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## Romanticism and Mortal Consciousness

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## Romanticism and Mortal Consciousness

## Abstract

The Romantic period coincides with a fundamental shift in Western attitudes toward death and dying. This dissertation examines how Romantic poets engage this shift. It argues that “Romantic mortal consciousness” – a form of mortal reflection characteristic of English Romantic poetry – is fundamentally social and political in its outlook and strikingly similar to what one might now call a liberal social consciousness. During the Romantic period, mortally conscious individuals, less able or willing to depend on old spiritual consolations, began to regard Death not as the Great Leveler of society but rather as a force that sealed social inequality into the records of history. Intimations of mortality forced one to look beyond the self and, to quote Keats, “think of the Earth.”

This dissertation considers the development of Romantic mortal consciousness. Death’s transformation from the Great Leveler of social inequality into its crystallizing agent is evident in the Romantic response to Graveyard School poetry. This is the subject of my first chapter, which focuses on Gray’s “Elegy” and Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage.” Chapter Two examines Lord Byron’s *Cain*, where mortal consciousness transforms Cain’s personal lament about mortality into a protest on behalf of a doomed race.

*Cain* anticipates death studies by dramatizing the shift from what Ariès calls the “death of the self” to the “death of the other” and by recognizing that mortality is essentially a cultural construct. However, the other idea of mortality as a solitary reckoning with death does not disappear entirely. Poems by Hemans and Keats, the subjects of my third and

fourth chapters, show how the “death of the self” flourishes as the other side of Romantic mortal consciousness.

Romantic mortal consciousness has centripetal and centrifugal aspects. It exhorts the ruminative soul to engage sympathetically with the suffering of others. At the same time, it turns the soul inwards, bringing the fate of the self into focus. One aim of this dissertation is to unify these aspects through an analysis of the sublime. In Chapter Five, which focuses on Byron and Smith, I illustrate the connection between mortal consciousnesses, social or political consciousness, and aesthetic awareness.

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## Dedication

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## Introduction: The Construction of Mortality

Toward the end of January 1818, Keats composed what was to be his last sonnet.

The poem reads:

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
    Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,  
Before high piled books, in charactry,  
    Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starred face,  
    Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
    Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,  
    That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the fairy power  
    Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink. (1-14)<sup>1</sup>

“When I Have Fears” is fundamentally a poem about death. It is also about literature and love – about the literary and erotic pursuits that death may, at any moment, put an end to. These themes are deeply intertwined, for the “high piled books” the speaker imagines never writing are works of “high romance,” a genre about which Keats had already grown deeply ambivalent precisely on account of its “unreflecting” quality, that is to say, its detachment

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<sup>1</sup> John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978).

from the darker aspects of human experience. Indeed, just a few days previously, Keats had composed another sonnet bidding farewell to “golden-tongued Romance” (1), peremptorily ordering it to “shut up [its] olden pages, and be mute” (4) because he had other literary business to attend to:

Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
Betwixt Damnation and impassion'd clay  
Must I burn through; once more humbly assay  
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit. (5-8)

The “fierce dispute” (5) to which the poet refers is the one dramatized by Shakespeare in *King Lear*, a tragedy I shall have reason to assay later in this project.

I have begun my project with Keats’ sonnet “When I Have Fears” because it exemplifies the intrusion into everyday life of something I shall define as *mortal consciousness*. The poem evokes those moments when our awareness of mortality arises from the background noise of life and, suddenly standing there “plain as a wardrobe,” speaks to us in somber tones, reminding us of the irrevocable truth that our lives are finite and we shall die.<sup>2</sup> I believe Keats’ sonnet also expresses a particular manifestation of mortal consciousness that one frequently encounters in British Romantic literature, and which, for this reason, I shall call *Romantic mortal consciousness*. This is an intimation of mortality that, besides simply drawing one’s attention to the inexorable fate of the self, also encourages one to look beyond the self, engage sympathetically with human hardship and suffering, and critically examine the forces causing, aiding, or abetting it. A world, as Keats would later describe it sixteen months later in “Ode to a Nightingale,” marked by “the weariness, the fever, and the fret / [...] where men sit and hear each other groan” (23-4).

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<sup>2</sup> Philip Larkin, “Aubade,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

There are, to be sure, instances of what I call Romantic mortal consciousness prior to the Romantic period. When Lear, alone on the heath, says

O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just (3.4.33-7)<sup>3</sup>

he is expressing an idea that will become a leitmotif in Romantic poetry. Lear realizes that he has failed as King to attend to and remedy or assuage the socioeconomic inequality of his kingdom, thereby contributing to a vast, unwritten legacy of poverty and suffering. In Chapter Four, which attempts to trace the development of Keats' mortal consciousness, I shall argue that Keats was thinking about Shakespeare's humbled king while composing his famous letter of May 3, 1818. In this letter, Keats develops his famous metaphor of life as a "Mansion of Many Apartments" in which the thinking individual, declining from innocence into experience, gradually becomes aware of the "dark passages" of human experience in fallen world. But I am getting ahead of myself. Before turning to Keats or any of the authors considered in this project, I need to say a few more words about mortal consciousness and its Romantic manifestations.

To frame my project, I must first of all distinguish between death and mortality. Death is a biological fact, life's terminus. It is the end of human experience as we know it. It is the ultimate unknown and the ultimate unknowable. For this reason, Hamlet calls it "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns" (3.1.82). Mortality, by contrast, is eminently knowable, because it is an idea. It is a cultural construct and a product

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<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: Norton, 1997). All subsequent references to Shakespeare refer to this edition.

of lived experience. Sometimes it is a casualty of experience, too; proximity to death and dying has a way of shaping what we think (or what we haven't stopped to think) about mortality and our personal relationship to it. Mortality, in other words, is malleable. Indeed, during the last 50 years or so, cultural historians have attempted to trace the evolution in Western attitudes toward death and dying. French historian Philippe Ariès is generally credited with inventing the field of "death studies." Jacques Choron and John McManners have made important contributions to it. Recent additions to the field include Drew Faust's book *This Republic of Suffering*, which examines how the Civil War changed American attitudes toward death and dying, and Susan Gilbert's *Death's Door*, which weaves together memoir and literary criticism.

In *The Hour of Our Death*, Phillippe Ariès identifies three major shifts in Western attitudes toward death and dying. The first occurred during the late Middle Ages, near the advent of the Renaissance. Prior to this time, Ariès argues, the death of an individual was only significant or important insofar as it affected his or her community. Death itself was not something to be feared or mourned. There was also nothing mysterious about it. People lived alongside and in close proximity to it. They were familiar with it.

While the "simple death" survived (and still survives) in isolated communities, Christianity had slowly been unleashing a new anxiety about the "death of the self." This anxiety reached its peak during the Renaissance. The moment of death became something to be feared, prepared for, and even lived toward, because the spiritual adjudication that followed death would determine the place of one's eternal abode: in Heaven or in Hell. Death thus became an eschatological drama enacted on every man and every woman's deathbed.

The second major shift in Western attitudes toward death and dying began to occur during the Enlightenment and continued into the late nineteenth century. This was the shift from the “death of the self” to the “death of the other,” where the crisis of mortality involved the dying or the deceased less than it involved his or her survivors. This is because the death of an individual also meant the severing of erotic, familial, or social ties. There were many reasons for this change, which occurred slowly and unevenly; two important ones identified by Ariès were the secularization of European culture and the rise of the family as an individual’s primary unit of social identification and organization.

The third shift took place around the beginning of the last century and was the product of the harrowing experience of total war. Ariès calls it the “dirty death” and the “invisible death.” It is the form of mortality most of us live with today. In our world, death generally takes place outside the home, usually in hospitals, and sometimes behind curtains. We don’t live with it; if we encounter it at all, it is in isolated environments. For this reason, we fear it, abhor it, or ignore it altogether. We are no longer familiar with it.<sup>4</sup>

I am primarily interested in the second shift identified by Ariès, the shift from the “death of the self” to the “death of the other,” because it roughly corresponds with the period of British Romanticism. Fundamentally, my project examines how British Romantic poets engage changing attitudes toward death and dying and asks what forms of mortal consciousness they inherit, adapt, or create to cope with them.

I have chosen the term mortal *consciousness* (as opposed to awareness, understanding, knowledge, or any number of synonyms) for two reasons. First of all, my term reminds us that we are rarely conscious – really, truly *conscious* – of our own mortality. While we may occasionally acknowledge our mortal nature (“I am going to die”), and while we may even

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<sup>4</sup> Phillippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

submit to the knowledge (during the funeral of a loved one, for instance, or after watching a horrifying segment on the news) that our time on earth could be cut short – and our bonds with innumerable lovers, friends, mentors, and students rudely severed – at practically any moment, we do not always act as though we are conscious of mortality. We tend to forget about it or put it aside. The mere business of living tends to get in the way. And well it should! Our business, while we are alive, is with the living. Our orientation must be, ought to be, and usually *is* toward life, its responsibilities, its demands, and its joys.

After all, it is not very easy to dwell on death for an extended period of time. In the lyric poem “Surprised by Joy,” Wordsworth’s speaker ruminates on the precarious place of the deceased in the minds of their survivors. To Sartre, this idea was so frightening that it informs his conception of hell in his play *No Exit*. The reason the Middle Ages invented the *memento mori* rather than a *memento vivere* or a *memento conjugere* was that most of us do not need to be reminded to eat, drink, and be merry, or to be fruitful and multiply. A decade of conversations with high school and college students has assured me that this is indeed the case.

But the primary reason I use the term mortal *consciousness* is that it helps me articulate an orientation toward mortality characteristic of the Romantic period. This is the idea – no, not the idea, but the exhortation – that mortality needs to be placed and held front and center in one’s consciousness, despite its natural resistance to being there. That mortality is something that must be remembered and ruminated upon. Not out of some morbid curiosity characteristic of Graveyard School poetry of the early eighteenth century, but because of its importance for how we relate to life and living in a world marked by inequality, injustice, and human suffering.

This had not always been necessary. The structure of human culture has always been, and continues to be, vastly unequal in its distribution of power, wealth, opportunity, and happiness. Prior to the Enlightenment, however, it was much easier for an individual to trust that God would iron out these wrinkles in the long run by rewarding the good and punishing the bad. One of the most famous visual representations of this idea is the *danse macabre*, where Death, the Great Leveler, invites men and women from all stations of life to dance together before the grave. In the wake of the Enlightenment, it became harder for many educated men and women to regard Death as a leveling force. Instead, they came to view it as something I will call the Great Crystallizer of human inequality: a force that permanently sealed inequality into the records of human history. Religious skepticism had a lot to do with this change, and we see this skepticism manifest in different ways in the work of Byron, Shelley, and Keats. However, even for Romantic poets one might call “religious” – poets like Blake, Smith, Wordsworth, Coleridge, or Hemans – the old spiritual consolations were less readily available to help one makes sense of or come to terms with human hardship and suffering. The Enlightenment did not just disbar God from the universal court of justice. It also nurtured new notions of liberty, equality, and freedom. The French Revolution was the greatest expression but also the greatest disappointment of these new ideals. It was by almost all measures a colossal failure, and in England it inspired fierce political reaction, but the hopes it enflamed lingered on, especially in the poetry of the second generation of Romantic poets and in the great Victorian novels of social reform.

So what picture of Romantic mortal consciousness does my project yield? Briefly, my dissertation falls in three parts. The first traces the rise of Romantic mortal consciousness and illustrates its similarities to what we might now call social or political consciousness. In Chapter One, I examine the Romantic response, beginning with Gray’s “Elegy Written in a

Country Church Yard” and continuing with Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage,” to Graveyard School poetry of the early eighteenth century. In Graveyard School poems like Parnell’s “Night-Piece on Death,” real or imaginative trips to the cemetery inspire morbid ruminations on transience and decay but typically end with appeals to God or his leveling instrument Death. (Parnell’s poem ends with an encounter with the voice of Death itself.) The effect of these appeals is to erase the legacy of inequality whose imprint remains in the physical features of the graveyard.

Something quite different happens in Gray’s “Elegy” and “The Ruined Cottage.” Gray focuses on individuals who could have left marks on history more significant than their own shallow graves had their lives been less circumscribed by class, poverty, or geography. Similarly, Wordsworth focuses on a woman whose family, person, and home all fall into ruin as a string of hardships works to undermine her rural abode. The hardship is partly natural but mostly manmade, and the manmade portion originates far away in centers of wealth and power where history is made and recorded. The tidal forces of this history seek her and her family out and sweep them up in its impetuous course. Her fate is sealed when her husband, in a move of economic desperation, enlists in the British army and goes off to fight in a foreign land, where he presumably meets his death. For both Gray and Wordsworth, ruminating on mortality – being truly conscious of it – means cultivating true awareness of socioeconomic and political as well as gender inequality. Contemplating death, in other words, leads to dissatisfaction with the structure of culture, pity for the dead, and sympathy with the sufferings endured by those who cling to the margins of history and life.

Perhaps the greatest manifestation in Romantic poetry of this dissatisfaction with the structure of things is Byron’s retelling of the Cain and Abel story in his mystery drama *Cain*. Byron’s eponymous protagonist, doomed to die but uncertain what death is because it has



yet to leave its mark on human history, is baffled by his mortal condition and seeks an understanding of it. In a parodic inversion of Books XI and XII of *Paradise Lost*, where Michael consoles Adam with a vision of human history culminating in man's redemption by Christ, Lucifer takes Cain into the underworld and shows him the Earth's geological past: a horrifying vision of ceaseless creation and destruction. Cain's traumatic vision of death radically transforms what until that moment had mainly been a private complaint about mortality: "Why do I have to die? Why should I be punished for my parents' crimes? How is this fair to me?" This complaint morphs into a protest against God concerning the fate of posterity. The new question becomes: "What did my children do to deserve a life in a world such as this?" This is not a self-centered complaint; it is a social and political grievance.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Byron's *Cain* is that it is, to my knowledge, the only work in English literature set in a postlapsarian world prior to the arrival of death. At the beginning the play, Cain does not know what death is, and after he murders Abel, whose blind worship of God has finally ignited Cain's smoldering anger toward their creator, he has a hard time comprehending what has taken place. In other words, the play explicitly links the birth of social and political consciousness – for the assault on Abel, misguided though it may be, is fundamentally a protest against God about the limitations of human existence – with the birth of mortal consciousness.

Moreover, Byron's play points to an important reason why Romantic mortality was qualitatively different from mortality as experienced or understood during preceding periods. Cain's vision in the underworld was deeply informed by Byron's familiarity with contemporary natural history, particularly speculation regarding the history and age of the Earth. During the Renaissance, cosmology had drop-kicked the Earth from the center of the universe to its outskirts; during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the new sciences

of natural history and geology were transforming a relatively young 6000-year-old planet into a gray-haired, tired, old rock estimated by one contemporary to be as many as 1.5 million years old. That is less by about three orders of magnitude than the current accepted estimate of six billion years but also three orders of magnitude greater than what Bishop Ussher had calculated using biblical genealogies. For this reason, geology contributed to the climate of religious skepticism that emerged in the wake of the Enlightenment. Death the Leveler fell from power, and Death the Crystallizer assumed its throne. Furthermore, the troubling idea of a very old earth cast the plight of the living and the unborn in a new light. The longer socioeconomic and political inequality continued to define human culture, the greater the number of souls that Death would cast to the margins of history.

The first two chapters of my project look at mortal consciousness in general, and Romantic mortal consciousness in particular, as a product of culture: a product of the Enlightenment and the ideals of liberty, fraternity, and equality that it kindled; a product of the twin spirits of political revolution and social reform; and a product of the anxiety produced by a climate of religious skepticism and exacerbated by contemporary science. But there is another way of looking at Romantic mortal consciousness, and that is to focus on its strangely solitary nature. The form of death studies founded by Ariès instructs us to regard Romantic mortal consciousness and all conceptions of mortality primarily as cultural constructs; however, Romantic mortal consciousness sometimes appears to transcend culture or arise in spite of it. Indeed, the deepest ruminations on mortality in Romantic literature seem to occur in moments where characters, speakers, or personae are physically or psychically alone. This is true of Gray's "Elegy," Wordsworth's "Ruined Cottage," and especially Byron's *Cain* – and not only the climax, where Byron's hero struggles to comprehend his brother's lifeless body, but also the beginning, where Cain recalls the

solitary vigils he has held in expectation of death's arrival. This is true, too, of many prose works that fall outside my project's scope, including a number of works by Thomas de Quincey. One recalls de Quincey's dreamlike recollection of viewing the corpse of his five-year-old sister in a sun-drenched room.

Culture attempts to structure our understanding of mortality and mediate our experience of it. Despite this, mortal consciousness tends to arise in moments of solitude that transcend culture and may even upend it, destabilizing what George Bataille would call culture's "projects" or explanatory structures.<sup>5</sup> My third chapter, which focuses on two poems by Felicia Hemans, explores in greater detail the solitary dimension of Romantic mortal consciousness. This chapter complicates my project by presenting Romantic mortal consciousness as a dual structure, one imposed by culture but substantiated and validated in moments of profound solitude. In Chapter One, I shall suggest that *Cain* enacts the shift from the "death of the self" to the "death of the other." Hemans' masterpiece "A Spirit's Return" is a product of this shift. Superficially, it is a poem in which anxiety about mortality centers on the death of a loved one and leads to a fantasy of spiritual reunion. Significantly, however, Hemans' speaker presents her longing for reunion-in-death as the culmination of a unique personal history: a life trajectory draped out across a series of experiences of love and loss. These experiences have continually challenged and revised her perception of the relationship between life and death, between living and the grave.

A deeply unsettling composition, "A Spirit's Return" embodies an existential paradox articulated by Bataille: namely, that love, that all-too-familiar desire to transcend the discontinuity of the mortal self by coupling with another object, is itself coupled with death, the primal state of continuity that marks the destination of all living beings. Hemans' poem

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<sup>5</sup> George Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

shows how one can know neither love nor death without knowing the other – without possessing a dual knowledge that simultaneously enriches and depletes the life of the individual. The poem provides a richly multi-faceted model of death. It shows how mortal consciousness, though informed by culture and history, manifests itself in the private life of the individual through a unique pattern of experience and knowledge gathering. Ironically, however, this solitude may itself be a product of culture: a space that unmarried women were encouraged to inhabit. By attending to this possibility, one sees how “A Spirit’s Return” yields a feminist version of Romantic mortal consciousness.

Romantic mortal consciousness has both centripetal centrifugal aspects. It causes one to look inwards and contemplate the fate of the self even as it exhorts one to look outward and consider the plight of fellow human beings whose mortal condition we share and may shape. Balancing these forces is a fundamental task of Romantic mortal consciousness.

My fourth and fifth chapters describe this challenge and consider the ways that John Keats and Charlotte Smith respond to it in two major poems: Keats’ *The Fall of Hyperion* and Smith’s *Beachy Head*. Keats’ poem is firmly established in the canon; Smith’s poem is a relatively recent restoration, thanks to the works of feminist scholars like Stuart Curran and Jacqueline Labbe. Both are epics or attempts at epics, and both are fragmentary in nature or unfinished. Both also respond in fascinating ways to the problem of Romantic mortal consciousness, which forces an individual to ruminate on fate of the self even as it urges him, in Keats’ words, to “think of the Earth” (1.169).

With Keats, Romantic mortal consciousness helps us understand his protracted struggle with *Hyperion*. In *Hyperion*, Keats set out to record the fall of the Titans and the ascendancy of a new race of Gods; the fragment concludes with the ascendancy of Apollo as

a new deity. I argue that as Keats composed the poem, he realized he was less interested in the new Olympian deities than the condition of the fallen Titans, whose suffering resonated with Keats' personal experience of the world. Letters written during this time reveal his struggles to reconcile poetry with his understanding of human experience. Ultimately, Keats began working toward crafting a poetics of relevance in a world of suffering and woe. I argue that *The Fall of Hyperion* illuminates the mortal consciousness Keats felt he needed to achieve before granting himself permission, midway through the revised poem, to reenter his earlier fragment and attempt to record the suffering of overthrown and disanointed gods. Ironically, this mortal consciousness forced him to scrutinize even more carefully the integrity of the poetic enterprise and vocation.

In my final chapter, I show how Byron and Smith attempt to forge an aesthetic solution to the problem of Romantic mortal consciousness. Continuing my earlier discussion of *Cain*, I first show how Byron's play dramatizes the birth of mortal consciousness, the arrival of social and political consciousness, and the development of sublime aesthetic awareness. The sublime, an aesthetic experience rooted in fear and thus in awareness of mortality, is Cain's consolation prize for the mortal consciousness granted to him by Lucifer. Crucially, it informs his understanding of God and lays the ground for his protest against him, which manifests as Abel's murder.

In the work of Charlotte Smith, mortal consciousness also takes on an aesthetic dimension. The final part of Chapter Five glances at Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* and her early long poem *The Emigrants* before focusing on *Beachy Head*. This poem begins as an exercise in the Romantic sublime, with its speaker dwelling on the massive geological features of the Southern coast of England and the historical events they bring to mind. Gradually, however, the poem transforms into a protracted meditation on minute fossil shells embedded in the

soil and the surrounding geological strata. To Smith's speaker, these fossil remains serve as visible signs of history's silent victims. Smith's foray into the Romantic sublime thus transforms into a critique of it; in her view, the sublime stands as an aesthetic and rhetorical corollary to the massive, male-driven forces of politics, history, and culture that have circumscribed the lives of so many individuals, particularly women and children. At the same time, Smith's poem also postulates a new version of the sublime arising from deep attention to the details of human life of culture: something akin to Wordsworth's "spots of time" but charged with profound sociopolitical implications in addition to personal relevance. Social and political consciousness work hand in hand with the discourse of the sublime as Smith fashions a feminist sublime and a feminist Romantic mortal consciousness. In *Beachy Head*, the poet deploys both ideas to administer a withering critique of human history and the forces that perpetuate socioeconomic and political inequality and cultural marginalization.

## Chapter One: Gray, Wordsworth, and the Romantic Graveyard School

### *Introduction: Preparing the Ground*

Chapter One traces the development of the Graveyard School of poetry and examines the Romantic response to this genre. It focuses on three key texts. It begins with a discussion of Thomas Parnell's "Night-Piece on Death," widely regarded by scholars as the progenitor of the Graveyard poems of the middle eighteenth century. This discussion will help highlight an important difference between Graveyard poems and later works that transform the genre, namely Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," arguably the first "Romantic" Graveyard poem – and the first to express what I called in my introduction "Romantic mortal consciousness" – and William Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage." In Parnell's poem, a speaker's solitary and anxious musings on mortality (galvanized by an imaginative trip to a nearby cemetery) are interrupted by the voice of Death the Leveler, who mocks the anxiety he inspires before redefining death as a gateway to immortal life.

Death the Leveler does not appear in Gray's poem. This manifestation of Death has no need to, because there is no one to level. Unlike the monument-filled cemetery visited by Parnell's speaker, Gray's churchyard appears to contain only the graves of the poor. Gray's speaker ruminates on the circumscribed lives of the inhabitants of these graves and their unrealized human potential. At the end of the poem, he imagines himself lying among them in the ground. Gray's "Elegy" is not a poem of social or political protest, but it recognizes socioeconomic and political inequality and does not attempt to level it with easy spiritual consolations.

In this way, Gray's "Elegy" exhibits the stirrings of the Romantic form of mortal consciousness that permeates Wordsworth's "The Ruined Cottage." This early poem concerns a peasant woman and her family, who are swept up and overthrown by the forces of history. Despite what some commentators have said, "The Ruined Cottage" *is*, I argue, a protest poem. Indeed, it displays a form of mortal consciousness strikingly akin to what we would now call a liberal social or political consciousness. Wordsworth's transformation of the Graveyard School poem paves the way for my extensive treatment in Chapters Two and Five of Lord Byron's mystery play *Cain*, which I regard as the capstone of Romantic Graveyard poetry and one of the fullest expressions of Romantic mortal consciousness.

*Entering the Graveyard: Parnell's Night Thoughts*

Parnell's "Night-Piece on Death" was published posthumously in 1722. It is the first in a long line of Graveyard School poems that includes Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, published between 1742 and 1745, and Robert Blair's *The Grave*, published in 1743. (William Blake illuminated both works – in 1797 and 1808, respectively). Parnell's poem features a speaker who, over the course of ninety lines, rejects book learning in favor of natural wisdom; takes an imaginative trip to a rural cemetery; has a vision of the dead, who beckon him to think about mortality; and then hears the voice of Death himself, who neutralizes his fears by helping him re-imagine the grave as a dark path to a sunlit space inhabited by the souls of the pious.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The best discussion of Graveyard School poetry of the eighteenth century appears in Laurence Goldstein, *The Ruins of Empire: The Evolution of a Theme in Augustan and Romantic Literature* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1977).



Parnell's conception of mortality is fundamentally rooted in a Christian world-view where death is not an end but a beginning. Death, the speaker says, is only "a Path that must be trod / If Man would ever pass to God" (67-8).<sup>2</sup> During his imaginative trip to the "Place of Graves" (19) in the middle of the poem, the speaker acknowledges and touches briefly on the physical and economic hardships that defined the lives of so many of the deceased and continue to define them after death. Indeed, the location, bareness, and disorderly appearance of their posthumous resting places attest to the low station they occupied in the world of the living.

But "A Night-Piece" is by no means a political poem or a poem of social protest. Implicitly accepting human inequality as a fact of life, the third verse paragraph reduplicates it structurally by giving just four lines to the graves of the poor. These simple graves surely outnumber the more elaborate tombs of the prosperous, but in the fifth verse paragraph those tombs receive twice the amount of poetic attention. Perhaps this is only natural; there is, after all, much more to describe when looking at these tombs. (In the intervening paragraph, the dead who made up the "*middle race* of Mortals" (37), and whose thin memories are preserved by simple, horizontal slabs, enjoy six lines of attention.) Ultimately, however, the poem neutralizes this socioeconomic and political inequality when the speaker imagines the spirits of *all* the dead assembling to remind him of his mortality collectively. This paves the way for the arrival of Death the Leveler himself, who redirects the speaker's (and the reader's) attention from a corporeal world marred by death and inequality to a spiritual world characterized by eternal life and shared bliss. The poem manifests a form of mortal consciousness that Romantic poets would later reject, in part because such a heaven seemed

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Parnell, *Collected Poems*, ed. Claude Rawson and F. P. Lock (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1989).

less readily available to them. And this, as we shall see, prodded poets to seek new solutions, or at least new responses, to the specter of Death.

Parnell's "Night-Piece" is composed of 45 iambic tetrameter couplets divided into ten verse paragraphs of varying lengths. In the first verse paragraph, the speaker closes the heavy religious and philosophical volumes he has been reading by candlelight because he hopes to find a "readier Path" (7) to wisdom in his surroundings. The poem begins:

By the blue Tapers trembling light  
No more I waste the wakeful Night,  
Intent with endless view to pore  
The Schoolmen and the Sages o'er:  
Their Books from Wisdom widely stray,  
Or point at best the Longest Way.  
I'll seek a readier Path, and go  
Where wisdom's surely taught *below*. (1-8)

In turning from received wisdom to the speaker's surroundings, "A Night-Piece" anticipates the Romantic turn to nature and its processes and cycles as sources of truth and guides to life. As we shall see, however, the speaker turns away from nature at the emotional climax of the poem, placing his hopes instead in the consolations of Christianity.

The second verse paragraph establishes the setting, directing the reader's gaze from a starry night sky presided over by a crescent moon down to a lake whose nearly still waters reflect the heavens as they quietly lap against the walls surrounding a graveyard. As the paragraph unfolds, the point of view subtly shifts from the speaker's to the reader's. In line 16, the speaker says that the reflected image of the stars meets "our Eyes" (16), but in line 21 the poet deploys a second person personal pronoun; the speaker points to a steeple that

“guides *thy* doubtful sight / Among the livid gleams of night” (21-22, my italics). The paragraph also concludes with a shift from the indicative to the imperative mood, as the speaker urges the reader to

pass with melancholy State  
By all the solemn Heaps of Fate  
And think, as softly-sad you tread  
Above the venerable Dead,  
*Time was, like thee they Life possest,*  
*And Time shall be, that thou shalt Rest.* (23-8)<sup>3</sup>

The prescriptive quality of the lines reflects the set of theological assurances that form the spiritual backbone of the poem. In the final couplet, the speaker implants a pair of self-reflexive thoughts about the transience of life. The couplet voices the *memento mori* occasionally found in Roman crypts: “What you are, we used to be; what we are, you will become.”

Verse paragraphs three through six focus on the graves and their inhabitants. The third paragraph, which begins with the deictic phrase “those graves,” is the shortest in the poem. Its four lines formally enact the physical attributes of the graves as well as the shock that the thought of death may give:

Those Graves, with bending Osier bound,  
That nameless heave the crumpled Ground,  
Quick to the glancing Thought disclose,  
Where *Toil* and *Poverty* repose. (29-32)

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<sup>3</sup> The italics are likely Parnell’s or were approved by him. The small number of poems published during Parnell’s lifetime, a body that includes *Homer’s Battle of the Frogs and Mice*, makes liberal use of italics.

Both the rhythm and syntax of the lines replicate the uneven contours of the “crumpled ground” where the “nameless” poor lie beneath shallow mounds of earth. The subject (“graves”) is separated from the main verb (“disclose”) by two and a half lines, and the direct object of “disclose” is the adverbial clause in line 32. In line 31, a trochee disrupts the poem’s iambic tetrameter line (“**quick** to the **glancing thought** disclose”). This slight rhythmic shift suggests that the idea of mortality, rendered suddenly palpable by the sight or idea of the cemetery’s graves, has jostled the speaker’s mind. In the fourth and fifth paragraphs, which I shall discuss at greater length below, the speaker focuses first on the “middle race” of men and then the more prosperous dead, and in the sixth paragraph, the shades of all the dead assemble to deliver a chilling command to the reader to be mindful of mortality.

The seventh verse paragraph marks a major turning point in the poem, for it introduces a new persona: Death, the “*King of Fears*” (62). The speaker says: “Now from yon Black and fun’ral Yew, / That bathes the Charnel House with dew, / Methinks I hear a *Voice* begin” (53-5). The speaker of the final three verse paragraphs is Death the Leveler. In paradox-filled lines vaguely reminiscent of Andrew Marvell’s “Dialogue between the Soul and Body,” Death chides the reader for fearing him and redefines dying as a process of homecoming and liberation. The eighth verse paragraph begins with a slightly amused tone, as Death considers all the fanciful ways in which the human imagination – especially, perhaps, John Milton’s, in his famous depiction of Death in Book II of *Paradise Lost* – has conceived him:

When Men my Scythe and Darts supply,

How great a *King of Fears* am I!

They view me like the last of Things:

They make, and then they dread, my Stings. (61-4)

Calling men “fools” (65), Death attempts to neutralize his “spectre form” (66) by depicting himself not as the “last of things” but as a “path” to somewhere else, and then as a “port” rather than an abyss. Parnell’s debt to Marvell’s poem, in which the Soul complains about being “shipwrecked into health” every time the disease-becalmed Body appears just ready to die, thus allowing the Soul to “gain” its heavenly “port,” is plain.<sup>4</sup> Parnell’s speaker says:

Death’s but a Path that must be trod

If Man wou’d ever pass to God:

A Port of Calm, a State of Ease

From the rough Rage of swelling Seas. (67-70)

In the ninth verse paragraph, a catalog of funereal images, Death questions man’s fixation on the trappings and the suits of woe, and in the tenth he disavows them entirely. Like the Soul in Marvell’s poem, who asks, “O who shall, from this dungeon, raise / A soul enslaved so many ways?” (1-2), Death re-imagines life as a prison where pious souls “waste” away and death as a state of liberation from that prison.

The end of the poem repeats the shift in the second paragraph from the indicative to the imperative mood, as Death urges the reader to imagine the joy of heaven:

On Earth, and in the Body plac’t,

A few, and evil Years, they wast;

But when their Chains are cast aside,

See the glad Scene unfolding wide,

Clap the glad Wing, and tow’r away,

And mingle with the Blaze of Day. (85-90)

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<sup>4</sup> Andrew Marvell, *The Poems of Andrew Marvell*, ed. Nigel Smith (London: Longman, 2003).

A poem that began with the guttering of a candle before plunging precipitously into the “livid gleams of night” (22) ends on a triumphant note with Death the Leveler imagining the light of heaven. The trochees at the beginning of lines 88 and 89 capture the surprise, relief, and joy experienced by souls ushered to heaven, thus inverting the emotional effect of the rhythmic shift in line 31.

Death’s self-disavowal in the last three verse paragraphs, rendered poetically through metaphysical metaphor, fundamentally depends on Christianity’s ability to stabilize fears about death by constructing a belief system around the fact of human mortality.

Significantly, however, the first two-thirds of the poem inhabits a non-Christian or at least semi-Christian space. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker turns away not only from books by “Schoolmen” or medieval scholastics but also from ones by “Sages” or classical philosophers (4). A church “Steeple” marks the “Place of Graves” where the middle of the poem dwells (21), and this place offers glimpses of sculptured “Angels” (42). However, the speaker refers to the moon by a classical name, and he refers to a vision of “Shades.” The poem’s first climax evokes pagan myth: “Ha! while I gaze, pale *Cynthia* fades, / The bursting Earth unveils the Shades!” (47-8). Only after Death begins to speak does the poem’s anxiety about mortality manage to find a resting place in Christian faith; death becomes “a Path [...] God” (67-8).

In the final verse paragraph, Death re-imagines the “Shades” that had haunted the speaker as “pious Souls” sprung from a prison:

As Men who long in Prison dwell,  
With Lamps that glimmer round the Cell,  
When e’er their suffering Years are run,  
Spring forth to greet the glitt’ring Sun:

Such Joy, tho' far transcending Sense,  
Have Pious souls at parting hence. (79-84)

Parnell's use of inverted syntax, which consists of an extended simile linked to a direct object ("Joy") followed in the closing line by the main verb ("have") and subject ("Souls), simulates the release of tension Christianity offers a mind apprehensive about mortality. A terminus transforms into a path, a prison cell into place of liberation, and darkness into form of light that "transcend[s] Sense."

The poem's narrative, thematic, and emotional trajectories illustrate how Christianity provides a structure to stabilize the anxiety produced by mortal consciousness. Navigating from a non-Christian or semi-Christian place of frustrated intellectual enquiry to a graveyard presided over by the spirit of Death of Leveler, who presents himself as a liberating entity, Parnell's "Night-Piece" describes a set of beliefs supremely well-equipped to manage fears about death. The availability of these beliefs to stabilize the speaker's uneasiness determines the structure and content of the poem's emotional core: the speaker's rumination on the "Place of Graves" in verse paragraphs three through six. Analysis of these lines sets up the contrast between the thematic aims of Graveyard School poets and their Romantic successors.

Verse paragraph three, whose two couplets bring the poem's lyrical, loco-descriptive passage to a jarring halt, focuses the reader's attention on a quantity of graves strewn across an uneven landscape:

Those Graves, with bending osier Bound,  
That nameless heave the crumpled Ground,  
Quick to the glancing Thought disclose,  
Where *Toil* and *Poverty* repose. (29-32)

Earlier, I showed how the syntax of this paragraph replicates the ground's "crumpled" state. I also suggested that the slight metrical variation in line 31 enacts the shock experienced by a mind turning from abstract rumination on mortality to the specter of death itself, embodied by actual graves. The paragraph's brevity amplifies the shock; it's the shortest in the poem.

A reader, perusing the poem for the first time, might think that the deictic phrase "those Graves" in line 29 refers to all the burial spots in the "Place of Graves" introduced in line 19. In hindsight, it becomes clear that the speaker is referring to a distinct subset of graves occupied by an impoverished underclass. In the fourth verse paragraph, the speaker turns his attention to the "flat smooth Stones that bear a Name, / The Chissels slender Help to Fame" (33-4). The graves in the third verse paragraph, marked only by "Osier" (29) or willow wreathes, are "nameless" (30) because the survivors of the deceased could not afford a more permanent memorial. It is thus fitting that the speaker should lump these dead men, women, and children together as the abstract personifications of "*Toil*" and "*Poverty*" (32). The italics suggest that either Parnell or Alexander Pope, who first published the poem, believed that poverty and toil were defining characteristics of their forgotten lives.

However, the extent to which the speaker is commiserating with their lot in life is uncertain. After all, the adverbial phrase "quick to the glancing Thought" (31) suggests that the graves of the poor only occupy the speaker's attention for a moment. While one can read the brevity of the third verse paragraph a formal instantiation of the impingement of mortal consciousness on the speaker's mind, one can also view it as a sign of indifference toward the crumpled ground and the remains they conceal. This is not to say that the speaker doesn't care about the poor; in death, after all, all pious souls are equal. Depending on the reader, the tone of the lines may range from unconcern to pity, but it is hard to hear it tipping in the direction of protest. This signals the presence of Death the Leveler.



Ironically, while Death may be a leveling entity in the poem, its structure actually restores the inequality that defined the lives of the graveyard's inhabitants by attending to their tombs for different lengths of time and with varying degrees of poetic detail. In the fourth verse paragraph, the speaker turns his attention to graves whose thin and horizontal yet smooth and engraved cenotaphs indicate that the deceased or their survivors had resources enough to employ the services of a stonecutter. But how long will the memory of the deceased survive? The speaker says:

The flat smooth Stones that bear a Name,  
The Chissels slender help to Fame,  
(Which e'er our Sett of Friends decay  
Their frequent Steps may wear away.)  
A *middle Race* of Mortals own,  
Men, half ambitious, all unknown. (33-8)

The adjective "slender" summons an image of thin-bladed chisels and the shallow letters they produce. Crucially, however, "slender" modifies "help" rather than "Name," thus calling attention to the frailty of the chisel's memorializing efforts. The poet underscores this idea ironically by rhyming "Name" with "Fame." Any fame enjoyed by this middle race is limited in scope and circumscribed by time. Indeed, the two lines that follow create a striking image of shallowly engraved names on horizontal cenotaphs being worn away by the footsteps of a single generation of mourners or passersby.

Poignant as this image may be, the poet's use parentheses make its tone hard to pin down; the parentheses seem to sterilize the image, presenting it as an afterthought or an aside – as something commonplace. The next two lines have a correspondingly matter-of-fact tone: the gravestones "own" or possess "a *middle Race* of Mortals," men neither rich nor

poor but destined, like the poor, to anonymity; man “half ambitious” in life but in death soon to be “all unknown” (36). Gray was likely remembering these lines when contemplating the individuals whose circumscribed lives, for better or for worse, never permitted them to develop natural talents that might have earned them a place in recorded history.

The speaker devotes four lines to the poor, six to the “*middle Race* of men” (37), and eight to the most prosperous of the dead, whose solid, heavily ornamented tombs dominate the eighth verse paragraph:

The Marble Tombs that rise on high,  
Whose Dead in vaulted Arches lye,  
Whose Pillars swell with sculptur'd Stone,  
Arms, Angels, Epitaphs, and Bones,  
These (all the poor Remains of State)  
Adorn the *Rich*, or praise the *Great*;  
Who while on Earth in Fame they live,  
Are senseless of the Fame they give. (39-46)

Lines 39-42 are crowded with eight massive nouns buttressed by equally weighty adjectives; the speaker sees “Marbled Tombs,” “vaulted Arches,” and “sculptur’d Stone” (39-41).

“Sculptur’d” also modifies the four nouns in line 42, the only line in the poem that contains an extra beat: “**Arms, angels, epitaphs, and bones**” (41-2). The only way to read this line naturally is to stress “arms” and allow a caesura before “angels.” This metrical irregularity gives the line a crowded, jumbled quality complimented by the haphazard assemblage of ornaments and words on the tombs. This irregularity is further underscored by line 44, which begins with a trochee and may also have an extra beat, depending on how one reads it.

The alternatives seem to be “**These** (all the **poor Remains** of **State**)” and “**These** (all the **poor Remains** of **State**).”

The poet’s formal tricks and the speaker’s parenthetical and ironic aside set up a joke that will actually cause the speaker to laugh in the following paragraph, which begins with the exclamation, “Ha!” (47). Picking up the idea of “fame” introduced in the preceding verse paragraph about the “*middle Race* of Mortals” (37), the poet takes the unusual step of deploying the word in both lines of final couplet. However, he quickly strips this “fame” away from the dead who supposedly possess it; even the “*Rich*” and “*Great*,” he notes, are “senseless” of the fame that outlives them. The ironic contrast between the dead, who lack all sense, and the visual, tactile, and weighty quality of their lavishly ornamented tombs described in lines 39-43 ruptures the semiotic bond between signifier and signified, demonstrating that the powerful and affluent dead are no less dead than the poor who died and were quickly forgotten, or members of the “*middle Race* of Mortals” (37) who dwelled in their survivors’ memories for perhaps a generation or so after their death. We see again the calling card of Death the Leveler – a black-edged card handed out to all.

Despite the varying amount of poetic attention given to the three classes of human beings in verse paragraphs three, four, and five, Death the Leveler ushers them all together to form the “visionary Crouds” that appear to the speaker in the next paragraph:

All slow, and wan, and wrap’d with Shrouds

They rise in visionary Crouds,

And all with sober Accent cry,

*Think, Mortal, what it is to dye.* (49-52)

The poet’s repetition of “all” emphasize that this vision is the work of a leveling power that neutralizes earthly distinctions. The shades all look alike, and they speak in unison.

This image of similarity-in-death is predicated on the Christian dispensation, which, by rewarding all “pious Souls” (84) regardless of their station in life, levels worldly inequality. This inequality yet survives, stamped physically on the graveyard’s crumpled soil and its unevenly adorned tombs and manifested poetically in the differing degrees of attention given to the three classes of the graveyard’s inhabitants. But Death’s leveling powers neutralize the potential impact of this inequality.

As mentioned earlier, the end of verse paragraph six marks a major break in the poem. After the assembled dead speak their one line – “*Think, Mortal, what it is to dye*” (58) – they disappear completely, reduced to a pile of bones from which another and larger voice begins to speak:

Now from yon black and fun’ral Yew,  
That bathes the Charnel House with Dew,  
Methinks I hear a Voice begin;  
(Ye Ravens, cease your croaking Din,  
Ye tolling Clocks, no Time resound  
O’er the long Lake and midnight Ground)  
It sends a Peal of hollow Groans,  
Thus speaking from among the Bones. (53-60)

In the last thirty lines of the poem, Death, the owner of this voice, redefines the grave as a point of entry to another life. The end of the poem constitutes an imaginative leap from the “Place of Graves” (19) to a dazzling realm of light where souls released from the prison of the body “Clap the glad wing, and tow’r away / And mingle with the blaze of day” (90).

For all the poem’s morbid interest in the “Place of Graves” (19) and the bones that its crumpled ground conceals, Parnell’s “Night-Piece,” like many other Graveyard School

poems, is fundamentally oriented toward the realm of the eternally living. This negates the need to dwell on the circumstances of the dead. But when religious skepticism starts to build a wall around the kingdom of heaven, the “Place of Graves” unleashes new anxieties that amplify the terror of death’s mortal sting.

*An Elegy for the Overshadowed*

These new anxieties, which permeate the Romantic works discussed in this project, begin to manifest in later Graveyard School poems, such as Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*. They also deeply inform Thomas Gray’s famous “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard,” which anticipates the Romantic response to the Graveyard School of poetry. Written in 1750 and reluctantly published by Gray in 1751, the poem ruminates on the socioeconomic and political inequality that circumscribed the lives of individuals who dwelt on the margins of history, far from its sources of power – so far, in fact, that neither the dead nor the village where they lived, toiled, and died is named by the poem’s speaker. I shall discuss Gray’s “Elegy” before proceeding to a longer analysis of Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage,” which extends Gray’s critique of Death the Leveler.

The first three quatrains of Gray’s “Elegy” establish the poem’s rural setting and solemn atmosphere.<sup>5</sup> This solemnity reflects both the peace and stillness at the close of day

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<sup>5</sup> On February 11, 1751, Gray wrote to Walpole in distress over the impending, unauthorized publication of the “Elegy” in the *Magazine of Magazines*. He asked Walpole to have Charles Dodley print the poem immediately. He furthermore directed Walpole to print the poem “without any Interval between the Stanza’s, because the Sense is in some Places continued beyond them.” See Thomas Gray, *The Correspondence of Thomas Gray*, 3 vols, ed. Paget Toynbee, Leonard Whibley, and H. W. Starr (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), Vol 1, p. 341. As Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, Jr., and Marshall Wainrow note in their anthology *Eighteenth Century English Literature*, the “ornaments that Dodsley’s printer supplied for the title page, including skulls and crossbones, picks and shovels, and hourglasses, suggest that

and the speaker's correspondingly ruminative frame of mind. Assonance, alliteration, and internal rhyme all supplement the poet's use of anaphora to create the mood of the poem:

The Curfew tolls the Knell of parting Day,  
The lowing Herd wind slowly o'er the lea,  
The Plow-man homeward plods his weary Way,  
And leaves the World to Darkness, and to me. (1-4)<sup>6</sup>

In the next four quatrains, the poet directs the reader's attention to the shadows beneath a cluster of elms and yew trees – trees imbued with mortuary significance – where, he says, “heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,” employing the inverted Latinate syntax that bothered Coleridge, and where “the rude Forefathers of the hamlet sleep” (13-15).<sup>7</sup> Like the speaker of Parnell's “Night-Piece,” Gray's speaker is arrested by the shallow mounds covering the remains of the poor. Unlike Parnell's speaker, however, Gray's speaker dwells only on these graves. If there are more lavishly decorated tombs in the country churchyard, the reader never glimpses them.

The poem's tone temporarily shifts in the eighth quatrain, where the speaker, moving for the first time from the indicative to the subjunctive mood, urges Ambition and Grandeur not to mock “the short and simple Annals of the Poor,” reminding these allegorical personae that the paths of all humans “lead but to the Grave” (32, 36). This exhortation resembles the leveling gestures typical of earlier Graveyard School poems, but in the twelfth quatrain,

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he thought of it as a graveyard poem” (943). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations refer to the version of the poem given by Tillotson et al., whose primary text is the first quarto edition of 1751. When describing the poem, I shall refer to its “quatrains” rather than to its “stanzas,” since to the modern reader “stanza” suggests the appearance of line breaks or “intervals” – which indeed a number of modern editions and anthologies use.

<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Tillotson, Paul Fussell, Jr, and Marshall Waingrow, eds., *Eighteenth Century English Literature* (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907), Vol. 1, pp. 12-13.

the speaker returns his attention to the graves in the churchyard and begins to speculate, as Parnell's speaker would never have considered doing, on the "circumscribed" lives laid to rest in its ground (65).

Whenever I reread a literary work, I am always intrigued and often surprised by the aspects of it that I remember and the ones I have forgotten; occasionally, I am so surprised, that I am starting to ponder rereadings' implications for literary study and the teaching of literature.<sup>8</sup> In Gray's "Elegy," something that always seems to surprise me is the moment where the speaker ruminates on the wicked souls who might be buried in the churchyard. Wicked – surely that is too strong a word for simple men who may have been unfriendly or unhelpful, had disagreeable or cold personalities, or perhaps committed minor transgressions during their time, and yet who might, born into different circumstances, have brought misery to their fellow man or even their country. When I reread Gray's "Elegy," I always remember the *Village-Hampden*" and – of course – the "mute inglorious *Milton*" who may rest in the

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<sup>8</sup> A few years ago, a college junior reading *Hamlet* for the first time since high school confided that she had forgotten about the graveyard scene in 5.1. I initially found this almost impossible to compass; after all, every poster for every production of *Hamlet* I have ever seen shows Hamlet ruminating on Yorick's skull. However, after talking with the student about her early encounter with Shakespeare's play, it began to make sense that, for the sixteen-year-old girl the student was in high school, Ophelia's relationship with Hamlet was more interesting to the imagination. Reader response theory has given us the concept of reading communities, which collectively formulate a response to literary works. What if we imagine this "community" as something internal to the self, a group formed by a single reader at different stages in his or her life? If one takes for granted that a man reading *King Lear* at sixteen is going to experience the play differently at 60, when he is beginning to deal with old age and has likely watched his parents grow old and die, what does it mean to write a scholarly article on the play at the age of 35? What does it mean to teach the play to college freshmen? What does it mean to teach any work of literature to young men and women? Relationships with students are typically circumscribed by semesters; this mostly prevents us from addressing this important question. In an attempt to begin answering it, however, I asked students in my freshman literature class at West Point this spring to reread a story or poem they studied at the beginning of the term and answer several questions designed to probe what they remembered about the story or poem, what they had forgotten, and how the work had changed as a result of other texts on the syllabus or other life experiences. This shall be, I hope, the first step in developing a critical methodology that permits us to think about reading and rereading through time.

country churchyard (57 and 59). By contrast, I seem always to have forgotten about the “*Cromwell* guiltless of his Country’s Blood” (60) and other inhabitants whose vices were circumscribed or curtailed by poverty. Perhaps my experience of the poem is merely idiosyncratic; regardless, it draws attention to an important theme in Gray’s poem. Virtuous or wicked, the inhabitants of the country churchyard lie beyond the margins of history. The speaker says:

Th’ Applause of list’ning Senates to command,  
The Threats of Pain and Ruin to despise,  
To scatter Plenty o’er a smiling Land,  
And read their Hist’ry in a nation’s Eyes  
Their Lot forbad: nor circumscribed alone  
Their glowing Virtues, but their Crimes confin’d;  
Forbad to wade through Slaughter to a Throne,  
And shut the Gates of Mercy on Mankind,  
The struggling Pangs of conscious Truth to hide,  
To quench the Blushes of ingenuous Shame,  
Or heap the Shrine of Luxury and Pride  
With Incense, kindled at the Muse’s flame. (61-72)

“Far from the madding Crowd’s ignoble Strife” (73), the inhabitants of this rural place led “noiseless” (76) lives that may have created no major social or political disturbances but also produced no acts of greatness nor works of art worthy of celebration or canonization.

But their lives did inspire slender attempts at commemoration. In the twentieth quatrain, the speaker turns his attention to the “frail Memorial[s] erected” (79) in the country churchyard and looks at the words engraved upon them by an unschooled artisan. He says:



“Their Name, their Years, spelt by th’ unletter’d Muse, / The Place of Fame and Elegy supply” (81-82). The second line of the couplet underscores the joint generic citizenship declared by Gray’s poem: it is an elegy for the overshadowed, the unremembered, and the forgotten. While no one would insist that Gray’s “Elegy” is a Romantic poem, its hybrid genre is a compelling reason for calling it “pre-Romantic” and teaching it in any course on Romantic literature and culture.<sup>9</sup>

The poem undergoes a profound shift in mood in the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth quatrains, where Gray introduces, in rapid succession, three new personae. The speaker addresses himself in the second person and, picturing himself buried in the churchyard alongside with “th’ unhonoured Dead” whose “artful Tale” his own “Lines [...] relate,” helping preserve the dead from oblivion, imagines a “kindred Spirit” enquiring about his fate. A shepherd, who speaks for nineteen lines beginning at line 98, answers this imaginary interlocutor:

For thee, who mindful of th’ unhonour’d Dead  
 Dost in these Lines their Artful tale relate,  
 If chance, by lonely Contemplation led,  
 Some kindred Spirit shall inquire thy Fate,  
 Haply some hoary-headed Swain may say,

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<sup>9</sup> Romantic poets were fond of declaring mixed generic affiliations: witness Smith’s *Elegiac Sonnets*, discussed in Chapter Five, which marry elegy to the sonnet; Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, which combine narrative poetry with poems of feeling and emotion; Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan,” Coleridge’s fragment of a vision in a dream, or conversation poems like “Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” which anticipate the dramatic monologues of Browning and Tennyson; *Hyperion: A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, fragments by Keats a verse epic about the fall of the Titan gods, discussed in Chapter Four; Percy Shelley’s gothic political drama *The Cenci*; Mary Shelley’s gothic epistolary science fiction novel *Frankenstein* about nature, education, and sympathy; and Byron’s closet mystery drama *Cain*, the focus of Chapter Two. In the second half of this chapter, I shall address the peculiar qualities of Wordsworth’s title for “The Ruined Cottage.”

“Oft have we seen him at the Peep of Dawn  
Brushing with hasty Steps the Dews away  
To meet the Sun upon the upland Lawn.” (93-100)

At the emotional climax of the poem, the shepherd leads the interlocutor to the speaker’s gravestone so he can read the twelve-line epitaph inscribed upon it:

“Approach and read (for thou can’st read) the Lay,  
Grav’d on the Stone beneath yon aged Thorn.’

#### The EPITAPH

*Here rests his Head upon the Lap of Earth  
A Youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown:  
Fair Science from’d not on his humble Birth,  
And Melancholy mark’d him for her own.  
Large was his Bounty, and his soul Sincere,  
Heav’n did a recompense as largely send:  
He gave to Mis’ry all he had, a Tear:  
He gain’d from Heav’n (’twas all he wish’d) a Friend.  
No farther seek his Merits to disclose,  
Or draw his Frailties from their dread Abode,  
(There they alike in trembling Hope repose,  
The Bosom of his Father and his God. (115-28)*

The parenthetical aside in line 115 underscores a profound irony: even if the dead buried in this country churchyard had lived great lives punctuated by events worthy of being recorded in stone, few of the hamlet’s living inhabitants would be able to read about them.

The reason I have taken time to summarize a poem that most of us love or at least know well is to underscore some important thematic and tonal differences between Gray's "Elegy" and early Graveyard School poems like Parnell's "Night Piece." The speaker's epitaph clearly indicates his belief that his soul will reside with God after his death. But this is different from the vision in Parnell's poem of a congregation of spirits. The posthumous abode of Gray's speaker is a "*dread*" one, not only because the bosom of God is a sublime place, but also because the soul's equipage includes its frailties as well as its merits – frailties made frailer by proximity to the divine judge. Furthermore, this final resting has a private, solitary quality, as if it were the spiritual embodiment of the narrow cells into which each of the village's rude forefathers has been individually deposited.

There are different ways of reading the end of the point. Perhaps it points to the survival, in rural places as yet unspoiled by the climate of religious doubt engendered by the Enlightenment, of the "death of the self," where the crisis of mortality centers on a private spiritual drama whose deathbed climax ends with an judgment about the soul's posthumous dwelling place in heaven or hell. However, the speaker's self-elegy resists the leveling efforts of Death. While the speaker's may rest ultimately with God, this consolatory vision does not occlude the inequalities the speaker has spent the majority of the poem delineating.

These inequalities are concentrated in the part of the poem beginning with the twelfth quatrain, where the speaker imaginatively surveys the inhabitants of the churchyard:

Perhaps in this neglected Spot is laid  
Some Heart once pregnant with celestial Fire;  
Hands, that the rod of Empire might have sway'd,  
Or wak'd to Exstasy the living Lyre.  
  
But Knowledge to their Eyes her ample Page

Rich with the Spoils of Time did ne'er unroll;  
Chill Penury repress'd their noble Rage,  
And froze the genial Current of the soul.  
Full many a Gem of Purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd Caves of Ocean bear:  
Full many a Flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its Sweetness on the desert Air. (45-56)

Gray develops the contemplative, melancholy tone of these lines with a subtle yet dazzling variety of linguistic effects. In lines 45-48, he uses the subjunctive mood, the mood of possibility or potentiality, to draw attention to all the unrealized possibility and unfulfilled potential buried in the churchyard. In the next quatrain, the poet introduces two new allegorical personae: Knowledge, who withholds her riches from the village's inhabitants, including of course history, from whose annals they will be excluded; and Chill Penury, which not only stifles questions they might have asked or rage they might have felt about their lots in life (for who has time to ask questions when struggling to survive from one year, season, or day to the next) but also cools their naturally genial spirits. All three quatrains contain negative language that captures the marginalized status of the village's inhabitants in life and in death. Knowledge declines to "unroll" its pages for them while they are living, and churchyard where they rest now is a "neglected spot." They existed and are condemned perpetually to exist outside of history.

In the next stanza, the speaker compares the village to an "unfathom'd Cave" and its inhabitants to "unseen" blooms are destined to "waste [their] Sweetness on the desert Air." The word "waste" has a sublimely negative quality, something akin to the "zero at the bone" felt by the speaker of Emily Dickinson's brief intimation of mortality "A narrow fellow in

the grass.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Gray’s shift, over the course of the twelve lines quoted above, from the past subjunctive to the present indicative, gives the statements in the last quatrain the quality of universal, irreversible truths.

But the speaker’s attitude toward death, and the clearest expression of the poet’s mortal consciousness, comes in the description of the churchyard in quatrains four to seven. The fourth quatrain identifies the place and its inhabitants:

Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yew-Tree’s Shade,  
Where heaves the Turf in many a mould’ring Heap,  
Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep. (13-16)

As in Parnell’s “Night-Piece,” the physical terrain of this cemetery is uneven; the ground lies “in many a mould’ring Heap” (14). But the word that most clearly illustrates the difference between Gray’s churchyard and Parnell’s is the adverb “for ever,” which might go unnoticed were it not for the speaker’s emphasis, in the quatrains that follows, on the diurnal labors and pleasures “no more” to be performed nor enjoyed by souls called to their eternal rest:

The breezy Call of Incense-breathing Morn,  
The Swallow twitt’ring from the Straw-built Shed,  
The Cock’s shrill Clarion, or the ecchoing Horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly Bed.  
  
For them no more the blazing Hearth shall burn,  
Or busy Housewife ply her evening Care:  
No Children run to lisp their Sire’s Return,  
Or climb his Knees the envied Kiss to share.

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<sup>10</sup> Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1960).

Oft did the Harvest to their Sickle yield,  
Their Furrow oft the stubborn Glebe has broke;  
How jocund did they drive their Team afield!  
How bow'd the Woods beneath their Sturdy stroke! (17-28)

The tragic poignancy of these lines arises from the contrast between the habitual quality of past action and the impossibility of future action. “No more” will the freshness of morning, when diurnal flowers disclose their blooms, nor the “twitt’ring” of swallows, birds active not only at dusk (as in John Keats’s “Ode to Autumn”) but also at dawn, nor the rooster’s call, nor the hunter’s horn: nevermore shall any of these “rouse” the dead from their lowly, subterranean beds. Nor shall they pursue their customary tasks. And neither shall they enjoy, at the other end of the long day, a blazing hearth and domestic companionship. Together, the lines underscore the finality of death to those it has touched. The dead are insentient and inactive, and they have been cut loose from all domestic bonds.

