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Catastrophizing Humanism in Romantic Literature:
Mary Shelley, Goethe, and Kleist

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A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2022

Reading Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Comparative Literature, Cinema and Media

University of Washington

Abstract

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This dissertation argues for a new notion of catastrophe as an affective encounter between human beings and an overwhelmingly unintelligible nature, which then creates new temporalities. It explores Romantic novels, poetry, drama, and scientific writings by Mary Shelley, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Heinrich von Kleist, places these texts within the context of the scientific discoveries and innovations of the late 18th to early 19th century, and looks at how the three authors charter their ways against, around, and amid these encounters and the consequent excesses of affects they produce. It argues for a reassessment of causality and proposes an atmospheric or emergent agency to describe how these affective encounters effect changes and traumas. Moreover, this study attends to the material continuation and tensions between the catastrophes that the texts seek to witness and the forms in which they attempt to grasp their objects, as well as the resultant cycles and practices of reading.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I started out writing this dissertation around the beginning of the Covid pandemic, and its completion would not have been imaginable without the patient feedbacks and warm encouragements from my professor and chair of my committee, Marshall Brown, who has read its different iterations multiple times and whose editorial expertise has taught me way more than what this dissertation encompasses. Prof. Gary Handwerk and Ellwood Wiggins have also provided generous support and feedbacks at different stages of my writing; without their knowledge and criticism this dissertation would not have been possible. For their keen interests, scholarly insights, and good company, I am grateful to my colleagues and friends at CMS and the feminist writing group, including Amanda Swarr, Maxine Savage, Erin Gilbert, Ananya Sikand, Amalie Goul Dueholm, Meshell Sturgis, Leah Rubinsky, Xin Peng, and others. Many thanks to the generous support of the Simpson Center for the Humanities and the valuable feedbacks from colleagues at the Society of Scholars workshops. My dearest friend Xin Peng needs to be thanked twice, who has helped me pull through difficult times and whose professional enthusiasm has always been a great inspiration and role model. My love goes to my parents, my sister, and my partner.

Introduction: Affective Atmospheres and Narratives of Catastrophe

Then when as must at last every tale, all tellers, all told, Menelaus's story itself in ten or ten thousand years expires, yet I'll survive it, I, in Proteus's terrifying last disguise, Beauty's spouse's odd Elysium: the absurd, unending possibility of love.

(John Barth "Menelaiad")

It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his own nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause.

(Baruch de Spinoza *Ethics*)

Atmospheric Causality

In the novel *Ceremony* (1977), Leslie Marmon Silko's protagonist Tayo, a mixed-blood war veteran, suffers from battle fatigue, otherwise known as post-traumatic stress disorder. In an episode of involuntary flashback, he revisits the scene of the "killer rain" which he believed had taken away the life of his cousin and close friend, Rocky:

Jungle rain had no beginning or end; it grew like foliage from the sky, branching and arching to the earth, sometimes in solid thickets entangling the islands, and, other times, in tendrils of blue mist curling out of coastal clouds...Tayo hated this unending rain as if it were the jungle green rain and not the miles of marching or the Japanese grenade that

was killing Rocky. He would blame the rain if the Japs saw how the corporal staggered; if they saw how weak Rocky had become, and came to crush his head with the butt of a rifle, then it would be the rain and the green all around that killed him. (Silko 10)

For Tayo's troubled mind, all occurrences operate on two layers of causality: one immediate or efficient, the other atmospheric. He is, to be sure, conscious of what "really" happened: Rocky, as a war prisoner, had become too weak to continue the Bataan Death March in the Philippines during the Second World War, and a Japanese soldier killed him because he was unable to follow. Tayo is fully capable of giving an account of the events strictly following the laws of causation, necessity, and probability. Yet somewhere deep inside his belly, he harbors a visceral feeling—of anger and hatred—toward the jungle rain as the main culprit. That is why he cursed the rain so vehemently that (he believed) the rain was cursed away for six consecutive years in his home country in Pueblo Laguna. The use of subjunctive ("he would blame the rain if such and such were the case") reveals an almost virtual quality of the rain as the ultimate cause of atrocities. And it can certainly be argued that Tayo directs his anger toward the rain as an escapist strategy so that he does not have to hate or kill any Japanese soldier. For he keeps insisting that he never killed a person during the war, even when he was given an order to do so. These psychological explanations, however, should not obscure the reality and significance of the agential capacities of atmospheric elements such as rain and clouds in this novel.

If we take Tayo's mode of accusation seriously (as we should), then, how exactly does the green rain kill? It possesses, first of all, an inner organicity that is depicted through largely spatial metaphors, as it grows and branches out like foliage. Its image gradually grows into a living and breathing spider's web, creating an oppressive and suffocating mood. The jungle rain is thus akin to Heidegger's *Stimmung*, or attunement, the "da" of Heideggerian *Dasein*, or the

“fundamental way in which Dasein is as Dasein” (67). The rain surrounds and encircles, creating an atmospheric space for the occurrences in the jungle. It functions as a causal agent by conditioning and enveloping all that happens within its circumference. *Stimmung*, according to Heidegger, is the “‘presupposition’ for, and ‘medium’ of thinking and acting” (68), and even when we do not find ourselves in a particularly strong mood such as joy or grief, even in that situation of neither/nor, we are never out of attunement. Instead, there is “only ever a change of attunement” (Heidegger 68). In that sense, *Stimmung*/attunement operates similarly to Kant’s “transcendental conditions of possibility”. Or in Thomas Pfau’s words, “it is the horizon wherein all conscious practice—including the whole spectrum from hyperrational pursuits to vehement passions—is being transacted, a horizon that therefore can never come into view as such” (Pfau 10). Tayo’s jungle rain is a similar horizon that cannot be shaken off because it is always already there (“had no beginning or end”). Nor can it be apprehended with any conventional form of representation. Yet it differs from this transcendental account of causes because it lacks that originary quality. It is unquestionably material, though its materiality is diffused, amorphous, almost phantom-like. It is nevertheless deeply embedded in the physical world of the novel, in both its past and future, for an imperceptible thread connects the jungle rain during the war to the droughts in Pueblo Laguna’s prehistorical as well as post-war eras. More importantly, the killer rain is not there a priori. To understand its agency requires a reconsideration of causality at large because in this case the cause does not necessarily precede its effects: it is more than likely that Tayo perceives the rain as a killing agent only after the death of Rocky.

Apart from the lack of a clear sequence between cause and effect, another context for Tayo’s perception of the atmospheric agency of the green rain is the existence of a general animism throughout the novel. Places, things, and natural elements have spirits, and they can

appear in human forms. In this way humans relate to nature not just through exploitation and control, but also through (physical and spiritual) intimacy, entanglement, and reciprocity. Critics generally agree that two of the novel's major healing powers and spiritual guidance of Tayo, Night Swan and the mountain goddess Ts'eh, are both incarnations of the same mythic power, a feminine and earthly power of healing and regeneration. Both are deeply associated with the color blue, and both are accompanied by heavy presence of rain, water, and snow. They function as "affective" instructors, as their union with Tayo is at once corporeal, spiritual, and emotional. In other words, water kills and heals at the same time, both before and after Tayo's war experience. And when Tayo witnesses what he has to witness during the war, the wounding happens not just on his body, but also on the body of the whole earth (and the uranium mine at the end of the novel is a trace of that worldly wound). Tayo's ceremony, therefore, must also be the healing of the whole world, as the medicine man Betonie insists. Part of the difficulty of conceiving an atmospheric causality lies in the fact that when the rain hurts and kills others, it also wounds itself; as Ku'oosh says, it is the world that is broken, rather than the individual veterans; the perpetrator is also the victim, and vice versa.

Atmosphere as a simultaneously meteorological and affective category has received a lot of critical attention in the past several decades. It has been variously theorized as aura (Benjamin), or a "tuned space, i.e., a space with a certain mood" (G. Böhme 2), "a quality of environmental immersion" (McCormack 413), or a singular affective quality with a "constitutive openness to being expressed and qualified in specific encounters" (Anderson 145). In short, it encloses a space but is not itself enclosed. Gernot Böhme accentuates atmosphere's spatial quality, as it mediates and travels between the subject and object and is thus non-localizable; that is, it is disseminated in and through space but cannot be attached to one definitive locus. "We are

not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze.” (G. Böhme 11-12) Its status or locality almost resembles Schrödinger’s cat (with the difference that the cat obviously cannot permeate a space), for we cannot tell for sure whether it is a subjective feeling or objective quality before we start describing it. For instance, when we sense an intense mood walking into a room, it is unclear whether this is a result of the specific qualities that the room and its gathering crowd emanate, or if it has more to do with our perspective and pre-knowledge as we get caught up in the air of the room. Here the terms atmosphere and mood are used almost interchangeably with “affect” or “affection,” which refer to “a field of pre-personal intensity” (McCormack 414), and which should be distinguished from feeling or emotion.

According to this distinction, affect is a transpersonal intensity that is registered when different bodies encounter, as an increase or decrease in one body’s capacity to act (Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari), whereas feeling is a sensation that has personal and biographical qualities (Shouse), and emotion is a socio-cultural expression or projection of a feeling (Shouse, McCormack). In Massumi’s words, “Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.” (*Parables for the Virtual* 28) For Massumi, intensity is the synonym for affect, something pre-personal, pre-social, and pre-linguistic, whereas emotion is an affect registered and expressed in language, facial expressions, or other socially recognizable signs. Emotions require the people experiencing them to draw on their personal history, previous sensations, linguistic skills and understanding of cultural-societal principles in order to properly identify and

project these feelings, even though they might not be aware of this reliance on past experience and pre-knowledge¹. Put differently, affect, as the ability to affect and be affected, functions similarly to primary matter or a field of potential, a prerequisite for emotions to appear. It is quantitative change (for the ability for affection can increase or decrease) accumulated and registered as qualitative difference (emergence of emotion). The distinction is especially useful for us because it makes clear the difficulty of understanding an affective agency. Since affect cannot be recognized or represented “immediately,” without first being registered in the body or qualified by emotions, we can only explain or understand an atmospheric quality retrospectively; moreover, the registered feelings might instantaneously trigger changes in a body’s power to affect or be affected, thus altering the surrounding atmosphere. As a result, an affective field is always intimately entangled with the effect it produces, together contributing to a future atmosphere that immediately catapults a new chain/web of events.

Ben Anderson resorts to the notion of “emergent cause” to explain the causal power of something like an atmosphere. It is emergent “because we cannot be sure of the character of the atmosphere before registering its effects in what bodies do—an atmosphere is revealed precisely as it is expressed in bodily feelings, and qualified in emotions and other actions” (Anderson 156). Its peculiar and ambivalent agency is partly a result of the “unfinished” or open quality of

¹ One way to understand this distinction is thinking about infants and their expression of emotions. Without personal history or the ability to label their feelings, what parents conceive of as the emotions of the infants are more properly spoken “direct expressions of affect” (Shouse). Developmental psychologist Daniel Stern, for instance, relies on the notion of vitality affect to account for the pre-verbal subjective formation of infants. For him, vitality affect describes qualities of experiences that are elusive but are sensible to infants and are of great importance to their survival. These qualities are “better captured by dynamic, kinetic terms, such as ‘surging,’ ‘fading away,’ ‘fleeting,’ ‘explosive,’ ‘crescendo,’ ‘decrescendo,’ ‘bursting,’ ‘drawn out,’ and so on” (Stern 54). Silvan Tomkins’s affect theory is also hugely influential, according to which “affects are comprised of correlated sets of responses involving the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalisations that act together to produce an analogue of the particular gradient or intensity of stimulation impinging on the organism” (Demos 19). For Tomkins affects provide evolutionary advantages as they arouse the organism into a state of heightened awareness and alarm.

any atmosphere: “Atmospheres are...always in the process of emerging and transforming. They are always being taken up and reworked in the events of lived experience: being expressed in feelings and qualified in emotions that may themselves become elements within future atmospheres.” (145) They mediate between the self and the environment, the subject and the object, the structural and the ephemeral, the formed and formless, but they always retain the tension between these opposing sides (141), constantly engendering and then mediating new binaries. Anderson borrows the notion of emergent causality from political scientist William E. Connolly, according to which causality is decidedly non-linear, but spiral or resonating. In his words, emergent causes “spawn” effects and they are not fully susceptible to a classical interpretation of causality, “partly because what emerges was not adequately conceptualized before its production and partly because of the strange element of creativity operating inside these spiraling movements” (Connolly 174). And thus, an element of mystery or uncertainty is an inevitable part of emergent causality (174). Since some elements of the effector of change are unknowable before they emerge as part of the effect, and elements of the new forces might themselves become infused into the formative structure, they are considered emergent causes because of their capacities for creation and for engendering spirals of change:

...third, some of these forces also continue to impinge from the outside on the emerging formation; fourth, the new infusions and impingements may trigger novel capacities of self-organization or autopoiesis within one of the two systems that had not been spurred into motion before; and fifth, a series of resonances may now roll back and forth across two partially separated and partially conjoined force-fields—sometimes generating a new stabilization and sometimes intensifying disequilibrium. (Connolly 171)

In other words, since there are too many moving parts that are nevertheless intricately connected

to each other, emergent causes appear to be extremely unstable, potentially destructive, yet also strangely world-creating. Any attempt to rationalize and explain the emergent causal chain is thus inevitably trumped by the massiveness of data and mechanisms that need to be taken into consideration. Emergent or atmospheric causality is as if clouded behind a mysterious haze.

For Tayo in *Ceremony*, there are too many moving pieces that make up the puzzle that is the death of Rocky in the Philippines. The brutality and incomprehensibility of the war, conflicts and droughts in the mythic past, distancing and alienation that he suffered as a child, the coming of the white men and the mining company on the sacred land, the veterans' struggle with their return to home and "normality"—all of these memories and images travel back and coalesce into the green jungle rain that kills. Tayo believes in the non-separable connection between all living things and the land, and so the strange and grotesque green rain resonates clandestinely with the death of Rocky, an absolute separation, and all of the other forms of severance. These separations, however, also engender new linkages: the war separates Tayo from his home but allows him to see the (uncanny) similarities between himself and his enemies²; the rain separates but also connects the various cycles of drought at least in Tayo's wandering mind; his hybrid ancestry and the consequent ostracization endow Tayo with a new perspective to view the spiritual tradition of his tribe, allowing him to appreciate and connect with this inheritance in a way that his "purely" Indian friends cannot. The green rain thus functions as an atmospheric agent that isolates and separates Tayo from his home, his friends, and even his enemies, but this elemental force remains protean and has the capacity to be modified and qualified with each new

² "The humid air turned into sweat that had run down the corporal's face while he repeated his dream to them. That was the first time Tayo had realized that the man's skin was not much different from his own. The skin. He saw the skin of the corpses again and again, in ditches on either side of the long muddy road—skin that was stretched shiny and dark over bloated hands; even white men were darker after death. There was no difference when they were swollen and covered with flies." (Silko 6-7)

encounter, in turn transforming into new horizons for new events to take place.

Defining Catastrophe

This dissertation takes its cue from the above notions of affective atmosphere and emergent/spiral causality. The particular affect that surrounds, determines, and limits the texts I examine is that of catastrophe. However, not all of the catastrophes I discuss here are sudden and violent disasters, which is more akin to the modern and everyday use of the word. Instead, I take a catastrophe to be an affective encounter between human beings and an overwhelming and overwhelmingly indifferent and intricate nature, an encounter that results in a new temporality, or feelings of an end. The word “catastrophe” comes from ancient Greek, combining *kata* (downward or against) and *strophe* (turning and twisting). It literally means turning down or against and is most immediately related to the overturning of a state or regime, or the end of life, or the conclusion of a dramatic work such as a tragedy. Its connection to sudden natural disasters did not seem to appear in European languages until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The fifth edition of *Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1798), for instance, lists just two meanings under the entry “catastrophe,” 1) the last major event of a tragedy, and 2) the unhappy ending such as of a person’s life. And yet an expanded meaning of the word appeared in the sixth edition (1835), which contained a new example of the word to refer to an earthquake, “Ce tremblement de terre fut une épouvantable catastrophe” (“Catastrophe. s. f.”). *OED*, on the other hand, lists Charles Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* (1832) as the earliest instance of the word to mean “a sudden and violent change in the physical order of things, such as a sudden upheaval, depression, or convulsion affecting the earth's surface, and the living beings upon it”

(“catastrophe,” *OED* 3.b)³. This meaning is clearly associated with geological catastrophism, of which the French naturalist Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) and Lyell’s teacher William Buckland (1784-1856) were famous proponents. In Cuvier’s extensive usage of the word, a key component of geological catastrophes is a sense of “revolution,” that is, they are cyclical events signaling the end of geological epochs or periods.

The change or expansion of the meaning of “catastrophe” coincides with the emergence of a geological discourse but also with the era of literary Romanticism in Europe. I propose, therefore, to approach the Romantic texts from a lens of catastrophe and to restore its richness and multi-layered meanings. Part of the “shock” of geological catastrophes comes from the discovery of a deep time, and so the first major quality of catastrophes I am interested in also derives from an encounter between humans and a much longer and unfathomable natural history. They typically produce an excess of affects because of humans’ sudden realization that they exist and have always existed on the edge of beings and scales, walking the thin line between humans’ ephemeral existence and the vastness (but also turbulence) of nature’s generations. In such encounters, suddenness is by definition relative. For what is considered slow in nature’s time scale might be extremely slow and imperceptible according to human time. And so I am less concerned with the slowness or quickness of catastrophic events than the novel senses of time they effect. Catastrophe in this context, therefore, does not simply describe a certain tragic tone

³ *OED* traces the meaning of “catastrophe” as “sudden disaster” to an earlier source, Benjamin Robins and Richard Walter’s *voyage round the world, in the years MDCCXL* (1748): “Thus we were all, both at sea and on shore, reduced to the utmost despair by this catastrophe, those on shore conceiving they had no means left them ever to leave the Island, and we on board utterly unprepared to struggle with the fury of the seas and winds, we were now exposed to, and expecting each moment to be our last.” (Walter et al. 319) The sentence marks the conclusion of a sudden storm that drives the ship *Centurion* out to the sea, away from the crew members on the shore of the *Tinian* Island, and it also signals the end of a chapter in this memoir. The meaning of “catastrophe” here is thus a combination of the novel “sudden and violent natural accident” and the more conventional meaning of conclusion or denouement.

that permeates individual literary works; instead, the catastrophes that take shape in and through these texts are always grounded in specific material contexts and often rooted in various ecological beliefs. I look at catastrophe narratives of the Romantic era: narratives where worlds come to an end, where humans cease to exist (Shelley's *The Last Man*), where people function like natural elements to face their inevitable demise (Goethe's poems and novella), and where the world of things rules like a tyrant so that different genders and/or races clash violently (Kleist's dramatic and prose works). These catastrophes spring from their particular fields of immanence, keep growing and entangling each thing and person they encounter along the way, gradually (or unexpectedly) metamorphosing into something of a hyperobject (Morton), that massive, nonlocal, and sticky something wherein everything inheres. It withdraws from our apprehension and expression, and it exists like a horizon. A more relatable example of such a catastrophe or hyperobject would be global warming⁴.

These catastrophes effect changes in mysterious ways. They might seem ambiguous or uncertain as causal agents, but they are distinctly affective. One result of this affective quality is that these narratives of catastrophe become broken themselves. Like witness accounts to traumatic events, they are shot through by the pains and extremities of what they bear witness to. In the end they struggle to find a cohesive form, or in other words a rational vehicle of apprehension. Anahid Nersessian calls this affect of "catastrophizing" the "calamity form," which refers to "both the Industrial Revolution and a poetics awkwardly responsive to or

⁴ Morton insists on the term "global warming" and refuses its alternative "climate change," for he believes that using the latter is downplaying or even denying the severity of the situation. "What we desperately need is an appropriate level of shock and anxiety concerning a specific ecological trauma—indeed, the ecological trauma of our age, the very thing that defines the Anthropocene as such." (8-9) Regarding the all-encompassing quality of hyperobjects, he writes, "For one thing, we are inside them, like Jonah in the Whale. This means that every decision we make is in some sense related to hyperobjects... When I turn the key in the ignition of my car, I am relating to global warming. When a novelist writes about emigration to Mars, he is relating to global warming" (Morton 20).

cooperative with it, working alongside though not necessarily in cahoots” (4). I sought out texts that display a mentality of catastrophizing, that is, a tendency to experience catastrophes as ongoing processes and to create artistic forms that attempt to capture and contain those experiences. In short, it is a literature that tries to meet the catastrophe halfway. Here I take inspiration from trauma studies of the recent decades. These narratives are all expressive of some kind of traumatic knowledge, which is paradoxically ineffable. Events/things like Shelley’s plague or Kleist’s night of betrothal in *Die Verlobung* reveal themselves ironically through concealment: as void or heart of darkness that must withdraw from linear narration. A gap thus arises between the figures and forms available to the authors and the reality they seek to witness: anxieties around various symptoms of modernity such as the rise of capital, industrialization, warfare, and massive nature loss. Artistic forms in this sense acquire relative autonomy, for they are not purely referential, instead, they exceed and ironize and circle back to themselves. In Geoffrey Hartman’s terms, it is a literature of testimony, which “transmits knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that were possible) or analytic form of representation” (Hartman 42). We might call this mode of transmission affective, in that it remains open, unfinished, and atmospheric, always receding from expression but also revealing something uncanny, unsought for or otherwise unwanted.

Corresponding to this brokenness of narrative is a distinct temporality, a time that fuses the past with future and the present with past, a thickened time where traumatic/catastrophic experience compulsively recurs and revisits. A time where writing and (re)reading concur. A larger background of this dissertation therefore concerns cycles of reading. How do past texts of the testimonial and traumatic kind inform or (more fashionably) infect us in the present time? How do we make sense of the uncanny recognition, in the Covid or post-Covid era, of our own

contemporary life in texts like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) or Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole* (1998)? For in both texts a pandemic/epidemic threatens to wipe out entire cities and worlds, while Covid gives us first-hand experience of imagining anthropogenic climate catastrophe in the form of a global pandemic. How to understand the regained popularity of pandemic stories during Covid anyway (texts like Camus's *Plague* or Tsai's film)? Are people losing their mind trying not just to live the pandemic but to read about it at the same time? If Goethean and Kleistian stories feel so resonant with contemporary critical theory, such as affect studies, critical plant studies, and thing theory, am I simply fantasizing about connections that do not actually exist? And what are these untimely and unintended readings for?

Literary Anachronism

I am particularly interested in different types of literary anachronism, where texts and fragments from far-apart times are juxtaposed and appear as if they are doubles of each other. Silko's narrative of the mixed-blood Indian offers a useful case for comparison. Tayo, similar to all of the main characters of the texts discussed in this study, feels himself stuck in between spaces: between different cultures and identities, between tradition and modernity, nature and civilization, life and death, and between a catastrophe too vast to comprehend and a perspective too limited to reconcile with its external reality. He suffers the same feeling of unbelonging that Kleist's characters suffer; he is torn between different kinds of intimacy (with nature, with other humans, and with supernatural entities) much like Goethe's Otilie; and he lives a cyclical temporality in the same way that Shelley's Verney does: an end that never ends but forever repeats itself. Different from those characters, however, Tayo is able to find cure and nourishment from his own culture and land. The Pueblo animistic belief system, its hills and canyons and mesas, and its ancient tales passed down from time immemorial—they all come to

aid Tayo in his healing ceremony. One of the symptoms of his ineffable trauma (for it should be clear by now that the disease exceeds the boundaries that any technical term such as “battle fatigue” could define), for instance, is a sensation of being “white smoke”:

For a long time he had been white smoke. He did not realize that until he left the hospital, because white smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls; it was sucked away by the words of doctors who tried to talk to the invisible scattered smoke...He inhabited a gray winter fog on a distant elk mountain where hunters are lost indefinitely and their own bones mark the boundaries. (Silko 13)

This particular sensation of haziness and invisibility could be a symptom of his disease, a result of his medication, or an outward reflection of his inner psyche. Importantly, the white smoke also emerges as a belated or retrospective recognition. Tayo’s trauma appears to have an unambiguous cause: the horrors he was subject to during the war, including the Bataan Death March, the death of Rocky, internment in a prison camp, etc. Yet for Tayo, his illness seems to be cosmic in nature: it has to do with the woes of his childhood, the cycles of drought, the loss of his uncle Josiah and Josiah’s cattle, the arrival of the white people, the subsequent loss of land and animals of his home country, the nuclear tests on the native land, and many more. In that sense inhabiting the white smoke could be read as Tayo’s self-diagnosis: the lack of boundaries, and the blurry and messy entanglements of the self with the environment, foreground with the background, the Indian with the white, the Japanese with the Laguna... For Tayo the entire world is a huge spider web interlacing past and future, and home and foreign lands.

Within his “madness,” therefore, the potential for cure is already implanted. His healing is completed through a spiritual as well as carnal relationship with a mysterious woman Ts’eh, a mountain spirit incarnated in human form. Critics have noted that the name of the woman echoes

the Laguna name for Mount Taylor, tse-pi'na, which literally means “Woman Veiled in Clouds” (Allen 121, Stein 205). Mount Taylor, moreover, is “blue against the sky, topped in white when it rains or snows” (Allen 121). The white of the bed sheets and walls in the hospital blurs into the white of the mountain top whose incarnation guides Tayo with love and knowledge. Rachel Stein points out the significance of the bonds between nature spirits and the tribespeople⁵: “these relationships epitomize the Laguna belief in the reciprocal spiritual kinship of human and nature, the belief...that the Laguna *became* a people when they articulated a partnership relationship to the surrounding landscape.” (205) Inhabiting white smoke and disappearing into the surrounding atmosphere thus embodies (albeit vaguely and strangely) the kinship he believes he is sharing with everything and every person around him. At this point the revelation—namely that between him and the world around there is no substantial boundary but only transition of states—occurs to him in the form of an uncertain sensation; and yet later in the novel this knowledge is presented in front of his eyes in broad daylight, plain as a painting.

The final piece of the puzzle that remains to be discovered, that is, the ultimate thread that connects the Laguna to Japan and thus unites all human beings in face of common destruction, is the vicinity of the location where the first atomic bomb was created and tested.

He had been so close to it, caught up in it for so long that its simplicity struck him deep inside his chest: Trinity Site, where they exploded the first atomic bomb, was only three hundred miles to the southeast, at White Sands. And the top-secret laboratories where the first bomb had been created were deep in the Jemez Mountains, on the land the

Government took from Cochiti Pueblo: Los Alamos...There was no end to it; it knew no

⁵ See also Smith and Allen’s discussion of the importance of sexual relationship between nature spirits and human beings in American Indian narratives (“Earthy Relations”).

boundaries; and he had arrived at the point of convergence where the fate of all living things, and even the earth, had been laid. From the jungles of his dreaming he recognized why the Japanese voices had merged with Laguna voices, with Josiah's voice and Rocky's voice; the lines of cultures and worlds were drawn in flat dark lines on fine light sand, converging in the middle of witchery's final ceremonial sand painting. (Silko 228)

The realization that the atomic bombs which exploded in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 were first conceived and tested on Laguna land functions as an epiphany. He had imagined seeing a Japanese soldier bearing the face of his uncle Josiah during the war, and now that vague (or even hallucinatory) connection has been fleshed out in the lived entanglements of the Japanese and the Laguna. Together with this piece of knowledge comes the recognition that he has never been crazy. "He had only seen and heard the world as it always was: no boundaries, only transitions through all distances and time." (Silko 229) He had merely intimated how stories were threaded together, stories that belong to distant times and spaces, "the old stories, the war stories, their stories" (229). And he now sees all living things as "united by a circle of death that devoured people in cities twelve thousand miles away, victims who had never known these mesas, who had never seen the delicate colors of the rocks which boiled up their slaughter" (228). The cloud of death which encircles the mesas of New Mexico also surrounds the Philippine jungles and hangs over Japan—an ecological-historical collision that transmits its affective potency to its observers such as Tayo and his readers.

