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ROMANTICISM AFTER NATURE: MATTER, MIND, AND SPECULATION

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Romanticism After Nature: Matter, Mind, and Speculation”

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For scholars of romanticism, “nature” has taken many forms: a site of imaginative renewal, a tool of conservative ideology, a distraction from historical trauma. Yet these apparently disparate accounts all focus more on the perceiving mind than on the natural world that it perceives or misperceives. It turns out to be hard to think about nature in itself.

“Romanticism After Nature” expands our sense of this key romantic concept by recovering a history of speculation about nature apart from human consciousness. In identifying a romantic-era concern with the world that exists independently of the individual mind, this dissertation finds varied, and sometimes conflicting, paradigms for thinking past the dialectics of mind and nature long held to define romanticism. This is also a story about the romantic survival of an early enlightenment view of the natural world, most memorably articulated by Baruch Spinoza’s “ethics” of substance. Beginning with the destruction of traditional ordering schemas like the Great Chain of Being, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the end of nature in its pre-modern sense and the discovery of an infinite material universe. This radical material vision, at odds with all triumphal narratives of human progress, returns in romantic literature and philosophy, refracted through a range of competing idealist commitments. Though it eventually gives way to an instrumentalism about

nature still in force today, romanticism itself comprises a moment of rare engagement with a world that is not inherently for us.

The dissertation draws on a variety of discourses, from the history of science and philosophy to contemporary ecological criticism and continental thought. Nonetheless, it pivots on the literary as a speculative enterprise that enables us to contend with the threats of catastrophe and extinction.

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Portions of Chapter 3 and a version of Chapter 4 are forthcoming in *Studies in Romanticism and SubStance*.

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Introduction

Romanticism and nature: what could be more familiar? At least since the 1950s, though, this familiarity has manifested itself as a resistance to the “‘large and lazy assumption’” that “the Romantics are fundamentally nature poets.”¹ For scholars of romanticism, “nature” usually means something else: a promise of imaginative renewal, a distraction from historical trauma, a tool of aesthetic ideology. “Nature” signifies so much, the story goes, because it is nothing without us; we must be reminded, again and again, “there is no nature.” From humanism to new historicism to ecocriticism, these disparate accounts join in focusing more on the perceiving mind than on anything it perceives or misperceives.² It turns out to be hard, perhaps even undesirable, to think about nature in itself.

“Romanticism After Nature” returns to this key romantic concept, by recovering a history of speculation about nature *apart from human consciousness*. For the romantics, if not always for their readers, nature is more than its relationship to a perceiving, poetic mind. In what follows, I identify varied, and sometimes conflicting, paradigms for thinking past the dialectics of mind and nature long held to define romanticism.³ This argument will lead me from the nature philosophy of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schelling, to the visionary epics and lyric poetry of Percy Shelley, to the apocalyptic fiction of Mary Shelley, to the fragments and notebooks of Samuel

¹ Cf. Hartman 1964: 350-1.

² Recent “end of nature” arguments in ecocriticism are no less focused on misperception than are new historicist or deconstructive critiques of ideology. Thus, Morton 2007 performs “a critique of the workings of ‘Nature’...by operating principally upon a single pressure point: the idea of ‘nature writing’ or...ecomimesis” (8). By interrogating a set of representational strategies, Morton suggests, “nature” will disappear before our very eyes, to be replaced by a level plane of objects. Related arguments about nature’s nonexistence in an era of anthropogenic climate change threaten to privilege human actors above all else. For a critical overview of these claims, see Ronda 2013.

³ According, that is, to the still canonical accounts in Abrams 1971b and Bloom 1971.

Taylor Coleridge. In each of these places, the romantic fascination with mind-independent reality manifests itself in different ways: as an atmosphere of imminent geological upheaval; as a poetics of ether, involving consciousness in crude matter; and as a narrative of extinction, where the human species' inexorable end reveals the contingency of nature as a whole.

In each case we see the romantics appropriating, contesting, or otherwise engaging radical enlightenment ideas about matter, cause, and substance. This is therefore a story about the romantic survival of an early enlightenment view of the natural world, most memorably articulated by Baruch Spinoza's "ethics" of substance.⁴ Beginning with the destruction of traditional ordering schemas like the Great Chain of Being, the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries saw the end of nature in its pre-modern sense and the discovery of an infinite material universe.⁵ This radical material vision, at odds with all triumphal narratives of human progress, returns in romantic literature and philosophy, refracted through a range of competing idealist commitments. Though it eventually gives way to an instrumentalism about nature still in force today, romanticism itself comprises a moment of rare engagement with a world that is not inherently for us.⁶

It should be clear that my argument is not just historical. I also want to make a point about romantic criticism and its habit of replacing "nature" with "nature's relation to the mind." To this end, I show that the tools used by romantic critics to

⁴ For the Spinozist "radical enlightenment," its doctrine of a single mental and physical substance, and the political implications of this substance theory, see Israel 2001.

⁵ On the transition from a pre-modern "closed world" to the "infinite universe" of Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, see Koyré 1957. The best account of the Great Chain of Being and its dissolution in modernity remains Lovejoy 1936.

⁶ Though my approach differs in substantial ways from theirs, Horkheimer and Adorno's remarks on "mental representation," instrumental reason, and the exploitation of nature remain deeply important for the argument to follow. Cf. Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 31-2.

think about nature, especially aesthetic categories like the sublime, make it hard to imagine a world without a human consciousness at its center. (This is true of both the most sympathetic and the most skeptical of critics.) Of course, this tendency doesn't come out of nowhere. Its origins are William Wordsworth's lines, so often made to serve as a definition of the romantic ideology: "How exquisitely the individual Mind / ...to the external World / Is fitted: – and how exquisitely, too – / ... / The external World is fitted to the Mind" (*CPW* 1936: 63-8).⁷

Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux has recently diagnosed all post-Kantian thought with subscribing to such a position. He calls it "correlationism," or the claim that "we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (2008: 5). Meillassoux argues that this makes it impossible to conceive of a nonhuman nature. But we needn't rely on contemporary philosophy for such a critique; William Blake puts it well in his notes on *The Excursion*, asserting, "You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted I know better & please your Lordship" (1969: 784). I am interested, therefore, in current philosophical and critical conversations, but especially as they are conditioned by the romantic problems I lay out here.

Finally, my dissertation is concerned with the utility of nature – with the extent to which nature can ever be seen as "given" or "for us." The modes of speculation I am interested in oppose this instrumental view, which underlies everything from the aesthetics of the sublime to the emerging discourse of political economy.⁸ In its resistance to utility and instrumentality, my project is ecocritical in

⁷ Of course, this is not the extent of Wordsworth's thought on the matter. For a Spinozist reassessment of Wordsworth on mind and nature, see Levinson 2007.

⁸ Modern political economy and aesthetics emerge at the turn of the eighteenth century, in the Scottish enlightenment. Common to both disciplines is the figure of "the gifts of nature": the pure given, prior to any exchange but thereby the basis of

intent. It concludes that, in the face of our own environmental crisis, romanticism continues to speak in meaningful ways about a world that never belonged to us.

Epistemologies of the Sublime

Before more fully setting out the terms of my project, I turn to some key moments in romantic criticism. My aim is to show how the theory of the sublime, an integral part of romantic studies, invariably shifts our focus away from the natural world that it purports to explain. Along the way, I give an overview of important scholarly claims about romantic nature, its relationship to the mind, and the category of materiality. I linger on the latter, because it has often been proposed as an alternative to the dialectics of mind and nature that I am also concerned to look past.

The sublime has long given critics a vocabulary for discussing romantic nature. Inauspicious, perhaps, considering its greatest exponent, Immanuel Kant, never thought that things in nature could be sublime. In the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant explicitly denies the possibility of a sublime nature. Instead, he describes a complex movement of the faculties of imagination and reason, first prompted by but then quickly leaving the world behind. No longer associated with the absence of form or limits in nature itself, the sublime identifies a particular cognitive exchange. As Frances Ferguson explains, Kant's sublime "does not do away with the empirical infinite," but subsumes it in "artificial systems of representing infinity that have no empirical correlates" (1992: 22). The sublime finds meaning or value only in the transcendence of the empirical.

value. For the economists and the aesthetic philosophers (particularly in their theories of the sublime), nature attains value only insofar as it is manipulated by labor, technology, or thought. Economics, industry, and aesthetics all share a logic of the "for us," according to which nature is justified only by its negation – or, in Herbert Marcuse's words, as "an instrument of destructive productivity" (1966: 240).

This may be a way of articulating the mind with the world. Yet it so strongly privileges the former that the latter retains no intrinsic interest. For Kant and for his inheritors in philosophy and criticism, “[t]he sublime...is not important because it represents formlessness but instead because it provides an occasion for seeing aesthetics as grounding epistemological inquiry” (Ferguson 1992: ix). It transforms the problem of nature into a problem of human knowledge. “What *is* nature?” becomes “How do I *know* about nature – or anything else?”

Accordingly, such epistemological questions have guided romantic studies for the last sixty years. In 1953, M.H. Abrams influentially defined romanticism as the literary correlative to Kant’s “Copernican revolution in epistemology”: “the general concept,” he explains, “that the perceiving mind discovers what it has itself partly made” (1971a: 58). In an equally important gesture, Abrams identified Book VI of Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, the journey across the Alps, as the preeminent poetic treatment of this theory of mind. He remarks on the Simplon Pass episode that Wordsworth’s “flash of vision,” following his belated realization that he has already crossed, shows how the human mind transforms its surroundings. Wordsworth’s “infinite longings” – his powers of imagination – may be disappointed by the actually existing world, but they also look forward to “a marriage between subject and object, mind and nature, which creates a new world out of the old world of sense” (1984: 65-6). The poet’s “obscure sense of possible sublimity” speaks to a desire to imaginatively overcome, and thus to renew, the natural world. For Abrams and his contemporaries, this “dialectic of nature and imagination” was the engine of romantic poetry, at its most pronounced in the experience of the sublime.⁹

⁹ For this phrase, see Bloom 1971: vii.

Through the 1960s and beyond, this was basically a given. Despite a different intellectual orientation, then, the phenomenological work of Paul de Man and Geoffrey Hartman also framed the mind-world relation in terms of the sublime. But from this perspective, Wordsworth's sublime vision in the Alps reveals the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of "marrying" mind to nature. De Man's early writing emphasizes the "intentional structure" of poetic language – its origins in an intentionality, or directedness, of mind that ultimately isolates consciousness from the world about which it speaks or thinks. A 1955 article on Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Hölderlin explores the linguistic mediation of nature, or "Being": "as soon as the word is uttered, it destroys the immediate and discovers that instead of stating Being, it can only state mediation" (1983: 259). Essays like 1960's "Intentional Structure of the Romantic Image" take this further, claiming that the romantics' goal of uniting mind and nature is undermined by their use of poetic language. Only after crossing the Simplon Pass, de Man says, does Wordsworth finally abandon his futile striving after the world. Hartman concurs, noting in the course of a similar reading of *The Prelude* that Wordsworth's imagination "obscures rather than reveals nature" (1964: 17). Abrams would never emphasize privation as strongly as de Man and Hartman. Yet from humanist and phenomenological standpoints alike, reading for the sublime ensured that nature had no existence apart from its relation to the mind.

By the later 1970s and 80s, these dialectics of nature and imagination became the explicit target of historical and linguistic critique. New historicism and deconstruction both articulated a skeptical challenge to the humanists' aesthetic, and insisted that Wordsworth's sense of the sublime should not be accepted uncritically. Thus Marjorie Levinson's claim, pursued in 1986's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems*, that while "we subscribe to the belief that 'a Wordsworthian landscape is

inseparable from the history of the poet's mind,' we will never really see Wordsworth's mind or his landscapes" (17). The so-called marriage of mind and world gives us no distance from either term and it renders both illegible. But not only this – according to Levinson, it also covers over “the process and relations that in part create the creator [or perceiver], his perceptual objects, and his range of responses to those objects.” The interplay between mind and landscape works to suppress its own condition of possibility: what is identified by new historicism as “the social” or “the historical,” the quasi-transcendental yet material substrate from which the perceiver, the perceived, and the protocols of perception that structure their encounter all emerge (39).

The apparent separation of mind and nature is only the first stage of the new historicist argument. In fact, as idealized projections of a repressed history, mind and nature are two sides of the same ideological coin. From a critical, historicist perspective, Levinson contends, “Imagination and Nature are not only not distinct (and therefore not liable to prolific marriages) but are, equally, indifferent avatars of historical consciousness and its severe conditions” (10-11). The romantic lyric's ground is the social and historical reality it obscures when it talks about imagination or nature. In other words, nature is merely a part of the aesthetic evasion of trauma or loss. For the new historicism, history is what hurts and nature is what stops us from registering the wound.

Linguistic critiques of the mind-nature dialectic also sought to recover its material conditions. Unlike the new historicism, however, deconstruction pointed to certain “text-events” as disrupting the humanist aesthetic (Warminski 1996: 7). In de Man's later writings, for instance, terms like “positing” and “inscription” identify the linguistic conditions for the union of mind and nature. This latter depends on a

process de Man calls “phenomenalization”: the alignment of a sign with “the phenomenality, as knowledge (meaning) or sensory experience, of the signified toward which it is directed” (1996: 111). In this way, the aesthetic relation between mind and nature, sign and signified, claims for itself the status of a natural phenomenon. Aesthetics denies the heterogeneity of language and being, and their relationship’s necessarily rhetorical status.¹⁰ But the union of language and being cannot ever fully overcome the conditions of its occurrence. The traces of inscription resurface as lapses of coherence in poetic or philosophical works. While attesting to a certain materiality, such traces remain unusable by knowledge or aesthetic experience.¹¹

Deconstruction refused, that is, to inflect materiality with the promise of restoration. In this, it further differentiated itself from the new historicist project. Neither the mark of a denied history nor a transcendental principle, for deconstruction, materiality is only its destabilizing impact. Thus, Cynthia Chase explains, the “disfiguring” power of materiality cannot be abstracted from its singular occurrence:

It must be encountered instead by way of readings that attend to the vicissitudes of particular tropes...for the stripping away of figurality is in no sense an emergence or restoration of *literal* language. It is, rather, a

¹⁰ As Andrzej Warminski helpfully explains it, rhetoric is what “makes the ‘marriage’ of mind and world, language and being, possible, because such a meeting of mind and world is possible *only* thanks to a phenomenализing (and hence aesthetico-ideologizing) trope” (1996: 12).

¹¹ As in his early work, the later de Man continues to equate “nature” with “being.” Such a Heideggerian move is complemented by the alignment, if not quite the equation, of mind with language’s cognitive aspects. Language’s “positional power,” on the other hand, names a materiality in excess of intention or cognition. This materiality disarticulates the cognitive function of language on which humanism depends. In this sense, for the later de Man, language is radically *inhuman*, while it also remains foreign to the order of nature or being. See the comments on Heidegger in de Man 1996: 129-62.

disruption of the logic of figure or form – not only a departure from representation, but the decomposition of the figures forming the text. (1986: 6)

Deconstructive materiality is no entity or substratum, but a disruption immanent to figuration. The event of this “materiality without matter” is both the minimal condition of cognitive language and aesthetic experience, and the guarantor of their decomposition.¹² Chase shows why this decomposing force cannot be allegorized into a repressed real; such an allegorical reading would only neutralize the disturbance, by recuperating it for an economy of signification. New historicism and deconstruction’s shared skepticism about the aesthetic therefore gave way to a divergence on the question of materiality.¹³

This refusal of recuperation was deconstruction’s great innovation and something of a liability. In the sublime dialectics of mind and nature, deconstruction saw a materiality that could not be turned to human purposes. At the same time, this materiality was nothing more (or less) than the instant in which the sublime misfired, when the inscription of the mind-world dialectic arrested its synthetic movement. In pursuing such a rigorously minimal linguistic materialism, deconstruction concluded there was nothing to say about the ontology of materiality which would not have been a return to dogmatic metaphysics. William Galperin captures the problem well: “To deconstruction...the mastery of the familiar in romanticism” – the aesthetic appropriation of nature by consciousness – “is contested less by a material world that

¹² The phrase is Derrida’s. On materiality, in its negative, deconstructive sense, as analogous to “*différance* or heterogeneity,” see Rajan and Plotnitsky 2004: 1-14, but especially 2-3.

¹³ The dialectic of aesthetic negation and materialist recuperation that structured new historicist criticism offers the clearest indication of its distance from deconstruction and its continued proximity to humanism. In a retrospective on the new historicism, Alan Liu identifies in its dialectical method a concept of the sublime. New historicism, Liu argues, constitutes the “sublime effort to imagine the perdurance of loss” (1996: 561). Its critique of the humanist sublime demystified on the level of theme, while it raised the sublime to the level of method.

has been repressed than by an imagined world, whose materialization in language resists the very structures and hierarchies that mandate the removal of the familiar to a metaphysical or celestial plane” (1993: 4). In other words, materiality tells us very little about the material world occluded by the epistemology of the sublime.

All the same, my project will no doubt appear more closely aligned with deconstruction – with its approach to reading and its claims about materiality – than with other critical schools. There are several reasons for this. First of all, in its resistance to recuperative exchange, to the conversion of materiality into an object with use value, deconstruction subverted the logic of the “for us” in ways I find compelling. It premised an anti-instrumentalism that I see as allied with ecocritical thinking. Even more surprising, deconstruction’s take on the traditional metaphysical problems (time, contingency, necessity, and so on) has often proved near to the romantic ideas about nature I adduce throughout. The romantics, however, were insistent that their thinking and writing about nature uncovered genuine ontological truths. In this, romanticism is still more radical than its critics.

After Nature

Why did the romantics write about nature? Didn’t they know better? By the turn of the eighteenth century, “nature” was a contaminated category. Erasmus Darwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, among other late enlightenment thinkers, insisted on nature’s responsiveness to human activity, its capacity to be permanently altered by technology. Others, like the Baron d’Holbach, argued away the distinction between society and nature entirely; on this point, Holbach’s 1770 *System* is as radical as any present-day “ecology without nature.” In several senses, then, romanticism takes place *after nature*. Not only are the traditional explanatory models – the Great

Chain of Being, the Book of Nature – increasingly unavailable,¹⁴ but nature itself threatens to become unrecognizable. As in our own day, the danger is not just conceptual. When Wordsworth writes, in 1802, of a London morning marked by “smokeless air” (CPW 1936: 8), he also conjures the choking pollution that is ever more ordinary. By 1844, in the sonnet on the Kendal and Windermere railroad, Wordsworth is even clearer that he does not naively invoke the “beautiful romance / Of nature” (11-12). Rather, by writing about nature at all, he is engaged in an act of resistance: against the “rash assault” (2) and “blight” (5) of encroaching industry.

For romanticism, nature has an inherent polemical force. This is equally so in Wordsworth’s poems against the railroad and the obscurest works of systematic *Naturphilosophie*. To assert that nature, in and for itself, *exists* is to disentangle it from its appearance to human consciousness; this in turn makes it possible to conceive of nature independent of any use value it might have. At the same time, this is not to see the natural world as “something ‘over there’ that maintains a mysterious allure” (Morton 2007: 19). The romantics I discuss are joined by their realism about nature, in the philosophical sense of maintaining its existence apart from human perception or practice.¹⁵ But this romantic realism can also be extended to mind, in ways that dismantle easy oppositions. Arguments for the emergence of consciousness,

¹⁴ Or at least they are faced with new and competing explanatory frameworks. Cf. Jager 2007 on secularization as “differentiation” (28).

On the Book of Nature: Halimi 2008 argues that, during the enlightenment, the metaphor of the book comes to reflect a new sense of “the impossibility of possessing a definitive understanding of either nature or the totality of human knowledge” (32). Mimicking nature in its extensity, the encyclopedia is offered up as compensation for a natural world that is no longer legible. Figuratively anyway, the book is supposed to stand in for nature. This inverts the metaphor traced by Curtius 1973: 319-26. Curtius shows how, from the Middle Ages on, nature itself was figured as a book; like Halimi, he finds in modernity a loss of the epistemological self-evidence suggested by this metaphor. As modern science renders the Book of Nature increasingly illegible, actual books, like the encyclopedia, combat this confusion by striving to encompass all of nature.

¹⁵ Cf. Braver 2007 and, below, Chapters 3 and 4 in particular.

like those in Schelling, suggest that nature produces mind. Nature is not simply “over there,” because it is in us and we are in it. Yet, as it precedes human consciousness, nature’s existence is never contingent on us. The mind’s reality is affirmed, while nature retains its independence.

So the romantics’ realism about nature has philosophical and eco-political aims, and these are intimately linked. By arguing for nature’s existence apart from the human mind, the romantics resist an instrumental view of the world implied by certain epistemological arguments. Claiming on the level of knowledge that the world only exists “for us” is not too far from asserting our right to manipulate and exploit it at will.¹⁶ Yet there is a tension in this romantic argument, attendant on its moving between metaphysical and political registers. If nature in itself exists, how can it also be threatened by human activity? Why should our actions or inactions have any lasting significance for the world without us? Such questions suggest that realism has its limits, especially as a politics.

Finally, then, a few words on terminology. My dissertation is largely taken up with the different forms of “nature” in romantic writing. But before I turn to individual chapters, I want to consider it in a broad sense.¹⁷ This will allow me to introduce the idea of speculation. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/7), Kant gives

¹⁶ See G.W.F. Hegel’s account, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), of consciousness prior to its recognition of the object’s independent existence: “Certain of the nothingness of this other, it [consciousness] explicitly affirms that this nothingness is *for it* the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a *true* certainty” (1977b: 109). Remarking on this passage, Jean Hyppolite explains that a desire to literally incorporate the other is the purest expression of such a condition. The conscious being, unconcerned with the object’s difference from itself, “experiences the character of ‘being other’ only as a moment within an encounter that is virtually resolved in satisfaction. The living creature appropriates the object and assimilates it with his own substance so that it becomes flesh and blood. In this way he affirms the identity in-itself of the object and himself” (1969: 3).

¹⁷ I draw here, and throughout, on several intellectual histories: Collingwood 1960, Willey 1961, Grant 2006, and Halimi 2008.

a useful definition of nature, from which romanticism in general departs. “We have two terms,” he explains, “**world** and **nature**, which sometimes blend” (A418/B446). By world, Kant says, we mean a quantitative whole, inclusive of all possible appearances. World is the word for totality. Nature, on the other hand, brings causality into the picture: “this same world is called nature insofar as we consider it as a dynamical whole.” To consider it dynamically, we need two more concepts, contingency and necessity, that explain the different kinds of causation in nature. In romanticism (and in the dissertation chapters to follow), these ideas recur frequently. But for now, the most important point is that nature puts the world in motion, by capturing “the unity in the *existence* of appearances” (A419/B447).

The distinction Kant articulates is an old one. Translated into a transcendental framework, world and nature are what Baruch Spinoza called, in his *Ethics* (1677), “*Natura naturata*” and “*Natura naturans*” (1992: 51-2). For Kant and his contemporaries, the twofold notion of nature they found in Spinoza meant that it could be seen, simultaneously, as an aggregate of objects and a field of interacting forces. This view exerted a powerful hold on Spinozists such as J.G. Herder; against the mechanical materialism of the early century, it suggested to them that genesis, production, even revolution constituted nature’s essence over time.¹⁸ The late-eighteenth-century rediscovery of “*Natura naturans*” meant rethinking nature’s history, and the place in it of human life and mind. Kant’s cautious claim, that a dynamic nature is only an idea for organizing appearances, would not hold – in part because, for romantics like Schelling, this implied that the same underlying forces must be at work in the mind and in nonhuman nature.

¹⁸ Cf. Herder 1940. For a good account of the late-century transition to a natural history grounded “in time, in units of becoming or development, rather than in bodies,” see Grant 2006: 119 ff.

In a way, the writers I discuss do confirm our intuition that romanticism is concerned with the mind's relationship to nature. Yet there is another important distinction to make. In his 1801 essay on *The Difference Between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, Hegel separates "reflective" from "speculative" thinking. According to Hegel, reflective thought always begins from the standpoint of consciousness; it has a "lifeless" image of the world, determined by the mind's a priori categories.¹⁹ The reflective mind looks out at nature and sees itself, as if in a mirror. Speculation, on the other hand, attends to the immanent logic of reality. It does not deny the fact of consciousness, but treats it as a natural product. Speculative thought intuits "an activity of both intelligence and nature, of consciousness and the unconscious together" (1977a: 110). In other words, it accounts for its own *genesis*, and in terms of the activity or forces also present in nature. It is in this sense that my dissertation identifies a "speculative romanticism," opposed to the reflective logic of the sublime. Romantic speculation will take many forms here – intellectual intuition, ethereal poetics, and atmospheric thinking among them – but each contests the deadening correlation of mind and world with a sense of their dynamic involvement.

The dissertation begins by reconsidering Kant's argument for the correlation of mind and nature. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously argues that a coherent scientific view of nature presupposes an account of "transcendental subjectivity," or the cognitive powers that make experience possible. This reorients philosophical inquiry away from the world in itself toward the world as it appears to us. In Chapter One, "Remaining Time: Kant's Natural History," I complicate this

¹⁹ From a "practical standpoint," Hegel writes, "Reason is nothing but the dead and death-dealing rule of formal unity, given over into the hands of reflection which puts subject and object into the relation of dependence of the one on the other" (1977a: 142).

story by pursuing the remainders of the “in itself” in Kant’s natural history writings. These include an atmospherics of catastrophe that unsettle his account of time as the “form of inner sense.” Overtly insisting on the futility of conjecture about the world’s origin or end in time and space, Kant also makes felt a temporality unconditioned by our cognitive apparatus.

Chapter Two, “Ether and Bad Atmosphere in the Shelleys,” turns to Percy Shelley’s visionary epic *Queen Mab* (1813). Closely engaged with enlightenment physics, especially Isaac Newton’s ether theory, this poem develops a materialism of spirit that suspends the division of mind from matter. For Percy Shelley, ethereality is a poetic, metaphysical, and even political ideal; it promises an end to critical labor and reveals in nature’s history a necessary movement toward the good. This utopian atmosphere finds its obverse in Mary Shelley’s novel of the plague, *The Last Man* (1826). Here, the plague’s “foul atmospheres” relentlessly subtract all life and thought from the earth, and its last man, Lionel Verney, is left to die on a directionless and uninhabited globe. For Mary Shelley, I argue, the history of nature bears no relation to the human values Percy Shelley overlays on it.

In contrast to such materialist perspectives, Chapter Three, “Late Coleridge and the Life of Idealism,” looks to romantic idealist notions of “the absolute,” or the metaphysical ground of all particular beings. In this context, the radical enlightenment is an antagonist more than an ally. But romantic idealists do share with their materialist contemporaries a fascination with the nonhuman. For the later Coleridge, this means reuniting idealism with realism, and on the terrain of “life.” Coleridge’s anxiety about life arises from vitalist efforts to make it an absolute, to identify it as the fundamental constituent of the real. Sickness and death threaten the purposive cosmos supposed to be grounded by absolute life. Coleridge’s “ideal realism,” articulated

most fully in the *Opus Maximum* of the 1820s, responds to these challenges. Drawing on unpublished lectures by Joseph Henry Green – surgeon, philosopher, and Coleridge’s literary executor – I argue that Green’s natural history shows Coleridge that ideas have a logic and existence of their own, external to any individual consciousness.

My final chapter, “Speculative Romanticism,” follows these debates into our own historical moment. Looking at contemporary “speculative realist” thought, particularly the work of philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, this chapter argues that recent efforts to conceptualize a reality independent of its relation to the human mind are best understood in terms of the enlightenment and romantic debates about nature that form their conditions of possibility. To prove this, I trace Meillassoux’s notion of “the great outdoors” – the central figure of his influential essay *After Finitude* (2006) – back to its radical enlightenment and romantic origins. This reveals that, as a post-Kantian formation, romanticism generates the thematics of mind and world that delineate speculative realism’s post-phenomenological and post-deconstructive horizons. Drawing especially on Schelling’s theories of intellectual intuition and the emergence of human consciousness, and on Percy Shelley’s poetics of natural contingency in “Mont Blanc” (1816), I offer a romantic genealogy of speculative realism.

In this chapter and others, therefore, I join romantic literature and thought with modern-day philosophical conversation to show how much remains to be said about nature. Ostensibly a familiar topic for romantic literary critics, nature takes new forms when we cease to treat it as a problem of knowledge. Our present moment of environmental crisis has prompted a return to ecocritical questions across the field of literary studies. Nevertheless, skepticism about nature and its ideological misuses is

strong. "Romanticism After Nature" contends that criticism still needs a concept of the world without us and that romanticism is where we will find it.

Chapter 1

Remaining Time: Kant's Natural History

Introduction

Kant's late work has provoked, in nearly equal part, fascination and contempt in its readers.²⁰ From the popular, often anecdotal *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* to the historical and medical articles in the periodical press, the writings of the 1790s and beyond seem almost studiously minor. Even more, their para-philosophical concerns are uneasily situated alongside the *Critiques* of the prior decade. Dwelling, sometimes morbidly, on minute empirical details – on the manifold forms of health and sickness, pleasure and pain, contentment and dissatisfaction – Kant's "post-critical" essays are littered with the detritus of transcendental inquiry.²¹

Kant himself insists on their slightness. 1794's "The End of All Things," for instance, is "to be read 'partly as doleful, partly as droll'"; this little meditation on eternity is just a diversion.²² Meanwhile, a letter of 1798 describes the philosopher's anxiety about the time that remains for him: "I see before me the unpaid bill of my uncompleted philosophy.... It is a pain like that of Tantalus" (1967: 251). This is a constant theme in Kant's correspondence. Painfully aware of a "gap" in the critical system,²³ he nonetheless spends his days on open letters and prefaces to others'

²⁰ Two well-known examples of the latter: Friedrich Schleiermacher deemed the *Anthropology*, on its publication, "a collection of trivial matters" (2006: x); for Kuno Fischer, writing in 1860, the *Opus postumum* manuscripts were only comprehensible as the product of senility. Cf. Förster 1995: xviii-xx.

²¹ On the "post-critical" as a distinct stage in Kant's thought, albeit one premised on the *incoherence* of the self-conscious subject, see Fenves 2003: 1-7. Clark 2003 makes a similar claim, by looking to the dialectics of sobriety and addiction in Kant's late writings.

²² Beck 1963: x.

²³ The status of this "gap" is controversial. Förster 1990 gives, to my mind, the most persuasive account of the critical system's missing piece. According to Förster, a "transition from the metaphysical foundations of natural science to physics" (the science of empirical nature) is needed to address a problem left unresolved by the

books. This disunity at the level of production is matched by a mental and physical “disorganization” that sharpens the philosopher’s sense of his own precarious life: “My health...is less that of scholar than that of a vegetable – capable of eating, moving about and sleeping,” he remarks (251).

But there are guiding threads in this disorganized corpus. With new urgency, these works take up questions of scarcity and subsistence, of material remainders (fossils, ruins) and remaining time. Such concerns are not wholly new. Articles like the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” had already argued that scarcity is inseparable from culture, that conflicts over the finite “gifts of nature” are not only inevitable but the very engine of civilization (*On History* 1963: 58). Because there is barely enough to go around and because humans are rarely satisfied with just enough, human history has so far been a history of planetary warfare. The only possible compensation for these melancholy thoughts, as Kant sees it in 1784, is the immortality of the species, as it slowly tends toward a condition of perpetual peace (14, 18-9).²⁴

This logic of species comes into question when Kant starts doubting fundamental parts of his theory of history. Still devoted to humanity’s moral progress, Kant becomes increasingly worried that “upheavals in nature” might cut it short (*Anthropology* 2006: 234). The miseries attendant on “mere” or “bare [*bloss*] life” (128) are now compounded by a catastrophic horizon, by the indeterminate threat of natural disaster and extinction. Unable, finally, to insulate humanity’s moral development from the possibility of geological revolution, Kant also gives up on the

Critique of Judgment: if nature itself permits us to think about it systematically, as the third *Critique*’s indeterminate concept of “purposiveness” implies, what is the underlying cause that allows us to do so? In other words, is there an idea of reason guiding our construction of nature as a system? In the *Opus postumum*, Kant proposes the idea of a “universal ether” in answer to such questions.

²⁴ On perpetual peace and the “just-enoughness” of the world, see Clark 2011.

distinction between human and natural history.²⁵ Scarcity takes on a whole new significance. The time that remains for us, as inhabitants of this earth, looks to be more fleeting than we had thought; every moment could be the last one, Kant repeatedly suggests. But because the world *without us* is even less knowable than the world *before us*,²⁶ the feeling of temporal scarcity stays just that: a pervasive mood or atmosphere, an unshakeable sense that less time remains than we might have hoped.

This atmosphere of living on “remaining time” colors the works of Kant’s last years.²⁷ Yet it is bound up with a central theme in all of Kant’s thought: the place of human consciousness in the world. Usually supposed to find an insuperable, or even eternal, bond between the two, Kant uses the threat of upheavals in nature to figure this bond’s fragility. This has no impact on the epistemological strictures produced by the first *Critique*’s transcendental arguments. All the same, the shifting sense of time this chapter traces is “not nothing.”²⁸ Indeed, it shows Kant returning to questions deemed unanswerable by the first *Critique*. The geological, or even cosmological,

²⁵ In both the pre-critical and the critical phases of Kant’s thought, *natural* history accounts for the earth’s present condition, via the conjectural reconstruction of its past, while *human* history (at its most philosophical) is actually future oriented. Thus 1784’s “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” makes no mention of history per se, but instead argues for the moral progress of the human species. Compare this with Kant’s earlier “universal history”: 1755’s *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*.

²⁶ The first *Critique*’s “Antinomy of Pure Reason” distinguishes “chosen” from “necessary problem[s] of pure reason” (A411/B438). The problem of the earth’s future, particularly a future without human observers, is a chosen problem, Kant contends, because it has no bearing on our grasp of the present. Human reason has tools for dealing with necessary problems like the distant past (e.g. analogy), but draws up against its limits when the future of the planet is in question. I return to the matter of analogy and natural history below.

²⁷ Cf. Agamben 2005, which pursues numerous forms of messianic “remaining time.”

²⁸ See Terada 2009 on the modes of “not nothing” in Romantic epistemology and aesthetics. For Terada, Kant’s noumenon exemplifies well this paradoxical condition: *as a thought*, it belongs to the phenomenal world, while *as an object*, it lies beyond the phenomenal and thus amounts to nothing at all (90-2). This account somewhat quickly brackets the noumenon’s practical dimensions, however.

time discounted by the “Transcendental Dialectic” reasserts itself in the form of these upheavals – inconceivable yet impossible to ignore, an emblem of human reason’s “peculiar fate” to be “troubled by questions that it cannot dismiss...but that it also cannot answer” (A vii).²⁹ Leaving untouched the epistemological and aesthetic minimalism many have found in the critical system,³⁰ Kant’s last work makes only the slightest difference. But the slightness or “mereness” of this conceptual shift is another way of saying, with Kant, that what was already very little – our tenuous hold on the world of appearances – can always be less.

“Out of the Blue”

Kant’s arguments about the shape and limits of human knowledge have fallen out of favor, in direct proportion to the heightening tone of humanistic discourse on our environmental crisis. From the epitome of theoretical sophistication to a pollutant or “rot” as destructive as any oil spill,³¹ Kant’s transcendental idealism now serves almost as shorthand for the conceptual conditions of global warming’s possibility. The argument goes something like this: by reorienting philosophy toward questions of

²⁹ As Fenves 1991 argues, the centrality of speculative categories like “fate” to the Kantian account of reason shows that Kant’s thinking is less punitively scholastic than it is sometimes purported to be. This is a useful corrective to recent, so-called “speculative” attacks on Kant, some of which function on the level of caricature. See, for example, Bogost 2012: 3-4, which misconstrues the Kantian problematic (as concerned with “Being” rather than knowledge) in the name of an object-oriented ontology.