This finality accentuates the tragic quality of the untapped potential of the village Hampdens, unpublished Miltons, and guiltless Cromwells described in the ensuing stanzas. For them, Death was not the great leveler. Death was instead the masterstroke of time which placed them beyond the margins of history, inaccessible to everyone except, perhaps, for a few survivors in this anonymous village (family or friends who will be laid to rest next to their forefathers in their own narrow cells), and except for the poet, whose elegy erects a monument to individuals he probably never knew but with whom he sympathetically identifies, imagining his own grave situated amongst theirs.

In William Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage,” the narrator accomplishes a similar form of memorialization, but in this poem the setting is not a graveyard *per se*, but rather a dilapidated cottage imbued with a blank, mortuary quality.

*Wordsworth's Graveyard Poem*

For many years, I have been fascinated by a striking detail near the beginning of “The Ruined Cottage,” Wordsworth’s story about the decline and fall of a peasant woman named Margaret, likely begun in June 1797, worked on intermittently in 1798 and 1799, and later incorporated into *The Excursion*.<sup>11</sup> I am referring to the moment when the narrator, who receives “Margaret’s story” (as Dorothy Wordsworth called the part of poem she copied out for Mary Hutchinson)<sup>12</sup> from a Pedlar named Armytage, notices beads of water on the brim of the Pedlar’s hat and imagines that a stream may be near. The narrator says:

With thirsty heat oppress’d  
At length I hailed him, glad to see his hat  
Bedewed with water-drops, as if the brim  
Had newly scoop’d a running stream. (48-51)

Why have these lines arrested my attention during every encounter with this poem? It is hard to answer a question like this with complete certainty, but looking back, I believe it is because they mark first instance in which the poet’s descriptive language attains such a high degree of resolution and detail – what a modern television audience might call its

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<sup>11</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). For a detailed account of the poem’s composition history, see Butler’s introduction. Unless otherwise noted, quotations refer to MS D.

<sup>12</sup> On March 5, 1798, Dorothy Wordsworth replied to Mary Hutchinson’s request for a copy of “The Ruined Cottage.” She writes: “You desire me, my dear Mary, to send you a copy of the Ruined Cottage. This is impossible for it has grown to the length of 900 Lines. I will however send you a copy of that part which is immediately and solely connected with the Cottage.” This is “Margaret’s story.” See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, ed. Ernest de Selincourt, rev. Chester L Shaver (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 199, 2909; quoted in Butler, 24. MS B contains a long description of the Pedlar that William Wordsworth would later incorporate into *The Prelude*, published after his death in 1850.

“production value.” The poem’s panoramic opening in lines 1-39 depicts a shadow-dappled landscape extending “far as the sight / Could reach” (6-7). Twenty lines later, the narrator picks out a cluster of trees where he hopes to find shade and where he subsequently finds the ruined cottage. Arriving at the cluster of trees at line 29, he sees an “aged Man” (33) and an “iron-pointed staff” (35) and immediately recognizes the “venerable Armytage, a friend / As dear to me as is the setting sun” (38-9). In the next paragraph, the speaker discerns the Pedlar’s “pack of rustic merchandize” (44) and sees shadows dancing on his face, a miniature version of the landscape described earlier. However, the beads of water on the Pedlar’s hat, tricked out by rays of light stealing through the elm trees overhead, attest to a more powerful descriptive lens. They remind me of the sparkling details that ornament the surface of Edmund Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.

But there is something else happening here. It is not only the degree of detail that is interesting but also the fact that this detail cause the to narrator imagine a sequence of events that occurred in the past, prior to his arrival at the cottage. The hat, he says, is “bedewed with water-drops, *as if the brim / Had newly scooped a running stream*” (50-1, my italics). For years the italicized clause has arrested me, and I have dismissed it as poetic embellishment, not recognizing its place in an emergent pattern of clues that enable the Pedlar and the narrator to piece together Margaret’s story and comprehend the magnitude of her decline during the years leading up to her death.

Significantly, it is at this moment that the Pedlar rises and, “pointing to a sunflower,” directs the thirsty narrator to climb a section of the wall surrounding “a plot / of garden-ground, now wild” (52-4). This garden plot is a “piece of ground” but also the place from which the “storyline” (*OED*) of the poem arises. The narrator, having climbed the wall, discovers himself in a “cheerless spot” (60) overgrown with “matted weeds” (55) and finds,



not the lively stream he had imagined, but a “half-choked” (63) well. Immediately after the narrator returns from the well, the Pedlar commences the tale of Margaret; the half-choked well is the story’s symbolic wellspring. The Pedlar’s first lines attesting to the hermeneutic richness of the spot where they are standing: “I see around me here / Things which you cannot see” (67-8). The ruined cottage is a spot of time, a point in space harboring not memories of a personal past, as in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, but the story of Margaret about to unfold.

The title of “The Ruined Cottage” is as rich and strange as the hybridized titles *Lyrical Ballads*, Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard,” and some of the other Romantic works mentioned in footnote nine above. *Lyrical Ballads* announced a union between two distinct kinds of poetry: the lyrical and the narrative. “The Ruined Cottage” takes an adjective more aptly applied to scenes in ancient Rome, Greece, or Egypt and transplants it into a rural English landscape. There are no pyramids, temples, or broken columns in this landscape, no vast and trunkless legs of stone, only “a ruined house, four naked walls / That [stare] upon each other” (31-2). There are no statues, monuments, or inscriptions, no pedestals, just the “cottage bench” where the narrator finds the Pedlar resting in the shade on a hot afternoon (34). And yet, in his speech beginning at line 67, the Pedlar asserts a thematic bond between the ruined cottage, its former inhabitants, and the subjects of the great elegies of old:

The Poets in their elegies and songs  
Lamenting the departed call the groves,  
They call upon the hills and streams to mourn,  
And senseless rocks, nor idly; for they speak  
In these their invocations with a voice

Obedient to the strong creative power

Of human passion. (73-9)

One of the primary features of elegiac verse is a speaker's invocation to his surroundings to join in mourning the deceased. As the Pedlar unfolds his story, the narrator learns that the cottage's decay is deeply intertwined with Margeret's.

Yet even as the Pedlar locates Margaret's story in the tradition of elegiac verse, Wordsworth distinguishes it ever so slightly from that tradition. Margaret is much closer socioeconomically and politically to the anonymous poor commemorated in Gray's "Elegy," itself a reappraisal of the elegiac mode, than to the subjects of the great elegies. She is poor, and she has no power. The Pedlar identifies a second and perhaps more crucial difference between his story and the others that comprise the elegiac canon. This is a difference in sympathetic understanding. The Pedlar says:

Sympathies there are

More tranquil, yet perhaps of kindred birth,

That steal upon the meditative mind

And grow with thought. (79-82)

Margaret's story induces thoughts, feelings, and words that may not be as loud or as easily formalized as in other elegiac effusions but are just as deep and arise from the same place in the human soul. Furthermore, in minds prepared to receive and shelter these thoughts, feelings, and ideas – minds accustomed to meditation – they appear almost without notice and yet, having established themselves, begin to take on a life of their own. These thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressions of what I have called mortal consciousness, the emotional expression of a sympathetic awareness of a social and political world that resides outside the

margins of history's annals but is deeply connected to our own place on this earth and our moral responsibility to it.

The thematic and tonal affinities between "The Ruined Cottage" and Gray's "Elegy" help identify Wordsworth's poem as a reply to classical elegy and the early Graveyard School poems. In its focus on the circumstances of Margaret's life, it gestures toward a form of Romantic mortal consciousness similar to what one might now call a liberal social or political consciousness – a form that will find its fullest expression (albeit in very different ways) in Byron's mystery play *Cain*, the subject of Chapter Two.

### *The Decline and Fall of Margaret*

In the opening paragraph of "The Ruined Cottage," the narrator, having made his way across a hot plain to a cluster of trees promising shade, comes upon a "ruined house" marked by "four naked walls / That stared upon each other" (31-32). Arising from this blank site over the course of the poem is the poignant tale of Margaret's decline and fall, narrated in part by Margaret herself to the Pedlar during his irregular passes through her village, and in part by the Pedlar to the narrator, through detailed description of the cottage and its grounds. The Pedlar's reportage and thick descriptions of Margaret and her cottage rehabilitate to a collective memory (composed of the narrator, the poet who invented this persona, and the poet's readership, including us) a woman who dwelt at the edge of culture, clinging hard to life through storms both natural and human before succumbing to death and returning, like her cottage, to nature. Through descriptions of socially and politically marginalized men, women, and children, "The Ruined Cottage" represents a continuation of a response to the early Graveyard School poems, a response that began with Gray.

Furthermore, through the relationship between the Pedlar and the narrator, who learns Margaret's story from him, the poem dramatizes instruction in mortal consciousness, implicitly linking it with the growth of political and social awareness and even protest.<sup>13</sup>

While it might sound strange to call "The Ruined Cottage" a Romantic graveyard poem, the cottage, situated beneath a stand of elms – trees associated with cemeteries – effectively functions as a natural cenotaph for its latest inhabitant. The narrator introduces the cottage midway through the first paragraph. Trying to rest but unable to do so on the hot, shadeless soil of the northern downs, the narrator sets out for "a group of trees" (27). Lines 32-33 have always struck me as two of the most powerful lines in the entire poem. Entering the "shade" beneath some "clustering elms" (29-30), the narrator finds a structure. He calls it a house but immediately corrects himself, renaming it a set of "four naked walls" (32). Stripped of a roof and thus dispossessed of their sheltering purpose, the four walls stare blankly at each other across an open and exposed space. These walls are not synecdoches; they are all that remain of a structure that once protected a family from the elements. The adjective "naked" evokes the vulnerability of humans that leads them to build and inhabit shelters. It also suggests that if any pictures or ornaments once decorated the walls, these signs of human habitation and personality have disappeared. The blank walls may also evoke the bare slabs beneath which frail humans will ultimately rest.

References to elm trees and ancient ruins work together in a curious way to enhance the mortuary quality of the place. The elm tree has a rich and diverse symbolic history, but Wordsworth is clearly drawing on its associations with death, as Gray did in the "Elegy," where the elm and yew are the only two trees identified by name in the church yard:

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<sup>13</sup> James Butler, in his introduction to the poem, states that "The Ruined Cottage" is not a work of "social protest" but notes that it "describes social conditions pretty accurately." Romantic mortal consciousness argues that this distinction is an arbitrary one.

Beneath those rugged Elms, that Yew-Tree's Shade,  
Where heaves the Turf in many a mould'ring heap,  
Each in his narrow Cell for ever laid,  
The rude Forefathers of the Hamlet sleep. (13-16)

The adjective “ruined,” which in Wordsworth’s poem modifies “house,” evokes a different sort of death and decay: the architectural remains of Italy, Greece, or Egypt. The contrast between the lofty images that the word “ruin” evokes and the pitiful scene that the narrator describes is deliberate, and it recapitulates the fundamental irony of Gray’s “Elegy.” Just as many of Gray’s contemporaries would not have considered the “rude Forefathers” of nameless villages appropriate subjects for elegies, *ruined* cottages would not have held much interest for eighteenth-century visitors to the ruins of empires. I italicize “ruined” because eighteenth-century writers and artists in England and Europe were keenly interested in cottage life. Yet with a few notable exceptions, most literary or visual “genre paintings” offer idealized depictions of rustic life. In his important book *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, John Barrell criticizes Wordsworth and Constable for studiously avoiding the realities of this life.<sup>14</sup> To my knowledge, very few genre paintings on canvas or in verse or prose take *ruined* cottages for their subjects.

At the end of “The Ruined Cottage,” however, the Pedlar reinforces the link between Margaret’s cottage and the ideas and images of ruins. He tells the narrator: “Here, my friend / In sickness she remained, and here she died / Last human tenant of these ruined walls” (490-2). Like Gray’s “Elegy,” “The Ruined Cottage” proposes an alternative vision of history grounded in uncelebrated, fameless death.

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<sup>14</sup> John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

Margaret's story is preceded by a protracted elegiac preamble spanning lines 67-119, spoken by the Pedlar. The preamble has a dual function: it grounds Margaret's tale in death, and it hooks Wordsworth's poem to the elegiac tradition. The Pedlar's first six lines fashion a haunting idea that "death" is something that can not only happen to people but also befall the very places where they dwell and the very objects they love, use, or otherwise incorporate into their lives:

I see around me here  
Things which you cannot see: we die, my Friend,  
Nor we alone, but that which each man loved  
And prized in his peculiar nook of earth  
Dies with him or is changed, and very soon  
Even of the good is no memorial left. (67-72)

The adverbial phrase "in his peculiar nook of earth" localizes the affective bond between humans and the objects they possess or use, geographically confining it to a unique place. Thus, when death severs this bond, the object is not the only casualty; "place" itself begins to disappear. The Pedlar's description of the well explains why this occurs:

Beside yon spring I stood  
And eyed its waters till we seemed to feel  
One sadness, they and I. For them a bond  
Of brotherhood is broken: time has been  
When every day the touch of human hand  
Disturbed their stillness, and they ministered  
To human comfort. (82-8)

The spring's "bond" with humanity was generated when the "touch of human hand" incorporated it into a pattern of daily use and employment. The phrase "time has been," synonymous with "there was a time" but more irrevocable in tone, suggests that time itself may be a casualty when the human presence in a place disappears. But place is the most visible casualty, as the Pedlar's description of the cottage illustrates:

She is dead,  
The worm is on her cheek, and this poor hut,  
Stripp'd of its outward garb of household flowers,  
Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind  
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked  
With weeds and the rank spear-grass. She is dead,  
And nettles rot and adders sun themselves  
Where we have sate together while she nurs'd  
Her infant at her breast. (103-11)

The two sentences in this passage, tonally linked by the poet's use of anaphora, mirror each other grammatically; a declarative statement about Margaret's death is followed by a lyrical description of the cottage's decay. A human being has died, and the place where she dwelt has begun to follow her into the undiscovered country. Theories of space and place generally postulate that "place" arises where human beings mark or build on an otherwise undifferentiated spatial plane or wilderness. Lines 82-88 and 103-111 constitute a haunting image of the death of place itself.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Martin Heidegger's foundational essay "Building Dwelling Thinking," and Edward Casey's more recent book *Getting Back into Place*. I call this the Jar Model of place, in homage to Wallace Stevens' "Anecdote of a Jar," which begins: "I placed a jar in Tennessee / and round it was, upon a hill. / It made the slovenly wilderness / Surround that hill" (1-4). Robert Pogue Harrison, in his recent book *The Dominion of the Dead*, offers an

Margaret's death and the decay of her cottage trouble the Pedlar greatly. Apostrophe and an archetypal lamentation mark his elegiac preamble: "O Sir! the good die first, / And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust / Burn to the socket" (96-8). The preamble also contains multiple instances of repetition, which suggests he is trying to manage emotions difficult to control. For example, the Pedlar says "She is dead" twice in lines 103-111.

These lines, discussed at length above, give utterance to a depth of feeling that the Pedlar elsewhere does a good job of containing. Phrases like "whose earthy top is tricked / With weeds and the rank spear-grass" or "nettles rot and adders sun themselves" bespeak a sense of desolation that would not be out of a place in "The Thorn." In moments like these, readers can detect a troubled undercurrent beneath the poem's ruminative but calm surface. Recoiling from the depths into which his thoughts are about to plunge, the Pedlar suddenly cuts himself off. "You will forgive me, Sir," he says, "But often on this cottage do I muse / As on a picture, till my wiser mind / Sinks, yielding to the foolishness of grief" (116-9). The Pedlar's self-consciousness exposes one of the darker aspects of mortal consciousness: when left unchecked, it can cause great pain and anxiety.

A primary feature of the elegy is the denial of death. As many commentators have noted, elegies typically end with the wishful sense that the beloved person is not really dead. One may thus regard the passionate nature of an elegy's invocation as an initial attempt by the emotions to establish what the intellect later manages to convince itself to be the case: that the dearly beloved departed is not in fact absent but very close to the speaker, perhaps

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alternative model of place, arguing that it is fundamentally mortuary in nature. Harrison notes that some of the first humans actually to enjoy a permanent abode *were* the dead, buried along migratory routes of our nomadic ancestors. In a paper delivered in March 2013 to the Northeastern Modern Languages Association, I discussed literary embodiments of mortuary conceptions of place and examined the anxiety that is produced when humans die or imagine dying outside of place's human dimensions. Central to the latter part of my paper was Ishmael's visit to the Whaleman's Chapel in Chapter Seven of *Moby Dick*, where he ruminates on sailors who have "placelessly perished without a grave" (45).



even closer now than in life. In “The Ruined Cottage,” however, the Pedlar’s words do not give voice to such a belief. Rather, they attest to a veritable universe of death, an idea no less harrowing on account of the microcosmic scale in which it appears in this poem.

This revelation is set up by an unexpected turn back in line 69. When the Pedlar says, “Nor we alone,” the auditor momentarily expects a denial or at least a clarification of the fact we find so unsettling: that while we may be in the company of or embraced by family or friends, death itself is a journey we undertake alone. Yet rather than sketching a vision of some community of the deceased, the Pedlar explains how even the objects we have prized and the places we have loved die with us or are “changed” (71), their connection to the world of the living irrevocably cut by the arrival of death. His lines are similar in tone to Elizabeth Bishop’s famous poem “One Art” on “the art of losing,” only here the loser is gone, and we see the world momentarily from the point of view of lost keys, continents, and lovers spinning quietly through space, shaken loose from their old orbits.<sup>16</sup> The Pedlar – gazing, perhaps, towards the well from which the narrator has recently drunk – remarks of its waters: “For them, a bond / Of brotherhood is broken” (84-5). Two images of this severed bond stand out in his mind: a spider’s web, and pieces of a bowl. The Pedlar says:

As I stooped to drink,  
A spider’s web hung to the water’s edge,  
And on the wet and slimy foot-stone lay  
The useless fragment of a wooden bowl;  
It moved my very heart. (88-92)

These lines encapsulate the tone of quiet sadness that permeates the poem – a tone that, in some instances, threatens to descend into despair.

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems 1927-1979* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1983).

Significantly, both the web and the bowl are associated with Margaret's hands and the work they performed. Drawing water from the well would have been one of Margaret's first tasks each morning, and her hand would have brushed aside any cobwebs that had gathered at night over its mouth. The bowl represents Margaret's hospitality, one of her virtues the Pedlar especially misses. He reminisces:

The day has been,  
When I could never pass this road but she  
Who lived within these walls, when I appeared,  
A daughter's welcome gave me, and I loved her,  
As my own child. (92-6)

The phrase "the day has been" in line 92 echoes the phrase "time has been" in line 85. It is an odd verbal construction – technically, the it is past continuous form of the verb to be – and it appears to serve a dual purpose: it locates the remembered welcome firmly in the past and expresses a desire not to let go of this memory. It also imbues this section of the poem with a deeply ruminative, even incantatory tone, similar to lines 103-11 discussed above.

In a previous time, Margaret used the bowl to bring him and others travelers water; on this day, he has had to scoop it for himself with his hat. The Pedlar says:

Many a passenger  
Has blessed poor Margaret for her gentle looks  
When she upheld the cool refreshment drawn  
From that forsaken spring, and no one came  
But he was welcome, no one went away  
But that it seemed she loved him. (98-103).

From the Pedlar's perspective, Margaret's "upheld" hand brought the bowl to life, and the bowl brought the cottage to life. Containing "cool refreshment," the bowl was the physical embodiment of the Pedlar's emotional connection to Margaret and his sense of belonging at a place that served as a temporary shelter or resting place during his perpetual travels. The bowl is now in "fragments," and these fragments are "useless" (145). This adjective suggests considerably more than the bowl's inability to perform its accustomed task; it also conveys the completeness and irrevocability of the separation perceived by the Pedlar between himself and a place that is dear to him. The place is out of joint, detached from its human and cultural moorings, and no hand can set it right. The image of the shattered bowl, handed in a previous time to thirsty travelers, is a crucial one in the poem. As we shall see, the Pedlar traces Margaret's decline and fall not only through detailed observation of her emotional and the cottage's physical decay, but also through carefully constructed images of the deterioration of labor.

This is a fitting time to point out that the narrator introduces the theme of work at the very outset of the poem. "The Ruined Cottage" begins with beautiful panoramic view of the northern downs on a hot summer day. The landscape is a mixture of light and shade; shadows projected by pendant clouds are interspersed with bright patches of sunshine:

'Twas summer and the sun was mounted high.  
Along the south the uplands feebly glared  
Through a pale steam, and all the northern downs  
In clearer air ascending shewed far off  
Their surfaces with shadows dappled o'er  
Of deep embattled clouds: far as the sight  
Could reach those many shadows lay in spots

Determined and unmoved, with steady beams

Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed... (1-9)

I have always found the images in these lines a little unnerving: the “feeble” glare of the midday sun on the wet uplands, and the “embattled” clouds that recently drenched them with rain but now sit motionless in a still sky, as shown by “determined and unmoved” shadows cast on the northern downs. I shall return to these lines at the end of the chapter, where I read them as an emblem of the problem of evil, but for now it suffices to point out how lines 10-18 immediately qualify them. The narrator remarks that the sunshine and, by extension, the sun-dappled landscape are “pleasant” only to a “dreaming man.” He says:

Pleasant to *him* who on the soft cool moss  
Extends his careless limbs beside the root  
Of some huge oak whose aged branches make  
A twilight of their own, a dewy shade  
Where the wren warbles while the dreaming man,  
Half-conscious of the soothing melody,  
With side-long eye looks out upon the scene,  
By those impending branches made more soft,  
More soft and distant. Other lot was mine. (10-18)

Wordsworth deploys a short, declarative sentence immediately after a long, syntactically complex description of the “dreaming man” and his pleasant pastime in order to draw a contrast between that man and his narrator. This statement effectively walls off the sunny landscape depicted in lines 1-9; the narrator’s four short words show that the contemplative pleasures of rural scenes, the *otium* celebrated in Virgil’s *Georgics*, are not available to him.

In Book Two of the *Georgics*, Virgil's speaker had extolled the lot of farmers and other inhabitants of rural scenes:

O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint,  
agricolas! Quibus ipsa, procul discordibus armis,  
fundit homo facilem victum iustissimus tellus.  
[...]  
[A]t securae quies at nescia fallere vita,  
dives opum variarum, at latis otia fundis,  
speluncae vivique lacus et frigida Tempe  
mugitusque boum mollesque sub arbore somni  
non absunt ... (458-60, 467-71)

O happy husbandmen! too happy, should they come their blessings! for whom, far from the clash of arms, most righteous Earth unbidden, pours forth from her soul an easy sustenance. [...] [T]heirs is repose without care, and life that knows no fraud, but is rich in treasures manifold. Yea, the ease of broad domains, caverns, and living lakes, and cool vales, the lowing of the line, and soft slumbers beneath the trees—all are theirs. (149)<sup>17</sup>

Line 18 terminates the narrator's brief reverie and severs him from the picturesque scene. Indeed, one can read the lines that follow as an amused rejection of *otium*. The narrator says: "Across the bare wide Common had I toiled / With languid feet which by the slipp'ry ground / Were baffled still" (19-21). Exhausted by his arduous travels, the narrator lies down on ground but cannot get comfortable because of the heat radiating from the sun and

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<sup>17</sup> Virgil, *Ecloques, Georgics, Aeneid I-VI*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), pp. 148-9.

the congregation of buzzing insects drawn by the perspiration on his face. He is also quite annoyed by curious popping sounds.<sup>18</sup> He says:

When I stretched myself  
On the brown earth my limbs from very heat  
Could find no rest nor my weak arms disperse  
The insect host which gathered round my face  
And joined their murmurs to the tedious noise  
Of seeds of bursting gorse that crackled round. (21-26)

Readers familiar with the English countryside have probably encountered a plant called common gorse: a tall, thorny bush whose yellow flowers can make it resemble rapeseed from a distance. The popping sounds are evidence of how hot the day is. Gorse grows in arid regions; highly flammable, it provides fuel for many wildfires. Heat makes its pods discharge their seeds, an adaptation that allows the plant to recover quickly after fires.

Unable to get comfortable on account of the heat, the narrator rises and walks toward “a group of trees” (27) in the middle distance. The sentence “Other lot was mine” (18) may suggest his belief, in retrospect, that fate was driving him to this spot. Indeed, what he discovers there is not a shady place in which to rest and admire the landscape but rather a place of shadows with an entirely different mood, a place about to consume his attention so entirely that the landscape described moments ago effectively disappears. “Thither come at length,” the narrator says, he finds the ruined house and the Pedlar, his friend Armytage.

The reader never learns why the narrator is walking across the northern downs. At the end of the poem, the Pedlar and narrator set out together toward “a rustic inn, our

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<sup>18</sup> I daresay few Romantic poets express annoyance as often or as effectively as Wordsworth.

evening dwelling place” (538), but it is unclear what the narrator’s destination is. The Pedlar, by contrast, has no destination; he is a peddler, and it is a peddler’s ceaseless business that brings him to Margaret’s cottage and all his stops. The Pedlar embodies the theme of labor that permeates the entire fabric of the poem. Indeed, the Pedlar’s “way-wandering life” (46) is inseparable from his work. Even when he rests, his “pack of rustic merchandize” serves as a pillow for his head (44-5).

The thematic associations between the Pedlar and work establish a rich contrast with the ruined cottage: a place, we learn, where labor fell into disarray before ceasing altogether. The first indication of this comes at the end of what I have called the elegiac preamble, where the Pedlar tells the narrator how the cottage has changed into a shelter for animals:

The unshod Colt,  
The wandring heifer and the Potter’s ass  
Find shelter now within the chimney-wall  
Where I have seen her evening hearth-stone blaze  
And through the window spread upon the road  
Its chearful light. (111-6)

The colt, heifer, and ass all point to work that has been neglected or abandoned, developing a portrait of a deeply depressed rural economy. Why is the colt unshod? Is it because the horse is too young and wild, or because its owner, unable to find a blacksmith to shoe the horse or pay him to do so, has put off the task? Could its owner have set the animal loose? It is worth noting that MS. B of the poem gives “wild colt,” which suggests that the horse was untamed or (more likely) had been turned loose.<sup>19</sup> When revising the poem in 1799, Wordsworth seems to have wanted to draw the reader’s attention to a domesticating task

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<sup>19</sup> See page 50 of Butler’s edition of the poem.

that had been neglected, left undone, or abandoned. Further evidence of this comes a little later when the Pedlar tells the speaker about the economic chaos that threw many artisans out of work around the time Margaret's life began to unravel:

As I have said, 'twas now  
A time for trouble; shoals of artisans  
Were from their daily labour turned away  
To hang for bread on parish charity,  
They and their wives and children. (153-7)

Perhaps the case is even worse than the one I have imagined, and the blacksmith has simply "cease[d] to be" (143), like so many of the poor described in lines 104-44.

One can ask similar questions about the ass and heifer. Why has the potter's ass elected to take shelter in Margaret's cottage? Could it be because the potter, unable to sell his wares, turned loose the animal he used to take them to market because he could no longer feed or care for it? Is the heifer wandering for a similar reason? The manuscript that gives "wild colt" also gives "unstalled heifer," which suggests that the animal had been deliberately set loose. These readings require the Pedlar's elegiac preamble to sustain a heightened degree of pathos. However, given Wordsworth's sympathetic treatment of animals in other early poems, such as *Peter Bell*, it is hardly a stretch to regard the colt, heifer, and ass as pathetic figures, both in their own right, and also as symbols of the degradation of human labor in a depressed rural economy.

When the Pedlar begins telling the history of Margaret's decline and fall, he focuses first on the degradation of her husband's labor. Indeed, the first thing we hear about Robert is that he was "industrious," "sober," and "steady." The Pedlar recalls:

She had a husband, an industrious man,



Sober and steady; I have heard her say  
That he was up and busy at his loom  
In summer ere the mower's scythe had swept  
The dewy grass, and in the early spring  
Ere the last star had vanished. They who pass'd  
At evening, from behind the garden-fence  
Might hear his busy spade, which he would ply  
After his daily work till the day-light  
Was gone and every leaf and flower were lost  
In the dark hedges. (119-30)

Robert was not merely productive; he was steady, dependable, and predictable. He started his work early – even before the mowers, during the summer, had begun their critical task. (Prior to the advent of long-term weather forecasts, grass for haymaking had to be cut very early on summer mornings to increase the chance of drying and bailing it before the arrival of an inopportune shower, which could cause it to rot.) After working all day at his loom, Robert would ply his spade in the garden until well after dusk. The passage synchronizes Robert's work with the daily passage of time and, through the image of the mower's scythe, connects it to a rural economy governed by even larger, seasonal cycles of nature and labor. The impression created by lines 119-130 is one of perfect order and harmony.

But circumstances have disrupted this harmony. Ten years ago, the Pedlar explains, the autumn harvest was damaged by blight, and the nation was dragged into war, wreaking havoc on the local economy. "Twas a sad time of sorrow and distress," the Pedlar says, recalling how "many rich / Sunk down as in a dream among the poor, / And of the poor did many cease to be" (138, 140-3). The blight returned the next year, adding to the economic

strain on the region, but Margaret and her family managed to get by until Robert fell sick. By the time he recovered from his illness, described in lines 147-53, the family was destitute. This reversal of fortune took an enormous psychological toll on a man accustomed to providing for his family. “Ill fared it now with Robert, he who dwelt / In this poor cottage,” the Pedlar says, recalling how Robert would stand beside his door and whistle “many a snatch of merry tunes / That had no mirth in them” or carve “uncouth figures on the heads of stick” with his knife (161-5). The enjambment of lines 163 and 164 enacts both the subtlety and irrevocability of the transformation, but the change is not just an emotional one. Crucially, the image of Robert’s “mirthless” tunes shows not only the emotional vacancy of his music but also its disconnection from something it once accompanied and made lighter: his work. This reading, supported by the image of Robert standing at his door, a liminal space between the inside of his house (where his loom is) and the garden (where he works well past the end of day) is further buttressed by the image of the knife in line 164, a tool desultorily employed to carve “uncouth figures” on odd sticks – useless, idle labor. The ensuing lines corroborate this reading. “Then,” the Pedlar continues, Robert

idly sought about through every nook  
Of house or garden any casual task  
Of use or ornament, and with a strange,  
Amusing but uneasy novelty  
He blended where he might the various tasks  
Of summer, autumn, winter, and of spring. (166-71)

They key word here is “idly.” In his state of distraction, Robert applies his energies not to what is necessary or important but to what is merely interesting or distracting. His work is

capricious, whimsical, and totally without purpose, a description amplified by the adjectives “every,” “any,” and “various,” the preposition “or,” and the conjunctions “and” and “but.”<sup>20</sup>

Lines 170 and 171 point to an even deeper sense of distraction. Earlier, we saw how Robert’s formerly “industrious” nature manifested itself as work harmonized with diurnal, seasonal, and annual rhythms – as of course it must in a predominantly agricultural economy supplemented with small cottage industries. Now, by contrast, he chooses his work in spite of the season. The normally innocuous verb “blend” belies the seriousness of Robert’s change and its implications for his family. Line 171 is unlike any other in English literature. In no other place does a list of the seasons, given in their natural order, convey so strongly that the time is out of joint and show the impending ruin of a man, his family, and his home.

The Pedlar traces Robert’s rapid decline in lines 173-83, again depicting it as a breakdown in labor. Like his “merry tunes,” whistled idly and without gaiety from the cottage door, Robert’s natural “good-humor / Became a weight in which no pleasure was” (172-3). “Day by day he drooped,” the Pedlar says, “And he would leave his home, and to the town / Without an errand would he turn his steps / Or wander here and there among the fields” (175-8). The phrase “without an errand” emphasizes the purposeless nature of his trips. Without an *errand*, perhaps, but not without *erring*. “Errand” derives from the Latin “*errare*” meaning “to wander,” which Wordsworth uses in line 178. Erring or wandering is one of those quintessentially Miltonic tropes located deep within the linguistic

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<sup>20</sup> In MS. B, the Pedlar elaborates on this point:

The passenger might see him at the door  
With his small hammer on the threshold stone  
Pointing lame buckle-tongues and rusty nails,  
The treasured store of an old household box,  
Or braiding cords or weaving bells and caps  
Of rushes, play-things for his babes. (224-9)

and thematic core of *Paradise Lost*. Its use here in successive lines expresses the gravity of Robert's fall.

The Pedlar, overcome by emotion, breaks off his tale at this point in the poem, and the narrator steps out of the shadows beneath the elm trees and warms himself in the sun. In Part Two of "The Ruined Cottage," the narrator asks the Pedlar to continue his tale, and the Pedlar reluctantly relates the rest of Robert's fall. He explains how, during his next pass through Margaret's village about twelve months later, he was met with tearful enquiries about her husband's whereabouts. Robert, he learned, had left his home just two months previously. Ironically, Robert's tragic inability to provide for his family had manifested itself in a single, small sum of money, a "purse of gold" (264) silently placed on her windowsill during the night while she was sleeping – an unambiguous sign that Robert had enlisted in the British army. "I trembled at the sight," the Pedlar recalls Margaret saying:

'I knew it was his hand  
That placed it there, and on that very day  
By one, a stranger, from my husband sent,  
The tidings came that he had joined a troop  
Of soldiers going to a distant land.' (264-9)

Margaret does not identify the conflict or the "distant land" where her husband was bound; it could have been India, America, or France. Wordsworth began the poem in July 1797, and the "war" to which the Pedlar refers in line 136 commenced a little less than a decade prior to his conversation with the narrator, so the latest Robert could possibly have enlisted was the late 1780s, around the time of the Third Anglo-Mysore War. However, Wordsworth could have been thinking of the current war with France or even the war against America in

the late 1770's and early 1780's. James Butler reminds us that both *An Evening Walk* and *Salisbury Plain* feature distressed woman whose husbands fought and died in America.<sup>21</sup>

Omitting the destination was a deliberate artistic choice; the poet could easily have rendered line 269 as follows: "Of soldiers bound for war against the French." One may plausibly conjecture that Wordsworth, by leaving Robert's destination unspecified, wished to draw attention to the vast geographic and psychic distance between the aforementioned conflicts, created and fought by men, and Margaret's cottage, the focus of her domestic and familial concerns; Wordsworth may also have been trying simultaneously to emphasize the tragic ability of the conflict that Robert had joined to reach deep into the heartland, "far from the clash of arms" (Virgil 149), and, with nature's unkind assistance, wreck local economies and leave families destitute. By withholding the name of the war, Wordsworth makes his verse applicable to all wars.

Once Robert, Margaret's last bulwark in an impoverished country, is swept up by the unnamed conflict, Margaret is left to her own devices with two children to feed. The tides of history are about to claim her life, too, and the poem, by focusing the reader's attention on Margaret and her cottage, proclaims itself a kind of alternative history, one detached from the conflicts through which the course of "history" is customarily emplotted, and centered instead on its powerless, defenseless, and marginalized victims.

After Robert enlists, Margaret is left to perform all the tasks needed to ensure the maintenance and upkeep of the cottage. When the Pedlar introduces Robert in the poem, the first adjective he uses to describe him is "industrious." Two months after Robert enlists, the Pedlar, having heard the sad story from Margaret and preparing to depart, sees her working in the garden, which had previously been Robert's evening task. "I left her busy

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<sup>21</sup> See p. 5 of Butler's edition.

with her garden tools,” he tells the narrator (283). However, the work proves too great, and the story of the Pedlar’s subsequent passes through Margaret’s village is not of work done but of work left undone and of a place falling into disrepair and final decay.

However, to suggest that cottage’s decay mirrors or symbolizes Margaret’s is to overlook a deeper aim of the poem. To identify this aim, it is essential to recognize that the Pedlar’s account of Margaret and her cottage is not primarily an attempt at verisimilitude nor a manifestation of his sympathetic spirit. It is an expression of moral and political outrage. “The Ruined Cottage” manifests a form of mortal consciousness that is fundamentally social and political in nature, unalleviated by the consolations of religious piety. No *deus ex machina* descends to raise Margaret, her children, or her husband; swept up by the currents of history, they lie forever beyond its margin. The poem, by delineating the shadowy places in the sunlit downs of human activity and experience, makes the price of history manifestly and chillingly clear.

Ironically, the narrator describes Margaret’s cottage and its grounds as a ruined paradise – an overgrown and untended Eden abandoned by God and man:

It was a plot  
Of garden-ground, now wild, its matted weeds  
Marked with the steps of those whom as they pass’d,  
The goose-berry trees that shot in long lank slips,  
Or currants hanging from their leafless stems  
In scanty strings, had tempted to o’erleap  
The broken wall. (54-60)

The verb “tempt” in line 59 secures the Miltonic connection. Unlike the biblical Eden, however, the wall surrounding the cottage garden is “broken,” and no god has stationed a

fiery throng of angels there to prevent passersby from climbing over it and stealing its fruit. Then again, few would wish to return to this garden, for its offerings are “scanty.”

Like the biblical Eden, Margaret’s garden also contains a source of water, but when the narrator goes to the well, he now finds it “half-choked with willow flowers and weeds” (63). The willow flowers are an archetypal image of sadness; the weeds, of work left undone. Margaret and her family are dead; no hand remains to perform the tasks required in Paradise.

The theme of work corroborates but also complicates the connection between Wordsworth’s poem and *Paradise Lost*. Milton describes Paradise as a place of easy, even delightful work. In Book Four, Adam tells Eve:

Tomorrow ere fresh morning streak the east  
With first approach of light, we must be ris’n,  
And at our pleasant labour, to reform  
Yon flowery arbors, yonder alleys green,  
Our walks at noon, with branches overgrown,  
That mock our scant manuring, and require  
More hands than ours to lop their wanton growth. (4.623-7)<sup>22</sup>

To underscore a point mentioned earlier, when the Pedlar introduces Robert midway through Book One of the poem, he describes him as “industrious.” While there is no indication his work is easy or enjoyable, there is no hint that it is hard or oppressive, either, and he approaches it with a steadiness and regularity that enabled Margaret and him to pass their days “in peace and comfort” (131).

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<sup>22</sup> John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Folwer, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Harlow: Longman, 1998).

But work also marks a point of thematic departure from Milton's poem. In *Paradise Lost*, one of the prices of Adam and Eve's transgressions is toil. Expelled from Paradise, Eve reluctantly welcomes the arrival of day:

But the field  
To labour calls us now with sweat imposed,  
Though after sleepless night; for see the morn,  
All unconcerned with our unrest, begins  
Her rosy progress smiling; let us forth,  
I never from thy side henceforth to stray,  
Where'er our day's work lies, though now enjoined  
Laborious, till day droop... (11.171-8)

By contrast, in "The Ruined Cottage," Margaret and her family's fall, depicted as the result of blight, sickness, and conflict in a "distant land" (269), is followed not by the need to work but by an inability to find it. Earlier, the Pedlar told the narrator how "shoals of artisans / Were from their daily labor turned away / To hang for bread on parish charity" (153-6).<sup>23</sup> The price of living in a fallen world is work. But a world in which men and women are unable to find work is even farther fallen, especially when it leads, as in Margaret's case, to the slow death of children for whom the pangs of childbirth, another result of the biblical fall, were originally endured.

Robert did manage at last to find work, but for him as for so many boys and men from unprivileged socioeconomic backgrounds, his job involved trying to kill other and likely equally unprivileged boys and men in a strange and distant land. When Margaret had

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<sup>23</sup> In the phrase "to hang for bread," the verb "hang" literally means "to depend," but it also suggests the harsh punishment that the most desperate of the rural poor may have endured for stealing what they could no longer afford to buy or make for themselves.



awoken one morning to find “a purse of gold” on her windowsill, she “trembled at the sight” because she immediately knew what it meant (264-5). “He left me thus—Poor man!” she exclaimed to the Pedlar, “He had not heart / To take a farewell of me” (270-1).

Robert’s inability to say goodbye to his wife anticipates the Pedlar’s difficulty in finding words to comfort Margaret in her grief, an aspect of the poem I shall discuss shortly. In the meantime, it is interesting to observe how Margaret’s instinctive “reading” of a pregnant image, the purse of gold left on her windowsill, anticipates how the Pedlar comes to read and relate the entire story of Margaret’s ruin: through an intense and oftentimes startling awareness of the minutiae of her decaying world. Due to the passage of time between the Pedlar’s visits, Margaret’s decline reveals itself to him in her cottage’s continual decay. The effect of this transformation, viewed as it were through a series of snapshots taken over many seasons, imbues the place and objects in it with intense emotional energy. It is a kind of domestic symbolism that resonates with a much larger world so that the personal and familial cannot be seen apart from the political and national. Thus, what I have called mortal consciousness becomes indistinguishable from social consciousness and even political protest.

As we have seen, in the poem’s elegiac preamble, the narrator describes the naked walls of the ruined cottage and the overgrown garden surrounding it, and the Pedlar couples the cottage’s physical decay with Margaret’s. “She is dead, / The worm is on her cheek,” he says, adding:

and this poor hut,  
Stripp’d of its outward garb of household flowers,  
Of rose and sweet-briar, offers to the wind  
A cold bare wall whose earthy top is tricked

With weeds and the rank spear-grass. (103-8)

In the second part of the poem, the Pedlar narrates a series of passes by Margaret's cottage, and in each instance, his eye picks out details indicative of her deteriorating circumstances.

The Pedlar had learned of Robert's sudden departure during the early spring about nine years previously. His next pass occurred near the end of the summer; when he arrived, Margaret was absent, and the Pedlar immediately noticed a subtle change in the cottage's condition:

Her cottage in its outward look appeared  
As chearful as before; in any shew  
Of neatness little changed, but that I thought  
The honeysuckle crowded round the door  
And from the wall hung down in heavier wreaths,  
And knots of worthless stone-crop started out  
Along the window's edge, and grew like weeds  
Against the lower panes. (305-12)

The rhythmic variation precipitated by the conjunction "but" in line 307 formally expresses the cottage's physical decay, as a familiar scene begins to disclose to the attentive eye minute but important differences. These differences accumulate in the subsequent lines, where repetition of the conjunction "and" gives them a rapidly accretive quality. The adjective "worthless," which modifies "stone-crop," retrieves the twin themes of labor and value that preoccupied the Pedlar in the first part of the poem. The presence of stone-crop attests that basic upkeep on the cottage was not being performed. It may also evoke the beginnings of the pangs of starvation; English stonecrop, while not inedible, provides little nourishment

and has a slightly unpleasant taste, and as the adjective “worthless” implies, and it has no utility or value.

The same ideas and images pervade the Pedlar’s description of the garden, which he entered next. There he noticed the “unprofitable birdweed” that

spread his bells

From side to side and with unwieldy wreaths

Had dragged the rose from its sustaining wall

And bent it down to earth. (314-17)

Like strone-crop, birdweed is virtually useless to a gardener, and its “unwieldy wreaths” pose a threat to the rose bush, probably the garden’s central ornament and delight. Order, too, has been compromised by the lack of upkeep. The Pedlar explains how “border-tufts” of various plants and herbs “had straggled out into the paths / Which they were used to deck” (319-20). A reader may recall the end of Adam’s speech to Eve quoted above on page 63: “Those blossoms also, and those dropping gums, / That lie bestrewn unsightly and unsmooth, / Ask riddance, if we mean to tread with ease” (4.630-2).

The Pedlar’s attention to the cottage’s decay and the garden’s disarray is mirrored by his own restlessness as he waited for Margaret for return. “Ere this an hour / was wasted,” he tells the narrator (321-2). For the Pedlar, as for so many laborers, time is money. At last, a stranger passed and told him that Margaret frequently disappeared for long periods of time:

Back I turned my restless steps,

And as I walked before the door it chanced

A stranger passed, and guessing whom I sought

He said that she was used to ramble far.

The sun was sinking in the west, and now

I sate with sad impatience. (322-7)

All the Pedlar could do was wait for Margaret to return. The phrase “sad impatience” instills this section of the poem with a curious tension and points out an important aspect of the Pedlar’s character. He was “sad” because he cared for Margaret and wanted to know how she was faring, and because he couldn’t help but be moved by the cries of her “solitary infant” (327) left alone in the cottage. But he was also anxious to get moving. A peddler’s business is always down the road in the next village; despite his concern for Margaret, he was acutely aware that he had “wasted” an hour at her cottage, and he doesn’t disguise his impatience as he retells the story to the narrator. To an unsympathetic reader, this might reflect negatively on the Pedlar’s character. To a more generous one, it merely reflects the Pedlar’s sensitivity to the economic hardship of the time; an hour wasted during his travels is business lost.

It is at this moment in the poem that the Pedlar relates to the narrator his most startling discovery about the cottage. It is a detail that, more than any other yet described, attests to the sad deterioration in Margaret’s circumstances. The Pedlar, waiting for Margaret to return, noticed a red smudge on the cornerstones of the cottage:

The spot though fair seemed very desolate:  
The longer I remained more desolate.  
And looking round, I saw the corner-stones,  
Till then unmarked, on either side the door  
With dull red stains discoloured and stuck o’er  
With tufts and hairs of wool, as if the sheep  
That feed upon the commons thither came  
Familiarly and found a couching-place

Even at her threshold. (328-336)

Sheep from the common were now using Margaret's cottage grounds as a fold, as shown by the tufts of wool and smudges of red paint (used then as now to mark and identify sheep) rubbed onto the stones. Butler speculates that Wordsworth "probably drew this observation" from an entry his sister's Alfoxden journal dated February 4, 1798, where Dorothy records, "The moss rubbed from the pailings by the sheep, that leave locks of wool, and the red marks with which they are spotted, upon the wood."<sup>24</sup> A reader might be tempted to read these bits of red paint as symbols of blood – Robert's, perhaps, spilled far away from home. A colleague recently speculated they might allude to the Passover; if so, then that allusion is profoundly ironic, for when Margaret returns, she reveals that she had apprenticed her eldest son, and on a subsequent pass to the village, the Pedlar learns that death had claimed her infant. Perhaps the most important aspect of these lines is that they point to the Pedlar's visual perspicacity – his eye for detail – and illustrate how he deduces from physical evidence the story of Margaret's decline and fall even before she returns to deliver the sad news that her husband has not returned, that her eldest son has left home, and that she occasionally harbors thoughts of abandoning her cottage and possibly ending her life.

Lines 392-446 contain the final chapters of Margaret's decline and fall. In them, the Pedlar recounts his third and fourth passes through her village. During the third, he found Margaret "sad and drooping" (396), and he detected further signs of decay about the cottage and garden. Her house, he tells the narrator, "Bespoke a sleepy hand of negligence; / The floor was neither dry nor near, the hearth / Comfortless" (400-2). Her few books were in disarray. Her crying infant appeared to have "caught" its mother's sadness, as though

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<sup>24</sup> See Wordsworth, *The Ruined Cottage and The Pedlar*, ed. James Butler, p. 64, and Dorothy Wordsworth, *The Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 5.

grief were contagious (410). Outside, weeds had begun to lay claim to the garden, and sheep had begun to eat the bark of an apple tree in her orchard. During his fourth and final pass through the village, he learned that Margaret's baby had died, and that she still had not heard word of her husband. This was the Pedlar's last pass through the village for many seasons. In lines 446-92, he narrates the last five years of Margaret's life and the final yielding of her life and her cottage to the forces of death and decay.

One of the signal achievements of "The Ruined Cottage" is how it recounts the drawn-out process by which national political concerns, played out in foreign wars, help destroy a domestic paradise situated "far from the clash of arms" (Virgil 149) – far, that is, from "history" as it is customarily emplotted, studied, understood, and retold. Early in his tale, the Pedlar says:

You may remember, now some ten years gone,  
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left  
With half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add  
A worse affliction in the plague of war:  
A happy land was stricken to the heart. (133-7)

In his ceaseless travels throughout the countryside, the Pedlar bears witness the dire effect of these calamities:

'Twas a sad time of sorrow and distress:  
A wanderer among the cottages,  
I with my pack of winter raiment saw  
The hardships of that season: many rich  
Sunk down as in a dream among the poor,  
And of the poor did many cease to be,

And their place knew them not. (138-4)

The stark contrast between the effect of “those calamitous years” (147) on the rich and poor is embodied by the verbs associated with them. “Sink” and “cease,” which describe the rich and the poor respectively, are both intransitive, pointing to a shared lack of control over circumstances, but whereas the word “sink” suggests movement, “cease” does not. For the poor, there is simply nowhere to fall to; when the calamity touches home, they simply cease to be. There was no social safety net in late eighteenth-century Britain, except what meager aid one’s family, friends, or parish might be able to supply. Robert, in an act of total economic desperation, gives himself to the tides of history and goes off to fight abroad. Margaret, unable to support her spirits, her children, or her cottage, sinks with them into the land. There could be no clearer indication of what I suggested in my introduction, namely, that for many poets during the Romantic period, Death underwent a change from the Great Leveler of human society to the great crystallizing force of human inequality. The rich fall but weather the storm; exposed to the elements, the poor suffer and die. In “The Ruined Cottage,” mortal consciousness is akin to social and political awareness and even protest.

For the individual poor, cessation means not only an end to life but also permanent removal from the records of history. Beginning at line 160, the Pedlar shifts his focus from the general welfare to Margaret’s story, a shift anticipated at the beginning of the poem by the narrator’s change in focus from the dappled landscape of the northern downs to one particular cluster of elms. “The Ruined Cottage” reclaims Margaret into a people’s history of Britain, just as Gray imaginatively reclaimed the rustics buried in a country churchyard; just as Cain, as I shall discuss in Chapters Two and Five, worries over the fate of his posterity; and just the speaker of Charlotte Smith’s *The Emigrants*, as I shall discuss in Chapter Five, reclaimed French exiles and other victims of the French Revolution, chiefly women and

children. I shall also show how, in *Beachy Head*, Smith imaginatively links these human victims of national history – collateral damage of the martial plots formulated and driven by ambitious men – to the sublime infinitude of minute, fossilized sea-creatures embedded in the geological formations along the English coast: the anonymous victims of natural history.

*Conclusion: Mortal Consciousness and the Forms of History*

Reading “The Ruined Cottage” carefully, it is possible to chart the sequence of events that it records. There are many temporal clues. The Pedlar’s tale begins one winter about ten years previously:

You may remember, now some ten years gone,  
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left  
With half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add  
A worse affliction in the plague of war. (133-6)

The Pedlar’s reference to his “pack of winter raiment” designates the season. Robert’s illness, which marks the beginning of the end for his family, begins about a year and a half later, during the late summer or early autumn. “In disease / he lingered long,” the Pedlar says, and “when his strength returned,” probably during the ensuing spring, he and his family found themselves totally destitute, “the little he had stored to meet / The hour of accident or crippling age” completely “consumed” (149-53). The story is frighteningly similar to the experience of many millions in our own time, for whom a single uninsured accident or illness has led to crushing debt and poverty.

The Pedlar appears to have visited Margaret at least once during this time. His first recorded visit, described beginning at line 241, took place in the spring, perhaps a year after



Robert's recovery, and two months after he enlisted with the army. Robert's second visit took place later the same year toward the end of the summer; he recounts this visit, and the change both Margaret and her cottage had undergone, beginning at line 298. His third took place the next year, at the very end of winter, "ere on its sunny bank the primrose flower / Had chronicled the first day of spring" (394-5). The winter had taken a harsh toll, both on the cottage, the health of her child, and Margaret's hope. By the time the Pedlar made his fourth and final pass in the middle of autumn, about a year and half after the first pass, Margaret's baby had died. The Pedlar records this beginning at line 434. Their parting was their last; for reasons the Pedlar never explains, but which one may speculate had to do with avoiding a source of great sorrow, "many seasons passed" before the Pedlar made another pass through the village. It must have been about three and a half years, because the Pedlar tells us that Margaret "lingered in unquiet widowhood" (446) for five years. "Unquiet" because, like the women in the whaleman's chapel in *Moby Dick* mentioned in footnote 14 above, she is denied the psychological closure that would come from certain knowledge that her husband is in fact dead and certain knowledge of his final resting place.

One could try to place the poem on a national timeline, but doing would be extremely difficult. As mentioned earlier, the Pedlar does not inform us where Robert has gone off to war; it could be India, France, or anywhere the English forces had met the French. The difficulty of synchronizing Wordsworth's poem with recorded history forces us to mark time the way the Pedlar does: by his intermittent passes through Margaret's village. This effectively creates an alternative version of history, one anchored in the experience of the poor and looking outward at the distant events that help shape its course. It is fundamentally in this manner that the poem exhibits what I have called Romantic mortal consciousness: a consciousness of mortality as it defines and circumscribes the lives of the

individuals who cling to the margins of history and culture. A consciousness equivalent to socioeconomic awareness and political protest.

In “The Ruined Cottage,” the Pedlar’s mortal consciousness manifests as sympathetic awareness of Margaret’s decline and fall, a collapse triggered by external circumstances depriving Robert of his health and then Margaret of her husband, furthered by her inability to find work, support herself and her children, maintain her small domestic economy, and finally consummated by her emotional and psychological decay, the loss of her children, and the ruin of her cottage and its grounds. Similar to Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” which eschews the lives of the famous and attends to departed souls who would not previously have been fitting subjects for elegiac verse, Wordsworth’s poem focuses on a set of ruins very different from those that would have captured the interest of most eighteenth and nineteenth-century travelers and readers.

Crucially, Wordsworth poem aligns mortal consciousness with social and political consciousness. We see this in how the poem anchors Margaret’s decline and fall in a larger, impersonal cycle of natural and national forces that creep into her domestic paradise, undermine her sources of support, and deliver her to ruin. Focusing on the plight of Margaret as embodied by the decay of her domestic paradise, the poem associates mortal consciousness, that deep attention to human mortality in a fallen world, with political consciousness, a sense of how the socioeconomic and political structures of human culture affect the lives and deaths of the members of that culture. In the next chapter, I shall read Byron’s *Cain* as a culminating point of the Romantic convergence of mortal, social, and political consciousness.

The Pedlar’s detective-like ability to perceive Margaret’s decline and fall contrasts in a very curious manner with his inability to respond to it at the time or even articulate it to

the narrator in the present. In the second part of the poem, after the Pedlar resumes telling Margaret's story, he relates his first pass by Margaret's cottage. He tells the narrator how his expectation of a friendly greeting temporarily gave way to an unbearable silence:

At the door arrived,  
I knocked, and when I entered with the hope  
Of usual greeting, Margaret looked at me  
A little while, then turned her head away  
Speechless, and sitting down upon a chair  
Wept bitterly. I wist not what to do  
Or how to speak to her. Poor wretch! at last  
She rose from off her seat—and then, oh Sir!  
I cannot tell how she pronounced my name. (245-53)

The idea of speechlessness saturates this passage. The Pedlar's hope "of usual greeting" is met with silence and the tears, and he himself can neither break the one nor staunch the other: "I wist not what to do / Or how to speak to her" (250-1). The verse completely breaks down in lines 250-2, a passage punctuated by caesurae, exclamations, the durational adverb "at last," and finally an apostrophe, all of which attest to a period of protracted and almost unbearable silence. The Pedlar's inability to speak to Margaret during that moment in the past is mirrored by his present difficulty accurately relating the encounter to the narrator. He "cannot tell" how she pronounced his name, and he describes the look on her face as "unutterably helpless" (255). When Margaret was finally about to speak, the Pedlar was stunned into an even deeper silence:

As she spake  
A strange surprize and fear came to my heart,

Nor had I power to answer ere she told

That he had disappeared—just two months gone. (257-60).

Reading these lines, I cannot help recalling John Keats' remark in a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon that Wordsworth's *Excursion*, in which Keats would have read Margaret's story, was one of the three "things to rejoice at in this age," and wondering whether the dreamer's difficulty in expressing Moneta's suffering in *The Fall of Hyperion* or his anguished silence when beholding the Titans for the first time owes something to this encounter between the narrator and the Pedlar.<sup>25</sup> In any case, this passage in "The Ruined Cottage" reveals an important characteristic of mortal consciousness, one that permeates Keats' attempt to tell about the fall of Hyperion, the subject of Chapter Four, and Byron's play *Cain*, the subject of the next chapter: the paralysis and speechless mortality can cause when the human mind comes face to face with it.

The rest of the Pedlar's account reveals other instances of speechlessness in Margaret's company. He recalls how, when she finished telling him about her husband's disappearance, he

had little power

To giver her comfort, and was glad to take

Such words of hope from her own mouth as serv'd

To cheer us both. (275-8)

One could read this merely as a further testament to Margaret's liberal and cheerful nature. Earlier in the poem, the Pedlar had said of Margaret: "No one came / But he was welcome, no one went away / But that it seemed she loved him" (101-3). At the same time, one can't help but wonder what the Pedlar gave Margaret in return for her hospitality during her hour

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<sup>25</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

of greatest need. He describes helping her build up “a pile of better thoughts” after learning of her husband’s disappearance (279), but one can read this as an attempt to distract her from her troubles rather than console her about them; indeed, the phrase is reminiscent of the vain discourse on “trivial” things that the Pedlar, suddenly reluctant midway through the poem to continue telling Margaret’s story, holds with the narrator until the narrator finally persuades him to proceed.

The Pedlar’s account of his final leave-taking of Margaret contains yet another instance of speechlessness:

I left her busy with her garden tools,  
And well remember, o’er that fence she looked,  
And while I paced along the foot-way path  
Called out, and sent a blessing after me  
With tender cheerfulness and with a voice  
That seemed the very sound of happy thoughts. (283-8)

Why is it Margaret who gave the Pedlar a blessing, and not the other way around? Could the Pedlar’s use of the verb “seem” in 288 to describe the “tender cheerfulness” of her voice suggest that he was and still is intentionally deluding himself about its tone?

In the next chapter, I shall read Byron’s play *Cain* as an allegory of the birth or arrival of mortal consciousness. One can see elements of this in Wordsworth’s poem as well. Besides its attentiveness to minute details that bear witness to Margaret’s decline, perhaps the most salient aspect of the Pedlar’s tale is its strong power on the narrator, who is left spellbound and speechless by it. When the Pedlar finishes his tale, the narrator turns away from the Pedlar to ruminate silently on its implications:

The old Man ceased: he saw that I was moved;

From that low Bench, rising instinctively,  
I turned aside in weakness, nor had power  
To thank him for the tale which he had told.  
I stood, and leaning o'er the garden-gate  
Reviewed that Woman's sufferings, and it seemed  
To comfort me while with a brother's love  
I blessed her in the impotence of grief. (493-500)

The effect of the Pedlar's tale on the narrator is reminiscent of the Ancient Mariner's effect on the wedding guest, who is left "a sadder and wiser man" by the Mariner's strange account of a sea voyage haunted by the specter of death.<sup>26</sup> The narrator's sadness also looks ahead to Byron's *Cain*, whose protagonist is thunderstruck by a vision of death on a geological scale (given to him by Lucifer) and then left to work out the implications of the vision on his own. In "The Ruined Cottage," the narrator gleans from the Pedlar a deeper understanding of human mortality and its political meanings in an unequal and unjust world. The fact that he turns away from the Pedlar to contemplate "Margaret's story" attests to an inherently solitary quality of Romantic Mortal Consciousness, something that I shall begin to consider in Chapters Two and Three.

