucidate the contrast between his play and the ministry of nature: it is the child’s projection of nature’s disapproving eye that causes his misgiving, a symbol of his internal negotiation between solitude and society and internal and external reality.

Mischief so regularly and totally yields to nature’s reprimand in the book. When read alongside the poem’s emphasis on childhood joy as a precursor to the poetic temperament, we begin to apprehend the complexity of Wordsworthian play. Huizinga challenges the possibility of a paideic play, asserting that “play to order is no longer play” (7) The notion of paideic play merges with the aesthetic, however, in the Romantic exaltation of childhood as a state to which the poet must return, in order to make that art which contributes to the moral good (interestingly, this later appears in the Victorian era as a mode for educating children and the working class). At the same time as Wordsworth uses these scenes of play to lay the groundwork for the development of poetic sensibility, he relies on a parallel but essentially antithetical tradition which sees play as an expression of fate. In this paradigm, we don’t play; rather, we are toyed with, typically by nature or a deity. In this mythic version of play we are humbled, exhilarated, and terrified by it, forced to reckon with the instability and fragmentation of our knowledge and power in the face of the universe (Kaiser 116-22). The paideic and fate models of play undermine each other even as the status of these events as morally educational undermine their status as play, period. But this may not be so: if the universe is ethical or an extension of a divine vision, then if the universe toys with us it may be to teach us a lesson. Here I think of Lear, for example, raging in the storm over a fate which probably was catalyzed by an act of pride.
What does it mean for the poet to depict himself in his early days in a destructive act against his purported muse? And then to describe his projection and/or reception of the muse's reprimand? Finally, how can we understand his reincorporation of that destruction and moralizing as itself a new muse? For the modes of play as paideic and fateful in *The Prelude* are compromised most by our understanding of these scenes as carefully crafted by the poet, as means toward an end: to provide a lucid, coherent view of the development of the creative mind and lyric skill. While these passages function within the intermediate area typically occupied by play, vacillating between (for example) internal and external, they also concretize the intermediacy of memory as part memoir and part fiction. The lack of endings in these scenes fixes their status as creative beginnings to be put in cumulative service of the overall lyric end; they are not narratives in and of themselves. We never find out what happens after the woodcock stealing or mischief with the raven’s nest; we never see the shepherd, and the playmates the boy skates with give their bodies “to the wind,” as ethereal and temporary as the spinning itself. As is so often the case in Wordsworth, the perceptual exchanges occur within the guise of memory; rather than the poet depicting his interaction with the muse, the poet remembers himself in a previous incarnation interacting with the muse purportedly as it then presented itself, but inevitably as the event was subsequently shaped by his internalization of it. The stealing of the boat, for example, is akin to his illusion of mastery over his memories as he uses them for poetic gain. Crucially, he adds to these memories his adult intellect and a rational perspective, important qualities typically used to distinguish mere frivolity from art.

But acts such as these are a sacrificial offering from the privacy of the self. They are an admittance of the failure of inspiration in the present, too. I read these scenes of play as the child’s incorporation and destruction of the transitional object, in which nature’s felt response mirrors the adult’s trepidation over his use, and the destructive effect, of the memory for poetic purposes. The memory is the inspiration which later becomes the form, as the poet reconstitutes it by retrospection. For Wordsworth, the repetition of the memory necessarily contributes to its dissipation or its transformation into the epitaph of metaphor, and is an implicit
acknowledgement of what is explicit in the text: a mourning of reduced pleasure and of what is nonrenewable in the child’s ecstatic discovery of the world. Wordsworth admits as much when he says that as an adult he loves the sun as a metaphor or symbol of the constancy of life, but that as a child he loved it entirely because it gave him pleasure (Spiegelman 45). The paradox is this: in the quest to articulate the self through the use of personal memory the individual threatens to erase memories of events which comprised himself. Alan Liu argues that the skirmish between self and nature so often depicted in Wordsworth’s poetry is in fact always peripheral to the real battle between history and the self. Though the poet’s intent is to depict a real event which also demonstrates his recognition of his insufficiency, he discovers in the construction of this narrative, which is actually an erasure, a subsequent and equally compromising incompleteness (538-40). The very process of detailing scenes of youthful play in *The Prelude* is an ironic acknowledgment of the impossibility of spontaneous creativity in the written word; and as every discovery is undercut by the overarching emphasis on the “tour” or self-discovery of an entire chronology of events, so these moments of play are undone by the poet’s emphasis on their narrative incorporation (506).

The woodcock stealing passage is incorporated into “Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey” in the “Poems of the Imagination” section of *Poetical Works*, and the eerie lines of having been in nature “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads” than one chasing the object of love follows lines describing the “coarser pleasures of (his) boyish days, / And their glad animal movements all gone by” (l. 70-74). In that poem, too, the poet’s use of the memory for aesthetic ends is what compromises its integrity as a discrete event; it is also what energizes nature to respond. One might say that it is precisely because his sister does not embody the role of poet that her memory can be “as a dwelling-place” (l. 141) for the music of nature, the “healing thoughts / Of tender joy” (l. 144-45) with which she will remember the poet after he has gone. By refraining (or being unable) to make use of the memory, she is free to harbor both the experience and her companion’s later articulation of it safely within her consciousness, “a mansion for all lovely forms” (l. 140). The productive tension in “Tintern
Abbey” comes from the reckoning of a past self with a present self; its preterition—the present-day mourning of a moment not fully experienced, a moment from the past (this feeling is complicated by the sensation of pleasure and ecstasy that was the speaker’s previous experience of the Abbey); and Wordsworth’s description of solitude as needing the company of another in order for that “aloneness” to translate into a meaningful experience of the self. This theme is subtly woven into the poem in the guise of the experience of wild ecstasy versus the experience of the sublime, as symbolized by himself and his sister’s respective experiences of the place.

While in “Tintern Abbey” the epiphany accompanying his adult reminiscence is recompense for the childhood joy that has passed (Pack 85), the depictions of play in Book One present something far more ambiguous.

A few thoughts before taking a closer look at The Prelude. To the extent that Wordsworth uses play to show transgressions corrected by an internal conscience projected in the natural world, we must consider whether or to what extent it is linked to fancy as a form of the imaginative faculty. What does Wordsworth gain by relegating these scenes to the imaginative realm of fancy, or by keeping them separate? I also want to briefly discuss two essential lenses which I draw upon in this essay. My use of key concepts in object relations—play as an expression of intermediacy, and the transitional and transformational objects—is a natural extension of my appreciation for the success and contribution of readings of The Prelude which use a psychoanalytic model, and what the centrality of play in object relations offers the theorist working to understand play in creativity generally, and poetry specifically. That the boy’s actions in these scenes is concomitantly titillating and disquieting brings it well in line with an object relational view of play in which it is satisfying and productive even when it leads to tremendous anxiety (Winnicott 70). That these changes emphasize the boy’s psyche as shifting within an intermediate state of internal and external reality, reiterated by the hallucinations which trouble
the scenes, is also in keeping with object relations. The heart of play from a psychoanalytic perspective lies in its articulations of the movement between subjective and objective, self and world, other, and object. While I draw freely from those concepts which are useful for understanding the text, I fear that I fail to offer a psychoanalytically consistent interpretation of the speaker of these poems and his relationship to himself or his metaphorical parent figures. I hope my reader will forgive moments of incompleteness or fragmentation in the interdisciplinary spirit of play which inspires me.

Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* is an equally important theoretical framework for this essay and an excellent base from which to understand the Romantic view of play. The *Anthropology* was first published in 1798 (eight years after the *Critique of Judgment*) and it offers a profound and representative view on the role of play in the artistic mind as it was viewed by the German Romantics, and aesthetic philosophers and the poets who were influenced by them. In it he centralizes the role of play in taste, the faculty of using the imagination’s powers to make social judgments about objects external to the individual, a part of the aesthetic judgment which chooses with universal validity. Taste also contains a tendency toward the external advancement of morality, as it offers the mind the feeling of freedom it needs for sociability with others, a freedom that results in pleasure in the play of images. Play provides, then, both pleasure and freedom. The judgment of taste is of an object’s “harmony or discord of freedom, in the play of the power of imagination and the lawfulness of understanding.” The understanding offers us the form that we need to determine a universal rule around the feeling of pleasure; we cannot expect this from sensations, which vary according to the individual” (137-38). Kant also explicitly considers rhetoric and poetry, saying they are the only two arts in which taste manifests (194). Poetry is privileged over rhetoric among the linguistic arts because of its musical element; in fact, even music is only art because it is poetry’s

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8 The scenes of play have been read through a psychoanalytic lens in various ways: the stolen boat episode, along with the surge and swagger in his self-identification as a “fell destroyer” and “plunderer,” with their sexual overtones, are frequently read as Oedipal expressions of dominance over mother nature (Wilner 42).
handmaiden in language (145). The poetic source of inspiration slowly diminishes with age and
the encroachment of habits, and playful poetry requires originality; novelty; only the caustic
satires agree with the temperament of old age (147). Poets cannot be trusted because they are
involved in the presentation of the passions, which are for Kant another sign of immaturity.
While we may excuse a poet for presenting the passions as necessary, the philosopher must not
accept this principle (167). It is “comfortable” to make oneself immature, and naturally makes
one susceptible to manipulation by others; by extension, maturity is central to Kant for truly
simple (as opposed to artificial) art (103-04). And passions are not merely unfortunate states
but are “without exception evil.” The text contains his most developed articulations of the role of
play in aesthetics, and as such, is a useful text for communicating to us how play was seen at the
time, largely because it communicates the various contradictions in the culture’s use of the play
concept.⁹

In the latter half this essay, I detail three elements of play which are especially integral to
*The Prelude*: spontaneity and impulse; illusion; and idleness. The element which receives the
most extensive treatment, and which I find especially interesting in Wordsworth, is spontaneity.
On one hand, this temporal rupture, this unpredictability, affords the poet a way to create an
atmosphere of veracity and unbridled, unmediated expression. Yet on the other hand, impulse—
internal spontaneity made external—results in the boy’s various transgressions, including
destruction and theft. The characteristic of illusion revolves around its intermediary status as an
expression of the internal creative mind morphed into external reality; yet it brings with it a
trepidation about the stability of the mind. Finally, idleness is a state which becomes
increasingly associated with poetic labor; yet in idleness, of course, lies a trepidation about
man’s natural inclination toward ease and a passivity toward truth-telling. By tracking these

⁹ As an example, one extensive footnote makes apparent his ambiguous use of the word “play”:
on one hand play is mysterious and serious: “we arrive at cognition of the play of forces through
experience of its effect; but we cannot reach the ultimate cause and the simple components into
which its material can be analyzed.” Yet that same mystery is what leads play to be an indication
lack of deliberation, impulsiveness and the seeking of pleasure as an end: of the reproduction
of the species we cannot assume “the Creator, simply for the sake of curiosity and to establish an
arrangement on our planet that pleased him, was so to speak just playing” (70).
characteristics of play in the text we may better apprehend how play operates in Wordsworth and Romantic poetry generally.\textsuperscript{10}

**II. Not Quite “Wilful Fancy”**

When reading these scenes of play as precursors to their own later composition as lyrical moments we must consider the extent to which the element of play overlaps with fancy as a component of the imaginative faculty. Fancy was popularly linked to poetry, with each containing elements of the other; equally if not more pronounced was its association with play and childhood. Both fancy and play are marked by the unusual combination of elements, expressing their creative power by juxtaposing unlike things: play theorists often identify a mode of play in the combination of what we would typically consider mutually exclusive behavior (fighting or nest building, for example). Importantly, Fancy is whimsical, playful, trivial, sexual, and popular, with a disregard for propriety. Its kinesthetic energy—it is often described as “winged” or “sportive”—is difficult to control or predict. Both fancy and play wield subversive potential: in his excellent book on fancy, *Unfettering Poetry*, Jeffrey Robinson links this mode of the imagination to anti-bourgeois and revolutionary movements, noting that fancy “isn’t about ‘work’ or ‘usefulness’ but about play” (Robinson 11). “Fanciphobia,” as he terms it, appears in a variety of ways: in the trivialization of fantasy; in the association of it with escape and unreality; in its subordinate status to the Imagination; in its association with the carefree, simple child (and thus with the past, irrelevant to the present); and its status as solely a “gatherer of ‘raw materials’” (25). The success of an individual’s maturation was measured in part by his repression or elimination of fancy: in his anthology *Elegant Extracts* (1784) Reverend Knox links the child and adolescent mind to the fancy, warning parents to guide them through the pleasurable (“sportive”) but dangerous waters of poetry (the Fancy) so they can

\textsuperscript{10} Two other modes of special importance in *The Prelude* and beyond are handled in subsequent chapters: playing pretend and mimicry is explored through a close look at the Boy of Winander alongside John Clare’s “Progress of Ryhme,” and spectacle / festival, such as we see in the passages on the St. Bartholomew and Grasmere Fairs, is examined in a chapter focusing on the influence of Rousseau’s *Emile* and the *Confessions* on the British Romantic poets.
enter adult reality (Robinson 25-6). While in 1826 a “fancier” was a “dreamer,” the fate of fancy was to be increasingly relegated to the ornamental, the lower faculty of the imagination; by 1856 a fancier made ‘artistic designs,” especially decorative or ornamental elements, more commonly ascribed to indicate a decorative or superficial creation without the aspect of reflection and deliberation expected of art (10).

Fancy is devalued as immature, incomplete, and superficial. In order to suppress its more dangerous elements—excess, extravagance, lust, eccentricity, political subversion—it must be neutralized as play in these early scenes, as something obviously undergoing the process of correction (Robinson 28). And so we might be tempted to read play in the early books as a kind of concretization of transgressive fancy: the object dislodged by irrationality then inevitably righted by the imagination as reflected in nature. But it would be rash of us to collapse the terms. As with so many other matters, Wordsworth’s perspective on fancy shifts radically over the course of his life, and it is precisely because of the similarities he sees between the fancy and imagination that we can say his use of play is decidedly not just a projection of fancy. While he does not as definitively relegate the faculty to the secondary imagination as Coleridge does in Biographia Literaria, Wordsworthian fancy is without question pre-imagination. His Preface to the Lyrical Ballads had a profound cultural effect in establishing the domination of the imagination over fancy, yet his 1800 note to “The Thorn” emphasizes the importance of fancy as inspiring and retaining “sudden varieties of situation” [the problem with “superstitious men” is that their minds “are utterly destitute of fancy” (qtd. in Robinson 30)]. In the 1815 preface maturity in poetry is equated with the dominance of the imagination and maturity in age, and fancy is deemphasized and rendered more passive. By 1828 he will begin “Poems of the Fancy”

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11 As elsewhere, in descriptions of fancy “childishness” is alternately a derisive and exalted term. In his praise of Wordsworth in Biographia Literaria, Coleridge states his admiration for the poet’s ability “To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with appearances, which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar;... this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents” (Major Works, IV, 202). Yet later he defends the ballads by saying “Had Mr. Wordsworth’s poems been the silly, the childish things, which they were for a long time described as being... they must have sunk at once, a dead weight, into the slough of oblivion, and have dragged the preface along with them” (XIV, 315).
in *Poetical Works* with “A Morning Exercise,” a poem devoted to the condemnation of the faculty when unchecked. Fancy is pleased to throw a “wayward dart,” appropriate sad visions of nature where no sadness is, and crowd innocent nature with symbols of tragedy; her influence is hyperbolic, harassing, restless, annoying, and affiliated with savages (l. 2-6). In sum, fancy “pervert(s) the evidence of joy” (l. 12). Even as early as the 1805 *Prelude*, however, we see glimmers of the later degradation of fancy as something melodramatic and wayward: in Book Eight he writes that “a wilfulness of fancy and conceit” is responsible for an excess of ornament in art and books, for rendering the “tragic super-tragic” with its “never-ending tears” (8: 521-540). Wordsworth also calls our attention to the distinction by describing his frequent gazing at a black rock as it morphs into various fanciful visions: a “burnished shield... / Suspended over a knight’s tomb” or a door to a magic cave or fairy palace (8: 573-74). Here fancy is finally superimposed over the “feelings” of the imagination which then raises them in poetic value. Whether the natural environment tempers it or the imagination exalts it, the fancy is decidedly subordinate.

What the separation between fancy and imagination illustrates is the extent to which the poets and taste makers of the day felt some need to shape the reception of various types of creative expression. This performance of naming unfolds as one of control and submission, of “mind’ over ‘matter’ and the body, of ethics over ethical indifference, of maturity over immaturity and youth” (Robinson 29). Coleridge devotes Chapter IV of *Biographia Literaria* in part to the distinction; though he discusses how the meanings of both words blend into the other, their differentiation is expressive in all societies which have an “instinct of growth, a certain collective, unconscious good sense” (203). Indeed, Wordsworth’s treatment of the faculties of the fancy and imagination operate within such subtleties that they strike Robinson as demonstrating the “absurdity of the distinction on the level of poetry itself; it is only in terms of

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This savagery is depicted as somewhat paradoxically arising from its “Perpetual flight, unchecked by earthly ties” which we would do well to “Leav’st to the wandering bird of paradise” (l.35-36). Fancy is able to manipulate the song of lesser birds at her bidding but “ne’er could Fancy bend the buoyant Lark / To melancholy service” (l. 23-24).
ideological issues of social power and aggrandizement that the distinction has meaning” (32). But Wordsworth was in good company; in two points in the Anthropology Kant defines imagination and fancy using the same words (29). If we acknowledge the inherent subjectivity and danger of arbitrariness in the assigning of various works of art to, say, “the fancy” or “the imagination” (primary or secondary, at that), we might well ask ourselves: why duplicate the error and name these scenes “play”? In doing so, don’t we operate within an aesthetic house of mirrors, and by aiming to mark the distinctions between modes of the imagination only anachronistically reiterate the sociopolitical implications in the categorizing of aesthetic states? For our purposes it is enough that the poets, essayists, and philosophers saw the distinction—and by extension, the commonalities—of the two faculties as having tremendous significance. The very debate about their differences and the occlusion of play is what sets the ludic apart. There are other, obvious reasons that play is divergent from fancy: the Romantic locating of play as part of the idealistic child of nature is one crucial way that play elides the debate of what is fancy, what is imagination; relatedly, play’s longterm status as the first aesthetic impulse to express itself after physical animal needs have been met, and thus its proximity to anthropology and animal expressions of play, is another crucial way it is separated from fancy. It is further protected from arbitrary categorization because it masks itself under a veil of unimportance and frivolity: it is safely housed within the world of the animal and child, and Western culture’s mistaken yet widespread assumption that the opposite of play is not what is real but what is serious.\footnote{In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” Freud writes that “the opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real” (437).}

Fancy is associated with “a loosening of the borders of the ego or lyric subject,” and has a dispersive function which genders it feminine and marks its erotic potential (10). Relatedly, the faculty is linked not only with political resistance but sexual transgression as well [so much so that Robinson urges us to read the vitality of poetry’s fanciful language as stemming from the erotic (10)].\footnote{In the 1815 preface Wordsworth limits fancy to the domestic and argues that fancy,}
unlike the imagination, allows its materials to be fixed and impermeable, unchanged or only slightly altered by her touch. The imagination by contrast “recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite.” Robinson distinguishes how Wordsworth and Keats use the fancy from the poets of the time: while visionary and transformative, fancy for them does not render the self limitless; rather, Wordsworth’s fancy is a vision of the mind in a sportive, compassionate, mischievous position precisely because “otherness’ is at stake” (255). The imagination is heralded for its synthesizing and unifying function, and in poetry that transformation necessarily “privileges the dramatic speaker, or lyric subject.” By contrast the fancy is dispersive, flighty, chaotic, blurring the distinctions between subject and object and without commitment to formal constraints (5). Furthermore, while fancy is an expression of the self capriciously dissipated into the elements around it, play is a sign of (in Schiller’s terms) “superabundance.” One way this appears in Wordsworth is as a demonstration of the child’s ego and superego development. For example, an often quoted passage from Wordsworth’s notes to “Intimations of Immortality,” dictated in 1843, is his memory of communing with nature as a child. The notes in part explain Wordsworth’s view on the idealization of childhood as representing a paradisal “prior state of existence.” He warns against it: “It is far too shadowy a notion to be recommended to faith,” and explains that because of this he felt justified using the idea as a poet. The most commonly quoted passage asserts how often as a child he felt he communed with nature as “something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature. Many times while going to school have I grasped at a wall or tree, to recall myself from this abyss of idealism to the reality” (qtd. in Beer 22). Most often used to demonstrate the disorienting power of the fancy in Wordsworth’s eyes, the context reveals something else altogether. Immediately before this statement he writes:

Nothing was more difficult for me in childhood than to admit the notion of death as a state applicable to my own being. I used to brood ... almost to persuade myself that, whatever might become of others, I should be translated, in something of the same way, to Heaven. With a feeling congenial to this, I was often unable to think of external things as having external existence; and I communed with all that I saw as something not apart from, but inherent in, my own immaterial nature (Poetical Works 4:463).
Wordsworth’s younger self’s inability to think of “external things as having an external existence” stands in stark contrast to the typical interpretation of “grasping at a wall or tree” to save himself from the “abyss of idealism”; it is not a sign of the ego’s surrender to its environment. Rather, Wordsworth’s own descriptions of childhood play tend to emphasize a childlike fantasy of omniscience, of having created the world. And this is what the notes to “Intimations” fixate upon: “Archimedes said that he could move the world if he had a point whereon to rest his machine. Who has not felt the same aspirations as regards the world of his own mind?” (403). Though the notes assert something far more complex than the importance of humility, it is not the infinitization of the self which he is interested in, nor even man’s first union with his natural environment through the sublime moment. As with the scenes of play in Book One of *The Prelude*, the notes consider the developing ego of the lyric subject and its overreach. The only ‘otherness’ at stake is between the ego and its restraining impulses. So often in the early books the boy’s mischief is a careless testing of boundaries. It is an exploration of dominance to which nature offers projective response: the superego in formation, writ large [which, as Wilner notes, is for Freud not only composed of the parental “mode” but also “compounded both of aggressive impulses turned back on the self” (4)]. In these scenes play is most often part of a solitary and individuating action: the boy skates away from his companions, steals the shepherd’s skiff, steals the woodcocks from traps laid by another. It is only subsequent to the play that the lyric subject begins to apprehend the sublime moment and in so doing, enter into a dialogue with nature which approximates the “loosening” of the lyric subject which Robinson identifies. Any dissipation happens through the imagination rather than play or fancy: the solid objects of nature ground him and he does not pine for “endless dreams” as “one in cities bred might do” (8: 604-609).

### III. Spontaneity and Impulse

Power is much more easily manifested in destroying than in creating. A child, Rousseau has observed, will tear in pieces fifty toys before he
The role of spontaneity in play is often pointed to in attempts to distinguish art-making from play. Impulsiveness is considered fundamental to the spirit of play; though a work of art may have its origin in unpredictable inspiration, it is the result of some sort of deliberative, reflective process (Huizinga 197). Even those play theorists who see play as manifest in all human activities agree that it is not continuously expressed (Hans 2). It is central to the poet’s authenticity: thus Wordsworth implores the reader never to doubt that he “still retained / My first creative sensibility” (2: 378-79). The connection between spontaneity and lack of design or forethought is central to psychoanalytic readings of play as well: Winnicott centralizes the moment of surprise in the child’s experience of the transformational object, viewing spontaneity as an indication that the child has moved beyond mere compliance with the object (68), a moment when the infant can “enjoy the illusion of omnipotent creating and controlling” (qtd in Hopkins, 146). Inevitably, then, the representation of spontaneity in art is invested in it as an expression which has somehow elided the deliberative element central to art-making: it reveals the “true self” without conscious construction, the ego unburdened by the superego. This illusion of a “first” utterance is prioritized because it is unfettered by the revision of even momentary contemplation. The spontaneous gesture indicates the self’s desire to represent its own idiom, and when the self adopts forms which restrict its freedom it has entered into a realm of falsehood (Bollas 25).

The guise of spontaneity relies on the illusion of near-simultaneity with the moment of inspiration, a visitation of the muse concomitant with the appearance of her portrait. The effort

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14 William Wordsworth, Preface to The Borderers, p.76-77. Prose Works of William Wordsworth. Ed. W.J.B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser. 3 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974. The editors note that the nearest parallel is in Emile, Book 2, p. 36: “Reason alone teaches us to know good and evil. Conscience, therefore, which makes us love the one and hate the other, although independent of reason, cannot develop with it. Before reaching the age of reason, we do good and evil without knowing it; and there is absolutely no morality in our actions.” It also echoes Locke in Some Thoughts Concerning Education (1693): “I think I may say, that of all the Men we meet with, Nine Parts of Ten are what they are, Good or Evil, useful or not, by their Education.... I imagine the Minds of Children are easily turned this or that way, as Water it self.”
to mystically overthrow temporality in the creative moment is central to the poet’s labor, in contrast to the prose writer: the former races after the original inspiration in the moment, rather than composing at leisure. The convention in which the poet’s psyche exists in a constant state of receptivity is what links them in the cultural consciousness to soothsayers, fortune tellers, or otherwise possessed persons (Kant 81).\textsuperscript{15} Spontaneity not only signifies the poet’s lack of design (which would be antithetical to the eruption of truth which is to accompany the aesthetic moment), but is necessary to soften the impression of metric regularity and compositional element of the poem’s form, but which was also integral to the derided staidness of the ornamental Augustan lyric (Wesling 33). Christopher Miller describes the eighteenth century aesthetic of “surprise” as a catalyst which prompts the unification of the individual’s emotion and intellect in the face of the sublime (he criticizes the looseness of the term “epiphany” and attempts to distinguish moments of surprise more specifically).\textsuperscript{16} There are differences between surprise and spontaneity: “surprise” emphasizes more the experience of the observer, and “exemplifies a crux in the vocabulary of affect... an emotion ... both coming from within and seizing the self from without” (Miller 413). By contrast, spontaneity is a quality of time itself, generally expressed through the speaker rather than imposed upon him from without (thus we speak of “being” or “feeling” spontaneous, of having a “whim,” more than of experiencing “spontaneity”). Still, both surprise and spontaneity ensure excitement by making the movement between tension and release in a poem unpredictable, while providing the illusion of verse composed without premeditation, yet with all the revelation of meditation. Each offers the reader the feeling that they are, for example, experiencing the sublime moment somewhat as the poet experienced it himself (and by extension some of the feeling or wisdom he has received through it). Both give nuance and a sense of veracity to the process of cognition, enabling us to

\textsuperscript{15} At the same time, the spontaneous eruption is one which inspires trepidation in the poet, as I explore in Chapter Three, for it reveals the unpredictable nature of inspiration.

\textsuperscript{16} As an alternative he notes Paul Fry’s description of the Wordsworthian moment as an instance of “a-theologic astonishment” or Bachelard’s observation that every child is “an astonished being, the being who realizes the astonishment of being” (Miller 411, qtd in Nichols).
feel that we trace the development of ideas or feelings in the lyric subject even as they are experienced (McGann 63).

Wordsworth’s sentiments on the role of spontaneity in poetry are especially paradoxical: most famously in his assertion in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: and though this be true, Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply.” The assertion is made in a paragraph preoccupied with distinguishing the “triviality and meanness,” “arbitrary innovation,” from that which is genuinely enlightening. In the same text, Wordsworth offers two understandings of surprise: the sensory and aesthetic jolts of city life and popular culture versus the epiphanic experience of reading poetry. Though Wordsworth heralds the spontaneous moment he wishes to avoid the vulgar spectacle of the reader experiencing a “jolt.” And whereas the element of spontaneity in composition is typically used to separate the poet’s work from that of the prose writer, Wordsworth asserts here that the “best poetry need not differ from the best prose,” because the verse itself should, through the regularity of meter, balance and temper the excitement and passion elicited by the art. Thus Wordsworth writes of the pleasure we experience in the “small, but continual and regular impulses of pleasurable surprise from the metrical arrangement” (1.146, Miller 416); and we cannot help but note the contradiction of the “regular... surprise.” In understanding the contradictions of Wordsworthian play and its relationship to spontaneous creativity we might also consider his response to “Mathetes,” a writer who submitted a letter to Coleridge’s periodical *The Friend* regarding educational methods. The essay appears in two installments in the end of 1809 and beginning of 1810. In it he generally disagrees with the idea that youth need a moral instructor, arguing that freedom and self-direction are all a man needs to develop to his best self. In this he echoes himself in Book Five, with its rallying against the so-called “educationalists” of the time. Much of what Wordsworth speaks against is essentially fleetingness, revealing a discouraging
attitude toward whim which we see replicated in the poetry. This deliberation is explicitly attached to art in the essay; he writes that the youth must return to the world:

let him feed upon that beauty which unfolds itself, not to his eye as it sees carelessly the things which cannot possibly go unseen, and are remembered or not as accident shall decide, but to the thinking mind; which searches, discovers, and treasures up, infusing by meditation into the objects with which it converses an intellectual life, whereby they remain planted in the memory, now and for ever.... (18)

His paradoxical assertion is that the youth’s engagement with an object, whether it be by chance or as an object of study, is marked by its lack of deliberateness, yet must itself be on a trajectory of reason and careful observation. Concomitantly, youth’s calling—his employment, his natural state—is to “accumulate in genial confidence; its instinct... is to love... to feel” (17).

The poet mourns the loss of the child’s power to experience nature in pure spontaneity, though the loss of that power is mediated by the development of the adult’s philosophic mind, the “tranquilizing spirit” which reaffirms his attachment to nature [(2:27-28); also see “Intimations” (Pack 127)]: after all, who doesn’t wish to give to mature “duty and to truth / The eagerness of infantine desire?” (3: 25-26). And when spontaneity is “recollected in tranquility” the emotion feels eerily compartmentalized in reflection. Though the movement between narrative tension and lyric reflection is The Prelude’s fundamental temporal and cognitive undergird, the philosophic and narrative gloss mediates our experience of surprise even beyond what is inevitable in composition. The collateral damage of this balancing act is that, subjected to repeat iterations, the autochthonous memory is an echo becoming more and more faint to the poet’s ear, a mirage becoming increasingly unstable the more one fixes its eye upon it. The recollection assures the poet he has the power to summon inspiration simply by returning to the curiosity cabinet of his own childhood memories; but in exchange, each recollected event, each “original surprise,” is muted.

Within the realm of play theory spontaneity does not so much counteract the effect of what is composed or signify a lack of deliberation; it more so indicates a desire to change or entertainment, a restlessness, an impulsive need for variation and novelty (Dissayanke 216). While ad-libbing in speech (“free association”) is for Winnicott a sign of the mind relinquishing
its defensive position in coherent thought and is precisely what makes play integral to the psychoanalytic framework, for Kant this kind of speech is nonsense, a fearsome glimpse of the wandering tendencies of the imagination which may incite madness (Winnicott 56, Kant 70). The Romantic aesthetic investment in the lack of design or deliberateness which spontaneity requires has a similarly destabilizing side: the individual who carelessly follows his mind in the free play of the imagination is habitually distracted, digressive, suggestible, prone to fabrication and the collapsing of representation with reality (Kant 102). The impulsive child in The Prelude, as an externalization of the internal whim integral to play, is no less troubled by these elements. The child who “fills the air” with her “involuntary songs” is compared to the wood sparkling, dangerously unattended on the hearth, in “Characteristics of a Child Three Years Old,” her solitary, unpredictable composition is troubling and dangerous (Spiegelman 60).

What do we make of the fact that so many of the boy’s impulses in the early books are to steal or destroy? The child’s whim is often in Wordsworth a vision of eagerness mitigated by later regret; in “Nutting,” perhaps most famously, a scene of pure idleness gives way to violence, as the speaker moves from a “sweet mood” of contentment and ease to the sudden, unwarranted yanking down of the bough of a tree, “with crash / And merciless ravage.” In this poem, as in The Prelude, Wordsworth invites our skepticism as to his reporting of his child self’s pain and regret subsequent to this act, with “Unless I now / Confound my present feelings with the past” (lines).

We would err to think the destructive thrust in these scenes mitigates their eligibility as play, since joy in domination— whether originating in the overcoming of difficulties or anxiety, the apprehension of mastery, or triumphant feeling of omnipotence —is one of its more commonplace causes and/or effects (Dissayanke 214). For Bollas and Winnicott, impulse in play can only develop “out of a principle of ruthlessness. In order to use an object, the self must be free to destroy it” (Winnicott, qtd. in Bollas 179). In the boat-stealing, woodcock, and bird-nesting scenes is what David Ellis calls the “predatory element in the boy’s vigour” in which the environment is assaulted and then responds more or less dramatically (Ellis 41). It has even
been argued that the poem’s protagonist is not, or not only, akin to Adam in *Paradise Lost*; rather, the scenes of play, revolving as they do around violence, transgression, and destruction, echo the fall of Satan (Speigelman 128). In many ways, however, the speaker is also akin to Eve. His intimate and adoring relationship to nature is followed in these instances by the sudden impulse to transgress; the voice of nature in response is not unlike the tempest that rains down on Eve after she has bitten the apple from the Tree of Knowledge. It is only after the transgressive action, “when the deed (is) done” (1: 328)— already hanging from the cliff in his aim to steal the eggs, for example— that the ministry of Nature becomes truly apparent: the ridge “perilous,” the wind with its “strange utterance.” In the ice skating passage it is the boy’s pride which dangerously propels him (making him closer to the fallen angel of Milton’s epic): he “(wheels) about / Proud and exulting, like an untired horse that cares not for home” (1:458-60). That carelessness and pride is further emphasized when he “cut(s) across the image of a star” reflected on the surface of the frozen lake (1: 477-78). In 1799, the phrase reads instead a “shadow of a star”; this small change reflects, I believe, not only a desire to emphasize the implied transgression over nature, but also an increasing parallel between these scenes of play and poetic composition). By “stopping short” the boy experiences the sensation that the earth is rotating in its “diurnal round” before him; but he stands transfixed, until he is in a “dreamless sleep” (1: 489), a foreboding description coming after the death of the evening itself (473). The passage is exquisitely Miltonesque; in fact it closely echoes the beginning of Book Seven of *Paradise Lost* when the narrator invokes the powers of astronomy, Urania, over the Olympian muses:

> Within the visible Diurnal Spheare;  
> Standing on Earth, not rapt above the Pole,  
> More safe I Sing with mortal voice... (though)  
> In darkness, and with dangers compast round,

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17 After the death of Robespierre, our speaker walks on the same shore he often played on with his school-time friends where they had ridden together and “beat with thundering hoofs the level Sand” (2:144). This final impression reveals the savagery of the boys as much as the immaturity of the men: both are like mythical satyrs. At the same time, as Beer notes, the memory underlines the speaker’s feeling of glee and vengeance, and immature response, at Robespierre’s death (Beer 47).
And solitude; yet not alone ...

But drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his Revelers, the Race
Of that wild Rout that tore the Thracian Bard
In Rhodope, where Woods and Rocks had Ears [ 35 ]
To rapture, till the savage clamor drowned
Both Harp and Voice; nor could the Muse defend
Her Son. So fail not thou, who thee implores:
For thou art Heavenly, she an empty dream.

In the above passage the Muse is Calliope, and the son she could not save is the poet Orpheus. Calliope is “an empty dream,” and Milton implores Urania to “drive off the barbarous dissonance / Of Bacchus and his Revelers.” By comparison, in the Prelude, the illusion of cliffs wheel by him, the earth rolls “with visible motion” within the “din / Smitten,” and amidst the “tumult” of the schoolboys (“Revelers”).18 Whereas the narrator of Milton’s epic is aware that his song is most secure when launched from “Within the visible Diurnal Sphere,” the child self of our narrator had not yet matured to his imagination. Instead he gives in to the fancy of mastery as if the earth rotated “her diurnal round” before him, and like the “empty dream” of Calliope, he watches until “all (is) tranquil as a dreamless sleep.”19 In short, the boy is akin to Icarus—a myth alluded to in the boy’s kite that soars high, sent from the meadow on a breezy day, and by pulling at its line impatiently is thus “Dashed headlong and rejected by the storm” (520-25).

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18 Critics have observed that the cyclical imagery of the poem, from “horses in a ring, the heavens wheeling round inexorably, the years recurring, the tides returning, the earthquake repeating itself,” will move from images of “spiral and progress....into nightmare wheeling and enclosure” (see John Beer, for example, in Wordsworth in Time). But I see this move foreshadowed in the ice skating scene itself, which has a nightmarish wheeling of its own: exhilarating but nauseating.

19 There are other similarities: “Rhodope” is a mountain and the “Harp and Voice” drowned out by the “savage” revelers in the Paradise Lost passage is echoed in the 1799 version of this scene, which includes a pagan address to “Ye powers of earth, ye genii of the springs / And ye that have your voices in the clouds, / And ye that are familiars of the lakes,” saying that they “by the agency of boyish sports” impressed upon nature the forms of danger, desire, hope and fear.” The “familiars of the lakes,” of course, brings with it the eerie gloom of the Drowned Man of Esthwaite and the Boy of Winander. Again here the play and fantastical pagan powers within from the boy’s imagination (“ye genii of the springs”) intimidate him though he does not yet comprehend why. Unlike Milton’s narrator the boy is yet unable to harness his poetic powers or locate his song in the appropriate muse.
The parallels with *Paradise Lost* here and elsewhere make clear not only that we are to read the boy’s actions as transgressions mimicking in spirit, if not in gravity, the sins of the fallen angel and Eve herself. The objects that he steals are symbolically revealing: a means of transport, of nourishment, of generation. In the raven’s nest passage, the sun shining on a knot of leaves “Decoyed the primrose flower” (335). The primrose in England was often called “Key Flower” because of its resemblance to hanging keys and indeed the boy seems to feel that something epiphanic is being withheld from him, some door kept locked. Yet the divine spirit that eludes him is not, or not only, a Christian God; rather, the poet is aware of having betrayed nature in his youth’s free play, so is he implicitly aware of having later misused the muse of childhood memory. The paradise which is lost in this case is not only childhood, it is also the integrity of the recollection.

