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THE PEEVISH WISH: CONJECTURAL LITERATURE FROM WALPOLE TO THE SHELLEYS

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation traces British Romantic literature's deep moral investment in the unjustified or aimless idea. That investment materializes as conjecture, which offers a means of expressing an idea without yet making a claim for what the idea ultimately signifies. Conjecture, therefore, is the form that thought takes when it aims beyond what it knows that it can presently justify as content.

The project traces conjecture from the Enlightenment texts of Adam Smith, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant to the poems, novels and plays of Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Walter Scott, William Wordsworth, and Mary and Percy Shelley. In these writers, conjecture unsettles narratives whose outcomes had seemed fixed and worlds that had appeared closed. As a narrative mode, conjecture acts as a placeholder for thoughts that have not yet found their final guiding idea or their final frame of reference. In some cases, conjecture takes the form of an unresolved question: narrators and characters are left gesturing at the place where an answer *should* go, but without thereby claiming to actually have found an answer. In other cases, conjecture takes the reverse form: the answer is there, but without the question that would make the answer meaningful. The idea lacks its frame of reference. In either case, an idea persists

in the subject's mind even when it is not yet—or is no longer—a live possibility for him or her.

The idealism in conjecture looks like simply being out of touch with reality. Kant, for example, talks about “the peevish wish . . . one that nothing satisfies.” Peevishness is usually considered a disengagement from others—something merely contrarian. However, one can appear contrarian precisely because one *hasn't* disengaged from others; because one hasn't silenced oneself. Conjecture keeps its thought alive in the faith that the idea does matter and that it does merit engagement, even when one can't yet explain why.

In conjectural literature, thoughts that feel idle, provisional, or incomplete turn out to reflect deep moral investments in ideas that cannot yet be fully articulated or justified. Such thoughts frustrate one's current understanding and thus take one outside of oneself. In these texts, as a result, the moral imagination remains collectively shared; the thoughts that appear most solipsistic at the time turn out never to have been properly one's own to begin with. For the present, however, conjecture leaves its subject in a position of darkness and doubt. And when it does, characters and narrators see how their own doubts might eventually contribute to the better moral understanding of others—even if they themselves will never share in that understanding. The peevish wish ultimately seeks a transformed world, not for oneself, but for others.

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DEDICATION

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Introduction

The Peevish Wish: Conjectural Literature from Walpole to the Shelleys

Even when he despairs of the cause, he will yet *wish*, that it had been successful.

—Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin”

1. The Peevish Wish

The spring of 1817 finds Robert Southey under attack on multiple fronts. First comes the pirating and unauthorized publication of his play composed in 1794, *Wat Tyler*, showcasing a radically egalitarian, anarchist politics at odds with the Poet Laureate’s current privileged position and vocal support of Britain’s repressive Tory ministry; then comes a very public rebuke in the House of Commons from William Smith, a progressive MP, featuring a reading from the freshly printed play and accusing Southey of hypocrisy in his political views. Faced with the growing scandal, Southey responds in a curiously double-edged manner. While rejecting the opinions of his youth, he takes care not to discredit the basis upon which he had formed those opinions in the first place. “At that time,” he writes, “and with those opinions, or rather feelings (for their root was in the heart and not in the understanding), I wrote *Wat Tyler*”;¹ feelings which were, he adds, “right in themselves, and wrong only in their direction.”² Opinions,

¹ Robert Southey, *A Letter to William Smith from Robert Southey* (London: J. Murray, 1817), 14, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/wu.89001029321>.

² Southey, 8.

Southey suggests, represent thought only in its temporal form, as it varies according to lived context and current understanding; feelings, in contrast, represent thought in its more enduring form of habitual association rather than discursive reason. Thus, he writes, “the needle has shifted according to the movements of the state vessel wherein I am embarked, but the direction to which it points has always been the same” (namely, “the improvement of mankind”).³ It was the world that changed, says Southey, not I.⁴

The paradox by which Southey finds himself called upon to account for opinions he no longer holds reflects a more general problem in British literature and thought of the Enlightenment, the late eighteenth century, and the Romantic era. This is the problem of conjecture: when those who do not actively endorse an idea (whether an idea from the past, or one that was only ever figurative to begin with) feel compelled to answer for it nonetheless because they remain attached, not to the idea itself, but to what it represents. That distinction was one that Samuel Taylor Coleridge, writing fifteen years before Southey in response to charges of political and religious apostasy that he himself faced, could well appreciate. In his essay “Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin,” published in the *Morning Post*, Coleridge reappropriates the slur referenced in his title as a badge of honor:

In this sense of the word, Jacobin, the adage would affirm, that no man can ever become an apostate to Liberty, who has at any time been sincerely and fervently attached to it. His hopes will burn like the Greek fire, hard to be extinguished, and easily rekindling. Even when he despairs of the cause, he will yet *wish*, that it had been successful. And even when private interests have warped his public character, his convictions will remain, and his wishes often rise up in rebellion against his outward actions and public avowals.⁵

³ Southey, 27.

⁴ For more context on the *Wat Tyler* controversy, see Matt Hill, “The Critical Reception of Robert Southey’s *Wat Tyler*,” *Romantic Circles*, August 2004, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/wattyler/contexts/reception.html>.

⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Once a Jacobin Always a Jacobin (1802),” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), 301-2.

Coleridge rejects the notion that an ideal, such as Liberty, can be forfeited in turning away from a particular political cause (implicitly, Coleridge's youthful revolutionary sympathies)—and, conversely, that any particular cause can exhaust the ideal it instantiates. One's loyalties, he suggests, do not pertain to the cause itself, but to what it represents: to the form of an idea, not to a particular temporal content. Thus the hopes formerly attached to the cause take on a life of their own, outliving one's attachment to the cause itself. To wish *that* the French Revolution had succeeded is not to wish *for* another French Revolution. Therefore, when William Hazlitt writes mockingly of Southey that "[w]e know no other person ... whose opinions change so much without any change in the author's mind," he simply reaffirms the point that Southey himself, like Coleridge before him, had been trying to make.⁶

The feeling or wish that still attaches to an obsolete idea persists, then, and motivates one to defend it—even when one no longer feels drawn to defend the idea itself. This persistence in the mind is one that Immanuel Kant had theorized in remarks appended to the 1798 reprinting of his 1797 text *The Doctrine of Right* (later published as the first part of *The Metaphysics of Morals*). That text begins with an account of "the faculty of desire," defined as "the faculty to be by means of one's representations the cause of the objects of these representations."⁷ On this view, one knows the kind of change one wants to see in the world, and goes after it. One's sense of purpose in the

⁶ William Hazlitt, "Review of *Watt Tyler*," (*The Examiner*, 9 March 1817, 57-9), ed. Matt Hill, *Romantic Circles*, August 2004, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/watttyler/contexts/reviews.html>. On the question of Coleridge's apostasy, see Charles Mahoney, "The Multeity of Coleridgean Apostasy," *Romantic Circles* (August 1999), <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/irony/mahoney/stasis.html>; and Jerome Christensen, "'Like a Guilty Thing Surprised': Deconstruction, Coleridge, and the Apostasy of Criticism," *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 4 (1986): 769-87, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/stable/1343438>.

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

world remains clearly linked to one's mental representations, which allow one to "be the cause" by means of which a desired object is brought about: a curiously indirect turn of phrase that opens a space between thought and its object.

A reviewer objected that Kant's definition of desire—with its causal language of making things happen—applied only to the external world, leaving no room for idealists; Kant insisted, in a response in the 1798 appendix, that the causality of mental representation could be internal, too, acting invisibly upon the subject even in the absence of a visible change in the external world. "[A]re there not also," Kant asks,

intense but still consciously futile longings (e.g., Would to God that man were still alive!), which are *devoid of any deed* but not *devoid of any result*, since they still work powerfully within the subject himself (make him ill), though not on external things? A desire, as a *striving (nisus)* to be a *cause* by means of one's representations, is still always causality, at least within the subject, even when he sees the inadequacy of his representations for the effect he envisages.⁸

The apparently idle desire that fails to add up to real-world actions or results may still produce iterative, cumulative changes "within the subject himself" simply by virtue of his having had the desire. On this account, mental purposiveness consists in the "striving," not in the attainment.

What saves such longing from total irrelevance, then, is the self-awareness with which it is practiced. The Kantian subject is fully "conscious" of the futility of his longings, fully aware of "the inadequacy of his representations." By dint of this self-awareness, desire turns from a passive, self-contained "faculty" into an active, extended period of "striving," opening a salutary gap between mind and world. "[A]ll that is in question here," Kant goes on to clarify, "is the relation of a cause (a representation) to an effect (a feeling) in general."⁹ The erstwhile object of mental representation (that man,

⁸ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 125; italics in original.

⁹ Kant, *Metaphysics of Morals*, 125.

still alive) falls by the wayside, and what emerges in its place as the real aim of representation is the “feeling” itself (“Would to God”). Desire therefore names a reflexive structure of thought that, by sometimes bracketing from the outset the possibility of making a difference in the external world, allows an internal difference to take its place. The gap between mental representations and real-world results enables a shift in focus from an object that may never be achieved to a feeling that has *already* been achieved, and may be so again, even without one’s conscious intention.

The idle desire that makes no clear difference in the world stands out, nonetheless, for its obdurate persistence in the face of reason. And it stands out within Kant’s writing, too, as a recurring remainder whose frequent relegation to the sidelines of the text (as appendix or footnote, for example) betrays the author’s struggles to assimilate this concept to his philosophical system.¹⁰ Even as he tries to theorize it, moreover, he remains skeptical that the idle desire deserves even the implicit credibility that theorization would give it. At times, this skepticism expresses itself more openly, as when Kant puzzles over the motives of individuals who seem not only incapable of acting on their volitions but even willfully resistant to the satisfaction of concrete results. He writes: “The undetermined desire (*appetitus vaga*), which only impels the subject to leave his present state without knowing what state he then wants to enter, can be called the *peevish* wish (one that nothing satisfies).”¹¹ Although Kant here dismisses such mental restlessness as beyond the pale of reason, the logic remains consistent with his account of

¹⁰ For instance, in a lengthy footnote in the second Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant describes the “fanciful desire” as an uncontrollable bodily tic, observing that “some of man’s desires involve him in self-contradiction.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 16-17n18. Although Kant frames this as an exceptional case, the combined impression, here and elsewhere, is of a missing crux that resists theorization.

¹¹ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 149; italics in original.

a kind of desire that retains its object-oriented momentum, even when it loses its object as a real possibility. Accordingly, Kant inscribes that object-oriented momentum at the heart of his theory of aesthetic judgment as “purposiveness without purpose,” a speculative construct that enables aesthetic perception.¹² But the translation from embodied cognition to abstract perception, from subject to system, does not quite take. The peevish subject is peevish not for its own sake, nor as a general mode of perception, but for the sake of an object that remains unrepresentable as such and thus unassimilable to theoretical system-building and to the kind of collective value that theorization represents.

Other Enlightenment thinkers testify to a similar paradox whereby an attempt to return the individual to the collective looks more like a retreat into the world of imagination. Adam Smith brings in an “invisible hand” to reconcile private and public interests; David Hume must posit an explicitly non-existent “necessary connexion” between mind and world in order to withstand skeptical despair.¹³ These self-conscious fictions enable a mental reflexivity that ultimately *does* return us to the world we share in common, but that must nonetheless look, for a time, like indefensible subjectivism: like peevishness. Hume’s necessary connexion, for instance, serves as a figure of thought that bridges the otherwise irremediable gap between mind and world, allowing the subject to get on with daily life.¹⁴ At the same time, however, Hume’s skepticism forces him to

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 65. I pick up the discussion of purposiveness without purpose in my first chapter.

¹³ I return to Smith’s invisible hand in my second chapter, and to Hume (on belief in miracles) in my fourth chapter.

¹⁴ Namely, by inferring that one’s experience of the “constant conjunction” between observed phenomena implies a reliable, causal principle—a “necessary connexion” between those phenomena that would serve as a reassurance of the reliability of one’s own observation and experience. This desired principle turns out to be a fantasy. Hume first iterates this argument in the *Treatise*, then doubles down on it in the *Enquiry*. David Hume, “Of the idea of necessary connexion,” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 155-72; David Hume, “Of the Idea of Necessary Connexion,” in

acknowledge that the necessary connexion *is* only a figure of thought, one that “lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquir’d by custom.”¹⁵ Thus the search for a necessary principle connecting mind to world throws Hume back upon the position he had set out to avoid in the first place, “that error, into which so many have fallen, of imposing their conjectures and hypotheses on the world for the most certain principles.”¹⁶ Such a position appears unjustifiably solipsistic, not least of all to oneself. The Enlightenment dilemma of world-directed thought that does not look or feel like such is Romanticism’s dilemma, as well, and one that we as readers and critics have inherited.

The outwardly antisocial individual in Romantic literature embodies Hume’s reflexive position, or Southey’s double-edged mode of self-defense, a mode split between views he no longer endorses and an attachment to those views that he still does endorse. The thoughts of such an individual remain turned outward, even though his posture looks self-absorbed, out of touch with “reality” as understood by those around him. He resurfaces in literature under multiple guises: William Wordsworth’s shepherd Michael, Walter Scott’s Jacobite enthusiast, Redgauntlet, and Mary Shelley’s infamous casuist, Frankenstein. In these and other cases, the peevish figure is one who feels drawn to ideas that appear unwarranted to others, ideas that have either missed, or not yet found, their proper audiences or activating historical contexts. By nonetheless turning attention from the apparent indefensibility of an idea to the continued relevance of the social and

An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 134-47.

¹⁵ Hume, *Treatise*, 266.

¹⁶ Hume, *Treatise*, xxii.

affective attachments that such an idea represents, the peevish figure operates as a figure of dissent, critical but still engaged.

In a period characterized by the Gagging Acts, the suspension of habeas corpus, and trials for sedition and treason, the possibilities for individual speech and action looked profoundly uncertain. In such a context, the refusal to explain oneself on someone else's terms transforms from mere disaffection into a deliberate act in its own right. This logic unfolds at the level of the text: characters' habitual attachments appear unjustifiable in light of empirical reason, while narrative itself proceeds recursively, toward no clear end. This is the aesthetics of "purposiveness without purpose" given literary form: a disposition that, when embodied in characters and narrators, looks like mere contrariness or peevishness. But for the Romantics, a renewed sense of the political—of a world shared with others—begins in an unremitting attention to thoughts that fly under the radar of social communication.¹⁷

¹⁷ The idea that makes a difference in the world even in the absence of a stable referential endpoint—or, conversely, in the absence of an originating, justifying context—finds several recent touchpoints in criticism and theory. These include Thomas Pfau's sense of "mood" as a "substratum of conscious awareness" that "resist[s] discernment"; Brian Massumi's notion of threat; and Sianne Ngai's "minor feelings" that succeed in registering in the world, however obliquely, despite their outward lack of an intentional object. Thomas Pfau, *Romantic Moods: Paranoia, Trauma, and Melancholy, 1790-1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 10; Brian Massumi, "Fear (The Spectrum Said)," *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 31-48, <https://muse.jhu.edu>; Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Pfau, Massumi, and Ngai all start from the premise that feeling is just another kind of thought, one that reveals something intrinsic to *any* kind of thought: thought's capacity to extend beyond the purview of its immediate object. "Feeling," on this model, is just a figure of speech expressing precisely this capacity that thought has, but for which the language of intentionality often fails to account. Thus Martha Nussbaum writes, "Emotions are not *about* their objects merely in the sense of being pointed at them and let go, the way an arrow is released toward its target. Their aboutness is more internal, and embodies a way of seeing." Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 27. I am grateful to Marilie Coetsee for suggesting this connection to me, and also for many conversations on the subject, which have pushed my project forward on multiple fronts. See her article, "The Phenomenal Appreciation of Reasons," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), for a revision of Nussbaum's argument by way of what Coetsee calls "implicit representations."

2. Conjecture and Romanticism

What Kant calls peevishness, we know—and the eighteenth century knew—as conjecture. With the 1754 *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* and its opening postulation of society’s origin in a primordial state of nature, Rousseau introduced a more general mode of speculating on why we are what we are now that would prevail throughout the second half of the eighteenth century as conjectural history. Also known as “natural,” “theoretical,” or “philosophical” history, the new genre (associated most strongly with the Scottish Enlightenment) deemphasized traditional political narrative in favor of a more totalizing view of the past, including those elements of deep time or individual experience for which no material evidence existed.¹⁸

While conjectural history therefore allows for a more capacious explanation of the present, it also runs the risk of reifying the present in its own right by making it seem self-evident or inevitable from the point of view of the historical system conjecture offers. In Kevis Goodman’s reading, this is the falsely retroactive logic that eighteenth-century conjectural history (both human history and geological history) sometimes runs into: what begins as an inductive process of piecing together empirical data into more systematic knowledge is then made to appear self-evident—a function of natural law—thereby obscuring the manmade process of inference that had adduced such knowledge as a possibility in the first place. On this view, conjecture sometimes covers up the

¹⁸ I take this brief overview from Frank Palmeri, “Conjectural History, the Form and Its Afterlife,” in *State of Nature, Stages of Society: Enlightenment Conjectural History and Modern Social Discourse* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 1-26; and Mark Salber Phillips, “Conjectural History: A History of Manners and of Mind,” in *Society and Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 171-90.

provisionality of its origins. In place of this model, Goodman (reading by way of Charlotte Smith's *Beachy Head*) offers a more literal take on the Latin *conjectus*. *Conjectus* envisions the historical present as that which is visibly “thrown together” out of the rubble of the past.¹⁹ Understood in this way, Goodman writes, conjecture “affords [a glimpse] of the present as the effect of otherwise absent and invisible causes—and thus already mediated by a process well underway.”²⁰ Considered as a form of perception, conjecture foregrounds the contingency of its method, creating a skeptical, salutary distance between thought and its object.

Frank Palmeri affirms Goodman's reading: even in the context of Enlightenment conjectural history, Palmeri argues, conjecture represents an open-ended form rather than a monolithic idea. “The form,” he writes, “provides a grammar, syntax, and vocabulary for statements, a flexible instrument with which to think, not an unvarying formula or message.”²¹ As a form, conjecture brackets historical fact in favor of what might—or simply *could*—have happened. That idealism inheres, moreover, even when conjectural language sounds most like a factual claim, as in the statement of what “must have” happened in the past: “[T]he ‘must have’ harbors in its assertion of necessity a doubt of actuality. ... The conjectural necessary tense ... indicates not a conditional and contrary-to-fact past but a speculative, possible, and necessary past.”²² Critically, conjecture is not just the counterfactual by another name: its sense of necessity stands apart from mere historical facticity.

¹⁹ Kevis Goodman, “Conjectures on Beachy Head: Charlotte Smith's Geological Poetics and the Ground of the Present,” *ELH* 81, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 994-98, doi:10.1353/elh.2014.0033.

²⁰ Goodman, 990.

²¹ Palmeri, 18. Cf. Goodman on Charlotte Smith's relation to contemporary geological histories: “Smith finds them imaginatively compelling—good to think with, more than to believe in.” Goodman, 986.

²² Palmeri, 16.

Following Goodman and Palmeri's open-ended, idealist usage of conjecture, we might understand conjecture as a kind of thought that moves away from the need for a single, determinate unfolding in time (whether past, present, or future). While such a thought *does*, nonetheless, continue to direct the thinker back toward the world and toward temporal resolution (as a desired outcome, or an object of knowledge), it cannot be exhausted *in* any given outcome or object. In place of the counterfactual logic of "if ... then," conjecture substitutes a logic of "even though ... and yet." Conjecture holds open space for an ideal that persists alongside the present, and it does so, as Palmeri's "conjectural necessary tense" suggests, through multiple kinds of temporality. The following chapters will explore several of these conjectural temporalities—recursive loops, temporizing and delay, the future perfect—and will draw on those suggested by others. These include Ina Ferris's remnant; Lily Gurton-Wachter's interval; Jacques Derrida's *arrivant*; and Walter Benjamin's citation. Taken together, such temporalities resonate with Jerome Christensen's sense of Romantic anachronism as "that which could not be over because it has not yet really happened."²³

My project tracks a mode of narrating the present by way of mental suppositions that often begin in description, or idle musing, but never end there—but neither do those suppositions amount to straightforward claims. Instead they consist in a recursive process that draws the subject out of himself precisely by way of a reflexivity that often looks, for the time being, like solipsism or retreat—like "imposing conjectures and hypotheses on the world," in Hume's phrase.²⁴ This is also to say that conjecture opens a gap between

²³ Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 25.

²⁴ Kevis Goodman, again, provides an illuminating image for this recursive process in her reading of William Cowper's "loophole of retreat" passage in *The Task*. The solitary in his study, peeping back out at the world through his keyhole, offers an unexpected figure for engagement in the world. Even in apparent seclusion from the world, Goodman argues, the subject remains looped

the form of thought and its content.²⁵ And this is the unsettled kind of thought that literary form is especially qualified to entertain—one that remains intrinsically figurative and intransitive. Literary form provides an analogue for the way that conjectural thought outlives its content, continuing to work indirectly, through reflexivity and anachronism.

In Romantic texts, conjecture occurs when characters and narrators feel drawn to an idea that they can't yet justify or explain because they lack a suitable language for it. As a result, the conjecturalist in literature must fall back, like her Enlightenment philosopher counterpart, on a provisional fiction—a mental conceit or figure of speech that the conjecturalist does not endorse, but that allows her to substantiate her intuitions in a way that could make sense to others. By entertaining a provisional fiction, conjecture holds open a space between what currently “counts”—ideas accepted as self-evidently consequential—and intuitions that could come to count, under a different epistemological or moral paradigm. Conjecture thus seeks a reevaluation of what it means to appeal to the world shared in common. Resisting the demand to accept things as they are, to grow out of solipsism or fantasy, the conjecturalist asks: what real possibilities for a better world does a focus on the “real world” obscure?

into it (via the newspaper, for instance). Kevis Goodman, “Cowper’s georgic of the news: the ‘loophole’ in the retreat,” in *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediation of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 67-105. And this is exactly the kind of vantage that the conjecturalist in literature often assumes: an outward estrangement from social discourse that nonetheless registers an engaged critique, not disengagement.

²⁵ In Adam Smith’s account of sympathy, for instance, the form that sympathy normally takes proves inadequate for responding to others’ feelings when we can adduce no discernible cause for those feelings. This is the case with ambiguous suffering: “The first question which we ask is, What has befallen you? Till this be answered, though we are uneasy both from the vague idea of his misfortune, and still more from torturing ourselves with conjectures about what it may be, yet our fellow-feeling is not very considerable.” Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 11-12. In the object that it cannot account for, the conjectural method runs up against its limit-case. As a result, conjecture itself falls out as a gothic remainder, uneasy and self-torturing: an activity that persists in despite of its object, like Smith’s invisible hand.

Conjecture takes many synonyms in the following chapters: peevishness, reflexivity, compulsion, nostalgia, superstition, fetishism, casuistry. Like the kind of problem that it engages with, conjecture has no cohesive language with which to describe itself. Nonetheless, there are well-known touchpoints for the sense of cognitive middle-space that conjecture suggests: readers of Romanticism will think immediately, for instance, of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.”²⁶ But when Kant’s subject says to himself, “Would to God that man were still alive!,” he is under no illusion—even a knowing or temporary one—as to the outcome of the case. Conjecture does not suspend reality but supplements it through a kind of double vision: the subject holds on to a hope (or an intuition, or an hypothesis) while knowing full well that its object will never come to pass (or that the imagined object is only standing in for some other idea, to begin with). Nor will John Keats’s famous formulation of a cognitive middle-space quite work here, either: “I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”²⁷ Yet that irritable reaching is exactly what conjecture looks like—it continues to seek out answers even where it knows there to be none, and in this sense it places the poet or author squarely in the messiness of history and of the social. Conjecture, then, shows that negative capability *does* involve an irritable reaching, and it shows, too—no news to the apostate—the social cost that must be paid as a result.

²⁶ The phrase comes from Coleridge’s account in the *Biographia* of his apportioned task in the *Lyrical Ballads*: “[I]t was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Biographia Literaria,” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), 490.

²⁷ John Keats, “On Negative Capability: Letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, ?27 December 1817,” *Poetry Foundation*, October 2009, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keatss-letters>.

What Coleridge's willing suspension of disbelief and Keats's negative capability give us, at least in the calcified associations that have since built up around them, is a more familiar view of the Romantic poet as the aeolian harp awaiting the touch of the Muse; what conjecture gives us is the decidedly less romantic image of the author as a spanner in the works. In fact, this is how the author of conjectural literature understands her own position: she knows that her resistance to received understanding looks contrarian. And she knows, moreover, that she's not going to find a rule to explain the problem at hand; but she can, nonetheless, start to describe the form that an explanation might take—even though she herself does not expect to be the one to find it.

That disjunction between the one who seeks and the one who finds is, in Wordsworth's estimation, necessary to poetry in the first place. Poetry, he suggests, consists less in the transcription of discrete ideas than in the formal repetition of "habits of meditation." The aim, he writes, is that

such habits of mind will be produced, that, by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments, of such a nature and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the being to whom we address ourselves, if he be in a healthful state of association, must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections ameliorated.²⁸

Wordsworth invokes William Godwin's doctrine of necessity as well as the principle of necessity that undergirds conjectural thought more generally. By that principle, he proposes not only that a change occurs in the poetic addressee, but that it *must* occur. The sense of necessity without conscious intention matters, since what that change will look like, Wordsworth does not presume to know; nor does he suggest that the change will even be observable, to the addressee or to others. Inasmuch as the addressee must be

²⁸ William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.

enlightened, after all, the poet herself must remain in the dark, “obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of those habits.” The poet’s situation, in fact, is “altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering.”²⁹ And this is the personal cost of conjecture, closely related to the social cost: when one’s earnestness in search of a better answer means that one must forgo *any* answer. A peculiarly obscure sorrow, then, attends the author of conjectural literature: her conflicted struggle to give shape to thoughts that are still inchoate does not itself count, not even as real suffering.³⁰

3. Form and Accountability

The conjectural author finds herself engaged in an activity whose final payoff she cannot foresee: telling a story she does not feel the full weight of, to an audience she cannot imagine, and for reasons she cannot explain. As a result, the texts in these chapters feature formal elements—the fragment, the iterative series, metonymy, deixis, figuration—that await the imminent but perpetually deferred arrival of content, that appear conspicuous in their failure to complete. My readings thus find common ground with recent Romanticist criticism that considers the work that literary form can still do even in the absence of determinate content. Anahid Nersessian, for instance, considers what she calls “nescience,” a state of unknowing, which involves taking “a

²⁹ Wordsworth, “Preface,” 104.

³⁰ The kind of suffering that remains unrecognizable as such will figure as a recurring theme throughout the dissertation, since it often serves as an analogue for a kind of thought that fails to justify itself by means of either an end goal or a discursive context. I return to the phrase “action and suffering” in my fourth chapter by way of Percy Shelley and Hannah Arendt.

nonanticipatory, antisymptomatic relation to the text at hand.”³¹ Such a stance accords with what she elsewhere calls “low adjustment,” a muted idealism that resists futurity or transcendence to grapple with the here-and-now, no matter how attenuated present possibilities may seem.³²

In a similar vein to Nersessian, Timothy Morton argues that “ecological thinking and practice must entail dropping the imminence of disaster, with its resulting states of exception.”³³ Nersessian and Morton’s “nonanticipatory” mode of formal description is close to what Robert Mitchell calls “rhythm” or “the rhythms of slow time,”³⁴ or what he also describes as a “non-conceptual, but also non-imaginative mode of synthesis proper to sensation itself” that both enables and precedes the imaginative work of “apprehension, reproduction, and recognition.”³⁵ Taken together, these critics suggest an agnostic approach to form, a deliberate cultivation of temporal and textual irresolution largely in the deconstructive tradition of Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, and Jerome Christensen.³⁶ Form in these accounts recalls the troublesome interval in Kant’s account

³¹ Anahid Nersessian, “Two Gardens: An Experiment in Calamity Form,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 74, no. 3 (September 2013): 312, doi:10.1215/00267929-2153482.

³² “Willing to tolerate and even to organize itself around the unease that slips out between the cracks of how things ought to happen versus how they do, low adjustment is constitutively attuned to the strange, vertiginous sensation such failures of alignment engender.” Anahid Nersessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 40.

³³ Timothy Morton, “Romantic Disaster Ecology: Blake, Shelley, Wordsworth,” in *Romanticism and Disaster*, ed. Jacques Khalip and David Collings, *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (January 2012): paragraph 2, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/disaster/HTML/praxis.2012.morton.html>.

³⁴ Robert Mitchell, “Suspended Animation, Slow Time, and the Poetics of Trance,” *PMLA* 126, no. 1 (January 2011): 119, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.libraries.rutgers.edu/stable/41414084>.

³⁵ Robert Mitchell, “The Transcendental: Deleuze, P.B. Shelley, and the Freedom of Immobility,” in *Romanticism and the New Deleuze*, ed. Ron Broglio, *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (January 2008): paragraph 12, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/deleuze/mitchell/mitchell.html>.

³⁶ Also relevant here is Ian Balfour’s description of a quasi-subjectivity that he terms “subjecticity,” “any number of configurations where the subject is said to be subject to something beyond itself and yet whose force finds enunciation only in, through, and as a subject.” Ian Balfour, “Subjecticity (On Kant and the Texture of Romanticism),” in *Romanticism and the Insistence of the Aesthetic*, ed. Forest Pyle, *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* (February 2005): paragraph 13, <https://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/aesthetic/balfour/balfour.html>.

of mental cause and effect, the gap between an inchoate thought or feeling and a particular referent. On this view, it is in the time of lingering between a mental representation and its object that feelings and intuitions are able to readjust the fit between mind and world—allowing us to return to the world as given while also refusing to accept it as inevitable.³⁷

A related but more phenomenological vein of recent criticism, having absorbed the value of deconstruction as a reading practice, has elevated several of its key concepts—including difference, withdrawal, and abjection—to aesthetic ideals in and of themselves. These critics find in literary texts an impulse to retreat, to relinquish any potential claims on the world in favor of muted forms of desire capable of retroactively accommodating themselves to what is already given. Anne-Lise François, for one, argues for a Romantic aesthetics that makes a virtue of relinquishing one’s claims on the world in favor of muted forms of desire capable of retroactively accommodating themselves to what is already given. Rather than pointing to foreclosed forms of experience, whether in the past (the missed encounter) or in the future (the deferred obligation), the “complaisance without hope” that she finds in certain aspects of Romanticism lingers in a virtual present, enjoying the “nonpsychological satisfaction” afforded by literary form itself in its “koan-like self-containment.”³⁸ François suggests that the real power

³⁷ Alan Liu’s account of emergence theory also applies to this discussion of form, since emergence theory allows for “no certain distinction between norms and unpredictable, chaotic, adaptive behaviors. ... [D]escription is creativity, in the sense that emergent systems themselves constantly describe at a higher level what is happening unpredictably at a lower level.” Alan Liu, “Thinking Destruction: Creativity, Rational Choice, Emergence, and Destruction Theory,” *Occasion: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Humanities* 1, no. 1 (October 2009): 11, <http://occasion.stanford.edu/node/24>. Liu’s “adaptive” account of temporal form corresponds, in my readings, to the way that archaic and emergent purposes can still matter even when they have yet to cohere as discursive content.

³⁸ Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), xxi.

harnessed by Romantic aesthetics is a mental reorientation from the future to the present such that the distinction—and the time lag—between mental representation and intentional object collapses;³⁹ thus the future-directedness of desire becomes the present-directedness of the sufficient.

Similarly to François, Jacques Khalip describes a Romantic aesthetics of impersonal fulfillment or “saturation” whereby “*nothing is lost or left behind in the subject*, because it doesn’t stand apart from the world: its relation to otherness is not one of subjugation, but of anonymous saturation *in the world*.”⁴⁰ Working in a related vein, Rei Terada describes what she sees as Romanticism’s penchant for “lingering in object perception,” which “holds itself apart from fact perception *without negating it*, and so lends itself to personification as gentle and noncommittal.”⁴¹ This mode of perception therefore enables an indefinite suspension of norms, a “lifted obligation to declare oneself.”⁴² This “lifted obligation” is close to Mitchell’s account of poetry’s capacity to enable a “suspension” of the burden of judgment,⁴³ but ultimately understands that suspension as its own reward, rather than as a step along the way toward what Mitchell calls “new forms and objects of willing”—even if, in the Derridean schema, those forms and objects are indefinitely deferred.⁴⁴

³⁹ She refers, for example, to “the sufficiency of imagined presence and the adequacy of a promise fulfilled at the moment of its making.” François, 53n78.

⁴⁰ Jacques Khalip, *Anonymous Life: Romanticism and Dispossession* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14; italics in original.

⁴¹ Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 15; italics in original.

⁴² Terada, 15. For another take on the value of lingering, see Ina Ferris’s account of the “time of the remnant” in Scott that frustrates attempts at narrative consolidation. Ina Ferris, ““On the Borders of Oblivion”: Scott’s Historical Novel and the Modern Time of the Remnant,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 2009): 473-94, doi:10.1215/00267929-2009-012.

⁴³ Mitchell, “Suspended Animation,” 115.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, “Suspended Animation,” 119.

Drawing on the collective wisdom of these different sets of critics, my project asks what the idea of conjecture can add to our understanding of intentionality, critical engagement, and interpersonal accountability in the Romantic era. In the texts under consideration in the following chapters, characters continually find themselves summoned to account in a legal or social sense; in response, they resist giving an account under the specified terms. That act of resistance appears to others as irresponsible willfulness. In the conjectural schema, however, resistance to account for oneself on others' terms, or in a context in which one's meaning is bound to be misconstrued, reflects not an unwillingness to engage with others, but the opposite: an earnest desire to change the terms on which social engagement is premised in the first place. Resistance to the limitations of what passes for social engagement aims to produce a real change in the present, not a further affirmation of current forms of power, knowledge, and discourse, nor a deeper entrenchment of standing assumptions. That the one called to account often fails to make her resistance register as anything *other* than mere willfulness, nonetheless, signals precisely that her thoughts are open, not closed. Her thoughts are not of the moment, nor is her language that of her contemporaries: she sees beyond a present that demands capitulation to what can currently be thought or said.⁴⁵

While the unaccountable individual looks beyond the present, she does not straightforwardly imagine the future, since the future, in these texts, too often serves as a figurative premise for extending present conditions under another guise. What that individual stands for, instead, falls outside of chronological sequence altogether; her

⁴⁵ Conjectural thought thus resists the tacit coercion that Michel Foucault finds in the discourse of interpersonal accountability. Foucault's history of the social account, or avowal, will be an important background context throughout the dissertation. Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

intellectual and affective investments matter as ideas, not as blueprints corresponding to temporal realities, present or future. Anachronism is therefore an important key to the logic of this conjectural account. When called upon by others to answer straightforwardly to claims that assert the self-evident authority of facticity, the subject responds elliptically, in temporally recursive modes of lingering, obsolescence, and anticipated retrospection. Rather than look to make a difference in the world on its own terms, the conjecturalist looks to broaden the scope of what it means to make a difference in the first place, and to ask how she and her interlocutors might attend differently to mere ideas as a result—to others' as well as one's own.

Shifting how one attends to non-actionable ideas, then, does return one to the world, though in a different light. Conjectural literature suggests that we can still *become accountable* to others even when we are momentarily unwilling or unable to *give an account* of ourselves—of our attachments, intuitions, and wishes. Conjecture therefore offers a model for engagement in the world in the absence of clear justification or end-goals. On this model, the peevish figure's dissatisfaction with the world as it is given represents not a turning away from others but a provocation to others to expand the collective moral imagination—the domain of shared perception and value. That change begins at the level of habit rather than thought, and of form rather than content: while routines, feelings, and mental reflexes may look like dead ends, they nevertheless allow the peevish figure and her interlocutors to reimagine the terms on which they share the present.

4. Plan of the Chapters

My project pursues its argument by way of a conceptual arc rather than a straightforwardly historical one. Whereas the conjectural method in Enlightenment philosophy and historiography builds between form and content, between an emergent object of knowledge and an emergent framework by which that object is known, conjectural literature works in the gap between them. In this way, literature describes a kind of thought that is itself emergent and processual. I begin in the gothic world of Walpole, Radcliffe, and Coleridge, a world which turns out to be surprisingly optimistic and open-ended, full of undecided possibilities. The gothic tale, accordingly, provides a formal structure ostensibly directed *at* an endpoint and directed *by* a controlling idea—but whose controlling idea isn't actually there yet. By the time we get to my final chapter, the reverse will apply: Victor Frankenstein and Beatrice Cenci have a clear idea of what they're after, but they lack the context in which that idea would make sense to their interlocutors. The middle chapters, meanwhile, trace the intermediate turns by which ideas and their informing contexts gradually trade places. Taken together, these chapters show the twofold work that conjecture can do, as literary form: it makes space for—and justifies the engagement with—ideas that don't yet exist as such, and it holds on to ideas that persist despite the present impossibility of their justification.

My first chapter, "Gothic Conjectures," traces conjectural literature to the gothic, in which the appearance of design gives characters and narrators a way of beginning to engage with provisional thoughts and feelings that lack a controlling idea that would adequately motivate or justify them. In Horace Walpole's novel *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's novel *The Italian* (1797), unaccountable phenomena serve as

the prelude to something more difficult: the task of accounting for one's own inability to discontinue thinking on—and trying to assign causality to—what one suspects to be without design in the first place. Characters in these novels are simultaneously aware of their own credulity and unable to justify it, either to themselves or to others. In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem "Christabel" (1797-1800), that condition extends to the act of narrating the gothic story in the first place. Coleridge's narrator goes through the motions of storytelling, repeating the formal gesture at meaning and event, but without thereby claiming the presence of either. By reflexively dwelling on the attitude of mental fixation that the search for design engenders, conjecture allows the gothic subject to go beyond skepticism in order to engage with knowledge that cannot yet be conceptualized as such.

My second chapter, "Scott's Disavowed Histories," turns to conjectural history by way of Walter Scott's historical fiction. This chapter tracks the regressive function of the archaic figure over the course of Scott's career, from his verse narrative *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805) to his novels *Old Mortality* (1816) and *Redgauntlet* (1824). Characters such as the trickster Gilpin Horner and the Jacobite enthusiast Redgauntlet interrupt the narrators' progressivist histories so as to render the narrative present a palimpsest of overlapping voices and perspectives, one that reveals lingering affinities that the historical present obscures. Whereas one version of conjectural history looks to explain the present by way of a speculated past, Scott's fiction turns the speculative lens back upon the present in order to unsettle it, not affirm it. Critics sometimes read in Scott a forward-looking, pro-Union invitation to consensus and reconciliation. But in moments of archaic interruption, an ostensibly disavowed stage of thinking—Scotland's medieval and Stuart past—reasserts itself in the present in order to show that historical fact is neither as inevitable nor as final as it at first appears.

In the first half of the dissertation, questions of form and narrative predominate; the second half of the dissertation, meanwhile, links these formal questions with real-world problems of ethics and epistemology. At the same time, these latter chapters mark a shift in what conjecture looks like: in place of a formal context that lacks a guiding idea, here the emphasis will be on ideas that lack a redeeming context, one that would justify the idea to others. Wordsworth's histories of feeling and Mary and Percy Shelley's deep justice leave narrators and characters struggling, therefore, to find a language to express the value of these concepts, to themselves or to others. The idea without a context fails, as a result, to make a clear difference in the temporal world, instead throwing narrators and characters back upon their own words and thoughts. Even then, however, the idea still persists in a form that reflexivity itself produces—as affective attachment, in Wordsworth; as conviction, in the Shelleys.

My third chapter, “Wordsworth's Vagrant Poetics,” takes up the theme of conjectural ethics, in which the question is how poetic narrative should engage with the stories of others. In the *Lyrical Ballads* (1798-1802) and the *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), William Wordsworth pursues this question by means of the figure of the vagrant—the dispossessed, shiftless individual common to eighteenth-century English rural life. In “Michael,” “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” “Resolution and Independence,” and “Animal Tranquillity and Decay,” vagrancy exemplifies a condition of mental irresolution that redounds upon Wordsworth's poetic narrators, who find themselves trying to tell the stories of others without yet knowing what, if anything, those stories will amount to. The vagrant's itinerant habit and the poet's recollective procedure therefore share a condition of seeking without the possibility of closure. And yet, that same inability to move forward also manifests, more positively, as a capacity for persistence. In

the shepherd Michael's repeated returns to his unfinished sheepfold, and in the daily rounds of the Leech-gatherer and the Beggar, Wordsworth's narrators find a model for persevering in a history of feeling—and gradually extending its ethical scope to include others—even when its larger meaning remains uncertain.

I sharpen the claim that conjecture can enlarge the scope of the world shared in common in my final chapter, "The Shelleys' Secret Convictions," which develops this argument by way of conjectural epistemology. The chapter interrogates the double resonance of conviction in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818) and Percy Shelley's drama *The Cenci* (1819). On the one hand, criminal conviction entails a legal obligation to acquiesce to the judgments of others, even when one does not oneself feel persuaded of them; epistemic conviction, on the other hand, entails a personal commitment to the felt truthfulness of one's own position, even in the absence of discursive reasons or evidence that might persuade others of it, too. This latter sense of conviction, unsurprisingly, often borders on casuistry. Critics therefore tend to assume that Beatrice Cenci is a casuist; Victor Frankenstein, meanwhile, actually *is* a casuist. But even in Victor's case, though wrongly motivated by casuistry, he remains fundamentally right in pushing back against the zero-sum model of guilt and innocence on display in Justine Moritz's social and legal condemnation. By the same logic, Beatrice Cenci maintains her belief in her own moral innocence over and above the fact of her legal guilt. In their refusal to justify these convictions to others, moreover, Victor and Beatrice hold out for an idea of deep justice that cannot yet be communicated to others or even fully represented to themselves.

The dissertation thus begins in optimism and ends in pessimism: from the open world of Christabel we move to the much more closed world of Victor and Beatrice.

Nonetheless, the utopian sense of possibility at work in the opening texts still inheres in the last. The commitment to new registers of thought, and to a new language in which to describe them, remains, no matter how attenuated such thought and language appear at present.

Taken together, the forms of conjecture on display in these chapters model a persistent attachment to ideas that appear, on the surface, indefensible: the story that leads nowhere, or into a discarded past; the belief that lingers, even in the absence of justification. Such ideas seem escapist because their time is out of joint, and their logic out of step, with the collective standards by which engagement in the world is usually measured. As Wordsworth's narrator reflects on the Old Cumberland Beggar's repetition of his daily round, such reflection does not, in itself, make visible the kind of history that the Beggar's daily round represents; but this and other reflexes of speech and thought, shared between characters and narrators, nonetheless suggest the work that narrative can do in entertaining ideas that have yet to coalesce as discrete arguments or to aim at particular results. By returning us to the world in an explicitly tentative mode, conjecture unsettles that shared world, making it appear more tenuous, not less—and, by the same token, more open to possibility. Conjectural literature narrates the shared present, but at an angle, askance; and in this way it describes an unforeseen mode of meaningful engagement within straitened circumstances, both in the Romantics' time and in our own.

Chapter One

Gothic Conjectures

What is it all about? What is the idea?

—Unsigned review of “Christabel,” *Champion*, 26 May 1816

1. Gothic and the Feeling of Design

A moment halfway through Ann Radcliffe’s 1797 novel *The Italian* exemplifies a conjectural mode of narration, in gothic texts extending from Walpole, to Radcliffe, to Coleridge, whereby idle thoughts unsettle apparently fixed realities. Radcliffe’s heroine, Ellena, finds herself imprisoned in a house on the shore of the Adriatic Sea, where she rightly fears she has been brought to be murdered. As she awaits an outcome that seems inevitable, her thoughts nonetheless continue to put that outcome to the test:

Again she listened, and scarcely dared to breathe; but not the lightest sound occurred in the pauses of the waves, and she believed herself convinced that no person except herself was in the room. That she was deceived in this belief, appeared from her unwillingness to approach the mattress, while it was yet involved in shade.¹

Ellena may or may not be right in supposing that she is alone; no murderer appears, in any event. But the suspense of these lines depends less on the actual question of an impending murder than on Ellena’s fluctuating state of mind as *she* weighs that question,

¹ Ann Radcliffe, *The Italian*, ed. Frederick Garber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 214-15. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

on no basis other than her own feelings. Believing oneself convinced stands crucially distinct from actually *being* convinced, after all, and opens a formal interim for thought—like the intermittent lapping of the waves—during which a third possibility arises: that Ellena is deceived in her belief. This possibility only “appears,” leaving open the question of whether it is Ellena who disavows her former certainty, or the narrator who disavows it on her behalf. All told, then, the initial impression of a fixed outcome gives way in this moment to an unexpectedly eventful interval during which thought doubles and redoubles on itself, creating substance out of vacancy. Even if Ellena does not yet quite dare to hope for a better outcome, neither is she simply resigned to the intractability of circumstances.

