

All Things Common: Community and Contingency in Romanticism

By

Joseph Gerald Albernaz II

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Committee in charge:

Professor Steven Goldsmith, chair

Professor Anne-Lise François

Professor Celeste Langan

Professor Chenxi Tang

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## Abstract

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My dissertation *All Things Common: Community and Contingency in Romanticism* draws its title from William Blake: “The whole Business of Man Is The Arts & All Things Common.” What would it mean to take such a radical claim seriously, and indeed as giving voice to the paradigmatic problem of the Romantic period? My project narrates the emergence of what I call “groundless community” in Romanticism, in addition to tracing its crucial, if submerged Romantic legacy in twentieth-century continental and environmental thought, up to its relevance to contemporary discussions about politics, critique, and ecology. Groundless community names a way of experiencing community as *contingency*, i.e., not guaranteed by essence, nature, identity, or any other authoritative term. Between the breakdown of traditional organizations of collective life and the consolidation of modernity in post-Revolutionary Europe, Romantic writers articulate a fecund poetics and praxis of the common—one that critics, in their eagerness to assimilate Romanticism’s communal impulses into emergent regimes of identity like empire or nation, have yet to recognize. Historically situated and attuned to the affective and literary-formal registers that accompany social change, the poetics of groundless community I find in Romanticism also unfold a furtive, unfulfilled promise of modernity; these communities are open, egalitarian, everyday, and shot through with an unpredictable entanglement with nonhumans. *All Things Common* thus turns to Romanticism for resources in reframing our relations to the environment in the Anthropocene, a time of global ecological crisis coextensive with political, economic, and energy shifts in the Romantic era itself. I also provide a novel interpretation of the *topos* of the everyday in Romantic poetry, locating a matrix of collective possibilities in the Romantics’ attention to the mundane, the local, and the ordinary.

My first two chapters, respectively on Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Jacques Derrida, work in tandem to demonstrate the nearly identical ways in which these two thinkers are *pre*-Romantic, broaching the possibility of groundless community while ultimately foreclosing it. Constellating Rousseau and Derrida sets up the long, untimely Romanticism that my dissertation unearths, counter-intuitively finding in Rousseau and Derrida’s *rejection* of community the closest analogue to the groundless community Romanticism and its twentieth-century inheritors would formulate. “Rousseau’s Doubles” traces an opposition between singularity and the double that obsesses Rousseau, who is deeply invested in protecting the unique singularity of the individual at all costs. For Rousseau, this singularity—exemplified both by his idea of humans in the “state of nature” and by his literary self-portrait in *The Confessions*—is constantly under siege in society, which seeks violently to impose a common measure onto singularity. By positing a purely historical and contingent state of nature prior to society’s imposition, Rousseau opens the door for a thinking of “*existence en commun*” that is not tied to any essential nature—one that is, in a word, groundless. Yet Rousseau refuses to think this historicity as an opening onto community, in a social or an

environmental key. Although Romanticism's thought of community is not possible without the breakthrough of Rousseau, his ultimate rejection of community as being merely social commensurability leaves him only at the threshold of Romanticism.

Chapter Two, "Derrida's Islands" turns to Derrida for an investigation into deconstruction's close intellectual and institutional relationship to Romanticism, as well as a broader methodological reflection on the practice of critique in relation to recent "post-critique" debates. This chapter focuses mainly on Derrida's late work, and uncovers the logics by which Derrida's own explicit resistance to community makes him an unwitting heir of Rousseau. Although Derrida began his influential career with a critique of Rousseau's desire for immediacy in *Of Grammatology*, the later Derrida places a radical emphasis on singularity that deeply resembles Rousseau's (with whom Derrida remained in constant dialogue), and which culminates in a rejection of everyday community. Looking especially at Derrida's final seminar course *The Beast and the Sovereign*—which itself reads another anti-relational pre-Romantic text, *Robinson Crusoe*—I critically examine Derrida's claim that each singularity resides, like Crusoe, on an isolated island. Putting pressure on Derrida's anti-communal stance by drawing from thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Fred Moten, and Lauren Berlant, I conclude the chapter by conceptualizing an eco-critical thought that attends to the relationality and community inherent in the everyday and the local, while still able to think on a global scale to confront global ecological crisis.

My next chapter, "Blake's Circulations," takes its departure from Blake's extensive engagement with the related motifs of circles and circulation. I show how Blake is attentive to the tendency of circulation to generate a hierarchical regime of commensurable equivalence from a grounded center. Against the historical backdrop of changing conceptions of sovereignty and economic circulation around 1800, I examine Blake's critique of grounded community, as well as the alternative vision of shared life displayed in his difficult late epic *Jerusalem*. I cast *Jerusalem* as a more everyday and domestic, as well as ecological, poem than what is suggested by its forbidding reputation and surface difficulty. Close readings of passages and images—including attention to Blake's understudied metrical theory and practice—allow me to provide novel interpretations of important issues in Blake like his conception of life, his aesthetics, and his idiosyncratic but perceptive forays into political theology. Rather than rejecting all measure outright, Blake finds the promise of groundless community—"all things common"—in what *exceeds* measure. Blake names this shared circulation of excess "forgiveness."

An interlude develops the Blake chapter's conceptuality of excess and measure to uncover Blake's vast but unexplored influence on Georges Bataille, a key figure in the twentieth-century thought of community. I employ insight into Blake and Bataille's shared concern with excess energy to intervene in the nascent eco-critical subfield "Energy Humanities," taking the Romantic-era transition to fossil fuels and changes in the very concept of energy over Blake's life as a case study for a Romantic vision of energy as a groundless commons. Through Blake and Bataille's communal inflection of solar energy, I orient the critical study of energy forms towards thinking excess rather than scarcity.

My penultimate chapter, "Wordsworth's Parts," primarily takes up William's understudied poem "Home at Grasmere"—but Dorothy's *Grasmere Journal* and poetry as well—to show how the Wordsworths conceived groundless community in and as the sharing of domestic life, at a time when the French Revolution and emergent feminism had opened up the home as a contested space of contingency. In an extended reading of "Home at Grasmere" that traces its partitive formal logic, I show how Wordsworth figures the locality of his home, Dove Cottage, as neither a complete organic whole nor an isolated and detached part. Rather, community takes place in the very incommensurability of part and whole, and the domestic is where this is shared and lived—including with nonhumans, for the domestic *oikos* also always carries a precarious ecological charge. Recent

debates on the conceptualization of the Anthropocene—should it be named for the whole of humanity (the *Anthropos*) or only *part*?—provide another framing for the stakes and affordances of “Home at Grasmere,” itself planned to be a part of *The Recluse*, William’s unfinished poem of totality. The Wordsworths’ domestic space never coheres into a whole, and it is in this groundlessness that they cultivate a utopian kernel of sociality, such that “solitude is not / where these things are.”

“John Clare’s Worlds,” the final chapter, examines the early and mid-career poetry of the English Romantic peasant-poet John Clare, and is concerned with representations of local community, environment, and emergent logics of globalization in the early nineteenth century. I ask how Clare’s well-known localism and defense of the commons against land enclosure might be studied in not just political or ecological, but also ontological terms: that is, as the poetic experience of particularity and community without reference to a unified world or totality (the “world” of globalization). Reading the under-theorized Clare, especially his poetry’s emphatic deploying of prepositions and sharp shifts in perspective, I consider the situated ways that unique relations happen in Clare’s alternately exuberant and elegiac poems, with particular attention to relations to nonhuman beings.

A concluding coda opens future comparative possibilities between European Romanticisms via an engagement with an untranslated, mysterious fragment by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin called “Communism of Spirits.” In Hölderlin’s very nostalgia for a lost world of divine presence—asking “where will you find community?”—I find an early intimation of groundless community.

*Dedicated with love to Doris Sailer Albernaξ (Grandma Moose)*

“It is as if each of us obscurely felt that precisely the opacity of our clandestine life held within it a genuinely political element, as such shareable par excellence—and yet, if one attempts to share it, it stubbornly eludes capture and leaves behind only a ridiculous and incommunicable remainder. . . . We must change our life, carry the political into the everyday—and nevertheless, in the everyday, the political can only make shipwreck.”

—Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*

“Who are you, in us, disrupting our measure?” —Alice Notley, *Certain Magical Acts*

## Contents

Acknowledgments	iv
<i>Introduction: All Things Common</i>	1
1. Rousseau's Doubles	12
2. Derrida's Islands	51
3. Blake's Circulations	87
<i>Interlude: Blake and Bataille: Sunray of the Negative</i>	123
4. Wordsworths' Parts	132
5. Clare's Worlds	177
<i>Coda: Hölderlin's Communism</i>	198
Bibliography	206

## Acknowledgments

In the first section of the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, his final work, Rousseau tries to pin down his proper identity, that is, what is particular and essential to himself alone: “But me, detached from others and from everything, what am I myself?” he asks. The fact that he could never quite answer this question caused Rousseau immense consternation and angst, but for me it is a great joy to look back over this dissertation and be unable to pinpoint anything that is wholly and solely mine. Even what is most intimately *me* is not *mine*, as a poet once said. Having written a dissertation about community and the necessity of relationality, it is especially clear to me how much I owe others, to the point where I’d almost rather not sign this with my own proper name.

The hasty circumstances of this dissertation’s completion and filing allow me to offer here only the most general thanks—though no less sincere and profound—to my friends, family, colleagues, professors, and the musicians that have soundtracked my writing. I look forward to making this general thanks more specific in the acknowledgements of a future version of this project. But for now, nameless friends, *thank you*. I dedicate this work to my beloved grandmother and favorite person, Doris Sailer Albernaz.

## Introduction: All Things Common

“One of my principal aims in the *Excursion* has been to put the commonplace truths, of human affections especially, in an interesting point of view; and rather to remind men of their knowledge, as it lurks inoperative and unvalued in their own minds” –William Wordsworth letter to S.T. Coleridge, May 22, 1815

“...the community that shares this small part of being that is the contingency of the world.” –Jean-Luc Nancy, *Adoration*

This dissertation, *All Things Common: Community and Contingency in Romanticism*, argues that Romanticism articulates a radical new conception of community and the common that I call “groundless community.” Both a poetics and ethics, groundless community insists on the necessity of relationality and being in common without basing this commonness in a transcendent ground, divine sanction or guarantee, work, *telos*, origin, necessity, totality, identity, substance, common measure, or shared essence. In excavating Romanticism’s forays into groundless modes of community, I recast our understanding of Romanticism’s relationship to the modernity to which it responded and with which it co-emerged, and in doing so I attempt to grant new purchase to Romanticism’s aesthetic, ecological, political, and philosophical registers, as well as to affirm its untimely theoretical fecundity. In this way, *All Things Common* proceeds simultaneously on three distinct but mutually imbricated and inextricable levels: first and foremost, the level of Romanticism itself, where I read authors from across the long and trans-linguistic Romantic period (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Blake, William and Dorothy Wordsworth, John Clare, Friedrich Hölderlin) to develop the notion of groundless community, dwelling with texts in their historical context and rich formal complexity; second, I unearth and trace the crucial ways in which the Romantic concept of groundless community directly and indirectly informs and even conditions twentieth-century theoretical discourse on community in thinkers like Jacques Derrida, Georges Bataille, Jean-Luc Nancy, Stanley Cavell, Donna Haraway, and Giorgio Agamben; third, I bring both Romantic poetry’s conceptual agility and my reconstruction of the Romantic genealogy of theory to bear on pressing debates in contemporary thought both in and outside of literary studies—including discussions relating to the Anthropocene, as well as the status of critique.

Why do the variously experienced (and variously communal) ruptures of groundlessness, which I place under the titular rubric of *contingency*, come to the fore in Romanticism? It is by now a familiar story that the modernity emergent in the late eighteenth century takes place amidst and *as* the breakdown of traditional authorizations of collective life across Europe, so that “the modern [is] that which affirms itself as having lost every given ground for orientation by nature, by God, and by tradition,” as the introduction to a recent collection on “the lost grounds of modernity” has it (Schuback and Lane, *Dis-orientations*, x). In the succinct three word formula of art historian T.J. Clark, discussing the emergence of post-Revolutionary modernity via David’s 1793 painting *The Death of Marat*: “Modernity means contingency” (*Farewell to an Idea* 7). However, the dis-orienting groundlessness occasioned by the unleashed forces of modernity is typically considered—whether discussed in conjunction with Romantic literature or not—to have been re-oriented, reformatted, and channeled into a newly atomized individualism on the one hand, or the newly coalescing modern structures and institutions of community on the other (the “imagined communities” of nation, empire, race, capital, etc.).<sup>1</sup> Indeed as is often the case with such binaries, these binary poles are two sides of the same co(i)n, both retaining the unitary logic of a grounded whole. Foucault, for

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<sup>1</sup> “Imagined communities” here refers to Benedict Anderson’s influential book of that name on nationalism, but also is meant more broadly.

instance, remarks on “the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures” in this era (“The Subject and Power” 216). Romanticism can be cast as a culprit in abetting, or at least as complicit in reflecting, the imaginary of these new social forms (as was certainly often the case), or as a critic of the new order; but these two poles still seem to be the only two outlets for Romanticism’s expansive collective energies.<sup>2</sup> Even accounts that illuminate Romantic literature in seeing it as negotiating the contradictions and confusions between individual and collective that are constitutive of modernity, like that of Daniel Stout’s excellent recent book on the Romantic novel *Corporate Romanticism: Liberalism, Justice, and the Novel*, leave the two poles essentially in place.

Instead, my project uncovers groundless community as a third way—an untaken path or “unlived possibility” of modernity (to use Colin Jager’s phrase), one that embraces contingency and groundlessness but does so in order to see the breakdown of grounds as pointing toward new possibilities for community and ecology, new modes of inhabiting the earth in its relational vulnerability and complexity (*Unquiet Things* 223).<sup>3</sup> These possibilities for community are new and promissory, but are also already minutely and mundanely immanent in the everyday, and as such demanding to be generalized. The logic, poetics, and experience of groundless community unwork both collaborating poles of the binary “individual” and “collective,” to find collectivity in and as the irreducibly shared exposure to contingency, finitude, and the impossibility of securing a stable presence, whether this presence be that of a non-relational atom or a homogenous, unitary communal substance. Both the necessity and the stakes of this operation in poetic ontology come to light in Romantic writers’ critical realization of the “seamless logical continuity between the sovereignty and organization of the individual self and the sovereignty and organization of the people,” as Saree Makdisi and John Mee write in a discussion of one of my study’s central figures, William Blake (a point also constantly made by Nancy) (“Mutual Interchange” 15). Indeed it is a remark from Blake’s late print of the *Lacooön* (1827) that provides my title: “The Business of Man is The Arts & All Things Common” (*Complete Poetry and Prose*; E 237). The business or work of man are those activities—paradigmatically poetry and “The Arts”—that precisely undermine the idea of work and completion, instead opening up “all things” to their groundless commonness, their interminable and excessive sharing that Blake calls “Eternal Life,” or at the end of his epic *Jerusalem*, “the Life of Immortality.”

Contingency can be seen to be what Raymond Williams called the “structure of feeling” in the Romantic period, allowing us to detect social forms and “social experiences in solution,” in their multiplicity and potentiality, before they fully consolidated into the modernity we are now accustomed to studying as if it were the only possible configuration (*Marxism and Literature* 134). It is true that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries see the shift from a great many older aesthetic, social, political, cultural, epistemological, and economic forms into the modern configurations and institutions that are still very much with us. But rather than take one such social form or social field and demonstrate how Romantic aesthetic and cultural forms both reflect and shape the consolidation (and often, the naturalization) of some emergent feature of modernity, as is the more customary and more historicist approach (an approach that has produced much valuable

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Janowitz, for instance, argues that: “We should consider romanticism to be the literary form of a struggle taking place on many levels of society between the claims of *individualism* and the claims of *communitarianism*” (*Lyric and Labour in the Romantic Tradition* 13).

<sup>3</sup> Jager also writes that “it is romanticism that is best positioned to speak to our present moment, for the issues and problems it first identified and posed in recognizably modern form remain our issues and problems” (*Unquiet Things* 6). Marc Redfield similarly claims: “To study romanticism is to study our modernity” (*Theory at Yale* 42). This is clearly a claim that Romanticists are fond of making (as I am making it now), but not unjustifiably, I think.

knowledge), I examine a number of different social forms in transition—thus with their contingency exposed—to see what particular possibilities for community the breakdown of each form offers. I am less interested in the content in the shift of social forms or a given form, but in the *fact* of their shift, how it is experienced, how it is written, and what it reveals. Put bluntly: living in the midst of such contingency, seeing so many shifts in the configuration of sociality, above all discloses the fact that social forms *can* change. They are contingent and not necessary, which is to say, all community is ultimately *groundless*. In this way, as Kir Kuiken has recently pointed out: “Romanticism sits at the crossroads of the modern era, which is forced to confront the task of reconstituting the political on new grounds...in the absence of an absolute ground” (*Imagined Sovereignities* 1, 17). However, groundless community is not (in) some other realm *apart* from given contingent social forms, but always situated and experienced in the everyday, and always immanent in the structures of the world as the truth of their contingency. The grounds and measures that *do* appear as the forces structuring our singular and collective life all silently point to their ultimate undoing, or rather, an undoing that is always ongoing and, and in a sense, always already here. This common destitution of grounds or immanent “dispossession in collaboration” (Fred Moten) is not here as a stable presence or identity, but in and as the fugitive, collective textures of sociality’s constitutive and quotidian *rhythms*.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, I am working towards a theory of rhythm. Groundless community is, to borrow the recent words of Anne-Lise François, “already at some level realized, already present, in the rhythm of this temporizing” (“Little While” 145). Poetry helps us see that and know that—it reminds us that we know it. If poetry has agency, it is in helping us imagine what we already know, to use the language of Shelley’s *Defence of Poetry*.

Thus, with one exception (the Derrida chapter), each organizational part of *All Things Common* examines one or more social forms undergoing a crisis of contingency, that is, a major historical transition (the self and society in Rousseau, sovereignty and circulation in Blake, energy in Blake and Bataille, domesticity in the Wordsworths, rural locality in Clare, and religion in Hölderlin), to show how Romantic writers inhabit these forms to unwork them and open them up to new modes of sharing, always situated, always ecological and beyond the human. Because every social form is contingent, every social form is a regime of commensurability constructed around a voided core of groundlessness, incommensurability, excess, and contingency. To inhabit these oppressive, hierarchical structures at the point of their contingency—the point where their imposed measures are exceeded, undone, made to crumble, etc.—is to render them inoperative, to open them to a new and common use. I develop this logic across the project—especially in the methodological reflections in Chapter 2, on Derrida—and refer to it as the Romantic logic of *immanent excess*, where excess is not apart from measure, but immanent in measure as its wound or point of opening, a wound which is also an invitation to ensemble. The common needs (a) measure; it is (what is) inextricable from but irreducible to the measures of the world.

Excess is always shared. The point of excess—the situated rupture where an imposition of identity, singular or communal, is exceeded and shown to not fully encompass a being—is the point of sharing and relationality. As Nancy writes: “It is the essence of a measure [*mesure*]—and therefore of an excess [*demesure*]—to be in common” (*Experience of Freedom* 72). Community is always community of excess (common excess), sharing the exposure to contingency, to the lack of any

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<sup>4</sup> This phrase is found in Moten’s text “come on, get it!” It seems to me related to Anahid Nersessian’s idea of Romanticism’s utopian ethic of dispossession in her remarkable recent book *Utopia, Limited*. While Nersessian’s paradigm is in many ways consonant with my own, especially in its focus on the quotidian, we have an important difference in orientation: while she is most concerned with attenuation, relinquishing, renunciation, and scarcity, for me community (and indeed Romanticism) is essentially about *excess*. As Blanchot writes: “Romanticism is excessive, but its first excess is an excess of thought” (*The Infinite Conversation* 353).

ground or substance, to separation, to the shaped site of measure's eclipse. This problematic of measure is central to whole project, starting from the first chapter on Rousseau, where I show that Rousseau, writing at the threshold of modernity, influentially conceives the (always violent) imposition of a common measure to be constitutive of all sociality and society *as such*. In this way, insofar as the emergent social forms of modernity index the imposition of new measures and new logics of measure (especially the ultimate universal and universally imposed common measure, global capital), modernity is both the time of measure (modernity, from Latin *modus*: "measure") and the time of measure's crisis and immanent breakdown. The characteristically Romantic ethical charge and utopian demand—which is also irreducibly ecological—with regard to these regimes of measure lies in expanding the immanent(ly) shared site of excess, dilating it and making its conditions general: *all things common*.

In its own constant formal oscillatory interplay of measure and excess, poetry provides the ideal site for both modeling and thinking through the political, philosophical, relational, ethical, and ecological issues raised under the rubrics of groundless community and measure. Poetry is language rendered inoperative—poetry is simultaneously language in excess of communication on the one hand, and measured language par excellence of the other.<sup>5</sup> The poem exceeds *through* measure. That is, in and against it. In the same way that groundless community is immanent in the world as its excess or breakdown, Romantic poets realized that the groundless common of excess must be disclosed as immanent in measure, and that excess must be recollected (Wordsworth), organized (Blake), made common (Clare), or measured/calculated (Hölderlin). The poem has a particular way of *thinking*, which is tied up with how it makes material of this excess. Engaging such social and theoretical questions through poetic form, I explore formal operations on the more macro level of Blake's metrical theory and aesthetics of the bounding line and the Wordsworths' engagement with the genre of the poetic fragment, for example, down to the micro level of pun, preposition (e.g., in Clare), and even the morpheme (the smallest possible semantic unit of language). The counterintuitive aesthetic implications of the Romantic logic of immanent excess can be glimpsed in the Blakean antinomy of form: Blake often despises limit, constraint, and measure, and prefers excess; yet he also praises what he calls "the bounding line," and writes in *Jerusalem* that "Spiritual Verse [is] order'd and measur'd" (J 48:8; E 196). This problematic can be encapsulated even more succinctly in the gulf between two famous statements of Hölderlin: the claim in "Brod und Wein" that "immer bestehet ein Maas, / Allen gemein" ["always there persists a measure / common to all"], and the portentous question in "In lieblicher Bläue," asked and answered: "Giebt es auf Erden ein Maaß ? Es giebt keines" ["Is there any measure on this earth? There is none"] (StA 2.1 91; 372). Between measure's total reign and its impossibility, there is *rhythm*: "Alles ist rhythmus," Hölderlin also said. What Blake calls "Spiritual Verse" eruptively passes through the measure of what Hölderlin elsewhere called "the solid letter [*der feste Buchstab*]."

How the poem *thinks* is one of the principal things I am after. Thus, *All Things Common* fundamentally routes the broad nexus of questions it interrogates through the philosophical power of the Romantic poem, in particular, the doubly phenomenological *and* speculative character of "fiat" lyric ontology.<sup>6</sup> Doing so means tracking the operations and afterlife up to the present of what Antonio Negri calls a "poetic ontology." Indeed I think it is not an accident that Negri arrives at this term by way of an extensive engagement with a Romantic poet (though one this study does not

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<sup>5</sup> In the claim that poetry is language rendered inoperative, I follow Agamben, who argues such a point in many texts. See e.g. his essay "Art, Inactivity, Politics": "What in fact is a poem if not a linguistic operation which renders language inoperative by de-activating its communicative and informative functions in order to open it to a new possible use?" (140).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eric Reid Lindstrom's elegantly brilliant *Romantic Fiat: Demystification and Enchantment in Lyric Poetry*.

consider, namely Giacomo Leopardi).<sup>7</sup> For as I have hinted, one of the central threads—and I hope, contributions—of this project is its excavations, both intellectual-historical and first-order theoretical, of the Romantic genealogy of twentieth-century theoretical discourse on community and inoperativity. The notion of a groundless community (or relationality) that I claim here as Romantic is probably in fact most recognizable to us in the writings of a number of twentieth-century and contemporary thinkers who have attempted to think community without recourse to a shared identity, essence, substance, or property in common. The most famous instance of this discourse is Nancy’s idea of an “inoperative community” in the 1983 book of that name, which gave rise to a number of other responses and linked reflections on community without ontotheological grounding in the 1980s, 90s, and 2000s up to today: texts by Blanchot (*The Unavowable Community*), Agamben (*The Coming Community*), Roberto Esposito (*Communitas*), and many others. Nancy develops his concept of groundless community by suturing it to the concept of inoperativity (*désœuvrement*) he had articulated in a previous book on Romanticism (1978’s *The Literary Absolute*, written with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe), itself indebted to Blanchot’s writings on the Romantics.<sup>8</sup> Blanchot in turn had generated his insights in dialogue with his close friend Georges Bataille (it is not a coincidence that Nancy’s *The Inoperative Community* began life as an essay on Bataille), who, as I demonstrate in an interlude in this dissertation, turned to William Blake to help articulate his own concepts of excess, inoperativity, and community. Romanticism thus permeates every node of this complex, this community of thought.

When, say, Nancy writes that “community...is *what happens to us in the wake of society*,” that community “is not a work to be done or produced” but rather an unworking, or that community is “being-in-common [that] is not a common being” or that “[c]ommunity means that there is no singular being without another singular being,” he is being (a) Romantic—he is partaking in a discourse and a praxis opened by Romanticism (*The Inoperative Community* 11; 35; 29; 28). Just as the Romantics’ articulations of groundless community came as they saw themselves as caught in the 1790s between the crumbling of the old forms of community and the catastrophic failure of the new—i.e., the utopian communal promise of the French Revolution culminating in Terror, war, and empire—the network of theorists of community that interest me found themselves in a similar situation in the *other* 90s, the 1990s, after the fall of disastrous Soviet Communism and the seeming untrammelled triumph of globalized capital and its concomitant individualisms. In each case, an altogether new thinking of the common is demanded. Thus I am not seeking so much to “apply” recent theoretical positions of groundless community and inoperativity to Romanticism, but if anything, quite the inverse; this project attempts to illuminate how Romanticism makes a number of central twentieth-century theoretical discourses—that of groundless community and ultimately of inoperativity (which I refer to under the rubric of immanent excess)—*possible*.<sup>9</sup> In doing so, I shed

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<sup>7</sup> See Negri’s *Flower of the Desert: Giacomo Leopardi’s Poetic Ontology*. Negri is also of course a thinker of the common and community, see e.g. his *In Praise of the Common*.

<sup>8</sup> Celeste Langan traces Blanchot and Nancy’s interest in *désœuvrement* back to Rousseau’s use of the concept to describe a similar groundlessness representative of *apraxia* in the eighteenth century, that is, a lack of “any stable place in the social order...[with] no *body*—no collectivity, of family, community, or class—that might serve as the basis for coordination” (*Romantic Vagrancy* 214).

<sup>9</sup> Aside from those theorists already mentioned in this introduction (Bataille, Blanchot, Nancy, Agamben, Esposito, Haraway, Cavell, Negri), a far from exhaustive litany of texts and thinkers working in the orbit of what I’m calling the discourse of groundless community, with varying degrees of explicit indebtedness to and engagement with Romanticism, might include: Alphonso Lingis’s *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*, William Corlett’s *Community Without Unity*, Frédéric Neyrat’s *Fantasma de la communauté absolue*, Edith Wyschogrod’s *Ethics of Remembering*, Juliane Spitta’s *Gemeinschaft jenseits von Identität?*, John Paul Ricco’s *The Decision Between Us*, Mick Smith’s “Ecological Community,” and the general corpus of thinkers like Luce Irigaray, Édouard Glissant, Bruno Latour, Gayatri Spivak, and The Invisible Committee. I would also add the work of Fred Moten (in particular his book with Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons*). I

further light on the important entanglement of Romanticism and theory—one could tell a mostly complete history of the development of twentieth-century theory, at least literary theory, through the lens of Romanticism alone, from Lukács on Novalis and Walter Scott to recent eco-criticism—especially deconstruction, the theoretical orientation most directly concerned with groundlessness: the groundlessness underlying every structure or measure. My chapter-length *Auseinandersetzung* with the late work of Derrida tries to work through some of the limitations of his deconstructive thought—even as I probably place myself somewhere within it—and expose some of the reasons, philosophical and otherwise (reasons that are representative far beyond Derrida or deconstruction), that Derrida felt he had to refuse utterly any notion of the common.

Invocations of the “common” in this project are always meant to carry both of the main senses of this word, and to thematize their inextricable relation: (1) common as shared or communal, and (2) common as ordinary. In this way, *All Things Common* provides a new framework for understanding the familiar Romantic *topos* of the everyday, where the everyday’s defamiliarization or re-enchantment lies in nothing other than its *disclosure of groundless community*, its radiation of collective possibility, of “an originary or ontological ‘sociality’” (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 28). This communal promise of the everyday also harbors a re-routing of Romanticism’s utopian and eschatological thematics, which were always fundamentally communal. Groundless community is always situated, experienced in the breakdown of familiar social forms and the shared ways we improvise coping with the impossibility of constituting an absolute identity. The paradox that Romanticism allows and invites us to think is situatedness without rootedness—the uniqueness of singularity (both of a being and of a particular collective or way of life) is retained, though as a rhythm, texture, or opening, rather than an essence or ground. Another reason this everyday, habitual, shared coping with groundlessness falls under the rubric of the *common* is that it maps onto the everyday practices of land commoners in the same historical period—J.M. Neeson writes of “the constantly negotiated interdependence of commoners,” for instance (*Commoners* 41). Relationality is constantly, and not always happily or smoothly, negotiated. Like a dance. For the current of Romanticism I excavate, groundlessness does not lead to the Selkirkian solitude that haunts so much of eighteenth-century literature and thought, even in its affirmations of grounded natural human “sociability.”<sup>10</sup> Instead, groundlessness is an aperture made into an overture.

