THE MATTER OF DISCUSSION:
CONVERSATIONAL POETICS IN THE BRITISH ROMANTIC PERIOD
by
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A dissertation submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Program in Literatures in English
Written under the direction of
William H. Galperin
and approved by

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New Brunswick, New Jersey
October 2018
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“The Matter of Discussion: Conversational Poetics in the British Romantic Period”

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Dissertation Director:
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This dissertation challenges the critical commonplace that British Romantic poetry was primarily expressive. Instead, this project takes seriously poets’ aspirations to convey “the very language of men” or to compose “conversation poems,” arguing that the period’s verse was not merely communicative but conversational. More particularly, by reading Romantic poetry and poetic theory alongside an interdisciplinary mix of literary criticism, philosophies of language and materialism, gender studies, and eighteenth-century natural science, the dissertation proposes that this “very language of men” generated its social power from nonverbal communication. It particularly focuses on the neglected connections between “natural signs”—such as gestures, facial expressions, and sublingual utterances—and contemporaneous debates on poetic form. Whether experimenting with meter or fixating on their interlocutors’ “looks,” writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley hoped to augment poetry’s unique ability to inspire visceral responses in their readers.

To address the somatic and environmental elements of communication in Romantic verse, the dissertation uncovers the marked affinities between Romantic poetic form and conversational protocols. Like poetry, conversation is comprised of words and
unspoken cues. And because it must be incomplete to continue, it relies upon imperfect communication to perpetually foster exchanges between interlocutors, however fraught the results. For the Romantics, then, mutual understanding need not be synonymous with language, affective mirroring, or metaphors of mindreading. In fact, as they knew, the irreducible differences between interlocutors intensify their connections, even (and especially) when they unearth disturbing insights into how “human nature” is not always humane. More broadly, this dissertation suggests that the Romantic conception of conversational poetics, as an embodied and response-oriented medium, should inform how we may conceive of verse’s communicative potential in the present day, liberating lyric poetry from its more exclusive associations with the isolated speaking voice and material text.
Dissertations are solitary endeavors, the writing of which, especially as a Romanticist, sometimes made me feel as if I were one of Caspar David Friedrich’s lone figures wandering through a sublime landscape, dwarfed by the momentous task at hand. However, as it would turn out, I was not quite alone. Several individuals made essential contributions to this project. I was fortunate to have a committee of sympathetic and challenging conversationalists, and, considering that my research addresses those very topics, I do not take this statement lightly. I am particularly indebted to my director, Billy Galperin, whose wit, insight, and uncompromising faith in my work and my ability to work energized this project. I’m grateful to Billy for his willingness to entertain and to help shape my wild ideas. Not in contrast to, but in tandem with Billy’s guidance, Colin Jager has always proven to be a model of argumentative restraint and intellectual daring. He provided invaluable feedback from start to finish. Most importantly, Billy and Colin have been voices of reason, consolation, and encouragement ever since I first arrived at Rutgers. Without them, I would have abandoned not only this project but also academia many times over.

I also wish to thank Jonah Siegel for being part of my dissertation committee and for being a wonderful instructor and interlocutor throughout my time at Rutgers. Jonah taught me how to teach literature and, in ways that are both subtle and direct, how to let my speaking voice inform my writing, a fitting transformation given this project’s aspirations. I also remind myself, sometimes daily, of what he told me during my first semester: aspire to write clearly—and have fun. I am humbled and thankful to Nancy
Yousef for agreeing to be my outside reader. I have admired Nancy’s work since this project’s inception, and she has influenced my own thinking about intersubjectivity in the Romantic period, as this dissertation’s contents make evident.

The A. W. Mellon Foundation, Rutgers School of Arts and Sciences, Rutgers English Department, Wellesley College Committee on Extramural Graduate Fellowships and Scholarships, and the Sperry Fund funded my research over the years. Thanks, too, to the archivists at the Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection at Victoria University, the Wordsworth Trust, and the British Library for making the experience of wading through primary sources productive and enjoyable.

Without Dr. Adam Trenton’s compassion, fair-mindedness, and impeccable professionalism, I would not have been able to complete this dissertation. He is without question the most important person I have met in the past decade. My mother, Trudy Brock, supported me through many a dark time, and her unwavering practicality, humor, and quiet strength have always kept me grounded. Rachel Lewis, Jonathan Mulrooney, Isaac Cowell, Beatrice Sanford Russell, Omar F. Miranda, Heather Barrett, and Jesse Hoffman helped me clarify my ideas at various stages of this project’s development; they also affirmed the value of genuine and generous intellectual camaraderie. My excellent “Later Romantic Literature” students inspired me to write about The Cenci, and they reminded me of how exhilarating it is to grapple with poems that “arrest… the vanishing apparitions which haunt the interlunations of life.” And, really, what more can a person ask for?

Portions of Chapters One and Two have appeared in European Romantic Review.
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Introduction

In the 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, William Wordsworth writes that he intends to “adopt the very language of men... to keep [his] Reader in the company of flesh and blood.”¹ This claim is not an anomaly: when elaborating on why embodiment and this very language are both important and inextricably linked, he states that poetry is *social* and that the ideal Poet should be “a man speaking to men.”² Wordsworth is in good company when it comes to these kinds of maxims, and this dissertation takes his claims seriously by exploring Romantic poets’ interest in the social power of poetic form. But, rather than restricting my inquiry to the various polemics and theories about verse in the period, these debates, I argue, were best carried on in verse itself, leading writers to a poetics that was fundamentally *conversational* rather than one-sidedly expressive.

Taken a step further, I show how, even when acknowledging the intersubjective dynamics present in Romantic poetry, we have overlooked an essential aspect of the social altogether. When Wordsworth imagines the ideal poet to capture “the very language of men,” he is not simply referring to words spoken into the air; rather, he is imagining a poetry that conveys what it means to exist in the present moment, where the poet speaks and *listens* through looks and gestures in order to solicit replies from his interlocutors and his readers alike. To forge connections beyond the verbal, writers like Wordsworth attend to and exploit the nonverbal components of poetry, from meter to stanzaic structure, to enact rather than mimetically simulate the power of what the Scottish common-sense philosopher Thomas Reid termed “natural signs,” such as gestures, facial expressions, and sublingual utterances.³ As Reid writes, “It is by natural
signs chiefly that we give force and energy to language… and the less language has of them, it is the less expressive and persuasive… Where speech is natural, it will be an exercise, not of the voice and lungs only, but of all the muscles of the body.”4 Pursuing the notion that communication is intuitive and sometimes uncannily intelligible, Romantic poets endow language with force that transcends mere signification, instead infusing “all the muscles of the body” with communication’s ability to animate interpersonal relationships rather than collecting information. While they work with words, or what John Locke and others called artificial signs, the Romantics experiment with the nonverbal components of verse to harness an expressive vivacity that is unspoken, but also hopes to inspire visceral responses from their readers. Writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and Percy Bysshe Shelley were particularly innovative, I suggest, because they conceived of poetry as a privileged medium for capturing the joys and risks inherent to deceptively ordinary or intimate social encounters.5

What I call conversational poetics, then, brings a peculiar dimension of Romantic social encounters to the fore, where audition, a sensible environment, and other tacit subtexts combine to highlight conversation’s most unique attribute: namely, that it relies upon imperfect communication to continue. Such incompletions and imperfections, contrary to Enlightenment fantasies of direct communication or sympathy, underscore the importance of viewing conversation as a practice irrespective of content. Put differently, the act of conversing is just as important as (if not more important than) the acquisition of “knowledge.” After all, to achieve a content-based form of “understanding” would bring conversation to an end. Departing from affect theory, which often represents “feelings” as
automatic and segregated from “emotions” and “thought,” as well as from “rational-critical” or even Bakhtinian discursive rubrics, “The Matter of Discussion” argues that conversation is a distinct and responsive subset of communication that has marked affinities with poetry’s unspoken qualities, striking a balance between words and nonverbal cues.⁶

My definition of conversation is not predicated on intentionality in the philosophical sense, where intentional thoughts are directed toward things or specific concepts. An emphasis on intention implies that our thoughts are made up of language—a position to which the Romantic-era linguist John Horne Tooke subscribed, but, as I discuss in Chapter One, does not adequately engage with the processual nature of how we often think through conversation. This point of view also does not account for Romantic poets’ interest in soliciting replies and revisions, let alone their fixation on the unspeakable.⁷ Coleridge, for example, describes the genesis of Lyrical Ballads as resulting from the activity of conversing with Wordsworth rather than debating particular issues. And it is only long after his falling out with Wordsworth that Coleridge would be more specific in his objections throughout the Biographia Literaria. There, he criticizes Wordsworth’s claim to be able to “imitate” the very language of men when good poetry by nature is not transcriptive; most famously, to Coleridge, meter and form cannot be “superadded” to language and then called poetry.⁸ So, regarding Wordsworth’s “The Thorn,” Coleridge condemns his former friend’s efforts, saying that Wordsworth only succeeds in replicating the speaker’s mental deficiencies and garrulousness rather than conveying any aesthetic insight or cultivating his readers’ interest (Biographia 2:54, 2:49).⁹
Earlier, however, Coleridge conceived of this communicative process as indeterminate, just like all open-ended and perfectly imperfect conversations. He writes, “Wordsworth's Preface is half a child of my own Brain / & so arose out of Conversations, so frequent, that with few exceptions we could scarcely either of us perhaps positively say, which first started any particular Thought.” The allusion to “frequency” suggests that repeatedly conversing was most responsible for gestating the Preface, to which Coleridge contributed his “half” as a good poet and a good interlocutor. And his belief that their exchanges were a creative labor persisted well into 1803. On that occasion, after relating another vexed account of the bearing of “ideas” on “feelings” to parse his “half-verbal, half-visual metaphors,” Coleridge cautions Robert Southey against publishing his Bibliotheca Britannica—a text that was itself generated from conversations between those poets (Letters 2:955, note 1)—and then reinforces this opinion by binding his view to Wordsworth’s: “it could not be otherwise than that I should feel a confirmation of them from Wordsworth’s compleat coincidence—I having requested this deliberate opinion without having communicated an Iota of my own” (Letters 2:961, emphasis added). Both of these citations invoke a kind of mindreading that, far from being strictly intellectual and knowledge-based, focuses on the absence of an “Iota” of content when communicating—and especially when communicating about and, as we shall see, within poetry itself.

While Coleridge is the focus of three of this study’s chapters, his position on conversation as a way to discover “coincidence” without content bears on my other readings of what constituted ideal conversation in the Romantic period. The formal act of conversing itself was considered an important mode of establishing interpersonal
intimacy because it required speakers to pay attention to a listener’s subtle manifestations of interest while talking and expressing “meaning,” which, like interest, can be relayed through body language and tone. As Stephen Miller observes, enjoyable conversation depended less on content than on constructing a social space where participants could take pleasure in attending and responding to companions. By collaborating in the ongoing production of spontaneous or collectively revised ideas, interlocutors could speak and listen without necessarily having premeditated, verbalized “thoughts.”11 To the poets in this dissertation, the best conversations unfold from moment to moment; participants share and feel each other’s presences; and the vulnerability involved in engaging with another individual carries a power that is only partly related to what is said. Avoiding the skepticism posed by other minds as well as the impossible ideal of “perfect” verbal communication, conversation, on the model I am exploring, is inherently metacritical, a view shared by Madame de Staël, who posited that such discussions required a heightened degree of interpersonal sensitivity.

Herself a celebrated conversationalist in the period, de Staël asserts that without vigilant attention to others, “self-love” will cause a conversation to falter. She emphasizes how considering conversation as a joint endeavor is essential to preventing dialogue from devolving into vain self-exhibition:

To succeed in conversation, we must possess the tact of perceiving clearly, and at every instant, the impression made on those with whom we converse; that which they would fain conceal, as well as that which they would willingly exaggerate—the inward satisfaction of some, the forced smiles of others. We must be able to note and to arrest half-formed censures as they pass over the countenance of the listeners, by hastening to dissipate them before self-love be engaged against us. There is no arena in which vanity displays itself under such a variety of forms as in conversation.12
De Staël adheres to certain social conventions of polite restraint, but does not figure
sociality like Adam Smith. Smith states that an individual seeking sympathy “must
flatten” his story and diminish “the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to
harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him.” By contrast,
De Staël emphasizes the necessity of perspicuity and attention “at every instant” while
one is talking because listening is a somatic activity that influences the content and
inflection of a speaker’s words.

De Staël’s comment encapsulates the importance of responding to both natural
signs and words—sometimes in the midst of speaking—and this is precisely what
Romantic poets aspire to express, albeit to various ends. In their letters and poetic theory,
we see them attempting to channel the inherent indirection and imperfection necessary to
sustaining conversation into creative and poetic thinking. When writing to William
Sotheby in 1802, for instance, Coleridge does not merely suggest that meter formally
generates a communicative passion between a poet and a reader; he characteristically ties
this comment to a conversation with Wordsworth:

metre itself implies a passion, i.e. a state of excitement…and tho’ I stated
this to Wordsworth, & he has in some sort stated it in his preface, yet he
has [not] done justice to it, nor has he in my opinion sufficiently answered
it. (Letters 2:812)

Here, Coleridge does not desire a transcription of ideas but a response to them that would
perpetuate dialogue. In other words, his complaints about conversing with Wordsworth
are not about ideological differences but about proportion: his friend does not answer
“sufficiently.” If anything, he wants more replies—more revisions—even as these
expectations are no longer being met.
I emphasize this interest in scale and proportion partly because, as any number of critics have remarked, sympathy is based upon a sense of ideal mutuality, similarity, and immediacy despite its ties to both performance and literary narrative. Distance and narrative are essential to Smith’s account of sympathy; the “spectator” judges whether to sympathize based upon the context and delivery of emitter’s story rather than “the view of the passion.”¹⁶ In turn, as I mentioned earlier, the emitter must curate his tale to avoid disgusting his listeners.¹⁷ For Smith especially, the process often involves interpretative delay, restraint, and organizing one’s feelings into both words and a larger trajectory of events since “we have no immediate experience of what other men feel.”¹⁸ But if we examine Romantic experiments with sympathetic exchanges in a genre like poetry, we uncover an attention to something immediately interpersonal that is located in bodies and surroundings, in tones and in looks. We see a bolder willingness to linger in the present—to submit to contingency and vexation—where the safety of rational distance and deliberation are abandoned. Along similar lines, Nancy Yousef has attended to the importance of “palpable proximity” to Romantic representations of social encounters.¹⁹ She argues that sympathy was an ideal rather than an achievable practice and offers the term “intimacy” to characterize “asymmetrical and nonreciprocal forms of relation, attention, and appreciation.”²⁰ Sympathy’s disappointments lead one to a form of philosophical modesty that allows “indeterminate and undetermined modes of attention and appreciation [to] come to account.”²¹

My project builds upon this interpretation of sympathy and its perils. However, I propose that poets were attracted to these dangers, as well as to probing the limits of language and understanding, because poetic form has the potential to challenge these
very strictures. As Robert Koezler observes of Coleridge’s “conversation poems,” the
Romantic verse-mode does not truly have the pretense of mimetically replicating a
conversation so much as cultivating a sense of “lively social interaction,” and
“embody[ing] larger tensions with Romantic poetics between talk, which pulls poetry in
the direction of discursive exchange (conversation), and song, which pulls it in an
opposing direction of musical expression (lyric).” Koezler acknowledges poetic form’s
influence upon conveying social energies, but he does not consider why “talk” must be in
tension with “music.” Instead, given how frequently eighteenth-century and Romantic
writers fixated on “harmony” as a metaphor for communication, speech and its nonverbal
musicality are hardly at odds, as I discuss throughout this project. Koezler’s reference to
“embodiment,” however, accords with my own take on poetic power. Verse has a
material presence at the same time it represents material presence through nonverbal and
formal components as stanzaic structure, prosody, and meter, all of which are intrinsic to
a reader’s experience. This poetic materiality is distinct from the materiality of the sign
and linked to our “flesh and blood,” as Wordsworth put it, allowing the medium not
simply to refer to but to channel the intensity of “natural signs.”

Indeed, it is no accident that another proponent of “natural language,” Jean-
Jacques Rousseau, claimed that the “first men” had “the tongues of poets” because the
language of metaphor was uniquely suited to communicating the “passions” and other
more nebulous feelings. The legacy of this imbrication of natural signs and poetry
extends beyond Rousseau and other Romantic figures like him: that poetry was thought
to best articulate unspoken passions anticipates and is supplemented by the current
theoretical interest in verse form, where critics like Simon Jarvis have devoted attention
to the importance of prosody and meter to understanding poetry’s words and
metaphysical connotations. Similarly, Susan Stewart observes that rhyme “offers a
particular kind of pattern, one that is only partly determinative. Unlike rhythm, which
may exist as pure haptic or tactile feeling, rhyme comes with aural, if not always
semantic, content; and unlike meter, which remains ideal, rhyme is always realized or
manifested.” In application to the Romantic period, Thomas H. Ford suggests that
poetry possesses a distinctive linguistic sensuousness that can make us perceive what
poets like Wordsworth termed the “atmosphere” outside of our bodies, and Daniel
Tiffany claims that “lyric substance” is “at once performative and representational,” but
“can never be entirely distanced from questions about the intelligibility and corporeality
of the lyric image and about the pneumatic substance—the breath—of the poem.”

Accordingly, this dissertation does not advance an exclusively historicist
argument: the connections between poetic form, bodies, and immediate environments
bear directly on current work in poetic theory. But I also would go further: the unspoken
dimensions of verse call attention to its status as a medium beyond the frameworks of
book and reception histories, eighteenth-century nostalgia for oral cultures, or form as
solely a conduit for affect. As the Romantics discovered, lyric poetry, far from being
atemporal and isolated, is actively subject to myriad social contingencies once we
recognize its capacity to be embodied—and, as this project shows, to communicate
beyond the lexical.

In short, when we view conversation apart from linguistic intentionality—but
linked to poetry and the unsaid—we see why Romantic writers thought that verse
captured the complexly visceral dimensions of communication. Not mimetic in the same
manner as eighteenth-century couplets or, later, dramatic monologue, these poems accept and even emphasize the power of the nonverbal when figuring speakers engaging with interlocutors. They were, as Arthur Hallam wrote of Keats and Shelley, “poets of sensation… [s]usceptible of the slightest impulse from external nature,” and, he continues, in possession of such perceptual surplus that “the delight attending the simple exertions of eye and ear… became mingled more and more with their trains of active thought, and tended to absorb their whole being into the energy of sense,” living a life of “emotions which are immediately conversant with… sensation.” These poets, not surprisingly, pick up on others’ responses and want replies in turn, putting sensation and words to good use when conjuring, not transcribing, conversational exchanges that just as often serve as commentaries on the aspirations of conversation itself. The poets in this study thus practice conversational poetics to explore the joys and dangers of embodied existence; to obsess over their interlocutors’ glances, movements, or perceived indifference; to ponder how gender informs the reception and conveyance of meaning; and to expose how social relationships are bound to their immediate physical surroundings. For the Romantics, differences between interlocutors actually intensify their connections, even (and especially) when they lead to disturbing insights into how “human nature” is not always humane.

Some Previous Conversations About Conversation

My definition of conversation diverges from accounts that, at their core, are tied to Lockean understandings of language and mainstream Enlightenment concerns with a common humanity. On Locke’s reading, words are assigned meaning by way of civil
negotiation so that they can best communicate information. These methods of establishing agreement are committed to the ideal of “human progress,” often directly related to our command and use of language, where societies continually move toward a more “civil” mode of governance and behavior. This interest in people’s motives and conduct—and, even more, their capacities to be “speaking animals” who are potentially “rational”—helps explain why David Hume, unlike Smith, has no qualms about claiming that part of our “remarkable” desire to sympathize with others is based upon our common embodiment, letting us “enter into” the feelings of another with a fluidity that would seem to run counter to the principles of skepticism. Emphasizing the importance of force and “vivacity” in keeping with his sceptical doctrine of impressions and ideas, he writes, “Every human creature resembles ourselves, and by that means has an advantage above any other object, in operating on the imagination.” Yousef describes Hume’s oddly enthusiastic confidence about entering others’ minds and bodies as indicative of sympathy’s complexities beyond the staples of reciprocity and mutuality; likewise, Adela Pinch discusses sympathetic “correspondence” and accounts for Hume’s equally important contention that the passions overrule reason. Yet his conception of embodiment as an equalizing force between persons is most important because it also “enters into” Enlightenment discourses of homogeneity, just as other philosophers find common ground by identifying humans as speaking animals, or, if conceiving of animals as machines (like Descartes), as thinking beings adhering to the principles of natural or arbitrary language. Indeed, such rationales justly lead some modern readers to qualify Enlightenment principles, begging, for example, the problematic question of what to do with “creatures” like women, whose physical differences may influence how they
communicate—a topic taken up in Chapters Two and Three at length.\textsuperscript{35}

Beyond the eighteenth century, these principles of sameness, agreement, and trust all underpin discussions of discussion, considering that conversation is often lumped together with Socratic dialogue, political debate, or other forms of discourse.\textsuperscript{36} Foremost among these theorists is Jürgen Habermas, whose account of the bourgeois public sphere is an extension of Enlightenment principles of cooperation, reason, and unilaterally desirable civil debate. Habermas tracks the movement from Queen-Anne coterie culture to its consolidation in a seemingly more democratic arena where, due to concomitant changes in mass-market print circulation, texts like epistolary novels encouraged private feelings to become public concerns, and educated people, thus individualized, began to exercise the “public use of their reason” more freely.\textsuperscript{37} Coupled with his theory of rational-critical discourse, which is perhaps the most thoroughgoing defense of “goal-directed, feedback-controlled interventions in the world of existing states of affairs,” the rise of the dialogic public sphere illustrates Habermas’s formal, politically oriented understanding of communication.\textsuperscript{38}

Habermas’s influence on literary criticism has been profound, and whether subscribing to or refuting these theories, he has led many critics to take a broad view of “the social.”\textsuperscript{39} However, as I have outlined above, my project does not attempt to take on the kinds of dialogue endemic to radical dissenters or Romantic literary coteries, nor does it attempt to encompass the historical scope that many excellent Habermasian approaches to the period accomplish.\textsuperscript{40} My work also contests the strictly verbal or performative understandings of conversation that necessarily arise when discussing political debate and oration. Reading for conversational poetics leads me to resist the impulse to fold the
Romantic period into the “long eighteenth century” and, by extension, Habermasian rubrics; at the same time, I do not neglect the influence of Enlightenment principles of agreement and a common “nature” with which these writers grappled—and for which they sometimes yearned.

In certain ways, this dissertation is in dialogue with other dimensions of what has been loosely termed “Romantic sociability.” Of course, this also is a large topic, as John Savarese’s recent survey article makes apparent. Setting aside previous scholarly work on Romantic collaboration and Bakhtinian dialogue, Savarese observes that this newest turn to the social is actually a turn to many other approaches to the period’s literature, including (but certainly not limited to) “interpersonal thinking,” affect theory, actor-network theory, and emendations to “rational-critical discourse.”41 Countering longstanding commonplaces about Romantic individualism,42 we have, thanks to scholarship like this, a wider and more diverse conception of Romantic literature in terms of genre—chiefly by studying novels, periodicals, essays, and drama—and we have come to recognize how marginalized writers operated within a world of sociopolitical upheaval and reform.43

As productively invested as this body of work is in “conversation” in a disciplinary but often-unqualified sense, the task of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which individual authors and interlocutors imagined themselves (and their poetry) to be engaged in social acts rather than private quests or total renunciations of the mimetic “mirror” in favor of an expressive “lamp.”44 And perhaps most surprisingly, canonical Romantic lyric is a crucial site for investigating how a more contained form of the social—and particularly a defined and qualified version of conversation—was
theorized, worked through, and figured poetically.

Chapter Summaries

“The Matter of Discussion” is divided into two parts: “Coleridge and the Love of Reciprocity” and “Other Matters of Discussion.” Each of the chapters in Part One builds upon the previous, and I devote all three to Coleridge for several reasons, the foremost being that he did write what G. M. Harper called “conversation poems” in a significantly more sophisticated and metacritical register. Coleridge was also one of the most famous “talkers” of his day and was constantly preoccupied with intimacy and communication even after having failed to maintain nearly all of his personal relationships, from his friendship with the Wordsworths to his marriage to Sara Fricker and his infatuation with Sara Hutchinson. Yet I mostly focus on Coleridge to trace a different genealogy of Romantic and poetic individualism: Coleridge, like many of his speakers, wound up alone, but only after repeated social rejections that were not imaginary. This is also why his conversation poems are not exclusively mental events, as M. H. Abrams famously describes them, but works whose speakers are embodied, environmentally attentive, and interested in soliciting a “reply.”

Some replies are better than others, however, and finding the right interlocutor was Coleridge’s lifelong project. Chapter One, “Pig Looks and the Serpent’s Tract Oblique: Coleridge’s Poetics of the Unsaid,” lays the groundwork for the subsequent two chapters and outlines many of the tenets of conversational poetics I have surveyed above. Here, I claim that Coleridge withdrew into monologue and largely gave up poetic composition after 1810—including the aforementioned “conversation poems”—because
he was an unexpectedly talented and multisensory listener. This skill left him both alienated from ordinary conversation and made him susceptible to the smallest unspoken slight—or, in the case of communicating with William Wordsworth, a “pig look” that was devastating in its perfection. It was everything Coleridge imagined himself to want from a male interlocutor—complete and instantaneous understanding—but what each man understood was something ugly and not quite describable.

The desire to establish social bonds without risking personal dissolution led Coleridge to develop an indirect but embodied form of sympathy through poetic form that is especially evident in “Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.” Articulating a serpentine poetics in contrast to what Abrams, in formulating the greater Romantic lyric, located in the *ouroboros*, Coleridge’s poetics of indirect sympathy is governed by a strangely tactile understanding of give and take that articulates some of his greatest communicative successes, harnessing “retrogressive” but “propulsive” movement through which poetry, like conversation, is experienced as a process rather than a solution that comes full circle.

The specter of the “pig look,” a nightmare of homosociality and a terrifying version of “perfect sympathy,” haunts Chapter Two. “Snake Looks and Sociable Individuation: Christabel Two Ways” examines the homology between the glare exchanged with Wordsworth and the moment of mirroring that famously occurs upon the conclusion of *Christabel*, where Christabel seems to reflect Geraldine’s “Serpent’s Eye.” My first reading of the Gothic ballad compares its 1800-02 and 1816 conclusions to show how Coleridge came to recognize that he, like his heroine, was doomed to retreat into a form of individuation, but only after many near-“perfect” but alarming instances of
social contact. In the second reading, I argue that *Christabel* depicts queer female sexuality as transgressive insofar as it models a highly effective and satisfying form of erotic communication. When the eponymous heroine and her shape-shifting guest, Geraldine, spend the night together, they converse in a spellbinding language that withdraws from patriarchal interference. They realize a form of mutual comprehension that can only be achieved through flexible *paired* relationships rather than the more rigid homosocial triangulations with which nineteenth-century literature is often associated. While Coleridge would never achieve any such bond in his personal life, this same-sex encounter closely resembles his ideal of a “reciprocal marriage” (*Letters* 1:131), where each partner preserves “Distinction without Division.”

Chapter Three, “The Critical Visions of Sara Fricker and Sara Hutchinson,” also focuses on gender and particularly on Coleridge’s fixation on *answering* rather than any actual answers. Proceeding from Romantic-era pseudoscientific accounts of female inconstancy in the guise of physiognomy, I argue that Coleridge’s enthusiasm for responsive expressions led him to revise these misogynistic views and to reframe mutability as responsiveness. In poems like “The Eolian Harp” and “Love,” he imbues women with the power to react and use their bodies and expressions to assert their vital presences, enthraling male speakers with a touch or a shooting look that both “darts” and speaks “well.” As I described in Chapter One, Coleridge remained equally engrossed with perfect language, as is evident in his mediocre sonnet, “To Asra,” the only copy of which Sara Hutchinson pasted into her presentation copy of *Christabel*. Sara’s act, I suggest, reveals her critical acumen when she locates the “turn” in Coleridge’s sonnet in a turn to *Christabel* itself. Rather than scrambling for the ideal way to articulate a love
that could never be reciprocated, Sara silently directs Coleridge to his own nightmarish
depictions of partnership gone awry.

Part Two, “Other Matters of Discussion,” concentrates on Keats and Shelley to
flesh out dimensions of conversational poetics left under-addressed by Coleridge: namely,
questions of natural history and the environment in the case of Keats; and responsive
theatricality, interrogation, and sexual violence in Shelley. Chapter Four, “Keats’s
Chameleonic Poetics,” shows how issues of responsiveness, the unsaid, and embodiment
are not exclusive to the human world, putting to question why Keats aligns the “poetical
character” with the “chameleon poet.” Drawing on philosophical materialism and
Romantic-period natural history, I show how the chameleon’s historical association with
both worldly communication and mutable physicality make it an ideal figure to probe
what Keats calls the “material sublime.” This more modest and communicative Keats
pursues ecological sources of poetic inspiration that need not “speak” and that blur the
boundaries between the human and nonhuman, most notably in “Ode to a Nightingale.”
The literary and scientific resources available to the Romantics, I suggest, aided them in
their efforts to imagine non-anthropocentric models of poetic subjectivity that are as
astute as—or more astute than—many current accounts of posthuman aesthetics.

My final chapter, “Tortured Logic: Answering to No One in Shelley’s The Cenci,”
contends that narrative and testimony have no therapeutic or legal value in a fallen world
of Papal corruption and domestic terror. In contrast to scholars who chastise its heroine,
Beatrice Cenci, for refusing to recount her incestuous rape or call herself a “parricide,” I
propose that she simply grasps the mechanisms that undergird her impossible situation:
she is subject to the logic of torture and interrogation where both truth and justice are
predetermined. And not surprisingly, Beatrice rejects verbal explanations in favor of meaningful gestures and penetrating, “anatomizing” looks, effectively embodying the poetic imagination in a way that, as Shelley explains in his Preface to the text, makes *The Cenci* not a closet drama but a “dramatic poem.” Menacingly sociable, Beatrice’s commitment to action enables her to radically channel her unremitting and inarticulable pain not only to rally collaborators but also to compel audiences to identify either with torturers who gaze from a distance or the tortured.

Selecting whom to include in these “other matters” was no easy task. Wordsworth, while discussed throughout Part One, deserves further attention, especially since he feared conversational poetics and the possibility of losing control over both his verse and his interlocutors. Wordsworth’s contributions to *Lyrical Ballads* are, as it happens, an inventory of communicative failures, and there are scenes in the *Prelude* (1805) that express serious discomfort with the immediate and “unknowable” natural world, in which taking recourse to the sublime is a relief rather than a legitimate risk. While this dissertation is committed to examining gender in the period from various angles, an extended version of my project would have to include female poets like Charlotte Smith or Joanna Baillie, whose attitude toward violence and sympathy is only touched upon in Chapter Five. These are not decisions to be taken lightly, but, as I have said, Keats and Shelley illustrate how conversational poetics were practiced to various ends and with different emphases, whether advocating for a closer engagement with our immediate surroundings or imagining a distressingly interactive form of poetic theatricality.

“The Matter of Discussion” examines the Romantic imbrication of connection and disconnection through a generatively imperfect nexus of embodiment, environment, and
the unsaid. Despite their difficulties with intimate social encounters, the Romantics tried to meet, however fitfully, their dual desires for perpetually unfolding conversation and “perfect” understanding. But, to do so, they had to turn away from Enlightenment aspirations to sameness and controllable affective responses. Conversational poetics and the resulting forms of sociable and irreducible individualism did not breed solipsism but, in the Romantic permutation my project explores, were socially and creatively generative. More broadly, the dissertation gestures toward the possibility that the Romantic conception of poetry as an embodied and response-oriented medium should inform how we may conceive of verse’s communicative potential in the present day, liberating lyric from its more exclusive associations with the isolated speaking voice and material text. The ramifications of this project also have a more troubling legacy: a poetics of response and its limitations shadow literary studies as well as our contemporary notions of selfhood. We crave total agreement even when it quashes discussion; we are physically and emotionally inundated with decontextualized and digitized information; we even ask whether the humanities must be human. But with the potential loss of embodied communication to the ephemeral abstractions that increasingly structure our social lives, Romantic questions of how we should respond to whom or what stands immediately before us—to the keenly audible silences that we cannot help but feel—remain matters of urgent concern.48

2 “Preface to 1802 Lyrical Ballads,” 751.
The actual quote regarding natural signs runs as follows: “there are natural signs as well as artificial; and particularly, that the thoughts, purposes, and dispositions of the mind, have their natural signs in the features of the face, the modulation of the voice, and the motion and attitude of the body: that, without a natural knowledge of the connection between these signs and the things signified by them, language could never have been invented and established among men: and, that the fine arts are all founded upon this connection, which we may call the natural language of mankind” (“An Inquiry” in Thomas Reid’s Inquiry and Essays ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983], 41). Reid goes on to assert that there are three different classes of natural signs, and the third class is of particular interest, where we seem to have an innate comprehension of what is communicated “though we never before had any notion or conception of the thing signified,” instead understanding whatever we encounter by way of “a natural kind of magic” (“Inquiry,” 43). Reid’s doctrine of natural signs is a “common sense” position because they are “the signs that are naturally expressive of our thoughts” and also available to “savages” and animals (“Inquiry,” 32-33). While utilizable to communicating “in some tolerable manner” (“Inquiry,” 33), however, natural signs are more interesting to Reid—and to me—not for their intended “meanings” in terms of content but the degree of force and expressiveness they allow—and which are more meaningful and “magical.”

4 “Inquiry,” 34.

5 This project only deals with the “nonhuman” in metaphorical terms in Chapter Four, but Tobias Menely is correct when he outlines how many eighteenth-century philosophers and rhetoricians understood poetry to be especially suited to incorporating “the passions” into verbal communications beyond the arbitrary signs, The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 7-8.

6 My criticism of a strictly verbal understanding of conversation does not mean that I view conversation as something that could be rendered a subset of affect studies. Brian Massumi and Teresa Brennan have directed our attention to the body’s movement through the world to redefine our notions of subjectivity and the methods of political coercion; in these readings, bodies often respond “automatically” to stimuli and experience “feelings” beyond language’s reach; see, respectively, Parables of the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002) and The Transmission of Affect (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2004). As Ruth Leys has observed, there is a scientific imperative that underlies many of these analyses. “Feeling” is often parsed from “emotion,” the latter of which is linked to “thought,” language, and narrative. This separation of the thinking mind from its body reproduces the very philosophical dualism from which affect theorists would otherwise recoil, “The Turn to Affect: A Critique,” Critical Inquiry 37 (2011): 452–58. See also Joel Faflak and Richard C. Sha, whose volume of essays attempts to historicize the current interest in Romantic affect and emotion. The volume aspires to “encourage disruptions of current neuroscientific accounts of emotion that insist upon the automaticity of the emotions at the expense of their intentionality” (“Introduction: Feeling Romanticism” in Romanticism and the Emotions [Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014], 13). For the kind of reading to which Leys objects, see Martha Nussbaum, Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions (Cambridge
and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 2-3, 179. For a slightly different take on the categorization of feelings and emotions as based on “conscious” perception, see Jesse Prinz, “Are Emotions Feelings?” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 12, no. 8-10 (2005): 9-25. Prinz’s monograph, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) offers a more nuanced take on the bifurcation between emotion and feeling, consciousness and unconsciousness, and cognitive labeling. Coining the phrase “embodied appraisal theory,” he argues that even if we “know” something in our gut in a pre-linguistic manner, it can drive us to action in the real world.

7 Discourses of intentionality influence more localized studies of conversational “efficiency,” not to mention the need for “agreement” for discussion to take place, the most influential of which is H. P. Grice’s seminal article, “Logic and Conversation,” *Syntax and Semantics* 3 (1975): 41-58. Grice is not interested in conversation’s main object—to solicit responses that may not have anything to do with debate or linguistic content—so much as the structure and quality of how conversation ostensibly should be. Grice imposes a four-part rubric on conversation according to the “cooperative principle,” where “conversational implicatures” are “essentially connected to with certain general features of discourse. The principle is based upon “Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner,” and the examples of each of these elements imply that conversation should move individuals toward performing clear and concrete actions in the world (45, 47).

John Searle poses a partial exception to content-based discussions of conversation, although he does not attend to the importance of gesture or tone, and his lecture is quite brief. Calling it “a paradigm of collective behavior,” he justly observes that, even when participants may say very little in terms of “the semantic contents of the words and sentences uttered,” they “understand each other perfectly well, and that a great deal is being conveyed” (“Conversation” in *On Searle on Conversation*, ed. Herman Parrett and Jef Verschueren [Amsterdam and Philadelphia: J. Benjamins, 1992], 21, 27). Searle’s point is not new; it is actually Romantic. We may recall a scene in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*: while dancing at the Netherfield Ball, Elizabeth Bennet tells Mr. Darcy that they should converse to avoid saying anything, but, naturally, they “say” a great deal: “One must speak a little, you know. It would look odd to be entirely silent for half an hour together; and yet, for the advantage of some, conversation ought to be so arranged as that they may have the trouble of saying as little as possible” (*Pride and Prejudice* [1813], ed. Vivien Jones [London and New York: Penguin, 1996], 90).


9 On “The Thorn,” Coleridge writes, “it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discouer, without repeating the effects of dulness [sic] and garrulity.” Coleridge then makes his point that Wordsworth’s own poetic voice differs markedly from “the real language of men”—and does so to great effect: “However this may be, I dare assert, that the parts (and these form the far larger portion of the whole) which might as well or still better have proceeded from the poet’s own imagination, and have been spoken in his own character, are those which have given, and which will continue to give universal delight” (*Biographia* 2:49-50).


Quoted in Richard Robert Madden, A Memoir of the Literary Life and Correspondence of the Countess of Blessington, vol. 1 (London: Newby, 1855): 158. See also Richard Armour and Raymond Howes’s introduction to Coleridge the Talker, who productively counter De Quincey’s conflation of monologue and soliloquy, stating that “the conversation best suited to sustain the interest of some groups may consist largely of a monologue by a person generally admitted to be best informed on the subject under discussion, ablest in presentation of ideas, and most adept at sensing and meeting unspoken queries and objections. The listeners, far from sinking into inanimate vacuity, may find such talk highly stimulating” (Coleridge the Talker [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1940], 81). Their attention to “unspoken queries and suggestions” corresponds to part of my own sense of nonverbal communication, although they do not quite see Coleridge as a listener who would practice such behavior in turn.

Enlightenment dictates of “politeness” have been outlined by any number of scholars; they remark upon the constraints and implicit classism of a “polite society” versus uncontrollable vulgarity that can, in turn, be used to justify class-based oppression. As John Mullan outlines in reference to Shaftesbury, “sympathy can stand for either a pleasurable ‘sharing’ of ‘sentiments’ or a ‘contagion’ which is dangerous and disruptive […] Sympathy, then, expresses two aspects of the ‘social and communicative’ capacities of humans, and revealingly does so according to the social positions of those who experience it. First, there is the possibly ‘infectious’ nature of the ‘passions’ and ‘affectations’ and the ‘panic’ which is their spread; then there is the assertiveness of an authority which finds in sympathy a means for the reestablishment of social order and harmony” (Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988], 26-7). See also Adela Pinch’s argument that degrees of “force” were essential to communicating the “passions” in Hume and other writers, as well as the resulting trepidation about feelings being able to attain a form of figurative autonomy in being “extravagant” (excessive and “wandering out”), Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1-50.


Indeed, this language of scale features in many of Coleridge’s early remarks about Wordsworth. Upon meeting the poet at Racedown, Coleridge, awe-struck, felt himself to be “a little man by his side; & yet do not think myself the less man” (Letters 1:325). Similarly, in a letter to Joseph Cottle on his contributions to the 1798 Lyrical Ballads, he stated that “the volumes offered to you are to a certain degree one work, in kind tho’ not in degree” (Letters 1:412).

Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1.1.1.10, 12.

Ibid., 1.1.4.7–1.1.5.10, 22-26.
Ibid., 1.1.1.2, 9. See Thomas Pfau on the issue of narrative in Smithian sympathy, where he reconsiders the effects of “a ‘narrative’ that tacitly regulates the specific dynamics of affect, both as it is expressed and received” as a “grammar” (“A Certain Mediocrity: Adam Smith’s Moral Behaviorism” in Faflak and Sha, 63). For an essential article on Smith’s use of theatrical terms (especially with regard to “spectating”), see David Marshall, “Adam Smith and the Theatricality of Moral Sentiments,” Critical Inquiry 10, no. 4 (1984): 592-613. Jon Mee discusses Smith’s and Rousseau’s suspicions about “polite conversation” briefly but incisively, noting, too, how Smith actually elaborates on many of Hume’s ideas, but teases out the sense that we are never not in “this theatre of sympathy, both feeling subject and object of the judgments of others” (Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community, 1762-1830 [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013], 75). This is a problem that we see manifest with particular acuity in Chapter Five, where audience-readers feel indicted or compelled to respond to Beatrice Cenci’s unspoken demands for recognition.


20 Ibid., 3.

21 Ibid., 24.


23 My project is not engaged with larger political issues of the time, but for a recent exploration of unique forms of poetic “attention” in the Romantic period, see Lily Gurton-Wachter, Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

24 “On the Origins of Languages” [p. 1781] in Two Essays on the Origins of Language, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 11. Rousseau, similar to Reid, writes of the nonverbal components of communication as modes of intensification: “The passions have their gestures, but they also have their accents; and these accents, which thrill us, these tones of voice that cannot fail to be heard, penetrate to the very depths of the heart, carrying there the emotions they wring from us, forcing us in spite of ourselves to feel what we hear. We conclude that while visible signs can render a more exact imitation, sounds more effectively arouse interest” (“Origins of Language,” 9). The arousal of interest, of course, is a key concern of Romantic poetic theory and expressly linked meter and, in the case of Coleridge, the recitational quality of hearing and reading poetry. See Chapters One and Two (especially) for accounts of meter and readers’ participation. For an excellent reading of Rousseau on language and the speaking animal, see Menely, Animal Claim, 67-79.

25 As just an example of one of Jarvis’s many excellent points on poetry’s intrinsic connections to qualities independent of language, see his suggestion of the term “verse” in place of the fraught category of “lyric,” whose utility as an ahistorical category and placeholder for all “poetry” has been a topic of debate for the past decade. Acknowledging debts to Romantic thought on verse, Jarvis explains that verse is not language, but that language is a component of verse: “Language is one of the materials deployed by the practices of verse making and the thinking in verse... Verse is not a subset of language. It is an institution, a series of practices as real as the belief in them and the capacity for them. Verse adepts [sic] cut up, mutilate, select from language—

26 “Rhyme and Freedom” in Perloff and Dworkin, 41.


29 Approaching the social by way of poetry and conversation as a specific subset of communication participates in current scholarship that takes, for lack of a better word, a more “modest” and heuristic approach to Romanticism. These scholars revise notions of social action, interpersonal engagement, and the everyday as a site of radical possibility. See Nancy Yousef’s *Romantic Intimacy*; William Galperin’s *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017); and Anne-Lise François’s concepts of “affirmative reticence” and “recessive action” in *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). All these texts are examples of the boldly modest, or more contained and individually focused approaches to British Romanticism that also, like much work on “Romantic sociability,” revise notions of Romantic subjectivity, but, in these cases, without sacrificing it. Put differently, these critics understand Romantic individualism as a viable topic of study despite its associations with more “old-fashioned” schools of criticism that I cite below. Like me, Galperin and Yousef do not view Romanticism as an uncritical extension of eighteenth-century Enlightenment principles of sensibility (or epistemology), nor do they necessarily think of Romanticism as an overt pivot from those precedents. Yousef’s account of intimacy is particularly important to my own. As I have noted, she incisively discusses the instability of “sympathy” as a construct, the importance of recognizing asymmetry in social interactions rather than “mutuality” as an achievable standard of encounter, and the paradox of Romantic individualism as socially constructed:

[R]omantic-era literature… is exceptional in its simultaneous acknowledgment and suspension of the epistemic and ethical demands of sympathy, allowing a backward and forward glance toward certain impasses in Enlightenment thought that recur within psychoanalysis—in particular, the struggle to reconcile ideals of mutual feeling with equally compelling commitments to the idea of an incommunicable core of self. The transformative romantic inheritance of Enlightenment sentimentalism does not dispel or resolve the paradox of intimacy, but it does so soften the
hard opposing edges of solitary inwardness and interpersonal exposure.  
(Romantic Intimacy, 4)

While Yousef also rightly criticizes the adoption of affect studies *tout court*, her understanding of the “felt” is akin to my readings of the unsaid, which are, due to my focus on poetry as a site of social exploration, more overtly communicative. I attend to how the imbrication of words, unspoken cues, and environmental contexts is not actually as nebulous as we might think; it is simply that “thinking” is not necessarily comprised of “language,” an argument borne out by contemporary theory of mind and new phenomenologies regarding topics such as “enactive perception,” as well as Romantic and eighteenth-century writers themselves. See also Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), although Quinney is more focused on a non-dynamic form of solipsism (linked to paralysis) and the state of disappointment as refracted through psychoanalysis.

Locke advances a functional and intentionalist approach to language as a means to ground social interactions between individuals, taking what Coleridge may have called a “mechanical” approach to words as “instruments” than the poet would have liked. Locke calls words “the Signs of [Men’s] Ideas; not by any natural connexion… but by voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an Idea” (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1689], ed. Peter H. Nidditch [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975], 3.2.1, 405). He states, “another great abuse of words is… taking them for things” (3.10.14, 497). Like Thomas Hobbes, Locke does not have much patience for metaphor, and instead yearns for a language that would serve to facilitate total intelligibility between individuals that leaves no room for potentially confusing interpretation. However, he also acknowledges the near impossibility of doing so in the case of “mixed modes”: “To make words serviceable to the end of Communication, it is necessary… that they excite, in the Hearer, exactly the same Idea, they stand for in the Mind of the Speaker” (*Essay* 3.9.6, 478). Despite the origins of language being self-interested so that an individual “himself might receive profit and delight” (3.2.1, 404-5), the endpoint of language is to make oneself understood to an auditor, requiring a collective social agreement on a word’s usage as well as a form of mind reading in which we anticipate others’ thoughts: “They suppose their words to be marks of the ideas in the minds also of other men… for else they should talk in vain, and could not be understood, if the sounds they applied to one idea were such as the hearer were applied to another, which is to speak two languages” (3.2.4, 406-7). Locke also echoes the economic undertones of Mee’s Habermasian view of conversation when he notes that conversation was linked to “commerce” and bartering in the eighteenth century, suggestively influencing the valuing of more combative debate in the Romantic period, *Conversable Worlds*, 1-80. To return to Locke, though: he contends that words, to have utility, must be linked to tenable ideas. Since words are the preeminently means by which to communicate—the desired endpoint of all speech and writing—they must intend both to capture the individual’s ideas and achieve a form of mutual, socially determined comprehensibility. That said, Locke was no idealist either in philosophical or practical terms. He was troubled by the insufficiency and unreliability of words, which even led
him to doubt whether he should write the Essay in the first place. Locke was therefore keen to correct any perceived direct linkage between words and substances, instead discussing how language is generated by custom rather than any natural connexion (Essay 3.2.8; 3.10.14; see also 3.9.21). Yet the arbitrary association between word and idea makes spoken and written language susceptible to misunderstanding in that, as “a voluntary imposition” (Essay 3.2.1, 405), persons can determine intention and meaning independently, and, granted enough power, invent and circulate new words for cultural consumption (Essay 3.2.8, 408). Locke’s emphasis on the “voluntary” and arbitrary process of naming is more flexible, since it implies that an individual is free to use words as he will so long as there is a correspondent idea to which the word is appended. Still, since ideas are derived from the “real” world, he has a wary and somewhat oblique suspicion of man’s tendency to “talk… of their own imagination,” for it may be “perverting the use of words, and brings unavoidable obscurity and confusion into whenever we make them stand for anything but those ideas we have in our own minds” (Essay 3.2.5, 407). See John Guillory, “Genesis of the Media Concept,” Critical Inquiry 36, no. 2 (2010): 321-362 for an excellent discussion of Locke’s innovative, social conception of communication that moves away from Hobbes’s less enthusiastic acknowledgement that “Speech, is to transferre our Mentall Discourse into Verbal; or the Trayne of our Thoughts into a Trayne of Words,” (Leviathan [1651] ed. Richard Tuck [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991], 25). Guillory contrasts Hobbes’s emphasis on language’s use for private memoranda to Locke’s realization of communication’s “inherent link to sociability” (“Media Concept,” 328-338).


31 Once committed to the Logos, Coleridge sometimes expressed a wish to link language to human progress and morality. In one of his 1819 philosophical lectures, he asserted that one of a philosopher’s most important vocations is to “desynonymize words originally equivalent, therein following and impelling the natural progress of language in civilized societies” (The Philosophical Lectures of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ed. Kathleen Coburn [New York: Philosophical Library, 1949], 152), for “the whole of the progress of society might be expressed in a dictionary” (Philosophical Lectures, 173). Chapter One discusses Coleridge’s complex relationship to his own coinage, “desynonymization,” at length.

32 A Treatise of Human Nature [1739-40] ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.2.5, 234. In one of several references to the “remarkable” quality of sympathy, he again avers the ease with which we enter into others’ affective states: “The best method of reconciling us to this opinion [the relation of impressions and ideas to the passions] is to take a general survey of the universe, and observe the force of sympathy thro’ the whole animal creation, and the easy communication of sentiments from one thinking being to another. In all creatures, that prey not upon others, and are not agitated with violent passions, there appears a
remarkable desire for company, which associates them together, without any advantages they can ever propose to reap from their union” (Treatise 2.2.5, 234).

33 Ibid., 2.2.5, 232.

34 Romantic Intimacy, 74-81; Pinch, Strange Fits, 17-44.

35 Pinch writes compellingly about women’s importance to eighteenth-century discourses of sensibility and “taste” to “the refinement of English society” (Strange Fits, 53). The great paradox of this, of course, is despite women’s importance to civilizing humanity, their tastes were sometimes considered indiscriminate, their reactions overly emotive, and their dispositions fundamentally childlike.


39 There are many critiques of Habermas’s understanding of the public sphere based upon how the private is folded into the public thanks to the changing relationships between readers and print culture. Unsurprisingly, though, Habermas focuses upon the eighteenth-century novel (and particularly the epistolary novel) in Public Sphere, 27-56. Michael Warner’s Publics and Counterpublics (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2002), in particular, diversifies both reading audiences and what those audiences may have been reading (in terms of genre, “popularity,” and so forth), thus generating other publics (and particularly queer ones).


Lyrical Dialogue [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988], 19). Of course, Bakhtin has something very different to say about poetry. Unlike the novel, poetry is not only monologic, but “without mediation”: “In poetic genres, artistic consciousness—understood as a unity of all the author’s semantic and expressive intentions—fully realizes itself within its own language; in them alone is such consciousness fully immanent, expressing itself in it directly and without mediation, without conditions and without distance. The language of the poet is his language, he is utterly immersed in it, inseparable from it, he makes use of each form, each word, each expression according to its unmediated power to assign meaning… as a pure and direct expression of his own intention” (“Discourse in the Novel” in The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], 285). This rather strikingly phrased account of the isolated lyric speaker runs counter to other theorists who explore, if not poetry’s social power, its relationship to the world. See Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society” in Notes to Literature, vol. 1 ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), who writes of lyric individualism’s paradoxical dependence on others to be intelligible—and to therefore express how it is outside of society—although an additional problem can arise: “the danger… lies in the fact that its principle of individuation never guarantees that something binding and authentic will be produced” (“Lyric Poetry,” 38). He, too, thinks of lyric poetry as comprised of language (which my argument does not deny), and, as the “medium of concepts,” it is inextricably linked to the objectivity of language in society and subjectivity of its artistic use: “lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing, when, instead, the subject whose expression is successful reaches an accord with language itself, with the inherent tendency of language” (“Lyric Poetry,” 43). Granted, I am simplifying Adorno’s argument; he has much to say about language’s relationship to constructing the subject, but he also advances a proto-Habermasian and Abramsian view of Romanticism: “Romanticism practices a kind of programmatic transfusion of the collective into the individual through which the individual lyric poem indulged in a technical illusion of universal cogency without that cogency characterizing it inherently” (“Lyric Poetry,” 45).

Earlier reactions to New Critical approaches to poetry and the “canon” form some of the bases of deconstruction as well as New Historicism, the most obvious examples of which I consider to be, respectively, Paul de Man’s “The Rhetoric of Temporality” [1969] in Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 187-228 and Jerome McGann’s The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

conventional notion of selfhood against which many critics have been working for decades. Calling the Poet not just “a” real man but “the Real Man,” Bloom writes:

The Real Man, the Imagination, emerges after terrible crises in the major stage of the Romantic quest, which is typified by a relative disengagement from revolutionary activism, and a standing aside from polemic and satire, so as to bring the search within the self and its ambiguities. In the Prometheus stage, the quest is allied to the libido’s struggle against repressiveness, and nature is an ally, though always a wounded and somewhat withdrawn one. In the Real Man, the Imagination stage, nature is the immediate though not the ultimate antagonist. The final enemy to be overcome is a recalcitrance of the self, what… Shelley [calls] the unwilling dross that checks the spirit’s flight, Wordsworth the sad perplexity or fear that kills or, best of all, the hope that is unwilling to be fed, and Keats, most simply and perhaps most powerfully, the Identity. Coleridge calls the antagonist by a bewildering variety of names since, of all these poets, he is the most hag-ridden by anxieties, and the most humanly vulnerable. (“Quest-Romance,” 11)


47 Notebooks 3:3705.

48 An expanded version of this project would invest more time in media theory, which is the most logical counterpart to my work. For example, Durham Peters’s view of “dialogue” is companionable to my understanding of “conversation”: acknowledging “nonreciprocal forms of action,” he contends, “Dialogue is a bad model for the variety of shrugs, grunts, and moans that people emit (among other signs and gestures) in face-to-
face settings. It is an even worse normative model for the extended, even distended, kinds of talk and discourse necessary in large-scale democracy” (*Speaking into the Air*, 34). This last comment is a shot at Habermas, but I would not discount the power of what Durham Peters is actually describing—conversation—in more local environments. As a media theorist, of course, he is ultimately interested in “dissemination” while also intending to “rediscover… the subtleties of what can count as dialogue and the blessedness of nondialogic forms” (*Speaking into the Air*, 35) However, he is not interested in poetry so much as challenging various assumptions about “transmission,” the possibility of perfect reciprocity, technological determinism, and favoring “dissemination” over easy notions of dialogue that ignore its surpluses, productive “distortions,” natural signs and, as I would argue, the misunderstandings necessary to creative imperfection. The following passage from Durham Peters strikingly resembles the kind of work presently performed by Yousef and others, as I describe in note 29 above, from a media perspective, where one-way communication can be just as destructive as pretenses toward reciprocity (*Speaking into the Air*, 56). Plus, some gaps are just not meant to be traversed:

Those strange and distended forms of dialogue that happen when people correspond over great distances of time or space are not just uncanny and bizarre, as many in the nineteenth century thought, recently confronting the lightning lines of the telegraph or the death-defying tracings of the photograph, but are the shapes in which we live and move among other people all the time. Clearly there is nothing ethically deficient about broadcasting as a one-way flow. Nor are the gaps between sender and receiver always chasms to be bridged; they are sometimes vistas to be appreciated or distances to be respected. The impossibility of connection, so lamented of late, may be a central and salutary feature of the human lot. The dream of communication has too little respect for personal inaccessibility. Impersonality can be a protective wall for the private heart. To “fix” the gaps with “better” communication may be to drain solidarity and love of all their juice. (*Speaking into the Air*, 59)

The issues articulated by Durham Peters bear on larger disciplinary questions of how literary scholars can conceive of poetry as a medium. Poetry, as perhaps the ultimate technē, can unexpectedly capture a form of intimacy and immediacy that even the most sophisticated technologies cannot, underscoring how essential interpersonal discomfort and disagreement are to social and creative progress.
PART ONE

Coleridge and the Love of Reciprocity

S. T. C. never did *converse* in the common sense of the word; he would lay hold of another person’s suggestions, & then refine upon it, and divide & subtilize it till he had made it entirely his own. He borrowed largely, but he had a right to do so, for he gave away as largely.

(William Wordsworth in *Table Talk* 1:546 [c. 1829])

There is one species of egotism that is truly disgusting; not that which leads us to communicate our feelings to others, but that which would reduce the feelings of others to an identity with our own.

(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Preface to *Poems on Various Subjects* [1796])

Loving her [Sara Hutchinson] I intensely desire all that could make the greatest & (be it viceless) the weak, if they be amiable, love me—I am so feeble that I cannot yearn to be perfect, unrewarded by some distinct soul—yet still somewhat too noble to be satisfied or even pleased by the assent of the man—myself will not suffice—& a stranger is nothing / It must be one who is & who is not myself—not myself, & yet so much more my Sense of Being <(The very Breath owes its power moral feeling)> than myself that myself is therefore only not a feeling for reckless Despair, because she is its object/Self in me derives its sense of Being.

(Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Notebooks* 2:3148 [September 1807])
Chapter One

Pig Looks and the Serpent’s Tract Oblique:

Coleridge’s Poetics of the Unsaid

Thanks to M. H. Abrams’s seminal essay “Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric” (1965), there is an accepted name for the kinds of poems, and poetics, that this chapter will address. Actually, there are two names: in addition to the titular greater Romantic lyric, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s so-called “conversation poems” provide the basis upon which Abrams models his account of how imperious, isolated Romantic speakers use Nature to explore the intricacies of their own mental processes. Abrams’s essay is so familiar and influential that the conversation poems’ uneasy reliance upon silent (or silenced) listeners has been taken for granted, leading critics to focus instead upon the eighteenth-century philosophical and historical contexts that inform Romantic depictions of sublime landscapes or, alternatively, to examine the poems’ paradigmatic depictions of apostrophe and ahistorical “lyric time.” And when it comes to the notoriously garrulous Coleridge himself, the idea that his seemingly mute addressees were essential to his compositional method and poetic theory does not correspond to contemporary scholarly narratives that cast him as a solipsist, nor do such accounts acknowledge Coleridge’s extraordinary sensitivity to the unspoken responses of his friends and poetic auditors. This chapter, by contrast, will demonstrate that his writings on poetic form, such as meter, were grounded in his talent for multisensory communication, and that, when we consider the importance Coleridge placed upon nonverbal forms of communication, his poetic interlocutors were anything but “silent.”
When it came to intimate relationships and, particularly, his participation in the give and take of conversation, Coleridge was an enigma. In an 1810 letter to Dorothy Wordsworth, for example, Henry Crabb Robinson expressed his decided discontentment with Coleridge’s social behavior. “Coleridge cannot converse. He addresses himself to his hearers,” he complains. But then, in the very next sentence, he goes on to say, “At the same time, he is a much better listener than I expected.” This second sentence may take us by surprise. It was Crabb Robinson, after all, who popularized Madame de Staël’s appraisal of Coleridge as “very great in monologue, but he has no idea of dialogue.” As de Staël’s summation implies, Coleridge was best known as a talker, a reader, and a lecturer—not a listener.

This reputation informs our current perception of Coleridge’s unwieldy speech, his notorious self-involvement, and his lack of self-control. Additional testimony from his contemporaries seems to render moot the question of whether he ever intended or even had the capacity to include other voices into a more recognizable form of social discourse. Some of his auditors favorably likened Coleridge’s erudite “monologues,” or what he ruefully called “Oneversazioni” toward the end of his life, to a river that could flow anywhere and, perhaps, sweep both the listener and Coleridge himself downstream. Others did not appreciate the submersion. Thomas Carlyle, in a truly scathing portrait, declared that “[t]o sit as a passive bucket and be pumped into, whether you consent or not, can in the long-run be exhilarating to no creature; how eloquent soever the flood of utterance that is descending.” Far from embodying John Stuart Mill’s later definition of eloquence, by which one could cogently persuade others or “court…their sympathy”
toward a desired end, Coleridge could “communicate no meaning whatsoever to any individual of his hearers,” Carlyle writes, for “his talk, alas, was distinguished, like himself, by irresolution.” So it comes as no surprise that Seamus Perry claims that Coleridge did not engage in “conversations in any normal sense, that is to say, any more than his ‘conversation poems’ are,” or that Alan Bewell states outright that “the Romantic period’s greatest talker was also its worst communicator.”

To be sure, Coleridge’s ideas about communication were anything but stable; they conformed to his steady and profound disillusionment with human relationships, love, and his poetic powers. It is no accident, then, that most anecdotes regarding Coleridge’s speech are drawn from encounters that took place after 1810, a year that marked an important shift in his social life: Sara Hutchinson had fled to Wales, rejecting him for the final time, and his relationship with the Wordsworths was strained at best. Dorothy Wordsworth remarked on Coleridge’s unusually silent depression early that year—as well as his increasing tendency to indulge in antisocial, abstract speech: “when he does talk it is always very much and upon subjects as far aloof from himself or his friends as possible.” Having abandoned the forms of social intimacy that would leave him vulnerable to the conversational responses he had once craved, Coleridge emerged from his disappointments committed to what Thomas McFarland calls his Christianized “trinitarian resolution.” This particular Coleridge privileged the written word, and especially the Word of God, over all other modes of communication between individuals or “finite” human minds, as he put it in the Biographia Literaria. And this Coleridge more confidently assumed the role of critic rather than poet—a critic who theorized the primary and secondary imaginations, a critic who painted the ideal poet as the reconciler
and fuser of opposites, and a critic whose work often centered upon the Logos, the infinite, and the “other great Bible of God, the Book of Nature.”

In what follows, I argue that Coleridge valued conversation as a subset of “communication” writ large. When we converse, we hope to elicit a response rooted both in verbal language and bodily reactions. These nonverbal forms of communication—or what in the Romantic period would be called “natural signs” such as gestures, facial expressions, and sublingual utterances—are often as important as the words spoken. In his verse, Coleridge depicted communication in just this way; and indeed, the powerful combination of words and natural signs corresponds to how a number of Romantic writers interpreted poetry’s effects. Coleridge, I contend, can help us rethink conversation as a balance between words and the nonverbal communication. His use of poetry to express a frustrated desire for sympathetic reciprocity highlights the significance of poetic form for understanding conceptions of interpersonal communication that are both distinctly Coleridgean and Romantic. In these ways, Coleridge’s works call into question whether direct communication or “perfect” sympathy should represent an ideal form of social closeness at all.

I begin by dispelling the common claim that Coleridge’s conversation poems are structured like his 1815 metaphor of the ouroboros, or the snake that consumes its tail. Abrams bases his influential account of both the conversation poems and the greater Romantic lyric upon this image, and the serpentine, self-enclosed “circle” enables him to argue that Coleridge’s solipsistic meditations are “firmly organized” around “the return” to moral or aesthetic insight despite “the initial impression… of the casual movement of a relaxed mind” (103). Like Bewell, Perry, and other critics who conflate Coleridge’s later
abstract thought with his early verse, Abrams takes the metaphor out of context, for its
original usage had nothing to do with poetry as a specific generic category. The
ouroboros was only one of many snake metaphors that Coleridge evoked throughout his
life. Unlike the ouroboros, these other serpents explicitly intertwine writing, conversing,
and the real-time experience of reading a poem. By describing their motions (Biographia
2:14), Coleridge articulates his ideal of poeticized conversation that progresses by means
of strategic indirection because, in his view, the perfect or “direct” communication to
which Enlightenment philosophers aspire closes down avenues for ongoing discussion.
His poetical serpent may indeed circle back on itself, but it does so in order to sidle and
move forward rather than to swallow its own tail. Like an endless conversation, it
“proceeds & is proceeding.” And, even more important, this “retrogressive… journey”
(Biographia 2:14) is predicated upon a response rather than the structural mirroring of a
“return”—a template that, following Abrams, critics have superimposed on poems like
“Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison.”

In fact, “Frost at Midnight” and “Lime-Tree” pointedly resist the ouroboros
model. In these poems, speakers and interlocutors can share, look upon, and reconceive
ideas and sensations together, establishing a certain degree of similitude that does not
devolve into sameness. The poems’ structures, like the serpent that does not consume
itself so much as “lie coiled with its’ tail round its’ head,” are not enclosed; rather, their
endings elaborate upon their beginnings in the pursuit of further collaborative thinking
between all parties involved. Each part of the poem remains a separate entity connected
by a continuous verse body, and this body turns upon itself to move forward. The
serpent’s mode of localized motion, as Coleridge reiterates throughout his prose writings,
also sheds light on why so many of his poems take place in confined spaces. His conversational poetics favors domestic settings rather than more sublime expanses—what we might consider “pocket sublimes”—where engaging with the present moment is paramount to discovering “strangers” who are also “companionable forms” (“Frost at Midnight” 19).\(^{16}\)

Works such as “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and “Frost at Midnight” demonstrate how Coleridge was not modest in his social aspirations as a younger man. In these early conversation poems, he achieves a tantalizing form of interpersonal satisfaction that, ironically, would lead him, misguided and impatiently, to accelerate the process of establishing close relationships. At the same time, he began to fixate on materialist conceptions of language. Following John Horne Tooke and using etymologies—or “desynonymization”—to discover perfect words, he yearned to connect to interlocutors like Wordsworth in moments of unspoken and “intense delight in fellow-feeling” (Letters 2:881-2). But desynonymization, when deployed in actual conversation, failed Coleridge miserably, and the “intense delight” he craved would prove nearly impossible to withstand when culminating in a mysterious and devastating “pig look” that he exchanged with Wordsworth in 1803 (Notebooks 1:1606).

Coleridge’s poetic sympathy shows how questing for instantaneous mutual comprehension is fallacious because it is both impossible and altogether too possible, and thus too dangerous, to one’s selfhood. But rather than adhering to his own creative insight into the potential of poetry to model the kind of indirect sympathies and incompletion that facilitated ongoing conversation, Coleridge remained preoccupied with immediate social gratification in his personal life. In other words, his aptitude for communication
and idealistic tendency toward self-sabotage ultimately destroyed his faith in friendship and creative composition.

Responding without Returning: Coleridge’s Serpentine Sympathies

Nonverbal cues populate many of Coleridge’s poems, and the unsaid undergirds his poetic theory. In “Fears in Solitude,” “tones proclaim” the actual meaning behind empty and hypocritical “sweet words / Of Christian promise, words that even yet / Might stem destruction” (67, 64–66). As his attention to tone in “Fears in Solitude” suggests—or, for that matter, his susceptibility to Sara Fricker’s “dart[ing]” and “more serious eye” that not only speaks but speaks “well” in “The Eolian Harp” (50, 49, 54)—poetry has the ability to communicate beyond the lexical: the multisensory effects of meter, rhythm, and other formal devices facilitate the reader’s immediate involvement whether listening to or reading poetry. Even in the Biographia Literaria, only pages after adamantly disavowing any similarity between reading poetry and conversing (2:60-61), Coleridge uses a metaphor of “animated conversation” to characterize the inarticulable and unnoticed impact of meter upon the reader-listener’s person:

As far as metre acts in and for itself, it tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continued excitement of surprize, and by the quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited, which are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence. As a medicated atmosphere, or as wine during animated conversation; they act powerfully, though themselves unnoticed. (Biographia 2:66)

Coleridge’s idea of the controlling poet provides the groundwork for this kind of sociable reading. A “legitimate” and self-enclosed poem (Biographia 2:13) would ideally “fuse… each to each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively
appropriated the name of imagination” (*Biographia* 2:15-16). However, Coleridge’s fixation on the nonverbal effects of poetry, and especially his interest in poetry’s unique capacity to be perceived as an *unintentional* object, implies that our thoughts are not entirely composed of language. Poetry’s power lies in its evasion of becoming a reified, intentional “object” of linguistic scrutiny: the social “quick reciprocations… are too slight to indeed be at any one moment objects of *distinct* consciousness” (emphasis added). Instead, Coleridge seems to value a processual experience of poetry much like the pleasurable unfolding of domestic, intimate conversation. He cannot help but refer directly to “reciprocations,” “conversations,” and somatic ingestion as inextricable parts or, to use a long-standing favorite word of his, “undersongs,” of poetic experience—an experience that invites readers to be vulnerable to the verbal and nonverbal effects of a poem and to respond in turn.

Still, the notion that Coleridge would desire any kind of independent response from his interlocutors and readers is at odds with many critics’ readings of the “conversation poems” and his later aesthetic writings. At the same time, the concept of “the return”—a term that has the valence of a reply or response even if we believe Coleridge to be conversing with himself—has dominated nearly every critical account of the conversation poems from their formal structure to how Coleridge’s speakers imaginatively exercise what Charles Rzepka has called “presumptive” insight into their silent interlocutors’ thoughts and experiences. George McLean Harper first articulated this “return” in his 1928 chapter on Coleridge’s conversation poems, a term under which he grouped eight works from “The Eolian Harp” to “To William Wordsworth.” Harper outlines a structure that critics like Abrams would incorporate into more rigorous
analyses of silence and solitude. “The poem begins with a quiet description of the surrounding scene,” Harper writes, “and, after a superb flight of imagination, brings the mind back to the starting-point, a pleasing device we may call ‘the return.’” Harper’s account of the “return” is not quite solipsistic, though. His choice of poems was predicated on Coleridge’s actual social life, where “we catch glimpses of those delightful people who formed the golden inner circle of his friends in the days of his young manhood.” This version of the return is more whimsically biographical than contemporary critics might prefer, and, unsurprisingly, Abrams’s version has proven to be more influential than Harper’s.

What makes Abrams’s account of the “return” particularly compelling is the connection he draws between the “greater Romantic lyric” and Coleridge’s striking 1815 metaphor of the ouroboros. Abrams applies the concept of the self-consuming serpent to poems like “Frost at Midnight” because “the tail-eating snake, had become the symbol for eternity and for the divine process of creation, since it is complete, self-sufficient, and endless… the perfect shape for the descriptive-meditative-descriptive poem” (82, emphasis added). Yet Abrams overlooks key elements of this quotation since, in actuality, Coleridge evokes the ouroboros to comment on the limitations of human perception rather than on poetic form; he even goes as far as to conflate narrative with poetry when describing what has now become a Coleridgean commonplace—the “Revelation of the One in and by the Many”:

The common end of all narrative, nay, of all, Poems is to convert a series into a Whole: to make those events, which in real or imagined History move on in a strait Line, assume to our Understandings a circular motion—the snake with it’s Tail in it’s Mouth. Hence indeed the almost flattering and yet appropriate Term, Poesy—i.e. poiesis = making. Doubtless, to his eye, which alone comprehends all Past and all Future in
one eternal Present, what to our short sight appears strait is but a part of the great Cycle… [the] Revelation of the One in and by the Many. (Letters 4:545)

Abrams applies Coleridge’s metaphor both to the conversation poems’ structure and to the poet’s overarching desire to dissolve the boundaries between subjects and objects. And it is indeed true that Coleridge’s letter to Joseph Cottle is consistent with his tendency to use circular metaphors—and circular thinking—when negotiating dialectics or reflecting upon his own deficiencies as a speaker. As he once confessed to his friend Thomas Allsop regarding his tendency toward defensive monologues, “My eloquence was most commonly excited by the desire of running away and hiding myself from my personal and inward feelings and not for the expression of them … I fled in a circle, still overtaken by the feelings from which I was ever more fleeing, with my back turned toward them.” In writing to Cottle, Coleridge sidesteps the emotionally fraught “expression” that is evident in his admission to Allsop where he vividly describes the torment of being incessantly pursued by feelings and ideas that could make him vulnerable to outside commentary. Instead, he represents the individual’s personal “circular orbit” in abstract terms: it is a function of detaching oneself from God to move toward “Privation” only to return to God “in order to be at all”; this produces “a straight Line…[and] continuously retracted forms of necessity a circular orbit” (Letters 4:545). Coleridge is thinking, broadly speaking, of how a Christian reconciles his mortal limitations and faith to God’s eternal timescale. This individual, however, is not equivalent to Coleridge’s physically sensitive and socially driven poetic speakers.

So while the ouroboros is a convenient and tidy image to describe an ideal poetic form—and perhaps an ideal Christian—it is not in keeping with Coleridge’s actual poetry.
There are other snake metaphors throughout his writings that are far more apt. Unlike the *ouroboros*, these other metaphors both distinguish poetry from narrative and are overtly social in emphasis. When Coleridge discusses another famed conversationalist, Sir James Mackintosh, in a December 1799 notebook entry, he links poetry directly to social and discursive “genius” in terms of physical movement. His contemporaries often contrasted his mode of conversing to Mackintosh’s, but publicly, Coleridge avoided commenting on his social rival’s *style* and instead focused on their philosophical differences. Privately, though, he objected to both Mackintosh’s method of argument and his capacity for conversational response. Deeming his style fragile, linear, and obtrusive, Coleridge believed that Mackintosh’s thinking exhibited a rigid narrative mindset rather than poetic one:

> Mackintosh intertrudes, not introduces his beauties. Nothing grows out of his main argument but much is shoved between—each digression occasions a move backward to find the road again—like a sick man he recoils after every affection. (*Notebooks* 1:609)

Metaphorically connecting mental inflexibility to a body, Coleridge conjures an image of Mackintosh as a “sick” man who is too intellectually enfeebled to handle open forms of discourse. He can only recoil from a conversational digression, returning from whence he came.

By contrast, Coleridge cleverly illustrates his more dexterous “Inventive faculty” to condemn Mackintosh’s limitations: he inserts a neologism to describe how Mackintosh “intertrudes” and implicitly lacks consideration for both his topic and his potential audience. To counter these deficiencies, Coleridge proposes that a serpentine “mode of motion” actually characterizes “a writer of Genius”—and this motion does not involve eating one’s own tail or turning back upon oneself. Instead, this serpent “varies his course
yet still glides onward,” a phrase that resembles Coleridge’s 1828 claim to “need the varied feeling… and the too great continuity of sound broken up, to begin anew” in order to resume composing poetry (Letters 6:731, n. 1).

To drive these points home, Coleridge makes an unexpected choice: he cites the moment before Satan corrupts Eve in Paradise Lost, interweaving poetry, style, and intimate discourse to supplement his understanding of how great writing facilitates argumentative and interpersonal “grow[th]”:

The Serpent by which the ancients emblem’d the Inventive faculty appears to me, in its mode of motion most exactly to emblem a writer of Genius.
He varies his course yet still glides onwards—all lines of motion are his—all beautiful, & all propulsive—

Circular base of rising folds that tower’d
Fold above fold a surging maze, his Head
Crested aloft, and Carbuncle his eyes,
With burnish’d Neck of verdant Gold, erect
Amidst the circling spires that on the Grass
Floted [sic] Redundant—
So varied he & of his tortuous train
Curls many a wanton wreath;
yet still he proceeds & his proceeding.— (Notebooks 1:609)²⁶

Coleridge chooses Satan’s approach to Eve not merely because Satan has taken the notorious form of a serpent that, with his “tract oblique,” makes progress both by circling upon himself and remaining “erect” with a single-minded purpose.²⁷ He chooses Satan because Milton’s great seducer is about to engage in one of the most damning and persuasive conversations imaginable. Satan’s look, his striking and animated corporeality, and his tone of voice are the means by which he secures Eve’s attention rather than simply standing tall: “His gentle dumb expression turned at length / The eye of Eve to mark his play. He, glad / Of her attention gained, with serpent tongue / Organic or impulse of vocal air / His fraudulent temptation thus began.”²⁸
Selecting Satan’s seduction of Eve to supplement his serpent metaphor, which is “all beautiful, & all propulsive,” may seem to be a disarmingly amoral decision. However, by citing Milton to describe the complexity of serpentine progress and aesthetic “genius,” Coleridge accomplishes two things: first, he directs our attention to Satan’s abandonment of voyeurism and internal debates in favor of physically entering into a conversation that, no matter how devastating its results, effects a significant change in both parties; second, the allusion to one of literature’s most notoriously complex and corrupted figures underscores how the literal context—and content—of the verse is not Coleridge’s primary concern. Just as he likened Mackintosh’s intellectually brittle and linear style to a sick man attempting to remain on a road, Coleridge evokes Milton to comment on how we might take cues from brilliant poetic form in order to embrace a more immediate and responsive communicative mindset. The serpent’s mode of indirect, open-ended, but “propulsive” progress where “all lines of motion are his” outstrips Mackintosh’s fractured and stunted interruptions that do not “introduce” concepts—they only “move backward.” Coleridge’s serpentine thinker-speaker best converses when embarking on a uniquely indirect but focused approach: with social intent, he is doubly present as he “proceeds & is proceeding.” And when he responds to digressions, obstacles, or hesitations, he circles back upon himself without retreating or “returning” with any kind of finality.

This serpent finds a surprising counterpart in the Biographia Literaria. Of course, the Biographia Literaria cannot be encapsulated in any one metaphor. If anything (or anyone), Coleridge focuses a large portion of the Biographia on Wordsworth—and, particularly, on disarticulating his own aesthetic views from the Preface to Lyrical
Ballads. Many critics, from Stephen Maxwell Parrish to Don Bialototsky, have dissected the nuances of both Coleridge’s criticisms and Wordsworth’s intentions, frequently centering on Coleridge’s attention to Wordsworth’s attempt to “imitate, and, as far as possible, to adopt the very language of men” at the same time he seeks to “purifi[y]… its real defects.” When it comes to issues of communication, it would first seem as if Coleridge’s disparaging account of Wordsworth’s uneducated rustics has much in common with his letter to Cottle, thereby corroborating Abrams’s decision to uphold the ouroboros as emblematic of both Coleridge’s poetic thought and valuation of the “eternal.” By this argument, Wordsworth’s “purification” of rustic speech only reveals how such language is marked by “a want of that prospectiveness of mind, that surview, which enables a man to foresee the whole of what he is to convey, appertaining to any one point” (Biographia 2:58). This ability to “forsee” one’s speech indulges a fantasy of total communicative premeditation and imaginative originality since the “best part of human language” is generated in isolation. It is based upon internal reflection and the “processes and results of the imagination” as opposed to the unoriginal “imitations” characteristic of rustic thought that cannot be copied in a “real” manner without producing mediocre poetry (Biographia 2:54, 2:49). But Coleridge is forever mindful of the formal and digressive dimensions of reading, hearing, and composing poetry even when he describes poems as autonomous units. Anticipating the New Critics, he endows poetic language and its formal qualities with an “explanatory” force. “A legitimate poem,” he writes, contains “the parts of which mutually support and explain each other; all in their proportion harmonizing with, and supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement” (Biographia 2:13).
These “parts” are not merely words or tropes. He intimates that the best mode of poetic engagement is explorative, present-oriented, and tactile. It is serpentine in its movement at the same time it is akin to the travel of sound itself, not unlike Milton’s Satan, who moves forward in circles and speaks with “[o]rganic, or impulse of vocal air” to Eve’s astonishment. Coleridge thus describes the reader’s nonverbal experience in dreamily atmospheric terms:

The reader should be carried forward, not merely or chiefly by the mechanical impulse or curiosity, or by a restless desire to arrive at the final solution; but by the pleasurable activity of mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent… or like the path of sound through the air;—at every step he pauses and half recedes; and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. (Biographia 2:14)

Coleridge’s account of reading complicates facile interpretations of how a poem’s components “explain” each other, suggesting that his idea of “explanation” has more in common with his 1799 claim that “Feelings” can give a “clear idea” of a poem even when the enjoyment of reading arises when its details are not “perfectly understood” (Notebooks 1:383). So, as much as Coleridge would like to fantasize that a poem is a self-supporting entity, his account of reading brings together speech and the not-necessarily-verbal back and forth of open-ended interpersonal discourse. “Half-receding,” like not being “perfectly understood,” actually energizes the conversation, and the intimacy of the reader’s “journey” hearkens back to how the serpentine thinker’s “genius” resides in how he “proceeds & is proceeding”—in how he circles and sidles as he “still glides onward” (Notebooks 1:609) toward greater insights and conversational elaboration.

Poetry’s “retrogressive movement” enables the reader to sense the larger goal of the work at the same time she attends to the particularities and unspoken metrics of each
moment. The reader’s digressive engagement does not impede her progress since it is fundamentally responsive: it is based upon similar kinds of “quick reciprocations” to which Coleridge made reference in his account of meter (*Biographia* 2:66). A poem, in other words, can ideally describe a kind of communication that is neither narrative nor linear in its trajectory and that is not strictly verbal, linking a snake’s animated “intellectual power” to “the path of sound through air.” By recognizing Coleridge’s other serpents, then, we can see that his early works like “Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” are quite “legitimate” by the *Biographia’s* standards—but not for the reasons we might anticipate. They are predicated not on a solipsistic return that imagines a Coleridgean speaker who unrepentantly projects himself upon other individual, but on a unique form of indirect sympathetic *response*.

**Two Successes: “Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison”**

Even with Abrams’s account of the “return” at their disposal, scholars have found themselves at an impasse when trying to decide what exactly makes poems like “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” and “Frost at Midnight” *conversational*. Whether denying Coleridge’s addressees any capacity for responding or emphasizing the speech-like quality of his blank verse, they have often set aside the nonverbal aspects of how Coleridge himself conceived of communication—namely, how listening and looking not only manifest, but exert palpable force in these works. In short, when conversation is equated with talk, conclusions about the “conversation poems” must necessarily be “provisional,” as Robert Koelzer terms his own otherwise persuasive argument that the Romantic “conversation poem,” despite the seeming absence of talkative interlocutor,
somehow “embodies larger tensions within Romantic poetics between talk, which pulls poetry in the direction of discursive exchange (conversation), and song, which pulls it in an opposing direction of musical expressions (lyric).” Ultimately, however, Koezler conceives of conversation in mimetic terms, where a literary depiction of conversation must transcribe multiple parties’ “talk,” rather than doubling down on how the formal “lyricism” of Coleridgean (or Romantic) poetry is exactly what makes these poems feel so social: verse is not impediment to communication but demonstrates how poetic form corresponds to the unspoken importance of natural signs and one’s immediate environment to conversation.

Peter Larkin more pointedly embraces the idea that conversation poems are partly communicative due to rather than in spite of their formal qualities. He pays particular attention to the relationship between the body and speaking voice, proposing that the “tension within the conversational hinges on Coleridge’s attempts to evoke invocation, sounding out the horizons of the conversational, that is only possible [when] it arises from the sounds of an ongoing dialogue which allows the poet to situate his own voice as a calling voice.” Larkin productively acknowledges the importance of silence to any conversation, as does Maurice Blanchot, but by drawing upon poetic invocation or apostrophe, his argument calls into question whether Coleridge may, in fact, be falling into self-reflexive apostrophic “embarrassment”: apostrophe, on Jonathan Culler’s reading, forces the reader to contend with the “paradoxical fact that this figure [the apostrophic “thou”] which seems to establish relations between the self and the other can in fact be read as an act of radical interiorization and solipsism. Either it parcels out the self to fill the world, peopling the universe with fragments of the self,” Culler writes, “or
else it internalizes what might have been thought external.”

Like Larkin, and in keeping with her understanding of “intimacy,” Nancy Yousef has challenged readings of the conversation poems that paint them as exercises in introspection. In contrast to Culler, though, she contends that Coleridge’s apostrophic utterances are not “embarrassing”: they highlight his remarkable power to intensify and give presence to silence in his immediate surroundings and, in the case of “Frost at Midnight,” other individuals. By Yousef’s account, Coleridge’s relationship to Hartley is an exceptional moment of “nonimpinging intimacy” because it grants the speaker the privacy of meditation at the same time it is “at least implicitly a fantasy involving both the desire and aspiration for intersubjective perfection.” Indeed, whether his hypersensitivity is directed toward a wintry cabin or a lime-tree bower, there is no disputing the importance Coleridge places on “the relational environment supporting the silent meditations of the romantic lyric subject.” He is focused less upon “all the numberless goings on of life” (“Frost” 12) than upon the intense multisensory awareness of his occupation of a discernable space and a moment in time—by the poetic “journey itself” rather than a “final solution” (Biographia 2:14).

In addition to physical proximity and the “relational environment,” however, it is equally important to acknowledge the bearing of temporality on Coleridge’s metaphors for communication. As we have seen, they are dependent upon an awareness of the present moment, and Coleridge is attentive to how formal devices can slow or accelerate the passage of time while also denying the poet-speaker total control, allowing him to remain susceptible to the subtle changes in his surroundings or in his interlocutors’ dispositions; that is, creating apertures for response within a poetic structure and, in
“Frost at Midnight,” an enclosed household. In that poem, the speaker settles into a more ruminative cadence over the span of two lines, first thinking of the “Sea, hill, and wood / This populous village!” and then a more measured “Sea, and hill, and wood” (10-11) as he moves away from the outside world’s frantic “inaudible” qualities to focusing upon his hearth’s crackling film and “thin blue flame” (13). These thoughts are predicated on the presence of a “companionable form” (19), and the speaker actually calls for a form of recognition whose profundity is often based upon nonverbal social contact.

The speaker’s desire for a companion in “Frost at Midnight” disrupts the supposed “repose” Yousef reads into the opening scene for reasons beyond Ewan Jones’s observation that the speaker exists among fellow “inmates” (“Frost” 4). Coleridge’s speaker has a tense and searching relationship to silence—a silence that, similar to his neologistic impulse to describe Mackintosh’s discourse as “intertruding” (Notebooks 1:609), he makes “stranger” by terming it “extreme silentness” (10). This searching is only appeased when he focuses upon the film or a different kind of “stranger” that is notably “the sole unquiet thing” (16) apart from the infant’s breathing which underlies the poem’s prosody. The stranger’s “motion” (17), “playfulness” (25), and audibility affirm its capacity to give “dim sympathies” (18). In other words, this stranger is not exactly “strange”—nor quiet—so much as sufficiently discrete as to motivate Coleridge to recall his childhood desire for church bells to be translated into “articulate sounds of things to come” (38) and his preceptor’s glares to be transformed into “the stranger’s face, / Townsman, or aunt, or sister more belov’d, / My play-mate when we both were cloth’d alike!” (46-8).

That Coleridge would conceive of a family member, and particularly his deceased
sister Anne, as both a “stranger” and a commonly dressed “play-mate” illustrates his unique sense of sympathetic connection. Play entails an imaginative response that requires improvisation within the bounds of particular and mutually pre-established parameters not unlike the desire for a “sufficiently” responsive conversation with Wordsworth in 1802 (*Letters* 2:812). While Coleridge does find himself drawn to the prospect of similitude, if not a kind of interpersonal redundancy, he emphasizes that the activity of communal “play” is also intrinsically connected to otherness, where “strangeness” is ultimately familiar—and familiarity strange—and often expressed through a “hasty glance” (45) or a somatic reaction (“still my heart leapt up” (45)). We see this strange and palpable similitude in “Frost’s” poetic form as well: verbal repetition, consonance, and syntactic doubling abound as Coleridge “retrogressively” circles back upon his memories thanks to a “companionable form.” But these more overt seeming-redundancies and repetitions, it would turn out, are necessary to preserving what Coleridge called the “rondo” in a note he wrote on Sir George Beaumont’s first published edition of the poem. There, he explains his decision to excise its final, more metaphysical six lines. “They destroy the rondo,” he explains, “and return upon itself of the Poem. Poems of this kind & length ought to lie coiled with its’ tail round its’ head | STC” (*Poetical Works* 1:456, n. to line 74). His phrasing is elliptical, but it is not wholly recursive: the “rondo” that “return[s] upon itself” is not a quite a return but a revisitation of the first melody from the perspective of the previous verse. It *does* circle back upon itself, but the snake’s head is not eating its tail so much as lying next to it. Doubled but not replicated, the serpentine conversation poem best “proceeds & is proceeding” when domestic intimacy is valued more than grandiose sublime gestures (*Letters* 1:609).
Coleridge’s companionable forms in “Frost at Midnight”—whether the speaker and the stranger, or the poem’s beginning and ending—do not replicate or “return” to each other so much as they enhance and accompany each other. The “articulate sounds of things to come” (38), which are perhaps of the “sole unquiet thing[s]” (16) fluttering before Coleridge’s speaker, allow him to respond attentively to Hartley, and particularly to his “gentle breathings, heard in this dead calm, / Fill up the interspersed vacancies / And momentary pauses of the thought!” (50-2). Silence, or “silentness” (10), is no longer a “disturb[ing]” (8) issue for the speaker—so much so that, unlike many other repeated words throughout the poem, it does not reappear in “Frost’s” third verse paragraph. Instead, he can now embrace Hartley’s immediate physical presence as well as the tangible “vacancies” he had once feared: indeed, “the thought” is now curiously liberated from any one mind’s possession, signifying a closer bond between the speaker and his son, and enlivening what, when alone, would be “dead.” At the same time, he feels and is comforted by the inherent spaces between them, for space and pauses are necessary both to a more social form of “thought” and to poetic prosody. Far from returning to a self-satisfied state of isolation, Coleridge’s speaker responds to his sociable environment without restlessness: he himself becomes a companionable form who listens attentively to his child, having previously and literally set him aside (“Frost” 6).

This acknowledgement of Hartley’s immediate presence is only possible once Coleridge accepts that irreducible separations—that “interspersed vacancies” (51)—counterintuitively forge parental bonds, but his conversational emphasis also extends to the poem’s concluding gestures toward Hartley’s future. Unlike Wordsworth’s hopes for Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey,” in whom he hears “the language of my former heart,” and
“read[s] / My former pleasures” in her eyes (118-19, emphases added), Coleridge’s references to language and communication in “Frost at Midnight” do not rely upon textual metaphors. He adamantly wants Hartley to have a better life independent of his father’s cloistered existence. More than this, he frames his son’s natural education in open-ended and near-interrogative terms:

But thou, my babe! Shalt wander, like a breeze,  
By lakes and sandy shores, beneath the crags  
Of ancient mountain, and beneath the clouds,  
Which image in their bulk both lakes and shores  
And mountain crags: so shalt thou see and hear  
The lovely shapes and sounds intelligible  
Of that eternal language, which thy God  
Utters, who from eternity doth teach  
Himself in all, and all things in himself.  
Great universal Teacher! he shall mould  
Thy spirit, and by giving make it ask. (59-69)

These lines resound with echoing repetitions, surrounding Hartley’s future life not with Coleridge’s memories but “crags.” Not depicting the boy as standing on mountain tops but immersed in the earth, Coleridge stresses the modesty necessary for Hartley to move “beneath” various features of natural landscapes, only after which he will be able to “see and hear” God’s “intelligible…utter[ance],” very much in keeping with the poet’s multisensory understanding of listening. Coleridge’s reference to God’s “eternal language” may seem to anticipate his later fixation on the Logos, as would the palindromic structure of “Himself in all, and all things in himself.” However, humility coupled with his anticipatory reference to “things”—such as the “greenness” and “redbreasts” directly outside of the cottage (72)—ground Coleridge’s fundamental desire for Hartley: he wants him to retain a collaborative autonomy that, with a cryptic antecedent that resembles “the thought” he shares with Hartley as a baby, would “by giving make it ask” (emphasis
added) despite having used personal pronouns for both God and Hartley himself. Future wishes, in other words, prompt future questions and future enlightenment—all of which coincide with Coleridge’s conversational aspiration to author a *response*- rather than *return*-oriented poetics.

Coleridge’s indirect, conversable sympathy may not seem to extend to other conversation poems, especially when the addressee is the speaker’s social equal. It is one thing to enter into an intersubjective, communicative relationship with a family member; it is quite another to pursue his form of indirect sympathy with an adult male friend whose physical and biographical similarities would seem to invite the very kind of mirroring that Coleridge’s conversational poetics seeks to avoid. The structure of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” for instance, appears to exemplify the greater-Romantic paradigm of an isolated speaker who, in an enclosed natural setting, takes imaginative flight only to return with some kind of insight into his situation. Worse, “Lime-Tree” is often read as the poem most indicative of Coleridge’s blatantly domineering tendencies.

The primary moment to which critics turn to discuss Coleridge’s colonizing impulse is when the speaker thinks of Charles Lamb as standing “as I have stood / Silent with swimming sense” (38-39), a move that Peter Barry has termed “surrogacy,” where “the core of the central meditative episode is a transaction between the speaking persona and a surrogate self, that is, another person onto whom are projected or transposed key elements of the speaker’s own personality, dilemmas, or thought processes.” By this argument, when the speaker attempts to reconcile the loss of his friends in “Lime-Tree,” he contrives absences and missed opportunities to carve out a space that his imagination can occupy. This emphasis on loss and recuperation also partly explains why Coleridge
addresses the poem to Lamb rather than to Wordsworth: for some readers, Coleridge is being compassionate toward Lamb in the wake of his family tragedy; for others, he is appropriating Lamb’s situation in his melodramatic opening description of the “prison” and his “Friends, whom I never more may meet again” (6). Lamb’s own agency or physical presence in the poem has not been of particular interest, even when scholars trace the deeply personal references interwoven throughout the text.

“Lime-Tree” does feature a conciliatory drive, but its ethical imperative is to transform the speaker’s bower into a space of communal collaboration and recuperation—even though Coleridge is fully aware of how such conscientious if not generous acts also support his own sense of self and creative production. It makes sense, then, that “Lime-Tree” is structured like a serpentine “rondo”; the poem coils upon but does not consume itself with a pretense of achieving “eternal” insight. Its beginning is paired with its ending, just as Coleridge pairs himself with his nominal addressee, Lamb, without co-opting Lamb’s “strange calamity” (31), when his sister Mary murdered their mother and was subsequently institutionalized. Coleridge can only partly share in Lamb’s grief as he acknowledges toward the poem’s conclusion, where they both may only “contemplate / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (67-8). Head and tail, existing side by side and unified in being parts of the serpent, are not identical so much as what Coleridge might call “coincident”—a term he used when describing intimate conversations and poetic composition with Wordsworth (Letters 2:961). That is, a form of combinatory collaboration takes place between the speaker and Lamb that is oddly independent of content: it is the activity of conversation or “gazing” together where their two “joys” literally stand side by side rather than collapsing into a single “joy” (68). So
even when some critics observe that Coleridge is especially “at pains to stress precisely what” Lamb and the Wordsworths see, the language of feeling and of occupying a “coincident” space is even more important than the landscape’s details.49

But what of the poem’s famous moment of sublime encounter, when the particulars of the “wide landscape” evanesce in the process of “[gazing] till all doth seem / Less gross than bodily: and of such hues / As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes / Spirits perceive his presence” (40-44)? These lines are often read as one of Coleridge’s more “Berkelian” moments (Letters 1:335), where God unites the speaker not just with Lamb but with the spiritualized landscape. The phrasing, however, is more complicated, pointing to more than the Almighty’s unveiling.50 Matter does not dissipate when Lamb acknowledges the landscape’s “hues” (41), for these hues still conceal the Almighty’s presence. One need not lift the painted veil in “Lime-Tree.” Lamb’s great success is in recognizing and respecting the landscape as a variegated and beautiful shroud. At the same time, Lamb’s, like the speaker’s, insight into whatever physical experience is occurring is comparative; each man preserves their discrete gazes while remaining connected in terms that are embodied and environmental. As in “Frost at Midnight,” where vague antecedents promote a state of uncertainty where the reader, almost in conversation with the text, moves back and forth between assigning meaning to paired nouns or figures, Coleridge affirms two senses of partial overlap. He issues speculative directives toward Lamb at the same time he embraces Lamb’s individual perspective, and he ponders the interconnections between human bodies and the specific facets of the material world.

The various versions of the poem elucidate Coleridge’s awareness of this tension
between a seeming drive toward a more sublime, Wordsworthian form of consolation—
for “life and food / For future years” (“Tintern Abbey” 65-66)—and his craving for
interpersonal connection. In the original drafts of “Lime-Tree,” “less gross than bodily”
was followed by “a living thing / Which acts upon the mind” (PW variorum 41-42.1 and
2). The antecedent of this “living thing” is either “the landscape,” or, in a July 1797 letter
to Southey in which Coleridge excerpted a portion of “Lime-Tree,” the “view” (Letters
1:335). The latter choice is strange and double-edged if we consider that Lamb’s personal
“view” could also be the “living thing / Which acts upon the mind.” In the latter case,
Coleridge hints at the actively sociable connection between two gazes and two views that
look together—and that may lead each mind to act on the other. Yet shortly after the
poem’s publication in Southey’s Annual Anthology (1799-1800), Coleridge removed all
references to this “living thing.” His decision heightens the ambiguous status of the
“bodily” and makes the verse paragraph more consistent with the complex shifts in
perceptual agency that occur over the course of the poem. Coleridge may be granting the
landscape a kind of embodiment if human bodies are to be transcended; he could also be
endowing individual bodies with an importance that explains why this pivotal
metaphysical moment would be bracketed by the speaker’s fascination with
particularities and Lamb’s personal vision.

These revisions also dispel the notion that passivity is at “Lime-Tree’s” core, a
conclusion that critics have based upon the speaker’s incapacitation and the poem’s
apparent epistemological grounding in a tabula rasa model of perception, where the
mind’s contents are entirely composed of external “actions,” images, and experiences.
This particular passivity and its attendant mind-body dualism vexed Coleridge, for he had
the indelible sense that “things” could not be “counterfeited” or easily separated from a
more pantheistic conception of spirit. In an October 1797 letter to John Thelwall,
Coleridge reflects upon “Lime-Tree’s” soon-to-be excised metaphysical lines as evidence
of his broader conceptual frustrations:

I can at times feel strongly the beauties, you describe, in themselves, & for
themselves -- but more frequently all things appear little -- all the knowlege
[sic], that can be acquired, child's play ---the universe itself -- what but an
immense heap of little things? -- I can contemplate nothing but parts, &
parts are all little —!—My mind feels as if it ached to behold & know
something great—something one & indivisible—and it is only in the faith
of this that rocks or waterfalls, mountains or caverns give me the sense of
sublimity or majesty!—But in this faith all things counterfeit infinity!”
(Letters 1:349)

While Coleridge’s dissatisfaction with “little things” and “parts” seems most pertinent
and anticipatory of his later theorization of concepts like the primary and secondary
imaginations, his language also resembles his characterization of the “Almighty Spirit” in
“Lime Tree.” In his letter, he describes his pursuit of “something one & indivisible” in
the conditional tense and also implies that the magnitude of sublime “things” could be
even more deceiving than “little” ones. Coleridge is unable to accept the kind of dualism
implied by Wordsworth’s “motion and a spirit” that “rolls through all things” (101-3) in
“Tintern Abbey,” a poem whose language closely follows “Lime Tree’s” to very different
ends.51 Once again, he is more interested in the scale of “things” when determining their
“counterfeit” qualities; “little things” contain more “beauties,” innocence, and an ease
that is difficult in its simplicity, whereas any recourse to the sublime actually leads one
into self-deception through homogeneous and sloppy thinking. The conventional
Romantic sublime certainly does not facilitate social engagement. Both Lamb’s and the
speaker’s recognition of what we might call the “parts” of the Almighty’s “hues” instead
of their sublime consolidation are a means by which they revisit rather than “return” to a more localized space of collaborative conversational enlightenment.

Bearing in mind the complexities of “Lime-Tree’s” epistemological mechanisms, we can see that when the speaker articulates Lamb’s (and the speaker’s) “swimming sense,” he is actually evoking another kind of coincident vision. The placement of “sense” has the grammatical valence of being both a noun and a verb: one’s sense is a mark of rationality, but the verse paragraph’s sentence is at once declarative and incomplete; “sense” is immediately elaborated upon as a form of “gazing”:

Now, my Friends emerge
Beneath the wide wide Heaven—and view again
The many-steepled track magnificent
Of hilly fields and meadows, and the sea,
[...]
So my Friend
Struck with deep joy may stand, as I have stood,
Silent with swimming sense; yea, gazing round
On the wide landscape, gaze till all doth seem
Less gross than bodily: and of such hues
As veil the Almighty Spirit, when he makes
Spirits perceive his presence. (20-42)

With his mind “struck like a sensation” (Notebooks 2:2829), Lamb could be “sensing” and engaged in the physical act of perception, thus also making his “sense,” or his coherent mindset, “swimming”; however, in so doing, he opens himself to greater insight into the ambiguities of his and the landscape’s physical constitutions. And in the third verse paragraph, the speaker takes up Lamb’s work by linking “Nature” to employing “each faculty of sense,” for onlookers must have the capacity to be “wise and pure” (61-64)—and wisdom comes from an ability both to discriminate and to remain open to others’ observations.

This insight only emerges after Coleridge’s speaker focuses upon the specificities
of the “wide wide Heaven” (21) and on how Lamb’s “strange calamity” is distinct from Coleridge’s own childhood isolation that sought out “strangers” in “Frost at Midnight.” Far from an “apostrophic dismemberment of Nature,” as Jones puts it, Lamb’s gaze in the second verse paragraph imbues these distinct parts of the natural scene with a kind of autonomy that may seem irrational, making his “sense” swim. But it also characterizes Lamb’s position as a gazer who has become partly independent from his personal confinement in the city and from the speaker’s ownership of the landscape “of which I told” (9) in the poem’s maudlin and self-parodying opening. Furthermore, in the lines immediately preceding Lamb’s view of the “hues,” the speaker’s apostrophe to the sun shifts away from its ostensible object to grant a sense of autonomy to individual aspects of the landscape that the sun had enhanced; in other words, they are no longer the sun’s objects so much as subjects to be exhorted themselves. With imperatives like “richlier burn, ye clouds!” (35), the speaker adopts a position of hortatory power while learning from Lamb’s particularizing vision. His friend’s perception of the landscape features intransitive verbs (“sink,” “burn,” “shine” (35, 34, 32)), and these aspects, whether flowers or clouds, are made both distinctive and ripe for elaboration—or for the speaker’s even more direct response.

This is the moment when Coleridge’s speaker feels the sensation of actual physical transport “come…sudden on my heart… as I myself were there!” (44-45). And what is “there is not what we might expect, given his reference to the “Almighty.” Not exclusively a mental event as we might expect of the “greater Romantic lyric,” he alerts readers to the somatic import of his realization and the solidification of his creative alliance with Lamb. His friend’s detail-oriented vision provides the speaker with the
opportunity to reengage with his lime-tree bower. This is not quite a “return”: Coleridge’s rhetoric bears the marks of a response rather than a reiteration or total revision of the opening verse paragraph. As in “Frost,” the speaker creates a more intimate and oblique form of space through his use of double negatives, acknowledging how absences can constitute a form of presence:

A delight
Comes sudden on my heart, and I am glad
As I myself were there! Nor in this bower,
This little lime-tree bower, have I not mark’d
Much that has sooth’d me. Pale beneath the blaze
Hung the transparent foliage; and I watch’d
Some broad and sunny leaf, and lov’d to see
The shadow of the leaf and stem above
Dappling its sunshine! And that Walnut-tree
Was richly ting’d, and a deep radiance lay
Full on the ancient Ivy, which usurps
Those fronting elms, and now, with blackest mass
Makes their dark branches gleam a lighter hue
Through the late twilight. (44-57)

The speaker’s “delight” would have been impossible had Lamb not also observed the landscape in all of its various “hues,” and, even more sociably, this delight is grounded in a simultaneous awareness of enlightenment and intellectual generosity by choosing to announce that he is following Lamb’s example. Following and directing, partly mirroring yet standing together, the speaker imagines a conversational engagement with Lamb that finds a homology with his complex account of Lamb’s overlapping yet discrete relationship to the material landscape. Both men share similar personal histories, and the imbrication of their sufficiently disparate visions has a collaboratively generative result; put differently, “Lime-Tree” is based upon a give and take where no one individual holds total conversational power. The speaker learns from Lamb and then supplements his friend’s insight into a veiled spirit: he studies the transparencies and shadows within his
own bower—“the transparent foliage,” “shadow of the leaf,” and “the “dark branches…
[that] gleam a lighter hue” (49, 51, 56)—in themselves, revealing how his layered mode
of looking does not quite penetrate his surroundings so much as acknowledge its
immediate and specific manifestations of presence. He also does not presume to have an
identical “look” as Lamb. While Lamb, too, had once been “[i]n the great City pent,
winning thy way / With sad yet patient soul” much like the young Coleridge in “Frost at
Midnight,” when he describes himself with near-identical language as “reared / In the
great city pent ’mid cloisters dim” (51-52), they do not share a common vision in terms
of strict content, but a common capacity to feel, or perhaps to “sense” and “contemplate /
With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (67-68).

At once revisiting and expanding upon Lamb’s gazes and experiences, albeit on
Coleridge’s surmise, he completes his serpentine rondo, laying head and tail side by side
where the speaker’s retrogressive consideration of Lamb’s particularized observations
yields a poetics of response and collaboration.53 Indeed, it is no mistake that Coleridge
ends the poem by moving beyond the visual to the auditory, where the conversation
proceeds and is proceeding through a single bird’s “creeking” (75) that would be
harmonious not only with Lamb’s coincident “gazing” (74) but also with his discerning
ear: “For thee, my gentle-hearted Charles, to whom / No Sound is dissonant which tells
of Life” (76-77, emphasis added). As in “Frost at Midnight,” this “path of sound through
air” (Biographia 2:14), where both the speaker and Lamb are receptive to an open-ended
engagement with their specific surroundings that is both personal and collaborative, finds
its best expression through Coleridge’s indirectly sympathetic poetic form.
Two Failures: Desynonymization and the Pig Look

Coleridge’s ability to capture the embodied undertones of interpersonal communication and poetic experience initially translated well to his personal life. Especially before 1802, his enthusiasm for intimate conversation and his confidence in his creative powers were as palpable as his striking capacity to unite words with nonverbal cues. Upon first meeting him in 1797, Dorothy Wordsworth not only focused on Coleridge’s uniquely impassioned conversation but also on how his words had the power to transform his otherwise “very plain” appearance:

His conversation teems with soul, mind, and spirit… At first I thought him very plain, that is, for about three minutes: he is pale and thin, has a wide mouth, thick lips, and not very good teeth, longish loose-growing half-curling rough black hair. But if you hear him speak for five minutes you think no more of them. His eye is large and full, not dark but grey; such an eye as would receive from a heavy soul the dullest expression; but it speaks every emotion of his animated mind.54

Coleridge’s “teem[ing]” conversation seems to anticipate his later life tendency toward delivering torrential monologues, but Dorothy is neither offended nor overwhelmed. She sees Coleridge’s face and body for what they are—plain and not particularly robust—but admires his ability to “speak… every emotion of his animated mind” through his eyes alone. Coleridge’s appearance and his literal looks work in tandem with his speech to make a transformative impression upon Dorothy, moving her to form a friendship and to engage in future conversations with such a charismatic individual.

This charisma, however, proved to be the source of Coleridge’s social undoing. On the one hand, he found mainstream discourses of sympathy appealing since they implicitly promised immediate and nonverbal interpersonal connections, imbuing his exceptional listening abilities and personal sensitivity with a value that he hoped would
mitigate the risk of being vulnerable to others. On the other, these very same social
desires blinded him to what made poems like “Frost at Midnight” and “This Lime-Tree
Bower My Prison” so successful: they do not promise or deliver immediate gratification.
They facilitate and enact a serpentine “journey” within the poem itself and in terms of the
reader’s experience. His speakers establish social connections with their surroundings
from moment to moment, and, likewise, his reader-listeners are submerged in the present-
time experience of verse that “proceeds & is proceeding” (Biographia 2:14; Letters
1:609)—verse that partly circles upon itself but whose form invites ongoing thought and
commentary.

But Coleridge was an impatient man. His desire for immediate comprehension led
him to impose an untoward burden upon his interlocutors to match his “intensity” and his
pursuit of perfect clarity, whether in terms of unspoken sympathetic resonances or
exchanging the perfect word. In an 1802 letter to his wife Sara, for example, Coleridge
explains ideal friendship in terms of sameness rather than the collaborative insight that
facilitated responses. After first acknowledging that he seems to “exist, as it were, almost
wholly within myself, in thoughts rather than things,” Coleridge asserts that, with his
“especial friends,” he understands his vivid emotional connection to the outer world as
evidence of “the Necessity of LIKE to LIKE”:

I seem to exist, as it were, almost wholly within myself, in thoughts rather
than things, in a particular warmth felt all over me, but chiefly felt about
my heart & breast; & am connected with things without me by the
pleasurable sense of their immediate Beauty or Loveliness, and not at all by
my knowledge of their average value in the minds of people in general; &
with persons without me… in general by general kindliness of feeling, &
with my especial friends, by an intense delight in fellow-feeling, by an
intense perception of the Necessity of LIKE to LIKE. (Letters 2:881-2)
In the passage, existing “in thought” is akin to a more “immediate” affective state that is not predicated upon social dictates but personal social encounters that are either aesthetic or overtly and “intense[ly]” sympathetic: the syntax of “LIKE to LIKE” evokes the “mirroring” that David Hume describes in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, where “the minds of men are mirrors to one another, not only because they reflect each others emotions, but also because those rays of passions, sentiments and opinions may be often reverberated, and may decay away by insensible degrees.”⁵⁵ As in Coleridge’s letter, Hume’s mixed metaphor of a “mirror” that “reverberates” has a somatic resonance that would provide the immediate gratification of seeing oneself in others. However, reverberations also have the potential to fade over time—something Coleridge desperately wished to avoid.⁵⁶

The written word’s promise of stability thus appealed greatly to Coleridge, especially once he began to think of himself as more of a critic than a poet after Wordsworth cut *Christabel* from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*.⁵⁷ In August 1803, Coleridge turned to vocabulary and lexical precision in his pursuit of “perfect” communication rather than the nonverbal and formal aspects of conversation. Earlier in that same year, he had coined the term “desynonymization” in his notebook, a word he would define in the *Biographia Literaria* as the process by which words’ meanings diverge over time. This coinage bears the influence of the radical politician and materialist theorist of language John Horne Tooke, whose concept of “dispatch” bore directly on Coleridge’s simultaneous attraction to emotionally satiating immediacy and painstaking, detail-oriented criticism.
Presented as an extended Socratic dialogue, Horne Tooke’s *Epea Pteroenta, or, The Diversions of Purley* (1786-1805) outlines how words, and especially nouns, are “abbreviations employed for dispatch.”58 These abbreviations are comprised of “conjunctions” of more basic, original words into which meaning is embedded. This emphasis on “dispatch” immediately associates words with communication rather than a doctrine of “signs,” grounding communication in a “material” basis that grants words substance, an idea that Coleridge would adapt when he wrote of the living word (the Logos) where “words are not merely symbols of things & thoughts but themselves things” (*Notebooks* 3:3762). In his etymological pursuit of a universal grammar, Horne Tooke counters Locke’s concept of “arbitrary” language, where words designated ideas that became standardized through social discourse.59 But he also attempts to reveal how words, by Locke’s own epistemology, have sensible origins—that they were based upon sense impressions rather than ideas—if we only examine their etymologies. Horne Tooke thus circumvents the need for Lockean “ideas,” contending that Locke himself could not but help but acknowledge “the inseparable connexion between words and knowledge” (*Purley* 1:45), thus compelling Locke to write the third book of his *Essay* on language.

The third book does not resolve Locke’s problem on Horne Tooke’s view; instead, it distracts readers from how Locke’s doctrine of ideas is inextricably linked to the *materiality* of words. Taken a step further, Horne Tooke criticized Locke for not addressing how language is not simply imperfect: language’s root terms do contain “perfections”—perfections that could only be discovered by way of etymological investigation (*Purley*, 1:50).60
Coleridge would come to dislike Horne Tooke’s reductive and problematic approach to the imaginative dimensions of language. Still, the potential utility of considering words as “things” in tracing the broader, linguistic history of civilization was undoubtedly appealing to Coleridge, who would eventually fully commit himself to the written word and its bearing on social progress after 1810. Coleridge’s version of etymological investigation was more embodied than Horne Tooke’s since words, as he regarded them, were organic entities that grew and changed over time. Despite his apparent distaste for the inherent superiority of rustic speech, many of his own “etymologies” were neologisms, unwittingly “retrogressing” into creating something new. They were based on how “living” words came to be differentiated through phonetics and common speech. Writing on January 17, 1803 “<Property, Propriety—curious instance of Desynonymization/>” (Notebooks 1:1336), Coleridge would expand upon this “curiosity” in the Biographia to demonstrate how “[e]ven the mere difference, or corruption, in the pronunciation of the same word, if it have become general, will produce a new word with a distinct signification; thus ‘property’ and ‘propriety’” (1:82-3, STC’s note). This “corruption” creates a place for phonetic error in the grander social “instinct of growth,” which is “a sort of collective, unconscious good sense that is working progressively to desynonymize those words originally of the same meaning” through cultural diffusion, in turning reflecting the need for neologisms to correspond to new concepts and for greater precision of speech (Biographia 1:82-4).

What seemed promising in theory did not go well in practice. In 1804, Coleridge made a wholly disastrous attempt to incorporate desynonymization into spoken conversation. He sought to combine the activity of verbal parsing with the somatic,
nonverbal communicative understanding that he craved from his dearest friends. As he
discovered, mechanical verbal precision, no matter how “discriminating” and accurate,
did not necessarily elicit the sympathy, comprehension, or the kind of reassurances that
would satisfy his desire for a love that would support “the vital air of [his] Genius”
(Letters 1:471).