The figure of Tayo works like an allegory for this dissertation, and I take my task to be one of reorganization, moving around bits and pieces of existent stories and narratives to see if they fit. Moreover, in a similar vein as Tayo's spectral disease, the catastrophes in the works I explore are also rooted in some version of an ecological sensibility. Romanticism, though itself

an uncontrollable and self-contradictory category, is commonly known for its idealization of nature. Related to this obsession with nature, then, the writings I examine all reflect upon a belief in the embeddedness of humans and humanity in natural history. From Shelley's and Wordsworth's familiarity with contemporary geological debates and discoveries, to Goethe's scientific experiments and writings, and to Kleist's more radical and somewhat eccentric ecology, these interactions between literature and science (though science means something quite different for the Romantics) serve as crucial points on which my reading pivots. Despite their differences from each other, one common feature does run through these authors' natural philosophy: a feature that I shall call "In-humanism". Under this umbrella term all things human and nonhuman are so deeply enmeshed in each other that no clear distinction can be made between these two seemingly opposing categories; the most "inhuman" violence that can be exerted on humans, animals, and the environment is also most definitively human, and thus should be better termed "in-human." The human and its other coincide nicely within this term, which is why it fits Romantic thinking particularly well. For the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the emergence of a humanist, or rather anthropocentric, ideology, but also a concurrent decentralization of humanity in science. For instance, the rise of a discourse on "culture" (albeit a still unstable one) and a newly configured curriculum of *Humanismus* in Germany testify to the dominance of the humanistic current in Europe in the period, a trend that distinguishes and shores up what is supposedly human and civilized. Yet various branches of science of the age fundamentally destabilized the ground which this anthropocentric sentiment inhabited. The 18th century geological discourse of Catastrophism, for instance, presented a powerful account of deep time and earthly precarity unconcerned with human wills. However, humanist concerns and scientific pursuits did not undermine each other, instead, they coincided and mutually

strengthened through an almost spiraling motion. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* features a mostly indifferent and inhospitable natural world where human endeavors appear relatively insignificant, and yet the last remaining man himself still places hope in chronicling and propagating memories of the human past; Goethe, on the other hand, develops a fundamentally naturalistic anthropology where there is, overall, only one nature, and where natural principles should also be applied to human society (though with different valence); lastly, in Kleist, and as a result of his unique poetics, there is no nature separate from human beings, nor bounded human sphere uncontaminated by the world of non- and in-humans.

Plane of Immanence

This project started out as an attempt to trace literary examples of metamorphosis, and, ironic or not, it has undergone a lot of shapeshifting. One thing, however, remains unchanged at its center, that is, the significance of the philosophical principle of immanence. Here I rely on a Spinozistic notion of immanence, which will be laid out in more detail in the second chapter. But in short, it follows from the doctrine of “deus sive natura,” namely there is no transcendent power that throws the world and its beings into existence or molds matters into forms. Or put simply, there is no “out there” where solutions lie, rather, everything abides by the same basic rules. Individual bodies and ideas emerge, take shape, flow, encounter, clash, and fade away, all working with materials on a single fluid ontological plane. Metamorphosis is inevitably a central character of such a world. In this sense agency is distributed across the plane of immanence, as every individual thing/body has the power to affect or be affected by others. This power certainly comes in different degrees, but it no longer determines any categorical difference (such as the difference between the human and the less-than-human). Connolly cites examples from recent

findings in biology to account for this kind of distributed agency:

Bacteria, stem cells, pheromones, hurricanes, dung beetles, viruses, yeast, chimps, parrots, rogue waves, and lava flows now assume one or two characteristics previously reserved entirely for human agents...Some pursue simple ends; some participate in a degree of creativity; some are invested with something close to purpose, meaning, and habit, and so on. (Connolly 173)

And that is precisely what many Romantic authors have started thinking about (even though they might lack the vocabulary): reconfiguring agency and resituating human agency within nature. This is why all the primary texts in this dissertation feel like a shrinking human world besieged by the unruly forces of things and natural elements. To use Spinoza's words from part four of his *Ethics*, titled "Of Human Bondage," "there is no singular thing in Nature than which there is not another more powerful and stronger" (*Ethics* IV, A1). However powerful and capable humans are, the world or nature is infinitely larger and more complex.

Following the logics of immanence, my reading is guided by the assumption that there is some continuity between the shape of the physical universe one envisions and the shape of art one creates. This is not simply a matter of reflection or representation; instead, a continuous affective flow connects the world presented through the texts and the forms of the same texts. These texts all (obliquely) found ways to revolve around an expressionless center that weighs heavily on themselves: the amorphous and atmospheric plague as well as the creation of Frankenstein's monster in Shelley, the moments of murderous frenzy and erotic consummation in Kleist that withdraw from either conscious awareness or narrativization, and various episodes of death-by-water in Goethe. These obscure centers appear as moments/events of horror, too traumatic and elusive to be arrested in linear expression, and yet their reality is so palpable that

they exist almost as the center of gravity of each work, effecting (unmistakably) qualitative changes.

Coincidentally, Walter Benjamin discerns an element of “das Ausdruckslose” in works like *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, an element that gives life to the work of art. The expressionless, for Benjamin, is the caesura in poetry⁶ and silence in music, a lack or rupture that highlights and heightens the surrounding words and sound, thus revealing the true nature (or “truth content” in Benjamin’s words) of the artistic creation (*SW* 1, 340-41). It functions as a kind of negative dialectics that is reminiscent of Kleist’s *Marionettentheater*. To bring life under the spotlight, therefore, the expressionless element has to take the form of death or petrification, a fissure in the otherwise seamless and harmonious world, or a self-reflexive moment that exposes the text’s own artificiality/lifelessness. For Benjamin, the endowment of life in works of art is not a metaphor; the stories and characters are not life-like but are enlivened. In other words, “das Ausdruckslose” is the electricity that goes through the body parts of Frankenstein’s monster, the moment when the creature is unleashed and when everything gets out of control. Benjamin calls the representative power of words “emergence,” as if the fictional characters and events are not fabricated with language but rise to (momentary) life from the world of phantoms. I understand this enigmatic factor of “life” in art as an affective power. That is, the characters and stories arise out of a plane of immanence (what Benjamin calls chaos), and there exists a continuity between the world of fiction and the world of writing (and critiquing) it.

⁶ Here Benjamin relies on Hölderlin’s exposition on Oedipus: “For the tragic transport is actually empty, and the least restrained.—Thereby, in the rhythmic sequence of the representations wherein the transport presents itself, there becomes necessary what in poetic meter is called caesura, the pure word, the counter-rhythmic rupture—namely, in order to meet the onrushing change of representations at its highest point, in such a manner that not the change of representation but the representation itself very soon appears.” (qtd. in Benjamin *SW* 1, 340-41)

Modulation

My chapters focus on individual authors, but they also characterize different movements of the underlying affective plane. In chapter one, “Catastrophizing Time and Literary Form: Eco-trauma in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*,” I focus on the notion of modulation, that is, the protagonist/writer Lionel Verney’s effort to use writing to steer the unbearable weight of his trauma and the consequent swinging back and forth between different moods and different styles or genres of writing. The novel tells the story of a mysterious plague that empties the earth of the entire humankind. The deadly plague is decidedly non-contagious and is thus atmospheric, shapeless and imperceptible. Building on her knowledge of the French geologist Georges Cuvier’s findings, Mary Shelley presents a “psychologization of geological catastrophe” (Bailes 671). However, more than simply displacing disasters of the earth, the novel directly embodies an “underland sensibility.” I trace the significance of the physical sensations of the journey into the Sibyl’s cave in the odd framing scene of the novel and connect it to Shelley’s encounter with an article from *The Morning Chronicle* which describes an adventure into a huge cave in Kentucky, America. A paradoxical temporality impregnates upon the dark cave: the temporality of the end and of eco-trauma where time past and time future intersect violently, folding into a thickened moment. According to the frame narrative, the text is a chronicle of future apocalypse documented in mythic scripts. Deep time and human time thus clash in an impossible now. The fictional world ends with the whimper of gradual and unending extinction rather than the bang of immediate annihilation. And the end of mankind is predicated on the perpetual delay of the end’s arrival, as Verney wanders on after the conclusion of his narrative, making home on an empty earth and eternal homelessness. The novel is as much about the specific catastrophe as the act of writing that disaster. In his lonely and desperate moments, Verney uses writing to sooth his

sorrow, the same way that Shelley mourns the death of her friends through writing this novel. He struggles frequently with the manner of his writing, and thus the novel catastrophizes its own process of narration or of “giving form,” exposing the difficulties of finding a form appropriate to the disaster it seeks to witness. Shelley experiments with writing as a technology of mediation and of mood regulation, and thus a modulating rhythm and intermittent disjunctions are inherent parts of the novel. The text provides a liminal space between form and formlessness, slow and fast trauma, the promise of the end and its perpetual delay.

Modification

The second chapter, “Life and Death of Modes: The Transindividual in Goethe and Spinoza,” concerns Goethe’s human and nonhuman characters as modifications of the immanent field of existence. I turn from Shelley’s nameless and formless horrors in this chapter to the catastrophe of too many forms in Goethe’s scientific and literary works. A transformation compulsion appears throughout Goethe’s oeuvre, which describes a drive of living things to keep assuming different shapes in order to remain their proper selves. I read this “Protean” urge in light of Goethe’s own principles of *Polarität* and *Steigerung* in his science writings, while also drawing on Spinoza’s theory of the conatus. As a result, I understand Goethean organisms as virtual intensities that are fundamentally relational. These bodies, moreover, harbor their own others at the center, thus expressing the conundrum of individuation. Goethe’s lyric poetry, especially his cloud poems, exemplify a poetics of immanence and the transindividual. In the novel *Elective Affinities*, moreover, the same natural principles abide within human society, resulting in a series of tragedies. The novel features a major crisis of immanence and relationality, where all characters are fatefully related to each other. It tells the story of the

entanglement of four characters, whose names are all variations of the name Otto, and the crystallization of their relations in a fifth Otto, the monstrous infant whose death is prophesized upon his birth. One character, Otilie, moreover, is widely acknowledged as a plant-like creature whose organicity defies the humanist project of modern education, which ultimately pushes her away from the realm of the living. The gradual fading away of Otilie is a sign of her resignation, to her role as a mode, fundamentally conditioned and shaped by the world and things around her. Last but not least, the catastrophe of relatability exceeds the boundaries of the fictional realm and arrests its readers and critics to participate in the completion of the work of art.

Mutation

In the final chapter, “Kleist’s Penthesilea and Other In-humans,” I turn to the last and most ambiguous or even demonic way of molding and flowing with the affective plane of immanence: the motion of metamorphosis. In this section I mainly look at two of Kleist’s “in-human” female protagonists: *Penthesilea*’s titular character and the mulatto Toni from *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*. Both are enigmatic signifiers and powerful shapeshifters. They exist on borderlands between the human and inhuman, the conscious and unconscious, civilization and barbarity, and between signs and things. In the previous two chapters the human characters I discuss are still (more or less) in a state of shock or at the mercy of the principles of nature, overwhelmed by their infinitely complex surroundings and the intricate connections they share with those surroundings, while these Kleistian characters seem to have gone one step further. They appear to be the most thing-like humans and are able to harness the metamorphic power of their environment, with or without their knowing. Kleist’s unique poetics and linguistic habits—that is, his tendency to confuse words and things, and the literal and figural—invoke a fluid

ontology, preparing the stage for his characters to perform “in-human” deeds. His works are replete with crumbling human subjects. Penthesilea, for instance, transforms into one of her dogs, makes kin with the dust around her feet, and forges a dagger with words and feelings that can literally kill. The 1808 play tells the story of the amorous battles between the Amazon queen and the Greek hero Achilles; after a series of power plays and tragic misunderstandings, Penthesilea kills her enemy-lover and tears open his chest together with her pack of dogs; she then conjures up a dagger in the core of her inner feelings, thereby killing herself with a metaphor. She is a paradoxical object-subject characterized by verbal and theatrical excess, and she inhabits precarious mental, sexual, as well as ontological states. She is, moreover, a doubly othered creature, an outcast of the already “inhuman” Amazon kingdom. She invokes a queer ecology, a potentially revolutionary “third realm” where she could harness freely the power of grafting (or queer procreation) and of metamorphosis.

The novella *Die Verlobung* (1811), on the other hand, features a mixed-blood protagonist who has the most versatile (and hence demonic) skin tone. It tells the love story between the native girl Toni and the Swiss officer Gustav von der Ried against the background of the Haitian Revolution, which ends with the violent death of both characters. The immanent world that Toni inhabits is characterized by a fluidity of colors: her facial color is depicted as “tending toward yellow,” and she crosses back and forth between different hues as required by circumstances. The world that her lover lives in, however, is a world of unambiguous black or white. Gustav first recognizes in her the figure of the treacherous black slave, but then tries to mold her into the image of his former white bride Mariane, who remains pure and faithful and who sacrifices her life for his. Yet he remains skeptical of this reading of Toni’s skin color, and when he believes his betrothed has betrayed him, he does not hesitate to shoot her dead. The murder is Gustav’s

final endeavor in his desperate pursuit of absolute certainty and unambiguous knowledge: he kills her so that she ceases to be the unruly signifier that throws his world into turmoil. The final straw that destroys him is the knowledge that Toni only pretends to betray him in order to preserve his life; that is when he realizes the inner fissures of Toni's identity: she is at once the femme fatale capable of treachery and pretension, and the faithful white bride who fulfills the duty he assigned to her. Gustav's enlightenment project—of elevating Toni into the light and rebuilding her into an unambiguously white woman—does not achieve its intended result. Instead of a perfect synthesis where Toni's different faces are subsumed under the superior identity of whiteness, the end product is a monstrous amalgamation where the inner ruptures and gaps are retained. Gustav kills himself thereafter.

From *Penthesilea* to *Die Verlobung*, then, we journey from the promise or hope of a new world ("the third realm") to a direct collision between the old (Europe) and the new (world), the transcendent and the immanent. The spectacular failure (for the death scene is truly a spectacle) of Gustav's enlightenment project testifies to the insufficiency of his belief system to account for Toni's fluid world. For him, there are boundaries to be crossed, higher ideals to be achieved, primitive states to be overcome and sublimated, social and ontological ladders to be climbed. Yet Toni follows no linear paths of progression. For her, these routes of advancement and ladders of ascension are extremely slippery, and her movement is inherently aporetic. Like Penthesilea, she is able to harness the power of her surroundings and is thus infinitely metamorphic.

In a way, the three types of motion correspond to three ways of coping. From Verney's modulation, a kind of involuntary *schweben*, to Goethean characters' resignation to their role as modes, and finally to Kleist's "in-humans" and their more active participation in their environing

world, a route opens up toward an alternative vision of agency and hence freedom. This alternative bears some resemblance to Tayo's liberation at the end of *Ceremony*, a freedom that is not premised on an exceptional view of humans. Different from Tayo who is aided by the spiritual entities of his native tribe, the methods that these texts adopt are more naturalistic. They ask, if humans seriously subject themselves to the same rules that govern the rest of nature, what are their odds? The purpose of this dissertation is not to suggest some bold new way of looking, or to uncover some profound truths about these canonical texts that no one has yet discovered. Instead, my work is that of reorganization, of juxtaposing incompatible things to provoke new questions.

Chapter One: Catastrophizing Time and Literary Form: Eco-trauma in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

For the world today, imagining anthropogenic climate catastrophe in the form of a global pandemic seems natural enough. But what does it mean to do it in the early nineteenth century, where there was no vocabulary nor conception of climate change? What does it mean to imagine eco-disaster as a plague? What is the role of nature in both cases? And when does the parallel stop working? What does it mean to feel the urge to witness something that one understands very little of, not because of lack of intelligence, but because the subject of understanding is the hyperobject par excellence—that vast, elusive and sticky thing (Morton 1-24) that impacts everything including the very structure of understanding? How to bear witness to a crisis that oneself also contributes to? Or in other words, how to articulate an epistemology and affect of “unknowing”? Moreover, how and why and when do we read and recognize (or fantasize) climate trauma in literary works several hundred years’ old? What kind of change does this act of recognition promise (or not)?

***The Last Man* and an Ethics of Witnessing**

In a class this spring where we discussed Mary Shelley’s 1826 novel *The Last Man* as a plague narrative, a student asked the following question: why does Shelley develop her characters so thoroughly and meticulously only to have them die somewhere in the novel? Indeed, in a story that falls under the genre of “last man” narrative, where a lonesome being, the last representative of his species, lives to tell stories that he remembers, the death of everyone else is the premise rather than the end of it. *The Last Man* is a romance that chronicles the life and times of an intimate circle of friends around Lionel Verney, the only one left of the human

species to pass his tale to an unknown posterity. Verney is an avatar of Mary Shelley, living at the end of the 21st century, whereas his friends Adrian and Raymond are literary avatars of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Lord Byron. Verney's sister Perdita marries the charismatic politician Raymond, who later dies in the Greek Revolution against the Turks, just as Byron did in 1823. Adrian and his sister Idris, who is later married to Verney, are the last blood of the English royal family which gets abolished in the imagined future of the novel. After a series of complicated love triangles, political campaigns, international travels, and the assaults of a mysterious plague and the consequent episodes of collective madness, all except Verney die. The plotline seems disconnected, composed of random events and anecdotes. Shelley's narration does not point to any meaningful fruition or development, at least none that differs from what is predicted at the start. The end is already folded into the beginning, in the Sibylline cave containing prophetic manuscripts which the author claims to have found on a trip to Naples. The author then deciphers, translates, and edits these manuscripts which turn out to be Lionel Verney's personal memoir.

The student's question, therefore, pertains to an ethics of witnessing. It describes a resolution, shared by Lionel Verney and Mary Shelley,⁷ to remember and record, no matter how absurd it will appear to an audience of a different time and space. Verney's writing is a testimonial, and the tediousness is the point. To some degree, Verney shares with many Holocaust survivors, according to the studies of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, a sense of

⁷ Like Verney, Shelley lost many people close to her before the publication of *The Last Man*: the death of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, from post-partum infection shortly after giving birth to her in 1797, the death of her first daughter 13 days after birth in 1815, the suicide of Percy Shelley's first wife in 1816, the suicide of her half-sister Fanny Imlay in 1816, the death of her daughter Clara in 1818, the death of her son William in 1819, the suicide of her friend John Polidori, who visited the lake of Geneva together with the Shelleys in 1816, the death of her husband in 1822, the death of Lord Byron in 1824. *The Last Man* is therefore commonly, and quite reasonably, read as a *roman à clef*.

moral imperative to remember and tell as well as a feeling of ineffability caused by the gap between the ungraspable experience and insufficient language (or literary forms in Verney's case) available to them. The most important difference between Verney's witnessing and that of Holocaust survivors is the absence of conspicuous and radical Evil, which disqualifies Verney as a "moral witness" in Margalit's terms (Margalit 165-168). But Verney is also not a survivor of merely natural disasters, for the plague is at once pervasive, mysterious, natural but also surreal. He writes out of a responsibility to his own life (how he becomes the last man) and to the collective fate of humanity (how they fall as a civilization).

E. A. Kaplan, in her work on climate trauma and images of catastrophe, proposes an ethical witnessing which is different from vicarious traumatization or empty empathy, where the viewer develops a moral consciousness, a sense of responsibility for injustices in general and a will to change the status quo (Kaplan 20). Verney's writing bears some traces of this notion of ethical witnessing because he narrates how human virtues and follies conspire with the seemingly indifferent plague to create the collective extinction of men; he hopes to leave a lesson or two to his readers:

Yet, will not this world be re-peopled, and the children of a saved pair of lovers, in some to me unknown and unattainable seclusion, wandering to these prodigious relics of the ante-pestilential race, seek to learn how beings so wondrous in their achievements, with imaginations infinite, and powers godlike, had departed from their home to an unknown country? (364)

He does not seek to infect the post-pestilential race with his emotions, nor is he raising awareness of any specific injustice either. Instead, he seems to place hope in a contagion of the act of witnessing. At the end, uncertain whether he will find any fellow humans, Verney calls

upon spirits and angels to bear witness to his remaining journey (360). Not knowing who exactly he is writing for, he is burdened with a diffused sense of responsibility. As an eyewitness to the downfall of the human species, he is in desperate need of his own witnesses.

Shelley's traumatizingly affecting event, the plague, is above all ecological. It is also "miasmatic," that is to say historically and geographically unspecific. Hence, *The Last Man* can be read as an early manifestation of climate or eco-trauma, an overwhelming assault on the biosphere that evades comprehension because of its scale, but at the same time causes deeply intimate emotions of loss and grief. But the catastrophe also infiltrates the form of its writing, causing Verney's writerly dilemma. He struggles to find a method of articulating the crisis that, in a way, meets the crisis. The self-reflexiveness thus contributes to an extra layer of recognition for the contemporary reader—what Rebecca Richardson terms "the *eco-historical uncanny*" (Richardson 1063). As people who live in the future of what had just begun to unfold in Shelley's time, readers nowadays perhaps find themselves more "at home" with the ambiguous but intense feeling experienced by Verney. Glenn Albrecht calls it "solastagia,"⁸ the mourning of a place when it becomes unrecognizable and uninhabitable, or "the homesickness you have when you are still at home" (Albrecht 299). Moreover, an uncanny resemblance exists between vocabularies contemporary psychologists use to describe climate trauma and Shelley's depiction of the plague. For instance, according to Zhiwa Woodbury, eco-trauma is "an ever-present, ever-advancing denouement" (Woodbury 5); and the remembrance of climate trauma is "like inhabiting an inhospitable, even dystopian world" where "[t]here can no longer be any question that life as we know it is now ending" (5). All of these words seem to come right out of the mouth of the characters in *Last Man*, who are facing a relentlessly advancing and death-dealing

⁸ A neologism used to express nostalgia, solace, and desolation (Albrecht 300).

plague that comes out of nowhere. The plague, “like a thousand packs of wolves” (*LM* 191), is said to “raise its serpent head” (137) from Asiatic countries, evolve into the “Queen of the World,” (273) and subjugate the world under “her barbarous tyranny” (332). Even the impossible temporality of trauma is registered similarly: climate trauma is said to have “no past tense” in Woodbury, whereas Shelley’s story, essentially a “narrative memory”⁹ of traumatic events, is framed as a past prediction of future memories through the Sibyl’s cave. Lionel Verney’s memoir-writing captures the “intersecting rhythms of fast and slow trauma” (Premoli 184) by traversing different temporalities. His writing is a troubled act of traumatic witnessing along the lines of Maurice Blanchot’s “writing of the disaster,” Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman’s theory of witnessing, and more recently, of Anahid Nersessian’s catastrophe theory.

The Cave and the Goat

Anyone who attempts a reading of *The Last Man* needs to address its odd frame narrative. “I visited Naples in the year 1818,” so the story begins (*LM* 1). The narrative corresponds to an actual visit to Baiae on 8 December 1818 recorded in Shelley’s *Journals* (*Journals* I. 242). What appears to be a historically specific starting point, however, only turns out to be a vortex of time. Shelley continues to narrate her journey with her dear companion through meandering paths into a dark cave, where she finds fragments of leaves containing ancient prophecies of the Sybil.¹⁰ The manuscripts are apparently written in different languages, from Egyptian hieroglyphics to modern English and Italian, and the discoverers then devote themselves to the task of translating

⁹ For a reading of the novel in terms of Cathy Caruth’s theory of trauma and narrative memory, see Patricia Cove, especially 27-28. Cove’s argument directs attention away from the metaphorical and cultural significance of the plague to its physicality and literality, but at the same time the article treats Shelley’s nature as essentially theatrical, as more of a stage for aesthetic reflection rather than an active agent in Shelley’s fictional universe.

¹⁰ The Sybil according to myths is Apollo’s priestess who sings prophecies on oak leaves. She is also said to be the guide to the underworld and the cave she occupies is a liminal space between death and life (cf. *Aeneid* 6).

and editing them.

I present the public with my latest discoveries in the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in these poetic rhapsodies, and the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven.

(*LM* 4)

Mary Shelley's companion died in the course of their labor, alluding to the death of Percy Shelley in 1822 from a boating accident. These "latest discoveries," moreover, take the form of a post-apocalyptic story taking place in an imagined English republic at the end of 21st century (from 2070s to 2090s). By the end of this "prophetic tale," the narrator, Lionel Verney, finds himself all alone in Rome as the last human standing, and decides to embark on a seaward journey for some new and perhaps desperate adventures: "Thus around the shores of deserted earth, while the sun is high, and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever-open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted with Verney—the Last Man. The End." (360)

The cave of the Sybil therefore represents an impossible temporality where antiquity and futurity merge into a thickened present that is at once fiction and nonfiction, an apt expression of the temporality of climate disasters. For they invade from the future into the present, but they "cannot but be felt in the now" and in its micro and macro particularities (Michael Richardson 1). Shelley's story is premised on a last man who survives to tell the story to a reader who may not exist. The reader who should not exist lives to read, and the last man who should have died miraculously perpetuates his existence beyond the end of the end. Barbara Johnson thus summarizes this complicated, folded temporality: "The end of man, in other words, will have

always already coincided with the moment of predicting, the moment of translating, and the moment of writing” (13). To this one may add that this folded moment also coincides with the act of reading, as readers at this moment of encounter project themselves into the uninhabitable future predicted in the novel and (ironically) find the future in the here and now. The reader participates in completing and perpetuating the end and its witnessing.

A similar dilemma of ending exists already in *Frankenstein*, where a Gothic tale is enveloped in personal letters and the monster journeys on to an implausible funeral pyre at the conclusion. Both Verney and the monster resemble Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner as well as Odysseus in Homeric epic, who continue their haunted and haunting journeys beyond the grand finale. Verney also shares with the Mariner a compulsion for storytelling: he repeatedly questions the point of his writing since there is, theoretically, no one left to read, but he always returns to the task. Geoffrey Hartman believes that the storytelling momentum or repetition compulsion of the Mariner suggests an “unresolved shock: a rhythmic or temporal stutter, they leave the storyteller in purgatory, awaiting the next assault, the next instance of hyperarousal” (Hartman 543). Verney suffers a similar cycle of hyperarousal where sensations from the moments of traumatic events (such as the death of his wife and children) hit him unexpectedly, followed by momentary composure, and the next assault. The sublime (the unassimilable and the too vast to grasp), with which a lot of Romantics and Romantic aesthetics were so concerned, no longer elevates humans into godlike transcendence but instead becomes an awkward repetition. In terms of the novel’s temporal scheme, *The Last Man* does not come to a resolution; it is as if the author suddenly wraps everything around and folds them in, so we are back to the beginning. The ending, therefore, is a disguised point of turning, or rather of re-turning.