Thus the “commonplace truths,” everyday truths of the common which are always those of relationality or “affections,” can be seen even as they “lurk inoperative” (to use language from Wordsworth’s 1815 letter to Coleridge that serves as this introduction’s epigraph). The point is not to make this inoperative relationality operative, but to bring the groundless modes of sociality that *we already inhabit* to bear as a force on the world as it is. That is, to expand these modes, and in doing so see that the world points to its own crumbling, the shape of which is the immanent image of what Wordsworth called “the world which is to come” (“Home at Grasmere” 902). In this way, if groundless community is an ethics (as *ethos*, form of life) or a praxis, it is one without goals, without why—it is what the queer theorist John Paul Ricco calls an “inoperative praxis of the already unmade.”<sup>11</sup> After dwelling with the consequential rejection of the everyday (and by extension, community) in Rousseau and Derrida, my chapters explore the everyday as a site of groundless communal possibility in William Blake’s epic *Jerusalem*, where forgiveness embodies the relationality inherent in everyday life, William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s vision of the “common day” in

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am currently working on an essay on Moten’s engagement of Romantic authors like P.B. Shelley and Hölderlin, including his transformation of them in the light of the black radical tradition.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Nancy Yousef’s *Isolated Cases: The Anxieties of Autonomy in Enlightenment Philosophy and Romantic Literature*.

<sup>11</sup> See Ricco’s “The Separated Gesture: Partaking in the Inoperative Praxis of the Already-Unmade.”

sharing domesticity at Dove Cottage, John Clare's poetic reclamation of the commons in his local village in the context of enclosure and emergent globalization, and Friedrich Hölderlin's evocations of "open community" (*offne Gemeinde*) under an ordinary sky emptied of divine presence and in the midst of the everyday measures of life. The Romantic orientation of the everyday toward groundless community allows us an alternative mode of reading the world that supplements the automatic suspicion and denaturalizing imperatives of critique, while still retaining critique's insistence on the contingency of social forms.

The avowal of situatedness and singularity against homogeneity and equivalence that is—again, somewhat counter-intuitively—constitutive of groundless community in Romanticism also directly relates to a crucial though only intermittently explicit problematic, context, and intervention of the project: namely that of ecology. The ecological aspect of *All Things Common* places the accent on *all things*, where sharing in common exceeds any anthropocentrism and is an ecological affair involving all beings of all kinds, human and not, living and not. Ecology names an always situated field of relationality, where certain modes and rhythms of living, gathering, coping, sharing, and dwelling can flourish, but not others. We are now learning *not* to see ecology as a stable and bounded, grounded eternal presence called "nature," especially given the recent revelation of, and discourses on, the Anthropocene.<sup>12</sup> In its attention to nonhuman sharing and to everyday practices of the commons, the paradigm in this project can model and can help us further imagine possibilities for relationality and earthliness that were proffered as un-lived possibilities and fugitive forms of life in modernity—"other ways of being modern," in Anne-Lise François's words—at the time of rapidly increasing enclosures (the General Enclosure Act was passed in 1801), the transition to fossil fuels and fossil capitalism, and industrial modernity's onset, which may also be the onset of the Anthropocene (according to Paul Crutzen, who popularized the term) ("Ungiving Time").<sup>13</sup> The Anthropocene names a new geological epoch proposed by scientists, named for the drastic cumulative effects of the human being (*Anthropos*) on the climate and earth system—effects of which global warming is only the most prominent.

The overlapping—indeed even the possible co-emergence—of the Anthropocene with Romanticism allows us to view the latter, qua both period and literary movement, as a privileged site for probing formal patterns and structures of feeling related to and intimating the Anthropocene,<sup>14</sup> which can be said to name a dramatic failure to think human and nonhuman entanglement. I deal with the Anthropocene (including the important debates around the use of the term itself) most directly in the Blake-Bataille interlude and in the chapter on the Wordsworths, but the larger problem is behind all my considerations of the common and the commons. As a global crisis, the Anthropocene calls for thinking on planetary scale, but one that can do justice to the singularity of uniquely situated configurations of ecology and relationality without foisting a blanket of equivalence or totality over them. I claim it is precisely at this difficult intersection that the Romantic experience,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature*. Not coincidentally I think, Morton is by training a Romanticist.

<sup>13</sup> In his early articles popularizing the term, Crutzen proposed to begin the Anthropocene with James Watt's steam engine in 1784 (see e.g. 2002's "Geology of Mankind"). The more recent dating proposed by some scientists to 1945, with the onset of the Great Acceleration, doesn't change my heuristic point.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Devin Griffiths on the Romantic period as a privileged site for studying the Anthropocene: "[T]he Romantic period... (in many accounts) marks both the dawn of the Anthropocene and a crucial stage in the formulation of its sciences and technologies... '[T]he sky of our manufacture,' as Taylor memorably terms it, is a product of the Romantic century, particularly in Britain. The period from 1750 to 1850 has a peculiar claim on the study of how climate science acts within the social world because it coordinated the wide-scale techno-scientific revolution that made industrialization possible with our earliest attempts to find the social forms adequate to address and respond to that transformation" ("Romantic Planet"). Griffiths is referring to Jesse Oak Taylor's *The Sky of Our Manufacture: The London Fog in British Fiction from Dickens to Woolf*.

poetics, and experiment with groundless community is located, making it a powerful tool to think with in the contemporary moment. The strain of Romanticism that interests me, and that I think it is now crucial to excavate, is the strain that struggles with poetically thinking a situated relational ecology without ground, though which is still amenable to thinking what Frédéric Neyrat calls an “unconstructable earth,” or what Nigel Clark’s important study of ecology, sociality, and contingency calls “sociable life on a dynamic planet.”<sup>15</sup>

The fact of the Anthropocene reveals a general time of breakdown and uncertain grounds, an end of the end of history, deeply similar to the atmosphere in the Romantic period after the “universal earthquake” of the French Revolution, as Friedrich Schlegel’s metaphor of groundlessness had it, and in which contingency came to the fore.<sup>16</sup> Recently, many scholars have been questioning just how “universal” this European earthquake was and what is at stake in such a designation, as what has been called the “global turn” attempts a revision of Eurocentric narratives and categories—especially of modernity. This move is refreshing and important, though sometimes, as Gayatri Spivak has noted, the hunger for perspectives from, by, and on “the global” risks reinscribing capitalist globalization as “the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere” (*Death of a Discipline* 72).<sup>17</sup>

While the authors in this study of Romanticism are European, and I only intermittently engage the questions of globality, globalization, the global turn and world literature (most directly in the Wordsworths chapter and the Clare chapter), I think the paradigm of groundless community that I find in Romanticism has stakes for these current discussions, especially insofar as the Anthropocene indexes some notion of globality and global ecological crisis (though again, a “global” crisis that manifests everywhere differently and whose effects are unequally caused and unequally felt). And what is more, insofar as modernity is also constituted by slavery, colonialism, and the rise of global capitalism, these viral and global European logics of domination operate by way of imposing a *ground* that gives rise to and authorizes hierarchy, constitutive exclusion, equivalence, and putative universality (Blake, in his remarkable tendency to connect the logics of money, reason, transcendent ground, and empire, saw this the most clearly). So the Romantic modes of tarrying with the negative of groundlessness—and finding new possibilities for community therein—also affords a chance to understand how writers of the period unworked these logics from the inside, even as certain Romantic ideologies (as Jerome McGann would have it) are also complicit in the rise and consolidation of the bad modernity that become the world that is.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Neyrat’s *La Part inconstructible de la terre*. In the words of Nigel Clark, his book *Inhuman Nature: Sociable Life on a Dynamic Planet* “is about coming to terms with a planet that constantly rumbles, folds, cracks, erupts, irrupts... the condition of being sensuous, sociable beings in a universe that nourishes and supports us, but is forever capable of withdrawing this sustaining presence. And it begins to ask how better we might live—with other things and with each other—in the context of a deep, elemental underpinning that is at once a source of profound insecurity” (xiv).

<sup>16</sup> For Peter Fritzsche, the era of French Revolution was a “radical moment of innovation,” after which “the role of contingency in history expanded as the developmental logic, which made the events of the past cumulative or the resolutions of the present inevitable, was no longer authoritative” (*Stranded in the Present* 7). The Schlegel quote comes from fragment 424 of the *Athenaeum*, where Schlegel also considers this overturning of grounds, this revolutionary groundlessness, in terms of immeasurable excess (*unermessliche Überschwemmung*): “Man kann die Französische Revolution... betrachten, als ein fast universelles Erdbeben, eine unermessliche Überschwemmung in der politischen Welt” (KA 2: 247-48). Schlegel notably qualifies his assertion of universality—the French Revolution is an “almost [*fast*] universal earthquake.”

<sup>17</sup> Spivak opposes globality to her notion of planetarity—see her *Death of a Discipline*. In a recent essay, “Willing Suspension of Disbelief, Here, Now,” Spivak laments: “All is global,” and notes: “My current department has not had a Romanticism specialist for some time” (312).

*All Things Common* adumbrates an untaken path of modernity by exploring the co-belonging of community and contingency in a fecund and turbulent period in which “all seems unlinked contingency and chance,” as Percy Shelley wrote in 1813 (*Queen Mab* VI.170). I’m interested in how poets see this “unlinked contingency and chance” not as isolating but rather precisely the chance for new linkings, new formations of community, new modes of what Shelley himself in his *Defence* called “unapprehended relations.”<sup>18</sup> In this way Romanticism sees contingency not as *unlinking*, but as a kind of linking or relating that is true to the relationality that is inherent in the etymology of the word “contingency”: *con-tangere*, Latin for “touching with.” Romanticism thus for me names the chance that groundlessness does not mean either atomism/nominalism/individualism, or the reactive and oppressive modes of social organization and coercion that paper over groundlessness to reinstate a ground and/or lay down a regime of homogenous equivalence. Rather, it means community and being together, which, for the world, means nothing.

Because I see this structure of feeling I call groundless community as closely related to the particular atmospherics of the Romantic period as such—what Amanda Goldstein aptly calls “the period’s pressing new sense of its own historicity,” and what Emily Rohrbach calls “modernity’s mist” in her recent study of Romantic literature’s handling of historical uncertainty, temporal flux, and contingency<sup>19</sup>—my hope is that the framework in *All Things Common* proves useful for reading other Romantic writers not included in this study (not to mention theorists). Groundless community could be a productive rubric under which to read a text like Charlotte Smith’s “Beachy Head,” for example—a poem deeply concerned with sociality, nonhuman relationality, and contingency even on a geological scale, and in fact a poem about *literal*, tectonic groundlessness.<sup>20</sup>

But as for the authors that I *do* include: my dissertation begins with the chronological bookends of Rousseau and Derrida as Chapters 1 and 2, respectively. These exordial chapters work in tandem to demonstrate the nearly identical ways in which these two thinkers are *pre*-Romantic, both broaching the possibility of groundless community while ultimately foreclosing it. Constellating Rousseau and Derrida sets up the long, untimely Romanticism that my dissertation unearths, counter-intuitively finding in Rousseau and Derrida’s *rejection* of community the closest analogue to the groundless community Romanticism and its twentieth-century inheritors would formulate. Chapter 1, “Rousseau’s Doubles,” traces an opposition between singularity and the double that obsesses Rousseau, who is deeply invested in protecting the unique singularity of the individual at all costs. For Rousseau, this singularity—exemplified both by his idea of humans in the “state of nature” and by his literary self-portrait in *The Confessions*—is constantly under siege in society, which seeks violently to impose a common measure onto singularity. By positing a purely historical and contingent state of nature prior to society’s imposition, Rousseau opens the door for a thinking of “*existence en commun*” that is not tied to any essential nature—one that is, in a word, groundless. Yet Rousseau refuses to think this historicity as an opening onto community, in a social or an

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<sup>18</sup> For Shelley, in his classic statement of Romantic poetics, it is precisely poetry that lets us both access and enlarge this unapprehended relationality. He says so in terms that invoke my key concepts of excess, community, relation, and the enchantment of the familiar, commonplace, or everyday: “Those in whom [the faculty of approximating the beautiful] exists in excess are poets, in the most universal sense of the word; and the pleasure resulting from the manner in which they express the influence of society or nature upon their own minds, communicates itself to others, and gathers a sort of reduplication from that community. Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension... [Poetry] awakens and enlarges the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar” (*Major Works* 676, 681).

<sup>19</sup> See Goldstein’s *Sweet Science: Romantic Materialism and the New Logics of Life* (the quote comes from page 4), and Rohrbach’s *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation*.

<sup>20</sup> Such a reading would in many ways align with that of Kevis Goodman’s; see her article “Conjectures on Beachy Head: Charlotte Smith’s Geological Poetics and the Ground of the Present.”

environmental key. Although Romanticism's thought of community is not possible without the breakthrough of Rousseau, his ultimate rejection of community as being merely social commensurability leaves him only at the threshold of Romanticism.

Chapter 2, "Derrida's Islands" turns to Derrida for an investigation into deconstruction's close intellectual and institutional relationship to Romanticism, as well as a broader methodological reflection on the practice of critique in relation to recent "post-critique" debates. This chapter focuses mainly on Derrida's late work, and uncovers the logics by which Derrida's own explicit resistance to community makes him an unwitting heir of Rousseau. Although Derrida began his influential career with a critique of Rousseau's desire for immediacy in *Of Grammatology*, the later Derrida places a radical emphasis on singularity that deeply resembles Rousseau's (with whom Derrida remained in constant dialogue), and which culminates in a rejection of everyday community. Looking especially at Derrida's final seminar course *The Beast and the Sovereign*—which itself reads another anti-relational pre-Romantic text, *Robinson Crusoe*—I critically examine Derrida's claim that each singularity resides, like Crusoe, on an isolated island. Putting pressure on Derrida's anti-communal stance by drawing from thinkers like Jean-Luc Nancy, Fred Moten, and Lauren Berlant, I conclude the chapter by conceptualizing an eco-critical thought that attends to the relationality and community inherent in the everyday and the local, while still able to think on a global scale to confront global ecological crisis.

My third chapter, "Blake's Circulations," takes its departure from Blake's extensive engagement with the related motifs of circles and circulation. I show how Blake is attentive to the tendency of circulation to generate a hierarchical regime of commensurable equivalence from a grounded center. Against the historical backdrop of changing conceptions of sovereignty and economic circulation around 1800, I examine Blake's critique of grounded community, as well as the alternative vision of shared life displayed in his difficult late epic *Jerusalem*. I cast *Jerusalem* as a more everyday and domestic, as well as ecological, poem than what is suggested by its forbidding reputation and surface difficulty. Close readings of passages and images—including attention to Blake's understudied metrical theory and practice—allow me to provide novel interpretations of important issues in Blake like his conception of life, his aesthetics, and his idiosyncratic but perceptive forays into political theology. Rather than rejecting all measure outright, Blake finds the promise of groundless community—"all things common"—in what *exceeds* measure. Blake names this shared circulation of excess "forgiveness."

An interlude develops the Blake chapter's conceptuality of excess and measure to uncover Blake's vast but unexplored influence on Georges Bataille, a key figure in the twentieth-century thought of community. I employ insight into Blake and Bataille's shared concern with excess energy to intervene in the nascent eco-critical subfield "Energy Humanities," taking the Romantic-era transition to fossil fuels and changes in the very concept of energy over Blake's life as a case study for a Romantic vision of energy as a groundless commons. Through Blake and Bataille's communal inflection of solar energy, I orient the critical study of energy forms towards thinking excess rather than scarcity.

My penultimate chapter, "Wordsworth's Parts," takes up William's understudied poem "Home at Grasmere," as well as Dorothy's poetry and *Grasmere Journal*, to show how the Wordsworths conceived groundless community in and as the sharing of domestic life, at a time when the French Revolution and emergent feminism had opened up the home as a contested space of contingency. In an extended reading of "Home at Grasmere" that traces its partitive formal logic, I show how Wordsworth figures the locality of his home, Dove Cottage, as neither a complete organic whole nor an isolated and detached part. Rather, community take place in the very incommensurability of part and whole, and the domestic is where this is shared and lived—including with nonhumans, for the domestic *oikos* also always carries a precarious ecological charge. Recent

debates on the conceptualization of the Anthropocene—should it be named for the whole of humanity (the *Anthropos*) or only *part*?—provide another framing for the stakes and affordances of “Home at Grasmere,” itself planned to be a part of *The Recluse*, William’s unfinished poem of encyclopedic totality. The Wordsworths’ domestic space never coheres into a whole, and it is in this groundlessness that they cultivate a utopian kernel of sociality, such that “solitude is not / where these things are.”

The fifth and final chapter, “John Clare’s Worlds,” examines the early and mid-career poetry of the English Romantic peasant-poet John Clare, and is concerned with representations of local community, environment, and emergent logics of globalization in the early nineteenth century. I ask how Clare’s well-known localism and defense of the commons against land enclosure might be studied in not just political or ecological, but also ontological terms: that is, as the poetic experience of particularity and community without reference to a unified world or totality (the “world” of globalization). Reading the under-theorized Clare, especially his poetry’s emphatic deploying of prepositions and sharp shifts in perspective, I consider the situated ways that unique relations happen in Clare’s alternately exuberant and elegiac poems, with particular attention to relations to nonhuman beings.

A concluding coda opens future comparative possibilities between Romanticisms via an engagement with an early (ca. 1790), untranslated, and mysterious fragment by Hölderlin called “Communism of Spirits” (“*Communismus der Geister*”). In Hölderlin’s very nostalgia for a lost world of divine presence—asking “where will you find community?” (“*wo willst du eine Gemeinschaft finden?*”)—I find an early intimation of groundless community. I trace the notion of “ether” in this text and in his late hymnic fragment “Griechenland” (third version), in order to explore how Hölderlin’s poem discloses the flickering promise of a groundless, “open community” (*offne Gemeine*) in the shared lightness of air. I close with a reflection on the air and atmosphere as a commons in the Anthropocene.

Ending the dissertation, and now this introduction, with Hölderlin’s inexplicable invocation of the word “communism”—which may well be the first modern use of the word in the German language—allows me more properly here to name the project as the two things that it truly and no doubt inadequately is: both a plea for communism and a praise of the world. Ultimately what follows will have been the attempt to muster the resources, and the capacity, to see and say these two things as one.

## Chapter 1: Rousseau's Doubles

*“Insensiblement je me sentis isolé et seul dans cette même maison dont auparavant j’étais l’âme, et où je vivais pour ainsi dire à double.” -Les Confessions, Book VI*

At the risk of adding an “us” to the name of a man who resisted almost every trace of collectivity, I want to speak not of Jean but of Jeanus, or maybe Janus: Janus-Jacques Rousseau. It will have been fitting for us to think of Rousseau at the start here alongside the old god of the first month, the one bringing transitions, bridges, new beginnings and origins. Janus is also the divinity of the doorway or threshold, even more fitting, as Rousseau—somewhat like two other eighteenth-century giants he so influenced, Kant and Goethe—opened and peeked obscurely through a threshold he could never quite pass over.<sup>21</sup> As Hölderlin wrote of Jean-Jacques in his poem “Rousseau”: “Und mancher siehet über die eigne Zeit / Ihm zeigt ein Gott ins Freie” [“Some see beyond their own time / a God shows them the Open”] (StA 2.1: 12). Rousseau, Kant, and Goethe each had one foot gingerly stepping into the new world of modernity (or is it Romanticism?), but another one stubbornly planted in something older—or we might better say, keeping Janus still in mind, one face looking longingly back and another dimly ahead (Derrida will say that we still remain in the “Age of Rousseau”—call it modernity, or maybe metaphysics; more on this later<sup>22</sup>). This of course brings us to the most famous and most apposite feature of Janus: his double head. The present chapter will be about Rousseau’s doubles, and I ask the reader to bear with me as doubles obsessively proliferate and redouble, starting with my observation that Rousseau’s first name is a (common enough in France) doubling: Jean-Jacques, often abbreviated by himself and others after him as J.J., which when pronounced in French sounds awfully (but not exactly) like *je je*, that is, *I I*. The peculiar ripple of this sonic fact is also fitting, as this exordial chapter will concern itself precisely with the question, or problem, of the I (the self, *le moi*, *je*) and its precarious singularity, the one and the twoness of its doubling, the I and the II.<sup>23</sup>

I hope it will become clear why, at least for the purposes of this project, it is necessary to begin a dissertation on the relational and communal poetics of Romanticism with a foray into the strange and vast literary-philosophical *forêt* of Rousseau’s oeuvre (and likewise for my engagement

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<sup>21</sup> Ernst Cassirer’s still penetrating book *Rousseau, Kant, and Goethe* constellates these three; there is also of course his short but important book *The Question of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (the literature on Rousseau’s influence on Kant and Goethe is substantial). Though the German title, significantly, is *Das Problem Jean-Jacques Rousseau*—not the question but the problem; one thinks here of the similar “Das Adam Smith Problem,” and it is no accident that Smith was an assiduous reader of Rousseau (one of Smith’s earliest writings is a 1756 text on Rousseau’s *Discourse on Inequality*). There is a good deal of work on the Smith-Rousseau relation; for an interesting recent take, the first chapter of which is entitled “The Jean Jacques Rousseau Problem,” see Istvan Hont’s *Politics in Commercial Society: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith*. On Rousseau and relationality as a “problem,” see also John Warner’s recent *Rousseau and the Problem of Human Relations*.

<sup>22</sup> See *Of Grammatology*, where this phrase occurs. My second chapter centers on Derrida. Scholarship on Rousseau and his relation to that nebulous thing “modernity” abounds; just from the last few years, for example, see Julia Simon’s *Rousseau Among the Moderns* and the collection *Rousseau and the Dilemmas of Modernity* (ed. Hulliung).

<sup>23</sup> In a letter, Rousseau recounts having to sign a document while a warrant was out for his arrest, and “eliminate[ing] the initial J from one of my first names” (qtd. in Starobinski, *Transparency* 61). Starobinski later on this page notes “how Rousseau, starting from an inauthentic duality, succeeds in creating an authentic personality” (61). He never quite succeeds, I think. Compare Peggy Kamuf’s *Signature Pieces*, which claims Rousseau’s as the first modern signature, because it cannot guarantee its authenticity. In “Justices,” a late essay on and for his friend J. Hillis Miller, J. Derrida plays obsessively with the ambiguity of the initial J, remarking precisely on its similarity to the French “je” (*I*). In Latin, of course, the letters “I” and “J” are interchangeable, representing exactly the same sound.

with deconstruction in the next chapter). Aside from Rousseau’s obvious immense direct and indirect influence throughout Europe and beyond, there is a very real sense in which “Rousseau...was perhaps the first thinker of community, or more exactly, the first to experience the question of society [in modernity] as an uneasiness directed toward the community, and as the consciousness of a (perhaps irreparable) rupture in this community” (Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* 9). Rousseau’s “uneasiness” at community’s rupture—even community *as* rupture—becomes especially manifest when viewed from the (double) angle of the singularity and the double. In Rousseau (as, I will claim, in deconstruction), singularity is both that which cannot be doubled and the only thing that can be doubled. The regime of the double (in a bit of Derridean *pharmakon* logic) names both the threat of commonality/relationality and the neutralization of this threat, but with the consequence that actual relation and the common can only be conceived of as violence, and the other that threatens to come into relation can only be seen as either an identical double or a monster; although this last double, the two conceptions of the other as a double or as a monster incommensurable and inassimilable to any common—my monster/my self, as Barbara Johnson will say—will ultimately show themselves to be one and the same thing.

The main insight of Rousseau that interests me is the idea that hierarchy and violence result from the imposition of regimes of commensurability onto uniquely singular beings—an insight that will have far reaching consequences, including for thinking community (or lack thereof) with nonhuman beings, and for conceptualizing the Anthropocene. But the corollary to this insight is the truly radical one: it concerns the *historicity* of this imposition. In uncovering the violence of any and every common measure, Rousseau realized that any such imposition of commensurability—however naturalized—is groundless and contingent, i.e., not founded in nature. Rousseau thus saw that every form of social organization is ultimately *groundless*—but his inability to dissociate commensurability from community blinds him from realizing how his own insight opened the door to thinking, beyond critique, the thought that Romanticism would pick up: that it is this precisely this groundlessness, this lack of a common measure, in which community finds its true possibility and its life.

## I. Rousseau Contra Rousseau

“*Why do I feel like the only one? / Why do I feel like you owe me one?*” –Drake, “Legend”

Most great writers produce a body of work that, if it is sizable enough, is shot through with inconsistencies, tensions, contradictions, conflicting possible interpretations, and so on. Yet it is difficult to think of a figure who presents as radically a dual or polarized image—both to contemporaries and to posterity—as Rousseau. This is, of course, a simple enough but significant way in which Rousseau is a *double*. As has been much remarked, even the organization of Rousseau’s major works seems riven, proffering us what seem to be two very different Rousseaus: that of the tortured confessional autobiographical writer of such works as *The Confessions* and *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* on the one hand, and on the other the austere political and social theorist on display in works like the *Discourses*, *The Social Contract*, and *Émile, ou de l’Éducation*.

There are many other ways in which Rousseau (and his work<sup>24</sup>) can be characterized as a double or doubled or doubling—he made his living as a copyist, of all things!—but let’s launch right

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<sup>24</sup> And there’s another double or division for you, Rousseau the man and Rousseau the author—one that obsessed Rousseau himself, as he became the object of public judgment and persecution in his life (and afterlife, especially in the French Revolution). For a study of the question of authorship and influence in and beyond Rousseau, see James Swenson’s *On Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Considered as One of the First Authors of the Revolution*. Swenson in particular notes “the

into the most important and relevant one: Rousseau's double emphasis on the individual (or solitude) and on the community. Indeed it is quite easy to find various mentions of Rousseau accompanied by antipodal characterizations of this name and what(ever) it represents: Rousseau, the most radical individualist, the "solitary self,"<sup>25</sup> the "the figurehead of the pathology and glory of solitude" (Krell, *Animal Others* 148), the "starting point" of modern notions of the individual self's "radical autonomy" (Taylor, *Sources of the Self* 363), authenticity,<sup>26</sup> and so on. It is, however, just as easy to come across an equal and opposite Rousseau—we have already seen Nancy name Rousseau as the first true thinker of community, for example (although this in a very qualified sense). For there is also Rousseau the most radical communitarian, the totalitarian communist of the *volonté générale*, the democrat, the "Rousseau [that] gave us a certain naïve and profound image of the new life—the return to the earth, the return to communion and community" (Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity* 66-67), Rousseau as nothing less than the founder of a "revolution" in philosophical anthropology, "the first to formulate a new conception of man" as an inherently and irreducibly social being (Todorov, *Life in Common* 10), the melancholy Rousseau of contemporary Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito, who is violently consumed by a "longing for community" (*Terms of the Political* 18).<sup>27</sup>

Rousseau himself, indeed "loin de posséder un esprit méthodique," is responsible for such wildly opposing representations, as they stem from various moments in his own corpus (Baczko, *Rousseau: Solitude et communauté* 96). In the first lines of the *Reveries*—his last work—he personally calls himself "le plus sociable et le plus aimant des humains" (OC I.995) and his political thought often insists on an almost Spartan-like devotion to the public and civic good, the sovereignty of the community and the unstinting dedication to the "droit que la communauté a sur tous" ["the right the community has over everyone"] (OC III.367/SC 56) and "les engagements qui nous lient au corps social" ["the commitments which bind us to the social body"] (373/61), as *The Social Contract* puts it.<sup>28</sup> Yet equally or more famous is the Rousseau of infinite loneliness in his affect and the radical defender of autonomous individualism and antagonist of society in his thought, the Rousseau who constantly compared himself to the islanded Robinson Crusoe (Crousseau?), with a "gout de la solitude" (OC I.1099) but constantly miserable in his isolation, paranoia, and misanthropy, prey to "une solitude aussi complete, aussi permanente, aussi triste en elle-même" (OC I.1023). Rousseau only rarely acknowledged or faced up to such ostensibly blatant contradictions in himself and his thought (though they were not lost even on his contemporaries, especially Diderot<sup>29</sup>); yet there is a

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process of double reading and division that we have seen to be so consistently at work in Rousseau" (185). Cf. also Catriona Seth on this question: "Ce Rousseau en mouvement que nous voyons dans les pages des Confessions est un *homme double*, à la fois celui qui vit et celui qui rédige" ("Roussau et ses doubles"). For Rousseau on the "fear of the author," see Chapter 1 of Tracy Strong's *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The Politics of the Ordinary*.

<sup>25</sup> I am thinking of the final volume of Maurice Cranston's landmark three-part biographical study of Rousseau, called *The Solitary Self*.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Ferrara's *Modernity and Authenticity: A Study in the Social and Ethical Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* or Marshall Berman's *Politics of Authenticity*.

<sup>27</sup> In *Communitas* Esposito finds Rousseau's solitude to be a "silent revolt against the absence of community" (50). Starobinski writes that Rousseau "meditates in solitude on man's collective fate" (34). Discussing Rousseau's idea of pity, Althusser says that Rousseau's "isolated man [is] athirst for the Other in his very solitude" (186).