Eve’s choice brings with it the birth of society; similarly, the play in Book One introduces the reader to the boy as operating within a social context rather than in the idealized, solitary state within nature the poet superficially depicts. At times the social context is straightforward: he steals from a trap laid by another man and a boat owned by a shepherd. At other times, the boy’s world is peopled but by ghosts and illusions, as the “low breathings” and “sounds / Of undistinguishable motion” follow him in the woods: the ice skating scene begins with a “tumultuous throng,” from which he breaks away; when they all together “give (their) bodies to the wind,” he watches as both friend and cliff “stretch in solemn train, / Feebler and feebler.” (1:476-88). His moment of “sportive” solitude gives way to group experience, and the passage moves from group to solitary to group to solitary experience; meanwhile, the speaker’s moments of solitude give way to a deceptive feeling of omniscience because of his manipulation of physical elements (skating across the reflected star; stopping short so that the cliffs spin). The card game represents “persons of departed potentates” (1:551-52). This ambiguous social violence is all the more eerie (and ironic) once we recall that these are the “spots of time” which presumably sustain Wordsworth after the grotesque devastation of the French Revolution (Harshbarger 115). And even the bloodthirsty revolutionaries will be compared to the “innocent
little one” who, dissatisfied with the motion of the windmill at his breath, must run towards the wind to watch it go faster (10:336-45). What the violence in child’s play, and the violence which will later be compared to child’s play, reminds us is that play’s most fundamental aspect is as an intermediate stage between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world (Winnicott 86). The child functions within a social world, but a world not built for him. This expression of play is also the destruction of nature as a transitional object which is already predicated on a paradox: the infant “creates” the object but it was also there waiting to be created, cathected and then decathected, as cultural interests develop (through, for example, education or poetry) (19). For Schiller, because play is the initial expression of man’s apprehension of the aesthetic the initiation of our aesthetic experience must come from the satiation of our primitive needs: once securing a foothold in what is enough, our mental activity is redirectable to the spontaneous and unnecessary. Following Schiller, however, this moment of freedom which yields to play must quickly be tempered for the introduction of moral education. When in Wordsworth this moral education is translated through the natural world, the adult poet’s aesthetic education is complete. If we pair Schiller’s focus on the education which play provides alongside the concept of the transitional object, we might add in a stage of destruction which is necessary to transition from freedom in play to an understanding of freedom which does not compromise the integrity of society. The most important function of the transitional object is to survive the subject’s destruction and his sense of omnipotent control; this is what marks the element of “use” in the relationship between them. Bollas tells us that in experiencing the transitional object

the infant evolves from experience of the process to articulation of the experience. With the transitional object, the infant can play with the illusion of his own omnipotence... he can entertain the idea of the object being got rid of, yet surviving his ruthlessness; and he can find in this transitional experience the freedom of metaphor....the use of the transitional object is the infant’s first creative act. (15)

20 In this context we might the centrality of “pretend” hunting to his play is apparent in the woodcock, raven’s nest, and ice skating passages. In the latter he and his boyhood friends imitate “the resounding horn, / The pack loud bellowing, and the hunted hare” (1:463-64), a reality which underlines the scenes as demonstrations of the boy’s awareness of his freedom from necessity.
The subject loves the object precisely because it has survived his destruction (often in unconscious fantasy) and because the object assists the subject in finally living within the world of objects (120 - 21). The child’s damaging impulse toward his transitional object (nature), appropriately expressed in play, is responded to by nature. Nature in turn surprises him with a preemptive, sublimated pathetic fallacy, and by seizing and projecting for later internalization what is anticipated and prompted within him: moral conscience. The relationship between the infant and his environment (a term intended to convey all that is the mother for the infant—her holding, her idiom of gesture, etc.) transmits to the infant in an entirely private, idiosyncratic and intersubjective, and silent dialectic that “aesthetic of being that becomes a feature of the infant self.” Bollas will build on Winnicott’s concept of the transitional object with an object of his own: expressed in gesture, gaze, and “intersubjective utterance,” the transformational object is as much a process as an object. As an adult our efforts to recover the transformational object is part of our ongoing desire to surrender to something which will fundamentally alter us. The transitional object “is heir to the transformational period,” a new stage in the process of individuation which allows the infant to fantasize his omnipotence through its destruction; to use the transitional object is the “first creative act” (Bollas 13 - 15). Bollas’s assertion is that we seek a transformational object as adults as a way to reconnect with what is essentially an existential memory. And it is through the aesthetic moment that we are able to experience, however fleetingly, our original feeling toward the transformational object itself. He reads this quest for the equivalent to our original transformational object as integral to spirituality, as what we are seeking when we visit museum or theater, commit a crime, gamble, or indulge in “erotomania” (among other things) (17-18).

21 "Internalization" calls up the picture of a force arising from within and seeking to discharge itself externally—whether in speech or in deed—but thwarted in its initial thrust and directed back toward its source” (Wilner 32). Wilner concludes: “what matters to Wordsworth is not simply that the child’s passions are ‘directed back toward the place from which they came’ (Freud), whether we understand that place as the child himself or the home he set out from, but that they are reflected back to him via the mediation of the surrounding landscape.... And it is of course precisely this “commutation and transfer of internal feelings, co-operating with external accidents” that, for Wordsworth, endows the incident with its poetic significance” (37-38).
Certainly the observation that the boy’s interactions with nature are made to elicit in our imagination the infant and mother has become relatively commonplace. The larger question is “why the poem so explicitly conjures up this primary relation only to make it into something else” (Yousef 121). The boy’s experience of the environment mother is an example of the process one undergoes within the transformational object, and his play an example of the destructive tendency towards a transitional object typical in separating from the mother. The adult’s composition of the poem is overtly an attempt to trace the poet’s cognitive, moral, and aesthetic development; yet implicitly the poet seeks to recreate through an aesthetic moment what was his original holding environment. The “ruthlessness” which is part of the transitional object will manifest in culture and arts: as we work to recover our profound intersubjective experience with the transformational object, so the artist remembers for us and provides us with those memories. But our experience of the aesthetic moment “is neither social nor moral; it is curiously impersonal and even ruthless, as the object is sought out only as deliverer of an experience.” Far from being a beautiful, awe-inspiring occasion, it can be “ugly and terrifying but nonetheless profoundly moving because of the existential memory tapped” (28 - 29).

Ultimately the transgressive element of play in these scenes, marked by the illusion of mastery through theft of the social or social object, is a refracted illumination of the ruthlessness of the poet’s use of the memory for creation of the aesthetic moment, which will itself elicit the existential memory that he was seeking. The spontaneous ludic event cannot be reproduced and the poet knows this: that reality is partially mourned in the theft. As the child is both invigorated and disconcerted by his activity, so the adult poet is reawakened yet disconcerted by his iterative use of the past self in the interest of poetic expression. An ironic foreboding takes shape over how the use of these scenes, intended to exalt him into the aesthetic moment, actually traps him within a world of play marked by illusion, impulse, idleness. In using the transgressive play of the child self to emblematize the development of the conscience, the poet reiterates the transgression and destruction of the transitional object. The effort to utilize these events for moral purposes is an effort to reincorporate that object, and to temper those destructive
elements which are so central to his memories of play. The natural and social objects—the woodcock, the boat, the memory, the moral lesson—are infinitely dislodged from their appropriate original place, and the transformational process always derailed.

For Winnicott, if not overtly for the Romantics, creative work is the antithesis of integration. We can only create when our personality is in a state of unintegration, and our creation becomes part of us only through the reflection of another (64). In various Romantic poems, the reflection may come not through another individual or “other” but rather the poet’s ability to imagine themselves as containing the other within themselves, or through the use of a memory of a previous, younger self: Coleridge’s “This Lime-tree Bower My Prison” comes to mind. The interpretation, the ordering of these experiences that produces the poems, though in a way that is invisible or silent, is the self reflected back to us: poetry relinquishing to chaos and play, the fragmentation of memory and the dream self against the organization of the form. In “Tintern Abbey” the poet appears to be reflected back by his sister: it is the “language of (his) former heart” (l. 117) which is captured by her. Yet she is herself remembered and reconstructed within the poem by the poet. The reflection we see in these scenes is offered from nature itself, which assists the poet in organizing his ego and entering into a more mature self. The boy’s impulse in the text expresses a restlessness, perhaps even more than an impulse toward domination. Or perhaps his fantasy of mastery is not over the thing itself, but of time and his place within it. It is counterpoint to the adult poet who, in recounting these moments of play, attempts to express mastery over time as well. The first theft is a necessary abuse: the object, warm and vital and receptive, is, must be, ecstatically adored and destroyed with the same passion. It must survive the instinctual, pure aggression of the child (Winnicott 7). But in these

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22 I am thinking here of his seminal essay “The Capacity to Be Alone.” I am not the first to consider this essay in light of The Prelude. One particularly interesting account, and which also deals with the relationship between spontaneity and Winnicott’s “spontaneous gesture” as indicative of the “real” self is Brooke Hopkins’s “Wordsworth, Winnicott, and the Claims of the “Real” in Studies in Romanticism 37.2 (Summer 1998): 183-216.

scenes, theft in play is also the theft of a symbol—a memory—which the poet attempts to claim from his boyhood self in the poem itself. Dislodging and disrupting the original memory for aesthetic ends, externalizing the internal, the poet appears to mirror his development from playful (composition) to the aesthetic, social and moral. Sharing these scenes with his audience, having imposed upon them a moral framework in which nature’s articulation is in service of correcting the boy’s transgression, the speaker of the poem has replaced the original theft from nature with a second theft from the self. In fact, it is not so much that the child is corrected by nature, or not only; but also that it is perceived as responding to his private, inner psychic reality. This very fact of being seen in the most intimate of ways, prepares him for entrance into a social world, where his play will be diffused into culture. Nature shifts into a state of limbo: not forgotten, not mourned, but having lost some kind of meaning which the individual was initially able to access. It is almost as though the boy’s original exclusive intimacy with his transformational object reveals, in its omniscient atmosphere, a narcissism which must be relinquished when the individual exits nature and enters the social world, the world of language and lyric. Without this transition, there would be no speech at all—all would be unspoken, intuited. There would be no poetry, no poet.

IV. [ ] phantoms [ ]: Illusion / Fantasy

“Play is finite creativity in the magic dimension of illusion.”

One of the earliest available fragments of a poem by Wordsworth describes a melding of illusion, spectacle, and the nightmare. He describes lying in bed as a child, and in the darkness seeing

Processions, multitudes in wake or fair

24 Summarizing the special qualities in the relationship between infant and transitional object, Winnicott writes: “Its fate is to be gradually allowed to be decathedect so that in the course of years... It loses meaning ... becomes diffused, have become spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and ‘the external world as perceived by two persons in common,’ that is to say, over the whole cultural field” (7).

Assembled, puppet shews with trumpet, fife,  
Wild beasts, and standards waving in the (field?).  
These mounting ever in a sloping line  
Were followed by the tumult of the shew...  
These vanishing, appeared another scene -

... Succeeding with fantastic difference  
And instant, unimaginable change.  
[phantoms]  

As spontaneity and impulse ("instant, unimaginable change") are causes for concern, so ruleless illusion thus begins in the child’s imaginative faculty. Manifest in adult society and culture, it will be attributed to the madness of artists and religious zealots. There has always been fear of the play of fantasy in dreams: while Kant names that place of play a “healthy” expression of the power of the imagination, saying that, in fact, the gaps we experience in memory of our dreams keeps us rooted in reality, he cannot resist warning us never to take the narratives we dream up to be “revelations from an invisible world” (68-69). What dreams and nightmares represent is the omnipresent possibility that our imagination will overtake us, leaving us without control and entirely the victim of our fantasies: that the division between the rational and mad mind becomes increasingly blurry the more we invest in our illusions. As we find with Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium Eater, Shelley’s Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation and elsewhere, the line between the play of fantasy which in dreaming is healthy, and madness is hazy, is frighteningly flexible. The word “illusion” from the Latin ludere means “in play,” and this element is central to play as a worrisome component of the imaginative faculty in the eighteenth century. The illusory element of play may be what

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27 Heather Glen explores the relationship between spontaneity, illusion, and ethics in Wordsworth, in Vision and Disenchantment: Blake’s Songs and Wordsworth’s Lyrical Ballads. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 1983). She argues that illusion and reality are totally opposed in much of the poetry precisely because illusion is associated with intrusiveness, itself an indication of the failure to recognize the other: the “most spontaneous feelings...are seen as fundamentally appropriative, instinct with aggression: however frivolous they may seem, this is what at basis they mean” (316).

28 See Schlutz, Mind’s World.
most intimately connects it to fancy, as they are like siblings in the same house; whether a self-generated deception for the sake of enjoyment, a willing forgoing of the balancing power of reason, or an unwilling hallucination, illusion and fantasy may lead a person to believe he sees and feels that which is only an invention of his own mind (Kant 71). In a passage that definitively connects the play of imagination with the play of children Kant writes forebodingly of the unintentional visions which can result from the deceit he calls “fantasy”:

*fantasy*, the tendency to harmless *lying* that is *always* met with in children and *now and then* in adults who, though otherwise good-natured, sometimes have this tendency almost as a hereditary disease. The events and supposed adventures they narrate issue from the power of imagination like a growing avalanche as it rolls down, and they do not have any kind of advantage in view except simply to make their stories interesting (73, emphasis in original).

The passage articulates the preoccupation of the uncontrollable illusion, the “hereditary disease” of hallucination, even when it begins in individual agency (lying). Still, the transgressive potential of the illusion is in its proximity to deceit and the lie; the child who playacts the king is not the king, but his very aping of the figure degrades its integrity. Following in Plato’s footsteps Kant asserts that poets are especially not to be trusted, as in their pursuit of fantasy they sacrifice all, including friends and loved ones, to the altar of wit. They ignore their conscience, are “capricious, moody, and (without malice) unreliable” and have “no character.” Though they don’t harbor hatred they make many enemies, and though not wanting to hurt a friend they still mock him [this is partly due to their innate temperament in which “eccentric wit” rules over the power of judgment (147)]. Illusion eases its way into culture in other ways, as in the fantasy of foresight: astrology is “childish and fantastic,” an example of our willful misreading of signs and foolhardy belief that we might gain some ability to anticipate what is impossible to predict. This childishness is linked to a failure of the supposed universality of signification: though we are united in language we can sometimes be “as distant as heaven from earth in concepts” (86). Fantasy also leads to the mistaken attribution of affects to objects rather than our own history or

29 According to Robinson, in the Oxford English Dictionary and Etymological Dictionary, the word “fancy” in 1579 meant “delusion.” It comes from Greek ‘phantasia’ - ‘to make visible’ and from ‘phainen’ - to ‘bring to light,’ and ‘to shine.’ He argues that the conviction that the fancy was dreamlike, irrational, and even untrustworthy goes back to the Homeric epics (5).
sensibility, as in the case of nostalgia. We become lost longing for, picturing our childhood home; upon visiting the place we are crushed with disappointment, because its image does not deliver with it our youth, the warm sociability of childhood or its freedom from obligation (71). Illusion can weaken human beings by rendering them superstitious (or if they already were so, further weakens them). Interestingly for our purposes in one passage he singles out hunters, fishermen, and gamblers (especially lottery players) as being particularly superstitious. They delude themselves through the illusion that the subjective is objective, that their own inner voice is equivalent to “knowledge of the thing itself” (176)—not unlike our boyhood Wordsworth and his experience of nature’s response to his “hunt.” In the games of boys in hitting a ball, wrestling, running, or playing soldier Kant writes that, though the boys believe they are playing with each other it is nature that plays with them. Stimulated by the illusion of mastery, however, they fail to notice this, and are instead swept away in “the most violent and long-lasting passion” (176). Thus inherent in the fear of illusion is that the individual will be led astray by his passionate fantasies.

For Winnicott, illusion is at the root of what is dangerous but also exciting and powerful about play: it is a characteristic that arises not from “instinctual arousal” (as the Romantics would fear) but from the “precariousness that belongs to the interplay in the child’s mind of that which is subjective (near-hallucination) and that which is objectively perceived (actual, or shared reality)” (118). In Wordsworth: Play and Politics, John Turner describes the play area in the Lyrical Ballads as in part an area of illusion, which he says expresses “precisely both the excursive confidence and the vulnerable fears which are expressed,” and argues that we might see the text as an early attempt toward object-relations psychology where play is the relational locus upon which subjective and objective convene (118). The “near-hallucination” which Winnicott speaks of appears in both spectacular and subtle ways in The Prelude, but illusion is rarely depicted without the mediating function of after-thought: having described at length how fancy led the poet to see a simple black rock become “a burnished shield / suspended over a knight’s tomb,” now an “entrance into some magic cave, / Or palace for a fairy of the rock” (8.
575), the narrator will reassure us that he “At all times had a real solid world / Of images about me” (8: 604-05). Yet the text is littered with dreams of shells and stones, pantomimes and miniatures, panoramas and raree shows; with cabinets or “wide museum(s), thronged with fishes, gems, / Birds, crocodiles, shells, where little can be seen” (3. 652-54); “singers, rope-dancers, giants and dwarfs, / Clowns, conjurors, posture-makers, harlequins”—in short, our pious narrator serves us with a generous smattering of “Delusion(s) bold” (7: 294-308). And of course, most of the scenes in Book One, as we have discussed, are presentations by the adult narrator of his boyhood self dealing with the illusion of nature’s embodied response to his transgression. The illusions he experiences are in keeping with the paradox of play as vacillating between two opposed poles, as though attempting to inhabit both opposites: illusion has the appearance of being simultaneously a surrender to the imagination and a quintessential expression of the imagination’s agency, a hallucination both summoned and forced upon us (Kaiser 119). In The Prelude, the delusion of omnipotence or mastery in stealing or destroying objects in the world and/or separating himself from his community (as I discussed earlier, in the spontaneous impulse which demonstrates his uneasy vacillation between solitude and society), is closely related to the illusion that the natural world observes and reacts to him in admonition. These two modes replicate the play continuum: the Apollonian expression of self-actualization versus troubled, Dionysian self-abandon (Fink 25-26). And while the former is often expressed as a sort of unbounded creativity, the latter is the cause of madness and the fragmentation of rationality. Wordsworth’s preoccupation is less with what is illusion and what is madness; rather, he works to distinguish between what is delusion and what is illusion catalyzed by a divine, benevolent, natural spirit. We see this when he defiantly asks the reader if we might name the idealized way he saw the shepherds in his boyhood

A shadow, a delusion? -- ye who are fed
By the dead letter, not the spirit of things,
Whose truth is not a motion or a shape
Instinct with vital functions, but a block
Or waxen image which yourselves have made,
And ye adore. But blessed be the God
Of Nature and of man that this was so,
That men did at first present themselves

48
Before my untaught eyes thus purified,  
Removed, and at a distance that was fit. (8: 431-440)  

In this passage, it is clear that illusion is not delusion. Rather, illusion purifies his vision, eliminating noise and detail to show a thing for what it is in essence; it can strip something in order to reveal its aesthetic. In this way Wordsworthian illusion is companionable with its function in object relations: for Winnicott and Bollas, as we explored earlier, illusion is the integral element in art, religion, dreaming, and fetishism in adult life, which are themselves clarifying quests for the existential memory of the maternal aesthetic [such quests most often surface in social and cultural ways, and some communities are even formed based on shared illusions (Bollas, The Shadow of the Object, 30).] The illusion in The Prelude of nature’s response to the boy’s actions seems to be a classic aesthetic moment, which is crucially related to the transformational and transitional objects. Indeed, the connection between play, illusion, and the aesthetic moment was certainly quite clear to Bollas, who references well known play theorist and anthropologist Gregory Bateson’s “double bind” theory as indicative of the infant’s experience of being caught between two contradictory experiences: “the conflict between the form as utterance and the content as message.” The aesthetic moment cannot be learned, summoned, or escaped; it is essentially a powerful illusion which elicits in the subject a feeling that he has been “selected by the environment for some deeply reverential experience” (34-39). It is an existential memory of the first idiom of care, when thought and speech were unrelated to our survival; when seized by the aesthetic moment, we experience the memory of a pre-linguistic pause within time in which we felt in suspension within a “deep enigmatic privacy,” a quiet sensation of profound exchange, which would eventually make possible our entrance into society. After the aesthetic moment has passed, we are left with the uncanny sense that the moment was initiated by the object itself (35). Wordsworth asserts that “by intercourse of touch / I held mute dialogues with my mother’s heart,” and his subsequent “fleeting moods” will

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30 Here he again separates his experience from the deliberative process of art-making, which is derided (“a block / Or waxen images which yourselves have made, / And ye adore”). The spontaneity implied in the “spirit” of things, the “untaught eyes,” is the result of his age, in which all creativity expressed itself in harmless illusion.
search endlessly for it: “the soul—/ Remembering how she felt, but what she felt / Remembering not” (2: 283-36). It is the aesthetic moment, with its existential memory of the first aesthetic of care when the “soul / Claims manifest kindred with an earthly soul” (2: 241-42), which is offered through the reprimand, through nature’s response to his private and solitary act. From the gentle breeze which seems “half conscious of the joy it gives” (1: 4), the “low breathings” among the solitary hills, (l. 330), the suspension he feels “by the blast which blew amain” (l. 345). When the spectacle of the cliff leaves him “with a dim and undetermined sense / Of unknown modes of being” (l. 419-20) we are reminded of Bollas’s “unthought known,” where the rules of being and relating originate within “the dialectic of the inherited and the acquired” but have not yet been thought (9).

There are many more palatable forms of illusion in play, one of which we see in the “game” of playing pretend. Kant acknowledges that some illusion is permissible on moral grounds, saying that our increased civility is predicated upon our ability to play a part. We adopt the expressions of respect, warmth, humility, and generosity, and eventually the virtues themselves morph from performance into habit: “They adopt the illusion of affection, of respect for other, of modesty, and of unselfishness without deceiving anyone at all, because it is understood by everyone that nothing is meant sincerely by this. And it is also very good that this happens in the world” (42). In another of play’s excellent paradoxes, the illusion that is imitation transgresses the original while also reifying it: the mantle that the child wears when playing “king” ensures that the children around him will associate that sign with the real king, a “stability of style or code” which “provides socially beneficial results of order and predictability that seemingly contradict the playful impulse from which they originally evolved” (Dissayanake 216). This is how play becomes united with work: in the imitation of adult life, conversation, even adult occupation. Thus the child in “Intimations of Immortality” moves from objects or toys (the plan and the chart) to ritual, such as playing at weddings, to more abstract aspirations

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31 Mimicry is a component of “playing pretend,” as I explore in the subsequent chapter on Boy of Winander and John Clare’s “The Progress of Ryhme.”

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which reveal his fantasy of human life (Spiegelman 44). To transfer this “playing pretend” into the role one plays in society requires the forfeiture of another more grave type of illusion, in which we take our own self-generated illusion for the thing itself.\textsuperscript{32} For Kant, the only illusion in society which must be entirely dispensed with is our self-love, the veil of our virtue and power which conceals from us our moral defects (45). If Wordsworth is to be taken at his word, it is nature which will tear the veil from us. Thus though the dialogue between the boy and nature would seem to be a disavowal of aggressiveness, that is far from the truth; his own self-love remains entrapped in a hostile inability to “bear the thought of being freed by anyone other than (him)self” (Lacan 86).

V. Idleness / Indolence

“We sauntered, played, we rioted, we talked / Unprofitable talk” (3: 251-52)

Is play a form of celebration, an expression of \textit{joie de vivre}? Or is it, finally, idleness? The history of indolence as a vice in Western literature is in part one of its slow transformation into creativity, into “a version of labor,” for which Wordsworth is the exemplar. In the Romantic era idleness shifts from laziness to a prefiguration of the receptive labor which the poet undertakes (Speigelman 9). This displacement will cause the Victorians to be increasingly interested in identifying its utility, while warning that idleness can leave adults open to manipulation and fogginess of moral vision [as when someone bends from the side of a slow boat enjoying his eye’s revelations, “Yet often is perplexed, and cannot part / The shadow from the substance, rocks

\textsuperscript{32} In dreams we are familiar with the phenomenon of one thing standing in for something else; metaphor is another crucial an element of play. Gregory Bateson memorably described the play of metaphor in metacommunication in “the playful nip” which “denotes the bite, but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.” In this paradox is a manipulation of expectation: “these actions in which we now engage do not denote what those actions for which they stand \textit{would} denote” (Bateson 180, emphasis mine).
and sky” (4: 247-55)]. But the Romantics were not the only ones to value idleness and its relationship to creative production: the concept is built into the German word for muse, musse, meaning idleness (Huizinga 158) and it is the ultimate aim for Aristotle, “the principle of the universe.... preferable to work; indeed, it is the aim of all work” (qtd. 161, emphasis in original).

Idleness in play represents a sort of middle state, a slippery and dangerous aspect of creativity taken too lightly, usually typified in either entirely positive terms (in which it is a sort of energy gathering for creative expression) or negative (in which it is morally reprehensible, akin to the Christian sin of sloth). In the early books of The Prelude we see idleness in children, in which it reveals the primal basic creative receptivity available to children and animals. and in poets, who attempt to sustain or reclaim that receptivity. Idleness in poets who attempt to sustain or reclaim that receptivity risk falling into the same trap as everyday adults, where idleness gives way to paralysis or sloth. Some indolence is considered harmless, such as the restless seeking out of entertainment such as card playing; adults who engage in idleness “withdraw” again into a carefree childhood, a silly but also charming or even healthy state (Kant 98). While it can indicate thoughtlessness and waste [as the poet describes himself “Unthinking .... / having in my native hills given loose / To a schoolboy’s dreaming” (3:433-35)] it is often also a process of collecting impressions for later composition. Describing the “moral life” he attributed to natural objects early on in life, Wordsworth writes that the world he had about him was his own; he made it, it only lives to him and to the God who saw into his mind. “Some,” he asserts ironically, “call’d it madness,” this time when his perception was activated to identify all “shades of difference” as they were hidden in all of nature’s forms— from the leaf to the stone, the ocean to the “azure heavens” (l. 160). This will later translate into the poet’s work— and as such is part of the education which will secure his career. Play gives way to labor (Speigelman

33 In a more social and political context, idleness gives way to being a pawn in war. John Ruskin writes, for example, that there are two races: one of workers and the other of players. This second group is composed of men who remain idle, having found no course of study to interest them. “Continually...needing recreation,” they make excellent soldiers or “human pawns” in the “game of war” (Ruskin 108, qtd. in Huizinga).
Finally it is man’s birthright: it is lamentable to lose that “majestic indolence so dear / To native man” (8: 389-90). As Wordsworth writes in his reply to Mathetes, “above all, Youth is rich in the possession of Time, and the accompanying consciousness of Freedom and Power.” Entirely unshackled by the negative emotions associated with the mature ego, youth stands “at a distance from the Season when his harvest is to be reaped, — .... he has Leisure and may look around— may defer both the choice and the execution of his purposes” (Prose Works, 13).

Idleness in play often functions as the catalyst or counterpoint to the spontaneous eruption or epiphanic moment which characterizes the poem as a whole and is itself so characteristic of play (Dissayanke 213). To choose and to act, whether for virtue or vice, is to be alive; idleness in the adult is often a sign of boredom and passivity, a paralyzing inability to act or create [to be an “idler” is the source of shame, to “(defraud) the day’s glory” (5: 509-14), to be burdened by “Idleness, halting with his weary clog” (l. 600)]. In Book Four, a fruitful state of exaltation and meditation, a delight in small events or objects, immediately precedes Wordsworth’s admission of an “inner falling off” after having been released from the university. Interestingly, this momentary lapse, which is the result of adult play [dances, revelry, feasts and games (4: 273-5)], is what gives way to his somber meeting with the discharged soldier; thus indulgence is tempered by pity (Speigelman 51). At the poem’s start our narrator is in a state of languishing inactivity, having relinquished many hours to empty musing. He cannot separate “Vague longing that is bred by want of power, / From paramount impulse not to be withstood” (1: 240-255); this prepares him for the fruitfulness of the poem:

Ah better far than this to stray about
Voluptuously through fields and rural walks
And ask no record of the hours given up
To vacant musing, unproven neglect...

In indolence from vain perplexity,
Unprofitably travelling towards the grave...

34 The word “idle” is entirely absent from Book Ten onward, a quality the poet works to sustain and reclaim as he increasingly focuses on the social and political world (thus his mind is unlike the “mother dove” that sits, brooding; it is full of fits of “unmanageable thoughts” (1: 149-52).

35 These words are often misattributed to Coleridge, who edited the essay.
Too much indulgence in idleness can render the imagination child-like and weakened. Boredom is the evil twin of idleness; it is “a disgust with one’s own existence, which arises when the mind is empty,” its cause the deceptive, “natural inclination toward ease,” which makes us glad to do nothing because at least we’re not doing anything bad. The deception, in turn, of boredom itself, is anything which “passes time,” which deceives us in our tendency toward idleness. With the fine arts, or even aimless games, we keep our mind “at play”: thus one “outwits” the inclinations: “as Swift says, surrender a barrel for the whale to play with, in order to save the ship” (Kant 43). Without the quality of creative reverie, indolence becomes boredom or laziness, akin to the Christian sin of sloth. Strangely, this boredom or restlessness is often read as a sign of insatiability. Kant describes the relationship between boredom and a desire for constant enjoyment as “a luxurious living which is at the same time an erosion of life, where one becomes hungrier he more one enjoys” (174-75). This hunger for entertainment can appear in the blank, unreflective indulgence in the beauty of objects, a passivity which at its most extreme appears in the “ministry of fear,” negating the energetic creativity the human being is capable of (Beer 207). The early books of The Prelude are marked by such infantile appetite: “in a period that is rich and dumb” until language slowly infringes on the awe of experience and the remembrance of joy (Oronato 112). But while Oronato asserts that for Wordsworth poetry, as “partially elusive of the limits of ordinary speech,” offers the adult the fantasy of “a prior and superior existence, perhaps as soul, from which the sense of self and time are a gradual estrangement” (112), I believe the reality is far more complex.

As the transgressive element of childlike impulsiveness is rooted in the child’s intermediate position between internal and external experience, so idleness, which when experienced in solitude is a state of “gathering” for poetic inspiration, is in society more dangerous. The narrator’s indulgence in idleness at first demonstrates an inclination toward society rather than solitude (3: 236); by Book Six, he has become part of “indolent and vague society” (6: 20). Idleness is frequently associated with chaotic experience within a crowd: in
France, he describes his presence in the “ant-like swarms / Of builders and subverters” as being in the middle of “gaiety an dissolute idleness” (l. 66). His depiction of adult leisure overall draws on eighteenth century notions of fancy as an immature expression of creativity, as something to dispense with; play-as-mischief, as sport, game, or general diversion does not appear in books 11-13 virtually at all. The social form of play manifest in festival and celebratory gatherings, with its accompanying glee in illusion (pantomime, farce, and the like), is indicative of stunted morality and superficiality: “the inner heart / Seemed trivial, and the impresses without / Of a too gaudy region” (l. 444-46).

As with the role of illusion in play, the careless, casual, relaxed quality of idleness often accompanies a flexibility toward veracity in the interest of poetic composition, often surfacing as a concern that the spontaneous quality of play harbors in deceit. Idleness is related to a fogginess of memory; the poet asks if he should allow himself to “(copy) the impression of the memory — / Though things remembered idly do half seem / The work of fancy” (7: 145-48). While idleness is a component of the poet’s labor the reader is encouraged to be wary of the poet’s account of that thoughtlessness. To be in a state of “idleness” one must protest his innocence and defend himself against charges of sloth. Wordsworth’s state as an “idler among academic bowers,” (l. 403) allows him to idealize man, but that perspective is actively challenged by the vice of those around him. And here as elsewhere he admits he can’t attest to the veracity of his account: of his “naked recollection of that time,” he tells us, some “may ... have been called to life / By after-mediation.” (l. 610). If he errs in his account, it is a mistake characterized more by “innocence” and “delight” than purposeful deception, all part of his “careless” roaming through memory, his “submissive idleness”:

... Carelessly I roamed  
I gazed, roving as through a cabinet  
Or wide museum thronged with fishes, gems  
Birds, crocodiles, shells, where little can be seen  
Yet still does every step bring something forth  
That quickens, pleases, stings— and here and there  
A casual rarity is singled out  
And has a brief perusal, then gives way  
To others....

55
Meanwhile, amid this gaudy congress framed
Of things by nature most unneighbourly,
The head turns round, and cannot right itself;
... Yet something to the memory sticks at last
Whence profit may be drawn in times to come.

Thus in submissive idleness, my friend,
The labouring time in autumn, winter, spring,
Nine months—rolled pleasingly away (3: 651-71)

This roaming is a description of his childish fickleness, his easily garnered attention; any one object would alone be seen as “most unneighbourly” all together, and the careless browsing turns the head around so it cannot right itself. Though in the moment he may have felt the pleasurable and disorienting “sting” of displaced entertainment, which itself caused an unproductive rapidity of time, this “submissive idleness” has its profit in the poet’s work so that what was luxurious frivolity is as a seed to be harvested in years to come. Yet in protesting these objects as insignificant and deceptive at such length, their entertainment distracts him from where his attention should properly be. This, combined with his earlier acknowledgment that his account may not be entirely truthful, makes his depiction of recollected play for poetic effect especially uneasy. In attempting to turn “profit” from memories of idleness the idleness is negated, the truth is elided, and the poet is left questioning his use of the memories; whether his imagination culls from the “wide museum” of his memory or whether he is manipulates a vague illusory past for poetic purposes.

VI. Conclusion

“Yet each man is memory to himself ... / I am not heartless” (3: 189-91)

I take the quote in the title of this chapter from a passage toward the end of Book One in which the poet summarizes his remembrances thus far. As a child, he asserts, he was able to experience the spectacular wonders of nature purely, unmediated by philosophical, intellectual, or moral consciousness, or by the associative memory (a la Hartley) which inevitably results from a more
mature mind. Without even the strange, reflective feeling of “quietness or peace,” his eye could move over “three long leagues” of water, collecting “New pleasure, like a bee among the flowers” (1: 605 - 09). He continues:

Thus often in those fits of vulgar joy
Which through all seasons on a child’s pursuits
Are prompt attendants, ‘mid that giddy bliss
Which like a tempest works along the blood
And is forgotten, even then I felt
Gleams like the flashing of a shield.

...And if the vulgar joy by its own weight
Weared itself out of the memory,
The scenes which were a witness of that joy
Remained.... (1: 600-28)

This is ordinary, mortal, bare, unmediated joy; an unexpected “tempest,” a momentary “flash” which leaves only its trace light. Its very ordinariness is predicated on the lack of habitual associations which accompanies memory, on being entirely devoid of a similar image to recollect (1: 603). Yet this joy is introduced to us as annual, attending “all seasons on a child’s pursuits” (1: 610-11). And the simile of the pollinating bee activates in our mind the sensation of the rapid conjunction of new images to old objects and feelings. His recitation in the following stanza of all those elements which alter our experience of nature further obscures the reader’s ability to experience what is “beauteous and majestic” about the scene: the following stanza lists the collisions and collateral objects, “ill-sorted unions,” and “links” which are soon gathered [though “doomed to sleep” until “maturer seasons” call them forth to “impregnate and elevate the mind” (1: 615-24)]. By describing these early experiences of “vulgar joy” in such a fastidious and exalted form, the passage performs the difficulty the poet faces in drawing from a similarly spontaneous ecstasy. We cannot help note the irony of the poet who wistfully recounts a child’s experience of nature as “pure” because of his lack of associations or memory, within the meticulously constructed epic of the development of his own mind.

To forget is an activity, a process; a forgoing which leaves us spiritually vulnerable. It is in our charge to relinquish the illusion that our memory is ever intact, an expression ever entire, and yet “(be) willing nevertheless to say you are strong again, recovered as from an
illness” (Cavell 75). In my view, this is the unspoken, yet equally heroic, tale of the early books of
*The Prelude*. To undergo the process of recollection in this poem is to write “with hand however
weak” upon a palimpsest which still reveals what is written below; despite the poet’s aspiration
for truth much of that rewriting is a smoothing gloss, a tension which is he readily admits: “in
the main” the development of an individual mind and soul “lies far hidden from the reach of
words” (3: 184-85). The poet is apprehensive that in ascribing, for each scene of impulsive play,
a knowledge gifted to the child by nature, that he has destroyed some spontaneous element of
that original scene. And so he indulges an idealization of these “god-like hours” and repents with
an exaggerated, haunting pathetic fallacy. The editorializing context is a gloss which tempers the
complex power dynamics inherent in the use of this memory and the poet’s requisite denial of
that very use. In this way, the young boy’s theft of the natural object is a prefiguration of his later
dislodging of personal memory through his use of it: in these scenes of play, the central object is
either destined for trouble or the cause of it. The transformational object (nature) later
manifests in the strangest of ways: as the memory of the incorporation of the transitional object
(the boat, the woodcock, the egg).

To accept the incompleteness of memory in a project such as this is to be paralyzed in the
face of an inconsistent muse. Memory is distinct from the imagination, Kant tells us, because we
are able to reproduce moments from our life *at will*: it is our agency in recollection which
demonstrates to us that our minds are not a “mere plaything of the imagination.” It is especially
imperative, therefore, that we keep fantasy discrete from memory: if the two are to become
intertwined, memory becomes “unfaithful” (75-76). It is difficult to parse out what exactly
“unfaithful” means when the memory itself is to be integrated into the exalted play of art-
making, the memory a pillar upon which a poem (with its dangerous proximity to illusion) is
based. The reader of *The Prelude* is further dizzied, as the memory upon which account this new
work is built is itself one of play, a play that involves the idleness and illusion we have been
warned about as coming from the poetic imagination. Yet it is far better for the poet to posit this
problem as fundamentally chronological, as being about the veracity of memory, rather than an
aesthetic or moral one. To read nature as opening up the twoness of our being by assisting us in the transition from solitary to social being, from infant to man, allows the poet to exploit the idea of a doubled self fragmented just by time: “The vacancy between me and those days,” he writes wistfully: “sometimes when I think of them I seem / Two consciousnesses” (2: 29-32).

Yet the “twoness” which Wordsworth articulates here is not his identification with himself as a boy, and then as an adult, but actually two experiences of adult contrition and regret: the adult who needs not be reminded of the folly of pride because of his experiences as a child, and the adult who wishes he could apply the same passion he had as a boy to his newfound investment in duty and truth. Cavell argues that the Mariner silences the albatross in order to establish an intimacy which transcends the seeming arbitrariness of human responsibilities; in other words, to make of the albatross a version himself. The appropriative action which the poet undertakes over the child’s play in the early books of The Prelude is similarly incorporated into the chaos and violence of the French Revolution. Which is to say, the boy in play becomes the sacrificial spectacle through which the poet aspires to elucidate some version of himself, to affirm the deep communion we hope to experience with our child self. The child transgresses by dislodging or destroying the natural object even as the poet compromises through iteration and inevitable alteration his own memory for the purposes of lyric: these paradoxically creative and destructive acts are a prefiguration to the violence to which the ideals of man (not to mention man himself) will be subjected in later books. For “to say that social freedom can only be built on the basis of the ‘freedom of the individual mind,’ as is Wordsworth’s conclusion, “is to say that certain philosophical dreams of justice ... require not seeing the human being as weak, and all that he may become as vulnerable to accident and circumstance (Yousef 138). His answer to this difficulty is to end The Prelude in a way suspect for its simple optimism (119). What the poet has actually done is hang an original transgression around the light figure of his child self, displacing guilt only to later revisit it in the form of a different fall of man. What makes this move singularly Wordsworthian, however, is the first embedding of the apocalyptic element into the boy’s frivolity. We were warned: he calls this time
— when the world “lived only to (him),” when his bounty was ephemeral joy—nothing short of prophecy. Others called it simply “madness” (3: 147-51).
Chapter Two

Birdsong Mimicry and Repetitious Play in John Clare and Wordsworth

So finally (form) begins to take possession of him himself, transforming at first only the outer, but ultimately the inner, man too....the confused and indistinct cries of feeling become articulate, begin to obey the laws of rhythm, and to take on the contours of song. If the Trojan host storms on to the battlefield with piercing shrieks like a flock of cranes, the Greek army approaches it in silence, with noble and measured tread. In the former case we see only the exuberance of blind forces; in the latter, the triumph of form and the simple majesty of law.

O fret not after knowledge—I have none,  
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.  
O fret not after knowledge—I have none,  
And yet the Evening listens.