³⁰ Cf. Terada 2009 and Gasché 2003.

³¹ Compare, symptomatically, Brown 1991 on Kant’s path-breaking “discovery of consciousness” in its independence from nature with Morton 2011: “the inner space of Kantian freedom develops unhindered [by material objects]. Good taste is knowing precisely when to vomit – when to expel any foreign substance perceived to be disgusting and therefore toxic. This won’t do in an ecological era in which ‘away’ – the precondition for vomiting – no longer exists. Our vomit just floats around somewhere near us, since there is now no ‘away’ to which we can flush it in good faith” (220). The description of Kant as “rot” or pollutant can be found in Bogost 2012.

appearance and representation, rather than toward reality itself, Kant and his progeny in critical theory ultimately construe all particular objects (especially imperceptible “hyperobjects” like global warming) as discursive fictions.³² So, as one anti-Kantian assesses the situation, to begin addressing the reality of global warming, we need to turn from epistemology and critical theory to “realist or materialist ontologies that recognize the efficacy of things themselves” (Bryant 2013: 19).

I am, to some degree, sympathetic to such claims. Kantian transcendentalism genuinely struggles to give definition to anything apart from, or in excess of, individual consciousness – particularly those parts of nature that appear unlawful or contingent. All the same, I am not convinced that any old realism is inherently an improvement on the anti-realism of much twentieth-century thought. What’s missing from many prominent “object-oriented” descriptions of reality, for instance, is an account of how objects – from rocks and trees to human minds, technologies, and their devastating externalities – come to be in the first place.³³ As romantics like Schelling first argued, to really improve on Kant we need to think about how both conscious and unconscious nature are *generated*, in their distinct yet certainly related fashions.³⁴

In this chapter, therefore, I seek to complicate, from within a generally realist framework, the now-familiar story of philosophy’s Kant problem. If Kant’s

³² I allude to, and only slightly oversimplify, arguments found in Bryant 2013 and Morton.

³³ As Bryant 2013 puts it, investigation into “the Real” entails “the exploration of those properties that really do belong to things and the efficacy things organize on other things” (20). One might also ask where these “things” come from, and what the differences are between things generated differently. A crab apple tree in Harriman State Park and an Apple computer in the Rutgers University library come to exist in significantly different ways.

³⁴ For romantic theories of generation and emergence, as well as a consideration of ontological “identity” that aims to preserve the nonequivalence of conscious and unconscious nature, see Chapters 3 and 4.

transcendental logic did indeed transform the thing in itself into an empty placeholder (famously, “a something = x of which we do not know...anything whatsoever” [A250]), it also made it possible to ask unprecedented questions about the intellect, its techno-practical extensions, and its apparent intimacy with the laws of inanimate nature. By offering “a system of *epigenesis*...of pure reason” (B167), as Kant came to see it, the first *Critique* establishes spontaneous self-generation, or autopoiesis, as a central philosophical category. It will remain for the romantics to ask how the physical laws of spontaneous generation explain both the mind *and* an external world in constant flux, and how such laws might operate differently on different, more complex levels of existence.³⁵

For now, I focus on Kant’s theory of time as “the form of inner sense,” asking how it develops in tandem with his investigations of the natural world. My aim is to show that Kant is far from oblivious to nonhuman nature. Indeed, his critical theory of consciousness is largely conditioned by natural-scientific problems. This is not to depart too strongly from Schelling’s verdict on the Kantian philosophy, that nature in itself does not exist for it. My point, however, is that Kant’s *difficulties* with nature – the seeming contingency of its productions, the possibility of radical upheaval, even its capacity to be transformed by human activity – motivate his account of the transcendental, in its purest, most minimal form. I therefore begin at the moment of the critical philosophy’s emergence, before looking to the third *Critique* and its treatment of time and history. The chapter ends with the late Kant, who reopens certain natural-historical questions intentionally marginalized by the *Critiques*.

³⁵ In other words, Kant raises the question, not of appearance – a mainstay of philosophical inquiry since Plato – but of “the appearance of an appearance” (Förster 1995: xli).

Time is the fundamental term in Kant's mature account of transcendental subjectivity.³⁶ Outer appearances and inner states alike depend on time as their "formal a priori condition": whether presented simultaneously or in succession, all of our experiences are inherently temporalized. Yet Kant is also clear that "in itself, i.e., apart from the subject, time is nothing" (A34-5/B50-2). There is nothing atemporal in experience, yet time itself is unknowable except as the necessary form of our intuitions. Controverting Newtonian scientific orthodoxy and common sense alike, such claims were initially met with powerful resistance. Thus, in a 1770 letter, cosmologist and mathematician J.H. Lambert appeals to the obvious finitude of earthly bodies as proof of time's reality: "Existing things that do not have absolute duration are temporally ordered, in so far as they begin, continue, change, cease, and so on. Since I cannot deny reality to changes...I also cannot say that time...is only a helpful device for human representation" (1967: 63-4). Because all existing things manifestly lack absolute duration, Lambert argues, time must have absolute reality.³⁷

Scholars identify a range of motives for this insistence on the ideality of time.³⁸ Most compelling to me are those accounts that see its transcendental a priori as a response to the nature's apparent contingency. Since at least the early twentieth

³⁶ As Martin Heidegger observes, the transcendental subject not only has a "temporal character," but, if we pursue the logic of the first *Critique*, displays a "primordial identity" with time itself (1962: 193-201).

³⁷ On Kant and Lambert's correspondence, see Friedman 1992: 34-7 and Grant 2008. The identification of time with change (and thus with decay) in Lambert's letter anticipates the "remaining time" of Kant's late work.

³⁸ Sadiq Jalal al-Azm's *Kant's Theory of Time* gives one standard account. For al-Azm, Kant's theory is conditioned by the terms of the Leibniz-Newton debate over the relativity of space and time. Thus the "Transcendental Aesthetic" mediates between Leibnizian relativism and Newtonian absolutism by defining time as transcendently ideal (relative to a subject) *and* empirically real (absolute condition of all possible experience) (1967: 1-28). Meanwhile, "The Antinomy of Pure Reason" recapitulates this on the cosmological level, via the unresolvable question of the world's beginning in time; as al-Azm explains it, "Kant utilizes the difficulties inherent in the first antinomy to strengthen the conception of time expounded in the *Aesthetic*" (84). For the full argument, see 1967: 71-84.

century, Kant's fascination with geological disturbances (like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake) has been linked to his equally powerful interest in discovering unchanging natural laws.³⁹ According to this line of thought, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and the like are not violations of the natural order, but limit cases needed for any theory of nature (whether scientific or aesthetic) to be complete. Thus "Lisbon," as a seemingly incomprehensible disaster, is simultaneously contained by and foundational for the "secular and scientific 'disciplining'" of nature (Regier 2010: 93). In other words, philosophy demands the very disturbances it explains away.

There is much to like in such accounts, which convey the seriousness of Kant's engagement with the natural world. But for Kant himself, it is *not* primarily empirical sciences like geology that enable the construction of a systematic theory of nature. In fact, the doctrine of transcendental subjectivity, or the network of categories that make experience susceptible to physical explanation, presents the most powerful means of securing nature's lawful operations.⁴⁰ Compared to a comprehensive theory of the subject, the collected observations of the geologist have limited scientific value. The contingent events and transformations on which geology dwells cannot provide

³⁹ Cf. Benjamin 2005 and Regier 2010. Regier links Kant's earthquakes to the aesthetics of the sublime, conceived as a (failed) technique for rationalizing contingent nature (88-94). On the sublime and the contingent, see Introduction and Chapter 4.

⁴⁰ The relationship between the transcendental subject and the natural sciences is complex. During the critical period, only physics qualifies as an "exact science," because it derives from an a priori, mathematical ground and is thus based in the structure of subjectivity itself. Friedman 1992 puts it well: the "indefinite iteration of constructive operations" that is the condition of possibility for both geometry and arithmetic is equivalent to the "construction in pure intuition" that "underlies Kant's radical division of the faculties of the mind" (xiv). In short, the forms of intuition (space and time) link subjectivity to mathematics. The comprehensive view of nature afforded by mathematical physics is guaranteed by the very structure of consciousness. By this same logic, non-mathematical sciences like chemistry, biology, and geology are better understood in terms of "systematic art or experimental doctrine" (qtd. on 217) – as methods for systematically organizing evidence that nevertheless give no direct insight into nature's laws.

even unsettled grounds for an exact science; they rather hover at thought's margins. In some ways, this exclusionary gesture lends greater force to such events. Escaping the terms of mathematical physics, the possibility of planetary upheaval takes on a purely negative magnitude – no science can speak of it, and for this reason it is all the more difficult to deny.

I will return to Kant's geological imaginary. First, I want to consider the largely forgotten *atmospherics* of his thought,⁴¹ partly by way of Walter Benjamin's 1931 radio broadcast on the anniversary of the Lisbon earthquake. This broadcast makes subtle reference to a dialectics of atmosphere and earth that shape Kant's notions of nature. In general, Benjamin is ambivalent about Kant's scientific achievement. He credits Kant with inaugurating the modern study of geology, then suggests that he founds it on an error: the archaic notion that "earthquakes came from the fiery gases and steam arising from the interior of the earth." We know now, Benjamin continues, that earthquakes are caused by changes in the earth's crust. Such changes have themselves a manifold of causes, from storms and erosion to the pull of gravity – so many that the earth's crust is "in a state of permanent turmoil; the masses of matter it contains are constantly shifting and striving to achieve equilibrium" (2005: 538). Even after Kant, then, geological "science" is perhaps a misnomer; looking from the singular event to the earth as a whole, we find only turmoil, shifting, and striving – that is, an even deeper stratum of contingency.

⁴¹ For Kant, and for the romantics that follow him, "atmosphere" indexes everything from air, weather, and climate to mood and even tone. These different meanings are not unrelated; as Kant argues in the *Opus postumum*, the ether that constitutes the physical atmosphere is also the vehicle for colors and musical tones. Indeed, their pulsating movement through the ether is what renders them susceptible to aesthetic judgment. Cf. Förster 2000: 24-47. In this chapter and others, I use "atmosphere" in this sometimes hazy, yet historically precise, sense.

Benjamin's little history of geology narrates the movement away from the assumption of continuity between geological and meteorological occurrences. For Kant, whose forays into earth science lie at the beginning of this story, earthquakes properly belong to "the history of the atmosphere," as he calls it in the 1750s (2012: 547). From his essays on Lisbon to his lectures on geography and meteorology, Kant describes in vivid detail vapors ejected from the earth, rending its surface and interfusing the sky with strangely colored mineral dust. Such passages insist on a constant exchange between ground and sky: subterranean winds erupt from the ground and permeate the atmosphere, while imminent geological events announce themselves through atmospheric disturbances.⁴² Among these can be numbered a dreadful quiet in the air, restlessness in animals, an incongruous giddiness in people ("the result of [inhaling] certain vapors that rise from the earth" [530]), and finally "the emergence of a fine mist from the ground that envelops the feet of people as they walk and makes them feel that they are being held back" (532). Almost hallucinogenic in its effects, this fine mist leads us away from empirical observations about the interplay of earth and air toward an atmospherics defined in terms of *affect*.

Therefore, though Benjamin insists that "[t]he earth experiences tremors all the time, but for the most part not so violently that we notice," his final remarks envelop us once more in an atmosphere of impending upheaval: "All the worse if suddenly, out of the blue, we feel a tremor" (2005: 539). Impossible to predict with any certitude, the coming catastrophe is presaged by an indefinable unease. It floats in the air and over the ground, like a mist or vapor that obscures our sight and distorts our perception of time (it makes us feel that we are both on the cusp of something and

⁴² Cf. Favret 2010 on the classical "exhalation theory" of weather still in vogue during the earlier eighteenth century. According to this view, "the *earth* provided the source of all atmospheric change...the exhalation theory traced the vagaries of weather back to a hypothetical geological origin" (127).

“being held back”). In this way, Kant’s atmospherics are inseparable from questions of temporality and inner sense. From out of the blue come “pulses of feeling” that threaten to suspend the arithmetical counting of seconds, minutes, and hours.⁴³ The history of the atmosphere runs athwart to the movement of time, particularly if this latter depends on an unclouded consciousness. And if Benjamin’s broadcast begins by separating out the geological from the meteorological, it ends by reuniting them in an atmosphere of contingent occurrence. Such an ominous blue fog, out of which anything could emerge, powerfully figures the contingencies at the margins of Kant’s thought: all those the singular occurrences or entities that seem to strain against the laws of nature, and whose necessity could only be grasped by a being with a very different intellect from ours.⁴⁴

The intersection of atmosphere and time can also be reached by moving in the other direction. That is, taken as a purely *external* phenomenon, the atmosphere also affects the human capacity to measure time. This is apparent in the lectures on *Physical Geography*. Wildly popular as a course (and delivered forty-nine times between 1756 and 1796), the *Geography* was published only in 1802 as a composite

⁴³ Favret 2010: 120. I pursue this notion in a less concretely historical direction than Favret, who “finds in the clouds and winds of romantic literature elements of a global system of communication, bearing if not news [about the Napoleonic Wars] then pulses of feeling, currents from abroad” (120). The language of pulsations once more evokes the ether theory of the *Opus postumum*.

⁴⁴ In a fascinating close analysis, Peter Fenves also identifies a blue vapor as an important figure in the Kantian corpus. For Fenves, it represents moral self-deception: “The origin of the expression ‘*sich selbst blauen Dunst vorzumachen*’ (blows blue vapor in one’s own face, hoodwink oneself, fool oneself) is appropriately obscure: alchemy, magicians’ tricks, and tobacco are all possible sources. Many years earlier, while inquiring into the disastrous effects of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, Kant had worried that ‘combustible and volatile vapor’ might lower the temperature of the earth and thus produce a terrestrial ‘catastrophe’....The ‘blue vapor’ that makes its way into ‘On the Radical Evil in Human Nature’ is even more volatile...[because it] casts a shadow on the distinctions by which Kant seeks to capture the specificity of the human species” – that is, it calls into question the human’s inability to possess an absolutely evil will (2003: 86).

of lecture notes, excerpts from contemporary scientific treatises, and addenda by Kant's editor, the theologian Friedrich Rink. Its status as a representation of Kant's actual views is debatable, and sections of the text were certainly never revised to reflect the critical turn's impact on the geometric spaces of geography.⁴⁵ Yet the *Geography* indisputably offers the most sustained treatment of those atmospheric problems that guide Kant's theorizing of time. Furthermore, as a kind of patchwork, the text situates itself in a world of late enlightenment assumptions, some contradictory, about the relationship between atmosphere and time. Such tensions give us a further sense of Kant's concern with the barriers between inner time and external world.

Drawing on a host of travel narratives and natural histories, Kant's *Geography* claims to develop "a general theory of all constant, periodic winds and of most changeable **winds**" (2012: 555).⁴⁶ Its aim is a view of the weather as a system, in other words, encompassing both seasonal patterns and idiosyncratic events. From this

⁴⁵ The opposition between geographic space and natural-historical time is Kant's starting point as he considers the proper sphere of each: "Geography and history encompass the entire range of knowledge [of nature]; that is geography for space and history for time" (2012: 450). With regard to the terms set in the *Critiques*, this claim is problematic in two ways: first, it makes no reference to the mathematical physics usually supposed to give knowledge of nature; second, it puts space at the basis of time, rather than vice-versa. As Kant explains, "events necessarily take place with reference to something. History is a continuous progression, but things, too, change, and give an entirely different geography at particular times. Geography is thus the foundation [*Substrat*]" (450-1). Last revised by its author in the late 70s, this text captures Kant's thought in the moment of its production, when its seams are most visible.

⁴⁶ Major sources for the chapter on the world's atmospheres include explorers Peter Kolb and Antonio de Ulloa y de la Torre Giral. See Eric Watkins's notes to the 2012 edition. In general, Kant draws on a range of enlightenment naturalists, from Leibniz to Linnaeus and beyond. Interestingly, Kant's editor also adds references to texts published well after Kant's last revisions to the *Geography* in 1778. As if to signal the post-Kantianism of Kant's own (mostly pre-critical!) writing, Rink looks to Schelling's *Journal of Speculative Physics* to corroborate the definition of heat as "a fine and subtle matter which penetrates all bodies and is uncommonly similar to the electrical" (521-3). Such passages also anticipate Kant's later ether theory.

interplay of pattern and event begins to emerge Kant's history of the atmosphere. This history is defined at least in part by the conjunction of weather with the passage of time. When Kant refers to the “annually changing winds” of the torrid zone or defines monsoons as “periodic winds” (555), the premise is that time is measured by the weather. Thus the *Geography* participates in a broader eighteenth-century phenomenon: the transformation of weather from singular, portentous instance to “‘quotidian occurrence’...inscribed in the chronological time of the almanac, newspaper, calendar, and clock.” Through this shift in significance, weather would come “to mark time’s movement in its most prosaic register” (Menely 2012: 481).

But Kant’s history of the atmosphere does not only make legible the passage of an impersonal empty time, manifest in the seasonal recurrence of certain winds. It also registers, in more subtle ways, the human presence in nature’s history.⁴⁷ Identifying weather as a mode of time keeping, Kant goes on to explain that the weather can be irrevocably changed by human actions. In this, he is not alone among eighteenth-century thinkers. The final year of Kant’s geography lectures also saw the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s popular travel narrative, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* have much to say about the changing climate of Scandinavia and its beneficial effects:

The destruction, or gradual reduction, of their forests will probably ameliorate the [Norwegian] climate, and their manners will naturally improve in the same ratio as industry requires ingenuity. It is very fortunate that men are a long time but just above the brute creation, or the greater part of the earth would never have been rendered habitable, because it is the patient labour of men, who are only seeking for a subsistence, which produces whatever embellishes existence....The world requires, I see, the hand of man to perfect it. (2009: 60)

⁴⁷ Favret 2010 observes that, at the turn of the century, “metaphors of weather participated in mediating history” (122). I would add that real weather did too.

Wollstonecraft invokes a familiar enlightenment ideal of human perfectibility. Yet for her, any movement toward perfection presupposes the manipulation of an inherently imperfect environment. It is only this – the human drive to work on and fundamentally alter the natural world – that makes civilization possible. In the case of Wollstonecraft’s Norway, the destruction of forests, and the warming climate attendant on it, is the precondition for any improvement in “manners” or “industry.” (Such claims echo Kant’s own in the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History,” a text no less fixated on subsistence, labor, and environmental change.⁴⁸)

Kant is also concerned with Europe’s warming climate. While the *Geography* initially distinguishes climate from weather – the former conceived, not in terms of seasonal change, but as a stable feature of the earth’s various regions – it cannot sustain the distinction. When faced with a scene of deforestation like Wollstonecraft’s, Kant gives up on the notion of climatic stability:

Even in Europe, it was much colder in former times than it is now. In Emperor Augustus’s time, the **Tiber** usually froze in the winter, but now it never does. The **Rhône** froze in Julius Caesar’s time to such an extent that loads could be carried across it; but now this is unheard of. The Black Sea was frozen over thickly at the time of Constantine Copronymus. Germany along the Rhine and France are described by the ancients as being like Siberia today.

The reason for this was presumably the many forests which covered most of the countries at that time and in which the snow melted very late, so that cold winds blew from them. But now the forests have largely been felled, while in the northern part of America and Asia they are still immeasurably large, which might be one of several reasons for the cold in those countries. (2012: 558)

⁴⁸ Climate engineering is a major enlightenment theme. For one more important instance, see Erasmus Darwin’s 1791 *The Botanic Garden*, and particularly this passage (important to poets from William Cowper to Percy Shelley): “If the nations who inhabit this hemisphere of the globe, instead of destroying their sea-men and exhausting their wealth in unnecessary wars, could be induced to unite their labours to navigate these immense masses of ice into the more southern oceans, two great advantages would result to mankind, the tropic countries would be much cooled by their solution, and our winters in this latitude would be rendered much milder for perhaps a century or two, till the masses of ice became again enormous” (529n).

The deforestation of Europe, in which Wollstonecraft sees so much potential for the future, is described here in superficially similar terms. Both accounts are agreed that the less forest there is, the warmer the climate will be. And both locate themselves at the nexus of nature and politics, as changes in climate seem to be shadowed by social and political change. But in Kant's version the consequences of climatic changes are harder to read. The warming climate seems to augur the fall of emperors and the progress of freedom, but it also freezes the circulation of people and goods. The passage's repeated movement between "now" and "former times," and its insistence on deforestation as loss, forecloses on any utopian logic; in such moments, nostalgia is as legible as optimism.

This temporal unease, or even pain [*Weh*], pervades the *Geography*. Early on, Kant wonders if the nostalgia [*Heimweh*] of the Swiss abroad can be attributed to the different air they breathe after leaving their mountain homes (517-8). The oppressively dense air of the lowlands seems to have a psychological impact, forcing the Swiss wanderer to fixate on their carefree youth. A change in the atmosphere leads to a change in the experience of time, which no longer proceeds as it once did.⁴⁹ The rivers Kant invokes as measures of climate change have their own multidirectional histories. The Tiber, the Rhône, the Rhine: each is a figure for *world* history, in the political sense, as much as natural history, and each raises the specter of the classical past as much as it points toward an uncertain future. We can never be sure about which direction it is they flow.⁵⁰ Between Wollstonecraft and Kant, then,

⁴⁹ Kant eventually concludes that the roots of nostalgia lie elsewhere. It is a longing for lost ways of life, and thus bespeaks an even more profound temporal dislocation. See the *Anthropology* on "homesickness," or *Heimweh*, and longing (2006: 71-2).

⁵⁰ In hymns such as "Der Adler," written after 1800, and "Der Rhein," from 1801, the poet Friedrich Hölderlin allegorizes the multidirectional "flow" of world history through the figures of the Rhône and the Rhine rivers.

there is no real agreement about the effects of climate change. For Wollstonecraft, a warming climate promises a better future. For Kant, its only certain outcome is this temporal affective disorder.⁵¹

In direct conflict, then, with the earlier claim that weather marks time's passing, moments such as these imply that time cannot be measured by atmospheric change. This is not because the atmosphere lacks a temporal dimension, but because it is so profoundly *historical*. As Wollstonecraft and Kant suggest, "the history of the atmosphere" is at once natural and cultural. The atmosphere registers and responds to human activity with such sensitivity that it loses track of time's endless, unvarying succession. If atmospheric change is indeed a fact of the external world, as it appears to be, then time (universal and necessary for all human experience) must become a fact of consciousness. Transcendental idealism emerges in the widening gap between time and atmosphere.

I conclude by returning to the first *Critique*'s "Transcendental Aesthetic." Here, following immediately on his account of time as the form of inner sense, Kant raises the question of atmosphere once more. But now the point is how removed our intuitions of time and space must be from anything like an atmospheric event. Time and space are transcendental categories, Kant explains. This means that no empirical change can affect them, because change is only possible in the world of appearances. In other words, change and time now operate on two different levels: the former in the empirical world of sensation and experience, while the latter forms the transcendental

⁵¹ Kant is a writer of the Anthropocene, in other words, the historical "period in which the human capacity to radically transform geologic and climatic processes alters the conditions of periodicity itself" (Menely 2012: 479). In the Anthropocene, as Kant will ultimately suggest, the boundaries between human and natural history melt into air. See also Chakrabarty 2009: 201-7. I differ from Chakrabarty in that I find, as early as the eighteenth century, varying degrees of recognition of nature's responsiveness to human activity.

conditions of possibility for this world. When time belonged to the world of sense, as it did in the *Geography*, it was changeable like everything else. Now it is the a priori *basis* for change, and it cannot be altered by any appearance – not even by a change in the weather.

“[I]n the world of sense,” Kant argues, “however deeply we explore its objects, we deal with nothing whatever but appearances.” Yet he also concedes, “that when during a rain accompanied by sunshine we see a rainbow, we will call it a mere appearance, while calling the rain the thing in itself” (A45/B63). This, however, is just a manner of speaking, a relic of the Lockean worldview. Both rain and rainbow alike are part of the empirical world of appearances. From a truly critical perspective, neither is a thing in itself: “Not only are these drops mere appearances; rather, even their round shape, and indeed even the space in which they fall, are nothing in themselves” (A46/B63). The space in which rain falls, and the time it takes to do so, is nothing but the necessary form of its appearance. Time and space are not sensory illusions, like the rainbow, but they are nothing “in themselves.” Nothing, that is, without a consciousness to inscribe them on experience. Forming an emblem at the heart of the first *Critique*, this changing weather figures the atmospheric conditions excluded from the “Transcendental Aesthetic” and, even more broadly, all those contingencies in nature’s history that the transcendental guards us against.

Natural History within the Limits of Reason Alone

Every theory of history, remarks Giorgio Agamben, is conditioned by a particular experience of time.⁵² This is decidedly so for Kant, who pursues throughout the later 1780s the implications for natural history of his transcendental account of

⁵² Cf. 1993: 91.

time. The various sites of this investigation – from the series of review essays on J.G. Herder’s *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humankind* to the third *Critique*’s “Critique of Teleological Judgment” – all ask if natural history is still possible when time is conceived as the subject’s form of inner sense. These texts revolve around a set of shared questions: how can we grasp the changes so obviously undergone by the earth if time is defined as the form of our present experiences? In view of time’s separation from change, what valid questions remain to be asked about the earth’s ancient past? What is the epistemic status of natural-historical discourse?

The underlying dilemma is quintessentially Kantian. There can be no definitive account of the earth’s formation or of the development of plant and animal species, because no human beings were present to witness them. In one sense, these “ancestral events” will always be unknowable.⁵³ But there is something in the nature of human reason that inevitably leads it back to such unknowns. In the “Preface” to the first *Critique*, Kant calls it “fate.” Rational beings like humans, he insists, are fated to wonder how they came to dwell on the earth.⁵⁴ Yet according to the critical

⁵³ Philosopher Quentin Meillassoux identifies as an “ancestral event” anything taking place before the appearance of the human species. With regard to natural history’s epistemological license, Meillassoux wonders, “having taken the Critical turn, how is Kant to conceive of the truth of such a history [that is, ‘a history anterior to every witness’]?” (2008: 138) He suggests that, for some hypothetical Kantian astronomer, God might, in some practical sense, serve as an eternal witness. Chapter 4 addresses in further detail Meillassoux’s response to Kantian epistemology.

⁵⁴ The question of humanity’s planetary dwelling is also a question of the different human races. Thus, in 1775-7, while drafting the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant proposes the first scientific theory of race. In this essay, he suggests that the phenotypical diversity of the human species is only comprehensible in natural-historical terms: “the description of nature (i.e., the condition of nature at the present time) does not suffice to explain the diversity of human deviations. We must, therefore, venture to offer a history of nature, even if we are also – and rightfully so – hostile to the impudence of mere opinion. This kind of history is, however, a separate special science and it could well serve to move us gradually from opinions to true insights” (2000: 22). Taken as a species, humanity is found nearly everywhere on earth. But the variety of human races can only be understood by

strictures on knowledge, any answers they propose must be provisional. As essentially finite beings, humans will never really know where they came from *or* where they are headed.

I have two aims in what follows. First, I show that natural history remains not only possible but also necessary for Kant, despite the fact that his notion of time is largely concerned with the present. Yet I also suggest that Kant's natural history cannot help opening itself up to the *future* – and thereby unsettling the sense of time it presupposes. In pursuing such themes, I turn from the atmospheric to the geological and biological sciences.⁵⁵ But as the last section showed, in Kant's thought these categories always infringe on each other. Thus the geological upheavals that ultimately irrupt into Kant's natural history are inseparable from a certain atmospherics: from a mood of impending catastrophe and from an indeterminate ethereal substance with a history and temporality all its own.

Late in the first *Critique*, Kant explains why it is that natural history remains such a problem for the critical philosophy. After the "Transcendental Aesthetic" and its newly restricted view of time and space, the cosmological questions that form the heart of dogmatic metaphysics become much harder to ask. Did the world emerge in time? Where are its boundaries? Is it composed of discrete substances or are its parts infinitely divisible? None of these are answerable questions when human finitude is

looking to the nexus of species, place, and history. The problem of racial difference is therefore an important motive for Kant's theorizing of natural history.

The *Opus postumum* returns to the matter of race and planetary dwelling. But it proposes that the natural history of racial difference should lead us to wonder if other, *nonhuman* types of rational beings will be next to occupy the earth (1995: 66-7).

⁵⁵ I apply these terms only somewhat anachronistically. The science of biology takes its name from the post-Kantian naturalist Gottfried Treviranus's 1802 *Biology, or the Philosophy of Living Nature*. As a term, geology's provenance is much older, though Kant does not seem to use it himself (despite Benjamin's claim that he is one of its pioneers).

the order of the day. Any answers would depend on a view of the whole ruled out of bounds by the internalization of time and space. Yet by a cruel fate, human reason demands just these impossible answers. This is perhaps why, for the poet Hölderlin, the gods are “fateless,” and “in bliss their eyes / Gaze in eternal, / Calm clarity” (1972: 5). Such an unproblematic intuition of eternity stands in stark contrast to the fated restlessness of human reason that Kant diagnoses.⁵⁶

There is fortunately a therapeutics to match this analytic case history of reason.⁵⁷ Indeed, there are limits to the demands reason makes on us, and coming to terms with them is a major part of the first *Critique*. “The Antinomy of Pure Reason” shows that even the impossible demand for completeness in our knowledge of the world can be turned to advantage. Because time is actually the form of present experience, the totality of past, present, and future – about which popular metaphysics and theology claims to speak – loses all coherence as a concept. But this is not really what reason is after, in its cosmological investigations. “Absolute totality,” Kant is relieved to note, “is demanded by reason only insofar as this totality concerns the ascending series of conditions for a given conditioned” (A409-10/B436). As beings inescapably bound to the present, we find past time meaningful only as a necessary *precondition* of the current moment. In an almost Hegelian fashion, then, totality is defined here as retrospective.

⁵⁶ Hölderlin’s poem alludes to contemporary philosophical debate about “intellectual intuition”: the immediate, non-discursive apprehension of reality. For more on this, see Chapter 3, especially the Appendix, and Chapter 4.

⁵⁷ Cf. Terada 2009: 74, 82, et passim. Critics differ on the extent to which the Kantian philosophy can be read as therapeutic in intent. The disagreement can be framed in terms of genre: are the *Critiques* fundamentally *comic* (in reconciling us to finitude and mere appearances), or are they fundamentally *tragic* (in lamenting the unanswerable nature of certain inevitable questions)? Fenves 1991 says “tragic,” while Terada says “comic.”

This means that the future has no possible theoretical significance. Only the totality of past time presents an unavoidable challenge for rational beings like us. As Kant explains once more:

a completely elapsed time up to the given instant is thought by us necessarily and as also being given (although not as being determinable by us). Future time, on the other hand, is not the condition for arriving at the present; and hence for comprehending future time it makes no difference at all how we want to deal with that time, i.e., whether we want to let it cease somewhere or let it run *ad infinitum*. (A410/B437)

In other words, because future time has no immediate relation to the present, it is merely hypothetical. We can imagine the future any way we'd like, but whether we imagine time's inevitable apocalyptic ending or its infinite continuation has no bearing on a truly *scientific* theory of nature. If the future has any significance, it is practical. There may be moral implications to futurity, but these can have no impact on the metaphysics of nature.

At the same time, Kant cautions, even if we do think the totality of past time "necessarily and as also being given," it fails to attain the determinacy we might expect theoretical investigation to yield. The earth's ancient past is by definition unexperienced, yet the laws of human experience are all we have to work with. Luckily, reason has the power to "prolon[g] the chain of experience," by presenting the understanding with a strictly *regulative* idea of past time's totality. Guided by this heuristic, the understanding, in concert with the power of judgment, can begin to construct a retrospective account of the conditions leading up to the present moment.⁵⁸ By assuming that the world has always followed the same physical laws, Kant observes, "I [am able to] present that a regressive series of possible perceptions

⁵⁸ For a helpful overview of the power of judgment's role in Kantian natural science (with particular emphasis on the problems posed by living organisms), see Steigerwald 2010.

(either by the guide of history or by the footprints of causes and effects) leads...to a bygone time series as condition of the present time” (A495/B523). These pathways of cause and effect lead us onto shaky ground: as the *Physical Geography* suggested, it is not always clear that nature does follow the same laws over time. Yet the assumption is necessary if the past is to be explained using the evidence left to us in the present.⁵⁹

All of which is to say that, in the face of such an epistemological dilemma, “we are left with nothing but analogy” (A566/B594): the ancient past is conceivable only on the supposition that it resembles the present. This realization shapes Kant’s extensive work on natural history in the later 1780s. The latter part of 1790’s third *Critique*, the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” offers a particularly searching account of natural history beginning from the analogy making power of judgment. While chiefly concerned with the forms of thought involved in the study of living organisms, the “Critique of Teleological Judgment” also raises difficult questions about the origin and evolution of life on earth. In so doing, it contends that any *analogical* natural history is always also a *teleological* natural history. The same forms of judgment that help us make sense of living organisms – and indeed, of nature as an organized whole – inevitably lead to a concept of natural purposes, or teleology.⁶⁰ At the same time, these teleological judgments about nature are

⁵⁹ This position is what Sloan 2006 calls “actualism”: “The concept of actualism implies an explanation of past events by analogy with empirically observable causes acting in the present. This need not entail that they act with the same intensity in the past. This distinguishes ‘actualism’ from the ‘uniformitarianism’ of Hutton and Lyell in which these causes are inferred to act in the past with the same intensity as those observed in the present” (629).

⁶⁰ This is the “reflective” power of judgment, devoted to the comprehension of seemingly contingent things. Reflective judgment moves from the particular (the thing) to the general (the concept), rather than vice versa. In so doing, it must “provide its own principle, ‘a principle for reflection upon objects for which we are entirely lacking a law’” (Steigerwald 2010: 294). The concept of a natural purpose is

themselves analogical in form. They allow us to judge nature *as if* it were purposively designed, without knowing what that purpose *is*. Ultimately, this complex interweaving of analogy with teleology motivates another shift in Kant's sense of time. By introducing teleology into natural history, the third *Critique* ends up unsettling the notion that past time can be dealt with in isolation from futurity.

Not until very late in the "Critique of Teleological Judgment" does Kant turn directly to the problem of analogical thinking. It soon becomes clear, though, that analogy is the crux of this entire complicated text on the form and cause of organized living beings. Dismissing all dogmatic arguments from design, Kant insists that the study of biological life can do just fine without them, by the careful use of analogy.⁶¹ He defines this as follows:

even if two things are heterogeneous, we can still *conceive* of the one by *analogy* with the other, and on the very point of their heterogeneity. But from that in which they are heterogeneous we cannot by analogy draw an *inference* from the one to the other, i.e., transfer that mark of the difference in kind between them from one to the other. (1987: 356-7)

Analogy helps us make sense of that which initially eludes our patterns of thought. At the same time, it does not give us knowledge of a "thing's intrinsic constitution" (359). It is pure formal modeling. To show its usefulness for biological inquiry, Kant gives several examples. When, for instance, we attempt to explain the possibility of organized beings, we might draw comparisons to human artifacts. Analogy would then work in two ways: first, it would set up a relation between a process we understand (that of building something complex, like a house) and a process we do not (that by which organized life forms come into being); second, it would set up a

one such principle for judging the possibility of apparently contingent entities like living beings.