<sup>28</sup> A note on how I'm citing Rousseau's texts: I try to cite exactly from the Pléiade edition of *Oeuvres Complètes*, even when, as often, Rousseau's eighteenth-century spelling, accent usage, and punctuation differs from modern French. Abbreviations: SC = *Social Contract*, D = *Discourses* (ed. and trans. Gourevitch), CW = *Collected Writings*, OC = *Oeuvres Complètes*. The English version of the *Reveries* I cite from is the Oxford Classics edition, translated by Russell Goulborne. I cite from Allan Bloom's translation of *Emile*. Occasionally I've modified the translations, and noted so.

<sup>29</sup> In 1757 Diderot ended one of his letters to Rousseau with this biting valediction: "Adieu, le Citoyen! C'est pourtant un citoyen bien singulier qu'un ermite" ["Farwell, Citizen! It is, however, a very strange sort of citizen that is a hermit"] (*Correspondance* XIX 438). Diderot's use of "singulier" (literally, "singular") to describe Rousseau's social withdrawal is

curious posthumous fragment (grouped in with the fragments on *L'art du jôûir*) wherein Rousseau claims that his double tendencies toward society and solitude are quite, if oddly, reconcilable:

Pour moi je croirois au contraire que ce n'est qu'autant qu'on aime à vivre seul qu'on est vraiment sociable; car pour ne pas haïr les hommes il ne faut les voir que de loin et ce n'est qu'alors que qu'on n'exige point d'eux des préférences qu'il n'est pas dans le coeur humain d'accorder. (OC I.1175)

As for me, I would believe, on the contrary, that it is only to the extent that one loves to live alone that one is truly sociable; for in order to not hate men it is necessary to see them only from afar and it is only then that one does not demand from them preferences that it is not in the human heart to grant.<sup>30</sup> (CW 12:58)

In this fragmentary passage, sociability is possible only by “vivre seul”—living alone, living as a singularity (this word “seul” will be important in my account)—and only from a *distance* (*de loin*); for coming too close threatens to put one into relations of exchange and measure such that “preferences” must necessarily emerge (a similar problem will be perhaps the central theme of the second *Discourse*, and indeed in so much of Rousseau, as we’ll see). The undeveloped idea of sociality by subtraction sketched in this fragment—a single sentence—is intensified by the stream of negations (including six uses of *ne*), some of which don’t come through in the English translation.

Because Rousseau presents such a glaring double visage to the world—J.G. Merguior for one anticipated my association of Rousseau and Janus in remarking on the “Janus mask of Rousseau, the dubious theorist of both ‘anarchic individualism’ and totalitarian rule” (*Rousseau and Weber* 36)—so much writing about Rousseau endeavors to establish and “restore the unity of Rousseau’s thought,” overcoming the conflicting emphases on the individual and the community (Merguior 36).<sup>31</sup> Unsurprisingly, however, Rousseau himself is contradictory on this very question of self-contradiction: speaking of himself early in *The Confessions*, he wistfully claims to be constantly in contradiction with himself, possessing a character that “m’a jusqu’au bout mis en contradiction avec

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uncannily perfect for the purposes of this chapter, which focuses precisely on the concept of singularity in Rousseau. That same year, Diderot was to write a notorious line in his drama *Le Fils naturel*: “Il n’y a que le méchant qui soit seul” [“It is only the wicked man who is alone”]. Rousseau took this line to be directed at himself, and was very deeply hurt by it.

<sup>30</sup> In a notebook fragment Hölderlin, perhaps even thinking of Rousseau, wrote: “Nun versteh ich den Menschen erst, da ich fern von ihm und in Einsamkeit lebe!” (qtd. in Waiblinger 31).

<sup>31</sup> See Jonathan Marks’s article “The Savage Pattern: The Unity of Rousseau’s Thought Revisited.” Marks’s book *Perfection and Harmony in the Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* interestingly puts Rousseau in dialogue with debates between so called communitarians and liberals. Another classic attempt to reconcile these competing tendencies in Rousseau’s thought is Marshall Berman’s *The Politics of Authenticity: Radical Individualism and the Emergence of Modern Society*, which centers on Montesquieu and especially Rousseau. For Berman: “‘The politics of authenticity’ is a dream of an ideal community in which individuality will not be subsumed and sacrificed, but fully developed and expressed” (xvii). In a recent book Denise Schaeffer writes: “Scholars...often focus on the individual and the community as the most fundamental of the competing goods that Rousseau seeks to reconcile” (4-5). Althusser calls this crux “the classical aporia that constantly counterposes the [*Social*] Contract to the second *Discourse*, an academic difficulty whose only equivalent in the history of Western culture is the absurd question as to whether Machiavelli was a monarchist or a republican” (186). See also Althusser’s earlier reading of the *Social Contract* in his *Politics and History*. This problematic is so commonly associated with Rousseau one sees it everywhere; in the second of Elena Ferrante’s breathtaking Neapolitan novels, for instance, the narrator, attempting to show off in a discussion with her love interest Nino, “cautiously went onto some reflections on how to reconcile individuality and universality, drawing on Rousseau” (194). For his part, and I am inclined to agree, Esposito claims that “unlike those who see in Rousseau a complementary relation between ‘solitude et communauté,’ it seems to me that such an antinomy can’t be resolved” (*Communitas* 51).

moi-même” (OC I.12). Yet those who try to reconstruct the unity of Rousseau’s thought and corpus are also following the author’s own scattered hints, like a passage in the *Dialogues* where the claim is made that J.J. (as he is called in this text) has produced “un système lié qui pouvoir n’être pas vrai, mais qui n’offroit *rien de contradictoire*” (OC I.930, my emphasis) [“a coherent system which might not be true, but which offered nothing contradictory” (CW 1:209)]. All this is to say that Rousseau, despite himself, wanted to portray his life, himself, and his work as on the order of the one, not the two or double. The ideal of authenticity that Rousseau is so often (perhaps rightly) credited with inventing is inextricably tied up with the idea of unity, or *singularity*<sup>32</sup>; virtue consists in striving ceaselessly “être soi-même et toujours un” (*Émile*, OC IV.250), to be oneself and always *one*.<sup>33</sup>

Insofar as there is a determinate position that is identifiably “Rousseau’s” (especially on the question of the individual and the community), it is one whose only content is irreconcilability and aporia, uneasiness and rupture. All of this turns, I claim, on Rousseau’s logic of the singularity and its (non-)relation to the double. Thus this chapter will not be concerned so much with the unity of Rousseau’s thought, as with Rousseau’s thought of unity, or what I am calling singularity.

## II. “Myself Alone”

Rousseau was certainly one of a kind, but he was also only kind of a one. This ambiguity persists despite the singularity that Rousseau so ardently claimed for himself. Take, for example, the astonishing opening passage of *The Confessions*:

Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple, et dont l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi.

Moi seul. Je sens mon cœur, et je connois les hommes. Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai vus; j’ose croire n’être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si je ne vau pas mieux, au moins je suis autre. Si la nature a bien ou mal fait de briser le moule dans lequel elle m’a jeté, c’est ce dont on ne peut juger qu’après m’avoir lu...Être éternel, rassemble autour de moi l’innombrable foule de mes semblables: qu’ils écoutent mes confessions...Que chacun d’eux découvre à son tour son cœur au pied de ton trône avec la même sincérité; et puis qu’un seul te dise, s’il l’ose: *je fus meilleur que cet homme-là*. (OC I.5)

I am forming an undertaking which has no precedent, and the execution of which will have no imitator whatsoever. I wish to show my fellows a man in all the truth of nature; and this man will be myself.

Myself alone. I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any of the ones I have seen; I dare to believe that I am not made like any that exist. If I am worth no more, at least I am different. Whether nature has done well or ill in breaking the mold in which it cast me, is something which cannot be judged until I have been read...Eternal Being, assemble around me the countless host of my fellows: let them

<sup>32</sup> As Starobinski takes great pains to show, authenticity for Rousseau is really a dream of *transparency*. That is to say, a state that would be immune to duplicity, the *double*. I’ll be in dialogue, implicitly and explicitly, with Starobinski’s book throughout, both for the inherent interest and power of this book and for its marked influence on Derrida and de Man.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *Julie*: “Is it not quite unworthy of a man never to be able to be at one with himself?” (CW 6:298).

listen to my confessions... Let each of them in his turn uncover his heart at the foot of Thy throne with the same sincerity; and then let a single one say to Thee, if he dares: "*I was better than that man.*" (CW 5:5)

Here we have a classic presentation of Rousseau's obsessive emphasis on singularity—that is to say, a *qualitatively unique being*. Rousseau and the work he embarks upon are utterly singular (he even uses this word in the alternate, unused preface to *The Confessions*—"mon entreprise est singulière" (OC I.1151)), such that not only is this work itself not an imitation, it can have *no possible* imitation in the future; in other words, it is not a double and cannot be doubled, duplicated, replicated—like the man himself. It is important for us to notice the emphasis on *quality* or the qualitative—this is what characterizes Rousseau's conception of singularity, more so than unity, self-identity, or sameness. Singularity has an absoluteness, a qualitative uniqueness, that cannot be destroyed or ontologically reduced to fit any common standard or "mold" (*moule*) of quantitative or calculable measure, though it can be violently corralled, hidden, made not to matter, flattened and forced into such a common measure. This is precisely what the second, the double—any real relation(ality) as such—threatens.

Though Rousseau claims to have no possible imitators or doubles, he does several times on this first page mention "semblables," translated here as "fellows." This word used as an adjective also means like or similar. Yet we soon see that these fellows are only "like" Rousseau in that they too possess their own unique singularity, however unaccessed. When these fellow semblables (a word now forever tinged with a dusky Baudelairean scent<sup>34</sup>)—like in their unlikeness—plumb the depths of their own being with the same sincerity, they will not dare to call themselves better. Why? Not because they will realize their own faults and deem themselves less moral, or equally so, but because the unique qualitative self is not on the order of quantitative comparison, so the regime of more/less, or better/worse, holds no sway. As Rousseau himself says: "If I am not worth more, at least I am different [*autre*]." The brief passage of this remarkable thought traverses the space of two opposite uses of the word dare (*oser*). At first Rousseau, with quasi-humility, or at least an acknowledgment of his impudence, dares to proclaim his uniqueness ("I dare to believe that I am not made like any"), but by the end of the passage the audacious one is the person who, after realizing their own singularity, would *dare* to reduce this qualitative being to the order of comparison ("let a single one say to Thee, if he dares: *I was better...*"). The very idea of the violent audacity of a unique being subjecting itself and others to comparison is underscored, with irony, by Rousseau's use of "un seul," as if to say: let one of them *as* a singularity ("un seul," like Rousseau's "moi seul" which began the passage) come forth and deny this ontological truth, if they dare.

Georges Bataille, who despite his intellectual omniverousness was strangely silent about Rousseau, wrote the following a propos of Rousseau's contemporary Sade, though it seems apt for the opening of *The Confessions*: "L'être n'est jamais *moi seul*, c'est toujours *moi et mes semblables*" (*Oeuvres* VIII. 297). Rousseau at first seems to be talking only and especially about himself (*moi seul* indeed), but we have just seen ways in which his language gestures toward the potentiality of singularity in everyone, the latent "un seul" within the mist of every "innombrable"—uncountable, incalculable—multitude of semblables: a possibility of relationality that Rousseau rarely picks up on or develops. Singularity, the one's impossibility to have a double, is crucial to much of Rousseau's thought, especially his idea of the state of nature, as we'll soon see. And yet: doubles lurk everywhere in Rousseau—they redouble and proliferate from the earliest. As Robert Elbaz writes: "From early childhood Jean-Jacques develops the concept of the double" (94). One of Rousseau's earliest writings, from around the age of twenty, is a play called *Narcisse, ou l'Amant de lui-même*, where the

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<sup>34</sup> Baudelaire's "Spleen de Paris" was originally titled "Le Promeneur Solitaire" in a nod to Rousseau.

narcissistic main character falls in love with a double—a portrait of himself as a woman<sup>35</sup>; there is his tale “La Reine Fantastique,” about twins and doubles; the self-doubling, among much else, of author and editor in *Julie*; the numerous doubles and doppelgängers in *The Confessions*<sup>36</sup>; the split in Rousseau’s social and political thought between man and citizen<sup>37</sup>; the abundance of shadows and of mirrors in his work, literally and as metaphors; the “double incorporation” constitutive of *The Social Contract*<sup>38</sup>; and so on. This hauntological doubling continues through Rousseau’s late writings, like the “schizophrenic”<sup>39</sup> autobiographical text known as the *Dialogues* or *Rousseau, juge de Jean-Jacques*, wherein two figures known as “Rousseau” and “A Frenchman” debate the life and work of a certain J.J. Even in Rousseau’s final text the *Reveries*, a work of absolute solitude, he notes that revisiting his own past “doublera pour ainsi dire mon existence. En dépit des hommes je saurai goûter encore le charme de la société, et je vivrai décrépité avec moi dans un autre âge, comme je vivrois avec un moins vieux ami” (OC I.1001) [“will double my existence, so to speak. In spite of men I shall still be able to enjoy the delights of company, and, grown decrepit, I shall live with myself in another age, as if living with a younger friend” (*Reveries* 9)].<sup>40</sup>

Although it is a rather understudied motif in Rousseau’s overall corpus, this singular corpus is crawling with doubles of various kinds.<sup>41</sup> No matter how apotropaic Rousseau’s proclamations and logics of pure singularity, the double—the second, the other—always emerges, either as a threat to singularity (the threat of a common measure), or as a neutralization or immunization of this threat of relation, by virtue of seeing the narcissistic double as an extension of the very singularity. Just as Derrida uncovered a logic of the supplement in Rousseau that permeated everything from Jean-

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Saint-Preux’s anxiety in *Julie* about feeling too strongly about a portrait (or copy—double) of Julie (see Part II, Letters XXII-XXV). This can be placed in context with a general suspicion of imitation in Rousseau’s corpus. In *Émile*, we learn that the child being raised “surely will not have this desire [to imitate],” since “the foundation of imitation among us comes from the desire always to be transported out of ourselves” (104). And in the *Reveries* Rousseau remarks on “my antipathy towards all kinds of imitation” (44).

<sup>36</sup> For a keen analysis of many specific instances of Rousseau’s doubles in the first half of *The Confessions*, including Rousseau’s preoccupation with the early eighteenth-century poet Jean-Baptiste Rousseau, see Catriona Seth’s article “Rousseau et ses doubles dans les livres I à VI des *Confessions*.” In *The Confessions* Rousseau also likes to alternate between all three persons, describing or addressing himself by name as if talking to or about a double.

<sup>37</sup> See for example Goldschmidt 150. Two other works on this question are Shklar’s influential *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau’s Social Theory*, and more recently, Pagani’s *Man or Citizen: Anger, Forgiveness, and Authenticity in Rousseau*.

<sup>38</sup> “What we have [in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*] is a double incorporation, a reciprocal cross-incorporation, between the body of each individual and the collective body...the middle term in this passage from body to body or doubling of the body lies of course in the concept of ‘general will’” (Esposito, *Immunitas* 116).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Celeste Langan: “the *Dialogues*, which, in its self-conscious splitting of man from citizen (Jean-Jacques from the ‘author’ of certain texts) refigures individuality as duality or schizophrenia” (35).

<sup>40</sup> Note the “pour ainsi dire” here and in the epigraph to this chapter culled from *The Confessions*. This “so to speak” shows Rousseau’s hesitancy about doubling even as he notes, in both of these very different passages, a kind of double existence, or the production of a double.

<sup>41</sup> The old but still classic study on the figure of the double, which deals quite a bit with literature but doesn’t mention Rousseau, is by Freud’s student Otto Rank. See *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Much more recently, a rather remarkable philosophical and critical reflection on the double is undertaken in Dimitris Vardoulakis’s *The Doppelgänger: Literature’s Philosophy*, a book that has influenced my thinking in this chapter. For Vardoulakis, the double or doppelgänger is the “emblematic subject of modernity,” and is “the element of formal relationality that structures the subject’s ontology” (3). Vardoulakis however, does *not* mention Rousseau in his study and begins his brilliant analysis of the doppelgänger with the German Romantic author Jean Paul and the latter’s reaction to the methodological solipsism of Fichte. Yet allow me to do some spectral doubling here and note that Richter was born Johann Paul Richter, and changed his first name to Jean—the French double of Johann—owing to none other than the huge influence of Jean-Jacques Rousseau! For a general study of the double in German literature from Romanticism to Modernism see Andrew Webber’s *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature*. For a couple of recent works that deal not directly with the double in Rousseau but with Rousseau and the related issue of narcissism, see Pleshette DeArmitt’s *The Right to Narcissism* (2014) and David Pacini’s *Through Narcissus’s Glass Darkly* (2008).

Jacques's grandest metaphysical assumptions to his ambivalence about masturbation, one can discern a regime of singularity as qualitative uniqueness that governs even seemingly unconnected issues like Rousseau's often reiterated dislike of money, his preference for melody over harmony, or his strange discomfort with calculating the self-sufficient formal singularity of geometric shapes with algebraic quantities, a discomfort that he explicitly says does not stem from a dislike of algebra as such.<sup>42</sup> Nowhere is Rousseau's conception of singularity more evident or more crucial, however, than in his famous portrayal of the so-called "state of nature."

### III. State of Singularity

Rousseau's idea of the state of nature is well-trodden—if eternally murky—terrain, but I want to look at a few passages to show how the governing logic here concerns the dynamic between qualitative singularity and the other—the second, the double—that threatens to nullify this singularity with devastating consequences (and ultimately succeeds in doing so); this latter regime is what Rousseau calls "society." This idea of the state of nature comes into play explicitly or otherwise in many of his works, but its most detailed delineation is found in the *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, known for short in English as the *Discourse on Inequality*, or simply the second *Discourse*. In this immensely influential text, Rousseau investigates the origin of social and economic inequality by analyzing the hypothetical situation of the pre-civilized human being: "en le considérant, en un mot, tel qu'il a dû sortir des mains de la Nature" (OC III.134) ["considering [man], in a word, such as he must have issued from the hands of Nature" (*Discourses* 134)]. Rousseau's state of nature is one in which every single person assumes the condition of the singular solitary author of *The Confessions* (or later and more miserably, the *Reveries*) as we saw it—here the achievement of singularity is not an anomaly, but universal (and thus not perceived as such). The state of nature is thus something like a utopia of singularity (in both etymological senses of u-topia); or to borrow a concept of Adorno, a "utopia of the qualitative" (*Minima Moralia* 120).

Rousseau's conception of humankind in its primordial natural condition is one of a "radical individualism," which "goes even further than [that of] Hobbes," according to one commentator (Grace 173). Yet those imagined in Rousseau's hyper-nominalist state of nature are not just individual and independent but *singular*; Rousseau's state of nature rejects, for the most part, both Hobbesian belligerence and Lockean benevolence and sociability, as these would imply something in common for which to fight or collaborate (thus the popular idea of Rousseau's natural human as a "noble savage"—a phrase he never used—does not hold up).<sup>43</sup> Instead, there is almost sheer indifference in this vast forested world of origins. Each person is an idle singularity propelled only by their own "amour de soi," radiating only an effulgent "sentiment de l'existence," that is, a feeling of one's own particular, qualitatively unique being and its capacities: "[For Rousseau] man's original sentiment of existence is entirely within himself" (Gauthier 165). The incommensurability of singularity in the state of nature was so profound—like that of the radical uniqueness we saw claimed and performed at the opening of *The Confessions*—that the aboriginal human had no conception of the future or even of the next day, as "day" would be a common measure equating

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<sup>42</sup> See the *Confessions* Book VI, CW 5:199; OC I.138. cf. Simone Weil (herself a thoroughgoing Rousseavian): "Analogy between algebra and money. Both are levellers" (*Notebooks* 144).

<sup>43</sup> "Il paroît d'abord que les hommes dans cet état n'ayant entre eux aucune sorte de relation morale, ni de devoirs connus, ne pouvoient être ni bons ni méchants, et n'avoient ni vices ni vertus" (OC III.152) ["It would at first seem that men in the that state having neither moral relations of any sort between them, nor known duties, could be neither good nor wicked, and had neither vices nor virtues (D 150)].

the different days<sup>44</sup>; that one person does not recognize another when they interact for the second time (so each meeting is radically singular)<sup>45</sup>; that language, abstract ideas and even any relation at all, do not exist<sup>46</sup>; one does not even recognize one's own children (this last point is particularly disturbing given the fact that Rousseau abandoned all five of his own children at birth to a foundling hospital). Such is Rousseau's utopia of singularity, where everyone exists in incommunicable isolation, relationless: "sans liaisons, sans nul besoin de ses semblables...et se suffisant à lui-même" (OC III.160) ["without relations, without any need of his fellows...and self-sufficient" (D 157; trans. modified)], with no possible double (even one's future self remains inaccessibly singular).

For Rousseau, this state of nature is a state of equality. There are of course quantitative differences between individuals—differences in size, strength, cleverness, and so forth—but these differences do not matter in the largely peaceful state of nature.<sup>47</sup> Humans live at great distance from one another and are nomadic, so interactions are rare; there is no common standard of equivalence that would measure quantity in a meaningful way, that is, of more or less, stronger or weaker: "Mais quand la Nature affecteroit dans la distribution de ses dons autant de préférences qu'on le prétend, quel avantage les plus favorisés en tireroient-ils, au préjudice des autres, dans un état de choses qui n'admettroit presque aucune sorte de relation entre eux?" (OC III.161) ["But even if Nature displayed as much partiality in the distribution of its gifts as is claimed, what advantage would the more favored enjoy at the expense of the others in a state of things that allowed for almost no relations of any sort between them?" (D 158)]. The sublime solitude in the state of nature is one in which necessary relations (relationality) do not exist, and each one is left to bathe in the "parfum de leur haecceité," to pilfer a gorgeous phrase from the French poet Jacques Roubaud (64). The qualitative

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<sup>44</sup> "Son ame, que rien n'agite, se livre au seul sentiment de son existence actuelle, sans aucune idée de l'avenir, quelque prochain qu'il puisse être, et ses projets, bornés comme ses vûes, s'étendent à peine jusqu'à la fin de la journée" (OC III.144) ["His soul, which nothing stirs, yields itself to the sole sentiment of its present existence, with no idea of the future, however near it may be, and his projects, as limited as his views, hardly extend to the close of day" (D 143)].

<sup>45</sup> "qui, n'ayant ni Domicile fixe ni aucun besoin l'un de l'autre, se rencontreroient, peut-être à peine deux fois en leur vie, sans se connoître, et sans se parler" (OC III.146) ["who, having neither a fixed Dwelling nor any need of one another, might perhaps meet no more than twice in their life, without recognizing and speaking with one another" (D 144)].

<sup>46</sup> "les hommes n'ayant nulle correspondance entre eux, ni aucun besoin d'en avoir, on ne conçoit ni la nécessité de cette invention [de langue], ni sa possibilité" (OC III.146) ["Men having no relations with one another and no need of any, one cannot conceive the necessity or the possibility of this invention [of language]" (D 145)]. Another Baudelairean word here, "correspondance," indicates that language is a system of common measure that has no place in the state of nature. This idea is borne out in the alternate unpublished "Neuchâtel preface" to *The Confessions*, where Rousseau states that his unique singularity is such that it needs its own singular language to express itself: "Il faudroit pour ce que j'ai à dire inventer un langage aussi nouveau que mon projet" (OC I.1152) ["For what I have to say it would be necessary to invent a language as new as my project" (CW 5:588)]. See Blanchot's brief but great essay on Rousseau in *The Book to Come*—in which he refers to Rousseau as "the this man to whom we owe literature"—for a discussion of this issue (41). Blanchot also briefly notes the doubleness in Rousseau I've been tracing, writing: "this duality of language exposes the writer to feeling himself to be first Rousseau and then Jean-Jacques, then both at the same time, in a dichotomy that he embodies with admirable passion" (47). Interestingly for our purposes, Derrida uses almost the exact same phrase when talking about the (im)possibility of his own autobiography; in an interview from 1986 he stated "In order to get there [i.e. a life narrative], I'd have...to invent a new language" (*Points* 203). Thus overall we see another connection between the singularity in the state of nature (no language, because everyone is so singular) to the singularity of the opening of *The Confessions* (a new language, because Rousseau is so singular). This accords with Starobinski's claim that Rousseau modeled man in the state of nature after himself (or is it vice versa?): "Without a doubt Rousseau is still a man of nature, or at any rate a man in whom the memory of nature survives" (291). On this point (the link between Rousseau's personal experience and his universal history/anthropology) see Judith Shklar, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Equality."

<sup>47</sup> Cf. the following succinct explanation found in *Émile*: "In the state of nature there is a de facto equality that is real and indestructible, because it is impossible in that state for the difference between man and man by itself to be great enough to make one dependent on another" (236).

rules the quantitative; or indeed, the two are seamlessly integrated as one, and every person is a “closed unity” (Starobinski 296).

But Rousseau’s narrative of the state of nature—which he openly admits may be just a fictive conceptual heuristic, one borrowed from thinkers like Hobbes and Locke—is a narrative of the Fall from such a blissful state into inequality.<sup>48</sup> As in most variations on the Fall, what precisely brings the decisive evil moment remains rather obscure; in Rousseau’s case the answer is deeply tied up with the concept of the human faculty of “perfectibilité,” an essential incompleteness of the human (more on this later). What does the Fall reveal about Rousseau’s logic of singularity and relation? Essentially, for Rousseau, *the origin of inequality is equivalence*, or measure. The fall out of the state of nature is a movement from the absolute to the relative, as society emerges as a system of necessary relations, which Rousseau calls “dependence.” Crucially, this system of relations is grounded in an equivalent or common measure that reduces qualitative singularity to a dependent, relative (comparative), and hierarchized quantity. Because people necessarily depend on one another and become inextricably tied together, they recognize—and thus actualize and implement—a reified regime of equivalent measure, such that quantitative differences in size, strength, etc. begin to matter; the strong eventually subjugate the weak, and make sure to perpetuate this subjugation. To use Rousseau’s chosen example, the size difference between a giant and a dwarf only matters if they are traveling on the same road (*même route*); for if they are, then the giant can overtake the dwarf<sup>49</sup>: “car qu’un Géant, et un Nain marchent sur la même route, chaque pas qu’ils feront l’un et l’autre donnera un nouvel avantage au géant” (OC III.160/D 158). It would seem, then, that in the state of nature we all have our own singular routes, incomparable, immeasurable, and never intersecting.

But in the postlapsarian world—the world of society, the world of relation—comparison and its concomitant hierarchy become the order of the day. Society’s introduction of a common measure also doubles us internally,<sup>50</sup> as the formerly seamless unity of the singularity becomes split between the qualitative and the quantitative, with the latter taking precedence. One important way Rousseau understands this last doubling is his distinction between *amour propre* and *amour de soi-même*. Rousseau develops these concepts over many works and they have shifting valences in his corpus,<sup>51</sup> but the *locus classicus* for this distinction is found in Note XV to the second *Discourse*:

Il ne faut pas confondre l’Amour propre et l’Amour de soi-même; deux passions très différentes par leur nature et par leurs effets. L’Amour de soi-même est un sentiment naturel qui porte tout animal à veiller à sa propre conservation et qui, dirigé dans l’homme par la raison et modifié par la pitié, produit l’humanité et la vertu. L’Amour propre n’est qu’un sentiment relatif, factice, et né dans la société, qui porte chaque

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<sup>48</sup> “Rousseau has rewritten Genesis as a work of philosophy, complete with a Garden of Eden, original sin, and the confusion of tongues” (Starobinski 290). See also the fascinating discussion of Rousseau’s narrative and the Fall in Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, between the ominous Jesuit Communist Herr Naphta and the bourgeois humanist and quasi-Kantian Herr Settembrini.

<sup>49</sup> Rousseau also invokes the image of a giant in a passage in his *Essay on the Origin of Languages* that both de Man and Derrida (and Mary Shelley for that matter) zero in on. I’ll come back to this.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Velkley, one of Rousseau’s most thoughtful readers, on “the problem of human dividedness, which emerges when man becomes a social being” (“Measure” 221). And cf. Derrida: “Auto-affection constitutes the same (auto) as it divides the same” (*Of Grammatology* 166).

<sup>51</sup> For two recent studies, see: Kolodny’s “The Explanation of Amour-Propre” and Neuhouser’s book *Rousseau’s Theodicy of Self-Love: Evil, Rationality, and the Drive for Recognition*. Neuhouser writes: “the theory of *amour-propre* is the foundation on which [Rousseau’s] social, political, and moral philosophy rests” (1). Rousseau develops *amour-propre* to be more than just a destructive feeling of comparison as it is in the second *Discourse*; much of *Émile* is concerned with how to channel *amour-propre* to more noble, social ends.

individu à faire plus de cas de soi que de tout autre, qui inspire aux tous les maux qu'ils se font mutuellement...

Ceci bien entendu, je dis que dans nôtre état primitive, dans le véritable état de nature, l'Amour propre n'existe pas; Car chaque homme en particulier se regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l'observe, comme le seul être dans l'univers qui prenne intérêt à lui, comme le seul juge de son propre mérite, il n'est pas possible qu'un sentiment qui prend sa source dans des comparaisons qu'il n'est pas à portée de faire, puisse germer dans son ame. (OC III.219)

*Amour propre* and *amour de soi-même*, two very different passions in their nature and their effects, should not be confused. *Amour de soi-même* is a natural sentiment which inclines every animal to attend to its self-preservation and which, guided in man by reason and modified by pity, produces humanity and virtue. *Amour propre* is only a relative sentiment, factitious, and born in society, which inclines every individual to set greater store by himself than by anyone else, [and] inspires men with all the evils they do one another...