This chapter aims to describe the Romantic gothic genre in terms of a narrative mode that seeks conceptual possibilities not to be found in the choice between positive belief and disbelief. Conjecture turns away from the Enlightenment language of probability, evidence, and skepticism—and the accompanying focus on external reference points—to focus instead on a reflexive feeling in the mind. That feeling in the mind, I will argue, makes room for a kind of thought that does not yet take a particular object—when one does not yet know what exactly one is thinking about, or to what end. In the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, for instance, the narrator of Wordsworth’s “The Thorn” repeatedly claims that “I’ll tell you every thing I know.”² Nonetheless, he just as frequently interrupts himself to disavow the tale even as he tells it: “I cannot tell,” “I cannot think.” In both the claim and its renunciation, the narrator protests too much: while he doesn’t believe that his version of events is quite the thing, he’s not prepared to

² William Wordsworth, “The Thorn,” in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

give up the matter, either. The resulting cycle of conjecture and disavowal both incites and frustrates the curiosity of the narrator's interlocutor, who demands the story of the mysterious woman, Martha Ray:

And wherefore does she cry?—
Oh wherefore? wherefore? tell me why
Does she repeat that doleful cry? (86-88)

Like the narrator, the interlocutor continues to press for a story where there seems to be none, and as a result, a story does start to come into view, if only in part.

In a well-known note to "The Thorn," Wordsworth extends the interlocutor's irresolute condition to the poet himself. Poetry, in his view, depends on repetition, but a kind of repetition that must look meaningless to the reader, like "apparent tautology"—and must feel like it to the poet, too. As he writes:

For the Reader cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion: it is the history or science of feelings: now every man must know that an attempt is rarely made to communicate impassioned feelings without something of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language. During such efforts there will be a craving in the mind, and as long as it is unsatisfied the Speaker will cling to the same words, or words of the same character.³

The poet has gotten himself stuck on repeat: he knows that his words and passions are mere shadows of the real thing, but he hasn't yet found anything better to replace them with. But in trying and failing to "communicate impassioned feelings," the poet discovers another feeling along the way: a "consciousness of inadequateness" amounting to "a craving in the mind."

Wordsworth's account of poetic repetition rests on a distinction between form and content that will tell throughout multiple moments in this chapter: as the poetic Speaker

³ Wordsworth, "Wordsworth's Endnotes," in *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 200.

“cling[s] to the same words,” the “passion” that he sets out to describe gives way to a feeling that the repetition itself produces.⁴ Therefore, when Wordsworth prefaces these sentences by cautioning that “Words, a Poet’s words more particularly, ought to be weighed in the balance of feeling, and not measured by the space which they occupy upon paper,”⁵ the identity of the subject who performs that judgment remains ambiguous: Wordsworth goes on to address himself to “the Reader [who] cannot be too often reminded that Poetry is passion,” but the overriding “balance of feeling” here belongs to the Poet and his craving in the mind.⁶ That balance tips more unambiguously farther on: “And further, from a spirit of fondness, exultation, and gratitude, the mind luxuriates in the repetition of words which appear successfully to communicate its feelings.”⁷ In the interim between feelings and their communication, the reflexivity of the attempt produces its own feeling; irritation at what the poet can’t yet achieve becomes “fondness, exultation, and gratitude” for what the poet already *has* achieved, precisely by way of that irritation. As the poet tries to conjure one poetic object, he discovers another.

The real substance that inadequacy motivates and reflexivity produces, moreover, bears no necessary connection to what the reader experiences. The actual substantive experience, after all, is the one that takes place in the poet’s mind as he measures the gap between what he thought he was going for and his achievement in the interim, which ought not to be “measured by the space which [words] occupy upon paper.” Instead the poet takes the ongoing measure of that gap, and of that achievement, by way of conjecture, a conditional language expressing the mind’s explicitly provisional

⁴ While Wordsworth refers here to a poetic speaker, I will instead be referring to a “poetic narrator” in my poetry readings, to emphasize that my argument about conjecture applies to novels and poems, across the dissertation, in similar ways.

⁵ Wordsworth, 200.

⁶ Wordsworth, 200.

⁷ Wordsworth, 200.

assessment of its own ongoing activity: “without *something* of an accompanying consciousness of the inadequateness of our own powers”; “the repetition of words which *appear* successfully to communicate its own feelings.” Wordsworth overtly brackets the question of what the reader takes away; the mere appearance of successful communication is enough, for now, to make the difference the poet seeks, one that registers in the mind rather than on the page.

The conjectural method by which Wordsworth proposes to measure the difference poetry makes in the world also lies at the heart of Immanuel Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment. In a famous passage from the Third Critique, Kant describes something he calls “purposiveness,” which allows the subject to consider the question of apparent design even in the absence of intention:

[W]e do call objects, states of mind, or acts purposive even if their possibility does not necessarily presuppose the presentation of a purpose; we do this merely because we can explain and grasp them only if we assume that they are based on a causality that operates according to purposes, i.e., on a will that would have so arranged them in accordance with the presentation of a certain rule. Hence there can be purposiveness without a purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will, and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will.⁸

Aesthetic judgment, Kant proposes, involves a quality of mind that looks like intention, but never quite adds up to a particular aim. Hence his reliance on the conditional mood and on an accompanying cascade of qualifiers: “even if”; “only if”; “would have”; “and yet.” The point, for Kant, is that because aesthetics presumes a kind of knowledge externalized (through objects, thoughts, or acts), it allows us to think about the mere appearance of design as something still valid, even when it’s no longer evidence of intentionality on the part of a given subject.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 65.

Kant's account of purposiveness outlines a conjectural method that the gothic codifies as a narrative practice. Gothic conjecture is a way of giving shape to a problem without (yet) trying to solve it, or, alternately, of teasing out an inchoate reality by way of a provisional fiction. In Kant, that fiction consists in projecting consciousness onto the world around us. That can only ever be a fiction, of course, but it nonetheless seems to reveal something irreducible in the world that we would not have seen otherwise: the presence of a design that cannot yet be accounted for but whose effects are tangibly felt nonetheless. Like Wordsworth's poet, then, Kant's subject finds himself in a position that he knows does not yet add up on paper, but which he is nonetheless bound to pursue.⁹

Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge all take up the conjectural method, moving it from Enlightenment philosophy into literary narrative. In Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and Radcliffe's *The Italian*, characters find themselves acting on the basis of ideas that, when formally articulated as beliefs, feel unjustified. This creates a reflexive state in which one is simultaneously aware of one's credulity and unable to account for it, either to oneself or to others. Such reflexivity doubles, moreover, as the ground of the reading experience: the reader of gothic is implicitly asked to hold competing options in mind, and then told that the choice between these options is no longer available. For readers and characters alike, the resulting sense of being at odds with oneself—left in a state of cognitive dissonance—means feeling called to account for ideas without yet feeling convinced of them.¹⁰

⁹ The serious pursuit of an idea founded on a fictional premise also encompasses Humean belief (premised on the fanciful "necessary connexion" between mind and world) as discussed in my chapter on the Shelleys, and Smith's reconciliation of public and private interests (premised on the "invisible hand" metaphor) as discussed in my Scott chapter. The Kantian sublime follows a similar conjectural logic, as discussed in my Wordsworth chapter.

¹⁰ This cognitive dissonance connects these earlier writers with the later gothic texts of Mary and Percy Shelley (as discussed in my fourth chapter), in which characters are simultaneously called

The idea that one remains unable to justify but feels nonetheless compelled to pursue also motivates Coleridge's poem "Christabel." Coleridge, however, takes that premise one step further. Unlike the revealed supernatural of Walpole, or the naturalized supernatural of Radcliffe, events in "Christabel" receive no final explanation: the narrator remains just as much in the dark as his characters. As a result, conjecture in Coleridge refers to the way in which the narrator often appears to be splitting hairs, making up distinctions that don't exist, or saying the same thing in different ways. But while the content of conjecture may look stuck in place (and may *feel* like being stuck in place), the form of tautology creates motion: a circular motion, but one that, with each subsequent iteration, further unsettles conceptual equivalences that had seemed self-evident. In this way, conjecture in "Christabel" makes room for imagining how, even in the closed world of the poem, things might still be otherwise.

In the same way that conjecture reveals the fictional premise of Kantian aesthetic judgment, it also shows the equal provisionality of gothic narrative and its premise of a premeditated design by virtue of which the narrator remains fully in control of his story.¹¹ The fact that characters and narrators project terror and suspense onto the world around them does not exhaust the work that such feelings do; instead mental projection takes on

upon to account for premises they do not endorse and drawn to convictions they cannot account for.

¹¹ Fiona Robertson, for instance, validates this premise in her argument that the gothic claim to narrative inadequacy is merely a conceit: "Narrators who claim, conventionally, to be inadequate, unimaginative, and commonplace, wield absolute tyrannical power over readers who are involuntarily identified with helpless, victimized protagonists." Fiona Robertson, *Legitimate Histories: Scott, Gothic, and the Authorities of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 108. In the texts treated here, however, I read the claim to narrative inadequacy less as a conventional pretense than as an earnest question that becomes the occasion of gothic narration, along similar lines as Wordsworth's "consciousness of the inadequateness of our powers" and Kant's "inadequacy" of the powers of imagination to the ideas of reason: a real feeling that produces a real difference in the way that gothic narrates experience. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 106.

a life of its own that narrative cannot fully account for. The gothic search for an absent cause behind observed effects picks up on the Enlightenment search for a principle of necessity—one that would connect the past to the present, in conjectural history, or mind to world, in philosophy. Gothic literature extends that search, but precisely by way of its fictionality. The absent cause in gothic remains a self-consciously literary device, one that narrators and characters are to some degree wise to; as a result, gothic deemphasizes the ostensible content of the search (the absent cause as such) in favor of the form that design-seeking thought takes. When Kant writes that aesthetic judgment begins in inferring purpose where we know there to be none, or when Wordsworth writes that poetry begins in repetition that the poet knows to amount to tautology, the point is that form works independently of its content, and without the need for justification.¹²

Gothic's reflexive emphasis on its own machinery, therefore, asserts a kind of thinking that can *only* be done in a mechanical way, by maintaining the premise of causal necessity even when that premise is simultaneously disavowed. Read in this way, gothic turns out to be Romanticism's most hopeful genre, even though it looks the most closed down. Moreover, the optimistic reading of gothic in this first chapter looks ahead to a residue of the utopian that will still inhere in the gothic texts in my last chapter, the texts that it seems the hardest to find any hope in. And that hope emerges by attending to the work that conjectural literature can do as a form still in wait of its controlling idea, even when that idea remains a figure of thought.

¹² Form's operation independent of its content is a feature inherent to conjecture from its Enlightenment origins. Francis Bacon, for instance, lays continual emphasis on the need for an inductive "machinery" to guide human reason, as in his Preface, where he proposes that "the entire work of the understanding be commenced afresh, and the mind itself be from the very outset not left to take its own course, but guided at every step; and the business be done as if by machinery." Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Fulton H. Anderson (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 34. Part of my argument will therefore be that gothic literature shares the Enlightenment sense of the possibilities latent in form.

2. Walpole and Radcliffe: The Idea without a Referent

Walpole foregrounds the gap between conjectural belief and full conviction in his Preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, from 1764. Walpole (alias “William Marshall, Gent.”) claims to be translating a document of the Italian Counter-Reformation, first published in Naples in the 16th century. This is a story set down by one Onuphrio Muralto, an Italian Catholic monk peddling a fictional narrative in the guise of a true history. Muralto’s motive, Walpole speculates, was ideological:

Letters were then in their most flourishing state in Italy, and contributed to dispel the empire of superstition, at that time so forcibly attacked by the reformers. It is not unlikely, that an artful priest might endeavor to turn their own arms on the innovators; and might avail himself of his abilities as an author to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions.¹³

Having posited this theory, Walpole immediately backpedals: “This solution of the author’s motives is, however, offered as a mere conjecture” (60). The choice between credulity and skepticism is no longer available to Walpole, the latter-day editor, nor to his readers, who can only approach the text as “a matter of entertainment” (60). By positing and then disavowing the fictional framework, Walpole seems to want to have things both ways. He asks us, his readers, to remain mindful of the work’s deceitful intentions, and also to remain sensitive to the reasons Muralto’s original readers may have had for credulity—but without endorsing that credulity ourselves. At the same time, such caution is not allowed to rise to the level of positive skepticism; the critique of Muralto, after all, is only “offered as a mere conjecture,” and in the second Preface Walpole dispenses with

¹³ Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto and The Mysterious Mother*, ed. Frederick S. Frank (Toronto: Broadview, 2003), 59. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

the found document conceit entirely. He speculates on the judgment with which an historical reader would have been faced but leaves his own readers little room for such judgment.

Walpole thus asks his reader to do two dissimilar kinds of cognitive work at once, to entertain both skepticism and credulity without actually buying into either of those mental states. Even the willing suspension of disbelief, it seems, would have little relevance here. Walpole, after all, is not talking about a Humean problem of probability or testimony, but about setting a mood. “Belief in every kind of prodigy,” he writes, “was so established in those dark ages, that an author would not be faithful to the manners of the time who should omit all mention of them. He is not bound to believe them himself, but he must represent his actors as believing them” (60).¹⁴ The catch here is that Walpole’s own author—the “artful priest,” Muralto—is *not* simply “be[ing] faithful to the manners of the time” but is in fact willfully deceiving his readers. As Walpole has already stated, Muralto is “avail[ing] himself of his abilities as an author to confirm the populace in their ancient errors and superstitions.” Ironically, therefore, Muralto’s broken faith vis-à-vis his readers becomes, for Walpole’s readers, a kind of kept faith—a fiction that is “faithful to the manners of the time.” Disbelief here is not so much suspended as rendered irrelevant. No longer a provisional condition of weighing probabilities, conjecture is now a permanent condition. To put it differently, the failure of testimony, transposed into a reading context, becomes business as usual.

¹⁴ Echoing Richard Hurd’s distinction: “But when ... his fancies have, or may be supposed to have, a countenance from the current superstitions of the age, in which he writes, [the gothic poet] dispenses with [the belief of the reader], and gives his Reader leave to be as sceptical and as incredulous, as he pleases.” Richard Hurd, *Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (London: A. Millar, 1762), 90, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (CW113766937).

The notion of permanent conjecture also serves, famously, as the precondition for Walter Scott's historical fiction. But as both this and the following chapter will argue, it would be a mistake to think of conjecture as merely a pretext for imaginative fiction, one that distances the author from his material. The crucial point, for Walpole, is that his readers must still try to enter into the mindset formerly attached to outmoded beliefs, even while they imagine a fictional monk laughing in his sleeve at them. Conjecture in this sense names not a convenient starting pretext but an ongoing struggle with awkwardness and uncertainty in the present. Samuel Johnson, writing contemporaneously with Walpole, articulates a similarly visceral experience in the Preface to his edition of *Shakespeare* (1765). Much of the Preface reads as a sort of negative manifesto of editorship, wherein Johnson recounts his anxieties in reviewing past editions of Shakespeare's work as he prepared to undertake his own editorial labors. "I was forced," Johnson writes, "to censure those whom I admired, and could not but reflect, while I was dispossessing their emendations, how soon the same fate might happen to my own."¹⁵ The only way forward, in Johnson's view, is an "emendatory" or "conjectural" model of editorial criticism that embraces this state of unknowing as the new normal: "That a conjectural critick should often be mistaken, cannot be wonderful, either to others or himself, if it be considered, that in his art there is no system, no principal and axiomatical truth that regulates subordinate positions."¹⁶ As Johnson pines after an authoritative rule or "axiomatical truth," he also looks ahead to Kant's search for an absent purpose, the "will that would have so arranged [our thoughts or acts] in accordance with the presentation of a certain rule." The absence of that "certain rule" for the editor leads

¹⁵ Samuel Johnson, *The Preface to Shakespeare* (Adelaide, South Australia: The University of Adelaide Library, 2014), <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/johnson/samuel/preface/>.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Preface*.

Johnson to place a premium on restoring the integrity of the work's original sense, even while simultaneously maintaining an ironic view of his own editorial position. Johnson sees his position as editor—and by extension, the position of any latter-day reader—as marked by an abiding inauthenticity, an irreparable lack of integrity, and an impending threat of dispossession.

Johnson infers that his own editorial position of erstwhile authority has been rendered irrelevant before he can even claim it as his own. This is the defining paradox for characters in Walpole's novel, as well. Theirs is Johnson's position of tentative conjecture without the possibility of a final appeal to an "axiomatrical truth." Conjecture for Walpole's characters emerges by way of the supernatural phenomena that pile up around them as the novel moves toward its final catastrophe, but does not end there. The characters' focus, instead, becomes a reflexive one: the inscrutability of their own motives to themselves. The princess Matilda, for instance, is preoccupied with the portrait of Alfonso, Otranto's long-dead ruler, that hangs in the castle's gallery; at the same time, she is incredulous of her own preoccupation. Thus when her maidservant refers in passing to "the picture of the good Alfonso in the gallery, which you sit and gaze at for hours together," Matilda responds equivocally: "Do not speak lightly of that picture, interrupted Matilda sighing: I know the adoration with which I look at that picture is uncommon—but I am not in love with a coloured pannel" (95). Matilda's iconoclastic declaration belies her anxiety at being unable to disavow her attachment to an idea connected with Alfonso's portrait, "that somehow or other my destiny is linked with something relating to him." By her own admission, Matilda's apprehension of fate *feels* unfounded; moreover, she is aware that this nameless "something" must *look*, to others, like an undue fixation on the material form of the object itself—like being "in

love with a coloured pannel,” over and above whatever the portrait might actually represent or portend.

Like Walpole’s heroine, characters in Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* continually find themselves in a similarly impossible situation: they feel drawn to ideas even as they realize that those ideas place them at cross purposes to themselves. This is the experience not only of Ellena, but also that of the novel’s titular villain, the scheming friar, Father Schedoni. Schedoni has colluded with a noblewoman, the Marchesa, to prevent her son from marrying Ellena, an orphan of supposedly ignoble descent. In a climactic scene, Schedoni enters the chamber in which he has imprisoned Ellena, intending, per the Marchesa’s instruction, to murder Ellena in her sleep. As Schedoni raises his dagger to strike, however, he recognizes his own portrait in the miniature she wears around her neck. This recognition confounds his homicidal scheme because he knows that Ellena believes the man in the miniature to be her father; he assumes, therefore, that she must be his daughter (in reality, as we later learn, she is his niece). “Thus by a singular retribution,” as he sees it, “his own crimes had recoiled upon himself” (243).

Schedoni’s neatly self-contained moral reflects a kind of simple cosmic irony. But the actual contradiction runs deeper than this; it is also a condition of mind that Schedoni experiences even as he is attempting to carry out Ellena’s murder, before he has seen the portrait. For instance, when Schedoni first tries to murder Ellena on the beach, he finds himself stymied by the faint stirrings of sympathy, “an emotion new and surprising to him” (228). He later sits in his room and reflects on this unforeseen contingency:

He considered the character of his own mind with astonishment, for circumstances had drawn forth traits, of which, till now, he had no suspicion. He knew not by what doctrine to explain the inconsistencies, the contradictions, he experienced. (225)

And that night, as Schedoni is again on the verge of murdering Ellena as she sleeps, “His agitation and repugnance to strike increased with every moment of delay, and, as often as he prepared to plunge the poinard in her bosom, a shuddering horror restrained him”; this dilemma leaves him, once more, “[a]stonished at his own feelings” (234). The recalcitrance that repeatedly stays Schedoni’s hand does not, then, simply spring from salutary impulses. Although in retrospect Schedoni labels this recalcitrance as “pity” or “compassion,” in the event itself, it is a nameless “shuddering horror” that restrains him, not moral sentiment. That horror might begin in a moment of pity, or of repugnance toward the idea of murder, but it does not reduce to clear-cut ideas such as these; the shuddering impulse quickly moves away from such sentiments to take on a life of its own, to feed on itself. Through a strange transmutation, horror now attaches not so much to the violent act Schedoni contemplates as to the act of contemplation itself, to the reflexive examination of one’s own mind and the “inconsistencies” and “contradictions” to be found there.

In Matilda’s fascination with the portrait of Alfonso, and in Schedoni’s ambivalence on the brink of murdering Ellena, both characters find themselves modeling attitudes that feel both compelling and unfounded in equal measure. At the same time, they realize that there is no one else to whom they could appeal for a final verdict as to the rightness or wrongness of their feelings. The impulsion, or the reluctance, they conceive of has no demonstrable basis that they could point out to others. The process of conjecture follows from trying and failing to trace that feeling of impulsion or reluctance; instead, the very process by which characters try to account for that feeling becomes the new object of fixation in its own right.

The experience of alternate fascination and dread in Walpole and Radcliffe, then, doubles the experience of aesthetic contemplation in Kant: both experiences consist in the inability either to fully avow or disavow an idea, the condition that Wordsworth called the “craving in the mind.” Such ideas could never be fully substantiated because they lack a clear empirical referent. That lack of a referent does not, however, mitigate the idea’s force but instead gives it a purchase that, as clear conceptual content, it could not have.

3. “Christabel” and the Fantasy of Repression

The gothic characters in Walpole and Radcliffe embody a kind of fixation that lacks a clear referent but which one nonetheless feels bound to pursue. When translated into narrative, this fixation tends to entail a certain amount of narrative excess, as the preceding examples illustrate: nested qualifications, double negatives, and recursive syntax. Perhaps this narrative excess was what Coleridge had in mind when, in an anonymous review of *The Italian*, he dissented from the majority consensus of critical approval:

The *Mysteries of Udolpho* fell short of the *Romance of the Forest*, by the tedious protraction of events, and by a redundancy of description; the *Italian* falls short of the *Mysteries of Udolpho*, by reminding us of the same characters and the same scenes; and, although the descriptive part is less prolix, the author has had recourse to it in various Instances, in which it has no natural connexion with the story.¹⁷

¹⁷ Unsigned review in *The Critical Review*, June 1798, 166-9, ed. Michael Gamer, <http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/coleridge.reviews>. Tellingly, among the passages in *The Italian* that Coleridge nonetheless singled out for praise was the “shuddering horror” passage (discussed above), which he excerpted in full, noting that “[t]here are, however, some scenes that powerfully seize the imagination, and interest the passions.”

The comment seems self-revealing: in protesting that Radcliffe's poetic narration is too much, Coleridge may be painfully aware that his own poetic narration is not enough. At the time of the review, after all, Coleridge was laboring at his own gothic text, "Christabel," which proved willfully resistant to completion and which, even in its published form, appears to leave Coleridge with little right to criticize Radcliffe for narration that lacks a "natural connexion with the story."

Written in two parts in 1798 and 1800, "Christabel" was not finally published until 1816, and even then only after Coleridge had been worn down by the repeated promptings of Wordsworth, Scott, Southey, and Byron combined.¹⁸ In the interim, however, "Christabel" operated behind the scenes, through coterie circulation, as a kind of absent cause for multiple texts in my following chapters. Scott credited the poem for his metrical scheme in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (and both Coleridge and the Wordsworths considered Scott's ballad derivative of Coleridge's in content, as well); Mary Shelley began *Frankenstein* soon after hearing Byron recite the poem in the summer of 1816; and Wordsworth, while he admired the poem, nonetheless considered it so discordant with the style of the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* that he thought it necessary to write an entirely new poem, "Michael," to replace it, delaying the book's publication by several months in the process.¹⁹ For all that the poem achieved prior to print, once finally

¹⁸ I draw on the textual history provided in Paul Cheshire, "'I lay too many Eggs': Coleridge's 'Ostrich Carelessness' and the Problem of Publication," *Coleridge Bulletin* (2004): 1-25, <http://www.friendsofcoleridge.com/Coleridge-Bulletin.htm>; and Susan Eilenberg, "Chapter 1: The Propriety of the *Lyrical Ballads*," *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 3-30.

¹⁹ The question of Coleridge's involvement in this decision remains contested. Wordsworth wrote to his publishers, Longman and Rees, that the "Style of this poem was so discordant from my own that it could not be printed along with my poems with any propriety" (qtd. in Cheshire, 6). For an interpretation of this as a power move on Wordsworth's part to sideline Coleridge, see Eilenberg; for an interpretation of the decision as a more mutual one, see Cheshire, 5-7.

published (in a pamphlet alongside “Kubla Khan” and “The Pains of Sleep”) it fell flat, panned by critics as alternately indecent and incomprehensible.

The difference that Coleridge’s poem makes in the world seems to occur more in its absence, as an unfulfilled potential, than in its material presence as text. Its agency in absentia reflects, in turn, something intrinsic to the logic of a poem that never elucidates its central event—Christabel’s ambiguous nocturnal liaison with the mysterious lady Geraldine—nor develops that event into a longer narrative arc. Like the ghostly position of “Christabel” within the *Lyrical Ballads*, the liaison operates as an absent cause within the poem, a negative space around which a fragmentary narrative halfway coalesces in spite of itself. Critics, accordingly, have tended to read absence in the poem as primarily a negative condition, either a deconstructive matter of recession and fissures in language, or a psychoanalytic matter of sex, trauma, and repetition-compulsion.²⁰ These readings find a plot and a cast of characters stuck on repeat, unable to move forward. In contrast, I suggest that the repetition narrative fragmentation produces *does* move the poem forward—not prescriptively but descriptively, by naming ideas that emerge while the narrator waits for a more connected story to come into view. The problem that occasions the difficulty of reading the poem, then, is also the problem that the poem takes as its predominant thematic concern: how to tell a story *about* nothing that does not reduce *to* nothing, that gives tangible form to the difference that nothing can make.²¹

²⁰ Deconstructive readings in this vein include Susan Eilenberg, “‘Michael,’ ‘Christabel,’ and the Poetry of Possession,” in *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Literary Possession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 87-107; and Claire B. May, “‘Christabel’ and Abjection: Coleridge’s Narrative in Process / on Trial,” *SEL* 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 699-721. Psychoanalytic readings include Jonas Spatz, “The Mystery of Eros: Sexual Initiation in Coleridge’s ‘Christabel,’” *PMLA* 90 (1975): 107-16; and Karen Swann, “‘Christabel’: The Wandering Mother and the Enigma of Form,” *Studies in Romanticism* 23, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 533-53.

²¹ My argument finds common ground with the spirit of Gregory Leadbetter’s argument. Leadbetter asserts that the poem deliberately forecloses the elaboration of certain kinds of

The nighttime liaison between Christabel and Geraldine takes its central position in the story by dint of the same cause that prevents the story from getting off the ground: the fact that the narrator keeps returning to that event. And this iterative form of narration reveals a strange disconnect. The more hints the narrator eagerly drops about the climactic encounter between Christabel and Geraldine, the less clear it becomes that there actually *is* a real crisis moment to be told at all—a skeleton key that, if revealed, would make the rest of the text come together. Readers have nonetheless tended to accept at face value the narrator’s insinuation that his story must have a textual crux. This is often taken to be the moment when Geraldine undresses:

Like one that shudder’d, she unbound
 The cincture from beneath her breast:
 Her silken robe, and inner vest,
 Dropt to her feet, and full in view,
 Behold! her bosom and half her side——
 A sight to dream of, not to tell!
 And she is to sleep by Christabel.²²

The narrator’s breathless punctuation gives the lie to his stated aversion: clearly he *does* intend to “tell,” and not for the last time, either. The long dash at line 246 makes prominent the fact that an elision has taken place, though the elided line (“Are lean and old and foul of hue,” in early manuscripts) doesn’t tell us anything we didn’t already know, namely that all is not well with Geraldine.²³

knowledge. For instance, talking about what it is that Christabel learns from Geraldine, he writes: “It is likely, then, if she *could* try and describe it, that in her fear and inability to articulate what she has known, Christabel would do violence to its truths and therefore to herself, by naming it as ‘evil.’” Gregory Leadbetter, “The ‘true wild weird spirit’ of ‘Christabel,’” *Coleridge Bulletin* 50 (Winter 2017): 27. Like Leadbetter, I am interested in how the poem holds out for an idea for which an adequate language does not yet exist. However, Leadbetter makes more of foreclosed knowledge, whereas my reading has more to do with moments that only *look* like foreclosure, but where knowledge is not necessarily present as such to begin with.

²² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “Christabel,” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), 241-48. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

²³ Halmi, Magnuson, and Modiano, 169n1.

Although the narrator treats this moment as self-evidently significant, what that significance amounts to remains uncertain. The narrator alternately offers and withholds the sight of Geraldine's disfigurement, and this gesture makes it seem that Geraldine's appearance is the key to understanding the threat she poses to Christabel. But why should it be what she looks, rather than what she says, or does? For all the stanza's language of sight, of knowledge revealed and withheld, any particular object of that knowledge has yet to coalesce. In place of knowledge, what emerges is a noncognitive mood of general foreboding without a specific threat, and of interest without a clear motive.

The narrator's avowed reluctance to tell what he knows disguises what appears to be his actual inability to tell much of anything at all, and this inability puts him in congruity not just with Christabel but, more unexpectedly, with Geraldine. Though ostensibly the one with a secret to keep, and even as she alerts Christabel to the spell that will prevent her from telling the secret to others, Geraldine seems hard-pressed to explain what that secret amounts to:

In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell,
Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!
Thou knowest to-night, and wilt know to-morrow
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. (255-64)

As Geraldine shifts into the incantatory rhythms of ritual speech, meter seems to take over the work of descriptive content, and this substitution hints that the knowledge the spell claims to proscribe has not yet actually coalesced in any meaningful way. All that Christabel now knows of Geraldine, apparently, is "This mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow"—but shame and sorrow for what? These remain indeterminate moods

without any kind of referent. Indeed, Christabel does not in fact “know” Geraldine’s shame or sorrow directly; all she knows, in the final account, are “this mark, this seal”—signs standing in for moods standing in for a story, signs that Geraldine seems concerned that Christabel would not even know to read *as* signs had Geraldine not directly referenced them with the repeated deictic, “this,” pointing back to her own body in speech akin to the narrator’s “Behold!,” and as if to say, if you don’t understand by now, you’re not going to.

“This,” then, is all Christabel knows on earth, of Geraldine at any rate, nor is it clear that Geraldine herself knows anything more of her own story. The fall from innocence into knowledge appears a peculiarly tautological experience for all who try to make sense of it, the narrator as well as his subjects: the deictic gesture cannot help but point back to its own object by way of explaining it. Such reflexivity unsettles the premise of narrative agency at a basic level. For if the knowledge Geraldine passes on to Christabel obscures more than it clarifies, then what would it mean for her to forbid Christabel from communicating that knowledge to others? How can Geraldine proscribe what she has not yet revealed? “But vainly thou warrest, / For this is alone in / Thy power to declare,” she tells Christabel, and the abrupt shift in the form of her speech—from four-stress rhyming couplets to two-stress lines comprising a sestet, set apart on the page both aurally and visually—appears to signal a shift in what her speech is doing. This apparent shift seems to follow, moreover, from Geraldine’s immediately preceding declaration that “In the touch of this bosom there worketh a spell, / Which is lord of thy utterance, Christabel!” Her reference to spells and utterances serves as a reminder of the power that words *can* have, and indeed, the ritual cadence of what follows sounds very much like a chanted spell.

Performative speech, here, seems to partake of the supernatural power of Geraldine's embrace. But the rhetorical sleight of hand goes only so far. The spell, after all, resides solely in Geraldine's embrace, not in her speech. There is no prohibition; it really is just all talk. Geraldine doesn't tell Christabel *not* to say anything; she only predicts that Christabel *won't* be able to say anything. Geraldine's words at this juncture therefore double as a reflexive commentary on Geraldine's own position as one who cannot herself say much of anything: "For this is alone in / Thy power to declare." Geraldine has only one thing to say, after all: to announce that Christabel's fall from innocence into knowledge has happened (or maybe that it will happen). However, that knowledge, such as it is, appears to be non-discursive, and thus Geraldine's gestures at doing things with that knowledge—revealing it, then proscribing it—seem absent of real purpose. The compulsion and powerlessness she ascribes to Christabel, therefore, reflect back on Geraldine herself. Coleridge's Mariner at least had a story to tell; Geraldine's doom is closer to that of Cassandra, fated to go on gesturing at the empty place where her story *should* go, and at the difference that her words *should* make—but don't.

The fact that relatively little actually happens in the poem shifts the narrative focus to the agency of narrative itself, to moments when it looks, or sounds, like speech has the power to make things happen: to reveal, to proscribe. Perhaps the desire for a figure to whom to attribute that causal power, a locus of narrative control in the poem, explains why readers have perennially attributed that control to Geraldine, asking only how she comes by her agency, and to what end. Figure out what Geraldine is up to (so goes the reasoning), and you'll know what the poem is up to, as well. A contemporary anonymous review in the *Champion*, for instance, puts the problem thus:

Mr. Coleridge's Poem is at present the standing enigma which puzzles the curiosity of literary circles. What is it all about? What is the idea? Is *Lady Geraldine* a sorceress? or a vampire? or a man? or what is she, or he, or it?²⁴

By conflating the question of Geraldine's identity with the question of the poem's governing "idea," the reviewer assumes that Geraldine has the power to give back to the poem the meaning it seems to lack.

The idea that Geraldine embodies an unrealized capacity to explain the poem, to give it back its missing "idea," has proven resilient. Susan Eilenberg calls Geraldine "a figure of censorship who cannot be described and who prohibits her story from being fully told."²⁵ For Eilenberg, Geraldine represents language's "infinite regress" consonant both with the poem's themes of ventriloquism, displacement, and dispossession and with the poem's withdrawal from the *Lyrical Ballads*. In sum, she writes, "'Christabel' allegorizes the failure of an independent voice in the presence of a greater power and dramatizes its own dispossession."²⁶ The force of Eilenberg's argument lands, like the *Champion* reviewer, on the language of a power struggle—the question of who gets to speak for whom—and the premise of a controlling idea repressed through censorship and prohibition. But the open secret about repression in the poem is that there is none, though the temptation to want to see it at work there nonetheless is no accident. The repression may be a fiction, but the feeling that something has been denied to us lingers and enables a reflexive attentiveness to absence itself. This is the power of conjecture—to build a story out of the very thing it disavows, and by dint of mere annoyance: "What is it all about? What is the idea?" Or, more familiarly: "Oh wherefore? wherefore? tell me why?"

²⁴ Unsigned review in *Champion*, 26 May 1816, in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge: The Critical Heritage, Volume 2: 1834-1900*, ed. J. R. De J. Jackson (London: Routledge, 1995), 251.

²⁵ Eilenberg, 104.

²⁶ Eilenberg, 100.

The narrator participates in the reflexive desire to complete, both in his speech and in his narrative structure. He preserves the places where performative speech should go, making it appear that a change has taken place where none has. He takes his cue, moreover, from his own anti-heroine. Geraldine speaks what sounds like a spell, and the narrator forgets that the actual spell resides in her touch, not her speech; she acts as if she were communicating a secret, and to the narrator's mind that insinuation now has the force of fact. In similar guise, the narrator's own speech, like Geraldine's, preserves the formal conceit of an object of knowledge without actually depending on such an object. In this way, narrative placeholder makes possible a kind of idea that coalesces as form rather than content; we are left looking for a change in the world of the narrative, when in fact the kind of difference narration makes occurs in the narrative structure itself.

The difference that narration makes as form rather than content appears, for example, in the narrator's description of Christabel (in the "Conclusion to Part the First") after she has received Geraldine's touch:

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? (280-85)

In the narrator's eagerness to observe a change in Christabel—a sign of the efficacy of Geraldine's spell—he either misses, hides, or simply ignores the fact that the change he looks for is one that he himself has just conjured up. This conjuration happens through accretion, which makes time for a new object of attention to emerge. The threefold repetition of "dreaming" and the rhetorical chiasmus that turns its object to observe it from different angles ("dreaming fearfully, / Fearfully dreaming") postpone the arrival of

“the lady” on line 285, the referent of the meandering adjectival phrase begun on line 280.

While the dreamer herself is still coming into focus in the narrator’s telling of the dream episode, a new referent emerges which, though grammatically subordinated, appears nonetheless to usurp Christabel’s place in the sentence: “Dreaming that alone, which is—— / O sorrow and shame!” These lines appear to demonstrate the narrator’s power of suggestion, but what they more tangibly demonstrate is the narrator’s susceptibility to suggestion—both his own suggestion and Geraldine’s. The lines briefly collate a series of prior moments: the narrator’s act of self-censoring when he claims that Geraldine’s disfigurement is “a sight to dream of, not to tell” (itself an asynchronous response to the proscription Geraldine appears to utter) and Geraldine’s reference to “this mark of my shame, this seal of my sorrow.” In merging these references, the narrator bypasses the presumable object to which they all refer, namely the sight of Geraldine’s disfigurement—the sight that is only to dream of, not to tell, that indeed cannot be told because it in turn refers only indirectly to a preemptively obscured story of “shame and sorrow.” The elision of that sight in line 283 nonetheless covers over the further elision of the story itself, and makes the shame and sorrow presumably associated with that story appear self-evident, and any further explanation unnecessary. In place of the elided sight or story, therefore, the narrator instead offers the sorrow and shame as the newly achieved *object* of the dream, as a fully coherent idea that does not refer to anything beyond itself: dreaming that alone, which *is* sorrow and shame.

This elision of the elision, as it were, obviates the question of whether it is Christabel who feels sorrow and shame on her own behalf, as a result of what she dreams, or whether it is the narrator who blushes for her. Questions of mental cause and effect—

feeling for, or because of, or on behalf of—seem to have little to do with it. What Christabel dreams, in the narrator's conception at any rate, is literally nothing—the eliding dash in line 283 that takes the place of a subject predicate. In this sense Christabel's mental absence reflects the anxieties of a narrator who fears that he is telling a story that will amount to nothing, and whose attempts to interject some degree of meaning back into this and other episodes through reflexive placeholders (“(ah woe is me!),” “yet I wis,” “O sorrow and shame!”) betray his inability to make anything happen. Christabel and Geraldine, after all, just go on sleeping. And all that the narrator's much-deferred question adds up to, in the meantime, is a self-evident equivalence (“Can this be she?”) that seems not to justify the question's incredulous tone, since no reason for incredulity on the point of Christabel's identity has been adduced.

Considering the dream episode in terms of event, therefore, nothing happens; but that very nothing, filtered through the narrator's internal monologue, nonetheless enables a mental reflexivity that does in fact produce the eventfulness the narrator was searching for, all along. What begins as a narrated event, that is, turns into frustration on the narrator's part that becomes an unfolding event in its own right: the narrator second-guessing what he thought he knew. This reflexivity does produce narrative substance, therefore—not the one the narrator was looking for, nor perhaps that readers are looking for, but a substance that the narrator enacts in his own verbal tics. The narrator's conjectures begin with something assumed and gradually develop it into an open question.

4. Peevish Narration

As the narrative coalesces around the fiction of a repressed crux, the narrator's conjectures concerning that crux begin to create the narrative object he seeks. This is to say that the erstwhile referents of narration—the unspoken spell, the forbidden sight—fall away but leave intact the narrative apparatus built up around them: the repeated substitutions, elisions, and interjections. These narrative features double and echo each other, but not just to give us more of the same; instead of repetition as compulsion, the poem treats it as a vehicle of change. Repetition, for the narrator, moves in two directions at once: it unsettles premises that had seemed self-evident, and it holds out for ideas that are still on the way in.

Repetition in the poem allows the narrator to reorient himself so as to approach his material in a new light. The difficulty, however, is how to narrate this reorientation, an internal shift which momentarily looks—and feels—like being stuck in a rut. This difficulty aligns the narrator with his protagonist in Part II of the poem as Christabel tries to tell her father of what she has experienced, but finds herself unable to do so. After coming out of a trance occasioned by Geraldine's hypnotizing stare, Christabel finally has the chance to speak:

But when the trance was o'er, the maid
Paus'd awhile, and inly pray'd,
Then falling at her father's feet,
'By my mother's soul do I entreat
'That thou this woman send away!'
She said; and more she could not say,
For what she knew she could not tell,
O'er-master'd by the mighty spell. (601-8)

In postulating an inner drama of trance, prayer, and spell, the narrator makes much of his own ability to drive the narrative forward by separating out a series of closely-related

mental states. The question thus becomes what difference it makes, to the story, whether Christabel is in fact under a spell, or in a trance, or merely praying. Such distinctions are lost, after all, on Leoline and his court, to whom Christabel appears to remain in a uniform state of suspended animation, “paus’d awhile.” Christabel’s dilemma thus becomes the narrator’s by extension: how to make Christabel’s unfolding mental drama “tell” as a meaningful event, either in Leoline’s court or on the printed page.

For the time being, therefore, the protagonist’s inner deliberations, and the narrator’s attempt to explicate them, make both figures look willfully resistant to more straightforward communication. Christabel’s inability to speak looks like simple recalcitrance, while the narrator’s equivocation (between trance and prayer, for example) makes him appear to be splitting hairs. Meanwhile, the outward ‘event’ around which Christabel’s various mental vacancies coalesce—the brief petition to her father that he dismiss Geraldine—amounts to little more than a vacancy in speech. After all, her petition replaces meaningful content (reasons for what it proposes) with a reflexive emphasis on the bare fact of the speech-act itself: “By my mother’s soul do I entreat.” The reflexivity of the petition deemphasizes its ostensible object (“that thou this woman send away”), and this puts it in continuity with other forms of petitionary speech in the poem, including Christabel’s silent prayer—the object of which is never specified—and the narrator’s own interjections throughout (“Jesu, Maria, shield her well!,” 56, 570). The fact that no meaningful change seems to occur as a result of these petitions reaffirms the way in which each petition appears to lack a settled purpose to begin with. Even if she were not under a supernatural prohibition, Christabel still could not “tell” what she knows in the sense that she could not meaningfully explain her aversion to Geraldine beyond a fleeting recollection of “[t]he vision of fear, the touch and pain” (441). Despite her

prayers, therefore, no real difference in Christabel's world can be expected to be made. Instead the petitionary form acts as a placeholder, allowing the narrative to collect itself in thought, "paus'd awhile," before moving on to leave the episode unresolved.

Whether considered as public petition, private meditation, or narrative reflex, prayer in "Christabel" continually fails to make a tangible difference in the sequence of events. The content of prayer gives way to merely going through the motions. Prayer claims common ground, in this regard, with the condition of mental vacancy associated with Christabel's intermittent state of trance in response to Geraldine's spell. The narrator cites this trance state as a peculiarly noncognitive kind of interval in the narrative action—an absence of thought in contrast to which the rest of the narrative looks proportionately more eventful. Nonetheless, that contrast appears less persuasive than the narrator makes it out to be, since trance in the poem occurs in conjunction with other intervals that look equally uneventful, as when Christabel recovers from her trance in Leoline's hall only to remain "paus'd awhile" in inward prayer. The narrator's difficulty, then, is how to take the measure of mental developments that never rise to an outward event. Prayer and trance exemplify peevishness, in short, because they are mental states that seem to be going nowhere.