There are two sorts of talkative fellows whom it would be injurious to
confound/&. I, S. T. Coleridge am the latter. The first sort is of those who
use five hundred words more than needs to express an idea—that is not
my case—few men, I will be bold to say, put more meaning into their
words than I or choose them more deliberately & discriminatingly. The
second sort is of those who use five hundred more ideas, images, reasons,
&c, than there is any need of to arrive at their object/till the only object
arrived at is that the readers’ mind’s eye of the bye-stander is dazzled with
colors succeeding so rapidly as to leave one vague impression that there
has been a great Blaze of colours all about something… I feel too intense
the omnipresence of all in each, platonically speaking—or psychologically
my brain-fibres, or the spiritual Light with abides in the brain marrow as
visible Light appears to do in sundry rotten mackerel & other smashy
matters, is of too general an affinity with all things/and tho’ it perceives
the difference of things, yet is eternally pursuing the likenesses, or rather
that which is common/bring me two things that seem the very same, &
then I am quick enough to shew the difference, even to hair-splitting—but
to go on from circle to circle till I break against the shore of my Hearer’s
patience, or have my Concentricals dashed to nothing by a Snore—that is
my ordinary mishap. (Notebooks 2:2372)\textsuperscript{64}

Blurring together reader and listener at the same time he seeks not to “confound” two
types of people, Coleridge seems to endorse his detractors’ condemnations of his own
intellectual solipsism and want of conceptual clarity. He refers to his audience as either
“bye-standers” or “Hearers,” denying them any participatory agency. While speaking,
Coleridge does not merely find himself vacillating between parts and wholes, but
between the imaginative and physicalized mind—his “brain marrow” and “fibres”—as
well as a strikingly tangible, smelly metaphor of “rotten mackerel & other smashy matters”
that accompanies his ascertaining attempt to “shew the difference.” This difference
demonstrates Coleridge’s awareness of the effects of his words on his listeners and to acknowledge his own vulnerability to these people—they are at once “dazzled” by “vague[ness]” and by his speech’s ability to evoke something like synesthesia: a “great Blaze of colours all about something.” But, he necessarily opens himself to the “reply” of his hearers’ own nonverbal communicative responses that threaten to “dash… to nothing” his ideas with a “snore”—a form of “dispatch” that Coleridge certainly did not anticipate or desire. His scrupulously chosen words do not communicate the force of his “smashy matters” or “brain-fibres” to his auditors, and rather than being intrigued or inspired to extend themselves into the social space of collective thinking, his listeners remain impenetrably and ungenerously “local in the body itself” (Notebooks 1:979). Coleridge’s desynonymization, to put it lightly, did not give him a satisfactory sense of achieving dialectical nuance or what Perry calls a “laudatory” “muddle”; his notebook entry demonstrates how one of his greatest literary and conversational powers—the ability to conjure striking metaphors for nonverbal vivacity—could also be a curse: he found himself helplessly adept at immediately registering and responding to all nonverbal cues, favorable or not.65

The potential downsides of Coleridge’s capacity to register nonverbal “dispatches” are even more apparent in consecutive October 1803 notebook entries. There, he gives two accounts of disagreements with friends: first, with Robert Southey; second, with Wordsworth. With Southey, things are simpler: an “action of words” leads to a misunderstanding that Coleridge could place into the broad scheme of their friendship, contemplate its triviality, and then reconcile with Southey (Notebooks 1:1605).

With Wordsworth, though, things are never simple. In the notebooks, Coleridge
makes multiple attempts to attain a safe distance from the intense emotional energy of the
exchange. His language is strangely coded, as if performing formal logic, but neither
words nor theorems can quite capture what has happened: a “pig look.” To set the scene:
Coleridge (A.) had been praising Wordsworth’s (B.) latest poem during a boat ride, and
in this closed environment, something at once viscerally comprehensible and totally
disturbing leaves him reeling:

A. thought himself unkindly used by B.—he had exerted himself for B. with what warmth! honoring, praising B. beyond himself.—&c &c—B. selfish—feeling all Fire respecting every Trifle of his own—quite backward to poor A.—The up, askance, pig look, in the Boat &c. Soon after this A. felt distinctly little ugly Touchlets of Pain & little Shrinkings Back at the Heart, at the report that B. had written a new Poem/an excellent one!—& he saw the faults of B & all that belonged to B. & detested himself dwelling upon them—&c. What was all this?—Evidently, the instinct of all fine minds to totalize—to make a perfectly congruous whole of every character—& a pain at the being obliged to admit incongruities—This must be plus’d + by all the foregoing Pains which were self-referent, & by their combination introduce a selfish Brooding into this latter Pain. (Notebooks 1:1606)

Toward the end of the passage, Coleridge attempts to fit this mutual recognition of “faults” into “a perfectly congruous whole” as he did with Southey, putting his “pains” in order and attempting to claim ownership over them: those “incongruous” pains must be “plus’d +”—itself a phrase that is doubly additive—with his own previous self-loathing. In other words, he is scrambling for a narrative to answer perhaps the most telling question at the heart of the passage, “What was all this?” despite already seeming to have arrived at the answer: envy.

In Coleridge’s attempt to transcribe the encounter, subjects and objects blur together amid the murky push and pull of extensions and retreats between “A.’s” and “B.’s” bodily and mental presences. The sentences momentarily break down: “—&c
&c—B. selfish—feeling all Fire respecting every Trifle of his own—quite backward to poor A.—The up, askance, pig look, in the Boat &c.” Verbs disappear, dashes set off shards of emotion and intelligible looks, and the sublingual noise of interpersonal disturbance is filled in with pseudo-signifying, hurried “&c’s.” Most troublingly, it seems plausible to attribute the “pig look” to either man. Its phrasing signals a disturbingly autonomous quality that at once mediates and merges their mutual attitudes: Wordsworth, in his moment of self-involvement, could be at once sneering at Coleridge and revealing himself to have an animalian, brute quality that could shut down “warm” discourse; alternatively, Coleridge could be indicting himself for at once looking “up” to Wordsworth and down on himself, for by looking “askance,” he performs a gesture commonly associated with envy, also reducing himself to baser instincts. But “envy” does not quite satisfy. Even in Notebook 21 itself, held by the British Library, it appears as if Coleridge came back to the entry to try to label what he was feeling, fruitlessly; in a different ink saturation and nib he writes in a cramped hand above a previous horizontal line with which he had separated his thoughts, “Question is, whether I have not mistaken for Envy a very different Feeling” (Figures 1.1 and 1.2).

This “pig look” captures not a mutual withdrawal but a perversion of sympathetic energies. Coleridge is close enough to Wordsworth as if to physically inflate him, and Wordsworth feeds on that praise. The two men are on the same spectrum. Yet corresponding feelings, where breasts communicate and harmonize with each other, are not always warm, stable, or beneficially sociable. The pig look is thus a complex example of a conversation gone wrong by going quite right. Neither man quite feels “dyspathy” or
Figure 1.1: Notebook 21.336. October 1803. ©The British Library Board, MS 47518, f69v. The British Library, London.
aversion (Letters 2:832)—a word that Coleridge reserves for characterizing his relationship with his wife, and for a marriage plagued not by disagreements so much as by a total inability to grasp each other’s feelings. Instead, there is a tactile and intelligible energy between Coleridge and Wordsworth, even if what they mutually comprehend and communicate is a troubling underlying form of hostility, selfishness, and frustration—insufficient terms, all. This moment of nonverbal contact not only supplants the language that would otherwise marshal it in some kind of time; it also brilliantly evokes the pains of the most ideal form of sympathetic understanding. Most pressingly, this pig look illustrates the deeply somatic nature of Coleridge’s capacity for response—a capacity that left him so wounded and so exposed that he eventually retreated into one-sided “eloquence.”

In these aborted “conversations,” Coleridge’s pursuit of “dispatch” leads him to traffick between the dual promises of Adam Smith’s theory of sympathy: the “spectator”
can sometimes achieve instantaneous, unspoken understanding with another person, but also he can instantiate a “rational,” narrative distance between himself and others. By embracing desynonymization and then situating his disagreement with Southey in the broader narrative of their friendship, Coleridge attempts to do the latter: he regulates his emotions and his talent for observing nonverbal cues by devising a contextual arc. These efforts do not quite satisfy his desire for perpetual and palpable intimacy, as he feels insufficiently heard or appreciated. With Wordsworth, by contrast, Coleridge exchanges a seemingly ideal and penetrating “pig look” in an enclosed space not unlike a cabin or a bower. In this case, though, the “success” of this instantaneous, embodied, and unspoken connection with his closest collaborator leaves him speechless and distraught. Conversation with Wordsworth is not productive since it is not actually conversational. Neither combining words and natural signs, nor indirection and unfolding, it is more akin to a form of mindreading that completely transcends language. The pig look only undermines Coleridge’s craving for conversation that would actually be productive—for similarity without sameness, for the possibility of ongoing questions and answers, for a rapport replete with kindness—putting the nightmarish costs of “perfect” understanding into stark relief.

In his account of the pig look, Coleridge discovers that he ought to have been careful what he wished for. He achieves what he had imagined to be the ideal conversation: he and Wordsworth share a serpentine body and gaze upon each other knowingly. Yet once Coleridge is totally comprehended by someone like Wordsworth, the conversation is irrevocably terminated, and he is left with a disorienting sense of being “unkindly used,” penetrated, and yet deeply alienated (Notebooks 1:1606). He thus
finds himself estranged from the model of indirect sympathy he articulates in his poetry, left only with violating glares and desynonymized verbal perfection. The inherently process-based nature of social discourse as a form irrespective of content collapses, and Coleridge ignores how poetic engagement—or the aesthetic immersion in a literary text—models how communicative indirection cultivates just enough imperfection that it enables readers and poets to explore verse “like the path of sound through air… paus[ing] at every step” (Biographia 2:14).

These recessive movements correspond to the silences and responses that, in poems like “Frost at Midnight,” provide the basis of the speaker’s eventual appreciation of “interspersed vacancies” (51) as the palpable content of silence without speech—as the “gentle breathings” (50), for example, that govern the poem’s prosody. Similarly, in “Lime-Tree,” Coleridge shows how the act of looking need not be confrontational but “coincident,” in which his speaker stands alongside his friend to appreciate the particularities of the “prison” he first conceived in terms of “blindness” (5), barrenness, and loss. Coleridge’s enthusiasm for ideal communication, where he would be understood while still retaining a measure of autonomy, only helps him realize two perfect failures: first, a pig look that threatens to obliterate his sense of self and that simultaneously alerts him to his alienated individualism; second, fixating on the perfect word, when employed in would-be “conversation,” makes him unintelligible if not repellant to his interlocutors. Not looking to the serpent’s tract oblique that “proceeds and is proceeding” (Notebooks 1:609), then, the Talker—not the Poet—finds himself consumed with yet another realization: not all responses foster ongoing intimate conversation or positive insights into his own or others’ characters. And as we will next
see in Chapter Two, the specter of the pig look and its promise of ideal, but painfully isolating, homosocial sympathy haunt Coleridge’s darkest and most metacritical conversation poem, *Christabel*.

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1 I am echoing the opening lines of Abrams’s essay: “There is no accepted name for the kind of poem I want to talk about, even though it was a distinctive and widely practiced variety of the longer Romantic lyric and includes some of the greatest Romantic achievements in any form,” (“Style and Structure in the Greater Romantic Lyric” in *From Sensibility to Romanticism: Essays Presented to Frederick A. Pottle*, ed. Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom [1965] rpt. in *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays in English Romanticism* [New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984], 76). Subsequent references to Abrams will be made in-text.


3 *Diary, Reminiscences, and Correspondence*, vol.1 (London: Macmillan and Co., 1869), 316.

4 Qtd. in Robinson, 314.


13 As I mentioned in the notes to the Introduction to this dissertation, see Tobias Menely on how eighteenth-century philosophers and rhetoricians understood poetry to be especially suited to incorporating nonhuman voices, the sublingual, and the passions into verbal communications beyond normative sign/signifier relationships, *The Animal Claim: Sensibility and the Creaturely Voice* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 7–8.


15 “Frost at Midnight,” *Poetical Works*, 2 vols., ed. J. C. C. Mays (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2001), 1:456, n. to line 74 of “Frost at Midnight.” All subsequent references in this chapter and others to Coleridge’s poetry or Mays’s notes will be made in-text by title and line number, or volume and page number in the case of notes.


17 By referring to “intentionality,” I am drawing upon its philosophical definition, which, put in admittedly highly general terms, examines the relationship between language and phenomenology; namely, what it means to think “about” something. See the Introduction to this dissertation for more on intentionality and my contention that thought need not be composed of language. Sara Ahmed also suggests that affect studies can incorporate a kind of intentionality when we store feelings in objects, “Happy Objects” in *The Affect
The term “undersong” features frequently throughout Coleridge’s writings. For example, in a 1795-96 poem to Joseph Cottle, where, perhaps anticipating his fantasy about Charles Lamb in “This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison,” he depicts Cottle as submerged in the noise of the natural world in contrast to the sublime “Pine-grove” that “to the midnight blast / Makes solemn music!” (21-2): “But th’ unceasing rill / To the soft Wren or Lark’s descending trill / Murmurs sweet undersong mid jasmin bowers. / In this same pleasant meadow, at your will, / I ween, you wander’d” (22-6). The term then comes up in his various literary lectures, such as how Shakespearean characters manifest nuance “by way of continuous undersong,” and notably and somewhat notoriously in 1829, he anticipates his later remarks on the “genius” of the androgynous mind, Table Talk, ed. Henry Nelson Coleridge [1835], ed. Carl Wooding (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 2:191; all future references to Table Talk in this chapter and future chapters will be made in-text.

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As Coburn observes in her editorial note to this entry, Coleridge changes Milton’s verb tenses from past to present. This decision corroborates my argument that he was interested in movement and articulated a strangely propulsive but responsive (and perhaps regressive) mode of conversational engagement (Notebooks, note to 1:609).


Regarding “The Thorn,” Coleridge writes, “it is not possible to imitate truly a dull and garrulous discouerer, without repeating the effects of dulness [sic] and garrulity.” Coleridge then makes his point that Wordsworth’s own poetic voice differs markedly from “the real language of men”—and does so to great effect: “However this may be, I dare assert, that the parts (and these form the far larger portion of the whole) which might as well or still better have proceeded from the poet’s own imagination, and have been spoken in his own character, are those which have given, and which will continue to give universal delight” (Biographia 2:49-50).

Milton, Paradise Lost 9.530.

Jon Mee takes cues from Tilottama Rajan in a softened but Habermasian reading of Coleridge’s conversation poems, conceiving of “conversation as a continuous and ongoing ‘supplement of reading’” that aspires to oneness; he cites a letter I discuss in my reading of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” where Coleridge distinguishes between “little things” and “something one & indivisible” (Letters 1:349) (Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830 [Oxford and New York, 2011], 185). Mee also thinks of the term “conversation poem” to signify (as it does for many readers) “its ease of flexibility of address,” yet this “flexibility” does not allow for as much of a “response” as I advocate (Conversable Worlds, 183)—especially if we are to accept Mee’s reading of Coleridge’s craving for indivisibility rather than indirection, as I suggest, and fear of “strangers,” another view I challenge in my reading of “Frost at Midnight” (Conversable Worlds, 190). That said, his reading of Coleridge is often helpful if pursuing a Habermasian line of inquiry, and he makes a vital distinction between Coleridge’s sociability and Wordsworth’s anxieties about miscommunication (Conversable Worlds, 192-200). For a somewhat strident if not hostile and mimetic understanding of conversation, see Bruce Lawder, “Secret(iing) Conversations: Coleridge and Wordsworth,” New Literary History 32, no. 1 (2001): 67-89. He views Coleridge’s conversation poems as failed Victorian dramatic monologues, implicitly holding up conceptions of lyric isolation, lyric time, and Aristotelian mimesis as the goals of short-form poetry. See Scott Simpkins, who conflates Coleridge’s later tendency to

Koezler, “The Poetics of ‘Divine Chit-Chat’: Rethinking the Conversation Poems,” *Literature Compass*, no. 3 (2006): 391, 390. Koezler also uses the term “conversationals” over the course of his essay and acknowledges the influence of Abrams and Harper, but his analysis focuses upon “The Nightingale,” namely because Coleridge had subtitled it “A Conversational Poem” only to later excise it for publication. As I have outlined in the Introduction to this dissertation, my understanding of conversation is considerably more expansive and less apologetic with regard to poetry. Koezler suggests that poetry chafes against communication rather than energizing Romantic poetry’s ongoing sense of presence even for current readers. Koezler also makes the important observation Wordsworth and Coleridge refer to “conversation” in the 1798 Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*.


“Apostrophe,” 146. In addition to “Apostrophe,” see Culler’s “Why Lyric?” *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2008): 201-6, which is a more recent response to the movement toward historical poetics and, more pressingly, the pedagogical strategy to try to make lyrics into little “narratives” rather than respecting poetic form and, implicitly, lyric time.


Ibid., 127.

Ibid., 127.

Ibid., 127.

Ibid., 127.

Yousef, 127; Ewan Jones, *Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 35.

See the Introduction to this dissertation for a discussion of Smithean sympathy as linked to narrative and theatricality rather than poetic “degrees” of proximity.

Jones contends that the “theme” of “Frost at Midnight” is “the mind’s attempt not only to bear repetition, but to inhabit it,” for, in Coleridge’s effort to transcend passivity to connect with the material world rather than being “aware of [his] complicity in constituting reality,” he must confront the possibility of the “echo” being his own voice even if it seems to come from without (*Poetic Form*, 37, 39). These realizations are akin to the self-negating “interruptions” of thought that create a sense of, seemingly by Jones’s account, unsatisfying and ungenial conversation: “Coleridge’s blank verse teaches us a truth not to be found in any etiquette manual” (*Poetic Form*, 55). However, Jones’s extensive account of Coleridge’s relationship to philosophical materialism as manifest in his verse has affinities with my own arguments, even if he is less interested in Coleridge’s humor, sociable overtures, or why such “interruptions”—what I would call pauses in “Frost,” for looks have more of a derailing effect on Coleridge than words—invite a revisionary response.

The additional lines from the first published version of “Frost at Midnight” (1798) read:

Like those, my babe! which, ere tomorrow’s warmth
Have capp’d their sharp keen points with pendulous drops,
Will catch thine eye, and with their novelty
Suspend they little soul; then make thee shout,
And stretch and flutter from thy mother’s arms
As thou would’st fly for very eagerness. (80-6)

Coleridge plays up the pulsating quality of the verse when he alludes to the sound of “pendulous drops” and remarks on Hartley’s oscillation between suspension and shouting. However, it is conceivable that Coleridge thought the “rondo” to be disrupted due to Hartley’s figuration not merely as a “fluttering” stranger himself but a “soul,” or quite nearly a bird or angel, on the verge of flight. Such a characterization destabilizes the sense of domestic, material locality in the poem. See Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 96-103 on Coleridge’s “creative plagiarisms” and the influence of Cowper on “Frost.” See also Kevin Goodman for a discussion of the “brown study” passage in Cowper’s “The Task” and “Frost,” *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 88-9.

43 Indeed, in his 1799 account of serpentine argument and movement in reference to *Paradise Lost*, Coleridge selects a pending conversation is inherently unequal: it is held between a shapeshifting, male, supernatural creature and a woman—and the initial encounter is not unlike Coleridge’s account of the relationship between the chameleonic Geraldine and perhaps-innocent Christabel who finds herself amazed and enchanted by the serpent’s remarkable voice and corporeal beauty.

See, for example, Felicity James, *Charles Lamb, Coleridge and Wordsworth: Reading Friendship in the 1790s* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 108-111.

William Ulmer outlines how Coleridge is careful not only to appeal to Lamb’s Unitarianism, but also makes reference to a series of conciliatory letters regarding the tragedy in which their theological differences surfaced; with “Lime-Tree,” Coleridge attempted to comfort Lamb with the notion of the “One Life,” “The Rhetorical Occasion of ‘Lime-Tree Bower my Prison,’” *Romanticism* 13, no. 1 (2007): 15-22; “veiled invitations” that Lamb ultimately resists due to his dislike of religious dogmatism (Ulmer, “Rhetorical,” 24), and, according to Alison Hickey, Lamb’s resentment of Coleridge’s egotism, “Double Bonds: Charles Lamb’s Romantic Collaborations,” *ELH* 63 (1996): 757-8.

See Kathleen M. Wheeler, for example, for an extensive discussion of the “mirroring” effect in “Lime-Tree,” *The Creative Mind in Coleridge’s Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 134-142. She extends her account of mirroring to the effect of reading the poem, where “[t]his self-conscious awareness of the speaker, who finally looks at his bower and his immediate situation as his proper objects of contemplation, exactly mirrors the necessary change of the reader’s attention. His proper object of contemplation is also his immediate situation, that is, it is his reading, perception, and interpretation of the poem which he must contemplate, not the poem as some external nature. The Richness of the poem as a mirror of mind, of imaginative activity, full of insights into the nature of perception, reflection, reality, and art becomes evident only then” (*The Creative Mind*, 143-44).

This activity of mutual appreciation of the immediate world resembles the conversational creativity that Coleridge articulated when explaining the “gestation” of *Lyrical Ballads*. In that case, he contends the text’s central concepts were begotten through collaborative dialogue that, like his account of meter in the *Biographia*, becomes “considerable in… aggregate influence” (2:66). See this dissertation’s Introduction on this topic and Chapters Two and Three for more on the gendered components of Coleridge’s conversable sympathies with Wordsworth.

See Bewell on Berkeley’s notion of Godlike communication as expressed through nature, “Coleridge and Communication,” n. pag. Regarding these lines, too, Coleridge wrote to Southey, “You remember, I am a Berkleian” when transcribing a portion of “Lime-Tree” in July 1797 (*Letters* 1:335).

The most obvious allusion to “Lime-Tree” would be Wordsworth’s famous wish to for his sister Dorothy in the last verse paragraph of “Tintern Abbey”: “And this prayer I make, / Knowing that Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her” (122-24).

It is well known that Lamb was embarrassed that Coleridge addressed “Lime-Tree” to him, and, more importantly, that he was characterized as “gentle hearted”: “blot out gentle hearted, and substitute drunken dog, ragged-head, seld-shaven [sic], odd ey’d, stuttering, or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the Gentleman in question” (*The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, 3 vols., ed. Edwin W. Marrs, Jr. [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1975-78], 1:224). Hickey argues that Lamb’s comments indicate his sense of entrapment and denied subjectivity in Coleridge’s
text ("Double Bonds," 758). However, Lamb also objected to the metaphysical lines in "Lime-Tree," calling his references to a "living thing / Which acts upon the mind" (PW variorum 41-42.1 and 2) and the "Almighty" an "unintelligible abstraction" that deadened both God and his "created thing[s] alive" (Lamb Letters 1:224). Taken together, Lamb’s remarks express a profound discomfort when the intimacy of Coleridge’s address—an address that remarks upon Lamb’s personal capacity for fellow-feeling—at the same time Lamb favored accounts of embodiment rather than “abstraction.” See Hickey and James on the relationship between the social and literary relationship between Coleridge and Lamb.


56 For an example of Coleridge’s anxiety about not being able to record his thoughts adequately, see, of course, the Preface to “Kubla Khan,” in which he claims that a visitor from Porlock interrupted his transcription of the opioid-driven dream vision: “on [Coleridge’s] return to his room, [he] found to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained some vague and dim recollection of the general purpose of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast” (PW 1:512). We might surmise that these remaining “eight or ten” lines are the poem’s conclusion, which expresses the conditional wish to “build that dome in air” ("Kubla" 46) with his poetry having been inspired by a female poet figure—“A damsel with a dulcimer” (37)—and thereby receive a form of social and critical approbation. On inspiring and “poetic” women, see Chapter Three.

57 See Holmes, *Early Visions* 282-96. In a letter to Francis Wrangham, Coleridge says as much: “[Wordsworth] is a great, a true Poet—I am only a kind of a Metaphysician.—He has even now sent of the last sheet of a second Volume of his Lyrical Ballads” (Letters 1:658).

58 *Epea Pteroenta, or The Diversions of Purley*, vol. 1 (London: J. Johnson, 1786), 36. Subsequent references to Purley will be made in text by volume and page number.

59 See the Introduction to the dissertation that discusses Locke and the empiricist/Enlightenment reverberations of his theory of language throughout discourses of sympathy in terms of “sameness” as well as “agreement” in Habermasian modes of discourse within the public sphere—a notion that has been superimposed on more intimate forms of conversation.

60 In Purley, “H” contends that Locke would not have discussed “the composition of ideas” had he overtly linked words to knowledge from the outset.

61 While Horne Tooke’s interest in etymology is in keeping with a Platonic version of “natural language,” his objection to Locke’s mixing of ideas and words leads him to one of his most important claims: one cannot *think* without language and therefore without intentional objects. By that same token, though, Horne Tooke does not allow for human innovation in the creation of language, for “the business of the mind, as far as it concerned Language [...] extends no farther than to receive Impressions, that is, to have
Sensations or Feelings (*Purley* 1:70); see James McKusick, *Coleridge's Philosophy of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4-13; McKusick, “Coleridge and Horne Tooke,” *Studies in Romanticism* 24 (1985): 92. The social implications of Horne Tooke’s position—where the “sensible signs” (rather than ideas) to which words are linked comprise our conscious minds—seem to be in keeping with other theories of language, natural and arbitrary. Horne Tooke’s focus on communication and ease of “dispatch,” however, differs. A materialist view of language imbues language with a core “truth” that in turn underlies all human thought, which, again, is comprised of language. Tim Milnes writes, “Tooke subordinates reason to communication, deflating the idea of truth into that which is coherent or acceptable within a natural language… truth should be seen primarily not as the goal of communication, but as its fundamental *presupposition*” (*The Truth about Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], 48). And as Tim Fulford has observed, the phonetic and sonic aspects of desynonymization added an etymological depth to Coleridge’s conception of poetry, where poetry “could force recognition of that original similarity be using its licence to exploit the sound of words—a licence not given to prose or to the ordinary speech from which Wordsworth wanted to derive poetry” (*Coleridge’s Figurative Language* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991], 24). The sounds afforded by poetry affirm words’ core existence as “things,” but also breathes life into such words. See Milnes, who argues that Coleridge anticipates the vitality with which he would later imbue the Logos, which, by being “both communicative word and divine presence” (*Truth about Romanticism*, 160), aligned language with truth and substance.

In a note to the sole use of the term “desynonymize” in the *Biographia*, Coleridge emphasizes the bearing of ordinary conversational speech on the process of desynonymization:

This is effected either by giving to the one word a general, and to the other an exclusive use; as "to put on the back" and "to indorse;" or by an actual distinction of meanings, as "naturalist," and "physician;" or by difference of relation, as "I" and "Me" (each of which the rustics of our different provinces still use in all the cases singular of the first personal pronoun). Even the mere difference, or corruption, in the pronunciation of the same word, if it have become general, will produce a new word with a distinct signification; thus "property" and "propriety;" the latter of which, even to the time of Charles II was the *written* word for all the senses of both. There is a sort of *minim immortal* among the animalcula infusoria, which has not naturally either birth, or death, absolute beginning, or absolute end: for at a certain period a small point appears on its back, which deepens and lengthens till the creature divides into two, and the same process recommences in each of the halves now become integral. This may be a fanciful, but it is by no means a bad emblem of the formation of words, and may facilitate the conception, how immense a nomenclature may be organized from a few simple sounds by rational beings in a social state. For each new application, or excitement of the same sound, will call
forth a different sensation, which cannot but affect the pronunciation. The after recollections of the sound, without the same vivid sensation, will modify it still further till at length all trace of the original likeness is worn away. (1:82-3, STC’s note 2)


64 See Michael Macovski, *Dialogue and Literature: Apostrophe, Auditors, and the Collapse of Romantic Discourse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 93-5 for a discussion of Coleridge’s cognizance of outer parties in his inward deliberations; see Perry, *Division*, 290 for the entry’s applicability to *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and, more broadly, Coleridge’s constant battle to somehow balance accurate “illustrations” with conceptual points.

65 Perry, *Division*, 7-18.
Chapter Two

Snake Looks and Sociable Isolation:

*Christabel Two Ways*

More than any of Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s other poems, *Christabel* has attracted scholarly attention for what it does not say. Its metrical experimentations, sublingual vocalizations, and complex reception history have all proven rich areas of inquiry. This is especially the case because most critics have largely given up on the question that has dogged *Christabel* since its publication in 1816: what does the poem mean—or want? Having ceased to parse its allegorical and psychological motivations, scholars favor examining the visceral effects of its formal dimensions such as its evocations of “blankness” or its use of nonsense words.¹ Reading, listening, and the poem’s metrical and conceptual fragmentation are often at the core of these analyses. This is hardly surprising given how *Christabel* has continued to entrance readers just as it did the listeners to whom Coleridge famously recited the poem ever since its initial composition in 1800.²

Much of this recent work bears directly on the poem’s “sociable” qualities even if critics do not quite realize it. Christopher Laxer observes that Coleridge’s powers of recitation “brought with [them] a certain kind of prestige or social value,” as did *Christabel’s* circulation in manuscript form, both of which excited his listeners to the point that some of them, like Walter Scott, copied its meter and plot elements in *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805).³ Addressing *Christabel’s* influence on Scott’s poem, Margaret Russett argues that the material aspects of meter, whether read or heard, are
“untranslatable” (*Biographia* 2:142). Even more than this, *Christabel*’s textual identity, and specifically its copyright, is based upon its communicability despite its seeming lack of content: “Unowned, the compulsively repeatable *Christabel* creates an authorial personality by possessing and reproducing itself in others. In so doing, it also poses the unthinkable possibility of a language without ideas… This very blankness… is inseparable from the poem’s undeniable originality.”*4* Celeste Langan elaborates on Coleridge’s separation of thought from speech, as well as mechanical or instrumental language from poetry, when she argues that *Christabel* “contrast[s] the sounds of animals… to the interior or mental speech of its characters”;*5* similarly, Anne McCarthy organizes her essay on *Christabel*’s reception history and relationship to the Romantic sublime around the poem’s power to make its readers “stupid.”*6*

These analyses share one thing in common: they do not explore whether *Christabel* features communication within the poem itself or in some other register beyond mere affect.*7* Ironically, too, for all of their attention to the *Biographia*, those readings disarticulate meter from language and nonverbal communication in a manner similar to Wordsworth’s account of “superadd[ing]” meter to poetry—a position that Coleridge famously derided (*Biographia* 2:69).*8* Put more plainly, meter and form are inextricably intertwined with unspoken and spoken conversable encounters in *Christabel*—not separate from them. And while these critics often quote the same accounts of meter that I have discussed at length in the previous chapter, they have not addressed Coleridge’s commitment to understanding its cumulative social effects, where the reader-listener only subconsciously notices the “quick reciprocations” of “animated conversation” between poets and audiences (*Biographia* 2:66).
The somatic components of meter and their capacity to enthral reader-listeners are vital to Coleridge’s poetry. But beyond the “mesmeric” speaker in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1798/1834), *Christabel* presents an even more elaborate case: its speaker and its characters look, cast spells, hiss—and exercise a kind of deeply physical “animal magnetism” that Coleridge associated with poetic recitation as described at the conclusion to the *Biographia*: “the enkindling Reciter, by perpetual comment of looks and tones, lends his own will and apprehensive faculty to his Auditors. They live for a time within the dilated sphere of his intellectual Being… [but] it is equally possible… that the poem left to itself should flag beneath the feelings of the reader” (2:239–40). Importantly, the reciter does not quite dominate his “auditor”-reader so much as develop a physicalized form of sympathetic bonding. He temporarily “lends his own will” by the “perpetual comment of looks and tones.” And no matter how “enkindled” the reciter may be, readers-listeners have agency: they, too, are responsible for maintaining the energy of these poetic encounters rather than simply draining the poet’s communal creative energies. Coleridge’s fixation on “perpetual looks and tones” is not unlike his formal “rondo” in “Frost at Midnight”: beginnings and ends are both part of the same serpentine body or “dilated sphere,” but they remain distinct entities. Like Coleridge’s present-time connection to Charles Lamb in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” each speaker and listener-reader lives and collaborates “for a time” in a collective enterprise of feeling, gazing, and hearing words and tones; they also retain sufficient room to place demands on each other. Both parties must look, speak, and listen in order to maintain the conversational capacity for response that was so important to Coleridge.
Viewing *Christabel* as Coleridge’s most fully realized, boldest, and metacritical “conversation poem” resolves the temptation to separate its formal qualities from its “meaning.” I say this not because the poem *has* no meaning or because its formal qualities are irrelevant. I refer to a lack of meaning because *Christabel*’s plot—often deemed incomplete, allegorical, or perplexing—is governed by the very kinds of conversational successes and failures I discussed in Chapter One. In his early poems, Coleridge’s own ideas about the conjunction between verse’s formal effects and indirect, conversational, and multisensory sympathy revealed a commitment to creatively productive incompleteness where *processes* rather than strict ideological or narrative content inspire replies rather than “returns.” Meanwhile, personally, Coleridge yearned for a more instantaneous form of mutual understanding, all of which he achieved (for better or for worse) when exchanging a perfect but devastating “pig look” with Wordsworth in October 1803 (*Notebooks* 1:1606).

Indeed, one of *Christabel*’s most remarkable qualities is how Coleridge uncannily foresees and works through the perils of perfect homosocial communication through verse, envisioning the “pig look” reflected in Geraldine’s “Serpent’s Eye” (585). As we know, this look encapsulates everything Coleridge thought he wanted from a social encounter: he and his male counterpart, Wordsworth, are sutured together, gazing upon each other in a moment of mutual comprehension. Yet the pig look also articulates Coleridge’s worst fear: it supplants the serpentine *indirection* that had made his earlier poems so successful, leaving him with an asphyxiating homosocial similitude that threatens to erase all autonomy. In other words, the pig look, prefigured by Geraldine’s “snake look,” both awaits and haunts him, leading in both instances to a bleak rendezvous.
with a lonesome destiny. And even though Coleridge came to know that the social contact he most wanted was achievable between men, the individualism in which he eventually found himself immured emerges, somewhat paradoxically, only after many frustrating interpersonal encounters, each of which deepened his sense of alienation.

*Christabel’s* complex depictions of interpersonal relationships push Coleridge’s serpentine poetics to the limit: they anticipate how sympathy, when wholly uncoupled from language and “contagious,” can be an unbearable form of communication.¹² The pig and snake looks are the beginning as well as the end of intimacy: an apotheosis that spurs Christabel, the poem’s speaker, and, allegorically, the poet himself to recoil from others, adopting a “forlorn” individualism not unlike the “sadder and… wiser” Wedding-Guest in *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834 Rime 624, 623).

In what follows, I perform two readings of *Christabel* to illustrate its simultaneously aspirational and fatalistic approach to communication. My second reading shows how Coleridge recasts his serpentine, conversational poetics in a more pointedly gendered manner in what ultimately amounts to a nuanced critique of homosociality. His protagonists are women whose bodies, Coleridge thought, possessed a superior capacity for intellectual flexibility, erotic sympathy, and responsiveness. Choosing to refract his fixation on communicative coupledom through women was an effort, then, to keep interpersonal contact from turning into the snake- and eventually pig-looked mirroring he dreaded.

To an extent, this works: he appoints female bodies with the power to establish an alternative form of intimacy that is spellbinding. When Christabel and her shape-shifting guest spend the night together, they converse in a language that is unintelligible to men,
escapes narrative control, and resists patriarchal interference. They realize a form of reciprocal comprehension that can only be achieved through adaptable and feminized interactions rather than the more rigid homosocial triangulations with which nineteenth-century literature is often associated. Coleridge thus surprisingly advances a more radical view of sexual relationships that underscores how the ideology of “separate spheres”—or separate genders—was not wholly applicable in the Romantic period, any more than heterosexuality was identical to heteronormativity. Most strangely, Coleridge conveys an animated ideal of “reciprocal marriage” (Letters 1:131) where each partner would preserve “Distinction without Division” (Notebooks 3:3705) through “love correspondence.”

Coleridge’s pursuit of perfect “correspondence,” of course, is my primary focus here, as it is in all three of this dissertation’s first chapters. I do so because his poetics of conversational indirection and imperfection links verse to the give and take of successful communication as well as to embodiment and “natural signs.” Moreover, his explorative poetry confronts the horror and disappointments of total “understanding” both before the pig look occurs and after he accepts a life devoid of intimacy. While he repeatedly tries to address nonverbal communication and gendered embodiment in his notebooks, letters, and other prose—texts I examine between my two readings of Christabel—these other writings put into relief why Coleridge’s poems are clearer, more probing attempts at modeling interpersonal intimacy and its dissolution.

Like the pig look, however, my first reading of Christabel begins with the poem’s endings. The specters of rejection and forcible individuation are what motivate Coleridge’s pursuit of sustainable forms of social contact. But the pig look predicts and
underpins a more melancholy fate—and both of Christabel’s melancholy conclusions. We are left watching Geraldine “lead forth” Christabel’s father, Leoline, to unknown ends in the 1800-02 manuscripts, or puzzling over the “Conclusion to Part the Second” in its 1816 published form (Christabel 655). In this latter version, Coleridge returns to Christabel a jaded man, stripping “The Conclusion to Part the Second” of its original homosocial context; it was a verse included in a letter to Robert Southey. Instead, for the first and only time, Coleridge’s speaker ironically adheres to M. H. Abrams’s model of the ouroboros: he, like Christabel and Coleridge himself, is a solitary, brooding onlooker who incoherently comments on a domestic scene without reply, “returning” to himself only to feel more dejected and alone than ever.16

Two Endings and One Snake Look

As I have indicated, Christabel features a striking counterpart to the pig look: Geraldine’s “snake look” famously silences and even surrogates Christabel’s identity once Geraldine becomes the “Lord of [her] Utterance”:

A Snake’s small Eye blinks dull and shy;  
And the Lady’s Eyes [Geraldine’s] they shrunk in her Head,  
Each shrunk up to a Serpent’s Eye,  
And with somewhat of Malice and more of Dread  
At Christabel she look’d askance!—  
One moment—and the Sight was fled! (583-88)

Unlike Coleridge’s faltering account of his encounter with Wordsworth, the poem balances verbal control with the unsaid insofar as Geraldine’s spell combines a verbal incantation and the “Touch of this Bosom” (263-68). What follows from this is not quite as titillating: Christabel struggles to communicate Geraldine’s potential treachery to her gullible father who sees their guest as a proxy, in due order, for his own daughter, his
dead wife, and his long-lost friend Sir Roland.

Unsurprisingly, readers and critics have remained more interested in “seeing” Geraldine’s simultaneously horrifying and arousing bosom than thinking about the “perfectly” communicative qualities of her “Serpent’s Eye” (585). After rescuing the beautiful stranger from “warriors” (81) and taking her to her room, Christabel watches Geraldine disrobe and reveal “her Bosom and half her Side— / A Sight to dream of, not to tell!” (252-53). This sight troubled contemporary readers: in various attempts to comprehend the ambiguous status of Geraldine’s body, some dismissed the poet as a feminine figure writing for women; others ventured that Geraldine was actually a man, perhaps picking up on and wishing to pin down flexible gender roles and the female-focused narrative that, in many respects, are the poem’s central accomplishments.\(^\text{17}\)

Adding to readers’ revulsion was Coleridge’s refusal to specify what exactly was dream-worthy about Geraldine’s body in the published 1816 edition, which eliminated the clarification in early manuscripts that her “Bosom and half her Side / Are lean and old and foul of Hue” (\textit{PW} variorum 252-252.1.1).\(^\text{18}\) Instead, the speaker commands the reader to “behold” a dash: “Behold! her Bosom and half her side— / A sight to dream of, not to tell!” (252-3).\(^\text{19}\) While it is feasible that either version could have been deemed “disgusting at the bottom of his subject,” as Hazlitt put it,\(^\text{20}\) Coleridge’s ability to sexualize a female body both outside of the strictures of language and despite (or because of) its potential “deformity” remains another of the poem’s notorious achievements.\(^\text{21}\)

\textit{Christabel} persists in teasing us to imagine these very details—to speculate about that “Sight to dream of, not to tell!” (253)—and most readings take the bait.\(^\text{22}\) Critics predominantly concentrate on how the speaker’s refusal to describe Geraldine’s form, as
Shears puts it, “returns us more urgently…to the ambiguity of the voice in the poem and the way that meaning becomes contingent upon the non-signifying components of the spoken word.”23 Still, in their pursuit of trying to discern what the poem “means,” scholars have often conflated what the poem’s speaker “tells” us—or refuses to tell us—with the forms of “telling” that occur within the poem itself. Thus, notwithstanding the amount of attention that the poem’s meter and relationship to recitation has received, the conversational and responsive qualities of the two women’s sexual connection, figured by Christabel’s nonverbal signs and sublingual utterances after the spell-casting, have frequently been thought to be synonymous with “silence” or “muteness,” setting aside the possibility that silence itself could constitute a response.24 Critics will therefore discuss Christabel’s inability to communicate, but only by highlighting exactly what she is communicating.25 Christabel’s meaning is clear to them: she is attempting to revoke her offer of hospitality to the woman she had previously rescued, thereby inciting Leoline’s rage.26 Similarly, in the spell-casting scene, any “factual” knowledge of their night together only offers details that distract from Christabel’s warning not to sympathize with Geraldine’s story, instead entreating Leoline to attend to his daughter’s physical presence. In order to occupy the poetic present with Christabel, in other words, he must resist a Smithean model of sympathy that is predicated on narrative distance and “rational,” or at least conventionally chivalric, social norms. But his desire to reconcile with his friend Sir Roland takes precedence, and he channels this need through Roland’s surrogate and wronged “daughter,” Geraldine.

But again: what about that snake look? Doesn’t it obviate or distort Christabel’s capacity to communicate? When Geraldine shoots “A Snake’s small Eye…askance” at
her host (583–87), Christabel consumes and is consumed by the other woman’s vicious expression:

She nothing sees—no sight but one!

So deeply had she drunken in
That Look, those shrunken serpent Eyes,
That all her Features were resign’d
To this sole Image in her Mind:
And passively did imitate
That Look of dull and treacherous Hate. (598–606)

Christabel musters a response to this seemingly colonizing look even though she “imitate[s]” Geraldine momentarily. She speaks, but it is to Leoline only. She cautions her father against trusting Geraldine and, even more compellingly, she assumes the physical position of a supplicant, “intreat[ing]” him to “send away” Geraldine and “falling at the Baron’s Feet” (615–17).

Christabel’s turn to Leoline also marks a turn away from Geraldine and the spellbound intimacy they once shared. As much as Christabel’s assumption of “[t]hat look, those shrunken serpent Eyes” implies that Geraldine is a kind of lamia, Christabel’s mirroring of her “shrunken” gaze most closely resembles Coleridge’s later account of the bizarre and depersonalized exchange of a pig look, where the encounter does not destroy communication so much as capture its alarmingly inarticulable perfections. Christabel’s words and thoughts abandon her, and she is bound to a look that permeates and confounds her: “The maid, alas! her thoughts are gone, / She nothing sees—no sight but one!” (597-98). The speaker adopts the passive voice just as Christabel is momentarily “passive” in the face of the snake look, and he underscores the coexistence of her powerful gaze and sense of evacuation with the Latinate structure of line 598, ending with a verb before the caesura (itself a pause and prosodic vacancy), and
juxtaposing “she” with “nothing.”

These doubled feelings of violation and retreat, externalization and painful individuation, also demonstrate how Christabel anticipates the pig look in ways beyond the initial act of looking. As we recall, when the look floats between Coleridge and Wordsworth, it buries the latter in a “selfish Brooding” that Coleridge had associated with Wordsworth or “B.”: “B. selfish—feeling all Fire respecting every Trifle of his own” (Notebooks 1:1606). Surprisingly, too, while Geraldine is the “shrunken” figure in Christabel, it is Coleridge, as “A.,” who is the shrinker once his conversational nightmare comes true: “A. felt distinctly little ugly Touchlets of Pain & little Shrinkings Back at the Heart” (Notebooks 1:1606). This makes sense. In the poem and the notebook entry, who is rejecting whom, who ultimately wields the pig look, is necessarily unclear: the two men, and two women, are indistinguishable for an instant. And as they did Christabel, the right words escape Coleridge. He asks, “What was all this?” as he grapples with the look’s intensity, and he feels obliged to acknowledge that, while he cannot quite characterize what happened, the look was an event: his account is “a very, very dim Sketch/but the Fact is stated” (Notebooks 1:1606).

As powerful as Christabel’s “unconscious Sympathy” with Geraldine’s expression may be (609), the speaker’s commentary on the situation is more telling than Coleridge’s own scrambling after “facts” in his own life. The speaker is careful to note that such mirrored hatred can only take hold of Christabel to an extent. She does, after all, break away from Geraldine to appeal to patriarchal authority, even if her father is not a receptive listener. The speaker marvels at Leoline’s inability to hear his daughter as she lies “[f]ull before her Father’s View— / As far as such a Look could be / In Eyes so
innocent and blue” (610–12), just as Leoline was only “half list’ning” to Bard Bracy’s dream (567). So rather than “instantiat[ing] a division between knowing and speaking,” as McCarthy contends, the true tension administered by Geraldine’s spell, and arguably the entire poem, is between expressing and listening—between solipsism and vulnerability.

This tension became more acute over time, especially if we compare the ending of *Christabel*’s 1800–02 manuscripts to that of the 1816 published version. In the manuscripts, the poem’s conclusion is open-ended but narratively optimistic: Christabel’s father “[leads] forth the Lady, Geraldine” (655) to balladic adventures that may include reconciling with his friend and Geraldine’s “father” Sir Roland. The 1800-02 ending holds out a hope for tying up the poem’s many loose threads at the same time it lends itself to oral recitation, during which, in his repeated performances of the poem, Coleridge frequently “led forth” the listener into excited speculation and further conversation.

For publication in 1816, however, Coleridge appended a seemingly unrelated poem by incorporating a small verse jotted in a 6 May 1801 letter to Southey. At the time, he explained that it was “a very metaphysical account of Fathers calling their children rogues, rascals, & little varlets—&c—” (*Letters* 2:729). Ernest Hartley Coleridge understood this gloss to imply that the “Conclusion to Part the Second” is written from Leoline’s perspective as he glares at his daughter. Constance Hunting takes an even more pessimistic view of Coleridge’s decision to tack on the “metaphysical” verse about his son, Hartley, writing that it “indicate[s] a decision of sad dimensions on Coleridge’s part… to eke his fatally projected poem out by a few more lines, any lines.”28 But for all
of its seeming irrelevance, “Conclusion to Part the Second” has remained baffling to critics for other reasons: it exhibits a total shift in tone; the speaker’s heretofore tentative, voyeuristic, and (sometimes dim-witted) teasing voice disappears; and the poem abandons all semblance of narrative while retaining its ballad meter. Indeed, the 1816 conclusion to *Christabel* actually has more in common with Coleridge’s more canonical and lyrical conversation poems. As if addressing an older version of baby Hartley from “Frost at Midnight,” the speaker attempts to connect with a different kind of “fluttering stranger” (“Frost at Midnight” 26): “A little child, a limber elf / Singing, dancing, to itself” (*Christabel* 658-59).

The nostalgic affinities of “Conclusion to Part the Second” with Coleridge’s canonical “conversation poems” underscore its ties to the 1800-02 version of *Christabel*. Whereas the original conclusion and poems like “Frost at Midnight” aspire to cultivate forms of open-ended balladic or conversational progress, *Christabel*’s second ending recognizes the impossibility of finding the right kind of responsive listener. By 1816, Coleridge had accepted that his oddly ideal, multisensory communicative skills never seemed to “work” in his private life. Whether resulting in a pig look, a monologic “river” of speech, or a failed marriage, Coleridge apparently came to see that he was unable to solicit a positive, mutual, and productively *indirect* reply in keeping with his own serpentine poetic sympathies. As if mocking his famous characterization of the poet as one who can “reconcile… opposite or discordant qualities” (*Biographia* 2:16), *Christabel*’s speaker muses, “Perhaps ’tis pretty to force together / Thoughts so all unlike each other; / To mutter and mock a broken Charm, / To dally with Wrong, that does no Harm” (666-69). This speaker has no illusions about a poet’s power unlike his
counterpart in “Kubla Khan” (1797). The negotiation of opposites is both decorative and painful—both “pretty” and “forced.” Unlike Geraldine, whose “charm” restricts Christabel’s capacity to attract others’ attention and represents a remarkable example of nonverbal communication, he exudes no such authority.

The speaker of “Conclusion to Part the Second” is rendered impotent, an onlooker. He gazes upon his child, but, more poignantly, he reflects upon the lost opportunities for social engagement present in the 1800-02 manuscript versions of Christabel, haunted by the shadow of a more social, confident, and younger poet. It is no accident that Coleridge would choose to end Christabel with a poem originally sent to another one of his greatest male friends, Southey, the poet with whom he had once imagined himself to best “amalgamate.” This amalgamation was productive in Coleridge’s mind because their merging actually allowed each man to preserve his autonomy: Southey was skilled in “feeling” and Coleridge in “thought,” making the relationship as complementary as the ostensible intentions behind Lyrical Ballads’ division of labor (Letters 1:294). But in Christabel, Coleridge cannot achieve another conversational rondo; while his speaker occupies a domestic space with an ostensible interlocutor similar to the early conversation poems, his words do not match his feelings, and the only “harm” he inflicts is upon himself. Once Geraldine’s penetrating gaze short-circuits the poem’s balladic energies, the speaker abandons the possibility of a rational narrative resolution. The speaker finds the conversational nostalgia to which he retreats—and, perhaps, returns—to be bitter rather than bittersweet. The 1816 version of Christabel thus leaves us with an ungrammatical end to “Conclusion to Part the Second”:

And what if in a World of Sin
(O sorrow and shame! should this be true)
Such Giddiness of Heart and Brain
Comes seldom, save from Rage and Pain,
So talks, as it’s most us’d to do. (673–77)

The sentence, or near-question, is open-ended and broken; at best, the antecedent to “it’s” would be “Giddiness,” a word that signifies a state of vertigo like Christabel’s “dizzy trance” (607) rather than a faculty that can “talk,” let alone be accustomed to “talking” given its anomalous nature. For once, the speaker’s and Christabel’s perspectives share an unmitigated commonality: they are individuated to the point where, no matter how fond of past intimacies either figure may be, neither he nor his heroine can go home again. Christabel’s closing lines are therefore as fragmented as Coleridge’s floundering account of the pig look, and the speaker remains estranged from and ignored by any possible interlocutor. He is left with the compulsion to “talk as it’s most us’d to do,” an activity to which Coleridge was, by then, quite well accustomed.

Love Correspondence, Critical Schematics

However “us’d” to misunderstandings and isolation he became over the course of his life, Coleridge’s descent into individuation was caused in many ways by perfect social contact that led inevitably to social rejection. Such perfections at once energized and cast an uncanny pall on Coleridge’s efforts to find an ideal partner and interlocutor. The rest of this chapter tracks this ill-fated quest by elaborating on how sex and gender differences inform his understanding of communication, where embodiment is front and center.

Coleridge unexpectedly backs into a pseudo-feminist position when he first intuitively, and then deliberately, questions the inherent limitations and possible dangers afforded by intimate contact between men; in the early conversation poems, his
trepidation about mirrored male embodiment leads him to cultivate the indirect “coincident” gazing in the sidling, serpentine poetics in “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison” (*Letters* 2:961). And as we see in the encounter with Wordsworth, Coleridge is disposed to resist certain deeply felt, homosocial encounters, moving him to retreat from and reject the man with whom he shared a powerful bond.

Coleridge’s fascination with the possibility of partnership and communication with women recurs throughout his prose. In his marginal comments on the German theologian Wilhelm Martin Leberecht de Witte’s 1822 romance *Theodor oder die Weihe des Zweiflers*, he makes a pointed distinction between heterosexual love and male friendship. The move runs counter to his youthful aspirations to cultivate a mirrored and “intense delight in fellow-feeling… of the Necessity of LIKE to LIKE” (*Letters* 2:881-2), and he derides the “common opinion,” supposedly held by Wordsworth, that love is additive. Here, Coleridge rejects the fantasy of total sympathetic similitude by attending to the physical positions of metaphorical “poles,” whether “juxtaposed” or “opposite.”

Among many other proofs, which I have noted elsewhere, this may be added, of the difference in kind between Friendship and Love: and in confutation of the debasing but alas! the common opinion, that the purest Love is no more than Friendship + Lust. Were this the truth, a woman might be in love with half a dozen Persons. But all, who are capable of Love, know that it must be exclusive—and the reason is evident, when it is seen that *Friendship is Sympathy, but Love Correspondence*—not a juxta-position of homonimous [sic] poles (gleichnämigen Polen) but the Union of opposite Poles.—Hence too the more intense the Individuality in a man, the more necessarily is his Love exclusive. (*Marginalia* 2:197, emphasis added)

At first, it would seem as if Coleridge is drawing upon the conventional Romantic trope of interpersonal and poetic “harmony” at the same time he is conjuring the kind of “union” that many critics, from Lucy Newlyn to Thomas McFarland, have discussed in terms of
his fraught but creatively generative friendship with Wordsworth. \(^{34}\) Yet in this passage and elsewhere, Coleridge favors a form of oppositional polarity with women, not men; additionally, his account does not quite resemble the Swedenborgian “complementary” view of heterosexual bonds that sometimes subordinates female bodies and their capacities for “sentiment” to more “rational” male intellects. \(^{35}\) Instead, despite having written his account of polar relationships well after the failure of his acrimonious marriage to Sara Fricker, Coleridge asserts that of these two forms of polarity—sympathetic and loving—the latter is both personally and logically preferable. To Coleridge, women are not capricious in their affections, and he places a premium on partnership, female communication, and what Jonas Spatz calls “the erotic impulse.” \(^{36}\)

Coleridge does not only criticize the aspiration toward homosocial sympathetic harmony. In his account of “love correspondence” with women, he also rejects the indirect sympathy that he innovated through his earlier poems addressed to men, where speakers and interlocutors stand side by side in the collaborative poetics of unspoken sensory exchanges. His description of “a juxta-position of homonimous poles” has an uncanny resemblance to the positional and revisionary relationship between Lamb and Coleridge’s speaker in “This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison.” Perhaps punning on the masculine personhood implied in “homo,” Coleridge calls attention to how the same words, notwithstanding their variable definitions, only nominally reflect each other, at best replicating the kind of collaboration that brings “Lime-Tree” to its formal conclusion. Each man “contemplates / With lively joy the joys we cannot share” (67-8) but cannot gaze upon the other without risking consequences of the pig look: reduplication, isolation, and scattered thoughts and feelings. While “friendship is Sympathy,” there is no, and
cannot be, “love correspondence” between men; an exclusive relationship with a woman, by contrast, intensifies “individuality in a man,” promising the best of both worlds: interlocutors possess a measure of autonomy, since some distance and difference are paradoxically necessary for partners to commiserate without end.

Coleridgean “love correspondence” takes on an even more corporeal emphasis in an 1811 letter to Henry Crabb Robinson, the ostensible purpose of which was to offer comments on his translation of Amatonda by C. L. Heyne. As was his habit, Coleridge weaves literary criticism into his meditations on interpersonal communication, and, in this instance, articulates some of his most concrete thoughts on romantic love and female embodiment: he asks Crabb Robinson whether there could be “Sex in Souls”:

Is there not a Sex in Souls? We have all eyes, Cheeks, Lips—but in a lovely Woman are not the eyes womanly—yea, every form, every motion, of her whole frame womanly? Were there not an Identity in the Substance, man & woman might join, but they could never unify—were there not throughout, in body & in soul, a corresponding and adapted Difference, there might be addition, but there could be no combination. One and one = 2; but one cannot be multiplied into one. 1 x 1 = 1—At best, it would be an idle echo, the same thing needlessly repeated—as the Ideot [sic] told the Clock—one, one, one, one, &c— (Letters 3:305)

This passage goes beyond simply anticipating his 1822 marginalia to Theodor, in which he emphasized the importance of retaining a measure of independent personhood, or, as he writes to Crabb Robinson, “corresponding and adapted Difference”; each passage’s vocabulary is nearly identical, as is his insistence that coupledom is not merely desirable but productive. He links body and soul in mathematical terms, at once abstracting his topic—intimate romantic attachments—and admitting a persistent craving for communication with women. While he grants that men share the same basic physical
“substance” as women—“eyes, Cheeks, Lips”—women’s “motion” and “form” are paramount to the intermingling of their spirits and bodies.

Most importantly, women possess a sufficient amount of sexual “corresponding and adapted Difference” to commune with others and to participate in the growth of a relationship, for otherwise, “there might be addition, but there could be no combination. One and one = 2, but one cannot be multiplied into one. 1 x 1 = 1—At best, it would be an idle echo, the same thing needlessly repeated.” Without the somatic variations that make a “lovely Woman’s… eyes womanly… [and] Were there not an Identity in the Substance, man & woman might join, but they could never unify,” a man seeking a deep form of sympathy might find himself in a redundant, terrifyingly doubled state of “plus +,” as Coleridge did when exchanging a pig look with Wordsworth (*Notebooks* 1:1606). On that troubling day in October 1803, Coleridge did not receive an “answer” from a “corresponding” woman (*Notebooks* 4:4730). He heard both a rebuke and an icy “echo”—hearkening to the total similitude (and outwardly imposed narcissism) that silently articulated his sense of isolation and personal violation with a disturbing acuity. As in the case of more “homonimous” friendships, echoing another person at once repels an individual and reduplicates his thoughts. It does not facilitate a state of balancing outward sympathy with “inward withholdings” (*Letters* 5:210), nor does it preserve the privacy he thought could instantiate a measure of “dissimilarity” and distance from male companions. With a woman, Coleridge envisioned the infusion of body and spirit more clearly, for her body’s influence upon her capacity to express “motion” and “corresponding Difference” allowed a couple to move beyond the endless repetition that,
even when conceived in mathematical terms, went nowhere. “1 x 1,” in other words, is a form of multiplication without reproduction.