The Pedlar's frequent powerlessness to respond to Margaret's condition or to give her words of comfort, and the narrator's powerlessness to respond to the Pedlar's tale, are manifestations of the hopelessness of Margaret's circumstances. Silence in these instances speaks volumes about the terrifying reversal she has suffered. In this respect, powerlessness and speechlessness belie the presence of anger and protest; Margaret's circumstances defy easy explanation or consolation.

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<sup>26</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Annotated Ancient Mariner*, ed. Martin Gardner (New York: Potter, 1965).

At times, however, the Pedlar seems to resist the political implications of the story he is telling. At the end of the first part of the poem, the Pedlar, having traced the beginning of Robert's rapid decline, interrupts himself and pauses his story to ask why an old man's eyes should have been filled with tears. He affirms his belief in the presence of a natural wisdom able to give solace to those who mourn the lives and circumstances of people like Margaret. The more one considers the poem, the more one detects a tension between the Pedlar and the narrator – a tension emanating from a difference in how the two individuals respond to Margaret's story. The Pedlar, who is more familiar with Margaret's story, seems able to place her life and death in a worldview in which death, as Gertrude tried to assuage Hamlet, is "common" (1.2.72). The Pedlar, seeing the narrator's sorrow, says:

My Friend, enough to sorrow you have given,  
The purposes of wisdom ask no more;  
Be wise and chearful, and no longer read  
The forms of things with an unworthy eye.  
She sleeps in the calm earth, and peace is here. (508-12)

Does Margaret *requiescit in pace*, or does she merely rest calmly in the earth, no longer burdened by life, toil, and misery? One could argue that the Pedlar's words are informed by and expressive of a Christian worldview and the consolations it provides. However, it is much more likely that they embody Coleridge's idea of the "one life," expressed most clearly in his early poem "Religious Musings." In any case, it is important to note that Wordsworth avoids any explicit references to Christianity in "The Ruined Cottage." This is *not* true of his 1817 poem *The Excursion*, at the end of which the Wanderer, having heard Margaret's story in Book One, is given a lengthy tour of a country churchyard by a country parson. By 1817, though, Wordsworth's religious views had grown more orthodox. "The Ruined Cottage" is

a Romantic rejoinder to Graveyard School poetry; through its expressions of mortal, social, and political consciousness, dramatizes the tension between them.

If I can return for a moment to where this chapter began, with the poem's opening lines, I want to suggest that they do more than provide a descriptive sketch of the northern downs. Metaphorically, they express one of the poem's central preoccupations: theodicy, or the problem of natural evil. Theodicy refers to the attempt by theologians and philosophers to account for the existence of natural evil (human suffering, as opposed to moral evil). The *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* defines theodicy as "the part of theology concerned with defending the goodness and omnipotence of God in the face of the suffering and evil of the world."<sup>27</sup> Kant defined it as "the defense of the higher wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive in the world."<sup>28</sup> It is practically synonymous with the problem of evil, or "the problem of reconciling the imperfect world with the goodness of God."<sup>29</sup> A valuable conceptualization of the problem of evil is the "great trilemma," a model that theologian Mark Larrimore has traced back to Marcion, Sextus Empiricus, and Epicurus.<sup>30</sup> Imagine three non-collinear points, one for each of the following propositions: God is omnipotent and omniscient, God is benevolent, and evil exists. In order to complete the triangle described by the points, one must qualify at least one of these propositions.

Modern solutions to the problem of evil, at least in Western theological and philosophical traditions, rarely involve the qualification of the first or second propositions.

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<sup>27</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, online.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge, 1996), p. 410.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Mark Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil – A Reader* (London: Blackwell, 2001), p. xv. According to Larrimore, the "modern source of the trilemma" is David Hume's *Dialogue Concerning Natural Religion*.



To suggest that God is not omnipotent, or that he shares power with some malignant deity, is tantamount to Manichaeism, or radical religious dualism.<sup>31</sup> (Byron, by contrast found the idea of Manichaeism delightful; Bayle's entry in his *Dictionary* on the Manicheans influenced Byron's thinking in *Cain*, the play to which I am shortly to turn.) To question God's goodness is equally appalling. The only other option is to qualify the third proposition. Evil, a number of thinkers would have us believe, is simply a matter of perspective; viewed from a distance, what looks like "evil" up close will resolve into a necessary component of a harmonious and balanced work of art. One famous articulation of this view occurs in the first part of Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, where he redefines the defects of creation as "shades" in a beautiful and painting:

We should further consider, that the very blemishes and defects of Nature are not without their use, in that they make an agreeable sort of variety, and augment the beauty of the rest of the creation, as shades in a picture serve to set off the brightest and more enlightened parts.<sup>32</sup>

Berkeley does not dispute that there are "blemishes" or "defects" in nature; he merely disputes their purpose, which is to make beauty elsewhere more beautiful. A harmonious world requires a balance of joy and suffering just as a harmonious landscape painting requires a mix of light and shadow.

The beginning of "The Ruined Cottage" seems to evoke a perspectival solution to the problem of evil similar to Berkeley's (a solution, it should be noted, proposed by many

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<sup>31</sup> Kant writes: "It occurred to human beings long ago to assume a *special* evil original being, who had wrested part of all things from the holy original source and impressed its own essence on that part." In Kant's view, "Manichaeism conflicts with human reason, since reason leads us to one single being of all beings, and it can think of this being only as supremely holy." See Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, p. 26.

<sup>32</sup> George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Jonathan Dancy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 160.

philosophers and poets in the eighteenth century). In lines 1-9, the narrator describes a landscape balanced by light and shadow. “Far as the sight could reach,” he says, “shadows” projected on the northern downs by overhanging clouds “lay in spots / Determined and unmoved, with steady beams / Of clear and pleasant sunshine interposed” (5-9).

Significantly, however, it is in one of the shadowy spots on the northern downs – the earth beneath a cluster of elm trees – where the narrator directs the course. There in the shadows of the “pleasant” scene the narrator meets his friend Armytage and hears Margaret’s story. “The Ruined Cottage” is an emblem of the problem of evil, but it resists all facile solutions. It simply explores a shadowy scene, just as Keats would learn to explore the dark passages of human experience. It nurtures mortal consciousness, just as the Pedlar did for the narrator. Margaret is dead, but there are many men and women like Margaret who are still living, or will soon be living. Margaret is dead, but they are not. Can mortal consciousness help us alleviate *their* suffering?

## Chapter Two: Byron, *Cain*, and the Birth of Mortal Consciousness

### *Introduction: The Undiscovered Country*

Try as we may to imagine it, none of us knows what death will be like. It is, as Hamlet described it, “the undiscovered country, from whose bourn / No traveler returns” (3.1.81-2). During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, explorers were returning to Europe from many other undiscovered countries (undiscovered, that is to say, by Europeans) with thrilling and oftentimes exaggerated or fictitious accounts of these places and their inhabitants. But death, the final port of call in each person’s voyage through life, remained and still remains shrouded in mists, its location and distance from us unknown. Many have tried to prise open and peek behind death’s door, and many have tried to describe what they believe they have seen there during near-death experiences. Judging by the immense popularity of the literature, the attempt to map the undiscovered country will not cease anytime soon.<sup>1</sup>

For most if not all of us, life is comprised of moments of deep proximity to death: the death of a parent or grandparent, a sibling or friend or colleague, occasionally (terribly) a child or student, and often a beloved pet, whose allotted time on Earth is shorter than ours. I remember playing with a new pet kitten as a child and vividly imagining an almost endless succession of dogs and cats in my future; when my first dog died, it suddenly struck me that the number of animals left for me to raise and care for was finite and, worse, rather small.

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent contribution to the literature on near-death experiences what lies beyond death is *Proof of Heaven: A Neurosurgeon’s Journey into the Afterlife*. At the time I submitted this dissertation on May 17, 2013, *Proof of Heaven* was number two on the *New York Times* bestseller list for paperback nonfiction, which it had graced for 28 weeks. Crystal McVea’s *Waking Up in Heaven* was number seven and had been on the list three weeks.

Sickness, too, may bring us close to death. I am not talking only about a life-threatening illness requiring extensive treatment and a long period of convalescence, but also the seasonal bout of flu or norovirus that drives us to our beds and temporarily causes the sphere we personally inhabit to collapse in upon itself like a burnt-out star, obliterating the sights, sounds, and distractions of everyday life (or rendering them utterly surreal)<sup>2</sup> and making us profoundly aware of our solitary and tender corporeality.

As our experience and knowledge of the world enlarges, so too does our awareness of the extent of death's domain. We see it in hospitals and newspaper and in our broadening knowledge of history and nature. Death links us to the natural world. But mortal consciousness, by which I mean one's awareness and knowledge of mortality and death, distinguishes us from that world. The ageing pet whose immanent deaths we mourn has no consciousness of its fate. "Fight or flight" is only an instinctual response to a potentially lethal entity or situation; a wounded animal knows neither why it is fleeing nor what it stands to gain by standing its ground and baring its claws. We, on the other hand, have a dim awareness of the reason for our fear. Obscure though the end may be – and incomplete our knowledge of it – we know that our life has a terminus and that the name of this station is Death. We are not born with this knowledge. Many children lack an understanding of death or have one to which their elders cannot relate; Wordsworth explored this in "We Are Seven," and Hemans looked at it from a slightly different angle in "The Two Homes."<sup>3</sup> But

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<sup>2</sup> The house where I grew up was located behind my elementary school. When I stayed home from school due to sickness, I could hear different grades playing in the schoolyard at different times of day. The sound was positively haunting.

<sup>3</sup> I enjoy teaching these poems in conjunction with one another.

even for us adults, mortality usually remains hidden from view, only occasionally “flash[ing] afresh to hold and horrify,” as Philip Larkin wrote in “Aubade.”<sup>4</sup>

Written in 1821, Byron’s mystery play *Cain* investigates the relationship between humankind and death, a relationship agonizing because of its obscurity and its uncertainty. What is it, when will it strike, what will it be like, and what comes afterwards? Death and its obscurity lie at the play’s thematic and intellectual core. Doomed to die but uncertain what death means, Cain is anxious to learn about what he calls the ultimate “myst’ry of [his] being” (1.1.322).<sup>5</sup> In Act One, Lucifer visits Earth to query Cain about his mortal condition and tantalize him with knowledge of death. In Act Two, he takes Cain to the underworld to show him what death is. Cain, depressed by the things he sees in Hades, returns to Earth in Act Three even more dissatisfied with the limitations of his existence. This fuels the rage that leads to Abel’s murder at the climax or catastrophe of the play. The play enacts the birth of mortal consciousness and connects it with the blossoming of political consciousness – an awareness of the powers that structure and either enable or limit human freedom.

The story of Cain and Abel enthralled writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. One of the most influential versions was Gessner’s epic *Der Tod Abels*, published in 1758. *The Death of Abel* was translated into several languages and was hugely popular in Britain and America. Scott and Wordsworth admired it, and it may have influenced Coleridge’s prose fragment “The Wanderings of Cain.” In the “Preface” to *Cain*, Byron mentions that he read *The Death of Abel* when he was eight years old, adding that “the general impression of my recollection is one of delight, but of the contents I remember only that

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Cain: Twelve Essays and a Text with Variants and Annotations*, ed. Truman Guy Steffan (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).

Cain's wife was called Mahala, and Abel's 'Thirza' (156). In his characteristically dismissive fashion, Byron informs the reader that his version of the tale is going to be different.

Byron subtitled his play "A Mystery," linking it with the Corpus Christi cycles of the Late Medieval period, whose pageants enacted over the course of one day the entire arc of sacred history from Lucifer's fall to the Last Judgment.<sup>6</sup> Byron was familiar with the old mystery plays, but *Cain* has little in common with them structurally or thematically, except (as in the Wakefield play of *The Killing of Abel*) a predilection for uproariously vulgar humor.<sup>7</sup> A closet drama never intended for performance, *Cain* eschews eschatology, subordinating plot to philosophical broodings on mortality, time, and man's place in the world. The play harnesses for dramatic effect the one aspect of the story that distinguishes it from all other stories in English literature: its liminal setting in a postlapsarian world that has been marked for death but – crucially – has yet to experience it. Cain knows he is mortal, but he does not understand what this entails. Thus, he Cain spends the beginning of the play ruminating on his fate, and when Lucifer offers to supply the knowledge that he seeks, Cain begs to learn "the myst'ry of [his] being" (1.1.322). The play's dramatic energy arises from a fate that is totally irrevocable yet totally obscure.

The first mention of *Cain* appears in a Ravenna Journal entry dated January 28, 1821, where Byron records having pondered "the subjects of four tragedies to be written (life and circumstances permitting)," including one on "Cain, a metaphysical subject, something in the style of Manfred, but in five *acts*, perhaps, with the chorus" (*BLJ* VII, 36-7). There are few other references in the Ravenna Journal to the play he was devising. Byron enclosed a copy

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<sup>6</sup> David Bevington, ed., *Medieval Drama* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. 227-241.

<sup>7</sup> See *Byron's Letters and Journals*, 12 vols., ed. Leslie Marchand (London: Murray, 1982), Vol. 6, p. 16. (When citing Byron's letters and journals parenthetically, I will abbreviate the title to *BLJ*.) The Wakefield play *The Killing of Abel* may have provided the inspiration for Cain's tragic misperception, after striking Abel, that Abel is merely asleep.

of the finished play in a letter to John Murray dated September 10, 1821. A couple of days later, he wrote to Murray instructing him to add three lines to Eve's withering curse against Cain in Act Three. Describing the play a week later to his friend Thomas Moore, Byron writes: "It is in the Manfred, metaphysical style, and full of some Titanic declamation" (215).

Given the scarcity of information about the play's origin and composition, the Ravenna Journal entry of January 1821 assumes a special gravity. It is important for three reasons. First of all, it contains a "Thought for a Speech of Lucifer" where Byron, remembering his Milton, comments on the sinuous nature of Satanic logic. As we shall see, one of the symptoms of Cain's incipient fall is his adoption of Lucifer's language, syntax, and ways of thinking about his mortal condition. The entry also contains another "Thought for a Speech on Lucifer" on the theme of posterity. In the play, one of the chief ways Lucifer taunts and torments Cain is by suggesting the bleak future in store for his children and descendents. This connects to the third important feature of the Ravenna Journal entry: Byron's rumination on Hope. "If it were not for Hope," Byron wonders, "where would the future be?—in hell. It is useless to say where the Present is, for most of us know; and as for the Past, what predominates in Memory?—Hope baffled. Ergo, in all human affairs, it is Hope—Hope—Hope" (*BLJ* VII, 37). As we shall see, Lucifer ultimately prevails over Cain by stripping him of hope about the future.

The assault on Cain's hope is carried out on multiple fronts, but the attacks are highly coordinated and reflect a common tactic: initiating Cain into the mysteries of death and shaping how he comes to interpret his mortal nature. In Act Two, Lucifer takes Cain on a voyage to the undiscovered country to show him what death is. The verbal equivalent of one of John Martin's apocalyptic landscape paintings, Lucifer's presentation is informed by contemporaneous speculations about the natural history of the Earth, particularly

Catastrophism, a theory that posited an endless succession of creations and destructions stretching back into the darkness of geological time. During Cain's vision, Lucifer triumphantly declares: "All to be animated for this only!" (2.2.43).

Significantly, Cain's initiation into the mysteries of death comes pre-packaged with the notion of the soul's immortality, which Byron, in his deeply ironic "Preface" to the play, insists was new to Cain. Citing Bishop Warburton's important *Divine Legation of Moses*, Byron reminds readers that there is no evidence of the doctrine of immortality in the Pentateuch. Subtly chiding Milton for playing fast and loose with Genesis in the last two books of *Paradise Lost*, where Michael consoles Adam with a vision of human history informed by immense pain and hardship but culminating in the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ and the salvation of humankind, Byron insinuates that his version of Genesis is more faithful. Unequipped, then, with knowledge of salvation that Adam might have passed on to his family to temper fears about their mortal condition, Cain comes to regard the afterlife as an interminable, meaningless existence in a world of forgotten shadows. This idea of the afterlife causes his distinctions between life, death, mortality, and immortality to collapse entirely. All of this merely confirms Lucifer's disturbing theodicy, that is to say, his solution to the problem of evil: a dark vision of perpetual struggle between good and evil. This vision is similar to the one Byron read about in the entry in *Bayle's Dictionary* on the Manichees, encapsulated in his play by a poignant image of meaningless pain: "a lamb stung by a reptile" (II.ii.90). There can be no convincing explanation for such suffering.

But the effect on Cain is even greater than this, because Lucifer transforms the way Cain conceives of God himself. The idea of good versus evil does not only define the fight between God and Lucifer for supremacy on Earth; according to Lucifer, it also defines the moral struggle that goes on in God's own soul. As we shall see, Cain comes to view God as



wanton creator and destroyer, an arbitrary giver of life and perpetrator of death. Depressed and disheartened by his appalling vision of a universe of death and his equally appalling idea of God, and incensed by a brother who continues to worship such a destructive creator, Cain lashes out against both. In an act of protest against God, Cain strikes his most devout worshipper. He thus unwittingly ushers Death into the world, giving birth to the monster that he has spent the majority of his life wondering about and fearing.

What consolations, if any, does Byron allow us to find in Death's arrival in the world and the birth of mortal consciousness? In the first part of this chapter, I illuminate how death and mortality rest at the thematic and intellectual core of Byron's play and explain why it haunts his titular character so deeply. Distinctive features of the play's preoccupation with death anchor it in a specific cultural moment when Western attitudes toward death and dying were experiencing a profound shift. My reading of *Cain* is based on the assumption, confirmed by Byron's notes about the play, that the knowledge of death received from Lucifer destroys Cain's hope, and that it is in Cain's resulting state of hopelessness and despair that he lashes out against Abel, a worshipper of the god he has come to hate.

Reading against the grain of the text, however, and with a mind attuned to the hermeneutical possibilities that Byron's profound sense of irony authorizes, I argue that the play allows for a positive reading of this second fall. Returning to *Cain* briefly in the final chapter of this project, I will show how the arrival of mortal consciousness leads to a new form of aesthetic awareness deeply dependent on knowledge of mortality. In this chapter, however, I focus on how Cain's new understanding of death cultivates a strikingly modern social and political consciousness, one identified in the Introduction and Chapter One as an important characteristic of British Romanticism.

*The Mystery of Cain's Being*

Mortality is the source of Cain's deep unhappiness with life, the world, and his creator. It is also the source of great resentment toward his family. The play opens with Cain stubbornly refusing to participate in his family's orisons, resisting his father's pleas to join in their praises by reminding him of his fate:

**Adam.** ...[T]hou, my eldest born, are silent still.

**Cain.** 'Tis better I should be so.

**Adam.** Wherefore so?

**Cain.** I have nought to ask.

**Adam.** Nor aught to thank for?

**Cain.** No.

**Adam.** Dost thou not live?

**Cain.** Must I not die? (1.1.26-29)

Cain's petulant replies to his father's questions show that he regards his mortal condition as a personal affront.

Part of Cain's discontent is intellectual in nature. Having completed their orisons, Abel, his sister-wife Zillah, and Cain's sister-wife Adah prepare to begin their daily chores. Cain, complaining he feels "sick at heart" (an expression gleaned by Byron from the opening scene of *Hamlet*, another play that ruminates on our mortal condition), tells his siblings that he "fain would be alone a little while" and promises to join them shortly. After they leave, he begins to ruminate on his unhappiness. In his first soliloquy, Cain struggles to make sense of the logic of his postlapsarian condition:

...And this is

Life. Toil! And wherefore should I toil? Because

My father could not keep his place in Eden?

What had *I* done in this? I was unborn;

I sought not to be born; nor love the state

To which that birth has brought me. (1.1.64-69)

Redefining life as “toil,” one of the fruits of man’s first disobedience, Cain contemplates how it follows that he should need to pay for his parents’ sins. “What had *I* done in this?” Condemned as an accomplice to the act, Cain calls attention to what ought to have been a watertight alibi: that he was “unborn” on the fateful day. Cain’s legal argument meshes with philosophical ones. He never sought life, and he doesn’t love it; he has neither explicitly nor implicitly consented to its conditions. Therefore, being bound by its mortal terms makes no logical sense to him.

Here again, as so often in the play, the form of Byron’s verse dramatically enacts its thematic content. Byron’s use of italics in line 67 suggests that Cain’s bewilderment extends to the very words he finds himself using to frame his condition. “What had *I* done in this?” he asks. How, in other words, does it follow that “I” is the subject of a clause (“I toil”) describing an action that represents the consequences of another man’s transgression at a time when I neither existed nor sought to exit?<sup>8</sup> Cain’s confusion manifests as choppy lines replete with spondees, trochees, caesuras (including two caesuras in line 65), short sentences, and monosyllabic words. My use of boldface suggests one way of reading these tortured lines:

**Life. Toil!** And **wherefore** should I **toil?** **Because**

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. 1.1.196-202.

My **father could** not **keep** his **place** in **Eden**?

**What** had *I* done in **this**? I was **unborn**;

I sought **not** to be **born**; nor **love** the **state**

To **which** that **birth** has **brought** me. (1.1.65-69)

The quality of the verse changes dramatically the moment Cain sees Lucifer. In lines 80-90, quoted below, Cain's broken, question-riddled utterances dissolve into a fluid, lyrical, and deeply-enjambed description of his otherworldly visitor and its impact on him.<sup>9</sup>

Cain's discontent has other sources as well. One of these is a feeling of entitlement to something stolen or taken away. By disobeying God, Cain's parents have stripped him of his birthright; they have taken away something rightly his. In my experience, most literary texts can be identified by a unique constellation of key words and thematic preoccupations. One of the brightest stars in *Cain's* thematic constellation is the idea of inheritance, derived from the Late Latin word *heres* for "heir." We first notice its glow during Lucifer's dramatic entrance in Act One. There Cain associates Lucifer, "the light-bearer" (for no brighter star fell from Heaven), with the angels stationed at the walls of Paradise, who illuminate its shut gates with fiery swords. Cain knows their appearance well, because he has frequently lingered at twilight around the gates of Paradise in order to catch a glimpse of what he deems his "just inheritance" (1.1.87). If I were staging *Cain* (and for a play consigned by its author to the closet, *Cain* has a rich performance history),<sup>10</sup> I would mark Lucifer's presence offstage by illuminating Cain's body from the wings with a warm light, before directing the actor to ask, trembling:

Whom have we here? A shape like to the angels,

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<sup>9</sup> Lucifer does not enter until 1.1.98, but Cain sees him (in the wings, as it were) after line 79.

<sup>10</sup> In 2003, Charley Sherman directed *Cain* for the TinFish Theater in Chicago, IL.

Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect  
Of spiritual essence. Why do I quake?  
Why should I fear him more than other spirits  
Whom I see daily wave their fi'ry swords  
Before the gates, round which I linger oft  
In twilight's hour to catch a glimpse of those  
Gardens which are my just inheritance,  
Ere the night closes o'er the inhibited walls  
And the immortal trees, which overtop  
The cherubim-defended battlements? (1.1.80-90)

Later, at the beginning of Chapter Five, we shall have occasion to remark on Cain's fear, which I shall argue indicates the new form of aesthetic experience that Lucifer helps Cain achieve. For now, however, I want to focus on the gardens that Cain describes as his "just inheritance." Though his by right, the fruits of these lands are "inhibited" or held in by walls whose gates are locked and defended. The enjambment of lines 86-7, separating the demonstrative pronoun "those" from the "gardens" it modifies, emphasizes their physical and existential inaccessibility. The phrase "inhibited walls" makes use of a transferred epithet. Like humanity itself, living now under a sentence of death, the walls are characterized by a quality not native to them: their forbiddenness. The aural resemblance between "inheritance" and "inhibited" makes the latter word more salient, justifying the hermeneutic attention paid to it.

The phrase "immortal trees" complements this verbal cluster, but here the epithet is less transferred than misapplied. I say misapplied because the trees that grow in Paradise are not immortal, at least not any longer. They like the rest of nature were doomed when Cain's

parents disobeyed God. Cain knows this – is painfully aware of it – so how can we account for his error? Cain is probably ruminating at this moment on the Tree of Life, whose fruit his parents foolishly forgot to eat after partaking of the Tree of Knowledge. To Cain, this was a critical oversight, and he expresses deep regret for it early in the play. The phrase “immortal trees” is also indicative of Cain’s nostalgic longing for the condition his parents’ disobedience has denied to him. The lost possibility of immortal of life in Paradise sharply contrasts with Cain’s fate in a postlapsarian world. In Act Two, Cain, clearly ruminating on his “just inheritance,” poignantly identifies the realm of death revealed to him by Lucifer as his new inheritance.

But Cain’s discontent is fundamentally rooted in the mystery enveloping his fate. After all, he has never seen death and thus doesn’t know what it is. “What is death?” Cain asks Lucifer in Act I. “I fear, / I feel, it is a dreadful thing, but what, / I cannot compass” (1.1.284-6). He reiterates his ignorance a few lines later, crying out, “Alas! I scarcely now know what it is / And yet I fear it—fear I know not what!” (1.1.298-9). Early in Act Two, Cain interrupts Lucifer to remind him that he knows “nought of death, save as a dreadful thing / Of which I have heard my parents speak, as of / A hideous heritage I owe to them” (2.1.61-3). When Lucifer asks Cain in the next scene whether he wishes to look on death, Cain essentially points out that he cannot really be expected to answer that question until he knows what death is (2.2.14-15).

Having no empirical knowledge of death, Cain anthropomorphizes it, poignantly imagining it as a wild beast he could fight and perhaps defeat, as Jacob would later pin an angel to the mat. “Could I wrestle with him?” he asks Lucifer, recalling how he “wrestled with the lion when a boy / In play till he ran roaring from my gripe” (1.1.259-61). When Lucifer replies that death has “no shape” (1.1.262) – a deliberate allusion to Milton’s sublime

description of Death in *Paradise Lost* as “a shape, / If shape it might be called that shape had none” (2.666-7) – Cain is astonished. “I thought it was a being,” he says before asking Lucifer: “Who could do / Such evil things to being save a being?” (1.1.262, 264-5). In *Paradise Lost*, Satan tempted Eve with knowledge of good and evil. In Byron’s dark sequel, Lucifer tempts Cain with knowledge of death, which Lucifer serves up in Act Two.

Inhabitants of a fallen world, Cain and his family are marked for death, but none of them has experienced or “undergone” it.<sup>11</sup> This is the crux of an important exchange with Lucifer in Act One:

**Luc.** Dar’st thou to look on Death?

**Cain.** He has not yet  
Been seen.

**Luc.** But must be undergone.

**Cain.** My father  
Says he something dreadful, and my mother  
Weeps when he’s named, and Abel lifts his eyes  
To heav’n, and Zillah casts hers to the earth  
And sighs a prayer, and Adah looks on me  
And speaks not.

**Luc.** And thou?

**Cain.** Thoughts unspeakable  
Crowd in my breast to burning when I hear

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<sup>11</sup> While no human being has died, many *animals* have; Abel has made many sacrifices to God. For this reason, one might ask whether it is appropriate to stress the ignorance of death shown by the play’s human characters. Given the extent to which Byron himself stresses this ignorance, he clearly was not concerned by this “historical” inconsistency.

Of this almighty death, who is, it seems,  
Inevitable. (1.1.250-9)

Lines 252-6 offer the reader a fascinating glimpse of how the idea of death casts a shadow over the lives of everyone in Cain's family, not just his own. The fact that Cain names each member of his family individually and describes his or her unique response to death is profoundly significant, for it suggests that mortal consciousness has a fundamentally private quality. This contradicts what death studies teaches us, and what, as I argue below, *Cain* demonstrates in fascinating ways: that our ways of thinking about and responding to death are largely constructed and given to us by the culture we inhabit. The solitary dimension of mortal consciousness is something I will explore at length beginning in Chapter Two.

Cain's paradoxically obscure insight into death's certainty constitutes the emotional core of his poignant recollection to Lucifer of the frequent vigils he has kept in expectation of death's arrival. In one of the most astonishing passages in the text, Cain tells Lucifer:

Since I heard  
Of death, although I know not what it is,  
Yet it seems horrible, I have looked out  
In the vast desolate night in search of him,  
And when I saw gigantic shadows in  
The umbrage of the walls of Eden, chequered  
By the far-flashing of the cherubs' swords,  
I watched for what I thought his coming; for  
With fear rose longing in my heart to know  
What 'twas which shook us all, but nothing came. (1.1.268-77)



The three phrases prior to the main verb in line 270 enact the experiential distance between Cain and death. He has only heard of death, he doesn't know what it is, and its name gives him an impression – but only an impression – of horror. This experiential distance, as I have called it, renders the constancy of Cain's vigils all the more poignant, as does the profound solitariness of the vigils implied by the phrase "vast desolate night."

The most salient stylistic feature of this passage is Byron's use of enjambment, which propels the verse forward, dramatizing Cain's belief that his nocturnal vigils must inevitably yield some momentous insight into death or even a physical encounter with it – that gathering in the night and slowly slouching toward him was this entity that he had heard about, learned to fear, but also longed to behold. Cain's anxiety, which wells up during this recollection of his vigils, reaches a fever pitch in the last line, where he refers to the idea that "shook us all," but here the verse flags and drops, ending anticlimactically with the clause "nothing came." The lines attest to a devastating failure of experience. Given Byron's obsession throughout the play with sexual climax – the "filthy cheat" (2.1.256) which, according to Lucifer, maliciously goads humankind into perpetuating its wretched condition, handing it on from one generation to the next – a reader would surely be forgiven for supposing that Byron was attempting to evoke the emasculating disappointment of a failure to reach climax, as he does, albeit more crudely, in the famous invocation to *Don Juan*. This sense of the verb "come" dates from the seventeenth century (*OED*), so a pun is certainly within the range of hermeneutic possibility. Nevertheless, the important point is that Cain's speech testifies to the depth of his craving for knowledge of the fate promised to him. Lucifer's dramatic function is to provide Cain the knowledge he seeks. The peculiar topology of this knowledge is what we will turn to next.

*The Catastrophic Nature of Death*

In my Introduction, I discussed how British Romanticism corresponds with a fundamental shift, delineated by Phillippe Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death*, in Western attitudes toward death and dying. This is the shift from the “death of the self,” where the crisis of mortality centered on the dying individual called upon to give a reckoning of his or her life, to the “death of the other,” where the crisis centered on the deceased’s survivors and involved anxiety about the severing of erotic, familial, and social ties. There were many reasons for this shift, which occurred slowly and unevenly during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two reasons identified and discussed at length by Ariès are the secularization of European culture in the wake of the Enlightenment and the rise of the family as the primary unit of social identification and organization. Byron’s *Cain* embodies and enacts both causes. However, it also enriches and complicates the standard model of mortality’s evolution. It enriches this model by pointing to two unique features of Romantic mortal consciousness, and it complicates it by showing how the standard model fails to account for the fundamentally solitary quality of mortal consciousness. While a culture may construct the way individuals comprehend their mortality, mortal encounters necessarily occur in moments of solitude that transcend culture, time, and place.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Cain* is that it maps almost perfectly onto the shift from the “death of the self” to the “death of the other” explained by Ariès. When Cain reflects in Act One on the individual responses to death exhibited by each member of his family, he gives voice to an idea of death as an event to be reckoned with privately at the terminus of life. Though the population of this most nuclear of nuclear families is only seven, there is no recognition of the threat that death poses to the family itself (and, by

extension, the entire human race). It is only later, after Cain is introduced by Lucifer to the notion of an ancient world shaped by catastrophic events through the slow march of geological time, and after Cain begins comprehend the universe of death implied by such temporal depths, that he begins to recognize his peculiar place at the root of a tree doomed continually to have its branches lopped by death. Only then does the nature of Cain's protest against death shift from one based on self-love to one grounded in compassion for the entire human race, particularly for posterity. It is important to note that this reorientation coincides with Cain's increasing secularization. Granted, secularization may be the wrong word to apply to a character who walks with spirits and firmly believes in the existence of God, albeit a cruel god; perhaps we should simply refer to Cain's increasing skepticism about the benevolent character of that god, contrasted with the piety exhibited by his family.

But even more striking than the way Byron's *Cain* maps onto the shift in attitudes toward death traced by Ariès is the way the work manifests a uniquely Romantic form of mortal consciousness pinned to contemporary scientific speculation about the nature, history, and the age of the earth, which helped fuel the secularization described in the preceding paragraph. A distinguishing element of Byron's play is its engagement with current ideas about the history of the earth. In Act Two, Lucifer hints at what Percy Shelley called Buffon's "sublimely gloomy idea" that the planet was gradually getting cooler.<sup>12</sup> This theory helped explain why the Earth was no longer able to support beings as massive as the ones whose forms were being reimagined and reconstructed from the burgeoning fossil

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<sup>12</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour through a Part of France, Switzerland, Germany, and Holland; with Letters Descriptive of a Sail Round the Lake of Geneva, and of the Glaciers of Chamouni* (London: T. Hookham, 1817), p. 160. Buffon's theory forms part of the intellectual backdrop of "Mont Blanc."

record. Shelley mentions Buffon's theory in a letter to Peacock written shortly after his visit to the Bossons Glacier in the summer of 1816. He had good reason to dwell on the theory, because Europe was uncommonly cool that summer due to a massive volcanic eruption that had taken place in Indonesia the previous year. That eruption had released so much ash and dust into the atmosphere that global temperatures plummeted by approximately two degrees Centigrade.<sup>13</sup> The glaciers above the vale of Chamonix customarily retreat into the Alps during the summer months; in 1816, however, they swelled by almost 300 feet. Shelley records this phenomenon in his and Mary Shelley's *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, and it helped form the intellectual backdrop of his ruminations on natural and human history and power in "Mont Blanc."

Buffon was the author of a monumental and very popular *Natural History*, published in 44 volumes over more than half a century beginning in 1749. Buffon's work had a huge impact on the young Georges Cuvier, whose work on geological Catastrophism left an even bigger imprint on Byron's imagination and the text of *Cain*. In his "Preface" to the play, Byron notes that he has "partly adopted [...] the notion of Cuvier, that the world had been destroyed several times before the creation of man" (157). This "notion" is Catastrophism, the theory that the surface of the earth has undergone a long succession of creations and destructions. The idea emerged in the late eighteenth century, partially in response to growing fossil evidence that the earth had been populated in former times by now-extinct creatures. Catastrophists explained these extinctions as consequences of violent geological upheavals on the surface of the earth. They believed that these changes had taken place suddenly and rapidly, as evidenced by the remains of "large quadrupeds" like the mammoth

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<sup>13</sup> John Gribbin, *The Scientists: A History of Science Told through the Lives of Its Greatest Inventors* (New York: Random House, 2002).

found “arrested in ice.”<sup>14</sup> It is not fully clear when or how Byron came to know Cuvier’s work, but it was almost certainly after 1813, when Robert Kerr’s translation of the *Essay on the Theory of the Earth* was published in Edinburgh. The subject of this volume is “the traces of those revolutions which took place anterior to the existence of all nations” (3).

Some of the best evidence of Cuvier’s influence on *Cain* rests in Byron’s vivid descriptions of the Earth’s geological past. Catastrophist imagery and rhetoric permeates Cain’s vision. “Where dost thou lead me?” Cain asks as they approach their destination. Lucifer replies: “To what was before thee, / The phantasm of the world, of which thy world / Is but the wreck” (2.1.151-3). Byron’s tortured syntax reflects the play’s catastrophic vision of the Earth’s natural history. Cain, unable to grasp how a world whose creation was cotemporaneous (or so he has believed) with the creation of his parents could accurately be described as a “wreck,” asks Lucifer, “What! Is it not then new?” Lucifer replies: “No more than life is; and that was ere thou / Or I were, or the things which seem to us / Greater than either” (2.1.153-6).

Elsewhere in the play, Byron’s language recalls the verbal muscularity of Kerr’s translation of Cuvier. In his introduction to the *Essay*, Kerr writes: “Nature also has had her intestine wars, and [...] the surface of the globe has been much convulsed by successive revolutions and various catastrophes” (6-7). When Cain asks Lucifer whether extinct creatures can ever return to Earth, Lucifer says:

*Their earth is gone forever,*  
So changed by its convulsion they would not  
Be conscious to a single present spot

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<sup>14</sup> Georges Cuvier, *Essay on the Theory of the Earth*, trans. Robert Kerr (Edinburgh, 1813), p. 15.

Of its new scarcely harden'd surface. (2.2.119-23)

Byron's use of the word "convulsion" emphasizes the belief among Catastrophists that the upheavals in the earth's past had happened suddenly.

Evidence for this part of the theory included frozen and partially intact remains of "large quadrupeds" like the woolly mammoth discovered "arrested in ice" during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Cuvier 15). Curiously, the first creature that Cain sees in Hades is an ancestor of the mammoth.

Those enormous creatures, taller than  
The cherub-guarded walls of Eden, with  
Eyes flashing like the fiery swords which fence them,  
And tusks projecting like the trees stripp'd of  
Their bark and branches—What are they? (2.2.138-42)

Lucifer answers: "That which / The Mammoth is in thy world;—but these lie / By myriads underneath its surface" (2.2.142-4). When Cain asks whether the mammoth or any other of the inhabitants of Hades can ever "repass" or return to Earth, Lucifer says that they cannot. "Their earth," he emphasizes, "is gone forever" (2.2.120). The woolly mammoth was the cause of great popular excitement during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is also the only animal mentioned by name in *Cain*, so its appearance in the play may not reflect the particular influence of Cuvier's text. Whatever the case, Cain's vision inspires a devastating notion of death as a force bent on destroying whole races and perhaps taking aim at creation itself.

What makes this idea more terrifying is Cain's simultaneous introduction by Lucifer to contemporary speculation regarding the age of the Earth. Indeed, nothing less than a sea change in humankind's conception of time took place in Europe during the later eighteenth

century. In 1620, Archbishop James Ussher had used genealogical evidence in the Bible to determine that Creation had taken place on a Tuesday in 4004 BC. In the eighteenth century, however, Ussher's calculations were challenged on several fronts. Not all the fronts were "scientific" in nature. Historical records from China, a civilization with which Europe was beginning to have more contact, indicated that its history was considerably longer than the 6000 years allowed by Ussher's calculations.

Of course, Ussher's number was not nearly as important as his idea that time began with man. Indeed, historian of science John Gribbin explains how "some theologians simply attempted to make Ussher's chronology match the Chinese records" (221). The emergent fossil record, however, implied that the earth had been inhabited long before man's arrival. Byron emphasizes this point in the "Preface" to *Cain* when he writes that "no human bones have yet been discovered" in strata containing "the bones of enormous and unknown animals" (157).<sup>15</sup> The actual age of these bones was at that time impossible to determine. However, crude analyses of sedimentation rates suggested that they had been in the earth for a very long time.

But how old, exactly, was the Earth? One of the first natural historians to try to date it was Buffon, whose "sublime but gloomy theory" of a gradually cooling Earth had haunted Shelley.<sup>16</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, Buffon believed that the sun was a ball of molten iron, and that the Earth had been ejected from it. Buffon took small balls of iron, heated them in a furnace until they were red-hot, and then timed how long it took for them to cool to room temperature. Using this data, Buffon was able to extrapolate a figure for a ball of iron the size of the Earth: about 75,000 years. A generation later, Buffon's

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<sup>15</sup> See Cuvier, *Essay*, § 31, where Cuvier offers "Proofs that there are no Human Bones in the Fossil State."

<sup>16</sup> See Shelley and Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, p. 160.

compatriot Jean Fourier used more sophisticated analyses of heat flow to arrive at a figure more than four orders of magnitude greater: 100 million years. Fourier's formula has survived, but his calculations have not. Gribbin speculates that he may have destroyed them intentionally because he was troubled by their implications (Gribbin 226-7).

Even the most radical estimates of the Earth's age during the early nineteenth century are orders of magnitude smaller than the current estimate of around six billion years, which was postulated only relatively recently (about half a century ago), thanks to the development of radiological dating. Yet during no other period of history did the age of the world change so much or so quickly. For all but the most ardent "creationists," it grew much more difficult to imagine dying in a world where one could comfortably and quickly count the number of generations back to his or her origins. It is hard to overestimate the impact of geological consciousness on educated men and women in nineteenth century. Geological time became the conceptual foundation upon which Catastrophism, its rival theory Uniformitarianism, and Darwin's theory of evolution developed. It changed the way humans viewed their relationship to the world. It reduced human history to a wrinkle in time, just as the Copernican view of the cosmos, a few centuries previously, had dropkicked Earth from the center of the universe to its outskirts.

One of the most fascinating aspects of *Cain* is that the play dramatically enacts both scientific revolutions in rapid succession. Milton's personal views on early Enlightenment science are famously difficult to tease out, but his Paradise stands unambiguously at the center of Creation. In Book Four of *Paradise Lost*, Uriel's ability to slide down to Earth and return to the sun later in the day on the same slant of light is predicated on a Ptolemaic model of the universe. In *Cain*, Byron duplicates, albeit on a smaller, more domestic scale, the Copernican model's physical exclusion of man from the center of Creation; indeed,



Byron designates the setting as “The Land Without Paradise.” Still, before natural history and geology had completely shattered time’s backwards barrier, man could still take comfort in the fact that, for all practical purposes, time began with himself. One can thus view Ussher’s model as preserving temporally what Copernicus stripped away from Ptolemy’s model spatially. Cain, however, is allowed no comfort from either model. His journey to Hades takes across vast stretches of space, and as he passes an infinitude of stars, his own world is reduced to a pinprick of light. Then, inside Hades, he is presented a vision of death stretching far into the geological past.

Crucial to the development of Cain’s particular understanding of death is his growing awareness of deep geological time. At the end of this chapter, we shall see how Lucifer inspires Cain to contemplate the implications of mortality not only for himself but also for his family and future generations – the “myriads” whose fate he ponders, adopting Lucifer’s own words. Lucifer nurtures this important stage in Cain’s mortal consciousness by initiating him into the mysteries of geological time. Deep time prepares the foundation for the universe of death Cain comes to behold and its social and political ramifications.

Significantly, Lucifer defines himself from the very beginning of the play by his ability to manipulate time and comprehend vast stretches of it. At the end of the first scene, Adah, fearing the intentions of the spirit in their midst, asks Lucifer where he is taking Cain. Responding to Adah, Lucifer refers not to the place where he is taking Cain but rather to its peculiar temporal quality:

**Cain.** Him I will follow.

**Adah.** Whither?

**Luc.** To a place

Whence he shall come back in an hour,

But in that hour see things of many days. (1.1.526-8)

Unable to think beyond the bounds of her own limited timeframe nor imagine how one could possibly see “things of many days” in a single “hour,” Adah continues to question Lucifer. Blasphemously, Lucifer responds by reminding her how divine beings such as God and he can perform actions that defy human time.

**Adah.** How can that be?

**Luc.** Did not your Maker make  
Out of old worlds this new one in few days?  
And cannot I, who aided in this work,  
Show in an hour what he hath made in many  
Or hath destroyed in few? (1.1.529-33)

Still unable to grasp the privileges of divine consciousness, Adah asks Lucifer, “Will he / In sooth return in an hour?” Underscoring his exemption from human time, Lucifer says:

**Luc.** He shall.

With us acts are exempt from time, and we  
Can crowd eternity into an hour  
Or stretch an hour into eternity.  
We breathe not by a mortal measurement,  
But that’s a myst’ry. Cain, come on with me. (1.1.526-39)

Once again, the form of Byron’s verse enacts its thematic content; the chiasmus spanning lines 536-7 verbally performs the kind of temporal acrobatics at which, Lucifer says, divine beings excel. Lucifer’s exemption from time is made possible by his exemption from death. This is because “breathe” in line 538 is a synecdoche for “live.” The measurements of human life are definite and inflexible; Lucifer’s existence, he claims, has no limits.

This is indeed a “mystery,” because while the notion of “infinity” can be conveyed with signs and words, it cannot be comprehended or understood. As a child I was haunted by the sign, resembling a Möbius strip, that mathematicians use to show infinity. I still am: at West Point, where I currently teach, math instructors routinely use the sign to designate material that must not be erased from blackboards in shared classrooms, leaving English instructors to explicate poems around it. (I put the sign on one blackboard after a discussion of Keats’ “Grecian Urn” to see what would happen; the sign was not respected.) But Byron is not just making a metaphysical point by describing Lucifer’s relationship with time as a divine mystery; he is also pointing to one of the play’s major themes. After all, Byron subtitled *Cain* a “mystery play,” linking it to Medieval representations of the inconceivable truths of Christian faith. The mysteries explored in this play are death and time, that other double helix that sets the parameters of human existence. Lucifer is exempt from both, and his presentation of death in Act Two depends on his ability temporarily to lift Cain from the confines of human temporal consciousness. Cain’s introduction to death is accompanied by his introduction to the temporal depths of natural history and the spatial depths of modern cosmology; human life is brief, its planet is an afterthought, and both are utterly insignificant. Thus, we see how contemporary notions of deep time are the materials used to construct the pillars of Cain’s mortal consciousness.

It is interesting to note how the play’s mysteries affect its dramatic structure and its relationship with the theater. By the Romantic period, the debate over the unities that began during the Restoration with Dryden had been laid aside, as the theater became a space for spectacle and melodrama. If *Cain* is a closet drama, a piece of mental theater, this may be because the trip to Hades in Act Two would have defied the imaginative and technical capabilities of even the most Faustian of Romantic stage wizards. Curiously, though, the

conversation between Lucifer and Abel quoted above suggests that, in at least some respects, *Cain* is actually a fairly conservative drama. While it certainly fails to adhere to the unity of place, it actually adheres quite faithfully to the unity of time, the only true Aristotelian unity. Indeed, Lucifer's ability to pack eternity into an hour allows for the dramatic continuity of the first and third acts of the play. A modern production might allot half an hour to an hour for Act Two. It would be like a trip to the planetarium; Cain will hardly be missed back on Earth as his family does its morning work. Given the extent to which Byron sardonically underscores the orthodoxy of his treatment of the Bible in the "Preface," and given, furthermore, Byron's involvement with the theater during his years in England, it is probable that he was playfully pointing out his play's adherence to the unities. And by having his antagonist Lucifer guide Cain from place to place whilst preserving the unity of time, Byron the playwright elevates himself and his dramatic medium to semi-divine status, just as Marlowe did two centuries earlier through his character-magicians Mephistopheles and Doctor Faustus.

But the play is more interested in investigating the psychological impact of geological time on Cain's budding awareness of death. In Chapter Five, I will show how Cain's deepening awareness of natural history serves as a gateway to sublime aesthetic experience. For Edmund Burke, an experience of sublimity was fundamentally rooted in fear and thus in death; Romantic aesthetics, I will argue, was deeply intertwined with Romantic mortal consciousness. In the remainder of this chapter, I will show how mortal consciousness grows into what we might now recognize as a liberal political or social consciousness.

The sublimity of a geologically and temporally expanded past arises from the "universe of death" it encompasses and implies. For Cain, what makes this idea especially awful is that he envisions a similar universe of death growing from his own body out into

human history: the world to be inhabited by his mortal descendants. The idea of geological time completely transforms Cain's understanding of death, filling it with fresh horrors. Crucially, it shifts the focus of his anxiety from his own mortality to the fate of posterity, doomed to be gathered up and deposited in the depths of history like all the Earth's previous inhabitants. And this, as we shall see, transforms a private complaint about mortality into a public protest against God on behalf of a beleaguered human race.

Cain sees himself as a progenitor of death long before he strikes Abel. In the play's opening scene, Cain complains about being "born to die." By the end of Act One, he has reconceived his fate as being born not only to die, but also to give birth to offspring who, before dying, will themselves produce yet more offspring bound for yet more death. Our parents, Cain tells his sister-wife Adah,

pluck'd the tree of science

And sin—and, not content with their own sorrow,

Begot *me—thee*—and all the few that are,

And all the unnumber'd and innumerable

Multitudes, millions, myriads, which may be,

To inherit agonies accumulated

By ages!—And *I* must be the sire of such things! (1.1.446-50)

Just as Cain resents being dispossessed of Paradise on account of his parents' transgressions, he perceives a deep injustice in having been grafted onto the trunk of a universal genealogy of death. Here we can see the first stirrings of Cain's social and political consciousness; he is thinking in these lines not only about himself and his mysterious fate but also about everyone on Earth who will eventually share it. He is deeply troubled by the circumstances and powers that have consigned humanity to a fate he still doesn't quite understand. Cain's

vision of death in Act Two provides the knowledge of death that allows his social and political consciousness to bloom and, tragically, spring into action.

### *Cain's Felix Culpa*

At the root of the ancient debate between innocence and experience is an argument concerning the *felix culpa*. Traditionally, apologists for the fall of man have pointed to the enormous act of mercy it allowed God to perform through the person of Christ. Reading Christian eschatology against the grain, however, it becomes possible to enquire whether the fall made human beings better because it made them morally and ethically more conscious and aware; the fallen man could choose to do good rather than merely be good. Now, the idea of the *felix culpa*, though not exactly heterodox, requires some sophisticated intellectual gymnastics, not least because it explains the problem of evil by pointing to a world of future good, one redeemed and restored by Christ. This idea of a future reward is one that a character like Cain would probably find quite repellent, given his consternation about the discrepancy between his actions (or rather his inaction: he never disobeyed God in Paradise) and his punishment or fate.

Regardless, Lucifer's purpose in Act Two is to destroy any possibility of a *felix culpa*. At the conclusion of *Paradise Lost*, Michael reveals to Adam a world where the rapid increase of suffering is relieved at last by the works of Christ. In Byron's play, however, Lucifer shows his pupil a world of death extending perpetually in both temporal directions and without any possibility of salvation. Indeed, he presents the sacrifice of Christ as just another catastrophic event in a world marked by destruction. Clearly, the *felix culpa* isn't convincing to Cain. But leave it to Byron to perform Byronic mysteries on the ideas he

touches. Is there a way of reading *Cain* that allows us to find consolation in Cain's devastating encounter with death? I believe there is, and I believe Cain's developing attitude toward God helps us identify it. The important thing about Cain's initiation into the mysteries of death is that it permits him better to comprehend the world he has inherited and to formulate a critical response to it. Crucially, Cain's vision of death in Act Two inspires a cynical view of God the creator that, at the climax of the play, culminates in a furious protest against him. In other words, the play shows mortal consciousness morphing into political consciousness.

At the commencement of the play, Cain's protest against mortality is primarily a private intellectual struggle, as he vainly attempts to make sense of the inscrutable logic of his postlapsarian condition. Why, he asks in his first soliloquy, should I suffer for another man's crimes? Why did God plant a forbidden tree in the center of Paradise and make it so beautiful? They say that God is good; what evidence do I have in favor of this assertion? (e.g., 1.1.65-77). During Act One, however, the nature of Cain's protest begins to change. We see a glimmer of this change at the end of the act, when Adah tries to dissuade Cain from following Lucifer, begging him to think of her and their children and to choose love over knowledge. The sudden recollection of "little Enoch" and "his lisping sister" produces a momentary vision of the bleak future in store for Cain's family:

Thy beauty and thy love, my love and joy,  
The rapturous moment and the placid hour,  
All we love in our children and each other,  
But lead them and ourselves through many years  
Of sin and pain, or few, but still of sorrow,  
Interchecked with an instant of brief pleasure,

To death, the unknown. (1.1.451-7)

All of life's pleasures, including its greatest physical pleasure – sexual climax and orgasm – are cheats which dupe men into perpetuating an existence embedded in sorrow and bound by death. Recalling, perhaps, the fiery swords of the angels stationed at the gates of Paradise and the shadows they cast at twilight, Cain distills his pessimistic view of life into a single visual image: a mostly dark plane with scattered patches of light. This is an image we have seen before: it is a visual representation of a conventional solution to the problem of evil. One recalls the sun-dappled landscape in *The Ruined Cottage* and the miniature version of it projected by the shadow of elm leaves onto the resting Pedlar's face.

Initially, Cain's discontent arises from his nearness to the root of human suffering. "Never," he declares, "Shall men love the remembrance of the man / Who sowed the seed of evil and mankind / In the same hour" (1.1.141-3). Cain is talking about Adam. His fear, though, is that he will be considered guilty by association as human history unwinds; he fears that, as generation gives way to generation, Cain's proximity to original sin will become more pronounced, and humanity's hatred for him as the sire of their lives and misfortunes will coalesce with the hatred they feel for their true sire Adam. It is worth quoting again Adam's angry words to Adah:

They plucked the tree of science  
And sin, and not content with their own sorrow,  
Begot me, thee, and all the few that are  
And all the unnumbered and innumerable  
Multitude, millions, myriads, which may be,  
To inherit agonies accumulated  
By ages—and *I* must be the sire of such things! (1.1.443-50)



One could account for this outburst by claiming that Cain is projecting his own hatred for his father upon his ancestors. But such a claim would overlook two crucial developments: first, that Cain is thinking now about his descendants, and second, that he is claiming some responsibility for them. “And *I*,” he exclaims, the emphasis falling on the first-person pronoun, “must be the sire of such things!” The italicized personal pronoun demonstrates how Cain is proleptically imagining himself as the trunk of human history. This sense of responsibility is profoundly ironic; when God, after the murder of Abel, asks Cain where he is, Cain replies, “Am I then / my brother’s keeper?” (3.1.468-9).

Cain’s fixation on future generations and his stirrings of sympathy for them suggest the influence that Lucifer is exerting on his consciousness. Phrases like “the unnumbered and innumerable / Multitudes, millions, [and] myriads” clearly echo Lucifer’s language.<sup>17</sup> In Act Two, Cain’s new consciousness of deep geological time will unleash an even more vivid conception of deep familial history extending far into the future, exponentially increasing the presence and work of death in the universe.

Cain’s nascent sympathy for his unborn descendants, doomed to suffer and die, likewise reveals Lucifer’s influence. From the beginning of their relationship in Act One, Lucifer tries to establish a relationship with Cain based on an understanding of his mortal condition and his sympathy with mortal creatures. When Lucifer enters the stage at 1.1.98, he addresses Cain as “Mortal,” connecting with Cain’s anxiety with a single epithet and showing that he sympathizes with him. When Cain enquires whether the “Master of Spirits” (as Lucifer calls himself) can “leave them and walk with dust,” Lucifer reassures him, saying, “I know the thoughts / Of dust and feel for it and with you” (1.1.98, 99, 100-1). He knows the thoughts of mortal beings and can sympathize with them; the idea of “feeling for dust” is

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<sup>17</sup> See 1.1.521-4, quoted in the footnote on the preceding page.

a striking and even poignant (to the extent one can call anything that Lucifer says poignant) formulation. Lucifer's sympathy with Cain becomes a refrain in the ensuing conversation between them. Contrasting the pangs shared by doomed spirits and men with the solitary pangs of God's divine loneliness, Lucifer says:

At least we sympathize  
And, suffering in concert, make our pangs  
Innumerable, more endurable  
By the unbounded sympathy of all  
With all! (1.1.167-71).

Commenting on the pleasure provided by Lucifer's compassionate companionship, Cain remarks: "Never till / Now met I aught to sympathize with me" (190).

The nature of Cain's protest continues to change in Act Two as Lucifer guides him through the abyss of space toward Hades, the abode of the dead. As they travel farther away from Earth, the planet diminishes to a pinprick of light and appears to join the stars. Lucifer hints at the existence of "worlds greater than thine own, inhabited / By greater beings" (2.1.44-5) but suggests that these creatures, too, are doomed to perish. Picking up on Cain's earlier anxiety about the role of sexual pleasure in adding to human misery, Lucifer scorns it as a "filthy cheat" which dupes men into perpetuating a world of death. He casually yet caustically redefines orgasm, ostensibly the "very best / Of thine enjoyments," as

a sweet degradation,  
A most enervating and filthy cheat  
To lure thee on to the renewal of  
Fresh souls and bodies, all foredoomed to be  
As frail and few so happy— (2.1.55-60)

As we have seen, in the previous act Cain was primarily fixated on his own fate: his death and his reputation in the memory of his descendants. He decried his place in human history close to the root of original sin and feared guilt by association with his sire Adam. Crucially, in Act Two, Cain begs Lucifer to let him die rather than be a father of beings condemned as he is to suffer and die:

[S]pirit, if  
It be as thou hast said (and I within  
Feel the prophetic torture of its truth),  
Here let me die, for to give birth to those  
Who can but suffer many years and die  
Methinks is merely propagating death  
And multiplying murder. (2.1.65-71)

Cain has not seen death yet, but his burgeoning mortal consciousness is already eliciting what one could call a humanitarian response. By dying, Cain hopes, he can wipe out the “hideous heritage” or debt his descendants will be forced to pay. Cain’s lines are poignant, ironic, and wholly blasphemous, as only Byron could render them. Christ-like, Cain offers to sacrifice himself to preserve posterity from the pains of living, oblivious to the fact that he will soon create the very death he fears.

This is not to suggest, however, that Cain is only concerned with posterity at this point in the play. Indeed, in Byron’s own view, Cain’s vision of death in Act Two is first and foremost an insult to his pride. “Cain is a proud man,” Byron wrote in a letter to Murray. Thus, if Lucifer “promised him kingdoms” as Satan did when tempting Christ in the desert, “it would *elate* him.” Rather, “the object of the demon is to depress [Cain] still further in his own estimation than he was before” (*BLJ* VI, 282). Lucifer achieves his aim by presenting

Hades as the bleak terminus of all life's journey. "All" is to be "animated for this only" (2.2.43), he says to Cain, referring to Hades and the departed souls it houses. It would be a mistake to say that Cain is thinking only about his descendants at this point. However, his vision in Hades fundamentally redirects his anxiety toward the future.

