

Formal Prospects: The Long Poem After Milton

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation examines how long form loco-descriptive poems written between 1660 1800 approach aesthetic experience as kinesthetic and embodied. Aesthetic theory since Addison has typically treated the experience or art as detached and contemplative, but the poems studied here challenge this approach. Contemporary scholars have read these poems from a perspective that holds the formal unity of a work of art to consist in an ideal axiom or moral precept. But these sprawling texts present artistic unity as prospective and open, emerging in line-by-line unfolding rather than existing as a transcendent predicate beyond them. The idealist tradition in philosophical aesthetics developed in foundational eighteenth-century critical theory still shapes contemporary debates about critical reading and methodology in literary studies, though scholars often fail to recognize or acknowledge it. This dissertation contests still-influential Enlightenment approaches to art and cognition and challenges the consensus that loco-descriptive poetry enacts fantasies of an imperious, remote observer, whose immobile eye orders the world around it. Instead, poems like John Milton's *Paradise Regain'd*, James Thomson's *Seasons*, William Cowper's *Task*, and William Blake's *Vala, or The Four Zoas*, join a critical tradition of common sense philosophy developed by Thomas Reid by rejecting the pervasive belief that cognition involves detached observation of the world by a single and unified optical

subject. These poems complicate critical narratives that narrowly define the visual culture of the Enlightenment in terms of the remote, unified and domineering viewer by exploring the prospects of an alternative eighteenth-century tradition of embodied aesthetics.

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## Chapter One

### John Milton and the Prospects of Enlightenment

*These old books suggested a certain fertility, an Ohio soil as if they were making a humus for new literature to spring in. I heard the bellowing of the bullfrogs and the hum of mosquitoes reverberating through the thick embossed covers when I had closed the book. Decayed literature makes the richest of all soils.* Henry David Thoreau

*Form does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide openness. Indeed, the conjunction of form with radical openness may be what can offer a version of the 'paradise' for which writing often yearns – a flowering focus on a distinct infinity.* Lyn Hejinian

Prospect views are ubiquitous in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century poetry because they provide a useful motif for poets to reflect on the ideas of order that influence their compositional practices. Prospects dramatize the creation of an aesthetic unity by positing a virtual observer, situated at a vantage, who organizes an expanse by identifying and integrating its elements into a whole. Prospects can thus disclose theories of formal unity and purposive arrangement, making them a moment of metapoetical reflection on the principles of order of the texts in which they appear. Critics have long known that prospects play a special role in loco-descriptive poetry, but as I show here the prospect view is not exclusive to topographical poems. The word “prospect” connotes both spatially comprehensive vision, and a temporally extended peering that gathers up the past in anticipation of the future. Its durational extension counters punctate, synoptic notions of sight. As simultaneously prospective and retrospective, prospects serve the temporal function of coordinating the past with a future projected spatially from the elevated vantage. They

anticipate futures by methodically coordinating elements in the composite scene, integrating foreground and background, while gesturing to distant possibilities.

The prospect view figures prominently in three principal areas during the Restoration and Enlightenment – in poetry, aesthetic theory, and in natural philosophy. This project shows how these three areas can be seen in productive conjunction, not as isolated pursuits. The figure recurs in each of these areas because of the work it does by staging the problem of formal unity. The central question posed by prospects is how unity emerges from a manifold. In poetry, the prospect consolidates problems pertaining to poetic form, and how poems, especially long descriptive ones, maintain internal self-similarity through time. In topographical verse, prospects reflect ordering principles, and present a rich site for theorizing unity. In aesthetic theory, particularly in the painterly aesthetics of John Dryden and Joseph Addison examined in the next chapter, the prospect view provides a visual example of how to balance aesthetically satisfying wholeness against requirements for rich detail. Aesthetic theory in the period grows out of natural philosophy, particularly out of questions posed by experimentalist and empiricist epistemology about how claims grounded in sense and dependent on particulars, can achieve general validity. In natural philosophy, the prospect dramatizes the experimentalist's effort to join into a conceptual unity the richness of empirical details. The integrity generated is of the nature of a general idea, abstracted from particulars of time, place, and perspective. In all three areas, the prospect queries sources of unity. Prospects thus afford insight into competing ideas of order during the Restoration and eighteenth century when loco-descriptive verse became ascendant. Prospects are about the integrity of a heterogeneous whole, and juggle a three-way analogy between the perceived unity of a landscape, the unity of a temporally extended work of

art like a poem, and the unity of a general idea that gathers under one heading multiple particular instances.

This study examines the poetics of the prospect in topographical verse written between 1660 and 1800. The poems I study afford ways of conceptualizing aesthetic experience and formal unity in terms of embodiment and kinesthetic activity in the physical world. While dominant theories of aesthetic experience during the period prioritized vision, detachment, and the specular unification of the landscape by the eye, by foregrounding the body's movement through space these poems present an aesthetic of the prospect that counteracts the premises of abstract ideal unity. Instead of providing a transcendent vision that organizes the world in accordance with a fixed vantage, the prospects I look at involve immersive contact with and exploration of the world. The corresponding ideas of order that they develop prioritize processes and techniques of methodical integration as a form of experiential *poesis*, against the idea that sense experience involves mimetic replication of the world in static images in the mind. These poems comprise a countercurrent in eighteenth-century aesthetics, and critique the dominant *camera obscura* model of vision, empiricist assumptions about sense, and the aesthetic program that arose with them. The prospect aesthetics I am interested in explore technical processes of mediation, and the way physical interaction with the world constructs the space of experience. The tradition of prospect poetry I identify helps rethink the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth century in terms of ecological immersion in networks of relation that cut against theories of sense and vision that isolate the subject from the world.

Long poems composed in this period pose a unique challenge to the influential critical methods that arose contemporaneously with them, which rely on assumptions about the discrete unity of aesthetic form. These methods exerted tremendous influence on the development of

English literary criticism. In recent years they have come under increased scrutiny and fueled a rich debate in literary studies about form and critical reading. But these debates, on the whole, have failed to reconsider the very texts that gave rise to problematic assumptions about literary composition in the first place, like the view that literature is an after-effect of something more fundamental. My project historicizes the contemporary reading debates by connecting them to assumptions incorporated in the foundations of aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century. The long poems I study tend towards expansiveness and are encyclopedic in their scope. As a result, they are uniquely irreducible to the kinds of generalizations scholars and critics have produced to interpret and organize them. Building on recent studies in art history and history of science on the visual aspects of Enlightenment natural philosophy, I examine techniques of disciplined and curated attention shared by scientific practice and descriptive poetry. Descriptive poetry develops alongside and in concert with new forms of attention and composition central to the period's observational sciences. Investigating the visuality of long-eighteenth-century science and poetry allows me to track the flow of central terms from aesthetics, such as function, purpose, and form, to various strains of Enlightenment materialism during the period that saw the emergence of discrete disciplines. Aesthetics became a viable and distinct area of philosophical inquiry in the course of the eighteenth century at the same time that modern divisions of knowledge were beginning to take shape. Aesthetics was gradually distinguished from practical and theoretical philosophy, but as the "science of sensory knowledge," it maintained a close association with the empirical study of nature.<sup>1</sup> The long-poems that I study are primary sites for theorizing questions in Enlightenment natural philosophy concerning continuity through change, identity, and teleology. These problems also occupy pride of place in eighteenth-century debates around

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Baumgarten defined aesthetics as "the science of sense," in his *Reflections on Poetry* trans. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954) 78.

materialism and organic development. Early aesthetics takes shape through these debates centering on empiricist theories of sensation, contingency, and the communicability of subjectively grounded, but generally valid judgments. Current scholarship about methodology in literary studies has largely overlooked the way that eighteenth century aesthetic theory codified ideas about form and the purposes of literary writing that continue to influence critical practice.

### Traditions of the Prospect

A generation of historicist critics has thoroughly critiqued loco-descriptive poetry to show how its descriptions cloak ideology in natural imagery, and dissolve social struggle and political strife through the representation of smooth aesthetic surfaces. John Barrell, Eric Gidal, W. J. T. Mitchell, James Grantham Turner, and Ann Bermingham, for example, have singled out the prospect view for criticism.<sup>2</sup> For them, the prospect represents the impulse to dominate the natural world, and is emblematic of the totalizing subject of Enlightenment rationality.

According to these critics prospect views conceal ideologically suspect ideas about forming, and feature a disembodied observer whose position is analogous to the disciplinary eye at the center of Bentham's panopticon. The spatial dynamics of elevation convey a sense of mastery and control, investing the prospect with exclusive and totalizing authority. According to Barrell, the

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<sup>2</sup> Historicist critiques have dominated approaches to prospect poetry, and loco-descriptive verse more generally since the 1970s. John Barrell's work has been particularly influential, especially his powerful interpretations of the syntax of the prospect view in terms of Claudian landscape in *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1972). See also his *English Literature in History 1730-1780: An Equal and Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983); *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1980); and "Being is Perceiving: James Thomson and John Clare" in *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester UP 1988). The ideology of landscape representation is the topic of James Turner's *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry, 1630-1660* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1979); and Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986). More recently, Eric Gidal has connected the imperial prospect with the practice of *wunderkammern* and the museum curio, in "Prospect and Form in Eighteenth-Century Progress Poetry" in *Ricerche di Storia dell'arte* 72 (2000): 21-28. Mitchell's approach to prospect poetry is specifically postcolonial, in his essay "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 1-34.

disembodied eye of the prospect is a proxy for the privileged aristocrat who surveys his vast landholdings, and bends all that he sees to his economic interests. Mitchell extends the argument, saying that the aristocratic eye that dominates the surroundings is an analog for the imperious eye of colonial expansion and resource extraction. But recently, critics like Kevis Goodman, David Fairer, Jonathan Kramnick and Heather Keenleyside have identified alternative approaches to topographical poetry, and explored sites in eighteenth-century literature where ecological approaches to human experience contest the ideology of optical objectification.<sup>3</sup> While Barrell's and Mitchell's critiques hold for a number of the prospect poems of the period, a rich counter-tradition provides ways of thinking about human experience as coextensive with and immersed in a world of ecological unfolding.

The counter-tradition in prospect poetry contains examples that explicitly critique the dynamics of optical separation, objectification, and control. Among these, the most influential instance is the view Satan composes as the third temptation of Jesus in *Paradise Regain'd*. Critics have long recognized Milton's influence on the English topographical tradition, and they tend to single out for comment Milton's lush descriptions of Eden in *Paradise Lost*.<sup>4</sup> But the georgic-inflected four-book "brief epic," arguably contains Milton's most sustained engagement with the *topos* of prospect poetry. Satan's prospect-temptation spans the third and fourth books of the poem, and follows after his initial attempts to tempt Jesus with various pleasures of the

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<sup>3</sup> See Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and Living Being in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016); Jonathan Kramnick, *Paper Minds: Literature and the Ecology of Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); David Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century, 1700-1789* (New York: Longman, 2003), and "'Where Fuming Trees Refresh the Thirsty Air': The World of Eco-Georgic" *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 20 (2011) 201-18.

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 296-352.

flesh, like indulgent food and sexual gratification.<sup>5</sup> Those failing, Satan tries another tack by challenging Jesus's vocation as savior. Jesus knows nothing of the world of power and the affairs of kings and leaders, Satan claims, and so what hope could he possibly have to become king of Israel. Jesus has lived "obscure,/ unmarkt, unknown" (1.24-25). "What thence," Satan queries, "could'st thou observe?" (3.235). Satan construes understanding the world and power in visual terms, as a function of surveillance. Limited to his mother's house in Galilee, Jesus has not seen how the world works. "The world thou hast not seen, much less her glory,/ Empires, and Monarchs, and their radiant courts/ Best school of best experience, quickest in sight/ In all things that to greatest actions lead" (3.236-39). For Satan, the world's glory is summed up in the gaudy accoutrements of worldly power. He assumes that Jesus's triumph will involve political revolution, and the violent overthrow of Herod and Rome, concluding with Jesus seated upon "thy father David's throne." One of the reasons *Paradise Regain'd* can be a frustrating and difficult poem is that readers, like Satan, expect a violent confrontation, and the physical defeat of Satan. The expectation is for cataclysmic action, but the poem delivers a largely spiritual and internal struggle.

Satan presents his prospect as instructive. Jesus is meant to learn from it the ways of worldly power and authority so that he can successfully claim his throne. The vision provides a shortcut to this knowledge: Satan describes it as the "quickest in sight," a way to gain experiential understanding without laboring to achieve it.

I will bring thee where thou soon shalt quit

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Gregory W. Bredbeck suggests the intimations of homoerotic sexuality in the "tall stripling youths rich clad" that tend to the table Satan has set, in "Milton's Ganymede: Negotiation of Homoerotic Tradition in *Paradise Regained*" *PMLA* (106) 1991, 262-76. Emily Babcock says that Satan's temptations proceed along a vertical axis from flesh to spirit in "Physical and Metaphorical Hunger: The Extra-Biblical Temptations of *Paradise Regained*" *Milton Quarterly*, 26 (1992): 36-42. The sumptuous excess of the banquet scene, and its explicit violation of Mosaic law is the topic of Alinda Summers's, "The Banqueting Scene in *Paradise Regained*: Milton's Temptation to the Anti-Puritan Appetite," in *Praise Disjoined: Changing Patterns of Salvation in Seventeenth Century English Literature* (New York: P. Lang, 1991) 273-302.

Those rudiments, and see before thine eyes  
 The monarchies of the Earth, this pomp and state,  
 Sufficient introduction to inform  
 Thee of thy self so apt, in Regal Arts,  
 And Regal Mysteries; that thou may'st know  
 How best their opposition to withstand. (3.244-50)

To gain this commanding ground, Jesus must first shed the “rudiments,” of his simple upbringing and human limitations. Satan grants him a transcendent vantage where he will be able to survey the world at once. What he essentially offers Jesus is an imitation of God’s seat, described in book three of *Paradise Lost* as “the pure Empyrean [...] High Thron’d above all highth . . . / His own works and their works at once to view” (3.57-58, 59). From God’s “prospect high/ . . . past, present, future he beholds,” (3.78-79). Satan offers a simulacrum of this position, and his repeated comments about “your father’s throne,” indicate that by claiming this vantage and ascending to his rightful seat, Jesus will be able to defeat the forces arrayed against him.

The privileged height that Satan offers inverts the poem’s opening. Christ is introduced in epic style, with the patronymic “Son of Joseph.” Parentage is the central question of the text, and the patronymic emphasizes Jesus’s humanity. Satan suggests that the “rudiments” he needs to cast off are his worldly portion, his humanity. The question of patrilineal descent is central to Satan’s attempts on Jesus, and in offering him an imitation of God’s throne, Satan hints that Jesus should accede to heavenly authority, if indeed he is the rightful heir. Satan prods Jesus to openly disclose his heavenly nature, sounding “In what degree thou art called/ The son of God, which bears no single sense/ The son of God I also am, or was/ And if I was, I am; relation stands;/ All men are sons of God” (4.516-20). His goading here and throughout is intended to get

Jesus to reveal himself by renouncing his kenotic, human self. Satan's temptation is transcendence of the flesh. The spatial dynamics of Satan's offered ascent invert Jesus's submission, at the beginning of the poem, to baptism by John the Baptist, who "witness bore/ As to his worthier, and would have resign'd to him his Heavenly Office" (1.27-28). But this is precisely what Jesus refuses to do. His consistent gesture is not one of ascetic refusal, as critics claim, but a rejection of hierarchy, and its figuration as spatial elevation.<sup>6</sup> In Satan's view, Jesus's vocation requires casting off his finite human side to become fully God on Earth, modeled on the "Regal Arts," that elevate a king above his subjects.

The first view Satan presents to Jesus is eastward towards the Parthian empire and the armies arrayed between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The position is one of fixity, from which Jesus could command the entire eastern expanse, should he acquiesce to Satan's temptation.

It was a mountain at whose verdant feet  
 A spacious plain out stretch't in circuit wide  
 Lay pleasant; from his side two rivers flow'd  
 Th'one winding, the other strait and left between  
 Fair champlain, with less rivers interveind,  
 Then meeting join'd their tribute to the sea:  
 Fertile of corn the glebe, of oyl and wine  
 With herds the pastures throng'd, with flocks the hills,  
 Huge cities and high towr'd that well might seem  
 The seats of mightiest monarchs, and so large  
 The prospect was, that there was room

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<sup>6</sup> For a survey of negative assessments of the poem, and particularly its ascetic frigidity, see Alan Fisher's "Why is *Paradise Regain'd* So Cold?" in *Milton Studies* 14 (1980) 195-217.

For barren desert fountainless and dry (3.253-64).

The view is paradigmatic for prospect poetry. It begins in the mid-foreground, along the mountain's flank before following the course of rivers over a fertile, agrarian middle, moving towards distant towers and civilizations, eventually disappearing in an indistinct horizon. Enjambment punctuates the perspective as the eye moves from point to point, hovering over specific features. Lorraine Daston distinguishes the ideal, martial *coup d'oeil* as "immediate, holistic indubitable, and perhaps . . . also structural," but "detached from the senses. . . . It is all *coup* and no *oeil*" (312).<sup>7</sup> Here, the synoptic sweep of the eye is subordinated to the successive, poetically measured composition of the view as a temporally extended process. The prospect and the extended topographical description that follows visually links the temptation with the assumption of an elevated position that connects visually to the "high tow'r'd" seats of monarchs. Satan very carefully curates this landscape, arranging it around an imperial center to tempt Jesus to seize such a position for himself.

There is a tendency in the critical literature on prospect poetry to overlook the dramatic aspect of the view.<sup>8</sup> By couching this landscape depiction as a form of temptation, Milton is suggesting that the objectifying eye of the imperial center represents an attempt to claim a powerful perspective reserved for God. In the last two lines of the prospect, Milton subtly undermines Satan's attempt to provide a view from nowhere, as the prospect becomes entangled in the desert wilderness in which Jesus has been wandering. The purpose of Satan's arrangement is to suggest that the entire landscape could be Jesus' possession, and that he could find his way

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<sup>7</sup> Daston, "The *Coup d'Oeil*: On a Mode of Understanding" *Critical Inquiry* 49.2 (2019) 307-31.

<sup>8</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, for instance, interprets the description of Eden from an ideal position in book four of *Paradise Lost* as enacting the optical ideology of colonial organization, calling it "Milton's description of Paradise." Mitchell acknowledges that the landscape is "framed by the consciousness of Satan," himself presented as a colonist on an imperial mission from Hell, but doesn't elaborate on how this dramatic framing affects how the prospect should be read. See "Imperial Landscape," (1994) 11-12.

from the “barren desert,” in which he is lost to the mountaintop if he only reveals his divinity. The claim is that Jesus could readily transcend his present suffering through what Satan presents as a short-cut to power: “Well have we speeded o’re hill and dale,/ Forest and Field and Flood, Temples and Towers/ Cut shorter many a league” (3.267-69). Satan continues pointing out civilizations in passing as the vision he offers the Son speeds over the landscape, blurring details into indistinct “Forest and Field and Flood.” The extension over the landscape is spectatorial, and the vision operates at a level of generality removed from the distinctive particularities of the ground. The speeding eye thus represents a radical contrast to Jesus’s pedestrian wandering, which has involved an ambulatory, ground-level interaction with the surrounding “barren wastes.”

The fourth book of the poem begins with Satan and Jesus still on the ideal mountaintop. Critics have identified it with Mt. Niphates, though the mountain is never named in the poem. Its existence, with its perspective commanding the world, both east and west, is ideal.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the third book, Jesus rebuffs Satan’s entreaty to claim the Parthian armies for his own and use them to unseat Herod. Milton mostly suppresses the conventional furniture of epic in *Paradise Regain’d*. There are no grand battles; the action is tertiary; and the writing lacks the flourishes, such as epic simile, that distinguish *Paradise Lost*.<sup>10</sup> But at the beginning of the fourth book, Milton describes Satan first as “A man matchless held in cunning,” who, when bested, “To salve his credit, and for very spight/ Still will be tempting him who foys him still” (4.10; 12). As the simile unfolds, Satan appears,

As a swarm of flies in vintage time

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<sup>9</sup> On the ideality of the bird’s-eye view in Enlightenment cartography, see Daston “The *Coup d’Oeil*” (2019).

<sup>10</sup> John Shawcross writes that “The emphasis on unity and concentration within the poem has created a bareness of style,” in “The Genres of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*: The Wisdom of their Joint Publication” *Milton Studies* 17 (1983) 229.

About the wine-press where sweet moust is pour'd  
 Beat off, return as oft with humming sound  
 Or surging waves against a solid rock  
 Though all to shivers dash't, the assault renew,  
 Vain batter, and in froth of bubbles end  
 So Satan. (4.15-21)

In one of poem's two epic similes, Satan at first appears as a vain, defeated boaster.<sup>11</sup> The temporality of "Still will be tempting," is particularly striking. The future progressive tense gives the sense of an endlessly renewed activity. As the vehicles develop, he becomes an indistinct, de-individuated crowd symbol, a generalized antipathetic force that works endlessly. The characterization raises questions about endings. Ostensibly, the plot of the poem is Satan's defeat, but the simile naturalizes Satan's temptations by equating them to recurrent rhythms in the natural world. The simile says that Satan's assaults cannot be defeated in the conventional sense of military triumph. The second vehicle of waves beating against an unmoved rock indicates that even the gesture of beating off flies is pointless, and foreshadows the final vision of Jesus standing upright, like the rock, on the temple's pinnacle at the poem's conclusion. The coordinating conjunction, "or," works in typically Miltonic fashion by presenting extensions and complications, a form of involution and retrospective commentary rather than logical alternative. The progression between the first and second vehicle is from a human drama of pride to an image of endless repetition. For all the vintner's waving, the flies will return. In the fourth book, Satan's assaults take on a rhythmic repetition that suggests guarding against him – the gesture of standing so important to the conclusion – is endless work.

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<sup>11</sup> On the relation of the two similes to the poem's sense of ceaseless conflict, see René E. Fortin, "The Climactic Similes of *Paradise Regained*: 'True' Wisdom or 'False' Resemblance" *Milton Quarterly* 7.2 (1973) 39-43.

From the idealized hilltop, Satan now directs Jesus's eye westward, "Whence he might behold/ Another plain, long in breadth, not wide" (4.26-27). The view this time is of the Italian peninsula, and the seven hills surrounding Rome. Satan points the way, and Jesus perceives, "Above the highth of Mountains interpos'd./ By what strange Parallax or Optic skill/ Or vision multiply'd through air or glass/ Of telescope were curious to enquire" (4.39-43). Milton here connects the prospect explicitly to the visual culture of early modern science, and to an enhancement that defeats physical limits. The lines recall the mention of "optic glass" in *Paradise Lost*, and there is an implication of distrust towards mechanical enhancements of sight.<sup>12</sup> But Milton was far from anti-scientific. He is skeptical of the idea that technological enhancements of vision, what Bacon calls "helps," on their own can overcome the limits of human sense, or can convert human "discursive reason" into intuitive reason (*PL* 2.488).<sup>13</sup> The language here bears greater scrutiny: Milton is using the terms of philosophical optics, like "parallax," but the "or" here, unlike its use in the simile above, modulates between incommensurable perspectives. The effect is to show the view as impossible. Parallax is the phenomenon of unified vision, much puzzled over after Kepler showed how the lens of each eye projects an inverted image onto the optic nerve. In spite of the dual inputs humans experience single vision, like the one-eyed view through a telescope. But unlike the vision through a telescope, what Satan offers isn't a simple magnification. It involves bending over interposed obstacles. *Paradise Regain'd* is roughly 75% dialogue, with few comments from the narrator, so

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<sup>12</sup> "The broad circumference  
Hung on his shoulders like the Moon, whose orb  
Through Optic Glass the Tuscan Artist views  
At evening from the top of Fesole  
Or in Valdarno to descry new lands" (*Paradise Lost* 1.286-90).

<sup>13</sup> On Milton's Baconianism, see Catherine Gimelli Martin, "Rewriting the Revolution: Milton, Bacon, and the Royal Society Rhetoricians" in *Science, Literature, and Rhetoric in Early Modern England* (New York: Routledge, 2007) eds. Juliet Cummins and David Purchell; on the complex engagement with early-modern science in *Paradise Lost*, see Martin, *Ruins of Allegory: Paradise Lost and the Metamorphosis of Epic Convention* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) 162-200.

this interjection is rare in the poem. The form of the poem's dramatic structure contributes to its inscrutability and the feeling of resistance with which it meets readers.<sup>14</sup> But the epic simile and the brief comment from the narrator on Satan's peculiar optical array link the vantage to both his endlessly repeated onslaught, and to an optical regime of detached observation. The objectifying, transcendental platform Satan offers, the "view from nowhere," he presents to the Son is the temptation of disembodied seeing, invested with the power to master time and space, from east to west.<sup>15</sup>

The vantage Satan extends to Jesus is ideal. It can unify in a single synoptic view the entire known world through the obscure means of "optic skill." The narrator's comment links the ideal unity of the prospect to Satan's manipulations, and to his attempt to entice Jesus to seize the promontory for his rightful seat, erecting thereon his "father's throne," with the implied usurpation of God's commanding seat. "Aim therefore at no less than all the world,/ Aim at the highest, without the highest attained,/ Will be for thee no sitting, or not long/ On David's throne" (4.105-8). In characteristic fashion, Satan collapses divine and worldly power, just as in *Paradise Lost* his temptation of Eve dissolves abstract knowledge into physical eating through the motif of "sapience:" "O Sovran, vertuous, precious of all Trees/ In Paradise, of operation blest/ To Sapience, hitherto obscur'd" (9.795-97).<sup>16</sup> Satan offers all "the kingdoms of the world," with the implication that as rightful heir, Jesus's claim extends to his father's seat, implicitly enjoining

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<sup>14</sup> On the feeling of the poem's resistance to reading, see Fisher, "Why is *Paradise Regained* So Cold," and Fish, "Things and Actions Indifferent: The Temptation of Plot in *Paradise Regained*" in *Milton Studies* 17 (1983) 163-85.

<sup>15</sup> The phrase "view from nowhere," comes from Thomas Nagel's book by that title. Nagel describes the "view from nowhere," as an achievement of Enlightenment objectivity, achieved by self-abstraction and testing against a community of observers. See Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 13-27. His account of objectivity has been countered by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, in *Objectivity*, (New York: Zone, 2007) where they suggest that mechanical objectivity as an epistemic ideal is quite new in the history of science, dating from the late nineteenth century and emerging in concert with technologies like film. Joanna Picciotto has recently examined the discourse of objectivity in the seventeenth-century, but her emphasis is squarely on the normative and collective work of virtual witnessing, and the vetting of sense experience by a community of inquiry, in *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> On the peculiar blending of knowing and eating in *Paradise Lost*, and the nexus of the two in the word "sapience," see Denise Gigante, "Milton's Aesthetics of Eating," *Diacritics* 30.2 (2000) 88-112.

Jesus to repeat Satan's own sin by attempting to seize Godhead. Most importantly here is that the position of divine authority is connected with the visuality of the imperial prospect. For Milton, objectifying, self-transcending sight extends Satan's transgression to optics by claiming divine visual authority for itself.

Satan's prospect view consolidates the tropes of imperial vision: elevation, disembodiment, transcendence of the limits of finite sight, and power. His imperial eye claims dominion and control, or at least offers out these things as a temptation to Jesus, and converts them into a visual paradigm in which the world is organized into a static tableau around, and in deference to, the commanding center. The prospective eye masters the natural, social, and political worlds by collapsing them into a single image, brought to unity for consumption by the fixed spectator. Meanwhile, the spectator occupies a position set apart, elevated to an ideal plane, disentangled from the limits of the body, and the contingencies of perspective. Satan's first gesture is to strip off the rudiments of perspective as obstacles to the ideal vantage. In this way, Satan's prospect enacts the power dynamics of observation denounced by subsequent critics of Enlightenment visual culture. However, by presenting these dynamics as Satanic, Milton anticipates the critique.

The view Satan presents to Jesus involves the eye mastering the surrounding landscape. Kevis Goodman describes this kind of prospect as the "contemplative, distanced, selectively comprehensive perspective," of an idealized "philosophical eye" (39). The "philosophical eye" aims at uniting the manifold of fragmentary space into a single image. John Barrell connects this comprehensive view with nationalist projects of identity formation and empire-building. The view protects the abstract unity of the spectatorial subject at the same time that it also creates a separate world of objects, arrayed around an imperial center. Satan presents to Jesus, perched on

the idealized top of an impossible promontory, an imperial fantasy of east and west grasped in a synoptic vision. Barrell writes of the prospects in James Thomson's *Seasons* that "an 'idea' of the landscape has been imposed," and the unity achieved "without too many details that might make us aware of it as a particular locality," by the imposition of an organizing schematic is abstract and conceptual.<sup>17</sup> "These semiotic features of landscape," W. J. T. Mitchell claims, "are tailor-made for the discourse of imperialism, which conceives itself precisely (and simultaneously) as an expansion of landscape, understood as inevitable progressive development in history, an expansion of 'culture,' and 'civilization' into a national space."<sup>18</sup> The centrally positioned, ideal eye disciplines the world by reducing its refractions to a smooth visual array. Satan assures Jesus that if he doesn't seize this commanding height for himself, he will never secure his throne against threats, and implies that obtaining the vantage will affirm his divine parentage, since the Archimedean platform offered by Satan is properly God's alone. The imperial eye consolidates the landscape, arranging its elements into fixed emblems of stable political, social, and epistemological orders.

The prospect view Satan offers is itself a kind of parody in advance of the dominating tendencies of "Enlightenment reason," and its visual program of optical mastery. The visual paradigm articulated by Satan involves reducing difference and heterogeneity to the unity of a single, graspable entity, like an idea or concept. The model for this is ideal, in which diverse sense impressions are smoothed and the vagaries of particular perspective and physical locality are subordinated to the universal. The panoramic view generates an allegorical landscape characterized by spatial and temporal continuity between past and present, depicted visually through the seamless integration of foreground and background. The resulting landscape layers

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<sup>17</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972) 27

<sup>18</sup> Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 17.

natural scenery with history and nationalism by reifying historically contingent political and social formations. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer denounce this as the “method,” of the Enlightenment, which they define in terms of the “categorization,” of the world by “instrumental reason,” into a fixed conceptual tableau. The desired “mastery of nature,” they identify plays out in visual culture as the arrangement of heterogeneous details into an aesthetic whole that mystifies, or otherwise suppresses the fractious world of experience. The eye of “instrumental reason,” stands accused here of an ideologically motivated suppression of discontinuities, presenting an image of nature viewed from an ideal perspective outside of it. Their critique, and that of many scholars who have adopted historicist approaches to landscape and topographical poetry, assume a unified Enlightenment attitude reducible to an idea of submitting everything in nature to the autocratic self. At the center of these critiques is the domineering subject of the Enlightenment: the detached, aristocratic sovereign man, who learns to master nature in order to bend it to proto-capitalist ends.

Historicist critiques of Enlightenment visuality have recently come under criticism for duplicating many of the gestures of Enlightenment epistemology that they claim to disclose.<sup>19</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have studied the history of scientific image making, and found that the supposedly objectifying gaze of the scientific viewer emerged much later, in the nineteenth century, in connection with technologies for mechanical reproduction.<sup>20</sup> Expertise in the Enlightenment, they argue, was a function of physical familiarity and accumulated bodily experience. Joanna Picciotto describes the entanglement of *otium* and *negotium* in seventeenth-century natural philosophy, and claims that the abstracted subject of “Enlightenment reason” targeted by historicist criticism has little to do with the experimentalist program inaugurated by

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<sup>19</sup> On the tendency of historicist critique to appropriate the posture of the coolly detached observer, see Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 1-21.

<sup>20</sup> Daston and Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2010) 115-190

Francis Bacon. Intellectual work during the period unfolded in workshops and laboratories rather than armchairs, through technical skill and labor, as part of an emergent network of material practice and virtual witnessing that she calls the “corporate personhood” of natural philosophy.<sup>21</sup> The creation of knowledge was a messy process of working physically with materials. Pamela Smith claims that early-modern scientific practices like grinding lenses for telescopes and compounding metals for tools first developed in craft guilds and artisanal workshops. The crucible of natural philosophy, she explains, was the goldsmith’s workshop and the painter’s guild where experiments in alloys and mixing paints produced a “material language” of skillful know-how that relied on embodied “vernacular knowledge.”<sup>22</sup> These accounts complicate the view of Enlightenment natural philosophy as prioritizing an abstract, optical subject, and point to an alternative experimental and practical tradition of kinesthetic involvement with the material world.

It is essential to recall that the vantage offered in the final two books of *Paradise Regain’d* is an imaginary one, conjured up by Satan to tempt Jesus to usurp the position of an autocratic, transcendent “I.” By presenting this position as a temptation, Milton anticipates the critical approach to Enlightenment visuality, disclosing as Satanic its idealization of the subject by casting off the “rudiments” of embodied perspective and finite sensibility. In *Paradise Regain’d*, and in the topographical and georgic traditions that follow it, there is an alternative to the domineering eye. Before Satan arrives on the scene to present the third temptation, Milton shows Jesus wandering in the desert.<sup>23</sup> Despite its finely wrought four-part structure, the poem has an anti-climactic flatness, marked by the word “wander,” which recurs at regular intervals

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<sup>21</sup> Piccotto, *Labors of Innocence in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Lewalski, *Milton’s Brief Epic: The Genre, Meaning and Art of Paradise Regained* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1966).

when Jesus reflects on his condition. While the poem resonates with elements of epic, it lacks the forward drive of narrative. The word “wander” is significant here because it marks an ambulatory, pedestrian aimlessness that counteracts the teleological thrust of biblical history, and of Virgilian epic.<sup>24</sup> “Where will this end?” Jesus asks, and the question echoes through the poem. Jesus’s “this” is sufficiently ambiguous to dilate, expanding to include not just his wanderings in the wilderness and the narrative of the poem, but also the broader vocation that Satan hopes to get him to reveal. Milton allows the question to reverberate, intimating the end of Jesus’s life in the passion. Many critics have observed the peculiarity of Milton selecting the temptation of Christ for his “brief epic,” rather than the more dramatic crucifixion and resurrection. But the violent end of Jesus’s life is hinted at throughout the poem, as in Mary’s concern in the second book, and in Satan’s recurrent fear about his prophesied defeat. Jesus’s question about endings suggests the haunting presence of the passion in the same manner that Milton, in the “Nativity Ode,” presents the terrifying image of the infant Christ crucified: “the babe lies yet in smiling Infancy/ That on the bitter cross/ Must redeem our loss” (151-153). The contiguity of the smiling child and the crucified man echoes in Jesus’s uncertain question about his ending, and the purpose of his wandering. *Paradise Regain’d* raises significant questions about endings and definitive action, as the epic simile shows. Jesus, too, seems uncertain about the possibility of heroic action bringing about definitive closure. Milton rejects the notion that redemption is bought by the bloody spectacle of the Crucifixion by refocusing the question of regaining

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<sup>24</sup> Frank Kermode writes about Milton’s criticism of the hero of classical epic through his redefinition of heroism in terms of Christian self-control in “Milton’s Hero,” *The Review of English Studies* 4.16 (1953) 317-330. John Shawcross compares Aeneas’s and Jesus’s nation-founding vocations in “The Genres of *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*: The Wisdom of Their Joint Publication” *Milton Studies* (1983). More recently, Christopher Bond contrasts the moral perfection of Christ as epic hero from Aeneas and Adam in *Spenser, Milton, and the Redemption of the Epic Hero*, chapter 4, “The Evolving Perfection of Milton’s Christ” (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011), 169-206.

paradise on the narrower but vastly more important, more human conflict of Jesus's resistance to temptation.

The immediate context of Jesus's question is his wandering in the wilderness, but Milton has made Jesus's wandering the dramatic center of his life, instead of a more spectacular moment, like the passion. "Four times ten days I have pass'd/ Wandring this woody maze, and humane food/ Nor tasted nor had appetite" (2.244-47). The image of wandering the "woody maze," echoing images of fallen existence from *Paradise Lost*, in conjunction with the question about endings, raises doubts about the purpose of both Jesus's life and the reasons he was led into the desert in the first place. The ambiguity of the line, "nor tasted nor had appetite," makes it uncertain whether Jesus suffers as a human in the desert. The issue of Jesus's hunger is a question of kenosis, or Jesus's divinity while on earth, and his susceptibility to human desire and weakness.<sup>25</sup> The double negation of the repeated "nor" in the line suggests that Jesus does suffer human hunger, as he makes clear when he says, "if nature need not,/ Or God support Nature without repast/ Though needing, what praise is it to endure?/ But now I feel hunger" (2.249-52). Jesus's hunger marks him here as subject to human needs and desires, which indicates that he resists Satan's temptations for mastery as a human rather than as the Son of God. The series of questions and Jesus's doubtful, interrogative mood emphasize his physical, human condition, and connects it to a state of indeterminate wandering. Jesus's pedestrian limitations and his uncertainty about himself and his parentage are what Satan tempts him to transcend.

Satan fixates on Jesus's lineage and the status of his divinity, and his temptations are concocted to get Jesus to dramatically disclose his parentage through divine or otherworldly

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<sup>25</sup> On the question of whether Jesus is tempted as a human, see Joseph Manry, "Does Relation Stand?: Textual and Social Relation in *Paradise Regained*," *Milton Studies* 56 (2015) 45-72.

action.<sup>26</sup> The result is that in *Paradise Regain'd*, as in *Paradise Lost*, the reader and Satan are brought into a similar position of expectation, since what we want from the poem is the vivid revelation of Jesus as Christ the Redeemer, through his triumph over Satan.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the poem's opening teases this expectation by promising Satan's defeat and "Eden rais'd in the wast wilderness" (1.7). Before Satan presents the lavish banquet spread to a humanly hungry Jesus in the second temptation, Jesus mounts a small hill to survey his surroundings. The second and third temptations involve first sexual and bodily appetite, and second wealth, glory, and dominion.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, Satan appeals to the desire to possess and consume, as one takes food into the body or claims territory as monarch. But Jesus's prospect view presents an alternative to Satan's acquisitive relationship to the world: "Up to a hill anon his steps he rear'd/ From whose high top to ken the prospect round" (2.285-86). This vantage anticipates the one proffered by Satan, but with crucial differences. The latinate syntax labors the steps, and gives a sense of firmly grounded, pedestrian motion that contrasts to Satan's optical speeding "o're hill and dale." Jesus's vantage is achieved through work, and his exhaustion – "fasting he went to sleep and fasting wak'd" – emphasizes the physicality of the prospect. The verb "to ken," derives from the Anglo-Saxon "can," which retains its connection to know-how, and physical ability. "Can" connects to a family of verbs connoting physical familiarity. While the OED cites this line as an instance of discovery by sight, it remains contextualized by a particular mode of visual experience that emphasizes physical presence and embodied understanding. "To ken" is distinguished from theoretical or abstract knowledge, and connects to practical know-how. "To ken," a place, then, is to come to an understanding of it through physical familiarity. Jesus's

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<sup>26</sup> Louis Martz, "Paradise Regained: The Meditative Combat," *ELH* 27.3 (1960).

<sup>27</sup> Fish, "Things Indifferent: The Temptation of Plot in *Paradise Regained*" *Milton Studies* 17 (1983) 163-85.

<sup>28</sup> On the progression of temptations, see John Shawcross, "Milton's *Paradise Regain'd* and the Second Temptation," *ANQ: A Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* 21.2 (2008) 35

prospect view differs from Satan's repeated enjoinder to "Behold." Where kenning, with its etymological connections to cunning, suggests reciprocity between observer and the world, beholding involves separating the subject, isolating the viewer from an object world fixed by his gaze. "To ken" the prospect is to come to know it through immersive, ambulatory contact. It involves looking around from a vantage, noting the path from the "woody maze," and speculating where it may lead: "where will this end?"

The two prospects represent two alternative approaches to visual experience. The prospect offered to Jesus by Satan dramatizes the imperious eye that critics have broadly attributed to the period, while the prospect of Jesus in the wilderness presents a more limited view, within the narrower circuit of the methodical unfolding of his wandering steps. "If cottage were in view, sheep-cote or herd,/ But cottage, herd, or sheep-cote none he saw/ Only in a bottom saw a pleasant grove/ With chaunt of tuneful birds resounding loud;/ Thither he bent his way, determin'd/ There to rest at noon" (2.287-91). Topographically, the view anticipates aspects of the Satanic vantage, in that the height does provide Jesus with a view of the surroundings, but his view focuses what the physical setting offers to the sensitive observer: a place to rest, shade from the mid-day sun, the pleasant sound of birds. Rather than figuring an ideal ascent, the prospect here guides attention along a route. The prospect presents a limited path forward, and a sense of where he will walk next. The scene, and the smaller, finite pleasure it offers stand in contrast to the elaborate and sumptuous optical array presented by Satan. Where Satan asks Jesus, "Hast thou not right to all created things?" Jesus rejects appropriative, acquisitive vision. His relation to the physical world is not driven by possessiveness. The view here still has purpose, it still peers forward and presents possible paths ahead, but its scale is smaller, more concrete, and the glimpses of the future are provisional, offering limited intimations of what

comes next instead of a totalizing view that would definitively answer the poem's lingering questions about purpose, vocation, and parentage.

The competing prospects both present ideas of formal order. Where Satan's view centers on an ideal, transcendent vantage that distributes the world around its fixed position, Jesus's prospect is embedded in the pedestrian thematics of *Paradise Regain'd*. The poem has been described as Milton's most tautly controlled, formally integrated work, and its tight organization, direct style and narrow focus make it a very different poem from *Paradise Lost*.<sup>29</sup> Unlike that more expansive poem, *Paradise Regain'd* has none of the epic machinery of battles and universe-spanning cosmology. Milton, whose interjections and self-reflections in *Paradise Lost* Coleridge thought that poem's greatest achievement, virtually disappears in the later work. The focus on the verbal exchange between Jesus and Satan shows the poem's principal purpose to be a fundamental rethinking of biblical teleology. The opening lines, "Now sing/ Recover'd Paradise to all mankind" (1.2-3) suggest that the poem has an eschatological bearing. But one reason for much readerly discontent is that it does not end with the resurrection, or the harrowing of hell, or the second coming. Instead, it ends with Jesus, who "unobserv'd/ Home to his Mother's house private return'd" (4.638-39). The echo of "unobserv'd" in "private," indicates a smaller victory, even though the invocation has promised nothing less than the recovery of paradise. The text requires a fundamental rethinking of what regaining paradise means: "all temptation, and the tempter foil'd" (1.5). Recovering paradise, then, isn't some future event, nor is it an apocalyptic fulfillment. The "Eden rais'd in the wast wilderness" is the provisional exercise of human moral freedom that is exhibited in a refusal to project oneself as the center of the world.

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<sup>29</sup> Knoppers, "Introduction," *The Complete Works of John Milton Vol. II: The 1971 Poems Paradise Regain'd and Samson Agonistes*. ed. Laura Lunger Knoppers (New York: Oxford University Press) xix-lvxxv.

Just as *Paradise Regain'd* begins with Jesus “obscure, unmark’t”, it ends with him returning home “unobserv’d,” rather than in triumphant glory. The echo of the beginning in the ending has two primary effects: the first is to emphasize Jesus’s human rather than his divine parentage; the second is to show how precarious the attainment of paradise is. Jesus will be tested again and again. By abjuring the punctate conclusion of history in the apocalypse, the poem refutes the closure of biblical history. Satan, like waves and hungry flies can’t be defeated in the manner of Turnus. By refusing dramatic resolution, the poem is consistent with Milton’s broader anti-millenarianism, and his view of history as developmental rather than cyclical. He refuses to posit paradise as some future condition. Instead, it is the actualization of human freedom within history, rather than the supersession of history itself. Milton suggests that the desire to transcend and command history from outside is itself characteristic of Satanic desire, and presents as an alternative an embrace of physical limits and human contingency. This is why the poem so heavily belabors the question of who is the rightful “Son of God.”<sup>30</sup> The phrase occurs 38 times in the poem, 21 of them in the final book where Satan labors hard to get Jesus to vividly display his transcendent nature. But from the initial patronymic naming of Jesus as “Joseph’s son,” it is his humanity that is at stake in the poem, and most important to Milton. The narrower circuit of *Paradise Regain'd* recasts biblical teleology away from transcending history towards the exercise of human agency within it. Jesus’s kenning prospect rejects the position of mastery in the same manner that *Paradise Regain'd* depicts “Recover’d Paradise,” as the human ability to make a free choice with full acceptance of the contingency, and provisional quality of human action.

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<sup>30</sup> On the disputed status of the phrase “son of God,” in the poem, see Edward Ericson, “The Sons of God in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*” *Milton Quarterly* 25.3 (1991) 88.

## The Temporality of Enlightenment

Milton formulates an alternative to the regime of the imperious eye to counter the twentieth-century critique of the prospect view. The alternative he develops features a relation to the physical world that is haptic and ambulatory, predicated on participation with rather than optical separation from the world. Milton's embodied sense of experience is an important source for an influential undercurrent in English poetry and criticism that rejected the remote observer of Enlightenment rationality. The English topographical tradition has two principal founders. The next chapter looks at the emblematic poetics of John Denham, one of its founders. The other is Milton, whose richly detailed descriptions of agricultural labor in paradise arguably prepared the ground for the eighteenth century "georgic revolution."<sup>31</sup> Recently, Saskia Cornes has said that Milton rejects the "lily-white hands of pastoral," by focusing on georgic improvement – "manuring," meaning both laboring with the hands (from the Latin *manus*) and reinvesting the rich excesses of nature's fecundity back into in the natural system. Milton's Eden is not a timeless present, but an evolutionary space that can be improved and enriched by the investment of human labor.<sup>32</sup> Recent reappraisals of Milton and Restoration ecology have identified positions regarding the natural world that run contrary to the caricature of Milton as shorthand for the world-historical Enlightenment subject, and the regimes of sensibility a generation of critics associated with that subject.<sup>33</sup> The rise of an eco-Milton has brought renewed attention to

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 296-352

<sup>32</sup> Saskia Cornes, "Milton's Manuring: *Paradise Lost*, Husbandry, and the Possibilities of Waste," *Milton Studies* 61 (2019) 65-85

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance, Crystal Bartolovich, "Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading – and Milton" *PMLA* 127.1 (2012) 115-21. Heather Love has quipped that the name after the long dash seems to indicate an embarrassed investment in a poet often seen as emblematic of traditional, canonical literary values and the New Critical period of "peak English."

the resources his poetry provides for thinking about how humans engage with the nonhuman natural world.<sup>34</sup>

The prospect view is contingent. Poets in the Denham line of literary history are as likely to use the prospect to their poetic ends as are poets following Milton, in large part because the figure provides a rich occasion for reflecting on practices of selectively arranging materials guided by artistic intention through the depiction of landscape. While the prospect tradition that descends from Denham and “Cooper’s Hill,” constructs the view in terms of a fixed vantage, affording the spectator an unobstructed view, and a commensurate omniscience, the other entangles the prospect in the wandering course of the walking poem. It is rare to see Milton engaging with contemporary poets, but a case could be made that Satan’s prospect in *Paradise Regain’d* parodies the detached and elevated observer of “Cooper’s Hill.”<sup>35</sup> What *Paradise Regain’d* offers as an alternative is an early example of the walking poem, in which wandering the natural world provides an open organizational structure for long-form poems that abjure the organizing schematics of plot as well as the fixity of immobile perspective. The “peripatetic tradition” in loco-descriptive verse has roots in Milton’s open-ended, ambulatory poetics both in *Paradise Regain’d* and *Paradise Lost*.<sup>36</sup> The idea of the expansive, topographical poem, organized in terms of a descriptive byway was central to Milton’s georgic heirs. A distinctive feature of the long poems studied here is their tendency to set their center in motion. The formal

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<sup>34</sup> Early examples of ecological approaches to Milton’s poetry are Jeffrey S. Theis, “The Environmental Ethics of *Paradise Lost*: Milton’s Exegesis of Genesis I-III” *Milton Studies* 34 (1997) 21-81; and Ken Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). The ecocritical approach to Milton is central to Diane Kelsey McColley’s *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton and Marvell* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2007). Seth Lobis attends to the poetics of “tending,” in *Paradise Lost* to show the extent to which Milton’s paradise is a place of temporal, physical labor, in “Milton’s Tended Garden and the Georgic Fall,” *Milton Studies* 55 (2014) 89-111.

<sup>35</sup> On the rarity of Milton’s engagement with contemporaries, see David Quint, “Milton, Waller, and the Fate of Eden,” *MLQ* 78.3 (2017) 421-441.

<sup>36</sup> The term “peripatetic tradition,” comes from Anne Wallace’s study *Walking, Literature, and English Culture: The Origins and Uses of the Peripatetic in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). I offer a different account of the origins of the tradition she studies by identifying it with Milton.

consequence is the elevation of their line-by-line development, in analogy with the step-by-step progression along a path, over a preconceived, determinative end.

The tradition of long poems studied here is distinguished by their poetics of movement, and a corresponding emphasis on dynamic landscapes in motion. Mobility connects the walking poem to the poetics of dynamization, and the sense of the world as an evolving, densely relational place that began taking hold during the Restoration period. Ambulatory poetry presents a concrete, relationally integrated world, yielding a tradition in loco-descriptive verse that emphasizes the subject's immersion in webs of dependence and interrelation, rather than his detachment. *Paradise Regain'd* begins with two walks. The first is that of "This glorious Eremite/ Into the desert," and the second that of the poet who traces the spirit "who broughtst him thence," seeking to succeed "through highth or depth of nature's bounds," the footsteps of Jesus "unrecorded left through many an age" (1.8-9; 1.10; 1.13; 1.16). The invocation develops an analogy between the walking path and the poem by taking Jesus's wandering for its structure and theme. The four-part division recalls the structure of Virgil's *Georgics*, and like the *Georgics*, the bent of *Paradise Regain'd* is pedagogical.<sup>37</sup> Jesus's meandering path through the desert and his challenges along the way resonate with the classical motif of the *nostos* journey, but as mentioned, there is a remarkable lack of closure or conclusiveness. Milton's resistance to closure and his refusal to wrap up the poem with definitive action show him triumphing over views of history as bookended by the fall and the eschaton, and arranged into a fixed providentially predetermined narrative in between.<sup>38</sup> Jesus's perambulations are not cumulative, and there is an acute feeling of openness that critics have tried to close by superimposing a providential narrative onto the poem's itinerant structure. The critical effort to account for the

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<sup>37</sup> Louis L. Martz discusses Milton's use of the middle style of *The Georgics* in *Paradise Regain'd* in "Paradise Regained: Georgic Form, Georgic Style" *Milton Studies* 42 (2002) 7-25.

<sup>38</sup> Fish, "Things Indifferent" (1983) 81.

poem's loose ends by converting it into a story of Satan's definitive defeat resembles Satan's own attempts "to persuade the Son of God that the Son himself is a character in a plot," contrived by God, with Jesus cast the epic hero (Fish 81). But as a wandering poem that refuses to end with the once-and-for-all defeat of Satan, the poem is "plotless," in Fish's words: "There is no final moment in *Paradise Regain'd*" (81).<sup>39</sup>

Walking poems are porous. In topographical poetry, the walk provides a model for the purposefully purposeless pleasures of poetry.<sup>40</sup> As such, the walking poem lacks the teleological thrust of other forms of writing. The suspension of purposeful communication of semantic or philosophical or moral content defines literary language more broadly. "Prose" derives from *pro-versus*, meaning forward turning, suggesting an orientation towards ends that is distinguished from the turning and re-turning of *versus*.<sup>41</sup> But the "pro-" in *pro-versus* need not indicate finality, or definitive teleological closure. It can also be like the "pro-" in *pro-spectus*, an anticipatory forward glance that is contingent, constantly renewed as it emerges out of the present. In the terms of poetics, the anticipatory but provisional view forward characterizes the feeling of the end of a poetic line. In the play of sound and sense in blank verse, the line ends not with syntactic closure, but with an expansive anticipatory tension.<sup>42</sup> The line is itself a prospect that opens onto white space where the mutually animating play of the expectations of syntactical sense and metrical sound dilate in a way that looks forward to the next line, while gathering up what has come before. Prospects are animated and energized by forms of syntactical carrying

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<sup>39</sup> On the inconclusiveness of Milton's "revolutions," and the indefiniteness that governs his endings, see Marissa Greenberg, "Milton Much Revolving" in *MLQ* 78.3, *Milton and the Politics of Periodization* (2017) 373-94.

<sup>40</sup> Gilbert, *Walks in the World: Representation and Experience in Modern American Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) 3.

<sup>41</sup> Goodman develops the analogy between *versus*, writing, and the turns of the plow in Virgilian georgic, writing "As their double sense of *versus* suggests, these books are as much about the tending of words as they are about agriculture" *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (2004) 11.

<sup>42</sup> On the play of sound and sense and the animating force of anticipation in poetry see the essays collected in Giorgio Agamben's *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*. trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), particularly the titular essay, "The End of the Poem" 109-118.

forward that generate anticipation and look ahead to the subsequent development of the text. The emphasis is on the formal potentiality of line-by-line development that belies assumptions about closure, and the containment of poetic energy.

In the peripatetic prospect, the recursive, revisionary looping of reading advances in analogy with movement through a landscape. Prospect poems develop a non-teleological yet still purposive sensitivity to the expanding potentiality that characterizes reading. Garrett Stewart describes this space of reading as, “the latitude, call it the maneuvering room, opened between what that wording seems now to mean and what it appeared a second before, all certainty deferred even within – and precisely by – textual self-adjustment” (38).<sup>43</sup> Stewart emphasizes the embodied, physical “vibrations” of this mode of reading. His physicalist aesthetics connects to peripatetic poetics, in which the gradual accumulation of lines spur recursive revision and readjustment to the landscape as one moves through it. As in the walk, the successively unfolding lines displace the teleological orientation towards a final end. The tension generated between the present and the horizon of expectation keeps the ambulatory subject in a state of suspended agitation. In the peripatetic prospect poem, this tension manifests in the aesthetics of dynamic change. The temporal navigation of a world in motion, changing from day to night, from season to season, and from historical period to period takes the place of a fixed, spatiotemporal center. In the eighteenth century there is an acute sense of change that breaks, in Reinhart Koselleck’s words, “decisively with the closed and cyclical structure of the eschatological worldview in which predictions of the coming end of the world and the Final Judgment set the limit to human ambition and hope” (xv).<sup>44</sup> Milton’s anti-millenarian sensibility

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<sup>43</sup> Stewart, *The Deed of Reading: Literature\*Language\*Writing\*Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

<sup>44</sup> Reinhart Koselleck’s work has received increasing attention from literary critics. See, for instance, Hogle Jordheim, “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities” *History and Theory* 51 (2012)

influences his innovations in peripatetic prospect poetry, because he substitutes endless development for the notion of final fulfillment. Walking poems develop a potentially interminable dialectical back-and-forth with the setting as the poet moves reflectively through the world.<sup>45</sup> The resulting immersion undermines teleology, but preserves the anticipatory forward orientation that impels both walk and poem.

In the peripatetic tradition, prospects ground down by focusing on particulars of place and perspective, and on scaled dependencies that highlight the embeddedness of entities within sustaining relational networks. Features of an “optic array,” in James Gibson’s terms, “are perceived by looking around and getting around (ambient and ambulatory vision)” (292).<sup>46</sup> The general and the particular are not dissolved into one another by some mystical, “esemplastic” fusion of self and world, but the subject and the world emerge reciprocally through the action of bodily movement.<sup>47</sup> The corresponding shift from a fixed, remote observer to a moving one also involves a reorientation of poetic attention from an externalized scene to how experience emerges. This refocusing on “knowing-how,” doesn’t imply a misplaced notion of immediacy, or intellectual intuition of the world as it really is, but instead heightened sensitivity to the way sensible experience is ordered and arranged in feedback with the real world.<sup>48</sup> The crucial

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151-71; Jonathan Sachs, *The Poetics of Decline in British Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018) 1-32; Christina Lupton, *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018); and Paul K. Saint-Amour, “The Literary Present,” *ELH* 85.2 (2018) 367-92

<sup>45</sup> Gilbert, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Gibson, “Notes On Direct and Indirect Apprehension,” *Reasons for Realism Selected Essays by James J. Gibson* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982) eds. Edward Reed and Rebecca Jones, 289-95.

<sup>47</sup> On the role of the body in the production of a three-dimensional experiential world, see James J. Gibson, “Observations on Active Touch,” *Psychological Review* 69 (1962) 477-491; and “Notes on Direct and Indirect Apprehension,” in *Reasons for Realism: Selected Essays by James J. Gibson* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982) eds. Edward Reed and Rebecca Jones, 289-95. Hubert Dreyfus has followed Gibson’s insights into ecological optics by looking at the “the whole human being is related to the world” (*Skillful Coping* 170) in the process of skilled bodily activity which “generates a human world,” (*Computers* 281) in *What Computers Still Can’t Do* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); and *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

<sup>48</sup> Jaako Hintikka, “Plato on Knowing-How, Knowing-That, and Knowing What” in *Knowledge and the Known: Historical Perspectives in Epistemology*, (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991) 31-49.

consequence of directing poetic energy towards processes of experience is that the subject of classical optics, conceived in analogy with the fixed center of the *camera obscura*, passively receiving a static image projected on the optic nerve, is replaced by an enactive, mobile sense-maker. In the peripatetic prospect, vision and *poesis* converge.

During the Restoration and eighteenth-century loco-descriptive verse joins natural philosophy by scrutinizing the techniques and practices of constructing sense experience.<sup>49</sup> The rise of scientific experimentation coincided with a deepening interest in descriptive naturalism. The artist's workshop became analogous to the laboratory as a space in which different ways of arranging the experiential world were held up for inspection. Naturalism here doesn't mean somehow depicting nature as it really is so much as it involves attending to how sense is constructed, making visible the categorial and normative frameworks that organize human experience in the world. Developing across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are "certain dissident strains of empiricism," that challenge the visuality of the *camera obscura* and provide alternative ways of understanding the relation of the subject to the material world (Kramnick 2018, 9).<sup>50</sup> According to the *camera obscura* model of vision developed by John Locke, seeing involves an optical opening that lets in a picture in the same manner that the *camera obscura* admits an image of the outside scene projected on the back wall of the enclosure. The subject

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<sup>49</sup> Marjorie Hope Nicholson first connected the rise of nature poetry and loco-descriptive verse to the development of experimentalism and natural science in *The Microscope and the English Imagination* (Northampton: Smith College Press 1935) and *Newton Demands the Muse: Newton's Optics and the Eighteenth Century Poets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945). Patricia Meyers Spacks examines the intersections of empiricist ideas of sight and poetic vision in *The Poetry of Vision: Five Eighteenth-Century Poets* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967). Recently, historians of science like Lorraine Daston have examined visual rhetorics shared by natural philosophers and poets in "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment" in *The Moral Authority of Nature* eds. Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 100-125. Svetlana Alpers's *The Art of Describing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) details the relationship between Kepler's optics, and Leeuwenhoek's experiments with microscopes and the aesthetics of descriptivism and naturalism. More recently, Pamela Smith has examined the emergence of a vernacular epistemology of practice and know-how from the artisanal guilds and workshops and its influence on early aesthetics in *The Body of the Artisan* (2004).

<sup>50</sup> See, for example, Svetlana Alpers, *The Vexations of Art: Velazquez and Others* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 10-11; Smith (2004) 12; and Kramnick *Paper Minds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019) 5.

remains fixed and sealed, letting in only images that, through mysterious and unresolved means, are converted from corpuscular impressions into insubstantial, mentalistic ideas. The analogy between the eye and the *camera obscura* is developed from Kepler's treatise on optics, and his identification of how the lens projects an inverted picture of the surrounding world onto the optic nerve.<sup>51</sup> But there are two really fundamental problems with the *camera obscura* model of vision. The first involves the obscure process by which non-mental sense impressions are turned into mental pictures. Coleridge writes that this model of sense requires "the absurdity . . . of intercommunion between substances that have no one property in common without any of the convenient consequences that bribed good judgment to the admission of the dualistic hypothesis" (113). Wilfrid Sellars has called this the pervasive "myth of the given": the idea that there is an intermediate, not-yet-conceptual but somehow conceptually rich entity that provides the raw content for more general thinking.<sup>52</sup> The basic problem is how something materially non-conceptual, and (according to the physics of the time) substantially different from mind, can give rise to the conceptual.

How the mind translates the non-conceptual "given" of visual images into concepts with general applicability was an unresolved problem for empirically oriented natural philosophers. Resolving this problem involved the premise of a stable and universal form that the mind,

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<sup>51</sup> On Kepler's optics, see Alpers, *The Art of Describing*, chapter 2, "Ut Pictura, it visio": Kepler's Model of the Eye and the Nature of Picturing in the North." For a more recent account on Kepler's insistence on the medium dependence of vision, see Raz Chen-Morris, *Measuring Shadows: Kepler's Optics of Invisibility* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), chapter 1, "The New Optical Narrative: Light, Camera Obscura, and the Astronomer's Wings" 24-47.

<sup>52</sup> Sellars describes the "myth of the given," in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapter 1, "An Ambiguity in Sense-Datum Theories" 13-24. On the importance of Sellars to contemporary ecological approaches to sense experience like James Gibson's and Alva Noë's see James O'Shea's *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn* (Malden: Polity Press, 2007). Sellars has received renewed interest by contemporary philosophers trying to move beyond the impasse between reductivist, neuroscientific approaches to consciousness and endless debates surrounding *qualia*. In particular, Sellars' discussion of the incommensurability of manifest and scientific images of the world is central to Daniel Dennett's recent work in *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: Norton, 2017) 53-75. See also Ray Brassier's rich engagement with Sellars's work in "Concepts and Objects," in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: Re.press, 2011) ed. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harmon 47-65.

through repeated exposure to particulars, abstracts from those particulars of time, place, and perspective through a process of smoothing. This resolution, however, doesn't address the more fundamental problem of the abyss opened up between mind and world by corpuscular theories of sense, and their more recent iteration in sense-datum theories.<sup>53</sup> Realist empiricists like Locke still believed there was an external world out there that was causally responsible for the images of it that arise in the mind. But the question of how mind and world could be correlated remained a problem for eighteenth-century empiricism, giving rise to Berkeley's nominalist idealism (which denied that there was anything except ideas) and Hume's skeptical critique, still resonant with contemporary work by Hilary Putnam and Daniel Dennett.<sup>54</sup> The problem is not with abstraction itself. All thinking relies fundamentally on "offline" conceptualization that allows for planning and design. But the crucial difference is that Putnam's "stereotypes," and Dennett's "types," are contingent, and subject to change and evolution. In this way, they are embedded in evolving conceptual frameworks that are open to the dynamism of the world itself.<sup>55</sup> Locke shares a notion of truth with Descartes before him, holding that for a concept to be true and generally valid, it must be inured against change and contingency. That is, for the natural philosophers of the Enlightenment period, opening their conceptual arrays to change and dynamism would undermine their truth-value. Abstraction was supposed to safeguard general ideas from the vagaries of particular perspective and the limits of time and place.

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<sup>53</sup> On the continuity of contemporary sense-datum approaches to experience with much older ideas about the impact of corpuscles on the sensorium and their conversion to ideas, see Alva Noë, see *Strange Tools* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), especially chapter 10, "Art and the Limits of Neuroscience," 120-133.

<sup>54</sup> See Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 49-74; Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back* (New York: Norton, 2017) 176-204

<sup>55</sup> On the "fabillism" of Putnam's notion of "stereotypes," see Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the History of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 75-111. The openness of the "type" to change has led to accusations of irrationalism, undermining the notion of truth as transcendent and marking it as spatiotemporally contingent.

The second unresolved problem posed by the representationalist, *camera obscura* theory of sense experience, is motion. It is not a disembodied, fixed eye that encounters the world, but instead an ambulatory being whose movement through space involves endlessly changing perspectives.<sup>56</sup> The three-dimensional world is a motile experience of physical navigation. The saccade of the eyes and the movement of the body involve active stitching together that is fundamentally compositional. Perception, in this view, is poetic in the sense of making. An embodied, enactivist approach to sense does not deny the existence of a mind-independent material world. But it does raise certain questions about the historical character of experience, since a firm line cannot be drawn between the world as it is in itself and human constructions of it. The fact that the world emerges for humans through reciprocal making does not mean it exists only as ideas, as the Lockean tradition holds. The peripatetic sense of experience undermines the dichotomies of subject and object by showing how the world emerges in conjunction with the mobile subject.<sup>57</sup> Instead of a mystical dissolution of subject and object, recent approaches to sense that emphasize the embodied and extended mind, like Gibson's and Alva Noë's, construe sense as a process of interchange with the physical world.

The exchange that brings a world and a moving subject into co-presence is methodical. The word "method" derives from Greek *methodus*, meaning a way or path of transit. In analogy to a walking path, method is purposive, "grounded on the habit of foreseeing in each integral part, or (more plainly) in every sentence, the whole" (Coleridge "Essays on the Principles of Method," 449). Method is also pro-spective, in the sense that the relational logic developed in a sequence or succession points to an unrealized or emergent whole. Ordered experience involves

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<sup>56</sup> See Kramnick (2019), 11.

<sup>57</sup> In peripatetic poetry, John Elder writes, "Mind and earth flow together in a process of the body's motion, and observation and imagination come to pervade one another" in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1985) 107.

coordinating dynamic and constantly evolving relations as one moves in the world. New experiences, like new lines in a poem, retrospectively reorganize what has come before, and influence expectations, shaping the anticipatory feeling for what is to come. Regulated by a sense of purposive integrity, “method” is an open-ended logic of relating: “Method therefore becomes natural to the mind which has been accustomed to contemplate not things, but likewise and chiefly, the relations of things” (Coleridge 300). Coleridge identifies a reorientation away from the foundationalist metaphysical hang-ups of his empiricist forebears, towards dynamically evolving relations. According to Coleridge, things are what they are not by virtue of a unique and self-similar essence that is timeless and ideal, but by virtue of the associative matrix within which they have their being. “[Things] are nested,” Gibson writes, “They are not discrete entities or denumerated units and they cannot be inventoried” (292).<sup>58</sup> Understanding, it follows, is not grasping the essential identity of a thing so much as attending to its embeddedness and connections to other things within purposively integrated relational networks.