This being clearly understood, I say that in our primitive state, in the genuine state of nature, *amour propre* does not exist; For, since every individual human being views himself as the only Spectator to observe him, as the only being in the universe to take any interest in him, as the only judge of his own merit, it is not possible that a sentiment which originates in comparisons he is not capable of making, could spring up from his soul. (*Discourses* 218)

Once necessary relationality, or dependence, is established—that is, once we can no longer exist in isolated singular existence—we begin to feel the venomous tug of *amour propre*, which causes in us the desire to rank ourselves above others. This comparative rank is always quantitative and vertical (i.e. hierarchical); we want to crush others and benefit at their expense. The feeling of relational *amour propre* is nothing less than the source of “tous les maux qu'ils se font mutuellement,” all the evils in the world that men do to one another mutually; but for Rousseau this last phrase—doing evils mutually—is a pleonasm. Mutuality, commonality, always engenders evil. Here is how Deleuze succinctly sums it up (in a book of essays named for *Robinson Crusoe*): “[For Rousseau,] society constantly puts us in situations where it is in our interest to be mean” (*Desert Islands* 53).

Paradoxically, the seeming rapacious individualism propelled by *amour propre* is only possible in society and community, once the relationality of interdependence has become irreversible. Thus, for Rousseau, relations and relationality are ineluctably tied up with violence, oppression, inequality, and hierarchy. We can see this in his description of *amour propre* as a “sentiment *relatif*”; Rousseau—except for a few possible, tantalizing glimpses I'll mention later—can only think the relational as *relative*, that is, quantitatively measurable and hierarchized; the uniqueness of qualitative singularity melts away. For the comparative regime of *amour propre* to take effect, a common standard of equivalence (introduced, reified and shored up by dependence) must be implicitly (even if involuntarily) agreed upon, recognized, entered into. Equivalence is equi-violence.<sup>52</sup> Relations are

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<sup>52</sup> Equivalence is the origin or *arche* of violence and is thus what Derrida in *Of Grammatology* calls “arche-violence” (112).

thus nothing but “les chaînes de la dépendance” (OC III.161)<sup>53</sup>; with that first throb of *amour propre* we begin to keep the tally in a wretched zero-sum game.<sup>54</sup>

The hierarchical—because quantitative—relations that constitute society do not exist in the state of nature, which, as we have seen, is a state where pure singularity reigns, ranging freely. In the same above passage the important word “seul” appears three times—each person is the sole spectator and judge of him or herself (an intriguing anticipation of Rousseau’s late text *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*), and the only one to take an interest in him or herself. On the one hand this is in keeping with the logic of singularity we have explored: in the utopia of singularity there is no commensurable standard for common interest or judgment. Yet even in the state of nature a doubling of the singularity occurs, as is evinced in Rousseau’s mention of the solipsistic, narcissistic gaze with which each person views themselves: “chaque homme en particulier se regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l’observe.”<sup>55</sup> The allusion to Narcissus is not accidental: recall Rousseau’s very early play, the full title of which—*Narcisse, ou l’Amant de lui-même* (*Narcissus, or the Lover of Himself*)—bears an incipient, proleptic Echo of his future concept of *amour de soi-même*. Indeed, about two decades after composing this (admittedly slight) play, Rousseau wrote an important “Preface” to it. This preface mostly ignores the play itself, but launches into the heated public debates that arose following the publication of Rousseau’s sensational first *Discourse*—the *Discourse on the Art and Sciences*—while glancing toward the second *Discourse*, which he would begin shortly thereafter, probably in late 1753.

In this preface we see a brief adumbration of the logic I’ve been trying to extract from Rousseau: the emergence of a common measure leading to the elision of singularity, and thus to violence and hierarchy. But notably—especially so given that this is a preface to a play inspired by Narcissus, arguably the most famous example of the double (and its dangers) in all mythology—the commensurability that for Rousseau is virtually synonymous with violence is here emblemized and thematized via the double, the number *two* (though from a slightly different angle):

C’est donc une chose bien merveilleuse que d’avoir mis les hommes dans l’impossibilité de vivre entre eux sans se prévenir, se supplanter, se tromper, se trahir, se détruire mutuellement! Il faut désormais se garder de nous laisser jamais voir tels que nous sommes : car pour *deux hommes* dont les intérêts s’accordent, cent mille peut-être leur sont opposés, et il n’y a d’autre moyen pour réussir que de tromper ou perdre tous ces gens-là. Voilà la source funeste des violences, des trahisons, des perfidies, de toutes les horreurs qu’exige nécessairement un état de choses où chacun

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<sup>53</sup> Compare the famous opening of the *Social Contract*, where we are “born free, but everywhere in chains [*fers*].” Later in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau associates money—the general equivalent par excellence—with chains and slavery: “Donnez de l’argent, et bientôt vous aurez des fers. Ce mot de *finance* est un mot d’esclave” (OC III.429) [“Give money, and soon you will have chains. The word *finance* is a slave’s word” (SC 113).]

<sup>54</sup> The zero-sum quality and measure of *amour-propre* is brought out more fully and explicitly in a passage in *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*: “As soon as this absolute love degenerates into amour-propre and comparative love, it produces negative sensitivity, because as soon as one adopts the habit of *measuring* oneself against others and moving outside oneself in order to assign to oneself the first and best place, it is impossible not to develop an aversion for everything that surpasses us, everything that lowers our standing, everything that diminishes us, everything that by being something prevents us from being everything. Amour-propre is always irritated or discontent, because its wish is that each person should prefer us to all else and to himself, which is impossible” (CW 1:112-113; my emphasis); Cf. the mention of “prefer” here to the “preferences” from the first block quote above. Derrida writes: “As always in Rousseau, evil...has the form of determination, of comparison, and of *preference*. That is to say of difference” (*Of Grammatology* 175).

<sup>55</sup> We might also note that not only is the singularity doubled in self-observation, but the word “propre” creeps into the description of *amour de soi* (cf. “propre mérite”). As Paul Hamilton writes in his essay on Rousseau: “*Amour de soi*...repeatedly turns out to be *amour-propre* in disguise” (50).

feignant de travailler à la fortune ou à la réputation des autres, ne cherche qu'à élever la sienne au-dessus d'eux et à leurs dépens. (OC II.968-969; my emphasis)

What a wonderful thing, then, to have put men in a position where they can only live together by obstructing, supplanting, deceiving, betraying, destroying one another! From now on we must take care never to let ourselves be seen as we are: because for every *two men* whose interests coincide, perhaps a hundred thousand oppose them, and the only way to succeed is either to deceive or to ruin all those people. This is the fatal source of the violence, the betrayals, the treacheries and all the horrors necessarily required by a state of affairs in which everyone pretends to be working for the profit or reputation of the rest, while only seeking to raise his own above theirs and at their expense. (*Discourses* 100)

Although the immediate context of this passage is not explicitly the exit from the state of nature, the move here is essentially the same. Singularity falls prey to the deleterious machination of the second, its double. Whereas in the state of nature and *amour de soi-même* described in Note XV quoted above, each isolated being was “le seul être dans l'univers qui prenne intérêt à lui,” here interest (*intérêt*) becomes commensurable, even though only shared by “*deux hommes*” (“pour *deux hommes* dont les intérêts s'accordent”). The “seul” becomes doubled, and when the two people who recognize their common interest join together *as* two, all hell breaks loose as the now familiar catalogue of ills cascades down before our eyes (“violences, trahisons,” etc.), resulting from the necessary zero-sum game of society where we win at the expense of others (“élever la sienne *au-dessus d'eux et à leurs dépens*”). The spatial language of verticality (“élever”; “au-dessus”) brings the point about hierarchy home. Singularity is bright but fragile—it only takes an alliance of the two to bring down the hundred thousand scattered ones. Deux au-dessus d'eux.

This brings us back to the second *Discourse*, where we find another moment that figures the evanescence of singularity in the state of nature exactly as a passage from the one to the two, from singularity to the double. It occurs in Part II, during a discussion of what we would now call the division of labor (here the influence of Rousseau's social thought on Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and later, Marx, is readily apparent):

En un mot tant qu'ils [les hommes] ne s'appliquèrent qu'à des ouvrages qu'un seul pouvait faire, et qu'à des arts qui n'avaient pas besoin du concours de plusieurs mains, ils vécurent libres, sains, bons...mais dès l'instant qu'un homme eut besoin du secours d'un autre ; dès qu'on s'aperçut qu'il étoit utile à un seul d'avoir des provisions pour deux, l'égalité disparut, la propriété s'introduisit, le travail devint nécessaire et les vastes forêts se changèrent en des Campagnes riantes qu'il falut arroser de la sueur des hommes, et dans lesquelles on vit bientôt l'esclavage et la misère germer et croître avec les moissons. (OC III.171; my emphasis)

In a word, so long as they [human beings] applied themselves only to tasks a single individual could perform, and to arts that did not require the collaboration of several hands, they lived free, healthy, good, and happy...but the moment one man needed the help of another; *as soon as it was found to be useful for one to have provisions for two, equality disappeared*, property appeared, work became necessary, and the vast forests changed into smiling Fields that had to be watered with the sweat of men, and where slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests. (*Discourses* 167)

In a logic that should now be familiar to us, the qualitative uniqueness of singularity becomes endangered, suppressed, and oppressed when it is exposed and entered into a system of common measure indexed by “deux,” where the equality of incommensurability becomes the violent inequality of the commensurable. Once again we see the crucial word “seul” that we’ve been tracing since our above reading of the opening to *The Confessions* (“moi seul,” etc.): “*dès qu’on s’aperçut qu’il étoit utile à un seul d’avoir des provisions pour deux, l’égalité disparut.*” When the one is able to judge the other and calculate his or her needs and provisions according to a commensurable or commensurate standard of the double (“pour deux”), relationships of dependence and thus hierarchy emerge, and they are rendered permanent with the establishment of property and work; the word *provisions* also hints at the temporal aspect of this state of affairs, with its etymology of *pro-videre* meaning “seeing ahead,” the same etymology as “providence,” that is, the opposite of contingency.<sup>56</sup>

Further close attention to Rousseau’s language and imagery above evinces the fatal intricacies of this inexorable logic. In the state of nature each restricts themselves to individual tasks and activities, and their singularity is pristinely preserved. Rousseau’s way of putting this is that they were happy and free as long as they were without “besoin du concours de plusieurs mains.” Gourevitch’s translation of “concours” here is “collaboration,” but the word in French also means “competition” or “contest” (in fact these latter two are its primary meanings), and this is precisely Rousseau’s point: that is to say, *any* modality of relation, even that which appears to be collaboration and sharing, always also is, or becomes, *competition*—with winners and losers—because it sets a common measure. Once we subject ourselves to relation and “concours,” we soon begin to depend on others for aid, or “secours” (cf. English “succor”): “mais dès l’instant qu’un homme eut besoin du secours d’un autre...” Rousseau—a diligent if untalented student of Latin—would surely have been aware of the implications of the verbal move from “concours” to “secours” (not least because he was writing a “discours,” *dis-cursus*). Both words have the same Latin root word (*cursus*, running or course) with a different prefix, con- from the Latin *cum* (with) and se- from the Latin *sub* (under). Thus: every course or dealing *with* another will inevitably end up with someone—indeed the great majority—subordinated, crushed, *run under* (remember the desire in *amour propre* to *elevate* oneself *above* the other: “*élever la sienne au-dessus d’eux et à leurs dépens*”<sup>57</sup>). Every con- as collectivity or relationality (con-, “with,” the prefix proper to com-munity) is revealed to be a con, a trap, one that will lead us to be trodden underfoot, making us into a *con* (the French swear word for dumbass, more or less). The relationality of the con- can never be divorced from the hierarchical relations implied in the sub-, starting from when we necessarily depend on others for succor.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Over the course of his works, Rousseau had a very vexed and shifting relation to the concept of Providence. For a good summary of Providence in Rousseau, and his declining belief in it, see the entry on “Providence” in the *Dictionnaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (769-771).

<sup>57</sup> The spatial language of above/below is also prominent in this passage on *amour propre* and measure from *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*: “Dès qu’on a commencé de se mesurer ainsi l’on ne cesse plus, et le coeur ne sait plus d’occuper désormais qu’à mettre tout le monde *au-dessous de nous*” (OC I.806; my emphasis) [“Once we have started to measure ourselves this way [i.e. comparatively, quantitatively], we never stop, and from then on the heart occupies itself only with placing everyone else beneath us” (CW 1:112)].

<sup>58</sup> At the end of Part 1 of the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau puts his monumental argument summarily: “les liens de la servitude n’étant formés que de la dépendance mutuelle des hommes et des besoins reciproques qui les unissent, il est impossible d’asservir un homme sans l’avoir mis auparavant dans les cas de ne pouvoir se passer d’un autre; situation qui n’existait pas dans l’état de Nature, y laisse chacun libre du joug et rend vaine la Loi du plus fort” (OC III.162) [“since ties of servitude are formed solely by men’s mutual dependence and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to subjugate a man without first having placed him in the position of being unable to do without another; a situation which, since it does not obtain in the state of Nature, leaves everyone in it free of the yoke, and renders vain the Law of the stronger” (*Discourses* 159)]. This is something of a preview of my next chapter on Derrida; as we will see, Derrida, like

Consider also Rousseau's point about the expansive forests that were prevalent in the state of nature being chopped down and transformed into fields of agriculture—the latter becoming primal sites of labor and slavery: “les vastes forêts se changèrent en des Campagnes riantes qu'il falut arroser de la sueur des hommes.” Rousseau means this image of deforestation to be both literal and figural (let us postpone the de Manian complications of this binary—doubling?—in Rousseau); literal because the rise of agriculture is an important part of his quasi-historical, quasi-heuristic narrative of the exit from the state of nature<sup>59</sup> (he also actually wrote the second *Discourse* in the Saint-Germain forest), in addition to the contemporary context of severe deforestation and wood shortage in mid-eighteenth-century Europe<sup>60</sup>; but figuratively speaking it is crucial to note that this is an image of *flattening*, of erasing singularity. Rather than a leveling that leads to equality, we have qualitative difference mowed down to generate a commensurable ground for exploitation. For vertical relations of hierarchy—wherein we need succor and are thus run under (*sub-cursus*), or maybe run over—are only visible, intelligible, and effective starting from a plane of equivalence or common measure: a “*même route*,” as above. In addition, we have a bleak image of the entanglement of human and nonhuman suffering, as the newly deforested lands were “watered with the sweat of men, and...slavery and misery were soon seen to sprout and grow together with the harvests.”

*Pace* Starobinski, then, who claims that society introduces “separation” and “difference” into the state of nature, we have seen that what society or relation—figured in Rousseau as the second or double—actually does is *nullify* qualitative difference by introducing equivalence (296). The double makes difference not matter except quantitatively, and as soon as the second appears, counting appears; so then the uncountable—singularity—ceases to count. Necessary, dependent relations inevitably become comparative, hierarchical, and violent, as the strong and powerful are compelled to dominate the weak. Rousseau was ever sensitive to this dynamic, and remarked upon viewing it in animal life and even in regard to nonliving things.<sup>61</sup> To the great, portentous Hölderlinian question

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Rousseau, will be obsessed with revealing the hidden presence of hierarchy or the “Loi du plus fort” within any structure of mutuality or relationality.

<sup>59</sup> A link can be drawn here to the implicit Rousseauism of Timothy Morton's recently introduced concept of “agrilogistics.” For Morton (in a rather hyperbolic key): “Ontologically, and socially, what we encounter in agrilogistics is immiseration. Very soon after its inception, agrilogistics led to patriarchy, the impoverishment of all but a very few, a massive and rigid social hierarchy, and feedback loops such as plagues” (92). Like Rousseau, Morton links the rise of rigid hierarchy to the figure of “the field,” and the beginning of agriculture around 10,000 BC: “The physical embodiment of this thought takes the form of the fields that surround the city-state at the start of the particular agricultural mode in the Fertile Crescent” (93). And as Rousseau does, Morton goes all the way to the end (and you have to give him credit for this) in declaring that not just Western culture but *civilization as such* has been a massive disaster. I hope it will become clear later in this chapter and in my chapter on Derrida why I think Morton's Rousseauism is not unrelated to his Derridianism—indeed Morton blames agrilogistics on “the metaphysics of presence.” He also discusses narcissism prominently in the agrilogistics article, and loves the figure of the loop; I would want to draw another link here to Morton's embrace of Object-Oriented Philosophy, which propounds a non- or even anti-relational ontology. We might say that the (admittedly compelling) nominalism of OOP is a cosmic Rousseauism. And I don't say “cosmic” lightly—the founder of OOP Graham Harman has named the black hole, in its absolute non-relational density, as the paradigmatic object of his ontology; for Harman all objects withdraw into themselves like black holes. Of course, astrophysicists call the center of a black hole, where the general laws of physics break down, (what else?) *the singularity*.

<sup>60</sup> See Clive Ponting's *A Green History of the World*, 278ff. The wood shortage in the eighteenth century was a major spur to the increase of coal production and usage, with further devastating consequences (through which we are now living).

<sup>61</sup> In Book I of *The Confessions* Rousseau describes being “bathed in perspiration, by pursuing at a run or by throwing stones at a rooster, a cow, a dog, an animal that I saw tormenting another because it felt itself to be stronger” (CW 5:17). In addition, in the 5<sup>th</sup> Walk of the *Reveries*, Rousseau mentions seeing one larger island dominate and destroy another because of their necessary relational proximity: “In the middle of this beautiful, almost circular lake are two small islands, the one inhabited and cultivated, and about half a league in circumference, the other smaller, deserted, and lying fallow, which one day will end up being destroyed by the constant removal of earth from it to make good the damage done to the big island by waves and storms. Thus it is that the substance of the weak is always used to the advantage of the

“Giebt es auf Erden ein Maaß?” (Is there any measure on earth?), Rousseau responds with Hölderlin: “Es giebt keines”—there is none. Yet even if there is no common measure on earth, or in nature, for Rousseau the fact remains that we have made and implemented one, and it has rendered our ruin. Rousseau can only conceive the common as the commensurable, with the consequence that he sees all relationality—that which the common grounds—even when it takes the form of sharing or help (*secours*), as violence.<sup>62</sup> One measure for the lion and ox is oppression.

The underlying logic that governs so much of Rousseau’s thought, then, will be the protection of qualitative singularity against the ultimately violent threat that any form of necessary (or dependent) relationality poses. We have been tracing his negative account of the catastrophic fall from the utopia of singularity into equivalence, society, dependence, and the misery of inequality; but what are some ways that Rousseau positively thinks the protection of singularity from the equivalent regime of the double? The next sections will examine several variations of this defense, all modulations of the same logic. In essence, these defenses resist relationality in the name of singularity—they all ensure that  $1 + 1$  does *not* equal 2, the double. To continue with the formulas, we might say the defenses correspond roughly to  $1 - 1 = 1$  (the general will and the *Social Contract*),  $1 + 1 = 1$  (the double as narcissistic extension of the self), and  $1 + X = 1$  (the monster).

#### IV. The Social Subtract

“To double life is both to conserve and to annihilate it” –Irigaray, “From *The Forgetting of Air to To Be Two*”

As we have seen, violence and inequality are, for Rousseau, founded in the common. That is, a common abstract measure that allows for quantitative—and thus hierarchical—difference, as opposed to the utopia of pure qualitative singularity. This inassimilable qualitative essence is the “natural” state proper to human beings—though crystallized in an eternally inaccessible past. But this logic still governs Rousseau’s conception of existence, as is seen in the remarkable and justly famous opening page of *The Confessions*. Despite the disaster known as “society” that subtends and imposes brutal inequality and servitude upon most human life (and not just human life), Rousseau believes he has discovered a way out—a way, in effect, to institutionalize loneliness. This (anti)institution he proposes is known as the social contract, outlined in a work of that title. In this text, Rousseau attempts to generate forcibly a common that does not brook hierarchical difference, a common that is itself a not a common measure, but is precisely structured in pure difference: he calls this the general will (*la volonté générale*). Rousseau did not invent the phrase or concept of “the general will”—Malebranche or Pascal probably used it first, interestingly enough in a theological context, and it was also used just before Rousseau by his great frenemy Diderot; still, Rousseau’s employment of the term remains the most notable, and the general will will always be associated

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powerful” (49). It is no accident that the larger, more violent, and dominant island is the “inhabited” one, since Rousseau associates violence, inequality, and domination with society—settlement—as such. There is a parable about solitude and relationality somewhere encoded here in this passage about islands—we’ll get to this more explicitly in the next chapter, on “Derrida’s Islands”—especially knowing Rousseau’s love for *Robinson Crusoe* (we might also be able to extract a proto-critique of geo-engineering). Thus Rousseau says his only ethical injunction is to avoid zero-sum situations where hurting another could benefit him (see CW 5:47; see also *Emile* 236); the true abjection of society lies in the fact that avoiding this entirely is not possible—as Adorno famously said: “Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen.”<sup>62</sup> One might object that Rousseau is not opposed to the common, and that indeed Part II of the second *Discourse* famously begins by locating the disaster in the first act of enclosure: “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of ground, to whom it occurred to say *this is mine*, and found people sufficiently simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society” (D 161). But a closer examination of this momentous sentence shows that it is not the act of enclosure itself that commences the fateful birth of society, but its declaration and *recognition* by others, the recognition or intelligibility through the equivalent common measure that the concept of property implies.

immediately with Rousseau, not least because *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen*, the French Revolutionary authors of which were deeply drunk on Rousseau, invokes the term prominently.

The general will is a crucial but still opaque concept in *The Social Contract*, in Rousseau generally, and indeed in the discourses of political theory and political philosophy. In what follows I'll briefly try to recast the social contract and general will from the perspective of the logic I've been developing so far in this chapter. This logic seeks to protect singularity from the threat of relation(ality), the threat of assimilation into the common measure of the countable double. Thus, the great conceptual and political challenge here for Rousseau is programmatically to imagine a community (since at this point we must accept our societal fate and live in a community) that does not embed the singularity into a dark web of measured hierarchical relations of dependence, but rather allows it to retain its luminous qualitative unique existence. Indeed, many commentators have pointed out that *The Social Contract* presents a vision of the social body wherein the singularity is transposed from an individual to a political key, such that the community becomes a (good) double of the individual (especially the autonomous individual in the state of nature).<sup>63</sup> Rousseau himself is more or less explicit on this point; he notes that the Legislator founding a new community under Rousseau's system must face up to the task of "changer, pour ainsi dire, la nature humaine; de transformer chaque individu, qui par lui-même est un tout parfait et solitaire, en partie d'un plus grand tout dont cet individu reçoit en quelque sorte sa vie et son être" (OC III.381) ["changing human nature; of transforming each individual who by himself is a perfect and solitary whole into a part of a larger whole from which that individual would as it were receive his life and being" (SC 69)]. The non-representable manifestation and instrument of this ontological transfer of singularity from individual to collective, the emblem and vehicle of "changing human nature" in order to let its singularity flourish more fully (one thinks of Wordsworth's "human nature seeming born again"),<sup>64</sup> is the general will.

Rousseau importantly distinguishes the general will from the "will of all"—the latter is simply the positive aggregate of the content of all the particular wills. The general will, however, is described as the "somme des différences," the sum of the differences of all particular, private wills (OC III.371). Scholars debate about what precisely this means, but for us it is important to note that the general will is arrived at through a strange arithmetic that provides a negative sum, a canceling out, a structure of difference. This "canceling out" (*s'entredétruisent*) of particular wills is meant to ensure that the hierarchical, see-saw, zero-sum game endemic (even inherent) to relation and society cannot operate, because the sum of zero *remains constantly at equilibrium* (OC III.371). Thus, we see Rousseau does not try to imagine a community based on mutually constituting singularity and relation, but accepts that relation must mean a zero-sum game; his move is only to try to prevent the game from starting. As Kevin Inston writes: "The general will, unlike the will of all, is defined differentially" (*Rousseau and Radical Democracy* 128). Because it is grounded in difference, Rousseau's general will cannot be represented, alienated or separated from itself, and significantly, cannot have content or concern itself with particulars (the influence on Kant's practical philosophy, especially his contentless moral law—not to mention Kant's social and political thought—is evident<sup>65</sup>): "la volonté générale...ne peut comme générale prononcer ni sur un homme ni sur un fait" (OC III.374) ["the

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<sup>63</sup> Esposito remarks on the "reciprocal interpenetration that awards to the community the profile of the isolated and self-sufficient individual (*Communitas* 52-53). Similarly David Bates finds the *Social Contract* to involve a "virtual generalization of individuality" (197). Starobinski's discussion of *Julie* mentions "the community, viewed as a collective ego" (109).

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Emile*: "social institutions are those that best know how to denature man, to take his absolute existence from him in order to give him a relative one and transport the I into the common unity" (40).

<sup>65</sup> No less a Kant scholar than Dieter Henrich once wrote: "One can describe Kant's entire philosophy as the result of an attempt to transform [Rousseau's] thoughts into a scientifically respectable and universally applicable theory" (Henrich 10). Similarly, Éric Weil remarked that "it took Kant to *think* Rousseau's *thoughts*" (qtd. in Swensen 183).

general will...cannot, being general, pronounce judgment on a particular man or fact” (SC 62)]. The structural emptiness of the general will (which Inston connects to the “empty space” of modern democracy theorized by Claude Lefort and then Laclau and Mouffe) also constitutes for Rousseau the only possible form of the exercise of sovereignty; but this is an always already voided sovereignty, one that anticipates Bataille’s astonishing insight that “la souveraineté n’est RIEN,” sovereignty is NOTHING.

To take part in such a generality, each citizen subtracts his or her particular claims, rights, property, etc., and subjects him or herself to total dependence on the unitary social body: “chaque Citoyen n’est rien, ne peut rien, que par tous les autres” (OC III.382) [“Each Citizen is nothing and can do nothing except with all the others” (SC 69)]. As we saw earlier, dependence is for Rousseau the great evil that introduces a common measure and inequality into existence; yet by making each person depend entirely on a “whole” or “all” that is in effect nothing in particular, each person is dependent on nothing, and thus independent! Everyone in the community is an artificially constructed independent singularity. There is no particular, mundane relation of dependence with a singular other, only on the empty whole: “chaque Citoyen [est] dans une parfait indépendance de tous les autres, et dans une excessive dépendance de la Cité” (OC III. 394) [“every Citizen [is] perfectly independent of all the others, and excessively dependent on the City” (SC 80)]. The general will is in place, then, to assure that the only thing common to all is a differential structure. Absolute dependence and absolute independence reach a point of indifference; each singularity alienates what is proper over to the measure of the general will, which is (and can be) nothing in particular. Thus what each person contributes to the general will is the negativity of his or her singular difference from others. The consequence is that the *corps social* is not underpinned by a common quantitative measure, and that each can subsist in a singularity—though not their own proper essence, but the single collective singularity, what Rousseau calls the “moi commun” (OC III.361). L’État, c’est le moi commun.

We are in a position to observe that Rousseau’s marvelous conceptual edifice is constructed in a grand attempt to neutralize, once again, the threat posed by the double. Because in typical societal relations the common is a common standard that allows hierarchy to emerge between quantitatively unequal singularities (we are “everywhere in chains,” as the famous opening note resounds), Rousseau imagines a common that empties itself of content, thus of any possible measure—though by doing so he makes impossible any particular necessary relationality between individuals. *The Social Contract* outlines for us, as David Bates writes, a “political association devoid of any concrete relationships” (177); a community with no relation, so not a community at all. In this way Rousseau ensures that as long as the general will and social body remain free of concrete ontological particularity, the commensurable and thus unequal regime figured by and as the double is kept at bay, and the singularity of the state of nature, though transfigured, is recrudescent. The following passage from the chapter in Book II on law makes clear that particular content infiltrating the general will leads to a doubling in the social body, a splitting into two unequal beings—so the double rears its head and the general will evaporates as such<sup>66</sup>:

J’ai déjà dit qu’il n’y avoit point de volonté générale sur un objet particulier. En effet cet objet particulier est dans l’Etat ou hors de l’Etat. S’il est hors de l’Etat, une volonté qui lui est étrangère n’est point générale par rapport à lui; et si cet objet est

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<sup>66</sup> Esposito’s recent book *Two* focuses on how Western political theology has for millennia tried violently to generate unity through an exclusionary fusion of two hierarchical parts into a single body (individual, social, etc.); see also his *Immunitas*. Judith Butler’s most recent work has also taken up the pseudo-unity of the social body: “The body politic is posited as a unity it can never be” (*Notes* 4). As Nancy writes: “There can’t be just one body” (*Corpus* 153).

dans l'Etat, il en fait partie : Alors il se forme entre le tout et sa partie une relation qui en fait *deux êtres séparés*, dont la partie est l'un, et le tout moins cette même partie est l'autre. Mais le tout moins une partie n'est point le tout, et tant que ce rapport subsiste il n'y a plus de tout mais *deux parties inégales*; d'où il suit que la volonté de l'une n'est point non plus générale par rapport à l'autre. (OC III.378-379; my emphasis)

I have already said that there is no general will about a particular object. Indeed, this particular object is either within the State or outside the State. If it is outside the State, a will that is foreign is not general in relation to it; and if this object is inside the State, it is a part of it: Then a relation is formed between the whole and the part that makes them into *two separate beings*, of which the part is one, and the whole, less that part, the other. But the whole less a part is not the whole, and as long as this relation persists there is no longer a whole but *two unequal parts*; from which it follows neither is the will of one of these parts general in relation to the other. (SC 66; my emphasis)

Again we see for Rousseau that separation—the condition of possibility for any real relation(ality)—immediately becomes hierarchy on a scale of more/less, as the “*deux êtres séparés*” turn into “*deux parties inégales*”; Rousseau cannot countenance the “*séparés, on est ensemble*” of Mallarmé, or Jean-Luc Nancy's ontological inflection of *partage*, a separation or division which is also a sharing and a joining together.<sup>67</sup> As usual in Rousseau, the emergence of inequality is figured as a two or double disrupting and annulling the pure singularity of the one. This double or doubling comes from particular content creeping in to create a common measure—and this movement is exactly what the general will tries to dispel. For a similar reason, Rousseau notes explicitly that there cannot be two sovereigns (SC 86).