Lucifer unfolds his catastrophic vision of death in the second scene of Act Two. "Where dost thou lead me?" Cain asks his guide, who replies: "To what was before thee! / The phantasm of the world; of which thy world / Is but the wreck." (2.1.151-3). As Cain approaches Hades, the space around him darkens, but through the darkness he is able to make out "huge dusky masses" (2.1.180). As Lucifer opens the gates, Cain sees "enormous vapours roll / Apart" (2.1.197-8). Inside them, he descries "vast" and "dim worlds" (2.2.1). When Cain observes that "all is / So shadowy and so full of twilight, that / It speaks of days past" (2.2.11-13), Lucifer informs him that this is "the realm / Of death" (2.2.13-14). Inside Hades, Cain sees shades of mighty and enormous creatures. Astonished, Cain remarks:

They bear not  
The wing of seraph, nor the face of man,  
Nor form of mightiest brute, nor aught that is  
Now breathing; mighty yet and beautiful  
As the most beautiful and mighty which  
Live, and yet so unlike them, that I scarce  
Can call them living. (2.2.56-62)

"Yet," Lucifer says, "they lived" (2.2.62), and in the ensuing lines, he devastates Cain with the knowledge that these creatures inhabited the earth long before him, and that they perished when their world was overthrown.

However, the knockout blow comes when Lucifer insinuates that creation is actually deteriorating over time. Confirming Cain's suspicion that these creatures "rose higher" than mankind, Lucifer explains that they were

Living, high,  
Intelligent, good, great, glorious things,  
As much superior unto all thy sire,  
Adam, could e'er have been in Eden, as  
The sixty-thousandth generation shall be,  
In its dull damp degeneracy, to  
Thee and thy son. (2.2.68-74)

In the "Preface" to *Cain*, Byron dismisses as "a poetical fiction" Lucifer's assertion "that the preadamite world was also peopled by rational beings much more intelligent than man, and proportionally powerful to the mammoth" (157). However, this "poetical fiction" actually contained a rich vein of truth. Buffon devised his "sublime but gloomy theory" in part to explain why the earth could no longer support creatures as large as the ones being found in the emerging fossil record; he believed that the cooler temperatures of the present age prevented it.<sup>18</sup> Lucifer deploys this hypothesis to suggest the dark fate in store for man. By merely procreating, Cain will be condemning his children all their children to a life of "dull, damp degeneracy" in addition to death (2.2.73).

So how does Cain exercise his newfound knowledge of the undiscovered country? What are the consequences of his mortal and political consciousness? The simplest answer to this question is the murder of Abel. Now, one may consider this act misguided or wrong, and it is. But that is not the point. The point is that Cain's act arises from his hopelessness,

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Gribbin, p. 228.

a feeling that springs from his newly hatched knowledge of death incubated by Lucifer's Catastrophist vision of the Earth's natural history. Cain's act is also, fundamentally, a political response based on his new understanding of nature and of the insidious intentions of the creator god, whom Abel seems blindly and thoughtlessly to worship and adore.

The fact that Lucifer uses Cuvier's blend of Catastrophism to depress Cain is deeply ironic. To Cuvier, a devout Christian, Catastrophism left open the chance of reconciling geological with Christian time. Byron was well aware of this; in the "Preface," he explains that Cuvier's theory "is not contrary to the Mosaic account, but rather confirms it," because "no human bones have yet been discovered" among "the bones of enormous and unknown animals" that once populated the Earth (157). Cuvier himself believed that God created mankind after the last great catastrophe. In other words, while acquiescing to a much older world, Cuvier also asserted the primacy of man within the most recently fashioned one. In the "Preface," Byron invokes Cuvier to give his play scriptural status; ironically, Lucifer uses his ideas to reduce Cain to despair.

Cuvier's *Essay* is not the only text that Byron invokes ironically in order to buttress his play's scriptural pretensions. The other is Bishop Warburton's *Divine Legation of Moses*. In Act One, Lucifer tells Cain that his existential questionings arise from a part of him that cannot die. Cain, however, has never heard of such a part.

**Luc:**                               They are the thoughts of all  
Worthy of thought;—'tis your immortal part  
Which speaks within you.

**Cain:**                               What immortal part?  
This hast not been revealed. (1.1.102-5)

In the “Preface,” Byron reminds the reader that there is in fact “no allusion to a future state in any of the books of Moses, nor indeed in the Old Testament.” Anyone skeptical of his claim, Byron adds, should consult Warburton before rashly accusing him of “a perversion of Holy Writ” – something Byron would never commit (157). In the *Divine Legation of Moses*, Warburton had argued that “the Doctrine of Life and Immortality were not yet known to a People *sitting in Darkness, and in the Region and Shadow of Death*.” He also argued that this was a “designed” omission, the purpose of which was essentially to season man for redemption.<sup>19</sup> Just as Cuvier believed that a succession of geological catastrophes had paved the way for the real Creation, Warburton believed that man’s lack of knowledge concerning immortality paved the way for Redemption. Byron sets up both authorities like bowling pins and knocks them down.

Cain’s initiation into the mysteries of human immortality coincides with his initiation into the mysteries of death, and this pre-empts whatever solace the promise of immortality might have held for him. When Cain sees Lucifer for the first time, he instantly associates the spirit’s immortality with despair. In lines Keats might have used to describe the fallen Hyperion, Cain says, “Sorrow seems / Half of his immortality” (1.1.95-6). Crucially, Cain links sorrow with immortality before he learns of his own immortality, and when Lucifer reveals it to him, he subtly encourages a satanic connection. Correcting Cain’s notion that he lives to die, Lucifer explains that he “must live forever” (1.1.116), but then he compares Cain’s future state to his own present one, a state sorrowful beyond human comprehension:

[T]hou wilt be

No less than thou art now.

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated, on the Principles of a Religious Deist, from the Omission of the Doctrine of a Future State of Reward and Punishment in the Jewish Dispensation*, 2 volumes, London, 1741, Vol. 1, pp. 445ff.

**Cain:** No *less!* and why  
 No more?

**Luc:** It may be thou shalt be as we.

**Cain:** And ye?

**Luc:** Are everlasting.

**Cain:** Are ye happy?

**Luc:** We are mighty.

**Cain:** Are ye happy?

**Luc:** No: art thou?

**Cain:** How should I be so! Look on me!

**Luc:** Poor clay!

And thou pretendest to be wretched! Thou! (1.1.118-24)

By the end of Act Two, Lucifer has influenced Cain to view immortality as an interminable existence alongside shades of creatures that, like him, were created to breed death and die. Immortality, in other words, is an eternal, meaningless, living death.

Lucifer's sorrow is rooted in his unsuccessful rebellion against God. However, Lucifer argues that God is miserable as well, implying that sorrow is intrinsic to immortality as well as to mortality. According to Lucifer, God's sorrow arises from his unfathomable solitude. In Act One, he describes God's state as one of "sullen, sole eternity" (1.1.239). He also suggests that God created the universe and man in order to ease his solitude and to divide his wretchedness. Eternally unsuccessful in securing either end, God eternally creates, crushes, and recreates creation. Lucifer's great speech beginning at 1.1.137 actually contains the play's first allusions to Catastrophism:

[God] is great,



But, in his greatness, is no happier than  
We in our conflict! Goodness would not make  
Evil; and what else hath he made? But let him  
Sit on his vast and solitary throne,  
Creating worlds, to make eternity  
Less burthensome to his immense existence  
And unparticipated solitude!  
Let him crowd orb on orb: he is alone  
Indefinite, indissoluble tyrant!  
Could he but crush himself, 'twere the best boon  
He ever granted. (1.1.145-54)

But God will in fact crush himself. In what are arguably the most blasphemous lines in the play, Lucifer hints at the coming of Christ and insinuates that God's own son will be just another victim of his catastrophic disposition:

But He! so wretched in his height,  
So restless in his wretchedness, must still  
Create and re-create—perhaps he'll make  
One day a Son unto himself—as he  
Gave you a father—and if he doth  
Mark me!—that son will be a Sacrifice. (1.1.161-6)

In *Cain*, a play for which Byron claims scriptural status, Christianity itself is reduced to a thin stratum in a world where catastrophic geological upheavals, “though rare in time, are frequent in eternity” (2.2.84-5). Cain seals his fate when he subscribes to this notion:

Why do I exist?

Why art thou wretched? Why are all things so?  
E'en he who made us must be, as the maker  
Of things unhappy! To produce destruction  
Can surely never be the task of joy! (2.2.279-83)

Led to the realization that all things “produce destruction,” reduced to a conception of himself as a “nothing” (2.2.421), and then conveyed back to a world where, according to Lucifer, his purpose is merely to “Eat, drink, toil, tremble, laugh, weep, sleep, and die” (2.2.415), Cain conceives a profound rage against the author of his being. Its offspring is Abel’s death.

*Conclusion: Mortal Consciousness and Political Protest*

As we draw this chapter to a conclusion, it is important to back up and realize how we have gotten here. Structurally, Byron’s mystery drama *Cain* is a continuation of *Paradise Lost*. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton tells of the creation and fall of the first generation of man; in *Cain*, Byron dramatizes a fresh lapse within the second. The domestic tale at the center of Milton’s poem takes place inside Paradise; *Cain* is set not far from its interdicted walls. Connecting the two works is an overarching concern with death. In Genesis, mortality is the core punishment that God imposes on Adam and Eve because of their transgressions. However, before they experience death for themselves, they see it perpetrated by one of their offspring against another. *Cain* is Byron’s account of that murder.

In Adam’s vision in Books 11 and 12 of *Paradise Lost*, Michael discloses “Th’ effects which thy original crime hath wrought / In some to spring from thee, who never touched / Th’ excepted tree” (11.424-6). The first of these “effects” is a murder, and Michael identifies

both assailant and victim as his sons. Frightened by the event, Adam asks, “But have I now seen death? Is this the way / I must return to native dust?” (11.462-3). Michael replies:

Death thou hast seen  
In his first shape on man; but many shapes  
Of Death, and many are the ways that lead  
To his grim cave, all dismal. (11.466-9)

*Cain*, too, is about seeing death. In Act One, Cain is anxious because death “has not yet / been seen” (1.1.249-50), and in Act Two, Lucifer takes him to Hades to reveal what it is. Here we begin to see, though, how *Paradise Lost* and *Cain* diverge, for the logic of the latter rests on Adam having received no revelation from Michael that he could have transmitted subsequently to Cain. Still, by contrasting these two moments, we see something that our analysis of Cain’s mortal consciousness, informed by contemporaneous speculation about the nature and origin of the earth and hence uniquely Romantic in form, has not sufficiently addressed: its curiously private nature. The vigils Cain tells Lucifer about in Act One are solitary ones, and his initiation into the mysteries of death in Act Two is essentially what an undergraduate at Cambridge or Oxford would call a tutorial.

So now we must give some thought to a secondary feature of mortal consciousness: its private and solitary quality, which complicates our ability to view it primarily as an effect of culture. The culturally-inflected nature of mortality can hardly be denied; the work of Ariès and other historians of death demonstrates this. But Bataille offers another idea of death; for Bataille, death is the moment in human experience that upends culture, undoing its “projects,” the structures it erects to keep death at bay (xxxii). Death, in other words, takes place on the very margins of life and culture. (One thinks of *Everyman* stepping into

his grave with only Good Deeds as a companion.) Is this true of mortal consciousness as well? Where, precisely, in relation to culture does it arise?

In *Cain*, Byron suggests that our knowledge of mortality manifests itself in a private, timeless, and distinctly non-historical moment of individual awareness. One of the peculiar features of the play is its temporally and geographically liminal setting on the outskirts of Eden, in a postlapsarian world where the threat of death has yet to be realized. The play's liminal setting mirrors the unformed quality of Cain's consciousness. Because Cain has not seen death – his recollection in Act One of his nocturnal vigils in expectation of death, which he can only imagine as a physical entity, is one of Byron's supreme artistic and intellectual triumphs – his ability to comprehend mortality is drastically limited. Lucifer grants Cain the knowledge that he seeks. Cain's vision of death is informed by culturally specific scientific speculation – especially Byron's reading of the work of Cuvier. However, it is also an intensely personal event: a private scientific demonstration, one might say, which takes place far from the Earth in the “abyss of space” and well outside of normal temporal bounds. As I have suggested, Cain's vision causes him to think about death's implications not only for himself but also for his descendants and the world as a whole; in other words, it anchors him in larger structures of history and time.

After killing Abel, however, Cain is initially at a loss to comprehend what has happened; the fact of death dawns on him only gradually. Significantly, this understanding takes place in a moment of solitude. Byron, by imagining the perpetrator and first lonely witness of death standing puzzled astride its first victim, shows that we actually come to know death alone, just as we will all one day die alone. This image of Cain urges us to enquire whether we can really “know” what death is until we ourselves die, and of course we cannot; the important thing is to ask where our moments of mortal consciousness take place,

and how they force us to reconsider our perceived connections with the world. This will be the subject of the next chapter.

This discussion raises another matter. In Byron's play, Cain's mortal consciousness leads to an act of rebellion against God in the form of a murder, and culminates in his ostracism from the human race. In Byron's view, can an individual survive or live with Romantic mortal consciousness, and if so, how? Actually, there are many ways of reading Cain's mortal consciousness as a boon. As I have shown, it leads to social and political awareness: sympathy with human suffering. In Chapter Five, we shall see that it also leads to a new kind of aesthetic awareness and understanding. At the same time, however, the immediate and tragic result of Cain's new knowledge a repetition of the very destructiveness that characterizes the history of the Earth and the character of God.

To complicate the problem even more, let us recall that Cain's introduction to mortality is cotemporaneous with his introduction to the idea of immortality. Cain's assessment of death crushes him, but his assessment of eternal life is hardly better; as I suggested earlier, he comes to perceive God's existence as an awful compound of solitude, boredom, and creative dissatisfaction. We thus encounter a crucial paradox. On the one hand, knowledge of death makes living meaningful because it permits us to understand our place in history and culture as well as to formulate a response to it. On the other hand, this knowledge also forces us to recognize death's complete hostility, not just to men and the responses it inspires in them, but also to the idea that any existence is actually preferable to a mortal one. Thus, *Cain* appears to suggest that a proper response to the arrival of mortal consciousness involves holding it in one's mind, admitting the reality and finality of death, and formulating a response to it that attempts, somehow, to level the inequalities and ease

the hardships in the world around us, rather than leaving this work to an afterlife that may not exist.

The catastrophic nature of Cain's response – the murder of his brother Abel – appears to undermine this view, or at least to wipe out any traces of optimism we might associate with it. Whether this is truly the case is a question I will consider in more detail in Chapter Four of the dissertation, but allow me to suggest a few thoughts here. I have just suggested that Romantic mortal consciousness fundamentally involves the recognition that mortality must be dwelt upon, and that it requires a response. Cain is compelled to seek knowledge of death; the instruction he receives, however, comes from Lucifer, and he is tainted by it; nevertheless, awareness of death helps Cain move beyond regarding it as a private affront and forces him to see it as something that draws all human beings together into a kind of mortal solidarity. As Marcuse would argue a century later, recognizing death creates political awareness.<sup>20</sup> The morality of Cain's response is certainly debatable, but its value as a response is not. After all, Cain's skepticism resonates with the views Byron laced all his works with, and if Cain's destiny ends catastrophically, perhaps that is only because Byron was compelled to remain faithful to the original story (a fidelity that Byron claimed, with profound irony, characterized the play as a whole). But an essential fact remains: Cain dramatizes instruction in death and meditation on it; this meditation leads to thoughts about the place of humanity in a puzzling world; it incites a response. This has compelling implications, not only for the political nature of Romantic mortal consciousness, but also for how we as scholars and students should approach our own individual encounters with these mortality-infused texts, and what we want our own students to take from them in the liberal

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<sup>20</sup> See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), especially Chapter 11 "Eros and Thanatos," pp. 222-37.

arts institutions where we work and live and continue to insist, against increasingly skeptical voices, that the study of literature has meaning and relevance.

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### Chapter Three: Hemans, the Death of the Other, and the Life of the Self

#### *Introduction: The Inward Turn*

The preceding chapters have described one model of Romantic mortal consciousness. In this model, a historically and culturally constructed one, Romantic mortal consciousness arose in a climate of spiritual doubt further dampened by contemporary intellectual and scientific enquiry. In the wake of the Enlightenment, educated men and women had a harder time greeting Death as the Great Leveler of society. Because the promise of an afterlife was less readily available to belief, Death changed into what I have called the Great Crystallizer of socioeconomic and political inequality. Death no longer razed inequality; it fixed it into history. And the specter of Death, rather than giving the mortally conscious imagination a consoling vision of the leveling of earthly distinctions, merely cast such distinctions in sharper relief.

I illustrated this in Chapter One by examining the difference between Parnell's "Night-Piece on Death," an early Graveyard School poem, and later ruminations on cemeteries and mortuary places in poems by Gray and Wordsworth. In Gray's "Elegy," Death is not a leveling force but an event that evacuates life of untapped human potential. In "The Ruined Cottage," Wordsworth vividly shows how the tides of national and international history reach far from the sources of power into places of simplicity, marking almost everyone it touches with poverty, hardship, suffering, and death. In this way, Romantic mortal consciousness is social and political in nature; it is akin to what we might now call a modern liberal social consciousness. Without the spiritual consolations provided

by the idea of Death the Leveler, one can only attend to the present or, as Cain in Byron's play, rage against the present in the name of the future.

Byron's *Cain* is fundamentally ironic because its hero ends up unleashing onto the world the very entity he fears. As tragically misguided as the murder of Abel may have been, Byron presents it as an act of political protest against a god whom Cain regards as unjust, and who appears to have little care for the world he created or the creatures he designed to inhabit it. Cain's vision of death and his resulting mortal consciousness are deeply informed by contemporary natural history, especially geology. This aspect of the play illuminates the extent to which our understanding of mortality is mediated by culture, as death studies has shown us. Like our ideas of love or beauty, mortality is a cultural construct, a product of its time and place.

But not entirely. At the end of my last chapter, I showed how Cain's understanding of death, though firmly rooted in Byron's familiarity with contemporary speculation regarding the natural history of the Earth, seems to emerge independently of culture in a deeply private mental space that transcends time and place. Long before Lucifer arrives to give Cain the knowledge he seeks, he has lingered about the interdicted walls of Paradise, keeping watch for death. His vision of death in Act Two is a private tutorial; Lucifer takes him away from his family to show him eternal things. And at the literal catastrophe of Byron's Catastrophist play, Cain stands utterly alone above Abel's bloody yet peaceful corpse, trying to grasp what has transpired. This would seem to reveal a paradox: can mortal consciousness be a product of culture but still emerge through one's singular and unique experience of life and living?

This chapter pursues this theme and, without losing sight of the cultural model discussed above, tilts Romantic mortal consciousness even further in the direction of the

personal, the ahistorical, and the acultural. In this Chapter, I shall focus on two poems by Felicia Hemans: her short lyric “The Two Homes,” a haunting reply to Wordsworth’s poem “We Are Seven,” and her considerably longer work “A Spirit’s Return.” “The Two Homes” serves as a thematic point of entry to a work Susan Wolfson notes was one of Hemans’ personal favorites, and which she enjoyed reciting to friends.<sup>1</sup> A poem with debts to Gray’s “Elegy” and Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” the poem uses a chance encounter between a young man and an older woman near the former’s boyhood home to generate a psychological portrait of a psychologically homeless or displaced woman wandering the earth. Her primary if not her sole emotional connections are to deceased kin whose otherworldly abode religious doubts threaten. The poem reveals a liminal figure inhabiting both a physical world that seems to have nothing for her and a spiritual one whose existence she doubts.

Hemans’ much longer poem “A Spirit’s Return” dramatizes a literal haunting of a woman speaker by the ghost of a beloved individual: a secret lover closed off in life by circumstances she never fully explains and now closed off by death. The poem shows how Romantic mortal consciousness is fundamentally janiform in quality; it is a product of culture that manifests through the experiences of the self. One of the ironies of “A Spirit’s Return,” however, is that its haunted woman speaker appears not to understand the painfully solitary role that culture has persuaded her to assume after the death of her beloved. The argument can be made that Felicia Hemans, if not exactly criticizing Romantic mortal consciousness, is nevertheless suggesting how it might be less readily available to woman. Such a reading yields a profound irony, for as Wordsworth’s “The Ruined Cottage” illustrated, women are among history’s most vulnerable targets.

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<sup>1</sup> Felicia Hemans, *Selected Poems, Letters, Reception Materials*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 444-5.

On the one hand, it is possible to read “A Spirit’s Return” as textbook example of what Ariès has called the “death of the other.” A passionate lament for a deceased lover culminating in an imagined spiritual reunion with him, Hemans’ poem looks directly ahead to the Victorian culture of mourning, by which time the crisis of mortality had mostly completed its migration from the dying individual to the survivors of the deceased. However, a closer look at the poem shows that the speaker is far less preoccupied with the deceased than with the spiritual and emotional vicissitudes she herself has endured, not only since his death but also throughout the entirety of her life. The speaker portrays the reunion for which she longs as the consummation of a uniquely personal journey marked by repeated encounters with love and loss that have continually reshaped understanding of life and death. This directly aligns the poem with the ideas of Bataille, who believes that mortal encounters can undermine the structures that cultures provide to help their members deal with the idea of mortality. “A Spirit’s Return” suggests how mortal consciousness may evolve along a distinctly individual path of experience and knowledge. At the same time, it also shows how culture may lay out this ostensibly individual path. While mortal consciousness may erupt in moments of profound solitude, and while we will all, eventually, die alone, cultural forces so deeply embedded and ingrained in life that we cannot even see them may still prescribe one’s journey to death. Hemans suggests that this may be especially the case for many women.

*The Two Homes of Felicia Hemans*

“The Two Homes” is a deceptively simple lyric that inhabits and complicates a number of lyrical subgenres. Its main thematic preoccupations are home and homelessness,

love and loss, life and death, and what – if anything – waits to be found in the undiscovered country. Fundamentally, however, it is a poem about faith and doubt. “The Two Homes” appeared in *Songs of the Affections*, published in 1830, the same year as *Records of Woman*. It is a short poem – only nine quatrains long – with two speakers. The speaker of the first five stanzas is a young man pointing out his home to an unknown persona: “Seest thou my home?—’tis where yon woods are waving, / In their rich darkness, to the summer air” (1-2). One can assume the young man has met this persona, whom he identifies as a “sad stranger” in line 20, somewhere in the environs of his home. The young man’s cheerful description of his boyhood home and the comfort it still holds for him triggers in the stranger a series of ruminations about deceased kin and the otherworldly place they may inhabit.

It is important to note that Hemans never specifies whether this second persona is a man or a woman. In fact, because the poet does not use quotation marks to set apart the words of her two poetic personae, one could plausibly argue that the poem constitutes an internal dialogue between a grown man and his imagined boyhood self. One could probably resort to biography – the huge marital, familial, and economic hardships endured and overcome by Hemans over the course of her life and career as a poet – to disprove this argument, but this is not necessary. The poem’s formal features suggest that its encounter is between a young man and an older woman. The poem adopts Gray’s elegiac stanza but makes use of alternating masculine and feminine rhymes. Furthermore, the poem bears a striking resemblance to Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven,” a dialogue between an adult and a child of different genders. (I discuss both poems in more detail below.) For these reasons, I will designate the stranger a woman.

I have identified the first of the poem's two homes, the one belonging to the young man. What about the second home? In the last four quatrains, the sad stranger answers the young man's question about the location of her home:

Ask'st thou of mine?—In solemn peace 'tis lying,  
Far o'er the deserts and the tombs away,  
'Tis where *I*, too, am loved with love undying,  
And fond hearts wait my step—but where are they? (21-4)

This speaker's home is a spiritual and emotional one: a metaphorical home in the land of the dead. In the remaining three stanzas, the woman dwells on her relationship with the spirits of her deceased kin, with whom she still feels a profound connection, despite their absence – a connection stronger, in fact, than the one binding her to the mortal world where she now wanders, a stranger to the living. The strength of this connection, however, is uncertain. Indeed, the woman laments the inaccessibility of this second home beyond the grave that her soul seems to inhabit. She feels cut off and isolated from it, not only by the fact that she still lives, but also by the fact that she harbors spiritual doubts. These doubts manifest at the end of the poem as the “dark seas” she imagines flowing between her and the objects of her love. This image powerfully punctuates the poem's tonal trajectory from wistful hope to doubt bordering on despair.

Because the reader knows so little about the identities of Hemans' two personae or their personal and emotional histories, one could argue the stranger is not literally homeless: that she has a real home besides the one lying “in solemn peace [...] / Far o'er the deserts and the tombs away” (21-2). There is no evidence in the poem that all her deceased kin are dead, or that she does not have a real home in this world – a dwelling, perhaps, not too far from the rural place where she has encountered the young man. While this may be true, and

while the poem thus poses a quantity of hermeneutical uncertainty to the reader, nevertheless it is clear that the home about which the woman is thinking, and the one which she feels the deeper spiritual and emotional attachment, lies beyond the grave. The poem's elegiac features confirm this.

Indeed, it is important to note that in "The Two Homes" Hemans elected to deploy the same elegiac stanza invented by Gray for his "Elegy" and used by Wordsworth in "Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele's Castle," the poet's elegy for his younger brother John, who drowned at sea in 1805. Hemans' quatrains use iambic pentameter and have an alternating *abab* rhyme scheme. As in the poems by Gray and Wordsworth, the alternating rhyme scheme reinforces the feelings of emotional and existential separation that give the works their emotional energy.

However, a comparison between Hemans' poem and its elegiac antecedents reveals some important metrical differences. Many of Hemans' lines deploy one or more trochees. In the first five stanzas, these trochees underscore the young man's confidence about the permanence of his home and of the emotional comfort it offers him. This is especially true of stanzas four and five. The fourth scans as follows:

**There** am I **loved**—there **pray'd** for—**there** my **mother**  
**Sits** by the **hearth** with **meekly thoughtful** eye;  
**There** my young **sisters watch** to **greet** their **brother**  
—**Soon** their glad **footsteps down** the **path** will **glide**. (13-16)

The deictic adverbs in lines 13-15, all of which are stressed, firmly anchor the young man's home in a physical and familial reality. Furthermore, the transition in line 16 from an iambic to a predominantly trochaic meter attests to his faith in the emotional comforts that his home gives. By contrast, in the last four stanzas, the trochees imbue the woman's words

with an uncertain and faltering quality. We see this in her very first lines: “**Ask’st** thou of **mine?**—In **solemn peace** ’tis **lying**, / **Far o’er** the **deserts** and the **tombs away**” (21-22). Line 22 actually begins with a spondee, the only one in the poem. The tonal difference between the two parts is underscored by the fact that the woman speaks four stanzas, one fewer than the young man, giving the poem an odd number of stanzas in all. This oddness conveys incompleteness, thus further enacting the woman’s feelings of separation from the abode of her loved ones.

“The Two Homes” develops its dramatic and emotional energy by engaging another poem featuring a conversation between an adult and child about life, death, and the relationship between the living and the dead: William Wordsworth’s “We Are Seven.” In that poem from Wordsworth and Coleridge’s *Lyrical Ballads*, an adult male speaker engages a little girl in friendly conversation about her family. In “The Two Homes,” Hemans turns the tables on “We Are Seven,” introducing a young man and an older woman and redirecting the poem’s focus from the younger speaker’s relationship with the deceased to the older speaker’s.

The escalating drama of Wordsworth’s poem centers on a simple math problem. The girl has six brothers and sisters but reveals that two lie “in the churchyard” (21).<sup>2</sup> When the speaker tells the girl that she therefore has *four* brothers and sisters, the girl innocently yet stubbornly rejects her interlocutor’s cold calculus:

“Sisters and brothers, little Maid,

“How many may you be?”

“How many? Seven in all,” she said,

And wondering looked at me.

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<sup>2</sup> William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Methuen, 1963).



“And where are they? I pray you tell.”

She answered, “Seven are we;

“And two of us at Conway dwell,

“And two are gone to sea.

“Two of us in the church-yard lie,

“My sister and my brother;

“And, in the church-yard cottage, I

“Dwell near them with my mother.” (13-24)

In “The Two Homes,” the woman speaker, having told the young man about the “fond hearts” that await her in her distant home, asks “But where are they?” (24). This appears to echo the speaker’s question in line 17 of “We Are Seven.” There is a difference, however: Wordsworth’s speaker is addressing the little girl, and Hemans’ woman speaker is addressing herself. In Wordsworth’s poem, the speaker professes greater knowledge about life and death. In “The Two Homes,” the woman speaker gives voice to a profound sense of uncertainty; her spiritual and emotional homelessness stands in stark contrast to the young man’s confident feeling of belonging.

This brings us to one of the most curious elements of Felicia Hemans’ poem: its title. The two homes of the title refer literally to the two dwelling places mentioned in the poem: the physical home inhabited by the young man and the emotional or spiritual home where the woman speaker’s domestic affections primarily reside. But the title does more than this. Paradoxically, the epithet “two homes” helps contribute to the poem’s peculiar atmosphere of homelessness. If one stops to think about it, the idea of “two homes” is an unusual one.

One may keep two (or more) houses, and one may identify a “home away from home,” but *home*, to quote the old saying, is where you hang your hat. It is where one is always welcome. Where one expects to be received. It is where the business of living begins, departs, returns, centers, departs, returns, and at last ends. One may *move away from* home, or *move* homes, or *move back* home – retroactively defining one’s present abode as a temporary dwelling place, and reclaiming as home a former abode. The privileged few may even *move between* homes, but in this case, a question arises about the status of the vacant home when it houses no dwellers. Indeed, the idea or practice of moving between homes may suggest a permanently uprooted quality, a fundamental rootlessness. Hence, the very title of Hemans’ poem evokes a spatially and emotionally liminal quality. As the poem unfolds, the reader learns that this is precisely the nature of the woman speaker’s habitation in the world and of her relationships with the individuals who have made up her familial web. The reader never learns if the woman has a home in this world or if she has living relatives; if she does, this merely underscores her tenuous position in the world of living.

The previous speculations are justified because “The Two Homes” is a conscious meditation on the nature of home. The epigraph to the poem, from Amelia Opie’s poem “Fond Dreams of Love by Love Repaid,” reads, “Oh! If the soul immortal be, / Is not its love immortal too?” Hemans’ corollary to this question, which appears in the penultimate stanza, encapsulates the poem’s thematic core and constitutes its emotional climax: “And what is home, and where, but with the loving?” (29). “The Two Homes” is a death poem, and it asks what happens to a home when death severs the emotional bonds nurtured there. It is, in a sense, an emotional corollary to the Pedlar’s ruminations on displaced objects in “The Ruined Cottage.” The woman’s answer, which ultimately proves unsatisfying to her, is that death multiplies the home, building a supplementary one in the place inhabited by the

memory of the deceased. This home is a supernatural dwelling place that beckons ceaselessly but remains, in life, permanently inaccessible and remote.

The poem begins with the young man's question to an unnamed addressee or companion, the "sad stranger" who begins to speak in the sixth stanza. "Seest thou my home?" he asks. This question is followed by a lush description of the scene before him:

Seest thou my home?—'tis where yon woods are waving,  
In their dark richness, to the summer air;  
Where yon blue streams, a thousand flower-banks laving,  
Leads down the hills a vein of light,—'tis there! (1-4)

This stanza has two salient stylistic features: one is the poet's use of the interrogative mode to begin the poem, which injects an element of uncertainty into the poem's tonal climate. (Later the reader will be able to define this uncertainty; the young man's question ironically underscores his older companion's inability to point out her home.) The other is repetition: the repetition of "where," which initiates two adverbial clauses, and the repetition of "yon," which places the young man's home at a geographic distance. The dramatic situation created by the opening stanza is that of a speaker trying to point out a place that might not be easily visible to his companion. This explains question, the adverbial clauses, and finally the excitement conveyed by the exclamation in line four, after the speaker has realized that he and his companion are looking at the same object. We have all experienced this excitement – pointing to something we want a companion to see – and the even greater excitement of realizing that he or she can finally see it, and that we have added something to his or her experience of the world. It is a delight felt by human beings of all ages. A child feels it when eagerly trying to indicate to an adult the cloud that looks to her like a bird. Veteran

birdwatchers feel it when they successfully help a novice train his or her binoculars on a spring warbler in a nearby bough.

The adverbial clauses in the first stanza contain striking imagery: the woods are “waving in dark richness,” and the “blue streams” bordered by “flower-banks” appear to glimmer in the summer sunlight, lending them the appearance of a “vein” of gold or silver. The description has a magical or otherworldly quality, giving the stanza a tone of reverence or awe as well as of excitement. The first two lines of the second stanza amplify this quality. “Midst those green wilds,” the speaker says, “how many a fount lies gleaming, / Fringed with the violet, colour’d with the skies!” (5-6). The adverb “how” imbues the scene with a sense of profusion, even abundance. The final two lines of the stanza explain the origin of this magical profusion: the home the speaker sees and is trying to point out to his companion gathers its richness from the creative power of childhood associations.

Grammatically, the last two lines serve in apposition both to the question in line one and to the sentence that ends in line four. The speaker says: “My boyhood’s haunt, through days of summer dreaming, / Under young leaves that shook with melodies” (7-8). The tone of the stanza comes to rest here on a satisfying note of discovery and identification, but like the trees waving in the winds and the young leaves stirred by active and eager birds, this tone is slightly unsettled by a momentary transition to the past tense expressed by the verb “shook.” It is the first and only instance of the past tense in the poem, but one that lays a slight chill on the poem – hinting, perhaps, at the precarious nature of the connection between the young man, his home, and its inhabitants. It suggests a temporal or spatial if not an actual emotional separation between the young man and his boyhood home. It may suggest that he has grown up and lives elsewhere now – that he may be visiting his home temporarily, or that he may be even just passing by. Whatever the circumstances, the poet’s

use of the past tense injects the dimension of time into the timeless, magical quality of the scene the young man has pointed out to the woman. It shows that for him, too, time is running and insinuates that his experience may ultimately mirror that of the woman who begins to speak in the second half of the poem.

In stanzas three to five, the young man describes in vivid and deeply emotional terms the quality of the home where he lives or once lived. One could express the tone of these stanzas with phrases like joyful security or pleasant nostalgia. (This tone predominates until the end of the fifth stanza, when the young man – sensing, perhaps, a different emotion on the countenance of his companion – enquires about the whereabouts of her home.) In stanza three, the young man describes his home as a living, breathing, organic form that draws its inhabitants or former inhabitants to it:

My home! the spirit of its love is breathing  
In every wind that plays across my track;  
From its white walls the very tendrils wreathing,  
Seem with soft links to draw the wanderer back. (9-12)

The words “track” and “wander” shed a little more light on the circumstances of the young man. They seem to imply that the young man has “wandered” from his boyhood haunt and now recalls it with that nostalgia common to many adults. (Is Hemans deliberately evoking the historically negative connotations of the verb “wander,” or *errare* in Latin?) He may be returning to his home or even just imagining his return after a period of time away. If this is correct, then the character of the woman becomes even more clear: she has passed well beyond the stage inhabited by the young man and is now looking forward in time, for she has no true home to which to return – no home charged with emotional bonds.

In the third stanza, the young man re-imagines the wind that in stanzas one and two he saw waving the trees and rustling the boughs; he refers to it as the “spirit of love” breathing its beneficent influence around his home. The whiteness of the walls is important because they make his home visible in the darkness of the surrounding woods. One might imagine it as beacon of light in a world full of dark places – what the shepherd Michael’s cottage, known to his neighbors as “The Evening Star,” might have been for his son, had that son ever returned from the city. The color of the walls also contrasts with the “dark seas” (36) that the woman later imagines flowing between herself and her distant, otherworldly home. Finally, whiteness of the walls connotes maintenance and upkeep. As I showed earlier in my discussion of “The Ruined Cottage,” one of the most poignant images both of the cottage’s structural decay and Margaret’s emotional ruin are the patches of pink paint where vagrant sheep have been scratching their backs against stones at the base of the cottage.

The vines and flowers that have been trained to grow on the white, gleaming walls, and whose “tendrils” the young man imagines as “soft links” connecting him to his home, reinforce the ideas of maintenance and upkeep. They are both an organic and an ornamental embodiment of the domestic affections described in the next stanza. The young man says:

There am I loved—there pray’d for—there my mother  
Sits by the hearth with meekly thoughtful eye;  
There my young sisters watch to greet their brother  
—Soon their glad footsteps down the path will glide. (13-16)

In this stanza, the population of the poem expands to include the young man’s “mother” and “young sisters,” who “love” and “[pray] for” him. Curiously, the young man refers to himself in the third person in line fifteen, as though he were indeed just passing through the

environs of his home and simply imagining his sisters running to meet him on his return up the familiar path. In a delicate touch, the poet personifies those footsteps as spirits of gladness gliding down the path, linking them to the luminous streams depicted in the first stanza falling through the dark woods and pointing the way to the young man's home.

Whereas the third stanza depends for its emotional effects on personification and visual imagery, and the fourth on a delineation of domestic relationships, the fifth utilizes aural imagery. In the young man's mind, the happiness of his boyhood life manifests as music, song, and laughter. He says:

There, in sweet strains of kindred music blending,  
All the home-voices meet at day's decline;  
One are those tones, as from one heart ascending,—  
There laughs my home ... (17-20).

The word "kindred" (17) evokes the harmonious nature of the young man's childhood, as do the words "all" and "one" in lines 18 and 19, respectively. The poet is consciously deploying the etymological roots of the word "kindred," which evokes familial relationships. While the phrase "in sweet strains of kindred music blending" comes close to cliché, the kenning "home-voices" in line 18 is a poetic masterstroke, effortlessly capturing the profoundly emotional stirrings of domestic sounds – sounds that separate them from all others. I am reminded of how in my own childhood, I could distinguish the rumble of my father's car engine from all others. I listened for it when I looked forward to his homecoming, and I dreaded its sound when I was in trouble. Yet the power of line 18 is surpassed by the personifying image in line 20 of the home "laughing" in jovial comfort. This image of the boy's home "laughing" may be unique in English literature.

The tone of stanzas three to five is positive, even ebullient, but an undercurrent of sadness is present. Glancing back at the fourth stanza, one wonders about the absence of a paternal figure. The young man doesn't refer to him. He isn't mentioned as being at home, nor is it clear that he is out doing work. Has the boy's mother, like Margaret, been stricken by the absence – voluntary or involuntary – of her husband? There is no way of knowing. Still, the phrase "meet at day's decline" has a slightly negative ring, similar to the phrase "darkening green" at the end of William Blake's song "The Echoing Green."<sup>3</sup> From the young man's perspective, the word "decline" may have purely innocent connotations; it may simply refer to close of day, when the dispersed inhabitants of a home gather back together, creating a familial unity that manifests as song, chatter, and cheer. At the same time, the word "decline" also sets up the rhyme with "thine," just prior to whose completion the young man, noticing (perhaps for the first time) something disquieting in his companion's countenance or gait, enquires about her home. "There laughs *my* home—sad stranger! where is thine?" (20). The italics are Hemans', and they connote the young man's confidence about the location of his home and its emotional provisions. They also foreshadow the woman's doubts concerning the otherworldly place where *her* hopes dwell.

The young man's confidence sets up a sharp and dramatic tonal shift between the first five stanzas and the last four. The young man's ebullience gives way to the stranger's uneasy, doubt-ridden faith in the endurance of familial love stricken by death. Replying to the young man's innocent question, the woman says:

Ask'st thou of mine?—In solemn peace 'tis lying,  
 Far o'er the deserts and the tombs away,  
 'Tis where *I*, too, am loved with love undying,

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<sup>3</sup> William Blake, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York: Doubleday, 1970).



And fond hearts wait my step—But where are they? (21-24)

This stanza dramatizes the woman's failure to connect on an emotional level with the picture of domestic affection and love drawn by the young man. She may understand and perhaps even remember the home life he has described, but now she gives a description of her own. Line 23 repeats the young man's statement "there I am loved" (13), and line 24 recreates the sense of anticipation he imagines preoccupying his waiting sisters, but the woman's home occupies a spiritual rather than a physical or geographical plane. Her home, she says, lies in "solemn peace," a metaphor for death. Thinking back to the naïve child in Wordsworth's "We Are Seven," one wonders whether the young man in Hemans' poem understands what death is – whether he, like Cain prior to Lucifer's arrival, perhaps has yet to arrive at mortal consciousness. The woman's home is "o'er the deserts and the tombs" (22). One can imagine the confusion these words might cause in the young man, since this landscape is so dissimilar to the one he has described. Lines 23 and 24 express hope in the continuity of familial and kindred relationships after the arrival of death. Significantly, however, the stanza is bookended by questions. The poet's use of the interrogative mode destabilizes her speaker's attempt to locate her home, foreshadowing at a formal level the spiritual doubt she later articulates.

If the sixth stanza represents an attempt to respond to the young man in terms he can perhaps understand, the remaining stanzas depict a speaker speaking primarily to herself. One can imagine an adult explaining heaven to a young man with the words "'Tis where I, too, am loved with love undying" (23), but the exhortations in the next stanza seem addressed to some other persona entirely, perhaps an internal one:

Ask where the earth's departed have their dwelling;

Ask of the clouds, the stars, the trackless air!

I know it not, yet trust the whisper, telling

My lonely heart, that love unchanged is there. (25-28)

The poem's transition into the imperative mode suggests a rhetorical and meditative turn. The questions the woman imagines asking of the clouds, stars, and air have no answer because there is no voice to answer them. Curiously, the woman's musings take their cue from her companion's description of his own childhood home. Her description of the "trackless air" contrasts with the well-defined tracks that lead to the young man's home, where he will or could meet his younger sisters. Furthermore, the "whisper" the woman feels arising from her heart to reassure her (however faintly) that "love is there" in the places she envisions pairs with the "spirit of love" that her companion hears in the rustle of leaves in the trees surrounding his home. The stanza pits knowledge against faith: the speaker "trusts" that her emotional relationships with the deceased have survived their departure from the earth, but this trust is based on faith, not knowledge.

The final two stanzas present similar vicissitudes of feeling. The eighth stanza begins with the rhetorical question mentioned earlier, Hemans' continuation of the epigraph drawn from Amelia Opie's song:

And what is home, and where, but with the loving?

Happy *thou* art, that so canst gaze on thine

My spirit feels but, in its weary roving,

That with the dead, where'er they be, is mine.

Go to thy house, rejoicing son and brother!

Bear in fresh gladness to the household scene!

For me, too, watch the sister and the mother,

I well believe—but dark seas roll between. (29-36)

Line 29 is one of those ostensibly rhetorical questions for which deconstruction discovers two incompatible answers. Home, the woman agrees with her younger companion, is “with the loving” – a place marked by deep familial and emotional bonds. But what happens to home in the absence of the loving? The eighth stanza depends for its effect upon a contrast between experience and faith. The young man is happy because he can “gaze” on his home; the woman can only “feel” a connection with a place she has to imagine. This connection, however, is strained by a weariness stemming from her emotional “roving” in the world, a form of wandering very different from that of the young “wanderer” (12) who may have left home to pursue his way in the world but can still return to it. The connection is further strained by uncertainty about the location of the dead and their habitation: “My spirit feels but, in its weary roving, / That with the dead, where’er they be, is mine” (31-32).

The dramatic poignancy of the self-interrupting adverbial phrase “where’er they be” is second only to that of the poem’s last sentence. In the final stanza, the woman makes an effort to collect herself; returning once more to the imperative mood, she beseeches the young man to “go” to his home and “bear” fresh happiness. She assures the young man that there are people waiting for and watching over her, too. However, the note of doubt on which the poem concludes undermines this possibility. In the opening stanzas, the young man had helped his companion discern the location of his home by pointing to a glittering stream falling through dark woods; in the poem’s final line, the woman sadly imagines the “dark seas” of time, distance, and spiritual doubt that “roll between” her place in this earth and the imagined dwelling place of her departed loved ones. The contrast between her companion’s confidence in the resilience of his home and the woman’s uncertainty about the location of hers – an uncertainty that certainly stems from grief but also, it seems, from

spiritual doubts – is the differential across which the poem’s emotional energy generates. Furthermore, if we assume that the woman is the main speaker of the poem, the one with whom the author most closely identifies, then this contrast also points to the moment of emotional disequilibrium and unease that brought the poem to life in the private life of the speaker.

The female speaker of “The Two Homes” is an isolated and curiously liminal figure. She exists on the borders of the young man’s consciousness and experience of the world. He addresses her in line one and again in line 20, but her identity remains concealed to us; she is a “sad stranger.” It is only a conjecture that she is, in fact, a woman. The place that young man is returning to or can imagine returning to is a physical place, one he sees: a place illuminated by the magic of childhood, but a real place nonetheless. It is a place with woods, trees, streams, paths, sounds, children, voices, and a mother. The woman’s habitation is unclear. No home of hers in this world is revealed to us; the one she describes is a faraway emotional or spiritual one “o’er the deserts and the tombs” (22), a deathly place inhabited either by the spirits or by the memories of loved ones. The stability of this home, and its status as a beacon for her and an ultimate destination, is threatened by the recurrent doubt that insinuates itself into stanzas six through nine. Belief is undermined by a lack of knowledge; faith is broken by the “dark seas” that roll between her world and the one her departed kin presumably inhabits. “A Spirit’s Return,” the poem to which I shall now turn, represents a vigorous attempt by a solitary woman to reconnect with the dead – in this case, a deceased lover. The success of her attempt is doubtful, and the fact that she strives so hard to make it shows how mortal consciousness can separate one from the world of the living. However, this very isolation may itself be the product of a culture that ushers

uncoupled women into isolated roles. In this case, mortal consciousness manifests as an unceasing and unheard soliloquy.

*“A Spirit’s Return”: The Death of the Other and the Life of the Self*

“The Two Homes” serves as a useful companion and introduction to the much longer poem “A Spirit’s Return.” This 262-line lyric meditation, which Hemans considered to be her greatest poetic accomplishment (Wolfson 445), dramatizes an imaginative attempt by a woman speaker to commune with a deceased male individual. It presents a speaker whose habitation in this world is tenuous and uncertain. In “The Two Homes,” the young man is emotionally if not actually geographically anchored in a landscape marked by sights and sounds; by contrast, the woman inhabits an emotional landscape that exists more in memory or in fantasy than in reality. Hemans’ speaker in “A Spirit’s Return” also reveals a tenuous relationship with the world of the living. Paradoxically, the strength of her emotional attachment to a deceased individual loosens her connection to the world. Her mortal consciousness detaches her from it, leaving her socially isolated.

The themes of home and erotic love come together in the verses Hemans composed for the title plate of *Songs of the Affections*:

They tell but dreams—a lonely spirit’s dreams—  
Yet even through their fleeting imagery  
Wanders a vein of melancholy love,  
An aimless thought of home:—as in the song  
Of the caged skylark ye may deem there dwells  
A passionate memory of blue skies and flowers,

And living streams—far off!

The referent of “they” in line one is the volume’s collection of songs. The author describes her songs as the dreams of a “lonely spirit,” and her loneliness, she implies, arises both from “melancholy love” and an “aimless thought of home.” As the conceit of the caged skylark reveals, this passion-charged home “dwells” in its song and the feelings from which it arises but also stands “far off” in time and space.

In “A Spirit’s Return,” the speaker’s imaginative attempt to connect with the departed is ultimately a successful one. However, this fact merely underscores the speaker’s liminal relationship to the world of the living. The power of “A Spirit’s Return” comes from its investigation of the emotional relationships that defy and outlive death. Yet these same relationships undermine the stability of one’s anchorage in this world. This poem is important to my project because it illustrates how mortal consciousness is a fundamentally solitary entity. An individual comes to learn about mortality through a unique set of personal experiences, and mortal ruminations tend to occur when one is alone. But the very solitariness of mortal consciousness may also be a product of culture. Indeed, Hemans suggests that this solitariness is especially the plight of women in a culture whose orientation toward death was shifting from the “death of the self” to the “death of the other.” The speaker’s fixation on the death of a beloved is an early example of a later nineteenth-century construction of mortality delineated by Ariès in *The Hour of Our Death*.

In “The Spirit’s Return,” the speaker’s relationship with life, death, the self, and the departed – all inextricably bound together by deep emotional ties – inhabits a lyrical place that transcends culture and history but is also deeply rooted in it. This lyrical place exists in an immensely lonely space occupied by a single, loving human being. It is unique because it is predicated on an individual set of experiences of love and loss; its parameters, however,

may be defined for her by the culture she inhabits. To demonstrate this, I shall focus first on the beginning and ending of the poem and then trace the path between them – a path of poetic digressions that formally enacts the speaker’s social isolation.

In the six-line verse paragraph that opens the poem, the speaker hears the voice of a “dear Friend” and announces that her “long-shut heart” shall be temporarily “unseal’d” for him. It is not immediately apparent who is calling to her, from where, or why, but it is clear that the two personae have been separated for some time, and that the vision about to occur will only be temporary. The poem begins:

Thy voice prevails; dear Friend, my gentle Friend!  
This long-shut heart for thee shall be unseal’d,  
And though thy soft eye mournfully will bend  
Over the troubled stream, yet once reveal’d  
Shall its freed waters flow; then rocks must close  
For evermore, above their dark repose. (1-6)

The tone of these lines is difficult to pin down, but identifying it accurately is crucial to a successful entry into the poem and a firm grasp of its emotional complexities. The positive connotations of the word “prevail,” which suggests a hard-fought and perhaps unexpected victory, convey a feeling of excitement about the spirit’s return, as do the twin references to the speaker’s “Friend” and the exclamation mark at the end of the first line.

The ensuing lines, however, undermine this initial tonal impression, yielding something slightly more ambiguous. The keywords here are the conjunctions “though” and “yet” in lines 3 and 4, which hint at a degree of reluctance about the impending encounter. These words formally enact a kind of tonal backpedaling suggestive uncertainty or hesitancy. Indeed, lines 5 and 6 point to the speaker’s knowledge that the return about to take place is

only momentary and will inevitably be followed by separation. Reviewing the paragraph as a whole, it isn't even entirely clear that the speaker wishes the return to occur in the first place.

This may be one reason why, in "The Spirit's Return," the speaker's communion with the poem's eponymous spirit does not occur for over 160 until the thirteenth verse paragraph. I shall return later to the beginning of the poem and trace the psychological trajectory followed by the speaker leading up to this communion, but now I wish to focus on the encounter itself. This occurs in a "consecrated spot" (130), a place where they once met frequently (or perhaps simply imagined meeting), and where the speaker has now beckoned the spirit to appear. Unlike the restless landscape described earlier in the poem, this spot is silent and wholly still. The speaker is physically alone, as she has been emotionally alone throughout the poem. Indeed, Hemans underscores the speaker's feelings of solitude, smallness, and insignificance by identifying the "planet" beneath which she sits. This a reference to the "large lone star" – Venus, perhaps, or maybe Jupiter – hanging in the Western horizon:

I sat beneath that planet,—I had wept  
My woe to stillness, every night-wind slept;  
A hush was on the hills; the very streams  
Went by like clouds, or noiseless founts in dreams  
And the dark tree o'ershadowing me that hour,  
Stood motionless, even as the grey church-tower  
Whereon I gazed unconsciously... (163-9)

The wind is asleep, the hills are hushed, streams flow silently, and the trees and church steeple stand motionless; there is no wind. Even the speaker's woe is still; it has been "wept / [...] to stillness" (163-4). Such profound stillness may suggest that the encounter that



follows is a dream vision rather than an actual visitation. Whether the visitation occurred, however, is beside the point; what matters is the physical, emotional, and spiritual distance the speaker still sees separating her from the visitant and the implications this has for her own station in the world of the living.

At the end of the poem, the speaker meets the visitant with excitement. She says:

There came  
A low sound, like the tremor of a flame,  
Or like the light quick shiver of a wing,  
Flitting through twilight woods, across the air;  
And I looked up! Oh! for strong words to bring  
Conviction o'er thy thought! Before me there,  
He, the departed, stood! Ay, face to face,  
So near, and yet how far! His form, his mien,  
Gave to remembrance back each burning trace  
Within ... (169-78)

“So near, and yet how far!” The speaker’s longing for “strong words” to reconstruct and cement the reality of the vision is partly a complaint about the failure of human language to capture an otherworldly event. One recalls the speaker’s earlier complaints about the “cold, weak and cold / [...] language” of the earth, “piercing not one fold / Of our deep being” (55-7). However, this longing is also a preemptive strike against the skepticism of the unnamed addressee, mentioned in line 174, who the speaker claims lacks “conviction” about the veracity of the vision.

This preemptive strike does not deliver its full payload, however, because the speaker’s description of her vision – real or in a dream – simultaneously draws attention to

her proximity to and distance from the visitant. “Ay, face to face, / So near, and yet how far!” she says (175-6). The speaker’s ensuing description of her visitant’s marble-like quality metaphorically underscores the emotional gap between them. She recalls:

Yet something awfully serene,  
Pure, sculpture-like, on the pale brow, that wore  
Of the once beating heart no token more;  
And stillness on the lip — and o’er the hair  
A gleam, that trembled through the breathless air;  
And an unfathomed calm, that seemed to lie  
In the grave sweetness of the illumined eye;  
Told of the gulfs between our being set,  
And, as that unsheathed spirit-glance I met,  
Made my soul faint ... (178-87)

These ten lines gather the atmospheric stillness of the “consecrated spot” (130) where the speaker has met the visitant and take them to a deeper level, into the abode of the dead. The friend’s “sculpture-like” mien is the inverse of the quality that so delighted Shelley about the finest Greek and Roman statues: their apparent readiness to cross the threshold from immobility to motion, from lifelessness to life. The serenity of the visitant’s brow has an “awful” quality: awe-inspiring but also appalling. The adjective “pure,” so often positive in tone, here has a negative valence, emphasizing the pallid quality of the visitant’s countenance, which no blood colors, even in an encounter with a separated lover. The visitant is defined wholly by negatives: the speaker sees “no token” of the “once-beating heart” on his brow. An “unfathomed calm” lies in his “illumined eye,” whose glance is simultaneously “sweet” and “grave.” The air around him is “breathless” – a curious choice

of words, considering that the root of “spirit” is the Latin word for breath, and that to be without breath means to be dead. She also describes his “spirit-glance” as “unsheathed,” attributing to it the lethal sharpness of a sword and suggesting that it seems out of its element, as though its proper place were death’s icy scabbard.

Tragically, the visitant’s presence tells the speaker of “the gulfs between our being set” (185). The spirit’s “return” dramatically underscores her solitude. Anticipating the interlocutor’s question whether she was “faint” with dread of her visitant, the speaker replies, “Oh! *not* with fear!” What made her faint was “the sick feeling that in *his* far sphere / *My* love could be as nothing!” (187-9). That her love for her friend, which has survived his death but left her emotionally isolated among the living, is all for naught.

In the poem’s emotional climax, the visitant breaks the silence of the scene and communes with the spirit, fulfilling her desire for intercourse with the dead. “But he spoke,” the speaker says, before asking her addressee:

How shall I tell thee of the startling thrill  
In that low voice, whose breezy tones could fill  
My bosom’s infinite? O friend! I woke  
*Then* first to heavenly life! (189-93)

Like the countenance and carriage of her visitant, the transcendent nature of the speaker’s intercourse has a troubling quality. Indeed, when the vision concludes, it leaves her even further separated from the beloved and even further removed from the domain of the living.

The speaker describes the visitant’s “mysterious accents” as “soft, solemn, [and] clear,” ascribing to them an almost tender quality, but she also recalls how his words appeared to rise “from depths of distance, o’er the wide repose / Of slumbering waters wafted, or the dells / Of mountains, hollow with sweet echo-cells” (195-8). The striking

phrase “depths of distance” ingeniously plots the origins of the visitant’s words in a three-dimensional sector far removed from the speaker’s human habitation; they come not only from afar but also from below. Hemans’ skillful deployment of spatial imagery recalls the opening of Keats’ *Hyperion: A Fragment*, discussed in the next chapter, where the poet uses a string of adverbial phrases to plunge into the vale where the overthrown Titans have fallen.

The climax of Hemans’ poem resembles Keats’ *Hyperion* project in other ways, too. In the revised *Fall of Hyperion*, Keats’ speaker nearly perishes from a sudden chill on the steps of Moneta’s temple before ascending to her altar, dying into life as Apollo had done in the earlier version of the poem. In Hemans’ poem, the speaker recalls how the “mortal chill” (200) occasioned by the visitant melted away as she was upborne “to that glorious intercourse [...] / By slow degrees” (201-2). The parallel is almost certainly coincidental; *The Fall of Hyperion* was not published until 1856. Nevertheless, it underscores that the communion that is occurring, and toward which she has directed so much of her life’s energy, is grievously coupled with death.

Overcoming her fears, the speaker searches for and meets her visitant’s eye, and her communion with him begins. “I questioned of the dead,” she says, “Of the hushed, starry shores their footsteps tread, / And I was answered” (205-7). She asks three questions: whether the dead remember the living, whether the living can carry their thoughts into the afterlife, and, finally, whether love, defying the transience of earthly things, finds a home there (207-12). “I asked, and I was answered,” she repeats, and while she describes her “communion with eternity” as “full and high,” she withholds the knowledge of her revelation (213-4).

Less important than the contents of the revelation is the speaker’s emotional state after it comes to a close. She says:

Like a knell

Swept o'er my sense its closing words, "Farewell,  
On earth we meet no more!" And all was gone—  
The pale bright settled brow—the thrilling tone,  
The still and shining eye! and never more  
May twilight gloom or midnight hush restore  
That radiant guest! (215-221)

Crucially, she compares the visitant's parting words to a "knell." The heavy undertone of this funereal noun seeps into the speaker's spirit of jubilation – her ecstatic account of "One full-fraught hour of heaven / To earthly passion's wild implorings given" (221-2) – and then wells up and subsumes it. The spirit vanishes; she finds herself a stranger to the earth, a mere dweller on it whose true home is somewhere else. "What now is left?" she asks. "A faded world, of glory's hues bereft— / A void, a chain!" (225-7). In the final lines of the paragraph, the speaker gives a vivid picture of her liminal existence, poised between the world of the living and the realm of the dead:

I dwell 'midst throngs, apart,  
In the cold silence of the stranger's heart;  
A fixed, immortal shadow stands between  
My spirit and life's fast-receding scene;  
A gift hath severed me from human ties,  
A power is gone from all earth's melodies,  
Which never may return: their chords are broken,  
The music of another land hath spoken —  
No after-sound is sweet! This weary thirst!

