

Vanishing Point: The Drive to Failure in Romantic Representation

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## **Abstract**

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As the modern academy continues to remake the literary canon--to determine whether such a thing should even exist, and if so, along what lines it should be formed--the notion of artistic quality has come under scrutiny as we try to determine, amid a glut of media and a world of distractions, what artworks are worth saving, and what value, if any, is there in studying artistic failure. Within studies of British Romanticism, the notion of failure has emerged as a topic of particular, and recurrent distinction. Failures of historicity abound (McGann, McFarland), as do failures of attention (P. Melville), failures of revolution (Duffy, Foot), biographical failures (Bloom), mental failures (Burwick), and failures of certain poems to finish (Levinson, Rajan). What all such studies neglect, however, is the performative aspect of such failures: that, when aesthetic disaster occurs within a work, rather than within a biography, they can be considered motivated, part and parcel of the work's meaning-making. The present work groups and explains aesthetic failures under the aegis of the theatrical. I argue that they are not accidental, but authorized and intentional, and as such, are not crippled the burden (of the past, of history, etc.) but are instead formalistic showcases of defeat that discourse on, and mean to transcend, poetic limits.

The six chapters of this dissertation comprise readings and critical discussions of a particular formalistic poetic device I call “the drive to failure” in major poets of the British Romantic period, demonstrating in each what the move looks like for that author, and what critical apperçu must be in place to understand it. The project explores the notion of grounding, which I refer to as “failure,” in its differing iterations across the poetic and critical spectrum which this dissertation maps in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and to some extent, Hunt and Byron.

My method is to focus on the pivotally absent centers of certain poetic work in the British 19th century. I highlight poems that are considered failures in otherwise strong oeuvres, weak lines in otherwise strong poems, lapses of attention mid-description, and the curious phenomenon of the intentional fragment poem in order to show what the resistance to completion, or to “success” might mean in each of these cases and to outline the recuperative function that the absent center serves. Theoretically, and in addition to a diverse and contemporary range of Romantic scholarship, my arguments are grounded in work on representation and impossibility, especially Vogler, Žižek, de Man, Kant, Coleridge, Nancy, Levinson, and Deleuze.

The first chapter, *Lyre Liar*, argues that an “authorized fragment” (one wherein the poet has an opportunity to finish the work, but doesn’t, as opposed to an “accidental fragment” wherein he drowns, loses the mss., etc) constitutes a thing à la Bill Brown and Jean Baudrillard’s “thing theory,” and that it thereby deserves unique consideration. When poets promise something, and fail to deliver, often they are suggesting something about the greatness of their original conception. Percy Shelley says the “mind in composition is as a fading coal,” which phrase is not meant to evoke the warmth or slight glow of coals and thereby to speak

to composition's value, but to point back at the original fire. If what we have is this poem-object (hot, alive) we are forced to imagine what it could have been. By not fulfilling his ostensible aim, the poet has enhanced the strength of the vision he once held, and bolstered his prophetic, if not poetic credentials thereby.

The next chapter, *The Prison Bower of Meaning*, posits that one demonstration of literary power might construct a black hole as a way of exploring what is poetically knowable. I use a section of Coleridge's *Nihil Negativum Irrepraesentabile* in which he differentiates between a "negative quantity" and "an absence," to show how poems like *This Lime Tree Bower*, *my Prison*, and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are epistemological excursions before they are purely literary ones. Meaning is confused, or contradictory in these poems because they are not intended to mean; they suck meaning back into themselves intentionally before it can escape into sense. In this chapter, de Man's work is used as a bridge between Coleridge and Gilles Deleuze, especially as it argues how *Mont Blanc-the-poem* is like *Mont Blanc-the-mountain* in that they are both solitary objects that refuse to connect to other objects in the signifying chain.

Part of the next chapter, *Keats and the Poetic Ruin*, has been published in slightly different form as my contribution to the book *Literary and Poetic Depictions of Work and Labor in the Romantic Era* (ed. Clason et al, 2011); it argues that though the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* may be one of the language's greatest poems, it also contains some of poetry's worst lines. Those lines, especially "More happy love, more happy, happy love," are not mis-steps; they are failures, and, I'm arguing, active failures in the sense Slavoj Zizek intends when he writes of the subject's experiential "displeasure" in sublimity, the "inadequacy" of a remnant that suggests "incomparable greatness." The poem thereby tropes a kind of theatrical dive, meant

to claim for the poet a documentable experience of the sublime. In what then becomes a discourse on imaginative limits, Keats discusses the form's ability to "tease us out of thought," connecting that lack of thought with silence, and ultimately to a breathlessness he enacts in these passages. As the poet demonstrates the failure of the poetic faculty in the face of the sublime encounter --making a spectacle of the climb, failure, and recovery-- he also hopes to induce a similar reaction in his readers, attempting to move us out of breath and to the same pitch of delirium he has exhibited, to make his private imaginative environment a public one wherein his theatrical swoon is contagious.

Next, a chapter called *Violence and Absence*, presented at the NASSR conference at Duke University, and a section of which is forthcoming in the Fall 2012 issue of *RaVoN*<sup>1</sup>, considers the active representation of absence-- a stone circle, a zero, an "O the difference to me!"-- as a response to violence. Absent histories create involuntary misreadings, as in *Tintern Abbey*, and *Three Years She Grew*, but present absences can heighten the descriptive violence as in a Hitchcock film where one only hears the scream as a camera cuts away, or as in Wordsworth's *Alice Fell*, wherein the violence reeked upon a girl is displaced onto surrounding objects making it at once more palatable and more subversive. This chapter's method is to consider Ovid (Wordsworth's early favorite) as a likely template for this trope. I show that certain of Wordsworth's poems emerged as exercises in Ovidian imitation, and that he's used the erasure of his poetic father to add darkness and suggestion to poems which are often misread as innocent.

Finally, the *Laugh of Recognition*, compares Byron and Hunt as models of aesthetic self-awareness and posits Hunt's failure of critical distance as an anti-Wordsworthian trope,

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<sup>1</sup> "Wordsworth's Stone Silence"

fighting for poetic strength in Harold Bloom's terms from his middle critical period. Other failures discussed in this chapter consist similarly of failing to keep respectable distance from the work before one, but, in these cases, the intentional gesture (the wink) rescues the artwork qua artwork in the manner of Byron's self-knowing slips.

I expect this research to contribute to robust debates surrounding the nature and purpose of failure across artistic disciplines, in recent collections like Wordsworth's Poetic Theory (2010) and The Horizon (2011), while it suggests a new and defensible way of reading performative aesthetics. Moreover, since this work is principally theoretical, and not bound by the confines of the period or genre on which it is demonstrated in this dissertation, it opens a vein for further inquiry into the notion of recuperative aesthetic loss, and in that, is poised to play an important role in shaping the perception not only of certain poems, or periods, but of artistic practice generally.

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Grateful acknowledgment is also given to the editors of the books and journals in which some of this work first appeared, especially to Michael Eberle-Sinatra, Dino Felluga, and Christopher Clason.

Lastly, to the lovely Mrs. Willett, for patience, imagination, and verve.

## Introduction: Performance Anxiety

To draw the limits of thought, as philosophy does, is to invite us to peak beyond.  
Dieder Maluevre, *The Horizon* (6)

Unless a seed falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies it  
bears much fruit.  
John 12:24

If it is true that the philosophy of Immanuel Kant has a theatrical quality, the theatre it offers is one of the mind, in which various faculties interact with each other, each trying to accomplish what only a higher faculty can deliver only to find, through a process of humiliation, their own limitations. In that sense, the work is often--even when it pretends to be philosophical, expository, descriptive--at center, *performative* and the play on offer is a tragedy: one failure after another until the stage is empty apart from Reason, the last man standing. Rather, we should say “the last *woman* standing,” as Kant’s project is to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism and restore metaphysics to its previous status as “the Queen of all sciences” (Reason 1). Kant’s method is to subject Reason to a radical critique, a strenuous process of temporary humiliation during which she can be cured of her pretensions and discover her limitations, namely that Reason cannot have knowledge of super-sensible ideas such as God or freedom of will.

At the same time, the rational procedures that failed to prove the existence of God<sup>2</sup> and other super-sensible ideas also fail to disprove them, as for Kant, Reason remains, even after

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<sup>2</sup> In this section of the *Critique*, Kant is referring to the God concept, and of Speculative Reason’s disability to disprove that which transcendental theology assumes, but the stature of Reason is undiminished at the close of this transaction, since it is still “of very great utility in correcting our knowledge thereof.”

her failures, “an ideal without a flaw, a concept that completes and crowns the whole of human knowledge” and which demonstrates simultaneously “the invalidity of all counter-assertions” (Reason 531). In the end, Kant wants to “make room for faith” in metaphysics and to defeat dogmatism that breeds “unbelief” by founding reason on a proper critique of its limitations. In order so to do, he has to find those limitations by pushing rational critique not only to its limits, but beyond them, until the point of system failure: a moment the poet John Keats shares when he writes in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, “thou silent form doth tease us out of thought as doth eternity” (lines 44-45). “Eternity,” of course, being one of Kant’s supra-sensible ideas.

In this, the Kantian text provides a model for the performance of failure that I outline in this dissertation. Herein, I mean to examine an aesthetic phenomenon at work in writers across the Romantic era which is similarly concerned with finding the limits of poetic representation, and in doing so by pushing a concept too far, and either forcing a cognitive, syntactic, or formalistic failure, or by mimicking one of these failures as a short-cut to a recuperative launch.

The six chapters of this dissertation comprise readings and critical discussions of the formalistic poetic device--recognizable in absent centers, conceptual vanishing points-- I call “the drive to failure” in major poets of the British Romantic period, demonstrating in each what the move looks like for that author, and what critical *apperçu* must be in place to understand it. The project explores the notion of grounding, and the downward impulse generally, which I refer to as “failure,” in its differing iterations across the poetic and critical spectrum which this dissertation maps in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and to some extent, Hunt and Byron. In addition to charting typologies of active failure, I also pro-

vide a theoretical framework for the drive toward it, showing not only that it happens, but positing why poets might feel and surrender to such a drive, performing and showcasing the downward arc in certain work.

Within studies of British Romanticism, the notion of failure has emerged as a topic of particular, and recurrent distinction. Marjorie Perloff's "poetics of indeterminacy" is only one example, pointing as it does to work that is either structurally or thematically irresolute and offering a positive reading despite the cracks in a given poem's surface. Jerome McGann writes about the recent failure of all synthetic narratives, "historicist, dialectical, and psychoanalytic," which, he writes, "have seen their truth values turn imaginary" (LH 825). But these are only two of the better-known such treatments: Cian Duffy and Paul Foot both write about Shelley and the failure of political revolutions, and of his poetry to effect their outcomes. Harold Bloom writes about biographical failures especially in Coleridge, Frederick Burwick about psychological failures, and Marjorie Levinson and Balachandra Rajan, to name just two, about fragments, or the failures of certain poems to finish. The present work groups and explains these failures under the aegis of the performative. I argue that they are not accidental, but authorized, and as such, are not crippled under the burden (of the past, of history, etc.) but are instead formalistic showcases of defeat that discourse on, and often transcend, poetic limits.

Paul Curtis suggests that some of the "significant pleasures" available to readers of Romantic poetry are "uncertainty," "indirection," and "maladjustment." "The principle source of this pleasure," he writes, is "the deliberately dilatory progress through a poem" (1). Curtis is wondering though about "following a narrative...vis a vis a poem's beginning, middle, and end" (1). I am arguing less for a narrative maladjustment, and more for an aesthetic

indirection, but we agree that the circuitousness is intentional on the part of the poet, and pleasurable for the reader.

Recent collections like Wordsworth's Poetic Theory edited by Alexander Regier and Stefan Uhlig (2010), and the volume including my chapter on Keats, Literary and Poetic Representations of Work and Labor in the Romantic Era, edited by Christopher Clason (2011), have shown renewed interest in the formal properties of poetic difficulty. The present work means to introduce to that discussion a poetic economy wherein nothing is lost. Even the weakest lines and most faltering spans of attention contribute, in this economy, to the launch of a larger conceptual framework unachievable without the original defeat, which suggests a new and recuperative way of reading weakness and displacement by contextualizing their discussion under the heading of performative aesthetic loss.

### **The Drive to Failure**

I suggest the term “drive to failure,” and employ it herein, to describe the purposive construction of an artistic partiality toward the partial, imperfect, or otherwise broken. That is, I am arguing for an aesthetic device that holds across the authors of this period, that makes an intentional failure--of completion, of argument, of sustained pitch--with the goal either of highlighting the original conception or of taking the work into an imaginary beyond the author's rendering.

If I am going to talk about the drive to failure, it may help to define what I mean by “drive.” A drive is not, for example, sociological or even psychological because it is not a phenomenon occurring within the author, or even within something like literary history, but

one that occurs within the work, and it only exists within the artwork because a drive is immediately related to a *telos*.

An outline of the general progress of the drive to failure may be instructive at this point. In general, it moves from 1) an objective to the 2) attempt at its fulfillment, 3) the failure to meet stated objectives, 4) recognition of the value in that failure, and 5) the recuperative function of the drive to failure, wherein the poet realizes he has attained a better transcendence than that of which he originally conceived.

By way of a brief example, and to demonstrate the types of reading this dissertation will perform, let's consider the general structure of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*, itself an affirmation of imaginative power in the face of Wordsworth's failure to write *The Recluse*. In that, of course, it is a kind of success as it demonstrates (if not completely for Wordsworth, at least for us, his readers) his possession of the faculties, however atrophied or underdeveloped they may have been by that point, for such an undertaking in the first place, and so keeps us in touch with our formal capacities for imagining alterity even if the poet can't achieve it in the terms of his original conception.

The recovery plays out at the level of the line as well. Whereas Wordsworth says his "errand" in *The Prelude*, was to sail to other coasts," (11.56) to transcend, he ultimately could not stand the task: "I could no more/trust the elevation which had made me one" (11.60-61). And so he falls. "Thus strangely did I...cut off my heart/from all the sources of her former strength" (11.74; 77-78). Then he realizes the absence is a present-absence, or a pregnant one: "and hence an emptiness/fell on the historian's page, and even on that/ of poets." And with that failure/silence/emptiness, he writes, "their empire pass'd away" (11.90-93).

Next, the poet asks the question, “What then remained in such eclipse” (11.96)? It’s a question all poets engaging the technique of the drive to failure want to know, the answer comes that the loss is ultimately a means. In Wordsworth’s case, “what remained” was the very transcendence he was originally after: “the laws of things which lie/ beyond the reach of human will or power” (11.97-98). Then he sums up the enterprise, “these left, the soul of youth must needs be rich” (11.101). He has “sailed to other coasts” after all. Though *The Prelude* is just that--a prelude to an adventure that never quite materialized, and in that, a record of failure-- it is ultimately a triumph because at the end of all that exhaustion, transcendence is achieved when the poet is defeated and bereft of strength.

Better still, this realization, since it has conquered failure by passing *through it* to transcendence, rather than *around it* by avoiding it, can’t fail again. The poet outlines this, in an understandable triumph,

Whatever else be lost, and these were mine.  
 Not a deaf echo, merely, of the thought  
 Bewilder’d recollections, solitary,  
 But living sounds. Yet in despite of this,  
 This feeling, which howe’er impaired or damp’d,  
 Yet having been once born can never die. (11.102-107)

### **Incidents and Accidents**

If something like the drive to failure has been considered in other scholarship, it has mostly concerned interpretations of the Romantic fragment poem, since, as James Reiger writes, “Romanticism is central to us, and fragmentation is central to Romanticism” (3). The

discussion surrounding the nature and purpose of fragmentation in Romantic poetry is both ongoing and historically-robust. Figures like Lacoue-Labarthe, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Marjorie Levinson play major roles in defining the aesthetic categories of the period. Critics tend to be interested in fragmentation either because of its aesthetic implications, or because of its political ones, but not both. Žižek for example, or Cian Duffy, or Paul Foot, are concerned with the political, while Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe focus on the theoretical interest of the fragmented body. Regier writes,

Burke's argument that we take pleasure in scenes of destruction relies implicitly of the moment of fragmentation exceeding all description. Thus the representation of the consequences, even when sufficient distance is gained, depends on a moment which denies the possibility of representation. An articulation of the ruins through the sublime domesticates the imagined catastrophe into a framework of manageable concepts. (83)

Regier writes about fracture and fragmentation, but his instances are all accidental. For example, he argues that in Keats' letters "fragmentation becomes the point around which his archival body, dominated by the rhetoric of brokenness, is assembled and understood" through their literariness, and self-reflexivity (119). Here, he follows Tim Webb and Susan Wolfson, by attempting to eradicate the letters' status as "secondary material," of which there is still, Regier says dismissively, a "residue" (120). I stand with John Barnard in appreciating the letters' literary qualities, but also in calling them an "invaluable supplement" to his poems. The reason I make this distinction is that, however fragmented the archival body of Keats' letters has become, he cannot have intended such fracture, and the "rhetoric of brokenness" in which they participate is not an artistic choice but an accident of history. As

such, we cannot examine what aesthetic or theoretical forces might have driven him toward such failure, in that case.

Another distinction between my approach and the current understanding is exemplified in Thomas McFarland's fragment work. A distinction must be made between the approach taken by his very helpful Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin (1981), and the present study. Briefly, it is that, when he discusses them, McFarland is after a former wholeness that has been fragmented, whereas my work is concerned with constructed fragments that imply a never-present wholeness.

My concept of the drive to failure as it relates to fragment poetry comes closer, not to McFarland's work on the fragment, but to his notion of "a disparactive structure," found both in the symbolic and the sublime, "wherein the object itself which is present to the mind, implies a larger whole, which is not" (30). Indeed, much of McFarland's work reflects what he believes is the "fragmentary nature of human existence" which necessitates fragmented expression; whereas I discuss the totalizing (or wholeness-making) tendency of art and the Romantic suggestion of wholeness via the fragment.

Other discussions of failure have taken place under the heading of madness. To display madness, fragmentary thought, or in-articulation is sometimes to catch the disease of one's subject, but it is not the same thing as to be mad, or hysterical. Frederick Burwick writes an astute and historically-grounded account of madness in the Romantic tradition in Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination (1996). There, he shows, among much else, how Coleridge's and De Quincey's use of psychotropic drugs can be regarded as explorations of the mind's latent capabilities and moves on to the "holy madness" of John of Patmos, and Holderlin, but his is not the model I mean to follow either.

Burwick's madness is involuntary as in King George III or Holderlin, or physiological, as in the opium-eaters. The madness displayed in the drive to failure, on the other hand, is a display firstly, and one wherein the ontological status of the perceiving subject is never surrendered. For example, there is that in Coleridge's biography that suggests he may not have been in full possession of his faculties at every turn, but these are not elements of the drive to failure, which is a drive: an aesthetic feature and not a biographical one, and cannot therefore be a mis-step. That is, it is a powered descent for some artistic effect. And so, even if Keats appears in hysterics in the middle of his experience of the Grecian urn, we know by his quick and total recovery one stanza later that his dumb show is just that: a show.

Finally, though critical discussions of sublime aesthetics continue to proliferate, this study uses such discussions only inasmuch as they're focused on the useful negativities, or symbolic absences occasionally inbuilt in representations of the sublime encounter. In a section of The Sublime Object of Ideology called "The Traumatic Kernel," Žižek defines the notion of the sublime with which I'm concerned, though delivered in terms appropriate to a discussion of statehood: "the indestructible and immutable body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical, this other body of money, is like the corpse of a Sadeian victim which endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate" (12). The preservation of this kernel is the goal of the performance of failure, which enacts the torment to showcase the endurance.

## **Method**

The methodology of the present work is to use the theoretical apparatus of aesthetic theory from the 19th and 20th centuries--largely German, though also French, American, and

Slovenian--to engage an heretofore unexamined phenomenon in the highly experimental poetry of major British Romantics. I focus on un-contentiously Romantic texts by uncontestedly Romantic authors. The choice of focus on what are often called “major” figures is deliberate: simply, that the critical discourse surrounding Romanticism was shaped by their work in a way that it was not shaped by “lesser” writers of the period. I have, however, included one such lesser writer, using Leigh Hunt as a contrast to Byron in chapter six in order to provide an example of the difference between an active failure, performed and highlighted toward some aesthetic goal, and regular failure, while still noting how the drive to failure can be useful for even weaker writers, by providing a kind of dexterity that allows them to ameliorate anxiety in the face of poetic strength. I focus on poetry because formal experiments in that genre tend to be more sophisticated than the concurrent novelistic ones, and because the theorists with which the present work is engaged were themselves so concerned.

I highlight poems that are considered failures in otherwise strong *oeuvres*, weak lines in otherwise strong poems, lapses of attention mid-description, and the curious phenomenon of the intentional fragment poem in order to show what the resistance to completion, or to “success” might mean in each of these cases and to outline the recuperative function that the absent center serves.

Theoretically, and in addition to a diverse and contemporary range of Romantic scholarship, my arguments will be grounded in Thomas Vogler’s Preludes to Vision, and in Žižek’s discussions of impossibility, mostly in The Sublime Object of Ideology. Since I’m planning to use Žižek, I’ll need to include some examination of the usefulness of ideological discussions for a theoretics of failure, and explore his notion of invisibility as it encounters those ideologies. He claims, for example, that “we can only save democracy by taking into ac-

count its own radical impossibility” (xxix). I argue that this is the same way poets manage to save certain poems. Žižek reads Hegelian dialectics not as a method for overcoming antagonisms but, “as a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts.” My thesis is that certain poems know this method more deeply, because they perform the failure, rather than note it. The goal: “absolute knowledge itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss” (xxx).

### **Chapter Outline**

This introduction means to situate my notion of the drive to failure along Kantian lines--imagination’s defeat in the little theater of Kant’s search for a methodology of reason which is founded on a proper critique of its limitations--and then to set up the representation of absence as a performative trope meant to claim for the poet a documentable experience of Kant’s supra-sensible.

I go on to argue in the first chapter, *Lyre Liar*, that an “authorized fragment” (one wherein the poet has an opportunity to finish the work, but doesn’t, as opposed to an “accidental fragment” wherein he drowns, loses the mss., etc) constitutes an privileged object that thereby deserves unique consideration. When poets promise something, and fail to deliver, often--if these are to become active failures--they are suggesting something about the greatness of their original conception. Percy Shelley says the “mind in composition is as a fading coal,” which phrase is not meant to evoke the warmth or slight glow of coals and thereby to speak to composition’s value, but to point back at the original fire. If what we have is this poem-object (hot, alive) we are forced to imagine what it could have been. By not fulfilling his ostensible aim--examples here will include Keats’ *Sleep and Poetry*, Shelley’s *Margaret*

*Nicholson Poems* and his rumination on the nature of fragmentation in *Notes on Sculpture from Florence and Rome*,-- the poet has enhanced the strength of the vision he once held, and bolstered his prophetic, if not poetic, credentials thereby.

The next chapter, *The Prison Bower of Meaning*, posits that one demonstration of literary power might construct a black hole as a way of exploring what is poetically knowable. I use a section of Coleridge's Biographia Literaria called *Nihil Negativum Irrepraesentabile* in which he differentiates between a "negative quantity" and "an absence," to show how poems like *This Lime Tree Bower, my Prison*, and *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* are epistemological excursions before they are purely literary ones. Meaning is confused, or contradictory in these poems--which I demonstrate through histories of their respective critical receptions--because they are not intended to mean; they suck meaning back into themselves intentionally before it can escape into sense. In this chapter, de Man's work is used as a bridge between Coleridge and Deleuze, especially as it argues how *Mont Blanc*-the-poem is like Mont Blanc-the-mountain in that they are both solitary objects that refuse to connect to other objects in the signifying chain.

I go on to argue, in *Keats and the Poetic Ruin*, that though the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* may be one of the language's greatest poems, it also contains some of poetry's worst lines. Those lines, especially "More happy love, more happy, happy love," are not mis-steps; they are failures, and, I'm arguing, active failures in the sense Žižek intends when he writes of the subject's experiential "displeasure" in sublimity, the "inadequacy" of a remnant that suggests "incomparable greatness." The poem thereby tropes a kind of theatrical dive, meant to claim for the poet a documentable experience of the sublime. In what then becomes a discourse on imaginative limits, Keats discusses the form's ability to "tease us out of thought," connecting

that lack of thought with silence, and ultimately to a breathlessness he enacts in these passages. As the poet demonstrates the failure of the poetic faculty in the face of the sublime encounter --making a spectacle of the climb, failure, and recovery-- he also hopes to induce a similar reaction in his readers, attempting to move us out of breath and to the same pitch of delirium he has exhibited, to make his private imaginative environment a public one wherein his theatrical swoon is contagious.

Next, a chapter on Wordsworth called *Violence and Absence*, considers the active representation of absence-- a stone circle, a zero, an "O the difference to me!"-- as a response to violence. Absent histories create involuntary misreadings, as in *Tintern Abbey*, and *Three Years She Grew*, but *present* absences can heighten the descriptive violence as in a Hitchcock film where one only hears the scream as a camera cuts away, or as in Wordsworth's *Alice Fell*, wherein the violence wreaked upon a girl is displaced onto surrounding objects making it at once more palatable and more subversive. This chapter's method is to consider Ovid (Wordsworth's early favorite) as a likely template for this trope. I show that certain of Wordsworth's poems emerged as exercises in Ovidian imitation, and that he's used the erasure of his poetic father to add darkness and suggestion to poems which are often misread as innocent.

*The Laugh of Recognition* compares Byron and Hunt as models of aesthetic self-awareness and posits Hunt's failure of critical distance as an anti-Wordsworthian trope, fighting for poetic strength in Harold Bloom's terms from his middle critical period. Other failures discussed in this chapter consist similarly of failing to keep respectable distance from the work before one, but, in these cases, the intentional gesture (the wink) rescues the artwork *qua* artwork in the manner of Byron's self-knowing slips.

A final coda, *The Closed Circle* discusses the poetic consequences of the drive to failure. An artwork's self-awareness and attempts at transcendence suggest it is a participant in what can be considered a modernist project, but they also suggest an order of power that is different in kind (though not in degree) from previous explanations. Shelley's *Defense of Poetry* may be full of hyperbolic assertions about the power of poetry to affect change in the world, but even there poetry has limits (especially as concerns its ability to render presence). The drive to failure, by trading on dramatic index, and by subsuming its theoretical interrogators, conquers even that last limitation, blowing Shelley's fading coal aflame.

## Lyre Liar: the Fiction of Fragmentary Poetics

*So should we save an absence?*

*Should we save the void and this nothingness at the heart of the image?*

*-Jean Baudrillard*

The poetic fragment, which is enjoying something of a vogue recently as a topic of scholarly discussion, was enjoying a hearty fadishness as a genre unto itself by the time the Shelley-Hunt literary circle sat down to try their hands<sup>3</sup>. In a review of Byron's *The Giaour*, an editor from the *Edinburgh Review* wrote in 1813, "the taste for fragments, we suspect, has become very general; and the greater part of polite readers would now no more think of sitting down to a whole epic than to a whole ox" (Jeffrey 299). The fragment has been called "Romanticism's most important genre" (Martin 57). It was recognized as distinctive in the period as early as Schlegel, to whom we will return, and it continues to prod scholars in the present. "In a certain manner," write Lacoue-LaBarthe and Nancy in the landmark study-*The Literary Absolute*, "fragmentation never ceased to preoccupy Romanticism" (59). Nor does it seem, we might add, to have done for scholars thereof.

Theories of the fragment continue to proliferate. Alexander Regier, in *Fracture and Fragmentation in British Romanticism* (2010), claims that "fragmentation and Romanticism

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<sup>3</sup> A shortened version of this chapter was given as "Shelley Amid the Ruins of Language," at the meeting of the International Conference on Romanticism: Tempe, AZ. 2012.

have a special relationship, and we can understand both of them much better through comprehending their interrelation” (2). His book argues for a “continuous presence of Romanticism in a variety of disciplines,” based on “the attractive power of fragmentation” (3). Anne Frey’s British State Romanticism (2009) begins with the chapter “Fragment Poems and Fragment Nations,” while Christopher Strathman’s Romantic Poetry and the Fragmentary Imperative (2005) argues mainly for the influence of the Romantic fragment on later authors like Joyce and Blanchot, but the seminal text on the Romantic fragment is Marjorie Levinson’s The Romantic Fragment Poem (1986) which claims that

although poetic fragments occur in periods other than the Romantic, criticism tacitly assigns them an unusually motivated and expressive condition within the early nineteenth century, or within that age’s dominant ideologies of reading and writing...it figures in our criticisms as an exemplary Romantic expression. (6)

Indeed, the Romantic fragment has been considered so often, one might almost call its treatment *exhaustive*.

An area that is under-studied however, is the Romantic response to extant fragments. This chapter’s concern is not only with the production of fragments, but the defense of the unfinished generally, and of the artistic ruin specifically, and how Shelley’s responses to ruination might help us to delineate between fragmentary types. After a discussion of Shelley’s juvenile creation, *The Collected Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*, and exploring the theoretical implications for reading fragments in the way suggested there, we will examine Shelley’s own responses to fragments he encountered-- written in letters home during the Italian exile and on scraps of paper later collected as Shelley’s *Notes on Sculpture from Florence*

*and Rome*--wherein I argue that an artwork is not an artwork until it is intended, in the same way that, for Speech Act theory, a statement is not a statement until it is meant. With this argument, I mean to highlight not only the difference between “authorized” and “accidental” fragments in Romantic poetry, which distinction Levinson maintains too, but to differentiate between fragments that should be read as remnants: pieces meant to be read as parts of erst-while wholes, and those that should be read as ciphers: pieces of truncated production meant to imply a never-present but imagined wholeness. I use Shelley as an example, though, in this case, his work is meant to stand for a distinction I’d like to maintain across Romantic poetry generally. Once we’ve established poetic fragments as intentional art objects, we’ll consider Shelley’s thoughts regarding the artistic, though not poetic, fragmentary, and close with a survey of the critical legacy of intentionality as it relates to fragmentary practice from major figures like Paul de Man and John Searle, and the theory of fragmentary resistance as rebellion especially in Theodor Adorno.

### **The Collected Fragments of Shelley’s Broken Image**

In much the same way that Shelley can be said to have prefigured his own death before he died it--or, at least, pre-stylized it in a fashion accurate enough that lines from his own pen eulogize his death on the walls of his memorial at University College, Oxford-- he also released, before the Posthumous Poems of 1824, another set of posthumous poems, while he was still very much *humus*, in 1810, while a student at that school.

The Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson, Being Poems Found Amongst the Papers of that Noted Female Who Attempted the Life of the King in 1786, are juvenilia,

though still poetically striking at times, and caused, naturally quite a stir, as did much of Shelley's poetic output from this time. They're useful for this discussion for their triple lie.

The first lie is that they were released posthumously. These poems ventriloquize the figure of Margaret Nicholson who in 1786 made an attempt on the life of King George III and was found competent to stand trial and sentenced to life in an asylum. When Shelley wrote the poems in 1810, Nicholson was still alive, a calculated move for the poet who later emphasizes the condition "death-in-life" which is understandably what Margaret Nicholson can be said to have lived.

The second is that they were ostensibly authored by someone other than the poet. This fiction doubles up: not only were the Nicholson poems supposedly not *written by* Shelley, they were not even collected by him as other poets had done<sup>4</sup>. Rather, Shelley invents two personas--the real-life lunatic would-be assassin, and her fictional editor "John Fitzvictor."

The third is that they were fragments. Marjorie Levinson calls Shelley's critical project in the Margaret Nicholson poems a failure, writing, "the first few poems achieve a modest success," she writes, but then counters,

although the tensions that motivate the utterance are not resolved, an equilibrium is reached, and it is this that suspends the discourse in a reasonably satisfying manner. As the sequence unfolds, however, the speakers enabling critical distance diminishes; her expression becomes increasingly disjunctive and terminally dissolved. (142)

and then, "that is to say, the volume does not realize its formal intention" (143).

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<sup>4</sup> Notably Thomas Chatterton, who collected the works of the fictitious monk Thomas Rowley, and whom Shelley listed among the heavenly throng welcoming Keats in *Adonais*.

That formal intention, for Levinson, is to produce a volume in keeping with Shelley's later "radical gestures," and strangely, to produce finished poems (149). Levinson reads Shelley's vision of Nicholson's revolutionary project as a failure not because the character fails in her attempt on the king's life and dies in prison, but because the poems Shelley writes about her themselves fail to finish. Her story is a "devolution," from "love to madness," and the poems' terminal irresolution proceeds as a mimetic for character's mental disintegration, or, as Levinson writes, "the reader...observ[es] the correlation of psychic states with degrees of poetic resolution; as character disintegrates, so does the poetry" (143-144).