Coleridge’s claim prioritizing relation over ideal identity shows him a careful student of the eighteenth century. While Locke and his immediate successors retained a notion of truth as a closed system of concepts, protected from change, the period also saw the emergence of more dynamic and relational approaches to epistemology, natural history, and art that moved away from the foundationalist assumptions of idealist theory.<sup>59</sup> The caricature of the Enlightenment as defined by the impulse to fix, taxonomize, and reduce nature to a set of universal laws on the model of Newton’s physics – what Voltaire called the period’s *esprit de géométrie* – overlooks a

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<sup>58</sup> Gibson, “Notes on Direct and Indirect Apprehension” (1982).

<sup>59</sup> On the importance of thinking about systems and relational connections during the enlightenment, see Clifford Siskin, Clifford. *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015) 26.

rich discourse of change and becoming.<sup>60</sup> “Radical Enlightenment” traditions that emphasized change over fixed conceptual hierarchies emerged through interest in materialism and various strains of vitalism that saw the material world as dynamically self-organizing and evolving through time.<sup>61</sup> Vitalist materialism presented matter as change, and created a conceptual space where poets and philosophers could think through historical contingency. The fixed, stable hierarchy of the *scala naturae* was temporalized under the influence of the emerging sciences of life at the same time that a progressive view of history began challenging closed, cyclical ones.<sup>62</sup> For natural philosophers, historicity represented a serious challenge to ideas about the natural world, and the status of truthful propositions about it by raising the possibility that all human knowledge had a historical character. In areas like the life sciences and natural history, change and development through time could not be explained away, and so alternative approaches to form, identity, and the nature of judgments about the world increasingly emphasized becoming rather than ontologically fixed being.<sup>63</sup> Around 1660 the emergent sense of the world taking shape was as a spontaneous and dynamically developing organic system.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Voltaire positions the “esprit geometrique” of the period against the “esprit d’invention,” in his “A La Philosophie de Newton.” The contrast is also essential to his guarded praise of Milton, who defies “The geometric spirit, which has in our time taken over the realm of belles-lettres,” in his “Essay on Epic Poetry.” Translation quoted in Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient: Literature and History in Early Modern France* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011) 158.

<sup>61</sup> The term “radical Enlightenment” is from Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford, 2001). On the rise of Spinozistic materialisms during the period, see Israel (2001) 157-174. On vitalism, see Peter H. Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005); Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2002); Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) 49-105.

<sup>62</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, in *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (New York: Harper, 1936), writes that the first forty years of the eighteenth century saw the conversion of the “once immutable Chain of Being into the program of endless Becoming” (259). Heather Keenleyside has recently discussed the enduring relevance of Lovejoy’s history of ideas to the conceptual history of scholars like Peter de Bolla in “Matter, Form, Idea: What Lovejoy’s History of Ideas Might Have to do With Literature” *ELH* 84.1 (2017) 223-57. De Bolla draws extensively on Lovejoy and Koselleck, admitting in a footnote that his “current project could be seen as very old fashioned, drawing on what Arthur Lovejoy considered to be the history of ideas” in *The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013) 12.

<sup>63</sup> During the eighteenth century, Janina Wellman says, “Notions of movement, such as progress, history, revolution, and acceleration formed the parameters of the new era. The opening of time into the future, the world’s

### Milton's Poetry of Change

The long poems examined in this dissertation did not merely register epistemic shifts like the dynamization of the world picture, but instead carved out space where change under the condition of continuity, and historical, temporal processes could be examined formally. Poems like James Thomson's *Seasons* use the gradually unfolding form of the peripatetic long poem to think through how change poses problems to notions of identity, truth, and formal unity predicated on foundationalist ideas about self-similarity and containment. The metaphor of the methodical walk, and the structural motif of movement along a path of transit in dialectical exchange with a moving world provided a structural principle that poets following Milton developed to explore change. The poems studied here elaborate the peripatetic prospect tradition, and challenge notions of form predicated on ideal unity. Their pro-spective formalism is essentially open to further development and elaboration. The topographical poetics in *The Seasons*, in William Cowper's *Task*, and in Blake's mixed-media art, sensitively attend to change over time in order to develop a materialist sensibility that runs counter to the much-critiqued specular regimes of Enlightenment optics.

Milton marks a crucial juncture in both the elaboration of a radical enlightenment, and in the development of the peripatetic prospect tradition. *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regain'd* straddle traditional periods, and Milton is the continued subject of literary turf wars.<sup>65</sup> Since

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dynamization and acceleration, was complemented by the discovery that it had a history" in *The Form of Becoming: Embryology and the Epistemology of Rhythm, 1760-1830* (New York: Zone, 2017) trans. Kate Sturge, 321. She connects the "new, distinctive kind of temporality," to developments in the life sciences.

<sup>64</sup> See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas About Probability, Induction, and Statistical Inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 11-18.

<sup>65</sup> The problems of periodizing Milton was the subject of a recent special issue of *MLQ*, "Milton and the Politics of Periodization" 78.3 (2017). See especially, Lee Morrissey, "Milton, Modernity, and the Periodization of Politics,"

Milton's life spanned the reigns of Elizabeth to Anne, his poetic output can be read as the crowning achievement of the Renaissance, or as the first daunting productions of the long eighteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Joanna Picciotto writes that "To take Joseph Addison and Richard Steele seriously as experimentalist authors alongside such writers as Milton is to challenge the literary history given to us by the Restoration victors, whose coordinated campaign to deny all continuity with the Interregnum period provided the basis for the scholarly myth of the 'long Eighteenth Century'" (24). While Picciotto wants to claim Augustan literature for the seventeenth century, her broader goal is to rethink literary and intellectual history in terms of continuity under change. A growing body of scholarship has shown that Milton causes problems for the conventions of literary periodization, and that the best way to approach his work is through the *longue durée*. Milton is crucial here because his mature poems appear at the moment of growing awareness of history and contribute to the emergence of a national literary and intellectual culture. But Milton also dramatizes this sense of historicity and change. His poems on biblical materials open up the present to the past by placing events along an unfolding continuum, while his experiments with vitalist and materialist thinking make progressive striving an ontological principle, described by Alistair Fowler as a "quasi-evolutionary vision of striving nature" (*Paradise Lost* 311).

Milton's contribution to a dynamic sense of historical and natural worlds provided the ground for radical experiments in material monism and vitalism. Milton's poetics of change contributed to a "more subversive and radical strain of Enlightenment thought – one which posed a threat to fundamental Christian beliefs . . . and by extension the status of natural as well as

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301-320; and James Nohnberg, "Milton and the Divisions of History," 321-348. While Nohnberg finds Milton astride large-scale periodizing shifts in belief structures and epistemology, and focusing his poems on the temporal "copresence" of different periods, the essays collected in the recent volume, *Milton and the Long Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) make claims on the value of reading Milton in the context of the "Long Restoration," which Blair Hoxby describes stretching up to 1748.

<sup>66</sup> See Hoxby, "Introduction," *Milton in the Long Restoration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016) 1.

revealed religion” (Sugimura 67).<sup>67</sup> While Richard Bentley expunged or attributed to editorial malfeasance those aspects of *Paradise Lost* that represented a materialist sensibility by depicting the natural world as autonomously teeming with organic life, critics and biographers like John Toland and the Richardsons found in Milton an ecological sensibility to counter the fixed hierarchies (and Tory politics) of one version of Enlightenment reason. Glossing Raphael’s metaphysical excursus in book five of *Paradise Lost*, the Richardsons write, “Matter is in perpetual motion. All bodies are wasting and needing Nourishment and one changing into others; Even the sun itself wastes” (qtd. in Sugimura 61). Milton offered the Richardsons a way to think about change as a fundamental feature of the natural world that pervades all things, even the sun. Implied in their gloss is a radical sense of the relational interdependencies of organic nature. Toland, one of Milton’s first biographers, went on to develop his own Spinozistic philosophy: “Considering the numberless successive generations that have inhabited this globe, returning at death into the common mass of the same, scattering and mixing with all the other parts thereof; and joining to this, the incessant river-like Flowing and Transpiration of Matter every moment from the bodies of Men while they live as well as their daily Nourishment . . . it seems to be probably that there is no Particle of Matter on the face of the whole Earth which has not bin a part of man” (qtd. in Sugimura 51). Toland’s physics are depropriating. He denies the individual has a singular essence, and dissolves selfhood in the flow of material becoming by presenting the subject as an assemblage – according to the OED, a word whose first instances appear in the early eighteenth-century.

Toland extends his ecological claim that all material being is held in common to the hylozoistic view that all matter is intelligent. The notion that “the whole face of the Earth

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<sup>67</sup> Sugimura, “‘A Fine Paradaisical Notion’: Materialism and Readings of *Paradise Lost* in the ‘Long Restoration,’” in *Milton in the Long Restoration* (2016) 41-68.

exhibits these mutations every minute,” challenges ideas about truth and identity formulated to the exclusion of dynamism. Richardson the elder writes that “Notions, like the fruits of the Earth, have their Spring, their Summer, Autumn, and Winter; How many that have been flourishing systems are withered and perished; and what more may who can tell!” (qtd. in Sugimura 58). The historical sense of contingency indicated in his remarks confronts the idealist belief that conceptual systems are composed of abstract, universally valid ideas. Truth, Milton writes, “turns herself into all shapes, except her own, and perhaps tunes her voice according to the times.”<sup>68</sup> There are intimations of relativism in Richardson’s and Milton’s comments, but also a clear sense that any conceptual array that cannot account for change except for by suppressing it will be susceptible to skeptical critique. This is not to say that Milton was a vitalist, or subscribed to hylozoistic theories of matter, but the historical sense of *Paradise Lost* afforded an imaginative space that cultivated radical strains of Enlightenment thinking.

Historical contingency pervades *Paradise Lost* and Milton’s last two poems, *Paradise Regain’d* and *Samson Agonistes*. Critics have pointed to the way Milton weaves the story of the difficult composition of *Paradise Lost* into the fabric of the text as opening it outwards to his present and to history. While *Paradise Lost* remains more heavily invested in plot than other poems studied here, its first critics, like Joseph Addison, were quick to point out its desultory, digressive form. Addison ultimately embraces its deviations from the teleological thrust of narrative: “I must confess there is greater Beauty in these very digressions, that I would not wish them out of his poem” (4.174). Addison’s aesthetics of the “byway” and the problems of poetic teleology are the topic of the next chapter. Here he intimates that digression and the suspension of the teleological, communicative thrust of language is a distinctive feature of the “greater

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<sup>68</sup> Milton, “Areopagitica,” *The Complete Prose Works Vol. II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959) ed. Ernest Sirluck, 563.

beauty,” of literature. Other critics have pointed to the way *Paradise Lost*, like *Paradise Regain'd*, abjures punctuated notions of beginnings and endings.<sup>69</sup> Even at the poem’s climactic center – “she plucked, she eat” – Milton obscures the precise temporality of the fall (9.781).

Does it happen in the successive thoughts, sparked by Satan, that Eve speaks in the moments before her action? Or is it in the decision to multiply her transgression by inducing Adam to join her? Or, alternatively, is the fault *a priori*, ontological, “but a Rib/ Crooked by nature, bent,” as Adam accuses in book ten (10.844-85)? Working within the notional structures of plot, Milton opens them up to communion with the present, creating a sense of history as a developmental continuum that resists definitive beginnings and endings.

*Paradise Lost* concludes with an opening into historical existence. The poem’s last epic simile describes “evening mist/ Ris’n from a river o’er marish glides/ And gathers ground fast at the labourer’s heel/ Homeward returning” (12.629-32). Adam and Eve’s path leads out of Eden, which seems dissonant with the simile’s image of return homeward. The simile depicts the exit from Eden as a homeward voyage, a pedestrian entry into the world of fallen experience that Adam and Eve share with readers of *Paradise Lost*. The poem closes by offering a view on the world of its readers, onto our world. In book eleven, Adam is led by Michael to the highest hill in Eden, “From whose top/ The hemisphere of Earth in clearest ken/ Stretched out to amplest reach of prospect lay” (11.378-80). Milton’s prospect here names a spatially and temporally expansive, anticipatory faculty that reaches physically into space. From the mountaintop, Adam surveys the new-fallen world, and the successive cataclysms of history as disclosed by Michael. In this line Milton nominalizes “ken,” indicating a simultaneously spatial and temporal range of sight. Within this visual space, past and present are submerged in the developmental stream of history. The position is powerful, authoritative, and in this way rhymes with the Satanic prospect in

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<sup>69</sup> See Morrissey (2017), 305.

*Paradise Regain'd*: “His eye might there command wherever stood/ City of old or modern fame” (11.385-86). Michael shows Adam the unfolding of history in the rise and fall of cultures and empires, and at the distant horizon, the enlightened kingdom of ends, a time, rather than a place, when God “shall be all in all” (3.341). But as Milton shows in *Paradise Regain'd*, the paradise he looks forward to is not some other world, or some place beyond history. It is instead the realization of human freedom and autonomy within history. The sense of progressive, incremental movement towards a goal that is neither final nor supersessive makes this a prospect of Enlightenment. The attainment is always precarious and deeply contingent, but for Milton it is nevertheless a regulative goal, accommodating the lapses and missteps that define historical existence.

The initial promise of the comprehensive “ken” Michael presents in *Paradise Lost* gives way to sequential, historical development. Incremental processes, and the slight movement of the needle in the direction of progress that results from action in accordance with the law of freedom displaces the apocalypse, and subverts the teleological thrust of millenarian eschatology. The immediate vision of the absolute, of the fulfillment and redemption of history by its definitive conclusion at the horizon of Adam’s prospect recedes in advance of the steps into history. From Adam’s vantage, a historical succession of gradual advances, sidesteps, and falls disrupts the synchronic revelation of the unity of history initially promised. The teleological vision gives way to something less certain: purpose without definitive end; process without final fulfillment; a view of the form of becoming.

The poem ends with Adam and Eve’s last glance from Eden: “The world was all before them, where to choose/ Their place of rest, and providence their guide” (12.646-47). The enjambment allows the word “choose” to reverberate across the subjected plain and saturate the

white space at the line's end with prospective anticipation. The drama of the poem contracts in this moment. "Choose" retrospectively sounds in all the previous examples of choice – one of the most important words in the poem – but the circuit here is narrower, domestic.<sup>70</sup> Like Jesus in *Paradise Regain'd*, Adam and Eve peer into the future looking not for ultimate salvation, but for a place of rest, of momentary stability in the flux of history. Obscure guidance, which for Milton is more likely to come from the free use of reason than from the accumulated doctrines of providential historiography, replaces Michael's axiomatic directives. Adam and Eve's first "wandering steps," out of Eden are not guided by a unified vision of the world they are entering. The world may be all before them, but the promise of its fulfillment and their redemption has disappeared with Michael. Where the prospect in book eleven glimpsed a promised end that would charge their present with meaning and purpose, here the view is finite, embodied, partial. The infinitive "to choose," throws the action of choosing beyond the frame of the narrative. Their "wandering steps and slow," - the stutter of the late-coming adjective drawing out the uncertainty of their present – lead them into a world of peripatetic wandering proleptically hinted at by the poet's own fall onto the "Aleian field,/ Erroneous there to wander, and forlorn," in the seventh book (7.19-20). The methodical but uncertain placement of one foot before the other displaces the formal end in the same way that the arrangement of successive lines atomizes any notion of an abstract, schematic "form." These last lines, the stumbling footsteps, the unmade choices, stretch out indeterminately into history, into Milton's history, into our history.

Milton makes contact with his readers in these lines by eschewing narrative containment in a move consistent with the dramatic integration of the poem's composition into the texture of the work itself. As narrator of this extraordinary moment, Milton is co-present. Earlier, in book

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<sup>70</sup> On the significance of the word "choice," see Paul Hammond, *Milton's Complex Words: Essays on the Conceptual Structure of Paradise Lost* (New York: Oxford, 2017) 38-46.

eleven, when Adam breaks into tears at the vision of the flood, Milton interjects: “How didst thou grieve then, Adam, to behold/ The end of all thy offspring, end so sad/ Depopulation; thee another flood,/ Of tears and sorrow a flood thee also drowned/ And sunk thee as thy sons” (11.754-58). Like the poem’s final lines, the moment is extraordinary for the temporal opening it creates. The direct address of the poet to a character produces a moment of imaginative contact between Milton, the reader, and Adam.<sup>71</sup> This other order of time that is generated by the imaginative opening is the unique temporality of literature, of a technical craft-culture that exceeds the chronological boundedness of a single period. One reason why Milton is such a problem for periodization is because he formally explodes the notion. “Contextual specificity cannot account fully for the poet’s expansive view of history, which crosses temporal intervals and recognized providentially significant convergences among past, present, and future” (Hertz 34).<sup>72</sup> The prospective immediacy invites the reader into participation in literary time. Just as the infinitive “to choose” opens into history, Milton’s interjection here brings Adam, Milton, and us into the present of “the narrative continuum” (Hertz 35). The succession of story tellers, from Michael to Adam to Milton to readers here explodes narrative containment, but it also undermines the effort to domesticate literary history by chunking it in accordance with extra-literary historical events, like revolutions and the deaths of monarchs. This is not to say that literature is universal, or not historical, but rather that its temporality exceeds historical capture.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> See Neil Hertz, *The End of the Line: Essays on Psychoanalysis and the Sublime* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985) 34.

<sup>72</sup> Trubowitz, “Introduction,” *MLQ* 78.3: *Milton and the Politics of Periodization* (2017) 292.

<sup>73</sup> Christina Lupton has recently examined the temporality of reading, but with a book-historical focus on how readers manage attention economies during the long-eighteenth century and document in journals and commonplace books their experiences of immersive reading, in *Reading and the Making of Time in the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018). Lupton’s discussion of the present of reading emphasizes her system’s theory approach, influenced by Niklas Luhmann, and she focuses on the simultaneity of the textual present, rather than the “present tense” of readerly contact. The latter is the focus of Paul K. Saint-Amour, “The Literary Present,” *ELH* 85.2 (2018) 367-92. Saint-Amour examines the ubiquitous and largely unquestioned reliance of

Poetry is always returning us to the world of experience, and experience has a historical character.<sup>74</sup> However, to presume that experience only has a historical character is to miss one of the most important things that literature does. By asking readers to labor to set aside their particular commitments and historical determinations in order to understand a text on its own terms, literature draws attention to and challenges the historical construction of experience. Experience is not reducible to normative, contingent conceptual systems. These systems can be critiqued, demystified, and shown to be the contingent, ideologically contaminated formations that they are. But without a fuller account of how concepts, or what Locke would simply call “ideas,” connect to and make communicable an actual world, anchored in *aesthesis* and *poesis*, criticism cuts itself off from its own ground. Raymond Williams said as much, in an interview in 1972: “There is no natural seeing, and therefore there cannot be a direct and unmediated contact with reality. On the other hand, in much linguistic theory and a certain kind of semiotics, we are in danger of reaching the opposite point in which the epistemological absorbs the ontological.” “The natural world exists,” he continues, “whether anyone signifies it or not” (167).<sup>75</sup> Williams is after a middle way between an empty notion of naïve or immediate sense experience, and conceptually burdened, historically determined ways of seeing.<sup>76</sup> The question of a middle way that balances historical thinking against the call of literature to suspend “one’s commitments in ordinary time in favor of an alternative sequence in narrative time,” is essential not only to thinking about “the way we read now,” but also to thinking about why students in the modern

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critical discourse on the present-tense, and claims that it evidences something true about the experience of reading and the irreducibility of the power of books to, quoting Carolyn Dinshaw, “touch across time” (377).

<sup>74</sup> See John Elder *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985) 26.

<sup>75</sup> Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left Review* (New York: New Left Books 1979).

<sup>76</sup> See James O’Shea, *Wilfrid Sellars: Naturalism with a Normative Turn* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007) for an account of Sellars’s attempt to counter positivist assumptions about induction and direct sense experience while preserving the notion that experience is not normative all the way out.

university might want to study literature (Hertz 35).<sup>77</sup> The question is what makes literature distinctive, or different from other kinds of writing, and this question is at the center of the emergence of disciplines during the eighteenth century.

The metaphor of “prospects” comes home here to the prospects for studying and teaching literature at this moment. If we acknowledge the impossibility of approaching literature unaccommodated, free from the normative linguistic equipage that makes functional humans and the habitually entrained ways of constructing perceptual space, does that rule out engaging with texts transhistorically? Is it possible to approach texts technically, with focused consideration of how they are made, given a reader’s own history, without relying on universals? Experience has a historical character, but to argue that it is determined by ideology, or theory-laden all the way down, is to deny the possibility of the kind of contact that Milton cultivates. Thinking transhistorically does not mean conjuring up the transcendental. Poems are prospects. They see their readers, “fit though few.” Directing attention to the forward-looking potencies of literary texts, to their prospective potential, can help us think them both as historical, but also always in excess, overflowing their moment in anticipation of futures they help make possible.<sup>78</sup> Literature can thus provide a model, as it did for georgic poets in the eighteenth century, for thinking historical continuity under the condition of change. Given this commitment to reading literature pro-spectively, with an eye towards what poems make new, and what potentialities they generate out of the materials writers inherit, this study looks forward from Milton to the eighteenth century, the emergence of aesthetics, and strains of Romanticism.

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<sup>77</sup> The phrase alludes to a now ten-year-old special issue of *Representations* widely seen as having kicked off the “reading debates.” See in particular Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, “Surface Reading: An Introduction” *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 1-21.

<sup>78</sup> Rita Felski draws on Gibson’s notion of “affordances,” writing that the word is “gaining traction in literary studies to help explain how meanings are coconstituted by texts and readers” because the relation the word denotes, “is neither subjective nor objective but arises out of the interaction between beings and things” in *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015) 164-65.

In her *Life of Milton*, Barbara K. Lewalski describes the scene at Cromwell's funeral. Milton is listed walking alongside Andrew Marvell, just in front of John Dryden, who had been employed by John Thurloe in Cromwell's bureaucracy. "Their names appear in the order of march, with the direction that they were to wait in the Privy chamber with some other clerks, chaplains, and Ministers" (Lewalski 360).<sup>79</sup> The image of the blind former Latin secretary being helped along by his friend and one-time assistant Marvell, along with Dryden and the Cambridge Neoplatonist Peter Sterry, who served as Cromwell's minister, captures a rich literary historical moment. This, too, is a prospect. Dryden had not yet penned the Restoration panegyric, "Astraea Redux," that brought him to the attention of Charles II. That poem, with its images of imperial mastery, wouldn't be printed until 1660: "Abroad your empire shall no limits know/ But like the sea in boundless circles flow." Dryden presents Charles as the imperial sovereign at the center of a vast though bounded and circular empire. Milton might be spoofing the image when in *Paradise Regain'd* he describes imperial Rome washed by "the Black-Moor sea" and stretching "from Gallia, Gades, and the Brittish west,/ Germans, and Scythians, and Sarmations North/ Beyond Danubius to the Tauric Pool./ All nations now to Rome obedience pay/ To Rome's great emperor" (4.72; 76-81). But the young Dryden, walking in procession with the accomplished elder poets and statesmen, in this moment, had not yet consolidated the aesthetic program that became the foundation of eighteenth-century *belletrist* criticism, had not yet written the poem, "Annus Mirabilis," that secured him the position of Poet Laureate. In that later poem, Dryden imagined London, ascending from the ashes of the 1666 fire: "Now like a Maiden Queen she will behold,/ From her high turrets hourly suitors come/ The East with Incense, the West with Gold/ Will stand like suppliants, to receive her doom." London, as imperial center, stands fixed

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<sup>79</sup> Lewalski, *Life of Milton* (Malden: Blackwell, 2000).

and the world sends tribute, arranged in supplication around it. From Cromwell's funeral, from these three poets, two paths diverge.

One path leads to the program of Neoclassical, speculative aesthetics, and the optical program of the Enlightenment that Barrell and Mitchell have critiqued at length (examined in the next chapter). The other leads to Toland's compost sensibility, to the Richardsons' depropriating sense of change and flux, to the peripatetic traditions of eighteenth-century eco-georgic, and the common sense tradition in English philosophy.<sup>80</sup> Far on the distant horizon, Romanticism and particularly the materialist sensibility of William Blake, the inheritor of an idealist theory of art, on the one hand, and a rich tradition of handcraft on the other. The end of this literary historical byway is not fixed in advance, or teleologically necessary, but from this vantage in 1659, we can make out continuities that do not culminate in Romanticism, but move through and beyond it, well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>81</sup> The question, "What is their left to do?" haunts poets and writers in the eighteenth-century.<sup>82</sup> How do writers inherit a literary, textual, technical, and intellectual tradition while still exerting freedom, creativity, and spontaneity within it? How can that tradition provide "the richest of all soils," rather than a dismaying "covering cherub," choking out poetic efflorescence?<sup>83</sup> These are the questions that animate the eighteenth-century at a moment when aesthetics and the study of literature were becoming

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<sup>80</sup> The term "eco-georgic" is David Fairer's. See Fairer, "'Where Fuming Trees Refresh the Thirsty Air': The World of Eco-Georgic," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 40 (2011) 201-218.

<sup>81</sup> See Jed Rasula, *This Compost! Ecological Imperatives in American Poetry* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012). Elder connects the loco-descriptive program of poets like Wordsworth to American poets from Whitman to Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder in *Imagining the Earth: Poetry and the Vision of Nature*. Tobias Wolff has recently connected Blake's depropriating poetics to Ed Roberson, in "Being Several: Reading Blake with Ed Roberson" *NLH* 49.4 (2018) 553-578.

<sup>82</sup> On the anxiety felt by eighteenth-century poets arising from their sense of belated arrival to an established literary culture, see Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1970) 12.

<sup>83</sup> The figure of the "covering cherub," is borrowed from William Blake by Harold Bloom to evoke the sense of dread and the repressive power of tradition that poets of the "age of sensibility," tried to ignore, but which became crippling for the Romantics: "For Collins, for Cowper, for many a Bard of Sensibility Milton was the Tyger, the Covering Cherub blocking a new voice from entering the Poet's Paradise" in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 35.

codified. These are also the questions that animate the chapters that follow. The dynamics of literary succession, or what Immanuel Kant called *Nachfolge*, how writers endlessly rework, remediate, and revive received materials with the impulse to make them new informs the selection of texts and the focus of what follows.<sup>84</sup>

The discipline of literary studies, under external institutional pressures, and with a sense of exhaustion with narrowly focused historicist study, has recently taken up fundamental questions pertaining to the literariness of literature in which I am especially invested.<sup>85</sup> What is distinctive about literature? What makes literary writing different from natural philosophy, or history? Debates about critical reading and methodology in literary studies have kindled rich conversations around these questions. But their emergence during the eighteenth century, in the quarrel of ancients and moderns for instance, and in the rise of aesthetics and the consolidation of the disciplines, has not been paid adequate attention in the “reading debates.” The issue of distinguishing poetry from other kinds of language use was central to the development of aesthetic theory. The effort to separate out different forms of writing was also essential to the consolidation of disciplines, since critics like Joseph Addison saw their task as disentangling and clearly naming distinctive modes of experience and expression by sorting out their essential differences. However, the criteria these early scholars and critics use to mark out differences often obscures what is distinctive about literature by approaching it as an expressive medium for moral axioms, in analogy to treatises, but enhanced by poetical embellishments.

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<sup>84</sup> Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Ed Paul Guyer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). On “Nachfolge” and literary history, see Sanford Budick, *Kant and Milton* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 253-300.

<sup>85</sup> On the question of literariness, see Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, “Form and Explanation” *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2017) 650-669; reprinted in *Paper Minds*, 51. On the fragmenting of the contextualist consensus in literary studies, see Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) 81-123.

The long poems I study here pose a unique challenge to critical methods that arose contemporaneously with them, which rely on assumptions about the discrete unity of aesthetic form, incorporated from the idealist epistemology of early empiricism. These itinerant poems afford different ways of conceptualizing key terms in literary studies, like form. They are expansive, encyclopedic, and uniquely irreducible to the kinds of generalizations scholars and critics have produced to interpret them. As a consequence, they constitute a counter-tradition, and provide a rich site for theorizing aesthetic experience as an embodied way of making contact with the world, rather than the disinterested, spectatorial separation from it. The contextualist effort to reduce the literary and the aesthetic to the habits and routines of everyday life, lived as it is immersed in entrained and conventional practices, has been undertaken with the metaphysical conviction that representation is all there is, and in association with a nominalism so dizzying it would make Hume swoon.<sup>86</sup> When “representation,” or “discourse,” absorbs highly differentiated technical cultures, what is distinctive about literature and the aesthetic mode of making contact with the world is lost. The flattening of all language use to ideologically suspect “discourse,” has displaced the question of what makes the “literariness” of a poem different from an agricultural manual or the daily news – a question that deeply concerned William Cowper.

Corresponding to the loss of the literariness of poetry is the historicist conviction that literature is epiphenomenal. Culture and ideology are the real entity that speak through literature, and provide a substratum that is grasped only by penetrating the veil of literary language. The conviction that there is something more fundamental beneath or just beyond fictional, formed language links modern contextualist approaches to the *belletrist* criticism of the eighteenth century. Both approaches share the view that literature is expressive of something truer,

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<sup>86</sup> Henry Staten calls these entrained practices “the grooves of effectuality that have been worn into the real,” in *Techné Theory: A New Language for Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019) 11.

mystified by literary language.<sup>87</sup> The result is that artworks are seen as vehicular. Whether they are communicating the universal truths of moral axioms, or determined by a historical episteme, conceptual array, or ideology, an extra-textual entity supersedes their literariness. My project historicizes contemporary reading debates by connecting them to these assumptions incorporated into the foundations of aesthetic theory in the long eighteenth century. By doing so, I try to present the prospects for reading and teaching canonical literature of the long eighteenth century now, at a moment of a profound rethinking of fundamental assumptions regarding literary study initially established in the eighteenth century.

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<sup>87</sup> On the reduction of “the beautiful to the true,” see Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger* trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 12.



## Chapter Two

### Anatomy of Idealism: Epistemology and Aesthetics in the Eighteenth Century

*A spacious Horizon is an Image of Liberty, where the eye has Room to range abroad, to expatiate at large on the immensity of its views, and to lose itself amidst the variety of objects that offer themselves to its observation. Such wide and undetermined prospects are as pleasing to the Fancy as the speculations of Eternity or Infinitude are to the Understanding.* Joseph Addison, *Spectator* 3:541

*When we sit down to appreciate the value of a poem or of a painting, and attend minutely to the language or composition of the one or to the coloring or design of the other, we feel no longer the delight which they at first produce. Our imagination in this employment is restrained, and instead of yielding to its suggestions, we studiously endeavor to resist them by fixing our attention upon minute and partial circumstances of the composition.* Archibald Allison, “On the Nature of the Emotions of Sublimity and Beauty” 1.II.ii

Description, form, and idea occupy a prominent position in recent debates about methodology in literary study.<sup>1</sup> Reading for form, depending on the critic might mean reading for the causes that account for literature’s shape. Or it might be the identification of a type or pattern, or educing the organizing idea of a text. Recent critiques of depth reading, whether

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<sup>1</sup> The *MLQ* special issue *Reading for Form* (2000) is a touchstone for new formalist critics. Robert Lehman points to it as the beginning of “new formalism” in his recent essay “Mere Form, Formalism, and Judgment” in *NLH* 48.2 (Spring 2017) 245-63. Marjorie Levinson characterizes the special issue as a watershed moment in “What is New Formalism?” *PMLA* 122.2 (2007) 558-569. For variations on the descriptive turn and a renewed interest in aesthetics see Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction” in *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 1-21; Heather Love, “Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn” *NLH* 41.2 (2010) 371-391. The movement has generated its critics. See, for example, Crystal Bartolovich, “Humanities of Scale: Marxism, Surface Reading—and Milton” in *PMLA* 127.1 (2012); also Carolyn Lesjak, “Reading Dialectically” in *Criticism* 55.2 (2013) 233-77.

construed as reading for a governing abstraction or for ideology, promise a minimalist descriptive practice characterized by attentive humility before textual artifacts.<sup>2</sup> But the status of “form” in these recent critiques remains obscure, as does its role in ostensibly less intrusive ways of reading.<sup>3</sup> A central difficulty in defining form has to do with determining its status as material – like the shape of Hogarth’s line of beauty – or ideal, existing as a schematic “S” in the mind of the artist prior to composition.<sup>4</sup> In particular, ideal form – whether understood as a determining design, or as an emergent property of coherence – presents a challenge for descriptive criticism. Is form a predicate of each discrete part of a text? Is it a mentalistic whole? Like much in contemporary criticism, uncertainty about form and its relationship to ideas originates in the development of philosophical aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Early aesthetic criticism equates form with an immaterial ideal essence. Assumptions about the immateriality of “form,” contested in recent debates about reading and method in literary study were baked into the foundations of aesthetic theory during the eighteenth century. The contradictory impulses of

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<sup>2</sup> For the critique of “depth” or “symptomatic” reading see Best and Marcus (2009). On the affective commitment to “attention” see Rita Felski’s *The Uses of Literature* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) and her follow-up, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2015). In *Uses*, Felski calls for a critical practice defined by “scrupulous attention to the medium specific features of artistic forms.” For responses, positive and negative, to Felski’s search for alternative affective relations to literary texts in *Limits*, see the essays collected in the “Theories and Methodologies” section of *PMLA* 132.2 (2017).

<sup>3</sup> According to the entry on “form” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* “The *OED* gives 22 definitions, with subcategory refinements and variations” for the word. Much criticism under the “new formalist” umbrella avoids defining the notoriously polysemous term by not theorizing it at all. Levinson (2007) remarks that much of the “new formalism” is oddly silent on the word “form” itself, and peculiarly bereft of any novel theorizing of the term itself. Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have recently suggested that “form” is inquiry relative, its definition depending on the kind of explanation into which it is recruited, hence its wide range of meaning, in “Form and Explanation,” *Critical Inquiry* 43.3 (Spring 2017) pgs. 650-669.

<sup>4</sup> The intermediate status of Hogarth’s S-shaped “line of beauty,” theorized in his 1753 *Analysis of Beauty* oscillating as it does between ideal and material, is discussed by Abigail Zitin in “Thinking Like an Artist: Hogarth, Diderot, and the Aesthetics of Technique” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 46.4 (2013) 555-570. Peter de Bolla says that for Hogarth, vision oscillates between subject and object, between representations in the mind and objects in the world. “Vision, according to Hogarth, is as much a property of the world viewed, of the object of sight, as it is of a viewing subject” in *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (2003) 27. Zitin’s account, like de Bolla’s counters Jonathan Crary’s influential discussion of observational practice in the eighteenth-century visual culture in *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992) 25-66. On the technical orientation of mid-eighteenth-century criticism, see R. S. Crane, “English Neoclassical Criticism: An Outline Sketch” in *Critics and Criticism: Ancient and Modern* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1975) 372-389.

contemporary formalist discourse emerge out of eighteenth-century idealist approaches to art and the influence of descriptive verse on the development of English practical criticism.

### Addison and the Prospect View

In eighteenth-century aesthetics nature is ideal. It provides the comprehensive, default object of poetic representation.<sup>5</sup> Nature is assumed by early critics to be the transhistorical, and universal object of artistic imitation.<sup>6</sup> Everywhere and always the same, ideal nature provides a stable substratum for the specifics of place, time, and language, and for the conventions of technique that could otherwise sink composition in spatiotemporal contingency. In *The Guardian*, Richard Steele writes that, “Nature being still the same, it is impossible for any modern writer to paint her otherwise than as the ancients have done” (77). For Steele, depicting nature consists not in mimetically representing empirical particulars but in disclosing it as it truly is, which in this period means without regard to accidents of time and place. Steele’s view is representative, and early eighteenth-century criticism is an idealizing enterprise. What matters is the type or schema, set over and against the particular. But a tension animates the practice of eighteenth-century descriptive poets. While an impulse towards idealizing is widely represented

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<sup>5</sup> My interpretation of the idealism of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory departs from the canonical account of M. H. Abrams in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953). Abrams defines eighteenth-century poetry as mimetic, aiming at an imagistic (and Lockean) representational correspondence to nature, while Romantic poetry departs from its eighteenth-century inheritance by expressing ideas generated out of the plenitude of the Romantic genius. Abrams rightly identifies the impulse to represent the general type in eighteenth-century poetry, but his Augustinian periodization separates the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a way that prevents him from identifying that the tension between ideal and technical in neoclassicism is also a fundamental contradiction in Romantic theory. On the myriad meanings of “nature” in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century criticism see Lovejoy, “‘Nature’ as Aesthetic Norm” *MLN* 42.7 (1927) 105-112.

<sup>6</sup> Abrams (1953) pgs. 30-47

in Restoration landscape poetry, there is a countervailing tendency towards the local and the concrete.

Locodescription oscillates between an idealizing vision of nature and a literalist emphasis on specifics. Describing the former tendency, Joseph Addison writes, “It is impossible for us, who live in the latter ages of the world to make observations . . . which have not been touched on by others. We have little else left us but to represent the common sense of mankind in stronger, more beautiful, more uncommon lights” (II. 484). If nature is always the same, Addison reasons, its depiction poses a technical problem: how to represent the common uncommonly or in a manner not slavishly imitative of the ancients. Assuming a world without novelty, Addison says everything that can be observed has already been described and so what remains for modern poets to do is represent the world in new ways without marring it by including inessential qualities.<sup>7</sup> To write well about types and kinds, themselves timeless and treated by antecedent authors, demands novel techniques of attention and composition. This tendency can be seen in the topical focus of poets like John Dryden and Alexander Pope. Under a growing sense of his belated position in literary and intellectual culture, in poems like “Absolom and Achitophel,” and “Annus Mirabilis,” Dryden refracts historical events through universal types and allegories. His treatment of contingent historical events through the recurrence of biblical and Augustan motifs points to a stable, transhistorical order that creates a closed network of associations. Similarly, in Addison’s view, the substratum of classical and biblical writing remains the same from the ancients to the moderns.

The double view towards universals and novel expression manifests in the period’s loco-descriptive verse. The tension between universality and particularity has sometimes been

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<sup>7</sup> On the widespread eighteenth-century view that everything that could be written about in poetry had already been done, and the anxiety of novel expression, see Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past* (Cambridge; Belknap Press, 1970) 29-59

understood in terms of the distinction between pastoral and georgic.<sup>8</sup> Pastoral presents an ideal landscape purged of labor set in a golden age, while georgic presents a fallen world defined by the work of generating novelty from decay. Not just a matter of generic distinction, the contest between pastoral and georgic is central to what Arthur O. Lovejoy calls the conversion of “the once immutable Chain of Being into the program of endless Becoming” that defines modernity (259).<sup>9</sup> Is the world static, or does it develop, and what is the nature of historical change? For Addison and Steele, true nature is timeless while its inessential qualities are subject to variation. They privilege ideal continuity over the shifting particulars of time and place. But does historical variation suggest decline or improvement? And where does novelty come from if the schemata determining nature remain always the same? These questions about the temporality of the world are central to the two major modes of descriptive poetry. The tension between alternative constructions of nature – as a closed world or as an open system – animates the debate between the idealist aesthetics developed in Addison’s programmatic essays and the anti-essentialist critiques of Thomas Reid.<sup>10</sup> An aesthetic program of naturalism and descriptive literalism anticipates Reid’s critique of the presuppositions of idealist theory and his elaboration of the position of common sense philosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> On the contest between pastoral and georgic in the seventeenth century see Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 71-116; William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions, 1974) 27-88; Dwight Durling, *Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935); Ralph Cohen, “Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry,” in *Literature and History: Papers Read at the Clark Library Seminar March 2 1973* eds. Ralph Cohen and Murray Krieger (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library 1974) 149-182; David Fairer, *English Poetry of the Eighteenth Century 1700-1787* (New York: Longman, 2003) 90-99. On georgic temporality, see Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1936). Recent scholarship shows renewed interest in Lovejoy, and the temporality of the “ideas” treated by his “history of ideas.” See Heather Keenleyside, “Matter, Form, Idea: What Lovejoy’s History of Ideas Might Have to do with Literature,” in *ELH* 84.1 (Spring, 2017). Janina Wellman explores Lovejoy’s notion of the dynamization of the world picture in eighteenth-century biology in *The Form of Becoming: Embryology and Epistemology of Rhythm, 1760-1830* trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2017), pgs. 13-36 and 321-324.

<sup>10</sup> On the distinction between open and closed perspectives on the world and the advent of modernity, see Alexander Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957).

The pastorals and hill-poems of the Restoration and early eighteenth-century feature extensive description, but with few exceptions their landscapes aim at generality. Though nominally based in actual locations, they tend to abstract their scenes into moral landscapes. In so doing, the prospect poem joins the concretizing impulses of georgic to the idealizing poetics of pastoral. Eighteenth-century criticism was practical and closely tied to the kinds of poems it was meant to explain, but its presuppositions prioritized generality at the expense of spatiotemporal particulars. Addison's criticism and the aesthetic theory that he developed were shaped by the topographical poems of the Restoration. After Addison, landscape description became paradigmatic for theorizing aesthetic experience generally. The nature these poems describe matters for the eternal verities it discloses. Moralizing heights like Grongar, Edge, Windsor, and Cooper dissolves their accidental features into permanent and universal axioms seen from a fixed optical platform, which it is the task of criticism to disclose.<sup>11</sup>

Topographical poems from the Restoration and early eighteenth-century are defined by the integration of didacticism with loco-descriptive prospects.<sup>12</sup> The didactic *telos* of the vantage points beyond the text and exerts causal force on the arrangement of its elements. In the 1763 preface to his edition of Virgil, Joseph Warton writes, "To render instruction amiable, to soften the severity of science, and to give virtue and knowledge a captivating and engaging air is the great privilege of the didactic muse."<sup>13</sup> Didactic prospects provided the right mixture of variety and unity that Addison, in his "Essay on *The Georgics*" and in the critical agenda developed later

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<sup>11</sup> John Denham, "Cooper's Hill"; Alexander Pope, "Windsor Forest;" Richard Jago, "Edge Hill;" John Dyer, "Grongar Hill."

<sup>12</sup> R. S. Crane defines didactic poems as "constituted of some particular thesis, intellectual or practical, relative to some general human interest" (156). Explicitly didactic poetry aimed at the presentation of moral or philosophical content is distinguished from looser pedagogical forms like georgic. See Crane, *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1953).

<sup>13</sup> Warton, "Reflections on Didactic Poetry," *The Works of Virgil in English Verse Vol. 2* (1763) 292.

in the *Spectator*, sought in both nature and art.<sup>14</sup> For Addison, the formal unity of a prospect is achieved by the generalities it makes intelligible. Descriptive beauty requires the transcendence of local perspective to make general nature appear. Addison writes, “This kind of poetry I am now speaking of addresses itself wholly to the imagination: it is altogether conversant among the fields and woods and has the most delightful part of nature for its province.”<sup>15</sup> Properly imaginative poetry is nature poetry. The Addisonian view that poetry expresses general truths circuitously was paradigmatic for Neoclassical aesthetics. Poets imitated external nature, rather than expressing internal states. But external nature was constructed in terms of naturalized moral and scientific axioms. Description in poets like John Denham is valued not for perceptual acuity, or for its own sake, but for the moral nature it makes present to the observer and reader. Addison privileges landscape poems over social or historical settings because poets can realize universal truths through the representation of nature. Accordingly, nature is valued not for itself but because of its presumed continuity from Homer and Virgil to the moderns. Depicting ideal nature affords poets the best opportunity to equal the ancients.

Loco-description is the verse form most immediately related to the imagination because the imagination delights in the play between the heterogeneity of a natural scene and a unified ideal. Addison writes that “Virgil has drawn together . . . in his *Georgics* . . . a collection of the most delightful landscapes that can be made out of fields, and woods, herds of cattle, and swarms of bees.”<sup>16</sup> This sequence of landscapes corresponds to the content of each of the four books of Virgil’s poem. In Addison’s reading, Virgil provides a model for using natural variety to realize abstractions. Virgil’s crowd symbols (herds of cattle, swarms of bees etc.) are vehicular, and

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<sup>14</sup> On the consistency of Addison’s aesthetic theory from the “Essay on *The Georgics*” through the *Spectator* essays on imagination, see Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity* (2004) 17-37

<sup>15</sup> Addison, “Essay on *The Georgics*” in *The Works of John Dryden* ed. Walter Scott (Edinburgh: Constable) 14

<sup>16</sup> *Spectator* 417

convey symbolic content. For instance, the social hierarchy of the bees in book four provides an emblem for the proper regulation of society.<sup>17</sup> Addison's reading of *The Georgics* is moral, and he draws attention to the poem's descriptive method, taking special delight in the scenic variety through which Virgil expresses his precepts. But Virgil's *Georgics* displays little landscape description comparable to that of Denham or Edmund Waller. Addison reads the homegrown tradition of English prospect poems into Virgil's original. Virgil's poem is both less moralizing than Addison presents it, and less descriptive. The conjunction of description and moralism common in English loco-descriptive verse derived from Denham influenced Addison's reading of Virgil. In his early introductory essay he identifies a classical precedent for the English moral landscape, connecting and thereby justifying it to a poetic practice from antiquity. The mode that emerges from Addison's consolidation connects strictly Virgilian georgic imitations, like those by John Phillips, James Grainger, and Christopher Smart, to the prospect poems popularized by Denham, Waller, and Andrew Marvell.<sup>18</sup> The topographical poetry, practical criticism, and emergent experimentalist program of the period share an interest in how description can suture the perceptual world to the supersensible domain of scientific and moral truth.<sup>19</sup> Most importantly for the history of aesthetics, Addison's arrogation of English topographical verse to georgic moves the techniques of natural description to the center of eighteenth-century criticism

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<sup>17</sup> On bee symbols from the classical period to early modernity as emblems for social order, see Christopher Hollingsworth, *The Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2001). See also Timothy Raylor, "Samuel Hartlib and the Commonwealth of Bees," *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1992)

<sup>18</sup> Alastair Fowler points to Restoration-era landscape poetry as a fundamental contribution to the development of the looser style of English georgic that came to be defined by James Thomson's *The Seasons* and William Cowper's *The Task* in "Georgic and Pastoral: Laws of Genre in Seventeenth-Century England," *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land* (New York: Leicester University Press, 1992) 81-90. As will become clear, the practice of poets like Cowley, who elevates "the mind's purged eye" over the contingencies to which it is often subject, is part of the "heiroglyphick" tradition of Denham, for whom contingency and particularity bog down the vision of divinity. See John Dixon Hunt *The Figure in the Landscape* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1989) 17.

<sup>19</sup> Kevis Goodman says that English georgic is "most influential, if less well-understood, not as a relatively short-lived Augustan genre, but when and where it persists afterwards as a subtle underpresence and discipline" (10). See Goodman, *Georgic Modernity* (2004) 10.

and links poetic description to the round-about representation of ideas. Formal inquiry then becomes the practice of inferring the idea or axiom suggested by the work of art. Starting with Addison, the standard example in English criticism for discussing aesthetic experience is the expansive prospect.

Prospects are central to the development of aesthetic theory because they push the boundaries of formal containment while offering a satisfying experience of unity. The question that Addison addresses is what that unity might consist in. The prospect view is exemplary in the period for the kind of elevated perceptiveness, sensitivity, and heightened attention that distinguished aesthetic experience from other modes of engaging the world.<sup>20</sup> It provides a primary poetic motif for thinking about the formal relationship of variety to unity that remains central to art criticism. For Addison, unity takes the form of an ideal precept that poetic prospects make available to reason. Loco-description “raises in our minds a pleasing variety of scenes and landscapes, whilst it teaches us, and makes the driest of its precepts look like a description” (380). Referring to Virgil’s practice of putting moral axioms “into a pleasing dress,” Addison praises the ability of landscape poetry to make abstract principles intelligible through what he calls the “by-way” of descriptive association.<sup>21</sup> While prose “tells us plainly what ought to be done,” Addison praises Virgil’s ability to “suggest a truth indirectly, and without giving us a full and open view of it, to let us see just so much as will naturally lead the imagination into all the parts that lie concealed.”<sup>22</sup> The play of partial exposure and the pleasurable labor of the imagination pursuing truths just beyond the horizon of description characterize the aesthetic experience of what Hogarth calls an “intricacy of form” that leads “the eye a wanton kind of

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<sup>20</sup> In his *Discourses* Sir Joshua Reynolds, for example, characterized aesthetic experience as a matter of “great labour and attention,” to be distinguished from everyday “dullness.” Qtd. in “Introduction,” *Discourses* XV.

<sup>21</sup> Goodman (2004) 32

<sup>22</sup> “Essay on the *Georgics*” 15

chace” (33).<sup>23</sup> Hogarth, like Addison, grounds aesthetic pleasure in what David Porter describes as “the tantalizing deferral of discovery” (400).<sup>24</sup> Addison’s aesthetics require the reader fill in the idea that is hinted at.<sup>25</sup> Pleasure in art derives from the process by which the mind infers an idea “that draws a whole train after it.” Crucially, the temporary suspension of language’s communicative purpose distinguishes poetic discourse from modes like natural philosophy which try to communicate truths directly. Unlike Hogarth, Addison is unwilling to make the pleasurable byway an end in itself. But description provides “the hint from the poet,” while the reader fulfills the Horatian requirement of instruction by inferring an abstraction to which the train of associations leads, and which retrospectively unifies the descriptive succession. Addison thus smuggles communicative purpose into his view of literature and his aesthetic theory by treating the “byway” as ultimately subordinate to the precept it expresses.

Addison’s view of description is an early species of depth formalism because for him description is a predicate of a transcendent axiom. The poetics of putting a scene together are epiphenomenal because subordinate to the precept intended by the poet. The particularities of technique and elements of attention and selection have secondary status to the idea that they make intelligible. Poetry, when viewed as a vehicle for the transcendent, “is analyzed to yield ‘leading ideas’ with poetics accorded secondary status (Wellek and Warren 110).<sup>26</sup> The contradiction between technical composition and organizing idea attaches to the notion of formal unity. In Addison’s theory of the “byway,” the technical, digressive mediations of description are

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<sup>23</sup> Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty* (1753) 25.

<sup>24</sup> David Porter, “A Wanton Chase in a Foreign Place: Hogarth and the Gendering of Exoticism” *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 33 (2004) 399-413.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Kroll says that Addison’s theory of partial disclosure is a species of metonymy, “denoting the reader’s responsibility to educe general principles from partial but suggestive signs,” in *The Material Word: Literate Culture in the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991) 22.

<sup>26</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren reject the view of literature “as a form of philosophy, as ‘ideas’ wrapped in form” but they don’t identify the fundamental role this view has played in the development of practical criticism after Addison (110). See Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York: Harcourt, 1949). The view is fundamental to Lovejoy, who says serious, reflective literature is “philosophical ideas in dilution” (*Great Chain* 17).

an adjunct of the ideal essence that readers infer. Representations of landscape advance towards an abstract singularity, the grasping of which involves the supersession of the imagery that leads to it. Formal unity is consequently divorced from poetics, because unity is construed as teleological fulfillment. Addison sees the ideal fulfillment of the “by-way” as the regulative purpose for the succession of images. Abstraction retroactively secures unity by being recursively implied throughout as the natural end of individual details.<sup>27</sup> Addison’s view of the byway introduces the pervasive problem of purpose-thinking into English aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> At issue is the fundamental question of what literature is for. Literature, he claims, involves balancing the pleasurable open and playfully digressive against neoclassical demands that literature do something – namely teach virtue. Prospects disclose a fundamental problem for eighteenth-century criticism: how can the particular, perspectival, and contingent obtain universality, analogous to concepts, without a governing representation or idea. For Addison, they can’t, but prospects in descriptive poetry provide him with a formal feature from the English tradition through which he develops an idealist theory of aesthetic unity.

To be properly aesthetic unity must be complex. For Addison, homogeneity affords the imagination no pleasurable play because no effort at comprehension. For that variety is needed. The elements of descriptive poetry “should all be so finely wrought together in the same piece that no coarse seam may discover where they join; as in a curious breed of needle-work, one color falls away by such just degrees, and another rises so insensibly that we see the variety without being able to distinguish the total vanishing of the one from the first appearance of the

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<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Swift, whose impulse towards georgic accumulation is on display in his “Description of a City Shower,” mocks the pedantic idealism of his colleagues: “[Since] our modern Improvement of Human Understanding . . . instead of desiring a philosopher to describe or define a mouse-trap, or tell me what it is; I must gravely ask what is contained in the idea of a mouse-trap?” *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head 1939) vol. 2.80

<sup>28</sup> On purpose-thinking, and the challenges of teleology in art, philosophy, and science, see Michael Ruse, *On Purpose* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

other” (Addison, “Essay,” 6).<sup>29</sup> In descriptive verse variety causes delight and the surprise of novelty. The poem or painting must include multiplicity but without becoming uneven.

Addison’s analogy to weaving is augmented by reference to music in Lord Kames’s *Elements*: “It is an improvement to intermix in the succession rude, uncultivated spots as well as unbounded views, which in themselves are disagreeable, but in succession heighten the feeling of the agreeable object.”<sup>30</sup> The metaphors in Kames’ description merge landscape painting, prospect poetry, and the succession of sounds in music as similarly determined by the demand for unity in variety. He goes on to cite the Italian ballad tradition, and the role of potentially jarring elements within a musical composition to meet the requirements of variation. Kames’ analogy between a prospect and a musical composition depends, like Addison’s, on an abstract universal – a didactic precept, or general truth – that is implied throughout the material of musical and poetic composition.

Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century prospect poems emblematically represent an abstract truth, quality, or precept from a fixed, elevated vantage. The most influential example of the allegorical prospects is Denham’s *Coopers Hill*. There are classical antecedents for the allegorical view, and it has connections to the Renaissance emblem tradition.<sup>31</sup> For instance, Aeneas’ prospect view of Carthage includes the epic simile of a busy beehive with everyone doing his or her part as an allegory for social order. Earl Wasserman has argued that in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century descriptive verse, the depiction of nature was dominated by

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<sup>29</sup> Addison, “Essay on the Georgics” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Kames, *Elements of Criticism Vol. I*, “Resemblance and Dissimilitude” (1769) 298

<sup>31</sup> On the emblem tradition in English descriptive verse, see Kitty W. Scoular, *Natural Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965). John Hunt describes the afterlife of the Renaissance “habits of reading natural phenomena as cyphers or analogues of divine wisdom” in Restoration and eighteenth-century landscaping practices (13) in *The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting and Gardening in the Eighteenth century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1989).

ideal “world pictures.”<sup>32</sup> In reproducing these schematic frameworks poets considered themselves to be imitating universal patterns. The resulting idealism is predicated on consensus about “cosmic designs” of a general nature. The work of the descriptive poet was not to pursue the particular or individual but the universal. Samuel Johnson’s canonical formulation of this principle in Imlac’s discourse on poetics declares that “The business of the poet . . . is to examine not the individual but the species: to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip.” The poet should “neglect the minuter discriminations, which one may have remarked and another have neglected, for those characteristics which are alike obvious to vigilance and to carelessness” (21-22).<sup>33</sup> Poets should perceive the general form beneath the contingent world and ignore accidental qualities. At the beginning of *Cooper’s Hill*, Denham describes “taking wing” from the prospect, “Through untrac’t ways and aery paths” until his Fancy ascends to an ideal vision of the surrounding landscape. For the topographical tradition that he inaugurates, the gesture of ascent is programmatic. Penetrating the veil of nature’s accidents requires elevation and separation.<sup>34</sup> Perspicuous sight depends upon vantage, and in the hill poems that follow Denham, rather than the Miltonic approach to prospects, this vision is closely tied to the metaphors of ascent as bodily transcendence.

Regal authority saturates the scene Denham describes, and every detail is bent to the service of the “sacred pile” of Windsor. “In this poetry,” John Barrell writes, “the landscape becomes a theater where the poet’s own moral reflections are acted out, where the objects do not so much give rise to the reflections as the ready-made and waiting reflections justify the

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<sup>32</sup> Wasserman, *The Subtler Language: Readings in Neoclassical and Romantic Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1959) 173.

<sup>33</sup> Johnson, *Rasselas* (New York: Dover, 2012).

<sup>34</sup> On the importance of elevation and separation to eighteenth-century visual culture, see Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*; for a counter-argument to Crary, emphasizing embodiment in mid-century visuality see de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye*

inclusion of this or that object in the poem.”<sup>35</sup> In the parlance of philosophy of science, the observations are saturated with the poet’s presuppositions, or “theory laden.”<sup>36</sup> As a microcosm of the power of divine ordering, royal power resolves any potentially dissonant (or dissident) elements in the landscape. “Wisely she [nature] knew the harmony of things/ As well as that of sounds, from discords springs./ Such was the discord, which did first dispense/ Form, Order, Beauty through the Universe” (ll. 203-6). Order emerges from chaos by divine and royal fiat, and hierarchical systems generate coherence from the cosmos to the state. The ideal “world picture” that permeates Denham’s landscape is defined by unity in variety.<sup>37</sup> Denham’s landscape is allegorical: the particulars point to an abstract vanishing point, at which juncture they are no longer necessary. Denham’s “world harmony” subsumes particularity under the isomorphic authorities of God and King and the visual array is arranged to demonstrate the alignment of the political with the theological and cosmic order. As the king joins together the sometimes violently heterogeneous nation (and without whom it threatens return to formlessness) so God guarantees the harmony between the micro- and macrocosms. Denham popularized the technique of inferring social and political ideals through description of English landscapes, and his influence on Addison’s theory of imagination is apparent. His imaginative ascent yields a description impossible to localize, remote, and virtual, though names for a well-known promontory. The allegorical vision transparently layers natural, aesthetic, moral, and metaphysical orders without concern for the particulars of perspective or setting, creating a

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<sup>35</sup> Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape*, 35.

<sup>36</sup> See Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 167-186.

<sup>37</sup> Earl Wasserman argues that in Denham’s prospect, “Nature’s design, expressed by the structure of Windsor Hill, now permeates the political world that the hill symbolizes; and the harmony of tensions in Nature becomes but the symbol of the perfect balance of oppositions in the monarch and the proof of its necessity” in *Subtler Language*, 57.

disembodied, totalizing prospect. The details of the landscape are there because they disclose universal principles that guarantee the coherence of the state, nature, and the poem itself.

Denham's emblematic landscape is paradigmatic for the idealist tradition. The practice of loco-description in the Restoration is dominated by the *paysage moralisé*. For instance, Edmund Waller's "On St. James' Park," imagines King James as a new Orpheus, renewing the landscape through the effortless overflow of his creative potency. In *Studies in Iconology* Erwin Panofsky defines the *paysage moralisé* as the embodiment in an image or painting of an abstraction. His example is Piero di Cosimo's "The Choice of Hercules" in which "the antithesis between Virtue and Pleasure is symbolized by the contrast between an easy road winding through beautiful country and a steep, stony path leading up to a forbidding rock" (64).<sup>38</sup> Abstract ideals define the emblematic landscape, and the features of the scene are selected by the artist in order to convey the intended abstraction. In "On St. James's Park," Waller describes the renewal of Eden in heroic couplets echoing Denham. For Denham, the Thames provides an emblem for smooth-flowing, rhymed verse: "Though deep, yet clear, though gentle, yet not dull/ Strong without rage, without o'erflowing full." Similarly, in "On St. James' Park," creativity is similarly balanced by restraint, and regal authority suffuses the setting not like a torrent but like the gently returning tidal flow of the Thames. Waller's prospect sutures past and present, as he hints at previous scenes of violence, "rolling flames and scatter'd cinders," and intimates "Lovers walking in the amorous shade" under trees not yet fully grown. Waller presents the park as both a new Arcadia, complete with "cupids" and "sea-nymphs," and as Eden. But as David Quint recently points out, his Eden is characterized by survival through violent tumults.<sup>39</sup> The Eden regenerated by Charles

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<sup>38</sup> Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Arts of the Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

<sup>39</sup> Quint, "Milton, Waller, and the Fate of Eden," in *MLQ* 78.3 (Fall 2017) 421-440.

II represents a state of permanence, from which the civil war and Interregnum were a momentary aberration resolved by the Restoration.

In prospect, the action of “looking out over a scene,” Peter de Bolla explains, is “temporalized into the expectation that arouses and stimulates our hopes for the future” (108). As a panegyric, Waller’s poem is principally interested in lauding the rejuvenation of a stable tradition brought about by the Restoration. Anticipating a common *topos* of the Augustan period, Waller compares Charles to Augustus before concluding with an analogy to Christ (Quint 430). From his Edenic seat, “His fancy objects from his view receives,/ The prospect thought and contemplation give.” Prospect views generate speculation. Waller imagines Charles seeing not just the park but far distant kingdoms. Like Denham’s – and like the Satanic prospect in *Paradise Regain’d* – Waller’s vision transcends the limitations of the local prospect of London to see “The world from India to the Frozen North.” While his eye settles on the fixtures of Whitehall and Windsor, both appear as emblems of Royal continuity, “Where Royal heads receive the Sacred gold.” Charles is but the latest in a long line of rightly ruling royal heads. The emblem legitimates him by connecting him and the Stuart line to the entire history of English monarchy embodied in Windsor. Waller describes the sites visible from St. James’s park in order to show how each gives evidence to the unbroken continuity of royal authority, from which the Interregnum was an unnatural deviation. The scene hints at a seamless moral landscape.<sup>40</sup> St. James’s Park becomes an emblem for the continuity of royal authority, stretching from the archaic pre-Roman past into the imperial ambitions of the future. Waller’s control over the associative succession links Stuart authority to the order of the stars in the final stanza.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> Quint explains, “Britain, like the park itself, is an Eden that was never lost but continued intact. The Restoration is not selling a new product, but an improved one,” (2017) 431.

<sup>41</sup> As described by Waller, the park is in an intermediate position in “what the standard account narrativizes as the development of the expressive garden from the emblematic” (de Bolla 115).

pleasure generated by the loco-descriptive by-way of the prospect view culminates in and is superseded by the principle governing the representation, as the emblems express features singled out for praise by Waller.

Like *Cooper's Hill* and "On St. James's Park," Alexander Pope's *Windsor Forest* presents an imperial English landscape organized around the power emanating from Windsor.<sup>42</sup> The landscape is varied, as it must be, but "not chaos-like, together crush'd and brus'd/ But as the world, harmoniously confus'd/ Where order in variety we see" (ll. 13-15). Pope's prospect of Windsor imagines heterogeneity disciplined by authority into harmonious arrangement. For Pope, disciplining a heterogeneous whole into a varied by formally integral body links the work of God and King to that of the poet and artist. Pope initially questions the formal integrity of his prospect, but then says that the order of the visual array is subordinate to a cosmic principle of unity. Descriptive poetry without an abstract goal, Pope writes, "Is absurd as a feast made up of sauces," since the purpose of description is to embellish the true aim of the composition.<sup>43</sup> Joseph Warton characterized Pope's descriptions using the Addisonian language of partial revelation, writing that the "description of places and images raised by the poet are still tending to some hint, or leading to some reflection upon moral life or political institution; much in the same manner as the real sight of such scenes and prospects is apt to give the mind a composed turn, and incline it to thoughts and contemplations that have a relation to the object" (30). The exact nature of the connection between an empirical landscape and the reflections and turns of mind that it generates remains obscure in these accounts. How the landscape can be said to hint

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<sup>42</sup> Carole Fabricant writes in the descriptive poetry of the Restoration "topography was regularly, as a matter of habit, moralized" (50-51), and that the tendency to attach a moral to every landscape had a long afterlife in the eighteenth century. See Fabricant, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Landscape in the Eighteenth Century" in *Studies in Eighteenth Century British Art and Aesthetics* ed. Ralph Cohen (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985) 49-81.

<sup>43</sup> Claude Wilan distinguishes Pope's hierarchical descriptions from the looser, more extensive practice in James Thomson's *Seasons*, which became more common in later eighteenth-century loco-descriptive verse. See Wilan, "The Proper Study of Mankind in Pope and Thomson," *ELH* 84.1 (Spring 2017) 63-90.

at ideals of social order is unclear. In Pope's view, as in Denham's, the landscape can be understood morally and politically on the basis of the normative presumption of isomorphism between natural and social orders. Each ordered system in turn depends on the *forma informans* of divine providence, responsible for orchestrating the various orders of order. When belief in the fundamental unity of ordering systems goes so goes the entire framework through which nature and society can be correlated.

Description for Pope, as for Denham, is not an end in itself. Rather, its "primary function . . . is to create a realizable and meaningful structure for the political concept being poetically formulated" (Wasserman 48).<sup>44</sup> For Pope artistry involves intuiting the ideal – what he calls the "genius of the place" – and realizing that ideal through the mediations of craft.<sup>45</sup> Pope's model is eidetic. He thinks that through the controlled application of art transcendent ideas can be realized in material space, like in his garden at Twickenham, and like Waller he presents artistry as a microcosm of royal and divine creative power.<sup>46</sup> In his best poems, like *The Essay on Man*, Pope's skill as a craftsman turning out redolent couplets one after the other undermines his executive, didactic goals. Simon Jarvis writes that "'The Essay on Man' . . . is deathless just insofar as the continuous explosions of wit, arranged for by Pope's rhymes, think back against, detonate those inert cosmological and moral schemes which they should, according to Pope's own poetics, meekly exemplify" (612).<sup>47</sup> Pope is at his best when his technical proficiency outpaces his own schematizing designs. In his weakest poems, like *Windsor Forest*, he remains

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<sup>44</sup> Wasserman, *Subtler Language*, 48

<sup>45</sup> Jerome Stolnitz calls this "the fallacy of vicious abstraction: abstracting one element [like form or theme] out of a total, concrete object and then thinking that it has the same properties when thus considered in isolation that it has when it is part of the object" (216) in *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism: A Critical Introduction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960) 216.

<sup>46</sup> On the practice of emblematic gardening, see de Bolla (2003) 115. On Pope's landscapes in general, and Twickenham in particular, see Malcolm Kelsall, "Landscapes and Estates," in *The Cambridge Companion to Alexander Pope* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007) 161-74.