And I have heard celestial fountains burst! —

What *here* shall quench it? (227-37)

The predominant images in these lines are of separation, isolation, and absence: like one of Byron's solitary or exiled heroes, she "dwells 'midst throngs, apart." The specter of death stands like a monolith or wall between her and the "scenes" of life, which she sees "receding" into the distance. She says that her domestic ties have been "severed," and that all her bonds with nature are "broken." The latter remark is especially ironic, for the natural forms that in an earlier stage of life presented signs of an underlying reality are now emptied of their meaning. The speaker dwells on the earth, but she is not of it. Like the speaker of "The Two Homes," she is a sad stranger to her kind. Her encounter with the deceased has simultaneously underscored his absence and emphasized her separation from the land of the living. Rumination of mortality has unmoored her from life.

"The Spirit's Return" dramatizes one of the negative consequences of mortal consciousness: the possibility of losing one's connection with the world of the living and resettling in the land of the deceased. This is a fundamental feature of the "death of the other," and one can see how it might stymie the operations of Romantic mortal consciousness. This is because death of the other forces one to adopt emotional positions where happiness can only be gained in imagined reunions with the dead. It seems clear that Hemans is critical of these positions. Her poem demonstrates the workings of Romantic mortal consciousness precisely because her speaker's erotic attachment to the dead unmoors her from the realm of the living; her speaker can think only about the dead, not about herself or the living. To push this reading a little further, perhaps Hemans is saying that the form of Romantic mortal consciousness expressed in "The Ruined Cottage" and *Cain* is less readily available to women who, as the nineteenth century unfolded, were encouraged to engage

death at the expense of living. Romantic mortal consciousness is an implicit feature of Hemans' poem; it manifests through her characterization of her speaker's emotional situation. In my final chapter, I shall discuss Charlotte Smith's attempt to fashion an explicitly feminist Romantic mortal consciousness that remains focused on the course of history and its record of suffering and woe.

At this point, however, I wish to trace in more detail the solitary journey that Hemans' speaker follows in "A Spirit's Return." This will help us understand how Romantic mortal consciousness, while informed by culture, simultaneously evolves along a path of individual experience. It will also set up my fourth chapter, in which I show how the evolution of Keats' Romantic mortal consciousness informed the development of his Hyperion project.

### *A Solitary Path*

It is worth pausing at this point to remind ourselves how "A Spirit's Return" begins. In the brief six-line paragraph that opens the poem, the speaker hears the voice of a "dear Friend" and invites him to come to her:

Thy voice prevails; dear Friend, my gentle Friend!  
This long-shut heart for thee shall be unseal'd,  
And though thy soft eye mournfully will bend  
Over the troubled stream, yet once reveal'd  
Shall its freed waters flow; then rocks must close  
For evermore, above their dark repose. (1-6)

Earlier, I discussed the ambiguous tone of these lines. Now, I wish to focus on the series of

questions that they pose to the reader. Who is the Friend? Is he or she the spirit mentioned in the poem's title? What is its relationship with the speaker? Where is the spirit now? And precisely over what has its voice prevailed?

The most plausible answer to the last question is death. Indeed, the most salient feature of the poem's first paragraph is its lexical set of words associated with tombs: adjectives like "long-shut," "[un]sealed," and "dark" and nouns like "rocks" and "repose." To some readers, the "troubled stream" may connote the waters of Lethe, from which, in Greek and Roman mythology, the shades of the dead were required to drink in order to forget their earthly life. Crucially, however, this mortuary imagery and these forgetful waters refer not to the gloomy habitation of the dear Friend, but rather to the heart of the speaker who has survived him. It is the speaker's "long-shut heart" that now "shall be unsealed," *its* "freed waters" that "shall [...] flow" temporarily while the "soft eye" of the deceased bends "mournfully" over them. Hence, from the very outset of the poem, Hemans scrambles the relationship between life and death, between the living and the dead. The subject of the two active verbs "prevail" and "bend" is the spirit of the deceased Friend; by contrast, the speaker's heart and the "troubled" stream it contains are the recipients of the actions suggested by the passive verbs "unsealed" and "revealed." The speaker yearns for communion with the dead but reveals that she has already been living with it. This is a consequence of the "death of the other."

These observations, however, do not sufficiently take into account all the nuances of the opening paragraph, which concludes with two assertions of agency. Once the "troubled stream" is "revealed," the speaker says, "its freed waters [shall] flow," and then "rocks must close / For evermore, above their dark repose" (4-6). I call these "assertions of agency" because here, as opposed to in lines 2 and 4, the speaker's heart is not subject to passive



verbs, but who, exactly, is the agent, and how much and what kind of agency does it have? The future verbal form “shall flow,” more formal and solemn than its near equivalent “will flow,” implies a granting of permission, but it also suggests inevitability. It is impossible to grant permission to that which is inevitable, or if one does, that permission is merely formal and may suggest a degree of concealed reluctance or resignation.

With these things in mind, the beginning of the poem demands closer inspection. “This long-shut heart for thee shall be unsealed,” the speaker says (2). Is Hemans’ speaker – unlike the speaker of Donne’s holy sonnet, who beseeches God to batter his heart – acquiescing to an unwanted visitor? Has the Friend’s voice merely prevailed over the silence and separation of the grave, or has it prevailed as well over the wishes of a speaker whose heart harbors and perhaps yearns to drink Lethean waters? Does the tone of the beginning bespeak a degree of emotional reluctance? Questions such as these underscore the poet’s negative attitude toward the emotional state occupied by her speaker.

One can also apply a degree of hermeneutical pressure to the end of the paragraph, which concludes: “rocks must close / For evermore, above their dark repose” (5-6). The verb “must close” demands a degree of attention, because this is the first instance in the poem where the speaker’s words shift into the subjunctive mood. Why must the rocks close, and by what power or act of will? If the dear friend’s voice has prevailed over death, why may it not do so again? If the dear friend has prevailed over the wishes of the speaker, then are these closing lines the expression of a desire or even a demand that this be the last time a connection be reestablished between them? If so, is there any guarantee that the speaker’s desire for finality, implied by subjunctive verb and compounded by that sonorous adverb “evermore,” shall be granted or achieved? Is the speaker saying, return to me once more, if you must, but only this once, for a first and last time? Is Hemans dramatizing a yearning to

break with the death of the other?

While there is no right way of reading these lines, there is clearly a tone of reluctance regarding the reunion about to occur. This reluctance and its corresponding desire for a form of closure, some kind of permanent separation over which the dear friend's voice can no longer prevail, firmly underscores the speaker's complex relationship with life and death, and with the living and the dead. It also suggests the poet's negative attitude toward her speaker's fundamentally liminal relationship to the land of the living.

The second paragraph deepens this complexity through a sudden shift in tone and mood. The speaker, having accepted and yielded to the pending visitation, now invokes her visitor. In other words, Hemans transforms the typical poetic invocation of a spirit or muse by having her speaker invoke a spirit that is already scheduled to arrive. Whereas the first paragraph began with a pair of alternating rhymes before ending in a couplet, the second begins with three couplets, giving the verse an incantatory quality accentuated by the shift from the indicative and subjunctive modes to the imperative. This elevates the tone of the poem to something like cautious excitement. I say cautious, because the speaker attempts to choose the location of their meeting. The speaker beckons her Friend to "our own dell," a place in the woods to which their relationship once laid claim through frequent visitation:

Come while the gorgeous mysteries of the sky  
Fused in the crimson sea of sunset lie;  
Come to the woods, where all strange wandering sound  
Is mingled into harmony profound;  
Where the leaves thrill with spirit, while the wind  
Fills with a viewless being, unconfined,  
The trembling reeds and fountains;—Our own dell,

With its green dimness and Aeolian breath,  
Shall suit the unveiling of dark records well—  
Hear me in tenderness and silent faith! (7-16)

The phrase “dark records” creates a tonal backstitch to the first paragraph and carries over some of its mortuary imagery and sentiment. The slant rhyme at the end of the paragraph, one of only a few instances of this kind of rhyme in the poem, again suggests that the speaker may not be entirely reconciled to the meeting about to transpire. The plea in line 16 may even suggest a tone of trepidation, as if the spirit would receive and respond to her words with something other than “tenderness.” But I do not wish to belabor this, because at the same time, it is manifestly clear that other feelings are present: amazement, enchantment, and excitement. This is to be expected; after all, the speaker *is* preparing to meet the dead.

At the surface level – the level of character and situation – the poem captures a multitude of emotions about the speaker’s impending reunion with her deceased friend. These emotions point to the complex relationship between the speaker, the domain of the living, and the abode of the dead. This complexity is accentuated by an eclectic assortment of characteristically Romantic ideas, images, and allusions operating just beneath the surface of the text. The blustery and luminous woods compose an unmistakably Romantic landscape, one inhabited in other poems by Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley. The idea that mighty forces are at play recalls Coleridge’s early conversation poem “The Aeolian Harp,” written in 1795 and published a year later. In this love poem to Sara Fricker, Coleridge ruminates on the desultory notes of a lyre placed on a casement, appropriating them as an image of his love.

But Hemans’ lines have more in common with Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,”

whose speaker invites that chilly harbinger of seasonal change and the death of the year to lift him up and remove him from a world unprepared for his prophetic musings. Shelley's "Ode" is, amongst other kinds of poem, a death poem, and Hemans' speaker is seeking communion with a spirit who is no longer living. The invocation by the speaker, the forest setting of the second paragraph, and the image of inspiration by a thrilling wind almost certainly allude to Shelley's great lyric. In Hemans' poem, however, the function of the wind is not to gather up and drive the speaker's thoughts into the future, but rather to create a connection with the past, laying bare the "dark records" of a relationship severed by death.

While Hemans' lines have a distinctly Shelleyan texture, tonally they seem governed by a Wordsworthian image. The lines "Come while the gorgeous mysteries of the sky / Fused in the crimson sea of sunset lie" may allude to the final stanza of Wordsworth's great "Intimations Ode," whose speaker asserts: "The clouds that gather round the setting sun / Do take a sober colouring from an eye / That hath kept watch o'er man's mortality" (201-3). Wordsworth's lines express his speaker's successful attempt to reconcile the beauties of nature felt in youth with the harsher realities of lived experience. Hemans' speaker is expressing her yearning for a similar reconciliation: an ability to square her continued existence with the loss of a friend who partially defined that existence. Perhaps that is why the speaker selects (or pretends to have the power to select) "our own dell" as the site of her reunion with her dead friend: a bucolic place where they once consummated or imagined consummating their love. This is the spot where its "dark records" will be unveiled, pored over, and relived. Even more so than the first paragraph, the second complicates the speaker's relationship with life and death: a place significant for its erotic associations becomes a site of rumination upon the deceased.

In the previous paragraphs, I have described Hemans' landscape as a composite of

multiple Romantic images, each with its own set of tonal characteristics. In line 13, however, the speaker reveals that this landscape is anchored in an emotionally if not geographically localized spot. She calls it “our own dell,” filling it in a single breath with an obscure but manifestly rich emotional history.

At this point in the poem, immediately following the invocation, the reader has every reason to expect the Friend’s arrival. Instead, the speaker begins to ruminate on her own spiritual and emotional history. At the beginning of the third paragraph, the speaker expresses a wish that she had known the Friend at an earlier time in their lives, “for then,” she says, “my heart on thine / Had poured a worthier love” (18-19). This is the first real indication in the poem that the speaker is addressing the spirit of someone with whom she had an erotic attachment. Was he a husband? A lover? An inaccessible beloved, like Coleridge’s *Asra*? Whatever the case, the Friend, to whom I shall now refer as the lover or the beloved, ironically recedes into the background of the poem, as the speaker directs her attention to her heart’s present incapacity for erotic love. “[A]ll o’erworn,” she says, “by its deep thirst for something too divine, / It hath but fitful music to bestow, / Echoes of harp-strings broken long ago” (19-22). Erotic love, imagined by the speaker as a broken instrument capable only of “fitful music,” has given way to a desire for something “divine.” But her heart is capable of neither – further demonstrating the speaker’s tragic dispossession from the land and concerns of the living.

The speaker’s ambivalence about this change is underscored by a tension between positive and negative tonal markers. The ideas and images of “o’erworn” love, “fitful” music, and “broken” harp-strings are unambiguously negative; on the contrary, the phrase “deep thirst” has an positive tone, as does the sacred-sounding verb “bestow,” which connotes a form of giving deeply charged with grace. But the object of “bestow” is a kind of love the

speaker is no longer able to give, and her “deep thirst” is for something different, something “too divine.” Too divine: as though this thirst were idealistic, impractical, or profane. One thinks of Shelley’s *Alastor*, who renounces the earth in his quest for an ideal love glimpsed in a vision. The quest causes him to waste away and die. One also thinks of Byron’s *Manfred*, condemned to “seek the things beyond mortality” and pay the ultimate price for his transgression.

As many critics have noted, *Alastor* and *Manfred* are important antecedents to “A Spirit’s Return.” The poem deeply engages both. However, the trajectory of the speaker’s quest in Hemans’ poem is markedly different from the ones in Shelley and Byron’s poems and has a unique beginning. Indeed, it arises neither from a vision of spiritual beauty nor a hopeless longing for an utterly transgressive love but rather from something much simpler: a broken home. The speaker refers to this in the fifth paragraph, which one might describe as Wordsworthian were it not for its tone of profound sorrow – though one recalls that his Wordsworth’s childhood, too, was marked with grief, and that the home to which he felt the most emotional allegiance was the one he created in adulthood with his sister Dorothy.

Hemans’ speaker says:

Yet even in youth companionless I stood,  
As a lone forest-bird ’midst ocean’s foam;  
For me the silver cords of brotherhood  
Were early loosed;—the voices from my home  
Passed one by one, and Melody and Mirth  
Left me a dreamer by a silent hearth. (23-8)

The gravity of the speaker’s childhood solitude and sorrow is expressed by the image of an avian forest-dweller, not just out of its element in the domain of pelagics and true seabirds,

but in real danger of perishing, striving desperately and futilely to attain purchase on the foam of agitated waters. While the speaker is not addressing a young man, like the speaker of “The Two Homes,” she inhabits a similar emotional space as she reflects on the unraveling of domestic bonds and the “silent hearth” that life gave to her. In “A Spirit’s Return,” it is the disappearance of domestic bonds that transforms the speaker into a “dreamer” yearning for something more permanent. This is the connective tissue between the two poems discussed in this chapter.

In paragraphs five and six, the speaker describes her “life’s lone passion, the mysterious quest / Of secret knowledge,” which arose from the ruins of her severed domestic bonds (36-37). This part of the poem is heavily indebted to *Alastor* and *Manfred*. In paragraph six, the speaker gestures toward a Byronically transgressive search for the “rich world unseen” (45). She compares her thoughts to a “gale” that blasts the trees, shaking their boughs and sifting their leaves for a response to her questions. The poem shifts into the interrogative mode as the speaker recalls her inquest into the nature of reality and of the unseen world she suspects the visible one of concealing:

O thou rich world unseen!

Thou curtain’d realm of spirits!—thus my cry  
Hath troubled air and silence—dost thou lie  
Spread all around, yet by some filmy screen  
Shut from us ever?—The resounding woods,  
Do their depths teem with marvels?—and the floods,  
And the pure fountains, leading secret veins  
Of quenchless melody through rock and hill,  
Have they bright dwellers?—are their lone domains

Peopled with beauty, which may never still

*Our* weary thirst of soul? (45-55)

The poet's use of the interrogative mode charges her verse with accumulating energy, which she discharges through a series of exclamations. In the ensuing lines, the speaker laments the gulf between the forms of the earth and "our deep being" and yearns for a means of bridging this gulf:

Cold, weak and cold,

Is earth's vain language, piercing not one fold

Of our deep being!—Oh, for gifts more high!

For a seer's glance to rend mortality!

For a charm'd rod, to call from each dark shrine

The oracles divine! (55-60)

The verb "rend," whose violent connotations are reinforced by the earlier comparison of the speaker's thoughts to a tree-blasting gale, and the adjectival phrase "dark shrine" underscore the transgressive nature of the speaker's desire.

Hemans' debt to Shelley is more nuanced; she reverses the trajectory of *Alastor's* quest, thus ironizing it. In *Alastor*, a vision of ideal beauty leads the protagonist on a fruitless and ultimately fatal journey to find it. In "A Spirit's Return," the speaker's quest is sparked by the dissolution of familial and emotional bonds, but the discovery of love initially causes her to redirect her attention to the earth. At the beginning of paragraph five, the speaker recalls how

with the fulness of a heart that burned

For the deep sympathies of mind, I turned

From that unanswering spot, and fondly sought



In all wild scenes with thrilling murmurs fraught,  
In every still small voice and sound of power,  
And flute-note of the wind through cave and bower  
A perilous delight! (29-35)

The “unanswering spot” in line 31 is her childhood home, emptied of its emotional content. One could view it as the inverse of a Wordsworthian “spot of time,” a place mundane to everyone but the individual for whom it is supercharged with deep emotional content: a signifier teeming with the signified. By contrast, an “unanswering spot” is a signifier that by all rights ought to point to many things but draws a blank. It is a chilling image: the Romantic equivalent of Dickinson’s “zero at the bone.”

The seventh paragraph records the speaker’s truce with life and living: “I woke from those high fantasies, to know / My kindred with the earth — I woke to love” (61-2). This paragraph is one of the most thematically complex in the poem. In line 63, the speaker addresses her “gentle Friend,” the deceased beloved. He still has not materialized, of course, and in line 73 she refers to him in the third – not the second – person: “There was no music but his voice to hear.” The emotional core of the lines comprises two concurrent realizations, one arising in the present, the other discovered in the past, but both felt in the present, superimposed upon one another in a form of grief that transcends time and place and living. “O gentle Friend,” the speaker says, addressing the memory of her deceased beloved, “to love in doubt and woe, / Shutting the heart the worshipped name above, / Is to love deeply” (63-5). “Woe” refers to her grief at his death; “doubt” to her uncertainty that she will ever be reunited with him.

The tragedy for the speaker is that both feelings predate the demise of her beloved. One might call this a proleptic corollary to the “death of the other.” The feeling of love,

Hemans suggests, arises concurrently with the fear of loss; erotic consciousness arrives hand-in-hand with mortal consciousness. Indeed, the profound strength of the speaker's love is a product of her childhood experience with love and loss; its weakness, its "melancholy power," is that it is filled with an understanding of love's transience, at least in the world we inhabit. The ensuing lines point toward a deep irony: the more firmly the speaker attaches her emotional life to another human being, the more unstable this love becomes, precisely because she fears its dissolution. For Hemans' vexed speaker, mortal consciousness manifests itself as erotic consciousness, and vice versa. "[M]y spirit's dower," she says,

Was a sad gift, a melancholy power  
Of so adoring — with a buried care,  
And with the o'erflowing of a voiceless prayer,  
And with a deepening dream that day by day,  
In the still shadow of the lonely sway,  
Folded me closer, till the world held nought  
Save the *one* being to my centred thought. (65-72)

The image in lines 71-2 may be an allusion to Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidden Mourning," whose speaker consoles his beloved with an elaborate conceit of geometric concentricity. Hemans' speaker recalls: "There was no music but his voice to hear; / No joy but such as with *his* step drew near: / Light was but where he looked — life where he moved" (73-5). The irony is that such a deeply-embedded love sets the stage for its own terrible uprooting, an event hinted at by the world "nought," that ultimate of negatives. The tragedy, however, is that the speaker, having earlier in her life felt the dissolution of familial bonds, and feeling in her young adulthood the strength of a different kind of erotic bond, is keenly aware of its transience. For the speaker, true love is commensurate with the solitude

that remains in the aftermath of death, because such love cannot fail to be conscious of its mortal quality. The speaker says:

Silently, fervently, thus, thus I loved.  
Oh! but such love is fearful!—and I knew  
Its gathering doom:—the soul’s prophetic sight  
Even then unfolded in my breast, and threw  
O’er all things round a full, strong, vivid light,  
Too sorrowfully clear!—an under-tone  
Was given to Nature’s harp, for me alone  
Whispering of grief. (76-83)

Lines 81-3 are profoundly ironic. Prior to her relationship with the beloved, the speaker had yearned for a glimpse of a reality underlying mortal forms; now she fears the dissolution of those very forms because of the nothingness that they may conceal – a revelation that further isolates her from land of the living. The emotional impact of the “death of the other” precedes actual death; the mere thought of death precipitates it.

At the end of the seventh paragraph, the speaker rallies her spirits, redefining “grief” as a form of “strength” able to maintain an erotic connection with the beloved in a spite of death’s “fastness” – an astonishingly apt choice of words, since it conveys not only the tightness of death’s grip on the spirits that inhabit its domain, but also the paradoxical “quickness” of one particular spirit in the imagination of the speaker:

Of grief? — be strong, awake!

Hath not thy love been victory, O my soul?  
Hath not its conflict won a voice to shake

Death's fastness?—a magic to control  
Worlds far removed?—from o'er the grave to thee  
Love hath made answer; and *thy* tale should be  
Sung like a lay of triumph!—Now return,  
And take thy treasure from its bosomed urn,  
And lift it once to light! (83-91)

Two developments are worth noting here. First of all, the speaker calls the prize of her “victory” a “voice to shake / Death’s fastness” and, in the appositional phrase following it, “a magic to control / Worlds far removed.” In other words, her steadfast love for a departed lover gives her the long-sought ability to rend the fabric of mortality and gaze upon an underlying reality. She has become the seer she yearned to be in the aftermath of the early dissolution of her domestic bonds. She is now a liminal figure, straddling the threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead. This development, however, is undermined by a return to the imperative mode at the end of the paragraph: “Now return / And take thy treasure from its bosomed urn, / And lift it once to light!” (89-91)! The speaker is still invoking the poem’s eponymous spirit, and we are now nearly halfway into the poem.

The other development to note is that the speaker exhorts the spirit to take *its* treasure from the “bosomed urn” wherein it lies. While the speaker is not quite imagining herself as a dead lover needing resuscitation, the haunting phrase “bosomed urn” locates the ashes of the deceased in the speaker’s still-beating heart, and she re-imagines the spirit as the victor in this struggle to bridge the gulf of death: opening the tomb, unsealing the urn, and lifting its treasure to the light of the day. The speaker imagines herself in a more passive role, thus ironizing her self-portrayal, now, in the present, as a kind of seer, and further

deepening the ambiguity of her position in relation to the living and the dead.

At this point, the reader might reasonably expect the spirit's return and its reunion with the speaker. But Hemans once again upsets these expectations; in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh paragraphs, the speaker reflects on her past relationship with the beloved.

Moreover, it gradually becomes clear in these stanzas why the speaker refers to the spirit throughout the poem as her "Friend" or "dear Friend": their love was never consummated on earth and thus existed only in some ideal world beyond the social and erotic constraints of this one. Paragraph nine deserves to be quoted in its entirety, not only because of its thematic complexity, but because of its singular status in the poem as a nearly fourteen-line-long stanza: an nearly, but not quite finished, love sonnet:

In fear, in pain,

I said I loved — but yet a heavenly strain  
Of sweetness floated down the tearful stream,  
A joy flashed through the trouble of my dream!  
I knew myself beloved!—we breathed no vow,  
No mingling visions might our fate allow,  
As unto happy hearts; but still and deep,  
Like a rich jewel gleaming in a grave,  
Like golden sand in some dark river's wave,  
So did my soul that costly knowledge keep  
So jealously!—a thing o'er which to shed,  
When stars alone beheld the drooping head,  
Lone tears! yet oftentimes burdened with the excess  
Of our strange nature's quivering happiness. (91-104)

The speaker's sonnet is irregular not only on account of its incompleteness. It also follows an unusual rhyme scheme: *aabbccdedeffgg*. Its formal singularity underscores the speaker's emotional singularity: her love is shot through with "fear" and "pain" yet tempered by a "heavenly strain / Of sweetness." This heavenly sweetness makes the pain bearable but gestures toward its otherworldly, that is to say unattainable, quality. The speaker states this explicitly in lines 95-97. While she knew herself to be "beloved," she and her lover "breathed no vow" because "No mingling visions might our fate allow / As unto happy hearts." The speaker gives no indication why their love was impermissible, but its potentially transgressive nature is underscored by the speaker's admission that mere "visions" of "mingling" were denied to them by fate. The reader will recall that the speaker's search for forbidden knowledge was triggered by the dissolution of domestic bonds, which left her alone in the world. Is the object of this love poem the spirit of a dead brother or an emotional substitute for a fraternal bond? Does that account for the epigraph from Byron's closet drama about unholy knowledge and unholy love?

My point in asking this question is not to add "A Spirit's Return" to the catalog of Romantic incest poems. My point is simply to underscore the fact that her love was in some way socially transgressive, and that this further isolates the speaker, situating her not only at the boundary between life and death, but also at the border between culturally permitted and impermissible love. Indeed, the speaker describes her passion for her lover during his life as "costly knowledge," suggesting that carnal knowledge of him would have had unthinkable consequence. Furthermore, she compares this love to "a rich jewel gleaming in a grave" (98). This is a stunning sexual metaphor: a metaphor of the erotic potential trapped in a socially dead body. The speaker's "chaste treasure" – to use Laertes' image of Ophelia's sexuality – will never be opened in this world. Even during life, her love has been utterly

incompatible with life – compatible only with some transcendent reality beyond it, and, as lines 101-3 make clear, something to be brooded over and guarded carefully on moonless nights. The peculiar nature of her love, both thrilling and disturbing, is captured by the phrase with which the sonnet closes: “our strange nature’s quivering happiness” (104).

In paragraph nine, the speaker compares her love to a buried jewel and then to “golden sand in some dark river’s wave” (99). In the following paragraph, she further complicates the obscure picture of her love, an *eros* situated precariously between life and death. Striking at the poem’s thematic heart, the speaker tells the spirit of her lover that only death can discover, in the literal sense of uncovering or laying bare, the true power of human love. The speaker’s liberal use of apostrophe, exclamatory sentences, and deixis gives these lines an epiphanic quality:

But, oh! sweet friend! we dream not of love’s might  
Till death has robed with soft and solemn light  
The image we enshrine!—Before *that* hour,  
We have but glimpses of the o’ermastering power  
Within us laid!—*then* doth the spirit-flame  
With sword-like lightning rend its mortal frame;  
The wings of that which pants to follow fast  
Shake their clay-bars, as with a prisoned blast—  
The sea is in our souls! (105-13)

These crucial lines demand careful scrutiny. Before the hour of death that severs the bond between two lovers, enshrouding one of them in “soft and solemn light” and leaving the other to worship the gently “enshrine[d]” image, the lovers may not know or even “dream” of love’s “o’ermastering power.” Only then, in the aftermath of death’s arrival and culling,

does love's "spirit-flame," still abiding in the heart of the living, "rend its mortal frame" and manifest itself fully. The verb "rend" echoes paragraph six, where the speaker recalled her youthful, pre-erotic longing "for a seer's glance to rend mortality" (58) and view the reality of things, of which the "vain language" of the earth was only a "cold, weak and cold" signifier (55-6). The verb "rend" also points to the violence of the revelation, underscored by images of lightning and its ensuing, bone-shaking thunder. However, there is a crucial difference. Here the object of the verb "rend" is not the fabric of the world, but the body and flesh of the surviving lover. The underlying reality discovered and laid bare is not universal but private. It has to do with the strength of love, concealed until the time of its rupture on account of the beloved's death.

Yet while the paragraph ends on a note of wild affirmation and triumph, this tone is undermined by a profound irony: the partner of the speaker's revelation, the other half of the pronoun "us," no longer exists. "The sea is in our souls," the speaker says, but her discovery of this reservoir is precipitated by and in fact depends on the absence of her beloved. His death, his escape from the "clay-bars" of life, becomes the wellspring of a love whose object is missing, and the source of the speaker's desire to shake her own mortal bars. Despite the paragraph's tone of jubilation and wonder, the paragraph leaves us, much more so than previous lines, with a deeply unsettling image of a human speaker stuck between life and death, an inhabitant simultaneously of both and neither. Here it is worth reiterating that the beloved still has not heeded the speaker's invocation; there is no evidence that he has appeared anywhere other than in her memory. Despite the epiphanic quality of the tenth paragraph, in the eleventh paragraph she refers to her beloved in the third person; the unnamed and silent interlocutor she addresses there is not the beloved but the reader. The speaker is consummately alone, in limbo between two worlds.



Paragraph eleven marks an important change in the poem. The four paragraphs that remain are, with one exception, considerably longer than the prior ones, reflective of a more solitary quality and contemplative tone. At the beginning of the eleventh paragraph, which spans 50 lines, the speaker reflects on her physical absence from her lover's deathbed:

He died, *he* died  
On whom my lone devotedness was cast!  
I might not keep one vigil by his side,  
*I*, whose wrung heart watch'd with him to the last!  
I might not once his fainting head sustain,  
Nor bathe his parched lips in the hour of pain,  
Nor say to him "Farewell!—He pass'd away ... (113-19)

There is no evidence in the poem to explain why the speaker's "wrung heart" had to watch her beloved's death from afar. While neutralizing the Byronic possibility of incest – for what would be more natural than for a sister to attend a brother's deathbed – her absence reiterates the transgressive quality of their attachment.

In the lines immediately following, the speaker reflects on the spiritual aftermath of her friend's death. Picking up the religious imagery of earlier lines, the speaker explains how the friend's grave became an altar, and how, as the business of life caused relatives and friends to dissociate themselves from the hallowed spot where the dead man lay, she was able to enjoy a kind of possession forbidden to her in this world. The lines are striking for many reasons, not least for their emotional rawness:

Oh! had *my* love been there, its conquering sway  
Had won him back from death!—but thus removed,  
Borne o'er the abyss no sounding-line hath proved,

Joined with the unknown, the viewless—he became  
Unto my thoughts another, yet the same—  
Changed—hallowed—glorified!—and his low grave  
Seem'd a bright mournful altar—mine, all mine:—  
Brother and friend soon left me *that* sole shrine,  
The birthright of the Faithful!—*their* world's wave  
Soon swept them from its brink. (120-9)

“Mine, all mine.” This vehement expression of ownership stands in stark contrast with the speaker’s measured, Shakespearian description of death in line 122, reminiscent of the “undiscovered country” pondered by Hamlet. The expression is also tonally jarring coming after the triplet of reverential adjectives in the lines immediately preceding it. The speaker’s lines also point to an unsettling truth, dramatized in *Everyman* yet abhorred by all to such a degree that we shun it from thought and cringe when we see it enacted in *No Exit*: that the memory of the dead often has precious little purchase on the minds of the living. “Brother and friend soon left me *that* sole shrine,” the speaker says. The italicized deictic gives the sentence a tone of barely concealed contempt, and the next clause amplifies it: “*their* world’s wave / Soon swept them from its brink” (128-9). The speaker could be saying that his survivors, too, are dead, but what she is likely saying is the even more frightening alternative: that they are still living and have simply moved on in the business of living, which has little concern with the dead. Her possessive cry stands as an accusation against a planet that continues blindly to turn, and whose living inhabitants quickly forget their predecessors. The fact that at least one of the beloved’s survivors was a “brother” suggests that men do not, cannot, or are not required to mourn as women do. Here again we sense Hemans’ critical eye brooding over the emotional situation she is describing.

In the ensuing lines, the speaker explains how her devotion to the memory of her dead friend revived her past longing for otherworldly knowledge. These lines are important because they introduce a new poetic persona. However, the individual addressed by the speaker beginning at line 129 is not her dead friend's spirit; rather, it is the reader or some other unnamed and silent interlocutor:

Oh! deem thou not  
That on the sad and consecrated spot  
My soul grew weak!—I tell thee that a power  
There kindled heart and lip;—a fiery shower  
My words were made;—a might was given to prayer,  
And a strong grasp to passionate despair,  
And a dread triumph!—Knowest thou what I sought?  
For what high boon my struggling spirit wrought?  
—Communion with the dead! (129-37)

A poem that began with the speaker addressing a deceased friend whose voice she had heard or imagined hearing has shifted again into a narrative poem, told to an unknown persona, about her response to her friend's death. She may, of course, be addressing no one in particular: a hypothetical listener or her objective self. But this merely underscores the extremely quality of her solitude, cut off from the world yet unable to connect with the dead man for whom she still yearns.

The recurrence of the word "spot" in the preceding lines marks another change in the poem. In the fifth paragraph, the speaker had referred to her childhood home, emptied of its inhabitants and the emotional ties they offered to her, as an "unanswering spot" (31), a sublime inversion of a Wordsworthian spot of time. In the eleventh paragraph, a grave, the

marker of a different kind of negativity, because supercharged with emotional power. The passage quoted above describes the discovery of an almost supernatural strength; words like “power,” “might,” “strong grasp,” and “dread triumph” work together to shape its tone.

In the ensuing lines, the speaker exclaims, “I sent a cry / Through the veiled empires of eternity, / A voice to cleave them!” (137-9). Hemans liberally deploys anaphora to imbue the speaker’s prayer for communion with the dead with a deeply incantatory quality:

By the mournful truth,  
By the lost promise of my blighted youth,  
By the strong chain a mighty love can bind  
On the beloved, the spell of mind o’er mind;  
By words, which in themselves are magic high,  
Armed and inspired, and winged with agony;  
By tears, which comfort not, but burn, and seem  
To bear the heart’s blood in their passion-stream;  
I summoned, I adjured... (139-147)

In lines reminiscent of Cain’s watch for the arrival of death, the speaker describes her equally intense watch for “an answer” from “worlds afar” (149-51). She says:

I taught *one* sound  
Unto a thousand echoes; one profound  
Imploring accent to the tomb, the sky;  
One prayer to night,—“Awake, appear, reply!” (151-4)

The speaker does not explicitly record the fruits of her watch, but we may surmise them from the formal features of the ensuing brief paragraph:

Hast thou been told that from the viewless bourne,

The dark way never hath allowed return?  
That all, which tears can move, with life is fled—  
That earthly love is powerless on the dead?  
Believe it not!—there is a large lone star  
Now burning o'er yon western hill afar,  
And under its clear light there lies a spot  
Which well might utter forth—Believe it not! (155-62)

In this passage, notable because it contains the first instance of the word “return” in the poem, the speaker exhorts the reader to believe that the dead may return from their abode, and that earthly love is felt there. However, the repetition of the command “Believe it not” suggests the strength of the skepticism she expects to encounter, and which she may herself feel: the frightening idea that death, the “viewless bourne,” will not in fact allow her lover to return across “the dark way,” and that “earthly love” is in fact “powerless on the dead.” The asyndeton in lines 159-62 formally enacts this skepticism as well. So, too, does the striking slant rhyme between “bourne,” the abode of the dead, and “return” in line 160. Despite the speaker’s past and present yearnings, the formal and rhetorical structure of the poem points to an irrevocable gulf between the living and the dead. The speaker’s insistence on a bridge linking them merely underscores the liminality of her position with respect to both. When the friend does appear, as a spirit or in a dream vision, in the lengthy thirteenth paragraph, the vastness of the gulf becomes sublimely manifest to her.

Before saying a few closing words about the final paragraph, let us briefly retrace the trajectory of the speaker’s life and attend to its profound ironies. The loss of domestic ties early in life leads the speaker on a fruitless quest for otherworldly knowledge. The discovery of love rebinds her to the earth, but the love she chooses is as inaccessible as the ideal world

she searched for in her youth. When her beloved dies, her connection with the world falters again, and she yearns for knowledge of the world his spirit inhabits. She invokes his spirit, and when it returns, rather than restoring her connection with life, it severs her from it completely. The trajectory of the poem reveals a cruel truth: love binds us to the earth, but it also sets up a belittling isolation from it. The force that drives us to merge our lives with the bloodstream of another paves the way for an ultimate and irrevocable solitude.

The end of “A Spirit’s Return” underscores the tragically liminal nature of the speaker’s place on Earth. Addressing the reader, she asks a rhetorical question: whether the return of spring each year provides a reason to “rejoice” (237). Paradoxically, she describes the breezes of spring as a spirit summoning her to the land of the dead, which she calls “spring fulfilled” (247). This conceptual marriage of spring and death tragically emphasizes the speaker’s simultaneous orientation toward yet detachment from the land of the living and of the dead. She says:

Dost thou not rejoice,  
When the spring sends forth an awakening voice  
Through the young woods? Thou dost! And in that birth  
Of early leaves, and flowers, and songs of mirth,  
Thousands, like thee, find gladness! Couldst thou know  
How every breeze then summons *me* to go!  
How all the light of love and beauty shed  
By those rich hours, but woos me to the dead!  
The *only* beautiful that change no more—  
The only loved!—the dwellings on the shore  
Of spring fulfilled! (237-47)

In the final lines of the poem, the speaker imaginatively redefines death as a rarefied version of life involving physical sensations, emotion, and knowledge of things hidden from the inhabitants of this world. She says she feels this posthumous life inside her struggling to be born but “pent” in her mortal frame. One recalls the complaint of the soul in Marvell’s famous dialogue:

The dead!—*whom* call we so?

They that breathe purer air, that feel, that know

Things wrapt from us! Away!—within me pent,

That which is barred from its own element

Still droops or struggles! (247-51)

The speaker insists that “the day *will* come,” since

Over the deep the free bird finds its home,

And the stream lingers ’midst the rocks, yet greets

The sea at last; and the winged flower-seed meets

A soil to rest in. (251-55)

“Shall not *I*, too, be, / My spirit-love! upborne to dwell with thee?” (255-6), the speaker asks.

Like so many of her questions, this one, too, is rhetorical:

Yes! by the power whose conquering anguish stirred

The tomb, whose cry beyond the stars was heard,

Whose agony of triumph won thee back

Through the dim pass no mortal step may track,

Yet shall we meet!—that glimpse of joy divine

Proved thee for ever and for ever mine! (257-62)

As the poet's use of the future tense shows, however, the reunion that the speaker so confidently anticipates is actually in a distant and deeply uncertain future, and the poem's closing image of fierce possession is undercut by the fact that the speaker has merely had a "glimpse" of her devoutly wished consummation. Whether it will indeed occur is, again, beside the point. The poem leaves us with an impression of a mind completely severed from the land of the living yet excluded from the place her visitant inhabits. She dwells in an emotionally liminal space that arose from her experience of the world but has now been unmoored from it. Fundamentally, the poem shows how mortal consciousness, regardless of how culture may shape, define, or direct it, arises or takes us to a profoundly private place where culture, time, and place dissolve, leaving us to wonder about our place in a world we inhabit so briefly. The fundamental irony of the poem is that the speaker is unaware that the "death of the other" has provided her with the template of this emotional trajectory. The speaker's decision – which really wasn't a decision at all – to live with death and ruminate upon it has separated her from life and the living; in this way, Hemans' poem elicits a critique of what I have called Romantic mortal consciousness.



## Chapter 4: Keats, Mortal Consciousness, and the Vale of Soul-Making

### *Introduction: The Privacy of Death*

In Chapter Three, I argued that Felicia Hemans' "A Spirit's Return" inhabits two forms of Romantic mortal consciousness. Embodying the death of the self and the death of the other, the poem stands at the threshold of the fundamental shift during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western attitudes toward death and dying, first identified by Ariès. The poem's emotional impetus is the speaker's grief over the death of her beloved. Thus, on the surface, the crisis of mortality in the poem appears to center on the cutting of an erotic connection. The speaker longs for and imagines a spiritual reunion with the deceased. In this way, "A Spirit's Return" is an early expression of the Victorian culture of mourning, which many recent literary and cultural critics have described.

At the same time, however, "A Spirit's Return" is less *about* the deceased or even the speaker's relationship *with* the deceased than a culturally oriented interpretation of the poem might suggest. The speaker's longed-for spiritual reunion only occurs after she has thoroughly retraced and reevaluated her relationship with life and living in the wake of the death of an individual who, she now realizes, anchored her to the earth. For a poem ostensibly about the return of the deceased, "A Spirit's Return" is a remarkably private poem; its emotional core is the speaker's anxiety about her place in a living world whose foundations have crumbled, giving her, as it were, dual citizenship with death. In this way, the poem holds fast to and inhabits the death of the self: that early form of mortal consciousness slowly dismantled during the Enlightenment and in its wake. It was the form, as I showed in Chapter One, that Cain inhabited until Lucifer, through instruction about the

earth's appalling geological past, inspired him to extrapolate the bleak future in store for Cain's posterity.

In Chapters One and Two, I argued that Romantic mortal consciousness, straddling the threshold between the death of the self and the death of the other, bears a striking resemblance to what we might now call a liberal political or social consciousness. In the wake of the Enlightenment, death transformed from the Great Leveler of human inequality into this inequality's crystallizing agent: the event that sealed it into the annals of history. In "The Ruined Cottage" and to a much greater extent in *Cain*, ruminating on death and its victims enables both a critical examination of the world and a critical imagination of what the world ought to be, could be, and perhaps may be like one day. Margaret's story teaches the reader how the forces of history, which arise in centers of power far away from her rural abode, ripple outwards and undermine her marriage, her family, her life, and finally her home, which, returning to the earth, serves as an organic and living memorial of an individual who dwelt on history's margins. In Byron's play, Cain's newfound perception of the world incites an act of rebellion against its creator and its most devout worshipper; right or wrong, the murder of Abel is a product of Cain's cosmic politics.

If, as I have suggested in Chapter Three, Romantic mortal consciousness still retains part of its solitary core, then how is it compatible with this modern liberal political or social consciousness that I have identified in the works of Gray, Wordsworth, and Byron? After all, Hemans' poem is not a politically or socially charged poem; the speaker's reevaluation of her relationship to life does not inspire a critical examination of human inequality. The purpose of my last two chapters is to explore the question I have just posed by examining two works whose emotional core is very much the death of the self, but whose centripetal

mortuary forces are ultimately balanced by a centrifugal force that commands one, in Keats' great phrase, to "think of the Earth" (1.169).

This chapter focuses on the work of Keats, particularly his protracted struggle with his epic poem *Hyperion*, which he began in late 1818, put aside for almost a year (an eon in Keatsian time), and recommenced in late 1819, only to abandon it a second and final time a few months later. Fundamentally, it argues that Keats' dissatisfaction with the first *Hyperion* stemmed from a failure of mortal consciousness. This may be putting it too bluntly; I do not think Keats recognized this failure at the time he set the first poem aside. However, Keats' revisions to the poem in late 1819, particularly his construction of a deeply personal frame narrative, help us understand what Keats, returning to his first mature long poem several months after putting it aside, felt that the first *Hyperion* lacked.

In *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, we see a marriage of the death of the self with the death of the other: a form of mortal consciousness in which fear of death is simultaneously magnified and tempered by the realization that death unites all of us, even the overthrown gods our ancestors worshipped. The poem reminds us that we will all be inhabitants of the undiscovered country, and soon. But this is not the work of Death the Leveler; rather, it is the work Death the Illuminator of shared humanity and suffering, who makes that suffering more visible, more poignant, and more compelling. Unlike Cain, the speaker of Keats' revised *Hyperion* does not act upon his newfound mortal consciousness. Granted, Keats' poem is unfinished; one can only guess how Keats' speaker would have evolved had he continued to the poem. But perhaps that is beside the point. Perhaps what Keats' *Hyperion* project shows us and tries to express is that mortality, however we respond to it, simply demands a response, whether political or, in this case, philosophical and poetical. That

mortality demands our attention, lest we forget what makes us human and what connects with all the other mortal creatures with whom, for a little while, we share the earth.

### *Keats and Hyperion*

Central to my reading of *The Fall of Hyperion* is the dramatic moment, about halfway through the revised poem, where Keats' speaker, after a near-fatal encounter with a goddess named Moneta, reenters his earlier poem *Hyperion* about the fall of the Titans and the ascent of a new race of gods. Keats began *Hyperion* in the closing months of 1818 but put it aside the following spring, not long after the death from tuberculosis of his brother Tom, whom Keats had nursed on his deathbed, and from whom he probably contracted the disease. The original poem, which Keats titled *Hyperion: A Fragment*, has three books. Book One begins "deep in the shady sadness of a vale" where Saturn, the old and deposed king of the Titans, has fallen to the earth. Midway through Book One, the narrator cuts to the solar palace of the sun god Hyperion, a Titan who still clings to power but sees omens of change. At the end of the book, he descends to earth to rally his fallen comrades. In Book Two, Saturn and the fallen Titans ponder what to do next: submit to the Olympians or begin a fresh assault? If this sounds familiar, it is because Keats modeled Book Two on the consultation in Hell at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. In the fragment of Book Three, the narrator describes Apollo's rise to godhood.

Keats returned to and began revising *Hyperion* in July 1819 but abandoned it a second and final time just two months later. To place the revised poem in the meteoric trajectory of Keats' brief career, this was just after that period of dazzling creativity in May when he composed his great odes, including "Ode on a Grecian Urn." However, to call *The Fall of*

*Hyperion* a “revision” of the earlier fragment is slightly inaccurate and misleading. It is really a complete recasting and re-imagining of the earlier poem, following a profound moral and aesthetic reorientation toward it. At the core of the revised poem is the story of the Titans. Preceding it, however, is a ruminative frame narrative detailing the experiences of an unnamed poet-narrator who wanders into the temple of Saturn. *Hyperion*, that is to say Keats’ original poem, is secreted away in the mind of Moneta, Saturn’s last worshipper, and the speaker has to glean it from her. The frame narrative, which ends with the dramatic encounter with the goddess, takes up about half the fragment and comprises the thematic and emotional core of the poem.<sup>1</sup>

I begin my discussion of the revised poem by quoting the opening of the original fragment of *Hyperion* and showing where Keats’ poet-narrator reenters it in *The Fall of Hyperion*. These are the first fourteen lines of the original poem:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,  
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,  
Sat gray hair’d Saturn, quiet as a stone,  
Still as the silence round about his lair;  
Forest on forest hung around his head  
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,  
Not so much life as on a summer’s day  
Robs not one light seed from the feather’d grass,  
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.

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<sup>1</sup> To avoid confusion when speaking of these two poems, I will refer to the “narrator” of *Hyperion* and the “speaker” of *The Fall of Hyperion*, whose self-conscious frame narrative gives the narration a more personal point of view.

A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more  
By reason of his fallen divinity  
Spreading a shade: the Naiad 'mid her reeds  
Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips. (1.1-14)<sup>2</sup>

Keats deploys three adverbial phrases in the first three lines to create an impression of profound spatial depth. This depth, with its attendant images of darkness, sorrow, and contagion, formally establishes Saturn's sad condition, his ponderous state of "fallen divinity," well before the narrator encapsulates it with this poignant phrase in line 12. So do the images of silence and stillness in lines 4-5 and the string of negative and doubly negative accounts and descriptions (difficult to compute, even after several close passes) in lines 7-10. In line 4, the narrator provides a brief glimpse of "gray-haired Saturn," who sits "quiet as a stone" in his miserable surroundings, "still as the silence round about his lair" (1.4-5). A stream flows nearby, but its waters provide neither nourishment nor comfort. Flowing without a sound, the "voiceless" stream is "still deadened more / By reason of [Saturn's] fallen divinity / Spreading a shade" upon it (1.11-13).

In the next verse paragraph, the shortest in *Hyperion*, the narrator trains his gaze on the fallen god. The negative adjectives deployed by the poet to describe Saturn's right hand, once the instrument of unlimited power, effectively sum up his current state:

Along the margin-sand large foot-marks went,  
No further than to where his feet had stray'd,  
And slept there since. Upon the sodden ground  
His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,  
Unscathed; and his realmless eyes were closed;

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<sup>2</sup> John Keats, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978).

While his bow'd head seem'd list'ning to the Earth,  
His ancient mother, for some comfort yet. (1.17-21)

The adjective “unscattered,” a sublime image of impotence, captures the tragic reversal in Saturn’s fortunes and the existential negativity of his condition. Indeed, the suffix “-less” appears three times in two lines.<sup>3</sup>

Much of this description of Saturn’s “fallen divinity” appears in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which Keats began in July 1819. In the revised poem, the narrative of the Titans’ fall exists in the mind of the goddess Moneta, who witnessed the tragedy and continually relives it, suffering a living death reminiscent of Coleridge’s ancient mariner. The speaker, after an arduous ascent to Moneta’s altar during which he nearly dies, makes a passionate plea to Moneta to uncover and share what she has experienced: “Let me behold, according as thou saidst, / What in thy brain so ferments to and fro!” (1.189-90). Moneta grants his request:

No sooner had this conjuration pass'd  
My devout lips, than side by side we stood  
(Like a stunt bramble by a solemn pine)  
*Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,*  
*Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,*  
*Far from the fiery noon and eve's one star.* (1.291-6, my italics)

It is not immediately clear to the reader why Moneta chooses to share her knowledge. It is obvious that the speaker has passed some kind of test, but a test of what? What aspects of the earlier poem does Keats feel he is now prepared to take up, and why? To phrase this important question another way, what did Keats have to do before he could give himself permission to reenter and perhaps attempt to complete his old poem? The form of the

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase “realmless eyes” is the first of many references to the organ of sight and seat of the creative imagination in the Hyperion project.

revised *Hyperion* permits us to ask these questions without taking the bait of biographical criticism hook, line, and sinker, a trap that students of Keats must always strive to avoid. They are important questions, too. As I will demonstrate, they strike not only at the thematic heart of the poem but also at the core of Keats' rapidly maturing thought about life, death, and everything that makes us human.

In this chapter, I argue that, in order to reenter *Hyperion*, Keats had to prove to himself that he truly grasped mortality: that he possessed a measure of mortal consciousness requisite to bear the weight of a poem about the massive suffering of fallen gods. The frame narrative of the revised *Hyperion*, a distillation of ideas Keats had been working through in his recent poems and letters, including the odes, functions as a demonstration of this proof. However, Keats' victory had an unintended consequence, for by testing and proving his depth of mortal consciousness, he also came face-to-face with a vexing and perhaps unanswerable question about the purpose of poetry in a world marred by human suffering. Fundamentally, *The Fall of Hyperion* asks whether the art of poetry can survive the injection of mortal consciousness that it needs to matter in – to be relevant to – a fallen world composed of immense suffering and woe.

The speaker's reentry into the fragment of *Hyperion* occurs at line 124 of the revised poem. During the first 293 lines, he is examining and evaluating his poetic credentials, attempting to prove to himself that he has the ability to write about fallen gods, that his pen can sustain the colossal events he intends to record. This is only partly a question of his talent as a poet; it is also a question of something I will here call "spiritual fiber," or the ability to withstand and comprehend the weight of a tragic situation. If this is unclear from the strange invocation at the beginning of the revised poem, which I will discuss shortly, that is because this invocation is a relic of a considerably less mature Keats, a poet driven by a



very different set of concerns. The question regarding the narrator's spiritual fiber is raised not during the invocation but over the course of his encounter with Moneta prior to his dramatic reentry into the Hyperion story.

This concept I have called "spiritual fiber" is not just a fancy term for artistic skill fortified by maturity and experience. The reason I believe a different expression is called for is that, through the revised *Hyperion*, Keats is attempting to judge himself and his work by a new set of criteria, in which aesthetic quality – whether a poem is "good," whether it is worthy of being remembered – is only one component and by no means the most important one. We might summarize these new criteria as questions concerning a poem's relevance, and indeed the relevance of all poetry, to the world we inhabit. Is it possible to justify, in a world so deeply and tragically informed by human suffering, the compulsion to dwell on it in art? In *Hyperion*, Keats had literally set out to trace the "imagined pinnacles and steep / of godlike hardship" (3-4) whose images an encounter with the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum had inspired. What benefit could a flight of fancy like this hope to serve, especially when his brother Tom lay dying in the next room?

This is one of the questions Keats that must answer in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and which Moneta asks the speaker as the poem nears its first climax. But this isn't to reduce the poem to a simple referendum on the use of poetry. There is a deeper question, one that has to be answered regardless of one's verdict concerning the relevance of this poem or any poem. This deeper question is whether Keats' poem shows a clear coming to terms with the immense suffering it seeks to record. Does the poem merely depict, or does it understand as well? Does it trace surfaces, or does it lay bare meanings?

A major reason behind Keats' dissatisfaction with *Hyperion* was that he couldn't reconcile its structure, development, or themes with his deepening speculations on the role

of suffering in the development of the human soul. I am referring to Keats' philosophy of "soul-making," which he mentions for the first time in a letter written in early 1819, a few months after shelving *Hyperion*, but which had been gestating since the winter of 1817-8, when he was putting the finishing touches on his first long poem, *Endymion*.

The overwhelming question Keats faced as he set out to revive *Hyperion* in 1819 was not whether he could capture in words the suffering of fallen gods. While the invocation to the poem acknowledges a problem of artistry, the poem attests to a problem of knowledge and experience. The speaker of the revised poem possesses less self-assurance than his predecessor. Even after Moneta grants him access to the tragedy in her mind, the speaker can barely withstand the sight of it. It applies enormous stress to his pen. The real question facing Keats, in other words, was whether he could reconcile this image of huge suffering with an understanding of human existence and development. Is the poem commensurate with human experience, and if so, how?

Putting the problem this way helps us to clarify our earlier question about the relevance of the poem. It isn't really a question of the "use" of poetry in a world determined to ascertain everything's usefulness and assign it a value accordingly. Rather, it is a question of whether the poem has been tested by life, whether it has been proved upon life's pulses. But if the poem can justify its relevance in this limited sense, then might not one of its uses be the fine-tuning of souls of empathetic readers, in accordance with Keats' philosophy of soul-making? This, I think, is the fundamental question that Keats was attempting to answer in *The Fall of Hyperion* and in his late poetry in general.

This is also why *The Fall of Hyperion* is, in my view, one of the finest expressions of Romantic mortal consciousness. The complex history of the *Hyperion* project attests to a gradually deepening awareness of human mortality and a resulting attempt to reconcile this

mortal consciousness with a theory of life, especially the artistic life. The clearest evidence of this intellectual growth is Keats' letters, which I will examine in detail, and the manner and form in which Keats salvaged the original *Hyperion*. *The Fall of Hyperion* does not simply attest to the development of mortal consciousness; it documents and embodies it. But what makes the poem's expression of mortal consciousness so quintessentially Romantic is how it is linked with Keats' concern about doing "good" in a world whose hardships and miseries he understood so well. Keats didn't live long enough to answer whether his chosen vocation was conducive to doing good (he hardly lived long enough to articulate it), but his writing attests to a moral instinct that it needed to be. Through the idea of "soul-making," Keats came to appreciate the moral necessity of experiencing and knowing both pain and suffering; by writing this into the *Hyperion* project, he ponders how literature and the literary life can aid the development of human souls.

One problem I have raised in these pages, and to which I have probably given an unsatisfactory answer, is whether I am secretly attempting to write biographical criticism. This is an entirely fair question. Yet while I certainly avail myself of biographical materials and information, my analysis is fundamentally formal. This chapter began with a question about form – about how Keats retrieves and reassigns *Hyperion* for the revised poem – and my argument will depend heavily on this formal reconfiguration. At the end of the day, however, an argument about Keats' revision of his poem will always contain a biographical element, because revision implies second-guessing and preference, and these things point, however tenuously, to the aesthetic sensibility generating and shaping the revisionary act.

Moreover, it would be disingenuous try to disguise the extent to which biography does in fact inform this chapter. More than the work of perhaps any other poet, Keats' invites or tempts biographical readings. Stuart Sperry's *Keats the Poet*, which was my first

introduction to Keats scholarship during my heady, romantic undergraduate days, is still in my opinion the best attempt to mesh Keats' poetry with his life, with Walter Jackson Bate's literary biography coming in a close second. Critics who read Keats' poetry apart from his letters do so at their own peril. Then, of course, there is the nature of my project itself, which has treated the arrival of mortal consciousness as a deeply private experience, and one with great personal ramifications. For the Romantics, acquiring and developing mortal consciousness was the crucial first step in any individual's moral development. Arguments such as these invite if not actually demand some degree of biographical corroboration.

Is *The Fall of Hyperion* an autobiographical poem? Yes and no. While the poem does not tell a personal narrative, it surely hints at one. Perhaps a better way of viewing the poem is to consider it a kind of poetical laboratory where Keats can pose vexing questions, attempt to answer them, and then gauge the authority of those answers. I consider *The Fall of Hyperion* a personal poem only in the very limited sense that it discloses the results of an intellectual litmus test to which Keats needed to subject his rapidly maturing consciousness. It is really a philosophical poem that lays the capstone on the philosophy of soul-making Keats had been nurturing during the preceding years.

When we see this, it renders obsolete the question whether Keats finished the poem, intending to leave it as a fragment, or just abandoned it. The question was never about whether he could finish *Hyperion*. It was about whether he had earned the attempt to write it – whether he had a right to enter and inhabit the poem. Thus, in a way, *The Fall of Hyperion* is less a poem or a fragment than the last chapter of a long conversation between Keats and himself regarding what poetry is and how or whether it can matter.

## *The Problem of Hyperion*

Why was Keats dissatisfied with *Hyperion*? Why did he abandon it? This is the basic question I wish to explore in this part of the chapter. My reading of the revised poem is indebted to what one might call the “standard model” of the *Hyperion* project, but it departs from this model in crucial ways. According to the standard model, developed by Sperry and other critics, *Hyperion* was motivated by Keats’ desire to write an epic poem, that pinnacle of poetic accomplishments. Keats’ struggles with the poem are symptoms of the burden of the past and the anxiety of influence, particularly the influence of Milton and Dante.

Keats’ struggles were no doubt exacerbated by the high poetic aspirations that had motivated his poetic practice from the beginning of this career. In a letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon written May 10, 1817, Keats describes his daily labors on *Endymion*, which he had begun about two weeks previously: “I read and write about eight hours a day. [...] I do begin arduously when I leave off, notwithstanding occasional depressions: and I hope for the support of a High Power while I climb this little eminence and especially in my Years of more momentous Labor” (12). That ominously capitalized “Labor,” of course, is an epic poem. *Endymion* had served as a kind of poetical base camp, a place where Keats could acclimatize to the cold, thin air of Parnassus.