Coleridge’s desire to “unite” with a woman may appear, at first glance, to exemplify Romantic male poets’ “colonization of the feminine,” where they supplement their own creative powers with perceivably feminine attributes often at their female interlocutors’ expense. Marlon Ross, Mary Jacobus, Terry Castle, and many other critics have corroborated and extended this influential critique, and, specific to Coleridge, Heather Jackson has argued that he believed women to be “made” to suit men, thus actualizing his possessive and domineering manner of loving. Taking cues from Coleridge’s later writings that sometimes dismiss women’s “powers of the mind” and from Thomas Laqueur’s three-part schema of how female bodies have been interpreted and regulated for the past two thousand years in the Western world, Jackson characterizes Coleridge’s attitudes toward sex and gender as follows: Coleridge thought women to be both the inferior “half” of a one-sex model and “complements” to men in the two-sex model, where each sex is considered “altogether different from one another” if not “opposite and incommensurable.” Jackson’s attention to how the female body bears on Coleridge’s conception of gender relations does depart from more psychoanalytic and archetypal analyses of his life and poetry. Still, she overlooks what else might constitute a “complementary” relationship all the while, severing correspondence from its essential association with communication, and circumventing Coleridge’s commitment to interpersonal, dynamic embodiment as a source of social power.

Scholars tend to oversimplify the complex social expectations faced by Georgian- and Regency-period women in order to frame Coleridge’s shifting conceptions of gender
relations in more rigidly categorical terms. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s account of homosocial triangulation has proven particularly enticing to those concerned with Coleridge’s apparent misogyny and vexedly gendered relationship with Wordsworth.

Yet when the poet fixated on paired relationships—the “union of opposites”—his desires were at once old-fashioned and emotionally intrepid. Put differently, and in good Coleridgean fashion, he “pauses and half recedes; and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward (Biographia 2:14) in the give and take of erotic relationships—relationships that, ideally, nurture conversational open-endedness through multisensory “listening”—marked by a nexus of looks, touches, and sensory attunement to one’s local, if not marital and domestic, environment.

The painful realities of Coleridge’s aborted romantic relationships did not stop him from being preoccupied with an equitable form of eroticism, no matter how responsible he may have been for his relationships’ failures. Amid his post-1810 embittered meditations on marriage and women in general, Coleridge would sometimes fantasize about mutually satisfying relationships with women. In a particularly odd instance, in 1819, he imagines each partner meeting at a triangle’s apex—a triangle that does not connote or require “triangulation” through a Sedgwickean third party. But, as in his most emotionally overwrought notebook entries that resemble formal logic or coded charts, he figures this romantic apogee graphically, drawing a triangle whose intricacies border on absurdity (Figures 2.1-2). This mutual ascendance would ideally supersede male friendships due to the added capacity for men and women to form a sexual bond, revealing that for all of his seeming retreat into metaphysics, Coleridge viewed the sharing of bodies—and the female body in particular—as key to interpersonal symbiosis
and growth. In short, erotic love was both a step above ordinary friendship between men and a more “perfect” (and not pig-looked) kind of companionship:

Love is a Desire of the whole Being to be united to some object, as necessary to its completion in the most perfect manner that Reason dictates and Nature permits. And herein does Friendship differ from Love, that it is not (or in the case of man and man), cannot be, a union of the whole Being—Perfect Friendship is only possible between Man and Wife: even as there is to be found the bitterest enmity. (Letters 4:904)

Coleridge’s wording unsurprisingly borders on idealism, but it also tries to negotiate two dimensions of his thoughts on communication. Nature also seems to be another abstraction—the nature of Coleridge’s logos and “Bible of God” (Philosophical Lectures 367)—but ultimately he yearned for a natural and literally physical “union of the whole Being” despite how “the bitterest enmity” underpinned his actual marriage and romantic life.45

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**Figure 2.1:** “Dupliciter Unum.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge. © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. c. 1811-12.
Coleridge’s complex thoughts on female embodiment and partnership show why, when figuring poetic collaboration and response in nonverbal terms, he did not wholly adhere to male-dominated “rational-critical” accounts of conversation and political debate endemic to the age of Samuel Johnson, nor did he conceive of “silence” as akin to being incommunicative or mute.\textsuperscript{46} His conversations with men like Wordsworth were often metaphorically gendered, and his attempts to experiment with verse form coupled with procreative metaphors shaped his thinking. As just one example, Coleridge laid claim to aspects of Wordsworth’s Preface to \textit{Lyrical Ballads} by describing conversation as both unspoken and constantly unfolding as well as metaphorically akin to childbirth: “Wordsworth’s Preface is half a child of my own Brain / & so arose out of Conversations, so frequent, that with few exceptions we could scarcely either of us perhaps positively say, which first started any particular Thought” (\textit{Letters} 2:829).\textsuperscript{47}
Two issues arise when we examine Coleridge’s account of conversations that, in part, address poetic form: first, he overtly links conversation to a kind of collaborative thinking not wholly grounded in language. Thinking requires one to effectively go out of oneself, an “outness” that would not only feature in *Aids to Reflection* (1825) but in his aspirations for sexual contact, a topic I will also discuss in Chapter Three. One must conceive and give birth to ideas in an intimate social setting at the same time these thoughts reside in the “brain,” a term that seems to suit the physiologically minded John Keats more than the supposed idealist, Coleridge. Just as the nonlexical elements of poetic form support meter-based “animated conversation” where the “quick reciprocations of curiosity… are too slight indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence” (*Biographia* 2:66), Coleridge’s poetry and poetic theory capture thought in development rather than presenting a complete psychological projection of the self.

Second, by framing the social activity of conversable “thinking” with childbirth, frequent social contact, and “halves,” Coleridge conceives of the conversational blending of selves as gendered labor, regardless of each party’s actual gender. Tying male-female relationships to the formal components of fluid responsiveness—and as Julie Ellison also contends, a desire for women—Coleridge expresses admiration for how the emotive and embodied intuitions of women reveal an inextricable connection between nonverbal communication and erotic love. As he writes in his dialogue “The Improvisatore” (c. 1826), “the presence of the beloved object modulates, not suspends…and, finding, again seeks on” (*PW* 2:1058, INT 76-85).
This hopeful process of “modulation” that “seeks on” is especially pronounced in his verse. It is not unlike the “rondo” of his serpentine conversational poetics, where head and tail are neither the same nor consuming one another on the model of the *ouroboros*. Instead, a longer, ever-moving body connects them. And the sexual implications of a connected body further eroticize his conception of poetic sympathy, for it both allows parties to exchange gazes and touches as well as to maintain a level of separateness. Women’s uniquely impressionable qualities make them “intensely similar, yet not the same… the same indeed, but dissimilar, as the same Breath sent with the same force” (*Notebooks* 1:1679); their common “breath” blazes a “path of sound through air,” as he would later describe the somatic and immersive experience of reading great poetry in 1817 (*Biographia* 2:14).

Being impressionable did not take away women’s capacity to impress. In his 1818 lecture, “On Poesy or Art,” Coleridge goes as far as to feminize Art as a “mediatress between, and reconciler of nature and man.”51 Although the gendering of artful mediation could imply that female bodies are hollow conduits between the human and nature, “Art” is anything but a cipher, and Coleridge accords the “mediatress” with certain powers: she is a “reconciler of nature and man,” which is to say, she is an active negotiator when attempting to bridge this gap. As many critics have noted, “On Poesy and Art” drew upon—or possibly plagiarized—F. W. J. Schelling’s *Über das Verhältnis der bildenden Künste zu der Natur* (1807). This fact may put to question, for my purposes, whether Coleridge’s retention of Schelling’s use of the feminine “*die Vermittlerin*” in making reference to a “mediatress” (and its related term, “mediatrix”) is significant, especially given that “art” (*die Kunst*) is a feminine noun in German.52 But
feminine versions of “mediator” as a noun in English (and in German) are relatively rare, particularly in an aesthetic context, suggesting that Coleridge’s choice to retain not merely Art’s but “mediator’s” feminine gender is deliberate. He abandons the feminine after granting Art tremendous power, shifting to neutral pronouns as the passage progresses and lending credence to the thoughtfulness with which he approached his near-translation of Schelling; that is, with the advent of Art as “power,” Coleridge moves to a neutral pronoun (“it”), distinguishing Art as communicative medium but denying it the capacity to “stamp… into unity” the diverse perceptions of the masculine artist.

This choice evinces both a fear and uneasy respect for female power and for women’s intellectual and aesthetic force. He articulates, at the very least, a certain ambivalence about feminine power as both “impressive” and changeable in contrast to the impenetrable solitude with which he eventually associated Wordsworth, whom he thought to have “the least femineity [sic] in his mind. He is all man” (Table Talk 2:391). As I have mentioned, and as he wrote to Thomas Allsop over the course of several letters from 1822 to 1826, male friendships involved sharing one’s thoughts and extending sympathy, but they also mandated respect for “the free-agency & individuality of your friend, or intimate” (Letters 6:531). But friendship, to Coleridge, was not the same as romantic love, and the generative differences between men and women could not be framed in terms of walled-off “free-agency.” He resists Wordsworth’s purported conception of love as “a compound of Lust with Esteem & Friendship” (Letters 3:305) that, as we also saw, Coleridge calls “the common opinion” of “Friendship + Lust” in his Theodor marginalia (2:197). This definition of romantic attachment reads like the
superaddition of sexual attraction to friendship, a position that runs parallel to their
dispute about “superimposing” meter upon prose to create poetry and recalls the
troubling state of “plus +” inspired by the pig look (Notebooks 1:1606). This “compound”
leads Coleridge to the conclusion that “Wordsworth is by nature incapable of being in
Love, tho’ no man more tenderly attached” (Letters 3:305), again separating “attachment”
from the continuously renegotiated symbiosis of love correspondence.

Coleridge’s condemnation of Wordsworthian love is all the more notable when we
consider how, when it comes to thinking about Coleridge and love, it is Wordsworth
rather than his wife Sara Fricker or his beloved Sara Hutchinson who comes to critics’
minds. The narrative is familiar, and I have recounted most of it: Coleridge and
Wordsworth’s bond was intense, creatively productive, and at times tumultuous;
Coleridge characterized their collaborative works in reproductive terms; and he also
meditated on Wordsworth’s “masculine” qualities in contrast to his own seeming
“feminine” weakness. Seamus Perry ventures that, in Coleridge’s ideal world, he would
have married his great friend: “If, in the private mythology, Coleridge represents a
feminine principle of responsive sensibility, and Wordsworth stands for an awesomely
internalised, masculine authority, then, in the very metaphor of gender, you can see an
implicit ambition to have both faculties at once, united in marriage.”

Parsing Coleridge’s and Wordsworth’s “masculine” and “feminine” attributes in
binary terms implies that one gender must make up for another’s deficiencies—and that
the feminine partner in particular lacks any independent social utility or agency. Doing
a disservice to Sedgwick’s theory, whose version of homosociality describes a range of
behaviors “between men,” analyses of the Coleridge-Wordsworth relationship often rely
on a specious and schematic version of her theory that is oddly antifeminist: it relegates Coleridge to a female, “relative” position that, by a binary logic, is “weak.” It also discounts the continuous negotiation that Coleridge made central to his theory of communication: each party may take turns yielding, or be desirous of a physical connection that need not devolve into another set of oppositions like total dominance and passivity. Moreover, as *Christabel* illustrates, Coleridge’s Art is a different kind of “mediatress,” refusing to uncritically incorporate the gender “asymmetries” of “erotic triangles” between two men and a woman more applicable to nineteenth-century novels.

**Another Reading of *Christabel*: The Real Language of Women**

As outlined in his prose, Coleridge’s efforts to classify, control, and diagram the conditions of a successful marriage never proved to be workable. Instead, poetry’s embrace of indeterminacy best articulates the inarticulable language of interpersonal eroticism, and *Christabel*, in particular, features the utter failure of various homosocial triangles. All of them cause the poem’s balladic narrative to collapse: the first triangle features Christabel’s father, Sir Leoline, who hopes to reestablish a friendship with his long-lost and beloved friend, Sir Roland, through Geraldine, who claims to be the latter man’s daughter while also supplanting Christabel’s role as Leoline’s daughter. In the second, while sharing his sham of a dream vision, Bard Bracy offers a ham-fisted interpretation of Christabel and Geraldine’s relationship not unlike the pietistic gloss upon *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (1834). In Bracy’s dream, Geraldine, as serpent, strangles a dove named Christabel, and while the meaning of this vision would seem
unambiguous even to a “half-listener” like Leoline (565), but Leoline still manages to misconstrue the symbolism. Bracy doesn’t do much better; he sees what he wants to see, and relates what he wants to relate: an illicit interaction between two women that he can only imagine in violent terms. More specifically, he frames his dream of the women’s private encounter in potentially murderous and even rapacious terms, where the bird is in “trouble” and utters a “distressful cry” (644, 647) not unlike Christabel’s discovery of Geraldine by the oak tree. Yet the dove’s and the snake’s entanglement is also plainly erotic: “the Dove… heaves and stirs, / Swelling its Neck as [the snake] swell’d hers” (553-54).

These interpretations are just a few examples of bad reading in Christabel. Bracy’s metaphor is at once literal and unsatisfying, highlighting why the women’s erotic “transgressions” are only “transgressive” because they remain stubbornly concealed from view and therefore impossible to subject to easy summation or moral judgment. The poem’s patriarchal forces refuse to confer value upon the nonverbal, multisensory forms of communication of which the women are uniquely capable. Male authority in Christabel is inadequate, especially in aesthetic terms, and narratively uninteresting because figures like Bracy, Leoline, and even the poem’s assuredly male speaker are obtuse—but, worse, Coleridge suggests that they could change if they so chose. The speaker eventually becomes insightful: as I argued previously in reference to the poem’s 1816 conclusion, he is essential to the poem’s revelatory account of the inevitable individualism that awaits those who experience perfect and penetrative interpersonal contact. Worse still, these men’s bad readings and inferences foretell how ruthlessly the communicative potential of the erotic relationship between Christabel and
Geraldine will be quashed. These foreclosures express the despair at the heart of both the poem and Coleridge’s own social life. Again, in comparing the Christophel’s 1800-02 and 1816 conclusions, it becomes clear that his ultimate nightmares are not populated with Gothic witches or specters of death. He fears the antisocial sociability of being willfully misunderstood through the “half-listening” and the stifling intimacy of being perfectly understood—not of being alone, but of being lonely. And it is the latter, of course, that results in what would become a pig look, but first guised in Geraldine’s serpent’s eye.

At any rate, homosocial triangles do not propel the poem’s momentum, nor are they the speaker’s primary focus. Both the poem’s failure and its great achievement (particularly as a fragment) depend on Geraldine and Christabel’s movement from an erotic, private encounter that is not wholly governable through language to exchanging a “snake look” replete with bad sympathies endemic to a public, patriarchal world that is marked by bad listening. It is no accident that Leoline refuses to heed to either his daughter or to the man with whom he ostensibly shares a common worldview, Bard Bracy. Instead, he chooses a fantasy that rejects erotic poetics—and even Bracy’s bad poetry—in imagining how, by rescuing the imperiled “dove,” he will necessarily bond with his lost friend, Sir Roland.

This latter narrative never materializes. What is most “material” and potent in Christophel are the sexually ambiguous exchanges between its spellbound female protagonists and the palpably vexed verse form of the spell itself. Like the bond between Geraldine and Christabel that it consecrates, the spell stands apart from the ballad’s already experimental prosody:
And with low Voice and doleful Look
These Words did say:

“In the Touch of this Bosom there worketh a Spell,
Which is Lord of thy Utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to night, and wilt know tomorrow
This Mark of my Shame, this Seal of my Sorrow;
    But vainly thou warrest,
    For this is alone in
    Thy Power to declare,
That in the dim Forest
    Thou heard’st a low Moaning,
And found’st a bright Lady, surpassingly fair. (265-76)

Critics have exhaustively analyzed Christabel’s meter, particularly since Coleridge’s Preface to the poem clarifies that we are to read its tetrameter in terms of accents rather than regularized metrical feet. Short lines recur throughout Christabel, and, in those cases, it is clear that readers should lay a strong accent on each word, thus slowing the poem’s pace and building suspense: in addition to a line like “These words did say,” we might recall the speaker’s question when Christabel first lays eyes on Geraldine, “What sees she there?” (57).

The verbal components of Geraldine’s spell, however, have generally lent themselves to summary rather than scansion since, as she states at the outset, the spell’s primary power lies “in the touch of this bosom.” Without this touch, her strange and nearly unrecitable words would carry no force, echoing Christabel’s eventual inability to narrate what is happening to her. Attempting to read the spell in tetrameter is laborious and confusing, making us impose spondees upon words that resist them. Eventually, whether reciting or silently reading, we must accept that Geraldine’s voice, coupled with her mysterious touch, breaks with the tetrameter, making magic in trimeter or, arguably, duple rhythm in accordance with a more natural speaking voice: “But vainly thou wárest,
/ For in this alône.” Geraldine draws up a contract of secluded submission in terms of twos—of pairs—and her tactile spell perhaps underscores her rebellion against both a man’s world and the poem’s formal constructs. When she and Christabel make an affective compact of “knowing” and “sorrow,” her modulated “low Voice” and “doleful Look” work in tandem. The spell captures how these two women speak a different language that acknowledges the importance of what is not said.

The most pointed references to the somatic and deeply private components of Geraldine and Christabel’s unspeakable contract emerge from the speaker’s allusions to marriage and his tendency to dwell upon each woman’s emotional ambivalence. He repeatedly suggests that marital erotic communication is, or could be, spellbinding. In Christabel’s bedroom, each character takes turns in the role of husband and wife, and their exchange of gazes and touches is alarmingly direct. Yet the repercussions for having committed a socially “harmful,” transgressive “lesbian” sex act are only clarified in the poem’s second half. There, the speaker focuses upon the “looks,” tones, and sensations that each character is experiencing and the actions they are performing rather than how the encounter may appear to the outside world.⁶⁴

Far from falling into uncritical and vacant feminine “archetypes,” as Mellor among others has argued, Christabel and Geraldine manipulate formal expectations and play with gendered social conventions.⁶⁵ Upon meeting Geraldine, for example, Christabel enjoys a position of masculine voyeurism and chivalry: she acts like a knight rescuing a damsel in distress from vagabonds and probable rapists; she carries Geraldine over the castle’s threshold; and she watches her lovely guest as she performs a kind of honeymoon striptease: “half way from the Bed she rose, / And on her Elbow did recline
“To look at the Lady Geraldine” (242-4). However, immediately after Geraldine is “drawing in her Breath aloud” (247) and casts a silent but “stricken Look,” we move from these racing thoughts and simultaneous feelings of happiness and fear (her “Brain of Weal and Woe” (239)) to Geraldine’s compatible but pained emotional state. For nearly twenty lines we assume a paradoxically doubled position as we watch these feelings both play out as Geraldine stands naked before Christabel while we also view the scene through the latter’s eyes. All the while, Geraldine wrestles with whether she should assert a more masculine dominance in becoming “lord” of Christabel’s “utterance,” eventually and reluctantly speaking “with a low Voice and doleful Look” (265).

In the midst of a “half-way” state that seeks both completion and “delay” (257, 259), Geraldine is careful to remind Christabel that it was her own initiative and “masculine” actions that brought the two women to this point, and, shifting back to the poem’s normative tetrameter, that those events are the only ones Christabel can “declare” in the outside world:

Thou heard’st a low Moaning,  
And found’st a bright Lady, surpassingly fair.  
And didst bring her home with thee in Love and in Charity  
To shield her and shelter her from the damp Air. (275-77)

Geraldine’s words resemble the speaker’s refrain in which he entreats a higher power to “shield her! shield sweet Christabel!” (254), but Geraldine, in a critically under-acknowledged moment of vulnerability, expresses how she, too, is in need of a protective and mutual partnership. Indeed, Julie Carlson is correct when she views the “female figures in ‘Christabel’” as more “adventurous” than some of Coleridge’s other women addressees, but their uniqueness is not just due to the poem being “an
exceptional text”: as characters in one of Coleridge’s best and most daring conversation poems, Christabel and Geraldine are exceptionally adventurous communicators, absorbing and traversing a range personal qualities and social positions.68

One More Triangle: Speaking Against the “Intensest Reality”

Possessing the most parodic but slippery version of the male gaze, Christabel’s speaker presents as one of the most controlling men in Coleridge’s verse. At the same time, and unlike Leoline or Bracy, he is fascinated with women’s communicative range and inarticulable sexuality even while attempting to interpretively govern how we “see” his protagonists. In the beginning of Part the Second, he returns to the poem’s opening scene only to assimilate Geraldine’s at once predatory and oddly neutral gaze upon Christabel at the old oak tree. But, throughout the text, he acknowledges his own limited capacity to understand the subjects of his poem, constantly questioning even the most basic details of the setting’s weather, or, more emphatically, lamenting and failing to editorialize Christabel’s post-coital state:

With open eyes (ah woe is me!)  
Asleep, and dreaming fearfully,  
Fearfully dreaming, yet, I wis,  
Dreaming that alone, which is—  
O Sorrow and Shame! Can this be She,  
The Lady, who knelt at the old Oak Tree? (292-97)

Christabel’s eyes are wide “open,” implying that she does not share the speaker’s nervous attempts to convey uncertainty. The number of his asides increases as his moral and narrative authority collapses when forced to reckon with Christabel’s independent, embodied mind. He finds himself able but unwilling to accept that his judgments cannot match her powerful discovery of self-awareness. His observations go nowhere other than
to suggest exactly what he wants to avoid—that Christabel might have enjoyed being erotically spellbound—and his insistence upon her “fearful dreaming” chiastically folds back upon itself, in turn leading him to censor himself. More uncomfortably, he recognizes that the “maiden” he had idealized in the poem’s opening may have courted social “sorrow and shame,” becoming another figure who is “a Sight to dream of, not to tell!” (253). When it comes to Geraldine, her titillating disfigurement troubles the speaker more than it does Christabel, which may explain why he frames her subsequent “dreams” as full of fear when it is more likely that they are fearfully absent of fear. In fact, Christabel’s erotic encounter with Geraldine provides a surprising solution to the problem of aging and of waning insight that plagues Wordsworth’s “Intimations” ode. An interpersonal experience encompassing a diverse array of gender roles and possibilities returns her to a positively construed state of childhood vulnerability, immersing her in an enlightened state of “free”-flowing bodily awareness:

And see! the Lady Christabel
Gathers herself out of her trance;
Her Limbs relax, her Countenance
Grows sad and soft; the smooth thin Lids
Close o’er her Eyes; and Tears she sheds—
Large Tears, that leave the Lashes bright!
And oft the while she seems to smile
As Infants at a sudden Light!

... And if she move unequently,
Perchance, tis but the Blood so free
Comes back and tingles in her Feet. (311-325)

When the narrator engages in hand-wringing speculation about Christabel’s somaticized thoughts, Coleridge caricatures a male viewer who desperately wishes to understand women and the nonverbal connections between them, but fears their understanding all the while. Unlike Leoline, the narrator does wish to listen through looks, but he cannot put
into words what he intuits: Christabel and Geraldine’s bodies have interacted in a way that does not require ordinary speech or men—and, very likely, to pleasant ends.\textsuperscript{69}

We can see, then, why the homosocial triangles throughout the poem and the one with which it concludes fail to capture the speaker’s—or the reader’s—interest. As much as the speaker attempts to make interpretative decisions in a manner that would be accessible to Christabel’s readers, the women thwart the homosocial commiseration that was later consolidated in the pig look. Christabel may end up alone and individuated, but no matter how carefully the speaker scrutinizes each woman’s facial expressions, their words, or even their sensations, we are denied access to what Geraldine and Christabel “know” (269). They exchange an entrancing snake look, but the speaker underscores how their \textit{female} bond is dynamic and indeterminate unlike the wooden and self-absorbed thinking that occurs between men in the poem—and unlike the perfect, yet suffocating, “conversation” that Coleridge would eventually have with Wordsworth. \textit{Avant la lettre}, Christabel distinguishes between the “snake look” and the pig look in salvaging an aspect of Coleridge’s conversational ideal from the taint of masculine “perfection.” So, even when she is “o’ermastered by the mighty spell” (620) that denies her the power to narrate her story directly, Christabel is not quite as lost as Coleridge would be in 1803: she can still speak, and she \textit{could} be heard if only someone were to listen. But disappointment and the dissolution of reciprocity abide; no matter how much Coleridge takes recourse to a feminine model of partnership, in the aftermath of mirroring Geraldine’s “Serpent’s Eye,” his protagonist follows his later example in accepting individualism and rejection rather than the now-terrifying intimacy she had once shared with Geraldine.
In not heeding Christabel, then, Leoline retains his authority within the poem’s patriarchal universe from which her bedroom had served as a refuge. The speaker inadvertently undermines this authority by focusing on the visceral energy of each woman’s look—a look whose intensity supplants our interest in the poem’s narrative—at the same time that the poem and the speaker submit to the realities of a rigid, male-dominated system: Christabel’s concluding, conventional male triangulations force both Geraldine and Christabel not merely into subordinate and individuated roles but into inflexible ones. They once again become daughters and romantic surrogates in a world, where, as Swann observes, they, like Bard Bracy, “can have no discourse within the law.” In other words, even when Coleridge instinctively makes homosocial partnership impossible by splitting masculine influences into three characters, or four if we count Sir Roland, alternatives fail in the shadow of encroaching male authority.

Tim Fulford is therefore correct when he observes that Christabel flouts linguistic and gender categories, making it difficult for the reader to comprehend let alone question the nature of the women’s transgressions. But the text’s foremost anxieties do not fixate on explaining the “meeting and interchange” of gender and language. The extra-linguistic “interchange” between sexually distinct but undivided parties is precisely the poem’s most climactic and “clearest” moment—a moment when two female figures “speak” a different and poetic language of social possibility. However, even this conversation, despite its similarities to the productive indirection of Coleridge’s other conversation poems, proves a dead end: men don’t listen, Christabel rejects and is rejected in turn, and readers demand to see Geraldine’s body and to “know” what transpired between the two. To Coleridge, men are not the only ones, who risk having
to choose between resentful isolation or violation. Total and fixed bodily similarities, now between women, are also impediments to forming intimate conversational connections. This realization recalls my first reading of the poem’s 1816 ending, where Coleridge’s speaker finally finds an unambiguous affinity with his heroine’s perspective. Because this conclusion was included in a letter to Southey, the context of the poem was initially homosocial and domestic but, like his choice of Lamb for “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” it avoids any association with Wordsworth. Nevertheless, by the time of its insertion into Christabel, Coleridge was not close to Southey, nor did he have much faith in male friendships. Yet the trace of homosociality—and its promise of perfect alienation—cannot be erased.\footnote{In adding this verse, then, Coleridge grimly fulfills Abrams’s theory of lyrical “return,” but only after having relentlessly imagined alternatives to homosocial coupledom in his social and creative life.}

Christabel is one of Coleridge’s most careful explorations of how erotic communication manifests in the constant exchange of looks, touches, and words—and how fragile these multisensory encounters can be. As such, its female characters are free to challenge gender constructs and to assume different social and sexual positions when alone together, but they also achieve a kind of “perfect sympathy” that portends the pig look and kills all conversation. Leoline’s world affixes them to bodies that are hollow effigies of gender roles, so much so that he confuses “daughters,” “mothers,” and “lovers.” In effect, these conversations between partners only succeed insofar as each party can take turns asserting responsive forms of power in the privacy of a nonrestrictive domestic space—a cloister that shuts out all forms of narrative intervention. Each party yields to the other as the occasion demands it, attaining a kind of permeable co-presence that
Coleridge valued, where body and mind are joined and “intensified.” This is the state the Coleridge called love, “in which all the individuous nature, the distinction without Division, of vivid Thought is united with the sense and substance of intensest Reality” (Notebooks 3:3705), not fantasy or self-projection.

What is most surprising about Coleridge’s pursuit of the “intensest Reality” with a woman is how his positive representation of transgressive erotic communication resembles his ideal of “reciprocal marriage” (Notebooks 3:3705, Letters 1:131). In one of his final letters to his first and best-matched love interest, Mary Evans, Coleridge relates how his admiration of her character grew from an “immediate Pleasure” to a passionate form of association in which her “Image was blended with every idea” (Letters 1:130). This “Image” remains as vague as Geraldine’s titillating bosom and powerful capacity to cast mysterious spells: no blazon awaits Mary. Other than admitting an attraction to her “pleasing person”—another phrase that does not so much separate body from mind as unite them into a consolidated, “pleasing” individual—Coleridge does not attempt flattery or effusive descriptions of her beauty. They had shared poetry, playful wordplay and banter, and in-depth discussions of literature and politics. He admired her personal qualities rather than indulging the period’s generalized ideal of feminine vacancy:

With quick perceptions of moral Beauty it was impossible for me not to admire in you your sensibility regulated by Judgement, your Gaiety proceeding from a cheerful Heart acting on the stores of a strong Understanding […] Were you not possessed of a Mind and of a Heart above the usual Lot of Women I should not have written you sentiments, that would be unintelligible to three fourths of your Sex. But our Feelings are congenial, though your [our?] attachment is doomed not to be reciprocal. (Letters 1:130-1)

Coleridge’s language here is very different from his troubling 1830 statement on marriage, where he claimed that “the perfection of woman [is] to be characterless. Every
one wishes a Desdemona or Ophelia for a wife—creatures who, though they may not always understand you, do always feel you, and feel with you” (Table Talk 2:124). The great tragedy of his separation from Mary, to his mind, is that they would never establish a reciprocal marriage where “understanding” and a culture of “response; answering, corresponding” (OED) would ground their matrimonial life.

Both the reciprocity and “distinction without Division” necessary to romantic love are metaphors for communication. As Coleridge wrote as late as 1820, “The Necessity in all men of human Sympathy, & hence in nobler Dispositions” entails “the yearning after that full and perfect Sympathy with the whole of our Being which can be found only in a Person of the answering Sex to our own” (Notebooks 4:4730, emphasis added).74 Indeed, throughout his life, Coleridge had difficulty disarticulating the body from love and sympathy, making the “answering” sex a more promising interlocutor. She could be “intensely similar, yet not the same… the same indeed, but dissimilar” (Notebooks 1:1679). As we may come to expect, his account of a “full” sympathy takes on a neutral tone about who should initiate action. And entering into an ongoing, somatic, and conversational exchange—where either “sex” may enter into the nebulous negotiations of productive and eroticized communication—resonates with his vital distinction between sympathetic friendship and love correspondence (Marginalia 2:197), which is the subject of my next chapter.

2 Coleridge tried to attain his poetic ideal of cultivating the immediate attention of reader-listeners as they feel a poem’s ever-varying meter, and how they read and re-read its
provocatively vexing language. Coleridge’s metrical experimentations lent themselves to near-endless possibilities for reading and reciting, just as he enjoyed pausing during his recitations to analyze the poem (Christopher Laxer, “‘The Lantern of Typography’: ‘Christabel,’ ‘Kubla Khan,’ and Poetic Mediation,” European Romantic Review 24, no. 2 [2013]: 168). Christabel thus afforded him many opportunities to cultivate the “quick reciprocations of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited” (Biographia 2:66). He, and his readers once the poem was published, could lay stresses differently, succumb to the speed of verse as it sometimes races forward, or find themselves stumbling over words when negotiating this “new principle of meter.” As Coleridge writes in the ballad’s Preface, the meter “is not, properly speaking, irregular… [but is] founded on a new principle: namely, that of counting in each line the accents, not the syllables. Though the latter may vary from seven to twelve, yet in each line the accents will be found to be only four” (PW 482-3). In short, the poem has a regular yet ever-varying quality that Coleridge valued and that I consider a form of conversational poetics. In Coleridge’s permutation, these metrical peculiarities continually directed the reader back to the text to reread, rethink, and become “re-excited” by effects that are “too slight to indeed to be at any one moment objects of distinct consciousness, yet become considerable in their aggregate influence” (Biographia 2:66). It forces an attentiveness that inspires the reader to negotiate not just the words but its unifying rhythms and nonlexical utterances, not unlike Madame de Staël’s account of conversational attention (quoted in Richard Robert Madden, A Memoir of the Literary Life and Correspondence of the Countess of Blessington, vol. 1 [London: Newby, 1855]: 158). For an excellent account of how Romantic writers like Coleridge and Wordsworth may have recited their own works, see David Perkins, “How the Romantics Recited Poetry,” Studies in English Literature 31, no. 4 (1991): 655-71.


7 For yet another reading of Christabel that bases its argument on form and affect, see Ewan Jones, Coleridge and the Philosophy of Poetic Form (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 56-106.
Chapter 18 of the *Biographia* goes into questions of meter and form at length. Interestingly, Coleridge also expresses his feeling that poetic composition implies a kind of responsibility, especially regarding the misappropriation of form. On the intrinsic connection of meter to poetry, Coleridge writes, “Metre therefore having been connected with poetry most often and by a peculiar fitness, whatever else is combined with metre must, though it be not itself essentially poetic, have nevertheless some property in common with poetry, as an intermedium of affinity” (2:71). For a nuanced exploration of Coleridge’s dispute with Wordsworth over meter, see Stephen Maxwell Parrish, “The Wordsworth-Coleridge Controversy,” *PMLA* 73, no. 4 (1958): 367-74; Parrish, “Wordsworth and Coleridge on Meter,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 59, no. 1 (1960): 41-49. For a recent and psychoanalytic approach to this dispute’s bearing on *Christabel*, meter, and Sedgwickean “kink,” see Samuel Rowe, “Coleridgean Kink: *Christabel*, Metrical Masochism, and Poetic Dissonance,” *ELH* 83, no. 2 (2016): 573-601.

On animal magnetism and what he calls the Romantic “physiological imagination,” see Richard C. Sha, “Toward a Physiology of the Romantic Imagination,” *Configurations* 17, no. 3 (2009): 197-226. On Coleridge’s concept of “suspended animation” as in dialogue with poetic embodiment, see Robert Mitchell, who writes “Romantic-era discussions of suspended animation thus help us to articulate the ways in which authors understood literary experience as embodied, and they point to the importance of rhythmic aspects of literature that enable, yet operate beneath, judgments readers make about relations between the rhyme and reason of a work. Moreover, focusing on the concept of suspended animation helps us to delineate the close, often counterintuitive links that Romantic-era authors established between altered states and druglike experiences, on the one hand, and what Orrin Wang has called ‘Romantic sobriety,’ on the other” (“Suspended Animation, Slow Time, and the Poetics of Trance,” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 [2011]: 108). Ultimately, Mitchell conceives of Coleridge as “fearing” suspension since it may cause a “necrosis of the will” in addition to associating it with mass media. By contrast, according to Mitchell, Keats and Shelley were more open to suspension’s “simplicity” and association with human life. Mitchell’s observations about the somatic aspects of Romantic poetry and intersections with contemporaneous science are indispensable to understanding the interrelationship between literature and science in the period; however, I will note that Mitchell draws most of his conclusions about Coleridge from his later works rather than his more poetically active period.

Jonathon Shears acknowledges how Coleridge binds together readers, speakers, positing that the poem “demands a surrogate voice from us—that is both reader and listener—whether the poem is read aloud or not,” but he falls back on thinking of *Christabel* in terms of automatism and replication as delimiting an independent response; “the auditor,” as Shears construes him or her, “must become reciter, in the manner of a ventriloquist” (“Listening to *Christabel*,” 53). Of course, I do not conceive of Coleridge as a ventriloquist; see Chapters One and Three regarding his craving for revisionary replies, not to mention the Introduction to this dissertation.


12 This account of conversational and sympathetic “contagion” was influenced by Enlightenment dictates of “politeness.” I note the issue of politeness in the Introduction to this dissertation, but this topic has been addressed by any number of scholars from Lawrence Klein to Adam Potkay. They remark upon the constraints and implicit classism of “polite society” versus uncontrollable vulgarity—“the very vulgarity that can justify class-based oppression; Klein, *Shaftesbury and the Culture of Politeness: Moral Discourse and Cultural Politics in Early Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994); Potkay, *The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).


14 See Susan Wolfson, *Borderlines: The Shifting of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 135-204, who, while interested in blurred gender lines throughout the monograph, is particularly invested in discussing such gender slipperiness in performative terms and with regard to Byron.


17 For an overview of the number of objections to *Christabel*’s “feminine” qualities and potential readership—and Coleridge himself gendering the poem itself as female—see Swann, “Literary Gentlemen,” 397-403; see also, for example, J. R. de J. Jackson, ed. *Coleridge: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1991), 251 [anonymous review in *The Champion*]. For reviews of *Christabel*, see *The Romantics Reviewed—Lake Poets* ed. Donald Reiman, 2 vols. (New York: Garland, 1972); *The Antijacobin Review* thought that *Christabel* would attract female readership due to Lord Byron’s endorsement of the text (*Romantics Reviewed*, 1:23 [July 1816, 632-36]); other reviews, as McCarthy among others have documented at length, deride its “childish” qualities, where the *Academic* wrote, “The poem of *Christabel*… outdoes even [Coleridge’s] former productions of extravagance and absurdity” (*Romantics Reviewed*, 1:1 [15 September 1821, 339-41]. As Swann and others note, though, reviewers fixate on the poem’s lack of “modesty” and Coleridge’s lack of restraint, both ethical and aesthetic, such as with regard to its prosody (*Romantics Reviewed* 2:742-43; [Monthly Review, January 1817, 22-25]). *The British Review*’s take on *Christabel* interesting frames the reader’s experience as one of having to “swallow” the text, hinting at its visceral effects: “Mr. Coleridge is one of those poets who if we give him an inch will be sure to take an ell: if we consent to swallow an elf or fairy, we are soon expected not to strain at a witch; and if we open our throats to this imposition upon our goodnature [sic], we must gulp down broomstick and all. We really must make a stand somewhere for the rights of common sense” (*Romantics Reviewed*, 1:239 [August 1816, 64-81]).
Swann’s reading of Hazlitt’s review in “Literary Gentlemen” remains one of the best analyses of his objection to Christabel, 403-7. There, she observes that Hazlitt, like others, thought Coleridge to be able to “tell us” what the “sight to dream of” was but simply would not (“Literary Gentlemen,” 406). He was attempting to reconcile himself to “the poem’s unsettling, uncentered power” by rendering it “disgusting” and, in essence, female. By interpreting Christabel to be “a disgusting ‘something’ obscurely visible behind a veil of language and sentiment,” Hazlitt is “reducing to its sexual content power he has just described as having philosophical as well as erotic dimensions: he contains this power in the ‘bottom’ and invites us to declare it female” (“Literary Gentlemen,” 407).

See Mays, the editor of Coleridge’s Poetical Works, for a detailed discussion of the various manuscript and published versions in the variorum accompaniment to the first of two volumes of Coleridge’s poems (609-624); see also Jack Stillinger, Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 79-91.


While Christabel’s speaker seems to have trouble interpreting what he is seeing, more imaginative—and poetic—readers gleaned some of the poem’s most important communicative subtexts. During the summer of 1816, the Shelley circle began their famous ghost-story competitions while confined to a house in Geneva. In a 18 June diary entry, John William Polidori claimed that Percy Bysshe Shelley reacted violently to the unarticulated image of Geraldine’s breast: “L[ord] B[yon] repeated some verses of Coleridge’s Christabel, of the witch’s breast; when silence ensued, and Shelley, suddenly shrieking and putting his hands to his head, ran out of the room with a candle. Threw water in his face, and after gave him ether. He was looking at Mrs. S[helley], and suddenly thought of a woman he had heard of who had eyes instead of nipples, which, taking hold of his mind, horrified him” (The Diary of Dr. John William Polidori, 1816, Relating to Byron Shelley, etc. ed. William Michael Rossetti [London: Elkin Mathews, 1911], 128). In keeping with many interpretations of the scene in which Geraldine undresses, the “ensu[ing] silence” encouraged by Coleridge’s lingering dash fires Shelley’s imagination to fill in the “witch’s” unarticulated form. However, Shelley notably imagines a sexualized body that looks back. He then transposes this harrowing gaze upon his wife, who, if we are to trust Polidori’s dating, had miscarried merely days before; see also Robert Gitting and Jo Manton on this time period in Claire Clairmont and the Shelleys (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 71. Shelley cannot escape the obstructive, responsive force of Geraldine’s body and its ambiguous communications, nor can he ignore Mary Shelley, a physical presence infused with a lingering loss who also looks back. For just a few articles on Geraldine as a projection of Christabel’s sexual desires or a “phantom,” see Jonas Spatz, “The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge’s ‘Christabel,’” PMLA 90, no. 1 (1975): 107-116; Karen Swann, “‘Christabel’: The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form.” Studies in Romanticism 23, no. 4 (1984): 533-53; Anya Taylor, “Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ and the Phantom Soul,” Studies in English Literature 42, no. 4 (2002): 707-30.
In a markedly different and rather remarkable reading of the poem, Ernest Hartley Coleridge writes of the reader’s experience of the poem’s first half as something we “behold” but not in a lewd sense: “It is not a tale that is told, it is a personal experience. The mechanism which shifts the scenes is worked by nature and not by art. The necessity of their connexion is not logical, but, in the strictest sense of the word, accidental. It happened, and it was so. Was it then an automatic effusion?” (“History of the Poem” in Christabel by Samuel Taylor Coleridge Illustrated by a Facsimile of the Manuscript and by Textual and Other Notes ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge [London: Henry Frowde, 1907], 15-16). We should note that E. H. Coleridge moves from the reader’s ostensible “personal” experience to his grandfather’s simultaneously “personal” composition and witnessing of the poem in language that is as dreamy as E. H. Coleridge’s own.

McCarthy makes passing reference to Christabel’s unwillingness to “affirm Geraldine’s version of events” but does not develop this observation (“Dumbstruck,” n. pag.).

Taylor writes of Christabel’s “strange facial twitches, her garbled speech, her unseemly hisses” as evidence of her failure to speak. Yet these same twitches, Taylor points out, show “her embarrassing lack of graciousness to [Leoline’s] new young friend,” inciting Leoline’s “rage” and “abandon[ment] of his daughter in her mute anguish” (“Phantom” 716). In short, Taylor and Leoline both read Christabel’s intent correctly for all of her “muteness.”

Taylor, “Phantom” 716.

Romantic “demonic” women anticipate Victorian treatments of female agency. Women in the mid-nineteenth century were considered sources of domestic comfort but also capable of using their bodies to transgress against gender norms. Nina Auerbach has outlined how women who had had “no Characters at all” in Pope’s time now had been granted a perplexing power both to provide a moral comfort to men and shapeshifting demonic capacity; in one such example, women in Victorian novels sometimes deliberately mismatch their sanctimonious dialogue from their more “resistant” gestures and facial expressions (The Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982], 88). Alex Owen discusses how the most “talented” female mediums were considered the most connected to domestic ideology and passivity; at the same time, mediumship also afforded these women the ability to, “in the name of spirit possession, women openly and flagrantly transgressed gender norms” (The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 11). Victorian mediumship and its inherent androgynous undertones find a basis on radical Protestantism of the late-eighteenth century and Swedenborgian, non-normative sexuality. However, Owen also justly observes that Swedenborg did not view the sexes as “equal” even if he may have represented individuals as having masculine and feminine principles (Darkened Room, 14). See Sharon Marcus on female “elasticity,” Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 23-108.


I refer to the poem’s closing verse paragraph, which takes cues from Plato’s *Ion*: Coleridge’s poet-speaker imagines his audience worshiping him as a prophet: “And all should cry, Beware! Beware! / His flashing eyes, his floating hair! / Weave a circle round him thrice, / And close your eyes in holy dread. / For he on honey-dew hath fed, / And drank the milk of Paradise” (49-54). Interestingly, however, he achieves this level of confidence only after, having first watching his reflected (and thus mediated) vision dissipate on “the waves” (32), hearing and acknowledging how a female poet-lyricist may have inspired the entire poem in the first place: “A damsel with a dulcimer / In a vision once I saw: / It was an Abyssian maid / And on her dulcimer she play’d, / Singing of Mount Abora” (37-41).

While it has been debated whether Coleridge reframed *Lyrical Ballads*’ aspirations in order to reconcile himself to the pain of having his work, and namely *Christabel*, rejected from the second edition, it seems probable that there was an agreed upon division of labor. Many of the volume’s poems are not “collaborative” so much as allusive to each other’s work, lending further credence to Coleridge’s account of the conversational give and take of their creative process. See Lucy Newlyn, *Coleridge, Wordsworth, and the Language of Allusion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Stillinger, *Coleridge and Textual Instability*, and Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 56-254 among others, regarding their collaboration.

This “Giddiness” may, perhaps, be likened to the “swimming sense” (39) of “This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison,” or even a perverse version of Wordsworth’s paradoxical claim in the 1800 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* that “all good poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” (744) that also “takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity” (“Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, 1800” in *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems, 1797-1800*, ed. James Butler and Karen Green [Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992], 756).

Chapter Three elaborates on this point by way of J. C. Lavater’s pseudoscience of physiognomy.

See Newlyn’s Preface to 2nd edition of *Language of Allusion*, xxii-xxxiv on “extremes meeting” and dyadic friendship. See Paul Magnuson, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 3-32, particularly where he writes, “In general [in the case of verse], the dialogue proceeds by opposition, a later poem or fragment turns from a preceding one” (18). By viewing their bond in dialectical terms, they call attention to how the poets themselves both embraced and glossed over their differences when mythologizing their friendship. Indeed, the entire premise of Newlyn’s monograph is that Coleridge and Wordsworth never could literally “collaborate” on a poem so much as be attentive readers of and allude to each other’s work, *Language of Allusion*, 32-56. See also McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin*, 56-254.

On the inequalities between the sexes in Swedenborg, see note 27 above. More directly, see Swedenborg himself on the “male” and “female principle[s],” both of which are link mental dispositions to bodily attributes—“wisdom” and intellect to robustness, in the case of men; the “will-principle” to whatever is not masculine, in the case of women (Emanuel
Swedenborg, *The Delights of Wisdom Concerning Conjugial Love after which Follows the Pleasures of Insanity Concerning Scortatory Love* [1768], trans. Anonymous [London: R. Hindmarsh, 1794], 32.ii, pp. 39-40. Swedenborg is notably less specific about women’s physical attributes apart from referring to how men are “less beautiful” than women, and that women “differ in their gestures and manners” (32.ii, p. 40). He locates femininity in motion and social disposition, anticipating the trend toward physiognomic thinking that often put women in a detrimental and, effectively, pathognomic position, albeit not quite as much so as J. C. Lavater would, as I will discuss in Chapter Three. This is not to deny that Swedenborg’s ideas about marriage and “conjugial love” did not influence Coleridge’s thinking; Swedenborg, too, was interested in the merging of communication between individuals who had spiritual or “conjugial” bonds, such as in his anecdote of a married couple who speak on each other’s behalves, or Swedenborg’s ability to detect enlightened passion in lovers’ faces (*Conjugial Love*, 42a and b, pp. 47-48).


40 Anne K. Mellor quite literally classifies the “kinds” of women in his verse such as the “absent mother,” “constraining wife,” “an all-controlling and malignant power in the universe,” “pure, chaste virgins,” and “objects of desire” (“Coleridge and the Question of Female Talents,” *Romanticism* 8, no. 2 [2002]: 120-1).

41 Jackson, “Girls Are Made To Love,” 582-84. Jackson’s reading disregards Coleridge’s nuanced and shifting attitudes toward love’s communicative capacity for creative production and devastation, some of which J. Robert Barth has documented at length in “Coleridge’s Ideal of Love,” *Studies in Romanticism* 24, no. 1 (1985): 113-39. Coleridge scholarship on erotic love and gender has often become muddled with his seeming desire
to “marry” Wordsworth, his later writings on agape, or his tendency to put women like Sara Hutchinson on a pedestal, subordinating her “own identity, opinions and needs” because “he fell in love with being in love” (Mellor, “Female Talents” 127). Erotic Coleridge is an important corrective to notions of the disembodied Coleridge—disembodied unless speaking of his drug addiction and physical ailments, of course—and almost entirely organized around how “Coleridge the dreamer was also a vigorously physical man, a close observer of female beauty and flesh” (Taylor, Erotic Coleridge, 2). See Abrams, for more comments on Coleridge and “degree” of relations, Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1973), 297. However, as Barth notes, Abrams understands Coleridge to idealize friendship over romantic love, whereas Barth suggests that Coleridge’s ideal form of interpersonal connection would be “married friendship”—a view that I share to an extent (Barth, “Coleridge’s Ideal,” 114, 137). See also Letters 3:304, Notebooks 4:5463 on the issue of degree. In the latter, Coleridge writes, “Love is Love—essentially the same, whether the Object be a helpless infant, our Wife or Husband, or God himself.” Much like his movement toward the Logos and generalized communication, it makes sense that Coleridge would prefer to generalize “love” into types as he aged.

In addition to starkly negative interpretations of Coleridge’s remarks on femininity, it is worth examining hysterical interpretations of “men of feeling.” Coleridge was well-aware and participated in the cult in a tongue-in-cheek manner, as he indicates when he writes to Thomas Poole that he wept upon receiving his letter (Letters 1:430). Indeed, by 1771, authors had begun to treat “men of feeling” as full-blown, womanly absurdities. However, for an account of the subversion of gender norms in sentimental literature, see, for example, Janet Todd, Sensibility: An Introduction (New York: Methuen, 1986), 89; G. J. Barker Benfield, The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Julie Ellison, Cato’s Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). On the issue of looks, the storing of sentiment and affect in objects, and sentiment, see James Chandler, “The Languages of Sentiment,” Textual Practice 22, no. 1 (2008): 21-39; on the shift from late-eighteenth century conceptions of sentiment to melodrama and the Sturm und Drang emoting of Romantic period, see Chandler’s “The Politics of Sentiment: Toward a New Account,” Studies in Romanticism 49, no. 4 (2010): 553-575; on Burkean sentimentality (and Wollstonecraft’s blistering critique of his “effeminate” style in Reflections on the Revolution in France), see Mike Goode, Sentimental Masculinity and the Rise of History, 1790-1890 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 26-86.

I am not totally critical of Sedgwickean triangulation, which, as I will discuss, applies to some of Wordsworth’s poems. Moreover, Anne Carson’s adaptation of such triangulations is compelling. Not merely cultivating “desire” but exercising a more abstract or flexible form interpersonal mediation—even if, in her example of Sappho, is still circulated through an instrumentalized member of the opposite sex—advances a form of triangulation that is more amenable to poetic form: “We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle and we may be tempted, with post-Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire. For, where
eros is lack, its activation calls for three structural components—lover, beloved and that which comes between them. They are three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationship, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. Conjoined they are held apart. The third component plays a paradoxical role for it both connects and separates, marking that two are not one, irradiating the absence whose presence is demanded by eros” (Eros the Bittersweet [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986], 16). Whereas Carson represents her observations as somewhat novel, what is truly innovative about Coleridge’s thinking is that, first, his notion of “distinction without Division” encapsulates nearly all of her points but directly thinks of poetry as a communicative medium; he also affirms the importance of partnership to this cross-circuiting that ideally would not be distracted by a third party. See also John Durham Peters, Speaking into the Air: a History of the Idea of Communication (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 36-51 on the erotic components of dialogue in Phaedrus.

Relationships between men in the Romantic period should not be thought to have avoided direct demonstrations of “feeling” in favor of politicized “sentiment.” As Goode argues, following Julie Ellison and Claudia Johnson, “feeling” helped establish notions of “masculinity” as much as it destabilized the inherent “anachronisms… [of] binary oppositions seemingly derived from a later… Victorian ideology of ‘separate spheres’” (Sentimental Masculinity, 19); Ellison, Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender, and the Ethics of Understanding (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Johnson, Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s—Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). In another corrective to Sedgwick’s homosociality that dismisses female relationships as significantly simpler or dependent upon patriarchal homophobia to operate, Marcus argues that “a narrow focus on women’s status as relative creatures, defined by their difference from and subordination to men, has limited our understanding of gender, kinship, and sexuality. Those concepts cannot be fully understood if we define them only in terms of two related oppositions: men versus women, and homosexuality versus heterosexuality (Between Women, 1-22). More specific to Coleridge, ahistorical and binary readings of his attitudes toward women, Wordsworth, and love invariably overlook the nuances of his notions of sexual difference: he often thought well “femininity,” for example, while being critical of “effeminacy.” Like many people, including Mary Wollstonecraft, he associated effeminacy with the hysterical emoting endemic to the cult of sensibility and the widely satirized “man of feeling.” See Notebooks 5:6197 as just one example.

See Spatz, “Mystery of Eros,” 107-9 for a discussion of this notebook entry and the importance of sex to Coleridge’s ideas about marriage.

I also use this quotation in the Introduction to this dissertation. Here, however, I am developing the gendered components of Coleridge’s resistance to intentionality by way of poetic thinking.


Coleridge’s language is not unlike the supervenience of conscious “thought” that George Henry Lewes would describe where, by emphasizing “feeling” as a mode of thinking common between men and animals, Lewes, too, associates “thought” with the finalized product of signification and not an interlinked perceptual, sensory, and cognitive process: “It may be respected without ambiguity if we understand that when Thinking is classed with Feeling it is in virtue of the process or function common to both; when classed in antithesis to Feeling, it is in virtue of the products of the operations… Thoughts differ from sensations as signs from things signified; but the processes by which they are combined are of the same nature, whether the products be sensations or perceptions, perceptions or conceptions” (*Problems of Life and Mind*, vol. 2 [London: Trübner & Co., 1879], 10, emphasis in original text).

Ellison writes, “Love translates nonverbal communication into spoken utterance of a surprisingly abstract but ostensibly feminine sort” (*Delicate Subjects*, 114).


See René Wellek’s chapter on Coleridge in *Geschichte der Literaturkritik 1750-1950*, vol. 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), 405-439. I cite the German version of Wellek’s book to address the issue of gendering nouns more effectively. Nicholas Reid contends that Coleridge’s adaptations of Schelling were a “sign of immaturity” (*Coleridge, Form and Symbol: Or The Ascertaining Vision* [Ashgate, 2006], 170). See also 167-74; Coburn shares this view (*Notebooks*, n. to 3:4397). Abrams briefly makes reference to “On Poesy or Art” in *Natural Supernaturalism*, 269, but does not address the gendering of Art herself.

*Der Vermittler* also means “mediator,” as do words like *der Schlichter*, which, grammatically, can be feminized presumably based upon the gender of the person performing arbitrations.

For a detailed discussion of Coleridge’s femininity—and this quotation—in contrast to Wordsworth, see Seamus Perry, *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 167-208. Perry attends particularly to Coleridge’s personal sense of weakness, thereby mostly construing femininity in negative terms. This should be regarded as more the case as he aged, however, than as a rule applicable to his entire life.

For one of the most careful accounts of Coleridge’s variegated thoughts on the interrelationship between love and friendship, see Barth, “Coleridge’s Ideal,” especially 124-26. His argument influences my understanding of Coleridge in love, although Barth does not address the issue of embodiment and communication in his article. Moreover, there is something to be said for Coleridge’s sense of a continuum between “types” of love, especially given, as Barth notes, his comments on sibling bonds and those of...
marriage in terms of “degree,” where “degree” also factors in Coleridge’s accounts of “scale” in his relationship with Wordsworth, as I have discussed in chapter one. Writing in 1826, Coleridge states, “Love is always the same in essence; tho’ it will receive a different shade according to its object… Still, I say, that the Love of a Husband sitting by the sick bed of a beloved Wife, and that of a Brother by the bed of a dear Sister would differ only in degree… Love is love—essentially the same, whether the Object be a helpless Infant, our Wife or Husband, or God himself” (Notebooks 4:5463). I will note here that I strongly doubt that Coleridge would ever have made such a statement prior to 1810.


57 It would be impossible to outline the immense amount of work on Romantic gender since the early 1980s. In Romanticism and Gender (New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1993), Mellor both counters and embraces two aspects of romantic gender studies that, at the time, had persisted since the late 1970s. Mellor sets aside the dense feminist and psychoanalytic theory that infused many studies of women in literature in the 1980s. Second, she perpetuates a dichotomous understanding of gender when she organizes the entire structure of the book around the poles of “feminine” and “masculine” romanticisms. She grants male poets the capacity to have greater affinities with the feminine than the masculine, thus anticipating studies like Wolfson’s Borderlines. A text that reflects how various disciplines in the humanities have moved from women’s studies to a broader conception of gender studies, Wolfson’s monograph is keenly interested in challenging the “too schematic… divide” (Borderlines, 3) between genders in Romantic literature. However, prior to these more recent studies of the flexibility and varieties of gender, same-sex relationships, forms of gendered performance, and presences of sexual transgressions in Romantic-period writing, feminist criticism often found itself in mired in the binaries it wished to combat. As Ellison has suggested, by attempting to call attention to women in the midst of discussing the important and complimentary relationship between feminine and masculine aspects of romantic literature, many studies ran the risk of letting the feminine itself slip away into the “wholly figurative or non-referential and then invisible” (Delicate Subjects, 11). In addition to Wolfson’s attention to androgyny, cross-dressing, and “sex in souls” in Borderlines, we might note that in 2003, David Collings and Michael O’Rouke held a conference dedicated to queer romanticism, in 2009, Richard C. Sha’s Perverse Romanticism: Aesthetics and Sexuality in Britain, 1750-1832 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) was published, and critics no longer shy away from the more literal aspects of overtly incestuous texts, such as those written by the Shelleys and Byron.