In The Republic Plato argues that mimesis renders both painting and poetry exceptionally seductive, if inferior. The poet, a master of it, must be held carefully at bay— an enchanter who will negate one’s reason and moderation, who will bark like a dog, bleat like a sheep, or crow like a cock without the guidance of a narrative (86). Even those with the best character cannot help but enjoy the rapturous sympathy or lasciviousness that a poem stirs within us; but in the real world we would be ashamed to be overrun with such feminine, exaggerated sentiments. The role of mimesis in art has always been a conflicted one: even beyond Plato’s conviction of its potential for deception, the sheer pleasure of repetition was reason enough to keep poetry out of his republic. There is something contagious about imitation: by awakening our passions the poet— a manufacturer of images thrice removed from the philosopher king—inculcates in us his


38 The poet may be allowed back into the city but only if she defends her utility and amiableness in lyric or meter. But the philosophers must be prepared to refuse her as they might refuse a lover to whom they are deeply attached, but have quarreled (330).
own tendency toward evil and lawlessness. If one does imitate, one should only imitate the best of models: for example, the child can learn to become by modeling that which is “brave, sober, pious, free” (Mitscherling 153). One wonders what Plato would think, then, of a poem presenting us with an individual playfully mimicking the sounds of lowly animals: the representation of mimicry embedded within an already mimetic art would surely be four times removed from what is true, and perhaps doubly enticing. This essay considers a speaker’s phonetic transcription of his childhood mimicry of nightingale song in John Clare’s “The Progress of Ryhme,” and a boy’s playful mimicry of owl calls in Wordsworth’s “Boy of Winander” passage as it appears in The Prelude (1805). In these poems the mimicry appears to illustrate a child’s spontaneous play within nature, the fickle nature of inspiration, and the adult poet’s attempt to corral both for poetic purposes. The cessation of that mimicry marks Clare’s exile from society; for Wordsworth, the boy’s silence is the very thing announcing the realization of his poetic skills. In both cases the adult speaker’s depiction of child’s play with animal utterance ends in a melancholic denouement.

“The Progress of Ryhme” is an apostrophic ode to poetry: its subject is the child’s discovery of verse alongside his exploration of landscape. In it Clare names poetry as his only balm as a hard-working boy, a passion more like a friend or guardian than a literary genre. “Poesy” is placed in opposition with various societal ills detailed in the verse: vulgarity, insults, class prejudice, and aggressive masters. But to claim the title of poet was a frightening act; one which intimidated him with its power so that he feared being laughed at by others. His shame was felt so deeply that he would not speak his rhymes aloud even when alone. Though self-deprecating about his early attempts, his first songs have a sympathetic and kindred ear in nature: unlike the social world later, it listens approvingly “no matter how the lyre was

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39 A similar idea about the potentially educational benefits of imitation is expressed in Kant’s Anthropology, as I discuss in the fourth chapter.
strung” (l. 209). In fact it encouraged, almost bewitched the young poet into attempting to replicate its visual and aural images, the fields appearing to hum in concert with him on “Those burning days when I should dare / To sing aloud my worship there” (l. 68-70). Yet as he develops his poetic skill, our speaker describes being plagued by anxieties in the human world while his intimacy with nature is compromised by his maturation. Eventually he interrupts his own narrative with a sonorous transcription of his mimicry of nightingale song as a boy. Originally this was a moment of ecstatic lyricism and harmony with nature. The passage is a kind of mirroring of memory in which nature's responsiveness is re-imagined as the poet articulates it falteringly through imperfect language and letter:

- 'Chew-chew chew-chew'- and higher still
'Cheer-cheer cheer-cheer'- more loud and shrill
'Cheer-up cheer-up cheer-up,/- and dropt
Low 'tweet tweet jug jug jug' and stopt
One moment just to drink the sound
Her music made and then a round
Of stranger witching notes was heard
As if it was a stranger bird
'Wew-wew wew-wew chur-chur chur-chur,
Woo-it woo-it'- could this be her
'Tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew tee-rew,
Chew-rit chew-rit,' and ever new
'Will- will will-will, grig-grig grig-grig'
The boy stopt sudden on the brig
To hear the 'tweet tweet tweet' so shrill
The 'jug jug jug,' and all was still
A minute- when a wilder strain
Made boys and woods to pause again
Words were not left to hum the spell.
Could they be birds that sung so well
I thought- and maybe more than I
That musics self had left the sky
To cheer me with its magic strain
And then I hummed the words again
Till fancy pictured standing by
My heart's companion poesy (l. 239 - 64)

Let us contrast this passage to another, if much more well known, Romantic example of a child’s mimicry of birdsong: Wordsworth’s “Boy of Winander.” Originally appearing in *Lyrical Ballads*
under the title “There Was a Boy” it makes its way to Book 5 of *The Prelude* (1805),
Wordsworth’s epic poem in blank verse tracing the development of the poetic mind. The book
is devoted to his fierce, unorthodox ideas about education, but makes its case in dizzying and
occasionally seemingly irrelevant twists and turns (its aimless quality has been frequently noted
by critics). The “Boy of Winander” passage is, among other things, a strange and sad tangent,
placed so awkwardly amid the poet’s long criticism of educationalists. Much has been made of
the story in Romantic criticism and of what it conveys about the possibility of human
communion with nature. The speaker recalls a boy who once stood on the shores of a cliff, or by
a lake, mimicking owl calls. It isn’t clear how or whether the speaker personally knew the boy:
the natural world, however, is described as knowing him well, which by virtue of contrast
implies the speaker did not (Kneale 24). As the boy calls out to the owls they call back and the
sound is echoed so that the boy’s mimicry and the owl’s actual calls are indistinguishable
literally and symbolically (as the owl’s calls are doubled by their own echo as well as by the boy’s
mimicry, and subsequent echo of *his* call):

There was a boy—ye knew him well, ye cliffs
And islands of Winander—many a time
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone
Beneath the trees or by the glimmering lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Pressed closely palm to palm, and to his mouth
Uplifted, he as through an instrument
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the wat’ry vale, and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud,
Redoubled and redoubled - concourse wild
Of mirth and jocund din. (l. 364-79)

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41 William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850: Authoritative Texts, Context and
Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company Incorporated (1979):
172-174, l. 364-425. Further citations sourced from this text, in the 1805 version. Lines will be
parenthetically cited.

42 See for example Evelyn Shakir, “Books, Death, and Immortality: A Study of Book V of ‘The
Occasionally the owls fail to respond and while the boy waits, listening, he receives “unawares” a sublime vision of the reflection of the woods in the lake, of the rocks, sky, or the sound of mountain rivers (l. 379-85). Shortly thereafter we learn the boy died, though the circumstances are not given. What makes the scenes of mimicry in these two poems feel like play, despite the boy’s death and the increasing dismay of the adult speaker in “The Progress of Rhyme”? The ludic aspect is largely owed to the incongruous juxtaposition of a human child imitating animal sounds: the boys choose to momentarily forego the eloquence of language in favor of guttural utterance, a willing sacrifice toward their efforts for cross-species play. The representation of these events in the poems nestles these events squarely between the sensual (animal) and formal (rational) modes of the imagination and they have a spontaneous quality. Clare’s passage in particular seems to erupt out of sheer impulse and joy. Both cases seem to be without aim, an important quality of play. But that spontaneity and lack of direction are called into question precisely because of its mimetic quality. The awkwardness of the phonetic passage in Clare reveals the adult’s inability to re-experience the natural sensuality of his boyhood, more than the joy or music of nightingale song. In Wordsworth, the perfection of the mimicry gives it by definition a direction or aim, as well as a chronological temporality— for one can only mimic what one has previously heard.43

Bird mimicry is a shrewd choice for a Romantic ars poetica: throughout the era poets deprecatingly compare their own art to that of the bird in song, which in turn symbolizes a mercurial and flighty muse [remember Coleridge’s nightingale, Shelley’s skylark and eagle, Keats’s nightingale and thrush (Doggett 554-61)]. Demonstrating a mode of composition that is relaxed, joyful, even effortless, the child and bird are opposed to a laboring poet, who chases a tantalizing but ever elusive muse. That this pursuit often also reveals distress about one’s

43 Schopenhauer parses out the difference between wit and a “play on words” as a matter of what is repeated: “With wit, the concept is identical and in actuality diverse; but with wordplay, it is the concepts that are different and actuality (since words are actual) that is identical.” Interestingly, he also pairs this issue to the aural and the matter of audience, continuing: “as a result, the hard of hearing often give us as much amusement as the fool does, and bad comic writers use deafness rather than foolishness to arouse laughter” (86).
mortality—as with Keats’s “When I have fears that I may cease to be” or Shelley’s “fading coal” — makes the child in particular doubly revered, if also envied.\(^{44}\) Both Clare and Wordsworth’s depictions are of a child whose experience of time is decidedly more ambiguous than the poet’s. While that quality is for Clare something to be forever mourned, the boy of Winander’s momentary suspension is the dramatic climax from which the poet demonstrates the ephemerality not only of the boy’s life, but also the stage of creativity which is expressed in his play. It is a striking move, and all the more so because of the eternal quality so often linked to the Romantic bird. The bird in flight is also one of aesthetic philosophy’s beloved symbols: the dove illustrates Kant’s point that it is a fallacy to believe that one might leave the world of air altogether, because they enjoy the freedom of flight [he compares this to Plato who, enjoying the freedom of human cognition, leaves ‘the world of sense’ (50)]. Music is especially kindled to the flight of birds in Shelling’s view: it frees itself of corporeality more than any other art “by being carried by invisible, almost spiritual wings” (117). As with today’s anthropologists, psychologists, and biologists, the aesthetic philosopher hoping to make sense of what exactly play is turns to animals to elucidate their thoughts. The entirety of the 27th letter in Schiller’s *On The Aesthetic Education of Man* is devoted to animal play, and the entire work, in fact, is interwoven with literal and metaphorical references to animal play. Schiller draws liberally from Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, but his is still one of the first major works in the Western canon to offer a full meditation on the relationship between play, art, and moral feeling, and with an overwhelmingly affirmative perspective at that. It was centrally influential to Romantic attitudes toward play: eagerly read by Byron and Shelley, Coleridge translated much of Schiller’s work (his impact on the latter poet is apparent especially in *Biographia Literaria* as well as “Sonnet XV. To Schiller”).\(^{45}\) Wordsworth was introduced to Schiller’s work through Coleridge, and it has been

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\(^{45}\) For more on Schiller’s influence on Coleridge see Michael John Kooy, *Coleridge, Schiller, and Aesthetic Education.* New York: Palgrave, 2002.
persuasively argued that Schiller’s maxim “May the poet compose from gentle and faraway recollection” became Wordsworth’s famous definition of poetry as the “spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (Davies 234-35). Schiller’s *spieltrieb* or play drive is at the center of the aesthetic experience. Play is most simply defined as the ability to create without overdetermination. The pleasure we experience in the aesthetic moment comes from the play between our rational and sensual selves, and our anticipation of form. He identifies prototypical examples of play in the animal world and—especially important for our purposes—in man’s games *with* animals: the play impulse manifests in bull fights, horse races, gondola races, and animal baiting (107). Animals are embody play as the formless expression of superabundance and excess, as the play impulse only expresses itself in animals and man after basic human needs—food, shelter, and warmth, are met. For this reason, play is best understood as the natural outgrowth of freedom and active self-determination, a remarkably simple but important assertion: yet when man’s imagination is in a state of entirely formless play his imagination is still part of his animal or sensual state. This stage may indicate freedom from external sensuous needs but it fails to demonstrate creative independence. And this is where the aesthetic comes in: it is the artist’s ultimate responsibility to shepherd man from the sensual, to enable him to use form for generalizing from specific experience. It is the movement of play which takes us from the sensual to the formal, and ultimately into a moral condition. While the ability to play may lead to an abundance of creativity nature must be overpowered by art: this is how we discourage hedonism and vulgarity. As a symbol, man’s games with animals render especially apparent the intermediacy of play, with the human imagination on the precipice of being released from the formal into the aesthetic. The Romantic trope of children (and some adults) playfully mimicking animals, then, often symbolizes man’s evolution or devolution and/or moral/aesthetic to or from the irrational

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46 As with Gadamer, play for Schiller is neither particular to humans nor animals, but part of nature itself, something which is perpetually renewing.
or sensual. We see examples of each—aesthetic advancement and rational disintegration—in these two works.

**The Role of Mimesis and Repetition**

For Clare the mimicry of animal sounds is a regression that reveals the speaker’s retreat into a fragmented internal state—man and boy, poet and laborer, creator and mimic. It is poor compensation for being so painfully ill at ease in the world. For Wordsworth mimicry is one stage in a trajectory toward the aesthetic condition. Neither case of mimicry is dialogic which, though seemingly paradoxical, is central to the type of mimesis which yields to the aesthetic. The seemingly paradoxical potential of mimesis-as-repetition is prioritized in both Schiller and Gadamer’s work. The essential cognitive response to imitation is the experience of recognition, Gadamer argues: one imitates not to be discovered but to acknowledge through representation what he knows to exist (112). This recognition-in-imitation must go beyond seeing the familiar in something, beyond mere repetition; for the aesthetic experience must be as illuminating as it is pleasurable (the relationship between repetition and pleasure also arises in Freud and Kierkegaard, as I will shortly discuss). Far from being an exact copy, artistic imitation reveals the essence of the thing itself, most commonly by exaggerating some elements. When the mimesis is a memory, the difference between repetition as copy versus as recognition is essentially that of repetition versus recollection—a central and pleasurable problem in philosophy and psychoanalysis. Freud’s transference is a form of repetition: the resurfacing of feeling the patient once had with another authority figure in his/her life. “A kind of intermediary realm between illness and real life, through which the journey from the one to the other must be

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47 This quality again made Plato distrust it. Gadamer writes: “Hence there exists an insuperable ontological difference between the one thing that is a likeness and the other that it seeks to resemble. As we know, Plato insisted on this ontological distance, on the greater or lesser difference between the copy and the original; and for this reason he placed imitation and presentation in the play of art as an imitation of an imitation, in the third rank. Nevertheless, operative in artistic presentation is recognition, which has the character of genuine knowledge of essence; and since Plato considers all knowledge of essence to be recognition, this is the ground of Aristotle’s remark that poetry is more philosophical than history” (112).
made,” repetition brings the patient to the recollection of the trauma which is responsible for their symptoms (160-65). Most usefully for our purposes, Freud sees the analyst’s purpose in observing the patient’s repetition as to “at last (understand) that it is his way of remembering” (161, emphasis mine). To say that transference is necessary to turn repetition into recollection is to say, strangely, that a second repetition— the story told in analysis, the analytic relationship— is required to transform the memory of affection into recollection, which is the resurfacing of the original relationship for analysis. One finds a similar entanglement in Kierkegaard. In *Repetition* he recounts a friendship between himself and a young man who comes to him after falling deeply in love, then finding himself paralyzed by his memory of his love as she first was originally. Kierkegaard uses the example of the conflict to elucidate the difference between recollection and repetition and to privilege the latter: rather than falling into a mature repetition of love the young man, plagued by recollection, is dissatisfied and his affair ceases to be fulfilling. At one point, in a digression, he describes returning to the theater for a farcical production which he had already seen. He is profoundly disappointed in small changes in the theater and production (a girl, some new pants), a problem he identifies as being one of having clearly and deeply recollected his previous experience. The young man who remembers the woman as she was rather than as she is, is himself stuck in an infant stage of love: repetition is by contrast “(the) beloved wife of whom one never wearies, for one becomes weary only of what is new” (132). What Kierkegaard experiences in repetition, however—the sensation of order and ease—comes from the subconscious memory or feeling or “presentiment” (one of several ways it is akin to Freudian transference). In this way, despite being less

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48 For example, the resurfacing of sexual activities about which he feels shame in a “mass of confused dreams and associations” (160). Freud, Kierkegaard, and Plato all depict repetition in terms of sex, presumably because it is an excellent example of the pleasure to be found in reproduction. Silence at the beginning of treatment is “of course nothing but the repetition of a homosexual attitude”. It is also in this essay that Freud explains how a patient must “promise to form no important decisions affecting his life during the course of the treatment, for instance, choice... of a permanent love object” (164). Presumably the latter dictate is because a love object would interfere with the movement between repetition and eventual recollection (Freud explains that this is for the patient’s own good, as he may “repeat” more extremely various traumas or neuroses during the course of treatment).
sophisticated, recollection is necessary for the pleasure of repetition which he so values. He finally concludes that there is, after all, no repetition because everything is a variation on a recollection. By emphasizing that repetition is what allows us to live freely, Kierkegaard makes recollection an initiatory stage in which one can, if not mature or sophisticated enough, be trapped. Both Freud and Kierkegaard present recollection as something with the potential to be paradoxically original: the actual source of pleasure in repetition, or the second but unique articulation of affect in the transference. Likely because Kierkegaard's ideas stay within the realm of the ostensibly personal or philosophical— he is not writing of a technique to be put into practice—he ultimately acknowledges the futility of differentiating between the two. For Freud, in part because he is speaking relatively pragmatically, recollection and repetition can be usefully understood as meaningfully discrete.

The fascinating ambiguity appears again in Gadamer. His interest is always equally focused on the audience or recipient of the image as it is on the work itself: his or her experience of recognition is part of the co-creative play of the mimetic work of art. Because recognition is predicated on the work reproducing the essence of a thing rather than its exact copy, sheer repetition is opposed to what we might also call “recollection.” For when we imitate something we show the thing that we know to exist in the way we currently know it to exist. This is how we recognize the essence of the thing which in turn creates our affective response (25). He writes:

A child begins to play by imitation, affirming what he knows and affirming his own being in the process. Also, when children enjoy dressing up, as Aristotle remarks, they are not trying to hide themselves, pretending to be something else in order to be discovered and recognized behind it; but, on the contrary, they intend a representation of such a kind that only what is represented exists. The child wants at any cost to avoid being discovered behind his disguise. He intends that what he represents should exist, and if something is to be guessed, then this is it. We are supposed to recognize what it “is.” (18)

If we see something as familiar, as something that we already have knowledge of, we will not comprehend recognition at its deepest, profoundest level [“we do not understand what recognition is in its profoundest nature” (13)]. Imitation must “bring forth” by omitting that which is unnecessary and exaggerating central elements: it is necessarily revelatory and a natural tendency in play, so that “The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus
frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence. This is also seen in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which affects its form (e.g., the refrain)” (105). Because he sees the aesthetic as mutually constitutive, object and spectator are never complete without the other. Though they maintain their separate ontological status, placed together in the aesthetic event they become part of an ongoing, participatory game. The “primacy of the play” is more important than the subjectivity of the viewer or the originality or separateness of the work: the work itself is “the playing of it,” the spectator and object both altered through the aesthetic event. For this reason all artistic mimesis is already creation: he quotes Schlegel that “All the sacred games of art are only remote imitations of the infinite play of the world, the eternally self-creating work of art” (qtd. in Gadamer, 105). Finally, while Gadamer makes use of Schiller’s spieltrieb or playdrive to articulate the centrality of movement which occurs in play, part of his project is to free the view of art from subjectivity, which he sees as the fatal flaw in Schiller and Kant’s theory of the aesthetic. Rather than focusing on beauty or morality Gadamer’s focus is on the mode of the aesthetic experience itself, a variable and never ending thing (Gill 4-5, 13).

In both Wordsworth and Clare the primary mimicry between the boy and nature becomes a striking, melancholic symbol for the loss of play and intimacy with nature, but only through the extension of the second mimicry of the poem itself. I read these scenes through the lens of mimicry as a dialogue or movement within the aesthetic, and the relationship of that mimicry to child’s play. The recounting of each story deep in midst of a lengthy verse about the development of poetic skill is itself far from the spontaneous play which Gadamer privileges (114). And rather than presenting us with a binary which would require, for example, a renunciation of the sensual world in order to embrace form, Schiller is clear that one cannot exchange one for the other. He must contain all within himself in an interplay closely akin to Gadamer’s own theory. Schiller argues that while the origin of the sensual is unpredictable it is form—the antithesis of spontaneity—that allows man to liberate himself from the relaxed, associative, free movement of play [this concept recurs in the play theory of art, as I discuss
elsewhere, which stipulates that play's spontaneous, undirected quality distinguishes it from art-making (Dissanayanke 212)].

Any mimesis which succeeds in becoming the aesthetic does so through the subtle and implicit conversations it makes between the original and its iteration. The owl's hoot, the nightingale's twitters: these are sounds for children to repeat, these poems tell us. The mimicry of the children in these poems is presumably play: their sounds, the echoes, and the response of the birds are all part of what appears a ludic scene. In Clare this original play is always mourned, whereas in Wordsworth it is indicative of the immature and unformed imagination. By pairing the symbol of the bird with the child in play, both poets harness a readily available trope in the cultural consciousness. The second mimicry, the poem itself, is compromised by the hazards of memory, the limitations of translation, and the poet's need to assess or create a meaning for play in the child's experience and within the context of the poem. When Clare's adult speaker attempts to make use of the sound or the story, it is the seduction of repetition which Plato warned us about; the speaker falls prey to it, which leads to his tragic end. In the case of the boy of Winander, the poet's voice emerges triumphant from the interplay between sensual and formal, having gained in the recounting of a child's repetition the reassertion of his own

49 Appropriately, Schiller illustrates the difference by contrasting the flight of cranes with the "noble tread" of an army (quoted above): "The lawless leap of joy becomes a dance, the shapeless gesture a graceful and harmonious miming speech" (213). The playdrive, embodied in the birds, lies in the "becomes" of the first clause. After the sensual and before the formal and rational, after the animal and before the citizen, is a cacophonic spell that somehow, very gradually, yields to aesthetic harmony.

50 I am reminded of another ars poetica with birds, many years later. Howard Nemerov's "Because you asked about the line between prose and poetry," demonstrates the fortitude and flexibility of flight-as-ars-poetica. It reads, in its entirety:

Sparrows were feeding in a freezing drizzle
That while you watched turned to pieces of snow
Riding a gradient invisible
From silver aslant to random, white, and slow.

There came a moment that you couldn't tell.
And then they clearly flew instead of fell.
originality and the artistic vitality of strong intellect and a rational mind. Meanwhile the death of the boy of Winander is needed for Wordsworth’s cool triumph.

Heteroglossia into Monologue

Comparing these poems one first sees a case of dialogic mimicry writ large: "The Progress of Ryhme" appears to be modeled on Wordsworth’s “There was a boy.” We know that Clare was given a copy of the four volume collected edition of Wordsworth’s Miscellaneous Poems by his father in 1822, and that it included “There was a boy.” He was already familiar with Wordsworth, especially through the Lyrical Ballads, and Clare writes about the poems he encountered in his 1820 correspondence. Both it and “Boy of Winander” attempt to track the development of the poetic mind, and though Clare’s 346-line poem does so more modestly, various thematic and linguistic similarities are apparent. Written sometime between 1830 - 1835, Clare’s titling of the poem demonstrates his learnedness and familiarity with literary gestures during the time; so-called “progress pieces” were a small genre which flourished in the 18th century and waned slowly in the 19th, with topics shifting from the sociopolitical to more

esoteric or philosophical. Both poems use the imitation of birdsong as a central metaphor for original, natural poetic inspiration; certain overlaps of diction also indicate the influence of “There was a boy” on Clare: for example, the young speaker who "paused to answer" the birds echoes the boy of Winander’s efforts to get the owls to “answer him.” Importantly, the line “The boy stopt sudden on the brig” (l. 252) is jarring as a sudden switch to third person, a change that makes the passage more closely mirror “There was a boy,” while also accentuating the speaker’s progressive disorientation. And a sudden silence—"all was still / A minute— when a wilder strain / Made boys and woods to pause again" closely mirrors the “chance” or “surprize” of the owls’ silence (l. 404-07), though the woods are similarly arrested, the moment has much less significance and does not lead to the apprehension of the sublime.

While a reading of ”The Progress of Ryhme” as Clare’s rewriting of ”There was a boy” is long overdue, this essay notes the context primarily to demonstrate that the echoes of Wordsworth in the Clare poem are no accident; my reading is more dependent on the important differences between the two texts, despite their clearly overlapping frames. In keeping with Clare’s resistance to representing the poetic self through potentially exploited abject figures, the boy is the speaker as a child rather than a separate character. This, along with the surprising address to a female companion at the poem’s conclusion, make this poem actually more akin in sentiment to “Tintern Abbey.” And unlike the boy of Winander’s perfect mimicry of the owls, the adult speaker in “Progress of Ryhme” emphasizes his lack of skill. In one of many overlaps of diction, the speaker describes his boyhood efforts as “mock(ing) the birds with artless skill” (l. 216); this is reminiscent of the “pauses of deep silence” that mocked the boy of Winander’s

52 Robert A. Aubin. “A Note on Eighteenth- Century Progress Pieces.” Modern Language Notes 49. 6 ( 1934): 405 - 407. Examples include “The Progress of Language” by John Mawer, 1726; The Progress of a Female Rake,” anonymous, 1739. Other titles in the late 18th century include “The Progress of Lying, A Satire” (1762, anon.) ; “The Progress of War, a Poem By an Officer” ( 1770?, T. P. Christian); “The Progress of Gallantry” (1776, Richard Graves ), and “The Progress of Science” (1780, Samuel Dexter). Once into the early 19th century “progress pieces” focus more on the abstract and aesthetic, with “The Progress of Poetry” by John Bidlake in 1794, “The Progress of Melancholy” in 1806 by Mary Robinson, and “The Progress of Love” by Margin Kedgwin Masters in 1808. There were also several “progresses of Poetry” published (including, in 1794, John Bidlake, and 1823, John Petre).
“skill” (l. 405)]. This seemingly slight alteration in the use of the word “mock” has in fact tremendous implications: the owls’ silence as mockery seems a rebuff, or even reprimand, to the boy’s play. The mockery in Clare’s piece, coming as it does from the boy himself, actually emphasizes the generosity of nature’s observation of his efforts, and the adult speaker’s present humility. In general the adult speaker’s conflicted subjectivity infiltrates the memory of the child’s play much more obviously than in “Boy of Winander”; his insecurities are sharply contrasted with the carefree boy he depicts, and he alternates between describing his early creations as flawed originals or harmonious copies of the natural environment. And the narrative structure of Clare’s work is, in some crucial ways, the reverse of Wordsworth’s famous piece: the boy’s fearful experience of what seems the sublime, as I later discuss, preempts his birdsong mimicry, not the other way around. This moment of ecstasy and fright—“I used to rove / Thro...the darksome grove / Of limes,” experiencing a burning vision of the “song sublime beneath” his breast—is autogenous rather than an expression of divine nature. But generally I consciously avoid a reading of Clare as the “Wordsworthian shadow,” though I do note those instances where he borrows most liberally.53 John Goodridge’s recent book John Clare and Community criticizes at some length the tendency to read “poor Clare” primarily through his biography or through his references to other poets, demonstrating how much of import is excised from such an approach (23). By smoothing over the many deviations from Wordsworth’s text in “The Progress of Ryhme” we would once again underestimate or oversimplify the idiosyncrasies of his aesthetic or the ways his political and social challenges manifest in his poetry.

A related trope which resurfaces in Clare criticism is the idea that the poet’s depiction of nature is more simple, literal, concrete, or more vitally and personally relevant, than that of the “major Romantics.” While for Keats and Shelley, for example, the bird is a complex symbol “of unknown modes of being, suggestive of an ‘unpremeditated art’ or ‘harmony’ or ‘ease’ one might

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go in quest of, could one only escape the supposed limits of human life.... in Clare the bird does not transfigure into a mystery. It remains stubbornly bird-like” (Swingle 274-76).

This supposedly stubborn, earthy quality, that inflexibility of song which will not be figurative, is a commonplace observation of Clare’s readership typically attributed to his especially intimate relationship to his Helpston home. He was exiled from it due to British enclosure laws, making childhood far from Clare’s only mourned finite resource. As Alan Vardy writes, “Unlike Wordsworth, whose elegies most often construct his poetic sensibility as their ultimate product, Clare does not have the luxury of distanced sympathy. Rather, he finds himself among the natural objects under threat” (156). The truth is that Clare’s representation of nature does in fact fail at that “distanced sympathy” which is arguably necessary to turn the natural object into a metaphor for poetic use. His deviation from that pattern in “The Progress of Ryhme” makes it an especially startling poem worthy of our attention. Rather than pointing to the degradation of his environment, for example, or depicting an idealized memory of Helpston, nature is the vehicle through which he represents a deep existential crisis of feeling caused primarily by the social world—not of politics or enclosure, but of poetry and romance. In the poem’s conclusion the speaker explicitly states that all that has come before—his vivid detailing of his experiences as a child in nature, and the entirety of his poetic attempts in those early days—were actually reflections and homages to his lover Mary. The end feels like a confession because this tragic and bare declaration is one of sorts: “But I mistook in early days / The world—and so our hopes decay” (l.344).

The speaker’s mistake has been foreshadowed by his attempt to repeat a long past, harmonious, playful mimicry into the fundamentally metaphorical system that is language. By turning what is play into what is “work” (the rest of the poem will make readily apparent the

54 Swingle later contradicts himself when he admits that Clare’s birds behave like human beings—“afraid, angry, or ecstatic”—just as often as they behave like birds. Poet Robert Pinsky agrees, noting that Clare’s animals act as vehicles for ”submerged human feeling” (qtd. in 278).

nature of the poet’s labour, and what it costs him) he forfeits the essence of that original, playful moment that lies, in part, in its spontaneity. The reduction of childhood play to the poet’s dramatic monologue is an Edenic loss: it reveals the devastation of the professionalization of a personal art, and the failure of language to liberate creative memory. The original mimicry is a nearly ideal example of the work of art being in what Gadamer would call “the playing of it,” or existing in the space between the composition and the audience. Nature is responsive, encouraging, and empathetic to his creative efforts, and it and the young are in constant dialogue. He is able to elicit a response from “the bird in glee” who “Seemed pleased and paused to answer me” (l. 227-28). A storm arrives; its sound rings over the sound of his own labour and his soul responds in kind: he “joined the chorus till the storm / Fell all unheeded void of harm” (l. 164-65). “No matter how the world approved / Twas nature listened,” he tells us, and so even when he “mock(s) the birds with artless skill” (l. 216), blowing a note through a blade of grass, the muses are pleased with him. These lines subtly reveal how his utterance hovers between mimicry and composition: “I caught with eager ear the strain/And sung the music oer again” (l. 139-40). Later he tells us “And then I hummed the words again / Till fancy pictured standing bye / My hearts companion poesy” (l. 262-64, emphasis mine). The phonetic passage begins much like the boy of Winander, in its way:

   And nightingales O I have stood  
   Beside the pingle and the wood  
   And oer the old oak railing hung  
   To listen every note they sung  
   ...The more I listened and the more  
   Each note seemed sweeter than before (l. 229-36)

Standing there, engrossed in aviary song, this could very well be our boy of Winander, who is also shown as having “hung / listening,” (l. 406-07), suspended physically and psychically by the environment. But what comes after is, of course, very different. The song of the birds which he repeats in “Chew-chew,” “Cheer-up,” “Woo-it woo-it” is most significant for its otherworldliness. Between the phonetic bursts, the speaker again and again emphasizes the strangeness of this

56 It is a crucial verb, as Bradford Mudge has discussed at length.
scene: the notes go “higher still,” become “more loud and shrill,” then “dropt / Low... and stopt,” (l. 239-43), and soon even “stranger witching notes... // As if it was a stranger bird” (l. 245-46). The song is with each sound “ever new,” so that he asks “could this be her”? (l.248). He even begins to wonder whether they are indeed birds at all (switching from singular to plural, “Could they be birds that sung so well / I thought” (l. 258-59). We must recall here that eventually (as I will shortly explore) the speaker admits that all the images in nature are variations of his beloved, Mary; the strangeness of the bird is especially tragic in this context. But the passage is most interesting because it tries to represent a cacophony of different voices—or rather, the multiplicity of the bird’s own voice, which stands now for song and poetry, and now for Mary, and now a friend, a balm, a harp, etc. Its eerie quality is predicated on how constantly in movement the notes are and this variability is a social something, a metaphorical something.

Perhaps it is too banal to say that poetry is by contrast a very solitary (or stodgy) affair. Still, it is the move from aural to written that catalyzes the speaker’s isolation and it intensifies his yearning for a more friendly past. To say so reminds one of Bakhtin’s flattening assertion that “the ethical forms of dialogic encounter and exchange” that are apparent in the novel are impossible in poetry for there, “even discourse about doubts must be cast in a discourse that cannot be doubted” (286). Yet as Mara Scanlon rebuts, those lyrics that include a multiplication of voices such as we see in Clare, and those forms that draw on the tradition of call-and-response, are just two ways that poetry does demand an ethical encounter with an answerable reader (2). Thus while the passage describes a heteroglossic original mimicry, its repetition as phonetic sound occludes joy by being so obviously of the poet’s singular voice. Indeed, the speaker prefaces the passage of phonetic transcription with a few lines on the impossibility of the whole endeavor by saying each note is more beautiful than the last: “And aye so different was the strain / Shed scarce repeat the note again” (l.235 - 38). There is necessarily a decreasing

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57 I cannot find it in myself to generally agree with Bakhtin’s assertion that “The poet is not able to oppose his own poetic consciousness, his own intentions the language that he uses.” Fortunately, he adds: “This is not to mean, of course, that heteroglossia or even a foreign language is completely shut out of a poetic work” (286).
accuracy and efficacy of a sound repeated too often; maybe a perfect copy of the sound is actually entirely beyond the point.

For the adult Clare, this heteroglossic mimicry is haunting, an ever-present infinitization of remembered mirrors which disorient him in the real world; his attempt to recall it through phonetic speech within the poem separates our speaker even more sharply from the spontaneity of the original play. By drawing on a variety of sources for his inspiration and including many natural voices (however falteringly), the boy’s composition demonstrates the warmth, playfulness, and mutuality. The jarring switch to the third person at the height of the speaker jarringly refers to himself as a boy in the third person immediately after the phonetic passage only confirms the speaker’s alienation (l. 252); before it returns to the “I”, the speaker states “Words were not left to hum the spell,” indicating to the reader that when the speaker later replicates the song his tools are imperfect (when “musics self had left the sky” “I hummed the words again”). Some have read this section as a success for the poet in his ability to make “new words,” a positive transformation of the non-linguistic into the poetic. In this passage, they argue, onomatopoeia becomes a way to unite the sound of nature with human language, in hopes that it will affect the reader so that they are as ecstatic as they would be in nature, were they overhearing the music as it happened. But this new “sound” is altogether different: “The reward reaped from a process Clare tells us began in imitation is thus a poetics that... remakes nature’s music according to the musicality not of the nightingale or the thrush but of the poet” (Weiner, “Listening with John Clare,” 384). Others have read the scene—more persuasively, in my view— as a symbolic rendering of the failure of language. Richard Cronin argues that while the passage "looks like a proto-modernist experiment" it in fact expresses nostalgia for his naive belief in the ability to use language to "fully (assimilate)... birdsong." Jonathan Bate agrees, arguing that the passage of onomatopoeic mimicry is “nonsense that reveals the insufficiency of language to convey the ‘poesy’ that Clare found in the fields” (qtd. in Weiner, “Listening,” 384-85). The integration of onomatopoeic words into rhymed iambic couplets indicates the translation of nature’s music into a human language is an impossibility, a
failure, or a sign of the poet’s exile from his home. In other words, the phonetic speech emblematizes an estrangement from which he cannot recover.

Central to his disappointment is the impossibility of representing *spontaneity* in language. The words are offered in replacement for the sound that has been lost, but that sound is characterized by the surprise the poet felt while hearing and attempting to repeat it and by its very unpredictability. Perhaps the failure is simply because artistic “articulate spontaneity” is only possible if it occurs without “recognizable figuration” or “the diversion of referent” (Gosetti-Ferencei 215). But while we tend to think of spontaneity as being an unexpected moment in time, it is also a matter of cognition: the unexpected is possible only when something deviates from what the observer expects; and a repetition of a memory is not that. One might argue that a repetition can never be spontaneous, but as I hope to have shown, there is mimesis and then there is *aesthetic* or dialogic mimesis. If spontaneity is a central quality of play, a related attribute is that play is nonteleological; one doesn’t play in anticipation of a goal which would bring the dance that is play to an end.58 Declining to significantly distinguish between games and play Gadamer writes: “games are not presented for anyone—i.e., they are not aimed at an audience. Children play for themselves, even when they represent (108, emphasis mine). The presence of birds in the child’s play in “The Progress of Ryhme” is a happy accident of audience; the adult poet is putting the memory *to use* for the benefit of his reader. In may also be to enact the Freudian repetition which spurs recollection, with the reader as recipient of the transference. But by placing the iteration in narrative it lacks the element we expect of the analytic environment and which only speech offers: that which is free, undetermined, associative. The repetition is also incomplete without the adequate presence of the analyst that accompanies the analytic environment, and the blank page and silent reader stand in stark contrast to the pastoral, Edenic setting and the sympathetic twittering bird.

Lacan emphasizes the sense that one is being mirrored and yet mirroring, both reciting and creating; this vacillation and ambiguity results in the instability of that apprehended

58 The original meaning of the word *spiel* is “dance.”
maturation of power. Ultimately, the fragmentation of the self is the core of this instability—the self as both social and spectral, both contained / confined in the realm of “reality” which it constructs (Lacan 2-3). It is a violent fragmentation and one I see in “The Progress of Ryhme.”

The speaker’s self is fragmented into pieces after the illusion of having mastered verse, and the violence he does to language and memory is a transgression against himself. It is an act of omniscience, bringing the destruction of an idyllic memory, and thus a part of the self, while demonstrating the hopelessness of poetry. The apocalyptic element is well within the context of Clare’s vision of nature, which includes the inflexibility of its violence. Swingle points out the many ways that Clare depicts the violence of nature, the vast interplay of survival and destruction that he sees in a colony of ants, the “butchering” of a moth, or in the boy who pursues the fox cubs, who chases blackbirds, who vault after the butterfly in “The Vixen.”

His fascinating conclusion is that, while the Wordsworth of “Nutting” must tie natural imagery to a human viewpoint, Clare seeks to stake a claim within the tense exchange of man and nature but to do so without ego; to be, in short, “like God” (Swingle 282-83). There is a sense of inevitability to this effort, just as there is in nature. As Swingle writes:

> Saints become the Sinners, and the ultimate effect of the poetic experience is to lead us to abandon our own coloring efforts, and accept instead those non-judgmental colorings of the poetry’s shifting surface. We are encouraged, finally, to embrace a sort of kaleidoscopic experience, in which we appreciate the aesthetics of interaction and shifting conflicts instead of identifying with one element or another... drawn into the conflict as vicarious participants and suffering the anxieties the conflict produces (282).

Having warmly reassured the poet of the correctness of his choice of vocation, the birds disappear, and what comes after it is terrible shame and distress. Though the spontaneous event

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59 Swingle quotes from a passage entitled “On Ants” in Clare’s “Nature Notes”: “I once when sitting at my dinner hour in the fields seeing a colony of red pismires near one of the black ones tryd the experiment to see wether they would associate with each other... (one) curld up & dyd at his feet I then put a red one to the colony of the blacks which they instantly seized & tho he generaly contrived to escape he appeared to be terribly wounded & no doubt was a cripple for life” (Prose 201).

60 In opposing Clare and Wordsworth’s birds, Swingle omits the latter’s “The Redbreast Chasing the Butterfly,” in which the poet laments the aggression of the bird who seeks to destroy the insect: “O pious Bird! whom man loves best, / Love him, or leave him alone!” (perhaps because of its obvious political symbolism).
of the poem initially appears to be his reliving of his boyhood song—the reader is certainly surprised by the repetitious, nonsensical, phonetic play—what it ironically foreshadows is the end of responsiveness within nature to his compositions, the rupture of the speaker's own mind, and subsequent confusion of past and present self. Increasingly destabilized, he becomes more and more distanced from nature, the social world, poetry— even his (deceased) lover Mary. The playful mimicry leads the poet to his tragic monologue, veiled as it is in simple repetition.

**Repetition and Lyric**

O BLITHE New-comer! I have heard,  
I hear thee and rejoice.  
O Cuckoo! shall I call thee Bird,  
Or but a wandering Voice?  