The Sibyl’s cave signals the opening up of an alternative temporality with the collapse of

linear time, and it also embodies the disorientation of space under the surface of earth. The cavern is a circular space with a moderate aperture toward the sky; the author and her companion have to grope through a succession of narrow and winding passages and a series of ascents to arrive at the wide dome-like space; its physical structure makes it both receptive and repellent to catastrophes, especially understood, quite literally, as downward turns. For the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven not just “poetic rhapsodies” but also a disoriented goat who fell into the cave. “The only sign that life had been here, was the perfect snow-white skeleton of a goat,” and this fall is the first instantiation of catastrophe in the novel (“ages perhaps had elapsed since this catastrophe” *LM* 3). Apart from the fall, various other natural disasters, such as earthquakes and volcano eruptions, had visited the landscape. The goat originally belonged to the upper world, whose “tinkling sheep-bells” could still reach the ears of the two discoverers in the cave (3). This pastoral allusion brings us directly back (or rather forward) to Verney’s last pages, where he roams the outskirts of Rome and encounters a family of three goats who reject his friendship.

I approached near to them, without their perceiving me; I gathered a handful of fresh grass, and held it out; the little one nestled close to its mother, while she timidly withdrew. The male stepped forward, fixing his eyes on me: I drew near, still holding out my lure, while he, depressing his head, rushed at me with his horns. (358)

Verney sinks into a moment of despondency after this sentimentalized encounter, and soon makes up his mind to escape “the wild” and enter the urban space of Rome. The corpse of the fallen goat first exists in the cave as a mute witness who testifies to the prior existence of life in an otherwise death-ridden world. But it intimates life through its death. The goats then function as the last straw that drives Verney out of the wild, a place where he believes he does not belong. In this sense the repeated image of the goat is a most proper kind of testimony to eco-trauma:

they testify with their silent suffering and death, and they disenchant the human subject of a harmonious world where he happily resides in paradisaal nature.

The cave, moreover, is a space of sensuous and emotional intensity. The underworld is a maze; the narration makes the mapping of the place impossible. In a way, its physical dimension can only be measured with the body but not the mind. Robert Macfarlane puts it better: “Space is behaving strangely—and so too is time. Time moves differently here in the underland. It thickens, pools, flows, rushes, slows” (Macfarlane 4) Shelley once wrote about a real cave adventure that she read of in *The Morning Chronicle* in 1816 (*Journals* 142). Comparing the dates in her journal and the publication itself, the one she referred to was likely “Wonders of Nature” on page 4 of the newspaper on October 25, 1816 (Fig. 1). The piece was originally published in August of the same year in the *New York Evening Post*, authored by a Dr. Nahum Ward, and it describes a journey into a cave in Warren County Kentucky, likely Mammoth Cave. The cave shares similar features of disorientation and darkness; and Ward expresses a similar interest in signs of life and death inside the cave, apart from his primary attention to different types of stones.

WONDERS OF NATURE.

(From the *New York Evening Post* of August 16.)

Description of the great Cave in Warren County, Kentucky, in a Letter from Dr. Nahum Ward, late of Shrewsbury, Massachusetts, now residing in the Western Country, dated at Marietta (Ohio), April 4, 1816.

The country for a considerable distance round the cave is not mountainous, yet broken and rolling. It was seven in the evening when I reached the hospitable mansion of Mr. Miller (the overseer of Messrs. Wilkins and Gratz, in whose land the cave opens), who met me at the gate, and as he anticipated my object, bade me welcome to all his house afforded.

During the evening, Mr. Miller made arrangements for my visiting the cave next morning, by procuring me two guides, lamps, &c. I could hardly rest during the night, so much had my curiosity been excited by my host's account of the "regular confusions" in this subterraneous world.

At eight in the morning I left the house, in company with my guides, taking with us two large lamps, a compass, and something for refreshments; and entered the cave about 60 rods from the house, down through a pit 40 feet deep, and 120 in circumference, at the bottom of which is a fine spring of water. When at the bottom of this pit, you are at the entrance of the cave, which opens to the north, and is from 40 to 50 feet high, and about 30 in width, for upwards of 40 rods, when it is not more than 10 feet wide and 5 feet high. However, this continues but a short distance, when it expands to 30 or 40 feet in width, and is about 20 in height for about one mile, until you come to the First Hoppers, where salt-petre is manufactured. Thence it is about 40 feet in width and 60 in height to the Second Hoppers, two miles from the entrance. The loose limestone has been laid up into handsome walls, on either side, almost the whole distance from the entrance to the Second Hoppers. The road is hard, and as smooth as a flag pavement. The walls of the cavern are perpendicular in every passage that I traversed; the arches are regular in every part, and have bid defiance even to earthquakes. One of my guides informed me, he was at the Second Hoppers, in 1812, with several workmen, when those heavy shocks came on, which were so severely felt in this country. He said, that about five minutes before the shock, a heavy rumbling noise was heard coming out of the cave like a mighty wind; that when that ceased, the rocks cracked, and all appeared to be going in a moment to final destruction. However, no one was injured; although large rocks fell in some parts of the cave.

As you advance into the cave, the avenue leads from the Second Hoppers, west, one mile; then S. W. to the "chief city," which is six miles from the entrance. This avenue is from 60 to 100 feet in height, and about the same in width, the whole distance, after you leave the Second Hoppers, until you come to the cross roads, or chief city, and is nearly upon a level: the floor of

elegant arch. When at the end of this avenue, and while I was sketching a plan of the cave, one of my guides, who had been some time groping among the broken stone, called out, requesting me to follow him.

I gathered up my papers and compass, and after giving my guide, who sat with me, orders to remain where he was until we returned, and moreover to keep his lamp in good order. I followed after the first, who had entered a vertical passage just large enough to admit his body. We continued to step from one stone to another, until at last, after much difficulty from the smallness of the passage, which is about 40 feet in height, we entered upon the side of a chamber, at least 1800 feet in circumference, and whose arch is about 150 feet high in the centre. After having marked arrows (pointing downwards) upon the slabstones around the little passage through which we had ascended, we walked forward nearly to the centre of this area.

It was past midnight when I entered this chamber of eternal darkness, "where all things are hush'd, and nature's self lies dead." I must acknowledge I felt a shivering horror at my situation, when I looked back upon the different avenues through which I had passed, since I entered the cave at eight in the morning; and at that "time o'night, when church-yards groan," to be buried several miles in the dark recesses of this awful cavern—the grave perhaps of thousands of human beings—gave me no very pleasant sensations. With the guide who was now with me I took the only avenue leading from this chamber, and traversed it for the distance of a mile in a southerly direction, when my lamps forbade my going further, as they were nearly exhausted. The avenue, or passage, was as large as any that we had entered, and how far we might have travelled had our lights held out, is unknown. It is supposed by all who have any knowledge of this cave, that Green River, a stream navigable several hundred miles, passes over three branches of this cave.

It was nearly one o'clock at night when we descended "the passage" of the chimney," as it is called, to the guide whom I left seated on the rocks. He was quite alarmed at our long absence, and was heard by us a long time before we reached the passage to descend to him, hallooing with all his might, fearing we had lost our track in the ruins above.

Very near the vertical passage, and not far from where I had left my guide sitting, I found some very beautiful specimens of soda, which I brought out with me.

We returned over piles of saltpetre earth and fire beds, out of one avenue into another, until at last, with great fatigue and a dim light, we entered the walls of the chief city, where, for the last time, we trimmed our lamps; and entered the spacious avenue that carried us to the second hoppers.

I found, when in the last mentioned large avenue or upper chamber, many curiosities, such as glauber salts, epsom salts, flint, yellow ochre, spar of different kinds, and some petrifications, which I brought out, together with the mummy which was found at the

called the "pool of Clitoria," after the "Pons Clitorius" of the classics, which was so pure and delightful to the taste, that after drinking of it a person has no longer a taste for wine. On our way back to the narrow defile, I had some difficulty in keeping my lights for the bats were so numerous and continual in our faces, that it was next to impossible to get along in safety. I brought this trouble on myself by my own want of forethought; for, as we were moving on, I noticed a large number of these bats hanging by their hind legs to the arch, which was not above twelve inches higher than my head. I took my cane and gave a sweep the whole length of it, when down they fell; but soon, like so many imps, they tormented us until we reached the narrow defile, when they left us. We returned by "Wilkins' arm chair," and back to the second hoppers.

It was at this place I found the Mummy, which I before alluded to, where it had been placed by Mr. Wilkins, from another cave for preservation. It is a female, about six feet in height, and so perfectly dried as to weigh but 20 pounds when I found it—the hair on the back part of the head is rather short, and of a sandy hue—the top of the head is bald—the eyes are sunk into the head—the nose, or that part which is cartilaginous, is dried down to the bones of the face—the lips are dried away, and discovered a fine set of teeth, white as ivory. The hands and feet are perfect even to the nails, and very delicate like those of a young person; but the teeth are worn as much as a person's at the age of fifty.

She must have been some personage of high distinction, if we may judge from the order in which she was buried. Mr. Wilkins informed me she was first found by some labourers, while digging salt petre earth in a part of the cave about three miles from the entrance, buried eight feet deep between four limestone slabs, and in the posture she is exhibited in the drawing I sent you. [Seated, the knees brought close to the body, which is erect, the hands clasped and laid upon the stomach, the head upright].—She was muffled up, and covered with a number of garments made of a species of wild hemp and the bark of a willow, which formerly grew in Kentucky. The cloth is of a curious texture and fabric, made up in the form of blankets or winding sheets, with very handsome borders. Bags of different sizes were found by her side, made of the same cloth, in which were deposited her jewels, beads, trinkets, and implements of industry, all which are very great curiosities, being different from any thing of the Indian kind ever exhibited in this country. Among the articles was a musical instrument, made in two pieces, of cane, put together something like the double flageolet, and curiously interwoven with elegant feathers—she had likewise by her a bowl of uncommon workmanship, and a vandyke made of feathers, very beautiful.

My friend, Mr. Wilkins, gave me the Mummy, which I brought away, together with her apparel, jewels, music, &c."

Figure 1: The cave adventure in "The Morning Chronicle" which Shelley read on October 26, 1816

Ward writes of "regular confusions" under the earth, and the cave's "defiance even to the earthquakes." The passages in the cave form a labyrinth reminiscent of the one in Shelley's introduction, and a chilling sense of death exists in both texts.

I followed after the first, who had entered a vertical passage just large enough to admit his body. We continued to step from one stone to another, until at last, after much difficulty from the smallness of the passage, which is about 40 feet in height, we entered

upon the side of a chamber...

It was past midnight when I entered this chamber of eternal darkness, ‘where all shings (sic.) are hush’d, and nature’s self lies dead.’ I must acknowledge I felt a shivering horror at my situation, when I looked back upon the different avenues through which I had passed since I entered the cave at eight in the morning; and at that ‘time o’night, when church-yards groan,’ to be buried several miles in the dark recesses of this awful cavern—the grave perhaps of thousands of human beings—gave me no very pleasant sensations. (*The Morning Chronicle*, Oct. 25, 1816, page 4)

The underground space, this “chamber of eternal darkness,” becomes a haunting presence later in the novel. Verney buries his wife in a similar cave in chapter 23 of the novel, and the vivid imagery and sensuous details revisit Verney in his dreams and reveries in the most mournful moments of his life. These visitations are signs of traumatic memory according to Judith Herman, who has written that traumatic memories are highly visual and enactive; they “lack verbal narrative and context, rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images” (Herman 75). Verney describes his burial ritual in chapter 23:

I descended the steps, and walked through the long passage to the large vault which contained the kindred dust of my Idris. I distinguished the small coffin of my babe. With hasty, trembling hands I constructed a bier beside it, spreading it with the furs and Indian shawls, which had wrapt Idris in her journey thither... She appeared to rest like one over-wearied, her beauteous eyes steeped in sweet slumber. Yet, so it was not--she was dead! How intensely I then longed to lie down beside her, to gaze till death should gather me to the same repose. (281)

The burial is full of sensuous details including the hand-crafted bier and the ornamental objects

such as the furs and Indian shawls¹¹ used to wrap the body of Idris. The cave becomes a place of mourning, and it contains Verney's death-wish. Later during his journey, Verney often closes his eyes and imagines "the obscure cavern, where was gathered the mortality of Idris" (300). The cave becomes a container for irreducible times (indivisible past present and future) and unassimilable experiences, represented first by the goat, an Other of humanity, and then by death as absolute separation. It is an expression of traumatic rupture, around which Verney's writing revolves in the hope of restoring a sense of equilibrium and the ability to adapt to life.

The Plague, or "the Writing of the Disaster"

Other than its odd temporality, the plague is also a conceptual difficulty of the novel. It is never depicted in any direct or concrete ways; people do not seem to care and debate much about its nature; the only thing we know is that it originates from Asiatic countries and gradually takes over the entirety of western Europe. It is described figuratively either as a chthonic demon, or as some miasmatic agent, intruding and spreading imperceptibly. It advances silently, like Homer's Ate (Discord), for "no sound was echoed from her steps" (*LM* 249). It is also similar to the ills in Pandora's jar, which are deprived of voice by Zeus so that they become existential conditions that cannot be bargained with. Contrary to our common belief concerning the nature of contagious diseases nowadays, Mary Shelley's position on epidemics was "anti-contagionist."¹²

That the plague was not what is commonly called contagious, like the scarlet fever, or

¹¹ The implication of the Indian shawls is not the focus of this study, but it is important to notice that the Orient is consistently characterized in the novel as an abject colonial Other. On the novel as a colonialist and Orientalist text, see Richardson, "The Last Man and the Plague of Empire," and Kolb.

¹² The anti-contagionist view was the mainstream position held by intellectuals and elites of Shelley's time, which might seem counterintuitive from today's standard. These beliefs in medical matters, however, are motivated largely by political ideologies: contagionism equals big government, restriction on immigration and trade, whereas anti-contagionism aligns with values like individual freedom, free trade and immigration, etc. (McWhir 26) Anti-contagionism gave way to its opposite later in the 19th century, especially after the microbiology research of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch.

extinct small-pox, was proved. It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased. If infection depended upon the air, the air was subject to infection. (182)

It means the disease is not transmitted through physical contact or fluid but is instead related to certain qualities of the air and is carried by the winds (McWhir 23). The text is thus a rewriting of Percy Shelley's politically optimistic "Ode to the West Wind": instead of regeneration and revolution, the wind now brings a crude and cruel equivalence by mass destruction. Like wind, the plague lacks physical substance and recognizes no boundaries. Moreover, the plague seems to have a will of its own. As the last survivors travel through the Alps, they realize that the plague has vanished. "For seven years it had had full sway upon earth; she had trod every nook of our spacious globe; she had mingled with the atmosphere, which as a cloak enwraps all our fellow-creatures...Her barbarous tyranny came to its close here in the rocky vale of Chamounix" (332). The last several companions of Verney, therefore, are not even victims of the disease.

The indifferent and whimsical plague is a mirror image of nature in the novel. Random natural disasters thread through the story, from the beginning in the cave of the Sibyl to the second to last chapter, where Adrian and Clara die of a shipwreck. Yet nature is unaffected by all the human miseries. For humans are the only victims of the plague while the rest of nature goes on as usual. Verney observes that nothing theatrical happens in nature as humans fall, no tempest or anything loud (as if mourning the departure of this "crown" of creation). Instead, the earth awakens as usual with spring: "the buds decked the trees, the flowers adorned the land: the dark branches, swollen with seasonable juices, expanded into leaves, and the variegated foliage of spring, bending and singing in the breeze, rejoiced in the genial warmth of the unclouded empyrean" (249). The plague's onslaughts follow the rhythm of nature, yet in reverse; hot

weather is to be feared whereas coldness signals a renewed lease on the earth (211). At some point the survivors manage to adapt to the “new normal,” for “Pestilence had become a part of our future, our existence; it was to be guarded against, like the flooding of rivers, the encroachments of ocean, or the inclemency of the sky” (211). The plague finally blends into nature and becomes a climatic force (like a cloak enwrapping the earth) that seeks its revenge on human beings. For apart from its elemental character, the plague also has a mythic or rather magical origin: the siege of Constantinople during the Greco-Turkish war and the curse of Evadne (the former Greek princess) on Raymond seem to be mysteriously connected to the first appearance of the disease in the novel.¹³ Though remaining as indifferent as natural elements, the plague eventually unveils itself as human beings’ uncanny Other; it feeds on humans and grows to become one with its prey; “she has invested his form, is incarnate in his flesh, has entwined herself with his being” (250). The atmospheric nature of the plague as well as its innate (albeit ambiguous) connection to human follies have made possible a reading of the story as a manifestation of eco-trauma.

The structure of perception elicited by the plague largely resembles the spatial-temporal configuration of the Sibyl’s cave, which is an expression of the unassimilable experiences of the novel. When the earth starts to depopulate and human life is increasingly cut short, people adapt to a temporality where the present is all that time is (214).¹⁴ Humans are obliged to “contract

¹³ Raymond is said to have a “contagion” in his soul (Shelley 98), perhaps referring to his pursuit of glory and imperial expansion. Evadne curses him upon her death: “Many living deaths have I borne for thee, O Raymond, and now I expire, thy victim!—By my death I purchase thee— lo! the instruments of war, fire, the plague are my servitors. I dared, I conquered them all, till now! I have sold myself to death, with the sole condition that thou shouldst follow me—Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction—O my Raymond, there is no safety for thee!” (142). Later when the Greek army enters Constantinople, they find out that the city has already been vanquished by the plague, thus marking the first physical evidence of the disease in the novel. Is the plague then a punishment on the East-West encounter? Or a [add: “suicidal”?] revenge of the colonial margins upon the imperial center?

¹⁴ A similar temporal perception can be found in *Valperga* in Euthanasia’s musings: “A hundred years hence,

[their] view” and concentrate their affection on the few who still live. The future and the past recede in an almost atmospheric amnesia, while the present is left to stand as humans’ “unalienable possession” (214). In a final reverie Verney likewise descends into “the abyss of the present” (361). And the spatial existence of human beings is also transformed. In chapter 19, Verney comments on a different way of grounding:

The experience of immemorial time had taught us formerly to count our enjoyments by years, and extend our prospect of life through a lengthened period of progression and decay; the long road threaded a vast labyrinth, and the Valley of the Shadow of Death, in which it terminated, was hid by intervening objects. But an earthquake had changed the scene—under our very feet the earth yawned—deep and precipitous the gulph below opened to receive us, while the hours charioted us towards the chasm. (214)

With the recession of the past, lessons taught by immemorial time no longer apply. Humans were once securely grounded on earth, but the arrival of the plague has torn up the terrain. The gaping earth no longer feels like a safe haven, but instead becomes an infinite grave ready to devour life at any minute. Similarly in the opening pages of *Rambles in Germany and Italy*, her last published work, Shelley writes that “graves have opened in my path since then; and instead of the cheerful voices of the living, I have dwelt among the early tombs of those I loved” (*Rambles* 2). The cave shares with the yawning earth as a result of the plague a similar perception of space and time: the imminent future collides with the past to threaten the present.

Moreover, critics of the novel generally agree that the plague functions as a sublime void that remains elusive and defies comprehension (e.g. An 586, Snyder 436). Snyder calls the

and young and old we shall all be gathered to the dust, and I shall no longer feel the coil that is at work in my heart, or any longer struggle within the inextricable bonds of fate. I know this; but yet this moment, this point of time, during which the sun makes but one round amidst the many millions it has made, and the many millions it will make, this moment is all to me” (305).

plague “an irreducible phenomenon that both challenges and defines the limits of rational understanding” (Snyder 437). This understanding echoes Eyal Peretz’s notion of the disaster as an absolute Other—an “unmasterable excess” and “a break in the possibility of knowledge” (Peretz 9). The collapse of cognition through a subject-object divide means that authorship in stories of catastrophe becomes dubious, since the disaster is no longer something waiting to be apprehended by the words of the writer, as in Maurice Blanchot’s notion of “the writing of the disaster,” where the genitive in the phrase takes on its objective aspect and hands over the writing to the disaster. “It is not you who will speak; let the disaster speak in you, even if it be your forgetfulness or silence” (Blanchot 4). In this scenario the author as witness is compelled to speak, to the point that even silence is a form of utterance; the writing belongs to the disaster as both object and subject. The witness, moreover, is no mere spectator but is equally implicated in the event that gets testified. No wonder that the plague first arises in the novel as a belated recognition (*LM* 137): when people realize its presence, it has already been everywhere. In a way, catastrophe of this kind precedes human encounter; it always takes place after having taken place, for it carries its own horizon of emergence.

Verney, however, asserts his authority as the writer and organizer of the past occurrences at several points. He is intent on retreating from active and public life to be a “mere spectator” (171) who chronicles the events of his world. In short, Verney clings to the notion of narration as his creative mediation or integration and insists on distancing himself from the events of the past to bring his materials, including the otherwise amorphous plague, to take on a shape. The mysterious disease, however, constantly threatens to consume his person and his narrative. As much as Verney wants and tries to insulate himself against this atmospheric catastrophe, it still invades him and weighs him down. In a sense, the plague as negation commands the narrative,

rather than Verney's authorial will. The writing of the disaster, for both Verney and Shelley, becomes a means of living over a chasm, and this writing is as much about the writing as about the disaster. Dominick LaCapra calls this genre a "traumatized or traumatic writing," a kind of "experimental, gripping, and risky symbolic emulation of trauma" (LaCapra 105), where the writing emulates the sublime experience only to encounter its ineffability.

Dialectic of the End

Numerous perplexities aside, however, I take it to be uncontroversial that *The Last Man* is a story about extinction and the end, or at least an end. For after all, it is an account of the earth's gradual depletion of the human species, and nothing very much happens in the novel save random deaths upon deaths. So, the subject is the end of humanity, the end of their life as well as their death, since no one in the end is left there to die whose death can still be told. But what exactly is an end? A terminal point, a limit, a purpose, an event, a state of being, a relief?

Barbara Johnson's musings on this novel play with the ambiguous meaning of the word:

When considering a subject as broad as "the ends of man," one can only ask oneself:

Where to start? Where to start speaking of the end? But on the other hand, isn't it always from the end that one starts? Isn't every narrative in fact constructed beginning with the denouement, as every project is constructed beginning with its goal? Isn't the end precisely that which never ceases to be repeated, which one is never done with? (Johnson,

A Life 3)

As the plural noun indicates, the end is always multiple, signaling both the extreme point of a thing and its intended completion. Its equivalence in ancient Greek would be "telos (τέλος)," which comes from the verb τέλλω, to complete or to rise. The end proliferates. In the novel, this proliferation takes the form of Verney's repeated ruminations and foretelling of the demise of

men, of the telos of his narrative, yet the novel's last page witnesses his embarkation on a new journey, rather than a full stop of human history. The end thus becomes a frequently rehearsed but never fully realized event.

Johnson in her essay is thinking through Derrida, particularly his essay "The Ends of Man."¹⁵ She continues to write, "if man is truly, as Derrida says, 'that which relates to its end,' he is also that which is never finished with ending" (Johnson 3). In Derrida's sense, man's "relating to its end" is fundamentally dialectical in nature. For man is finite, and so the end of finite man (*la fin de l'homme fini*) is also "the end of the finitude of man" and the beginning of its infinite telos (Derrida 121). The end is thus at once an empirical closure and an opening to the indefinite. The relation between these two ends, the factual and the transcendental, are dialectical, for the factual end is "announced to thought from the vantage of the [transcendental] end of man," whereas the transcendental end "can appear to itself and be unfolded only on the condition of mortality" (123). *Relever* is Derrida's translation of Hegelian *Aufheben* (sublimation), a transformation of *Wesen* (being) into *Gewesenheit* (having been) through consciousness, where the past is "surpassed and conserved, retained and interiorized" (121). *Relever* thus translates *Aufheben* "in the sense in which *relever* can combine to relieve, to displace, to elevate, to replace and to promote, in one and the same movement" (121). Man relates to his end through displacement, or an untimely encounter; he becomes temporarily burdened with but also relieved of his finitude. Verney's account is such an untimely meditation on the end of man: the dialectic of the end through his words takes on the form of a dialectic of emotions and of literary styles.

¹⁵ Johnson's article was first published in *Les fins de l'homme: À partir du travail de Jacques Derrida. Colloque de Cérisy, 23 Juillet-2 août 1980*. Ed. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy.

Rather than the technologies and realities¹⁶ of the end of the world, the novel instead speculates on the experiences and affects of that world, with its various moods and their modulations. It keeps the dialectical nature of the end constantly in sight, pursuing it both (often simultaneously) in its unfolding and as a completed totality. It is almost unrelieved in this effort, ceaselessly vacillating between a mode of meticulous narration and a more meditative mode where Verney contemplates the story from the vantage point of its end. When chronicling events of the pre-pestilential era, for instance, Verney suddenly realizes that he has become “the father of all mankind”: “Posterity became my heirs. My thoughts were gems to enrich the treasure house of man’s intellectual possessions” (*LM* 120). Later, midway through the novel, Verney suddenly feels an urge to finish his narration, for “the same sentiment that first led me to portray scenes replete with tender recollections, now bids me hurry on” and so “I must complete my work” (188). But immediately after, “one moment, one brief interval before I put from shore—once, once again let me fancy myself as I was in 2094 in my abode at Windsor” (188). The same emotion drives Verney in two directions, and he is thus torn between two points in time and two modes of narrative. He is stuck between fiction and lyric (or poetry), or between history and prophecy. The generic differences bring to light an inner rupture of the novel’s temporality, as it engages at once a more linear time and a suspended and folded prophetic time. Instead of resolving the disjunctions accompanying this project, Shelley effectively creates a threshold space (one like the Sibyl’s cave) to traverse the two sides. In a sense, the novel is a prolonged account of the agony of crossing. Like Dante’s limbo, which also occupies a liminal space, Shelley’s novel is replete with futile repetitions and endless exhaustions. And one is reminded

¹⁶ The novel’s depiction of the future world is not exactly imaginative or forward-looking; see Siobhan Carroll for a critique on this point.

that this space of crossing in Dante is in fact the most abhorred locus, hated even by the residents of Hell.