By offering his conjectures on an inner struggle that never clearly amounts to anything, Coleridge's narrator loosens the expectation that what counts, in narrative, reduces to what can be told as event. In distinguishing between noncognitive states that look alike, therefore, the narrator attempts to give visible shape to thoughts that are not nothing, but which do not yet add up to anything substantive. Moreover, as the narrative works in this peevish gap between purposiveness and clear purpose, it starts to take the form of what it describes, halfway between vacancy and substance. This doubling

structures the Conclusion to Part I, where the narrator tracks the progress of Christabel's inner life during sleep:

And see! the lady Christabel
Gathers herself from out her trance;
Her limbs relax, her countenance
Grows sad and soft. (299-302)

The exclamation in line 299 attempts to create through speech the dramatic urgency the moment lacks as reported event; after all, trance appears more continuous than not with the sleep it gives way to.

Despite the seeming uneventfulness of this episode, the narrator doubles down on his claim that he can observe a meaningful change in Christabel's inner life. This change, he speculates, consists in a transmutation by which the evil thoughts Christabel is privy to during her trance (the "sorrow and shame" of her "fearful" dreams) vanish and are replaced by a beatific calm:

Yea, she doth smile, and she doth weep,
Like a youthful hermitess,
Beauteous in a wilderness,
Who, praying always, prays in sleep. (307-10)

The fact that the figurative hermitess's prayers carry on uninterrupted even in sleep suggests that no particular thought attaches to her prayers. As in the later moment of silent prayer without a referent in Leoline's court, here too the subject prays, but does not necessarily pray *for*. Consequently, this noncognitive turn reflects a tacit implication that the passage's position near the end of the Conclusion to Part I serves to justify: that the idealized image of Christabel in prayerful sleep has become its own end. Part I concludes

as it began, with Christabel in prayer. The story has come full circle, apparently, with nothing left to wish for on Christabel's behalf, or the reader's.²⁷

The narrator's conjectures on prayer without a referent loosen his assumption that an idea only matters if it can be completed. Christabel's thoughts still matter, the narrator suggests, even when they remain opaque to *him*. This distinction suggests the urgency of the kind of idea conjecture accommodates: the thought that can be imagined in outline without having a language to flesh it out. And it is in this spirit that Coleridge has his narrator offer the concluding image of Christabel as hermitess: the image works against the possibility of narrative fulfillment because it cannot be completed. The hermitess's prayer, after all, does not bring inner thoughts closer to outward accomplishment; instead her manner of prayer forecloses the question of thought entirely. The image in fact depends on this premise of mental absence, which turns out to be simply an expedient fiction: the narrator must put Christabel's thoughts on hold in order to elaborate his own.

Beyond simply foreclosing Christabel's thoughts, the hermitess image in fact elevates foreclosure as an aesthetic ideal. Because no reason is given for Christabel's smiling and weeping, they are flattened into a single expression of uniform emotion,

²⁷ The idea of prayer that lacks a cognitive referent accords with Coleridge's description of a similar kind of prayer in the opening to "The Pains of Sleep" (published in the same pamphlet):

Ere on my bed my limbs I lay,
It hath not been my use to pray
With moving lips or bended knees;
But silently, by slow degrees,
My spirit I to Love compose,
In humble Trust mine eye-lids close,
With reverential resignation,
No wish conceived, no thought expressed!
Only a *sense* of supplication. (1-9)

The absence of prayer's outward signs parallels a lack of inward signs, too: in place of "wish" or "thought," prayer registers only as a noncognitive mood of "resignation" and a guarded "*sense* of supplication." The speaker senses he is praying, but he does not know for what; he seems cautious, in fact, not to allow his prayers to take a referent. Coleridge, "The Pains of Sleep," in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2004), 184-85.

congruent with the earlier description of “[h]er face resign’d to bliss or bale” (276). Foreclosure also informs the juxtapositions of youth/age and beauty/waste—“Like a youthful hermitess, / Beauteous in a wilderness”—so that hopefulness and resignation start to look like much the same thing. By bracketing the question of the hermitess’s inner life, the narrator creates an absence which he can then populate with an aestheticized vision that is the narrator’s own fantasy, and one that allows him to look past Christabel, the actual tenor of the simile. Christabel has nothing left to wish for, then, only because the narrator has forgotten that she may have wishes of her own, too—or perhaps because, in his idealized conception, she has forgotten how to wish.

The Conclusion to Part I draws to a close by highlighting the conjectural distance between the narrator and his subject. The image of Christabel in a state of suspended animation proves nothing about what she may or may not be thinking. What is readily apparent, instead, is the narrator’s own feeling of suspension as he labors to make the figurative imagery stick. He narrates his Conclusion’s provisionality in the final stanza by way of an ostensibly idle afterthought:

And, if she move unquietly,
 Perchance, ‘tis but the blood so free,
 Comes back and tingles in her feet.
 No doubt, she hath a vision sweet.
 What if her guardian spirit ‘twere
 What if she knew her mother near? (311-16)

The artificial quiet of the hermitess image gives way to Christabel’s disquiet without a discernible cause. Christabel’s restive movement becomes the narrator’s own peevish unwillingness to give up the question of his protagonist’s dreams, as evidenced by the accumulating patchwork of equivocations framed in the conditional mood: “Perchance,” “No doubt.”

Having offered his conjectures on Christabel, therefore, the narrator ends by musing on the larger question of what difference narrative resolution would make at this point, either to the narrator or to his reader. The pointed hypothetical “what ifs,” accordingly, offer possible causes for unquiet that provide scant resolution. What if, indeed? What difference would any of these various conjectures make to how we read the story? The undefined “vision sweet” proves no more conclusive than the “fearful dreaming” earlier in the Conclusion. The narrator cannot give us Christabel’s dreams, only his own dream of Christabel, and this serves as a reminder that the narrator’s vision does not exhaust Christabel’s: there *is* mental design there, but not one that the narrator’s poetic design can accommodate. As the concluding imagery of Part I gives way to conjecture, therefore, what looks like a dead end turns out to be more of an open question. Foreclosure is not simply vacancy, nor is suspended animation the same as narrative stasis, even if these remain unresolved.

5. Compulsion as Purposiveness

The narrator’s failure to resolve the Conclusion to Part I into the settled quiet that he seeks throws into relief the question of what counts, in poetic speech: what is real substance, and what is mere wishful thinking? The latter seems predominant as the narrator tries to distinguish between Christabel’s evil dreams and her good dreams by way of his own idealizing fantasy. What saves the narration from wish-fulfillment, however, is the moment when the narrator’s fantasy, by inevitably falling short of its ideal, exchanges completion for conjecture. It is in this moment, and in others like it, that narration reveals the contours of the real substance beyond it—possibilities for thought

and action that a more objective view of things might miss. The narrator's compulsion to engage with the seemingly insubstantial (and unsubstantiable), that is, makes conjecture possible.

In Part II of the poem, accordingly, the narrator's conjectures as to his characters' motivations continue to tease out inchoate realities by way of provisional fictions. When Geraldine speaks to Leoline the next day, for instance, the narrator infers a measure of active will at work in this passage that seems to produce a real effect, but which he can only infer by giving Geraldine's speech an efficacy out of proportion with what her words add up to on paper. He insinuates that she is manipulating Leoline through reverse psychology, and he does so by prefacing what she eventually says with a lengthy discursus about what she merely looks:

Yet he, who saw this Geraldine,
Had deem'd her sure a thing divine,
Such sorrow with such grace she blended,
As if she fear'd, she had offended
Sweet Christabel, that gentle maid!
And with such lowly tones she pray'd,
She might be sent without delay
Home to her father's mansion.

'Nay!

'Nay, by my soul!' said Leoline. (463-71)

On the face of things, Geraldine succeeds in being allowed to stay, and this obscures the fact that her petition has in the literal sense failed—Leoline has refused to allow her to leave.

The narrator, however, reads this moment as an unqualified success on Geraldine's part. He makes this reading appear self-evident by framing the scene from the vantage of a neutral, because fictional, third party: "Yet he, who saw this Geraldine, / Had deem'd her sure a thing divine." Anyone *could* agree on Geraldine's angelic appearance, apparently, and therefore no one *needs* to; the claim is "sure," beyond doubt

(like the claim about Christabel's dream at the end of Part I: "No doubt, she hath a vision sweet"). The fiction of the hypothetical observer, couched in the conditional mood, in turn allows the premise of Geraldine's subterfuge to go unsubstantiated. The provisional language further allows the narrator to infer Geraldine's disingenuous anxiety at the thought of having given offense ("As if she fear'd, she had offended"), and the narrator shores up that inference of Geraldine's disingenuousness by literally putting words in her mouth—"Sweet Christabel, that gentle maid!"—that smack of mock piety. By the time Geraldine finally does speak for herself, then, her intention to manipulate Leoline appears self-evident. No matter what she says, it will tell against her. Nevertheless, the narrator asks his audience to accept her guilt at face value—and to read in Leoline's "Nay!" Geraldine's triumph.

On paper, then, Geraldine is no more able than Christabel at the end of Part II to get what she asks for. To say that Geraldine nonetheless succeeds at a hidden purpose would be simply to accept the narrator's assertion of what her purpose must be—an assertion based on a conjectural form of narration in which figurative images and hypothetical constructions never quite add up to the inferences drawn from them. The fiction of Geraldine's success therefore grants her a measure of agency that seems otherwise out of her reach, and out of the narrator's power to give her. In granting her that agency nonetheless—albeit reading it, for the time being, as 'evil'—the narrator chooses to privilege reflex over substance, but also begins to turn reflex *into* substance. That move returns us to the narrator's concluding words following Christabel's petition to her father. "And more she could not say," the narrator tells us,

For what she knew she could not tell,
O'er-master'd by the mighty spell. (606-8)

On the face of it, Christabel cannot tell her father what she knows because she has been “o’er-master’d” by the spell; but also, she *herself* cannot tell what she knows in the sense that she does not yet know what she knows. In this sense, her position reflects the “Thorn” narrator’s refrain: “I cannot tell; I wish I could” (89).

And what *could* Christabel tell her father—indeed what does the narrator himself say, except that Geraldine showed Christabel something on her torso the night before, or looked at her oddly the next day? Christabel’s silence obscures the possibility that there’s not much there to tell in the first place. In fact, the most incriminating moment in their brief shared history (because it is the moment that Geraldine most explicitly narrates, or spells out, as it were) seems to be when Geraldine predicts Christabel’s inability to speak. All that Christabel cannot speak, then, is the moment when Geraldine told her she would not be able to speak. This tautology follows, moreover, from the empty place of telling in the poem as a whole: an activity whose agency appears to consist in bringing speakers and listeners into sociability but actually consists in holding open space for a kind of thought that does not yet amount to a communicable narrative. On this model, self-absorbed muttering, not sociable speech, gives thought its substance.

As the burden of telling shifts from Geraldine’s fruitless warning to Christabel at the end of Part I, to Christabel’s failed warning to Leoline at the end of Part II, to the narrator’s own words that continually fall short of their ostensible purpose, the telos associated with telling falls away. The poem’s usages of “telling,” accordingly, turn increasingly from settled purpose to aimlessness: the sense of giving a straightforward account to others gives way to the more provisional sense of inner discernment as to an undecided question. At the opening of Part II, meanwhile, “telling” becomes less

purposive still. As the matin bell tells the hours and rouses the castle inhabitants, the sense is of merely marking the time in the absence of any further thought:

Each matin bell, the Baron saith,
Knells us back to a world of death. (320-21)

Making the bell serve the same timekeeping function as it does at the opening of Part I (“‘Tis the middle of night by the castle clock,” 1), the narrator creates a structural parallel by dint of which the poem appears to be stuck in place, picking up the next morning at the same juncture at which Part I began. In this regard the narration seems to double the repetition-compulsion of Leoline, whose grief at the death of his wife, we are told, occasions the daily ringing of the bell.

But structural repetition suggests an agency of design that goes beyond Leoline’s repetition-compulsion. Instead of returning to the same entrenched reality, that is, repetition unsettles the premise of a fixed conclusion. Although the matin bell ostensibly memorializes a particular moment of loss, in the narrator’s account that daily ceremony takes on a life of its own, independent of its former referent:

And hence the custom and law began,
That still at dawn the sacristan,
Who duly pulls the heavy bell,
Five and forty beads must tell
Between each stroke—a warning knell,
Which not a soul can choose but hear
From Bratha Head to Wyn’dermere. (326-32)

The bell here loses the significance Leoline associates with it, that of a discrete moment of loss in the past reverberating into the future. Instead of communicating that personal loss, the bell sets an impersonal tone of general foreboding with its “warning knell,” a *memento mori* that only gestures at what it cannot prevent. The fruitlessness of the warning aligns, in turn, with the aimlessness of the sacristan’s prayer as he repeatedly tells his beads while also telling the hours with his chimes. This intermittent, alternating

activity prolongs the sacristan's watch while deferring the possibility of any larger purpose; the sacristan passes the time in keeping it.

Without any particular object of knowledge to be aimed at in this moment, the narrator's erstwhile dilemma of making his thoughts add up on paper falls away. In place of the Enlightenment crisis of how to produce epistemic closure from skepticism, the narrator substitutes a formal exercise: how to create the metrical accents sufficient to fill up the poetic line. Such activity takes as its analogue a more familiar kind of placeholder—Leoline's repetition-compulsion, the desired return to a foreclosed moment in the past—and defamiliarizes that concept by extending it to those who have nothing in particular to return to: the sacristan compelled to tell the hours along with his beads; the narrator compelled to pick up the thread of a story with no discernible beginning or end. Thanks to the protracted droning of the matin chime, even the local inhabitants find themselves unwittingly implicated in this ambiguous space of waiting, since “not a soul can choose but hear.” Compulsion, then, signals a shared condition of waiting without expectation, and this condition has the power to bring characters into something like common purposiveness without a particular purpose yet in sight.

As the matin bell gives acoustic shape to apparently empty, homogenous time, the compulsion of form allows what looks like nothingness to reveal a kind of substance that does not, however, lend itself to direct narration. Narrative doubles back on itself, but without seeking to recover a particular object; instead of *telling*, that is, it merely *tells over*. Midway through Part II, this distinction again reveals itself by way of Leoline's grief—not for his wife, this time, but for his estranged friend, Lord Roland:

They parted—ne'er to meet again!
 But never either found another
 To free the hollow heart from paining—
 They stood aloof, the scars remaining,

Like cliffs which had been rent asunder;
 A dreary sea now flows between,
 But neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
 Shall wholly do away, I ween,
 The marks of that which once hath been. (406-14)

By comparing Leoline's pain with the image of the sundered cliffs, the narrator acknowledges the fictionality of an image that nonetheless expresses a real condition of suffering. In its opacity, that suffering seems to point, in turn, to a larger design that the narrator cannot account for with his own poetic design. As a result, the language of suffering—scars, dreariness—rings figurative, a pathetic fallacy projected onto nature rather than the actual tenor of the image. Like the matin bell's "warning knell," therefore, the narration here gestures at what it cannot change, nor adequately relate.²⁸ The point, after all, is not to bring the events of the poem to a final reckoning, but to imagine a kind of underlying design that resists narrative closure. The narrator's paradoxical effort to pin down such a design in the poem therefore accounts for his compulsion not so much to tell the story as to tell over its various parts to no clear end. When the narrator pushes on his poetic materials to give them a motivating purpose, his materials push back with a purposive life of their own.

²⁸ Tellingly, when Leoline has his change of heart shortly hereafter, he expresses it in the future tense (imagining his reunion with Roland):

‘And, by mine honour! I will say,
 ‘That I repent me of the day
 ‘When I spake words of fierce disdain
 ‘To Roland de Vaux of Tryermaine!’ (499-502)

Repentance, here, remains incomplete, and this looks ahead to my discussion of a similarly inchoate expression of repentance in Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, in which the difference repentance makes again registers only in the mind, not as an outward change in the world. Indeed, in Coleridge's poem, the split between Leoline and Roland is never made whole: in Gillman's account of Coleridge's plan for finishing the poem, Bracy rides to Roland's castle only to discover that it has been washed away in a flood. Halmi, Magnuson, and Modiano, 179n7.

6. The Poetic Fragment as Placeholder

As the poem proceeds in its course, human activity in multiple forms appears irresistibly compelled rather than explicitly motivated. Suffering stands divorced from its erstwhile context; waiting loses its sense of expectation; and subterfuge takes place in the absence of a clear endgame. The narrator notes the presence of these compulsions invisibly at work in the closed world of his text, but never in such a way that he could adequately explain them. In the absence of explanation, then, the narrator remains constrained to offer mere surmise. Compulsion in the world of the poem therefore serves as an analogue for the narrator's own activity, his compulsion to engage with what he cannot understand.

Engagement in the absence of understanding demonstrates that the narrator's task is less about filling in the blanks in his story than about giving form to those blanks as the peevish remainders that his story is unable to account for. These remainders are Coleridge's poetic fragment. They make no apparent difference in the world of the poem, and indeed they might well appear unremarkable in an already discontinuous and belated text. But the fragment, by further slowing and obscuring the poem, compels a reorientation from the content of the story to the form of its telling. That reorientation returns us to Geraldine's fruitless warning to Christabel at the end of Part II, and to the revealed "sight" and the chanted "spell" that register as little more than tautologies. For in the gap between the sight and the spell, a brief interval supervenes during which Geraldine "took two paces, and a stride, / And lay down by the maiden's side" (249-50). In a revision, however, Coleridge replaced these lines:

She gaz'd upon the maid, she sigh'd!
Then lay down by the maiden's side:

Deep from within she seems half-way
 To lift some weight, with sick assay,
 And eyes the Maid, and seeks delay:
 Then suddenly as one defied
 Collects herself in scorn and pride
 And lay down by the maiden's side.²⁹

In comparison to the couplet they replace, these lines dramatically expand the interval between the sight and the spell. But only on paper; in practice, this interval takes up no more time than in the original, since what it amounts to in terms of event could, apparently, be told in the first two lines anyway. And no difference is made, regardless, since Geraldine still lies down with Christabel.

The addition of the revised lines appears unaccountable, then, both because it produces no difference in the world of the poem, and because the narrator seems to be repeating himself. The principal event, after all, happens twice: “Then lay down by the maiden's side,” “And lay down by the maiden's side.” The narrator, as a result of this repetition, appears to “seek delay” along with Geraldine. Rather than looking for a change in the outcome, however, the narrator temporizes in order to flesh out a change taking place in Geraldine's mind, which becomes more pronounced with successive iterations. Bare regret at what cannot be changed (“gaz'd,” “sigh'd”), in the first iteration, gives way to an inner battle in the second, expressed in the tentative, figurative language of conjecture: “Deep from within she seems half-way / To lift some weight, with sick assay.” The “sick assay” that is Geraldine's inner trial also describes, at this point, the narrator's own struggle as he doubles back on his narrative in order to express a mental event to which he has no access and whose outcome he has no hope of changing.

²⁹ Halmi, Magnuson, and Modiano, 169n3.

The narrative digression at the end of Part I takes the measure of an internal difference that the poem cannot yet account for nor turn to narrative account. For if Geraldine is in fact struggling against supernatural possession, as seems to be the case, that struggle never recurs nor develops later on in the poem. Certainly in this interval, Geraldine's struggle does not produce a meaningful difference, any more than the events that bookend the interval—the sight and the spell—reveal what they purport to. Although Geraldine's suffering is in theory the cause of Christabel's, the poem does not try to provide that key by way of resolution, or to suggest a transitive link between cause and effect. Instead the poem treats suffering as an intransitive condition, something irreducible—like the feelings that unexpectedly attach to poetic form, or the purposiveness of Kantian aesthetics—that conjecture can begin to reveal in outline but never explain or exhaust.

In this light, Geraldine's inner struggle looks a lot like Christabel's dreaming, or praying—moments in which a fabric of hopes and fears seems to be emergent, but without taking a direct referent by which those hopes and fears might be brought to completion. Conjectural narration matters, then, because it highlights a deliberate choice to earnestly engage with what narrative cannot yet account for, and it models the form such engagement might take. As opposed to merely communicating what is already known, or filling in the blanks of a familiar outline, gothic conjecture raises the questions of what counts as narrative consequence and of how we should orient our desire for it. As gothic narrators know, we tend to see only what we were looking for in the first place.

The double narration of Geraldine's pause before lying down with Christabel exemplifies the kind of irreducible remainder around which conjecture in Coleridge's poem centers. Unable to explain what such moments amount to for the purposes of his

tale, the narrator nonetheless persists in trying to account for them. To call this unaccountable remainder *the* form of the poetic fragment in “Christabel,” therefore, is to revise the term slightly. The fragment in Coleridge appears as such not because it ends prematurely but because it runs on too long, past what would seem justified by its content. In place of the fragment as poetic foreclosure, that is, the poem offers the fragment as a surplus of poetic labor. Coleridge’s fragment produces its defamiliarization effect, then, by means of the repetition associated with it: as the narrator fixates on details he cannot resolve, his focus necessarily shifts from the content of his story to the form of its telling.

On some accounts, the poetic fragment primarily manifests a negative kind of fixity. For Thomas McFarland, the fragment reflects the Romantics’ phenomenological condition of a desired return to wholeness in the face of incompleteness and ruin;³⁰ for Marjorie Levinson, it reflects the Romantics’ historical-material condition of ambivalence toward the demands of the literary marketplace.³¹ But on other accounts, the fixity of the fragment reveals more open-ended possibilities beyond the constraints of authorial circumstance. In Andrew Allport’s reading, for instance, Coleridge’s conception of the fragment has less to do with generic form—with what we expect to find—than with what we are prompted to look for between the lines: a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach.³² Anne Janowitz offers a similarly open-ended assessment. For Coleridge and others, she writes, “the fragment formally embodies, without resolving, the problem of language as the necessary impediment to the impossible project of articulating

³⁰ Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

³¹ Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

³² Andrew Allport, “The Romantic Fragment Poem and the Performance of Form,” *Studies in Romanticism* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2012): 399-417, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24247307>.

vision.”³³ Faced, then, with the task of “finding figures for what is unfigurable,”³⁴ the poet seizes upon the fragment as a type for *all* poetic labor.

To say, with Janowitz, that the poetic fragment adds a “necessary impediment” to an already “impossible” task is to recall Wordsworth’s comments on the simultaneous frustration and liberation of poetic tautology. Whether labeled as fragment or tautology, the gap between thought and its communication in language matters because it allows the subject to hold her thoughts at arm’s length in order to attend to them in a new light. I take this to be Coleridge’s point, too, when he describes a feeling he calls “giddiness” in his famously enigmatic Conclusion to Part II of “Christabel.” Having ended Part II with Leoline in a state of “confusion” at his daughter’s request to dismiss Geraldine, the narrator now extends that condition to all fathers, both fond of their children and perplexed by them and thus speaking “words of unmeant bitterness” as a result. Those bitter words, the narrator speculates, betray the confusion or “giddiness” that result from intertwined fatherly feelings (of fondness and perplexity) that cannot be pulled apart:

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 used to do. (661-65)

What should we make, the narrator asks, of thoughts and feelings (like the fond perplexity of fathers) that express themselves as something that we know them not to be (“rage and pain”), but for which we otherwise lack a suitable language? Such thoughts leave us searching, like Leoline, for an absent rule by which to explain them.

Accordingly, in these, the final lines of the poem, the narrator effects not to provide that

³³ Anne Janowitz, “Coleridge’s 1816 Volume: Fragment as Rubric,” *Studies in Romanticism* 24, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 35, doi:10.2307/25600522.

³⁴ Janowitz, 35.

rule but to reinforce by means of the circuitous form of the question the conjectural mood that the search for explanation engenders.

The Conclusion to Part II extends the conjectural mood while abstracting conjecture from its erstwhile narrative contexts. In this way the Conclusion's inconclusiveness follows the logic of Coleridge's fragment more generally as it turns from the matter of unresolved content as such—Christabel's dreams and prayers, Geraldine's hesitation, Leoline's confusion—to an overt narrative method of treating such content as fundamentally unresolvable within its current narrative context. Conjecture, then, provides a means of engaging with the unresolvable nonetheless, sketching a general pattern of design without the expectation of assigning it a causal referent. By thus maintaining the purposive attitude associated with the search for a cause, the narrator follows in the spirit of Kant's practitioner of aesthetic judgment, compelled to assume—without believing in it—an ulterior will at work in the world. Here we might hear, too, an echo of Wordsworth's poetic speaker, "cling[ing] to the same words," or of the Sage of Highgate himself, Coleridge, the inveterate talker to no discernible end.

Coleridge's conjectural method of holding open space for ideas that cannot yet be filled in looks ahead to Jacques Derrida's concept of democracy as an "infinite promise" that "will never present itself in the form of full presence." Derrida uses the logic of the *arrivant* to ascribe a salutary aspect to this condition of unfulfillment. The infinite promise, he writes, serves as the "messianic opening to what is coming, that is, to the event that cannot be awaited *as such*, or recognized in advance therefore, to the event as the foreigner itself, to her or to him for whom one must leave an empty place, always, in

memory of the hope.”³⁵ Jerome Christensen echoes this logic in his account of Romantic anachronism, and particularly of anachronism’s defining trope, the chiasmus: the structure of a double-crossing-over between past and future, “the placeholder for a place yet to be attained.”³⁶ Whether formalized as *arrivant*, as chiasmus, or as fragment, conjectural literature works to hold open space (even reflexively, unthinkingly, compulsively) for an idea that has not yet arrived—or, conversely (and as later chapters will show), to register an idea that is already present, but which lacks a justificatory context that would make it intelligible.

The inability to anticipate the final form an idea will take allows the conjectural subject to hold her idea at arm’s length and to resist diminishing it to the constraints of what can currently be thought or said about it. Those constraints usually take the social form of an account given to others. But conjecture, as following chapters will show, is not disengagement; instead it operates as a dissensus or critique, something critical but still engaged with the social. In Scott’s historical fiction, therefore, moments that cannot be assimilated to narrative unsettle the premise of a collective return to the past by way of closure; in Wordsworth’s poetry, attention to dispossession sharpens the picture of what constitutes the world shared in common; and in the Shelleys, individual casuistry enables a truer understanding of collective justice.

Between and within each of these cases, important differences will emerge. Sometimes the literary subject gains a sense of agency in the face of constraining circumstances; in this case the emphasis falls on the side of conjecture as a mental act

³⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006), 81-82.

³⁶ Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 75. More recently, David Simpson has argued that the figure of the stranger serves a similar placeholding function in Romanticism. David Simpson, *Romanticism and the Question of the Stranger* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

that one has control over. At other times, the subject feels frustration with the world as it is given, but without being able to give reasons for that frustration; in this case a merely peevish affect substitutes for the conjectural act. Conjectural literature therefore pulls in different directions at different times, and even within the same individual. And it is by means of this varied movement that conjecture pushes back against the problem of thought more generally: that it “talks as it’s most used to do” (665), only confirming what we are prepared to understand. Conjectural literature suggests, then, that by suspending thought from its referent, we can begin to see beyond apparently settled realities to the direction in which our thoughts keep turning, nonetheless—even if those thoughts are, for the time being, only “to dream of, not to tell.”

Chapter Two
Scott's Disavowed Histories

I cannot tell how the truth may be;

I say the tale as 'twas said to me.

—Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*

1. Scott's Fragmentary Narrative Present

Walter Scott's introduction to his 1816 novel *Old Mortality* ends with an unattributed anecdote about his title character, Robert Paterson, alias Old Mortality. Paterson is engaged in his usual work of restoring the headstones of seventeenth-century Scottish Covenanters, while the local sexton is digging new graves close by. A group of "roguish urchins" interrupt the old men, asking the sexton "what use he could possibly make of the numerous fragments of old coffins which were thrown up in opening new graves."¹ Paterson interjects, inexplicably, that the coffins are turned into servingware by the local cooper. When the children spread the rumor, the cooper loses business and eventually dies in poverty.

The anecdote suggests a narrative pattern, pertaining throughout Scott's historical fiction, by which an idea that lacks causal motivation nonetheless takes on a life of its

¹ Walter Scott, *Old Mortality*, ed. Jane Stevenson and Peter Davidson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 21. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

own. The illogic of the rumor that the children spread doubles the strangely unmotivated quality of Paterson's comment; both the rumor and the comment emerge from a shifting narrative ground that is as broken and fragmentary as the ground of the church graveyard. This sense of Scott's narrative present as discontinuous and underdetermined contributes to what Ina Ferris identifies as "an alertness in Romantic historical fiction to what we might call the time lag: a suspension of connection and continuity that generates a curiously insubstantial existence in the present."² Paul Ricoeur offers a similar model of suspended causality in the present in what he calls the trace. Ricoeur describes the trace as a space of attenuated approximation between past and present that "signifies something without making it appear": it marks a vestigial moment or passage without revealing *what* has passed through the space of the present.³ The trace offers what only looks like an account of the past but does not add up as such. History in Scott works in a similarly indirect manner: though clearly still at work in the present, it never adds up to a necessary causal principle by means of which the present could be logically inferred as the sum of its past.

The past in Scott continually intrudes upon a present with which it seems to share no necessary connection. Characters and narrators find that a supposedly obsolete past impinges on them in unexpectedly direct ways and thus obliges them to account for that to which they cannot yet assign a cause: prophecies, apparitions, and uncanny resemblances. Caught in this awkward position, subjects from Scotland's post-Enlightenment present—Henry Morton and Edith Bellenden in *Old Mortality*, Darsie

² Ina Ferris, "'On the Borders of Oblivion': Scott's Historical Novel and the Modern Time of the Remnant," *Modern Language Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (December 2009): 475.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 125.

Latimer in *Redgauntlet*—are compelled to attribute significance to what nonetheless looks to them like mere contingency or coincidence. They feel as if they are in the presence of a larger design, and at the same time they consciously disavow that as a possibility. They know, after all, that their world has moved beyond the kind of tenacious ideological adherence that they see in the older generation, whether the Covenanter John Balfour of Burley or the Jacobite Edward Hugh Redgauntlet. The younger generation codes this commitment to ideas as superstition, fanaticism, or mere wishful thinking. But they know, too, that their own fixation on unaccountable phenomena puts them in uncomfortable proximity with exactly the kind of thinking they disavow: thinking that appears irrational because it refuses to accommodate itself to a present that demands capitulation to things as they are.

The ideologue appears beyond the pale of sociability because of his adherence to an idea that has (at least for now) lost its justifying context. That adherence proves to be not the antithesis but the counterpart to the skeptic's persistent search for an absent cause that would bring her back into the social sphere of discursive reason. The ideologue's guiding idea has lost its way; the skeptic's has not yet come into view. In each case, the direction of causality between the idea and the character-type matters. The fact that an idea has lost its justifying context is what makes the fanatic appear as such in the first place (rather than fanaticism per se leading to that loss of context); conversely, the fact that a given context has not yet received its controlling idea is the cause of skepticism rather than a function of it. Both characters must therefore persist in a search for, or an adherence to, an apparently obsolete cause. Such a cause appears unaccountable, and this unaccountability is what the engagement with the past both looks like to others and feels like to Scott's subjects.

The presence of design cuts in different ways in Scott, but always to the effect that design cannot be reduced to a function of the individual subject. This explains why, for William Pietz, the fetishist's mode of attention cannot be dismissed as irrationality: because it describes the way in which deep-seated thoughts continue to work on us even when we do not positively endorse them. Rather than a matter of endorsement or belief as such, fetishism for Pietz is better thought of as a form, a structure of mind that doubles the material object of the fetish itself. Specifically, fetishism gives form to thoughts and experiences which, though substantive, cannot be justified as discrete ideas. The fetish creates an enduring pattern of association out of such thoughts; it continually manages to "repeat its originating act of forging an identity of articulated relations between certain otherwise heterogeneous things."⁴ In this way the fetish makes tangible certain "crisis moments of singular encounter and indefinable transaction between the life of the self and that of the world."⁵ In Scott, the encounter with history consists in just such crisis moments, when a past that seemed to have been accounted for reemerges unexpectedly and throws into doubt the present's claim to have settled and superseded that past.

In Pietz, fetishism names a kind of thought that is never really about its ostensible object but about the structure of thought that is thereby made possible. In this sense, a structure of repetition and association, even one that begins in the individual's private thoughts, can begin to unsettle collective assumptions about what counts in the world. The same distinction between content and form also applies to one version of conjectural history—or rather, to the kind of conjectural thought that the engagement with history can produce. That kind of thought finds perhaps its best-known Scottish Enlightenment

⁴ William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 9 (Spring 1985): 7-8, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20166719>.

⁵ Pietz, 12.

antecedent in Adam Smith's trope of the invisible hand. Despite his appeal to this figure of speech at a critical moment in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) and again in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), Smith was apparently aware of the limits to his most famous phrase, since he had earlier ridiculed and dismissed it in his *History of Astronomy* (probably written around 1750, and posthumously published in 1795). There he treats it as an archaic bugaboo exemplifying superstitious thought: the primitive man or "savage" is said to have attributed "irregular events" in nature to "the invisible hand of Jupiter."⁶

When the invisible hand reappears in its better-known uses in Smith's later work, however, it claims to be doing intellectual heavy lifting, turning self-interested activity to public gain. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for instance, the relevant chapter offers a brief conjectural history explaining the market economy by way of a "love of system," intrinsic to human nature, which causes the rich to redistribute their gains.⁷ When push comes to shove, however, the zero-degree moment of Smith's account consists in a shift to the passive voice and the conditional tense: "They [the rich] are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants."⁸ The

⁶ Adam Smith, "The History of Astronomy," in *Essays on Philosophical Subjects*, ed. W. P. D. Wightman and J. C. Bryce, vol. III of the *Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), section III, paragraph 2. For more context on Smith's use of the invisible hand, see Stefan Andriopoulos, "The Invisible Hand: Supernatural Agency in Political Economy and the Gothic Novel," *ELH* 66, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 739-58; and A. L. Macfie, "The Invisible Hand of Jupiter," *Journal of the History of Ideas* xxxii (1971): 595-99.

⁷ This "love of system" or "spirit of system" consists in an attachment to the form of human contrivances over and above the particular good they are designed to produce. Smith's examples extend from the arrangement of chairs in a room to the market economy and systems of government. The paradox of the human attachment to form for its own sake, in Smith's view, is that "this fitness, this happy contrivance of any production of art, should often be more valued, than the very end for which it was intended; and that the exact adjustment of the means for attaining any conveniency or pleasure, should be frequently more regarded, than that very conveniency or pleasure, in the attainment of which their whole merit would seem to consist." Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 179-80.

⁸ Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 185.

conditional mood signals that Smith adduces design as substantive only in its effect, and as merely figurative in its cause. As he searches, therefore, for something that could fill in for the place where a cause *should* go, he settles on a figure of thought—the invisible hand—that he himself had already dismissed as an exemplar of the irrational.⁹

In his conspicuous summoning or recall of this “savage” hermeneutic device, therefore, Smith does not thereby close the central loophole in his argument, the question of how to account for the love of system that leads the rich to act against their own self-interest. Instead he leaves that question conspicuously unresolved and perpetually unaccountable *except* through the uncanny return of a discarded rhetorical figure. Originally a figure, in Smith, for primitive thought, the invisible hand moves on to become, first, a valid figure of thought in its own right—a vehicle standing in for the causal principle Smith seeks—and from there to actually *become* that causal principle, directly mediating between private self-interest and the public good. A figure for causation transcends skepticism to take on a causal power of its own.

The obsolete idea that persists in an imagined form and in inferred effects, rather than in an empirical causal context, also describes the way that the past persists in the present, in Scott. This unaccountable form of persistence troubles the Scottish Enlightenment view of social life as a consensus narrative, or what Ian Duncan calls “an ongoing, collective project, consensually shared and reproduced.”¹⁰ In Duncan’s view, Scott’s novels reflect this spirit of consensus by proposing that the nation can be

⁹ Compare Kant’s difficulty in trying to account for a phenomenon—the peevish wish—that he simultaneously wants to insist does not *need* to be accounted for, since any cause that he could name would fall outside of the purview of his philosophy. The explanation he finally settles on is that “the deception contained in vain wishes is only the result of a beneficent arrangement in our nature.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 17n18.

¹⁰ Ian Duncan, *Scott’s Shadow: The Novel in Romantic Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 120.

“recovered and circulated” in fiction and *as* fiction, through sympathetic exchange.¹¹ On this view, “[Scott’s] work of fiction is a representation that keeps visible its accidental rather than necessary construction by giving ritual form to its own artifice.”¹² Certainly, Duncan’s emphasis on contingency and form aligns with Smith and with the Scott readings that will follow in this chapter. But his constructivist emphasis on social life as a shared fiction cannot account for the elements in either Smith’s or Scott’s histories that do not easily lend themselves to sociable exchange. A trope like the invisible hand, after all, does *not* keep visible its own artifice: what begins as a disavowal of the kind of thinking that the trope represents becomes a *de facto* engagement with such thinking. Moreover, while the invisible hand provides a parable for the way in which social life is shared and reproduced, the hand does not itself constitute a straightforwardly shareable principle: this is the kind of thinking that society is supposed to have moved on from, after all.

In one version of the Scott story, historical fiction as a genre does the nation-building work of compromise and mediation, constructing a shared vision of Scotland’s present and future on the basis of what readers can agree Scotland *used* to be but no longer is.¹³ A conjectural reading of Scott, however, shows a past that cannot be related to the present in a straightforward line of cause and effect. That past intrudes on the present elliptically, in a figurative mode that remains causally underdetermined. This conjectural reading is of a piece with recent Scott readings by Ina Ferris and Caroline McCracken-Flesher. Ferris, for instance, identifies a recurring trope by which Scott’s

¹¹ Duncan, 279.

¹² Duncan, 130.

¹³ See, for instance, Andrew Lincoln’s assessment that “imaginative opposition to modernity becomes, paradoxically, the ground upon which the unity of the modern nation is to be built.” Andrew Lincoln, *Walter Scott and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 32.

fiction “defines a present state without necessarily specifying its cause. ... [The trope’s] generic impulse is defined by a focus on the condition itself rather than on what brought it about.”¹⁴ Meanwhile, McCracken-Flesher suggests, more generally, that Scott “gestures ever to the tale still untold and value still to be determined.”¹⁵ My reading follows up on the causal underdetermination that these critics see as constitutive to Scott’s fiction: in the texts treated here, the historical present comes to look less like a progression from the past and more like a back-formation in light of a future that is still undecided.

In what follows, I consider three Walter Scott narratives: his first verse narrative, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (1805), and two novels, *Old Mortality* (1816) and *Redgauntlet* (1824). These texts formally stage the problem of the historical account at multiple, nested levels of narration—plot and subplot, anecdotes, songs, editorial apparatus, endnotes—each of which is characterized by an excess of evidence and an indeterminacy of interpretation. While Scott’s narratives themselves typically move on toward a final denouement in line with Scottish modernity, the textual fragments that accumulate along the way remain unassimilated to that ending. The same goes for moments in which characters find themselves unable to account for private meanings and intentions by squaring them with a collective framework of evidence, testimony, and probable motive. As a result, modernity comes to seem more accidental than inevitable, and thus more open to revision. The necessary connection between past and present in Scott becomes less the means of giving an account of the present than the very thing that the present cannot yet account for.

¹⁴ Ferris, “Modern Time of the Remnant,” 487.

¹⁵ Caroline McCracken-Flesher, *Possible Scotlands: Walter Scott and the Story of Tomorrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 20.

Like Smith's reading of economy, Scott's reading of history remains an incomplete account, suspended in the gap between tenor and vehicle, between the content of a thought and the form—or figure—of its representation. As an ostensibly disavowed past reemerges in the present in fragmentary form, and for no clear reason, historical experience becomes something to which the possibility of a shared interpretive construction no longer applies. Instead the past presents the trace of an archaic narrative ground, of obsolete knowledges and ideologies, that a present view of things cannot account for—but which Scott's protagonists find themselves pushing up against, all the same, in moments of unexpected familiarity.

2. The Lay of the Last Minstrel: History as Absent Cause

In the invisible hand, Adam Smith instantiates a disavowed past that resurfaces ambiguously in the present—ostensibly as a figure of thought, but nonetheless acquiring sufficient imaginative power, *as* a figurative construct, to cause a narrative to take shape around it. A similarly doubled structure characterizes Walter Scott's first standalone work, his 1805 long-form narrative poem *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. The *Lay* is at once a fictional-historical romance of a borderland feud between the Scott and Carr families, set during the English-Scottish border wars of the mid-sixteenth century, and a gothic ballad recounting the story of the wizard Michael Scott, his goblin servant, Gilpin Horner, and Michael Scott's tome of occult knowledge, his "book of might." These two stories continually intersect but never merge; instead the supernatural tale seems to delay the main plot line, the Romeo-and-Juliet story of Lord Cranstoun and Lady Margaret, and to interrupt the generic resolution that is their marriage at the poem's end.

For Stuart Curran, the exemplar of this narrative mismatch is the goblin, Gilpin Horner, whom Curran calls “an incongruous and unintegrated presence in the poem—as if Scott were so uncomfortable with the supernatural that he could not employ it without embarrassment.”¹⁶ Like the invisible hand in Smith, Gilpin in Scott’s text serves as an unaccountable remainder; in his ubiquitous reappearances throughout the poem, Gilpin represents an apparent narrative excess that also loosens a main plot line that had seemed generically fixed. That plot line traces its history back from the time of the recounted events in 1552 to the origin of the family feud in 1526 and forward to the families’ reconciliation in the last Canto. In contrast to this reconciliation narrative, the supernatural narrative follows a more gothic timeframe as it inexplicably disappears and reemerges over the course of the text, punctuated by Gilpin’s repeated exclamations of “Lost! lost! lost!” and “Found! found! found!”¹⁷ When Gilpin’s former master, the wizard Michael Scott, reappears at the end of the poem to summon the goblin back to his service in a flash of lightning, it turns out that Gilpin himself is what has been lost and found. However, he serves as only the most visible remainder of a story that is not otherwise explained. Standing against the romance narrative’s direct line between past and present, Gilpin—like Coleridge’s Geraldine—comes from a past that is always anterior to the causal sequence of narrative history.

In the archaic figure of Gilpin, the poem’s deep past takes on a life that the narrative cannot account for. The past works as an absent cause, one that does not motivate or give meaning to events in the present but rather shows the trace of prior

¹⁶ Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 136.

¹⁷ Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* (Oxford: Woodstock Books, 1992), 3.13; 6.9; 6.25. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by canto and stanza number.

meanings and intentions already at work in any given present, whether that of the Scotts and Carrs or that of the Minstrel and his audience. That trace of prior intention still at work in the present materializes at the opening of the third Canto as a force that Gilpin himself has not accounted for. Lord Cranstoun, a Carr, has just unhorsed Sir William of Deloraine, an ally of the Scott family. As Deloraine lies dazed, Cranstoun's servant, Gilpin, picks Deloraine's pockets and discovers that Deloraine is carrying the lost book of spells formerly belonging to the wizard Michael Scott. Gilpin eagerly opens the forbidden book, but his reading is cut short:

He had not read another spell,
 When on his cheek a buffet fell,
 So fierce, it stretched him on the plain,
 Beside the wounded Deloraine.
 From the ground he rose dismayed,
 And shook his huge and matted head;
 One word he muttered, and no more—
 "Man of age, thou smitest sore!"

 Now, if you ask who gave the stroke,
 I cannot tell, so mot I thrive;
 It was not given by man alive. (3.10)

Gilpin's enthusiastic pursuit of forbidden knowledge is cut short in a moment of violent rebuke, followed by repentance and disavowal: having received his timely comeuppance, Gilpin wisely declines to open the book a second time.

The stage entrance of the wizard's invisible hand at this moment occasions a sense of hesitation not unlike Adam Smith's hesitation to assign an ultimate cause to the uncanny, self-enacting mediation between private and public interest that he observes at work in the world, or the stated hesitation of Coleridge's narrator at the critical moment of Geraldine's undressing in "Christabel": "A sight to dream of, not to tell!"¹⁸ The

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Christabel," in *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), line 247.

experience of coming into knowledge, for Gilpin as for Christabel, amounts to a disorienting encounter with the trace of what the subject cannot account for. This is an experience, moreover, that Scott's narrator, like Coleridge's, claims a part in, too. Accordingly, as Scott's Minstrel tells the story at the turn of the eighteenth century, he repeats the "Christabel" narrator's gesture of disavowal—"I cannot tell, so mot I thrive." In the gesture of disavowal, the Minstrel uses an atavistic part of speech, "so mot I thrive," a claim to sincerity hinting at dire consequences that might attend a lack of sincerity. Of course, the disavowal is transparently a reflexive placeholder: the Minstrel *is* of course telling the tale, and will, like the "Christabel" narrator, continue to tell it most eagerly (and will suffer no knock from an invisible hand as a result). Nonetheless, in signaling his return to a moment of naive enthusiasm—Gilpin's absorptive reading—that Gilpin himself had subsequently disavowed, the Minstrel puts himself in that same compromised position. Even for the narrator of the story, it seems, a feeling of something like shame still applies: a feeling that the tale was never really his own to tell in the first place.