While I am lying on the grass  
I hear thy restless shout:  
From hill to hill it seems to pass,  
About, and all about! (l. 1-8)⁶¹

Wordsworthian birds are a diverse bunch, as likely to be sinister or evaluative of the poet’s song as to serve as muse [see “The Sparrow’s Nest” (1807), “The Cuckoo and the Nightingale” (1842) for examples of the latter]. In “The Poet and the Caged Turtledove” (1835) the bird is placed in a position of judgement over the poet and his engagement (or lack thereof) with his environment. “O Nightingale! Thou surely art” (1807) appears initially to celebrate the era’s favorite bird, but its activity while humanity sleeps is rather dubious: “A song in mockery and despite / Of shades, and dews, and silent night” (Randel 50). Even the owls in the “Boy of Winander” are not the first sign of aviary foreboding in *The Prelude*: as has been previously noted, the passage closely parallels another in Book One when the speaker recalls hanging above a raven’s nest as a child to

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steal the eggs. What is remarkable about the cuckoo in the above passage is not its gorgeous song but its ability to be at once everywhere and nowhere—an “invisible Thing,” “a voice, a mystery” (l.15-16). Wordsworth’s birds have a special skill with throwing their voice (or song), a quality which is frequently linked to their ability to seem to be suspended in all places and all times; they work well as a symbol for that is eternal and ephemeral all at once. No less with this bird: it inhabits the present, but initiates in the poet powerful visions of the past and future, inhabiting as it does the “vale / Of visionary hours” (l. 11-12). It even brings the poet to “beget / That golden time again” (l. 27-28). The cuckoo’s doubled (an early version describes it as “twofold”) song is infectious, and the poet’s tense proves sympathetic to its collapsing of past and present: “I have heard, / I hear thee.”

The boy of Winander passage offers yet another variation on the theme of bird as mercurial muse. It is apparent that we are to read this scene as paralleling in some way the spontaneous creativity we expect of our poet. A central ambition of The Prelude is to trace the development of a child’s creative harmony with nature through its manifestation in poetic skill, and Wordsworth’s progress through his life-in-verse is a movement from past to present self, child to adult, playful into formal. In this scene, the boy’s playful performance appears to be one of spontaneity and harmony, if not explicit collaboration, with his environment. His mimicry is described in ways that call on prayer, as others have noted, with “fingers interwoven, both hands... Pressed closely palm to palm.” But the actual sound comes from him “as through an instrument...// That they might answer him”; the allusion to music making aligns him more closely with the poet than with the devout. And the owls’ sudden, “deep silence mock(s)” not his

62 See Bradford Mudge, “Song of Himself: Crisis and Selection in The Prelude, Books 1 and 7,” Nineteenth-Century English Literature 27.1 (1985): 7 - 8. Mudge and De Man both write of the obvious parallels between the scene and that of the boy of Winander. The speaker in the earlier passage recalls being a boy on a ridge, which will be echoed in Winander’s cliffs; and as the lake reflects the sky in latter scene, so this early passage includes what “(seems) not a sky / Of earth.” An important difference, of course, is that only the wind speaks a “strange utterance”—the speaker does not mimic the sounds around him. It is as though even in his memory of his own childhood, the speaker cannot portray himself as in playful concert with nature, but rather only as an adult observing its mystery from an estranged, albeit poetic, point of view. For Wordsworth, play, like nature, is only possible to depict as a stage on the way to art.
play but “his skill” (l. 395-405), a word that connotes vocation and training. Finally, the boy’s repetition is what leads to the owls’ silence and then the sublime vision, the experience of which is the impetus for so much Romantic poetry. The scene, then, makes the boy more akin to a shepherd or poet than a pious adolescent; if intended to be the latter, his expectation of response would surely indicate a more presumptuous pride than is borne out by the rest.

This scene of the boy is quite jarringly placed, in the context of Book Five (on “Books”) and in the epic’s overall development. That Wordsworth revised the poem from first to third narration makes obvious he viewed the separation of narrator and boy as crucial to the poem’s success. If both are characterized through their creative constitution, how do we know the two are foils rather than parallels? Is the boy’s action even creativity? Isn’t it “just” play? To begin with the first matter, while it is true that the boy can be read as one of many abject figures appearing throughout The Prelude as projections of the speaker’s own self, reading the passage in this way precludes us from acknowledging the profundity of the distinction between the speaker and the boy (De Man 74). In fact, as is so often the case in the Lyrical Ballads, the reader is gently urged to be aware of the construction of the speaker’s account of the boy—most particularly as it relates to his experience of this event in time, as I will shortly discuss. In my view the speaker’s repetition of this story is an opportunity for him to demonstrate his own artistic triumph—to reveal the transition from play to art, as it were, before his reader’s very eyes. That the poet intends the death to be an opportunity for dominance has been previously argued in the wide expanse of Winander criticism; however, my focus is on understanding that move specifically through the role mimesis plays in the text. It cannot be stressed enough, however, that though opposed the two figures are not antithetical to one another—are not, for example, hero and anti-hero. The poet’s demonstration of worth through the boy’s death is not one of exultation, righteousness, or jubilation. In fact, the poet takes pains to show how his repetitive play unifies him with his environment. The boy’s mimicry of the owls is so accurate that it is unclear whether what is echoed is the boy’s voice, that of the owls, or yet another echo

63 Again, see Mudge.
of either. As with the young boy in Clare’s poem nature is “responsive,” answering, however eerily, with “long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud / Redoubled and redoubled” (l. 402-03)]. Though the response is described as coming from the owls, the description of echoes makes clear his own calls must reverberate so that nature (“ye cliffs / And islands of Winander”) mimics the “original” sound of the owl calls and the boy’s mimicry, too. To complicate matters even further, in one sense the owls’ calls are actually not original, because they are a response. These various threads are a sort of sacred merging leading to the owl’s sudden, profound silence, which elicits his “gentle shock of mild surprize” and allows for the boy’s vision. The redoubling establishes the profundity of the indistinguishable in the poem: that the echoes cannot be discerned from the original sound that prompted them shows that his is a boundless if momentary concord, where mimicry and actual and child and nature are deeply in flux. At the same time the boy’s play happens within a suspension of time, a frame showing its transcendence. His play seems an example of the successive temporality which Schiller identified as linked to the formal: it erases temporal boundaries as well as those between species, self and other, even author and audience. Because his creation is generated alongside the inspiration that is its genesis—is before and after, specific and generalized, original and replica—it exhibits an absolute simultaneity and spontaneity. In his essay “‘Unrememberable’ Sound in Wordsworth’s 1799 ‘Prelude,’” J. Mark Smith reminds us that Wordsworth was intrigued by the departed sound that has moved beyond conscious recollection, saying: “The heart of the paradox lies in the fact that the sentences of a poem are actually at odds with this pre-semantic ‘time’: for once possibility has been instantiated in, or ‘spread’ out into, sentences, it can no longer be a blank and unrememberable fullness” (503).

Because of the association of the boy with composition, we wonder whether his activity may be accurately deemed creative such as one would expect to find in art-making, or if it is “just” play. Of course the question hinges on one assuming a meaningful distinction between them, a matter about which I am still frankly mixed, if leaning toward the negative. But Wordsworth obviously had an altogether more stern view of the issue (as I explore in the
previous chapter). To start with the obvious, then: the child’s mimicry clearly leads to a unique revelation— he has some access to a unique experience that the adult poet does not, or does not presently, and that knowledge is revealed by his activity. What he offers is of course illusory: a fresh, ludic encounter with the natural world unmediated by the retrospective effect of the poet’s own education, socialization, poetics, or maturation. The child’s ability to easily move from the actual into the virtual has long been viewed as indicative of an easy (if unformed) penchant for the aesthetic (Gosetti-Ferencei 200). Here too, because he is a child and not ostensibly a representation of Wordsworth, the reader more easily slips into the experience as being one of unmitigated veracity; without our skepticism about the narrator’s self-critical, editing eye, the boy of Winander has the ring of truth. In this way it seems to be creative: it reveals something that creates an affective response, and does so through an uncanny exchange between two normally estranged languages. And, of course, Wordsworth’s painting of the scene lends it a striking and ethereal tint. But the boy’s mimicry cannot stand as an idealized, creative experience within nature, because the poet must demonstrate his aesthetic evolution and his personal chronology. And so the poet reinstates time, as we shall see. For though the adult poet evades the recreation of the child’s play (in the first person, for example), and cannot comprehend its atemporality, he can process it through the form that is human rationality and chronology.

Is it play? It certainly seems so, at least simply or traditionally understood. The unusual juxtaposition of animal sounds and a human voice, the spontaneity of it, the youth of the “player,” the call and response like a ball being batted back and forth—yet the only words connoting play are in those lines about the “concourse wild / Of mirth and jocund din.” In fact, the description of the scene suggests his alienation and a worrisome unpredictability. The owls are ominous, capricious, fickle, and capable of a mocking silence. When they do call back it is in shrill and frightening bursts: “with quivering peals / And long halloos, and screams, and echoes
In the strangest of ways the characterization of their call reminds one of the Queens in *Alice in Wonderland*: their speech play is at once terrifying, even murderous, and yet delightfully effervescent. Perhaps one way to approach the contradictory representation of this call-and-response is to consider the element of spontaneity in play. Certainly Wordsworth encourages us to view the boy’s play as repetitive: it is temporally so, as he has done this before; and the mimicry itself is, as so precise a repetition, not exactly unpredictable. Yet the owls’ sudden silence is in fact spontaneous; if it were not, it would not give a “gentle shock.” That temporal pause lets the reader witness with the boy how the fantastical becomes something real—his fantasy of unification with the owls is strangely externalized and validated by this internal receptivity. It is a merging central to the aesthetic experience and which we experience naturally as children (Gossetti-Ferencei 202). Kneale addresses this in his excellent reading of the poem, calling the mimicry a repetition-with-a-difference. He, too, concludes that the echoing of the owl calls is central to Wordsworth establishing of his poetic voice:

> The conferring of speech on nature, anticipated in the personifying apostrophe to the cliffs and islands, implies that the poet calls on these natural objects to have them testify, to make them ‘responsive to his call’ or invocation. Reiterating this movement, the Boy plays Narcissus to the owls’ Echo, giving them a voice but half their own. The poet, through his poem, mutely ‘answers’ the Boy, whose hootings are now ‘the ghostly language of the ancient earth’ (*Prelud* 2.309), *de profundis*. (27)

Even the regularity of the boy’s visitations doesn’t keep the figure from appearing to be in this one instance within a spontaneous suspension of time. In fact, the depiction of time is markedly unsettled, to a large extent characterized as linear/chronological or cyclical/eternal depending on whether the reader is being asked to focus on the boy or the speaker. The speaker first identifies the time in which the boy would call to the owls as “at evening,” a pronouncement underscored by “when the stars had just begun.” The subsequent description of those stars as “rising or setting,” however, while perhaps literally pointing to the many instances in which the boy played this game, introduces an ambiguity. These equivocating phrases could be a way for

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64 The complexity of the depiction owes something to Cowper, whose depiction of animals in his fables had recently liberated the contrived and simple genre for more complex poetic work. See Rachel Trickett’s “Cowper, Wordsworth, and the Animal Fable” in *The Review of English Studies* 34.136 (Nov. 1983), especially p. 473.
the adult speaker to describe his own indeterminate view of time—that he himself sees the appearance and disappearance of stars as fluid—but such a reading is contradicted by his absence from the original scene of play, his initial description of the time as “evening,” his general emphasis on the boy’s atemporal experience, and the precision of his subsequent descriptions on matters of duration and time. At the same time the respective ages of our figures are called into attention; the speaker is “setting” in his age and wisdom, the young boy “rising.” In his solitary ability to mimic nature he apprehends and perhaps temporarily succeeds the arbitrariness of human time. Their positions will switch soon enough, a reality that further distinguishes them.

The adult speaker’s need to construct meaning from the boy’s play appears to place him at odds with the ludic freedom that the boy embodies—its “functionality” as a story within the poem is all the more apparent because its beginning and end are so arrant and abrupt. Gadamer insists on the nonteleological nature of play and the use of mimicry play for poetic purposes is what announces Clare’s tragic end. Yet it is precisely this quality that for Wordsworth makes the boy’s play an empty space within which his narrative can occupy. Fundamentally the boy’s play signifies an ambiguity of the creative impulse that is progressively destructive. In the exchange of sounds which could be owl, or boy, or echo, or both; the confusion over what is real and what is pretend; and what the difference is at all and whether it matters— these are the questions sharply answered by the death of the child. It essentially leaves him in the limbo of the play drive, moving back and forth between sensuality and form, animal and rational, actor and audience. The adult poet’s transformation of that material into the aesthetic is totally dependent on the reinstatement of chronological narrative that the boy’s death allows. His triumph is his ability to create independently of nature’s echo: it is a transcendence, a radical if careful overthrow of the deification of the natural object (the birds who “mock” the boy’s call is in this context an apt projection of the Romantic poet’s anxieties, perhaps, about this act). But that move cannot be made without the reader affirming his spectatorship, and so the owls are silenced to make way for the voice of the sublime to enter the boy, and the death of the boy.
allows the sublime poet’s voice to reach the new audience of the reader. As in Gadamer’s concept of the “event” of the aesthetic, our attention is requisite for the completion of his epic. He ends the boy’s sensual imitation in a work of art that is by contrast shaped in rationality, reason, and a sense of temporal succession, asserting the evolution of the adult poet over the innocence of childhood and even the experience of the sublime. In this way art is the only mimesis that is genuinely dialogic and lives on—the poet and reader continue in their eternal exchange.

In Book Three Wordsworth writes of the “pageant” that was his time at the university, which he experiences as carelessly and roaming as “through a wide museum,” casually picking up and examining this, then that object. That “pageant” is far from irrelevant: in fact, it might “well demand / A more substantial name, no mimic show / Itself a living part of a live whole” (l. 623-25). This seems an appropriate description for the boy of Winander: as with that scene the images of the pageant will be stored by the poet for later use. Though both scenes are of “an aching and a barren sense,” a melancholy without wisdom and without mature love, with both, “something to the memory sticks at last / Whence profit may be drawn in times to come” (l. 667-78). It is a type of idleness, this mimicry. And as that passage gives way to the narrative progress introduced by Book Four, so the boy of Winander demonstrates with his death the shift from playfulness into art-making: a shift, as Schiller always maintained, necessary to reach the aesthetic condition. It is partly his incorporation of the scene into a narrative that makes this achievement possible. That returns us to Plato and Bakhtin’s assertion that only narrative transforms the aesthetic into the ability to extrapolate from individual experience, which then in turn makes it ethical. In Wordsworth the exalted mimesis is one that shows his incorporation of nature’s song temporally and psychically, and his assertion of mastery as a rational and creative is far from mere repetition—if anything, it is actually a repression of lyricism.  

Thus play with animal sounds is a way to portray a stage of pure sensual creativity; a play which morphs into the mature, rational, tempered, and heightened art of the poetic speaker.

65 One is reminded of his assertion in the Preface of the *Lyrical Ballads* that “the language of every good poem can in no respect differ from that of good Prose” (68).
Lost Mary and the Lost Boy

John Clare knew the difficulties of trying to translate his delight in nature through poetry, compounded as it was by his negotiations with the publishing world. The poem itself is bracketed by his distress in the human world, and poetry is initially set up as the antidote to that discomfort: as a day laborer, it was “poesy” that, like a friend or “parents first regard,” cheered him. When his master’s disapproval shamed him to tears, it was poetry which “check(ed)” its effects. Poetry is what keeps the boy from sighing at the world’s malice and allows him to ignore the insult or sneering of mean and vulgar men, and he believes that it is poetry that will be his balm until death (l. 14-30). His first attempts to write are marked by solitude and the fear of scorn by others. It is this aspect of “ryhme” that becomes the speaker’s focus after the phonetic birdsong passage—his social isolation after the insults and accusations of plagiarism by those he considered friends. Thus the blossoming of his self-identification as poet leads to tremendous disillusionment. Before that passage, he describes himself in more ambiguous terms: a “happy and lonely” boy (l. 222). But that same isolation is decidedly more pained after the seemingly jubilant “Cheer-up cheer-up” of birdsong; “The Progress of Ryhme” is nearly as much a progress of disappointment in humanity. He never really recovers, and his attempt to represent in writing a world of aural collaboration— in which human and animal voices are dynamic, alternately discrete and unified—is a doubled wound, illustrating the failure of language and the absence of Helpston’s kindly birds to play with.

There are political and economic underpinnings to this feeling of otherness, even as it manifests most basically with the poet’s sense of estrangement from language. By becoming a “professional” poet he is forced to bear witness to the radical editing of his own words: correspondence with his publisher John Taylor reveal their ongoing disagreements regarding his idiosyncratic punctuation, grammar and diction (Weiner, Clare’s Lyric, 25). Indeed, his defiant assertion that he has a “right” to a happiness stemming from the labour of poetry rather than agriculture reveals the extent to which becoming a poet was a form of rebellion (l.108). When the master shames him it is because sheep and horses who have strayed under his watch,
as though the very inability to corral animal life is an ongoing strife for our poet, one that will frequently result in humiliation (l. 21-22). Later when the speaker describes how poetry “hardly turned my sheepish eye / I worshiped yet could hardly dare,” (l. 52-53), the image again calls on the wandering sheep: poetry is a temptation from traditional and enclosing labor. It also subtly underlines how the day laborer felt he was property of his master. When he praises nature he will not relinquish its wildness but he emphasizes its communal qualities: weeds “(make) a garden free for all” (l. 86).\(^{66}\) The poet’s education is often described in terms of cultivation of the land: his “musings” are praised despite his own lack of “garden care” (l. 117).

As his poetry was more and more recognized, he gained friends. But the off-hand way in which he mentions those friends discounts the idea that he increases in happiness in sociability: “Twas then I found that friends indeed / Where needed when Id less to need” (l. 297-298) he says cryptically, after explaining how he was unexpectedly paid for poems. The subsequent accusations of plagiarism and false friendship he describes is especially devastating after this picture of a nature which, though perhaps sometimes violent, is decidedly without malice. The tone shifts into one of defense and protection: “My harp tho simple was my own” (l.133). While nature was his teacher if his poetry is dilute or temperate “Tis I not they who bear the blame” (l. 144). The speaker’s scope of interest begins to substantially include other men (and their less-than-ideal traits); the slow-dawning understanding of his own potential triggers a recognition that there are other humans with whom he must interact, and not always happily. For it is only once the speaker “blossom(s)” into identifying with the role of poet that he experiences a revelation of self as subject, and he must then, and only then, delineate his own work from that of others. The explosion of his identification of self-as-poet [“just as a blossom bursts to bloom/ And finds its self in thorny ways” (l. 114 - 15)] is simultaneous with his pronouncement of so-called “friends” as traitors and liars who claim his work for their own.

\(^{66}\) He makes a point, however, that wildness is not a requisite for natural harmony: “As garden flowers with all their care / For natures love is even there” (l. 102-03). Nature in any manifestation is full of maternal warmth.
The more discomfort he experiences in society, the more intense and dialogic his poetry becomes. It is described as the unconscious song of a dreaming bird; poesy is a magic “spell” and “(his) soul to its responses rung / And joined the chorus” of a storm. He takes shelter under a tree during this storm, and the tree becomes a palace within which he may safely compose. We see elements of that shared composition I discussed earlier, but the mutuality dissipates into something fearsome. As the speaker’s focus on poetry is shifted to “beholding” the sublime: when an “ancient lime” becomes like a church (or grows into the roof of a church) we feel the sudden instability of the poet’s song manifest in his body, his gasping breath and beating heart. We might recall Clare’s assertion that “The fields were our church and we seemed to feel a religious feeling in our haunts on the sabbath”— the lime tree, which before was like a “princely pallace” and thus inhabitable by man, is now ominous, something which will “haunt” him on the sabbath (qtd. in Bate 29, l. 168). The vision grows in magnificence, awe-inspiring, until the poet awakes from the vision ready to write. And yet he doesn’t: a “gloom” spreads over him, and the urge to write is nearly smothered by a melancholy mood. The composition of verse has always been stifled by the speaker’s humiliation, so we are not entirely thrown. But what intense gloom it is! The aforementioned dreaming bird, a symbol of his poetry, finds itself in “thorny ways” not only because of others; it is also due to the fragmentation of the speaker’s own perspective. And his own biography isn’t what leads me here; it is omnipresent throughout the latter half of the poem. The tragedy of Clare’s poem is not only the inability of language to accurately ascertain the memory or beauty it represents, nor the exile of the individual from nature, society, and his own childhood. It is also the poet’s use of nature as metaphor that is solely relevant in a social context rather than for its own sake. It is ironic: in a poem specifically about his development as a poet, he defies those future critics who see him as naive and literal especially when it comes to nature. His turn to the song of birds is a turn away from human speech, from meanness and vulgarity. The mattin, the sparrows— any utterance they make is a joyful song to dissipate the cloud of grief hanging over him, “shroud(ing)” hope (l. 160). And when we move into the phonetic passage, again and again the song is described in terms that place it antithetically to his
loneliness: “No friends had I to guide or aid,” no friend “but (his) own kin and poesy” (l. 285-86).

The poem ends with a devastating lament for his lost love, Mary Joyce. He speaks directly to her, explaining that his passion for nature’s beauty was really because it inspired him to write poems about her. He begins: “And Mary thou whose very name / I loved whose look was even fame” (l. 321-22). The poem rapidly draws to a close with an examination of how her otherworldly beauty—the “fairy form” of Mary (l. 325)—was his inspiration. But aesthetic beauty and poetry progress in parallel paths and do not meet. Afraid to reveal his love to her “to them I talked aloud / And grew ambitious from the crowd” (l. 339-40) of flowers, and those who initially praised his work. What is doubly devastating about this end is his admittance that nature is all a metaphor for Mary. Even his own gentleness toward the landscape is because he sees in it his idol:

I saw thy blush and thought it love  
And all ambitious thee to please  
My heart was ever ill at ease  
I saw thy beauty grow with days  
And tryed song pictures in thy praise  
And all of fair or beautiful  
Where thine akin - nor could I pull  
The blossoms that I thought divine  
Lest I should injure aught of thine (l. 331-36)

The ending of “The Progress of Rhyme” is a confession, an apology of sorts to his reader. When the harmony of nature was described as one of deep generosity and maternal care, so that the thirsty animals are “kindly” rained upon, and the flowers are smiled upon by the sun [“No matter how the world approved,” he tells us, “Twas nature listened” (l. 207-08)], we now understand it as an address to his idealized love. The love poem in the guise of an ars poetica feels duplicitous. After the frightening and overwhelming experience with the sublime, the speaker grows up: he moves from his reflective and harmonious play with nature into a world of social (dis)affection. The poem narrates an individual who only understands his ambition to become a poet through the lens of his adoration of Mary. But the anticipation of success as a poet is complicated by the increasingly and inevitable reliance on others (critics, friends, editors,
and the like). The resulting, self-imposed isolation is parallel to the iconic trajectory of the infant who, after the jubilation of recognizing his own image in the mirror, must then understand that the “self-mastery” of that image is contingent upon separateness. Years removed from his childhood love affair with language, the poem ends with the message that human love and social acceptance are impossible as language fails him. Childhood, its remembrance and its play, are seen by the Romantics as a special gateway into the imagination. It is a powerful fixation and will be far-reaching in the Victorian era. But when an author attempts to so directly mimic childhood play, as Clare does, we see Plato’s warning come to pass: the excess of feeling destabilizes his psyche and compromises his ability to function within society. Because the mimicry is of his own previous mimicry, he deceives himself. By contrast, Wordsworth uses the narrative of a boy’s playful mimicry with the owls to show himself as being “of sheer language” (De Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, 18) as well as the extent of his poetic ambition. In considering the death of the boy of Winander let’s first turn to a brief excerpt from Clare’s prose on Wordsworth, in which he writes of his concern that Wordsworth (a poet who he sees as very worthy of praise) is not more popular. Finally he assures himself that “this lack of living praise is no proof of his lack of genius. The trumpeting clamour of public praise is not to be relied on as the creditor of the future. The quiet progress of a name gaining ground by gentle degrees in the world’s esteem is the best living shadow of fame to follow” (*Life and Remains of John Clare* 314).

We know now more than ever, of course, that “poor Clare” was very prescient indeed to have been so assured of Wordsworth’s own “progress of name.” That fame is due in no small part to the much celebrated passage of the boy of Winander. After the scene of the boy of Winander’s mimicry, which explodes into “redoubled and redoubled” echoes, the owls cease their call. The silence, and his eager anticipation of sound during it, makes him receptive enough for the sublime to enter his consciousness:

... And when it chanced  
That pauses of deep silence mocked his skill,  
Then sometimes in that silence, while he hung  
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprize
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain heaven, received
Into the bosom of the steady lake. (l. 379 - 88)

Here the narrator shifts from describing what is actually observable into hypothesizing not only the boy’s subjectivity but, radically, his *unconscious* reception of imagery. The move is jarring enough that it urges our awareness of the fictitious quality of the account, even as it reifies the notion of the sublime, and it reminds us who is steering this ship, as it were: the owls and boy must now fall as silent as us. The lines also increasingly make apparent that the boy’s play is intended to be a metaphor for writing poetry—a change that occurs alongside an emphasis on his solitude, as the owls cease in their call-and-response play and fall silent. The easy, playful atmosphere gives way with the introduction of words suggesting art making: “skill,” “imagery,” “scene.” Gadamer argues that Huizinga’s most important contribution to play theory was his conjoining of animal and child’s play with “holy play,” as being ultimately an acknowledgement of the vital indecisiveness of one’s consciousness when at play. The “uncertain heaven” that is “received/Into the bosom of the lake”— which is taken into, or becomes, the heart of the lake—shows us that when we are playing we never know what is believable and what is not, for in play “the difference between belief and pretense is dissolved” (qtd. in Gadamer 109). Earlier the boy’s reverberated play collapsed author, responder, and audience into an ambiguous cacophony of echoes. Now the boy’s singularity is something to contend with, or else it makes him vulnerable. In the speaker’s confident hands the setting moves from relational and fluid— from “knowing well” the boy, with stars which rise or set, to formidable and dignified: “with all its solemn imagery, its rocks,” “Into the bosom of the steady lake.” Whereas earlier nature joined in on the game through its echoes, it is now evaluative, offering what seems almost a reprimand (“mocked”).

Lionel Trilling reads this turn as preserving the boy’s mystic suspension in nature; Mudge sees the exchange of silences here—the boy sudden silence with the poet’s, standing by
his graveside—as essentially a “usurpation.” For Wordsworth survives: “The speaking poet evidences the ability to move through that silence as the trauma of both past and present is paradoxically alleviated by a return to the original scene.... belatedness here operates as a distinct advantage, once again stabilizing the narrative by providing the poet with a borrowed legitimacy” (Trilling 125-26, Mudge 8-9). I agree with Mudge’s assessment: belatedness is, for Wordsworth, a stabilizing and legitimating force. This is one reason why spontaneous play in Wordsworth is so often a transgressive, destabilizing, and unformed stage that the poet must overcome. While the ambiguous temporality and unifying chorus that initially defines the boy’s mimicry may remind the poet of his mortal and artistic limitations, its status as repetition rather than recollection or creation forces its surrender. At no point is the poet himself caught unaware, as we see in the rather blasé way he passes over the fact of the boy’s death. He makes the spontaneity, he is not subject to it. Having invoked the reader’s awe with this vivid scene the poet plucks the first, then second figure from the cliffs upon which they play, leaving only the “uncertain heaven” reflected in the lake. The narrative choice is made all the more strange because we expect the boy’s seemingly extemporaneous play to be idealized by our speaker: the boy communicates with nature in a unifying, overlapping interplay until he receives a startlingly profound vision. But the poet insists we see nature as the boy’s audience, not as his muse or lyric match (that is for the poet). The silence is a strong rejection, so that the owls are not so much a playmate that suddenly won’t play—after all, the mimicry is not dialogic but pure repetition—but an audience who, without warning, spins on its heel and exits the theater.

Perhaps this is a sheepish expression of the poet’s fears—a jolting rejection that will prefigure his death as the boy’s mimicry prefigured his own. After all, recollecting one’s life in epic verse already intimates an ominous awareness of mortality; what would it mean for the

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reader to refuse to read on? But lest we become too fixated on the silence or death, the poet (as Mudge argues) firmly takes over, standing over his grave, ruminating. The conclusion of the scene shows the poet reorienting us within the limitations of human time. We shift from this temporary, ephemeral scene of “rising or setting” into one in which time is certain [the passage is populated with words marking time (“evening”, “oftentimes” and “erewhile,” “A full half-hour together I have stood / Mute”) (l. 396-97)]. In an early draft of his essay on the boy of Winander, De Man wrote the following sentence and later crossed it out: “Being the father of man, the child stands closer to death than we do.” What he does include is this: in Wordsworth,

evocations of natural, childlike, or apocalyptic states of unity with nature often acquire the curiously barren, dead-obsessed emptiness of non-being. The poetic imagination... realizes this and thus encompasses source and death, origin and end within the space of its language, by means of complex temporal structurizations of which we found an example in “The Winander Boy” (“Time and History” 274).

Wordsworth eliminates the birds and then the boy to establish the originality of his voice. De Man finally returns to Hartman’s account of the poem: “that when Wordsworth speaks about the daring of his imagery... this risk involves more than mere experimentation with words. Hartman refers to this danger as an apocalyptic temptation, in his words, ‘a strong desire to cast out nature and to achieve an unmediated contact with the principle of things’” (278-79). Like Kneale, I read the boy’s death as the restoration of the poet. The manifestation of language into structure is something that reveals our “true being,” our “origin and end”: these matters would otherwise continue to be reticent of representation and withdrawn (Gadamer 110-12). And so the adult speaker’s transformation of the mimicry into poetic structure is his triumph.

Wordsworth’s poem “To the Cuckoo” concludes thus:

O blessed Bird! the earth we pace  
Again appears to be  
An unsubstantial, faery place;

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68 De Man argues “The objectification of the past self, as that of a consciousness that unwittingly experiences an anticipation of its own death, allows him to reflect on an event that is, in fact, unimaginable. For this is the real terror of death, that it lies truly beyond the reach of reflection” (“Time and History” 272).

That is fit home for Thee! (l. 29-32)

Earth has the appearance of being an “unsubstantial, faery place”— in actuality it is far from that, and this is something that poetry, as the imposition of form and rationality on the play impulse, allows him to apprehend. Wordsworth takes pains to create the illusion of temporal complexity in the boy of Winander passage: why? To, as De Man argues, “(demand) the description of a future experience by means of the fiction of a past experience which is itself anticipatory or prefigurative” (272)? Maybe the temporality of the poem is more simple than it appears: a depiction of the way we experience time as children versus as adults. Feeling the center of everything, the actor on central stage or in play forgets the existence of time altogether. This is one reason why the village church is personified as forgetful of the boy’s death, and the death of all those in her graveyard. She is preoccupied listening to the transitory—already as “withered leaves in winds” —”gladsome sounds” of the “race of real children” who play in her churchyard. She does so not because they are innocent, pious, or transcendent: they are “mad at their sports,” “wanton, fresh, / And bandied up and down by love and hate,” “doing wrong and suffering” (l. 427-41). Rather, her preoccupation of the living children urges us, as the poet cannot, to accept the boy’s death as part of the natural trajectory of play. The illusion of a suspension of time is what allows Wordsworth to aestheticize the boy’s mimicry as more than simple repetition, demonstrating his own poetic skill and making his sudden disappearance an all the more striking declaration of the poet’s dominance.

At Last the Spectator

Jonathan Bate writes of Clare that “... he frequently imagined childhood as a kind of Eden, but the point about Eden is that those who write about it have been expelled from it” (19). We might read Clare’s speaker’s childhood harmony with the Helpston landscape as a moment of doomed glory that the adult speaker elegizes with his delayed mimicry. While the poem ostensibly sets out to track a simple and lonely working boy’s turn to poetry for respite, its concerns enlarge to eventually encompass how the poet expresses his adoration of his lover through the natural world, how we first apprehend our own identity by recording and playing
within our vocation, and how seeing oneself reflected in nature is quite different from understanding oneself through the eyes of others. The end of the poem reveals a speaker who must surrender the point that the very poetic language so desperately coveted as a child is flawed, and by so doing he lays bare the weakness of his own idealized childhood. In social and aesthetic contexts, the speaker’s attempt at mastery is enabled and hindered by his ever imperfect tool: words. For Clare the only connection there can be between child play and adult lyric is that an inability to play gives rise to poetry mourning its loss: he makes his home not in the natural, poetic, or human world but in the space between articulation and inarticulation, fragmentation and totality. If in Clare’s poem the tragedy is linked to the use of nature as metaphor not for poetic composition but for social relationships, then in Wordsworth his triumph is in the incorporation of a scene of mimesis in his own mimetic art. “Boy of Winander” ends with an awkward transition back to the subject that preceded it: the speaker wishes aloud that children will learn not through schoolteachers but through books and nature. This will result, he hopes, in “knowledge, rightly honored with that name - / Knowledge not purchased with the loss of power!” (l. 424-25). It is an acknowledgment of all that is lost in the shift from youthful ecstasy to mature and tempered aesthetic, and what he has worked shown here: a wisdom come not in spite of but because of the relinquishing of youthful intimacy with nature.

Wordsworth’s art is one that needs, requires, expects, a spectator. De Man also notes that the specific time, the “curiously exact full half-hour that becomes available to (the poet), is a purely meditative time proportionate to the time it takes us to understand meditatively WW’s own poem” (9). In this I see Wordsworth’s success:

Even a play remains a game—i.e., it has the structure of a game, which is that of a closed world. But however much a religious or profane play represents a world wholly closed within itself, it is as if open toward the spectator, in whom it achieves its whole significance.... In fact, it is experienced properly by, and presents itself (as it is "meant") to, one who is not acting in the play but watching it. In him the game is raised, as it were, to its ideality (Gadamer 114).

Gadamer’s primary point is that the subjectivity of the player is less relevant than Kant and Schiller admit; rather, as “the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience that changes the person who experiences it,” so is this true with play. Play indicates
at a primordial level what is medial, what is happening, what is going on (something is “playing”
at such and such a time) (104). Comparing “Nutting” to “The Woodman” Swingle writes that the
boy in both poems experience a feeling of pain. He continues, “But Clare is not Wordsworth.
Clare’s whole endeavor is to prevent the tension from being resolved. Wordsworth has been
termed the spectator ab extra. But Clare lays a more valid claim to that title. Wordsworth is
profoundly ad hominem, ultimately, as are all the major Romantics” (283). The inability or
unwillingness to liberate his speaker from the nostalgia of childhood, and subsequently from an
intermediate space between past and present, creative and failed mimesis, is where the tragedy
of Clare’s poem lies. Plato would describe Clare as the “writer of tragedies,” an imitator who is
“two removes from the king and the truth” (316-17). By contrast, Wordsworth would be the
better artist:

If he really knew about the things he imitates, I imagine, he’d be much keener on action
than on imitation of it. He’d try to leave many fine actions as memorials to himself, and
be much more interested in having poetry written in honour of him than in writing
poetry in honour of others (318).

It would be an unfair and inflammatory assessment, but I point it out to show the Platonic
nature of Wordsworth’s piece and the devastation of Clare’s work. Language and mimicry are
veils in “The Progress of Ryhme,” whereas in Wordsworth’s the mimicry is a sort of unveiling of
the boy’s unification with the environment and later, the poet’s more enduring aesthetic. And
Clare’s veiling is linked to the speaker’s distrust of humanity. Consider again Gadamer’s
assertion that the aesthetic is mutually constitutive, that it is an event through which both artist
and spectator are forever altered. Clare’s estrangement from society alienates him from his
spectator as his use of nature for metaphorical lover’s ends estranges him from the birdsong.
What Wordsworth manages so well is to demonstrate that the failure of sheer repetition, though
lovely and affecting, is due to the unification of sounds. Sheer repetition makes it impossible to
differentiate speaker from listener, and fundamentally elides that spontaneous element which is
central to all true play. Repetition or mimesis which erupts from a genuinely spontaneous play is
of a different character than that of Clare’s adult narrator or Wordsworth’s boy. As
Nachmanovitz writes, “we can be thrilled by the beauty of a child’s spontaneous play and
fantasy, but if we ask the child to repeat the same sequence when the relatives come over, we have a horse of a very different color— and a double bind for the child” (10). Wordsworth’s reimposition of temporality onto the scene at the graveyard reinstates the respective roles of poet and reader, utterer and audience. Ever compliant, his reader hangs listening.
Chapter Three

“Incessantly Beneath (our) Gaze”:
The Spectacle of Vain Rousseau

That (the child) do or undo is a matter of no importance; it suffices that he change the condition of things, and every change is an action. If he seems to have more of an inclination to destroy, it is not from wickedness but because the action which gives shape is always slow and the action which destroys, being more rapid, fits his vivacity better.\(^\text{70}\)

Although in certain respects I have been a man since birth, I was for a long time, and still am, a child in many others. I never promised to present the public with a great personage. I promised to depict myself as I am...I should like in some way to make my soul transparent to the reader’s eye, and for that purpose I am trying ... to contrive that none of its movements shall escape his notice.\(^\text{71}\)

I. Rousseau in the English Public Imagination

In 1816 Coleridge wrote a piece for *The Statesmen’s Manual* condemning the “French wisdom” which inspired Jacobinism. Its “nature of rapacity, levity, ferocity, and presumption” turns into a “prurient, bustling, and revolutionary” spirit. The result, he warns, “is heartless frivolity alternating with a sentimentality as heartless... a neglect of moral self-discipline and deadening of the religious sense.”\(^\text{72}\) The statement is one of many by Romantic authors which referenced Rousseau in spirit but not in name, using him to typify the worst aspects of French character. The English response to Rousseau vacillated from the dismissive—in which he was an author of mere “romances,” with a lively imagination and childish temperament— to fearsome, a

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\(^{72}\) From *Collected Works of Coleridge, Lay Sermons*, ed. R.J. White, 6: 74-77. Qtd. in Duffy 66-67. Duffy later adds that “these general condemnations of Jacobinism in the Statesman’s Manual are to be compared with a letter of Coleridge’s, written two years later and containing, as his last extended reference to Rousseau, the insistence to a conservative friend that he had been a mocking critic of Rousseau for no less than two decades” (*Collected Letters*, 4: 880). He continues, “The moral is clear; Coleridge’s Rousseau is the staple of caricature, the natural man down on all fours but still driven by vanity; to follow him is to let things go to the devil. Coleridge certainly believes this in 1818; he protests rather too much that he already believed it in 1797\(^\text{7}\) (165-66).
dangerously manipulative figure whose vanity reached catastrophic proportions, becoming the winds that spurred on the disastrous, bloody Revolution.

The English reception of Rousseau’s work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reflects their ambivalence about the role of the imagination in moral education, and the public perception of Rousseau paralleled his discussion of the forming of character, temperament, and the imagination in his novel *Emile, or On Education* (1762). In fact to understand the influence of *Emile* on English perceptions of the child’s imagination, one must first understand the public spectacle that was Rousseau. The widespread influence of *Emile* coincided with a shift in English public opinion about its author: Rousseau’s vanity and megalomania were at first read as the natural outgrowth of a fundamentally innocent, nondestructive, childlike personality. At times his obliviousness was even interpreted as naïveté revealing the extent of his genius: “It is not Voltaire’s *Candide*, but Rousseau’s Jean-Jacques, who presents the most accurate pattern of the naive in world literature” (Mcfarland 58). In February 1762 a reviewer in the *Critical Review* described Rousseau this way: “we conclude with regarding the author as a prodigy of genius, misled and infatuated by caprice and the affectation of peculiarity.” Eventually, however, these same traits were interpreted by English society as deeply disturbing, and Rousseau becomes a deeply disturbed sensualist indulging a need for spectacle, who thrusts himself into the public eye and flagrantly ignores the rules of social decorum. What this evolution reveals is the way in which English society in the eighteenth century wrung their hands over matters of the “immature”: should one celebrate free play, or work to repress its urges as inappropriate? Are we to draw inspiration from the tendency of children toward fantasy and fancy, or redirect it as dangerously quixotic?