At heart, Levinson's is a criticism of the Nicholson poems for having participated too fully in their human and historical situations. Whereas an artist should "keep his eye on higher things, his vision intact and uncontaminated by historical particulars," Nicholson's mania and revolutionary act are shown to have grown from an earlier spurned love, which Levinson views as "poetic failures." She claims that,

by interpreting Margaret Nicholson's action, and the fictive Nicholson's convictions as reactions to private betrayal and expressions of psychic effects, Shelley neutralizes the radical gesture he hoped to make early in this volume. (149)

And then, "*Posthumous Fragments* dramatizes the futility of formulating antithetical ideologies; all such impulses are shown to be grounded in private life and psyche, which cannot but participate in the dominant, institutionalized ideology" (149).

I think both of these are massive overstatements borne of Levinson's readerly impulse to keep Shelley's critical project consistent--a notoriously dangerous proceeding-- and to make each of his characters symbolic. Nicholson is not "Asia," or "Prometheus" who can be

read as stand-ins for humankind, or “the world-soul.” That she is a factual, historical character and not a creation of the poet’s imagination should free us from such readings as Levinson offers. That Margaret Nicholson’s particular mania was motivated by nothing more noble than her own broken heart does not, as Levinson claims, show “all [revolutionary] impulses” to be “grounded in private life;” it just shows that hers happened to be.

Furthermore, Shelley does not, by fracturing the poems, “neutralize the radical gesture.” This would be the case if the idea were to create a dialectic through an equally strong force in an opposite direction, which it is not here; the fragmentary poems *are* the radical gesture. Margaret Nicholson’s madness and despair *are* her contribution. Her project hasn’t failed any more than any martyr’s has. Her *life* has, in a sense, failed in that her mind is broken, and Shelley’s project, which was to valorize the gesture, is a success in part because of the refusal of his poems to become tyrannical themselves through a totalizing act.

Though Nicholson’s scorned--or, we should say, “unfulfilled”-- love and the ensuing fragmentation of her psyche is the shown eventually to be the cause of her madness in the posthumous collection, love is also an antidote to fragmentation in it, according to Levinson. “Here,” she writes, “Shelley identifies ‘the tie that binds’ --the principle that maintains psychic and social integration--as erotic love” (148). This concept is consistent in Shelley’s thought, who would later write, in the *Defense of Poetry* that “the great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own,” and its relationship to psychic fragmentation has been discussed in psychoanalytic theory that has been roundly appropriated by scholars of literature.

## Love and Projected Completeness

Jacques Lacan can be a slippery theorist with whom to work, and his “mirror stage” is but one facet of a highly nuanced and at times contradictory array of theory, but I’d like to look at it for two reasons: because it’s concerned with fragmentation and totalization and their effects on self-formation, and because, like Shelley, Lacan counts “love” as a kind of antidote to that fragmentation.

Lacan terms the fantasy of “totality that extends from a fragmented body-image” “orthopaedic,” but might he might as well have called it “the possibility of love” (736). According to his seminar “La Relation d’Objet,” the human child moves quickly from the moment of her *meconnaissance* into the “assumption of the armor of an alienating identity,” but that in between these phenomena is a projection of what a “total” self would look like. The child assumes her identity of alienation, in fact, *by* that projection, and her infantile sense of lack. If we stand in the idea of totality within the artwork as akin to the *imago*, the fragment would make the work of art both fragmented body and imaginary totality.

I raise this formulation of a “child” as stand-in for “fragment” because the type of fragment that is my concern is not a fractured former whole, which a child obviously is not, but a projection of a larger completeness, which, I think it makes sense to say, a child manifestly is.

“The mirror stage” is a “progression” for Lacan, however brief, and one with an “internal thrust,” or predetermined path of succession, which should sound familiar in our discussion of trajectories and intentionality in the case of the Romantic, and particularly the Shelleyan, fragment. It begins, says Lacan, when “the subject assumes an image” of herself, and concludes by the “identification of the imago of a counterpart” (735, 737). In between these

stages is the succession of fantasies that extends from the body image, fragmented at the moment of its self-recognition, “toward the form of its totality” (737). This brief infantile process, says Lacan, “will mark the rigid structure of the subject’s entire mental development,” and then “it is this moment that decisively tips the whole of human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other,” a cultural mediation “as exemplified in the case of the sexual object” (737).

The succession of fantasies that extend from the truncated image is one of the benefits of the fragmentary form in much the same way that poetic enjambment implies a further line that might exist, or might have existed had the line drawn out to the page’s edge. Lacan posits that the moment of the subject’s “breaking out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt*” is a moment “libidinally invested:” the beginning of sexual jealousy and the beginning of sexuality, which is Shelley’s position in the Nicholson poems (736,737).

Until the mirror stage, the subject does not know “isolation” any more than it knows “desire,” as, for Lacan, these are codependent terms. The realization of a self is quickly followed by the realization of others, and therefore of the self’s distance from those others, and the subsequent desire for a union, or *reunion* which is instinctually sexual. This reunion (sexually intoned) with others and its “totalizing” or self-finishing function might well be a prescription for romantic love.

Lacan mentions love once in “The Mirror Stage,” but the theme of love as a possible remedy to the human self’s alienating function runs throughout. “At this junction of nature and culture,” he writes, “psychoanalysis alone recognizes this knot of imaginary servitude that love must always undo again, or sever” (738). In context, the “love” to which he refers is the passion or dedication of a research professional such as the psychoanalyst, the philan-

thropist, the pedagogue (738). “For such a task, we place no trust in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressivity that underlies [the activity of such professionals],” Lacan says, clarifying.

In the same way, the love to which he implicitly refers as a completing function is not all “altruistic feeling.” It’s possible that this “love” is underlined with the same “aggressivity” as the other “pursuits” he describes. It can be “laid as bare” as “the recourse of the subject to the subject,” or it can be as idealistic and romantic as “the ecstatic limit of the ‘Thou art that,’ in which is revealed to [the subject] the cipher of his mortal destiny” (738).

Lacan’s “cipher of his moral destiny” might therefore be a fitting definition of *the symbol of*, as distinct from *the symbol in* fragmentary poetics. Nicholson doesn’t have to kill the king in order to spark a revolution because her act *and its failure* become symbolic, in the same way that Shelley doesn’t have to “finish” the Nicholson poems in order to have them succeed. Had either of them succeeded, in the traditional sense, they would cease to be coherent protests against tyranny, because they would themselves become tyrants, Nicholson a murderess and the poems political propaganda.

### **Unsayable Symbol**

One needn’t read the broken (body, psyche, poem-cycle) as a failure, though, especially when the broken is itself such a compelling symbol. Thomas McFarland recalls Goethe’s definition of the symbol from *Maximen und Reflexionen* to emphasize the importance of the unfinished for either an artwork or an act’s becoming symbolic, noting how “symbol transfers the appearance into the idea, the idea into an image, in such a way that the idea remains always infinitely active and unattainable, and, even if expressed in all languages, remains in

fact, inexpressible” (30). Inexpressibility, limitlessness, and their relationship to the sublime are discussed elsewhere in this dissertation and so it should suffice to say here that this passage is McFarland’s rough read on Kant’s

the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality (90)

and it stands in marked contrast to Levinson, who argues that “poetic failures reflect corruptions peculiar to historical moments” (149).

There are two options, according to McFarland, for building a sublime poetry: either the poet expresses in all languages--that is, expresses and expresses from every angle, creating a deluge<sup>5</sup>, or he can shortcut to failure, making a dumb-show of inexpressibility. The Nicholson poems try both the exhaustive and absent postures to gain poetic credibility. They attempt “an outline of the character’s psyche,” and then the breakdown--or inability to keep them apart, to show the poet unequal to the task.

Nor is this the only occasion wherein Shelley uses this technique: he tries both approaches at the close of *Adonais*:

Die

if thou wouldst be with that which thou dost seek!

Follow where all is fled!--Rome’s azure sky,

Flowers, ruins, statues, music, words are weak

The glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak. (*lines* 464-468)

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<sup>5</sup> A technique favored by Wordsworth, whose *Prelude* is nothing if not taxonomic, and Keats, whose bathetic impulse is discussed in another chapter herein.

The first approach, according to McFarland, is to “express [the idea] in all languages.” How to describe Rome, the great sublime city? Shelley tries outlining its contents<sup>6</sup>: “sky, flowers, ruins, statues, music,” and quickly realizes that a list of contents is inadequate to the task of suggesting Rome’s grandeur. Abandoning that tack, he tries the other. Instead of exhausting the idea, he suggests the mind’s exhaustion itself: “words are weak.” And then, adding a bit of didacticism without which this work would not be typically Shelleyan, he launches a short essay on the topic of expressibility with “the glory they transfuse with fitting truth to speak.”

The Shelleyan drive to failure is distinct from the Keatsian, which is discussed in the chapter *Keats and the Poetic Ruin*, herein, and on this topic I agree with Michael Bradshaw, who writes of the Shelley’s practice of fragmentation, “How sweet,”

unlike certain other Romantic figurations of reading--notably Keats’s *The Eve of St. Mark*<sup>7</sup>-- this fragment does not represent the subject of reading as rapture and absorption, nor the reading subject as an entranced devotee. Instead it hones in on a moment of lost concentrations, of distraction from the text into a competing but complimentary pleasure, a moment of errancy rather than immersion. It is sweet when the attention fails, so that music can invade and occupy the space left by their text in the reader’s mind; the pause becomes filled with auditory sensation. (20)

This section is only one example of the drive to failure, but I think this is an amazing moment in the history of poetry. Rather than the poet’s giving us the image before him, he gives

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<sup>6</sup> The collection of short nouns suggests a list; even if there were only three items on it, it would *sound* taxonomic.

<sup>7</sup> My example for Keats’ failure is *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, discussed in *Keats and the Poetic Ruin*, herein, though Bradshaw has the point about rapturousness dead on.

up, and showcases that giving up as a way to imply, through absence, the original image and its accompanying grandeur.

### **Authorized vs. Accidental**

But let us return to Lacan's "cipher" and McFarland's "symbol" because the way in which those concepts differ from Levinson's "Romantic disappointment" illustrate two conceptions of the fragment and its relationship to the drive to failure: either the fragment as remnant or as cipher.

"Theories of the Romantic fragment poem have tended to propose constitutive reading by the projection of an absent whole," writes Michael Bradshaw in "Reading as Flight: the Romantic Fragment Poems from Shelley's Notebook" (22). He continues, "the fragment --whether overtly presented as such or identified editorially (as in the case of notebook drafts) is instinctively interpreted as a deviation from a standard norm of wholeness and completion" (23). "Instinctively" is wrong here, since the poems are often labeled as fragments by their authors, and so we readers are not being reactionary to read them as such, but my dispute with this line of thinking goes much further than Bradshaw's semantic oversight.

Bradshaw disagrees with Marjorie Levinson's smart distinction in The Romantic Fragment between "accidental fragments" and "authorized fragments." He writes, "rather than acknowledging a tendency to intentionalize the fragment, I would argue that it is in the fragment's exclusion of intention...that the freedoms and fascination of the 'genre' truly lie" (22). Later, Bradshaw refers to "the fragment's radical exclusion of intentionality." Phrases like this miss that what is truly radical in the Romantic fragment is the intentionalizing gesture itself directed at such "poetical germ-cells," suggestive of the absent whole. Far from dimin-

ishing the fragment by comparison to that projected whole, the absence enlarges the scope of the original project, elevating the remaining struggle to (often) epic terms.

But we don't have to read fragments as remnants; they can instead be ciphers, projecting beyond themselves, beyond even what Tennyson termed "the utmost bound of human thought" ("Ulysses" *line* 34). D.F. Rauber calls the fragment "the ultimate Romantic form," arguing that "the apparently premature truncation of a text can give the impression that it continues in some ideal space beyond comprehension," which is closer to the form I mean to identify (215).

One instance of my notion of the drive to failure is encoded here in Rauber's "premature truncation." He is noting a formal device that apparently destroys, or cuts into a work of art, a resistance to finished-ness for some active effect that points to a beyond itself, sometimes even beyond the perceiving subject's representative capabilities. It is the same notion McFarland has in mind when he reads Kant as saying "both the sublime and the symbolic, accordingly, have in common a disparactive structure: the object itself, which is present to the mind, implies a larger whole, which is not" (30). We know that the hand of the Colossus that sits in foyer of *Museo Palatino* in Rome is part of a former entire statue, but the drive to failure suggests that, as an artist, one might not have to build the whole monolith in order to imply it. Perhaps it is enough to construct the broken hand.

There are other ways of pointing beyond comprehension in order to suggest greatness. One way is to use invisibility. Shelley goes to great lengths in *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*, for example, to make sure no reader can conceive of, or present to himself, the image with which the poet opens.

The Awful shadow of some unseen Power

Floats though unseen, among us, - visiting  
 This various world with as inconstant wing  
 as summer winds (l. 1-4)

The subject is already difficult to imagine: “a power.” But perhaps some people can picture that mass of force, so he removes it a step: we’re not seeing the power, but a *shadow* of the power. So strong is the emphasis on not looking--on absence--that he repeats, in the space of a few words the adjective: the *unseen* power floats though *unseen*, and it doesn’t even do that all the time, but only “visits.” And the place it visits --this world-- is itself shifting, and “various.” Four lines into the poem, we are now cast quite out of thought. The image he describes is not only invisible; it is immaterial and inconstant and however much we might concentrate, it will not body forth.

### **Defending the Unfinished**

That artworks have their own drives toward completion, which are, in instances like these, checked (for whatever reason, to whatever ends) is noted by Balachandra Rajan, in Forms of the Unfinished, who writes of the fragment’s “poetics of independence,” arguing that fragments have “a right to significance without incorporation” (309).

I think Rajan is wrong on this point, but he’s wrong in an important way. Fragments need neither to be incorporated into erstwhile wholes nor left, as Rajan would like, “on their own” somehow, considerable as objects in their own right. In the authorized fragment, the brokenness is a choice which turns the whole piece into a symbol pointing--whether forward or backward--*out*. Part of the significance to which Rajan believes fragments have “a right” is their tendency toward completion. In my conception, that more could have been said, but

wasn't, adds dimension, and usually a good deal of mystery to what would otherwise be half-coherent strands. Anthropologists appreciate the finding of a Brontosaurus' femur not because the bone is so interesting in itself, but because of the monster it implies.

But then, Rajan has a reason to be wrong. He is no disinterested observer, but is using Romantic poetry as a way of forwarding a particular brand of historical revisionism. He calls the tendency to assert completeness on a fragment "colonial," part of which mythos is believing that all former colonies resisted political domination by an outside government, and so his claim about the fragment's right to independence is really just an overdrawn metaphor, wherein colonies play the part of fragments and empires the part of completed poems.

The debate surrounding the method of reading fragments is complex, and like Rajan, Michael Bradshaw does the conversation a disservice by over-simplifying it when he writes "this complex debate can therefore be seen to work from a tacit assumption that 'fragments' are generally erstwhile 'wholes' in a state of partial decay" (26). But that isn't right: to project completeness is not to imagine an "erstwhile whole;" it is, for these poets, to imagine an *ideal* whole, which is a rather different thing.

The Shelleyan fragment is exemplary for a theory of the drive to failure for its errancies, lapses of attention, and performativity, but we needn't limit our discussion to the poetry, especially since Shelley is so concerned with visual arts, and since so much of the art he saw, and commented upon, was itself fragmentary.

I'd like to mention one more disagreement with Levinson as a way of introducing Shelley's theory of extra-poetic fragmentation. Levinson writes that

the English Romantics practiced the fragment; they generated it naively--not in the absence of ideological and material constraints but without benefit of collaboration, perceived precedent, or theoretical apparatus. (11)

What Levinson means when she claims that the English Romantics did any writing without the “benefit of collaboration,” I cannot discern, since they were, generally, terrific collaborators. Not only did the great Wordsworth/Coleridge collaboration Lyrical Ballads contain fragment poems, but we know of collaborations of a kind between Percy and Mary Shelley, Byron/Shelley/Polirodi, Shelley/Wordsworth, Shelley/Hogg, and others too numerous to name here. That they were working without “theoretical apparatus” is equally untrue, since most of them were reading, or at least talking about without having exactly read, Schlegel; and wrestling with Kant, at least through Coleridge, when they weren’t trying to read him in German, as Shelley seems to have been doing. This particular mistake of Levinson’s though is part of a larger project of hers: to argue that “we should no longer elucidate English practice by German aesthetics” (11). That charge has been answered with a resounding “Oh yes we should” by several scholars<sup>8</sup>, but the third part of Levinson’s audacious claim is this section’s concern: that Romantics wrote fragments without perceived precedent. Shelley’s response to perceived precedents is instructive for understanding his approach to the practice of fragmentation and its connection with the drive to failure.

## Finishing

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<sup>8</sup> Andrew Franta, for one, in “Keats and the Review Aesthetic,” and Victor Yelverton Haines in “Recursive Chaos in Defining Art Recursively.”

The Italian tour of 1812 which Shelley undertook with wife Mary, son Percy Florence and a variable group of other guests has been well-documented by enthusiasts and scholars (Lehmann, Pite). While on tour, he encountered art that he had little access to in England, as “there was no British National Gallery, and England was practically destitute of all public art collections; and photography had not yet come to the rescue, [to supply] in any way, the deficiency” (Angeli 91). He took notes on some pieces, journaled about others, and wrote to friends about still others, which included both classical and contemporary paintings and statuary.

Most of his jottings, titled by an early editor, *Notes on Sculpture from Florence and Rome*, were made in what is now the Uffizi gallery (Forman). Frederic C. Colwell has done a remarkable study of these notes by way of introduction, so it is not my wish to introduce or explain them, but rather to see what principles hold them together as a body of work, to find what those principles may mean.

The first thing that strikes a reader of Shelley’s notes--fragments themselves on the topic of fragments--is how strangely life-like the poet apparently believes the statuary to be. Although it is true that many critical contemporaries of his also used language of apprehension with regard to sculpture<sup>9</sup>, there is a sense in Shelley’s notes that the artwork features actual human figures who have somehow been trapped. Of the *Minerva*, he writes “the tremendous spirit...producing something beyond insanity...seems to have caught them (63). Of *Venus Anadyomene*, “she seems to have just issued from a bath, and yet to be animated (60). Of *Bacchus* and *Ampelus*, “the neck is swollen as with the respiration of delight,” and “the

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<sup>9</sup> Winckelmann, for one.

figures are walking” (57). Of *Figure of a Youth Said to be Apollo*, he notes, “through the limbs there seems to flow a spirit of life” (69).

Not only do the figures seem to Shelley to be alive, but they seem also to be suffering, which will surprise few readers conversant with Shelley’s poetry or politics. One sees this most clearly in his unique reaction to the group of sculptures known as *The Laocoon*. Shelley was reading Winckelmann's History of Art among the Ancient Greeks while on the tour and he writes about mainly the same sculptures, sometimes in the same vein but their descriptions of *The Laocoon* are markedly different (Wallace 12). Writes Winckelmann, “Laocoon is not praised for any Dionysiac quality, but as a supreme instance of stoicism...[he is]..the determined spirit trying to *overcome*, to *suppress* and *dominate* suffering” (124). Byron saw the sculpture also and writes, “Laocoon's anguish is *absorbed* by that of his children, that a mortal’s suffering is blending with an immortal’s patience” (italics mine). Winckelmann and Byron both read the Laocoon as a classically Greek sculpture: a picture of the mind in control over the body, and a stoic’s response to external events. Shelley, characteristically, thinks otherwise:

Intense physical *suffering*, against which he pleads with an upraised countenance of despair, and appeals with a *sense of its injustice*, seems the predominant and overwhelming emotion. He is *sick* with pain and horror. We almost seem to hear his shrieks. (45)

“The Laocoon” pleads, according to Shelley, like the poet himself, against the injustice of the heavens.

Shelley is not contemplating in a subject-object format; it seems impossible for him to separate himself from the scene he is viewing, one might almost say “in which he is involved.” In this figure group struggling with a serpent, Shelley sees a Prometheus<sup>10</sup>.

In addition to copious observations of craft with specific attention to the draperies and mouths of figures, what Shelley finds in this figure, as in most figures, is the religio-political struggle of another being. He *feels* for Laocoon and his family. He is angry at the serpent, but angrier with the god responsible for their suffering. He closes his note on the piece, “the spectator of this miracle of sculpture [must] turn away with shuddering and awe, and doubt the reality of what he sees” (46).

If Shelley’s occupation with the various forms’ personal or religious struggles and his presumed relationship with figures as personalities evidence his belief in the exterior lives of artistically-rendered figures, Harold Bloom’s theory of *mythopoesis*, fully explored in Shelley’s Mythmaking, offers an explanation<sup>11</sup>. In one mode of understanding, which Bloom labels “The Primitive,” the artist “embodies a direct perception of a ‘thou’ in natural objects or phenomena. The ‘I’ is not a subject experiencing an object, but exists in an ‘I-Thou’ relationship to everything in the world” (5). This is the world-view that Shelley exhibits over and over again in his poetry; the author’s voice, in effect, never says “it,” only “you.”

I am suggesting that it didn’t stop at poems. For Shelley, the sculpture and painting he saw existed not first as paint-on-canvas, or as hewn rock, but usually as actual subjects, “caught” somehow, and that, as subjects therefore, they have rights, to which notion we will return at the close of this chapter.

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<sup>10</sup> This makes a kind of chronological sense given that “Prometheus Unbound” was composed only a few months earlier, in spring, 1820.

<sup>11</sup> Itself an update of Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” concept.

In addition to this somewhat imaginative reconstruction of the extra-representational lives of figures, this language of apprehension, Shelley's notes also disclose an impassioned interest in unification. Nothing displeased him artistically, except perhaps the covering of genitals by tin fig leaves for modesty's sake, so much as poorly-done restorations. Of the *Venus Genetrix*, he writes: "the restoration of the arms and hand truly hideous" (54). Of *Hercules*, "the arms probably restored, for the right hand especially is in *villainous* proportion" (italics mine 54). Furthermore, a sculpture could be "exceedingly fine" for him and yet be counted a failure on artistic grounds, if restored; that is, if not left a fragment. The *Bacchus* by Michel Angelo for example, Shelley says, is "altogether without unity. Merely as a piece of workmanship it has great merits, the arms executed with the most perfect and manly beauty" (71). But he adds, "the countenance of this figure is the most revolting mistake of the spirit and meaning of Bacchus. It looks drunken, brutal, narrow-minded."

Why does the contemporary practice of finishing the unfinished, of completing the fragmentary so irk the poet? A first answer comes from Walter Benjamin, who writes, "the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (223). This is probably correct: no time passing, no one historical point of creation in which to situate his 'thou' would be frustrating for Shelley. The second is from Shelley himself, writing on the principle of evanescence:

It made me melancholy to see that they had been varnishing and restoring some of these pictures, and that even some had been pierced by the French bayonets. These are symptoms of the mortality of man; and, perhaps, few of his works are more evanescent than paintings. Sculpture retains its freshness

for twenty centuries—the Apollo and Venus are as they were. But books are perhaps the only productions of man coeval with the human race. Sophocles and Shakespeare can be produced and reproduced forever. But how evanescent are paintings, and must necessarily be. (Letter to T.L. Peacock XV)

Shelley takes himself to be, as an author, a worker in the medium of the eternal which paintings fail to treat. Over and again, he says that he doesn't like paintings; here is one of the reasons: they fade, and thereby suggest death.

He shows himself to be somewhat of an even-handed critic by divorcing the subject from the style and considering them independently and contrarily. As a piece of sculpture, he notes, “this is one thing...of the highest order of boldness and beauty” but then qualifies, “as a representation of the Greek Deity of Bacchus, it wants everything” (72). This dualism (conception vs. execution) is included in every discussion of artistic process in the notes. Of different sculptures, he writes,

the body [is] exquisitely imagined and executed...It seeks to express what cannot be expressed in sculpture...The right shoulder is admirably imagined, the countenance expressed...The hardness of the stone does not permit arriving at any great expression...Whatever may be the conception and execution of it... (72, 55, 56, 68, 51)

all of which are attempts to overcome this problem of indirect representation through language.

When writing to friends in England, Shelley tries to give them what he sees. This accounts for his thorough descriptions in the *Notes on Sculpture*. Having no other means with which to communicate the splendor of the art he studies, the landscapes he travels, Shelley

employs the tools at his disposal, stretching language past its ability, to make a kind of photograph of the scene before him.

I have seen a quantity of things here—churches, palaces, statues, fountains, and pictures; and my brain is at this moment like a portfolio of an architect, or a printshop, or a commonplace book. I will try to recollect something of what I have seen. For indeed it requires, if it will obey, an act of volition. (Letter to T.L. Peacock XV)

In his meditation, And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos, John Berger writes of a photograph's ability to attest to something that once existed in the world; "No writing can give me this certainty. It is the misfortune (and the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself" (85). This though, was a limit, in which Shelley apparently disbelieved.

Nevertheless, the limit does represent a difficulty, and that difficulty suggests the supra-sensible. As Angela Leighton says, "The paradigmatic figure of the sublime poet is of one who stands solitary, powerless, silent and rapt before the object, the landscape, or the idea which first arrests him" (21). Shelley clearly experiences this solitary, powerless, silent, arrest as he enters into relationship with art. "It is difficult to speak," he says on more than one occasion (57). His response to *A Statue of Minerva*, mimics the psychological steps of the sublime:

It is the joy and the poetry of sorrow, making grief beautiful, and giving to that nameless feeling which from the imperfection of language we call pain, but which is not all pain, those feelings which make not only the possessor but the spectator of it prefer it to what is called pleasure. It is difficult to think [...] (62)

These notes have been condemned on the grounds of their unfinished-ness by Shelley's biographer Richard Holmes who evaluates the notes thus, "He is too excited, cannot calm down long enough to write well," but I think the notes are useful not only as art criticism, and as sketches of "a mind in composition," but because, contrary to Webb and Bradshaw's reading, death and decay give him no qualms at all: Shelley seems perfectly comfortable with the fragment (566). Nowhere does he say "I wish this were finished," nowhere does he lament the effects of time on the sculptures, and where they are "finished," the poet lashes out at the attempt. Just as he is comfortable in "that nameless[ness] of feeling"--when the poet's very task, as traditionally understood, is to do that very naming, he finds the broken sufficiently suggestive without an irritable reaching after the facts of their former wholeness, all while separating, and thereby highlighting the importance of, intention from execution in art-making.

### **Intentional Traces**

Paul de Man argues against the notions of completion and connection, and uses similarly, metaphors of fragmented statuary to do it. "Shelley Disfigured," the principle essay in which he discusses *Prometheus Unbound*, uses archeological metaphors to understand certain pieces within literary history, and the notion of history itself, of which notion he is ultimately critical. His contention is that our notion of Romanticism presupposes that it and Shelley himself are entities which, like statues, can be "broken into pieces, mutilated, or allegorized." Instead, he argues that *Prometheus Unbound* engulfs and dissolves what it started out to be, to be replaced by something quite different, "for which we have no name among the props of literary history" (98). That "something" is language-driven, according to de Man, who ar-

gues that language often carries the poem further than it would have gone on its own, because of its “inherent violence” and dissatisfaction with the fragmentary. De Man ends up being a kind of Anti-Bloom, destroying the chain of poetic inheritance, when he claims that “the *Triumph of Life* warns us that nothing, whether in deed, word, thought, or text ever happens in relation to anything that precedes it, follows, or exists elsewhere” (122).

In Alan Weinberg’s essay, “Yet in its depth what treasures: Shelley’s Transforming intellect and the Paradoxical example of Coleridge” the critic describes Shelley’s as a “poetics of transformation,” using terms like “volatile,” and “mercurial” to describe the machinations of his work, whose end, Weinberg claims, is to “naturalize and unmask fixed conceptions or ideologies so that they can be reconstituted within the flow of mutability” (2). His argument is that, for Shelley, any transformation out of an entrenched view must begin in transgression, since “systems of thought acquire the character of indisputable authority, which to resist is considered ‘evil,’ and to obey ‘good.’” How strange then, Weinberg continues, is Shelley’s handling of Coleridge who is at once Shelley’s model of the transgressive (revolutionary) and of the turncoat. In this way, Coleridge becomes a kind of Satan-figure for Shelley, both in the Miltonic sense, as a hero defying authority, and in Shelley’s negative and personal conception of the devil as that which binds energy and makes things “dull.” Weinberg takes a decidedly Bloomian approach to this paradox describing Coleridge as one of Shelley’s poetic predecessors, with whom he wrestles as much to emulate as to satirize.

I want to use Weinberg and de Man’s emphasis on violence and transgression not as sociological or even psychological readings because the drive to failure is not a phenomenon occurring within the author, but one that occurs within the work, and it only exists within the artwork because a drive is immediately related to a *telos*. If the drive to failure as I’ve out-

lined it here is an aesthetic trope, we are confronted with the notion of intentionality, since the agents of aesthetic decisions are possessed of reflection and choice in a manner not open to victims of sociological or psychological impulse. To make a poem is to “say something,” (to commit a speech act), but also to create an object, which, fragmented or otherwise, is a kind of performance.

If we think of John Searle’s discussion of the speech act (as it concerns just as equally the written act of communication) in terms of literary theory, we can call the performer of the speech act, “the author,” the resulting performance, “the text,” and the recipient of the performance, “the audience.” Then, the theory which Searle posits in “What is a Speech Act,” could be titled “the denunciation of the text.” With his thesis, he shifts the focus in linguistic performance from the symbol to the symbolizer, from text to author:

It is not as has been generally supposed, the symbol or the word or the sentence, or even the token of the symbol or word or sentence which is the unit of linguistic communication, but rather the production of the token in the performance of the speech act that constitutes the basic unit of linguistic communication. (60)

He shifts this attention by emphasizing the author’s intention and the audience’s reading against “the token of the symbol or word or sentence.” Searle describes the action of receiving a coded linguistic message thus:

when he (the recipient) takes a noise or mark on paper to be an instance of linguistic communication, as a message, one of the things that is involved in his so taking that noise or mark is that he should regard it as having been produced by a being with certain *intentions*. (60)

Searle changes the definition of the speech act with this notion of intentionality. To use his own terms, we would say that one of the “constitutive rules” for performing a speech act is intention on the part of the performer to perform said act. At least, that a set of symbols cannot count as a speech act without such a being, because “to construe [marks or noises] under the category of linguistic communication necessarily involves constructing their production as speech acts” (61).

Similarly, poetic or artistic marks even if fragmentary as works, involve constructing their production as intentional art objects. This is one of the many rules which Searle prescribes in this essay. One of his ideas of “fair play” is that both teams must know which game it is they are playing. In this case, the rule means that the text must be received in order to be described as having created meaning.

Implicit in his notion of intention as constitutional to the production of linguistic communication, and of Levinson’s “authorized fragment,” is that the practice of communication is not an “antecedently existing form of behavior.” Or, that one cannot consider the making of marks on a page or the utterance noises without the intention that they be understood to have meaning by some later recipient, as a speech act. Searle asks the question for us,

what is the difference between just uttering sounds or making marks and performing a speech act? One difference is that the marks or sounds one makes in the performance of a speech act are characteristically said *to have meaning*, and a second, related difference is that one is characteristically said to *mean something* by those sounds or marks. (64)

One of the many interesting things about this sentence is that there exists, for Searle, a fundamental difference between the production of meaning and the product.

If set in literary terms, Searle would be arguing here that the text can mean very little except inasmuch as it gets the audience to recognize the author's intention to communicate a certain idea. Likewise, the reception of the text involves a complex set of actions on the part of the audience, such as playing within the set of rules and conventions surrounding the language transaction, since "what we can mean is a function of what we are saying" (64).

The text then, according to Searle, is not the basic unit of linguistic communication. Rather, it is the author's creation of, and the audience's reception of the text which can be said, in any sense, to create meaning. More specifically, it is the author's intention as embodied within the text, according to the conventions of speech or writing, --"meaning is more than a matter of intention, it is also a matter of convention,"-- and the audience's successful reception of that intention, which imbues a text with meaning (65).

The authorized fragment is a thing by virtue of its having been intended as an aesthetic choice in a way that turns it into a cipher. As noted earlier in this chapter, there is another way of reading the fragment as a remnant, or as the result of fracture, but I'm arguing that this should only be the case in accidental fragments. In most cases, authorized fragments should be read as ciphers and accidental as remnants.

This is why Shelley's best-known fragment, *The Triumph of Life*, doesn't figure in the present discussion. The poem is not a linguistic act, in Searle's terms, since the author's intention cannot be coherently inscribed therein; neither can it be an "attempt at symbolization-totalization" as Žižek describes them, because such attempts are only possible on the parts of finished objects; there is no more such a thing as a partial totalitarian state than there is a fragmentary aesthetic domination scheme: once broken, the claim to inevitability, or to divine

sanction withers. Žižek writes that all such totalizing symbols, act as “an attempt to suture an original cleft, which is, in the last resort, by definition, doomed to failure” (xxix).