<sup>47</sup> Jarvis, "The Melodies of Long Poems" *Textual Practice* 24.4 (2010) 607-621.

narrowly didactic. Like Denham and Waller's, Pope's poetics of order are teleological: the moral or political end of description determines in advance the framing of perspective and the selection of details included in the prospect view.

The political and ideological determination of prospects makes them a target for critique. The coordination of natural, and moral orders is the work of ideology, passing off the contingent as universal. Eric Gidal critiques the imagined temporalization of space in prospect poetry as an imperial fantasy of continuity with a mythic past, strategically deployed to warrant expansionist colonial projects.<sup>48</sup> In a series of books and articles, John Barrell follows Raymond Williams by diagnosing the idealization of the rural landscape in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century loco-description and the resulting erasure of its laboring denizens through their redefinition as happy swains.<sup>49</sup> The supervening form is part of an ideological regime that validates certain ways of seeing the world. Thus, for Barrell, topographical verse represents a technology for standardizing observation and description in a manner that supports the optical regime of the aristocratic eye, which surveils the landscape and objectifies its surrounding for financial exploitation. For Rachel Crawford, "Political expansionism" has its literary corollary in the "celebration of unrestricted views in the vast parks of the gentry" (5).<sup>50</sup> The presumption is that to view a landscape is the same thing as to master it by containing it under the totalizing gaze that prospect poems secure virtually for landed aristocrats.

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<sup>48</sup> Eric Gidal, "Prospect and Form in Eighteenth-Century Progress Poetry" in *Ricerche di Storia dell'arte* 72 (2000): 21-28.

<sup>49</sup> Barrell's most cited books on the ideology of eighteenth-century landscape are *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1972); *English Literature in History 1730-1780: An Equal and Wide Survey* (London: Hutchinson, 1983); *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 1983). See also his essay "Being is Perceiving: James Thomson and John Clare" in *Poetry, Language and Politics* (Manchester: Manchester UP 1988). More general treatments of the ideology of landscape representation include James Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry, 1630-1660* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1979); and Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1780* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1986)

<sup>50</sup> Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP 2002).

In the emblematic landscape tradition, ideological motivations do not require sophisticated diagnostics. Near the end of *Windsor Forest*, Pope merges the trees of his landscape with the imperial goals of Queen Anne's war and the Treaty of Utrecht, which the poem was written to commemorate. "Thy trees, fair Windsor! Now shall leave their woods,/ And half thy forests rush into my floods/ Bear Britain's thunder, and her cross display/ To the bright regions of the rising day" (383-86). Pope envisions the forests of Windsor dissolving into the ships of colonial expansion following the conclusion of the war. Mercantile vessels follow naval ones, retrieving wealth and goods from the far reaches of the empire while banishing "to deepest Hell" the "barb'rous discord" that haunts the margins of imperial power. The trees of Windsor are already observable as their final purpose; they are emblems of naval conquest and colonial domination. And as conventional symbols of ancient British culture, the oaks connect an imagined mythical past to English imperialism in order to justify the expansion of empire by characterizing it as the defeat of disorder. Pope presents British imperialism as one with the providential unfolding of history, producing order from chaos. Whatever is individual about the forest is of secondary importance to its divinely authorized imperial use.<sup>51</sup> Pope's emblem naturalizes the expansion of British control by making it a microcosm of the divine ordering of the cosmos. It participates in the same labor of harmonizing that, at the beginning of the poem, he characterizes as the work of creation: producing order from chaos. His ideological motivation for layering social, political, and natural order is evident. Prospects in Denham, Waller, and Pope are characterized by the imposition of order and structure derived from normative religious and political values. These poets schematize their landscapes in accordance with leading ideas, which the landscapes are designed to meekly exemplify.. The aesthetic idealism of early prospect poets,

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<sup>51</sup> Wasserman writes, "The description is not scenic but thematic; we are not to see things but to realize the principle of *concordia discors*" in *Subtler Language*, 111.

with their tendency to locate purpose beyond the particulars of composition, produced ideological and didactic poems that saw order as dependent upon permanent, supersensible principles.

### Empiricism and the Visual Culture of Aesthetic Idealism

The basic premises of idealist poetics derive from the dominant philosophical tradition with which they were closely linked. In Denham's, Waller's, and Pope's poems, *concordia discors* is a formal organizational principle. It authorizes the ideologically motivated layering of moral, political, and natural systems and the inference of abstract concepts from the materials of description. Form, in this case, is an abstract principle that Wasserman joins Leo Spitzer and A. O. Lovejoy in claiming permeated Western intellectual culture before the rise of modernity.<sup>52</sup> All three authors share a discrete, notional idea of "form" as universal and non-contingent units or containers of autonomous moral and philosophical content capable of traversing time and space. But as Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian have recently written, "form" depends on the kind of explanation to which it is tied. Form is called on to explain all kinds of phenomena, from something like the world-ordering abstractions of Lovejoy and Wasserman, to specific forms like sonnets or ballads, and to virtually everything that may account for the literariness of literature.<sup>53</sup> In literary criticism, form often "distinguishes ordinary from figurative utterance and thereby defines the literary per se" (650). Form can be posited as the ultimate end or purpose towards which any temporal process, like a poem, incrementally advances, and explains why words, lines, sound and meter – the stuff of poetics – are organized the way they are. Any entity

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<sup>52</sup> Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1963); Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1936)

<sup>53</sup> Kramnick and Nersessian (2017) 651.

exhibiting bounded patterns can be understood “formally” but what that understanding implies is the subject of endless debate. Garrett Stewart says that form is simply “controlled repetition,” and therefore “form – repetition – is change” (5). Any entity that exhibits continuity under the condition of change, he reasons, should be understood formally.<sup>54</sup> Much of the confusion surrounding form is a result of a failure to acknowledge that formal explanation is “inquiry relative.” “The effort to define form as something over and above the explanation through which it comes into view and whose ends it serves has led to some confusion” (Kramnick and Nersessian 651). Positing form as something ideal that can be abstracted from the context of its emergence, that is not itself contingent on internal patterns is a constitutive feature incorporated by aesthetic idealism from the epistemological program of which it was an adjunct. This “speculative theory of art” incorporated a conceptualist model of form from the philosophical idealism under which it developed, and exhibits the same prejudice in favor of the abstract over the contingent and experiential that vexed early experimentalism.<sup>55</sup>

The view of form as a regulative idea, and artistic experience as the mysterious intuition of that idea depends on metaphysical assumptions that separate the world of meaning from the world of technical media.<sup>56</sup> Early aesthetic theory borrows its two-world metaphysics from the pervasive idealism that held truth to consist in universal, *a priori* axioms like those of Euclidean geometry or Boyle’s gas law. Idealist aesthetics posits an analogy between the inference of ideas

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<sup>54</sup> Stewart, *The Deed of Reading* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015) 1-20

<sup>55</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer terms the dominant theory of modern art criticism “the speculative theory of art,” and says that it is defined by positing a transcendental entity abstracted from the technical aspects of a work of art, but exerting causal force on its every feature. Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2000) trans. Arthur Danto, 67-135. On the prejudice in favor of “theory,” and abstraction, see Hacking, *Representing and Intervening* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 149-166; also Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 183-236.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Marie Schaeffer says that the idealist view of art depends on the notion that “there are two kinds of reality, the apparent one to which we have access through our senses and reasoning intellect, and the hidden one that reveals itself only to art” (6).

in empirical research and the inference of universal truths in artistic experience.<sup>57</sup> The theory that art objects are epiphenomenal, and their true being and meaning lie in an ontologically prior realm is developed in Addison and his successors. The conviction that the end of art is the “ontological revelation” of “the content of philosophy” is central to the theory of aesthetics laid out in Addison’s essays. The speculative theory of art “confuses art as a phenomenal object with art as value: it defines it by its value and then valorizes it in return by means of its definition” (Schaeffer 64).<sup>58</sup> By equating the beautiful with the true, idealist aesthetics characterizes the experience of art as the grasping of a primary ontological content, an idea.<sup>59</sup> Idealist aesthetics reduces “artworks to metaphysical hieroglyphs,” and short-circuits the work of criticism by identifying it with the eduction of the ideal content of the work.<sup>60</sup>

Idealist aesthetics defines form as anterior, and retroactively causal.<sup>61</sup> In the tradition of speculative aesthetics, abstract ideas are the cause that is at the “bottom of things, at the base of an order from which everything else scales up” (Kramnick and Nersessian 656). The speculative

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<sup>57</sup> For the influence of Hutcheson, Kames, and Burke on Moses Mendelssohn, Christian Wolff, Gottfried Lessing, and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, see Manfred Kuehn, *Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially pgs. 100-188. Schaeffer says the “speculative theory of art” “projects a transcendent entity that is supposed to found the diversity of artistic practices and to have ontological priority over them” (7). While he situates the “birth of the speculative theory of art” at the end of the eighteenth-century, with the widespread misreading of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Schaeffer doesn’t note the pervasive influence of British practical criticism on theories of art developed in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century.

<sup>58</sup> Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*, 64

<sup>59</sup> Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, and its central formulation of “purposiveness without purpose” can be read as an “early critique of the logical foundations of the speculative theory of art,” as they were formulated in the British critical tradition. For a recent account of the careful distinction of the beautiful and the true in Kant’s third critique, see Michel Chaouli, *Thinking With Kant’s Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) 1-111. Another important recent example of the effort to recover the core Kant’s aesthetic theory, and demonstrate its enduring importance for thinking about art and experience is Thierry de Duve’s new *Aesthetics at Large* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018).

<sup>60</sup> Schaeffer, 13.

<sup>61</sup> Wasserman defends his primary interest in ideas accountable for the shape of poems by aligning his critical practice with Lovejoy’s focus on the “thought-content” of literature and its presentation of “philosophical ideas in dilution.” See Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats’ Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1967) 3; Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1936) 16. For a recent attempt to connect Lovejoy’s history of ideas with contemporary movements in philosophy and literary criticism see Heather Keenleyside, “Matter, Form, Idea: What Lovejoy’s History of Ideas Might Have to do with Literature” in *ELH* 84.1 (Spring 2017) 223-57.

tradition sees ideas as discrete and timeless entities. According to Lovejoy, “Ideas are the most migratory things in the world.”<sup>62</sup> His “unit ideas” are unbounded by geography or time, and can circulate promiscuously, compounding “just as chemical compounds” with elements of other ideas. But the task of identifying them remains fundamentally reductionist. To get at the idea it must be isolated from the medium of its expression, and educed from the techniques through which it always says the same thing. But as Heather Keenleyside points out, Lovejoy’s effort to get at unit ideas struggles with how they always appear “agglutinated,” showing up with other ideas with which they have “natural logical affinity” (236). Relational dependence and the embeddeness of ideas within networks that change and develop over time, and through which they become meaningful, thwart the effort to isolate the idea itself.<sup>63</sup> Lovejoy’s practice, more often than not, shows the dependence of ideas, and the near-impossibility of cleanly removing them from the matrices of relation that constitute meaning meaning. Nevertheless, the teleological thrust of speculative aesthetics imagines an ideal towards which temporally extended processes lead as their natural ends, but that is also is posited in advance and thus fundamental. As in Addison’s idealizing aesthetics, pleasure in art is annexed to the imagination’s apprehension of the ideas poems make intelligible, but which are predicated in advance of the poem itself. Wasserman’s “subtler language,” lurking just beneath the poetic veil is analogous to the ideology diagnosed by Barrell and the material history that Alan Liu argues descriptive verse conceals under its surfaces.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Lovejoy, “Reflections on the History of Ideas,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 1 (1940) 4.

<sup>63</sup> Reinhart Koselleck writes, “The diachronic organizes itself in terms of multiple, overlapping layers which run contrary to the conventional periods, and opens up different combinations,” undermining the attempt to do conceptual history without adopting what he calls the “Janus-faces,” looking both backward in history and forward in time. On the interplay of synchrony and diachrony in Koselleck’s theory of multiple, coexisting, sometimes contending “times,” see Helge Jordheim, “Against Periodization: Koselleck’s Theory of Multiple Temporalities” *History and Theory* 51 (May 2012) 151-71.

<sup>64</sup> Alan Liu, in *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989) writes that georgic is “the supreme mediational form in which to bury history in nature” (18).

In the early decades of the eighteenth century empiricism and aesthetics shared practices and presuppositions about observation and abstraction. While Locke holds the physical world has material existence, he insists human interaction with it always takes place in ideas. Aesthetic idealism shares with Lockean empiricism the belief that general principles are made available through repeated exposure to contingent instances, but can be abstracted from those instances and handled independently.<sup>65</sup> Generalizing depends on distinguishing essential attributes and suppressing accidental qualities and spatiotemporal specificity. In *The Essay on Human Understanding*, Locke describes perception as a camera obscura: “Methinks the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without; Would the pictures in such a room but stay there, and lie so orderly as to be found upon occasion, it would very much resemble the mind of man, in reference to all Objects of sight and our ideas of them” (2.12.17). Reversing the rationalist metaphor of reason as a candle enlightening the obscurities of nature popular among the Cambridge Platonists, Locke emphasizes the mind’s passivity and receptivity. Through inscrutable means the closet or empty cabinet stabilizes and consolidates corpuscular simple ideas into more general ones: mobile thought-pictures distinct from the impressions on the sensorium that initially caused them and capable of being variously combined to create complex

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<sup>65</sup> On Locke’s influential idealism, see John Yolton, *The Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958); *Locke and the Compass of Human Understanding* (Toronto: York University Press, 1970); and *Thinking Matter: Materialism in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). For more recent accounts, see Donald Davidson, “On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme” in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2001); David Soles, “Locke on Ideas, Words, and Knowledge,” *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 42 (1988) 150-172; Thomas Lennon, “Locke and the Logic of Ideas,” *The History of Philosophy Quarterly* 18 (2001) 139-54; Yasuhiko Tomida, “Locke, Berkeley, and the Logic of Idealism” *Locke Studies* 2 (2002) 227-31.

representations.<sup>66</sup> Through their removal from immediacy, ideal representations provide a template for making judgments and categorizing the world.

Knowledge is produced through stages of generalization from the mechanical impact of corpuscles on the sensorium up to classificatory representations, or ideal types. “The mind, in all its thoughts and reasonings, hath no other immediate object but its own ideas” (Locke IV.I.i). Jonathan Crary argues that the *camera obscura* is the paradigmatic model for perception in the period.<sup>67</sup> Crary refers to historically contingent “collective assemblages” that include the descriptive practices and norms of painting, poetry, philosophy and natural science. Following the *camera obscura* theory of mind, knowledge of the world was thought to consist in pictures of it let in to the dark interior of the mind.

In the early stages of its development, the *camera obscura* model of perception and Locke’s “way of ideas,” dominated aesthetic theory.<sup>68</sup> The *camera obscura*, Crary writes, “defines an observer as isolated, enclosed, and autonomous within its dark confines” at the same time that it “sunders the act of seeing from the physical body of the observer, to decorporealize vision” (38). By analogy, the aesthetic subject is presumed to be a remote, disembodied *theoros*, or spectator, impassively viewing the world from a distance. The representationalist focus of Locke’s empiricism provides the framework through which early theorists of aesthetic experience understood the unifying work of reason in relation to judgments about natural order. Like Locke’s general ideas, ideal form amounts to a vanishing point towards which textual

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<sup>66</sup> Nathaniel Culverwell, in *An Elegant and Learned Discourse on the Light of Nature* (1652) writes, “This eye of the soul ’tis to spy out all dangers and all advantages, all conveniences and inconveniences in reference to such a being, and to warn the soul in the name of its Creator, to fly from such irregularities as have an intrinsecal and implacable malice in them, and are prejudicial and destructive to its Nature, but to comply with, and embrace all such acts and objects as have a native comeliness and amiableness, and are for the heightning and ennobling of its being” (72).

<sup>67</sup> In *Techniques of the Observer* Crary writes, “What determines vision at any given historical moment is not some deep structure economic base, or world-view, but rather the functioning of a collective assemblage of disparate parts on a single social surface” (6).

<sup>68</sup> Christopher Fox, *Locke and the Scriblerians: Identity and Consciousness in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

particulars are drawn. The particular is consequently construed as epiphenomenal, an after-effect of a structuring generality which it is the vocation of reason to abstract from the manifold of sense, but which never itself appears in sensible experience. Knowledge, in the *camera obscura* model, consists of ideal representations whose relationship to the empirical world is problematic. The representationalist model rests on a fundamental distinction between the empirical world and human experiencing of it. Since there is nothing in the mental representation that is “like” what is in the world there can be no inference from ideas to the external world.<sup>69</sup>

Two figures of observation define visual culture in the period of Locke and Addison: the sage and the spectator. Crary describes the eighteenth-century spectator “a passive onlooker at a spectacle, as at an art gallery or theater” (5). But Addison and Steele’s Mr. Spectator could hardly be characterized as passive. In the fourth installment of *The Spectator*, Steele criticizes the waxen passivity of the average reader of newspapers, who regurgitate whatever falls first into their hands and heads at the start of the day. Their undisciplined blankness contrasts with the carefully cultivated perspective offered by the paper’s protagonist. Mr. Spectator is a reliable witness and judge, and an accurate observer of general nature. He is a skilled watcher and a keen listener who overhears “the conversation of every table in the Room.” Seen but never heard, Mr. Spectator patiently defers judgment. A lifetime of silent observation has cultivated “a more than ordinary penetration in seeing” while his attention to “the higher and lowest of mankind” has enabled him to make judgments of general validity. He presents himself as a principle example

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<sup>69</sup> This is what Berkeley concludes from Locke. Locke’s effort to link mind to a mind-independent world is inconsistent, which leads to Berkeley’s abandonment of the notion of mind-independent reality altogether. The “correspondence” theory of truth, that truth consists in the correspondence of ideas to their referents, has been exhaustively critiqued. C.S. Peirce criticizes as meaningless the notion of agreement between an unknowable thing-in-itself and ideas, writing, “You only puzzle yourself by talking of this metaphysical ‘truth’ and metaphysical ‘falsity’ that you know nothing about. All you have any dealings with are your doubts and beliefs” (CP 5.416). John Dewey derided the correspondence view as the “Spectator theory of knowledge” (Dewey LW 4:19) In philosophy of science, Thomas Kuhn, argues that the development of science is not towards ever-more precise matches between paradigms and the way the world is in itself, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

of how taste and judgment can be cultivated and refined so that truths of a general nature can be perceived. Mr. Spectator joins Locke's gradual accumulation of particulars to impartial judgment and attentive receptivity. Not a partisan, he promises his readers that his essays will not fall into political wrangling over specific issues of the day, but will offer instead disinterested views of wide applicability. Mr. Spectator's disinterest should not be mistaken, however, for passivity. His ability to perceive the subtending types that populate his daily paper depends on a highly refined faculty of judgment. "The spectator," Michael Ketcham says, "translates the visual into the rhetorical, the specific into the universal, the fortuitous into the systematic" by the application of a curated sensibility able to disclose ideal figures (41).<sup>70</sup>

Dryden, Young, and Hume all agree that judgment and taste can be refined through practice, experience, and deliberate cultivation, even though it might not be reducible to a set of rules or guidelines.<sup>71</sup> Proper viewing depends on cultivation, and normative restrictions dictate whose view is authorized and whose taste authoritative: men of means and education, with access to clubs and galleries, who gather in coffee shops.<sup>72</sup> Mr. Spectator provides a principal example of disciplined judgment. He discloses the archetypes that populate the private clubs and coffeehouses in which he circulates, and highlights the superfluities of contemporary art and drama by suggesting the absence of anything fundamental supporting them. His discernment is a product of his deliberate cultivation of taste. Judgment, in this view, is an ability to penetrate the

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<sup>70</sup> "The spectator," Michael Ketcham says, "translates the visual into the rhetorical, the specific into the universal, the fortuitous into the systematic" by the application of a curated sensibility able to disclose ideal figures in *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press 1985) 41.

<sup>71</sup> David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," *Critical Theory Since Plato* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) 322-31; John Dryden, "An Essay Of Dramatic Poesy" *Critical Theory Since Plato* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) 253-80; Edward Young, "Conjectures on Original Composition," *Critical Theory Since Plato* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) 348-56; Kames, "Elements of Criticism" *Critical Theory Since Plato* ed. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005) 369-76.

<sup>72</sup> Peter de Bolla describes this trend in aesthetic theory in terms of an opposition between an expert "painterly eye," and a more democratic "autonomous eye," which granted aesthetic perceptiveness to every perceiver, threatening to open the elite taste culture of the eighteenth century to general admission.

merely accidental in order to grasp more fundamental, underlying reality.<sup>73</sup> Attentive observation, broad access to exhibitions and coffeehouses, and acute self-consciousness contribute to his perceptiveness. In contrast to the passivity of the *camera obscura* model of vision, Mr. Spectator shows that proper viewing is the result of training, and is reserved for those who, like Hume's arbiters of taste, have had the necessary education and experience to validate their judgment.

The counterpart to the cultivated discernment of the spectator is the scientific erudition of the sage. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have written in this spirit of a "truth-to-nature" episteme, characterized by the pursuit of "the idea in the observation, not the raw observation itself" (73).<sup>74</sup> Prioritizing the ideal raises concerns about the idiosyncrasies of sense experience, and the problem of what may be peculiar to the observer, or spatiotemporally particular in a given perception. But Mr. Spectator's subjectivity is not the problem. As with the sages of natural history, cultivated taste is offered as the solution to idiosyncratic perception. Addison and Steele pitch Mr. Spectator's subjective acuity as the primary reason for reading. His practiced eye, like that of the eighteenth-century atlas makers Daston and Galison analyze, is the paper's principal selling point. The sage is one "whose well-stocked memory synthesizes a lifetime of experience with skeletons or crystals or seashells into the type of that class of objects" (*Objectivity* 44). In the early pages of the *Spectator*, Mr. Spectator contends that a lifetime of careful observation of human society, art, and politics make him a trustworthy judge of what he sees. Echoing Addison and Hume's idealist convictions, Sir Joshua Reynolds writes that "it is from a reiterated experience, and a close comparison of the objects in Nature, that an artist becomes possessed of the idea of that central form, if I may so express it, from which every

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<sup>73</sup> For a recent attempt to rethink the dynamics of judgment, and the tension between elitist emphasis on capacity and democratic inclusivity, see Michael Clune, "Judgment and Equality," in *Critical Inquiry* 45.4 (2019) 910-34.

<sup>74</sup> Daston and Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2008).

deviation is deformity” (24).<sup>75</sup> For Reynolds, successful art instantiates ideal forms in material artifacts like paintings and poems. A highly disciplined subjectivity – the sum of the experiences, peers, education, and travelling that Addison and Steele describe – enables the observer to see and disclose underlying patterns. *The Spectator* serves a pedagogical end. It is meant to provide a model and example of aesthetic cultivation for readers, and to demarcate what is required to make valid judgments on the basis of sense experience.<sup>76</sup> The basic assumption is that cultivated judgment is the ability to perceive the schematic ideal beneath the heterogeneity of both sensible objects in nature and works of art. Addison and Steele’s paper is a manual for the development of discernment and the practice of judgment, which they understand in Lockean terms as the inference of general governing patterns and the clear articulation of ideas that lie beyond the threshold of what is given confusedly by sense.

Daston and Galison’s analysis starts with the eighteenth century. Like *The Spectator*, the function of the scientific atlas is “the calibration of the eye” (44). The eighteenth century, they write, produced the “cult of the genius of observation” (46). Addison and Steele offered carefully curated images of early eighteenth century English culture. In the visual culture of the period, “Sharp and sustained observation was a necessary prerequisite for discerning the true genera” (58). Disciplined perceptiveness adds something to nature. Sight that penetrates the accidental to grasp the underlying type is not given, but a product connected to Pope’s view of artistic refinement. Under the truth-to-nature paradigm pure receptivity bogs down in unnecessary detail, unable to distinguish noise from signal; it must be completed by bringing nature to ideal unity through the application of the arts of discernment. The ideal unity pursued is construed as a synoptic image in the mind that suppresses the refractions of sense experience to produce a

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<sup>75</sup> Reynolds, “Discourse Three,” *Discourses Delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy* (1790)

<sup>76</sup> On *The Spectator* as tool for training judgment, see Michael Ketchan, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in The Spectator Papers* (1985)

broadly applicable picture of the empirical world. Eighteenth-century visual culture features ubiquitous demands that cultivated judgment complete nature to do the work of identifying its ideal “true genera.”

Mr. Spectator embodies the “entanglement of conceptions of self” with the “right depiction of Nature” that characterizes the period (*Objectivity* 9). The observational methods of the *Spectator* share a type-schematism with the experimentalism of the late seventeenth century, underwritten by an idea that nature’s truth lies beneath its local accidents.<sup>77</sup> The eighteenth-century focus on “True Taste” and judgment connects aesthetic theory to the visual culture of natural science and experimentalism. What Daston and Galison call the “reasoned image,” – the product of norming guided by the goal of disclosing the essential – is an instance of what Pope called “Nature methodized.” The production of schematic images relied on the same practices of refinement that defined wit, “weeding out atypical variations and extraneous details,” to eliminate accidental qualities that otherwise detract from “true expression” (*Objectivity* 43). The natural types apprehended by judgment “transcended the species or even the genus to reflect a never seen but nevertheless real . . . archetype: the reasoned image. . . . The type was truer to nature – and therefore more real – than any actual specimen” (60). The assumption is that truth must be purged of the spatiotemporal vagaries of change and perspective, and that these ideal types, non-identical with any individual specimen, were nevertheless the most real, in analogy to Platonic forms. The idealizing impulse in eighteenth century visual culture granted ontological priority to a transcendent nature that it was the task of trained observers to identify beneath the teeming heterogeneity of the world offered up in experience.

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<sup>77</sup> Daston and Galison, in their analysis of eighteenth-century image-making describe the tendency of natural philosophers to “select the most typical, or even archetypical skeleton, plant, or other object under study, then perfect that exemplar so that the image can truly stand for the class, can truly represent it” (35)

Image-making in eighteenth century natural history shares with speculative aesthetics certain assumptions about nature's uniformity and availability to seasoned observers. The status of the "reasoned image" that judgment produces out of the materials of experience raises metaphysical problems. Is the type identified by natural philosophers a notional convenience? Or does it have real existence? The relationship of general ideas to the particulars of a world that precedes experience, and how that world might be related to ideas about it, was an unresolved problem passed from Descartes to Locke.<sup>78</sup> Locke claims that the first link in the chain of cognition is the impact of external corpuscles on the sensorium, but his account of generalization fails to explain how those external impulses become the stuff of ideas, and how memory successfully compounds singular simple ideas together to make them abstract and generally applicable. Since Locke's corpuscles are of a fundamentally different nature than the simple ideas they generate, he incorporates from Descartes' dualism the gap between the atomic world of matter and that of thought. As Andrew Seth explains, "Locke took for granted the independent existence on the one hand, of a system of material substances, which we may call the material world, and on the other hand, of a number of separate minds or substances with the power of thinking" (16).<sup>79</sup> These substances remain fundamentally incompatible in Locke's system because he remains within the dualism of the idealist tradition. In contrast to Locke's attempt to maintain the existence of a mind-independent world, Berkeley's idealism denies the existence of the pre-ideational world altogether. Berkeley correctly identified that there is no basis in Locke's system for assuming a world that corresponds to the mind's notional representations of it. "On

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas Reid criticizes Locke's unacknowledged incorporation of Cartesian idealism in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. Coleridge similarly criticized Locke's claim to iconoclasm, when in fact his theory of cognition is thoroughly Cartesian. On Locke's idealism see Yolton, *John Locke and the Way of Ideas* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968); Andrew Seth, *Scottish Philosophy: A Comparison of the Scottish and German Answers to Hume* (Edinburgh: W. Blackwood, 1907).

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Seth, *Scottish Philosophy: A Comparison of the Scottish and German Answers to Hume*, (London: W. Blackwood and Sons, 1907).

Lockean principles, Berkeley resolves matter into simple ideas plus the notion of some cause” (Seth 34). The “way of ideas,” in Thomas Reid’s phrase, displaces the world of sense experience, positing in its place interior relationships between representations in various states of abstraction.

The relationship between the material world and human constructions of it was at the center of scientific and philosophical speculation in the early decades of the eighteenth century. The concomitant rise of both empiricist philosophy and aesthetics was driven by the interest in attention and perception central to early modern experimentalism.<sup>80</sup> The empiricist theory of aesthetic experience builds on and extends earlier accounts of particular aspects of beauty or aesthetic feeling, but the Addison’s paradigmatic theory fundamentally shifts speculation from the object of aesthetic experience – the Beautiful – to the perceiver. Building on Addison’s reorientation, Hume writes in, “Of the Standard of Taste,” that “Beauty is no quality in things themselves; it exists merely in the mind which contemplates them” (230). But then, in Hume’s view of empiricist epistemology generally, the world of representation that defines human experience only ever exists “in the mind which contemplates,” – this is the basic substance of his critique. The redirection of aesthetic speculation makes the communicability of a sensation the central focus of philosophical aesthetics, rather than qualities of the aesthetic object itself. Aesthetics and empiricist epistemology share the problem of the general communicability of sensations based in the subject and not in the object. In the early eighteenth century, idealist aesthetics appears as a special case of the more general problem of how knowledge based on experience can be other than spatiotemporally contingent.<sup>81</sup> By shifting speculation about the

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<sup>80</sup> See Lorraine Daston, “The Empire of Observation: 1600-1800” in *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 81-114. Michael McKeon calls early aesthetics “a sub-category of empiricist epistemology,”(198) in “The Scientific Experiment as a Model for the Literary Aesthetic in England, 1600-1800” in *Imitatio-Inventio: The Rise of “Literature” from Early to Classic Modernity* ed. Mihaela Irmia and Dragos Ivana (Bucharest: Editura Institutului Cultural Roman, 2010) 198-235.

<sup>81</sup> On the evolving relationship of the terms “experience” and “experiment” see Lorraine Daston, “The Empire of Observation, 1600-1800” in *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011) 81-

aesthetic from external beauty to “the way we know it,” aesthetic theory joins experimentalism in questioning how general propositions can be made on experiential grounds.

Interest in how the idiosyncrasies of sensible experience can be purged suffuses eighteenth century empiricism, experimentalism, and aesthetics. For early proponents of experiment like Sprat and Glanville, scientific experiment is “only a methodical exploitation of experience through techniques of detachment and abstraction” (McKeon 204). Paraphrasing Sprat, McKeon says, “If we would know nature well we must distance it from what inevitably clouds its perception and description, which is to say from the local, punctual, and merely sensible experience of its knowing” (204). The contingencies of sense experience impede knowledge, and experimental procedures provided early scientific researchers a method to overcome the limitations of historically embedded experience.<sup>82</sup> The goal of late-seventeenth century experimentalism is to “isolate that quantity of nature that can be seen to persist invariably across a range of artificial variations” (McKeon 205). By restricting the range of potential outcomes through experimental design, early scientists sought to discover nature’s uniform and permanent laws. Neoclassical aesthetics attempts a similar exorcising of the inessential qualities of experience through an identification of the laws of artistry with the laws of nature. But taste demonstrably changes over time, so the analogy between natural and artistic law breaks down. The breakdown of the isomorphism between art and nature challenges the validity of propositions, like those of taste, that are grounded on sense. Though Hume argues that

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114. McKeon writes, “Since the senses are the gateway of experience, to ask how we know art is to ask what is singular about our perception of, our response to, and our subjective attitude toward aspects of our experience we deem aesthetic” (198).

<sup>82</sup> McKeon follows Shapin and Schaeffer in seeing experimentation, scientific writing, and the early-modern laboratory with its audience seating as technologies for multiplying witnesses to achieve general validity. See Shapin and Schaeffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985) 22-79.

literary judgments exhibits a greater uniformity over time than speculative knowledge, for Pope and Dryden before him changing taste presents a problem for universalizing aesthetics.

The debate of ancients and moderns provided a framework through which Dryden, Pope, Johnson, and Hume each attempted to account for the status of universal propositions about beauty, given that both literary judgment and scientific reasoning change. At the heart of the quarrel of ancients and moderns is the problem of the historicity of knowledge and experience. The assumed superiority of eighteenth-century natural history over its ancient precedents showed that speculative reasoning had advanced well-beyond antiquity, while the superiority of Homer and Virgil, as evidenced by their endurance, meant that the ancients exceeded the moderns in artistic achievement. In both cases, successful achievement is defined by breaking free of local and temporal contingency.<sup>83</sup> The successes of modern philosophical knowledge over antiquity contributed to the disaggregation of knowledge into distinct areas by identifying and analyzing the uneven development of human culture over time. One argument for treating the eighteenth century as “modern,” is its acute sense of historicity, and the embeddedness of both knowledge and art in historical contexts.<sup>84</sup> Idealism, in both epistemology and aesthetics, offered one way to dissolve the exigencies of change.

The triumph of speculative knowledge in early modernity over antiquity raised questions as to whether similar achievements were possible in the arts. The details of Homer’s context and the idiosyncrasies of his historical taste culture are lost but his achievement lies in his enduring

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<sup>83</sup> In the first of his famous essays on aesthetics, Paul Oskar Kristeller points out that “The famous *Querelle des Anciens et Modernes*, which stirred many scholars in France and also England during the last quarter of the century was due largely to recent discoveries in the natural sciences” (525). The eighteenth century saw the disaggregation of “the various fields of human endeavor, thus developing a classification of knowledge and culture that was in many respects novel” (525) See Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part 1” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.4 (Oct. 1951) 496-527.

<sup>84</sup> For a similar periodizing claim, see de Duve, who writes, “Modernity as an era is a *longue durée* ‘dispositif’ to which a variety of birthdates can be given. My choice is the eighteenth century, the century of the Enlightenment and of Kant” (27).

capacity to produce pleasure. Therefore, the reasoning goes, there must be something universally true – and therefore ideal – in Homeric poetry. For eighteenth-century theorists, the transcendental explained transhistoricity. If something survived time, it was because its truth was transcendent. Because Homer has ascended to the universal, Pope declares that he and nature are one. Similarly, in his “Preface to Shakespeare,” Johnson argues that the general approbation of Shakespeare is without consideration of nationality or historical context, citing as evidence his enduring popularity in France. Universality, he argues, is achieved by surviving the disappearance of the immediate occasions for art. Shakespeare’s plays, in 1750, are “read without any other reason than the desire of pleasure, and are therefore praised only as pleasure is obtained; yet thus unassisted by interest or passion, they have passed through variations of taste and changes of manners and, as they devolved from one generation to another, have received new honours at every transmission” (“Preface to Shakespeare” 470). Johnson establishes as a criterion of aesthetic judgment that the pleasure in Shakespeare’s art be disinterested, unmotivated by ideological convictions or peculiarities of taste. He goes on to conclude, axiomatically, “nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature.” Since nature is presumed to be everywhere and always the same, above the variations of “particular manners,” excellence in art is achieved through piercing the veil of historical particulars to identify transcendent truths.

Addison’s elaboration of a suite of observational practices, techniques, and principles in the *Spectator* is programmatic for the dominant line of aesthetic theory in the eighteenth century. Addison’s corpus contains the seminal articulation of the problems of eighteenth-century philosophical reflection on beauty and its relationship to speculative knowledge that occupied later critics. For Addison, imaginative refinement along the aesthetic byway is the analog of

reason's work of abstraction: it achieves a similar validity, but one that is grounded in the peculiar combination of physical and rational activity that distinguishes aesthetic experience.<sup>85</sup> Painting lacks the reflective distance of verbal description, and its immediacy undermines the pleasure of imaginative abstraction, which he describes in his essay on Virgil as following out the delightful succession of images that precipitate an idea. The incremental distancing and detachment from immediacy afforded by print activates the imaginative by-way: the pleasurable succession that takes its "hint" from nature. When Addison writes, "Undetermined prospects are as pleasing to the fancy as the speculation of Eternity, of Infinitude are to the understanding," he is establishing an isomorphism between aesthetic and rational pleasure. Addison's analogy attempts to think through the differences between two ways of perceiving and interacting with the world, but his empiricist epistemology determines the goal in advance. Like the understanding's generalizations, aesthetic pleasure culminates in ideality.<sup>86</sup> Aesthetic pleasure is like rational pleasure in that its associative logic culminates in a formally unified and universally communicable experience. While the empiricist model of scientific cognition bases universal claims on subjective conditions of experience, the validity of those claims rests on transcendent ideas. Aesthetic pleasure is modeled on the pleasures of regular cognition, and borrowed from empiricism its basic structure for associative generalization.

The teleological drive of Addison's formalism and that of eighteenth century philosophical aesthetics generally produces the theory of the totalizing prospect. Having

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<sup>85</sup> In the essays on imagination, "The imaginative mediation of sense experience possesses its own system of refinement that filters out the brute materiality of the senses and purifies their emotional heft" (McKeon 212).

<sup>86</sup> McKeon writes, "The effort to define the integrity and autonomy of aesthetic response and aesthetic experience – of the epistemology of the art experience – took place not in opposition to but in explicit emulation of a normative model of empirical and scientific cognition" (199).

advanced through the successive hints, the imagination rises to a position of absolute vision.<sup>87</sup> According to this view, loco-descriptive verse naturalizes imperialist vision. The visuality of the prospect view and its underlying empiricist epistemology homogenize the world around the remote spectator and promulgate a “conception of English centrality and British potentiality that could be grasped by a heterogeneous population” (Crawford 230). Loco-descriptive prospects reproduce the invisible observer whose domineering eye contains and domesticates the world around it.<sup>88</sup> Landscape representation in painting and verse comprehends the scene by grasping its formal unity from a fixed and privileged position. Consequently, for Barrell and Crawford, prospects are an instance of disciplinary observation and a figure for the impulse to immobilize identify, and tabulate that defines Enlightenment rationality. By universalizing what is contingent, idealist aesthetics performs the work of generating unity and coherence. By assuming a totalizing position, Enlightenment observation, as exemplified in the prospect view, attempts to erase the situatedness of pedestrian perspectives. Representation in prospect, like the Claudean landscapes Barrell associates it with, “does its best to prevent the particular things within it from asserting themselves at all” (23). The visuality of the totalizing vista connects to the English reception of Italian landscape painting and the *camera obscura* theory of vision. Both assume an image with a central vanishing point, and provide the spectator with an elevated position around which the landscape organizes itself. The disembodied vantage is a figure for the idealized observer whose training and judgment warrants his subordination of the surrounding

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<sup>87</sup> Rachel Crawford says that the totalizing vantage produces a “single English center” of the world that in turn becomes an invisible ideological point of view in *Forms of Sublimity: the Garden, the Georgic, and the Nation* A *Concise Companion to the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Malden: Blackwell, 2005) 230.

<sup>88</sup> Barrell writes, “The main point of this insistence on a high viewpoint is that it creates a space between the landscape and the observer, similar in its effect to the space between a picture and whoever is looking at it” (21) in Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape* (1972). Barrell’s view of Enlightenment rationality corresponds to that critiqued by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*

environment. In this view the prospect is a central metaphor of Enlightenment epistemology, from the vista from Bacon's House of Solomon to Newton's from the shoulders of giants.<sup>89</sup>

### Thomas Reid, Andrew Marvell and Anti-Idealism

There is another tradition of the prospect, one that departs from the imperial allegories of Denham and Pope, and that follows the peripatetic approach laid out by Milton. Locke, along with the dominant "way of ideas," was not without critics. The Edinburgh school of common sense philosophy, and especially the work of Thomas Reid, developed an alternative to the representationalist theory of sense experience and the "spectator theory of knowledge," that dominated English accounts of visuality. Reid's direct or common sense realism stands in opposition to the idealism of Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, all of whom held that knowledge consists in ideas abstracted from the world, reference to which can never be determined with certainty. The principal target of Reid's criticism, especially in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, is the skepticism idealism generates. Skepticism results from the inability of the "ideal system" to reason backwards from immediate objects of cognition – ideas – to their ground in a shared empirical world.<sup>90</sup> While Locke tries, in spite of inconsistency, to retain reference to reality, Hume demonstrates that both Locke's system and Berkeley's render problematic reference to a

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<sup>89</sup> On Newton's appropriation of this phrase from Robert Burton, who maybe got it from one "Didacus Stella," see Robert K. Merton's playful, *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>90</sup> Terence Cuneo and René van Woudenberg explain, "There is no imagistic resemblance between an idea of pain in the mind that we are aware of when experiencing pain and the sharpness of the instrument that occasioned that idea, for the idea in question is not itself sharp, extended, and so forth. Accordingly, if what the way of ideas theorist says is true, there is no adequate inference from ideas in the mind to an external reality that resembles it" (7) in their "Introduction," to *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 1-30.

world beyond analytic, mentalistic relations. Reid accepts Hume's critique, and sees skepticism as a consequence of the *a priori* conviction that the immediate objects of experience are ideal representations instead of the material world. Skepticism is an inevitable by-product of representationalist theories of cognition, in which all perception proceeds by the production of pictures in the mind that stand for things in the world. There is nothing really new in Hume's autoaffective theory of mind.<sup>91</sup> Hume merely makes explicit the consequences of the doctrine of ideas: "The theory itself is perfectly inevitable if we start with relationless units of impression" (54). Overcoming the skepticism that idealism produces demands a theory of cognition not based on the idea that the atomic, representational "given" of sense experience is a foundational picture language from which all mental life scales up.

Reid's realism attempts to correct the view that there is no reality independent of mental representations of it, and he affirms, on the basis of shared, communicable experience the existence of a mind-independent world. In the *Inquiry* Reid points out that the dominant empiricist method of considering perception and reasoning by linking the effect (the mental image or representation of external objects) to the cause (the external objects themselves) is untenable because of the dualism it generates. Cognitions do not resemble objects or things at all. Since they share no common substance the idea that the one could cause something utterly unlike itself rests on a dubious foundation. The Lockean view of impression, which presumes a kind of mental copying - as Locke describes the action of imagination - cannot account for the human ability to form general propositions about the world. For Reid, this inability leads to Hume's preposterous claims that there is no material reality. According to Reid "common sense," as the shared set of capacities of the sensorium, is in direct contact with the world. "Locke's doctrine of

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<sup>91</sup> Seth explains that according to Hume, "the so-called causal relations of ideas to each other become 'the set rules or established methods wherein the mind we depend on excites in us the ideas of sense,'" which is really an extension of principles already established by Locke (52).

ideas alleges, without any manifest proof, that every man shut in, as it were, in a *camera obscura* perceived nothing outside but only the images or ideas of things depicted in his own *camera*” (*Philosophical Orations* 61). Reid specifically singles out the analogy to the *camera obscura* for criticism. Human beings experience the world through sensuous embodied contact, and don’t think in a kind of picture language from which the physical world can merely be inferred. The picture-thinking Reid rejects would be both grossly inefficient, but also unable to yield the kinds relations and patterns that make shared understanding possible. If thinking is picture language, Reid suggests it would result in an infinite regress. The ideal system displaces the material world with ideas, and then relies on a homuncular view of mind, since positing image-ideas in the mind requires another viewer of those ideas, *ad infinitum*.<sup>92</sup> The endless doubling, “as in a mirror,” produced by the ideal system undermines the subject of understanding, while also replacing the material world with phantasms of its own making (*EIP* I.i.31).

On the basis of the communicability of common sense, Reid argues, “that there is really something in the rose or lily which is by the vulgar called smell, and which continues to exist when it is not smelled” (26). Reid’s realism holds that subjects (like flowers and smells) in the world do not depend on human experience, and that the human sensorium is fitted to the world in a way that enables humans to experience really existing entities. Reid’s theory of sense experience emphasizes embodied, ambulatory contact of human subjects with a world of mutually entangled entities. While Reid’s principle target is Hume, he largely accepts the premises of Hume’s critique, but says it is only valid if one accepts the presuppositions of the

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<sup>92</sup> Terrence Deacon explains, “The little man inside the man, responsible for analyzing sensory inputs and deciding on appropriate responses, is a *homunculus* (literally, a ‘little man’). In the sense that I will use the term here, it refers to a form of explanation that pretends to be offering a mechanistic account of some living or mental phenomenon, but instead only appeals to another cryptically equivalent process at some lower level” in *Incomplete Nature: How Mind Emerged from Matter* (New York: Norton, 2012) 47. The “spectator theory of knowledge” criticized by Dewey depends on homuncular regression to explain mental phenomena.

Cartesian-Lockean theory that all sense experience is mediated by immaterial representations. In the *Essays* he expresses surprise at the prevalence of idealism, writing, “I cannot help thinking that the whole history of philosophy has never furnished an instance of opinion so unanimously entertained by philosophers upon so slight grounds” (*EIP* II.iv.183-4). Reid counters this ubiquitous idealism by proposing that, “Our senses are given us by nature not to deceive us but to give us true information of things within their reach.” His metaphors for sense rely on touch, and physical presence, emphasizing the haptic, kinesthetic relation of the entire human person to their environment.

An element of faith inheres in Reid’s claim that our senses give us access to the real world. In both the earlier *Inquiry* and in the later *Essays* he asserts the existence of a shared physical world as a first principle, the denial of which leads inevitably to skepticism that undermines the reality of both the world and the thinker: “A man that disbelieves his own existence is surely as unfit to be reasoned with, as a man that believes he is made of glass” (16). Assent and community are brought in to ratify the view that sensibility delivers a shared world with mind-independent status. Since humans can communicate with others about the world and form mutually intelligible propositions about it, there must be a world universally available to attention and discernment. Humans ratify one another’s perceptions, and the communicability of sensation secures all meaningful discourse. Most importantly, Reid rejects the idea that thinking is privative and takes place within the confines of the individual skull, since communicability and the public, linguistic character of mental life is axiomatic to his common sense approach.

The emphasis on a shared world about which valid and verifiable propositions are possible connects Reid to an alternative visual culture in the eighteenth-century that emphasized collective capacities for attention and communication grounded in commonalities shared by

human sense.<sup>93</sup> The decade of the 1760s (when Reid published the *Inquiry*) was a singular moment in visual culture, during which Hogarth developed the aesthetic program of *Apology for Painters*, premised on shared human capacities for sensing.<sup>94</sup> Hogarth's aesthetic theory, like Reid's view of perception renounces the enclosure of *camera obscura* visuality.<sup>95</sup> The aesthetic subject integrates mind and matter in a way that resonates with Reid's perceptual realism. Reid's realism is democratic in its claim for shared access to the empirical world. Unlike the cultivated eye of the sage or spectator surveyed above, the common viewer doesn't rely on training to pierce nature's veil. Instead, a shared world and a common apparatus for experiencing it guarantee communicability. Critics have pointed out there is circularity to Reid's account, since the shared world is brought in to explain interpersonal communicability, and communicability in turn provides an argument for the existence of the world.<sup>96</sup> But what is most important here is that, for Reid, intersubjective experience does not depend on the transcendent. He writes, "If we would know the works of God, we must consult themselves with attention and humility, without daring to add anything of ours to what they declare" (12). Reid also defends here against the Humean charge that all communication is a function of habitual association by contending that the structures of language that make the world mutually communicable do not exhaust what shows up in experience.

The challenge Reid runs into here that he shares with Hume is that given the endless unfolding of the material world, where does the experience of continuity come from? Hume says, "All general ideas are nothing but particular ones annexed to a certain term, which gives them

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<sup>93</sup> De Bolla has described as the "paradigm of the eye" in *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003) (112).

<sup>94</sup> De Bolla, *The Education of the Eye* 14-71.

<sup>95</sup> De Bolla "radically embodied" aesthetic subject is "a subject in and of the look that inhabits both the plane of representation and the place of vision, a subject without the capacity for distinction, since the interior and exterior worlds have been superimposed on each other" (234).

<sup>96</sup> For an assessment of the criticisms of Reid's circularity, see James van Cleve, *Problems for Reid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015) 301-26.

more extensive signification and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals which are similar to them” (*T* 1.1.7, 17). For him, names are a placeholder that present continuity without any real reference, and are purely notional shorthand, a convenience. All representations of general applicability are actually just nominal labels attached to ceaselessly changing and materially discontinuous particulars. Reid counters Hume on the problem of generalization in one of the *Essays* entitled “Of Abstraction.” According to Reid, the mind is not populated with an infinite number of particularities, grouped by habit under conventional names, but produces categories that he calls “predicables.” From the manifold of any sensible subject, humans can single out specific attributes that, through relational reasoning, are susceptible to abstraction. Unlike Locke, who posits that simple ideas enter the sensorium and are organized into complex ideas, like those of a subject or category, Reid sees cognition as advancing from the indistinct complexity of any material entity to simplicity, turning Locke’s theory on its head. “It is by abstraction that the mind is furnished with all its most simple and most distinct notions: the simplest objects of sense appear both complex and indistinct until by abstraction they are analyzed into their more simple constituents” (388). But what is particularly important in Reid’s rejoinder is the view that predicables, like colors or textures, are relationally contingent. Seth explains that for Reid “it is simply impossible to consider anything in sheer isolation from its temporal and spatial environment; every quality which we recognize involves relations to other things, and it is as a complex of such relations that the ‘thing’ in questions receives its name and place in the universe” (42). This also means that predicables are susceptible to change, and porous to the world’s spontaneity and capacity to generate novelty in a way that Locke’s conceptual array is not. Unlike the idealist tradition that sublimated historicity, Reid’s fallibilist

account of predicables is historically flexible and doesn't depend on the notion that general validity requires permanence.

Idealism posits the absolute space of pure ideas, whether construed mentally or in terms of some realm of permanent forms. "Of man, of a rose, of a circle, and of every species of things they [idealist philosophers] believed that there is one idea or form which existed from eternity before any individual of the species was formed: that this idea is the exemplar or pattern according to which the Deity formed individuals of the species: that every individual of the species participates of this idea, which constitutes its essence; and that this idea is likewise an object of the human intellect" (*EIP* V.vi.389). The belief that ideas exist anterior to forming and exert causal force on the material world, while also existing apart from empirical entities has been the source of endless philosophical confusion. Reid rejects the notion that there is some spatiotemporally distinct realm of ideas, and the belief that they have some kind of independent existence safeguarded against change. "We need not believe with them that ideas are eternal and self-existent, and that they have more real existence than the things we see and feel." Reid's rejection of the ontological priority of ideas avoids the trap of regarding the material world as epiphenomenal. Reid uses the term "general conception" instead of "idea" to avoid the confusion it brings with it, since "idea" can be variously construed as mental representation, form, and essence.<sup>97</sup> The existence of general conceptions, or ideas, is not in some world of pure meaning. Instead, "their existence is nothing but predicability, or the capacity of being attributed to a subject" (V.vi.393). One of the most profound consequences of Reid's pragmatic focus on communicability is his bracketing of the paradoxes associated with essence and form. A predicable or attribute is a mediating representation that enables communication about the shared

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<sup>97</sup> Locke's diverse usage was the source of significant dispute in the eighteenth-century reception of the *Essay*, and one reason Kant clearly defined and restricted his definition of the term in *Critique of Pure Reason*.

empirical world. What abstraction produces in Reid's account is not a universal template, schema, or type, nor is it essential form. Instead, abstraction generates contingent relational categories with pragmatic function.

In rejecting the two-world metaphysics of idealism, Reid positions relational reasoning at the center of his theory of cognition. All conception depends fundamentally on metaphor, and has a practical bearing. "The labour of forming abstract notions is the labour of learning to speak and to understand what is spoken" (V.vi.398). Throughout the *Essays* Reid argues that human communication is dominated by predication, and all predication consists in linking via mediating representations two or more conceptions. General conceptions enable one not only to think but also communicate to others the similarity between two non-identical entities. General conceptions meet the practical demands of effective communication, since without them communication would have to proceed by itemizing a potentially endless list of empirical attributes. "There can be no resemblance in objects that have no common attribute; and if there be attributes belonging in common to several objects, and in man a faculty to observe these, and to give names to them, this is to have general conceptions" (V.vi.403). Reid is focused here on refuting the claims of Berkeley and Hume that all general ideas are actually just particulars, but his argument proceeds by affirming the fundamental dependence of thinking on identifying resemblances, or metaphorical relationships. Reid's theory does not withdraw meaning from the world, or relocate it to a nominal world of forms and ideas because for him meaning is a function of relational patterns and dependencies that exist in the real world.

Reid's theory of generalization shows that conceptions are relationally dependent. Seth explains that for Reid, "The mind is incapable of considering any object in itself; every object carries us beyond itself, and forces us to recognize its connection with other objects" (56).

Particular subjects are always entangled within networks that can be methodically traced rather than discrete. Subjects do not possess a unique substantial essence, but are defined by their relational dependencies. The identity of a subject is secured not by reference to a transcendent entity, but practically through shared linguistic networks. Meaning is not something “in” Reid’s general conceptions: it is something that they do. Meaning is an event of public and communicable contact between a community of humans and the world. “In the productions of Nature, great numbers of individuals are made so like to one another both in their obvious and in their more occult qualities, that we are not enabled, but invited, as it were, to reduce them into classes” (Reid *EIP* V.vi.375). The claim here goes further. As a realist, Reid believes that categories and attributes have mind-independent status. Reid’s view of the communicability of sensation doesn’t depend on metaphysical convictions about universal ideas or concepts, nor does it require a rational superstructure – just the premise of shared human sensibility that is attuned to its real environment. While the attachment of particular phonemes to material relationships might be arbitrary, the similitudes themselves exist in the world.

The metaphysical problems of the “way of ideas” involve trying to coordinate to planes of being. Reid’s theory of public communication is bottom-up. Starting from inexhaustible substances that he calls subjects, humans are able to make predications of them, which involve fundamentally attention and correlation. “All the distinct knowledge we have or can attain of any individual is the knowledge of its attributes: For we know not the essence of any individual” (*EIP* V.2.365). Nor do general conceptions provide knowledge of the “essence” of attributes. Attributes are identified by relational comparison with other empirical entities, and any predication of a subject does not exhaust its being. It merely describes attributes in a manner that makes certain distinctions singled out by attention communicable to others. “Every object that

falls within our view has various attributes; and it is by them that it becomes useful or hurtful to us: we know not the essence of any individual or object; all the knowledge we can attain of it is the knowledge of its attributes: its quantity and various qualities, its various relations to other things; its place, its situation and motions. It is by such attributes of things only that we can communicate our knowledge of them to others” (*EIP* V.i.355). Reid’s version of realism holds that human knowledge grasps those aspects of the environment which carry potential harm or benefit, but falls short of exhausting the manifold that present to perceptual experience.<sup>98</sup> What shows up in sense experience is not pictures in various states of abstraction, but the world itself as mediated through the common human sensorium.

Keeping in mind that Reid equivocates between idea, form, and essence, “form” can be construed as an event of interpersonal, communicable intelligibility rather than a transcendent schema.<sup>99</sup> Knowing the “form” of something does not imply knowing its transcendent referent, but instead being able to communicate its embeddedness within the relational matrices that constitute knowledge, and that make that thing the particular thing it is. The question of “Being” dissolves into relations. By rejecting essentialism, form becomes not an entity but a verb: the action of identifying the systematic relationships and embedded dependencies of subjects. Subjects receive meaning and significance not from the realm of forms but through their metaphor-like connections with other subjects in the concrete world. The material world is not displaced by abstraction since abstractions communicate dynamic and evolving correlations between subjects. By eliminating the transcendent aspect of ideas, Reid literalizes metaphor.

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<sup>98</sup> Reid’s explanation of the potential harm or benefit objects might bear their users anticipates Gibson’s notion of affordances. Kramnick argues for a common sense, realist philosophical tradition stretching from Reid through the pragmatist positions articulated by Peirce and Hilary Putnam to “Gibson and Alva Noë in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” (10) in *Paper Minds* (2018).

<sup>99</sup> In “Of the Powers We Have By Means of our External Senses,” Reid writes, “These shadows or images,” by which he means ideas, “which we immediately perceive [according to the ideal system], were by the ancients called species, forms, phantasms” (*EIP* II.vii.105).

Reid's critique of idealism and his principles of common sense have few precedents in eighteenth-century intellectual culture. His influence on German philosophy, Romanticism, and American pragmatism are well documented; but the force of his rejection of dominant forms of idealism makes him a singular figure in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>100</sup> While he was influenced by Lord Kames, Reid's analysis of the deficiencies of British idealism and his novel response to Hume's critique are unprecedented. Reid reads Berkeley and Hume as accurately understanding the consequences of idealism: "They reasoned justly from this hypothesis [that the immediate objects of thought are ideal representations] when they concluded from it, that there is neither a material world, nor any such power in the human mind as that of abstraction" (*EIP* V.vi.393).<sup>101</sup> But what distinguishes Reid is his novel response to the problems of idealism and skepticism. He singled out for critique the presupposition that privileged abstract theory shared by both rationalism and empiricism in the period. By theorizing the logic of relations in which meaning is not an essential or transcendent property of things but a process of identification, correlation, and abstraction, he developed a viable alternative to the metaphysical prejudice that withdrew form and ideas from the material world. While philosophically Reid has few antecedents, there are poets who register the deficiencies of the ideal system. For instance, as the previous chapter demonstrated, Milton's poetics of monistic descent, grounded in his positive valuation of the

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<sup>100</sup> For the influence of Reid and the common sense tradition on German thought, see Andrew Seth, *Scottish Philosophy: A Comparison of the Scottish and German Answers to Hume* (London: W. Blackwood, 1907); and, more recently, Manfred Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany, 1768-1800* (Montreal: Queen's University Press, 1987) 52-69. For Reid's influence on Scottish philosophy, see Nicholas Rescher, *Common Sense: A New Look at an old Philosophical Tradition* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2005). On the general dissatisfaction with Locke's "way of ideas" and usefulness of Reid to rethinking Romanticism, see Charlotte Klöckner, *Science and the Perception of Nature* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1996) 9-36. On Reid and American pragmatism, see the essays collected in the recent issue of *The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, "Pragmatism and Common sense," 9.2 (2017).

<sup>101</sup> This is a repetition of the claim he makes in *Intellectual Powers* about Berkeley and Hume that "their conclusions are justly drawn from the doctrine of ideas which has been so universally received" (*IHM* V.viii.75).

material world over the transcendent sphere, afforded an alternative to the poetics of allegorical ascent that defined the descriptive poetry of Denham, Waller, and Pope.

As discussed above, description in the allegorical landscape tradition points beyond the material world to fulfillment in transcendent ideas. But, while empiricist epistemology emphasized transcendent predicates, the practices of early modern scientific description elevated scrupulous attention to minute details as valuable in itself.<sup>102</sup> Concurrently, poets like John Milton (as the previous chapter shows) and Andrew Marvell were developing a literalist poetic project. Marvell in particular occupies intermediate position in the development of topographical poetry. Nearly one hundred years separate the publication of *Paradise Lost* and Thomas Reid's first mature work, and Marvell's collected poems appeared posthumously in 1682. He was not widely read, but his poetry represents an important undercurrent during the period. Between the Restoration publications of Milton and Marvell and Reid's critiques of idealism the doctrine of ideas was given its most influential treatment in Locke's *Essay* and taken to its logical extreme in Hume's *Treatise*. But these two poets' interest in the continuity of mind and matter anticipate the breakdown in idealism that Reid makes systematic. Seth says that "by maintaining a theory of immediate perception, Scottish philosophy destroys the foreignness of matter to mind, and thus implicitly removes the only foundation of a real dualism" (76). The previous chapter explored the ecological sensibility and monist implications of Milton's peripatetic prospects. Milton shares with his friend and colleague Marvell the refusal to separate the subject from webs of relation, and a skeptical view of the remote observer of Enlightenment epistemology. Scottish philosophy and Reid in particular, are distinctly Miltonic: "The essence of Scottish philosophy as it appears in Reid, may . . . be described as a vindication of perception as perception, in contradistinction to the vague sensational idealism which had ended in the disintegration of

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<sup>102</sup> Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan*, 59-94; Picciotto, *Labors of Innocence*, 129-254.

knowledge” (Seth 96). Milton and Marvell are an important literary antecedent for Reid’s emphasis on perceptual precision and his tendency towards literalism, against the vagaries of idealist and allegorical expression.<sup>103</sup>

Marvell’s precise description and his acute sensibility point forward to the poetics developed at length in Thomson’s *Seasons*, a poem that greatly influenced Reid, while his impulse towards epigrammatic contraction recalls the associative logic of the emblem tradition.<sup>104</sup> In this way, Marvell both points backward to the visuality of Renaissance allegory and forward to the looser, ambulatory technique of Thomson and Cowper. Marvell occupies an intermediate space between two modes of description, and what distinguishes him from Denham, Waller and the landscape poets examined above, is the self-critical aspect of his poetry. Rosalie Colie reads Marvell as a poet-critic whose self-awareness is disclosed by his analysis of received traditions and poetic conventions. Marvell’s descriptive practice displays concern with the logic of association that in poets like Denham unproblematically joined the material to the spiritual. Figures in Marvell register the breakdown of allegory and the notion that “knowledge of the transcendent” could be had “by means of metaphor” (Parker 2).<sup>105</sup> For Marvell, this linkage is always frayed and his descriptions tend to rebound on themselves with a resulting literalism that anticipates later poets like Thomson. Where Marvell might at first seem to be pursuing an emblematic representation, there is a tendency towards elevating the descriptive byway into an

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<sup>103</sup> Gordon Teskey argues that “Milton is not an allegorical poet” since he consistently abjures the incoherent dualism on which allegory is premised: *Allegory and Violence*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 187.

<sup>104</sup> Rosalie Colie, *My Echoing Song: Andrew Marvell’s Poetry of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1970). On Thomson’s influence on Reid, see Jonathan Kramnick, “An Aesthetics and Ecology of Presence,” in *European Romantic Review* 26.3 (2015) 315-27. On the highly contracted visual cues of the emblem tradition, see Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978); on the relationship of emblematic representation to naturalism, see Smith, *The Body of the Artisan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>105</sup> Blanford Parker, *The Triumph of Augustan Poetics: English Literary Culture from Butler to Johnson* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998). On Marvell and the breakdown of emblematic representation see Cohen, “Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry” 151. Catherine Gimelli Martin links Marvell’s “equivocal architectonics” to the Restoration explosion of allegory into “manifold forms” in *The Ruins of Allegory: Paradise Lost and the Metamorphosis of Epic Convention* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998) pg. 13. She discusses Marvell’s “half-ironic” play with the conventions of the “system of Neoplatonic figuration” (16)

end in itself. As a consequence his poems anticipate the anti-idealizing poetics that characterized the georgic mode in the eighteenth century.

Marvell's loco-descriptive poetry does allegorizing to excess, bordering on parody, with the result that his poems read as criticisms of the *topos* of prospect poetry. As Colie argues, it is a hallmark of Marvell's style – in "Upon Appleton House," for instance, or "To his Coy Mistress" – to take up a genre, whether country-house or *carpe diem*, and run to its extreme, thereby exhausting its resources and calling attention to its conventionality. "Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough" belongs among the tradition of hill poems that includes *Cooper's Hill*, "On St. James's Park," and *Windsor Forest*.<sup>106</sup> The poem seems a conventional moral landscape of the type examined above, especially in its depiction of nature as a vehicle for ethical values.<sup>107</sup> But the landscape is not dominated by its allegorical trappings. Marvell's figuration unites nature and artistic mediation by subverting the dichotomy of subject and object.<sup>108</sup> The literal level of description bodies forth the ideal in a poetics of immanence. Unlike in Pope, where the conceptual and ideological pole is weighted, Marvell's landscapes resist allegorical containment.<sup>109</sup> The critical characterization of Marvell as literalist of the ideal highlights his medial position between two approaches to description: the emblematic and what the following chapter explores as the georgic concrete. Marvell's self-aware handling of figuration suggests that his interest is in understanding the possibility of dissolving the dichotomy of the material

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<sup>106</sup> On the mountain-poem tradition, see Rostvig, 237-432; on Marvell's debt to the mountain and grove poem, see Scoular, 1965 159-62). In his comments on the poem, Nigel Smith suggests that "Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough" implies "an ethical stance through the mode of a description of nature" (204).

<sup>107</sup> Nigel Smith suggests that the poem implies "an ethical stance through the mode of a description of nature" (204).

<sup>108</sup> Smith says, "The focus of poetic invention is a series of conceits (by which Bilbrough hill and the trees of the grove are variously personified) but they are never allowed to detract from the literal landscape being described: nature and art are in this respect fused" (205). The "literalism" of Marvell is discussed by J. B. Leishman, *The Art of Marvell's Poetry* (London: Hutchinson, 1966); Colie (1970); Gavin Dominic in "'The Garden' and Marvell's Literal Figures" *Cambridge Quarterly* 37.2 (2008) 224-52; and Ryan Netzley, "Sameness and the Poetics of Nonrelation: Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden'" *PMLA* 132.2 (2017) 580-595.

<sup>109</sup> J. B. Leishman writes that the poem's achievement lies in its balance "between the literal and the metaphorical, the pictorial and the conceptual" (250).

and ideal, and the poems register the possibility of such a fitting of one to the other through the kind of relational logic developed by Reid.