⁶¹ On the interchange between design and analogy in eighteenth-century natural philosophy, see Jager 2007: 102-23, especially 113-7.

relation between the present (in which it is possible to build a house) and the past (in which organized life arose, with no one there to attest to its conditions of possibility). Thus, analogy allows us to view living nature as if it were the purposive product of a “supreme world cause.” On the level of scientific practice, this opens up the possibility of a special mode of causality that long ago gave rise to organized beings. Importantly, though, such a possibility tells us nothing determinate about that causal power or that distant past. We make these comparisons “only in order to assist our cognitive power in dealing with natural things in the world” (357). In the face of irresolvable problems, like the origin of life, analogy allows inquiry to proceed.⁶²

The limits of analogy are therefore the limits of natural history. This epistemological difficulty explains why Kant so studiously distinguishes natural history from science proper. While natural science is founded on exact mathematical laws and gives *mechanical* explanations of material objects, natural history is inherently *conjectural*, even speculative: it strives to imagine an ancient world devoid of human witnesses, and it does so entirely by the force of analogy. Yet this is not to call it fiction. Writing just before the third *Critique*, Kant explains that

[a] history of nature would...concern itself with investigating the connections between certain present properties of the things of nature and their causes in an earlier time in accordance with causal laws that we do not invent but rather derive from the forces [*Kräften*] of nature as they present themselves to us, pursued back, however, only so far as permitted by analogy. (Sloan 2006: 640)

Analogy authorizes our backwards glance, but it does not provide the same kind of knowledge as a physical account of matter’s mechanical laws. Indeed, if the natural

⁶² Breitenbach 2014 persuasively argues that Kant in fact rejects the artifact analogy, as it elucidates just one facet of living nature: its purposive organization. Living beings are not only organized, she observes, but *self*-organized. Therefore, they demand comparison with the only other self-organizing thing we know: the human power of reason. The analogy between reason and the organism would then provide the true ground for teleological judgments (136).

historian does claim certainty about “events to which human reason [*Vernunft*] cannot extend, e.g. the first appearance [*Entstehen*] of plants and animals,” he transgresses the bounds of analogical thinking. This rogue natural historian pretends to engage in what would only be “a science for gods” (640).

So what would a properly *finite* natural history look like? The science of comparative anatomy offers Kant his starting point. It also shows how analogy in the life sciences is invariably accompanied by teleology. Comparative anatomy is a fraught case for Kant, and the “Critique of Teleological Judgment” is not the first occasion for him to weigh in on this increasingly fashionable science. Indeed, the third *Critique*’s discussion of anatomy follows near on a series of damning review essays published in the *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*; like these reviews, it offers yet another rebuke to Kant’s apostate student, J.G. Herder. Alluding to the notions of “essential form” and organic force elaborated in Herder’s *Ideas*,⁶³ Kant observes that, indeed, “many genera of animals share a certain common schema on which not only their bone structure but also the arrangement of their other parts seems to be based.” But the critical naturalist should be cautious about where such apparent commonalities lead. The danger lies in the abuse of analogy, which occurs anytime we treat it as a real principle in nature, instead of as a principle of judgment.

This is a temptation that Herder cannot resist. Faced with an array of morphological resemblances throughout the animal kingdom, he and others like him are led to speculate about the “common archetype” of organic life and even the “common original mother” from which all living beings might have emerged (1987: 304). The inevitable impulse to think systematically, to try uniting all of organized life in a single family tree, should be recognized for what it is, however. Herder

⁶³ Cf. *On History*, “Reviews of Herder’s *Ideas*” 1963: especially 30-1.

claims to explain nature's immanent logic by appealing to a vital force or formative drive, but he is merely engaged in "a daring adventure of reason," Kant says (305).⁶⁴

Taken as a constitutive claim about natural history, his evolutionism exceeds the bounds of sense.⁶⁵

Yet the apparent analogies between different organic beings *do* suggest something definitive about our power of judgment. Not all animals can be analogically linked, of course, and the morphological similarities between a human and an orangutan are more obvious than those between an orangutan and a polyp. All the same, our judgments about anatomy invariably lead us to the notion that "the different animal genera approach one another gradually" (304). The reflective power of judgment, in its analogy making use, pushes us to conceive of nature as an organic whole, capable of developing over time and in increasingly complex forms. How we use this idea is the important thing: taken as an aid to systematic thinking, it is invaluable; taken as proof of an evolutionary "*generatio univoca*," whereby simpler

⁶⁴ This rather patronizing assessment is kinder than that of five years earlier. Then Kant claimed that Herder's vital principle "leads nowhere" – except perhaps to "ideas which are so monstrous that reason recoils from them: either one species would have emerged out of the other and all out of one original species, or perhaps all would have emerged out of a single primordial womb" (1963: 38). Both possibilities are equally disgusting to him.

Kant's gendered language is interesting, especially for a philosopher so "ferociously anxious about the question of women," as David Clark puts it (2001: 266). Clark's observation that, for Kant, the female body is alternately "figured in terms of excrescence or absence" – as both "too much and too little" (270) – holds true here: the primordial womb surpasses the limits of reason *and* offers too little by way of scientific explanation.

⁶⁵ Talking about "evolution" in the eighteenth century is difficult. For Kant, evolution implies *preformationism*, or the theory that organic beings develop from fixed embryonic seeds. It is usually contrasted with *epigenesis*, which contends that organisms develop spontaneously by means of a formative force. In the Herder reviews, Kant attacks what he sees as an epigenetic theory inattentive to development's limiting factors (like climate and habitat). Generally, though, he is also unsympathetic to strict preformationism. See the definitions in Richards 1992: 5-16, 21-5. Cohen 2009: 16 ff. gives the clearest recent account of Kant's mediation between these two theories of development.

organic beings transform themselves into higher life forms, it contravenes all the accumulated data of experience (305).

With very strict limitations, then, analogical thinking suggests that is possible to comprehend all of nature as a system. This system of nature ranges widely, Kant explains, “from the genus where the principle of purposes seems to be borne out most, namely, man, all the way to the polyp, and from it even to mosses and lichens and finally to the lowest stage of nature discernible to us, crude matter.” But in constructing this system, the natural historian encounters a stumbling block. In the present moment, all the laws of nature with which we are acquainted are mechanical; they are atemporal, physical laws, derived from the operations of consciousness. Such laws, by which we construct the nature of the physical sciences, have no way of accounting for life. On their evidence alone, the transition between inorganic and organic matter would be incomprehensible. The solution to this problem, Kant contends, is to introduce another principle: purposiveness, or teleology. Only thus can the system of nature make sense of nonliving matter. As he explains it,

From this matter, and its forces governed by mechanical laws (like those it follows in crystal formations), seems to stem all the technic that nature displays in organized beings and that we find so far beyond our grasp that we believe that we have to think a different principle [to account] for it. (304)

While providing no definite evidence that life or consciousness emerged from crude matter, a limited teleological principle is nonetheless a necessity. Nature’s “technic” is inconceivable without assuming that materiality has an innate formative drive. But this formative drive cannot be said to belong to nature in itself; it is instead a part of our cognitive apparatus. Kant’s argumentative balancing act permits nature to be organized as a unified system, while evading any materialist or vitalist implications. The “*archaeology of nature*,” as Kant calls it (315), must be supplemented by

teleology. At the same time, teleological judgment is only a placeholder, a stopgap measure for those moments when mechanical explanations fail us.

Confronted with the problem of living matter, natural history must turn to the indeterminate concept of a latent teleological drive. In so doing, it appears to abandon its strictly analogical form. Indeed, teleological judgment's entire function is to explain the transition between nonliving and living matter – between, that is, two moments in which nature is decidedly *not* operating according to the same laws. So what happens to analogy? As I've already suggested, it is still at the basis of teleology. Kant's teleological judgments have themselves an analogical status: they help us conceive of nature *as if* it were purposively designed or had a purpose to its development. Analogy in natural history leads us to articulate a teleological principle, which is itself analogical in form.

But the introduction of teleology into natural history has at least one consequence wholly unanticipated by the first *Critique*'s appeals to analogical thinking. This is the future orientation implicit in teleological judgment. Intended to put the present and past in contact, teleology opens up another dimension of time. It defers making constitutive claims about nature, but in this deferral discovers the “indeterminate future end” that serves as human thought's vanishing point.⁶⁶

From a moral standpoint, futurity is always a concern for Kant. Thus his reviews of Herder conclude that the human species should be understood morally, not biologically, as engaged in a collective progress toward perfection: “no single

⁶⁶ For this point, see Zuckert 2007. According to her, the third *Critique* discovers something like the historicity of human being: “Kant's concept of purposiveness without a purpose...aim[s] *towards* an indeterminate future end, and this new form of teleology characterizes only and specifically human, judging subjects” (10). By grounding all possible knowledge of nature in this new “way of being,” the third *Critique* constitutes the moment at which “Kant's transcendental idealism is stretching beyond its formal, critical limits” (11).

member in all those generations of the human race, but only the species, fully achieves its destination,” Kant writes (1963: 51). Because moralization is an infinite task, the immortality of the species must be assumed in order to justify human practice in the present.

What the *Critique of Judgment* suggests is rather different. By extending teleology from the practical to the theoretical dimensions of Kant’s thought, the third *Critique* proposes that futurity is, after all, a necessary problem for reason. This is not just a matter of resurrecting the pre-enlightenment specters of design and teleology, but of what Kant considers human reason’s ineluctable fate. Because of the limits reason puts on the concept of teleology, natural history must defer its completion to some future moment, impossible to anticipate. Yet human thought invariably orients itself toward this moment. Against his own therapeutic impulse in the “Antinomy of Pure Reason,” Kant now discovers, in the very text intended to close off the critical system, an obscure yet unshakeable feeling for the future.

Remaining Time

Many of Kant’s readers have observed the transformation in his sense of time that takes place during the 1790s. Michel Foucault, for instance, finds in the 1798 *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* a revisionary repetition of the first *Critique*’s account of time. In this later work’s insistent empiricism, Foucault contends, time is reconceived, not as a mode of intuition, but as a mode of “dispersion, which will never end and has never [truly] begun” (2008: 89-93). The three-dimensionality dimly felt at the close of the third *Critique* takes a more determinate form here: time is less an aspect of the subject’s intuiting activity, endlessly reiterated in the present, than the necessary shape of experience as it befalls

the subject. Foucault is right to observe that, in such moments, the *feeling* of time (if not its transcendental logic) is the feeling of being passively thrown into the middle of things. Such radical passivity is a far cry from the spontaneous activity of consciousness that the first *Critique* calls “time.”

So even if Kant never goes back on the transcendental, he does become increasingly aware of human finitude in all its physicality. This has the strange effect of once more loosening time from its foundations in consciousness. Taken transcendently, time is finite because it is inconceivable apart from a subject. And such epistemological-transcendental finitude, as we have seen, immunizes time against any empirical changes that might compromise its universality and necessity. In light of the decidedly more *material* finitude explored in texts like the *Anthropology*, time starts to feel rather different. It is now experienced in its acting on the subject – and even more, on the bodies in which subjectivity resides. This is time under the sign of lateness: an implacable wearing away, in which all material things are implicated.

This raises the question of how much time is allotted to, or remains for, any particular being. Unlike in the *Critiques*, where the transcendental is defined by its a priority, Kant now wonders if the machinery of cognition can be brought to a halt by the body’s being in time. Thus, an essay from the 1798 collection *The Conflict of the Faculties* asks if the human mind could “Master its Morbid Feelings by Sheer Resolution.” The answer is “yes,” for the most part. But the essay also identifies an “involuntary spasmodic condition of the brain” that disrupts “the firm coherence of ideas in their temporal sequence” (1799: 207). Such brain spasms issue in morbid feelings strong enough to dismantle the subject’s inner time-sense. This is a matter of personal experience for Kant, who admits to having “contracted” the very illness he

describes (“I think it is a kind of gout that has to some extent penetrated the brain,” he writes [205]). Afflicted with a condition that will only end with life itself, Kant finds it harder and harder to organize his thoughts. Now, he remarks, “when the time comes for me to connect” the end of a lecture with its beginning, “I must suddenly ask my audience (or myself, silently): now where was I? where did I start from?” Profoundly disoriented as he stands at the podium, the great expositor of the transcendental unity of apperception is unable “to maintain unity of consciousness in his ideas” (207). There is more to this than a sad irony. The disunity that Kant associates with his own finitude is in fact the feeling of a temporality independent of consciousness, as it inscribes itself on the aging philosopher’s body.⁶⁷

Intimations of this non-transcendental temporality can be found across the late Kantian corpus. Ruins, fossils, and scars of geological upheaval – all point to a time without the subject.⁶⁸ In the *Anthropology*, Kant calls such marks or traces “*signum rememorativum*,” signs of remembrance (2006: 86), and locates them in the category of “natural signs.” According to hermeneutic tradition, natural signs include anything immediately expressive of an unintentional causal relation (e.g. smoke from a fire or leaves from a tree). To identify a ruin as a natural sign is to render already tenuous divisions – between natural and human history, physical change and inner time – even

⁶⁷ To cite Foucault once more, old age is “the state in which illness can no longer be mastered – where time, once again, is in control” (2008: 51). On the *Conflict*’s broader medical context, especially its relation to Cristoph Wilhelm Hufeland’s 1796 *Macrobiotics, or the Art of Prolonging Human Life*, see 44-51.

⁶⁸ Thus, the “morbidity” taken up in the *Conflict* is only one of the forms in which it makes itself felt. Cf. Lehman 2009 for more on the tension between morbidity and closure (systematic, subjective, and otherwise) in the late Kant. For Lehman, the finitude of the transcendental subject makes possible a “theory of the event, as a theory of exposure to the unprecedented occurrence” (72). The morbid feelings of the *Conflict* constitute such a moment of exposure to what exceeds the transcendental. My reading of the late Kant is obviously quite similar. But rather than call such instances of exposure “events,” I want to further specify their temporal nature.

more so. Taken as a natural sign, a ruin does not only signal the intentions of its human architects, but the intentionless process of its decay. This effectively inverts the logic of the *Physical Geography*, which saw nature as a record of human actions and affects. Here, in the ruin, human history and its monuments are naturalized in decay.⁶⁹

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant had already anticipated this undermining of the distinction between human and natural history. The claim that natural history actually means doing “the archaeology of nature” suggests that each of these categories is contaminated by its other. Following on the reintroduction of teleological principles into philosophy, archaeology uncovers signs of design in nature – that is, signs used to justify the analogy between natural and human artifacts. As Kant explains, “an archaeology of nature would cover, for example, petrifications, just as cut stones, etc. are covered by [the archaeology of] *art*” (1987: 315). But when the *Anthropology* engages in an archaeological reading of nature, the result is a history written in signs of remembrance:

Layers of shells in regions far from the sea, the holes of Pholades in the high Alps, or volcanic residue where no fire now bursts from the earth, signify to us the ancient condition of the world and establish an *archaeology* of nature.... The ruins of Palmyra, Baalbek, and Persepolis are telling monuments of the state of art in *ancient* states, and sad indications of the change of *all* things. (2006: 87)

This is a natural history of destruction, written in the marks of past geological catastrophes: the rise and fall of oceans, the eruption of volcanic ash and fire, the collapse of civilizations. Nothing, human or otherwise, escapes the “change of *all* things.” These archaeological discoveries signal, not design or purpose in nature, but the fissures in the transcendental; they are fossil evidence of a time before and

⁶⁹ Cf. Benjamin 2003: “In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (177-8).

without the subject. Such a natural history, which exceeds *and* encompasses the human, makes it nearly impossible to isolate time from physical change. On the far side of critique, J.H. Lambert's incredulous remarks are worth recalling: because change is real, time must be real as well.

These natural-historical signs of remembrance may also serve as portents of catastrophes to come. Faced with the evidence of past geological disturbances, we cannot help speculating about the possibility of future "revolutions." The archaeology of nature reveals that major upheaval is not at all uncommon. The fossil record, for instance, gives compelling proof that each epoch in nature's past history was preceded by a planetary catastrophe. How else can we explain the seashells discovered at the tops of mountains, or the fossilized remains of animal species no longer extant on earth? Faced with such questions, the third *Critique* concedes that the apparently purposive shape of the world's continents is "merely the result of eruptions, either of fire or of water, or of upheavals of the ocean." Departing from familiar physico-theological accounts of catastrophe,⁷⁰ Kant asserts that no such event was unique: "This is how this shape was first produced, but especially also how it was later restructured, a restructuring that brought along with it the destruction of the first organic products of the earth" (1987: 315). Species extinction only makes sense if nature's history has been punctuated by violent upheavals.

But did these upheavals, and the mass extinctions attendant on them, serve a purpose? The question is an important one for Kant: if the system of nature is not to be dismantled by sheer contingency, these revolutions must be recuperated as, in some sense, purposive. The concluding sections of the "Critique of Teleological

⁷⁰ Departing, that is, from the Biblical interpretations of natural history offered by Thomas Burnet and others. See Abrams 1971b: 99 ff.

Judgment” show how hard it is to find a purpose in nature at all. From a strict physical standpoint, not even the human can claim to be nature’s “special darling”:

[It] has in fact spared him no more than any other animal from its destructive workings: plague, famine, flood, frost, or attacks from other animals, large or small, and so on. What is more, man’s own absurd *natural predispositions* land him in further troubles that he thinks up himself, and [make him] put others of his own species in great misery through oppressive domination, barbaric wars, etc., and [so] man himself does all he can to work for the destruction of his own species. (318)

If the violence of nature were not enough, the human suffers from self-inflicted wounds. Colonialism, slavery, war – evidence enough for Kant to identify a death drive operating on the level of the species.⁷¹ But there is one important caveat here: this self-directed violence originates in humanity’s “natural predispositions,” with the animal in “man.” And of course, there is more to the human than this. So the moral core of human being is the only conceivable purpose in nature, insofar as it is essentially *unnatural*.

This is why Kant still deems the human species to be nature’s “*ultimate purpose*” (317). As the only rational and moral being we know of, and thus as the being “where the principle of purposes seems to be borne out most” (304), the human is the only end that nature could have. Simultaneously animal and moral, the human being provides reflective judgment with the unique instance of a living entity generated by *and* somehow external to the natural world. Nature’s purpose is to transcend itself, then, by circuitously leading the human away from violence toward culture and morality.⁷² But Kant also notes, as we have seen, that moralization is an

⁷¹ *Perpetual Peace*, published in 1795, contains Kant’s most extensive attack on colonialism. Against the European propensity to colonial violence, this essay develops a law of universal hospitality, derived from the inherent right of rational beings to inhabit the earth.

⁷² Cheah 2003 gives an account of nature, culture, and freedom in the third *Critique* that nicely captures the paradoxes at work: “What does it mean for freedom

infinite task; an ideal of reason, it is necessarily accompanied by a notion of the human species' immortality. The earth's revolutions must have contributed to the production of a morally free being, without ever compromising its survival. (Or at least such a claim would suffice for the power of judgment, as it employs the principle of purposiveness in its systematic ordering of nature.)

By the time of the *Opus postumum*, Kant is less sure about this last point. A series of notes from around 1800 raise directly the question of human survival, as they consider the ways in which planetary catastrophe could be necessary for the fulfillment of nature's purposes. Significantly, these texts also return to, and now seem to embrace, Herder's evolutionism. One note proposes the following: "The organized creatures form on earth a whole according to purposes which [can be thought] *a priori*, as sprung from a single seed (like an incubated egg), with mutual need for one another, preserving its species and the species that are born from it." Returning to the idea of organic life as a whole, this text uses teleology as an organizing principle and as justification for entertaining the same evolutionary hypotheses dismissed in the third *Critique*. This vision of nature is almost ecological in its insistence on preservation and "mutual need." But the note quickly turns from relations of mutuality to supersession. "Also, revolutions of nature which brought forth new species (of which man is one)," Kant writes, as an afterthought (1995: 57). His claim is that the evolution of animal species depends, not on an innate vital force, but on revolutions in nature. Even the human being arose out of this revolutionary

to be based on something inhuman when we have always regarded freedom as *human* and humanity to be *free*, when we axiomatically view freedom as that which co-belongs with humanity, as humankind's distinctive and highest trait, so much so that it is redundant to speak of *human* freedom?" (3) The result, for Cheah, is the exposure of human freedom to heteronomy, to the "gift" or "favor" of nature upon which it ultimately depends (19-20). Cf. Deleuze 1985: 68-75 on the realization of freedom by a "ruse of nature."

chaos, which invariably accompanies the transition between “different world-epochs” populated by different species (67). Each past upheaval, it seems, was a herald of earth’s progressive development toward the better.⁷³

This leads Kant to a profoundly unsettling thought. While the third *Critique* tried to delimit historical development to the moral realm, the *Opus postumum* intimates that *natural* history may not be over. And if it is not, we have to ask whether or not these planetary catastrophes have had, or will have, an impact on the human species. Strangely, the past is no help here. When we look to the fossil record, Kant remarks, we find no evidence of human life in earth’s early epochs. The absence of evidence is not enough to draw conclusions. Without fossilized human remains, there is no way to know if a planetary extinction event could have taken place during the time of humanity’s existence.⁷⁴ The uncertainty is paralyzing, a fragment explains:

How many such revolutions (including, certainly, many ancient organic beings, no longer alive on the surface of the earth) preceded the existence of man, and how many (accompanying, perhaps, a more

⁷³ The account of development here is *palingenetic*. Indeed, Kant proposes, the earth should be viewed as a single entity undergoing progressive development: “One must also conceive of a world-organization in a unified body, in which no forms perish without having brought forth other better ones” (1995: 65). On Kant’s interest in palingenesis, see Effinger 2011.

⁷⁴ Human fossils were a matter of some debate in Kant’s time. Their seeming absence from the fossil record was often held to corroborate Biblical accounts of creation. Kant does not go this far, but he does suggest, in a bizarre passage from the 1775 race essay, that Tibet may have been “the common place of refuge for humankind during the earth’s last great geological revolution, and, in the period following that revolution, a plant nursery for the re-vegetation of the entire earth” (17). By hiding in Tibet, the members of the human species were able to escape extinction.

Schelling proposes, in the 1809 *Philosophical Investigations*, that different species of humans may have sequentially occupied the earth. The epoch of pagan myth, “time of the presiding gods and heroes,” was immediately followed by a “time when all this magnificence dissolves and, as if by a terrible sickness, the beautiful body of the previous world collapses and chaos finally emerges once again” (2006: 45). After this collapse of the mythic world, so complete as to leave no trace of its inhabitants behind, comes our Judeo-Christian era. Rather than begin from a biblical framework, Schelling presents the history of religions as a catastrophic natural history.

perfect organization) are still in prospect, is hidden from our inquiring gaze – for, according to Camper, not a single example of a human being is to be found in the depth of the earth. (67)

The sheet ends here. Confronted with the eerie non-appearance of human fossils, Kant concludes that inquiry can go no further. The natural historian can have nothing more to say about the revolutions of the earth.

Without the evidence of the past to work with, the future of the earth is left radically open. We already know that future time plays no part in a strictly critical natural history. Yet it is also clear that Kant cannot help speculating about it. The signs of remembrance that litter the pages of the *Anthropology* demand to be read as portents as much as monuments or memorials: “*prognostic* signs are the most interesting of all,” this text acknowledges. The danger is when prognostication turns to prophecy – when, for example, “comets, balls of light shooting across the sky, northern lights, even solar and lunar eclipses” are taken as visible signs of the impending “end of the world” (2006: 87). Kant vehemently denounces such mysticism. At best an absurdity, it is more often a tool of manipulation. Careful legislation of the faculty of desire by the understanding is the only sure guide to what the future holds; once more, Kant restricts futurity to its practical significance. He thus remarks, “One might almost believe that Providence intentionally made the play of atmospheric conditions such an inscrutable tangle that human beings could not make the necessary preparations for every occasion” (79). The future will not be heralded by signs in the sky or by alterations in the atmosphere. Indeed, the end of the world can’t be anticipated by looking to the weather.

This absence of atmospheric evidence does not do away with the catastrophic mood of the late Kant. In fact, it does just the opposite. These revolutions to come, about which we know nothing at all, are a persistent and haunting presence in Kant’s

later writings. What is more, the thought of revolution tends to intrude right when it would seem to be least welcome: in anticipations of humanity's moral improvement. For instance, near the *Anthropology*'s close, as he confidently looks forward to "the development of good out of evil," Kant interrupts his own train of thought. Struck with a certain morbid feeling, perhaps, he remarks that "[t]his is a prospect that can be expected with moral certainty...unless upheavals in nature suddenly cut it short" (234).

Published in the same year, *The Conflict of the Faculties* offers an even more uncompromising vision of moralization interrupted. Kant may argue here, as he often does, that "the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth" (1979: 159). This is the moral proof of the species' immortality with which we are familiar. Once more, though, moral certainty is not quite certain enough: "this reveals the prospect of an immeasurable time – provided at least there does not, by some chance, occur a second epoch of natural revolution which will push aside the human race to clear the stage for other creatures, like that which (according to Camper and Blumenbach) submerged the plant and animal kingdoms before men ever existed" (161). Over against the infinite task of moralization, Kant holds out the possibility of the human species' total extinction.

Even more unsettling, this appears to be an extinction event with a *purpose*. The end of the world for us may be just the beginning for some other species – a species for which a planetary catastrophe would "clear the stage." And if the revolutions in nature do contribute to its purposes, then the human being may not be the last word. In the *Opus postumum*, Kant suggests that this is more than likely: "men, as rational beings, exist for the sake of others of a different species (race)," he

proclaims (1995: 66).⁷⁵ Kant's fascination with extraterrestrial life is well known. In the early *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, Kant imagines the inhabitants of each planet in our solar system, arguing that their powers of mind must be heightened in inverse relation to the density of the matter of which they are composed. The *Anthropology* also speculates about alien species, and it juxtaposes the human reliance on language with the telepathic communications of hypothetical extraterrestrial beings.⁷⁶ Here, however, little can be said about this "different species (race)" destined to inherit the earth. We know that their time is not ours, but that no visible signs will alert us to its arrival. For now, this alien world-epoch is conceivable only in an affective register, as an atmosphere of living on (who knows how much) remaining time.

I conclude by turning to one last late Kantian document. This is 1827's *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant*, by Thomas De Quincey (who, in turn, adapts a memorial written by Kant's disciple E.A.C. Wasianski). A philosopher in pain himself, De Quincey seems to find great pleasure in cataloguing the aging Kant's infirmities – not least among which are the headaches he suffered in old age. In nearly constant agonies, "he now lost all accurate measure of time" (1890: 346); as Kant also suggests in the *Conflict*, the transcendental subject cannot do without a body. Increasingly desperate to explain his time-distorting headaches, Kant becomes fixated

⁷⁵ Fenves 2003 derives from this claim a Kantian "geo-ethics," whereby humans ought to act as if they are preserving the earth for another species of rational beings. Fenves's work has been enormously influential on my own; see especially the chapter in *Late Kant*, "Revolution in the Air," which links up Kant's interests in atmospheric electricity with his anxieties about revolutions in nature and the general discussion of "transitions" in the *Opus postumum*.

⁷⁶ Clark 2001 gives a good account of Kant's "alienology," as it joins the question of extraterrestrial life with that of human difference. Cf. Cohen 2009 on the significance of alien beings to Kant's anthropological method.

on the earthly influence of atmospheric electricity. De Quincey describes this obsession well:

Another sign of his mental decay was the weakness with which he began to theorise. He accounted for everything [even his headaches, De Quincey scoffs] by electricity. ...he persuaded himself that a peculiar configuration of clouds prevailed; this he took as collateral proof of his electrical hypothesis.... And this was a notion of which his friends were not anxious to disabuse him; because, as something of the same character of weather (and therefore probably the same general distribution of the electric power) is found to prevail for whole cycles of years, entrance upon another cycle held out to him some prospect of relief. (344-5)

Kant waits anxiously for a new atmospheric cycle to begin, convinced that only thus will his morbid feelings be alleviated. Yet the loss of his sense of time is not without recompense. Nearly unable to think, let alone bear witness to the forms of intuition, Kant is more a “vegetable” than a scholar. And yet this nearly subhuman state opens up the transcendental frame – that is, to a temporality that is inhuman in scale.

What Wasianski and De Quincey assess as theoretical weakness – the attribution of everything to changes in the atmosphere – is nothing other than the ether theory of the *Opus postumum*. In this final collection of notes, Kant still argues that space and time, taken as finite magnitudes, are nothing but appearances. But he now contends that these appearances demand from us the idea of “an even greater magnitude,” in which they take place (1995: 63). This infinite magnitude is the ether. Furthermore, and most radical of all, Kant’s ether is no mere hypothesis. It is demonstrable a priori to *exist*. The necessary site of all appearances, the ether itself is an imperceptible “world-material.” But we may think it, Kant writes, as subject to “alternating impacts and counterimpacts [existing] from the beginning of the world, as a trembling (oscillating, vibrating) motion of the matter which fills the entire universe, includes within itself all bodies, and is both elastic and at the same time attractive in itself” (25).

The catastrophic moods and morbid feelings of the late Kant almost seem to emanate from this trembling, pulsing ethereal world. De Quincey's elegy suggests that these atmospherics could be the sensible mode of the universal ether grounding all appearances. If this is right, the unsettled, disorienting time of the late Kant is in fact the feeling of an atmospheric revolution – of the arrival of a new epoch in the ether.

Chapter 2

Ether and Bad Atmosphere in the Shelleys

Introduction

How should we understand Percy Shelley's *materialism*? More and more, Shelley's readers identify him with some form of materialist thought.⁷⁷ This intuition is surprising in light of earlier scholarship, which saw the poet's youthful skepticism cast aside in his mature writing for an "impulse toward a postmortal transcendence."⁷⁸ Even harder to account for, by 1819 Shelley has explicitly denounced the materialism of the *philosophes* ("a seducing system to young and superficial minds" [*SPP* 2002: 506]), while his poems repeatedly invoke "the soul" and "spirit."

My chapter aims to make sense of this ideological puzzle. It does so in several ways. First, it argues that Shelley's materialism, if such it is, needs to be read alongside contemporary physical and chemical debates about ether. I touched on Kant's use of this concept in the previous chapter. Here, I look further back, to its preeminent modern articulation in Isaac Newton.⁷⁹ For Newton, ether was the extremely subtle conduit of forces such as light, magnetism, and gravity. By way of ethereal mediation, he argued, these forces could operate between distant objects (like

⁷⁷ For only a few of the most influential instances, see de Man 1984, Morton 1994, Hamilton 2003, and Hamilton 2006.

⁷⁸ See Wasserman 1971: ix. More recently, Roberts 1997 examines Shelley's "conscious employment of idealist topoi" (108), while arguing that the poet's Lucretianism explains his vacillation between idealist and skeptical standpoints. In resisting the zero-sum logic of much Shelley criticism, Roberts's method has affinities with my own. Generally speaking, Hogle 1988 and Wilson 2013 take similar approaches.

⁷⁹ Schofield 1970 explains that, while this "subtle spirit" (13) appears in the 1713 text of the *Principia*, the 1717 *Opticks* holds its fullest explanation: here, "the aether is described as a medium which expands through all space, filling it and pervading the pores of gross bodies by virtue of its great elasticity and because of its extreme subtlety" (14). For in-depth historical accounts of ether theory, see Schofield and Milutis 2006. Grabo 1930 exhaustively catalogues Shelley's allusions to these ideas.

planetary bodies) without violating the laws of nature. Newton's ether cannot be categorized as material or immaterial, and it ultimately suspends the distinction. This is its appeal for Shelley, who takes ether as an ideal for poetic thinking; traversing opposed, even inconsistent, terms, ethereality signifies the desire for a thought or theory *without reduction*.

This is not just a useful metaphor. On the levels of poetic form and metaphysical argument alike, Shelley's ether tests the limits of ontological reduction. This is especially so as he considers, in poems like 1813's *Queen Mab*, the relation between matter and consciousness. From the mid-eighteenth-century on, ether had been considered, not just a vehicle for physical forces, but as somehow involved in the operations of human thought.⁸⁰ In the ether hypothesis, therefore, Shelley sees the possibility of a materialism that would resist eliminating questions of mind as inherently false or misguided. Shelley's materialism is a "real materialism," in Galen Strawson's sense of the term: it assumes "that experiential phenomena are real concrete phenomena – for nothing in life is more certain" (2006: 55).

To be sure, Shelley is not a philosopher. He is fascinated by philosophical and scientific problems, but his thinking largely takes place in poetry. His materialism is therefore unsystematic, even *inconsistent*, in the best possible sense: it encompasses both matter and mind, by way of an etherealist poetics that insistently upends the priority of either term in this pairing. Thus Shelley can suggest, in his apparent ode to imagination, "Mont Blanc," that the mind is a contingent product of natural forces,⁸¹ while arguing, in his most obviously materialist poem, *Queen Mab*, that "[t]hroughout this varied and eternal world / Soul is the only element" (*SPP* 2002: IV.139-40). The

⁸⁰ See Wroe 2010 on David Hartley's 1749 *Observations on Man*, its etherealist theory of mind, and Shelley's marginal notes on the essay.

⁸¹ For this argument, see Chapter 4.

anti-reductive impulse of Shelley's poetry is such that it turns and returns from matter to mind and back again, in an effort to do justice to both.⁸² This is as much a political, as an ontological, justice: Shelley's opposition to hierarchies of being is explicitly intended to have political consequences.

One might reply: "This etherealism is all well and good, but it is still no materialism." Again, that depends on what we mean by materialism. Strawson has already provided us with one example of a self-described materialism committed to the reality of conscious experience. Enlightenment and romantic thought is replete with others, from Spinoza's dual-aspect monism to the anti-mechanistic fluid theories of the young Joseph Priestley and Erasmus Darwin (for whom, one historian suggests, "materialism" was opposed to the mechanical physics of the earlier eighteenth century).⁸³ Percy Shelley is not alone, then, in using materialism to resist the processes of reduction or elimination often associated with it. Among the romantics, however, the most pointed exploration of eliminative materialism and its consequences for life is in fact Mary Shelley's.

This chapter closes with a look at her 1826 novel of human extinction, *The Last Man*. First tracing the aesthetic education of its protagonist, Lionel Verney, *The Last Man* rapidly becomes a kind of *Bildungsroman* in reverse. In its later volumes, where a plague eliminates the entire human species, it tells a story of relentless

⁸² In reading Shelley's ethereality as a *poetics*, I hope to avoid the all-too-common critical reduction of Shelley's poetry to "'lyricised science'" (Wilson 2013: 26). As Wilson argues, the problem with this approach is its assumption "that the process of 'lyricising' science has no significant effect on the thinking that science is always already taken to have set forth" (27).

⁸³ Schofield 1970: 15-6, where "materialism" signifies the mid-century physicochemical notion that all causes "inhere in unique substances, each possessing as an essential property the power to convey...some characteristic quality." This is opposed to the attribution of causation to uniform particles of matter and their motions. On Spinoza's dual-aspect ontology, which identifies thought and extension as two attributes of substance, see Deleuze 1988 and Levinson 2007.

deformation, of cultural collapse, that is also an education in the starkest, most uncompromising materialism.⁸⁴ Against *Queen Mab*, which it frequently alludes to and critiques, the novel reduces mind to matter and then evacuates this reduction of any explanatory force. It rejects the utopian premises of Percy Shelley's etherealism entirely. Substituting for ether the "infect[ed]" "air" (1998: 231) and "pernicious effluvia" (259) of the plague, Mary Shelley envisions a natural history that runs athwart all anthropocentric notions of the good. The novel's materialism cannot be recuperated by or for us. Indeed, it premises a resistance to instrumentality so complete that it dismantles human knowledge and values as we know them. This, Mary Shelley suggests, is a truly consistent materialism. The question remains: is this a world in which we could possibly live?