In the experiments in political ontology that are the social contract and the general will, then, Rousseau protects singularity by trying to transpose it, or its structure, onto the collectivity. To quote him again, what Bates insightfully calls the “singular logic of the general will...mirrors perfectly the singular logic of the autonomous individual” (226). Rousseau achieves this transposition by having each individual subtract their content and their claim to particular relations in order to be reabsorbed into the singularity of the whole, the *moi commun*.  $1 - 1 = 1$ . However, Rousseau's attempt to re-create the singularity characteristic of the state of nature in a political community runs into one huge and fatal problem: the essence of singularity in the state of nature (or say, in the opening of *The Confessions*) is *quality*—but since the general will cannot contain content, such qualitative uniqueness and particularity cannot shine through the *moi commun* (contrast—kind of—the “*moi seul*”). There is *only* a blank emptiness, a “blind and mute monster,” as de Man called Rousseau's social body (*Allegories* 274). An impossible void.

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<sup>67</sup> Nancy first begins to reflect on his ontology of *partage* in 1982's *Partage des voix*, and takes it up in many other texts since, including *The Inoperative Community*, as one of his recurring and key concepts. For Nancy, *partage* names the groundless sharing that is constitutive of existence itself, a sharing that is only possible via a separation/division of finite singularities that (can) have no essence, substance, or ground in common. In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau associates the end of the state of nature with the earth being divided up (“*partagée*”) (D 144), even though the state of nature is one where the fruits of the earth are common (Rousseau says, looking back to Locke). Because there is no relationality in the state of nature but only pure isolated incommensurability, separation can only be thought of as hierarchical division, not sharing. See my Chapter 4 on the Wordsworths for more on community and *partage*.

## V. “I” Will Be Your Mirror: Narcissistic Doubles

“Rousseau believed this is because the girl saw how unattractive she looked while writing. But as someone wrote in the margins of one of my books:

‘ROUSSEAU KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE’

Rousseau’s little girl saw herself in the mirror, writing, but she did not quit writing because she could not tolerate a reflection of her own unloveliness.”

-Anne Boyer, *Garments Against Women* 84

In the community envisioned in *The Social Contract*, every citizen is supposed to look into the social body as in a mirror brightly, seeing a collective double of their singular self. This would be a *good* double for Rousseau, a narcissistic one, one opposed to the bad double that wants to dominate and kill singularity by subjecting it to a common measure. In contrast to this threatening double, if the other as double is simply an extension of the identical self or same, then there is no threat to the singularity—this second kind of narcissistic or solipsistic double only extends and reinforces singularity. If the formula for resisting the relationality of the bad double in *The Social Contract* was  $1 - 1 = 1$ , we might characterize the formula of the encounter of the good double as  $1 + 1 = 1$ . This particular figuration of the double, which occurs in several of Rousseau’s texts and which can be closely associated with the privileged state he would come to call “reverie,” ensures that the other is encountered as an extension (*étendre*) of the unique one, so singularity remains. The two stays away.

Despite Rousseau’s contention in the *Lettres Morales* that “nous ne voyons l’ame d’autrui...ni la nôtre, parce que nous n’avons point de mirior intellectual” [“we do not see anyone else’s soul...nor our own, because we do not have any intellectual mirror”], he often finds himself in a state where he sees himself mirrored everywhere. (OC IV.1092; CW 12:183). This is a state of extension, expansion, appropriation, and incorporation instead of mutual relation, an attempt to dissolve alterity and exteriority. Significantly, Rousseau most often resorts to this aspect of the double in his encounters with nonhuman beings—indeed, this might be Rousseau’s primary way of (not) relating to nonhumans. Take the following passage from Book IV of *The Confessions*, where Rousseau describes the pleasure he takes in countryside walks. It is important that he be largely isolated in the natural landscape, basking “in the distance from everything that makes me feel my dependence”—for as we recall, Rousseau associates relations of dependence (“les chaînes de la dépendance”) with society, and thus with violence and inequality. There, alone and on foot, “seul et à pied,” in:

l’éloignement de tout ce qui me fait sentir ma dépendance, de tout ce qui me rappelle à ma situation, tout cela dégage mon ame, me donne une plus grande audace de penser, me jette en quelque sorte dans l’immensité des êtres pour les combiner, les choisir, me les approprier à mon gré sans gêne et sans crainte. Je dispose en maître de la nature entière; mon cœur, errant d’objet en objet s’unit, s’identifie à ceux qui le flattent. (OC I.162)

the distance from everything that makes me feel my dependence, from everything that recalls my situation to me, all this disengages my soul, gives me a greater audacity in thinking, throws me in some manner into the immensity of beings in order to combine them, choose them, appropriate them at my whim without effort

and without fear. I dispose of all nature as its master; wandering from object to object my heart unites, identifies with the one that gratify it. (CW 5:136)

Rousseau finds himself in an “immensity” of otherness, but comes out as the “master” of nature. The central actions named here are appropriation, combination, unification, and identification—all this exteriority is reincorporated and reinscribed as part of the singularity. Notice here we have more or less the same move as that of *The Social Contract*, but employing the inverse directionality. Whereas in *The Social Contract*, the singular citizen alienates what is proper to him or herself in order to be absorbed into a larger singularity, here the individual expands outward in order to bring everything *in*, making the surrounding objects correspond with and enter as part of the singularity of Rousseau’s soul (*mon âme*)—expansion as enclosure (or vice versa). In each case, though, whether going outward or inward, the result is the same: the relationality of the double is warded off.

It is this same soul of his that Rousseau describes as “expansive” numerous times in at least five different major works.<sup>68</sup> The most famous and developed depiction of this expanding, embracing, encompassing sentiment to swallow everything into himself is of course the idea of “reverie,” found in his final text *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*. While in reverie, one enjoys “de rien d’extérieur à soi, de rien sinon de soi-même et de sa propre existence, tant que cet état dure on se suffit à soi-même comme Dieu” (OC I.1047) [“nothing external to the self, nothing but oneself and one’s own existence: as long as this state lasts, one is self-sufficient like God” (*Reveries* 55-56)].<sup>69</sup> Levinas once quipped that “no one is more self-sufficient” than Rousseau (*On Escape* 50), and one is reminded here of the description of “amour de soi” from Note XV to the second *Discourse*, where the singularity is the only being in the universe to observe itself.<sup>70</sup> The natural world becomes a part of Rousseau, or his double, to the extent even that it takes on his name; just before the above quoted passage, Rousseau describes reaching this state of reverie while lying down beside a stream—in French, *un ruisseau*.<sup>71</sup> There are many more instances that could be given of Rousseau’s action of extending his own being outward to incorporate and encapsulate otherness. For example, Rousseau claims that the feeling of hatred is impossible for him—to hate “seroit resserrer, comprimer mon existence, et je voudrois plustot l’étendre sur tout l’univers” (OC I.1056) [“to hate would be to limit and repress my existence, whereas I would prefer to extend it across the whole universe” (*Reveries* 65)]. To hate is also to induce a separation between oneself and the other that, by acquiescing to a common standard of judgment, ends up limiting one’s own existence and prevents either leaving the other totally alone (as in the state of nature) or incorporating their otherness via an ontological extension (*étendre*).

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<sup>68</sup> The phrase *ame expansive* occurs in *The Confessions*, the *Reveries* (75), *Emile* (235n; OC 4:523n), *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*, and *Julie*.

<sup>69</sup> Peter Sloterdijk makes this passage from the *Reveries* the subject of a recent short book, *Stress and Freedom*. For Sloterdijk, this revelation represents nothing short of an “ontological revolution,” for “these words convey no less than the first appearance of a concept of existence in which the modern individual enters the scene” (28, 20). Sloterdijk goes on to say that “Rousseau should have retracted his doctrine of *volonté générale*” after discovering this idea of individuality (50); Sloterdijk thus does not see how both the general will and the individual under reverie both function according to the presiding logic of singularity.

<sup>70</sup> For “the allure, and elusiveness, of divine self-sufficiency” in Rousseau, see Julie Cooper’s *Secular Powers*, Chapter 4.

<sup>71</sup> Rousseau also once wrote a poem where he talks to a *ruisseau* as his double. It begins: “Ruisseau qui baignes cette plaine / Je te ressemble en bien des traits” (OC II.1168). Also cf. “ruisseau” in the second walk of the *Reveries*, where he has an out of body experience after being injured by a dog: “je n’avois nulle notion distincte de mon individu, pas la moindre idée de ce qui venoit de m’arriver ; je ne savois ni qui j’étois, ni où j’étois ; je ne sentoie ni mal, ni crainte, ni inquiétude. Je voyois couler mon sang, comme j’aurois vu couler un ruisseau, sans songer seulement que ce sang m’appartint en aucune sorte” (OC I.1005). This injury leads to his first experience of reverie.

Some commentators, like Esposito, want to see in this expansiveness a tendency toward sharing, relation, and community: “[Rousseau’s] ego coincides with the impulse to be reflected outside of itself: ‘to be shared’ with the other in the profound sense of sharing the other’s alterity” (*Communitas* 60). Yet it seems to me that for Rousseau, in reverie, there is no “outside” to the ego—remember, “rien d’extérieur à soi.” This is a narcissism that forecloses any outside, and precludes community and sharing by swallowing any space for relationality; staying singular, the self expands into a radical “solitude cosmique”<sup>72</sup>; thus it is not really a contradiction how in the *Reveries* Rousseau will discuss his extreme solitude in one breath and total communion in another. When not absorbed by the *moi/soi*, the outside is infinitely distant, or even threatening: “Tout ce qui m’est extérieur m’est étranger désormais. Je n’ai plus en ce monde ni prochain, ni semblables, ni frères... Si je reconnois autour de moi quelque chose ce ne sont que des objets affligeans et déchirans pour mon coeur” (OC I.999) [“Everything outside of me is from this day on foreign to me. I no longer have any neighbors, fellow men, or brothers in this world... if I recognize anything at all around me, it is only objects which distress and rend my heart” (*Reveries* 7)]. This paragraph in the first walk of *Reveries* goes on to call that self-same text an appendix to *The Confessions*, and here we find Rousseau mimicking (doubling?) his own language from the opening of that earlier autobiographical text (“semblables,” “(re)connois,” “autour de moi,” “mon coeur,” etc.); but while *The Confessions* refused relationality via an effusive celebration of unique incommensurable singularity (“moi seul”), here Rousseau’s *seul* soul is saddened, isolated, threatened, broken: “Seul pour le reste de ma vie... je suis nul désormais parmi les hommes... n’ayant plus avec eux de relation réelle, de véritable société” (OC I.999-1000) [“alone for the rest of my life... I am from now on as nothing amongst men... for I no longer have any real relationship or keep any kind of company with them” (*Reveries* 7-8)]. Relation is impossible—in the *Reveries* Rousseau finds himself, quite literally, in “une situation si singulière” (OC I.1000).

Relation is impossible, that is, except as narcissism. That Rousseau sees the unbreakable loop of narcissism as the only possibility for any relation is evidenced by his claim in the *Reveries* that the only community he can countenance is one peopled with doubles born of his own singular substance, “les enfans de mes fantasies que j’ai créés selon mon coeur”: “mon coeur se nourrit encor des sentiments pour lequel il étoit né et j’en jouis avec les êtres imaginaires qui les produisent et qui les partagent comme si ces êtres existoient réellement” (OC I. 1081) [“the children of my imagination, which I created according to my own heart... my heart still feeds on the feelings for which it was created and I enjoy them with imaginary beings who produce them and share them with me, as if these beings really existed” (*Reveries* 90)].<sup>73</sup> Here the *partage* of *jouissance* (“j’en jouis avec... partagent”) is not a sharing in relation to an other, but only a self-sharing that comes from self-separation as doubling, a splitting of the self and its narcissistic double(s). Despite the concessive force of the “comme si” (“as if”), this is as about close as Rousseau will venture to opening to real relationality. Here commensurability is not a threat because the others in question are governed by the sole and *seul* “selon” of singularity; Rousseau says they are created “selon mon coeur,” according to my heart, its singular measure, its immeasurable excess of quality (the French for excess is *démesure*).

If the demiurgic pathos of this fantasy of imagined and imaginary narcissistic community is one of Rousseau’s “silent revolt[s] against the absence of community”—as Esposito claims about

<sup>72</sup> “Dans l’écriture de soi [de Rousseau], le sentiment de l’extériorité se radicalisera en solitude cosmique, en perte vécu du monde entièrement extérieur, inhabitable (‘Moi voice donc seul sur la terre’)” (Caudoux 478).

<sup>73</sup> Compare similar fantasies of self-community in *The Confessions*, Book IX: “The impossibility of reaching real beings threw me into the country of chimeras, and seeing nothing existing that was worthy of my delirium, I nourished it in an ideal world which my creative imagination soon peopled with beings in accordance with my heart [*selon mon coeur*]... I made for myself societies of perfect creatures... reliable, tender, faithful friends such as I never found here below” (CW 5:359; OC I.427). Note the phrase repeated over both texts, “selon mon coeur.”

Rousseau's corpus in general—it is also an assurance that community will never come (*Communitas* 50). Esposito goes on to ask regarding Rousseau: “How is it possible to derive a philosophy of community from a metaphysics of solitude?” (51). I am in sympathy with the impulse behind this question, and I ultimately agree with Esposito (and Nancy) that Rousseau opens the thought of community in modernity that I want to trace, though indeed this is an opening wherein “the thought of community is born within the terms of its own closure” (61); but I think Esposito does not go far enough in recognizing just how terrified Rousseau is of relationality, and how ontologically closed and narcissistic his realm of solitude really is. For it is clear that Rousseau only wants to see himself, and succeeds in this, especially when among a world teeming with nonhuman beings. We have seen just above how Rousseau can only share his *jouissance* with (good) doubles, beings created by his imagination after his own heart (let us bracket what immediately comes to mind here, namely Derrida's discussion of Rousseau and masturbation); this point is brought home in an incredible fragment by Rousseau from an aborted text with the manuscript title *De l'art de joiür*, that is, *On the Art of Enjoying*:

Solitude cherie où je passe encore avec plaisir les restes d'une vie livrée aux souffrances, forest sans bois, marais sans eaux, genets, roseaux, tristes bruyères, objets inanimés qui ne pouvez ni me parler ni m'entendre, quel charme secret me ramene sans cesse au milieu de vous. Etres insensibles et morts, *ce charme n'est point en vous, il n'y sauroit être, il est dans mon propre coeur qui veut tout rapporter à lui*. Le commerce des hommes m'éloigne de celui qui m'est le plus cher, et ce n'est que dans vos aziles que je puis être en paix avec moi (OC I.1173; my emphasis)

Cherished solitude, in which I still pass with pleasure the remnants of a life given over to suffering, forest without woods, marsh without waters, furze bushes, reeds, sad heaths, inanimate objects that can neither speak nor listen to me, what secret charm ceaselessly draws me back into your midst? Insentient and dead beings, *this charm is not at all in you, it could be not be there, it is in my own heart that wants to relate everything to itself*. Commerce with men takes me away from the commerce that is dearest to me, and it is only in your refuge that I can be at peace at all. (CW 12:57)

In solitude, among things, Rousseau finds only the charm of his own heart (cf. “selon mon coeur,” etc.); he finds himself more truly and more strange. What I referred to earlier as the closed loop of narcissism is readily visible here, as Rousseau's heart must “relate everything to itself”—relationality is first always a self-relation. Once again, Rousseau deflects the possibility of any external relationality by expanding outward and turning everything around him into a double after the (im)measure of the secret charm of his heart. This scene becomes a bizarre being-among without community, a solipsistic commerce without relation—perhaps what it would be like to dwell in a “forest without woods” or “marsh without waters.”<sup>74</sup>

Such is Rousseau's attempt to figure and conjure a “good,” narcissistic double, one that does not threaten singularity with a common measure because this double exists precisely and only in

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<sup>74</sup> The exceedingly puzzling, even mysterious, imagery of “forest without woods” and “marsh without waters” might be slightly more legible if it is read as an echo of Job 8:11-12: “Can papyrus grow tall where there is no marsh? Can reeds thrive without water? While still growing and uncut, they wither more quickly than grass.” Rousseau's image of “forest without woods” and “marsh without water” interestingly might also suggest a non-exploitative relationship to nonhuman nature, where one can be in a forest without imagining the trees as woods to be cleared, or the marsh as waters to be drained. Thanks to Steve Goldsmith for this insight.

accordance with (*selon*) the singularity, which does not have to come into relation with a second self-sufficient entity whose content might subjugate it when both are placed on a plane of commensurable equivalence. Hence the one, even encountering another, remains one:  $1+1 = 1$ . That this avoidance of relationality via narcissism and/or solipsistic absorption is Rousseau's primary mode of interacting with nonhuman beings—though we find it in (non)relation to humans too<sup>75</sup>—is especially worth pondering when we consider the coinciding dating of the age we have come to call the Anthropocene, a proposed geological epoch often said to have begun in the mid to late eighteenth century, just as Rousseau was writing. Put in a concise but simplified way, the Anthropocene names the time when human beings collectively begin to effect unintended changes, often catastrophic, to the very geology and atmosphere of the earth.<sup>76</sup> That is to say, the Anthropocene comes about because (some) humans think that what we do to the earth doesn't matter, that we are not entangled with nonhuman beings—animal, plant, mineral, and others—in essential and inextricable ways. Rousseau's refusal to think relations with nonhumans other than as a narcissistic projection or extension thus coalesces well with the hubristic ideology co-emergent with the modernity Rousseau himself in part inaugurates, the logic that helped (and still helps) subtend the Anthropocene.

We find this borne out in a fragment written for Book IV of *Émile*, but ultimately not included in the text, where Rousseau actually takes up this very question, writing that humans can have absolutely no effect on the totality of the earth: “encore ce que les hommes y font [sur la terre], étant peu de chose relativement au tout, est nécessité par leur nature à ne pas passer certaines bornes et ces bornes empêchent les actions libres des hommes de pouvoir déranger l'ordre total” (OC IV.874) [“since what men do [on earth] is such a small thing relative to the whole, it is necessitated by their nature not to pass certain limits, and these limits prevent the free actions of men from being able to disrupt the total order” (CW 13:683)]. The claim regarding the impossibility of humans “disrupt[ing]” (*déranger*) the whole earth—which we know now to be disastrously false—is the logical consequence of this refusal of relationality, the idea that the nonhuman world is simply a reflection of the secret charm of human hearts and a clean, equivalent, malleable and mirrored double susceptible to mastery—recall the above quote from Book IV of *The Confessions*, where wandering alone (or so he thinks<sup>77</sup>) in nature Rousseau writes “Je dispose en maître de la nature entière.” By claiming that human beings overestimate their effects on the earth, Rousseau precludes consideration of the kind of unintended consequences and feedback loops that characterize ecological crisis in the Anthropocene. Although Rousseau did so much to give us our modern (and Romantic) idea of Nature—an idea of Nature not divorceable from an alienation from this same Nature—I don't wish to do something as ridiculous as “blame” Rousseau for the Anthropocene, whatever the latter actually is; and besides, the idea of mastering Nature has often been traced back at least to Bacon and Descartes (sometimes in similarly questionable blamings), and Rousseau's obsession with botany would seem to suggest a careful attention to the singularity of nonhuman

<sup>75</sup> “I enjoy the attachment I have for my friends...everything I see is an extension of my being” (*Julie* 566).

<sup>76</sup> At this early point intense debates across the “hard” sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities are currently raging about the meaning and existence of the Anthropocene, so much so that one cannot deploy the term without hesitation, or at least a footnote like this one. Indeed, it seems everyday a new “-cene” is posited as a more productive and more accurate way to characterize the current ecological (and economic, and political, etc.) crisis: Petrolocene, Capitalocene, Chtulucene, Corporatocene, Coloniocene, etc. I discuss this more in my Wordsworths chapter.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. Marder in *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium*: “Rousseau might have been mistaken after all: he was not alone during his walks full of ‘happy reverie’ amid ‘greenery, flowers, and birds.’ Is it the case that we are—still or already—immersed in solitude when we are with animals or plants? What does being with these nonhuman beings mean? Doesn't ‘being *in* nature,’ as we say in everyday language, ineluctably create a broad transhuman community: being *with* nature?” (xviii).

beings.<sup>78</sup> However, I do want to see what the refusal of relationality can look like when the logic of this refusal is thought within a broadly ecological register—*sub specie Anthropocenis*, as it were; or reading in light (or in the long backshadow) of what Timothy Clark calls “the retrospect of the Anthropocene” (*Ecocriticism on the Edge* 64). The ecological aspect and implications of this problematic will be important for my project as a whole.

The regime of the “good,” narcissistic double is one in which Rousseau expands himself, or his own measure (*selon*), outward to incorporate (usually but not always nonhuman) exteriority, and in so doing, wards off the kind of double analyzed above, the second which would threaten domination through quantified hierarchy in a common measure. I want to end this section with the feminist thinker Luce Irigaray, who in her poetico-philosophical missive *Elemental Passions*, elliptically analyzes the role of doubling at the ontotheological heart of Western patriarchy. Though Irigaray doesn’t mention Rousseau specifically, and focuses largely on a question—that of sexual difference—which has not fallen under the purview of this chapter, the leap to Irigaray seems like less of one when we consider that modern feminism more or less *begins* as an intensive critique of none other than Rousseau (in Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*). Irigaray recognizes that this oppressive structure relies on a double doubling:

And do not think that I want you to go round in circles inside yourself. But to take the measure of your power, to allow the other a horizon, to enable a meeting with the other. Your economy always requiring at least two props to shore it up. Two others functioning in secret, or in your innermost self, as your doublings. The Omnipotent and the impotent. The Completely-Other and the not-other. The Completely-Different and the indifferent. . . . Does that mean you have a good doubling and a bad one? (*Elemental Passions* 93-94)

If this section has taken up the narcissistic self-circling double, what Irigaray calls “the not-other” or “the indifferent,” which sees any outside as an assimilated and doubled extension of the self so that amid any encounter with another the singularity remains ( $1+1=1$ ), the next section will take up how Rousseau also figures the double as the “Completely-Other” and “Completely-Different,” so that  $1+X=1$ —or perhaps:  $1+1=X$ . Anything but two. This inassimilable X is the monster.

## VI. “Unheard-of Monsters”

“That I may reduce the monster to  
Myself, and then may be myself

In face of the monster, be more than part  
Of it, more than the monstrous player of

One of its monstrous lutes, not be  
Alone, but reduce the monster and be,

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<sup>78</sup> In the *Reveries*, Rousseau claims he could write a book about every blade of grass (51-52). Cf. Marder *Plant Thinking* 197. Thinking further along these lines would lead us to the communism of a Whitman or a Platonov. The latter writes: “A new agricultural epoch is coming, when a person will learn every individual plant and even each section of a plant, and not the whole look of them, when he will give a name to every leaf, will know the character, soul, needs, illnesses and moods of each grain and will know the difference between it and other such grains” (“Life to the End,” trans. Emily Laskin). There may never be a Newton of a blade of grass, as Kant says, but there is a Rousseau. But this singularity means precisely that they cannot enter into relation, following the logic we have been tracing in this chapter.

Two things, the two together as one,  
And play of the monster and of myself'  
-Wallace Stevens, "The Man With the Blue Guitar"

The monster is the last of Rousseau's logics of counter-relationality that I'll discuss. The double as monster is—at least *prima facie*—the antipode of the narcissistic double, for while the narcissistic double reduces everything to a mirror image of the self's singularity and attempts to expand, absorb, and merge, the monster appears as so foreign that it exceeds and repels any standard of comparison or even recognition (one thinks of Kant's non-concept of the monstrous as that which destroys any containing concept). However, both the narcissistic double and the monstrous double are equally meant to ward off and neutralize the kind of double that would subject the singularity to a quantitative common measure. As Irigaray recognizes, both doubles, the Completely-Other and the not-other, are constructed to "shore up" the economy of the singularity and inhibit the emergence of a shareable common.<sup>79</sup> Like the narcissistic double, the monster is a way to manage otherness—the second is now so incommensurable it cannot be conceived under any rubric or regime of sense, cannot even be measured, counted, or encountered. It is X. By the same token, then, it cannot threaten the singularity with its (non)measure.

Monsters abound everywhere in Rousseau's corpus,<sup>80</sup> but they are mentioned explicitly in conjunction with the idea of a common measure—or here "modèle commun"—in the preface to Rousseau's massively successful, and massive, epistolary novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (beloved by both Mary and Percy Shelley, along with the rest of Europe). Since I cannot help obsessively seeing double, I note that the preface in question is actually the *second* of two prefaces, and features one of Rousseau's most common forms of self-doubling: a dialogue. Here "R" or Rousseau (in the guise of editor) discusses his manuscript with "N," an unnamed "homme de lettres." The dialogue itself begins with a strange invocation of the double or two, as R lamentingly asks N, who has just read the entire manuscript, if he thinks others will also read the whole thing. N responds in Latin, quoting a line from the satirist Persius: *Vel duo, vel nemo*. An endnote to the English critical edition of *Julie* correctly translates this Latin idiomatically as "Perhaps two, perhaps none," suggesting that Rousseau (quite wrongly!) expected his book to find few readers. Strictly translated, though, "*vel duo, vel nemo*" reads as "either two, or no one." This latter rendering would be a fitting motto for Rousseau's treatment of singularity and the double in this chapter—*either two or no one*; that is, if you are afraid of the second, you must turn it into a *nemo*, a nobody, a copy...a monster.

The second preface of *Julie* then turns into an aesthetic debate which quickly becomes epistemological and ontological. N complains that the characters in the novel do not contain "les traits commun à l'homme," traits common to mankind, and are thus unnatural, like "gens de l'autre monde," people from another world (OC II.11-12). R responds by positing the primacy of human difference and singularity over and against any common traits:

Savez-vous jusqu'où les Hommes différent les uns des autres? Combien les caracteres sont opposés? Combien les moeurs, les préjugés varient selon les temps, les lieux, les âges? Qui est-ce qui ose assigner des bornes précises à la Nature, et dire: Voilà jusqu'où l'Homme peut aller, et pas au-delà? (OC II.12)

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<sup>79</sup> A quick glance at even just the titles of many of Irigaray's books show the deep importance of this very problematic for her thought: *This Sex Which is Not One, To Be Two, Democracy Begins Between Two, From Singularity to Community*, etc.

<sup>80</sup> And in others' writing about him—e.g. Voltaire and Hume (see Cranston 7, 167).

Do you know how vastly Men differ from each other? How opposite characters can be? To what degree morals, prejudices vary with the times, places, eras? Who is daring enough to assign exact limits to Nature, and assert: Here is as far as Man can go, and no further? (CW 6:7)

In other words, R asks, who dares give singular men, ones that differ so much from one another and are never two (“les uns des autres”), a common measure? This would be a delineation of human nature such that it is enclosed within hard limits (“bornes précises”)—though the *not* beyond (*pas au-delà*) is always also the *step* beyond (*pas au-delà*), as Blanchot and Hegel knew—and given determinate content. We know by now where Rousseau thinks this leads. Yet N replies, stating that without reference to a common measure or model, one leaves nature open to invasion by *monsters*. Here is N’s objection and R’s further reply:

N. Avec ce beau raisonnement les Monstres inouis, les Géans, les Pygmées, les chimères de toute espece; tout pourroit être admis spécifiquement dans la nature: tout seroit défiguré, nous n’aurions plus de modele commun? Je le répète, dans les Tableaux de l’humanité chacun doit reconnoître l’Homme.

R. J’en conviens, pourvu qu’on sache aussi discerner ce qui fait les variétés de ce qui est essentiel à l’espece. (OC II.12)

N. With such fine reasoning, unheard-of Monsters, Giants, Pygmies, chimeras of all kinds, anything could be specifically included in nature: everything would be disfigured; we would no longer have any common model! I repeat, in Tableaux of humankind, Man must be recognizable to everyone.

R. I agree, provided one also knows how to distinguish what constitutes variations from what is essential to the species. (CW 6: 7-8; translation modified)

To paraphrase Goya then, the dream of Rousseau (not razón) produces monsters. For N, the reasonable, classically oriented man of letters, a “common model” of humanity grounded in essential traits is not just requisite for the proper mimetic activity of art, but is needed even as an ontological basis for the recognition of one’s fellow beings. Without this model or common measure, there is only the chaos of universal disfigurement: “tout seroit défiguré.”