Catastrophizing Form

The traumatic rupture creates two incompatible times corresponding with different modes of telling, and the question is where to begin. As Johnson asks, where does the end start? And since the end is forever iterative and iterable,¹⁷ the question then becomes “how to finish speaking of it, how to narrate something other than the interminable death of the penultimate, how to be finished with the end” (Johnson 3). *The Last Man* displays a difficulty along the same line, namely the difficulty of having a form, as in having (at least) a beginning and an end to differentiate itself as a distinctive whole. If the novel can be read as a bildungsroman, something like “the life and times of Lionel Verney,” then it is also about the inner contradiction of *Bildung*, or of coming to a form. The paradox is that the form, a literary form in this case, is conceived as both universal and particular, timeless and yet deeply rooted in time. Percy Shelley’s “Defence of Poetry” calls a poem “the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth, as existing in the mind of the creator” and “the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature” (Percy Shelley 515). A truly poetic form thus pertains to the scale of eternity and universality. It resists time’s corruption. Yet poetry is also said to apprehend fleeting moments in life, such as “evanescent visitations of thought and feeling” and “vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life” (532). In her essay on formalism and time, Catherine Gallagher points out the paradox in this passage: “The eternal takes a form so fleeting that it hardly appears at all, except in the act of disappearing” (235). Indeed, the poetic form

¹⁷ Here I’m appropriating Jonathan Culler’s phrase in his discussion of the lyric (Culler 226).

which is supposed to stand outside time by being completely devoid of temporal movement now embodies time's unrelenting motion. "If the unchanging form of human nature seems to reside above time, its literary figures try to dart beneath it, like Stealth aircraft below temporality's radar" (Gallagher 237). Endless duration is strangely united with the complete lack of duration to describe the puzzle of forming.

While Percy Shelley does not seem to talk too much about what happens during that dialectical turning from the instantaneous moment in time to poetry's eternal form, Mary Shelley's novel dwells, almost excessively, on the agony and labor involved in that interlude. Lionel Verney repeatedly sinks into a sullen mood and contemplates his life's history as well as, vaguely, the earth's history, in their entirety; these moments emerge out of his personal history and become akin to the special "now" of the lyric, where time is suspended, and past and future collide with the eternal present. In chapter 19, for instance:

After a long interval, I am again impelled by the restless spirit within me to continue my narration; but I must alter the mode which I have hitherto adopted. The details contained in the foregoing pages, apparently trivial, yet each slightest one weighing like lead in the depressed scale of human affliction; this tedious dwelling on the sorrows of others, while my own were only in apprehension; this slowly laying bare of my soul's wounds: this journal of death; this long drawn and tortuous path, leading to the ocean of countless tears, awakens me again to keen grief...there will be a more melancholy pleasure in painting the end of all. But the intermediate steps, the climbing the wall, raised up between what was and is, while I still looked back nor saw the concealed desert beyond, is a labour past my strength. (*LM* 209)

Verney's storytelling is deeply self-reflexive, as he "lays bare" the entire processes of narration,

from the “restless spirit” urging him to speak, which constitutes the narrative’s originating point or *arche*, to his experiments with different modes of narration along the way, and finally to a speculation of the “melancholy pleasure” lying at the *telos* of his story. If we understand trauma to be an opening, then his project is a stripping bare of an ongoing process. And shortly after turning from a mode of meticulous chronicling to poetic contemplation, Verney returns quickly to the former style, only to turn again at another point. Shelley here focuses not so much on poetic form’s glorious outcome as on its harrowing delivery: the task of bridging the gaps between the “was” and “is” becomes a weight too heavy to bear. The form of human nature may well be as unchangeable as it wants, but the “mind of the creator” in which this form exists is in a constant flux. The flux is above all an emotional modulation, as Verney sinks into depression at one moment, and rises to some slight hope at another. For Verney, to have a timeless form of the rhapsodies in his mind is one thing, to be able to put his fingers on it and mentally maintain the form is quite another. Alice Fulton once wrote that “[fiction] is about what happens next. Poetry is about what happens now” (Fulton 7). Verney’s problem is that he is stuck in the ever-receding now and the next that is pressing on the present but never really arrives.

Catastrophizing Time

In its striving to come to terms with a catastrophe that is at once personal and global, the story exposes itself as a crisis. It is a crisis of finding a right way to speak, but also of finding a right time. Shelley’s historiography, the past prediction of future memories, adds a twist to her husband’s poetics that resonates with Walter Benjamin’s theses on history. The passage from Percy Shelley’s “Defence” cited above is embedded in the distinction he makes between story and poetry, or mapped on to Aristotelian terms, that between *historia* (inquiry) and *poiesis* (creation):

There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other bond of connexion than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect; the other is the creation of actions according to the unchangeable forms of human nature, as existing in the mind of the creator, which is itself the image of all other minds. The one is partial, and applies only to a definite period of time, and a certain combination of events which can never again recur; the other is universal. (Percy Shelley 515)

According to this view, history is about particulars that do not follow universal laws; it is not applicable outside the specific space-time it occupies; and it is not a cohesive whole, or in other words, it does not fall into a recognizable form or type. Poetry, for Percy Shelley, is completely different. The poet “not only beholds intensely the present as it is, and discovers those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered, but he beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time.” The poet, rather than the historian, is a prophet, and not “in the gross sense of the word.” The poet is prophetic in its elevated meaning, for he “participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one” (Percy Shelley 513). For him, poetic thought entails three moments and hence temporal dimensions all at once: the germ (beginning), the flower (middle), and the fruit (end). In this monistic universe that Percy Shelley envisions, the poets of the world participate in the Oneness of the universe in its life and its unity, for the metaphor of the three stages of plant alludes to the inherent organicity and aliveness of poetry.

The Last Man reverses Percy’s idealist poetics, showing poetry in its dying moment as inorganic matter pieced together by force. Still, Mary’s history is no mere “catalogue of facts.” Verney the historian does not pretend to stand outside the history he recounts, nor does he aspire

to a kind of mimetic writing that presents the past as it is in its pastness. Instead, the three tenses, the past, present and future, are all incorporated into the moment of storytelling, thus forming a “Gordian knot of time” (O’Dea 293). As Verney puts it, “and in to-day already walks to-morrow” (208).¹⁸ Chapter 19 opens “after a long interval,” but this is a gap in his writing, not in the narrative, which is continuous with the previous chapter. Verney begins by addressing the current instant when he “is” awakened. Following the previous account of historical details, he is now impelled to imagine the sweet end that “will be,” and the intermediate steps in between, where he “looked back” onto the events that furnish the road from the past to the present.

Benjamin quotes Friedrich Schlegel’s dictum that the historian is a prophet looking backward. “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 255). Past events are constantly receding, and they can never be grasped “in the moment” of their experience. According to this view, true history is therefore never an accurate representation of the past, namely in its pastness; rather, it always incorporates the moment of its writing and recognition. A historical perspective, then, is inherently parallaxic, viewing its object through two angles at once, and a prophetic or speculative dimension is already built into the historical. Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History” asserts that the historian “turns his back to his own time, and his seer’s gaze ignites on the peaks of the peoples of mankind always receding deeper into the past. This seer’s gaze is precisely directed toward that which for one’s own time is far more clearly present than it is to the contemporaries who ‘keep pace with it.’” (qtd. in Balfour 16) The prophet-historian, such as Lionel Verney, always writes in a time

¹⁸ According to Shelley’s note, this line is a quotation from S.T. Coleridge’s translation of Friedrich Schiller’s *The Death of Wallenstein*.

out of joint, citing the past in order to prophesy the present. It then becomes completely understandable that Shelley in the introduction calls her work that of “adding links” to the poetic rhapsodies, for her work is precisely to display connections where originally there were none.

In Shelley’s reworking of her husband’s poetics, then, prophetic poetry is inevitably corrupted, whereas history is always somehow prophetic. For Blanchot, the prophetic word is a dialogue “in a more essential way, to the extent that he only repeats the word entrusted to him, an affirmation in which an originary word finds expression, one which has nonetheless already been said. That is its originality. It is primary, but before it there is always a word to which it responds in repeating it” (qtd. in Balfour 5). In the frame narrative of the novel, the prophetic word is mediated not just by the Sibyl and her cave, but also by Shelley’s silent editing during long nights of solitude.¹⁹ Paradoxically, prophecy loses no meaning in translation, and thus it is “mediated immediacy or immediate mediation” (Balfour 8). The immediacy of Shelley’s account, its truthfulness to the original “truths,” however, is contestable. She claims at one point that “the main substance rests on the truths” contained in the manuscripts and “the divine intuition which the Cumaean damsel obtained from heaven.” But shortly afterwards she acknowledges that there is inevitably “distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands” (*LM* 4). Her job, then, mainly lies in molding the form of the prophecy, and so her work becomes a kind of formal violence to the poetic word.

Formal Crisis

The novel repeatedly draws attention to its shaping of its otherwise amorphous and catastrophic contents, for Shelley describes her writing, or rather, editing of Verney’s story as

¹⁹ See Ruppert for a discussion of the relationship between the text and print and editorial culture of the time.

“giving form and substance to the frail and attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl” (*LM* 5). In the frame narrative Shelley says she is an editor and co-author whose work consists of “deciphering,” “adaptation,” “translation,” “transcribing,” “adding links” and “modelling” (4-5). The result is a narrative with a “consistent form,” though inevitably suffering corruption from its pristine state (4). Like the plague, these archival materials are “obscure and chaotic” (4), and Shelley admits that the fragments make sense only intermittently, and her art of giving form is at once the attempt and failure of making sense. A case in point is the unresolvable puzzle of the nature of the plague.²⁰ Her task is thus to interpret, reorganize and stitch together the different parts of the manuscript in order to make sense of something unintelligible. It removes the Sibylline leaves from the realm of the supernatural, forces a suturing of the past and future, and adds connections where there are none. Yet somehow, this violence brings consolation to the author/editor. Editing soothes pain in her “long hours of solitude” after the passing of her companion. Her labor, moreover, “softened my real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing these fictitious ones in that ideality, which takes the mortal sting from pain” (5). Verney takes the same strategy in composition. In an apologetic passage in volume II, Verney insists that there is no need to replicate the work of Boccaccio, Defoe, and Thomas Browne in their narration of “the variety of disease, desertion, famine, despair, and death” (209). His approach is rather different, in that he mellows “the lurid tints of past anguish with poetic hues,” thereby evading the sting of reality by “perceiving and reflecting back the grouping and combined colouring of the past” (209). It is thus also a technique of disciplining passions, regulating moods, and hopefully reintegrating oneself into the life that is still left to live.

In the context of the novel, then, “giving form” has a specific, but also manifold meaning.

²⁰ For compelling discussions of the nature of the plague, see for instance Anne McWhir and Peter Melville.

It puts an otherwise amorphous content into a cohesive and definitive (narrative) structure, thus rendering it as an intelligible and aesthetic experience. It originates from a compulsion to record, edit and archive in the face of an overwhelming and traumatic, almost sublime object. It is, moreover, a kind of intense labor that itself unfolds and undulates in face of some life-shattering experience. Giving form to catastrophe also means containing its emotional intensity so that telling the story can somehow make it bearable. Finally, it allows the narrators to attempt at navigating between different scales. Verney's account, for instance, is supposed to mediate between two seemingly irreconcilable poles, the elusively global plague and the radically personal griefs, both of which are equally incommunicable. Despite, or rather because of the overwhelming presence of the pandemic, Verney's story is "a slowly laying bare of my soul's wounds." The trauma of his life however infects his act of writing. Verney hesitates on several occasions about the appropriateness of his mode of narration, tries to alter the pattern and rhythm with which he tells his story, and swings back and forth between different techniques of story making. In short, the act of giving form is itself catastrophized in the novel. In his efforts to name and grasp the elusive and constantly shifting disaster, the narrator becomes both the perpetrator and victim of violence.

A related problem has to do with the tension between the time in and of the novel. In the course of his narration, Verney often tries to break out of a previous frame or style in which he writes. And this formal break is often manifest as a change of narrative pace. The avowed change of narrative mode in the beginning of chapter 19 takes place immediately after one of Verney's nocturnal meditations at the end of chapter 18, where he sees his wife Idris in sleep and fears that one day she will die, leaving him as the only person living on earth. He then seems to adopt a more composed narrative pace, omitting gory details of death and focusing more on those close

to him. The next case of shifting speed of narration takes place about 100 pages later, in the middle of chapter 26. At that point Idris has already died (in chapter 24) and Verney is travelling with a small band of survivors to the south. An insight again occurs to him when he hears of more plague deaths among them. He then contemplates the descent of humanity from the crown of creation to bare life and the necessity behind all these changes:

Suddenly an internal voice, articulate and clear, seemed to say:—Thus from eternity, it was decreed: the steeds that bear Time onwards had this hour and this fulfilment enchained to them, since the void brought forth its burthen. Would you read backwards the unchangeable laws of Necessity? (312)

Verney rehearses his friend Adrian's necessitarian worldview, which is also that of Percy Shelley. Since all history is decreed by a tight causal link, there seems to be no need to dwell too much on small details. Verney thus tries to speed up his story for fear of boring his readers. "It is right that I should erect for thy instruction this monument of the foregone race; but not that I should drag thee through the wards of an hospital, nor the secret chambers of the charnel-house. This tale, therefore, shall be rapidly unfolded" (312). A creature born of charnel-house is Frankenstein's monstrous son, a consequence Verney tries to evade. He wants to avoid mechanic repetition and present the events quickly. And for a moment the pace does speed up: the next paragraph begins with "We arrived at Fontainebleau, and speedily prepared for the reception of our friends" (313), as if the course of events is catching up with the speed of storytelling. The following paragraphs begin with pointers of time or time-period, still in the same vein of hastening the story: "We passed four days at Fontainebleau," "At length, on the fifth day, a messenger arrived," "We arrived the same night at Villeneuve-la-Guiard" (313-15). However, this mode of acceleration does not last, and two pages later the reading experience feels exactly

the same as before the change. The story returns to its more repetitious mode where things happening on one day can hardly be differentiated from those happening on another. The length of the novel is not necessitated by the complexity of the plot, rather, it seems the novel is so long (seemingly unnecessarily long) only to make space for sufficient iterations of Verney's narrative experiment, for him to waver enough times until his passions are relieved. The time of the novel becomes almost a formal catharsis.

Conclusion and Resonation

The Last Man exemplifies Anahid Nersessian's "calamity form," a traumatic writing that captures the emotions associated with "unknowing," because the subject of its writing is too distant or too close, too obscure or too obvious, too detached or too intimate, or all at once. "To feel but not to get, to undergo but not to understand: this is the etiology of trauma and of the traumatic historical event. Nescience captures not just its rational but also its affective dimension. It is, you might say, calamity's unique structure of feeling." (Nersessian 4) Romantic testimonial narratives like this give form to the affectivity of climate catastrophe within their particular historical and literary context. The airiness and penetrability of the plague makes it a suitable subject for Shelley to express an imperceptible co-suffering and co-victimizing that only makes sense as interspecies and trans-individual. The intersecting times of slow and fast traumas in the novel are embodied in the underworld temporality and translated as the formal struggles between poetry and history, and between the double perspectives of the end. The human entanglements in the catastrophe, however, are mainly seen as metaphorical and indirect, with one exception of the plot with the Imposter, an evil but minor agent who does not have the power to influence the unrelenting pace of the plague. Shelley's depiction of humans' contribution to the crisis is perhaps too diffused and mysterious for a modern taste; the hope for change,

basically as a contagion of witnessing, might also be considered too limited.

But a short video I saw this April resonated with me strongly as I was thinking through the novel. The context of the video cannot be further apart: it's a short documentary with moving images of the urban landscape of Shanghai shot by a drone during the city's strict lockdown from March to June. The black and white, almost post-apocalyptic images (because of the utter silence and absence of people on streets in the images) are accompanied by recordings of press conferences, conversations, and phone calls that people published on social media. Most of the recordings were meant to call attention to personal disasters of various types: people dying from chronic or acute diseases because no hospital would accept them (some actually died or killed themselves), infants torn away from parents during quarantine, people starving from quarantine (because no grocery stores or delivery service or restaurants were allowed to operate for about two months), etc. The tone of the documentary is described by many as restrained, and no narrative is added, no critique clearly voiced. The author said he made the video just to remember and witness a collective trauma. But the video was soon vehemently silenced and censored throughout the internet, which ironically inspired more circulation. Millions of people participated in the performative and cathartic hide-and-seek in order to preserve the life of the video in the digital space. The silent spring scenario in the video reminds me of the several silent springs recorded in *The Last Man*; the futuristic quality of the images make the documentary seem prophetic; the collective (and failed) collaboration online is reminiscent of Verney's repeated cycles of narration; the imperative to remember and witness, despite or rather because of the absurdity of individual tragedies, is especially resonant; and importantly, it's the material affect created through the jarring, growling, screaming and silenced voices that makes it powerful. The Chinese netizens experienced a collective witnessing, and every witness, in a way,

participates in the same oppressive regime that caused the disasters. Just like the novel, it is a crystallization of the banal and fantastical elements of a political as well as ecological catastrophe.

Chapter Two: Life and Death of Modes: The Transindividual in Goethe and Spinoza

In this chapter I turn from Mary Shelley's formal crisis in *The Last Man* to the catastrophe of too many forms in the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's scientific and literary works. A transformation compulsion appears throughout Goethe's oeuvre, which describes a drive of living things to keep assuming different shapes in order to remain their proper selves. It thus recalls the paradoxical temporality of catastrophe discussed in the previous chapter, a double invocation of termination and regeneration. I read this "Protean" urge in Goethe's works in light of his own principles of *Polarität* and *Steigerung* in his science writings. I will draw on Spinoza's theory of the modes and the conatus and examine the affinities between their ideas of individual things, an overlooked aspect in scholarship on comparative studies of these two writers²¹. As a result of this comparison, I understand Goethean things as modes or virtual intensities that are fundamentally relational, different from the traditional understanding of individuals as bounded unities. The Goethean things or bodies, moreover, harbor their own other at the center, thus expressing the conundrum of individuation. This conundrum, however, opens up new ways of reading Goethe's literary texts. From the perspective of Spinozistic immanence, I read Goethe's characters as modifications of their environing world, rather than enclosed individuals. They strive to come to terms with their role as modes and understand themselves as sharing the power of affecting and being affected with things and bodies around

²¹ Traditional studies on Goethe's Spinozism tend to focus on Spinoza's concept of substance, the so-called *Deus sive natura*, rather than modes, which are modifications of the universal substance, and which can take the form of finite and individual things. See for instance David Bell's *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe*.

them.

Recent scholarship has seen a revival of interest in Goethe's forms, as natural forms seem to spill into the world of art and almost guide his compositional strategies. In Wellbery's entry on form in the *Goethe-Lexicon*, a notion of Geist or intuition (*Anschauung*) bridges the gap between natural and aesthetic forms, as the experience of both requires a similar intensification of mental capacities. To grasp the forms or formative principles in nature, "our intuitive-intellectual activity participates in and, in this sense, becomes identical with the natural form." ("Form," *Goethe-Lexicon*) And in the realm of art, the Geist undergoes a similar intensification by tuning its creative production to the lawfulness and activity of a perceived form: "das Schöne sei, wenn wir das gesetzmäßig Lebendige in seiner größten Tätigkeit und Vollkommenheit schauen, wodurch wir zur Reproduktion gereizt uns gleichfalls lebendig und in höchste Tätigkeit gesetzt fühlen." (qtd. in "Form," *Goethe-Lexicon*) We might characterize the relationship between human participation in natural forms and that in artistic forms as that of a parallel, an analogy, a conformity, or a consonance. Eva Geulen, on the other hand, discusses the structure of seriality²² (*Reihenbildung*), a thematic concern in the essay "Der Versuch als Vermittler," which is at the same time an overarching feature of the episodic and heterogeneous form of the *Wanderjahre* as well as the Hefte *Zur Morphologie* themselves. This affinity between the formative principles of the texts and the form-conception in Goethe's Naturphilosophie opens up a continuum between art and nature, poetry and science ("Kontinuum... von Kunst und Natur, Dichtung und Wissenschaft.") (Geulen 130) Lastly, in Carranza's careful reading of the

²² Geulen helpfully points out the serial relationship and hence differentiation between *Erfahrung* and *Versuch* in this essay, which are often mistaken as synonyms, and concludes that seriality is a mechanism that thwarts the mind's pursuit of the whole (*Ganze*). This however points to an interesting tension with Goethe's apparent pursuit of totality in his early years.

Beinhaus poem, Goethe's exposition of the principle of polarity is used to explain the textual movement between two sets of conceptual doubles, from the dialectic between the shell and core to the doubling of writing and meaning. (Carranza 123) My essay seeks to juxtapose the serialized, temporalized, and self-generative Goethean form and Spinoza's notion of *conatus* as the site of individuation.

Affinities between the thought of Goethe and Spinoza have been explored a lot in recent scholarship, for instance in Clark Muenzer's discussion of the Spinozism in Goethe's color theory and in Eckart Förster's explication of the relationship between the "Versuch" essay and Spinoza's idea of intuitive understanding (Förster 250-276). But no scholarship has to my knowledge explored Spinozistic implications in Goethe's forms. The idea of *conatus*, which is defined as the striving of a thing to persevere in its being, coupled with Spinoza's theory of diachronic identity, that is, a theory of form, make him a perfect reference point to talk about Goethe's forms. The key takeaway is that *conatus* allows us to understand individual identities and forms in terms of a coherence of desire or striving and is thus inherently a theory of immanence and of self-generative metamorphosis.

Goethe's Forms and Spinoza's Modes

Spinoza's *Ethics* develops a theory of substance monism using geometric method. The formula of *deus sive natura*, which transforms into Goethe's *Gott-Natur*, summarizes the doctrine that God-nature is the only substance in the world, while all the things and phenomena we perceive are but its modifications. For Spinoza, God is indivisible and everything that is not God is called a modification instead of a part of God. Clark Muenzer's comments on Spinozistic bodies are especially helpful here: they are "virtual, or commemorative, sites where the effects of hidden causes collect and become visible as the perpetual record of each body's actions and

sufferings” (219 n.1). We might use the metaphor of a grain field to visualize this metaphysical plane²³: if the entire face of the field seen from above represents the totality of the indivisible substance, then local ripples and shapes caused perhaps by a passing breeze can be thought of as individual modes. Their individualities are virtual in the sense that they are not fundamentally separated from everything else; and their particular bodies are shaped by their own movements plus the external causes like the wind and the adjacent crops that are touching them. In Goethe’s pantheistic worldview, Gott-Natur is similarly conceived as an infinite totality of beings. In the early “Studie nach Spinoza,” Goethe writes, “In jedem lebendigen Wesen sind das, was wir Teile nennen, dergestalt unzertrennlich vom Ganzen, daß sie nur in und mit demselben begriffen werden können.” (HA vol. 13) Similar to the field imagery above, Goethean nature is portrayed as living, indivisible, yet agonistic and in constant flux.²⁴ It should be thought of as an “unerforschliches, unbedingtes, humoristisches, sich selbst widersprechendes Wesen” (*Die Natur* FA vol. 25, 81). Things in this world are fluid, as they are simultaneously self-splitting, self-identifying, and striving for better states. Underlying the variegated phenomena of the world, nevertheless, is an economy of basic principles which, according to Astrida Tantillo, describes nature’s almost unconscious urge for creation, a will “to create, evolve, struggle, transform, and metamorphose” (Tantillo 6).

As localized modifications of this endlessly creative entity called nature, then, the same principles and energies penetrate natural forms as well. In a letter to Kanzler v. Müller where Goethe explains the two great “drive wheels [*Treibräder*]” of nature, the motions caused by polarity (*Polarität*) and intensification (*Steigerung*) are said to permeate all things, animate or

²³ See also Jonathan Bennett, especially 67-71.

²⁴ On this point see for example Astrida Tantillo, *The Will to Create: Goethe’s Philosophy of Nature*, 14-15.

not.

[J]ene (Polarität) der Materie, insofern wir sie materiell, diese (Steigerung) ihr dagegen, insofern wir sie geistig denken, angehörig; jene ist in immerwährendem Anziehen und Abstoßen, diese in immerstrebendem Aufsteigen. Weil aber die Materie nie ohne Geist, der Geist nie ohne Materie existiert und wirksam sein kann, so vermag auch die Materie sich zu steigern, so wie sichs der Geist nicht nehmen läßt, anzuziehen und abzustoßen (FA vol.25, 81)

[T]he former (polarity) belongs to matter insofar as we think of it as material, and the latter (intensification) insofar as we think of it as spiritual. The former is in everlasting attraction and repulsion, while the latter is in ever-striving ascent. However, since matter never exists and acts without spirit and spirit never without matter, so matter can also intensify itself, and spirit cannot be denied attraction and repulsion.

Goethe's division of the two fundamental forces in terms of spirit and matter is here reminiscent of Spinoza's theory of the two attributes of God: thought and extension. But the parallel no longer works as the text soon proceeds to a unity of mind and body. Interestingly, the movement of the passage itself abides by the principle of polarity. The text first sets up a dichotomy between spirit and material to illustrate the difference between *Steigerung* and *Polarität*. The distinction then quickly collapses, and we find that matter also participate in intensification, whereas spirit is equally capable of unions and divisions. The concepts of mind and body experience in this text a division followed by an immediate reunion, moving through *Steigerung* toward a more complex understanding of things. A quick survey of polar phenomena sampled by Goethe, however, raises more problems than it solves. In the essay "Polarität," Goethe provides a

list of dual phenomena starting with subject and object (Wir und die Gegenstände).

Dualität der Erscheinung, als Gegensatz. (Duality of phenomenon, as opposites)

Wir und die Gegenstände (We and the objects)

Licht und Finsternis (Light and dark)

Leib und Seele (Body and soul)

Zwei Seelen (Two souls)

Geist und Materie (Spirit and matter)

Gott und die Welt (God and world)

Gedanke und Ausdehnung (Thought and extension)

Ideales und Reales (Ideal and real)

Sinnlichkeit und Vernunft (Sensuality and reason)

Phantasie und Verstand (Fantasy and understanding)

Sein und Sehnsucht (Being and longing)

Dualität als Auseinandergehen der Einheit (Duality as unity broken apart)

Zwei Körperhälften (Two body halves)

Rechts und Links (Right and left)

Atemholen (Breathing)

Physische Erfahrung (Physical experience)

Magnet (Magnet) (FA 25, 142-43)

By the end of the survey, it's not hard to see the problem. Namely polarity as a simple principle is used to describe extremely variegated and hardly reconcilable things and experiences. Its explanatory power is not distributed equally. These items do not follow a conspicuous order, and they come from such diverse realms as physics (magnet), optics and chromatics (light and

shadow), biology (breathing), metaphysics (thought and extension), epistemology (observer and the objects), and more. Another observation is that there are apparently many different ways of being polar pairs. The polar relationship between two ends of a magnet, for instance, is not the same one as that between God and world, which is basically a tautology according to Goethe's immanent view of God,²⁵ nor are these two the same as the relation between inhaling and exhaling. These phenomena seem so diverse that it is hardly conceivable for one overarching notion to catch them all. The passage does attempt to salvage the unity of the term "polarity" by including a taxonomy of polar phenomena, and yet the categories are far from unambiguous. For instance, the category of physical experiment, with two ends of a magnet as its sole example, seems to merge partially into the first category, that of opposites. Besides, within the first category, the meaning of opposition comes into question. Cases like "two souls" and "God and the world" describe opposing items that are in reality one thing, but considered differently, therefore might also fit into the second category, whereas examples such as "we and the objects" and "fantasy and understanding" belong to a different kind of opposing relation. Moreover, one thing comes into polarity with different items under various circumstances. The soul, for instance, is set against the body in animate beings; and it becomes the polar partner of a second soul when characterizing the human psyche, like the two souls of Faust. The term *Polarität*, therefore, is not a fixed concept consisting of clearly delimited subcategories; there is ineluctably something messy about it. Despite the status of the principle of polarity as a foundation of the world, it is not actually concerned with ontological facts; it is foundational in the sense of being formative and constitutive of the endless phenomena in nature. These principles are ways of describing and seeing things and are always bound up in the realm of phenomena.