That attempts at either symbolization or totalization are necessarily *ex post facto* is obvious, and it is true that they act as sutures of certain breakages; that they are doomed to failure in Žižek’s terms is interesting, but that they are “*by definition* doomed to failure” is nonsense [italics mine]. What does a symbol attempt that it fails, according to Žižek, necessarily and in every case to do, while still remaining a symbol? Aren’t we simply talking about a new term here?

We can read *The Triumph of Life* as an excursus on the fragmentary, but that is not the same as saying it is a cipher, or that it is driven by the same engine that pushes aesthetic breakage in the other poems of Shelley discussed herein. Psychological studies of Shelley’s work have claimed that

with its unanswered questions, its episodes of eclipse, its themes of oblivion and blindness, its narrative beginning in ‘untold’ thoughts, its attendant biographical mysteries, and its unfinished status, the *Triumph of Life*...can serve as a fit symbol for all the diverse forms of negativity we have observed: the intense inane, the unknowable, the inexpressable.” (Frosch 288)

The reason is that our readerly direction of critical attention at such, to reappropriate Bradshaw’s term from earlier in this chapter, “poetical germ-cells,” is the act that yields Frosch’s “unanswered questions,” and “biographical mysteries.” It is possible that Shelley, had he lived, might have left *The Triumph of Life* a fragment of one kind or another, but the difference between the eventual shape of that poem and the one we have is the difference between the drive to failure and the larger drive that rendered fragmentary the poet’s very life.

## Aesthetic Completion

Many of the difficulties that arise in the critical treatment of artistic fragments do so because it is difficult to pin down just *what they are*, and because of the viewers' tendency to finish them, if only imaginatively (though in the case of the Shelley marbles, literally), which amounts to a kind of recreation of the fragment in the form of (in comparison to) either a former or a projected completeness. Theodor Adorno claims this correction of the fragments' falsehood is endemic to a post-structuralist subjectivity, writing, "a fake identity is everywhere forcibly imposed on objects by the insatiable subject" (233). According to Adorno, this "fake identity" imposed by all perceiving subjects is the same sort of fake identity found in representational works of art. A still life painting, for example, which is not a bowl of fruit but rather a painting, suffers the same forceable imposition of identity by the art audience that, say, the actual bowl of fruit suffers. But art, because it knowingly calls up this fake identity (no one will mistake the two bowls of fruit) gains strength from it. In effect, the art correctively misreads the represented object with such strength as to become more valuable than its precursor.

This value-added tendency is the trick of the intentional fragment. Knowing that readers cannot but follow the cipher through to its end and referent, these poets--Shelley, in the current example--, in these poems, have found a way to erect a small system (like Lacan's infant, bound for adulthood) that has rights as a subject and that has an inbuilt teleology at which the fragment is aimed and to which the audience, like an arrow directly flies<sup>12</sup>. The poems' lie is that they are circumscribed by a barrier: the limits of representation, an interrup-

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<sup>12</sup> One thinks of Hart Crane's line "Your hands within my hands are deeds," from *Harbor Dawn*.

tion, etc; that though they have gone as far as they can possibly have gone, there is still more space ahead.

In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno quotes Hegel, “the intellect no sooner poses a barrier than it has to go beyond it, absorbing into itself that against which the barrier was set up” (233). His calling up this particular line of argument implies a relationship between Hegel’s concept of “intellect” and Adorno’s own concept of artistic representation. This posing is the business of art for Adorno. By posing the barrier of subjectivity, by making, literally, a show of this forced fake identity, art “absorbs into itself that against which the barrier was set up.”

Art celebrates the foggy mirror of subjectivity and perception and therefore owns it, but this ownership is less a drive toward strength for its own sake than it is a revolution in its own right. “Aesthetic identity” he writes, “is different however in one important respect: it means to assist the non-identical in its struggle against the repressive identification compulsion that rules the outside world” (232). This is, of course, why we can consider Adorno a Marxist theorist. Since it sees and is indeed constituted by what Adorno calls “tension” between representation and reality, art is therefore *by its very nature* a revolutionary fact, standing up against the totalizing and repressive structures that dictate the “unresolved antagonisms of reality” and of aesthetic perception, which is why, to return to this chapter’s opening, Shelley cannot have “finished” the Margaret Nicholson poems: had he, they would have diluted this “tension,” mimicking a representational totality and trading in their revolutionary credit thereby.

Throughout *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno argues for the connectedness of art to the world over its transcendence or other-ness, which belief he holds in common with Shelley, writing, “the dialectic of art resembles the social dialectic,” “[artistic] style...corresponds to social de-

velopment,” and “the productive force of useful labor and that of art are the same. They both have the same teleology” (233). This connectedness is not a symptom of representation to be cured, rather, “art must feel the presence of the empirical other at all times,” in order to avoid “slipping into outright indifference to the world” (234). This idea also squares with Marxist thinking. As Adorno says, “Art both is and is not being-for-itself” (234). The latter clause of this phrase relates art to its production and to its historical moment in a teleological, revolutionary way. The former is the transcendence and “purity,” which is so often argued for artworks: “the continued relevance of the work is due to the unity of both.”

Here is one of Adorno’s “tensions.” The first is the “repressive, structural” tension of subjectivity in “reality.” The second is the tension between representation and the represented object (or idea) in art. A third is the tension between “sublimation and integration” in the dialogue between art and the world, and it is this tension which Adorno takes to be the most relevant. “The tension in art,” he claims “therefore only has meaning in relation to the tension outside” (233). This tension can be lost either by the artwork’s “losing its power to transcend mere existence,” or by its sublimation into indifference (237). If it maintains this tension, successful art becomes “a mode of behavior” (236). The effect, socially, that the artwork eventually has is the only way to measure its relevance, for Adorno, and therefore its greatness; “it is only those works of art that manifest themselves as modes of behavior which have a reason for being:” another belief he holds in common with Shelley (237).

Again, this is only one side of Adorno’s argument. “Art is related to its other like a magnet to a field of iron filings,” and these tensions are the addresses of real art. On the one hand, art must effect behavior: on the other, Adorno argues the pride of place which is due to primarily aesthetic criteria. “Take a look at the widespread inclination,” he argues “to per-

ceive art in terms of extra-aesthetic, or pre-aesthetic criteria. This tendency is...a mark of the atrocious backwardness or of the regressive consciousness of many people” (234). But, he continues, “that tendency is promoted by something in art itself.” Ultimately Adorno settles on the *via media*, that “if art is to be perceived in strictly aesthetic terms then it cannot be properly perceived in aesthetic terms.”

In order to see the aesthetic dimension of an artwork, the viewer must realize and respect --the intellect no sooner posits a barrier than it goes beyond it--that other dimensions (i.e. social, historical) are vying for power just underneath the aesthetic. Similarly, in order for art to maintain its transcendent other-ness, its “pure spirituality,” it must realize and respect that “its position vis-à-vis reality” is centripetally bound, structurally supporting that spirit. “The profane secularizes the sacred realm to the point where the latter is the only secular thing left,” after all (233). Art’s inherent consciousness of these tensions constitute both “the magnitude of its dignity,” and its “special significance” for human behavior.

## The Prison Bower of Meaning

I lose my anchor; my main-sail is rent to shreds; I kill a shark, and by signs converse...

-William Cowper

It is something of a scholarly commonplace that the imagination, for Coleridge, functions to reconcile opposites<sup>13</sup>. We imagine that his response to the semiotic crisis engendered in Romantic aesthetics was to seek a kind of clarity through “reconciliation.” If we look at the seventh of his “Lectures,” however, we see that achieving something more like a vanishing point, a present absence, or a useful negativity is the poet’s goal. For Coleridge, this is the form the drive to failure takes: following Kant (sometimes referentially, as will be shown) he attempts to ensure an ongoing imaginative engagement in certain poems by denying the slippage into understanding, which he takes to be a lower-order faculty. By building a kind of prison for meaning itself, he mimicks the tension created by the

effort in the mind when it would describe what it cannot satisfy itself with the description of, to reconcile opposites and to leave a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other when it is hovering between two images. As soon as it becomes fixed, it becomes understanding and when it is waving between them, attaching itself to neither, it is imagination.

(Foakes 311)

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<sup>13</sup> An earlier version of this chapter was presented as “Suspended Animation: Coleridge and the Prison Bower of Meaning,” at the annual meeting of PAMLA: Seattle, WA. 2012.

The previous chapter suggested a new way of reading the intentional fragmentary in Romantic poetry using Shelley as an example; this chapter explains Coleridge's interruptions and contradictions as workings out of the drive to failure in order to achieve this "negative quality," vanishing point, or what he will later call "rest." As examples, I explain Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *The Aeolian Harp*, *Reflections on Having left a Place of Retirement*, and *Recollections of Love* as discourses on poetic and epistemological limits, then focus on the Biographia Literaria as both the place where this dialectic method is proposed and a ground on which it is practiced, and finally, discuss the implications for the drive to failure of such choices by looking at the work of Paul de Man and Gilles Deleuze as modern exemplars of this Coleridgean trope.

In response to *the Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, readers have often been guilty of attributing meaning where none was intended. In the most famous example, critics have long puzzled over the significance of the mariner's shooting the albatross. The trouble is, there is nothing inherently symbolic in his having done so. The birds were not taken commonly to be symbols of Christian piety, nor were they "tutelary spirits" of a particular region, as Wordsworth suggests<sup>14</sup>, and as guides of a voyage they were perfectly useless. To kill one (or several) was not to declare one's independence of nature, or of a god's provision, and thus mount up on wax wings, but was instead an effective way to get fresh meat at sea. Sailors looked upon them as "good luck," not because of some superstition, but because it was lucky to get warm meat after a few days of eating salted ship's provisions.

In 1769, Joseph Banks records, without a touch of remorse, that he'd personally shot "several large albatross," some with "nine-foot wingspans," exclaiming that the crew ate

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14 Reported by William Keach in his edition of Coleridge's poems. (498-99).

food “fresh every morning as at the Covent Garden Market,” and accounting to such dietary provisions a good portion of his voyage’s success (Holmes 13).

The difficulty arises because in the poem, the action *sounds* fraught. We read it as a motivated symbol because it *appears* to be one. Another reason, to which we will return, is that the mariner himself seems to interpret it as meaningful, though there is no objective verification of the character’s interpretation available in the 1798 pre-glossed version of the poem. The deadpan declarative sentence sounds like a confession: “With my cross-bow/ I shot the albatross” (lines 81-82). The mariner’s wearing it like a talisman *seems* like penance, and the bird’s slipping off his neck and into the sea upon his praising *looks* like redemption.

The moral ambiguity of the mariner’s action--or, more precisely, the apparently-meaningful setting in Coleridge’s poem of an historically-meaningless action--has touched off, of course, a whole flock of critical opinion. Robert Penn Warren called the act “a crime against nature and against God” and suggests the poem is about the destruction of “the myth of the unity of being” (Warren 681). Frances Ferguson claims that “the Mariner commits the sin of pride in killing the Albatross, and thereby assert[s] his power over it” (Ferguson 700).

In “Coleridge and the Deluded Reader,” Frances Ferguson attempts to rescue the poem from Warren’s admirable, but overly-simplistic reading of the poem. She acknowledges the “know nothing” school of interpretation and dismisses it as a cop-out. At the same time, she argues that Warren’s reading, which she calls “the most provocative interpretation,” relies too heavily on convenient unities (697). His reading leaves us with a clear moral, which is, for Ferguson, exactly what Coleridge means to deny us, calling the poem “as thorough a work of

backwardness ...as we have" (698). Her argument is complicated by her reliance on the glosses, which appear to be attempts at sense-making, at further clarity, at unity.

Furthermore, her perspective is steeped in late-twentieth century values, skewing her own reading, at times. She writes,

if the Mariner commits a sin of pride in killing the albatross and thereby asserting his power over it, even the Mariner's refusal to kill the bird would in this context involve the pride-laden assurance that man's domain measures the universe.

(700)

That Ferguson criticizes as "prideful" the assumption "that the bird is a visitor in the Mariner's domain" is an irresponsible imposition of environmentalist, and fairly recent, cultural values on the writer of more humanistic ones. It was a perfectly normal enlightenment assumption that the bird was a trespasser on the mariners' ship rather than the reverse, that era lacking for the most part a sense of immanent domain and the natural habitat rights of lower-order animals.

Ferguson shows herself further to misunderstand her Coleridge, not only as a humanist, but also as a Christian with her defense of the crew. "Since the mariner did the killing when [the crew] only expressed opinions about it, their fate seems cruel indeed," she writes (704). The idea that "opinions" (or beliefs generally) can be read as harmless is both recent and too liberal for the Christian audience and author of late eighteenth-century Britain. Faith is, and certainly was then, made of such beliefs; the mariners in the poem are pagans and idolators, attributing divine characteristics to created beings and switching allegiance with every changing wind. Their fate can only seem cruel to wholly secular readers, which of course, Coleridge's were not.

Her article is valuable though for its idea that the mariner's chief sin was "interpretation from a limited perspective" (709). She reads the poem's symbolism opposite to Warren's. Since her reading is successful—since the poem holds such interpretation as easily as it does Warren's contrary one—Ferguson has made her point: that the poem has both more and less at stake than story-telling as a purely subjective art.

Coleridge's own gloss confuses the issue, by saying the Mariner "inhospitably killeth the pious bird of good omen." Later, Coleridge --if one takes the glossalist to be Coleridge himself, which I do not--recants: "the only or chief fault, if I may say so, was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination" (Table Talk 2:100). This very fact, that the text works against itself to deny or suspend interpretation, ought to give us pause, or, in a term that will become clear in this essay's next section, it ought to give us "rest." That is, the albatross isn't supposed to be a symbol of anything because the work isn't supposed to mean.

Perhaps, for the purposes of this study, it is better to say "the work fails to mean." It gives every indication that it is going to make meaning, and then refuses to cross that threshold. Edward Pechter summarizes the passage from the *Lectures* quoted at this chapter's outset as representative of Coleridge's belief that "imaginative activity...entails an effort that is ongoing; it fails to find--or, rather, succeeds in not finding--a stable closure" (169). Pechter's sense of "success in not finding" is the goal of Coleridge's suspension of meaning, or drive to failure, as I am arguing here.

If the work is a success that fails to mean, it is like Shelley's *Mont Blanc*, according to Paul de Man's reading. There, de Man argues that the point of *Mont Blanc* is its gravitational pull inward. In "Shelley Disfigured," he writes

But we can only inadequately understand in this fashion why the shaped light of understanding is itself allowed to wane away, layer by layer, until it is entirely forgotten and remains present only in the guise of an edifice that serves to celebrate and to perpetuate its oblivion. Nor can we understand the power that weighs down the seductive grace of figuration until it destroys itself.

(112)

The poem is, according to de Man, like the mountain: a solitary object that refuses to connect to other objects in a chain of meaning. Perhaps we cannot understand that “power,” but certain poems, I argue, attempt to move beneath the “weight” that bends toward “destruction,” an impulse I call “the drive to failure.”

de Man’s reading is the closest thing we get in Romantic criticism proper to the sort of technique I’m suggesting in this chapter, wherein a work is built in such a way that it acts as a black hole, pulling meaning back into itself like light, before it can escape into sense. It is a technique Coleridge uses over and over, and one he uses intentionally. It is not a consequence of form, or an inactive (or thoughtless) failure, but a motivated trick of sign-making: to let meaning emerge, if at all, only through dialectic and conquest.

### **A Broken String on the Aeolian Harp**

This discussion concerns the notion of “the sublime” only secondarily, but as this reading of Coleridge’s work depends on a familiarity with its terms, let me offer a very brief outline as a starting point. No single definition is possible which would do justice to the com-

plex, and often contradictory theories of Burke, Hazlitt, Volney, Ried, Stewart<sup>15</sup>, and the many other thinkers who have participated in, and refined, the dialogue surrounding Longinus' treatise which touched off Romantic era interest in the sublime, but, using a Shelleyan essay-fragment, I'd like to describe not the impetus for sublime encounters, nor the intellectual maneuvers codified within them, but what might be called the "poetic symptoms" with which an imagination is afflicted therein.

Although he does not announce the essay as a treatise on the sublime, a section of Percy Shelley's *On Life*, provides a useful schematic of the type of encounter we're concerned with here. "Intellectual philosophy," he writes, "has conducted us to that verge where words abandon us, and what wonder it we grow dizzy to look down the dark abyss of how little we know" (508)? There are four distinct and instructive stages in this passage which I will consider throughout this discussion. The first is linguistic failure: "where words abandon us;" the second: physical symptoms: "what wonder if we grow dizzy;" the third is particular to my thinking about Romanticism and might be called alternately, a "vanishing point" or "representations of absence:" "to look down the dark abyss;" and the fourth is a re-orientation of scale/recovered perspective: "of how little we know." This last suggests a kind of shaming based on checked flight, or failure.

When Bloom suggests that "Coleridge's story lends itself to myths of failure," he is referring to the facts of Coleridge's biography: that in his actual life, academically, militarily, financially, and amorously, the man was not a success (MCV 2). When he says elsewhere that Coleridge's "poetry is a testament of defeat, a yielding to the anxiety of influence, and to

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15 This list is nothing like exhaustive: the works I have in mind though are Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1844); Hazlitt's *Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805); Volney's *The Ruins of Empires and the Laws of Nature* (1793); Ried's *Inquiry in the Human Mind* (1764); and Stewart's *Elements of the Philosophy of the Human Mind* (1814).

the fear of self-glorification,” he is referring to failure of another kind entirely (BPEL 357). I am concerned only with the latter sense, how the poet, in trying to describe a moment (usually an encounter with the sublime), and finding the poem inadequate to the task, builds a failure of expression into the poem, and thereby conquers the limitation. Such expressions are choices, and formalistic tropes which often occur during encounters with the super-sensible<sup>16</sup>; failures that, through the process of discovering their own limitations, suggest a greatness beyond themselves, little temples of defeat that imply a deity.

One of the markers of an encounter with the sublime is that the encounterer’s senses fail therein. Often, the intellect is considered one such sense and can only be marshaled upon recollection, which is one reason for the familiar Romantic trope of the poetic retelling of an event already past<sup>17</sup>.

Wordsworth is the *exemplar par excellance* for such recollections. He describes his own biological responses to a moment of sublimity in *Tintern Abbey*, “even the motion of our human blood/ almost suspended, we are laid asleep/ in body, and become a living soul” going on to describe “all its dizzy raptures” (l. 45-47).

For Wordsworth, the sublime encounter can only be seen from a distance, whether it is a distance of time, or of memory. He can say something like *I remember it was almost like my blood was frozen*, but only from the safe vantage of having regular, flowing blood again; in *The Prelude* he describes the same sort of feeling, again from a vantage: “That spectacle,

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<sup>16</sup> For Kant, if an encounter which would be considered sublime had it occurred in nature, occurs by the impetus of an artwork, (or sometimes, a concept) it is called “super-sensible” instead. For consistency’s sake, I will use the term “sublime” for either such encounter.

<sup>17</sup> Here, one might think of Wordsworth’s feinting/fainting spell while crossing the Alps, or of his famous, but often misquoted definition: “I have said that Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till by a species of reaction the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind.” (Preface, 1802).

for many days my brain worked with dim and undetermined sense (of unknown modes of being)/ In my thoughts there was a darkness—call it solitude, or blank desertion” (l. 423). He couldn’t write while dizzy in rapture, and if he could, what quality would be present in a composition made by a brain of “dim and undetermined sense?”

Coleridge knows the answer: not much. Taking this queue, Coleridge injects a kind of theatricality in certain of his poems, which imitates the sublime encounter and the accompanying failure of sense before continuing.

Bloom is referring, I take it, to this very trick when he suggests that “Coleridge’s poetry itself discourses on poetic limits” (19). What I find fascinating about such moments is that Coleridge leaves them in the poems—a kind of record of the struggle—and that they strengthen the poems overall by their presence.

To what end? The drive to failure attempts to harrow and explain the weaker moments in the poetry as active failures by announcing them as demonstrations of unmediated perception. It suggests a poet’s way of saying, with Bottom Weaver in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,

I have had a most rare  
 vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to  
 say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go  
 about to expound this dream. Methought I was--there  
 is no man can tell what. Methought I was,--and  
 methought I had,--but man is but a patched fool, if  
 he will offer to say what methought I had. (IV.i.204-10)

Notice the terms the weaver uses to explain his inability to explain: he is afraid of being “a patched fool,” and “an ass,” afraid of being thought an imaginative adolescent.

One example of Coleridge’s having put himself “past the wit of man” occurs in *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement*, which uses similar fissures and poetic dives to achieve aesthetic coherence.

For Coleridge, the principal concern is how to achieve pure presence, which is a rather more fragile form of sublimity, and Jean-Luc Nancy argues, the greater sacrifice (*La Sense du Monde*). In “The Unsacrificeable,” Nancy writes, “It is the ability of presenting this self-consciousness or naïveté—that is rarer than the ability simply to produce magnitude: it is the production of a fragile sublime, that, in the end, may be its telos” (6). Given Coleridge’s connections to Wordsworth, we are not surprised to see the title of this poem announcing itself as a reflection, that is, a recollection of a spontaneous overflow. Since these lines are “reflections,” they are already one step removed from that presence—the best we’re going to get here is a story. In the following excerpt, the poem moves from the cottage to the face of sublimity and before he attains the pure presence he’s after, back down to sensibility.

But the time, when first  
 From that low Dell, steep up the stony Mount  
 I climb'd with perilous toil and reach'd the top,  
 Oh ! what a goodly scene ! Here the bleak mount,  
 The bare bleak mountain speckled thin with sheep ;  
 Grey clouds, that shadowing spot the sunny fields ;  
 And river, now with bushy rocks o'er-brow'd,  
 Now winding bright and full, with naked banks ;

And seats, and lawns, the Abbey and the wood,  
 And cots, and hamlets, and faint city-spire ;  
 The Channel there, the Islands and white sails,  
 Dim coasts, and cloud-like hills, and shoreless Ocean--  
 It seem'd like Omnipresence ! God, methought,  
 Had built him there a Temple : the whole World  
 Seem'd imag'd in its vast circumference :  
 No wish profan'd my overwhelméd heart.  
 Blest hour ! It was a luxury,--to be ! (*l. 27-42*)

But then the poem continues,

Yet oft when after honourable toil  
 Rests the tir'd mind, and waking loves to dream,  
 My spirit shall revisit thee, dear Cot!  
 Thy Jasmin and thy window-peeping Rose,  
 And Myrtles fearless of the mild sea-air.  
 And I shall sigh fond wishes-sweet Abode!  
 Ah!-had none greater! And that all had such!  
 It might be so-but the time is not yet.  
 Speed it, O Father! Let thy Kingdom come! (*l. 63-71*)

At one point in the poem, his simple being was a luxury--he was nearing complete presence—and by the end, he is wishing for other kingdoms, and times yet to come: the opposite of presence.

Having transformed himself into a god through his imagined (this is a recollection) encounter with the sublime, and having shared some of that sublimity with us through the poem, his conscience gets the better of him—we see it get the better of him—and restrains him.

In this case, the restraint comes from Coleridge's religious leanings. The poet recognizes his tendency to moralize, which is why he calls "moral sentiment" an "obtrusion" upon the "pure imagination" poem he would like to have made in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (qtd. Ferguson 697). Henry Fielding, in the introduction to Joseph Andrews, provides a good explanation for this impulse, "but it is the business of a man and a Christian to summon reason as quickly as he can to his aid; and she will presently teach him patience and submission" (258).

There is hardly a better summary of the drive to failure as exhibited in Coleridge's *Reflections* than this selection from Fielding. The poems start, move toward the daemonic, or the transcendent, then we see the poet gather reason unto himself, the leap of its aid, see him receive the lesson, and finally, see his submission.

Bloom has it right when he reads Tolstoy as having located the true grounds of Shakespearean power and offense in "freedom from moral and religious over-determinations" (WC 58). This freedom is what Coleridge is missing. This is what Bloom is sensing when he calls Coleridge's poetry a "testament of defeat" (357).

He continues, "his boasted liberty is nothing" --and what else is Coleridge's "no wish profaned my heart" if not boasted liberty--"if there is a single point where he is under constraint and bound" (129). Coleridge knows this and so, Promethean, displays that binding and its poetic effect, for our outrage. Invoking a form of the Kantian drive to failure,

Coleridge says--no, shows us, effectively--“look how well I was doing before the constraint; and now, constrained, look at the wreck I’ve become.”

Nicolas Boileau, who wrote once that “a beautiful disorder is an effect of art,” also theorizes this moment of failure. He writes, “in the experience of the sublime, the dimensions become diffused and you can’t quite grasp the parameters of the real” (11). This is what Coleridge demonstrates here; he might say “look at how the poetic faculty breaks down – Look at my inability to paint a concrete image in the face of the sublime!”

The poet here is the “window-peeping” rose straining for growth but determined to stay rooted. He wants more than the cot, but also wants happiness, and so settles for it. He is guilty here of getting out of the beauty game in exchange for the goodness game, as he is in *The Eolian Harp*, which poem also features a moving along toward fever-pitch before a corrective moment steals his inertia. He describes first, an “indolent and passive brain,”

As wild and various, as the random gales  
That swell and flutter on this subject Lute !  
And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversly fram'd,  
That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all ?  
But thy more serious eye a mild reproof  
Darts, O belovéd Woman ! nor such thoughts  
Dim and unhallow'd dost thou not reject,  
And biddest me walk humbly with my God.

Meek Daughter in the Family of Christ !

Well hast thou said and holily disprais'd

These shapings of the unregenerate mind ;

Bubbles that glitter as they rise and break

On vain Philosophy's aye-babbling spring.

For never guiltless may I speak of him,

The Incomprehensible! (*l.* 34-51)

Returning to *Reflections* then, the poet exclaims “no wish profaned my overwhelmed heart,” meaning he had achieved complete presence. At the end, though he sounds exultant, his heart is “profaned” with the wish for another kingdom. This is a case of the saying’s being divided from what it says. It says he’s happy with “honorable toil,” with the cot, with religion as locally practiced, and, by extension, with his wife, but the saying tells us he’s bursting for more.

The poem is about transgressing phenomenological boundaries anyhow. We follow the image of the roses on a climb, from “low” to “steep up”: this sets up the mechanics of the poem. The first stanza thereby implies movement but where does the poem actually take us? From the close to the cottage, wandering toward the end of an artistic leash, and back safely to bed, having decided it too dangerous out there. Coleridge’s own drive to sublimity should end in beauty, made up of complete presence; instead, he decides, or rather, he lets his narrator decide, that the price is too high.

It is a climax like the sexual: a slow boiling up to a point of rapture—in this case of pure presence (and not only that, but a pure presence of feeling)-- and the move toward regained sense. As the sublime is, according to Edmund Burke, a form of “recuperative terror,”

the poet may be recovering from his imaginative encounter with it, which was so real for him due to the strength of his vision, that he has to talk himself back to the ground before losing his sanity. Alternatively, he shows us that he has both the desire and ability to transcend, but that he can't within the poem ("it would be past the wit of man to say what methought I had") and proceeds regardless.

So does he return to the cot? There's a theatricality present in and necessary to an understanding of these poems as I read them here that says "well, in one sense, yes, and in another, not quite." It is essentially a question of tone; Coleridge says one thing, but means something else by the display of return. While his first man returns to the flower bed, growing no higher than the windows, his third has shown us, via the drive to failure, that there is more, and so has given us a record that lives beyond those boundaries.

The usefulness of this reading strategy is reinforced by a look at *This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison*, whose argument proceeds on the principles of imagination and transference. Before examining it, however, it will be useful to note the biographical back-story. Firstly, Coleridge is stuck in a marriage which can be euphemistically described as "unequal." Mrs. Coleridge was not particularly pretty, and not particularly bright--biographers tend to say things like "Coleridge was not happily married," and "he had chosen [a wife] badly"-- and the poet, for all is talking himself into appreciating her for her religious hard-lining, ("but thy more mild reproof...") is deeply unsatisfied with their relationship (Mallaby 2). Since I won't say more about it later, let me sound the note here that may ring true as we examine the poem on other terms hereafter: a Freudian reading of this poem stands-up to scrutiny; it makes sense to consider that the "prison" of the title is his marriage relationship in which he has been hamstrung by Sarah. No matter that he manages to make the best of it, as he does

of his situation in the poem, he still wants to be doing more glorious things, and thinks himself unable because of her. If this is true metaphorically, it also happens to be true literally in the case of this particular poem.

Just as his friend Charles Lamb (to whom the poem is addressed) shows up for a week of hiking, Mrs. Coleridge spilled boiling milk on Coleridge's foot accidentally, which meant that he couldn't go on the planned hike with Charles, Wordsworth, and Wordsworth's attractive and imaginative sister Dorothy (Johnston 380).

The poem becomes a discourse on imagination almost immediately. In line 2, the poet begins to complain not that he is missing out on time with his friends, not that his scalded foot is sore, and not even that he is missing the bounty and beauties of nature. He expresses remorse that, since he is stuck at home, he is missing out on potential fuel for future recollection. It is a curious lack of presence that concerns not the present environment, the ruined body, or even the potential excursion, but the self projected into the future --and into imagined blindness-- lacking fulfilling memories of a particular day's hike (Coleridge had been on hundreds by this point) with which to dawdle away the imagined geriatric hours.

Next, he guesses at what the hikers might be seeing and feeling at the moment of his composition. He sees them "wander in gladness," when they may very well have been miserable and wonders if Wordsworth takes them to see a particular waterfall that he, Coleridge, discovered (*l.* 9-16).

In the next stanza, the imagined setting grows so strong it is hard to tell it from the real. The line "Now my friends emerge/ beneath the wide wide heaven," may read to some as "Now my friends emerge beneath the wide wide heaven," which is to say, they have returned home and Coleridge sees them cresting the hill and walking toward him, but this little phrase

“Yes! they wander/ in gladness all” reminds us that we are still in the poet’s imagination.

The transference begins in this stanza as well. Coleridge imagines that the hike is especially beneficial for Charles who has

pin’d  
 And hunger’d after nature many a year  
 In the great city pent, winning thy way  
 With sad yet patient soul, thro’evil and pain  
 And strange calamity! (28-32)

He also imagines that Charles is “gentle-hearted,” with which epithet the receiver of this homage was apparently much displeased. Lamb hated being called “gentle-hearted” and insisted several times, in writing, that Coleridge replace the lines (Lamb, i. 217–18). But who is it that is really “pent” and “hungering after nature?” Who is “sad, yet patient,” and who has just endured a (rather) “strange calamity?” Not Charles, who is busy “wandering in gladness” surely<sup>18</sup>.

It is Coleridge himself, of course, just as he is really the subject of the poem’s final lines, despite the direct address “For thee,” and the use of the man’s name “Charles,” and the repeated accusation of his “gentle-heartedness.” The rook, which Coleridge has “blessed” (recalling *Rime of Ancient Mariner*) flies overhead bearing a charm for Charles “to whom/ No sound is dissonant, which tells of Life,” the point of which line is to say that Charles makes the best of even unpleasant circumstances, turning dissonance into life-giving melody (75-6). Again, it is actually Coleridge himself who has this ability and has just demonstrated it in the previous stanza, wherein he argues for a kind of imaginative making the best of one’s

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<sup>18</sup> William A. Ulmer would disagree, having argued recently that Mary Lamb's murder of their mother is the real subject of the poem.

circumstances, argues even that the imaginative consolation can be more rewarding than the real experience, a sort of hyper-articulate way of saying there no use crying even over very-literally spilled and scalding milk.

Just as the narrator really wants to be with his friends in *This Lime Tree Bower, My Prison*, hiking over the fells, but must stay, hamstrung and imprisoned in the gilded cage of his imagination, so he wants in *Reflection on Having Left a Place of Retirement*, the sublime extended vision, wants in effect to “drink the milk of paradise,” but ultimately chooses the small roses, the cottage, the thrice-woven circle of bondage.

These three poems exhibit only one aspect of Coleridge’s drive to failure: that of the shamed return, but there are others. His work is full of absences, stuttering, memory losses and other zeros, usually in the context of desiring to speak, but being unable. In *Recollections of Love* the poet refers to his “Faltering voice and pausing harp” (107). In *Christabel*, he has both the title character tongue-tied: “for what she knew, she could not tell/ O’er mastered by the mighty spell,” as well as the sidereal, who claims the story is “sweeter than my harp can tell” (178, 176). Even *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* is predicated on this dramatic situation: a man stunned silent, just when he would speak. In *Dejection: an Ode*, the poet paints a grim self-portrait: “at the barr’d window often did I sit” (147).