Rousseau or R seems to agree, but with a very important qualification: namely, that we must distinguish variations from what is “essential.” Yet what for Rousseau is essential to mankind? Rousseau is very suspicious of imputing or positing particular essential, eternal traits to mankind—the problems of doing so form the kernel of his critique of the natural law tradition (in which he is sometimes included, albeit erroneously), as they would of the young Hegel,<sup>81</sup> and accord with the problems attached to the idea of a common measure we’ve been examining so far; as we know from the *Discourses*, the only essentially human trait for Rousseau is an abyssal *perfectibility*, which is not really a determinate trait at all, but rather a constitutive openness and necessary historicity: “Humans are essentially perfectible, for Rousseau, always open to change for better or worse” (Inston, “Finite

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<sup>81</sup> See Hegel’s 1802 essay on *Natural Law*.

Community” 188).<sup>82</sup> If we are *perfectible*, it means we can never actually be perfect, that is, closed and complete (perfect from Latin *perfectus*, complete). Man’s nature is not to be natural.<sup>83</sup>

Rousseau, then, accedes to the lack of a common model and the consequent disfigurement (let us note but bracket the importance of “disfigurement” in de Man’s reading of Percy Shelley’s Rousseau). Indeed, for Rousseau, mankind is the disfigurer and denaturer par excellence, the essentially monstrous maker of monsters. If we want to see Rousseau providing an actual figure for the nature of man, he does so explicitly in the preface to the second *Discourse*, selecting “la statue de Glaucus que les tems, la mer et les orages avoient tellement défigurée, qu’elle ressembloit moins à un Dieu qu’à une Bête féroce” (OC III.122) [“the statue of Glaucus which time, sea, and storms had so disfigured that it less resembled a God than a ferocious beast” (*Discourses* 124)]. The search for human nature involves looking at a disfigured, monstrous statue—yet as Richard Velkley reminds us, “the original god [Glaucus] was itself a bizarre being, a human fisherman transformed into a god adorned with sea monsters” (“Measure” 226).<sup>84</sup> Thus even when *not disfigured* by time, sea, and storm, the polished statue of Glaucus presents a hideous image of monstrosity and disfigurement, not to mention a double doubling: human-god, god-monster. Humankind is aboriginally and essentially nature’s disfigurement, a disfiguring that precedes any original figure. This, then, is how we should understand R’s response—couched in the form of an agreement—to N’s call for a “common model” that would encapsulate the essential measure of man.

This brings us to a particularly famous invocation of the monstrous and monster-loving (non)nature of mankind in the opening passage to *Émile*, Rousseau’s great philosophical novel of pedagogy. Here man is not just disfigured but disfigurer and denaturer; the passage even contains (seemingly counter to the hubristic Anthropocene ideology we witnessed above) an astonishing intimation of climate change:

Tout est bien, sortant des mains de l’auteur des choses : tout dégénère entre les mains de l’homme. Il force une terre à nourrir les productions d’une autre; un arbre à porter les fruits d’un autre. Il mêle et confond les climats, les éléments, les saisons. Il mutilé son chien, son cheval, son esclave. Il bouleverse tout, il défigure tout : il aime la difformité, les monstres. (OC IV.245)

Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another. He mixes and confuses the climates, the elements, the seasons. He mutilates his dog, his horse, his slave. He turns everything upside down; he disfigures everything; he loves deformity, monsters. (*Émile* 37)

Monstrosity is Rousseau’s way of figuring disfigurement; the monster is the non-measure of man, mankind’s lack of commensurability—its singularity, its qualitative X. But since for Rousseau, as we have seen, the lack of common measure also means the impossibility of any community or

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<sup>82</sup> Interestingly for our purposes, this quote from comes from an article on the concept of community and discusses Nancy’s reading of Rousseau.

<sup>83</sup> As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe puts it nicely and summarily in his reading of Rousseau: “La nature de l’homme [pour Rousseau] est de ne pas avoir de nature. Ou si l’on veut: l’homme n’est pas un être de nature, mais un être originairement en défaut de nature” (*Poétique de l’histoire* 43). Thanks to Ann Smock for this reference, which provides me with another important link between Rousseau and deconstruction. See also Bates 181ff, as well as the first chapter of Ian Duncan’s forthcoming *Human Forms*: “Perfectibility unmakes the human nature it is supposed to constitute.”

<sup>84</sup> See also Velkley’s discussion of this in his book *Being After Rousseau* (37).

relationality, the monster is also an index of isolation—even as it affects everything it comes across: from trees to dogs to other humans, all the way up to “the climates, the elements, the seasons.” By the same token, the lack of equivalent measure means there can be no inequality of monsters.

Because the monster is a conceptual technology that indexes the lack of commensurability to any order (natural or otherwise) and thus, for Rousseau, the impossibility of relationality, it is no surprise to find Rousseau declaring on the first page of his work of solitude *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* that “je [suis] tenu sans moindre doute pour un monstre” (I am held to be a monster), with no “semblables” (OC I.996, 999). The monster is also a constant leitmotif of the late work *Rousseau, Juge de Jean-Jacques*, with the word “monstre” occurring over forty times over the course of the text.<sup>85</sup> In both of these late works, the monster is the set-apart, the non-related, the incommensurable, the double that is “Completely-Other” (Irigaray). While these two late autobiographical works stem from Rousseau’s personal misery at society’s egregious mistreatment and persecution of him (paranoiacally exaggerated and even imagined in some cases but in others very real), the general logic of the other or second as monster is observable from much earlier in his career. Indeed, according to Rousseau’s account of the primordial encounter with otherness, found in Chapter III of his early *Essay on the Origin of Languages* (in a passage to which both Derrida and de Man afford great importance in their respective readings of this text), the “savage man’s” first encounter with another human being leads him to imagine and indeed perceive, wrongly, that other humans are huge, monstrous giants—this man calls them “Géans,” a word to indicate their difference from him (recall “les Géans” as part of N’s parliament of monsters that the lack of a common model would unleash in nature).<sup>86</sup> The singular, isolated man’s first encounter with a *second* being like him takes the form of a monster. The “savage man” does not recognize any commonality between himself and the other, only a monstrous incommensurability; it is only after several more encounters that the primitive man recognizes a common measure between himself and these other humans such that he can invent “un autre nom commun à eux et à lui...le nom d’homme” (OC V.381).<sup>87</sup> We can recognize in the passage from the word of incommensurability, “Géant,” to the later word of commensurability and the “commun,” i.e. *homme*, a miniature version of the passage from the glorious incommensurable and autonomous singularity in the state of nature to the fallen world of society defined by its common measure, dependence, and hierarchy—and since this is a text on the origin of languages, such commensurability is thematized as the communicability provided by a shared, common language.

The monster, then, is a double (of that) which can have no double. For despite the incommensurability and singularity that would seem to characterize the monster, monstrosity is very often associated with doubles and doubling. In the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie française*, the official French dictionary comparable to our OED, over all eight editions running from the seventeenth century to the twentieth, the very first entry for “monstre” contains unchanged the following idiomatic example to illustrate the usage of the word: “*Un monstre à deux têtes*”—a monster with two heads. Sure enough, at one point late in the *Dialogues* where the Frenchman is discussing the nefarious abuse of poor J.J. by d’Alembert and Diderot, the Frenchman claims that the latter two

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<sup>85</sup> For a brief take on the “monstre” and the “prodige” in the *Dialogues*, see Michèle Crogiez’s “Le Monstre et le Mystère: Le Rôle de l’Imagination dans les *Dialogues* de Rousseau.”

<sup>86</sup> One thinks of Victor’s first outside sighting of the monster in *Frankenstein*, and even Edmund Burke: “It is impossible to suppose a giant the object of love” (*Enquiry* 126). Thanks to Tim Heimlich for first pointing out this parallel to me.

<sup>87</sup> Cf. a very similar point—that singularity and incommensurability come first—made even more explicitly in Rousseau’s first attempt at discussing the origin of language, in Part I of the second *Discourse*: “Each object was at first given a particular name without regard to kinds and Species, which these first Institutors were not in a position to distinguish; and all particulars presented themselves to their mind in isolation, just as they are in the picture of Nature. If one Oak was called A, another oak was called B; for the first idea one derives from two objects is that they are not the same, and it often takes a good deal of time to notice what they have in common” (*Discourses* 147; my emphasis).

*philosophes* could spread lies that J.J. was a “monstruosité” with “deux têtes” and they would immediately be believed by the public—the public would even perceive these two heads when passing J.J. in the street.<sup>88</sup>

So the monster is that which can have no *semblables*, no fellows or beings in a community with it—yet it also indexes a doubleness. It is at this point that we should remember that another primary meaning of the word “monstre” in eighteenth-century French is a living being—animal or plant—that cannot reproduce. Perhaps the most well-known of these monsters in the plant kingdom is a flower that has an extra set of petals in lieu of stamens, and thus cannot pollinate. Such monstrous sterile flowers are rarer in the wild, but are cultivated and bred (through grafting) by humans for their beauty. In the seventh of his *Lettres élémentaires sur la Botanique* (composed in 1773), Rousseau discusses the proliferation of these monsters in gardens, considering it another one of mankind’s characteristic acts of “disfigurement,” and an example of the impossibility of studying pure unmediated nature. And what is the much more common term—in Rousseau’s time and ours—for vegetal monsters, flowers that cannot reproduce? *Double flowers*<sup>89</sup>:

L’homme a dénaturé beaucoup de choses pour les mieux convertir à son usage, en cela il n’est point à blâmer; mais il n’en est pas moins vrai qu’il les a souvent *défigurées* et que quand dans les œuvres de ses mains, il croit étudier vraiment la nature, il se trompe. Cette erreur a lieu surtout dans la société civile, elle a lieu de même dans les jardins. *Ces fleurs doubles qu’on admire dans les parterres, sont des monstres dépourvus de la faculté de produire leur semblable* dont la nature a doué tous les êtres organisés. (OC IV.1188; my emphasis)

Man has denatured many things in order to convert them better to his use, in that he is not at all to be blamed; but it is not less true that he has often disfigured them and that when in the works of his hands he believes he truly studies nature, he deceives himself. This error occurs especially in civil society; it likewise occurs in gardens. *These double flowers that people admire in flower-beds are monsters deprived of the faculty of producing their like* with which nature has endowed all organized beings. (CW 8:156).

In an unlikely place, the seventh letter of an epistolary botanical course composed for the instruction of a young girl, we find something absolutely essential for understanding Rousseau (and so much else, as I hope to show): the sterile—should we call it queer?—flower is the point of indifference between the monster and the double. The sterile flower is overtly named a *monstre* that can have no *semblable(s)* and cannot enter into (here, sexual) relation (“dépourvu de la faculté de produire leur semblable”), yet exists as a *double* bloom in excess of the proper singularity.<sup>90</sup> The flower as both

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<sup>88</sup> “Si d’Alembert ou Diderot s’avisent d’affirmer aujourd’hui que [J.J.] a deux têtes, en le voyant passer demain dans la rue tout le monde lui verroit deux têtes très distinctement, et chacun seroit très surpris de n’avoir pas aperçu plutôt cette monstruosité” (OC I.961). [“If d’Alembert or Diderot took it upon themselves today to affirm that [J.J.] has two heads, everyone who saw him pass in the street tomorrow would see his two heads very distinctly, and everyone would be very surprised that they hadn’t perceived this monstrosity sooner” (CW 1:233).]

<sup>89</sup> Indeed we read the following in the *Dictionnaire* entry for “monstre” right after the example of “un monstre à deux têtes”: “Il se dit aussi des Végétaux. *Les fleurs doubles sont des monstres.*”

<sup>90</sup> Especially since the next passage in the *Lettres* goes on to discuss grafting, it would be interesting here to compare this thought about reproduction to the above-quoted opening to *Émile*, and the mention of grafting there, not to mention the connection with children and reproduction that emerges when one considers *Émile* is a work of philosophical pedagogy. Cf. also Rousseau’s claim from the second *Discourse*, discussed above, that in the state of nature one does not recognize one’s own children! I’ll come back to the parent-child relation in my Derrida chapter and elsewhere.

monster and double brings us full circle, and is a good place to end—or rather begin. The monster is equally the double and the impossibility of the double. Rousseau even explicitly invites us to generalize this gesture of denaturalization from the garden to “civil society,” in a primal gesture of ideology critique; the suggestion here is that just as we imagine ourselves to be studying nature in our backyards when we actually are faced with a garden of monstrous and unnatural double flowers, the world of modern society through which we move—with all its naturalized equivalence and commensurability—is actually a den teeming with monsters, monsters so singular they can only be our mirror image.

## VII. Conclusion

*“Ainsi parmi nous chaque homme est un être double; la nature agit en dedans, l’esprit social se montre en dehors. Tout ce que nous faisons semble se rapporter aux autres et se rapporte toujours à nous... Nous ne sommes pas précisément doubles mais composés”* (from an early draft of *Émile*, Manuscript Favre; OC IV.57)

[*Thus among us each man is a double being; nature acts inside, the social spirit shows itself outside. Everything that we do seems to be related to others and is always related to us... We are not precisely double but composite* (CW 13:4)]

“We are here to learn the power of solitude... Solitude, yes. Think of being alone and frozen in the crypt, the capsule. Will new technologies allow the brain to function at the level of identity? This is what you may have to confront. The conscious mind. Solitude in extremis. Alone. Think of the word itself. Middle English. *All one*. You cast off the person. The person is the mask, the created character in the medley of dramas that constitute your life. The mask drops away and the person becomes *you* in its truest meaning. All one. The self. What is the self? Everything you are, without others, without friends or strangers or lovers or children or streets to walk or food to eat or mirrors in which to see yourself. But are you anyone without the others?”

—Don DeLillo, *Zero K*

*“Mais moi, détaché d’eux et de tout, que suis-je moi-même?”* (*Reveries*; OC I.995)

[*But me, detached from them and from everything, what am I myself?*]

So far we have explored the double in Rousseau as it relates to the problematic of commensurability, singularity, and relationality. Rousseau’s chameleonic double follows his writing (*l’écriture*, that dangerous double of speech) wherever it goes, in various guises: the threat of commensurability, dependence, and inequality; the social body as the double of the singular individual; the narcissistic double; the monster. All of these guises represent either some threat to or protection of singularity (another doubling: poison and cure like the *pharmakon*<sup>91</sup>), which names a qualitatively unique being. For Rousseau the double is threatening not so much because it threatens the self-present identity of the same or autonomy with otherness, but rather because it threatens to introduce a common standard by which qualitatively unique singularity (“I am like no one,” “moi seul,” etc.) can be measured and compared quantitatively, resulting in relations of dependence, hierarchy, violence, and oppression. The evanescent dream of pure singularity in Rousseau is so often haunted by a double, an exteriority, that wants to constrain singularity by setting or assimilating it into relations of dependence, thus eliminating its incommensurable quality (which cannot as such be in or enter into relation—as soon as it does, its quality is quantified). So the threat of relation must be assimilated back into singularity by appearing as a double (the same, the singular,

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<sup>91</sup> I am thinking of Derrida’s essay “Plato’s Pharmacy.” On this idea, and frequent metaphor, in Rousseau, see Starobinski’s essay “The Antidote in the Poison: The Thought of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.” I owe this reference to David Bates’s book.

total commensurability or rather commensurateness) or a monster (total incommensurability). Rousseau, essentially, cannot think relation(ality) except as hierarchical and dangerously dependent, and cannot think the common except as a common measure of equivalence. As a consequence, there is no community.

So then why Rousseau? Given his undeniable record of not playing well with otherness, why am I talking about him in a project about community? First, there is his immense and still pervasive, if sometimes invisible, influence—and not just on literature. Claude Lévi-Strauss saw Rousseau as “the founder of the human sciences” (*Structural Anthropology* II, 33), while Starobinski plausibly claims that “one could trace, if one wished, all modern thought about the nature of society” to Rousseau, in particular to the *Discourse on Inequality* (289). In a very real and important sense, all critique—and also all of the “limits of critique,” we might say following Rita Felski—remains essentially and inescapably Rousseauvian. Just as Rousseau saw society as a contingently imposed relational structure of domination and inequality upon singular human beings and the earth on which they live and die, critique—nobly and correctly, I might add—seeks to unveil the truth of a given persisting societal arrangement as an ideologically buttressed naturalization of a politically determined, contingent and not necessary or natural distribution of material force and power relations—a distribution that is always unequal and unjust in some way. Like Rousseau, critique sees only misery everywhere. Yet it is worth asking now if critique, while still valuable and necessary, has “run out of steam” (Latour) in the era begun with the steam engine—that is, the Anthropocene, said by Paul Crutzen to have first emerged with the invention of the steam engine by Rousseau’s contemporary James Watt. It is worth asking, with Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, if “critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend” (*The Undercommons* 19). Because of the way his thought can be seen as a kind of ur-critique, Rousseau and his crusade against commensurability can function as a deeply illuminating test case, analogue, and index—a sort of intellectual synecdoche—for the inability of so much contemporary critique to move beyond the regime of equivalence of which it is critical; the regime of equivalence, quantification, digitization, and measure that insidiously infects both life and thought more fully than ever in our iron age of neoliberalism, globalization, financialization, and ecological crisis. The link between the problem of equivalence and of all of these latter trends becomes especially pronounced, and critical, if one views “the development of capitalism [as] an ongoing crisis of measure,” as Martijn Konings has recently argued we should (260).<sup>92</sup>

In fact, on the question of financialized equivalence, a century before Marx analyzed money as a “universal equivalent,”<sup>93</sup> Rousseau prophetically grasped that the destructive regime of equivalence imposed by society was tied to the way that “par la monnoye les biens d’espèces diverses deviennent commensurables et peuvent se comparer” [“by money goods of various kinds become commensurable and can be compared”], since money introduces a “mesure commune” (OC IV. 462; *Emile* 189-190). Though he was not the first to recognize the equivalence that characterizes money (this analysis goes back to Aristotle), Rousseau intuited that money’s equivalence was not just an accidental feature of society, externally imposed at some point in a contingent manner, but rather constitutes the very essence and spectral (non)embodiment of society’s violent equivalence (such as we have already been exploring it): “la monnoye est le *vrai lien* de la société” [“money is the *true bond*

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<sup>92</sup> Likewise, Wendy Brown exemplarily defines neoliberalism as invasion of measure (“metrics”) into every aspect of social and individual life: “Neoliberalism...is best understood not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and *metrics* to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo economicus*” (*Undoing the Demos* 176; my emphasis).

<sup>93</sup> See, among other places, the first volume of Marx’s *Capital*, 162ff, just before the famous analysis of commodity fetishism.

of society”] (OC IV.461; *Emile* 189; my emphasis). The moment there are bonds of society tying singularities together, there is equivalence, and there is money—not only in the same moment, but in and as the same movement.<sup>94</sup> This is in keeping with the Rousseau we have seen throughout this chapter, who cannot imagine relation (*lien*) or society without equivalence, who cannot think a common that is not a “mesure commune” that annihilates singularity. Yet despite this general inability, Rousseau remains important as an influence and as a model of ur-critique here, with his recognition of the contingency of money and thus society: since money is something totally artificial and conventional—for “tout peut être monnaie” [“anything/everything can be money”], fur, livestock, metals—and money is the essence and “true bond” of society, that means that society and any given form of it, can be changed and remade. It is not necessary or natural: groundless. Indeed, what John Guillory calls “the commensurability...of all objects [which] is for us the inescapable horizon of social life” infects even the most radical form of critique, deconstruction, in all the latter’s attempts to resist it (this will be the subject of the next chapter) (322). What we need, then, is a dexterous and sensitive apparatus of thought that can think relation freed from equivalence and freed from grounds—that can think relation in its singularity and singularity in its infinite relationality. There are many resources and tools for building this thought and putting it into play (for it is precisely a matter of *play*); the goal of this dissertation is to investigate Romantic poetry with these tools and *as* one of the first and most important of these tools, to try to develop a way of thinking about relationality alongside and through Romanticism. But it starts with Rousseau.

This, then, is the other answer to the question just posed, i.e., why Rousseau? So far I have engaged only in a propaedeutic and *via negativa*, and sure enough I do think Rousseau missed a great opportunity to develop a crucial insight that he only glimpsed—but he did glimpse it. Before coming to this glimpse, with which I will conclude, we must first understand the importance of Rousseau’s denial of nature and essence and his embrace of contingency.

Perhaps Rousseau’s most significant intellectual achievement was to destroy—although it continues to persist, zombie-like, even when appearing most healthy—the intellectual foundations and legitimacy of any discourse of community or association that based this association on some natural or essential trait, and/or some ultimate ground. For shorthand, let us call such a grounded discourse *sociability*. The discourse of sociability in various forms goes back to Aristotle, who claimed man was naturally a “*zoon politikon*,” and was especially prominent in Rousseau’s era of the mid-eighteenth century, where thinkers like Francis Hutcheson proclaimed “the natural sociability of mankind”<sup>95</sup>; another representative figure of this tradition, the German jurist Samuel Pufendorf (1632-1694), explicitly linked natural sociability (*sociabilitas*) to the ontotheological ground of a

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<sup>94</sup> In claiming money as the “true bond of society,” Rousseau again wonderfully anticipates Marx here. In the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx writes: “If *money* is the bond which ties me to *human* life and society to me, which links me to nature and to man, is money not the bond of all *bonds*? [*ist das Geld nicht das Band aller Bande*]” (*Early Writings* 377). Here we might think back to Rousseau drawing the intimate connection between money and chains (“Donnez de l’argent, et bientôt vous aurez des fers”), noting that the German word that Marx uses here, *Band*, can—like the English equivalent “bond”—mean both a relation that links me to something *and* shackles (cf. the English phrase “bonds of captivity”). English would seem to complete this dubious circle in its use of the word “bond” also to mean a purchased debt. On debts as bonds, monetary and otherwise, and on the intimate historical—indeed ontological—link between “violence and quantification,” see David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5000 Years* (a very Rousseauvian book). On Rousseau and monetary vs. political representation, see Chapter 4 of Marc Shell’s *The Economy of Literature*.

<sup>95</sup> Hutcheson’s lecture *The Natural Sociability of Mankind* dates to 1730. Other thinkers in this tradition from the same era include Grotius and Vattel; the latter, a countryman and trenchant critic of Rousseau, writes: “Man is by nature sociable,” etc. See Christov’s *Before Anarchy* 240ff. On Vattel see also Chenxi Tang’s forthcoming *Imagining World Order: Literature and International Law in Early Modern Europe, 1500-1800*.

transcendent God and His providence, as Giorgio Agamben has shown.<sup>96</sup> This discourse of sociability, and its assumptions, continues in our own day, not least with evolutionary psychologists who look to the evolutionary history of *homo sapiens* to prove that people naturally, via some biologically determined essence, tend to group together and form societies, however small. What Rousseau did, in his unraveling of essence and his demonstration of “the necessary contingency of any social grounding,” was forevermore to divorce sociability from any particular necessary content or ground (Inston, *Rousseau and Radical Democracy* 19).<sup>97</sup> The point is not even so much that humans are *not* “naturally” sociable, but that this claim about content, nature, or essence *cannot serve as the ground of (a) community*. Starting in the second *Discourse*, which is explicitly framed as a fable of divine abandonment, Rousseau so thoroughly opened up the historicity of being that any attempt to think community or relationality after him would have to grapple with this void. With this in view, one can understand the intimate connection between Lévi-Strauss’s aforementioned claim that Rousseau was the founder of the human sciences, and the programmatic credo in Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*: “I believe the ultimate goal of the human sciences is not to constitute, but to dissolve man” (247). Rousseau commenced this ongoing dissolution of man and his grounds and gods. Rousseau himself, however, concludes from this groundlessness that there is no real community possible and that singularity must be protected at all costs, but he didn’t have to conclude this; even though he did not really pursue it, he opened the possibility of an ontological *sociality* (or a social ontology) not dependent on *sociability*—indeed, not dependent on anything at all. The precious, clandestine kernel of Rousseau’s thought is the intimation that the groundless incommensurable uniqueness of qualitative singularity, far from being threatened by the possibility of a common measure for relation and dependence, *is itself the common as such*, and is the condition of possibility for relationality and community in modernity. Where measure fails is where we meet.

To recap: Rousseau definitively and provocatively shows that any theory of necessary relationality, community, or sociality, cannot be based on any essence, characteristic, universal, nature, principle, or ground—real or imagined. He usually draws the conclusion from this that no necessary relationality, no community, is desirable or even truly possible, but he could have realized—as is suggested in certain glimpses and as the Romantics as I read them pick up, as well as some thinkers in our own day—that it is precisely this impossibility of grounding, this radical contingency of being, this shining singularity and open historicity, that is the possibility—even the fact—of community.

What are and where are these glimpses? I just want to look at two, my magic (tragic?) number. The first is an early (1764), unpublished alternate preface to *The Confessions*, known by the editors of the Pléaïde edition as the “préambule de Neuchâtel,” because it is found as part of the incomplete Neuchâtel manuscript but not the more reliable Geneva or Paris manuscripts. The treatment of singularity in this preface is radically opposed to what would become the famous opening to the text, which we analyzed in detail above. Whereas in the actual opening to *The Confessions*, Rousseau presents himself as a reprimed unique singularity, a “moi seul” who has broken the “moule” of nature, here is how the Neuchâtel preface begins:

J’ai remarqué souvent que, même parmi ceux qui se piquent le plus de connoître les hommes, chacun ne connoit guères qui soi, s’il est vrai même que quelqu’un se connoisse; car comment bien déterminer un être par les seuls rapports qui sont en

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<sup>96</sup> “To found this precept [of sociability] and confer the force of law to it, Pufendorf has need not only of a God but of a transcendent God who governs the world with his providence” (*Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty* 110). Agamben goes on to quote a relevant passage from Pufendorf’s *De Officio* (1673).

<sup>97</sup> Many more have noticed this, from Althusser 186, to, more recently, Schaeffer 4 and Bates 176.

lui-même, et sans comparer avec rien?...On se fait la règle de tout, et voilà précisément où nous attend la double illusion de l'amour-propre...[J]'ai résolu de faire faire à mes lecteurs un pas de plus dans la connoissance des hommes, en les tirant s'il est possible de cette règle unique et fautive de juger toujours du cœur d'autrui par le sien; tandis qu'au contraire il faudrait souvent pour connoître le sien même, commencer par lire dans celui d'autrui. Je veux tâcher que pour apprendre à s'apprécier, on puisse avoir du moins une pièce de comparaison; que chacun puisse connoître soi et un autre, et cet autre ce sera moi.

Oui, moi, moi seul... (OC I.1148-49)

I have often remarked that, even among those who pride themselves the most for knowing men, each hardly knows anyone but himself, if it is even true that anyone actually knows himself; for how can a being be defined by means of the relations that are inside itself alone, without being compared with anything?...One makes oneself into the rule of everything, and this is precisely where the double illusion of amour-propre is waiting for us...I have resolved to cause my readers to make an additional step in the knowledge of men by pulling them away, if possible, from that unique and faulty rule of always judging someone else's heart by means of their own; whereas, on the contrary, even to know one's own [heart] it would often be necessary to begin by reading in someone else's. In order for one to learn to evaluate oneself, I want to attempt to provide at least one item for comparison, so that each can know himself and one other, and this other will be myself.

Yes, myself, myself alone... (CW 5:585; translation modified)

In this alternate preface to *The Confessions*—we might call it a shadowy double of the famous preface we all know—we see much that is familiar to us at this point, but also much that is strangely transfigured. The passage I quoted ends with the familiar “moi seul,” yet here the “moi seul” (“myself alone”) is not really *seul*, but inextricably entangled with others and otherness. The other time that the key word “seul” is used in this passage, it is strangely *plural*, and used adjectively to modify none other than the word for *relations* (“les seuls rapports”). These lone relations, however, are internal, narcissistic self-relations which Rousseau here says *cannot* define the being of a being (with “être” his language is explicitly ontological): “car comment bien déterminer un être par *les seuls rapports qui sont en lui-même*, et sans comparer avec rien?” To define a being properly, you must look *not* in the proper, *en lui-même*, but *outside* to its relations with the world; this is surprising coming from the Rousseau who is usually so hostile to the idea or the approach—the ontological *reproach*—of the outside (cf. “Tout ce qui m'est extérieur m'est étranger” from the *Reveries*, and similar quotes).

We might connect this admission of necessary exteriority to the first epigraph to the present section, from an early draft of *Émile*, where Rousseau writes that man is—what else—a double, with an inside (*dedans*) that is natural, and an outside (*dehors*) that is social: “la nature agit en dedans, l'esprit social se montre en dehors.” Rousseau then takes care to prevent the misreading of this claim that the “natural man” persists beneath the external veneer of historical and contingent social determinations. For we know by now that according to Rousseau man has no nature, or at least, in mankind nature sows the supplemental seeds of its own unraveling. So, if the natural is the inside, but there is no natural, then there is no inside. Everything is outside, exposed, social, relational. Sure enough, the next sentence of the text is about relationality; it reads: “Tout ce que nous faisons semble se rapporter aux autres.” Everything we do is necessarily involved with and related to others;

I am not I, I am not a seul singularity, nor am I a double. Or, I am I, but a strange I—exposed, composed of you: “Nous ne sommes pas précisément doubles mais composés.” The fact that Rousseau seems to mean this composedness to be understood with a negative connotation—his typical suspicion of relationality—makes no difference for our purpose; the point is that he opens the possibility of thinking a composedness, or relationality, that is not based on anything at all, or rather, that is based on the groundless openness of the inside, the proper disfiguring of nature. So Rousseau, like snapping the stem of a flower, simply deactivates an entire tradition of thought.