Edward Duffy’s study *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley’s Critique of the Enlightenment* remains the most thoroughly researched exploration of the influence of Rousseau on English society, and I find myself heavily relying on it in the first half of this chapter. I am indebted to his hard work and research, which turns to the *Critical Review*, *London Chronicle*, the *Annual Register*, the *Analytical Review* and other periodicals to
establish what the literary reception was of Rousseau’s works and how they were influenced by widespread assessments of the author’s character. Another indispensable text is Thomas McFarland’s *Romanticism and the Heritage of Rousseau*. Both authors paint the following picture, more or less: at the beginning of the 1760s, the English viewed Rousseau with a lukewarm sense of his complexity but couldn’t be troubled to think further about the matter. Most were rather content to waver between dismissal and favor of his work (McFarland 16). Some considered him as limited to the genre of romance: the *London Chronicle* confidently asserted that Rousseau was so distracted by his own “irregular fancy and a proud spirit of misanthropy” that his “performances” would never be appropriate to the upper classes. He would “never...succeed in any undertaking which requires sound judgment and an accurate spirit of investigation.” The denigration of his work was overwhelmingly linked to his immaturity, so that the reading public’s response tended to be that of an exasperated parent or an indulgent aunt. Midway through 1763 and before the peak of public derision Samuel Johnson wrote the following:

Rousseau, and all those who deal in paradoxes, are led away by a childish desire of novelty. When I was a boy, I used always to choose the wrong side of a debate, because most ingenious things, that is to say, most new things, could be said upon it.

This public characterization of his childish impetuosity reveals more than what we typically expect of insult. For the English literate classes, Rousseau was either a child endeared by the dazzling brightness of his own intellect, erroneously believing that whatever was novel was true; or he was devious, working to con favor through his strange, elaborate tall tales. In the case of the latter the “enchantment of (his) words” was a dazzling cosmetic to cover up the sinful nature of his opinions (Duffy 19). In the case of the former, less ominous characterization, Rousseau’s intellect and often paradoxical ideas are ridiculed. *The Critical Review*’s observation of *Emile* was thus:

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Mr. Rousseau can handle the most beaten topic with novelty, and throw new light on subjects which have been thought exhausted. As if he enjoyed a peculiar sensation, every object strikes his mind in a very uncommon manner, and hence it is possible that his writings will be admired as the effusions of genius, while his precepts will be neglected as the effects of caprice and affectation.75

By the time Rousseau came to London on January 13, 1766 he was quite a celebrity, and was lavishly courted by cabinet ministers, the owners of wealthy country estates, “a legion of nobles, members of Parliament... the director of the reading room at the British museum,” and “Chevalier’ d’Eon, the former soldier, spy, and representative of the French court in England” (Zaretsky and Scott 115-123). King George III offered him a pension of one hundred pounds per year. When his dog Sultan was lost in the city, it was reported in the papers (118). Attending a production on Drury Lane, it was Rousseau’s presence which became the show rather than the stage, or even the king and queen in attendance. In fact even they looked more at Rousseau, observed Hume, than at the production. The wife of famous actor David Garrick later reported that “the recluse philosopher was so very anxious to display himself, and hung so forward over the front of the box, that she was obliged to hold him by the skirt of his coat, he might not fall into the pit.”76 Hume rather jealously remarked of the public’s “great interest in M. Rousseau; and though we are now in the hottest time of our hottest factions, he is not forgot” (115).

Those works of Rousseau that fall outside the realm of political philosophy were widely read, a fact which has been somewhat lost by contemporary focus on the Discourses— The Social Contract was far less widely reviewed than Emile and other fictional or nonfiction texts; this was especially true in England (22). Julie, or The New Heloise was published in English nearly immediately after its debut in Amsterdam, and it helped establish Rousseau as a sentimental novelist— a man with a passion for the morally beautiful. In 1759 Lettre a d’Alembert sur les spectacles (Letter to M. D’Alembert on Spectacles) was reviewed by the


London Chronicle, the Monthly Review, the Critical Review, the London Magazine, and Burke’s Annual Register (in fact that year the Annual Register reviewed only six books, of which it was one). Rousseau’s ambivalent text on the theater, combined with his Discourses and Julie, or The New Heloïse gave the English the impression that Rousseau was a moralizing, rigid man with a vision of austerity “pushed to an unsociable fierceness.” He was a man with a middle class imagination and without the Parisian sophistication they craved (11-12). When Emile first appeared in England in 1762, then, it was received by an English populace well familiar with Rousseau and his work. Initially many saw Emile as another relatively benign text detailing the subtle pleasures and values of middle class life—the London Chronicle used the first book to encourage mothers to nurse their children and the romantic relationship between Emile and Sophie was emphasized in the English title Emilius and Sophia; or a New System of Education.

Reviews of his work increasingly emphasized the frivolity and childishness of the language with both author and work guilty of deceitful affectations. Even if Rousseau’s work is read as erupting from a child’s spirit—impulsive, drawn to devil’s advocacy, rebellion, and paradox—this in no way undermined a very real fear about the dangerous impact of his work. In fact, the two viewpoints were intimately related. In Emile the relationship between vanity, childishness, and destruction was perplexing: though the text professes to be about the ethical righteousness of educating the child according to his own nature much of Emile shows the child's imaginative play as savage and destructive. The imagination must be guided out of this stage in order to shape the sensibility and prepare it for citizenship. At the very time of its publication Rousseau’s own impulsive vanity was inextricably tied in the public eye to the question of the boundaries—or lack thereof—of his imagination and self-interest, with the result that his works were also seen as terribly destructive. This overlap reveals the extent to which the British public turned the play of the child and literature about the education of the child into a spectacle with meaning far beyond the maturation of imagination. Rousseau was a man driven mad by vanity: a reputation which ironically coincided with Emile, a text which identifies vanity

as the one folly of man which cannot be undone (Emile 245). In fact, the narrator warns that in socializing young men one must take care to protect them not from sensuality but from vanity, because "amour-propre produces more libertines than love does" (311)]. These criticisms conflate the faults of Rousseau’s vanity with that of a child “captivated by the bright lights of his own rhetoric and mistaking for the truth anything that was capable of forceful and original expression”:

... he entertained no principle, either to influence his heart or to guide his understanding, but vanity. With this vice he was possessed to a degree little short of madness. It is from this same deranged, eccentric vanity, that this, the insane Socrates of the National Assembly, was impelled to publish a mad confession of his mad faults, and to attempt a new sort of glory from bringing hardly to light the most obscure and vulgar (174).

That response was colored by the European reaction to the Savoyard Vicar as a scandalous denunciation of traditional church doctrine—the Monthly Review noted the “extraordinary” and “severe treatment” of it abroad.78 The shift from viewing the author as naive to seeing him as a tempestuous ideologue was also caused by Edmund Burke’s scathing review of Emile and its author. The novel, Burke exclaimed, was not only “impracticable and chimerical” but also positively “dangerous.”79 In Duffy’s view this is the turning point for the reception of Rousseau’s work in the English press, which increasingly moves from a vague appreciation to distaste for his ideologies and skepticism about the soundness of his mind (17-18). His personal eccentricities had begun to haunt him: the first controversies attached to Rousseau would not be due to “The Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” in Emile nor to the radical ideas of the Social Contract, but rather his personality (Duffy 19-22). Hume concluded that Rousseau, who confused his friends by alternating between sociability and reclusiveness, was “a man flayed alive, thrown into the recoiling confusion and beauty of our world, deprived of the protective layers of education and etiquette, objectivity and distance, that society wrapped around the rest of us” (Zaretsky and Scott 136). The discord between Rousseau and Hume that increasingly held the public’s interest furthered the view that he was, if not mad, then certainly a quarrelsome

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79 Qtd. in Duffy 20.
eccentric. His paranoia became increasingly notorious: his sudden flight from England, spurred on by a conviction that he was under siege, was widely publicized as was his appeal to the Chancellor of England for assistance. “And so England,” concludes Duffy, “long the distant spectator of Rousseau the eloquent writer, became the theater for the last and noisiest outburst of Rousseau the paranoid. Occurring in complete view of the public and at a time when Rousseau was frantic, the affair left the English with a sharp and intimate impression of Rousseau's madness” (26).

The vanity that Rousseau became famous for reached beyond himself: he typified something in the English cultural consciousness that was already worrisome. When Burke called Rousseau “the great professor and founder of the philosophy of vanity in England” (174) it was in part out of fear of the connection between vanity and fantasy in the public eye, and how this madness may lead to destructive political notions. Rousseau's work was perhaps a mirror for what was mad in society itself: collapsed into a sin of deceit and egomania, “the show of tender and equalizing sensibility; the reality of selfish and tyrannical indulgence; the consequences of personal madness and public carnage” (51). By the 1790s, the deceased Rousseau was little more than a scapegoat for the tragedy of the French Revolution. As a consequence the kindest reviews of Rousseau’s work are those which follow the tradition of the philosopher as “a specimen of abnormal psychology”: the Critical Review concluded that if Rousseau's work had any utility at all it was to entertain men who enjoy observing a capricious mind at work.80 As one reviewer wrote:

In a word, we see a performance, every paragraph of which contradicts the plainest maxims of common sense... and we conclude with regarding the author as a prodigy of genius, misled and infatuated by caprice and the affectation of peculiarity.81

Relatedly, as the public became increasingly convinced of the extent of Rousseau's mad egotism it is more frequently described in genetic or corporeal terms, with the accompanying potential

80 Critical Review 22 (December 1766): 466. Qtd. in Duffy 27.
81 Critical Review 13 (February 1762): 100. Qtd. in Duffy, 18-19.
for contagion. Hazlitt described Rousseau’s “craving after excitement (as) an appetite and a disease” so that what genius he possessed was solely “the effect of his temperament” (88-89). A more generous view by “Citizen Corancez” depicted a Rousseau driven to madness by the public’s assault on his character but only because his mind was already suffering from “the smouldering elements of distemper” (62). In The Friend, in 1809, Coleridge wrote:

> But the strange influences of his bodily temperament on his understanding; his constitutional Melancholy pampered into a morbid excess by solitude; ... these, or at least the predisposition to them, existed in the ground-work of his Nature: they were parts of Rousseau himself.

For his part, Rousseau had professed to accept in advance a reception to Emile that fundamentally misunderstood both its aim and import, saying that he cared not if men took it to be only a novel when it ought to be a history of his species (Emile 3). His statement proved prescient: though he was increasingly portrayed as a sort of willful, confusing 18th century performance artist, Emile was influential to aesthetic philosophers including Kant and Schiller. The latter’s contribution to aesthetic criticism and play theory, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, was inspired by the novel. The former’s assessment was that “it is the work which attempts to reconcile nature with history, man’s selfish nature with the demands of civil society, hence, inclination with duty” (Bloom, “The Education of Democratic Man: Emile” 88). If Emile’s “Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar” and the frenetic, painful escapades of its author were the source of controversy, the novel was still deeply admired.

**Rousseau’s Influence on the Romantics**

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82 The locating of Rousseau’s vanity in his body points to yet another contradiction in the public’s view of his persona. Was Rousseau simply another “unfortunate children of temperament, who mistake the fretful irritability of their nerves as a yearning of soul”? Or was he to be pathologized as a delusive paranoia? Diagnosing Rousseau is a project which continues on well into the 19th century. See “The Insanity of Jean Jacques Rousseau” by William Noyes, M.D., in The American Journal of Psychology 3:3 (1890): 406-29. Also Rousseau by John Morley (London: Chapman and Hall, 1873) and J.J. Rousseau’s Krankheitsgeschichte by P.J. Mobius (Leipzig, Vogel, 1889).

It has often been said that Rousseau’s *Confessions*, published first in 1782, was the most important single text in the advent of Romanticism. It is a valid enough assertion considering its widespread dissemination in the European reading public. Irving Babbitt identifies Rousseau as “the most significant figure” if not the originator of “emotional romanticism” (257); several decades later De Man states that “the affinity of later poets with Rousseau... can well be considered to be a valid definition of romanticism as a whole” (10). The *Confessions* has all the central tenets of Romanticism: the rejection of the city and society; the prioritization of individual sentiment over rationality; heightened, even epiphanic emotion; and the celebration of seclusion in nature. It is Rousseau who demonstrated the utility of viscerally minute self-exploration. Rousseau’s radical egotism in the *Confessions* and later his *Reveries* forcefully ruptured the moralizing Christian self-abnegation which had long reigned in European, and especially English, art and literature. McFarland notes how difficult it is, indeed, to imagine De Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, Lamb’s *Confessions of a Drunkard*, Hazlitt’s *Liber Amoris*, or Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* without Rousseau’s astonishing work (50-52). The *Confessions* was published in two installments: the first six books in 1782 and the second six in 1789. Until the latter date, the memoir as it was known to the English public ended with the youthful Rousseau many years away from the political writings which would make him and his moral righteousness famous (Duffy 33). The immediate reaction was thus a rejection of its very salacious contents. Even worse than the scenes of sexual perversion, hypocrisy, and transgression contained in the *Confessions* was Rousseau’s declaration of his own self-importance and genius which revealed him to be

a man whose vanity and presumption so imposed on his understanding, as to lead him to imagine that mankind would lend a ready ear to the most trifling, to the most dull, to the most impertinent, to the most disgusting relations, because they concerned ROUSSEAU! that they would examine every folly, and forgive every fault, because they were the follies and faults of the incomparable Author of *Emilius and Eloisa*.84

It was especially horrifying for the public to read of Rousseau’s desire to be spanked like a child, or his early penchant for thievery and public masturbation, as he was known as the author of a novel about the ideal education of children.

The notoriety of the *Confessions* became a central motivation for Romantic writers to explicitly deny the author’s influence on their own aesthetic, even when his influence is readily apparent. But he is never absent from their writings: Coleridge wrote "crazy ROUSSEAU... the Spinner of speculative Cobwebs... quick-eared for every whisper of the public opinion; the Teacher of stoic Pride in his Principles, yet the Victim of morbid vanity in his Feelings and Conduct!"\(^{85}\) Stanzas 76-84 of Byron’s *Childe Harold* offer a portrait of Rousseau which, in just seven stanzas, includes the words “vanity, sophistry, self-pity, emotional masochism, eloquence, verbal wizardry, sensibility, idealism, sensuality, paranoia, insanity, social and political revolution, and selfishness”\(^{86}\) Mary Wollstonecraft had the conflicted response to *Emile* that we might expect, finding his ideas about man’s nature rather on point though she objected to his depiction of women. Her *Original Stories from Real Life with Conversations Calculated to Regulate the Affections, and Form the Mind to Truth and Goodness*, often misidentified as a work of children’s literature, is an educational text in direct affinity with *Emile*. It largely reiterates Rousseau’s notion that the ideal education of the child is one which follows his or her own natural inclinations. Most revealingly, it replicates an underlying trope of *Emile* in which children are savage creatures who must be tamed and protected from themselves. More famously Wollstonecraft published her *Vindication* as a rebuttal to *Emile*’s system of women’s education, and her response was doubtless informed by the sexualization of women in the *Confessions* (Duffy 49). In fact, she is likely the author of this *Analytical Review* piece:

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\(^{85}\) Excerpts from reviews as quoted in Duffy. From *London Chronicle* 19; *Critical Review* 19; Coleridge 62.

\(^{86}\) Duffy continues to say that Byron’s portrait does indeed direct a good deal of personal criticism at the “‘self-torturing sophist, wild Rousseau.’ The fictional Harold is himself one such lair for the cleansing passion epitomized by Rousseau. So too, perhaps, is the real Byron. Although he denied it, the apparent similarity between Byron and Rousseau was an assertion repeatedly made in the English press. Blackwood’s called him a ‘patrician Rousseau. The *Longan Magazine* called them twin masters of a ‘minute moral anatomy’ of the self” (73 - 74).
Her future son-in-law ultimately viewed Rousseau with more unequivocal favor, and his work was a tremendous influence on Percy Shelley. Initially his view was in keeping with the time: vaguely scornful and dismissive with a tint of humor. In a letter to T.J. Hogg written in 1810 he references the *Confessions*, saying that they are “the only thing of the kind that have appeared, & they are either a disgrace to the confessor or a string of falsehoods, probably the latter.” But by 1814 he had read *Reveries of a Solitary Walker* and given Claire Clairmont the job of translating from it (93). Two footnotes with amiable references to the first book of *Emile* on the matters of vegetarianism and breastfeeding appear in “Queen Mab” (1813), and Mary wrote that “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” (1816) was inspired by Shelley’s fascination with *La Nouvelle Heloise* (94, 102). Shelley’s change of heart is made most apparent after 1815, in his assertion that Rousseau is “essentially a poet”; by 1816 he had quite made up his mind and wrote that "Rousseau is indeed in my mind the greatest man the world has produced since Milton.” By 1821, the time of Shelley’s "Defence of Poetry,” Rousseau was a "[poet] who had celebrated the dominion of love, planting as it were trophies in the human mind of that sublimest victory over sensuality and force" (99). Claiming Rousseau once again for the ranks of the poet, his portrayal in “Triumph of Life” (1821) is equivocal: a symbol of the world divided “between the divine poetry of love, and the self-centered humans chosen to be its vehicle” (104-05).

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87 *Analytical Review* 11 (December 1791): 528. Qtd. in Duffy 48. Duffy adds that even if she were not the author, “the *Analytical’s* critique of Rousseau’s sensibility coincides exactly with the anti-Rousseauean message of her *Vindication.*”

88 French and American scholars have remarked upon the supposed similarity between the protagonist of Shelley’s “Alastor: The Spirit of Solitude” and the character of Rousseau as he was perceived by the English reading public. Duffy contests this point, saying that Shelley’s Rousseau of “The Triumph of Life” is significantly more developed, a hero undone by his own egomania, than the more ambivalent figure he held in mind during the composition of “Alastor.” He concludes that it was only after 1816 that Shelley began to fully view Rousseau as a “visionary poet” (94).

It isn’t difficult to understand Shelley’s feeling of kinship with Rousseau: both writers foregrounded the role of sentiment and emotion over reason. Wordsworth and Coleridge were significantly more affected by Burke’s damning assessment of Rousseau: the two poets iterated his assessment even as their letters, library records and own published works reflect the influence of Rousseau’s thought (Duffy 53). Coleridge’s opinion on Rousseau was more ambivalent than Wordsworth’s and he described himself as “never more than a very lukewarm admirer” of the idealistic Rousseau, though he was “better-hearted” than Voltaire.90 His ideas were terribly destructive—Rousseau was lucky to die before having seen “a tenth part of the miserable effects of his doctrines.” Rousseau and Voltaire become for Coleridge the very reason for the “Democratic phrensy, the uncontained and destructive revolutionary energy so feared by Kant in the Anthropology, and Coleridge saw it as his personal mission to prevent England from such devastating philosophical and political confusion” (Schlutz 249). But there is ambiguity in his depiction of Rousseau. For instance Coleridge frequently compared him to Martin Luther, a figure he much admired (McFarland 38). Wordsworth viewed Rousseau’s egotism and radical confessionalism as entirely odious while he also availed himself of many of the moves which Rousseau made. Duncan Wu’s study identifies evidence for Wordsworth’s reading of Emile, the Discourses on Equality, and the Social Contract by 1799, and the likelihood of him having also read the Confessions by that date, of which he had a copy in his library, is extremely high (52). Wordsworth agreed with conservative opinion that the French philosopher was largely responsible for inciting the disastrous revolution, and so he would have had grave significance for him even if he actually hadn’t read much of the philosopher’s work: “He was,” writes Duffy, “an ideological wild oat. To know him as a philosophe was to know what was radically wrong with him, and that was all an English poet needed to know” (56). The two authors were paired in the public eye: William Hazlitt’s "On the Character of Rousseau" famously linked them and not very flatteringly. Hazlitt viewed both writers as imposing their viewpoint and ego upon the

reader, so that their imagination failed to spark the identification of one self with another. At least Wordsworth affected to be interested in more than himself or to be following the trajectory of his own memory. Rousseau was a flagrant egomaniac, refusing even to feign sympathetic identification:

Both create an interest out of nothing, or rather out of their own feelings.... But Rousseau, as a prose-writer, gives only the habitual and personal impression. Mr. Wordsworth, as a poet, is forced to lend the colours of imagination to impressions which owe all their force to their identity with themselves, and tries to paint what is only to be felt. Rousseau, in a word, interests you in certain objects by interesting you in himself: Mr. Wordsworth would persuade you that the most insignificant objects are interesting in themselves, because he is interested in them (92).

Though Mme de Stael and others viewed Rousseau as a man of pure imagination, for Hazlitt Rousseau's sensibility dominated him such that his imagination and reason were stunted. Both Rousseau and Wordsworth were guilty of developing characters and narratives which were only projections of the author's temperament. The one kind thing the critic said about Rousseau was that he "makes us enter into his feelings as if they had been our own, and we seem to remember every incident and circumstance of his life as if it had happened to ourselves" (90). Having taken so much from Rousseau's emphasis on sentiment and inwardness, one imagines these two Romantics must have felt compelled to distance themselves from his grotesque exhibitionism: both essentially dismissed Rousseau as a philosophe whose obsession for personal disclosure was disastrous if strangely transfixing. These poets worked tirelessly to transform a central Rousseauean principle—the reconstitution of reality as a self with no boundaries— into one which was limitless, which went beyond the perspective of a single individual (McFarland 60).

Contemporary scholars have built on Hazlitt's essay's pairing of Wordsworth and Rousseau by specifically exploring the effect of *Emile* on Wordsworth's poetry. Alan Bewell sees the surfacing of *Emile's* tenets in "We Are Seven" (*Wordsworth and the Enlightenment* 195-96) while James Chandler suggests that Book 5 of *The Prelude*, which considers the ideological and historical contexts for various educational practices, is intended to parallel the educational text

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91 Hazlitt’s essay first appeared in *The Examiner* in 1816. The following year, it was republished in his book of essays *The Round Table* in 1817.
William A. Ulmer furthers Chandler’s argument by arguing that Wordsworth directly engages *Emile* in its famous Drowned Man of Esthwaite passage, specifically in the assertion that the child does not fear the sight of the corpse because he has been emotionally prepared for it by reading literature which describes death. The narrator of *Emile* remarks that one of the marks of the child’s strong character is his lack of foresight about death: having been dissuaded from reading overly lively fiction, his imagination is always temperate and never anticipates danger (17). Wordsworth reacted strongly to Rousseau’s argument that reading is “the plague of childhood” and spends a good amount of Book 5 recounting his own childhood joy when reading fairy tales, romances, and adventurous narratives. When the boy watches a corpse recovered from a nearby lake he is at first frightened, but the poet soon recounts that he was not debilitated by that fear because his "inner eye had seen / Such sights before" (5: 474-476) in the fairy and adventure tales of his childhood. Having been previously adorned with "ideal grace," "dignity," and "purest poesy" (480-820) he is prepared for the reality of death, however grotesque it may be (17). While Ulmer argues that Wordsworth scoffs at Rousseau’s caution that the imagination can create a fear of death, for Wordsworth the child’s imagination is insufficient. Both may be a “natural” part of the world, but the child’s imaginative play isn’t enough to guide him toward a measured encounter with death. Instead he must be trained to understand it through its representation in books or art.

McFarland notes various commonalities between the first books of the *Prelude* and the *Confessions*: both include episodes of boyhood theft and subsequent moral crisis, though he notes the striking difference between Wordsworth’s “grave tone” and Rousseau’s “own near-burlesque chatter” (*Shapes of Culture* 70). But there are significant deviations between the two texts. In his effort to depict the self as part of a common soul Wordsworth renders idiosyncrasies of temperament as quirks, personality traits that vivify the story before being overcome in the name of the common good. Thus Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime” avoids the aggressively self-revelatory moves one finds in Rousseau, and is always mediated by decorum. In Rousseau, the cult of personality is arguably his first indulgence (75). Wordsworth’s *Prelude* also includes,
especially in later versions, a severe morality—so that, for example, the affair with Annette Vallon becomes a poem-within-a-poem, 'Vaudracour and Julia' (*Romanticism and the Heritage of Rousseau* 68). And perhaps most importantly, memory is a difficulty which Rousseau feels he must overcome: the potential spottiness of his recollection is an anxiety apparent in both the *Reveries* and *Confessions*. By contrast, Wordsworth uses the very fault lines of memory to manage the speaker’s self-consciousness and keep it from too obviously dominating his poetic frame (Weiskel 143).

II. The Child’s Imagination, Play, and Games in *Emile*

For every review of *Emile* or the *Confessions* which posits Rousseau as a dangerous, infantile, self-obsessed fantasist is a sentence of Rousseau’s own, warning of the dangers of the vain and immature imagination. In both cases—Rousseau’s view as articulated by the narrator / governor of *Emile*, and the view of the public about Rousseau—the adults are troubled by the child’s supposedly natural egocentrism and the extent to which their self-interested imagination compromises their moral “innocence” and / or their creative potential. Yet more so with Rousseau than perhaps any author in the history of Western literature one must attend to the obvious discrepancies in the text between what the speaker says and what he does. “All of childhood is or ought to be only games and frolicsome play”: so the narrator of *Emile* tells us (*Emile*, 153), a prescription which the governor will act against throughout the novel. As in Rousseau’s other works the narrative play in *Emile* undercuts the severity with which he puts forth various maxims. Despite—or perhaps in concert with—his sense of the importance of the

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92 It is with characteristic obliviousness that Rousseau writes in *Emile* that vanity is the worst of all the vices, even worse than the “motive of gluttony,” he tells us. The latter is “an appetite of nature, immediately dependent on sense, while (vanity) is a work of opinion subject to the caprice of men and to all sorts of abuses” (152). Coleridge writes that Rousseau’s vanity turns him into a madman precisely because he is secular: that same energy is what brought devout Luther to great heights. Had he lived in the same time as Rousseau, he too “‘would have held himself for a Man of Genius and original Power,’ his ideals would have shriveled into selfhood, and his writings would have become engines of satanic destructiveness” (*Collected Works*, ed. Rooke, 1:136. Qtd. in Duffy 60-62).
project, Rousseau expresses a cranky ambivalence about the concept of education itself, while constructing what is arguably the most elaborate prescriptive educational model since Plato’s *Republic* [a text which he calls “the most beautiful treatise on education ever written”(40)]. The overall goal of the text is to articulate the way that man may be restored to himself—how the proper education of a child might make it possible for an individual to preserve most of his own natural impulses in their best form, while still contributing in a moral way to his community and fellow man. The way this is accomplished is through the careful management of the child’s appointed governor, who chooses objects and situations for presentation (and in what order) based on their potential to stimulate various faculties such as the imagination, the passions, and reason. But the author is mixed on the details: his governor alternately decries the arts and celebrates them, for example, or describes the ideal man as a citizen on one page and a hermit on another. Sometimes the governor’s actions contradict the statements made by the narrator, a play that engages the reader and turns the novel into spectacle. Simultaneously the descriptions of Emile and the “reader’s pupil” (the figure often used in negative comparison) parallel public criticism of Rousseau himself— even the private self-criticism which he later articulates in the *Confessions* or *Reveries*. Emile is either a naive child, unaware of his own strength and incapable of resisting his impulses, or he is a self-interested and destructive spirit needful of containment [for example, the master is mistaken to believe that he is in charge because it is the child who governs: “He uses what you exact from him to obtain from you what pleases him; and he always knows how to make you pay.... At every instant pacts must be made with him. These treaties, which you propose in your fashion and he executes in his, always turn to the profit of his whims” (12)]. The “reader’s pupil,” a figure held up as the real and thus lesser child, is similarly akin to Rousseau as the public would come to see him: proud, perverse, manipulative, destructive. Riddled with internal and external tension, *Emile* is as elaborate a construction of the image of unpremeditated freedom as one can imagine—so contradictory that it approaches farce at times, were it not for the narrator’s earnestness. The novel offers us an emblematic case of Romantic play: here as elsewhere the sentiments and experiences of childhood are blank
placeholders upon which to write the author’s ideology, so that the “natural” education and play of a child is about everything except what is natural and childlike. But its legacy is well beyond that of education: it engages Montaigne, Locke, and Hobbes at various moments (126, 88) and demonstrates Rousseau’s ambivalence about personal freedom, the nature of man, and his place in society. As Allan Bloom notes, it is in *Emile* that we get the tale of the origin of *amour-propre* and where Rousseau documents how man may return to himself after his “spiritual exile... during which he wandered through nature and society, a return to himself which incorporates into his substance all the cumbersome treasures he gathered en route” (4).

What should we make of the fact that this return to origins, which necessitates the incorporation into an individual “all the cumbersome treasures he gathered en route,” is only possible with the oversight and management of another individual (4)? Must we presume the governor has successfully completed this transformation? Is it even possible to identify when the governor moves from watching to affecting? Does the fact that the individual cannot find his own way to his origin fundamentally contradict the idea of its naturalness? Even the structure of the novel is based on a paradox of sorts: the character who must be metaphorically led back to his origin is actually *born* at the start of the novel— the first book is largely concerned with the best way to nurse. And the governor who leads the way is a highly educated and socialized adult. The structure of the novel is elaborate, and Rousseau details several stages of childhood in the novel (at what age each stage begins is rather ambiguous). The first age of childhood is leisurely and should be taken up most by play. The second age of childhood is quite busy, marked by exercise of the body and senses such that “we do not have enough time to do everything which would be useful” (172). That turns out to be rather a good thing since there is a tremendous inequality between the child’s strength and needs in the second age. The third stage of childhood “approaches adolescence without yet being that of puberty”: passion is not yet present and the child is subsequently at the peak of his strength yet suffers few desires (165). In this third stage

93 It also puts forth models for three different stages of education. The first belongs to mothers, and is the education of nature; the second comes from men, and is the education of the domestic; and the third is the education of things.
the child is ready to differentiate himself as an individual and becomes increasingly aware of “the necessity which attaches him to things,” his mind and his judgment (203). And when that “critical age” commences, youth must be offered sights which will temper their passions and damper their senses rather than arouse them (231). Regardless of the stage of childhood, Rousseau believes that a faulty education is that which robs a child from what nature has given him; a proper education will result in the governor able to say to himself, "At least he enjoyed his childhood. We did not make him lose anything that nature had given him" (162). By extension, the narrator assumes that the faculties given to the child may remain intact into adulthood if only his maturation is properly managed. Yet when his ideal governor states that he is simply allowing Emile to develop naturally, it is often while chronicling his manipulation: he constructions games, lies, and manipulates situations to function as “lessons” for the young boy. While the narrator will frequently state that governance must be invisible or even that effective governance is the absence of governance, he also emphasizes the power of the educator: “O tremble, you, who are going to lead him in these perilous paths and raise nature’s sacred curtain before his eyes” (167). At various moments the educator’s evaluation of the “naturalness” of Emile’s play makes his own adult subjectivity especially apparent. The child’s happiness comes from the exercise of their own freedom, he tells us, but that joy is limited by a natural weakness. Nature provides for the overcoming of those disadvantages and the natural exercise of play and games is always to a purpose even if it is not immediately apparent. If they jump, it is to strengthen their calves; if they play house, it is to practice their domestic skills. The natural play of children is always paideic; but certain dangers are present which require the governor to remain watchful. By observing the child’s play, for example, he may determine whether an activity “stems from nascent whim or from the need which comes only from the superabundance of life” (86). The impression Rousseau works to give of the governor’s disinterest and the child’s freedom is never very convincing: it appears from the start to be a elaborate costume masking at best a subjective viewpoint or at worst an oppressive panopticon, and no reader can finish the
novel without feeling Emile has endured an elaborate and extremely cruel experiment in manipulation.  

The contradictions in the text abound, and become particularly thorny when considering matters of moral education. The narrator argues that moralizing in education by men is the “death of all good education” (390). The solution, he explains, is an education by man inspired by nature’s instruction. The individual only becomes moral through a return to his origins: “We work in collaboration with nature, and while it forms the physical man, we try to form the moral man…. In going back to the principle of things we have protected him from the empire of the senses” (314, emphasis mine). The way toward a more wholly moral and natural self is not intuitively apparent to the individual born into society; Emile’s education is ultimately a concretizing of Rousseau’s ideas about the cultivation of the ideal citizen (51). Other than his prioritization of “natural education” the best social institutions are ones which denature man, “take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity, with the result that each individual believes himself no longer one but a part of the unity and no longer feels except within the whole” (40). In part this is because the self-interest of men makes them naturally destructive, even violent, though not because they are fundamentally wicked. The child wants to smash and break everything he sees— “He grabs a bird as he would grab a stone, and he strangles it without knowing what he does” — because, enthralled with his ability to change his environment he knows that “the action which gives shape is always slow and the action which destroys, being more rapid, fits his vivacity better” (67). Even when children exploit the vulnerabilities of those in charge of them the impulse does not come from immorality but rather from a natural desire to shake off the leash that has been slipped upon them (121). Children are violent because they are weak and wish to be strong, and for this reason they must never be punished or reprimanded: in fact we should be reassured by the child who has an idle and amoral soul, because the appearance of good in

94 For example, at one point the governor misleads Emile to believe that Sophie has died— when she is in fact very much alive. He does so in order to teach him the importance of not becoming too attached to any one object (442-43).
children is a dissemblance: “good is only truly such when reason enlightens it” (92-94). If left unchecked, however, impulsive violence in children will become in time sinful adult behavior. Vulgarity in the adult man is an extension of overactive “giddiness” in children (106). Violence on the microcosmic level moves into the macrocosmic, and the child who wants to hit will murder in adulthood (97-98).

In checking the violent impulses of the young, Rousseau emphasizes first the management of the imagination and its development: all that education aims to do—construct the citizen, create moral feeling, balance the power of the senses with the intellect—is ultimately a matter of taming the imagination. Because the taming of the imagination so often fails, we associate youth with wildness, a phenomenon caused not by temperament but the opinion of society and those who govern him poorly (330). The governor is the watchful guide of Emile’s imagination—“Do not stifle his imagination; guide it lest it engender monsters” (325)—and that control most often and obviously expresses itself in the management of the child’s play, particularly in the early stages of childhood. The governor states that the imaginative faculty remains “inactive” in the young child but the majority of direct references to the imagination describe how to slow its development and cultivate its trajectory: if he gets “fantastic notions of the moral world of which you speak to him,” you will never be able to recover him from them (161, 89). By the age of fifteen Emile has many excellent qualities—patience, courage, and fortitude—and this accomplishment is specifically due to the temperance of his imagination which “is in no way inflamed and never enlarges dangers” (208). Relatedly, in a particularly evocative passage the narrator explains that it is not the imagination itself which is the problem; rather “all the pains that make us truly unhappy” are born from the awareness of the difference between the limitless imagination and the limited real world (81). This is why the governor must make sure to keep the development of Emile’s amour propre away until he has reached the proper age to resist its detrimental effects: the faculty gives us the ability to make comparisons between ourselves and others, inflaming our desires and inciting us to manipulate others for our own purposes. The age of reason is linked to the dawning of amour propre, both of which form
and come from the ability to make comparisons: the comparison of self with things is the job of childhood, and later it will be the job of men and moral relations (214). But that ability to make comparisons depends itself on the imagination through which we projectively envision what others are experiencing (Shuffleton 310-11). Here as elsewhere, the secret to wisdom and happiness lies in balance: mitigating desires with reason, tempering power with will. It is only when all is balanced that the soul is at peace.

Another challenge to the management of youthful imagination is the child’s literalness. Rousseau’s child is incapable of the sophistication that would allow him to think in terms of metaphor. This is why fables should be kept from him, lest he believe animals can converse and reason with each other [Cowper writes a wonderfully snarky retort to this in his poem “Pairing Time Anticipated: A Fable,” saying that the child who interprets “by the letter / A story of a cock and bull / Must have a most uncommon skull” (311)]. Nor can the child conceive of God: one should be disturbed by the pious child for he is only an idolator or playing at devotion (here we again see the portrait of a dissembling child which actually occurs within a guise of innocence: the very conflict in public assessments of Rousseau’s own character) (256). The child’s imagination is amoral and one-dimensional: an activity guided not by a desire for depth but novelty. That desire manifests in strident, egocentric independence, a passion for literature—all that Rousseau claims to see as soft, sedentary, and lustful, and he warns us that it will result in the temperament of the poet, the lover, or the hunter. It is perilous and the governor must trick him, must “put his senses off the track…. by exercising his body with hard labor.” He even seeks to eradicate even the memory of these pleasures. It is an “art,” this education “of detaching him from everything... (to) distract him from himself” (320).

95 Shuffleton, a child development scholar, adds “It is thought-provoking to compare Rousseau’s ideas about the origins of both reason and vice in humanity’s ability to compare the self with others to the recent research on young children’s development of ‘other minds theory’ and how it alters their intellectual capacities and behavior” (311). She adds that the scholar of Rousseau who argues that philosophy should not be read as science is using a “curiously modern interpretation of philosophy and not one that would have made sense to pre-twentieth-century philosophers.” For surely “Rousseau would not have divided philosophy from anthropology and psychology” (316).
Unchecked imagination allows our desires to outrun what is possible: “No longer seeing the country we have already crossed, we count it for nothing; what remains to cross ceaselessly grows and extends” (81). What we are given by nature is always good and always enough, and it is social life which displaces it: the more we get, the more we want. Men tear themselves apart, he concludes, like “ferocious animals because they do not know how to be satisfied with being men.” Shortly thereafter he elaborates that when young people read historical accounts only to aspire to “become now Cicero, now Trajan, now Alexander,” they will become “discouraged when they return to themselves” (243). Left to develop on its own trajectory, urged prematurely forward by the increasingly popular novel, the imagination of social man results in fear and bitterness. The difference between a productive and destructive imagination lies in the careful management of developmental stages, of time itself: the imagination inflamed too early causes many of our gravest social ills. The overeager imagination actually accelerates the development of reason to its detriment (316). "Nature's instruction" is “late and slow,” allowing man’s imagination to be awoken by the senses in a gradual and cumulative way. By contrast, education by men nearly always causes premature awakening of the senses, “a precocious activity which cannot fail to enervate and weaken individuals first and in the long run the species itself” (215). Much of the governor’s project, then, is devoted to determining what objects to introduce, how to introduce them and when. There is no spontaneous play with objects: “From the moment that the child begins to distinguish objects, it is important that there be selectivity in those one shows him... I want him habituated to seeing new objects, ugly, disgusting, peculiar animals, but little by little, from afar, until his accustomed to them, and... finally handles them himself” (63). Objects used in play are a source of power: mastery over them allows the weak child, whose dependence is inevitably the condition for wickedness, to dominate [“Children begin by getting themselves assisted; they end by getting themselves served. Thus... is subsequently born the idea of empire and domination” (64-66)]. Another central way that the governor slows the development of Emile’s imagination is by preventing his indulgence in “fantastic notions” or “whims.” The word appears frequently in Bloom’s translation: the French word is “fantasie,”
which is closely aligned to the imagination: whim is to want without need, and is the first mark of prejudice and opinion (68). The problem with whim is not that it results in pleasure: children can only learn from what is pleasurable or useful if they are not being forced to learn through obedience (116). In fact, their hedonism is a symbol of freedom; it allows man to avoid yoking others to his will (84). Rather the problem with whim is that it is impulsive and without reason, and so reveals the narcissism of such blindness: the word emphasizes a connection between the imagination and impulsive demands centered in the ego (Shuffleton 312). It is to be irritably preoccupied as with “countless vain projects” which we believe will gain us the favor of authority figures, for example (Emile 229, 341). To grant the child his whims is to offer him the illusion of power, and the educator should therefore never give the child what he asks for when the child asks in such a way to reveal it as a capricious request or one to test his powers (89).