Though coming to the story a century and a half later, the Minstrel takes Gilpin's compromised position as his own: like Gilpin receiving a "buffet" from the wizard, the Minstrel checks himself, in reflexive speech, with the same disciplining shock of self-estrangement. Along with his Minstrel, moreover, Scott places himself in that same unaccountable position. In an 1805 letter to Anna Seward, Scott represents himself less as the author of a story that begins with him than as an intermediary agent capturing the trace of that story in the present but without being able to assign it a cause. The story's trace emerges, again, by way of the character of Gilpin, a character who, in Scott's account, formally occasions the poem but does not necessarily motivate it. Scott writes:

The story of Gilpin Horner was told by an old gentleman to Lady Dalkeith, and she, much diverted with his actually believing so grotesque a tale, insisted that I should make it into a Border Ballad. I don't know if ever you saw my lovely chieftainness—if you have, you must be aware that it is *impossible* for any one to refuse her request, as she has more of the angel in face and temper than any one alive; so that if she had asked me to write a ballad on a broomstick, I must have attempted it.¹⁹

If Gilpin is, as Curran suggests, an embarrassment to the poem, that is because assigning motivating causality to the narrative act remains an inherently awkward task. In the case of the ballad form, moreover, that awkwardness—or what William Wordsworth in his own ballad experiment a half decade earlier had called “feelings of strangeness and awkwardness”—seems not just inherent but constitutive.²⁰ The ballad mediates uncertainly between the country and the city, the periphery and the center, and without a necessary principle connecting the two. In the encounter between the old gentleman and Lady Dalkeith, therefore, the *Lay* takes as its origin story a moment of disbelief. The text's history is precisely a history of its own disavowal.

Disavowal, however, takes on a life of its own in Scott's account to Seward. The ballad form preserves the imprint of past minds over and above the belief or skepticism of narrators or readers in the present. This deep history becomes, in the present, a force of necessity, one that Scott models in his invocation of the gothic language of compulsion. No explanation of the poem's origins seems necessary, therefore, apart from the fact that it is “impossible” to refuse the Lady Dalkeith—but at the same time, only those who have

¹⁹ Walter Scott, letter to Anna Seward, 21 March 1805, qtd. in David Hill Radcliffe, “Composition,” *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, ed. David Hill Radcliffe, Center for Applied Technologies in the Humanities, Virginia Tech, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20141226170236/http://scott-minstrel.cath.vt.edu/>.

²⁰ As Wordsworth writes: “They who have been accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” William Wordsworth, “Preface,” in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 96.

been privy to her direct request could appreciate this. Adding to his account to Seward in his 1830 Preface to the poem, Scott remarks that in response to the Lady Dalkeith's request, "Of course, to hear was to obey; and thus the goblin story, objected to by several critics as an excrescence upon the poem, was, in fact, the occasion of its being written."²¹ Contingency gives way to necessity, and while the language of obedience remains tongue-in-cheek, a figure for artistic inspiration, a poem is nonetheless produced; although the cause is figurative, the effect is concrete. In limiting his account of his poetic intentions to the figurative realm, therefore, Scott suggests that even if he were to give a more mundane history of the poem's compositional circumstances, such a history would not exhaust the kind of absent causality that history in the poem represents.

Scott's account of his poem's origin in a state of self-conscious mesmerism resurfaces thematically throughout the text, most notably in a state of sensory overload and beguilement that Scott refers to as "glamoury" or "gramarye." This is the power of the spell contained within the wizard Michael Scott's forbidden book, which "had much of glamour might, / Could make a ladye seem a knight" (3.9)—a power to attract credulity and readerly absorption that Scott wants to claim for his own latter-day work. Like his goblin, Scott seems to take an impish delight in his borderland position between public and private obligations, between latter-day incredulity and folkloric superstition. This is a position from which he can find himself led on in a gothic mode of unforeseeable consequences, a position that suspends skepticism and belief alike, or as he

²¹ Walter Scott, Preface, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, ed. David Hill Radcliffe, Center for Applied Technologies in the Humanities, Virginia Tech, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140319000704/http://scott-minstrel.cath.vt.edu:80/select.php?select=intro>.

tells Seward, “so on I wrote, knowing no more than the man in the moon how I was to end.”²²

Scott constructs his authorial position on the basis of an obscure purposiveness that he finds himself led on by but unable to account for, much as his characters continually find themselves pushing up against the unaccountable trace of an archaic narrative ground that they appropriate without adequate preparation or understanding. Thus when Lady Buccleuch sends her retainer, William of Deloraine, to Melrose Abbey to collect the book of spells buried there, Deloraine finds that the Monk of the Abbey has gone before him, as it were, to serve as a cautionary tale against pursuing forbidden knowledge. In the Monk’s account, the book of spells represents a kind of knowledge that threatens the structural coherence both of the Abbey and of narrative itself:

The words may not again be said,
That he spoke to me, on death-bed laid;
They would rend this Abbaye’s massy nave,
And pile it in heaps above his grave. (2.14)

The Monk’s act of self-censure here casts a similar shadow on the Minstrel, who, in the exhumation scene, implicitly questions his own license to speak on such esoteric matters. Initially, as Deloraine breaks open the wizard’s tomb and the scene speeds toward its climactic moment of revelation, the Minstrel seems to share in his characters’ eagerness to pursue the past, telling his listeners,

I would you had been there to see,
How the light broke forth so gloriously. (2.18)

By thus interpolating his listeners into the scene, the Minstrel suggests that he himself was present at the uncovering of the wizard—that he has firsthand knowledge of the

²² Walter Scott, letter to Anna Seward, 21 March 1805.

events he is relating. However, once the book is recovered and Deloraine and the Monk retreat to the sound of demonic laughter,

As if the fiends kept holiday,
Because these spells were brought to day,

the Minstrel seems to share in his characters' shame and corresponding withdrawal from the scene. Their retreat from the tomb parallels the Minstrel's own narrative retreat from his earlier claim of firsthand knowledge of the events described:

I cannot tell how the truth may be;
I say the tale as 'twas said to me. (2.22)

In similar rhetorical reversals throughout the *Lay*, the Minstrel continually makes an initial gesture of enthusiastic and unpremeditated disclosure that he subsequently disavows—but such disavowals are only ever momentary. In this recursive model, as in Adam Smith's return to the invisible hand, an archaic past can be ironized but never disavowed wholesale. In both writers, this is a moment of rhetorical fascination—with a figure of speech or a figure of thought—that continually overcomes its own prior disavowal to reassert itself in the present, as when the Minstrel signals his belated awareness of having said too much—and then continues to speak anyway: “I say the tale as 'twas said to me.”

In the *Lay*, the past reappears of its own volition; neither the Minstrel nor his characters are able to summon it at will. Instead, characters are linked by cascading acts of summons: the Lady's command to Deloraine, Deloraine's call upon the Monk, the Monk's fateful attendance upon Michael Scott at his deathbed. In each moment of summoning, characters participate in recalling an obsolete object of knowledge to the present in spite of their reluctance to do so. Like Coleridge's Wedding Guest who “cannot choose but hear” the mariner's tale of sin and penance, Deloraine is similarly

constrained to listen to the Monk (by dint of his vow to the Lady), while the Monk's vow to the wizard compels him to divulge the wizard's burial spot at Deloraine's insistence. As the unwilling intermediaries of the will of others, Deloraine and the Monk find that although they dutifully play their parts, the predetermined script within which they act fails to recall or cancel the past with any kind of authority. The historical object seems impossibly overdetermined by a series of tellings and retellings, and it weighs burdensomely on tellers and listeners alike, who find themselves unprepared for the moment of narrative encounter.

Scott interleaves these attenuated or unfinished acts of narration with similarly incomplete but less purpose-driven moments of sound and audition. Sound enables a different kind of transmission to take place, one in which distraction and lack of preparation are not obstacles but rather the conditions of possibility for new forms of ventriloquized response. The Minstrel's harp, for example, builds a momentum through music that allows the poet to sing his song:

In varying cadence, soft or strong,
 He swept the sounding chords along;

 Each blank, in faithless memory void,
 The poet's glowing thought supplied. (Introduction, p. 8)

In the telling of the *Lay*, memory acts as an obstruction because it takes the project of historical recovery too literally; memory is "faithless" to the Minstrel inasmuch as it is *too* much with him, as when "scenes, long past, of joy and pain, / Came wildering o'er his aged brain— / He tried to tune his harp in vain" (Introduction, p. 7). In contrast, music serves as a liberating antidote to this compulsion because it suspends the imperative to recall: within the formal impetus of rhythm and melody, a moment of

cognitive stoppage or absence—a “void”—becomes instead an opportunity, a “blank” that holds open a space for thought-in-process.

The spontaneous eruption of sound that overtakes the Minstrel and replaces “faithless memory” with “glowing thought” stands in contrast to the painstakingly curated detail of Scott’s accompanying endnotes, where even the slightest historical allusions are made to take on a visible history. For instance, when William of Deloraine, on his way to Melrose Abbey, passes by the site of the 1526 Battle of Melrose, which instigated the present clan feud, the Minstrel gives us a brief history of the battle, which Scott has already given us in extensive detail in a previous note (pp. 205-8). In contrast to this overdetermined history, when Deloraine hears the singing of the “midnight lauds” in the Abbey shortly thereafter, Scott emphasizes the sound’s mysteriousness. It seems to Deloraine to be without a cause, like the aeolian harp:

The sound upon the fitful gale,
In solemn wise, did rise and fail,
Like that wild harp, whose magic tone
Is wakened by the winds alone:
But when Melrose he reached, ’twas silence all. (1.31)

The abruptly decelerating anapests that rein in the music in the last line and give way to silence preserve the mystery surrounding the music’s origins. The monks have already retired upon Deloraine’s arrival; thus the music seems, to him, to have performed itself. In the power of sound to produce an effect without disclosing its cause, Scott finds a model for unsettling histories that seem, at first glance, already fully determined.

In the *Lay*’s retrograde movements, both anteriority and posteriority come to stand as the necessary conditions of narrative: historical fiction cannot amount to cultural recovery, in other words, because the writer arrives on the scene either too late or too soon. The different kinds of cultural work that the *Lay* represents—narrating, editing,

collecting—do not so much reinforce one another as reveal their shared inadequacy. Scott’s performance of an antiquarian sensibility, then, does not claim to recover the past as an object of knowledge from the standpoint of a literary present (either his own present of composition or the Minstrel’s present of narration) toward which that past was always directed as its erstwhile future. Rather than a thing-in-itself available for recovery, the past remains a figure of thought. In this regard Scott anticipates Friedrich Nietzsche’s (qualified) admiration of the antiquary as one who possesses “the ability to empathize with things and divine their greater significance, to detect traces that are almost extinguished, to instinctively read correctly a past frequently overwritten, to quickly understand the palimpsests, indeed, polypsests.”²³ In the tentative labor of tracing without finding, Scott suggests, the encounter with the past consists in a series of conjectures and digressions, a palimpsestic overlay that invites reading, and hearing, between the lines.

3. *Old Mortality*: Effects without Causes

Scott’s conjectural and digressive method represents authorship as never fully his own; likewise, his ventriloquistic narrative voice represents a kind of experience that is always outsourced, vicarious, and ghostly. The past, on this model, is less a content than a form. In place of a stable object of knowledge waiting to be recovered, the *Lay* suggests a presence of design that cannot be known as such, only observed in its effects. As a result, the past for Scott is not the target of conjecture but its vehicle of figuration; it consists in obsolete purposes and ideologies that cannot be related to the present in a

²³ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Utility and Liability of History for Life,” in *The Nietzsche Reader*, ed. Keith Ansell Pearson and Duncan Large (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 136.

directly causal way. Precisely as that which has been discounted as irrelevant, conjecture in Scott suggests a kind of thought that persists as a formal structure even when it does not add up to a necessary connecting principle, nor to a particular content.

The idea that persists as form even when its content appears hopelessly obsolete recurs in Scott's 1816 novel *Old Mortality*, and this time under the guise of a particular cause, one that clearly *could* have mattered: the political and religious hopes of the Scottish Covenanters. The novel focuses on the Covenanter Rebellion of 1679, which pits West Scottish Presbyterians against the Royalist forces of Charles II. James Chandler has argued that this is "a novel about the pragmatism of application," one in which conflicts of ethics and duty result in crises of situational legibility, so that the "trajectory" of the novel's protagonist, Henry Morton, seems "largely structured by or as a sequence of casuistical problems or cases of conscience"²⁴—"casuistry" being defined as "the discourse of the application of principle to circumstances."²⁵ The historical present does indeed present Morton with a series of difficult ethical decisions. But even from Morton's perspective, the decisions he must make were never what his historical moment was *about*. History is not the stage on which he plays the leading role, but a fragmentary ground that (borrowing a phrase from Kevis Goodman) "precedes and exceeds" him.²⁶ The point is not, then, that Morton's choices are predetermined by his historical moment, but that the question of the choice as such—and the attendant premise of a necessary connection between past and present—come to seem suspect, to Morton and to us.

²⁴ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214.

²⁵ Chandler, 39.

²⁶ Kevis Goodman, "Conjectures on Beachy Head: Charlotte Smith's Geological Poetics and the Ground of the Present," *ELH* 81, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 998, doi:10.1353/elh.2014.0033.

The moments on which the narrator lingers often have less to do with finding a guiding causal principle with which to explain the present or one's choices in it and more to do with observing effects to which no causal principle can be meaningfully applied. In such moments, causality falls out as the object of thought to become, instead, the figure that thought takes. That shift from content to form appears, for instance, in a series of sermons following the Covenanters' initial victory at the Battle of Drumclog. Even before the Reverend Macbriar starts speaking, he commands attention by means of the visual spectacle of his own face, with its shifting panorama of light and color:

He threw his faded eyes over the multitude and over the scene of battle; and a light of triumph arose in his glance, his pale yet striking features were colored with a transient and hectic blush of joy. (209)

This spectacle is mingled with and augmented by the spectral quality of the minister's features, untimely aged by his sufferings and imprisonments for the cause: "[He] had been twice imprisoned for several months, and suffered many severities, which gave him great influence with those of his own sect" (209). The interpretive crux, here, is *how* this patient forbearance has led to Macbriar's "great influence." In the narrator's retelling, it seems that Macbriar's suffering has been incorporated into his features in such a way that his influence now appears to derive not so much from the fact of his sacrifices as from the arresting visual effect, in the present, of those sacrifices on his facial features.

Narrative continuity and individual agency have fallen out of focus: Macbriar's influence now appears less as a consciously recognized function of his past actions and more as an inherent symptom or effect of the present visual field he constitutes.

Scott configures historical representation in the Macbriar passage as a matter of aesthetic judgment, a matter in which—following Kant—observed effects remain underdetermined by causal intentions. The matter of historical interpretation therefore

doubles as a matter of spectatorship, as evidenced by the complex interplay between Macbriar and his audience:

When he spoke, his faint and broken voice seemed at first inadequate to express his conceptions. But the deep silence of the assembly, the eagerness with which the ear gathered every word, as the famished Israelites collected the heavenly manna, had a corresponding effect upon the preacher himself. His words became more distinct, his manner more earnest and energetic; it seemed as if religious zeal was triumphing over bodily weakness and infirmity. (209)

The narrative voice remains indirect in this passage, beginning and ending with a qualification—“seemed at first inadequate,” “seemed as if religious zeal was triumphing over bodily weakness.” These qualifications imply a lingering uncertainty as to the method by which the assembly’s silence produces its “corresponding effect upon the preacher.” Is the preacher the one affected, encouraged by his audience’s attentiveness? Or does the audience’s willing receptiveness make it seem, to *them*, that the preacher is becoming “more earnest and energetic”? Or is the shift from “bodily weakness” to “bodily strength” in fact a deliberate theatrical ploy on Macbriar’s part? The causality of the “effect” here seems suspended across all three possibilities. Similarly, the casually interjected simile—“as the famished Israelites collected the heavenly manna”—appears to be free-floating; it might be a bit of sarcasm on the part of the editor, or it might be Macbriar’s egotistical self-absorption, or the incredulous viewpoint of Morton. Alternatively, the simile might be a reflection of the audience’s own anachronistic self-identification with the Israelites.

The passage implies these various options but does not explicitly engage with any of them. Instead, as the narrator’s running commentary on the sermon continues, the mediating language of “taste” combines with the narrator’s obfuscation of perspective and causality to produce an eerily disembodied syntax, one that downplays, paradoxically, the preacher’s part in the affair:

His natural eloquence was not altogether untainted with the coarseness of his sect; and yet, by the influence of a good natural taste, it was freed from the grosser and more ludicrous errors of his contemporaries; and the language of Scripture, which, in their mouths, was sometimes degraded by misapplication, gave, in Macbriar's exhortation, a rich and solemn effect, like that which is produced by the beams of the sun streaming through the storied representation of saints and martyrs on the Gothic window of some ancient cathedral. (209)

The passive voice shifts grammatical agency from the preacher himself to the tools of his trade, the “natural eloquence” and “language of Scripture” which pass through the mouths of Macbriar and his peers in a free-floating manner—much as light “streams through” stained glass, or as the “transient and hectic blush of joy” momentarily colors the minister's face but does not ultimately reside there. This suspension of subjective experience corresponds with a suspension of the usual criticism and sarcasm by which Morton and the narrator judge the Covenanters' use of Scripture. Morton, for instance, will later upbraid the Covenanter mastermind, Burley, for his “application of Scriptural phrases to circumstances and events with which they have often very slender relation” (230), and, later still, the narrator will sardonically remark that, post-1688, the Covenanters continue to “[cite] various texts, all, as it may well be supposed, detached from their context” (376). In contrast, in the Macbriar passage, the charge of misapplying biblical content to historical context falls out. Instead the sense of interpretation shifts from a question of textual exegesis to the question of achieving an aesthetic effect.

In the Macbriar passage, the narrator seems to forget his usual cynicism about the Covenanters' interpretation of Scripture, and this forgetfulness helps weaken the premise of an absolute historical break between archaic and modern ways of thinking. In fact, the narrator's enthusiastic elaboration of the awkward “Gothic window” simile signals that he is just as caught up in the “rich and solemn effect” as is the minister's audience. Thus the narrator's initial ironic distance quickly gives way to a self-conscious desire to be

absorbed or held by an archaism, a moment of skepticism-turned-conviction indicating an inclination to stay in an alienated position in regard to the narrator's own historical moment. Since no individual speaker, observer, or timeframe emerges as the text's final, determining frame of reference, what emerges instead is a profoundly underdetermined, free-floating mode of representation seemingly at odds with the overdetermined and overburdened history upon which it draws.

The apparent lack of narratorial guidance as to how to read the visual drama of the sermon continues as Macbriar steps down from the podium. Burley nominates another Covenanting preacher to take Macbriar's place, "[proposing] that, to crown the victory, Gabriel Kettledrummle should be called upon to improve the providential success which they had obtained, by a word in season addressed to the army" (207). Having suggested the expediency of another spiritually uplifting oratory, Burley immediately retreats to "a private council of war, undisturbed by the discordant opinions, or senseless clamour, of the general body" (207). This creates a curious disjuncture between suggestion and observation: Burley instigates the performance but does not stick around to observe its effects. Likewise, the observation that immediately follows—"Kettledrummle more than answered the expectations of Burley"—suggests a strangely disembodied model of agency in which a narrator who was absent at the scene is nonetheless allowed to pass second-hand judgment on the behalf of an instigator, Burley, who *also* was absent for Kettledrummle's sermon. Thus the mercurial slippage of attribution that Ina Ferris observes in the multiple frame narratives as "the noncoincidence of event, telling, writing, printing, reading" gets distilled, here, into a uniform voice that simultaneously incorporates and occludes such distinctions.²⁷

²⁷ Ferris, "Time of the Remnant," 491.

4. Spots of Time

In the sermons following Drumclog, causality falls away as perspective and interpretation are multiplied across multiple viewpoints. At other times, the novel chooses to double down on the mercuriality of witnessing and interpretation by routing them through a single consciousness. This is the case, for instance, when the Royalist leader, Claverhouse, saves Morton from imminent murder at the hands of Morton's former confederates, Macbriar and Mucklewrath, following the Covenanters' defeat at Bothwell Bridge. Reflecting on the prospect of death, Claverhouse expresses his wish "of pressing one day some well-fought and hard-won field of battle, and dying with the shout of victory in my ear" (352). As if on cue, the dying Mucklewrath "seemed to rise out of the floor of the apartment [and] stood upright before him," prophesying Claverhouse's death: "The wish of thy heart shall be granted to thy loss, and the hope of thine own pride shall destroy thee" (352-53).

In the sudden confluence of Claverhouse's expressed wish and Mucklewrath's unexpected prophesy, ideologically opposed subjects come together in a moment of uncertain connection. Morton, observing this strange scene, experiences a sense of historical double-consciousness as a result:

Morton was much shocked at this extraordinary scene, and the prophecy of the dying man, which tallied so strangely with the wish which Claverhouse had just expressed; and he often thought of it afterwards when that wish seemed to be accomplished. (353)

At the narrator's whim, Morton's confusion is suddenly transposed onto a temporal axis, and his singular moment of double-take reverberates indefinitely into the future. A moment just past is pulled into the present as Morton considers Mucklewrath's prophecy

in light of Claverhouse's wish. At the same time, the prophecy's future fulfillment extends into an even more distant future as Morton continues to think on the prophecy in light of its eventual accomplishment (Claverhouse's death-in-victory at Killiecrankie). Thus Mucklewrath's prophecy comes to seem strangely inconclusive, echoing and reechoing into an undisclosed future beyond the scope of the narrative.

The subsequent unfolding of the narrative bears out the strange temporal dynamic Morton observes in the prophecy scene: an anticipated future continually fails to resolve itself in any given moment of witnessing, or through a single viewpoint. For instance, while the narrator suggests the effect that Claverhouse's death will have on Morton in light of Mucklewrath's prophecy, in the event itself, Morton is not there to witness Claverhouse's death in person. Instead, upon his return to the Bellendens' estate at Fairy-Knowe ten years later, Morton hears Mucklewrath's prophecy to Claverhouse repeated to him by his former servant Cuddie (who fails to recognize Morton): "I heard it wi' my ain lugs [ears]," says Cuddie, "foretauld to him by a man that had been three hours stane dead, and came back to this earth again just to tell him his mind" (380). As Morton hears his own thought repeated back to him, that thought seems no longer to be his own.

Moreover, while Morton does not witness Claverhouse's death in person, the narrative itself does not witness even Morton's *reception* of the news of Claverhouse's death. Instead, when the news of Claverhouse's death at Killiecrankie *does* arrive at the Bellendens' estate (the morning after Morton's arrival), we hear the news not through Morton but through his rival, Evandale, speaking to Edith Bellenden (392). In its meandering homelessness, the news has the power to produce a series of temporal, spatial and vocative dislocations and misapprehensions with a missed phenomenological target (Morton), the combined effect of which is to trope the passage of history as a missed or

out-of-body experience, one that divides and scatters our attempts to apprehend it in the first person. This is, again, the logic of the trace, the space of attenuated approximation that, as Ricoeur says, “signifies something without making it appear.” The present never appears as an *event* capable of conjuring an embodied spectator to bear witness on its behalf. History only appears in the space of the present as a form of anachronism and ventriloquism, either as prophecy (which by definition comes too early) or as news (which comes too late).

The particular kind of theatrical spectatorship involved in witnessing history, for Scott, amounts to a kind of mental disembodiment. In this, Scott picks up on David Hume’s model of mind: “The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.”²⁸ The point, for Hume, is that these perceptions are both the medium of knowing and the very things to be known. As a result, consciousness is always divided from itself: “They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos’d.”²⁹ The divided nature of perception means that the act of witnessing, in Scott, remains fragmentary and insufficient for providing a causal narrative, whether to oneself or to others. This fragmentation precludes the strong teleological and dialogical ambitions that witnessing implies (bearing witness *to*, bearing witness *for*). In Scott’s text, history never coalesces as an event, or scene of witnessing, in the present; individual spectators are always arriving either too early or too late for sociable communication.

²⁸ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge and P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 253.

²⁹ Hume, 253.

Morton's physical presence at the moment of encounter between Claverhouse and Mucklewrath is belied by his mental waywardness, the sense of "shock" and estrangement that prevents his act of spectatorship from producing any kind of certain knowledge. That sense of estrangement might be thought of as the inverse complement to what Ina Ferris calls the "apparitional structure of copresence" that Scott's reader experiences: "Aligned with the external narrator in the present tense of modernity, readers of the novels know that what they are 'seeing' in the present tense of the represented world no longer exists but experience it (almost) as if it does."³⁰ For characters *within* the novel, meanwhile, these terms apply in something like the reverse order: they know that what they are seeing *does* exist but experience it almost as if it does not. This is the experience, for instance, of two of Claverhouse's soldiers also present at the prophecy scene along with Morton: "Two of the dragoons who were in the apartment, hardened as they were, and accustomed to such scenes, showed great consternation at the sudden apparition, the event, and the words which preceded it" (353). For the soldiers, as for Morton, Mucklewrath's "apparition" is marked by a feeling of unreality and causal indeterminacy. Thus the event instantiates a more general mood of suspended accountability, of spots of time in which characters sense history unfolding around them but never for them. This mood corresponds, moreover, to a model of historical experience as a continuous back-formation in light of an undisclosed and indefinitely deferred future.

A similar spot of time recurs near the novel's end, at the crucial moment when Edith sees Morton's face at her window at Fairy-Knowe. Morton now finds himself in Mucklewrath's position: rather than the observer, he is now himself the apparition. The

³⁰ Ina Ferris, "'Before Our Eyes': Romantic Historical Fiction and the Apparitions of Reading," *Representations* 121, no. 1 (Winter 2013): 77-78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rep.2013.121.1.60>.

terms of the situation, however, remain the same: there is again an apparent, though seemingly untraceable, connection between “the sudden apparition, the event, and the words which preceded it.” Edith is in fact in the midst of apologizing for her reluctance to marry Evandale, and is assuring Evandale’s sister, Emily, that “no idle recollections of past times shall intervene to prevent the zealous and affectionate discharge of my duty; no vain illusions recall the memory of other days—” (398), when the vain illusion, Morton himself, suddenly appears in the flesh.

Edith’s extended gesture here of compromise or capitulation to Evandale’s marriage proposal nonetheless contains an implicit rebuke to Evandale, who has just summoned Edith on abrupt notice to force her decision on the issue. The reason that he gives for this sudden precipitation is tied to the news of Claverhouse’s death: Evandale wants to take command of the nascent Jacobite rising before it falls apart. As Edith is a pro-establishment Hanoverian, her disavowal of “idle recollections” and “vain illusions” is directed as much at Evandale’s outmoded political ambitions as at her own lingering hopes for Morton’s return. Skepticism with regard to apparently obsolete causes—and lingering purposiveness and private conviction with regard to those same causes—here operates in a double register.

Evandale responds to Edith’s hesitation to accept his proposal with a rebuke: “This, Edith, is no time for temporizing with our duty” (392). He thereby suggests that what Edith what counts as an idle wish on his part, one that she sees as wasting time on obsolete ventures while ignoring reality, may reflect back on Edith, too. At any given moment, therefore, multiple and perhaps conflicting possible futures appear to be in play. The premise of what counts as real-world engagement or vain illusion remains, here and elsewhere, a live question. Evandale unwittingly implies this sense of live possibility in

his demand that Edith accept things as they are: what he calls “temporizing”—by which he means simply wasting time—also implies the more purposive sense of stalling for time while waiting for something better to come into view.

From Evandale’s perspective, Edith seems to have just moved past her peevish obstinacy to a more sensible, albeit reluctant, position of accepting her fate. In the digressiveness with which she performs that gesture of acceptance, however, Edith proves strategic. Like Penelope weaving and unweaving the burial shroud so as to put off her suitors, Edith holds open a space for thought that results in an unforeseen possibility—Morton’s reappearance. Edith therefore turns Evandale’s logic against him: far from this being “no time for temporizing with our duty,” temporizing may be precisely what makes time in the first place.

Responsibility for explaining the event of Morton’s reappearance devolves upon Evandale, whose interpretive struggle echoes that of Morton himself earlier on at the scene of prophecy. Despite his self-image as a figure of enlightened reason, Evandale is unable to reconcile the weight of corroborating testimony (of both his fiancée and his servant, Halliday) with his equal certainty that Morton could not have appeared in his own person:

But he would have set the apparition down to the influence of an overstrained imagination ... had it not been for the coinciding testimony of Halliday ... On the other hand, it seemed in the highest degree improbable that Morton ... who was, with such good reason, supposed to be lost when the *Vryheid* of Rotterdam went down with crew and passengers, should be alive and lurking in this country, where there was no longer any reason why he should not openly show himself, since the present government favoured his party in politics. (402)

The doubling and redoubling of Evandale’s Humean struggle in this moment, as he weighs eyewitness testimony against general probability, brings him into unexpected proximity with Edith and her “overstrained imagination.” The evidence corroborating the

event is overdetermined, the circumstances leading up to the event completely underdetermined. Of course, the circumstances (namely, Morton's reluctance to intrude upon what he presumes to be Edith's present happiness) are clear to Scott's narrator. By focalizing the event through the mind of one who lacks the skeleton key, however, the narrator preserves and extends the time of conjecture. Evandale knows that Edith is reluctant to marry him, but he does not understand why that reluctance should have intensified at this moment to the point that "the idea [of marriage] seems almost to unhinge her understanding" (403). Because Evandale discounts the possibility of Morton's having actually appeared at the window, he does not connect the idea of Morton with the question of Edith's reluctance. The engagement seems to him, therefore, to be "broken off without any apparent or rational cause" (402). As a result of this disjuncture, an observed effect appears by way of an unknown origin.

The interaction between Edith and Evandale suggests that the episode's obscurity as to causes does not result merely from the dramatic irony attending Morton's appearance. That is, while temporal experience resembles the irony of fiction, it is not reducible to it. Instead, there is another kind of obscurity in play, one that Edith herself is unable to explain, as when we are told that "she had nothing to oppose to [Evandale's] ardour, excepting a causeless reluctance, which she herself was ashamed to oppose against so much generosity" (396). Her sense of "causeless reluctance" matches up with Edith's anguished declaration that "'such is the waywardness with which my heart reverts to former times, that I cannot' (she burst into tears) 'suppress a degree of ominous reluctance at fulfilling my engagement upon such a brief summons'" (395). In this case, even the narrator is at a loss: while it is clear how Edith's prophetic words contribute—at the level of fictional representation—to the dramatic irony of Morton's impending

appearance, the question of how the prophecy relates to the event at the level of direct causation remains opaque.

This is the narrative structure of what Scott in the *Lay* had called “glamoury,” the wayward obtrusion of an obscure form of knowledge that proves unaccountable both to characters and narrators. Just as Mucklewrath’s prophecy engenders in Morton a feeling of “[shock] at this extraordinary scene, and the prophecy of the dying man, which tallied so strangely with the wish which Claverhouse had just expressed” (353), Edith’s apprehension of an unexplainable “waywardness” of mind likewise speaks to the intrusion of an absent cause. This is a form of temporal experience that frustrates attribution, testimony, or ethical judgment. Through a series of double-takes on the part of its characters, the text imagines a kind of thought that persists as form, over and above the cognitive demands of belief or skepticism.

5. *Redgauntlet*: Summons and Recall

Old Mortality sets in motion a pattern of unforeseen and escalating cognitive demands giving way to a moment of lyrical stoppage, of temporal dilation and suspension. In the proposal scene between Edith and Evandale, the past intrudes upon the present in the form of a nested series of conflicting interpretations with no necessary principle for adjudicating between them. By the time Scott arrives at his 1824 novel, *Redgauntlet*, that pattern has become part and parcel of the novel’s explicit plan. Unlike *Old Mortality*, which ends twice—first in a pitched battle at Bothwell Bridge, then in a marriage, with clear winners and losers in each case—*Redgauntlet* provides no end-point for the novel to work backward from. Instead the novel constructs itself by fits and starts

in a disjointed series of revisions and nested narratives, but nowhere does it provide the skeleton key that would hold it all together—the imaginary third Jacobite rising, which remains a non-event even in the novel, not merely fictional but also hypothetical.

Redgauntlet gives its hypothetical turn narrative substance midway through the novel in a scene of legal summoning. This is the interview between the novel's protagonist and representative of the modern era, Darsie Latimer, his Jacobite uncle, Redgauntlet, and the ineffectual country judge, Foxley. Redgauntlet arranges the interview in order to impart a veneer of legality to his claim on Darsie. He finds, however, that he himself has become the target of legal claim when the ubiquitous Peter Peebles (himself hoping to assert his claim on his absentee lawyer, Alan Fairford) arrives and sees through Redgauntlet's alias, recalling his involvement in the rebellion of the "Forty-Five" and thus cuing the memory and recognition of Foxley's clerk. Foxley, at his clerk's insistence, hesitantly produces a warrant for Redgauntlet's arrest; in response, Redgauntlet casts the paper into the fire, and deflects Foxley's further questions with self-conscious irony: "There is no such warrant in existence now; its ashes, like the poor traitor whose doom it threatened, have been dispersed to the four winds of heaven."³¹

Beyond its defiance of Hanoverian legal sovereignty, Redgauntlet's gesture, in its evasively retroactive logic, demonstrates Redgauntlet's refusal to recognize himself and what he stands for in the normative terms of crime and punishment afforded to him by a modern bureaucracy eager to sweep away the embarrassing remnants of its Stuart past. Reversing his interlocutors' sense of chronologically appropriate sequence, Redgauntlet suggests that they, not he, are the ones whose time is out of joint. The warrant, consumed

³¹ Walter Scott, *Redgauntlet*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 202. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

in the moment of its exhumation, is as evanescent as the subject to which it laid claim; it is “like the poor traitor whose doom it threatened” in that both have suffered a “dispersal” of their representative status. Not only is the relation here between legal claim and personal identity metaphoric, it is also more tangibly metonymic: Redgauntlet has been “dispersed” not simply *like* the warrant, but *in* or *as* the warrant.³² He thus cannot be properly summoned because he exists only as a trace.

The warrant is the vehicle meant to bind Redgauntlet to the new order of things. Of course, the state’s representative, Foxley, does not really *want* to produce the warrant or to force the issue of Redgauntlet’s arrest, since this would serve to admit that what the modern state offers as compromise is really, as Redgauntlet well knows, a demand for capitulation. By forcing the issue himself, then, Redgauntlet seizes upon the warrant as the guarantee of affiliations and purposes that the modern British state has failed to account for.

In the warrant, Redgauntlet recognizes a logic of the unaccountable remainder: as an archaism reemerges into the present, a presumed reconciliation between past and present turns out to be one that has failed to take. That logic of the remainder is one that even Darsie, though his uncle’s ideological opposite, finds himself caught up in. During the same interview with the country judge, Darsie catches himself in the mirror involuntarily mimicking Redgauntlet’s characteristic expression of wrinkling his forehead into the shape of a horseshoe (200). Fascinated by the coincidence, Darsie attempts to replicate the look later on, “moulding my visage like a mad player” (207), but

³² I am borrowing James Chandler’s term of phrase from his reading of “Ode to the West Wind”: “For if thought decays as composition begins, then the pages of text, “withered leaves,” are not so much a metaphor for the dead thoughts as the form that thought takes when it dies. The dead thoughts are driven not *like* withered leaves, but *as* withered leaves; they ride the boundary between metaphor and metonymy.” (*England in 1819*, 552)

finds he cannot call up the expression voluntarily. When a serving-girl startles him in the midst of his play-acting, however, “chance produced the change on my features which I had been in vain laboring to call forth” (208). In these moments, Darsie gains an alien vantage point on his historical present. In spite of his progressive allegiances, his involuntary resemblance to his uncle makes Darsie the carrier of an absent cause operating above and beyond his own skepticism or his uncle’s perceived fanaticism.

The absent cause that Darsie observes at work in himself emerges by way of the supposedly obsolete past that Redgauntlet represents. Importantly, however, the absent cause does not reduce to that past. Instead the obsolete or archaic becomes, in this novel—as in Scott’s work more generally—a figure for the form that thought takes in the apparent absence of a controlling idea. What the form makes room for may belong to the future as well as the past: to the idea that has not yet emerged as well as the one that has only gone to ground for the time being; to the hope that remains figurative and hypothetical as well as the one with a lingering purpose. Thus Darsie, following his abduction by Redgauntlet, begins his journal on the premise that it will provide useful information for would-be rescuers, though he does not claim to know what that information would be: “I even hope . . . that, amid the multitude of seemingly trivial circumstances which I detail at length, a clew may be found to effect my liberation” (162). The clew or necessary principle that would decide between the telling detail and the merely incidental detail is one that can only emerge retroactively. Even as he is writing his journal, therefore, Darsie cannot know what its final meaning will be. Darsie’s position in this regard comes close to Redgauntlet and his faith in the Stewart cause that remains a live option, in Redgauntlet’s conception, even after two failed Jacobite risings.

Both characters remain agnostic in regard to an historical present that has no necessary connection with the past or the future that they imagine.

In Darsie's unwitting approximation to his uncle's position, the encounter with the past represents an immersion in the minds of others: not so much an immersion in the content of others' thoughts as in the formal structures of those thoughts, such that *all* thinking begins to appear suspended, directed toward an absent purpose. In this, Scott complicates Kant's sense of a necessary correspondence between purposes and intentional objects, "the faculty to be by means of one's representations the cause of the objects of these representations."³³ Scott suggests, instead, that mental presence may consist, also, in *failing* to make an intentional object appear—or in reckoning with the possibility that one's thoughts were never on the way to an endpoint in the first place. The historical encounter in Scott serves as a form for thought rather than an object of thought in and of itself, and it is the contingency of this form that makes possible an engagement with what appears presently lacking in motivation or direction.

The engagement with a wayward form of thought takes Scott's subjects outside of themselves, but it does not thereby bring them into the rational-discursive sphere of public justification. This turn away from the public sphere reveals the hypothetical turn implicit in Hume and Smith, for whom mental co-presence with imagined others cannot guarantee sociable knowledge as a result. Ideally, however, being in the same mental space as another also makes one present to oneself, thereby making it possible to think or speak at all. To this end, in the 1830 Preface to the *Lay*, Scott makes a point of acknowledging his debt to Coleridge—specifically to "Christabel" and its "singularly

³³ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 11.

irregular structure of the stanza, and the liberty which it allowed the author to adapt the sound to the sense.” For having given him a metrical voice in which to speak, Scott says, “it is to Mr Coleridge that I am bound to make the acknowledgment due from the pupil to his master.”³⁴

Scott’s gesture of indebtedness imitates the Enlightenment paradigm by which imagined sociability with virtual others gives us license to speak on our own terms. Nonetheless, the figure through which Scott routes this gesture—the student/master relationship—suggests an affiliation that is more gothic than democratic. The connotation of indenture and of an uneven distribution of knowledge represents the poet’s coming-into-speech as a process of initiation, with overtones of ritual practice and occult knowledge. The encounter with an unaccountable form of thought thus follows a distinctly gothic model, one that takes us back to Deloraine and his dark errand at Melrose Abbey in the *Lay*. As the Lady of Buccleuch tasks the knight with retrieving the wizard’s book of spells, she also enjoins him with a prohibition:

Into it, knight, thou must not look;
If thou readest thou art lorn! (1.23)

In response, Deloraine reassures the Lady of his illiteracy:

Letter nor line know I never a one,
Wer’t my neck-verse at Hairibee. (1.24)

The knight later makes a similar claim to ignorance in response to the Monk’s warning of “ceaseless prayer and penance drie” should Deloraine follow through with his

³⁴ Walter Scott, Preface, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, ed. David Hill Radcliffe, Center for Applied Technologies in the Humanities, Virginia Tech, 2013, <http://web.archive.org/web/20140319000704/http://scott-minstrel.cath.vt.edu:80/select.php?select=intro>.

mission. Deloraine replies, contemptuously, that the Monk's superstitions are not his own:

Penance, father, will I none;
Prayer know I hardly one;
For mass or prayer can I rarely tarry,
Save to patter an Ave Mary. (2.5-6)

Deloraine imputes superstitious ignorance to the Monk, but he also claims ignorance of his own as a gesture of protection. In this double gesture, Deloraine signals his awareness that ignorance alone might not save him, after all. Even if he cannot read the spells written in the wizard's book, merely being acquainted with the outward form of another's thoughts may lead as easily to incoherence and muteness as to understanding and speech. And indeed, when the spirit of the wizard returns to summon his goblin servant back to him at the end of the sixth canto, Deloraine's fears prove justified:

His blood did freeze, his brain did burn,
'Twas feared his mind would ne'er return. (6.27)

By dint of sheer proximity to the book he carries, Deloraine finds himself unwittingly initiated into the unsociable cabal of the Monk, the Lady, the wizard, and the goblin—and of the form their thoughts take, even before it is put into words or given coherent purpose. As a result, Deloraine is reduced to Gilpin's animalistic state of gibbering, muttering, and anaphorically abbreviated speech.

The epistemic fragmentation that marks Scott's historical present—the time of writing, reading, and retelling—does not, then, amount to an assertion of what we latter-day readers cannot know of the past, nor does it ask us to take stock of the past in order to move on from it. The past in these texts is not an object of knowledge but a figure for thoughts that cohere in the present as formal patterns: double takes, effects without apparent causes, temporal overlaps. By its nature, such a thought is one that Scott's

subjects must continue to entertain even while they consciously disavow the outmoded beliefs it represents as content. In this way, Scott does not present the past as something that can be accounted for, but instead represents the unaccountable—the gaps in what had seemed already determined—as a new form of mental presence in its own right. Scott invites us to trace the clew of an archaic form of knowledge that seems to lead nowhere. Hunched like Gilpin Horner over these texts, sneaking glances at histories we could never fully share, we are thereby returned to the world of the present: a world that looks less settled, and more open to rewriting, than the one we thought we knew.

Chapter Three
Wordsworth's Vagrant Poetics

[He] does not move with pain, but moves

With thought.

—William Wordsworth, “Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch”

1. Poetic Vagrancy

From the middle of the eighteenth century onward, a series of legislative battles took place in Parliament surrounding issues of containment, control and productivity in the English countryside. Two particularly fraught questions emerged: how to divide up common lands for private ownership, and how to dispose of increasing numbers of people uprooted and dispossessed as a result of urbanization and the decline of cottage industry. These debates and their resulting legislation—the acts of enclosure and the poor laws—had direct and destructive effects on late-eighteenth-century British society’s most vulnerable, both those threatened with the loss of their livelihood (smallholders and landless commoners) and those already dispossessed and reduced to positions of vagrancy. Alongside the immediate consequence of rendering these populations still

more vulnerable, the parliamentary debates and legislation also involved less tangible questions of national identity and common purpose.¹

The socioeconomic reality of dispossession in England at the end of the eighteenth century thus involved not just particular policies but deeper, underlying concerns about the limits of a collective's ability to imaginatively represent itself to itself, to tell a story about its shared past, present, and future. And in this period, the idea of self-possession through narrative representation proves particularly resilient in the poetry of William Wordsworth, the poet whose lyric "I" inaugurated a British Romantic confessional movement of going on the record, assimilating one's experiences to formal narrative structure through a commemorative process of what Wordsworth in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads* calls "emotion recollected in tranquility."²

But it is worth remembering that Wordsworth's "tranquility" is only the prelude to poetry, not its goal; the point is not to produce a static record of emotion but actually to recreate that emotion in the present of composition. As Wordsworth goes on to clarify, "the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquility gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind."³ The imaginative economy of poetic recollection fails to produce a stable object of aesthetic contemplation. In place of a descriptive record of experience as such, recollection gives

¹ For more background on the politics of vagrancy in this period (particularly in relation to enclosure), see Richard Price, *British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: common right, enclosure and social change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); and Rachel Crawford, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

² William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 111.