At the center of Marvell's descriptive practice in the prospect poem is the questionable association of a mentalistic schema with an empirical entity. "Upon the Hill and Grove at Bilbrough" begins with a compass. As soon as it is mentioned, the description is dislocated into absolute, geometric space, where the products of the compass's art have their real being. "The stiffest compass could not strike/ A line more circular and like" (ll. 3-4). The curvature of the hill is elevated to the ideal that the mediations of human artistry can only ape. As in "The Mower Against Gardens," the products of artistic technique have secondary status. But the comparison here is relative. The ideal circle and the hemisphere of Bilbrough are identified with one another as models for human artistry: "Nor softest pencil draw a brow/ So equal as this hill does bow./ It seems as for a model laid/ And that the world by it was made" (5-8). Marvell plays here with the notion of an ideal model that has priority over its iterations in the empirical world, except that here the model is itself the empirical entity, reversing the priority granted to abstract schemata by Addison and his followers. The sense is that there is knowledge in nature itself that can be earned through close familiarity and attentive presence to context-embedded experience. The natural setting here subsumes the ideal, in ways that anticipate elements of Augustan aesthetics. But Marvell is an expert exploiter of semantic ambiguity.<sup>110</sup> A model can be an ideal type or exemplar, the schema that governs its reproductions, but it can also be a three-dimensional representation, such as the ones that accompanied Boyle's descriptions of the air-pump, or Hooke's woodcuts displaying the minute structure of insect eyes. In the latter case, the priority is unclear. As Daston and Galison argue, scientific images in the period were subject to norming to

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<sup>110</sup> On Marvell's ambiguous words, see William Empson, "Marvell's Garden: The Ideal Simplicity Approached by Resolving Contradictions," in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York: New Directions 1974) pgs. 119-148.

make them representative types. What may have started as an imitation of secondary status became through artistic rendering and detail-selection an ideal image through which to identify individual entities. While the repeated imperative to “see” in the poem draws attention to the features of the hill, the description discloses moral verities immanent in the landscape. Its gentle slope not “for itself the height does gain,/ But only strives to raise the plain” (23-24). As the poem progresses, the hill and Lord Fairfax’s moral virtues become indissoluble. Fairfax is Marvell’s patron, and the poem, like Waller’s and Pope’s, participates in the idealizing tradition of panegyric, but the self-awareness and precision of its emblems and its peculiar involutions of emblem and emblemized articulate an alternative to the mechanical associations of the moral landscape.

The tradition of the *paysage moralisé* is often ambiguous and less since they tend to demand critical scrutiny and advanced visual literacy in order to discern the ideal content suggested by the image.<sup>111</sup> The requirement of critical discernment to proceed along the associative by-way initiated by a visual cue opens a potentially insuperable rift between the description and its symbolical association that is bridged by normative conventions and habit.<sup>112</sup> Marvell’s critical poetry takes shape within the chasm between material and spiritual that his acute awareness of a changing poetic and intellectual tradition made central to his techniques. His sequence of mower poems, for instance, contains a sustained contestation of the received pastoral conventions. Marvell’s mower doesn’t labor in the Hesperides; he’s not a shepherd. The poems feature physical labor and loco-description, which link them to the georgic mode, while

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<sup>111</sup> Patricia Emison argues few painted landscapes are as unambiguously allegorical as those in Pope or Denham in “The Paysage Moralisé” *Artibus et Historiae* 16.31 (1995) 125-37. On the demand for advanced visual literacy required to properly view most emblematic images, see Gombrich, *Symbolic Images* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1978) 21. On the complex relationship between naturalism and the emblem tradition, see Smith, *Body of the Artisan* 95-128.

<sup>112</sup> Smith tracks the iconography of the “egg, or ‘hermetic vase,’” in the etchings of alchemical treatises to show how precise details in visual representation called up an elaborate visual program, in *The Body of the Artisan*, 129-154.

the dramatic narration more closely affiliates with pastoral.<sup>113</sup> Unlike the timeless present of pastoral, the Mower poems present a world that unfolds temporally. The poems advance from late-spring or early summer (when grafting – described in “The Mower Against Gardens” – is done), through the hay harvest before the height of summer, to the conclusion of the mower’s seasonal employment and his identification at the end of the sequence with that other reaper, Death. A temporalized view of nature characterizes georgic, and connects the poems to that mode, as does the four-part structure. While the sequence may have been the invention of the editor of the 1681 collection, Smith and Wilcher argue on the basis of internal evidence that the poems constitute a temporal series, much like Virgil’s *Georgics* and Thomson’s *Seasons*.<sup>114</sup>

The poems’ critique of pastoral conventions is most obvious in the first of the series, “The Mower Against Gardens.” Marvell’s mower denounces the geometrical ordering of agrarian space. Since georgic tends to praise ameliorative improvements to the landscape, the mower’s criticism of agrarian embellishments challenges its connection to the mode. The mower’s lament seems a reactionary ludditism. But the target of his criticisms is the excess of art on display in French and Italian gardening. Enclosed gardens leave nothing of nature, replacing it with human ingenuity. The worst crime, for Marvell’s mower, “is to interfere with the order of nature by grafting trees” (Smith 132). In contrast, Virgil praises universal grafting in the first book of the *Georgics*, praise echoed in the eighteenth century by Philips’ *Cyder*.<sup>115</sup> But what is at stake in Marvell is not human art so much as human luxury. The first word of the poem, “Luxurious,” suggests the target is self-indulgent artistry. Marvell’s opening to the sequence anticipates Cowper’s mock-heroic introduction to *The Task*, desecrating aristocratic ease. Enclosed

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<sup>113</sup> Alistair Fowler argues that the sequence enacts the gradual arrogation of pastoral by georgic that began in the 1650s in “The Formation of Genres in the Renaissance and After” *NLH* 34.2 (2003) 185-200.

<sup>114</sup> Robert Wilcher, *Andrew Marvell* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985) pp. 89.

<sup>115</sup> Philips writes, “Let sage experience teach thee all the Arts/ Of Grafting, and In-Eyeing” in *Cyder* 1.21.

gardens “seduce” nature from its original state “most plain and pure,” dislocating its products within “A dead and standing pool of air.” The poem describes nature submerged by inauthentic human art. “Yet these rarities might be allowed/ To man that sov’ reign thing and proud;/ Had he not dealt between the bark and tree,/ Forbidden mixtures there to see./ No plant now knew the stock from which it came;/ He grafts upon the wild the tame” (19-24). The target of the criticism is the pridefulness that sets human prescriptions above the self-governing laws of natural development. Anticipating the neoclassical precept to follow nature’s rules rather than those of art, the mower’s claims suggest that conventional domestication destroys the fecundity of natural products, producing “eunuchs,” and stoneless cherries that “procreate without a sex.”

Vital, living traditions become host to domesticated, conventionalized products that leech on the energy of earlier innovations.<sup>116</sup> Through mechanical association and habit, tameness grows out of what was once a rich tradition. In this sense the poem is about change and continuity. The failure of procreation that concludes the poem suggests that withdrawal from immediacy and contact with the “wild” world results in decadence and decline. “Their statues polished by some ancient hand,/ May to adorn the gardens stand;/ But howsoe’er the figures do excel,/ The gods themselves with us do dwell” (37-40). As in the prospect poem, Marvell targets the substitution of an iconic representation for the thing itself. The Mower acknowledges that smoothed representations, like the statues polished for enclosed gardens, may excel their empirical entities, but the concluding “us” prioritizes closeness to the ground and its chthonic rhythms. As with the ascent up Bilbrough, the mower’s lament indicates that closeness to truth is a function not of purging off accidental detail or smoothing, but of gripping down and making

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<sup>116</sup> On the literary historical implications of Marvell’s criticism, in relation to the quarrel of ancients and moderns, see Bradford Boyd, “‘He Grafts Upon the Wild the Tame’: Marvell’s Mower Poems as Alternative Literary History,” *Marvell Studies* 1.1 (Andrew Marvell Society 2016), 1-11.

contact with the material world. The consequent valorization of the particular and contingent as integral to the ideal defines a fundamental aspect of Marvell's literalist poetics.

Throughout the Mower poems Marvell is acutely interested in *allegoresis* and the logic through which the world becomes arrogated to spiritual entities. He lays out the problems of association, unity, and idea that were later formalized in Addison's aesthetic theory. In "The Mower to the Glow-Worm" Marvell describes the multivalent symbolism of glow-worms. They illuminate the landscape for the poet-analog, the nightingale, providing light for her "matchless songs" (3). But their reference is inscrutable. The first three of the four-line stanzas in the poem offer shifting and contradictory perspectives on the glowworms. First, they are the light by which the nightingale sees the landscape, then the "country comets, that portend/ No war, nor princes funeral" (5-6). These are emblems in search of a meaning, "shining unto no higher end/ Than to presage the grass's fall." They point to no universal significance that "vexes monarchs," but, for the mower, they signal it is time to harvest. Their light is part of a vernacular epistemology, an organic way of tracking time and development. Marvell here draws on Pliny, whose *Natural History* says that "the appearance of glow-worms . . . in summer was a signal to country people of the time for the sowing of panic grass and millet, or any other plant, to make hay directly after the harvesting of barley" (qtd. in Smith 140). These worms signify that the mower's labor is about to start. Their meaning exists within a delimited context that is legible by those attuned to agricultural rhythms of growth and harvest. But the next stanza complicates this humble significance, as the light of the glow-worms is contrasted to the delusive fire of the *ignis fatuus*: "Ye glow-worms, whose officious flame/ To wand'ring mowers shows the way,/ That in the night have lost their aim/ And after foolish fires do stray" (9-13). The direct address shows the confusion here: the lights are officious, but deceptive. Their purpose is obscure. It isn't clear if

the glow-worms' light is meant to contrast and correct the will-o-the-wisp's delusive light by showing the "wand'ring mowers" the path to their labor, or if theirs is the light after which they "do stray."

The glowworms light "in vain," as our Mower counts himself among the itinerant wanderers, "displaced" from his immediate task of harvest. The Mower doesn't recognize or doesn't acknowledge the portent, and the poem concludes with his dislocation and isolation. The glow-worms in the poem really do shine "unto no higher end" since their signal is not heeded by the person to whom it would be meaningful. The mower raises the question of whether symbolized content can be said to exist in the absence of its legibility. If an *ignis fatuus* shines in the fields, and no one sees, does it still deceive? Anticipating the skepticism that follows from idealism, Marvell shows that the abstract signified of an empirical entity may exist only in the mind. Without the accurate interpretation of the sign it can't be said to communicate anything beyond itself. The emblem is mute. Consequently the glow-worms' light has no purpose, no end that could be posited as their reason for shining. The main verb of the single sentence comprising the poem, "waste," to describe the lights of the worms, lands in the final stanza with anti-idealizing force. Marvell again collapses material and spiritual, but here the skeptical suggestion is that any transaction between the two is conventional and depends largely on a pre-established rapport between the sender and receiver of a symbol.

The mower poems conclude with isolation and death. The collapse of the symbolic order that their analysis of mechanical association describes has two consequences: either the mower's alienation at the end of "The Mower to the Glow-Worm," or the his reunification with the grass that concludes "The Mower's Song."<sup>117</sup> But other poems present alternative responses to the

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<sup>117</sup> The association of georgic to Isaiah, 40.6 is mentioned by Durling, Chalker, and Low: "All flesh is grass,/ and all its beauty is like the flower/ of the field./ The grass withers, the flower fades."

collapse of the material and the spiritual developed in the Mower sequence. “The Garden,” likely written in the same post-Restoration time as the first, third, and fourth Mower poems, dramatizes the problem of Locke’s “way of ideas”: how to construe the relationship of entities like concepts or abstract categories that at first blush seem mentalistic in origin, to the empirical world. “The Garden” begins with a withdrawal from clamorous and competitive society to “repose” in an enclosed garden. The poem moves from withdrawal from an oppressive empirical world to the absolute space of pure mind.<sup>118</sup> As in the mower sequence and the prospect poem, Marvell attempts to unify the literal and the figurative in a self-subsistent whole while resisting the mechanical associations of the emblem tradition. The first verb of the poem, “amaze,” presents movement in a state of confusion, a lack of clarity and direction in the noisy world of human society. The purpose of human self-delusion is conveyed synecdochically. Men “themselves amaze/ To win the palm, the oak, or bays” (1-2). Military, civic, and poetic achievements are each represented by their conventional crown. The scarce shade provided by these crowns mocks the achievement of their wearers, whose vanity drives them to toil for public acknowledgment. These discrete, single crowns are contrasted to the richness of “all flowers and all trees” that weave “the garlands of repose” to which Marvell retreats. The first stanza sets the poem up as a typical retirement poem in the *hortus conclusus* tradition, lamenting the busy world and praising the country. But Marvell’s opening play with synecdoche and conventional association foreshadows the use of the conventions of retirement poetry to explore idealist logic as a withdrawal from the world and a retreat into solipsism.

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<sup>118</sup> John Hunt describes the poem’s “gradual development of an expressive vision at the expense of the emblematic, of an empirical or scientific regard at the expense of the discovery of *a priori* ideas in a garden world. . . . “The Garden” celebrates an actual and a symbolic world” (153) in *Andrew Marvell: His Life and Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).

The second stanza opens by personifying “Fair Quiet” and “Innocence dear” as the inhabitants found far from the “busy companies of men.” “Quiet” is set against the noise of worldly confusion. Already removed from the social world, the allegories introduce another level of abstraction, moving the garden into an idealized place where allegories not only share space with, but “only among the plants will grow” (14). Marvell’s “then,” marking the time he sought Quiet and Innocence, “In busy companies of men,” temporalizes the development from the first to the second stanza. The time stamps of the poem distinguish successive stages in withdrawal. The status of this garden is uncertain; it is vegetative but also populated by spiritual entities. Despite the attempted retreat into “delicious solitude,” “society” keeps interrupting: “No white, nor red was ever seen/ So am’rous as this lovely green./ Fond lovers, cruel as their flame/ Cut in these trees their mistress’ name” (ll.17-20). Marvell parodies the conventional imagery of love poetry with its white lilies and red roses. He refers not to flowers but to abstracted qualities, distinct simple ideas that are dissociated from their bearers. The “am’rous” green of the garden rhymes with the *eros* of the “fond lovers” whose carnal passion violently imprints itself on the world of things. Eroticism inscribes the physical surface of the objects of attention in violation of their being: “Wheres’ e’er your barks I wound/ No name shall but your own be found” (23-24). Developing the doctrine of signatures – the belief that the essences of empirical objects bear their true names – Marvell riffs on the Petrarchan convention of carving lovers’ names into trees as a denigration of the original Adamic vocation of naming. The names displace the beauties of the trees. Marvell describes this as a failure of attention on the part of overenthusiastic lovers, who “little . . . heed/ how far these beauties hers exceed” (21-22).

Stanza IV begins with another temporal marker, “When we have run our passions’ heat,/ Love hither makes his best retreat,” but it is unclear who “we” includes, given Marvell’s

withdrawal and his denunciation of conventional love poetry. The closest subject is the “Fair trees” of the previous stanza, and the praise that was heaped on their beauties before makes it plausible that the amorous encounter of these first two lines is between Marvell and nature itself. But then, the question is where are they retreating? The timestamp marks another stage in the withdrawal. The trees here dissolve into their ends: “The gods, that mortal beauty chase,/ Still in a tree did end their race:/ Apollo hunted Daphne so,/ Only that she might laurel grow,/ And Pan did after Synrinx speed,/ Not as a nymph but for a reed” (27-32). Marvell identifies with Apollo and Pan, important figures for poetry, but more significantly his amorous encounter with nature aims beyond itself. In his presentation, Apollo and Pan’s carnal engagement has as its end not physical pleasure but song. The sexual embrace with nature generates music. This clarifies the ambiguity of the earlier “We,” as Marvell indicates through his comparison with Pan and Apollo that his lover is the garden itself. Marvell’s erotic encounter with the trees is a means, a pursuit of “mortal beauty” bent on the transcendent beauty of music.

While the garden is figured as an escape from “passions’ heat,” the interaction with nature in stanza V is charged with erotic union. The poet, attempting to surmount bodily and sexual absorption finds nature insinuating itself into his presence, pressing on him with its organic energies: “Ripe apples drop about my head,/ The luscious clusters of the vine/ Upon my mouth do crush their wine;/ The nectarene, and curious peach/ Into my hands themselves to reach” (ll. 33-38). The attempt to withdraw into an allegorical and spiritual space is interrupted by the press of sensibility. Personification imbues the natural beauties with an intrusive agency, and the presentation of the sex organs of plants charges the encounter with overwhelming eroticism. Marvell, who should be the one curiously exploring the setting, becomes the object of the “luscious clusters” and “curious peach.” He falls victim to a sensuous natural world that will

not be denied: “Stumbling on melons, as I pass,/ Insared with flow’rs, I fall on grass.” An insistently attractive nature resists the sublimation of mortal into spiritual beauty exemplified by the gods in the previous stanza and implicitly associated by Marvell with the origins of poetic song. Instead of overcoming, he succumbs, entangled by the sensuous pleasures of immediacy.

Pure sense is crippling, and the press of external beauty causes the poet to fall into a sensual identification with nature. But Marvell’s allegorizing impulse tries to transcend the garden’s ensnaring beauties. The disaggregation of the poet into head, tasting lips, and groping hands in stanza five is juxtaposed to the idealizing mind in stanza six: “Meanwhile the mind, from pleasures less,/ Withdraws into its happiness:/ The mind, that ocean where each kind/ Does straight its own resemblance find” (ll. 41-44). “Meanwhile,” that Miltonic mark of simultaneity, conveys that while Marvell is having this intense physical experience with the sexual tendrils of nature, his mind is going the other direction, pursuing transcendence. There are echoes of the fall at the end of stanza five, and intimations of Isaiah’s “All flesh is grass.”<sup>119</sup> The shift from the fifth to the sixth stanza is marked by the move from immersion in the world of sense (and the threat of death and disincorporation suggested by that immersion) to the leap into absolute space.<sup>120</sup> The threat of dissolution in bodily pleasure is not at odds with the echoes of Isaiah, and eventual mortality. In the tradition of western love poetry the specter of death and decay haunts erotic and bodily love. Inevitable senescence and eventual, irreparable loss are countered in the Judeo-Christian tradition by the impulse towards transcendence.<sup>121</sup>

The stanza reflects on the pleasures of abstraction, and the sublimations of cognition as a process of matching entities in the world with the timeless ideas that resemble them. The idea is

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<sup>119</sup> See Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1950), 132.

<sup>120</sup> For Empson, “The root of the joke is that a physical desire drives the human creature to a spiritual one” (Empson 138).

<sup>121</sup> On the impulse towards transcendence as a suppression of the limits of embodied love in Western poetry, see Henry Staten, *Eros in Mourning* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001), 1-21; 108-138.

the fulfillment of the thing and offers release from the contingencies of sensual pleasure. The pleasure of intellection consists in overcoming physical reality to discover essential form in the oceanic mind. But the transcendence is ambiguous. Is the mind withdrawing from the lesser pleasures of the body, or is the mind lessened by its pleasurable encounter with the material world, somehow degraded by its sexually charged contact?<sup>122</sup> The departure of the mind from the richly visual amorous encounter with nature in stanza V is stark. It is hard to imagine a more alien landscape from the curious peaches and melons than the cold, expansive ocean of stanza VI. The move to connect kinds with resemblances is equally opaque. A “kind” is already a conceptual category, an abstraction that joins a group under the same heading. The reference to “kind” makes clear that the stanza is about different kinds of abstractions, and about relationships among ideas. The confrontation of prior ideas with subsequent ideas that resemble them produces a dizzying effect, from which it becomes hard to orient towards the empirical world, which the “meanwhile” has pivoted away from. There are echoes here of Milton’s “thoughts that wander through eternity,” and the disorienting affect of immersion in the oceanic absolute of pure speculation (*Paradise Lost* 2.148). Ideas mirroring ideas generate an intractable *mise en abyme*. The sublimation of nature’s manifold into pure idea involves violence: “Yet it creates, transcending these/ Far other worlds, and other seas;/ Annihilating all that’s made/ To a green thought in a green shade” (ll. 45-48). The rational world of forms and kinds into which Marvell recedes, and which he claims in the opening allegories to desire, is predicated on destruction. Abstraction purges off particularity through world-denying annihilation. What is annihilated here is contingency and relation. In substituting idea for thing the mind claims for

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<sup>122</sup> Pierre Legouis, *Andrew Marvell. Poet, Puritan, Patriot* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1965).

itself the divine power of the reduction to singularity.<sup>123</sup> The conceptual violence that destroys embeddedness and embodiment of thought as a precondition for the ascent to ideality is figured by Marvell as a destructive withdrawal into the infinite expanse of pure reason.<sup>124</sup>

In the absolute of the “green thought in a green shade,” Marvell discovers pure abstraction. Ryan Netzley has recently described the narrative of “The Garden” in terms of “subtractive poetics.” Netzley argues that Marvell pursues the annihilation of relation, which he describes as the meaning-generating practice of pointing beyond to a symbol or network of symbols. Consistent with treatments of Marvell’s “un-metaphorizing” poetics, Netzley identifies the poem with a rejection of traditional emblematic associations. The succession of abstractions aims beyond reference or relation. “In the first instance,” Netzley says, “the far other worlds and seas are given, out there in the empirical world. In the second, they reside solely in the imagination, yet they still require overcoming” (585). The end of the successive stages of abstraction is pure non-relation, the clarity and distinction of an idea undetermined by any empirical substrate, existing in pure unconditioned autonomy, like Lovejoy’s unit ideas. The “green thought in a green shade,” (which Netzley interprets as a green hue rather than a shade caused by overarching tree limbs, absencing it further from any non-identical relations) is purely self-referential. The green thought is *a priori*, possessing the purity of number, geometry, and logic, which Hume would describe as a relation of ideas rather than matters of fact. “Marvell’s poem contends that qualities, green in particular, are not accidents that objects own but rather abstract attributes . . . apprehensible in their own right” (592). The description of “green” here as an abstract predicate that can be known in its own right, in isolation from any instantiations,

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<sup>123</sup> In *Paradise Lost* 6.347 the power of annihilation, not just destroying or killing but un-creating, is reserved to God. Created beings cannot annihilate, though they can maim, harm, and if mortal, kill one another.

<sup>124</sup> Gordon Teskey calls this form of conceptual capture the “prevenient violence of allegory,” in *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 18.

makes Marvell a Cartesian (or, in Netzley's presentation, a harbinger of contemporary neo-Cartesian philosophies of mind-independence) and downplays the succession that leads to the crescendo in the last line of the sixth stanza.<sup>125</sup> Marvell's "green thought" is an attribute, but rather than being a relationless abstraction it is closer to an emergent category that, like Reid's predicables, always carries us beyond itself to the world in which it is embedded and in which it becomes meaningful. Marvell accords independent reality to "green," but Netzley suppresses the emergence and embeddedness of such concrete attributes. Instead of a purely self-referential idea, as Netzley views Marvell's "green thought," it is closer to one of Reid's predicables: an emergent category that instead of being known purely and self-referentially is instead inseparable from the network of relations through which it becomes identifiable.

Marvell sets out in pursuit of eidetic repose, but empirical reality keeps returning him to the body. It seems that only by an act of conceptual violence can he escape the press of sense. But the last three stanzas develop a *via media* between the passivity of sense and reason's ideal projections. Stanza VII removes from the perfect stillness of the "green thought in a green shade," with the deixis "here." "Here" is multiple, "the fountain's sliding foot/ Or at some fruit-tree's mossy root." These are instances of greenness; places where the attribute is experienced as part of a subject. "Here" restores us to the vegetative world whose mossiness is saturated with the quality that Marvell has prescinded from it.<sup>126</sup> Relational reasoning dominates Marvell's garden. The green thought cannot sustain itself. Ernst Gombrich points out that color is relative

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<sup>125</sup> On contemporary Neo-cartesianism and rationalist theories of mind-independence, see Quentin Meillasoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2009) 1-28; and Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) 49-96.

<sup>126</sup> Within a work of art, Jerome Stolnitz writes, "the appearance, pleasantness, imaginative import, and emotional tang of the color are determined by its interrelationships with everything else" (12) in *Aesthetics and Philosophy of Art Criticism* (New York: Houghton Mifflin 1960). Stolnitz's emphasis is on the total concreteness of the work of art, and the way particular elements are defined by their local context within the governing whole.

to gradient, always defined by its relationship to surrounding colors.<sup>127</sup> That is, its identification depends on its embeddedness within a local, concrete context. The transcendence imagined is ultimately not world-destroying: “My soul into the boughs does glide:/ There like a bird it sits and sings/ Then whets, and combs its silver wings;/ And, till prepared for longer flight,/ Waves in its plumes the various light” (49-56). Here, in the localized context, Marvell’s sought-after repose takes the form of an imaginative identification with an organic entity: a bird in a fruit tree overhead. The bird is both a conventional emblem for the human soul and a present feature of the empirical world, a real bird preening real feathers that refract the light coming through. The image is strikingly concrete when contrasted to the speculative expansiveness of the “green thought.”

The final stanza of the poem suffuses the entire landscape with imaginative identification as Marvell contemplates creation and the purposive construction of nature: “How well the skillful gard’ner drew/ Of flow’rs and herbs this dial new;/ Where from above the milder sun/ Does through a fragrant zodiac run;/ And as it works, th’industrious bee/ Computes its time as well as we./ How could such sweet and wholesome hours/ Be reckoned but with herbs and flowers” (ll. 65-72). The connotations of mechanical time suggested by “computes,” are displaced by the organic time of the sundial. The movement of shadows through the tertiary Zodiac connects micro-level description to cosmic motion. In watching the shadows cast by flowers and herbs, Marvell is literally watching the earth’s rotation. The introduction of temporal rhythms reclaims the immediate garden, here and now, from the timelessness of pastoral, and locates it in the georgic stream of change. The particular is joined to the universal as Marvell identifies simultaneously with the industrious bee and the world-revolving rhythms of organic

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<sup>127</sup> Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study of the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) pgs. 56-57

time. The end of the poem connects back to its beginning, as the bee – that consistent figure for unity in multiteity – and its pleasant, mutually beneficial labors answer the vain toil of striving men. Georgic labor is continuous with nature’s productivity and harnesses natural rhythms of growth and decay, emerging in the final stanza as a model for human activity, predicated on contact with the empirical world. Marvell’s vision is not the ideal of pastoral: his “wholesome hours” are measured out “with herbs and flow’rs,” which, recalling Isaiah, drop their leaves and petals. The careful tracking of time culminates here, with seasonal, fragile blooms. The aura of finitude that suffuses the final stanza, from the intimations of Isaiah to the identification with bloom and decay, connects the poem to georgic, while its descriptive techniques blur hierarchical distinctions by embedding entities in material contexts.<sup>128</sup> “The Garden” thus provides a fully realized and successful alternative to the allegorical landscapes that dominated most Restoration topographical verse.

Marvell’s poetry displays a careful inquiry into the mechanical symbolism of the *paysage moralisé*. In his handling, where convention would dictate the inference of an abstract idea, the material descriptions are stubborn. The stubbornness of Marvell’s figures demonstrates the critical tendency of his poetry. His figures evaluate received associative modes, scrutinizing the logic whereby a drop of dew, in his most emblematic poem, can signify the immaterial human soul. John Hunt writes, “Part of Marvell’s versatility within his received traditions is his very skeptical delight in teasing the accepted habits of thought and poetry. This in its turn contrives the impression that Marvell is alert to fresh possibilities of syntax that would allow more than analogic significances to be discovered in landscape” (17).<sup>129</sup> In “The Garden,” the narrative of retreat from the material exigencies of the world culminates in a moment of world-destroying

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<sup>128</sup> On Marvell and georgic, see Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1985) pgs. 274-295.

<sup>129</sup> Hunt (1989)

transcendence, consummated in pure idea, “A green thought in a green shade.” The poem’s plot literalizes the logic of abstraction by telling a story of withdrawal and separation from the organic world, while the body finds itself entangled in ambiguous but delightful pleasures. The simultaneity evoked by Marvell’s “meanwhile” creates a tension that the final two stanzas, which materialize both the soul and time by making them physical entities, aim to reconcile. Marvell attempts to resolve the mind-body dualism that playfully animates much of his poetry into monism that – like Milton’s – reconciles material and spiritual.

The entanglement of images and ideas characterizes the poetry of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.<sup>130</sup> The challenge posed by linking the material world to the ideal through descriptive practice is not unique to Marvell, but he highlights the difficulty of doing so without producing poems reducible to versified semantic content. The “way of ideas,” given its most canonical formulation in Locke but pervading western philosophy as a ubiquitous prejudice in favor of theory and abstraction, construes thought as a picture language. But there is nothing in the mind that is like what is in the world, or that is a mimetic picture of the manifold of sense. As Reid vigorously argued, thought simply doesn’t take place in pictures. The amalgamation of material and spiritual results from the precarious dichotomy of mind and matter that defined both rationalist and empiricist epistemology. If poems are pictures of semantic content, then the question central to eighteenth-century descriptive poetry and aesthetics arises: what makes poetry a unique kind of writing? Empiricist aesthetics held that poems present, in the words of Lovejoy, “philosophical ideas in dilution,” but their way of presenting them was circuitous. The view is a consequence of a metaphysical belief that the terms idea and form have their proper

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<sup>130</sup> Of the poetry created out of the difficulty of empiricist epistemologies to distinguish material and ideal, Ernest Tuveson writes that “Since ideas are images, since even complex ideas are multiple pictures, and since the understanding itself is a form or perception, the visual and the intellectual would tend to become amalgamated” (72-3) in *The Imagination as a Means of Grace: Locke and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1960).

existence in some “eternity before any individual of the species was formed,” that they are timeless, distinct, and self-existent. That conviction leads to the view of discourse generally, and poems in particular, as vehicular. That is, the belief implied is that that behind the *techne* of literature there exists a governing representation, a philosophical truth, or an axiom of moral virtue, the grasping of which gets at the meaning of poems.

The metaphysical conviction that the true form of poems lies somewhere beyond the horizon of the page emerged as a central tenet of aesthetic idealism. The history of idealizing aesthetics posits aesthetic experience as a pseudo-religious event of unconcealing philosophical content, and has dominated Western aesthetics from the reception of Kant through various species of depth formalism that have characterized twentieth and twenty-first century criticism. This chapter shows that speculative approaches to art have roots in the prejudice towards the abstract and theoretical at the expense of the technical and practical. The idealism that suffused British empiricism as the conviction that all access to the world is through representational images derives from empiricism’s unquestioned incorporation of the pervasive “doctrine of ideas” called out by Reid. Early aesthetic theory incorporated its idealism from the epistemological paradigm of British empiricism. Reid offers a view of form not as an ideal schema, or something set over and above the technics of a text, but instead an emergent property of relational reasoning. Idealist views of form have contributed to the systematic privileging of external propositions believed to shape the text at the expense of its internal relational patterns. The idealist prejudice is part of a broader intellectual paradigm privileging the universal – theory – at the expense of the technical.<sup>131</sup> The poetry of locodescription, and in particular the development of the georgic in the eighteenth century extends the poetics of embeddedness that

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<sup>131</sup> On “theory” in relation to the remote spectator, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997) trans. Steven Randall

emerged in the Restoration-era poetry of Milton and Marvell and grounds an aesthetic counter-tradition. The ecological sensibility of these poets presents a world of concretely embedded natural processes unfolding through time that counters the hierarchical, dualist metaphysics of idealism. Their poetics of concrescence emphasize the entanglement of experience in webs of relation, and their formal innovations contribute to the development of haptic, peripatetic approaches to aesthetic experience.



## Chapter Three

## Georgic Aesthetics

*There are connections in these*

*-between an earth, sentient with moles,  
and the owl's  
radiant eyes-*

*fine as a web drawn  
by spiders,*

*Close as the grain of oak.*

Ronald Johnson, *The Book of the Green Man*

Eighteenth-century aesthetic theory was dominated by the program articulated in Joseph Addison's "Essay on *The Georgics*," which first appeared as a preface to Dryden's 1698 translation and was later reprinted in Dryden's collected translations. Addison's aesthetic theory in that essay and developed at length a decade later in the *Spectator* papers on the pleasures of the imagination, conceived aesthetic experience as the methodical succession from the details of poetic description – like elements in a natural landscape – to a universal maxim or precept. What Addison calls the "by-way" of description distinguishes poetic composition from philosophical and scientific writing. Like scientific writing, poetry aims at truth, but its path is circuitous. For Addison, imaginative pleasure lies in following an associative by-way that is consummated in an abstract, transcendent predicate. As the previous chapter shows, by privileging a symbolic referent Addison's theory treats as epiphenomenal the particulars of textual composition and the elements of craft, relegating details and textual particulars to secondary status. But, a program of literalism and naturalism, nascent in the Restoration compositions of John Milton or Andrew Marvell which resists the movement towards synthesis and anticipates the enumerative poetics of

the mid-eighteenth century, developed alongside and in response to Addison's theory. Milton's mature poems conclude not with the consummation of history, but with an immersion in incrementally unfolding historical processes. Milton's most immediate heirs are descriptive poets like Marvell who took up the georgic mode as a way to imagine the dynamics of development.

Georgic poetics and aesthetic theory are characterized by attention to the conrescence of objects and entities in the material world. Their characteristic entanglement operates intensively, multiplying internal relations and dependencies, and consequently challenging criticism predicated on educing organizing ideas. In georgic, objects become meaningful and gather significance not by distilling their internal, self-similar essence, but through spider-webs of relation and close-grained associative networks. Georgic prioritizes relation over idea or essence. Georgic aesthetics develops a bottom-up view of experience as *poesis*, understood as the stitching together of entities into reciprocally causal networks. The georgic way of thinking is an undercurrent within aesthetic theory and poetic practice in the eighteenth century. Its emphasis on contingency and its pervasive systems-thinking makes it a distinctive and influential eighteenth-century genre that runs counter to Addison's speculative aesthetics.<sup>1</sup>

Eighteenth-century georgic takes special interest in the emergence of novelty from well-worn techniques and materials that are renewed through selection, relocation, and placement in new enlivening contexts. By prioritizing relation over essence or idea, georgic aesthetics develops an alternative to what Jean-Marie Schaeffer calls the "speculative theory of art" that, as the previous chapter argues, has dominated philosophical aesthetics since its emergence from the

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Siskin argues that the working up of knowledge into areas that are incorporated and interrelated within scaled organizing systems was the principal project of the eighteenth century. See Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (2016) 15-78. On the pervasiveness of a distinctively georgic sensibility in American poetry, see Jed Rasula, *This Compost* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2002).

representationalist idealism of early-eighteenth-century English philosophy.<sup>2</sup> The “speculative theory of art” postulates a “transcendent entity” outside the work of art that exerts causal determinacy prior to the labor of composition, and retrospectively guarantees the unity of composition. Addison’s highly influential theory represents a watershed in the development of the speculative aesthetics that influenced literary criticism from Lord Kames’ belletristic moralism to the depth formalisms of contemporary ideology critique. In both cases, the true being of poetry is held to exist in a prior, determinative entity.

Concrete comes from the Latin verb *concreſcere*, meaning to grow together.<sup>3</sup> The word’s organicism makes it amenable to georgic, and georgic aesthetic theory. Its meaning as a “unified mass” composed of internally differentiated parts originated in the sixteenth-century, while its association with aggregates of qualities, like color, not considered abstractly derives from scholastic origins (OED). Something grown together suffers from analytical abstraction, or separating out and distinguishing a part without consideration of the whole in which it exists. The balance of fullness with specificity, and of particularity with an impulse towards the encyclopedic characterizes eighteenth-century georgic. The mode attempts to balance the totality of mutually implicated processes, like social history and agrarian practice, against the demands for unity and coherence. As poetry about local agrarian scenes, georgic shares an interest in observation and description with dominant empiricist accounts of sense experience, but its immediacy links it more closely to common sense philosophy than the “way of ideas.” The centrality of descriptive immediacy to georgic, marked by its emphatic use of deixis and the

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<sup>2</sup> Schaeffer, *Art in the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Randall (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 2000), 7.

<sup>3</sup> On the centrality of concreteness to twentieth century philosophy (centrally, that of Alfred North Whitehead and Susanne Langer) and to new critical reading practice, see Nicholas Gaskill, “The Close and the Concrete: Aesthetic Formalism in Context,” *New Literary History*, 47.4 (Autumn 2016), 505-524.

language of perceptual contact, accounts for its prominent role in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory.

The English georgic vogue began with Dryden's 1698 translation of Virgil.<sup>4</sup> Addison's prefatory essay sutured georgic to the didactic and loco-descriptive poetry popular in the late seventeenth century. The English topographical tradition provided the groundwork for Augustan repurposing of classic georgic. Eighteenth-century poets readily adapted Virgil's account of rural life by merging it with prospect poetry. Nominally about farming and agrarian concerns, Virgil's poem explores the dynamics of natural and cultural reproduction by connecting social and political change to rhythms of organic development. Farming allowed Virgil to think through how novelty emerges from the decomposition of old forms and materials.<sup>5</sup> Rhythms of decline, decay, and renewal provided Virgil and his English followers with an organic analogy for similar processes in human culture, with an eye towards how cultural reproduction creates continuity under the condition of change. With memories of the civil war still alive, georgic poets of the period identified in Virgil's "poem of the earth" a poetics of remediation.<sup>6</sup> Agriculture, which

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<sup>4</sup> See Alistair Fowler, "Georgic and Pastoral: Laws of Genre in the Seventeenth Century," in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England: Writing and the Land*, eds. Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor (Leicester: Leicester UP, 1992) 81-87. According to Dustin Griffin, "Formal Georgics," bear their "model closely in mind and center on a didactic purpose," in distinction from to from looser, wide-ranging poems "shaped by georgic conceptions" (866). See Griffin, "Redefining Georgic: Cowper's Task," *ELH* 57.4 (1990) 865-79.

<sup>5</sup> On the "necropoetics" of emergence, see Rasula, *This Compost*: "The subterranean transmissions of composting poetry have been compacted in the compost library, where biodegradable thinking occurs, where we can conceivably speak of an 'ecology of consciousness,'" (34).

<sup>6</sup> On georgic as poetry of remediation, see Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity*. On the centrality of "mediation" to eighteenth-century thought see Clifford Siskin and William Warner, "This is Enlightenment: An Invitation in the form of an Argument," *This is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 1-36. On "mediation" providing new "ways of thinking about change" (70) see Clifford Siskin, *System* (Cambridge: The MIT Press 2016) 68-77. Ralph Cohen argues that the historical account of the rise of georgic is incomplete and requires reference to contemporaneous changes in natural philosophy (the rise of the new science) and the internal dynamics of poetic evolution which he describes as a dialectic of innovation and variation (re-mediation) in "Innovation and Variation: Literary Change and Georgic Poetry." Putnam emphasizes the earthiness of Virgil's *Georgics* in his *Virgil's Poem of the Earth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1979).

regenerates the old into the new, modeled reception, development and innovation in intellectual and literary culture.<sup>7</sup>

Georgic poems focus on changes in shape, evolutions of landscape, and development between stages of decay, regeneration, and growth. They are temporal poems that attend minutely to incremental shifts in form and condition. Foregrounded in these formal processes is the central philosophical problem of identity through time: how can a body or a culture or any developing and multiform entity be said to be continuous with itself when it is constantly changing? The mode relies on analogical reasoning and isomorphism to link together the various processes that it treats.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the lengthy account in Book IV of *Georgics* on how to regenerate a bee colony after a harsh winter incorporates an extended account of the suffocation and gradual putrescence of an ox, and the spontaneous proliferation from within, of “new creatures . . . a moving mass at first.” Virgil describes the development of the squirming mass into flying insects: “shooting out with Legs, and imp’d with Wings,/ The grubs proceed to bees” (439-40). The narrative is a microcosmic account of the natural progress from chaotic indistinction towards form and regularity that for Virgil characterizes organic process. The passage conveys the materialist notion that vital matter renews itself through putrefaction.<sup>9</sup> The sequence is typical in georgic: death precedes decay, decay generates new life, and the new life is the boon of the human agents who labor to direct the process by providing the proper context –

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<sup>7</sup> On the acute self-consciousness of eighteenth-century poets see Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970). Harold Bloom’s Oedipal account of the anxiety of English poets writing in the shadow of Milton’s “covering cherub” is in *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Devin Griffiths doesn’t discuss georgic in his recent *The Age of Analogy: Science and Literature Between the Two Darwins* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), but his opening chapter on Erasmus Darwin’s georgic-influenced *The Botanical Garden* and *Zoonomia* shows the centrality of analogical reasoning to eighteenth-century scientific and literary culture

<sup>9</sup> On the role of decay and putrefaction in early-modern materialisms, see Smith, *The Body of the Artisan* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2004) 117.

it “must be done, e’re Spring makes equal day.” Human artistry and technology depend on appropriating natural processes of decay and regeneration for human ends.

The sequence on spontaneous generation in Book IV is comparable to the passage Goodman identifies as programmatic for georgic generally. Describing the Etruscan plains following the bloodshed of the Roman civil war, Virgil writes, “a time will come when in those lands the farmer, as he cleaves the soil with his curved plough, will find javelins corroded with rusty mould, or with his heavy hoe will strike empty helmets, and marvel at gigantic bones in the upturned graves” (Loeb, 1.493-97). The image of farmers working fields fattened by the dead of the past typifies georgic’s distinctive poetics of remediation.<sup>10</sup> By repurposing, renovating, and variously appropriating inherited techniques of composition, georgic identifies natural rhythms of decomposition and regeneration with the poetic labor of generating novelty from well-worn cultural materials.<sup>11</sup> Joseph Farrell writes that just as the death of Roman soldiers contributed to the fertility of future Etruscan farms, “The death of the bees and their recovery, the image of new life brought forth from the corpse of a young bull is clearly a symbol of the rebirth of a society that has, literally or figuratively, died” (263). The processes that renew decay, and, by analogy, remediate the sedimentations of history and culture, are at the center of georgic poetry.

In both Virgilian examples of regeneration, natural process is formally isomorphic to the development of cultural knowledge. Cultural composting involves reinvesting received practices

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<sup>10</sup> To remediate, Goodman explains, is to “mediate and remedy, or outdo” (71). The word suggests a form of aperiodic identity, where patterns of change define formal continuity. On “remediation” as the movement across specific mediums and the appropriation and adaptation of expression in one medium by another and the inevitable dislocations that result, see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation* (Cambridge: MIT Press 2001). Bolter and Grusin define “remediated” cultural products as “hypermediate,” citing Dutch still-life as an example: “the world as made up of a multiplicity of representations” (37). Clifford Siskin, in a less media-theoretical tenor writes: “New technologies, in other words, do not simply replace the old; they tend, in fact, to provide their predecessors with new contexts and uses” (7) in *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain 1700-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Goodman, *Georgic Modernity* chs. 1-2; Bate, *Burden* 29-58.

and traditions into the creative work of generating novel productions.<sup>12</sup> Regeneration is linked to a practice of knowledge production that offers a prospect of the genuinely new achievable by reconstellating what at first blush appears outworn. Virgil's description of the generation of the hive leads into the poem's concluding Orphic myth, recounting how "this useful science was taught/ Or by what man's Experience was it brought" (Dryden 4.449-50). Virgil describes the mythic origins of knowledge and how it has been disseminated through a continuous line of beekeepers. But the cultural continuity he describes is one of practical reworking rather than essential self-similarity. Violent interruptions, and death disjoin the succession, but in Virgil breakdown and decline provide the ground for reconstruction and advance. The Etruscan farmer opens a prospect of future prosperity emerging from the blood of historical conflicts and envisions a time when the implements of war appear as alien artifacts of a barbaric past. In this way, georgic is optimistic. Its vision of time is ameliorative. Unlike pastoral, which presupposes a fall from the golden age, georgic identifies in nature's boundless potential for renewal an analogous reproductive energy in human culture and history. Georgic is progressive rather than nostalgic. Its isomorphism integrates natural and social development, with the result that both nature and culture disclose futurally oriented, gradually unfolding processes that recursively bring out the living from the dead, and novelty from tradition.

Processes, especially organic ones, don't always produce finished products. The dynamics of change in georgic are dramatically unfinished, and they present an alternative to the mechanical linking of cause and effect that dominated post-Newtonian English natural

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<sup>12</sup> Jed Rasula uses "compost" as a central metaphor for thinking about practices in American poetry, writing, "Compost is not conceptually restricted to the decay of organic matter; it affords a commanding prospect of correspondences, resonant parallelisms, glimpses of independent figures participating in a fortuitous isomorphism" (Rasula 2). On georgic in the nineteenth-century American context, see William Dowling, *Poetry and Ideology in Revolutionary Connecticut* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Larry Kutchen, "Timothy Dwight's Anglo-American Georgic: *Greenfield Hill* and the Rise of United States Imperialism" in *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 33.2 (2000) 109-28; and Timothy Sweet, *American Georgics: Economy and Environment in Early American Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

philosophy. While development often supposes an end, that end recedes as the incrementally unfolding process advances. As a result, processes are open to further elaboration and development. So by taking organic process as a model, georgic poems often have a problem with coherence. The processes they describe go on indefinitely, challenging notions of unity premised on containment. Without narrative structure to provide internal coherence, closure comes from inferring didactic advice, an axiom, or abstract idea that is the *telos* of the text as Addison claims. In this way, Virgil's repeated descriptions of new life emerging in the decay of the old can be read emblematically as allegories of social rebirth. The integration of information about natural processes with accounts of the origin and transmission of knowledge creates a poem expansive in scope that includes heterogeneous materials. Under a general interest in the emergence of order from disorder, georgic joins together natural philosophic speculation, practical advice, political and economic considerations, description, and myth. In Virgil's beehive example, the hierarchically ordered unity of the beehive – an ancient and well-worn emblem of social cohesion – begins as an indistinct and teeming mass that gradually produces order, distinction, and hierarchy, though not homogeneity.<sup>13</sup> Virgil catalogs the roles of each member of bee society. The form of the beehive is immanent, and its final hierarchical unity determines the developmental succession from an indistinct mass to a purposive order. But the succession is not mechanical, since the final purposive arrangement regulates the development. The formal end guides the process throughout.

The development of natural order challenged mechanical accounts in the period that sought to banish the idea of purposeful development, and rely exclusively on efficient causality

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<sup>13</sup> On the beehive as emblem of social order, imperiled or otherwise, see Elias Canetti *Crowds and Power* (New York: Viking Press, 1962) 107; on beehives in classical poetry, see Feeney, "First Similes in Epic," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 144.2 (2014) 189-228. On the hive as a historically contingent figure for unity in multiteity, see Christopher Hollingsworth, *The Poetics of the Hive: The Insect Metaphor in Literature* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2001).

to explain organization. Of particular interest here is the emergence of complex, internally coherent systems that exhibit high levels of order. As Dror Wahrman and Jonathan Sheehan have shown, self-organization was central to eighteenth-century history, economics, and science, and foundational to the growth of the life sciences and the emergence of biology at the end of the century.<sup>14</sup> But it is also an aesthetic problem, since poems also develop unity and coherence through time, but accounting for that unity remains a profound problem for practical criticism. The focus on process and development makes georgic poetry a resource for theorizing how formal organization emerges, but the poems themselves, in their tendency towards relational expansion, undermine notion of unity like Addison's that are based on a containing abstract predicate. The defining characteristic of georgic aesthetics typified by James Thomson was concrete variety: variety that is grown together and exhibits coherence and systematic organization but resists treatment in the terms of speculative aesthetics.

The concreteness of georgic aesthetics, as opposed to the abstraction that characterizes aesthetic theory in the period, challenges formal analysis. What is the shape, or determining idea of these long, itinerant poems, whose design seems to derive from the Miltonic condition of wandering?<sup>15</sup> The English followers of Virgil enthusiastically embraced the capaciousness of his poem. In blank-verse that channels Milton, John Philips' *Cyder*, the first "true" English georgic, ranges from techniques of apple-tree grafting, proper soil care, and catalogs of apple varieties, to pre-Roman English folk-traditions and the bloody battles that prepared the English soil for cultivation. The effort to include English cultural history, verse traditions, and agricultural practices alongside practical precepts for the cultivation of apples and production of cider strains

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<sup>14</sup> Wahrman and Sheehan, *Invisible Hands: Self-Organization and the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015)

<sup>15</sup> On Miltonic wandering, see Sarah Ellenzweig, "'Paradise Lost' and the Secret of Lucretian Sufficiency" *MLQ* 75.3 (2014) 385-409

the internal coherence of the poem. Georgic poses the question of how long plotless poems focusing on processes of ordering, and inclusive of heterogeneous materials can cohere. Poetic unity is not exclusively a challenge for georgic, but because of the content and formal itinerancy of georgic, it is especially acute. The centrality of processes of ordering and the nesting of ordering systems within one another threatens formlessness. Ironically, poems distinctly interested in the emergence of order often appear to lack any themselves.

Georgic variety resists explanation in terms of ideal form. The multiplicity of georgic demands an alternative mode of explanation. In eighteenth-century aesthetic theory an abstracted ideal performs the homologizing function, sublimating textual particulars to a symbolic unity. This kind of formalism seeks, in Northrop Frye's words, an abstract "informing cause," that provides for the coherence of its object.<sup>16</sup> The critical pursuit of an "informing cause" generates a monological formalism that posits a distinct predicate to explain and resolve heterogeneity.<sup>17</sup> In eighteenth-century aesthetics, "Nature" provides the role of universal predicate, as both the original animus and ideal object of poetic composition. It is the transcendent referent posited to account for the unity of the poetic text. But georgic resists the idealism of eighteenth century aesthetic theory. In georgic, nature is temporalized, and inextricable from its developmental processes.<sup>18</sup> Two incommensurable images of nature emerge from the comparison of georgic poetics and its contemporaneous aesthetic theories. The "Nature" of Addison's program for

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Robert D. Denham, "Northrop Frye and R. S. Crane" *University of Toronto Quarterly* 86.1 (Winter 2017) p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> Kramnick and Nersessian write, "Under reductionism, form can be anything from a *primum movens* to a force responsible for the existence of the many different shapes and patterns" of the entity under examination (655).

<sup>18</sup> On the temporalization of the world in eighteenth-century science and philosophy, see Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge: Harvard UP 1936) pgs. 242-87; Reinhart Koselleck, *Critique and Crisis* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) 127-87. Stephen Toulmin writes that "By 1730 many scientists of Western Europe had come to accept a view of nature even more static and fixed than that of Medieval Europe," a position he attributes to the broad acceptance of Newtonian mechanics (74). But the rise of the life sciences in the second half of the century, and alternative accounts of matter influenced by Lucretian vitalism began to disrupt the static picture of the world. See *The Discovery of Time* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965). On the centrality of biology to the dynamic image of the world, see Janina Wellman, *The Form of Becoming* (New York: Zone, 2016).

aesthetics is ideal, stable, and uniform, while the nature of georgic is multiform and glimpsed only through temporary mediations of its processes. Georgic poetics develop promiscuous internal patterns and a concrete grown-togetherness that presents a challenge to the abstracting impulses of aesthetic idealisms, old and new.<sup>19</sup>

Georgic aesthetics has a subterranean influence on mainline aesthetic theory through most of the eighteenth century. The poems don't match the theory meant to explain them, especially as it developed ideas of form derived from empiricist epistemology. The uniqueness of georgic aesthetics can be seen in widespread criticism of their descriptive excess, and in the poems themselves. Georgic description registers a breakdown in idealization, something dislocated in the causal succession of Lockean epistemology. While Addison is a central figure in the history of idealist aesthetics, the ambiguity surrounding the *telos* of his "by-way" suggests uncertainty about whether the end of the succession lies in a universal formal maxim, or in the pleasure itself. By the time David Hume wrote "Of the Standard of Taste," the teleology of aesthetic experience had become autocatalytic. "Every work of art," he writes, "has also a certain end of purpose for which it is calculated; and it is deemed more or less perfect as it is more or less fitted to this end" (277). In itself, this statement doesn't sound very different from Johnson's claims about "unity of effect," but Hume redefines the "purpose for which" poems are "calculated" in the direction of pleasure. Against Horace and the Neoclassical tradition that followed him, Hume suggests that the end towards which the work of art proceeds is not instruction but the pleasurable byway itself. Implicit in Hume's marginalization of the didactic end of aesthetic pleasure is the notion that the purpose of a work of art and specifically poetry, does not lie at the margin of the page, but is intrinsic to the work. By prioritizing pleasure over

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<sup>19</sup> On the trenchant idealism of aesthetic theory, see Robert Lehman, "Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgment" *NLH* 48.2 (2017) 245-63.

instruction, and identifying formal purpose and design with the production of pleasure, Hume makes the teleological end of poetry immanent. Where for Addison the technical aspects of poetry was a pleasurable sideshow for the real end of the work of art, Hume makes pleasure the organizing principle of design, and the end of poetics. For Hume, the finality that underwrites the manifold of the text and that guarantees its unity is internal to the work, and inseparable from the technical craft, the line-by-line composition – those particulars around which disagreements about taste emerge – of the parts that are reciprocally responsible for the whole. Hume’s essay marks a milestone in the theorization of aesthetic concreteness. The theory he articulates connects to the peripatetic expansiveness of the georgic mode, and its formal deferral of closure.

#### James Thomson and “The full-adjusted Harmony of Things”

The georgic tendency towards descriptive excess has frequently been targeted for criticism. As poems about continuous process, georgics have porous boundaries. While “close lexical imitations” of Virgil’s *Georgics* died out by mid-century, the mode in English developed in concert with topographical verse throughout the eighteenth century (Fowler 124).<sup>20</sup> Denham’s descriptive practice in *Coopers Hill* incorporated the emblematic traditions of the *paysage moralisé* and the fixed, panoramic perspective of Italian landscape painting into English topographical poetry.<sup>21</sup> The depiction of moralized landscapes connects Denham to Pope and

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<sup>20</sup> Alistair Fowler, “The Beginnings of English Georgic” in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1986) 105-125. On “georgic,” defined loosely as a “middle-style” of long-form blank verse and its pervasive influence on English poetry from Spenser to the Romantics, see Fowler, “Georgic and Pastoral: Laws of Genre in the Seventeenth Century” in *Culture and Cultivation in Early Modern England* ed. Michael Leslie and Timothy Raylor (New York: Leicester University Press, 1992) 81-90; Anthony Low, *The Georgic Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); and Goodman (2004).

<sup>21</sup> In a chapter titled “The Prospect Poem,” C. V. Deane acknowledges the influence of Claudean and Salvatoran on English locodescription, but disputes the idea that eighteenth-century descriptive verse universally follows the axiom *ut pictura poesis*. In particular, he cites Thomson and Cowper as deviating from the *ut pictura poesis* dogma.

Waller, whose royalist panegyrics presented landscapes ordered around the imperial center of the English monarchy. Like Denham's and Waller's landscapes, Pope's are vehicles for ideas.<sup>22</sup> Pope's poetics are distinguished from Thomson's in *The Seasons* because Pope's interest is not in minutely accounting for the entities in nature so much as in extracting "a closing *moralitas*" amenable to his ideology (Wilan 80). Pope's idealism has affinities with the aesthetic theory that developed under his direct influence. But developing in the later decades of the seventeenth century was an alternative descriptive paradigm. Georgic aesthetics emerged from the breakdown of the emblematic tradition, and a turning away from symbolized contents towards practices of description themselves. Description veered away from the representation of abstract or semantic content as it turned from the representation of things to the incremental process of perception.<sup>23</sup> Early-modern descriptive technique and the development of topographical naturalism moved away from objects and essences and towards process developed in the period's georgic poetics.

Eighteenth-century naturalism was part of a visual counter culture that relished description for its own sake and challenged the metaphysical presuppositions of allegorical and emblematic landscapes. Where emblematic landscapes depicted a world divided between ideal content, on the one hand, and sensuous content on the other, the visual culture of descriptive naturalism rejected the two-world metaphysics of allegorical representation.<sup>24</sup> In the culture of

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See Deane, *Aspects of Eighteenth Century Nature Poetry*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell (1935) 100-109. On Denham's influence on English georgic, see Dwight Durling, *The Georgic Tradition in English Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1935).

<sup>22</sup> Claude Wilan has recently argued, "Pope is unconcerned with the operations of the laws of the natural world compared to obeisance to divine laws" (80) in "The Proper Study of Mankind in Pope and Thomson," *ELH* 84.1 (Spring 2017) 63-90

<sup>23</sup> Svetlana Alpers has identified the impulse towards detailed description in the visual culture of Dutch still-life. The Dutch painters represented the "perception of a thing . . . in such a way as to encourage the mind to dwell on perceiving as a process" (*Vexations* 27).

<sup>24</sup> In her analysis of the visual culture that produced Dutch still life, Alpers singles out for criticism the view that artistic composition "hides meanings beneath descriptive surface." Such criticism exposes hidden significance at the

attentive observation that pervaded the seventeenth and early-eighteenth century, “The skies are scanned, land surveyed, flora, fauna, the human body and its fluids are all observed and described. But if we consider what all this empirical observation of nature entails, we are in for a surprise. Instead of finding a direct confrontation with nature, we find a trust to devices, to intermediaries that represent nature to us. . . . The artifice of the image is embraced along with its immediacy” (Alpers 32). Descriptive techniques in the period don’t deny mediation, nor are the practices of representation treated as naively transparent. Instead, image-production and descriptive technique in the sciences and visual arts focus on how the world is seen and the practical methods for constructing it. This focus makes description a form of inquiry into the technologies for assembling an embodied, immersive experience of the natural world.

In the context of poetic description, neoclassical critics assumed that the pleasures of poetic description were consummated in the lesson that description entices the reader to accept. As a consequence descriptive verse could be characterized as arbitrary versification of didactic precepts. The charge is made as early as George Puttenham that naturalist poetry was not poetry at all since it contained nothing of fiction in it. Such poetry was defined by technique – what Addison refers to as “embellishments” – but technique seen as a means to an extra-textual end. For the Johnsonian line of poets and critics artistic success is defined by a generalized unity of effect.<sup>25</sup> This criterion contributed to Johnson’s criticism of descriptive poems that proliferated in the early- to mid-eighteenth century. He singles out Thomson for criticism, writing that *The*

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expense of the aesthetic experience of a description. The naturalism of Dutch still life delights “in representational presence” (64). “Northern images do not disguise meaning or hide it beneath the surface,” she writes, distinguishing northern European visual culture from the allegorical landscape traditions (*Description* xxiv).

<sup>25</sup> Reuben Brower points out that in Pope and Dryden, “Although verbal devices are so important, although so much is being done by means of grammatical, metrical, and larger rhythmic orderings, the formal activity is truly executive, at the command of further concerns, and with the aim of attaining a large Johnsonian ‘effect’” (536). What Brower calls “technical or executive” formalism subordinates the materials of poetic composition to the generalized “effect” or end produced. See Brower, “Form and Defect in Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” *College English* 29.7 (1968) 535-41

*Seasons* is “all Descriptions, and nothing is doing.” *The Seasons*, which Thomson revised and expanded up until his death, was one of the most popular poems of the century.<sup>26</sup> Thomson’s heterogeneous poem presents a fundamental challenge to accounts of form like Johnson’s that rely on an ideal unity of effect. Aesthetic unity in Johnson is the unity of the concept, that species of generalization whose function is to unify the manifold of sensuous impressions that cumulatively lead to it. Instead what *The Seasons* offers is the experiential immediacy of an intricately patterned, purposively arranged, yet constantly changing world. Thomson’s descriptive practice enacts the kind of aesthetic reasoning that it hopes to cultivate in readers. Its didacticism doesn’t lie in the unity of effect it attempts, but in its exemplification of how to perceive and relate to the world as a dynamic, developing, but integral aesthetic entity. Thomson articulates his georgic aesthetics throughout the poem, but the recurring prospect views of *The Seasons* play a particularly important role in their development.

Thomson’s analysis of aesthetic experience is irreducible to a notion of “aestheticizing” that assumes the disembodiment of the observer.<sup>27</sup> His aesthetics have more in common with Alexander Baumgarten’s “science of sense” than with the idealist theories of his English contemporaries. Baumgarten’s aesthetics differentiate poetic and philosophic language, and deny that poetry is reducible to abstract ideas.<sup>28</sup> Poetry is characterized by “extensive clarity,” that

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<sup>26</sup> James Sambrook describes Thomson’s inveterate editing between the initial independent publication of “Winter,” in 1726, “Summer” in 1727, “Spring” and a revised “Winter” in 1728, the collected quarto of 1730, the 1734 edition, and the final 1746 edition, in his introduction to the Oxford *The Seasons*, xxxiv-lxxix.

<sup>27</sup> The claim that Thomson’s observer represents a disembodied and ideologically suspect aristocratic eye, has been made by John Barrell in a number of books and articles. See *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (London and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972); and *English Literature in History 1730-1780: An Equal, Wide Survey*, in the series *English Literature in History*, general editor Raymond Williams (London: Hutchinson, and New York: St Martin’s, 1983). For more recent iterations of the claim, see Eric Gidal “Prospect and Form in Eighteenth-Century Progress Poetry” in *Ricerche di Storia dell’arte* 72 (2000): 21-28; and David Desroches, “The Rhetoric of Disclosure in James Thomson’s *The Seasons*; or on Kant’s Gentlemanly Misanthropy” *The Eighteenth Century* 49.1 (2008) 1-24.

<sup>28</sup> See Baumgarten’s *Reflections on Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954). Robert Lehman has recently connected Baumgarten’s aesthetics of “extensive clarity” with trends in new formalism, in “Formalism, Mere Form, and Judgment” in *NLH* 48.2 (2017) 245-63. Abrams discusses Baumgarten’s “logic of sensuous

emerges through relational concreteness (43). The notion of “aestheticized,” employed by John Barrell and David Desroches, whereby an entity is made into an autonomous art object, purified of historical exigencies by its withdrawal from the world of sense, cannot account for the immersive and sensuous world Thomson produces. World-denying and transcendent accounts of aesthetic experience suppress physicality and the influences of locality and perspective.<sup>29</sup> But the posture of a disinterested, detached observer more often characterizes critics of *The Seasons* than Thomson. Thomson’s “nature” is aestheticized, in that the mode of relation to the natural world that the poem enacts involves imaginatively heightened attentiveness. Thomson stands out from other descriptive poets like Pope because of the extent to which his technique focuses on the “minuter discriminations” of things in the world and his tendency towards observational precision.<sup>30</sup> Rather than understand “aestheticize” as a verb meaning to sublimate into an abstract realm occupied by art, in the context of *The Seasons* it means the consideration of nature by rooting down into its complex networks of reciprocal, purposive relations.

The ambulatory mode of aesthetic experience developed in *The Seasons* is especially resistant to critical methods derived from idealist epistemology that emphasize conceptual closure. Most scholarship on *The Seasons* begins with a discussion of the critics who, like Johnson and Brower and F. R. Leavis and Yvor Winters, claim the poem is an artistic failure because it remains a heap of fragments without any “underlying form” (as Brower argues), lacking transitions between its descriptive set pieces.<sup>31</sup> But the effort to identify an “underlying

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thinking” in “From Addison to Kant: Modern Aesthetics and the Exemplary Art” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics* ed. Ralph Cohen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Crary writes that idealist approaches to art are “founded on a desire to escape from bodily time and its vagaries” (46) in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (Cambridge: MIT UP 1999).

<sup>30</sup> James Sambrook writes, “Thomson’s distinctive quality lay in his close observations and in the novelty, particularity, and exactness of his paintings from external nature” (“Introduction”).

<sup>31</sup> This tendency is widespread in Thomson criticism. Patricia Meyers Spacks begins *The Poetry of Vision* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967) with a discussion of Thomson’s detractors; Ralph Cohen’s two book-length studies of *The Seasons*, *The Art of Discrimination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964) and *The*

form,” admirably and exhaustively pursued by Ralph Cohen in *The Unfolding of “The Seasons,”* is a symptom of the idealist aesthetics that have haunted English criticism since Addison’s essays. “The great defect of *The Seasons*,” Johnson says, “is want of method” (*Lives* III. 299). In Johnson’s dictionary “method” is synonymous with a “scheme of management,” so his criticism is that *The Seasons* lacks an organizing schema. In other words, it is formless. Cohen suggests that the poem’s fragmentary glimpses of nature, offered up in 100-200 line sections that bristle against those nearby, mimetically represent fallen human perception, which grasps the world in bits and pieces without ever managing to compass the whole. Uniting the poem, he argues, is an underlying theory of human experience, which awaits its fulfillment at the end of history when experience will finally attain synoptic fullness. For critics who defend the coherence of *The Seasons*, the disorder of the poem points to a higher level order, most often an axiom about human experience of the world. But the kind of aesthetic receptivity *The Seasons* focuses on discounts the notion of culmination borrowed from idealist epistemology. In Thomson the associative by-way theorized by Addison is valuable in its own right and not for the symbol it yields. The “method” of Thomson is closer to the Greek: a path of transit that unfolds successively rather than an abstract schema that can be grasped synoptically. Thomson’s aesthetics are characterized by the active agitation of the mental faculties without the presupposition of a definitive proposition or concept that would conclude their mutually animating play.<sup>32</sup> The category error critics make by attempting to account for the cohesion of *The Seasons* is their presumption that its manifold should render up a concept.

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*Unfolding of the Seasons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970) both begin by addressing the uneven responses to Thomson by the succeeding generation of poets (Johnson and Cowper) and by the early Romantics (Wordsworth and Hazlitt). David Desroches begins his recent essay on Thomson by pointing out the defensive and apologetic posture adopted by twentieth-century scholars.

<sup>32</sup> The language here is Kantian because Thomson’s georgic perambulations anticipate the distinction between reflective and determining judgment that Immanuel Kant made at the close of the century. For Kant, reflecting

Criticism of *The Seasons* shakes out into one of two camps based on how the distinction between description and classification is managed. The attempt to differentiate the two is a topic in philosophy of science. Since all description involves selective attention, and attention is guided by tacit convictions and presuppositions about the world, about what an empirical entity is and which of its sensible features define it as that thing, description is often contaminated by classification.<sup>33</sup> The theoretical presuppositions of attention challenge the attempt to cleanly segregate description and classification.<sup>34</sup> In criticism of *The Seasons*, either all description is classification, in which case it involves generalizing along theoretical and ideologically determined lines; or poetic description follows a fractured human sensorium, whose unity is achieved theologically. What these accounts have in common is the error of substituting conceptual determination for aesthetic expansiveness. But Thomson's repeatedly discounts the moral ends of describing, subordinating them to the immersive pleasures of observation themselves and refusing to make it serve ideological and didactic ends.<sup>35</sup> The hallmark of Thomson's poetics is concrete attention guided by steadfast faith in the world's purposeful order, but without the prospect of a determinative *telos* or totalizing concept under which its manifold may be subsumed.<sup>36</sup>

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judgment is On Kant's distinction between reflecting and determining judgment see the "First Introduction" in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

<sup>33</sup> On the historical nature of description see Lorraine Daston, *Histories of Scientific Observation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2011) 1-14 and 81-114. On the ways that description and classification problematize one another, see Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). The trouble with description and reference since Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein is given canonical treatment Saul Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

<sup>34</sup> Heather Love writes, "There is no such thing as a 'pure' description, since every description entails an interpretation of some kind" (380) in "Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn" *NLH* 41.2 (2010) 371-91.