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey written October 8, 1817, Keats quotes from a letter (now lost) to his brother George sent that spring, around the time of his letter to Haydon. In the letter to his brother Keats called *Endymion* “a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention,” a probationary exercise that he had to undertake before beginning the works he hoped would secure him a place in “the Temple of Fame” (27). Chief among these was the epic poem that preoccupied his imagination. While Keats was writing about

*Endymion*, it is hard to read the excerpt from the letter to George Keats without thinking about the poet's struggles with *Hyperion* at the other end of his short career:

I have heard Hunt say and may be asked—why endeavor after a long Poem?  
To which I would answer [...] a long Poem is a test of Invention which I  
take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the  
Rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces? I mean in the shape of  
Tales. (27)

In a letter to Leigh Hunt written the same day as the letter to Haydon quoted above, Keats envisions the poet's lifelong task as forging a spear from a supply of needles, the miniscule results of daily application and labor: "When I consider that so many of these Pin points go to form a Bodkin point [...] and that it requ[i]res a thousand bodkins to make a Spear bright enough to throw any light to posterity—I see nothing but that continual uphill Journeying" (10). Apollo is usually imagined holding a bow and arrow or a lyre but occasionally is shown (on ancient Greek coins, for instance) carrying a spear. Thus, the spear at the tip of Keats' metallurgical conceit and the image of mountainous heights implicit in the phrase "uphill Journeying" together point to the epic realm "which bards in fealty to Apollo hold" and represent the singular accomplishment Keats aimed to make in that genre.

Critics who subscribe to the standard model have seen in the evolution of the poem a shift in poetical allegiance from Milton to Dante. Keats was always deeply ambivalent about Milton. In his famous letter of May 3, 1818 to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats compares the respective merits of Milton and Wordsworth and suggests that the latter's greatness arose from the fact that he could see deeper into the human heart than Milton. At some point during 1818, Keats was also becoming interested in Dante. That summer, Bailey was encouraging him to read the *Divine Comedy*, and we know Keats was reading it by the end

of the year, because he quotes from Cary's translation of the poem in a letter to his friend Christopher Dilke. There is also an amusing letter to Haydon where he describes waiting in line at a bank for two hours and calls it "worse than anything" in Dante's hell. One wonders where in Dante's *Inferno* Keats would have placed the architects of the 2009 financial crisis.

But critics like Sperry who stress Dante's influence on the revised *Hyperion* see the *Purgatorio*, not the *Inferno*, providing Keats a thematic model for the new poem. In Book Three of *Hyperion*, the narrator imagines Apollo's ascendancy to godhood as a massively painful rebirth. In the revised poem, which Keats did, it must be noted, choose to divide into "cantos" rather than books, the narrator undergoes a similar experience, but there is a crucial difference. This rebirth is less an external transformation than a test or proof of an internal change he has already undergone, and this change consists not of a new relationship to tradition but a new understanding of human experience. Understanding that Keats claimed Wordsworth possessed but Milton lacked. Knowledge of the dark passages of human life. Mortal consciousness. It is only in this limited respect that *The Fall of Hyperion* is Dantean in spirit.

Keats intended *Hyperion* to trumpet a new age of poetry. In the important letter of May 3, 1818 to Reynolds, Keats had coined the expression "the grand march of the intellect" (96) to help explain up why Wordsworth had been able to see more clearly and deeply than Milton into the human heart. It wasn't because Wordsworth had a greater innate capacity for emotional intelligence or moral clarity; he simply lived in a time more conducive to the cultivation of these qualities: a conception of cultural change that probably would have made Keats amenable to the field of death studies. Content with the "resting places" provided by Protestantism, Milton, Keats says,

[d]id not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done—Yet Milton as a Philosopher, had sure as great powers as Wordsworth—What is then to be infer'd? O many things—It proves there really is a grand march of intellect—, It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest Minds to the serice of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion. (96)

In Book Two of *Hyperion*, Oceanus offers a similar explanation for the sudden reversal in the Titans' fortunes. The main difference is that he is testifying to a grand march of beauty and power. Today we might call this a goal-oriented theory of divine evolution. The defeated ocean king tells the assembled gods:

As Heaven and Earth are fairer, fairer far  
Than Chaos and blank Darkness, though once chiefs;  
And as we show beyond that Heaven and Earth  
In form and shape compact and beautiful,  
In will, in action free, companionship,  
And thousand other signs of purer life;  
So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,  
A power more strong in beauty, born of us  
And fated to excel us, as we pass  
In glory that old Darkness... (2.206-15)

Keats could not have constructed an elaborate “as/so” simile for the “fresh perfection” that has chased the Titans from Heaven without thinking of Milton. By having Oceanus express his thoughts with a distinctly Miltonic conceit, could Keats have been suggesting that Milton, too, was in danger of being toppled?



Oceanus offers a fundamentally aesthetic explanation of the Titans' fate. It is the "eternal law," he says, "that first in beauty should be first in might" (2.228-9). As Book Two unfolds, it becomes clear that Keats is not only referring to intellectual beauty or some other abstract expression of the "fresh perfection" embodied by the Olympian deities. He is also referring to various forms of aesthetic beauty that testify to their unprecedented powers. Oceanus gives the first account of a successor deity, and in his description of his successor Neptune, he calls attention to his new god's chariot and the fine creatures that pull it:

Have ye beheld the young God of the Seas,  
My dispossessor? Have ye seen his face?  
Have ye beheld his chariot, foam'd along  
By noble winged creatures he hath made? (2.232-5)

Significantly, Oceanus characterizes Neptune as an artist or craftsman; he has "made" the animals that pull his chariot. Neptune's chariot has also been made, either by Neptune or by another Olympian, perhaps Vulcan. Oceanus specifies that it is "his" – Neptune's – chariot, not the one Oceanus used to command. By anchoring his account of Neptune in closely-related ideas of making, building, and creating, Keats is underscoring the connection between divine power and aesthetic beauty. The revolution taking place is not just political or religious but also artistic; Oceanus is bearing witness to a grand march of the arts different in all respects from the cycle of indifferent creation and destruction meted out by the bored creator god in Byron's *Cain*.

Nothing shows this grand march clearly than Clymene's account of her encounter with the sun god Apollo, the god destined to take Hyperion's throne. He is also the god of music and poetry, and when Clymene hears his "blissful golden melody" wafting across the

waters, she petulantly throws down the conch shell she had been playing on. “While I sang,” she says,

And with poor skill let pass into the breeze  
The dull shell’s echo, from a bowery strand  
Just opposite, an island of the sea,  
There came enchantment with the shifting wind,  
That did both drown and keep alive my ears.  
I threw my shell away upon the sand,  
And a wave fill’d it, as my sense was fill’d  
With that new blissful golden melody. (II.272-80)

Inspiration quickly turns to dread, however; the sheer beauty of the song shakes her to the core of her being:

A voice came sweeter, sweeter than all tune,  
And still it cried, “Apollo! young Apollo!  
The morning-bright Apollo! young Apollo!”  
I fled, it follow’d me, and cried “Apollo!” (II.292-5)

Hounded by the new god’s name, Clymene fears that her very identity was at stake.

It is tempting to characterize this as a dramatization of *clinamen*, that slash-and-burn clearing of artistic ground central to Bloom’s theory of influence: to suggest, in other words, that Keats is envisioning the ascent of a new generation of poets or (to swallow the alluring bait of biographical criticism) is predicting his own ascent. This is a tantalizing hypothesis, but it has two flaws. One is the poem’s unmistakably Miltonic stamp. From its form to its diction, the influence of *Paradise Lost* on *Hyperion* is clear. Why write Miltonically in order to dispatch Milton? To beat him at his game? Perhaps, but Keats would have been the

underdog in this struggle. Besides, Neptune rode in a new chariot; Apollo didn't play on Clymene's conch shell. They selected or devised new formal testaments to their power. Perhaps *Hyperion* was an exercise like *Endymion*: something to get through before Keats could begin something else.<sup>4</sup> Such a hypothesis, however, not only ignores Keats' ambitions for his new poem but also the high quality of some of the verse. The other, more serious flaw with the Bloomian reading of *Hyperion* is the startling frequency with which Keats' narrator agonizes over the very words he is trying to say. On multiple occasions and in numerous ways, the narrator states or implies a profound lack of confidence in his craft.

An acknowledgment of the failure of human language to convey the thoughts, words, and sentiments of the gods precedes the very first instance of reported speech in *Hyperion*, when Thea, laying her hand upon Saturn's "bended neck," tries to find some words of comfort for the fallen king of the Titans:

To the level of his ear  
Leaning with parted lips, some words she spake  
In solemn tenour and deep organ tone:  
Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue  
Would come in these like accents; O how frail  
To that large utterance of the early Gods! (1.46-51)

The contrast between the "frail accents" of human speech, even poetic speech, and the "large utterance" of the gods is one of the poem's organizing patterns. It reappears midway through Book One, where the focus shifts from Thea and Saturn to Hyperion. Keats writes: "Meanwhile in other realms big tears were shed, / More sorrow like to this, and such like

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that if Keats had completed *Hyperion* as a twelve-book epic, then judging by the length on Books I and II it would have been about 4000 lines – approximately *Endymion*'s length.

woe, / 'Too huge for mortal tongue or pen of scribe" (I.158-60). In Book Two, Keats sets out to describe the colossal grief and suffering of the other Titan gods, which the beauty and power of the usurping Olympian deities exacerbates. At the beginning of Book Three, the narrator seems relieved to leave them behind. He says:

O leave them, Muse! O leave them to their woes;  
For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire:  
A solitary sorrow best befits  
Thy lips, and antheming a lonely grief. (3.3-6)

Whether the narrator's ensuing sketch of Apollo, the god destined to take Hyperion's place, is actually better *poetry* is a question I will consider shortly.

Keats' ability to translate godlike hardship and sorrow into human language remains an important concern in *The Fall of Hyperion*, even after Moneta grants him permission to re-enter the earlier poem. Directly and indirectly, the speaker expresses anxiety about his pen's ability to bear the weight of such colossal suffering. When Thea speaks to Saturn beginning at line 534, he says that he can only approximate her words:

Leaning, with parted lips, some words she spake  
In solemn tenor and deep organ tune;  
Some mourning words, which in our feeble tongue  
Would come in this-like accenting; how frail  
To that large utterance of the early Gods!" (1.349-54)

In these five lines, Keats formally enacts the speaker's uncertainty about the power of his language to capture Thea's words. The poet's use of anaphora shows the speaker trying to get a vocal foothold on his recollection of the speech. The phrase "some words" in line 349 reappears in line 351 as "some mourning words." Combined with the adjective "mourning,"

the acoustic image “deep organ tune” prepares us for an utterance of melancholy heft, but no sooner has the speaker expressed the tone of Thea’s words has he noted the inability of “our feeble tongue” to repeat them. The words, he says, “[w]ould come in this-like accenting,” coining an abject yet utterly appropriate adjective to convey “how frail” his lines are to the “large utterance” even of fallen gods. This leads one to conclude that Keats’ fundamental problem with the earlier *Hyperion* was not an aesthetic one but something else entirely.

To understand why Keats was dissatisfied with *Hyperion*, it helps to focus on its last, unfinished book, particularly the place where the poet left off. The fragment of Book Three is quite short – just over 136 lines – and focuses exclusively on Apollo, whose painfully beautiful melodies Clymene had described near the end of Book Two, inciting the wrath of Enceladus. The narrator begins Book Three by shaking off the image of the fallen Titans. He gives two reasons for doing this: the inability of his muse, whom he invokes here for the first and only time in the poem, to express the magnitude of the Titans’ woe, and the fear that their woe is only about to increase. He says:

Thus in alternate uproar and sad peace,  
Amazed were those Titans utterly.  
O leave them, Muse! O leave them to their woes;  
For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire:  
A solitary sorrow best befits  
Thy lips, and antheing a lonely grief.  
Leave them, O Muse! for thou anon wilt find  
Many a fallen old Divinity  
Wandering in vain about bewildered shores. (3.1-9)

It is not entirely clear to what Keats is referring in lines 7-9. Perhaps he meant to suggest that the Titans, huddled together in their nest of woe, would soon part ways or be forcibly dispersed after Hyperion fell, multiplying their individual grief by the power of solitude. Perhaps he envisioned them exploring their new home, just as Milton imagined the fallen angels exploring Hell (or sitting around an engaging in hard, knotty philosophical disputes) after Satan left Hell to lay siege to God's newest creation.

A couple of pages ago, we looked at moments where the narrator voices uncertainty about his language. Perhaps this was merely poetic modesty or decorum; these are, after all, gods he is describing. Perhaps Keats and his narrator are cognizant of the difficulty, noticed by many commentators, that Milton himself experienced when trying to describe or put words into the mouths of gods, especially the benevolent ones. But therein lies a crucial difference, for in *Paradise Lost* and its brief sequel, the most awkward instances of divine description or reported speech inevitably involve the inhabitants of heaven, not the fallen angels.<sup>5</sup> To paraphrase Blake, Milton was in his element when making devils talk. By contrast, when Keats expresses uncertainty about his craft, he is without exception preoccupied with the Titans, Keats' counterparts to Milton's fallen spirits.

Keats never expresses uncertainty about describing Apollo or translating his words. Ironically, these are the weakest moments, poetically speaking, in the poem. Hard as it may be to describe in human language the "big tears" of the Titans, these are some of the most powerful passages in the poem. The narrator's account of the young Apollo's joyful sadness upon hearing the beautiful sounds nature simply withers in comparison. "Throughout all the isle," the narrator writes,

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<sup>5</sup> Occasionally Milton's descriptions of the *actions* of God or Christ are comical. In Book I of *Paradise Regain'd*, the speaker imagines Christ "Musing and much revolving in his brest, / How best the mighty work he might begin / Of Saviour to mankind" (1.184-6)

There was no covert, no retired cave  
Unhaunted by the murmurous noise of waves,  
Though scarcely heard in many a green recess.  
He listen'd, and he wept, and his bright tears  
Went trickling down the golden bow he held. (3.38-43)

The image in the last two lines is downright risible. The Titans' tears compel readers to avert their eyes; Apollo's make us wince with embarrassment. Ironically, the simple language Keats deploys when describing the Titans' woe is more effective poetically than any attempt at verisimilitude. For the key to Keats' dissatisfaction with *Hyperion*, we must actually look to some of the finest passages in Book Three – another indication that the problem is not poetic in nature.

One of the peculiarities of Book Three is that the narrator appears to have traded one kind of woe for another. When we meet Apollo, we find him in a state of immense sorrow, summed by that awkward description of his tears. But why is he sad? This is the question put to the narrator by an “awful Goddess,” later identified as the Titan goddess Mnemosyne (the goddess of memory, and the mother, by Zeus, of the nine Muses), who suddenly appears from across the waters. She asks the weeping Apollo: “Is't not strange / That thou shouldst weep, so gifted? Tell me, youth, / What sorrow thou canst feel?” (3.45, 67-9). As the interview unfolds, the reader gradually learns that Apollo's sorrow stems not from something that has happened to him but something he has yet to experience. He says: “For me, dark, dark, / And painful vile oblivion seals my eyes” (3.86-7). A few lines down, he redefines his state as “ignorance.” Having spent the entirety of his brief existence alone on the island of Delos, Apollo has felt but not experienced the tremendous “power”

displayed during the recent tumult in heaven. Telling Mnemosyne that he has “heard the cloudy thunder,” he asks her:

Where is power?  
Whose hand, whose essence, what divinity  
Makes this alarum in the elements,  
While I here idle listen on the shores  
In fearless yet in aching ignorance? (3.103-7)

Apollo makes three complaints. Firstly, he feels detached from events happening elsewhere, where power is being exercised; the adverbs and adverbial phrases grammatically encapsulate his feelings of detachment. Secondly, he feels “idle.” Rather than sounding the alarm or participating in the tumult, he is stuck listening to it. Finally, he doesn’t really know what is happening. His ignorance pains him; he says it has an “aching” quality.

Lines 103-7 are not difficult to understand; I have explicated them because they reveal some cracks in the poem’s thematic foundation. Fate has determined that Apollo shall occupy the sun, but he begins his existence in a state of sorrow. He deplores his innocence, first describing it as ignorance and then, in a remarkable turn, comparing it to the condition of a fallen god, one who has already lost his power:

I strive to search wherefore I am so sad,  
Until a melancholy numbs my limbs;  
And then upon the grass I sit, and moan,  
Like one who once had wings. (3.88-91)

Emotional pain, physical discomfort, a feeling of despair: these things are more characteristic of the Titans than the Olympians who have supplanted them. The verb “moan” is especially telling. This is its only occurrence in *Hyperion*, but in *The Fall of Hyperion* it becomes a kind of



leitmotif of the Titanic condition. It is the first word spoken by Saturn – “Moan, brethren, moan; for we are swallow’d up /And buried from all Godlike exercise (1.412-3) – and it appears thirteen times in the agonizing speech that these lines introduce.

The distinguishing features between Apollo from Saturn, apart from their respective places in the order and succession of gods, are the fruits of experience and knowledge of Saturn’s fall. These are precisely what Apollo craves. Mnemosyne declines to answer Apollo’s questions about the location of power and his separation from it. But as Apollo studies her face, he begins to see the answers. She is, after all, a Titan. The knowledge she possesses begins to flow between them, as it will later flow between the goddess Moneta and the speaker of the revised poem, and it has the effect of restoring the wings Apollo feels are missing or lost. The quality of Keats’ lines bears out this transformation; maudlin depictions of tear-soaked bows give way to sublime poetry. Apollo says:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.  
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,  
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,  
Creations and destroyings, all at once  
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,  
And deify me, as if some blithe wine  
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,  
And so become immortal. (3.113-20)

The “knowledge” imparted by Mnemosyne does not consist solely of pleasant visions; remarkable “deeds” are complimented by “dire events,” “majesties” and “sovrans voices” by “rebellions,” “creations” by “destroyings,” and the pleasures of understanding by the “agonies” such knowledge entails.

The dichotomous nature of Apollo's vision is a formal counterpart to Mnemosyne's liminal status as a Titan goddess who has abandoned her race in order to serve Apollo.

Early in Book Three, Mnemosyne tells Apollo to

Show thy heart's secret to an ancient Power  
Who hath forsaken old and sacred thrones  
For prophecies of thee, and for the sake  
Of loveliness new born. (3.76-9)

The dichotomous nature of Apollo's vision has profound thematic implications. Apollo's first disciple is a Titan, and it is from a Titan that he receives the knowledge that deifies him. One could read this discipleship as an allegory of influence or perhaps a softened version of a Bloomian *clinamen*, in which a poet steals possession of a predecessor's land and impresses him into his service. But Mnemosyne's service to Apollo is voluntary and self-initiated. Furthermore, Apollo's physical resemblance to the Titans, a result of the deep sadness that precedes his sudden influx of knowledge, seems only to grow as a result of Mnemosyne's tutelage. On the one hand, Apollo's new knowledge, which he describes as a "bright elixir peerless," appears diametrically opposed to the "dismalizing poison" fate has poured on Saturn's head. The former confers immortality; the latter takes it away. On the other hand, it remains unclear whether the knowledge and experience that compose these distillments are all that different.

These are difficult questions to untangle, but here they are, embedded in the text Keats was trying to weave. I am not convinced Keats put them there deliberately. I believe he noticed them in retrospect, after they were already an integral part of the fabric. And I think it took him a long time to make sense of their nuances and implications. I also think *The Fall of Hyperion* represents an attempt to do all of these things: namely, to identify and

understand the conceptual flaws in the structure of the earlier poem. As I stated earlier, the primary goal of this chapter is to understand why Keats temporarily shelved *Hyperion* by looking at *The Fall of Hyperion* and ascertaining out how the revised poem attempts to articulate and solve the problems of its predecessor work. Doing so will require a comprehensive view of the poem, informed by all of Keats' mature work, especially his letters. More importantly, it will require thinking about the two *Hyperion* poems in relation to one other – not as draft and revision, but as vision and exegesis.

Lest we end this section too caught up in abstractions, let's take a final glance at the point in *Hyperion* where Keats suddenly laid aside his pen. This passage will help us refine all the questions we have raised about the poem. At the end of Book Three, the tumult in Apollo's brain caused by the rapid influx of knowledge from Mnemosyne begins to take hold of his entire being. Curiously, the narrator is at a loss to say whether these are the pangs of birth, death, or rebirth:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush  
All the immortal fairness of his limbs;  
Most like the struggle at the gate of death;  
Or liker still to one who should take leave  
Of pale immortal death, and with a pang  
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse  
Die into life... (3.124-30)

Experience and knowledge: are they more like the pangs of birth or the pains of death? Do they increase one's power or take it away? How is one to acquire them, and what good do they provide? The feeling with which the fragment of *Hyperion* leaves us with is one of pain,

and pain, we recall, is the condition of a fallen god. And yet the last word is “celestial.”

Keats writes:

During the pain Mnemosyne upheld  
Her arms as one who prophesied.—At length  
Apollo shriek’d;—and lo! from all his limbs  
Celestial           \*       \*       \*       \*       \*  
\*       \*       \*       \*       \*       \*       \* (3.133-7)

*The Fall of Hyperion* will help us understand these problems more fully and see how Keats tried to make sense of them. First, however, we need to look at his philosophy of soul-making, because it’s really here, in this idea, developed over the course of many letter and poems, that Keats engages most vigorously with the problem of pain and suffering: the province of mortal of human beings.

### *Keats in the Vale of Soul-making*

Writing to Benjamin Robert Haydon on May 10, 1817, Keats reflects on a positive aspect of human hardship. “I must think that difficulties nerve the Spirits of a Man,” he tells Hayson, adding that “they make our Prime Objects a Refuge as well as a Passion” (11-12). Buried in this statement is the seed of the philosophy of soul-making Keats would develop over the course of the next year: the idea that suffering fortifies and refines the human soul. Here, however, Keats is thinking mainly about the difficulties one inevitably meets with on the road to poetic fame. His ambition is great. “The Trumpet of Fame,” he says, “is as a tower of strength the ambition bloweth it and is safe.” Keats expresses a lack of confidence in his craft, imagining how “the Cliff of Poesy Towers above me,” but then he goes on to

describe his daily work on *Endymion*, the romance he had begun about two weeks previously: “I read and write about eight hours a day. [...] I do begin arduously when I leave off, notwithstanding occasional depressions: and I hope for the support of a High Power while a clime this little eminence and especially in my Years of more momentous Labor” (12).

Six months later, the seed had begun to germinate. Keats’ letter of November 22, 1817 to Benjamin Bailey is famous for its enigmatic speculations on imagination, beauty, and truth, which have teased many generations of readers of the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” out of thought. “I am certain of nothing,” Keats writes, “but of the holiness of heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not.” He encapsulates this idea with the famous metaphor of Adam’s dream of Eve as conceived by Milton in *Paradise Lost*: “The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth.” Longing for “a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts,” Keats goes on to posit a striking vision of an afterlife, which one might describe as the fusion of imaginative experience with ideal Platonic forms.

For readers of *The Fall of Hyperion*, the letter to Bailey becomes particularly interesting toward the end, where Keats reflects upon his speculative flight of fancy. “What a time!” he exclaims. “I am continually running away with the subject.” Earlier in the letter, Keats had distinguished between “Men of Genius” and “Men of Power.” He defines Men of Genius – precursors to Keats’ later conception of the “chameleon poet” – as “certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect.” Unlike Men of Power, who enjoy a “proper self,” Men of Genius “have not any individuality, any determined Character” (36). Now he draws a second distinction, this time between minds like his own and “complex” ones like his correspondent’s that are less prone to speculative flights. The distinction hinges on an important allusion to Wordsworth. Keats writes: “I am continually running

away with the subject—sure this cannot be the case with a complex Mind—one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits—who exist partly on sensation partly on thought—to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind—such a one I consider yours” (38). The allusion to Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode” is obvious, but the way Keats uses it is striking, particularly in light of his later poetical and philosophical development. The language of the penultimate clause comes from what one might call the ode’s philosophical climax, where the speaker’s regret, uncertainty, and feelings of a deep loss modulate into an expression of hope. The tone of quiet confidence in this section of Wordsworth’s poem is underscored by the poet’s use of the first person plural pronoun and a curious *aabbccda* rhyme scheme, which formally rejects death by withholding a rhyming word and circling back to the original rhyming pair, thus giving the lines a feeling of emotional closure. The speaker says:

We will grieve not, rather find  
Strength in what remains behind;  
In the primal sympathy  
Which having been must ever be;  
In the soothing thoughts that spring  
Out of human suffering;  
In the faith that looks through death,  
In years that bring the philosophic mind. (184-91)

The “soothing thoughts that spring / Out of human suffering,” the “faith that looks through death” (188-90): Keats’ idea of soul-making, described in the famous letter of May 3, 1818 to Reynolds, embodies these forms of comfort and hope.

Having said that, it is astonishing how far Keats is from the idea of soul-making. Elsewhere in letters written in 1816 and 1817, we see glimmerings of Keats' burgeoning mortal consciousness, but here his response to human suffering could almost be described as callous. He tells Bailey, "The first thing that strikes me on hearing a Misfortune having befallen another is this. 'Well it cannot be helped.—he will have the pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit.[?]" Yet conscious of a defect in sympathy implied by this response, Keats implores his friend's forgiveness: "I beg now my dear Bailey that hereafter should you observe any thing cold in me not to put it to account of heartlessness but abstraction—for I assure you I sometimes feel not the influence of a Passion or Affection during a whole week." Occasionally, he confides, this lack of feeling perseveres for so long that "I begin to suspect myself and the genuineness of my feelings at other times—thinking them a few barren Tragedy tears" (38). Keats is echoing a sentiment expressed to Bailey a couple of weeks previously in the letter of October 28-30. Pained by the remembrance of his friend's kindness – a feeling triggered by a letter that reminded him of a neglected reply – and wishing he could be more mindful of this kindness, Keats writes: "I wish I had a heart always open to such sensations—but there is no altering a Man's nature and mine must be radically wrong for it will lie dormant a whole Month" (30).

The point I am building toward is this: Keats is grappling with the ideas at the core of his idea of soul-making, but he hasn't been able to bring them together. Aware as though by a kind of philosophical instinct of the spiritual value of grappling with pain or misfortune, Keats also displays a tendency to gravitate toward the realm of innocence or ignorance, where the life of sensations is not bothered by the thoughts to which experience gives rise. At the same time, Keats is embarrassed by this tendency, equating it with a form of selfishness. As Keats tells Bailey, "Health and Spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish

Man—the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits—when I am not suffering for vicious beastliness I am the greater part of the week in spirits” (32).

Keats developed his philosophy of soul-making in 1818 and the early part of 1819. By January 1819, Keats had finished *Endymion* and was beginning to copy it out for his publisher Charles Taylor. He was also, however, beginning to lose patience with the poem, a feeling that would only grow stronger in the coming months. Critics and biographers have offered several explanations for Keats’ sense of estrangement from his first long poem. A major reason seems to have been Keats’ growing awareness of a profound gap between the “skyeey” genre of his poem and the “bruised” world in which poetry is written and read. Writing to Bailey on January 23, 1818, Keats says, “[H]e who feels how incompetent the most skyeey Knight errantry is to heal this bruised fairness is like a sensitive leaf on the hot hand of thought” (53). Almost effortlessly, Keats devises an exquisitely tender and beautiful image of the pain and suffering to which our moral sensibilities object, finding them incommensurate with our notions of justice and fairness. However, the individual who would turn away from the charms of romance to engage the harsh realities of life is likely to suffer on account of it. Is the pain that results worth the effort? For Keats, this was still an open question at this time, but in the weeks and months ahead, he would gradually begin to answer in the affirmative. Indeed, the letter to Bailey contains a hint of his final position. Shortly after speculating on the moral cost of romance, Keats observes, “The best of Men have but a portion of good in them—a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence—by which a Man is propell’d to act and strive and buffet with circumstance” (53). The solution to the problem would come when Keats realized that the “spiritual yeast” that gives rise to the “ferment of existence” was not inherent to man’s



frame but ambient in the air we breathe every day: sprinkled upon the spirit by and though a world of “circumstance.”

In a long verse letter to Reynolds written on March 25, 1818, Keats recalls a dream and reflects on his intellectual temperament, declaring himself most at home in the realm of fancy:

O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake  
Would all their colors from the sunset take:  
From something of material sublime,  
Rather an shadow our own Soul's daytime  
In the dark void of night. For in the world  
We jostle—but my flag is not unfurld'd  
On the admiral staff—and to philosophize  
I dare not yet!—Oh never will the prize,  
High reason, and the lore of good and ill  
Be my award. (81)

Employing a phrase he would later use to describe the Grecian urn, Keats explains: “Things cannot to the will / Be settled, but they tease us out of thought” (81). Keats is using “will” as a synonym for the mind and its faculty of reason, ascribing to it a gently nudging quality that forces things to be as one wishes them to be. By “things” Keats is referring to anything that a thinking mind might seize upon, ponder, and try to understand: an object, perhaps, but also an experience, work of art, or intellectual or moral problem.<sup>6</sup> These “things,” Keats

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<sup>6</sup> Just two weeks previously, in his letter of 13 March 1818 to Bailey, Keats had explained how “Ethereal things” could be made “real.” “As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself nothing.” He proceeds to distinguish between “things real,” “things semireal,” and “no things”: “Things real—such as existences of Sun Moon & Stars and

tells Reynolds, “cannot be settled” – cannot, that is, be figured out, understood, or solved, for no sooner has the mind, like a navigator trying to read a map, managed to hold down one corner of a problem than another corner curls up. “In the world,” he says, “We jostle.” Thought replicates life; a mind that would will stability or order in the things it contemplates is “tease[d]...out of thought” by their details, aberrations, or vicissitudes.<sup>7</sup> Imagination, too, fails to assist in this endeavor, because it finds itself out of its natural element:

Or is that Imagination brought  
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,—  
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,  
Cannot refer to any standard law  
Of either earth or heaven?<sup>2</sup> (81)

At this point in time, in March 1818, Keats drops these questions, explaining to Reynolds that they spoil happiness:

It is a flaw  
In happiness to see beyond our bourn—  
It forces us in Summer skies to mourn:  
It spoils the singing of the Nightingale. (81)

Two months later, however, Keats was beginning to come to terms with their necessity.

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passages of Shakespeare—Things semireal such as Love, the Clouds &c which require a greeting of the Spirit to make them wholly exist—and Nothings which are made Great and dignified by an ardent pursuit” (73).

<sup>7</sup> It would be a mistake to think that Keats is describing here a definite philosophical system. Keats may be skeptical about the claims of the reason, but he is not a skeptic; there is truth for Keats, but it can only be found via the intensity of lived experience. It is a personal truth, a subjective truth, a truth to Keats, one that does not foreclose upon other truths. Indeed, the very Keats is skeptical about the reason is a statement that has to be qualified. In a letter written November 22, 1817 to Benjamin Bailey, Keats says, “I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning—*and yet it must be*” (37, my italics). How often those last five words are omitted or forgotten!

By May, Keats had made great strides in his conception of life, a vision incorporating and even embracing its vicissitudes and rough edges – all the forces that drive a wedge between the real and the ideal. In the famous letter to Reynolds written on May 3, 1818, Keats develops his famous metaphor for life as a Mansion of Many Apartments. This letter is so familiar to students of Keats, and so important, that it is hard to imagine “Keats” prior to its composition. The fact that Keats labored towards this letter and the views expressed in it, but with such swiftness and at such a young age, should never cease to amaze readers. In a letter to Taylor composed on April 24, Keats was still referring to the “Uneasiness” (here meaning a lack of ease, caused perhaps by dissatisfaction or sorrow) engendered by a man’s increasing experience of the world as a weight or burden, something to be humbly and patiently submitted to:

Young Men for some time have an idea that such a thing as happiness is to be had and therefore are extremely impatient under any unpleasant restraining—in time however, of such stuff is the world about them, they know better and instead of striving from Uneasiness greet it as an habitual sensation, a pannier which is to weigh upon them through life. (87)

There is no evidence the Keats imagined anything advantageous arising from an experience of uneasiness; it is merely a burden, albeit one that becomes quickly familiar, like the weight of a soldier’s rucksack. Contrast this with the famous letter to Reynolds written less than a fortnight later, where Keats declares that “an extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever: and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the mystery” (92). In less than two weeks, Keats had come to suspect that knowledge and experience served as palliatives to the very heartache they could engender.

It may be helpful to give a summary of this letter, which like so many of Keats' develops in a desultory and unpredictable manner. Keats apologizes for not writing sooner, explaining that the gloomy thoughts that had been oppressing him were not fit to be shared with one who was recovering from an illness. He then gives a positive report of his brother Tom's health: "[A]fter a night without a Wink of sleep, and overburdened with fever, [Tom] has got up after a refreshing day sleep and is better than he has been for a long time" (91). He offers an amusing explanation for a recent spell of bad weather: "[O]ne would think there has been growing up for these last four thousand years, a grandchild Scion of the old forbidden tree, and that some modern Eve had just violated it" (91).

The first important part of the letter comes when Keats takes up the subject of knowledge. In the past, as we have seen, Keats had often viewed knowledge with deep suspicion, regarding a life of thought as incompatible with the life of sensations for which he longed. In his letter to Taylor written ten days previously, however, Keats had hinted at an ambitious plan to build up his knowledge. As with so many young minds discovering and learning to negotiate a prodigious intellectual strength, Keats was also mortified by his perceived ignorance. In the letter to Reynolds, Keats elaborates on the rationale behind the program of "application study & thought" (88) he had proposed for himself. When we are immature, Keats says, a mind can be sidetracked or hemmed in by its pursuits. The mature mind, by contrast, learns to see how any pursuit leads to the greater end or goal that the mind has identified. "When the mind is in its infancy a Bias is in reality a Bias, but when we have acquired more strength, a Bias becomes no Bias. Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole" (92). Keats says he is glad he has kept his medical books: "Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again,—I feel it would not make the least difference in my Poetry" (92).

But what is the allure of this knowledge, beyond its usefulness for his development as a poet? As Keats explains to Reynolds, it has a palliative effect on one who is troubled by the world. “An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the fever and the heat” – a phrase Keats almost certainly recalled when composing “Ode to a Nightingale” a year later in May 1819 – “and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery” (92). The phrase “Burden of the Mystery” is an allusion to Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey.” The “mystery” is “the heavy and the weary weight / Of all this unintelligible world” (39-40).

Like Keats in the letter to Reynolds, Wordsworth was describing an intellectual reconciliation with the world achieved through experience and maturity and sealed by resolution: “We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind” (184-5). Keats reaches a similar conclusion when he contrasts a “life of sensations” with and without the knowledge acquired by experience. “In the latter case,” he says, “we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all the horrors of a bare shouldered Creature.” By contrast, “in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go thro’ the same air and space without fear” (92).

This striking conceit is an amalgamation of two powerful literary allusions, each invoked for different reasons. For the vertiginous spatial quality of the novice’s perilous first flight, Keats draws on the moment in Book Two of *Paradise Lost* where Satan, departing Hell for the long journey to Earth, plunges into Chaos, where a chance updraft prevents him from falling for eternity. Spreading his “sail-broad vans” (2.927), Satan ascends into the “surging smoke” (2.928); unable to gain any lift, he falters over a “vast vacuity” (2.932):

Fluttering his pennons vain plumb down he drops

Ten thousand fathoms deep, and to this hour

Down had been falling, had not by ill chance  
The strong rebuff of some tumultuous cloud  
Instinct with fire and nitre hurried him  
As many miles aloft. (2.933-8)

Keats draws on the imagery of Satan's voyage to express the nature of emotions in a life unsupported by knowledge. But Keats' wingless fledgling is not Milton's pinioned Satan, and it would be a mistake to suggest that Keats intended to attribute a Satanic moral quality to the innocent life. That would be to misread an allusion evoked primarily for its gusto.

For the moral underpinnings of Keats' metaphor, we have to look to the phrase "bare shouldered Creature," reminiscent of the "poor bare, forked animal" which King Lear considers in Act 3, Scene 4 of Shakespeare's play – a work that rests very near to the heart of Keats' aesthetic and moral sensibility. If we believe Keats' sonnet, the play was in fact the crucible in which Keat's fascination with romance gave way to more serious matter: "the fierce dispute / betwixt damnation and impassion'd clay" (5-6).

At this moment in the play to which Keats alludes, Lear is standing wet and cold before a hovel on a heath. Two ungrateful daughters have dispossessed him of all his retainers, the last vestiges of the power he once possessed and so foolishly gave up, and turned him out of doors. He meets Edgar, who, disguised as a madman, tells a garbled tale of profound mistreatment by others, a cruelty disproportionate to his crimes. Though the tale is barely intelligible, it elicits from the fallen king a sympathetic response, and he begins to contemplate "unaccommodated man." "Is man no more than this?" Lear wonders. "Thou owest the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume." Contrasting Edgar with himself, Kent, and the fool, he exclaims, "Ha! Here's three on 's are

sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself.” In a profound act of sympathy and solidarity, Lear removes his clothes. “Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here” (3.4.91-7 *passim*).

What does this have to do with Keats? I argue that by invoking a phrase reminiscent of Lear’s famous speech in 3.4, Keats is showing that the hard shift from a life of sensations to one simultaneously cracked yet buttressed by knowledge involves an intellectual and moral transformation, and that Lear’s transformation on heath is a type or symbol of this. What, precisely, is this transformation? A new consciousness of the pain and suffering that mars the world. A consciousness of the tenderness and vulnerability of the naked human frame, protected by so little from the elements. In a word, mortal consciousness. For Lear, two royal daughters couldn’t provide this protection. What safety net can the rest of humanity depend on to catch it should it fall?

The speech that most clearly encapsulates this new consciousness in Lear occurs just a few lines earlier in the scene. In a soliloquy that must have resonated deeply with Keats, the embittered king addresses all the “poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,” wondering how they will survive the night. “How,” he asks, “shall your houseless heads and unfed sides, / Your loop’d and window’d raggedness, defend you / From seasons such as these?” (3.4.28-32 *passim*). It is undoubtedly a moment of profound mortal consciousness, wherein a king who until now has been largely insulated from the hardships endured by the majority of his subjects, suddenly encounters the brutal strength of these hardships. Lear’s mortal consciousness leads him to recognize the ways he has been remiss as king. “O, I have ta’en / Too little care of this!” he exclaims, referring to the suffering of the poor (3.4.32-33). Switching to the imperative mood, Lear orders pomp to amend itself by taking a dose of sympathy:

Take physic, pomp;

Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just. (3.4.33-36)

In 3.4, Lear's suffering triggers a moment of deep mortal consciousness and moral clarity. Plunged into circumstances that enable sympathy with the plight of "poor naked wretches," Lear issues a rhetorically powerful yet dramatically impotent command to power to mend its customary ways. A powerless command, but one that, if heeded by others, might result in the material improvement of their lives.

I must pause here to address questions that my brief discussion of *King Lear* has surely raised in the reader's mind. Should it surprise us to find in Shakespeare an example of what I have described in this projected as Romantic mortal consciousness? Might it suggest that Romantic mortal consciousness is not exclusively the property of Romantic writers? These questions shouldn't alarm us. In Chapters One and Two, I discussed the fluidity in Western attitudes toward death and dying. The shifts delineated by Ariès were gradual, not seismic in nature. Indeed, in Byron's work, we find traces of everything from the good death of antiquity to the dirty or invisible death characteristic of modernity.

The image of Lear on the heath does not undermine the idea of a Romantic mortal consciousness. Rather, it underscores its most salient quality: that mortal consciousness compels an individual to think on human inequality and suffering and endeavor, in ways that make the most sense to that individual, to alleviate it now – in the present – rather than leaving it up to heaven or god to sort through. For Keats, that way was through study and application: presumably, the study of poetry and execution of gradually expanding poetic powers. In the letter to Taylor written April 24, 1818, Keats said:



I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing the world some good—some do it with their society—some with their wit—some with their benevolence—some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good humor on all they meet and in a thousand ways all equally dutiful to the command of Great Nature—there is but one way for me—the road lies th[r]ough application study and thought. (88)

Lear, a fallen king, declares that it the responsibility of powerful men and woman to “show the heavens more just,” that is to say, to seek actively to reconcile reality with the ideas of human justice originating in a belief in an omnipotent and benevolent creator. This form of mortal consciousness was more common in the wake of the Enlightenment, but it certainly is not the exclusive domain of Romantic writers. Indeed, it is not surprising at all to discover elements of it in Shakespeare, whose body of work (contrasted with Milton’s, for example) feels less the product of doctrine than of lived experience, and it shouldn’t surprise us that, for Keats, Shakespeare proved instrumental in his discovery or apprehension of what I have called Romantic mortal consciousness. As Keats told Haydon in one of his earliest surviving letters, “I am very near Agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare is enough for us” (14).

To put Lear’s transformation in Keatsian terms, the naked king undergoes in 3.4 that sharpening of vision Keats describes in his conceit of the “Mansion of Many Apartments,” which occupies the next part of his letter to Reynolds of May 3, 1818. This section deserves to be quoted in its entirety, for it constructs, with a profound visual and spatial image of physical movement through chambers that darken even as they illuminate the mind, the idea of intellectual growth at the core of Keatsian soul-making and mortal consciousness:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Aparments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first

we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it: but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight. However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous sharpening of one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist.—*We* are now in that state—We feel the “burden of the mystery.” (95)

One could write about these lines for pages, and many have, but let it suffice to point out a few crucial elements. One is deliberate or willed ignorance, summed up by the image of delay in the “infant or thoughtless Chamber” and then again in the “Chamber of Maiden Thought.” The untutored man remains in the infant or thoughtless chamber “a long while, notwithstanding the doors of the Second” being “wide open,” and “think[s] of delaying” in that chamber “for ever in delight.” Opposed to the tendency to remain in the infant or thoughtless chamber is an impelling force, which Keats calls the “thinking principle” and considers inherent to rational beings. But there is no commensurate force compelling the

thinking man to move beyond the second chamber into the numerous “dark passages” branching out from it, even as their shadows creep into the chamber, the consequence of a widening experience of life that teaches the thinking man about pain and suffering. Movement into the dark passages where, among other specters, the problem of evil rears its ugly head is completely voluntary and requires the effort of a special spirit, one capable of navigating the mist and feeling the mystery at the core of human experience. “To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote “Tintern Abbey” and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those Dark passage [...]. Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton.” Milton’s failure was that he “did not think into the human heart, as Wordsworth has done” (95). Keats does not mention Shakespeare in this part of the letter, but once can feel certain, based on the impact *King Lear* had on him, that Keats would have placed the dramatic poet next to Wordsworth in the deepest, dark passages of human experience.

In a letter written a year later to his brother and sister in America, Keats reflects on the spiritual consequences of exploring the dark passages of life. They consist of nothing less than the tempering of the human soul:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is ‘a vale of tears’ from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making” Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it)... (249-50)

“The use of the world,” Keats remarks, breathlessly dashing off (as on so many of his letters) a phrase of incomparable gravity and power, is the fashioning of souls through individual experience of pain, suffering, and hardship, in concert with all the pleasures of human life. The vale of soul-making is the place in Keats’ moral geography where mortal consciousness arises and takes shape.

Keats’ notion of soul-making is embedded in a frame of deep religious skepticism, which identifies it as a manifestation of Romantic mortal consciousness. He pulls the rug out from under redemption, calling it an “arbitrary interposition of God” and dismissing it as a “circumscribed straightened notion.” And in the parenthetical comment that follows the great phrase “the use of the world,” Keats takes for granted the immortality of the soul so he can explain how the soul arose. In other words, he fashions a deliberate tautology, deploying a logical fallacy to underscore the notion that, while God may have produced the soul, only lived experience in a most imperfect world develops and strengthens it. Keats says:

I say ‘*Soul making*’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls ~~the~~ till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. I[n]telligences are atoms of perception—they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God—how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chrystain religion—or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation... (250)

Keats developed his notion of soul-making in the spring of 1819, a year after the famous “Mansion of Many Apartments” letter, but his spiritual embrace of human suffering is implicit in that earlier letter. Together, these letters and the moral philosophy whose evolution they trace help us to understand the fundamental problem with *Hyperion*. In that poem, Keats had started off by describing the suffering of the fallen gods before shifting to the birth of Apollo. It isn’t difficult to imagine how, in retrospect, the suffering of the overthrown Titans might have been more compelling to Keats, especially when we consider how he described that suffering: as a mortalizing process, something that made divine beings almost human.

*Keats in the Vale of Mortal Gods*

In *Hyperion*, Keats describes the fallen gods in curiously mortal terms. For the poet, this was a way of expressing their newfound weakness. Over the course of 1818 and 1819, however, this “mortalization” of the deposed gods grew increasingly problematic, because Keats could not reconcile it with his developing thoughts on the profitable spiritual effects of human suffering. This, I argue, is the problem that *The Fall of Hyperion* attempted to solve.

Near the end of Book One, Hyperion, fatigued by an unfamiliar sorrow, stretches himself out on a bank of clouds beneath the stars. His father Coelus addresses him; reflecting on the sad condition of the Titans, he wonders if Hyperion will be the next to fall. “Art thou, too, near such doom?” (1.327). Coelus fears that Hyperion may be, not on account of any prophecy or portent, but because of a simple but profound change that has taken place in his behavior. Hyperion is being tossed by passions, upsetting the emotional equilibrium described by Enceladus in Book Two as fundamental characteristic of divinity:

“To bear all naked truths, / And to envisage circumstance, all calm, / That is the top of sovereignty” (2.203-5). If this is the “top” of sovereignty, the bottom is summed up by what Thea sees on Saturn’s face when they arrive in the shady vale where the other Titans have assembled. Their dejected condition scars Saturn’s countenance:

There saw she direst strife; the supreme God  
At war with all the frailty of grief,  
Of rage, of fear, anxiety, revenge,  
Remorse, spleen, hope, but most of all despair. (2.92-95)

These passions are characteristic of humans, not of gods. All of the other Titans had begun to display them before they fell from the heavens. These passions toss Saturn when he arrives at their gathering place. Now Hyperion is experiencing them, too. This is the essence of Coelus’ reply to his own question about whether Hyperion must fall. He says:

Vague fear there is:  
For I have seen my sons most unlike Gods.  
Divine ye were created, and divine  
In sad demeanour, solemn, undisturb’d,  
Unruffled, like high Gods, ye liv’d and ruled:  
Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath;  
Actions of rage and passion; even as  
I see them, on the mortal world beneath,  
In men who die.—This is the grief, O Son!  
Sad sign of ruin, sudden dismay, and fall! (1.327-36)

“Fear,” “wrath,” “rage,” and “passion”: this set of nouns powerfully attests to the change in the once “undisturb’d” and “unruffled” carriage of the one unfelled Titan. In Book Two,

the narrator characterizes all of the Titans with similar displays of emotional disequilibrium. A “shatter’d rib of rock,” the victim of Creus’s “ponderous iron mace,” speaks to the rage of that Titan. A serpent was Iapetus’ weapon of choice, but in wrath he has strangled it, enraged that “the creature could not spit / Its poison in the eyes of conquering Jove.” Cottus lays prone on the ground like common Bedlam inmate, grinding his head on a rock “with open mouth / And eyes at horrid working” (2.41-52). Enceladus, Keats’ version of Beelzebub, burns with desire for revenge:

Once tame and mild  
As grazing ox unworried in the meads;  
Now tiger-passion’d, lion-thoughted, wroth,  
He meditated, plotted, and even now  
Was hurling mountains in that second war,  
Not long delay’d, that scar’d the younger Gods  
To hide themselves in forms of beast and bird. (2.66-72)

The image of Enceladus “hurling mountains” at divine forces alludes to Milton’s famously uneasy description of the artillery deployed during the battle in heaven.

Like their fellow Titans, Saturn and Hyperion feel sadness, rage, and despair, but Thea and Saturn, respectively, detect in their countenance another feeling: hope. This word normally has positive connotations, but these curdle when applied to a god. For why should a god have to hope? Hope necessarily involves a wish or desire for change: an improvement of circumstances, a change in fortune, a reversal of some turn of events, or a return to a previous state of things. Divinity is incompatible with hope. To hope is fundamentally to be insecure, for it is to admit a degree of impotence. Once a god begins to hope, divinity is

lost beyond recovery. This is why the narrator's Miltonic description of Asia in Book Two, to whom he compares Hope leaning on her trusty anchor, is so poignant:

More thought than woe was in her dusky face,  
For she was prophesying of her glory;  
And in her wide imagination stood  
Palm-shaded temples, and high rival fanes,  
By Oxus or in Ganges' sacred isles.  
Even as Hope upon her anchor leans,  
So leant she, not so fair, upon a tusk. (2.56-62)

The other reason this passage is so poignant is that it depicts a moment of sheer escapist fantasy in a divine or formerly divine being. Nowhere else in Keats' poems or letters does one discover a more hapless portrayal of the power of the imagination.

Yet nothing in the poem captures the magnitude of the Titans' fall more powerfully, or expresses the acuteness of their suffering more poignantly, than the varieties of pain that they experience, all too familiar to us but quite new to them. This pain takes different forms. Stunned by Saturn's sad condition at the beginning of Book One, Thea feels a pain similar to heartache, that deep-seated throbbing, half physical, half psychological, felt by mortal individuals. The speaker says, "One hand she press'd upon that aching spot / Where beats the human heart, as if just there, / Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain" (1.42-4).<sup>8</sup> The narrator's subjunctive adverbial clause beginning "as if" suggests his reluctance to admit that Thea's sensation is indeed human pain. But all doubt is cast aside in Book Two when Thea guides Saturn to the rocky "nest of pain" (2.90) where the Titans have assembled. There we see the

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<sup>8</sup> Contrast this with Saturn's account of the "heartache" experienced by Gods in their prime, a kind of divine throbbing assuaged by doing good: "I am smother'd up, / "And buried from all godlike exercise / ... / And all those acts which Deity supreme / Doth ease its heart of love in" (2.106-12).



unspeakably horrible condition of the “brawniest” gods. They have been “chained in torture” (2.18) both to punish them and to prevent them from executing further hostilities:

Coeus, and Gyges, and Briareüs,  
Typhon, and Dolor, and Porphyriion,  
With many more, the brawniest in assault,  
Were pent in regions of laborious breath;  
Dungeon'd in opaque element, to keep  
Their clenched teeth still clench'd, and all their limbs  
Lock'd up like veins of metal, crampt and screw'd;  
Without a motion, save of their big hearts  
Heaving in pain, and horribly convuls'd  
With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse. (2.19-28)

The seismic contrast between the imprisoned God's clenched, fixed postures and the strenuous heaving of their “big hearts” powerfully evokes the intensity of their pain. (Here again, Keats deploys one of the simplest words in the English language to achieve a powerful emotional effect.) The pent-up Titans cannot even attempt to dissipate their pain, as sick or tortured bodies often do, by thrashing about.

As one delves deeper into Book Two, it becomes apparent that “fallen divinity” means the loss of divinity, and that the fallen gods have become mortal. When Saturn joins the others at their nest of woe, Thea sees the passions moving in his face, and the narrator says: “Fate / Had pour'd a mortal oil upon his head, / A disanointing poison” (2.96-8). Keats coins a word to encapsulate the Titans' loss of power; while Milton has used the word “disanoint,” its participial form appears in *Hyperion* for the first time in the English language (*OED*). The fact that this political loss entails a physical change becomes unmistakably clear

two lines later; for the first time in the poem, the narrator draws a direct comparison between Saturn and mortal human beings:

As with us mortal men, the laden heart  
Is persecuted more, and fever'd more,  
When it is nighing to the mournful house  
Where other hearts are sick of the same bruise;  
So Saturn, as he walk'd into the midst,  
Felt faint... (2.101-6)

There is something unpleasant and embarrassing in the directness of Keats' Miltonic simile. It's as though the narrator had stripped away Saturn's clothing and shown him to us naked. Or perhaps it's that the simile confirms what the narrator had suggested forty lines into the poem when Thea, standing before the sleeping Saturn, lamented that the Earth, the "ancient mother" (21) of the Titan king, could no longer recognize him as a divine being. It's almost as though Saturn is indistinguishable from the cold river sand where he lies.

The emotional effect of the poem is even more devastating when Saturn arrives where the other Titans have assembled. Here the speaker applies the language of mortal pain directly to him:

Old Saturn lifted up  
His faded eyes, and saw his kingdom gone,  
And all the gloom and sorrow of the place,  
And that fair kneeling Goddess; and then spake,  
As with a palsied tongue, and while his beard  
Shook horrid with such aspen-malady... (2.89-94)

The predominant symptom of Saturn's new condition is a kind of shaking or twitching, which manifests even in his "palsied tongue," a discomforting of image not only of age but also of impotence, given the customary correlation between a god's words and reality: a god speaks, and it is so. Thunderstruck by his new condition, Saturn has trouble recognizing himself and asks Thea for confirmation of his identity:

Look up, and tell me if this feeble shape  
Is Saturn's; tell me, if thou hear'st the voice  
Of Saturn; tell me, if this wrinkling brow,  
Naked and bare of its great diadem,  
Peers like the front of Saturn. (2.98-102)

Saturn's fear of having lost his identity manifests itself as a single, awful question, one that reminds us again of Shakespeare's tragedy about an old king buried from all kingly exercise: "Thea! Thea! Thea! where is Saturn?" (134). Inflamed by his own words, Saturn arises from the ground, but the exertion causes his eyes to bulge, his face to sweat, and his voice to fade (1.135-8).

Reading the narrator's vivid description of Saturn's physical ailments, one cannot help recalling Keats' gratitude, expressed in the letter for May 3, 1818, for having saved his books from when he was a student at Guy's Hospital: "Every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated toward a great whole. [...] I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards" (92). Indeed, commentators have detected the influence of Keats' medical training in his powerful description of the disoriented Titan.

Thus, it is not surprising that when Keats shifts focus to the sun-god Hyperion midway through Book One, he draws a connection the Titan's impending loss of power with

the arrival of physical, that is to say human, pain. Hyperion is, of course, the one member of “the whole mammoth-brood” who still keeps “his sov’reignty, and rule, and majesty” (164-5).<sup>9</sup> While he continues to enjoy man’s worship, expressed by the “incense, teeming up” (167) from the earth, he is unnerved by a sense that his position in heaven is “unsecure” (168). Because he has not yet fallen, this illness, as it were, initially presents not as physical pain but as something like sensory displeasure or discomfort. For example, the narrator explains how “savour of poisonous brass and metal sick” ruin Hyperion’s “ample palate” when he tastes “the spicy wreaths / Of incense, breath’d aloft from sacred hills” where man still worships him (2.186-9 *passim*).

Hyperion’s insecurity also manifests itself as psychical pain, a kind of superstitious dread. Many commentators on *Paradise Lost* including Stanley Fish have pointed out that man’s fall from grace is preceded by a mental or psychical fall. This is also true of Hyperion, whose fall is foreshadowed by feelings of trepidation to which the narrator’s human readers can relate all too easily:

For as among us mortals omens drear  
Fright and perplex, so also shuddered he—  
Not at dog’s howl, or gloom-bird’s hated screech,  
Or the familiar visiting of one  
Upon the first toll of his passing-bell,  
Or prophesyings of the midnight lamp;  
But horrors, portion’d to a giant nerve,  
Oft made Hyperion ache. (169-76)

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<sup>9</sup> This line reminds us of the mammoth’s importance as a cultural phenomenon during the early nineteenth century.

The phrase “horrors, portion’d to a giant nerve” is the masterstroke of this sublime passage; in it, the mental and the physical, the unreal and the corporeal, the human and the divine, combine and coalesce. Still divine yet “unsecure” in his divinity, Hyperion straddles these dichotomies; like Cain, he is the inhabitant of a tragically liminal space on the verge of a fresh fall. Yet if this weren’t enough to convince us of Hyperion’s impending doom, Keats strategically deploys the verb “ache” at the end of the sentence, dexterously backstitching to the suffering of Thea and Saturn in Book One. In the ensuing lines, Hyperion’s discomfort morphs into wrath, the supremely fallen emotion epitomized in Book Two by Enceladus. The narrator describes Hyperion’s return to his solar palace at the completion of day:

He enter’d, but he enter’d full of wrath;  
His flaming robes stream’d out beyond his heels,  
And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,  
That scar’d away the meek ethereal Hours  
And made their dove-wings tremble. (213-7)

The adverbial phrase “as if of earthly fire” shows that the cancer eating away at the sun god is consuming the very essence of his being. Moments later, Hyperion releases a cry of woe, in spite of his customary reserve: “His voice leapt out, despite of godlike curb” (2.226).

However, Hyperion’s mortalizing process only begins when he begins to feel real physical pain. This pain follows quickly on the heels of sensory and psychological discomfort:

And from the mirror’d level where he stood  
A mist arose, as from a scummy marsh.  
At this, through all his bulk an agony  
Crept gradual, from the feet unto the crown,  
Like a lithe serpent vast and muscular

Making slow way, with head and neck convuls'd

From over-strained might. (2.257-63)

When revising *Hyperion*, Keats never reached these lines; *The Fall of Hyperion* breaks off with Hyperion streaming through his celestial palace, trailing less than celestial fire. One wonders what Keats would have done with them, whether he would possibly have expanded them; after all, this image of a giant agony working its way slowly from toe to crown is precisely what the narrator of the revised poem has to undergo before Moneta allows him to behold the sad spectacle behind her eyes.

These images of attenuated time point toward another technique Keats uses to express the magnitude of the Titans' despair. At the end of her long speech in Book One, Thea voices a poignant complaint to "aching time," telling how each passing second, every one of them "big as years," renews the full weight of their suffering:

O aching time! O moments big as years!

All as ye pass swell out the monstrous truth,

And press it so upon our weary griefs

That unbelief has not a space to breathe. (1.64-7)

The phrase "aching time," a temporal manifestation of the "aching spot" (1.42) in her breast, suggests that the very dimensions of the Titans' world have mortalized and become human. At the end of her speech, Thea lays her head at Saturn's feet. They remain in this posture for so long, the narrator says, that a passerby might mistake them for "natural sculpture:"

One moon, with alteration slow, had shed

Her silver seasons four upon the night,

And still these two were postured motionless,

Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern;

The frozen God still couchant on the earth,  
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet... (83-8)

It is tempting to speculate that Keats, when composing these lines, had in mind the image of the massive basalt columns on the island of Staffa, which he had visited with Charles Brown during their tour of Scotland in early 1818. Pursuing this thought, one wonders whether the forest of columns in Moneta's sanctuary in *The Fall of Hyperion* are rooted in this excursion to the legendary site of Fingal's Cave.