³ Wordsworth, 111.

way to an experience that is ongoing, a recording practice. The poet's labor becomes its own object.

The debates about what to do with uncultivated common lands and the vagrant poor accepted as a given the need to turn these unproductive spaces and people to useful ends. In this context, what stands out as distinctive in Wordsworth's recollective process of poetic composition is that it never really *goes* anywhere. As the contemplation of former emotion gives way, once again, to the renewed experience of that emotion, all that gets "gradually produced" is more of the same. The poet, by his own estimation, seems stuck in a loop; the record of his experience encodes its own feedback, overwriting itself *ad infinitum*.

Recursion, of course, also characterizes the perambulatory habits of the human subjects in the 1802 *Lyrical Ballads* and the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*, subjects dispossessed by the new socioeconomic reality rapidly transforming English rural life at the turn of the 19th century. Despite their diminished socioeconomic relevance and precarious circumstances, these subjects continue to engage in habitual behaviors from former days: the shepherd Michael returns repeatedly to his unfinished sheepfold, while the Leech-gatherer and the Cumberland Beggar continue to make their daily rounds.

One difficulty of these poems is that they might seem to lionize dispossession as the precondition for poetic material, or to idealize the vagrant as a poet in disguise in the mould of Thomas Gray's "mute inglorious Milton." Wordsworth's concern, however, is not to raise the vagrant to his level but to come down to the vagrant's. Material dispossession highlights a less visible condition of epistemic dispossession that attends the work of the poet. Both vagrant and poet, that is, find themselves continuing in activities that appear, for the time being, circular, unproductive, and hard to justify.

Accordingly, Celeste Langan has argued that Wordsworth and his vagrant subject together epitomize capitalism's "logic of infinite circulation" that is both the "pathos" and the "pathology" of the liberal subject.⁴ In Langan's framework of capitalist alienation, poetry becomes a "pure form" complicit in the erasure of history, places, and persons.⁵ Indeed, in the readings that will follow, alienation is not far to seek—"Michael," after all, confronts it explicitly. But a conjectural view shows Wordsworth's poetic narrators continuing to reflect on the vagrant even when they feel most alienated from him. Far from a figure of interchangeability or substitution, the vagrant represents something stubbornly irreducible: a story of felt attachments in which both he and the narrator participate, though that story cannot be said to belong properly to either of them. The form of these poems is narrative, after all, and narrative suggests not infinite circulation but a built-in endpoint, even if the poetic narrator consistently fails to achieve it. The history of affective attachments in these poems cannot be narrated directly, only through the slow, cumulative persistence of vagrant movement—even as narrators remain uncertain as to what that history amounts to, why they are telling it, or on whose behalf.

Wordsworth's vagrant characters embody conjectural narrative's persistent movement, carrying on in the face of changed circumstances. Their mental and physical impulses place them in a cognitive middle-ground. They appear to have already lost, or to be on the verge of losing, a clear sense of purpose in the world; but at the same time, they prove surprisingly difficult either to write out of the story of collective life or to assimilate to the stories of others, including those of the poems' narrators. These

⁴ Celeste Langan, *Romantic Vagrancy: Wordsworth and the Simulation of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 14.

⁵ Langan, 72.

characters move through the world in a gothic state of suspended animation that also suspends and disrupts the poetic narratives that would try to account for them. As a result, Wordsworth's narrators come to realize that they themselves share in this unexpected form of persistence, by continuing to seek narrative resolution at the level of structure rather than event: in the way that thoughts lean on other thoughts. Dispossession allows Wordsworth to construct a new model of *poiesis* as haphazard accumulation that seems never to quite add up to anything, or to arrive anywhere, at least in the present. Instead, his vagrant poetics holds open space for an affective history that can only be known indirectly, through the itinerant, recursive movement of versification.⁶

The vagrant's itinerant habit and the narrator's recollective procedure share a condition of persistence in the absence of clear purpose and despite the impossibility of narrative closure. That shared persistence reveals the narrator's embeddedness in a world of others whose activities remain as unfathomable to him as his own. Poetic vagrancy, then, imagines a way of continuing to think on and feel for those who have been written out of the story of common life, and it does so, moreover, in the face of the loss of purpose that attends mental dispossession—when it seems that there is no place left in the world for the narrator, either. The vagrant's purpose in the world seems opaque or impossible to justify, and this condition also implicates the narrator and his own anxious sense of inadequacy at what he appears unable to achieve. But inadequacy and digression, Wordsworth suggests, may be exactly the mode that necessarily must attend the narration of those whose stories' meaning resists assimilation to narrative form. Such

⁶ My reading of vagrant poetics as a form of conjectural literature, marked by accumulation and recursion, contrasts, for instance, with the sense of growth and progress in Wordsworth's poetry that defines Alan Liu's account. Alan Liu, *Wordsworth: The Sense of History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

a poetics therefore models an ethics of attachment, not to the other directly (by way of sympathetic identification), but to what the other represents: a history that can only be known, at present, on a provisional, figurative basis. By way of a specifically conjectural ethics, then, Wordsworth in these poems offers the sense of a shared world that does not depend on a shared sense of purpose.

2. “Michael”: An Inheritance without an Inheritor

The narrative poem “Michael” concludes—and concludes the *Lyrical Ballads* (the 1800 and later editions) along with it—in disappointed hopes and unresolved questions. Michael fails to give his son, Luke, the inheritance he intends for him, and Luke, who “in the dissolute city gave himself / To evil courses,”⁷ seems lost to Michael and his wife, Isabel, for good. That concluding irresolution reflects an ambivalence built into the poet’s stated purpose. In a letter to Charles Fox, a Whig MP, Wordsworth writes that the poem intends to provide “a picture of the domestic affections” among “proprietors of small estates,” a picture that shows the inherent strength of those affections;⁸ at the same time, and in uncertain apposition to that avowed strength, Wordsworth writes that he is motivated by an awareness of the domestic affections’ “rapid decay” in the face of changing economic conditions and policies.⁹

In order to represent the small-time landowners’ domestic affections as at once strong in themselves and vulnerable to circumstance, Wordsworth in the letter displaces

⁷ William Wordsworth, “Michael,” in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), lines 454-55. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. All references are to the 1802 edition.

⁸ William Wordsworth, “Wordsworth’s Letter to Charles James Fox,” in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 308.

⁹ Wordsworth, letter to Charles Fox, 307.

“affection” into a more general and intransitive sense of “feeling,” which he dissociates from either a particular feeling subject or a particular object to which feeling attaches or toward which it aims. His poem, he says, was “written with a view to shew that men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply”; “and I hope,” he adds,

whatever effect [the poem] may have upon you, you will at least be able to perceive that [it] may excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts, and may in some small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species.¹⁰

The deep feeling of the “men who do not wear fine cloaths” remains intransitive; Charles Fox’s feelings about or as a result of the poem are bracketed entirely; and the generality of species-wide feeling stands a long way from the initial question of actionable policy on behalf of small-time landowners.

The poem’s avowed object—feeling—moves along a metonymic chain of association that suggests an open-ended form of affective attachment. That open-ended attachment offers no certain basis for its inclusion of others, nor a clear desired outcome. Even Wordsworth’s personal example of his neighbor and her stated devotion to her own domestic situation rings curiously distant and tentative: “These people could not express themselves in this way without an almost sublime conviction of the blessings of independent domestic life.”¹¹ Wordsworth’s reference to the sublime provides a clue to his conjectural tone here, and throughout the letter. In Kant’s account of the sublime, the ability to reason towards what cannot be imagined shows that certain ideas exist which cannot be exhausted by the language available to talk about them.¹² Wordsworth’s open-

¹⁰ Wordsworth, letter to Charles Fox, 308.

¹¹ Wordsworth, letter to Charles Fox, 307.

¹² Kant’s example is the idea of infinity: “[What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination,] our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 106.

ended model of attachment constitutes one such idea: a kind of feeling that cannot be imagined directly, only inferred.

In “Michael,” accordingly, feeling remains an idea, not a reality that Michael fully achieves in the way that he hopes, nor one that the poetic narrator manages to fully represent. These uncertainties reflect Michael’s tenuous economic position. As a smallholder rather than a landless commoner, Michael is in a better position than many of Wordsworth’s rural poor, but he also has more to lose. Having pledged himself as the guarantor of a loan on which his nephew has recently defaulted, Michael finds that he is now at risk of having his lands taken from him as a result. He is neither secure in his current state of possession nor technically dispossessed as yet. His story, accordingly, cannot settle on a final inheritor (or auditor, or reader) because the value of this poetic inheritance is always still coming into focus.

Michael’s struggle most visibly involves a matter of financial insecurity as he strives to avoid his impending dispossession, the liquidation of his land as capital to pay off his nephew’s defaulted loan. Less visibly, but no less urgently, his is also a struggle with imaginative representation: both Michael and the narrator seek to give tangible form to a story that flies beneath the radar of chronological events, and whose value exists outside of the getting-and-spending paradigm of capital and commodity. That story, as Michael frames it to Luke, is the history of a plot of land and of the family that lives on it:

I will relate to thee some little part
Of our two histories; ‘twill do thee good
When thou art from me, even if I should speak
Of things thou canst not know of. (346-49)

Glossed in this way, the story seems doubly obscure, reaching forward into a future state of exile Luke cannot imagine and backward into a past he never experienced. Indeed, as

Michael offers that history to Luke, and as the narrator in turn offers it to the implied listener, what emerges seems less a coherent history than a gesture at a story that has yet to be told because its informing context has yet to arrive.

The family's story cannot yet be properly told, but necessity compels Michael, nonetheless, to come up with a version of the story that can fulfill conflicting aims in the present. Although Michael depends on the land's material value to secure his family's future, the meaning of that future, as he imagines it, depends on the land's immaterial value as the site of patrimonial tradition. That tension between the material and the immaterial becomes clear as Michael tries to link his family's future to its past, to ingraft his son's life, as he tells him, onto "the life thy Fathers liv'd" (421). The obligation to make good on his nephew's debt, however, brings home for Michael a hard truth: while the inheritance itself may be inalienable, the same cannot be said of the land to which that inheritance attaches. Instead the patrimonial tradition is inextricably bound up with property ownership and the various forms of alienation it entails. Accordingly, Michael sends Luke away to work in the city in order that Michael can afford to keep the property in the family for his son's inheritance. "He quickly will repair this loss," Michael reassures his wife Isabel, "and then / May come again to us" (262-63).

In order to justify his plan for Luke, however, Michael must convince himself that Luke's birthright is redeemable in monetary terms. Michael struggles to articulate what such an inheritance, one that alienates the inheritor, would look like in practice:

Our Luke shall leave us, Isabel; the land
Shall not go from us, and it shall be free;
He shall possess it, free as is the wind
That passes over it. (254-57)

Although voicing the ironies of capitalist alienation, Michael attempts to frame those ironies as compatible ideas. Michael is sending Luke away, he says, in anticipation of

Luke's future return and financial redemption of the land. The circularity of recovery-via-alienation, however, reveals the underlying incompatibility of the terms of freedom and possession: how can the land be simultaneously "free" and "possessed"? The sense of simultaneous freedom and unfreedom at work here reveals a standing contradiction already built into the land itself in its split valuation as both inalienable inheritance and transferable property.

Michael's speech merges incongruous conditions of freedom and necessity to suggest that neither is, after all, a precondition of the other. The land's patrimonial value exists alongside its property value, just as Luke's future presence appears equally as tangible as his imminent absence. The rhetorical traction, therefore, that Michael achieves here depends on taking a seemingly predetermined order of events and removing the sense of logical consequence. He could, of course, express his plan more flatfootedly: 'Luke shall leave us, and *thus* the land shall not go from us *because* it shall be unencumbered, which is how he will inherit it.' Instead, as the auxiliary "shall" takes over the work of the coordinating conjunctions, causal sequence falls away; the auxiliary makes it seem that each term in the series has originated independently of the others. The logic is not sequential but rhetorical; as if by fiat, Michael's grammatical repetition closes the entrenched gap between what is and what ought to be.¹³

Michael looks beyond a timeframe of before/after to a longer duration, one that transcends particular events. Within this protracted timeframe, Luke's absentee attachment to the land shades into a gothic sense of "possession" as spectral lingering. In

¹³ The redundant and iterative quality of Michael's syntax yields a paradoxically liberating effect through its gradual division of sound from sense, and in this respect the poem meshes with Jerome Christensen's sense of the demotic as "signs out of time." Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 26.

Michael's imagination, Luke stands doubled between his present and future selves; the landscape already bears the stamp of the Luke that will return to an unencumbered inheritance. The land may be temporarily alienated from Luke, but Luke can never be alienated from the land. This sense of virtual presence, therefore, helps to explain Michael's desperate and counterintuitive scheme of recovering Luke's inheritance by means of exiling Luke in the present. It is on behalf of the future Luke, the fully self-possessed individual, that Michael is striving, and in whose service he sees fit to expropriate Luke's labor, in the present, as an investment in Luke's future self. The younger man's imminent dispossession transcends short-term expediency to become a new and self-consistent ground of possibility in its own right: Michael comes to believe that Luke's freedom, a form of self-possession in the future anterior, can *only* be achieved by sending him away. Luke always *will have* possessed the land, even though presently he does not.¹⁴

In Michael's view, when his son finally comes into an ancestral inheritance that Luke himself will have redeemed (as a commodity, by expropriating his own labor in exchange for capital), it will be *as if* Luke were also inheriting his earlier unalienated self. Even though the result Michael looks for—Luke's inheritance—is literal, he can only express its value in terms of a figurative comparison, “free as is the wind,” illustrating, precisely, the impossibility of such an inheritance: in inheriting the land, Luke will inherit only the wind. Reading against the grain of Michael's speech, one might, as Marjorie

¹⁴ Michael's view of Luke's immanent state of indenture as consistent with his future freedom draws on the model of possessive individualism that C.B. Macpherson traces to the seventeenth century. In this model, “[t]he individual, it was thought, is free inasmuch as he is proprietor of his person and capacities.” C.B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

Levinson does, interpret these lines as ironizing the eventual failure of Michael's hopes.¹⁵ However, the irony of this passage is not so much in the future as in the present: even while the future Michael hopes for still seems possible, he cannot express the value of that future *except* through a borrowed metaphor whose proper tenor runs counter to his own hopes.

For Levinson, Michael is a figure of poetic failure because he cannot translate his ideals into lived realities. But in the narrator's conjectural framework, he does not need to. The poem's ideal and temporal worlds exist in parallel; a failure of real-world results cannot exhaust the ideal. The point as I take it, then, is not so much the improbability that Michael's plan for Luke's inheritance will succeed as the impossibility of expressing what that inheritance would look like, even *were* it to succeed. Michael's figurative language hints at a kind of value that he himself cannot quite imagine, one that exists outside of the pragmatic sequence of getting and spending that otherwise governs the family's lives. The future that Michael holds out for may, as he hopes, emerge *through* that sequence, but it will not be *of* it. Instead Luke's inheritance will reveal itself gradually, discontinuously, recursively, like the restless movement of the wind.

Michael aims to give Luke a future whose value he cannot explain, and this disjunction follows from a life already spent in the service of an ideal he himself never knew. As he tells Luke,

¹⁵ The lines, as Levinson points out, evoke Proverbs 11:29: "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind." In Levinson's reading, Michael's "free as is" creates a double syntax, equivocating between a usage that is adverbial (Luke will possess the land *freely*, unencumbered by mortgages) and one that is adjectival (an existential *freedom* of Luke himself). Levinson points out how the latter, adjectival reading of the simile transforms Michael's words into an unwitting prophecy that receives its "terrible fulfillment" in Luke's prodigal dissolution by the poem's end. Levinson's reading therefore looks ahead to Celeste Langan's argument that Wordsworth's poetry reflects the pathos of the liberal subject, for whom freedom means primarily negative freedom. Marjorie Levinson, "Spiritual economics: a reading of 'Michael'," *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 70.

These fields were burthen'd when they came to me;
 'Till I was forty years of age, not more
 Than half of my inheritance was mine,
 I toil'd and toil'd; God bless'd me in my work,
 And 'till these three weeks past the land was free. (384-88)

In anthropomorphizing the land as a burdened subject whom he has worked heroically to “free,” Michael downplays the fact that he is the subject to whom the burden really applies: he has worked his whole life to redeem an inheritance that should have been his by birthright. Through this reversal, the georgic ideal he imagines has been replaced with a compulsory routine; life, for Michael, happens while he is waiting for it to begin.

Notwithstanding Michael’s frustration at finding himself caught in a holding-pattern, that pattern nonetheless begins to take on a forward momentum of its own through sheer accumulated repetition: “I toil’d and toil’d.” This repeated toil extends beyond the weeks and years by which Michael measures his equity in the land; in fact, it preexists Michael himself. Though he shares in the land’s burden, he cannot fully account for it since he was not present at its origin. That burden began in a past Michael cannot trace and extends into a future he cannot foresee. Thus the land has become the experiencing subject of the story Michael tells: “These fields were burthen’d when they came to me ... And ‘till these three weeks past the land was free.” In this narrative, Michael imagines himself as a martyr exhausting his own resources, his own labor-power and that of his son, into an ongoing work of emancipating the land itself. As the desired payoff shifts into the figurative and the timeframe expands into the indefinite, Michael begins to sound less like someone holding out for a particular result and more like someone holding onto an idea—freedom, an inheritance—that cannot yet be deliberately worked towards because its meaning has not yet been worked out.

3. Feeling in the Future Anterior

Although Michael overtly frames his efforts in terms of present means aiming at future ends, his imaginative commitments seem to extend beyond the possibility or impossibility of their realization, either in lived experience or in narrative time. Thus Michael moves away from his ostensible goal—Luke’s future—and towards a more open-ended form of attachment without a clear inheritor or payoff. This open-ended attachment reflects, in turn, the spirit in which the narrator inherits the story, however figurative that inheritance remains. The story of Michael and Luke is one that in the narrator’s childhood, he says,

... led me on to feel
 For passions that were not my own, and think
 (At random and imperfectly indeed)
 On man, the heart of man, and human life. (30-33)

The concluding slippage between these abstract object-lessons suggests that they are not, after all, the narrator’s object, any more than any particular “event” could be said to be his subject; the tale’s value, rather, is contained in the habit of association by which the narrator has been “led ... on to feel / For passions that were not my own.” That habit itself is what this story is about, and not any particular insight such feeling or thinking has bestowed.

The shift in emphasis from what the narrative is about to how its narrator learns to attend to it in the first place corresponds, in turn, with a changed notion of poetic purpose. In the Preface, Wordsworth theorizes poetic purpose as something that emerges only retroactively, and precisely as a result of a circular method that fails to take a more definitive object. “Not that I mean to say,” he cautions,

that I always began to write with a distinct purpose formally conceived; but I believe that my habits of meditation have so formed my feelings, as that my descriptions of such objects as strongly excite those feelings, will be found to carry along with them a *purpose*.¹⁶

The poetry traces its ostensible “objects” only to find that they refer, in turn, back to prior “habits” of thought and feeling whose value might best be described, in Kantian phrase, as purposiveness without purpose. This form-giving potential does not begin in the mind of the author, not even as a felt absence that leads the author in search of meaning; instead such purposiveness emerges between the lines while the author is looking elsewhere.

In his commitment to digression, Wordsworth would seem to be at odds with his own title character, whose life has consisted in an unremitting routine of industry: “the Sun itself / Has scarcely been more diligent than I” (243-44). By his own admission, Michael can ill afford to waste time on anything but his one overriding purpose of redeeming his land from its past and present financial encumbrances. And yet Michael, too, now catches himself wandering in thought, momentarily forgetful of his erstwhile aim. Even in the poem’s climactic moment, as Michael instructs Luke to lay the sheepfold’s cornerstone in memorial to a patrimony secured, his attention shifts, instead, to his impending loss:

‘Luke, thou hast been bound to me
Only by links of love, when thou art gone
What will be left to us!—But, I forget
My purposes.’ (411-14)

The plural form of the noun speaks to a confusion of “purposes” as Michael tries to tie together an inheritance in different registers of value—the material and the immaterial, property value and patrimonial tradition—and belonging to different subjects, Luke and

¹⁶ Wordsworth, “Preface,” 98.

the land itself. Nonetheless, these shifting values and goals all revolve around a purposive logic of present means aiming at future ends. And as that future orientation falls away, what remains are the “links of love” from time out of mind, or what the poet might call the “habits of meditation” around which the poetic materials slowly coalesce.

While he at some level foresees that sending Luke away to the city will constitute an irreversible loss, Michael shies away from facing that knowledge directly. Rather than suggest a personal failing, however, his reticence seems to square with the poem’s investment in a kind of knowledge that cannot be directly ascertained because it does not, in the end, reside at the level of propositional content. Instead it inheres in the poem’s structures of digression, repetition, and return, in the associations Michael finds himself unable to shake. Michael’s strength of feeling consists not in the calculation of loss and gain but in the strength of habit that drives his work. The kind of anxious self-analysis that marks Michael’s crisis-moment, in other words, has no relevance to the substance of a life spent in embodied activity and embodied feeling. He persists in his emotional attachments because he has always felt that way; he continues in the cyclical activity of animal husbandry for no other reason than because that is what he has always done.

For the poet of the Preface, the meaning of Michael’s lived routine would appear self-evident: the value of poetry, similarly, consists in the repeated practice, not in any prescribed aim. That tacit premise is what justifies habits of feeling despite the apparent haphazardness of the subject-matter that elicits feeling in the first place. For the poetic narrator, meanwhile, repetition means continuing to make a claim on his audience even as that audience becomes ever more abstract and hypothetical. The narrator makes it clear that while he is speaking to a visiting outsider, the story is not for him; instead it is told

For the delight of a few natural hearts,
And with yet fonder feeling, for the sake

Of youthful Poets, who among these Hills
Will be my second self when I am gone. (36-39)

The narrator's seeming willingness to relinquish his own claim on the story remains ambiguous, since those to whom he wills the story are none other than the narrator's own transubstantiated presence, his "second self" persisting in spectral form. The poem, therefore, remains oddly circular: the narrator cycles among given subjects (shepherds, youthful poets, the land itself) without ever settling on any one of them as his final inheritor or object of concern. Narration and the sense of feeling attached to it operate through accumulation and recursion, and this slow persistence becomes its own narrative object. Less a direct inheritance than a will-in-trust, the narrator's story coheres as an ongoing process rather than in an anticipated endpoint.

The narrator's opening dedication, in its indirectness and reflexivity, refers to a measure of feeling that, like the narrative itself, has been detached from a final telos. The narrator may have that same sense of undirected feeling in mind when he describes Michael's affection for his native fields and hills as

A pleasurable feeling of blind love,
The pleasure which there is in life itself. (78-79)

This pleasure, which can only be felt, not thought, depends on particular objects but does not consist in them, and this makes Michael a figure for the poet whose "descriptions of such objects as strongly excite [his] feelings" continually return him to the "habits of meditation" that formed those feelings in first place.

The pathos of Michael's situation lies in his gradual realization that he may never achieve the future he hopes for in anything other than a provisional sense. Thus in the midst of his account to Luke, Michael slips into an unaccountable aside: "—It looks as if it never could endure / Another Master" (389-90). In place of his erstwhile language of

equivalence and substitution, Michael's subordinating conjunction, "as if," underscores the fictionality of a personification that makes no change in the real world. The figure of speech suggests both Michael's jealous intimacy with a land whose "look" only he can read and his corresponding awareness that the land *could* endure another master, and that it might very well not be Luke, either.

That same desire to secure Luke's inheritance, coupled with the same awareness of the impossibility of that desire, also motivates an earlier digressive remark as Michael explains his plan to Isabel. Michael imagines his undead body rising from the grave, tormented by the proleptic thought of a stranger possessing his land:

[Y]et if these fields of ours
Should pass into a Stranger's hand, I think
That I could not lie quiet in my grave.' (240-42)

Once again the remark seems half-muttered, in equal measure earnest and self-conscious: the conjectured possibility, again, remains a figure of speech. Desiring, of course, does not make it so, as Michael knows all too well. Nevertheless, the desire remains.

The same self-conscious impossibility that marks his figurative speech applies, moreover, even to Michael's more explicit motivations. As he expresses to Luke his wish to pass on to him his ancestors' lifeways along with their land, he nonetheless phrases that wish in the past tense of failed possibility: "I wish'd that thou should'st live the life they lived" (381). That he persists in that wish even after having given up real hope for its realization signals, again, a kind of mental fortitude that exists in the desire itself, not in its attainment. "There is a comfort in the strength of love," the narrator tells us; "'Twill make a thing endurable, which else / Would break the heart" (458-60). Importantly, however, endurance is not recompense; this is not "Tintern Abbey," and the narrator knows it. Michael's particular "strength of love" derives from the earnestness with which

he still wishes that Luke *could* have lived the life of his ancestors, even as he foresees the impossibility of that ever happening. While the possibility itself disappears, the ingrained desire directed at that possibility remains as a residual force of feeling. Michael's residual feeling becomes a condition that the poet shares with him, in turn: the poet finds himself continuing to think on and feel for Michael, even though he cannot quite explain why.

In Michael's desire for an unattainable object, an uncanny metaphysics emerges: in anticipation of eventual self-possession, the ghost of Luke's once and future self continues to linger in and possess the land, while Michael comes back as a protective and vengeful *genius loci*. Thus Michael attempts not to downplay Luke's impending absence but rather to make it sufficiently conspicuous, revealing a longer horizon of expectation beyond the purview of his own family. Michael and Luke remain the ghostly heirs to a story that has yet to be written, though they are not the ones who will write it.¹⁷

4. "The Old Cumberland Beggar": Slow Feeling

Michael fails to achieve the future he imagines for himself and Luke. But that failure also manifests, more positively, as a capacity for persistence in the face of the obsolescence of one's former purposes. Such persistence becomes clearer in relation to another poem that appeared along with "Michael" in the 1800 and later editions of the

¹⁷ In characterizing dispossession as the grounds of a future repossession, I am mindful of Athena Athanasiou's distinction between dispossession as simple deprivation and as an alternative form of selfhood, or what she calls "a constitutive self-displacement, that is, the constitution of the subject through certain kinds of foreclosure and preemptive loss." Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 5. In this "constitutive" form of dispossession, Athanasiou goes on to say, "acts of catachrestic 'making present' often displace the terms (that is, including property, priority, and propriety) by which presence has attained its normative omnipresence, as it were." Butler and Athanasiou, 15.

Lyrical Ballads, “The Old Cumberland Beggar.”¹⁸ Whereas Michael is on the verge of losing his land along with the family history from which he draws his sense of purpose, the Beggar appears divested of history and purpose to begin with. Without past or future, he seems locked in the perpetual present of his daily round, moving through the village and collecting charity. His slow, cumulative movement, however, makes visible a narrative that would otherwise remain invisible at the level of chronological events. In the same way that Michael’s hopes for Luke outlast the possibility of their realization, the Beggar’s narrative does not need to take place in any straightforwardly empirical way in order to still matter. The Beggar makes no progress, and by virtue of this fact he points to a kind of history that coalesces not as event but as affective attachment.¹⁹

Situated on the margins of society, and by that virtue able to move across class boundaries to elicit a charitable response from all social classes, the Beggar acts as the

¹⁸ William Wordsworth, “The Old Cumberland Beggar, a Description,” in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. All references are to the 1802 edition.

¹⁹ My reading of the Beggar as a figure of slow accumulation and enduring affective attachments follows in the spirit of critics who similarly read the Beggar as a figure that cannot be accounted for, and, for that reason, cannot be discounted. For Joshua King and Adam Potkay, the Beggar cannot be accounted for by sympathetic identification. In their readings, the Beggar, in his opacity, prompts an interpersonal ethics based on distance and alienness. Joshua King, “The Old Cumberland Beggar’: Form and Frustrated Sympathy,” *The Wordsworth Circle* 41, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 45-52, Literature Resource Center; Adam Potkay, “Close Encounters I” and “Close Encounters II,” in *Wordsworth’s Ethics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 31-70. In the historicist readings of David Chandler, Alex Dick, and David Simpson, meanwhile, the Beggar cannot be accounted for by political economy. For this set of critics, the Beggar reflects Wordsworth’s aversion to legal or interpersonal obligation. David Chandler, “Wordsworth versus Malthus: The Political Context(s) of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’,” *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, series no. 115 (July 2001): 72-85; Alex J. Dick, “Poverty, Charity, Poetry: The Unproductive Labors of ‘The Old Cumberland Beggar’,” *Studies in Romanticism* 39, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 365-96, doi:10.2307/25601456; David Simpson, “Poets, paupers and peripatetics: the politics of sympathy,” in *Wordsworth’s Historical Imagination: The Poetry of Displacement* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 160-84. My focus, finally, is less on Wordsworth’s politics, or his view of interpersonal ethics as such—less an argument about the Beggar per se than about histories of feeling and the way in which those histories resist representation except through the kind of formal, accretive movement the Beggar embodies. Nonetheless, I draw on these critics’ insights and share with them a view of the Beggar’s fundamental resistance to accountability in Wordsworth’s representation.

unwitting archive of an untold number of small kindnesses. These kindnesses are performed reflexively and unthinkingly, but their accumulation over time in the person of the Beggar takes on a life of its own, over and above the Villagers' conscious intentions:

While thus he creeps
 From door to door, the Villagers in him
 Behold a record which together binds
 Past deeds and offices of charity
 Else unremember'd, and so keeps alive
 The kindly mood in hearts which lapse of years,
 And that half-wisdom half-experience gives
 Make slow to feel, and by sure steps resign
 To selfishness and cold oblivious cares. (79-87)

The Beggar embodies an ephemeral history of charitable acts, each insignificant and forgettable in itself but meaningful when added up over time. Adding up to *what*, though, must be the question. When the narrator observes that the Villagers' charitable acts are "else unremember'd," he does not refer to memories narrowly saved from oblivion but to acts that were never fully present to memory in the first place. The record the Villagers behold in the Beggar therefore registers with the Villagers noncognitively, as a "kindly mood" rather than conscious thought.

In his creeping movement, the Beggar both occasions and reflects a kind of affective attachment that remains noncognitive. Conscious recollection, that is, gives way to the recursive movement of repeated experience. That movement registers as structure rather than content: in "hearts ... [made] slow to feel," the Beggar instills slow feeling. For the Villagers, this means that habit overtakes conscious thought:

Where'er the aged Beggar takes his rounds,
 The mild necessity of use compels
 To acts of love; and habit does the work
 Of reason; yet prepares that after joy
 Which reason cherishes. (90-94)

On this account, charity has little to do with sympathy. The Villagers don't give to the beggar because they feel for him; their "acts of love" are after all "compelled," not freely given, and they only emerge through the "mild necessity of use." The mechanical compulsion associated with slow feeling overrides any sense of motivation or reward for charity. Rather than demand a feeling of love for the neighbor as the prerequisite to charity, the necessity of use merely compels the loving act. And this complicates what sounds like an emotional payoff that accrues retroactively, as if recovering something missed the first time around. In contrast, feeling here is not missed because it was never fully present in the first place; even in retrospect, it exists not as love per se but as an ambiguous "after joy" and "kindly mood."

Slow feeling, as the narrator observes it at work in the Villagers, constitutes a kind of affect that is protracted across time. That protraction makes it difficult to pin down a particular affect, or its referent, by name. The long duration and epistemic indeterminacy that attend slow feeling, moreover, constitute a condition that the narrator finds himself caught up in along with the Villagers. After all, the narrator, too, claims a longstanding familiarity with the Beggar: "Him from my childhood have I known" (22). The almost interrogative form of the statement, however, leaves the payoff of such familiarity undecided. Later in the poem, accordingly, the narrator doubles down on this indeterminacy by recasting the matter in the third person. "Some there are," he speculates, who from the Beggar

... have perchance receiv'd

.....
 That first mild touch of sympathy and thought,
 In which they found their kindred with a world
 Where want and sorrow were. (97-108)

Carefully avoiding the claim that he himself has received that touch of sympathy, the narrator instead posits a conjectural framework for sympathy that acts without a clear subject or indeed a clear object apart from the “world” writ large, and that can only be talked about, seemingly, in the possibilistic language of the subjunctive (“have *perchance* receiv’d,” “Where want and sorrow *were*”). The progress and result of such a feeling cannot be told apart from its “first mild touch,” and in this regard the passage chimes with the “mild necessity of use” according to which the Villagers’ habits stand in for affections that can never quite be known as such. On this account, feeling for others is not so much recollected in tranquility as inferred to be present, despite one’s inability to represent such feeling to oneself discursively.

The indirectness of feeling associated with the Beggar chimes with what Pheng Cheah calls virtuality, “a force that is impossible, something not yet and no longer of the order of presence and the possible”: both radically past and radically future. This archaic and unanticipated force, in turn, “apolitically implies an absolute or incalculable hospitality to the other that demands a response.” In Cheah’s view, virtuality exposes the insufficiency of the logic of appropriation and self-mastery in such a way that we open ourselves to the demands of the other.²⁰ And this is the social utility of the Beggar, in Wordsworth’s view: the virtual presence that reflects to each member of the rural community a felt sense of his or her own spectral continuity through time. In this sense, the Beggar’s exceptional status makes him the rural community’s plus-one—its impossible or inappropriate other, one who does not so much demand or solicit a

²⁰ Pheng Cheah, “Non-Dialectical Materialism,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, edited by Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 80-81.

response (indeed, he never speaks in the poem) as much as elicit in those he meets an unexpected demand upon themselves.

In the poem's conjectural schema, the sense of connection to a larger world emerges only indirectly, by being dispossessed of one's own concerns and finding oneself caught up in a larger (though unseen) network of concerns. Both the Villagers and the narrator receive from the Beggar, therefore, an awareness of the other—and, by extension, an awareness of a larger world beyond their daily experience, resulting in a provisional *ekstasis* or moving beyond oneself. In this way the poem's narrator looks ahead to the "Michael" narrator's claim that the tale he now tells, when he himself first heard it as a child, had "led me on to feel / For passions that were not my own." By invoking the gothic trope of being led on by an invisible hand, the "Michael" narrator suggests the ultimate unknowability both of others' motivating passions and of the process by which the narrator arrives at fellow-feeling with passions he cannot name. In this moment, and in the "Beggar" narrator's description of the guiding power inherent in the "mild touch of sympathy and thought" and in the "mild necessity of use," the sense is of a larger design at work in the world.

The conceit of an unseen design that motivates sympathy works in two directions at once: it leads Wordsworth's narrators to feel for others even as it dispossesses them of any insight they might claim to have gleaned on the basis of such feeling. After all, as the "Michael" narrator says, the story he tells only taught him to feel *for* the passions of others, not to directly feel those passions himself—that is, to feel *as* those he reflects on. Conjectural feeling stands apart, then, from projected feeling, or what Adam Smith has in

mind when he defines sympathy as an imaginary change of situations.²¹ Sympathy in Smith reasons by analogy from one's own situation to that of the other, and in this way it presumes approximate knowledge of what the other feels; sympathy in Wordsworth, by contrast, adduces no reasons as such for fellow-feeling, but instead a compulsion to feel—a necessity, a touch—that remains explicitly figurative and tentative, and that thus does not presume to close the gap between self and other. Learning to feel for passions not one's own, then, is also learning to entertain a figure of thought that does not amount (at least not yet, and possibly never) to a discursive insight.²²

The feelings the Beggar provokes appear as circular as the movements of the Beggar himself; thus the kind of difference the Beggar makes in the world—or in the poem—must look, for now, like being stuck in a rut. The activity the Beggar elicits on his behalf appears uncertain, whether the Villagers' apprehension of a "kindly mood" that never quite amounts to a conscious thought, or the narrator's struggles to articulate the social utility of a person whose kind, as the prefatory note predicts, will in any event "probably soon be extinct." In pursuing his defense of a poetic subject already declared obsolete at the outset, therefore, the narrator mimics the Villagers in their habitual acts of

²¹ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1982), 317.

²² In David Simpson's account, the fact that Wordsworth's dispossessed characters remain opaque to narrators and readers and thus unavailable to sympathetic identification reveals Wordsworth's troubled awareness, with Smith, that sympathetic exchange, like commodity exchange, "depend[s] upon abstractions as the bearers of value." David Simpson, "At the limits of sympathy," in *Wordsworth, Commodification and Social Concern: The Poetics of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 39. Simpson's line of argument—the entanglement of Wordsworth's poetry in the circularity of capitalist exchange—is already familiar from Marjorie Levinson and Celeste Langan. And Wordsworth does indeed recognize sympathy's potential to repeat capitalism's dehumanizing effects. But I want to emphasize, instead, the way in which sympathy's inherent figurativeness also serves to implicitly acknowledge its own limitations. In this way, figurative abstraction in Wordsworth makes room for what it cannot account for: the feelings of the dispossessed other, certainly, but also—and by extension—one's own affective attachments, which represent histories of feeling that resist diminishment by way of abstraction or exchange.

charity that never amount to a conscious purpose. Such a pursuit, in both cases, is as much about a reflexive stance as it is about the ostensible object of attention, the Beggar himself.

The vagrant's ability both to embody and to prompt that reflexivity also motivates Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence," composed in 1802 and published in the 1807 *Poems in Two Volumes*. Here again the narrator focuses his attention on another vagrant figure, another old man seemingly bereft of purpose, stirring the pond with his staff in an echo of the beggar's rounds. The narrator interprets this activity as a fruitless attempt at reading. The old man, he says,

... fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
As if he had been reading in a book.²³

Upon closer inspection, however, the narrator discerns that the man is a leech-gatherer, and that his apocryphal reading is nothing more than the unthinking daily habit of his livelihood. Yet, in his half-satirical and half-hopeful attribution of occult vision to this figure, it turns out that the narrator is the one muddying the waters: the man *is* reading, after all—for signs of the leeches.

The Leech-gatherer's concerns at first seem limited by the banality of his task.

After many years, his only observation is that the leeches are disappearing:

‘Once I could meet with them on every side;
But they have dwindled long by slow decay;
Yet still I persevere, and find them where I may.’ (131-33)

The Leech-gatherer tells a story that emerges in between the lines, one without discernible events. His long habitual repetition of subsistence, like the Beggar's daily

²³ William Wordsworth, "Resolution and Independence," in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), lines 86-88. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

round, appears meaningless at the level of content. His story makes sense to the narrator, instead, as a reflexive stance: a compulsion of economic necessity that doubles the narrator's experience of mental compulsion in the act of poetic composition.

The reciprocity between the narrator and the Leech-gatherer consists in a shared condition of seeking without the possibility of closure. The narrator enters into that condition through his compulsively repeated questions, "What kind of work is that which you pursue?" (95) and "How is it that you live, and what is it that you do?" (126). These questions quickly turn away from seeking conceptual resolution and turn rhetorical; the narrator cannot, after all, expect a different answer than the one the old man has already given him. The questions enable a reflexive attitude by means of which the narrator can stand alongside himself in thought without the immediate need for closure. This capacity for persistence doubles the Leech-gatherer's own perseverance. "Resolution" in the poem, therefore, does not so much occur as a conceptual turn in the narrator's thoughts—an object-lesson or dialectical synthesis—as accrue in the movements his thoughts take as they keep returning, like the Leech-gatherer himself, to what is in front of him. What the narrator has gained by the poem's end is simply the ability to remain in a space of uncertainty, of looking without yet knowing what one hopes to find.

5. Figures of Thought

In the *Beggar and the Leech-gatherer*, Wordsworth's narrators are confronted with an inner life that remains opaque to them, and in this regard they take up the conjectural pursuit of knowledge that only exists, at present, as a figure of thought. In continuing to think on and feel for the dispossessed other despite that epistemic gap, the

narrators experience conjectural literature's ethical turn: narrative's engagement with the stories of others even when those stories preclude consolidation *as* narrative, as a reflection of the other's inner life. The compulsion to give shape to that inner life, nonetheless, reorients Wordsworth's narrators from the question of what others are thinking to the question of what thoughts are there to be had in any given moment, even if no one is thinking them—and what difference such figurative thoughts might make in how we attend to the world.

“The Old Cumberland Beggar” opens with an image of the Beggar apparently absorbed in thought. At the same time that it registers that impression, however, the image also asserts its own figurativeness and thus its distance from whatever may really be passing in the Beggar's mind. As he eats his lunch, the Beggar conducts a kind of inventory of the contents of his bag, from which

[h]e drew his scraps and fragments, one by one,
And scann'd them with a fix'd and serious look
Of idle computation. (10-12)

While the narrator describes the Beggar's look using the language of intentionality—“fix'd and serious”—he simultaneously denies intention as a real possibility. The narrator of “Resolution and Independence” maintains the same careful hypothetical distance between looking and reading when he says that the Leech-gatherer

fixedly did look
Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
As if he had been reading in a book. (86-88, emphasis mine)

The “Beggar” narrator's language of poetic “scanning” seems similarly invested in preserving that distance between knowledge and appearances.

In one sense, then, the reading metaphor in both cases highlights its own figurativeness: these figures are self-evidently *not* looking ahead to what comes next, but

merely looking for more of the same. But by the same token, the reading metaphor is apt, since the kind of attentiveness reading requires remains an ambiguous one, suspended between active choice and mechanistic compulsion.²⁴ The activities of conning and scanning, by dint of their “fixed,” metrical nature, occupy a cognitive middle-ground beyond mere purposelessness but before the articulation of a coherent purpose. Lily Gurton-Wachter describes this cognitive middle-ground in terms of a particular “rhythm” that accrues to the activity of reading Wordsworth’s poetry, a rhythm that the halting, enjambed form of the poetry encourages by creating a space, or interval, between the withdrawal of attention’s object and the lingering attentiveness produced as a result.²⁵ By means of this interval, Gurton-Wachter writes, “verse form heightens and highlights the rhythms of attention and inattention at work in all reading.”²⁶ Gurton-Wachter’s explanation of form as rhythm helps to make sense of the Beggar’s paradoxical stance of “serious” yet “idle” attention, of “computation” that yields no final account. In modeling an attitude of expectation without a particular object yet in view, then, the Leech-gatherer and Beggar reflect an activity that belongs to both the poetic reader and the poetic narrator in his work of versification.

The look of purposive activity that does not amount to a purpose turns out to be one that Wordsworth’s narrators share with those whose stories they tell. As a result, the distance between thought as such and the mere appearance of thought does not reduce to the difference between self and other, since that cognitive gap inheres also in the mind

²⁴ Cf. *Peter Bell*: “He looks, he cannot chuse but look, / Like one that’s reading in a book.” William Wordsworth, “Peter Bell,” in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), lines 548-49.

²⁵ Lily Gurton-Wachter, “Bent Earthwards: Wordsworth’s Poetics of the Interval,” in *Watchwords: Romanticism and the Poetics of Attention* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 84-109.

²⁶ Gurton-Wachter, 105.

that explains it. Accordingly, the image of the Beggar as “[i]n the sun ... He sate,” counting his scraps, recurs in the French Revolution books of *The Prelude*, but this time as an image of the narrator himself:

Where silent zephyrs sported with the dust
Of the Bastile I sate in the open sun
And from the rubbish gathered up a stone,
And pocketed the relick in the guise
Of an enthusiast; yet, in honest truth,
Though not without some strong incumbencies,
And glad—could living man be otherwise?—
I looked for something which I could not find,
Affecting more emotion than I felt.²⁷

Could someone, indeed, be otherwise than glad in this moment? The question’s defensive tone suggests the narrator’s awareness that, even in retrospect, he still has no right to his dissatisfaction then, as a young progressive invested in the revolutionary cause.²⁸ But the question suggests, too, an unanswered inquiry that goes beyond the merely rhetorical: *could* someone be otherwise than glad? And if so, what would that look like? The self-conscious aside, no matter how parenthetical, nonetheless motivates the narrator’s ongoing search for a basis for thinking and feeling other than simple “enthusiasm.”