<sup>35</sup> *The Seasons*, Blanford Parker says, is a "de-allegorized allegor[y], in which the observing power seems to override any moral purpose" (149).

<sup>36</sup> On attention in eighteenth-century visual culture, see Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); on attention in the poetry of the period, see Margaret Kohler's *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan,

The nominal subject of *The Seasons* is the changes to the natural world and the events that punctuate its development through the course of a year. But to describe *The Seasons* as about the seasons is like saying *Paradise Lost* is about Adam and Eve. Thomson's expansive descriptions swell to include science, natural history, agricultural practice, and theology, all of which are submerged within his practice of relational reasoning. The poem begins with *Spring*, and with a typical periphrastic personification: "Come, gentle Spring, Etherial Mildness, come,/ And from the Bosom of yon dropping cloud,/ While music wakes around, veil'd in a Shower/ Of shadowing roses, on our Plains descend" (*Sp.* 1-4). The manipulation of prepositional phrases to defer the main verb to the last foot of the final line exemplifies the attenuation of syntax common in eighteenth-century blank verse. Thomson's line replaces the regularity of heroic couplets with the forward-falling energy of blank verse that lends momentum to the presentation of a changing natural setting. The proleptic quality is underscored by the description of "shadowing roses," suggesting buds that haven't yet bloomed. The use of "shadow" here in the sense of "prefigure," follows Johnson's definition of "adumbrate," as "shadowing forth," and Dryden's use in his translation of Virgil: "Augustus is still shadowed in the person of Aeneas."<sup>37</sup> It is essential to recall the temporality of the poem's sections: roses bloom in summer, and Thomson here emphasizes the intimation of those later blossoms in the spring landscape.<sup>38</sup> The poem is anticipatory throughout, and its invocation of an ethereal animating energy sets the stage for Thomson's later minute analysis of the forces that drive organic growth and reproduction. The descriptions are populated by personifications, but Thomson's handling lends them peculiar

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2012). As has been widely observed, "attention" is a watchword of the so-called "return to aesthetics," from Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' "Surface Reading: An Introduction" in *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 1-21 to Rita Felski's recent *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>37</sup> See OED "Shadow" 7a and 7b: "to symbolize, typify, or prefigure" and "to hint at something."

<sup>38</sup> Rachel Crawford reads the "Spring" section as fundamental forward-looking and prophetic, writing, "the viewer's apprehension of space presupposes an analogue in the viewer's expectations" (26).

materiality. The personifications do things in the world, and in that sense they are acutely real. Thomson asks what happens when ideas are considered not as discrete, corpuscular densities withdrawn from space and time but as worldly entities existing contiguous with rocks and stones and trees.

Thomson's depiction of nature blurs distinctions between organic and inorganic by suffusing the natural world with vitalist striving.<sup>39</sup> Thomson's monist materialism anticipates recent philosophical views of mind as distributed through the physical world.<sup>40</sup> His panpsychism breaks down the distinctions between human and nonhuman, mind and world thought to be fundamental to modernity. Personification in Thomson is principally a way to discuss actions in nature, but by personifying natural processes, Thomson challenges assumptions about intelligent or purposeful action and end-directed growth often considered to define the difference between organic and inorganic worlds, blurring the distinctions between them.<sup>41</sup> The invocation of Spring concretizes it, and Thomson spends the rest of this section of the poem meticulously describing the relational networks through which the regenerative energy of Spring becomes legible, and from which it cannot be separated. The focus on the agency of ideas, the attention to what they do, and Thomson's mingling of general and particular raises the question of what it means to concretely realize an idea. Thomson "insists that individual and class, sense and idea, are not separate orders" (Keenleyside 449). The middle path developed in *The Seasons* and in

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<sup>39</sup> On the problematic categories of organic and inorganic, and living and nonliving matter in the eighteenth century, see Susannah Gibson, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral? How Eighteenth-Century Science Disrupted the Natural Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). Gibson focuses her discussion on Trembley's discovery of the polyp, and the crisis for Newtonian science produced by Enlightenment life science and vitalism.

<sup>40</sup> Keenleyside, "Personification for the People: On James Thomson's *The Seasons*" ELH 76.2 (2009) 447-472

<sup>41</sup> Keenleyside argues that Thomson's unique handling of personification "acknowledges that we may not know what a person is. But he also suggests that we may not know what a person is not; or who (or what) is a person" (451).

subsequent georgic poets anticipates the axiom, articulated two centuries later by William Carlos Williams: “No ideas but in things.”<sup>42</sup>

Thomson’s descriptions zoom in and out on the processes of spring are first surveyed remotely. The initial image is one of an external force acting upon the natural world: “the penetrative Sun,/ His force deep-darting to the dark Retreat/ Of Vegetation” (*Sp.* 79-81). At first the description seems Aristotelian. The sun, source of form and order, acts upon passive, recipient matter, educing shape. But then Thomson complicates things. The sun “sets the steaming Power/ At large, to wander o’er the vernant Earth,/ In various hues” (*Sp.* 81-2). The “steaming power” indexes a bottom-up, unfolding energy, itself multiform and variously colored. Thomson’s “steaming power” recalls Neoplatonic ideas about plastic nature: a kind of living energy animating the self-organization of matter and the recreation of new forms from the detritus of past years.<sup>43</sup> The “steaming power” isn’t simply an imagined vital force, it is also the literal sap that rejuvenates plant-life from within, hence an immanent *Bildungstrieb*, an inherent power of autopoiesis.<sup>44</sup> While an Aristotelian account of the external sun acting on passive matter would complement the mechanical philosophy with which Thomson was familiar, his shift to an intrinsic, self-governing fecundity orients the *Spring* section towards a self-regulating account of natural rebirth.<sup>45</sup> Thomson’s view of renewal shows that nature is invested with the capacity for

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<sup>42</sup> Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992) 6. Rasula links Williams to the “compost” tradition in contemporary American poetry, which itself has significant if often unnoticed connections to the traditions of eighteenth-century georgic. On American georgic, see Ronda (2013).

<sup>43</sup> Cambridge Neoplatonist Ralph Cudworth says “Nature is Art,” and that plastic nature is “Incorporated and Imbodied in Matter, which doth not act upon it from without Mechanically, but from within Vitally and Magically” (155) in *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> On eighteenth century vitalism see Peter Reill, *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment*; and Denise Gigante, *Life*; on epigenetic theory, and the rhythms of natural unfolding, see Wellman, *The Form of Becoming* (New York: Zone, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> My reading of Thomson departs from M. H. Abram’s account, in “From Addison to Kant: Modern Aesthetics and the Exemplary in Art” in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics* ed. Ralph Cohen (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1985) 16-48. Abrams distinguishes between *natura naturata*, nature as a product of mechanical law which he associates with eighteenth-century mimetic poetry, and *natura naturans*, or nature as

generating itself, and spontaneously producing new life in violation of mechanical principles of linear causality. Thomson submerges the causal agency of his personified “Spring” in its effects in the natural environment. As such, the initially external force becomes the natural world’s self-articulation.

The prospects in the poem likewise shift from an external “personage” – the word Thomson uses in his prefaces to describe personifications – to an internal and fully diffused entity. They move from an abstracted and general quality to the details through which that quality realizes itself in the world. When Thomson invokes “chiefly thee, gay Green,” as “Nature’s universal Robe” he is operating at a high level of generality. But, like the refraction of white light into its spectrum by the prism – a recurring image in the poem – the generalized green is distributed into its concrete constituents through the course of a verse paragraph. “From the moist Meadow to the wither’d Hill,/ Led by the Breeze, the vivid verdure runs,/ And swells and deepens, to the cherish’d Eye” (*Sp.* 87-89). Personified Spring has been dissolved into the natural setting, as the re-greening works gradually across the landscape from the meadows, which show green in the early months of spring, to the subsequent return of leaves in the forest. “Gay Green” is superseded by “vivid verdure.” The passage also introduces the first of Thomson’s eyes. The “cherish’d Eye,” or well-tended, well-cultivated vision stands for a sensitive response to the scene. “The Hawthorn whitens; and the juicy Groves/ Put forth their Buds, unfolding by degrees,/ Till the whole leafy Forest stands display’d/ In full luxuriance to the sighing gales” (*Sp.* 90-93). Thomson’s eye isn’t disembodied, but is firmly localized in time and place as it attends to the gradual unfolding – a distinctive Thomsonian word, as Cohen

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active, productive, “a perfected whole” that gives law to itself, which he associates with Romanticism, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge preeminently.

shows – of natural processes.<sup>46</sup> The minute emergence of buds on trees gives way to the full bloom of the forest, but the generalized green has been refracted into the white of the hawthorn, and “all the Colours of the flushing Year” (*Sp.* 96). The anthropomorphism of the Year makes spring a wave-like force that, like the breeze and the “sighing Gales,” moves incrementally across the setting. The description here is literally prospective: a forward vision, looking into cycles of development that unfold into the future and anticipating the changes the season will bring to the landscape.

The first proper prospect, in the sense of a view from a hill, comes in the same verse paragraph. It follows a series of “or” statements that Thomson, like Milton, uses to accumulate details rather than offer contrast. “Oft let me wander o’er the dewy Fields/ Where Freshness breathes, and dash the trembling drops/ From the bent bush, as thro’ the verdant maze/ Of sweet-briar hedges I pursue my walk” (*Sp.* 103-6). There are intimations of remote observation and optical dominance in the way the eye traverses the landscape in this passage.<sup>47</sup> It follows that Thomson’s privileged vantage could be seen as enacting the aristocratic fantasy of detached mastery. But the physicality of Thomson’s description, the richness of smells and the feel of wind on skin ground the scene. The “cherish’d Eye” which governs the verse paragraph alternates between macro-level changes to the landscape and micro-level details. Moving from the “full Luxuriance” of the whole to “trembling Drops,” it slides along a scale of attention. This prospect works across scales of human observation, from the microscopic to the panoramic, flickering between the two. From the heights of “some Eminence,” immediately specified as

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<sup>46</sup> Cohen, *The Unfolding of the Seasons* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970).

<sup>47</sup> According to Barrell this prospect is a typical example of Thomson’s characteristic optical detachment: “Thomson is able to see the landscape, not as something in which he is involved, and which is all round him, but as something detached from him, *over there*: his eye may wander over the view, but his own position is fixed, and from this viewpoint he can organize the landscape into the system of parallel bands and flat perspectives by which he can comprehend what he sees” (21). See Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972).

Augusta, a Roman honorific for London, Thomson looks on “the Country, far diffus’d around,/ One boundless Blush, one white-empurpled Shower/ Of mingled Blossoms” (*Sp.* 109-11). The scene is indistinct, all blurry, as the colors (like the senses of smell, sight, and taste earlier in the passage) blend into one another. The mingling that takes place here precedes the emergence of clarity and precision. The view, now “raptur’d,” drawn away and out towards the details of the setting, “hurries from Joy to Joy, and hid beneath/ The fair profusion, yellow Autumn spies” (*Sp.* 111-13). Present and future collapse as Thomson anticipates the emergence of fruit, presaged earlier in the passage by the flower’s “little Embryo, unperceiv’d/ Within its crimson Folds,” and the eventual arrival of fall colors (*Sp.* 99). His exemplary eye advances from an indistinct manifold to clearly defined details. But the details are not abstracted from the scene. They are concretely realized in the spatial and temporal succession that the verse paragraph organizes.

As the verse paragraph accumulates details, they lead not to the consummation of the prospect view, but through the logic of resemblance and affinity, to more details with which they are related. The emphasis throughout is on the relative quality of existing entities. Entities in nature are what they are not from themselves but by virtue of their relative position within the natural system. *The Seasons* does not merely register epistemological developments like the emergence of anti-essentialist perspectives on the natural world and epistemological shifts like Reid’s common sense realism, but contributes to the elaboration of the heterocosmic views that became increasingly influential through the course of the century.<sup>48</sup> Specifying an entity in Thomson’s natural world requires identifying networks of relation through which individuals emerge as particular things. The movement through kinship patterns requires Thomson to ascend the scale of observation through recourse to a general quality or characteristic that allows details

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<sup>48</sup>Blanford Parker says, “The movement from cosmos to heterocosm, from *topos* to landscape, was a necessary step in removing the bondage to an essentialist metaphysics,” and claims that Parker (1998) 150.

to be connected. When the connection is postulated attention is directed down again towards the micro-level. For example, the tentative displays of spring in the buds and flowers share a precarious quality, susceptible both to “a cutting Gale” and to the “Insect-Armies” that accompany the warming weather. The upward ascent describes a forest “blacken’d” by the “Corrosive Famine” of invasive insects. Thomson develops a pattern of recursion by which qualities held in common are identified at a general level, but then explored in fine-grained detail, before the view retracts again to examine a broader expanse.

The minute particulars of Thomson’s descriptions are identified by their position relative to other details. The accumulative “or” allows Thomson to define clarity through contiguity and pattern. The flattening procedure of adducing more and more “or” propositions renders the details, including the generalities and personifications that pop up equally important.<sup>49</sup> The result of this poetic procedure is the articulation of a common empirical world, available to any observer who pays adequate attention by following the model set out in the text. The parity created between generalities and the details that realize them denies priority to governing metaphysical entities. The prism provides a principal example of Thomson’s equivocations between an immaterial unity and the multiplicity of its parts. The “various twine of light,” when refracted proves multiple. Here Thomson invokes the “sage-instructed eye,” an eye that, having learned from “awful Newton,” knows that the spectrum of the rainbow is actually a differentiation of “the white mingling maze.”<sup>50</sup> The two words “mingling” and “maze” are central to Thomson’s poetics. By mingling ideal and material orders, Thomson depicts a

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<sup>49</sup> In Thomson’s system “the individual is not prior to relation, nor the unity of maximum difference or particularity. It is a term that resolves difference into equivalence” (Keenleyside 455).

<sup>50</sup> In “To the Memory of Newton” Thomson describes refraction in terms of generalities, the “Parental hues, whence others all proceed,” as the kinds from which the variety of color in nature depart. But the description of white light is closer to that in *The Seasons*: “An ever mingling, changeful, countless breed,/ Unravel’d, variegated lines of light,/ When blended, dazzling in promiscuous white” (110-11). On Newton’s influence on Thomson, see Marjorie Hope Nicholson, *Newton Demands the Muse* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966) ch. 2.

monistic world whose exploration involves reflective and refractory wandering, a mazy and perambulatory process that corresponds formally to Thomson's open and exploratory poem.

The itinerant structure of *The Seasons* resists reduction to unity. But the poem is also fixated on how of unified order emerges within the ceaseless becoming of the natural world. Rather than offering momentary concrescences that fleetingly join form and material process, the poem's restless "glancing eye" realizes continuity in change as a function of attention. Continuity in Thomson is opposed to the "exanimation" of stasis that he associates with remote engagement and detachment. For Thomson, unity is a function of scale. Every entity appears self-similar at a certain scale of attention, but upon closer inspection reveals itself to be internally complex. The description of the complexity of entities that at first blush seem single is consistent with the conviction, on display throughout the poem, that nature itself is defined by shifting patterns of mutual dependency. "Nature' is not a thing," David Fairer writes, "but has its own mixed economy. To attempt to conceptualize 'Nature' as a single force, rather than as ever-changing modes through which many forces work risks making 'it' a purposeful system rather than an endlessly varied process that takes many forms" (210).<sup>51</sup> By "purposeful system" Fairer is singling out the mechanical approach to nature often attributed to the enlightenment that saw nature in terms of clockwork. When Thomson criticizes eating meat, for instance, his ethical ground comes from his belief that all living things participate in equal share in the divinity that suffuses material nature. "Who knows," Thomson speculates, "how rais'd to higher Life/, From stage to stage, the Vital Scale ascends" (*Sp.* 377-38). Recalling Raphael's principle of matter striving "by gradual scales sublim'd," in book five of *Paradise Lost*, Thomson suggests that the mutual dependencies of created nature undermine priority claimed for humans. The realization of

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<sup>51</sup> Fairer, "Where Fuming Trees Refresh the Thirsting Air': The World of Eco-Georgic" *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture* 40 (2011) 201-218

material contingency enforces the notion that nature is held in common, and that privative, foundationalist ideas about the self ignore or suppresses its constitutive embeddedness. Thomson develops a poetics of indistinction to examine the complexity of natural “assemblages,” and calls into doubt the unity, or self-similarity, of all entities, whether they are empirical, ideal, or aesthetic.

Through the course of the poem, the prospect provides a central technique for developing his poetics of indistinction. Early in *Spring*, he writes, “Behold, Yon breathing Prospect bids the Muse/ Throw all her Beauty forth. But who can paint/ Like Nature? Can Imagination boast,/ Amid its gay creation, Hues like hers?” (*Sp.* 466-69). The passage could be interpreted as indexing the inadequacy of human imagination, degraded as it is, to do justice to the plenitude of the natural world. Like the prism passage, Thomson focuses distinctly on color, and on the suppleness of nature’s appearance: “Can it mix them with that matchless skill/ And lose them in each other, as appears/ In every Bud that blows?” (*Sp.* 471). The problem Thomson identifies is not with the fallen sensorium, which he thinks is adequate to the infinite variety of natural coloration. The problem lies with the tendency of language to stabilize and abstract. Naming singles out and defines, arbitrarily, and disregards the codefinition of colors in the spectrum, and their relative dependence on context and surrounding. The relational dependency of color is belied by the abstract discreteness of language, which removes color from its infinitely varied embodiment and fixes its meaning. Through the discussion of color, Thomson asserts the fundamental nature of metaphor: terms, entities, ideas, generalities, and concrete details gain significance only by virtue of their co-implication, and their relative location in a world of meaning. “Where find words,” he asks, “Ting’d with so many colors?” One of the peculiarities of Thomson’s periphrases is their tendency to displace the base term. Thomson refuses to grant

priority to the tenor, imagining instead a world of promiscuous vehicles, reaching out to touch one another in a semantic and semiotic web – semiotic because working alongside Thomson’s relational logic is an intricate patterning of sound that suffuses verse paragraphs. Sound, even smell is in play in the coextensive world Thomson imagines. Thomson seeks words “whose Power/ To life approaching, may perfume my lays/ With that fine Oil, those aromatic gales,/ That inexhaustive flow continual around?” (*Sp.* 476-9). The entire passage hinges on the inadequacy of language, but in a manner almost completely antithetical to the problems with language raised by Sprat and “plain English” arguments made by members of the Royal Society. Rather than desecrating the metaphorical slipperiness of language as Sprat does, Thomson finds it altogether too discrete, too removed from his grown-together world. His problem with language is its tendency to leave body and sense behind in their sensuous manifold. The abstracting power of language displaces the overlapping, physical patterns that include smell and touch, and that locate the observer relative to a dynamic physical universe. The feel for nature is fully embodied, and Thomson struggles to do justice to the physicality of experience when language tends to point to semantic content.

Thomson’s prospects can be viewed as didactic not because they express a precept but because they exemplify an aesthetic education.<sup>52</sup> Aesthetic receptivity is a practice and an achievement worked at incrementally. Thomson’s intention, like that of Addison in the *Spectator*, is to develop this skill in his readers and their proxies, the various “eyes” that populate the poem. They often involve the poet giving directions to “behold,” and then explaining in detail precisely how to do so by pointing out features through a characteristic movement of far-

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<sup>52</sup> Blakey Vermeule points out, description is implicitly normative, and tacitly prescriptive: “So pervasive is the idea of art’s normative power, so deeply entrenched in the collective psyche of the dominant classes, that we are only fitfully aware of its power over us” in Vermeule, *The Party of Humanity: Writing Moral Psychology in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP 2000) 18.

near-far. The back and forth pivots between detail and vista, foreground and background, along the scale of attention. For instance, he instructs a partner-observer, Amanda, to “See, where the winding vale its lavish stores/ Irriguous spreads,” surveying the valley through which a river winds (*Sp.* 494-95). And in the next line points to “See, how the lily drinks/ The latent Rill, scarce oozing through the grass.” The move from panorama to discrete detail involves examining how fine-grained details of the scene constitute it.<sup>53</sup> The pull of detail supplants the synoptic view. Thomson tends to point out the features of a scene through repeated imperatives to “see,” drawing attention to the elements of the prospect view as they relate to one another through contiguity, and as they relate to the whole.<sup>54</sup> Thomson moves back out to a broader view, “where the breeze blows from yon extended field/ Of blossom’d beans” (*Sp.* 499-500). The breeze works like a crowd symbol. The smell of the beans in bloom is indistinct, mixed up in the wind, but what is characteristic of Thomson’s use of similar crowd imagery in *The Seasons*, like bees or fields of wheat or swarms of insects, is his refusal to identify the crowd with a general entity and instead to plunge into it in order to identify its constituents. From the earlier “yon,” marking distance, Thomson focuses: “Here [in the blooming bean field] their delicious Task the fervent Bees/ In swarming Millions, tend” (*Sp.* 508-9). Out of an undistinguished mass features are defined methodically and small-scale clarity emerges: “Thro’ the soft Air the busy Nations fly/ Cling to the bud, and with inserted Tube,/ Suck pure Essence, its Ethereal soul” (*Sp.* 510-11).

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<sup>53</sup> Peter Stockwell defines an “attractor” as an element in an image meant to draw attention and that invites careful consideration in *Cognitive Poetics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge 2002) 173.

<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Kramnick describes the technique as an “attempt . . . to use the descriptive mode to see along a gradient both over the ground and behind what is in front of you” (*Paper Minds* 320). Michael Fried describes the novelty of eighteenth-century painting of absorption, depicting “a particular state or condition . . . of rapt attention, of being completely occupied or engrossed or (as I prefer to say) absorbed” in *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1980) 10. Margaret Kohler applies Stockwell’s definition of “cognitive poetics” to eighteenth-century topographical verse in *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave 2012). Attention is having a critical heyday. In addition to the centrality of the term in various new formalist discourses, Andrew Epstein uses attention as a trope through which to understand the various movements of contemporary poetry in *Attention Equals Life: The Pursuit of the Everyday in Contemporary Poetry and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2016).

The transition in scale from the multitude of “busy Nations,” and the suggestion of an indistinct mass of nameless workers, to the hyper-focus of the tube inserted into the flower to draw nectar is disorienting. It requires a simultaneous imagining of the many and the one that ultimately shows them to be reciprocal.

Following the description is a bee’s-eye survey of the scene that generates an analogy between what the poet sees and what the bee sees, confirming a shared physical world. The identification with the bee’s view transitions back to a human-scaled prospect, where “Snatch’d thro’ the verdant Maze, the hurried Eye/ Distracted wanders” (*Sp.* 518-19). The result of this snatching is “a syncopated effect. There is no way that we can stand back and take in a homogeneous space” (Alpers 58). The eye is not that of the abstracted observer but an immersive one that glances from surface to surface, literally a-mazed, snatched into the world of contiguous wonders that is accessible to all sentient creatures if they pay attention. The Miltonic “wander” once again marks the absence of a defined purpose, or an instrumental deployment of vision. Thomson suggests that moving in and out along the scale of focus, taking note of everything, receptive to all details however trivial, is the properly aesthetic way to experience the world.

The aesthetic in Thomson is an embodied and immersive form of experience. Synesthesia brings in senses besides vision, while the visual is refracted into a temporalized succession of views up and down along a scale of attention. The synoptic view, like the thread of light, is dissolved into the concrete details that make it up. The prospects in *The Seasons* self-consciously develop a program of reflection involving a kind of breakdown in parallax.<sup>55</sup> While one eye explores the vista, the other is focused on things that lie close to the nose. The flickering never

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<sup>55</sup> Wilhelm Dilthey writes, “If I am looking out the window and perceive a landscape, the light of consciousness may well distribute itself evenly over the entire landscape. But as soon as I try to apprehend a single tree or even a branch in greater detail, the consciousness which I direct toward the rest of the landscape diminishes,” quoted in Crary (1999) 59.

resolves into a single unitary image. The prospect view is inseparable from the “microscopic eye” that pauses and pores over detail. Transitioning from an open vista to a claustrophobic “bowery walk/ Of covert close, where scarce a speck of day/ Falls on the lengthened gloom,” and back out to “the ethereal mountain and the distant main,” Thomson pauses to query coyly, “But why so far excursive?” (*Sp.* 519-21). The question redirects focus, drawing it down from the sweeping landscape view to what lies “at hand”: “these blushing borders bright with dew,/ And in yon mingled wilderness of flowers” (*Sp.* 526-7). The “mingled” flowers are not individually identifiable. “Mingled,” here, as above, indexes attention in motion, moving from the horizon to the detailed foreground. Thomson’s visual imagination is stereoscopic.<sup>56</sup> The eye constantly shuttles between the vista and the immediate foreground. At another level of attention, the field of flowers discloses its constituents. Like the prism, the meadow offers a complex composite. At a certain remove it presents blotchy variety, each flower blurring into those around it as in Italian *sfumato*. But under closer scrutiny the “blushing borders” disclose “The daisy, the Primrose, Violet darkly blue/ And polyanths of unnumber’d dyes” (*Sp.* 549-50). Even here, at this level of detail complexities emerge. The exhaustive catalog of flowers that follows, and the detailing of their variegated coloration, suggests that Thomson could have spent as many lines numbering the polyanth’s “unnumber’d dyes” as he does identifying the flowers of “mingled wilderness.”

Aesthetic experience of a complex landscape requires moving across scales in order to identify correlated details. The successive and stereoscopic supplants a temporally punctate experience of the whole in a single intuition.<sup>57</sup> The whole, the prospect, is there for the part and the part for the whole, as Thomson’s far-near-far formula indicates. Everything in Thomson’s

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<sup>56</sup> Crary describes the stereoscopic image as follows: “Our eyes follow a choppy and erratic path into its depth; it is an assemblage of local zones of three-dimensionality, zones imbued with a hallucinatory clarity, but which when taken together never coalesce into a homogeneous field” (Crary 126)

<sup>57</sup> Alpers writes, “A single prospect, to use the relevant term, is sacrificed for an aggregate of aspects” (*Art of Describing* 59).

nature is composite. The poem rejects singular and self-same essences, whether material or spiritual, that could be understood on their own. The entities of experience, including ideas and physical percepts, are only knowable through the proliferating relations that Thomson's descriptions only partially catalog. This is why congenital drift afflicts both Thomson's descriptions and the poem at large. Variety is endlessly self-propagating: "From Family diffus'd/ To Family, as flies the Father dust/ The varied colors run" (*Sp.* 540-42). The codetermination of concepts and objects makes their clean segregation impossible. General categories, like families, which Thomson here understands botanically, blur into one another, promiscuously generating the inexhaustible novelty of the natural world.

The suggestion of mutual purposiveness points to the influences of vitalist materialism on Thomson's view of nature. The conviction that the full scale of the natural world is "suffus'd" with autonomously acting intelligence and divinity warrants Thomson's attention to minute particulars. Multiple critics have pointed out the unorthodox, slant quality of Thomson's theology. Nature, or "Source of Beings," or "Universal Soul" or "Mighty Breath" or "Life" are more common epithets for nature's mysterious quality of purposive codependency than the less frequently invoked "God." The assertion of divine ubiquity drives Thomson's encyclopedic impulse. Because "in every common Instance God is seen," Thomson accounts exhaustively for the small and the particular. His identification of the ubiquity of life, descending below the threshold of human "grosser sight" is not unique.<sup>58</sup> Addison observes that "Every part of Matter is peopled; every green Leaf swarms with inhabitants. . . . The Surface of Animals is also covered with other Animals, which are in the same manner the Basis of other animals that live

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<sup>58</sup> See Gibson's discussion of microscopy in *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral? How Eighteenth-Century Science Disrupted the Natural Order* (Oxford: Oxford UP 2015) 43-79. Many authors have examined the crises caused by microscopy, and the development of the fields of biology and embryology, including Wellman (2017); Reill (2004); Gigante (2009); and John Rogers, *The Matter of Revolution: Science, Poetry, and Politics in the Age of Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell UP 1998).

upon it” (*Spectator* 519). Addison’s comment raises the possibility of infinite divisibility, and the extension of life along an interminable line both beyond and below the scales of human perception. The notion was common enough after the observations, accompanied by minutely detailed woodcuts, in Hooke’s *Micrographia*. Describing the effect of Constantin Huyghens’s discoveries on visual culture, Alpers writes, “An immediate and devastating result of the possibility of bringing to men’s eyes the minutest of living things (the organisms viewed in the microscopic lens) or the farthest and largest (the heavenly bodies) was the calling into question of any fixed sense of scale and proportion” (18). For Addison, scale denotes status in a hierarchy. “Since there is an infinitely greater Space and Room for different Degrees of Perfection between the Supreme Being and Man, than between Man and the most and the most despicable Insect,” Addison reasons that there must be higher orders of perfection like angels because there are demonstrably lower and intrinsically less valuable ones, like insects. Thomson’s originality lies in the consistency with which he adheres to his monist principles. In *The Seasons*, neither size nor humanness confers priority. Hierarchy exists in that there are smaller and larger entities, but Thomson does not privilege the large over the small in an ascending scale of importance. Since every assemblage is composed of equally “suffus’d” component parts, Thomson’s “mingling” monism denies ontological privilege to larger composites. Like his rejection of foundationalist essentialism, Thomson’s materialism makes human and natural worlds continuous. The back-and-forth movement of his prospects across scales evokes the reciprocity and equality of the different strata he observes. His “glancing eye” oscillates between composite wholes and equally composite particulars, ascending and descending the scale of attention, pausing and poring then moving restlessly on.

The pervasiveness of Thomson's leveling poetics runs the risk of dissolution. The associative logic of his descriptive by-way and his rejection of hierarchy intimate the infinite extensibility of relation. The "Boundless Spirit" that "pervades,/ Adjusts, sustains, and agitates the Whole" dissolves difference and could undermine the identities of what he describes, dissolving them by the universal solvent of panpsychism. "The poem's constant devotion of extravagant attention to so many attractors," Margaret Koehler explains, "can erode the reader's ability to pay any attention at all" (147).<sup>59</sup> Since God cannot be abstracted from material creation, in all its rich interconnectedness, but only inferred from purposive relationships, every particular, glimmering instant in which "we feel the present Deity, and Taste/ The Joy of God" can become an emblem of the divine.<sup>60</sup> But with so many divinities demanding attention, the glancing eye might settle on nothing, experiencing only a deluge of dissociated images. The sensuousness of feeling and tasting keeps the body on the scene, but the impulse towards specificity is often undermined by the tendency to arrogate the particular to a totalizing natural-theological system.<sup>61</sup> The assertion of a comprehensive, universal Nature – and universalist claims more generally – convert specificity to universality along ideologically determined lines.<sup>62</sup> But what counters the impulse to sublimate, or to read the visible as transparent indexes for the transcendental, is Thomson's emphasis throughout that entities receive their significance and value not on account of their relationship to God, but from their context. In another example of the descent from general to particular and back again, Thomson's insects in *Summer* are introduced with the periphrasis "the Summer-Race," designating a whole class of entities, "not

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<sup>59</sup> Koehler, *Poetry of Attention in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Palgrave, 2012).

<sup>60</sup> Ralph Cohen advances this reading of Thomson's luminous fragments in *The Unfolding of The Seasons* (1970).

<sup>61</sup> Brower describes recourse to ideas of universal order "the *deus ex machina* of modern criticism of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, the 'Great Order of Nature'" (539)

<sup>62</sup> Cohen, "Notes on the Teaching of Eighteenth-Century Poetry of Natural Description," in *Teaching Eighteenth-Century Poetry* ed. Christopher Fox (New York: AMS Press, 1990), 75-102.

mean, tho simple.” Their emergence, “rising from their Tombs,/ To higher life” evokes seasonal change as universal resurrection but naturalized and repeated at regular intervals, recalling the “Vital Ascent” that Thomson has postulated as a principle of natural striving. The indistinct, “swarming” mass is gradually defined as Thomson catalogs the “reptiles” that people the air in summer. Echoing Addison, he writes, “Gradual, from These what numerous Kinds descend,/ Evading even the Microscopic Eye!/ Full Nature swarms with life; one wond’rous/ Mass of Animals or Atoms organized” (*Su.* 286-89). The “or” offers a complicating addition, raising a question central to eighteenth-century biology and its differentiation from natural history. Thomson equivocates, and leaves it undetermined what does the organizing and where the dividing line between organic and inorganic may lie. But his description is not amenable to the mechanical materialism of the previous century. Even “the stone/ Holds Multitudes.” There is a risk of self-loss and dissolution in the minutiae of Thomson’s “Worlds/ In Worlds inclos’d,” a risk of being wholly swallowed up in the noise of his concatenating systems. The internal complexity of things includes the human, who is as multiple and open as everything else Thomson describes. The suggested porousness of the person makes the individual an entity among entities instead of an ordering center.

Thomson displaces the human self from the organizing center of his world, treating as excessive hubris attributions of relative value, like Addison’s. “Shall little Haughty Ignorance pronounce/ His works unwise, of which the smallest Part/ Exceeds the narrow vision of her mind?” (*Su.* ll. 315-17). Inquiry into nature is guided and sustained by the principle of purpose, and Thomson refuses to bracket the scale in which purpose is presumed to operate. Human shortcomings account for the failure “to tax the structure of the whole,” from the minutiae below the threshold of even the “microscopic eye,” to that which lies just past the horizon of the

prospect: “Lives the Man, whose Universal Eye/ Has swept at once th’unbounded scheme of things;/ Marked their dependence so, and firm Accord/ As with unflinching Accent to conclude/ That *this* availeth nought” (*Su.* ll. 333-37). Thomson’s “this,” following the catalog of insect life points most immediately back to that section and its detailing of sub-poetic species, but his emphasis allows it to concatenate, and include anything that might be thought purposeless. The synoptic view that could “sweep at once th’unbounded scheme” is invested with the intellectual intuition Thomson implicitly denies to human subjects. Scheme filiates etymologically with terms like *eidos* and the suggestion here is that the view Thomson describes is a privileged perspective of totality. Like the “eyes,” that might belong to anyone who cares to look carefully, “*this*” is anything in creation that some “critic fly” might decide avails nought. Thomson erects no limit to the premise of purposiveness. The refusal to deprecate anything as good for nothing defines his ecological poetics.<sup>63</sup> Some critics, following A. O. Lovejoy, read the lines describing the scale of creation as an endorsement of the great chain of being. But Thomson levels the chain by making every link reciprocally causal and contingent.<sup>64</sup> Where the *scala naturae* assumed hierarchy, Thomson emphasizes reciprocity. All existing things depend on all other existing things. None can abstract themselves from this matrix of relational dependency, and Thomson scoffs at the human endeavor to extricate ourselves from it as a presumption of the “universal eye.”

The reciprocity of part and whole, and the infinite divisibility of any unity defeat any quest for a transcendent predicate presumed to govern the whole.<sup>65</sup> Over and over wholes

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<sup>63</sup> “An ecosystem, although very complicated” Karl Kroeber writes, “is also very specific” (58). They are composed “of complex integral unities of being whose wholeness [can] only be imagined.” See Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of Mind* (New York: Columbia UP 1994).

<sup>64</sup> See Lovejoy (1936) 280; for critics that follow Lovejoy’s reading of Thomson’s view of the great chain of being see Spacks (1967); Cohen (1970)

<sup>65</sup> The attempts are many, though as many are the critics who pronounce *The Seasons* an artistic failure for its lack of abstract unity. Among the apologists are Cohen, *The Art of Discrimination* and *The Unfolding of the Seasons*; Oscar Kenshur, *Open Form and the Shape of Ideas* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1986); Spacks, *The Poetry of Vision* (who interprets the poem in terms of a unity of expression, aligning it with M. H. Abram’s

decompose into their parts and the parts are then reworked into novel and dynamic wholes. But how then to characterize the wholeness of *The Seasons*? Its poetic principles, especially as developed in its many prospects, suggest the general survey exists only in the concrecence of its minute particulars. Like the “various twine of light,” Thomson’s prospects show his primary interest is “not the image of the finished whole,” as Kramnick says, but “the various strands by which it is made” (322). In this regard Thomson is more Blakean than generally acknowledged. Like Blake, he insists on embodiment, feet planted firmly on the ground, and like Blake he finds the details of his text proliferating, compounded by his tendency towards inveterate tinkering. In the *Hymn* that closed the 1730 edition, Thomson attempts something like a grand summation, resolving the heterogeneity of the text with an apocalyptic vision of transcendence. The poetic principles he sets in motion, like the seasons themselves, could continue indefinitely without the presumption of an end to time itself. Thomson’s original conclusion to the poem defeats its organizing principles, and the *Hymn* reads as a dramatic departure, even in a poem characterized by abrupt transitions. Its omission from later editions shows that Thomson realized the eschaton was a too-convenient *deus ex machina* to wrap up the poem. He continued editing until he died and, as Spacks points out, there is little reason to think he would have stopped. Thomson detected something unfinished in *The Seasons*, but it was necessarily so. The prospects, with their dramatic shifts of attention from the near at hand to the line where sea and sky blur indistinguishably into one another, provide a way of thinking about the unity of the poem as inseparable from what critics starting with Johnson have described as the vagaries of its endless enumeration.

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characterization of Romanticism in *The Mirror and the Lamp*). In the Johnsonian line of accusers are F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (New York: G. W. Stewart, 1947) 90; Reuben Brower, “Form and Defect in Eighteenth-Century Poetry,” *College English* 29.7 (1968) 535-41; Dennis Desroches, “The Rhetoric of Disclosure in James Thomson’s *The Seasons*; Or, Kant’s Gentlemanly Misanthropy,” *The Eighteenth Century* 49-1 (2008) 1-24.

The Form of Roving in Cowper's *Task*

The enumerative poetics of *The Seasons* may rightly be said to lack “method” if by method is understood an abstract schema, as it was by Johnson. Thomson’s practice of associative succession joins the perambulatory tradition in English loco-descriptive poetry. In Pope, as in Denham before him, landscape description is pictorial. Whether seen from Cooper’s Hill or Windsor, the scene is described from a fixed vantage with particular elements coordinated to emblemize abstract content. But Thomson’s poetics are peripatetic. His method relies on a moving center in the form of the pedestrian narrator. Thomson’s innovations in landscape description, and his contribution to what Roger Gilbert calls “the walking poem,” made georgic poetry into a looser itinerant mode of topographical depiction wedded to aesthetic instruction. The poem’s recurring prospects model for readers how to encounter nature as a “non-hierarchical, practical, functioning system” (Fairer 205). Thomson’s immediate successors, like John Dyer and James Grainger, remain within what Fowler called “strict lexical imitations” of Virgil’s original. But his contributions to the georgic mode, especially his development of a pedestrian center and of walking as a structural and formal model for the relational reasoning through which the poem unfolds exerted their strongest influence on William Cowper’s *The Task*.

Thomson’s excursive eye, prone to wandering, has its analog in Cowper’s “roving” one, and to similar effect. Relational extension strains formal unity and threatens the poem with formlessness. The georgic emphasis on methodical extension decomposes epiphanic vision, with the result that scenes of sensitive intimacy with the world lead on accumulatively without

seeming to make teleological progress.<sup>66</sup> Unlike *The Seasons*, which lacks the self-scrutinizing tendencies of *The Task*, Cowper regularly reflects on the formal problems posed by his relational and successive method of composition. “Roving as I rove,” he asks, “Where shall I find an end, or how proceed?” (4.232-33). The poem’s perambulations and dramatic shifts in register, from sermonizing to satire to sensitive natural description, contribute an uneven feel. Cowper is aware that “roving” entails desultory looseness. He points out halfway through the poem that the principles guiding his composition – the succession of relational reasoning as it develops through give-and-take with the changing environment and the poet’s speculations – pose problems for notions of closure and schematic patterning. Yet Cowper insists that the poem is methodical. “If the work cannot boast a regular plan (in which respect I do not think it altogether indefensible) it may yet boast that the reflections are naturally suggested always by the preceding passage” (*Letters* 2:285). Here, and in the remarks in the Advertisement, Cowper claims the poem has method in the sense that things follow from one another, but he denies that it has or needs a single unifying schema. In another letter he writes, “A man that has a journey before him twenty miles in length, which he is to perform on foot, will not hesitate and doubt whether he shall set out or not because he does not really conceive that he shall ever reach the end of it; for he knows that by the moving of one foot forward first and then the other he shall accomplish it” (*Letters* 1.80). Cowper prioritizes the foot-by-foot unfolding of walking a path over the *telos* that lies at its end. Punning on the analogy between poetic composition – putting one foot in front of the other – and walking, he suggests that method in *The Task* takes the form of the gradual traversal of a heterogeneous landscape.

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<sup>66</sup> David Fairer writes, “In a georgic context, ‘Nature,’ repeatedly breaks down into its discrete phenomena; instead of an emphasis on inspirational or mystical effects, there is a commitment to the minuter readjustments and qualifications that allow life to continue” (Fairer 207).

*The Task* is an experiment in boundary testing. How much flexibility does poetic unity have? How far can the eye rove, and on what range of materials can it settle – from sofas to earthquakes and ice palaces – before the promise of coherence must be abandoned? Following Thomson, Cowper asks just how much heterogeneity can be admitted into a poem before it violates the principle of internal consistency.<sup>67</sup> Cowper’s claim that the poem exhibits a loose relational method, which he likens to the coherence of steps along a path, suggests that within an aesthetic frame of mind or in a state of ambulatory musement everything is admissible. In the poem’s regular asides, he comments on its openness and aimlessness. Moral discourse and invective can take a place alongside loco-description, current events, and natural philosophical speculation within an aesthetic object. The path through *The Task* develops a dialectical interchange with the unfolding setting. Natural scenes give rise to moral reflections that turn recursively back to natural description. The resulting sprawl, as the poem accumulates ever more material, exhibits the unity of an unfolding process.

Relational diffusion threatens the identity of process poetry like *The Task*. The risk is that identity will hemorrhage. If an entity is what it is based solely on the associations into which it enters, it loses distinction. Dustin Griffin says the formal risk that Cowper takes in *The Task* is that “the poet’s meditative river will lose itself in an endless plain” (867). Its relational patterning, like that of *The Seasons*, is not a mechanical advance in which one thought triggers another, as in Hartley’s associationist psychology. In the contemporaneous introduction to his *King Arthur*, Richard Blackmore describes “unity of action” that results from linear association as the result of “the regular succession of one Part or Episode to another, not only as Antecedents

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<sup>67</sup> Ralph Cohen sees the mixed form of literature between 1660 and 1770 as its defining feature in “On the Presuppositions of Literary Periods” *NLH* 50.1 (2019) 113-127.

and Consequents, but as it were Cause and Effect” (qtd. in Kallich 38).<sup>68</sup> Blackmore’s view of relational association is mechanical: the parts, like pinwheels and springs in a clock are only important insofar as they make the hands move. Subordinate to determining order at the level of generality, the minute particulars of composition are negligible. What is important is the final outcome of the machine. Blackmore’s chain of mechanical causality corresponds to Locke’s theory of conceptualization as a series of cause-effect interactions resulting in a unified general proposition. But the dynamics of Cowper’s relational poetics are more reciprocal than what Blackmore describes. Prospective reciprocity, as distinguished from strictly sequential causality, involves reading back into and modifying the field of association previously generated as new relations are added. The philosopher of science Tim Lenoir has formalized reciprocal relation as “A-B-C-A” in which A exists for the sake of B, which exists for the sake of C, which exists for the sake of A (88-89).<sup>69</sup> The feedback loop undermines strictly linear advance; it preempts the subordination of parts to whole along with autonomous self-subsistence. The line by line work of composition that Cowper likens to steps along one’s way retroactively adjusts and alters the associative range of what came before at the level of the sentence, the verse paragraph, the book, and the poem as a whole. In his *Elements*, Lord Kames connects reciprocity with organicism: “It is required in every work of art that, like an organic system, the constituent parts be mutually connected and bear each one of them a relation to the whole” (I. 34). For Kames the “whole” is an “ideal presence,” a mentalistic totality grasped by synoptic apprehension that moves beyond the text, as distinguished from its “real presence” as a succession of shaped lines. In his letters

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<sup>68</sup> Martin Kallich, *The Association of Ideas and Critical Theory in Eighteenth Century England* (Paris: Mouton and Co., 1970).

<sup>69</sup> Lenoir, “Kant, Blumenbach, and Vital Materialism in German Biology” *Isis* 71 (1980): 77-108. For a recent reconsideration of Lenoir’s work on early biology and purpose-thinking, see John Zammito, “The Lenoir Thesis Revisited: Blumenbach and Kant” in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 43 (2012) 120-32.

and in the prefaces that precede each section of the poem, however Cowper rejects the role of determining ends in composition. His reciprocal poetics place mind, morality, and nature within a circuit of stimulation producing a successive, extensively elaborated horizontal monism.

The georgic mode is characterized by attempts to suture the gap separating the transcendent and mundane, and in this manner the poems plunge into theodicy. Georgic depicts organic and inorganic nature suffused with a universal spiritual force and life that is responsible for the relational continuity of creation.<sup>70</sup> The organicism of georgic derives in part from the insights of eighteenth century science, and particularly early developments in biology, but there are literary-historical sources for it as well.<sup>71</sup> When Cowper announces in self-consciously Miltonic language, “I sing the sofa. I who lately sang/ Truth, Hope, and Charity, and touch’d with awe/ The solemn chords, and with a trembling hand,/ Escap’d with pain from that advent’rous flight/ Now seek repose upon an humbler theme” (1-5) he is differentiating himself from the topoi of heroic poetry, claiming that his song will not be of abstract universals but about the mundane. Rather than soaring, Cowper will be sitting. He claims in the Advertisement that the poem proceeds on the basis of no preconceived plan but follows the “train of thought” as it moves in concert with his peregrinations through Olney. The opening conceit is revealing because the succession of thoughts leads him through a history of particular seats, from stools and chairs to the contemporary decadence of the reclining sofa, and the decaying moral world it bespeaks. The abstention from abstraction announced in the pseudo-invocation and the turn to a “humbler theme” reflects the dialectic between material objects and moral assertions. By the end

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<sup>70</sup> Fairer says, “To see the earth as an animated system came naturally to the English georgic, with its organic modes of thought” (96)

<sup>71</sup> On the Importance of the unresolved problem of teleology and purpose-thinking to challenging the mechanical worldview and the development of the life sciences, see Zammuto, “Teleology Then and Now: The Question of Kant’s Relevance to Contemporary Controversies Over Function in Biology” in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Science* 37 (2006) 748-770. Carsten Strathausen reviews the vexed relationship between literary studies and biology, hinging on the question of purposiveness in *Bioaesthetics: Making Sense of Life in Science and the Arts* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2017).

of the first book of *The Task*, the moral structure of the universe appears inscribed on the surface of objects. But though Cowper wants to discover moral truths in nature, he renounces any claim to writing a moral treatise or a philosophical argument. In a letter to John Newton he writes, “I do not know that a poet is obliged to write with a philosopher at his elbow, prepared always to bind his imagination to mere matters of fact” (*Letters* 7.108). Moral axioms are subordinated to aesthetic ends throughout *The Task*. “For Poetry (except professedly of the didactic kind) a logical precision would be stiff, pedantic, and ridiculous” (*Letters* 6.180). As a result, moral reflection tends to rebound to naturalistic description in a feedback loop that impels the forward movement of the poem.

As “The Sofa” modulates between cosmopolitan and natural settings, Cowper’s method of juxtaposition problematizes the relationship between the particular and the universal. His Parnassus is the “peasant’s nest” “perch’d upon a green-hill top, but close/ Environ’d with a ring of branching elms,” and his Hippocrene no “crystal well”; instead he “dips his bowl into the weedy ditch” (1.240, 241). Conventional abstractions of poetry de-particularize, but Cowper here wants to replace the traditional *topos* of poetry with scenes from around Olney.<sup>72</sup> The central question of “The Sofa,” with its opening rejection of abstraction, concerns the status of the mundane. If the particular is merely a pinwheel in the watch, valued only for what it brings about at the level of the collective or aggregate, then the topology is mechanical. Cowper aims instead to give each part its due: “No tree in all the grove but has its charms/ Though each its hue peculiar” (1.306-7). However, if the unity depends on the multitude, such that the whole is there for the purpose of each part and the part reciprocally there for the sake of the whole, a dynamic

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<sup>72</sup> Coleridge, in *Biographia Literaria*, writes of his own literary education and fondly describes his tutor’s emphasis on the literal and particular in a manner recalling Cowper: : “Pegasus, Parnasus, and Hippocrene were all abominations to him. In fancy I can almost hear him now exclaiming, ‘Harp? Harp? Lyre? Pen and ink, boy, you mean! Muse, boy, muse? Your nurse’s daughter, you mean! Pierian spring? Oh aye! The cloister-pump, I suppose’” (381).

relationship emerges. Cowper's eye dilates and contracts as he attends to the minuter discrimination of details, "alike yet various," and their situatedness within larger frames. He attends minutely to the trees, withholding the comprehensive sight of the forest until he has catalogued the constituents: "Here the grey smooth trunks/ Of ash or lime or beech distinctly shine/ Within the twilight of their distant shades./ There, lost behind a rising ground, the wood/ Seems sunk, and shortn'd to its topmost boughs" (1.302-6). The individual trees loom larger than the forest – but this just reverses the emphasis. The colors and textures of individual trees "distinctly shine," when singled out by Cowper's "guiltless eye." The challenge of his relational poetics is to attain to the principle of reciprocity by focusing successively on the leaves and the forest, without dissolving the part into the whole, or just reversing the emphasis.

"The Sofa" oscillates unevenly between appreciation of the multiform world and invective leveled at the moral decay of cosmopolitanism caused by the withdrawal from salutary georgic labor. The foil for contemporary urban turpitude is the agrarian laborer whom Cowper, with less regard than he evinces for the trees, reduces to abstracted work, the embodiment of the "ancient curse."<sup>73</sup> Cowper's project to move by gradual scales from particulars to moral universals stumbles here, and opens up a void between the human microcosm, the geocosm of nature, and the macrocosm of the moral structure of the universe. By generalizing about happy swains, Cowper downplays the realities of labor and strife at a crucial stage in the logic of the first book of the poem. The turn to rural labor does significant work in getting him back to where he started, and without the healthy agrarian laborer to contrast with the gouty city-dweller the moral critique of decadence couldn't proceed. But by disembodiment of labor the progressive ascent

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<sup>73</sup> Fairer explains that georgic nature has "stubborn materiality," a recalcitrance that makes even the pleasant labors of the cucumber garden hard work (Fairer 206)

from particulars to the general makes an ideological leap.<sup>74</sup> Cowper's generalization here exemplifies ideologically motivated universalization. The agrarian laborer, "derives/ No mean advantage from a kindred cause/ From strenuous toil his hours of sweetest ease./ The sedentary stretch their lazy length/ When custom bids, but no refreshment find/ For none they need" (1.386-91). By romanticizing labor Cowper contrasts the healthy toil and well-earned rest of the agrarian worker to the sleepless nights on feather sofas of the urbanite, whose discomfort results from his removal from natural rhythms. Idealized labor establishes a foil for urban decline, but the high level of generality here lapses into facile moralizing, defying the pull of georgic materiality towards a more realistic assessment of work. Cowper's effort in "The Sofa" to ground moral universals in successively accumulated particulars stumbles on account of his own surreptitious substitution of an allegorized treatment of labor where his own poetic procedure, banishing allegory from the outset, would call for a treatment of labor that doesn't prematurely strip away particularity for the purpose of a moralizing discourse.

The books that follow "The Sofa" proceed according to the same technique of oscillating between large-scale events in the mundane sphere – earthquakes, wars, "rumour of oppression and deceit" – and moralizing interpretations that provide the ground for frequent invective. Book two of *The Task*, "The Time-Piece," is a travesty on the mechanistic philosophy that Cowper sees proliferating in the universities. Mechanism prevails in the state of society, but in nature mechanical philosophy loses its potency. In what Cowper calls the "boundless contiguity of shade" of the "vast wilderness" mechanical cause and debates about colorless corpuscles reveal

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<sup>74</sup> Denise Gigante, describing the intersection of politics and Romantic aesthetics, argues that "Romantic ideology," is really "ideology *tout court*, where ideology entails the politically problematic universalization of a particular. To think of living forms as stubborn particulars, resisting logical abstraction and preserving (however partially) their freedom is to better understand the critical problems facing eighteenth century taste philosophers and Romantic natural philosophers alike" (28-9) in *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

themselves to be meaningless. Manifest natural systems are entangled, overlapping one another like endlessly layered shadows and exhibiting purposeful, end-directed behavior. The idea of discrete, unseen theoretical entities has no practical bearing here. Cowper reads the phenomena of earthquakes and proliferating violence as natural signs or emblems of disease the cause of which is the pathological moral perception of the world as a machine – “The Time-Piece.” For Cowper, the clockwork world doesn’t make sense, and this is why he opens the section with a description of the 1783 earthquakes in Calabria. Disruptive events that rattle the cosmos would indicate a faulty bit of machinery. But against the machine-image of the world, he contends that earthquakes and hurricanes are not a gear come loose but are part of the moral structure of the cosmos: “When were the winds/ Let slip with such a warrant to destroy?/ When did the waves so haughtily o’erleap/ Their ancient barriers, deluging the dry?/ Fires from beneath, meteors from above/ Portentous, unexampled, unexplain’d/ Have kindled beacons in the skies, and th’old/ And crazy earth has had her shaking fits” (2.53-60). The language suggests agency, implying the question, who let slip the winds? Who gave them “such a warrant to destroy”? Which amounts to an inquisition after purpose, an inadmissible inquiry if the world is thought of as an automaton. Cowper’s method of interpretation involves the careful study of phenomena reported in the local newspaper – a considerable influence on his poetry as Goodman points out – and inferential reasoning to a presumed cause. His interpretive ascent is an example of the seventeenth century practice of inference from natural signs to pervasive causes known as the doctrine of signatures. Here, the causes Cowper inquires into are not the universal laws of Newtonian mechanics, but obscure “unexampled, unexplain’d” tremors in the world conceived as an organic entity. Cowper adduces natural phenomena attesting to the invisible, trying, in Ian Hacking’s words, “to find the sentences on earth’s surface” that articulate what is invisible (43). The language of signs and

emblems in nature made to speak to some cause – the question of why – is not a holdover from some superstitious or pre-scientific world. Cowper’s sense of the world as an organism displaying symptoms is consistent with georgic vitalism.<sup>75</sup>

The presence of signs, and signatures in nature show God’s diffusion into the world: “Happy the man who sees a God employ’d/ In all the good and ill that chequer life!/ Resolving all events with their effects/ And manifold results, into the will/ And arbitration wise of the supreme” (2.161-65). Given Cowper’s monistic view of God’s ubiquity, when bees make their appearance in his poem, they are agents of a divine vocation. Plants “have their sexes; and when the summer shines,/ The bee transports the fertilizing meal/ From flow’r to flow’r, and ev’n the breathing air/ Wafts the rich prize to its appointed use” (2.537-40). Anticipating Blake’s insistence on the sexual organization of all creation, Cowper describes the intervention of the bee that, like other agents of nature (the wind, for example) without conscious intention serves the organic totality by facilitating sexual exchange.<sup>76</sup> In “The Garden” Cowper presents nature in time and flux. The minute particulars perform cosmological ends of reproduction and regeneration, while the totality exists for the benefit of each unit of which it is composed. Cowper’s theologically-inflected view identifies purposes and processes that reciprocally animate the whole: “In his works/ Though wondrous, he commands us in his word/ To seek *him* rather, where his mercy shines./ The mind, indeed, enlighten’d from above,/ Views him in all; ascribes to the grand cause/ The grand effect” (3.222-27). The purposive arrangement of nature reveals God’s agency at every level, from the actions of the bee and wind to the universal reciprocity of the sexes. Mechanical philosophy relegated God to the position of prime mover,

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<sup>75</sup> On Cowper and eighteenth-century science, see Harry Kroitor, “The Influence of Popular Science on William Cowper,” *Modern Philology* 61.4 (1964) 281-87

<sup>76</sup> The sex lives of plants is the central theme for Erasmus Darwin in “The Loves of Plants,” section of *The Botanic Garden*.

and abstracted divinity from creation. But the “mind . . . enlighten’d” sees God suffusing material creation. While deistic natural theology “Spare[s]/ The Great Artificer of all that moves/ The stress of a continual act, the pain/ Of unremitting vigilance and care/ As too laborious and severe a task,” Cowper counters with the view of God “himself through all diffused/ Sustains and is the life of all that lives” (6.206-210; 220-21). The impulse towards theodicy in *The Task* emerges regularly in moments like this one, where the “grand cause,” and the “grand effect,” are the focus. But the poem returns to the stuff of the physical world, to pollen and reproduction, and eventual senescence: “All flesh is grass, and all its glory fades/ Like the fair flower disheveled in the wind” (3.261-62). Cowper’s image of the reciprocal relationship between the bee and the plants, each dependent on the other not for mere personal survival, but for the perpetuation of the whole, creates a microcosmic image of the mutually purposive arrangement of the organic cosmos at large. Death is the precondition of life, as the blooms of previous generations are recycled back into the system: “From dearth to plenty, and from death to life/ Is nature’s progress when she lectures man” (6.181-82). By focusing on natural processes and ascending the scale of reciprocal arrangements it is possible to contemplate the totality of ecological relations Cowper identifies with God.

Yet Cowper, unlike Thomson, is prone to skepticism. Natural description in Cowper oscillates between the impulses to identify natural order with the presence of divinity in the world, and an effort to distance the aesthetic appreciation of nature from the intuition of moral and theological axioms. Sometimes Cowper’s nature appears transparently moral while at others it is inscrutable. As a result, one of the many tasks that *The Task* sets for itself is distinguishing between the moral interpretation of the natural world and an “indolent,” or reflective experience of nature. “The Time-Piece,” for example, contains an extended effort to interpret calamities in

the natural world in moral terms. The Calabrian earthquake of 1783 and the Laki eruption in Iceland in the same year that blackened skies over England and much of Western Europe, causing a particularly harsh winter, are signs of cosmographic discord that Cowper connects to the disruptive forces of depopulation, industrialization, and urban development.<sup>77</sup> Natural signs disclose “a world that seems/ To toll the death-bell of its own decease/ And by the voice of all its elements/ To preach the gen’ral doom” (2.50-53). The generally mute world, the world that requires interpreters to decipher its sounds here speaks out in the voice of violent calamities to tell of its impending end. Between the “fires from beneath,” that answer comets like Halley’s which passed in 1759, Cowper imagines universal upheaval portending violent interruption of nature’s normal course. For the cause of these upheavals Cowper offers “common peccancy” that afflicts “nature with a dim and sickly eye” (2.72; 64). Natural facts are entangled in human developments but the association between the two remains unstable. From the poem’s beginning in the tradition of moral satire and the interpretation of the sofa as an emblem of human decline Cowper widens the scope in the second section by extending his critique of decadence to his intuition that natural convulsions like the events of 1783 are evidence of and caused by social decline.

The sense of imminent cataclysm is dissonant with Cowper’s georgic sensibility, and his pervasive sense that the new emerges gradually and constantly from the sedimentations of culture. The punctuated periods of sudden disruption described in “The Time-Piece” threaten to rupture the relatively stable developmental processes that Cowper details, for instance, in the “historical deduction” of seats in “The Sofa,” and in the careful cultivation of hot-house cucumbers in “The Garden.” “By ceaseless action all that is subsists./ Constant rotation of

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<sup>77</sup> On Cowper’s moral interpretation of natural calamities and how they register a sense of global calamity, see Tobias Meneley, “‘The Present Obfuscation’: Cowper’s *Task* and the Time of Climate Change” *PMLA* 127.3 (2012) 477-492.

th'unwearied wheel/ That nature rides upon maintains her health,/ Her beauty, her fertility" (1.367-70). Stasis is the condition of the inanimate, but the being of organic process, which for Cowper includes cultural development, is constant change. But change has different modes: the cataclysmic, which represents an interruption of the common course of natural development and the gradualist accretions of natural and cultural evolution. In cataclysmic change, "What solid was by transformation strange/ Grows fluid, and fixt and rooted earth/ Tormented into billows heaves and swells/ Or with vortiginous and hideous whirl/ Sucks down its prey insatiable" (2.99-103). The self-consciously latinate, Miltonic diction ("vortiginous,") and syntax channel the language of cataclysmic transition to describe the momentary supersession of nature's normal course. But the rest of the poem shows that there is methodical order in change, in a manner that embraces Milton's gradualist, peripatetic view of history. The task of the poet is to identify and name the patterns of change but in a manner that does not remove it from the unfolding that makes it vital. The identity of a process for Cowper sometimes takes the form of a providential and allegorical narrative about nature that he wants to tell, as in "The Time-Piece" section, but other times in the poem Cowper's attention to the process itself circumscribes his effort to posit prematurely an abstract moral or theological maxim as the process's natural end. This tendency in Cowper is clearest when he transitions from moral discourse to natural description while walking through a scene. The prospect views that were the site and occasion for moralizing nature in Pope and Denham become in Cowper instances of an elevated perspective from which he can survey where he has been, and glimpse where the gradually unfolding path is heading. In the poem's first prospect view Cowper's past imperfect simultaneously suggests novelty and tradition, an experience vividly present, but with regularity and rhythm that connects it to past iterations and to the future. "How oft upon yon eminence, our pace/ Has slacken'd to a pause,

and we have borne/ The ruffling wind scarce conscious that it blew,/ While admiration feeding at the eye/ And still unsated, dwelt upon the scene” (1.157-61). The view is happening now, but the reflective “How oft,” makes it an instance in a sequence like the individual steps in a walk. The temporality of the “how oft,” dilates to include past and future recurrences. The frame of mind here foreshadows Cowper’s defense of a musing “indolent vacuity of thought” that characterizes reflective experience. Landscape provides a sense of continuity, though the force of the wind ruffling the scene introduces change and movement. The view is singular, since the movement of the wind will always be distinct, but it has the broader continuity of a repeated action. The prospect view is insatiable because the scene is not a picture. No matter how many times it is viewed it will always show change and development coexisting alongside familiarity.

Habitual walking provides a way for Cowper to conceptualize the continuity in the condition of change that is central to his view of nature as a developing system. Immediacy succeeds the retrospective mood in the initial prospect through the deictic. “Here Ouse, slow winding through a level plain/ Of spacious meads with cattle sprinkled o’er,/ Conducts the eye along his sinuous course/ Delighted. There, fast rooted in his bank/ Stand, never overlooked, our favorite elms/ That screen the herdsman’s solitary hut/” (1.163-67). In this state of receptivity, the eye follows the features of the landscape it surveys. The view is not punctate. The lines stretch attention from foreground to background in a methodical course. It follows the Ouse, whose winding alongside the walking path, provides one of the poem’s structural metaphors. The flow of the Ouse and the eye along with it is checked by the stability of the elms, which anchor the scene and recall its regular repetitions. Walking is characterized by the experience of familiarity periodically punctuated by novelty and movement. The “never overlooked” shows habitual familiarity, as does the mention of favored features of the landscape. Yet natural settings

are never the same twice, and consequently afford a vision of identity in change: “Scenes must be beautiful which daily view’d/ Please daily, and whose novelty survives/ Long knowledge and the scrutiny of years” (1.177-79). Inexhaustible novelty characterizes beauty, and the unstable union of temporal change with continuity generates the pleasurable agitation of aesthetic experience. Cowper earns the move to reflection on the beautiful through exhaustive and concrete loco-description. The theory of beauty emerges from the complex temporality of his pedestrian prospect, suturing past and present to an imaginable but indefinitely changing future. The sense of change perceptible in patterned development contrasts the disjunctive vision of cataclysm. The reflection on beauty doesn’t afford a symbolic referent for the prospect, nor is the description itself reducible to an axiom since the claim made for beauty has to do with its potential for endless elaboration. However ritually repeated, the walks traced in *The Task* always disclose new sights, sounds, and smells. Cowper contrasts the experience of continuous change from staid habit: “It is the constant revolution stale/ And tasteless of the same repeated joys,/ That palls and satiates and makes languid life/A pedlar’s pack that bows the wearer down” (“The Sofa,” ll. 460-5). The tension between dulling habit and repeated actions that still surprise and contain novelty and spontaneity seems to be a matter of mindset. Novelty is a function of the mindfulness and attentive awareness that distinguish aesthetic experience from mundane, task-oriented movement through the world. The aesthetic involves pedestrian attunement to change under the condition of continuity, while habit and convention are associated with the pedlar’s pack that blunts sensibility to the surroundings. The descriptions of nature are animated by the tension between novelty and habit in which novelty is closely associated with the aperiodic rhythms of nature, while habit results from the ossifying force of society.

Cowper's effort to moralize nature rests uneasily alongside the poem's celebrated moments of imaginative engagement with the natural world. These two approaches to nature emerge as two distinct views, one narrowly didactic, the other pedagogical and aesthetic. The didactic view of nature dominates the satirical opening of the poem and the polemics of "The Time-Piece," but is increasingly interrupted by aesthetic-pedagogical approach to the natural world. While distinguishing these two visions of nature is one of the central tasks of the poem, it is largely subsumed in the broadest task Cowper sets for himself: identifying and defining the purpose and end of poetry itself. Cowper closely aligns didacticism with the critical imperatives of his poetry. But didactic instruction does not exhaust the purpose of poetry the poem articulates. Where his didacticism tends to be backward-looking, and consistently heavy-handed in its moralizing treatment of social ills, the pedagogical impulse is prospective, aimed at cultivating virtue through aesthetic experience. Cowper details the ailments of an alienating and disenchanted world, but suggests that the solution to disenchantment lies not in moral instruction but in the cultivation of aesthetic attentiveness. "There is a pleasure in poetic pains/ Which only poet's know" characterized by the labors of composition, its "twists and turns," that "steal away the thought/ With such address, from themes of sad import,/ That lost in his own musings, happy man!/ He feels the anxieties of life, denied/ Their wonted entertainment, all retire" (2.284-85, 299-303). The turnings of writing verse can be anodyne, a momentary suspension of the anxieties under which Cowper particularly suffered. "But is amusement all?" he asks. The notion that poetry should be an escape doesn't sit well with Cowper. There seems to be no end to what a poem cannot do. "What can satire, whether grave or gay?" The didacticism that guided the poem's opening polemic and that regulates Cowper's effort to interpret natural events as signs of providence is as unsatisfying as escapism. "What vice has it subdued? Whose heart reclaim'd/

By rigour, or whom laugh'd into reform?" (ll. 320-21). Cowper asks what can art or literature do? In the purposively ordered world he has described, what is the purpose of poetry? At the mid-point of "The Time-Piece," *The Task* becomes freighted with metapoetic reflection, and anxiety about the ends of his own labor. Cowper doesn't answer the questions raised here, immediately after his own polemic against "common peccancy." He chastens the pridefulness of satirizing, and evaluates his own ambition "not to sing in vain," or "trifle merely," but his irresolution reorients the poem from macrocosmological discord to the smaller dramas of "The Garden," and the spaces of aesthetic reflection that dominate "The Winter Evening," "The Winter Morning Walk," and "The Winter Walk at Noon."