Crucially, in the *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats redeploys the image of attenuated time, which defines the suffering of Saturn and Thea, to describe the speaker's experience of this woeful natural sculpture. Keats writes:

Long, long, those two were postured motionless,  
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave  
Of their own power. A long awful time  
I looked upon them; still they were the same;  
The frozen God still bending to the earth,  
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet;  
Moneta silent. (1.382-8)

The poet's repetition of the adverbs "long" and "still" suspends all action implied by the gerunds "bending" and "weeping," thus rendering this scene a hellish version of the frozen yet cheerful one captured for all time on the Grecian Urn. The speaker continues:

Without stay or prop  
But my own weak mortality, I bore  
The load of this eternal quietude,  
The unchanging gloom, and the three fixed shapes

Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon.  
For by my burning brain I measured sure  
Her silver seasons shedded on the night,  
And every day by day methought I grew  
More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I praye'd  
Intense, that death would take me from the vale  
And all its burdens. Gaspings with despair  
Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself:  
Until old Saturn rais'd his faded eyes,  
And look'd around, and saw his kingdom gone... (1.388-401)

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the suffering of the speaker, conceived here temporal terms, figures as predominantly as the suffering of the Titans. But if the suffering of the gods is a sign of their fallen condition, it signals something very different for the speaker. This brings us back to the main subject of the chapter: the purpose of pain and suffering in a fallen world. It is now time to see how Keats grafted his philosophy of soul-making onto the unfinished revision of *Hyperion*.

### *Keats in Hyperion*

Near the beginning of this chapter, I described the moment in *The Fall of Hyperion* where Keats re-enters his earlier poem. My underlying argument has been that the lines leading up to this reentry show Keats reflecting on and continuing to work through ideas that had been preoccupying him since in 1817 and 1818: the value of life and the place of art in a world marred by pain and suffering, and the closely related concept of soul-making.



Before Keats can behold the suffering of the fallen Titans, deposited in the dark chambers of Moneta's mind, he must prove to her – and to himself – that he has the power to withstand the sight of the Titans' appalling circumstances. Furthermore, he must prove that imaginatively viewing it is not an act of poetical or emotional solipsism. In other words, he must prove that he possesses mortal consciousness.

The narrator's journey back into the poem begins in an arbor near Moneta's temple. Before that, however, we have the invocation, one of the most mysterious and challenging passages of the poem, and a relic, I argue, of a younger poet's anxieties. *The Fall of Hyperion* begins with these lines:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect; the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at heaven: pity these have not  
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf  
The shadows of melodious utterance.  
But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;  
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable charm  
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say  
"Thou art no poet; may'st not tell thy dreams"?  
Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd  
And been well-nurtured in his mother's tongue.

Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse

Be poet's or fanatics will be known

When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave. (1.1-18)

These lines pinpoint two of the central preoccupations of the revised poem: the nature of the poet and his art, and the problem of mortality with respect to art. But how do Keats' prefatory remarks relate to the body of the poem, and how are the two themes connected? These are hard questions to answer. At the core of these lines are three crucial assumptions: that all sensible beings, even savages, have "visions" and "dreams" and are compelled to express them; that these dreams are functional equivalents to the works of "imagination" created by the poet, though they are unrecorded; and that only the poet's art, the "fine spell of words" described by the speaker as "shadows of melodious utterance," can preserve these dreams from the silencing power of that other enchanter, death. Ultimately, the speaker says in lines 16-18, the only thing that can distinguish the poet from the fanatic, savage, and all other natural dreamers is the staying power of his dreams. What gives the poet's dreams this staying power? Words, of course – the legible signs of immaterial dreams, which one can "[trace] upon vellum or wild Indian leaf" (5) – but also something extraneous to those words that the poet brings to bear upon them: a facility with and love for them. But that isn't all. Lines 16-18 also suggest that the ultimate status of the poet's dreams depends on some quality that I will provisionally call their enduring communicability to other human beings. For, as the speaker realizes, "Whether this dream now purpos'd to rehearse / Be poet's or fanatic's will be known / When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave" (16-18).

What can facilitate the communicability of a poet's words after his death, and why is his death required in his first place? While the answers to these questions are unclear, Keats appears to be thinking about the judgment that posterity makes about all work of art,

including his own. But the opportunity to have one's work judged by time is not a given. Lines 1-18 describe poetry as something fundamentally ephemeral in nature; they highlight its fortuitous and accidental quality. All sensible beings dream and have visions, but only those who possess language and have learned to love it have the potential to be poets. Yet even with poets, dreams and visions temporarily preserved from the oblivion to which death sends its creators are only "shadows" of song "trac'd" upon a surface that may or may not survive. Furthermore, the speaker will not be present when the verdict is announced, and the verdict will have as much to do with the graces of time and the opinions of others as it will with the poet's poetic ingenuity, now silent and no longer able to command his scribe. The quietly somber tone of these lines speaks to a state of ultimate powerlessness that the future passive verb "will [...] be known" grammatically encapsulates.

But the question remains how this revised introduction fits with the rest of the revised poem. To me the relationship is not entirely clear. The questions raised during the speaker's encounter with Moneta at the center of the poem – the second most important textual crux in Keats' body of work, after the closing lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" – are not the same as whether the speaker is a poet or a fanatic, and they have nothing to do with the enduring communicability or staying power of his work.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they involve the speaker's relationship with individuals who seek pleasure instead of contemplating sadness, and perhaps with other poets who, in committing their words to vellum, profane the name of poetry. The encounter between the speaker and Moneta preserves some of the language of the introduction – the primary question at hand is whether the speaker is a "poet" or a "dreamer" – but neither persona is defined by the same qualities or attributes as the different

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<sup>10</sup> Keats may have intended to delete lines 186-211 from the revised poem, in which he condemns "all mock lyrists, large self worshipers, / And careless Hectorers in proud bad verse" (1.207-8). The evidence, however, is unclear.

kinds of dreamers described in the introduction. The encounter with Moneta introduces an entirely new set of questions and speculations about the relationship between the poet, his productions, and the inhabitants of the mundane world variously seeking pleasure or dealing with sorrow. These latter questions swallow up the comparatively minor question about the enduring communicability of this speaker's poetry, for the nature of his enquiry has changed from the durability of his words to their purpose in a world that, to put it bluntly, can seem so unfriendly to poetry.

The main body of *The Fall of Hyperion* also treats mortality from a different point of view than the invocation. The first eighteen lines describe death as a kind of solvent in which the resilience of a poet's works will ultimately be tested. In other words, death is the necessary first step in a great poetical reckoning. In anticipation of this, the death of the body is nearly lost from view. There is a latent awareness that the poet's scribe, his "warm [...] hand," will no longer be operable, buried in the cold ground, but there is no indication that this prospect itself is any real source of discomfort. I would gladly undergo this thing called death, the speaker seems to imply, if only I could count on a favorable verdict.

The main body of the poem treats mortality in an altogether different light. Here, death is not something to be borne and perhaps even embraced so one's poetic reputation can be tested; instead, mortality becomes a subject with which a poet must reckon so that he or she can write poetry relevant to its time and circumstance. The fundamental question that the new *Hyperion* seeks to answer in the dramatic meeting between the speaker and Moneta, during which the speaker nearly dies from cold on the broad steps leading up to her altar, is not whether he is worthy of a place in the temple of poetic fame, but whether he is worthy of his own poetic vision. That vision, of course, was *Hyperion*, the epic poem to which Keats turned his attention in 1818, after finishing (or rather bidding farewell to) *Endymion*, and also

while nursing his brother Tom through the final stages of tuberculosis. This poem was to serve as a second test his poetic mettle, but by late 1818, as we have seen, Keats was greatly dissatisfied with the direction it was taking. Did he have the right to grapple with a subject like this one, when there was real suffering in the world? More importantly, could a poem like *Hyperion* somehow assuage this suffering? These are the questions Keats was asking himself in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and he was still grappling with them near the end of his brief poetic career. He never finished the poem, and the question of whether he meant to leave it a fragment, while interesting, leads one astray from its central preoccupation. The poem is essentially an exercise in self-scrutiny that would determine whether Keats could justify his poetic vocation. In many ways, then, it was like another *Endymion*, but a poem considerably further along the path to the Temple of Fame – though its author may not have felt this at the time.

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, this journey begins in a wooded landscape, where the speaker comes upon the remnants of a feast on a mossy mound. The speaker describes it as “refuse of a meal / By angel tasted, or our mother Eve” (30-1). Seized by hunger and thirst, he eats and drinks; quickly intoxicated, he sinks into a deep slumber. Awakening, he rises up “as if with wings” (59) and finds himself in the vicinity of an “old sanctuary” (62). Because of the reference to Eve in line 31, this sequence of events could be interpreted as a reenactment of the fall. But an allusion must help explain passage. What insights would an allusion to *Paradise Lost* provide here? What prohibition is the speaker ignoring? What is his transgression, and against whom? What are the consequences of his actions? The text does not provide immediate answers to any of these questions. As we shall see, the encounter with Moneta fills in some of the details, but it also destabilizes the allusion.

Of course, it is not even clear we should be reaching after the allusion or working through its implications. After all, the sequence of events depicted in lines 28-57 departs in crucial ways from the story of the fall. Perhaps the most striking difference is the “vessel” of juice the speaker finds and the toast he proposes as he drinks from it. Keats writes:

[T]hereby  
Stood a cool vessel of transparent juice  
Sipp'd by the wander'd bee, the which I took,  
And, pledging all the mortals of the world,  
And all the dead whose names are in our lips,  
Drank. That full draught is parent of my theme.

This is not in the account of the fall. It couldn't be. Mortality was the punishment for Eve's transgression; before that moment in time, death was not a part of the human condition. It was not even known until Cain murdered Abel – a fact Byron exploits so effectively in *Cain*. Keats' speaker, by contrast, is deeply cognizant of death, as the invocation made clear. Thus, the questions one must ask are why the speaker “pledges” the dead as he drinks, and what this “full draught” has to do with the narrative that unfolds. The encounter with Moneta suggests some answers, but to understand them fully it will prove necessary to have traced, as we have done in this chapter, Keats' thoughts concerning mortality and the uses of poetry in the years and months leading up to this attempt to revise *Hyperion*. For the speaker here is claiming possession of mortal consciousness, an understanding of the pain of the human condition. Whether the pledge is sincere – whether the speaker has the spiritual fiber needed to sustain it – is something Moneta will test.

The most salient characteristic of the sanctuary in which the speaker finds himself is its staggering age, which nearly defies comprehension. This may be an allusion, though I can

find no evidence to support it, to contemporaneous ideas about geological deep time, with which Byron and Shelley were, of course, quite familiar. If it were an allusion, it would give Keats' interest in time and temporality in the poem a contemporaneous intellectual basis.

Inside the sanctuary, the speaker discovers a vast trove of fine objects:

Upon the marble at my feet there lay  
Store of strange vessels and large draperies,  
Which needs had been of dyed asbestos wove,  
Or in that place the moth could not corrupt,  
So white the linen... (73-7)

Stranger than the shapes of the vessels or the unusual fineness of the linens is the fact that they all seem to have been abandoned, like the remnants of the feast. The inverted syntax and the long list of nouns enact the physical confusion the speaker describes. He says: "All in a mingled heap confus'd there lay / Robes, golden tongs, censer and chafing dish, / Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelries" (78-80). The nature and use of these objects becomes gradually apparent: they are religious implements. Why have they been abandoned? The simplest explanation is that these are relics of the worship of the fallen Titan deities; there is no longer anyone to use them. But this doesn't help us to understand the one detail about these objects that the speaker discloses: the somber images on some of the tapestries. Of these the speaker remarks that "in some, distinct / Ran imageries from a sombre loom" (71-2). To my knowledge, no critic has explained why the tone of the tapestries is described as "somber." Perhaps they contain a prophesy of the Titans' fall, which Keats' *Hyperion* had set out to trace. Perhaps, in other words, they are a visual manifestation of the earlier poem.

As the speaker approaches the altar, he sees a figure engaged in a ritual of some sort, and he notices a flame. A powerful fragrance overwhelms him. Keats uses a Miltonic simile

to compares this fragrance to the first breath of spring, which gathers up and distributes the “frozen incense” of sleeping flowers, creating an air so fine and pleasant that mortality seems quite out of place, even to a dying man:

When in mid May the sickening East wind  
Shifts sudden to the south, the small warm rain  
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,  
And fills the air with so much pleasant health  
That even the dying man forgets his shroud;  
Even so that lofty sacrificial fire,  
Sending forth Maian incense, spread around  
Forgetfulness of everything but bliss,  
And clouded all the altar with soft smoke... (97-105)

Like the spring air, the incense from the altar spreads “forgetfulness of everything but bliss” (104). The sentiment described here feels vaguely out of place. Like the speaker’s account of his pledge, his description of the sanctuary’s air is permeated by a sense of mortality. To whom or to what should we ascribe it? The old and empty sanctuary itself, with its heaps of abandoned implements? Or does it tell us something about the speaker himself?

The encounter that follows between the speaker and Moneta helps guide us toward an answer. One of the most dramatic moments in the poem comes as the speaker tries to ascend the steps to her altar. Moneta’s first words to the speaker constitute a mortal threat: “If thou canst not ascend / These steps, die on that marble where thou art.” The speaker commences the hard task, and what follows is a sublime account of a near-death experience:

Prodigious seem’d the toil; the leaves were yet  
Burning,—when suddenly a palsied chill



Struck from the paved level up my limbs,  
And was ascending quick to put cold grasp  
Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat:  
I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek  
Stung my own ears—I strove hard to escape  
The numbness; strove hard to gain the lowest step.  
Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold  
Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;  
And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not.  
One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd  
The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd  
To pour in at the toes... (1.121-34)

Reading these lines aloud reminds us once again how a poem's formal and stylistic elements can enact and thus help create its thematic content. Consider the constellation of words evoking coldness or numbness or an inability to feel; consider the numerous plosives, which give these lines a panting quality indicative of shortness of breath; consider the repetition, which evokes the struggle the speaker is undergoing. Finally, consider the heavy accenting in lines 129-30, whose halting quality suggests the heart's struggle to continue beating.

In the lines that follow, Moneta explains why the speaker has survived the encounter. "None can usurp this height," she says, "But those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest" (1.147-9). In other words, the speaker survives because of the depth of his mortal consciousness. The speaker's "pledge" to the dead granted him access to Saturn's temple, over which Moneta presides. His grasp of the "miseries of the world" permitted him to ascend the steps. His sympathy for Moneta's plight has persuaded

her to grant him access to the original *Hyperion*. Having proven the depths of his mortal consciousness, the speaker can now reenter his old poem. Guided to the vale where Saturn lies, he will be overcome by a power “of enormous ken” to “take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye” can grasp color, shape, or size. To “take the depth of things” – this phrase is virtually synonymous with Romantic mortal consciousness.

After the speaker successfully mounts the stairs, Moneta confirms that he has experienced death. “Thou hast felt,” she says, “What ’tis to die and live again before / Thy fated hour” (141-3). But then she says, “That thou hadst power to do so / Is thy own safety; thou hast dated on / Thy doom” (143-5). What is this “power” that enables one to experience and withstand death, and how or why does the speaker possess it? The speaker demands elucidation, and Moneta answers him:

“None can usurp this height,” return’d that shade,  
“But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest.  
All else who find a haven in the world,  
Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,  
If by a chance into this fane they come,  
Rot on the pavement where thou rottedst half.” (1.147-53)

In this crucial passage, Keats establishes a contrast between two kinds of individuals: thinking souls who perceive the “miseries of the world” and are bothered by them, and thoughtless souls who find a haven in the world where they can forget about them; the latter would die, the speaker says, if they tried to approach the altar. This exchange discloses some important information about the speaker. It tells us about his relationship with the world’s miseries: he feels them deeply; they torment him. This provides the key need to unlock the

speaker's mysterious gesture in the arbor, the "pledge" he made to all the world's dead before drinking from the vessel. The speaker of *The Fall of Hyperion* is an individual deeply burdened by mortal consciousness: by an awareness of mortality, of the miseries of human life that end only with death, of all the ills that flesh is heir to. Mortal consciousness prevents him from finding a "haven" in the world; it hangs upon him like an albatross.

This exchange also helps us understand the effect of the altar's incense, which "spread round / Forgetfulness of everything but bliss." Its fragrance had caused the speaker to forget for a while the miseries of the world suffered in the present by the living and in the past by its dead, all of which had been weighing on his mind in the arbor. Indeed, Moneta reveals that the temple had been established as a kind of temporary shelter or refuge for those burdened by mortal consciousness. "That happiness be somewhat shar'd," she says,

Such things as thou art are admitted oft  
Into like gardens thou didst pass erewhile,  
And suffer'd in these temples: for that cause  
Thou standest safe beneath this statue's knees." (177-81)

Admitted into these gardens, and suffered in these temples, to enjoy a modicum of happiness – but to what end?

This is another difficult question raised by the text. Still another is the speaker's apparent solitude. Moneta says that individuals like the speaker are "admitted oft" into this realm established for those who feel the miseries of the world. Thus, the speaker is surprised not to see anyone else there:

"Are there not thousands in the world," said I,  
Encourag'd by the sooth voice of the shade,  
"Who love their fellows even to the death;

Who feel the giant agony of the world;  
And more, like slaves to poor humanity,  
Labour for mortal good? I sure should see  
Other men here; but I am here alone.” (154-60)

In response, Moneta sharply distinguishes between those individuals who “labour for mortal good” and individuals like the speaker, “vision’ries” and “dreamers weak” whom she summarily dismisses:

“Those whom thou spak’st of are no vision’ries,”  
Rejoin’d that voice; “they are no dreamers weak;  
They seek no wonder but the human face,  
No music but a happy noted voice;  
They come not here, they have no thought to come;  
And thou art here, for thou art less than they... (1.161-6)

“They come not here, they have no thought to come,” Moneta says, apparently referring to other individuals who also “labour for mortal good.” Who are these people? What do they do? Are they the “thoughtless” (151) people who manage to find a “haven” (150) in a world of misery? “They seek no wonder but the human face,” Moneta says, “No music but a happy noted voice” (163-4). The meaning of these lines is difficult to tease out, because they seem like negative judgments, even moral accusations. But to read the lines this way is to presume that it is morally culpable to find a “haven” in a world of misery and woe. And it’s not clear that Keats believes this to be the case. It might be that there are two types of thoughtless individuals: the truly thoughtless, who exists in willed ignorance of the world’s evils, and those who are cognizant of these evils and may even have constructed a life that aims to remedy them but, for better or for worse, never feel them as deeply as the poet.

The lines that come between the speaker's ascent up Moneta's steps and his re-entry into Keats' earlier poem constitute an anxious meditation on the purpose of poetry. Moneta asks the speaker, "What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe, / To the great world?" This 100-line passage articulates doubts about poetry that had haunted Keats since October 1818, when he had told his friend Woodhouse that while he hoped to achieve greatness in poetry, he was also "ambitious of doing the world some good" (158). This is precisely the debate the speaker has with Moneta by her altar, and it is a debate Keats was having with himself throughout 1819, most famously in that crucial letter to his brother and sister written in the early spring where he discovers the "vale of Soul-making" (249).

Is *The Fall of Hyperion* a success or a failure? The new narrative frame did not enable Keats to complete the poem. He abandoned it two months later. The revised poem is much shorter than the original. Indeed, the new frame accounts for about half of the extant poem. Still, the poem is a ringing declaration of poetic confidence, and it formalizes what Keats had spent most of 1819 trying to formulate: a poetics of relevance in a world defined by human suffering.

*The Fall of Hyperion* poses a problem to which Keats offers no solution. The speaker's mortal consciousness allows him to survive the encounter with Moneta and manifests itself as revived poetic confidence. The poem agonizes over the fate of the mortal human body, but this strengthens the speaker's ability to look outward and feel the giant agony of the world. This may not change the circumstances of the living, but it alleviates the burden of the mystery. The poem's achievement is not that it answers how or whether poetry can matter, but rather that it asks the question. It is consummately ironic, consummately negatively capable. Indeed, the poem embodies Romantic irony, that tendency of so many Romantic poems, noticed by Anne Mellor and other critics, to express

doubts about their ability to comprehend the subject they attempt to grasp. In order to be a true poet, a poet relevant to human experience, *The Fall of Hyperion* says, one must pass through the chamber of maiden thought into the dark passages of life where mortal consciousness arises. Paradoxically, however, moving through these dark passages necessarily calls into question the very relevance of the poetic enterprise. The poem reveals deep ambivalence about poetry, but an ambivalence that is a triumph of Romantic mortal consciousness. The driving force behind *The Fall of Hyperion* was not a new relationship between the poet and his poetic forbears, as the standard model of the Hyperion project suggests. It was a new understanding of human experience.

*Keats, Mortal Consciousness, and the Use of Poetry*

Writing to Benjamin Bailey on October 28-30, 1817, Keats apologizes for not having replied to a previous letter. When he received Bailey's most recent letter, Keats explains, he felt a touch of "despair" for having neglected their correspondence, but this pang of guilt quickly dissipated, clearing the air, as it were, for a sweeter sensation: remembrance of his friend's kindness. Wishing he could preserve such feelings, Keats laments their transience: "I wish I had a heart always open to such sensations—but there is no altering a Man's nature and mine must be radically wrong for it will lie dormant a whole Month" (30). At this moment in the letter, an observation based on self-scrutiny evolves into an impressionistic brushstroke of moral philosophy – something that happens so frequently in Keats' letters. He writes: "This leads me to suppose that there are no Men thoroughly [sic] wicked—so as never to be self spiritualized into a kind of sublime Misery," in which self-awareness might

clear the ground for a flourishing of nobler feelings. “[B]ut alas!” Keats says, “’tis only for an Hour” (30).

Readers of Keats’ letters have commented frequently on his ability (or at least his tendency) to jump between seemingly disparate ideas. One minute he is commenting on Shakespeare, Milton, or Wordsworth, the next minute reflecting on the fine energies displayed during a common street brawl, and the next minute observing the motions of a sparrow pecking about the gravel outside his window so closely that he seems to inhabit it. Even so, what comes next in the letter to Bailey is striking. The inconstancy of Keats’ feelings, even when buttressed by consciousness of this inconstancy and the will to hold them, causes him to reflect on the difficulty of maintaining mortal consciousness, and on the importance of this task for one who would live both a moral and a morally useful life. Quoting Wordsworth’s “Intimations Ode,” Keats says of the poet: “[H]e is the only man ‘who has kept watch on Man’s Mortality’ who has philanthropy [sic] enough to overcome the disposition [to] an indolent enjoyment of intellect—who is brave enough to volunteer for uncomfortable hours” (30). Keats leaves off the subject here. Still, one can detect in these words the ideological core of his desire, expressed in the letter to Woodhouse quoted above, to “do the world some good” in spite of his vocation, one not normally associated with moral utility; and also the core of his idea of soul-making, which allows him to reconcile life and suffering by underscoring the latter’s moral necessity. Indeed, Keats equates mortal consciousness (as expressed in the “Intimations Ode,” and as understood by him) with “philanthropy.” A word whose literal meaning is “love of mankind,” philanthropy has always held connotations of “practical benevolence” (*OED*), that is to say the performance of moral or charitable actions. Keats contrasts this action with the work of self-indulgent poets who reside chiefly in the realm of intellectual pleasure. Whether a poet’s efforts can

ever amount to “philanthropy” remains unclear. Articulating and seeking an answer to this question constitutes the intellectual quest that girds *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Keats’ desire to do some good for the world through poetry developed alongside his idea of soul-making and in fact goes hand-in-hand with it. Writing to Reynolds on April 9, 1818, Keats says, “I would jump down Aetna for any great Public good—but I hate a Mawkish Popularity” (85). And writing to Taylor on April 24, 1818, he says, “I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world” (88). One can accomplish this many ways, he explains in a passage cited earlier. “Some do it with their society—some with their wit—some with their benevolence—some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good humor on all they meet” (88). The latter possibility is strikingly reminiscent of the “little, nameless, unremembered acts / Of kindness and of love” that Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” identified as the “best portion of a good man’s life” (34-6). Other folks, he adds, do good “in a thousand [other] ways all equally dutiful to the commands of Great Nature” (88).

Turning his gaze on himself, Keats says: “There is but one way for me—the road lies through application study and thought” (88). Keats hoped to do good with poetry—not poems he had already written, romances like *Endymion*, but poems that lay far in the future, at the end of a road of “application study and thought.” Crucially, while Keats professes a “love of Philosophy” (88), he does not necessarily mean the kind of philosophical thought by which a complex mind such as his friend Bailey’s hoped to advance. Rather, he is referring to the intensive course of reading he fancied undertaking, considering it indispensable to his moral and literary development.

As we read *The Fall of Hyperion*, the idea of doing the world some good should stand at the forefront of our consciousness. Keats fervently believed – yearned to believe – that



poetry could do the world some good, that it could attain a moral clarity and usefulness above and beyond its artistic merits. Bearing this in mind, one can see that *The Fall of Hyperion* was only in part an artistic test, a test of whether the young Keats had the requisite poetical fiber to translate a tale about the huge suffering fallen gods. It was also a moral test, one that would determine whether he could truly sympathize with downcast gods. Working his way back into his original epic, Keats illustrated how, for him, a literary work could fine-tune the spirit. One feels it would have been Keats' greatest hope that his work would have the same effect on his readers: instruction in the ways of mortal consciousness, and a concomitant inspiration to do the world some good, its massive and often utterly meaningless pain and suffering notwithstanding.

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## Chapter Five: Byron, Smith, and Sublimity – The Aesthetics of Mortal Consciousness

### *Introduction: Sublimity and History*

In Chapter Four, I delineated Keats' attempt to nurture a poetics of relevance in the aftermath of Romantic mortal consciousness. In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats gives his speaker permission to reenter the earlier fragment of *Hyperion* after the speaker demonstrates he grasps mortality's implications not only for the perishable self but also for the entirety of human history and the legacy of pain and suffering it reveals. My final chapter explores a second way of negotiating the dual nature of Romantic mortal consciousness: through the discourse of the sublime.

In this chapter, I argue that this quintessentially Romantic aesthetic experience is a manifestation of Romantic mortal consciousness. Kant and Wordsworth claimed that the sublime elevates the human mind by making it aware of its comprehensive powers. However, the sublime also poses a grave threat to the mind. In his *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke argued that the sublime is fundamentally rooted in fear and thus in mortality. This chapter views the sublime as an ennobling aesthetic experience with profound social and political implications precisely *because* it brings an individual face to face with the inescapable fact of death: the mortality of the self, and the mortality of everyone living, all who will join the living, and all who have died.

Chapter Five is the capstone of my project, involving all previous chapters, but its starting point is where Chapter Two left off. It begins by taking another look at Byron's *Cain*. This chapter complicates my earlier reading of Byron's play by examining the connections between mortal, political, and aesthetic consciousness. It then focuses on the

work of Charlotte Smith, especially her late poem *Beachy Head*, which draw on the discourse of the sublime while simultaneously interrogating it from a feminist perspective.

In Chapter Two, I suggested one could read Byron's mystery play *Cain* as an allegory of death's arrival in the world, the birth of mortal consciousness, and an activation of what we might now call a modern liberal political and social consciousness. However, *Cain* is also an allegory of the arrival of sublime aesthetic experience and awareness. Cain's vision of death in Act Two, assembled by the poet from sublime images and ideas gleaned from contemporary natural history and geology, triggers a profoundly unsettling vision of God as a bored artist-tyrant who obsessively and incessantly builds, destroys, and rebuilds a world with which he is perpetually dissatisfied. Cain's vision of God engenders a protest on behalf of a beleaguered human race.

However, to equate mortal consciousness and social or political consciousness with *aesthetic* consciousness is an ambitious proposition, one that Burke's theory of the sublime might even appear to oppose. According to Burke, the sublime annihilates details; during an experience of a sublime landscape, for example, one is struck by vast and mighty forms, not the details to which one might attend in an experience of the beautiful. But haven't I argued that Romantic mortal consciousness involves a willingness to ruminate on the details of human history, such as careworn and impoverished inhabitants of dilapidated rural cottages, silent and nearly forgotten inhabitants of country churchyards, or even, as in Byron's *Cain*, all the unborn and the legacy of suffering we are preparing for them merely by continuing to be fruitful and to multiply?

Byron was keenly aware of this problem, and Romantic women writers were especially attuned to it. In *Epistles on Women*, Lucy Aikin equates the sublime, which Burke and Kant cast in masculine terms, with the male-driven forces of history that have

circumscribed the lives of so many individuals – especially women, children, and the poor. In Epistle I, Aikin rebukes conventional representations of human history. Addressing the “prophetic spirits” who “with with ken sublime / Sweep the long windings of the flood of time, / Joyless and stern,” she points out how their

deep numbers dwell

On rocks, on whirlpools, and the foaming swell,

But pass unmarked the skiffs that gaily glide

With songs and streamers down the dimpling tide. (1.106-11)<sup>1</sup>

By focusing on rocks, whirlpools, and raging seas – metaphors of the sublime disturbances along which conventional narratives of history are usually emplotted – historians silence other patterns of human experience. In a sense, they are false prophets, because they give only one version of events; however, they are true prophets in a very real sense, for their versions of history become the stories by which other men and women learn to locate their place in history or culture – or, in Aikin’s case, rage against it.

But women writers did not reject the sublime; instead, they tapped its aesthetic power and deployed it in feminist critiques of history. In Epistle Four, Aikin fashions a sublime vision of British national and cultural history; she imagines a bird’s-eye view of the Thames, with all of its tributaries flowing into the Atlantic Ocean. At the end of this epistle, however, Aikin redraws British history through the lives and experiences of a series of British women. Charlotte Smith offers a slightly different take on the sublime. In her fragmentary epic *Beachy Head*, an odd conglomerate of personal, national, and natural history, Smith devises a feminist sublime that holds fast to the minutiae of history, thereby marrying aesthetic consciousness with Romantic mortal consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Aikin, *Epistles on Women and Other Works*, ed. Anne Mellor and Michelle Levy (New York: Broadview, 2010).

*Cain, Mortal Consciousness, and the Sublime*

In *Cain*, Byron identifies an important link between mortal consciousness, social and political consciousness, and sublime aesthetic awareness. Cain's geologically inspired tutorial with Lucifer in Act Two introduces him to the idea of death. This new familiarity with death grants him access to sublime aesthetic experience – an access hitherto impossible, if one believes Burke's hypothesis about the fundamental connection between sublimity, fear, and death. The discourse of the sublime allows Cain to imagine and comprehend the enormity of suffering in store for future man, thus triggering his protest against it.

Cain's mortal consciousness is the seed of the play's crisis or catastrophe. In Chapter Two, I showed how Cain, at the beginning of the play, is unable to comprehend or even imagine the fate to which the transgression of his parents has unjustly consigned him. For this reason, Cain desires knowledge of death. Lucifer gives Cain a glimpse of the knowledge he seeks by taking him to the underworld and showing him the shadowy remnants of overthrown worlds. This vision, as Byron explained in the important letter to Murray quoted in Chapter Two, destroys Cain's hope. Stricken with despair concerning the condition and fate of humanity and filled with anger at its creator, Cain lashes out against God by attacking Abel, his most devout servant. Viewed in this light, the catastrophe of the play is profoundly tragic, for Cain becomes the unwitting progenitor of a fate whose mysterious nature has haunted him for much of his life. Cain's nocturnal vigils in expectation of death's arrival, explained to Lucifer in Act One, are poignantly ironic; the death he imagined creeping towards him from the shadows actually springs from his own fist.

But this is not the whole story of Cain, just as mankind's expulsion from Paradise is not the whole story of *Genesis* or *Paradise Lost*. The heterodox idea of the *felix culpa* suggests that the fall of man was a happy or fortunate event because it allowed God to demonstrate his love for man in a manner many times more powerful than merely creating the world – by assuming a mortal body and allowing that body to be destroyed. Whether Milton himself subscribed to the idea of the *felix culpa* is irrelevant, for the idea deeply informs the structure of his epic. In Books Eleven and Twelve, the archangel Michael grants Adam a terrifying vision of human history culminating in Christ's crucifixion, resurrection, and redemption of mankind. This vision, which Byron blasphemously parodies, shows Adam that all is not lost.

Cain's vision – not on a mountain, but in Hades; not of the future, but of the past; and not of eternal life, but of ceaseless death – is the intellectual and theological inverse of the one granted to Adam. For this reason, it might be absurd to seek a *felix culpa* in the catastrophe of Byron's play. For isn't that the point, that there is no felicity in a world of death? That is, after all, what Lucifer says; even sex, the highest of man's pleasures, is merely a trick designed to goad mankind into propagating itself. And isn't it the point that there *is* no hope? That is essentially what Byron says in the important letter to Murray.

However, I have already suggested that there are positive ways of viewing Cain's mortal consciousness and the events that follow it. In Chapter Two, I argued that Cain's mortal consciousness gave rise to something akin to social or political consciousness. In this chapter I shall propose a second positive outcome: Cain's achievement of sublime aesthetic consciousness. Making this argument will require a certain amount of reading against the grain of the text. Ultimately, how convincing and consoling one finds the play's reassurances to be will depend on our understanding of Byron's attitude toward his protagonist Cain and Cain's attitude toward *his* antagonist God.

Prior to his education by Lucifer, Cain has subscribed to a primitive, anthropomorphic conception of death. “Could I wrestle with him?” Cain asks Lucifer, imagining him as a lion with which he played as a boy (1.1.259). Lucifer’s reply utterly dismantles Cain’s conception: “It has no shape; but will absorb all things / That bear the form of earth-born being” (1.1.262-3). This is a stunningly Satanic revision to the moment in *Paradise Lost* where Adam, having just witnessed the primal murder, asks Michael whether that is what death looks like. Michael replies:

Death thou hast seen  
In his first shape on man; but many shapes  
Of death, and many are the ways that lead  
To his grim cave, all dismal ... (1.1.466-9)

These lines create a backstitch to Milton’s famous description of death in Book Two. Satan, having made the laborious flight from Pandaemonium to the gates of hell, meets two creatures. One is a woman, his sister-daughter Sin. The other is even more monstrous:

The other shape,  
If shape it might be called that shape had none  
Distinguishable, in member, joint, or limb,  
Or substance might be called that shadow seemed,  
For each seemed either; black he stood as night,  
Fierce as ten Furies, terrible as hell,  
And shook a deadly dart; what seemed his head  
The likeness of a kingly crown had on. (2.666-73)

This was one of Burke’s favorites in *Paradise Lost*, and it is no coincidence at all that Lucifer’s first definition of death in Byron’s play alludes to it, because Byron’s Lucifer is a master of



Burkean sublimity. Indeed, Byron characterizes Lucifer as the living embodiment and representative of the sublime.

In his preliminary remarks on the sublime in the *Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke writes: “Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner similar to terror, is a source of the *sublime*.”<sup>2</sup> To Burke, nothing was more terrible than death, and the power of the sublime arose from its ability to plumb our mortality:

[A]s pain is stronger in its operation than pleasure, so death is in general a much more affecting idea than pain; because there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death; nay, what generally makes pain itself, if I may say so, more painful, is, that it is considered as an emissary of this king of terrors. (103)

Burke redeploys the epithet “king of terrors” in his important chapter “On Obscurity,” where he describes Milton’s famous description of Death. My argument in this chapter depends on the fact that Burke considered this passage the epitome of the sublime in literature. He explains:

No person seems better to have understood the secret of heightening, or of setting terrible things, if I may use the expression, in their strongest light by the force of judicious obscurity, than Milton. His description of Death in the second book is admirably studied; it is astonishing with what gloomy pomp, with what a significant and expressive uncertainty of strokes and colouring he has finished the portrait of the king of terrors. (101)

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 86.

Burke goes on to cite lines 666-73 and offers this analysis: “In this description all is dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree” (101). Had Burke lived long enough to read *Cain*, he could just as easily have applied this constellation of adjectives to Cain’s vision of death in Act Two or even to Lucifer himself. This is because Byron’s *Cain* is as much a product of the *Philosophical Enquiry* as it is a response to *Paradise Lost*.

Burke believed that the sublime was fundamentally rooted in fear, and fear requires consciousness of one’s mortal nature. Before his tutorial with Lucifer, however, Cain lacks a complete understanding of fate. In familiarizing Cain with death in Acts One and Two, Lucifer is providing what Wordsworth described as the “preparatory intercourse” needed to grasp sublimity, and in dramatizing death’s arrival into world, Byron is recording the birth of a new and quintessentially Romantic form of aesthetic awareness and understanding.<sup>3</sup>

This preparatory discourse begins early in the play. When Lucifer comes onstage in Act One, he has a strange effect of Cain, which Cain cannot comprehend:

Whom have we here? A shape like to the angels,  
Yet of a sterner and a sadder aspect  
Of spiritual essence. Why do I quake?  
Why should I fear him more than other spirits  
Whom I see daily ... ? (1.1.80-4)

The first response Lucifer inspires is fear; the moment Cain sees Lucifer, he begins to quake. This is highly significant, because, according to Burke, fear and trembling are the emotional and physiological symptoms of an experience of sublimity. This passage, which competes with Milton at his finest, attests to Cain’s growing potential for an experience of the sublime

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<sup>3</sup> Wordsworth, *The Prose Works*, ed. W. J. B. Own and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), Vol. 2, p. 359.

through its evocation of fire, darkness, magnitude, danger, and the forbidden. Burke catalogues all of these elements of the sublime in various chapters of the *Enquiry*. Because Lucifer's arrival forces Cain to reflect on his furtive, nocturnal visits to the gates of Paradise in search of Death, might we suggest that Lucifer himself embodies sublimity?

Cain's sister-wife Adah's reaction to Lucifer later in Act One reinforces this reading. When she sees Lucifer for the first time, she describes the "pleasing fear" he inspires in her. In the *Enquiry*, Burke draws an important distinction between terror and the sublime. When something frightens us to the point of terror, aesthetic contemplation is not possible, because the instinct of self-preservation overrides it. An avalanche is not a sublime event when it engulfs you in snow and freezes you into place – a truly terrifying image of being "arrested in ice" that probably explains the fate of the woolly mammoths discovered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and alluded to in *Cain*. But viewed from a safe distance, perhaps from a carriage on the way to the Vale of Chamonix with Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley, the avalanche becomes one of the chief images of the Romantic sublime. Adah's response to Lucifer explores the psychological moment when sublimity turns into terror. Seduced by the "fastening attraction" of Lucifer's eyes (1.1.409), Adah draws close to him, but as she does so, her "pleasing fear" quickly changes into something else entirely. "In his eye," she says,

There is a fastening attraction which  
Fixes my flutt'ring eyes on his. My heart  
Beats quick, he awes me, and yet draws me near,  
Nearer, and nearer. Cain, Cain, save me from him! (1.1.409-13)

While the ideas "pleasing fear" and "fastening attraction" attest to feelings of sublimity, Adah's outburst in line 413 shows that this feeling has devolved into to terror. The genius

of this moment in the text is that it postulates the line that theoretically must exist between sublimity and terror: the threshold beyond which fear can no longer be pleasing.

I wish to return for a moment to the part in Act One where Cain describes his nocturnal vigils in expectation of Death. Elsewhere I have remarked on the lyrical qualities of these lines. Here I want to emphasize how they evoke an incomplete or unconsummated experience of the sublime. Indeed, one might call Cain's recollection of his vigils an instance of the "protosublime," or a nearly sublime aesthetic experience in a world where sublimity cannot yet be felt because its inhabitants do not know death. Since he has "head / of Death," Cain says,

I have looked out  
In the vast desolate night in search of him,  
And when I saw gigantic shadows in  
The umbrage of the walls of Eden, chequered  
By the far-flashing of the cherubs' swords,  
I watched for what I thought his coming; for  
With fear rose longing in my heart to know  
What 'twas which shook us all, but nothing came. (1.1.268-77)

While Cain does not know what death is, it has harrowed him with fear and wonder. Thus, he has kept watch for death in the "vast desolate night," and he has felt intimations of it in the "gigantic shadows" cast by the fiery swords of angels guarding the entrance to Paradise. The surface of the text is decked in the trappings of Burkean sublimity: ideas and images of vastness, desolation, darkness, enormity, danger, fear, and the presence of something spiritual or divine, all of which Burke treats in Part Two of the *Enquiry*. More importantly, Cain presents an unequivocal emotional symptom of the sublime: that uneasy combination

of fear and delight, or as Cain calls it, “longing.” “When danger or pain press too nearly,” Burke explains, “they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful” (86).

But do Cain’s vigils lead to an experience of the sublime? The structure of the verse points to something incomplete. Initially, the enjambment of Byron’s blank verse propels the verse forward, implying that Cain’s vigils are preparing him for a momentous realization or discovery. His emotions reach a fever pitch in line 277, when he mentions the idea that “shook us all,” but here the verse suddenly droops, ending with the declarative phrase “nothing came.” The verse thus demonstrates how Cain, an inhabitant of a postlapsarian world where death has yet to set leave its mark, has experienced an incomplete intimation of the sublime. Only in Act Two, where Lucifer introduces Cain to death, does Cain finally achieve sublime aesthetic experience.

The buildup to Cain’s initiation into the sublime is fascinating because it enacts the displacement of the beautiful, a mode of aesthetic awareness with which Cain and his family are quite familiar. Earlier I showed how the action of the play retraces the broad trajectory of Western scientific thought: first the spatial shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric model of the universe, and then the temporal shift from a 6000-year-old world to one much, much older. Cain’s journey to the underworld in Act Two familiarizes him with deep space, and his vision there introduces him to deep geological time. Similarly, along the course of this journey, Cain’s perception of the universe dramatically changes from a thing of beauty into something darker and more fearful. Is Byron, while enacting in miniature the course of Western scientific thought through Cain’s journey to Hades, positing a similar trajectory for aesthetic experience from the beautiful to the sublime, and if so, then why? Before we can

address these questions, however, it is necessary to describe the process by which, in *Cain*, the beautiful gives place to the sublime.

I have described Cain's nocturnal vigils in expectation of Death's arrival as incomplete or unconsummated experiences of the sublime. What happens in the aftermath of these proto-sublime vigils? Significantly, one of them lapsed into an experience of the beautiful, as Cain explains to Lucifer early in Act One. Exhausted from trying to search for death in the shadows around the walls of Paradise, Cain turned his eyes up to the stars, and the beauty he saw there offered him some momentary solace. He recalls this moment for Lucifer:

And then I turned my weary eyes from off  
Our native and forbidden Paradise,  
Up to the lights above us in the azure,  
Which are so beautiful. (1.1.278-81)

It is clear that Cain is able to experience beauty at this point in his aesthetic development, but the implications of this are unclear. Is Byron suggesting that consciousness of beauty precedes consciousness of the sublime, and if so, why? In the passage just quoted, Byron associates beauty with the lights of heaven. By contrast, Cain's initiation into the sublime begins when he encounters Lucifer, and his vision in Hades completes it. Is Byron positing ethical correlatives to these two aesthetic modes? Or is he suggesting that the sublime required man's fall in order to be accessible? Given the depth of Byron's engagement with the sublime, not just in *Cain* but all of his most famous works, it seems reasonable to suggest that, for Byron at least, the fall from grace was, aesthetically speaking, a happy one indeed.

In *Cain*, Lucifer serves as the conduit of sublime aesthetic awareness. This explains why he inspires tremors Cain and Adah when they first lay eyes on him. It also explains why

Cain's vision of death in Act Two is cast in the language of the sublime. Furthermore, it explains why Cain's journey through the abyss of space prior to his vision is cast in the language of the beautiful. It is no coincidence that the adjective occurs five times in Cain's descriptions of the star-studded universe he passes on the way to hell. Here are two separate brief passages from that journey:

Oh thou beautiful

And unimaginable ether and

Ye multiplying masses of increased

And still increasing lights! (2.1.98-101)

Oh God! Oh Gods! or whatso'er ye are!

How beautiful ye are! how beautiful

Your works or accidents or whatso'er

They may be! (2.1.110-3)

When Lucifer asks Cain what he thinks of the "bright and sparkling" worlds he has shown him, Cain says they are "beautiful" (2.1.127, 129).

Cain's journey to Hades is marked by intimations of the sublime. At one point, he says that his soul "aches to think" of the space occupied by the stars. "Is your course measured for ye?" he asked Lucifer,

Or do ye

Sweep on in your unbounded revelry

Through an aerial universe of endless

Expansion, at which my soul aches to think,

Intoxicated with eternity? (2.1.105-9)

The phrase “intoxicated with eternity” evokes the sublime, which, according to Burke, includes ideas such as eternity and infinitude. As Cain approaches and enters the gates of Hades, his experience tilts even further in the direction of the sublime.

**Cain.** How the lights recede!

Where fly we?

**Luc.** To the world of phantasms, which

Are beings past and shadows still to come.

**Cain.** But it grows dark and dark, the stars are gone.

**Luc.** And yet thou see'st. (2.1.173-7)

Cain's description of a “fearful light” illuminating a shadow-infested yet visibly dark world is reminiscent of Milton's Hell, whose raging fires burn with dark flames. “'Tis a fearful light!” Cain exclaims.

No sun, no moon, no lights innumerable—

The very blue of the empurpled night

Fades to a dreary twilight; yet I see

Huge dusky masses... (2.1.177-81)

All is “dark and dreadful,” yet all is “distinct” and visible (2.1.190). Finally, Lucifer opens the gates of Hades, releasing “enormous” billows of thick “vapours” (2.1.198), and leads Cain into the land of the dead:

**Cain.** [H]ere is all

So shadowy and so full of twilight that

It speaks of days past.

**Luc.** It is the realm

Of death. (2.2.11-14)



*Cain* is not only about the birth of death in our world; it is also about the birth of sublimity in human aesthetic awareness, made possible by an initiation into the mysteries of death.

Inside Hades, Cain sees the shades of enormous creatures. Like Milton's Death, and like Lucifer himself, they embody Burkean sublimity:

Oh ye interminable and gloomy realms,  
Of swimming shadows and enormous shapes,  
Some fully shown, some indistinct, and all  
Mighty and melancholy—what are ye?  
Live ye, or have ye lived? (2.2.30-4)

The shades are “enormous” and “mighty.” They cannot be seen clearly. They incite vertiginous feelings. These are all symptoms of the sublime, as defined by Burke in the *Enquiry*.<sup>4</sup> What most alarms Cain, however, is that these giant, shadowy forms appear superior to any living creature that he has ever seen on Earth. He tells Lucifer:

They bear not  
The wing of seraph, nor the face of man,  
Nor form of mightiest brute, nor aught that is  
Now breathing; mighty yet and beautiful  
As the most beautiful and mighty which  
Live, and yet so unlike them, that I scare  
Can call them living. (2.2.56-62)

“Yet,” Lucifer says, “they lived” (2.2.62). In the next lines, he devastates Cain with the knowledge that these superior creatures inhabited Cain's world long before he did, and that

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<sup>4</sup> “Swimming” can mean “affected with, or characterized by, dizziness or giddiness” (*OED*). Byron invokes this sense of the word in *Mazepa*.

they died out when their world was destroyed. Lucifer cannot explain why their earth was annihilated – “Ask him who fells,” he acidly comments at 2.2.79 – but he can explain how:

By a most crushing and inexorable  
Destruction and disorder of the elements,  
Which struck a world to chaos, as a chaos  
Subsiding has struck out a world. (2.2.80-3)

Byron's Hell is a picture of Catastrophism in image and in language. The chiasmus spanning lines 82 and 83 formally enact the endless cycle of creation and destruction posited by Catastrophism and espoused by Lucifer. In *Cain*, Cuvier's catastrophic vision of the earth's natural history is the vehicle that Lucifer uses to lead Cain to sublime aesthetic awareness as well as to mortal consciousness.

To suggest that *Cain* enacts the birth of sublimity even as it dramatizes the arrival of death and the blossoming of mortal consciousness raises fascinating questions about aesthetic understanding. Is Byron proposing that consciousness of beauty predates awareness of the sublime? And is mortal consciousness the event that grants one access to the sublime? Byron did not leave a fully fleshed-out theory to help answer these questions. However, evidence in *Cain* clearly suggests that its hero can perceive the beautiful before he perceives the sublime. While Adah and Cain have intimations of the sublime during their initial encounters with Lucifer, Cain's experience of the sublime is not complete until his vision in Hades.

This brings us to a fascinating conclusion: that Byron is attempting to isolate a connection mortal consciousness, political or social consciousness, and aesthetic awareness. In *Cain*, Lucifer arrives to give Byron's hero the knowledge of death he desperately seeks, but which has remained barred to him because he lives in a postlapsarian world yet to be

marked by death. Lucifer supplies this knowledge and, in doing so, shifts Cain's anxiety away from his own fate to posterity's. Cain's sublime vision of death in Act Two, a shadowy assembly of past, overthrown worlds and the extinct creatures who inhabited them, triggers a temporally and biologically sublime image of a whole race of descendants doomed, like Cain, to live, eat, drink, and be merry for a few deceitful moments before dying, but not before perpetuating their doomed species themselves. This sublime vision, I argue, fosters the anxiety that leads to the murder of Cain's brother Abel who, appallingly in Cain's mind, continues to worship the God with whom their mother and father walked once in Paradise.

*Charlotte Smith and the Victims of History*

In *Cain*, Byron dramatizes the arrival of mortal consciousness and links it with the birth of sublime aesthetic awareness. Cain's access to the sublime allows him to grasp the horrors of a world created for destruction and incites his protest against God. Thus, Byron isolates a connection between mortal consciousness, social or political consciousness, and sublime aesthetic awareness. In her long fragment *Beachy Head*, Charlotte Smith proposes a similar connection between these ideas but complicates it. Indeed, she discovers a curious incompatibility between the sublime and its psychic underpinnings in Romantic mortal consciousness.

In *Beachy Head*, Smith asks whether the sublime, with its emphasis on massive forms and huge energies, is really compatible with Romantic mortal consciousness, which urges one to dwell and ruminate on the margins of history and pay attention to individuals who either have no place in it or, as in the case of Margaret and her family, are simply swept up by it and discarded. At the end of this chapter, I will show how Smith attempts to fashion in

*Beachy Head* a new version of the sublime, one that can see into the depths of things and trace the details of human experience that history ejects from its records. If Burke cast the sublime in masculine terms, emphasizing its totalizing force, Smith seems to be developing a feminine and, indeed, feminist sublime.

Charlotte Turner Smith is a re-emergent member of the Romantic canon, thanks to the efforts of feminist scholars like Stuart Curran and Jacqueline Labbe. Smith was most famous in her time for *Elegiac Sonnets*, which appeared in ever-expanding editions beginning in 1784 and were instrumental in the Romantic revival of the English sonnet. Smith is also noted for her two-part poem *The Emigrants*, which concerns the plight of French exiles living in England in the early 1790's after the French Revolution turned bloody. After glancing at these works briefly, I will focus on Smith's unfinished poem *Beachy Head*, published after her death in 1806. Like her earlier works, Smith's sublime meditations on British history demonstrate a concern for the fate of individuals whom the forces of history have overlooked, swept aside, or crushed. However, it also betrays anxiety regarding the efficacy of sympathy, that "fellow-feeling" instrumental to Romantic mortal consciousness.

*Elegiac Sonnets* is a curious volume. Someone perusing its contents for the first time might expect, from the title, to find a sonnet sequence about a deceased lover or friend. However, the elegiac tone of the sonnets arises from sorrow over a personal past that cannot be reclaimed. Sonnet Two, entitled "Written at the Close of Spring," is the best expression of this. In this poem, the speaker contrasts the end of spring, whose sadness is tempered by the promise of its annual return, with the permanent inaccessibility of past happiness. The poet devotes the octave of this Italian sonnet to a description of seasonal change. It begins:

The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,  
Each simple flower which she had nurs'd in dew,

Anemonies, that spangled every grove,

The primrose wan, and hare-bell mildly blue. (1-4)<sup>5</sup>

The intransitive verb “fade,” which depicts the decay of the “garlands” mentioned in line 1, is also the predicate of the words “flower,” “anemonies,” “primrose,” and “hare-bell” (2-4). This gives the first quatrain a quietly despondent tone. The poet’s use of an intransitive verb is deliberate and important, for it suggests that the change from efflorescence to decay, while natural, is inevitable. Curiously, the verbs in the subordinate clauses in each of the first three lines are transitive. “Spring,” personified as a weaver in line 1 and a maternal figure in line 2, intervenes each year to nurture life in wintry groves. This labor, however, is transitory.

In the second quatrain, the poet shifts the focus to spring’s labors:

No more shall violets linger in the dell,

Or purple orchis variegate the plain,

Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,

And dress with humid hands her wreaths again. (5-8)

The quatrain opens with the classic elegiac construction “No more shall [N + V]” deployed so powerfully in Gray’s “Elegy.” However, the word “till” in line 7 signals a tonal shift to something akin to hope, a shift achieved by the redeployment of the verb “shall” from a phrase of prophetic doom in line 5 to one of affirmation two lines later, and by the repetition of the adverb “again” in lines 7 and 8. Whereas the first quatrain focuses on the inexorability of spring’s decline, the second emphasizes its dependability; however brief the English spring may be, it will return again next year.

But the end of the sonnet – functionally a sestet, though it consists of a quatrain and

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<sup>5</sup> Charlotte Smith, *The Works of Charlotte Smith*, 14 vols., Vol. 14 *Elegiac Sonnets, Volumes I and II, The Emigrants, Beachy Head: With Other Poems, Uncollected Poems*, ed. Jacqueline Labbe (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2007).

a couplet, thus giving it the emotional punch characteristic of English sonnets – drastically tips the balance in favor of decay. The speaker laments:

Ah! poor Humanity! so frail, so fair,

Are the fond visions of thy early day,

Till tyrant Passions, and corrosive Care,

Bid all thy fairy colours fade away!

Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;

Ah! why has happiness – no second Spring? (9-14)

The exclamation “Ah! poor humanity!” momentarily suggests that the subject of the poem has shifted from the natural world to humanity, but as the lines unfurl the reader learns that the real subject is the speaker’s past and the happiness that is buried there. The speaker has no emotional equivalent to spring’s annual return to breathe new life into past happiness. The subject of lines 9-12 is “visions,” undone by “passions” and “care” that blight the “fairy colours” of youthful hope. The sonnet ends on a note of quiet bewilderment and intense but controlled dejection; the certainty of spring’s return, expressed by the verb “shall,” sharply contrasts with the speaker’s equal certainty that past happiness is irrecoverable.

Smith’s sonnets are intensely personal poems, and the theme of an irrecoverable personal past permeates all of her work. In *The Emigrants*, the speaker’s familiarity with tremendous personal loss allows her to sympathize with French exiles who have fled to England for safety. In *Beachy Head*, the speaker’s personal past informs her critique of British history. Even in *Elegiac Sonnets*, however, one sees signs of Romantic mortal consciousness: the recognition that such suffering as hers is universal. Significantly, of the ten numbered sonnets that make up the first section of the first volume of *Elegiac Sonnets*, only the fourth, “To the Moon,” contains a reference to deceased human beings, and they

aren't lovers or former lovers (as one would expect in a typical sonnet) but rather all of history's victims. In this sonnet, the speaker describes the comfort she receives from the observing the moon, which helps her imagine a refuge for the "sufferers of the earth."

Addressing Diana, she says:

QUEEN of the silver bow! – by thy pale beam  
Alone and pensive, I delight to stray,  
And watch thy shadow trembling in the stream,  
Or mark the floating clouds that cross thy way.  
And, while I gaze, thy mild and placid light  
Sheds a soft calm upon my troubled breast;  
And oft I think – fair planet of the night,  
That in thy orb, the wretched may have rest:  
The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go,  
Releas'd by death – to thy benignant sphere,  
And the sad children of Despair and Woe  
Forget, in thee, their cup of sorrow here.  
Oh! that I soon may reach thy world serene,  
Poor wearied pilgrim – in this toiling scene! (1-14)

The comfort drawn by the speaker from the moon's "mild and placid light" is undercut by deep uncertainty; the moon's "trembling" reflection described in the first quatrain is parallel to the speaker's "troubled" breast described in the second. A careful reading of the poem reveals that a heavenly abode for "the sufferers of the earth" is by no means certain. "Oft I think," the speaker says, "that in thy orb, the wretched may have rest: / The sufferers of the earth perhaps may go, / Releas'd by death – to thy benignant sphere." The poet's use of the

subjunctive mood in two successive phrases (“may have rest” and “may go,” the latter further qualified by the adverb “perhaps”) depresses the verse’s heavenly aspirations with intimations of religious skepticism. In any case, the moon’s “benignant sphere” is reduced to a luminous orb where “the sad children of Despair and Woe” merely “forget” their “cup of sorrow.” The final couplet makes a last, desperate vault toward serenity, but the closing line grounds the poem firmly in “this toiling scene” where the speaker and other “poor wearied pilgrim[s]” struggle on, only occasionally buoyed by hope. “To the Moon” captures perfectly what I have defined in this project as Romantic mortal consciousness. Indeed, one wonders whether Hemans was thinking about the emotional climax of this poem when she composed “The Two Homes,” another poem about an otherworldly abode whose existence is by no means certain.

Like *Elegiac Sonnets*, reprinted in ever-expanding editions throughout Smith’s lifetime, *The Emigrants* is also concerned with the irrecoverable nature of the past. In this long poem, however, the poet combines meditations on a lost personal past with melancholy reflections on the French Revolution and its victims. The poem fuses Romantic mortal consciousness with social and political consciousness, and its critique of history frequently invokes the language of the sublime. The poem is important for my project because it shows Smith working toward the feminist sublime deployed in *Beachy Head*.

Smith’s primary focus in *The Emigrants* is on a particular subset of the victims of the Reign of Terror: aristocrats, especially women and children, and members of the clergy who fled to England. Smith presents these individuals as victims of history’s massive tidal forces, which she describes in sublime language and imagery. Indeed, the first book of the poem concludes with a sublime vision of war. The speaker imagines

the deafening roar



Of Victory from a thousand brazen throats,  
That tell with what success wide-wasting War  
Has [...] thinned the world. (134)<sup>6</sup>

In *The Emigrants*, Smith is beginning to explore the connections between mortal and political or social consciousness with aesthetic awareness. Her late fragment *Beachy Head* is the fruit of this process of discovery.

*The Emigrants* is an anti-war poem, but its subject and tone are deeply problematic. On the one hand, it expresses sympathy for a class of individuals from a nation with which England was at war. On the other hand, it undercuts itself by questioning the efficacy of its sympathetic aims. In her dedicatory letter to William Cowper, Smith humbly apologizes for the “unavailing compassion” (121) that permeates her poem. Keats’ struggle with *Hyperion* would foster a similar kind of embarrassment. Smith extricates herself from this problem by showing sympathy for individuals driven into exile without excusing the faults of their class. She also depicts them as emblems of hardship endured by all creatures. When her speaker first shows us a group of French exiles, she uses them to illustrate how the “spectre Care” haunts men and women in all walks of life. “Ah! Mourner,” she says, addressing herself, “cease these wailings: cease and learn” that nothing

Can shut out for an hour the spectre Care,  
That from the dawn of reason, follows still  
Unhappy Mortals, ’till the friendly grave  
(Our sole secure asylum) “ends the chace.” (126-7)

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<sup>6</sup> References to *The Emigrants* refer to page numbers, since Labbe does not give line numbers in her standard edition of Smith’s poems.