58 Writers like Wayne Koestenbaum, for example, imply that a “feminine” attribute requires a “masculine” counterpart. Femininity and “mediation” are akin to male “passivity,” where, in Koestenbaum’s view, Coleridge assumes an “antimasculine posture of [sexual] receptivity” that is reflected throughout the Lyrical Ballads, where, by acceding to Wordsworth’s control, Coleridge “signals a readiness to accept the thrusting imperatives of Nature and of the male spirit guide” (Double Talk: The Erotics of Male
Marlon Ross does not literalize metaphors of procreation as homosexual intercourse to the extent that Koestenbaum does, but his Deleuzean concept of desire as “energy” and his general claim that male Romantic writers authored the concept of “self-possession” in response to the rise of women writers and a female reading public once again puts Coleridge in a “weakly” passive and feminine position: he submits to Wordsworth’s masculine authority by “claim[ing] for himself a kind of tragic heroism in marginality” that is typically denied to female figures (The Contours of Masculine Desire, 7-10, 95).

Sedgwick, Between Men, 23-24.

60 See Diana Long Hoeveler, who describes how Leoline “sees Roland’s face and swears vengeance on Geraldine’s ravishers. He embraces her and, in proxy, Roland, for as Roland’s daughter she is also his property, an extension of him” (Romantic Androgyny: The Woman Within [University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991], 185).

61 In a reading with which I generally concur, Andrew Elfenbein partly addresses the groundbreaking instability of gender roles in Christabel by pointing out that simply conceiving of the women as “lesbians” is misguided: “Lesbianism remains unassimilable to conventional patterns because Coleridge does not allow Geraldine to be seen as simply a masculinized aggressor. Relations between women in Christabel are the terra incognita through which Coleridge’s poem severs itself from eighteenth-century conventions of representation” (Romantic Genius: the Prehistory of a Homosexual Role [New York and Chicester, UK: Columbia University Press, 1999], 193). For the quintessential and provocative reading of Christabel and Geraldine’s lesbianism, see Camille Paglia, “The Daemon as Lesbian Vampire: Coleridge” in Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 317-346.

Coleridge arguably anticipates “sprung rhythm” by several decades, a phrase associated with Gerard Manley Hopkins’s verse.

63 As an exception, see Elfenbein’s attention to the spell’s prosody, although he is not interested in the implications of the breaking of poetic form so much as the “rushed” quality of Geraldine’s spell: “As Geraldine begins to speak, Coleridge dramatically increases the number of syllables per line. Assuming that the timing of the beats in each line remains regular, fitting Geraldine’s words into the space of four beats demands pronouncing them more quickly… Her curse becomes not a leisured piece of oratory but a rushed murmur, as if her ‘shame’ and ‘sorrow’ led her to thrust out her words as quickly as possible” (Romantic Genius, 199).

64 Thomas Pfau makes this observation by way of Hegel: “In affectively grasping critical knowledge as a deeply ephemeral pursuit, melancholy rediscovers the kinship between time as a formal category indispensable to all knowledge and its metaphysical dimension of transience” (Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840 [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005], 312).

65 See Mellor, “Female Talents.”

66 See Susan Eilenberg’s discussion of how the identities of the two young women are intertwined: “Christabel’s passive imitation of her guest is the most dramatic instance of the confusion of the two characters, who have switched and shared roles from the beginning” (Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992], 99). However, Eilenberg does not address the
gendered aspect of this “switching,” or Christabel’s assumption of a seemingly bizarre fatherly role upon the poem’s conclusion.

The passage reads: “Yet Geraldine nor speaks nor stirs; / Ah! what a stricken Look was hers! / Deep from within she seems half-way / To lift some weight, with sick Assay, / And eyes the Maid and seeks delay” (255-259).


See Elfenbein, who writes of the speaker’s “faux-naif conjecture that Christabel moves unequilly because her feet have gone to sleep becomes eerie through his image of her ‘blood so free’ and the peculiar tangibility of her feet. The freedom of Christabel’s blood contrasts pointedly with the incarcerating image of Geraldine’s arms as ‘the lovely lady’s prison’ (304). Geraldine’s imprisoning of Christabel may have ‘freed’ Christabel’s blood in ways that heighten her erotic corporeality, which is made particularly vivid in the fetishistic detail of tingling feet” (*Romantic Genius*, 193). Elfenbein eventually attributes this foot-tingling to the possible presence of Christabel’s mother as a guardian spirit rather than attending to this sensation not as neuropathy but something that lends itself to “a vision sweet” (*Christabel* 326) and that make the speaker’s questions (or perhaps Christabel’s in a manner consistence with free-indirect discourse) about her mother’s presence more indicative of social anxieties than associated with a “sweet vision.”

“Wandering Mother,” 550.

*Romanticism and Masculinity: Gender, Politics and Poetics in the Writing of Burke, Coleridge, Cobbett, Wordsworth, De Quincey and Hazlitt* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 107.

*Christabel* is a poem replete with what William Galperin would term “missed opportunities,” a phrase that is a portion of his most recent monograph’s title, *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017). See his brief discussion of the fragmentary status of *Christabel* whose “ending departs from balladic hysteria” (132), a position with which I agree given its return to a meditative form and mood akin to Coleridge’s earlier conversation poems.

Even though he revised many of his earlier works in this time period, Coleridge chooses to allegorize his experience of social alienation in *this* poem quite deliberately: after all, as early as late 1800, he linked his perceived creative deterioration to melancholy individuation in direct reference to Wordsworth’s excision of *Christabel* from the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in early October. Wordsworth initially received the poem well according to Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals and Coleridge himself, writing that it was “so much admired by Wordsworth” (*Letters* 1:631). And shortly before Wordsworth’s rejection of Coleridge’s greatest poem on communication and its limits, Coleridge associated *Christabel*’s composition with both femininity and poetic failure pondering whether literary criticism would be a better occupation to act as a conduit to mediate understanding and feeling for readers. Wearily writing to James Webb Tobin on 17 September 1800, he complains, “Every line has been produced by me with labor-pangs. I abandon Poetry altogether—I leave the higher & deeper Kinds to Wordsworth, the delightful, popular & simply dignified to Southey; & reserve for myself
the honorable attempt to make others feel and understand their writings, as they deserve to be felt & understood” (*Letters* 1:623).

Pfau observes how this statement, coupled with Coleridge’s numerous more abstract accounts of relationality, resembles both Martin Buber’s theory of the I-thou relationship, in which love takes place *between* individuals, and Plato’s account of love in *Symposium*, where, in Aristophanes’s speech, the two sexed halves of a previously androgynous pursue each other in the hope of merging (*Minding the Modern: Human Agency, Intellectual Traditions, and Responsible Knowledge* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013], 556-590).
Chapter 3
The Critical Visions of Sara Fricker and Sara Hutchinson

Samuel Taylor Coleridge spent his life in search of answers. He pursued an imaginative organicism that sought, among other things, to reintegrate human perception with an “outside” world that he thought secular empiricism to have robbed of spirit. As the previous two chapters have outlined, however, his preoccupation with the activity of “answering” has not inspired the same amount of inquiry despite being one of the defining structural components of his (ideal) social life and creative process; additionally, Coleridge’s concept of the “answering Sex” (*Notebooks* 4:4730), taken in communicative terms, has not been applied to poetry written to women or featuring female interlocutors.

“Love correspondence” (*Marginalia* 2:197), as well as its complementary ideals of “Distinction without Division” (*Notebooks* 3:3705) and “reciprocal marriage” (*Letters* 1:131), will continue to inform this chapter, which explores the degree to which Coleridge believed female interlocutors to be superior and more inspirational conversationalists. I will develop the importance of “answering” to Coleridge’s poetics and personal aspiration to cultivate rewarding and requited erotic relationships and personal friendships with certain women conceived as individuals rather than female “types.” “Corresponding” with or seeking answers from women does not require the same kind of poetic indirection I outlined in Chapter One in poems such as “The Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison.” Instead, like his sister Anne in “Frost at Midnight,” certain women’s listening and reactive bodies are “strange” enough (“Frost” 41) to allow him to maintain the sense of autonomy and conversational distance that more direct nonverbal
modes of communicating with members of the same sex tend to obliterate, whether in the
guise of a pig look or a feminized snake one whose potentially indirect yet mutual
sympathies are perverted by homosocial norms. These two moments achieve social
perfection at the same time they violate those who pursue interpersonal connections like
Coleridge and Christabel; in the face of losing their autonomy, these “looks” push them
to eventually accept a form of wounded individuation, as demonstrated in “Conclusion to
Part the Second” of Christabel (1816).

Prior to this, Coleridge remained committed to the idea that he could practice an
emotionally satisfying form of conversational poetics with certain women, whether in a
“reciprocal marriage” or in dialogue with Platonic “mediatresses.” Regarding the latter,
Coleridge’s appreciation of female interlocutors was not restricted to those whom he
found sexually attractive. Rather than being yet another Romantic writer who strictly
instrumentalized “the answering sex”—and as important as eroticism was to his
thought—Coleridge was drawn to women who synthesized bodily receptivity and
intellectual acuity, Dorothy Wordsworth and Lady Beaumont chief among them; he
associated both friends with creative and materialist metaphors such as “electrometers” or
the Eolian harp. Where frantic notebook entries or discussions with men failed, then,
poetry and responsive relationships with women provided Coleridge with a source of
hope in finding someone with whom he could connect—and use his poetic powers to do
so. Coleridge’s verse thus unexpectedly recasts the period’s myriad misogynistic
accounts of female inconstancy by reframing mutability as responsiveness.

Whereas my analysis of Christabel in Chapter Two served as an apt starting point
for examining the overlooked nuances of Coleridge’s attitudes toward femininity that
deteriorates into a form of stultifying and imperfectly perfect homosociality, the poem’s setting and sometimes-satirical experimentation with Gothic conventions put male characters at a remove. Triangulated homosocial relationships necessarily cause the ballad to fall apart, but they also uphold the inescapable, patriarchal logic that proves so destructive to intimate and somaticized discourse between women. Still, female figures can work their magic in a more literal fashion in Christabel’s strange world; they are free to explore “our inward nature” by way of the “supernatural” (Biographia 2:6, emphasis added), or what he would later describe as “witchery by daylight” (Table Talk 1:409-10).¹

The reader and Coleridge’s speaker never bear direct witness to such erotic and conversational explorations since Christabel and Geraldine provisionally achieve a form of communicative perfection that does not allow for eavesdropping. And when, upon its first conclusion, Sir Leoline and Bard Bracy refuse to hear Christabel’s verbally indirect but nonverbally persuasive pleas to expel Geraldine from their home, there is no “answer,” and no dialogue. Coleridge further underscores how Christabel’s social rejection and her own rejection of Geraldine bear upon his sense of poetic and social exhaustion when, in 1816, he included an even more “out of place” poem—a lyric originally sent to Southey some fifteen years earlier—that strips of the verse of its previous homosocial intent and features an embittered speaker compulsively “talking” even when any possible listeners have long since abandoned him.

Unlike Christabel, Coleridge’s poems to women solicit nonverbal responses from “silent” interlocutors—and they are sometimes successful. In texts like “The Eolian Harp,” “Love,” and, less impressively, “To Asra,” Coleridge emphasizes the creatively generative qualities of romantic pairdom as opposed to the homosocial triangulation to
which Wordsworth was attracted. Unlike the famous “turn” to Dorothy Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey,” where readers are startled to find that the speaker’s addressee is not a male reader or Coleridge himself, Coleridge’s speakers are involved in a conversational process that includes and acknowledges women’s “pathognomic” abilities. In his influential treatise on physiognomy, Johann Caspar Lavater had dismissed pathognomy in favor of his system of facial reading: he closes the second chapter of his Essays on Physiognomy with only three sentences on the subject: “All people read the countenance pathognomonically; few indeed read it physiognomically. Pathognomy has to combat the arts of dissimulation; physiognomy has not. These two sciences are to the friend of truth inseparable; but as physiognomy is much less studied than pathognomy, I shall chiefly confine myself to the former.”

By contrast, Coleridge resisted these cultural and scientific norms by imbuing women with the power to react and use their bodies and expressions to assert their vital presences, enthralling male speakers with touches, textual critiques, or looks that both “dart” and speak “well.” And for all his personal failings, from his marriage to his hapless and unrequited love for Sara Hutchinson, Coleridge nevertheless challenges the notion that a woman’s silence must signify disempowerment.

This chapter therefore contends that two of Coleridge’s best known and most belittled female interlocutors were not just responsive to his poetic speakers’ communicative overtures but cast “critical visions,” offering critiques of his assumptions about sex, philosophy, and language with varying levels of accomplishment. In the first case, I contrast Coleridge’s treatment of Sara Fricker in early and later versions of “The Eolian Harp” (1795/1817) with Wordsworth’s attitude toward his sister Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey.” Rather than interpreting Sara’s notorious “darting look” as quashing the
Coleridgean speaker’s imaginative flight in her capacity as an anti-intellectual, unsupportive erotic partner, I argue that Sara’s forceful and repeatedly acknowledged presence is responsible for the poem’s deft formal structure as well as its alignment of pantheistic materialism with embodied communication between romantically paired individuals. I also examine two so-called “Asra poems” addressed to Sara Hutchinson—“Love” and “To Asra”—to illustrate the extent to which Coleridge desired female partners to meet him halfway, as it were, at the same time he was frustrated by language’s limited ability to express his longing for Sara’s touch and intellectual input. Her response to these overtures is both canny and unspoken: she pastes the only copy of “To Asra” into her copy of Christabel, suggesting to Coleridge that any relationship between them will end in tragic frustration, no matter how carefully he wields his poetics of the unsaid in his pursuit of answers—and answering.

Pathognomy Recovered: Lavater and Feminine Vacancy

Coleridge’s interest in soliciting responses from “the answering sex” did not correspond to how Regency society represented women’s simultaneously unsubstantial and potent social powers. As many critics have documented, women were largely consigned to an impossible existence: they were expected to be “cipherous,” enticing, and yet blandly modest. This impressionable, passive diffidence was intended to restrain their supposedly dangerous sexuality while increasing their attractiveness to eligible bachelors, relegating women to a state of decorative “infancy,” as Mary Wollstonecraft described it. They were directed to communicate through “looks,” but what they communicated was supposed to be deference and flattery rather than any distinctive
aptitude for rapport or equal partnership. A woman’s social worth therefore directly correlated to her conformity to conventional social expectations of refinement and “accomplishment” rather than anything resembling what we might generally term Romantic individualism. They inhabited a paradox as both invisible female “types” and hyper-visible objects. They were also and often, in some men’s eyes, troublingly animated.

_The Memoirs of the Life of J. C. Lavater_ (1804) shows why embodied female expression was deemed so “problematic” to the various men who at once desired and ignored them. Preceding the second edition of Thomas Holcroft’s English translation of the Swiss writer’s wildly popular _Essay on Physiognomy_, Lavater’s son-in-law, Georg Gessner, recounts a conversation between Lavater and Emperor Joseph II of Austria.

The Emperor doubts whether the physiognomical method could be applied to female faces. Who, he wonders, can read visages with “less strongly delineated” features when women both “choose” and are compelled to be submissive and malleable in the presence of men?

“Women,” said [the Emperor], “are governed by men, and apt at imitation. They have no character of their own, and assume any that they choose. Their character is that of the man whom, for the time, they wish to please… What then is their character? Who can ascertain their disposition from their countenance? The physiognomist may study then a long time, and when he thinks he has obtained certainly, on the sudden they are totally changed.”

Lavater terms this kind of “changing” “pathognomy” early in his _Essay_, and fleeting expressions are exactly what he wishes to avoid; systematizing physiognomic facial structures is necessary to protecting the proper scientist from misleading and manipulative emotional outpourings.
This acknowledgement that facial expressions had a capacity to effect an immediate, uncontrollable, and potentially damaging connection between interlocutors was not without philosophical precedent. Adam Smith, at the beginning of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, notes an important exception to the distance and delay endemic to his own and other familiar accounts of sympathetic communication:\(^9\)

The passions, upon some occasions, may seem to be transfused from one man to another, instantaneously and antecedent to any knowledge of what excited them in the person principally concerned. Grief and joy, for example, strongly expressed in the look and gestures of any one, at once affect the spectator with some degree of a like painful or agreeable emotion. A smiling face is, to every body that sees it, a cheerful object; as a sorrowful countenance, on the other hand, is a melancholy one.\(^{10}\)

Smith does not develop this observation, but his language emphasizes that communicating by way of what would have been termed “natural signs” penetrates and connects individuals through “transfusion.” By being “involuntary,” the influence of non-or sub-intentional awareness becomes critical to our social relationships. Such encounters circumvent Enlightenment emphases on rationality and narrative and temporal distance, showing how the precept of a common, embodied humanity may make “transfusions” possible at the same time it fails to address the irreducible differences among people—differences that, for my purposes, are necessary for any conversation to take place.

Reacting to others’ expressions precedes rational thought and the exertion of will, both of which halt the intrusion of another’s feelings and allow the sympathizer to decide whether to feel for another individual. “Transfusion,” in short, demarcates social and physical unity rather than elective reflection. The physical effects of this raw and unprocessed communication elicit not only a response but also mutual comprehension, no matter who the interlocutor may be. This kind of instantaneous nonverbal knowledge
exists outside of the empirical pursuit of a perfect and verbal language that ideally would bolster mutual intelligibility at the same time that such “civilized language” ensures a safe distance from other parties; that is, the direct connection of thoughts to bodies within and without the self.  

Ian Duncan has written of the anxieties surrounding physiognomy’s supposed ability to unite bodily and moral constitutions, potentially leading to “an epidemic of obsessive, invasive face-reading.” Duncan’s emphasis on this very term, “reading,” does not correspond to the “transfusion” described by Smith, but it accurately describes the apprehensions that fueled Lavater’s project: he ostensibly sought to teach his readers to interpret faces in order to derive a perfect language that would escape arbitrary signs and reconnect humanity to a pre-Lapsarian state of existing in God’s word and image. As he wrote in a series of letters addressed to the Swiss physician and philosopher Johann Georg Ritter von Zimmermann,

> Arbitrary sounds that have no natural connection with what they are supposed to represent seem such an imperfect, accidental, indefinite means of conveying our thoughts and feelings to others, that I simply cannot imagine they exist in the celestial land of truth… One can imagine a means of communicating our thoughts, feelings, mental images, etc. that is purely immediate and allows us to dispense with all language we have learned. This immediate language is physiognomic, pantomimic, musical.

Unlike Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Reid, both of whom were more comfortable with what Lavater calls “arbitrary sounds,” Lavater’s physiognomic method of communication is rooted in exegesis: with his system, we can interpret fixed and preferably immobile features at our leisure. This approach to the social world removes temporal immediacy from interpersonal encounters—along with responses, feedback, and the real-time manifestation of multisensory listening. Physiognomy renders the body a
sign, grounding it in the stability of the written word. The arrest of these “visible
superficies and invisible contents” lends credence to Christopher Rivers’s observation
that “Lavater’s methodology is... a semiotic one: a process of reading (physical)
signifiers as a means of access to (metaphysical) signifieds.”  
Anticipating Charles Bell’s later application of physiognomy to aesthetic criticism in 1806, Lavater refers to paintings throughout his text. He also makes frequent and enthusiastic use of diagrams, life masks, and, perhaps most strangely (given his fixation on bone structure and facial
details), silhouettes (Figure 3.1). When transformed into an image, or an outline that is
close to a letter, one can literally textualize the body to improve its legibility, voiding
the symbol of expressive animation, nuance, or any capacity for deceit.

Women’s mercurial nature, by this logic, poses a challenge. Lavater ultimately
insists that women, too, can be “read,” but he also concurs with Emperor Joseph: a
woman’s only stable characteristic is her instability. Worse, her capacity to shape-shift is
at once voluntary and seemingly restricted to an involuntary impulse to please and reflect
her companion. Lavater explains that rather than having a method to read “less bony, less
projecting” features, women’s pathognomic talents can be assessed and regulated through
a law of averages: “if we always, in the first place, direct our attention to the sum of
receptibility and power, and the basis of their character, to the grand outline and form of
the countenance, we shall not greatly err.” Since they are troubling mirrors, he does not
acknowledge female interiority or nonverbal intelligence as responsive, but reflective;
rather, he measures a woman’s morality according to how her behavioral patterns match
social standards—a determination that can only be made over the course of multiple
observations. Physiognomy can therefore protect men from women’s variable surfaces
Figure 3.1: Plate VI to page 114 from Lavater’s *Essay on Physiognomy*, vol. 1, trans. Thomas Holcroft (1804).
that are at once naturally impressionable, connecting their bodies to some kind of
mysterious mental state, and “artful” in the most negative possible sense: “there is so
much in every human countenance that is independent of all the arts of dissimulation, that
we ought not to fear those arts. Only the moveable features are within the influence of
dissimulation; the real countenance, or the basis of those features, is beyond its power.’”

The “basis of those features” is a woman’s moral and pathognomic behavior, after which
she may be transformed directly into a “grand outline” or perhaps one of the many
silhouettes Lavater includes in his Essay—beautiful, frozen, and empty of all content.

Coleridge did not subscribe to this negative view of pathognomy. In fact, he was
one of the few individuals to call attention to pathognomy not as a thing to be surmounted
but as a necessary counterpart to physiognomy. Upon seeing the Sistine Chapter in 1806,
he comments upon Michelangelo’s ability to capture a supremely pathognomic moment
on a woman’s face as distinguished from the banal “Opie-ism[s]” of other representations
of human visages:

Ideal = the subtle hieroglyphical felt-by-all though not without abstruse
and difficult analysis detected and understood, consonance of the
physiognomic total & substance (Stoff) with the obvious
Pathognomic/herein equi-distant from Opie-ism, i.e. passions planted in a
common face <or portrait> that might equally well have been the
accidental Substrate of any other Passion, and the insipid personified
passions of Lebrun, or the unmeaning abstractions of, mere Form of the
Pseudo-Greeks. Take as an instances of the true Ideal Michel Angelo’s
despairing Woman at the bottom of the Last Judgement. (Notebooks
2:2828)

Julian Knox notes that “Coleridge regards the ‘Ideal’ as inextricable from the material
qualities of the work: the proper convergence of the ‘physiognomic’ (the physicality of
depicted figures) with the ‘Pathognomic’ (the passions those figures express) will
elucidate that which is ‘felt by all.’” This “abstruse and difficult analysis” does not
circumvent the pathognomic, however “obvious” it can be. It concerns the discovery of “consonance,” where a material “substrate” gains particularization through pathognomic expression. Despite Coleridge’s later-life allegiance to dialectical metaphysics, we can see how, in the early 1800s, pathognomy—an alternative true “ideal”—suffers an erroneous diminishment when reduced to an “abstraction” like the “insipid,” or aesthetically and sensuously tasteless, “personified passions of Lebrun.” These expressions effect no sensation upon the viewer: they are not “felt by all,” and they do not communicate either the immediacy of an expression or the material basis from which it emanates, both of which are exemplified by the visage of “a despairing Woman.”

Contrary to interpretations of women that determine their characters by a disturbing law of averages that renders them nondescript yet highly decorative vessels, Coleridge’s perceptions of both pathognomy and its best practitioners—women—actually rework these conventional attitudes toward female communication that view impressibility and “characterlessness” as at once totally passive and dangerously illegible. In turn, Coleridge attempts to renegotiate the limitations of masculine discourses of conversation and sympathy that often excluded or relegated women to an inferior position. He acknowledges the female capacity to communicate in ways that are powerfully immediate and individuating, and whose responses do indeed make them the “answering Sex” (Notebooks 4:4730), a point of view he animates with even greater acuity in his poetry—the medium, as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing argued in Laocoon (1767), that exists in time rather than space.
Women of Sense

Animation often formed the basis of Coleridge’s admiration not just of individual women but women as individuals. He frames this animation in responsive terms, whether such responses are intellectual or physical—or, usually, both. As I have mentioned in my account of “reciprocal marriage,” one of the hallmarks of his romantic attachments to Mary Evans and, later, Sara Hutchinson, was not their appearance so much as their capacity to converse intelligently; this connection between a woman’s intellect and her body proved one of the most important bases of intimacy through which he hoped to attain the “intensest Reality” of partnership (Notebooks 3:3705).

It comes as no great shock that one of Coleridge’s most famous objections to his wife’s social disposition was her profound lack of “reality.” In an 1802 letter that viciously analyzes their respective characters, he famously (and flatly) states, “whether of Feeling, or of Intellect, you are the Inferior” (Letters 2:888); however notorious this declaration, the primary distinction he is making is the degree to which he and Mrs. Coleridge experience “intensity” and “immediate Beauty or Loveliness.” Their dispute, in other words, is based upon their social “dyspathy”: his wife conceives of personal relationships in terms of “their average value in the minds of people in general.” He writes to her, “[you] exist almost wholly in the world without you / the Eye & the Ear are your great organs, and you depend on the eyes & ears of others for a great part of your pleasures” (Letters 2:880-2).23

The problem is not that Sara is oriented toward the senses; it is how she is oriented to her senses. Much like Lavater, Sara cultivates a social world based upon propriety and generalized personhood, whereas Coleridge values vivid, haptic, and near-
immediate contact with other individuals. His bitter discussion of her as being
“uncommonly cold in her feelings of animal love… [and] deficient in tangible Ideas &
sensation” (Notebooks 1:979) indicates that he did not merely believe that she lacked
basic carnal impulses but that she resisted the kind of “blending & unifying of the
sensations” (Notebooks 1:979) inherent to intimacy. Her mode of existing “outside” of
herself certainly does not invite the kinds of his angst-ridden fantasies Coleridge had
about Sara Hutchinson. In 1805, he imagines “sleeping with the Beloved,” where
intercourse would nurture “these kind and pleasurable feelings [that] would become
associated with a Being out of me, & thereby in an almost incalculable train of
consequences increase my active benevolence” (Notebooks 2:2495). Unlike the “active”
quality of self-extension pictured here, Coleridge’s reference to how Sara Fricker lives in
the eyes and ears of others indicts her refusal to attune herself to the present moment and
her withdrawal from physical contact. He begs her to acknowledge that relationships
should be based upon encounters with the distinct individuals for whom, in his case, he
feels “a particular warmth… all over me, but chiefly felt about my heart & breast; & am
connected with things without me” (Letters 2:880).

This account of being simultaneously “out of oneself” and immersed in one’s
senses runs parallel to Coleridge’s interest in the gendered erotics of meter, such as in
Geraldine’s spell and, as we shall see, in “The Eolian Harp.” In the same notebook
entry in which he figured sex with Sara Hutchinson as a dynamic state of “outness,” he
addresses how his transcendentally earthy attitude toward the “tenfold heat and blaze…
that the Pressure of the Husband’s Hand or swelling chest on the bosom of the beloved
Wife shall appear as strictly and truly virtuous, as Actively virtuous” defies social
conventions that neither allow women sexual expression nor support the notion that
coupledom could engender ethical improvement. Frantically desynonymizing his “active
benevolence” as “< = virtuous Volificence = benevolifice = goodwilldoingness>,”
Coleridge refers to the “Sneerers” who would denigrate his belief that “being with [Sara
Hutchinson] I should be so very much a better man /—and why should it be a Woman, &
a beloved Woman? will the Sneerers ask. They have not the Heart to understand the
answer” (Notebooks 2:2495). Such sneerers, in other words, cannot engage in a different,
less misogynistic language of answers—love correspondence—that Coleridge’s
expansive sense of erotic sociability (as evident in Christabel and elsewhere) would
ideally support. It is no surprise, then, that his “actively virtuous,” prospective sexual
encounter would lead him to cite a line from his 1801 poem, “Inscription for a Fountain
on a Heath,” whose deeply somatic and metrically allusive phrasing invokes the kind of
silent cadences characteristic of his greatest conversation poems. “This all in deep quiet,
a fountain with unwrinkled surface yet still the living motion at the bottom,” he writes,
“that ‘with soft and even pulse’ keeps it full—& yet to know that this pleasure so
impleased is making us more good” (Notebooks 2:2495). At once satiated while forever
seeking more, “still” but animated with “even pulse,” this fountain finds its greatest
analogue in the Eolian harp, one of Coleridge’s favorite metaphors for articulating the
social (and sometimes erotic) sources of creative inspiration.

In consecutive notebook entries from November 1806, for example, Coleridge
associates the Eolian harp with the nonverbal communication necessary to love and
poetry and, once again, directs these meditations toward Sara Hutchinson. Coleridge
moves rapidly from pondering the Eolian harp to composing a torrid entry in which he craves an affirmation of versified and romantic love through Sara’s touch and words.

Aeolian Harp motive for opening the Sash; & at once lets in music & sweet air; purifies & delights, = moral Eloquence—Poetry—

O Elpizomene! When shall I have to write a letter to you, with no other Sorrow to communicate, than that absence from you, which writing itself implies? … I know, you love me!—My reason knows it, my heart feels it / yet still let your eyes, your hands tell me / still say, o often & often say, My beloved! I love you / indeed I love you / for why should not my ears, and all my outward Being share in the Joy—the fuller my inner Being is of the sense, the more my outward organs yearn & crave for it / O bring my whole nature into balance and harmony. (Notebooks 2:2937-2938)

To play this instrument of poetry, Coleridge would have to open a window to allow in the breeze of creative invention, a decision consonant with the bodily and communicative openness he hopes to inspire in Sara. Just as poetry “purifies & delights,” sexual consummation would result in the unification of his internal desires and his body, thus establishing a peaceful and “delightful” synergy, “bring[ing] my whole nature into balance and harmony.” Moreover, despite being aware of how the act of writing is more important than the arbitrary nature of the words when describing his sense of estrangement, not to mention the gap between concepts and utterances, he cannot escape his desire to discover a more precise language that would unite his verbal talents with his social sensitivity. He wants Sara to use her “hands” to “tell” that which cannot be completely captured in words, endowing her with a spellbinding and responsive sensibility that, while resembling Geraldine’s spell in Christabel, finds an even better analogue in poetry written to both his wife Sara Fricker and to Sara Hutchinson herself; namely, “The Eolian Harp,” “Love,” and the sonnet, “To Asra.”
Before turning to these texts, it is important to clarify that Coleridge did not only value women with whom he could have sexual relationships. His friendship with Dorothy Wordsworth, for example, illuminates his inclination to tie female embodiment to a woman’s individualism and intellectual receptivity. He regarded Dorothy without a shred of condescension, calling her a “a Woman of Genius” whose “manifold acquirements but for the absorption of her whole Soul in her Brother’s fame and writings would, perhaps, in a different style have been as great a Poet as Himself” (Letters 6:959). This comment was not anomalous; as early as 1797, he remarked on Dorothy’s distinctive capacity to perceive and communicate her femininity as a source of agentive power: “She is a woman indeed!—in mind, I mean, & heart,” Coleridge wrote to Joseph Cottle. A distinguishing feature of Dorothy’s embodied intelligence, as critics have long noted, is her environmental attentiveness in contrast to her brother’s self-absorption, which sublimated her “genius” (and, implicitly, Coleridge’s own) as well as her distinctive mode of perceiving her surroundings and formal “style.” Coleridge emphasizes this point by likening her ability to collect “information various” to a “perfect electrometer.” As an instrument that is sensitive to unseen materialities, Dorothy feels the electrical charges between people and their environments.25 Taking in both positives and negatives, Dorothy’s somaticized insight is flexible and engaged with the immediate contingencies of worldly existence: like the electrometer, she “bends, protrudes, and draws in, at subtlest beauties & most recondite faults” (Letters 1:330-1).26 Measuring the world around her does not impress her. On the contrary, she possesses the same “simple, ardent, impressive” manners that “Art” would in 1818. She is an embodied and electric “mediatress” of the world, and in her, he seems to recognize a form of vulnerability that
is equally adept at “draw[ing] in” things much like himself, whose “bodily Feelings are linked in so peculiar a way with my Ideas” (Letters 1:887). Dorothy is a “woman indeed” because she harnesses the power of sensitivity rather than conceiving of it as a weakness, and this mode of engagement does not obliterate her selfhood or render her a mirror of others’ desires: it strengthens her presence as an intellectual, poetical, and “impressive” person capable of grasping and sharing “information various.”

Indeed, Coleridge remained preoccupied with metaphorical ways to express his fixation on conversing about “information various” throughout his life, and, in 1828, he again turned to his favorite figure for somaticized poetics: the Eolian harp. However, his reference to the inspiring instrument takes a darker turn when he corresponds with his friend Lady Beaumont, where he is flustered when reminded of how vulnerability actually fueled his poetic talent even if it forced him into a state of painful individuation.

Coleridge knows that metaphysics allow him to safely retreat into the asociality of the Logos whereas creative production, spurred by marital metaphors and, in this case, women themselves, requires an “outness” whose lack he once disparaged in Sara Fricker. In this little-known letter, though, Coleridge cannot control his compulsive responsiveness: he immediately and literally replies by writing directly upon the note itself (Figure 3.2):

Lady B. in this letter urges me to resume Poetry. Alas! How can I? Is the power extinct? No! No! As in a still summer noon when the lulled air, at irregular intervals [wakes] up with a startled Hush—it, though to re-demand seems the silence, which it breaks, or heaves a long profound sign in it’s Sleep, and an Aeolian Harp has been left in the chink of the not quite shut Casement. Even so how often scarce a week of any [my] Life, shuffles by without its “every now and then” of that does not at some moment feels the spur of the old Genial impulse—even so do there fall on my inward Ear swells, and broken snatches of sweet Melody, reminding one that I still Love that within me which is both
Harp and Breeze. But in the same moment awakes the sense of C[hange] without—Life unendowed. […] In order to poetic composition I need the varied feeling—thought charmed to sleep, and the too great continuity of sound broken up, to begin anew, with new-power[s] seeking & finding new themes. (Letters 6:731, n. 1)

Coleridge’s response resonates with his most emotive and compulsive notebook entries. He does not describe poetry as language but as sheer sound, which includes its absence; it is both “a startled Hush” and a “Melody” that must evoke “varied feeling” since “too great continuity of sound” does not afford the silence necessary to “seeking & finding” inspiration, recalling the serpentine, indirect poetics of Coleridge’s youth that “proceeds & is proceeding” (Notebooks 1:606). However, he also undercuts his tentative suggestion that his poetic impulse is “both Harp and Breeze” when he must acknowledge how important “the sense of C[hange] without” and the “Language of Music” are to producing verse that could, for instance, express his passion for Sara (Notebooks 2:2035). Poetry necessitates “varied feeling… to begin anew, with new-power[s] seeking & finding new themes.” Most significantly, while he initially claims that his “harp” is only exposed to a small amount of air, the image of the “not quite shut casement” reflects the self-imposed solipsism and resistance to emotionally exposing conversation that he had largely adopted by 1828, for his greatest anxiety remains unshakeable: his susceptibility to the “too great continuity of sound.” As if the inspiring noise and “music” of the world were the kind of relentless monologue which he was often accused of delivering, Coleridge desires not merely a melody but a harmony—a response that would allow a “first violin” to emerge from the “misty Medley” of the thoughts and influences to which he knew himself to be overwhelmingly sensitive (Notebooks 1:1599). Coleridge vividly articulates his trouble with poetic composition not as a lack of inspiration, as in his “Dejection” ode,
but too much inspiration in response to the letter. Ultimately, his agonized reply to Lady Beaumont’s encouragement to resume writing poetry, which largely concurs with his own ideas, reveals how conversation with a woman forces him to confront the speciousness of his own claim that philosophical writings could be a way back to poetry.

Female Forms: “Tintern Abbey” versus “The Eolian Harp”

Whether making an impression in 1797 or 1828, women moved Coleridge to question not only his relationship to verse but to the creative powers of intimacy. His appreciation for heterosexual coupledom, intellectual and otherwise, manifests in an
uncomfortable but artistically exhilarating acceptance of how uncontrollable these encounters are. By contrast, and even though Wordsworth’s poems largely avoid or quash the unexpected movements of any such conversation, “correspondence” is often considered emblematic of the poet’s thinking; his description of the “corresponding mild creative breeze” memorably serves as the 1805 Prelude’s vexed invocation, and it inspires the title of one of M. H. Abrams’s most well known essays on Romantic inspiration.30

This “vital breeze,” however, is not interpersonally communicative. On the contrary, it has the troubling and singular capacity to “become / A tempest, a redundant energy, / Vexing its own creation” (1:44-47). Such “redundancy” resembles “Tintern Abbey’s” frequent syntactic and formal doublings, where the “picture of the mind revives again” (62), but his silent female interlocutor is not a respondent so much as a storehouse: Dorothy is a “mansion… For all sweet sounds and harmonies” rather than issuing them (141-143). This representation sharply differs from women in Coleridge’s poetry, whose “more serious eye[s]… dart” (“Eolian Harp” 49-50) and whose touches electrify and influence verse form. In Wordsworth, corresponding breezes are inspirations to write, but he transforms would-be interlocutors into texts and places them at a safe remove. Among many other one-sided encounters that recur throughout the 1805 Prelude, and to return to its invocation, Wordsworth also refers to his “friend,” Coleridge, who is typically sequestered in the verse paragraph following the “corresponding…breeze,” which describes Wordsworth’s self-conscious, hierophantic isolation: “To the open fields I told / A prophesy” (1805 Prelude, 1:55, 1:59-60).31
In the 1799 Two-Part Prelude, accounts of unspoken inspiration are more conflicted. Wordsworth’s friendship with Coleridge was in a transitional phase; it was creatively satisfying but marked equally by the poet’s attempts to disentangle himself from Coleridge’s desire for conversational intimacy. Tactile breezes and sublingual speech terrify the Poet as he remembers himself as a less-compartmentalized “four-years child”: “Low breathings coming after me, and sounds / Of undistinguishable motion, steps / Almost as silent as the turf they trod.” More here, he uncomfortably finds his solitude interrupted, “With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind / Blow through my ears!” (Two-Part Prelude, 1:64-5), and despite his claims to be troubled by “vacancy,” he clearly prefers “such self-presence in my heart” where he “seem[s] / Two consciousnesses, conscious of myself / And of some other being (Two-Part Prelude 27-31). This communicative “correspondence” of doubled consciousness is fundamentally interior. It is a correspondent solipsism.

Female interlocutors are peripheral in either version of the Prelude even though women often have powerful and disturbing presences in his other poems. Poetical speakers in texts ranging from the “The Thorn” to “The Solitary Reaper” only feel safe when distanced from their female objects, or, in the case of a poem like “We Are Seven,” occupying worldviews that are so disparate that they speak past each other. Yet “Tintern Abbey” features a literally surprising, nuanced, and nervous engagement with a woman—Wordsworth’s sister, Dorothy—when he unexpectedly “turns” to her in the final verse paragraph rather than continuing to address his ostensibly male readers. Nevertheless, this complex pseudo-recognition of his Dorothy actually illustrates his
tendency to embrace homosocial triangulation whereas Coleridge emphasizes creative coupledom in poems like “The Eolian Harp.”

The significance of Dorothy’s presence in “Tintern Abbey” has long been a point of debate, often centering on whether she has any power to issue a response or ward off the speaker’s possible wish to transform her into an autobiographical text to be later read and revised. As one example, James Soderholm convincingly outlines how the speaker uses Dorothy to ameliorate his anxieties about his own future and his work’s posthumous reception. Alternatively, scholars hoping to recover Dorothy’s agency in the poem have often compared her contemporaneous verse and journal entries to “Tintern Abbey,” suggesting that she replies to Wordsworth extra-textually. Other readings stress the speaker’s discomfort with his sister’s silent proximity while still taking recourse to the verbal as the only acceptable mode of “conversation.” Describing a hypothetical situation between two men, Susan Wolfson implicitly positions Dorothy between Wordsworth and the poem’s true addressee, Coleridge, in a strikingly Sedgwickian manner: “The second speaker is present invisibly, his words are not there, but deep traces left by these words have a determining influence on all the present and visible words of the first speaker.” Wolfson does attribute a somatic force to words and attends to unspoken “traces” between individuals, but her account nevertheless relegates Dorothy to a ghostly role at best, and a cipherous conduit at worst.

Fundamentally, however, whether Dorothy “responds” within or without “Tintern Abbey” is less important than how desperately Wordsworth’s speaker wants to anticipate and control her potential reply. The speaker’s fearful attempts to manage her (or any) conceivable conversation do not assuage his preoccupation with how to reconcile himself
to his more interpersonal social impulses and how to regulate his female interlocutor’s body by anatomizing her senses. These actions infantilize and reify Dorothy, as do the speaker’s various other descriptions of her appearance. As just one example, “wildness” in “Tintern Abbey” is not a mark of independent Romantic thought so much as the artificially construed, picturesque landscape of “sportive wood run wild” (17) and continuous with the unthinking childhood during which the young poet was a “roe” that “bounded o’er the mountains” (68-9). Not unlike Gessner’s account of women’s supposed unmanageability in his biography of Lavater, William recounts Dorothy’s female unruliness in order to tame her potentially more mobile and communicative features, turning her into an archive of his own past. At the same time, he oddly reassures himself that “thou are with me, here,” but, similar to “Nutting,” in which the implications of a female figure’s “touch” are not fully developed (53), he does not grant her a response outside of the scope of his own mirrored and augmented thoughts.38

It makes sense that, given Wordsworth’s troubled depictions of intimate social encounters, he borrows Coleridge’s language in “This Lime-Tree Bower, My Prison” when gesturing toward his sister, but in a way that distorts his friend’s nuanced representation of sympathetic male friendship. In “Lime-Tree,” unlike in “Tintern Abbey,” the speaker insightfully recognizes absence as a form of presence, overlaying Charles Lamb’s melancholy but intense “gaze” with his own views rather than hoping that his interlocutor will possess a voice that can be “caught,” speak a legible “language,” or have reflecting eyes that can be “read” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey” 117-18). Instead, “Lime-Tree’s” speaker states, “Henceforth I shall know / That Nature ne’er deserts the wise and pure, / No Plot so narrow, be but Nature there, / No waste so vacant, but may
well employ / Each Faculty of sense, and keep the heart / Awake to Love and Beauty!”

(60-65). Wordsworth’s anxieties and Coleridgean allusions aside—and whether we read Dorothy as a victim of Romantic masculine individualism or as an active interlocutor—it remains the case that she has been studied more carefully than Sara Fricker in “The Eolian Harp.”

Because Coleridge would later claim that his wife lacked intensity, reality, and sexual availability, it might seem misguided if not willfully contrary to assert that Sara Fricker is a strikingly dynamic and astute interlocutor in “The Eolian Harp.” Dorothy Wordsworth herself observed in 1801 that Sara’s “radical fault is want of sensibility.”

However, in “The Eolian Harp” and Coleridge’s other early love lyrics, Sara’s “sensibility” is quite literally palpable. In addition to possessing a gaze that “dart[s]” (“Eolian Harp” 50), Coleridge dreams of her “gentlest Look divine.” With a “tender” tactility where eyes merge with lips, he elaborates that “[b]right shone her Eye, yet tender was its beam: / I felt the pressure of her Lip to mine!” (“Lines in the Manner of Spenser” 37-39). But, in communicating nonverbally and acting as a force of worldly logic, Sara’s sensibility is also sensible—and it certainly never “swim[s]” (“Lime-Tree” 39).

Her more grounded disposition has almost unilaterally led critics to read her as something of an intellectual villain. No matter how “mild” her look, she has either been tied to more biographical readings of “The Eolian Harp,” where her darting glance was a harbinger of their marriage’s impending failure, or she is thought to upset the poem’s formal arc. In either case, these standard accounts depict her as a disciplinarian: she seems to cut off Coleridge’s speaker with a moralizing force that, rather than supporting his materialist inquiries into whether “all of animated nature / Be but organic harps
diversely framed, / That tremble into thought” (44-46), firmly sets him back on the path of normative and obedient Christian thought.\(^{41}\)

In actuality, Sara’s “pensive” presence is neither apostrophic (thus indulging the speaker’s monologic inclinations) nor is it a function of Coleridge’s sadomasochistic desire to censure himself and demonize his wife. Thematically and structurally, Sara Fricker governs the poem’s unfolding as well as its thematic interest in materialism and two-way communication. Her influence extends to both early and later versions of the poem: she helps establish the formal symmetry of the 1795 version, “Effusion XXXV,” and, in the revised “The Eolian Harp,” her presence supplements the famous “one life” passage’s materialist dilation, in which Coleridge’s speaker explores prosodic musicality, silence, and bodily porousness. Although various philosophical principles (and Wordsworth’s influence) led him to rework the poem over the course of several years, Coleridge did not merely bookend “The Eolian Harp” with references to Sara. Rather, he gestures to her presence throughout, generally to bring the speaker’s thinking back to earth without restricting his creativity. Recovering Sara’s formal importance to “The Eolian Harp” allows us to address the poem’s central concern: the communicative power of poetic inspiration whose sources are not simply sublime but erotic and interpersonal.

Sara’s strange charisma is evident from the very start. In the poem’s opening lines, the speaker describes her demeanor as “pensive,” an unusual choice for a romantic epithet (“Eolian Harp” 1). Emphasizing neither her beauty nor her susceptibility to seduction in keeping with a Spenserian dynamic, he portrays his addressee as deeply thoughtful and slightly melancholy. He also links her meditative affect to tactility, similar to later notebook entries lamenting his distance from “Elpizomene” (Sara Hutchinson). In
both “Effusion XXXV” and “The Eolian Harp,” Sara Fricker’s thinking mind and her cheek’s touch the speaker’s arm, foreshadowing the poems’ concern with human relationships and heterosexual coupledom in particular. Complexly intelligent rather than shrewish, she necessarily troubles interpretations of “Effusion XXXV’s” two halves as not only distinct but also in conflict with one another: the first half represents the harp in erotic terms and the second in pantheistic ones whose intellectual depth make the speaker’s musings inaccessible to women like Sara. Yet these latter qualities are just as pensive as the speaker’s wife. The “desultory breeze” (14) runs parallel to the “plastic and vast... intellectual breeze” to which Coleridge’s speaker finds himself indelibly responsive, just as he responds to the unspoken “mild reproof” (49) that brings the poem to a close.42

Unlike the unexpected appearance of Dorothy in “Tintern Abbey,” Sara exudes a forceful and tangible presence as an interlocutor over the entire course of the poem, no matter how metaphysical the speaker’s flights or how deeply scholars fixate on Coleridge’s later insertion of the “one life” passage. Even as the speaker begins to ruminate in seeming solitude, our knowledge of the common “touches” of Sara’s gaze and cheek gives the reader a shared and uncanny sense of being both ignored and bearing witness to an unsocial form of sociability: Coleridge’s speaker ruminates in abstract terms, perhaps as a “man speaking to men” rather than to his fiancé, yet he repeatedly attempts to excite his interlocutor’s interest, going as far as to incorporate Sara (and all of humanity) into his “plastic and vast” pantheistic vision (47).43 At the same time, he also desires a kind of active passivity that would allow his hypothetical if not unarticulated thoughts to develop and unfold. This play extends to the speaker’s metaphorical
androgyny: the lute is feminine and “caressed” as Sara would be if she were easily transformed into a trope rather than an individual, but the poem’s third verse paragraph grants the instrument a markedly active position, reconceiving Coleridge’s own passivity as peculiarly creative and syntactically reflective:

And thus, my love! as on the midway slope
Of yonder hill I stretch my limbs at noon,
Whilst through my half-closed eye-lids I behold
The sunbeams dance, like diamonds, on the main,
And tranquil muse upon tranquility;
Full many a thought uncalled and undetained,
And many idle flitting phantasies,
Traverse my indolent and passive brain,
As wild and various as the random gales
That swell and flutter on this subject lute! (34-43)

As in the case of “Lime-Tree’s” doubled “joys” (69), Coleridge may “tranquil muse upon tranquility” (“Eolian” 38)—a chiastic state of mind that, without Sara to help him reintegrate himself into a domestic and interpersonal space, could devolve into a bizarre form of sociable onanism.

Once again, we are reminded of how Sara’s participation in the poem’s progress—and its resulting cultivation of an imaginative and eroticized domesticity—is one of its formal and conceptual achievements. The third verse paragraph opens with a gesture to Sara (“my love!”), and the speaker’s imagined isolation is framed in the conditional tense, much like Coleridge’s closing vision in “Kubla Khan” of a prospectively worshipful audience. The stanza’s layering of multiple similes never quite expresses a genuine desire to leave Sara’s side. “As on a midway slope”—much like his “midway” musings—he admits that, left to his own devices, he could separate himself from Sara. If he did, though, he would also be leaving the Miltonic and “pensive” “mark of the star of eve / Serenely brilliant (such should wisdom be)” (7-8) to occupy an
alienated and alternate temporality “at noon” (35). But the speaker entertains these options because poetry inspired by the harp cultivates a state of play that is neither passive nor wholly “indolent” so much as explorative. Such musings will come full circle and become intensely responsive once Sara intervenes in the final verse paragraph, reinforcing the poem’s formal need for a face-to-face encounter that does not mirror so much as cause reflection. Indeed, while Alan Bewell has made the convincing argument that Coleridge manifests a broad interest in communication in the poem by way of George Berkeley—where, as Bewell paraphrases it, “Nature exists to be seen because God had created it as a means to communicate with human beings”—“The Eolian Harp” ultimately drives toward a communicative encounter between the speaker and his skeptical fiancé, whose speaking looks remain untouched over the course of multiple edits between 1796 and 1803. In fact, the inclusion of Coleridge’s “one life” passage for its publication in Sibylline Leaves (1817) only reiterates the importance of Sara’s presence and of “love correspondence” to his poetic imagination, figuring visual and aural descriptions as interlocked and ensuring its formal success.

The “one life” passage is replete with a kind of sociable, open-ended music that has “the power of infinitely varying… expression” (Notebooks 2:2035). The speaker steadily moves from Spenserian intrigue and an orderly, “sequacious” (18) conception of the harp’s song to transcending derivative metaphors. Poetic musicality infuses multiple modes of substance with an underlying “rhythm”:

```
O 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—
Methinks, it should have been impossible
Not to love all things in a world so filled;
```
Where the breeze warbles, and the mute still air,
Is Music slumbering on her instrument. (26-33)

Coleridge’s initial syntactic distinction between the one life being “within us and abroad” quickly collapses upon itself. There is a “light in sound” that, in turn, expands outward into a chiastic, but more tentative, repetition, where light is “sound-like” rather than resounding. While the content of the lines, “A light in sound, a sound-like power in light, / Rhythm in all thought, and joyance every where,” reveals a material, synesthetic desire to unite human perception with the natural world as Abrams has explored with regard to Coleridge’s vitalist “metascience,” the “rhythm” with which the speaker revises his thinking has its own tactility.48 The breeze may “warble,” but there is also room for “the mute still air”—a substantive vacancy that affords an opportunity for response. Muteness, in other words, is not akin to passivity nor does it signify total absence: it captures and is necessary to the conversational poetics of halves and correspondence. This binding “rhythm” fits with Coleridge’s sense of the social insofar as it unites thought with palpable experiences, tying poetic composition to his later accounts of the immersive, processual act of reading a poem in the Biographia Literaria. This rhythm requires both sound and silence, putting meter on the same footing as words themselves.49 The closing lines of the poem’s first stanza, then, are neither perplexing nor paradoxical: “The stilly murmur of the distant Sea” can indeed “Tell…us of Silence” (11-2) just as Sara will tell the speaker of his momentary self-absorption. In “The Eolian Harp’s” world, that which is silent “murmurs” provocatively, opening onto even more lulling repetitions that communicate an undersong and continuity between the speaker and his world.

Coleridge’s speaker makes clear that music’s material bonds are hardly monotonous, anticipating the irreducibly different and revisionary perspective that Sara
will provide. The instrument speaks the “language of music” (Notebooks 2:2035) since it is “[a]s wild and various as the random gales / That swell and flutter on this subject lute!” (42-3).\textsuperscript{50} It provides a focalized medium through which variety and creativity can endlessly operate and grow (Notebooks 2:2035). This stream of sound and silence could be partly “orchestrated” through social contact and expression, similar to how Coleridge once described “one of the excellent uses of communication” with a friend (Notebooks 1:1599), all of which leads his speaker to ask the poem’s most famous question: “And what is all of animated nature / Be but organic harps diversely framed, / That tremble into thought, as o’er them sweeps / Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze, / At once the Soul of each, and God of all?” (44-48).\textsuperscript{51}

Of course, Sara disapproves, but her expression of disapproval is at once verbal and nonverbal in keeping with the poem’s communicative aspirations. The speaker registers Sara’s “dart[ing]” look as speech, and eloquent speech at that: “Well hast thou said and holily dispraised / These shapings of the unregenerate mind” (54-5). Yet her darting gaze of “mild reproof” encourages an equally rhythmic, and harmonic, rethinking that brings closure.\textsuperscript{52} Compared to Coleridge’s pantheistic speculations, Sara’s moralizing force is conventional. Her assertion of social norms causes him to backpedal into an embrace of an “Incomprehensible” (59) that is comprehensibly biblical. These worldly realities, however, also allow Coleridge to preserve the language most sympathetic to his own ideas while negating this language with strange prefixes, composing the kind of undersong he thought essential to all great poetry: “Well hast thou said and holily disprais’d/ These shapings of the unregenerate mind” (54-5, emphasis added). If we were to remove these prefixes, we perhaps can glean what Coleridge
wanted to hear: “Well hast thou said and holily praised/ These shapings of the regenerate mind.” These comments would have mirrored Coleridge’s speculations rather than challenging him to reconsider his place in a metaphorically expansive but domestic realm in which the poem actually takes place.

Sara’s penetrating look, itself a reply, also demands a response. But Coleridge’s reaction speaks to his own perceptive presence as not merely a porous, amorphous, and weak-minded future husband, but a pathognomonic and sexually fluid “electrometer” in his own right.\(^5\) He uses her disagreement to produce formally intriguing poetry that virtually backs into a conclusion, exhibiting the “impressive” feminine capacity to accurately perceive another’s unspoken meaning, grant elements of its validity, and to retain, in the process, elements of his original, now-modified thought (Letters 1:330-1). Coleridge is susceptible to the communications of others even when they are negative, but even though he “bends and protrudes” to incorporate Sara’s “disprais[ing]” of his litotes-like prefixed “unregenerate mind,” he never totally allows her disapproval to supplant his own thoughts (Letters 1:330-1). Likewise, Sara’s penetrating discontentment emerges through the lines’ layered awkwardness, but she does not merely overwrite or override Coleridge’s creative speculations about the philosophical potential of the harp metaphor.\(^5\)

There is a distinctive homology between Sara and Coleridge’s exchanges in “The Eolian Harp” and Geraldine and Christabel’s relationship in Christabel, conveying Coleridge’s own sense of feminine receptivity and the conversational promise of female embodiment. He values the sanctity of domestic spaces untouched by the kinds of masculine anxieties that underlie both Leoline’s and Wordsworth’s triangulating
impulses—the same anxieties, though, that make women susceptible to the homosocial contact that culminates in and meets a bitter end in what would become the pig look.

“The Eolian Harp” thus shows how serious Coleridge was when, in 1797, he declared to his wife that “Love is the vital air of my Genius” and inextricably linked to his intellectual powers. His nonsexual admiration of women like Dorothy Wordsworth and his embrace of Sara Fricker’s resilient refusal to be a Wordsworthian “mansion,” a Spenserian sexual object, a Lavaterian shapeshifter, or a site of revision illuminate how relationships between the “opposite” sexes were in fact power negotiations grounded in the expressive body—a grounding that, in turn, links poetic “retrogressive movement” to unspoken “answers” and a partly distributed sense of self. “The Eolian Harp” captures Coleridge’s desire for a response where his own words could find expression and recognition. But this response, spoken and otherwise, also subjects his claims to thoughtful revision. He fulfills his wish to gaze upon an interlocutor whose darting glances are sensible, articulate, and imaginatively productive.