Along with of course the double—as in the “double illusion of amour-propre” and in the assertion later on in the preface that Rousseau will “peind[re] doublement l’état de mon ame [paint doubly the state of my soul]” (OC I.1154)—another familiar problematic that surfaces in the Neuchâtel preface is the rejection of a common standard. Here the common standard is called the rule (*régle*) that one derives from oneself then illegitimately imposes on everyone else for comparison and judgement; but this rule is singularly unique and thus faulty in its universal application: “[une] régle unique et fautive de juger toujours du cœur d’autrui par le sien.”<sup>98</sup> What is remarkable is that here we do not find the preclusion of any possibility of community that so often goes alongside Rousseau’s railing against a common measure. Equivalence—a universal *régle*—is still rejected, but there is an openness and acknowledgement here that the quality, the qualitative uniqueness, of singularity cannot exist in ontological isolation.

Thus Rousseau, astonishingly, contrary to so much we have seen in this chapter, is effectively admitting that *singularity cannot alone give itself content*, and is necessarily constituted by exteriority and relationality: “il faudrait souvent pour connoitre le sien même, commencer par lire dans celui d’autrui. Je veux tâcher que pour apprendre à s’apprécier, on puisse avoir du moins une pièce de comparaison; que chacun puisse connoitre soi et un autre, et cet autre ce sera moi” [“even to know one’s own [heart] it would often be necessary to begin by reading in someone else’s. In order for one to learn to evaluate oneself, I want to attempt to provide at least one item for comparison, so that each can know himself and one other, and this other will be myself”]. Even the *cœur*, the heart, which elsewhere in Rousseau is the core of pure non-relational singularity (“selon mon cœur,” “mon propre cœur,” etc), is here something that is only legible via the heart of another. Finally, since with this readerly relation “chacun puisse connoitre soi et un autre,” the other can present itself as a non-threatening two. “Soi et un autre”—two but not a double, not a copy, not a monster, just...an other. Not a narcissistic loop, but a companion adrift in the with.

With this, Rousseau, as Hölderlin wrote, has seen into the Open. Rousseau has glimpsed the possibility that singularity is necessarily relational, and relational owing precisely to its groundlessness, its lack of a possible common measure. The quality of singularity does not come surging from some chimerical self-grounded internal depths (this is the fantasy and fallacy of individualism as it persists to this day), but eddies endlessly from the “enchainement d’affections secrettes [qui] l’a rendu tel” (OC I.1149) [“a chain of secret affections [that] have made it the way it is”] (CW 5:586). Whereas in the second *Discourse* Rousseau referred to “the chains of dependence,” and the famous opening of *The Social Contract* declares that “Man is born free, but everywhere in chains,” the chains here are the affections and relations that shape the singularity and “ma[k]e it the way it is”; not “chaînes” but “enchainement,” a linking and interlocking that reaches all the way *en-*, into the “lavish absence” (Jabès), the rich nothingness, of the inside.

The most solitary Rousseau still needs others and other things, and relations thereto, in order to speak about himself and his uniqueness. At the end of his other main autobiographical text, the *Reveries*, Rousseau complains: “[J]’ai été tellement agité, ballotté, tirailé par les passions d’autrui que

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<sup>98</sup> Cf. a note in the *Lettre à D’Alembert*: “C’est que la raison humaine n’a pas de mesure commune bien déterminée, et qu’il est injuste à tout homme de donner la sienne pour régle à celle des autres” (OC V.11).

presque passif dans une vie aussi orageuse j'aurois peine à demeler ce qu'il y a du mien dans ma propre conduite" (OC I.1099) ["I have been so shaken, tossed, and pulled about by others' passions that, almost passive in such a stormy life, I would struggle to identify what there is of mine in my own conduct" (*Reveries* 108)]. And so much of *The Confessions*, the book ostensibly dealing with just the singularity of Jean-Jacques, is about other people; we hear constantly about all of Rousseau's entanglements, many of them miserable. By far the most profound of those myriad entanglements is the one with the woman he called *Maman*, Mme. de Warens: his caretaker, lover, teacher, spiritual guide, benefactress, ineffable partner. Though Mme. de Warens had been dead for years and they had lost touch long before that, it is no accident that Rousseau returns to her in what is perhaps the last thing he ever wrote: the tenth and final unfinished walk of the *Reveries*, composed weeks before his death in July 1778. Here he recalls how his relation to Mme. de Warens has fundamentally shaped his own being. When "my soul...still had no definite form," meeting Mme. de Warens was "the moment that would give it form" (*Reveries* 107).

But instead of dwelling with this very late recollection, I want to examine another, earlier passage about Mme. de Warens. There is a moment late in Book V of *The Confessions*, where Rousseau discusses the sublime happiness he felt in the simple everyday being with her. This is the most concrete glimpse we have in Rousseau of what a groundless relationality would look like, an inextricable relation "unqiue parmi les humains" that does not, like the lovers in *Julie*,<sup>99</sup> strive to become a unitary fusion. Rather, they become what they are by sharing an "existence in common":

Je devenois tout à fait son oeuvre...Nous commençames, sans y songer, à ne plus nous séparer l'un de l'autre, à mettre en quelque sorte toute notre existence en commun, et sentant que reciproquement nous nous étions non seulement nécessaires, mais suffisans, nous nous accoutumames à ne plus penser à rien d'étranger à nous, à borner absolument notre bonheur et tous nos desirs à cette possession mutuelle et peutêtre unique parmi les humains, qui n'était point, comme je l'ai dit, celle de l'amour; mais une possession plus essentielle, qui, sans tenir aux sens, au sexe, à l'age, à la figure *tenoit à tout ce par quoi l'on est soi, et qu'on ne peut perdre qu'en cessant d'être.* (OC I.222; my emphasis)

I became completely her work...Without thinking about it we began not to separate from each other any more, so as to put our whole existence in common in some way, and feeling that we were reciprocally not only necessary but sufficient for each other, we accustomed ourselves to thinking about nothing that was foreign to us any longer, to limiting our happiness and all our desires absolutely to that possession that was mutual and perhaps unique among humans, which was not at all, as I have said, that of love; but a more essential possession which—without depending on the senses, on sex, on age, on looks—*depended on everything by which one is oneself, and which one cannot lose without ceasing to be.* (CW 5:186)

Rousseau begins this amazing passage by stating that he became Mme. de Warens's "oeuvre," her work; but because for Rousseau we are always perfectible, open, and incomplete, this means he must be an undone *oeuvre* of the other, unfinished and unfinishable, an inoperative (*désoeuvre*) sharer in

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<sup>99</sup> "Never did [love] create such a perfect union...Our souls too well fused can never again be separated" (*Julie* CW 6:173). Also, for example, on page 555: "But do two lovers love each other? No; *you* and *I* are words banished from their language; they are no longer two, they are one." This is also Spinoza's conception of love.

relation.<sup>100</sup> Rousseau then broaches not the possibility but the actual living fact of a common, a way of being in common, that is not simply a bad common standard of equivalence and domination. The “existence en commun” that Mme. de Warens and Rousseau share is singularly “unique” and not based on any ground or determinate content, anything *mesurable*; age, looks, etc., these characteristics have no bearing. Instead they encounter each other in a common where they share their sheer singularity, simply what and whatever they *are*—their relation “tenoit à tout ce par quoi l’on est soi, et qu’on ne peut perdre qu’en cessant d’être.” The other person in this relation is not a mirror image or double, nor a totally incommensurable monster, but simply themselves. Their groundless relation is just life, everyday life, the sharing of and in domesticity.<sup>101</sup>

Though he does not mention Rousseau, we should draw a parallel here to Agamben’s book *The Coming Community*. In a very similar fashion to Rousseau’s common that is not based in qualities (i.e. characteristics) but simply “everything by which one is oneself,” whatever one is, Agamben theorizes a community of singularities that share their evacuation of the claim of and to their qualities, existing exposed as simply their manner of being what they are, being their *thus*: “being-thus” (93).<sup>102</sup> He calls this non-predicable being-thus “whatever being” or “whatever singularity” (1-2). Again, this is not to say that characteristics, predicates, content, nature, even essence, do not exist—Rousseau and Mme. de Warens do indeed still possess age, looks, sex, etc. It is simply that these qualities make no difference, for Rousseau and Mme. de Warens’s relation is both more and less than these contingent qualities. If one can put it like this, their relation is based on and is the very contingency of these contingent qualities, their nonsubstantial subsistence. “Whatever is the thing *with all its properties*, none of which, however, constitutes difference,” as Agamben makes clear (19). Whatever is whatever, the shared nude mundaneness of existence, unenclosed, “whatever is the event of an outside,” the taking place of the world as a world and the taking part of and in difference (67); we can say it is the common.

To conclude, let us return to the figure of Janus with which we began. I opened this chapter by pondering the image of a *Janus*-Jacques Rousseau, both to invoke the problematic of singularity and doubleness implied by one god having two heads, as well as to conjure Janus’s function as the keeper of the threshold. We have explored the myriad ways in which Rousseau recoils from otherness or relationality figured as the double while at the same time having recourse to doubles in order to protect the uniqueness of singularity from equivalence, dependence, and inequality. But I ended by offering some redemptive or reparative moments in Rousseau’s work where singularity can *only* exist as such through its relationality, a relationality that is ontological and cannot be reduced to a particular characteristic, commensurable content, ground, or nature—one that moreover, emerges only from and as the everyday, everyday being-with. Here Rousseau shows himself as the second Janus, the door-god, and though he did not develop this, Rousseau opened the door, pointing the way toward a thinking of community and the common that is groundless, that is, toward a community that would not be a work or essence, a community without the contamination of *arche* or *telos*.<sup>103</sup> In fact, the double-head of Janus offers us a fitting final image, for what is Janus’s double-head except a practice of *partage*, of shared separation? The unidentifiable jointure of the two heads is also a constitutive gap or parallaxic *décalage*, ensuring they can never see the exact same thing at

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<sup>100</sup> On Rousseau and *désoeuvrement*, see Langan’s *Romantic Vagrancy*.

<sup>101</sup> I take up the question of the domestic everyday in later chapters, especially on Derrida and Wordsworth.

<sup>102</sup> Compare Agamben’s “thus” to Rousseau’s “tel,” from the Neuchâtel preface’s the “enchaînement d’affections secrettes [qui] l’a rendu tel.” Agamben: “Being-thus is not a substance of which *thus* would express a determination or a qualification. . . . an absolute *thus* that does not presuppose anything, that is completely exposed” (93-94).

<sup>103</sup> My reading here is close to Bates, whose Rousseau opens the possibility of a “community . . . with no agenda or goal other than our existence” (214).

the same time. The two heads are necessarily incommensurable, and necessarily related—their common incommensurability *is* their relation.

It is here, finally, that we might revise our earlier claim that the human being—or anything at all, for that matter—has no essence. For every thing *is* thus, and *a* thus, everything *is* whatever and however it is. There *is* essence, but it is a strange essence, fragile and friable, relational; this would be an always riven essence, dehisced, pouring open its everyday emptiness to the shared outside that has no ground or guarantee. What do we call this bare exposure, gentlest of fissures? *Community* is the cut, the lived rhythm of this rupture.

## Chapter 2: Derrida's Islands

“Love: to yield to the incommensurable; to madness” –written at the end of an exam by a 20-year old Jackie Derrida

“...the great invisible Other, the furtive prosecutor who *doubles* me everywhere, that is, redoubles and surpasses me, always arrives before me where I have chosen to go...” –Derrida, “La parole soufflée,” *Writing and Difference* 181

“I don't much like the word community, I am not even sure I like the thing” –Derrida, *Points* 355

“As usual, I never form alliances and shoot in every direction: completely alone...there is nothing heroic about my solitude—instead, something fearful and cowardly: ‘they can't catch me here’—and I start to seek the cause in ‘flight from alliance’ and disgust with ‘community.’ This very word [‘community’] makes me sick.” –from an unpublished personal notebook of Derrida, 1976

“Est singulier non pas ce qui diffère, ce qui ne ressemble pas à un autre sous tel ou tel rapport, mais ce qui est *seul hors de tout rapport: singulus* signifie à l'origine *solus*.”

Car il n'y a pas d'entité collective, toute collection est une série et toute série a seulement une unité de signification qui est une unité iréelle...C'est un principe fondateur de l'ontologie ockhamiste que toute hiérarchie et toute opposition introduite à partir des modes de signifier est une illusion, une *ombre portée* sur l'étant par le langage...La singularité est le trait fondamental de l'étant, de cet étant ultime, extérieur, qui n'est pas un signe et ne renvoie qu'à lui-même.

Tout ce qui est du singulier, ‘essence,’ ‘nature’ ou ‘forme,’ est bien singulier. C'est précisément ce que disent les dernières phrases de la refutation du réalisme du Scotus: il n'est pas vrai que la nature de la pierre soit véritablement *dans* la pierre. La nature de la pierre *est* la pierre.”  
–Pierre Alféri, *Guillame D'Ockham: Le Singulier* 17, 27-29, 63

Deconstruction is riddled with doubles. Rather than spilling them all out here, I will refer to a very incomplete catalogue in this footnote.<sup>1</sup> The obsession with doubles and doubling alone would

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<sup>1</sup> The question of the double is also what Derrida calls “a double question, therefore...what is this question, divided or multiplied by two? At the moment of confiding it to you, I am myself torn or split in two” (*Rogues* 7). Doubles obsessively proliferate in deconstructive discourse, starting with the pun-loving Derrida, many of whose early works focus on the way a single word with a double meaning (supplement, *pharmakon*, etc.) or a pun unravels a philosophical enterprise. The supplement itself, and its exemplary instance (writing), are described as a “double” (of speech) in *Of Grammatology* (34-35). Other of Derrida's doubles found in various texts include the critical interest in “binary structures” (though this is something of a caricature of deconstruction), the ever present double bind, “double affirmation,” the “double memory” of Europe, the “double secret of literature,” the claim in *Margins of Philosophy* that deconstruction “must, by means of a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, practise an overturning of the classical opposition, and a general displacement of the system” (195), and many, many, more. Apart from Derrida himself, Barbara Johnson writes of a “double mourning” in her book *The Wake of Deconstruction*. Alongside J. Hillis Miller's deconstructive concept of “double reading,” many commentators describe deconstruction itself as a kind of “double reading”: Jeffrey Nealon's *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* is another book that links the practice of deconstruction to the double: “deconstruction involves a *double* reading, a neutralization and a reinscription” (29). Jonathan Culler describes what he calls the “double procedure” of deconstruction” (*On Deconstruction* 149). Simon Critchley claims: “what got confusedly named ‘deconstruction’...is better approached as *double reading*” (*Ethics of Deconstruction* 289). For the “double-take” of deconstruction, see Cynthia Chase's “Double-Take: Reading De Man and Derrida Writing on Tropes.” Another book sympathetic to deconstruction which foregrounds the theme of the double is Paul Gordon's *The Critical Double: Figurative Meaning in Aesthetic Discourse* (with a foreword by J. Hillis Miller).

make deconstruction an apt subject to pair with the concerns of the previous chapter on “Rousseau’s Doubles,” but there is also the happy (non)accident that deconstruction—which always goes beyond or beneath names but which is inevitably indexed by, in another doubling, “the double figure de Man-Derrida,” as Marc Redfield claims in his history of deconstruction in America (4)—first emerges most visibly as an intensive engagement with none other than Rousseau, i.e., in Derrida’s 1967 book *Of Grammatology* (hereafter OG).<sup>2</sup> The concluding section of the last chapter suggested that Rousseau’s voluble agonizing over what I constructed as the problematic of singularity and the double could be read as a kind of parable for the recent history and present of critique. In this chapter, I now wish to flesh out and test that claim, using deconstruction as my case study. Aside from its close connection with Rousseau and with the theme of doubles, deconstruction will also prove to be the most apt test case for critique—at least such is my hope and my wager—because it is the most *radical* instantiation of critique, and thus its premises and problems can *a fortiori* illuminate the grounds of other forms of critique. Despite the ever-elusive Derrida’s characteristic denial that deconstruction is one form of critique among others, or is even critique at all,<sup>3</sup> it can be shown that deconstruction often performs a similar or identical operation to most other modes of critique: in a (simplified) word, denaturalization—specifically the denaturalization of measure.<sup>4</sup>

However, I call deconstruction the most radical form of critique precisely because it goes to the *radix* or root, and below, to the very bottomless bottom of things, to the abyss that undergirds any contingently structured configuration of relations; deconstruction is ever attentive to the “racinating function” of texts, which use roots to “redouble old adherences, to circulate among their differences,” for “a text is never anything but a *system of roots*” (OG 101-102). While other forms of critique unveil how a given status quo has been naturalized to legitimate oppression and an unjust distribution of power along the political lines of class, race, gender, sexuality, subalternity, etc., deconstruction similarly but more radically goes further down than the “base” of class, further even than Freud’s *Acheronta*—deconstruction’s denaturalization of content goes all the way down to *being*. In excavating the ontological assumptions of a discourse, deconstruction tries to show how contingent hierarchies, explicitly or not, emerge from and are buttressed by a certain *ontology*. The various forms of this ontology, however, which Derrida also calls—in a phrase that now sounds

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<sup>2</sup> There is also of course, de Man’s major reading of Rousseau in his *Allegories of Reading*, published in 1979 but brewing for much longer, as well as de Man’s review of *Of Grammatology* written in 1969 and collected in *Blindness and Insight*. Indeed Derrida and de Man, who would become great friends, first met at the famous 1966 Johns Hopkins conference and hit it off in part because both at the time were working on Rousseau’s “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” which was then a fairly marginal text in Rousseau’s oeuvre. For an extensive take on the complicated Derrida-de Man relation see Currie’s *The Invention of Deconstruction*.

<sup>3</sup> In the “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” Derrida tries to distance his project from critique: “in spite of appearances, deconstruction is neither an analysis nor a critique and its translation would have to take that into consideration. It is not an analysis in particular because the dismantling of a structure is not a regression toward a simple element, toward an indissoluble origin. These values, like that of analysis, are themselves philosophemes subject to deconstruction. No more is it a critique, in a general sense or in Kantian sense” (*Psyche* vol. II, 4). For another such move of distancing from critique, see the endnote in *Rogues* (174-175n). I’ll try to complicate this refusal of affiliation.

<sup>4</sup> Here is how the feminist thinker Alice Jardine (critically) discusses deconstruction’s operations of denaturalization: “Because Derrideanism is a philosophy of the unnatural and, on occasion, of the supernatural; as a project, it is about the necessary culturalization of nature. To the extent that natural words, and the natural world are at the foundations of all Hellenistic philosophies, Derrida denaturalizes both the word and the world according to a logic that can move in its range from pyramids to wells, sources to trees, circles to rectangles. Anything natural (and therefore coded as feminine or maternal) is susceptible to denaturalization through Derrida’s logic of the between” (*Gynesis* 182). In an interview in the documentary *Derrida* by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering, Derrida attempts to denaturalize the whole documentary setting, drawing attention to its artificiality and saying: “One of the gestures of deconstruction is to not naturalize what isn’t natural—to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, or society is natural.”

tired and almost rote, alas—“the metaphysics of presence,” always stumble and generate contradictions because they have recourse to an *outside* that can never be present. The work of deconstruction, though not the only work, is to mark and inhabit these aporetic stumblings and tremblings—that is, to stumble alongside the text’s impossible task of standing on itself. For, as another celebrated Derridian sentence has it: “il n’y a pas de hors-texte.” Importantly, the claim “there is no outside-text” is made, as Derrida explains in the much less frequently quoted next sentence, not simply because of the ontic fact that information about a text or person or event—in this case Jean-Jacques Rousseau—comes down to us only through other texts (records, documents, archives, artifacts, etc.); no, “there are more radical reasons” for the absence of an outside-text (OG 158). These “more radical reasons” are ontological ones—specifically, the impossibility of establishing an absolute ontological ground. What good are roots without a ground?

Somewhat paradoxically then, deconstruction’s ontology of groundlessness supplies the necessary, *a priori* ground for all other forms of critique. That is to say, if critic X—indeed correctly—shows how a given inequality—say, relating to gender—is not the natural order of things, not inherent in the nonexistent biological or eternal essence of gender, but rather a politically imposed inequality which can be traced to specific contingent decisions and their empty ideological justifications, this critic normally does so with the underlying premise that there *is* no “natural order” of things. Just an abyss where nature should be. Deconstruction, then, whether the practitioners of other kinds of critique refer to it or not, provides the rigorous ontological grounding for the claim that any given system or status quo is *not* itself ontologically grounded, that is, necessary. I’m not trying to disprove or discredit critique (whatever that would mean; and really insofar as it is a question of right or wrong, I think critique on the whole is usually right); I have only attempted to probe critique’s limits and (re)produce the problems of critical reading—the problems that arise when denaturalization is the unquestioned assumption and primary orientation. In doing so, I hope to supplement critique and make it more robust.<sup>5</sup>

But as we saw at the end of Chapter 1, the first thoroughly to open up nature to contingent historicity and essence to groundlessness was Rousseau, who in this and other ways can be seen as the progenitor of a kind of ur-critique: the Rousseau who once claimed—in his autobiography, no less—that everything was at its *root* political: “tout tenoit radicalement à la politique” (OC I.404). Thus, although Rousseau is not at the center of this chapter, he will be fading in and out of focus as I examine what might be called the Rousseauism of critique—which here is the Rousseauism of deconstruction, of its avatar Jacques Derrida.

Derrida read and re-read Rousseau obsessively starting as an early teen,<sup>6</sup> and his engagement with Rousseau hardly ends with *Of Grammatology*; Derrida mentions Rousseau frequently throughout the decades, and in the last years of his life conducted a seminar on *The Beast and the Sovereign* (published recently in two volumes) in which Rousseau is a prominent reference point. Indeed, the entire second year of this seminar (published as Volume 2) is essentially devoted to reading Heidegger and others alongside a single novel, which happens to be Rousseau’s favorite novel, and which happens to foreground issues of contingency (or providence) and community (or solitude): Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. This chapter will try to show that Derrida’s version of deconstructive critique runs into the same limits as Rousseau does regarding the question of thinking community, relationality, measure, and singularity. That is, Derrida’s discourse, especially in its later stages, goes so far in attempting to protect unique singularity from a common measure that would subject this

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<sup>5</sup> In this way I am thinking in the wake of debates about critique (without quite taking a “side”) occasioned by texts like Bruno Latour’s “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?” and more recently, Rita Felski’s *The Limits of Critique*.

<sup>6</sup> See Peeters’s biography 27-28. The young Derrida especially loved *The Confessions* and the *Reveries*.

singularity to domination, that this discourse hinders itself from thinking any common, community, or relationality at all.

But how can I possibly claim that Derrida is not a relational thinker when his most obsessive theme, especially in his later work, is the Other? And this is not even to mention the related network of key concepts like hospitality, friendship, democracy, and the like. Here is a stab at an early, and still rather unsatisfying formulation: for Derrida, relating to the Other is actually relating to/protecting the Other's otherness, which is total and absolute—so absolute and singular that, at least in moments in his work, any rhythm of everyday relationality or community cannot properly emerge. The other is so other, so monstrous, that it starts to look like a double of oneself. My monster/myself. As Derrida writes in a very late essay (“Justices”) that I’ll return to shortly: “the most similar and the infinitely other return in a circle to each other” (690). I am not so invested in collecting moments in Derrida’s gigantic corpus (over seventy books, countless essays and interviews) where he explicitly questions or even rejects the concept of community—these moments are fairly easy to find (see some of the epigraphs above, for example). While these moments are intriguing and might provide an entry point and an external validation to some of my claims, I am much more interested in trying to draw out the logic of Derrida’s discourse as it takes up the issue of singularity (and the double), and some of the implications of this logic.

I realize that diagnosing and analyzing Derrida’s Rousseauism is not without a certain irony, since Derrida more or less launched his own career critiquing the “Rousseauism of a modern anthropologist,” namely Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Of Grammatology* (xc) and in the celebrated essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences” (first given as a lecture at the infamous 1966 Johns Hopkins conference). It is perhaps no accident that both of these works, at privileged moments, have recourse to the (non)figure of the *monster* to announce the event of deconstruction. The final sentences of “Structure, Sign, and Play” are particularly famous, and might remind us of unhappy mothers like Mary Shelley and Victor Frankenstein in their invocation of “a birth...in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (*Writing and Difference* 293). The monster is indeed a recurrent motif throughout Derrida’s work, especially used to designate the future, something totally new and totally singular; but I’ll leave this motif aside for now, as it could take up a whole chapter. Had I space, I might also trace how Derrida’s treatment of narcissism and the double closely intersects with Rousseau’s in many ways; but here it must suffice to examine Derrida’s Rousseauism—and by extension, critique’s Rousseauism—by looking closely at how Derrida, through fear of a common measure, wards off any common or community, any situated relationality, in the (proper) name of that monster: *singularity*.

## I. Derrida’s Loneliness

“Loneliness is still time spent / with the world” –Ocean Vuong, *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*

“Does she [the sea] have a destiny? If by destiny we mean incurable solitude, we can say that she carries Being’s structure in ways that escape our understanding. Sea and Being are accomplices.” –  
Etel Adnan, *Sea and Fog*

“Into the sea you are returned, to live your loneliness.” –Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover*

“The bridge, we’ll build it now / It may take a lotta time / And it may be lonely but ooh baby”  
–Neil Young, “The Bridge”

Many have noted a “turn” in Derrida’s later work—Derrida himself of course vehemently denied any such turn—a kind of *Kebré* toward ethics, politics, religion, and related issues that are supposedly more concrete than the hyper-abstractness of his earlier work on metaphysics, phenomenology, writing, etc. Regardless of whether there is a “turn” or not, one can certainly detect a quite palpable, if gradual, shift in emphasis that links all these putative turns together: a shift toward *singularity*. And this may be not just a shift in emphasis, but an actual shift—in the earlier work Derrida was more suspicious of the proper (and the proper name), the absolute, immediacy, uniqueness, interiority, and the one-ness that singularity at least ostensibly entails (the word “singularity” only occurs a few times in *Of Grammatology*, for example, with no special privilege), as these all smack of the dangers of unmediated “presence.” Yet the word “singularity” begins increasingly to insert itself in his voluminous discourse as Derrida becomes more Kantian, more Levinasian, more insistent on solitude and secrecy, more interested in cracking open the Open as wide as it can go, to prepare the most hospitable space for the Other who may come, but who will never return.

What is singularity, for Derrida? The importance of the word is signified by its association or interweaving with other key Derridian conceptual signatures: the other, the event, the to come (*l’a-venir*), the secret, the monster, etc. For Derrida, singularity is not essentially different from the singularity as we encountered it in the first chapter, paradigmatically in Rousseau’s state of nature or on the first page of his *The Confessions*—a page Derrida refers to as the “whole first page of Book I, a page that is at once canonical and extraordinary...this immense little page would call for centuries of reading by itself alone, as would the reactions that it has incited” (*Without Alibi* 139). Derrida recognizes the strange paradox of what he calls the “signatory” of Rousseau’s text, who “wants to be, he declares himself to be, at once singular, unique, and exemplary...*moi seul*: Rousseau insists both on his solitude and his isolation” (141). It is probably no accident that this brief discussion of Rousseau and singularity comes in a long essay “Typewriter Ribbon,” which contains extensive treatments of Rousseau, but more generally deals with Derrida’s deconstructive double Paul de Man.<sup>7</sup> And the only time the question of collectivity—of the “we”—rears its head in this essay, it becomes an affair of monsters: “But who, us?<sup>8</sup> Who would be this ‘us’...? Perhaps it designates at bottom, and first of all, those who find themselves in the improbable place or in the uninhabitable habitat of monsters” (74). This last locution is a fairly apposite way of figuring some pronounced tendencies in Derrida’s treatment of singularity and community that I want to thematize—that is: singularities are so monstrously unique, there is no common situated dwelling place for them together, no shared habitat that is habitable, or that is habitable as shared.<sup>9</sup> We—but who, us?<sup>2</sup>—will have reason to return to this specific problematic, but I want to flag here a rejection of the *oikos* that

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<sup>7</sup> This essay even presents itself as a kind of double, as the full title is: “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2).” But this is a double with a slight difference, since the original essay this subtitle refers to—the famously scathing reply to John Searle—is spelled slightly differently: “Limited Inc a b c...”. See the book *Limited Inc*. One sometimes is tempted to say of Derrida’s love of puns what Dr. Johnson said of Shakespeare’s: “A quibble is to *Shakespeare*, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire. It has some malignant power over his mind, and its fascinations are irresistible...A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal *Cleopatra* for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it” (“Preface to Shakespeare,” *Major Works* 429). So much the better. And we’ll see later in this chapter that Derrida was quite consciously determined to lose “the world.”

<sup>8</sup> cf. “But who, we?”—the famous last sentence of the 1968 essay “The Ends of Man.” This essay figures importantly in Barbara Johnson’s reading of Mary Shelley.

<sup>9</sup> In an interview in *Points*, Derrida discusses the monster and threat of “domestication”: “But as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it...” (386). I’ll come back to this question of domestication and the *oikos*.

is emblematic of how the everyday represents a scandal—a *skandalon*, a stumbling block—in Derrida's thought.

Derrida's singularity is, then, much like Rousseau's: the radically unique, the inaccessible, solitary, incommensurable, qualitative being, one that cannot be subjected to a common measure without violence. There are myriad places in Derrida's corpus where he describes singularity or the singular, and still innumerable more commentators giving us definitions and analyses of this (non?)concept, but let us just look at a few juxtaposed quotes and phrases from some different works, chosen more or less desultorily but mostly from Derrida's later writings, so my initial point can be established, and we can get a taste of how, and how sacrosanctly, Derrida uses this word:

“Justice always addresses itself to singularity... **the other's coming as singularity that is always other...**”

-“Force of Law” 20, 25

“**[T]he uniqueness and irreplaceable singularity of the self** as the means by which—and this is the approach to death—existence excludes every possible substitution.”