"A Certain Very Subtle Spirit"

Shelley's interest in the ether hypothesis begins early. His friend Thomas Jefferson Hogg reports that, in his Oxford days, Shelley was more taken with chemistry ("the only science that deserve[s] to be studied" [1904: 15]) than metaphysics or literature.⁸⁵ Hogg recalls the young poet's excited claims, around 1810, for its boundless potential. When the state of chemical knowledge permits water, heat, and electricity to be produced at will, Shelley predicts, the human species will attain perfect mastery of the earth. Such "useful fluid[s]" will then be ours to manipulate; by their "chemical agency," he promises, we may "transmute an unfruitful region into a land of exuberant plenty" (17-8), make clay and stone into

⁸⁴ For a related reading of the novel's interest in culture, cf. Strang 2011.

⁸⁵ As Alfred North Whitehead puts it, "What the hills were to the youth of Wordsworth, a chemical laboratory was to Shelley" (Grabo 1930: xiv). There is a story to be told about the competition between physics and chemistry for the status of romantic master science. In the previous chapter, in assessing Kant's notion of the exact sciences, I briefly touch on this topic.

sources of warmth, and even control the “omnipotent energies” of electricity (20).

This techno-utopian vision is not unique, and Shelley will soon repudiate its baldly instrumental premises. But the language of electrical fluids and physical forces reveals a burgeoning fascination with scientific etherealism.

More compelling are Shelley’s comments on metaphysics, immediately following in Hogg’s remembrance of their first meeting: “‘Ay, metaphysics,’ he said, in a solemn tone, and with a mysterious air, ‘that is a noble study indeed! If it were possible to make any discoveries there, they would be more valuable than anything the chemists have done, or could do; they would disclose the analysis of mind, and not mere matter!’” (23). Shelley’s claim is strikingly ambivalent. If it were *possible* to make pure metaphysical discoveries, these would indeed be valuable. But the phrasing implies that this possibility is far from certain. For now, the analysis of mind, disclosed by a kind of chemistry of consciousness, is a mere imagination.

The nature of Shelley’s skepticism about metaphysics is clarified by an 1811 letter to Elizabeth Hitchener. Broaching the topic of aesthetic experience, he cautions that philosophical inquiry often obfuscates more than it reveals: “Thus does knowledge lose all the pleasure which involuntarily arises by attempting to arrest the fleeting phantom as it passes...vain, almost like the chemist’s ether it evaporates under our observation” (1912, I: 115). The object of scientific or philosophical inquiry becomes, in Shelley’s metaphor, an ether that vanishes under scrutiny.⁸⁶ In its

⁸⁶ The chemical sense of “ether,” which Shelley uses here, is not identical to those I discuss below. As the *OED* explains, the ether of Newtonian physics is “[a]n extremely rarefied and elastic substance formerly thought to permeate all space, including the interstices between the particles of ordinary matter” (3a); chemical ether, on the other hand, is a “sweet-smelling, volatile, flammable liquid made by distilling ethanol with sulphuric acid and used as a solvent, as an intermediate in chemical synthesis” (5a). But cf. Priesner 1986 on the historical and conceptual intersections between alchemical, chemical, and physical ethers – not least of which is their shared name.

familiar forms, philosophy is unsuited to such subtleties. Shelley's implication is that, when investigating ethereal substances ("pleasure," in this case), a correspondent style of thinking is called for.

These anecdotes about the young Shelley show that, by 1810 or 11, he was not only invested in the science of ethers, but that he had already begun to conceive of ethereality as a mode of thought. In view of his skepticism about philosophical analysis, it makes sense that such ethereal thinking would best take place in poetry. An 1812 sonnet, on the circulation by hot air balloon of Shelley's pamphlet *A Declaration of Rights*, imagines what this might entail:

Bright ball of flame that through the gloom of even
Silently takest thine ethereal way
And with surpassing glory dimm'st each ray
Twinkling amid the dark blue Depths of Heaven:
Unlike the Fire thou bearest, soon shalt thou
Fade like a meteor in surrounding gloom. (*SPP* 2002: 1-6)

The poem's imagery, conspicuously borrowed from optics, astronomy, and so on, stages a complex interplay between light and darkness, density and weightlessness. The apostrophized balloon begins as a gleaming fireball that reduces even starlight to dimness. In its radiant glory and seeming independence from gravity, it can only be made present metonymically. But this weightless luminosity is suddenly outshined and burdened down by the "fire" it carries: Shelley's own anarchist manifesto, the *Declaration*.⁸⁷ The poem's course, from the materiality of flame and light to the immaterial glow of an idea, is changed by a countervailing diction. Describing a

⁸⁷ For Shelley's political anarchism, see Scrivener 1982. Scrivener comments, too, on the use of light imagery in Shelley's political writings. In such texts, he observes, "fire and light imagery signif[ies] the creative mind": "The enlightened mind gives off light and heat, which can ignite other minds in a fiery apocalypse of libertarian revolution" (60). Such tropes are often taken as proof of Shelley's elitism. But the radical impersonality that, for him, undergirds processes of enlightenment, creativity, and sympathy should complicate this somewhat. Cf. Khalip 2009: 97 ff.

weightless flame as it is “laden” down by an even subtler substance – by “*Knowledge*,” as the title has it – the poem asserts the real substantiality of thought. Floating weightlessly and pulled back to earth, brighter than the stars and fading into night, the balloon travels on its “etherial way.”

Such paradoxes do not make a theory. (They barely constitute a reading of Shelley’s poem.) But by turning from these suggestive invocations of ether to their natural-scientific referents, I aim to restore some of the gravity to Shelley’s ethereal poetics. So before turning to *Queen Mab*, the visionary materialist poem that is my focus in what follows, I consider some contemporary physical theories of ether, and ask how they might inform Shelley’s ideas about poetic language.

Though not the first, the preeminent modern ether theory is Isaac Newton’s. It emerges directly in response to a difficulty in his account of gravity: how do gravitational forces operate between bodies distant from one another in space? In his correspondence with the theologian Richard Bentley, Newton elaborates on this problem of action at a distance. A letter of 1692 explains in detail:

It is inconceivable that inanimate brute matter should, without the mediation of something else, which is not material, operate upon and affect other matter without mutual contact....That gravity should be innate, inherent, and essential to matter, so that one body may act upon another at a distance through a vacuum without the mediation of anything else, by and through which their action and force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an absurdity, that I believe no man who has in philosophical matters a competent faculty of thinking can ever fall into it. Gravity must be caused by an agent acting constantly according to certain laws; but whether this agent be material or immaterial, I have left to the consideration of my readers. (*Writings* 2004: 102-3)

Newton explicitly rejects all Epicurean or Spinozist ideas about the forces inherent in matter. For him, there is no such power in matter – and therefore no sign in it of nascent will or consciousness. The danger of falling into an atheistic panpsychism

looms large for Newton and Bentley.⁸⁸ In an earlier letter, Newton even warns, “You sometimes speak of gravity as essential and inherent to matter. Pray do not ascribe that notion to me” (100). But, he adds, because gravity is universal and lawful in its operations, even between distant bodies, it must function by the action of some obscure agent, be it “material or immaterial.”

The *Principia*’s “General Scholium” speaks more directly about the unknown cause of gravity. Here, in a passage that Shelley will cite in the notes to *Queen Mab*, Newton observes that, despite “explain[ing] the phenomena of the heavens and of our sea by the force of gravity,” he has “not yet assigned a cause to gravity.” In the absence of any tangible evidence about its nature, he famously proclaims, “I do not feign hypotheses”: “whatever is not deduced from the phenomena must be called a hypothesis; and hypotheses, whether metaphysical or physical, or based on occult qualities, or mechanical, have no place in philosophy” (92). For Shelley, this dismantling of hypothetical thought is as good as a proof of God’s nonexistence. Any phenomena supposed to demonstrate God’s existence is better explained otherwise, he argues. “The consistent Newtonian is necessarily an atheist,” the poet concludes, thereby confirming Bentley’s worst fears (*Prose* 1988: 102). In the *Principia* itself,

⁸⁸ The correspondence between Newton and Bentley is largely concerned with the theological implications of the law of gravity. Implicit in this dialogue is an anxiety about Spinozist thought. Committed to both the inherent mindedness of substance and the equivalence of God and nature, Spinoza holds all those positions Newton and Bentley try to avoid. See the latter’s 1692 sermon *Matter and Motion Cannot Think*, on St. Paul’s refutation of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophies of material nature (Bentley 1724).

In early modernity and beyond, “Stoicism” could often mean Spinozism. Henrich 2003 points out the deep continuities, in enlightenment Germany, between the revival of Stoic philosophy and a “suppressed tradition” of “Spinozism, not in its academic form, but as a philosophy that various little Protestant sects (in the Netherlands, for instance, from whence their influence subsequently spread over Europe) advocated” (85). Cf. Israel 2001 for a related account of Spinozist currents in enlightenment thought, as opposed to Locke and Newton’s “moderate mainstream” (12). This is not, however, all there is to say about Newton and the radical enlightenment. I return to this below.

however, this rejection of hypotheses is intended to foreclose on all speculation about the basis of gravity's mathematically verifiable effects.

Yet Newton's text goes on to engage in the precise mode of thinking it seemingly forbids.⁸⁹ Following his direct prohibition on hypotheses, Newton off-handedly remarks that a "few things could now be added concerning a certain very subtle spirit pervading gross bodies and lying hidden in them." This spirit has perhaps already been alluded to in the correspondence with Bentley. Now, however, the unknown agent of gravity's effects receives more than a negative definition. This "certain very subtle spirit" resolves the problem of action at a distance by filling in all the gaps in the theory of gravitation. But it does so much more than this. By its "force and actions," Newton proposes,

the particles of bodies attract one another at very small distances and cohere when they become contiguous; and electrical bodies act at greater distances, repelling as well as attracting neighboring corpuscles; and light is emitted, reflected, refracted, inflected, and heats bodies; and all sensation is excited, and the limbs of animals move at command of the will, namely, by the vibrations of this spirit being propagated through the solid fibers of the nerves from the external organs of the senses to the brain and from the brain into the muscles. (*Writings* 2004: 93)

The spirit, in other words, not only allows gravity to operate between planetary bodies. It also explains the attraction and cohesion between particles of matter, and the transmission of electricity and light. There is more: by its vibrations, it also transmits sensory data from the perceptual organs of living beings to their brains and muscles. Well beyond any possibility of empirical verification – "there is not a sufficient number of experiments to determine and demonstrate accurately the laws

⁸⁹ See Janiak 2004: "Newton does not systematically avoid hypotheses; rather, he believes that within the boundaries of experimental philosophy...one may not hypothesize, but it is not improper to propose hypotheses to prod future experimental research" (xxv). For Newton, it seems, hypotheses function like Kant's regulative ideas.

governing the actions of this spirit,” Newton says (93) – the spirit is found on the corpuscular as well as the cosmological scale. It binds together everything in nature, from the minutest inanimate particles to the innermost pathways of the human brain.

It would be some time before this subtle spirit was identified, in print anyway, as ether. But a 1675 letter to Henry Oldenburg, first secretary of the Royal Society, shows that Newton had always relied on some form of the ether hypothesis.

Furthermore, while the *Principia* had used it to suture together disparate parts of the natural world,⁹⁰ Newton argues here for its essential heterogeneity. After proposing to Oldenburg that light may travel as a vibration in some ethereal medium, he insists on this medium’s multiform composition. There is no reason to assume that it is “one uniform matter,” he writes. More likely, what we call “ether” is in fact “various æthereal spirits, much after the manner, that air is compounded of the phlegmatic body of air intermixed with various vapours and exhalations: for the electric and magnetic effluvia, and gravitating principle, seem to argue such variety.” The ether’s different functions, gestured at in the *Principia*, suggest that it may, in turn, be composed of as many rarefied and imperceptible substances.

The ether’s endless decomposability is matched by a powerful holism.

“Perhaps the whole frame of nature may be nothing but various contextures of some certain æthereal spirits,” Newton continues, now in a thoroughly speculative mode, “condensed as it were by precipitation...and after condensation wrought into various forms; at first by the immediate hand of the Creator; and ever since by the power of

⁹⁰ This tendency toward holism is often invoked in arguments about the mysticism or spiritualism of ether theory. Milutis 2006, for example, characterizes ether as “the irrational element of Newton’s rational universe, productive of a secret history of philosophic holism, radiant bodies, universal energy, and deterritorialized flows” (8). Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as I am at pains to show, ether was a widely accepted scientific concept. For Newton, Kant, Shelley, and so many others, its existence was nothing if not a rational assumption.

nature” (“Hypothesis” 2003). Ether involves all of nature in a unified process of condensation and formation, while it remains fundamentally multiple. In other words, ether is irreducible to any single element or function *and* it allows nature to be thought of as a totality.

For the natural philosophers expanding on Newton’s account, “ether” could name any number of subtle fluids or substances. For mid-century materialists such as David Hartley and the young Priestley, ether theory provided “a substantial model for their fluid matters of heat and electricity, their vital spirit, and their chemical elements” (Schofield 1970: 16). Each of these forces, from electricity to life itself, became a different type of fluid matter. The now-forgotten naturalist and theologian George Gregory – whose book *The Economy of Nature* Shelley first studied in 1810 – identifies between eleven and forty of these “distinct, simple, and elementary substances” (1796, I: 9). His catalogue of elements includes many that might once have been seen as immaterial forces; heat, light, electricity, and so forth have all become simple fluids.⁹¹ Resisting the uniform substance of the Spinozists, natural philosophers like Gregory descended into an “infinity of material substances.” Not without reason, however: the formation of a habitable, living world from so many original elements was seen as proof of divine agency in nature. As Gregory himself puts it, in a chapter on fermentation and chemical ether, “the naturalist at least can

⁹¹ Shelley’s 1814 essay *A Refutation of Deism* at least partly aligns itself with such theories, as it identifies “light, electricity, and magnetism” as both “fluids” and “substances.” More provocatively, Shelley also argues here that such fluids “seem to possess equal claims with thought to the unmeaning distinction of immateriality” (Prose 1988: 133). This claim, which not only imbricates thought in matter but dismantles the opposition between them, hews closely to those made in *Queen Mab*.

never be an atheist” (III: 83). In the name of God, theorists of the elements were content to give up on an underlying order in nature itself.⁹²

From this infinity of simple fluids arose, by century’s end, a veritable *infinity of ethers*. For instance, in Erasmus Darwin’s 1803 *Temple of Nature*, everything from repulsion and attraction – in its gravitational and chemical forms – to the power of muscular contraction – which shortens “animal fibres” and “excite[s] the sensorial power of irritation” (2006: I.245n) – is identified as an “ethereal fluid” (235n, 239n, 245n, et passim). Looking back to the origins of the universe itself, Darwin sees these manifold ethers giving shape to the primordial mass, a “flaming Chaos” that is molded into the sun and the planets (227-42). But he also insists, against the arguments from design of Gregory and others, that these ethers work without divine intervention; the natural history recounted by the *Temple* is basically absent of a designer.⁹³ This is so even in the moment of consciousness’ emergence. For Darwin, mind is no divine gift, but an epiphenomenon of the power of contraction. Thought arises from, and is mediated by, the ethers of brain and body.

In such moments, the potentials of ether theory are clearest. Ether offers not only a resolution to certain problems in physics, but a still unfamiliar way of thinking

⁹² For the “infinity of material substances,” see Schofield 1970: 121, where it refers to Robert Greene’s philosophy of substantial forces. On the religious motivations for these theories of the elements, see 99-100.

⁹³ God does make a very brief appearance in Darwin’s natural history, as the “first cause” of creation (I. 222). Apparently by way of an explanation, Darwin cites St. Paul on God (“In him we live, and move, and have our being”). Taken from Paul’s Areopagus sermon in *Acts* 17, this line is absolutely central in period debates about pantheism, panpsychism, and (somewhat later) the absolute. Thus, a theologian like Bentley marshals it against panpsychist theories of nature (1724: 56), while for Darwin it serves just the opposite purpose; as Martin Priestman observes, “The St. Paul quotation...lends apparent Christian legitimacy to the idea [of God as first cause], but out of context could imply no more than a pantheistic equation of God with the material universe” (2006: Editor’s Note, I.223). The same line is cited in Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* as a comment on the absolute. In each instance, these authors use Paul’s attack on pagan idolatry to sort out their different relations to Spinozism.

about matter and mind, substance and spirit. Indeed, as Newton, Gregory, and Darwin give substance to those forces they define as simple fluids, they simultaneously introduce the subtlest of matters – light, heat, electricity, even life and thought – into the category of substance. The etherealism that unfolds between the *Principia* and the *Temple of Nature* is uncontainable by the routine categorical oppositions: force and substance, spirit and matter, consciousness and unconsciousness. Ether is “a threshold of indifference,” in other words; it undoes all such divisions.⁹⁴ What Newton called a subtle spirit is this complex enfolding of substance with immateriality, life and consciousness with crude matter.

Shelley recognizes this when he writes, in 1814, that there is no such thing as the inert, extended matter of Lockean empiricism. Light and electricity are cause enough to say that all matter might be inherently active. In true etherealist fashion, he takes this one step further. For Shelley, such active fluids “possess equal claims with thought to the unmeaning distinction of immateriality” (*Prose* 1988: 133). Like his precursors in natural philosophy, for Shelley ether renders inoperative the division between materiality and immateriality: all matter exhibits some degree of activity; active matter is as immaterial as thought; therefore, all matter is immaterial, to a greater or lesser extent. The important point is that this is not a reductive argument. By this logic, matter and thought alike retain their reality, because ether theory is a *materialism of spirit*.

So when we consider Shelley’s “ethereality,” perhaps the enlightenment physicists, rather than Victorian critics like Arnold or Symonds, ought to be our

⁹⁴ Agamben 2011: 6. Throughout I am informed by Agamben’s thinking of indifference, suspension, and inoperativity – especially as it occurs in recent works such as *Nudities*.

touchstones.⁹⁵ *A Defence of Poetry* makes it clear that ether is a central category in Shelley's poetics. There, he proposes that the poet's enthusiasm makes "self appear as what it is, an atom to a Universe" (*SPP* 2002: 532). The impersonal force of inspiration joins the poet with nature as a whole. Evoking Spinoza's intellectual love of God or the post-Kantians' intellectual intuition, Shelley's vision of poetic experience entails the dissolution of the self in "the eternal, the infinite, the one," where "time and place and number are not" (513). Most importantly, the poet has the peculiar gift of communicating from within this standpoint. In Shelley's words, the poet "can colour all that they combine with the evanescent hues of this ethereal world" (532).

Shelley's argument is that poetry strives to speak impersonally, independent of its situation in time and space. It testifies to the self's embedding in nature, not in order to affirm its particular position but to get past it. Poetry, says Shelley, "reproduces the common universe of which we are portions and percipients, and it purges from our inward sight the film of familiarity which obscures from us the wonder of our being" (533). Poetry wants to renew our powers of "apprehension," in other words, our feeling of ourselves as material and intellectual beings in the world.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ In a well-known essay, Matthew Arnold describes Shelley as "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain" (Reiman and Fraistat 2002: 541). More interestingly, John Addington Symonds writes, in his 1878 biography, "All was of one piece in Shelley's nature. This peculiar voice [i.e., Shelley's extremely high-pitched voice, as described by Hogg]...corresponds to the high-strung passion of his life, his fine-drawn and ethereal fancies, and the clear vibrations of his palpitating verse. Such a voice, far-reaching, penetrating, and unearthly, befitted one who lived in rarest ether on the topmost heights of human thought" (1922: 26).

⁹⁶ On Shelley's sense of apprehension, see Wilson 2013: 12-5. According to Wilson, the power of apprehension (particularly "the apprehension of life," as his title suggests) subtends and therefore unifies sensation and intellect. Especially apparent in poetry, "it designates a kind of sensation that is always already conscious" (14). The fantasy of a unifying cognitive-somatic principle, or sense of being, is widespread. Cf. Heller-Roazen 2007 on its various classical and early modern manifestations. More

Moreover, it wants do this ethereally. As Shelley argues in the *Defence*, poetry is an ethereal language, attuned to the complex entanglements of materiality and immateriality. Though perhaps counterintuitive, the etherealism of enlightenment physics may find its purest expression in poetry. This will be my wager in the following section, where I look at *Queen Mab*'s strange crosspollination of prophetic vision and materialist thought.

Visionary Materialism

The scientific and natural-philosophical are not the only relevant contexts for an understanding of Shelley's poem. *Queen Mab* is also a political work. And one of its most compelling characteristics is the intimacy it builds between natural philosophy and politics. For Shelley, as many have noted, the two are inseparable.⁹⁷ This is certainly so with regard to his etherealism. Fascinated with matter and force, ether theory in general belongs to the scientific radicalism of the later eighteenth century. Its language of force and power, body and mass readily lent itself to both scientific and political purposes; Priestley and Comte de Volney, among others, made canny use of these dual significances.⁹⁸ But the connections are not only rhetorical.

proximately, Kant wonders in the first *Critique* about "the common unknown root" of sensibility and understanding.

⁹⁷ G.M. Matthews, in a classic 1957 essay, comments on the "inviting analogy between social upheaval and the highly topical science of geology" that Shelley borrowed from earlier revolutionary writers (2002: 564). Bewell 1999 goes even further, claiming that the link between politics and natural philosophy is such that "Shelley denies that nature is conceivable apart from human life" (217).

⁹⁸ Cf. Curran 1975: 95 ff. on ether's political valences in Volney's *Ruins*: "So universal a force [as electricity] had political implications as well – radical, secular, democratic – and Shelley was not the first to seize them. Ether is another tool that the antiestablishmentarian Volney wields in toppling monarchs and priests from the eminences of power" (108). Coleridge, in *Religious Musings*, draws a similar connection between Benjamin Franklin's experiments with electricity and his revolutionary politics: "muse / On that blest triumph, when the patriot Sage / Called the red lightnings from the o'er-rushing cloud / And dashed the beauteous terrors on

Indeed, Gregory's *Economy of Nature*, an important sourcebook for the young Shelley, was published by the well-known radical Joseph Johnson. Despite its theological leanings, the *Economy* and its infinity of simple fluids apparently held real interest for this associate of William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. Perhaps these radicals saw, as Shelley did, the potential in ether theory for an ontology liberated from hierarchies of mind or matter.

Shelley himself was convinced of this. In *Queen Mab*, the progressive history underpinning Godwin's philosophy takes an ethereal form. What the *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* projects as humanity's "'tend[ing] to a total extirpation of the infirmities of our nature'" (Wilson 2013: 11) is revealed by Shelley to depend on "the happy ferment" of nature itself (IX.49). Godwin's utopian history of humankind thus becomes, in Shelley's presentation, a utopian natural history. Furthermore, the engine of this history is the ether, its "fermentation" drawing nature and human reason into a condition of perfect harmony and unconstraint.⁹⁹ Teasing out the affinities between Newtonian physics and utopian politics is one of Shelley's great achievements in this poem.

In joining natural philosophy with politics, *Queen Mab* aligns itself with the radical enlightenment.¹⁰⁰ In Jonathan Israel's formulation, this is the strain of

the earth / Smiling majestic. Such a phalanx ne'er / Measured firm paces to the calming sound / Of Spartan flute!" (2000: 233-9)

⁹⁹ For the role of "fermentation" in Robert Boyle and Newton's ether theories, see Grabo 1930: 97. At one point, Grabo notes, Newton wonders if "'nature may be nothing but ether condensed by a fermental principle.'"

¹⁰⁰ On Shelley's belated fascination with, and critical rereading of, the radical enlightenment, see Jager 2010. Newton's position here is a matter of debate. Israel is emphatic that Newton was a moderate, not only accommodating his physics to the church, but also taking explicitly anti-radical political positions: his "notion of the constantly regulated...orderliness of the world, inevitably imparted a degree of legitimacy to the existing order of things as encountered in society and politics" (2001: 521). But Schliesser 2013 offers a different view, describing how the readers of the *Principia* identified it with atheistic Epicurean ideas.

enlightenment thought that “combines immense reverence for science...with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakable republican, even democratic tendencies” (2001: 12). But the poem also makes heavy use of the language of vision and prophecy. In Shelley’s post-revolutionary moment, such rhetoric could hold a political charge of its own.¹⁰¹

Queen Mab invokes prophecy much as it does scientific ether theory: to figure forth a world without domination, and to therefore open up the possibility of a politics “thoroughly beyond the confines of the established order” (Scrivener 1982: 8).

Shelleyan prophecy lies, once more, at the intersection of nature and the political, as it imagines a natural world that *necessarily* tends toward *freedom from compulsion*. The prophetic and the ethereal align, therefore, by suspending categorical oppositions in the name of an ontological and political justice. As ether names the indifference of matter and mind, prophecy defuses the division between necessity and freedom.

Most readers of *Queen Mab* see its necessitarian natural history in tension with a demystifying impulse.¹⁰² Its lengthy and caustic notes on the history of religion furnish evidence of this. In one, Shelley directly takes up the Hebrew and Christian

¹⁰¹ Cf. Scrivener 1982 on late-eighteenth-century forms of “millennial anarchism” – part of “a tradition of mass movements of religious heretics who wanted a paradise on earth with direct democracy and the abolition of secular and spiritual hierarchies” (35). Agamben 2011 offers a helpfully schematic explanation for prophecy’s radicalism. Prophecy, he observes, plays a crucial role in the founding of new religions, but quickly becomes intolerable to the established order: “within the Christian tradition, those who claim to be prophets cannot but be looked upon by the orthodoxy with suspicion” (1). The task of the prophet, to redeem the created world, is replaced, Agamben argues, by the non-revolutionary labor of hermeneutics. In the interests of orthodoxy, then, the link between redemption and creation is severed.

¹⁰² For Grabo, the “contradictions...are irreconcilable.” How, on the one hand, can humanity hope to be freed from the mystifications of priest- and statecraft “in a world governed by the iron law of necessity, in which...every lightest thought is an inescapable consequence of an infinite series of causes?” On the other, how did such false ideas take hold in the first place, when nature supposedly evolves toward the good? (1930: 20) Wasserman 1971 and Curran 1975 find similar problems in the early Shelley.

prophecies. The Biblical prophets, he writes, following Spinoza's method in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, give no evidence that their visions predate the events they describe. By any rational criteria, "[i]t is more probable that writings pretending to divine inspiration should have been fabricated after the fulfillment of their pretended prediction than that they should have really been divinely inspired." When the prophets claim to transcribe the word of God, they are likely writing history. Yet the prophets' language is so "unintelligible and obscure" that this may be a history of what never took place: "vague and indirect," their prophecies can "apply in a hundred senses to a hundred things" (*Prose* 1988: 107).

To see this as an exercise in skepticism is only half right. These notes should equally be read for their fascination with prophetic style. Shelley's distillation of the prophetic says much about the mood or tone of his own poem. It captures, in particular, *Queen Mab*'s resistance to ideological fixedness; throughout, familiar concepts like "spirit" find themselves suspended between contrary significations. Present here too is the peculiar sense of time cultivated in *Queen Mab*, as it wavers between grammatical tenses – and thus between futurity and the past.¹⁰³ Shelley's utopianism is bound up, in other words, with an ethereal metaphysics *and* a certain understanding of language. Nor are these latter terms entirely distinct. The suspension that characterizes Shelley's prophetic-poetic language belongs as well to the ether, which puts an end to the task of separating mind from matter. In this sense, for Shelley, "[n]one of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace" (Adorno 1974: 157) – of freedom from endless critical work.

¹⁰³ For a serious, rhetorical analysis of romantic prophecy, see Balfour 2002. I am indebted to Balfour's account of prophetic language as both "a call and a claim" to action and a rhetoric of citation, potentially ending in the "cessation of movement" (17-8).

Often called Shelley's "first major poem" (Reiman and Fraistat 2002: 15), *Queen Mab* receives comparatively little attention from critics.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, it is probably his most philosophically and politically influential poem. Throughout the nineteenth century, Shelley's hybrid of vision and prose treatise was printed and reprinted in a series of pirated editions. The volume itself is half poem, half explanatory notes – the latter touching on superstition, marriage law, astronomy, animal rights, and more, and compiling ideas from the ancient atomists to Hume, Holbach, and Godwin. Needless to say, it is a difficult text to treat as a whole. But in this form, it became a major vehicle for the transmission of radical political thought in nineteenth-century England.¹⁰⁵ Its influence was also felt in Europe: Friedrich Engels began translating it into German in the 1830s, and later proclaimed, "Oh, we all knew Shelley by heart then." With the Marx-Engels circle it returned to England, forming, in 1888, the centerpiece of Eleanor Marx's essay "Shelley and Socialism."¹⁰⁶

The poem itself tells the story of a young woman, Ianthe, whose spirit leaves her sleeping body and embarks on a journey to the outermost reaches of the universe. It determinedly evokes those enlightenment freethinkers who found in their physical theories political significance. Moreover, it does this in the language of ether. Ianthe's soul travels in an "etherial car" (I.65) to the fairy queen Mab's "etherial palace" (II.29). Beyond the reach of "matter, space, and time" (91), this palace built of flashing lights and changing colors must be entered on "etherial footsteps" (46). Once she is within the palace, Ianthe looks through "etherial eyes" (III.3) to see the world's

¹⁰⁴ Wasserman 1971, for example, begins its comprehensive account of Shelley's oeuvre with the *Alastor* volume, published after *Queen Mab* in 1816.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Thompson 1966: "Godwin's philosophical anarchism reached a working-class public only after the [Napoleonic] Wars; and then mainly through the Notes to Shelley's *Queen Mab*, in Richard Carlile's pirated editions" (98).

¹⁰⁶ The Engels anecdotes are frequently repeated; for one source, see Engels's letters of 1839 and 40, printed in Volume II of the *Collected Works* (1975).

past, present, and future. The fairy queen narrates this prophetic vision, which comprises the majority of the poem. It explains the constitution and laws of the universe, traces the origins of political and religious domination, and finally culminates in a utopian scene of freedom from compulsion and harmony between nature and humanity.

Ether permeates the poem. Just as in Newton and his inheritors, Shelley's ether is a multiplicity, even as it tends toward holism. Part of its fascination, then, is its capacity to give definition to, or even just nominate, the fundamentally limitless or indeterminate. Mab's palace is ethereal, because it paradoxically lies at the boundary of an infinite universe; similarly, Ianthe's eyes become ethereal, as they look in the present moment on the infinitely receding past and the infinitely advancing future. This early poem, painted in "the evanescent hues" of an "ethereal world," shares the aims of the later *Defence*. It strives to exceed the standpoint of the individual, to speak about the common universe that grounds and surrounds us.

Further, it uses an ethereal language to do so. How does Shelley conceive of language as ethereal? In the prose fragment "On Love," he speaks about the impossibility of reducing language to its materiality. By Frances Ferguson's account, Shelley shows that one can identify "the material aspects of language," but also "cannot see them as language without seeing them as implying something more than matter" (1984: 211). To register as linguistic, materiality must be accompanied by a surplus: of sense, reference, meaning, and so on.¹⁰⁷ Such a surplus is necessarily

¹⁰⁷ This argument finds its inverse in a slightly later work, "On Life." There, Shelley argues that signs are ultimately meaningless – they are contingent marks with which any sense at all can be interwoven. The immaterial surplus in language, discovered by "On Love," itself depends on a nonlinguistic materiality. These two texts are not contradictory, but offer mirror images of the indifference between materiality and immateriality. In both, the nature of language is revealed to have broader ontological implications. See Chapter 4 for more.

immaterial, Ferguson contends. In Shelley's formulation, this is the "subtler language within language wrought" (1829: VII.32). The important point is that such a subtle spirit cannot be distinguished from language in general. The subtler language is inseparable from the materiality of language, and vice versa. Of course, the involvement of immateriality in matter is not only a feature of language. Shelley makes comparable claims about the natural world in *A Refutation of Deism*. For him, language does not just represent, or function analogically to, nature. It *belongs* to nature, as much as anything else.¹⁰⁸

The ethereality of language and nature helps account for Shelley's fascination with prophecy. Eighteenth-century accounts of prophetic language hinge on a play of immediacy and mediation – of affective transport and a self-awareness about textuality – that evokes physical theories of action at a distance. Shelley makes the most of these parallels. Further, in line with his metaphysics of language, he finds in the prophetic style genuine ontological implications. Understanding these will mean reconsidering Shelley's relation to the materialism of the *philosophes*, long held to be *Queen Mab*'s primary ideological inspiration.¹⁰⁹ With the descent of Mab's "etherial car" in the opening lines of Canto I – "Behold the chariot of the Fairy Queen!" Shelley says, deictically (59) – the poem announces its own visionary materialism, in linguistic and natural-philosophical terms.

The magic car is a recurrent Shelleyan figure; it appears everywhere from the early lyric "The Retrospect" to the final fragmentary "Triumph of Life." But the figure is drawn, I think, from Volney's 1791 *Ruins, or Meditations on the Revolutions*

¹⁰⁸ See Mitchell 2008, on Shelley's understanding of poetic language as real, "sonic material" (par. 19).

¹⁰⁹ On the *philosophes*, specifically those eighteenth-century materialists, La Mettrie, Diderot, Holbach, and so on, for whom "philosophy was released from her previous subordination and became once again an independent force potentially at odds with theology and the Churches," see Israel 2001: 10 ff. and 704-13.

of *Empires*, which explicitly signals its ties to ether theory and to prophecy. In his historical overview of the rise and fall of religious and political orders, Volney makes much of ancient ideas about ether. For Egyptian cosmology a vital spirit, or world soul, traversing the universe and each entity within it, ether suffuses physical bodies, but is not reducible to them (1853: 151-2). The idea is adopted by Greek and Hebrew thinkers, Volney reports, who identify ether with the immortal soul. After death, as he explains, the ether “becomes a phantom or shade, the perfect image of the deceased. The Greeks called this shade the image or idol of the soul; the Pythagoreans its chariot, its mould; and the rabbinical school, its vehicle, or boat” (152). In this form, as the soul’s chariot or vehicle, it rejoins the universal ether, ready to enter another physical form. The mover of souls, ether is the conduit between the individual and the whole, between finite existence and the standpoint of eternity.

In this spirit, Mab’s magic car moves Ianthe’s soul to her “etherial palace.” Speaking quite literally, the car is a figure of transport; in just over forty lines, the phrase, “The magic car moved on,” appears four times (I.207, 212, 237, 249). But it is also a figure for mediation more generally, for *metaphorein* as the transporting of meaning. As it transports Ianthe’s spirit, now freed from the “chains of earth’s immurement” (188), the car simultaneously figures linguistic transport. It alludes to its own vehicular status, in other words. The “apprehension uncontrolled” (193) that the car grants Ianthe – the vision of a world fulfilled in its significance – is predicated on its diegetic movements and on the mediating, transporting power of the word (foregrounded here by the sheer reiteration of a phrase). In this vehicle of prophecy, ethereal and linguistic transports converge.