The governor must also manage Emile’s artistic training and his exposure to art objects, and both tasks are prudently filtered through his pragmatism. The boy may sing but only to improve his voice: he must never sing a “bizarre,” passionate, or expressive song (149). When he learns to draw it is only to develop the accuracy of his perception and dexterity; he is never taught to imitate other painters nor allowed to draw what he imagines, and his artwork must attend only to the actual object it represents (144). Having been raised for eighteen years with “only the preservation of a sound judgment and a healthy heart” the governor imagines Emile watching a play: Emile is ashamed to see the “whole of humankind its own dupe, debasing itself in these children’s games” (242). Elsewhere Emile is described as able to turn scenes of great distress and sadness into pleasure at having been spared such misfortune; and it is his lack of familiarity with dramatic literature that frees him from overwhelming pity. At the heart of the governor’s desire to control Emile’s exposure to art is the complex nature of sympathetic identification: will a work of art elicit in him the kind of identification with others which would obscure his “normal existence as (a) citizen,” as Rousseau feared of the theater? (Kelly, Rousseau as Author, 73). The ability of man’s art to incite the swelling of certain emotions
— pride, ambition, violence, envy— is a real danger: it may prematurely awaken and then confuse his passion, making him so narcissistic that he is disinterested in the fates of others. The imagination exposed too early to narrative also creates desires which do not stem from necessity. The governor explains that writing and reason should be a sort of spectacle: language should be as adorned as actors in a play, and one of the main errors of the time is the tendency to “neglect the language of signs that speak to the imagination.” Writing has become too weak: “Always to reason is the mania of small minds. Strong souls have quite another language,” and it is this language that persuades and drives others to action. “Clothe reason in a body if you want to make youth able to grasp it,” he concludes (321-23). Thus the governor makes clear that effective argument and rhetoric should be somewhat performative, and that the more dramatic the spectacle of one’s reason, the more powerful the soul behind it. Yet this is only the case in philosophy or political rhetoric: he denigrates the role of fiction and historical narrative in the child’s education, in an extensive denunciation which becomes part of the impetus for Wordsworth’s Book Five of *The Prelude* on “Books.” We might first begin with case of that female quixotic, Sophie. So enamored is she by the story of Telemachus that frustrates her parents by refusing all men. Though she knows that the story is only a fiction it makes no difference: none of real love’s potential pleasures can match what she holds in her mind.

The account given of Sophie’s imaginative fixation is not entirely without nuance, however, just as at other moments the governor argues that art makes us sensitive to others.

The problem of Sophie’s quixotic imagination doesn’t extend to Emile’s own experience of love. Unlike Sophie, Emile has been kept from books. So in a sense, Sophie is Emile’s first aesthetic object— and she is, initially at least, a fiction created by the governor. The introduction of Sophie has all the markings of a game, and the young Emile is intended to practice his real feelings on a false or imaginary object. Of course, the rules of the game are kept from a key player and the governor is careful to obscure them, to more “easily prevent my young man from

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96 Rousseau himself felt that he had undergone a similar experience of being swept away by the novel’s drama: as he articulates in the *Confessions*, he has previously seen himself as both Roman hero and pastoral lover [“Taking Readers as they Are,” (Kelly 92)].
having illusions about real objects” (329). It is yet another contradiction in the text: by describing an object (a woman) in a way that pleases him, the governor manufactures in Emile a desire for a like object. This is achieved in a manner not unlike art-making: “it is a matter of some skillful descriptions which clothe this imaginary object with features he can grasp with his senses and give it a greater air of truth” (329). The young man will come to think that the governor knows something about his future spouse which is to him as of yet unknown, and this only increases his desire. It is irrelevant, the narrator-governor insists, that the woman doesn’t actually exist. His praise of her makes Emile “disgusted”: rejecting all the real women around him, he prefers the one presented to him by the governor though she be but a likeness of the fictional character. In a fascinating rationalization the governor explains:

And what is true love itself if it is not chimera, lie, and illusion? We love the image we make for ourselves far more the object to which we apply it.... The magic veil drops, and love disappears. But, by providing the imaginary object, I am the master of comparisons, and I easily prevent my young man from having illusions about real objects (329).

For the governor *Emile* the imagination is best used when the individual projects himself in a balanced way into the subjectivity of others. Pity is "the first relative sentiment which touches the human heart according to the order of nature ... no one becomes sensitive until his imagination is animated and begins to transport him out of himself" (222). Sophie’s “extreme sensitivity” may be exactly what makes her active imagination difficult to moderate, but her imagination does not carry away her reason, and it only makes her more attractive. As she puts it, “I know that he is only a fiction. I seek someone who resembles him.... Let us not think that a lovable and virtuous man is only a chimera. He exists, he lives; perhaps he is seeking me” (405). Emile will come to be for her that resemblance, just as he is the resemblance of the ideal pupil for the governor.

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97 Similarly, the educator must “clothe reason in forms which will make it loved... let what you say always have an attraction that forces him to listen to you” (325). Manipulation in rhetoric is described not infrequently in terms of clothes and costumes; one is reminded of Rousseau’s famous, often remarked upon affection for wearing “Armenian dress” late in life.

98 He later adds that it is “enthusiasm” which creates true love, and there is “no enthusiasm without an object of perfection, real or chimerical, but always existing in the imagination.... In love everything is only illusion” (391).
Rousseau’s narrative play in *Emile* and the reception of Rousseau in England indicate opposed attitudes toward the freedom associated with the child’s imagination, specifically as it manifested in actions determined to be impulsive or frivolous. Something about the play impulse rests uneasily within the Romantic sensibility, requiring that depiction of it at its most literal (games, for example; sports, outside play) be carefully managed. The text of *Emile* exhibits play in two primary ways: first are the various depictions of play and games which Emile engages in and his governor orchestrates, and the second is manifest in the narrative framework: Rousseau plays with the role of narration and the dynamic of power between authoritative speaker and receptive reader. That engagement is characterized by antagonism, a dynamic of alternating intimacy and distance that actually allows more room for playing. The narrator instructs the reader / potential educator in the technique of manipulation which feels eerily like a description of narration itself, rendering the reader complicit: “hide yourself,” he writes, “so that he may seek you” (234). He frequently expresses this desire that the governor’s influence be invisible; he explicitly does not want him to be “an author” (248). And here we must address a difficulty with the text. The narrator is initially not the same entity as the governor, though they are sometimes collapsed. The former has created this “master of science” to carry out his precepts but calls him “governor” because he is supposed to instruct rather than be an example. Yet the governor is also positioned similarly to this narrator, this author of a novel in third person limited omniscient perspective, as he knows the thoughts of Emile and Sophie as well as his own. It is, in fact, this reality that allows the governor to easily take advantage of the child, along with the child’s inability to imagine the future (123).

The narrator’s fantasy of the reader’s constant engagement is an important element of this play. Unlike a “relationship,” this “relating,” as Masud Khan would call it, is framed

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99 The text’s intended audience is similarly convoluted: at several points it appears to be parents [“It is to you that I address myself, tender and foresighted mother” (37)], but Rousseau would go on to deny this in future work (Shuffleton 317).
consciously and doesn’t require the surrender from both parties one expects from a relationship (Khan 120). At one point the reader’s imagined skepticism causes a modification in the construction of Sophie’s character, and an admission of error on the author’s part:

Here someone will stop me and ask whether it is nature which prescribes our expending so much effort for the repression of immoderate desires? My answer is no, but ... Let us resuscitate this lovable girl to give her a less lively imagination and a happier destiny. I wanted to depict an ordinary woman, and by dint of elevating her soul I have disturbed her reason. I went astray myself. Let us retrace our steps. Sophie has only a good nature in a common soul. Every advantage she has over other women is the effect of her education (405–06).

But more often the narrator uses the construction of the reader in derogatory ways. For example he frequently makes reference to the “reader’s pupil,” who is used as the antithesis of Emile. With this fiction he demonstrates how the child raised according to present structures falls short: the reader’s pupil is covetous and irritable, vain, whimsical, and desirous. The reader is implicitly to blame: we are one of those loved ones too “eager to serve (the pupil).” By indulging him and immediately satisfying all the pleasures he seeks, we have damned him to a life of prideful dissatisfaction (228-29).

By contrast Rousseau’s governor insists that he simply follows the “easy and voluntary direction of the movements nature asks of children,” only “varying their play to render it more pleasant to them,” but his next sentence mitigates this feeling of ease: “Really, what will they play with that I cannot turn into an object of instruction for them?” (148) And it is difficult to see what is natural about the scenes of games and play, as they are nearly always presented in the context of how they function to educate or build character. We are told that play is entirely for pleasure, that play is entirely natural: childhood is “reason’s sleep,” and one cannot say the child does nothing unless they believe it is nothing to be happy (107). If Rousseau’s explicit statements on the imagination of the child are contradictory, perhaps an initial look at games and literal play will be clarifying— that is, unless play comes from some place other than the imagination. In Book Two the governor asserts that the child’s imagination remains “inactive” at the earliest stages of development and so one may rest assured that the child’s play is driven simply by necessity, a desire for freedom, or to exercise his body, will, or ability:
Whether he is busy or playing, it is all the same to him. His games are his business, and he is aware of no difference. He brings to whatever he does an interest which makes people laugh and a freedom which pleases them, thereby showing at once the turn of his mind and the sphere of his knowledge. Is this not the spectacle appropriate to this age, the charming and sweet spectacle of seeing a pretty child with an eye that is lively and gay, a manner contented and serene, a face open and laughing, doing the most serious things at play or profoundly busy with the most frivolous entertainments? (161)

In these early stages, pleasure in play is a sign of health and a “robustness of spirit”: outside games, races, and a good appetite keeps one healthy and free (153). One need never worry about the antics in this early stage, no matter how performative or deceitful the child’s actions seem. For the freedom and pleasure which characterize this early stage makes the child instinctually friendly and relaxed, at peace, ready to laugh— and incapable of real dissemblance (79).

Rousseau’s insistence on the dormancy of the young child’s imagination signals his tremendous anxiety about it, and the rest of the novel is devoted to the cultivation of Emile’s inevitably dawning imagination. This is supposedly accomplished through the governor’s elaborate concoction of various educational “games.” Two games in particular are characteristic of the whole. The first game in the novel is described as a “night game”: the governor’s goal is to rid Emile of any fear of the dark, and it involves a rather vague plan to send several children out into the evening together (“that not chance be taken with a single child alone”) so that Emile will learn to associate nighttime with amiable company. To make this point, however, the narrator spends some time recounting a terrifying story of being a child and on a dare crossing a graveyard to enter a stone, pitch-dark temple to take from the pulpit a Bible. He is too frightened to do it properly the first time, and so returns; but the effect of the story is not to show the narrator in a triumph of courage. Rather what comes across is a reminder of the tremendous panic that can accompany a child in the dark, making the reader disinclined from seeing the governor’s “game” for Emile as anything but a cruelty. Shortly thereafter is a second game which is similarly disturbing. “I can imagine nothing so pleasant and so useful as such games,” says the governor, “if one is willing to put a bit of skill into organizing them” (137). He goes on to describe what he believes is a delightful diversion: having created an elaborate and “torturous” labyrinth out of the furniture and screens in a room, he places ten or eleven boxes in
various hiding places. One of these boxes contains candy. The governor tells the children how to
find the box with candy, taking care “to make finding it difficult in proportion to their skill,” and
then sends them in:

    Just think of a little Hercules arriving with a box in his hand, full of pride in his
expedition. The box is put on the table and ceremoniously opened. I can already hear the
bursts of laughter, the jeers of the joyous band when, instead of the candies that were
expected, they find, very nicely set out on moss or cotton, a June bug, a snail, a piece of
coal, an acorn, a turnip or some other similar foodstuff. (137)

This is no “frolicsome game”— it’s a dirty trick. The pattern continues: the governor’s games
involve humiliation, anxiety, physical pain, goading and mockery, and are far from free and
enjoyable events. In fact the imposition of some games results in blistering pain, though the
framework of play supposedly “seasons” that agony into something less bitter: they play games
“they would never otherwise endure without shedding torrents of tears. Long fasts, blows,
burns, fatigues of all kinds are the amusements of young savages” (131). The theme of play
trumping pain recurs, and the freedom the governor offers his charge is always described as
abundant recompense for the child’s many discomforts. When the governor observes a band of
children “numb with cold, hardly able to move their fingers” while they play in the snow he does
not call them inside. If he did so, he explains, “they would feel the rigors of constraint a hundred
times more than they feel those of the cold” (87). The only way the reader accepts such scenes as
“natural” is if it we believe it natural to be humiliated or experience terrible pain. The reader is
similarly skeptical that, as the governor would have us believe, the memory of that pain is later
absolved through his introduction of another game.

    The reader becomes increasingly aware that the narrator’s use of the word “natural” is
rather flexible; what’s more, the play he describes is of a specific type and seems to apply only to
certain temperaments. Finally, the educator’s engagement in a child’s play can help shape its
function. Because the child has not yet come upon the age of reason he is amoral, as we
discussed earlier. But the condition is not a neutral one, and it often is accompanied by violent
destruction: the child cannot help but want to smash, and break much of what he sees, because
his energy is “superabundant.” He senses within himself an excess of energy and power, and it is
simply easier to destroy than to create (67). In the first extensive description of a scene of play, then, the governor describes a veritable battle of wills. He has been taking care of a child “full of whims” who on the first day awoke at midnight ready to play: the child leaps from his bed, takes his robe, and calls for the governor, who wakes and lights a candle until the child retires. Two days later the child repeats this act, and receives no impatient reprimand but a warning: “I said to him in a deliberate tone, ‘My little friend, this is all very well, but do not try it again.’” The child’s curiosity is piqued by this and he rises again the following night, saying he is unable to sleep. “Too bad, (the governor) replied, and kept quiet.” Suddenly and firmly refusing to give into the child’s nighttime wakings, the governor listens as the child “(runs) giddily around the room, yelling, singing, making a lot of noise, purposely bumping into the table and chairs” (121-122). In response the governor puts him in a room without windows and anything to break, and, locking the door without a word, goes back to bed. The child follows this with many other “similar caprices,” and the narrator’s explanation for this is that he is narcissistic and impulsive, thinking only of the immediate moment and believing himself to be the most important person on earth (123).

Games clearly have a socializing function as well, as is especially apparent in the gendered games which are made up for Emile and Sophie. One of the governor’s most important tasks is to monitor how Emile’s social relationships are shaped by play, specifically to keep him from the illusion that all social relationships are within reach. But as always the intent is hidden within the frivolity. Emile “trains” Sophie in matters of music, dance, and song; yet both feel animated not by character building but by “rollicking gaiety,” a feeling of boundless energy which counteracts the otherwise “timid respect of love” (425). Emile becomes Sophie’s governor in the process, “is permitted to be his mistress’s master.”100 Earlier we have been told that if young women are denied play, games, dance, and entertainment, they turn that energy inwards and become “sullen, shrewish, and unbearable” and bear weak sons [the convent is better than

100 This, though later the narrator-governor will say at Emile’s conclusion that Sophie has become his master. It is an indulgent sentiment and another one which we don’t quite believe.
high society for this reason (374, 366)]. Women play more intensely than men, a sign of the “capriciousness and infatuation” which will later make them fickle. Thus they should be allowed to play their games so long as the educators “accustom them to being interrupted in the midst of their games and brought back to their cares without grumbling” (370). The games constructed for Emile and Sophie also often take the form of inciting nostalgia: the recreation of childhood games is to appease Sophie’s family, and Emile flatters Sophie by allowing her to win. Having previously been known for his speed [a quality developed from a competitive game constructed by the governor in previous years (141)], Emile and Sophie race. But this race must give Emile the sense of being a previous childhood game that he now uses for more strategic purposes, and so a cake is placed on the goal “in order to better imitate Emile’s former games (436). The governor’s intent in the earlier races was to teach Emile how to be generous: experiencing the loneliness of eating the cake he’d won without the companionship of his competitors, he begins to share his prize as he becomes more confident in his victories (142). He moves, then, from generosity of substance to generosity of spirit, allowing Sophie to feel that she has won though “Women are not made to run. When they flee, it is in order to be caught” (427).

Because of their social utility that games are frequently a component of adult life in Rousseau’s other works, though it takes varied forms. In the Confessions the game of the cup-and-ball is an escape for the disillusioned adult speaker who seeks to escape the mindless gossip of others: “the only morality within the reach of the present century is the morality of the cup-and-ball,” he writes, and so he carried a cup-and-ball in his pocket everywhere, to assist him in ignoring the absurdities of social life (194-95). In Emile any exclusive or solitary pleasure is the “death of pleasure, games and fun,” leading to bitterness, conflict, jealousy, even imprisonment. Games here are always democratic and inclusive: “If some country celebration brought the inhabitants of the place together, my companions and I would be among the first ones there...... I would join in the refrain of an old rustic song, and I would dance in their barn more gladly than at the opera ball” (352-53).
Shuffleton argues that Rousseau felt it was not the imagination in its natural state which was dangerous. Rather, it was the colonized imagination that was problematic: for example, play with toys which are then connected to television shows, and those in turn to major corporations. Sophie is described as waiting to become a doll, says Shuffleton, and so do we: but “A child whose imagination flourishes uncolonized, on the other hand, is on a promising path to happiness, as a careful reader learns from the education of Emile, Rousseau’s imaginary friend” (321). Importantly, what really makes Emile different from other children is that in midst of his imaginative play he has been taught to think and reason (316). The “reader’s pupil,” by contrast, simply acts as a mirror to the adult world, demonstrating to civilization its many faults: we are naturally hedonistic, amoral, weak, incapable of metaphorical thinking, and exist only in the present (94, 127). Finally, the ability to dissimulate or pretend to be other than what one is, is the phenomenon of an adult imagination. And so we turn to the play that the narrator of Emile performs in the text.

III. Public Spectacles, Private Entertainments: Emile and The Confessions

Unhappy Rousseau! whom in art alone
All climes have honour’d, but no clime would own.101

Christopher Kelly points out that if we treat Emile as a novel as he believes we should, we see that between 1756 and 1762 “Rousseau turned himself from a writer of academic discourses into a novelist” (“Taking Readers as they Are,” 86). Kelly ultimately argues that shift is due to Rousseau’s increasing doubt about a previously articulated philosophical position. If he is correct that reason is no stronger an influence upon man than his passions and if passions are root cause of all rational illuminations, then an argument based solely on reason is unlikely to

encourage readers to balance the two faculties. In short, “Philosophers may require complex argument and citizens clear and simple statements, but children and adults who are like them require stories that gratify their passions even while changing them for the better” (87 - 89). Fair enough. But why write a novel, rather than a play or opera, genres he was more familiar with? On one hand, Kelly says, Rousseau knew that a modern audience would be likely unmoved by the earnestness of his characters, even finding them laughable rather than honorable; though he was trepidatious about the way novels can sweep their readers away in fantasy, it was a better alternative if action and plot remained firmly rooted in reality. And Rousseau would have been disinclined from writing a play because of his published critique of the theater in Lettre a d’Alambert, which argued that the audience of theater masks selfishness by creating the illusion of sociability (Kelly 92-95). "It makes very little difference to me if I have written a novel,” writes Rousseau. “A fair novel it is indeed, the novel of human nature. If it is to be found only in this writing, is that my fault? This ought to be the history of my species. You who deprave it, it is you who make a novel of my book" (qtd. in Kelly 96). One sees here how little distinction he makes between the public and private, precisely because of his own self-aggrandizement: the work becomes a “novel of human nature,” a “history of my species,” and the reader an intimate antagonist, yet one of mythological proportions. For Rousseau the boundary between speaker and audience is always wavering. As he puts it in the Confessions:

Before I go further I must present my reader with an apology... a justification, for the petty details I have just been entering into.... Since I have undertaken to reveal myself absolutely to the public, nothing about me must remain hidden or obscure. I must remain incessantly beneath his gaze, so that he may follow me in all the extravagances of my heart and into every least corner of my life. Indeed, he must never lose sight of me for a single instant, for, I am laying myself sufficiently open to human malice by telling my story without rendering myself more vulnerable by any silence (65).

This passage is not an apology but a demand: I must remain incessantly beneath your gaze, the gaze of all readers throughout time. Do not take your eyes off me. Read every niche of my

102 Kelly also points out that Rousseau always anticipated this result: “In one of his last efforts at a defense of the Discourse, he says, “I know very well that the trouble I am taking is useless, and in my exhortations I don’t have the chimerical pleasure of hoping for the reformation of men.” (88)
heart and examine every detail of my biography. I deserve your attention because I have exposed myself to you.

Emile's version of play, both in the governor's games and in the narration, emblematizes what Matthew Kaiser calls the rhetoric of “play as identity”: when human beings play with one another to “experience a primal, intersubjective sense of belonging.... This rhetoric of play underlies the socially cohesive logic of holiday, feast, public spectacle, and all forms of customary revelry” (119). It informs the intimacy which is created between author and reader and which was so central to Rousseau's aesthetic. The governor even praises Plato's belief that children should be raised by festivals, songs, and pastimes, and he describes the participation of women in public festivals as one of the charms of ancient life (107, 387). Traditionally occupying the status of “low” art, the spectacle/festival, with its Bacchanalian roots, is a social or communal expression of hedonism and dangerous freedom.

Rousseau's praise of community festivals and celebrations work against the Romantic depiction of the public gathering as a sight of idleness and vulgarity at best, or violence and chaos at worst. As an example, I'd like to diverge for a moment in order to examine the world of spectacle in The Prelude. The theatrical world in that text—appearing in marionettes as well as satires and revenge tragedies— is usually accompanied by a crude, belligerent audience. Book Seven includes several such spectacles: descriptions of performances and plays in London which then young Wordsworth attended, and London's most famous spectacle, St. Bartholomew Fair. The poet describes the latter as similar to “times when half the city shall break out / Full of one passion” such as it does for “executions... a street on fire, / Mobs, riots, or rejoicings” (l. 646-49). It is a “hell / For eyes and ears, what anarchy and din / Barbarian and infernal” (l. 661-63). There one can behold the “spectacle”— “A parliament of monsters,” the “blank confusion” that

103 Kaiser's rhetoric of the “play of identity” draws on Huizinga, who traced the appearance of the root of the word “play” (pflegen) in the ceremonial realm by noting where it is used to denote community-oriented celebrations [for example, the Dutch word for marriage—huwelijk—reflects the Middle Low Dutch huweleec or huweleic meaning literally “wedding-play” (41)]. Appropriately for a study of Emile, Huizinga notes that the Greek and Roman unification of gruesome contests with a festival atmosphere, such as in gladiator combat, is one of the more peculiar confluences of meaning encompassed in the word “play” (73).
“jumbled up together” “lays...//The whole creative powers of man asleep” (l. 693-98). In a more measured earlier passage he links the “hubbub” of London to Chaos in Paradise Lost, with a lengthy detail of the pantomimic scenes, panoramas, dancing dogs, miniatures, “singers, ropedancers, giants and dwarfs... / Clowns, conjurors, posture-makers, harlequins” (l. 294-97). The “mechanic artist” that represents in exact miniatures “famous spots and things,” literally reducing grand architecture to small curiosities (l. 266-79). What the young Wordsworth expects of the city are realizations of his “fond imaginations”: infinite streets, innumerable churches, “wilderness of lamps,/ Your gorgeous ladies, fairy cataracts/ And pageant fireworks” (l. 124-35). As when he crosses the Alps his imagination proves more glorious than the reality. Of the plays, they are “antics and buffoonery” (l.464). These spectacles are “crude Nature work(ing) in untaught minds,” not quite “unamusing” or a “mean delight” but pleasing only to the mind that is feminine and immature: “sportive and alert” like a “kitten when at play” (l.473-474). Even the memories take on a “girlish childlike gloss / Of novelty” (l. 479-80). While Wordsworth speaks tenderly of the entertainments of his youth there is no doubt that it is a time of superficial and indulgent pleasures. “Life then was new,” he tells us, indulgently: “The senses easily pleased” (l.440-41). This entertainment robs man of his creativity. Even solely recalling the scenes causes him to forget his own creative powers: “when I think / Of these I feel the imaginative power / Languish within me” (l. 500-02). The theme continues, and idleness and theatricality become increasingly sinister as the narrator matures. In Book Ten the French Revolution is disparagingly compared to cheap theatre: the sun “turned into a gewgaw, a machine,/ Sets like an opera phantom” (l. 939-40). In later prose works Wordsworth opposes the “noisy pleasure” offered by pantomime, farces, and puppet shows to the peaceful nature one sees along the margin of Windemere, saying wryly that “the crowd of spectators who partake of your enjoyment will, by their presence and acclamations, enhance it” (Prose Works 157). His

\[104\] Much of the play is deadened from these scenes of enjoyment because of the imposition of capital: these ballads include one that in fact is “in masquerade” (disguises the goods actually for sale). Indeed, the business of the festival strikes from it all of its joy and spontaneity, as “the antic (strive) to outstrip each other” within the “fray or brawl” of spectators.
point is that this “enhanced pleasure” is false, less profound than the solitary meditation on the landscape.

Play for Wordsworth is properly part of the child’s community. It is not for the reflective adult. Collective adult play is in fact usually deceptive and troubling. The mind awakened by these public celebrations is far from the masculine depths of the poet’s adult, mature imagination: when not implicitly linked to chaos or exhaustive commerce, these festivals are superficial, feminine, and lack the quiet rigor of the poet’s intellect. What’s more, spectacle is for Wordsworth defined by its public nature. “Personal spectacle” may seem an oxymoronic term, but I use it here to distinguish it from the public spectacle, festival, or fair that I have been discussing. To make a spectacle of oneself is to be an object of curiosity, or contempt; to become a public show. It is also to be used as, or to use oneself as an instrument through which to create a show: it is to be an actor. The personal spectacle often involves a narrator who recounts personal episodes in which they are revealed in an intimate, eccentric, or compromised light, while directly addressing the reader as representing a generalized social body. By so doing it reveals how we incorporate aspects of the social and political worlds into our psyche and the creative underpinnings of such an act: the narrator develops elaborate and dramatic atmospheres within which he is the central actor, carefully and eagerly watched. In Rousseau, in the Gothic writers, and in the Romantics various dramatic tropes and elements of fantasy were used to depict a narrator “carried away” by sentiment, with the reader expected to follow suit.

Equally, however, the personal spectacle was used to indicate an under-developed, inferior, fragmented or immature sensibility: the individual ungrounded by experience rather than heightened by it. We especially see this in texts attributed to the “fancy” or the feminine, young, or otherwise compromised. In Wordsworth one never makes a spectacle of one’s private or personal life, without carefully qualifying it through the refining lens of the poetic imagination. There is a striking scene in The Prelude in which Wordsworth writes of having seen

105 Confessions of an English Opium Eater is an example of personal spectacle; “Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation” is another excellent example.
a child in a theater placed on the board usually used to carry refreshments for the crowd. He
describes the child as “in face a cottage rose / Just three parts blown.” He is caressed, given
treats, surrounded happily by slurs and the “ribaldry” of the “chance spectators, chiefly dissolute
men / And shameless women” (l.354-360). The poet recalls this memory as vividly as if he was
presently watching him, but in his memory the tone of the event changes substantially. There
the child sits “Among the wretched and the falsely gay, / Like one of those who talked with hair
unsinged / Amid the fiery furnace” (l.398-400). Ever since he first saw this child, he adds, the
child has appeared to him in visions “as if embalmed / By Nature.” The child is unharmed by the
“fiery furnace” but not because he triumphs over it—rather he has been offered another kind of
death, “embalmed” in the poet’s memory and the poem by “Nature.” This is the spectacular form
in which he may survive—as a vision for the poet to recount: “beauty is such excess / Adorned
him in that miserable place” (l. 406-07). In Anthropology for a Pragmatic Point of View Kant
explains why “old people prefer comedy, even burlesque” while young people love to perform
tragic drama. Young people prefer drama for the same reason children are moved to risk danger:
they are driven by an instinctual desire to test their powers. This certainly seems to be the case
for the depictions of play in Books One through Three of The Prelude (1805), except that Kant
concludes that the glee of youth leaves no room for melancholy, no matter how distressing and
fearful the drama. Children are very easily put back into a cheerful mood whereas “with old
people these impressions are not so easily blotted out, and they cannot bring back the cheerful
mood in themselves so easily” (162). The cognitive dissonance between the tragedy of old age,
and the play in comedy, burlesque, festival, and spectacle, is too distressing: it is Wordsworth’s
“weary throng” facing the “string of dazzling wares” (l. 71-74).

Rousseau is by contrast the master of the personal spectacle, and his narrators are often
a raree or peep-show of their own. It is this which will make him so susceptible to the
accusations of vanity we considered earlier. Spectacle provided Rousseau’s narrators with a way
to project his mind and character onto the world he created. In The Confessions Rousseau asks
the reader if we have ever been to the opera in Italy. Here as elsewhere, spectacle is for Rousseau inseparable from the written word. During scene changes, he writes:

...wild and prolonged disorder reigns in their great theaters. The furniture is higgledy-piggledy; on all sides things are being shifted and everything seems upside down; it is as if they were bent on universal destruction; but little by little everything falls into place, nothing is missing, and, to one’s surprise, all the long tumult is succeeded by a delightful spectacle. That is almost exactly the process that takes place in my brain when I want to write. If I had known in the past how to wait and then put down in all their beauty the scenes that painted themselves in my imagination, few authors would have surpassed me (Confessions, 113).

In other moments he writes with great affection for what he calls the “language of signs,” of costumes, ovations, thrones, and crowns. The Romans got it right, he tells us: “Different clothing according to ages and according to stations.... Everything with them was display, show, ceremony, and everything made an impression on the hearts of the citizens” (322).106 In Emile the public spectacle offers the governor the opportunity to define and reinforce social lines in order to ensure a deeper civility; he is easily able to corral the public spectacle. A feast, a long procession, the gaiety of “rustic labors, and frolicsome games,” is a comforting event because it reveals how we prefer ourselves to all else. We take comfort that others feel the same, preferring their own selves to us: “From this cordial and moderate familiarity there would arise—without coarseness, without falseness, and without constraints— a playful conflict more charming than politeness and more likely to bind together our hearts” (352).

In a different way, personal affectation become spectacle when it takes on a sexual or corporeal form.107 In Book Three of the Confessions is an extraordinary description of a deeply

106 My interest in this essay is considering how Rousseau handles spectacles which occur within prose, and so I do not consider Lettre à d’Alembert sur les spectacles (1889). But of course Rousseau was famously ambivalent about the theater, and wrote many works for the stage. He writes of having composed an opera that “only cost me five or six weeks’ work, (yet) brought me in almost as much money, in spite of my misfortune and stupidities, as Emile has done to this day, though it cost me twenty years of meditation, and three years to write” (Confessions 360).

107 As Joshua Wilner writes in Feeding on Infinity: “But beyond this familiar dialectic of self-reference, Rousseau’s figure of inwardness also functions as an intensification of Montaigne’s location of the writer’s body as the figural center of attention. For the figure of the unveiled interior repeats as it inverts the body’s relation to the surrounding world, from which it is differentiated but on which it depends for its existence, and makes of the body’s surface a Janus-like entity, one side turned inward and in communication with the encrypted self, the other turned outward toward the world” (8).
exhibitionistic performance by our narrator in public: “... being unable to satisfy my desires, I excited them by the most extravagant behaviour. I haunted dark alleys and lonely spots where I could expose myself to women from afar off in the condition in which I should have liked to be in their company” (90). At the end of the memoir Rousseau assumes Armenian costume, ostensibly to help him hide his catheter, but it makes his body quite a spectacle, and one that was not insignificant. Questioned about it by a Parisian reporter, he replied: “I’ve thought as a man, I’ve written as a man and I have been called bad. Well, now I shall be called a woman.” Voltaire, angered by London’s warm welcome of Rousseau, later wrote: “I do not know whether he was chased from Paris, as the rumor has it here, or whether he left on all fours or dressed in his Armenian robe” (Zaretsky and Scott 115-16). In London and elsewhere the costume becomes his mark; he is chased as though a “were-wolf” and crowds follow him on his daily walks, but he refuses to relinquish it, viewing that as a sign of cowardice. Shortly after this example, we are given another anecdote including an embarrassing physical detail. Having so dramatically pleased the public with a musical composition, Rousseau is invited to visit the king. The idea troubles him: he thinks only of his “frequent need to retire (urinate) which had caused me much suffering on that evening in the theatre, and which (would) afflict me next day when I was in the gallery or the King’s apartment, among all those great people, waiting for His Majesty... (this fear) prevented me from staying in a room with ladies when the doors were closed” (354). The scene denigrates the King, and all those waiting for His Majesty, even as it appears a humble and risky disclosure of physical weakness.

These moments of personal spectacle allow the narrator to emphasize his physical presence in the reader’s imagination, to become even more aggressively present. Exhibitionism is about the spotlight, about the power of being in it. In the scene in which he exposes himself in the alleyway the narrator asserts that what the women saw “was nothing obscene, I was far from thinking of that; it was ridiculous. The absurd pleasure I got from laying myself before their eyes is quite indescribable” (90). “Laying myself before their eyes” is obviously intended to resonant with the entire project of the Confessions, for the text is entirely a laying oneself before the
reader’s eyes. In fact, this metaphorical pairing makes the reader the woman to whom Rousseau exposes himself to, emphasizing the sexuality of narrative spectacle. It also reminds us of another sexual performance, this time of submission. Rousseau describes kneeling, unseen, on the carpet before a woman he admired. Eventually, she sees him in the bedroom mirror. Thus the spectacle is tripled: in the eyes of the woman, the mirror, and the eyes of the reader. It is described as a performance—a “lively dumb-show—despite his violent and emotional response [he “trembled, cried out, and threw (him)self down”(79)]. In yet another passage conflating performance and spectacle with sexual receptivity, Rousseau describes the performance of one of his musical compositions. The female members of the audience are reportedly quite swept away by it: “And yet I am sure that sexual passion counted for more at that moment than the vanity of an author; if there had only been men present I am positive that I would not have been devoured, as I continuously was, by the desire to catch with my lips the delicious tears I had evoked” (353). It is one of many scenes of mutual intoxication: Rousseau describes creating something that moves his audience to great passion, and the exchange is described in an indubitably sexual diction. As readers we are aligned with his audience: the spectacle of his retelling of the musical performance is intended to elicit a similar response.

The Confessions ends with a dramatic scene of the narrator reading the scandalous text aloud to a roomful of distinguished persons. His tone is defiant:

I have told the truth. If anyone knows anything contrary to what I have here recorded, though he prove it a thousand times, his knowledge is a lie and an imposture; and if he refuses to investigate and inquire into it during my lifetime he is no lover of justice or of truth.....Thus I concluded my reading, and everyone was silent. Mme d’Egmont was the only person who seemed moved. She trembled visibly but quickly controlled herself, and remained quiet, as did the rest of the company. Such was the advantage I derived from my reading and my declaration (606).

It is his quintessential move: a dramatic spectacle elicits from the reader the feeling that they, too, are in the room, under the inquisitive and searching eye of Rousseau. We feel suddenly under his gaze, which undermines our ability to reflect on what we’ve read. Do we believe him? Are we lovers of justice or of truth? Would we too “tremble visibly”? Would we remain quiet? By creating such a scene—one that is indeed worthy of the stage— in a context as intimate as the
Confessions, Rousseau dismantles and exceeds our expectations. It is like the actor’s sharp turn to the audience in a soliloquy, or the aside a player makes to the audience in the midst of a scene. He urges our sympathy, our laughter; he puts us on the spot from the very position of the spotlight. Rather than calling attention to the text as a construction these moments actually reinforce the narrator’s authority.

The personal spectacle as it appears in Emile is more complex than in the Confessions. The governor is a proxy of the narrator who is a proxy of Rousseau, and that governor experiences some events as a decoy for Emile. Sophie offers Emile “countless tender caresses” through the governor—“she would rather die,” he assures us, than “give (them) to him directly” (424). She even refuses to take Emile’s arm on a stroll, instead preferring the governor’s. Here and elsewhere the governor and Emile blend together— at another moment the when the narrator is tired he suppresses the feeling because Emile hardly gets weary (412). In a similar blurring of lines the narrator asserts his rights to Emile over Emile’s biological father. The father has “confid(ed) his son to me” and in so doing “yields his place... he substitutes my right for his.” He concludes “I am Emile’s true father; I made him a man” (407).

In closing I’d like to point to a text so obviously influenced by Rousseau’s work, De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium Eater. De Quincey’s tale takes several cues from Rousseau, perhaps most obviously in his sudden direct address to the reader. In the introduction to his Confessions he tells the reader his disclosures are “spontaneous and extra-judicial confessions... for any such acts of gratuitous self-humiliation from those who can be supposed in sympathy with the decent and self-respecting part of society, we must look to French literature” (1). Unlike Wordsworth, De Quincey adapts Rousseau depiction of the shameful or sexual confession; his memoir too includes an element of sexualizing the reader. There is an early discussion of self-conquest versus self-indulgence in which he asserts “Guilt, therefore, I do not acknowledge” (4). He includes the reader in his musings about the experience

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108 This text was also inspired in part by Wordsworth’s then-unpublished Prelude, which De Quincey read in manuscript as early as 1811.
of reading another person’s confessions, saying “As creating some previous interest of a personal
sort in the confessing subject, apart from the matter of the confessions, which cannot fail to
render the confessions themselves more interesting” (7). In a particularly Rousseauean scene De
Quincey writes of composing the letters of two women who want to write to their loves:

In the midst of their confusion and blushes, whilst dictating, or rather giving me general
instructions, it did not require any great penetration to discover that what they wished
was, that their letters should be as kind as was consistent with proper maidenly pride. I
contrived so to temper my expressions, as to reconcile the gratification of both feelings...
they were astonished at my having so readily discovered them (15).

In this narrative move De Quincey implies that he writes of the reader’s secret thoughts as well:
we enjoy the confessions as we read them, the vicarious intoxicating philosophizing which
accompanies the opium high; we relish his exploits and are paralleled with the women who are
similarly excited. By demonstrating his skill in writing letters based on fantasy which
nonetheless elicit strong emotions, he communicates to us how keenly he can sense what it is
that a reader wants. Unlike Rousseau, however, De Quincey invites us to create the text with
him: to rise and paint into the room in which he sits an “eternal tea-pot” (60). De Quincey
departs from Rousseau by inviting the reader who receives his confession to consider their
imaginative participation—the voluntary nature of reading itself. In its own way, this renders
even more apparent the text as a construction: “Now then, reader, from 1813, where all this time
we have been sitting down and loitering-- rise up, if you please, and walk forward about three
years more. Now draw up the curtain, and you shall see me in a new character” (54).

Rousseau’s work invites the critique of vanity, and not only because he so often declares
himself an altogether extraordinary personage, as excellent a man as ever lived. One of Burke’s
scathing reviews pointed to the incredible irony of the author of *Emile* having put his children in
the foundling home:

It is that new-invented virtue [vanity] which your masters canonize that led their moral
hero constantly to exhaust the stores of his powerful rhetoric in the expression of
universal benevolence, whilst his heart was incapable of harboring one spark of common
parental affection.... He melts with tenderness for those only who touch him by the
remotest relation, and then, without one natural pang, casts away, as a sort of offal and
Hazlitt’s response would be that the narcissism of Rousseau may free us by keeping us from our own narcissism (Duffy 77). As with the gay procession that allows us to see how we prefer ourselves to others and others prefer themselves to us, Rousseau’s narcissism is a comfort and entertainment, a demonstration of the author’s power, and a display of the reader’s sympathy at once. In this charitable if perverse reading, Rousseau makes of himself a spectacle in authorship and life, a sort of performance which liberates the reader from his own boredom and self-interest. It worked then and works now: he controls our entertainment and education as he controls Emile’s, and all the while we think we are just being told a story.