Like Thomson, Cowper redefines georgic didacticism in terms of aesthetic cultivation modeled on the sensitive agitation of the country walk. Aesthetic cultivation is a kind of georgic labor, the goal of which is to produce attentiveness to natural rhythms and processes that afford the best resistance to the disenchanting forces of industrialization and urbanization, which reduce human sensitivity to novelty and spontaneity by disciplining the working body and routinizing human activity. In the opening of "The Garden" Cowper again queries what he is after in the poem, what is its central task or purpose. "What chance that I, to fame so little known/ Nor conversant with men or manner much,/ Should speak to purpose, or with better hope crack the satiric throng" (3.24-6). He goes on to suggest "t'were wiser far" to disavow polemics and instead "repose where chance may throw me, beneath elm or vine/ To muse in silence" (ll. 36-38). The withdrawal from the earlier condemnations of "common peccancy" suggests recoil from worldly affairs, politics, and the contemporary issues of industrialization that figure prominently in the first two sections. Cowper offers withdrawal into silent musing as an alternative to noisy polemics. This might be construed in terms of a retreat from pressing contemporary concerns

into aesthetic disinterest, but Cowper's alternative to didactic invective doesn't represent a renunciation of the world so much as an alternative mode of engaging with it. After signaling a shift in the way of relating to the world, Cowper affirms a common, shared physical reality that might ground alternative social forms. "I think, articulate, I laugh and weep/ And exercise all functions of a man./ How then should I and any man that lives/ Be strangers to each other?" (ll. 198-201). These lines at first seem to repeat the neoclassical emphasis on the general, the "happy man," or the type. But the commonality that Cowper is after isn't ideal. He construes it through materialist georgic metaphors borrowed from Isaiah: "All flesh is grass and all its glory fades/ Like the fair flow'r disheveled in the wind" (ll. 261-2). What connects humans is flesh and body, a universality predicated on physical experience navigating a recalcitrant world. The formulation appears paradoxical, but seen within the trajectory of *The Task* as a whole, at the pivot from didacticism to aesthetic education, Cowper's universal validity on subjective grounds can be seen as theorizing what is involved in aesthetic judgment, contrasted to the habitual operations of reason that dominate urbanized landscapes.

The retirement figured in "The Garden" involves an alternative view of the world rather than a withdrawal from it. In "The Winter Evening," immediately after "The Garden," Cowper alternates between a critical, distanced view of the social world and an imaginative intimacy with natural scenes and rhythms. In the opening of "The Winter Evening," Cowper withdraws from the world in order to reengage with it. Sitting down with his evening paper he implores, "Now stir the fire, and close the shutters fast/ Let fall the curtains, wheel the sofa round/ . . . So let us welcome peaceful evening in" (4.35-40). The move is characteristic of Cowper's closing in with the purpose of opening out. The domestic space provides the context for his perusal of "this folio of four pages.../ What is it but a map of busy life/ Its fluctuations and concerns" (4.54-56). The

newspaper affords critical distance, and the effect of its mediations is removal from the tumults and violence the paper recounts. Extending the metaphor of the map, Cowper describes his reading in the terms of prospect poetry: “Here runs the mountainous and craggy ridge. That tempts ambition. On the summit see/ The seals of office glitter in his eye;/ He climbs, be pants, he grasps them. At his heels,/ Close to his heels a demagogue ascends/ And with a dex’trous jerk soon twists him down/ And wins them, but to lose them in his turn” (4.57-63). The open paper, with its middle ridgeline, appears as a landscape, and Cowper uses the deictics and imperatives that characterize prospect description to gesture to its features. Like the other prospects in the poem, this one features regularly recurring patterns, but unlike the views of nature, which constantly generate novelty, here the cycles are habitual, staid, and unproductive, like the recurring displacements of political jockeying. In *The Task*, a map provides a certain vantage that, like a prospect, affords a clearer picture of the surrounding world by virtue of an elevated perspective. The paper provides Cowper, retired to his Olney homestead, a stable ground from which to take stock of a changing world.

The newspaper prospect straddles the two dominant tones of the poem, satirical/didactic and aesthetic/pedagogical. Cowper’s trouble here is that he wants the poem to do something, but he has disavowed the efficacy of versified invective. Criticism requires a critical remove and productive alienation while the aesthetic theory he has been developing foregrounds immediacy and imaginative engagement with the world that borders on pantheistic monism. As satirist, Cowper discerns “rills of oily eloquence” and much triviality and intrigue in the paper, but he is laboring to view the world aesthetically, with sympathetic attention, but also disinterest. The result is troubling since it arrogates suffering and violence to aesthetic pleasure. But the problem Cowper raises is important. Is it possible to engage the social and political world aesthetically

without falling either into polemic, thereby creating something closer to a sermon than to poetry, or purging off real human suffering and the ethical imperatives its recognition calls for?<sup>78</sup> The newspaper prospect blurs the two impulses that animate *The Task*, since Cowper wants to make sure that his poems aren't the pointless trifles that he criticizes earlier, but he has acknowledged that the promise of a definitive moral end for poems of the kind premised by *belletristic* criticism would make them something else. Cowper's task, then, is to write a poem that is purposive and everywhere exhibits the design and intention that he earlier describes as the peculiar "pleasure" of "poetic pains," while not short-circuiting the by-way with unambiguous moralizing. The often unstable balance that he aims for, exemplified most clearly in the contradictions of the newspaper prospect, is summed up in the figure of the map: sufficiently withdrawn from the contingencies of time and place to be useful for gaining perspective, and inured against the expediencies of fashion to provide a stable vantage, but simultaneously engaged concretely with the world. The map attempts a union of the poem's central tension between versified polemic and escapist retirement.

The map also affords Cowper a way of trying to discipline his own effort towards encyclopedic inclusiveness with the demands of shape and coherence. As he elaborates the metaphor, the initially clear vantage of the social world becomes increasingly entangled. The newspaper-prospect's initial promise of a clear view is drowned out as the visual motif of the prospect is displaced by cacophonous sound. "Cataracts of declamation thunder here,/ There forests of no-meaning spread the page/ In which all comprehension wanders lost;/ While fields of pleasantry amuse us there/ With merry descants on a nation's woes./ The rest appears a wilderness of strange/ But gay confusion" (4.73-79). The clarity of the prospect succumbs to

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<sup>78</sup> For a critique of the idea of aesthetic distance as it appears in the recent reading debates, see Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132.2 (2017) 371-76.

noise, and formlessness threatens to displace the initially coherent vision. The distinction between map and territory dissolves as the prospect extends to include “Heav’n, earth, and ocean plunder’d of their sweets/ Nectareous essences, Olympian dews.” The view that was initially intended to aid insight becomes exploitative, extracting goods for consumption. The borders around the bounded view dissipate, and Cowper proceeds to denounce the presumptuousness of ascending to this “more than mortal height” in the first place. The vantage earned comes at a cost, since the height “exempts me from them all” in an ethically questionable manner (4.97). The prospect view here belongs to an unseen, unscathed observer, but given Cowper’s criticism of the pride and presumptuousness of securing such a view for oneself, such a totalizing prospect is both undesirable and unethical since it involves inuring oneself against the voices of others. The language of exemption and separation calls up associations with the disinterest of aesthetic judgment, reinforced by the description of paper reading in the language of landscape. Cowper waffles on whether aesthetic disinterest exempts one from the claims of others and from a common humanity. By aestheticizing the newspaper, Cowper risks isolating the reader, observer, or listener from ethical engagement with the world. The questions raised by the newspaper prospect are central to *The Task*, and the multifarious purposes it sets for itself, and at the heart of philosophical aesthetics. Cowper directly questions what the purpose of art might be, if it isn’t a vehicle for moral instruction, or a tool for teaching virtue, or window-dressing for precepts. *The Task* anticipates many of the critiques of aesthetics as the flight from history and politics, and the construal of aesthetic experience as at best the denial of political realities, and at worst their deliberate mystification through reduction to the smooth unity of a pictorial landscape. As a retired reader, “the sound of war/ Has lost its terrors ere it reaches me,/ Grieves but alarms me not.” He goes on to connect the poet’s task to the traveler and journalist, to glean “intelligence in

ev'ry clime." But Cowper is deeply uncomfortable with the idea of the detached observer, and questions whether aesthetic experience is ethically irresponsible if it involves a form of purposeless pleasure. The contradictions of Romantic theory, between poets as either unacknowledged legislators or indolent aesthetes, between political engagement and the subsequent sacrifice of critical and aesthetic distance all arise here in the closing sections of *The Task*.

The newspaper prospect occasions the self-commentary noted above in which Cowper questions "Roving as I rove/ Where shall I find an end, or how proceed?" (ll. 232-33). With the newspaper prospect he has written himself into a corner. He wants the poem to be like the newspaper, open to current events, politics and history, but he also claims it needs the element of detachment and disinterest that he finds lacking in the traditions of verse satire and polemic. Cowper seems to have in mind the topicality of poets, like Dryden and Pope, who threw themselves into political events and satire, but in doing so sacrificed something distinctive and essential about literary writing. Returning to the motif of the walking poem he likens himself to a traveler without a purpose, who records "how far he went for what was nothing worth/ So I, with brush in hand and pallet spread/ With colours mixt for far diff'rent use/ Paint cards and dolls, and ev'ry idle thing/ That fancy finds in her excursive flights" (4.238-42). The thrust here is still inclusive. Since its opening *The Task* has tried to incorporate everything from trifles to cataclysmic world events. But the tack is towards the "diff'rent use" of the mundane and of current events, as distinguished from the useless, aimless adventures of the traveler. Cowper distinguishes himself repeatedly from other kinds of craftsmen – but it isn't clear what kind of craftsman he is. Not a poet of sublimity, he writes of "ev'ry idle thing" while at the same time holding, with Thomson that the claim something "avails not" is most often a failure of attention.

Cowper suggests that idle things are things that don't serve, or that are purposeless, but defends throughout the purposiveness of the seemingly purposeless, including that of his own alternately playful and deadly serious poem. What follows is the section of the poem made famous by Coleridge's extensive borrowing in "Frost at Midnight." Called in the introduction the "Brown Study," Cowper describes a state of mind suspended between end-directed action and the meditative caesura of speculative dilation. The scene is characterized by an ambivalent hovering between determinations: "such a gloom/ Suits well the thoughtful or unthinking mind." In his study, seated in front of the dying embers of a fire Cowper indulges in "indolent vacuity of thought." But the mind is not sedated or passive. "I am conscious," he claims, asserting active awareness, "and confess/ Fearless, a soul that does not always think" (4.284-85). In this state, "the mind contemplative . . . with some new theme/ Pregnant, or disposed alike to all," Cowper identifies a reflective condition that can hold the purposive thrust of thought together with the aimless and roving condition that presides over the structure of the poem. Understanding is not the dominant mental faculty at this moment, which is why Cowper confesses a "soul that does not always think" where the verb would seem to require a different subject. "Tis thus the understanding takes repose," but this vacation from goal-oriented, deterministic thought is not passive. He describes a state of hyper-attentive awareness as he watches the play of light and shadow in the dying fire, but his attention is not consummated in anything in particular. The state of mind is musing, and the dying fire with its aperiodic patterns provides the appropriate analogy for the endlessly successive by-way of aesthetic reflection.

The remaining two books of *The Task* play out a dialectical pattern of immersive attention and musement balanced by periodic eruptions of polemic aimed at excesses of artistry, decadence, and social decline. They include Cowper's vocal support for those imprisoned in the

Bastille, and his meticulous description of shadows elongated by the setting sun on a snow-covered field. These two poles of the poem play off one another, ringing antiphonally but always in tension. On the one hand, Cowper wants to produce a poem that does something, as the half-joking title suggests. While the origin of *The Task* lies in a trifling dare, its reflections on the limits of poetry, on aesthetic experience, what it means to write about unpoetical or even anti-poetical materials like sofas and card games, and its explicit challenge to views of poetic form predicated on arrival are among its most significant contributions to poetic theory in the second half of the eighteenth century. The tensions that animate *The Task* and that Cowper, out of a stubborn tenaciousness and poetic honesty that recalls Thomson's own editorial dilemmas, refuses throughout to reduce to unity are the inheritance of Romantic poetic theory. Cowper's achievement undermines both claims for the unprecedented novelty of Romanticism, since the union of everyday speech patterns and conversational structure derive from Cowper's "chatty" verse, but also the teleological premises of Cowper's preromanticism. What Cowper discloses is the falsity of separating Romanticism and Romantic poetic theory from trends that developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The tensions remarked in Milton and in the structure of *Paradise Lost* provide the animating dialectic for eighteenth century long-form poetry, especially in the mixed, experimental modes in which Thomson and Cowper innovated. Both poets take continuity under the condition of change for their theme, aligning them with the georgic focus on ceaseless renewal, and use the peripatetic form to challenge the efforts to fix and thereby contain a continuously developing thing. Formally and thematically, Thomson and Cowper undermine notions of identity that are defined against change, such as the abstract schematism that characterizes much formalist discourse.

Two moments in the second half of *The Task* demonstrate the tension between an internal, speculative aesthetics amenable to the formalist fixation of things, and a more processual, capacious, peripatetic formalism. Cowper in the brown study, indulging his “indolent vacuity of thought,” cultivates imaginative dilation conversant with the fire’s flickering “strangers,” that represents a more conventional, narrowly “aesthetic,” experience defined by the “out-in-out” dialectic that Abrams identified as the basic structure of greater Romantic lyric.<sup>79</sup> Casting off of the mind’s intentionality, and suspending its task-oriented engagement with the world, Cowper attends to the natural variations of the fire, which projects shadows on the wall of his study. This external hint occasions his internal reflections, like how the formation of frost on Coleridge’s bedside window provokes reflections on his formation and upbringing in “Frost at Midnight.” “Some stranger’s near approach,” disrupts Cowper’s rapturous absorption, and returns him to the busy world of newspapers and invective in which *The Task* often bogs down. But the final two books of the poem, “The Winter Morning Walk,” and “The Winter Walk at Noon,” open back out from the cloister of the brown study, and into the extensive, ambulatory mode of experience. Both versions of aesthetic experience share a dialectical exchange between the poet and the setting, but where the one seems to locate imaginative expansion within the confines of the poet’s skull, merely cued by external environmental details, the other distributes it through the natural setting, and constructs the dilation as an extension of the poet’s perambulations in the physical world.

The brown study section and the mode of imaginative reflection developed there represent an aesthetic of retirement and withdrawal. Its self-stimulating reflection needs only slight prompting from the outside world to get the associative machinery going. By contrast, the

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<sup>79</sup> Abrams, “The Structure and Style of the Greater Romantic Lyric,” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

peripatetic mode involves a give and take with the surroundings that urges the walker forward, although the forward movement intends no higher aim. Cowper's byway is an end in itself. The walking path unfolds in verse paragraphs that, as Marshall Brown explains, "ramble into one another with accumulative (rather than contrastive) links" (397).<sup>80</sup> The moment-by-moment, accumulative unfolding of the text effects a diffusion of the peripatetic subject into exchange with the setting. Where the internal private experience of the brown study section lends itself to patterns of unity and containment like those described by Abrams, the walking mode dissolves both the integrity of the poet's subjectivity, which emerges in and through intercourse with the setting, and the coherence of the poem because the path lacks conclusion. It is significant that Cowper ends *The Task* with an extended, two-book treatment of a walk through the winter setting around Olney, rather than with the retirement section in the poem's fourth book. The final sections include some of his most striking descriptions as Cowper "settles in soft musing as I tread" (6.69). The sympathetic descriptions of non-migratory birds searching the winter landscape for sustenance, and the manifold nameless sufferers and survivors that enliven the scene anchor the final two books in a highly particularized and detailed setting, "In such a world, so thorny, where none/ Finds happiness unblighted" (4.333-34). By ending the poem opening out to seasonal rhythms of decline and renewal, Cowper dramatizes the tension between two kinds of romantic poetry: the lyric mode that lends itself to containment and contraction, and the looser desultory forms that characterized the period's long poems. Cowper's meandering in the final two books of the poem, taking up subjects as he comes upon them, "in the course of a leisurely mental excursion," is ultimately inconclusive (Griffin 865). Like the interminable development of Wordsworth's philosophical mind in *The Prelude* (itself only the preamble for the more ambitious, interminable *Excursion*) and in a more satirical vein, the inconsequential

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<sup>80</sup> Brown, "The Pre-Romantic Discovery of Consciousness," *Studies in Romanticism* 17.4 (1978) 387-412.

bildungsroman of Byron's *Don Juan*, Cowper's perambulations do not culminate triumphantly. His circuitous route lacks the pattern of excursion and return that integrates romantic lyrics like "Frost at Midnight," or "Tintern Abbey," or the narrative ordering of Southey's epic-inflected *Roderick*, *Thalaba the Destroyer*, and *Madoc*.<sup>81</sup> Thomson and Cowper's loose long poems cannot be accounted for by modes of criticism predicated on arrival or the teleological premises of plot. Their tertiary rhythms of purposive aimlessness contrast instrumental, ends-driven exploration and ground aesthetic experience in a reciprocally animating exchange with a world in motion.

Georgic is about reworking received materials and practices to make them newly productive, and describes the processes by which a literary and cultural inheritance is made generative again. In this manner the georgic perspective is prospective, forward-looking. Georgic poems aren't about an epic past, nor are they nostalgic for a lost golden age. They look to the past not as a lost origin, but as providing materials for the new. The prospect, in this broader sense, plays an especially crucial role. The orientation of these poems towards what can be made possible, what can be glimpsed just beyond the horizon, accounts for their feel of futurity. The forward view is balanced by stereoscopic attention to the foreground, to the leaves that, from a more synoptic vantage, would be dissolved into forest. The flickering between foreground and background has a temporal affect of displacing the notion of a final end because the prospect view coordinates the spatial problem of scale with the temporal correlation of present immediacy against glimpses of where things are going. In long desultory poems, they confer a moment of insight into textual method. Prospects make possible novel ways of constructing the unity of a manifold, and provide a way to theorize complex temporally patterns that view movement and

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<sup>81</sup> On Southey's forays into epic, see Herbert Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) 128-89.

change as fundamental, rather than perversions of integrity. The dynamics of purposeful relation in these poems are reciprocal rather than sequential, and the prospect involves reading back and revising in light of what occurs in the present, while also anticipating and contingently positing what the present may precipitate. In this way, the prospect in long poems is an analogy for the act of reading. The reader, like the poet, ventures along the line-by-line development of the text, and that unfolding is both means and end of the sustained action of reading. All reading comes to an end, of course, but in georgic that end resists closure.

The inconsistency of *The Task* – its tendency to meander from invective, to aesthetic speculation, to descriptive immersion, accumulating disparate elements as it goes – makes it exemplary of eighteenth-century mixed georgic. Critics have claimed that the nineteenth-century gave rise to the open-ended, formless long poem, and that these poems registered the breakdown of consensus and the emergence of alienated Romantic subjectivity. The eighteenth-century peripatetic georgic poses the problem of formally accounting for a developing, temporally continuous but changing entity. The unity of these poems doesn't rely on widely held extra-textual assumptions or "ideational patterns" that could be posited to subtend all Enlightenment-era texts (Cohen 126). They are "formless," but only in the sense that the form they exhibit cannot be accounted for by *coup d'oeil*, synoptic notions of form as grasped instantly and non-successively, on the model of conceptual capture. Their itinerancy develops a view of form as "the shape by which change becomes legible" (Stewart 5). Self-similarity through time, while essential to extended poetic forms, has traditionally been dissolved into a totality that lies just beyond the horizon of the text, whether that totality is understood as the culmination of the Addisonian byway, or as Johnson's "unity of effect," or the notional cultural totality that long poems body forth. Herbert Tucker has described the shift from a neoclassical "unity of effect," to

the Romantic “cultural criterion” of unity in terms of a shift from narrative-driven long poems towards the more meandering productions of Romanticism. But these poems, like Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, are themselves remediations of the peripatetic georgic.

Criticism has traditionally privileged the nominal account of form over the verb, so that “form” can be treated as an extra-textual thing exerting causal force. Consequently, the “form” of a long poem becomes identical either with the community that it expresses, or with a determining abstraction or schematic in the mind of the poet. The poems surveyed here replace this notion with a view of form as change that corresponds to broader intellectual shift away from a foundationalist metaphysics of essence towards relation. The nominal “form,” characterized by urn-like thingness, underlies debates about poetic purpose and the *telos* of literary writing. Essentialist nominative formalism elevates synoptic immediacy over successive development, and consequently can only define georgic as formless. In contrast, these poems are formally methodical, in the sense that they develop a formalism of the walking path as a pleasurable, valuable end in itself. The “greater Romantic lyric” has contributed to the nominative view of form, as a fully integrated and hermetically sealed self-sustaining artifact, understood in analogy to the concept. Nominative form joins the manifold, in a synoptic instant, but the long poems of the eighteenth century present a sustained critique of this view of form launched from a position that embraces both change and contingency. In the peripatetic tradition traced here, technical practices of ordering and directing attention generate matrices of imaginative relations that move through time. The challenge these poems present to readers tasked with following their reasoning afford opportunities for thinking about Romanticism, and particularly the Romantic long poems as extending the critique of the poetics of containment witnessed here. Long poems, from the Restoration to Romanticism reconceptualize formal integrity in terms of complex systems with

principles of ordering and relation that generate self-similarity without yielding to schematism. In this view, long poems take as their central question how order emerges, and the processes through which formal organization takes place. Long form poetry constitutes a fundamental site for theorizing the emergence and maintenance of temporally extended self-similar systems. Georgic explores formally and thematically what it means for temporal and developmental entities to exhibit unity that admits of change. The coupling of intensity of focus with duration in Thomson and Cowper makes these poems fundamental technologies for understanding the working of self-similarity. Against monumentalizing ideas of form, *The Seasons* and *The Task* insist on dynamism, and it is this insistence that proved so influential for Romantic students of the eighteenth century.



## Chapter Four

### Form and Intelligibility: Blake's Theory of Vision

*The real problem, as Professor George Boas once put it to me, is not so much "What is a metaphor?" as "What is a literal statement?"* Ernst Gombrich

*A thing's being real or being an entity or being an object just consists in the fact that it has attributes.* Gilbert Ryle

*"A Griffin is a winged quadruped." The conception of being contains only that junction of predicate to subject wherein these two verbs agree.* Charles Sanders Peirce

Two prevailing, and often competing, views of form expressed in William Blake's corpus frequently divide critics of his work. The first construes form as capture or containment. According to this view, form bottles up the excess or overflow of energy that Blake identifies with life and vitality – a spontaneous, ebullient striving that form attempts to master. Forming appears as the effort to shape and direct the flow of energy in the world, and because of the check it exerts, represents a repression of the excess of creation. Forming is a power play: the ideologically motivated constraint of revolutionary and destabilizing energy. In the terms of Blake's prophetic books, it is the enchainment of Orc, and the endlessly repeated construction of a finite body for the fallen. But there is an equal, and opposite, view of form in Blake. According to the contrary perspective, form, lineation, and outline are necessary stays against the noise that threatens clarity and intelligibility. Form provides integrity and ensures continuity through time by staving off the dissolution that characterizes chaos in Blake's cosmology, and which he identifies with the dispersed condition of "Eternal Death." Form guarantees the intelligibility that

he identifies with “Vision,” by restraining entropic forces of disintegration. The problem confronting readers of Blake’s difficult texts is how to hold these presumably incommensurable views of form – form as the necessary constraint that allows for intelligibility and vision, and form as the culturally accumulated, normative oppression of productive energy – together without resorting to a symbolic synthesis, or reducing to unity the essential tension between them by prioritizing one side of the dyad at the expense of the other.

Blake’s comments on form are scattered throughout his body of work, from the intense focus on making in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the gnomic remarks in his *Descriptive Catalog* and published marginalia on contemporaries like Joshua Reynolds, to the inquiry into developmental process sustained through the prophetic books. This chapter examines the centrality of Blake’s idea of vision to his view of the body and to his practice as a mixed-media artist and engraver by looking at key moments in the *Songs*, in his published comments on artistic production, and through an extensive analysis of Blake’s difficult long poem, *Vala, Or The Four Zoas*. Many critics have identified the importance of the body to Blake while still maintaining that his notion of vision is synoptic and transcendent. The critical construction of Blake as a mystic for whom the material world obscures ideal essence overlooks the fact that Blake was never a mystic in the sense that he rejects the physical world. This critical commonplace often results from a construction of Blake’s poetic development modeled on the Virgilian *rota*: from the pastoral *Songs* through politically-inflected, didactic Lambeth prophecies to the transcendent epics, *Vala, Or The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. But this construction overlooks the way themes of embodied vision weave throughout Blake’s career. He repeatedly returns to the problematic relationship of making to vision and the thematics of inspiration that he takes up in the very first of the *Songs*. The engraver’s workshop grounds

Blake's idea of vision in a physicalist, experimentalist context, and his artistic sensibility is attuned to forms of understanding that emerge through the artisan's laborious exchange with a recalcitrant material world.

The tension in Blake's thinking about form anticipates debates about open and closed form that rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century. Reacting against the hermeticism and self-sufficiency associated with the "organic unity" of purportedly closed form, critics describe open form as permeable, inviting into the text exigencies of historical circumstance while cultivating the participation of the reader in stitching together their heterogeneity.<sup>1</sup> The caricature of closed form as artifactual, existing in the timeless, otherworldly space of art, and open form as contingent and embedded in history, overlooks the reliance of both on technical shaping and the incremental, temporally extended labor of systematic organization. In the hymn that precedes Chapter Four of *Jerusalem*, Blake writes, "I give you the end of a golden string/ Only wind it into a ball/ It will lead you in at Heavens Gate/ Built in Jerusalems Wall" (E. 231, pl. 77). The direct address ("To the Christians") puts the onus on the reader to undertake the arduous work of winding through *Jerusalem's* walls of words to achieve arrival. The difficulty of Blake's texts and their tenacious refusal of anything resembling mythopoetic closure, and his regular entreaties to the reader to bear with his wandering path makes him a forerunner of looser and more digressive kinds of long-form poetry. But Blake is also a successor to the meandering mode of

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<sup>1</sup> Critics who identify Blake as the prophet of open form include Donald Ault, who is particularly attentive to the deferral of closure in *The Four Zoas* in his *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning Blake's Four Zoas* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1987). Morton Paley sees Blake initially embracing heterodox views of history and closure, but ultimately rejecting them as he became more conventional and conservative with age, in *Energy and the Imagination: A Study of Blake's Development* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970). Steven Shaviro sees in Blake's late works intimations of the openness of deconstruction in "'Striving with Systems: Blake and the Politics of Difference,'" *boundary 2* 10.3 (1982) 229-50. More recently, Tristanne Connolly has argued that Blake's texts indulge in the open play of the "semiotic," by suspending the "lexical, syntactic, and semantic operation of deciphering," (6) in *William Blake and the Body* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002). Other critics, from Northrop Frye to Kathryn Freeman see Blake as a poet of mythopoetic totality, creating a comprehensive, inclusive cosmological system. See Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2004); and Freeman, *Blakes Nostos: Fragmentation and Nondualism in the Four Zoas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

Cowper and Thomson, whose non-narrative encyclopedic poems also apply pressure to the relationship between openness and formal closure central to much eighteenth-century aesthetic theory. Of his romantic contemporaries, Blake is the keenest reader of the georgic tradition examined above, and the innovations in his own poetry show greater affinity with the georgic poets than at first glance appears. In the opening hymn of Chapter Four, Blake constructs his invitation to the reader in what could be described as the conventional, “closed” form of ballad measure. As is common in Blake, he has toyed with the metrics of the stanza, decomposing what could be two of the irregular fourteeners that predominate in *Jerusalem* into a 4/3/4/3 stanza. The first line opens with an iamb, succeeded by two anapests, and closed with another iamb. The following three lines deviate from the regular iambic pentameter of common measure, as with the anapestic “-to a ball,” departing from what he describes, in the introductory “Letter to the Public,” as the “Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakespeare & all writers of English Blank Verse” (145). Instead, even in traditional structures like the ballad, Blake has “produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables,” to prevent the reader from too readily assimilating the lines to their habitual reading practice. As he does throughout the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, Blake has taken up a conventional form and introduced metrical variance, inviting into the opening hymn the aural pulsation and variation of the longer lines of the prophetic works in order to cultivate attention and short-circuit the anaesthetizing affect he associates with verse forms conforming to traditional expectations.

Blake’s unconventional long lines, taken with his tendency to project historical events, political upheavals, and personal enmities into the imaginative space of his mythic poems, make him a foundational figure for open, long-form poetry of a distinctly “modern” kind.<sup>2</sup> Blake’s

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Vogler, *Prelude to Vision The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

texts generate heterogeneity by allowing for incommensurable positions and contradiction, rather than prioritizing a single monomial “form.” The prophecies in particular are distinguished by their tendency to multiply perspectives, and to fragment, like the body of Albion, anything resembling a unified center. When Blake does use more traditional forms, as in the hymns that open *Milton* and the four chapters of *Jerusalem*, he subverts their conventions, drawing on certain potencies within them, like the aural qualities of common measure, for unconventional ends. Construed in this way, Blake’s open form is amenable to the various strains of antiformalism that, in Joseph North’s view, have dominated literary study since the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Blake follows the Miltonic tradition of what Susan Wolfson calls “prosody as politics,” by seeing certain conventional forms as bearers of traditional cultural and political values (77).<sup>4</sup> The idea here is that style, or technical craft can be a vehicle for supertextual, governing ideas, that at their most pernicious perpetuate broad cultural and political norms. Form can thus be a suspect predicate, since there is the assumption that reading “formally” involves grasping a textual manifold by reducing it to unity along normative lines. That unity can be construed in terms of a set of assumptions that determine in advance the shape of poetry, much as Addison’s poetic “by-way” culminated in the commonplaces of eighteenth-century virtue. Open form is pitched against this tendency towards reductionism and ideological capture.

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<sup>3</sup> North’s account in *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2018) focuses on the prevailing antiformalism of criticism and not on the poetry that challenges artifactual notions of form. But his criticism of the dominant contextualism aligns with a dominant historicist approach to Blake that interprets his formal difficulties in terms of his radical politics and the context of late-eighteenth century revolutionary upheavals. The starting point for this criticism is David Erdman’s *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954). A more recent example approaches formal complexities in Blake in terms of the history of emotions and affect theory is Steven Goldsmith’s *Blake’s Agitation: Criticism and the Emotions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). W. J. T. Mitchell criticizes the tendency to discount Blake’s formalism through by taking “refuge in a paradox and propos[ing] that the form of the poem to be some species of ‘antiform’” (165) in *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978)

<sup>4</sup> Wolfson, “Blake’s Language in Poetic Form,” *The Cambridge Companion to William Blake* ed. Morris Eaves (New York: Cambridge University Press), 63-84.

Blake's difficult, "writerly," poems make extraordinary demands on the reader, and in this way do seem to anticipate the challenging, "open" long poems of modernism.<sup>5</sup> But the characterization of Blake as prophet of open form, contesting the ideological capture of poetic productivity in form, fits Blake imperfectly. Blake frequently prioritized notions of unity and what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "linearity." "Outline is linked with permanence and recurrence in time," Mitchell explains, and is fundamental to Blake's sense of both engraved and poetic form (50). While he places the responsibility of winding the golden string on the reader, his corpus is filled with claims for the importance formal integrity and coherence to his poetic practice and his theory of vision.

Blake prioritizes an intelligible, manifest structure in visual and poetic art, which his practice of etching and manuscript production indicate he saw as complementary. In a letter to Dawson Turner, Blake writes that his designs should not be separated from their accompanying poetry, "For they when printed perfect accompany Poetical Personifications & Acts without which Poems they never could have been executed" (771). For Blake, his etched designs and poetic compositions are mutually animating practices. His ideas about form often take shape in comments and reflections on how the significant relationships between details in a "Vision," or in a "composite" work of poetic and artistic craft, are a function of the intelligibility of "Design," or the formal structure at work. Purposive integrity is essential for Blake's view of art, putting pressure on the critical commonplace that he is somehow "antiformalist." At the end of *Jerusalem*, he writes, "He who wishes to see a Vision; a perfect Whole/ Must see it in its Minute Particulars; Organizd" (91.20-21; E. 251). He goes on to distinguish "Organizd" vision from shapelessness through various crowd symbols, such as "snowy cloud; brooder of tempests,"

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Vogler argues that Blake belongs in a lineage that leads to Pound's *Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson*, and Crane's *The Bridge* in *Prelude to Vision: The Epic Venture in Blake, Wordsworth, Keats and Hart Crane* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

which he associates with “the aggregate” – a mere chaotic accumulation of indistinct stuff. The antithesis he presents is between manifestly integral experience and diffusive energy.

Blake defines “Vision” by the experience of unity and wholeness. In vision there is a felt sense of reciprocity and purposiveness. The “Minute Particulars” are organized just so, creating the “perfect whole,” which in turn provides the necessary conditions for perceiving the systematic organization of the particulars. Coming near the end of *Jerusalem*, on plate 91 of 100, the lines echo the claim in the opening “Letter to the Public,” that “Every word and letter is studied and put into its place” (pl. 4; E. 146). Such a view contradicts interpretations of Blake as an antiformalist for political and ideological reasons, as Saree Makdisi argues.<sup>6</sup> In *A Vision of the Last Judgment*, Blake makes a similarly formalist claim that art is distinguished by manifest purposive structure: “as poetry admits not a letter that is insignificant, so painting admits not a grain of sand or a blade of grass insignificant, much less an insignificant blur or mark” (E. 560). He directs a subtle jab towards his favorite punching bags, the Italian *sfumato* painters “Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt,” whom he faults with formal deficiency because they are always blurring their lines. “Till we get rid of Titian and Correggio, Rubens and Rembrandt, We never shall equal Rafael and Albert Dürer,” he writes in the *Descriptive Catalogue* (E. 530). The muscular lines of Dürer are paradigmatic for Blake. In his view, there can be nothing arbitrary or accidental in art, and his claim here, as in *Jerusalem*, challenges the characterization that Blake sees forming in terms of oppressive constraint.

Critics have often treated Blake’s celebration of revolutionary energy as an antiformalist *ars poetica*. Makdisi takes the position that form in Blake is an imposition on the anarchic

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<sup>6</sup> Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

energy of the revolutionary imagination.<sup>7</sup> From his vantage within the Lambeth books of the 1790s, when Blake begins working on his prophecies, Makdisi says that Blake rejects not just conventional forms, but any constraint imposed on revolutionary energy. But there is sufficient reason to be skeptical of this view. Makdisi sees Orc as the embodiment of energy, and argues that his repeated chaining in the Lambeth prophecies constitutes a critique of traditional forms and modes of experience as binding revolutionary futurity. Makdisi connects Orc to freedom and desire, and describes Blake's view of freedom as "freedom into the infinite and away from the finitude of the 'world of liveness'" (69). But this claim overlooks Blake's close association of formlessness and dispossession with chaos and "Eternal Death." The discordant impulses in Blake dramatize the difficulty of balancing an enabling constraint against the need for dynamism. This problem is particularly acute in Blake, but it is not original to him. Constraint, and particularly constraint as manifested formally in poetry, often derives from tradition and culture – like the "monotonous cadence" Blake attributes to iambic pentameter. Blake's obscure, seemingly private mythmaking suggests a rejection of inherited, conventional forms of organization like meter, narrative, self-consistent character, and unified perspective. But Blake never rejects constraint as such – only derivative, conventional, or "bonified" forms of it. Makdisi argues that Blake's "form of freedom," is incompatible with any kind of constriction, but a fuller account of Blake's theory of vision has to attend to his repeated emphasis on forming: "What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery but the hard and wiry line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions. Leave out this line and you leave out life itself; all is chaos again" (E. 550). Blake sounds here like a traditional formalist, and insists on certainty as a function of clear delineation. His theory of vision and its complementary view of

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<sup>7</sup> The politics of Blake's formal innovations is the focus of Makdisi's *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s*. Makdisi takes a critical view of form and, consistent with the dominant contextualist paradigm, construes form in terms of ideological capture.

form, demand a definition of form amenable to the dynamism and energy that he privileges, but that can also account for his insistence on line and definition.

Like most Blakean contraries, his view of form resists reduction to unity. “The bounded,” Blake writes, “is loathed by its possessor. The same dull round, even of a universe, would soon become a mill with complicated wheels” (“There is no natural religion b”; E. 2). At 100 plates, organized through patterns of echo, subject rhyme, and aperiodic “emanations,” and bookended by claims about the purposive integrity of the visionary work of art, *Jerusalem* has been read as just such a bounded universe.<sup>8</sup> But the formal problem articulated in *Jerusalem*’s opening letter, and in remarks and claims scattered throughout Blake’s published writing and personal correspondence, is of the proper ratio of openness to integrity. Too much porosity and text dissolves in noise. Too much integrity and it falls into repetition of the “same dull round,” repeating step for step the steps taken by earlier poets, artists, and craftsmen. Under the accumulated weight of the technical traditions of engraving and writing poetry, Blake comes to resemble the bounded form of Orc, struggling against accretions of tradition, culture, and history. The formal problem here is of the relation between tradition and spontaneity that in the eighteenth-century was closely associated with theories of genius.<sup>9</sup> “Blake seems so original because – to invoke Eliot’s paradox in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – he is so deeply traditional” (Mitchell, 14).<sup>10</sup> As a dedicated craftsman with a uniquely material sense of artistry,

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<sup>8</sup> According to Frye, *Jerusalem* proceeds towards apocalyptic closure, and the imaginative redemption of the world brought about by Los, Blake’s hero and archetype for the poetic imagination. Frye’s view of Blake’s work as “anagogic,” means the poems culminate in the transcendent. Paraphrasing Dante, Frye writes, “All moral, historical, political, biographical and other ‘interpretations’ should lead us directly from the superficial to the complete apprehension of the same thing, the single image of reality which the work of art is” (121) in *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969).

<sup>9</sup> The notion of genius is central to Young’s “Conjectures on Original Composition,” and takes a central position in Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, where the archetypal poet-genius is John Milton.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell, *Blake’s Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry*, (Princeton University Press: 1983).

Blake dramatically displays the struggles of receiving a technical culture of composition while exerting the freedom and spontaneity within it that distinguish artistic achievement.

The essential tension in Blake's work between tradition and spontaneity, which I have also characterized in terms of an opposition between formalist and antiformalist characterizations of his work, anticipates contemporary disputes about form. On the antiformalist side of the dyad are views that emphasize diffusive energy and spontaneous productivity unchecked by notions of propriety or integrity. On the formalist side are positive valuations of the attention-directing and selective force of form. These tensions come to a head in Blake, and are inherited by post-Romantic literary criticism. But as I have previously pointed out, the tension between the drive to order, and the challenges of generating novelty from inherited cultural practices are central the compost poetics of eighteenth-century georgic. Blake receives this problem, and is often more a product of the eighteenth-century than is acknowledged.<sup>11</sup> But what is uniquely useful about Blake is how he takes up eighteenth-century problems pertaining to the integrity of meandering, non-narrative poetry, and focuses his vision on the enactive labor of forming itself. Forming is allied to vision in Blake, as the action through which "minute particulars" are seen not as "bounded" but "organized." When Blake writes, at the end of *Jerusalem*, that he who would see a vision, "must see it in its minute particulars; organized," he is asserting that vision is a form of *poiesis*. Vision is thrown back on the reader as the line-by-line organization of materials into an experience of a "perfect Whole." Vision in Blake is about active reading as the analog to his

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<sup>11</sup> There is a critical tendency to either dissolve Blake back into his literary and cultural milieu, as Kathleen Raine does, presenting him as more conventional and traditional than typically recognized, and an opposite tendency to project Blake into the future by presenting him as out of step with his time, and much closer to experimental twentieth and twenty-first century poets. For the former tendency, see Raine, *Blake and the Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), and Mitchell *Blake's Composite Art* (1978). For the latter tendency, see Tobias Wolff, "Being Several: Reading Blake with Ed Roberson" in *NLH* 49.4 (2018) 553-78. The truth lies somewhere between these polemical positions.

material practice of painting and acid-etching copper plates. Reading and etching come together as the techniques of forming – the *poesis* of actively constructing vision.

### Vision, Realism and Common Sense

Like the tensions in his work surrounding form, Blake's theory of vision has roots in the eighteenth century. The interpretation of Blake as a mystic has led to his association with figures like Paracelsus, Jacob Boehme, Emanuel Swedenborg, and his contemporary the neoplatonist Thomas Taylor.<sup>12</sup> This interpretation overlooks the rich connections between Blake and eighteenth-century realist philosophy. To understand what Blake is after with vision requires reevaluating his relationship to the philosophical traditions of materialism that emerged during the eighteenth century. Pamela Smith argues that the mystic reading of Paracelsus and Boehme overlooks how their ideas are grounded in the vernacular epistemology of the artisanal workshop, and the materialist sensibilities of incipient experimentalism.<sup>13</sup> In similar fashion, interpreting Blake as a mystic often comes at the expense of his common sense materialism, and the roots of his artistic practice in his apprenticeship and employment as a commercial engraver. The eighteenth-century produced two descriptive traditions, with distinct and often competing theories of vision. The first, which I have connected with the aesthetic program of Joseph Addison, and which developed on the principles of Lockean epistemology, is represented by the emblematic poetics of Denham and Pope. Hilary Putnam describes the pervasive Lockean theory of perception as involving two fundamental assumptions: "(1) we receive 'impressions,' which are immaterial, totally different – and separated by a metaphysical gulf in fact – from all the

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<sup>12</sup> Paley in particular studies the affinities between Boehme and Blake in *Energy and the Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970).

<sup>13</sup> Smith, (2004) 155-82.

objects we normally claim to perceive; and (2) from the character of our internal mental impressions, we infer how things are in the external physical world” (156).<sup>14</sup> The inference from mind to world is a matter of faith, and the correspondence between the two is problematic. The mind, Addison says, “requires something more perfect in matter than what it finds there, and can never meet with any sight in Nature which sufficiently answers its highest ideas of pleasantness.”<sup>15</sup> Corresponding to this epistemology, the descriptive practice of the dominant line of eighteenth-century visual culture emphasizes the generalizability of details and their arrangement in a system of pointing at conventional truths and moral axioms. Joshua Reynolds gives this aesthetic theory its clearest articulation when he writes, “The disposition to abstractions, to generalizing and classification, is the great glory of the human mind.” In the margins of this claim, Blake responds, “To Generalize is to be an idiot. . . . General knowledges are those knowledges idiots possess” (E. 649). For Reynolds and the Lockean aesthetic tradition he draws on, art should aim for generally communicable ideas by sublimating particularity, and smoothing out the irregular or deviant. Reynolds models aesthetic experience on the empiricist theory of mind that proceeds from particular to general along a “by-way,” parallel to normal cognition.

Reynold’s aesthetic idealism is based on a set of beliefs about how the mind works, and the role of representation in cognition. In the dominant eighteenth-century view that Reynolds endorses, all thought occurs in a generalized picture language, or in representations of the external world that, in their truest form, are ideal and irreducible to particular examples. Hubert Dreyfus describes this “epistemological view of mind,” as dominating philosophy since early modernity, expressing the view “that the mind consists of set of ideas, analogous to images or

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<sup>14</sup> Putnam, “Pragmatism and Realism,” in *Cardoza Law Review* 18 (1996) 153-170.

<sup>15</sup> *Spectator* 418.

descriptions, that represent the outside world and may correspond or fail to correspond to what is actually out there in the world. The mind is a set of representations, and through these representations, the person knows and relates to the world” (*Skillful Coping* 169). The correspondence of mentalistic representations with the material world defines empirical knowledge, but how the identity of ideal pictures with their corpuscular causes might occur remains an unresolved problem in eighteenth-century epistemology, and the aesthetics that emerge with it. The correlation of immaterial, generally applicable representations to objects is problematic. Putnam describes the representational view of cognition dominant in both Cartesian and Lockean epistemology as “a picture according to which our sensations are as much an impassible barrier between ourselves and the objects we perceive as a mode of access to them” (153). The difficulty, if not impossibility, of coordinating a world of subjects with one of corpuscular objects leads to the solipsism of Bishop Berkeley’s immaterial ideas in one’s head, on the one hand, and the skepticism resulting from Hume’s critique on the other.

The widespread view that thinking involves the manipulation of mimetic pictures within the mind, in analogy to viewing images in a *camera obscura*, finds expression in aesthetic theory from Addison to Reynolds. I have called this the tradition of aesthetic idealism. For these theorists, fictional or literary writing is distinguished from scientific or theological speculation by the aesthetic “by-way,” a circumlocution that, analogously to natural philosophy and theology, aims at the truth but does it at a slant. Aesthetic representation expresses ideas and eternal verities, like other forms of writing, but its means are descriptive and digressive. The pleasure of literature results from its temporary suspension of the communicative purpose of language, but according to Addison that suspension serves the higher purpose of enticing the reader to accept the didactic precepts intended by the artist. Description launches the mind on an

associative by-way that culminates in and is superseded by ideas made intelligible through the associative succession. Aesthetic contemplation issues in the ideal on the model of how general ideas emerge from a sequence of mechanical cause-effect reactions, from the brute impact of colorless corpuscles on the passive sensorium to their gradual refinement into generally applicable, mental images. Under this view, which Thomas Reid calls the pervasive “way of ideas,” the shared world of embodied experience recedes, replaced by the private, noetic space of relations between images.

What Reid characterized as the “ideal system” and its associated aesthetic theory was contested by a project of realism, literalism and common sense naturalism, developed in long-form descriptive poems of the period, especially georgic. Georgic aesthetics, with roots in the concretizing poetics of Milton and Marvell, might also be described, as a program of anti-mimetic realism. The paradoxical formulation captures the rejection of mimetic theories of art and sensation by georgic poets, and their reorientation towards a view of experience as *poesis*, or enactive making. In contrast to the mimetic *camera obscura* model of experience, in which a stable and immobile subject arrays the physical world around them by fixing mentalistic images of that world, the embodied and perambulatory perspective developed in georgic testifies to how sense experience is actively organized and cultivated through embodied, reciprocal exchange with a shared physical world. Where the aesthetics of Addison and Pope aim at generality, the tradition of georgic anti-mimetic realism is characterized by attention to processes and techniques of sensible experience, and a reorientation away from “knowing-that,” towards what Jaako Hintikka has called “knowing-how.”<sup>16</sup> The literary tradition of embodied perception, exemplified in James Thomson’s *Seasons* and William Cowper’s *Task*, has a philosophical

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<sup>16</sup> Hintikka, “Plato on Knowing That, Knowing How, and Knowing What,” in *Knowledge and the Known: Historical Perspectives in Epistemology* (1974)

analogy in the work of Reid. Reid's critique of the "way of ideas," and insistence on a form of direct realism is entangled with strains of eighteenth-century aesthetics that contest idealist approaches to art and experience, that also anticipates contemporary ecological approaches to perception.<sup>17</sup> For Reid, perceptual experience involves making contact with a world populated not by hermetic subjects and corpuscular objects, but by the publicly available affordances and perceptual constancies that together constitute a shared material world.<sup>18</sup>

Direct realism advances the common sense view that human perception accesses the physical world without diverting through ideas. It is not, as Putnam says, "a particular metaphysical theory; rather it is our implicit and everyday conviction that in experience we are immediately aware of such common objects as trees and buildings" (153). Experience involves "sensings of what is there," rather than the manipulation of ideal representations. "The Theory of Ideas," Reid writes, "like the Trojan Horse, had a specious appearance both of innocence and beauty; but if those philosophers had known that it carried in its belly death and destruction to all common sense, they would not have broken down their walls to give it admittance" (*Inquiry*, 75-6). Reid regularly expresses shock at the acceptance in the history of philosophy of the idea that experience only accesses mediating representations of an external world, and not the world itself. Wilfrid Sellars has queried the usefulness of the idea of a picture language that is somehow prior

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<sup>17</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce writes, "Every philosopher who denies the doctrine of Immediate Perception – including idealists of every stripe – cuts off all possibility of ever cognizing a relation" in "Of Phenomenology" in *The Essential Peirce* Vol. 2 (155). Peirce recognizes Reid's theory of direct perception as a forerunner to his own, and Reid's naturalism is a starting point for philosophers of empiricism and sense experience from Wilfrid Sellars and Putnam, to John McDowell, Willem de Vries, and John Searle. See the essays collected in *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity, and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Willem de Vries (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For the debt owed to Reid by contemporary realist and ecological approaches to sense, see James Van Cleve's recent *Problems from Reid* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). J. J. Gibson credits Reid with breaking new ground, including in the distinction he introduced into philosophy for the first time between sensation and perception.

<sup>18</sup> Gibson explains that "the affordances of things is what gets attended to," further specifying, "affordances for manipulation, locomotion, nutrition, and social interaction," in "Notes on Direct Perception and Indirect Apprehension," *Reasons for Realism: Selected Essays of James J. Gibson* (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982) 289-95.

to generalization, like Locke's simple ideas, but also at least partially conceptual. "Is it genuinely necessary," Sellars asks, "to interpose non-conceptual representation as states of consciousness between the physical impact of the sensory stimulus and the conceptual representations . . . which find verbal expression, actually or potentially, in perceptual statements" (21). Sellars' comments draw on the critical tradition Reid inaugurates. The conceptual richness of sensation threatens to cut off human experience from contact with the shared physical world by replacing it with a normative categorial framework of general ideas or representations.<sup>19</sup>

Reid deserves credit for the novelty of the critique of what he contends is a ubiquitous and unquestioned assumption in modern philosophy, with roots in antiquity. James Van Cleve summarizes Reid's direct realism as the view that "I do not perceive something directly if I perceive it only by perceiving something else that is not a part of it" (84). The "indirect realism" of Descartes and Locke, who (unlike Berkeley) still believe in a real world beyond human sensings, holds that humans do not encounter that world directly, but only through representations that are not "a part of it" because they are substantially distinct from the scentless, colorless corpuscles whose impact on the sensorium provides the "given" of sense experience.<sup>20</sup> Van Cleve writes that "the theory of ideas cuts us off from the direct perception of the external world because there is no external world to be perceived, or because our perception of it is indirect – not strictly perception at all, in Reid's view, but only an inference based on

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<sup>19</sup> The equivocation between "idea" and "representation" or "image" in empiricist phenomenology after Locke exemplifies the problem Sellars names. While "idea" is often placed on the general end of the spectrum at the furthest remove from pre-conceptual, corpuscular nature, image and representation are placed closer to the ground story of experience. But they manner in which they blur into one another is the source of considerable difficulty. For an account of the contamination of the "ground story," by the upper levels of conceptual experience (the metaphor is Dreyfus's) see Dreyfus, "Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit From the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise," in *Skillful Coping: Essays on the Phenomenology of Everyday Perception and Action* (2014) 104-126

<sup>20</sup> For the canonical critique of the idea of "the given" in phenomenology, see Sellars, "The Myth of the Given: Three Lectures on Empiricism and Philosophy of Mind," published as chapter one in *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, under the title "An Ambiguity in Sense-Datum Theories" (1997) 13-24.

what we do perceive, namely, ideas” (58). For Reid, “Ideas,” as conventionally construed, are a veil. They conceal the world, the existence of which must be inferred from the given of sense data. Where all experience is through immaterial ideas, Reid sees the inference from noemata to world as problematic, and, like Hume, a function of culturally accumulated, habitual association. But, unlike Hume, Reid rejects the skepticism that is an inevitable consequence of the ideal system. Rather than questioning the existence of the world Reid rejects the way of ideas.

Sensible experience is not mediated by mentalistic images. By focusing on the retinal image, visual theory becomes fixated on the idea of a mimetic, synoptic doubling of the environment. Reid holds that humans deal with a shared physical world that is navigated directly, not through an ideal or mentalistic interface.<sup>21</sup> Reid’s realism is not naïve, nor does he have recourse to a model of intellectual intuition. Sensible experience is mediated by the biological constraints of the human sensorium, but Reid rejects that sense experience depends on the mimetic reproduction of pictures of the world. Copenhave joins Van Cleve in arguing that admitting the mediating functions of sensation and the forms human sensibility does not make one an indirect realist, or undermine the claims that sense experience makes contact with the shared physical world. The relationship of the conceptual and categorial to perception remains an unresolved problem in Reid (as it does for contemporary philosophy of mind). The solutions he offers for how human knowledge makes contact with the material world remain as unsatisfying as Descartes’s beneficent God and Leibniz’s preestablished harmony. There remains in Reid an unresolved tension between sensation, a form of preconceptual contact with the world of sense experience, and perception, which has categorial and normative force.<sup>22</sup> Dreyfus describes this

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<sup>21</sup> What shows up for an animal in sensory experience,” Jonathan Kramnick writes, “shows up directly without a representational interface, and . . . acts of perceiving involve a moving body, not fixed points” (*Paper Minds* 11).

<sup>22</sup> Dreyfus reviews the still unsettled state of this debate in contemporary philosophy in “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise” in *Skilled Coping*.

unresolved problem as “the question of how conceptual content arises from nonconceptual content” (120). In Wilfrid Sellars’ words, the problem is of how the “this-suches,” of sense are “conceptually rich, even ‘theory laden,’ and presuppose the predicative use of general representations” (14).<sup>23</sup> “There is no operation of the mind,” Reid argues, “without conception” (*E.I.P.* 4.1:296). Reid wants to maintain a world of physical experience, but he also acknowledges the role that normative categories, culturally accumulated ways of seeing, and historically entrained, perceptual responses play in sense experience. The realist tradition that developed in the eighteenth century affords an alternative way to understand human interaction with the material world that can illuminate some of the complicated contradictions in Blake’s work.

Blake seems an unlikely candidate for association with either common sense philosophy, or with direct realism. He regularly insists that the senses derange and enclose humans, cutting them off from the world of “Eternity,” rather than granting access to the world. He laments how humans are contained within the “vegetative” world of the Mundane Shell, a hardened, protective coating that contracts human experience. In *Milton*, Erin laments the fallen condition of humanity, “shut in narrow doleful form!/ Creeping in reptile flesh upon the bosom of the ground!/ The Eye of Man, a little narrow orb, closd up & dark,/ Scarcely beholding the Great Light” (E 198, 49.32-35). Here, as elsewhere in Blake, the body and its natural limits cut humanity off from divinity. Blake’s hostility to everyday deployments of sense, and his praise of the visionary can be read as an endorsement of transcendence and a commitment to the ideal at

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Dreyfus argues that John McDowell’s claim in *Mind and World* that experience is categorial “all the way out,” (11) resuscitates a form of cognitivism and idealism that he intends to counter the naïve naturalism of positivist phenomenology. See McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>23</sup> Sellars, *Science and Metaphysics: Variations on Kantian Themes* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968). For a recent treatment of the problem of “the given,” and the “categorial,” or “conceptually rich,” quality of sensation that draws heavily on Sellars, see Ray Brassier, “Concepts and Objects” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (2011) eds. Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harmon.

the expense of the material world. Morton Paley has said that Blake is ultimately unable to free himself from dualistic metaphysics, and while there are intimations of nondualism, especially in the early works like “Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” Blake ultimately retreats to a more conventional Christian diminishment of the physical world. Paley suggests that for Blake, vision involves breaking out of the constrictions of the material, vegetative world to access, however momentarily, the transcendent. The critical tendency is to view Blake’s comments on the body in the context of his dramatic poems as propositions about how the material world obscures the spiritual one.

Blake’s views of sense experience are caught up with his view of form. In addition to the composition of bodies by various proxy-maker in his poems, there are also makers who build entire systems and worlds, like the “Mundane Shell.” The “Mundane Shell,” is the world within which humans live their lives, but it isn’t identical to the shared physical world. Rather, it is analogous to the “system of ideas,” a set of mentalistic abstractions that stabilize the dynamic physical world. “In every species of Earth, Metal, Tree, Fish, Bird & Beast/ We form the Mundane Egg” (E 122, 1.41-2). In this view, the Mundane Shell or Egg (Blake uses the terms interchangeably), is not the physical world, but it is the obstacles to sense and attention erected by habitual task-oriented uses of sense. “Every species of Earth” domesticates and habituates the world along conventional pathways, and in accordance with the imperatives of survival. Nelson Goodman writes that “with repetition,” or habitual association, the “transferred application of a schema becomes routine, and no longer requires any allusion to its base application. What was novel becomes commonplace, its past forgotten” (80).<sup>24</sup> Sense loses its link to its grounding in the shared material world. The mind stabilizes world of experience so that task-oriented activity doesn’t bog down in unnecessary detail.

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<sup>24</sup> Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

Successful existence in the world depends on disciplined sensitivity to those things necessary to survive, or what Gibson calls “affordances.” The complete set of all possible optic arrays, Gibson explains, “is potential stimulation, and the actual or effective stimuli for a particular animal or man will always fall short of it no matter how thoroughly he inspects his part of the world. The notion of an unlimited reservoir of potential stimuli for the eyes to explore is a very fruitful one for visual theory” (65). Biologically and culturally accumulated ways of seeing do not exhaust the physical world and can, instead, come to present an obstacle to exploring what is actually there for perception. It is in this sense, rather than as conventionally dualist, that Blake’s comments on “melting apparent surfaces away and displaying the infinite which was hid” should be read (E. 38). The world of experience is inexhaustible; it is the conventional entrainment of seeing that suggests a world of simple objects. “It is one thing to have the sensation and another thing to attend to it, and make it a distinct object of reflection,” Reid explains. “The first is very easy; the last, in most cases extremely difficult. We are so accustomed to use the sensation as a sign and to pass immediately to the hardness signified that, as far as it appears, it was never made an object of thought” (*I.H.M.* 5.2.56). Attending to how experience is organized opens up possibilities for noticing and attending to features of the environment occluded by habitual familiarity. Leo Damrosch says that when Blake criticizes the constraints the material world exerts on the supersensible vocation of human imagining, “his real target is often mistaken human constructions of nature” (232).<sup>25</sup> The target of Blake’s critique is how conventionalized representations, or the “way of ideas,” intervene between the individual and the world and by doing so circumscribe sensings of what is there to fit culturally accreted modes of experience.

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<sup>25</sup> Damrosch, *Eternity’s Sunrise: The Imaginative World of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

The consensus view of Blake's theory of vision sees Blake in idealist, Romantic terms. Earl Wasserman says flatly that "Blake was an idealist," and argues that his "allegorical figures are drawn from his world of 'vision' and not from the 'prison' of the senses" (436).<sup>26</sup> Mitchell agrees, describing the products of Blake's "intellectual vision," as "pictorial ideas," and treating Blake's image-making in terms of epiphanic vision (19). This view finds support in some of Blake's treatment of embodiment in the prophetic books, and in elliptical claims in the marginalia, the *Vision of the Last Judgment* and *Descriptive Catalogue*. These statements often hinge on a distinction between perceptions of "Eternity," and the finite glimpses of the "Corporeal understanding." For instance, alongside Lavater's 407<sup>th</sup> aphorism, which reads "Whatever is visible is the vessel or veil of the invisible past, present, and future – as man penetrates to this more or perceives it less he raises or depresses his dignity of being," Blake jots, "A vision of the Eternal Now" (592). The aphorism suggests that what appears in experience is a temporary concrescence or veil (a term central to Blake's later work, but around which there is little critical consensus) that needs to be penetrated in order to grasp the permanent substratum of being that underlies the endless unfoldings of becoming.<sup>27</sup> Piercing the deceptive and transient surface of things, Lavater claims, elevates and ennobles vision. The aphorism encapsulates a dualist view of sensible experience by suggesting that the world offered by sense is contingent and deceptive: "For now we see through a glass darkly."<sup>28</sup> The visible world is an encrustation on the permanent or essential, that which endures as the "invisible past, present, and future" as an essential substratum. Blake's marginal comment responds to Lavater's description by characterizing visionary experience as a glimpse of the "Eternal Now." But it is hard to

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<sup>26</sup> Wasserman, "The Inherent Values of Eighteenth-Century Personification" in *PMLA* 1 (1950) 435-463.

<sup>27</sup> On the veil in Blake's late works, see Paley, "The Figure of the Garment in *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*" in *Blake's Sublime Allegory*

<sup>28</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:12 King James Version.

determine whether Blake is offering a rejoinder to or an endorsement of Lavater's view. If the former, his claim about the "Eternal Now" would seem to be a statement about attention. Experience is cluttered by culturally accumulated ways of seeing that organize sense along normative pathways. If the gloss is read as an uncritical endorsement, Blake's comment might suggest that "vision of the Eternal Now," involves penetrating the "vessel or veil" in order to see what is occluded by contingent surfaces. There are remarks consistent with a dualist view of the sensible world like this scattered throughout Blake's corpus that could affirm Wasserman's characterization of Blake as idealist. But Blake's early and vociferous criticisms of the conventional dyads of Christian dualism challenge this perspective.

The difficulties of interpreting Blake's marginal comments, which often involve a *sic et non* dialogue with his textual interlocutors, are exacerbated by the effort of pinning down Blake's view of "Eternity," or reconciling it with a conventional metaphysics. While Blake may sometimes suggest a view amenable to the mystical neoplatonism of contemporaries like Thomas Taylor, who sees the physical world as a shadow of the permanent and transcendent one, there are many occasions where he mocks the same notion. In *Europe*, for instance, Enitharmon calls on Rintrah and Palamabron to spread the nets of organized religion. "Go," she orders them, "tell the human race that Woman's love is sin/ That an eternal life awaits the worm of sixty winters/ In an allegorical abode where existence hath never come/ Forbid all joy" (pl. 5.5-8; E. 62). These lies comprise Enitharmon's net, which rhymes with Urizen's "Web of religion" in *The Four Zoas*. The dramatic context of the statement suggests we should view it skeptically, rather than as a statement of Blake's own views of embodiment. Blake regards the view that sexual desire, and especially feminine sexuality, is a source of degradation that must be mastered by reason as a mystification perpetrated by patriarchal religious hierarchy. In this case, religious dualism cuts

humans off from their own bodies and their most immediate sources of pleasure and meaning. The deceit of conventional religion is to equate embodied existence to a worm-like state that culminates in a redemptive allegorical world.

Blake associates allegory with mystery and deception, and he here casts doubt on transcendence. In the *Descriptions of the Last Judgment*, he describes allegory as fabulist, “formed by the daughters of memory,” and a function of mechanical association (E. 554). Ernst Gombrich says that the legibility of allegory depends on a complex of culturally accumulated associations, without which the figures become illegible. Gombrich calls aggregated representational practices “programmes,” composed of consolidated visual motifs and figures sufficiently conventionalized to produce generic types and schematics. An allegorical “programme” is an implicit semantic code that dictates in advance the meaning of the elements in an image. Although visual allegory does not have dictionary-like reference, because it derives “definite meaning from its context,” its legibility depends on its position within a tacit, normative visual culture.<sup>29</sup> Blake claims that allegory is a function of habitual, remembered association, as distinguished from vision, which comes from “the Daughters of Inspiration” (E. 554). By connecting the view of worldly existence as degradation with the allegorical perspective, which raises “nets in every secret path,” Blake counters the characterization of “Eternity” as transcendent and accessible only by surmounting the “vegetative world.” In the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* Blake says, “Energy is Eternal Delight” (pl. 3; E. 34). As Paley has shown, energy in Blake is connected with endless development and dynamism. The ceaselessly motive

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<sup>29</sup> Gombrich calls this the “institutional function of images,” and argues that the visual culture of an allegorical “programme” exerts a normative function of image-making by dictating in advance a set of assumptions and associations baked into what he characterizes as a “genre.” “Iconology must start with a study of institutions rather than with a study of symbols,” he argues, since institutions are like a cookbook “that tells us how meals are conventionally composed” (*Symbolic Images* 21). This view of image-making is the one Blake pitches himself and his theory against most vigorously.

force of energy implies constant change and growth. The conventional associations of allegory, like ideas that ossify into the “Mundane Egg,” stymie the motive force of energy. Blake’s emphasis on dynamism complicates the sense of eternity that emerges through his work, since for Blake eternity is connected with endlessly flowing energy. Only the dead are static.

### Energy and the Body

Blake’s theory of vision joins the lawful regularity associated with “Eternity” to the dynamism of change. A consequence of Blake’s theory of vision is his view of the body. Sometimes the body is seen as an ossifying constraint, and a withdrawal from the circulation of energy, as in Erin’s lament cited above. But at others the body is the enabling form that counters the dissolution of “Eternal Death.” “More extensive/ Than any other earthly things,” Blake writes in *Milton*, “are Mans earthly lineaments” (pl. 21.20-11; E. 115). Blake’s Eternity has no truck with fixity, which is incompatible with the dynamism that characterizes embodied existence. Tristanne Connolly argues that Blake’s view of the body is rife with contradiction. Erin’s lament in *Milton* proceeds from the limits of the eye through the rest of the senses: “Conversing with the Void/ The ear, a little shell in small volutions shutting out/ All melodies & comprehending only Discord and Harmony/ The Tongue a little moisture fills, a little food it cloys/ A little sound it utters and its cries are faintly heard” (pl. 5.23-26; E. 99). Erin laments the constraint and limitation of existence in a body. Bodies limit human experience for the “worm of sixty winters,” equipped with dull senses that seem to undermine humanity’s supersensible vocation: “Can such an Eye judge of the stars? & looking thro its tubes/ Measure the sunny rays that point their spears on Udan Adan/ Can such an Ear filld with the vapours of the yawning pit/

Judge of the pure melodious harp struck by a hand divine?/ Can such closed nostrils feel a joy? or tell of autumn fruits/ When grapes and figs burst their covering to the joyful air/ Can such a Tongue boast of the living waters? or take in/ Ought but the vegetable ratio?" (pl.5.28-35). The interrogative mood here emphasizes the inadequacy of human sense to compass creation.