²⁵ See for instance, Goethe *Handbuch Supplemente* Band 2, ed. Manfred Wenzel, p646.

Despite all its problems the law of polarity is significant for our purpose here in three ways. First, it draws the subject or observer on to the same phenomenal surface as the objects of observation. Second, particular laws are not so important as the lawfulness of nature's creation. In other words, existence of such basic drives guarantees that natural phenomena are always legible and can be derived from something simpler, more general, but still naturalistic. A similar pursuit of immanent legibility, or rather intelligibility, of nature can be seen in Spinoza as well. Prior to the existence of ordinary modes like you and me, which he calls finite modes, there are infinite modes which can be further divided into immediate infinite and mediate infinite modes. The technicalities are irrelevant here, but Spinoza once (and rarely) gave an obscure example of what he meant by mediate infinite modes, which is "the face of the entire universe" (*facies totius universi*). The example is sometimes seen by Spinoza critics as a desperate move (though I find it extremely poetic), but it shows a need to derive more concrete and complex phenomena from simpler ones which nevertheless constitute the same reality or oneness. Last, the principle of polarity expresses the conundrum of individuation: it at once enables and disables individual forms. Division and repulsion allow the appearance of individuated things according to Goethe: To be able to appear as one thing requires it to be divided and hence distinguishable from other things. Yet the doctrine also prescribes a way of seeing things as necessarily related to and shaped by each other, creating blurry boundaries between entities. To use Goethe's own words, "Das Getrennte sucht sich wieder und es kann sich wieder finden und vereinigen" [what has been divided seeks itself again, can return to itself and reunite] (FA 25, 143). What gets divided from a thing in that ordinary moment is, according to Goethe, still part of itself. To remain truthful to oneself, therefore, it is necessary to combine with others and merge into larger unities.

The principle of *Steigerung*, on the other hand, is a vehicle toward infinity, for nature is

said to have a potential to diversify simple appearances into immensely dissimilar phenomena: “die einfachsten Anfänge der Erscheinungen durch Steigerung ins Unendliche und Unähnlichste zu vermannigfaltigen” (FA 25, 143). Moreover, according to Goethe, there are different types, degrees, and scales of polar movements, and only the intensified motions are capable of regeneration:

Im niedern Sinne, indem es sich nur mit seinem Entgegengestellten vermischt, mit demselben zusammentritt, wobei die Erscheinung Null oder wenigstens gleichgültig wird. Die Vereinigung kann aber auch im höhern Sinne geschehen, indem das Getrennte sich zuerst steigert und, durch die Verbindung der gesteigerten Seiten ein Drittes, Neues, Höheres, Unerwartetes hervorbringt. (FA 25, 143)

In a lower sense it mingles with its opposite and unites with it, whereupon the phenomenon is nullified or at least becomes neutral. Unification, however, can happen in a higher sense when the divided is first intensified and, through the union of intensified opposites produces a third thing, something new, higher, and unexpected.

Similar to Spinoza’s *conatus* by which everything is invested in its own perseverance, the Goethean *Steigerung* pertains to a thing’s strengthening of its own individual nature. According to the *Farbenlehre*, the intensified union of yellow and blue creates the color red, which is said to be the acme of all colors. Redness is considered as the most “pregnant” of all colors, for it entails within itself all other colors partly in actuality and partly in potentiality (*teils actu, teils potentia*, paragraph 793). More importantly, this ideal union in red can occur only because yellow and blue by their own nature already incline toward redness (paragraphs 520, 521, 794),

in their own unremitting (*unaufhaltsam*) and constant (*stetig*) movement.²⁶ The color red is therefore the end product of the natural development of the more basic colors yellow and blue, in which the basic states are both overcome and preserved. The irony is that in this play of *Steigerung*, the will to persevere in oneself and the will to transform into something else are one and the same. It is because they already strive toward redness that pure red can be generated from a *coincidentia oppositorum* of yellow and blue; and in that end result, some version of the basic elements (as actual or potential) still survives.

A similar tension between individual bodies' duration and change exists in Spinoza:

II L5 (Physics digression): If the parts composing an individual become greater or less, but in such a proportion that they all keep the same ratio of motion and rest to each other as before, then the individual will likewise retain its nature, as before, without any change of form.

III P7: The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.

An individual thing can lose parts of its body and have parts replaced by external bodies, and it still remains the same as long as it keeps striving and retains its ratio of motion and rest. The form or essence of a thing is expressed as a coherence of desire which stretches in time. A similar virtuality of individual identity can be found in Goethe as well, for he states that life in its oneness expresses itself as a force. Spinoza keeps on saying that individual bodies can combine with others and form larger bodies, such as social ones, and then keep com-posing with others until at the end we end up with the entire nature as one vast individual, the truly monstrous face

²⁶ Notice here that colors acquire a thing-like quality, capable of striving on their own terms. Colors are elsewhere defined as “actions and passions of light (*Die Farben sind Taten des Lichts, Taten und Leiden. Farbenlehre*),” similar to virtual bodies or coherence of power.

of the whole universe. Likewise for Goethe, there are different degrees of wholeness (*Ganzheit*). In his mineralogy, particular mountains combine and constitute one entire mass of granite; in his color theories, the eye actively creates the opposite of the color seen, thereby producing a liberating wholeness (*eine befriedigende Ganzheit*). In this case the eye and the color, subject and object, together make up a composite individual.

The urge of intensification, in a sense, is also an urge to com-pose with other bodies, ideally all the way until the completion of the entire nature. The desire to persevere and strengthen one's own nature, becomes one and the same as the urge to meet and merge into other things. The perseverance qua metamorphosis of individual bodies gives his morphology an almost daemonic character.

Die Idee der Metamorphose ist eine höchst ehrwürdige, aber zugleich höchst gefährliche Gabe von oben. Sie führt ins Formlose; zerstört das Wissen, löst es auf. Sie ist gleich der vis centrifuga und würde sich ins Unendliche verlieren, wäre ihr nicht ein Gegengewicht zugegeben: ich meine den Spezifikationstrieb, das zähe Beharrlichkeitsvermögen dessen, was einmal zur Wirklichkeit gekommen. Eine vis centripeta, welcher in ihrem tiefsten Grunde keine Äußerlichkeit etwas anhaben kann. Man betrachte das Geschlecht der Eriken. (HA 12, 35)

The analogy of centrifugal and centripetal forces makes clear that these are not two separate powers, rather, the urges to persevere and to transform are symbiotic. The power of metamorphosis is almost a death-drive that pushes an organism toward the infinite and formless, for endless shapeshifting is the same as losing one's form. The salvaging force appears in the power of perseverance (*Beharrlichkeitsvermögen*), enabling a living body to prosper in its own specification (*Spezifikationstrieb*), and yet precisely this striving in favor of one's specificity

drives an individual to disappear into larger unities.

The same ambiguity exists in Spinoza's theory. According to his *Ethics*, it is necessary and even essential (because it stems from *conatus* which is the essence of individual things) that finite modes seek to come together with external bodies which will make them more powerful. To use the terms from the *Ethics*, all beings necessarily strive after what brings them joy.

III P11: The idea of any thing that increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our body's power of acting, increases or diminishes, aids or restrains, our mind's power of thinking.

III P11Schol.: By joy, therefore, I shall understand in what follows that passion by which the mind passes to a greater perfection. And by sadness, that passion by which it passes to a lesser perfection. The affect of joy which is related to the mind and body at once I call pleasure or cheerfulness, and that of sadness, pain or melancholy.

As a logical result of these two principles and the need for an individual to strive, then, a particular mind always attempts to think about things that bring it joy, and a body always seeks to be affected by external bodies that bring it pleasure or increase its power of acting. Borrowing from Gilbert Simondon, Etienne Balibar calls this feature of Spinozism "the transindividual." Each individual is continuously in exchange with other individuals both mentally and physically, for all finite modes seek to evade adversity, or things that do not agree with their dynamic essence of motion and rest, and they strive to encounter modes that increase their power of action and compose new individuals (on a higher order) with them. And so, "to say that an individual continues to exist is simply to say that it is regenerated or reproduced. An isolated individual, deprived of exchanges with the other individuals that form its environment, could not be regenerated. It would not exist." (Balibar 52) Regeneration and reproduction are unalienable

features of an individual's continuous existence, and so is death or virtual decomposition (at least in parts of the individual).

Transindividuality in Goethe's Cloud Poetry

Within the Goethean-Spinozist universe of substance monism, an individual form or mode is defined by a particular way of striving and a relativized movement (ratio of motion and rest).

The poem "Du Schüler Howards" discusses how these aspects of natural form impact poetic forms. Is it possible to speak of, as it were, a poetics of the transindividual?

Du Schüler Howards, wunderlich
 Siehst morgens um und über dich,
 Ob Nebel fallen, ob sie steigen,
 Und was sich für Gewölke zeigen.

Auf Berges Ferne ballt sich auf
 Ein Alpenheer, beeist zu Hauf,
 Und oben drüber flüchtig schweifen
 Gefiedert weiße luftige Streifen;
 Doch unten senkt sich grau und grauer
 Aus Wolkenschicht ein Regenschauer.

Und wenn bei stillem Dämmerlicht
 Ein allerliebstes Treugesicht
 Auf holder Schwelle dir begegnet,

Weißt du, ob's heitert? ob es regnet?

You student of Howard's, wondering / You look around and above you in the morning, /
 Whether the mists sink down, or if they climb up, / And what they reveal about the
 clouds. / Up distant mountains an Alpine army / Clusters, , thickening, / And fleetingly
 overhead, course / Feathered, white, airy stripes; / Yet downward sinks, ever grayer, / A
 rain shower from the clouds. / And if by the quiet dusk light / A most lovely and faithful
 visage / Meets you at the lovely threshold, / Are you aware, if it's fine, or if it rains?

It is one of Goethe's late lyric poems addressed to Ulrike von Levetzow. The first stanza starts with an apostrophe, addressing a student of Luke Howard, the British meteorologist who invented the naming system of clouds. Goethe wrote "Howards Ehrengedächtnis" around the same time in the early 1820s, and he is known to have been a passionate reader and admirer of Howard's "Essay on the Modifications of Clouds." The addressee of the poem, the lover qua cloud-observer, is therefore a combination of Goethe and Ulrike. In line 3 of the first stanza, we quickly encounter the bipolar movement of the mist: a simultaneous drive to move downward and upward. This movement, or rather proportion of movement and stillness, is crucially indicative, since it determines in what shapes the cloud will emerge and consequently what kind of weather ensues. Individual clouds have a certain virtuality or *conatus* to their nature. Luke Howard, for instance, talks of modifications rather than cloud forms: "By modification is to be understood simply the Structure or manner of aggregation, not the precise form or magnitude." (Howard 6) Different clouds appear as specific ways of modifying the underlying and fluid plane, namely the atmosphere. In Anahid Nersessian's discussion of clouds and the figure of

apostrophe, the clouds and the appeal they have on humans derive from the fundamental liminality of their being. “They live in near flatness, in the dispersal of depth across a shifting plane. Not nothing, but very little: a threshold expression, a tender subsistence.” (Nersessian 130) They are on the verge of form and formlessness, and despite their effort at sustaining themselves, they have but a transitory existence. As “an ill-defined indefinite something,” though, the affective power that the atmospheric cloud possesses is tremendous (Anderson 140).

Stanza 2 describes three types of these threshold beings: from cumulus (the ones accumulating at the mountain top) to stratus (the feathered white sheet high above) to nimbus (the rain cloud that darkens and presses down). Read together with some of its intertexts, including the essay “Wolkengestalt nach Howard,” the poem “Howards Ehrengedächtnis,” and the final scene of *Faust II*, “Bergschluchten,” it becomes clear that this stanza enacts a cosmic drama. Goethe moves from the middle realm inhabited by cumulus, to the upper *Luft-Region* where the air is dry and the weather is fine, and finally descends with the rain cloud back into the earth’s embrace. The last stanza takes place at a liminal time and place: when the face of a loved one is seen at twilight on the lovely threshold (*auf holder Schwelle*), Goethe asks, “do you know, is it fine weather, or is it raining?” The actions and passions of clouds allow individual and localized shapes to appear out of the immense unity of the atmospheric substance. And as the cloud thickens into a specific form, that of a darling’s face, the “you” of the poem, an ambiguous and aggregated identity itself, suddenly faces extreme uncertainty. The face of the loved one, moreover, is not just any regular face, it is a *Treugesicht*, a faithful and true visage. Given the background of the cosmic drama in the second stanza, is it possible that this *Treugesicht* is pointing to the face of the whole of Spinoza’s universe, a vision on the threshold of form and formlessness, finitude and infinity? The last question then, takes on a much heavier weight than

simply asking for a local weather forecast. The question, instead, could be about the striving of specific modes. Asking “ob’s heitert? ob es regnet?” is the same as asking: Is it going up to the dry upper realm, or is it going down to the moist lower world? It becomes the same question that is also asked about Faust’s ending: is he saved or is he damned? Is his reception in the sky an ascent or a descent?²⁷

These metaphysical questions are nevertheless anchored in private emotions. Asking about weather is the same as asking about love. At the moment of the encounter with the lovely face and on the verge of posing his question, Goethe chooses to deflect and distribute a personal feeling into a diffusive or atmospheric poetic conscious. This gesture reveals a particular kind of sensibility, a way of situating one’s body and one’s art within the environing world. Encounter with the clouds creates a certain affect that mirrors the poet’s already existent feeling, and this affect is in turn presented as an enigma in the poetic form. The entire formative process of the mystery, moreover, has a deep sense of contingency. For the poem starts with an accidentally triangulated relationship, an apostrophe that invokes the reader, the poet and the addressee all at once; and it gives the poem a quality of improvisation, as if the poet is thinking the poem along the way. The task of writing the poem, moreover, is nothing less than wresting a form from the formless, of composing a puzzle to speak of a puzzle. This task is accomplished through an ambiguous affect that is more commonly known as love. The question about weather, or about the movement of cloud, is genuinely unanswerable, for the clouds are pulled by two polar forces at the same time. To understand the nature of motion and rest of this specific modification is to grasp all the external forces that have ever come into a relationship with it, that is, the entire

²⁷ See for instance Heather Sullivan, “Ecocriticism, the Elements, and the Ascent/Descent into Weather in Goethe’s *Faust*.”

prehistory of this liminal being, which could stretch well into deep time and distant places. As a response Goethe creates a poetic form that meets the mystery on its own terms, by grasping and relaying it through an equally enigmatic feeling.

A question lingers, however, or rather a vague feeling, that there seems to be a material continuation between the cosmic drama in the first two stanzas and the message of love in the final one. The transition between the two parts, an ambiguous yet highly tempting “und wenn,” seems to suggest an intimate connection, something like a weak causal link. Could it be that the celestial show functions as a kind of emergent cause that sets in motion an affective flow which resonates with the cloud-observer? In this way, the dual meaning of the final question becomes a materialized result of this (albeit) mysterious causal field. For the observer is suddenly struck by a new-found alignment between himself and the clouds: the recognition that they share the same atmospheric plane of immanence, and the same (though different degrees of) conatus, a unique power to affect and be affected. The compound meanings of the verses correspond to the observer’s newly gained identity as a transindividual, someone whose essence (or power of affecting and being affected) exceeds its self and spills over to others.²⁸

²⁸ Before I turn to Goethe’s other literary works, I would like to mention another point of comparison with regard to cloud poetry. Wordsworth’s “A Night-Piece” features a similar scene of immanent cloud-space which exerts a tremendous affective power on the viewer-poet. The sky is depicted as a “veil of one continuous cloud,” and the poem plays with another potential plane of immanence apart from (but as a result of) the moving cloud, namely the play of light and shadow, colors and colorlessness, and of visibility and invisibility. The poem is quoted in full here:

A Night-Piece

The sky is overspread
 With a close veil of one continuous cloud
 All whitened by the moon, that just appears,
 A dim-seen orb, yet chequers not the ground
 With any shadow—plant, or tower, or tree.
 At last a pleasant instantaneous light
 Startles the musing man whose eyes are bent
 To earth. He looks around, the clouds are split
 Asunder, and above his head he views

Ways of Becoming Water

Humans sometimes become water in Goethe's lyric poetry, a motif of the transindividual with varied ambiguities. The theme of water-human exchange challenges the paradigm of subject-object opposition. In his work on the change of visual technologies in the 19th century, Jonathan Crary talks of the shift from objective vision to subjective vision evidenced in Goethe's *Farbenlehre*. The strict division between the observer's mind and its external objects "implicit in the camera obscura becomes in Goethe's work a single surface of affect" (71). The body of the observer, which was previously locked inside the dark space of the camera obscura and thus remained invisible, has now come to the fore and becomes part of the observed world. Take, for instance, the figure of Homunculus in *Faust II*, Act II, who is an all-spiritual being, a seeker of knowledge and of materiality, "greiflich Tüchtighaften." There he and Thales encounter Proteus the sea god, a traditional provider of "unerring truths." Seduced by the beauty and liveliness of the ocean, and especially by the Nereid Galatea in her Aphroditean costume (accompanied by doves and dolphins and standing on a seashell), Homunculus ventures into the ocean to embark on his journey toward corporealization, a scene of *Liebestod* with sexual and procreative implications.

The clear moon and the glory of the heavens.
 There in a black-blue vault she sails along
 Followed by multitudes of stars, that small,
 And bright, and sharp along the gloomy vault
 Drive as she drives. How fast they wheel away!
 Yet vanish not! The wind is in the trees;
 But they are silent. Still they roll along
 Immeasurably distant, and the vault
 Built round by those white clouds, enormous clouds,
 Still deepens its interminable depth.
 At length the vision closes, and the mind
 Not undisturbed by the deep joy it feels,
 Which slowly settles into peaceful calm,
 Is left to muse upon the solemn scene.

As both a primary matter, the most foundational of materials, and quasi-immaterial screen for reflections, water in Goethe's universe is a liminal and erotic substance. When the all-spirit Homunculus jumps off into the ocean, into a partly real and partly representational medium, he partakes of the borderline characteristics of this pervasive matter and takes on various forms. And this quest for knowledge and materiality is not a straightforward one, we learn that Homunculus has to be united with water and undergo a long process of evolution, taking on "tausend abertausend Formen" (*Faust* line 8324), before completing his journey. In other words, his jump is a leap of faith, and a perspectival shift from finitude to infinity. This episode reads like a rewrite of the Proteus tale in the *Odyssey*. Both Menelaus and Thales are, in a way, trying to extract knowledge out of the shape shifter through trickery and aggression. Homunculus, however, tries to become Proteus. Viewed as two modes of learning, the differences between them are clear. One includes a subject-object divide which ensures the integrity of both the seeker of knowledge and the object of study, whereas Homunculus chooses to participate in what he seeks to learn, throwing himself into the object of his knowing and his desire.

There are other versions and variations of the Homunculus figure, or persons who participate in a kind of watery mind and knowledge. In Goethe's early Anacreontic poem "Unbeständigkeit," composed around 1770, his immersion in water results in a different type of perspectival shift, not between the finite and infinite, but between continuity and change:

Unbeständigkeit

Auf Kiesel'n im Bache, da lieg' ich, wie helle,

Verbreite die Arme der kommenden Welle,

Und buhlerisch drückt sie die sehnende Brust.
 Dann trägt sie ihr Leichtsin im Strome darnieder,
 Schon naht sich die zweite und streichelt mich wieder,
 Da fühl' ich die Freuden der wechselnden Lust.

O Jüngling, sei weise, verwein' nicht vergebens
 Die fröhlichsten Stunden des traurigen Lebens,
 Wenn flatterhaft je dich ein Mädchen vergißt.
 Geh, ruf sie zurücke, die vorigen Zeiten,
 Es küßt sich so süße der Busen der zweiten
 Als kaum sich der Busen der ersten geküßt.

Unsteadiness

On pebbles in the streamlet, there I lie, how bright, / And open my arms toward the
 coming wave, / That lovingly presses on my yearning breast. / Then her fickleness
 carries her down the river, / Already a second wave draws near and caresses me again, /
 There I sense the joys of shifting desire.

O youth, be wise, and do not weep away in vain / The happiest moments of sorrowful
 life, / If a flighty maiden forgets you. / Go, call back to mind earlier times, / The second
 breast is as sweet to kiss / As the first breast hardly ever was.

Goethe immerses himself in the joy of “wechselnde Lust (shifting desire)” brought by the
 ever-changing waves. There the language is that of eroticism: like a lover the first wave presses

on his longing breast, then quickly disappears in the flow, giving way to the next (“Unbeständigkeit,” 3-5). The wave is propelled by its “Leichtsinn.” In the line “Dann trägt sie ihr Leichtsin im Strome darnieder,” the diction separates the wave as agent from the river as its bearer, yet a central message of the poem is precisely that the distinction between the shifting waves and the enduring river is illusory. When mapped onto human relations, this natural phenomenon corresponds to the interchangeability of the objects of erotic desire, for “Es küßt sich so süße der Busen der zweiten / Als kaum sich der Busen der ersten geküßt. (The second breast is as sweet to kiss / As the first breast hardly ever was.)” (11-12) The watery lesson concerns the congruity between the changeable loving objects and the seemingly enduring structure of the poet’s desire. The last two lines blur the boundaries between all individual objects of desire. The first kiss becomes a “first” only when the second kiss doubles down on it, being both similar (“als”) and superior (“kaum”). The excitement brought by the first lover is always replaceable. In fact, a later version of the poem is titled “Wechsel,” which could be rendered “Exchange,” emphasizing the substitutability of love interests. The kisses are, after all, likened to waves that, in reality, merge together to constitute the entire flow. To compare individual objects of desire to separate waves is to put that very individuality into question, as if the kisses are actually capable of disappearing into other kisses. The pleasure of the second kiss becomes a combined memory of both events.

The relationship between the river and the poet’s mind, however, is more than metaphorical. The “helle” “Welle” rhyme, for instance, secretly connects the person and the wave. The lesson that the river teaches is then imparted from the poet to a “Jüngling.” It is as if by immersing himself in the river, the poet starts to participate in its watery mind and hence knowledge: the boundary between the human and watery characters becomes weakened and

allows for generous exchange between the two entities both spiritually and materially. The poem dramatizes the encounter between the heart and the water and allows them to become metaphors of each other. The moment of contact and its physicality are important, as suggested by the emphatic “da” in “da lieg’ ich” and “Da fühl’ ich die Freuden.” Only then and there, with physical connection between the poet’s and the river’s body parts (the breast and the wave), and not anywhere else, can the exchange of meaning between the tenor and the vehicle happen. And in this case, it’s not clear which is the tenor and which is vehicle. Are the waves a figure of speech of the unsteady heart? Or is the yearning heart a metaphor for the fickle river? In the end, it is hard to tell, and it’s never one or the other. Similarly, it’s hard to say if the extended arms are the poet’s or “die Arme der kommenden Welle,” if it is the poet’s fickleness in games of love or the “Leichtsinn in Ströme,” and if the interchanging desires belong to the person or the “buhlerisch” river. The equivalence between the two is in part clear in the verses, and sometimes it takes a little misreading to confuse the two categories. And so the confusion remains a potential rather than an actuality. The joy is in the “shifting,” for the substitution of love objects never reaches a completed status (or a sublation), just as the exchange of the person and the river is not a complete transformation either in the physical or rhetorical sense; more properly speaking, it is an agitation between the two poles, a partially completed metaphor, an always ongoing event that abides by the same rules of *Polarität* and *Steigerung*.

This is not the only instance where a river and a poet, as it were, exchange their reality. In the later poem “Mahomets Gesang,” (1777) a key text of his Geniezeit, a metaphor functions to bring together a stream and a religious founder. The river flows from mountains across a plain toward the originary ocean; and the anthropomorphic figure nourishes and establishes cities and civilizations. The course of the river coincides with the course of the life of the human figure.

According to Wellbery, the Genius is a term that designates this whole movement which brought about the fusion or “identification of the semantic domains of nature and culture.” Genius becomes, in a sense, the mender of a fission (*The Specular Moment* 136). The result is achieved when the terms on the two sides of the equation, the person and the stream, take on each other’s characteristics by exchanging actions. The actualization of the metaphor is thus a “specular metaphorical structure,” where the equated terms represent one another like mirror reflections. These brief citations should be enough to illustrate the “semantic interweaving” of the two terms. The river is said to be fresh like a youth, it dances and cheers, hunts and strides. It first acts like a human, then takes on a human body (a knee and a foot), and gradually becomes indistinguishable from the human. The following stanza works equally well whether it’s talking about a stream or a human being:

Und nun schwillt er
 Herrlicher; ein ganz Geschlechte
 Trägt den Fürsten hoch empor!
 Und im rollenden Triumphe
 Gibt er Ländern Namen, Städte
 Werden unter seinem Fuß.

It’s at once a fusion, confusion, and confluence of the stream and the person. The result is a personified river / watery person. The difference between “Mahomets Gesang” and the earlier “Unbeständigkeit” lies in the lack of a point of origination or arche. “Unbeständigkeit” dramatizes the physical and sensorial contact between the human body and the river as the starting point of metaphorical exchange. In “Mahomets Gesang,” however, the exchange has already begun or maybe has already finished before the poem even starts. The shift is specular

and hence transparent; no substance or sensory experience is needed to realize it.

In the last poem I discuss, however, the water-human encounter is again emphasized as a sensuous experience. In “Der Fischer,” composed toward the end of the decade, the persona is lured into destruction by the “wellenatmend” image in the river. On appearance, the poem tells the story of a fatal encounter between a fisherman and a mermaid:

Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll,

Ein Fischer saß daran,

Sah nach dem Angel ruhevoll,

Kühl bis ans Herz hinan.

Und wie er sitzt und wie er lauscht,

Teilt sich die Flut empor:

Aus dem bewegten Wasser rauscht

Ein feuchtes Weib hervor.

Sie sang zu ihm, sie sprach zu ihm:

»Was lockst du meine Brut

Mit Menschenwitz und Menschenlist

Hinauf in Todesglut?

Ach wüßtest du, wie's Fischlein ist

So wohlilig auf dem Grund,

Du stiegst herunter, wie du bist,

Und würdest erst gesund.

Labt sich die liebe Sonne nicht,
 Der Mond sich nicht im Meer?
 Kehrt wellenatmend ihr Gesicht
 Nicht doppelt schöner her?
 Lockt dich der tiefe Himmel nicht.
 Das feuchtverklärte Blau?
 Lockt dich dein eigen Angesicht
 Nicht her in ew'gen Tau?«

Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll,
 Netz' ihm den nackten Fuß;
 Sein Herz wuchs ihm so sehnsuchtsvoll
 Wie bei der Liebsten Gruß.
 Sie sprach zu ihm, sie sang zu ihm;
 Da war's um ihn geschehn;
 Halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin
 Und ward nicht mehr gesehn.