The narrator remains aware, however, that enthusiasm constitutes his only plausible justification for sitting in the dust and picking at scraps. A plausible justification, perhaps, but not an adequate one. For when sociable reason seems to compel satisfaction with the present course of events, the narrator suggests that to keep on looking askance at the present must seem like an irrational aversion to self-evident truth, or (worse yet) like bad faith. For John Locke, enthusiasm constitutes “[t]he way of

²⁷ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*, ed. Jonathan Wordsworth, M. H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York: Norton, 1979), 9.63-71. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by book and line number. All references are to the 1805 edition.

²⁸ I am thinking here of Rei Terada’s construction: “The phenomenophile is convinced that he has ‘no right’ ... to his dissatisfaction.” Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction, Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 24.

immediate revelation; of illumination without search; and of certainty without proof, and without examination.”²⁹ But for the *Prelude* narrator, enthusiasm is only a guise; he goes through the motions of enthusiasm while knowing full well that he has not found what he is looking for. In this context, continuing to hold out for something better will appear peevish to others, and feel indefensible to oneself. Looking *for* something which one cannot find, that is, must look *like* being the Beggar, sitting in isolation and poring over one’s scraps and fragments.

In the Revolution books, the *Prelude* narrator finds himself in a position similar to those of Wordsworth’s vagrants: he has been written out of the story of common life. Moreover, he is unable to write himself back into his *own* story—his time in France—because any sense of purpose that would give structure to that story remains elusive, even in retrospect. The narrator could not name to himself what he was looking for then, nor can he name it now, except to note that “[o]f all these various objects” found in his travels, some served “to recompense the traveller’s pains” (9.75), others to “shew / The temper of my mind as then it was” (9.73-74). Whether at the time or in retrospect, the rationalization remains, either way, explicitly compensatory, a provisional stand-in for the missing key that would retroactively give meaning to the narrator’s search. This search for an object that has yet to emerge and an idea that has yet to take shape corresponds to the logic of the souvenir in Susan Stewart’s account. The souvenir, Stewart says, provides a narrative as a substitute for an original context and a presumed experience. This substitution reveals, in turn, that the tourist’s experience was in fact

²⁹ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (London: Penguin, 1997), 617. The figure of the enthusiast will recur in the character of Victor Frankenstein, whom I discuss in the following chapter.

never available as such in the first place—it only takes shape as and through the narrative supplement.³⁰

In Wordsworth's account of his time in France, experience not only remains figurative but actually presents itself to the narrator's mind *as* figuration. As the narrator's intermittent feeling that he is missing out on historical events unfolding elsewhere continues to recur, that feeling becomes, in its turn, just what it means to experience the presence of history. Thus in the Square of the Carousel the narrator finds himself

... upon these
 And other sights looking as doth a man
 Upon a volume whose contents he knows
 Are memorable, but from him locked up,
 Being written in a tongue he cannot read,
 So that he questions the mute leaves with pain
 And half upbraids their silence. (10.48-54)

The reading metaphor suggests an indexical form of thought in the future anterior: because the text remains unreadable to the narrator, the meaning that the text withholds will always *have* been “memorable,” even though at present there is no particular memory to be gleaned. Present experience, on this model, depends on the premise of its correspondence to a future moment of insight that cannot be known, for now, other than hypothetically. This premise puts the narrator in an awkward halfway position that the overextended metaphorical language reflects. His frustration with an experience that is

³⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 135. Stewart further explains that when the tourist gifts the souvenir to someone else, he performs a double substitution. Stewart's example is the postcard: an iconic image accepted in the collective imagination as a figurative substitute for the context of origin—the Eiffel Tower as a stand-in for Paris—becomes further displaced from that context as the tourist buying the postcard internalizes that public history as his own personal experience. He can thus present the iconic image to friends and family back home as a substitute for his own experience of the city: “Through narrative the souvenir substitutes a context of perpetual consumption for its context of origin.” Stewart, 135.

denied to him—and that thus cannot be expressed other than as a metaphor—is, the narrator implies, justified; but at the same time, he is forced to acknowledge that if he “questions the mute leaves with pain,” letting himself be frustrated by his own figure of speech, then he has only himself to blame.

For the *Prelude* narrator, as for the narrators of “Michael” and “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” the memorable names a story that persists in potentiality, though not one that he himself will ever tell. In this sense, the narrator’s position is that of the nostalgic. Susan Stewart defines nostalgia as “a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience.”³¹ Instead, nostalgia sets up a memorial to itself, to an “absence that is the very generating mechanism of desire”;³² and in so doing, the nostalgic, like Wordsworth’s narrator, acknowledges his dependence on the gap between the figurative and the literal. The memorable, then, names the bare form of thoughts without content.³³

In Wordsworth, accordingly, the impression of something missed and waiting to be recovered is one that the narrator acknowledges to be a conceit; the insight presumed to attend experience does not exist. But that insight is still possible, even if the narrator is not the one to think it. In presuming that there is meaningful content there, after all, the narrator infers the presence of a story that exists independently of his own understanding

³¹ Stewart, 23-24.

³² Stewart, 23-24.

³³ The figural instability and referential indeterminacy that Stewart ascribes to the souvenir also speak to what Svetlana Boym calls the “reflective” rather than “restorative” aspect of nostalgia, the side of nostalgia that ironizes and defers its own longing: “ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary.” This reflective nostalgia, “aware of the gap between identity and resemblance,” liberates a past that “is not made in the image of the present or seen as foreboding of some present disaster; rather, the past opens up a multitude of potentialities, non-teleological possibilities of historical development.” Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 50. What Wordsworth adds to this model, then, is a narrator who is well aware (like the reflective nostalgic) of the irony of his position and yet keeps pushing for conceptual resolution nonetheless—even though he does not expect to be the one to find it.

of it. That work of inference shows that the narrator has not given up on his search begun in the Square of the Bastille, only on the expectation that a particular object of experience will come into view. The formal structure of object-oriented activity remains intact, regardless, and prompts a reflexive turn: in place of looking for something that he cannot find, the narrator now looks “as doth a man / Upon a volume.” The shift from looking *for* to looking *as* reaffirms the sense of figurative distance implicit in the earlier passage, and confirms the way in which thought in Wordsworth cannot be known apart from the figuration it takes.

The *Prelude* narrator’s explicit turn to the figurative by way of the reading metaphor in the Square of the Carousel episode recalls the language of the vagrant poems as it gives form to the cognitive middle-ground of seeking without finding. That middle-ground receives its embodiment in the Beggar and his “fix’d and serious look”; in the Leech-gatherer who “fixedly did look ... as if he had been reading in a book”; and finally in the narrators themselves, whose reflections on the vagrant constrain the narrators to a self-consciously figurative, *as-if* mental stance, a stance like Michael’s as he tries to defend his attachment to the land in the face of circumstances he knows to be beyond his control: “—It looks as if it never could endure / Another Master.” In each instance, the speaker abandons the possibility of redeeming his meaning logically, instead deferring such redemption to the level of phenomenology and the “look.” These thoughts remain explicitly provisional and unjustified, and in this way they register less as positive assertions than as imaginative possibilities: not the achieved mental act but simply the form that thought *might* take, under different circumstances. While Wordsworth’s speakers assert in such moments that the world *can* be read in terms of ideas, they

simultaneously relinquish their own claim to be able to *do* that sort of reading, and in this way the idealizing move of fitting mind to world remains potential rather than actual.

The *Prelude* narrator's struggle to give shape to experiences that turn out never to have been fully present as such reveals an otherness at work in his thoughts that he cannot account for. The figurativeness that his narrative keeps running up against turns out to be not just the vehicle through which thought is represented but the ground of thought in the first place, that which makes experience possible. The narrator's thoughts, it seems, were never his own to begin with. And this places him in unexpected community with Wordsworth's Beggar, whose formal attitude of habitual receptiveness to the world around him follows from Wordsworth's assertion of the inherent figurativeness of thought—its persistence through time as form rather than content—and shows what that persistence looks like in practice.

The formal persistence of thought collapses the distinction between the "Beggar" narrator and the Beggar himself, since the one who looks and searches turns out to share a common attunement to the world with the one who only appears to be looking and searching. The narrator takes his cue for his own formal activity of versification, accordingly, from the Beggar's form hunched blindly over the features of the landscape. These features are meaningless at the level of content but invested with habitual meaning by dint of daily repetition that doubles, for the narrator, as a kind of structural repetition:

Thus, from day to day,
Bowbent, his eyes for ever on the ground,
He plies his weary journey, seeing still,
And never knowing that he sees, some straw,
Some scattered leaf, or marks which, in one track,
The nails of cart or chariot wheel have left
Impressed on the white road, in the same line,
At distance still the same. (51-58)

The Beggar's view of the road he walks on every day constitutes a form of looking without seeing. In the narrator's account, that unseeing vision gives the Beggar access to an expanded field of perceptual possibilities that do not, however, result in the perceptual act. Through him, instead, the narrator unfolds a growing inventory of possible observations that are each taken up momentarily and abandoned in turn as the narrator looks in vain for some telling detail that will have made this weary journey worthwhile, something to relieve the monotony that has become the narrator's own.

Given poetic form, the Beggar's vision remains a hypothetical, processual exercise, one that is revealed not through signs but through illegible "marks," not through careful reading but through careless inattention. Far from readerly absorption, this is a model of reading as mental vacancy: the eyes tracking the markings on the white page as if by rote, the syntax doubling back on itself redundantly, the lines of verse running together into "one track." All that saves the eye from total standstill, it seems, is the ear's attention to alliteration and assonance, to moments of acoustic punctuation that, like the nails of the cart, have "left / Impressed" some vestige of textual continuity. These residual markers of absent meaning compel the text to carry on alongside the Beggar, the metrical feet proceeding "in the same line, / At distance still the same" (57-58). The mechanical work of versification—of scanning, tracking, and turning—folds narrator and Beggar into the same cognitive middle-ground.

The Beggar's experience becomes the narrator's, then, because of the way in which poetry widens rather than closes the gap between them. Because the Beggar resists narration, the narrator finds himself telling over his lines, doubling and redoubling them in muttered speech as he wonders what they might mean—"bowbent" in thought like the Beggar in body. In his capacity to provoke that reflexive distance, the Beggar with his

stooping form mirrors the “bending figure” of the Old Man in “Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch,” early in the 1802 *Lyrical Ballads*.³⁴ The narrator of that poem represents the Old Man as

... one by whom
All effort seems forgotten, one to whom
Long patience has such mild composure given,
That patience now doth seem a thing, of which
He hath no need.³⁵

Mild composure looks ahead to the “mild necessity of use” and the “first mild touch of sympathy and thought” (in “The Old Cumberland Beggar,” later in the volume) in suggesting an appearance of design that does not, however, imply any truth-claims about it. Effort and patience only *seem* forgotten on the man’s part, after all. Nonetheless, the conditional turn of phrase in this passage does not quite imply its opposite—that the Old Man really is possessed of effort and patience. While his mild composure now may have been formed by those qualities, it no longer consists in them. The long duration of the man’s existence empties his labors of the intentionality (effort and patience) with which those labors began, thus making his state of composure appear self-generated. Mild composure here describes a sense of emergent form beyond either specifically mental composure or the shaping hand of poetic composition.

The passage offers a subject without a history, then, but only as a provisional fiction. At the same time, the hedging language reflects back on the narrator himself, who can only imagine his subject’s inner life by simultaneously positing and withholding the possibility of intentionality in the Old Man’s movement. Conjecture about what it might

³⁴ The poem appears in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* as “Old Man Travelling; Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch.” All subsequent editions retain only the shortened title.

³⁵ William Wordsworth, “Animal Tranquillity and Decay, a Sketch,” in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 8-12. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by line number. All references are to the 1802 edition.

be like to be the Old Man, therefore, becomes conjecture about what it is like to be the narrator thinking about the Old Man. That reflexivity ultimately precludes the possibility that the poem constitutes a retreat from the world, despite what its language of “settled quiet” might suggest (8). Nothing about the man’s purposiveness seems settled or quieted, not even as poetry—especially not as poetry, which here narrates its own disquiet. When the narrator suggests, therefore, that the man “does not move with pain, but moves / With thought” (6-7), he is offering neither an escape, nor a consolation, but simply the inherent figurativeness of thought as a condition in which the narrator himself shares.³⁶ And this shared condition makes room, in turn, for a kind of experience not constrained to the individual mind, nor to a determinate unfolding in time: the place of thought need not coincide, for the time being, with thought itself, nor with a particular thinker.

6. Waste and Remainder

In Wordsworth’s vagrant poetics, thought remains unassimilated both in experience and in representation. The Beggar tells over his scraps with “idle computation”; the *Prelude* narrator tells over his sights “with pain”; and the “Beggar” and “Animal Tranquillity” narrators tell over their lines with mechanical reflexivity. Such

³⁶ The poem’s ending reaffirms the impossibility of consolation by revealing that the man has in fact been moved by a tragic purpose, all along: he is “going many miles to take / A last leave of his Son, a Mariner, / Who from a sea-fight had been brought to Falmouth, / And there was dying in an hospital” (17-20). This brief story is put in direct speech in the 1798 *Lyrical Ballads*, in reported speech in the 1800, and omitted entirely in 1815. As these narrative shifts steadily displace the Old Man’s story, they also remove the emotional buffer of pathos by which the man could be assimilated to thought and by which the poem’s earlier ambiguities of outer look and inner life could be inferred to have been resolved. In this way the removal of a story, by withholding the possibility of facile sympathetic identification, furthers the poem’s project of returning to the world on its own terms, not as an abstraction.

thoughts constitute a scrapyard of poetic materials that can only be told over piecemeal, not told as a connected story. These materials remain figurative and provisional, and while they cannot therefore be made to count as such, they also cannot be discounted: their resistance to narrative assimilation is also resistance to erasure. Vagrant poetry's loose ends outlast a particular purpose or object of thought. By virtue of this fact, they offer possibilities for affective attachment beyond sympathetic identification, and for narrative imagination beyond the narrow purview of the individual story.

In the poetic economy of the vagrant text, unrealized possibilities for thought and feeling that appear to be wasted on the present nonetheless constitute a persistent remainder. Vagrant narrative can still register this remainder, even though it can neither account for it nor turn it to lyric account. What the "Beggar" narrator does record, instead, reduces at times to the contingency of what the Beggar sees, or of what the Villagers see through him:

... all behold in him
 A silent monitor, which on their minds
 Must needs impress a transitory thought
 Of self-congratulation, to the heart
 Of each recalling his peculiar boons,
 His charters and exemptions. (114-19)

The Beggar acts as a focal-point for the past actions of the Villagers, actions which, though insignificant at the time, metamorphose through this "silent monitor" into a sense of self—of coherent purpose extending through time—as constituted through the interplay of past and present. This emergent sense of purpose reflects, in turn, the dynamic form of the Beggar's economic subsistence. In the same way that the Leech-gatherer wanders about the country, harvesting a natural resource of the commons, so the Beggar maintains an opportunistic connection to the land and the community, using donations of money and food without ever properly owning those resources, since they

are given in charity and immediately consumed. Thus the Beggar's subsistence serves as the template for poetic narrative as it indexes, archives, and retrieves the past piecemeal, in "scraps and fragments, one by one" (10), without presenting the history of the Beggar and Villagers' relationship as a determinate causal sequence.

What he should make of that piecemeal history and of what it means to the Villagers, the narrator declines to say. While he posits in the Villagers' minds "a transitory thought / Of self-congratulation," that thought does not become its own end because it does not add up to anything self-evident. After all, the upshot of the self-congratulatory feeling registers in each mind separately, and to disparate effect—"to the heart / Of each recalling his peculiar boons" but leaving those boons, charters, and exemptions unspecified. This ambiguous sense of recollection, moreover, produces no apparent change in the Villagers' thoughts or actions as a result. Accordingly, the language of necessity—"must needs impress"—brackets the question of what may or may not be taking place in the Villagers' minds as a result of their encounter with the Beggar. While the passage sets out to imagine the Villagers thinking on the Beggar, then, all it can show for certain is the narrator thinking on the Villagers.

Recollection in the poem names the recovery of an experience that hardly existed the first time around, and that resists narrative assimilation even in the present of poetic composition. This resistance materializes in the bodily comportment of the Beggar, whose restful habit continually verges on restiveness. As he eats his midday meal, for example, the Beggar strives in vain to keep the crumbs from escaping:

And ever, scattered from his palsied hand,
That, still attempting to prevent the waste,
Was baffled still, the crumbs in little showers
Fell on the ground. (16-19)

Dispossessed even of self-mastery, the Beggar sees his purposes (modest as they are) displaced into a bodily tic that operates according to an inchoate purposiveness of its own. The Beggar finds, to his confusion, that his attempts at economy are self-defeating. And this self-defeating activity looks ahead to the end of the *Lyrical Ballads*, where Michael attempts to perform a tidy wholesale transfer of value, undiminished, from one register of possession to another but instead finds, to his sorrow, that the figurative freedom of the wind “passing over” the land has no real agency to bring about an actual transfer of freedom and self-possession from father to son.

The struggles of these figures parallel the struggles of a narrator aiming at textual economy but finding himself mired, instead, in something more like compulsion, redundancy, and waste. Such a project appears, on its face, gothically futile: the narrator is trapped in a maze of his own design. But the bent of the vagrant poem is to represent this futility as a necessary condition of holding on to histories that are still waiting for their redeeming contexts. If the narrator could tell his story with the expectation of what it might come to mean, that would be to give up on meaning that is recursive and processual—contained in the poem’s stops and starts, its vagrant movement between the lines. As the “Beggar” narrator tries to articulate the Beggar’s impact on the Villagers, therefore, he expresses what holding on to that conjectural remainder looks like, precisely by way of all that gets left behind:

[A]nd, perchance,
 Though he to no one give the fortitude
 And circumspection needful to preserve
 His present blessings, and to husband up
 The respite of the season, he, at least,
 And ‘tis no vulgar service, makes them felt. (119-24)

As in the Beggar’s earlier attempt “to prevent the waste,” the narrator here ruefully tallies off everything that the Villagers *might* gain from the Beggar but fail to do—fortitude,

circumspection, blessings, respite. He ends, nonetheless, by finding the something that remains, precarious though it is: the trace of feeling left behind by these various squandered blessings, lost to the world but remaining, in Kantian phrase, “within the subject himself.” That trace does not need to register, for the time being, as anything other than an ideal; it is not swallowed up in the world because it is not of the world, but persists alongside it and amid the daily life that must still carry on, regardless.³⁷

“The Old Cumberland Beggar” suggests a subjectivity that is always on the verge of coming into its own, and a history of feeling that is always on the verge of cohering as poetic narrative, but never quite succeeding. The attachment between the Beggar and the Villagers resists poetic disclosure—in fact, it seems almost foreclosed in the narrator’s attempts to speak about it. At the same time, though, that irresolution creates an affective openness that draws in the narrator, however uncertainly: the Villagers’ attachment to the Beggar is one that the narrator must continue to think on and feel for, precisely because he cannot squarely place it in lived experience, in time. And in this irresolution, the open-ended attachment looks ahead to the bond between Michael and Luke at the end of the *Lyrical Ballads*. The narrator finds himself unable to say what that bond meant, since its informing context went awry, with Michael’s best-laid plans for himself and Luke

³⁷ This remainder produced by way of waste and excess recalls Adam Smith’s wealthy miser. The miser does not mean to share the excess produce of his land, but finds himself forced to do so when he realizes that “[t]he capacity of his stomach bears no proportion to the immensity of his desires.” Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 184. Smith’s famous observation, in this same passage, that the rich “are led by an invisible hand to make nearly the same distribution of the necessaries of life, which would have been made, had the earth been divided into equal portions among all its inhabitants” indicates a common figural ground for the “stomach” and “hand” metaphors: both depend for their rhetorical effect on the connection between failed purposes, bodily excess, and unintentional outcomes. Smith, 184-85. In much the same way, the Beggar’s inability to rein in his “palsied hand” seems inseparable from his inadvertent ability to make the Villagers inwardly feel their blessings. Smith and Wordsworth thus share in the condition of trying to account for a difference in the world that remains opaque to them, and which they can only represent tentatively and figuratively.

turning out all wrong. All that remains of their attachment, in the narrative present, is the unfinished sheepfold; and it is to this site, accordingly, that the narrator's thoughts keep turning.

Something about the sheepfold's material irreducibility, the narrator suggests, does the explanatory work that narrative itself cannot. It is the sight of the sheepfold, after all, that prompts the telling of Michael and Luke's story in the first place. Their story, now detached from the lived experience of its original subjects, nonetheless persists as an apocryphal residue embedded in the landscape, as the narrator explains:

Nor should I have made mention of this Dell
But for one object which you might pass by,
Might see and notice not. Beside the brook
There is a straggl'g heap of unhewn stones!
And to that place a story appertains. (14-18)

The sheepfold appears at a double remove from the present: not only is the "straggl'g heap of unhewn stones" unreadable to the passerby, it is altogether unrecognizable, in the first place, as a thing-to-be-read. This anti-monument, a materialized referent of 'time immemorial' or 'time out of mind,' represents a form of history in the future anterior—that which will have been. If the stones in their present state resemble a ruin, they also preserve their "unhewn" status as objects that have been cursorily but not fully appropriated for human purposes. Such uneventfulness on the material level corresponds, moreover, with an equally striking absence on the narrative level of a story (in typical *Lyrical Ballads* fashion) "ungarnish'd with events" (19).

For the narrator, the sheepfold references a story no longer confined to a fixed temporal duration, because it now exists as an idea rather than an empirical history. Michael, after all, remains attached to Luke and to his wish to bring him into the fold of "the life thy Fathers lived," even as he senses the impossibility of bringing that hope to

pass. In an analogous way, the story of that attachment now itself attaches or “appertains” to the site of the sheepfold only in an open-ended, idealistic sense. The logic of correspondence between story and site is not discursive but metonymic: it assumes a meaning that does not strictly belong to the temporal object of the sheepfold as such but cannot be explained otherwise. Accordingly, the narrator’s deictic gesture—there it is!—points to the presence of that meaning without, however, claiming to have explained it, or presuming that it will be self-evident to his audience.

Even though the narrator’s indirect introduction of the story marks it as belonging ultimately to the ideal world, he does not remain content to leave it there but tries to locate its meaning in the temporal world. He goes on to give the story, after all, but always by returning to the sheepfold, the apparent guarantor of residual meaning to which narration cannot do justice. In the narrator’s view, the straggling heap of stones always *will have* amounted to something; in his telling, the stones have reified a purposiveness that outlasts Michael’s changing fortunes, or the narrator’s own telling of the story. The sheepfold’s unfinished status, the narrator hopes, testifies to this lingering purpose. The stones, after all, are neither in their raw state nor fully appropriated as yet. They have been invested with purpose, though not with labor:

For this same purpose he had gather’d up
A heap of stones, which close to the brook side
Lay thrown together, ready for the work. (336-38)

Although Michael goes on to claim a symbolic purpose for the stones (the covenant between father and son), that symbolism remains secondary to the stones’ more mundane purpose—the building of the sheepfold, a purpose which predates and therefore outlives Michael’s disappointment at the end of the poem. If there is a time for every purpose under heaven, for throwing away and gathering together, then the stones of the sheepfold

show that for deferred purposes and deferred promises there may be not just *a* time, but *times*.

Michael's sheepfold exists in parallax as both a ruin and a potential building-site, and in this way it tangibly models the open-ended purposiveness that defines the poem's affective attachments.³⁸ Even at the poem's end, this structure survives the final overthrow of Michael's hopes to remain the material vessel into which Michael continues to channel his efforts, though now in an unthinking and compulsive manner:

The length of full seven years from time to time
He at the building of this Sheep-fold wrought,
And left the work unfinished when he died. (480-82)

Michael's earlier mental compulsion, his harrowing work of self-accountability, is transmuted here into a purely physical compulsion, a residual phantom response to a purpose that is now lost.³⁹ Michael's position becomes that of the Old Cumberland Beggar, unable to save up what he has gathered. But by the same token, Michael's loss of clear purpose reveals the deeper underlying purposiveness by which he has always conducted himself, regardless of his changing circumstances. The poem, accordingly, ends with what remains: although "great changes have been wrought / In all the neighborhood" (488-89), still "the remains / Of the unfinished Sheep-fold may be seen" (490-91). In its state of raw potentiality and suggestion of other purposes (albeit unrealized), the sheepfold offers a site of resistance to a more formal account of the present based on a logic of beginnings and ends. And this is a resistance that the poem

³⁸ In calling the sheepfold's place in the poem "parallax," I am thinking of Žižek's term for a shift in perspective that mediates between the subjective and the objective, revealing "two sides of the same phenomenon which, precisely as two sides, can never meet." Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), 4.

³⁹ Cf. the old Royalist officer in the *Prelude*, bereft of purpose in the wake of the Revolution: "While he read, / Or mused, his sword was haunted by his touch / Continually, like an uneasy place / In his own body" (9.161-64).

doubles down on structurally by taking the unchanged sheepfold as its beginning and ending site, its sufficient occasion for the labor of composition and sufficient reward for the labor of reading.

7. Palimpsests

Even as “Michael” acknowledges its losses—lives that have come undone and a story that is left unfinished—the poem also suggests that those losses do not subtract from the kind of idealism the poem was always about, nor do they exhaust the forms its story might still take in other tellings. In his parting speech to Luke, accordingly, Michael articulates a kind of vision that superimposes a desired future on the present without, however, needing for that future to become a reality:

‘Now, fare thee well—
When thou return’st thou in this place wilt see
A work which is not here; a covenant
‘Twill be between us——but whatever fate
Befal thee, I shall love thee to the last,
And bear thy memory with me to the grave.’ (423-28)

In Michael’s language, the sheepfold acts as the sign of an ideal—the attachment between Michael and Luke—that persists alongside the temporal world but is not defeated by it. The long dash halfway through the sentence sets hope and probability in apposition without suggesting that the latter cancels out the former. Notwithstanding Michael’s hopes to be reunited with Luke, the kind of feeling he refers to here does not depend on that outcome. Their attachment seems to extend beyond time (by way of the covenant) even as their separation in time becomes more final. The sheepfold registers that sense of persistent idealism, moreover, precisely *as* an ideal itself, as an absence. Michael makes the facts of absence and loss more conspicuous, not less; his goal, in this moment at least,

is not to compensate himself or his son for their loss, but to imagine the bond that might still remain, even if they are no longer able to experience it. The attachment between them falls outside of lived experience and chronological sequence.

By entertaining the possibility of a future that is already obsolete, Michael registers a wish without looking for a change in his family's outcome. In place of the settled probabilities of temporal experience, therefore, he imagines possibilities outside of chronological cause-and-effect. That reimagining takes place through Michael's attention to time's slips and loops—when one moment opens unexpectedly onto another, as in the time-bending logic of the covenant. His cryptic comment in the speech to Isabel (mentioned earlier) reflects this same logic:

‘[Y]et if these fields of ours
Should pass into a Stranger's hand, I think
That I could not lie quiet in my grave.’ (240-42)

Michael reappropriates as his own the same logic that has dispossessed him, the “unlook'd for claim” by which he is “summon'd to discharge the forfeiture” of his nephew's debt (225-27). The irony of the legal logic at work in the claim is that Michael has been dispossessed by his own hand. He finds himself summoned to account for his own earlier choice to pledge himself as the surety for his nephew's finances—summoned to account *for* that choice, but also *by* that choice. While his choice comes back to haunt and dispossess him, therefore, it also gives Michael a glimpse of his own spectral power of summons and recall, which resists the state of settled quiet to which he seems consigned; and it is on the basis of this uncanny agency that Michael predicates his future rise from the dead. The surety, like the covenant, reflects an agency that loops backwards and forwards at once, and this shows that the possibilities of thought and feeling that

Michael's story represents do not reduce to what he himself is likely to experience—except, perhaps, as a figure of speech: as gothic disquiet.⁴⁰

Michael reappropriates the anachronism of the legal claim to work for him rather than against him, showing, in short, that if such logic is extrapolated far enough, it can end only in the Judgment Day. And this is no more than the narrator himself would do when he states his desire to persist in spectral form in the next generation of “youthful Poets, who among these Hills / Will be my second self when I am gone” (38-39). Counterintuitively, the narrator's eventual absence from the scene becomes the very ground of his transubstantiated endurance, much as his frank avowal of the narrative absences of a story “ungarnished with events” is what nonetheless prompts him to tell that story in the first place. Whether for Michael or the narrator, dispossession of one's purposive basis for acting and speaking still leaves intact the affective attachments that have built up around that purposive activity.

In Wordsworth's vagrant poetry, the story of affective attachments—one's own, or those of others—persists, even when one finds oneself written out of that story, or when one loses the context in which it formerly made sense. Like the building of Michael's sheepfold, the narration of the vagrant story begins in time but is no longer bound to it. That tangential relation to the temporal world is one that Walter Benjamin

⁴⁰ Michael's sense of having been summoned to account for the choices of his past self, and of a further summoning and accounting displaced into the future, suggests a gothic corollary to Adam Smith's sympathy. Smith writes that in sympathizing with the suffering of others, “I consider what I should suffer if I was really you, and I not only change circumstances with you, but I change persons and characters. My grief, therefore, is entirely upon your account, and not in the least upon my own” (Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 317). Sympathy, on this model, avoids the difficulty of having to account for one's own feelings, or for the “person and character” one adopts in the act of sympathizing. Read in this light, Michael can temporarily identify with his past and future selves without having to account for them.

calls “citation.” Citation, he says, describes the way in which an ideal possibility persists alongside the present:

[N]othing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—and that day is Judgment Day.⁴¹

Although Benjamin elsewhere describes the past as something waiting to be brought to light, this passage brackets that teleological impulse—or frames it, rather, as a figure of thought. The sense that each present moment *will have* become citable supersedes the need for that citation, or redemption, as an anticipated event.

The Judgment Day is less an actual future, in Benjamin’s account, than a vehicle for perceiving something unseen in the present. Accordingly, in Jewish messianic thought, “[E]very second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”⁴² From the standpoint of citation, the messianic arrival can remain hypothetical. It does not need to take place in history in order to matter, because it refers, instead, to a figure of thought. As such, the messianic idea perceives the redeemed version of the present that the present already contains within itself, if only in negative, and over and above the facts of temporal circumstance.⁴³ In Wordsworth, that mode of perception reveals the present to be a palimpsest of possibilities that are overwritten but not erased,

⁴¹ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254; italics in original.

⁴² Benjamin, 264.

⁴³ Jacques Derrida refers to this same register of non-transcendent idealism in his notion of “messianicity without messianism,” which follows from Derrida’s description of the stranger or *arrivant* as “the messianic opening to what is coming” in *Specters of Marx* (discussed in my first chapter). Jacques Derrida, “Marx and Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s “Specters of Marx,”* ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 2008), 253. For an explanation of how the possibilistic language of messianicity resists the utopian demand for concrete results, see Agata Bielik-Robson, “The Messiah and the Great Architect: On the Difference Between the Messianic and the Utopian,” *Utopian Studies* 29, no. 2 (2018): 133-58, <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.

and thus more open and more unsettled than what we can know of those possibilities directly or bring into focus by way of an achieved result.⁴⁴ The Beggar's periodic return never amounts to a wholesale redemption of the Villagers' potential charters and exemptions, but it "makes them felt" nonetheless; Michael knows he will never give Luke the life his fathers lived, but he memorializes that life as one that still exists in possibility, all the same.

These affective histories may remain, for all intents and purposes, the rubble of "wreckage upon wreckage" that confronts Benjamin's angel of history;⁴⁵ but they may also be Michael's heap of stones, gathered up and ready to be reworked under new auspices.⁴⁶ Attention to dispossession, in Wordsworth's poetic representation, allows for this ambiguity: it enables a persistent openness to attachment in the absence of an expected endpoint or redemption. That vagrant openness, Wordsworth suggests, shows that our stories are never fully our own. Conversely, it is also by means of that openness, he suggests, that we can begin to see, not just that others' stories *could* be ours, but that they already are—and with that, to begin to reimagine what we could be to others, and others to us.

⁴⁴ I borrow the metaphor of the palimpsest from Jonathan Gil Harris, *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009).

⁴⁵ Benjamin, 257.

⁴⁶ Cf. Bielik-Robson's description of the difference between utopianism and messianicity: "While the Great Architect builds a utopian vision on the most secure ontological foundations, the Messiah, or any representative of *messianicité*, chooses the 'rejected stones' of the seemingly nonexistent 'fantasy.'" Bielik-Robson, 141.

Chapter Four

The Shelleys' Secret Convictions

It is indeed a tale so strange, that I should fear you would not credit it, were there not something in truth which, however wonderful, forces conviction.

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

She is convicted, but has not confessed.

—Percy Shelley, *The Cenci*

1. Conviction without Justification

Conviction appears on shaky ethical and epistemic ground in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This holds doubly true at the trial of Justine Moritz. Victor Frankenstein's personal conviction of Justine's innocence depends on mere intuition; the court's criminal conviction of Justine, meanwhile, rests on circumstantial evidence. Justine, a servant to the Frankenstein family, stands falsely accused of murdering Victor's brother William, a crime, as Victor suspects, that the Creature in fact committed. Reluctant, however, to implicate himself by speaking up and revealing the truth, Victor instead reassures himself that Justine's innocence must be self-evident. As he says,

I was firmly convinced in my own mind that Justine, and indeed every human being, was guiltless of this murder. I had no fear, therefore, that any circumstantial evidence could be brought forward strong enough to convict her.¹

This naive rationalization flies in the face of his brother Ernest's assertion that "several circumstances came out, that have almost forced conviction upon us" (56). A split sense of conviction informs this dialogue: on the one hand, Ernest feels forced to acknowledge Justine's probable guilt, even in the absence of persuasion, and on the other hand, Victor feels persuaded of Justine's innocence, even in the absence of forcible, exonerating evidence. Thus Victor chooses to double down on his persuasions even as they seem to be losing their power to sway others.²

In spite of Victor's self-assurance, Justine's judges fail to see the truth of her innocence, choosing instead to condemn her to death. Justine's criminal conviction would seem, therefore, to undermine Victor's commitment to his personal conviction, which he believes should be clear to all. The trial and verdict do of course deal a shock to Victor's moral nature, forcing him to grapple with the fact that what feels so self-evident in his own mind—the truth of Justine's innocence—might fail to appear in the same light in the minds of others. But Victor's faith in Justine's innocence never depended, in the first place, on how the circumstances of the case appear to others, nor on whether others

¹ *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus*, in *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, ed. Nora Crook, 8 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1996), Vol. 1, 57. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

² Recent literature in cognitive science argues that rationalization and cognitive biases evolved as social adaptations to help humans live together in groups. In this light, Victor's self-imposed social exile, and his resistance to self-disclosure, make visible the equally *antisocial* consequence of human reason's proximity to rationalization. See, for example, Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, *The Enigma of Reason* (Harvard University Press, 2017); Steven Sloman and Philip Fernbach, *The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017); and Sara and Jack Gorman, *Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts that Will Save Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). For an overview of these arguments, see Elizabeth Kolbert, "Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds," *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/02/27/why-facts-dont-change-our-minds>.

recognize or assent to his position. As he sees it, just because others can't, or won't, recognize the truth of the matter does not in any way negate it—even if that truth is never enacted as justice.

The writings of both Mary and Percy Shelley, I suggest, attempt to vindicate this wayward form of moral idealism by taking it beyond the social, rhetorical contexts in which it becomes least defensible. Moving away from the language of persuasion and justification, the Shelleys associate conviction not with the propositional content of belief but with a reflexive structure of feeling that proves unaccountable to others. The Shelleys recognize that one may be forced (by reason or evidence) to acknowledge the truthfulness of a position that one does not yet *feel* persuaded of, or conversely, that one may feel fully satisfied of a truth, even in the absence of reasons or evidence for it. Accordingly, in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* and Percy Shelley's 1819 drama *The Cenci*, the protagonists resist either endorsing others' positions or disclosing their own. But such resistance, I argue, does not reduce these protagonists to complacency or withdrawal. Instead, when Victor Frankenstein and Beatrice Cenci refuse to explain themselves in terms satisfactory to their contemporaries, they signal a commitment to a paradoxical form of conviction whose integrity depends, precisely, on its lack of overt justification.

In the Shelleys' account, the structure of feeling that attends conviction becomes antithetical to the structure of performance that attends justification. Michel Foucault has given such a performance the name "avowal" (*aveu*). The avowal, in his history, takes various forms—monastic penance, sacramental confession, legal trial, psychiatric diagnosis—all defined by a moment in which the subject recognizes a truth about herself and performs that recognition for others. Justice, on the model of avowal, simply amounts to that recognition of oneself within a social script and according to a formulaic

protocol.³ By these lights, the trouble for Victor and Beatrice (or the trouble *with* them, depending on how one reads) is that their narratives fall outside the purview of socially legitimate accounts; their stories are beyond the pale of what others are prepared to hear. Victor made a Creature; Beatrice was raped by her father, and murdered him in turn. Such stories, as Victor and Beatrice both rightly anticipate, strain the belief and understanding of their interlocutors. Therefore, when called upon (whether by conscience or necessity) to explain themselves to the court in scenes of legal trial (Victor at Justine Moritz's trial, Beatrice at her own), they demur. Victor's conviction, though wholly self-serving in practice, remains sound in principle: that the proof of Justine Moritz's innocence should not rest, zero-sum, on the exposure of his own complicit guilt. In like manner, Beatrice's conviction is that she retains her own moral innocence even in spite of the fact of her father's murder. Conviction, in both cases, names a mere idea, one that appears perverse because it operates independently of, even refuses, understanding or recognition.

Of course, to have a conviction in the first place (albeit one that remains untested or theoretical) one must have some minimal sense of the story that underwrites it, and of an audience to whom one might eventually tell that story—even if the story has yet to add up, and the audience yet to materialize. This is, for Hannah Arendt, the inherent paradox of human action and speech. These functions, performed in a “space of appearance,” afford the possibility of revealing “who” one is (as opposed to merely “what” one is: a set of traits, social utility). This revelatory possibility, however, is complicated by the unpredictability of speech and action: present motives are opaque to oneself, and future

³ Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

consequences are unforeseeable. And because of this unpredictability, the subject does not have access to the truth about himself, even as he reveals it, through action, to others: “What the storyteller narrates must necessarily be hidden from the actor himself, at least as long as he is in the act or caught in its consequences, because to him the meaningfulness of his act is not in the story that follows.”⁴ Victor and Beatrice compound that paradox: they are both the actors *and* the narrators of their own stories. Therefore, in place of the double-bind Foucault describes, by which “the subject affirms who he is, binds himself to this truth” and also “places himself in a relationship of dependence with regard to another,”⁵ Victor and Beatrice occupy the more liberating position of (so to speak) a double-blind: if they cannot understand the meaning or consequence of the stories they tell, then neither can others. The meaningfulness of their acts, as Arendt might say, is not in the story that follows, not even when they tell that story themselves.

The moral truths that Victor and Beatrice sense cannot yet show in the stories they tell, at least not in the contexts in which they tell them. Nor do their stories amount to an avowal in, or on, the other’s terms. Although Victor and Beatrice do eventually offer an account of themselves (Victor to the Genevan magistrate and to Walton, Beatrice to her judges), that action no longer implies revealing an essential truth about oneself, nor being accountable for the belief or skepticism of one’s audience. Instead, we might think of the Shelleys’ protagonists as among those whom Colin Jager describes as “[p]eople muttering to themselves on the sidelines.”⁶ “[S]uch figures,” Jager writes, “are difficult to

⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 192.

⁵ Foucault, 17.

⁶ Colin Jager, *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 137.

place within the ideological landscape, in part because nobody quite knows what they are saying.”⁷

The Shelleys focus in these texts on convictions that can only be felt, not yet thought or spoken about with any coherence, and on forms of narrative aimed at misrecognition and displacement rather than epistemic closure or confessional disclosure. The particular forms of justice Victor and Beatrice imagine have not so much been overlooked as not yet come into being. These characters inhabit a broken world—or, more precisely, a *metonymic* world of false signs and misleading narrative associations. And they respond to that world in kind, through an oddly vacant narrative mode centered on absent causes and unrepresentable acts. In this way, Victor and Beatrice seek to give formal shape to convictions that cannot yet be spoken, and to forms of justice whose end goals cannot yet be specified.

This kind of conviction, one that turns away from an endpoint of justification or redemption, is also set up in Percy Shelley’s 1820 drama *Prometheus Unbound* (whose intermittent composition bookended the composition of *The Cenci*). The play begins with Prometheus’s desire to “recall” his earlier curse upon the tyrant god Jupiter:

The Curse
Once breathed on thee I would recall ...

⁷ Jager, 135. Jager connects such figures with the political and religious settlement of 1688-89. That settlement enforced what he calls “the logic of minoritization” (14), which involves a cycle of incriminating recognition and retroactive justification that I take as particularly relevant to my own argument. Under this logic, the state claims its own violence as normative and resistance to it as terror. Thus it justifies itself in opposition to a narrative category (the ‘religious’) that the state has only just created, but which is nonetheless made to appear self-evident: “Whenever the troops arrive, someone will be sure to run; and in that act, to suddenly find themselves ‘religious’ in a way that takes them outside the law, outside the space in which recognition—of a child, of a way of being in the world—is even possible” (171). As Jager describes it, the logic at work is doubly disingenuous: in a moment of involuntary performance, the subject is made to recognize herself, implicitly, within a stigmatized category masked as value-neutral, and that imputed self-recognition is then used to make her appear unrecognizable to others, monstrous. A similar logic of self-incrimination on another’s terms will recur in Percy Shelley’s Inquisition court, as I discuss in my reading of *The Cenci*.

.....
 What was that curse?⁸

As critics have noted, this “recall” might suggest resolution in a double sense: to remember the curse, and by remembering, to revoke it. Even so, such tidy resolution is at odds with the overall drift of the scene. When he hears his original curse upon Jupiter echoed back to him (by Jupiter’s ghost), Prometheus turns to his mother, Earth, in incredulity: “Were these my words, O Parent?” When Earth confirms “They were thine,” Prometheus responds:

It doth repent me: words are quick and vain;
 Grief for awhile is blind, and so was mine.
 I wish no living thing to suffer pain. (1.302-5)

Rather than repent of the curse directly, Prometheus’s deictic phrase, “It doth repent me,” expresses a thought that comes from elsewhere, one that resists resolution. His gesture of repentance seems strangely purposeless, disembodied, and devoid of authority, not unlike the ghostly messenger. Repentance, in this context, remains an inchoate mood, not a conscious act; Prometheus *feels* repentance without directing that repentance toward an object of epistemic closure—without, so to speak, *repenting of*.

By this measure, Prometheus seems less interested in repentance per se than in disavowal; rather than turn toward the ghostly messenger (whether in reconciliation or renewed opposition), Prometheus instead turns back upon himself to no clear end, refusing to name his own former vengeful desires even as he acknowledges the need for repentance. By declining to identify himself as grammatical agent of the curse in such a

⁸ Percy Shelley, “Prometheus Unbound,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 1.58-73. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act and line number.

way that he could revoke it, Prometheus signals that his aim is not so much to find immediate justice or closure as to actually extend the time of self-doubt.

Likewise, in both *Frankenstein* and *The Cenci*, the peevish turn away from the other is also a turning against oneself in self-estrangement. This turn seems to lead the Shelleys' protagonists astray, making them appear unrecognizable, even inhuman or perverse, to others. Rather than accommodate themselves to the limits of a collective moral imagination, Victor and Beatrice resist recognition, even at the risk of appearing monstrous. But by the same token, this turning away is ultimately what gives Victor and Beatrice their moral relevance. They realize that to frame their own stories in others' terms would mean not just self-incrimination; it would also mean foreclosing on the real significance their stories might still hold. By refusing to give an account of themselves, Victor and Beatrice begin to imagine a new form of moral consequence, one in which speech and action do not imply self-disclosure and thus do not reduce to a confessional framework of guilt, repentance, and reconciliation.

On this account, conviction as the Shelleys imagine it coheres not *in* ideas, but *as* an idea: as an abstract force at work in the world over and above conscious reflection, one that registers as a mere feeling, a reflexive gesture, even a mental vacancy. Such ephemeral traces remain inscrutable both to the subject of conviction and to her interlocutors, prompting both self-doubt on her part and incredulity on theirs. That same incredulity nonetheless serves as the hopeful sign that conviction as such remains possible, if only in potential. As inchoate form rather than content, the structure of conviction in the Shelleys' work remains unassimilable to, and unfulfilled by, the stories we tell, to ourselves as well as to others.