I’ll provide one final example of Coleridge’s poetic swoon from the poetry. In *Recollections of Love*, the narrator whips himself into a similar frenzy through both the strength of the remembered images and, I would argue, the strength of his own writing about those images, before affecting the drive to failure. Stanza 5 reads,

You stood before me like a thought,  
A dream remember’d in a dream,

But when those meek eyes first did seem  
 To tell me, Love within you wrought—  
 O Greta, dear domestic stream! (*l.* 21-25)

There is no noun in this passage to act as an indirect object for “Love wrought.” “O Greta...” is not a parenthetical phrase, or an interruption after which the poet returns to his speech. The “beautiful disorder” here is the sentence fragment.

What is it that Love wrought within the addressed? We can’t know. What we do know is that, for the narrator of this poem, the very thought of that love is literally overwhelming; he can’t continue. The poet has lost control of the poem, it appears; the Sun-god is no longer driving the chariot. By leaving this failure in the poem, though, he has implied its power. The ruin of it suggests that they are thoughts all too deep for words.

### **Nihil Negativum Irrepraesentabile: The Nothing That Is**

Coleridge affects the drive to failure in prose as well. In the middle of his chapter in Biographia Literaria *On the Imagination, of Esemplastic Power*, Coleridge approaches a definition of this literary project, and grounds the project philosophically in Kant, writing, “the venerable sage of Koenigsberg has preceded the march of this master-thought as an effective pioneer in his essay on the introduction of negative quantities into philosophy, published 1763” (162). The “negative quantities” in this passage is the same artistic/philosophical move as I mean by “present absences,” or “active failures.”

That Coleridge means to use this philosophical device toward a literary end, and not just as a “toy of thought” is evident in the section immediately following. “Another use is possible,” he writes, “and of far greater promise, namely, the actual application of the posi-

tions which had so wonderfully enlarged the discoveries of geometry, mutatis mutandis, to philosophical subjects” (163). “Actual application” is what Coleridge endeavors to show, making his own necessary changes.

A “negative quantity” is not the same as an absence. Rather, it is a nothing. This is a fine distinction to cut, but it is the same differentiation Wallace Stevens would make later in *The Snow Man*, where he describes, “the nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is.”

Coleridge further distinguishes between “stillness” and “rest,” explaining that,

a body at one and the same time in motion and not in motion  
is...nonsense...but a motory force of a body in one direction and an equal force  
of the same body in an opposite direction is not incompatible, and the result,  
rest, is real and representable. (*BL* 163)

The poem’s main thrust is one direction; the drive to failure is “the motory force in the opposite direction,” and this section means to show how that “rest” is achieved.

As shown earlier, *Reflections on Having Left a Place of Retirement* announces itself as the sort of poetic object that demonstrates this theory. Though it ends with the poet at rest, or “in retirement,” the poem is about how he energized that rest through dialectic. He tried (or, erected a motory force in one direction) and failed (erected one in the opposite) and the poem, the reflection, is the “real” and “representable” figuration of that negative quantity.

Interestingly, and to complicate matters--but also to emulate Kant and to pave the way for the demonstrative theory that is the concern of this chapter’s final section--Coleridge uses the *Biographia Literaria* itself, indeed, uses this very section wherein he first suggests the idea of this move through dialectic toward rest, to practice the theory. Remember that he is

not merely interested in suggesting a reading of Kant, but in “the actual application of the positions.”

In a poetically just, and rhetorically incisive move, Coleridge decides, mid-sentence that he’s had enough of explaining the theory, frankly, right when his readers were probably falling off themselves, and begins an unannounced demonstration. He writes, still on the subject of contraries and Kantian application,

Now this tertium aliquid can be no other than an inter-penetrations of the counteracting powers, partaking of both . . . . Thus far had the work been transcribed for the press, when I received the following letter from a friend, whose practical judgement... (164)

That central ellipsis describes the same moment as the “O” in Coleridge’s *Recollections of Love* discussed earlier. It is the breaking-off point: the system failure. He inserts a purported transcription of a letter right then, before finishing his thought or his sentence, which advises him not to continue.

The letter is a fraud, of course. In his own actual letter to Curtis, his publisher, the poet explains as much, calling the intrusion “a letter addressed to myself as from a friend, written without taking my pen off the paper except to dip it in the ink stand” (CL iv 728).

To those familiar with the facts of Coleridge’s biography, this fraud will not surprise. Just as the thought of Greta intrudes and stops the poet dead in his experimental love poem, just as Sara’s moralizing intrudes on the poet’s quest for pure presence right when he would attain it, just as the glossalator confuses interpretive possibility right when the Albatross’ death might cohere into a symbol, and just as the man from Porlock (in)conveniently interrupts *Kubla Khan* right when daemonic transcendence might be achieved, so too here, the

author of Biographia Literaria stops himself just at the point of rupture with a literal breakthrough: one genre breaking through the other, interrupting, and destroying it.

As with all the previous examples though, the failure here is not total. Yes, a system has broken down, but that forces another kind of reading: you might call it the launch of a larger conceptual framework that contains the failure of the first, or the imagination's mediating function between an equally-armed dialectic, but they amount to the same thing artistically. That is: the work becomes aware of its method.

In this case, the letter-writer takes the reader back through what has just happened, and even summarizes what might have taken place had he not himself interrupted. "Be assured," he writes, setting up the anxiety, build-up, or move toward sublimity that occasioned his entrance, "that I look forward anxiously to your great book on the Constructive Philosophy which you have promised and announced" (63).

The distance between explicitly-stated goals and the actual finished products poems become can be exacerbated by many things, as has been shown. Coleridge's letter-writer in this instance is but one type. He is an incarnation of the pressure the poet feels in between those very different spaces. His is the same weight that W. Jackson Bate describes as the "burden of the past," and that Bloom calls the "Anxiety of Influence," and it is the same weight that kept Wordsworth's Prelude a prelude to an absent work<sup>19</sup>.

The figure continues, "only I will not promise to descend into the dark cave of Trophonius with you, there to rub my own eyes in order to make the sparks and figured flashes which I am required to see" (166). Here is a kind of deus-ex-machina, or an insider's apol-

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<sup>19</sup> For Wordsworth, The Prelude's very germination is that distance and his failure to reconcile the Recluse-extant with the Recluse-concept, concentrating his energies instead on the prelude to that greater work, which becomes a kind of apology for its absence, and eventually, its replacement.

ogy for the trope. Coleridge-the-essayist is doing that exact thing: having found himself in the “dark cave,” as it were, where understanding is limited, or, on the liminal edge of understanding, he is now rubbing his own eyes “in order to make the sparks and figured flashes” that the piece requires.

As it turns out, this dis-ease is contagious. Though Coleridge uses the drive to failure as a trope to illustrate how high he has climbed, or how far he has fallen--to trace anyway the limits of knowable and representable experience--the theoretical/theatric becomes almost a genre unto itself, as scholars of literary theory in general, and of Romanticism in particular, practice, along these same Coleridgean lines, the theories they’d been ostensibly discussing, creating lime-tree bowers, where meaning itself is the hamstrung poet, imprisoned.

### **Deleuze and the Asyntactic Sentence**

The section from Biographia Literaria that we have been discussing is a piece of literary theory that crosses the genre line and becomes a performance of the theory it set out to expound. The final section of this chapter looks at other Romantic theorists, who, following both Kant (from whom Coleridge learned the trick) and Coleridge himself, who has just demonstrated it in the previous discussion attempt their own crossings of the performative/theoretical barrier.

In a special edition of the *Romantic Circles Praxis Series*, Rob Mitchell and Ron Broglio argue that “the work of Gilles Deleuze has not had quite the impact on Romantic studies that one might have expected,” and offer, in the collection of essays entitled Romanticism and the New Deleuze, several applications of Deleuzian literary theory, mostly to Shelley, but also to Wordsworth.

The authors of the collection perform highly formalist readings that attempt to read Kant through a Deleuzian lens, and thereby to illuminate sensational manipulations on the parts of rhythmic, or structural poetry. Mitchell states the project clearly in his opening essay, “The Trancendental: P.B.Shelley and the Freedom of Immobility”: “one of the primary goals of this special collection is to highlight the utility and importance of Gilles Deleuze's philosophy for scholars of Romanticism” (1).

Though it is helpful to one’s understanding of Romantic poetry to study the work of Deleuze, this section suggests the reverse: rather than using the philosopher to read the poetry, we ought to use the poetry to read the philosopher. That is, instead of--or perhaps, in addition to--a Deleuzian view of Kant, what we need is a Coleridgean view of Deleuze. Once in place, this manner of reading also opens up a number of other theorists of Romantic poetry, including de Man, with whose work this chapter itself began.

Reading Coleridge, especially the Coleridge of the Biographia Literaria, though also of the other poems discussed in this chapter, presents a sense-making problem. Even readers as astute as Thomas Merton railed at the poet’s “nonsense.” Thinking Coleridge was having fun at readers’ expense, Merton wrote in 1941, “Every man a Coleridge! Fill your journals with worthless projects! See what jolly sport!” (7). Essentially, what readers like Merton have not grasped is the intentional quality of the drive to failure; that the inability of meaning to escape from Coleridge’s formalistic system marshals the mediating quality of the imagination, in the same way higher faculties are marshaled for Kant upon, for example, imagination’s own failure.

Coleridge takes Kant from the theoretical to the practical, demonstrating the theory mid-step while discussing it; thereby failing in the discussion, but deploying a theatric that

rescues the larger project. This demonstrative gesture, sacrificing traditional meaning on the altar of a larger conceptual deployment, is then repeated by theorists of Romantic poetry, especially de Man, who demonstrates blindness in his discussion thereof, and by Deleuze who formally demonstrates stuttering and other communication failures within his discussion-- though it is really a performance-- of those subjects.

Like Coleridge, reading Deleuze can create a kind of mental stutter, wherein a reader, trying to make organized sense of the theories expounded in the Critical and Clinical Essays, for example, --trying to wrestle a blessing from its angel-- finds herself thrown off, empty-handed, stuck thick-tongued mid-sentence. We do not owe this psycho-syntactical break to the fact that Deleuze is a difficult theorist, or, not only to that fact, rather, we owe it to his formal aesthetic decision to demonstrate, at every turn, the theory he's discussing. In this way, he is a formalist and a performer in the manner of Coleridge and the other writers (who think they are theorists) discussed here<sup>20</sup>.

In an essay cleverly titled "He Stuttered," Deleuze opens with this sweeping dialectic: "in fact [...] the writer seems to have only two possibilities: either to do it...or else to say it without doing it" (107). Is it incredible that a writer of such shift, and movement, of what seems a kind of (even Derridian) free play builds such comfortably exclusive categories? If so, it is because we have not been paying close enough attention to his images.

One almost hears the excitement in Deleuze's description at the end of his essay "Lewis Carroll" about the uses of "surface nonsense." He writes, using images and language that belong almost to poetry, "They let the incorporeal rise to the surface like a mist over the

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<sup>20</sup> Other examples abound. Roland Barthes' outline of "zero degree writing" and his failure to attempt such writing himself is a massive underdetermination. Julia Kristeva's hyperbolic historicizing in "My Memory's Hyperbole" is, perhaps, an overdetermination in this Deleuzean vein.

earth, a pure ‘expressed’ from the depths: not the sword, but the flash of the sword, a flash without a sword like the smile without a cat” (22). The Cheshire Cat is a hero for him because it cannot be followed, cannot be traced, can still smile (is an expressive subjectivity) and yet has no history. Later, in the essay, “What Children Say,” he will hold up a similar model in Dionysis, “as the god of places of passage and things of forgetting” (67). This untraceable, this bifurcation of expressivity --we could call it “forgetfulness,” or “stuttering”-- is for Deleuze the route to creative freedom, and it is precisely the sort of zero I’ve been after; it is the moment of reason’s having found out finally the shape of its skull, imagination’s laying in a heap, licking its wounds.

“It is as if the syntax,” Deleuze writes of Whitman,

that composes the sentence, which makes it totally capable of referring back to itself, *tends to disappear* by setting free an infinite asyntactic sentence, which prolongs itself or *sprouts dashes* in order to create spatiotemporal intervals. (58)

Here is Deleuze’s new aesthetic of the fragment, one that amounts to a version of Keats’ “negative capability:” constructing a whole from the particular, and “making no attempt to totalize them.” The philosopher is not being illogical here, but his logic is one of postures, of living in certain suits, trying on poses that may or may not cohere into a “work” (and here we may recall McGann’s fight with de Man over that constitution, and revel in a Deleuzian *jouissance* over his not having been similarly conscripted).

When he writes that “Whitman enters into a gymnastic relationship with young oak trees,” the reader feels his envy; Deleuze enters, at that same moment, his own gymnastic pose, one that adopts Whitmanian-American-poetical stances without transition between

those thoughts and his own, one that shouts from barbaric rooftops with Whitmanian braggadocio, totalizing and essentializing “laws of the fragment” and “objects of literature” even while undermining such firm postures through his own theoretical morphogenesis, tongue firmly in cheek, or balled up and stuttering, bodiless smile flashing in the dark.

### **de Manian Blinding**

My notion of the drive to failure, which is grounded theoretically in Kant’s system of shamings and exhaustions, also opens the work of de Man, who adapts the Kantian device, if not the Kantian project, in such a way that his work can serve as a hinge on which turn similar vanishing points<sup>21</sup>, or “active failures.”

De Man is particularly useful, for my purposes, not in the exposition of his own theory of reading, but in his readings of contemporary thinkers, and the way those readings demonstrate, or act against his work’s explicit aim. Of Derrida, for example, he writes,

The insight seems instead to have been gained from a negative movement that animates the critic’s thought, an unstated principle that leads his language away from its asserted stand, perverting and dissolving his stated commitment to the point where it becomes emptied of substance, as if the very possibility of assertion had been put into question. (103)

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<sup>21</sup> Pierre Machory’s description from *Theory of Literary Production* provides a helpful image of the absence I mean to imply: “Like a planet revolving around an absent sun, an ideology is made out of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of” (91).

What strikes one about The Rhetoric of Blindness is how brave it seems. de Man is claiming a totalizing system of reading-- akin to Bloom's<sup>22</sup>--wherein misreading is a necessary component of literary strength. In order to demonstrate that he has himself such strength, de Man engages in a little misreading of his own.

This is something like Keats' concept of "negative capability," and something like an attempt to capture the force of atoms flung together from opposite ends of a particle accelerator<sup>23</sup>, but when he writes,

if the radical position suggested by Levi-Strauss is to stand, if the question of structure can only be asked from a point of view that is not that of a privileged subject, then it becomes imperative to show that literature constitutes no exception, that its language is in no sense privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms of language, (12)

one senses trouble. Granted, this claim contains a lot of "ifs," but if we take de Man's reading seriously--that is to say, literally-- we will have misread him.

Jerome McGann's is another theoretical text in which this Coleridgean phenomenon appears. He modifies Kant who writes that "[the poet]...tries, by means of imagination, which emulates the play of reason in its quest after the maximum, to go beyond the limits of experience and to present them to sense with a completeness of which there is no example in nature," and contrasts de Man, when he argues in The Romantic Ideology,

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22 One can situate Bloom's scholarly-critical career into three major phases: his early work on British Romanticism, culminating in 1971's The Ringers in the Tower, the middle period during which he outlined a literary theory of agon, as in The Anxiety of Influence (1973) and A Map of Misreading (1975), and what I am terming the later "heroic stage," during which he defends the canon and canonical authors to a more popular audience, as in Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, and The Western Cannon. I am referring in this instance especially to his critical middle phase, though, interestingly, the others are every bit as bound to the systems they create.

23 Each being attempts to harness the energy from opposing forces toward an (epistemological/artistic) product that is greater than the sum of its respective parts.

everything of art has this power to pass judgement upon the (necessarily partial and distorted) ideas and attitudes of the present, because the work of art is always discrete, finished (formally), and not abstract. (151)

With Shelley, who closes *The Defense of Poetry*, famously, with “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” McGann believes, unlike de Man, that poetic language is privileged in terms of unity and truth over everyday forms.

Later, de Man qualifies Rousseau’s notion of longing in a way that’s useful because of the ways its own process of naming demonstrates the theory he’s discussing, and denies--like many of the Romantic poems with which he is concerned--history and death through the erection of a little memorial to loss:

But one hesitates to use a term such as “nostalgia” or “desire” to designate this level of consciousness, for all nostalgia or desire is desire of something, or for someone; here the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding, and, like Rousseau’s longing, it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming we call ‘literature.’ (18)

De Man is here talking about a different absence than I’m concerned with, but it’s useful for that very reason, if only as a foil. He’s suggesting that literature as act stares into the fundamental void of human existence by announcing itself as a fiction, thereby shaming other fictions like anthropology, self-hood, science, and other presumably-authentic systems.

The vanishing point I mean to distinguish as part of the drive to failure is a trope, that--because it is theatrical--argues the opposite: that literature in this case attempts to be real, that the failure of description (for example) announces the very authenticity of the system, or re-

ality it purports to describe. This linguistic failure is a way of avoiding de Man's nothing by believing in the general coincidence of sign and meaning and shoring up the concept by playing out this rare exception.

Earlier in the same essay, de Man had said,

The fallacy of the belief that, in the language of poetry, sign and meaning can coincide, or at least be related to each other in the free and harmonious balance that we call "beauty" is said to be a specifically Romantic delusion. The unity of Appearance (sign) and Idea (meaning) is said to be a Romantic myth embodied in the topos of the "beautiful soul." (13)

Two things interest me here: one is how defensible this idea may be using Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," or "The Leech-Gatherer" as evidence. The narrator in those poems, at least, really believes in this *Schone Seele* vis-a-vis authenticity, and two, how similar this work is to de Man's on Shelley's *Mont Blanc*. There, he argues that every work of literature is a mountain, referring to nothing outside itself, extant independent the chain of influence, history, and even authorial corpus. Here, he argues that all signs, tropes, and even languages exist in that same un-referential solidarity, participating in meaning only by way of (partially) convincing fictions.

De Man's misreadings<sup>24</sup> spring naturally from the ground of perception on which he takes position. "We know," he writes, "the meaning of stone only refers to a totality of sensory appearances" and that it differs from chair, "which can only be understood by an allusion to its use" (23-4). The object, he suggests, is meaningless without that intention. But

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24 To be fair, we should call them "active mis-readings," infelicitous as that might be; it is not as though de Man is dim, but blind, or rather demonstrating blindness.

isn't that intention the very thing that marks poetry as a privileged act with a unique relationship to meaning?

Anticipating the question, de Man goes on to argue, or, I should say, goes on to misread Wimsatt's theory of meaning<sup>25</sup>, by way of answer:

If such a hypothesis, which changes the literary act into a literary object by the suppression of its intentional character is not only possible, but necessary in order to allow for a critical description, then we have not left the world in which the status of literary language is similar to that of a natural object. This assumption rests on a misunderstanding of the nature of intentionality. (25)

It does; only the misunderstanding is de Man's, not Wimsatt's. A literary act becomes a literary object not by the "suppression" of its intentional character, but by the emphasis of, or even by the fact of that character. A poem is a poem (failed or otherwise) when the poet announces it as one, in the same way that a Catholic is a Catholic when she is baptized.

de Man understands this, as is evident in the very next paragraph (his blind episodes never last for long, lest we start believing in them), but he argues that the intentionality is implicit in the structure, rather than in the author: "the structure of a chair is determined in all its components by the fact that it is destined to be sat on, but this structure in no way depends on the state of mind of the carpenter who is in the process of assembling its parts" (26).

Here, de Man is eliding the unmediated quality of (some) perception with the intentional: a conflation to which scholars of Romanticism are particularly prone. What, we could ask, of a chair with only two legs? The carpenter's putting it forth as a chair-object constitutes a separate act in the same way that Keats' publishing a fragment is an intentional act

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<sup>25</sup> As Outlined in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Kentucky UP, 1954)

suggesting it as finished and considerable object. In fragments, hypostasis is not structurally embedded, and yet, they can still be read as intentional objects/poetic entities.

Just as de Man is saying, “Frye falls into the same error as Wimsatt in reifying the literary entity into a natural object, he is himself falling into the error of defining it all as a toy, or as “an aesthetic object,” as he calls it (26). He differentiates between a gun used to shoot a rabbit as a “tool,” used toward some end, and a gun used to shoot targets as a toy, which “takes aim for its own sake and constitutes a perfectly closed and autonomous structure, reflecting back on itself and remain[ing] circumscribed in the range of its own intent” (26).

What then, we should immediately wonder, of a poem like Shelley’s “England 1819?” How closed and autonomous is the structure that relies on a specific historical referent<sup>26</sup> to make sense? de Man comes down saying, “the aesthetic entity definitely belongs in the same class as the toy,” but Shelley’s<sup>27</sup> seems to me emphatically more like a pistol put to the head of a king. What I mean to show in this brief reading is how de Man’s several arguments crumble under their own weight, but also how that disaster doesn’t render them useless. With a nod and a wink, de Man seems to know the contradictions and to embrace them in a version of Coleridge’s “rest.”

## Conclusions

To what purpose has Coleridge worked to suspend meaning, in these few poems I have discussed here? What use is this inbuilt negativity? Jean Baudrillard provides a possible

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<sup>26</sup> This concept will be further discussed in this dissertation’s chapter on “Violence and Absence.”

<sup>27</sup> My readings of Shelley are closest to those of Paul Foot, and recently, Cian Duffy, who historicize his work in order to highlight its revolutionary, rather than aesthetic zeal, and to balance Matthew Arnold’s nonsense about ineffectual angels.

answer. “At any rate,” he writes, “removing meaning brings out the essential point: namely, that the image is more important than what it speaks about--just as language is more important than what it signifies” (49). In Coleridge, this means that if he hadn’t called attention to the artifact-uality of the poem, especially in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, if he hadn’t obtruded upon his own reverie in *Recollections of Love* the narrative drive would have won out, the imaginative charge lost as the understanding taken over. Then, what we would have is a rhythmic story, or an adventure tale with rhymes. The failure of meaning exists to “bring out the essential point,” as Baudrillard has it, to make the poem into a thing-in-itself, rather than a vehicle for transmission (of a story, a moral).

In Coleridge’s own words, what he is seeking through driving these poems to failure, through repelling pure presence, short-circuiting the sublime, are

the grandest effects where the imagination was called forth, not to produce a distinct form but a strong working of the mind still producing what it still repels and again calling forth what it again negatives and the result is what the Poet wishes to impress, to substitute a grand feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image. (Foakes 311)

Or, the kind of quietness and tension-in-peace that Goethe is after when he writes,

Irresistibly moved and drawn by those former qualities, kept at a distance by these latter, we find ourselves at one and the same time in a state of utter repose and supreme agitation, and there results that wondrous stirring of the heart for which mind has no concept nor speech any name. (109)

That is, the burden’s having slipped from the sailor’s neck, he can himself slip into the silence of real rest.

## Keats and the Poetic Ruin

*May one not say that the writer's soul has mounted the chariot,  
Has taken wing with the horses and shares the danger?*

*-Longinus*

So familiar are the stories of Keats' early artistic failures, and the savagery of his first reviewers, that they hardly bear repeating<sup>28</sup>. Suffice it to say that modern critical assessment takes a rather different view of the poet's work than did his contemporaries. If anything, it may esteem the poet's work too highly, approaching it reverentially, and missing thereby some of the work's important, and even intentional failures.

In the previous chapter, we looked at Coleridge's grand aesthetic project, largely consistent throughout his career, of creating a space of animated stillness, or rest through binary tension, as a way to weave a circle of bondage around the prophetic impulse in order to prevent the fall of his work from imagination into a lower-order of understanding. In this chapter, we'll focus on a single poem from Keats, and how he uses its failures to move readers beyond the strength of his own poetic telling into the sublime.

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819) may be one of the language's great poems, but it also contains some of poetry's worst lines; the disjunction is not completely accidental. Anyone who has tried to teach the poem to undergraduates will recognize the weak link in its poetic chain. If students tend to be a bit dumbfounded as early as "foster child of silence and

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<sup>28</sup> A shortened version of this chapter has been published as "Theatricality and Imaginative Failure in Keats." in Literary and Poetic Representations of Work and Labor in Europe and Asia During the Romantic Era. Ed. Christopher Clason: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011.

slow time” (*line 2*), they perk up again by “Fair youth, beneath the trees” (*line 15*). Without fail though, whenever I introduce this poem, someone chuckles at “More happy love! more happy, happy love!” (*line 25*).

Why? There’s nothing funny about the line. There’s nothing sexual to giggle at, not even an amusing meter, as there might be in a limerick. One student wrote a parody of the whole poem; her version of this line was “More sappy prose! More crappy, sloppy words!” Even the uninitiated cannot fail to notice the difference in tone and in literary quality this line exhibits compared with the rest of the poem. The chuckle of embarrassment comes from readers’ frustrated expectations: how could someone who writes as well as Keats does in the rest of the poem be responsible for such “sloppy words”?

This line is not a mistake, I argue, it is a demonstration of the drive to failure and by way of answer to the previous question, I’d like to provide a schematic of five possible theoretical approaches to this poem’s method of failure that, together, illustrate the different shape of that drive for Keats. He is not, like Coleridge, an Icarus falling from the sky, and not quite like Wordsworth–, who with Yeats is “struck dumb by the simplicity of fire” (*Vacillation 7.4*) but represents his imagination’s failure in a mode more like that of an “aye babbling stream”. It is another case of the poet’s missing his explicitly-stated objective, and leaving the wreckage of attempt in place to showcase the struggle.

This chapter seeks to explain the role that aesthetic/mental failure plays in this poem, and how the concept of failure functions in Keats’ work generally. In the first section, I argue that Keats offers this line as an imaginative failure in order to claim for himself a documentable experience of the sublime. In the next, I show it as an instance of Friedrich Schiller’s principle of “living excess,” or “joy.” The third outlines a senselessness in this poem typical

of experiential trauma. Then, I discuss Keats' unique theatricality and the difference between his concept of an "active failure" and Wordsworth's. Finally, I offer the concept of "symptomatic poetry," culled from Slavoj Žižek's discussions of ideology as a useful way of thinking about failed symbols in Keats' work.

### Front Lines of the Sublime

Studies of the sublime vary almost as wildly as the (often conflicting) ideologies of their authors. As early as 1811, critics were decrying "the various metaphorical and transitive meanings of the term 'sublime'"<sup>29</sup>. For C. F. Volney, the sublime is the natural progression toward fantastic ruin exhibited by blasted trees and blasted governments alike; for Dugald Stewart, the sublime was a stand-in for height, or altitude. More recently, Cian Duffy has suggested a "revolutionary sublime," and Christopher Hitt has offered an "ecological sublime." But the process of sublime encounter is always described in similar terms: wherever the experiential subject ends up post-encounter, they first take the subject *out of herself*. I'd like to offer performances of the sublime encounter as an aesthetic trope by outlining, in Keats, the bathetic impulse, arguing that though a subject is moved to "sublimity by greatness," as Burke has it, for the artist, the best record of that move might be to represent the chaos, or blankness of mind left in its wake.

Usually, a picture of the sublime involves a mimetic representation of the overwhelming spectacle. Shelley opens his terrifying *Hymn to Intellectual Beauty* with "the awful shadow of some unseen Power/ floats, though unseen among us" (l. 1-2). Though the poet fails in representing the metaphysical, he tries, comparing it to a shadow, then a cloud, then a

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<sup>29</sup> Remarks of Stewart's Theory of the Sublime." Letter to the Editor of Belfast Magazine, April 1811.

shower, and abstractly as a “hue,” and a “power.” Its invisibility is heightened by Shelley’s repetition, within one sentence, of the word “unseen.”

Keats knows such an approach to be a fool’s errand. The poet will necessarily and always fail in the attempt to represent directly a concept or an experience which *by definition* is greater than the mind of man can conceive. Rather than seek after the direct representation of the spectacle--rather than face the “painful awareness” of his own limitations--Keats will sometimes admit defeat: more than that, he will *showcase* the defeat as a way of authenticating his sublime experience, bringing a souvenir back from the exotic country he’s just visited.

The trope works because the sublime is already chained to inadequacy. In [The Sublime Object of Ideology](#), Zizek writes,

sublimity gives us simultaneously pleasure and displeasure: it gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to the thing-idea, but precisely through this inadequacy, it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the thing, surpassing every possible phenomenological, empirical experience. (210)

The pleasure in being unable to make a just representation is exploitable, because the faculty breakdown is predictable. Several theorists have noted this type of difficult pleasure though they are often focused on “modern” works of art. Jean-François Lyotard argues that the writer’s job is not to create beautiful and harmonious forms, but to voice disharmony and excess. Theodor Adorno writes, “it is the scars of damage and disruption that guarantee the authenticity of the modern work of art” (163). As explained by Dee Reynolds (summarizing Kantian notions of sublimity) in “Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art,”

In the face of a spectacle which overwhelms the subject's capacity to represent it, imagination is made painfully aware of its own limitations. Imagination's serial mode of apprehension can continue to infinity, but cannot meet reason's demand for 'absolute totality': discouraged, it sinks back into itself. (9)

I suggest though, that this model works just as effectively for reading Keats, whose more performative notion of sublimity suggests it could short the circuit by tracing the limitation, and sinking of its own volition.

All of the poet's descriptive powers have failed him in this moment on the urn, but, since it is only a description of a moment, he obviously had a chance to re-write it, or to make multiple drafts. Instead, he chose to depict this too-much-ness, this moment of creative failure *as is*, which is a way of saying, with Polonius, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in't" (2.ii.206). I'm arguing that this stanza is Keats' report from the underworld, his picture of an encounter with the sublime from *inside it*. The poem continues,

Forever warm and still to be enjoyed,  
 forever panting and forever young;  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 that leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed  
 a burning forehead, and a parching tongue. (26-30)

We're a far cry from Shelley's "the mind in composition is a fading coal;" "still to be enjoyed" indeed (531). Neither is the speaker (or the reader, who are, after all, in the same sinking ship here) recalling "a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," as Wordsworth suggests "all *good* poetry" should, and is recollecting the memory in nothing like tranquility

(598). The powerful emotion is happening presently, while he is writing, in a fever. In short, the Keatsian poetic model has become the anti-Wordsworthian.

Aside from the line's poor quality compared with the rest of the composition, one also notices its repetitiveness. Thomas Wieskel, a theorist of the Romantic sublime, set up a 3-part model to explain encounters with the sublime in art; he describes phase 2: "the feeling is one of *on and on*." This is precisely the feeling I get by the fourth, the fifth occurrence of the word "happy." Wieskel continues,

[one has a feeling] of being lost. The signifiers cannot be grasped or understood, they overwhelm the possibility of meaning in a massive under-determination that melts all oppositions or distinctions into a perceptual stream, or there is a sensory overload. (32)

In this poem, anyway, Keats attempts to "overwhelm the possibility of meaning," or at least to adapt the posture of one overwhelmed with the possibility of meaning, "in a massive under-determination."

Later in the essay, Wieskel explains, "repetition of any excess of 'substance' in the signifier is a technique, familiar in architecture, music and poetry, for inducing a sense of on and on" (50). How else are we to explain this fourth stanza, which repeats both a pattern of rhythm and a word over and over, on and on?

### **Ode: to Joy!**

The principle of generous excess, of an overwhelming deluge, is not particular to Keats. He might, in this passage, fit Friedrich Schiller's description, from the *Letters Upon on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, of a happy animal. "An animal" writes Schiller, "might

be said to be at play, when the stimulus is sheer plentitude of vitality, when superabundance of life is its own incentive to action” (207).

One does sense super-vitality here. It is bad poetry, but it is not *just* bad poetry: it is senseless, ecstatic babbling. Would Schiller say that Keats is just “playing” in this passage, then? I don’t think so. The “play” of nature exists to “offer us a prelude of the Illimitable,” for Schiller, which means, that the excess/waste is not wasted at all.

Neither is the fact that the lines are incomprehensible (or *reprehensible*, depending on the strength of the reader’s stomach) any reason to discard them, for Schiller. After all,

the tree puts forth innumerable buds, which perish without ever unfolding, and sends out far more roots, branches, and leaves in search of nourishment than are ever used for the sustaining of itself or its species. (207)

The poet has a right to that same senseless profusion because he is a “living thing.” Schiller claims that the excess need not even be comprehended, in order to be excusable, since “such portion of its prodigal profusion as it returns, unused and unenjoyed, to the elements, is the overplus which living things are entitled to squander in a movement of carefree joy” (207).

“Joy” seems to me the right word to describe this theatrical blank, this exuberance.

Adam Potkay has just written a study called [The Story of Joy from the Bible to Late Romanticism](#), where he argues that “joy is always, to a certain degree, an aftertaste of pre-linguistic totality, before space or time or the categories of thought” (17). I think the bathetic impulse here is a recourse to Potkay’s “pre-linguistic totality.” Keats is not an ecstatic here. Potkay writes,

although [ecstasy] may be understood as joy at its outer limit, ecstasy nonetheless differs from joy in consisting not of fullness but rather of absence, and annihilation of embodied agency and surrender to the not-I. (20)

Though they are both forms of failure, his babbling puts him in a different experiential category than a stunned silence would. Potkay calls the former “joy,” and the latter “ecstasy.”