The water rushed, the water swelled, / A fisherman sat by, / And gazed upon his dancing
 float / With tranquil-dreaming eye. / And as he sits, and as he looks, / The gurgling waves
 arise; / A maid, all bright with water drops, / Stands straight before his eyes.

She sang to him, she spake to him: / "My fish why dost thou snare, / With human wit and

human guile, / Into the killing air? / Couldst see how happy fishes live / Under the stream
so clear, / Thyself would plunge into the stream, / And live forever there.

“Bathe not the lovely sun and moon / Within the cool, deep sea, / And with wave-
breathing faces rise / In twofold witchery? / Lure not the misty heaven-deeps, / So
beautiful and blue? / Lures not thine image, mirrored in / The Fresh eternal dew?

The water rushed, the water swelled, / It clasped his feet, / A thrill went through his
yearning heart, / As when two lovers kiss! / She spoke to him, she sang to him: /
Resistless was her strain; / Half drew him in, half lured him in; / He ne'er was seen again.

(John Storer Cobb's translation)

The first stanza establishes an equivalence, or rather, an equivocation, between the “wet woman” and the element of water, since the same verb “rauschen” is assigned to both. The mermaid first accuses the fisherman of an environmental crime: the mass killing of fish; she then immediately boasts the blessed life that watery species enjoy at the bottom of the stream, encouraging the fisherman to descend so that he might become whole. He is further enticed by the images reflected in water: the doubly glorified face of “wave-breathing” celestial bodies and the “wetly-transfigured” blueness of sky. Unable to resist temptation any longer, he finally gives in and is never seen, presumably having met his demise. Not just the human figure, but the entire poem has in fact become water-like: it has acquired a watery sound and form. The enjambments and caesurae in the first stanza of the mermaid's speech enable the verses to break free of the ballad form to create a rhythmic ebb and flow; the “rauschen” of the river which sets the stage

and mood of the poem, is, punningly, a distinctly watery, intoxicating and mesmerizing sound; the symmetrical visual and acoustic structure inheres in lines like “Das Wasser rauscht', das Wasser schwoll” “Und wie er sitzt und wie er lauscht” “Sie sang zu ihm, sie sprach zu ihm” “Halb zog sie ihn, halb sank er hin,” giving them an almost incantation-like quality. This time, poetic utterance, and not just the human character, comes into an exchange with the water.

Deva Kemmis emphasizes the importance of sound and listening in her reading of the poem. She writes, “the posture of listening, being ready for, or anticipating, makes room for moments of extraordinary awareness...In this ontological posture, represented by the figure of the listening fisherman at the outset of the poem, inheres a possible unity between self and world.” (Kemmis 50) The sensory experience of listening is accompanied by the act of touching, when the swelling water makes the fisherman’s foot wet, which mysteriously causes his heart to become full of longings. The fisherman’s transformation is conditioned and restricted by his body (so we don’t know what really happens), and it unfolds in time, unlike the partial transformation of the blithe poet of “Unbeständigkeit,” whose change of mind happens almost instantaneously. In this sense, it can be said that the fisherman is in fact more open toward whatever the water offers. If the Anacreontic poem parodies the plot of the “Sturmatmende Gottheit” by trivializing the accomplishment of the creative spirit, then “The Fisherman” demonizes this figure. The erotic union with water in “Unbeständigkeit” becomes in the ballad a drowning, and it’s a drowning that the fisherman himself half-heartedly desires. It becomes a highly ambiguous event, a passage to heaven (Locket dich der tiefe Himmel nicht?) that cannot be distinguished from a downward turn, a kata-strophe. In this sense, the course of the river in “Mahomets Gesang” also shares this ambiguity of direction, for its journey down from mountains to the ocean is also a travelling back toward its origin, an origin that coincides with its

telos.

Taken together, then, the poems gradually bring to full fruition the daemonic and catastrophizing potentials of the theme of watery exchange in particular, and of transindividuality in general. The human characters in the three poems all succumb to the power of water, recognizing themselves as modifications of a fluid and underlying substance. Participation in the watery consciousness means losing parts of themselves, but in return they can hope to obtain/borrow some creative power from this mediating agent. The three poems constitute an experiment of sorts, and this literary and scientific experiment continues with *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, where the law of elective affinities rules the protagonists as if governing natural elements²⁹.

***Die Wahlverwandtschaften* and Modifications of the Laws of Nature**

Die Wahlverwandtschaften tells the story of the messy entanglements of four characters, whose names are all variations or modifications of the name Otto, and the crystallization of their relations in a the infant Otto. In this novel, each Otto is conditioned and shaped by the others, constantly approaching and distancing from one another following the principles of *Polarität* and *Steigerung*. In the beginning of the story, Charlotte and Eduard are a married wealthy couple who use their life as a field of social-scientific experiment. They invite Otilie, Charlotte's niece, and Eduard's old friend, the Captain, to participate in their rather secluded life in the hope that the addition of new people will function as a catalyst for chemical changes. Eduard soon falls in love with Otilie and Charlotte with the Captain. Eduard refuses to give up Otilie and leaves for war while Charlotte is bearing his child conceived on a previous night of "spiritual adultery"

²⁹ For a detailed elaboration of the cultural history of the principle of elective affinities, or in other words an account of the life of this metaphor, see Christian P. Weber.

where the couple were thinking about their own lovers but making love to their lawful spouses. Charlotte's child, Otto, dies from an accident when Otilie is caring for him; as a result, Otilie realizes her sin and resigns from food and social life, gradually fading away and dies at the end of the novel.

The novel, above all, foregrounds a crisis of immanence, where the mythic nature holds sway with an iron fist over the four protagonists. In David Wellbery's words, the fictional world is cut off from a transcendent meaning-giving realm: the novel displays a cultural transformation where all signifiers have lost connections to a pre-given symbolic order, and so the protagonists are left to freely associate signs with meanings (Wellbery, "Die Wahlverwandtschaften," 293). They are fervent readers and often times they interpret things and objects in a misguided or even delusional manner. For instance, Eduard once takes a goblet with the inscribed letters "E" and "O" to be a sign of the destined fulfillment of his love for Otilie, a romance that ends tragically for all four characters. "Der Mensch ist ein wahrer Narziß," says Eduard in chapter 4, "er bespiegelt sich überall gern selbst; er legt sich als Folie der ganzen Welt unter" (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften* 36). The captain takes up the topic and continues, "so behandelt er alles was er außer sich findet; seine Weisheit wie seine Torheit, seinen Willen wie seine Willkür leiht er den Tieren, den Pflanzen, den Elementen und den Göttern" (36). Humans lay themselves down as a transparent foil under the world, as if to create a palimpsest of meanings by layering together different discourses and pile them up into an undistinguishable whole.

The behaviors and movements of the characters, moreover, are subject to the same laws of polarity and intensification which, for Goethe, drive the entirety of nature. The novel is apparently invested in establishing all kinds of repulsions, attractions, and affinities. It sets up several pairs of opposites: calm Charlotte as opposed to impulsive Eduard, Otilie as serene,

saintly, and death-driven versus Luciane the stormy, triumphant, and Lucifer-like, or as silence is set against discourse (Kittler). At the same time the text merges figures together, following the law of intensification, the most striking examples of which are the chemistry formula and the infant Otto. Conceived at the night of the spiritual adultery of Eduard and Charlotte, the boy resembles not the couple, but their lovers Otilie and the Captain. A perfectly naturalistic explanation of the mysterious physiognomy does exist, for instance through Nicholas Boyle's reading. Boyle argues that the erotically charged scene on the lake could hint at adultery between Charlotte and the Captain, especially considering the captain's previous history with his "strange neighbor" (Boyle). The birth of Otto could also reflect the debate between preformationism and epigenesis in reproduction theory of the 18th century (Engelstein). Or according to Friedrich Kittler's analysis, with the child the text brings together (symbolically) Otilie's pure motherliness (*Mütterlichkeit*) and the captain's role as official (*Beamtenethos*) under the coercion of a ghostly power which is the need to educate citizens for the new civic society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*) (Kittler 263). Whichever explanation we choose, the novel clearly posits the transgression of individual boundaries as a given condition, just as natural beings seek out and transform into other bodies in order to remain their true self.

Here I want to point to a passage that illustrates more clearly the novel's principles of immanence and relationality. In chapter three of part II, immediately after describing Charlotte's contentment in seeing Otilie occupied, Goethe inserts a strange little paragraph:

... so betrachten wir dagegen mit Ehrfurcht ein Gemüt, in welchem die Saat eines großen Schicksals ausgesäet worden, das die Entwicklung dieser Empfängnis abwarten muß, und weder das Gute noch das Böse, weder das Glückliche noch das Unglückliche, was daraus entspringen soll, beschleunigen darf und kann. (*Die Wahlverwandtschaften* 140)

But we look with reverence at a personality in which the seed of a large fate has been sown and which must wait upon the future growth of this conception and is not permitted and is not able to hasten the good or the ill, the happiness or the unhappiness, destined to come forth from it. (*Elective Affinities* 127-28)

It is unclear who is thinking these thoughts, nor whose great fate is referred to here, but it could be the narrator who is reflecting on the fate of the exceptional few (his characters) as opposed to the *gewöhnliche Menschen*. In this case, then, the one who possesses this great fate could be any of the four heroes, or indeed, all of them. The metaphor of the seed of a great fate reiterates a similar figuration in the earlier “Studie nach Spinoza.” There Goethe describes the effect of perceiving the seed of a relation (*Verhältnis*) whose harmony is beyond comprehension once it is fully developed. Goethe calls this experience sublime. Human destiny or personal history is defined in its core as relational. And in both cases, the external observer, either as a collective “we” or an indefinite mind (*Seele*), is inevitably entangled in the worldview. To perceive a character’s entire history puts one in a dizzyingly elevated position (*erhaben*), even if the history is still in its incipient stage (*Keime*), for it already forebodes an ungraspable relationality. The thought of grasping the entire essence of a finite mode, such as a human character, is especially tempting, yet its vision (or *Anschauung*) both seduces the curious onlooker and also repels the gaze.

Individual characters in the novel thus border on the realm of things and nonhumans. An innate connection between Otilie and natural elements, for instance, has been noted repeatedly by critics. Benjamin speaks of Otilie’s plant-like muteness (“Pflanzenhaftes Stummsein” 337); Stefani Engelstein, on the other hand, reads Otilie as a particular kind of plant, a graft, combining qualities such as “an indeterminate generational position, an extreme dependence, and

an asexual productivity regulated through the eyes” (45); Matthew Bell similarly takes Otilie to be a “Kind der Natur” trying to adjust to an unfavorable environment (319); Gabriel Trop, furthermore, connects Otilie and Eduard to the undifferentiated matter of nature. She lives within the natural economy of guilt and innocence, rather than the moral realm of good and evil, which prompts Benjamin to conclude that “nothing more untragic (untragisch) can be conceived than this mournful (trauervoll) end” (337). Otilie’s final resignation to her fate can also be read as a resignation to the world around which envelops and conditions her existence, and a consequence acceptance of her own role as a modification of nature.

The affective plane of immanence, however, does not cease at the border of the novel, instead, it extends beyond into the world of the viewer/reader. For the novel features a crisis of seeing, namely no one can ever see without a body or without being affected. Otilie’s name, for instance, plays on that of Saint Odilia, the patron saint of good eyesight. Throughout the novel, gaining a new way of seeing works affectively as a means of periodization: every time a person sees something anew, an unfamiliar epoch enters in. Charlotte’s knowledge of the imminent departure of the Hauptmann transforms her perspective, allowing her to see the friend with completely different eyes (81); after that, when the new vision is confirmed by the Hauptmann’s unexpected kiss after the spectral hour on the lake, she comments, “daß dieser Augenblick in unserm Leben Epoche mache, können wir nicht verhindern.” (93) Discovery of affections (Neigung) in general produces new perspectives and hence punctuates time (33, 56). Later in the novel, when Otilie visits the newly decorated chapel, she experiences something utterly novel and shocking:

Otilie freute sich der bekannten, ihr als ein unbekanntes Ganze entgegnetretenden Teile.

Sie stand, ging hin und wider, sah und besah; endlich setzte sie sich auf einen der Stühle,

und es schien ihr, indem sie auf- und umherblickte, als wenn sie wäre und nicht wäre, als wenn sie sich empfände und nicht empfände, als wenn dies alles vor ihr, sie vor sich selbst verschwinden sollte. (143)

Otilie was delighted by the familiar parts now appearing before her as an unfamiliar whole. She stood, walked to and fro, looked and looked again; finally she sat down in one of the stalls, and it seemed to her, as she looked up and around, as though she existed and did not exist, as though she had feelings and had none, as though everything might vanish before her eyes or she herself might vanish even as she looked. (129-30)

She feels immediately the strangeness of the epoch (*sonderbare Epoche*) and the shock (*Überraschung*) that befalls her (143). These are kairoitic and intensive *Augenblicke*. Her perception is transformed by the newly furnished chapel, as a result of which she becomes deeply entangled with her environment. From her diary, we know that while in the chapel, she is indulging the thought that the ancestors would sit in circles and converse with each other. Her feelings of simultaneous being and not being, feeling and not feeling, seeing others disappearing and vanishing herself, are all prefiguring her fate, that she is going to be welcomed into the realm of the dead.

A sense of inescapability from what one sees thus pervades the novel. The furnisher of the camera obscura, supposedly a mechanism that allows the observer to inspect objectively from the security of a dark box, is the same man who tells the tale of “Die wunderlichen Nachbarskinder.” He intends it as a fairytale-like story completely removed from the life of his listeners in order to offer them some pleasure and solace, but it turns out the novella dismays Charlotte even further, as she recognizes the intimacy between the story and her life. The novel, moreover, is interested in turning people into images and semblances. The Architect, for

instance, believes the best way to remember the dead is to preserve their living forms (*lebende Formen zu erhalten*), which is “der beste Text zu vielen oder wenigen Noten” (133). Besides, the characters produce tableaux vivants based on existent paintings; and Otilie writes about people’s tendency to treat those present as if they were pictures. The Architect means to preserve the connection between the people’s likenesses and themselves, since it is for the purpose of memorialization, while the pleasure of watching tableaux vivants partly derives from the fine line between the natural person and the mask of the role (176). However, the connection as well as the distinction are both difficult, if not impossible, to sustain. Charlotte comments on the Architect’s living forms, saying they are “doch wohl unabhängig” (134). The link of signification breaks apart. We face an increasingly turbid but always somehow meaningful symbol. And in the process of striving, of coming to terms with what we see, invariably we get captured in and by the object. As Otilie says, “wir sehen ihn, wir fühlen unser Verhältnis zu ihm, ja sogar unsere Verhältnisse zu ihm können wachsen, ohne daß er etwas dazu tut, ohne daß er etwas davon empfindet, daß er sich eben bloß zu uns wie ein Bild verhält” (138). To see something is to be related to it, albeit in an uncertain way. As living organisms can be defined as virtual and relational, an image likewise participates in a portion of that life and growth of relationships. Otilie takes a person’s existence in image as a second life, but “auch dieses Bild, dieses zweite Dasein verlischt früher oder später” (139). Even pictures are capable of affections and passions, the strengthening and diminishing of conatus.

The crisis of seeing, or of the inescapable affective power of seeing, infiltrates the novel’s meta-fictional level, as the text constantly hints at the existence of a (potential) observer or reader. Its most obvious manifestation is the novel’s intransigent novella-like qualities: first, its ubiquitous self-consciousness, for the spectral existence of the narrator is everywhere present;

and second, its focus on types and contours of characters rather than their interiority, leading to a sense of the purity, fragility and inconsequentiality of the characters. Taking the catastrophe to a yet higher order of consciousness, then, the reading of the novel may as well be catastrophizingly affective. Moreover, readers are frequently reminded of a perspective to look at the fictional events. The novella in the work is an example; in the beginning of part I chapter 12, the narrative takes up the viewpoint of a hypothesized “aufmerksamer Beobachter” of the varied expressions of the main characters; in chapter 6 of part II, the narrator looks at Otilie’s performance in the tableau vivant from the perspective of the Architect, while lamenting the lack of a perfect observational point (174); when the narrative shifts focus from one event to another, it almost displays a cameraman’s work, as the author not only changes perspective, but also explains the movement of angles (chapter 12 part I). Since the observers are not able to escape from the apprehension of what they see, it is better to situate and angle themselves more properly in relation to their object, so as to be affected and modified in a more advantageous way.

A version of art theory suffused with mysticism appears near the end of Benjamin’s Goethe essay. He argues that beauty is not semblance: it “is not appearance but purely essence—one which, of course, remains essentially identical to itself only when veiled” (351). Benjamin emphasizes that, first of all, this beauty is full of life, and second, it is a composite of two parts, appearance and essence, which are not really separable. The function of this veil is similar to that of the daemonic water: it promises clarity through the act of covering up. A precedent of this union of duality can be found in Hölderlin’s tragic theory. In his “Grund zum Empedokles,” Hölderlin posits two primordial forces, the organic and organizing (“organisch,” subjective, particular, conscious) art vis-à-vis the “aorganisch” (objective, general, unconscious, formless)

nature. The two principles permeate and penetrate each other, leaving behind a fleeting but intense moment, a moment marked by the death or sacrifice of the tragic hero. The theme later finds another variation in Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, where the plastic Apollonian does no more than cast a veil over the Ur-eine of the Dionysian world (26). Yet Benjamin's *Wahlverwandtschaften* is distinctly not tragic. Hölderlin's tragic hero is, after all, a selected somebody; Empedokles is an exceptional person upon whom the salvation of the world is bestowed. The sacrifice of Otilie, on the other hand, makes no promise of redemption. She is certainly unique but lacks the kind of prestigious status enjoyed by tragic heroes; she does not enjoy an elevated status to act as a savior of the world from outside, instead she sees herself as fundamentally conditioned and shaped by the "one nature" that envelops the entire world. Just like the summer flowers she identifies with, Otilie stands for the weak and fragile, in which "Vergängliches und Dauerndes ineinander greift" (198). The redemptive potential of the story, according to Benjamin, lies precisely in the hopeless hope cherished by the observer, the person who memorizes. "For the tears of emotion, in which the gaze grows veiled, are at the same time the most authentic veil of beauty itself" (Benjamin SW 1, 349). In other words, affect itself enters as part of the truth content of the artwork, and the reader/critic, once again, should not be spared from the completion of the work.

Chapter Three: Kleist's Penthesilea and Other In-humans

Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) was an outlier among his contemporary German writers, at once anti-classical and anti-Romantic. He is best known for his dramas and novellas, which deal with excesses and transgressions of all kinds: corporeal, cognitive, social, and even generic ones. His tragedies border on “the unintentionally comical” (Hermand 44), and his comedies are constructed upon fundamental ambiguities and existential heartbreaks. Unlike Goethe’s catastrophe narratives, for Kleist calamities are always prefigured in the very beginning of his works: the earthquake in Chile, the foreboding newspaper announcement in *Die Marquise von O...*, and the mysterious advent of Penthesilea on the battlefield of the Trojan War. Kleist’s taste for extremities and overdetermined catastrophes are clearly manifest in the 1808 play *Penthesilea: A Tragedy*, which tells the story of the amorous battles between the Amazon queen Penthesilea and the Greek hero Achilles, with love and battle being mutually dependent and indistinguishable. The Amazons in ancient Greek legend are a tribe of all-female warriors who participate in the Trojan War, a nation of “wild barbarians” that is completely incompatible with the civilized (i.e., Greek) order and is thus inevitably defeated. Kleist’s *Penthesilea* falls in love with Achilles during the fight and, after a series of tragic misunderstandings, kills him out of frenzy,³⁰ tearing him apart and becoming one with her dogs in consuming his flesh. The play was not well received by its contemporary readers, and unsurprisingly so since it was in direct violation of the so-called classical ideal of “edle Einfalt und stille Größe (noble simplicity and

³⁰ With this ending Kleist deviates from most versions of his source story, according to which Achilles is the one who triumphs and falls in love with Penthesilea as he kills her. See for instance the account in *Aithiopsis*, which is part of the epic cycle (Blok 195-96).

quiet grandeur).” Goethe, the literary giant of Kleist’s time, saw the play as unstageable and called the author “sick” in his private correspondence (Günzel 273). An early commentator on Kleist likewise remarked that the play should be put neither on stage nor on paper due to its “Verwirrungen der elementaren Gewalten (disarray of elemental forces)” and “rasenden Abnormitäten (frenzied abnormalities)” (Wilbrandt 262).

It is above all the perversion of gender roles that the text’s contemporary critics found so atrocious. Not only does the play feature bloodthirsty and breastless³¹ women warriors, but they also hunt Greek soldiers in the battlefields and force them to participate in their ritual of sacred orgies—the Feast of Roses—in order to produce female offspring. What happens to the male children is left unsaid, but it can be assumed that they are killed upon birth. The Amazons fight neither on the Trojan nor on the Greek side, instead, their battle is their erotic season of harvest. Penthesilea, moreover, is defiant even in her death. At the end of the play, after being outlawed by the highest religious authority of the Amazons, Penthesilea kills herself with a speech-act composed of an extended simile, a puzzle that has perplexed generations of readers. What happens on the page of the text and according to Kleist’s sparse dramatic direction is something impossible: she kills herself by forging a dagger from the “anvil” of her heart and the “ore” of her feelings. It remains unknowable what “really” happens to Penthesilea, just as it remains ambiguous whether her death is a punishment or a redemption.

The play has seen a revival of interest largely within feminist discourses since the latter half of the 20th century.³² Carol Jacobs notably argues that the rhetoric of feminism in the play

³¹ According to one popular etymology, the name “Amazon” combines privative “a-” and “mazo” meaning breast, resulting in the cultural imagination of Amazon women as breastless.

³² Early critics idealized Penthesilea as a romantically transfigured matriarch (Daly, Göttner-Abendroth); some have deconstructed the image of the Amazon state as a product of male fantasy that further promotes patriarchal ideals of Kleist’s age and arguably of Kleist himself (Birkby); later scholars have taken psychoanalytic approaches and focused on Achilles as Penthesilea’s mirror image and hence the heroine’s

lies not so much in its sexual politics, but rather in the subversion of language, that linguistic signs oscillate freely between figurative and literal meanings and speakers have lost control of what they say (Jacobs 94). Kate Rigby takes issue with the abstractness, if not nihilism within this kind of deconstructionist reading, and instead foregrounds the play's self-critique and its exposure of the pitfalls and contradictions within any emancipatory project while drawing parallels between the Amazon state and the French Revolution (Rigby 330).

A connective thread recurring throughout scholarship on this dramatic work is Penthesilea's (and Kleist's) idiosyncratic linguistic habit: their words seem to travel freely between literal and figural meanings, thus constituting the instability and unknowability of what they mean. Words transgress. This linguistic subversion, according to Carol Jacobs, is the core of the text's feminist rhetoric. Linguistic signs move stealthily in and out of the realm of authorial intention, to the extent that their speakers lose control of the words spoken (Jacobs 94). To consider their meaning is to consider the inherent ruptures as well as linkages between two realms which are themselves constructed: the literal and the figurative. And so Penthesilea's linguistic subversion is more properly spoken of as a restoration, reinstating words to an almost mythic world where they hold reality in their grasp.³³ But my thesis is not about Kleistian language, which a wide body of scholarship has already taken up.³⁴ My aim is to bring together the linguistic subversion of the play and its implications for revolutionary ideals. Penthesilea's Amazon embodies a revolution according to her account of its history. The Amazons slaughtered their previous oppressors and established an all-female sovereignty (supposedly) free of slavery and oppression. But the Amazonian law ultimately replicates the logic of oppression by

unconscious narcissism and death drive (Gallas, Kublitz-Kramer).

³³ On the characteristics of mythic words, see for instance Cassirer 24.

³⁴ See for instance Ilse Graham's *Word into Flesh*.

repressing the desires and individual expressions of its citizens (forced self-mutilation, prohibition of heterosexual romance, etc.).

Drawing on the theory of queer inhumanism as well as recent scholarship that looks at the play from the perspectives of affect studies and ecofeminism, I contend that the play's linguistic slippages tear open an uncharted realm beyond the rivalry of Greeks and Amazons, civilized and barbarian, the race (*Geschlecht*) of man and woman. Through her confusion of words and things, and her "voluntary thingification," Penthesilea has formed a community with things and objects, until her heart finally (through a figure of speech) becomes the same as iron that can literally kill. Her suicide with this dagger of emotions is thus less of a punishment than an entelechy of her fate.

Linguistic Subversion

Penthesilea is, rightly spoken, a paradoxical object-subject characterized by verbal and theatrical excess. After coming to herself and realizing what she has done to the body of Achilles, she commits suicide through a speech-act:

Penthesilea.

Denn jetzt steig' ich in meinen Busen nieder,

Gleich einem Schacht, und grabe, kalt wie Erz,

Mir ein vernichtendes Gefühl hervor.

Dies Erz, dies läutr' ich in der Glut des Jammers

Hart mir zu Stahl; tränk' es mit Gift sodann,

Heißätzendem, der Reue, durch und durch;

Trag' es der Hoffnung ew'gem Amboß zu,

Und schärf' und spitz es mir zu einem Dolch;

Und diesem Dolch jetzt reich' ich meine Brust:

So! So! So! So! Und wieder!—Nun ist's gut.

(sie fällt und stirbt)

Penthesilea:

For now I shall descend into my breast,

And dig a shaft, and quarry out the cold

Ore of a feeling that annihilates.

This ore I purify in fire of grief

To hardest steel; in pain then, of bitter,

Burning remorse, I soak it, through and through;

Now carry it toward Hope's eternal anvil,

And grind and sharpen it into a dagger;

And to this dagger now I yield my breast:

So! So! So! So! Again!—Now it is done.

[She falls and dies.] (3025-3034)

Flipping the inner depths of feelings out onto a theatrical surface is a recurring motif in Kleist's works. And such is the ending of *Penthesilea*, an ending that is both tragic and "good": she kills herself with a simile. Hölderlin's judgment about Greek tragedy aptly describes Kleist's language here, for the language is "lethally factive, because the body it seizes hold of does literally kill." ("Notes to *Antigone*"). Deemed by many a most unclassical author, Kleist paradoxically inhabits a (Hölderlinian) classical tongue. By literalizing a common metaphor of the era, that of the pit of interiority, Kleist turns the supposedly ideal world within the self into an

external space that can be accessed by the subject and owner of the same interior space. Katrin Pahl discusses the teichoscopic quality of this monologue, namely it describes events occurring in off-stage space (inside the heart), and convincingly argues that Kleist “interlaces the outside world beyond the scene and the inside world of the bosom” (“Forging Feeling” 676). Kleist thus challenges the hierarchical relationship between language and emotion (that language names and thereby contains emotions) and subverts the “bourgeois ideology of feeling” where “feelings are colonized and often killed by words”; Kleist instead stages “their adjacency and their similarity to the point of exchange or confusion” (676). Kleist forges words and feelings into things and bodies, as Penthesilea’s feeling now acquires “the exteriority and material density of iron ore” (676), so that in the end “words, bodies or things, and feelings become impossible to entangle” (679). Many critics of *Penthesilea* have noticed the tendency of the heroine’s mind toward literalness: she seems to have failed to notice the difference between things and metaphors, and by extension, between the body and its representation (eg. Chaouli, Pollard, Graham). To such a mind, there is essentially no difference between love-making and war-making, since the latter is often used as a metaphor for the former. In Rigby’s words, “unable to conceive of love without violence, unable to imagine ‘defloration’ other than as ‘desecration,’ the man in search of whom she has come to Troy is not really Achilles himself but a personification of the eroticism of violence” (329). As a result of this “confusion,” the connection between the two characters is realized in a most radical and physical way— through Penthesilea’s devouring of Achilles’s flesh. A spiritual connection is thus literalized and physicalized in the entanglement of two bodies.