2. *Frankenstein*: Ideas at a Standstill

Unlike certain of Percy Shelley's lead characters, such as Prometheus and Beatrice Cenci, Mary Shelley's protagonist cannot be traced back to an original moment of radical innocence. Victor Frankenstein's fatally compromised position places him beyond the pale of a collective moral imagination. Indeed, this is also what separates Victor from his Creature, who remains an easy object of readerly sympathy. The following discussion will not deal with Victor's relationship to the Creature, therefore, but with Victor himself, and with the way that he channels an intrinsically ethical argument—a defense of the refusal of self-justification—that could never *look* ethical, coming from him. Precisely *as* a fundamentally irredeemable character, Victor is forced to imagine a new form of conviction that moves away from a paradigm of social justification.

Conviction and justification part ways most decisively at the trial of Justine Moritz. Even before the prosecution has adduced its single, circumstantial piece of evidence—the incriminating miniature painting found in Justine's pocket, formerly carried by William—the judges and onlookers have already determined to put an incriminating construction on the events. Looking at the crowd looking at Justine, Victor observes: “[A]ll the kindness which her beauty might otherwise have excited, was obliterated in the minds of the spectators by the imagination of the enormity she was supposed to have committed” (58). In the face of these ingrained attitudes, even Victor's fiancée Elizabeth's friendly testimony works against the defendant, “on whom the public indignation was turned with renewed violence, charging her with the blackest

ingratitude” (60). Although blind to his own habits of rationalization, Victor nonetheless recognizes those of others clearly enough.

The collective machine of justice operates inexorably at Justine's trial, back-forming evidence to suit predetermined narratives. Even the circumstantial detail, when presented in the courtroom, must be perceived as evidence; and evidence, once perceived as such, must necessarily be taken as evidence *of* something. According to this logic, Justine's legal condemnation gives the lie to her seeming innocence. For Victor, however, the reverse is true: Justine's innocence gives the lie to her legal condemnation. And he can imagine this chiasmus because he puts his faith in the moral world as it should be seen, over and above the world of contingent happenstance that others see.

Victor therefore distinguishes a narrative that is *potentially* legible to all from the narrative that others insist on reading. Victor's sense of truth and consequences as potentialities places them beyond the legal purview of mere crime and punishment, which adhere to a timeline of actions and events already accomplished. The law moves at once backward and forward along this diachronic axis: evidence is made to underwrite a narrative telos of criminal judgment, and conversely, the telos of judgment is taken to retroactively justify the interpretive weight placed upon the evidence. A closed loop of this kind, working in both directions at once, seems unassailable. Thus when Ernest tells Victor that “several circumstances ... have almost forced conviction upon us,” he is signaling not so much his voluntary assent as his capitulation to an axiomatic imperative of universal recognition grounded in an empirical protocol of observation, inference and extrapolation. Conviction, understood in this sense, necessarily follows from the accumulated weight and momentum of a series of steps undertaken in logical sequence.

In contrast, the particular proof Victor adduces for Justine's innocence appears strangely groundless, an intuition underdetermined by experience or evidence. Returning home from university to attend William's funeral, Victor makes a detour to visit the spot where William was murdered, in the woods near Plainpalais. A lightning bolt illuminates the Creature walking in the woods nearby, whereupon Victor suddenly apprehends the Creature's guilt and Justine's innocence in William's murder:

What did he there? Could he be (I shuddered at the conception) the murderer of my brother? No sooner did that idea cross my imagination, than I became convinced of its truth. . . . The mere presence of the idea was an irresistible proof of the fact. (54-55)

Like the flash of lightning that reveals the Creature's presence, the "idea" here arrives instantaneously and irresistibly, with the force of an immaculate conception. Unlike the miscarriage of justice at Justine's trial, or the abortive creation that is the Creature, the "conception" in Victor's mind, and the "shudder" that engenders it there, derive from no prior evidence, experience, or preconceived notions.

Conviction—"[becoming] convinced," in Victor's phrase—refers in the Plainpalais episode to a peculiarly reflexive experience. "The mere presence of the idea" serves as "irresistible proof" without, however, suggesting that such proof is derived from anything *but* mere presence; the self-evident nature of the idea makes no claim to an underlying principle or axiomatic truth beyond or beneath it. Instead, the idea of which Victor becomes convinced—that William's murderer is the Creature—is felt as much as thought: rather than a thing that Victor has always known without realizing it, this is an idea that, although it has never occurred to him before, feels as if he *could* always have known it. Conviction, then, refers to a quality of feeling: a structure of internal persuasion through intuition, not of outward demonstration through sequential reasoning. Victor, in telling his story, asserts that an intuitively felt truth never ceases to matter. It still has

consequence as a feeling, even if such a feeling fails to add up to a courtroom narrative linking—in logically persuasive sequence—evidence, testimony, and probable cause.

Victor's convicted feeling of self-evident certainty derives from no clear antecedents and results in no discernible difference made in the temporal world. It holds instead to a model of epistemic and moral consequence that does not reduce to chronological sequence; invisible in the chain of events, such consequence reveals itself only in negative, as a feeling that persists as a potential for action, even when it fails either to follow inferentially or to produce desired results. Conviction and consequence, for Victor, thus proceed along a *via negativa*, one that straitens and narrows as, near the novel's end, Victor finally decides to speak out and reveal his secret. In a suitably anticlimactic encounter, he brings his case before a magistrate in Geneva, clinging to the same Godwinian principle of necessary acquiescence as he did at Justine's trial—but this time, only *as* a principle, not as a foregone conclusion.

At this latter juncture, with the benefit of hindsight, Victor is prepared not only to anticipate his interlocutor's resistance as it builds, but to simultaneously shift his own priorities—what he hopes to achieve as a result of the interview—elsewhere. After all, by the time he appeals to the magistrate, the deaths of William, Justine, Elizabeth, Clerval, and finally of Victor's father have furnished ample evidence (if any were needed) that simply feeling the weight of injustice does not automatically lead to the righting of wrongs. And indeed, as a result of telling his tale, Victor manages only to elicit the magistrate's simultaneous absorption and skepticism, "that half kind of belief that is given to a tale of spirits and supernatural events; but when he was called upon to act officially in consequence, the whole tide of his incredulity returned" (153).

But such incredulity no longer fazes Victor. Whereas the failure of justice in Justine's case had left Victor profoundly shaken, this second failure of the law and its representatives to give Victor the justice that he seeks (either to credit his tale or to pursue the Creature) leaves him in a more ambivalent—almost pleasurable—state of ironic detachment. This detachment deepens in inverse parallel with the magistrate's absorption as Victor observes, in real time, the effect of his tale on his listener:

The magistrate appeared at first perfectly incredulous, but as I continued he became more attentive and interested; I saw him sometimes shudder with horror, at others a lively surprise, unmingled with disbelief, was painted on his countenance. (152)

Victor focuses here on his listener's involuntary absorption in the tale rather than on the self-conscious incredulity he both anticipates and receives; he therefore partakes, however ironically or vicariously, in his listener's out-of-body experience.

In the magistrate's involuntary shudder of horror, Victor might recognize an echo of his own irresistible shudder of conception at Plainpalais. Now, as then, what temporal consequences such a reaction might portend remain doubtful—certainly none in the domain of crime and punishment, the domain in which Victor appeals to the magistrate “to act officially in consequence.” In the interim, however, Victor achieves a different, specifically aesthetic, kind of effect. By means of a palimpsestic or stopped-time-tableau form of vision, he reads the trace of his listener's gothic “horror” lurking beneath his Enlightenment “disbelief.” As a result of this vision, Victor displaces his narrative focus from the magistrate's inevitable rejection (of the plaintiff's claims) to his more immediate reaction (to the storyteller's art). Instead of a *willing* suspension of disbelief, this is what it looks like when someone simply forgets that they don't believe you—and what it feels like when you allow yourself to forget it, too.

Victor's readiness to switch roles from plaintiff to storyteller, along with the cool, detached tone of empirical observation by means of which he signals his awareness of that switch, suggest his emerging ability to look at the present askance. This sidelong perspective does not override Victor's anticipation of what is about to transpire—the magistrate's rejection of his claim, and Victor's resulting disappointment and anger—but instead momentarily brackets his anticipation of those events through a second-order imaginative procedure. The questions at stake are, not what consequences *will* follow (necessarily and disappointingly) from this moment, probabilistically speaking, but what consequences *could* follow, hypothetically speaking; and not how Victor's convictions might appear *to* another, but how they might appear *in*, as embodied by, another. Through this imaginative procedure, it becomes as if Victor's own convictions were still live options for his interlocutor, rather than dead on arrival. In aestheticizing the magistrate's reaction as a kind of tableau vivant, then, Victor turns the magistrate's combined absorption and incredulity into the sign, not of inevitable frustration, but of hypothetical possibility.

As he narrates this episode to Walton, Victor retrospectively weighs the magistrate's overt skeptical resistance against his implicit desire to believe. The point seems to be that Victor still can elicit a response, even in the absence of more forceful persuasion and acquiescence. Accordingly, the reaction thus elicited is not a willing suspension of disbelief, but a less intentional *look* of "lively surprise, unmingled with disbelief." Such a reaction stands apart from the more usual "suspension" of disbelief: a figure which suggests a top-down hierarchy of the layers of consciousness in a relation of control and subordination. This depth model of interiority might normally be associated with the threat of a fatal misstep resulting from an overeager or misguided reading of

appearances. And in fact, as the interview proceeds and “the whole tide of [the magistrate’s] incredulity return[s],” Victor realizes that he *has* misread his opponent: the magistrate’s disbelief *is* only suspended, after all, not surmounted for good.

On the order of aesthetic rather than temporal perception, however, a different kind of consequence emerges. This appears in Victor’s particular turn of phrase, “unmingled with disbelief,” which moves away from modeling consciousness as a temporal process of depth or layering and towards an atemporal flattening of surfaces, as on a painter’s canvas. This move, in turn, sidelines the confessional anxieties that psychic depth implies: questions of sincerity and deception as well as anxieties concerning the failure of self-control. The magistrate’s reaction thus bears witness not to his interiority or autonomy but to a thought that comes from elsewhere, a force of “truth” that Victor wants to believe is still at work in the world above and beyond individual skepticism or belief—as the passive voice, “*was* painted on his countenance,” attests. Even if the magistrate will not intentionally countenance Victor’s tale, his more visceral reaction suggests a different possibility. The question of whether or not Victor’s interlocutors in such instances are actually convinced becomes, over the course of the text, increasingly beside the point.

3. Persistence in the Mind

Victor can ultimately disregard his failure to achieve the justice he seeks because he is not, in the end, looking for that justice to be enacted as much as for confirmation that it still exists as an abstract potential. He aims, then, to test whether such justice could, in principle, still be sought out—even as he increasingly senses (his self-righteous

protests notwithstanding) that, due to his own fatally compromised moral position, he is not the one to seek it. Indeed, Victor himself is increasingly unable to articulate or imagine what sort of justice the Creature's destruction would amount to—justice in whose name, or for whose benefit—beyond his self-interested desire for revenge. As he tells the magistrate, “My revenge is of no moment to you; yet, while I allow it to be a vice, I confess that it is the devouring and only passion of my soul” (153). By Victor's own admission, this “passion” is morally indefensible and ultimately inconsequential, “of no moment.” But his proposed eye-for-an-eye justice, both reactive and reactionary, is not, in the end, where the tenor of Victor's former language of conviction resides; this was not the kind of truth revealed to him in the lightning flash at Plainpalais. The passion for vengeance that attends the talionic sense of justice (“You refuse my just demand,” 153) can be straightforwardly and rationally explained—blood for blood—whereas the shudder of recognition that attends the latter sense of Truth or Justice writ large signals a feeling that can neither be explained rationally, nor directed toward a clear end-goal.

At this point late in the novel, Victor is chasing a mere feeling—the same feeling he experienced at Plainpalais, the feeling that his story still somehow matters. He holds onto this idea unto the very end, even as he loses his sense of *why* his story matters, or to what particular end he is telling it (since those who lent his story its moral weight and affective urgency are dead). The reaction that Victor now seeks from his listeners, the magistrate and Walton, is not to feel the same conviction he does (after all, he himself no longer remembers exactly what that conviction amounts to), but rather to model and mirror what the mere feeling of conviction could look like in another, regardless of their own conscious beliefs. This modeling remains a hypothetical, reflexive exercise. Victor's target is not other minds, but his own; by channeling his thoughts through others, his aim

is not to convince them but to safeguard his own sense of the power of ideas still at work in the world.

Victor's apprehension of the possibility of vicarious conviction precedes the Geneva interview, going back to Victor's second run-in with the law, in Ireland. Here (exchanging positions with Justine) he is arrested on suspicion of having murdered Clerval (again the Creature's doing). As he listens to the depositions of the witnesses, Victor experiences a start of pseudo-recognition on perceiving how his guilt in the affair could appear so plain, given a certain construction of the circumstances: "I could not help being struck by the strange coincidences that had taken place during this eventful night," he says, even as, secure in the knowledge of his own innocence, he remains "perfectly tranquil as to the consequences of the affair" (136). His consciousness is doubled, here: fully satisfied of the necessary future revelation of his innocence, he also feels convinced of how circumstances appear, in the present, necessarily to indicate his guilt. This echoes his earlier discovery at Justine's trial: "Several strange facts combined against her, which might have staggered any one who had not such proof of her innocence as I had" (58-59). At both trials, "strange coincidences" or "strange facts" seem initially to indicate an external world of appearances aligned against the defendant, or at least against the defendant's credibility with regard to others. But at the same time, others disappear: in the latter case, for instance, those "who had not such proof of her innocence as I had"—namely, everyone—are reduced to a hypothetical "any one" that quickly brackets and subordinates the problem of other minds.

Victor's recognition, at such times, of the indefensibility of his position yields no corresponding defensiveness. He experiences the "strange" quality of such moments, instead, as a kind of possibility, a form of *déjà vu* in which it feels to Victor as if he

always *could* have put a certain construction on events—although he never *had* until just that moment, when he saw events vicariously, through the abstracted gaze of an impersonal collective. He views the world as an expression of mind, and only knowable as such; the corollary of this view, seemingly, is the necessary failure of any individual mind to adequately conceive of the world fully or with any sort of duration or consistency, only in momentary flashes of intuitive recognition and untraceable insight. The sense of estrangement from the present that such flashes afford, then, proves salutary: it relieves Victor from his usual psychological burden of attempting at once to foresee and to trace in hindsight all the patterns of thought potentially alive and at work in the world. His ongoing faith that the world could be read in terms of self-evident ideas does not, then, require that anyone ever be able to *do* that sort of reading. Although occasionally embodied in individuals, including Victor, the Idea ultimately exists independently of his, or anyone else's, conscious thought.

Victor's continual rationalization as to whether or not he should, or could, have foreseen events fades, by dint of repetition, into the background; what emerges into the foreground, by contrast, is a kind of second-order recognition of alternative histories and possible futures already in play in any given moment. This second-order recognition tends to collapse both narrative perspective and temporality, as at the opening of Justine's trial:

It was to be decided, whether the result of my curiosity and lawless devices would cause the death of two of my fellow-beings: one a smiling babe, full of innocence and joy; the other far more dreadfully murdered, with every aggravation of infamy that could make the murder memorable in horror. (58)

Displacing Justine, in memory, as the one on trial, Victor looks back on himself looking ahead to a verdict he already regards as a foregone conclusion. The impression of inevitability, however, gives way to a stranger, less-settled form of imaginative

anachronism: why is William's death framed in the future tense? William, the "smiling babe," stands restored to life, waiting to die, while Justine, "far more dreadfully murdered," is already beyond the grave; a death accomplished and one still to come switch positions. The pivot-point upon which this inversion turns is not simply memory, a stable process of contemplation enacted by a single mind looking backward and forward in time, but the "memorable," a free-floating quality of perception that encompasses multiple perspectives and timeframes simultaneously while being bound to none. To the public, Justine's execution will be made "memorable in horror" by revealing her to be a murderer; to Victor, her execution will be memorable *as* a murder, as a miscarriage of justice. Gothic "horror" attaches ambivalently to Justine's criminality and her victimhood—but whether as mutually exclusive or mutually compatible possibilities is unclear. Any final, determining frame of narrative reference proves illusory.

The sense of the passage, then, is of two minds (Victor's and the public's) working alongside each other in snatches of free indirect discourse ("It was to be decided," "every aggravation of infamy," "memorable in horror") and in pursuit of the same representational object (imagining the deaths of William and Justine). But to asynchronous effect: Victor to see reprised a scene that has already played itself out in his mind many times (in advance of the trial itself), the public to see that scene unfold for the first time without realizing it to *be* a scene whose ending, as Victor imagines it, has already been written. The trial's status as narrative event diminishes to merely secondary relevance in comparison to its status as mental event in the minds of the spectators; which one constitutes the primary event appears undecided. Mental effort, and expectation, and desire cross and recross the scene as so many competing absent causes. What had before seemed merely inevitable, as plot, now seems impossibly overdetermined and ultimately

inconclusive; the mental event persists alongside the external event, refusing a false sense of closure offered simply in terms of ‘what happens.’⁹

4. Conviction without Purpose

In intuiting Justine’s innocence in the Plainpalais episode, Victor conceives of an idea, underived from evidence or experience, that serves as its own self-evident proof. In this he demonstrates a particular kind of mental reflexivity that persists even when it seems to lead nowhere. As the novel progresses, such conviction without purpose emerges most clearly in moments of interpersonal testimony (first to the magistrate in Geneva, then to Captain Walton), moments in which Victor feels the necessity of telling his tale even when he fully expects it neither to persuade his interlocutors nor to reveal a higher truth.

When Victor brings his case before the magistrate in Geneva near the end of the novel, his peculiarly impersonal language signals his faith in his tale’s irresistible and involuntary operation in the mind. “It is indeed a tale so strange,” he tells the magistrate, “that I should fear you would not credit it, were there not something in truth which, however wonderful, forces conviction” (152). Victor’s preamble here could read as a paraphrase of William Godwin’s assertion, in the 1793 *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, of a direct connection between being convinced oneself and convincing others: “There is certainly a way of expressing truth, with such benevolence as to command

⁹ Recalling Kant’s “consciously futile longings ... which are *devoid of any deed* but not *devoid of any result*, since they still work powerfully within the subject himself.” Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 125; italics in original.

attention, and such evidence as to inforce conviction in all cases whatever.”¹⁰ For Godwin, conviction is a matter of interpersonal persuasion based on performative expression. In a subtle but key distinction, Victor recasts conviction as a wholly abstract and impersonal process in which Godwin’s “way of expressing truth,” with either “benevolence” or “evidence,” no longer matters. The counterfactual structure of Victor’s statement directly opposes the matter of truth to the manner of its expression: because the “something in truth” now “forces conviction” all on its own, Victor feels licensed to emphasize the incredible aspects of his tale, the gothically “strange” and “wonderful” qualities that are precisely the ones least conducive to conviction. For Victor, now a storyteller as much as a witness, giving an account of a truth no longer implies being accountable for how that truth will be received.

Godwin’s statement aspires toward a more universal model of persuasion, one that applies in “all cases whatever.” In contrast, Victor acknowledges, up front, the contingency of interpersonal testimony—“I should fear you would not credit it.” But the saving grace, in Victor’s mind, is the redeeming conditional: “were there not something in truth which, however wonderful, forces conviction.” By personifying truth, Victor allows it to act independently in the world even when its human agents stand paralyzed by doubt. Unlike Godwin, Victor is increasingly unconcerned with using truth to persuade others. Replacing “a way of expressing truth” with a “something *in* truth,” Victor’s formulation now derives the “force” of truth from an undefined quality pertaining to it over and above conceptual content. This abstracting process sidelines not only the magistrate, the erstwhile audience and target of persuasion, but also the truth

¹⁰ William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

itself—now become a mere metonym for a withdrawn “something” bound up inside of it, something that persists beyond the failures of the law and beyond even Victor’s own willful blindness. No longer “thoroughly convinced in my own mind” as he had been (of Justine’s innocence) on the eve of the trial, Victor seems no longer to *have* in mind a conviction *of* anything in particular—except of the power of conviction itself. That power is still there, remote and inaccessible, even if to Victor’s imaginings it has been reduced to little more than vacancy.

Although Victor begins by offering to give an account for the other’s judgment, he ends up talking himself into asserting, fairly explicitly, that the other’s belief does not matter, as well as somewhat peevishly implying that he might not *want* the other to believe him, anyway. This attitude dispenses with Godwin’s model of performative disclosure in the *Enquiry*. No longer something for which we owe testimony to other people, the truth is now its own testimony. As such, the matter of truth moves away from an empirical calculation of credibility and probability—an essentially social matter, in David Hume’s view. In Hume’s essay “Of Miracles,” witness testimony to “the extraordinary and the marvellous” sets up a contradiction in the listener’s mind between two premises drawn from prior experience: the general reliability of witness testimony, and the unlikelihood of extraordinary events. “[H]ere,” writes Hume, “is a contest of two opposite experiences; of which the one destroys the other, as far as its force goes, and the superior can only operate on the mind by the force, which remains.”¹¹ In Hume’s zero-sum model, conviction is a diminished remainder; whether we decide in favor of the attested fact or against it, this decision comes as a pyrrhic victory over ourselves, one that

¹¹ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82.

saps us of cognitive “force.”¹² For Victor, however, conviction is not the remainder of competing forces, but a metaphysical force all its own, one that cannot be diminished by the tale with which it is associated, “however wonderful.” Victor’s position, then, is that his testimony does not need to reconcile mind and world because the truth exists independently of any individual’s understanding, including his own.¹³

Whereas Humean conviction may suffer diminishment as the price of achieving closure, Victor’s conviction performs the converse: it persists, undiminished, as a pattern in his mind even as it moves away from a particular mental object or desired outcome, whether achieving justice for Justine or convincing the Genevan magistrate of the truth of his tale. This possibility of conviction’s persistence in the absence of clear purpose follows implicitly from Godwin’s sequel to the *Enquiry*, his 1794 novel, *Caleb Williams*. Framed for theft by Falkland, his employer, Caleb appeals at his trial to his conviction of his own innocence as evidence in and of itself: “I will never believe that a man conscious of innocence, cannot make other men perceive that he has that thought. Do not you feel

¹² Colin Jager has shown how the miracle-believer’s diminished position doubles that of the skeptical philosopher and follows, ironically, from Hume’s attachment to those same Enlightenment principles (probability, semantic transparency) that were supposed to lead to renewed confidence in one’s own beliefs and those of others. On this account, the miracle-believer faces a double bind: he must testify both that the miracle did happen and that, *as a miracle*, it should not have happened. Colin Jager, “Hippogriffs in the Library: Realism and Opposition from Hume to Scott,” in *Unquiet Things: Secularism in the Romantic Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 125-52.

¹³ Hume frames his account of miracles, as does Kant his account of aimless desires, as seemingly ironic exceptions or limit-cases; what both accounts reveal, nonetheless, is a certain logic essential to belief and desire as such. In Hume, witness testimony to miracles shows up an inconsistency in *all* testimony: that since it is reliable more often than not, we start to assume a necessary connection between testimony and truth. Testimony in favor of miracles catches the mind up short, then, not simply because it seems like we’re being lied to in the moment, but because such testimony makes us realize that we have been lying to ourselves all along—in assuming a necessary connection where there was really only a customary conjunction. Miracles in Hume, like the “consciously futile longings” in Kant, show that self-deception, far from an exception or anomaly, inheres in the structure of thought at the most basic level.

that my whole heart tells me, I am not guilty of what is imputed to me?"¹⁴ Though he intends this to persuade, Caleb's appeal nonetheless uses the same circuitous logic that marks Victor's appeal to the Genevan magistrate: both move toward a language of private feeling that dispenses with outward justification. Caleb momentarily sets aside the direct issue of the legal appeal, asking the assembled audience instead to judge, not whether he *is* innocent, but whether he *feels* himself to be innocent—and whether the audience, by reflection, feels that he feels it.

Likewise, when Caleb in his own turn summons Falkland to stand trial at the end of the novel, he again shifts focus from the question of the legal outcome to a self-evident quality of feeling. This time the question of innocence or guilt, to Caleb's mind, is not only suspended but obviated entirely, even in the climactic moment in which Caleb finally stands vindicated in the court of public opinion. "I see," says Falkland, "that the artless and manly story you have told, has carried conviction to every hearer" (275)—to every hearer, but not to Caleb himself, who feels newfound compassion for Falkland and overwhelming remorse at having brought him to his final undoing: "It was too late. The mistake I had committed was now gone past all power of recall" (272). It is only a half-step from Caleb's repentant position, here, to the blank bafflement of Percy Shelley's Prometheus, whose feeble "I would recall" registers the loss of his ability not only to revoke the curse upon Jupiter but even to call to mind the curse as an object of repentance in the first place.

Whereas Caleb has lost his driving sense of purpose by the end of the novel, as Victor's story progresses he retains a vague sense of purpose, albeit one that grows

¹⁴ William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, ed. Pamela Clemit, in *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, gen. ed. Mark Philp, 8 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1992), Vol. 3, 152. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

increasingly abstract. Like Caleb, Victor finds himself with no particular point left to prove, no particular justice left to achieve (beyond mere revenge against the Creature); unlike Caleb, he remains convinced, nonetheless, that the story he has to tell still somehow matters. He holds onto this idea unto the very end, even as he loses his sense of *why* his story matters, or to what particular end he is telling it. Conviction, in Victor's understanding, now pertains reflexively to itself—to a necessity inherent in its structure, not to any particular truth that could be communicated to others.

That reflexive necessity, first given shape in Victor's speech to the Genevan magistrate, repeats as Victor prepares to give his account to Captain Walton in the outer frame narrative: "[B]ut I do not doubt that my tale conveys in its series internal evidence of the truth of the events of which it is composed" (20). Hardly a ringing endorsement—more a theatrical aside. The guarded tone of the address preserves a skeptical distance not just between narrator and interlocutor but also between the narrator and his own mind, leaving open the question of what exactly it is that he "[does] not doubt." And the narrator's skeptical reflexivity follows, in turn, from the ambiguous position of the tale he tells: a tale that runs parallel to true events but never touches on that truth directly, only conveying it, by reflection, into an indefinite future in which story and history might (or might not) finally intersect.

The tale thus bears witness neither conceptually (as compelling content) nor dialogically (as persuasive style), but formally, as a pure, almost mathematical set of relations joining events in narrative sequence. Unlike the external, circumstantial evidence of Justine's guilt that, accumulating piece by piece, had gradually "almost forced conviction upon" the Frankenstein family (56), what Victor calls the "internal evidence" of narrative form—namely, the narrative's internal consistency—must either

appear all at once, as a readymade, or not at all. Of necessity, after all, formal consistency cannot be abstracted from the form, here the “series,” within which it inheres. The tale conveys its evidence, therefore, not diachronically or *as* a series, but *in* its series: something visible only at the end, synchronically, once the series is complete.

But for Victor, that moment of retrospective proof never arrives. All he has to go on, in the meantime, is his increasingly threadbare faith in his tale’s formal coherence, his sense of the mutual fit of its parts, even as he remains uncertain as to what, if anything, those parts will ever amount to. “The whole series of my life,” Victor says, “appeared to me as a dream; I sometimes doubted if indeed it were all true, for it never presented itself to my mind with the force of reality” (137). Such doubt does not quite amount to positive skepticism, only to the preliminary apprehension of a provisional, serial form. The dreamlike appearance of the series anticipates the arrival, indefinitely deferred, of a mental representation that would more convincingly “present itself” on the stage of the mind. Conviction, as Victor understands it, still consists in a moment of theatrical revelation, one that is in theory still available to other minds in the future. But for Victor himself, trapped in his own dark dream of reality, the veil will not be torn. He can only trust that his tale will one day appear to others with the same intuitive force with which it once appeared to him.

As he continues to actually live out the tale of his life in the present, however, Victor's experiences not the reassuring force of epistemic conviction but the unsettling force of bodily compulsion. He seems, even to himself, to have become the ventriloquized dummy puppet of a tale told elsewhere, stuttering and stammering. His history is a nightmare from which he is still trying to awake. Walton is the novel’s Coleridge fan, but Victor’s less pleasant role is that of the Mariner himself:

And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns.¹⁵

Like the Mariner, Victor has become an avatar for the tale he tells, not a spokesman for it. The tale passes through him but does not belong to him, nor to his listeners.

The impersonal compulsion of a structure, whether of body, of mind, or of narrative form, expresses belief as a kind of bare remainder left over at the end of a subtractive process: “. . . nor can I doubt but that my tale conveys in its series internal evidence of the truth” (20). Such belief now pertains only to its own abstract necessity; it no longer corresponds to a particular mental object, nor to a felt sense of urgency. Negative belief coexists, moreover, with an equally unsettled form of doubt that registers only as lack, as the nagging absence of an ambiguous “force of reality” (137), rather than as positive skepticism. In Byronic phrase, Victor doubts if doubt itself be doubting; these are figurative, not literal, states of mind, and as such they need not cancel each other out. Victor’s conviction makes room, side-by-side, both for the appearance of truth’s unreality and for his ongoing faith that the “force” of truth’s reality (137)—metonymically parceled out, at present, as “internal evidence” (20)—still exists in the future, for other minds, other lives. And this faith in truth’s epistemic force persists in and as a felt compulsion, a compulsion whose accompanying lack of cognitive persuasion shows that the truth does not reduce, fortunately, to what can be known of it in the present.

Whether coded as truth or as the force of reality, the absent cause lends both provisional form and content to Victor’s thoughts. The idea of an absent cause, then,

¹⁵ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1834),” in *Coleridge’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson, and Raimonda Modiano (New York: Norton, 2004), lines 584-85. The Mariner thus embodies what Kant describes as the Sisyphean task of “fanciful desire”: “For since these desires [alternately] expand the heart and make it languid, thus exhausting its forces, they prove that these forces are repeatedly tensed by presentations, but that they allow the mind each time to relapse into weariness as it considers again the impossibility.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 17.

allows him a peculiar negative capability of treating his own state of mind as figurative (whether not-quite-belief, or not-quite-doubt). This capability still pertains even at the novel's end, as Victor pursues the Creature. As he daydreams about his departed relations, he does not lose his grip on reality so much as the reality he has created loses its grip on him:

At such moments vengeance, that burned within me, died in my heart, and I pursued my path towards the destruction of the daemon, more as a task enjoined by heaven, as the mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious, than as the ardent desire of my soul. (156)

Through a second-order imaginative procedure, Victor imagines himself channeling an absent "power." Vengeance thus shifts from an urgent, "burn[ing]" sense of purpose to an impersonal compulsion, a "mechanical impulse" that arrives from elsewhere. But even as vengeance takes a clear object, it also already implies an unreflective, knee-jerk reaction, an estrangement from one's former, higher purposes—having forgotten what they were, or why they mattered. Therefore, the hopeful news, here, is that vengeance itself may be forgot: a double estrangement. As "ardent desire" fades, it gives way to an absent cause. Whether figured abstractly as truth, justice, or simply "some power," this cause is ultimately beyond Victor's recognition or comprehension; it operates through him but does not depend on him to account for or feel convinced of it.¹⁶

¹⁶ Victor's apprehension of a "mechanical impulse" working through him echoes Hume's ironic comment concerning religious belief at the end of the "Miracles" essay, that "whoever is moved by *Faith* to assent to it, is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding" (*Enquiry*, 131). What Victor's remark offers, then, is Hume without the irony. Such irony is also conspicuously lacking, for instance, in Wordsworth's description of the poet's "situation" as "altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering"—a gothic task, like Victor's, of channeling an absent power. William Wordsworth, "Preface," in *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 104.

5. *The Cenci*: Radical Innocence

Over the course of Mary Shelley's novel, both in the buildup to Justine Moritz's trial and in its aftermath, Victor Frankenstein increasingly distances himself from a discernible purpose. First at Plainpalais, then in his testimony to the Genevan magistrate and to Walton, Victor shifts his emphasis from a belief in the truth of Justine's innocence to a belief simply in the truth of his narrative and in the self-evidence of feeling.

Percy Shelley's 1819 play *The Cenci* takes up and extends the problem of conviction that fails to make a difference in the world. This time, the woman on trial is herself the subject of conviction. For the play's heroine, Beatrice Cenci, there is no gap between ideas and outcomes; she lives out the consequences of both. Even as Beatrice, like Justine, stands unjustly condemned, she maintains her faith that her justification remains self-evident, transcending her criminal conviction and death.

Whereas Justine stands condemned by circumstantial evidence, Beatrice's case looks even more hopeless: she stands condemned by actual events. The tragic irony of Beatrice's story is that although she was raped by her father, the tyrant Count Cenci, she is nonetheless the one on trial, at the end of the play, for having hired an assassin to murder Cenci and thus to free herself and her family of her oppressor. Beatrice comes to realize, as a result of this moral reversal, that for the law's purposes, the question of innocence depends solely on the question of guilt. The point might read as a Blakean aphorism: innocence would be no more, if we did not make somebody guilty. But Beatrice's situation reveals the blind spot in this logic. For her to admit her technical guilt in her father's murder would be to falsely give up her enduring claim to true innocence of

a higher order—to an inalienable moral rectitude which still persists in spite of the murder, but which the Inquisition court is unwilling to see.

In resisting the law's zero-sum logic, therefore, Beatrice is at pains not to justify herself according to the interpretive categories, loaded and predetermined, of either victim or criminal. In Shelley's view, it is not Beatrice herself but the audience of her story who remain caught in this obsolete way of thinking. As he writes in the Preface:

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.¹⁷

Another audience, another woman on trial. The trial of Beatrice Cenci overlays as a palimpsest onto the trial of Justine Moritz, where contemplation of the “murder memorable in horror” had left Victor convinced of Justine's victimhood but aware, at the same time, of how the case could appear differently to a public convinced of Justine's criminality. There, Victor was the only one to experience that “restless and anatomizing” double perception; here, through the transposition of the courtroom to the theater, the members of the audience are made to experience the reflexive quality of casuistry for themselves, to see both sides of the issue at once.

James Chandler has argued that this passage reflects the play's investment in what he calls, with Shelley, “sublime casuistry.” This sublime casuistry constitutes a second-order stage to historical casuistry, where “the case is to be understood as a scene of motivation,” so that we see how the historical conditions particular to a given age determine the character of its individuals; in sublime casuistry, moving up a level, we

¹⁷ Percy Shelley, “The Cenci,” in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 142. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by act, scene, and line number.

recognize that historical conditions determine character in *all* ages, and thus that we ourselves are susceptible to the same determination. From this differentiation, Chandler concludes that the play's moral impact depends upon, indeed consists in, the spectator's recognition of Beatrice's subjection to historical circumstance as a condition in which the spectator, himself an historical subject, shares.¹⁸

In this reading, the drama passes along to its audience the possibility of a kind of self-awareness that Beatrice herself fails to achieve. The question at stake, then, is whether it is up to us to redeem Beatrice—to perceive her as a failed character and to take it upon ourselves to excuse her for it. In Chandler's view, this work of redemption is precisely what the play calls us to do: to “see the historical situation of a Tasso or a Beatrice as hopeless and see their efforts at self-exculpation as a function of their helplessness,” and to take from this the lesson that “when we make history we do so under conditions that are not, at least in the first instance, of our own making.”¹⁹ And we may well take away this lesson on our own behalf, but not, I think, on behalf of Beatrice. To imagine for ourselves a position of moral clarity relative to the play's heroine is exactly what the play denies us. Contrary to a persistent critical tradition, Beatrice cannot be written off as merely a victim, whether of her father or of historical circumstance; nor does she see herself as one.²⁰ In her own view, she does not require redemption; the truth of her moral innocence in spite of her legal guilt is a paradox that she does not expect will make sense to anyone except herself, the actor of her story. What Victor had only

¹⁸ James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 507-15.

¹⁹ Chandler, 513.

²⁰ Critics have often insisted on reading Beatrice as the passive victim or the cautionary object-lesson of the play, rather than the heroine. These accounts consistently portray Beatrice either as an inconsequential victim of circumstance or as a casuist who has become complicit in the corrupting logic of her persecutors (both her father and the papal state).

realized in the aftermath of Justine's trial, Beatrice intuits from the outset and then confirms at her own trial: the existence of a radical form of innocence that remains wholly invisible to others. Neither "self-exculpation" nor "helplessness," therefore, can explain Beatrice's decision to double down on what she sees as the necessity of her innocence, even as she knows how the case must look to her judges.

When the court seems bent on doing willful violence to the truth, Beatrice responds by refusing to be read. Whereas the law reaches into the past to retroactively establish one-to-one correspondences between cause and effect, suffering and revenge, Beatrice looks ahead to a future capable of more fully comprehending the true moral consequence of her position. Her aim is to create a space for justice whose form is as yet unforeseeable and unrepresentable given the limitations of the moral language currently available to her and her judges. Beatrice thus reads her story through the lens of what Jerome Christensen has called anachronism, "the assertion of the historical as that which could not be over because it has not yet really happened."²¹

Beatrice is not, after all, making a case for herself; to return to Shelley's remark on casuistry in the Preface, *we* are the ones trying to make a case for *her*. The dramatic character of Beatrice's story depends on the particular kind of reflexivity it produces in its audience, not in its heroine; the "restless and anatomizing casuistry" pertains specifically (by Shelley's own pointed declaration) to those who are privy to her story, not to her whose story it is. Any perceived helplessness in the play speaks, then, not to Beatrice's inability to imagine her own moral position, but precisely to the play's ability to make its spectators reimagine their own moral implication in the unfolding drama.

²¹ Jerome Christensen, *Romanticism at the End of History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 25.

Fearful as the rape and murder may appear as enacted events, they only rise to the level of “superstitious horror” as ideas weighed against one another in a mind that feels the need to so weigh them. That horror derives not so much from the actual contemplation of the “wrongs and their revenge” in and of themselves but from the cyclical mental activity, attendant upon such contemplation, of alternate “seeking” and “feeling”—an automaton-like condition of death-in-life (what Mary Shelley might call a “mechanical impulse”) to which the spectator is reduced. Coleridge's *Mariner* may be the one who tells the story, but it is the *Wedding Guest* who is left trying to figure out what it all means. As Percy Shelley's description in the Preface attests, the gothic tale is gothic because it creates in the spectator's mind not merely a prurient interest in outré content but a harrowingly conflicted structure of thought. That structure does not reduce in a Humean mutual destruction of arguments but goes on repeating ad infinitum.

It is this obsession with reconciling competing arguments—an obsession which Shelley takes to be inherent to the human condition—that gives *Beatrice's* tale its “dramatic character,” its fitness for dramatic representation to an audience, but also what bars that representation from ever being intended *for* its audience. Unbeknownst to them, Shelley's spectators remain players in a drama that is still unfolding even after the curtain falls. That larger drama consists in the spectator's inability to see the play as anything other than an extended scene of casuistry. Such spectatorship may present itself, in theory, as what Chandler calls “the occasion for self-knowledge,”²² but it feels, in practice, more like self-deception; if we *think* that we have *Beatrice* figured out, then we have only gotten as far as “what the multitude are contented to believe that they can

²² Chandler, 506.

understand,” in Shelley’s words.²³ In Percy Shelley’s representation, as in Mary Shelley’s before him, knowledge and revelation remain mere figures of thought. They are hypothetical qualities of a conceiving mind, a seat of purpose and judgment, that is not one’s own, and that one does not (nor could ever) have access to. The *Cenci* is not a play designed for us to transcend its heroine’s position of darkness and doubt, but to share in it. As witnesses to her ordeal, we become vehicles of the play’s moral meaning, just as much as Beatrice herself, and becoming a vehicle of this kind means losing direct access to the meaning one carries.

6. A Story without a Subject

The goal of the Inquisition court, in Percy Shelley’s representation, is not to uncover the truth but simply to assign blame. The court wants to make the defendant tell a story that will sustain the justice system’s fantasy of what Foucault calls “the fortunate coincidence between the author of the crime and the subject who had to account for it.”²⁴ From the outset of her defense, therefore, Beatrice holds her story at arm’s length in a way that Victor tries to do but never quite manages to sustain. Victor remains stuck in seeing his own life *as* a story, even when that story appears dreamlike, as an inconsequential sequence or series of events. Beatrice, in contrast, begins her defense on

²³ Shelley was commenting on his play in a letter to Thomas Love Peacock, reprinted in Mary Shelley’s 1839 Introductory Note. Shelley was asking Peacock to see to having the play produced at Covent Garden. One point in favor of anticipating the play’s success, Shelley argued, was that “there is nothing beyond what the multitude are contented to believe that they can understand, either in imagery, opinion, or sentiment.” Percy Shelley, letter to Thomas Love Peacock, 20 July 1819, quoted in Mary Shelley, *Mary Shelley’s Introductory Note, 1839 edition*, ed. Stuart Curran, <http://knarf.english.upenn.edu/MShelley/cenci.html>. By these lights, Shelley’s position relative to his audience doubles what I will argue is Beatrice’s position relative to her judges: neither offers a self-defense. Instead they at once acknowledge and look beyond their audience’s limitations.

²⁴ Foucault, *The Function of Avowal in Justice*, 200.

the explicit premise that there is no story there to tell in the first place, or at least none that will give the law the criminal subject it seeks. She can therefore deflect her interlocutors' demands that she justify herself by means of revealing her history because the question of her innocence or guilt, as she sees it, does not reduce to the barren facts of what happened, either to her or because of her—namely, the rape and the murder. When the demand for a justificatory account of events does violence to the truth and produces only a mockery of justice, Beatrice responds with strategic equivocation and misdirection.²⁵

That demand for self-justification materializes in the play's fourth Act in the person of the papal legate, Savella. Arriving at the Castle of Petrella to arrest Cenci, Savella finds instead that Cenci has been murdered. After first arresting Marzio, the paid assassin, Savella next seeks to identify Marzio's employer and to determine a plausible motive. Justice, in Savella's limited understanding, hangs on the question of who hired Marzio—quickly transferring guilt from Cenci (whom Savella had come to arrest in the first place) to Beatrice. She recognizes that Savella's concern is with the formalities of

²⁵ My reading of Beatrice as a successful oppositional figure stands in contrast to an alternative reading in which her opposition to the state constitutes simply a failure to effect a verdict of 'not guilty.' Beatrice's failure, on this account, signals Shelley's endorsement of the liberal state's subordination of individual conscience to pragmatic legal necessity. Critics who take this view read Shelley's representation of the Papal state of Rome in 1599 as foreshadowing the British Hanoverian state's transition toward a liberal model of bureaucracy, toleration, and paternalism. For Mark Canuel, the play stages the obsolescence of the language of confession and individual religious belief; even as the Papal state ambivalently lays claim to that "theatrical" language, it ultimately writes it off as superfluous to the more impersonal legal machinery of the bureaucratic state. Mark Canuel, *Religion, Toleration, and British Writing, 1790-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 244-56. Similarly for Michael Kohler, the Papal government as represented in the play anticipates the modern British state: both have effectively given up the "speculative fiction" of individual assent, so that the state's enforcement of law no longer presumes the moral autonomy of its subjects. Michael Kohler, "Shelley in Chancery: The Reimagination of the Paternalist State in 'The Cenci,'" *Studies in Romanticism* 37, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 545-89, doi:10.2307/25601359. In my view, Beatrice does not simply uphold that obsolete notion of moral autonomy; rather, she imagines a kind of morality that (as Kohler acknowledges) exists outside of the language of autonomy or metaphysical foundations.

the legal process, not with people; in his view, as long as someone can be made to answer for something (the usual suspects, in other words), then justice will have been done. And this is the line of logic that Beatrice resists when, with reference to Marzio, she musters a series of conditionals that refute a straightforward imputation of criminal responsibility or motive:

That poor wretch
Who stands so pale, and trembling, and amazed,
If it be true he murdered Cenci, was
A sword in the right hand of justest God,
Wherefore should I have wielded it? Unless
The crimes which mortal tongue dare never name
God therefore scruples to avenge. (4.4.124-30)

The initial conditional clause, “If it be true he murdered Cenci,” seems to set up the “sword in the right hand” metaphor as its syntactic consequence; but this clause, too, slips to a further consequence by way of a question: “Wherefore should I have wielded it?” And even this question, with its tone of apparent rhetorical closure, gives way in its own turn to a further qualification and consequence: the possibility that Beatrice must indeed “wield” Marzio if God will not intervene.