Rather, he is an actor. Fredrick Burwick writes, in Poetic Madness and the Romantic Imagination,

the history of drama has a long and well-established tradition of exhibiting the excess of grief, remorse, or rage as passion transformed into madness. But madness as a trope of poetic creativity allows for a different strategy than one might witness in the raging Medea or the sleepwalking fits of Lady Macbeth.

The poet steps forth on the stage to describe or even enact his visions. (10)

Keats begins in the former, and ends in the latter. Importantly though, the pull of vision is so strong that he can't speak from it. His is a way of saying, with Bottom Weaver in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,

I have had a most rare  
vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to  
say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go  
about to expound this dream. Methought I was--there  
is no man can tell what. Methought I was,--and  
methought I had,--but man is but a patched fool, if  
he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye  
of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not

seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue  
 to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream  
 was. (IV.i.204-214)

His metaphors mix up, and stack, and fall down as he attempts description.

As Thomas Vogler terms it, in Preludes to Vision, Keats' "attempt to move from lyric to epic was an attempt to *sustain and expand* the intense *happiness* experienced in the moment of inspired vision" [italics mine] (117). Apt words, those.

Keats even explained the intentionality on evidence here in a letter to John Taylor. "I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess," he writes, "and not by singularity." Certainly, this line is an excess--Christopher Ricks calls it the "happy, happy, happiness sequence"--but if Keats keeps the first half of his outline to Taylor by "surprising" readers with "excess," he violates the rest of his prescription, which continues: "it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance." The dumb stuttering strikes few readers, I imagine, as a wording of their "own highest thoughts." Moreover, the poem is made of sheer presence that borders on drama: nothing like a Wordsworthian (or, as here, a theorhetico-Keatsian) "remembrance."

### **Trauma/Ward**

Though the poem repeats the word "happy" over and over, the stanza ends with "a burning forehead and a parching tongue," which belong to the (familiar for Keats) world of medical jargon (*line* 30). This dumb repetition may be like the joy of an exuberant child, but it may be more like the bleating of a frightened sheep (or the urn's sacrificial heifer). That is, the failed attempt at representation may be representative of the "non-integrated surplus of

senseless traumatism,” which, according to Slavoj Žižek “confers on the law its unconditional authority” (SoI 43). “Non-integrated” because these lines stick out--they are different tonally--an interruption of the poetic music preceding and to follow. “Surplus” because they are not just different, they are different in a way that represents excess--an overdetermination. “Senseless” because they are plus-sensual-- put the poet beyond if not thought, at least, language, in a way that suggests experiential trauma.

Aside from this excess/repetition, what are the markers of trauma as Keats paints them here? Since it is common knowledge that Keats was a trained surgeon, I won’t belabor the point, except to note how curious are his descriptions of the effects of sublimity *on the body* in this poem. He begins the stanza immediately following, “forever warm,” as though alive and sweating, and he continues the description, “forever panting,” as though one has just run a race and is breathing hard; “All breathing human passion...that leaves a heart high:” increased breath rate increases heart rate to “high,” and leaves one finally with “a burning forehead, and a parching tongue,” as though dehydrated and spent. Keats would come to know too well about burning foreheads before his short time was up, but for now, he is projecting. He is describing not simply “joy” or “rapture,” but an actual physical set of sensations—we might call them symptoms—with which the encounterer of the sublime is afflicted. But the poet’s body and breath are not only passively affected in this encounter; they are manipulated as agents of incantation.

The exhalations in this poem are interesting, both because of their manipulation of breath and because, for a theoretic of failure, of their graphic representations as zeroes. In the urn, we see “Ah Happy, happy boughs,” but also, “O mysterious priest,” and “O Attic Shape” (*lines* 21,33,41). Sometimes, of course, an “O” can be a device to get the poem’s me-

ter back on track; at others it can be a way of re-directing the address, as here where, while signaling the apostrophe, the speech to Urn (General) has been re-directed to Urn-Figure-Priest (Specific) instead, but it is importantly like a breath.

Of course, many Romantic poets do this. Wordsworth has “Oh/ the difference to me,” (*She dwelt among the untrodden ways* 11-12) which reads more like a sigh, and Coleridge, “But O!, (*Kubla Kahn* 11-12) which is just an exclamation, but in Keats, we readers already have a sense that our breath is being manipulated, from looking at the end of the first stanza:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (8-10)

Since “wild ecstasy” is exactly the thing he wants to convey, he’s chosen short, tight sentences in succession, which are significantly shorter, at 3.2 words per sentence compared with the very next sentence, which, as punctuated, goes on for the entire length of the stanza: 45 words. They race along like a racing heartbeat to suggest the ecstasy present and to come both for the character/poet as he beholds the urn and now, for we readers aloud of the poem, as we turn it in our own hands.

### **Active Failures**

This line, which may be a crack in the Urn, is not a mis-step; it is a failure, and, let me suggest the term “active failures” in Zizek’s sense, because the dive is theatrical. There’s no reason Keats *couldn’t* sustain the lyrical/introspective tone and high-mindedness of the rest of the poem; so why didn’t he?

His failure may provide documentable experience of the sublime, and may represent other-worldly joy, or experiential trauma, but *to make a show of his failure* switches the subject/object roles in the encounter as the background rises to the fore, overwhelming it. It takes readers through the layers of interpretive possibility as the poem's task deepens from 1) poet's confrontation of urn, to 2) attempt at recreation of life/scene depicted on urn, and then to 3) poet's inability to represent grandeur of urn/experience. In what thereby becomes a discourse on imaginative limits, (rather than a trip to the museum) Keats discusses the form's ability to "tease us out of thought," connecting that lack of thought with dumbness, and ultimately to a breathlessness he *enacts* in these passages.

The theatricality is multi-faceted here: as the poet demonstrates the failure of the poetic faculty in the face of the sublime encounter --making a spectacle of the climb, failure, and recovery-- he also hopes to induce a similar reaction in his readers, attempting to move us out of breath and to the same pitch of delirium he has exhibited, to make his private imaginative environment a public one wherein his theatrical swoon is contagious.

Wordsworth's work essentially says, "I had a vision; where has that vision gone? If I could only remember it, and get close again, I'd be great." Shelley argues that the act of writing necessarily takes place post-vision, that "the mind in composition is as a fading coal." Keats' approach is fundamentally different, tending more toward the spectacle, the exhibitionist. It says essentially, "my vision too is beyond the power of my telling it, but through this poem, I re-create (not remember) that vision in such a way that you can have it, too." In this way, the poem becomes something closer to a script, intended to be performed later by the reader. Keats has forced an imaginative self-identification, has found a way to do better than to report the vision: having remembered the spell just right, he can now *induce* it.

If something strikes us as disingenuous in these “oh’s and ah’s” and quickened breathing, it is due to our built-in senses of the ironic, and it is the same thing that strikes Shakespeare’s Juliet:

Nurse: Jesu! what haste? can you not stay awhile?

Do you not see that I am out of breath?

Juliet: How art thou out of breath when thou hast breath

to say to me that thou art out of breath? (*RJ* II.v.30-33)

Juliet is asking a preternaturally complicated and important question, and if we readers hadn’t thought to ask it of Keats, it is only because his spell is working too well.

What Juliet levels here is the sincerity charge: she knows that the nurse is playing at being breathless for some effect, and, preferring her experiences less full of artifice (and her news quick) she says something like “oh come off it, I know you’re only doing that to get a rise out of me.” This is the charge a reader levels, consciously or otherwise, when she begins to feel tricked. We know enough about the writing process to realize that the poem could not have properly been written *during* the moment of vision any more than a dream can be recorded while dreaming. Actually to write out the characters “o” “h,” as though swooning at the thought of one’s own story feels manipulative to our sensibilities—essayist Alan Jacobs refers to this response as the need to assure ourselves that we are not “imaginative adolescents: the fear of being caught believing what others have ceased believing—”—and poets have tried various ways to excuse themselves from it (42).

Breathlessness, of course, leads to thoughtlessness. Wordsworth describes his own biological responses to a moment of sublimity in *Tintern Abbey*: “even the motion of our human blood/ Almost suspended, we are laid asleep in body, and become a living soul...and all its

dizzy raptures. (l. 44-47) People become dizzy when they're not getting enough oxygen to their brains. For Wordsworth, the sublime encounter can only be seen from a distance, whether it is a distance of time, or of memory. He can say, "I remember it was almost like my blood was frozen," but only from the safe vantage of having regular, flowing blood again; in *The Prelude* he describes the same sort of feeling, again from a vantage:

That spectacle, for many days my brain  
 Worked with dim and undetermined sense  
 Of unknown modes of being; o'er my thoughts  
 There hung a darkness—call it solitude,  
 Or blank desertion (l. 391-395)

He couldn't write while dizzy in rapture, and if he could, he knows there'd be no quality in a composition made by a brain of "dim and undetermined sense."

Wordsworth describes such feelings as one's having been overpowered, and his mind erased. Now let's remember that Keats had just been telling us about encounters with sublimity, and how breath is affected therein: how blood is struggling to move around the body, and the heart to keep up, causing dehydration and a lack of oxygen to the brain. Here's Wordsworth again: "In such strength/ Of usurpation, in such visitings/ Of awful promise, *when the light of sense goes out in flashes*" (Prelude 6.533-536). As we have seen, Wordsworth claims that his mind essentially doesn't work during sublime encounter, and we would do well to consider that he may be telling the truth; he may actually be hyper-ventilating-. The poet has become, in any case, essentially thoughtless.

But Keats has also been *mastered* in a way that asks him to expand. The urn is, like the past, like the Greek language, a world he can't enter, which sets up a longing; at the same time, it is overwhelming sensually.

Apparently, we are meant to think that this brain-freeze is pleasurable. In his essay, *On Picturesque Travel*, William Gilpin describes a similar effect, though regarding natural, rather than artistic encounters.

But it is not from this scientific employment that we derive our chief pleasure. We are most delighted when some grand scheme, perhaps of correct composition rising before the eye, strikes us beyond the power of thought—when mental operation is suspended. In this enthusiastic pause of intellect, this delirium of soul. (47)

Gilpin's "pause of intellect," and Wordsworth's "light of sense" going out in flashes are versions of the same theoretical idea that Keats is enacting here. Speaking to the urn, the poet says "Thou silent form doth tease us out of thought/ As doth eternity, Cold Pastoral!" (44-45).

I've long puzzled over this strange declarative accusation, but its meaning grows clearer in this bodily-affective context. When Keats cries out "Cold Pastoral," I think he is referring to a medical technique, popular in the early 19th century, meant specifically to bring down fever called "Cold Affusion"<sup>30</sup>. The "Pastoral" (the story on the urn) is credited then with cooling him off, waking him up from the fever dream he'd been stuck in, which was itself caused by his contemplation of it. It is both symptom and salve, which is a version of "all ye know...and all ye need to know" (50).

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<sup>30</sup> More information of the process can be found in Johnson, Jeffrey C. *Anatomies of the Soul and the Self, From Galen to Romanticism*. Diss. University of Washington, 2012.

He knows two things capable of teasing a person out of thought, making him effectively brain-dead: the urn's form, and the notion of eternity, and he holds both of those things up for our contemplation here. Why? First, he has us watch with him as he turns the urn over and over in his hands, telling us its story, detailing its decoration with an archivists' detail, though a poet's imagination. By this point, "thou silent form" (the urn itself) has become the object of our readerly contemplation as well. The other half of the simile is "as doth eternity," which is apt, considering that one of the poem's main projects is to contemplate the effects of time on eternal objects. So he intentionally puts his and our minds to the necessarily impossible task of comprehending eternity in lines like "when old age shall this generation waste, thou shalt remain;" to what end? He is trying to cast over us the same spell that was cast over him.

Describing the self-aware moment in an artwork in [Of the Sublime: Presence in Question](#), French theorist Jean-Luc Nancy writes,

from the moment when representation comes to know itself to be such and comes to present itself as such (that is, also to criticize, distance, deconstruct, or destroy itself) a moment which constitutes the history of modern art and thought, it takes up at unknown cost a question, at once traditional and unheard of-- of presentation. (viii)

Nancy is right to call the question "traditional;" he's even right to reference modern art, if by "modern" he means a certain thing. This is the poet making a public spectacle of his private imaginative experience.

Keats is doing the opposite of Wordsworth here, who describes events as necessarily past tense. He is writing a musical score for a later performance which is also a record of

this, the artifact/poem's first performance. This theatricality creates a third man, in the Derridian- sense, because it assumes a cast featuring 1) the poet/character, entranced by the urn, 2) the reader, entranced by the poem and 3) the poet, aware of the reader and the poem being made, who anticipates its reception and reacts preemptively to it.

The third man does two things principally: he harrows and explains the despicable stanza as an *active failure* by announcing it as a demonstration of unmediated perception. Keats has been contemplating just such a move here in the poem's narrative, in his attempt to move himself and audience "out of thought." He takes it one step further. Through his public demonstration, Keats acts out his own giving up of self-consciousness, and attempts to enact a similar experience in his readers. The poet has lost control of the poem, it appears; the Sun-god is no longer driving the chariot. We know this because any poet in his right mind would never pen lines like "More Happy love! More Happy, Happy Love!" But that's the point; he isn't in his right mind at all; he's lost in the world of the urn.

My claim is that Keats not only does this poetic posturing and theatrical swoon for our benefit, and as an incantation towards our own swoon, but that, recognizing the device of the drive to failure, calls attention to his own device in the manner following. Michel Deguy describes the sublime as "the deluge," and writes, "the sublime simulates the origin in reproducing it" (11). We can see why this approach would have been attractive for Keats. He is trying to do exactly that: simulate the origin of his brush with the sublime in reproducing it. Keats, in acting this way, claims for himself a documentable experience of eternity, which will remain in midst of other woe even than his own.

Deguy continues, "the re-ascension to the postulated sameness can only be accomplished in the re: (reproduction, repetition) in the knowledge of the difference and the aware-

ness of the mechanisms (ruses, turns of phrase and pen: technique) for feigning forgetfulness of difference and its differentiations” (11). In the *Ode*, Keats does all these things: 1) feigns forgetfulness, and 2) calls attention to his mechanisms 3) through repetition in order to 4) reproduce his experience. His role changes mid-step from the temple priest interpreting the vision to that of Cassandra herself, having it, to (perhaps once more) the Delphic mist, invoking it.

Dee Reynolds writes about similar representations of absence, or active failures, and grounds them, as I have, in the Kantian sublime.

What is peculiar to the experience of the sublime, however is that this very lack of presentation itself functions as a ‘negative presentation’ of what lies beyond the power of imagination to present. The mind feels itself raised by the awareness of the unrepresentable produced by the recognition of its own powerlessness. In this way, the imagination undergoes an extension of itself. Its *telos* is the reflexive consciousness of the subject, which recognizes its own failure thereby producing a split consciousness where the breakdown of imagination itself can be objectified. (10)

This objectification of imaginative failure is what Keats demonstrates here. “Who are these coming to the sacrifice?” the poem asks. The drive to failure offers an answer, suggesting that it’s the *imagination itself* tied to the pyre.

### **Radical Impossibility**

If it is ultimately a victory, the poem is first a failure, and this wreckage is an instance of Reynolds’ “negative presentation.” At this point, Žižek becomes useful because he con-

nects ideologies with failure, and with invisibility: two tropes that are essential for my discussion of the drive to failure. He acknowledges that failures can produce success--can be useful to it, claiming for example that “we can only save democracy by taking into account its own radical impossibility” (xxix). The notion of negative presentation takes many of the claims Zizek makes about ideology or statehood as useful for a discussion about Romantic poetry because this is the same way poets manage (sometimes) to save certain poems.

Zizek reads Hegelian dialectics not as a method for overcoming antagonisms but, “as a systematic notation of the failure of all such attempts.” My thesis is that certain poems know this method more deeply, because they perform the failure, rather than note it. The goal: “Absolute knowledge itself is nothing but a name for the acknowledgment of a certain radical loss” (xxx).

In an essay called “The Traumatic Kernel,” Zizek defines the notion of the sublime with which I’m concerned, though delivered in terms appropriate to a discussion of statehood: “the indestructible and immutable body which persists beyond the corruption of the body physical--this other body of money is like the corpse of a Sadeian victim which endures all torments and survives with its beauty immaculate” (12). The preservation of this kernel is the goal of the performance of failure, which has enacted the torment and showcased the endurance.

He probably picks this up from Lacan, though Lacan is talking about development of infant (sexual) identity, and Zizek is talking about the efficacy of philosophical systems, and I of the genesis of an artwork, but the phrase does the work of addressing all three concerns: “there is the theater in which your truth was performed before you took cognizance of it” (14). The phrasing is apt too, all three are a theater (a self-conscious, and artfully-

manipulated spectacle) wherein truth performs. If we can think of consciousness as a kind of theater space, the unconscious becomes a useful tool for artists.

Zizek, overstating, writes “ideological is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being, but this being itself insofar as it is supported by ‘false consciousness’” (5). This is true of the ideological state apparatus, but not of “ideology” proper, which is a way of knowing and not a fact of existence. I make this distinction because here I depart from Zizek. This fact takes him to a definition of the symptomatic subject, claiming, “the subject can enjoy his symptom only insofar as its logic escapes him. The measure of the success of its interpretation is precisely its dissolution” (16). This may be true of ideology--Zizek will later claim that “all ideologies are invisible”-- but it is not true of artwork, unless, interestingly, the artist and the viewer constitute a single subject with a split consciousness, half of which, though playing the role of the subconscious (the artist) is aware of the symptom’s logical dimensions, and half of which (the viewer/reader) enjoys it because he is not, though that is reading more deeply into the implications of this phrase than Zizek seems to intend.

Rather, I’d like to argue, the subject can enjoy his symptom in full complicity with it. Its visibility is no measure of its efficacy, at least as far as poetry is concerned. Part of the drive to failure is an acknowledgement (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, always visible under scrutiny) of the work’s logical dimensions. In fact, the machine functions because it discourses on those very limits. The point is not to launch the poem simply up, but to find the point at which the poem breaks down (syntactically, logically, imagistically) and to proceed, “consumed with that which it was nourished by,” as Shakespeare’s Sonnet 73 has it (*l.* 12).

I suggested earlier that Keats describes, in this poem, in this moment, a set of symptoms with which the imagination is (possibly) affected during the sublime encounter. Žižek uses the same term for potential failures--though, again, he means them politically--claiming that “Marx ‘invented the symptom’ by means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain ‘pathological’ imbalance which belies the universalism of the “bourgeois rights and duties” (16). If we substitute “poem” or “aesthetic” for “bourgeois rights and duties,” we will have a pretty compact parsing of what an intentional “failure” can do, and can be doing in a work of art. “This imbalance,” continues Žižek,

far from announcing the imperfect realization of these universal principles [...] functions as their constitutive moment. The symptom is, strictly speaking, a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation, a species subverting its own genus. (16)

I want to make clear that “the symptom” is not a mistake. I’m not arguing that Keats should have written a better line in the Ode, and that had he done that, the poem would be more successful. The symptom, according to Žižek, is a vital, though failed element in [the work’s] success. The “criticism of ideology,” he writes, “consists in detecting a point of breakdown *heterogenous* to a given ideological field and at the same time *necessary* for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form” (16).

The danger, we might say, is that a poetic system threatens to shift from totalizing (many poetics are) to totalitarian, if it does not somehow include, within its program, its own exception. In a poetic body total, such an exception could be the inclusion of a fragment, which concept is discussed in greater detail in another chapter, herein.

I think the method works within a poem as well. “This procedure”--for our purposes, the procedure is the drive to failure--“thus implies a certain logic of exception: every ideological Universal--for example, equality --is ‘false’ in so far as it necessarily includes a specific case which breaks its unity, lays open its falsity” (16).

This laying open of falsehood bucks the totalizing/blinding function in these poems. Because they are seen (not, any longer, invisible) they cannot be ideologies. Perhaps these poems are more like capital systems. Writes Zizek, “this is exactly how capitalism differs... this contradiction, the discord forces, relations is contained in the very concept (53). The attempt to capture discordant forces in the very concept of (an artwork’s/a government’s) genesis shows an awareness of potential future (interpretive/ideological) difficulty that registers the subject in either case as self-aware, perhaps as an artist who can deploy symbols, even if the symbol is the system’s own failure.

This ability is at the center of what I’m calling “symptomatic poetry.” “The symptom arises,” Zizek argues (he is talking here about the wreck of *The Titanic*),

where the world failed, where the circuit of the symbolic communication was broken: it is a kind of prolongation of the communication by other means; the failed, repressed word articulates itself in a coded, cyphered form. (79)

He continues, “the implication of this is that the symptom can not only be interpreted,” which is the work of the present study, “but is already formed with an eye to its interpretation” (79). If Zizek is right, then we ought to read in the Ode a fourth interpretive layer, which is the deployment of a larger conceptual framework, containing the failure of the earlier expressive attempt (and the subject’s annihilation) as part of its method, like a rocket, half of which is destroyed in the launch so that the capsule might be propelled beyond its in-built range.

## Other Failures

We should remember that the line we've been discussing in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is not an anomaly; Keats has failed fantastically before, and as here, left the record of his defeat--sometimes even showcasing it--for the poem's good.

In *Sleep and Poetry*, for example, Keats promises the reader an unequivocal definition of "The end and aim of Poesy," which he acknowledges is a "vast idea," but one which, the speaker reassures us is

clear

As anything most true; as that the year  
Is made of the four seasons—manifest  
As a large cross, some old cathedral's crest,  
Lifted to the white clouds. (293-297)

However, after several reassurances to the reader that the speaker would consider himself "the essence of deformity," and "A coward, did my very eye-lids wink/At speaking out what I have dared to think" (298-299), he falls prostrate on "his bended knees" (310) crying that "the visions all are fled" (155). Eventually, he admits that the task of defining the aim of poetry is "impossible!/Impossible!" (311-312). His project has failed.

Naturally, he wonders why the failure of vision has occurred, and whether it is particular to himself:

Is there so small a range  
In the present strength of manhood, that the high  
Imagination cannot freely fly

As she was wont of old? (*l.* 162-166)

The poet should be here the very essence of despair: the vision has fled and his promises are bankrupt.

But the poet doesn't despair at this failure. "Yet," he writes, "I rejoice" (*l.* 248). We should not overlook the strangeness of this moment. It might be the prime example of what Christopher Ricks called "unembarrassed poetry." "Keats," he writes,

was especially sensitive to anything which threatened of discredited identity (his and others), and he was especially audacious in believing that the healthy strength of a sense of identity depends paradoxically upon the risk and openness and not upon self-protection; depends upon risking the absence of identity rather than upon guarding the circumstances of one's identity. (25)

It is not as though the poet doesn't have a conscience, or an ego-; he anticipates the backlash, asking, "will not some say that I presumptuously/ have spoken?-"

Keats has a clear picture of the depth of his failure and what his response should be to it.

that from hastening disgrace  
 'Twere better far to hide my foolish face?  
 That whining boyhood should with reverence bow  
 Ere the dread thunderbolt could reach? (*l.* 270-274)

Ultimately, (of course) he refuses shame, calling it "a miserable bane," and even going so far as to declare, "If I do hide myself, it sure shall be/ In the very fane, the light of Poesy" (275-276).

Keats is not always a braggart about his failures, though even when he is melancholic in response to them, they are still showcased in the poetry. Martin Aske suggests that the representation of the dying Saturn in *Hyperion* “might be interpreted as a grotesque image of...the writer of *Hyperion*, unable to write, bereft of inspiration, his imagination already defeated and deadened” (90).

As with a sacrifice, the imagination stagnates, or decomposes on the altar just like the Saturnine-mythic body. But Zizek admits that this sort of failure can lead to real power:

Here is the paradox proper...capitalism is capable of transforming its limit; its very impotence is the source of its power.. the more it putrefies, the more its immanent contradiction is aggravated, the more it must revolutionize itself to survive. (53)

## Conclusions

The poet Ben Lerner writes what might function as a kind of expose on this sort of poetic difficulty. Though he is writing, like Reynolds and Lyotard before him, about an aesthetics of modern painting, the terms he uses in *Didactic Elegy*, can be usefully applied to our discussion here. He writes,

It is easy to apply a continuous black mark to the surface of a primed canvas.

It is difficult to perceive the marks without assigning them value.

The critic argues that this difficulty itself is the subject of the drawing.

Perhaps, but to speak here of a subject is to risk affirming

intention where there is none.

...

An artwork aware of this struggle is charged with negativity.

(l. 13-17, 20)

This is how the drive to failure functions. Keats has enacted a performance of failure wherein the poetic limit, or “the difficulty itself,” is the subject of the work. “Aware of [its own] struggle;” according to Lerner, it is now “charged with negativity.” This negative charge, based on self-awareness, and achieved through dizziness and repetition becomes the very picture of the sublime, for J. Hillis Miller, who writes that it is a “mechanical senselessness in language” that points to “mortal danger” (246). The reader, Miller explains, is “dizzied by the repetitions,” and “through this dizziness the reader reaches in the emptying out of meaning a glimpse of the materiality of the letter” (247). The glimpse is into the “madness of words” (249).

“And yet,” continues Lerner who would agree on this point with Žižek, “naming negativity destroys it” (21). At the risk of violating Lerner’s artistic/moral system, this is precisely what I’m trying to do in this reading: to name the negativity that charges particular artworks when they are aware of their own evaluative difficulty, when they are toys that Drosselmeyer has failed to bring to life, but which come to life on their own after he has gone home.

One way to charge a negativity is to violate an otherwise coherent artistic system; in Lerner’s painting,

Just as the violation of a line amplifies the whiteness of the field,

so a poem can seek out a figure of its own impossibility.

*Hyperion* then does not suggest that epics are no longer possible; it does not suggest a peasant revolt and the overturning of bourgeois structures by failing to perform to those standards

(of completion, for example). Rather, by failing to perform to those standards, it shores up their relevance and even suggests their permanence in the way that a man might demonstrate the steadfastness of a brick wall by breaking his fist against it.

The failure to perform to standards is, of course, a usual occurrence for the Romantic artist, as is the exultation of that failure. Mario Praz argues,

the Romantic exalts the artist who does not give a material form to his dreams--the poet ecstatic in front of a forever blank page, the musician who listens to the prodigious concerts of his soul without attempting to translate them into notes. It is romantic to consider concrete expression as a decadence, a contamination. How many times has the magic of the ineffable been celebrated, from Keats, with his 'Heard melodies are sweet but those unheard are sweeter' to Maeterlinck, with his theory that silence is more musical than sound. (14-15)

But Praz' estimation seems to me a passive failure. "A forever blank page," would be just that. The question is how to distinguish between, to quote Stevens again, the "nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is." To create an absent center, or a poetic ruin, is not to sit still, and it is not, as Praz claims, to consider every expression a decadence. Rather, it is to consider direct, complete, or perfect representations a fiction at best, and a form of totalitarianism at worst.

Transcendence is, for these poets, a fact of reality, and the symbol--even the failed symbol--the way towards it. Shelley argues in the *Defense of Poetry*,

Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar; it reproduces all that it represents, and

the impersonations clothed in its Elysian light stand thenceforward in the minds of those who have once contemplated them, as memorials of that gentle and exalted content which extends itself over all thoughts and actions with which it coexists. (517)

But it is not as though after poetry has lifted the veil, one can finally see clearly and objectively, because there is an unknowability at the center of things which cannot be represented, or which can only be represented as a negativity. “Veil after veil may be undrawn,” Shelley writes, “and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed.” Far from the symbol’s distracting, it is only through the symbolic that one can approach the real of our otherwise veiled experience.

The thing which must not be spoken of is what Žižek calls the “unsymbolizable element at the center of a symbolic order striving for balance.” Pierre Machery also uses ideological terms to describe the swerve around that unsymbolizable element: “like a planet revolving around an absent sun, an ideology is made of what it does not mention; it exists because there are things which must not be spoken of” (132). So, in perfect keeping with orthodox readings of Romantic rebellion, the drive to failure not only erects an alternative system of poetics as a response to the generation previous, but questions within that system the notion of systems.

Lerner writes, as I have shown earlier in this chapter, that one way to charge symbols with negativity, rather than having them simply flop, is to use repetition:

But as it is repeated, the power of an image diminishes,  
producing anxiety and symbolic reinvestment.

The image may then be assigned value where there is none.

(4.10-13)

Surely the “happy, happy happiness sequence” is an instance of diminished power, and surely it is anxiety-producing, but what values do we assign to Keats’ “none?” Lerner’s poem continues, predicting the existence of a “negative lyric,”

If and when the negative lyric exists, it will be repetitious.

It will be designed to collapse in advance, producing an image

that transmits the impossibility of transmission. This familiar gesture,

like a bold black stroke against a white field,

will emphasize flatness, which is a failure of emphasis.

We might term Keats’ poetic ruin a “negative lyric” (that anachronistically, might someday exist) in Lerner’s sense, or a “swerve” in Machery’s, or an “active failure” in mine, but they all arrive at the same vanishing point.

For Žižek, all symbols are failures because they arrive too late, because “every attempt at symbolization-totalization comes afterwards: [they are] an attempt to suture an original cleft--an attempt which is, in the last resort, by definition doomed to failure” (46; xxix).

I want to suggest not the failure *of* symbols in representing the Real, but failure *as* symbol: an empty place at the center of things which is caused by the unrepresentable, or by the resistance to symbolization on the parts of certain Realistic elements, which means ultimately that there are no subjects unsuitable for poetry, and no limit it can’t transcend, because like the decaying corpse of a mother salmon whose body nourishes the soil where she has just laid her eggs, even its failure/death is useful. It is still the purview of poetry to represent the unrepresentable, if only as an un-representability; if only to be a “mute attestation” as in Keats, “bearing witness to a disgusting enjoyment” (Žižek 82).



## Violence and Absence

If I could tell you, I would let you know..."  
-W.H.Auden *If I Could Tell You*

In the last chapter, we discussed the Keatsian drive to failure as a theatrical dumb-show manifest in the bathetic impulse meant to invoke the unrepresentable (sublime) at the center of the Real<sup>31</sup>. In the present chapter, we will look at Wordsworth's recourse to the drive to failure, manifest for him not as excess as in Keats, but as representational absence in response to economic, mythic, or physical violence.

Longtime readers of Wordsworth are somewhat used to disappointment. First, he appears to be the great poet of the revolution, "a lone star, whose light did shine/ On some frail bark in winter's midnight roar," weaving "songs consecrate to truth and liberty" as Shelley has it in *To Wordsworth* who fails in that capacity, eventually joining the government he'd railed against, prompting the younger poet to label him a "deserter," and to count him, though still very much living, among the dead (*l.* 7-8;11).

Then, he spends his career hyping a long poem, his masterwork, and manages to produce only a very promising prelude. "We know," writes Thomas Vogler, "however painful it is to admit, that *The Excursion* does not fulfill the anticipations of the preparatory poem, either in quality or in the nature of vision" (17).

There are moments within certain poems that cause disappointment too. "Wordsworth skirted and sometimes crossed the boundry of the ineffective," writes McFarland, "we cringe

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<sup>31</sup> A slightly altered version of this chapter has been published as "Violence and Absence: Wordsworth Struck Dumb by the Simplicity of Innocence," in *RaVoN*. 2012.

at the ‘six years Darling of pygmy size’ and the rhyme ‘hither and thither’” (61). And so we do.

And then there is all this business about the abbey. It’s true that what one notices upon visiting the ruins of Tintern Abbey is what isn’t there. The lack of a roof, windows, and internal divisions opens up the cathedral to the sky; it feels like a frame without a picture. It feels like one is standing out in the open, though s/he is circumscribed by the ring of the walls. It feels like what structure survives exists only to emphasize the absence.

The absence in this case has a violent past. Tintern Abbey was surrendered to the King’s Visitors on 3 September 1536, who proceeded to take everything that could be carried and burn everything that could not. Thereafter, it became a place for England’s poor to gather and plan political action, or to stay warm. And when William Wordsworth visits, he mentions none of this. He looks away. One doesn’t have to *mention* the political implications of a site in order to suggest them; even to ignore them is to say something, since the reporter has obviously avoided them consciously.

Or is it so obvious? Much has been made of Wordsworth’s supposed evasion of Tintern Abbey’s history in studies of Romanticism recently. Jerome McGann writes as a new historian about the poem in [The Romantic Ideology](#):

In the course of the poem not a word is said about the French Revolution, or about the impoverished and dislocated country poor. ... [Tintern Abbey’s] method is to replace an image and landscape of contradiction with one dominated by “the power/Of harmony. (85-86)

James Chandler suggests that what’s strange about Wordsworth’s failure to mention the Abbey’s history is that 1793 “marks the center of Wordsworth’s revolutionary phase” and yet

“the poem makes no mention of political affairs” (p. 9). Marjorie Levinson asks the question directly, without posing an answer: “why would a writer call attention to a famous ruin and then studiously ignore it” (15)?