Sara Hutchinson and the Space Between

Carefully pasted into Sara Hutchinson’s presentation copy of *Christabel* is the only extant copy of Coleridge’s little-discussed sonnet, “To Asra” (Figure 3.3). The love poem is one of the many that he wrote for this second Sara, the sister of Wordsworth’s wife Mary and the woman with whom Coleridge became obsessively enamored upon meeting her in late 1799. The album is not a scrapbook. Unlike many of the Wordsworths’ or Coleridge’s notebooks, no pages are excised, and no other
contemporaneous writings or clippings are inserted. The sonnet’s placement feels deliberate, and the little poem’s creases reveal that it had once been folded into a perfect square, perhaps suggesting that it was one of the verses Coleridge gave to Sara in person in addition to being one of the many documents she retained until her death in 1835. The editor of Coleridge’s poetical works, J. C. C. Mays, writes that because the “sonnet is on a different paper from Christabel… there is no way of knowing whether the two texts were brought together in the album by SH or, after her death, by someone else” (PW 704).

It is true that the text’s provenance makes dating “To Asra’s” inclusion into Sara’s presentation copy difficult, even if the sonnet was likely composed between 1801-4. The album passed through many hands. Coleridge transcribed the poem and gave her the album in 1802, and Sara left it to her sister, Mary, upon her death, as Mary’s daughter, Dora Quillinan, confirms in one of the notebook’s inscriptions (Figure 3.4). Dora then gave it to Coleridge’s daughter, Sara, after which Sara’s daughter, Edith Co...
Figure 3.3: “To Asra” in Sara Hutchinson’s copy of Christabel. © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. c. 1801-4; notebook c. 1802.

Figure 3.4: “Inscriptions in Sara Hutchinson’s Christabel.” © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. May 22, 1847.
Christabel—where Coleridge, in keeping with his tendency to interrupt himself when reciting the poem, excitedly annotated its sometimes-abstruse vocabulary, such as the word “Tairn” (Figures 3.6-8)—this journal reveals a measure of back-and-forth between Sara and Coleridge: her handwriting is free rather than tidily transcriptive, the poems are lighter, and Coleridge jots corrections and comments throughout (Figures 3.9-10). More darkly, Sara assisted Coleridge in the production of The Friend (1809), though this collaboration seems to have precipitated her decision to sever their personal and working relationship once and for all. Still, although none of her letters to Coleridge have survived, it is clear that she was inclined to contribute and to reply to his work through textual arrangements when not solely acting as what Richard Holmes calls “Coleridge’s most faithful amanuensis.”

While she may have lacked Dorothy Wordsworth’s poetic genius, Sara was not simply a collector, transcriber, and arranger. She was Coleridge’s intellectual counterpart
Figure 3.6: Asterisk next to “Tairn” in Sara Hutchinson’s copy of Christabel. © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. c. 1802.

Figure 3.7: Detail of Asterisk. © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. c. 1802.
Figure 3.8: Coleridge’s note on the word “Tairn” on opposing verso page. © Samuel Taylor Coleridge Collection. Victoria University, Toronto, ON, Canada. c. 1802.
Figure 3.9: “The Keep-sake” in Hutchinson’s hand with Coleridge’s corrections and explanations (compare his asterisk in the presentation copy of Christabel in Figures 6-8), drawn from “Sara Hutchinson’s Poets” notebook. © The Wordsworth Trust. The Jerwood Centre, Grasmere, UK. Transcription date 1806-7. DCMS 41.36.
not despite being subject to his romantic desires but because she embodied the kind of “electric” intellect he admired in Dorothy and the responsive sensuality with which he was endlessly preoccupied. To his mind, she offered the “Perfect Friendship… only possible between Man and Wife” (*Letters* 4:904). This attraction had little to do with her physical appearance, and this was fairly typical of Coleridge. As we have seen, he complimented specific aspects of Mary Evans’s personality rather than (or in tandem with) her unspecified attractiveness; and in “The Eolian Harp,” Sara Fricker’s ability to
look and the touch of her cheek prove more exciting and creatively galvanizing than the accommodating, decorative, and vacuous standards of femininity in Regency England. Most contemporaneous accounts describe Sara Hutchinson as quite plain but appealingly active, sensible, and clever, making her poised to “respond… to [Coleridge’s] jokes” and to exhibit her profound “love of poetry.” Her wit and literary intelligence, then, were most likely the primary bases for Coleridge’s agonized love for her.

The level of esteem with which Coleridge held her intellect is particularly pronounced in one of the few complete letters that remains of their correspondence. The letter accompanied his gift of Sir Thomas Browne’s philosophical text *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646-72), a book that almost certainly would have been outside the purview of most early nineteenth-century ladies’ reading. He expresses his admiration of Browne’s prose and then advises her to read Browne’s *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial, or, a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk* (1658) for its expertly sensuous union of form and content: “how earthy, how redolent of graves & Sepulchres in every Line!” He praises Browne’s ability to traverse boundaries through literature, commenting on how the book’s style models a form of communication that does not resemble the type of superficial conversation characteristic of Montaigne’s “chit-chat,” but instead uncovers a generosity of perception that bridges gaps between self-regard and an interest in others: “[the egotism of] Sir Thomas Brown [sic] is always the result of a feeling Heart conjoined with a mind of active curiosity—: the natural & becoming egotism of a man, who loving other men as himself, gains the habit & privilege of talking about himself as familiarly as about other men” (Letters 2:1081). Remarks like these could well have been drawn from Coleridge’s literary lectures or even the
For a one-dimensional misogynist who thought putatively little of women’s minds, he is confident that Sara is able to comprehend both these texts and his commentary—and he eagerly awaits the conversation that may result from her impressions.

Coleridge channels his intellectual connection to Sara through Browne to remind her of their compatibility, triangulating his desires through a man to establish a distinctly nonhomosocial intimacy. Enacting the “union of opposite poles” (Marginalia 2:197) that is essential to love correspondence, he composes the letter at midnight and imagines Sara to be reading it at the same time he is writing. As if in her presence, Coleridge entreats her to fall asleep: to do otherwise would be “to act our Antipodes” and estrange them from each other. Yet, for all of this epistolary romance, he turns to poetry to evoke a sense of immediate presence and to maintain “distinction without Division” (Notebooks 3:3705). Coleridge quotes two lines from the final and reconciliatory stanza of “Dejection,” associating verse with both his tormented confession of love and the present-time fantasy of co-reading and co-imagining beyond the epistolary form (Letters 2:1083): “May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling, / Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth” (130-1). Poetry—and a poem that he had once titled “A Letter”—drives home his yearning for an emotional and intellectual union despite being physically separated from Sara. Interestingly, in previous drafts of “Dejection,” Coleridge had conflated Sara with Wordsworth when searching for an addressee, again incorporating a man into the activity of heterosexual bonding. Coleridge’s reference calls up the specter of the man with whom he had hoped to cement a perfect intellectual partnership to his peril, but he reclaims the allusion to Wordsworth for himself and Sara.
Much like his 1819 diagram of the triangle of marital love, he attempts to transcend the degradation and dominance that he increasingly associated with Wordsworth. For his intelligent and responsive female counterpart, then, Coleridge repurposes “Dejection” to forge a connection that supersedes the verbal and the masculine. And though his letter accompanies a book of prose and is a text unto itself, he concludes with the poetry of a “silent” gaze that speaks volumes of tenderness.

This mutual respect for one another’s intellectual intensity sheds light on why Sara chose to insert “To Asra” into Christabel. Sara and Coleridge communicated both directly and through all kinds of texts to build a private world, but when she includes “To Asra” in her presentation copy, she reveals a sharp critical acumen. She is never blind to the problems of erotic communication that govern both poems and her relationship with Coleridge: the sonnet explicitly examines the tension between expressing love through words and the inability of words to foster a more satisfying form of haptic communication. It would be a remarkable coincidence indeed for a stranger to paste such a love sonnet next to Christabel, a poem that explores illicit sexual desires and forms of “silence” that are only destructive when exposed to patriarchal norms.

Upon first glance, “To Asra” hardly seems worth preserving. Elements of it, including the fountain metaphor also present in Coleridge’s notebook entry on erotic meter, are utterly contrived. These failures are telling, though: he strives to synthesize his visceral, affective outpourings with language, but the resulting awkward tentativeness chafes against the sonnet form. “To Asra” features a conventional question/answer structure in which Coleridge confesses his love in terms so effusive that he comes close to exhausting the ways he can characterize “growth.” In one of the few readings of the
poem, Anya Taylor comments on its relationship to Petrarchan and Shakespearean models, and she also finds parallels between the sonnet and the ballad “Love,” obliquely noting “Love’s” responsive qualities, for “each segment of the inner story prompts a change in the outer courtship.”

Pairing “Love” with “To Asra” takes an optimistic view of a belabored sonnet about communicative failure. While it is true that “To Asra” seeks to reconcile tensions between verbal and nonverbal expression and taps into Coleridge’s intense desire for a reciprocal and physical consummation of his relationship with Sara, “Love” fulfills this fantasy where “To Asra” necessarily falls short: in “Love,” Coleridge manages to close the gap between speaker and interlocutor. As he would later lament in 1807, “To Asra” only captures how “the inadequacy <of Words to Feeling,> of the symbol to the Being… Words—what are they but a subtle matter?” (Notebooks 2:2998).

“Love’s” heroine, Genevieve, is not a “woman beyond utterance dear” (“To Asra” 4). The poem’s structure and character development expressly focus on the shift from telling tales to unspoken erotic contact within a closed environment, revisiting Coleridge’s ideal conversational scenario without getting bogged down in “pig looks,” snake looks, or language, as in “To Asra.” The ballad features a troubadour relating a complex chivalric tragedy that shifts depending upon the reactions of his interlocutor, who is, of course, Genevieve. The tale is as bleak as Genevieve innocent, and the speaker seems to know that an “old rude song” (23) will prove most exotic, or enticing, to a woman with “few sorrows” (17): in the tale, the “Lady of the Land” repeatedly rejects a knight to the point of driving him mad, only for her to regret her decision once he saves her from “a murderous band / And… [an] outrage worse than death” (54-55). Yet once
the speaker is about to recount the knight’s “dying words” (65), he loses control over the ballad: the pseudo-mimetic representation of dialogue gives way to a wholly unsaid and more powerful interaction: “My faltering voice and pausing harp / Disturb’d [Genevieve’s] soul with pity! / All impulses of soul and sense / Had thrill’d my guileless Genevieve” (67-70). His failure to execute the perfect tale—where the knight expires without speaking his last words—secures the imperfection necessary to enlivening the speaker’s and Genevieve’s connection. As is characteristic of Coleridge when describing interpersonal merging, he adopts the passive tense and grants objects or concepts agency, just as he did when recounting the pig look and when describing Christabel’s mirroring of Geraldine. In “Love,” the moment before the speaker is sure that Genevieve has fallen for him, the speaker’s first-person perspective momentarily dissolves. In these key stanzas, their point of contact is at once hazy and replete with the overlap of natural signs and words that Genevieve does not merely speak but “breathes”:

And hopes, and fears that kindle hope,
An undistinguishable throng,
And gentle wishes long subdued,
   Subdued and cherish’d long!

She wept with pity and delight,
She blush’d with love and virgin shame;
And like the murmur of a dream,
   I heard her breathe my name. (73-80)

Recognizing the speaker’s intense longing, Genevieve traverses the gap between them, and the ballad closes with each party gazing upon the other, attaining mutual “calm” (93) once they are engaged.

Genevieve’s willingness to bridge the gap between speaker and interlocutor counters the idea that language, as Coleridge’s wrote with his usual unwitting ability to
articulate the inarticulable, “is still at once the Link & the Wall of Separation”
(Notebooks 2:2998). The speaker uses balladic tales of thwarted romance, insanity, and chivalry to excite and persuade his seemingly silent lover to marry him. In other words, he gets to have it both ways: his reading audience raptly attends to the poem while, in the verses themselves, his speaker tailors his story to subtle, perceived changes in Genevieve’s mood and countenance. At once distanced from his story of the knight and cleverly using this poetry to effect an immediate sensory and intellectual connection, the speaker moves between the frame narrative and inset tale to remind the reader of the controlled spontaneity characteristic of conversational poetics: as much as the speaker dictates what happens, Genevieve’s responses ultimately determine the poem’s unfolding as he calibrates his manifest desire for her:

I told her how he pined: and ah!
The deep, the low, the pleading tone
With which I sang another’s love
Interpreted my own.

She listen’d with a flitting blush,
With downcast eyes and modest grace;
And she forgave me, that I gazed
Too fondly on her face. (33-40)

The poem closes with the perfect (and poetic) union of verbal and nonverbal communication—as well as an implied sexual consummation. Beyond even Sara’s responsiveness in “The Eolian Harp,” the speaker’s tales inspire Genevieve both to speak and to accept his romantic advances through looks and the pressing of breasts. They meet each other quite literally halfway:

She wept with pity and delight,
She blush’d with love, and virgin shame;
And like the murmur of a dream,
I heard her breathe my name.
Her bosom heaved—she stepp’d aside,
As conscious of my look she stept—
Then suddenly, with timorous eye
She fled to me and wept.

She half enclosed me with her arms,
She press’d me with a meek embrace;
And bending back her head, look’d up,
And gazed upon my face.

'Twas partly love, and partly fear,
And partly ’twas a bashful art
That I might rather feel, than see,
The swelling of her heart. (77-92)

Taylor astutely observes that “Love’s” concluding stanzas successively “build…up a responsive love of watching, listening, and attending to one another.” However, this love grants Genevieve more power than Taylor would allow. By the end of the poem, the speaker no longer leers at and entices his would-be object, for she looks back and demands that the speaker “rather feel, than see” (91) her physical presence similar to Sara Fricker in “The Eolian Harp.” He comes to know that Genevieve could either side-step his advances or embrace them with an odd weeping joy not unlike Christabel’s mixed reaction to her encounter with Geraldine. As Taylor also grants, she eventually chooses to “love on her own will: she is a full participant, eager to do what the woman in the inner tale does not have the emotional resilience to do.”

“To Asra” only complements “Love” as its antitype. It is marked by a sense of tangible frustration. Whereas “Love” celebrates the poet’s triumphant attainment of reciprocal verbal and tactile contact with his beloved, “To Asra” is unilaterally confused and tentative:

Are there two things, of all which Men possess,
That seem are so like each other and so near
As mutual Love seems like to Happiness?
Dear Asra, Woman beyond utterance dear!
This Love, which ever welling at my heart
Now in it’s [sic] living fount doth heave and fall,
Now overflowing pours thro’ every part
Of all my Frame, and fills and changes all,
Like vernal waters springing up thro’ Snow—
This Love, that seeming great beyond the power
Of Growth, yet seemeth evermore to grow—
Could I transmute the whole to the rich dower
Of Happy Life, and give it all to Thee,
Thy Lot, methinks, were Heaven, thy Age Eternity! (1-14)

Originally containing two “seems,” a pair of which reemerge in lines 10 and 11, its opening question casts doubt on the validity of its comparison of “two things” to “mutual Love” and “Happiness”: “Are there two things, of all which men possess, / That are so like each other and so near, / As mutual Love seems like to Happiness?” (1-3). Here, the possession of internal qualities, happiness, and reciprocity feel irreconcilable and the “question” irresolvable. As Wolfson points out, “the emotional pain of this question, which is really no question but a proposal of desire, is that there is no equation for this speaker: ‘seems like,’ devastatingly, names the illusion that even a simile cannot fancifully recuperate.” This irresolution infuses the entire poem; if, in Christabel, Geraldine is the “lord” of Christabel’s utterance (268), Asra transcends articulation altogether. She is doubly “dear” to Coleridge in his affection for her and his sense of emotional indebtedness to her: “Dear Asra, woman beyond utterance dear!” (4).

Nevertheless, in keeping with the fantasies about perfect communication that he articulates in “Love,” Coleridge attempts to describe the endless escalation of his passion from moment to moment, repeating “now” in lines 6 and 7, but the sensations of love that “overflowing pour[] thro’ every part / Of all my Frame, and fills and changes all” (7-8) leave him once again “seeming” and “growing” to no avail. “No utterance” can
adequately establish a situation where Sara would respond to Coleridge through speech. He forces a sense of twoness upon the poem by repeating pairs of words, but its resulting clumsiness makes clear that answering the opening question is impossible. These formal issues culminate in its lack of a decisive volta. At best, the only shift comes between lines 11 and 12 in which Coleridge assumes an abstracted parental role, all but anticipating Christabel’s “Conclusion to Part the Second.” He attempts to quantify his love for her with a monetized “dower,” perhaps in reference to how “dear” Asra is, but, with this subjunctive blessing, he couches his gift in a timid “methinks” to acknowledge the futility of any such acquisition. Like Sara Fricker in “The Eolian Harp,” Asra is neither an object nor a clearly articulable trope that can be bought, reified, or managed.

Accordingly, when Sara Hutchinson pastes the sonnet into her copy of Christabel, she makes an incisive interpretative claim: as our eyes move from the inside cover to the album’s facing page, the real turn in “To Asra” is to Christabel itself—a poem whose accounts of communication and desire devolve into a form of social rejection that is nightmarish both for establishing an intense “unconscious Sympathy” (609) and realizing Christabel’s inadvertent yet self-imposed isolation from her father and from Geraldine. Sara indicates her awareness of how important gendered communication is to both poems: Christabel explores the creative potential behind unspoken connections and sexual interactions between its female protagonists, whereas in “To Asra,” Coleridge cannot reconcile himself to language’s limitations when seeking intimacy. By setting these two poems side by side, Sara tries to converse with Coleridge, suggesting that he revise this thinking about eroticized communication by attending to his own poetry. Their potential love, as Coleridge’s sonnet anticipates and Sara already knew, could only breed
disaster: if the women in Christabel momentarily immerse themselves in a more satisfying and alternative language of physical contact, in the end, they are robbed of their utterances as well as their mobility, leaving them at the mercy of stringent social conventions.

Like Sara Fricker, then, Sara Hutchinson is no trope or cipher; she does respond to the man who loved her even though Coleridge, at once brilliantly preoccupied with and tormented by conversational poetics, seems not to have registered her meaning. Her inclusion of the sonnet shows how keenly Sara hears and “speaks” Christabel’s inarticulable language of poetic sympathy when Coleridge does not: he insists upon finding the right “utterance” in his most personal love poetry even though it undermines his own principles of “love correspondence” (Marginalia 2:197). And indeed, Coleridge never did reach these impassioned goals in his personal life because, in a sense, he never assumed Christabel’s fluidly receptive and capaciously feminine position—only her alienated one. He would not embrace the girl to whom no one would listen, instead seeing what he wanted to see and hearing what he wanted to hear. In short, Coleridge became the kind of man he despised and that Christabel ridicules in Leoline, Bracy, and the speaker—a half-listener, hearkening to a self-defeating love that, in the end, could only correspond to despair.

1 That Coleridge would, in 1817, include women’s interpersonal interactions within his account of “human nature” (well after he had spent significant time defending and glossing the published version of Christabel to mollify hostile critics) once again speaks to his persistent engagement with women’s complex humanity for all of his acquiescence to, especially in the case of Geraldine, her status as both a potentially possessed woman and, in his 1824 gloss to the poem, “a supernatural being” (PW note to lines 451-56, p. 497).
Essay on Physiognomy, vol. 1, (1775-78) trans. Thomas Holcroft (London: C. Whittingham, for H. D. Symonds, 1804), 21. Despite Lavater’s claim that “pathognomy” has been widely studied, as a term, it appears infrequently in English, and invariably after his Essay’s first publication in English (which was the Holcroft edition).


In Wollstonecraft’s opening letter to the Vindication of the Rights of Woman, in which she explains how women are not only excluded from the recent radical assertion of political rights in France, she asserts that they are “without... a voice” (67) and in turn are left to subversive tactics within their households to acquire social power. This is a universal desire to Wollstonecraft’s thinking, but women’s attempts gain power has disastrous effects when they lack an education in anything other than to subordinate themselves to men. Some of the text’s central conceits emphasize female vacuousness and their status as animals, slaves, toys, and children, since their existence is predicated on being a supplement to men (who are themselves corrupted by this unequal dynamic): “As the fair sex, the business of their lives is gallantry. — They were taught to please, and they only live to please” (Vindication, 89). On female “presentism,” Wollstonecraft writes, “For though moralists have agreed that the tenor of life seems to prove that man is prepared by various circumstances for a future state, they constantly concur in advising woman only to provide for the present. Gentleness, docility, and a spaniel-like affection are, on this ground, consistently recommended as the cardinal virtues of the sex; and disregarding the arbitrary economy of nature, one writer has declared that it is masculine for a woman to be melancholy. She was created to be the toy of man, his rattle, and it must jingle in his ears whenever, dismissing reason, he chooses to be amused” (Vindication, 100). Wollstonecraft also places the blame for the exclusion of women from worldly knowledge on marital infidelity. The domestic sphere that women are expected to uphold collapses after the dissipation of sexual infatuation, leading to infidelity and further confirming that a woman’s sole value is in coquettishness and the appearance of desirability rather than her capacity to be an intellectual partner: “whilst [women] are only made to acquire personal accomplishments, men will seek for pleasure in variety, and faithless husbands will make faithless wives; such ignorant beings, indeed, will be very excusable when, not taught to respect public good, nor allowed any civil rights, they attempt to do themselves justice by retaliation” (“A Vindication of the Rights of Men” [1792] in A Vindication of the Rights of Men; A Vindication of the Rights of Woman; An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution, ed. Janet Todd [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press], 68).

For discussions of etiquette manuals and the interest in regulating conversational decorum in the eighteenth century, see Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady, 3-47; Lucy Morrison, “Conduct (Un)Becoming to Ladies of Literature: How-To Guides for Romantic Women Writers,” Studies in Philology 99, no. 2 (2002): 202-228; Bharat Tandon, Jane Austen and the Morality of Conversation (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 1-54; see also Anne K. Mellor’s discussion of manners and conduct books directed toward women, and how more “feminist,” female authors such as Maria Edgeworth and
Mary Wollstonecraft responded by emphasizing that the “enduring domestic affections over unlicensed sexual passion as the basis of true love and benevolence,” (*Romanticism and Gender* [New York and Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 1993], 31-64); Mellor frames the question of ideal female behavior or “talents” in terms of critical approaches to Coleridge’s perception of women in “Coleridge and the Question of Female Talents,” *Romanticism* 8, no. 2 (2002): 115-130; see also Taylor, “Filling the Blanks,” 84-88.


8 Ibid., xcix.

9 See the Introduction to this dissertation that discusses Smith, but also addresses David Hume’s more facile notion of “entering into” others’ feelings despite being a skeptic, *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739-40] ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2.2.5, 234. Chapter One, however, also discusses the issue of “vivacity” and interpersonal “fading” in Hume’s metaphors of mirroring, making sympathy somewhat more difficult than his cavalier phrasing might initially suggest; Nancy Yousef investigates Hume and the sympathetic distance (rather than comparatively impartial judgment) in *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 74-81.


11 In one of the few references to communication between men and women in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith acknowledges a certain measure of disorder in romantic relationships but is strongly sympathetic to women’s positions, who, by social standards of the period, were subject to inequality and in constant danger of “ruin.” It is also unclear whether his reference to “weakness” is directed toward women or social norms. He also grants women a greater capacity for aesthetic appreciation due to their receptivity to the emotional dimensions of theater and art: “The reserve which the laws of society impose upon the fair sex, with regard to this weakness, renders it more peculiarly distressful in them, and, upon that very account, more deeply interesting… The sympathy we feel with them [the love object], renders the passion which they accompany less disagreeable, and supports it in our imagination, notwithstanding all the vices which commonly go along with it; though in the one sex it necessarily leads to the last ruin and infamy; and though in the other, where it is apprehended to be least fatal, it is almost
always attended with an incapacity for labour, a neglect of duty, a contempt of fame, and even of common reputation” (The Theory of Moral Sentiments, 1.2.2.5, 33). As noted in the Introduction, see Adela Pinch on women’s civilizing capacity to influence “taste” (Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996], 53).

12 “Sympathy, Physiognomy, and Scottish Romantic Fiction” in Recognizing the Romantic Novel: New Histories of British Fiction (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 289. Even though Duncan describes the relationship between Scottish Enlightenment forms of sympathy (namely Adam Smith) and physiognomy, a connection in continuity with this project’s concern with embodiment and sympathetic paradoxes, he is concerned with narrative and novels. Calling sympathy “the dialectical medium of sentimental and social formation,” he writes, “The literary uses of physiognomy, the most elaborate of a range of Enlightenment techniques for interpreting, representing and thus fully socializing the embodied self, are less well studied. If Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments undertakes the age’s most ambitious codification of sympathy as the foundation of a modern moral technology, Johann Kaspar Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy… expresses, in an attempt to solve, this project’s ethical and epistemic crisis”—i.e. the issue of “entering into” another person’s thoughts and feelings (“Sympathy, Physiognomy, and Scottish Romantic Fiction,” 286).

13 Since Aussichten in die Ewigkeit in Briefen an Herrn Joh. Georg Zimmermann is not available in English translation, quotes from this text have been taken from Carsten Zelle’s translations of passages in his book chapter, “Soul Semiology: On Lavater’s Physiognomic Principles” in The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater, ed. Ellis Shookman (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1993), 40-63. The original quotation from Lavater’s Aussichten is in vol. 3 (Zurich: Orell, Gessner, und Comp., 1768-1773/8), 101-108.


15 See Charles Bell’s Essay on the Anatomy of Expression in Painting (London: Longman, 1806). Lavater goes as far as to suggest that to be a “good physiognomist,” one must possess good physiognomy in the first place: “The handsomest painters were the greatest painters” (Essay on Physiognomy, 116). See also Essay on Physiognomy, 116-27; Lavater also remarks on painters’ limitations when capturing features, Essay on Physiognomy, 219-20.

16 See, for example, Essay on Physiognomy’s plates for pages 66, 114, 174, 208, 240, et al. The vast majority of the plates depict men, although it may be the case that one or two silhouettes are women in the plates for p. 114, although Lavater does not clarify the gender of any of the plates. Still, they are by and large obviously male. Figure 3.1 presents a more androgynous silhouette situated amid a series of masculine profiles.

17 Lavater presents an interesting case of straddling the line between natural and arbitrary signs, as well as a kind of materialist view of signification due to his fixation on the body. He wants to make people “legible,” who are, of course, tangible and therefore not necessarily an “arbitrary sign,” as I discuss in the notes to the Introduction to this dissertation. However, Lavater does hollow individuals of their individuality, setting
aside what they actually communicate and insists upon making them static and rationally explainable; that said, there does not seem to be much room for the Lockean “voluntary” negotiation of meaning when Lavater superimposes meaning upon those subject to scrutiny, assuming that we should all “agree” with his theory, to refer to Habermasian views of discourse. See Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [1689], ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 3.2.1, 405; Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, vol. 1 trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981). It is important to note that Thomas Reid’s understanding of physiognomy combines permanent “dispositions” with pathognomic expressions, and he is more interested in the latter: “[T]here are certain modifications of the human face, which are natural signs of the present disposition of the mind. Every man understands the meaning of these signs, but not one of a hundred ever attended to the signs themselves, or knows anything about them. Hence you may find many an excellent practical physiognomist who knows nothing of the proportions of a face, nor can delineate or describe the expression of any one passion” (“An Inquiry” in *Thomas Reid’s Inquiry and Essays* ed. Ronald E. Beanblossom and Keith Lehrer [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983], 77, emphasis added).

18 Qtd. in Gessner, “Memoirs,” xcvi.
19 Ibid., xcvi.
20 Coleridge’s application of physiognomy to art in 1806 coincides with Bell’s application of Lavater’s methods to aesthetic criticism (and the composition of art) in 1806. See Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 44-79 for an extensive discussion of Bell and Lavater. Coburn notes that Coleridge was familiar with Bell in her gloss on a notebook entry from the late 1820s that also, interestingly, links beauty (with a neologism, “mesothesis”) to the body, leading Coleridge to further wonder “Whether… Respiration is the Mediator of the Musculo-arterial and the Nervous <i>e.g. Cerebral> System, so the Nerves so named may not convey an indifference or mesothesis of Motion = Volition, and Sensation?—Even as Beauty is the mesothesis or amphoter (=both and neither, or neither because both) of Sense and Sensation” (*Notebooks 5:6542*). It is unclear whether he would have read Bell at the time of composing the May 1806 entry, though.
22 For one of the few, and abbreviated, discussions of Coleridge and this notebook entry, see Nichola Deane, “Coleridge and J. C. Lavate’s Essays on Physiognomy,” *Notes and Queries* 49, no. 1 (2002): 29-30, where she reads the passage as Coleridge lauding himself for exceptional physiognomic insight. My reading calls attention to how a physiognomic “substrate” grows expressions—and what primarily interests Coleridge in his description of the Ideal.
23 As late as 1822, Coleridge would assert that that “I cannot love without esteem, neither can I esteem without loving” in a melancholy account of his withdrawal from personal and emotionally vulnerable conversation (qtd. in *Letters, Conversations and Recollections of S. T. Coleridge*, vol. 2 ed. Thomas Allsop [London: Edward Moxon, 1836], 213).

Perry equates the electrometer with the Aeolian harp in *Coleridge and the Uses of Division* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), 162. By contrast, Paul Gilmore, albeit not in direct reference to Perry, points out how electrical and mechanical metaphors for transatlantic romantic poetry were distinct from the Aeolian harp even if they had conceptual affinities, *Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 6-7.


Coleridge frequently shared poetic “information” with the Wordsworths, and even in some of his most maudlin letters to the siblings, he interweaves fantasies of admirable coupledom and poetic experimentation. Around same time Coleridge was praising Dorothy’s shrewd, flexible, and responsive form of embodied existence in a social environment, he famously closed a December 1798 letter with two sentences, a portion of which Newlyn uses to title her biography of the Wordsworths, *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: All in Each Other* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Taken in full, the lines seem to epitomize Coleridge’s cringe-worthy capacity for self-pity: “William, my head and my heart! dear William and dear Dorothea! / You have all in each other; but I am lonely, and want you!” (*Letters* 1:452). These lines are generally read to be a lament about the friends’ separation while traveling in Germany (*All in Each Other*, xi), but Coleridge and Wordsworth conceived of them quite differently. Not a sentence at all, they are not quite as confessional, if not desperate, as they may seem; the lines were overt experiments in poetic form. Coleridge was working through “English hexameters,” about which he successfully solicited a response not only from Wordsworth but also erudite female interlocutors. After discussing the nuances of Vergilian and German hexameter as well as metrical feet, he writes, “Thirdly, women all dislike the hexameters with whom I have talked. They say, and in my opinion they say truly, that only the two last feet have any discernible melody” (*Letters* 1:451). Wordsworth concurs with “the German ladies” and only briefly acknowledges the “sentiment” present in the verse’s content (*The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth—The Early Years: 1787-1805*, vol. 1, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and Chester L. Shaver [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967], 236). As Coleridge desired, the exchange is primarily grounded in a discussion of the unspoken dimensions of poetic form, but Wordsworth revises Coleridge’s and his female conversation partners’ term, “melody,” to a more abstracted form of “sensation” (*Early Years* 1:236). Indeed, the notion that Coleridge would take seriously women’s opinions about any intellectual topic—let alone poetic form, nonverbal musicality, and drafts of his poetry—runs counter to the common critical perspective that he was prone to, when
not belittling them, indulging a Petrarchan model of sadomasochistic romantic idealization. More than this, though, we can also see based upon Wordsworth’s reaction and Coleridge’s phrasing that what he “wants” from William and his sister is not the triangulation with which we associate gender dynamics in nineteenth-century literature. While he does miss his friends, Coleridge also expresses a desire for a similar kind of relationship grounded in mutual possession of each other—of “having all” while, as we saw above, resisting the kind of absorption that robbed Dorothy of her own poetic potential. By granting that women could have a keen insight into the unspoken aspects of poetic musicality and meter, this exchange between the two poets illustrates Coleridge’s association of not general social intimacy, but coupled correspondence, with poetic form.

28 Ernest Harley Coleridge suggests that this word is “husk,” but having personally examined the manuscript, the word seems to be “hush”; “hush” also makes more contextual sense. See also Earl Leslie Griggs, “Coleridge as Revealed in his Letters” in *Coleridge’s Variety: Bicentenary Studies* ed. John Beer (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974), 45-46, who transcribes this word as “Hush-st.”

29 He impulsively overlays his response upon Lady Beaumont’s hand, who had written in yet another response to a conversation during which Coleridge had apparently shared a piece of writing. Far from badgering Coleridge to resume poetic composition as his violently emotional response would suggest, Lady Beaumont agrees that metaphysical writings can fire his poetic imagination: “let me remind you of our last conversation wherein you said that metaphysics so far from deadening the spirit of imagination had added new wings from the power of contrast, and the last specimen you read is a proof of your not having deceived yourself, do not let the last rays sink for want of exertions” (*Letters* 6:731 n. 1).

30 *The Thirteen-Book Prelude*, ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1:43. Subsequent references to the 1805 Prelude will be made in-text by book and line number.

31 While accounts of the “spots of time” and the “blind beggar” abound, see Nancy Yousef, *Romantic Intimacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 83-97, 130-32 for a detailed reading of the roles of silence and physical distance in the “discharged soldier” episode.


33 My reading of “correspondence” differs from Abrams’s in his seminal article, “The Correspondent Breeze,” which examines wind tropes in Romantic poetry including Coleridge’s. I do not see the correspondent breeze solely as a metaphor for mind or “an entirely invisible power known only by its effects, thus play[ing] its part in the Romantic revolt against the world-view of the Enlightenment” (“The Correspondent Breeze: A Romantic Metaphor,” *The Kenyon Review* 19, no. 1 [1957]: 129). On the contrary, such a reading would seem to indicate the exact opposite: the breeze is results-oriented in its metaphorical capacity to inspire. Fundamentally, Abrams advocates an “expressive” version of Romanticism while overlooking the obvious: correspondence demands a form of sociability that is interactive.

“Dorothy Wordsworth’s Return to Tintern Abbey,” *New Literary History* 26, no. 2 [1995]: 309. This reading, as Soderholm also notes, refutes Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom, both of whom view the turn to Dorothy “as generously including her in the poet’s landscape of memory” (“Return to Tintern,” 313).

Erinç Özdemir has advanced an intertextual understanding of Dorothy and William’s joint work, suggesting that her poem, “Thoughts on my sick-bed,” is “embodying a direct response to ‘Tintern Abbey’” (“Two Poems by Dorothy Wordsworth in Dialogic Interaction with ‘Tintern Abbey,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 44, no. 4 [2005]: 551-52, emphasis added). He inadvertently notes the importance of her physical presence to understanding Wordsworth’s simultaneous discomfort with and desire for interpersonal contact; yet, similar to Don Bialostosky and Paul Magnuson, Özdemir takes a Bakhtinian approach to “dialogue” that is grounded in the “voice”—itself a byword for spoken language; see Bialostosky, *Wordsworth, Dialogics, and the Practice of Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Magnuson, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). Alternatively, Heidi Thomson turns to historical poetics to reclaim Dorothy’s agency. She bases her reading on the poem’s relationship to English odes, which often feature sharp turns between verse paragraphs, and classical rhetoric, thus advancing a more capacious understanding of the Romantic egotism with which “Tintern Abbey” is often associated. “Dorothy’s part,” she writes, “is not to serve as the speaker’s nursery training wheels en route to individual selfhood. On the contrary, the poem affirms the continuous necessity for a web of interlocution between Wordsworth and his sister to substantiate the myth of memory” (“‘We Are Two’: The Address to Dorothy in ‘Tintern Abbey,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 40, no. 4 [2001]: 533).


“Nutting” closes as follows: “I felt a sense of pain when I beheld / The silent trees and the intruding sky.— / Then, dearest Maiden! move along these shades / In gentleness of heart; with gentle hand / Touch,—for there is a Spirit in the woods” (50-4). As in “Tintern,” the speaker advises the “Maiden” to avoid his own rapacious mistakes in the untouched nut grove, warily displacing his “pain” and nervousness about being in physical proximity to nature onto a “gentler” female figure. For a reading of the conclusion to “Nutting” as “didactic” and a serious flaw given its intended inclusion into the *Prelude*, see Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of Form* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 60-76.

*Early Years*, 330-331.


Magnuson overtly discusses the movement from love and “sexual union” to intellectualism in these terms (“Dead Calm,” 55).


As other critics have noted, by calling the poem “Miltonic,” I am referring to “Il Penseroso.”

Some years later in “To William Wordsworth” (1807), a poem that Frederick Burwick has observed alludes heavily to “The Eolian Harp,” “Coleridge’s Conversation Poems: Thinking the Thinker,” *Romanticism* 14, no. 2 (2008): 168-82. This passivity clumsily echoes the kind of replication without reproduction that Coleridge disparaged in his letter to Henry Crabb Robinson, where “1 x 1 = 1” (*Letters* 3:305). In “The Eolian Harp,” though, Coleridge ponders his physical and imaginative environments while never quite losing hold of his “subject”—the speaker as lute; the lute as wordlessly speaking.


From the very first poem Coleridge ever wrote to Sara in 1794, she resists incorporation into such Spenserian sexual scenarios where no means yes, or where she would acquiesce to becoming an empty, Lavaterian female who could speak a “Sweet Falsehood, that endears Consent! […] Dawns the soft relenting smile, / And tempts with feign’d dissuasion coy / The gentle violence of Joy” (“The Kiss” 24-28). While Taylor contends, in terms hostile to Sara, that Coleridge’s speaker cannot help but acknowledge the “complex negative aura of his future bride,” she neglects the actual source of this “complex negative desire”: the speaker himself (*Erotic Coleridge*, 25). He recognizes and is troubled by the temptation to foist himself upon a romantic partner, indulging the “gentle violence” underlying all such tropes. As he would write to Robert Southey on regarding how their Pantisocracy scheme required that he marry Sara, Coleridge was deeply uncomfortable with turning a sexual partner into an object of lust: “Love makes all things pure and heavenly like itself:—but to marry a woman whom I do not love—to degrade her, whom I call my Wife, by making her the Instrument of low Desire […] Mark you, Southey!—I will do my Duty (*Letters* 1:145). Coleridge prefers a different kind of “instrument”—the harp—even figuring “The Eolian Harp’s” tropological and distinctly hypothetical “coy maid” in terms of halves (“half yielding”). By 1795, Coleridge has learned his lesson: the speaker of Effusion XXXV separates his initial address to Sara in the first verse paragraph from these Spenserian tropes in the second, displacing any such lustful desires upon an actual object and figure, “that simplest Lute… by the desultory breeze caressed” (“Eolian Harp” 12-14).
M. H. Abrams has demonstrated that this collapse of light into sound is representative of Coleridge’s adherence to a vitalist “metascience” that attempted to carve a place for human perception in Newton’s corpuscular approach to the material world; against Opticks and in favor of Schelling’s and others’ Naturphilosophen, Coleridge wrote on more than one occasion of how light and gravity were ideal powers from which qualitative phenomena, including sound, emerged, “Coleridge’s ‘A Light in Sound’: Science, Metascience, and Poetic Imagination,” Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society 116, no. 6 (1972): 461-66. See also Richard C. Sha, “Toward a Physiology of the Romantic Imagination,” Configurations 17, no. 3 (2009): 197-226.

Richard Berkeley writes of the “ambiguity of silence” as reflected in Coleridge’s form and content, and particularly “The Eolian Harp” and Christabel, but does so in anticipatory rather than responsive terms: “This experience of silence is crucially structured around sound and movement. When you notice a silence you listen further and further outwards until you hear something (a distant murmur) that limits the entranced state of listening. Silence is a clearing in the world of sound: to understand it we must listen through it to its limits” (“‘Jealous of the Listening Air’: Silence and Seduction in Christabel,” Romanticism 20, no. 3 [2014]: 262). Why Berkeley believes that listening must involve being “entranced” is unclear.

See Sally Trower for a discussion of the Aeolian harp metaphor’s relationship to contemporaneous understandings of nerves and associationist “vibrations,” further supporting my claim about the poet’s physical embedment in his environment by way of listening and immersion into rhythm, “Nerves, Vibration and the Aeolian Harp,” Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net 54 (2009), n. pag.

As I have mentioned, Lucy Newlyn and Taylor have both remarked upon the force with which Sara acts as an intervening presence, with Newlyn viewing her as a symbol of the reading public’s scrutiny (Reading, Writing, and Romanticism: The Anxiety of Reception [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], 72-74). Taylor reads the scene as Sara simply shooting one of many unpleasant looks upon which Coleridge would remark throughout his life (Erotic Coleridge, 25-6). Less has been said about Sara’s ability as a woman not to stunt his production of poetry or poetic discussion, as Wordsworth’s “pig look” would later do in 1803 (Notebooks 1:1606).

See Kelvin Everest, Coleridge’s Secret Ministry: The Context of the Conversation Poems 1795-1798 (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 218 for another interpretation that does not view Sara’s intervention as wholly negative; Jon Mee, too, remarks on Sara’s regulatory function, although he sees Coleridge’s imagination as a (tacitly) colonizing force: “Sara’s admonitory eye might be considered to validate Coleridge’s imagination as recognizing proper limits rather than cancelling it out. Only present in the text as Coleridge’s voice, his imagination effectively incorporates and levels off difference” (Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830 [Oxford and New York, 2011], 188).


Richard Holmes notes that, while coded in Latin, Coleridge retrospectively identified the moment he fell in love with Sara Hutchinson. Unsurprisingly, given his tactile orientation, they had been holding hands: “Three years later, when he was certainly deeply in love, he added a retrospective entry for 24 November 1799, which traces his fall to one vividly remembered incident which has all the accidental quality of truth… The Latin part of the entry reads in full: ‘and I held Sara’s hand for a long time behind my back, and then for the first time, Love pierced me with its dart, envenomed, and alas! incurable’” (Coleridge: Early Visions, 1772-1804 [London: Pantheon, 1989], 250).

In addition to Coleridge’s “A Letter” that would become “Dejection: an Ode” recited in late April 1802, Dorothy Wordsworth refers to letters containing “verses to Hartley & Sara H” received on 6 May 1802. In addition to the number of poems Coleridge mailed to Sara, Holmes also writes that he “continued to work on other Asra poems, bringing some of them over to Grasmere on 4 May” (Holmes, Early Visions, 323).


In a 10 January 1835 letter to J. H. Green, Sara Hutchinson expresses concern about recovering one of the books that Coleridge had given her, which she had lost due to having been away from Rydal Mount when his books were sent away after his death: “[Chapman’s Homer] was a gift of our dear friend to me—I therefore will not wonder that I am desirous of re-possessing it. His books were sent from Rydal when I was absent—& I do not know whether it was sent to Hampstead Highgate or to Helston—Should you meet with it among the books I shall be greatly obliged if you will retain it for me” (The Letters of Sara Hutchinson from 1800 to 1835, ed. Kathleen Coburn. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1954], 439).

Holmes, Early Visions, 253. See Kathleen Coburn, Introduction to the Letters of Sara Hutchinson, xxi-xxxviii; Taylor, Erotic Coleridge, 77-78.

Holmes, Darker Reflections, 148.

See the previous chapter, Figures 2.1 and 2.2., “Dupliciter Unum.”

“Dejection’s” power to have a physical and emotional effect upon its readers and auditors is famously recorded in Dorothy’s Grasmere journal, when in April 1802, “Coleridge came to us & repeated the verses he wrote to Sara. I was affected with them, & was on the whole, not being well, in miserable spirits” (The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals, ed. Pamela Woof [Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002], 89).

Erotic Coleridge, 78. Coleridge compares the receptions of “Love” and Christabel in his Conclusion to the Biographia 2:238.

This phrase, “subtle matter” [matière subtile] is drawn from Descartes’s Meteorology (although it also features in his correspondence and the Treatise on Man and Passions) in which the philosopher advanced a more materialist, corpuscular understanding of continual, extended matter not wholly unlike Newton’s corpuscular theory that relied on concepts of heat and magnetism. “Meteorology” [Les Météores, p. 1637] in Oeuvres de Descartes, vol. 6, ed. Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (Paris: Léopold Cerf, 1902), 233-39. Indeed, as George S. Erving observes of Coleridge’s attitudes toward Priestley and Newton that he may have objected to “thinking matter,” it seems that he thought
otherwise about sub-intentional, feeling matter; namely, what bodies could say in tandem with the words that sought to broach gaps between lovers, “The Politics of Matter: Newtonian Science and Priestleyan Metaphysics in Coleridge’s ‘Preternatural Agency,’” *European Romantic Review* 19, no. 3 (2008): 219-323. But to cultivate these bonds, Coleridge also had to—and had a natural talent for—assuming and exploring what made female communication often superior to establishing the intimate bonds of a “real Self” (*Notebooks* 1:979). Ideally and accordingly, then, he found himself admiring and acknowledging the power of these female modes of response independent of what personal gain he may have extracted from them. As we saw in his account of Dorothy, with his reference to “subtle matter,” too, Coleridge described his esteem for other “exquisite” women in materialist metaphors like the electrometer.

66 Of course, the vagabond rapist scenario and medieval references have parallels to Christabel’s discovering of Geraldine in *Christabel*, and Coleridge was composing “Love” and “The Dark Ladie” (a poem closely related to “Love”) at around the same time. The movement of “Love’s” inset tale from rejection to acceptance that cannot be articulated in the knight’s story but is nonverbally communicated in the frame narrative, however, reverses *Christabel’s* unfolding.

67 *Erotic Coleridge*, 81.

68 Ibid., 81.

PART TWO

Other Matters of Discussion

I wish to go on writing ad infinitum to you—I wish for interesting matter, and a pen as swift as the wind—but the fact is I go so little into the Crowd now that I have nothing fresh and fresh everyday to speculate upon, except my own Whims and Theories.

(John Keats to George & Georgiana Keats, *Keats Letters* 1:400 [21 October 1818])

Of all earthly things
I fear a man whose blows outspeed his words.

(Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Cenci* 2.2.124-25)
Chapter Four

Keats’s Chameleon Poetics

John Keats’s “camelion Poet” has long been hiding in plain sight. In his 27 October 1818 letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, he puts the creature in apposition to the “poetical character,” a selfless entity that seems amoral, dispassionate, and so sympathetic that “the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that, I am in very little time annihilated” (KL 1:387). Fittingly, though, we only catch a glimpse of the chameleon after several cryptic if not outright paradoxical definitions: “it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated” (KL 1:387). Given the “negative” quality of these references, scholars have chosen to read the poetical character in connection to “negative capability,” a solitary and internal frame of mind in which “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (KL 1:193). However, it remains the case that the “chameleon poet” is a more precise metaphor than the deliberate generalizations and negations that precede it.

The critical tradition of overlooking Keats’s particular choice of the chameleon to describe the—and his—poetical character runs parallel to the tendency to disregard Keats’s broader commitment not merely to the senses, but to particular objects and experiences, to forms of lyric embodiment that do not solely drive toward death, and to the inspirational qualities of what he called the “material sublime.” In this chapter, I chart how and why the chameleon poet can help us understand Keats’s much-discussed notion
of dispersed yet puzzlingly autonomous personhood in a way that negative capability cannot. For Keats, the chameleon was a discrete poetic figure that also illustrated his belief in the continuities between material and social environments—a position he developed by drawing upon both the animal’s variegated literary history and new natural-historical approaches to analyzing its transformative physical abilities. As a creature that was at once substantively independent and mercurial, it could immerse itself into a tactile environment of give and take, becoming both subject and responsive to the possibilities presented by the present moment and material world.³

Still, in keeping with its nature, the chameleon metaphor would first appear to be so self-explanatory that it is one of these least perplexing aspects of the poetical character. Chameleons’ skins automatically change color in response to light and other environmental variables.⁴ They camouflage themselves to hide from predators, underscoring how the poetical character is supposedly passive and retiring—a model example of Keats’s fraught preoccupation with an “annihilating” poetic nonidentity that is both liberating and terrifying.⁵ Such readings discount how the ever-changing chameleon is neither a historically stable metaphor nor did it always have exclusively negative connotations. Unlike the nightingale, whose endless song is invariably associated with poetic inspiration, the chameleon was consistently linked to worldly and flexible forms of communication. It was analogized to the quintessential liar in the medieval and early-modern periods, while, in the eighteenth century, it modeled the excellent (or at least highly committed) conversationalist. By the Romantic period, the chameleon became a means to describe how a good conversationalist should occupy the present moment, unselfishly concentrating upon and, to an extent, being vulnerable to
others in order to support an ongoing discussion that, ideally, would never come to a defined conclusion. And with the rise of more rigorous and classificatory natural-historical practices, the association of the chameleon with intimate conversation became even more entrenched in its remarkable anatomy and behavior. Its exotic appearance, distinctive capacity to manifest light through color changes, and ability to inflate itself by “consuming” air moved both natural historians and literary authors to understand the chameleon as a uniquely liminal figure: as an animal, it withdraws from human contact but remains fascinating for its ability to commune with, adapt to, and manifest intangible substances; as a metaphor, the environmentally embedded creature fluently responds and attends to its conversation partners for good or evil. Natural historians consequently set aside early-modern characterizations of the chameleon as a vacuous shape-shifter. Instead, the animal evolved into a creature of substance that could not be easily generalized or go unnoticed. By being so finely attuned to the present moment, its apparent “passivity” constituted a form of active commiseration with the contingencies of its immediate ecology.

Terms like ecology, contingency, and, in Keats’s letter itself, “speculation” (KL 1:387) all resonate with the current critical enthusiasm for applying present-day theories of “object-oriented ontology,” “speculative realism,” and “new materialisms” to literary texts. These approaches vary widely in emphasis—especially when it comes to materiality and communication—but they all hope to destabilize Kantian hierarchies between human subjects and objects. In the wake of the Anthropocene, justifiable anxieties fuel these posthumanist analyses; scholars debate the ethical consequences of representing the natural world with words and other media when such efforts could be
considered acts of anthropomorphic domination.\(^7\) Perhaps due to the deep interiority implied by more traditional accounts of lyric subjectivity, philosophers and literary critics alike have found themselves especially attracted to Romanticism when exploring such issues. These practices of anachronistic theoretical mediation, though, obscure the opportunity to look *directly* at Romantic poetry and poets’ awareness of natural-historical innovations and materialist ontologies when examining the intersections between aesthetics, language, and nonhuman environments—and, in turn, to pursuing alternative and ecologically mindful forms of poetic subjectivity.\(^8\)

Keats presciently probed the connections between materialism and conversation to imagine a more egalitarian and less anthropocentric poetics. In the chameleon poet, he creates a template for a vulnerable, humble, and embodied subject that seeks poetic inspiration as it moves through its immediate surroundings. When he articulates the environmental sources of this inspiration, he embraces the special qualities of poetry itself rather than equating art, literature, and even language with other kinds of “objects” or “perception” in general.\(^9\) Accordingly, reassessing his deliberate selection of a nonhuman metaphor to describe the sociable physicality involved in composing poetry shows the influence of eighteenth-century and Romantic discourses of philosophical materialism and multisensory communication on his thinking. Although there has been a great deal of important work on Keats’s social activities and interest in science respectively, scholars have not often brought together these two essential components of his thought.\(^10\) New scientific theories of dynamic “ether” and imponderable forces help explain why Keats’s chameleon submits to a constant interchange with the peculiarities of its social and material environments from “The Sun, the Moon, the Sea, and Men and
Women” (*KL* 1:387). As the poet would have known, philosophers and scientists were moving away from understandings of substance as static, impenetrable, or comprised of Newtonian “corpuscles,” a topic that has been explored in recent studies of Romantic vitalism by critics ranging from Robert Mitchell to Denise Gigante. By the late eighteenth century, natural historical and literary authors alike began to examine how matter could form uninterrupted connections with the human body, and some, like the chemist and rhetorician Joseph Priestley, overtly desired to collapse dualist separations between matter and spirit. Indeed, as Richard Sha has demonstrated, seemingly discrete forms of “matter,” materiality, and idealism were not incompatible in the period: writers had started to “link [these concepts] with indeterminacy, complexity, and dynamism”—all qualities that the chameleon exemplified by blending with and adapting to subtle atmospheric changes.

The chameleon reveals a side of Keats that does not fetishize grandiose allegorical figures like the nightingale or the “beauty that must die,” Melancholy. The poetry of earth truly is never dead (“On the Grasshopper” 1) when practicing chameleon poetics, for Keats models a way to have a more equitable and open-ended relationship to the material world that does not require critics to turn to contemporary posthumanist philosophies. Keats’s chameleon poet takes us on a different path: he attempts to combine words with unspoken, tactile communication to best engage with his irreducibly nonhuman environment. Not simply rehashing William Hazlitt’s notion of “disinterested” sympathy through which the chameleonic poetical character has often been read, Keats preserves the distance necessary for aesthetic perception, discussion, and literary composition to take place. He intertwines Romantic natural history with a conversational
orientation toward poetic inspiration to conjure a non-anthropocentric poetic subject that is physically susceptible to diverse local ecologies and grounded in the present moment—a moment construed not as a fixed point, but as a constantly unfolding process of attentive observation and response. And, as we shall see, this process underlies not only his unique epistolary style but also the formal structure of one of his most seemingly solipsistic poems, “Ode to a Nightingale.”

From Social Parasite to Social Operator

Chameleons had been associated with social duplicity and bodily vacuity since the sixteenth century. This was especially the case when describing Protean behavior or an entity capable of sustaining itself on nothing—or at least nothing substantial. Shakespeare, for example, applies the chameleon’s supposed ability to “feed upon the air” to characters who are mentally ephemeral, villainous, and opportunistic, or (compared to chameleon airiness) down to earth. Its medieval metaphorical precedents are also almost exclusively negative. Travel writers and proto-natural historians, such as Laurence Andrew in his translation of Hortus Sanitatus (1491), The Noble Lyfe a[nd] natures of man of bestes, serpentys, fowles a[nd] fisshes [that] be moste knoweu [sic] (c. 1527), comments on how the “Cameleon is a beste y1 is very ferfull bothe of man & all other bestis.” Andrew amplifies the creature’s exoticism by placing it out of human reach. However, despite inexplicably being able to change color, inflate itself, and therefore “feed upon the air,” this animal is not quite supernatural: Andrew recognizes that the chameleon’s timidity signifies its vulnerability to the material world into which it retreats.
These descriptions of the chameleon’s strange position between ephemerality and physicality manifest in religious texts as a metaphor for treacherous speech. *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (c. 1340), a Christian devotional compendium translated from the French text *Somme le Roi* (1297), features the chameleon’s first recorded use in English, comparing it to the liar who “like the devil, changeth in many ways the folk to beguile. He is like the chameleon [gamelos], that liveth by air, who with all sorts of colours has none of his own.”

Contrary to the common ahistorical assumption that the chameleon’s primary source of interest and figurative utility reside in its ability to change color, writers emphasized its ability to move among and manipulate ordinary people. Its capacity to “liveth by air” corresponds to the communicative “breath” that the somatic components of conversation entail. This preoccupation with how the chameleon can live in the world, and especially how it both inhales and digests its surroundings, also takes cues from Leviticus 11:30, which lists the chameleon among other “unclean,” forbidden animals according to Mosaic dietary laws. Even before the advent of the scientific method, then, the chameleon occupied an imaginative space that combined its vexing physicality with its fluid ability to blend into and consume the world. In rendering the chameleon an edible body at the same time it lives upon deceitful talk and other “airy” substances, these texts recognize the mutually constitutive relationship between natural-historical observations and more literary metaphors.

Closer to Keats’s own time, early eighteenth-century poetry retained some of the chameleon’s negative associations but likened its communicative abilities not to lying but to conversing. In Matthew Prior’s satirical poem “The Chameleon” (1718), the conversational creature is thoroughly of the moment and socially ambitious, but it does
not merely change colors: it “is known / To have no Colors of his own” as well as not
“one Notion of his own.”20 Until he is exposed to male acquaintances and coterie
discourse, he remains a thoughtless, dispossessed blank canvas. But the chameleon’s
capacity to take on acquaintances’ colors shines when they “befriend Him, / Smear’d
with the Colors, which They lend him” (19-20). Prior wryly remarks that this nightmarish
version of a Lockean tabula rasa does have one innate talent: he “is fit / To be a
Statesman, or a Wit” (11-12). On a more serious note, though, the poem pointedly closes
by reemphasizing the importance of style over content: the speaker alludes to the
chameleon’s specific mode of conversation within Queen-Anne coffeehouse and club
culture:

If happily he the Sect pursues,
That read and comment upon News;
He takes up Their mysterious Face;
He drinks his Coffee without Lace.
This week his Mimic-Tongue runs o’er
What they have said the Week before. (23-8)

In this passage, Prior plays with the chameleon’s “tongue” but does not figure him as a
clever and conniving assessor of the social “air” as did Shakespeare. Instead, he is a dull
but devoted follower of fashion, not quite meeting the standard that Jon Mee outlines
when accounting for how early eighteenth-century periodicals aspired to spur lively and
exclusive conversations between men.21 Rather, the quality (or the poverty) of the
chameleon’s ability to read with an eye toward discussion provides Prior with another
opportunity to ridicule the shape-shifter. Prior’s chameleon, like its predecessors,
embodies a paradox. He thoughtlessly picks up on nonverbal cues without
comprehending them—“Their mysterious Face”—but this easily impressionable social
being can only speak in terms of delay rather than in-the-moment quips: his news is from
“the Week before.” The chameleon conversationalist cannot banter, for his literal superficiality and stunted “Mimic-Tongue” end all discussions before they can truly begin.