Taken as a whole, then, the chain of ascription, qualification, and suspended consequence in Beatrice’s statement suggests that if Beatrice did employ Marzio as a proxy for God’s justice, then she did so not in her own character but as a proxy for God Himself. Not merely God’s instrument, she becomes His wholesale substitute. This logic runs two ways at once. If God was indeed behind the murder, then Beatrice’s part in it was superfluous; if God was *not* behind the murder, then He is either unjust or absent, in which case Beatrice’s role is self-justified. The point, either way, is that Beatrice remains justified as her own agent, not God’s.

Beatrice's parallax logic quickly complicates what could otherwise be a straightforward self-justification by way of appeal to a heavenly court of authority. Her goal, then, is not to displace the appeal for justice from the human sphere to the divine, but to suspend the necessity of an appeal altogether. She refutes Savella's model of legal cause-and-effect, where both the assassin's straightforward act (murder) and surface motive (payment) merely stand in for an employer's more premeditated schemes and darker motives. Such signs invite close reading. Against that reading, Beatrice suggests that she employed Marzio not in her own name but on behalf of a God who was Himself absent. In this, she frustrates Savella's assumption that to find justice is a straightforward matter of working backwards to a previous link in the chain. In Beatrice's telling, instead, any final author of the murder, God included, fails to materialize.²⁶

The grammatical structure of deferred consequence in Beatrice's statement thus doubles the ethical structure of a world in which justice is indefinitely deferred, a world that seems stripped of moral consequence. And in making this moral vacuum appear as

²⁶ Beatrice's justice, then, is not specifically divine justice; her "God" constitutes less a final author than a figure of speech. In making this case, I want to resist a critical tendency to read Beatrice's 'divine instrument' language as flatly literal, and to impute this literalism to either disingenuousness or naiveté on her part. In Mark Canuel's reading, for instance, Beatrice's language exemplifies "the utter falsity of religious rhetoric," so that "Beatrice strikes us as ... suspicious in her attempt to legitimate her crime on the basis of appeals to divine authority." Canuel, 253. In a similar manner, Reeve Parker reads Beatrice as more earnest but no less mistaken in attributing her part in the murder to divine justice. "[H]er deeply religious ... conviction," according to Parker, is that she and Marzio "perform as no more than blind instruments of what she thinks of as her Almighty God's *appropriately* vengeful justice." Reeve Parker, *Romantic Tragedies: The Dark Employments of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 210. For Parker, this makes Beatrice merely a "tragically deluded" character, not, as for Canuel, a devious one. Sean Dempsey offers an assessment similar to Parker's, that Beatrice is "delusional" because her "confusion of signs between father, sovereign, and God enslaves Beatrice to an idealized system of relations despite her own father's betrayal of that system." Sean Dempsey, "The Cenci: Tragedy in a Secular Age," *ELH* 79, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 890, doi:10.1353/elh.2012.0034. The common thread here is that Beatrice is in the wrong because she reads, whether by delusion or design, too literally. My argument, in contrast, is that Beatrice reads the world around her, and the language in which she and others relate to that world, as inherently figurative. She therefore attributes Cenci's murder to no final author; even God, in her language, remains a placeholder.

what it is, Beatrice aims to restore moral consequence by setting it above judicial consequence, above mere crime and punishment. She thus issues a tacit rebuke to a world that can passively condone Cenci's act of rape, a crime which, as she later tells the judges at her trial, "high judging God ... [made] unutterable, and took from it / All refuge, all revenge, all consequence" (5.3.78-82).²⁷

²⁷ My reading of Beatrice's conception of her own innocence thus corresponds closely to that of Margot Harrison, for whom Beatrice's assertions of innocence have seemed deceitful to so many critics because we are still inclined to still read within a post-Romantic view of acting. That view, which Harrison traces back to Rousseau, privileges the spontaneous revelation of interiority over the practiced, self-conscious performance, seeing the former as 'true' and the latter as 'false.' If one has something to hide (so the logic goes), it must be from motives that are either confused or malicious. As Harrison therefore argues, Beatrice is conscious that she is putting on an act for her judges. Nonetheless, that self-conscious theatricality just is what the project of truth now looks like: "In a fallen world where appearances obscure truth, Beatrice's innocence *must* 'show' itself as a performative, a demand that compels assent and obliterates contradiction." The fact that her performance fails to "compel assent" from her judges, in Harrison's view, speaks not to an inherent "ethical failure" on Beatrice's part but merely to the fallibility of the logic of circumstance and appearance by which she is judged—the same logic that leads her to have to put on a show in the first place. Margot Harrison, "No Way for a Victim to Act?: Beatrice Cenci and the Dilemma of Romantic Performance," *Studies in Romanticism* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 203-4, doi:10.2307/25601442. I want to extend Harrison's compelling reading by way of adding that Beatrice is aware that her performance will fail to convince her judges *even as* she is putting on the performance. Her act, therefore, is not directed toward her judges, but toward an extra-judicial form of consequence: idealist, not applied. Like Harrison, Julie Carlson reads Beatrice's overtly theatrical self-presentation as a strategic response, not only to her judges' disingenuous demand for self-revelation, but also to the disingenuousness of Romantic theatrical conventions more generally. For Carlson, Romantic theater holds its own trademark figure, the "commanding genius," to a sexist double standard. The male lead character is "moved to act under what turn out to be false pretenses or intentionally obscure causes," and this allegiance to false motives is represented as the sign of the character's heroism, the "lyric" expansiveness of his imagination. Julie Carlson, *In the Theatre of Romanticism: Coleridge, Nationalism, Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 195. On Carlson's account, circumstance is what male characters rise above to take on universal status, and it is simultaneously what constrains female characters to irrelevance and mere case status. The only interiority allowed to female characters such as Beatrice, then, is that of victimization, duplicity, or circumstantial irrelevance. Carlson calls this "the open secret of the stage—that actresses command the house when they display their victimization." Carlson, 203. In Carlson's view, moreover, this is a double standard that even Shelley himself does not manage entirely to see beyond.

7. A Subject without a Story

Given Beatrice's frustration with a model of justice willing to apply itself only to those crimes that are "utterable" in the first place—i.e., murder, but not incestuous rape—her own refusal to name Cenci's crime becomes particularly telling: it demonstrates her unwillingness to treat the rape as an end in itself, as the skeleton key that would explain her own position and make it legible to others in *their* terms. What she calls the "unutterable" therefore becomes a double-edged sword in Beatrice's hands (5.3.81). From the perspective of the law, that which cannot be spoken of in the courtroom need not be given redress; legal responsibility attaches only to those wrongs that can be described in the language currently available, and only to those norms which we can mentally represent to ourselves.²⁸

Beatrice, in contrast, holds out for a norm which not only defeats the law's taxonomies, but which seems to defy even her own ability to represent that norm to herself: namely, the possibility of innocence that persists alongside guilt. Such innocence, seen as though in parallax, still exists in spirit, if not in deed.²⁹ Moreover, Beatrice's

²⁸ Colleen Fenno has demonstrated how Beatrice's reticence to name the rape reflects back on a nineteenth-century British justice system designed to silence and condemn survivors of sexual assault. As Fenno puts it, "Shelley's play implies that her silence is a consequence of the justice system's conditions for truth: her half-truth reflects their half-truths." Colleen Fenno, "Remembering Beatrice Remembering: Sexual Crime and Silence in Shelley's *The Cenci*," *Essays in Romanticism* 22, no. 1 (2015): 48-49, doi:10.3828/eir.2015.22.1.4. See also Frances Ferguson's argument that rape law works to obviate the question of intention altogether, and that it does so by making the mental states of both the victim and the accused appear inherently contradictory and thus irrelevant in comparison to more formal, statutory criteria for establishing truth. Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* no. 20 (Autumn 1987): 88-112.

²⁹ Beatrice herself acknowledges the near-impossibility of imagining this kind of innocence when she declares to Savella that "I am more innocent of parricide / Than is a child born fatherless" (4.4.111-12). In basing her declaration of innocence on a hyperbolic comparison with an impossible figure—"a child born fatherless"—Beatrice signals that her intention is not to persuade the legate but to resist justifying herself according to his moral code. By means of hyperbole, therefore, Beatrice pushes back against Savella's model of ethical life, a model

conviction of her innocence remains not just a mere idea but a conviction *about* the idea: that it still exists, if only in theory. Her innocence, as she sees it, is inherently unjustifiable, and not just because there is no language to represent it to herself or others. Rather, her innocence is unjustifiable because its justification is always already established in advance of its representation, including the inner mental representation that can look like rationalization.

Beatrice does, of course, claim her innocence mainly in retrospect, when called upon to do so by Savella and the Inquisition; but to call her reasoning casuistical because she formulates it only after the fact would be to assume, like the Inquisition, that only those norms matter, or apply, which we can presently imagine to ourselves, or find language to describe. As Beatrice argues, to assume such a limitation would also be to assume that “[t]he crimes which mortal tongue dare never name / God therefore scruples to avenge”—to assume that God is a casuist, too. Thus Beatrice can remove herself from the temporal chain of criminal motive and probable cause because of a higher form of truth and justice that transcends temporal causality.

Beatrice does not so much defer the question of responsibility as render it forever unanswerable, least of all to herself. Her other responses to Savella do similar work, as when he asks

Is it true, Lady, that thy father did
Such outrages as to awaken in thee
Unfilial hate?

and she responds

Not hate, ’twas more than hate:
This is most true, yet wherefore question me? (4.4.102-5),

incapable of imagining alternative forms of innocence and guilt beyond those prescribed by law within the form of the case.

or when Savella asks “You own / That you desired his death?” and Beatrice replies,

’Tis true I did believe, and hope, and pray,
Aye, I even knew ... for God is wise and just,
That some strange sudden death hung over him. (4.4.130-36).³⁰

The ellipsis indicates a pause during which Beatrice stops herself from saying outright that she knew that Cenci was going to die, since this would be taken as an admission of premeditation. The murder, of course, *was* premeditated; but the kind of knowing that Beatrice refers to here is precisely *not* premeditation, but rather her awareness of a larger design at work in the world—an awareness of what necessity and justice demanded to be done, and for which she served merely as the agent, not the instigator.

In response to Savella's leading questions, therefore, Beatrice repeatedly admits to the explicit object of the question but denies the implicit inference. While admitting that she hoped for Cenci's death, Beatrice at the same time rejects the import of Savella's questions, asking him in turn, “now what of this?” (4.4.139). By means of this double perspective, Beatrice admits, even endorses, the truth of what Savella is asking her and also refuses to endorse the seemingly obvious consequence: namely, that her admitted hatred for her father could indeed constitute a plausible motive for murder. Beatrice demonstrates a principled logic of non-recognition in these moments. She flips the script on the idea of epistemic consequence, denying neither her involvement in her father's death, nor her desire for it, but instead denying that any amount of intention on her part could ever make her the true author of the murder.

In Beatrice's view, to be immediately answerable for one's actions as direct ends in themselves is to arbitrarily limit oneself only to what can be thought and said in the

³⁰ Ellipsis in the original. The play's thematization of what cannot be said often takes the form of the ellipsis. To avoid ambiguity, whenever the ellipses in quotations are my own, square brackets will be used.

present, to turn a blind eye to what such action might mean in the future. She enacts this argument, moreover, through the grammatical and rhetorical forms of deferred consequence in her speech, forms that serve as instruments of futurity—holding open space for meanings and purposes that are unforeseeable in the present. In contrast, Beatrice’s brother Giacomo takes an altogether more pessimistic view of language, as expressed in his initial rendezvous in the second Act with the prelate Orsino, the self-serving instigator of Cenci’s murder. Thinking out loud, Giacomo pauses on the verge of stating his intent to murder his father. Orsino presses the point:

What? Fear not to speak your thought.
Words are but holy as the deeds they cover. (2.2.74-75)

But Giacomo quickly disavows his half-articulated murderous thought because, as he says, he fears confusing involuntary fantasy with conscious intention:

Ask me not what I think; the unwilling brain
Feigns often what it would not; and we trust
Imagination with such phantasies
As the tongue dares not fashion into words. (2.2.82-85)

Both characters assume an intimate but hierarchical association between imagination, language, and will. As the last term in the sequence, the will finds itself at the mercy of the imagination, through which “the unwilling brain / Feigns often what it would not”; and language intermediates between the two by giving full-fledged form to latent “phantasies.”

For both Giacomo and Orsino, each individual is ultimately responsible for his or her own proper purposes, which lie dormant as latent content awaiting the form (the hint, the question) that will activate it in the future (as thought, as desire). As Orsino insinuates after Giacomo’s exit, the content of thought and the form of its expression give life to one another:

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. (2.2.110-13)

Orsino's hope, and Giacomo's fear, is that this "self-anatomy" will lead us to actions we did not know we were capable of—"into the depth of darkest purposes." And indeed, once Cenci's death is accomplished, Giacomo upbraids Orsino after the fact, in an agony of guilt and fear: Orsino's "hints and questions," Giacomo says, have

made me look
 Upon the monster of my thought, until
 It grew familiar to desire. (5.1.22-24)

According to this scheme, which is also Savella's, purpose works by way of a neat iterative sequence, making manifest what was there all along, so that one crime can be traced back to a previous one along a probabilistic chain of plausible motive and likely consequence. Such a view, in turn, encourages an anxiously retrospective and introspective relation to the self, ever watchful to avoid unwonted familiarity with the inner "monster" that lurks in the margins of thought.³¹

Giacomo's claim that Orsino has "made me look / Upon the monster of my thought, until / It grew familiar to desire" thus doubles the moral logic of Percy Shelley's Preface. There, looking at the audience looking at Beatrice, Shelley asserts (as previously noted) that "it is in the superstitious horror with which they contemplate alike her wrongs

³¹ The dialogue between Giacomo and Orsino thus reads as a refutation of Godwin, for whom self-disclosure yields self-mastery. See, for instance, his comment in the "Exercise of private judgment" chapter of the *Enquiry*: "Countries, exposed to the perpetual interference of decrees instead of arguments, exhibit within their boundaries the mere phantoms of men. We can never judge from an observation of their inhabitants what men would be, if they knew of no appeal from the tribunal of conscience, and if, whatever they thought, they dared to speak, and dared to act." Godwin, *Enquiry*, 127. By contrast, in *The Cenci*, and particularly in the imaginations of Orsino and Giacomo, the compounding of thought, speech, and action fails to yield self-mastery because the act of putting thoughts into words creates new thoughts and purposes as much as it discloses those that are already present. For Percy Shelley, the demand to "speak [one's] thought" produces gothic retrogression, not the utopian progress that Godwin had anticipated.

and their revenge; that the dramatic character of what she did and suffered, consists.” Extending Giacomo’s “monster of my thought” to the play’s audience, Shelley implicates them as one more layer in the drama of persistent cognitive irresolution, one more embodied placeholder for a suspended truth or justice that has yet to find its final form. If the Inquisition is baffled, then so too is the audience—or at least, such is Shelley’s express hope, since our anticipated opposition and incredulity mean that Beatrice still has power to elicit a response.

And after all, Giacomo’s casuistical anxieties, as well as the audience’s, are not Beatrice’s. An anxiously teleological model of purpose, in her view, satisfies itself (like the Inquisition) with simply connecting cause and effect by naming the rape and the murder as origin and telos, respectively, on a straightforward causal string—one in which both the rape and the murder might erroneously be perceived as mutually justified, each perversely licensing the other. Instead, Beatrice’s model of purpose resists justification and accountability altogether. Hers is not a case of being unwilling (like Giacomo) to speak what she imagines, but of being unable even to imagine, in the first place, the nature of what she has suffered. This distinction crystallizes in an exchange between Beatrice and her mother, Lucretia, just after Beatrice has been raped offstage by Cenci, sometime between the end of Act 2 and the beginning of Act 3. Perceiving that Beatrice has suffered in some mysterious way, Lucretia implores her,

Oh, my lost child,
Hide not in proud impenetrable grief
Thy sufferings from my fear. (3.1.103-5)

In effect, Lucretia’s supplication to Beatrice, although more earnest than Orsino’s self-serving insinuations to Giacomo, nonetheless shares the same essential Godwinian appeal to mutual disclosure: “fear not to speak your thought.” But the plea rings hollow

for Beatrice, who has experienced “sufferings” so foreign to her understanding that they defy not just verbal representation but mental representation altogether:

I hide them not.
 What are the words which you would have me speak?
 I, who can feign no image in my mind
 Of that which has transformed me. I, whose thought
 Is like a ghost shrouded and folded up
 In its own formless horror. Of all words,
 That minister to mortal intercourse,
 Which wouldst thou hear? (3.1.106-13)

Unlike Giacomo, whose “unwilling brain / Feigns often what it would not,” Beatrice “can feign no image in my mind / Of that which has transformed me.” Whereas Giacomo’s imagination misdirects his will because it is too fraught with latent content, Beatrice’s imagination fails to direct her will at all because it is a vacancy, “like a ghost shrouded and folded up / In its own formless horror.”

But if the “horror” of Beatrice’s thought remains unthinkable, “formless,” even to herself, then this fact exonerates her from having to justify her thoughts to others in the present. In this light, her question to Lucretia, “What are the words which you would have me speak?,” registers not just as a rhetorical deflection but also—at least in embryonic form—as an earnest invitation to Lucretia to give Beatrice back her own voice by speaking through her: a sort of ethical ventriloquism. As such, her response to her mother borrows on the same logic that Shelley had employed earlier that year in *Prometheus Unbound*. Like Beatrice refusing her mother’s demand, Earth initially refuses Prometheus’s demand to hear the curse repeated:

No, thou canst not hear:
 Thou art immortal, and this tongue is known
 Only to those who die. (1.149-51)

Earth’s larger point is not simply that some things are incommunicable, but that they depend for their correct communication on an informing spirit or context that has yet to

arrive. This informing spirit resides in the future, in “death,” which in Earth’s formulation is not simply a negation but a world set apart:

For know there are two worlds of life and death:
 One that which thou beholdest, but the other
 Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit
 The shadows of all forms that think and live
 Till death unite them, and they part no more. (1.195-99)

“Death,” in this usage, seems not just a metaphysical reality but also a figure for the unknowable, for those “shadows” that cannot yet formally coalesce as coherent thoughts. If Beatrice’s lived experience has made her mind “like a ghost shrouded and folded up / In its own formless horror,” then such formlessness is only temporary, waiting for a future moment of resolution. Her mother’s plea that Beatrice simply name the crime that has been done to her therefore resembles Prometheus’s demand that Earth simply repeat the curse. By trying to speed up the formal process of thought, to precipitate understanding in the present, Lucretia and Prometheus both fail to acknowledge that the integrity of thought depends not only on the overt content it expresses but also on the historical circumstances in which thought is received—on “Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change,” as Demogorgon explains to Asia (2.4.119).

Both Lucretia and Prometheus demand, in effect, an impossibility: the communication of that which cannot yet be thought because its informing spirit has not yet arrived. The Earth’s solution to this paradox, in turn, resembles Beatrice’s when she invites Lucretia to speak on her behalf. In similar guise, the Earth invites Prometheus to ventriloquize his own former speech, to “Call at will / Thine own ghost” to repeat the curse (1.210-11). This solution separates the developing thought—the curse—from the will of its creator; by routing the thought through a lackluster spirit, Prometheus dissociates the curse from the hatred that originally informed it, leaving it open to other,

more humanizing permutations in the future. And Beatrice anticipates this same line of reasoning in refusing to name the rape except as “that which has transformed me,” leaving the endpoint of this process—transformed how, or into what—unspecified.

Beatrice’s sense of purpose operates indirectly, emerging in the future, not in the past. Or, more precisely, her purposes are not legible through anxious retrospection in the present, but only through anticipated retrospection from some unforeseeable point in the future. Savella begins to pick up on this logic, however dimly, when in the later scene he tells Beatrice,

There is a deed demanding question done;
Thou hast a secret which will answer not. (4.4.106-7)

Like Victor’s “mechanical impulse of some power of which I was unconscious,” Beatrice’s “secret” operates in and through her without belonging to her. Quite unlike Orsino’s prophecy regarding Giacomo, that “such self-anatomy shall teach the will / Dangerous secrets,” Beatrice’s secret is not one that she herself could necessarily be “taught,” or give a name to—much less communicate to others.

Therefore, rather than reproach herself, as Giacomo does, for her inability to fully control or foresee her own future, Beatrice sees the chain of consequence within which she is implicated as inherently unforeseeable and out of her control. This recognition gives Beatrice a sense not of powerlessness, but of power. Rather than the passive victim of circumstance, she sees herself as an active messenger; tragic though her individual history may be, it is merely the prelude to a much larger chain of story (what Hannah Arendt called “the great story without beginning and end”) whose meaning does not reduce to the simple tragedy of its parts.³² The significance of that larger story, in

³² Arendt, 184.

Beatrice's view, cannot be traced back to a single author or action, whether Orsino's schemes, Cenci's crimes, or God's providence.

In Beatrice's inability to trace or comprehend the absent cause of her action and thought, the will that operates through her, Shelley makes a virtue of Savella's suggestion of "a secret which will answer not." In this view, language does not, and should not, "answer" to the preexisting limits of our moral imaginations. The only answer Savella is looking for, of course, is for Beatrice to incriminate herself by giving probable cause, by naming the fact of the rape—"the words which you would have me speak," as Beatrice admonishes her mother. Although strongly hinted at, this event is never named (nor even confirmed to have taken place) within the play itself: an open secret, conspicuous by omission.³³ Ostensibly, this omission was a concession to the public's moral sensibilities, a strategic choice on Shelley's part in a failed bid to see the play performed. More to the point, however, is that the omission served Shelley's dramatic purposes anyway, by returning the spectator's mind to that restless state of seeking and feeling (outlined in the Preface) upon which the play's dramatic effect, in Shelley's view, depends. The event of the rape structures the play but does not, as Beatrice knows, contain its moral meaning. In being made to guess at the unnamed event, then, the spectator is made to seek out a dramatic cause that is both absent and, as the whole play serves to argue, somewhat beside the point to begin with. The spectator's position thus anticipates that of Prometheus trying to recall his curse, before he realizes that "words are quick and vain." In leaving the audience to infer the fact of the rape—an event whose conspicuous

³³ In the 1839 Introductory Note, Mary Shelley commented, "Shelley said that it might be remarked that, in the course of the play, he had never mentioned expressly Cenci's worst crime. Every one knew what it must be, but it was never imaged in words."

omission makes it *seem* morally significant—Shelley is prompting them to do cognitive work that, unbeknownst to them, is in fact already obsolete: that will not answer.

8. Refusing Recognition

In refusing to justify herself in the normative terms of the law, Beatrice stands firm in her conviction that a meager account of events as facts (i.e., the fact that she murdered her father) can reveal nothing about the truth as it really stands (i.e., that he, not she, was the guilty party). Nonetheless, Beatrice knows that the Inquisition, like Savella, is incapable of making this distinction. At her trial in Rome in the play's fifth Act, therefore, she again resists delivering a descriptive account of her actions that the court would automatically understand as a normative account—as an admission of guilt or repentance. She refuses, specifically, to recognize herself in the Inquisition's primary piece of evidence, a letter from the prelate Orsino that Savella had earlier discovered on Marzio when he arrested him. The letter hints at both the family's design (to murder Cenci) and underlying motive (to avenge Cenci's rape of Beatrice), but as Beatrice shrewdly observes, the letter does not name either of these events. As a result, the letter remains purely circumstantial evidence:

Here is Orsino's name;
Where is Orsino? Let his eye meet mine.
What means this scrawl? Alas! ye know not what. (5.2.175-77)

As a response to her judge's question—"Know you this paper, Lady?" (5.2.171)—Beatrice's answer refutes the judge's implication that knowledge, or recognition, connotes guilt.

What “means” this scrawl, indeed? Beatrice’s question to the judge reads rhetorically—‘Why should I make your case for you?’—but also reflexively: ‘What might my story mean to others, in the future?’ As Beatrice perceives, what the law hopes to treat as self-evident can only come to appear as such through the narrative supplement of the defendant. Rather than provide that supplement, Beatrice’s response, instead, is to pause in reflexive skepticism, standing alongside herself in imagination as she recollects the significance Cenci’s murder held for her and her family in prospect, and compares it to the significance it holds for her now in retrospect. After all, the explicit tragic irony is that Savella had originally arrived at the Castle of Petrella with a warrant for Cenci’s death, not Beatrice’s arrest. In Lucretia’s words,

All was prepared by unforbidden means
Which we must pay so dearly, having done. (4.4.29-30)

From a means-ends perspective, then, circumstantial details would seem to render the murder superfluous, and the family’s trial and punishment unnecessary. But Beatrice’s convictions, once again, do not depend on the contingency of circumstances such as these. “What is done wisely, is done well,” she tells Lucretia (4.4.35); warrant or no warrant, the spirit of justice in which the murder was performed remains vitally relevant.

In the immediate context of the courtroom, meanwhile, Beatrice’s question, read rhetorically, proves strategic. In the judge’s demand (“Know you this paper, Lady?”), recognition amounts to self-incrimination; for Beatrice to recognize herself in the letter would be to recognize herself in an implied narrative of probable cause. In this logic, as Beatrice infers, to “know” oneself in the other’s terms is also to endorse their narrative of events, the particular “meaning” or interpretive construction they put on the circumstances. By turning the burden of argumentation back on the judge, therefore,

Beatrice refuses to recognize the circumstantial evidence of the letter in such a way that it could be used against her.

By refusing to recognize herself in the evidence, or even to name the facts of the case, Beatrice compels her judges to carry out their routine in the absence of the performative apparatus that usually motivates it, the drama of persuasion and confession. In refusing the pre-scripted form of this routine, therefore, Beatrice forces her judges to show that their work is inherently empty and retroactively predetermined, a pro forma routine aiming at a foregone conclusion—the guilty verdict demanded by the Pope. Accordingly, when the judges reach their inevitable verdict of guilt, they find their victory strangely inconclusive: “She is convicted, but has not confessed” (5.3.90). Although her judges have managed to convict Beatrice in the eyes of the law, they have not managed to convict her on her own terms; and this is because her own internal convictions remain directed elsewhere, toward a higher form of justice that the Inquisition cannot fathom.

Beatrice’s strategy of turning away from others initially seems to place her ethics in some sort of continuity with her father’s. In a soliloquy shortly before his death, Cenci outsources his own hatred in terms that anticipate Beatrice’s when she imagines herself as the instrument of a higher justice:

My soul, which is a scourge, will I resign
 Into the hands of him who wielded it;
 Be it for its own punishment or theirs,
 He will not ask it of me till the lash
 Be broken in its last and deepest wound;
 Until its hate be all inflicted. (4.1.63-68)

Like Beatrice’s comparison of the assassin Marzio to “a sword in the right hand of justest God,” Cenci’s comparison of his own soul to “a scourge” in “the hands of him who wielded it” imagines a similar chain of agency by proxy. The adverbial phrase at the heart

of Cenci's monologue, "Be it for its own punishment or theirs," does not specify a particular coordinating verb, nor a particular timeframe for punishment, whether this life or the next. Cenci thus equates his actions with God's by means of the hand-whip assemblage which they together constitute, and suggests that retributive justice, reflexive and indiscriminate, has no end. Like Beatrice, Cenci resists a metaphorical logic of substitution, opting instead for a metonymic logic of displacement and unanswerable consequence. Neither Beatrice nor Cenci is relinquishing final authority to God; rather, God (already fragmented in both characters' formulations into a "hand" or "hands") becomes a placeholder for a still greater force, one that is as yet ineffable and unnameable.³⁴

Cenci and Beatrice both turn away from sympathy and recognition, and they both do so by making their intentional mental states (hatred and vengeance, respectively) appear inhuman in their inscrutability. Cenci's hatred and Beatrice's vengeance appear monstrous, then, *not* because of the monstrous purposes with which those intentional states are associated (the rape and the murder, respectively), but because the language both characters associate with their intentional states does not express itself in terms of a clear-cut motive. The monstrous, in *The Cenci* (as in *Frankenstein*), refers to what cannot

³⁴ My argument for Percy Shelley's language of proxy agency draws on Forest Pyle's and Kir Kuiken's accounts of figurative displacement in Shelley. For Pyle, the trademark Percy Shelley trope is catachresis, the figuration of prior figures signaling the postponement or displacement of unfulfilled desire. Forest Pyle, "Shelley: The Ends of Imagination, the 'Triumph' of Ideology," in *The Ideology of Imagination: Subject and Society in the Discourse of Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 94-128. In a similar vein, Kir Kuiken focuses on Shelley's use of metalepsis, the expression of "something unseen in the present that acts as its condition of possibility without being actually temporally or logically prior to it," or "a repetition of something *originally* or *fundamentally* unapprehended in the past." Kir Kuiken, *Imagined Sovereignities: Toward a New Political Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 184-85. Though catachresis emphasizes the fact of involuntary misappropriation, while metalepsis emphasizes the possibility of reappropriation, both terms suggest a frustration at having missed something, followed by a desire to recall that which was missed.

be accounted for as cause and effect. Cenci expresses this kind of thought, for instance, when he invokes his curse upon Beatrice and ends by declaring,

I do not feel as if I were a man,
But like a fiend appointed to chastise
The offences of some unremembered world. (4.1.160-62)

As in the “scourge” passage shortly before this, Cenci gives voice to a hatred so strong that it pushes him to an out-of-body experience.

Instead of giving him a strong sense of purpose, then, the force of his hate divides Cenci from his own actions: in the “like a fiend” simile, although “appointed to chastise,” he has no memory of the “offences” that merit chastisement, nor even of the context or antediluvian “world” in which those offenses took place.³⁵ But while Beatrice shares Cenci’s intuition regarding the ways in which our purposes are never fully our own, she does not agree with his apparent conclusion, that this renders purpose forever indiscernible according to any larger scheme. Cenci asserts,

As to the right or wrong that’s talk ... repentance ...
Repentance is an easy moment’s work
And more depends on God than me. (4.1.41-43)

“Repentance” of this sort stands in stark contrast to the anguished reflexivity of Prometheus (“It doth repent me”). Cenci is happy to leave aside the question of the ultimate import of his actions, satisfied that purposes that are twisted now can somehow be set right in a cumulative and retroactive gesture, “an easy moment’s work.”

³⁵ Cenci’s suggestion of deep time here resonates with Shelley’s idea of “savage” time consciousness, a concept which Robert Mitchell tracks in Shelley’s “An Essay on the Punishment of Death” and *A Philosophical View of Reform*. In savage time consciousness, present and future are supposed to be locked down in an immutable past—as opposed to Godwinian philosophical necessity, whereby the present positions itself as “the active source of future events” (“An Essay on the Punishment of Death”). Robert Mitchell, “The ghost of gold: National debt, imagery, and the politics of sympathy in P. B. Shelley,” in *Sympathy and the State in the Romantic Era: Systems, State Finance, and the Shadows of Futurity* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 163-204, esp. 170-73.

For Beatrice, in contrast to her father, self-estrangement is not a free pass but an earnest labor of ethical engagement akin to that of Prometheus. That earnestness explains her reaction when the court presents its incriminating evidence, Beatrice's letter to Orsino. Beatrice's response is not, to be sure, the Titan's explicit act of repentance, but rather his implicit act of self-distancing, prefatory to that act: "Were these my words, O Parent?" In Beatrice's formulation, the question reads not as the prelude to repentance but as a disavowal—"What means this scrawl?"—and as such, it does not seek to resolve the time of doubt, but to deepen and extend it. The act of disavowal, then, allows her to see the bare fact of the murder (like the bare fact of Prometheus's curse) as a necessary step in a larger ethical project, one that is still unfolding and that remains to be put into words.

In contrast to the *Prelude* narrator's "laughter for the Page that would reflect / To future times the face of what now is," for the Shelleys' protagonists, "the face of what now is" can *only* be seen through the gaze of "future times." That distinction is what justifies Beatrice in refusing recognition in the present, since how things currently appear must necessarily be a lie. Her advice to Lucretia immediately before Savella's arrival demonstrates one version of this logic:

'Tis like a truant child
To fear that others know what thou hast done,
Even from thine own strong consciousness, and thus
Write on unsteady eyes and altered cheeks
All thou wouldst hide. (4.4.36-40)

Beatrice compares Lucretia to "a truant child" not because she tries to hide her actions from others, but because she hides them for the wrong reasons. In contrast to the usual assumption that we hide things from the other because we don't want them to see the truth, Beatrice is counseling Lucretia to do the opposite: to hide appearances (Lucretia's consciousness of having murdered Cenci) precisely to enable the Inquisition to access the

truth (the family's innocence relative to the enormity of their injuries at Cenci's hands). But, in accessing the truth in this roundabout way, Savella and the Inquisition judges will not actually recognize that truth for themselves. That is, in delivering a verdict of 'not guilty,' they will be touching on the higher truth precisely because they were *blinded* to what Beatrice perceives as the more mundane circumstance of the murder itself.

Beatrice's faith in the deferred forms that justice can take explains her advice to Lucretia to deliberately mislead the Inquisition judges so as to allow them to access the truth in spite of—or rather, by means of—their own ignorance. Or, as Beatrice explains to Savella regarding Lucretia,

She cannot know how well the supine slaves
Of blind authority read the truth of things
When written on a brow of guilelessness. (4.4.182-84)

In this view, "blindness" or ignorance may yet produce the right outcome, even though through doubly flawed means: through the misguidedly literal, surface reading of the Inquisition judges as well as through (what Beatrice takes to be) Lucretia's ignorance of how the world works—which is exactly what will lend her a convincing air of "guilelessness" (or so Beatrice hopes). Even though Lucretia and the judges are misguided, and their intentions misdirected, both parties may yet end up serving the cause of justice through the peculiar recombination of their particular understandings.³⁶

Shelley's larger point, however, is not just that estranged purposes may turn out to produce ethical silver linings due to contingent circumstances, but that contingency is inherent to responsible thought, to intention and meaning at all levels. As a result, the

³⁶ Shelley went on to make this point more explicitly in his poem written the following year, "The Witch of Atlas," in which the Witch sets the world's wrongs to rights by leading those astray whose purposes are already misguided to begin with, in a sort of double negative: "And she would write strange dreams upon the brain [...] and make / All harsh and crooked purposes more vain." Percy Shelley, "The Witch of Atlas," in *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), lines 617-19.

contingency of thought nullifies the sorts of distinctions—between active and passive, author and instrument, criminal and victim—that often pass for moral substance. Such binaries may seem revelatory, but they fail to tell the story of who we are. This is why, for Hannah Arendt, even the “revelatory character” of action remains necessarily contingent, since the question of what exactly is revealed, or to whom, proves impossible to resolve:

Although everybody started his life by inserting himself into the human world through action and speech, nobody is the author or producer of his own life story. . . . Somebody began it and is its subject in the twofold sense of the word, namely, its actor and sufferer, but nobody is its author.³⁷

And I take this to be Shelley’s point, too, when he reflects on Beatrice’s story in the Preface: “The crimes and miseries in which she was an actor and a sufferer are as the mask and the mantle in which circumstances clothed her for her impersonation on the scene of the world” (144). From this perspective, action and suffering alike are only skin-deep, not revelatory; as so many stage props, they bear no necessary relation to underlying moral truth about the subject.

9. Deep Justice

The Shelleys suggest, in short, that moral truth bears little resemblance to what we can know of it from any given action, disclosure, or outcome. As Demogorgon says to Asia in *Prometheus Unbound*, “the deep truth is imageless” (2.4.116). The legal determinations based on appearances have no necessary relation to a kind of justice that abides regardless of whether or not it ever produces public assent or tangible results.

³⁷ Arendt, 184.

Legal guilt and moral innocence, things as they appear and things as they ought to appear, are suspended alongside each other in the Shelleys' work, periodically overlapping, in their protagonists' minds, without contradiction. And this is because Victor and Beatrice read the world not as it appears to others but in light of an idea—even when that idea seems to make little difference in the here-and-now. Their persistent feeling is that wrongful incrimination and its supports—the misleading appearance of events, and their mistaken interpretation—remain utterly contingent, accidental; the fact remains that things still could have proved otherwise, even if, for present purposes, they no longer will.

So much for surface justice, for things as they are. The less settled question, in contrast, is what deep justice consists in, or what it depends on once surface appearances are dispensed with. Not on the courts, after all; regardless of which way the law settles the issue, any legal judgment remains superficial. Deep justice will not be foreclosed even if the desired outcome (acquittal of the innocent, whether Justine or Beatrice) should never come to pass. Or even if it should—which is to say that, in theory, even the arrival of justice as a legal event could neither fulfill nor justify an idea that now operates, as Kant would say, “within the subject himself.”

Where others extrapolate directly from incriminating appearances to essential moral truth, Victor and Beatrice perceive mere contingency, or what Demogorgon calls “Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change” (2.4.119). In Percy Shelley's concept of Necessity, passing events do bear on underlying truth, though less directly. “[T]he events which compose the moral and material universe,” he writes (echoing Godwin), constitute “an immense and uninterrupted chain of causes and effects” illustrating “the certainty of

the conjunction of antecedents and consequents.”³⁸ But certainty of constant conjunction—Victor’s confidence, for instance, “that my tale conveys in its series internal evidence of the truth of the events of which it is composed”—is not yet certainty of what final significance those conjunctions will amount to, even as a tale laid out in sequence. While events may be necessary, their meaning is no longer self-evident nor conclusive; those legal judgments which seem most settled at the time are only the prelude to an idea still on its way to fruition.

What the concept of conviction adds to that of Necessity, over and above the fact of “antecedents and consequents,” is the outline of a new form of moral consequence as precisely that which seems least consequential on the page, least likely to sway others. Deep justice depends for the time being, then, on an idea that the subject intuits without wholly understanding or being able to justify it. Victor perceives Justine’s innocence in the face of circumstantial evidence; Beatrice maintains her moral innocence over and above the fact of her legal guilt. Such ideas can only be felt, not argued. Radical innocence cannot be exhausted by legal judgments; the idea persists alongside the settled outcome.³⁹

The justness of Justine’s and Beatrice’s innocence is self-assured; it does not depend on justification, least of all on the legal judgment of the courts. In Walter Benjamin’s essay “Critique of Violence,” the law remains incapable of imagining true justice because it fixates on a mythical moment of origin, of the law’s inception, a myth that serves the purposes of “bloody power.”⁴⁰ In place of the law’s moral logic of origin

³⁸ Percy Shelley, note to *Queen Mab*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 52n3.

³⁹ In thinking of deep justice as a potential that can never be fulfilled by any given legal event, I have in mind Jacques Derrida’s concept of the *arrivant* as discussed in my first chapter.

⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Critique of Violence,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 277-

and compulsory return, Benjamin offers an alternative moral logic of the divine commandment, which acts not as an absolute limit but as a contingent placeholder: something made, as it were, expressly to be annulled.⁴¹ The commandment or “injunction” dispenses with the law’s causal framework of proscription, transgression, and predetermined consequence:

But just as it may not be fear of punishment that enforces obedience, the injunction becomes inapplicable, incommensurable once the deed is accomplished. No judgment of the deed can be derived from the commandment. And so neither the divine judgment, nor the grounds for this judgment, can be known in advance.⁴²

Unlike the judgments of “bloody power” (whether legal judgments or the judgments of fate), divine judgment does not follow causally from the breaking of the commandment and cannot, therefore, be understood as a punishment or retribution.⁴³ Understood instead as “expiation,”⁴⁴ such a judgment breaks with the logic of cause and effect, transgression and punishment, and with the myth of origins upon which that logic depends. To imagine justice without the narrative of law, then, would be to imagine the source of moral

300. The myth of origins, in Benjamin’s view, grounds and justifies “bloody power” in two forms: both as “legal violence,” a human institution that follows a logic of means and ends, and as “mythic violence,” a “manifestation of the gods” that follows a logic of fate (294). Law, in either sphere, is continually instated, transgressed, and reinstated in a “lawmaking and law-preserving” cycle (300).

⁴¹ In the model of origins, as soon as the law is pronounced or codified, it is already obsolete. In this respect, the moment of the law’s institution proves as deceptive and elusive as the moment of poetic composition in the *Defence*: “A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry.’ ... [W]hen composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline.” Percy Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 531.

⁴² Benjamin, 298.

⁴³ Benjamin goes on to elaborate that the specific commandment at stake in his discussion—“Thou shalt not kill”—is mistakenly taken to justify a misplaced attachment to “mere life for its own sake” (297). The real violence at issue, in Benjamin’s view, is not the question of killing itself, but the interpretive violence of turning a general “guideline” (intended, as he reads it, for case-by-case determinations) into an absolute prohibition, a “criterion of judgment”—an interpretive move then used to justify the legal violence of condemnation and punishment (298-99).

⁴⁴ Benjamin, 297.

meaning not as a fixed limit set down in the past but as a state of exception and contingency originating in a future that has yet to be written.

To say, with Benjamin, that such a future “[cannot] be known in advance” is also to speak, with Shelley, of “some unimagined change in our social condition or the opinions which cement it.”⁴⁵ We would not recognize that future, it seems, were we even now living in it. This is Godwin’s point, too, in writing of a “future reformation.” That reformation steals upon us lightly, imperceptibly: “It can in reality scarcely be considered as of the nature of action. It consists in an universal illumination. Men feel their situation, and the restraints, that shackled them before, vanish like a mere deception.”⁴⁶ At stake here is an ability to “feel [one’s] situation”: to remain open and receptive to a contingent, barely even perceptible, change in our present condition. Such a change breaks with the logic of cause and effect, with the notion of “action” as such. The moral revolution, then, does not so much *begin* in an inner transformation as wholly *consist* in it. And this is the abiding faith of Shelleyan conviction: that the transformed world we sought is already nearly accomplished, requiring only that we cleanse the doors of our perception in order to see it.

This “universal illumination,” as Godwin calls it, depends on looking beyond the horizons of expectation we set for ourselves, beyond a timeline of clear action and measurable change. To do so may well be to forfeit, as Victor and Beatrice both know, a certain power in the here-and-now: the power either to alter one’s present circumstances, or to maintain one’s sense of identity in the face of those circumstances. Thus Frances Ferguson has argued that “[t]o lose romantic memory is to lose the ability to act by losing

⁴⁵ Percy Shelley, “Preface,” *Prometheus Unbound*, in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: Norton, 2002), 208.

⁴⁶ Godwin, *Enquiry*, 123.

the ability to see oneself in one's own past actions."⁴⁷ But for the Shelleys, that may be all to the good, since self-recognition of this sort is tantamount in these texts not only to self-incrimination but also to self-deception, and thus antithetical to making a real difference. To acquiesce to the logic of recognition is to cede priority to the outward world of action and circumstance and to concede that what happens—or what we can presently imagine could happen—is what matters. To concede this would be to foreclose on a change from within, a mere feeling, but one that can move worlds. For the Shelleys, the deliberate refusal to justify one's convictions (as in Victor's case), or even to recognize oneself in one's own actions (as in Beatrice's case), is the means not of avoiding punitive consequences but of reimagining moral consequence beyond the terms currently available to us.

Conviction confers on the subject, then, a duty of refusing to curtail her own moral intuitions to what others will easily understand. But conviction, in these texts, confers another duty, too: the reflexive examination of one's intuitions in order to imagine what moral consequences they might still yield in a transformed world. And such an examination may require that one remain, for the present, in a position of doubtful obscurity, no matter how inconsequential, hopeless, or even perverse it may feel at the time. Conviction, then, need mean nothing more, and nothing less, than that the world as it currently stands has not yet overwritten the world as it could be—even if such a world remains unimaginable, lost in darkness and distance.

⁴⁷ Frances Ferguson, "Romantic Memory," *Studies in Romanticism* 35, no. 4 (1996): 533, doi:10.2307/25601195.

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