They have been answered severally, by Alan Rawes in “Romantic Form and New Historicism,” which recounts the academic discussion hereon, and by Kim Sung-Joong who relates Levinson’s anecdote about how obvious is the problem of Wordsworth’s practical avoidance of history in *Tintern Abbey*, and offers an answer: her undergraduate students wondered why “in a poem commonly known as *Tintern Abbey* and, by its title, very concretely situated with respect to time and place of composition, there is no mention of an abbey.” She answers them,

While Levinson turns her doubt to the poet’s integrity, my response to the students would be that if *Lines Written At a Small Distance From My House* is called by *My House* for convenience’s sake, they should not expect that the poem should be about a house because it is actually about nature. This is also the case with *Lines Written A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*. (470)

We should also note that Wordsworth *does* mention the rural poor surrounding the abbey, by introducing “vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods” (l. 21). In addition to all this, the poem is about *memory*...of course we are meant to recall the ruins of the abbey, and the whole history of that area. It’s not as though the poem is purely imagistic, or narrative. It discourses on memory and sets that discourse in a place pregnant with them.

But then, Wordsworth has a habit of not mentioning the things we readers would sometimes like him to have done. He was in Orleans, France on 21 September 1792 when Henri Gregoire proposed the abolition of the monarchy to the National Convention, and was pre-

sent during what would become known as the “September Massacres,” yet his only significant poem of the period is *Evening Walk*, describing his explorations of the banks of the Loire (Barker 75). His biographer, Juliet Barker, writes “French historians are not alone in bemoaning William’s infuriating failure to record life in Orleans at such a momentous time, to which one might add the equally maddening silence on Annette” (p. 75).

Wordsworth continues the pattern of evasion throughout his career: from his missing the summit of the Alps, to a later poem, discussed at length in this chapter, wherein the poet describes a druidic stone-circle without mentioning the druids.

So why does he displace its representation? I think his inability to look at certain types of images comes through a strange patron, whose practice of not looking in order to heighten representational violence holds all the way to Hitchcock and beyond.

Ovid had to be careful anyway. Toeing (unsuccessfully it turned out) the line between pleasing his patron and writing the histories of the holiest of gods, he writes a book full of rapes and murder, but knows, if only as a poet, that there are some scenes best left undescribed, whose horror would be heightened by a lack of direct gaze.

This chapter is concerned with representational absence in response to violence, beginning with Ovid’s sublimated descriptions of sexual transgression, continuing to Wordsworth’s appropriation of Ovidian myth-structures, especially in *Alice Fell* and the Lucy poems, and closing with Wordsworth’s continued representation of absent centers in both personal anecdotes and later poems like *Long Meg and Her Daughters*.

## **Apollo’s Open Arms**

In The Metamorphoses, readers are introduced Apollo through the story of his conquest of Daphne, wherein the young god falls in love, and in short order, pursues the shepherdess.

So ran the god and girl, one swift in hope,  
The other in terror, but he ran more swiftly,  
Borne on wings of love, gave her no rest. (*l. 1.537-539*)

Soon, she is exhausted, and prays “if there is any power in the rivers/ Change and destroy the body which has given/ too much delight.” At once the poem goes on to describe how “her soft breasts/ were closed with delicate bark, her hair was leaves, her arms were branches, and her speedy feet/ rooted and held” (*l. 1.549-550*). She has become a tree, and the young god is left stupefied, standing “with many words unsaid.”

When Apollo wraps his arms to gather his beloved, he gets nothing. Where he expected a warm girl, he has, due to a supra-divine intervention, got instead only air. Dis- mayed, he sits under the tree she has become for awhile and then, reports Ovid,

he placed his hand  
where he had hoped and felt the heart still beating  
Under the bark; and he embraced the branches  
As if they were limbs, and kissed the wood,  
And the wood shrank from his kisses, and the god  
Exclaimed: “Since you can never be my bride,  
My tree at least you shall be! Let the laurel  
Adorn, henceforth, my hair, my lyre, my quiver. (*l. 1.553-560*)

Having failed to violate the girl, the young Apollo instead violates the tree that is her refuge. That symbol of the ring of his arms encircling an absence gets echoed in the shape of the lau-

rel wreath he makes instead. Since he takes the laurel branch from the tree that Daphne became, it is for him a consolation prize, and henceforward, since Apollo is the god of poetry, and since the laurel is the poet's crown, poetry is connected to notions of consolation and secondary lights.

And so, when he writes the rape of Proserpina, though her ravasher is Hades himself, Ovid shows us almost nothing. For a description of a rape scene, and all the emotion that must be present in such an encounter, the detail is notably sparse.

So, in one moment,  
Or almost one, she was seen, loved, and taken  
In Pluto's rush of Love (l. 5.394-396)

The closest thing we get to a detail is told in past tense; the event is over: "Where he had torn the garment from her shoulder, the loosened flowers fell, and she, poor darling, in simple innocence, grieved as much for them as for her loss." That distance softens the blow somewhat, as does the editorial interjection. "In simple innocence" creates a character who is telling this story, and we are whisked away from the violence as quickly as possible.

But the description of those flowers falling *is part of* the rape scene. They are described no more vividly than the climax, but they are doing some work in the story, if only the work of absence. Proserpina's mother is Ceres, who is also called "Hymen," and so the fact that flowers are falling suggests the girl's own deflowering is being told by proxy.

Still, there seems a willful avoidance to deal with the aggression directly, which is not always the case. Ovid can describe other things vividly. In the story of Caunus and Byblis, for example, he describes a girl who is crying (importantly not in response to immediate violence) in hyper-real clarity:

As the cut bark

Oozes its pitchy drops, or as ice trickles

To melting in the warm west wind and sunshine,

So Byblis in her tears became a fountain. (l. 9.660-664)

One wonders then if the displacement we see in the Proserpina story isn't Ovid's way of getting around the issue. If he describes everything around the rape in hyper-real clarity, he can suggest the details of the encounter without doing it directly.

The horses the Pluto drives, for example, sound like what they are: beasts from the pit of hell. "Her ravager," the poet writes, almost with relish, "drove the car fiercely on, shook up the horses...the reigns, dark-dyed, sawing the necks and manes." This blackness, this urgency, this brutality is what Ovid meant to suggest in the episode immediately previous, but--because that scene's actual violence is too palpable--he displaces it onto the nearest other living object.

Which leaves us to re-create our sympathy for Proserpina through the sympathy we're feeling for his team. A young girl has just been raped and dragged to hell, and we're left thinking about *those poor horses*. It's a remarkable poetic device.

Another, yet more visceral example of Ovid's displacement in this same episode comes from the description of the what happens to the ground as Pluto's chariot enters it.

Burning with terrible anger, [the god] whipped the horses,

Whirled, with his strong right arm, the royal sceptre,

Smote the pool open to its very depths,

And the earth opened, and the chariot plunged

Through the new crater down to Hell. (l. 5.424-428).

It should be clear from what I've just argued that Ovid means to suggest more by describing Pluto's "strong right arm" than meets the proverbial eye. He's given the violence that was wreaked upon Proserpina's body to the earth around her. When we hear about "the royal sceptre" smiting "the pool open to its very depths," we cringe, not because we're concerned about the water, but because, if we've been paying attention, we know that it is Proserpina herself who's been smitten.

### **Triton's Wreathed Horn**

"Great God! I'd rather be a Pagan," Wordsworth writes in what is perhaps his best-known sonnet,

suckled in a creed outworn;  
 So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,  
 Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;  
 Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;  
 Or hear old Triton blow his wreathed horn! (l. 10-14)

I asked in class one time who Triton was, from Wordsworth's great poem, and was answered that it doesn't really matter to the poem; it's only that Wordsworth longs for a more glorious past to revitalize his present. It's a good answer, consistent with a general reading of his poetry, and satisfying enough at the time, but reading through Ovid answers the question more completely and the answer has important implications for the poem and for this study.

The story of Triton is recorded in The Metamorphoses in terms which Wordsworth's sonnet recall.

From down under, with his shoulders

Barnacle-strewn, loomed above the waters,  
 the blue green sea god, whose resounding horn  
 Is heard from shore to shore. Wet-bearded, Triton  
 set lip to that great shell, as Neptune ordered,  
 sounding retreat, and all the lands and waters  
 heard and obeyed...the world returns. (l. 1.243-252)

Wordsworth's "world" which is "too much with us" is, as usually interpreted, the Britain of the agricultural revolution, but is also, ironically, an un-world. It is the water-covered world of Ovid's flood and man's "getting and spending" fills and kills everything just like that water did.

I had always wondered why the poet suddenly says "the sea that bares her bosom to the moon;" we hadn't known him to be standing on a seashore up to this point. Still, we don't have to envision him as a solitary wanderer facing an untamable sea vis-à-vis Caspar David Friedrich. "This sea" is a metaphorical one: the sea all around us is, in Wordsworth's poem, the sea of Ovid's flood.

The poem continues with, "the winds that will be howling," giving us the second of only two natural phenomena in the poem: the sea and the wind. The section in Ovid containing the Triton tale is actually from the story of *Deucalion and Pyrrha*, itself immediately following the story called *The Flood*. In that tale, the creation of the world is envisioned as an action of these same natural phenomena: the sea and the wind.

The North-wind, and the West-wind, and such others  
 As ever banish cloud, and he turned loose  
 The South-wind, and the South-wind came streaming

With dripping wings. (l. 1.169-172)

When Triton blows his horn after water covered the earth again, he is re-creating the world that had just been created in the previous chapter, hence the poem's ending: "the world *re-turns*".

Wordsworth's wish then, his prescription, is at once a desire for a return to the world--that the natural world will return to our sensibilities as dry land after being at sea--and that, in hearing Triton blow his wreathed horn, the world will be created again, in his poem. To hear that horn is to hear the world-making sound of poetry.

With this reading, I mean to demonstrate how reading Ovid can backlight and fill our interpretation of Wordsworth's poetry. Without that background, much of this poem is closed to us. Keeping Ovid in mind, however, other curiosities of the poem become clearer.

I've long thought strange the diction "the winds that will be howling at all hours and are up! Gathered now like sleeping flowers." What does it mean for the winds to be "up?" If we envision the poem's taking place between the two Ovidian myths I've referenced, the answer is obvious. What sort of hand could reach *down* to gather the winds, pulling them "up" as a wanderer who gathers flowers? A god's hand. It is no act of unmediated nature; rather, this is an involved act on the part of a pagan god<sup>32</sup>.

Midway through the sonnet, the narrator calls out "Great God!" claiming he'd rather be a pagan. Rather than what? Since the pagan creed is described as "outworn," we can assume that the narrator has been suckled in a living or still-applicable creed, which for an Englishman of the 18<sup>th</sup> century is the Christian.

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<sup>32</sup> Triton, in this case, whose horn-blowing pulls the winds up and off the watered surface of the world.

For this exclamation, there are two interpretive options. Either “Great God!” is a curse-word, immediately after which the narrator returns the prophetic/solitary voice of the beginning, or the entire poem following line 9 is a prayer to that “Great God.” If the latter, it may well be that the Christian world is one of the many that are “too much with us.” How then can the narrator revitalize his present? The answer cannot be religious, since he offends one creed<sup>33</sup>, and describes the other as “outworn<sup>34</sup>.”

The poet inherits the mandate of world-making then, but what sort of world? The narrator doesn’t only long for a past to revive, but for the specifically classical past of ancient Greece and Rome. The world he wants to re-make, the flood to uncover, is significantly not the one of Noah’s flood, but of Ovid’s.

In “The Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms,” Friedrich Schlegel outlines this Romantic impulse toward Hellenism and world-making:

I will go right to the point. Our poetry, I maintain, lacks a focal point, such as mythology was for the ancients; and one could summarize all the essentials in which modern poetry is inferior to the ancients with these words: we have no mythology. But I add, we are close to obtaining one, or, rather, it is time that we earnestly work together to create one. (81)

It has been called a central project for the Romantic poets, both British and Continental, to find ways of reusing or reviving classical myths. Harold Bloom<sup>35</sup> argues that this was not only an ambition, but a necessary step to the success of their own verse. This mandate for

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<sup>33</sup> As far as I can tell, it is theologically unsound to pray to the Christian God petitioning the return of the Pagan gods to glory.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Triton cannot come back in glory and bring the classical past with him.

<sup>35</sup> See: *The Ringers in the Tower: Studies in Romantic Tradition*; or *The Map of Misreading*.

the modern artist<sup>36</sup> was articulated as early as Winckelmann, whose dictum, “there is but one way for the moderns to become great, and perhaps unequalled; I mean, by imitating the ancients” amounted to a kind of Platonic banishment of the poets to which all later theorists must respond (61). One such scholar, David Ferris, argues that an imitation is impossible.

The necessity of this path is clearly dictated by the inimitability of a Greece whose achievement is so complete, nothing can be added to it. Since nothing can be added, Greece can be said to have attained the most perfect representation of itself: Greece is now completely embodied by its representation. (p. 32)

This impossibility does not, however, leave the Romantic poet without hope. Ferris continues,

Modernity, in effect, seeks to affirm the necessity of its existence, and this necessity is discovered in the impossible example of Greece. This impossibility is expressed both by the inimitability of Greece and the paradoxical demand that such inimitability be imitated. Faced with such a demand, modernity has no choice but to produce its own history.

Indeed, Continental Romantics like Schlegel and Wilhem Von Humboldt were implying such a resolve<sup>37</sup> in their own time. Humboldt writes of the ancients, “but their greatness is so pure and true, its origins so genuinely rooted in nature and humanity that they move us, not with compulsion to be more like them, but with inspiration to be more like ourselves” (p. 81).

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<sup>36</sup> Defined, obviously, in the broader sense.

<sup>37</sup> See: The So-called “Oldest Programme for a System of German Idealism,” appendix to [The Genealogical Approach to the Romantic Symbol](#), by Nicholas Halmi.

If ancient poetry must be imitated to gain greatness, as Winckelmann asserts, and if it is inherently inimitable (and was for the Romantics) as Ferris claims, what options? One possible Romantic response to this paradoxical mandate is to do what they did: Greece represents *itself*, embodies itself in representation. England must therefore represent not Greece, but herself, which is what Wordsworth set out to do in Lyrical Ballads and in later work. Indeed, it is possible to read Wordsworth's entire career as a response to this mandate: a re-creation of the Greek mythological/artistic system in British form.

For now, let us content ourselves with seeing how this response works in a second poem. We've seen one way Wordsworth answers this call, in *The World is Too Much With Us*: by setting up a verse narrative in which a figure like himself encounters nature and (in this case) literally calls out for the classical past: "Great God! I'd rather be a pagan..." Here I'd like to suggest another of Wordsworth's methods for re-creating the ancient myths in his poetry.

### **Alice Fell's Fall**

The copy of Wordsworth that I read<sup>38</sup> is from the Bromley School for Girls, 1911 edition. I mention it as a "note on the text" and for one other reason: many such editions have appeared and, if I find it endearing, I also find it a bit troubling. I contend that a literary collective nostalgia for the golden days of the British countryside and its poetry has colored public perception of Wordsworth's poetry in a way that emasculates it, making tame and even patriotic, a *corpus* that is dangerous and that, at times, borders on the obscene. Reading

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<sup>38</sup> For pleasure, that is; for scholarly purposes, I use Stephen Gill's edition.

Wordsworth alongside Ovid refreshes the myths on which he draws and restores some of their violence.

In Wordsworth's *Alice Fell*, a young girl is picked up and cries for the cloak that has been torn in the wheel of the carriage in which the narrator has offered her a ride.

“My cloak!” no other word she spake,  
 But loud and bitterly she wept  
 As if her innocent heart would break;  
 And down from off her seat she leapt.  
 “What ails you, child?”--she sobbed “Look here!”  
 I saw it in the wheel entangled,  
 A weather-beaten rag as e'er  
 From any garden scare-crow dangled.  
 There, twisted between nave and spoke,  
 It hung, nor could at once be freed;  
 But our joint pains unloosed the cloak,  
 A miserable rag indeed! (l. 21-31)

Upon seeing her tears, the Wordsworth/*flaneur* is touched by her simplicity and gives her money for a new cloak before driving off. Critics<sup>39</sup> have suggested that the Wordsworthian wanderer never really helps any of the figures he encounters and prefers to showcase their plight, as here, in his argument for a return to simpler times: his own brand of Romantic nostalgia.

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39 Jerome McGann, Majorie Levinson, and Alan Liu have offered insightful criticisms of Wordsworth for glossing over the social dimensions of his characters and their stories. See: *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form*, and *Wordsworth: The Sense of History*, respectively.

I told my teacher, the late Dr. Bryan Short<sup>40</sup>, that I would be giving a copy of Richardson's Pamela to all of the young girls I knew, nieces and godchildren especially. He said, "you should give it to the boys, too, so they can find out who to watch out for—these manipulating authors and their seemingly innocent characters." The editor of the art journal, *Image*, writes, in an essay discussing sentimental art<sup>41</sup>,

Sentimentality...can be harmless. A penchant for Hallmark cards and posters of kittens playing with balls of yarn is not in itself a mortal sin. But when the misrepresentation of the world takes on a particular consistency and brittleness, darker consequences are possible. (p. 146)

In Ovid, Proserpina is gathering flowers (as do many of Wordsworth's young maids) when she is abducted by Pluto.

Where he had torn the garment from her shoulder,  
The loosened flowers fell, and she, poor darling,  
In simple innocence, grieved as much for them  
As for her loss. (l. 5.397-400)

This loss to which the story refers is, of course, her virginity; Pluto goes on to rape her. I'm suggesting that Alice is Wordsworth's version of Persephone myth.

The similarities are many, and mostly structural. Wordsworth's version begins with a carriage that is being driven "with fierce career/ For threatening clouds the moon had drowned..."

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<sup>40</sup> Northern Arizona University

<sup>41</sup> Wolfe, Greg. "What's Wrong with Sentimentality?" *Intruding Upon the Timeless: Meditations on Art, Faith, and Mystery*. Square Halo Publishing, 2001.

and Ovid's, "her ravager drove the car fiercely on." Each poem continues to use the phrase "simple innocence" and "the garment torn," verbatim<sup>42</sup>.

Both concern girls who are themselves over-concerned with their cloaks, which becomes the center of the story, in each case. In Ovid, the cloak is what reminds Ceres that Proserpina has been taken and causes the blight of Sicily. Similarly, Wordsworth has nearly all the action surrounding Alice's cloak: its loss, grieving, explanation, and replacement. Both girls are then taken up in the chariots by powerful men, riding behind teams of horses, and both are, importantly, shown in their grief to misunderstand their true loss. In Proserpina's case it is her virginity, and in Alice's (on a literal level) her dead parents.

My name is Alice Fell;  
I'm fatherless and motherless.  
And I to Durham, Sir, belong.  
Again, as if the thought would choke  
Her very heart, her grief grew strong  
And all was for her tattered cloak! (l. 45-50)

Alice is both an orphan and a street-dweller who only cries for her "torn cloak," while her counterpart, Proserpina, has been taken from the world completely, to dwell in Hades: she cries only for her dropped flowers.

Reading *Alice Fell* with these allusions intact also makes better sense of the title. "Fell" acts as a verb here, which strengthens the suggestion *via* fallen-ness as sexual transgression; Alice fell from innocence.

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<sup>42</sup> This will depend, of course, on the translation of Ovid you read; still, the similarity is notable.

We can also see how, if she is the counterpart to Proserpina, she *fell* directionally, since Hades is down, beneath the known world. Ovid uses the directionality in this case as another sexual image, a way of describing the rape without describing it directly. This one is a picture of Pluto's chariot itself as it plunges and "[earth] opened willingly to that ravishment."

In the same vein, the rape (of Alice) is implied in the tearing of the cloak/hymen just as it is represented imagistically in Ovid by the peeled pomegranate, "with the inside coating of the pale rind showing." Wordsworth's retelling doesn't focus on the rape anymore than does Ovid. Rather it retells the whole story *around* it, as a way of "gentling the daemonic," as Wieskel has it.

The technique is a way of letting the unsaid do the dark work. Richard Rorty gives us terms for such a theory, describing "the way in which the accidental, or incidental features of the text can be seen as betraying, or subverting, its purportedly essential message" (qtd Weinberg 49). Wordsworth's straight story says he only met her, gave her a ride, and then gave her money, but the story's recognizable structure suggests that our discomfort with lines like "then come with me into the chaise," may be warranted.

My contention is not that Wordsworth was a child molester, but that he was an Ovidian. He knew this version of the *Rape of Proserpina*, and others from Ovid and used them to add darkness and suggestion to poems which would otherwise sound trite<sup>43</sup>.

Strangely, he knew Ovid before Virgil, the former's having apparently been standard instruction at Hawkshead Grammar School, according to Duncan Wu (p. 109). According to the poet himself, he preferred Ovid as well, describing how he was "quite in a passion whenever

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43 As "Alice Fell" rather does without this reading, having been largely ignored both critically and popularly.

I found him, in books of criticism, placed below Virgil” (Cornell *Poems 1807-1820* 544). He’d read *Metamorphosis* in the original, in both the Bailey<sup>44</sup> and Sandy<sup>45</sup> translations, and was given new copies of the collection by friends who knew him well.

Critics then, may be right to detect a note of malice in Wordsworth’s *flaneur*. What I’m interested in here is how Wordsworth’s poem builds an undertone, a suggestion of terror--that he may have been interested in these figures (Alice, Margaret, Lucy) for more than sociological reasons--while remaining the poet of innocence.

Biographical criticism has it that Wordsworth heard the story from a friend, to whom the incident happened and was encouraged to turn it into a poem<sup>46</sup>, so we should do something with this less-compelling explanation<sup>47</sup>. The possibilities for excusing our reading from it are many, and all pure speculation, my favorite of which are either that these classical myth structures had by this point worked there way so deeply into Wordsworth’s imagination that the text could have been (as Rorty suggests) subverting itself unknowingly, or that he did hear this story from Mr. Graham, but he told it this way as a joke, knowing what a fan of Ovid he was, and wondering whether he’d catch the implication.

Of course, the trope of the overheard story is a classic tool of Romantic poetry. “I met a traveler from an antique land who said...” begins Shelley’s *Ozymandias*, which continues to recount an alleged overheard observance. As another example, the whole of

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44 Bailey, Nathan. *Ovid’s Metamorphosis...with the arguments and notes of John Minellius*. 7th ed. 1787.

45 Sandy, George. *Ovid’s Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz’d, and Represented in Figures*. Oxford, 1632.

46 Wordsworth’s own Fenwick note and Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal entry on the poem both identify the source of the story as a Mr. Graham of Glasgow.

47 Coleridge found the poem so dull he criticised it in the *Biographia Literaria*, opining that the story would have been better recounted in prose; the criticism sufficiently stung Wordsworth. He omitted “Alice Fell” from editions of his poetry from some years after.

Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* claims to be mere *reportage* from the wild imaginings of a wedding guest. Many works of Romantic imagination, from Ossian onwards, take a similar form.

One other option is also based in biography. Wordsworth was an outspoken reader of Ovid throughout his life, "expressing an early independence by preferring Ovid over Virgil" (p. 52). Biographer Kenneth Johnston writes, in The Hidden Wordsworth, that not only did he read and admire Ovid, but he had begun writing imitations of him as a schoolboy under the tutorship of William Taylor, who "set his young charges to imitate not only the best classical models but also a wide range of contemporary ones" (52). It is entirely possible then that consciously or otherwise, *Alice Fell* emerged as a kind of schoolbook exercise in Ovidian imitation at which he was practiced and which he reportedly enjoyed.

There's one further implication of this reading I'd like to point out. If Alice is Proserpina, and the *flaneur* is Pluto, who plays Ceres, the third character in Ovid? The role is split two ways. Ceres is the agent who rescues Proserpina back from Hades, making her innocent again, and regenerating the world thereby. This part of Ceres is played by the Wordsworth/*flaneur*, who buys a new cloak for Alice, and in so doing, turns her from "Half-wild," and from broken innocence ("as though her innocent heart would break"), "insensible to all relief," into a "proud creature." That this transformation happens through the repaired cloak is exactly in keeping with the Ceres myth. If the cloak represents hymen, (as do the ground, the pomegranate, the cloak, and the flowers in Ovid) then Ceres, in restoring her to innocence --in making Spring come, and thereby regenerating the broken flowers—restores her torn cloak as well, imagistically.

The second half of Ceres is played by Wordsworth the poet. We recall that the whole Proserpina tale is being told by Ceres as a lament, and so she is both character and author. Here is a role Wordsworth would have relished. In it, he becomes, as a poet, Ceres the re-pairer of innocence, making spring over and over again in these poems. As teller of the tale, he has stitched innocence back into the thing, which may be one reason he left the violence inexplicit. The poet as world-maker becomes Ceres the Weaver, who by sealing up the gash – in the earth, in the cloak – cyclically uncovers the world of its water.

### **The Stone Circle**

Exactly 31 years<sup>48</sup> after his visit to Tintern Abbey, Wordsworth set out on a tour of remote northern islands that became a sequence of poems “Composed or suggested During a Tour in the Summer of 1833.” This title is another of Wordsworth’s usual compositional fictions, as argued by Tim Fulford, who points out that, though it was included in the second edition of that volume, the poem “Long Meg” was actually published earlier in the 1822 Description of the Scenery of the Lakes in the North of England, and was even included in the 1827 Collected Poems (39).

Fulford goes on to argue in *Long Meg and the Later Wordsworth*, that, in the area’s folklore, Long Meg--a stone circle on the order of Stonehenge, but a bit smaller-- “hints at monstrosity and magic,” explaining how

One [folktale] said that Long Meg was a witch who with her daughters was turned to stone for violating the Sabbath as they danced wildly around the

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<sup>48</sup> *Tintern Abbey* was composed, if the title is to be believed, on 13 July, 1798. Wordsworth set out on a tour of the islands of Cumberland and Scotland on 12 July, 1833.

moor. Another suggested that, were Long Meg to be shattered, it would run with blood. It seems that, in oral tradition the stones were, rather than a holy family, the frozen embodiments of a witches' coven--a sacrificial rite metamorphosed or a transgressive dance petrified. (p. 40)

Something about the movement of those daughters suggests for me Robert Frost's poem, *The Secret Sits*, which reads, in its entirety,

We dance round in a ring and suppose,  
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows. (l. 1-2)

This poem suggests two ideas important for a reading of Wordsworth, and for the absence he outlines by swerving around some structural center. One, that the closest anyone can get to the center, to mystery, to real knowledge is to dance around in a circular fashion, often missing the point.

This should not be taken as a lament for the insufficiency of human knowledge, but can instead be read as an artistic prescription; if you want to capture something as it is, don't go directly after it, but define it by dancing around it, hedging it in, or, as Coleridge did according to my argument in *The Prison Bower of Meaning*, render it as a negative quantity. The second idea that is suggested by Frost's poem reinforces the first: if one finds himself at the center somehow, it will be impossible to speak out. This may not seem to follow immediately, but the language of the poem implies it because, rather than "suppose," as the secret does--that is, rather than conjecture, posit, philosophise, and render artistically, the center/subject ("the secret," in this formation) only *knows*. Whatever certainty the subject might enjoy at that moment must be its own reward, because "knowing" is not the same as "telling."

This is why Keats has Cortez “silent upon the peaks of Darien.” If he could speak from it, he wouldn’t be on the peak; the poet’s options are to report from the edge of the circle, or to stand in the center and be silent. It is also why T.S. Eliot chose as the epigraph for *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, these lines from Dante:

S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse  
 A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,  
 Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.  
 Ma per cio che giammai di questo fondo  
 Non torno vivo alcun, s’i’odo il vero,  
 Senza tema d’infamia ti rispondo<sup>49</sup>.

These are the two options: either the artist can flail about like Long Meg’s daughters, can build domes in the air like Kubla Khan, or he can progress, or descend to where all is clear, but with the caveat that from that point, words won’t carry. If, finally, she “knows,” the artist can’t tell anyone.

William Hazlitt has a similar reaction to the same circle of stones. He refers to the monument as “that huge, dumb heap, that stands on the blasted heath, and looks like a group of giants, bewildered, not knowing what to do, encumbering the earth, and turned to stone, while in the act of warring with heaven” (p. 56). His reading is, not surprisingly, *literary*; that is, it is filtered through Milton, but what he emphasises about the circle is the same thing that Wordsworth emphasises: the great silence that the stones both live in, and create.

The theme comes up over and over again: the stunned silence at the moment of acute perception and the re-entry of logic, and speech, following a period of recovery.

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49 “If I thought that I was replying to someone who would ever return to the world, this flame would cease to flicker. But since no one ever returns from these depths alive, if what I’ve heard is true, I will answer you without fear of infamy.”

Wordsworth's famous crossing of Simplon Pass in book VI of the 1805 Prelude is representative of the move because of its lack of such a point. Safely grounded, Wordsworth reports,

By fortunate chance,  
 While every moment now increased our doubts,  
 A peasant met us, and from him we learned  
 That to the place which had perplexed us first  
 We must descend, and there should find the road  
 Which in the stony channel of the stream  
 Lay a few steps, and then along its banks—  
 And further, that thenceforward all our course  
 Was downwards with the current of that stream.  
 Hard of belief, we questioned him again,  
 And all the answers which the man returned  
 To our inquiries, in their sense and substance  
 Translated by the feelings which we had,  
 Ended in this—that we had crossed the Alps. (*l.* 5.577-591)

Often the anecdote is told amusingly: *Silly Wordsworth, climbing all that way and missing what he came for!* But anyone who has done much hiking will recognise the experience. Mountains often refuse to culminate in a convenient peak. One usually wanders around asking “Is this it? Are we there?” as the terrain rises and falls and meanders. In fact, Wordsworth's description demonstrates the veracity of his tour because of this recognizability. If he had bounded up and said “O, what vistas!” we could take the story for a

convenient Romantic fiction; that he couldn't tell when he'd arrived suggests a real experience. This failure of representation of a literal mountaintop experience gets echoed in descriptions of other, usually metaphorical high points in the poetic *oeuvre*.

The poet recognises that failure of representation, which is why he leaps immediately from the scene described to a meditation on the imagination. The poem shifts hard:

Imagination! — lifting up itself  
 Before the eye and progress of my song  
 Like an unfathered vapour, here that power,  
 In all the might of its endowments, came  
 Athwart me. I was lost as in a cloud,  
 Halted without a struggle to break through,  
 And now, recovering, to my soul I say  
 “I recognise thy glory”. (l. 5.592-599)

The readings of this passage are legion, and usually negative. W.J.B. Owen calls the passage a “poetic failure” (106). David S. Miall calls it “a logical failure” (87). It is both of those things perhaps, but it is importantly an *intentional* failure. Miall shows how Wordsworth had been disappointed many times before, by setting up for himself too-grand expectations. Here, the Poet-Specific (Wordsworth) is a figure of the Poet-General who doesn't *happen* to miss the point of his hike, but *necessarily* misses the point of it, because its greatness is beyond intelligibility.

Furthermore, that “unfathered vapour” that thwarts the “progress of [the poet's] song” stands in for Wordsworth's expressive difficulties, which Derrida posits in “Structure, Sign,

and Play,” is due to language’s dream of agamogenesis. *Of course the vapour is “unfathered,”* Derrida would say, *and of course the poem can’t continue.*

Derrida argues that for writing to “substitute itself for its own origin,” is an usurpation which amounts to incest (p. 101). Quoting Socrates, Derrida notes that it is an historical violence for speech to “dream its own self-presence,” for it is then capable “of helping itself; and [believing] itself to be its own father.” Derrida says the same is true for writing. Of the many acts of violence done by writing, (to memory, to speech, to history), this is possibly the worst. Critics may sense this violence, “to memory,” and “to history” in Wordsworth’s failure to honor either of those in *Tintern Abbey*; hence the impassioned debate outlined earlier. Derrida terms it “the original sin,” because the metalepsis imposed on language by writing destroys the myth of “the simple origin” (p. 98-9).

The relationship between speech and writing, as it now stands, is unnatural and violent, according to Derrida, and it is up to the “sciences of language to recover the natural order,” “the purity of its origin” (97-8). Note how similar his project sounds to Wordsworth’s, writing in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*:

Poetry, however, in its ancient original condition, was perhaps more vigorous than it is in its modern state. It included, then, the whole burst of the human mind; the whole exertion of its imaginative faculties. It spoke then the language of passion, and no other; for to passion it owed its birth. (p. 427)

Writing enacts a kind of fall from grace, [like Alice Fell’s], because it inverts the proper order of things. For Derrida, Adam usurped the role of his creator by undermining his authority. Likewise, writing has taken the power from its own precursor and thus become the origin and the original sin.