The discourse of transport is a feature of most important accounts of prophetic writing. Bishop Lowth, for instance, explains that prophetic language *moves*, and not

in a single direction, as it mediates between prophet, text, and reader.¹¹⁰ In *Queen*

Mab, the circulation of affects takes on a cosmological scale. Its world is thoroughly sensate. Thus Mab explains,

I tell thee that those viewless beings,
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
Of the impassive atmosphere,
Think, feel and live like man;
.....
And the minutest throb
That through their frame diffuses
The slightest, faintest motion,
Is fixed and indispensable
As the majestic laws
That rule yon rolling orbs. (II.231-4, 238-43)

Mab here unfolds to Ianthe the constitution and laws of the natural world. The throbbing atoms, from which all else is composed, are no less capable than humans of sensory and even cognitive experience. But this is not to personify individual atomic particles. Rather, Shelley uses the image of a feeling, thinking world to reveal the inadequacy of certain definitions of the human, reliant on the division of conscious from unconscious beings. “How strange is human pride!” Mab exclaims, when “[t]here’s not one atom of yon earth / But once was living man” (225, 211-2). Joining together all of nature, including human beings, such sensory and intellectual movement is a law of the physical world.

¹¹⁰ In a powerfully suggestive coincidence of literary history, naturalist George Gregory, author of the *Economy of Nature*, translates Lowth’s *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* from Latin in 1787. Shelley does not mention reading them until 1815 (1912, I), but he was clearly familiar with Gregory’s work. The lectures themselves emphasize the link between prophecy’s power to affectively transport its readers and the transports of figure, which arise in turn from the powerful feelings of the prophet. Lowth also observes how prophecy plays with presence and absence, materiality and immateriality: “in a manner,” he says, the prophets’ rhetoric brings “whatever is described or expressed...immediately before our eyes” (1815: 204). The feeling of immediacy arises from the interplay between language’s material presence and the “ideal presence” of what it signifies. For more on this as a general principle in eighteenth-century poetics, see Rothstein 1981.

Perhaps, then, the action at a distance of certain natural laws, like gravity, holds for feeling and thinking too. In 1820's poetic drama *Prometheus Unbound*, this is certainly so. Shelley there invokes "subtle and fair spirits / Whose homes are the dim caves of human thought / And who inhabit... / Its world-surrounding ether" (*SPP* 2002: I.658-61). These subtle spirits of the earth, which pass through the minds of revolutionaries, philosophers, and poets, are the vehicles of prophecy; "they behold / ...as in a glass, / The future – may they speak comfort to thee!" says the Earth to her captive son Prometheus (661-3). Only by their inspiration can Prometheus imagine his imprisonment's end.

In sum, for Shelley, the forces that constitute nature (gravity, electricity, feeling, thought) and the language of prophecy have powerful affinities. The action at a distance that defines the operations of the former is echoed by the linguistic mediations and transports of the latter. Moreover, because he believes that language is not just representational, but a part of nature, these echoes speak to a real common root. Ether is the ontological link between nature in itself and the poetic-prophetic.

Shelley's motives in this, as I have suggested, are anti-reductionist. But as a poet, rather than a philosopher, he is not content with abstract claims about mind and matter, spirit and body. Such arguments, even when they aim at overcoming false oppositions, can actually reinstate the divisions they seek to suspend. Though "merely nominal," he observes, the absolute difference between "ideas" and "external objects" achieves its strength by "reiteration" (*SPP* 2002: 508). Shelley therefore relies on an ethereal poetics, through which we might sense, or apprehend, the subtle interweaving of mind and matter.¹¹¹

¹¹¹ On poetry's capacity to restore the apprehensive powers, see Wilson 2013. In a different context, Keach 2004: 118 ff. marks the etymological affiliation between subtlety, weaving, and interweaving in Shelley's poetic diction.

Appropriately, *Queen Mab*'s etherealism is felt throughout those passages where "soul" or "spirit" is at issue. In such moments, Shelley also makes known his differences from materialists like Holbach, committed to reduction, elimination, and critique.¹¹² He does so, however, by drawing a figure from the *philosophes*. This is the "Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing Power, / Necessity! thou mother of the world!" (VI.197-8) In Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770), taken by many as Shelley's major philosophical source, necessity is a hypostatization of causal determinism. The defining principle of Holbach's thought, it is figured as a chain of causes and effects, and as the hidden truth beneath nature's veil. It thus suggests, for one commentator, that "he has not outgrown all religious sentiment, but rather transferred it to another divinity" (Willey 1961: 166). Despite its similar name and personified form, Shelley's spirit of nature is something different.

According to the notes to *Queen Mab*, Shelley is carefully attuned to the dangers of such anthropomorphisms.¹¹³ Drawing on his own 1811 pamphlet, *The Necessity of Atheism*, he contends, in Newtonian terms, that to posit a creative deity as nature's ultimate cause is an illegitimate use of hypotheses:

The being called God by no means answers with the conditions prescribed by Newton; it bears every mark of a veil woven by philosophical conceit to hide the ignorance of philosophers even from

¹¹² For the *philosophes*, including the Baron d'Holbach, ideology critique reduces the number of things in the world, identifying as "superstitions" all those things to be eliminated. Shelley, on the other hand, wants to talk about the fundamental laws of nature without denying the reality, or the inherent value, of emergent properties and late-coming entities (like the human mind).

¹¹³ Holbach himself insists that "nature" is not a personification. Even when the *System* does treat nature as an agent, he remarks, "there is no intention of personifying that nature, which is purely an abstract being; it merely indicates, that the effect spoken of, necessarily springs from the peculiar properties of those beings which compose the mighty macrocosm" (1835: 16). Despite this disavowal, throughout the *System*, nature is represented as the veiled goddess of ancient mythology. Shelley's use of personification is rather more self-aware than Holbach's. On using the figure, as I think Shelley does, to *contest* familiar definitions of personhood, see Keenleyside 2009.

themselves. They borrow the threads of its texture from the anthropomorphism of the vulgar. Words have been used by the sophists for the same purposes, from the occult qualities of the peripatetics to the *effluvium* of Boyle and *crinities* or *nebulae* of Herschel. (*Prose* 1988: 99)

By anthropomorphizing God, Shelley contends, the philosophers say too much and too little. They overstate the extent of their knowledge and they install a personification in the place of an unknown. Claiming to find an absolute, or an ultimate metaphysical principle, where there is only a hypothesis, philosophy misconstrues what, by its very nature, is provisional and unfixed.

Might not the ether be vulnerable to these charges? Actually, in its multiform composition and its suspension of familiar categorical oppositions, ether resists ossification. (Even for Newton, it was always “various æthereal spirits.”) Shelley’s subtle spirit should instead be conceived after the pattern he establishes in an 1811 letter to Elizabeth Hitchener, where he admits the existence of a deity, but only in a certain sense. “The word God,” he says, “analogises with the universe, as the soul of man to his body, as the vegetative power to vegetables, as the stony power to stones” (1912, I: 92). Thereby do “I acknowledge a God,” the letter continues, “merely as a synonyme [sic] for *the existing power of existence*” (93). God talk becomes, by this logic, a way of generalizing about ipseity, the is-ness that makes individual things what they are. At one and the same time, it is a general and a particular. The definition not only dismantles unreflective anthropomorphisms. It also makes clear the performative, even poetic, dimensions of such thinking. That God is best defined tautologically and by a pleonasm suggests that, for Shelley, poetic language makes the “existing power of existence” felt. Rather than being philosophically argued for, it is made apprehensible by a poetics.

Shelley approaches the spirit of nature, necessity, through a similar method of poetic thinking. Shelley's poetics not only align his spirit with those of the physicists, but also etherealize the *philosophes'* figure of necessity. Midway through the poem, in Canto IV, Mab turns again to the constitution of the natural world. These ontological claims are startling, both in their directness and in their seeming misfit in a poem about matter:

Throughout this varied and eternal world
Soul is the only element; the block
That for uncounted ages has remained
The moveless pillar of a mountain's weight
Is active, living spirit. (139-43)

Mab's language of soul and spirit is provocative. The insistence on spirit's activity powerfully strains against the *philosophes'* ideas about necessity. For Holbach, a materialist in the eliminative sense, activity in nature is simply a misapprehended passivity, lacking a grasp of determining causes. "[S]trictly speaking," he remarks, "there is no such thing as spontaneous motion" (1835: 17). Shelley, on the other hand, insists on the inherent activity of nature, and in so doing replaces inert matter with spirit.

A closer look at the text complicates the terms of the exchange. For Mab, soul is the world's "only element," yet it is somehow "varied" too. More confusing, perhaps, this soul or spirit is "active" and "living," while it remains a stony, "moveless" "block." Multiform and entirely homogenous, vital and stone-like, spirit gives nature an unstable foundation. Such indeterminacy is unavoidable, says Holbach, because "the word *spirit* conveys no one sense even to those that invented it; consequently, [it] cannot be of the least use in either physics or morals" (53). The impossibility of fixing spirit's meaning suggests that it has no philosophical use.

Eluding any single sense, spirit is as little worth talking about as angels, demons, or, by Holbach's account, the supposed immaterial causes of gravity and electricity.

Yet *Queen Mab* persists in such language. Even in those moments where it most directly draws on the *philosophes*, the poem treats "necessity" and the "spirit of nature" as interchangeable. In Canto VI, turning directly to the problem of natural causes, Mab offers to define necessity's effect on nature. "A spirit of activity and life," she says once more (148), necessity

...still
Guides the fierce whirlwind, in the tempest roars
.....
And in the storm of change, that ceaselessly
Rolls round the eternal universe, and shakes
Its undecaying battlement, presides,
Apportioning with irresistible law
The place each spring of its machine shall fill. (156-7, 160-4)

Departing from Holbach's figure of the chain – representing the unbreakable causal links between objects – Mab's vision of necessity gives it substance. In other words, unlike the empty and mechanical formalism of the chain, Shelley's spirit has a reality all its own. It not only "guides" and "presides" over things, but, irreducible to the machine-like movements of matter, permeates and gives them life. It appears to be immaterial, yet it has a real existence. For Shelley, the spirit of nature is clearly not just a mental projection.¹¹⁴

At the same time, he does suggest that this spiritual substance is to be apprehended poetically. In *Queen Mab*, that is, necessity's substance includes its linguistic and poetic form. Like the "existing power of existence," spirit demands the materiality in which it is always entangled. All the more surprising when, in Canto I, Mab commands Ianthe's spirit to leave her body: "Soul of Ianthe! / Awake! arise!" (128-9) By the injunction alone, soul and body are separated out from one another.

¹¹⁴ For Shelley's "projections", see Hogle 1988: 37 ff.

Ianthe's soul, the intellectual aspect of her being, takes on an independent existence from its embodied form. Mind is no mere epiphenomenon, suggests Shelley, no illusion reducible to the nerves or the flesh. The spirit in itself is "beautiful in naked purity, /The perfect semblance of its bodily frame," but absent every "stain of earthliness" (132-3, 135). It shakes free of the body, which is doomed to break down "like an useless and worn-out machine" (155).

By asserting the reality of spirit, Shelley seems to fall back into dualism. The division of Ianthe's spirit from her bodily machine does indeed resemble the "Christian duality of flesh and spirit."¹¹⁵ It also recapitulates the spirit of nature's division from its own "machine," material nature. In both cases, Mab explains, spirit

...aspires to Heaven,
Pants for its sempiternal heritage,
And ever changing, ever rising still,
Wantons in endless being. (148-51)

Appearing to insist on ontological dualism – on the spirit's transcendence of material things – these lines actually exert a countervailing force. Through them, Shelley poetically suspends the division of mind from matter. Indeed, as spirit leaves the world behind, it "aspires" and "pants," in an etymological play on *spiritus*, or breath, that restores to it a certain materiality. Shelley's language thereby implicates the repetitive, involuntary, even mechanical, movement of breathing in spirit itself.¹¹⁶ He recalls, through the medium of poetic language, another claim from Holbach's *System*: "the word *spirit* presents to the mind no other ideas than those of breathing, of respiration, of wind. Thus, when it is said, the *soul is a spirit*, it really means nothing more than that its mode of action is like that of breathing, which, though

¹¹⁵ Curran 1975: 18.

¹¹⁶ The point is driven home as the three-stress, six-syllable line, "Wantons in endless being," gives way to a series of five-stress, ten- or eleven-syllable lines that require substantially more breath from their reader.

invisible in itself...produces very visible effects” (50). Unlike in Holbach, however, Shelley’s gesture is emphatically *not* reductive. Rather, as Canto VI shows, spirit is for him a real substance, defined by the *indifference* of materiality and immateriality. Because poetic language is marked by this ontological indifference too, it is, as such moments make clear, the spirit’s finest mediator.

Why write a philosophical poem that resists fixed definitions? Why proclaim one’s materialism in a poem about spirit? The ether, I have proposed, resolves such skeptical doubts. Operative as both a spiritual substance and a poetic principle, ether is, in *Queen Mab*, an unstable ontological foundation. But instability, or inconsistency, is the aim. Subtly woven together with the figure of necessity, the spirit of nature brings immateriality and materiality alike into the fold. It joins the subtle spirit that permeates all nature with the language (and even the physical breath) in which it finds expression. Moreover, because it *poetically* suspends categorical oppositions, it avoids reiterating the divisions between mind and matter, soul and body. Each is integrally involved in the other by the movement of the poetic text. Thus, too, does the spirit of nature distance itself from the “dualistic and tyrannizing” deity of Holbach, necessity.¹¹⁷ Despite its personified form, this spirit is no being at all. It is the basis of Mab’s system of nature, but only in the manner of Newton’s “various æthereal spirits” or the letter to Hitchener’s “existing power of existence.” The spirit of nature’s “eternal breath” (I.274) is as determinedly ethereal as Shelley’s language and his metaphysics. Necessity, spirit, ether: these are the modes of

¹¹⁷ Again, compare with Hogle 1988: 37 ff., where Shelleyan necessity is explained in psychological terms, as “a projection of a causal mechanism out of a gradual composing of thoughts that turns its own procedures into a foundation” (38). In the notes to *Queen Mab*, Shelley claims that “the doctrine of Necessity” has a liberating effect: it “tends to introduce a great change into established notions of morality and utterly to destroy religion” (*Prose* 1988: 111). According to Hogle, however, a foundationalist theory of necessity is just as authoritarian as the moral and religious principles it attacks.

Shelley's unstable, even absent, ontological foundation and the materialism of spirit that unfolds from it.

In other words, for Shelley, necessity is neither mere causal determinism nor a homogenous spiritual substance. It is rather the form taken by events, by the interacting and intermingling of beings – whether ideas or external objects.¹¹⁸ In *Queen Mab*, this form is ethereal and natural-historical. It also has a utopian horizon, visible only through the lens of prophecy. Just as ether suspends the division of mind from matter, in its poetic-prophetic mode, it promises an end to the opposition between necessity and freedom. Thus, the “happy ferment” of natural history tends toward a moment in which “reason” will be “free” (IX.49-50). The movement toward harmony and unconstraint is the final end of *Queen Mab*'s politics. Fulfilling this end does not depend on the work of ideology critique, however. Rather, the realization of unconstraint demands an acceptance of natural-historical necessity that only prophecy makes possible.

Like Spinoza's “third kind of knowledge,” the knowledge of our participation in God, or nature,¹¹⁹ Shelleyan prophecy embeds human beings in the world. Moreover, it suggests that human goods, like freedom from constraint and oppressive labor, are best realized in the course of natural history itself. Struggling by themselves to achieve these ends, humans run athwart of nature's activity; they become victims of “famine, cold, and toil,” of all “that earth's revenge / Could wreak on the infringers

¹¹⁸ As Fredric Jameson puts it, in a well-known passage, “Necessity is not...a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events, ...the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an ‘absent cause.’” (1981: 102). Jameson's point is that history never manifests itself directly. It is accessible only mediately, as the narrative concatenation of facts in the form of inevitability. Shelley's subtle spirit operates after a similar law. It is neither material nor immaterial, and it dismantles all anthropomorphic deities; in its “absence,” it resists definition and personification. At the same time, it permeates all nature, as a metaphysical principle and as the engine of its history. See Chapter 4 for more on this concept of necessity.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Spinoza 1992: 213 ff.

of her law” (VIII.160, 163-4). The good of humanity, properly understood, is identical to the good of nature. Only this knowledge can bring humans into harmony with their world. Humans are not made happier by mastering nature, Mab says, but by finding themselves a part of it:

How sweet a scene will earth become!
Of purest spirits, a pure dwelling-place,
Symphonious with the planetary spheres;
When man, with changeless Nature coalescing,
Will undertake regeneration’s work,
When its ungenial poles no longer point
To the red and baleful sun
That faintly twinkles there. (VI.39-46)

Not only are humans to cease laboring against nature, using it a mere means. Ianthe’s vision, as Mab explains it, shows that humanity’s “coalescing” with the world is inseparable from certain natural-historical processes. It will not be human action that brings us together with nature, but rather the *relinquishing* of activity or work – of that which pits us against the world by setting it up over against us.

Once more, the poem’s notes helpfully elaborate on this. In them, Shelley explains that the earth’s present state – its climate, its seasons, and the human cultures they form – is greatly determined by the angle of its axis. Currently oblique, he continues, the angle “will gradually diminish until the equator coincides with the ecliptic; the night and days will then become equal on the earth throughout the year, and probably the seasons also” (*Prose* 1988: 339). This long view of natural history uncovers significant repercussions for human life. Along with the climatic and seasonal changes it predicts, “[t]here is no great extravagance in presuming that the progress of the perpendicularity of the poles may be as rapid as the progress of the intellect; or that there should be a perfect identity between the moral and physical improvement of the human species” (340). In other words, Shelley suggests, as the poles shift and the earth is transformed into a single temperate zone, the material and

intellectual being of the human will follow suit. Human perfection, the liberation from infirmity promised by thinkers like Godwin, depends on the movement of the earth. In turn, the earth's movement depends on the ferment of the ether.

In Canto IX, Ianthe sees firsthand the results of such geological and atmospheric change. Heralding the collapse of all political and religious orders, her vision reveals the distant future as if it had already come to pass. Mab comments while the vision unfolds, and she triumphantly predicts the destruction of palaces, cathedrals, and prisons. As she speaks, her voice moves into the past tense:

These ruins soon left not a wreck behind:
 Their elements, wide scattered o'er the globe,
 To happier shapes were moulded, and became
 Ministrant to all blissful impulses:
 Thus human things were perfected, and earth,
 Even as a child beneath its mother's love,
 Was strengthened in all excellence, and grew
 Fairer and nobler with each passing year. (130-7)

Ianthe's vision culminates with this proleptic glimpse of a utopia fulfilled, where the "elements" of oppression have been alchemically turned toward bliss. Throughout, her prophetic vision has wavered temporally between past, present, and future. But the language used now is unique, in that it presents history's utopian end as a thing of the past, as a matter of fact; in the words of eighteenth-century Hebraist J.D. Michaelis, it brings futurity into "the *prophetic present*" (Lowth 1815: 207-8n). The passage's peculiar temporality is produced by this rhetoric of necessity, which corresponds on the level of language to the inexorable movement of the earth. Shelley's prolepsis, in other words, is the poetic form of a utopia inevitably to be realized. It makes felt the pressure of natural history.

The apprehension of history's necessary end is therefore the condition of its arrival. By giving in to necessity, Shelley says, we begin to liberate ourselves and others. This is not only because necessity promises a perpetual peace to come. Rather,

by taking necessity as a law, humans make liberation a *present* possibility. The earth's progress toward the better is independent of human activity; this fact in itself liberates us from a violent instrumentalism, according to which the earth must be manipulated for human purposes. If the good is immanent to natural history, humanity is freed from the obligation to perform all manner of world-transforming labor. Like the utopias of the young Marx and Adorno,¹²⁰ Shelley's is a "paradise of peace" (VIII.238).

At the same time, this will mean rethinking, in the light of necessity, our concept of the good. Things we once called "good," or thought were necessary for happiness, may ultimately transgress necessity's law. This becomes clear when necessity is conceived in terms of *need*. Diet, Shelley argues, shows how violent excess can be misapprehended as a need. At the end of history, therefore, humans will demonstrate their harmony with the world by adopting a vegetable diet:

...no longer now
He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,
And horribly devours his mangled flesh,
.....
All things are void of terror: man has lost
His terrible prerogative, and stands
An equal amidst equals. (VIII.211-3, 225-7)

The liberatory promise of Shelley's natural history is fulfilled in the homeliest of practices, eating. And the vegetable diet is truly a metonymy for a host of other

¹²⁰ As Marx and Engels insist, in *The German Ideology* (1845-6), communism is the only form of life to enable truly unconstrained activity. Under capitalism, "each person has a particular, exclusive area of activity which is imposed on him and from which he cannot escape.... In communist society, however, where nobody has an exclusive area of activity and each can train himself in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production, making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, breed cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I like, without ever becoming a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critic" (1967: 424-5). The achievement of unconstraint is, for Marx as for Shelley, a historical necessity. Cf. Adorno 1974, especially the fragment "Sur l'eau."

changes: a bond of respect between living beings; a rethinking of necessity in terms of freedom; and, most importantly, the recognition that nature provides for and sustains us, if only we let it. Underpinning all these is a suspension of oppositions, an indifference, we could again call “ethereal.”¹²¹

Bad Atmosphere

For Percy Shelley’s readers, the liberatory potential in his necessitarian natural history has sometimes been hard to see. With surprising frequency, *Queen Mab* is identified with the same dominating and instrumental view of nature that it rejects. Thus, its materialism of the spirit is characterized as a “technohumanism”; a colonial “technotopian[ism]”; and, most recently, “more an extension than a repudiation of technological domination and self-destructive exploitation.”¹²² The question remains: why have so many scholars mistaken Percy Shelley on this point, and in precisely the same way?

This section turns for an answer to Mary Shelley’s speculative fiction of species extinction, *The Last Man*. In this novel, often seen to renounce the romanticism of her recently dead husband,¹²³ Mary Shelley imagines the global spread of a plague that will wipe out the human species. The narrative’s relentless drive toward extinction alludes to, and critiques, *Queen Mab*’s utopian natural history. It also illuminates the striking coincidence at the poem’s center, the coalescence of natural history with the human good. Percy Shelley insists that the good in natural history is realized independently of human activity, while nonetheless coinciding with the species’ aims. It is this idea that has, I think, led so many of *Queen Mab*’s readers

¹²¹ As John Addington Symonds did, in remarking on Shelley’s “ethereal diet” (1922: 166).

¹²² Cf. Morton 1994: 228; Bewell 1999: 213; Gidal 2008: 75.

¹²³ Paley 1998: xi, xvi.

astray. Mary Shelley, on the other hand, resists the notion that the good in nature would necessarily be a good for us. *The Last Man* does share with Percy Shelley's poem an aversion to instrumental views of nature. At the same time, the novel posits an anti-instrumentality so powerful that it purifies nature of all marks of human value – including mind itself. Mary Shelley's severing of natural facts from values thus takes narrative form as an extinction story; hers is ultimately an eliminative materialism. Moreover, by depicting plague as a "pernicious effluvia," or a bad atmosphere (1998: 259), the novel reveals one last, unsettling mode of ethereality.

The Last Man's clearest allusions to *Queen Mab* are critical. Set in the future, its world is decidedly not the "happy Earth! reality of Heaven!" predicted by Percy Shelley's poem (IX.1). The global warfare and political upheaval that marks the year 2092 brings it rather near an early nineteenth century of colonial violence and revolutionary struggle. "Be assured that earth is not, nor ever can be heaven, while the seeds of hell are natives of her soil," one character acerbically remarks (219). During a meeting of political leaders, planning England's first completely democratic elections, soon-to-be Lord Protector Adrian ventriloquizes Percy Shelley's utopianism. In this same scene, however, utopia loses its natural-historical foundation; it becomes the mere imagining of an interloper, a "little old astronomer." For the astronomer Merrival, utopia is imminent no matter the outcome of the elections: "the poles precede slowly, but securely," he explains, and "in a hundred thousand years...[t]he pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the ecliptic, ...a universal spring will be produced, and earth become a paradise" (220). His reverie is interrupted, though, by another biting comment. Centuries and centuries on, by the time the poles coincide, "[w]e shall all be underground."

Drawing directly on *Queen Mab* and its notes, such moments offer more than glancing parody. Mary Shelley's aim is not just to link certain astronomical theories with a humorous figure like Merrival. (In fact, later on in the novel, Merrival becomes quite sympathetic.) Rather, her point is that the earth's history need not end in a paradise for any particular life form, least of all for the human. Perhaps natural history necessarily ends with the *absence* of human life and mind. This is the consequence of the novel's plague narrative, as Barbara Johnson observes. First appearing on the battlefields of a world war, the plague "extends out over the entire world from the point of encounter between East and West." "Its lethal universality," Johnson continues, "is a nightmarish version of the desire to establish a universal discourse" (1993: 264). The plague figures both the leveling force of universals and the violence with which they are imposed; it is the "*inverted image*," Johnson contends, of "Western humanism." In sum, the human subject and the plague that eliminates it from the earth follow the very same law: universality.

It is no coincidence, then, that the character of Raymond, leader of the Greeks against the Turkish army, subtly insists on the ubiquity of mind in matter. Imagining his own death in captivity, Raymond tells his lover Perdita to "treasure up my ashes till yours may mingle with mine. ...even in that dark cell, I may feel that my inanimate dust mingles with yours, and thus have a companion in decay" (169). The champion of Western humanism proposes that, after death, his ashes should continue to feel or think. The definition of the human that Raymond defends is wrapped up with a claim about mind. But this implies that mindedness is another universal value, like equality or liberty, in need of defending.

The extinction story that dominates the novel's second half can therefore be read as a prolonged attack on the universality of mind. Plague relentlessly eliminates

mind from the material world, as it reduces consciousness to crude matter. The novel's protagonist Lionel Verney, once a wild child and now the companion of Adrian, thus exclaims,

What are we, the inhabitants of this globe, least among the many that people infinite space? Our minds embrace infinity; the visible mechanism of our being is subject to merest accident. ...He whom a scratch has disorganized, he who disappears from apparent life under the influence of the hostile agency at work around us, had the same powers as I – I also am subject to the same laws.

...Thus, losing our identity, that of which we are chiefly conscious, we glory in the continuity of our species, and learn to regard death without terror. But when any whole nation becomes the victim of the destructive powers of exterior agents, then indeed man shrinks into insignificance, he feels the tenure of life insecure, his inheritance on earth cut off. (230)

The mind seems so powerful, Verney argues, especially when compared with the fragile body. Yet, he concedes, the former depends on the latter; with the death of the body comes the loss of a mind. This is the first premise of eliminative materialism: mind is totally reducible to the “visible mechanism of our being.” The only consolation for such thoughts is the immortality of the species. This should be a sign of mind's persistence, of its continued presence on earth. What the plague represents, then, is the possibility of a world without mind. If entire nations can die out, Verney says, so too can entire species; living and thinking beings could completely disappear. The universal mindedness, or panpsychism, that Raymond espouses – and which is also integral to Percy Shelley's materialism of spirit – is threatened by global extinction. No less universalizing in its claims than panpsychism, the materialism figured by the plague insists on the fleetingness of mind.

Accordingly, this plague materialism entails the elimination of purposes, of finality, and, indeed, of any *reasons* from nature. It dismantles explanatory logic

entirely.¹²⁴ Verney exasperatedly remarks “[t]hat the plague was not what is commonly called contagious.... 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.... But how are we to judge of airs, and pronounce – in such a city plague will die unproductive; in such another, nature has provided for it a plentiful harvest?” (231) The only knowledge he has is negative: the plague is not contagious, and its origin and mechanisms are unknown. It spreads with arbitrary power, through an equally illegible medium (“air”).

Resisting all causal claims, plague infiltrates and upsets another Shelleyan category, necessity. This is not just to turn it toward contingency; in fact, as we have seen, Percy Shelley’s concept of necessity is already entwined with absence and instability. Rather, the contingency that plague figures has no explanatory function whatsoever. In its total resistance to instrumentality, it cannot even ground a theory of nature. The plague presents a strictly negative mode of the contingent, absolutely pervasive yet without use value. Its nearest counterpart is, with no little irony, the contingency Paul de Man discovers in Percy Shelley’s “Triumph of Life”: this too “warns us that nothing, whether deed, word, thought, or text, ever happens in relation...to anything that precedes, follows, or exists elsewhere, but only as a random event whose power, like the power of death, is due to the randomness of its occurrence” (1984: 122). A type of action at a distance, though it destroys causation

¹²⁴ Cf. Johnson 1993: “The Plague is at once that which stops all systems of meaning from functioning and that against which those systems are necessarily erected” (264). To me, Johnson’s essay, on the failure of causation and the deconstruction of “man,” is still the best statement on Shelley’s novel. According to it, *The Last Man*’s politics are negative, lying in the dismantling of certain humanist categories. More recent accounts of the novel try to find in it positive political claims and often begin from the tension between collectivity and “lastness.” For two good examples, see Canuel 1998 on “the boundaries of community” (148) and Strang 2011 on the “politics of common life” (409).

entirely, de Man's notion of pure contingency captures well the narrative logic of Mary Shelley's novel. Unreadable, unexplainable, without aim or purpose, the plague is contingency itself. It is a "pernicious effluvia," "infected air," a bad atmosphere from which there is no recovery. In its utter uselessness for life, plague is materialism made consistent.

Chapter 3

Late Coleridge and the Life of Idealism

Introduction

The fortunes of romantic idealism are changing. For decades the object of deconstructive and historical-materialist critique, idealism is beginning to be regarded as a resource rather than a problem. Idealist system building, for instance, is invoked in current reflection on the disciplines and the organization of information. More surprisingly, romantic idealism has also found new life in ecological criticism and analytic philosophy of mind.¹²⁵ Of course, contemporary uses of idealism are not identical to those of the romantics. One influential strain in the return to idealism expresses a strong resistance to what, historically, was its central concept: “the absolute,” or the independent, metaphysical basis of all contingent things. These critics’ argument is that idealism is worth salvaging, but only when rid of its hubris. Instead of an absolute idealism, the goal is now an “idealism without absolutes” -- no longer oriented toward being in itself, but bound by the skeptical horizons of our moment.¹²⁶

Such an approach threatens to recapitulate the same anti-idealist arguments it wants to move past. Indeed, it suggests that idealism continues to have interest only if we can continue critiquing it. This is also to accept the familiar charges: idealism privileges totality at the expense of singularity; it ignores language; it reduces difference to identity. Most egregiously, it speculates about the nature of what “exist[s], in and by itself, outside our engagement with it” (Rajan and Plotnitsky

¹²⁵ For some examples of this reevaluation, see Rigby 2004, Rajan 2007, and Strawson 2014.

¹²⁶ See Chai 2006.

2004: 243). By trying to purge Romantic idealism of its absolutes, we lose the chance to ask how the concept works and what it offers.

This chapter gives the romantic absolute another look. I do this by turning to the later thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the best-known translator of German idealism into British literary life. Focusing on Coleridge's later work reunites absolute idealism with its ostensible opposite, "realism." Philosophers define "realism" as the notion that a world exists, independent of the mind and its perceptions.¹²⁷ Scholarship on Coleridge's thought typically portrays it as defending the individual mind, or the "I am." Yet his most famous prose work, the *Biographia Literaria*, explicitly advocates "the truest and most binding realism."¹²⁸ What sense can "realism" have for a thinker who deploys a systematic idealism to explain "the nature of the ultimate reality in the World"?¹²⁹ How would this realism change our perspective on both Coleridge's thought and romantic idealism more broadly?

I use the problem of "life" to map the shifting lines of idealism and realism in Coleridge's thinking. Coleridge is often seen as pitting a vitalist theory of nature against the mechanical materialism of the enlightenment.¹³⁰ Yet Coleridge is as much repelled as fascinated by vitalism. This ambivalence arises from the attempt to make life absolute, to identify it as nature's fundamental term.¹³¹ Disease and deformation, especially, threaten the orderly cosmos supposed to be grounded in an absolute life.

¹²⁷ Braver 2007.

¹²⁸ Throughout this chapter, I refer to the 16 volume *Collected Works*, edited by Kathleen Coburn; I cite the *Works* by volume and page number. Here, the reference is to 7, I: 261. Compare with McFarland 1969: 123, 152, et passim.

¹²⁹ Muirhead 1930: 96. Muirhead takes Coleridge's thought seriously as a "spiritual realism" (101).

¹³⁰ Cf. Abrams 1984 on Coleridge's "philosophy of life": "in radical opposition to the post-Newtonian picture of the world Coleridge puts forward what...he calls a 'vital,' or 'dynamic,' or 'constructive' philosophy of nature" (209). More recently, see Gigante 2009.

¹³¹ On absolute life in post-Kantian idealism, see Thacker 2011.

Through close engagement with the philosophy of F.W.J. Schelling and the natural-history writing of J.H. Green – renowned surgeon and Coleridge’s posthumous literary executor – Coleridge articulates his own idealist response to the challenge of absolute life. This is what he calls “*ideal Realism*” (*Works* 7, I: 303), premised on the existence of ideas external to any individual consciousness. I contend that Coleridge’s ideal realism has the power to upset received wisdom about idealism and realism alike – and to thus reopen some basic questions in romantic studies about the relationship between mind and nature.

Recently, philosophers like Slavoj Žižek and Iain Hamilton Grant have begun to question the habitual association of materialism with radical thinking, and idealism with hegemony or reaction. Key to this reassessment has been the disentangling of idealism from an individual subject supposed to swallow up everything else within it.

¹³² In this spirit of revision, I plot the late Coleridge’s elaboration of an absolute idealism unattached to any individual mind or interiority. This philosophy of spirit and of the impersonal unfolding of ideas exceeds anthropomorphic and lexical domestication in ways that still demand accounting for.

Grounded in the actuality of ideas, and not vital forces or bodies, Coleridge’s thought also nuances our picture of romantic vitalism. Vitalism has lately emerged as one of romanticism’s signal contributions to modernity,¹³³ but Coleridge suggests that the romantic relation to life is more conflicted than modern-day “vital materialists” acknowledge. For Coleridge, this means that, as long as *ideas* are the life of the absolute – “the invisible energy of the spirit,” as he describes it in *Aids to Reflection* – material living nature has a more marginal status. But this is not to discount the force

¹³² See Žižek 1996, Grant 2006, and Dunham 2011.

¹³³ Cf. Bennett 2010, where the notion of an agentive “vibrant matter” is traced in part to Spinozist and romantic thought.

of matter. The tension between shaping spirit, or will, and plastic matter is in fact the engine of Coleridge's thinking about the absolute. Life traverses both of these poles; a law of teleological and autopoietic development, it is also, in each of its particular manifestations, a testament to matter's persistence.

Thus, the theory of life is intimately linked to Coleridge's "struggle against subjectivism."¹³⁴ A chapter on this struggle could, of course, begin earlier. 1790s poems like "The Eolian Harp" and "The Destiny of Nations" strongly resonate with the materialist and necessitarian thought of Godwin and the early Shelley, and with the Spinozist ecologies of Wordsworth's nature poems. I begin in the 1810s, however, at the moment of the *Theory of Life*, because it is then that Coleridge directly addresses the status of life in idealist metaphysics. This approach also avoids familiar narratives of romantic apostasy. Rather than privileging the young radical over the old conservative, I insist on the late Coleridge's own theoretical significance. If this significance has been hard to see, it is perhaps because we are only now remembering how to read those idealisms we have been critiquing for so long.

What is Life?