The overlap between personal and public spectacle appears in a remarkable scene in his memoir *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. Having simultaneously admitted regretting his decision to give up his children and defended it as an effort to prevent them being made into “monsters” by their mother and her family, Rousseau transitions into a scene of himself and his wife buying wafers for a passing group of young children led by a governess. They are later at La Chevrette, the home of Mme d’Epinay, where Rousseau leaves an elaborate festival, preferring to instead visit a county fair. He watches as a young man buys gingerbread and, breaking it up into pieces, throws it into a crowd of “yokels” who race and knock each other down for a scrap. Though initially he is less amused by this than the others in attendance, Rousseau eventually follows suit, buying a bushel of apples from a little girl and inviting her to distribute them among the boys. He does so not because he is gratified at having caused the children joy. Rather, he writes, he experienced a strange and “disinterested” enjoyment which is “independent of the part I play in it, for I have always been very attracted by the pleasure of seeing cheerful faces in popular rejoicings.” It is in other words, an aesthetic experience: “I, who shared in this joy at so little cost to myself,” he writes, “had the added pleasure of feeling that I was the author of it” (146).

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Chapter Four

The Ethics of Play and Silence: Lying Fallow in Shelley’s Julian and Maddalo

Let not high verse, mourning the memory
Of that which is no more, or painting’s woe
Or sculpture, speak in feeble imagery
Their own cold powers. Art and eloquence,
And all the shows o’ the world are frail and vain
To weep a loss that turns their lights to shade.\(^{110}\)

If words be not ... an incarnation of the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely will they prove an ill gift; such a one as those possessed vestments, read of in the stories of superstitious times, which had power to consume and to alienate from his right mind the victim who put them on. Language, if it do not uphold, and feed, and leave in quiet, like the power of gravitation or the air we breathe, is a counter-spirit, unremittingly and noiselessly at work, to subvert, to lay waste, to vitiate, and to dissolve.\(^{111}\)

“Eloquence is heard; poetry is overheard”: so states Mill in “Poetry and its Varieties.” Eloquence assumes an audience, he tells us; it works to influence them, move them to action or “(court) their sympathy.” The strange thing about poetry, by contrast, is that the poet composes with no awareness of a listener: “Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and embodying itself in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind” (71). This unconsciousness is not entirely beneficial, however. According to Plato it can lead to deception, lawlessness, and chaos. Enthralled with his ability to imitate the poet feels that “nothing (is) beneath him”: he mimics animals, musical instruments, mechanical operations, thunderstorms, and subjectivities without discernment (86).\(^{112}\) The trepidation about poetry’s power is rooted in a fear that the power of


\(^{112}\) Keats embraces this aspect of the poet’s character of the poet, delighting as it does in conjuring both “light and shade...high or low...mean or elevated.” He adds, “What shocks the Virtuous Philosopher, delights the camelion poet” (Keats’s Letters, Letter to Richard Woodhouse, October 27, 1818).
mimesis obscures the apprehension of truth (at best) or corrupts its listener (at worst). The imitation of “thunder, the din of wind and hail” is apparent in Shelley’s *Julian and Maddalo: A Conversation*, both literally as setting and metaphorically in the Maniac’s “mad” speech. The poem engages several central themes in Shelley’s work, including the primacy of the role of sympathy and feeling in ethics, and it is often characterized as an unusually pessimistic tale. While this may be true I do not believe it is because (as so often asserted) the philosophical argument remains unresolved and the Maniac’s end is so tragic. Rather the poem presents its reader with two modes of creative expression: the expression of the self in words and the idle, silent play of a child, and what we find to our surprise is that the poetic faculty does not enable but rather obfuscates sympathetic intersubjectivity. The very loquaciousness of Julian, Maddalo, and the Maniac is symptomatic of an exhausting need to be understood, to persuade; yet overwhelmed by their own rapid speech, they ironically fail to realize how language actually confounds that desire. Thus poetry is sharply and unfavorably contrasted with the silent, directionless play of the girl, which enables her capacity for sympathy and dissolution into her environment. This chapter traces the poem’s complex framework of temporality, creativity, and failed intersubjective exchange, working to uncover the moral implications of each character’s mode of expression as it manifests in an individual’s experience of time. In this poem, to be caught up in linguistic expression means to be out of sync with time—to be breathless and oblivious within one’s temporal experience. By contrast, the girl is naturally integrated in her temporal experience; her play with Julian marks not only a welcome suspension in speech but a concomitant slowing of the experience of time.

The 617 line poem was likely written in Este where Shelley rented a villa lent to him by Byron, with a last revision in 1819. Originally Shelley intended it to appear in Leigh Hunt’s *The Examiner*; later he decided on publication by Charles Ollier. Enclosing the poem in a letter to Hunt, Shelley expressed his desire that the poem be published anonymously and he made a
similar insistence to Ollier. The poem, however, did not appear in print during his lifetime; it was first published in *Posthumous Poems*, a collection edited by his wife Mary, in 1824. The titular characters are introduced to us in a preface written in the first person which briefly describes the history and characteristics of each. About the Maniac the speaker “can give no information” though he does offer general conjectures: the man was very “cultivated and amiable” when in his right mind and his madness is clearly due to his heartbreak (121).

At the poem’s start we see the two friends riding horses on the banks of the Lido. A lively debate energizes them as they ride: Julian, an atheist, argues that man is capable of controlling his destiny if only he could become master of his own will and mind. Maddalo sees the world in colder terms, with man subject to the whims of the universe; he points to an asylum on their way to support his point. They part, the argument unresolved. Early the next morning Julian visits Maddalo’s home in the interest of resuming the conversation. While he waits for Maddalo to rise Julian sits on the floor with his daughter, and together they playfully “(roll) billiard balls about.” Julian fondly praises the infant, who he had first met some six months ago. When Maddalo awakens Julian immediately returns to the terms of the debate, using the daughter’s simple happiness in play as an example of the ideal state man is capable of. In response Maddalo says he “talks Utopia”; he reminds him of a man who also had lofty ideals and was similarly distraught at humankind’s failure to achieve its potential. He asks Julian if he would like to join him to visit the man in the asylum where he now resides. Just a few months before this man was functionally sane, known in Venice and to Maddalo; his madness seems something of a mystery. Julian agrees and they take their gondolas to the island.

Upon embanking they hear the terrible sounds of the lunatics around them as well as some musical sounds coming from the Maniac’s apartment which lift their spirits. Unbeknownst to the Maniac, Julian and Maddalo sneak into his apartment; it is outfitted with books, artwork,

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114 The asylum which Julian and Maddalo visit was likely based on San Servolo, which was originally a monastery, but was converted into the Central Mental Hospital for the area in 1804.
and instruments such as he would have enjoyed in his previous more lucid state; Maddalo’s generosity is the reason for his comfort. The apartment is so close to the seashore that the Maniac, who has left his windows open, is sprayed with the saltwater. Unobserved, the two men listen to the Maniac’s extensive and fragmented lament about a lover who scorned him. Finally exhausted by his speech and sobs, he collapses into a deep slumber; Julian and Maddalo weep silently in sympathy, never having been observed. They exit the apartment having forgotten the original debate entirely. When they return to Maddalo’s they eat a fine meal and talk until dawn, speculating about the Maniac’s lot. So engaged in each other are they, in fact, that Julian doesn’t realize the evening has passed. Julian then assures the reader that he wishes he could have stayed to help take care of the Maniac but because of duties elsewhere he is obligated to leave Venice; the subsequent lines make clear he is actually quite at liberty. When Julian returns to Venice some years later, his friend Maddalo is gone but his daughter is there. She is graceful and hospitable and again lavishly praised by Julian. He inquires about the Maniac and the daughter tells him that the woman who was the source of his original dismay returned to him only to leave once again. The single detail she recalls is being a girl and playing with the lady’s shawl. Yet again Julian asks about the parting [“How did it end?” (l.608)]; Maddalo’s daughter asks him why what she has told him is not enough. He repeats his inquiry, “Child, is there no more?” (l.609). She asks that he let her be as silent as the years which mark their memory and “the marble where their corpses lie” (l.615). Having learned that the Maniac and the lady are dead, Julian is yet unsatisfied: still he questions her. Finally she tells him what he most wants to know: “how / All happened” (l.617). Julian closes the poem without sharing this information, saying only “the cold world shall not know” (l.616).

115 Critics are divided as to whether the object of the Maniac’s affection is singular, double, or even three figures, separating his references to the “spirit’s mate” (l.338); “Death’s dedicated bride,” (l.384), and the “child” (l.484), as potentially discrete individuals, rather than varying perspectives on the same individual. Still others see the Maniac’s love object as an ideal projection, like the spirit Alastor pursues (Wasserman 77; Hirsch 27). Because of the final scene in which the woman tells Julian of the Maniac’s end, identifying the return of a single lover, I am inclined to disagree with readings that argue for more than one love object.
One thinks of the Maniac’s metric, heightened speech and Julian and Maddalo who overhear him in Mill’s assertion that poetry is “feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude.” But the Maniac hallucinates figures to address, fantastic audiences to receive his words (“death’s dedicated bride,” the child). His vacillation between content-based speech (about the lover and her scorn) and speech about writing itself—the spoken and written word—underlines his consciousness of an audience and even reader. His speech has the pleading tone of one hoping to “court sympathy” or move to passion, even if the listener is a figment of his imagination. Julian and Maddalo’s conversation is likewise a contest to influence the other’s (and by extension the reader’s) belief. Even the narrator of the Preface assumes an audience: specifically a reader who will be engrossed enough to offer judgment as to Julian’s character. The speech of these characters is not emotion confessed in solitude; rather it is feeling openly expressed in the effort to judge, condemn, or persuade. Only the girl has the “utter unconsciousness of a listener” and the symbols which accompany her appearances— the billiard balls, a reference to Hume’s first principle, and the woman’s shawl, a redemptive lifting of the veil, as frequently used in the Defence to emblematize the virtues of the poetic spirit — emphasize her importance, and are potential representations of the poet’s feeling in the “exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind.”

Unlike Julian and Maddalo, the reader rarely feels that our presence as audience is unnoticed. Our readerly attention is often called to the poem’s construction, either directly or indirectly, and our suspension of disbelief is frequently destabilized due to Shelley’s deployment of literary allusions, biographical parallels, and liberal use of the pathetic fallacy. Attempting

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116 Shelley writes that the words of poets “unveil the permanent analogy of things by images which participate in the life of truth.” In Homer “the truth and beauty of friendship, patriotism, and persevering devotion to an object, were unveiled to the depths in these immortal creations.” “Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world” and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar. It “strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms” (Shelley’s Poetry and Prose, 524-535).

117 The poem incorporates a number of allusions to King Lear (“what may tame the heart / must leave the understanding free” and “when the mind is free, the body is delicate”) as well as to Milton’s Paradise Lost, Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, and Dante’s The Inferno.
to make meaning of the philosophical question which ostensibly drives the poem, we are similarly tripped up by ambiguous articulations, shifts of point of view and verb tense, and sentences fragmented by asterisks. Our assessment is further stymied by the overlapping characterization of Julian, Maddalo, and the Maniac, who blend into the sort of composite figure we might more properly expect of dreams—sometimes discrete, sometimes collapsed, and always talking. Because speech is conflated in the text with writing and poetry [the Maniac references writes as he speaks; Maddalo says he is a wretched man “cradled into poetry by wrong, / They learn in suffering what they teach in song”(l.544-45)] the reader becomes increasingly suspicious of the written and spoken word. The effect of these writerly sleights of hand is that we cannot help but wonder whether, as Plato argued, there is something troubling or even deceptive about the poetic faculty.

The shared idle play in the scene between Julian and Maddalo’s daughter is posited as antidote to this overwhelming web of words. Radically contrasted with the performative quality of the Maniac’s hyperbolic speech and the intellectual shrewdness of Julian and Maddalo, her quiet appearance offers the briefest of glimpses of a creativity which is contingent on the acknowledgement that we cannot apprehend the consciousness, much less the temporally unstable will, of another human being, even through their own articulation—nor can we articulate our own. The girl’s play with Julian, her memory of playing with the Maniac’s lover’s shawl (which offers nothing to further the plot, and thus reifies her status as outsider), and her reluctance to tell Julian of the Maniac’s end symbolize the beauty of a shared creativity which has no purpose. Her later appearance at the poem’s conclusion reinforces a reading that this play— so obviously antithetical to the directed and self-interested speech of the three main figures—is the only mode of creative expression which enables empathetic, moral understanding.

I. “Ever-shifting sand”: The characters and their readers

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I’d first like to briefly survey the existing criticism which surrounds this poem. Doing so allows us to see how and in what ways the critical web is preoccupied with identifying the characters and their supposed analogues in real and literary life. For perhaps more than any other of Shelley’s major works, one is tempted to go sleuthing for the real world clues to *Julian and Maddalo*. There is no dearth of evidence linking Shelley’s life and social circle to the cast of the otherwise fantastical poem. The poet was circumspect to his editors about the date and circumstances of its composition. In a letter to Leigh Hunt Shelley makes a flippant yet melancholy comment about the enclosed poem, saying “I would not put my name to it. I leave you to judge whether it is best to throw it into the fire, or to publish it. So much for self—self, that burr will stick to one.” The accepted critical view is that Julian, an atheist, represents Shelley and Maddalo is the proud, vain, and cynical Byron. To support the assertion that Julian is Shelley readers have paired the opening of the poem, with its ecstatic yet unsettling description of the ride of the “barren” Lido, to a letter to Mary on August 23, 1818 in which Shelley describes a gondola ride to a “long sandy island” and a horse ride with Byron (though the conversation was more personal and less lofty than that which launches the poem, consisting “in histories of his wounded feelings... and great professions of friendship and regard”). To support their assertion that Shelley is Julian many readers have also pointed to “Athanase: A Fragment,” a poem composed within a year of *Julian and Maddalo* that Shelley wished to appear alongside it (also anonymously).

The lyrical quality of his fragmentary rant, the music with which he is associated, and his excess sensitivity has led to the Maniac being frequently read as a generalized poet, the poet

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120 The poem was first published in Shelley’s *Posthumous Poems* with Mary’s retitle “Prince Athanase.” There are parallels between the two texts: among others, the poem includes the debate of Athanase’s friends over the unknown cause of the young man’s sorrows.
Tasso, the pale visionary who appears in so much of Shelley’s work, or Shelley himself. Critics also point to the folded leaf of paper which the Maniac scribbles upon and the fact that the soliloquy is given to us in metric speech to support this reading. Readings which interpret Julian and the Maniac (or Shelley/Julian and the Maniac) as in fact parallel figures also focus on image motifs which unite the two: the imagery of the Lido which Julian finds so enchanting is echoed in the description of the madhouse: the “bare strand,” “matted” weeds, “salt ooze,” and “uninhabitable” seaside resonate with “oozy stairs,” “woods on a wrecked palace,” “tangled locks,” and so on (cite). Additionally, both Maniac and Julian work to separate feeling from intellect, though the Maniac fails where Julian succeeds because Julian does not attempt to subject his idealism to real-world problems. If the Maniac is intended to be the figure of the poet, however, then his speech is easily read as indicative of the dangers of poetic inspiration rather than its ultimate failure; I will argue the latter reading is more persuasive.

When the Maniac is read through the lens of Shelley’s biography his “uncommunicable woe” (l.343) is considered a reflection of the poet’s grief over the loss of his daughter and marital estrangement from Mary (who blamed him for the loss), or as a voicing of distress over his divorce from Harriet and her subsequent suicide. These same critics have assumed that Shelley’s desire to have the poem printed anonymously stems from his anxiety that Mary would recognize his voice in the passages in which the Maniac laments (and attacks) his estranged lover—a reading loosely supported by Mary’s apparent ignorance about the poem’s existence (Bieri 145).

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121 See Frederick Burwick: *Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination*. University Park: Pennsylvania UP, 1996. Byron wrote “Lament of Tasso.” In November 1818, Shelley sent Peacock a letter, enclosing a splinter from the door of Tasso’s prison cell; he intended to write “a tragedy on the subject of Tasso’s madness” through 1819 (Letter XII, Nov 8, 1818). Two fragments remain: “Scene from ‘Tasso’ and “Song of ‘Tasso.” Though beyond the scope of this essay, it is also interesting to note that Tasso’s most famous work is *Discourse on the Art of the Dialogue*, which Shelley surely read (Wasserman 77, Hirsch 28).

122 Interestingly Shelley’s asserted that in this poem he especially worked to keep the language “conversational” if not “vulgar”: “I have employed a certain familiar style of language to express the actual way in which people talk with each other whom education and a certain refinement of sentiment have placed above the use of vulgar idioms... (including) the vulgarity of rank and fashion (as well as poverty)”(letter to Leigh Hunt). Yet the lyric in which the conversation is translated is obviously— both translated and verse—and heightened for dramatic effect, and, well, written.
In his excellent treatment of these questions Reiman asks whether portions of Shelley’s letter to Hunt about the poem’s composition on August 15th, 1819 “might not also be premeditated set-pieces rather than fully candid commentary”; he does so in service of an argument that Shelley’s identification with the Maniac would have been so apparent to those around him that he felt it necessary to distance himself as the author and preempt a biographical reading. In the same letter Shelley describes the Maniac as “in some degree pointing from nature, but with respect to time and place, ideal,” which Reiman reads as “much like the modern novelist claiming that resemblance to particular persons living or dead is purely coincidental” (859). Ultimately he returns to “Athanese: A Fragment” and Julian and Maddalo to argue that Athanese, Julian, and the Maniac form a complete self-portrait at the poet in a state of extreme melancholy in the latter half of 1819, specifically representing two stages of his adjustment to his estrangement from Mary. Though titled A Conversation he reads the poem as an unforgiving, mocking, and self-critical dramatic monologue on the part of Shelley, with the Maniac and Maddalo functioning as dramatic foils to lay bare Julian / Shelley’s narcissism and naiveté and the selfish implications of his idealism (318-22). The Maniac’s speech is a portrait of the “inner side of Shelley” whereas the portrait of Athanese is the outer, depicting his isolation from Mary, the Hunts, Charles Ollier, Peacock and Godwin (320-22). Hirsch makes a similar argument that Shelley, not the poem, is “the text to be read and understood” (14).

The “who’s who” of the text, then, is a level of engagement which critics eagerly participate in. Like a matryoshka, the text offers us glimpses of figures within figures, tempting us to attempt to trace each parallel, potential origin, or poetic / allusive equivalent. One might say that the critical response has attempted to grapple with the lack of resolution in the poem, both the unfinished tale of the Maniac and Julian and Maddalo’s abandonment of their debate,

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123 Letter to Leigh Hunt, Letter XXI, August 15, 1819. Shelley also wrote to his publisher Ollier, “Have you seen my poem, Julian and Maddalo? ... I mean to write three other poems... the subjects of which will be all drawn from dreadful or beautiful realities, as that of this was” (Letter to Charles Ollier, Letter II, December 1819, 164, 539).

124 Here he consciously references and offers a counterpoint to Wasserman’s influential reading that “we, the readers, then, are in the end the text to be read and understood” (92).
by identifying new puzzles: the tripartite projection of Shelley, the doubling or tripling of imagery and characters, the reflection of the reader as the answer to the philosophical question, or the correlation of griefs between poet and madman. In so doing I believe it overlooks the extent to which the poem’s cast of characters are dancing a narrative waltz in a veritable hall of mirrors. It is a poem full of epistemological dead-ends, dizzying speed and rapid shifts of events, so that what the poem fundamentally represents is the failure of speech to be coherent. To be sure, when its object of study includes a lengthy monologue delivered by an insane man any literary criticism relying on biography (even in part) is bound to be laden with reaches and contradictions. And so we get arguments that Julian is “Shelley’s avatar” or incarnation, that the Maniac is a dissociated self-portrait of Shelley, and that the poem is a monologue of a madman written by a madman (Matthews 64). Hirsch notes that the Maniac’s visage calls to mind Shelley’s own face— pale skin “in hue too beautiful for health,” a “sad meek face and eyes lustrous and glazed” (l.285)— and Shelley’s personality generally; yet he then acquiesces that the image of the Maniac are common to Shelley’s depiction of any poet or visionary (23-4). Reiman assures us rather over-confidently that the poem’s central theme is “the mid-life crisis (characteristic of ambitious people in their mid-thirties), which struck (Shelley) early” (320-22). The poem engages us on so many fronts that the willingness to move between biographical, material, and textual criticism, despite its sometimes contradictory yield, is understandable. Still, as O’Neill wryly states, “No amount of spadework about Shelley’s and Mary’s marital problems is going, I think, to uncover the decisive clue to understanding the Maniac’s monologue” (138).

The blurring of lines between the characters of Julian and Maddalo presents a more troubling problem for the critic who works to solve the debate which ostensibly propels the plot: whether man could be in charge of his own destiny if he would only harness the power of his will

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125 In his study of Shelley’s draft Matthews excitedly details how the Maniac’s soliloquy is written in a “gross and chaotic” hand, its text “literally disjointed, scribbled in unarticulated bits and pieces, so that the curious arrangement of dots and asterisks...reflects faithfully the broken way in which the Soliloquy was composed” (Matthews 64). What he seems to be positing here is not that the Maniac is Shelley, but that Shelley may be, in fact, the Maniac.
and mind. A passage in Shelley’s essay “On Life,” also written late in 1819, is extremely helpful in parsing out Shelley’s intention in overlapping their character to such an extent, despite their philosophical disagreement. In that essay he insists on a view of life which is characterized by “unity,” arguing passionately that the concept of distinct individual minds is a “delusion”:

> The words *I, you, they* are not signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated, but are merely marks employed to denote the different modifications of the one mind....The words *I, and you and they* are grammatical devices invented simply for he arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to him. It is difficult to find terms adequately to express so subtle a conception as that to which the intellectual philosophy has conducted us. We are on that verge where *words abandon us, and what wonder if we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of—how little we know.* (508, emphasis mine)

There is an eerie overlap between this passage and a passage from Kant’s *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; so similar, in fact, that it has the ring of a conscious reference.

Published in 1798, the text deals in part with the issue of mental illness in that text and it is very possibly part of Shelley’s inspiration for the Maniac and Julian and Maddalo’s observation of him. In the passage which this excerpt from “On Life” most echoes, Kant writes: “Deception due to the strength of the human power of imagination often goes so far that a person believes he sees and feels outside himself that which he has only in his mind”; he goes on to describe this as “dizziness” one experiences at looking down the “abyss.” Mentally ill individuals “have a strange fear that, seized by an inner impulse, they will spontaneously hurl themselves down” (71).

That the *Anthropology* may be an inspiration for the poem itself is certainly logistically possible. The collected lectures were published in German twenty-one years before the composition of Shelley’s poem. Leland R. Phelps has successfully argued that by 1809 Shelley was producing rudimentary translations of German; by the end of his life, by all accounts, he was fluent.126 Mary says he was reading the German works by fifteen years of age, and that though he loved wild and fantastical literature “he had not fostered those tastes at their genuine sources — the romances and chivalry of the middle ages; but in the perusal of such German

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126 In his biography, Holmes concluded that Phelps is correct.
works as were current in those day.” Finally, and most important, we know that Shelley had eagerly read Kant: lamenting that the Gisbornes had failed to buy the books he had requested, he writes to a friend before leaving Venice, “they knew how very much I wished to receive these books by the same conveyance as the filtering-stone. Dare I ask you to do me the favour to buy them? A complete edition of the works of Calderon, and the French translation of Kant, a German Faust, and to add the Nympholept?”

There are other remarkable similarities: Kant twice warns that in social conversation, jumping off from one topic to another in a way “contrary to the natural relationship of ideas” interrupts and destroys intersubjectivity: “for then the company breaks up in a state of mental distraction, since everything is mixed together and the unity of the conversation is entirely missing. Thus the mind finds itself confused and in need of a new distraction in order to be rid of that one” (101). The madhouse is described as a place where men must be kept, as the Maniac “despite the maturity and strength of their age...“orderly through someone else’s reason” “with regard to the smallest matters of life” (97); we can read “someone else’s reason” as Maddalo’s generosity to him. “Talkativeness” is directly related to derangement and can land you in the lunatic asylum: “the lively power of imagination inserts so much into what they are relating that no one grasps what they actually wanted to say.” Dementia involves the “falsely inventive power of the imagination” where “self-made representations are regarded as perceptions,” much like the Maniac’s hallucination of listeners. Finally, poetry and madness are decidedly linked: “Dementia accompanied by affect is madness, whose fits, though involuntary, can often be original and which then, like poetic rapture (furor poeticus), border on genius” (97); but the mind can be held dangerously in suspense by means of analogies that are confused with concepts of similar things, and thus the power of imagination, in a play resembling understanding, conjures up the connection of disparate things as universal.... (those mad in this way) write insipid poetry... The lunatic of this sort is not curable because, like poetry in general, he is creative and

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127 Reiman concurs that he was reading German by 1812 if not before. As for his interest in Kant, De Quincey writes that he misses Shelley while visiting Dove Cottage, and that his own library, “being rich in the wickedest of German speculations, would naturally have been more to Shelley’s taste than the Spanish library of Southey” (MacCarthy 126).
entertaining by means of diversity. This third kind of derangement is indeed methodical, but only fragmentary (109, emphasis in original).

Madness equates to a sort of “nonsense in form” a fragmentation akin to the Maniac’s own speech: “The irregular, roaming power of imagination so confuses the mind, through the succession of ideas that are not tied to anything objective, that he who leaves a gathering of this kind feels as though he has been dreaming” (70).

Because of their talkativeness, the way in which they are seduced by their conversation’s leap from topic to topic, the Maniac’s hallucinations and the fickleness with which Julian and Maddalo attend to their debate, characteristics of the three characters which are merged. This unification is ironically a way for Shelley to demonstrate the tragedy of man’s conviction that he is separate: Julian because he believes he can discern his own will; Maddalo because he believes he can know that the universe is chaos; and the Maniac, because he has grown “dizzy” looking at the dark abyss of how little we know (he thinks, of another, but in fact of the universe entirely). What the three men fail to recognize the unity which their reality insists upon. In his attempt to express his concept of unity Shelley bemoans the limitations of language, and that same awareness is woven throughout Julian and Maddalo. For example, though Julian and Maddalo are opposed characters they frequently overlap in their worldview. Both scoff at things holy [Maddalo draws a “wicked pleasure” (121) in encouraging Julian’s taunts]; when describing to Julian how the Maniac despaired over the “absurd deceits” man falls for (presumably religion) Maddalo says that he thinks with him “In some respects” (l. 240). Yet both of their attitudes are described in terms which rest on faith. Julian describes his attitude as “another faith,” (l.166), as one which exists outside of the realm of the provable, and Maddalo’s position is similarly construed: “My judgement will not bend, though I think you might make such a system refutation tight as far as words go” (in this statement Maddalo also points to the ultimate incapacity of even the most elegant, rhetorically exact speech to affect a strong will) (l.194-95). Emphasizing the peripherality of their philosophical argument, the blending of their traits are often linked with a confusion of events or tenses, making it impossible to discern cause and
effect. This moves their philosophical debate even further on the periphery of the poem’s concerns. This sentence, for example, both shifts point of view to collapse Julian and Maddalo, while simultaneously confusing causality: “While we to such sick thoughts subjected are / As came on you last night - it is our will” (l.169-70). Are they subjected, or is it their will? Does it matter?

The sudden abandonment of this debate following that visit—presumably because of their emotional sympathy with the Maniac’s tale—feels terribly abrupt, but shouldn’t. It is indicative of the superficiality of the debate and is, after all, far from the only narrative fragment in the poem: the text is characterized by unfinished business. The narrator of the preface, as Silke-Maria Weineck argues, “opens a frame which is never closed; Julian who tells the story of his visit and his return to Venice but leaves the years in between blank; Maddalo’s daughter who tells the story of the maniac to Julian but not to the reader; the maniac whose own story keeps emerging in his soliloquy only to submerge again and again in rows of asteriks.” Weineck’s overall interpretation is that the poem’s real subject is the limits of narrative and the dangerous violence lurking within the poetic faculty. That violence is cognitive and linguistic, and it results in madness. Julian’s wish to help the Maniac is indicative not of his sympathy, then, but rather his desire to restore the integrity of narrative and save it (and himself) from the madness of pure poetry. In Weineck’s view, the Maniac’s emotive outbursts are offered in exchange for causality itself (91-92), a reading which somewhat dispenses of a serious consideration of what the question of causality is doing, if anything, in the poem. It is posited as key to their philosophical disagreement and needs attending, but perhaps not in the way we think.

Loosely put, if man’s habit of mind is capable of predicting events before they occur he is more able to determine his fate. If there is truly no such thing as cause and effect, or no such thing discernable by us, then we will be eternally “baffled” (l.130); in this case, the notion of human will is simply “All that vain men imagine or believe / Or hope can paint” (l.44-5 ). The billiard balls which Julian and Maddalo’s daughter roll about serve as a reference to Hume’s first principle. Hume famously used them in a metaphor to help explain that there is nothing in an
object itself, nor of our observation of the frequent conjunction of objects, from which we may draw any conclusion. When observing a billiard ball rolling towards another it would be impossible “to infer motion in the second ball from the motion and impulse of the first” (Enquiry 4.1). It is through the association of ideas, or induction, that the mind learns to expect regularity; the habit is so powerful that we create what we begin to think of as the “necessary connection.” Hume’s conclusion is that all knowledge, such as it is, is based on each person’s individual habit of thought, leaving an impossible logical gap. While Kant agrees with Hume that causation has no logical explanation he disputes the idea that causation is entirely a habit of our minds, developing his central concepts of judgement of experience and judgement of perception in response to the problem of cause. Ultimately Kant will use this argument in establishing that knowledge shapes experience, which is roughly translated into Julian’s position (more discussion on Kant’s influence on the text, albeit in another direction, follows).

Shelley was deeply influenced by Hume and no doubt familiar with the famous passage [Godwin reiterates it in “Of Free Will and Necessity” in Political Justice, a passage to which Shelley directly responds in Queen Mab (subtitled “A Philosophical Poem with Notes”)]. Despite the tidiness of this framework—Julian and Maddalo’s intellectual sparring clearly detailed in their “conversation” and a paralleling image motif—because of the poem’s insistence on the inability of language to signify, we are invited to remain skeptical of the terms of the debate and the seriousness with which Shelley intends us to consider it. One might even say that the authenticity of the debate is questioned even before the story begins: the title is a misnomer, because though called A Conversation it is (as Reiman noted) a dramatic monologue. Shelley’s

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128 The trope of colliding billiard balls which has been part of philosophical discussions about causation since Newton (133, Dev of Cognition, Affect, and Social Relations Vol 13, The Minnesota).

129 “When a ball upon a billiard board is struck by a person playing, and afterwards impinges upon a second ball, the which was first in motion is said to act upon the second, though it operate in the strictest conformity to the impression it received, and the motion it communicates be precisely determined by the circumstances of the case. Exactly similar to this, upon the principles {307} already explained, are the actions of the human mind.” Free Will and Necessity
decision to write the preface in the voice of an unnamed first person observer then move to
Julian’s voice similarly demonstrates to the reader the centrality of imagination’s role in the
narration of personal history; it also reminds us of our own requisite complicity as listener in the
suspension of disbelief. Before the poem begins an especially equivocating tone highlights the
instability of the narrator: the first line of the final paragraph is: “Of the Maniac I can give no
information” and the sentence repeatedly marks the ambiguity inherent in any characterization
of another [“He seems,” “he was evidently,” “might be like many other stories,” “will perhaps be
found” (121)]. Wasserman’s widely influential reading of the poem insists the resolution of
Julian and Maddalo’s debate is left up to the hands of the reader, whose response to the lack of
explanation for the Maniac’s woe will be indicative of their own condition. The poem is “a gloss
in aid of interpreting ourselves. We all suffer the human state... whatever we sympathize with or
are adverse to in the Maniac’s cries will be our personal explanation of that state” (61).

But ultimately what Shelley expects from his reader is not a temporary suspension of
disbelief followed by a reflective return to ourselves. He too obviously directs the reader’s
critical eye to the implausibility of the scene at the asylum and the red herring of Julian and
Maddalo’s debate. In this it is characteristic of his work generally: De Man notes how in The
Triumph of Life, as with Alastor, Epipschehidion, Adonais, and other poems, the original
“articulation in terms of the questions is displaced by a very differently structured process that
pervades all levels of the narrative...to replace it by something quite different for which we have
no name readily available in the familiar props of literary history” (99). A careful reading
convinces us that the crux of the poem’s crisis lies not in meliorism versus skepticism, but
somewhere else. To the extent that the debate is a lens through which events are read, it
distracts both reader and characters from the interpersonal ethical questions which trouble the
poem. That we allow ourselves to be distracted ironically demonstrates the point: at any time a
member of the party—speaker, poet, listener, overhearer, reader— may be suddenly capricious
in speech, veracity, or attention. This, combined with the arbitrary and inevitable play of the
signifier, significantly impedes the extent to which language facilitates intersubjective understanding.

II. “...many a bare broad word, / ... I heard / And can forget not”

The real question the poem poses is not whether we may control his destiny through our will but rather if and how we can control our fate if we cannot express it: either because our articulation is unintelligible to the other, is obscured from ourselves, or because in the course of identifying and expressing our desires time acts upon us and we change. This is especially true in the face of another’s will which is similarly shifting and porous, subject to influence, and inadequately expressed. In this world we never learn what—or all—that we think we’ve learned from another through their speech, no matter with what care or how sympathetically we listen. One of the central difficulties of speech is this inevitable incompleteness: as Christopher Bollas writes, “we speak, but only ever partly, and the unspoken is as intrinsic an utterance as the enunciated” (48).

Earlier I described the three men as forming a composite figure. By using “composite” I purposely allude to the condensed figure of Freud’s *Dream Work* who expresses in the dreamer’s subconscious the features of two or more individuals (Freud 135-46). Such a reading is appropriate as the trip to the asylum begins and ends in sleep: Maddalo is asleep with Julian comes to his home and the Maniac falls asleep at the end of his lament. The asylum and Maniac’s speech have decidedly dreamlike quality and the depiction and experience of time in the poem is quite surreal. Richard Holmes is right in saying that “rather than a real character or person, (the Maniac) is part of a person, the part which lies below the threshold of consciousness. It is symbolic that he is both found and left asleep by his visitors” (Holmes pp). This is not to say, of course, that we should conclude the three figures form a composite of

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130 The condensation of the figure also functions to represent a displaced common feature, or to symbolize a desired quality which is missing.

131 Yet it is not the quality of dreaming which Freud links most explicitly to creative writing, but rather the play of children, which is something I’ll return to, as with the assertion about time.
Shelley’s subconscious (though it has been done). Rather it is to point out how maintaining a hypnagogic atmosphere of shared traits prevents the reader from forming a sympathetic attachment to any of the three figures. The poem’s genius lies in its ability to dramatize the illusion of an intersubjective connection and seduce the reader with a tremendous overflow of speech, in order to demonstrate the extent to which language in service of narrative can cause us to evade a state of true sympathy. It accomplishes this using a wild aesthetic that circles around three metaphors: speed, the rising and setting of the sun, and language itself.

To begin with the latter: in this poem, speech fails both character and reader on a number of fronts. It necessarily results in contradiction: to talk is to wade into misrepresentations and paradoxes, to paradoxically declare your silence. When the Maniac laments that “(his) secret groans must be unheard by thee ... Thy lost friend’s incommunicable woe” (l.341) the reader— hidden as it were behind the same curtain as Julian and Maddalo—cannot help but note the irony; for of course his groans are neither secret nor unheard. At another moment the Maniac expresses skepticism at the idea of truth shortly before he affirms it (l.345). Then there is the issue of audience: our words might be heard but by the wrong person, as none of us are the Maniac’s addressed listener, and his intended audience is a fabrication. Or our words are uncomfortably altered for the sake of the listener: the Maniac’s first lines have not to do with a broken heart but the feeling of being compelled to put a false face on for others (l. 308 - 12). Because the pain is actually “incommunicable” its expression creates more agony while failing to further understanding or sympathy, and when we are most in need of understanding we become overwhelmed by all that cannot be named: “deed too dreadful for a name” (l.456) and later, “How vain / Are words! I thought never to speak again, / Not even in secret, - not to my own heart” (l. 472-74). The listener for his part is concomitantly troubled. One never knows when one is listening the extent of the speaker’s sincerity or revelation. Indeed, sometimes the speaker himself does not know: the Maniac announces halfway through his speech, “I must remove / A veil from my pent mind. ‘Tis torn aside!” (l. 382-83).
The interpretive stakes (as it were) are considerably raised when the poem begins to conflate speech and the written word. And this—more than its expression of heartbreak, isolation, indifference, or exile—may be what makes some critics characterize it as a deeply cynical poem. Shelley calls our attention to the writing of the poem at various moments, heightening our awareness of the overlap between composition and recorded speech. Critics often observe the expressly literary quality of the Maniac’s articulation. He speaks “sometimes as one who wrote, and thought / His words might move some heart” (l.286-87). He writes as he talks, furthering our image of him as a sort of poet: he cries to his imagined lover “If this sad writing thou shouldst ever see” (l.340); pressing his lips to a letter he has written he describes how “from my pen the words flow as I write, / ... to see that characterized in vain / On this unfeeling leaf” (l.476-79). The present tense in this statement (“the words flow as I write”) implies that, impossibly (which is to say symbolically or metaphorically) the Maniac is writing as he speaks. Both speech and writing have the potential to create suffering, largely through their ability to obscure meaning or thrive in ambiguity, as in the “unfeeling” leaf of paper which “burns the brain / And eats into it... blotting all things fair / And wise and good” (l.479-81). When the Maniac’s lover is imagined as saying “that when I speak / My lip is tortured with the wrongs which break / The spirit it expresses” (l.409-10) we wonder whether the words express the spirit or the wrongs and whether “express” here means to “get rid of” or “to communicate.” In Weineck’s view, the ambiguities of speech are a radicalization of Shelley’s idea in the Defence of Poetry that pure poetry is “characterized by the absolute absence of narrative; however, a purely poetic, i.e purely non-narrative poetry would render poetic speech indistinguishable from mad speech” (89). But the pains of speech are more far-reaching and intimate than the simple absence of narrative: there is no rest for a calm and pure mind, the 

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132 Shelley did say in a note which enclosed this poem with several others, that the letter contained all my saddest poems raked into one heap” (Holmes).

133 as de Man writes, again of The Triumph of Life, “Whenever this self-receding scene occurs, the syntax and the imagery of the poem tie themselves into a knot which arrests the process of understanding. The resistance of these passages is such that the reader soon forgets the dramatic situation and is left with only these unsolved riddles to haunt him....” (98-99)
Maniac tells us, because the awful, suppressed thoughts were by the lover “sealedst... with many a bare broad word / And seal’dst my memory o’er them, — for I heard / And can forget not.” The Maniac wishes those “curses” could be mixed in a cup like poison, to make the blessing of death (l.432-36). If what is true in speech is true of writing then both written and spoken language fails to promote intersubjective understanding, even obscuring the other from us, an impediment to intimacy. Even the most benevolent speech can unknowingly harms us or the other.