Referring to eyes as "tubes," Erin implicates mechanical enhancements like telescopes and microscopes to suggest that they don't overcome the deficiencies of perception. Eyes see within a narrow spectrum, cluttered by habit. Ears become clogged with noise, unable to distinguish divine melody from the din of the fallen sensorium. The synesthesia of ears snuffing "vapours" and eyes taking measurement shows the sensorium to be all mixed up. As the passage proceeds, the challenge to judge the stars is brought down to the body, and the difficulty of being physically present to an environment where ripening fruits perfume the air and sensuous richness threatens to go unnoticed. The passage queries what is responsible for the anesthetic response to natural vibrancy, and whether the fault lies in the body's deficiencies, or in "vegetable ratio," as a conceptually predetermined responsiveness to the world that delimits human experience.

The questioning here recalls Blake's line of inquiry in "The Tyger," and the imagery of sunny rays throwing down their spears rhymes with the image at the dramatic center of that poem. The view expressed by Erin seems to connect Blake to the tradition of Romantic transcendence. Nicholas Williams summarizes, "For much of the history of commentary on Blake's works, the focus on the difficulty of being born into the body has underwritten the view that Blake looks beyond that body to a spiritual experience unclogged by physical obstructions" (488).<sup>30</sup> But as Hazard Adams has pointed out, Blake rejects idealist, Romantic theories of experience, and shows a closer affiliation with eighteenth-century craft traditions of manual

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<sup>30</sup> Williams, "Blake Dead or Alive," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 63.4 (2009) 486-498

dexterity and embodied know-how than with the speculative theories that dominated Romanticism.<sup>31</sup>

As Blake's central conceit, whether in the "Giant Forms" of his Zoas, or in the figure of the man-as-cosmos of Albion, the body is central to his theory of art and to his idea of vision as a craft-like process. Like Erin, who characterizes the body as a hindering constraint, Blake's Milton, addressing Ololon, says "This is a false Body: an Incrustation over my Immortal/ Spirit; a Selfhood, which must be put off & annihilated always/ To cleanse the Face of my Spirit by Self-Examination" (40:34-36; E. 142). Milton seems to be calling for an apocalypse, a literal lifting of the veil so he can see clearly. However, Milton's sight is obscured here by "The Reasoning Power in Man," not the narrow "tubes" of his physical eyes. " "This," not the physical body, Milton says, "is a false Body." The shadowy productions of reason obtrude, and the false body generated from within, like the spider-silk of Urizen's web in *The Four Zoas*, connects to the Mundane Shell, that "vast concave Earth: an immense/ Hardend shadow of all things upon our vegetated earth" (pl.17.22-22; E. 110). The language of adumbration and unreality distinguishes the productions of reason when they are cut off from common humanity and confined within a private mental world. Erin echoes Milton's sentiment when she connects Urizen's "Striving to create a heaven in which all shall be pure & holy/ In their Own Selfhoods" to becoming the "One Great Satan/ Inslavd to the most powerful Selfhood" (E 198 49.26-7, 30).

The Mundane Shell and Urizen's web are both examples of formative energy subverted into an oppressive drive to stabilize and contract. Makdisi critiques this kind of forming as "the process by which the 'infinite' is bounded, limited, and restricted by organ-ization into simultaneously physiological and psychological entities, limited into units by the five

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<sup>31</sup> Adams, "The Marriage of Imagination and Intellect," *Thinking Through Blake: Essays in Literary Contrariety* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2014) 171-83.

physiological senses” (41). For Makdisi, the archetypal examples of creative energy turned to controlling and domineering ends are Los’s enchainment of Orc in the Lambeth books, and its later analogy in his building a fallen body for Urizen in *Vala, or The Four Zoas*. The view that any constraint on the flow of energy represents an enemy to revolutionary becoming finds some support in Blake’s prophetic books. Particularly, Blake’s repeated scenes of embodiment, which feature language of violence and torment, connect to his descriptions of building the mundane shell and spinning webs and veils in a way that could be interpreted as aligning forming with contraction.

According to Makdisi, Blake counters the impulse towards “Organ-ization,” by embracing self-loss in revolutionary collectivism. Collective, “fierce rushing” emerges in violent crowd symbols: the cataclysms, fires, and enshrouding smoke of Orc. It is the unfettered energy that Blake imagines smashing the charters that circumscribe the Thames – a figure for the energetic potency of British literary and intellectual culture at least as far back as Denham – and usher in a new era characterized by revolutionary futurity. But Blake’s radicalism – his emphasis on spontaneity and unconstrained, violent energy – has, like most things in Blake, another side. The poet-engraver educes form, “by printing in the infernal method, by corrosives, which in Hell are salutary and medicinal, melting apparent surfaces away, and displaying the infinite which was hid” (*MHH* 39). The view expressed here connects to Milton’s desire to purge off the “Selfhood,” in order to “cleanse the face of my Spirit by Self-Examination” (E 142). Giving form by corrosive education construes forming as a practice of selective elimination, a kind of precise and manually guided constraint of what enters into the field of vision. What is particularly challenging about Blake’s subtractive formalism is that it can sound like purging off particularity and contingency in favor of spiritual, ideal vision, which would be a view consistent

with the visual program of eighteenth-century scientific representation, and the notion that the sage eye is capable of perceiving the general beneath mutable surfaces. But this reading is incommensurable with Blake's comments on generalization and his insistence on minute detail and particularity. The eduction view of form that develops alongside Blake's material practice of acid-relief etching, contrasts to the more conventional *intaglio* method of inscription where the schematic is impressed into the receptive copper.<sup>32</sup> In *intaglio*, form is imposed rather than drawn out.

The acid-relief theory of form as constraint and subtraction has certain resonances with Keats' negative capability and Coleridge's notion of "suspension," but for Blake this is a physical practice deeply connected with technical know-how and manual dexterity. This view of form as subtractive eduction appears discordant with Blake's emphasis on surging energy. In *Four Zoas* the fierce rushing cataclysms kill indiscriminately, dragging in their wake the bloated corpses of king and yeoman alike and overthrowing charters that direct the Thames just as they direct human behavior in "London." Does Blake endorse a violent purge of existing social order? Makdisi's claim about Blake's radicalism, and his enthusiastic view of "fierce rushing" that smashes all constraint is dissonant with Blake's linearity, and with the disciplined, subtractive formalism of his etching technique. The dissolution that counters "organ-ization" may exhibit primal, unbridled energy, but it is also indiscriminately destructive of art.

Like the acid-etched line, the body in Blake is a form of constraint that makes possible certain potentialities for movement and action. The prophetic poems repeatedly depict falling as the loss of bodily integrity. When Tharmas falls at the beginning of *Four Zoas* he describes

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<sup>32</sup> On the inseparability of Blake's theory of art from the practices of etching and plate production, see Damrosch, *Eternity's Sunrise* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015) 7-38; Mei-Ying Sung, *Blake and the Art of Engraving* (Vermont: Pickering and Chatto, 2009); Morris Eaves, *William Blake's Theory of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); and W. J. T. Mitchell, *Blake's Composite Art: A Study of the Illuminated Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

himself as “A nothing left in darkness” (pl. 4.44). As he dissolves, Enion labors at her loom, “every vein & lacteal threading them among her woof of terror,” working, like Enitharmon does later, to weave a textile that will hold together Tharmas’ dividing self (E. 302). Blake plays with the text-textile analogy throughout the *Four Zoas*, and Enion’s efforts to produce coherence and forestall disintegration anticipate the problem Blake has keeping the poem together. Just as Los’s labor to build a body for the fallen Albion at the beginning of *Jerusalem* leads to his own division, Enion’s efforts to compose a container for Tharmas causes her to bifurcate. In both instances, Enion and Los are motivated by pity and mercy. Their acts of making are intended to stave off the dissolution of “Eternal Death.” Incarnation imposes a merciful limit meant to prevent total disintegration. Worse than embodiment for Blake is the fall “far into Non Entity” (FZ 44.5; E. 329). He systematically opposes chaotic imagery of self-loss with figures of form giving. In “Night the Fourth,” of *Four Zoas*, Ahania’s fall, after being cast out by Urizen, is described as “all confusion/ Swallowing up the horrible din in agony on agony/ Thro the confusion like a crack across from immense to immense” (44.8-10; E. 329). The use of crowd imagery here, like indistinct smoke, to depict the “wracking elements,” connects to the distinction Blake makes at the end of *Jerusalem* between a “Vision,” and the appearance of a “disorganized/ And snowy cloud” (pl.91.22-23; E. 251). Blake distinguishes the integral organization of the body from forms of dissolution that are characterized both as powerful, and as threatening, since they destroy the purposive manifest structure that Blake views as the privileged distinction of artistry and craftwork. “All depends on Form or Outline,” and Blake opposes the unity of the body against the forces of disintegration.

Blake’s crowd symbols dissolve particularity by arrogating individuals to collective and cataclysmic expressions of unconstrained energy. In the final night of *Four Zoas* an unchained

“Serpent Orc,” sets loose anarchic energies that destroy the created world: “The tree of Mystery went up in folding flames/ Blood issued out in mighty volumes pouring in whirlpools fierce/ From out the flood gates of the Sky The Gates are burst down pour/ The torrents black upon the Earth the blood pours down incessant/ Kings in their palaces lie drowned Shepherds their flocks their tents/ Roll down the mountains in black torrents Cities Villages/ High spires & Castles drown in the black deluge Shoal on Shoal/ Float the dead carcasses of Men and Beasts” (119.4-11). The violent energy of Orc’s cataclysm kills indiscriminately. The “Universal Confusion” of the apocalypse is read positively by Makdisi. But here, given Blake’s professed dislike of the Urizenic god of the Old Testament, it is difficult to say with certainty that he views this cataclysm typologically, as a repetition of the first flood and a renewing Baptism. Blake’s skepticism towards revolutionary violence becomes increasingly clear in his later poems, where the tendency of upheavals like the one described at the end of *Four Zoas* to reproduce the structures of power and domination they set out to overthrow presents one of the major compositional dilemmas of the texts. Cataclysmic violence tends towards cyclical repetition, and mires the prophetic poems in patterns of circular recurrence.

The violence of the imagery is striking, and its depiction of shepherds and agrarian laborers drowned in the flood marks the indiscriminate destruction as arbitrary. The human cost is extraordinary, and recalling Enion’s laments in “Night the First,” and “Night the Second,” Blake condemns the barbarousness of justifying present suffering by reference to a redemptive *terminus ad quem*. In Genesis, when God declares his supreme right to “blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them,” he sounds like Urizen exclaiming in *Four Zoas*, “Am I not God . . . Who is Equal to me/ Do I not stretch the heavens abroad or fold them up like a

garment” (42.19-20; E. 328). Folded into viewing the flood positively is an affirmation of the kind of appropriative and egotistical action that Blake rejects as the paradigmatic gesture of the “Selfhood.” Urizen designates himself, “God the terrible destroyer & not the Saviour,” and spends the rest of *Four Zoas* attempting to control and coerce creation until its violent destruction. Blake figures destructive energy with crowd symbols, but the creative energy of poetic vision emerges through figures of embodiment and composition. Blake wasn’t singularly committed to the power of energy to disrupt form. Energy also produces form, and Blake invests in the formative aspects of energy by aligning it with his own artistic practice of drawing his visions forth from the copper plates. The crowd symbols in the Lambeth prophecies, taken alongside those in *Four Zoas*, undermine the unqualified positive assessment of collective energy. Blake raises significant doubts about the Orc-like tendency to annihilate, especially when contrasted to the claim by Los, at a crucial juncture in *Jerusalem*, that his “business is to create.”

### Form and Know-How: “The Tyger”

The poems collected in *The Songs of Innocence and Experience* foreground manual dexterity and the embodied physicality of composition. “The Tyger,” is probably Blake’s most commented on poem, and certainly his most anthologized.<sup>33</sup> The common path through Blake criticism is to start with the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, work through the Lambeth books of Blake’s radical 1790s, with their celebration of revolutionary energy, and finally proceed to his “mystical turn” in the late poems *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. What

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<sup>33</sup> For example, see Adams, *William Blake: A Reading of the Short Poems*; Miner, ““The Tyger’: Genesis and Evolution in the Poetry of William Blake” *Criticism* (1962); J. E. Grant, “The Art and Argument of ‘The Tyger,’” in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*. Most recently, Tobias Wolff has read Blake’s shorter poems alongside Ed Roberson, in “Being Several: Reading Blake with Ed Roberson” in *New Literary History* (2018). Morris Eaves says that “The Tyger” is Blake’s most anthologized work in the introduction to *Cambridge Companion to William Blake*.

often results is a mapping of Blake onto the conventional Virgilian progression from pastoral through didactic to epic. Connected with the Virgilian characterization of Blake's poetic progression is a view of his political evolution: from the revolutionary fervor of *America* and *Europe*, and their sense of impending global revolution, to the inward-looking quietism of the psychical dramas in the later works.<sup>34</sup> The treatment of Blake's poetic development from a direct engagement with the social and political turmoil of the 1790s to the presumably apolitical mysticism of the long poems, with their inner struggles and spiritual warfare, is sometimes described as Blake's gradual disenchantment with political change, much in the manner that Milton's shift from political propagandist to poet of personal salvation is seen as a renunciation of politics. But what this construction of Blake's Virgilian-Milonic progression suppresses is the close relationship of the theory of vision and composition worked out in the *Songs* to the longer poems. "The Tyger," for example, is principally an interrogation of the labors of creation, rendered in the language of craftwork and manual dexterity.

"The Tyger" is all questions. Kathleen Raine called the poem "a grand incantation of rhetorical questions" (43).<sup>35</sup> Hazard Adams has said that for this reason, critics tend to outdo themselves proposing answers.<sup>36</sup> The first question introduces the inquisitive speaker. Before it's posed, the tiger is vaguely localized, "burning bright," in "forests of the night" that recall Dante's "shadowed forest," and Spenser's "wandering wood." But unlike Errour, Blake's tiger is a source of illumination in the darkness. What insight can the inquirer gain from this beacon? The tiger's brightness links it to other instances of illumination in the collected songs, which, like Blake's

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<sup>34</sup> Derek Erdman, *Blake, Prophet Against Empire: A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954); Jon Mee, *Dangerous Enthusiasm: William Blake and the Culture of Radicalism in the 1790s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Makdisi, *William Blake and the Impossible History of the 1790s* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Raine, "Who Made the Tyger?" *Encounter* (June 1954) 43-50.

<sup>36</sup> Adams, *William Blake: A Reading of the Shorter Poems* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1963).

later works, are integrally patterned and designed to echo each other across the sequence. Adams writes, “The shorter poems, like the prophetic books . . . evoke a vast world of particulars shading and shifting into one another, and modifying one another’s meaning” (28). Individual songs should be read in the context of the collection, since the meaning of figures and images emerges through patterns generated through the sequence. Images and motifs resonate across the individual poems, creating the intelligible structure within which each poem should be read. In *Songs of Innocence*, sources of light are most often clarifying, even if readers from the vantage of experience are likely to identify the precariousness of the innocent sense of light depicted there. In “Little Black Boy,” for example, the speaker intones ingenuously, “Look on the rising sun; there God does live/ And gives his light and gives his heat away” (E. 9). In the boy’s view, light is a boon that no amount of piety can possibly reciprocate, and an unambiguous embodiment of God in the world. But, from the perspective of experience light shines less unequivocally, and the tiger’s bright burning is unquestionably of a duller, sublunary quality.

The association of light with God and paternity in “Little Black Boy,” is picked up again two poems later, in “The Little Boy Lost”: “Father father where are you going// O do not walk so fast./ Speak father speak to your little boy. Or else I shall be lost” (E. 11). At his peril, the little boy follows the pattern of associations of father-light-God developed earlier in the *Songs*, and proceeds after a luminous entity that leads him into the darkness. Because of his innocence, the boy doesn’t perceive the danger of substituting identity for analogical filiation: “The night was dark no father was there/ The child was wet with dew./ The mire was deep & the child did weep/ And away the vapour flew” (E. 11). The risk in positing identity where only conventional association governs is the possibility for profound misrecognition. While in “The Little Black Boy,” the reader is aware of the naïveté of boy’s view of God living in the sun, in the “Little Boy

Lost,” that same identification of light with divinity and beneficence has disastrous consequences. The child falls victim to the conventional association of a luminescent patriarch with light itself, articulated in “Little Black Boy.” As a consequence, he mistakes the delusive light of an *ignis fatuus* for the guiding light of God the father. Even in innocence, light is not unambiguously illuminating.

The drama of “Little Boy Lost” closely parallels the simile in book nine of *Paradise Lost*. There, an “amaz’d night wanderer” – lost, like the little boy but also potentially culpable to a greater degree than the child because he is out wandering at night in the first place – follows a will-o-the-wisp “to bogs and mires,” where he is “swallow’d up and lost from succor far” (9.640-41). In “Little Boy Lost,” and in the context of innocence, Blake is asking how light should be construed. The association with divine presence is misleading. The child-like literalism of identifying light and God endangers the boy. In “Little Boy Found,” “God ever nigh,/ Appeared like his father in white” (E. 11). The child, having mistaken the *ignis fatuus* for his father in the previous poem is here confronted by yet another light, this time structured explicitly in the language of simile. How should the boy interpret this instance? In his innocence, he follows this one, too, and is, mercifully, “To his mother brought.” But readers, burdened by experience, are alerted to the ambiguity the visual parallel introduces between God the father, dressed in white, and the delusive light of the “vapour” that the boy misidentified in the previous poem. The light that leads astray mirrors the one that restores. The challenge of the poem, as with all the poems collected in *Innocence*, is to strive to imaginatively put off experience and the pervasive doubt it brings, much as Milton demands readers set aside their fallen state to see innocent sexuality and physical pleasure as faultless in Eden. But doubt governs in *Experience*, and inflects the “interrogative mode” Blake uses in “The Tyger.” Susan Wolfson distinguishes between

questioning in *Innocence*, where answers are readily supplied, as in “The Lamb,” and in *Experience*, where speculative doubt is allowed to dilate.<sup>37</sup> The duality of light, the inscrutability of creation, and the hollowness of theodicy emerge from the questions Blake puts to the tiger.

The provenance of the tiger – where it comes from – and its brightness are the subject of the first question. The inquisitor – who can be plausibly imagined as the little boy lost, only now grown into the deep uncertainty of experience that succeeds “the Infant’s faith” – voices the kind of questions that recur in Blake’s corpus, as when the Daughters of Albion ask in *Milton* “Can such an eye judge of the stars?” The questions in “The Tyger” query vision and judgment, and raise skeptical doubts. It is unclear whether the interrogative mood in “The Tyger” represents the “words of doubt,” that “Doth put the light of knowledge out,” as Blake writes in “Auguries of Innocence.” The questions here seem more earnest than those of the “Questioner who sits so sly,” in “Auguries.” In *Milton*, Blake’s poet vows “To cast off the idiot Questioner who is always questioning,/ But never capable of answering, who sits with a sly grin/ Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave/ Who publishes doubt & calls it knowledge (*Milton* 41.12-15). The questioner in “The Tyger” has none of the smug self-satisfaction of the skeptical philosopher Blake criticizes in “Auguries” and *Milton*, but he raises serious doubts about creation that don’t readily yield answers, which connects him to other auditors in Blake’s work, specifically Enion whose unanswered questions haunt *The Four Zoas*.

The inquisitor’s first question has less to do with theodicy than with capability. He doesn’t ask after whose “immortal hand or eye,” but about “what” hand or eye could undertake a specific act of framing. Steven Shaviro points out that “frame” can mean two things here. The first is framing as an act of designing and fabrication. The second is framing as contextualizing,

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<sup>37</sup> Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). Wolfson starts her book on questions in Wordsworth and Keats with a consideration of Blake’s *America*, and the questions in *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

“as a picture frame sets off and defines the space of a painting” (237). But the synecdoche focuses on the ability to frame, rather than on the ontological status of who does the framing. By focusing on “what” rather than “who,” Blake directs attention to the action itself, rather than to the actor. Much of the critical effort proposing various framers – whether Los, or Urizen, or God, or whoever – thus misses the point. The poem takes up questions of the relation of design and intention to the work of composition, and in this manner follows the progression in the “Introduction” to the *Songs of Innocence* from the vision of the cherub, to music, to the work of composing “In a book that all may read,” that causes the initial vision to “vanish from my sight.” Both poems query the relationship of inspiration and design to technical framing.

Blake yokes hand and eye together with an “or.” Sight was dominant for the eighteenth century “way of ideas,” but as Adams argues, Blake’s sensibility has greater affinities to craft cultures of the eighteenth-century than to the painterly tradition of Reynolds and the Royal Academy. The ideal system and the *camera obscura* theory of vision suppress the physical and technical manipulation of the environment through embodied “coping,” and the central role of the ambulatory, mobile body in perception.<sup>38</sup> In the *camera obscura* paradigm for sense, the body is fixed in space, and images of the world enter at the retina where they become the raw material of perceptual experience. The model separates the subject from the world by construing experience as the passive reception of sense data. According to that model, the eye takes in an image that provides the raw material for unified, mimetic pictures of the surrounding world.

Understanding works up the images into general knowledge, carving nature at its joints into

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<sup>38</sup> The language of “coping” is Hubert Dreyfus’s. Dreyfus describes “skilled coping” as intelligent or skilled bodily activity that “generates a human world.” Coping is a form of *poesis* in its original sense of making, involving the reciprocal exchange of a holistic body with the world that brings both into being. Dreyfus writes, “The meaningful objects among which we live are not a model of the world stored in our mind or brain; they are the world itself” (265-66). “As a perceiving subject I am therefore not a monadic, transcendental ego,” as the *camera obscura* model of vision purports, “but neither am I just a field open to a stream of appearances – a being-at-the-world. I am a situated subject, set to explore objects whose concealed aspects are copresent to me because I am copresent to them” (74).

discretely bounded categories. Blake shares with this tradition a broad interest in line and distinction, but rejects the distanced passivity of the subject of empiricist optics. As Damrosch, quoting Gombrich, has recently pointed out, Blake loathed the “blurred outline and mellowed colours that allow one form to merge with another,” of Italian *sfumato* (qtd. in Damrosch, 33). But Blake brings to his interest in linearity an engraver’s physicalist sensibility. The “indelible line,” produces a “form immortal with/ Golden pen” (E 126), tracing the shape that the acid wash will educe from the copper plate. Blake’s “iron pens,” and “golden pens” with which he etches his “adamantine leaves,” suggest a view of vision in its relation to embodied forming that differs from the speculative ideation of the *camera obscura* model by associating it with physical construction and dexterity.

Blake systematically privileges an embodied sense of *poesis*. As Damrosch says, echoing W. J. T. Mitchell, Blake’s material practice shaped his theory of vision and imagination – terms he uses interchangeably. Vision is Blake’s way of talking about imagination while avoiding the pitfalls of eighteenth-century faculty psychology that saw “imagination” as the faculty of image-making, a loosely mimetic and reproductive capacity at the service of understanding, and “fancy” as the distinguishing feature of the inventive genius. Vision connotes not a thing or a module in faculty psychology but an action and form of enactive *poesis*.<sup>39</sup> Blake’s hostility towards the program of eighteenth century aesthetic idealism articulated in Reynolds’s *Discourses on Painting*, is well represented in his vitriolic marginalia. Some of Blake’s hostility towards Reynolds can be attributed to his rejection from the Royal Academy (Reynolds was its president), and the secondary status attributed to engraving as a trade rather than an art. Engraving was seen as merely craftwork, and not dignified with the status of true art by the

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<sup>39</sup> Alva Noë has recently said that “consciousness is not something that happens inside of us,” but is instead “something we make” in *Out of Our Heads: Why You Are Not Your Brain and Other Lessons From the Biology of Consciousness* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010) 24.

Royal Academy. The artisanal context of engraving, and the workshop mentality invested Blake's theory of vision with a practical and materialist sensibility that ran counter to idealizing theories, like Reynolds's, that presented artistic production as principally conceptual.

Blake's sense of framing, forming, and vision are inseparable from his practical employment as an engraver, and from the technical craftsmanship demanded by his chosen medium. Framing by giving line and "integument," is not speculative, or something that happens in the mind prior to the work of composition. It involves the physical negotiation with obdurate material, "the stubborn structure of the language," and an unyielding, resistant world (E 183). "Artisanal aesthetics continually blurs the distinction between the visual and the haptic, turning the act of seeing into the act of exploring and manipulating" (Kramnick 90). In its emphasis on the craft-like practices of *poesis*, "The Tyger" develops a craft theory "framing," by representing creation as technical rather than speculative. The laboriousness of framing in the poem returns to the question of potency. What power makes it possible to work obdurate materials in such a manner that they take on this bright, astonishing form, this "fearful symmetry." The origin of art is uncertain here, since it seems to take form only through reciprocal exchange with the materials of production: the plates, the etching tools, the specially contrived varnishes, and precisely diluted hydrochloric acid washes with which Blake constructs vision. The artisanal epistemology that grounds Blake's theory of vision subordinates schematic design to the processes and practices of its labored emergence.

"The Tyger," then, is principally about the labors of giving shape to resistant materials that assert their own influence on the making process, in excess of the maker's intentions. Gary Tomlinson has written, "Sequence interposes a series of actions between the beginning and end of a manufacturing process [that] decenters any putative mental template in favor of a continual,

gesture-by-gesture recursive shifting of aims” (*A Million Years of Music* 68). The materials of composition are not “matter,” passively awaiting form. In the line-by-line work of composition they assert their own agency on the process of making that requires recursive adjustment of a putative intention or schematic design in the head of the maker. “The Tyger,” has often been treated in terms of theodicy, with commentators venturing various answers to its inscrutable questions, and attending less to its manifest linguistic structure.<sup>40</sup> The effort to answer the poem’s questions involves speculating about ideas in the maker’s head. It is a poem of questions, and those questions provide bits of information. But it is unclear what is gained by positing various identities to answer the question of “who,” which is never directly asked, and which orients attention away from the primacy of action in the poem towards intent and ideation. Is it Los, as Adams claims? Or maybe a proto-Los being developed in Blake’s pastoral workshop? Or maybe God, or, under the lights of the roughly contemporaneous *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, a Satanic-Promethean striver who dares seize fire from a jealously hoarding God? However answered, the identity of the maker is of manifestly less importance than the various acts of creative composition the poem details.

The poem’s second question also focuses on brightness, and queries the origin of the glimmer in the tiger’s eye. Is the fire infernal or divine, forged in “distant deeps or skies”? This question, too, hints at origins by suggesting the “fire” is derivative, having first “burnt” elsewhere. But the question is ambiguous, since the past-tense “burnt” might also just be asking about where the tiger currently abides, rather than about its origin. It depends on whether the verb is construed as a past participle, indicating a continued condition of burning, or in the usual past tense of “burned,” which would seem to suggest an inquiry into origins. In either case, the

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<sup>40</sup> The phrase is Henry Staten’s, who makes a similar argument about interpretations of Blake’s “London” in “Art as Techné, or, The Intentional Fallacy and the Unfinished Project of Formalism,” *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature*. Eds. Gary L. Hagberg and Walter Jost. (New York: Blackwell, 2010) 420-435.

question introduces further elements of uncertainty that challenge reading the poem as theodicy. Blake is often hostile to the complacencies of the “Happy Man,” who divines a benevolent God in the events of the physical world.<sup>41</sup> He sometimes seems incapable or unwilling to abide in the “the infant’s faith,” that “triumphs over Hell and Death,” and sees a “God employ’d/ In all the Good and Ill that chequer life” (Cowper, *Task*, “The Time-Piece” 161-62). Blake sympathizes with Cowper’s view of the “happy man”: “Happy who walking with him! Whom what he finds/ Of flavor or of scent in fruit or flow’r/ Or what he views of beautiful or grand/ In Nature, from a broad majestic oak/ To the green blade that twinkles in the sun/ Prompts with remembrance of a present God” (“The Winter Walk at Noon” 247-52). Near the end of *Milton*, Blake describes a similar feeling of intimacy and comfort in the natural world, and he resonates with Cowper’s view of God suffusing creation. But, like Cowper, Blake distrusts the easy faith that seamlessly accommodates the divine to the mundane, and, in its worst form, becomes the “Natural Religion” of Deists denounced in *Jerusalem*. Cowper’s view of “One Spirit” that “rules Nature,” and of the ubiquity of divinity across all scales of creation resonates with Blake’s advice that, “To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And eternity in an hour” (“Auguries”). Both poets share a sense of scale, and Blake’s indefinite articles pluralize heavens and worlds to make glimpsing them a function of looking closely at one’s immediate surroundings, in the same manner that Cowper sees God diffused through oak and blade of grass alike. Order and divinity are found in even the smallest particles of creation, if one only pays attention. But both poets are equally prone to the kind of severe doubt that issues in isolation and despair, as in Cowper’s “Castaway,” or Blake’s violent gouging from the plate of *Jerusalem* all reference to “love,” “friendship,” and the happy state of being

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<sup>41</sup> On the “happy man” motif, see Røstvig, *The Happy Man: Studies in the Metamorphosis of a Classical Ideal* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

“blessed.”<sup>42</sup> The uncertainty that erupts in Blake and that often goes unanswered animates the interrogative mode throughout the *Songs of Experience*.

As “The Tyger” proceeds, the aspirational and upwardly oriented imagery is checked by physically rooting, earthy language. “On what wings did he aspire?” gestures to the upward intimations of “Skies” in the previous question, and hints at transcendence, but the question checks this movement by focusing on the medium of the wings rather than the aspirational goal. Blake doesn’t ask after the fire, but about the hand that seizes it. The cumulative effect is a physicalist emphasis that reaches a climax in the heavily accented drumming of the third and fourth stanzas. The questions become terse, clipped into fragments that focus on body parts. The rhymes land with marching force, as the iterated “ands” keep accumulating unanswered speculation: “And when thy heart began to beat/ What dread hand? & what dread feet?” Twice now Blake has asked about the hands, the manual vehicle for shaping. Forming is a kind of cunning here, a craftwork predicated on skilled know-how. But as composition proceeds, the work takes on a life of its own. The beating heart seems to animate the shaping hand rather than the other way around, which in turn labors over the dread feet. It becomes harder to distinguish the craftsman from the artifact, as they seem to merge in in the reciprocity of maker and making.

The maker becomes less and less the source of a securing intention and designing motive, and more a restraint on the rhythmical, motive energy that is breaking free and gaining creative autonomy as a sequenced, organized activity. As the forward pulsing energy of the verse advances, the role of the maker, who initially frames and twists, is altered. Where the first two stanzas deal with sources of inspiration and the initial creative spark, when the work of composition takes over the maker restricts and restrains, guiding the flow of creative energy in

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<sup>42</sup> On the complex relationship of Blake and Cowper, see Morton Paley, “Cowper as Blake’s Specter,” *Eighteenth Century Studies* 1.3 (1968) 236-52.

reciprocal determination with the materials: “what dead grasp/ Dare its deadly terrors clasp.” Working with recalcitrant materials, hammering them against an anvil demands sensitivity to their autonomy, and to their agency in the compositional process.<sup>43</sup> Matter, in this view, isn’t mere stuff to be formed up how the maker sees fit, but exerts a will of its own, even intentionality. “In what furnace was thy brain?” Blake asks. Forming takes on elements of selective guiding and contouring in the fourth stanza, before the cosmic caesura that pauses and dilates the energetic pulsation of the rhythm.

There is an important connection between the “twisted sinews,” and chain in “The Tyger” and the “charter’d Thames” of “London.” When the inquisitor asks, “what art/ Could twist the sinews of thy heart,” the question is about channeling and constricting. The analogy between charters and sinews is that both shape movement. They are a form of control, constricting and directing energy in accordance with predetermined grooves. Sinews and charters both provide the integuments for the muscular use of energy and guide the forceful flow of water. But sinews, veins, arteries can also be “chartering,” in the pejorative sense emphasized in “London,” where chartering represents state-sanctioned containment of potentially cataclysmic energy. “Chartering” can be analogous to versifying, capturing poetic energy in conventional forms and numbers. Denham develops the theme explicitly when he describes the Thames as “My great example, as it is my theme!/ Though deep, yet clear, gentle, yet not dull,/ Strong without rage, without o’re-flowing, full” (“Cooper’s Hill,” 190-93). Rendered in mellifluous couplets, Denham links the smooth and controlled movement of the Thames to his own poetic goals. But Blake would see the contrived and conventional couplets as a “charter,” binding the force of the Thames in the same manner that the chain binds the tiger here. In the development of “The

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<sup>43</sup> On the object-oriented intelligence of craftwork, and the sophisticated understanding of chemistry, material composition, alloy, and exigencies of geographical impurities that artisanal making contributed the scientific revolution, see Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (2006).

Tyger,” the sinews are an initial biological constraint, but they can readily become a mechanized lead, a chain imposed from without.

By pursuing the question of how composition develops, “The Tyger” offers a compressed drama of poetic creation, from the initial creative impulse, of uncertain provenance, to externally imposed strictures: “What dread grasp/ Dare its deadly terrors clasp?” The question isn’t about the grasper so much as the grasp itself – the restraining labor that tries to check the disruptive energy set loose by the act of forming in the first place. What is the relationship of an artist, Blake asks, to the forces of artistic creation? Are they a passive conduit, or does the artist’s agency exert a restricting, shaping force? Blake’s educative formalism suggests that the artist is more than a simple author function, selectively delimiting the totality of possible utterances, but less than the inspired genius of Romanticism. Blake’s artist-maker is a proficient technician laboring with the obdurate materials of language and received ways of writing to do something new, working within traditions of technique and practice with skilled dexterity in order to create.

The first four stanzas of “The Tyger” pulse forward with a feeling of inevitability. The heavy rhythms, repetitions, and rhymes feel like they are moving towards something with ineluctable force. The poem’s surging energy is paused in the fifth stanza where “what” questions are superseded by the resonant cosmic vision delivered with a “when.” The poem pivots between the fourth and fifth stanza when the pounding rhythm is interrupted and the frame of reference dramatically expands: “When the stars threw down their spears/ And watered heaven with their tears.” The shift in the kind of question being asked from what to when gives a sense of arrival and completion, hinted at by the momentum of the first four stanzas. The sudden expansiveness and dilation of the line, following on the rapidly accumulating question-fragments, creates what Kathleen Raine called a moment of “sublime doubt” (44). The cosmic

image of stars engaged in either capitulation or an act of cosmic engendering links “The Tyger” to *The Four Zoas*, where the image recurs in a simile describing Urizen’s armies throwing down their weapons. The technical sense of craftwork that governed the first four stanzas gives way to a different kind of forming in which stars rain down the nutriments for growth. The image of stars shedding both light and water blurs together two necessary preconditions for life and organization. Whether giving light or rain, the stars provide the prerequisites for vitality. In *Four Zoas*, the image suggests that the capitulation of the stars is self-sacrificial. They give of themselves to cultivate the organic universe. Their action mirrors that of the blacksmith technician, whose hands and grasps are absorbed into the work of making. The relation between conception and execution animates the poem’s questions and their central concern with the gap between an idea and its technical articulation. The “When” of the fifth stanza indicates stepping back, an evaluative examination of the work of creation: “Did he smile his work to see?/ Did he who made the lamb make thee?” This pivotal, penultimate question is the first to focus on the maker himself rather than on the work of making. Kathryn Freeman claims that creation in “The Tyger,” is a labor of egotistical self-assertion, but the poem suggests creation isn’t an imposition of will on passive matter, but a reciprocal negotiation that involves sacrifice and the suspension of a domineering, schematizing “Selfhood,” rather than the forceful imposition of design. The formative energy that the poem centers exceeds both its makers and products, and the poem treats the impulse to craft as a cosmic vocation that links individual makers to the *nisus formativus* embodied in the stars.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> The idea of an innate formative drive (*nisus formativus*) in nature that produces order and complexity is central to the proto-biology of Johann Blumenbach. See *Vitalizing Nature in the Enlightenment* by Peter Reill (2004); Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*; and Denise Gigante, *Life: Organic Form and Romanticism* (2009).

The “fearful symmetry” of the tiger, its design as an efficient killer and apex predator does suggest questions of theodicy. Paired, as it often is in criticism, with “The Lamb,” the poems seem to query why the symmetrical purposiveness of the created universe entails that some things must be food for others.<sup>45</sup> Blake again shows skepticism towards the complacent faith of the deistical happy man. Tigers kill lambs, and Blake provides a grim rejoinder to the compost sensibility of his georgic predecessors. His view, like Walt Whitman’s in mid-nineteenth-century America, expresses horror at nature’s alchemical conversion of death into life.<sup>46</sup> If everything in creation is purposive, then that means everything is at least potentially food for something else, and life is predicated on death. Blake looks at the universal striving of organic nature, and the ecological entanglement of living things with one another and perceives fatal parity. The “fearful symmetry” that characterizes organic life undermines deistical self-assuredness by presenting a clear-eyed view of how life feeds on death, and death reciprocally provides for life. The destruction of the old prepares the ground for the new, as Blake’s description of sacrifice and harvest in *The Four Zoas* makes clear. But Blake doesn’t romanticize it. The reality that death and decay are prerequisites for renewal is presented as a grim but undeniable truth about having a fleshy body. The insight has depropriating force, since it implies that self-identity and the domineering egoism at which Blake directs his vitriol in the prophetic books is predicated on a vain attempt to transcend the symmetries of life and death, and to withdraw oneself from the reciprocity and mutual dependence that characterizes physical life. The attempt at mastery of the system through withdrawal from the self-sacrifice that figures

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<sup>45</sup> For the pairing, see Raine (1954); Paul Miner, “‘The Tyger’: Genesis and Evolution in the Poetry of William Blake,” *Criticism* 4.1 (1962) 59-73; Philip Hobsbaum, “A Rhetorical Question Answered: Blake’s Tyger and its Critics,” *Neophilologus* 48.1 (1964) 151-55.

<sup>46</sup> In “This Compost!” Whitman, also deploying the interrogative, asks nature, “Where have you disposed of their carcasses?/ Those drunkards and gluttons of so many generations;/ Where have you drawn off all the foul liquid and meat?” in *Whitman: Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1996) 495.

prominently in Blake's treatment of making and embodied organic life provides the central drama in the late prophecies.

### Making and the Zoas

Many critics have observed that the three major works, *The Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*, center around scenes of making. That these extended treatments of making, involving weaving, smithing, and construction, are continuous with the *Songs* has been less frequently observed. Composition in Blake is the articulation of form and line in the service of clarity and vision, because "Truth has bounds: Error none: falling, falling" (E. 92). But the impulse towards distinction and systematic organization can tilt into a pathological effort at domination. A sustained inquiry into what Coleridge called *forma efformans*, the formless, formative energy that he associates with the secondary imagination, drives the recursions of mastery and upheaval in *Four Zoas*. Coleridge wrote that "all form as body, i.e., as shape & not as *forma efformans* is dead" (CN III 4066). *Forma efformans* is essentially dynamic. "Here, then, is the error – not in the faculty itself, without which there would be no fixation, consequently no distinct perception or conception, but in the gross idolatry of those who would abuse it, & make the goal and end which should be only a means of arriving at it." The energy of forming is perverted by fixation, and by its redirection from processual "knowing-how" to artifactual "knowing-that."<sup>47</sup> Knowing-how closely connects to Blake's technical sensibility and his identification of vision with manual dexterity. "Knowing how" subtends all "knowing that." But "knowing that" fixes the object and is, in Coleridge's words, an "idolatry" that displaces dynamic processes of "knowing how" with

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<sup>47</sup> Hintikka argues that for the ancient Greeks all content rich epistemological "knowing that," and ontological "knowing what," is subtended by "knowing how," which is the craftsman's knowledge of how to bring about an end, in "Plato on Knowing That, Knowing How, and Knowing What." The abstraction of "knowing that," and "knowing what," as conceptual contents, from "knowing how," characterizes the rise of a certain construction of scientific rationalism. For an account of how scientific knowledge in the early-modern period suppressed its emergence from the technical know-how of the artisan's workshop and experimental laboratory, see Pamela Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*, (2004) especially chapter 6: "The Institutionalization of the New Philosophy," pgs. 183-236.

a finished perceptual or conceptual product or object.<sup>48</sup> Object-oriented fixity erases the technical history of a thing's emergence by focusing on what it is, rather than what it does. Blake, like Coleridge, prioritizes the dynamic and developmental over the rigidly "bonified." The word recurs in Blake to mark conceptual and experiential entities that have been hardened by habit into solidity. What is "bonified" in Blake are those things that have become inflexible truths accepted complacently. *The Four Zoas* provides Blake's testing ground for poetic system-making predicated on dynamism rather than fixity, and for his critique of the hegemonic impulse that defines the rage for timeless, self-similar order.

Blake initially presents *The Four Zoas* as a mythic story of fall and redemption: a narrative of the Eternal Man, Albion's "Fall into division and his resurrection to unity." He seems at least initially to have planned the book as a *nostos*, a journey through alienation, self-division, and death to a higher order: "Regeneration by the Resurrection from the dead" (E 301).<sup>49</sup> From the first manuscript page the work of regeneration is closely connected to the labors of composition, and to Blake's reflections on what is involved in putting together an imaginative system. "Night the First" begins not with Albion's fall, but with Tharmas, already fallen into watery dissolution, and Enion struggling to hold him together. Against Tharmas' decline, Enion labors, "In gnawing pain drawn out by her lovd fingers," to make a body for Tharmas, "As garments woven subservient to her hands." As mentioned above, the text/textile analogy introduces at the beginning of the poem the connection between the labors of composition in the narrative and Blake's work of putting it together. Enion's weaving, motivated by her pity for

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<sup>48</sup> For a version of New Formalism focused on "form as shaping agency rather than a shaped body" see Sandra Macpherson, "A Little Formalism" *ELH* 82.2 (2015) 385-405. But Macpherson adopts an ontological approach to form, seeing it in terms of entelechy, of matter's self-organization into order, form "as nothing more – and nothing less – than the shape matter (whether a poem or a tree) takes" and in doing so dismisses anything unique about literary forming.

<sup>49</sup> On the *nostos* theme in relation to Blake's providential mythopoetics, see Kathryn Freeman, *Blake's Nostos: Fragmentation and Nondualism in the Four Zoas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

Tharmas' fallen formless condition, is meant to hold together his diffusive parts. As she weaves "a form of vegetation," or a physical body, to contain Tharmas, the body becomes monstrous to her: "What have I done! . . . What deed/ Is this a deed of love I know what I have done. I know/ Too late now to repent" (E. 303). Her formative labor, which she intends as a mercy, generates one of the many monstrous bodies that populate Blake's works. She immediately regrets her presumption and throws herself "trembling before her own created phantasm," which, now autonomous and separated from her formative labor, stands over her in judgment: "Who art thou, diminutive husk and shell/ If thou hast sinnd and art polluted know that I am pure/ And unpolluted & will bring to rigid strict account/ All thy past deeds" (E 303). Enion's act of merciful creation redounds on her by generating a new form of physical and moral domination. She starts out trying to create a salvific form for Tharmas who, at the start of the poem is already "darkning in the west." Stuart Curran says that Blake's goal in the late works is to "destroy specious orthodoxies and to create new ones," but here the newly created spectral body of Tharmas, later described as "the father," presents Enion, his maker, with a new set of dogmatic constraints. The decline of the "parent power," elicits Enion's attempt at recovery, but she ends up producing a domineering specter instead. Creative labor easily reproduces structures and assumptions inherited from the past,. Blake's challenge, like Enion's, is not to create "new orthodoxies," but an imaginative system that won't settle into the same patterns of domination and hierarchy that it was initially meant to subvert.

The heavily revised opening sequence of *Four Zoas* is significant because it establishes a recurrent pattern. One or another of the visionary forms, observing a formless and fallen world around them, endeavors to create stability and shape through composition – whether weaving, architectural design, the textual tradition of Urizen regulating his books, or Los laboring at the

forge to melt down and reform the decayed fragments of his inherited world. Their labor to “create a system,” provokes their fall into multiplicity, as the fixed products of their *forma efformans* judge the motives and aspirations of their makers. Where in “The Tyger,” the maker stands in evaluative judgment of his composition, in the *Four Zoas* products of creative labor stand in judgment of their makers. These recurrent scenes question the motives underlying Blake’s systematizing, which, they imply, tilt easily into dogmatism and tyranny. Blake certainly possesses a desire to create an imaginative mythic world, but he is also sensitive to how mythic systems can be consolidated into rigid codes of moral virtue. The extraordinary difficulty of his late poems often results from his effort to make his compositions irreducible to dogmatic axioms.

The dissonance between Blake’s skepticism towards reified religious and social systems and his vocation to “Create a System, or be enslav’d by another mans” animates the mythopoetic project of *The Four Zoas* (153). Spoken by Los in *Jerusalem*, these lines are often quoted as evidence of Blake’s systematizing impulse, via the identification of Blake with his poet-blacksmith character. Donald Ault and Kathryn Freeman have cautioned against the critical tendency to identify Blake with Los, saying that he “is not necessarily a stand-in for Blake” (Freeman 20). Shaviro says that Blake, the systematizing prophet, is often at odds with Blake the “dramatic poet,” who rarely speaks in *propria persona* and never endorses a single authoritative stance. Also at risk in identifying Los and Blake is turning Los into an unproblematic hero and unambiguous figure for the redemptive imagination. Blake identifies with Los’s creative energy, but he also connects himself with Urizen’s textual practice. Blake recalls his own dilemmas editing of *The Four Zoas* manuscript in a description of Urizen: “Oft would he sit in a dark rift & regulate his books/ Or sleep such sleep as spirits eternal wearied in his dark/ Tearful & sorrowful state. then rise and look out & ponder/ His dismal voyage” (349). Like Urizen, Blake is besieged

by doubt and here, in “Night the Sixth,” on the cusp of the dramatic disjuncture of “Night the Seventh,” he is unable to see how to proceed. As much as Blake connects his imaginative goals to Los, he also identifies with Urizen’s self-aggrandizing and fatally flawed missteps.<sup>50</sup> In the *Four Zoas* manuscript Blake visibly wrestles with the challenge of producing a mythic system that evades the dogmatism of the systems he has inherited and doesn’t simply reproduce the characteristics of the accumulated cultural and religious systems he rejects.

To the extent that systems fix and stabilize relations between their constituents, they appear as Urizenic law and as “the net of religion,” woven by Urizen, “as the web of a spider, dusky and cold,” in a perversion of the creative impulse (350). What distinguishes Urizenic systematicity from its alternatives is fixity. Urizen’s characteristic gesture is to take the supple and flexible, like his weavings from spider silk, and turn them into rigid snares, and the moral axioms indelibly inscribed into his books of iron, gold, and brass. But static systems are actually the exception rather than the norm for Blake. Most complex systems, particularly those in the natural world, are distinguished by their dynamic equilibrium, and the restless exchange that defines both Blake’s theory of contraries, and his view of Eden. Contraries contend endlessly, mutually displacing one another without, as Shaviro says, “ever achieving any reconciliation of teleological subsumption” (235). When Blake claims, “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to human existence,” he defines progress not in terms of a dialectical movement towards sublation, but as “the continuation of a lived tension of opposites” (*MHH* E 34; Shaviro 232). Similarly, Blake’s

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<sup>50</sup> Jerome McGann has asked how readers are supposed to understand Blake’s devotion to a total mythical system alongside the dramatic characteristics of his verse in “The Aims of Blake’s Prophecies and the Uses of Blake Criticism” in *Blake’s Sublime Allegory: Essays on the Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem* ed. Joseph Wittreich and Stuart Curran (1973).

Eden isn't characterized by uniformity, but by the ceaseless exchange he describes as the "spiritual warfare," of "sweet science."<sup>51</sup>

An allegorical reading of Blake's prophecies in terms of the contraries named in *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* could connect Urizen to Reason and Los to Energy, and construe their dramatic conflict in the Romantic terms of the contest between Enlightenment rationalism and the Imagination of the inspired genius. But Blake characteristically rejects synthesis, or the triumphalism of a potential victory for Los. Blake's dynamism depends on their complementarity.<sup>52</sup> Dynamic systems are constantly changing, developing, integrating new elements and excreting the old, to maintain dynamic continuity over time as the system grows and declines. It is only to conceptual systems, like those indelibly etched in Urizen's books, that contingency and change are anathema. The irony, of course, is that Urizen can never seem to get his books quite right, and so tinkers endlessly trying to get his universal axioms encoded once and for all. The notions of static truth and self-consistency privileged by conceptual systems like Urizen's "Natural Law" and his geometrical order are not definitive. Blake's struggle in *The Four Zoas* is to identify an alternative model for systematicity based on systems that emerge organically and develop over time, that are dynamic and open, but nevertheless still integral and self-similar through change.

The triumph of Los, read allegorically as the besting of reason by imagination, would qualify as a "negation." "Negation," Blake writes, "must be destroyed to redeem the contraries," because "Negations are not contraries: Contraries mutually exist" (E 162). Urizenic systems are

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<sup>51</sup> On the materialist implications of Blake's view of Eden as a restlessly evolving system, see Amanda Jo Goldstein, *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 35-71.

<sup>52</sup> On the usefulness of the notion of irreducible complementarity in the physical sciences, see Niels Bohr, "Light and Life," in *Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York: Dover, 1961). For Gerald Holton, the restless, mutually decentering movement of complementarity is an engine of scientific research. See Holton, *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973) especially chapter four, "The Roots of Complementarity," 99-146.

characterized by negation and conceptual capture, by the dominance of one position by another. To claim Los represents the energetic, imaginative alternative to Urizenic moral and conceptual systematization would be negation. Shaviro says the challenge of Blake's view of system is "reconciliation." Blake's "doctrine of contraries," he explains, is "differential and anti-discursive in terms of its polemical content, but universalizing, conceptual, and systematic in terms of its form. It becomes necessary simultaneously to read Blake's text both in terms of its system, or conceptual unity, and in terms of its anti-conceptual differentiability, or ironic perspectivism and dramatic contextualism "(232). For Shaviro the incommensurability of Blake's broadly systematic, formal impulse with his diffusive anti-conceptualism render the late poems undecidable. But Shaviro is hog-tied by his view of system. For him, all system suggests fixity, closure, and self-containment. Shaviro's view of systems derives from the same Enlightenment ideas about the essential timelessness of order that he sets out to critique.

The dominant eighteenth-century view of "system" is as a set of fixed, widely held beliefs, norms, and standards. As Clifford Siskin has recently shown, the word is used to describe lawful and permanent relations between entities in natural, social, and artistic worlds.<sup>53</sup> Viewed accordingly, Blake, like his patron William Hayley, rejects the system of inherited standards and conventions for versifying and making art. Hayley writes, "In every Art will systems rise/ Which Fancy must survey with angry eyes/ And at the lightning of her scornful smile/ In frequent ruin sinks the labour'd pile" (*An Essay On Epic Poetry* 17).<sup>54</sup> Hayley's view, setting the accumulated "pile" of rules and conventions for the arts against insurgent Fancy, is conventionally romantic. Blake shares aspects of Hayley's rejection of normative systems for the arts, and the iconoclastic impulses of romanticism more broadly. But Blake does not endorse

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<sup>53</sup> In Siskin, *System: The Shaping of Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016) 79-146.

<sup>54</sup> Hayley, *An Essay on Epic Poetry: in Five Epistles to the Reverend Mr. Mason* (London: J. Dodsley, 1782).

Hayley's dichotomy, or his triumphalist view of imagination. Just as there are different expressions of the *forma efformans*, Blake shows that the problem is not with systematicity itself, but with "bonified" conceptual systems predicated on a propositional view of meaning. By rejecting the reason/imagination dichotomy, Blake rejects the associated view that all systematizing, and broadly formalist, pattern-making behavior is suspect. What Blake rejects is not system itself, but the paradigmatically Urizenic effort to sublimate systems into the fixed transhistorical orders of natural and moral law, and the production of lawful arrays by withdrawing them from time, dynamism, and contingency.

Enion's compositional labor loosely adheres to the functional structure of the prospect view as it develops in *Four Zoas*. Ault claims that "Night the First" establishes a method of perspectival discontinuity. In practical terms, this means that the first night is governed by looks and visions. Events are depicted from different perspectives, each affording a vantage often in conflict with the assessments of other witnesses. Consequently, from the first scene of the poem attention is drawn to processes of witnessing and observing. Tharmas has dissolved into watery substance, and Enion laments that she too, "soon shall be a shadow in oblivion/ Unless some way be found that I may look upon thee" (E 301). The union of observer and observed, described in the repeated formula, "they became what they beheld," here points to the threat Tharmas's formlessness poses to Enion. Tharmas, as seen by Enion, appears as a formless mass, described through crowd symbols that depict him as a chaotic aggregate, rather than an organized whole. In the logic of the prospect, a viewer examines a spatial manifold of potentially inexhaustible detail, and sets to organize the space temporally by stitching together its multifarious attractors. As mentioned, Enion's weaving introduces the recurrent analogy between the poetic work of putting

together a complex whole and textile production.<sup>55</sup> Paley says that garment making is Blake's flexible term for considering the constraining activity of writing. Tharmas is dissolved in "weeping clouds," a "nothing left in darkness," that Enion endeavors to aggregate, examining "every little fiber of [his] soul/ Spreading them out before the Sun like stalks of flax to dry" (302). Her work at first is analytical, as she breaks Tharmas down into individual threads and fibers. Despite Enion's anatomizing, Tharmas voices a unified identity that protests his analytical disembowelment. He complains that while Enion spreads out his constituent parts he loses integrity, suggesting the priority of part to whole. But then the stalks of flax provide the textile material from which Enion will create a unified body, indicating that without the whole the parts remain inert. The scene raises the question of which is more fundamental, part or whole, and whether the work of composition proceeds from wholes to the parts that realize them, or works up from parts to wholes. Blake's incessant destabilizing of origins and beginnings makes it difficult to privilege the part or the whole as the more fundamental.

The opening scene introduces the logical structure of the prospect and its dynamics of viewing and composing. The structure follows the pattern of a viewer, in the first instance Enion, who beholds a vast and unbounded, formless space, represented at first by Tharmas. The shapeless aggregate provokes a formative impulse and desire to give definition to what is beheld. Its indefinite formlessness threatens the identity of the viewer, given the reciprocity of beholder and beheld in the poem, and the response is one of self-assertive overcompensation. The impulse to provide shape and distinction, motivated by a sense that the labor will be redemptive, ends up eliciting its opposite, as the willful imposition of order generates the very decline it was intended

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<sup>55</sup> On the garment in Blake, see Donald Ault, *Narrative Unbound: Re-Visioning William Blake's Four Zoas* (Barrytown: Station Hill Press, 1987); Morton Paley, "The Figure of the Garment in the *Four Zoas*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*" in *Blake's Sublime Allegory: Essays on The Four Zoas, Milton, and Jerusalem*. eds. Joseph Wittreich and Stuart Curran. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1973.

to forestall. Blake criticizes the logic by which a centered and immobile subject can presume to order the world around them, or introduce fixity in defiance of change. Blake is skeptical about the ordering impulse – his own included – as an expression of egoism. While “Tharmas ground among his clouds . . . in the vast deep,” Enion works to stabilize and consolidate his form by making for it a container. But her labors produce instead a horrifying “Spectre,” a perverse embodiment of the task-driven, willful assertion of selfhood. That Enion’s product eludes her intention suggests that the intended whole is undone by its parts. As teleological end, the whole is subverted by its means and the labor of its composition. What she actually produces ends up being a spectral embodiment of her will to order.

Enion’s ascent to a position where she can constitute order for Tharmas, and her subsequent decline anticipates the dynamics of what Northrop Frye named the “Orc Cycle.” According to Frye the “Orc Cycle” involves three stages: the birth and binding of Orc, his colloquy with Urizen in which each recognizes their contrary states as hegemon and revolutionary, and Orc’s crucifixion, which ultimately brings about Urizen’s downfall. For Frye the Orc Cycle is an allegory for rhythms of degeneration and renewal, through which, he claims, Blake’s mythopoetic system should be interpreted. The *telos* is from decline and fall through struggle to renewal and the restoration of unity.<sup>56</sup> When Urizen initially declares himself God in “Night the First,” he is in fact seizing the scepter from the Eternal Man even though his self-assertion intends to minimize his usurpation. Urizen begins as revolutionary executing a coup d’etat, ascending to a position of authority, and crowning himself the snowy, “obdurate” monarch. Upon ascension, he comes to resemble the Eternal Man, hardened onto the “Rock of Ages,” only to be overthrown in turn by Orc. The recurring rise to authoritarian dominance of Urizen, who asserts himself in order to constrain the emergence of his revolutionary counterpart,

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<sup>56</sup> Frye, *Fearful Symmetry* (234)

Orc, only to be eventually displaced when Orc ascends to the position of authority, sets the stage for the endless repetition of the process. Frye's "Orc Cycle" is nested within the more ubiquitous pattern of ascent and its complementary assertion of will that attempts to control and master a situation, producing consequences that only deepen the crisis. This pattern brackets the *Four Zoas*, and the "Orc Cycle" is merely a special case of a more general sequence that develops in the successive prospect views of the poem. The pattern involves one or another of the Zoas ascending to a height from which they can survey the surrounding world, and attempting to fix it through compositional labor.

The opening sequence of Enion's prospect of Tharmas, and her effort to impose order by weaving a body from his disaggregated elements establishes a recurrent pattern in which the Zoas take turns looking on the formless and responding like Enion by trying to stabilize what they perceive to be a disordered void. Later in "Night the First," after the framing narrative of Tharmas and Enion's decline and fall, and after the birth of Los and Enitharmon from the coupling of Enion with the Spectre, Blake introduces in a series of competing narrative accounts of a power struggle between Urizen and Luvah for dominance within the "Fallen Man" (305). Los and Enitharmon provide contrary accounts of their own generation and of the cause of their diminished existence. Their competing songs introduce the characters of Luvah, Vala, and Urizen, who have not appeared in the main narrative of the poem prior to Enitharmon calling on Urizen to descend. Urizen's arrival and his response to the chaotic scene of sexual jealousy and violent discord recalls Enion's response to Tharmas's disfigurement. Urizen immediately asserts himself "God from Eternity to Eternity." As Ault points out, Urizen deliberately conceals the contingency of his claim to supremacy. He declares himself the Godhead, asserting "his individual identity, and treats himself as a totally isolated being" (*Narrative Unbound* 72). His

biblical “I am” argues for his autonomy, but his appearance is contingent on Enitharmon’s calling on him, and his description repeats and amalgamates features of other characters. His “Indignant” descent recalls Los’s “indignation hid in smiles.” Like the other characters in the poem, and in spite of his claims for himself, he is not inured against context, and, he takes shape through his arrogation of the textual details previously connected with other characters.

Urizen sees the disarray of the fallen world and names himself its master and organizing center. Sounding like Satan in *Paradise Regain’d*, he tempts Los with mastery if only he will serve Urizen’s cause: “Lo these starry hosts/ They are thy servants if thou wilt obey my awful law” (E. 307). Urizen presumes that he has the authority to command the starry hosts, and is justified in delegating their allegiance as he deems fit, even though his authority is very much in doubt. Los refuses his offer, but observing Urizen’s aggressive self-assertion adopts a similar posture, and presents himself as a coequal power, capable of vying for dominion with Urizen. The space in which this crisis of authority unfolds is inscrutable, but Blake integrates the structure of the prospect view to emphasize the contested status of the organizing center. Where Urizen pursues mastery, Los eventually relents, “now repented,” and abandons his claim to authority. As “the earth spread forth her table wide,” Urizen takes the position of divine monarch, around whom the earth is organized, and to whom it yields its harvest. Repeated confrontation with the vast surroundings and the effort to impose mastery over all that he surveys follow Urizen’s ascension.

Frequently in *The Four Zoas*, Urizen is a figure for rationalistic mastery. His actions embody a state of egoistic self-assertion, which isn’t the same as him being an allegory for reason. If allegory can be described, as John Neubauer does, as starting “with an *a priori* concept” and then searching out “an adequate sensuous representation,” the contemplation of

which “leads the reader back to the original concept,” then Urizen should be viewed not as a conceptual identity, like the abstraction “Enlightenment rationality” (168).<sup>57</sup> Rather, he embodies of set of responses that are not unique to him, but are an assemblage of reactions to the experience of change and uncertainty. While Los withdraws from the prospect view at the end of the first night and is described returning to his cold furnaces, the second night begins with Urizen constructing his kingdom. The conflict amplifies after the “Nuptial Feast” of Los and Enitharmon. “Urizen cast deep darkness round him silent brooding death/ Eternal death to Luvah. raging Luvah pourd/ The Lances of Urizen from chariots. round the holy tent/ Discord began & yells & cries shook the wide firmament” (E. 312). As Urizen, the “Prince of Light,” casts darkness around him, Luvah mirrors his action by pouring his “lances” on Urizen. The nature of this conflict is unclear, since Luvah’s lances are described as Urizen’s, and a general sense of confusion governs the discord of the conflict. Luvah and Urizen’s distinct identities begin to mirror one another in the conflict. The yells and cries dissolve into indistinguishable noise that threatens to plunge “the wide firmament” into chaos. Urizen, fearing the loss of his commanding sense of self, “Sent round his heralds secretly commanding to depart/ Into the north Sudden with thunders sound his multitudes/ Retreat from the fierce conflict all the sons of Urizen at once/ Mustring together in thick clouds leaving the rage of Luvah/ To pour its fury on himself & on the Eternal Man” (E. 312). In spite of his claim to godhead and exclusive authority, Urizen retreats from the conflict over control to his original dominion in the north. Aware that the deindividuating violence of the war threatens his sense of atomic subjectivity by merging him into the general chaos, Urizen prefers to decamp to a zone where his authority will go uncontested. His departure precipitates a fall: “Sudden down fell they all together into an

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<sup>57</sup> Neubauer, “The Sick Rose as an Aesthetic Idea: Kant, Blake, and the Symbol in Literature” in *Irrationalism in the Eighteenth Century* (Cleveland: Case Western University Press, 1972) 167-80.

unknown Space/ Deep horrible without End.” In this “fierce hungry void,” into which the cast of characters has fallen, the problem of the redemptive labor of composition to restore unity and wholeness becomes especially acute.

Blake develops the themes of restoring order and unity in visual terms. He suggests that the perception of unity in multiteity is a function of vision, and the scale on which it operates. At the end of the first night, in the pseudo-propositional language of the “Council of God,” Blake describes the “Divine Vision”: “For contracting their exalted senses/ They behold Multitude or Expanding they behold as one/ As One Man all the universal family” (310-11). Retroactively reading into these lines the axiom from *Jerusalem* that to see a “perfect Whole” or a vision, one must see it in its minute particulars, suggests that vision, and therefore purposive integrity, is a function of integration of different scales. Blake connects contraction of the senses with a narrowing that discloses multiplicity and discreteness. The language here suggests that beholding “as one,” is a function of expansion and elevation. But there is a question here of what happens to the status of the minute particulars under this expansion. The emphasis appears to be on the whole, at the expense of the “Multitude,” which when beheld from a certain vantage give up specific identity for membership in the “universal family.” The propositional language of the narrator here is nevertheless perspectival. The kind of seeing described is that of the “Council of God” surveying “in perfect harmony in Eden the land of Life” from “above the Mountain of Snowdon. Sublime” (E 311). From their vantage above the melee depicted in the previous passages, they perceive the surrounding world as harmonious. The chaotic disorder previously depicted results from the scale at which it has been presented.<sup>58</sup> Events that are chaotic on the

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<sup>58</sup> On the relationship of scale to chaos and catastrophe, particularly in connection to corpuscular materialism, see Gerard Passannante, “On Catastrophic Materialism,” in *MLQ* 78:4 (2017) 443-64, and *Catastrophizing: Materialism and the Making of Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019). On the threat of disorganization posed by

ground level disclose their unity when seen in high altitude survey. Where it has been characterized by the Zoas as fragmented and chaotic, from a sufficient height everything appears purposively integrated to the Council. The scales of observation are radically discontinuous here. The relatively clear propositional language of the Council differs significantly from the contradictory and syntactically ambiguous language through which the conflict among the Zoas has been described. The discontinuities and competing perspectives are reduced to unity in the view of the scene from the prospect of “Eternity.” This is the vantage that Urizen desires when he declares himself God and asserts “My strong command shall be obeyed” (311) He seeks to elevate himself above the noisy fray of the surrounding text to assume the harmonizing vantage occupied by the council. To attain this fixity, Urizen issues the “strong command,” of causal determinism and mechanist materialism, generating a world of inevitable action-reaction relations and mathematical regularity that will guarantee the harmonic, machine-like functioning of his world against the interruptions of “futuraity” and its threat of dynamic change.

The engine of *Four Zoas* is the recurrent pattern in which one of the dramatic forms responds to a changing world by endeavoring to fix it by an assertion of will. The pattern emerges on the first manuscript page in Enion’s attempt to bind together the dissolving subjectivity of Tharmas. Her response is motivated by pity and love, and it is of particular import that Blake presents the efforts to forestall disintegration in sympathetic terms. It is not the impulse to organize that is the problem in *The Four Zoas*, but the kinds of actions the impulse elicits. This plays out most clearly with the narrative of Urizen. While narrative beginnings and linear causality are destabilized in *The Four Zoas* by competing and contradictory accounts of

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atomic theory, see Kevis Goodman, “The Microscopic Eye and the Noise of History in Thomson’s *Seasons*” in *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism* (2004) 38-66.

events, and by the refusal by the narrator to invest a particular perspective with authority, across the competing accounts the attempt to assert mastery uniformly precipitate crises and falling.