Also, writing does violence to language because it imposes an artificial structure, thereby inhibiting the natural “play” of oral tradition. This concern seems central to reading Wordsworth. Not only is he a collector of “oral traditions,” in his poaching folktales from Britain’s rural poor, but he is careful to capture them in “the real language of men.” But the structure disables him, and some structures, I’ve argued, take over and determine the narratives’ course.

“[Language] is not innocent,” Derrida explains, because the imposed structure, or “clothing,” “imprisons the inside” in the same way that Cartesian Dualism posits the body as a clothing for the soul (p. 97). Writing is not only a “guise for language,” but a “disguise,” because writing, “the exterior figuration,” is “not a [mere] representation.” Rather, “the meaning of the outside is always present within the inside,” and as such, it is a “misrepresentation.” Writing cannot “veil” language without disfiguring it<sup>50</sup>.

The “strange external system that is writing” is a “historical usurpation” that “has already begun” to such a degree that presently, “language is first writing” before it is itself (99). Writing’s incestuous replacement of its father has brought about this “fallen condition,” from which linguistics now must try to rise. Derrida suggests a “return to the natural relationship: subordinating writing to speech” (98). Which, despite its “theoretical oddities,” would amount to a kind of reckoning, or restitution; a reversal of the original sin.

The trouble in such an attempt (which Wordsworth surely encountered, and which may explain the failure of his explicit project regarding real language) is that “as necessary preamble to restoring the natural to itself, one must first disassemble the trap” (p. 99). The

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<sup>50</sup> Derrida writes, “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, logic, and implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (85). In the contest of language, the imposition of the written image forces the language into those “forms and logics and implicit postulations.”

sin of writing, though, is so great that it must be repressed from our consciousness; “it has breached living speech,” and thus found itself “within the work of historical repression” (p. 113). And so the “reversal” back to the original, or “natural” is harder work than it was supposed to be; Laius cannot simply rise from the dead.

When language “usurps the main role,” it commits an Oedipal sin: that of becoming its own precursor, thereby committing incest (p. 98). It has, in effect, “broken the norms regulating society,” even the only norm which Derrida takes to be “universal” (p. 87). The crime of the written word is so great because it has made a scandal of the only prohibition “which is both natural and cultural.” Having killed its father, it has obliterated the notion of its father-- “natural language had never existed, never been intact and untouched by writing,” --leaving no innocence, no Eden to which it can return (p. 113).

Simplon Pass is another place—like Tintern Abbey, and Long Meg--that is fraught with historical meaning for Britain and is rendered by Wordsworth as an openness, or a vanishing point. It is another unrepresentable Eden in the Derridean sense. Which is why Fulford says about the stone circle, though he means it historically, “it is a poem of significant absences” (p. 43).

## **Conclusions**

I think all of this is interesting; certainly, it is germane to a discussion of the drive to failure as I’ve outlined it here, but I’d like to look now at why this reading matters to any interpretation of Romantic poetry, especially Wordsworth’s. Simply put, an ignorance of Wordsworth’s classical template in Ovid, and of his frequently-used displacement trope has

disallowed access, or at the very least, rendered obtuse many poems that snap into focus when given their proper background.

*Three Years She Grew*, for example, is usually read, with the rest of the Lucy poems, as a complicated metaphysical exploration of the effects of early death on a psyche. Richard Matlak, for one, argues that,

Although the grief of [the poem] is blended with hostility, it remains intense; after the development of the mythical rationalization for Lucy's death in "Three Years," her death is, as the lover admits, a memory, an acknowledged event, indicating that the crisis of his mourning period has passed. (p. 58)

Geoffrey Hartman argues that "Lucy seems to jump over the crisis of self-consciousness...by dying into nature" (p. 158). Such arguments are typical of the Lucy poems.

That these poems cause such critical difficulty stems from the fact that their poetic precursor has rarely been properly understood. Careful readers of this essay, and of Ovid, may be able to guess my thesis: the Lucy poems are not about a girl who has flower-like qualities; they are about a flower who has girl-like ones.

Our first clue that *Three Years She Grew* is an Ovidian poem occurs within the very first lines.

Three years she grew in sun and shower  
Then Nature said, a lovelier flower  
On earth was never sown (l. 1-3)

Critics usually bend over backwards to explain how it is that Lucy came to be growing outside.

In not only comparing a child with a flower, but conflating them, Wordsworth has pulled off a classically Ovidian trope, that of women metamorphosing into flora, and usually at the point of sexual transgression.

Frances Ferguson is the closest any critic has come to making this claim. She writes that “[when Lucy] is given a corporeal form, it is a flower form, and not a human form,” but then backs off her claim by saying “the similes and metaphors which conflate Lucy with flowers are, of course, merely similes and metaphors” (p. 544).

Her observation is astute, but I can’t completely agree about the similes and metaphors. In Ovid, to say a female has become a tree, or a field of daisies, is to mean it both literally and figuratively. Ferguson continues: “the flowers do not simply locate themselves in Lucy’s cheeks, they expand to absorb the whole of her” (p. 534).

Her article goes on to suggest that such ambiguities highlight Wordsworth as an epistemologically interested poet, rather than a simple nature poet. I think Wordsworth is interested in more even than these; namely, the uses of allusion, structural and otherwise, and in how a poet can make classicism come alive again in a British and contemporary context.

Then Ferguson makes a final point, wherein she speaks more truly than she may realise, observing that

Personified nature dominates the poem, but with the radical difference from the static visual personifications of much pre-Romantic poetry; this Nature has a speaking voice—and a pre-emptive one at that. It is not a benevolent mother, but rather a Plutonic male. (p. 544)

“Plutonic” is the *mot juste* here. Ferguson is exactly right to sense the malevolence of Nature in this poem, although she does not go on to develop the theme in her essay. I contend that in

this exercise, “Nature” is actually a triumvirate of Ovidian characters: Pygmalion, Pluto, and Eros.

Like Pygmalion in Ovid’s account, “Nature” in Wordsworth’s poem is ultimately crafting Lucy into the ideal mate for himself. Not only will her form be reared “to stately height,” and not only will “her virgin bosom swell,” which is the basis of making her an ideal sexual partner, but she will love the things that he loves—”The stars of midnight shall be dear to her—and his subjects (if we consider this masculine spirit of nature as a kind of king) will respect his queen: “The floating clouds their state shall lend/ To her, for her the willow bend.”

In this project, Nature is exactly like the sculptor Pygmalion who fashions a love for himself out of similarly pliable materials. We could almost mistake the beginning of Wordsworth’s poem for the beginning of Ovid’s.

This child I to myself will take,  
 She shall be mine, and I will make  
 A Lady of my own. (l. 4-6)

Both decide arbitrarily to craft lovers for themselves. Wordsworth’s Nature fantasises about his creation just as Ovid’s Pygmalion does about his. Nature imagines, after he has imagined “her virgin bosom swelling,”

Such thoughts to Lucy will I give  
 While she and I together live  
 Here in this happy dell.

While Pygmalion imagines of his creation that

His kisses

She fancies, she returns; he speaks to her,  
 Holds her, believes his fingers almost leave  
 An imprint on her limbs, and fears to bruise her. (l. 10.392-396)

For Wordsworth to become a Pygmalion--whether he is giving alms that offer new life, or offering a new cloak and a ride to a new city, or whether he is fabricating a mythology in which he can comfortably move is to suggest the artist's struggle with his work and tools. If the artist works in words, the contest is the ego's asserting itself against the structural pull of language.

Emile Benveniste discusses the critical implications for the poet's charge, and finds himself on the dilemma's horns, playing up the violence of the contest. Benveniste speaks of language as being both subservient to and dominant over man. His terminology illustrates a power struggle between the Created, in this case: man, and the Creator: language. This is of course the same problem Wordsworth wrestles with as Pygmalion: an ur-text on the Creator/ Created problem.

"Language is transcendent," Benveniste writes in "Subjectivity in Language," in that it resides, "in the nature of man," and in its preexistence to man; "he did not fabricate it" (728). Benveniste predicts the refutation, "but isn't language an invention of man?" He answers, "we can never get back to man separated from language and we shall never see him inventing it." No, then; language is not an invention of man, it is rather the other way around, "language makes man."

When he *describes* language however, Benveniste uses tool-terms. Speech is described as "assuming an instrumental or vehicular function (p. 729). Instruments and vehi-

cles are both inventions of man (unlike language) which he has created for the purposes of doing work. Although he must be initiated into their use, he is their master.

Benveniste makes the distinction between “language” and “speech,” and although he describes language as transcendent to man, speech is entirely subservient to him. He has said, “language is form, not substance,” but then goes on to call speech, at least “the individual act of speech,” “a thing which we exchange,” “an object” (725, 729). Of course this is no relaxation of Benveniste’s critical attention; rather, it illustrates the structure which he finds inherent to the language/mind transaction.

There may be four levels in Benveniste’s power structure. He begins, “the sign over-  
lies and commands reality,” and then, “it is in and through language that man constitutes himself as a subject, because language alone establishes the concept of “ego” in reality, in its reality which is that of the being,” and “the individual act of speech is a thing which we exchange” (p. 729). Would Benveniste’s hierarchy then look something like this: Sign (overlying and commanding reality), Language (the reality of being), Man (subject in reality), Speech (tool of man)?

For a man to “speak ego” is for him to reassert his dominance over the force that created him. “This is language in so far as it is taken over by the man who is speaking,” Benveniste writes (732). Keats, who believes famously that the poet is “nothing,” that “he has no Identity<sup>51</sup>” because “he is continually filling some other body” accuses Wordsworth of trading on the “egotistical sublime” because of his “self assertion,” or “speaking ego” in Benveniste’s terms.

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51 To R. Woodhouse Oct. 27, 1818

Although Benveniste says that language makes man, he is acutely aware of a battle for position between language and man, realizing that if man is made by language, he also uses language, and has a position of power in relation to it. He quotes Saussure, in agreement, “language is radically powerless to defend itself against the forces which from one moment to the next are shifting the relationship between the signified and the signifier” (727). Language, for Benveniste, has power, does things, but that power is usurped. He describes even the theories regarding language in terms of battle, “the linguist will one day, perhaps be able to *attack*,” and, “to establish a relationship as arbitrary is for the linguist a way of *defending* himself” (726). These are, of course, academic terms which are not specific to Benveniste (any position can be “attacked” or “defended”) but in this context they are worth noticing.

Throughout these texts, Benveniste has been describing the power relationship between the two middle forces of his hierarchy, “language makes man and he did not fabricate it,” vs. “this is language so far as it has been taken over by the man who is speaking.” This rebellion seems to me akin to the godly violence of Cronos’ killing by Zeus; which myth has its exact analog in Wordsworth’s line “the child is father of the man<sup>52</sup>.”

This excursion into Benveniste’s thought is important, I think, because the question of fabrication is at issue in these poems of Wordsworth’s. There is a palpable struggle in this work of the individual or poetic ego against the various pulls of history, memory, language (or structure) and mythic precursor.

The sense of violence present in *Three Years She Grew* is already there in Wordsworth’s template in The Metamorphoses. It doesn’t come solely from these passages re-

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52 From “My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold”

garding Pygmalion. “Lucy,” the feminized form of the Latin “Lucas,” means “sacred grove.” In Ovid, this fact alone suggests that an attempt has been made on her virtue, usually in the form of a rape. Women are constantly becoming trees beloved of gods, or “sacred groves,” in flight from their would-be ravishers in the Ovidian myth-cycle.

If Nature, in *Three Years She Grew*, forms his ideal lover in one sense, and thereby becomes a Pygmalion-figure, in another, he abducts a young girl to whom he is already attracted, and thereby becomes a Plutonian.

Remember that Nature has mused, “three years she grew in sun and shower,” before calling her “a lovely flower,” and deciding,

This Child I to myself will take,  
 She shall be mine, and I will make  
 A Lady of my own.

In Ovid, young Proserpina is gathering “lovely flowers” of her own, in sun and showers when “in one moment, / Or almost one, she was seen, loved, and taken/ In Pluto’s rush of love” (119). Pluto then takes the young girl to his kingdom to be his wife, thereby making “a lady” of her.

Part of the reason that the Lucy poems have remained enigmatic and interesting these past two hundred years is structural. They have built into their poetic method the literature of the ages, most tellingly, Wordsworth’s own favorite work from the classical period, The Metamorphoses. His poetry, as exemplified by the readings herein, takes part in the Romantic myth project of re-creating a localized mythology for England through the appropriation of the myth structures and literature of antiquity and building around them his own vision of pastoral piety in the twilight of an empire consciously built on that model, his own too-much-

with-us world. It also enacts the struggle of the ego against the language that may have created him, and in that sense, exists as a fulcrum on which turns a war which was old by the time Ovid arrived at its battlefield, and to whose detritus our own linguistic theorists enthusiastically contribute.

## Laugh of Recognition

*Then burst the mob into jovial cry  
And largess! Largess! claps against the sky  
-Song of Rimini, Leigh Hunt*

In the previous chapter, we saw how Wordsworth built –like an archway, or a Roman circus—poetic monuments around an absence as a way to codify or circumscribe experiences of violence in order to lend his work a primitive force. In the present, we will look at Byron’s and Hunt’s differing approaches to the refusal of just such Wordsworthian monumentality in what we might call “self-erasures.”

In “Leigh Hunt’s Accidental Poetry,” David Stewart claims, essentially, that Hunt’s failure to write good poems is actually part of the poems’ meaning. Or,

the readers’ doubtful conception of the value of Hunt’s poetry is a central part of a proper appreciation of it, because his verse displays a peculiar felicity in questioning its own success. (25)

Byron’s bad lines, on the other hand, with which Hunt’s are contrasted, are intentional, Stewart claims, and “exhibit authorial control,” whose “disorder” is “systematized.” “We might say,” writes Stewart, “that Byron’s attentiveness to the possibilities of accident suggests a tightening of authorial control” (28). But the examples Stewart gives are not accidents.

Rather, they are failures. The question we should be asking about lines like Byron's "But-Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual./ Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?" is not *how did that happen*, or *how could he let that happen*, but rather, *how do formal patterns develop ideation*, or *what happens when poetic seriousness is abandoned and the form becomes a game?* (i.22).

The measure is not some arbitrary ideal by which all poetry might be judged, but whether the work is true to the terms it sets out for itself, whether the artist has violated those terms and with them, reader's trust, or, more succinctly, has the work succeeded in creating the taste according to which it is judged?

However much some critics may be uncomfortable with the term, "intentionality" figures here. Stewart writes "many of Wordsworth's contemporaries took pride in the fact that he had failed to create their taste for them, but if we dislike Byronism or Wordsworthianism, at least we know that they meant to be that way" (28). We know this, for example, in Byron because he seems to be in on the joke of his unfit verse, as Stewart explains, "the laugh that the feminine rhyme prompts requires a wink of complicity between the reader and writer" (29).

In Hunt, there is no such wink, and, so, no such laugh. Rather, Hunt repeatedly indicates his anxiety over the project before him. He "obtrudes himself upon the narrative, he introduces neologisms, he mixes stylistic registers, and he does all this in a way that suggests that all of these flaws are, oddly enough, the product both of failure and of affectation" (29).

The failure in the following cases is one of keeping respectable distance from the work before one, but, in these cases, the intentional gesture (the wink) rescues the artwork *qua* artwork in the manner of Byron's self-knowing slips. The question this chapter poses is when

is a poetic failure *just* failure? Before we discuss them however, we'll need to explain the kind of violation that's taking place which hinges on the idea that an artwork has a sovereignty distinct from its maker's, itself dependent on the notion of the inviolability of the artwork's ontological status, and that violations thereof can be judged on an ethical register. For that, we turn to a range of theorists from Wittgenstein to Cleanth Brooks.

## **Distances**

Some think that confronting failed artwork is useful despite, or even because of, their failure. Elizabeth Hansen writes for example that Lady Mary Wroth is "entitled to serious and detailed consideration," because her writing is terrible. In Hansen's terms, Wroth's "aesthetic limitation...activates important questions about the relation of social experience and literary production in this period" (167).

This method of reading depends heavily on the socio-political, which is not our concern here. Hansen writes "the recognition of aesthetic limitation, as opposed to the denial or bracketing of it" can serve as "point of departure" for "a strategy of socio-political reading" (167). In the current discussion, however, we argue that "aesthetic limitation" is a primary source of concern for artists, and that any self-conscious display of that limitation (as in Byron) is only useful when it serves to further the project at hand. In the case of Byron's epics, they serve as jokes: we laugh because he gives us permission to laugh, because we (both the author and his readers) possess enough literary sophistication to realize that no one could write so badly without intending to.

This sophistication is what Hunt lacks, however dexterous his blending of forms. Hunt's poetry lacks the monumentality (if only intellectual) of reading Wordsworth or

Coleridge, and it lacks the urbanity of Byron, and so the reading experience is impoverished, where, instead of a shock of recognition, or the sense of having been included in a joke, one feels repeatedly: does the poet know he looks foolish here? To trot out examples would only be to add to the monolith of critical disparagement at Hunt's vulgarity. Rather than laugh at the hapless editor cum poetaster, I want to suggest that there is value still in Hunt's project vis-a-vis the drive to failure. If it doesn't rescue the poetry quite as an aesthetic object, it does render sensible Hunt's groveling posture as author.

Before that however, we'll need to understand the kind of aesthetic violations Hunt enacts. In her discussion of aesthetic theory, KE Gover claims that, "artists can continue to revise their creations until they are satisfied with the results, and only they can determine when that level of satisfaction has been reached," much to the likely consternation of readers of Wordsworth's The Prelude (359). She goes on to write that "only the artist can determine whether the work is a failure...because there is no objective standard against which to measure the success of the work" (359).

To say that there is "no objective standard" with regard to an artwork's possible failure is not the same thing as to say that "there is no standard," however. There is one, and it does not, contrary to Gover's renunciation of critical judgment, require the artist's approval: wholeness. More particularly, there is any individual work's wholeness, which is an observable, defensible, phenomenological fact. The artist can disagree, and can continue to tinker, but at some point, his role changes from creator to adulterer or destroyer. At some point does not the artwork develop an internal thrust, almost a will, which can then be violated, even by its creator?

This is something of what's behind Hunt's vacillations as Stewart reads them. Hunt sets out to write one kind of poem, lets it grow to a stage beyond which it has acquired some rights as an object, and then takes it in another direction, or introduces some element-- Stewart calls them "obtrusions"--which does not fit, and which cannot fit regardless of the author's will.

Artists in nearly every genre have spoken of the phenomenon of having heard the poem, or of having "allowed the sculpture to emerge," as though it already existed somehow in the stone. "How do you carve an elephant," asks the oft-repeated quip, "Get a block of stone and carve away everything that doesn't look like an elephant." What are we talking about when we say such things? Surely it is this sense of consciousness that exists when a work starts to take form.

Martin Heidegger asks, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," a question about the artwork's self awareness:

And what is more commonplace than this, that a being is? In a work, by contrast, this fact, that it is as a work is just what is unusual. The event of its being created does not simply reverberate through the work; rather the work casts before itself the eventful fact that the work is as this work, and it has constantly this fact about itself. (143)

What is obvious to the work itself, Heidegger states, is that it is a work. Once this stage has been crossed, as I discussed under the heading of Lacanian *meconnaissance* in a previous chapter herein, it becomes an ontological fact, and therefore a subject.

To put the question another way, Louis Althusser asserts that "you and I are always already subjects," and that there are, in the world, "a certain set of obviousnesses that we can-

not fail to recognize and before which we have an inevitable and natural reaction: ‘That’s obvious! That’s right! That’s true!’” (245). In the artwork/viewer discourse, this wholeness--the degree to which the work is true (does justice toward) its structure, or inherent obviousness-- is the principle determinant for judging a work’s success.

Not all theorists agree, of course, that the trajectory of a work is considerable, much less that it ought to be *respected*. Wittgenstein writes, “the expression ‘and so on,’ is nothing but the expression ‘and so on’...it does not harbor a secret power by which the series is continued without being continued” (Philosophical Grammar 282). His is a position that this dissertation is resolutely against. Though Wittgenstein is usually anti-transcendentalist, this claim of his refers to reality, in which realm it may be true in some way, but artistically, it is nonsense. Since poetry is a system--often a closed system whose rules are defined by a set tradition--the phrase “and so on” can be used to continue a series without its actually being continued, and it often is. After reading 13 lines of a sonnet, a reader is never surprised that there’s only 1 line left, even if, for example, that line is carried over by the printer to the next page.

If I write,

Roses are red;

Violets are blue;

Dinner is good for one,

but it’s better for [and so on]

every reader in the language can discern with certainty what the [and so on] stands in for.

Will anyone guess “a dozen?” or “a monkey?”

Of course not. [And so on] works as a technique because a linguistic trajectory has been sketched out and a literate audience can follow the arc beyond its drawing.

This is the engine of the drive to failure: that a poem can act as a catapult, erecting a conceptual or linguistic line which extends into ideal space, or into the imagination, higher than its author's actual powers of description, or its readers' of comprehension.

## Registers

A work eventually leads its author when the system on which the work is built closes. At that stage, the work gathers to itself Althusser's "obviousness" and has thereafter the force of authority: an upended hierarchy that has, as Wordsworth puts it, the "child...father of the man" (*My Heart Leaps Up*).

Even writers as strong as Nabakov recognize this closure. "Goodbye, she chanted, my American sweet immortal dead love," he writes in *Lolita*, "for she is dead and immortal if you are reading this. I mean, such is the formal agreement with the so-called authorities" (320). On the one hand, this is just Nabakov continuing the court narrative that frames *Lolita*, wherein the author-character is already a ward of the state as he summons the recollection that becomes the book, but on the other, he means the only real "authorities" that matter for an artist: the aesthetic ones. *Lolita* must be dead and immortal in order for us to read her at all, just as *Anna Karenina* is closed in the story by the time we hear of her first breath, according to Dieder Maleuvre. "It is absurd," he writes,

to think there are hidden facts or aspects of *Anna Karenina* left unsaid in Tolstoy's narrative. Everything Anna was, is will, or can be holds inside the novel. The blue ribbon she wore in her hair one day, which Tolstoy omits to

mention, never existed, nor the day, nor her hair on that nugatory day...Where storytelling begins, time is finished. The premise, or promise, of any story is that it conveys all there is to say. (31)

That is, aesthetic representations render the incomprehensible, incomplete mess of experience into harmonious and rewarding wholes because they allow us to “jump beyond the horizon, and behold the whole thing, round like the Earth seen from outer space,” but they only do this when they are themselves harmonious and rewarding (31).

Later, Humbert writes of the inevitability of his personal trajectory: “any deviation in the fates we have ordained would strike us not only as anomalous, but unethical” (302). This small phrase is useful for the kind of ethics of aesthetics that I am outlining here. The first part of the claim is that we ordain the fates of our lives; they do not come, as Gover rightly notes, from some “objective standard.”

The second part is that the “deviations” therefrom smack, and that readers can hear them. Nabakov is demonstrating here the same kind of critical awareness that Byron exhibits over and over again in his work. Just when we notice a deviation from the rhythmic pattern (such as a feminine ending in an otherwise hard formal register), rhyme scheme, or seriousness of the scene, he, the poet-character knows we’ve caught it, and chuckles the whole thing off, a trick that Hunt never perfected. The “deviations” from the aesthetic authorities--since the reference comes from *Lolita*, we might as well call them “perversions”-- deny, according to Nabakov, “the golden peace of logical recognition” (310).

Most importantly though, these deviations are *unethical* because ordinations are holy and violators of holy orders play on an ethical index. This is what’s so wrong about Gover’s defense in *Art and Aesthetics*. Her point would be correct if the world were devoid of the

gods of order--if an artist were not bound to any system or force--but the world is not so void, nor the gods so dead. "We ordain the fates," as Humbert says, and are thereafter bound to them.

Cleanth Brooks recognizes the constructed quality of aesthetic systems, and that "violations" are both possible and unethical in The Well Wrought Urn. That "a poem is a construct, an articulation of ideas and emotions," means, for Brooks, that it is also a *corpus*, whose rights can be transgressed and whose just or unjust treatment has moral implications (395). He warns that "the attempt to assimilate poetic knowledge too directly and abruptly to other kinds of knowledge has its risks." Aside from the implication that poetic study must rather be indirect and arduous, this statement also implies that some element of danger is involved in literary encounters.

What would this risk be? What is at stake? Brooks imagines poems as "a special kind of document," whose "characteristic modes" ought to be "respected," which is to say, done justice by (395). A poem can, according to Brooks, through a misreading of "its mode," be "violated" (395).

Ironically, it is those readers who are "anxious to extract the ethical content [of a poem]" who are most likely to commit this violation. Appealing to such readers' moral sense, which is already in place, Brooks suggests through his language that reading a poem is a moral act which can be performed either ethically or unethically. In their attempts to "assimilate poetic knowledge too directly" to a moral message, these readers have "hopelessly distorted the meaning" of the poem and have therefore behaved unethically, despite their good intentions (396). "Ignoring the poetic form is...dangerous" after all.

Brooks has fallen into this danger himself on occasion, as he freely admits. To begin an anecdote about the history of his own reading, he writes, “I confess that I once thought...” He “*confesses*.” Endowing the artwork with rights, and its reception with moral meaning, Brooks announces his youthful misreading in terms of religious penitence, a confession. His argument “is not an esoteric one,” neither is it “mystical,” as he reminds readers on three occasions. It is, however, religious in both its dogmatism and the ethical terms in which his argument lives and moves.

In his reading of Richard Lovelace’s poem, “The Grass-hopper,” Brooks continues his just and religious rhetoric. Citing the poet as an example, Brooks writes, “Lovelace would not reform the little wastrel, but delights in him, so joyously and thoughtlessly at home in his world” (401). This is the way Brooks would have us approach a poetic work of art. We ought not to “reform” it, to make it something other than it is (i.e., “a personal document,” a moral fable, etc.) but should rather respect its right to be “joyously at home” in the world of its form. Is this the same joy of Heidegger’s temple?

Brooks cautions that “the grasshopper’s life then, though described in terms that hint at the human world, is not used to symbolize a type of human experience to be avoided” (401). But we have been talking about poetry precisely in terms of human experience, and the ways we can avoid violating its rights. We could substitute the subject of his paper for the subject of Lovelace’s poem, thus: “the [poem’s reading] then, though described in terms that hint at the human world, is not used to symbolize a type of human experience to be avoided.” That is Brooks’ point; it should not be used to symbolize anything. MacLeish has written, “a poem should not mean, but be;” Brooks writes, “we have here no fable of the ant and the grasshopper.”

## Wink

How then to demonstrate the ontological fact of an artwork's self-aware existence? By the second stanza of the first canto of *Childs Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron establishes a clear tone and aim for the work: of ironic distance, revel, and autobiography, all in the two words "ah me!"

He begins with a character sketch that sounds damning, but which later readers will recognize as a self-portrait.

Whilome in Albion's isle there dwelt a youth,  
 who ne in Virtue's ways did take delight:  
 bur spent his days in riot most uncouth,  
 and vexed with mirth the drowsy ear of night. (*l.* 1-4)

Few would have admired a character like this then, though some might today. For the poet to call England by her true and elder name of "Albion" is to call on her historic virtue, and to mention a youth who "riots" is to suggest the ramble and unquiet spirit that was tearing apart France, a mere swim across the channel, is to induce a chorus of shaking heads amazed at what the youth of today have come to.

Byron adds his head to the bobbing: the next words, following this description are "ah me!" At one level, the invective is as simple as a curse. He lets out a kind of sigh to commiserate with readers as in *s' death* and *what will we as a society come to next?*

At the same time, of course, he is confessing--wink wink, nudge nudge--that he is that character, as if punctuated thus: "there dwelt a youth/ who.../vexed with mirth the drowsy ear of night: me!"

It's a small trick, but a good one, and it establishes the poet as one who demands close reading at the same time as it creates a self-aware character, whose in-joking is not going to take us in to the usual heroic-epic tropes.

Another example of Byron's wink from the same stanza is also a two-letter word, fraught and wracked with meaning. Of the youth, all we know so far is that he is from England-- "Albion's isle"-- and that he "ne in Virtue's ways did take delight." We should note how many ways "ne" functions in that line, because Byron's irony and art lie in just such apparently tossed off details. The first use is to negate the sentence, as in "who never in Virtue's ways..." The second is to make an internal rhyme with "ways" and "take:" "who nay in Virtue's way did take..." which has the effect of making the delight in Virtue seem childish, because the line is overly rhymed as in a children's nursery song. The third is subtler, and more fun. "Ne" means "to be born," as in the old French past participle of *naitre*, which carries over into English in words like "nativity." It makes perfect sense to have at the very beginning of an epic poem<sup>53</sup>, an account of the hero's birth.

When our eyes run over "who ne in Virtue's ways did take delight," our first thought, even if quickly corrected by the syntax we encounter after the line's turn, is of a child *born in Virtue*. But we needn't even amend our reading as early as that. The next line reads, "but spent his days in riot most uncouth," and continues, as noted earlier, to enumerate the sins of this character. Though born (ne) in virtue, the character "spends his days" in vice, presumably as, or after, he grew up.

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53 We know we are in this genre because of the invocation, or anti-invocation, of the muses in the very first stanza

## Grounded-ness

Hunt, on the other hand, is after lower-hanging fruit. He is not, like Byron, attempting to tear down the entire epic genre, but is happy just to have made something that might pass for an entry in it. His lack of a complicit character, mocking the whole enterprise, forces us into the seat of mockers, by lending a sense of earnestness to his work which, following the sophisticated formal experiments described in the rest of this study, sounds childish by contrast.

This is where we find Hunt: at once older than the others (his work lacks the sophistication that would make it modern) and younger (it lacks that sophistication is a way that makes it seem juvenile). We don't have to leave Hunt there though, vacillating between derisive states, because his work does show a sense of self-awareness, if only as an awareness of that self's relative poetic weakness. For example, in *The Book of Beginnings*, the poet writes

I want, in fact, to finish a whole poem  
 At once; and to write properly, I find  
 I can't have flowers as quickly as I sow 'em  
 Something will still take place, not to my mind,  
 Some weakness, lameness, some hard buddings (blow 'em)  
 Some graftings, which I hate to leave behind;  
 So I must take my time with such grave matters,  
 And sow, meanwhile, my cresses in these tatters. (l. 17-240)

This is an instance of Hunt's "obtrusions," wherein he has stepped out of the world of the poem in order to tell us what a difficult time he has making the poem, noting his "lameness," and "weakness," and inability to leave behind weaker lines along the way. In that way, his

epic *apologia* really is a kind of apology wherein he is chiefly asking for our mercy as we read a poem that he himself agrees is not very effective. That awareness though, enacts in a particular way, the drive to failure for Hunt.

Byron's drive is easy: he simply won't deign to occupy the poetic ground before him. He sets himself a serious task, and laughs all the way through its performance is a way that suggests he could have done still more, had he tried. In doing so, he creates a consciousness so large that it can't be contained in poetic form, even a form as large as the heroic epic.

For Hunt, the attempt is similarly to exhibit discomfort with the poetic form in which he is ensconced, but he attempts to erase himself, not, like Byron, by becoming so large no form can contain him, but by becoming so small that his obtrusions are inconsiderable.

What do such performances have to offer readers of Romantic poetry? For one, they ask us to remain aware of the performative aspect of the self-conscious artwork. For another, the tactic may rescue otherwise embarrassing work, if it can be shown that the juvenilia/linguistic slip/other failure is motivated, or necessary to the work: that the work demanded it.

For example: does Leigh Hunt court disaster? Is his verse pedestrian because he needs it to be? I am not suggesting that as a suburbanite he was incapable of more sophisticated (Byronic) work, nor that his Cockney credentials required his keeping the accent, so to speak, but that his performance of a certain kind of blunder is integral to the work itself.

Consider Hunt's appraisal of Wordsworth, whom he damned for "making a business out of reverie" (*Feast* 97). One of the tasks of the poet is to inspire such reverie, to seek it out and eventually to fly, hence all the metaphors about birds and climbing in the history of poetry. Hunt however, says of himself that he "dislikes mountains," and "can't bear heights." True, he is speaking here of his biological, or, more to the point, physiological states, but

mightn't such a diagnosis apply to his poetry as well? Perhaps Hunt hears himself, like Coleridge as discussed in *The Prison Bower of Meaning* (herein), approach reverie, and, afraid of sounding Wordsworthian (and therefore, derivative) chains himself to the ground pre-eminently, to avoid any accusations of attempted flight.