An 1804 poem asks just this, in terms that resonate strongly with Coleridge's later efforts to uncover the fundamentals of nature:

Resembles life what once was deem'd of light,
 Too ample in itself for human sight?
 An absolute self? An element ungrounded?

 Is *very* life by consciousness unbounded?
 And all the thoughts, pains, joys of mortal breath
 A war-embrace of wrestling life and death? (*Works* 16: 1-3, 6-8)

¹³⁴ I draw this phrase from Beiser 2002, which argues, against traditional interpretations of post-Kantian thought, that absolute idealism is "a reaction against subjectivism, an attempt to prove the reality of the external world and to break out of the egocentric predicament" (viii).

Lexically, the poem broadcasts its participation in a post-Kantian philosophical milieu. But its interest lies not only in the early (for Coleridge) invocation of concepts like the absolute, or the ungrounded. “What is Life?” is also notable for the ambivalence it expresses about its central term. It thus anticipates the difficult questions that motivate Coleridge's theoretical investigations of life: what is the ontological ground of particular living things? How do living things emerge from or implicate themselves in this ground? Is life distinct from the forces of sickness and disease? If not, is a concept of life still adequate to the task of understanding nature as a purposively developing whole?

Asking therefore if life could be an “absolute self,” “What is Life?” quickly differentiates this self from the individual mind. It suggests that life not only eludes perception, but is fundamentally in excess of, or even antagonistic to, finite human consciousness. The “war-embrace of wrestling life and death” with which the poem closes is perhaps then the ongoing struggle between an absolute impersonal life and the entities emerging within it. Life is not primarily affirmation, a vitality or vibrancy immanent to all particular things. Instead, in this poem it appears to be a perpetual state of war.

Such claims sit uneasily alongside Coleridge's better-known statements on the topic. For instance, in a famous quatrain added in 1816 to “The Eolian Harp,” Coleridge pays tribute to

...the one life within us and abroad,
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul,
A light in sound, a sound-like power in light,
Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where. (*Works* 16: 26-9)

This ecstatic moment, in which human and nonhuman beings are joined by a synesthetic and synthetic vision, is the basis for claims about Coleridge's vitalism.¹³⁵ Recurring to the language of light and movement, Coleridge now frames this disordering of all the sense as an experience of joy. Absolute life no signifies threatening indifference, but the interconnectedness of all things. For Coleridge in 1816, as for modern-day vital materialists, the one life is a powerful notion, with metaphysical and ecological affordances.

In the contemporaneous prose work *Theory of Life*, Coleridge pursues this universal vital force into the realm of systematic nature philosophy. The immediate oneness glimpsed in "The Eolian Harp," with its echoes of Spinoza's intellectual love of God, is reconceived as an unfolding of identity in difference. Coleridge's aim is to theorize living nature as a whole without reducing everything to a single indeterminate substance. To this end, the *Theory of Life* employs a genetic schema to introduce difference into the concept of life, while also preserving its universality – that is, its status as an absolute. Once more asking, "What is Life?" Coleridge gives much the same response as he does in "The Eolian Harp": "Were such a question posed, we should be tempted to answer, what is *not* Life that really *is*?" (*Works* 11, I: 506) While expressing apparently conflicting sentiments, all three texts are therefore united in treating life as the absolute ground of reality.¹³⁶

¹³⁵ Cf. Abrams 1984: 158-91 on the textual history and intellectual contexts of "The Eolian Harp."

¹³⁶ Coleridge's marginal writings and notebooks around 1816-7 reveal the extent of his investment in a concept of absolute life. At the height of his enthusiasm for Schelling, he still defends Fichte's equation of being with life against the younger philosopher's attacks: "But is it [not] the same...to s[ay] that alles Seyn [being] is [a] Derivative [of] dem *Thun* [action] and in [the] popular [belief] that all this Being i[s] *Life*?" (*Works* 12, IV: 346). An 1817 notebook entry puts it even more plainly: "We have suggested likewise that the whole Planet has been actuated by a planetary Life: or rather we have shewn that in the assumption of an Absolute...it must be so." I refer

In these same years, when Coleridge is most devoted to the possibility of an absolute life, he also draws up against its limits. These are inseparable from the attempt to make life the basis of all things. The leveling force of the one life, drowning all reality in an “intuition of colorless light,” as Hegel might have put it,¹³⁷ brings Coleridge perilously near the materialism he attacks elsewhere. This tendency is unabated even in the *Theory of Life*. Complicated by its twofold definition as “the principle of unity in *multeity*” and “*the principle of individuation*” (*Works* 11, I: 510), the progressively developing, yet universal, vitality traced over the course of the text is positively abyssal in its power to swallow up differences. Immanent teleology notwithstanding, it continues to verge on the hylozoism identified elsewhere as “the death of all rational physiology, and indeed of all physical science” (*Works* 7, I: 131-2). By preemptively finding life in all things, “The Eolian Harp” and the *Theory of Life* threaten to deprive nature of a developmental aim.¹³⁸ As in the 1804 poem, life begins to look like an absolute at war with the particular.

So Coleridge’s investigations of life are not just adventures in lay science. They are comprehensible only in terms of the post-Kantian questions about metaphysical grounding posed more explicitly in texts such as the *Biographia Literaria*. By the 1810s, these had taken on real urgency for Coleridge. Struggling with the consequences of the Kantian revolution, particularly its destruction of all dogmatic claims about God and nature, he is famously drawn to Schelling’s

throughout to the 5 volume *Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, also edited by Kathleen Coburn. This is entry 4333; hereafter, I cite by entry number.

¹³⁷ Cf. Roy 2007: 284-7, on Hegel’s criticisms of insufficiently differentiated versions of the absolute.

¹³⁸ Modiano 1985 also points out that the *Theory* includes no mechanism for the emergence of mind, or soul. The three intersecting powers that constitute life are incapable of entering into radically new formations (201-2).

naturalistic idealism.¹³⁹ Against the “boastful and hyperstoic hostility to NATURE” that marks Fichte’s philosophy (*Works* 7, I: 159), Coleridge seeks a more robust account of external reality and, for a time, he seeks it in Schelling. But Schelling’s thought is more provocation than solution; as Coleridge’s marginalia attests with particular force, its materialist and irreligious tendencies are hard to ignore.¹⁴⁰

At the same time, the questions Coleridge poses in the 1810s and after are shaped profoundly by his encounter with Schelling. Thus, as he asks repeatedly in Chapters XII and XIII of the *Biographia* (in a series of plagiarisms from 1800’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*),¹⁴¹ if transcendental philosophy entails a subject and an object, does not some third thing mediate their interaction? If mind is oriented toward nature, and nature follows rational laws, does not some identity persist between them? Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* proposes a general law of productivity or becoming as the answer to such questions: “what we call ‘reason,’” Schelling wagers, “is a mere play of higher and necessarily unknown forces” also at work in nature (2004: 195). In Coleridge’s *Theory of Life*, on the other hand, where the relevance of a systematic presentation of living nature to the aporias of subject-object dualism is mostly unstated, life itself appears to be the point of contact between these terms.

But for Coleridge, if not for Schelling, life’s entwinement with death and disease constitutes a genuine concern. As he sees it, disease is a threat to the natural

¹³⁹ On Coleridge’s engagement with Schelling, see the appendix below and the widely differing accounts in McFarland 1969, Modiano 1985: especially 160-73, and Hamilton 2007.

¹⁴⁰ See, for instance, Coleridge’s remarks on the 1799 “Introduction to the *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*.” Here, Schelling argues that consciousness is a manifestation of the same forces at work in unconscious nature. Coleridge objects, “An unconscious activity that acts intelligently without intelligence, an intelligence that is the product of a Sans-intelligence, are positions calculated...to startle or confuse the mind” (*Works* 12, IV: 374).

¹⁴¹ Cf. Schelling 1978: particularly 5-14.

order that any absolute is supposed to guarantee. His unwillingness to contaminate the absolute – to give up on the idea of a purposive cosmos – will eventually lead him to a new theory of natural history, oriented not toward life, but toward the progress of mind, or spirit. Before turning to this natural-historical critique of absolute life, I will look more closely at the reasons for Coleridge's discontent with the concept. As suggested by an 1812 contribution to Robert Southey's *Omniana*, the guiding principle of Coleridge's work on cognition is that "pathology is the crucible of physiology" (*Works* 11, I: 333). This is also the basis of his work on life. The texts peripheral to the *Theory* treat pathology and physiology as entirely continuous. While the *Theory* resists any definition that reduces life to a resistance to sickness or death, the "Essay on Scrofula" asserts that, because disease is "a derangement of some one or all of the primary powers, in the harmony or balance of which the health of the human being consists," it remains incomprehensible without "a distinct conception of life itself" (*Works* 11, I: 478). In other words, the nexus of powers that constitute life in general – reproduction, irritability, and sensibility – can only be grasped in light of their derangement.

An 1821 essay on uterine disorders develops this point further. Here Coleridge remarks, pointing to the indeterminacy of classification and diagnosis in contemporary medicine, that before rejecting or advocating a surgical "cure" for cancer "[i]t is necessary to determine not only whether morbid formations & metamorphoses not cancerous may have been confounded with the proper cancer...but likewise whether false formations cancerous or otherwise have not been mistaken for the Womb itself" (*Works* 11, II: 878). A genuinely philosophical practice of surgery might articulate new, more logical modes of diagnosis and thereby

distinguish between life's healthy and unhealthy formations. That this is so difficult suggests how disturbingly similar life's productions can be.

More than a practical challenge, therefore, the indiscernibility of healthy and diseased formations has consequences for a notion of absolute life. It not only suggests that the production of particular living things can go wrong, but that the very same forces give rise to health and to sickness.¹⁴² If, as Coleridge argues, the *law* of life is meaningless apart from the *living*, then deformation and disease are no less central to this law's expression than the processes of reproduction and growth. The teleological unfolding of life, mapped out in the *Theory*, is merely the obverse of these "inversions of teleology."¹⁴³

Such indeterminacy is precisely the point of Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, with which Coleridge was closely engaged in these years. Schelling argues here that all things, even God, need a material ground of existence. He thus posits a materiality, immanent to the absolute and somehow distinct from it, in which its unfolding can take place. The divine absolute is shadowed by an anarchic materiality it does not produce, and yet, as Schelling writes, "[t]his is the incomprehensible base of reality in things, the indivisible remainder, that which with the greatest exertion cannot be resolved in understanding....Without this preceding darkness creatures have no reality" (2006: 29). The paradoxical condition of the unconditioned, this indivisible remainder is contaminant and sustenance. It is the foreign body that enables the absolute to develop and that gives reality to all particular things. Though it may be incorporated into the absolute, in humans and other organic beings an excess of this darkness

¹⁴² Rajan 2003b explores this "strange concession of a malign creativity" (408).

¹⁴³ See Joan Steigerwald's forthcoming essay "Degeneration: Inversions of Teleology."

generates moral evil and disease: “it provides the basis for varied formations and deformations” throughout nature (Steigerwald 2002: 582).

For Coleridge, this hybrid of idealism and materialism may well explain the ubiquity of disease and deformity in nature. His marginal notes on the *Freedom* essay comment admiringly on its account of the “[ex]crescences [of] Life” (*Works* 12, IV: 432). But the vision of an internally divided cosmos that comes out of it, a cosmos torn between the light of God and the darkness of his material ground, must be resisted. In the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge explicitly dismisses such a concept of the absolute and remarks, “If...we speak of the ground or the nature of Deity, we nevertheless abjure the rash and dangerous expressions that the depth begetteth the paternal Deity” (*Works* 15: 232). No more an explanation of emergent and evolving realities than Hesiod’s myth of night and chaos, this kind of language makes the absolute secondary to “the depth” or dark ground. Despite Schelling’s protestations to the contrary, in the *Freedom* essay, the ground does seem to precede God himself. In attempting to exonerate God of all direct responsibility for moral evil and “universal disease” (Schelling 2006: 34), the essay subordinates the absolute to its shadowy material basis. Both logically and theologically, therefore, it must be in error.¹⁴⁴

Fundamentally opposed to such a train of thought, Coleridge is also not willing to give up on the absolute. In the words of St. Paul, it is that in which “we live, and move, and have our being” (*Works* 7, I: 277). The problem, however, is that an absolute *life* cannot be isolated from its diseased manifestations. As a “concrete universal,” it is nothing but the life forms, diseased or healthy, through which it

¹⁴⁴ As Coleridge incredulously remarks, “A Nature, [the] Groun[d,] the *Subs[tans]* of God [it is,] which y[et] is not...God himself[,] but of whic[h] God [himself] exists, & which y[et] is bego[t] by the se[lf-]existent[,] & yet is evil, morally evil – ...what is all this?” (*Works* 12, IV: 433).

expresses itself.¹⁴⁵ Coleridge resists Schelling's tortured materialist cosmos – in which not even “the absolute” is really an absolute – but at the time of the *Theory of Life*, he has no more satisfactory response. For now, absolute life is as much a destructive, as a vital, force.

Physiogony (Against the World, Against Life?)

In the years following the *Theory of Life*, Coleridge continued to wrestle with these problems. His marginal writings and notebooks offer vivid testimony to his ongoing negotiations between life and the absolute. But Coleridge did not only work in isolation. Starting in 1818, he met weekly with surgeon and student of idealism J.H. Green. Green was deeply knowledgeable about innovations in European science, and was well read in *Naturphilosophie*, comparative anatomy, and medicine. Intellectually and temperamentally, he was a good match for Coleridge (who was, by this time, already living in Highgate with his doctor James Gillman). So in 1819, the two began to collaborate on an evolving philosophy of ideas.¹⁴⁶ Outlined and incessantly worked over until Coleridge's death in 1832, this philosophy extends across an array of notebooks and unpublished manuscripts. Yet it also has a public face, as it develops in dialogue with Green's medical and scientific works –

¹⁴⁵ See Dunham 2011 on “concrete universality” (6-9). Hamilton 2007 unfolds the logic of the absolute in Schelling, Hegel, and Coleridge. Meanwhile, Levere 1981 tries to resolve this problem by distinguishing “[t]he life *of* nature” as a whole from “the life *in* nature” (107). This distinction cannot hold, however, without a better-articulated theory of ideas than Coleridge has in 1816.

¹⁴⁶ For the details of their relationship, see Jackson 1982. There is relatively little scholarship on Green's important role in introducing *Naturphilosophie* into Britain. Desmond 1989, Richards 1992, and Sloan 1992 are among the only in-depth treatments of this significant topic.

particularly his influential lectures on life and organization, given at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1824-8.¹⁴⁷

Drawing on the anatomical specimens in the College's Hunterian Museum, Green's lectures aim at "a general view of animal Nature – commencing with the simplest and tracing forwards" (1824, 7). The five-year course was published only in part, but attended by many important figures – including Charles Darwin's great antagonist Richard Owen, whose notes are an important record of Green's thought. Anticipating Owen's own fraught relation to evolutionary theory, the lectures occupy a complex ideological position. By drawing directly on Lamarck's "transformism," Green shows himself to be surprisingly open to the possibility of species change; thus, he structures the course by a developmental schema that locates organisms in "an ascending series" of complexity mirroring "the gradual ascent of the animal Kingdom from the most simple" (1824, 9). Conveying this ascent by a Lamarckian tree diagram, Green insists that nature is not static but dynamically organized. At the same time, his persistent language of "fit" implies an anti-evolutionary stance: each fixed correspondence between anatomy and environment militates against notions of unlimited species change. The lectures are ultimately an experiment, it seems, testing the claims of a dynamic, even historical, transformism against an empirically minded, "functionalist" anatomy.¹⁴⁸

This practical syncretism rises to the level of theory in the 1827 and 1828 courses on birds and mammals. Green begins both by outlining three possible views

¹⁴⁷ Green published a heavily revised version of 1827's inaugural lecture as part of his *Vital Dynamics*. Throughout this section, I also refer directly to the notes on Green's 1824, 1827, and 1828 lectures taken by naturalists William Clift (1824, 1827: 1) and Richard Owen (1827: 2-15, 1828), and held in the archives of the Royal College of Surgeons, London. I cite these by year and lecture number.

¹⁴⁸ On transformism and functionalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Desmond 1989.

of nature, each of which demands a different mode of scientific investigation. These are description, or “physiography”; theory, or “physiology”; and history, or “physiogony.” Each is concerned with the same set of objects – those entities together called living nature – but in fundamentally different ways. As Green explains it, physiography is the study of life in appearance, the descriptive cataloguing of *natura naturata*. It treats nature as a set of fixed objects (and is the course’s primary mode of engaging with the Hunterian collection). Physiology, on the other hand, is the study of life “in kind,” dedicated to isolating the powers constitutive of vitality, and to understanding their “affections and disturbances” (1827, 1). This is the mode taken up in Coleridge’s “Essay on Scrofula” and in the treatise on uterine disorders. Even in the *Theory of Life*, the second half of which locates inorganic and organic beings in a scale of increasing individuation, the definition of vitality as “the internal copula of bodies” is the focus (*Works* 11, I: 510).

Finally, then, physiogony is the study of nature as a historically developing while. It is an inquiry into life “in degree.” Looking beyond the theory of life in general, the physiogonist writes its history. But this is not natural history in the enlightenment sense of a naturalized social history or anthropology. This is a history of life as “construction,” or productivity, as a force not unlike gravity in its irreducibility to any particular body. Physiogony raises fundamental questions about life’s origins and its ends. From this natural-historical perspective, life cannot be a transcendental condition or an absolute; it subsists only “in a diversity of degrees even to an unknown minimum” (1827, 1). In other words, life emerges and unfolds in time

and space. To treat life in degree, as a historical force, is therefore to reject vitalist assertions of its ubiquity.¹⁴⁹

What Green proposes is, admittedly, a history of nature rather different from later Darwinian accounts. But physiogony does separate out organic from inorganic nature, and it makes this distinction in part a historical one. In a fragment contemporaneous with Green's lectures, Coleridge also claims that the recognition of nature's history necessarily orients scientific inquiry toward "the first faint day-break of Life." Thus departing from the vitalist vision of "The Eolian Harp," Coleridge and Green both find themselves at the brink of "that thin yet impassible Chasm" dividing inorganic from organic matter (*Works* 11, II: 1193). Frost formations and crystals, objects of interest from "Frost at Midnight" on, might "prophecy" organized vital bodies to come, but they do not live.¹⁵⁰

This natural history also speaks to the challenges posed by deformation and disease. No longer defined in pathological terms, deformity and disease are reframed as resistances immanent to the historical unfolding of life. The contaminating forces so problematic for a notion of absolute life are neutralized by their incorporation into the historical process. Green discusses this in detail in an 1840 presentation of his nature philosophy, *Vital Dynamics*. Here, as in Coleridge's physiological writings, life is defined in relation to disease. But rather than seeing vitality and sickness as opposites, for Green disease becomes a mere moment in the history of living nature.

¹⁴⁹ My understanding of natural history, in its enlightenment and romantic forms, derives from Rajan 2003a and Grant 2006: 119-57. But I differ with Rajan's account of biological life as subverting the teleological form of Green's history (192-3). Green uses physiogony to neutralize life.

¹⁵⁰ The difference between inorganic and organic nature becomes a major concern for Coleridge, especially after he begins collaborating with Green. See the 1825 fragments, "Law of Distinction between Organic and Inorganic Forms" and "First Effect of the Holomeric Nature" (*Works* 11, II: 1212-14). For an earlier instance of the separation between "Being," "Christallization," and "Life," see *Notebooks*, 4517.

An appendix explains, with regard to its role in the unfolding of life, that “[t]he resistance of a contrariant subject in nature is throughout implied; and if the process be that of converting resistance into willing subjection and cooperation, it cannot, from the imperfection of the subject, be effected otherwise than gradatively” (1840: 58). In other words, if physiogony conceives life as a process of increasing complexity, then the resistance posed by disease actually drives it onward. Disease poses no threat to life in itself because it is a necessary stimulus to it.

While therefore adopting the dialectical structure of *Naturphilosophie*, Green treats ends, or purposes, quite differently from his German contemporaries. This is clearest with regard to “recapitulation,” the notion that certain basal types, forms, or units might recur throughout nature’s history.¹⁵¹ For Green, the purpose of nature’s developmental processes is clear: the emergence of the human species. Each prior stage in nature’s history – each species produced before humans – is subsumed in this final end. Thus, as he remarks in 1828, “we may always, by modifying particular parts of the Human skeleton, reduce it to any of the preceding forms & develop out of it all the forms of mammals’ skeletons” (4). The point is further sharpened by 1840, when the project of physiogony is explicitly defined as “exhibit[ing] nature as labouring in birth with man, and her living products as so many significant types of the great process, which she is ever tending to complete in the evolution of the organic realm” (38). Green’s natural history is only comprehensible in relation to its end. The production of the human species is the key to understanding each prior living form and, perhaps, the emergence of biological life in general.

¹⁵¹ The best-known formulation of this idea is Ernst Haeckel’s “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny” – that is, individual organisms, during embryological development, pass through the same developmental stages as the whole species. Cf. Richards 1992.

This has serious repercussions for nonhuman nature. Each organic being lower in the ascending series is measured against the human and found wanting. More than a point about varying capacities for adaptation or language, this marks all nonhuman life forms as, in some sense, *deformed*. Embryological data, says Green, confirms this. If each evolving embryo passes through different stages of development, then perhaps what naturalists call “monsters,” so often cited as proof of degeneration,¹⁵² are better seen as evolutionary interruptions – products of a failed embryological unfolding. This does not just explain away theories of human degeneracy. By this logic, all of nonhuman nature could be considered monstrous in comparison to the human. As Green puts it, again in *Vital Dynamics*, “if in the human embryo these defective forms constitute a series of transient epochs, which are repetitions of the types, that denote the grades of the ascending scale of animated being, in like manner all the lower forms in relation to the highest may be regarded as abortions, by anticipation of nature’s mature work, the human frame” (40). Each living thing, from the perspective of nature’s final end, is an aborted human, a remnant of past evolutionary stages. The bodily frame of every animal species offers a visible testament to this. In their nearly parodic difference from the human, all animal parts are “[d]eformities by exaggeration or defect” (61).

In sum, Green’s is a natural history of ruins. Constructed out of the deformed and fragmented bodies of nonhuman creatures, nature’s “abortions,” physiogony offers a history of life fundamentally antagonistic to its central term. Living nature ascends from invertebrates to mammals and works through the resistances of disease, not to maximize the expression of vital force, but to overcome itself in the emergence of the human. The history of nature is indeed “preface and portion of the history of

¹⁵² Cf. Steigerwald’s forthcoming “Degeneration.”

man,” “the outwardly realized history of our own consciousness” (43), but this is not to imbue it with any inherent value. In moments like these, natural history may enable the discovery of what *Naturphilosophen* like Schelling and G.H. Schubert first called the unconscious. Contrary to its late-century instantiations, however, this is an externalized unconscious realm. Indeed, in *Vital Dynamics*, the unconscious is a material relic of humanity’s evolutionary origins, a ruined monument to thought’s emergence from an unthinking world of animal drives and processes.¹⁵³

Green expresses little worry about humanity’s exit from this unconscious world. Arranging the different orders of mammals in an ascending series, he observes, “I could not place Man [in this series] – In his structure there are too many evidences of his moral nature to be placed even at the head of the list of mammalia” (1828, 2). The human being has so visibly transcended nature that even putting it in direct contact with an animal species would be a form of degradation. Humankind inaugurates a new series, a cultural and moral history that begins where natural history ends. Aiming at some higher good, just as natural history aims at the origin of the human, moral history has its own ultimate end. But as the human species is nature’s “end,” in both senses of the word, this higher spiritual good is itself “pure and impersonal,” Green writes (1840: 12). What is “proper” to the human is to strive after something utterly alien to its finite embodied condition. The human may be the end of nature’s history, but it is not an end in itself.

Whatever there is of ends or purposes in any individual is a borrowed light – the source of which, as Coleridge will also maintain, is the ideality that also gives

¹⁵³ In Rajan’s concise overview, “Natural science in the Romantic period is increasingly the *history* of nature. And the history of nature is the prehistory of Spirit, one might say, its psychic history” (2003a: 404). Žižek 1996 sees Schelling’s *Freedom* essay and *Ages of the World* drafts as works of materialist metapsychology. Cf. Schelling 2004: 193-4.

form to nature.¹⁵⁴ At the close of *Aids to Reflection*, for example, Coleridge remarks, “what you see *is* blood, *is* flesh, is itself the work, or shall I say, the translucence, of the invisible Energy” that is the true subject of history (*Works* 9: 398). This energy, or spirit, moves in and through material nature, differentiating and organizing an indistinct “multeity.” In Kantian terms, it operates like an idea of reason, purposefully arranging the brute facticity of the world. And as Green argues, with the start of human history, it leaves unconscious nature behind. The ruined world of deformity and disease is reduced to cosmic debris. Physiogony may be an “attempt to show how the findings of contemporary science might support a philosophical account of a rationally ordered universe” (Harding 2000: 143). And it does attempt to make sense of a fractured, seemingly aborted, *scala naturae*. But it can only do so by turning spirit against the world and, in particular, against living things, in all their deformed corporeality.¹⁵⁵

Becoming Potential

Coleridge’s struggle with life is thus part of his ongoing effort to theorize the absolute basis of reality. Before working through Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* and Green’s natural history, he almost always poses the question of metaphysical grounds in terms of life. The separation of the spirit from the world of finite living things, which structures physiogony as a discipline, helps Coleridge realize that spirit might

¹⁵⁴ As early as 1820, the history of nature becomes a major concern for Coleridge (cf. *Notebooks* 4648). But the term “physiogony” does not appear in his writings until April 1824, when he remarks that “the first Chapter of Genesis” contains, in nuce, the truths of “Physiogony” (*Notebooks* 5144). This particular entry dates from the weeks immediately following the first lecture of Green’s 1824 course, which began on March 30.

¹⁵⁵ Again, in Harding’s formulation, “the upward-striving power is not inherent in Nature itself but is evidence of Nature responding to an impulse coming from what precedes (and, he [Coleridge] would insist, remains outside) Nature” (148).

have a logic and reality all its own. This purity of spirit is the central problem of Coleridge's later thought. Beginning from the fact of spirit – defined as a “mental background” that any reasoning mind can intuit¹⁵⁶ – this philosophy has two additional premises: ideas give form to material nature, and they exist apart from their apprehension in human consciousness. Through the externalizing of ideas, Coleridge's idealism also appears to be “the truest and most binding realism.”

In the collected manuscript pages of his unfinished system of idealism, which we now call the *Opus Maximum*, Coleridge tries, and fails, repeatedly to derive the cosmos from these basic spiritual principles. Rather than herald absolute idealism's end, however, these fragments of a system speak to his devotion to the absolute – whether or not it ever attains conceptual fixity. (And Schelling's early ethics of intellectual “striving” suggests that it ought not to).¹⁵⁷ For Coleridge, the *practice* of absolute thinking is as significant as any conclusions reached.

All the same, a rigorous logic of ideas is undeniably at work in these texts. A related 1824 notebook entry reveals the impact of this logic on the concept of life:

A very original & pregnant Idea started and pursued by Mr Gillman afforded me a highly gratifying proof that I had not idly attached so great an importance to the fundamental Schema in the Logic of Trichotomy...

Prothesis / Real

Thesis / + Actual Antithesis / - Potential

the + Real or Positive Pole, and the – Real or Negative Pole being two forms [of the same Reality, the latter no less real than the former] – just as negative Electricity is as truly Electricity as Positive Electricity. (*Notebooks* 5143)

¹⁵⁶ On intuition as a basis of Coleridge's philosophy, see Roy 2007. I draw the notion of a “mental background” from Strawson 2014.

¹⁵⁷ See 1795's *Philosophical Letters on Dogmatism and Criticism*, in Schelling 1979: especially 189.

This is Coleridge's modified dialectics, his "logic of trichotomy." Instead of an initial polarity, it grounds the opposition between thesis and antithesis in a more primordial term, called the "prothesis." The prothesis is not a product, but a presupposition, a logical medium making possible the action of thesis and antithesis on each other. These three terms are complemented by a fourth, the "synthesis," or the compound result of this tripartite dynamic; and, in some formulations, by a fifth, the "mesothesis," or the second-order mediator by which the thesis comes to impact its antithesis. As a whole, the scheme is called either the "tetractys" or the "pentad," and it maps the immanent logic, not just of philosophy, but of being itself.¹⁵⁸ The presentation above makes this particularly clear, as it translates Coleridge's abstract logic into properly ontological categories. Thus the prothesis corresponds to the "real," the thesis to the "actual," and the antithesis to the "potential" – with the important caveat that both actuality and potentiality are already encompassed by the prothetic term. As Coleridge observes throughout the *Opus*, the real has no opposite. In its broadest ontological sense, the prothesis is the absolute.¹⁵⁹

Mapping the structure of being in itself, Coleridge's logic holds at all levels of existence, each recapitulation of its four- or five-part structure an "exponential" of reality's most primordial movements (*Works* 15: 298-9). In this entry, the tetractys is pursued in a specifically physiological direction. No longer conceived as the basis of every real thing, life is subsumed in something more profound:

¹⁵⁸ For more general discussions of Coleridge's logic, see Modiano 1985: 189 ff. and Harding 2000: 154-6.

¹⁵⁹ Already by 1817, Coleridge had become wary of the distinction between the real and the ideal. Responding perhaps to an equivocation in Schelling's notion of "the real," whereby it sometimes signifies the material or objective only and sometimes includes the ideal as well, Coleridge writes, "I avoid the false opposition of Real & Ideal which embarrasses Schelling. – Idea with me is contra-distinguished only from Conception, Notion, Construction, impression, Sensation" (*Works* 12, IV: 401). The point is not that sensations, for instance, are unreal, but that ideas are fundamentally non-subjective. On the prothesis, cf. Roy 2007: 287-90.

Now Mr Gillman's idea may be expressed in this Position, and in his own words – Organization, and each total organismus or organized Body is Potential Life; Life Actual has no organ. The act of organizing (as in the Foetus) is the transition into the Potential a vital Fluxion – a becoming Potential. (*Notebooks* 5143)

This is puzzling: how can any organized body be an instance of *potential* life?

Shouldn't life itself be the potentiality that is actualized by a particular living being?

The seeming illogic of the claim is manifest in the strained rhetoric of the last sentence: how can any "act" be conceived as a "transition into the potential"?

Coleridge's suggestion is that the formation of organic bodies is in fact a movement away from life in itself. Because "life actual has no organ," the production of particular living entities will not involve a passage from potentiality to actuality, but its reverse. This process, through which life is instantiated in particular beings, Coleridge calls "becoming potential." Rather than a scale of increasing complexity, however, what this entails is the *descent* of life into its manifold potential forms. The ascending series of Green's anatomy lectures is thus inverted. In the Platonic terms of Coleridge's logic, the division between actual and potential life is the division between life as an *idea* and as particular living being. The distinction is hierarchical, to be sure, but neither term is deprived of reality. As modeled by the tetractyc logic, both the actual (thesis: the idea of life) and the potential (antithesis: the living) are encompassed in the real.

The ascending series of physiogony and the becoming potential outlined here give two different views of the same problem: the relation between spirit, or idea, and material nature. According to the former, spirit drives nature's evolutionary development; it is the immanent force by which nature attains greater complexity and, finally, overcomes itself in the emergence of human consciousness. Physiogony is the history of this evolutionary overcoming of unconscious nature, now conceived as a

mere precursor to rational mind and morality. Its thematics of ascent are matched, in the latter, by a thematics of descent, through which the relation between actuality and potentiality can be presented. On this view, spirit descends into matter and only a cosmology is capable of telling its story. In the theological terms of a shorter 1819 section of the *Opus*, this must be a creation story that begins from an “Inceptive Actuality,” or the “the free realizing Moment of the divine Will” – that is, from the first consequence of God’s unlimited actuality (*Works* 15: 389-91). While Green’s physiogony derives the highest from the lowest, Coleridge’s idealist cosmology attempts to derive every material being from the highest point of all: the *actus absolutè purus, sine ulla potentialitate*, the absolute and pure act without any potentiality, as Coleridge repeatedly names the divine.

This derivation of the cosmos is, of course, a complex procedure, and the *Opus Maximum* attempts it in various ways.¹⁶⁰ But the vast majority of these insist on the ontological primacy of spirit – operating in “Fragment 4,” as it does in *Aids*, as a fundamental principle of unity in difference. Unlike in Green’s natural history, where plastic matter and forming power are inseparable until the advent of consciousness, this unifying principle precedes all difference. As Coleridge explains, materiality in itself cannot account for the emergence of order, so an ordering principle must in fact produce matter (295-6). Once more defining himself against Schelling, Coleridge seeks to give matter its due, without compromising his idealist absolute.¹⁶¹ He thus begins from “[a]n Allness that in its Unity is the causative principle of its

¹⁶⁰ Levere 1981 gives a thorough overview of Coleridge’s cosmology (103-8, 123-58).

¹⁶¹ Elsewhere, Coleridge attacks Schelling directly for the “establishment of Polarity,” rather than unity, “in the Absolute,” and for “represent[ing] as aboriginal the same idea as I have deduced under the name Multeity” (*Notebooks* 4449).

comprehended distinctions” (313). Coleridge’s cosmology starts with God, in other words, his theory of everything simultaneously an assertion of religion.

Coleridge’s God is not the transcendent subject supposed to be the basis of post-Kantian idealism. In fact, Coleridge is adamant about the non-subjective status of this absolute. At times alluding to a “supreme mind” or “absolute Will,” from which the “divine ideas” that form reality are communicated (220, 216), he is quick to add that these ideas are nothing individual or subjective. Quite the contrary, each idea, as a law of the cosmos originating out of the absolute, possesses an independent reality. No idea is reducible to any of its instances, though each idea – from will, being, and action to life in itself – is manifest in its potential cases as the source of their actuality. Ideas retain a higher ontological standing than their particular expressions, but neither is more or less real than the other. The idea “must have all the essential attributes of reality,” Coleridge contends, and so it must exist “out of the mind”: it is “that which cannot be conceived of in the subjective other than as objective, or in the objective otherwise than as subjective” (301). The idea is the prothesis, or ground, of subjectivity and objectivity alike – the inherent rationality or lawfulness of the object world, *and* the mode of concrete universality in which these laws are expressed. It cannot be reduced to either of these poles, because it constitutes them both. “For if...it be notional and purely subjective,” he concludes, “it can have as little place in a system of construction...as the verbal definition of a fluid would have in the extinction of a fire” (300).

These “pure and impersonal” ideas (Green 1840) unfold dialectically, the moments of the tetractyc logic plotting the actual formation of the world. “Fragment 4” of the *Opus* thus unfolds the cosmos from a single principle of unity, alternately identified as “spirit,” “God,” and “the absolute Will.” Accessible to human reason,

because inherently rational, the stages of this cosmology are not adapted or fitted to human thought, however. As Coleridge observes, the relation is just the reverse: “Reason as the living source of living <and substantial> verities presents the Idea to the individual mind and substantive intellect, which receives and employs it to its own appropriate ends” (*Works* 15: 274). Reason is external to the reasoning mind, a part of the furniture of the cosmos. It has a motion, even a life, of its own, but it exceeds every individual being. There may be rational order in nature, but only insofar as reason is voided of all anthropomorphic trappings. All reasons are not reasons for us.

A certain tension between spirit and matter remains, however, and it is to Coleridge’s credit that he does not ignore the problem. Even as the spirit’s purity is vehemently defended, the *Opus* fixates on its descent into matter. Returning again and again to the moment of contact, Coleridge aims to give material nature its due, without falling prey to Schelling’s tortured materialism. He insists on the primacy of spirit, but he also has a hard time letting go of anything.