To return to that “unfeeling leaf”: how were those “fair / And wise and good” things which the Maniac mentions originally written? They were written, he tells us, by time itself. Yet the temporal experiences of the men appear as spotty and unpredictable as the narrative: the poem begins with a memory [“I rode one evening with Count Maddalo” (l.1)] but we are never told how much time has passed between this memory and his current day. While most of the poem feels as though it were written shortly after the event (if we are to believe that the Julian’s memory of the Maniac’s soliloquy is in fact “exact”) we learn at the poem’s end that “many years and many changes” have passed. The Maniac’s transition from sane to mad happens on short order, within less than a year [“some months ago” (l.197)]. Julian and Maddalo are invigorated by the rapidity of their rhetoric, characterized by its ethereal quality: their “swift thought” is too quick for melancholy. Taking flight on their laughter it “(lingers) not / But flew brain to brain, - / Charged with light memories of remembered hours” (l.29-31). The pairing of swift time with similarly speedy rhetoric enables the illusion of perfectly harmonious intersubjectivity which transcends speech (“flew brain to brain”); yet the use of the word “light” with “memories” implies that those vaguely referenced “remembered hours” are inconsequential or easily forgotten. Preoccupied by their activities, Julian and Maddalo’s days pass swiftly and we have the feeling of a kind of manic dislocation in time. Our sense that something is “out of sync” is compounded by frequent shifts in tense, inversions of syntax, and otherwise puzzlingly constructed sentences that obfuscate our sense of time: for example, “What we behold / Shall be the madhouse and its belfry tower” (l.106-07). The dreamlike, eerie feeling that the characters...
are oblivious to the passing of each day is bolstered by its concert with the images of nature: gondolas arrive as soon as they are wanted (l.61-62, l.211), sailing through the “fast-falling rain and high-wrought sea.” The storm that rages throughout the Maniac’s speech adds to this feeling of the world as a stage, so that when the Maniac states “I know / that to myself I do not wholly owe / What now I suffer” (l.320 - 22), we are on one hand inclined to believe him, as nature seems itself his enemy; yet due to the poet’s heavy reliance on the pathetic fallacy we are so aware of the poem’s construction that we cannot help but be skeptical of his denial of responsibility.

If one examines the glimpses of sun that appear throughout the poem one sees that sunlight is also used to manipulate the reader’s experience of day and evening, further calling attention to the poem as a written artifact. Often complementing the actions of our central characters, the sinking of the sun corresponds with increasingly serious speech (l. 35); it defies physics by pausing, as though waiting, like the gondoliers, for Julian and Maddal; and it ceases its descent in companionship with them when they pause as in the midst of a “pleasant pilgrimage” (l.64). In the end of the first day, precisely as the sun sets, Maddalo describes death as a “sunset” which “severeth / Our memory from itself” [a statement that marks the end of speech for the day (l.127-29)]. It can also be punishing: the sun’s marking of time in shadow is central to an agonizing metaphor presented by the Maniac, in which he describes feeling like a worm which, stepped on, writhes and watches the light making shadows on the grass. The sunlight and shadow mark the “eternal periods” which encompass his state of “living death” (l. 415-19). Finally, in an oft analyzed passage, Julian criticizes Maddalo as having struck “his eagle spirit blind / By gazing on its own exceeding light” (l.51-52) before himself offering a lengthy description of the sunset. Most critics read the irony here as located in the idea that the idealistic Julian is the blind one. But the eagle is also used by Shelley in “Adonais” as having extraordinarily sharp sight which could be renewed by flying toward the sun (l.148-49). An

De Man points out that it is in the motif of light that Shelley is “extraordinarily systematic”: “Shelley’s treatment of the birth of light reveals all that is invested in the emblem of the rainbow. It represents the very possibility of cognition” (111). In *Adonais*, poets are “sons of light” (l. 36).
alternate reading offers a more nuanced irony: perhaps it is not that Julian is in some way blind because of his idealism but rather that, in ascribing the eagle’s characteristics to Maddalo as a negative trait, Julian has in fact misused the symbol itself. This latter reading is more persuasive when linked to the myriad of other ways Shelley calls our attention to the failures of figurative language and the potential for the poet to misuse them.

That the poem’s central characters are often interrupted emphasizes the fact that we only ever truly speak in fragments, an inevitable reflection of our subjugation to the inconveniences of passing time. We are interrupted by the impatience of others to speak, as Julian is interrupted by Maddalo: “I was about to speak, when—” (l.3) and the Maniac is interrupted by “the din / Of madmen, shriek on shriek again begin” (l.266-67). We are sometimes interrupted by ourselves, our own change of subject, as the Maniac’s speech is interrupted by asterisks. Sometimes we’re interrupted by corporeal needs, as the Maniac is interrupted by his sleep (l.514) and later by death. Yet another kind of interruption signifies more obviously a failure of our ability to know our mind: we fail to finish our story because we are interrupted by our own forgetting or our own self-interest. We forget what is said (or we say that we forgot what was said, even if it we did not). When Julian says he remembers exactly what the Maniac said (l.288-89) it contrasts sharply with his earlier admittance that, though he recalls the “sense of what (Maddalo) said” he “(mars) the force of his expressions” (l.130-32). His inability to recall the exact argument of Maddalo again underlines the flimsiness of the poem’s frame.

After the Maniac finishes his soliloquy Julian and Maddalo return to Maddalo’s to dine, and their relinquishing of the argument is a coldly efficient transition which highlights the voyeuristic element of their eavesdropping. The scene of suffering has energized them: after dinner they ironically converse about his “unspeakable” ill until daybreak. Julian’s preoccupation with the “secret” of that dreadful ill will continue to the poem’s conclusion and further our view of him as an entirely unsympathetic figure. When they return to Maddalo’s Julian dreamily expands to say that he could sit with his witty friend throughout the night:
And subtle talk would cheer the winter night
And make me know myself, and the firelight
Would flash upon our faces, till the day
Might dawn and make me wonder at my stay (l. 560-64).

Their conversation once again causes Julian to misapprehend time: winter seems full of “cheer” until dawn arrives, leaving Julian astounded at the sudden presence of dawn. This significantly contradicts his assertion that the talk makes him “know (him)self”; indeed, he still “wonders” at his own actions. The deceptive speech enables the illusion both that we can know ourselves or our will, and know another and their will; it reinforces the fantasy that causality in human relationships—why we are who we are, why she did what she did—are discernible and predictable. It gives us a false sense of mastery in the world. The tragedy of madness is the suspension of reason, yet the poem attempts to offer us an explicable cause for the Maniac’s madness (Weineck 100) and when the Maniac tells us what caused his madness, he does so in so eloquent a way that we wonder not at the source of his insanity but rather the relationship between madness and language itself. By linking speech with a chaotic experience of time Shelley demonstrates how mistaken we are to believe expression in language will fulfill our quest for intersubjective understanding; for the reality is that we actually become disoriented within our own speech and our own place in the world. If Julian cannot “know himself” he cannot experience harmonious sympathy with another.

III. “Graceful without design, and unforeseeing”

The poem encourages our interrogation of what he has laid before us yet too often we fail to follow the lead. To return to the metaphor of the matryoshka, because we are distracted by this chaotic, swift world of fragmented speech and shifting subjectivities we overlook the solid innermost object: Maddalo’s daughter, the one figure who remains silent and who offers a moment of brief clarity in the poem’s sense of time. Though she speaks just seventeen lines she has been of central interest to critics, yet no one is exactly sure what to do with her. Her appearance in the middle of the poem has the feeling of being a metaphorical crux, her centrality only bolstered by her participation in the final scene; but it is again difficult to determine what
she represents. Ascribing meaning to her in the context of the debate is particularly fraught, though this hasn’t stopped critics from trying: she is often read as a factor in favor of Julian’s idealism, or as a generally positive symbol. Others argue she is a sort of zero-sum equalizer rendering both perspectives moot: as Holmes writes, “Shelley places (the child) here carefully in the thematic development of the work, as a kind of hostage both against fortune and against the purely intellectual side of Julian and Maddalo’s argument” (Holmes 57). Still others see Julian’s response to Maddalo’s daughter as an example of the fallacy of his idealism at best; at worst an example of his ability to reduce people to what they represent for him (Hirsch 20). These readings fail to notice the singularity of the girl and the way she clearly exists outside of the philosophical context we’ve been given. Her graceful silence and brevity allows her to be incorporated whole into the text rather than being reflected or reflecting the characteristics of those around her. Ultimately her speech and actions can only be identified as admirable and representative of sympathy and wisdom (in the first scene she is described as “graceful without design;” in the second, as having a “manner beyond courtesy”).

Of the two scenes in which she appears the first is when she and Julian “(roll) billiard balls about” (l. 157) as he waits for Maddalo to arise. We know that the girl is quite young, perhaps even pre-language. Julian has come in hopes of continuing his conversation with Maddalo; when they do, he incorporates his idealism of the girl in support of his position (that she is called a “toy” highlights both the importance of play, and that she will soon be used by Julian for his argument). Holmes writes that “his recourse to the child is a very superficial kind of Wordsworthian platitude” (qtd. in Hirsch, 21), to which Maddalo retorts, simply, “You talk Utopia.” Shortly thereafter, the men leave for the asylum. With the context of Hume’s first principle in mind, the casualness with which the girl and Julian play with the billiard balls has

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135 James L. Hill, for example, who sees Julian as the clear winner in the debate with Maddalo, argues that ‘Julian’s powers of insight are revealed in his rapid estimate of Maddalo’s little daughter,’ and that his ‘ability to penetrate beneath the outward appearances of things... (is).... demonstrated in his estimate of the child’ (Hill, “Dramatic Structure in Julian and Maddalo” *ELH*, 35, 1968, 87 - 89). See also “Optimism and Anti Climax in Julian and Maddalo” by Julia Tejblum (26).
the tongue-in-cheek feel of an inside joke, especially because any attempt to discern causal relationships in the poem is willfully confused. But the use of the symbol makes clear that in some way she holds the key to the poem’s meaning. In this moment of play, the sit in silence, language and time suspended:

And whilst I waited, with his child I played;  
A lovelier toy sweet Nature never made,  
A serious, subtle, wild, yet gentle being,  
Graceful without design and unforeseeing,  
With eyes - oh speak not of her eyes! - which seem  
Twin mirrors of Italian Heaven, yet gleam  
With such deep meaning, as we never see  
But in the human countenance...  
...she yet seemed to know  
On second sight her antient playfellow.  
Less changed that she was by six months or so;  
For after her first shyness was worn out  
We sate there, rolling billiard balls about. (l. 144 - 57)

This demonstration of creative activity is characterized by passivity and lack of purpose or direction; its goal is not to communicate, but to act without forethought, casually observe, and enjoy the result: “She spends a happy time with little care / While (Julian and Maddalo) to such sick thoughts subjected are” (l.168 - 69). Here, as elsewhere in Romantic poetry, play offers a way for the poet to rupture the experience of time which we have come to expect, presenting an idle state outside of the wild searches for meaning which preoccupy others. At the same time, it signifies the potential erasure of the productivity, artistic and otherwise, which is the side effect of such preoccupation. Though tempting we would be mistaken to read her creative play as a stage, form, or metaphor for fancy; it does not function, as James Beattie argues, “harmoniously with the Imagination as a kind of servant or ‘lady-in-waiting’ providing ‘raw materials’” which the poet then shapes into an original creation (qtd. in Duff, 58-59), nor does it occupy the more conflicted role of “rambling and sportive’ Fancy,” the volatile, hurried, superficial or incomplete accessory to the imagination (Duff 58-59). It is certainly not “hurried”: because the child’s experience of time is natural and in sequence it is actually quite remarkable in the context of this dizzying poem. Her physical aging is commented on by Julian both times he sees her [l.155, 588-89], and gone are the syntactical inversions, sunlight imagery (the morning is rainy and
“dim”), composite figures, shifting of tenses and pronouns and emphasis on excessive speech. In both appearances she is oriented within the calm quietude of Maddalo’s home where “spirits (are) tame.” Emphasizing this anachronistic righting of time and place are two temporal paradoxes which bracket off their play. The passage opens with “Ere Maddalo arose, I called on him” (l.142 - 43). While the literal meaning is apparent—he arrived before Maddalo had risen—the phrasing is purposefully strained as if to say, I called on someone who was not yet present. The reversals resume after the scene of play is over: “When the Count entered - salutations past” (l. 158 - 59). In this phrasing Maddalo seems to simultaneously enter before and after the salutations, emphasizing the extent to which time is subject to the whim of memory.

For her part, the girl has little expectation or care about the future: she is “unforeseeing,” a quality matched with her lack of “design.” The word carries tremendous weight when we consider the centrality of “design” to the other characters’ speech: Julian, Maddalo, and the Maniac are unable to speak without the goal to persuade. Because her lack of forethought is linked to her disinterestedness and we know it is not a failure of her “mind’s habit” [her memory functions in accordance with her will, both as a girl and later (l.153-55, 604-05)] her indifference to causality must be read as in some way indicative of her sympathetic nature. While causality is important to the poem, it is not, again, in the way that Julian and Maddalo pose it: the question is intimate and linguistic, rather than philosophical.

In the first sustained psychoanalytic treatment of the relationship between play and creative writing, “Creative Writers and Day Dreaming,” Freud states that any creative text is “a continuation of, and a substitute for, what was once the play of childhood” (442). Yet he writes that if a day-dreamer were to confess his intimate fantasies to a listener, the listener may feel indifferent or even repulsed by the disclosures. The same fantasy presented in writing, however, enables the reader to experience pleasure. The writer’s skill in making this shift is ultimately unfathomable: “(it is) his innermost secret; the essential ars poetica lies in the

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136 The English translation seems to elide the meaning of the title, which emphasizes the importance of child’s play to creative writing.
technique of overcoming the feeling of repulsion in us which is undoubtedly connected with the barriers that rise between each single ego and the others” (443). Julian and Maddalo presents its reader with both forms: the fantasy presented in speech and writing detailed by Freud, and the fantasy expressed in child’s play as detailed by Christopher Bollas, D.W. Winnicott, and others. Yet in this case it is the expression into language that repels us. The Maniac’s speech is more akin to the adult day-dreamer who, in confessing fantasies both unreal (for example, a world which correlates to one’s inner state) and terrifying (madness), alienates us; het he does so in the context of poetry. By contrast the child’s silent play offers us enjoyment; a moment of respite in a sea of debate and speech. As Winnicott states, art relieves us from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and the a process that has its origin in child’s play: “on the basis of playing is built the whole of man's experiential existence....We experience life... in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals (86).

What Freud left unexplored is the exact way that the transition to from child’s play to the written word alters the imagination itself, if at all. While we often think of how various artistic forms affect the viewer, reader, or audience, Bollas points out that different forms actually “process (the creator) very differently”:

Is it possible that this ending of a person’s idiom as a self, and new beginning as a different form, is part of the pleasure of creativity? .... If I paint my ideas rather than put them to musical sound I not only select a different form, I also find a different unconscious aesthetic. My ideas will materialise, transformed according to the characteristics of the representation form’s unconscious structure.... different forms process us very differently. (175)

The characters in Shelley’s poem are processed by alternate modes of creativity: for certainly to roll balls about on the floor is not the same as to write a poem in heroic couplets or paint a seascape. The excess of speech and the written word in this poem corroborates a dizzying, destabilized position in time. Yet the play of the child holds her in quiet passivity and in a realm safe from speech, relieved from the strain of relating inner and outer reality. If, as Winnicott argues, our experience of our existence is located within an intermediate space between the intimate and the public, then language, a central tool of communication with another, is a pillar
of the shared world. The girl’s play marks a type of creativity which is passive, receptive, silent, and yet sociable, and it enables her to navigate that interweave; thus it is a form of creativity privileged over speech, and puts her squarely in the intermediate space in which we may properly observe our own, and another’s, experience. She also evinces what Masud Khan describes as the “fallow state.” A capacity of the ego to be suspended within a transient, unintegrated, receptive and labile mood, it is kinaesethic in expression, without conflict, intellectually uncritical, and noninstinctual. The capacity to lie fallow enables the adult to express “the creative potential of the madness” created by those experiences of the infant which s/he was unable to psychically process (every adult, Khan continues, is “mad and in a very private way, and also alone”); it also requires a toleration of silence and suspension of interaction with one’s environment. Our creative adult actualization of this madness occurs in “art and literature; through sharing unexcited mutuality with the other; and through mystic states of being, like the Persian sufis or the Zen priests” (181-88). Lying fallow is frequently paired with poetic reverie: Bollas describes it as having more to do with “the poetic and the sensory” than with abstract thought or the intellect, and says that as a state characterized by a regression to dependence it has to do with the “the physical properties of objects (including the self) and with concreteness of the world” (271) (Khan similarly describes it as an “image-based” mood). The fallow state is nicely compatible with Gadamer’s description of play as a form of “self-movement” without purpose or goal. As Samuel Gill describes it, “Play does not allow the player or the spectator to act toward it as if it were an object. It cannot be understood as a kind of activity, nor can it be subjectively determined” (9). The characteristics of play—the absence of subjective and objective contingency, the lack of outward and inward necessity, the to-and-fro movement that is itself life—are to Gadamer clues to the ontology of art. Play is at once the metaphor for art, and a description of its structure. (12). Yet though the fallow state may be shared we are (tragically) more often blocked by another’s benevolent but misguided desire to

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137 Though Bollas builds on Khan’s ideas, he does not link the fallow state to madness, writing “This state of mind means that the picturing inside the mind of some person or event has the integrity of memory rather than the fracture of hallucination” (Bollas 271).
interpret our play, to put it into their own “conceptual vocabulary” or identify its necessity. In trying to create a narrative out of the fragments of “nonsense” which characterize the artifacts of some of our experiences, either by tracing the past or its hallucinations, we destroy the creative potential of madness: it falls into oblivion so that we are “no longer mad or alone, but merely lonely and lost!” (Khan 182).

In her recent essay “Romanticism, Psychoanalysis, and the Interpretation of Silence,” Nancy Yousef focuses her attention on a similar scene in which companionable silence is part and parcel of the freedom to play: the description of the babe and his “curious toys” created by “idle thought” in “Frost at Midnight.” The nearness of infant and poet, their speechless interchange, leaves room for both the play of the infant and the creative solitude of the speaker (223-25). She rightly asserts that our tendency to strictly partition off the social and solitary experience occludes the relational elements which actually sustain the private meditation, writing that “the peculiar grace of such intimacy is that the other need not be a preoccupation, even though his or her presence is what allows for the spiritual ‘loitering’ of silent musing” (226). Far from loitering, the three men in the poem are as archeologists in the face of narrative: attempting to establish causality, they leave themselves and the other forlorn and disintegrated (even Maddalo by the end has lost his dog). The Maniac is no different; though his fragmented language has the madness of poeisis, it ultimately fails to express poetry because in his hallucinations he works to cohere a narrative from his own chaotic interiority. The foundational prerequisite of creative expression for Khan is a “capacity to lie fallow in a quiescent aloneness with the other”; it is this state which allows us to truly relate and be actualized. The girl enables Julian to experience what Winnicott would describe as the “capacity to be alone,” a “sacred” noncommunicative state which requires the presence or steady awareness of another [a mother figure (31)]; but his quick transcription of the experience into a metaphor for his philosophical position (its “objective contingency,” in Gadamer’s terms) reveals his failure to independently remain in the state. Rather than truly relating he has “replaced effort with labour, and lying fallow with... leisure” (185-88).
In the girl we see Keats’s identification of the central faculty of poetic genius as the ability to diffuse one’s identity and extend oneself into the lives and emotions of others. If we return to Shelley’s *On Life* we see that he admires the ability of children to intuit the unity of their existence and dissolve into their surroundings:

Let us recollect our sensations as children. What a distinct and intense apprehension had we of the world and of ourselves....We less habitually distinguished all that we saw and felt from ourselves. They seemed as it were to constitute one mass. There are some persons who in this respect are always children. Those who are subject to the state called reverie fell as if their nature were dissolved into the surrounding universe, or as if the surrounding universe were absorbed into their being. They are conscious of no distinction.... As men grow up, this power commonly decays, and they become mechanical and habitual agents (507-8).

If we construe the activity of the imagination as an oscillation between the self and the other or a diffusion of the self into various subjectivities, then the poet must maintain a discrete sense of his own subjectivity in order to differentiate it and then return for the purposes of poetic composition. Schlutz describes the paradox this way: “The subject can only become conscious of itself as the subject if it distinguishes itself from an outside, the object.... the absolute subject thus simultaneously posits and delimits itself, for the possibility of unity can only be perceived consciously, once a distinction has been made, from which unity becomes observable” (152). The child, however, is capable of experiencing a complete dissipation into the universe, and so oblivious to any distinction; it is in this context that she is idealized. We would be right to ask how this silence, this “capacity to be alone,” should be understood in the example of Keats’s poet, who transcends the limitations of his idiom while also expressing the universal desire to create and extend imaginatively into the lives of others. The shared aspect of that desire is what opens the creative act from one which is displacement into one which is, ultimately, temporally transcendent. Robert Pack links this to Freud’s description of the “wish to be father to oneself,” a restating of Wordsworth’s “the child is father to the man.” But Pack points out that unlike the dreamer and the madman, the artist must return his readers to the actuality of their mortal singularity and to their own lives. It follows that an effective poem must be a dream – a convincing illusion – and a waking return, as Keats says, to “one’s sole self.” In this return, the poem becomes an act of celebration of the mind’s fecund power of identification with others, and, finally, a celebration of the finite and the limited self from which imaginative art may spring. (27)
An—if not the—ethical end of poetry is to vault readers into compassionate identification with another, then shepherd them back into their own moment in time and their own idiom. What this initial and momentary pause of the individual consciousness entails is nothing less than a move outside of time, making the ethical and temporal profoundly linked in the context of the creative act. This is what Schlegel means when he says that Romantic poetry, which is alone “infinite,” “can also, more than any other form, hover at the midpoint between the portrayed and the portrayer, free of all real and ideal self-interest, on the wings of poetic reflection... multiplied it in an endless succession of mirrors” (31).

This process necessitates an abeyance of the self and so disinterestedness is central to poetic transcendence. It is something the girl is along capable of. The preoccupation with the self is painfully revealed in one of the most tragic aspects of the Maniac’s condition: the involuntariness of this speech. He desires never to speak or even think again, but is compelled to do so. Hyperbole erupts from him without mediation, demonstrating his failure to suspend subjectivity in the midst of imaginative speech: “that thou on me / Shouldst rain these plagues of blistering agony” (l.453) or “I had torn out / The nerves of manhood y their bleeding root / With mine own quivering fingers” (l.424-26). Some argue that the Maniac’s hyperbole is the indication of his poetic sensitivity, and perhaps this is so; but in lines that call upon the images in that famous passage in the Defence that “the mind in creation is as a fading coal” (531) we see the extent to which his words destroy him: “I do but hide / Under these words like embers, every spark / Of that which has consumed me” (l. 503–05).

Compulsive speech plagues Julian and Maddalo as well. Though Maddalo sees sacredness and joy in “A heaven of sacred silence,” (l.261), and Julian describes Venice as a “delight” when the “town is silent,” (l.551), that joy is ironically experienced in terms of words: one may write or read book or admire statues “which were twin-born with poetry” (l.556). What their involuntariness of speech signifies most of all is uncontrolled self-interest, the unchecked consumption of the experience of others in order to bolster one’s argument. It is also to be mad, so enraptured with your narrative that you hallucinate listeners to attend to your laments while
failing to notice the two real people eavesdropping in your bedroom. The conversation itself is what keeps the Maniac in a state of madness and Julian and Maddalo’s dialogue itself is a state of madness. It is ongoing, without resolution, fragmentary, and it operates under the fundamentally mad assumptions regarding causality and the nature of the human will.

By contrast, the woman delivers Julian back to himself, changed by his experience: a “waking return... to one’s sole self,” as Keats puts it (cite). The activity of a disinterested imagination is, as Jacques Khalip demonstrates so precisely, an expression of an “aversion to the self” which “leads to an extra-individual concern for ethics, politics, and alterity. Disinterest evokes a profoundly renunciatory force in the face of a colonizing desire to approximate the other” (885). By being “without design,” the daughter contrasts sharply with the others: in her fallow state, pre-speech and pre-language, she does not use others to support an intellectual position; rather, she is idle and creative within a backdrop of intersubjective limitations. Her second appearance corresponds with Julian’s return to Venice. Maddalo is absent, and so he stays with his daughter at his villa. The woman is as praiseworthy now as when she was a girl: Julian describes her as a “a wonder of this earth / Where there is little of transcendent worth / As with one of Shakespeare’s women” (l .590 - 52). Julian inquires after the Maniac and the woman recalls the lover returned to him briefly only to leave again. The one specific detail she offers of the lover is impressionistic, outside the narrative and philosophical frame, and again rooted in play: it is a memory of playing with the woman’s shawl. Julian asks her to tell him “why they parted, how they met” (l.610).138 The woman requests he cease his inquiry, saying:

Yet if thine aged eyes disdain to wet
Those wrinkled cheeks with youth’s remembered tears,
Ask me no more, but let the silent years
Be closed and ceared over their memory
As yon mute marble where their corpses lie (l.611-14).

He presses, and she finally reveals his end. Crucially, however, Julian then refuses to tell the reader, saying in the poem’s final line that “The cold world shall not know” (l.617).

138 These questions reappear in “The Triumph of Life”: see Julia Tejblum.
Her plea for Julian to allow for the cessation of the Maniac’s sad tale is described as a posthumous antidote to his torture: the phrase “closed and ceared over their memory” echoes the Maniac’s own earlier description of his despair: “Thou sealedst them with many a bare broad word/And cearedst my memory oer them” (l. 432-33). The foundation for the woman’s reticence to speak is laid in the first scene; her silence there expresses the profundity of play, not only as a welcome relief from the poem’s dizzying rhetoric and speed, but as a contrast to Julian, Maddalo, and (soon) the Maniac’s desire to make use or persuade the other, and their ultimate failure to translate their sympathy into any effective relief for themselves or each other. After the Maniac collapses, exhausted, on his couch, Julian and Maddalo “(weep) without shame in his society” (l.516), urging the reader to wonder whether shame should in fact have a place in this experience after all. They do not weep in his conscious society, where he might be comforted by their sharing of the sorrow. In fact the Maniac never sees them at all—his speech becomes fodder for an evening of lively conversation, yet they elide the responsibility true sympathy might entail. Despite their proclaimed distress, immediately thereafter—quite speedily in fact—they dine at Maddalo’s where Julian is cheered by the fire and Maddalo’s “wit” (l.559). The lines “Then we lingered not, / Although our argument was quite forgot” (l.519-20, emphasis mine) is a reminder of the utilitarian perspective with which the two men have observed the Maniac. It also prepares us to be skeptical of Julian’s claim that he is not an “unconnected man” and thus cannot stay to help Maniac (in l. 550 - 67 it becomes clear he is, in fact, exactly that; he leaves for London to visit friends and the “chief attraction” is that it takes him far from the “deep tenderness” the Maniac evokes in him). For his part, that Maddalo helps the Maniac by attempting to outfit him with the trappings of high society actually exiles him from both societies: that of the asylum and of Venetian society (Weineck 100). Julian describes how he wishes to study the Maniac “as men study some stubborn art / For their own good” (l.571-72), and the use of the word “art” there reminds us of the vital connection in the poem between language and using the other.
The reaction of both men to the Maniac at the poem’s close is insensitive and brutish: Maddalo praises his speech as a kind of poetry: “they learn in suffering what they teach in song” (l.546), a line with more elegance than revelation, and Julian’s insistence at learning the Maniac’s fate despite the woman’s reticence is another example of his voyeurism. Ultimately the evasion of the resolution of Julian and Maddalo’s debate —their argument is, Julian tells us, “quite forgot”—comes not as an exchange for something more profound; for example the education that sympathy might provide. Rather, speech retards sympathy. The ending of the poem is a doubled cessation: the ending of the poem, the blankness which follows the line, underlines the termination of Julian’s speech, the woman’s knowledge, and the Maniac’s life. Initially one has the feeling of devastation in this end— “the cold world” feels like a falling gavel, a pursed lip—but what we are invited to contemplate is the grace and ethics of silence in the face of the other. That the woman does finally tell Julian of the Maniac's end must not be read as a retraction of her position as the poem’s a silent and creative ideal. To maintain the fallow position she must stay in a place of receptivity, as with the knocked billiard ball. And crucially she has succeeded in gently transposing her ethics to Julian, as he refuses to pass along the story to his listener / reader. Perhaps it is an inevitable part of the maturation process, to move from a silent fallow state to passivity; yet she maintains the integrity of the unspoken by calling for an end to the Maniac's tale. In urging her silence upon him the woman protects the reader from occupying a stage of similar unsympathetic voyeurism and is responsible for the return of the reader back to their own moment in time and idiom. She is the one who delivers us, and him, back to our own existential position. Her awareness is that the intimacy we experience between ourselves and another is based not on disclosure or narrative, but rather “out of (our) failure to reach one another.” For ultimately “intimate relatedness can, and at times ought, to be imagined as the forbearance of distance, dissonance, estrangement. Unviolated privacy is not, after all, inviolable privacy” (Yousef 11).

There is something of the Shelley’s neo-Platonic epipsyche in the figure of the girl. In “On Love,” Shelley describes the epipsyche thus:
We dimly see within our intellectual nature a miniature as it were of our entire self, yet deprived of all that we condemn or despise, the ideal prototype of every thing excellent or lovely that we are capable of conceiving as belonging to the nature of man.... a mirror whose surface reflects the forms of purity and brightness; soul within our soul that describes a circle around its proper Paradise which pain, and evil, and sorrow dare not overleap. (504)

One might imagine the girl on the floor rolling billiard balls about as the “soul within our soul that describes a circle,” who demonstrates in her silence “there is eloquence in the tongueless wind” (504). The girl’s eyes are described as “Twin mirrors of heaven” a reminder of the mimetic function of art which makes it suspect for Plato who sees it as leading to "a corruption of the mind of all listeners who do not possess as an antidote a knowledge of its real nature" (Republic 595b). Yet that is also what makes it redemptive for Gadamer, who locates the mimetic function in the imitation of human nature rather than of the material world. An artwork is incomplete without the participation of the reader, viewer, audience; yet simultaneously we are transformed by seeing ourselves through its “mirror” or interlocutor. This is a “serious play”: the context of our own values and subjectivities is made apparent by the work, and it is this melding of perspectives that creates a dialogue and allows us new ways of looking at each other and the world.

III. Conclusion

Finally we are led to the question of whether the silent creativity which the girl’s play marks is fundamentally inaccessible to the poet. In the action of iterating selves which “being a character” entails, Bollas tells us, the creative writer paradoxically preserves the integrity of the figure while destroying it. Thus “what is gained in freedom of expression is lost in terms of personal security”; the various forms into which, and through which, we shift and speak our being becomes our consolation (180). Yet Gadamer’s argument is that the aesthetic experience is characterized by a movement from individuating to participatory: what happens to the integrity of the figure of the artist, or the audience, in the play of art which “destroys the figure”?

The story-within-a-story quality of Julian and Maddalo, with its strained depiction of hallucinated listeners and over-hearers, is an active invitation to the reader to consider their
own participation in the construction of meaning-making. We might remember the Preface’s narrator’s invitation to us: “Julian... is conjectured by his friends to possess some good qualities. How far this is possible, the pious reader will determine” (121). The sentence cannot be taken to mean exactly what it seems; Shelley has left a small rent in the portion of the curtain. For while the typical interpretation is that the reader can decide how accurate the friends are in determining that Julian has good qualities, this inverted, complex sentence is in fact structurally ambiguous. The sentence equally states that the reader can decide to what extent it is even possible to make such a judgement at all. Gadamer’s assertion is that the viewer’s construal or misconstrual is constitutive of the work itself; this then alters our way of viewing the world.

Relatedly, in her response to De Man’s reading of *Triumph of Life* Rajan argues that “the supplement of reading’ is a process in which the positive essence of the work must be grasped across the barrier of the text’s negativity, and in which the reading does not simply complete the creative process but compensates for the destructive momentum of the latter” (352). By arguing that the active response of the reader, rather than their spectatorship, enables the creation of meaning as a response against the text’s own self-erasure, she positions herself nearer to Gadamer than De Man. As with the dream element of *The Triumph of Life*, which Rajan points out “suggests an incomplete attempt at mastery,” so the fragmentation of the Maniac’s speech and Julian and Maddalo’s too-ready willingness to abandon their argument in favor of sympathetic voyeurism suggest an incomplete mastery of narrative and rhetoric. And as with the “temporal repetition of Rousseau’s life in the form of retrospective narration” (Rajan 355), so the repetition of the Maniac’s story in the form of retrospective narration, alongside the Julian’s repetition of it (verbatim, if we are to believe his account), invites the reader to consider the element of fiction which is inherent in all intersubjective exchange, if only because the very word itself requires a suspension of disbelief where both individuals pretend that they share the same idea of what “love” means, for example (or “subtle talk” or “zeal” or “patience”).”

It is difficult to access the reader’s redemptive role in the text when speech itself is so condemned, and our ability to assess another so centrally in question. But by focusing our
attention on the girl, and resisting the distraction of speech, we realized that her silence is part
and parcel of her creativity, an idleness which is integral to a profoundly ethical position which
accepts the unknowability of another’s sorrow. The poem’s ultimate tragedy is that any speech,
even creative speech, prevents ethical behavior because it fosters the illusion of knowing the
other. Thus it is not only the madman who drowns in the text: it is also his hidden audience of
the two men and the doubly hidden audience of ourselves as readers. Shelley’s call is for the
cessation of speech; the death the Maniac seeks “is partly the death of the desire to write,
paradoxically communicated through writing” (O’Neill 140). Something in Maddalo recognizes
this, too: “Poetry for Maddalo has its origins in some kind of wrong; ‘song’ requires
‘suffering’” (140). Ultimately the text forces us to apprehend what is at stake when the
conversation stops, when Julian and the poet cease their speech, when the composite figures
become separate: of the other, “I can give no information” (121). Yet much of the poem’s
criticism, by focusing on the debate and adding voices and biographies and figures to the text,
ironically replicates the problem of doubled and redoubled, circular speech.

We are reminded that Plato’s apprehension about the centrality of mimesis to poetry is
rooted in the potential lack in interpretive skill on the part of the audience. By presenting us
with two modes of creativity, that of poetry and that of silent play Shelley also engages two
forms of mimesis. Julian, Maddalo, and the Maniac seem to come from and themselves
represent the poet Plato warned us of: who represents shifting subjectivities, and in the
excitement of that mimesis, fails to act ethically or recall the larger questions at hand. The child
is more of Gadamer’s sort: Shelley’s poiesis-epipsyche, a work of art within a work of art, silently
reflecting back to the individual his or her mode of being. Her presence causes Julian to reflect
upon his own commitments to narrative completion and the result is that he refrains from
speech at the end.139 “The ‘final product’ of this most serious of all playful activity is not merely
the work of art, but the human being whom we have chosen to imitate, and in whose

139 “the structure of the ego is the self’s shadow, a silent speech that is unheard by the subject
until he enters the echo chamber of psychoanalysis” (72)
characteristic modes of being we have thereby chosen to participate”; thus “At the very heart of the aesthetic object we find the subject who concretizes it, and who, by virtue of the self-reflection made available by the work of art, becomes conscious both of who he is and who he might want to become” (Mittscherling 158, 161). The figure of the girl saves us from having to make an ethical choice between speech and response, between the experience of being properly within time or vaulting through it, because she transposes her own ethical value of silence onto Julian. Which is of course a way of saying that Shelley saves us.

Cavell discusses that “habit” of mind which Hume speaks of in identifying how we learn to expect one billiard ball will move another and concludes that what anticipation means is that we are always wrong. Even when what we expect to happen actually happens the coincidence of events fools us, “for we imagine that we knew this would happen, and take it either as an occasion for congratulations or for punishments, of ourselves or others. Instead of acting as we can and remaining equal to the consequences” (322). He continues that in acknowledging that skepticism says we cannot definitively know that the world exists, we erroneously think perhaps there isn’t one at all. What we fail to comprehend, by being fixated on the acquisition of more knowledge, is that we actually have to give up knowing entirely. For what skepticism really says is that the existence of the world is not, cannot be, a function of knowing: “The world is to be accepted; as the presentness of other minds is not to be known, but acknowledged” (324). Julian and Maddalo, in their efforts to use the Maniac in their argument, operate on the assumption that another mind can be known and that a narrative can be effectively parsed through cause and effect. The Maniac’s story is “one of these ‘catalogues of detached facts’ which Shelley dismisses in the Defence—negligible not because it does not reveal a general causality but precisely because it does” (Weineck 92). The fallacy of their thinking is indicative of their failure to acknowledge the unknowability of the other, and their experience of sympathy, such as it is, is predicated on a problematic reliance on coherent narrative.

In Julian’s final lines he repeatedly asks Maddalo’s daughter “how” the Maniac’s story ended: “how did it end,” (l.607) “why they parted, how they met” (l.610), “how it / All
happened,” (l.616-17). Julian’s preoccupation is not with the Maniac, for the woman does tell us what happened to the Maniac: he dies (l.615). His assertion that he is finally told “how” all happened at the end is striking, because it shows he has failed to recognize the death as the end of the Maniac’s narrative. Perhaps because there is no end to his own curiosity. I’d like to close with a brief look at the poem’s epigraph:

The meadows with fresh streams, the bees with thyme,
The goats with the green leaves of budding spring,
Are saturated not-- nor Love with tears.

A translation of Virgil’s Tenth Eclogue, the casual reader understands the last line as a reference to the tears of the Maniac, a reading supported by the original context: the words are spoken by Pan in his attempt to calm the “immod’rate grief” of Gallus due to an unsuccessful wooing in which he was passed on in favor of another man.\textsuperscript{140} The tears wept by the Maniac are the physical manifestation of his expressive, uncontrollable outpouring of grief and function as the physical expression of his speech. While love may never be saturated with tears, perhaps cause and effect is confused here as in so many other places in this poem.

But there is something off about Shelley’s translation; more often the translation depicts Pan unambiguously emphasizing the cruelty of Love: ““Will there be no end?” he cried. “Love recks naught of this: neither is cruel Love sated with tears, nor the grass with the rills, nor bees with the clover, nor goats with leaves.”\textsuperscript{141} By linking love with cruelty so explicitly, and cruelty with language in the poem, we wonder if perhaps the tears themselves are actually what cause the spoiling of Love, or what prevents us from love. The meadow can be, after all, flooded with streams; the goats may eat all the leaves which yield the buds of spring and keep the bush from bloom. The lines complement the woman’s lines in the poem’s conclusion, when she asks him to

\textsuperscript{140} Lines from the poem also serve as the epigraph to Adonais: “Young Naiades, in what far woodlands wild / Wandered ye, when unworthy love possessed / Our Gallus?” (l. 9 - 10, Shelley’s translation). For more on the significance of the Tenth Eclogue to Shelley’s works, see Michael Vicario, III. “Virgil’s Tenth Eclogue and Shelley’s Adonais,” Keats-Shelley Journal 161-83.


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let her keep her silence over the Maniac’s fate: “If thine aged eyes disdain to wet / Those wrinkled cheeks with youth’s remembered tears” (l.611-12). The juxtaposition of “aged” and “youth’s remembered” is another temporal contradiction of sorts - and, in another syntactical collapse of subjectivity, it begs the question of whose tears are being remembered (the Maniac’s? Julian’s?). Returning us to the state of shifting tenses and collapsed figuration which characterizes so much of the poem, we confront again the hazard of conversation as a distraction from our orientation within time. Ultimately Julian and Maddalo fail to calm the grief of the Maniac. Like the “lone fisher” in the poem’s opening who “when his nets are dried” abandons the waste of the “uninhabitable sea-side” and its earthly “embrace” of “salt ooze,” (l.6-8) so they abandon the waste of the Maniac’s speech and his tears after their own hunger is satisfied. The matter is not so much whether the excess of madness makes poetry impossible but how the production of speech is the production of a text which drowns us. And in this narrative poem— a monologue purporting to be a dialogue with the feel of a drama— the importance of an unsung lyric is child’s play.
Works Cited