Prior’s concern with temporally out-of-sync communication chafes against more favorable contemporaneous portrayals of the chameleon’s conversational abilities. Especially in the mid-eighteenth century, writers began to experiment with how the chameleon could help articulate the best way to occupy the present moment and remain open to other individuals’ rebuttals and replies. The noted conversationalist Lord Chesterfield, for instance, was careful to call attention to his positive use of the metaphor when describing ideal social behavior. In his 19 October 1748 letter to his son, Chesterfield depicts the chameleon socialite as a cosmopolitan figure that is neither socially passive nor preening and conspicuous; he is marked by his ability to adeptly observe and humble himself in a social environment: “A man of the world must, like the Cameleon, be able to take every different hue; which is by no means a criminal or abject, but a necessary complaisance; for it relates to manners, and not to morals.”

As in the medieval period, the limits to and advantages of chameleon communication developed in tandem with more systemized scientific attempts to analyze the lizard’s precise physiological traits and its relationship to its immediate physical environment. We find a particularly apt example of this type of combinatorial analysis in Oliver Goldsmith’s popular History of the Earth: And Animated Nature (1774). In it, he argues that the chameleon is not an ephemeral entity but is a type of creature that is somewhat akin to other embodied animals. Unlike his predecessors, Goldsmith explains that the chameleon’s transformative abilities are, in fact, restricted:
When it is wrapt up in a white linen cloth for two or three minutes, the natural colour becomes much lighter; but not quite white, as some authors have pretended: however, from hence it must not be concluded that the chameleon assumes the colour of the objects which it approaches; this is entirely an error, and probably has taken its rise from the continual changes it appears to undergo.  

Goldsmith also focuses on the chameleon’s more ordinary habits of existence in the material world, such as its manner of hunting insects, its movements, and its ability not to “eat” air but to inflate itself for hours at a time (154). As if protractedly inhaling its surroundings, the chameleon “is often seen […] blown up […] for two hours together; and then it continues growing less and less insensibly” (152). By this account, its simultaneous internalization and “sensible” expansion into its surroundings suggest a certain amount of agency on the lizard’s part at the same time it is subject to uncontrollable biological processes: “it can blow itself up, and contract itself, at pleasure […] these different tumours do not proceed from a dilatation of the breast in breathing, which rises and falls by turns; but are very irregular, and seem adopted merely from caprice” (151-2). Not a magical or “airy” creature as in previous metaphorical accounts, Goldsmith’s chameleon must inhale its immediate atmosphere, but sometimes does so for its own capricious purposes. The chameleon therefore occupies an indeterminate position between its physiological needs and willful physical expansion that Goldsmith always figures in terms of elapsed time. From the “two or three minutes” (154) it takes to adapt to being wrapped in a towel to the “two hours together” (152) it holds its breath, his account of the chameleon’s body and behavior is preoccupied with the lizard’s immersion into the present moment and, particularly, with how quickly it manifests environmental changes. Making visible the unseen materials of its surrounding ecology, the chameleon fascinates Goldsmith for its sensitive ability to occupy, suspend, or alter a moment at the
same time the animal is “continually” moving forward: its progressive ability to undergo “continual changes” (154) is the source of the “wonderful part of its history” (153).

Goldsmith’s description of the chameleon demonstrates how its metaphorical implications had begun to evolve beyond associations with prevarication, vapidity, and the capability to live on nothing. The chameleon’s most remarkable quality is not merely its capacity to change color, but rather its internalization of substances and attenuation to the shifting circumstances of its material surroundings. The present environmental moment appears on and is channeled through its body, and the chameleon’s ability to respond to ecological changes invites metaphorical speculation about how humans can occupy, classify, and attend to their own natural and social worlds. As Theresa M. Kelley has observed of botany in revolutionary France, Romantic natural historians constantly found themselves inventing taxonomies to accommodate the influx of newly discovered species, “eschew[ing] naïve fascination with the curiosities of nature for a more disciplined inquiry that itself seeks to discipline curiosity, accident, and contingency.”

Challenging Linnaeus’s system of categorization—which reordered both natural and social forms of classification—required scientists to embrace “a sense of openness toward a future that would be made available by sudden unexpected shifts in genre, events, or figurative language that constitute the possibility of freedom in history, and in Romanticism.” By incorporating contingency into their analytical rubrics, natural historians began to specify how the chameleon’s body might reveal the continuities and interchanges between animate and inanimate substances. Through the chameleon, the present moment is “continually” advancing but also legible—if we carefully attend to and drink in the materials that surround us.
This brief discussion of the chameleon’s metaphorical contexts elucidates the deliberate quality of Keats’s decision to reconceive of the animal as neither passive nor hollow; he drew upon the chameleon’s associations with communication and alternative forms of embodiment to model a nonhierarchical poetic subject that seeks creative inspiration from its material ecology. Just as Goldsmith did not view the chameleon as temporally locatable or physiologically predictable, Keats’s chameleon is alert to a tactile form of the present that is at once momentous and capacious. Its refusal to alight in any one place or any one color invite associations with lyric time and poetic subjectivity, where its form partly controls a poem’s processual unfolding, and the lizard itself exemplifies how Keats, as a poet, had a sensuous and, as he would say of Wordsworth’s early work, “explorative” engagement with a world of “dark passages” and inspiring contingencies (KL 1:280).

More broadly, by acknowledging the intentionality behind the specific terminology of the chameleon poet, we can better see how Keats repeatedly called upon materialist terminology to describe other indeterminate and dynamic figures before distilling these observations into the chameleon poet. From “Men of Power” in 1817 to the poet-speaker of his March 1818 “Epistle to J. H. Reynolds,” both are vulnerable to outside influences, but they elect to participate in and commune with their unpredictable surroundings in an actively passive—or, perhaps, passively active—manner. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats states that “Men of Genius are as great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect—but they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power” (KL 1:184). Keats was well aware of how the term “ethereal” was
directly linked to Sir Humphry Davy’s concept of “imponderable substances,” where properties like heat, light, and electricity were, as he put it, “terms representing the unknown causes of certain effects”; these mysterious substances, while connected to discernible material quantities, can only be studied by progressively assembling smaller particularities: “simple collections of facts.” In Keats’s letter, specific kinds of flexible men—“men of Genius” without “any determined Character”—can be socialized with irreducible and imponderable forces, for a lack of concretized “individuality” does not “annihilate” them, as most critics have read the conclusion of Keats’s letter to Woodhouse (KL 1:387). Instead, unstable subjectivities enable these men to develop an indeterminate and therefore “proper self” that grants them “Power.” Most importantly, Keats comes to this realization once he feels the idea “press… upon me… and [it] encreased my Humility and capability of submission” (KL 1:184). “Submission,” “humility,” and a resistance to “determined character” do not denote total passivity or result in oblivion. Power and genius arise from accepting the “press” of humility and from being willing to undergo constant changes in response to imponderable material forces—all of which language Keats also employed when describing his revision-oriented conversations with close friends.

Of course, when making any claim about Keats’s social life, we must acknowledge that he constellated his desire for personal privacy with his generous but continually reevaluated commitment to members of his circle. At once fiercely loyal and exceptionally attentive to others’ motivations and behaviors, Keats would support John Hamilton Reynolds through dark times but withdraw from Leigh Hunt’s overbearing influence. In another notable case, he analyzed Charles Dilke’s intellectual limitations;
namely, how Dilke “cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his
Mind about everything” as opposed to “strengthening one’s intellect… [by making] up
one’s mind about nothing” (KL 2:213).\(^{28}\) Constantly thinking and resistant to platitudes in
spite of his reputation for producing some of Romanticism’s most quotable aphorisms,
Keats disdained any mindless subscription to social mores and propriety, even going as
far as to overtly condemn forms of superficial conversation that are “not a search after
knowlge [sic], but an endeavour at effect” (KL 2:43). As one might expect, then, Keats
associated social posturing with the kind of public speech that frustratingly required the
*performance* of vulnerabilities that were only creatively productive when part of an
intimate discussion.

His anxiety about the cross contamination between disingenuous public speech
and conversation is evinced in his 9 April 1818 letter to Reynolds, where, referring to his
friend’s request that he write a preface to *Endymion* (1817), Keats protests, “If I write a
Preface in a supple or subdued style, it will not be in character with me as a public
speaker” (KL 1:267). Writing to the public would demand him to feign the exposure and
“supple[ness]” of intimate conversation without affording an actual opportunity to “speak”
or encounter his readers: with Burkean flair, the public to Keats is a “Thing I cannot help
looking upon as an Enemy” (KL 1:266).\(^{29}\) Whereas he is willing to physically “stoop”
and submit to commentary from close friends, “a Preface is written to the Public […] I
would be subdued before my friends and thank them for subduing me, but among
Multitudes of Men I have no feel of stooping. I hate the idea of humility to them” (KL
1:266-7).\(^{30}\) That is, Keats is grateful *only* for his friends’ thoughtful responses and
emendations—for conversation in a more local and shareable space—implying that the
generous quality of their responses even when critical at once humbles him and energizes his pursuit of knowledge and, imaginably, “genius” (KL 1:184)\(^{31}\).

Keats’s exceptional “men of power” and his ideal conversationalists have a modest but active relationship to an irreducible, sociable, and sometimes nonhuman world: they exist in “something of material sublime” (“Dear Reynolds” 69). And this famous phrase, “material sublime,” which was coined some months before writing his chameleon poet letter, represents Keats’s incipient attempt to describe how the poet embraces an ecology of “things” that “tease us out of thought” (76, 77).\(^{32}\) He does not even preface this partial and indeterminate quantity of “material sublime” with an article for fear of indulging the human tendency to pursue reified abstractions like “high reason” (75). He aspires to draw poetic inspiration from the material world in which we “jostle” (72) and where “Things cannot to the will / Be settled” (76-7). Keats does not view matter or poetry as static; he wants to occupy a liminal, unfixed position, participating in an environment inaccessible to verbal or defined “thought,” but still tangible, present, and, if practicing chameleon poetics, consistently stimulating.

**Not Quite Disinterested: The Chameleon Poet without Hazlitt**

Despite the historical and personal contexts of Keats’s metaphor, the chameleon poet has persistently been interpreted as self-abdicating and in danger of annihilation. This reading originated on the very day Keats sent his letter to Richard Woodhouse, and his friend’s misleading notes on the document have governed criticism of the poetical character ever since. Susan Wolfson, for example, channels Keats’s “genuine worry about one of the dangers of practicing chameleon poetics” through Woodhouse’s belief
that “continually cultivating” the poetical character’s imaginative powers may lead to madness. Yet Woodhouse’s comments reveal his tendency to misread Keats and to contradict himself:

I believe him to be right with regard to his own Poetical Character—And I perceive clearly the distinction between himself & those of the Wordsworth School [...] The highest order of Poet will not only possess all the above powers but will have [so] high an imag" that he will be able to throw his own soul into any object he sees or imagines, so as to see feel be sensible of, & express, all that the object itself wo'd see feel be sensible of or express—& he will speak out of that object—so that his own self will with the Exception of the Mechanical part be “annihilated.”—and it is [of] the excess of his power that I suppose Keats to speak, when he says he has no identity—As a poet, and when the fit is upon him, this is true... Shakesp' was a poet of the kind above ment'd—and he was perhaps the only one besides Keats who possessed this power in an extr^ degree. (KL 1:388-390)

Woodhouse imposes a form of philosophical dualism onto Keats’s words, making overtly value-laden distinctions between the “soul” and “the Mechanical part.” He also does not register the chameleon poet’s fluid connection with particular objects and persons when it is “continually in for and filling some other Body” (KL 1:386-7). Instead, Woodhouse attempts to fit Keats’s words to Hazlitt’s model of sympathetic self-structuring, basing his own language on An Essay on the Principles of Human Action (1805) that later resurfaced in Hazlitt’s lectures on Shakespeare.

Many critics have discussed the bearing of Hazlitt’s ideas upon Keats because Hazlitt’s theory of sympathy is future-oriented and develops the self through comparison to others. In other words, to Hazlitt, one’s personal growth is dependent upon a form of self-involved “disinterest” that allows him to “throw himself forward into the future, to anticipate unreal events and to be affected by his own imaginary interest,” which, in turn, demands that he “be capable in a greater or less degree of entering into the feelings and
interests of others and of being consequently influenced by them.” Yet applying Hazlittian sympathy to the poetical character implies that there is also a gap to be traversed between the chameleon poet and “some other” discrete body, where the chameleon must “throw himself” rather than being “continually in for and filling” others (KL 1:387). Woodhouse therefore takes Hazlitt’s reference too far: he conflates the metaphor of a stabilized “same soul” who operates “by an art like that of a ventriloquist”—the master of thrown voices that animate the inanimate—with the chameleon, an animal enmeshed within a living, non-machinic ecology. When Woodhouse reads Hazlitt into the chameleon poet passage, he also places Keats’s apparent negation of self into a tradition of figuring poetic inspiration as a form of prophetic surrogation. To Woodhouse, the poet is another vessel to be filled, for “when the fit is upon him, this is true.”

Rather than adopting Hazlittian disinterestedness, Keats characteristically reworks it to his own purposes. He focuses on the expansion of worldly knowledge both in the poetical character letter and elsewhere. He does not emphasize the absenting of self, and he does not subscribe to the same kind of “passivity” implied by Hazlitt’s philosophy. Social interactions enable what he calls “yeasted” growth, a term Keats uses to characterize both his enthusiasm for Hazlitt’s lectures and the beneficial activity of social compromise. Commenting on a quarrel between his two friends, J. H. Reynolds and Benjamin Haydon, Keats writes to Bailey that the inability of friends to reconcile and maintain friendships “is unfortunate. Men should bear with each other […] The best of Men have but a portion of good in them, a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence, by which a Man is propell’d to act and strive and buffet
with Circumstance. The sure way, Bailey, is first to know a Man’s faults, and then be passive” (KL 1:210). As in his description of “Men of Power” and “genius” (KL 1:184), Keats does refer to passivity, but it is secondary to the “knowing,” acting, and striving that he associates with being “buffet[ed] with Circumstance,” much like a chameleon that must breathe regularly but can also partially control the extent to which it “imbibe[s]” a world subject to unpredictable changes.³⁷ Social tolerance actually facilitates a form of “action” and temporal engagement that fuels the engine—that feeds the yeast—of a growing life nourished by evolving possibilities.

In keeping with the activity of submission that recurs throughout Keats’s letters, the chameleon poet is an especially vulnerable and creatively vital figure. But only when it is reified by one identity or is sequestered from social and physical contact does it risk “annihilation.” It is not surprising, then, that Keats isolates the “wordsworthian or egotistical sublime” within parentheses, separating the poetical character from Wordsworth’s monologic influence, perhaps with Hazlitt’s review of The Excursion (1815) in mind. There, Hazlitt had stated that Wordsworth’s “materials” of sublime natural encounter were not materials at all: “He may be said to create his own materials; his thoughts are the real subject… There is, in fact, in Mr. Wordsworth’s mind an evident repugnance to admit any thing that tells for itself, without the interpretation of the poem, —a fastidious antipathy to immediate effect, —a systematic unwillingness to share the palm with his subject.”³⁸ In addition to not working with “materials” as Keats does, Wordsworth, according to Hazlitt, will not “admit any thing that tells for itself” and possesses “a fastidious antipathy to immediate effect.”³⁹ Likewise, Keats perceives how, in Wordsworth’s later work, the poet’s resistance to the “immediate effect” of the world
causes serious problems for *The Excursion*, a poem that ostensibly features dialogue. By contrast, Keats’s language pointedly resists dialogic transcription. He does not mimetically reproduce dialogue so much as evoke its affective immediacy, conjuring and concentrating the voice that has proven to be endurably arresting not merely due to Keats’s diction but, in this case, the formal, syntactic velocity that reveals his communicative mind at its best: embodied, reflexive, reflective, and refusing tidy self-enclosure:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade […] What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet […] He is continually in for and filling some other Body. The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute. The poet has none; no identity. He is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature. How can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that I am in very little annihilated. Not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children. I know not whether I make myself wholly understood; I hope enough so to let you see that no dependence is to be placed on what I said that day. (*KL* 1:386-7)

The chameleon poet’s method of attentively communicating with its surroundings is significantly more complex than Hazlitt’s model of sympathy. As Jonathan Mulrooney also observes, the phrase “in for” implies that it might literally stand in for these bodies’ material content as they and it move “continually” through time. This sense of motion is propelled by the phrase’s doubled preposition and the letter’s overall use of active verbs,
repetition, and litotes. The letter’s negative constructions pile onto one another, having the effect not of total erasure but aggregation and constant change. Asserting presence only to dissolve it in the next few words, Keats makes “unpoetical” the poetical character that exists in “speculation.” Granted, given the poetical character’s association with the myriad possibilities of any given moment and its ability to indiscriminately fill whatever body it encounters, the poetical character would indeed seem to be a perfect emblem for what he considers poetic: it is subject to “impulse” and is “unchangeable” in its constant changeability. Yet the only distinction between the chameleon poet and its “poetical” objects is how they are bound to the static “identities” of names, whereas Keats repeatedly implies that the chameleon poet is always outgrowing the classifiable self it had occupied in the previous moment, for “not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature.”

Chameleonhood is not what threatens the poet with annihilation: ceasing to undergo transformations and becoming a temporally fixed “I” ironically create the most dangerous and destabilizing environment for the poet. When he finds himself in a room with generalized “people” analogous to the anonymous reading public that Keats had previously termed a “Thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy” (KL 1:267), his fears become palpable. For the first time in the letter, he internalizes his “creations,” demarcating a boundary between “my own brain” and the social world in the vein of the egotistical sublime. But it is important to note that only when the “I” is threatened with being strangled by “everyone in the room […] pressing upon me” do questions begin to surface. Keats first takes on a rhetorical tone when he asks Woodhouse, “where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more?” The question itself occupies optative
and conditional tenses that produce even more rhetorical questions. These proto-social overtures eventually lead him to ask for reassurance and, put more strongly, a reply: “I know not whether I make myself wholly understood.” But does Keats ever desire to be “wholly” understood? Chameleon communication seeks to uncover new creative ideas within one’s present ecological circumstances, where Men and Moons are on the same spectrum, rather than settling upon an unimpeachable answer or fixed self. If he were to be wholly understood, responses would become unnecessary. Perfectly comprehending Keats’s metaphor would freeze the chameleon poet’s social and physical development—and kill the conversation.

**Chameleon Insight: “Ode to a Nightingale”**

I have cited various poems in my discussion of Keats’s chameleon poetics, but I wish to close with a more detailed case study of “Ode to a Nightingale,” a seeming paragon of M. H. Abrams’s “greater Romantic lyric.”\(^{41}\) The nightingale, of course, has an extensive history as a metaphor for lyric inspiration, but in Keats’s 1819 ode, the chameleon has remained undetected amid the darkling verse of what seems to be a one-sided address.\(^{42}\) This is no surprise, for “Ode to a Nightingale” features a particularly striking failure to communicate: the bird cannot or will not listen to the speaker’s responses to its thrilling song, and he cannot seem to surmount this barrier. By most accounts, the speaker’s embodied, human, and “dull brain” (34)—not to mention his sensuous intoxication with the mortal world—weighs down any imaginative ability he may otherwise possess to fly to the realm of immortal poetry.\(^{43}\) Accordingly, critics have primarily debated the methods by which the speaker attempts to escape his situation.
without sufficiently questioning whether he actually wants to escape it. In an exception to such readings, Cynthia Chase argues that the speaker listens more attentively to literary allusions than to the nightingale’s ceaseless and unvarying song. She thus introduces the possibility that the bird is not the speaker’s only addressee—and that the speaker’s mortal and mutable environment could be more creatively generative than the nightingale’s “selfsame song” (65).

“Ode to a Nightingale” models how a poet-speaker might realize an egalitarian relationship to his surroundings despite the temptation to retreat into staid poetic ideals, even when faced with crippling grief and the prospect of oblivion. It traces how a poet might submit to a more open-ended, social, and contingent relationship to his immediate ecology, and, in so doing, progressively gain control over his work’s metrical and prosodic innovations. In other words, the poet-speaker of “Ode to a Nightingale” becomes a chameleonic “Man of Power” (KL 1:184) when he rejects the nightingale and his predetermined attitudes toward mortality. When he submits and hearkens to, if not exclusively a verbal “call of things,” as Andrew Cole puts it, he accepts an indeterminate and difficult existence amid “something of material sublime” (“Dear Reynolds” 69). He consents to the give and take necessary to cultivating a humble relationship to an environment where the speaker, like the chameleon, can both “dilatat[e]” in the moment while exhaling the very breath that represents his reliance upon and embrace of materiality.

The arc of the poem centers on the speaker’s realization that the nightingale cannot converse and is fundamentally unnatural. The speaker never names the nightingale; he draws upon various mythic and ephemeral aliases: “light-winged Dryad”;
“thou among the leaves”; “immortal Bird” (“Nightingale” 7, 22, 61). These attempts to reach his ostensible muse have supplanted the traditional metaphor of inspiration with a dialogic appreciation of his immediate environment, the garden. The nightingale’s disengagement with its interlocutor and the mortal world makes it, and not the speaker, the limited party. By the ode’s conclusion, we come to hear a song that is unresponsive and whose singer, the bird, assumes a static posture that homogenizes literary tropological history. Through the speaker’s social trials and errors, we realize that the nightingale’s “selfsame song” (65) is as wearying as the pain of the “drowsy numbness” (1) with which the poem opens and that awaits those who remain stationary and bereft of insight within a potentially rich and sensuous ecology.

Such ecological richness, though, demands that the chameleon poet eventually face the final materiality of death: he must become a “sod” (60). Nevertheless, or, rather, because of his sociable orientation toward his mortal condition, his mode of multisensory communication with the garden and even with death itself inspires him to adopt his own voice, moving away from attempts to reintegrate the nightingale into the rhetoric of generalized “nature writing.” Moreover, while seeming to be another potentially empty and ahistorical reference, it is no mistake that the speaker alludes to “the sad heart of Ruth” (65) in the penultimate stanza after his seemingly disillusioned acknowledgement of his inevitable fate as a dreaded sod. Although she stands “in tears amid the alien corn” (67) during her greatest moment of isolation and despair, Ruth is unaware of how, upon meeting Boaz, she will soon be reintegrated into a new social sphere, reap a bountiful harvest, and be valorized for her righteous commitment to family (Ruth 1:1-3:17). Both Ruth and the speaker are subject to the “buffet of Circumstance” (KL 1:210), and the
chameleon poet recognizes that, in the present moment, he can only speculate about his potential to become either literal or poetic fertile ground.

But, to take a step back: it is “Ode to a Nightingale’s” formal unfolding that makes any, or all, of the above conclusions feasible. Its first three stanzas memorably feature the speaker’s melancholic yearning to emulate the bird’s immortal song in the midst of human suffering. Stanza four, however, marks the ode’s first major turn, and it is a turn away from the nightingale to the speaker’s immediate surroundings. He commands the bird to leave him so that he may take flight himself:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Through the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. (31-40)

The speaker swears off two abstractions—the inspiring nightingale and the Roman god of wine—to insist that he can transcend the miseries of the previous stanzas on the “viewless wings of Poesy.” Initially, he seems to immediately regret his decision to dismiss the emblem of perpetual poetic song when he admits, “the dull brain perplexes and retards,” making him helpless to rise to the occasion of his own addresses to the bird and to himself.49 But the colon between lines 34 and 35 gives us pause. As is the case of the poem’s overall structure, the ode’s individual stanzas—with the exception of its pivotal fifth stanza—have defined conceptual turns between their fourth and fifth lines, and Keats formally marks these shifts with endstops like periods or semicolons. But in stanza four, this punctuation makes the antecedent to “Already with thee!” somewhat
vague. If the lines were enjambled, we could claim with a fair amount of certainty that “the viewless wings of Poesy” are “with thee.” But with the colon, “Already with thee” can be read as yet another dismissal, where the speaker accepts the effect his “dull brain” has on the “viewless wings” but impatiently claims that he has “already” had enough of the bird and its song—and enough of his own envious pining. Line 35’s caesura further underscores the sense that the speaker is cutting off his former thought patterns. Keats’s punctuation splits the third foot of the line’s pentameter in two, effectively creating an emphatic but fractured spondee, forcing the reader to give pause almost in anticipation of one of the poem’s most memorable phrases, “Tender is the night.” Indeed, this severed line resembles another socially and physically arresting poem, “This Living Hand.” Its concluding line of iambic pentameter is cut in half—“I hold it towards you” (8)—and it uncannily meets the reader’s grasp halfway at the same time it emphasizes the poem’s postmortem status as a written text and fragment.

In “Nightingale,” “tender is the night” invites a friendlier form of companionship: gone is the previous lines’ overwrought prosody. Instead, Keats turns our focus to the night’s tactile softness and permeability. Unlike the nightingale, the night can become a more palpable acquaintance. It is open and penetrable, an entity with whom he will soon commune and thereby undergo a perceptual and bodily transformation. Paradoxically aware of his immediate surroundings while submerged in darkness, the speaker summons his chameleon self by introducing the language of proximity. We move from a celestial realm filled with moonlight “what from heaven is” to traversable “winding mossy ways” (39, 40), thus establishing a continuity between large- and small-scale spaces. And like Goldsmith’s chameleon, the speaker’s embodied brain has the capacity to occupy the
moment and his place in the world: he will experience his local surroundings through a kind of synesthesia that need not emphasize superficial or ordinary modes of seeing the local color.

Now attentive to the garden, the speaker cultivates his own mode of multisensory perception:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglandine;
Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;
   And mid-May’s eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
   The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. (41-50)

Insightful darkness leads the chameleon speaker to steadily refine his sense of time’s passage. The month of May and its flora demarcate the general period, but the “soft incense” that fills the air lets the speaker decipher, taste, and inhale “each sweet” in phenomenologically precise and near-visual terms. And, as we saw in Goldsmith’s natural-historical fixation on the chameleon’s sensitivity to (and manipulation of) time, the speaker’s perception of “Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves” (47) emphasizes the violets’ concealment and their “fading” rather than their eponymous coloration. The darkness suffused with scent moves the speaker to look past any literal and conceptual obstructions to see the violets as co-present and equally “embalmed” at the same time he retains some subjective particularity: he can count his own body among the catalog of actual flowers. Neither the flowers nor the speaker can escape the death implied by their eventual “embalmment,” but his sharpened awareness of the garden’s scent communicates a lively attentiveness to the present moment that directly contravenes the
painful “numbness” (1) he felt at the ode’s beginning. The chameleon speaker can now realize that he has achieved a much-desired “parallel state in inanimate nature and no further,” as Keats once wrote of a rose that must accept any and all sensory experiences that “are as native to the world as itself” (*KL* 2:201). In his ode, Keats stresses this newfound awareness by breaking with its typical stanza structure. He makes no reference to the nightingale of any kind, pseudonymous or otherwise, and rather than being endstopped, lines four and five flow into each other just as the speaker and tender night intermingle in the garden. This tactile engagement with the present moment also transforms his capacity to listen, and upon stanza five’s close, we hear hints of speech in the “murmurous haunt of flies,” introducing a sound unlike the nightingale’s generalized and perpetual song.

Thus inspired, the speaker recognizes that the nightingale signifies the poetry of possession, of “ecstasy” (58), whose distinctly unsociable indifference only serves to exacerbate his sense of inadequacy. The bird leads him to view his mortal body as an impediment to poetic work rather than a conduit for discovering the mutable matter of inspiration: it can only alienate the speaker who would “have ears in vain” (59). The nightingale makes him feel “press[ed] upon,” as in the letter to Woodhouse (*KL* 1:387), or worse, “smothered” as Keats did by the vapid conversations he endured at social gatherings outside of his inner circle (*KL* 2:12). To resist this immortal song of constriction, the speaker therefore courts a new kind of death. He has learned from the somaticized, perceptual transformation he underwent in stanza five to embrace a sociable death unlike that which awaits those locked in thought (27) and who “sit” filled with “leaden-eyed despairs (24, 28). These individuals’ intellectual opacity and immobility
lead them to find companionship only in solipsistic misery. By contrast, the chameleon poet finds inspiration through a friendly and poetically dexterous engagement with his surroundings: he can be both “amused” and “a mused” (53) in a stanza replete with the language of reciprocity, double entendre, and social openness. “Half in love with easeful Death” (52, emphasis added), the speaker signals his desire for a partnership with a death that promises indeterminacy and “rich” plentitude.

Ultimately, then, the nightingale cannot inspire but only expire, “pouring forth [its] soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!” (57-8). Andrew Bennett argues that the nightingale’s song “produces a mimetic response in the listener”—that is, the speaker—and that the speaker’s own “call[ing]” (53) and exhaling affirm the relationship between singing and dying endemic to the “posthumous life of writing.” Yet this allusion to breathing also recalls poetry’s association not just with writing but recitation, suggesting that the line “To take into the air my quiet breath” (54) could also imply an inhalation—or perhaps another chameleonic “dilatation.” A pause may be necessary to maintain what Paul D. Sheats calls the speaker’s “dark colloquy” with death, for pregnant silences are required for conversation—rather than monologic, relentless song—to take place. Since the nightingale only “pours forth” without taking in, it cannot connect to either its mortal listener or the mutable material world. Unlike the bird, they both continually develop and change with a communicative flexibility that is open to multisensory and unexpected information. Cut off from an ecology that is subject to the progress of time, the nightingale does not sing a song that can “strive and Buffet with Circumstance” (KL 1:210). The bird can only inspire in name, for Keats may have written an “Ode to a Nightingale,” but his speaker is a chameleon poet.

While the apparent dialectic between Keats’s “negativity” and his strikingly distinctive voice has been a major through line of nearly all Keats criticism, see Jacques Khalip on Keats and the ethical power of anonymity, Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession (Stanford University Press, 2009) 1-24; 97-132. See Jeffrey Cox for the chameleon poet’s inability to love or connect to anything strongly due to the individual’s liberal capacity for self-abstraction, Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and their Circle (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 195-96.


Typical readings of the chameleon metaphor run parallel to Chapter Three’s account of feminine mutability in J. C. Lavater’s Essays on Physiognomy.

Following Khalip and Stanley Cavell, Magdalena Ostas argues that Keats’s concept of self is marked by “impersonality” at the same time it is fundamentally social, where “personal and therefore common identity coalesce” (“Keats’s Voice,” Studies in Romanticism 50, no. 2 [2011]: 336). I am sympathetic to the social component of this argument and the power of Keats’s poetic voice. However, I dispute Ostas’s claim that “the self for Keats is thus not a thing (or a non-thing) but a set of aesthetic, social and political stresses” (336); Ostas discounts the complexity of what a “thing” might be when analyzing Keats’s concept of dispersed personhood and its resultant poetic power.


See Margaret Ronda for a discussion of how contemporary “ecopoetics” aspires to cultivate an egalitarian form of poetic subjectivity, “Anthropogenic Poetics,” minnesota


9 Harman states, with a generality that would seem antithetical to object-oriented ontology’s fixation on the inherent unknowability of discrete entities, that “The fate of language as of all perception and (we will see) of all relation, is forever to translate the dark and inward into the tangible and outward, a task at which it always comes up short given the infinite depth of things” (*Guerilla Metaphysics*, 105).

For an extended discussion of Humphry Davy’s influence upon Keats’s terminology see Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, 30-71.


“Some Versions,” 237.


In response to Claudius’s enquiry after his health, Hamlet replies, “Excellent, i’ faith; of the chameleon’s dish. I eat the air, promise-cram’d. You cannot feed capons so” (3.2.93-95). In Richard III and Two Gentlemen of Verona, the chameleon is a duplicitous figure that is also capable of sustaining itself on its environment: “Ay, but hearken, sir; though the chameleon Love can feed upon the air, I am one that am nourished by my victuals, and would fain have meat” (*Two Gentlemen of Verona* 2.1.159-61). All quotations are drawn from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., ed. R. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).


18 I am quoting Richard Morris’s gloss. The Middle English is as follows: “Þe dyeuel him sseweþ ine uele ssefþes. and him chongeþ ine uele wysen / þet uolk uor to gyly. Alsuo þe lyYeþere. huerouere he is ase þe gamelos þet leueþ by þe ayr and nayt ne þeþ ine his roppes bote wynd. and þeþ eþ manere colour / þet ne þeþ non þis oþen” (*Dan Michel’s Ayenbite of Inwyt*, or, *Remorse of Conscience*, ed. Richard Morris [London, 1866], 62).

19 It would be arduous to cite all of the scholarship devoted to how natural history influenced literary production, which often focuses upon Erasmus Darwin in the case of the Romantic era.

20 “The Chameleon” in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1718), 192-3; lines 1-2; 13. Subsequent line numbers are cited in text.


23 Goldsmith’s description of the chameleon would prove to be highly influential to subsequent readings of the animal’s body and environmental behavior produced during Keats’s lifetime such as William Bingley’s Animal Biography; or Popular Zoology (1802), which was reprinted six times through 1824.


29 Eighteenth-century rhetoricians frequently discussed the necessity of conforming to audience expectations, acknowledging that despite oratory’s ostensible persuasive purpose, speeches would and could only be received by an audience that was already sympathetic to the speaker’s argument. See David Goring, The Rhetoric of Sensibility in Eighteenth-Century Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Adam Potkay, The Fate of Eloquence in the Age of Hume (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

30 Keats frequently disparages “society” and comments on his silence and dislike of “Men” as opposed to “Human Nature” (see specifically his 22 December 1818 letter to Haydon [KL 1:414-5]). However, as Wolfson notes, he also expressed his love of debate among friends, a love of supposed “contraries” that puts his manner of thinking in the vein of Blake’s dialectical paradoxes, The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 187-9. It is notable, though, that Keats would choose the term “human nature” over “men,” given his interpersonal and environmental sensitivity.

31 For the influence of Keats’s friends on his writing process, see Jack Stillinger, Romantic Complexity: Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 77-88.


33 Questioning Presence, 38.

34 As just a sampling, see David Bromwich, Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 362-401; Stillinger, Romantic Complexity, 52-60.
40 “Avatar,” 314.
43 Vendler, Odes, 81; Vendler also introduces a polarity common to readings of the ode and to readings of the poetical character when she claims that, its crucial fifth stanza, the poet “must here choose annihilation or a return to life” (Odes, 93); by contrast, Stillinger has a more nuanced take on the ode’s representation of loss, where, by crossing over to an ideal imaginary realm, the speaker mourns his movement away from the painful “drowsy numbness” (1) of total immersion into the sensory world, The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats’s Poems (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 102.
44 See Andrew Kappel, “The Immortality of the Natural: Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’” ELH 45 (1978): 270-284; see also Vendler for the link between art, nature, and the pathetic fallacy, Odes, 95. Stillinger writes that “the speaker’s problem has always seemed fairly clear—dissatisfaction with the real world of mortality and mutability […] and desire to escape that world by imaginatively joining an invisible bird in ‘the forest dim’—but the attempts at solution, and even more so the attitudes that the poem takes toward them, continue to be a matter of dispute” (Complete Poems, 468-9).
48 For a Spinozistic reading of Wordsworth’s “A slumber did my spirit seal” that addresses the transformation of Lucy into a “thing” after death, see Levinson, “Romancing Spinoza,” 388-395; on the problem of imagining other beings, corporeality, and “things,” see Charles Rzepka, “To Be a Thing: Wordsworth’s ‘A slumber did my spirit seal’ and the Paradox of Corporealization,” The Wordsworth Circle 39, no. 1 and 2
Onno Oerlemans contends that Romantic writers did not try to transcend death but to “confront” it (Romanticism and the Materiality of Nature [University of Toronto Press, 2002], 13).

In Woodhouse’s commonplace book, line 34 ends with either a semicolon and dash or a colon and a dash. I am using Stillinger’s punctuation, but in all versions it seems that the punctuation suggests a causal relationship between lines 34 and 35.

Jonathan Mulrooney also discusses the ambiguity of stanza four’s colon; his reading is companionable to my own insofar as he attends to the sense of physical dislocation that the moment of crying out “Already with thee!” suggests: “Are these scenes imagined or real? (‘Do I wake or sleep?’) They are, of course, both and neither; and thus the act of imagining the unimaginable real becomes the point of the poem, inviting the reader to be at once immersed in the sensory world the poem provides and aware of the impossibility of such immersion” (“The Sadness of Avatar,” The Wordsworth Circle 42, no. 3 [2011]: 203). I would suggest that the sense of possibly impossible immersion to which Mulrooney refers, however, has more to do with the difficulty of accepting the poetic state of reading—and of lyric speaking—that “tease[s] us out of thought” and into a more tactile experience of both poetic form and the chameleonic, synesthetic materiality with which we engage in stanza five (“To J. H. Reynolds” 77).


In the immediate aftermath of being raped by her father, Beatrice Cenci, the heroine of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1819 tragedy, *The Cenci*, finds herself fielding questions about “what has befallen” her.¹ Her stepmother, Lucretia, begs Beatrice not to spare the details of her sufferings out of pride, but Beatrice’s response is strange: she insists that she is not concealing anything even though she thinks of her experience as “expressionless” (3.1.214). Throughout the play, Beatrice maintains this position. She will not discuss the incestuous sexual violence to which she was subjected, nor will she later confess to being a “parricide.” But in addition to asserting that she “hides” nothing, she poses *The Cenci*’s most important and unanswered question:

LUcretia: Oh, my lost child,
Hide not in proud impenetrable grief
Thy sufferings from my fear.

BEatrice: What are the words which you would have me speak?
I hide them not.

(3.1.104-8, emphasis added)

Most readers would have Beatrice do as Lucretia asks: testify. The ostensible rationale behind this desire has varied since the play’s first publication. An 1886 write-up of The Shelley Society’s production of *The Cenci* stated that her failure to “avow…the act” or confess to State authorities was a mark of her damaged moral code and erratic character trajectory. To “be consistent,” the writer claims, “she should have avowed the act, but denied its criminal character. As it is, she falls below herself, and no reason is given for the fall.”² Whether supporting her abandonment of mortal law or condemning her
decision to kill her father, critics have used Beatrice’s refusal to speak about “what happened” to speculate about her mental state and, in turn, her capacity to make “reasonable” decisions. Such readings typically rely on the psychoanalytic construct that survivors of trauma need narrative to “heal” and to put violent experiences in the past to prevent these dislocated memories from erupting into the present; at the same time, violent acts are “unspeakable.” These various responses to the play share a frustration with Beatrice’s reticence, interpreting it as a resistance to “understanding” or, in effect, to getting over the rape. Willfully silent, she seems beholden to the patriarchal system she claims to despise.

Against readings that see Beatrice as “mute” or unable to speak on her own behalf, this chapter contends that she moves from being a narrator and a rhetorician who practices fruitless passive resistance to, after her assault, embodying Shelley’s unique notion of the dramatic poetic imagination. Not inarticulate but disarticulated, Beatrice repurposes her violation to hone her preexisting but under-utilized powers of nonverbal communication, or what Shelley calls her “anatomizing gaze.” Rather than answering to anyone who would ask her to narrate her condition, she discovers that leaving things unsaid enables her to act and to inspire action for the first time in her life.

“Disarticulation” and “anatomization” share a common association with physical dismemberment, but in The Cenci, they carry additional metaphorical weight: they describe the unspoken procedures through which Beatrice becomes a different kind of social operator. After her sexual assault, she feels “disarticulated” in two ways: she conceives of her body as torn apart, and she recognizes how her previous reliance on cohesive narrative and persuasion was fallacious in The Cenci’s fallen world, shattering
all preconceptions of how to assert power and secure salvation. Instead, as I shall show, poetry is the way forward, a view Paul de Man also holds when he notes the strange relationship between disarticulation and poetic form in “The Triumph of Life.” Disarticulation does not suppress language so much as it calls attention to the animated, unspoken, and formal undertones of Shelley’s fixation on making and unmaking in his poetry. Shelley, like Beatrice, forms the “formless” (Cenci 3.1.111), and de Man describes this process in reference to environmental metaphors: “[a river] generates the very possibility of structure, pattern, form, or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelessness. The repetition of the erasures rhythmically articulates what is in fact a disarticulation, and the poem seems to be shaped by the undoing of shapes.” The Cenci takes de Man’s tentative engagement with poetic disarticulation further when Shelley embodies dramatic poetry in Beatrice. Just as the unspoken, disarticulated dimensions of poetry constantly reshape social, material, and aesthetic boundaries, Beatrice’s fragmentary, newly versified life is one of action. Not inarticulate, she chooses to embrace her brokenness to fight against narrative and against what her father intends, but fails, to accomplish through rape: to isolate and consolidate her into a mere “particle of [the Count’s] divided being”—a “specious mass of flesh” (4.1.117, 115).

Count Cenci attempts to control Beatrice through “anatomization,” the second of my key terms. His perverse mode of anatomization helps him rationalize his violent, identity-destroying actions, yet it is also a term that Shelley applies to his audience’s attempts at analyzing Beatrice’s disturbing rebirth as a disarticulated figure who expresses herself through actions, looks, and gestures. As I shall demonstrate, though, Beatrice’s own mode of anatomization is distinctive. She dissects and reveals the truths
of others’ motivations and the mechanics of *The Cenci*’s fallen world while remaining subject to her own penetrating insight, performing “self-anatomy” (2.2.110) to parse her behavior prior to the rape. Anatomization and disarticulation, then, are both metaphorical and physical processes that fuel Beatrice’s transformation into Shelley’s dramatic poet of unspoken but intelligible action—and of parts.

Shelley’s accounts of dramatic poetry in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) and in his Preface to *The Cenci* are not what we might envisage from an idealist who usually describes the imagination in analogical terms. We may recall the opening paragraphs of the *Defence* where he contrasts the imagination with “reason” and the body: “Reason is to Imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance.” Later on, however, Shelley explains that the dramatic poetic imagination expresses itself not just through language, but also “in form [and] in action” (*Defence* 518). Even more surprisingly, dramatic poetry constellates but does not unify these components; Shelley compares it to a “prismatic and many-sided mirror” that both “teaches… self-knowledge” and “multiplies all that it reflects” (*Defence* 520). Read alongside his unexpectedly materialist claim in the Preface to *The Cenci* that the “Imagination… should assume flesh” (143-44), the prismatic pieces of his dramatic poetic theory coalesce in Beatrice after she is raped. She expresses herself through deeds, looks, and figurative language just as Shelley’s poetic ideal channels form, action, and language. These various *lacunae*—of not answering, not narrating, and not pretending that her sense of fragmentation is easily reparable—endow Beatrice with poetic power: she speaks through gestures and metaphors that her interlocutors grasp without any need for narrative detail that they crave nonetheless. Disarticulation and assault do not weaken
Beatrice; they activate the poet within, and only once she feels dismembered can she move through the world as an actor, however questionable her actions.

My argument’s emphases on disarticulation, anatomization, and interrogation are founded on the underlying precept that torture, as both a totalized structure of power and a specific mode of violent and empty questioning, drives *The Cenci’s* plot and Beatrice’s character trajectory. While scholars have focused on how discrete acts of violence, like her rape and Count Cenci’s murder, take place off-stage, torture has a pronounced metaphorical and literal presence throughout the play. Characters refer to torture and its variants over thirty times, and it is the only act of violence actually depicted in the text itself. Just as torture unites words, sublingual cues, and violent actions, *The Cenci* is preoccupied with continually blurring the line between speech and deed. As one character tells Beatrice’s brother, Giacomo, when describing how their conversation has created an “all-communicating air” between them (2.2.92), “Words are but holy as the deeds they cover” (2.2.75). But Beatrice offers the most pointed example: in the scene immediately preceding the rape, she says of her father, *The Cenci’s* preeminent torturer, “He said, he looked, he did,—nothing at all / Beyond his wont, yet it disordered me” (2.1.76-77). If Beatrice’s silences—or more accurately her provision of language that refuses narrative—trouble the relation between naming an action and the action itself, then torture—where physical and mental cruelty compel responses—depicts a ritualized practice of that trouble.

Slurring words with brutal violence, torture promotes the fantasy that answering or complying with an abusive interrogator will put an end to suffering. The cruel reality is that compliance only legitimizes a torturer’s actions and “purpose.” In *The Cenci*, Shelley
illustrates this very point: his heroine will no longer obey once she realizes how torturous interrogation makes language performative and empty rather than communicative and progressive—and these latter qualities constitute what this dissertation has been characterizing as “good” conversation, and what Shelley, in his Defence, calls great poetry. When Shelley puts torture in proximity to these other modes of discourse, he introduces audiences to a poet-figure born out of violence, radicalizing his dramatic poetics of parts and modeling responsive forms of expression that escape the bounds of language.

By exploring the nonverbal dimensions of torture as pseudo-communication, Shelley importantly anticipates elements of Elaine Scarry’s well-known account in The Body in Pain, where she argues that a torturer’s intent is conveyed through tonal and situational subtexts much more than through threats, making victims feel as if they are partly responsible for their own fates. Scarry writes:

The idea that the need for information is the motive for the physical cruelty [of torture] arises from the tone and form of the questioning rather than from its content: the questions, no matter how contemptuously irrelevant their content, as announced, delivered, as though they motivated the cruelty, as if the answers to them were crucial… But as the content and context of the torturer’s questions make clear, the fact that something is asked as if the content of the answer matters does not mean that it matters.10

Form, intonation, and replies are all necessary to sustain torture’s spectacle of power.11

As “conversation is displaced by interrogation, where human speech is broken off in confession and disintegrates into human cries” (Scarry, Body in Pain 50), torture is a spectacle since it exists only to produce more torture. Violent interrogation thus generates a different kind of open-ended intimacy; the questions and answers endemic to torture’s
theater of pain only reinscribe the power to violate others and to produce more dehumanization.

In short, torture only works when victims respond to *questioning*—not to questions themselves. Responses sustain a cyclical dynamic that mocks conversation while bringing its reliance on somatic and environmental variables to the fore. Without victims’ reactions, even if they are in the form of screams, lashing out, or facial expressions, torture cannot serve its ostensible purpose: to gather information or, in the case of Count Cenci’s sadistic practices, to gather others’ freedom, self-respect, and identities. For him, to torture is to consume, and he claims to “love / The sight of agony” (1.1.81-82) because his victims’ responses are his “natural food” (1.1.89). And like other torturers, he does not feed on words so much as *all* responses extracted through violence, all of which ratify his power over others. Accordingly, Beatrice denies him any such power by subsequently refusing to “answer” to him (or to anyone else) after he tortures her through sexual violence.

In a sense, then, Beatrice and Count Cenci operate within the same expressive economy; both are adept at using nonverbal cues when they “anatomize” and see into others, albeit to very different ends. But, contrary to what some scholars have argued, this continuum between Beatrice and her father is not based upon their common moral corruption. Rather, she embodies what it means to be a subject of torture who is completely disarticulated but still refuses to comply with her abuser, putting them at opposite ends of the spectrum. And since Shelley thought that dramatic poetry reveals social truths, Beatrice-as-poet bears out this belief. She shows what it is like both to be tortured and to be cognizant of the mechanisms of torture, *uncovering* just how deeply
torture permeates *The Cenci*’s world by *recovering* the power to respond to events and questions electively. Beatrice uses her unspoken powers of anatomization to inspire her interlocutors (and audiences), pushing them to recognize how any attempt to impose narratives on her unspeakable situation obscures the truth of their baser motivations—particularly, the voyeuristic desire to witness and “understand” violence.\(^{12}\)

In what follows, I provide an overview of the play’s continual interest in the tension between questioning and narrative. I then connect this reading to Shelley’s theory of dramatic poetry, which argues that plays derive their energy not merely from their plots, but from how audiences *respond* to these plots, however “restless[ly]” (Preface 142). Moreover, because these plots are grounded in torture, the imbrication of violent inquiry and action lets us track the under-recognized contiguity of Beatrice’s character development: while her trajectory does hinge on her assault, it does not signal her descent into madness. Instead (and unexpectedly), her fragmentation through rape allows her to achieve an Aristotelian, tragic “realization” (or *anagnorisis*). Moving from “ignorance to knowledge,” Beatrice sees that neither descriptions nor testimony will help her escape torture’s reinscription of tyranny through its endless cycle of empty questions and answers.\(^{13}\) Silences, metaphors, and expressions, however, leave room for replies—and an escape from tortured logic if not *The Cenci*’s tyrannical society. Beatrice thus assumes an anatomizing, disarticulated poetic identity to encourage her family to join her in her quest for revenge. Finally, by way of closure, I revisit Shelley’s dramatic poetics of parts. As embodied in Beatrice, these poetics are troubling because they force the audience to make a choice: either enjoy violence like a torturer, or accept the inexpressible pains of poetic uncertainty.
The Imagination Made Flesh: Beatrice’s Dramatic Disarticulation

In a July 1819 letter to Thomas Love Peacock, Shelley acknowledged that *The Cenci* was unlike any of his other works. Its central point of departure, he explained, lay in his effort to sympathize with characters “without any of the peculiar feelings and opinions which characterize my other compositions.” In the *Defence*, Shelley associated this ability to imagine and sympathize beyond one’s normal capacity with Athenian drama, whose aesthetic achievements rise above any moral judgment. Claiming that “in drama of the highest order there is little food for censure” no matter how disturbing the topic, he writes that the success of these works resides in how, for audiences, “[t]he imagination is enlarged by a sympathy with pains and passions so mighty, that they distend in their conception the capacity of that by which they are conceived” (*Defence* 520).

This letter, the Preface, and the *Defence* all demonstrate how plots and audiences’ participation are interdependent. To Peacock, Shelley ventures that *The Cenci*’s subject is sufficiently “real” to be accessible to general audiences, but these same audience members must decide where to draw an imaginative line: they have to determine for themselves what they “are contented to believe that they can understand either in imagery, opinion, or sentiment.” Whether Shelley is extending his imagination beyond its usual margins or whether his reader-audiences are obliged to recognize their own mental boundaries, “understanding” is reduced to a reckoning of how much one can take. *The Cenci*’s plot generates its dramatic energy from a strange tension between actors and onlookers, where the audience wants to retreat into “superstitious horror” but “seek[s] the
justification of Beatrice” (Preface 142). Ultimately, though, the best drama cultivates “sympathies and antipathies” as its plot unfolds; in The Cenci, the line between these seeming opposites is constantly in flux, and there is no hiding from the play’s off-stage events or its heroine’s refusal to be “wiser and better” (Preface 142).

Ironically, and notwithstanding Shelley’s enthusiasm, The Cenci’s plot and Beatrice’s character trajectory have been read as the play’s chief failures. These objections are typically based on “moral” or “structural” principles, and sometimes lead readers and reviewers to accuse the play of being “undramatic.” In 1821, The British Review complained that The Cenci was “a series of dialogues in verse; and mere versified dialogue will never make a drama.” This same writer also notes that Shelley “rendered the story infinitely more horrible and more disgusting than he found it” despite the play’s seeming lack of action or interest. But the play is neither horribly boring nor boringly horrible: it is profoundly discomfiting even as critics have found it difficult to describe exactly why it is so troubling. Unlike other dramas that feature vicious anti-heroes who kill and maim others on-stage, The Cenci continually induces a visceral response from audiences by disrupting linguistic and political conventions: it conceals the details of Beatrice’s victimhood while also mesmerizing interlocutors with her expressive actions.

Shelley’s Preface describes this very situation: discomfort does not move audiences to rationalize Beatrice’s actions per se, but to come to terms with their mixed feelings about those actions. This kind of anatomization, as we will see, is unlike Beatrice’s ability to “lay… bare” (1.2.86) other people’s motivations, which obliges them to look at aspects (or pieces) of their true selves. Instead, audience members, as casuists, “anatomize” Beatrice to maintain an antisocial distance from a work that makes nebulous
ethical demands upon them. Shelley’s account of reading or watching his play, accordingly, takes on a particularly Brechtian tone. He writes,

It is in the restless and anatomizing casuistry with which men seek the justification of Beatrice, yet feel that she has done what needs justification; it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists. (Preface 142)

By trying to divine a condemnation or a justification for Beatrice’s behavior, audiences make the mistake of attempting to uncover a more linear form of narrative reason in a world whose power dynamics rely on torture: the asking of empty questions and the demanding of predetermined responses.18

For all this casuistry, though, sympathetic distance remains hard to come by. The passage’s phrasing complicates the entanglement of plot and audience when Shelley makes certain antecedents murky. Audience members “contemplate alike her wrongs and their revenge,” so it unclear if audiences should feel vengeful or if the wrongs themselves take on an agency that diminishes Beatrice’s responsibility for her actions.19 But a larger question looms: how can we sympathize with a woman who will not or cannot explain herself? Without testimony or seeing events like Beatrice’s rape and her father’s murder, it seems impossible to extend our sympathy. While it is possible, as Adam Smith asserts, to feel for a person based on a fleeting assessment of her appearance, we are more inclined to rely on the narrative context of a person’s elation or distress to determine the emotion’s propriety; in short, we pass “rational” judgment on supposedly irrational “passions.” Without such narratives, by Smith’s logic, we are unable to imagine ourselves in another person’s position—or to achieve the social catharsis of “harmonizing” with another person’s troubles or triumphs.20 Drawing on Smith and Wordsworth, Joanna
Baillie makes a similar point in direct application to Romantic theater in tying “sympathetick curiosity” to how conversationalists read natural signs in her introduction to *Plays on the Passions* (1798). What “roused and interests us,” she writes, lies in our fascination with “an unquiet mind, the restless eye, the muttering lip, the half-checked exclamation, and the hasty start,” the perception of which encourages “a feeling… as though we [have] found ourselves in the neighbourhood of some secret and fearful thing.”

The problem with applying sympathetic principles to Beatrice’s “secret” is that we do not lack any narrative context: we already know what she would be describing and, ostensibly, pity her accordingly. So when Beatrice asks Lucretia, “What are the words which you would have me speak?” (3.1.108), she is not equivocating, nor does she quite claim that she is unable to answer. Instead, Beatrice calls attention to the real motivation behind Lucretia’s question. She would be “speaking” words for Lucretia’s benefit rather than her own, challenging the longstanding supposition that testimony has a superlative palliative power. More pointedly, Beatrice also signals that she is aware of how a form of hypocritical, altruistic voyeurism motivates these inquiries rather than any genuine desire for reciprocal and compassionate communication.

Before discussing the alignment of Beatrice’s resistance to questioning with the play’s state of torture, it is worth considering how *The Cenci’s* plot coheres around the perversion of inquiry, the disarticulated body, and, finally, what results in the attainment of Shelley’s poetic ideal. Its events are fairly straightforward, even if readers have deplored or doubted Beatrice’s decisions—or claim to be alternately irked and terrified by what happens off-stage rather than focusing upon what happens on-stage. Beatrice’s
decisions make considerably more sense if we recognize that she has not lost her ability to communicate but has acquired an alternative social power that strips the torturous status quo of all semblance of legitimacy.

Beatrice and her family exist in the thrall of her father, Count Cenci, who avoids prosecution for his many crimes by paying off and blackmailing Papal authorities, which is unsurprising in such a Machiavellian setting. Meanwhile, he also terrorizes his daughter, her brothers, and her stepmother by keeping them in a literal dungeon and reveling in his freedom to torture anyone who crosses his path. Things change when, at a banquet celebrating the deaths of two of his four sons, the Count grows angry after Beatrice calls upon his noble guests and clergy to bring her father to justice. While her appeal is eloquent, no one aids her. His guests merely ask each other, “Can we do nothing?—/ Nothing that I see” (Cenci 1.3.142). Nevertheless, Count Cenci becomes particularly enraged when Beatrice calls attention to how he is a distillation of the Papal state’s corruption, where torture is normalized and torturers celebrated, and orders him to “cover [his] face from every living eye” (1.3.154). He decides, without ever saying the word “incest,” to escalate his usual violent tactics in order to make Beatrice “meek and tame” (1.3.167) and, in the process, to gratify his ever-present hunger for violence. As he tells Cardinal Camillo in the play’s opening scene, he wants, finally, “[t]o act the thing I thought” (1.1.98). What he most craves, however, is Beatrice’s response: he wants to force her to fear him and, as we later find out, to “consent” to his desire (4.1.102).

Threatened by Beatrice’s expressionlessness which he interprets as a sign of resistance, he harangues her after the banquet, claiming that she will answer to him once more:
“Never again, I think, with fearless eye, / And brow superior, and unaltered cheek…
Shalt thou strike dumb the meanest of mankind” (2.1.116-19).