In other words, as the fragments of the *Opus* make clear, absolute idealism cannot do without matter. Made external to the spirit, it begins to take on an independent reality of its own. One of the many attempts to inaugurate the spirit’s descent even *begins* from matter: “Darkness; materia prima, indistinction in actu, multitude *in posse* = *the faces of the waters*” (389). This indistinct mass will be fully actualized by the spirit, in the form of a light in the darkness. But it also precedes the initial movements of the absolute will. Before the beginning, a dark prime matter waits to be shaped by the forming spirit of the absolute. On the level of philosophical practice, it seems, “the absolute” opposes all kinds of reduction or exclusion.

“Life” can once more serve as the measure of this. In Green’s physiogony, living nature is overcome by the spirit and reduced to pure anteriority. The separation

of these two terms sometimes seems to be the goal in Coleridge's own thinking. At times, though, he is decidedly less sure about the spirit's ability to transcend matter. The 1832 version of "Youth and Age" thus implores, "O! might Life *cease*, and selfless *Mind*, / Whose Being is *Act*, alone remain behind!" (*Works* 16: 12-3) Echoing the *Opus*, with its impersonal ideas of reason, this late lyric simultaneously acknowledges how hard it is to give up on life – on the materiality through which the spirit moves. Rather than call this an admission of failure, we might call it "realism." Indeed, if Coleridge tells us anything about idea and matter, it is that we need not choose between them.

Appendix: Realism and Anti-Realism in the *Biographia Literaria*

This appendix, which pursues a related but independent argument, considers the fraught relation between the *Biographia Literaria*'s transcendental theory of the subject and its equally powerful realist impulses. Begun in 1815 and published two years later, the *Biographia* promises an encyclopedic overview of its author's principles in politics, religion, philosophy, and literature, unified by a narrative of literary life. What it delivers is neither an encyclopedia nor an autobiography, but a self-consuming monument to the desire "'to reduce all knowledges into harmony.'" ¹⁶² From this perspective, the *Biographia* reads as an inorganic assemblage of life writing, post-Kantian theory, and poetry criticism. In this incoherence, it emblemizes the contested status of idealism at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The ninth chapter famously recounts Coleridge's exposure to Kantian ideas. Reading Kant only after the passionate and formative study of Spinoza and the English mystics, he nonetheless recalls that "[t]he writings of the illustrious sage of

¹⁶² See Milnes 1999: 309.

Königsberg, the founder of the Critical Philosophy, more than any other work invigorated and disciplined my understanding” (2000: 232).¹⁶³ In what is still probably the best-known British assessment of Kant's transcendental idealism, Coleridge goes on to insist that its critical and disciplinary rigor is inseparable from its limitations. The reasons for this are historical. Kant's *Critiques*, written under the nose of a repressive and arbitrary tyrant, were restricted by political pressures to the realm of the finite intellect. While scrupulously anatomizing the network of conceptual categories that make experience possible, Kant had to declare morality and religion to be matters of practice only, off-limits for theoretical philosophy. Thus, Coleridge argues, the great modern thinker of moral freedom was “constrained to commence at the point of reflection, or natural consciousness” (232). Coleridge concludes that it remains to Kant's followers – Fichte, Schelling, and perhaps Hegel – to extend transcendental inquiry to the ultimate things only hinted at by the letter of the *Critiques*.

Passed over here is a rancorous and ongoing debate over the very aims and scope of philosophy. Coleridge locates his own work at the end of a history that, in actuality, was far from over. His narrative not only assumes a unity of perspective absent from the constellation of thinkers it describes. It also covers over the *Biographia*'s own philosophical disunity, obscuring the uncertain significance within post-Kantian idealism of the transcendental itself. In this appendix, I outline the various and conflicting forms of transcendental available by 1815. As we will see, the claim that Kant's epistemological revolution merely required “completion” (236) by Fichte and Schelling is profoundly misleading.

¹⁶³ This section refers to the 2000 Oxford University Press edition of the *Biographia*.

Coleridge's literary life also hints at its own worries about the transcendental. These concern transcendentalism's tendency to obliterate the real world. Such a charge is resoundingly echoed by Schelling, whose 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism* is the *Biographia*'s primary philosophical source. Much excellent work has been done on this relationship.¹⁶⁴ My contribution here is to observe that the *Biographia* comes apart just as it begins to articulate a form of philosophical realism. This fragmenting – varying attributed to Coleridge's antipathy toward Schelling's materialism (McFarland 1969) *and* to his having “reached the brink of the absolute subjectivism which was at the centre of Schelling's idealism” (Orsini 1969: 214-5) – is not a recoil from Schellingian premises wholesale. At issue is in fact a fundamental incompatibility between the *Biographia*'s doctrine of transcendental subjectivity and its simultaneous alignment of the transcendental with a non-subjective absolute or “unconditioned” – just as in Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*. The task left to Coleridge's later works by the unfinished *Biographia* is to formulate an idealism in excess of the correlation between subject and object.

What, then, is the transcendental? For Kant, whose *Critique of Pure Reason* offers the canonical account, the term has a range of complex and shifting significations. At least three of these, all adjectival, are operative in Coleridge's book. First, as a mode of doing philosophy, it signifies the deduction of the necessary conditions for experience. “Transcendental philosophy” establishes the a priori conditions of possibility for the empirical knowledge generated by the understanding. But the term has implications for the higher-order power of reason as well as for the understanding. In this sense, it entails the unification and regulation of scientific knowledge according to systematizing ideas (e.g., the idea of the world as a totality).

¹⁶⁴ For instance: McFarland 1969, Orsini 1969, Modiano 1985, Milnes 1999, Rajan 2003b, Hamilton 2007, Roy 2007.

The “transcendental use of reason,” with its regulative, organizing ideas, is opposed to its “transcendent” misapplication, to the lawless overreaching of enthusiasts and fanatics. Finally, in its most important usage for the thinkers who respond to Kant, the “transcendental subject” denotes the logical center that unifies these cognitive faculties. No substantial entity or soul, this vision of the subject as “transcendental unity of apperception” is purely formal; it is presupposed by and orients all thinking, but has no ontological standing. In each of these senses, the transcendental provides the basis for any possible knowledge. It signals a commitment to determine the forms of rationality proper to finite beings. After Kant, theoretical philosophy can no longer speculate baselessly about God, man, and the world. In its newly attenuated state, it engages primarily in deducing cognition’s laws and thinking through their structuring of the sensory manifold.¹⁶⁵

My first and fourth chapters describe in some detail the criticisms leveled at this transcendental procedure. For Coleridge and for the idealists working in the wake of Kant’s *Critiques*, the most significant of these is still the claim that Kantianism effectively annihilates the “in itself,” reducing it to an unknowable placeholder. Kant’s transcendentalism makes it impossible to think about anything apart from the subject. Two trajectories of thought diverge from this point. The first, pursued by Fichte, further radicalizes the anti-realist tendencies in Kant. The second, pursued by Schelling, aims to overcome anti-realism via a philosophy of nature. Both are integral to Coleridge’s later work. This will be an unsurprising claim for scholars of romanticism. But the acknowledged intimacy between the *Biographia* and the whole complex of Fichtean and Schellingian ideas demands reassessment in terms of the

¹⁶⁵ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, see A845-6/B873-4 on “transcendental philosophy”; A341-405/B399-432, the “Paralogisms of Pure Reason,” on the distinction between a purely formal “transcendental subject” and a substantial soul; and A103-10 on “transcendental apperception.”

philosophical realism, or even materialism, only lately recovered in the latter.¹⁶⁶ In parsing the varieties of transcendental at work in Coleridge's text, I aim to continue this work.

Like Schelling's, Fichte's transcendental philosophy departs from the stricter epistemological aims of Kant's. But it does so by appealing to the subject's "intellectual intuition" of its own self-activity.¹⁶⁷ Rather than relying on a strictly logical deduction of the transcendental subject, as Kant does, Fichte proposes in his *Science of Knowledge* that "the I" immediately intuit itself as a being determined by its own actions. This is an intuition made possible only in practice and not by theoretical abstraction. Positing its own freedom, the I strives to fully realize it by eliminating any trace of the thing-in-itself left on the margins of consciousness. As Frederick Beiser observes, for Fichte "there always remains an extent to which the world is simply given, for we as finite beings do not have the power to create all our experience. We can, however, diminish the given, and increase the created, content of experience as we approach the ideal of complete independence: total power over nature" (2002: 218). According to Fichte, therefore, the transcendental subject is defined not as a nexus of cognitive powers, but by its self-positing free activity and its subsequent striving to attain dominance over the given world.

Despite caricaturing Fichte as theorist of a "crude egoismus" (2000: 234), the *Biographia*'s take on the transcendental is deeply informed by the *Science of Knowledge*. Near the beginning of Chapter XII, Coleridge claims that only the self-

¹⁶⁶ See the important reassessments of Schelling, and of idealism more generally, in Žižek 1996, Toscano 1999, Beiser 2002, Grant 2006, and Dunham 2011.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. 1797's "Second Introduction to the *Science of Knowledge*" (1970: especially 38-42). See Chapter 4 on intellectual intuition in Kant and Schelling, and its revival in the speculative philosophy of Quentin Meillassoux. Fichte uses the concept differently from these thinkers, but each aligns it with an immediate, non-discursive knowledge.

reflective and self-active consciousness, attuned to its own operations, is capable of venturing into “the domain of pure philosophy.” This is a domain “properly entitled *transcendental*,” he contends, “in order to discriminate it at once, both from mere reflection and re-presentation on one hand, and on the other from those flights of lawless speculation which abandoned by all distinct consciousness...are justly condemned as *transcendent*” (283). Situating the transcendental between the passively reflective and the wildly speculative, this passage hews closely to the canonical Kantian usages outlined above.

Only a few pages later, though, Coleridge alludes to the possibility of *intuiting*, rather than simply thinking, one’s own self-activity. Even more significantly, he argues that this intuition cannot be theorized but is conceivable only in practice: “How and whence to these thoughts...the ascertaining vision, the intuitive knowledge, may finally supervene, can be learnt only by the fact” (284). He thus pairs a strictly critical application of the term “transcendental” with a concept of self-activity wholly dependent on “the philosophic imagination, the sacred power of self-intuition” (285). Just as Fichte does, Coleridge leverages the subject’s intuition of its own spontaneous self-positing as the ground for transcendental philosophy. The great philosophy of limitation must therefore be completed by the one unlimited, unmediated fact available to consciousness: freedom, as grasped by intellectual intuition.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, by attributing this intuition to “the philosophic imagination,” Coleridge emphasizes its significance for his book’s overall project of defining the power of imagination, exploring its laws, and applying these to the criticism of poetry.

¹⁶⁸ At the close of Chapter XII, in a long footnote, Coleridge again argues for the possibility of intellectual intuition in Fichtean terms (2000: 303).

Coleridge follows this redaction of Fichtean ideas by turning directly to Schelling. Ostensibly preparative to the deduction of imagination, the explicitly philosophical passages that make up the rest of Chapter XII are taken verbatim from a range of earlier essays including the *System of Transcendental Idealism*. Despite having before signaled the “genial coincidence” between Schelling’s work and his own (235), Coleridge now borrows without acknowledgment. Scholars have proposed a wide range of psychological and philosophical explanations for this silence, but often conclude that these plagiarisms have little impact on the *Biographia* as a whole.¹⁶⁹ More interesting to me are accounts like Tilottama Rajan’s, which treat Coleridge’s plagiarisms as integral parts of his essay.¹⁷⁰ I agree with Rajan that Coleridge knew what he needed from Schelling. But looking to the texts in question suggests that this was not, or not only, a theory of transcendental subjectivity (intended to bolster the *Biographia*’s discussion of imagination). What the *System* reveals is in fact a Schelling at odds with the anti-realist subjectivism he is routinely supposed to espouse.¹⁷¹ This implies that the *Biographia*’s philosophical difficulties reside, not only in its conflicted relation to nature, but in the explicit incompatibility

¹⁶⁹ This begins with Green, who argues that, though much of the *Biographia*’s language belongs to Schelling, the ideas expressed are indisputably Coleridgean. This is, to my mind, still more productive than McFarland’s dismissal: “after translating some of Schelling, Coleridge began increasingly to realize that Schelling’s thought was so alien to his own that no use could be made of it in his final reticulation.... Such an explanation is supported by the very lameness and inconsequence of the use made of Schelling in the *Biographia*” (1969: 42).

¹⁷⁰ Emphasizing the materialism of Schelling’s later *Philosophical Investigations* – of which Coleridge was well aware by the time of the *Biographia* – Rajan sees the “moderated Fichteanism” (2003b: 400) of the *System* serving as a prophylactic against these ideas and against Coleridge’s own doubts about transcendental idealism.

¹⁷¹ This is also a Schelling at odds with himself. Another of Coleridge’s main Schelling sources, the 1795 *Treatise on the Explanation of the Idealism of the Science of Knowledge*, is an interpretation of Fichte opposed to the nature philosophy of 1797 onward. My argument emphasizes the Fichte-Schelling divide in order to bring out the *Biographia*’s fraught engagement with philosophical realism.

between its anti-realist theory of the subject and the realist account of the transcendental it also incorporates. The *Biographia* wants it both ways, in other words: leveraging a Fichtean doctrine of the subject en route to the theory of imagination, Coleridge recognizes in it a fundamental antipathy toward reality. In this conflict between self-positing subjectivity and the real world, the nature of the transcendental is once more at stake.

As we have seen, the transcendental in both Kant and Fichte belongs to the theory of the subject – whether conceived as a focus for cognition or as the self-positing origin of activity. These versions of transcendental, different as they may be, are joined in excluding nature from their innermost core. Moreover, both afford a central role to the imagination, either as the mind’s mediating and synthesizing power or as a suture between the unconditioned will and the finite being of the subject. According to the still dominant reading of Schelling’s thought, an even more radical version of transcendental subjectivity is found in essays like the *System*. For most scholars, the earlier Schelling – and, by extension, Coleridge in the *Biographia* – not only declares that the world is inconceivable apart from its relation to consciousness, but that no such external world can be said to exist. At its most fundamental, “Nature turns out to be Mind,” self-consciousness presented to itself in the mode of objectivity (Orsini 1969: 205).¹⁷²

A closer look at the *Biographia*’s Schellingian moments gives a rather different picture of this relation. Asking how it is that philosophy grounds its truth claims, Coleridge proposes that nothing constitutes true knowledge but the “identity” of a subject and an object. Such an identity must be derived and not assumed. To do this, he continues (via the text of the *System*), philosophy must begin with one of

¹⁷² For similar approaches to the *System of Transcendental Idealism*, if not necessarily to Schelling as a whole, see also Modiano 1985 and Roy 2007.

these two terms, with either an object or a subject. The identity of both, and thus the truth of the system, is guaranteed only if they metamorphose into each other. For instance, if philosophy began from objectivity – as it does in Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* – it “would then be completed, when all nature was demonstrated to be identical in essence with that, which in its highest known power exists in man as intelligence and self-consciousness” (2000: 292; cf. Schelling 1978: 6). By the standard model of Schelling’s thought, the discovery of such an identity effectively subordinates nature to mind. The deduction of subjectivity from within objectivity would demonstrate the all-encompassing universality of mind, its presence even in that which appears mindless.

Turning to the Schellingian context for this claim, we find a different kind of “identity” at work. Indeed, Schelling’s notion of identity is entirely opposed to equivalence or correlation; it is not static but “dynamic in precisely the sense that it is symmetry breaking.” Against Hegel’s bitter attacks,¹⁷³ Schellingian identity actually corresponds to an immanent polarity that “causes difference to proliferate” (Grant 2006: 172). From this perspective, the account of mind and nature cited in the *Biographia* looks different than we might have thought. A nearly contemporaneous Schelling text, 1799’s “Introduction to the *Outline of a System of the Philosophy of Nature*,” glosses the identity of subjectivity and objectivity in terms of natural forces exerting themselves at different levels of existence. This identity of forces leads neither to a dialectical synthesis nor to the subordination of the real to the ideal. Rather, it uncovers

¹⁷³ For Hegel, the principle of identity amounts to no more than a “night in which all cows are black” – to an indiscriminate sameness, in other words. This charge is leveled first at Fichte, in defense of Schelling, in the 1801 *Differenzschrift* and then at Schelling himself in the 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

an unconscious productivity in its origin akin to the conscious, whose mere reflection we see in Nature, and which from the standpoint of the natural view must appear as one and the same blind drive...only acting on different planes.... [Thus] what we call 'reason' is a mere play of higher and necessarily unknown natural forces. For, inasmuch as all thinking is at last reducible to a producing and reproducing, there is nothing impossible in the thought that the same activity by which Nature reproduces itself anew in each successive phase, is reproductive in thought through the medium of the organism. (2004: 194-5)

What we see here is not the harmonious dialectical interplay of mind and nature. Nor is it an absolute subjectivist annexation of nature to consciousness. In fact, what Schelling describes is a set of forces or drives, present in both nature and reason yet in different degrees. The identity of mind and nature supposed to be found in the early Schelling is actually a naturalistic theory of the mind's emergence from unconscious being. Mind is "identical" to nature because they are *ontologically* identical; they are both real, in other words. Neither term is fundamentally opposed to or dependent on the other, even though the latter generates the former. For Schelling, *nature* is thought's transcendental condition.¹⁷⁴

What does this mean for Coleridge? First, it suggests that his turn to Schelling genuinely reflects an unease with transcendentalism's "boastful and hyperstoic hostility to Nature, as lifeless, godless, and altogether unholy" (2000: 234). Criticisms such as this one, leveled in the *Biographia* at Fichte himself, imply not only that Coleridge sought a more robust account of reality, but that he knew he would find it in Schelling. By distinguishing "identity" from dualistic pairing, we see Coleridge insisting on nature's independent existence. Far from making the external world dependent on the transcendental subject, he asserts, once more in the words of the *System*, "[t]he conception of nature does not apparently involve the co-presence of an

¹⁷⁴ Grant puts it thus: the knowledge produced by Schelling's philosophy is "not transcendental insofar as it determines nature for consciousness; rather nature is transcendental with regard to the production and producing of consciousness" (2006: 162).

intelligence making an ideal duplicate of it, i.e. representing it” (291; cf. Schelling 1978: 5). From this objective perspective, at least, realism about nature is the necessary foundation of philosophy. By extension, transcendental idealism accounts for a merely regional, rather than a universal, phenomenon.¹⁷⁵ The natural world can be conceived prior to any transcendental deduction of the forms of thought.

Even more strikingly, this realism about the nonhuman world remains legible in the *Biographia*’s consideration of subject-oriented truth claims. Beginning from a radically subjective standpoint, Coleridge levels a purifying skepticism against our philosophical prejudices. Foremost among these is the common-sense notion “that there exist things without us” (293; cf. Schelling 1978: 8). From within the individual mind, it seems, there can be no sufficient proof of the independent reality of things outside. But skepticism cannot undermine the immediate certainty of consciousness itself. The self-conscious I initially appears to be the only possible beginning for philosophy. Rather than pursuing this insight in a Fichtean direction, however, the *Biographia* and the *System* point out an “apparent contradiction”: that “the existence of things without us...should be received as blindly and as independently of all grounds as the existence of our own being” (294; cf. Schelling 1978: 8). The feeling of the real is an insurmountable fact, in other words, despite seeming to lack any logical explanation. As Schelling observes in a different context, the constraint inevitably felt in judgments about organisms, for instance, suggests that their physical properties are “*real* (actually outside you).”¹⁷⁶ Instead of dismissing the external world as a folk-psychological prejudice, Coleridge proposes that it must be “one and the same thing with our own immediate self-consciousness.” Just as before, the

¹⁷⁵ The distinction between regional and universal theories of mind is drawn from Grant. Earlier, I make a similar distinction with regard to life.

¹⁷⁶ *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature* (1797-1803), quoted in Peterson 2004: xxv.

identity operative here implies real continuity rather than correlation. The transcendental idealism invoked in Schelling's title and in Coleridge's text produces knowledge precisely because it does not establish a merely reflective relation between mind and world. The world is knowable because the mind itself is part of it. But just a part – and in this caveat the *Biographia* resists the claim that *only* the I can orient philosophy. Thus Coleridge, by way of Schelling, aims at an idealism that is also “the truest and most binding realism” (2000: 294).

Yet in this moment, the *Biographia* also begins to come apart. Breaking off its continuous argument, the book offers ten theses intended to clarify the “original realism” it has just begun to articulate. These propositions do little to clarify, however. I have shown that the *Biographia* is divided between two competing accounts of the transcendental: the first Fichtean and anti-realist, the second Schellingian and realist. Ultimately, the persistent returns of the transcendental subject foreclose on any fuller exploration of the text's non-subjectivist tendencies. Even the theses on realism privilege “the conditional finite I” over its external ground: what Coleridge calls “the absolute I AM” (2000: 298). The central concern of the *Opus Maximum*, this absolute ground of all particulars is apparent only momentarily here, in the fleeting glimpses of an identity between subjects and objects. As Coleridge observes, some third thing must bring mind and nature, subject and object together. But for now this is a “vanishing mediator” (Žižek 1996): the *Biographia* insists that identity and difference must inhabit the same ground, but, as its philosophical chapters come to an end, this ground drops out beneath our feet.

Such conceptual tensions, raised to a maximum of intensity, eventually register on the level of form. I conclude by observing that the conflicting kinds of transcendental we've identified in the *Biographia*'s philosophical chapters are not

only conceptually but *rhetorically* incompatible. Indeed, the accounts of subjectivity and nature converging in this literary life function according to wholly divergent temporalities: the first defined by pure occurrence, or iteration; the second by genetic development, or process. In Thesis X, for instance, Coleridge promises “to construct by a series of intuitions the progressive schemes,” or stages, of self-developing mind, “till I arrive at the fullness of the human intelligence.” Yet the unfolding of the mind’s epochs that structures Schelling’s *System* is missing from the *Biographia* at large. In the absence of a natural history of consciousness, as Schelling calls it, Coleridge must “assume such a power as my principle, in order to deduce from it a faculty, the generation, agency, and application of which form the contents of the ensuing chapter” (302). As assumption supplants construction, we see these two temporalities at odds, with the genetic losing out; this second deduction, for the sake of which the first must be deferred, will also be put off.

Even in the abandonment of a developmental narrative, the transcendental subject is written into existence as a necessary condition of the theory of imagination. This, we might say, occurs by fiat. Coleridge closes his précis of transcendental philosophy by stipulating the cognitive powers involved in his theory of the subject.¹⁷⁷ Strangely, his anatomy of subjecthood is cited from his own 1812 article on cognition and madness in Southey’s *Omniana*, “The Soul and its organs of Sense.” So Coleridge once again declines to trace the epochs of thought’s formation. Instead, in this act of self-citation, the transcendental subject is miraculously summoned into

¹⁷⁷ There are over ten, including the individual physical senses and, as distinct from the moral will and the power of “choice,” the “sensation of volition.” Along with his medical interlocutors, Gillman and Green, Coleridge continues this exploration of subjecthood and its constituent faculties in the 1820s and 30s. Cf. an 1820 notebook entry on the distinction between the senses (as receptive, or “feminine”) and the faculties (as formative), and on senses like time and relation that complicate this distinction (*Notebooks* 4713).

being – inserted into the text of the *Biographia* – and posited as already existing. By a kind of “thetic judgment,” Fichte’s name for the founding moment of the *Science of Knowledge*, Coleridge grounds subjectivity in a logically ungrounded positional, or performative, force. In other words, the chapter ends with a *textual* “repetitio[n] of the groundless act of the I positing itself absolutely” (Warminski 2001: 969).¹⁷⁸ Defined by its own self-citing, the subject doubles back on itself both textually and ontologically.

Divided between two transcendentals – the first, an a priori network of cognitive categories; the second, an a priori network of natural forces from which the subject emerges – the *Biographia* formally asserts the victory of the first over the second. In rhetorical terms, the performative ultimately takes precedence over the genetic. At the same time, on the level of its Schellingian argument, the book insists that transcendental subjectivity must be supplemented by an account of the non-subjective real world. Its inability to provide this is inseparable from its commitment to the self-positing subject. With no ground or point of origin beyond its self-reflection, the *Biographia*’s transcendental subject is constituted in the “specular moment” that, for a reader like Paul de Man, defines all autobiographical accounts of subjectivity (1984: 70-2). A narrative of its author’s literary life as well as a treatise on transcendental idealism, the *Biographia* suggests that transcendental and

¹⁷⁸ Cf. Warminski 2001: 964-70 on the repetition of thetic judgments like “I am” or “A is beautiful” as opening up the Fichtean system to “the subject-less positing power of language” (970). This would pose a challenge to McFarland’s account of the self-enclosed subject, or “I am.” Warminski’s deconstruction suggests that the “I am” is in fact constituted by the “it is” of performative language. But see below; this is not enough to obviate a properly genetic natural history of the subject.

autobiographical subjectivities alike are constructed in a specular self-recognition that effaces its own conditions of emergence.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ See, in particular, de Man's "Autobiography as De-Facement." The specularity that, for Warminski and de Man, ultimately founds the subject might seem to dismantle all narratives of emergence. But because the self-positing, rhetorically constructed subject is so easily recuperated for anthropocentric and anti-realist thought, conceiving subjectivity in terms of its genesis, genealogy, or becoming may offer a more effective critique. Thus, the distinction between *specularity* and *speculation*.

Chapter 4

Speculative Romanticism

Introduction: Romantic Nature from a Realist Point of View

“Speculative realism” has lately emerged as one of the most provocative, and frequently misrepresented, currents in contemporary intellectual life. As articulated during the 2007 conference from which it takes its name, speculative realism encompasses an entire spectrum of philosophies “committed to upholding the autonomy of reality...against the depredations of anthropocentrism” (Brassier 2007b: 306).¹⁸⁰ After a century of phenomenological and deconstructive investigations into consciousness and language, speculative realists take seriously the metaphysical claim that the world exists, independent of the mind and its perceptions. At the same time, in contesting all forms of relativism or anti-realism, they are joined in an appreciation of what Graham Harman calls “the *strangeness* of the real: a strangeness undetectable by the instruments of common sense” (2011a: viii). Speculative realists speak of reality in surprising, even uncanny, ways.

Skeptics have dismissed speculative realism as everything from the philosophical form of neoliberal economics to a cynical effort “to exploit the misguided enthusiasm of impressionable graduate students” (Brassier 2011).¹⁸¹ In this chapter, I will argue not only for its philosophical importance, but for its potential to reshape debate about “nature” in literary studies. My investigation therefore turns to romanticism, a literary and philosophical movement defined by its sustained reflection on the concept. Reading speculative realism through romanticism, and vice

¹⁸⁰ For a transcript of the complete conference, at which Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux spoke, see Brassier 2007b.

¹⁸¹ For these particular denunciations of speculative realism, the latter from an early proponent, see Nealon 2012 and Brassier 2011.

versa, suggests that much remains to be said about nature, even in its romantic instantiation – which turns out to be less familiar than we might have thought. It also shows how nearly our present theoretical moment hews to a certain romanticism and its afterlife.

For most speculative realists, the tradition of modern anti-realism begins with Kant's epistemology. Responding to Hume's skeptical attack on the uniformity of nature, Kant established the possibility of empirical realism by grounding it in a transcendental idealism. According to the familiar story, the Kantian revolution ensured the validity and coherence of our phenomenal experiences, but at the cost of transforming things in themselves into mere logical placeholders. After Kant, dogmatic speculation about the world in itself is supplanted by critical inquiry into the conditions under which experience of the world is possible.¹⁸²

The story is hardly new. More strikingly, though, the speculative realists insist that this transcendental procedure provides the basis for nearly all forms of modern thought. This poses major challenges for a renewed realism, since any contemporary thinking about the nature of reality begins with what Iain Hamilton Grant terms "the excision of the 'in itself' from metaphysics" (2006: 3). Grant draws on the work of F.W.J. Schelling, who declared in Kant's immediate wake that nature does not exist for modern philosophy. Replacing ontology with the transcendental analytic and cosmology with the transcendental dialectic, Kant's "antiphysics" (10) forecloses on speculation about the in itself or its origins. The transcendental method ultimately prevents us from engaging with nature other than as it is shaped by the conditions of human knowledge.

¹⁸² Each of the four original speculative realists offers a version of this story. See Grant 2006, Brassier 2007a, and Meillassoux 2008. Harman 2011b also finds the origins of modern anti-realism in Kant's philosophy, but argues against materialist strategies for overcoming it, in favor of an object-oriented realism.

If this is an accurate account of modern philosophy's failure to engage with nature, it also comes close to the thinking about nature that characterizes romantic literary criticism. For romanticists, nature has always been both near and hard to grasp. Indeed, romantic studies is afflicted by an antiphysics of its own. For example, when humanist scholars of the 50s and 60s tried to account for the interplay between the human mind or imagination and the natural world, they drew on the theory of the sublime.¹⁸³ Deconstruction and new historicism, even when most critical of humanism's mind-nature dialectics, continued to leverage the sublime as a way to theorize the breakdown of correspondence between mind and world.¹⁸⁴ In relying on the discourse of philosophical aesthetics, humanist, deconstructive, and new historicist critics alike conceived of nature in relation to human experience (no matter how fraught or mystified the relation). The sublime invariably reduced nature to a set of epistemological or phenomenological problems and made it impossible to think about nature in itself.¹⁸⁵

In the aftermath of its humanist absorption by imagination, its deconstructive alignment with aesthetic ideology, and its new historicist reading as a "displacement of history," romantic nature remains difficult to approach on its own terms. Even contemporary ecocriticism, presumably centered on something called "nature," offers no consensus on how to think about it – or whether scholars should continue to do so.¹⁸⁶ As Timothy Morton frames the problem, when we look for nature in itself, "we encounter just a long metonymic string," a set of unique objects (2008: 187). Rather

¹⁸³ See Bloom 1971 and Abrams 1984. Hartman 1964 makes a comparable, though more complex, argument.

¹⁸⁴ Cf. Levinson 1986, Liu 1996, and de Man 1996.

¹⁸⁵ Ferguson 1992 remains the definitive study of the intersections between romantic aesthetics and epistemology.

¹⁸⁶ On aesthetic ideology, see Warminski 1996. On "the new historicism's reading of nature as a displacement of history," see Levinson 2007: 396-7. Rigby 2004 opens with a useful overview of ecocritical positions.

than see these objects as supervening on “a solid metaphysical bedrock,” Morton proposes that we elaborate a “depthless ecology,” without recourse to concepts of nature or life (180). Alongside like-minded theorists such as Jane Bennett and Tristan Garcia, Morton argues for what he terms “ecology without nature” in hope of refocusing attention on the interrelatedness of objects, human and nonhuman alike.¹⁸⁷

Rather than re-echo these demands to abandon nature for objects or ecology, I argue that we needn’t give up on nature quite yet. Speculative realism helps identify precisely *why* nature is a problem for romantic criticism as much as for post-Kantian philosophy – not least by encouraging us to interrogate the prominence it grants epistemological, instead of ontological, questions. This chapter looks to the speculative turn in philosophy for help recovering a different romantic theory of nature, one that begins from the non-correspondence of being and human thought. This is not only to use speculative realism as a tool for interpreting romanticism, but to give a romantic genealogy of modern speculation. Locating philosopher Quentin Meillassoux’s return to “the great outdoors” – to what exists regardless of its being given to an individual mind – in a post-enlightenment context, I demonstrate that speculative realism’s concerns are fundamentally romantic.

This has two consequences. First, it shows that romanticism resolves certain impasses in speculative realism; thus, I use Schelling’s concept of natural-historical time to elucidate Meillassoux’s account of an absolute temporality. Further, by foregrounding aspects of the natural world overlooked in studies of life or affect,¹⁸⁸ speculative realism helps us unearth a less-familiar vein of romantic nature

¹⁸⁷ Cf. Morton 2007 and 2008. See also Bennett 2010 and Harman 2012.

¹⁸⁸ See Levinson 2007 on romantic Spinozism and Wordsworth’s early poetry of the body; new Deleuzian approaches to romantic affects (e.g. Mitchell 2008); and, in a somewhat different register, the “epigenesist poetics” of Gigante 2009. For detailed critiques of vitalism as a crypto-humanism, see Grant 2006 and Thacker 2010.

philosophy – according to which nature can be conceptualized, without being inevitably annexed to notions of will, thought, or vitality. I end, therefore, with Percy Shelley’s “Mont Blanc,” which articulates just such a model of the materialist absolute. Signaling its genealogical ties to both speculative realism and the natural philosophy of the enlightenment, Shelley’s poem shows that our theoretical commonplaces about nature are not always those of the romantic writers we read.

The Great Outdoors

The most strenuously developed, and provocative, speculative realist argument is undoubtedly that of Meillassoux’s 2006 book *After Finitude*. Here, Meillassoux confronts what he calls philosophy’s ongoing “Kantian catastrophe” – the continued hegemony of the transcendental approach – with the methods of Kant’s first critics: philosophers like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel, now associated with romanticism or speculative idealism. For this reason alone, it would be worth considering *After Finitude*’s relevance for romantic studies. But even more provocatively, Meillassoux wagers that the absolute of these post-Kantian thinkers can be reconceived in materialist terms. This entails conceiving the absolute neither as an aesthetic ideal nor as a transcendent spiritual entity, but as independent of human thought and fundamentally without reason.

Like other speculative realist interventions, *After Finitude* directs its polemical force at the epistemological and transcendental stance of modern philosophy. Meillassoux coins the term “correlationism” to encompass the entire post-Kantian problematic, “according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other” (2008: 5). Correlationism thus refers to any mode of thought predicated on a founding

correspondence between mind and world, subject and object, language and being, life and world. The coinage serves a strategic as well as a descriptive function, because it undercuts any phenomenological or vitalist claim to have returned to the things themselves. To insist on a fundamental relation between thought or life and the world is still to insist on the unthinkability of a world *without us*.

By Meillassoux's telling, correlationism takes hold of modern philosophy in three stages. Two are familiar: Hume's attack on the uniformity of nature and the principle of sufficient reason, and Kant's consequent redefining of knowledge of the world as knowledge of the conditions of knowledge. Looking further back, however, we see that Kant's limitation of possible knowledge is more than a response to epistemological skepticism. An even more profound challenge is the "radical enlightenment" decentering of the human being in the universe: the first Copernican revolution. As the work of Jonathan Israel suggests, the enlightenment's great achievement is to give a rational account of a world without a first or final cause.¹⁸⁹ Alongside Spinoza's materialist ontology, Israel writes, it was "the scientific advances of the early seventeenth century and especially the mechanistic views of Galileo, which chiefly generated that vast *Kulturkampf* between traditional, theologically sanctioned ideas about Man, God, and the universe and secular, mechanistic conceptions which stood independently of any theological sanction" (2001: 14). The pairing of enlightenment with the nihilistic implication that nature's

¹⁸⁹ For Jonathan Israel, the "radical enlightenment" of the seventeenth century is defined by "combin[ing] immense reverence for science, and for mathematical logic, with some form of non-providential deism, if not outright materialism and atheism along with unmistakable republican, even democratic tendencies" (2001: 12). Thus opposed to all traditional sources of authority, the radical enlightenment is distinct from later, more moderate expressions of enlightenment ideas. Cf. Levinson 2007 and Jager 2010 on the radical enlightenment's romantic afterlives.

movements lack a goal or significance – this is the deeper, existential threat to which correlationism responds.¹⁹⁰

As *After Finitude* describes it, correlationism is dedicated to defending the claims of the human against the materialist world revealed by physics. Beginning with Galileo and Descartes, who understand even planetary motion mathematically, “the world becomes *exhaustively* mathematizable” (2008: 115). Coupled with the doctrine of primary qualities, which asserts the independent reality of qualities like extension, the new mathematical science proves the existence of a self-moving universe without a necessary connection to its human inhabitants. The aimless and indifferent cosmos uncovered by physics is, for speculative realism, the paradigmatic attempt to conceive of what persists independent of life or mind. In its decentering of human thought, the radical enlightenment enables theorizing about a materialist absolute: “a being whose severance (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not” (28). This absolute again appears unthinkable after the correlationist decision to put the relation between thought and being at the foundation of all philosophy – a decision, in effect, to cover over the unsettling truth revealed by enlightenment physics.