The “unavailing” quality of the poet’s sympathy emphasizes the powerlessness of the exiles to oppose the events that have turned their lives and their country upside down. Ironically, the ineffectiveness of her compassion points to her depth of mortal consciousness.

The speaker introduces us to the emigrants in the next passage. The poet’s language and diction illuminate the razor’s edge upon which she stands as the speaker sympathetically describes the French exiles. Indeed, the speaker’s description of the emigrants expresses her ambivalent attitude toward them. As the exiles approach, she marks “dejected looks” that bespeak distress. She explains their circumstances: they have been “banish’d” from their home and doomed to “wander [...] thro’ the wide World unshelter’d.” Yet as sympathetic as these lines may be, the speaker also notes that the exiles carry with them “the prejudice they learn’d” from their nation’s “Bigotry.” She also notes that, despite having endured the horrors of war, they harbor hopes that “German spoilers” will wreak further vengeance on their devastated land (127).

The speaker’s ambivalence toward the emigrants is clear from the poem’s outset. She neither hides nor softens her views regarding their religious beliefs or social attitudes. The monk, priest, abbé, nobleman, and nouveau riche: all are subject to withering criticism. But compassion for their tribulations tempers her animosity. “Yet unhappy Men,” she says,

Whate’er your errors, I lament your fate:  
And, as disconsolate and sad ye hang  
Upon the barrier of the rock, and seem  
To murmur your despondence, waiting long  
Some fortunate reverse that never comes;  
Methinks in each expressive face, I see  
Discriminated anguish ... (127)

The poet's use of enjambment enacts the psychological dimension of the exiles' pain. It shows how their thoughts bend toward France. But the exiles' suffering is not of one kind; the speaker can detect "discriminated anguish" in each "expressive face." Underneath the image of suffering on a grand, collective scale is a collection of individual woe and anxiety. This is important, because Smith is attending to the minutiae of history, not settling for grand persons and events. The image of the exiles "hang[ing] / Upon the barrier of the rock" (127) like sea birds that make their homes in chalk cliffs of the southern English coast, or the mollusks that cling to rocks exposed to the incessant beating of waves, expresses their smallness relative to their surroundings and also captures the precarious nature of their existence. As we shall see, this idea will become a central thematic preoccupation of *Beachy Head*.

The speaker also expresses sympathy for the English living near the Southern coast and negotiating hardship and suffering. Early in Book II, the speaker laments the plight of Louis XIV's son, the "most unhappy heir / Of fatal greatness" (140). Indulging in a bit of pastoral fantasy, she speculates that the boy would have been luckier had he been born to an English shepherd:

Then, in an humble sphere, perhaps content,  
Thou hadst been free and joyous on the heights  
Of Pyrennean mountains, shagg'd with woods  
Of chesnut, pine, and oak: as on these hills  
Is yonder little thoughtless shepherd lad,  
Who, on the slope abrupt of downy turf  
Reclin'd in playful indolence, sends off  
The chalky ball, quick bounding far below ... (140)

It is an appealing vision, but it is only a vision, for later in the book the speaker unfolds a scalding critique of the pastoral mode, exposing – as Crabbe, Goldsmith, and Wordsworth before her – the brutal hardships of rustic life. The similarities between the passage I am about to quote and Margaret’s story in *The Ruined Cottage* are so strong that one wonders whether Wordsworth was thinking about it when composing his tale. Where does happiness reside? Certainly not in the country, where the “inhabitant” of the “hut / Of clay and thatch” cannot even find “Content.” Laboring, as Margaret’s husband labored, from dawn until dusk, the English peasant can barely make ends meet, and “should Disease” or some other accident keep him from working, little stands between him and “the squalid figure of extremest Want” (141). This passage from the poem shows the acuteness of its speaker’s social criticism and the depth of her mortal consciousness:

We ask anew, where happiness is found? —  
Alas! in rural life, where youthful dreams  
See the Arcadia that Romance describes,  
Not even Content resides! — In yon low hut  
Of clay and thatch, where rises the grey smoke  
Of smold’ring turf, cut from the adjoining moor,  
The labourer, its inhabitant, who toils  
From the first dawn of twilight, till the Sun  
Sinks in the rosy waters of the West,  
Finds that with poverty it cannot dwell ... (141)

Yet what really invites comparison with *The Ruined Cottage* is the second half of this passage, where the speaker imagines the laborer managing to recover from a chance illness – a potentially devastating setback for one living from day to day – and emerging from his

cottage with “feeble effort, to resume / Some heavy task, above his wasted strength” (141).

This is uncannily similar to the fate of Margaret’s husband. Smith writes:

For bread, and scanty bread, is all he earns  
For him and for his household—Should Disease,  
Born of chill wintry rains, arrest his arm,  
Then, thro’ his patch’d and straw-stuff’d casement, peeps  
The squalid figure of extremest Want;  
And from the Parish the reluctant dole,  
Dealt by th’ unfeeling farmer, hardly saves  
The ling’ring spark of life from cold extinction:  
Then the bright Sun of Spring, that smiling bids  
All other animals rejoice, beholds,  
Crept from his pallet, the emaciate wretch  
Attempt, with feeble effort, to resume  
Some heavy task, above his wasted strength ... (141)

The oxymoronic phrase “wasted strength” reveals the direness of the man’s circumstances.

The passages I have just quoted underscore the hardship of pastoral life. Curiously, in an earlier passage, the speaker invites those dwelling in poverty in the English countryside to compare their lot *favorably* with that of the French exiles. This passage, from Book One, evokes the scene from *King Lear* discussed in the previous chapter but redirects its meaning. Echoing the broken king’s plea of mercy for the poor, the speaker asks the English poor to consider what destitution is like when one has fallen from a state of plenty:

Poor wand’ring wretches! whosoe’er ye are,  
That hopeless, houseless, friendless, travel wide

O'er these bleak russet downs; where, dimly seen,  
The solitary Shepherd shiv'ring tends  
His dun discolour'd flock (Shepherd, unlike  
Him, whom in song the Poet's fancy crowns  
With garlands, and his crook with vi'lets binds);  
Poor vagrant wretches! outcasts of the world!  
Whom no abode receives, no parish owns;  
Roving, like Nature's commoners, the land  
That boasts such general plenty: if the sight  
Of wide-extended misery softens yours  
Awhile, suspend your murmurs!—here behold  
The strange vicissitudes of fate—while thus  
The exil'd Nobles, from their country driven,  
Whose richest luxuries were their's, must feel  
More poignant anguish, than the lowest poor,  
Who, born to indigence, have learn'd to brave  
Rigid Adversity's depressing breath! (132)

This passage illustrates the suffering and, thus, the humanity shared by two very different groups of people and shows how they are all victims of history. The speaker's attribution of a steely fortitude to the English poor is a little hard to stomach, yet it allows the poet to paint a desolate picture of their pastoral circumstances without seeming radical; it also allows her to express sympathy for an unpopular group of French exiles who, whatever the crimes, have experienced the unspeakable horrors of war.

In another passage, the speaker explains how she is able to reconcile her conflicting attitudes toward the exiles. She says:

Still, as Men misled  
By early prejudice (so hard to break),  
I mourn your sorrows; for I too have known  
Involuntary exile; and while yet  
England had charms for me, have felt how sad  
It is to look across the dim cold sea,  
That melancholy rolls its refluent tides  
Between us and the dear regretted land  
We call our own ... (128)

The speaker's sympathy for the emigrants is rooted in a sense of shared suffering and hardship. Indeed, near the beginning of Book Two, the speaker draws a direct connection between the emigrants and herself. In lines that echo *Elegiac Sonnets*, she says: "They, like me / From fairer hopes and happier prospects driven, / Shrink from the future, and regret the past" (137). Here the poet draws on the original sense of "regret" meaning "to think of or remember (something or someone lost or absent) with distress or longing" (*OED*). The suffering on an aristocratic mother is especially compelling to her.

The speaker's account of the aristocratic mother is one of the most poignant passages in Book One. As her children, unconscious of their plight, play along the shore, their mother, "lost in melancholy thought" and "lull'd for a moment by the murmurs low / Of sullen billows" (130), slips into a dream of the mirrored galleries of Versailles. The dream vanishes as quickly as it steals upon her:

Ah! too soon

From the gay visionary pageant rous'd,  
See the sad mourner start!—and, drooping, look  
With tearful eyes and heaving bosom round  
On drear reality—where dark'ning waves,  
Urg'd by the rising wind, unheeded foam  
Near her cold rugged seat... (130)

Book One of *The Emigrants* displays a wide spectrum of guilty and innocent victims of the French Revolution: humble parish priests, haughty urban bishops, proud aristocratic men, and these men's wives and children. Book Two focuses on the humble, vividly illustrating how civil strife has “thinned” many of the world's most vulnerable inhabitants (134).

The speaker's emphasis on the innocent victims of history authorizes and permits her spirited defense of “Liberty,” an explosive word at the time of the poem's composition. The speaker condemns those who, appalled by events in France, would “profane” the name of Liberty or the martyrs to its cause, telling them to reflect on the “hecatombs of victims” felled by despots and divine-right monarchs:

Deluded Men!

Ere ye prophane her ever-glorious name,  
Or catalogue the thousands that have bled  
Resisting her; or those, who greatly died  
Martyrs to *Liberty*—revert awhile  
To the black scroll, that tells of regal crimes  
Committed to destroy her; rather count  
The hecatombs of victims, who have fallen  
Beneath a single despot; or who gave



Their wasted lives for some disputed claim  
Between anointed robbers: Monsters both! (139)

Smith uses sublime language and imagery to show the true horror of the French Revolution: its legacy of death. The phrase “hecatombs of victims” evokes a universe of death similar to the one Lucifer shows Cain in Hades, causing him to imagine extending deep into the future, swallowing all of his descendents in its charnel of maw.

In Book Two, the speaker rehearses a catalogue of horrors narrated by the exiles:

Shuddering, I view the pictures they have drawn  
Of desolated countries, where the ground,  
Stripp'd of its unripe produce, was thick strewn  
With various Death. (142)

These lines may allude to the opening scene in *Macbeth*, where a messenger describes the “strange images of death” wrought by the protagonist in the battle against the Norwegians. In the ensuing lines, the speaker unfolds a sublime vision of death, underscoring the horrors endured by the most innocent victims of the Revolution’s march, the French peasantry:

[T]hro’ the sullen evening’s lurid gloom,  
Rising, like columns of volcanic fire,  
The flames of burning villages illum’d  
The waste of water; and the wind, that howl’d  
Along its troubled surface, brought the groans  
Of plunder’d peasants, and the frantic shrieks  
Of mothers for their children; while the brave,  
To pity still alive, listen’d aghast  
To these dire echoes, hopeless to prevent

The evils they beheld, or check the rage ... (142)

The phrase “lurid gloom” evokes the visible darkness of Milton’s hell and Cain’s Hades. Columns of smoke arise vertically from smoldering villages; the sounds of suffering emanate from it and echo across the landscape. The sublimity of war expands to fill all space and is unstoppable. Even in defeat there is no safety; indeed, some of the emigrants have told the speaker how, once the tide turned against the royalist forces, young men begged their friends to help them commit suicide rather than face defeat.

But the most distressing passage comes when the speaker relates how an aristocratic woman, her house besieged by Republican forces, manages to escape with one child to the mountains, where she sank from grief and exhaustion and died with her child of exposure:

To a wild mountain, whose bare summit hides  
Its broken eminence in clouds; whose steep  
Are dark with woods; where the receding rocks  
Are worn by torrents of dissolving snow,  
A wretched Woman, pale and breathless, flies! (143)

Wary of pursuers, she

trembling seeks

A temporary shelter—clasping close  
To her hard-heaving heart, her sleeping child,  
All she could rescue of the innocent groupe  
That yesterday surrounded her ... (143)

As the mother regrets fleeing with her youngest child into the woods rather than dying with the rest of her family, an explosion interrupts her thoughts, and Smith paints a sublime picture of the destruction of her house:

Hark! again

The driving tempest bears the cry of Death,  
And, with deep sudden thunder, the dread sound  
Of cannon vibrates on the tremulous earth;  
While, bursting in the air, the murderous bomb  
Glares o'er her mansion. Where the splinters fall,  
Like scatter'd comets, its destructive path  
Is mark'd by wreaths of flame! (143)

In Chapter One, I showed how Wordsworth links Margaret's decline and fall to a series of national political events that originate far away but whose pale fingers reach into and blight her rural abode. In *The Emigrants*, Smith juxtaposes a visually and aurally sublime picture of martial destruction with a poignant image of a dying mother:

Overwhelm'd

Beneath accumulated horror, sinks  
The desolate mourner; yet, in Death itself,  
True to maternal tenderness, she tries  
To save the unconscious infant from the storm  
In which she perishes; and to protect  
This last dear object of her ruin'd hopes  
From prowling monsters, that from other hills,  
More inaccessible, and wilder wastes,  
Lur'd by the scent of slaughter, follow fierce  
Contending hosts, and to polluted fields  
Add dire increase of horrors—But alas!

The Mother and the Infant perish both! (143)

Smith does not shrink from the Gothic horror of the scene, noting the likelihood that wolves and other scavengers will eat the corpses of both mother and child. The devastating human cost of war could not be clearer. These victims will not even receive the dignity of a burial. The wolves will claim them first.

The passage described above sets the stage for the speaker's boldly sympathetic account of the plight of the most famous female victim of the French Revolution, the wife of Louis XVI. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke famously described Marie Antoinette's circumstances in a way that summed up his horror at the Revolution's bloody turn. Smith's speaker, on the other hand, sees the woman's suffering as an emblem of her own, and, reflecting on her childhood, uses it to comment bitterly on ignorance of future tribulations, a theme explored at great length in the *Elegiac Sonnets*. She says:

How little dream'd I then the time would come,  
When the bright Sun of that delicious month  
Should, from disturb'd and artificial sleep,  
Awaken me to never-ending toil,  
To terror and to tears!—Attempting still,  
With feeble hands and cold desponding heart,  
To save my children from the o'erwhelming wrongs,  
That have for ten long years been heap'd on me! (145)

The speaker's suffering permits her to sympathize not just with peasant women and children and an aristocratic mother but even with Louis XVI's wife and child, who, at the time Book Two takes place, were imprisoned in a medieval fortress in the center of Paris. The speaker laments the "most unfortunate, imperial Boy" whose "unoffended life" is threatened daily by

“the savage howl of Murder” (140). She mourns as well for the boy’s “wretched Mother,” the “hapless Queen” whose plight she deems incommensurate with any errors she may have committed in life (140). The speaker, defying as it were English versions of history, even laments the fate of Louis XVI. “Born a Monarch,” he too had been swept up by the tide of history and dropped on the guillotine in January 1793. Louis’ death inspires a vision of the desecrated and “ruin’d mass” of the temple of liberty where

Flush’d with hot blood, the Fiend of Discord sits  
In savage triumph; mocking every plea  
Of policy and justice, as she shews  
The headless corse of one, whose only crime  
Was being born a Monarch... (138)

This passage introduces the catalogue of horrors touched on earlier: French soil strewn with strange images of death, the woman who flees with her youngest child to the mountains, and the Royalist who returns to his bomb-shattered mansion and literally stumbles upon the bodies of his other children. We see the return of Death the Leveler. War grabs all men in its beak. But while aristocrats have a reasonably secure place in history, the forest mother is only recorded in *The Emigrants*. The sublime course of history has cast her to its margins.

### *Charlotte Smith and the Feminist Sublime*

In *Beachy Head*, Smith speaker presents the sublime as the aesthetic corollary to a male-driven natural history that has swept the lives of so many men, women, and children to its margins. The poem marries mortal consciousness, social and political consciousness, and sublime aesthetic awareness. However, it also complicates the sublime. Because Smith

equates sublimity with history, she transforms the sublime, focusing on the details of life it normally obscures from view. In doing so, she offers an alternative version of history grounded in the lives and experiences of the marginalized, dead, and forgotten. Her version of history is sublime not because it attends to a handful of important national events but because it evokes the profundity of human experience tragically omitted from typical historical narratives. Smith's poem, which scrambles generic categories, is itself a product of this feminist variation of sublime mortal consciousness.

*Beachy Head* was published posthumously in 1806. The first part of the poem is a meditation on natural and national history, but the poem quickly begins to defy generic categorization, marrying sublime loco-descriptive verse with sublime accounts of British national history anchored in the landscape the speaker describes; with highly naturalistic descriptions of local flora and fauna; with philosophical ruminations on childhood, nature, and happiness; and, finally, with semi-autobiographical passages touching on her own domestic hardships, similar to parts of *The Emigrants*. The poem ends with a quasi-mythical account of a hermit living in a cave by the shore, a man who has renounced society yet attempts to aid mariners who encounter trouble along the coast.

The poem begins with the speaker's recollection of a sublime experience triggered in by the massive natural forms of Beachy Head, on the southern coast of England:

On thy stupendous summit, rock sublime!  
That o'er the channel rear'd, half way at sea  
The mariner at early morning hails,  
I would recline; while Fancy should go forth,  
And represent the strange and awful hour  
Of vast concussion; when the Omnipotent

Stretch'd forth his arm, and rent the solid hills,  
Bidding the impetuous main flood rush between  
The rifted shores, and from the continent  
Eternally divided this green isle. (1-10)<sup>7</sup>

As Smith explains in her notes accompanying the poem, lines 6-10 allude to the hypothesis that “this Island was once joined to the continent of Europe, and torn from it by some convulsion of Nature” (155).<sup>8</sup> Like Cain’s vision of death, the speaker’s geologically sublime vision of the English is firmly grounded in Catastrophism.<sup>9</sup> Her fancy summons massive forms and forces, all of which Burke would have approved as species of the natural sublime: broken hills, rushing waters, and divided shores.

Through the next hundred or so lines, the speaker gives a long description of a day as experienced from the heights of Beachy Head, proceeding from morning through noon and afternoon to night. This long passage, anchored in the discourse of the sublime, is followed by the first of many rhetorically sublime meditations on important episodes in British history centered on the southern coast:

Contemplation here,  
High on her throne of rock, aloof may sit,  
And bid recording Memory unfold  
Her scroll voluminous—bid her retrace

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<sup>7</sup> References in quotations from *Beachy Head* refer to edition of the poem in Charlotte Smith, *Selected Poems*, ed. Judith Wilson (New York: Routledge, 2003), which includes line numbers. This edition, however, does not give all of Smith’s footnotes. References to footnotes refer to Labbe’s edition.

<sup>8</sup> Smith continues: “I confess I never could trace the resemblance between the two countries. Yet the cliffs about Dieppe, resemble the chalk cliffs on the Southern coast. But Normandy has no likeness whatever to the part of England opposite to it” (155).

<sup>9</sup> The reference to the “Omnipotent” reminds us that Catastrophism offered a way of reconciling biblical history with natural history; see Chapter Two.

The period, when from Neustria's hostile shore  
The Norman launch'd his galleys, and the bay  
O'er which that mass of ruin frowns even now  
In vain and sullen menace, then received  
The new invaders... (118-25)

Lines 118-42 paint a sublime historical backdrop stretching from the eighth century, when, as Smith explains in her notes, "Scandinavians, and other inhabitants of the north, began [...] to leave their inhospitable climate in search of the produce of more fortunate countries" (158), to the Norman Conquest of 1066, when William the Conquerer defeated Saxons. The passage ends with a brief description of Battle Abbey, the "holy pile" raised by William to "appease heaven's wrath for so much blood" (159). Smith also explains that William "endowed" Battle Abbey "with an ample revenue, that masses might be said night and day for the souls of those who perished in battle" (159). These are important details, because they illuminate the mortuary qualities of this sublime landscape whilst simultaneously imbuing them with great historical significance; furthermore, they focus the reader's attention on the individuals whose blood was spilled here, and whose bones rest in the earth. The remains of the dead will reappear later in the poem, but for entirely different reasons.

The speaker's account of early English history culminating in the Norman Conquest is followed in lines 143-66 by a patriotic address to Britain, which begins: "But let not modern Gallia form from hence / Presumptuous hopes, that ever thou again, / Queen of the isles! shall crouch to foreign arms" (143-5). The passage is a product of the compulsory nationalism that occasionally qualifies Smith's defense of liberty in *The Emigrants*. During the first decade of the nineteenth century, Britain watched in fear as "modern Gallia," under the leadership of Napoleon, invaded nation after nation. Britain's naval prowess and island



status offered it a degree of security not enjoyed by other states, but fears of a French invasion had paralyzed the nation in 1797, a topic Coleridge explores in “Fears in Solitude.” In lines 154-60 and the long accompanying footnote, the speaker recalls how, in 1690, the waters surrounding Beachy Head had been the scene of a humiliating defeat of combined English and Dutch forces by the French navy, which might have caused even greater destruction, had it not been for their commanders’ “ignorance of the coast, and misunderstanding among each other” (160).

The speaker invokes the term “modern Gallia” to distinguish Napoleon’s France from the Franco-Norman culture with which Britain’s culture was inextricably entwined, and which she celebrates in a long footnote spanning six pages of the original text. The note reminds readers that William the Conqueror was a scion of a Franco-Norman stock famous for implementing justice and defending Christian civilization. Contemporary readers might not care to be reminded of their Franco-Norman ancestry, a possibility that made the speaker’s patriotic address, described above, all the more essential. The address ends with a paean to the “series of illustrious men” who have “vindicate[d] her cause,” a list which, “as Fame echoes it, blanches the cheek / Of bold Ambition; while the despot feels / The extorted sceptre tremble in his grasp” (161-66).

In sum, the poem’s historical backdrop accomplishes two objectives simultaneously. As in *The Emigrants*, the speaker’s patriotic address is crafted to insulate the poem from charges of disloyalty that might stem from the ensuing critique of British history and culture. They also have a subtler aim. Smith’s extensive notes to the poem constitute a declaration of poetic confidence in the female poet’s ability to labor in literary genres – such as history – typically regarded as more suitable to male intelligences. Lucy Aikin made use of a similar tactic in *Epistles on Women*.

But before I discuss Smith's critique of British history as well as the men who created and recorded it, it is important to step back and notice how the sublime rhetoric that permeates the speaker's loco-descriptive prelude and ensuing historical sketch is occasionally interrupted by more mundane topics. The vision with which the poem commences is followed by a description of a sublimely "resplendent" sunrise, but in the lines that follow, immense forms and powers recede and give way to a beautiful delineation of a sparkling coastal habitat springing to life at the break of day:

From thy projecting head-land I would mark  
Far in the east the shades of night disperse,  
Melting and thinned, as from the dark blue wave  
Emerging, brilliant rays of arrowy light  
Dart from the horizon; when the glorious sun  
Just lifts above it his resplendent orb.  
Advances now, with feathery silver touched,  
The rippling tide of flood; glisten the sands,  
While, inmates of the chalky clefts that scar  
Thy sides precipitous, with shrill harsh cry,  
Their white wings glancing in the level beam,  
The terns, and gulls, and tarrocks, seek their food,  
And thy rough hollows echo to the voice  
Of the gray choughs, and ever restless daws ... (11-25)

The sublime rhetoric that permeates the speaker's loco-descriptive prelude and her ensuing sketch of British history descends here into a more mundane register as she describes the glistening sands along the ocean's margin and the numerous inhabitants of the chalk cliffs

whose winged forms glance in the horizontal light of early day. In other words, sublimity and history temporarily give way to something more local and domestic. The interplay between these registers points to one of the poem's main thematic preoccupations.

There are many of these shifts in the poem, but one is especially important, because it fuses sublime landscape description with a harsh critique of British history, especially its imperial ambitions. The speaker lays the foundation of her critique by honing in on the human price of history and empire. Midway through the introduction, the speaker fixes her gaze on the horizon:

Afar off,  
And just emerging from the arch immense  
Where seem to part the elements, a fleet  
Of fishing vessels stretch their lesser sails;  
While more remote, and like a dubious spot  
Just hanging in the horizon, laden deep,  
The ship of commerce richly freighted, makes  
Her slower progress, on her distant voyage,  
Bound to the orient climates, where the sun  
Matures the spice within its odorous shell... (37-46)

The image of the horizon as a solid foundation for the "immense" dome of the sky places this passage in the realm of the natural sublime. However, the passage contains a deeper rhetorical sublimity arising from its textual affinity with *Paradise Lost*. In Book Two, Milton compares Satan's long, laborious flight toward the gates of hell to the barely discernable motion of ships so far from land that their masts appear to hang in the clouds. In a classic example of a Miltonic simile, the poet writes:

As when far off at sea a fleet descried  
Hangs in the clouds, by equinoctial winds  
Close sailing from Bengala, or the isles  
Of Ternate and Tidore, whence merchants bring  
Their spicy drugs: they on the trading flood  
Through the wide Ethiopian to the Cape  
Ply stemming nightly toward the Pole. So seemed  
Farr off the flying fiend. (2.636-43)<sup>10</sup>

Smith's Miltonically sublime image of a "ship of commerce" so far from the shore that its "richly freighted" and deeply laden hull is partly invisible, making it appear about to fall off the sea's flat surface, anchors the scene visible from Beachy Head in British imperial history. As Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg have explained, the ships in Milton's simile "mimic the spice route," which ran "from India south and west around the Cape of Good Hope" before tracking north along Africa's west coast to Europe.<sup>11</sup> Like Milton's fleet, Smith's "ship of commerce" is "bound to the orient climes" (44, 46).

If Milton's Satanic conceit delivers an implicit critique of international trade, Smith's is more blatant, for the speaker's description of the "ship of commerce" paves the way for a muscular repudiation of the spirit of luxury which, she claims, motivates and perpetuates the traffic with "orient climes," subordinating in the process the rights of man to material desire:

There the Earth hides within her glowing breast  
The beamy adamant, and the round pearl

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<sup>10</sup> Wordsworth cites this passage as an example of the workings of the imaginative faculty in his 1815 "Preface."

<sup>11</sup> Orgel and Goldberg, *The Oxford Authors: John Milton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 868. Orgel and Goldberg add: "Ternate and Tidore are two of the Spice Islands near New Guinea."

Enchased in rugged covering; which the slave,  
With perilous and breathless toil, tears off  
From the rough sea-rock, deep beneath the waves.  
These are the toys of Nature; and her sport  
Of little estimate in Reason's eye:  
And they who reason, with abhorrence see  
Man, for such gaudes and baubles, violate  
The sacred freedom of his fellow man ... (50-59)

Abolitionist literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries frequently described and condemned in no uncertain terms the “perilous and breathless toil” of the pearl fisheries.

In a long passage reminiscent of *The Emigrants*, whose speaker simultaneously pities and scorns the exiles nostalgic for the luxuries of Versailles, the speaker of *Beachy Head* draws a sharp contrast between vitiated palates that seek beauty in the stuff of commerce and the “unadulterated taste” (65) that discovers the highest beauties in nature. Driving her point home, the speaker gathers up the “brightest gems, / Glancing resplendent on the regal crown, / Or trembling in the high born beauty's ear” (68-70) and redeploys them in a luminous description of a sunset as day draws to a close. Directing the reader's gaze to the clouds gathering around the sun's orb, she says:

There, transparent gold  
Mingles with ruby tints, and sapphire gleams,  
And colours, such as Nature through her works  
Shews only in the ethereal canopy. (81-84)

The word “gold” evokes the most precious of metals but refers to a color; similarly, “ruby” and “sapphire” – here used adjectivally – depict the deep colors of the sun-painted clouds.

Like many gemstones, however, this descriptive passage has a dark history, for the word “ruby” evokes the color of blood. Smith reminds us of the cost of these stones and points to a deeper problem: when gems have been appropriated as metaphors for natural forms, they are stripped of their ability to trigger the workings of mortal consciousness. And for good reason: even today, many individuals would recoil from the knowledge of the provenance of gemstones in engagement rings and other ornaments.

As Smith’s description of day unfurls, her language becomes even more problematic. Lines 81-84 mark another aesthetic shift in the poem, this time from the rhetoric of the beautiful to the sublime. The phrase “ethereal canopy,” which hearkens back to the image of the “arch immense” in the speaker’s description of the afternoon sky, evokes the voluminous expanse arising from behind the horizon. In lines that may have inspired Keats’ description of Hyperion’s palace, the speaker says:

Thither aspiring Fancy fondly soars,  
Wandering sublime thro’ visionary vales,  
Where bright pavilions rise, and trophies, fann’d  
By airs celestial; and adorn’d with wreaths  
Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers. (85-89)

While I can find no evidence that permits me confidently to assert that Keats was alluding to *Beachy Head* or had read it, Smith’s “sublime” wanderings in “visionary vales” bear a striking resemblance to Hyperion’s fiery, colossal strides through his bright solar palace, a gigantic structure “bastion’d with pyramids of glowing gold, / And touch’d with shade of bronzed obelisks” (1.176-78), and boasting “bowers of fragrant and enwreathed light, / And diamond-paved lustrous long arcades” (1.217-220). The connection with Keats, whether real or not, helps us see the peculiar martial bearing of Smith’s description of the close of day,

with a sunset described almost as an explosion:

Now bright, and brighter still the colours glow,  
Till half the lustrous orb within the flood  
Seems to retire: the flood reflecting still  
Its splendor, and in mimic glory drest;  
Till the last ray shot upward, fires the clouds  
With blazing crimson ... (90-5)

The sublimity of Britain's martial history is instantiated in the skies above it.

The perilous toil that leads to the accumulation of gems to crown the British Empire isn't just happening elsewhere. It is also happening at home. This becomes apparent a little later in the poem when the speaker redirects her gaze from the annals of ancient and contemporary British history to the lives of the individuals who dwell in the vicinity of Beachy Head. In lines 183-189, she describes one of the many shepherds who have quit their "honest toil" for the "clandestine" and "perilous trade" with smugglers along the South coast:

He braves himself  
The heaviest snow-storm of December's night,  
When with conflicting winds the ocean raves,  
And on the tossing boat, unfearing mounts  
To meet the partners of the perilous trade,  
And share their hazard. (184-89)

In a note to the poem, Smith explains why smuggling was so dangerous. In order to "elude the watchfulness of the Revenue officers," the smugglers only worked during bad weather,

“when no other vessel [would] venture to sea” (160). She also identifies what they are smuggling: distilled spirits. The speaker unequivocally disapproves of this labor:

Well it were for him,  
If no such commerce of destruction known,  
He were content with what the earth affords  
To human labour; even where she seems  
Reluctant most. (189-94)

But she does not condemn them. The phrase “commerce of destruction” emphasizes that they engage in this trade at the risk of their lives. The adjective “reluctant,” which modifies “earth” in line 191, explains why: many shepherds are turning to smuggling to augment a life that barely rises above subsistence. Here, too, Smith’s mortal consciousness reveals itself.

Indeed, Smith’s portrayal of rustic life is deeply ambivalent. Building on the tradition of Crabbe, Goldsmith, Cowper, and Wordsworth, as well as her own work in *The Emigrants*, the speaker gives an incisive, withering account of the hardships endured by the rural poor. This is not immediately apparent from the passage, which begins:

How gladly the reflecting mind returns  
To simple scenes of peace and industry,  
Where, bosom’d in some valley of the hills  
Stands the lone farm; its gate with tawny ricks  
Surrounded, and with granaries and sheds,  
Roof’d with green mosses, and by elms and ash  
Partially shaded... (168-74)

These lines resemble an English landscape painting by Constable, whom, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, John Barrell has roundly criticized for works that obfuscate, or rather reduce



to patches of paint, evidence of hardship and toil that might unsettle the viewer's pastoral fantasy. Just a few lines later, however, Smith's speaker begins to strip the varnish from the scene. In the winter, when "tempests blow" the shepherd's "rugged shed," he brings his sheep into his cottage to protect them from the elements:

A few sheep,  
His best possession, with his children share  
The rugged shed when wintry tempests blow;  
But, when with Spring's return the green blades rise  
Amid the russet heath, the household live  
Joint tenants of the waste throughout the day... (197-202)

Spring returns, but the vernal promise communicated by the pastoral image of "green blades [rising] / Amid the russet heath" is undercut by the speaker's declarative statement that the shepherd's "household," meaning both his children and his sheep, "live / Joint tenants of the waste." A hardscrabble year of subsistence farming awaits them. One remembers the description of the emaciated farmer in *The Emigrants*. Just a few lines down, the speaker declares that "the rough dweller among scenes like these" is only barely "remov'd from savage life." Stripping the adjective "savage" of any Rousseauvian connotations, the speaker deploys a stinging critique of pastoral fantasy:

Rude, and but just remov'd from savage life  
Is the rough dweller among scenes like these,  
"Scenes all unlike the poet's fabling dreams  
Describing Arcady"—But he is free;  
The dread that follows on illegal acts  
He never feels; and his industrious mate

Shares in his labour... (207-13)

Since Smith does not cite the quotation in lines 209-10 in her notes, it is possible that she expected her audience to recognize it, but I have not yet been able to trace it. Immediately following this attack on the pastoral mode, Smith contrasts the conscience of the shepherd who, unlike his fellows, has not succumbed to the temptation to smuggle. While some shepherds may remain moral in spite of circumstances, the reality of the shepherd's almost "savage" life points to the very circumstances that could drive one to the illicit trade the speaker ostensibly condemns.

In the ensuing lines, the speaker turns her attention from the noble shepherd to his "industrious mate," his wife, who leaves with her children to the fields where their sheep graze. The description of her labor contains two sublime images reminiscent of historical events from which she and her family are geographically removed, but to which their lives and livelihoods are inextricably bound. Like "The Ruined Cottage," Smith poem shows how the forces of history emanate from its sources in urban centers, impinging on the lives of those who live far away. It also creates a small, alternate, domestic history, complete with battles and monuments of humble nature.

The first image is of a heap of weeds that the woman and her children have gathered into a pile and set on fire. Viewed from a distance, the speaker says, these piles flash to the sky "like hostile war-fires" (228):

She leads her infant group where charlock grows

"Unprofitably gay," or to the fields,

Where congregate the linnets and the finch,

That on the thistles, so profusely spread,

Feast in the desert; the poor family

Early resort, extirpating with care  
These, and the gaudier mischief of the ground;  
Then flames the high rais'd heap; seen afar off  
Like hostile war-fires flashing to the sky. (219-28)

Like the weeds that have begun to grow around and on Margaret's cottage, the flowers of these plants are beautiful but have no economic value; in fact, they compete with the sustenance their sheep need to survive on the waste. Thus, the mother and her children carefully "extirpate" them, uprooting and consigning them to flames to prevent them from reattaching to the soil. It is an image of violence and of widespread death on a highly localized, rustic scale. The image accomplishes two things. First, it presents the industrious wife's labors as a ceaseless battle for survival against nature and the elements. Yet whereas the war-fires these burning weeds resemble are signs of large-scale endeavors to destroy human life, the wife's task is ultimately to preserve lives whose survival is by no means guaranteed in the "waste" they inhabit. Thus, the image pits in opposition two kinds of warfare, and two kinds of history: one masculine, one feminine, and one national, one domestic.

The second image develops these themes in a different way. In the lines following the ones just cited, the speaker describes another of the wife's tasks: gathering the numerous rocks "that shew / As angry Heaven had rain'd sterility / Stony and cold, and hostile to the plow" and depositing them in "rugged pyramids" around which the plough can maneuver (228-35). A pyramid, of course, is the natural configuration that a loose pile of stones would naturally assume, but no poet in the early nineteenth century could deploy this word without thinking of or evoking the pyramids of Egypt and other sublime monuments of ruined empires. Smith's image is tragically and poignantly ironic: the small, rugged pyramids

haphazardly built by the industrious woman and her children serve as temporary markers of lives precariously lived on the margins on history where larger monuments to power are constructed. They are sublime not because of their size, but because of the vast legacy of rural hardship and toil to which they attest. To reconfigure an image of Wordsworth, they are spots of time with significance that transcends the personal and reaches the cultural.

Following the speaker's account of the wife's labors is a deeply ambivalent passage about the pastoral scenes described by the speaker. This passage marks a crucial turning point, for it reintroduces the theme of death, sets up a meditation on the nature of happiness, and prepares the way for the operations of mortal consciousness. In lines 239-54, the speaker imagines the looks of "envy and contempt" on the face of a "sturdy hind" marking the passage of a "car / Where prosperous Fortune sits" (239-42). Little does the rustic know, the speaker says,

what secret care  
Or sick satiety is often hid,  
Beneath the splendid outside: *He* knows not  
How frequently the child of Luxury  
Enjoying nothing, flies from place to place  
In chase of pleasure that eludes his grasp;  
And that content is e'en less found by him,  
Than by the labourer, whose pick-axe smooths  
The road before his chariot; and who doffs  
What *was* an hat; and as the train pass on,  
Thinks how one day's expenditure, like this,  
Would cheer him for long months, when to his toil

The frozen earth closes her marble breast. (243-54)

These lines underscore the presence of Smith's profound mortal consciousness by pointing to a radical misdistribution of wealth and an equally dramatic failure of sympathy. Doffing his hat as the car passes, the laborer reflects that "one day's expenditure" by the wealthy could sustain him through the winter months, when "the frozen earth closes her marble breast" to his labors. Line 254 is one of the most rhetorically sublime in the entire poem. It not only underscores winter's hostility to agricultural labor but also evokes the grave to which winter might deliver the rustic or his family. It transforms an entire landscape into a national graveyard. This is important because, as I discuss below, the poem gradually turns its focus to the human bones buried in this rustic ground.

The lines quoted above serve to highlight another tragic element of the human condition: the failure of individuals from different social stations to empathize with each other's hardships. It isn't just the land that is hard; it is the hearts of people, especially the wealthy and the powerful. This leads to a meditation on the fleeting happiness of the world, followed by an autobiographical account of suffering and exile reminiscent of *The Emigrants*. "Ah! who *is* happy?" the speaker asks. She imagines happiness as an *ignis fatuus*:

Happiness! a word

That like false fire, from marsh effluvia born,

Misleads the wanderer, destin'd to contend

In the world's wilderness, with want or woe... (255-58)

As in many of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith's speaker is able to find a semblance of happiness in childhood, the province of innocence but also, of course, of ignorance: "Yet *they* are happy, who have never ask'd / What good or evil means" (259-60). The speaker describes the

happiness of two children, a boy and a girl, before lapsing into an autobiographical interlude reminiscent of *The Emigrants*:

I *once* was happy, when while yet a child,  
I learn'd to love these upland solitudes,  
And, when elastic as the mountain air,  
To my light spirit, care was yet unknown  
And evil unforeseen... (282-6)

The description of the boy is important because it reintroduces the theme of death and heralds the arrival of the poem's sublime mortal consciousness. In an astonishing passage one can easily imagine resonating a decade or so later with Byron, the speaker visualizes a boy playing by a river that he has heard could cause his death. He does not fear this event, however, because he doesn't know what death is:

The boy  
That on the river's margin gaily plays,  
Has heard that Death is there—He knows not Death,  
And therefore fears it not; and venturing in  
He gains a bullrush, or a minnow—then,  
At certain peril, for a worthless prize,  
A crow's, or raven's nest, he climbs the boll,  
Of some tall pine; and of his prowess proud,  
Is for a moment happy. (260-68)

Happiness, the speaker says, is the enjoyment of a mind unconscious of death. It ends – it must end – when we become consciousness of death and the many shapes it takes for its human victims.

The irruption of mortal consciousness into the poem informs its second, more important loco-descriptive passage, in which the speaker, climbing Beachy Head in the present, trains her poetic gaze not on huge forms or distant vistas and the cataclysmic historical events connected to them, but rather on the objects at her feet. Initially, she focuses her attention on the diverse flowers in her path, whose taxonomy she gives in the notes. Calling herself “an early worshipper at Nature’s shrine,” an echo of Wordsworth, Warton, and other early Romantic poets, she gives beautiful descriptions of flowers such as the anemone, “with rays like golden studs on ivory laid / Most delicate: but touch’d with purple clouds.”<sup>12</sup> As the speaker continues her ascent, however, her eyes focus on even smaller objects. She marks “the strange and foreign forms / Of sea-shells; with the pale calcareous soil.” Seashells! Here on the heights of Beachy Head, high above the margin of the shore; surely the ocean has never rolled its waves here! The discovery of “bivalves” and “inwreathed volutes” in Beachy Head’s chalky soil inspires the speaker’s second geological meditation, one imbued with Romantic mortal consciousness. Does Nature, she asks,

Mimic, in wanton mood, fantastic shapes  
 Of bivalves, and inwreathed volutes, that cling  
 To the dark sea-rock of the wat’ry world?  
 Or did this range of chalky mountains, once  
 Form a vast bason, where the Ocean waves  
 Swell’d fathomless? What time these fossil shells,  
 Buoy’d on their native element, were thrown  
 Among the imbedding calx: when the huge hill

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<sup>12</sup> The anemone is a key Romantic image. In Smith’s poetry, it suggests transience and unrecoverable loss; indeed, the flowers appears in the “Sonnet Written at a Close of Spring,” discussed above.

Its giant bulk heaved, and in strange ferment  
Grew up a guardian barrier, 'twixt the sea  
And the green level of the sylvan weald. (373-83)

The verbs are crucial to the meaning of these lines. Notice how the bivalves and volutes “cling” to the wave-dashed rocks, and how the shells are “thrown” about. Their precarious existence stands in stark contrast with the massive energies displayed by the forms around them, things that “swell” and “heave.” The speaker associates the bivalves and shells, destined for the imbedding calx, with the victims of history, here conceived as natural history. The contrast of delicate forms and robust, heaving energies suggests a specifically gendered dynamic. It is worth noting that many women practiced shell art during the “Rococo” period in early eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

Thomas Weiskel, in his study of the sublime, reads the famous “spots of time” passage in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* as a manifestation of the sublime, but he distinguishes it from the Burkean or natural sublime, where the mind is overwhelmed by massive forms. The sublimity of “spots of times,” which he labels “metonymical,” arises not from an excess of signifiers but an excess of the signified.<sup>14</sup> *Beachy Head* draws its power from this form of sublimity. Tiny forms that “cling” to the world before being overrun by its forces inspire the speaker’s sublime ruminations on the history of the Earth, a natural history that grows into a metaphor for human history.

Smith harnesses the power of this sublimity in an ensuing passage. Reflecting in a moment of deep Romantic irony on the utter irrelevance of natural history to the individuals

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<sup>13</sup> See Rosemary O’Day, “Family Galleries: Women and Art in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71(2), pp. 323–349.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime – Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1976).



who manage to carve out a subsistence life in this portion of it, a decisively non-pastoral rural landscape, the speaker ruminates on the implications of their ignorance of the human remains beneath their feet, remains of people swept up by the course of history, deposited in its wake, and forgotten. Like Wordsworth's "spots of time," these remains pulsate with significance for the mortally conscious speaker:

...Little recks the herdsman of the hill,  
Who on some turfy knoll, idly reclined,  
Watches his wether flock; that deep beneath  
Rest the remains of men, of whom is left  
No traces in the records of mankind,  
Save what these half obliterated mounds  
And half fill'd trenches doubtfully impart  
To some lone antiquary ...

[...]

[who] may trace,  
Or fancy he can trace, the oblong square  
Where the mail'd legions, under Claudius, rear'd,  
The rampire, or excavated fossé delved;  
What time the huge unwieldy Elephant  
Auxiliary reluctant, hither led,  
From Afric's forest glooms and tawny sands,  
First felt the Northern blast, and his vast frame  
Sunk useless... (399-416)

These lines inspire a vitriolic address to Ambition, inviting it to “Come and behold the nothingness of all / For which you carry thro’ the oppressed Earth, / War, and its train of horrors.”

The elephant, blasted by the climate to which it is not accustomed, and to which it has been led, an “auxiliary reluctant” in the building of empire, is one of the most poignant images in the poem. Bones of elephants had indeed been found in England, perplexing natural historians and sparking competing hypotheses about their origins; they haunted men and women the same way that the ice-arrested remains of the elephant’s cousin and ancestor, the woolly mammoth, would haunt Byron and inform Cain’s vision of death. But we don’t need natural history to explain these bones. Like the “mail’d legions” with whose bones they are intermingled, the elephants, too, are the victims of empire. They were led to England in war, just as Hannibal took them into Europe.

What is perhaps most interesting about this passage is the total absence of women. The speaker, a woman, meditates at length in the poem on her own domestic afflictions, but the bones she teases out of the ground are of male soldiers and animals. With the exception of the feminine shells discussed earlier, women do not even enjoy an imaginative place in the history Smith imaginatively excavates and among the dead she imaginatively recuperates. This points to why Smith’s sublimity, imbued with Romantic mortal consciousness, is fundamentally feminist in nature. It is a protest poem: a work of cultural, political, historical, and aesthetic dissent motivated by mortal consciousness.

As we have noted, Burke believed during a sublime experience, huge and mighty forms or ideas transfix the mind; in the process, their vastness swallows up details that are the domain of beauty. Through *Beachy Head*, Smith poses an equivalence between this form of sublimity and the sublime forces of history as normally conceived and composed: a

sequence of giant events plotted, executed, and later emplotted or recorded by men. In their execution, these events sweep up individuals who have little say either about their design or their direction. Some survive; a few may thrive; many are caught in the undertow and lost.

One's proximity to or distance from the bodies and sources of power driving these events may or may not make a difference. Cain had no part in the primal transgression for which God ejected man from Paradise; nevertheless, he is a victim of its direst consequence: mortality. In *The Ruined Cottage*, the Pedlar explains how a confluence of national and natural ills – war, drought, and sickness – resulted in a surge whose waves lapped at the very foundations of Margaret's cottage. In an act of economic desperation, her husband Robert enlisted in the army and presumably died in a foreign land. Leveled by anxiety and worry, and unable to support her family on her own, Margaret lapses into a slow psychological and physical decline that eventually claims her life, but not before she watches the death of two children. Her cottage, now a rustic ruin already returning to the nature in which it was built, stands – at least temporarily – as a living monument to her life, just as the ruins of empire that captivated the British imagination in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries served as reminders of the rise and fall of nations.

*Beachy Head* poses a similar equivalence between the ruins of empire and the bones of its servants and victims but on a more microscopic – and, for that very reason, more sublime – level. Careful not to give too much freedom to her critical eye, Smith deploys a subtle yet withering attack on the pastoral mode, exposing the harshness of life in a rural, coastal community. She describes the immense labors that farmers and shepherds and their wives and even children must do to eke out a life of sustenance on land she imagines cursed by Heaven. Bones in the soil beneath the feet of these villagers – human and animal remains of which they are ironically unaware – encapsulate and foretell their fate. But one doesn't need

to be an antiquarian to discover these bones or dwell on their implications; a botanist's or a natural historian's eye will do just as well. Ascending Beachy Head, Smith's speaker points out and describes the local flora and fauna, occasionally expanding on these descriptions in her notes to the poem.

Significantly, these "natural" notes are interleaved with notes described earlier that elaborate on the poem's many historical references and allusions. A reader with a penchant for geology skimming through the notes might imagine them as a kind of textual equivalent to a polymict conglomerate, in which rocky debris of a variety of sizes and shapes have intermingled and, though the barely imaginable workings of the earth's geophysical forces, fused together; or a kind of textual shale, in between whose thin strata occasionally appear, revealed by chance or the stroke of a hammer, the filmy remains of ancient life. Perhaps the latter image is more appropriate, given the chalky soil in the environs of Beachy Head: a soil containing the remains of millions upon millions of "inwreathed volutes" and other sea life. Each of these fossils once had a distinct, individual existence; now, each lies in the soil high above its oceanic origins, raised there by the operations of vast forces. For Smith, these fossils become a collective sign of all the lives cast to the margins by the storm surge of history, and through them, a measurement of history's immense forces. Each fossil is like one of Wordsworth's spots of time; the landscape is supercharged with them. Smith's version of sublimity – a manifestation of mortal consciousness that, as we have seen, is deeply political at its core – is an accumulation of metonymical sublimities. Over time they gather into geological forms that Burke himself might recognize as sublime.

But what is the purpose of this sublimity? What does it allow one to do, other than to contemplate the tragedies recorded and the inequalities crystallized by the march of time and history? Perhaps very little; Keats, unable to solve this problem for himself, seems to

have believed that simply asking the question – of attaining and then maintaining mortal consciousness – may have been enough and all that mortals might do, aside from sympathizing with and comforting or aiding one another during times of hardship. But Keats, as we have seen, was also determined to do good for the world, and the end of *Beachy Head* involves a liminal figure who attempts to do just that.

Actually, Smith introduces two new personae at the end of the poem: a dreamer and a hermit, both of whom live apart from society, but for different reasons. The dreamer shuttles between living in the past and constructing an ideal retreat away from the civilization that has somehow wounded him. He reminds one of the speaker of *The Emigrants*, who early in Book One says:

How often do I half abjure Society,  
And sigh for some lone Cottage, deep embower'd  
In the green woods, that these steep chalky Hills  
Guard from the strong South West... (p. 3-4)

The benefit of such solitude, the speaker speculates, is

[T]hat I should then behold  
The beauteous works of God, unspoil'd by Man  
And less affected then, by human woes  
I witness'd not; might better learn to bear  
Those that injustice, and duplicity  
And faithlessness and folly, fix on me... (p. 4-5)

In *Beachy Head*, the speaker has rejected society and dwells alternatively in an imagined past and an imagined future.

The hermit, too, has abjured the company of men. Living alone in a cave by the sea, however, the hermit occasionally comes out to aid sailors who have come too close to the shore and dashed their crafts against the rocks. Some of these are the smugglers whom the speaker described earlier: shepherds who gave up honest yet impoverishing labor for a more lucrative yet dangerous enterprise. The hermit becomes a living legend to the inhabitants of Beachy Head, and after an especially powerful storm, the villagers, fearing his safety, descend to his cave dwelling, only to find him drowned. There they bury him, consigning his bones to the geological forms that signify the present and past inhabitants of history's margins. These geological forms are the natural productions of geophysical forces symbolic of human ones that the hermit anonymously yet steadfastly tried to resist by helping those in danger of losing their loves. Just as Lucifer, in *Cain*, embodied the sublimity of which the play's protagonist became gradually conscious, Smith's hermit embodies sublimity, too. He becomes a living synthesis with massive geological forms and the voluminous evidence of life embedded in them. He is Smith's symbol of the anonymous – yet, through *Beachy Head* – the recuperated victims of history.

## **Coda: The Modernity of Romantic Mortal Consciousness**

My project has offered a fresh intervention with English Romantic poetry in light of death studies. It has illustrated attempts by a number of poets – chiefly Gray, Wordsworth, Byron, Hemans, Keats, and Smith – to grapple with changing attitudes toward death and dying after the Enlightenment. My project has also complicated death studies. It has underscored that the shift from what Ariès called the “death of the self” to the “death of the other” was not a sudden or quick one; indeed, “A Spirit’s Return” anticipates the Victorian culture of mourning but fundamentally concerns an individual woman’s relationship to life and death in a mutable world full of loss and sorrow. More importantly, it has credited Romantic writers with inventing death studies. *Cain* clearly attests to a realization that “mortality” is a cultural construct; after all, Cain’s vision of death is deeply rooted in Byron’s own understanding of contemporaneous natural history. However, Byron’s play also challenges this notion of death by showing how Cain’s idea of mortality emerges in a private intellectual and emotional space informed by his individual experience of the world.

Cain’s vision of death galvanized an already pessimistic attitude toward the divine architect of human life and culture, and his disenchantment with God led, through Abel’s murder, to the creation of the very entity he fears most: death. Yet the irony of the play’s catastrophe should not prevent us from seeing that Cain’s actions are fundamentally political in nature. Abel’s murder is the result of a protest against God regarding the human condition. In this sense, Byron’s play shows how Romantic mortal consciousness is akin to what one might now describe as a liberal social and political consciousness. *Cain* is the clearest expression of a form of mortal consciousness inhabited by Gray, Wordsworth, Hemans, Keats, and Smith. While Romantic mortal consciousness betrays considerable

anxiety over death's threat to the self, it also urges one to look beyond the self and consider the circumstances of those who have shared, still share, or will share the earth. It urges one to challenge the status quo, in large part because, after the Enlightenment, death can no longer be trusted to do so; in the absence of spiritual consolations for worldly inequality, death changes from its leveling agent to a force that crystallizes that inequality.

The social and political disposition of Romantic mortal consciousness also reveals itself in Romantic aesthetics. My project has traced Keats' attempt to develop a poetics of relevance that could reflect and enact poetry's ability to matter in a world of suffering and woe. My project has also offered a new analysis of the sublime, regarding it as a manifestation of Romantic mortal consciousness. Cain's initiation into the mysteries of death enables sublime aesthetic experience; the sublime, in turn, not only helps him comprehend the vast legacy of death implicit in the Earth's natural history but also transforms the way he views God. In *Beachy Head*, Smith sees the sublime as an aesthetic corollary to the forces of history that have circumscribed the lives of women, children, and the poor. She develops a new form of the sublime that allows her imaginatively to recuperate the victims of history. A sense of moral obligation informs Romantic mortal consciousness, and Romantic aesthetics reflects this.

We are still – or ought to be – living in an age of Romantic mortal consciousness. Ariès would say that we are living in the age of the “invisible death,” and one could make the argument that we are less familiar with death than our ancestors two centuries ago. I am thirty-five years old, and I have only seen one corpse. I have lost several family, a few friends, and even – terribly – a student, but in most cases, those deaths happened while I was far from home. Even in cases where I was or could be present, death mostly happened in hospitals, behind screens. Death in our postmodern world is all too often like the one



represented in Margaret Edson's recent play *Wit*: ugly, painful, and solitary. And yet the modern world has given us many new, highly visible shapes of death. Routine hospital procedures can infect the body with bacteria for which medicine has no cure: a metaphysical paradox alluded to in Edson's play. I dance with death twice each day while driving an automobile 60 miles an hour over Storm King Mountain. Many of my students at West Point will dance even more closely with it in just a few years; some of my students already have, on previous deployments. Every time I visit the city, I am reminded we live in age of global terror. Yet I don't necessarily feel safer at home; Sandy Hook, a scene of unthinkable domestic terror, is merely 30 minutes away.

I do not mean to sound morbid, solipsistic, or both. Chances are I will die a very typical and relatively quiet death. And despite having worked on this project for over half a decade, I don't think about death very often; the business of living tends to get in the way. That is probably a good thing. But I don't think it hurts to be mindful of mortality. It can make us stop and reflect on how we are living and ask whether we are making the Earth a kinder if not better habitation for those closest to us, and perhaps for individuals farthest away from us, too. An increasingly globalized and interconnected world shows that our lives and livelihoods are closely entwined with those of human beings far outside our immediate circles; it also shows that our fates may be intertwined as well. Romantic mortal consciousness may help us keep our individual priorities straight, and it may help us strive to ensure that the work we do and energy we expend is, in the balance, aimed at the betterment of a culture we share with seven billion people. To give a mundane example, Romantic mortal consciousness can inspire us to consider (if not actually to calculate) our carbon footprint and, more importantly, dwell on its impact on people whose paths we may never cross and places we may never see.

The study of Romantic literature must not be exempt from the burden of Romantic mortal consciousness. If anything, it must strive to assume an even greater share of it. Why is it important to approach Romantic or any literature or art from the vantage point of mortal consciousness? Why, as Romanticists, do I think we need to dwell on death? What are the implications of my project for Romanticism as a discipline, and for ourselves as “Romanticists” and as teachers of literature and culture? In failing to pay sufficient attention, as I believe we are doing, to mortality and other big issues, have we wandered too far from own roots as Romanticists and forgotten what it means to think Romantically about literature and culture?

It has always seemed to me that a defining characteristic of Romantic literature is its unabashed tendency to ask big questions about life and death, even when it is clear that this kind of questioning will only lead to further rounds of interrogation and greater and greater uncertainty. (For that, in essence, is the meaning of Romantic irony.) It also seems clear to me that, as students of this literature, we are considerably more embarrassed than the authors we study about asking these kinds of questions. As a result, a disconnect has grown between Romantic scholarship and the concerns that drew many of us to the literature in the first place, and what many of us like to talk about in the classroom with college undergraduates – most of whom will never become professional literary scholars, but any one of whom could have a palpable impact on human culture and life.

Thus, I would like to suggest that we step back and think about the state of the field, consider what it means to be practicing Romanticists, and ask what it is we want our students to take from this large and wonderfully contested body of work. To do this, we may need to undertake empirical research on how we teach Romanticism today (by looking at syllabi and anthologies), but we can begin by thinking about the work we do inside the

classroom and how or whether it relates to the work we do outside of it. My purpose is not to take a negative stance toward the field or give the impression that I regard myself as a critical voice in the wilderness; that would be too bold for a young student. I do not wish to advocate a change to the canon or the rejection of any particular critical methodology.

Rather, I want to suggest that we foreground in our teaching and scholarship the questions that drive Romantic writing, that we consider the importance of this work, especially teaching, within the larger mission of a liberal undergraduate education, and that we recognize our privileged position as Romanticists to assume this responsibility.

In an increasingly globalized world where our decisions about how we live, what we eat, and where we spend our money have more and more direct consequences on the lives of others, and as natural and man-made pressures combine to create newer and ever more dire threats against the ability of humans to coexist with each other and their environment, it is, I think, morally imperative that we rage, if not against mortality itself, then against where and how and when people die. As Byron's *Cain* suggests, the first step in our capacity for rage is renewed acquaintance with mortality. Introspective action like literary study can contribute to this; so can extrospective action like reading the newspaper, doing service, or teaching. These two forms of action are not mutually exclusive, but they rarely fuse together as powerfully as they do in the college classroom, where as teachers we have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ask students to "think of the Earth" before they enter it fully. We may not live to see the full results of these conversations, but we must have faith in their efficacy. And in an educational climate where the humanities continue to be pushed to the margins, even as we strive to articulate the value of the arts, Romantic mortal consciousness could play an important role in the renewal of our discipline. Mortal literary study will never replace other forms of professional literary engagement, but it could infuse them with new

vitality; moreover, for those who doubt the value of the humanities in education, both outside and inside our classrooms, it could make the relevance of the humanities and powerfully clear.

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