For the Amazon queen herself, this union happens as an inevitable result of linguistic slippage. She says to herself, “So it was a mistake. A kiss, a bite, / The two words rhyme, for one

who truly loves / With all her heart can easily mistake them.” (So war es ein Versehen. Küsse, Bisse, / Das reimt sich, und wer recht von Herzen liebt, / Kann schon das eine für das andre greifen. 2981-2983) It might seem like a terrible pun, that of “Küsse” and “Bisse”. But Penthesilea is dead serious about this, and this rhyme has material and deadly consequences. The contingency of the rhyme is materialized in the material world in the almost necessary event of the consumption of Achilles’s flesh. The confusion is literally an oversight, a *Versehen*, as a careless reader surveys the text of her lover’s body and mistakes a bite for a kiss. Penthesilea loses control of her lips by misspeaking the word and also physically misplacing her mouth. The event of confusing the two similar words and hence courses of action is, moreover, an act of grabbing (*greifen*) the word Bisse instead of Küsse. Mental cognition (wordplay between *greifen* and *begreifen*, to comprehend) transforms into touching, thus taking on a tangible quality. Apart from seeing, the heart and the feelings are also capable of touch for Penthesilea. In an earlier episode, she confesses to Achilles, “Zwar gern mit diesem Arm hier traf ich dich,” (True, with this arm here I was glad to strike you”) and then “Denn die Gefühle dieser Brust, o Jüngling, / Wie Hände sind sie, und sie streicheln dich.” (Because the feelings in this breast, oh youth, / Are just like hands, and are caressing you.” 1760, 1772-1773) Here is another example of Penthesilea’s confused and confusing way of thinking: she desires Achilles, and this desire takes the form of physical contact or proximity, for she is glad to touch Achilles, whatever the word touch means. Striking, harming and killing function the same way as loving or spiritually caressing the object of her desire. The metaphor of the hand-like heart has been dismissed by critics as bad taste. True, it is a rather excessive and even camp figure of speech. But the same excess, grotesque, catachresis, camp or even queerness can be said about most if not all of Kleist’s theatrical works.

The consistency of a confusion of the literal and figural, or of signs and things, forces us to take it more seriously. As Jacobs observes, the scandal of Penthesilea's death scene lies in the conundrum in which it leaves the readers. She writes, "this is because we can neither relegate it to a nonthreatening realm of mere language, mere imagination, nor regard it as language's nihilistic threat to a realm of substance otherwise left whole." (xiii) It's as if by reading the play, critics must face an altered reality where the substantial and palpable world is torn open by Penthesilea's dagger of language, then only to realize that there's no difference between substance and language.

To address Penthesilea's "confusion of categories," and the scandal or void left on readers, scholars have generally taken two routes of interpretation. On the one hand, Michel Chaouli and Matthew Pollard have placed more emphasis on the textualization of the body and the aesthetics of this device. Penthesilea's desire to strike Achilles with arrows or spears is read as an urge to write on the body of the Greek hero, for the arrows of war represent the arrows of Amor, the hunter's arrows, and the feathered writing instrument of the pen. Chaouli concludes that the play is a monstrous writing exercise, "as a long and increasingly violent writing exercise in which Achilles is writ, is written upon, at steadily decreasing range and with steadily increasing harm" (Chaouli 139). Pollard then takes up this insight and follows that Penthesilea's writing mania culminates in her suicide, where "both metal and flesh, language and body melt into a single unity of symbols." She "not only textualizes Achilles, but embodies writing as a desire, articulated by her own writing within herself with the dagger of language... The author's work is complete; the poisonous pen forged from within is a writing instrument and a weapon with which she writes her death sentence." (Pollard 390-391) In this way Penthesilea is herself a Kleistian writer, in that she anticipates and prepares for her own death meticulously with her

writing.³⁵ Much as I admire these nuanced readings of the play, I believe that a reading of Kleist should not stop there if we want to harness its full power.

The problem is that this line of reading inevitably reduces the body and bodily expressions to signs and symbols. However, as Bohrer has stressed in his study on the aesthetics of suddenness, Kleist held a strong belief in the material foundation of emotions and hence bodily expressions. He even developed a psychology of polarity which sees feelings and mental states as electrical, which is why emotions in his writing are often extremely unstable, for they are constantly on the verge of transition, of migrating from one pole to the other. In “Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden,” Kleist goes so far as to provide an occasionalist explanation for the French Revolution: “Vielleicht, daß es auf diese Art zuletzt das Zucken einer Oberlippe war, oder ein zweideutiges Spiel an der Manschette, was in Frankreich den Umsturz der Ordnung der Dinge bewirkte (Perhaps, in this way, it was ultimately the curl of an upper lip or an ambiguous play of a cuff that caused the overthrow of the order of things in France).” In other words, expression of emotions for Kleist cannot be simply read as completed symbols, rather, it has material impact on reality and its “order of things”. These gestures, or signifiers of feelings and moods, exist in between signs and their referents, as mediating agents between the self and other, interior and exterior, cause and effect. They do not relate to their real-life counterparts inside the “pit of interiority” through an enclosed circuit; instead, they are open and active participants in both the symbolic and physical realms of events. They trigger and catalyze, albeit in an uncertain way; emotions then agitate and move; an unexpected chain of events follows.

³⁵ Kleist himself also planned and staged his own death. In *Der romantische Brief*, Bohrer has attempted to read his letters as anticipation of his death, dating back ten years from his actual suicide..

On the flip side of this reading of the body as text, scholars have alternatively focused on the physicality of the play and its various implications. In “Lektüre der Sinne: Kleists ‘Penthesilea’ als Körperdrama,” Maximilian Nutz notes that aligning the Amazons with natural elements such as water and storm defies the objectifying male gaze of the Greeks. Penthesilea’s body is multiply transgressive: it violates gender boundaries by being destructive and animalistic; it also transgresses the boundary between the material and symbolic, thereby disrupting the patriarchal symbolic order that dictates a correct way of signification. The play ultimately demonstrates the “Auferstehung des Körpers im Text,” the rise of the body in and in defiance of the word (Nutz 185). Similarly, Bettine Menke argues that “[a]ls das monströse Mischwesen, weibliche Kentaurin und die Hündin (2553) wie die Hunde und unter ihnen agierend, stellte Penthesilea selbst diese Nicht-Ganzheit, die Nicht-Geschlossenheit im grotesken Körper dar, als nicht-menschenähnlich.” (As the monstrous composite being, the female centaur and the she-dog who acts amongst other dogs, Penthesilea represents the fragmented and the open in the grotesque body as the nonhuman-like. 120) However, the problem with this line of reading is that it fixes Penthesilea in a single position which doesn’t really exist for her. To say that Penthesilea’s uncontainable body represents the nonhuman which disrupts the symbolic order is to ignore the fact that the ruinous and mutilated bodies of Amazons also implant a new, equally oppressive order that replaces the heteronormative one. The foundational ritual of the Amazon kingdom is to mutilate the right breast, or to grow a bow in lieu of a breast to honor the founding of the state through violence. This ritual is then preserved and repeatedly exercised to maintain the purity and dignity of the Amazon identity. One might say that this custom replaces the phallic-centered order with a breast-centered one as a new form of instrumental rationality (See Simon Richter). The “revolution” of the Amazons thus revolves and circles back to take on

the logic of their oppressors. Moreover, Penthesilea is a doubly otherized figure, deemed monstrous and inhuman by both Greeks and her fellow Amazons. If the Greeks think of her face as an expressionless and blank paper that's completely unintelligible, the Amazon princess Prothoe similarly describes her eyes as shining with an alien light, exceeding her comprehension. Achilles calls Penthesilea *unmenschlich*, *unnatürlich*, *unweiblich*, *barbarisch* because of the Amazon's violent rituals, whereas the Amazons assert that she's no longer human after her cannibalistic crime. "Mensch nicht mehr, wie nenn ich dich?" (2731) In short, Penthesilea is simply more versatile than these readings will allow.

I argue that not just bodies become texts in this play, as scholars from the former group noted, but words also take on thing-like qualities. Words become "purely material sound-objects" (Jacobs 109) that are interchangeable given any likeness; besides, nothing stands in between a term and what it stands for as the final scene makes clear, the telling is the thing. The hierarchy that allows for metaphors to function has collapsed. In fact, the perversion of language becomes such that the male captives of the Amazons become a single faceless collective that functions as a metaphor. The ancient laws of Amazons decree that their warriors should not seek out their own opponents, for they are all "brides of Mars." The anonymous multitude that the maiden warriors have harvested and decorated for the Feast of Roses is thus called "Mars," or "the wreathed god." A further implication of this sub- or perversion of language is that it opens up a new realm, a flat and fluid plane of ontology where words, things, humans, and others can mutually compose and decompose.

The Third Realm ("eines Drittes")

Beyond the binary of civilization and barbarity, power and its resistance, a third realm is opened up between Penthesilea's emergence on stage and her descent at the end. We can borrow

Odysseus's words from the opening scene as he reports on the appearance of the Amazons. The descent of Penthesilea on the battleground is almost a *Deus ex machina*, where she suddenly falls from heaven (von Himmel plötzlich... fällt), clad for war, and mingles in the fight. Her very existence troubles the resourceful Greek hero. Just when he thinks she's fighting on the Greek side, this enigmatic female centaur starts killing people on both sides. No wonder she's repeatedly compared to various natural elements, like a storm, lightning, or the gush of a forest stream. For these things know no friend or foe. She's that third element, "eines Drittes," that perplexes the binary thinking mind of Odysseus. Moreover, she inhabits precarious mental, sexual, as well as ontological states, oscillating between consciousness and delirium, and human and nonhuman states. The main plot of the play consists of Penthesilea and Achilles alternating roles in hunting each other. Matthew Pollard aptly characterizes the play as a "somasochistic oscillation between submission and domination." (372) At the end the Amazon queen kills Achilles in a frenzy, tearing open and consuming her rival's body together with her pack of dogs. In Scene 23, as Penthesilea triumphs over Achilles, she orders her hunting dogs to attack the Greek hero, and "Die hungrige, die wild nach Raub umher, / Auf öden Schneegefilden heulend treibt; / Sie schlägt, die Rüstung ihm vom Leibe reißend, / Den Zahn schlägt sie in seine weiße Brust, / Sie und die Hunde, die wetteifernden, / Oxus und Sphinx den Zahn in seine rechte, / In seine linke sie." (Howling her hunger through the snowy wastes— / She strikes—tearing the armor off his body— / Into his ivory breast she sinks her teeth, / She and her savage dogs in competition, / Oxus and Sphinx chewing into his right breast, / And she into his left. 2667-2673) A special bond is created in this murderous scene, for Penthesilea is accompanied, or beigesellt, by her dogs, with the verb containing the root for community (*Gesellschaft*).

Despite the conspicuous (albeit grotesque) bond between Penthesilea and her dogs, Kleist

himself is not known for his passions for nature and natural beings, unlike the other authors discussed in this study (Mary Shelley, Goethe and Wordsworth were all famous nature-lovers). Nowhere in his literary work does he take natural events or objects as prominent subject matters, perhaps with the singular exception of the novella *Das Erdbeben in Chili*. Even in the *Erdbeben*, however, the earthquake functions more as a convenient literary device facilitating sudden turns of events. He likewise rarely talks of his adventures in nature in his letters. To talk about an ecological sensibility in his works, therefore, is to address the lack of it. If he takes no particular interest in the natural world³⁶, what does this external world, composed of animate and inanimate things, mean to him? What makes this lack of ecological sensibility intriguing is how Kleist constantly emphasizes the power of things and the violence they are capable of exerting on human beings. The world of things and the world of nature are often characterized as violent, if not tyrannical, in his writings. He once wrote, for instance, to his cousin Marie von Kleist: “meine Seele ist so wund, daß mir, ich möchte fast sagen, wenn ich die Nase aus dem Fenster stecke, das Tageslicht wehe tut, das mir darauf schimmert (my soul sores so much that, I could almost say, when I stick my nose outside the window, the sunlight that glimmers on it hurts me).” (10. Nov. 1811, qtd. in Graham 122) Daylight becomes violent when it encounters a hypersensitive body as a result of the sore of the soul. In a sense, Kleist subverts the pantheistic sentiments in vogue among many of his contemporaries, according to which view the divine resides in all facets of nature. Instead of comfort or temporary flight beyond finitude or even just a foil or backdrop, what nature offers for Kleist is always horrors of the uncanniest kind: a spectacular earthquake thwarting the suicidal attempt of a hero, or an ordinary “daily hurt” such as the assaults of sunlight.

³⁶ With the exception of *Michael Kohlhaas* and the role of horses in the work.

Kleist's view of a perverted nature is present in a speech by Jupiter in disguise in *Amphitryon*, in teasing self-reference, where Kleist offers slight mockery of the *Sturm und Drang* movement and its pantheistic tendencies.

Jupiter. Ist er dir wohl vorhanden?

Nimmst du die Welt, sein großes Werk, wohl wahr?

Siehst du ihn in der Abendröte Schimmer,

Wenn sie durch schweigende Gebüsche fällt?

Hörst du ihn beim Gesäusel der Gewässer,

Und bei dem Schlag der üppgen Nachtigall?

Verkündet nicht umsonst der Berg ihn dir

Getürmt gen Himmel, nicht umsonst ihn dir

Der felszerstiebtten Katarakten Fall?

Wenn hoch die Sonn in seinem Tempel strahlt

Und von der Freude Pulsschlag eingeläutet,

Ihn alle Gattungen Erschaffner preisen,

Steigst du nicht in des Herzens Schacht hinab

Und betest deinen Götzen an? (1420-1433)

(Is he present to you? / Do you truly perceive his great work, the world? / Do you see him in the shimmer of afterglow, / When evening falls through silent trees? / Do you hear him in the murmuring waters, / And in the voluptuous song of the nightingale? / Does not the mountain speak to you in vain of him, / Piled up at heaven, in vain to you, / The cataracts scattered by the rocks? / When the sun shines high in his temple / And heralded by the pulse of their joy, / Creatures of all kinds praise him, / Do you not descend into your

heart's shaft / And worship your idol?)

Jupiter invokes the trope of the divine in nature as an excuse for his “punishment” of Alkmene essentially through rape. Instead of seeing and worshipping the almighty god in various natural scenes, Alkmene perhaps recognizes a familiar letter inscribed by lightning on the night’s sky, presumably the letter “A” standing for her husband Amphitryon (“Wars nicht, / Weil in des Blitzes zuckender Verzeichnung / Du einen wohlbekanntem Zug erkannt?” 1443-1445). Jupiter accuses her of idolatry, for her weak senses and nerves (“befangner Sinn”) cannot apprehend the divine in its true form, so instead she pays adoration to the face and features of her mortal husband. According to this line of argument, Alkmene fails to read the natural signs correctly and her sin justifies Jupiter’s rape and roleplaying (impersonating Amphitryon). However, all this pantheism talk and appeal to ethos is just a pretense that in fact does not get Jupiter what he wants. Alkmene asserts that if she were to go back in time, she would lock her doors and shut everyone out of her chamber, be it god or human. Unsatisfied, Jupiter opts for an alternate argument, and claims that “Auch das Olymp ist öde ohne Liebe (Even Olympus is barren without love, 1519).” The idea of nature as a book written with divine and unerring truths becomes a petty excuse and a manipulable tool to satiate Jupiter’s lust. Alkmene’s and Amphitryon’s despair is to some extent an epistemological one stemming from the uncertainty and malleability of perception, for it is precisely the writing of the lightning (and by extension, that of the almighty Jupiter) that deceives them.³⁷

What looks like a paradox, that between Kleist’s apparent indifference to the world of nature and an almost paranoid anxiety about its destructive power, can be resolved with the

³⁷ This despair is reminiscent of Kleist’s own Kantian crisis, which a lot of scholarship has tackled. See for instance Mehigan’s *Writing after Kant*.

understanding that for Kleist, there is no nature separate from human beings, nor bounded human sphere uncontaminated by the world of nonhumans. All he does is to envision a constant flux where natural and unnatural objects possess an almost tyrannical/whimsical/mythical power of signification and work their own ways to surprise the human characters. At the same time humans and other animate and inanimate beings are readily reduced to physical bodies and are thus literally entangled with each other. The linguistic transformation of Penthesilea into a centaur, for instance, is no different than a physical merging (or grafting) of the queen and her horse.

This ontological fluidity, moreover, allows the human characters' inner emotions to surface. In an earlier play, *Amphitryon*, the Theban king experiences his own existential crisis when he finds that he can no longer assert his own identity. He is literally split up, because the king of gods, Jupiter, impersonates and doubles the mortal king, to the point that Amphitryon's wife cannot distinguish between the two. In a moment of near breakdown, Amphitryon talks of himself as a collection of bodily parts. He says, "Augen / Aus ihren Höhlen auf den Tisch gelegt, / Von Leib getrennte Glieder, Ohren, Finger, / Gepackt in Schachteln, hätten hingereicht, / Um einen Gatten zu erkennen." (Eyes / From their sockets laid down on a table, / limbs, ears and fingers taken off a body / And packed in boxes would have been enough / To know one's husband by." *Amphitryon* 1683-1687) Talking in subjunctives, Amphitryon externalizes and visualizes his inner ruptures. The human subject falls apart, both physically and figuratively. To some extent, Kleist empties the subject's interiority by displacing what's assumed to be inside to the external surface. The result is that the supposed subject exists on the same plane as all the nonhuman elements that make up its self. Deleuze and Guattari offer a reading of Kleist in *A Thousand Plateaus*, which can be said about both *Amphitryon* and *Penthesilea*:

Similarly, feelings become uprooted from the interiority of a “subject,” to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings but affects. And these affects are so many instances of the becoming-woman, the becoming-animal of the warrior (the bear, she-dogs). Affects transpierce the body like arrows, they are weapons of war...

Such is Kleist’s personal formula: a succession of flights of madness and catatonic freezes in which no subjective interiority remains. (Deleuze and Guattari 356)

Both *Amphitryon* and *Penthesilea* are prone to projecting their inner feelings outward onto an exterior surface, whether a stage or, as in this case, a (Spinozistic) plane of immanence. And as a result their bodies become the reality of their selves rather than just an index or marker of identity. Both (the body and the self) are equally vulnerable, for they are liable to any contingent influences or affects received from the world around. They are, literally and figuratively, laid bare and pierced open.

As a result, the fate of human agents in his works are often determined by the objects around them (e.g. Adam in *Der zerbrochene Krug*, Alkmene in *Amphitryon*). As Hartmut Böhme remarks, we might be able to speak of “the Nemesis of Things” where “it remains unknown to the human agent that he is that which is corporealized through the acting things, and the person preserves the features of things”³⁸ (H. Böhme 193). This revenge of things originates from humans’ “projektive Zuschreibungen (projective attributions)” whereby things are supplied with often teleological meanings. An anthropocentric will assigns meanings and values to nonhuman beings, which is itself an act of perversion. It perverts the world of things by inserting them into

³⁸ „Dann können wir von der Nemesis der Dinge sprechen. Und da dem Handelnden unbewusst bleibt, dass er es ist, der sich in den agierenden Dingen verkörpert, erhält die Person Züge der Dinge selbst.“ (H. Böhme 193)

a human context where they don't originally belong. Once inserted, however, the things cannot be easily torn away. They work in their own fickle and mysterious ways and trap the human subjects into their abyss of meanings and meaninglessness. For instance, Alkmene in *Amphitryon* receives a diadem from her husband Amphitryon (impersonated by Jupiter), and the letter "A" is supposed to be inscribed on the jewel as a confirmation and symbol of their love, which is the first act of perversion. On the second day, however, the inscription turns into a "J," which throws Alkmene into complete confusion and fear, for she then believes that she has unwittingly committed adultery. Her fate and wellbeing are thus completely dictated by what the stone says. It is indeed the Nemesis of things. Moreover, the stone does to the person exactly what the person does to the stone. For it is the value and attachment attributed to the jewelry that gives it the power to (re)write the fate of the humans. Many of Kleist's works can thus be read as the violent writing of things on man. Penthesilea and Achilles mutually and violently write on each other's bodies, and in the end the heroine rewrites herself into the immanent plane of reality where things, words, and bodies belong equally.

This third realm, the tyrannical governance of things, might be characterized as "in-human." What is meant by the word is precisely the result of the process of mutual perversion between humans and nature/things. I take this neologism from Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay collection *Habitations of Modernity*, in which he writes, "it is clear that the inhumanity of collective violence is, after all, human. The inhuman is in humans and, in that sense, is better written as *in-human*." (142) A lot of Kleist's works can certainly be read as comments on ethical implications of collective violence (such as the French Revolution), though that is not my central concern here. The term "in-human," nevertheless, captures succinctly the ambiguous states and locales that Kleistian subjects such as Alkmene and Penthesilea inhabit. In-humanism describes a

realization that what's supposed to be natural is already unnatural and has human imprints on it, and what's supposed to be human is already reified or thingified (*verdinglicht*). The human subjects are sometimes sucked into the web of things involuntarily, like Adam and Alkmene, but there is also Penthesilea who inclines toward an almost voluntary thingification.

Radical Ecology

Katrin Pahl's recent essay "Queer Procreation: Reading Kleist Plantwise," offers a way of reading Penthesilea as a composite being from the perspective of ecofeminism. According to her argument, Penthesilea is a plant-like being that performs spontaneous grafting whenever possible. Pahl discusses literature in critical plant studies and finds that grafting often happens spontaneously in nature, though it can also be artificially produced, and so grafts "form intersections or zones of entanglement between activity and passivity, nature and culture, drive and technique" ("Queer Procreation" 148). Moreover, grafting requires a cut to create a cultivar for new life to issue, and is thus a Derridean "force of breaking," at once wounding and healing. Finally, grafting propagates itself, engenders new circumstances and requires new grafting "in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion" (qtd. in Pahl, "Queer Procreation," 150). In contrast to heterosexual reproduction, grafting deploys a "metonymic logic of reproduction" which messes with the generational difference and sequence. When we first see Penthesilea, she is said to be implanted (*gepflanzt*) at the front of the Amazon army, suggesting the plant-like quality of the Amazon community from the very beginning. Pahl further reads passages depicting Penthesilea's bow and horse as examples of grafting. Moreover, Penthesilea's desire of approximation (she seeks to touch Achilles with her actual and metaphorical hand) can be seen as a vegetal desire: she seeks to cut the body of Achilles in order to create a graftage with him. Penthesilea's life story is thus a darker version of Goethe's metamorphosis of plants. Unlike Goethe who likes to

repress the negative side of things, Kleist reminds us that the telos of such metamorphosis or composition is opaque, and the formula of (vegetal) regeneration always involves a portion of death.

Another notable example of bonding with nonhuman things is a special affinity between Penthesilea and *Staub* or dust. Her appearance often accompanies the presence of dust, which is understandable because she's always riding her horse. In a scene near the opening of the play, the Greeks describe her appearance in quick exchanges of brief sentences:

Der Hauptmann. Was?

Der Myrmidonier. An des Berges Saum—

Der Ätolier. Staub—

Der Myrmidonier. Staub aufqualmend, wie Gewitterwolken:

Und, wie der Blitz vorzuckt—

Der Ätolier. Ihr ew'gen Götter!

Der Myrmidonier. Penthesilea. (387-389)

Moreover, Penthesilea repeatedly talks about her wish to throw Achilles in the dust under her feet (“Zum Staub mir noch der Füße hinzuwerfen” to throw him into the dust by my feet 846), and then saying she almost covets the dust since it's going to receive the hero's beautiful body. In a later scene of their amorous-violent exchange, she talks about throwing herself under his feet instead. She says, “Wozu auch sollen / Zwei Wangen länger, blühnd wie diese, sich / Vom Kot, aus dem sie stammen, unterscheiden? ... Und diesen Leib her...Den Hunden mag er ihn zur Morgenspeise, / Dem scheußlichen Geschlecht der Vögel, bieten. / Staub lieber, als ein Weib sein, das nicht reizt.” (Why, tell me, should two cheeks / That bloom like these be any different from / The mire of which they're born...Let my body be served as breakfast for his dogs, / for

the hideous race of birds. Let me be / Dust instead of woman without charm.” 1245-1253) This monologue signals her voluntary return to the dust-world from which she was born. Dust is another figure of eros-thanatos, implying both death and regeneration, while the feet closely connected to images of dust are also important agents in the erotic violence of the play.

Penthesilea is recognizing the earthy dust as the plane of immanence from which she emerges and in which she’s forever embedded. It’s a condition of vulnerability and openness that she herself acknowledges, and whose consequence she embraces wholeheartedly.

Eunjung Kim’s “Unbecoming Human” offers a different way of understanding the relation between the human and nonhuman realms in *Penthesilea*, the two mutually dependent and mutually perverting worlds. Kim writes about the ethics of queer inhumanism, “based not solely on identity and sociality but also on proximity and copresence.” (302) She discusses the act of thingification and self-objectification as opening up possibilities of challenging the received concept of humanity based on a limited notion of agency and ableness. Penthesilea’s existence, in a similar vein, challenges the illusion of a body fully under control and the idea of humanity closely associated with it. Through her confusion of words and things, Penthesilea invokes a world of immanence where signs do not stand beyond bodies and where bodies no longer remain untouched by language. She opens up an unfamiliar third realm, the realm of the in-humans where humans and nonhumans freely interchange, compose and decompose. She is at once chthonic goddess and mortal queen, human and its opposite; she’s in-human in both ways: alienated from humanity because of her eccentric behavior, but at the same time functioning as a wedge (Kleist’s favorite metaphor) that prevents the two civilizations (Amazons and Greeks) from collapsing. By choosing unbecoming and unbelonging, Penthesilea kills herself as a gesture of surrender to the world of dust, which means at once death and regeneration. Ironically, this act

of unbecoming, which appears to be a severing, conditions and is conditioned by an ontological and linguistic fluidity, essentially a plane of immanence where everything is intricately entangled with each other, and nothing can really be torn apart from anything else.