This story will be familiar to romantic critics. Since M.H. Abrams’s work in the 1950s and beyond, scholarly narratives about romanticism have begun from the enlightenment’s dismantling of an inherently meaningful world. More recently, Nicholas Halmi has identified aesthetic and symbolist theory as a response to the “burdens of enlightenment” also discussed by the speculative realists. Foremost among these burdens, writes Halmi, is the infinite space revealed by technologies like

¹⁹⁰ On the intersection of enlightenment and nihilism, see Brassier 2007a.

the telescope and the microscope. To posit the real existence of the infinite or the infinitesimal “was not only to deny humanity the centrality it had enjoyed in a closed cosmos, and indeed any absolutely determinable position in the universe, but to renounce definitively the assumption of the commensurateness of the senses...with nature” (2008: 39). While Meillassoux points to correlationism as the eighteenth century’s response to “the eternal silence of infinite space,” Halmi observes that the sublime offered an aesthetic means of “mastering the infinite psychologically” (43). Rather than opening onto the absolute, the sublime strives to refashion it in a human form. It appears to confront the infinity of the cosmos, but, particularly in Kant’s version, actually reveals a power of human reason to insulate itself.

The deconstruction of the sublime, decisive for romantic criticism in the 70s and 80s, may have uncovered the linguistic materiality underwriting this ideology of the aesthetic. Yet the “material events” of deconstruction bear no straightforward relation to the material world obscured by the sublime. Indexing the moment in which the inscription of the mind-world dialectic decomposes its own synthetic movements, deconstructive materiality names the disruptive and unredeemable core of language, while foreclosing on a fully articulated materialist ontology.¹⁹¹ Neither the sublime nor its deconstruction helps us grasp the world beyond the correlation. Scholars interested in taking nature on its own terms must therefore consider other ways of stepping into “the *great outdoors*,” Meillassoux’s name for “the *absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers” (2008: 7). This would be a natural world independent of any transcendental, phenomenological, or vitalist subject upon which its manifestation would depend. It would remain irreducible to human history, economics, or social

¹⁹¹ The best deconstructive accounts of linguistic materiality are Chase 1986, de Man 1996, and Warminski 1996. Chase is clear about the impossibility of abstracting the materiality of language from its singular occurrence in a text (6). Resistant to conceptual generalization, it cannot be discussed in ontological terms.

structures, defined instead by an inhuman, deep time of its own. It would be material, but its materiality would not be encompassed by an inscription or event.¹⁹²

At the same time, a return to the great outdoors would not entail a revival of pre-critical metaphysics. Resisting dogmatic stipulation about reality, Meillassoux's speculative realism does not reject outright the arguments of Kantian philosophy. It instead extends them past their limits. In common with the late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thinkers on whom he avowedly draws,¹⁹³ Meillassoux seeks "the ontological truth hidden beneath the sceptical argumentation" of the correlationist (52). But he also insists on the undesirability, if not the impossibility, of returning to a pre-Kantian position. Thus the importance of turning critical thought against itself to articulate what Schelling termed a "higher realism," opposed to dogmatism, transcendentalism, and common sense alike.

In so doing, Meillassoux explicitly aims to circumvent the deconstructive arguments that have been the familiar terminus of the idealist tradition. By giving up on any determinate discourse about the absolute or the real, deconstruction opened itself up to all forms of irrationality and in fact "justified belief's claim to be the *only* means of access to the absolute" (46). Thus the critical project of deconstruction gave way to post-metaphysical theology. This religious turn in phenomenological and

¹⁹² In other words, "the great outdoors" resists categorization in terms of "the sublime" (Abrams 1984), "history" (Levinson 1986), or "inscription" (Warminski 1996).

¹⁹³ *After Finitude* insists that, to refute correlationism, "we must take as our exemplar the first metaphysical counter-offensive against Kantian transcendentalism" (51). This clearly refers to romantic and idealist philosophers like Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. In a recent interview, Meillassoux is more ambivalent about his relation to romantic and idealist thought. Thus he strenuously denies that his philosophy "remain[s] within the standpoint of German idealism" (Harman 2011a:165), while remarking on the important yet overlooked contributions of "Reinhold, Jacobi, and Maimon: the German thinkers who formed the junction between Kant and Fichte" (172).

deconstructive thought is *After Finitude*'s other main target.¹⁹⁴ As we shall see, the ease with which a vacant or voided absolute is occupied by belief is also a concern for Shelley.

The ontological truth pursued in *After Finitude* is starkly materialist. Hidden in plain sight of the correlationist worldview, it entails two fundamental postulates: first, even in the face of humanity's entire extinction, there would remain some material being, whether or not anyone perceives or thinks it; and second, human thought can grasp this material being in its very separateness from mind or consciousness. That is, some being in excess of thought exists and it is possible to think this being without reducing it to its relation to thought. Meillassoux insists on the possibility of deriving these two principles directly from transcendental arguments about knowledge. This entails transforming transcendental idealism into a materialism that not only points to a repressed real but establishes its determinate properties. How *After Finitude* turns correlationism against itself in this precise fashion will be my next concern.

Hyper-Chaos and Non-Ground

Guided by the idea that correlationism is inherently self-destroying, Meillassoux's argument begins by juxtaposing the "weak correlationism" of a Kantian with the speculative positions of the absolute idealists.¹⁹⁵ When Fichte and Hegel contest Kant's point about the finitude of human knowledge, they eliminate the thing-in-itself and transform the relation between thought and being into the absolute. Historically and conceptually, Meillassoux observes, this is the condition for another

¹⁹⁴ Cf. Marion 2001 and, at least by a certain reading, nearly any of Derrida's writings on the gift or the temporality of the "to come."

¹⁹⁵ My account is informed by Brassier 2007a: 49-94, Critchley 2009, and Harman 2011a.

type of correlationist thinker to emerge, exemplified by Heidegger and Foucault, among others. These “strong correlationists” respond to absolute idealism by asserting that the relation between thought and being can only be a fact of finite existence. They insist on “the facticity of the correlation” (38): even though we can never observe variations in the transcendental conditions of experience, they could always be otherwise – and indeed, probably are for beings other than ourselves.¹⁹⁶ These thinkers suggest too that there is no reason for the correlation to take any particular form over another. The in-itself may be entirely different from the for-us *and* there is no necessary relation between them. To state otherwise would be to reintroduce an absolute ground of knowledge.

The crux of Meillassoux's argument is that strong correlationism does just this. By arguing for the necessity of facticity, it has appealed to the *absolute* contingency of the relation between thought and being. So contingency in general, and not only the contingency of the thought-being relation, must belong to the absolute. Meillassoux thus claims to have derived one of its determinate properties from within the correlation. At first glance, the concept of an absolute contingency meets both of his criteria for materialism. In its derivation from the facticity of the correlate, it implies that thought bears no necessary relation to being; by this argument, nothing is strictly necessary but contingency itself. At the same time, the logical proof of contingency implies that the great outdoors, the realm of being without thought, can be readily conceptualized – just as it was during the seventeenth-century radical enlightenment.

Following this demonstration of “the necessity of contingency,” Meillassoux extends in two directions his account of the absolute: first, noting that the absolute

¹⁹⁶ Even Kant suggests this might be so, and the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* speculates about the cognitive powers of “non-terrestrial rational beings” (2006: 225).

must lack any reason for being what it is, and second, claiming that its contingency must hold for some existing being. Rather than remain subject to the anthropomorphic principle of sufficient reason, the contingent absolute legitimates “a *principle of unreason*” (60).¹⁹⁷ This absence of reason, or ground, holds even for laws of nature, which, as contingent elements of a cosmos where anything is possible, have no ultimate reason for operating as they do. However, because contingency itself is a necessity, there must be a contingent being in order for it to hold absolutely; contingency must be predicated *of* something. From this being follows an infinite universe of entities and laws, all equally contingent in their emergence and destruction. This is not, as critics of the concept of nature might see it, to reinstate an original entity but to determine the minimal condition for the necessity of contingency. The old question of why there is something rather than nothing finds an answer: for no reason. The outlines of a nature philosophy without metaphysical grounding, yet comparable to dogmatic metaphysics in scope, begins to emerge from this total absence of reason – what Meillassoux terms “*hyper-Chaos*” (64).

In both its dialectical method and its assumption that determinate properties of the real can be established through abstract reasoning, *After Finitude* draws directly on the first speculative challenge to Kant’s transcendentalism, that of the absolute idealists. Its most obvious debt to these thinkers lies in the claim to attain an “*intellectual intuition* of the absolute” (82), which I take up below. But in using the language of philosophical rationalism to delineate a world whose only ground is the unreason of hyper-chaos, Meillassoux also signals his affinities with the post-Kantians.

¹⁹⁷ The implication is that all “reasons” are anthropomorphic when they serve a human understanding of the cosmos. A truly inhuman nature is one inherently without reason. This goes some way to explaining why the contingency of thought entails the contingency of unthinking being.

Charged most recently with reinstating a deity under the sign of the hyper-chaotic,¹⁹⁸ *After Finitude* is better understood in terms of romantic nature philosophy's insistent interrogation of metaphysical and transcendental grounding. This is both a claim about speculative realism's romantic tendencies and an assertion of romanticism's continuing centrality to modern thought. Already in 1999 Alberto Toscano was proposing that Schelling's ontology could illuminate the revival of an "an-historical materialism" in modern philosophy.¹⁹⁹ Anticipating *After Finitude*'s polemic against the return to religion, Schelling's rethinking of the absolute challenged the moralized and transcendent God of Kantian theology. Toscano's work on the Schellingian absolute thus implied that romanticism's conceptual tools were still the best way to grasp new materialist opposition to the religious turn – whether conceived as a deconstructive negative theology or as a political theology (47-9). A genealogy of speculative realism must therefore confront the nature philosophy of Schelling and others, as much as the physics of the radical enlightenment.

Such a genealogy would show that Meillassoux's absolute is less a post-metaphysical deity than a contribution to the discourse on ontological grounding that begins with Fichte, Schelling, Coleridge, and Hegel. To indicate only one point of contact between Meillassoux and the philosophy of the romantic era, I cite Schelling's 1809 *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*. Here, as in *After Finitude*, the absolute is conceived in starkly anti-foundational terms, as a "non-ground" or "not-Being" that "has no predicate, except as the very lacking of a predicate, without it being on that account a nothingness." Neither is this a negative theology. Schelling's non-ground of being is rather the "point of contact" between, or

¹⁹⁸ Johnston 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Toscano thus differentiates historical or dialectical materialism from materialist philosophies of "becoming" or "the event," which allow for temporal occurrence without privileging human history.

the “indifference” of, conflicting forces or modalities (2006: 68-9). Contrary to most dismissals of Schelling, from Hegel on, it is also not an original identity. The non-ground is rather the absent cause or precondition of ontological difference, the antecedent to any opposition between necessity and contingency, ideality and reality, and the site of every contingent entity’s emergence and destruction.

Two hundred years after Schelling’s *Freedom* essay, contemporary philosophy has reentered its distinctive terrain. Meillassoux’s speculative realism both reanimates a romantic line of questioning and offers an equally romantic solution, with its own vision of the absolute as non-ground. The an-historical materialism linking Schelling with a range of more contemporary theorists receives a particularly stringent elaboration in *After Finitude*, where the materialist absolute remains irreducible to human consciousness but inaccessible without its ratiocinating power. In articulating this intersection (without identification) of thought and the absolute, Meillassoux makes another romantic gesture, assuming “an ontological force of knowing” legible across the spectrum of late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century thought – from Wordsworth’s Spinozist poetry of embodiment to Schelling’s dynamic naturalism.²⁰⁰ This complex relation of thought and being, as encompassed in the notion of intellectual intuition, will be the next point on our itinerary.

Intellectual Intuition and Absolute Time

The romantic coordinates of modern speculation become increasingly apparent when one asks why the unveiling of hyper-chaos must constitute an act of intellectual intuition. The concept of intellectual intuition originates in Kant’s transcendentalism and the idealist response to it, so Meillassoux’s materialist use of it

²⁰⁰ Levinson 2007: 388. For Levinson, this phrase refers specifically to Spinoza’s sense of knowledge as bodily and mental.

is provocative. As Ray Brassier has observed, it demands a difficult balancing act, wherein Meillassoux must argue both that reality is “intrinsically accessible to intellectual intuition” and that thought and being are not exactly parallel (2007a: 88). The danger is that, in appealing to intellectual intuition’s unique power to grasp the absolute, Meillassoux will inadvertently return to the correlationist fold.

After Finitude’s most detailed discussion of intellectual intuition follows near on its treatment of hyper-chaos, as Meillassoux concludes that “we must project unreason into things themselves, and discover in our grasp of facticity the veritable *intellectual intuition* of the absolute.” Aware that such terminology will sound out of place in a work of philosophical materialism, he defines it as follows: “‘Intuition,’ because it is actually in what is that we discover a contingency with no limit other than itself; ‘intellectual’ because this contingency is neither visible nor perceptible in things and only thought is capable of accessing it, just as it accesses the chaos that underlies the apparent continuity of phenomena” (2008: 82). Experience gives us knowledge of the world of things, subject to physical laws, while pure thought conceives the hyper-chaos that defines it ontologically. Yet the chaos revealed by thought’s transposition of facticity into the in-itself is no phantasm; absolute contingency is both intelligible and intuitable because it is “actually in what is.” To explain how this transposition occurs, without at the same time re-establishing the correlation between thought and being, it is important to return to the Kantian and post-Kantian context of “intuition.”

In the first and especially the third *Critiques*, Kant employs the notion of an intellectual intuition to foreground the peculiarities of the human understanding.²⁰¹ Intellectual intuition allows Kant to think the possibility of an understanding unlike

²⁰¹ I draw on Pluhar 1987: lxxxvi-cix.

our own that would not depend on the harmony between concepts and intuitions for knowledge. Intellectual intuitions would therefore belong to an intuitive understanding, as opposed to the discursive understanding of the human subject. While it is not clear what kind of beings, if any, might think this way, Kant does suggest that an intuitive understanding would not passively depend on particular sensible intuitions for the content of its thoughts. Instead, it would be able to immediately grasp the world in its actuality – not just the conditions of possibility for experiencing the world or its phenomenal appearance for us. “If our understanding were intuitive,” Kant writes, “it would have no objects except actual [ones]” (1987: 284); indeed, the distinction between possibility and actuality would not even hold for such an understanding, according to which cognition of the world is equivalent to the determination of its actual existence (286).

Leaving aside for the moment Kant’s point that intellectual intuition is impossible for a human subject, there is substantial overlap between his and Meillassoux’s accounts. Both assume that intellectual intuition entails a direct engagement with the thing-in-itself. In both cases, this means intuiting the supersensible ground of ordinary experience: for Kant, the pure actuality of a world known in the fullness of its existence; for Meillassoux, the radical contingency that gives rise to phenomenal stability. Each account neatly inverts the other therefore, and while Kant speculates about the necessary ground of apparently contingent entities, Meillassoux intuits the contingency that gives rise to a world of apparent necessities.

This comparison begins to clarify the concept’s appeal. But it is still not obvious how Meillassoux reconciles it with his materialism. Doesn’t the insistence on intellection’s unique power to access the absolute establish an unbreakable bond between them? Why is Meillassoux’s deployment of pure logic to reach ontological

conclusions different from idealist uses of this method? Once more, Schelling's philosophy suggests an answer. Because it situates thought in being without rendering them necessary to each other, Schelling's theory of intellectual intuition is more amenable to realism than Kant's account. It both upsets correlationist dualism and allows us to consider the reality of thought itself. Meillassoux's account of the materialist absolute not only echoes Schelling, therefore, but demands to be supplemented by the Schellingian proposal that human consciousness is produced from unthinking being.

In his survey of post-Kantian efforts to articulate a non-subjectivist idealism, Frederick Beiser offers a surprisingly realist account of intellectual intuition. According to Beiser, for thinkers like Schelling intellectual intuition is not the merely indeterminate idea of a non-discursive mode of cognition or even, as it is for Fichte, an immediate knowledge of the I's self-activity. Rather, it "consists in the knowledge of my identity with the universe as a whole. Through intellectual intuition I do not see myself acting but all of nature acting through me." Drawing on Spinoza's ontology, which culminates in an intuitive knowledge of the mind and body as part of nature, Schelling conceives intellectual intuition as "the self-knowledge that I am part of the absolute" (2002: 583-4). By this definition, intellectual intuition is an explicitly anti-subjectivist knowledge of the world and the mind's embedding in it, a self-knowledge predicated not on the transcendental conditions of possibility for experience but on the real conditions of the mind's production.

Schelling's interest in the genesis of thought suggests that "a naturalism attaching to reason" is endemic to the romanticism supposed to be furthest from such a position. This is not to say that Schelling solves, or even claims to solve, the hard problem of consciousness. But he does make two important points: first, that it is

worth looking for a naturalistic solution to this problem; and second, that a temporality untethered from the subject will play a part in it. As Grant observes, Schelling's is "a time- rather than a substance-based naturalism" (2006: vii); by inquiring into the temporality of the mind's genesis – especially in the later writings associated with *The Ages of the World* (1811-20) – Schelling performs the radical "unconditioning of *time* as the merely subjective a priori form of inner sense" (19). In other words, his realism about intellectual intuition entails a time that is no longer a transcendental condition but that traverses the absolute and the human subjects embedded within it. Schelling's an-historical materialism reveals itself, not as a negation of history in toto, but as a *natural-historical* materialism.

The inhuman temporality interwoven with Meillassoux's account of hyper-chaos should now be legible. Consider this nearly literary interlude, where *After Finitude* vividly imagines the great outdoors:

If we look through the aperture which we have opened up onto the absolute, what we see there is a rather menacing power – something insensible, and capable of destroying both things and worlds, of bringing forth monstrous absurdities, yet also of never doing anything.... We see something akin to Time, but a Time that is inconceivable for physics, since it is capable of destroying, without cause or reason, every physical law.... It is a Time capable of destroying even becoming itself by bringing forth, perhaps forever, fixity, stasis, and death. (2008: 64)

Hyper-chaos is aligned here with a temporality irreducible to time in the intra-worldly or transcendental sense, yet allowing for the emergence, destruction, or persistence of everything. Defined by both "random and frenetic transformations," and "fixity, stasis, and death," this absolute time is the vehicle of contingency's manifestation. Almost despite its name, hyper-chaos entails instants of emergence and sheer duration, the interruptive event and homogenous emptiness.

Such an absolute timescale, opening onto what precedes the emergence of human consciousness and what follows its extinction, implies that the thought of contingency will emerge and disappear along with the mind that thinks it. The intellectual intuition of hyper-chaos must also be an intuition of its own contingency *as a thought*. Ultimately independent of any contingent act of intellection, the absolute must always exceed the mind that thinks it. Therefore, in Schellingian terms, to intuit the absolute is to think “subjectivity *on the verge of annihilation*” (Toscano 1999: 53).²⁰²

This is not to realign the great outdoors with the ungraspable real. Despite its seeming indifference to organic life, its absolute and inhuman timescale, nature at its most fundamental is susceptible to conceptualization. To maintain the asymmetry between human thought and being while legitimating the ontological force of knowledge, the emergence of consciousness must be understood as a wholly contingent event that nonetheless makes possible the comprehension of an equally contingent real. This is why an account of intellectual intuition, like Schelling’s, that hinges on a time without mind is essential to the project of speculative realism. Without relying on vitalist or panpsychist arguments for the reducibility of being to life or thought, a naturalistic theory of emergence would further clarify both thought’s contingency and its grasp on unthinking being.²⁰³ Speculative realism still needs a theory of mind.

²⁰² There may be a surreptitious humanism to such claims. In thinking its own annihilation, Meillassoux and Schelling imply, the human mind reasserts its own power of thought. Cf. Bowie 1993: “The [Spinozist] demand to lose yourself is...contradictory: what does the losing is what must be lost, but in the act of losing itself it affirms its own existence” (27). I am grateful to William Galperin for conversation on this point.

²⁰³ I use the term “emergence” to refer to the naturalistic, yet unpredictable, production of higher-order properties like consciousness or life from a physical

Shelley's Nature

Speculative realism offers varied and significant conceptual resources for those of us interested in reopening the question of nature. This is in no small part because of its romantic coordinates: speculative realism, especially as theorized in *After Finitude*, defines itself in relation to the philosophical problems of greatest moment for romanticism. As a post-Humean and post-Kantian formation, romanticism is occupied with the same thematics of mind and world that delineate speculative realism's post-phenomenological and post-deconstructive horizons. From a metacritical perspective, meanwhile, the term "correlationism" helps identify the shared assumptions of vastly differing methodologies. The inability to think nature on its own terms defines not only the epistemology of the sublime, but many of the theories supposed to overcome this epistemology. Attending to criticism's long-standing correlationism points out what it elides: the great outdoors, understood here as a concept of nature as it exists independently of human life or thought. Scholarship suggests that a return to defining romanticism through its ideas about the natural world is already under way.²⁰⁴ Critics are also beginning to explore the deep continuities between romanticism and the enlightenment that precedes it.²⁰⁵ Meillassoux's work thus takes on further significance for romantic scholars, as its conditions of possibility lie in the enlightenment physics of Galileo and Spinoza and the idealist speculation of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel.

substrate. On arguments for emergence in the enlightenment and beyond, see Kramnick 2010 and Jager 2011.

²⁰⁴ For some literary critical reassessments of romantic nature, by way of modern ecology and the science of biological systems, see Rigby 2004 and Levinson 2007: 398-403.

²⁰⁵ On the romantic adoption of enlightenment ideals of education and scientific knowledge, see Beiser 2006. On romanticism as an "immanent critique" of enlightenment, particularly its collusion with sovereign power, see Jager 2010.

I conclude this chapter with a reading of Shelley's well-known poem "Mont Blanc." The relation of speculative realism to literature is admittedly fraught.²⁰⁶ Yet there are powerful affinities between Meillassoux's philosophy of absolute contingency and Shelley's poem of contingent nature. Each pivots on the correlation of mind and world, and each offers a materialist vision of what lies beyond it. The poem's final lines move from epistemological aporia to ontological truth in a manner that both anticipates Meillassoux and attests to the romantic concern with the "eternal silence of infinite space" discovered by the radical enlightenment. Speculative realism reminds us that the real gravity of "Mont Blanc" is in its passage through the correlation's "transparent cage" to an absolute outside. Even more, because my reading treats the poem's form as an integral part of Shelley's argument, it makes room for the literary in a genealogy of modern speculation.

For readers interested in the philosophical implications of Shelley's poem, its close offers a particular challenge. Seeming to draw a conclusion about the "everlasting universe of things" (*SPP* 2002: 1) and its relation to the mind, these lines also take the form of a question, addressed to the mountain before which the poet stands: "And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea, / If to the human mind's imaginings / Silence and solitude were vacancy?" (142-44) The philosophical commitments entailed by this question have long been a matter of dispute. But the significance of everything that precedes these lines – from the early sections' staging of "an unremitting interchange" between the mind and "the clear universe of things

²⁰⁶ Against deconstruction, speculative realism resists endowing literature with any special authority. For Meillassoux, if there is a master discourse, it is mathematical physics. Cf. Meillassoux 2008: 1-27, 103-11, 112-28, and 2012a. At the same time, in a recent book on Stéphane Mallarmé, Meillassoux attributes to the poet a unique vantage on the triumph of secular modernity (2012b: 221-3). This book, situating Mallarmé's theological-political project "in the line of the first romantics" (24), signals once more the importance of romanticism for speculative realism.

around” (39-40) to the middle sections’ natural history of the Alps – seems to hinge on how they are read.

At least two incompatible, but entirely plausible, readings of these last lines are possible. The first is idealist, the second skeptical. The idealist reading would insist on the rhetorical status of Shelley’s question. Despite its catastrophic natural history, glaciers upsetting human and animal dwelling as they “creep / Like snakes that watch their prey, from their far fountains, / Slow rolling on” (100-2), the mountain is a figure of hostility and indifference to life only for its human observers. In this insistence on the insuperable relation between material nature and its aesthetic appropriation, Shelley’s poem stages “a central paradox of the sublime”: the pleasure it extracts from experiences of the incomprehensible or the unmasterable. In Frances Ferguson’s terms, “Mont Blanc” guarantees the mind’s Copernican centrality in the world because “the ideas of the destructiveness of nature and the annihilation of mankind require human consciousness to give them their force” (1984: 210). While silence and solitude may terrify or awe, they will never reach the zero point of human significance. Absolute vacancy or void is strictly unthinkable insofar as such an idea always depends on the human mind that thinks it.

A skeptical reading, by contrast, might see in the poem’s close a legitimate confrontation with the external world’s independence from all human significance. But it would also insist that, in ending with a question rather than a declaration of nihilism, the poem performs the uncertainty of all our knowledge. Earl Wasserman’s influential discussion of “Mont Blanc” makes just this point. Even though Shelley desires “visionary knowledge of the absolute Power behind all worldly action,” by the poem’s own skeptical logic, this cannot be attained. The poet’s sublime vision before the ravine at Mont Blanc’s base does not reveal anything determinate about the

absolute power that is its ground. This is why the poem must end in “skeptical incertitude” (1971: 238).

At this stage of the reading, one might conclude that incertitude is the end of intellectual inquiry for Shelley. The poem’s close would thus mount an attack on philosophical dogmatism and religious belief.²⁰⁷ Shelley himself appears to corroborate this in a prose fragment of 1819, which identifies philosophy’s task as the “destr[uction] of error, and the roots of error.” While proposing “no new truth,” he continues, philosophy nevertheless “leaves...a vacancy. It reduces the mind to that freedom in which it would have acted, but for the misuse of words and signs, the instruments of its own creation” (*SPP* 2002: 507). This vacancy or freedom of mind is the same vacancy that surfaces at the end of “Mont Blanc.” The mountain’s lesson to its observers is that any liberation from “[l]arge codes of fraud and woe” depends on the discipline of “awful doubt” (81, 77). Unlike the idealist reading, which ends by asserting the mind’s power to find meaning even in that which appears vacant, these skeptical approaches revalue vacancy as a state of vigilant questioning.

The incompatibility of these readings tells us something about the presuppositions of Shelley’s interpreters. The conflict between idealism and skepticism is a conflict generated by the assumption that “Mont Blanc” is primarily about epistemology. Both accounts of its final lines aim to discover in the poem a theory of knowledge. The equal plausibility of idealist and skeptical readings demonstrates how much these two accounts share, not just in their insistence that the poem is concerned with a relationship between the mind and the external world but in their reliance on the discourse of the sublime. Whether understood as transcendence or delusion, the poet’s “trance sublime and strange” (35) is at the center of both

²⁰⁷ Cf. Hamilton 2006.

readings. The assumption that “Mont Blanc” is a sublime poem locates the correlation of mind and world at the foundation of every possible reading of the poem.

Another moment shows us how to proceed beyond this epistemological dead end. Confronted with the ceaseless flux of nature’s history, the poet concludes, “All things that move and breathe with toil and sound / Are born and die; revolve, subside and swell. / Power dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (94-7). This seemingly straightforward contrast between “power” as inaccessible foundation and the revolutions of visible nature should puzzle any reader familiar with works such as 1811’s *Necessity of Atheism*, where Shelley contests anthropomorphic and religious notions of an absolute being or principle of reason. Yet in its “dwelling apart,” power is etymologically identified as some form of absolute, “capable of existing whether we exist or not” (Meillassoux 2008: 28). Power lies beyond the relation between mind and world which shapes both idealist and skeptical accounts of the poem. But it is not clear from this passage how to conceive it without recourse to dogmatic claims about a necessary being.

From these intimations of unfathomable depth the poem turns its attention to surfaces. “And *this*,” the speaker continues, “the naked countenance of earth, / On which I gaze, even these primaeval mountains / Teach the adverting mind” (*SPP* 2002: 98-100). These lines, beginning with the deictic “*this*,” suggest that if the deep truth is inaccessible, power is to be sought on the face of things. It must be an open secret, in other words, seemingly encrypted or hidden away, yet manifest in everything. Only at the poem’s close does its nature become clear. Here are the final lines again:

The secret strength of things
Which governs thought, and to the infinite dome
Of heaven is as a law, inhabits thee!
And what were thou, and earth, and stars, and sea,
If to the human mind's imaginings
Silence and solitude were vacancy? (139-44)

Leaving all content and deep truths aside, it is still possible to read the form power takes. After bracketing the epistemological questions posed by idealists and skeptics alike, what remains is a series of lines linked together only by the reiteration of contingent sounds and marks. The insistently reiterated “s”-sounds, including the final word’s soft “c,” are less a poetic device than the form of power’s occurrence. As sound, the reiterated “s” turns alliteration to disarticulation. It establishes fleeting ties, without cumulative effect, between words that lack any causal connection or meaningful resonance.²⁰⁸ As letter, the “s” is a pure mark, absent of any clear relation to the poem’s content and thus subtracted from all significance. What Shelley identifies in the subtitle of his poem as “Lines Written in the Vale of Chamouni” are just that: lines and nothing more. On the level of the text, power reveals itself through the contingency of the mark.

This is not to reduce Shelley’s principle of contingency to its effects on language. For him, no such delimitation is possible. In his own reflections on language, Shelley insists that the words used to refer to things in the world have no necessary relationship to these things. All signs are arbitrary, he contends: they are “merely marks,” rather than “signs of any actual difference subsisting between the assemblages of thoughts thus indicated.” Such a claim about the arbitrariness or conventionality of signs is far from unique. But Shelley takes it further still. “The words *I*, and *you* and *they*,” he continues, “are grammatical devices invented simply

²⁰⁸ For the distinction between repetition (as a cumulative, aesthetic effect) and reiteration (as the serial form of the identical), see Meillassoux 2012a.

for arrangement and totally devoid of the intense and exclusive sense usually attached to them” (508). Not only do signs lack a necessary relation to things, their signifying power is predicated on this absence of innate significance. Devoid of all “intense and exclusive sense,” any sign can refer to any thing. Conversely, any *thing* can operate as a sign. Signification is possible only because nothing is essentially more fit than anything else to serve such a function.²⁰⁹

Beginning from the contingency of language, Shelley’s essay reveals a certain contingency in things in general. The interchangeability of signs and things alike is indicative not just of an absence of meaning at the core of language. Indeed, this meaninglessness that is the condition of possibility for any signification at all holds for every material thing. As Meillassoux puts it, following a very similar logic, in the essential arbitrariness of signs – in their capacity to signify anything whatsoever *and* in the capacity of anything whatsoever to be a sign – “the possible being-otherwise of every entity” is at its clearest (2012a: 36). Thus he concludes that the contingency of language opens onto the same speculative contingency accessed by the facticity of thought.²¹⁰ For Shelley too, I am proposing, language permits us to intuit the absolute contingency named by “power.” By insisting on their own status as mere words and letters – on their own fundamental meaninglessness, that is – the lines and marks that comprise “Mont Blanc” bring into view the contingency of all things.

²⁰⁹ In Shelley’s words, “By signs, I would be understood in a wide sense...[whereby] almost all familiar objects are signs, standing not for themselves but for others, in their capacity of suggesting one thought which shall lead to a train of thoughts” (SPP 2002: 507). Cf. Meillassoux 2010, which argues that “the sign devoid of meaning” is in fact “the eminent condition” of any rational or logical discourse about the real. Such claims echo the comparison made in Shelley’s 1822 poem “The Triumph of Life” between a series of marks on a sandy beach and the mind of the philosopher Rousseau.

²¹⁰ Meillassoux argues that formal languages display their contingency more readily than natural languages. This may be so, but I would contend that formal and natural languages alike are comprised of meaningless, contingent signs.

In sum, contingency functions as a general ontological principle for Shelley. It displays itself through language without being confined to it. At the same time, it remains opposed to any principle of reason or transcendent being. Absolute contingency in “Mont Blanc” is nothing but the *form* that events take. In this respect, the reiterated letters at the poem’s close are no different from the interminably “revolving” material things depicted earlier on. Each part of the natural world, like each letter or sign, could always be or mean something other. “Power” is Shelley’s name for this necessary contingency.²¹¹ Like Schelling’s non-ground and Meillassoux’s hyper-chaos, it is both the absolute ground of all particular things and an absolute groundlessness. There is no need to look for power in obscure depths because it is finally no foundation at all.

This necessary contingency holds for human thought as much as for language and the material world. Only thus does Shelley’s poem truly get past the correlation of mind and world. “The secret strength of things,” contingency “governs thought” because for Shelley there is no total divide between thinking and unthinking being.²¹² This is not to set up a necessary correspondence between the human mind and the world. The mind emerges into nature, and disappears again, just like anything else. Nature can be grasped by human thought, but this is no guarantee of the mind’s eternity.²¹³ Accordingly, the contingency on the poem’s surface can be drawn out of the epistemological aporia with which we began. In its strict undecidability, its

²¹¹ Shelley’s early notion of “necessity” – elaborated in writings like *Queen Mab* (1813) – is precursor to this account of a necessary contingency. Jager 2010 connects necessity and power in Shelley, with reference to Fredric Jameson’s discussion of necessity as the “form of events.” Cf. Jameson 1981: 102.

²¹² See particularly the first two sections of “Mont Blanc,” 1-48. On Shelley’s anti-dualist theory of sensation as “a mode of synthesis that binds a living being into the non-organic forces of the cosmos” (par. 24), see Mitchell 2008.

²¹³ In poems like *Queen Mab*, Shelley’s emphasis is slightly different. There, he proposes that matter has an inherent mental aspect. Nevertheless, this mental aspect is decidedly not a human consciousness.

insistence that the relation between mind and world could always be otherwise, the conflict between idealism and skepticism generates a facticity sufficiently powerful to be transformed into an ontological truth. The absolute undecidability encountered in any epistemological reading of the poem is indicator not only of a philosophical stalemate, but of the contingency that is nature's law. From this perspective, the poem closes in a vision of absolute contingency as it indifferently "inhabits" earth, stars, sea, and minds alike.

I began by claiming that literary critics shouldn't yet give up on nature. I have aimed, therefore, to find in Shelley's "Mont Blanc" radical possibilities for rethinking nature in opposition to dogmatic metaphysical foundations and their skeptical or transcendental revisions. By identifying power and contingency, the poem maps out one route that such a rethinking might follow. Reading "Mont Blanc" for its ontology of absolute contingency also locates Shelley in the romantic genealogy of speculative realism that this chapter proposes. Such a genealogy helps make sense of speculative realism's central questions. Indeed, Meillassoux's account of the correlation between mind and world, and his attempts to get outside it, are decidedly romantic. This in turn suggests that romanticism itself is just what we have been looking for – a literary and philosophical formation marked by the same concerns as our speculative moment.

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