The inscrutability of origins in the poem means there is no single fall but rather a general condition of falling connected with the embodiment of certain states and behaviors. In the first account of falling after Enion and Tharmas – themselves already in various states of decline when the poem begins – Enitharmon tries to identify an original fall with the power struggle between Luvah and Urizen, when “Luvah seizd the Horses of Light & rose into the Chariot of Day” (E 305). Since Urizen is the “Prince of Light,” this act of usurpation ostensibly causes the Zoas to fall to warring against one another for dominion. Her account, however, is immediately challenged by Los, who accuses her of deception. Los counters by saying that Luvah was in fact a victim of Urizen, and that Vala weeps “for Luvah lost, in the bloody beams of your false morning” (E 306). The pun on morning/mourning raises question about the sincerity of Enitharmon’s account, and that her construal of events portays the victim as the aggressor. While pinning down precise events leading to this iteration of falling in the narrative is a challenge because of the competing perspectives, there is considerable continuity across the varying accounts that assertions of control motivated by the impulse to restore harmony precipitate further crises.

Causality is constantly challenged in the poem. Events occur sometimes simultaneously with their causes, or prior to what was supposed to bring them about. The poem’s tendency to undermine sequence with simultaneity compromises a linear account of events progressing from a primordial unity through an original and singular fall, to a present postlapsarian condition. For instance, while Enitharmon’s account of the fall as a result of the discord between Luvah and Urizen looks backward to an origin, Los’s response offers a forward-looking counternarrative

and prophecy of a fall still to come. “I see the swords and spears of futurity,” he says, indicating that the violence Enitharmon recounts still waits in the future: “I see the invisible knife/ I see the shower of blood” (305). The repetition of “I see” indicates that Los, already referred to as “the fierce prophetic boy,” is countering Enitharmon’s retrospective account with a prospective one that locates the fall in future warfare and violent sacrifice. The word “futurity” recurs in the poem at crucial moments of temporal confusion, where the relationship between past and future is up for grabs. It marks an uncertainty about previous events that contributes to a prevailing sense of terror at an indefinite future. Competing accounts of originating events in the poem undermine the security of remembrance, and challenge its usefulness as a predictor of what is to come. Much of the poem, particularly the six nights leading up to the crisis in “Night the Seventh,” unfolds around efforts to fix a clear and necessary past. But, the inability to find any harmonizing vantage like that of the Council of God renders the competing accounts of the past as inscrutable as futurity. The destabilization of past and future in Los and Enitharmon’s competing narratives and the intimations of a cycle of sacrificial violence in Los’s prophecy precipitate the descent of Urizen, who Enitharmon looks to in hope that he will be able to unify the discordant voices. She calls on him to seize control of the situation, so that his intervention will fix the relation of her retrospective account to Los’s prospective one.

From the outset of the text beginnings are displaced, and the crises the poem dramatizes call for a character to fix firm boundaries so that the other characters can understand both themselves and their relationships to one another. Fixing a beginning also requires fixing a narrative end towards which events are drawn. Blake’s pseudo-invocations suggest such a teleological organization, but the compositional techniques in the poem itself decouple

beginnings and endings by defying purposeful movement towards closure.<sup>59</sup> By destabilizing origins and ends, *The Four Zoas* calls into question the notion narrative integrity. Indeed, throughout the poem such stability comes at extraordinary cost to the characters. When Enitharmon calls on Urizen to descend and set the world in order, he promptly declares himself “God from Eternity to Eternity” (E. 307). The assertion could indicate that Urizen construes himself as a transcendent deity, with “from Eternity to Eternity,” meaning simply forever. Or alternatively the lines could mean that Urizen is a much more limited authority, reigning only in the temporal duration between two indefinite periods of timelessness, limiting his reign to the postlapsarian but pre-redemption period that Kermode calls “the middest.” His initial effort to assert himself is plagued by the uncertainty that he was supposed to correct. Urizen is a self-defined lawgiver. According to the Council of God, he tells Luvah “My strong command shall be obeyd/ For I have placed my centinels in stations each tenth man/ Is bought and sold & in dim night my word shall be their law” (E. 311). His report here seems to limit his domain to the “dim night” of fallen existence. Luvah’s response to Urizen’s power grab echoes Los’s earlier in the poem when he says, “Dictate not to thy Equals. am not I the prince of all the hosts of Men nor equal know in Heaven” (311). The term “prince” is contested, and Urizen, Luvah, and Los all at one point or another denote themselves by it, raising the problem glossed by Luvah of how there can be hierarchy among supposed equals. The ostensible narrative of the poem, as indicated in the invocation, is towards the restoration of a proper distribution of power amongst the Zoas, but the recurrent pattern of each Zoa pronouncing himself king and then making the situation worse displaces progression towards the promised restoration.

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<sup>59</sup> Frank Kermode says that “coherent patterns” in literary texts are a function of the “provision of an end [that] makes possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle” in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 200) 17.

The temporality of competing recollections of past events and intimations of future ones in “Night the First” subverts linear progression from “Eternity,” or Eden, through an originary fall to redemption, replacing it instead with recursive patterns. Enitharmon’s lament – a frequent mode of expression of the female characters in the poem who provide, like a Greek chorus, running commentary on the poem – is retrospective but it also analyzes proleptically events in the narrative that have not yet happened. At the end of “Night the First” when “sudden down they fell they all,” the precipitous collapse is surprising in part because it has been preceded by so many other falls. The peculiarity of reading about this instance of falling, as recounted in the vision of the Council of God, is that these events seem to have already happened before the poem began, but at the same time they seem to fulfill Los’s prophecy about the “spears and swords of futurity.” Either the text is suggesting a vicious cycle in which the struggle for authority between Luvah and Urizen repeats endlessly and each time plunges the world further into “a fierce hungring void,” which would require abandoning the teleological movement towards redemption in “Night the Ninth” – “The Last Judgment.” Alternatively, the pattern of repeated ascents and calamitous falls points to a sustained concern in the text with defining and determining the relationship of past and future when all is in motion, and neither beginning or end possess fixity.

The prospect view in long form poetry serves the metapoetic purpose of coordinating past and present. As mentioned, prospects are not simple spatial descriptions, but they think space temporally. In doing so, prospects are about principles of ordering, and the relational logic that governs a particular text. The forward-looking view from the high hill works spatially and temporally, as an eventual destination. It involves recollecting where the text has been in order to prospectively imagine where it is going based on the method developed thus far. They involve pro-spective thinking that relies on contingently extending emergent patterns in the text. This is

made explicit in *The Four Zoas* where the prospect view is tightly linked to the vision of futurity, and with the compositional labors the poem dramatizes. The relation of past to future in the poem is highly attenuated, just as in the text itself it is exceedingly difficult to coordinate events and identify narrative through-lines. This difficulty has led some critics to suggest that the poem is fundamentally “unreadable” in the conventional sense of that term, meaning following from beginning to end linear narratological and syntactical relations.<sup>60</sup> It is hard to say whether *The Four Zoas* makes any progress towards a goal, or if its perambulations are endless. The opening and closing nights, with the invocation suggesting a *nostos* journey to redemption, the “Last Judgment” and culminating in the reign of “sweet science,” make claims about teleological development towards closure. But it is impossible to align events “in the midst,” in such a manner that the apocalyptic future can be seen emerging from something resembling linear narrative sequencing. Central to the poem’s many prospects is the tension between the notional teleology of the text, its orientation towards the future, and the recursive entanglements of past and future in the contested present of the poem, as in the competing retrospective and prospective or prophetic accounts of falling in the first night.

Blake preserves the functional aspect of the prospect as a device for considering the relationship of openness to artistic constraint and aesthetic unity, but he transports the functional aspect of the prospect into the strange cosmographical space of his long poems. While his prospects undertake the work of coordinating part and whole, and past and present in order to imagine a future continuous with it, they hint at endlessness. Blake uses conventional landscape description sparingly, and his prospects usually don’t proceed along the lines of eighteenth-century locodescriptive verse by itemizing aspects in a rural setting. But they nevertheless exhibit

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<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, Steven Shaviro’s claim that the poem is “undecidable,” in “Striving with Systems’: Blake and the Politics of Difference,” *boundary 2* 10.3 (1982) 229-50.

the same functional tendency towards dramatizing the purposeful arrangement of parts into an organized, formal unity. The peculiarity of Blake's prospects lies in how the absence of teleological thrust in the narrative exerts pressure on the purposeful arrangement of details in the view. By abjuring the end-driven impetus of the prospect, Blake shows himself a careful critic of the eighteenth-century topographical tradition, adapting its techniques to his specific concern in *The Four Zoas* with the relationship of an observer to a dynamic world.

Blake can and does demonstrate his skill in locodescription, though his long poems do not exist in a readily identifiable mimetic space. Even *Milton*, with its concrete setting at Blake's cottage in Felpham, blurs the rural scene with the cosmological world of Urizen and Los. In *The Four Zoas*, when Luvah and Vala stand "in the bloody sky on high," observing from a remove the nuptial feast of Los and Enitharmon, they see "purple night & crimson morning & golden day descending/ Thro' the clear changing atmosphere display'd green fields among/ The varying clouds, like paradise stretchd in the expanse/ With towns & villages and temples, tents, sheep-folds and pastures/ Where dwell the children of the elemental/ Worlds in harmony" (E. 308). Their vision includes the temporal passage from night to dawn to the brightness of day and focuses on transitions across both time and scale of attention. The present participles, "descending," "changing," "varying," and the past imperfect "dwell," incorporate the past into the presently unfolding landscape. The description proceeds from a changing horizon to the fields in the foreground to the middle-distance towns and villages. The long lines, with the musical chiming on the participial endings and the alliteration, measure out the scene in time, directing attention to clustered attractors before widening the perspective to a view of the whole as "Worlds in harmony." The pluralizing of "worlds" hints at the multifaceted unity of the scene. But Luvah and Vala's view is also literally a pro-spectus, a seeing forward in time. The

description concludes with, “Not long in harmony they dwell their life is drawn away/ And wintry woes succeed” (E 308). The fields seen in spring are green and paradisiacal but also provisional, followed ineluctably by seasonal decline. The movement of the prospect towards eventual decay aligns with a view of Blake’s cosmogony: “successive driven into the Void/ Where Enion craves: successive drawn into the golden feast.” The paradigmatic prospect merges with cycles of growth and decline in the *Four Zoas* and its peculiar character dramas. The temporal aspect of the prospect is linked to the poem’s dynamics of growth and decay, and also to its notional orientation towards the “Last Judgment,” hinted at here as the “golden feast,” that becomes in “Night the Ninth” the “Harvest of Nations.” The prospect weds space and time, and represents a more general comment on the organization of the poem itself. It reinforces the linear path through the narrative by describing the landscape as tending towards culmination in the “golden feast,” which will bring about an end to the succession of “wintry woes.”

This first conventional prospect of the poem shows a landscape developing through successive seasons, constantly changing as it moves ineluctably towards apocalyptic consummation. In this manner the prospect is nested within the narrative arc progressing from unity, through the fall and postlapsarian degradation, to restoration and reunion in the apocalypse indicated in the invocation. The seasonal changes, like the smaller scale shifts of “varying clouds,” are governed, “successive driven,” and “successive drawn,” by the teleological end of the developmental pattern. The thrust of the depiction indicates that the organization of details in the prospect is governed by its *telos*, which ensures that the “elemental worlds in harmony,” proceed toward a predetermined goal. That end, the “golden feast,” towards which the temporal succession is drawn, retroactively ensures the harmonic arrangement of parts and also redeems the “wintry woes,” that afflict the landscape. The fall is redeemed by the restoration that, in the

prospect view, lies on the distant horizon. The image of the “golden feast,” points ahead to the final night of the poem, “The Last Judgment,” in which Urizen plows under the nations, reaping the human harvest and threshing the grain in preparation for the feast. The final night describes the same patterns of decline and renewal compressed in the prospect by connecting them to the return of Ahanian – Urizen’s female counterpart – and the seasonal renewal of the landscape.

Luvah and Vala, from their commanding vantage observe in this first prospect a microcosmic depiction of the broader narrative structure of *The Four Zoas* from fall through regeneration to renewal and restoration. Critics since Northrop Frye have tried to account for the poem by fitting it into the teleological pattern in which the fall and the suffering it introduces are redeemed by the final restoration that joins together the otherwise fragmentary and discontinuous changes from one state to another that refract the poem into so many unmanageable parts. Without the promise of an end, the waves of conflict and the stages of alienation that characterize the line-by-line, night by night unfolding of *The Four Zoas* would be indeterminate. But careful readers of *The Four Zoas* have shown that Blake’s poem can be made to fit the four part mythic structure of “a fall, the struggle of man in the fallen world which is what we usually think of as history, the world’s redemption by a divine man in which eternal life and death achieve a simultaneous triumph, and an apocalypse,” only through extraordinary critical pressure (Frye 348).<sup>61</sup> Frye calls this linear, providential sense of structure the “imaginative vision of human life,” enfolded neatly in “a drama of four acts” (348). But Blake’s heavily revised and compressed invocations belie the notion of a definitive beginning, and his reliance on participial falling, rather than the nominative fall, subverts the linear thrust Frye identifies. Frye says this

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<sup>61</sup> Morris Eaves says, “It takes the massive critical pressure of a Northrop Frye to bind Blake’s formidable difficulties into an illusion of total coherence, which inevitably falls into contradictions, fragments, and dead ends as soon as the pressure lets up” in “On Blakes We Want and Blakes We Don’t” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1995) 415-17.

pattern governs not just *The Four Zoas*, but is the archetype through which all of Blake's works should be interpreted, constituting a notional mythic system that everywhere exerts influence on the long poems but is nowhere achieved in its totality – except, according to Frye, maybe in *Jerusalem*.<sup>62</sup> Vala and Luvah's prospect at the end of the first night nests neatly within Frye's schematism, and the prospect provides a vantage on the text as a whole, proffering a synecdoche for the integration of successive patterns under a determining end. But, as the text develops, its unfolding takes on a life of its own. The promised end in the Golden Feast glimpsed by Luvah and Vala from their position elevated above the fray recedes as the poem's divisions and intensive complexities multiply. Blake, like Luvah and Vala, wants a vantage from which he can make his refractory material behave in accordance with his schematic intent, but immersed in the work of composition, his teleological goal recedes. Much as Enion's efforts to make a body for Tharmas produce something that takes on its own autonomous, self-guiding power, so the end-driven organization of *The Four Zoas* as a redemption myth shatters into a recursion that undermines the prospect's promise of definitive closure. The prophesied end in the golden feast takes on the qualities of a schematic design that later prospects retrospectively analyze, undermining its purposive thrust. The schematism of the first prospect, when read alongside later ones, shows that its goal-oriented organization is pursued through an attempt to bring change under the governance of fixed laws through control and mastery of a dynamic process.

The first prospect of the poem is a spatial and temporal vision: Luvah and Vala's view is of both a landscape and a future. It is also a metapoetic reflection on a form of order in which parts are arranged in the manner of linear, causal mechanism. Looking at the scene, they see seasonal growth, and neatly arranged rural life depicted in the manner of a Claudean landscape,

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<sup>62</sup> Vogler disagrees, and describes *The Four Zoas* as a "prelude" to a vision, but claims the vision doesn't come in the mostly anti-climactic *Jerusalem*.

nested within cosmic patterns of change, and governed by the promised end which integrates and redeems the movement of the eye across the field of vision. Their vantage is withdrawn, allowing them to grasp the whole. Space and time are collapsed in a manner programmatic for subsequent prospect views in the text. Their vantage becomes, in later iterations, a powerful promontory and a site from which the imperious eye can order the world around itself. The cycle of ascents and attempts to gain this promontory, made famous by the terms of Frye's "Orc Cycle," involve the rise of one or another Zoa to this commanding position, and from here attempting to wrest control of the world through self-assertion and force. One by one, the male Zoas ascend to a position of height and authority and endeavor to redeem history while simultaneously trying to extract themselves from its exigencies. In a lyrical interlude near the end of the first night, Enion laments, "Why does the Raven cry aloud and no eye pities her?/ Why fall the sparrow and the Robin in the foodless winter?/ Faint! Shivering they sit on leafless bush, or frozen store/ Wearied with seeking food across the snowy waste; the little/ Heart, cold; and the little tongue consum'd, that once in thoughtless joy/ Gave songs of gratitude to the waving corn fields around their nest" (310). Enion's lament picks up on images of seasonal decline from the Luvah/Vala prospect, only Enion's interrogative mood repeats a single question: why all this death? Why the mutual depredation of created beings? Why do things live only to die or to be food for others? The passage draws heavily on eighteenth-century conventions of querying nature's purpose. Doubt and skepticism suffuse Enion's interrogation into why the world seems so meaninglessly cruel, and is periodically afflicted by seasonal genocide, distinguishing her uncertainty from deistical faith that sees a higher purpose redeeming pervasive suffering on earth. Enion emerges as one of the poem's most vocal critics of the logic

of providential, teleological history, whereby present horror is justified by reference to the apocalyptic ends.

At the beginning of “Night the Second” Enion’s cry has suffused the setting, providing a background song of uncertainty explicitly identified with the void. Her eloquent doubt breaks periodically into the text, in the poem’s most “syntactically transparent lyrically evocative verse” (Ault 94). Her lament comments on the convoluted events and syntax of the poem up to that point by relocating its cycles of violence within the natural world. “Enion’s voice is crystal clear here, stark and devastating in its indictment of the natural cycle of feeding in which all creatures are simultaneously victims and victimizers” (Ault 94). Enion is a member of the feminine tragic chorus in the poem, who appear periodically to comment with lyrical and moral clarity on the seemingly irrational, purposeless cruelty of creation and its endless cycles of death. In this, she stands slightly outside the involutions of the narrative, its power struggles and conflicts, and offers a critical perspective on events. Her song has an ineluctable pull, “direful hunger craving/ All ravning like the hungry worm,” drawing characters in by the gravity of its doubt. Her questions mark an absence, “like the silent grave” (E 313). The near-rhyme of “grave” and “craving” links Enion’s interrogation of purpose to powerful desire, a “draught of Voidness, to draw existence in” (E 313). Her lament is a rejoinder to Luvah and Vala’s teleological prospect. Where the question of “why” was implied in their prospect, and answered by the “golden feast,” Enion’s questions mark a profound absence, a black hole where the *terminus ad quem* should be, with the gravitational force to “draught,” drawing in all its surroundings. Following Enion’s lament, and her rejoinder to the earlier prospect vantage, the prospect view becomes increasingly imperious, defined by an effort shut out Enion’s doubt.

Will fills the void left by Enion's critique of teleology. While Luvah's and Vala's vision grasps in a single view the "wintry woes," when "life is drawn away," and their redemption by the "golden feast," Enion's lament queries the barbarousness of justifying suffering by subsuming it to an imagined end. While the deists Blake singles out for criticism in *Jerusalem* might be content to see suffering resolved by the "Harvest of Nations," and the end of history, the powerful lyricism of Enion's interruptions stubbornly intrudes and refuses to be reincorporated into the mythical structure. The "draught," of the absent purpose that Enion voices is what Urizen, when he ascends to the vantage previously occupied by Luvah and Vala, labors to wall out. Hearing Enion's ululations in the void, "Urizen strode above, in fear & pale dismay/ He saw the indefinite space beneath & his soul shrunk with horror/ His feet upon the verge of Non Existence" (314). Urizen occupies the prospect vantage, standing above a space that lacks purpose and organization. He recoils from the uncertainty that threatens to consume him, and tries to occupy the stance of the imperious eye, taking the position of the privileged and empowered viewer. The task of this position, as Urizen construes it, is to shape the void and carve out a space of certainty and security against the pulsating doubt of Enion's domain. "His voice went forth/ Luvah and Vala trembling & shrinking, beheld the great Work Master/ And heard his word! Divide ye bands influence by influence/ Build we a bower for heavens darling in the grizly deep/ Build we the Mundane Shell around the Rock of Albion" (E 314) Urizen sees himself as God, creating a protective shell by fiat to keep out Enion's domain. Having mastered Luvah and Vala, they become the material for his creation, as Luvah is fed into Urizen's forges. Urizen's response to the prospect of chaos is to construct a mathematically ordered, fixed world that will shut out the uncertainty of Enion's "draught." Urizen intends his "Mundane Shell," the geometrical order he commands built, to redeem the fallen world around him by restoring order.

His response to the terrifying prospect of a meaningless and purposeless world is to petrify a protective shell that will guarantee order and intelligibility by suppressing uncertainty and change.

The view of “Non Existence,” is analogous to the subsequent vision of “Futurity,” a word first used in the poem by Los and associated with uncertain and violent events. The prospect visions in the poem are linked together, as each new prospect analyzes its precedent. From Luvah’s and Vala’s teleologically ordered vision, to Urizen’s view of “Non Existence,” and his subsequent glimpse into “Futurity,” Blake generates a pattern where each prospect reinterprets the dynamics of its predecessors. The self-critical pattern shows Blake interrogating the potential imperiousness of the conventional eighteenth-century prospect, as a view from nowhere that organizes space and time around its own fixed center. In the prospect tradition Blake mines, the view forward in space from a high hill is also an anticipation of things to come. In the mechanical universe Urizen creates, he imagines the vantage will allow him to occupy a space like Laplace’s demon, surveying the past and able to determine with mathematical certainty an unavoidable future. As in Luvah’s and Vala’s view, present-tense verbs and deictics like “among,” cede to temporal indicators like “not long,” as present patterns point to eventual developments. Impressions of a present landscape, “there,” merge with intimations of change. In Blake’s handling the anticipatory thrust of the prospect view is characterized as a self-assertive effort to determine the future in advance and therefore fix temporal development in accordance with laws of mathematical regularity. The Urizenic prospect provides a vision of a mechanical universe where the fixed laws of movement lead inevitably to a certain future. But the prospect view is not grasped all at once. It must be made, and in verse this involves the line-by-line process of visual *poesis*. The successive arrangement undermines Urizen’s desire for intellectual

intuition, the ability to see past, present, and future simultaneously. This process is itself indeterminate: it doesn't conclude with a supersessive totality. The LaPlacean vantage Urizen desires is destabilized by the contingencies of time and change, and the effort to master the whole spatial-temporal complex is figured by Blake as a form of dogmatic capture.

“Night the Second” begins with Albion rising to see the world in decline. This beginning echoes that of “Night the First,” by pointing to some inscrutable origin for the decline, but presenting it as a foregone conclusion. Where Enion and Tharmas and Enitharmon and Los all offered conflicting accounts of falling in the first night, Albion suggests falling is not the result of external or narrative events like the power struggle between Urizen and Luvah, but instead a failure of vision: “Albion beheld his sons/ Turning his Eyes outward to Self. losing the divine vision” (E. 313). The period in the middle line, and the parallel verb structures suggest that “turning” and “losing” are simultaneous. The act of beholding his sons is somehow also a projection of himself outward. The line could be interpreted in terms of mysticism. In looking outward to the material world, Albion loses spiritual vision. But the peculiarity of Albion looking outwards “to Self,” troubles this interpretation since “Self,” is often conceived as an intimate part of the individual, as in one’s “inmost self.” But “Self” in Blake is more closely a reified abstraction. “Self” converts a continuously developing, porous and evolving assemblage into a fixed, atomic subject that encounters a world that becomes similarly fixed by a projection of self.

The projection of the fixed self onto the world defines fallen vision in Blake, what he elsewhere calls “Single vision and Newtons sleep” (E. 722). “Behold my sickning spheres,” Albion exclaims. “Night the First,” concluded with a view from “Above high Snowdon,” so Albion’s exclamation could be interpreted as a view of the fallen cosmos, the “spheres” being the stars and planets of his postlapsarian world. But Albion’s gesture outward rebounds onto his own

“sickning spheres.” Given the reference in the previous line to his eyes turning outward, and the reorientation from a supposedly fallen world to self, the “sickning spheres,” are both the world as observed by the projective selfhood, seen through the veil of its fixed ideas, and eyes habitually dispensed to see only their own schematic representations of the world. The ambiguity of the “sickning spheres,” as both the world seen through conventionally distributed vision and the habitually organized eye itself intimates the propositional statement that recurs throughout the poem: “he became what he beheld” (336; 337). The entanglement of observer and observed in the formulation suggests that the sickness of the eye and the perceived sickness of the world are a function of how one sees rather than an ontological condition. The prospect view here queries how to observe and account for deficiencies of sight, when vision would be the very thing one would have to rely to make such an assessment. How can one see oneself seeing, and observe how perceptual experience is schematically organized in accordance with a reified notion of “Self”?

The opening of “Night the Second,” depicts the fallen visual experience of “those sickning spheres,” as a projection of the Self from the past into the future. When Urizen takes up Albion’s scepter at his request, he beholds “the indefinite space beneath,” and peers into futurity. The vision fills him with horror and uncertainty. The “indefinite space” he sees is visually linked to Enion’s void, and thus to her lament, which haunts “Night the Second,” and the rest of the poem as the figure for “Futurity.” Just as Enion’s horrified response to Tharmas is to build a container, so Urizen’s response to “Futurity,” is to build the “Mundane Shell.” Urizen is a maker, but he is described as a “Work master.” He works conceptually, while others do the labor. He frames the laws and schematizes the geometrical order of the “Mundane Shell,” but the material is provided by Luvah’s body, which is fed into the “furnaces of affliction,” to prepare the

substance of the structure. Urizen commands the “labour of ten thousand slaves” to complete the construction of his sacrificial altar, and his creation emerges from forced servitude: “Some fixd the anvil, some the loom erected some the plow/ And harrow formd and framd the harness of silver & ivory/ The golden compasses the quadrant & the rule & balance” (320; 314). The progression of implements for making proceeds from agrarian and artisanal tools to increasingly abstract, geometrical measures. The coordinating conjunctions amass the means of mechanical production, culminating with the tools for the geometrical manipulation of space. Urizen directs the construction from the fixed center of this workshop, ordering various “human forms distinct,” to labor around him, “Petrifying all the Human Imagination,” into “rock and sand” (E 314). Urizen construes the uncertainty Enion represents as a threat that needs to be guarded against, but his own obsessive efforts at mastery destroy the imagination by turning it into inert matter. His atomizing force intends petrific stability, but the irony of Urizen’s directives is that his architectural labor engenders its opposite. His smelting of Luvah into the substance of the Mundane Shell and his effort to construct a stable, hierarchical system over and against the uncertainties of Enion’s “Futurity” redound against him by creating the conditions for Orc’s emergence and for another iteration of falling.

The tendency of dogmatic mastery to engender its opposite is a central theme in Blake. In the little untitled lyric, “Mock on Mock on Voltaire, Rousseau,” the thrust of corpuscular philosophy to define nature in terms of simple discrete particles and reduce all phenomena to the universal laws governing their movement self-deconstructs. “You throw the sand against the wind/ And the wind blows it back again” (E 477). The imagery of atomization connects what Blake conceived as the imperiousness of Voltaire and Rousseau to Urizen, who by fixing his geometrical laws turns the human imagination to rock and renders everything reducible to sand.

Urizen projects himself into the world of flux that Blake call “Futurity.” His intentional, purpose-driven distribution of the world in accordance with his model of it is Blake’s paradigmatic example of the contraction of human experience. Under Urizen’s regime, “all peoples and Nations of the Earth,” are contracted: “Their eyes Their ears nostrils & tongues roll outward they behold/ What was is within now seen without” (E. 314). The development here closely parallel’s Albion, who in turning outward projects a schematic design on the world. After this contraction, the prospect view of the “Children of Man,” after this contraction develops and analyzes the previous prospect in which Urizen surveyed the void and responded by building the “Mundane Shell.” “With trembling horror pale aghast the children of Man/ Stood on the infinite Earth & saw these visions in the air/ In waters, & in Earth beneath they cried to one another./ What are we terrors to one another. Come O brethren wherefore/ Was this wide Earth spread all abroad” (E. 318). The response of the “Children of Man,” to the “infinite Earth” that unfolds before them is a microcosmic repetition of Urizen’s response to “Futurity.” Their impulse to seize control and master the world nests within and repeats the effort of Urizen to displace change with his own rational system. The Children of Man set to work to “Measure the course of that sulphur orb that lights the darksome day . . . forming instruments/ To measure out the course of heaven” (319). The compulsion to reduce the sun to its chemical constituents, and replace a world of infinite potential with a rule-governed one repeats itself along a narrower scale of creation, from Urizen’s cosmic mastery to the tertiary efforts of the Children of Man.

Urizen perceives his construction as redemptive, an act of reproducing what was lost in the fall by creating a stable, rule-governed world. “The wondrous work arose/ In sorrow & care. a golden world whose porches round the heavens/ And pillard halls & rooms receivd/ The eternal wandring stars/ A wondrous golden building; many a window many a door/ And many a division

let in & out into the cast unknown/ Cubed in window square immoveable” (E. 321). Urizen achieves a kind of fixity suspended in the void, but he cannot eradicate or fully contain change: “Many a window . . . / Lookd out into the world of Tharmas where in ceaseless torrents/ His billows roll where monsters wander in the foamy paths” (E. 321). Urizen’s achievement is ironic because when he is introduced in the beginning of “Night the Second” he is described standing “In the Human Brain/ And all its golden porches” (E. 313). The repetition undermines the sense of achievement since it isn’t clear if Urizen’s labor has actually brought about anything new. As the “architect divine,” he has attempted to “square the heavens by a line,” but the result is that “the heavens were closd and spirits mournd their bondage night and day” (E. 321). His labors have had an extraordinary human cost, and the threats lurking just beyond the porches and rectilinear windows have not been brought to heel. “Repining he contemplated the past in his bright sphere/ Terrified with his heart & spirit at the visions of futurity/ That his dread fancy formd before him in the unformd void” (322). Another recurrence here further undermines Urizen’s sense of fulfillment. His first introduction into the poem, in Enitharmon’s song in “Night the First,” has Urizen asleep “in the porch” of the brain, just before the beginning of conflict with Luvah. The narrative has turned back on itself, and all of Urizen’s labors seem to have precipitated but more crises. The very thing that his architectural mastery was meant to control – time, change, and spontaneity – continues to haunt his sphere as a constitutive margin, and all his efforts to assert certainty only bring him back to the precipice of the fall. In spite of his efforts, “Futurity” eludes Urizen’s control and ultimately his straining to contain and master it brings about his fall.

The dense pattern established in the first two nights of *The Four Zoas* seems inescapable. Characters ascend and perceive from an imperious height what seems to them a dire situation

demanding their action to remedy it. Their efforts are self-deluding, and by thinking they act on the world from a privileged position outside of it, they end up subverting their own ends. Donald Ault and Kathryn Freeman have pointed to how the complex involutions and circular, nonlinear dynamics of ascent and fall in the poem subvert the progression towards teleological fulfillment of the kind imagined by Northrop Frye. The breakdown in the progression towards the millennium occurs most vividly in the heavily revised seventh night. In David Erdman's standard edition, the two existing manuscript versions of the night, VIIa and VIIb, are integrated so that the seventh night ends with the reconciliation of Los with his "Specter" – an embodiment of the intentionality and directedness of mind that realizes ends in the world – and then with his female counterpart, Enitharmon, as preparation for his poetic-prophetic regeneration of the world. This arrangement of the text makes Los the heroic figure of redemptive imagination and the agent of the "Regeneration/ by the resurrection from the dead" promised in the invocation. Erdman sandwiches VIIb into the middle of VIIa in a manner that leads plausibly to the preparations for the apocalypse in "Night the Eighth," and ultimately to the "Final Judgment" of "Night the Ninth." But Erdman remarks in his textual notes that the manuscript is indeterminate, and his arrangement represents only one possible solution to the acute editorial problems posed by "Night the Seventh." Blake's comments to the manuscript itself are difficult to parse, and the challenge of arranging "Night the Seventh" has plagued editors of the manuscript since Yeats and Ellis' edition. On the top of the first page of VIIb, Blake writes, "This night begins at line 153 the following comes at the end." This could suggest that VIIb should link up with Urizen's recognition of the identity of Orc and Luvah, and proceed to the conclusion. Or it might mean that the entirety of VIIb should be inserted at line 153, and then at the end of VIIb, VIIa picks up again. Without resolving the severe difficulties posed by "Night the Seventh," it is clear that they

represent a compositional crisis for Blake, and an editorial one for his readers. At least initially intended to be a story of a fall into human contraction and entrapment within limited conceptual systems, followed by a restoration to unity, by “Night the Seventh” Blake can see no clear way towards restoring the primordial unity of the “wandering man” that he initially intended.

Given the recursive pattern of ascent and fall, in which each well-intentioned, salvific endeavor generates its opposite and ushers in another fall, from “deep to deeper still,” Blake is unable to present a compelling case for why it will be different with Los. Only by reading the Los of *Jerusalem* retrospectively into *The Four Zoas* is it reasonable to present him as somehow exempt from the patterns of ascent, creative production, and fall that have entangled the other characters. But Los in *The Four Zoas* is not Los in *Jerusalem*. Blake’s characters are not fixed allegories, representing the same stock traits from poem to poem, and always meaning the same thing, regardless of context. They don’t belong to some fixed notional world, of which each poem represents a partial exemplification. The characters are contingent and emerge in particular ways in accordance with each poem and their development in that text. While Harold Bloom says that through the course of *The Four Zoas* Los evolves from the selfish lover of nights one and two into the figure of redemptive imagination that he plays in *Jerusalem*, accepting Los as savior requires forgetting the cyclical pattern that makes Blake’s compositional dilemma so acute in “Night the Seventh.” It means forgetting that Los, too, has responded to “futuraity” and uncertainty with labors of constraint, as when he perceives with jealousy and possessiveness the threat posed by Orc and so smiths the chain that binds him to the rock. Los is not exempt, so why should his systematizing labor bring about salvation, rather than adding another link to the chain of successive falling that Blake has initiated?

The messy and confusing manuscript of VIIa and VIIIb, with insertions, large and unrecoverable deletions, and uncertain ordering, show the trouble Blake had determining how to proceed, and how to bring about the promised resolution of the text's multiplying bifurcations. If he elevates Los into the position of redemptive savior, it's just another turn of the screw that repeats the very act of seizing control that has precipitated collapse and fall previously. If he leaves the conclusion of VIIa, the redemptive *telos* of the text is undermined by Enitharmon's desperate assessment of the power struggle between the Zoas as intractable. Through the multiplying conflicts and the shadows and emanations that continue to divide, Enitharmon and the other characters have lost all sense of identity and purpose. Blake anticipates these problems in a moment of retrospection in "Night the Sixth." Blake editing and reediting his manuscript, trying to find a way clear of the involutions and refractory fragmentation of the material, the "gins and traps," that he has laid for himself in nights one through six, resembles Urizen. Having recurrently fallen, then endeavored to create a new redemptive world, only to fall again, in a dull recursive round of ascent and descent, Blake describes Urizen writing and rewriting, trying to get the story straight: "Oft would he sit in a dark rift and regulate his books/ Or sleep such sleep as spirits eternal wearied in his dark/ Tearful & sorrowful state. then rise look out and ponder/ His dismal voyage eyeing the next sphere tho far remote/ Then daring into the abyss of night" (349). As mentioned above, Blake and Urizen resemble one another here, entrapped within textual difficulties of their making, without a clear way forward. Urizen's problem is that he is caught in a vicious loop where the conditions he himself produces at an earlier time have "petrify'd" into feed forward mechanisms that entrap him in a cycle of behavior. The patterns he has established previously in the text become a prison from which he struggles to free himself, driving him to create yet another dogmatic system that merely repeats the cycle. Blake, too, having established

a pattern of decline and fragmentation, cannot extricate himself from the compositional morass to gain a ground where “self-sustaining I may view all things beneath my feet” (349). He cannot achieve sufficient height above the text, which has proceeded through successive waves of disintegration, so see a way forward towards the redemptive unity initially promised.

Blake and Urizen’s problem is a broader challenge of producing novelty under the accumulated pressures of past productions. Products of imagination, creative systems tend to harden over time and when passed on become feed forward mechanisms. Tomlinson calls this tendency of cultural products to detach from their initial context and exert forward cultural pressure on subsequent generations “epicycles”: “These are the systems that broke loose from their cultures, so to speak, to achieve an operation so independent that they could turn back and guide culture in the manner of a feed-forward control mechanism” (160). The cultural disciplining of the eye to perceive those elements singled out as important, the structuring of complex conceptual systems that constrain and direct thinking along conventionally established lines are feed forward mechanisms that Blake and his proxy Urizen struggle to overcome. But what Urizen’s struggles reveal is that the effort to subvert consolidated conceptual systems most often reproduces the same dynamics that it pitched itself against. Trying to transcend inherited visual and conceptual systems generally results in their repetition. The challenge posed by Blake’s text, and dramatized by Urizen, is how to achieve sufficient reflective distance to observe and account for the patterns and accumulated behaviors that organize activity in the world. As McGann points out, Blake possesses mythmaking aspirations, but he is also deeply skeptical of the tendency of myth to harden into dogma, and he pours this tension and uncertainty into the manuscript of *The Four Zoas*, with the broader goal of taking stock of how historically accumulated ways of seeing and thinking regulate experience.

The critical literature on prospect poetry construes the prospect view as the imperious, disembodied eye of reason, offering an imaginary Archimedean platform from which to observe and arrange the cosmos. The prospect view has been demystified as a privileged view from nowhere, a vantage that is imagined to be purged of the contingencies of particularity and perspective. Urizen obsessively desires such an unseen position from which “self-sustaining I may view all things beneath my feet,” but his repeated attempts at transcendence in order to attain this commanding position instead multiply the crises and catastrophes of *The Four Zoas*. The narrative arc of Urizen shows Blake anticipating the twentieth-century critique of the prospect, and laboring to identify alternatives to its imaginary transcendence. The inability of Urizen to free himself from dynamics of his own making mirrors the problems that confound “Night the Seventh,” that Blake confronts throughout the increasingly messy poem. Given the pattern of rise and fall, distinctly captured in the present perfect of Urizen’s recurrent “then rise look out & ponder/ His dismal voyage eyeing the next sphere,” the prospect of closure and finality seems unlikely. Blake can perceive no way to transcend the vicious loop he has created. The result is the collapse of the teleological thrust of the poem towards its millenarian conclusion.

Urizen eventually abandons his desire for a commanding position from which to dictate the lawful regularity of a complex whole while maintaining a position untouched by change and spontaneity, just as Blake abandons the teleological thrust of the text towards apocalyptic closure. Urizen’s questions about how to transcend “this world of cumbrous wheels,” is replaced, in “Night the Ninth,” with another question that modifies and corrects the earlier prospect view, in the same manner that the densely patterned prospects of nights one and two provide critical commentary on one another. In the prospect view in “Night the Sixth,” where Urizen appears

trapped in endless cycles of ascending to ponder and returning to his darkened rift, he expresses his desire to transcend the circuit that he has created. But his upward movement is balanced by descents, “sinking thro these Elemental wonders swift to fall/ I thought perhaps to find an End a world beneath of Voidnes/ Whence I might travel round the outside of this Dark confusion” (349). Urizen can find no bottom, however. He hopes to reach a non-complex, atomic foundation from which he can start over. The deictic “this” points to the “dark confusion” of the recursive patterns of his attempted transcendence, and failed efforts to overcome the “Circle of Destiny” that binds his narrative arc. Urizen fails to realize that his repeated efforts to withdraw from the world and command it from outside, implied in his initial characterization as a self-contained divinity, virtually guarantees that he will find no end to the cycle. So long as he maintains a sense of himself as unmoved mover, a subject acting on a passive, objectified world, he will continue to generate his own fall. His desire to find an “end” corresponds to Blake’s anxiety about how to bring his poem to conclusion without reproducing the problems of closed systems he has diagnosed.

Urizen’s self-reflection in “Night the Sixth,” and Blake’s growing anxiety about how to proceed, as evidenced in the increasingly fraught revisions to his manuscript, do not lead to any fundamental change in character, or alteration to the established pattern until later in the poem. Urizen again attempts to assert his schematizing will, deciding somewhat arbitrarily, “Here will I fix my foot & here rebuild/ Here mountains of Brass promise much riches in their dreadful bosoms” (350). But this has all happened before, and there is no longer any temptation for the reader to think that this act of self-assertion will be redemptive in the way previous instances were not. The stage is set for another repetition of the pattern. Urizen is trying to return to an origin that has never existed by projecting into the future a static world where everything is

properly ordered. His nostalgia for an absent origin drives his compulsive repetition, and “so he began to dig forming of gold & iron/ And brass vast instruments to measure out the immense and fix/ The whole into another world better suited to obey/ his will where none should dare oppose his will himself being King/ Of all & all futurity be bound in his vast chain” (350). Where his first efforts in “Night the Second” are tragic, here Urizen’s lack of self-reflection and his compulsive repetitions are pathetic. From the start Enion’s lament, and her clear-eyed assessment of the cost of Urizen’s idea of order drives his repeated efforts at domination. As Ault explains, Urizen “devotes great energy to evading” Enion’s assessment of his efforts to master futurity. The repetition of “his will” and the obsessive desire to enchain “all futurity,” by bringing everything under his control adds another loop to the “Circle of Destiny” that has entrapped the narrative of the poem. At this juncture, the prevailing sense is that it could proceed in this cyclical form indefinitely. And the state of the manuscript, with large interpolated verse paragraphs, reinforces this perception. The categorical response to uncertainty in the poem has been to fix developmental becoming by positing the end in advance. Urizen exemplifies most vividly this tendency to petrify the prospect of futurity, as one kind of systematizing in accordance with universal fixed laws. But the pattern is not unique to Urizen. It also characterizes Enion’s response to the decline of Tharmas, and Los’s labor smithing a chain to bind Orc, and Luvah’s declaration of authority. Under the regime of fixity, whether Urizen’s or Enion’s or Los’s, “the eyelids quiverd/ Weak and weaker their expansive orbs began shrinking” (350). The rage for order that haunts the poetic and formative impulse in *The Four Zoas* produces a contraction of sense that has the anesthetizing function of numbing human sensitivity to the changing vitality of the world by putting in its place rigid conceptual systems of immutable laws and values.

*The Four Zoas* defies itself by refusing to move in linear fashion towards its promised end, while still holding out the hope that millennial closure is attainable. While “Night the Ninth” does depict the apocalyptic “Harvest of Nations,” the return of Urizen to the harrow and Luvah to the vines, and the apparent restoration of the natural order between the Zoas, there is nothing definitive or final about it. Instead, “Night the Ninth” reads more like a metacommentary on the cycles and recursions of the previous eight nights. Where nights one through eight offered a microscopic analysis of dynamics of rise and fall, “Night the Ninth” pans out for a more synoptic view. The rhythms that seemed catastrophic in first eight nights are naturalized, and made to resemble the seasonal successions first glimpsed by Luvah and Vala in “Night the First.” The death and rebirth of Ahania, and her recurring reunion with Urizen – a subplot of nights two and three – coincides in the synoptic perspective of “Night the Ninth” with the patterns of the seasons. A dream vision presents a reunion of Tharmas with Enion, whose separation started the poem, as children playing in the pastoral garden of Vala. But Enion still scorns Tharmas, and Tharmas continues to pine for Enion. Luvah and Vala, who in some accounts brought about the conflict in the first place by seizing Urizen’s reins, remain where they were in “Night the First.” When they are first introduced into the narrative proper they are isolated from the other Zoas, “standing in the bloody sky/ On high remaind alone forsaken in fierce jealousy” (E 308). In “Night the Ninth,” their drunken excesses at the harvest have caused them again to be cast out from the feast, in a scene that parallels their initial appearance in the poem.

The first lines of the text, in the heavily revised invocation, appear to declaim unity: “Four Mighty ones are in every man; a perfect unity cannot exist” (E 300). By the poem’s end, the characters are in positions comparable to where they began. The events in the poem, and the conflicts between the contending “Mighty Ones,” haven’t ushered in reconciliation. Their unity

is rejected by the incipit, raising troubling questions about the poem's potential closure. But on the next page, in the second of two competing invocations, Blake calls on the "Daughter of Beulah," to "Sing/ His fall into Division and his resurrection to Unity." The tension between the two invocations to the poem, the "song of the ancient mother" that contains the claim that perfect unity is impossible and that of the "Daughter of Beulah," compresses the tension between the poem's potentially endless, cyclical tendencies and the transcendent impulse of the text towards apocalyptic fulfillment. The "song of the ancient mother" brackets the song of the "Daughter of Beulah," which contains the teleological narrative of the "fall into Division," and "Resurrection to Unity." This narrower account is contained within the ancient mother's song that resurfaces in the synoptic view of Night the Ninth. The final night's metacommentary on the poem nests the narrative dynamics of nights one through eight within natural rhythms of recreation. Arguably the 7000 year span created by Eno in "Night the First" doesn't end history, but represents instead a larger scale of repetition within which the micro-cycles of the narrative play out.

A balance of contraries emerges between the end-driven impulse of the Daughter of Beulah's song and the macro-cycles of the aged mother, resulting in an irreducible tension between purposiveness and openness. The competing invocations indicate two forms of organization, cyclical and linear, that "Night the Ninth" refuses to reduce to unity in spite of its millenarian subtitle, "Being the Last Judgment." At its beginning the Eternal Man again calls on Urizen, just as he did at the beginning of "Night the Second," and as Enitharmon did in "Night the First": "Come forth from slumbers of thy cold abstraction come forth/ Arise to Eternal births shake off thy cold repose/ Schoolmaster of souls great opposer of change" (E. 389). Urizen's petrific frigidty has been systematically opposed to the uncertainties of change, and his labors have been intended to establish the mechanical laws capable of reducing "futuraity," to a linear

development of past into present and future time. Urizen's strategy has not failed to fail in the poem, and there is a suggestion here that becoming doesn't follow laws of causal necessity. The manuscript page containing Urizen's response shows Blake's uncertainty with how to extricate himself from the narrative loop and bring the poem to an end. Where Blake had originally written "Then Go O dark remembrance I will cast thee forth from those/ Heavens of my brain, nor will I look upon remembrance more," he scratches out "remembrance," and replaces both occurrences with "Futurity" (E 390). The revisions capture the entanglement of past and future in Urizen's effort to make the one the unavoidable consequence of the other. Urizen's confrontation has been with unpredictable change, and his labors to master it provide the poem's most vivid example of falling. He has sought to put a limit on change and carve out a "dread form of certainty," inured against the disruptions of time. This labor has repeatedly involved a nostalgic effort to recreate an ill-remembered stable origin and project it into the future through dogmatic self-assertion.

The poem ends with considerable overlap with its beginning, but there is a moment of reckoning for Urizen that suggests an intervention into the cycle of ascents and falls is possible, even if wholesale redemption and millennial resolution have been foreclosed. Called on by the Eternal Man to once again repeat his labors of control, Urizen swears off domination: "Let Orc consume let Tharmas rage let dark Urthona give/ All strength to Los & Enitharmon & let Los self-cursd/ Rend down this fabric as a wall ruind & family extinct/ Rage Orc Rage Tharmas Urizen no longer curbs your rage" (390). In "Night the Second," the watery chaos of Tharmas was described as imperiling Urizen's geometrical labyrinth, and he here gives up his effort to keep it out. Where Urizen's speech has been previously marked by assertions, after his refusal to curb the destabilizing energy of Orc, and to dominate the other "starry ones," his language is

recast into the interrogative mode. He begins to sound more like Enion. Enion's character arc, from her attempt at mastery and subsequent fall, and eventual self-reckoning contrition, and her role as cautionary chorus, is the model for Urizen's change here. Her questions about the natural and human costs of his deterministic universe haunt his repeated attempts at control. Unlike Urizen, in "Night the Second," Enion acknowledges her mistake in a lamentation that extends the critique of her first lament to the social and human costs of mutual exploitation. Urizen has been content with the terrible suffering his efforts create because to his mind, his exploitative actions forestall uncertainty and are therefore justified. The narrator says, "Ah happy blindness Enion sees not the terrors of the uncertain," but what follows in Enion's lament is a devastating critique of Urizen's program of control. She doesn't fear uncertainty like Urizen. She is acutely sensitive to the sacrifices required to hold "futura" at bay and convert the future into a seamless extension of the past into the present. In what Ault calls some of the poem's "most detachable verse," she asks, "What is the price of experience do men buy it for a song/ Or wisdom for a dance in the street? No it is bought with the price/ Of all that a man hath his house his wife his children/ Wisdom is sold in the desolate market where none come to buy" (E. 325). Her lament reflects on her own devastating experience, and recasts narrative events of the poem in the more recognizable space of human exploitation. "It is an easy thing to laugh at wrathful elements/ To hear the dog howl at the wintry door, the ox in the slaughter house moan/ To see a god on every wind and a blessing on every blast," Enion laments, but her song is not registered by Urizen until "Night the Ninth." He has tried to shut it out and ignore human suffering, deeming it worth the cost of the stability achieved by his rigid natural and social laws.

In "Night the Ninth," Urizen begins to sound more like Enion, and there is an increasing sense that he has learned to hear her lamentation. Like Enion, he adopts a questioning stance,

asking, “What chain encompasses in what Lock is the river of light confind/ That issued forth in the morning by measure and in the Evening by carefulness” (E. 391). There is clarity to Urizen’s insight here that he is not the sole source of order and regularity in the world. It exists independent of him in the subtly evolving patterns of natural change. Nature is not purposeless or irrational, nor is it the mechanical, deistic world that contains “A god on every wind & a blessing on every blast,” a world that justifies present suffering in the service of a higher end. “I have erred & my error remains with me,” Urizen reflects (E. 391). His error has consisted in assuming that he alone was the source of order in the universe, and without his centering gravity the world would descend into unpredictable chaos. There is “measure,” proper to the sun that regulates its rise, and sensitive “carefulness,” that guides its setting. Natural measures, and continuously changing rhythms, like the patterning in Blake’s long lines, exhibit a formal continuity that admits of change and variation. The rhythmical measures of organic time differ from the fixed, mechanical laws Urizen has sought to impose, and his realization here shows that the recognition of natural patterns of continuity through time involves sensitive attention to the present world rather than the projection of self upon it. The measured, purposeful world Urizen perceives is not mechanical: its futurity is not fixed, and it exhibits infinite potential for change.

In his last prospect view in *The Four Zoas*, Urizen no longer dictates to his surroundings, but queries them instead. “Where shall we take our stand to view the infinite and unbounded,/ Or where are human feet for Lo our eyes are in the heavens” (391). Where previously the unbounded prospect provoked Urizen to try to contain it, here he indulges in the indeterminate, speculative agitation that the “infinite and unbounded” provides. His stance contrasts with his putting his foot down in “Night the Sixth,” and reinterprets that effort as the labor of grounding down into the worldly and particular that he has previously attempted to transcend. He is asking

how the limited and perspectival, grounded in finitude and sensitive experience, relates to the endless. These questions are crucial at this juncture in the text because they stage the relation between limitation and plenitude, and between the demands of unity and the endlessness of change that have prevented the poem from settling into anything resembling a clear and linear trajectory towards narrative closure. Urizen's prospect vision provides the clearest metacommentary on the compositional problems Blake has been grappling with throughout *The Four Zoas* manuscript. Urizen, like Blake at crucial moments in the text, has repeatedly negated change through labors of linear narrative and end-driven composition. But the efforts at enclosure and containment have repeatedly been displaced by a compositional struggle that, in its unfolding, takes on a life of its own while the schematic *telos* withdraws.

Openness is often treated as de facto destabilizing. Urizen has repeatedly endeavored to circumscribe open-ended uncertainty, and replace it with mechanical order. In doing so he is easy to construe as the poem's arch-conservative to Orc's revolutionary futurity. But in Urizen's final prospect, the "infinite and unbounded," or energetic flux does not negate the necessity of constraint. The questions that he asks try to coordinate the two without subordinating one to the other. *The Four Zoas* shows how revolutionary fervor shares self-assured, controlling dogmatism with Urizen's totalitarian self-assertions. As negations, they mirror one another, becoming what they behold. Urizen and Orc share the impulse to fix and correct the deviant state of affairs through the imposition of righteous will. But there is a third way between the mutual negations of chaotic energy on the one hand and rigid systematicity on the other. Selective constraint, and grounded, embodied, perspectival experience enable Blake's visionary experiences. *The Four Zoas* has repeatedly treated scenes of making and composition, and all the Zoas at some point are generative of forms of order, whether as weavers or builders or blacksmiths. The ordering

impulse has often come at the cost of the “infinite and unbounded,” as in Urizen’s views of futurity. Blake is trying to balance the linearity of his artistic practice, and his emphasis on artistic unity against the equally powerful demands of energetic, generative dynamism. In “Night the Ninth,” Urizen renounces the position of unmoved mover and the effort to create a system inured against the destabilizing presence of the unbounded. His previous prospects of indefinite futurity provoked the desire to control, but here he wonders how to live in the uncertainty of an unbounded and changing world. In the context of the “Last Judgment,” this realization suggests that the apocalyptic impulse towards eschatological closure is balanced by infinite development. Urizen is left here with the unresolved problems of embodied presence to a changing world. The lines compress the dynamic tension of the prospect view between a satisfying sense of unity and the aesthetic requirement of movement and productivity that belies the closure of a propositional statement. At stake is the relationship of openness and heterogeneity to the techniques of formal artistry and compositional integrity. Blake is trying to find a balance between mutually existent contraries whose copresence ensures both the vitality of his text and its artistic unity, but without negation: “Negations are not contraries: Contraries mutually exist” (161).

The dynamic interplay between openness and unity in the prospect view is integral to Blake’s poetic practice. In the epigraph to this dissertation, Lyn Hejinian writes, “Form does not necessarily achieve closure, nor does raw materiality provide openness. Indeed, the conjunction of form with radical openness may be what can offer a version of the ‘paradise’ for which writing often yearns – a flowering focus on a distinct infinity” (42). The balance she describes of “radical openness” with form is distinctive of the prospect view, which in turn provides an insight into Blake’s notions of artistic unity and vision. His prospects, which recollect the past and peer into the future, are microcosms for the poems in which they are embedded, and afford

insight into the prevailing ideas of order in the poems. Blake's prospects in *The Four Zoas*, and also in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, figure the irreducible tension that Hejinian describes.

Formal integrity and linearity are the mark of artistic achievement in Blake but they do not preempt the dynamism he connects with energy and living vitality. Coordinating these contraries, "a flowering focus on a distinct infinity," is the central challenge posed by Blake's prospects. The views in *The Four Zoas* sustain a critique of the imperious eye that we have seen connected with Milton's Satan, and with the conventional practices of emblematic landscape poets of the eighteenth century. But the eye that dominates the landscape from an ideal vantage does not exhaust the prospect view. In his three long poems, Blake endeavors to find a dynamic ground for poetic composition that balances the impulse towards formal arrangement with change and dynamism, without which the impulse to order can slide into imperial control. Artistic unity, construed along propositional lines as univocal meaning, is antithetical to the ground Blake establishes. This ground is an ever shifting, and ambulatory center, unlike the fixed eye associated with the *camera obscura*. Urizen's realization in "Night the Ninth" is that his error has consisted in taking propositional and conceptual containment as his model for systematicity and unity, at the cost of "the infinite and unbounded." When he abandons this pursuit, he is able to see the world not immediately. It isn't as though the veil suddenly drops, but instead he is able to perceive the finitude of his own experience, his tertiary "human feet," fixed firmly on the ground rather than in a world "outside this dark confusion." His realization represents a fundamental revision of his relation to change, and an acceptance of uncertainty without suggesting that it entails abandoning the human vocation of identifying form and order in the endlessly developing non-human world.

Urizen's epiphany is like other epiphanies in the long poems. They involve not pure perception, or transcendence of the veil of becoming to see being in and as itself, but instead the reorganization and reorientation of vision. In the conclusion of *Milton* when Blake is seized by a vision, he describes himself collapsing: "Terror struck in the Vale I stood at that immortal sound/ My bones trembled. I fell outstretched upon the path/ A moment" (143). What follows this ecstatic experience is a reorganized relationship to the surroundings at Felpham: "Immediately the Lark mounted with a loud trill from Felphams Vale/ And the Wild Thyme from Wimbletons green & impurpled hills" (143). The word "immediately" can mean here at the same moment that he falls the Lark starts up, or it may mean that the lark mounted without mediation, without being seen as something else. The Wild Thyme has previously been described in the poem as Los's messenger, but it is seen here as a simple flower in bloom, intermingling green and purple. "Thou perceives the Flowers put forth their precious Odours! And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets/ Forgetting that within that center eternity expands" (131). Blake coordinates vision with heightened attention:

General knowledge is remote knowledge; it is in particulars that wisdom consists  
& happiness too. Both in art & in life General Masses are as much art as a  
Pasteboard Man is Human Every Man has Eyes Nose & Mouth this every Idiot  
knows but he who enters into & discriminates most minutely the Manners &  
Intentions the [Expression] Characters in all their branches is the alone Wise or  
Sensible Man & on this discrimination All Art is Founded. (E 560)

Blake's theory of vision is not ideal or transcendent. It is, as Damrosch says, not the kind of vision "that dismisses the visible world as a mere illusion" or that desires "escape to a 'higher realm'" (Damrosch 124). The critique sustained in *The Four Zoas* paints the desire to transcend

the world as the definitive gesture of the Selfhood, and as the act that precipitates falling. Visionary or epiphanic experience of the “eternal now” means attending to how seeing is conventionally organized, and reflecting on the task-oriented entrainment of the sensorium that blots from awareness the expansive scent of wild thyme in bloom, or the almost imperceptible flitting of a lark in a nearby tree. Vision involves noticing those minute particulars that our everyday deployments of sense and our skilled navigation of the physical world suppress.

Alva Noë, writing about the way art asks us to attend to how task-oriented activities discipline our sense experience, says art offers, “not a view from on high; rather it is an attempt from within the activity to make sense of where we find ourselves” (31). Like the prospect view, art doesn’t provide transcendence of the patterns and bodily dispositions that make us skillful navigators of the empirical world, but provides insight from within those activities into how they organize human experience. The prospect view is thus a metatheoretical moment in long poems. It isn’t transcendence, or an escape from organized activity into sensuous immediacy, but a simultaneously retrospective and proleptical glance, a gathering of what came before and an intimation of the path that leads forward. A momentary pause within the simultaneously anticipatory and retrospective work of reading, they gather up and hint at the ordering principles that will shape what is to come. But this view is provisional, a form of imaginative, speculative dilation and expectation that is not deterministic, because the logic of literary texts is not that of causal necessity. The prospective view hints and suggests, offering probationary hypotheses subject to temporally extended modulation by the act of line-by-line reading. They provide insight into the method, or organized relational activity of the text itself. But the insight is recursive, since the retrospective work of the prospect, its figuration of how the text has organized and integrated materials up to that point feeds back into the developing text,

reorganizing the methodical relations that came before to generate an aperiodic, patterned, continuously developing structure.

The false fixity of our everyday operational, conceptual furniture is what Blake calls the “Mundane Shell.” When this furniture is functioning the way that it should, when our experiential world exhibits a degree of invariance, these impressions harden, allowing us to take them for granted. We never find ourselves in a changeless and self-similar world, since the experience of embodied, ambulatory beings means the world is constantly changing as we move through it, but the mind stabilizes and solidifies the experiential field to make it manageable. The honing of perceptual constancies and their stabilization in the world of experience is an achievement, since it allows for the successful and efficient navigation of three-dimensional space. Seeing, in its practical deployments, is petrific by necessity. Noë writes, “Insofar as seeing is active, embodied, subordinate to task, then what we see is always just the furniture of our living, the equipment, the gear we use to take care of business” (52). But the fixity of sense experience is subject to reorganization, to seeing differently. Blake’s prospects suggest that when fixity gives way we experience gestalt shift: the sudden reorganization of the relations between elements in the perceptual field that allows us to attend to things that our task-oriented movement through the environment suppressed. As we move through the world, we are “sensitive to these changes in the apparent size and shape and color of things around us as we move about; indeed it is our very fluent mastery of them, our familiarity with them that makes it possible in the first place for us to use this pattern of variability as a means of looking onto a stable world around us” (Noë, 9). Seeing, in this view, is an entrained activity and an achievement of normative visuality in a material world present to perceptive beings. Perception is not categorial all the way out: there is a physical world that sense makes us present to. But

normative visuality and the routinized organization of sense experience stabilize the world we are present to. Perceptual naturalism and direct realism confront the normative, categorial sorting of experience and the stability of habitual, embodied movement through space.

Seeing is an organized activity that is both natural and culturally learned. The organization of seeing achieves fixity and stability, but in Blake vision involves attending to the processes and minute particulars through which the world as a unity becomes visible. What Blake is doing with his mixed media art is showing the contingency of human sense experience, and creating the conditions for reflecting on and potentially reorganizing how the perceptual field is distributed. This does not entail that Blake rejects regularity and pattern as corrupted by convention and the normative organization of space into invariants and perceptual constancies.<sup>63</sup> There is no vision without regularity and organization, but the habitual attainment of stability conceals complexity, and the suspension of the task-oriented use of sense in the experience of art allows us to reflect on habitual and culturally accumulated ways of encountering the world. Blake's advice to see a vision, whether in *Jerusalem*, or *Milton*, or *The Four Zoas*, or "Auguries of Innocence," consistently involves refocusing attention on the habitual ordering of sense experience in order to notice to what gets left out. Vision is not the kind of seeing Urizen pursues, freed from perspective and disentangled from the world, but instead placing under caesura the instrumental use of vision to attend differently to the world it makes present.

Blake's naturalism and his "literalism of the imagination," is not so skeptical that it dismisses all embodied seeing as contaminated by normative visuality and the vagaries of the evolved eye that it requires mystical transcendence to truly see. Jonathan Kramnick has written

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<sup>63</sup> The idea of "invariance," comes from James J. Gibson. See "The Information Contained in Light" in *Reasons for Realism: Selected Essays of James J. Gibson* eds. Edward Reed and Rebecca Jones (Hillsdale: L. Erlbaum, 1982). Peter Godfrey-Smith discusses "perceptual constancies," in the context of the coevolution of eyes and ecological niches in *Other Minds: The Octopus, the Sea, and the Deep Sea Origins of Consciousness* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2016)

that “the perceptual act is not of or about anything, but rather a striving to be, or perhaps more accurately, to be *with* the literal thing itself” (*Paper Minds* 9). A prospect doesn’t afford a virtual experience of looking at a landscape but instead a theorizing of how it is we experience such a setting by stitching its manifold into unity, and the pathways along which this organizing tends to proceed. Blake’s naturalism involves holding up for scrupulous examination the way visual and linguistic experience is conventionally organized. Prospect poetry casts an examining eye on how we are linguistically organized to compose a sense of the whole, and of intelligibility by drawing out, lineating, and opening to scrutiny our daily enactment of sensuous *poesis*. The goal of Blake’s scrutiny is not transcendence, but a renewed attention to the shared world of physical experience.

In one of his best-known short lyrics, entitled “Eternity,” Blake writes, “He who binds to himself a joy/ Does the winged life destroy/ He who kisses the joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity’s sunrise” (E 978). The imagery recalls the motifs of binding and chaining familiar from the long poems, alongside the flighty organic life of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. The little lyric captures the two-fold challenge posed by Blake’s work. The act of composition can be a form of binding, and an act of capture that undermines its own ends. The parallel structure of the quatrain balances the effort to enclose against the necessity to keep things moving in order to maintain vitality. But this entails a state of suspension, living always on the cusp, in a transitional and transitory moment. The lyric also consolidates the problem of reading Blake. The critical impulse to reduce the poems to unity is countered by their instability. Nevertheless, Blake’s texts are still susceptible to thrilling contact, as many readers have experienced. That contact is flighty, and resists reformulation in the propositional language of criticism. Most students of Blake are familiar with the experience when the manifest design of one of Blake’s poems

becomes suddenly clear, graspable, and intelligible. This moment is what Blake calls “vision,” when the intentional structure is understood not in the abstract, but as a communicable complex of shifting and dynamic relations, a “joy as it flies.” Blake’s vision, Damrosch clarifies, is never “a mystical escape from reality – he was never a mystic in that sense – but a fuller and deeper engagement with reality” (*Eternity’s Sunrise* 3). The corresponding view of form is not as a property or an abstraction, but rather as an event of shareable, mutually communicable intelligibility of real, existing patterns. The intelligibility of “Eternity’s sunrise,” is not simply grasping the meaning of each individual word, but understanding the reasons for their relations within an irreducible concrete whole.

The critical, retrospective aspect of Blake’s scrutiny of the organized operations of visual and linguistic experience discloses how language and sense are distributed by providing a suspension of their routines. But the prospective aspect of Blake’s suspension of our habitual techniques for organizing experience opens these activities to reorganization, creating potential for new meaning and new relations. The fundamental work of the prospect is suspension and reorganization. The prospect is a figure for the work of literature and art to provide a pause from the regular execution of determining judgment in order to reflect on how those judgments routinely proceed. Poetry is both linear and recursive. As “a temporal phenomena, a linear sequence of lines, words, and episodes which must be apprehended in and through time,” poetry is anticipatory (Mitchell 168). But like prospects, the line-by-line unfolding of a poem in reading recursively modifies what that came before. The prospect view shows us how we are organized in time to do the work of integrating elements into a unified, intelligible whole. Prospects are temporary breaks that allow us to take in and actually see the paths that guide our behavior, scrutinize their ground conditions, and reflect on the human organization by and with the world.

When Los, in *Jerusalem*, exclaims, “I must create a system or else be enslaved by another mans,” he is disclosing the ritualized activities and systems that govern bodies and sense experience. But the alternative is not to do without system altogether in favor of some mystical experience of immediacy, or generate *sui generis* his own idiosyncratic system. Instead, the response is to do what Los always does: labor with obdurate materials, in “the stubborn structure of the language,” with the inherited materials of culture, visuality, and mythology to make it new (183). Like his georgic antecedents, Blake’s project is to remediate the materials of his inheritance by suspending their determining force and reorganizing them, “continually building & continually decaying . . . / In eternal labors” on Golgonooza, the ever-renewed city of art.

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