Between Acts Two and Three, Beatrice is raped, and her family perceives both her devastation and a new and unspoken power in her. Prior to the assault, she had described her life of torture in detail, vowing to her stepmother, Lucretia, that, even though she had a foreboding feeling that her father was planning to inflict worse tortures upon her, she was not “mad” because she could speak (2.1.34). In Act Three, by contrast, she claims that to speak would be madness, inverting a previous adherence to description and narrative (3.1.85). Instead, she expresses herself through elaborate metaphors, gestures, and alarming looks, eventually realizing that any attempt to recover her past self through testimony would be foolish and ultimately destructive to her identity. Were she to relate “what happened,” she tells her friends and family, she would be able to describe her plight, but the effect of such testimony would satisfy people’s curiosity rather than securing recourse. Narration would result only in what she calls a “stale mouthed story; / A mock, a bye-word, an astonishment” (3.1.159-60). Resisting narrative, in other words, is a mode of self-preservation: testimony would allow listeners to summarize Beatrice’s personhood, to dismiss her individual experiences, and to distance themselves from the galvanizing if unbearable immediacy of her pain.24

Even though she will not narrate what happened to her, her remaining family conspires to murder Count Cenci with a daring that had previously eluded them. The family hires two assassins, and the murder, like the rape, takes place off-stage. The killers are later apprehended and tortured, as are the Cencis themselves. Notoriously, Beatrice faults her family for confessing on the rack; forces one of the assassins, Marzio, to recant
his confession through her prevaricating logic and menacing looks; and refuses to call herself a “parricide,” thus becoming what many have interpreted as a version of her father, not to mention delusional.

Beatrice’s rape has been deemed an exceptional occurrence that, in one way or another, destroys her. Yet for all of the event’s granted importance, critics have not read it as a moment of tragic “realization” or Aristotelian *anagnorisis*, nor have they situated the act of rape within the play’s broader continuum of torture. Sean Dempsey and Roger Blood, for example, deny that Beatrice experiences *anagnorisis* because her sexual assault has damaged her mind and sense of self. The opening of Act Three would seem, at least initially, to bear this argument out: it does not appear to depict a woman who is enlightened so much as one who has lost her capacity to think or feel coherently. In the immediate aftermath of the rape, Beatrice stumbles on stage in a state of total disarray. Her hair is undone, she is half-blind but displays, in Lucretia’s words, “no wound” (3.1.4). Existing outside of her body yet hyperaware of her physical surroundings, she cries that her “brain is hurt” and that her “eyes are full of blood” (3.1.2-3). Worse, she feels like her body is both “polluted” and the polluter, imagining her dead and “putrefying limbs… burst[ing] forth into the wandering air” (3.1.26-27). At first calling herself “mad beyond all doubt” (3.1.25), her sense of fragmentation and pending death support any number of critical assessments of her predicament: Young-Ok An’s attribution of “madness” to patriarchal oppression; Harry White’s contention that Beatrice’s “hysteria” as “psychologically plausible”; or Andrea Henderson’s insistence that Beatrice is “profoundly disorganized” and unable to “mediate imaginatively between her inner and outer selves.”

By these accounts, Beatrice is severed from her previous identity as a
rhetorically ambitious but domestically oppressed practitioner of passive resistance. With the bonds between body and mind, mind and language, and, implicitly, language and identity broken, it seems as if testifying is the only way Beatrice can regain her sense of integrity. As it is, she is left expressing what it might be like to be a scattered if not murdered object in search of her former notion of subjectivity: “What thing am I?” (3.1.38). 

Indeed, Beatrice’s sexual assault is a turning point for her character and the plot, but only because it alerts her to the state of torture in which she was already living. When she sees her body is a fragmented and material “thing,” she is well on her way to becoming the imagination that “should assume flesh” (Preface 142). But what is most central to Act Three, as I have indicated, is how Beatrice totally inverts what she had said and done in Act Two: she does not think that speech corresponds to sanity, she refuses to offer “factual” information, and she no longer sees her body as unified. Instead, she begins to hone her capacity for “anatomizing.” In this case, she practices a form of “self-anatomy” (2.2.110) at the beginning of Act Three, calling herself a figure or “that wretched Beatrice/ Men speak of, whom her father sometimes hales / From hall to hall” (3.1.43-45). These lines belie a poetic impulse rather than a solely descriptive or narrative one; she puns on “hale” to combine violence with a demand for response—the nexus of which forms the basis of torture that is “effective.” Beatrice also recognizes that in “haling” her father, men already “spoke of” her without intervening—suggesting that, no matter how desperately she had hoped to retain some measure of dignity during her life in a dungeon, she was still subject to the kind of gossip and “stories” that she later
adamantly rejects when she states that all attempts to narrate her experience would render her life and story “a mock, a bye-word, an astonishment” (3.1.160).

In Act Two, by contrast, Beatrice attempts to take solace in description when her father utters “one little word” that almost certainly alludes to rape, terrifying her. But comforts are few and far between in the Cenci household: her account of her family’s domestic life is so outrageously violent and degrading that it initially seems hyperbolic or metaphorical. Beatrice has not yet embraced alternative figurative modes of expression, and the sheer level of detail in her explanation of what “disorder[s]” her makes us realize that this is no exaggeration (2.1.77). It also becomes clear that Count Cenci’s treatment of his children is not geared toward inflicting pain for its own sake. He wants to ensure their responsive compliance, and, to sustain dominance, the tortured household runs according to the perversely sociable logic of interrogation:

BEATRICE:  It was one word, mother, one little word;  
One look, one smile.  
[Wildly]  
Oh! he has trampled me  
Under his feet, and made the blood stream down  
My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all  
Ditch-water, and the fever-stricken flesh  
Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,  
And we have eaten. He has made me look  
On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust  
Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs;  
And I have never yet despaired—but now!  
What would I say?  
[Recovering herself]  
Ah no! ’tis nothing new.  
The sufferings we all share have made me wild;  
He only struck and cursed me as he passed;  
He said, he looked, he did—nothing at all  
Beyond his wont, yet it disordered me. (2.1.62-77)

Critical accounts of this passage debate how this “one little word” could have “disordered” Beatrice so badly. The word, to Jerrold Hogle, carries phallic implications and establishes
a masculinist “master language” that foreshadows how “the dictates of male-supremacist discourse have become virtually inescapable, even in attempts to escape them.”

I do not dispute the importance of this unknown word that anticipates sexual violence. I will note that what Beatrice can articulate (by whatever means) has been of little interest throughout most criticism of the *The Cenci*. Not yet having lost her faith in descriptive language, her fear of this “little word” does not only stem from its phallic overtones. The word suggests that something different is about to happen—something that will escalate the type of torture her father will inflict and thus change their routine. Bizarrely, a home in which she is beaten, cursed, chained, and starved regularly is just that: a normal home insofar as what is “normal” in the world of *The Cenci* is fundamentally “disordered.” Worse, Beatrice’s choice of details suggests that being a victim of torture requires a measure of participation. It would seem, for instance, that being “bade” to eat rotten meat or to drink ditch-water would characterize her suffering sufficiently, but Beatrice makes sure to indicate that she was not merely compelled to do horrible things. She, and her siblings, actually did them as a matter of course. With seemingly redundant phrasing, she clarifies that her father “bade us eat or starve / And we have eaten.” Here, the cruelty of enforced consent transcends what Scarry calls the “sadistic potential of... language” (*Body in Pain*, 27). In *The Cenci*, one can “answer” not merely by speaking but also through actions and sublingual cues.

Yet, as I have said, internalizing what is rotten is nauseatingly ordinary in the Cenci household. As such, Beatrice explains away her dread of this “one little world” as best she can, basing her appraisal of Count Cenci’s behavior on his previous actions. Knowing her father to be a torturer whose words and actions often slur together, Beatrice
reasons that the implications of the encounter are “nothing at all,” a point Shelley underscores by enjaming the lines: “He said, he looked, he did—nothing at all / Beyond his wont.” Indeed, Shelley’s pun on “wont,” which connects her father’s violent tendencies to what he wants, is at the crux of the passage. Identifying the mysterious “one little word” matters less than the fact that what he says corresponds to what he will do—and he will do what he always does: control, abuse, and extract reactions from his victims. In her description, then, Beatrice inadvertently alerts us to the nature of Count Cenci’s status quo; he possesses the sadistic power to unite words and violent deeds so frequently that they are “inconsequential” in the larger narrative of Beatrice’s life, but she also expresses her trepidation at how he will surpass and intensify this “nothing”—not that he will do something atypical. Shelley therefore shows how the condition under which she has been living all along is tantamount to the power dynamics of sexual assault; the discrete act of rape itself is an escalation of torture, differing not in kind but in degree.

In Act Three, however, once Beatrice is disarticulated, she can finally see her past behavior for what it was: a form of compliance under torture. She feels as if she is comprised of pieces and, as a “thing” unable to describe what has happened (3.1.38), she reflects upon her previous state of mind derisively. To do so, she abandons narrative and any pretense of linguistic control, which Shelley illustrates by constantly bringing together words and bodies. Beatrice vividly externalizes the inarticulate rape as an environmental phenomenon that is also inextricably bound to her. She feels a “clinging, black, contaminating mist / About me… [that] eats into my sinews, and dissolves / My flesh to a pollution, poisoning / The subtle, pure, and inmost spirit of life!” (3.1.17-23). Flesh and spirit intertwine, and in an exchange between Lucretia and Beatrice, Beatrice
begins to speak in metaphors and to accept the comfort afforded by her stepmother’s physical presence. Lucretia examines Beatrice in pieces, assessing her gestures, her hands, and her gaze in an attempt to “unlock” her stepdaughter’s secrets:

LUCRETIA: Thou art unlike thyself; thine eyes shoot forth
A wandering and strange spirit. Speak to me,
Unlock those pallid hands whose fingers twine
With one another.

BEATRICE: ’Tis the restless life
Tortured within them. If I try to speak
I shall go mad. Aye, something must be done;
What, yet I know not… something which shall make
The thing that I have suffered but a shadow
In the dread lightning which avenges it;
Brief, rapid, irreversible, destroying
The consequence of what it cannot cure. (3.1.81-91)

Meanwhile, Beatrice feels the depth of her tortured disarticulation, where her hands are infused with a “restless life / Tortured within them,” and her mind is fixed upon doing something that will not alleviate her own pain so much as allow her to wield a violent and poetic force. Her rape is a catalyst and a “shadow” compared to what she is becoming—“the dread lightning” of vengeance that, as Shelley writes in the Defence, is also the indomitable force of poetry: “Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it” (520).

This is an exchange about what cannot be shared through speaking but perhaps through doing. When Lucretia encourages Beatrice to unlock her hands, a mental block is lifted: Beatrice indicates that she can no longer “speak” in her customary, and unwittingly passive, manner, but she can inhabit various metaphors and examine her own “restless” physicality. Indeed, Beatrice’s and Lucretia’s hand-holding extends to Shelley’s blank
verse, where five beats meet five beats, resembling the way Keats’s “This Living Hand” formally reaches toward the reader upon its conclusion.\textsuperscript{31}

Beatrice’s ability to channel her sense of disarticulation to exact vengeance recalls Shelley’s account of Athenian drama. Social yet fractured, dramatic poetry and its surrogate, Beatrice, are like the “many-sided mirror” that “multiplies all that it reflects… propagating its like wherever it may fall” (\textit{Defence} 520). Her family’s reaction to her after the assault also reminds us that contextual narration should not be necessary for them (or for audiences) to sympathize with her situation. No one doubts that Beatrice was raped. Still, Lucretia, Orsino, and her brothers insist upon asking her for details, for narrative. In the absence of answers, they hope to scrutinize and translate Beatrice’s embodiment of a disarticulated, “tortured life” into something articulable. But their failure, then, to extract answers provides further insight into how actions and unanswerable questions can be more telling than words, and, again, it is no accident that the interpenetration of body and mind are at the forefront of how \textit{The Cenci} models post-\textit{anagnorisis} communication. Later on in Act Three, for example, Orsino remarks on how Beatrice’s expression fills in any “half conjectures” he and her stepmother initially made since talking had gotten them nowhere:

\textbf{ORSINO:}  \begin{quote} His grave is ready. Know that since we met Cenci has done an outrage to his daughter. \end{quote}

\textbf{GIACOMO:}  \begin{quote} What outrage? \end{quote}

\textbf{ORSINO:}  \begin{quote} That she speaks not, but you may Conceive such half conjectures as I do, From her fixed paleness, and the lofty grief Of her stern brow bent on the idle air, And her severe unmodulated voice, Drowning both tenderness and dread; and last From this; that whilst her step-mother and I, \end{quote}
Bewildered in our horror, talked together
With obscure hints; both self-misunderstood
And darkly guessing, stumbling, in our talk,
Over the truth, and yet to its revenge,
She interrupted us, and with a look
Which told before she spoke it, he must die…

GIACOMO: It is enough. (3.1.347-62)

Performing emotional range and bewilderment accomplish nothing, but the oddly
nonperformative theatricality of Beatrice’s “fixed paleness” and “unmodulated voice”
proves intelligible and motivating even to people who prevaricate and “stumble” in their
talk. “Half conjectures” become full resolutions as Beatrice’s countenance assumes the
likeness of a mask in Athenian drama, which Shelley also discusses in the Defence:

Our system of divesting the actor’s face of a mask, on which the many
expressions appropriated to his dramatic character might be moulded into
one permanent and unchanging expression, is favourable only to a partial
and inharmonious effect; it is fit for nothing but at monologue, where all
the attention may be directed to some great master of ideal mimicry. (518-19)

Unexpectedly, masks are not forms of subterfuge but genuinely communicative, and
Beatrice’s mask-like face evinces her poetic power to act in lieu of becoming a
disingenuous, “commanding actress.” On the contrary, she inspires her on-stage
audience to collaborate with her, allowing them to contribute to the “dramatic character
of what she did and suffered” in their own right (Preface 142). Beatrice thus resists
devolving into the “monstrous lump of ruin” (4.1.95) that her father hopes to make her
through rape, and instead embraces a bodily and dramatic form of disarticulation: her
face is part of a larger assembly of dramatic-poetic parts with which she demands
attention and solicits action.
Masks are sites of emotional distillation for Shelley not because they muddle affects, then, but because they invite responses and leave room for interpretation.

Unexpectedly, Shelley claims that the emotive human face is only suited to speaking in the absence of others—for speaking to oneself rather than to seeking “harmony” or playing a larger “part” between actors. Orsino’s description of Beatrice’s demeanor supports this reading: her expression may seem expressionless in its unchanging quality and in “drowning both tenderness and dread,” but Beatrice is open to replies that are proactive and collaborative. Until meeting Beatrice’s gaze, Lucretia and Orsino claim to be “bewildered” in their own “horror” rather than thinking of how to help Beatrice, holding a “self-misunderstood” conversation that is self-indulgent and indolent. Metaphorically, guessing only leads to stumbling—not to dealing with the present moment—but Beatrice’s masked expression interrupts all such reveries. With a gaze and demeanor that tell without speaking, she helps Lucretia and Orsino focus on the task at hand along with Giacomo, who finds this account to be “enough” to join her in acting against their father. In keeping with Aristotle’s account of tragic anagnorisis, too, Beatrice’s realization pushes her to reconsider her social relationships—those who inspire “either friendship or hatred”—and to make a change: she pursues a forward, tragic trajectory that reveals rather than submits to torture’s hidden cycle of abuse. In what remains unspoken but palpable, the Cenci family (excluding the Count) intuits a form of dramatic and poetic “harmony” that focuses on what is to be done rather than what has happened. Rather than “darkly guessing” together, it is “enough” to recognize that they can no longer separate Beatrice or themselves from the “mask and the mantle” of circumstance (Preface 144).
Beatrice the Anatomizer

Beatrice’s disarticulated poetic powers do not only inspire social action; they also facilitate introspection. Her mode of anatomizing sets her apart from the kind practiced by audiences and by her father. Indeed, “anatomization” is a word that is as slippery as it is important in *The Cenci*. It has metaphorical affinities with torture and nonverbal communication, but most critics conceive of “anatomization” as akin to self-absorbed, calculating machinations. This is not without good cause: Orsino’s famous account of the Cenci family’s collective talent, or “trick,” for performing “self-anatomy” in order “To analyze their own and other minds” (2.2.110, 109) has encouraged strictly cognitive approaches to anatomization. Alan Richardson, while acknowledging that Orsino is hardly an impartial observer, calls the Cencis “connoisseurs of consciousness” who think so much about their narcissistic desire to gain access to other minds that they “introduce a division that easily grows pernicious.” But if anatomization means just one thing, its bearing and importance would be limited to keeping Beatrice on solely an *ethical* continuum with her father. She would become a torturer rather than an exposér of torture, opening her to the familiar argument that rape either silences or “pollutes” her to the point that Count Cenci’s sadism supplants her identity and corrupts her free will (3.1.26).

Her father’s brutality is undeniably thoroughgoing. Unlike Beatrice, when he “anatomizes” others, he revels in rationalizing his debased need to eviscerate and own them. More specifically, Count Cenci’s interest in torture and his ability to “look… so dreadfully” (2.1.158) are based upon extracting what he calls the “sensual luxury” of “the sight of agony, and the sense of joy, / When this shall be another’s and that mine”
This fixation on sight distinguishes him from the Papal State’s official torturers: while he is a public figure who terrorizes fellow noblemen and family alike, he is less interested in “voices,” to refer to Scarry, or in confessions. As much as he enjoys this absence of pain, just as he thinks “all men… exult / Over the tortures they can never feel” (1.1.78-79), his understanding of expression is more expansive: it is embodied, active, and not necessarily verbal.

This attitude is evident in the play’s very first scene and in Count Cenci’s first major monologue. There, he describes the dark side of witnessing violence: anyone can become a sadist once they begin to crave responses to pain that, for him, are his “natural” sustenance. With lurid insight into this voyeuristic, would-be sympathy if it were not a kind of distancing “casuistry,” he explains quite plainly to Camillo that his actions do not make him a fiend or a monster. They make him a particularly imaginative man—and other men would do the same if they had the nerve:

All men delight in sensual luxury,
All men enjoy revenge; and most exult
Over the tortures they can never feel—
Flattering their secret peace with others’ pain.
But I delight in nothing else. I love
The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,
When this shall be another’s, and that mine.
And I have no remorse and little fear,
Which are, I think, the checks of other men.
This mood has grown upon me, until now
Any design my captious fancy makes
The picture of its wish, and it forms none
But such as men like you would start to know,
Is as my natural food and rest debarred
Until it be accomplished. (1.1.77-91)

Cenci has a dramatic orientation toward his victims, at once enjoying the spectatorial distance endemic to the insidious privileges of being a torturer and—because he is deeply
invested their bodies as creative, consumable objects—projecting upon them “[a]ny design my captious fancy makes.” In this way, Shelley puts the audience on notice as he did in his Preface: we may have more in common with Beatrice’s father than Beatrice herself when we, too, make demands not only to see but also to own others’ experiences. Hypervisual and tactile to the point of metaphorical cannibalism, Count Cenci’s mode of anatomizing is very much attuned to the body and does not rely upon extracting pleasure from statements or pleas; he understands the potency of alternative modes of communicative expression just like his daughter.

Beatrice, however, has no interest in possessing others; instead, she reveals others’ motivations to themselves with an equally tactile, penetrating insight. Even in one of the play’s most notorious scenes, where Beatrice compels Marzio to recant his confession, her anatomizing gaze is frightening because it makes him see Beatrice as the unapologetic embodiment of a fully tortured and disarticulated subject who, at the same time, has refused to answer to corrupt authority. Her power may be born out of suffering, but she does not suffer the charade of the Papal State’s moral codes any more than its governance by torture. So when she turns to Marzio and tells him to “[f]ix thine eyes on mine… [and] answer what I ask” (5.2.81-82), she is not torturing him; if anything, Marzio says that her words and demeanor, as Marzio observes, are “worse than torture” since they compel him to take back the confession that the State wanted to hear and had extracted. What Beatrice’s alarming presence brings to the surface is “worse” because what she asks him to do is harder: to contend that Count Cenci is no father—thereby obviating any accusation of “parricide,” and, by extension, that his murder should be no crime—would be tantamount to rejecting the social structure to which Marzio is bound.
Recognizing this is more painful than any “wounds” that the perverse juridical system, a mirror image of the Count himself, could possibly inflict. Beatrice’s words and anatomizing expressions thus prove unbearable: Marzio cries, “Speak to me no more! / That stern yet piteous look, those solemn tones, / Wound worse than torture. I have told it all” (5.2.108-110). While it is technically “true” that he killed Count Cenci, Marzio sees that torture “forced” a more superficial truth (5.2.32) because such an accusation frames Cenci as an ordinary citizen. What Beatrice draws out of him is a social truth: Marzio committed a revolutionary, political act in killing a tyrant. He therefore cannot stand Beatrice’s “terrible resentment” (5.2.30) since her glare indicts him for his weakness, just as she cannot stand the idea of answering to torturers.

In anatomizing others to “teach… self-knowledge” (Defence 520), Beatrice’s power to penetrate and dissect those upon whom she gazes (including herself) is more social and reflective of Shelley’s poetic principles than the kind of “restless and anatomizing casuistry” that audiences perform or that Count Cenci enjoys (Defence 520, Preface 142). There is an intimacy to Beatrice’s gaze, and her ability to see into Orsino is one of the central points of attraction (and repulsion) she affords him. Orsino covets the Cenci family’s ability to anatomize at the same time he is deeply committed to the kind of linguistic “casuistry” about which Shelley is suspicious. It is no surprise, then, that Orsino’s framing of “anatomization” has more in common with the audience’s and Count Cenci’s modes of rationalizing than his experience of being anatomized. Orsino tells us that Beatrice has a power to “lay… bare” others’ bodies and “hidden thoughts,” weaving together the rhetoric of torture, vivisection, and detailed self-awareness: “Yet I fear / Her subtle mind, her awe-inspiring gaze, / Whose beams anatomicize me nerve by nerve / And
lay me bare, and make me blush to see / My hidden thoughts” (1.2.83-87). Orsino’s account is particularly notable because his access to language is not destroyed nor is he traumatized. Stripped “nerve by nerve,” Orsino becomes more conscious of his private thoughts and corporeal self rather than devolving into “agony.”

It makes sense that Orsino would attempt to mitigate this sense of exposure by calling anatomization a “trick.” After all, tricks can be managed, learned, and, like Orsino himself, are fundamentally insincere.

It fortunately serves my close designs
That ’tis a trick of this same family
To analyse their own and other minds.
Such self-anatomy shall teach the will
Dangerous secrets: for it tempts our powers,
Knowing what must be thought, and may be done,
Into the depth of darkest purposes:
So Cenci fell into the pit; even I,
Since Beatrice unveiled me to myself,
And made me shrink from what I cannot shun,
Shew a poor figure to my own esteem,
To which I grow half-reconciled. (2.2.107-18)

Jeremy Davies interprets this passage as describing the perils of how a commitment to calculating reason can quickly devolve into rationalizing horror and to excavating things better left unthought. “Trying to understand yourself,” as Davies puts it, “alters the very thing that you examine.” 42 Such a reading, however, ignores Orsino’s strange movement between singular and plural possessive adjectives as well as some of his most important lines: “’tis a trick of this same family / To analyse their own and other minds. / Such self-anatomy shall teach the will / Dangerous secretes: for it tempts our powers.” The Cencis do not simply perform “self-anatomy”—they also penetrate “other minds.” But the diffusion of agency echoes Shelley’s account of the “superstitious” and “restless” anatomizing that his audiences perform; they, too, become intertwined with the “wrongs”
they investigate, just as the antecedent of “it” in the above passage could be “self-anatomy” or the “will.”

Beatrice’s mode of anatomizing constitutes a third way. She does not “fall into a pit” of calculating involution or attempt to disentangle complex causal systems, but she manages to “unveil” Orsino, just as she had laid him bare in Act One. Bared once more, Orsino’s language takes on a dissociative quality in the second half of the passage much like Beatrice’s own frame of mind after her disarticulation in Act Three. He sees himself as a distant “figure,” but he remains stuck in a “half” state of neither rejecting nor embracing the realities of his desires or identity. Orsino is too mired in “dangerous secrets” to which he does not attribute any agent even as these secrets are indisputably solipsistic and self-interested.

Beatrice’s “secrets” are not quite so insular; they are, in fact, the dangerous realities of the world that oppresses her. As I have mentioned, in the wake of being assaulted, her capacity to anatomize mirrors Orsino’s experience: she sees herself from afar and indicts her former “haling” of her father. But unlike Orsino, she does not take half-measures or retreat from seeing herself as “a poor figure to [her] own esteem” (2.2.117). She uses her powers of anatomization to reconcile herself to her new identity as a disarticulated woman without a father. Attempting at first to reason her way out of the “truth” of what happened, she eventually stops herself to focus upon the physical and social positioning of her body in her household, grappling with an identity that is at once new and old. Not delusional, she becomes a realist who knows that no amount of testimony—or silence—will undo the past or let her escape what “is.” The concrete facts
of embodiment and social collectivity must trump any previous faith in moral reasoning or words, whether they are “wild” or the “truth”:

LUCRETIA: My sweet child, know you…

BEATRICE: Yet speak it not: For then if this be truth, that other too
Must be a truth, a firm enduring truth, Linked with each lasting circumstance of life, Never to change, never to pass away. Why so it is. This is the Cenci palace; Thou art Lucretia; I am Beatrice. I have talked some wild words, but will no more. Mother, come near me: from this point of time, I am… [Her voice dies away faintly.] (3.1.60-69)

Beatrice not-so-simply “is,” piecing herself together amid her allies. She realizes that her voice offers no comfort, and the future—“from this point in time”—remains uncertain. For her, as for Shelley’s Poet in the Defence, “the future is contained within the present” (511), and the only remaining response is to be, to act, and to kill the torturer to whom she will no longer answer.

Nerve by Nerve: Shelley’s Poetics of Parts

Far from being unable to express herself after being raped, Beatrice communicates her plight with an unspoken and figurative force that resists The Cenci’s world of cyclical violence and specious narrative. This accords with Shelley’s concept of dramatic poetry and his general ambivalence about language as an effective mode of communication. As William Keach argues, Shelley had a “shifting and divided attitude toward words” that led him to make particularly gripping formal and stylistic innovations in his pursuit of the “vitally metaphorical” potential of language (Defence 512). We can extend this attention to what Keach summarizes as “the unique but imperfect relation
between language and thought” to how Shelley, in his dramatic as well as lyric poetry, models social encounters and other forms of aesthetically productive communicative incompletion, often by posing unanswered questions. Shelley rarely composed “narratives” in any kind of ordinary sense, and *The Cenci* criticizes explanatory testimony as an evasion of the present. If Beatrice were to testify, she would reflect too much upon the past rather than dealing with her current situation, and she would lose her capacity to communicate through action. In the *Defence*, the idea that “language itself is poetry” stresses this point: poets must reinvigorate language’s metaphorical qualities “afresh” lest it fade and become useless to “all the nobler purposes of human intercourse” (*Defence* 512). Shelley’s argument antedates Paul Ricoeur’s theory that “living metaphors” possess many meanings simultaneously and only die once they become clichés. As Ricoeur writes, “Initial polysemy equals ‘language,’ the living metaphor equals ‘speech,’ [and] metaphor in common use represents the return of speech towards language.” Metaphor moves between language and speech, just as, for Shelley, language is only communicative *when* it is metaphorical and implicitly poetic. And because poetry taps into the “vitaly metaphorical” powers of language, we can see how Beatrice’s embodiment of Shelley’s disarticulated dramatic ideal—a figure of tortured insight—helps audiences and her family alike see the “unapprehended relations of things” (*Defence* 512), which is precisely the work of metaphor, even when those things arise from the fragments of her former, less perceptive self.

But, as I discussed earlier, Shelley has an expansive notion of “expression,” the most frequent term used in his *Defence* when describing the poet’s imaginative powers and obligations. He emphasizes the importance of “form” and “action” (*Defence* 512),
but he also conceives of poetry as the medium of innovation itself, such as when he states, “the true poetry of Rome lived in its institutions” (*Defence* 523). And when it comes to dramatic poetry, Shelley knew that language alone did not guarantee greatness. Lord Byron intuited the novel and multifaceted nature of Shelley’s dramatic verse when he wrote to his friend in 1821 in regard to the play. While Byron states that *The Cenci* is “essentially un-dramatic in its subject,” the sentence does not end there: “I read Cenci—but, besides that I think the subject essentially un-dramatic, I am not an admirer of our old dramatists as models. I deny that the English have hitherto had a drama at all. Your Cenci, however, was a work of power, and poetry.”

Byron was right. The source of *The Cenci*’s “power” lies in its distinctively dramatic form of “poetry,” whatever Byron may have thought of its “subject.” At first, though, Shelley’s claim for drama in the *Defence* may seem fairly conventional. He appears to subscribe to a form of sympathetic distance that he derides in audience members who perform “restless and anatomizing casuistry” (*Preface* 142), and this echoes how meter can, as both Wordsworth and Dryden argue, regulate readers’ emotions. As we may recall from his comments on how Athenian drama offers “little food for censure” (*Defence* 520), Shelley also contends that the formal components of dramatic poetry in general have an ability to make the most disturbing topics palatable, where “crime is disarmed of half its horror and all its contagion by being represented as the fatal consequence of unfathomable agencies of nature” (*Defence* 520). Paradoxically, only once dramatic poetry is “disarmed” of its taboos and “horror” can an audience confront a play’s taboos and horrors. Put differently, onlookers are not forced to see themselves as “superstitious,” as Shelley describes *The Cenci*’s squirming audience (*Preface* 142); they
can achieve a form of Aristotelian catharsis since all staged immorality is at a safe remove, allowing them the luxury of imaginative projection rather than responsive indictment (Defence 520).51

Shelley’s broader accounts of dramatic poetry, however, are more complex: as we might expect of such a political poet, he does not separate a work’s aesthetic value from its moral implications. On the contrary, dramatic poetry is the form of verse that is most attuned to the triumphs and the “periods of decay of social life” (Defence 520). When works are thoroughly corrupted by political propaganda or do not attempt to invent new forms, they do not “express poetry” (Defence 520). By contrast, good drama is a means toward moral imagining unconfined by social or even literary conventions. This explains why Shelley does not separate plays from works like Paradise Lost in the Preface to Prometheus Unbound, and why he also notes that drama allows for different kinds of poetic “expression” beyond language, a position that, to an extent, also applies to verse generally.52 In the Defence, Shelley emphasizes that all poetry influences history whether manifesting “in form, in action or in language” (518), placing nonverbal components of imaginative communication before words, which are produced “arbitrarily” by the imagination (Defence 513). And, as I have noted already, this interest in “form” and “action” is literalized in his praise of Athenian drama, which constellates “language, action, music, painting… dance” (Defence 518). Drama that is “divested of all… accompaniment of the kindred arts” (Defence 520) cannot “harmonize” or express the inherently innovative nature of poetry, which is why Shelley faults modern productions that replicate rather than create new dramatic forms.
While bad drama captures something about the society in which it was written, it does not critique social “decay” so much as subscribe to it. Audiences and authors will collaborate in weak dramatic works, but the interaction is superficial, similar to Keats’s likening of bad conversation to “an endeavour at effect” (KL 2:43). Shelley writes:

But in periods of the decay of social life, the drama sympathizes with that decay. Tragedy becomes a cold imitation of the form of the great masterpieces of antiquity, divested of all harmonious accompaniment of the kindred arts; and often the very form misunderstood, or a weak attempt to teach certain doctrines, which the writer considers as moral truths; and which are usually no more than specious flatteries of some gross vice or weakness, with which the author, in common with his auditors, are infected… To such purposes poetry cannot be made subservient. Poetry is a sword of lightning, ever unsheathed, which consumes the scabbard that would contain it. (Defence 520)

Audiences and authors are connected, but only through the “specious flatteries” that are at once shallow and by an “infect[ion]” that oddly does not seem to spread so much as deepen a text’s association with whatever “gross vice” governed the period. These dramatic works do not—and cannot—“express” poetry because they are too easily contained. Real poetry “consumes the scabbard that would contain it.”

To Shelley, an array of components is not a part of drama: drama cannot be poetry without being comprised of parts—without being a many-sided mirror that constellates language, action, and form. It is not ideal, in other words, if not anatomized, and these various pieces, spoken and unspoken, resemble and comprise his disarticulated heroine whose embrace of action and figurative language conveys “the dramatic character of what she did and suffered” (Preface 142). As a poet-figure who no longer entertains pointless questions that violate rather than educate, she becomes an “influence which is moved not, but moves” in the face of impossible circumstances (Defence 535). She also illuminates the radical implications of Shelley’s dramatic ideal: Beatrice has been
tortured to the extreme, but she becomes more socially cognizant and active once she sees herself as an assemblage that can never cohere no matter how earnestly she might describe or testify.

The poeticized Beatrice answers only to herself, but, counterintuitively, her refusal to answer inspires deeper social commitments that help her “lay… bare” (1.2.86) The Cenci’s governance by torture. She moves both audiences and her family to recognize that, while her capacity to act and to express herself through poetic form and through looks that speak may have arisen from disturbing circumstances, she will not be ignored or made to recount humiliations, nor will she accede to vicious social conventions of torturous interrogation and subjugation with which narrative is aligned in The Cenci. Most compellingly, Beatrice’s disarticulated “dramatic character” shows why audiences are uncomfortable with a powerful woman who is neither a tyrant nor a victim no matter how hard readers may try to align her with her father’s debauchery. Transforming the terrorized into a terrorizer evades Shelley’s complicated poetics of parts that puts his audiences in a more social and responsive role whether they like it or not. Indeed, Shelley believed that dramatic poetry could “teach…self-knowledge” and could illuminate aspects of human nature (Defence 520), but when viewing plays like The Cenci, audiences are confronted with a darker reality. As William Hazlitt said of Coriolanus in 1816, “If the language of poetry naturally falls in with the language of power,” reader-audiences need to be careful with what they discover, which very likely may be an ugly impulse to identify with torturers rather than those subject to torture. Hazlitt writes: “We had rather be the oppressor than the oppressed. The love of power in ourselves and the admiration of it in others are both natural to man: the one makes him a
tyrant, the other a slave”—or, in terms germane to this discussion, the one makes him the anatomizer, the other the anatomized.\(^{53}\)

Shelley faced this dilemma of his own creation when confronted with the prospect of staging the play. In the same letter to Peacock where he acknowledged that *The Cenci* is a unique work, Shelley asked his friend to help him arrange for the play’s production. He also confessed that, were *The Cenci* to be staged to his specifications, watching it would be utterly compelling but necessarily excruciating: “What I want you to do, is to procure for me its presentation at Covent Garden. The principal character, Beatrice, is precisely fitted for Miss O’Neil, and it might even seem written for her (God forbid that I should ever see her play it -- it would tear my nerves to pieces).”\(^{54}\) Shelley’s “nervousness” does not stem from any fear of O’Neil butchering the part; he is more worried that she will bring Beatrice’s actions to life “precisely.” Whether this is the unspoken power to deny others gratification while inspiring a social response, or of Shelley’s having kept, as a nineteenth-century reviewer for *The British Review* described it, “whatever… is most revolting constantly before our eyes,” we cannot know.\(^{55}\) But there is something disturbing even to an audience member who is not a “restless” casuist, raising the question of what is most revolting when encountering the play: is it the torturer’s anatomizing casuistry or feeling tortured when witnessing it?

Shelley’s language strongly resembles the State torturer’s vow in Act Five to “wring the truth / Out of those nerves and sinews, groan by groan” (5.2.193-94). The victims in the play, of course, are Beatrice and her family, and the victimizers are afforded the spectator’s luxury of simultaneous distance and violation that Shelley, apparently, is not. Like the reviewer who “sees” that which is never staged, he, too, finds
himself troubled by the text’s unspoken evocation of penetrating and sometimes violent modes of social contact. Either frustrated or tormented, onlookers cannot achieve catharsis because, in *The Cenci*, neither speaking nor leaving things unspoken will ever secure a satisfying or stable notion of what violence “means.”

As it did in Shelley’s moment, then, the play puts the audience in a position not unlike that of the speaker of “The Triumph of Life.” Should one “from spectator turn / Actor or victim in this wretchedness” (“Triumph” 305-8) when Beatrice must be *both* an “actor and a sufferer” (Preface 144)? Neither Beatrice nor Shelley offers an easy answer, and *The Cenci* is no parade or dream vision. The audience’s choice is simpler but starker: they may remain at a safe and “sympathetic” remove to interrogate Shelley’s heroine in the hope of, as he also wrote to Peacock, becoming “contented to believe what [we] can understand”; or, they can submit and react viscerally to the text’s poetic power. Perhaps, if the audience is to do anything, it should be to ask a version of the impossible question with which I began: “What are the words which you would have us speak?”

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4 Cathy Caruth’s *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), by way of Freud and De Man, influentially articulates this paradigmatic approach to trauma studies. To an extent, Geoffrey Hartman also supports a dialectical approach to trauma in “On Traumatic


6 Michael Worton writes, “The rape drives Beatrice into an impotent mutism in which she strives to find a new language to express her feelings…[but] when she is confronted by an action which she can neither comprehend nor describe, she resorts in desperation to a deed which runs counter to her natural goodness and innocence” (“Speech and Silence in The Cenci” in Essays on Shelley, ed. Miriam Allott [Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble Books, 1982], 115). See also William Ulmer, who contends that Beatrice is a “poet figure”—but only up until she is raped, not after, since, again, she has apparently lost her access to language and her “self,” Shelleyan Eros: the Rhetoric of Romantic Love (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 123-4.

7 “Shelley Disfigured” in The Rhetoric of Romanticism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 107. De Man writes, however, in reference to “The Triumph of Life”—yet another one of Shelley’s poems that is fundamentally interrogative in emphasis. In “Triumph” and other texts, Shelley’s questioning stance also models conversational incompleteness. Even if we were to grant that Rousseau’s questions or replies are repetitive or erased, de Man discounts whether Shelley is embracing repetition amid watching an endless, macabre parade while also attending to his corrupted Vergil-figure; indeed, it would makes sense that Shelley would be invested in figurative language—in this case, the “shape all light” (“Triumph” 352)—and syntax rather than individual words when pursuing the poet’s ultimate goal to revitalize metaphorical language through imaginative, sympathetic action. As Shelley writes in the Defence, “[Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought… and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” through the kind of “love” that is “a going out of our own nature” (517). Cultivating these “unapprehended combinations” requires a certain humility on the part of the poet and reliance on figuration—and, as de Man himself says of “Triumph’s” river metaphor, “disarticulation.” To cite a longer version of the quote I cite in the body of this chapter:

Water, which has no shape of itself, is molded into shape by its contact with the earth, just as in the scene of the water washing away the tracks, it
generates the very possibility of structure, pattern, form, or shape by way of the disappearance of shape into shapelness. The repetition of the erasures rhythmically articulates what is in fact a disarticulation, and the poem seems to be shaped by the undoing of shapes. (107, emphasis added)

De Man’s use of the term “disarticulation” rather than “inarticulate,” given his acknowledgement of Shelleyan form as paramount to the metaphor rather than words themselves, is in reference to the dismantling of argument that he believes is stated object of “The Triumph of Life”: “Then, what is Life?” (544). De Man does not value how questions model the strange, presentist momentum to which Shelley alludes at the conclusion of his Defence, where the poet’s greatest talent is embracing uncertainty, incomplete thoughts, and the future-present, submitting themselves to metaphor and “the words which express what they understand not” (535).


9 Among other articles, see Greg Ellermann’s “Speculative Romanticism,” SubStance 44, no. 1 (2015): 154-174 on Shelley’s materialism. Ellermann does not, however, address how Shelley represents the human body.


11 In Act Five, Beatrice anticipates Scarry when she censures Cardinal Camillo for his ability to “countenance” the “wicked farce” of Marzio’s spectacular dismemberment on the rack, observing that the victim provides no viable intelligence. Instead, he is “bade to answer, not as he believes, / But as those may suspect or do desire / Whose questions thence suggest their own reply” (5.2.38, 41-43) and, even if Camillo believes Beatrice to be “innocent,” the court judges flatly reply, “Yet she must be tortured” as a bizarre matter of course (5.2.62).

12 It is no accident that Antonin Artaud would choose to adapt The Cenci for the only production of his “theater of cruelty” in 1935. For comparisons of Shelley to Artaud and the latter’s fixation on inspiring visceral reactions in his audiences, see Adrian Curtin, “Cruel Vibrations: Sounding Out Antonin Artaud’s Production of Les Cenci,” Theatre Research International 35, no. 3 (2010): 250-62; for a reading of the two places in terms of trauma studies, see Aileen Forbes, “Return of the Cenci: Theaters of Trauma in Shelley and Artaud,” Comparative Literature 67, no. 4 (2015): 394-414; for Artaud’s take on the “unspeakable,” see Robert Vork, “Things That No One Can Say: The Unspeakable Act in Artaud’s Les Cenci,” Modern Drama 56, no. 3 (2013): 306-26. See Guy Debord, who argues, in addition to his fundamental premise that Marx’s fixation on objects has been displaced by images, that the Spectacle’s “goal is nothing, development is all. The spectacle wants to get to nothing other than itself,” just as torture serves to perpetuate the charade of gathering intelligence or a faux-conversation. See also Debord on how “the spectacle presents itself as an enormous unutterable and inaccessible actuality… The attitude which it demands in principle is the passive acceptance, which in fact it has already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance” (Society of the Spectacle, trans. Black & Red [Detroit, 1970], theses 14 and 12).


18 Stuart Sperry calls this passage a “struggle of the imagination” on the part of the audience, that, “erring though it may be,” constitutes the play’s catharsis (“The Ethical Politics of Shelley’s ‘The Cenci,’” *Studies in Romanticism* 25, no. 3 [1986]: 423); I would contend that what makes readers so uncomfortable about *The Cenci* is Shelley’s utter denial of catharsis. Catharsis is only available to those who enjoy torture and interrogation.

19 While I argue that the “code” of *The Cenci*’s society is a code of sadism and recursive torture, for an reading that views *The Cenci* is an “existential drama” in which Beatrice must remake her own ethical code in a codeless world, see Stuart Curran, *Shelley’s Cenci: Scorpions Ringed With Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Sperry summarizes the issue of logic (or illogic) in *The Cenci*’s world: Shelley’s insertion of Savella’s appearance with an arrest warrant for Count Cenci immediately after his murder is the play’s greatest source of dramatic irony. It illustrates the two major ethical positions critics have taken: for some, “the irony served to underline Beatrice’s error in adopting violent means to do away with her father… For others, quite to the contrary, Savella’s arrival is the culminating absurdity in a cruel and illogical world where the only course open to Beatrice is to seek to impose a moral order of her own and where she is punished for bringing about the very end that society itself has at last belatedly ordained” (“Ethical Politics,” 416).

20 As this dissertation has noted throughout, Smith’s version of sympathy is largely investigative, where we collect narratives and “information” (i.e. content) to speculate about and spectate upon a situation. For example, see his famous comment on “situations” and detailed circumstances: if there is to be “some correspondence of sentiments between the spectator and the person principally concerned, the spectator must first of all, endeavor, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents; and strive to render as perfect as possible, that imaginary change of situation upon which his sympathy is founded” (*The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Rachael and A. L. Macfie [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976], 1.1.4.6, 21). Smith applies “harmony” and musicality—terminology that M. H. Abrams observes to be quintessential Romantic tropes in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1953), 51-53—to “[t]he great pleasure of
conversation and society” whose “delightful harmony cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions… to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other’s bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which really subsist there” (Theory of Moral Sentiments, 7.4.28, 337). As we have seen, the poets in this study deepened this model of conversational “penetration” to take embodiment quite seriously, and to explore the consequences of achieving these “harmonies,” discordant or disturbingly melodic, in the case of Coleridge and Wordsworth. See Nancy Yousef on Romantic writers’ tempered attitude toward the ability to achieve such “harmony” and the “constant, mutual passage of feelings between persons” (Romantic Intimacy [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013], 74).

21 “Introductory Discourse” in Plays on the Passions [1798] ed. Peter Duthie (Petersborough, Canada: Broadview Press, 2001), 72, 73. Baillie opens by distinguishing between types of conversation, the best of which effectively turns one into a Coleridgean pathognomist rather than the kind of conversationalist Keats despaired, who indulges in “trivial and mischievous tattling” (Baillie, “Introductory Discourse” 68). As we know, the good conversationalist, by contrast, listens as he speaks, cultivating an aesthetic and ethical sensibility while also practicing what is, as Thomas Reid might say, “natural” to all people: “Every person, who is not deficient in intellect, is more or less occupied in tracing, amongst the individuals he converses with, the varieties of understanding and temper which constitute the characters of men; and receives great pleasure from every stroke of nature that points out to him those varieties” (“Introductory Discourse,” 67-68). Baillie notably resists J. C. Lavater’s physiognomic thinking. See Chapter Three on this topic.

22 Lucretia effectually works as a proxy for The Cenci’s audience, as do most of Beatrice’s interlocutors.

23 For one article on the taboo in The Cenci, see Stephen Cheeke, who writes, “the unnameable is everywhere, the off-stage violence is central and the taboo word starkly legible” (Shelley’s ‘The Cenci,’: Economies of a ‘Familiar’ Language,” Keats-Shelley Journal 47 [1998]: 149).

24 Orsino actually substantiates Beatrice’s position on the “mocking” quality of words like rape, incest, or, in his conversation with Giacomo, “parricide” when Giacomo refers to a prior conversation and expresses fear of words: “It must be fear itself, for the bare word / Is hollow mockery” (3.1.342-44).


In one of the many places where Scarry argues that language comprises the “contents” of thought, she writes, “It is the intense pain that destroys a person’s self and world, a destruction experienced spatially as either the contraction of the universe down to the immediate vicinity of the body or as the body swelling to fill the entire universe. Intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (Body in Pain, 35).

As I mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, it is tempting to apply trauma studies’ emphasis upon the healing power of narrative to scenes like this. To do so, however, would ignore Beatrice’s own process of piecing herself back together that unfolds over the course of the scene. For more on the debate regarding trauma as causing amnesia yet necessitating narrative versus traumatic events’ ability to tap into a more detailed form of memory formation, see, Caruth, Unclaimed Experience and Shoshana Felman, the latter of whom contends that testimony should be understood not “as a mode of statement of, but rather as a mode of access to, that truth.” The process of narrating trauma to a listener, then, is the only means by which a witness “begets the truth, through the speech process of the testimony” (“Education and Crisis,” Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History [New York and London: Routledge, 1992], 16). For one of the best engagements with trauma studies’ bearing on poetics and Romanticism, see Geoffrey Hartman, who emphasizes the role of the “listener.” He asserts that the “interpreter” must act as a listener if we are to attend the modes of “testimony” that surface within texts like Coleridge’s Rime of the Ancient Mariner, instilling poetic texts themselves with a kind of anthropomorphic, speaking (or divisive) force when occupying a space of “traumatic knowledge.” They model the dialectical movement between “nescience” and “knowledge” characteristic of traumatic states of mind (“On Traumatic Knowledge,” 541-43, 537). Joshua Pederson challenges this dialectical thinking and the notion that survivors of trauma cannot remember; he suggests that they may choose not to remember or testify, an argument that more directly applies to Beatrice’s situation in “Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory,” Narrative 22, no. 3 (2014): 333-53. On the silencing of women and children with sexual violence, see Judith Herman, Trauma and Recovery (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

Shelley’s Process, 153.

It is notable that when Beatrice criticizes confession under torture in Act Five, she uses the same verb, “bade,” to describe the interrogation process (5.2.38-43).


Carlson, In the Theatre of Romanticism, 192; on the lack of soliloquy, see Margot Harrison, “No Way for a Victim to Act? Beatrice Cenci and the Dilemma of Romantic Performance,” Studies in Romanticism 39, no. 2 (2000): 200; for a particularly rigid reading of the split, “costumed,” and corporeal self as indicative of Beatrice’s alienation from her “internal” identity, see Henderson, Romantic Identities, 96-129.

Needless to say, things do not go according to Count Cenci’s plan: she externalizes her disarticulation in the form of a prismatic yet masked dramatic figure, and she inspires simultaneous introspection and action. By existing as a “many-sided mirror” that
“multiplies all that it reflects… propagating its like wherever it may fall (Defence 520), she thwarts him because he can no longer “act the thing [he] thought” (1.1.98) if she will not answer or be “dragged”: “I will drag her, step by step, / Through infamies unheard of among men: She shall stand shelterless in the broad noon / Of public scorn, for acts blazoned abroad, / One among which shall be… What? Canst thou guess?” (4.1.80-84). In not answering, though, Count Cenci finds himself unable to make her infamous at the same time he attempts to tease Lucretia and the audience with the taboo of incest, an act that has, by Act Four, lost its shock value and become enfolded into his torturous repertoire.

34 See Alan Richardson on Count Cenci’s projection of self onto Beatrice through incest, where he hopes to encompass her with gloom and, with Gothic flare, “place… her in an artificial isolation… intended to reflect his own, radical social detachment; and, through calculated suggestions of the imminent rape… impress upon her his own mixed feelings of repulsion and desire” (A Mental Theater: Poetic Drama and Consciousness in the Romantic Age [University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988], 107).

35 Aristotle, Poetics, 11.34; 1452a.

36 Shelley uses this phrase in both his Preface to The Cenci and his Defence. In each case, he emphasizes the complex relationship between poets and their social environments. In the case of the Defence, Shelley describes the “distorted notions of invisible things” (i.e. organized religion) to which Dante and Milton responded were “merely the mask and the mantle in which these great poets walk through eternity enveloped and disguised” (526). In the Preface to The Cenci, though, the “mask and the mantle” is considerably more complex given the number of cloth metaphors that tie together mind and body, and the added layer of meaning behind “impersonation on the scene of the world” beyond metatheatricality: “impersonation” as a form of duplicitous mimicry was only one (and not necessarily as prevalent) definition in 1819; it also signified endowing something with personhood or embodiment, reinforcing how Beatrice’s “circumstances” embed her in the bleak realities rather than necessarily subscribing to the duplicities “interwoven with the whole fabric of life” in The Cenci (Preface 144, 143).

37 John Schell, for example, conceives of anatomization as a lack of imagination, “Shelley’s The Cenci: Corruption and the Calculating Faculty,” University of Mississippi Studies in English 2 (1981): 1-14. This is in continuity with readings, like Carlson’s, that track Beatrice’s transformation from “virtuous heroine” to “master dissembler” (In the Theatre of Romanticism, 194).

38 A Mental Theater, 102-3.

39 Beatrice describes those tortured as “slaves” for confessing to anything in order to make physical pain stop. Speaking to Camillo, she posits that even he could be made to say that he poisoned his nephew despite grieving his death: “Yet you would say, ‘I confess anything,’ / And beg from your tormentors, like that slave [Marzio], / The refuge of dishonorable death” (5.2.55-57).

40 Scarry’s point is that the torturer and tortured exist in a state of total inversion: “For the prisoner,” she writes, “the body and its pain are overwhelmingly present and the voice, world, and self are absent; for the torturer, voice, world, and self are overwhelmingly present and the body and pain are absent” (Body in Pain, 46).
Dempsey makes much of Marzio in his argument for Shelley’s reconfiguration of the tragic genre, “Tragedy in a Secular Age,” 885-90. For an excellent reading of how Marzio’s interrogation scene ties to the larger legal concerns in The Cenci, and specifically of the “analogy between the paternalism of the state and the violative patriarchalism of the father,” see Michael Kohler, “Shelley in Chancery: The Reimagination of the Paternalist State in ‘The Cenci,’” Studies in Romanticism 37, no. 4 (1998): 580. On Beatrice’s adoption of amoral—if not immoral—casuistry in order to enact her own “thoughts” in the Cenci tradition in order to both “lie” and “bully” Marzio, see Finn, “The Ethics and Aesthetics,” 177-97; for a more expansive reading of torture and Marzio (that also makes reference to Scarry) as indicative of Beatrice’s problematic relationship to “sympathy,” see Jeremy Davies, Bodily Pain in Romantic Literature (New York: Routledge, 2014), 142-50.

Keach’s monograph remains one of the most important studies of Shelley’s relationship and prowess with language as an unstable but enlivened entity when handled by a poet. My interest, as I have stated, however, addresses Shelley’s less-explored fixation on the imbrication between what is actually written in plays like The Cenci and what remains unspoken. See also Robert Kaufman’s important article on Shelley’s concept of sympathy, form, the importance of imperfection to his aesthetics and politics. Kaufman asserts that the poet was not quite so naïve as to think that art could provide total social change: “Instead, Shelley conceives aesthetic experience as a formal process that produces—in the mind’s engagement with the dynamics, textures, and resistances of art—critical thinking itself as a form of truth” (“Legislators of the Post-Everything World: Shelley’s ‘Defence of Adorno,’” ELH 63, no. 3 [1996]: 709, emphasis added).

We might think of the Poet in “Alastor” as a quintessential example of such a figure, whose disappointment is, of course, inevitable. The trope of chasms and gulfs in Shelley’s work is yet another example of his relationship to sublime disappointment that may lead to provocative questions, such as at the conclusion of “Mont Blanc”; see Frances Ferguson on “Mont Blanc” as investigating the frustrations with being unable to avoid attributing “meaning” to the mountain, “Shelley’s Mont Blanc: What the Mountain Said” in Romanticism and Language ed. Arden Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), 202-14. Chasms also appear in The Cenci as the only example of “mere poetry” in the text, according to Shelley (Preface 143). Shelleyan idealism and radical utopianism are staples of work on the poet. See, of course, Scrivener’s Radical Shelley as just one example. However, it would be remiss to suggest that scholars, new and old, have not acknowledged and investigated to great effect Shelley’s awareness of the problem of just how to achieve the intertwined projects of political and aesthetic revolution. On “The Triumph of Life” specifically, see Madeleine Callaghan, “Shelley and the Ambivalence of Idealism,” Keats-Shelley Journal 64 (2015): 92-104. See Kenneth Neill Cameron, Shelley: The Golden Years (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 150-58 on the variety of philosophical influences upon Shelley’s thought; Tim Milnes, in The Truth About Romanticism: Pragmatism and Idealism in Keats, Shelley, Coleridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 105-144 negotiates Shelley’s simultaneous attraction
to Platonism and skepticism (in more pragmatic, educable terms). See also Stuart Curran, “Shelley and the End(s) of Ideology” in *The Most Unfailing Herald: Percy Bysshe Shelley* ed. Alan M. Weinberg and Romaine Hill (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 1996), 21-30. There, Curran restates his position that *The Cenci* is one of Shelley’s most pessimistic plays and the natural counterpart to *Prometheus Unbound*: “I believe that *The Cenci*, as a representation of ‘sad reality’ against the ‘idealisms of moral excellence’ of *Prometheus Unbound*, systematically inverts the issues and tropes of that work” (23).

46 I allude, of course, to the conclusion of the *Defence*, where inspiration is figured as temporally nonlinear and creativity as a process that exists outside of defined understanding, possibly residing in metaphorical, unspoken musicality: “Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present, the words which express what they understand not, the trumpets which sing to battle and feel not what they inspire: the influence which is moved not, but moves” (535).


49 Harrison has provocatively called *The Cenci* a “verse-play” rather than a closet drama because it “occupies the liminal space between closet and stage” (“No Way for a Victim to Act?” 187).

50 Shelley anticipates issues in trauma and Holocaust studies (especially those regarding the depiction of atrocity, elements of which are captured in the debate between Claude Lanzmann and Georges Didi-Huberman on the photographs taken by the *Sonderkommando* at Auschwitz in August 1944) about whether such language should be used to describe violence. While it is not part of this chapter’s scope, Shelley is seemingly reluctant to depict actual moments of violent revolution in texts like *Prometheus Unbound* or “The Mask of Anarchy,” both of which contain notable elisions. For more on picturing atrocity, see Kate Lawless, “Memory, Trauma, and the Matter of Historical Violence: The Controversial Case of Four Photographs from Auschwitz,” *American Imago* 71, no. 4 (2014): 391-415; see also, of course, regarding photographs of atrocity, Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador—Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); Susie Linfield, however, denies the voyeurism of looking upon violent acts in *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

51 See John S. Flagg, “Shelley and Aristotle: Elements of the ‘Poetics’ in Shelley’s Theory of Poetry,” *Studies in Romanticism* 9, no. 1 (1970): 44-67, whose reading of the bearing of Aristotle’s *Poetics* upon his Preface to *The Cenci* and *Defence* is compelling, particularly insofar as he observes, “Shelley’s possible debt to Aristotle for the whole idea that poetry in its broadest sense should be extended to include all forms of human making has been virtually unrecognized” (51), and, more specific to *The Cenci*, that emotion is a result of the “course the action takes” and “with the appearance of necessity that it takes on as it is represented on the stage—what Shelley calls ‘fatal consequence’” (62).
Shelley likens Prometheus’s character to Satan’s in his Preface to the eponymous text (Preface, Prometheus 206-7); he also writes of Dante, Shakespeare, and the “Greek poets” as sharing a common dramatic element: “imagery” that comes from “the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed” (207). Once again, lyric interiority and “expression” by way of movement and action are not easily parsed in Shelley.


The Cenci ends on a particularly troubling interrogative note not unlike the punning “vacancy” that awaits the speaker of “Mont Blanc,” or the unanswered imprecation with which “Ode to the West Wind” concludes. I would propose that his larger aesthetic is fundamentally interrogative, which he takes a step further in the form of interrogation in The Cenci. This topic deserves more attention than there is space in this chapter.
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