Immanence and Colorism in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*

While Kleistian ontological fluidity in *Penthesilea* opens up a radically new possibility, a window of flight from the logics of binarism and othering that define the two kingdoms (the Greek and the Amazon) where the Amazon queen is trapped, in *Die Verlobung in St. Domingo*, though, no such room of escape seems to be in place. The novella was written and published in 1811, the year when Kleist killed his acquaintance Henriette Vogel and subsequently killed himself. The narrative features a protagonist, Toni, a 15-year-old girl with unreadable facial colors. Similar to *Penthesilea*, Toni is also a figure of transgression and unbelonging, doubly incorporated and excluded by both the black and white, whose tragedy concludes with her death and the erection of a tombstone for her and her white fiancé. The story takes place in St. Domingo, today's Haiti, during the insurrection of the black slaves against their white colonizers in the early 1800s. The majority of the plot take place within the household of Congo Hoango, a "fürchterlicher alter Neger" who kills his old master and occupies his plantation. While he is out fighting the whites, the domestic space is run by his concubine Babekan, a mulatta, and her daughter Toni whom she had with a European man. A Swiss officer, Gustav von der Ried, arrives one day "in der Finsternis einer stürmischen und regnigten Nacht" (161), who looks for shelter and sustenance for himself and his family who are fleeing toward Port au Prince and who are currently hiding outside in the wilderness. Gustav finds himself bewildered, disgusted, and obsessed with Toni's face color, the "ins Gelbliche gehenden Gesichtsfarbe" (161). They fall in love and become engaged through an event elided by the narrative ("Was weiter erfolgte,

brauchen wir nicht zu melden, weil es jeder, der an diese Stelle kommt, von selbst liest" 175).

Toni, however, is supposed to seduce and deceive him in order for Hoango to return and kill the white family, as she is accustomed to doing with other French and Belgian men. Instead, though, she quickly comes to terms with her new (white) identity and tries to save her fiancé from the hands of the blacks. After a series of misunderstandings, Gustav kills her believing that she has betrayed their engagement, only to kill himself thereafter in a familiar Kleistian vein, with a pistol in his mouth and his brains completely smashed on the wall (194).

After a journalistic and meandering opening paragraph,³⁹ the story moves on to an intricate play of color semiotics: a stark contrast between black and white, and by extension, between darkness and light.⁴⁰ The night of Gustav's arrival is characterized with words like "Finsternis," "Dunkelheit," and "stockfinster" (161-62). Against this foreboding and pitch-black backdrop, Toni greets the white stranger, holding the light in such a way "daß der volle Strahl davon auf ihr Gesicht fiel" (163). The color of her countenance is one of the most powerful tools of deception that the Hoango household has been utilizing since the beginning of the revolt ("die...zu dieser gräßlichen List besonders brauchbar war, mit ihren besten Kleidern auszuputzen" 161): her task is to seduce the white refugees into the house to have them slaughtered. Toni thus takes care to let the full radiance of her face be displayed in front of Gustav von der Ried, but she also invokes the light of the sun ("bei dem Licht der Sonne" 163) to

³⁹ The story begins with the sentence: "Zu Port au Prince, auf dem französischen Anteil der Insel St. Domingo, lebte, zu Anfange dieses Jahrhunderts, als die Schwarzen die Weißen ermordeten, auf der Pflanzung des Herrn Guillaume von Villeneuve, ein fürchterlicher alter Neger, namens Congo Hoango." (In Port au Prince, on the French part of the island of St. Domingo, at the beginning of this century when the blacks were murdering the whites, there lived a ferocious old negro, Congo Hoango by name, on Guillaume von Villeneuve's plantation. 160)

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion of the development of the motif "black/dark vs. white/light," see for instance Charbon, especially 83-84.

strengthen the sense of familiarity and security already conveyed through her lighter skin tone. Daybreak is also emphasized several times in the text as a time of salvation. From the perspective of Gustav the Enlightenment man and “metaphysical humanist” (Kaiser 354), the radiance of his skin color signals safety and trustworthiness, whereas skin tones tending toward darker shades feel obnoxious to him. For instance, he first finds Toni’s dark yet uncannily familiar skin color “anstößig” (172), and he would rather stare into the face of the dark night than into the face of a black person. Hence he tells Babekan, “Euch kann ich mich anvertrauen; aus der Farbe Eures Gesichts schimmert mir ein Strahl von der meinigen entgegen” (164). Gustav adopts an Enlightenment view on light and colors: black and white are universal categories signifying polarized moral and aesthetic values, such as truth and falsehood, good and evil, beautiful and ugly, etc.⁴¹ Under the “white gaze” of Gustav as well as, arguably, the narrator, color becomes imbued with definitive meanings and fixed connotations.⁴² The problem thus arises with the perception of the color yellow, or that of in-betweenness, which can be seen as at once black and white, yet also neither one nor the other.

Apart from Toni, whose facial color tends toward yellow, other black characters of the novella are also threatened by the contamination of the golden hue. Babekan is a mulatta who contracts the “Gallenfieber” as a result of her pregnancy in Europe, reminiscent of the slave girl in one of Gustav’s tales, who takes revenge against her previous master by sleeping with him after getting yellow fever. Congo Hoango, moreover, originates from the Gold Coast of Africa.

⁴¹ See Immanuel Kant’s “Von den verschiedenen Rassen der Menschheit,” Johann Gottfried Herder’s “Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit,” and Christoph Meiners’s *Grundriss der Geschichte der Menschheit*. On intuitive perception of blackness, typically with fear and horror, see for instance Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, especially 131-132. On black people’s lack of aesthetic capacity for the beautiful and sublime, see Kant’s *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*.

⁴² On the problem of racism in the narrative and of the author Kleist, see for instance Fleming, Gilman, and Horn.

His last name is a translation of the Chinese Yellow River, at least according to Zelder's *Grosses vollständiges Universallexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*. The 18th century encyclopedia includes an entry on "Hoang oder Hoam," which is a transliteration of the Chinese Huanghe, or Yellow River, "der größte Fluß in dem Königreich China, welches Wort in chinesischer Sprache gelb bedeutet" (Zelder 292-293, also quoted in Reuß 18 n.44). Roland Reuß stresses the fact that the two rivers that compose Hoango's name flow in opposing directions: the Congo River flows roughly westward from central Africa to the Atlantic coast, whereas the Yellow River flows generally eastward from the Tibetan plateau to the Gulf of Bohai. In short, Hoango bears a name of disorientation. Reuß points toward Gustav's flight after Mariane's death for a similar disorienting effect. Gustav narrates that he flees from Strasbourg "halbwahnwitzig gegen Abend" and then crosses the Rhine after a while. Crossing the Rhine means he is travelling eastward, but "Abend" for Kleist's contemporaries connotes the west. The text thus seems to imply that Gustav is carried toward two opposing directions at the same time (Reuß 18). Zachary Sng, on the other hand, argues that Hoango's name is "flagrantly at odds with itself," and is "ostentatiously made up of two parts that do not entirely cohere, loosely yoked halves that can be rearranged at will" (Sng 86). Sng connects this textual detail to the larger discourse of mediality and uses it as an example of syncretism (where differences and disjoints are preserved in the whole) as opposed to the more hegemonic synthesis (where difference is subsumed under a higher and supposedly harmonizing order). This syncretism, however, offers a particularly dystopic outlook, as the story teems with total chaos and bloody vengeance. Sng brings up the notion of syncretism in relation to Susan Buck-Morss's work,⁴³ but unlike Buck-Morss, who celebrates the critical potential of

⁴³ Sng discusses Susan Buck-Morss's work *Hegel and Haiti* where the term "syncretism" is proposed as a master- or meta-figure: "Syncretism designates "the hybrid mixture of elements within each of the two signifying systems of Vodou and Freemasonry, freely borrowed from other older idioms and traditions. It also names the mixture of openness and secrecy that each practices, and most intriguingly of all, it describes Buck-

syncretism, Kleist's version has a particularly sinister twist. "For Kleist, in contrast, the sign unites secrecy and betrayal in a nonadversarial, nonbinary way that is disastrous, for one can never tell if they are doubles or opposites of one another." (Sng 91)

In *Die Verlobung*, boundaries are inherently porous, but the act of crossing is aporetic. The broken and contaminated (by yellow) identities of the black characters embody a similar ambiguity. According to Susanne Zantop's reading, the problematic color yellow points to an important cultural debate of the era: the dilemma over miscegenation. The narrative proposes and problematizes literal and metaphorical cases of miscegenation to reveal the fact that "cross-racial love is tied to the violent historical encounter between whites and blacks" (Zantop, "Changing Color" 194). Along this line of reading, the subjugation of the black population is the originary event that produces yellow,⁴⁴ the demonic and illegible color of in-betweenness. The reading of Toni as a transgressor is also premised on this theory, that in the beginning there is a strict rule governing the boundaries between black and white, men and women, barbarity and civilization, etc. But Toni's *Gesichtsfarbe* is, from the beginning, in a state of constant becoming ("ins Gelbliche gehend"). She first "becomes" white through a deliberate manipulation of costumes and lighting, then becomes black through Gustav's tale of the sinister black woman who attempts to infect the white race with yellow fever. After telling the story, the officer asks Toni, "ob sie wohl einer solchen Tat fähig wäre" (170). To Gustav's not-so-subtle identification of Toni and the girl in the tale, Toni's response is a not-so-assertive "Nein," as she looks bewildered and her gaze sinks down (as is customary of her) while making the utterance.⁴⁵ She then "becomes"

Morss's own method, which enables us to read one in the critical mirror of the other without asserting their identity." (Sng 78)

⁴⁴ Yellow is allegedly the skin tone of mulattos, or children of white fathers and black mothers, according to Christoph Meiners, the 18th century German historian and theorist of scientific racism (Zantop, "Changing Color" 198).

⁴⁵ "Nein! Sagte Toni, indem sie verwirrt vor sich niedersah." (170)

white after Gustav's second story, that of his former white bride, Mariane Congreve, "die treuste Seele unter der Sonne" (174). Mariane sacrifices her life for Gustav when the revolutionary mob presses her for the whereabouts of her fiancé; she saves him by denying his acquaintance, an act of faithfulness in the form of a fake betrayal. At this point of his narration Gustav walks toward the window and buries his face in a piece of cloth; "so übernahm sie, von manchen Seiten geweckt, ein menschliches Gefühl; sie folgte ihm mit einer plötzlichen Bewegung, fiel ihm um den Hals, und mischte ihre Tränen mit den seinigen." (175) This time her becoming-white accompanies an awakening to humanity. For the first time she emerges out of a dreamy and almost blank state of the mind, no longer looking down in front of her. And for the first time she expresses her interiority with the full force of tears, a sign of the "menschliche". She even accepts the cross that was previously given to Gustav from Mariane as a gift, a sign of the completion of her becoming, or an "overtly symbolic referent of Toni's transformation into the white woman" (Werlen 464). Toni appears to cross over a preexistent set of boundaries in an attempt to build a bridge between the rivaling sides. But that is only an appearance, and the attempt is doomed to fail.

Toni's transformation is, arguably, Gustav's enlightenment project of education, of bringing her out into the sun. For she can merely borrow the symbolic power of the sun in the beginning ("bei dem Licht der Sonne") but is then reincarnated into the most truthful soul under the sun, only to prepare for a further twist of plot and the final demise of both lovers. The problem with this "enlightenment" argument is that it presupposes the arc of narrative and the trajectory of her development as a one-way street, as an act of crossing with no return. Yet for Toni, there are never any clear boundaries to cross in the first place, just as her color is always on the move. The transformations of her gender as well as racial identities are equally problematic.

Before the engagement, she already is (or assumes or plays) that ideal image of womanhood, the embodiment of the “schöne Seele,” with her blushing face, graceful traits, downcast eyes, her bashfulness, silence and other “spezifische Ausdruckweise des ‘weiblichen Geschlechts’” (Weigel 212). And after the critical event of crossing, that is, the sexual consummation elided in the narration, she again assumes the role of the faithful and selfless woman. But she breaks the sexual taboo by the same token, a crime punishable by death according to the laws of Hoango the black patriarch. As Hans Jakob Werlen puts it, “as Gustav's bridal substitute, Toni has left her race and simultaneously the domain of its laws” (Werlen 464). In a way, she remains the exemplar of femininity both before and after the crossing, but she also preserves traits of treachery and resourcefulness of those of the sick black girl. She used to trick white men into their downfall before her betrothal, whereas later she directs her deceits and performance toward her black parents and kin. When she finds out that Congo Hoango has arrived at home earlier than expected and that there is not enough time for her to save her fiancé from the “ferocious negro,” she pretends to tie up Gustav and deliver him to Hoango, buying time for her to slip out of the house to inform Gustav’s family, who are still wandering in the wild. In short, her racial and sexual transformation is of an extremely ambivalent nature: she wears an indeterminate skin color throughout the story and becomes at once the idealized woman (Mariane) and the femme fatale (disloyalty to the black community), which identities she has always already assumed even before the night of the engagement (the docile and malleable girl and the treacherous seducer).

Similar to Penthesilea, the existence of Toni points toward an (almost) absolute other, unrecognizable and unassimilable by either of the opposing sides. But slightly different than the Amazon queen, the monstrous duality inherent in Toni is shared at least by her black parents. She is not alone in wearing an ambiguous color. She is, however, singular in her position as at

once a product of racial violence, a sexual object, and a colonial subject who tries to cross the racial boundaries to embrace a new-found whiteness. In this way she is much more versatile than both Babekan and Hoango. Her skin tone is, moreover, the most illegible, which rings at once familiar and exotic to the white gaze of Gustav von der Ried. Her facial expressions are similarly indecipherable. During the foot-washing scene where she is left alone with Gustav, for instance, she is persistently “gedankenvoll und träumerisch” (173). For Gustav as well as for the readers of the novella, this expression might mean that she is submissive or hypnotized by Gustav’s eloquence, or she could equally be calculating, pretending the submissive role that has helped her capture other white refugees already. In the end, as Weigel rightly pointed out, “Das Gelb von Tonis Haut verbindet sich dabei einerseits mit der ‘Sonne Europas’ und andererseits mit dem Gelbfieber der kranken Schwarzen” (“The goldness of Toni’s face is therefore associated on the one hand with the ‘sun of Europe’ and on the other hand with the yellow fever of the sick black woman.” Weigel 216).

With this built-in duality in the major characters of the novella, recognition becomes no different than misrecognition. Critic Hans-Jürgen Schings identifies three critical scenes of recognition in the novella, each time with Gustav stepping toward the window.⁴⁶ First, in the presence of both Babekan and Toni, Gustav narrates the story of the black femme fatale and expresses his indignation over the injustice (according to himself) of the whole occurrence. He then invokes the vengeance of heaven, and “trat bei diesen Worten auf einen Augenblick an das Fenster, und sah in die Nacht hinaus” (171). The window, ironically, does not provide any light of knowledge, but only darkness and obscurity. The second instance happens after the story of

⁴⁶ These scenes of recognition also point to the “mimetic desires” of Gustav and Toni, that they both imitate the sexual and racial stereotypes of desire commonly seen in colonial romance of the era (Martin 59). See Martin and Zantop’s *Colonial Fantasies*.

Mariane Congreve, after sensing an “entfernte Ähnlichkeit” between the two women. This recognition dispels Gustav’s previous belief of Toni as a “cold and hideous treachery” (eine kalte und gräßliche Verräterei 173) and effectively results in the exchange and mixture of tears of the two lovers by the window. Finally, after realizing that he has wronged and murdered Toni, Gustav approaches the window for the last time and kills himself with a pistol. The final tragic recognition is what Schings calls the “Höllenaugenblick” of the story: when Gustav realizes that the whore and traitor he takes Toni to be is in reality self-identical with his faithful bride, the new Mariane Congreve (Schings 48). Toni’s duality makes her an elusive signifier, laying the foundation for these pivotal scenes of (mis)recognition that lead to both her murder and Gustav’s suicide. The tragic anagnorisis of the tale is that all of Gustav’s recognitions are misreadings, but they are all correct to some extent. In other words, the ladder of recognition does not lead to an all-encompassing and all-subsuming truth that resolves the chasm between enlightenment’s different iterations along the way. The identity of Toni—the colonial and sexual other—is itself fractured and fluid: she relates to herself negatively through these fissures, and so her absorption into whiteness, the norm of unproblematic self-identity, an image of full radiance under the sun, is doomed from the start.

Gustav’s pursuit is of certain knowledge, of a light so bright and a whiteness so white no shadow can be cast over it. In short, it is his Enlightenment project. The element of light in the novella has an inherently European quality to it. As Babekan says (as a means to persuade Gustav of her “white” allegiance), “was kann meine Tochter, die in Europa empfangen und geboren ist, dafür, daß der volle Tag jenes Weltteils von dem ihrigen widerscheint?” (How can my daughter, conceived and born in Europe, help it that the full daylight of Europe is reflected in her face? 165) What Gustav (thinks he) desires, therefore, is the purest possible white to the

point of transparency, so that there should be no looming shade or secrecy underneath the radiance of complete and unproblematic knowing. Despite the “obnoxious” and uncertain color of Toni’s face, however, he is helplessly drawn to the girl from their first encounter. And the last time he walks up to the window (ans Fenster treten), he is met with the bankruptcy of his venture, which nevertheless coincides with the unconscious desires deep in his heart. For the impossibility of Toni’s identity exposes the fraught foundation upon which his epistemological as well as racial ideologies are erected, yet it is through this recognition and the ensuing death that their betrothal is fully consummated. As Volker Kaiser points out, Gustav is, “in Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s terms, nothing but an allegory and victim of the dialectics of enlightenment” (356). To this one may add that he is also a figure of enlightenment’s death wish.

Gustav betrays his humanist epistemological principle through the course of the story, and the narrator shares a similar narratological principle of whiteness. “Nun weiß jedermann,” so the second paragraph begins, “daß im Jahr 1803, als der General Dessalines mit 30000 Negern gegen Port au Prince vorrückte, alles, was die weiße Farbe trug, sich in diesen Platz warf, um ihn zu verteidigen.” (“Now it is generally known that in 1803 when General Dessalines advanced with his thirty thousand blacks against Port au Prince, all who bore the color white hastened thither to defend the place.” 161 emphasis mine) The narrator appeals to a principle of universality and neutrality in this opening sentence, for “everyone knows” the events referred to here. It is the same kind of unproblematic knowledge aspired after by the like of Gustav. Zachary Sng, in his work on radical neutrality, points out the doubling of the verb *weiß* (to know) and the color *weiß* (white) in this sentence. The color moreover is something to be worn by people like a piece of clothing. He thus argues that this line “invites us to imagine white (*weiß*) as one side in this conflict, but also as the color of unmarked, unvoiced, and neutral universality represented in

what everyone knows (*weiß*)” (Sng 85). This narrative principle of whiteness is at the same time a principle of erasure, for “it strategically precludes any questions one might ask about the voice that speaks for this universality” (85). The narrative thus reveals its own inner contradiction in the form of a paradox: whiteness erases its own existence but positions itself as an exteriorized object to be worn. As a reading and narrative principle, it conceals its own conditions of being and pretends rather to be a gaze from nowhere. The same paradox exists with the appeal to light as a source and condition of certain knowledge. For light enables seeing and, by extension, knowing, but it is also closely associated with false knowledge and appearance (*der Schein*). The *Fremde* (Gustav) first emerges out of the night’s darkness, “beim Schein des Mondes” (162), to appear in front of Hoango’s bastard boy Nanky; and similarly, “bei dem Schein des Lichts” (163), Babekan is able to recognize the stranger as an officer. Light can be manipulated to affect perception, just as Toni wields its power to appear white and hence trustworthy. Both light and whiteness have two faces, and to use such double-edged sword as a means of self-erasure and a guarantor of unequivocal knowledge and domination is destined to become a self-defeating enterprise.

The person closest to being colorless in *Die Verlobung*, an ideal pursued so relentlessly by Gustav and the narrator, is Toni: she can be whatever color people choose to see. She is not transgressive, but protean. For she never truly violates her own principle of being: an amalgamation of treachery and loyalty, dark- and light-skinned, master and slave, faithful bride and femme fatale, etc., in which all these components and the insurmountable gaps among them are preserved in full. The result is a monstrous signifier. In a way, both Toni and Penthesilea inhabit a world of immanence, where conflicts and differences, both physical and linguistic, clash but no path is offered out of it. If Penthesilea can be read as tearing open and disappearing

into a revolutionary third realm, where she succumbs to the fluidity of dust and emotions—her plane of immanence—then Toni's ending is its grim counterpart. *Die Verlobung* tells us what it feels like to try to make sense of such a being (as Toni and Penthesilea): an impenetrable thing that conceals and reveals at the same time, a free-floating sign, a demonic face, an inherently agonistic creature, and a born aporia... It shows the depth into which the violence has gone: violence of reading, violence of the enlightenment project, and violence of sexual and racial conquering.

Conclusion

Goethe wrote in an advertisement piece for his novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* about his choice of the work's title:

Es scheint, daß den Verfasser seine fortgesetzten physikalischen Arbeiten zu diesem seltsamen Titel veranlaßten. Er mochte bemerkt haben, daß man in der Naturlehre sich sehr oft ethischer Gleichnisse bedient, um etwas von dem Kreise menschlichen Wissens weit Entferntes näher heranzubringen; und so hat er auch wohl in einem sittlichen Falle, eine chemische Gleichnisrede zu ihrem geistigen Ursprunge zurückführen mögen, um so mehr, als doch überall nur eine Natur ist und auch durch das Reich der heitern Vernunft-Freiheit die Spuren trüber, leidenschaftlicher Notwendigkeit sich unaufhaltsam hindurchziehen, die nur durch eine höhere Hand, und vielleicht auch nicht in diesem Leben, völlig auszulöschen sind. ("Notiz" in *Morgenblatt für gebildete Stände*)

Despite its playful and somewhat satirical tone, the passage expresses a valid premise for most, if not all of Goethe's scientific as well as literary endeavors: the realms of the spiritual and physical are intertwined, and there is in the entire world "just one nature" that impacts things and humans alike through an "opaque and passionate necessity." I have tried to follow the logic of this "one nature" principle through to its end and see what different paths these three authors have offered. I have subsumed their writings under a Spinozistic plane of immanence where things and bodies emerge as various modifications of the same underlying field. And the "passionate necessity" I have taken to be the mechanism of affects which allows all things to encounter, act and be acted upon.

The benefit of starting with a Spinozistic model is twofold. From the perspective of cultural history, Spinoza has exerted a huge influence on the German Romantics and through

them on the British. Certainly not all of the Romantics were self-acclaimed monists, but they more or less advocated for the significance of nature and a deep connection between humans, the divine and the natural world. The second part of the “use” of Spinoza has more to do with contemporary concerns and with his influence on critical theory in the last several decades, including (eco)feminism, affect studies, posthumanism, etc. His theory is based on the notion of *conatus* as self-perseverance and the capacity for affect as defining features (or essences) of individuals, which allows for a distributed system of affect and agency across the board for all beings, organic or nonliving. According to this view, the nature of a body resides in its ability to affect and be affected by other bodies, and this ability comes in degrees rather than as a whole package (Spinoza talks of degrees of power, perfection, and freedom, which are all correlated). He characterizes affect in fundamentally relational terms, and each encounter results in an increase or decrease in the body’s *conatus*, or its ability to persevere. It is easy to infer that, therefore, all things living or not possess an inherent *conatus* and a capacity for affects. In other words, this system, despite its simplicity, allows for a reconsideration and reassessment of human agency and its status in the universe, which is a necessity if we are to turn away from anthropocentrism and all of its exclusionary connotations. A distributed system of agency and affect further enables us to consider new forms of causality where cause and effect cannot be easily distinguished because they are too entangled and too far apart at the same time, or because they operate on drastically different scales. For me, Spinozism also allows us to imagine a literal interconnection of all things that can be understood and communicated on rationalistic and materialistic foundations.

Catastrophe within this Spinozistic context is therefore a kind of affective encounter between individuals and an overwhelming yet indifferent natural force, an affect that feels like it

is epoch-making. I have started with Shelley's extinction event, an airy plague that wipes out the human species; the encounter between our narrator and this massive and traumatizing force produces a new time: a coincidence of past, present, and future and a self-repeating end. An apocalyptic time in short. Despite her imagination of the closeness and interconnectedness between human woes and ecological disasters, Shelley's writing still endorses some sort of thin division between humans and nature, and her writing presents the most conspicuous effort to relate the object one tries to grasp and the forms in which one writes. In Goethe, however, we no longer see human subjects who try to resist or control their relation to an all-powerful and all-encompassing nature. Instead, they almost readily participate in exchanges of energy and power with atmospheric and aquatic elements. In a sense and to different degrees, these human characters see themselves as "fellow modes" with the elements surrounding them since they shape and are shaped by the same underlying natural fields and forces. Even with Goethe's optimism, these encounters sometimes have a demonic face such as the natural-social experiments we witness in *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*. The new temporality marked by these Goethean encounters is not traumatically arresting like in Shelley, it seems rather like a forever-land with no beginning or end; sometimes it is called mythic. Kleist, on the other hand, remains the most radical of all three. He writes of the aftermaths of these human-nature encounters where the two realms have mutually perverted each other and so there remain no natural elements or things untouched with human imprints, and no humans that do not bear traits of objects. He depicts fateful clashes between different individuals or groups of people, and one side of these encounters always bears an uncanny face (such as Penthesilea and Toni). It is as if these in-human characters have already harnessed the shapeshifting power of the environing world and function as eternal shocks. In a way, Kleist's narratives read most like extinction stories (or

stories of radical and absolute ends)⁴⁷; his deaths seem more like demises of entire species rather than individuals. His protagonists are eccentric, unrecognized and unintelligible, excluded by all, and the world goes on as if unaffected after their deaths.

A demonic quality infuses all of the catastrophic encounters discussed in this study. Shelley's plague arises from nowhere, carries death around the world, and ends for no obvious reasons; it functions as a void at the center of the narrative that devours peoples and times; it is massive and extremely personal, naturalistic yet all too human. In a way, it is similar to Frankenstein's monster which is ostensibly a "daemon," a personal spirit and an undifferentiating and destructive force, a human and a god, a creature and a machine, an animal and a divinity, etc. The key difference, however, is that the plague is shaped but not invented by humans, which perhaps signals a deeper commitment to nature-human entanglements in a later stage of Shelley's career. Goethe's demon, on the other hand, is watery. It nurtures and drowns, seduces and repels, reflects and conceals. It is the opaque and transparent force of the mythic that Benjamin sees in the immanent world of *Elective Affinities*. In Kleist, moreover, the demonic is the monstrous figure of Penthesilea and the illegible and color-changing face of Toni, but it also encompasses the tyrannical force of things which weave a spider's web around Kleistian subjects. From a structuralist point of view, these demonic faces are signs without substances and cut off from meanings. But more importantly, it is an ambiguity shaped by the vastness and intricacies of the world of nature and things together with its inseparable connections to the worlds within.

⁴⁷ Kleistian extinction, however, differs from extinction temporalities emerge from recent scholarship in this interdisciplinary field which attends to particular species and the stories we tell of their extinctions. According to the editors of *Extinction Studies*, for instance, it differs from the death of singular organism in that extinction is "the ending of an ongoing lineage cultivated over hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions, of years of evolutionary time; the abrupt termination of a whole way of life, a mode of being that will never again be born or hatched into our world" (Rose et al. 9).

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