Hunt's neurotic self-consciousness and lack of discipline some have categorized as a function of his gentle personality. Nicholas Roe uses the terms "affability," and "impulsiveness" to explain what most readers today would call "saccharine" and Stewart calls "affectation" and "unevenness" (Stewart 6). It is not my intention merely to add to what Greg Kucich calls "the generations of disparagement...focused on [Hunt's] apparent stylistic ineptitude, weakness of thought and vulgarity of taste," or to wonder simply: why didn't Hunt write as well as his friends? (qtd. Roe 119).

There are hints in Hunt that he knows what he's doing. Here is his picture of life inside prison:

Sad is the strain, with which I chain my long  
 And caged hours, and try my native tongue;  
 Now too, while rains autumnal as I sing  
 wash the dull bars, chilling my sickled wing,  
 And all the climate presses on my sense. (*Rimini* 3.3-7)

On one reading, the poet here writes, "Sad is the strain," because he's writing from jail; he's in a tough predicament, but the strain itself--the poem about his pain--is also "sad," because it is pathetic, wilted. The poet knows that the verse is inadequate somehow (that is, not tragic) which is why he describes his wing, a symbol of poetic flight, as "sickled."

Furthermore, he's aware of the "strain," in its tertiary meaning, that of "pressure," rather than "song," that he's placing on language by dealing so loosely, so un-poetically, with it. To "try [one's] native tongue" is of course to give poetry a try, to attempt some verse, but it is also to strain the way one's patience is tried. The test is real; the song is discordant, and the poet is aware of both, but offers a shrug of the shoulders as the poetic "climate" he creates "presses on" our much-abused readerly sense.

Of the inception of the *Story of Rimini*, Hunt writes, "I was very happy; and looking among my books for some melancholy theme of verse by which I could steady my felicity, I unfortunately chose the subject of Dante's famous episode" (Autobiography II. 170). This short passage offers several telling aspects of Hunt's compositional practice that may be instructive here.

One aspect the passage evidences is artificiality. Keats wrote, "if poetry does not come as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all<sup>54</sup>." Whether or not there is any truth to Keats' statement is irrelevant for our purposes, but he knows how to tell a poetic birth-story, and what posture a creator should adopt in relationship thereto. Hunt has none of that Romantic sense. The choice of Dante and Beatrice seems arbitrary: he might well have written about anything else and found it just as compelling.

Secondly, it's false, emotionally. Hunt writes that he was "happy" and so set out to write "melancholy" verse. Why? Wouldn't it make more sense to write "happy" verse in such a mood? Wordsworth wrote famously that poetry is "the spontaneous overflow of powerful emotion recollected in tranquility," a practice Hunt is working against here (Preface 19). Again, we may consider that Hunt is voluntarily defining himself as an anti-Wordsworth, but

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to John Taylor (February 27, 1818)

there is nothing “spontaneous” here, and the only emotion is false; he’s electing not to write out of the emotion he’s actually experiencing, and instead choosing one to put on, as though his own emotions were books on a shelf before him that might be chosen on a whim.

Thirdly, he views the composition of poetry not as a high and holy calling, as Shelley does, for example, but rather as physic for his mood, akin to taking an aspirin. Why does Hunt write poetry? Not for anything so noble as the regeneration of man, or the defeat of tyranny, but “to steady [his] felicity.” The subject is arbitrary, the mood is false, and the choice of poetry as a genre seems again to be that: *a choice* he made because he had to do something with his hands. One gets the sense that he might just as well have done a crossword, or taken up knitting.

Finally, his anecdote is self-defeating. That is, his poetic birth narrative amounts to a kind of apology about an “unfortunate” selection. As usual, the Huntian poetic posture amounts to a kind of shoulder shrug that conveys “well, I did my best with the poor resources to hand.”

### **Strength**

Jeffrey C. Robinson argues that “Hunt...deliberately promotes anti-monumentality” and suggests that his flippancy and triviality are a kind of anti-aesthetic (160). That, “in advocating the Fancy,” as he does in Foliage (1818), Hunt “urges a poetry of the supposedly trivial and immature, the ephemeral and the light, the casual and the playful, the scurrilous and the immoral, the contradictory” and that he does these as an act of what Harold Bloom would call a fight for literary survival against the monumental publications immediately previous Wordsworth’s Poems of 1815 and Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria of 1817 (165).

This struggle is really a chain of battles for Bloom, occurring within each poem, within the poet's greater career, and within the literary sweep of history. "The poet takes the patterns of quest romance and transposes them onto his own imaginative life, so that the entire rhythm of the quest is heard again in the movement of the poet himself from poem to poem," [which is a move from nature to redeemed nature] "or to the imagination's freedom from a preoccupation with the self," Bloom writes (Ringers 15,16).

Similarly, Bloom shows himself to be a Romantic, believing with that visionary company that "the map can be put to saving use" (Ringers 13). The "saving" in these arguments is a salvation usually from "excessive self-consciousness" which often restricts artistic creativity. This is the salvation longed for by Wordsworth who continually sought to escape the boundaries of his own presence in the face of nature, seen in his three great crisis lyrics, "Intimations of Immortality," "Resolution and Independence," and "Tintern Abbey." The same is true of Shelley, of whom Bloom writes, "there is no acceptance in Shelley, no tolerance for the limits of reality, only the outrageous desire to never cease desiring" (142). All survival for Bloom is survival of the imagination and his map is the same as the Romantics', with few additions. The "saving map" for Bloom is provided by the reading of "strong poets," wherein "consciousness heals itself by complex acts of invention" (Ringers 337). His own "imagining a being more healed and original" happens only in an imagination baptized in the great works of literature.

"Strength" for Bloom can be a slippery term. In a version of Eliot's "these fragments I shore up against my ruin," which corrects the usual myth that poets are writing towards immortality, Bloom explains, "the strong romantic poet, when he is most himself, makes a world in which his real man, the imagination, can never die. His spectral self, which must

die in nature, never enters the world of his imagination” (Ringers 10). For Hunt, this means not entering the same arena as his peers; in order to win imaginative freedom, he must invent a different game.

Primarily, to be “strong,” for Bloom, a poet must “make a world” for his imagination. This world-making is an example of the totalizing vision which Bloom identifies and seeks in the great writers of history. The world a writer makes, the world he must make if he is to survive, is comprised of four things for Bloom: originality, beauty, strangeness, and space. This concept of poetic strength is founded, Bloom is quick to point out, on a solely aesthetic ground, rather than on any historical or sociological basis: “literary criticism, as I have learned to practice it, relies finally upon an irreducibly aesthetic dimension” (Cannon 92). Bloom’s judgment of quality in the aesthetic is formulated according to the four previously mentioned criteria; a writer’s success or failure in these arenas is the only qualifying marker, but is only the qualifying.

In Bloom’s estimation, those writers whose work is more beautiful than others will somewhat naturally gain prominence in the Nietzschean “will to greatness” of literary struggle. Although he doesn’t define what it takes for a work to be beautiful outright, Bloom suggests that the sort of beauty required to lend poetic strength to a work comes through its “strangeness.” That is, the startling difference a poet achieves, the distance from the existing tradition he manages to make for himself. Again, recall Hunt in the strange overgrown, sensuous world of *Foliage*, which he created in both literary and literal senses through what Daisy Hay calls a democratic subversion of the first generation Romantics’ inherently solitary pursuit of genius (142).

But beauty and strangeness are not enough to make a poet strong. For that his work must also create a space in which it can exist, through a process Bloom calls “misreading.” Bloom defines the sort of misreading necessary for a poet to come to strength in the example of Tennyson.

Tennyson wrote for an age of reform, while Keats and Shelley wrote for one of stasis, Tennyson shows the exhaustion following apocalyptic fervor, he confronted a time which neither challenged nor repelled imagination, and yet also gave it no proper arena in which to function. (Ringers 149)

All artists need space in which to work that they themselves must carve out of the weight of their own artistic tradition, Bloom argues, and the weight of Western literary tradition is very nearly overwhelming, and thus, only the strongest poets can make for themselves a place in it. Using the language of Freud's family romance, Bloom demonstrates this weight and the poet's struggle to be free of it. Though Bloom's critical work is somewhat out-of-favor as he enters his late, popular, canon-defense phase, his critical middle-period work is at the heart of claims like Robinson's about Hunt's struggle for literary strength.

One of the major features of Bloom's critical work, early and late, is his insistence that all authors must reconcile themselves somehow to their state, having come “at the end of a very long literary period” (Ringers 12). Writes one critic, “Bloom argues that the relations between poets are the true subject of literary history” and that “strong poets in particular suffer from an acute anxiety of belatedness,” and “their writing consists of a series of defenses against the sense that they have been born too late to do any truly original work” (Wyatt 59). The same critic says that this, Bloom's theory of poetic influence, “is the most controversial and influential of our time.”

I want to look at one particular essay of his from this period though as a way of demonstrating Bloom's self-knowing failure as a positive because the move will be familiar to readers of Byron's. Bloom's "Poetry, Revisionism, Repression" is full of errors. Under its theories however, "an error" is not a mistake, nor is it even negative. Rather, it is wholly a necessary component to the interpretive/ critical process. Bloom argues that all poems are "acts of reading" which depend for their being on "misprisons," or "creative misreadings" of the "loved-and-feared poems of [the poet's] precursors" (332, 340). This "willful selection" of some "traces of language," and the "repression" of others is a function of "the curse of belatedness," or "the necessary aftering," that all poets face (333, 332). I argue that all critics face this "aftering" as well, and if "poetry lives always under the shadow of poetry," so too does poetic criticism (333).

Bloom claims "a strong poet must divine or invent himself," and this "because poetic strength involves a self-representation that is reached only through trespass" (333). His notion of trespass-as-bound up in self-creation incarnates in his own "revision" or "creative misreading:" the implicit notion of the critic-as-poet.

"Poems themselves are acts of reading," Bloom claims, as are (more obviously) pieces of literary criticism (342). "The reading of strong poetry is just as much a poetic fact as is the writing of such poetry," Bloom writes (333). This is a case of the referees' inserting himself into the game. If this is true, then Bloom, master-reader strong poetry, as he shows himself even in this essay to be, is a master participator in "poetic fact."

First, Bloom refers to "textual usurpation," by poets as a necessary symptom of their belatedness and their creation (333). "By defining poetic strength as usurpation and imposition, I am offending against civility," Bloom says, self-consciously, but self-consciousness of

one's offense and imposition is the "daemonization" which any poet must wrestle with if he would be "strong" (339).

Then, he practices this usurpation and imposition, which defines poetic strength, in this essay's introductory paragraph. Later in the same he will say, "the trope involved [in the poetic final movement] is an unsettling one anciently called metalepsis or transumption, the only trope reversing trope, since it substitutes one word for another in earlier figurations" (339). In the introduction to this essay Bloom has given us an example of this "metalepsis" which he will later describe as the "poetic final movement." Quoting Derrida, Bloom begins, "what is a text, and what must the psyche be if it can be represented by a text" (331). Immediately, Bloom "creatively misreads" Derrida's question, employing his own "trope reversing trope, substituting one word for another in an earlier figuration," as "what is a psyche and what must a text be if it can be represented by a psyche?"

As to the causes which impel a poet to create--"why is his poem?"--Bloom posits, "to be in the body is to suffer a condition in which we are ignorant of causation and origins," and "poetry is born of our ignorance of causes" (333). If this is poetry, then Bloom is "doing battle" against this ignorance of causes by stating them. After naming origins of the words involved, defending, as a poet does, against the ignorance of origins, for example, "psyche' is ultimately from," and "[the word] was possibly imitative in its origins," and "'text' goes back to the root," he practices this metalepsis again, "what is a breath, and what must a weaving or a fabrication be so as to come into being again as a breath?" (331).

To close the essay, Bloom describes his own writing as having been misread in the same terms that a poem must necessarily be. Having just called poems "necessary errors," and "misreadings" of earlier texts, he advances, "whatever the criticism of poetry that I urge

is, and whether it proves to be, as I hope, a necessary error, or just another useless mistake [remains to be seen]" (342). This sort of error I take to be positive. He continues, "I find such to be the usual misunderstanding that my own work provokes," which I take to be negative. Positive or negative though, what these "misreadings" do is place Bloom's work into the same interpretive category as poetry; "they are defensive processes in constant change" (342). The work of criticism he has created does the work of a poem and can be read as a poem.

The critic then has shown himself to be a poet inasmuch as his discipline, as a case of strong reading, "constitutes a poetic act," and as his own writing "does battle with ignorance of origins" as poems do, and as he demonstrates in the process of the essay the "misreading," "repression," and "revision," necessary to the strong poet's work. "By 'poet' I do not mean only the verse writer" Bloom says, in the same way that Cixous does not mean by "woman" only "female" (331). He then demonstrates this misread meaning by saying, "Freud's life-work is a severe poem" (342). In his loose (Shelleyan) definition of poetry, philosophers, such as Nietzsche, psychoanalysts, such as Freud, and perhaps critics, such as Bloom himself, have a place.

How has Hunt created such a place? Robinson asks "How, in a poetic society that honors Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and (at times) Pope, can one take such a program (as Hunt's) seriously" (165)?

The theory I am presenting in the present work offers an answer: through the device of the drive to failure, Hunt forces us to consider: *if he does work of this level when he's only playing around, imagine what he could do if he were serious*. We are to think, *if his Fancy is this strong, and capable of so much, what couldn't he do with his Primary Imagination, if he*

*wanted to?* and we are launched into ideal space, a trajectory beyond the extant series of Wittgenstein's denial.

And we have another benefit. Like Shelley, Hunt is failing to keep the coal alive, but he is in on the same project: that of depicting the mind in composition. Of "Fancy's Party," Robinson writes, "[it is] an ungainly, inelegant-looking poem," and that "the poem jars," and again, "the poem has no stability" but then he notes: isn't this more like the process of mind "as quick moving from perception to perception"?

Robinson is right here: it is "more like the process of mind," and this speed and lack-of-consistency implies veracity; the failure is a kind of triumph. "For if," as Kristeva writes, "an immediate vision is possible, and must be sought, then it is necessarily accompanied by visionary constructions that are imperfect...fragmentary, schematic," because "Truth [sic] can only partially be spoken" (262).

### **Self Negation as Anti-Monumentality**

In order to understand the differences between and the motives for Hunt's and Byron's drives to failure, we will need to say a bit about the monumentality they are attempting to swerve around and undercut, Byron with his laugh and Hunt with his shrug.

For one example, while Wordsworth and Coleridge were both working away on hugely ambitious poetical projects--the Recluse and Biographia, respectively--that might systematize poetic knowledge, Byron rejects "the very notion of a philosophical poem, with its implied claim to a totalizing systematicity" (Halimi 591). He does this not because he doesn't think himself capable, but because, for Byron at least, there is no epic possible. This Wordsworth

does not know as a poet, though his art seems to know for him, failing itself to cohere finally and rise like a tower or a tyrant.

Byron explains as much to John Murray specifically negating the charge that he might be making such an attempt: "what you call a 'great work' an Epic poem I suppose, or some such pyramid<sup>55</sup>." By comparing an epic to a pyramid, Byron is highlighting a) the very genre's monumentality--a negative association in itself following the French Revolution, wherein monuments became lightning rods of populist ire-- b) its size and c) its outdatedness. To make such a poem in the modern world, the poet thinks, would be as suitable as it would be to build a pyramid in Trafalgar Square.

Byron's conscious avoidance of monumentality stems from what Tilottama Rajan calls "a basic epistemological modesty." Rajan goes on to then to argue that this resistance manifests "in a formal openness, or resistance to closure, a recognition of the inevitable 'incompleteness of knowledge'" (T. Rajan, qtd. Halmi 596).

Hans Blumenberg has called this "basic epistemological modesty" a defining characteristic of modernity; as one critic summarizes his argument,

reality as the actualization of a context that cannot be determined a priori.

Reality is now understood not as a property of objects, but as a potential that can be realized only subjectively, or intersubjectively, and hence always partially (Halmi 597)

This is the world-view exhibited by Byron, which awareness has led Nicholas Halmi to term *Don Juan*, "The Very Model of a Modern Epic Poem." Too often though, this basic epistemological modesty has been denied to first-generation Romantics, while it is granted to sec-

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<sup>55</sup> *Letters* 6:105 (6 April 1819)

ond. We should note this difference because it has important implications for a study of Hunt's drive to failure as self-erasure.

My concern in this chapter has been to show how Byron and Hunt differently perform the work of creating critical distance in a gesture of self-erasure meant to avoid the charge of creating a monumental poetic. In order to show one way in which standard readings of Romantic practice--that is, those absent a theory of the drive to failure--have missed this work of self-erasure, we'll need to look briefly at Coleridge, not because I want to discuss the idiosyncracies of his work particularly, which I addressed in Chapter 3, but because his theory of erasure, as it has often been read by scholars of Romanticism, is useful in illuminating the drive in Hunt and Byron.

McFarland's "Coleridge's Theory of the Imagination," scold readers for our too-close attention to Coleridge's famous division between the terms "Imagination" and "Fancy" in Biographia Literaria. McFarland asks, "What in fact does Coleridge mean by imagination," and chides "the answer is clear: he means exactly what we all mean in ordinary language by the word imagination" (751).

McFarland's gently mocking tone and clear-headed argument are removed in the next paragraph however, as he expounds. While differentiating Coleridge's conception from Kant's and Schiller's, McFarland outlines a difference between nature and imagination, using the terms "it is" to represent the former and "I am" for the latter. He takes these terms from the Biographia Literaria, wherein Coleridge calls the imagining faculty "the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM."

Later, as a chapter in his book, McFarland again takes Coleridge's terms at face value: I AM as a statement of self-assertion (95). In a footnote, he underlines this clarity "Broadly

speaking, the function of the imagination for Coleridge was to connect the ‘I am’ with the ‘it is’ while maintaining the primacy and independence of the ‘I am’” (95).

Following McFarland, Clayton writes,

Coleridge’s problem as a philosopher was not that he had an unsystematic mind, but that he insisted to the death on systematizing what no thinker had ever systematized because they cannot be systematically united--the self within and the nature without--and that he did so in full awareness of the difficulties involved. (220)

Clayton is right to highlight Coleridge’s systemic rage for order following a Kantian series of categorization, but he continues: “Coleridge never lost, would not and could not ever have lost, his love for the external world; but he was even more dominated by the commitment to the ‘I am’ principle of an inner moral reality, and he could not reconcile the two” (220).

What amazes me is that the implications of this term and reference seem entirely lost on McFarland, Clayton, and even Marjorie Levinson who furthers this vein of discussion in a recent article, writing, “My pictures sought to revive a once-generative conflict between fact and value, between Coleridge’s “it is” and his “I am,” and to do so by showing how much more formidable the “it is” really was, and in what ways” (358).

All three employ the terms “I am” and “it is” as though they were obvious categories of Coleridge’s thought, and terms he was meaning to identify and to use himself, just like the critics who have spent so much time on the imaginative triad distinction. That Coleridge was directly quoting Hebrew scripture is mentioned nowhere, nor the implications therein given their due.

With those two small words, Coleridge is calling up a good bit of his artistic philosophy as it is informed by Christian theology. In the passage under consideration, Coleridge is not asserting a subject-object distinction; still less is he asserting a self under ontological threat; rather, the poet says that when an artist exercises his imagination, is a co-creator with God, “the great I AM,” of the world. An artist participates in the divine creator’s work by a kind of incarnational imitation. As Christ is the embodiment of God’s ideas (which are for Coleridge “more real than reality” [Hohensiel]) so too is the artistic creation a localized and therefore incarnated version of the poet’s. Coleridge isn’t meaning to rename the imagination “the I am” and differentiate it from some “real world” of nature therewith, he is defending the artist’s calling as a particularly Christian one, and trying to follow the finger pointing to the heavens.

Not only is the “I am” passage not “a commitment to the principle of an inner moral reality” as Clayton argues, or an individual personal consciousness as McFarland does, it is not a principle of self-assertion at all; in fact, it is the reverse. When Coleridge writes of the mind’s “eternal act of creation within the infinite I AM,” he is arguing for a principle of *self-denial*, in two ways. The first is that the reference places the locus of the self in God, rather than in an individual consciousness. This is why Coleridge writes that “faith [is] the fidelity of man to God, by the subordination of his human will...to his reason...representing and manifesting the will Divine” (565). The poet is not most supremely an individual in this moment, as defined against an outward nature; he is the least so, having been subsumed into a divine one. The second is that the Exodus 3:14 passage from which the reference is drawn centers on God’s own refusal of definition against an outward nature. Indeed, his refusal to be named is the refusal to take on just such an individual identity as Coleridge is accused of as-

serting here. In the passage, God is saying “there is more to me than this particular iteration and locality,” at least, this is what Coleridge understood him to be saying in the passage, which is why he says of himself in the famous *Regula Maxima* passage, “I know that I possess this consciousness as a man, and not as Samuel Taylor Coleridge” (557-58).

Finally, we know that Coleridge means the “I am” term as a failure of individual identity, and creativity as a way of dissolving such distinctions and participating in the Trinitarian community because such a reading coheres with his other supposed division between the Primary Imagination, Secondary Imagination, and Fancy. We know that he made such distinctions as a way to talk about divine co-creativity rather than a piece of pseudo-faculty psychology because of the division’s tripart structure. Since full participation in the divine involves a giving-up of self consciousness, for him to say “I am” is really a way of saying “I am not.”

## **Conclusions**

These late Romantics carried a burden not explicitly carried by their immediate forebearers: not only the epistemic, inwardly-motivated charge to find out what poetry can do, but also, if they were to gain strength in Bloom’s terms, an injunction against the kind of monumentality they saw in Wordsworth and, to some extent, Coleridge. As different as their approaches are, Hunt and Byron are working on the same project: how to decry the monolith, the monumental self, while still making important work.

Byron’s response, as we have seen, is to make a joke of the whole process. While showing that he has the intellectual resources, through, for example, attention to formal minutiae or the broad historical referent, to have created a pyramid of Egypt had he wanted to,

he also mocks the very idea of such an enterprise as egotistical and aged. In this of course, Byron's use of drive to failure is not like Wordsworth's blankness, nor Keats' bathos, not Coleridge's binding, or Shelley's broken statues; rather, we may think of Byron's use of this particular trope as a Venetian masque, behind which lingers a fierce intelligence, but on whose surface is (over)drawn a huge ironic smile.

If readers experience frustration at Byron's constant refusal to do the kind of work of which we think him capable, they are in good company. Shelley often regaled his friend with such charges, not realizing how the drive to failure functioned to buy some of Bloom's imaginative space, and to launch the older poet into the [and so on].

Hunt's failure, on the other hand, to produce a serious, monumental body of verse like Wordsworth and Coleridge, or to render a persona as poetically self-aware as Byron's has ironically allowed him access to something denied them all. His answer to Bloom's contest of history was, like Byron's, to disapprove of the proceedings, but rather than mocking them, he bows out.

Hunt's slips and apologies and evasions do however perform a kind of poetry in the Real. That is, his halting, distracted, "ungainly" language is actually the language of men, and in that, showcases an anti-monumentality consistent with his earliest political principles, and a picture of the mind in composition that were the actual and explicitly-stated aims of his stronger peers.

Wordsworth had as his "principle object... to choose incidents and situations from common life and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men," a task he did not, and could not formally accomplish, if only because men tend not to speak in 10,000 line rhymed excursus. Hunt's "lack of author-

ial control” though, has, in a sense, allowed him to disappear since the forms he erects--due to their aesthetic weakness-- never, and never even threaten to become, monumental. In that, his line too has gone beyond the edge of its drawing, if only by the relative freedom it allows him, more often called “felicity,” to create work that is both “young/ and warm with life as ever minstrel sung,” all but calcified under the weight of competing poetic strength (Hero *l.* 1-2).

Coda: Modernity

What I have endeavored to show in these readings of various Romantic figures is, in brief, that failure can act as a figure, that it can signify. Each of the writers discussed herein found, for one reason or another, the poetic forms they meant to occupy, even to liberate, structurally foredoomed. Rather than abandon the enterprise however, they have each in distinct ways, responded to that failure by pointing, within the poem, to what the poem can't contain, often thereby, conquering the original limitation.

This is a conversation about the nature of aesthetics contemporary poets are still having, but which, as I have shown, had its genesis in the experiments of the major Romantics. Alan Grossman refers to something like an inbuilt drive to failure in what he calls "the bitter logic of the poetic principle," which argues that as soon as an artist moves from the poetic impulse to the artifact, or actual poem, the song of the infinite is compromised by the finitude of its terms. In that way, for Grossman, all poems are records of failure because an artist can't actualize the impulse that gave rise to the work without betraying it.

Ben Lerner said in a recent interview,

you might say that even the failed attempt to write a successful poem makes us aware of having the faculties, however atrophied or underdeveloped, for such an undertaking in the first place, and so keeps us in touch with our formal capacities for imagining alterity even if we can't achieve it.

He goes on to argue that this principle is basically what Benjamin is arguing about Baudelaire: that he makes a lyric out of the lyric's impossibility in modernity. According to my

reading, this contest and question existed long before such modern epistemological or formal crises.

Neither is the question of the sign's failure settled for modern theory. Lacan writes that "ideology...designates a totality set on effacing the traces of its own impossibility," while Zizek writes that all symbols are failures, part of an "alienating symbolic network" (qtd. *SoI* 50).

Again, though, the Romantics are instructive. As the present study has shown, sometimes the impossible trace can act as a weapon against such totality, and far from the symbol of failure creating distance, it is (sometimes) only through the symbolic that one can approach the real of our otherwise veiled experience. Zizek calls this the "pre-ideological level of everyday experience" but it is the same thing Shelley claims lies behind the "Many colored glass that stains the white radiance of eternity" (*SoI* 49).

In *Organs without Bodies*, Zizek writes, explaining Deleuze, "the standard *topos* of the critique of idealism is that at the point at which the conceptual deployment/presentation (*logos*) fails, touches its limit, a narrative (*mythos*) has to intervene--this holds from Plato through Schelling" (74). I have endeavored to show here that in the aesthetic contest, the necessary intervention needn't be narrative, that because these poets built a *mythos* without a "game over" feature, or one in which failure is accompanied by a compensatory function, that each compensation is explanatory.

That is, a poet can sit on the peaks of Darien if he likes, watching his little drama play out in my presentation of the drive to failure. The "conceptual deployment," in the trope I've explained in this dissertation, doesn't fail if there is a second, larger conceptual deployment that contains the failure of the first, like a hunter who doesn't fret the loss of his decoy in a

duck blind, knowing that the wooden thing is about to be replaced by a living facsimile, rising from the reeds.

Though poets all want to be nightingales, some realize that a picture of flight doesn't work without a coordinate grounding to give it definition, in the same way that Lacan means when he writes "to know what a table really is, what it means, we must have recourse to a world which implies an absence of the thing" (qtd Zizek 145).

This is important not only because it offers a re-reading of these poems that explains some of their weaker moments, but also because modern poets have not gotten away either from the sublime, the recuperative terror associated with it, or from the sincerity charge (from which Hunt and Byron excuse themselves). The impulse to illustrate the drive to failure in Romanticism is the same impulse that theorists have had to hold up the ruin over the monumental, the fragment over the whole, and it is an impulse that still drives a good deal of artistic creation.

Structurally speaking, the sublime in art is the negation of flawless or harmonious aesthetic synthesis, that is, of a perfect interpenetration of sensuous and spiritual elements in the sense of the idealist conception of beauty. It is a negation of beauty, that is, of measure, of balance, of flawless unity of harmony—in short, of beautiful semblance. (Adorno 56)

"It is the scars of damage and disruption," Adorno continues, "that guarantee the authenticity of the modern work of art" (163). Why should this be? Because a perfect poem is a monument, not a ruin, because the sublime bucks the drive toward totalization. It is not about rough edges or street credit, it is about uncompromised systems. A perfect sonnet, clapping

along in iambs, written now is a world: a too-believable world, too complete; it doesn't remind us of ours.

Does that mean a modern poet is incapable of writing in iambs? When are we writers only talking about form anymore? Are we at such a place historically that it is impossible to write a sonnet about death without its being read as an exercise in writing a sonnet about death? Perhaps the only things poems can be about anymore is poems. Weiskel offers a kind of answer: anymore, "to please us, the sublime must be abridged, reduced, and parodied as the grotesque, somehow hedged with irony to assure us we are not imaginative adolescents" (Weiskel 6).

Billy Collins, the recent two-time Poet Laureate of the United States, offers another, through his poem "Sonnet."

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,  
 and after this one just a dozen  
 to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,  
 then only ten more left like rows of beans.  
 How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan  
 and insist the iambic bongos must be played  
 and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,  
 one for every station of the cross.  
 But hang on here while we make the turn  
 into the final six where all will be resolved,  
 where longing and heartache will find an end,  
 where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,

take off those crazy medieval tights,  
 blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.

What Collins dodges here so artfully is what Wieskel terms “the guilt of original obedience” (10). This is what modern poets feel, stuck inside traditional forms *apparently unaware*. Collins knows he’s inside a form, and lets the reader know that he knows—that is, he lets the organ music come forward—in the first line of the poem. Lest the work be outsmarted, because a reader, seeing its shape will immediately say, “oh, this is one of those sonnets,” it announces the fact up front, saying, “hang on, *I know I’m a sonnet*, but this might not be so bad.” The poem even says “hang on there,” in line 9, “as we make the turn into the final six.” Lines, that is. It even places the word “turn” at the very hinge of the *volta* (or turn) to thwart even a clever reader from feeling proud at finding that.

A sonnet about death, then, is not, *cannot be* only a sonnet about death once the pervading culture is not one that deals with crisis in sonnet form. The immediacy is lost and—especially if it is written on a serious subject—it will always be read, at least in part, as an exercise in making a sonnet about death. Wieskel continues, “it was becoming disastrous not to leave home, strike out on one’s own, try to be original. The founding gesture of the ego was becoming the requisite for success.” The way Collins’ poem disengages itself from the trap of sincerity is to make a poem that is aware of itself as an artwork in the exact same way I’m suggesting the Romantics have: securing the poem’s originality, and aesthetic coherence by demonstrating the founding gesture of a larger conceptual deployment within the work.

Even Elizabeth Bishop’s well-known “One Art” is a kind of leaving home. Not only because it is a terribly original poem, though it is that, but because it introduces a spectator:

the poet as maker who is not only a subject in the poem, but a subject which is critical of the composition process. Its last stanza reads,

---Even losing you (the joking voice, a gesture  
I love) I shan't have lied. It's evident  
the art of losing's not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster. (*l.* 16-20)

The Maker-Poet knows that “disaster” is too cute, too neat a rhyme to end such a haunting piece, especially following a phrase as full of sentiment as “even losing you...” And so, preempting our cringe as readers--like Leigh Hunt, that--she creates in two words, a character who sympathizes with that cringe. She says, in effect, “I don’t want to write it, but the poem wants to go there, I know, I know, you can still trust me; I’m not trying to drive something straight into your heart.” And of course, by assuaging the guilt of original obedience through the trope, she does.

In the same way that the drive toward sublimity can be an escape, a way to *transcend* the world stained radiance of the world, so the modern drive to failure by way of authenticity, following Byron, must come from the presumption of a heaven above the world of the poem, an “else.” Bishop’s poem is one world until “(Write it)!” Then it splits into two: the poem’s world, and some “real world” in which writers struggle with motives, and with finishing poems.

“Great art wants to be true, as Adorno insists, aesthetic coherence is possible only under the condition that the work of art is true, therefore *art must turn itself against aesthetic illusion*, against everything that is illusory about it” (Wellmer 157). This is what makes these Romantics essentially modern poets. He continues,

The infinite spaces are no longer astonishing, still less do they terrify. They pique our curiosity, but we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the romantic sublime, this natural infinitude. We live once again in a finite natural world whose limits are beginning to press against us, and may well crush our children. (Weiskel 6)

How to avoid it? Wellmer argues, “the drive toward self-transcendence,” and this is exactly what I’ve been trying to describe through various methods from Keats to Coleridge to the present day,

has to be thought of in conjunction with its abiding autonomy. Only by remaining autonomous can art still generate that surplus by which, for a few moments at a time, a disenchanted world can be re-enchanted again, the dried riverbeds of ordinary communication can be flooded, and the structures of meaning we inhabit in our everyday world be shaken up. (169)

I love that sentence for the way it demonstrates, mid-step, its argument. After suggesting a re-enchantment of the disenchanted world, Wellman, in the next clause, re-enchants his didactic sentence with a metaphor about dried riverbeds—mellifluous and apt—before returning us, re-enchanted, to the world of the theoretical sentence, and in that of course, his model is Coleridge.

It is also what I love about the rest of Collins’ poem. After making his “little ship,” he brings in this character of Petrarch and has him doing specific character things, like sleeping and undressing. Weren’t we just talking about sonnet making? Well yes, but now the little ship of his own sonnet is finished, and sailing to what adventure? Having created a be-

lievable world by having it turn against its own illusions, he (the modern poet) can “take off those crazy tights/ and come at last to bed.”

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