“For the secrecy of secrecy does not consist in hiding something, in not revealing the truth, but in **respecting the absolute singularity, the infinite separation** of what binds me or exposes me to the unique, to one as to the other, to the One as to the Other”

-*The Gift of Death* 42; 122-123

“That which defies anticipation, reappropriation, calculation – any form of pre-determination – is **singularity**. There can be no future as such unless there is **radical otherness**, and respect for this radical otherness.”

-*A Taste for The Secret* 21

“...**the other, the ineluctable singularity** from which and destined to which a poem speaks. In its otherness and its solitude...”

-*Sovereignities In Question* 9

“Friends of solitude: this must be understood in multiple fashion: they love solitude, they belong together—that is their resemblance, in a world **of solitude, of isolation, of singularity**, of non-appurtenance”

-*Politics of Friendship* 42

“Of course, **singularity resists**, it remains...”

-*For What Tomorrow* 98

“Another ‘tolerance’ would be in accord with the experience of the ‘desert in the desert’; it would respect **the distance of infinite alterity as singularity.**”

-“Faith and Knowledge” 60

“**singularity in its very immeasurability**...[B]y effacing the difference of singularity through calculation, by no longer counting on it, measure risks putting an end to singularity, to its quality or nonquantifiable intensity.”

“Without the absolute singularity of the incalculable and the exceptional, no thing and no one, nothing other and thus nothing, arrives or happens...what or who comes, of what happens or who arrives—obviously as other, as **the absolute exception or singularity of an alterity** that is not reappropriable by the ipseity of a sovereign power and a calculable knowledge.”  
-*Rogues* 52; 148

“What we have nicknamed here without knowing the messianic: the coming of the other, the **absolute and unpredictable singularity** of the *arrivant as justice*”  
-*Spectres of Marx* 28

“Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not disassociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the **radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other ...**”  
-*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 14

Note how the word “singularity” is almost always accompanied by an adjective of extremity—absolute, radical, infinite, etc. Much time and thought could be spent on any one of these remarkable passages (and many more such passages could be given), but I wanted to collect them to demonstrate a tendency that extends itself across Derrida’s later thought. And not just his thought. His close friend Avital Ronell mentions the “immense solitude” that seemed to envelop Derrida’s person, despite his kindness and many friends (Peeters 309); in an interview given after Derrida’s death, perhaps his closest and greatest friend—and a key interlocutor, especially for us—Jean-Luc Nancy spoke of Derrida’s “profound sense of solitude...the solitude that he nonetheless knew was impossible to overcome” (“Philosophy as Chance” 211). Derrida’s later writings thematize this solitude more and more, as solitude becomes linked with the radical incommensurability of singularity.

Another close friend and founding member of the so called “Yale School” of deconstruction, J. Hillis Miller, writes in an essay called “Derrida Enisled” that “Derrida is unusual, if not unique, in explicitly denying that Dasein is Mitsein. His concepts of ethics and of community are consonant with this assumption of each ego’s inescapable solitude” (102). Miller’s essay is mostly drawing from Derrida’s late seminar *The Beast and The Sovereign*, an astonishing text to which I’ll return shortly. But first, let us turn the tables to look briefly at a text Derrida himself wrote on and for Hillis Miller, a text contemporaneous with the second year of the BS seminar: the essay “Justices,” given as a talk at a conference honoring Miller in 2003. “Justices” ranges over many of Miller’s writings, but continually comes back to Miller’s reading of the poetry of G.M. Hopkins, particularly the poet’s notions of “inscape” and “selftaste.” Derrida sympathetically glosses Hopkins’s “selftaste” as “solitude and unspeakable singularity,” linking it as Miller does to the “the tradition of the *ultima solitudo* of Duns Scotus,” as well as to the “terrible and uncanny solitude of God” himself, the hidden and disappeared God, “he who is, himself, absolutely alone, isolated, insulated, or even abandoned in his absolute uniqueness, and in the hyperbole of his very ipseity” (701-702). This is the God who began to withdraw, perhaps, right around the time of Scotus.

Scotus was the great medieval thinker of unique haecceity and individuation (and thus non-relation<sup>10</sup>), yet he still—ambivalently—opposed the nominalists: those thinkers who, denying universals, shrouded God (and thus God’s creation) in sheer contingency and thus laid the intellectual groundwork for modernity’s groundlessness and concomitant emphasis on the

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<sup>10</sup> As one Scotus scholar puts it: “Scotus’ interest in human freedom is found...in texts showing that man’s personality is constituted by ‘independence’ in relation to other persons, an *ultima solitudo*” (Sylwanowicz 193).

individual.<sup>11</sup> Could we say the same of Derrida—that he was, in the last instance, an opponent of anti-relational nominalism? I don't think so. I rather suspect that Derrida's late thought culminates in a nominalism, however "refined,"<sup>12</sup> that forecloses any actuality, or even possibility, of a situated community or relationality. Finally privileging a strand of thought that was more or less latent in his discourse for some time, the late Derrida sees all sharing and relationality as violently imposed regimes of equivalence and commensurability which must be deconstructed to make way for the event, the coming of the absolute or wholly other (what he calls the *tout autre*). Rather than a Scotus, then, Derrida makes himself into, or makes himself resemble, a modern Ockham, that medieval nominalist philosopher of hyper-contingency and absolute singularity.<sup>13</sup>

"Justices" was first delivered in mid-April 2003, just a few weeks after the tenth and final session of the second year of *The Beast and The Sovereign*,<sup>14</sup> the last seminar session Derrida would ever hold (he died in October 2004). Though the BS seminars have only recently been published and translated, they have been immediately recognized as essential late works of Derrida, and a growing body of commentary has emerged.<sup>15</sup> The first year of the seminar announced an intention to examine the figures of the beast (*bête*) and the sovereign—two figures monstrously different, yet doubles of each other, linked by both being the *exception*, that is, outside the general law: the beast and the sovereign are both "radically heterogeneous to each other" and yet there is "narcissistic resemblance, the one recognizing in the other a sort of double... they both share that very *singular* position of being outlaws, above or at a distance from the law" (BS I.32, my emphasis). The first session alone of the first year launches quickly into a discussion of Rousseau, followed by virtuosic readings of Hobbes, the Bible, Freud, and others. This sinuous and generously eclectic path is followed for the rest of the year; along with the animal-human binary and the question of sovereignty (political and otherwise), issues of gender—the seminar begins with Derrida simply repeating the two definite articles *sans* referent: "La...le," while Derrida notes throughout the gender dynamic in *la bête* and *le souverain*—as well as the origins of justice, force, and hierarchy (the so called "reason of the strongest") are always in view.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On nominalism as the true precursor to modernity (and its atheistic groundlessness), see for example the analyses of Dupré, Gillespie, Pfau, Pabst, and Milbank, et. al. Note that those associated with Radical Orthodoxy often focus their critique especially on Scotus and his—in their eyes—deleterious doctrine of the univocity of being, as well as his embrace of contingency (often pairing Scotus and Ockham as culprits).

<sup>12</sup> The phrase "refined nominalism" occurs in the second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* seminar, to which I'll return below.

<sup>13</sup> Coincidentally or not (for as we shall see, the question of the family and the familiar is part of what is at issue here), Ockham's nominalism and treatment of singularity is the subject of the 500-page first book by Derrida's son Pierre Alféri: *Guillame D'Ockham: Le Singulier* (see opening epigraph). Alféri's book was published in 1989, which is more or less exactly the time when Derrida began to shift his emphasis to singularity. Derrida, who was so concerned with the proper name in his thought, was surprised and hurt by his son's name change from Derrida to Alféri. Yet is not the son bearing the father's name a kind of doubling? As Derrida says in *The Ear of The Other*: "only the name can inherit" (7). Even aside from the key issue of singularity, the titles alone of some of Alféri's other books read, uncannily, almost like a list of themes I'm discussing: *Jumelles* (twins), *Enfants et monstres* (children and monsters), *Le Cinéma des familles* (the cinema of families), *L'inconnu* (the unfamiliar), etc.

On the issue of deconstruction and nominalism, we could also see Paul de Man's deconstructive materialism as an extreme nominalism resisting all relationality. Fredric Jameson, for example, makes the charge that de Man is a nominalist in *Postmodernism* (thanks to Megan O'Connor for the reminder on this point).

<sup>14</sup> Hereafter BS (with I or II indicating volume/year one or two of the seminar).

<sup>15</sup> David Farrell Krell (*Derrida and our Animal Others*) and Michael Naas (*The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments*) have already written entire books focusing on Derrida's final seminar, both of which I am indebted to. I am also thinking of a chapter in Vincent Leitch's recent *Literary Criticism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, various chapters in Hillis Miller's *For Derrida*, and more.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida's lamenting of the inevitability of the "reason of the strongest" (*Loi du plus fort*) prevailing in any relationality becomes especially pronounced in two late works *Rogues* and *The Beast and The Sovereign*, both of which begin by analyzing

But something changes in the second year of the seminar (2002-2003). While still allowing for plenty of anfractuous tangents,<sup>17</sup> Derrida leaves behind the erudite comprehensiveness of the first year to focus primarily on just two texts for the entire second year: Heidegger's own seminar course from 1929-1930, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Solitude, Finitude*, and Daniel Defoe's novel *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the paradigmatic narrative of the desert island. Moreover, Derrida states early on that "this year's seminar...will have to do with island, insularity, loneliness (it will, if you like, be a seminar on solitude: what do 'being alone' and 'I am alone' mean?)" (BS II.7). Derrida even performs this solitude for his audience. Imagine: the first day of the seminar, December 11, 2002, Derrida walks into his packed lecture hall and intones the first words of the course, words he will repeat like a plaintive refrain or a promise: "I am alone [*Je suis seul(e)*]. Says he or says she. I am alone. Let's hear this sentence all alone...I am alone" (BS II.1). Even before any mention of Rousseau, which sure enough comes shortly after, again already in that first session, Derrida's opening "Je suis seul" recalls the "moi seul" of the first page of Rousseau's *The Confessions*, or the "Me voici donc seul sur la terre" that opens the *Reveries*. Yet what truly evinces Derrida's Rousseauism and ties him to Rousseau, Rousseau the lonely crusader against commensurability as we saw him in Chapter 1, is a passage a few pages later in the first session:

[N]either animals of different species, nor humans of different cultures, nor any animal or human individual inhabit the same world as another...*the difference between one world and another will remain always unbridgeable, because the community of the world is always constructed*, simulated by a set of stabilizing apparatuses, more or less stable, then, and *never natural*, language in the broad sense, codes of traces being designed, among all living beings, to construct a unity of the *world that is always deconstructible, nowhere and never given in nature*. Between my world, the 'my world,' what I call 'my world'—and there is no other for me, as any other world is part of it—between my world and any other world [*tout autre monde*] there is first the space and time of an infinite distance [*différence infinie*], an interruption that is *incommensurable with all attempts to make a passage, a bridge, an isthmus, all attempts at communication*, translation, trope, and transfer that the desire for a world or the want of a world, the being wanting a world will try to pose, impose, propose, stabilize. There is no world, there are only islands. (BS II.8-9; my emphases)

Just as for Rousseau, for Derrida any isthmus or bridge of commensurability—of relation, of community, of sharing—is an attempt to force ("pose, impose, propose, stabilize"), a common measure onto a qualitative singularity that remains radically incommensurable and insular; we are back in Rousseau's reign of "amour de soi," or Hopkins's "selftaste." Islands can never really, truly touch.

Derrida's gesture here is quite explicitly one of critique, that is, of denaturalization: "the community of the world is always constructed...and never natural." The isthmuses that make islands touch, or bridges that come between to connect them, are only the contingent constructions of society. These mediators and mediations (from the Latin *medius*, "middle") between islands can

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the fable of The Wolf and the Lamb by La Fontaine. This tendency is deeply Rousseauvian—as we saw in Chapter 1, in lamenting the fall from the state of Nature into relational, mutual dependence, Rousseau casts the non-relational state of Nature as a state where "la Loi du plus fort" does not exist (OC III.162). Hierarchy only comes with (and as) relationality and community. Derrida's longing for singularity is a kind of longing for the state of Nature.

<sup>17</sup> "Tangents" is of course a loaded word, especially for us—Derrida touches on its etymology (Latin *tangere*, touch) in his book on Nancy: *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*. Tangent shares an etymology with contagion, contingency, and the like.

and should always be deconstructed, to remind us of the truth of the incommensurable isolated island. How far from the more Hegelian-inflected Derrida of *Of Grammatology*, who claimed critically that “mediacy is the name of all that Rousseau wanted opinionatedly to efface” (where Rousseau here is also a cipher for the whole metaphysics of presence) (157)! Derrida began by wanting to deconstruct *im*-mediacy, but now seems suspicious of any mediacy, anything that might come between and connect the islanded singularities. Because these bridges—structures of relationality—are constructed and not natural, any attempt to acknowledge relationality, community, or even to communicate will be an “imposition,” an attempt to corral incommensurable singularities into a common measure that will “both hide and reflect the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society” (“Force of Law” 13); this imposition is always ontologically violent if not always physically so (though it often is the latter too). Any community, for Derrida, inevitably sows the seeds of its own violent destruction: “[a] death-drive...is silently at work in every community, every auto-co-immunity, constituting it as such in its iterability, its heritage, its spectral tradition. Community as com-mon auto-immunity: no community that would not cultivate its own auto-immunity, a principle of sacrificial self-destruction ruining the principle of self-protection” (“Faith and Knowledge” 87). Relationality is just naturalized equivalence, furrows of force, the fertile ground(ing) from which hierarchies and violence grow.<sup>18</sup>

Efface, deconstruct, the bridges that join us and make us think we dwell together in the same habitat or *oikos*—and what trace is left? What was beneath the bridge? Just the churning of the waves, the abyssal moan of the vast ocean, the sea as bearer of “infinite distance.” As in Rousseau, “nature” here is unraveled and revealed to be nothing other than nature’s self-unraveling. In the tenth and final session of the second year of the BS seminar, Derrida pushes this line of thought to even more radical, indeed incredibly bleak conclusions (if we can call them such). Allow me to quote a very long passage from this last (ever) session, even though it contains much repetition (of itself and of the previous block quote from the first session); it’s important, I think, to try to give a sense of the combination of dizzily self-consuming thought and almost unbearable melancholy that is the hallmark of Derrida’s *spätstil*:

[N]othing is less certain than the world itself, that there is perhaps no longer a world and no doubt there never was one as a totality of anything at all, **habitable and co-habitable world**, and that radical dissemination, i.e. the **absence of a common world**, the **irremediable solitude** without salvation of the living being, depends first on the absence without recourse of **any world, i.e. of any common meaning [sens] of the word “world,” in sum of any common meaning [sens commun] at all.**

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When every day, at every moment of the day and night, we are overcome with the feeling that between a given other, and sometimes the closest of those to us and

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<sup>18</sup> Derrida’s insistence on the utter separation and isolation of worlds here bespeaks a broader Leibnizian tendency in his later work (despite his deconstructive suspicion of Leibniz in *Of Grammatology* and other early texts). I’m thinking here in particular of the Leibniz of the *Discourse on Metaphysics*, who wrote that “each substance is like a separate world, independent of every other thing except God” (Section 14). Remove God from this equation and you get purely independent, non-related worlds. Sure enough, a “hypersolipsism” in a “Leibnizianism without God” is *exactly* how the late Derrida describes his thought: “Call it monadology—the fact that between my monad—the world as it appears to me—and yours, no relation is possible...But from monad to monad, and even when monads speak to one another, there is no relation, no passage...it is a question for me of a Leibnizianism without God, so to speak” (*Taste for the Secret* 70-71). The question of narcissism is also in play here, in Leibniz’s characterization of monads as “mirrors.”

those that we call so imprudently and stupidly, tenderly and violently, *our own*, and ourselves—those with whom we share everything, starting and ending with love, the feeling that the worlds in which we live **are different to the point of the monstrosity** of the unrecognizable, of the un-similar [*in-semblable*], of the unbelievable, of the non-similar, the non-resembling or resemblable, the non-assimilable, the untransferable, the incomparable, the absolutely unshareable (we know this with an undeniable and stubborn, i.e. permanently denied, knowledge), the **abyssal unshareable [*impartageable abyssal*]**—I mean separated, like one island from another by an abyss beyond which no shore is even promised which would allow anything, however little, to happen, anything worthy of the word “happen”—the **abyssal un-shareable**, then, **of the abyss between the islands** of the archipelago and the vertiginous untranslatable, to the point that the very solitude we are saying so much about is not even the solitude of several people in the same world, this still shareable solitude in one and the same co-habitable world, but the solitude of worlds, the undeniable fact that there is no world, not even a world, not even one and the same world, no world that is one: *the* world, *a* world, a world that is *one*, is what there is not. . . .there is no common world, be it a life-world, **and the presumed community of the world is a word, a vocable, a convenient and reassuring bit of chatter**, the **name** of a life insurance policy for living beings losing their world, a life belt on the high seas that we pretend to be leaving, long enough to spend a moment during which we pretend to say “we” and to be together together. (BS II.266-267; Derrida’s italics, my bolding)

Given its enormous implications, it’s hard to know where to begin with this astonishing cascade, *de profundis* of dark rumination. The islanded solitude adumbrated here is so absolute that we are not even alone, separated in the same world; rather, we are alone in our own universe—like Rousseau’s “chaque homme en particulier se regardant lui-même comme le seul Spectateur qui l’observe, comme le seul être dans l’univers [every individual human being views himself as the only Spectator to observe him, as the only being in the universe].”<sup>19</sup> In insisting so intensely on incommensurability at the expense of community and sharing as *partage*—three times in the above passage Derrida repeats the word *impartageable*—Derrida lays bare some of the key ontological presuppositions, and consequences, of anti-humanist critique, even if they are not presented as such. For Derrida, the common is too redolent of the “comme-un” (as-one)<sup>20</sup>; the common can only be a violently imposed and falsely naturalized *common measure*, and must be rejected. It is enough to wonder if deconstruction—and all critique as such—must ineluctably begin and end in loneliness, if “critique endangers the sociality it is supposed to defend” (Moten and Harney 19).

We have already had occasion to mention Derrida’s distrust of the habitat and the *oikos* (cf. above “the uninhabitable habitat of monsters” from “Typewriter Ribbon”), and I’ll return to this

<sup>19</sup> Derrida discusses Rousseau’s idea of the “(le) seul”—so important for my first chapter—in the third session of BSII (64ff), using Rousseau’s famous 5th Reverie as an example. I wonder if it is possible to trace Derrida’s shifts over time by examining the differences in his first and final readings of Rousseau’s 5th Reverie. This final reading of the 5th Reverie in 2003’s BSII is quite sympathetic to the singularity and solitude of Rousseau, whom Derrida calls “Rousseau, that man of the island” (64). On the other hand, Derrida’s treatment of the 5th Reverie in 1967’s *Of Grammatology* is much more critical of the fantasy of divine self-sufficiency and presence (OG 249-251).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *A Taste for the Secret*: “If I have hesitated to use this word, it is because too often the word ‘community’ resounds with the ‘common’ [*commun*], the as-one [*comme-un*]” (25). An alternative, less pessimistic and explicitly ecological thought of the *comme* and the *comme-un* is found in extensive writings of Derrida’s close friend and early classmate, the poet Michel Deguy. See for example Deguy’s *Écologiques*.

below; but let us note that, sure enough, the possibility of co-habitation—even simply habitation as such—is denied in this passage. Even “our own” (*les nôtres*), our family members and closest friends, co-inhabitants of the *oikos* (*oikoi* can mean “relatives” in Ancient Greek), are utterly incommensurable and secret, “different to the point of monstrosity,” such that no genuine co-habitation is possible. There is no—or no thought of—the everyday, no *oikos* as the site of the everyday and its dwelling, no home to return to as shared, or to return to at all. What “presumed community” there is, even with our own beloved ones, is only “a word [*mol*]” or “name [*nom*]”—that is, a *nomen* (Latin for “name”), which gives the name to “nominalism,” the position that universals, structures, and categories do not actually exist in the world, but only as conventional “names” people use to group together otherwise incommensurable individual things. Derrida even admits later on the same page that he is flirting with a “refined utilitarian nominalism” (BS II.267).

But if every community, every returning rhythm of relation, of touching, even of love, is just convention, an agreed upon “name,” “convenient and reassuring,” what is there actually? That is to ask, how do we account for the fact that we do agree to agree upon such conventions, that we agree (sometimes) to love each other, that it certainly seems like we (sometimes) understand each other and that there *is* some degree of commensurability, that *there is* communication, however fallible? It is in response to these implicit questions—similar to problems put forth by M.H. Abrams, famously if not first, to J. Hillis Miller (and indirectly Derrida) in a now canonical exchange from 1976 MLA<sup>21</sup>—that Derrida’s Nietzschean pessimism culminates. For the apparent commensurabilities of life, love, world, family, communication, and touching, are illusions papering over an abyss of force:

For it is not enough that we all of us have—you and me and so many others, here and now or wherever and whenever—the vague comforting feeling of understanding each other [*nous entendre*], of speaking among ourselves the same language, and sharing an intelligible language, in a consensual communicative action...that does not suffice for it to be true and for anything other to be happening than an agreement inherited over millennia between living beings who are more or less anguished by illness, death and war and murder and eating-each-other-alive, etc., an agreement, then, an always labile, arbitrary, conventional and artificial, historical, non-natural contract, to ensure for oneself the best, and therefore also the longest *survival* by a system of life insurances counting with probabilities and including a clause that one *pretend*, that one make *as if*, signing the insurance policy [*police d’assurance*], basically just the police, out of clearly understood interest—that one pretend...to give the same meaning...in order to survive, to persevere in life, to prevail... (BS II.267-268; Derrida’s emphasis)

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<sup>21</sup> A nice summary and analysis of aspects of the Abrams-Miller debate, which continued over several exchanges of essays, is found in Redfield’s *Theory at Yale* (69-73). Basically, Abrams is asking Miller to account for the fact that he, Miller, in his scholarship was trying to make sense, and expected his listeners to understand him. This might at first blush seem facile but I think it touches on a profound point that was never fully answered—deconstruction must account for the commensurability of its own discourse. We must also push this question beyond the linguistic and epistemological realm though—it is not just a matter of discourse. How do things make sense together (Wordsworth would say “are fitted”), in the broad sense? Because sense is always a matter of coming together in some way, of relation, it is thus a question of accounting for relations and relationality. Accounting ontologically for the relational sense of things is more or less Nancy’s project, as I understand it. I’ll try to think about the stakes of this more as the chapter continues. Finally, it’s worth foregrounding, as Redfield does, the importance of Romanticism in the Abrams-Miller debate (and in other similar disputes). Abrams’s and Miller’s differing approaches are exemplified in their essays through disparate readings of Wordsworth’s riddling lyric “A slumber did my spirit seal.”

The emergence of any meaning or sense [*sens*] in common is just an illusion, an illusion against a (hi)story of violence, against the “blamed bleeding hands” of the years (Hart Crane), the slaughter-bench of history (Hegel), against sheer force, life-force and will-to-power, an illusion to help us survive a little longer, a fragile but persistent illusion sprouting from an impossible chasm of “as if” (*als ob, comme si*); we act *as if* we could touch, and touch each other again, so that we might live more. As in Rousseau’s vision of history and society since the fall from the state of nature (for Rousseau it’s all “crimes, guerres, meurtres, misères et horreurs”) all our inheritance, all we can actually return to, is an inheritance of violence, despair, cannibalism and misery: “an agreement *inherited* over millennia between living beings who are more or less anguished by illness, death and war and murder and eating-each-other-alive.” The illusion of this “vague comforting” convention, or the convention of this illusion, goes all the way down to our everydayness and our co-habiting and co-*in*habiting any common space or *oikos*; for Derrida here, our relationship to the world is like that of a tired and loveless marriage, tacitly, nervously, agreeing to stay together for the kids.

We *pretend* to be together, across infinitely distant and different shores, so that we might obey the imperatives of survival (*survie*), in a kind of “life insurance policy [*police*].” Derrida plays on the double meaning of the French “*police*,” which can mean both a “policy” but also the cops: “insurance policy, basically just the police [*police d’assurance, en somme la police tout court*].” What this pun suggests, more or less overtly, is that the insurance policy of *pretending* to communicate and be-in-common is itself only another violence, that is, a violence promising to protect us from a greater violence (just as, everywhere but especially in America, a kind insurance is supposed to be granted by agreeing to let the police “protect” by shooting down people of color in the street). With this problematic we are back at Benjamin’s *Kritik der Gewalt*, a text Derrida wrestled with in the essay “Force of Law,” where he admits: “For me, it is always a question of differential force, of difference as difference of force, of force as *différance*” (7). If *différance* is force, and the quantitative relation of hierarchical, differential forces is the only possible relation, is it any wonder that Derrida once cagily suggested that *différance* means nothing other than “solitude”<sup>22</sup>? The common is “artificial,” “non-natural,” awaiting its denaturalization and dissolution, its deconstruction; the common can only be an imposed equivalent, common measure, which is hierarchy, which is force and violence. Once again: equi-valence, equi-violence.

There’s a problem with that. I’ll lay some of my cards on the table now, and hope to organize them into a better hand as I continue: Why must it be so all or nothing? Why, if there is no

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<sup>22</sup> “I do not absolutely reject the proposition according to which *différance* would also be solitude,” Derrida says with characteristic litotes (“The Original Discussion of ‘Différance’” (86). This question of force, along with the almost vitalist, almost Spinozist invocation of a kind of primordial *conatus*—i.e. Derrida’s mention in the above block quote of the primacy of the drive to “persevere in life, to prevail”—is a good place to begin investigating Derrida’s unlikely but profound similarity with Deleuze, a crucial point we cannot pursue in detail here but that I wish to raise briefly (Nancy insightfully if cryptically remarked that “Deleuze will have been like [Derrida’s] very strange and very foreign twin” (“Philosophy as Chance” 222)). It is the Spinozist and Nietzschean Deleuze who writes in *Nietzsche and Philosophy* that “all reality is already quantity of force... forces which enter into relation do not have quantity without each of them having, at the same time, the quality corresponding to their difference in quantity as such” (40). For Deleuze’s Nietzsche/Deleuze, relation and difference are only a matter of quantity, and thus hierarchy: “difference, in short hierarchy” (9). It is worth noting that Derrida approvingly cites Deleuze’s book during a discussion of force and quantity in the (dis)seminal 1968 essay “Différance.” What is at issue here again is the inability or refusal to think quality, qualitative singularity, as relational. With this in view, Derrida’s affirmation of his philosophical proximity to, even identity with, Deleuze in his eulogy for the thinker becomes more understandable and revealing: Derrida writes of the “experience of a closeness or of a nearly total affinity concerning the ‘theses’ [of Deleuze], if we can use this word... Deleuze undoubtedly still remains, despite so many dissimilarities, the one among all of those of my ‘generation’ to whom I have always considered myself closest. I have never felt the slightest ‘objection’ arising in me, not even potentially, against any of his works” (*The Work of Mourning* 192-193). Even allowing for Derrida’s typically sentimental exaggerations in his eulogies, this is a remarkable admission.

single world as totality or unity (a claim I agree we must affirm), must there also be no touching of worlds at all? Is all relationality sheer construction, convention, imposition, all the way down? Certainly, all attempts to ground and found community based on a supposedly common trait or essence or nature or measure or blood or soil are constructed and haunted by the threat of violence—naturalized or otherwise—but can't there be a common, a touching, a sharing, a measure, based on nothing at all other than the fact(icity) of finding myself in my everyday existence, next to you? What if “sociality ain't there so you can come into being. Sociality makes you come out through being” (Moten, *The Service Porch* 70)? Rather than being only a constructed bridge or phantasmatic isthmus of force, the common is itself the little incommensurabilities we already reach across and handle and live in, that we negotiate in our infinitely diverse local ways, “the local plural intimacies and associations that make life sticky and interesting” (Berlant 408), ceaselessly appearing and multiplying and fading away. Despite everything, there is a world: a world teeming with sometimes uneasy dwellings and communal copings and fraught commensurabilities, a world infused with measure and measure's fragile strangeness (to be sure, don't naturalize it), half-measures, temporary measures, desperate measures, the everyday assurances and excesses (*démesures*) we throw in for good measure; this is the common we make and measure up to, or don't. The rhythm of life, of everyday life, is this toggling between measure and its undoing, the coping with measure's inexorable essential drift into the immeasurability that can never not shine through it and hide in it.

Derrida speaks of an “abyss between islands,” but—aside from the fact the ocean is not a dark abyssal chasm but a populous world (whose sea-levels are rising and pH is decreasing) of billions of living and nonliving beings—this characterization or figure of separation as always a vast ocean is perhaps too heroic and tragic (indeed masculine), even for our “shipwreck modernity”<sup>23, 24</sup>. The “abyss”—which means groundlessness—is not the grand abyss of the ocean, but the everyday hiccups of measure, the quotidian abysses, the one between our lips when we kiss (Irigaray: “Kiss me. Two lips kiss two lips, and openness is ours again. Our ‘world’” (*This Sex Which Is Not One* 210)), the creases of an unmade bed, syncopated peals of laughter or shudders of terror, smudged fingerprints on a glass, sinuous cracks of a shared sidewalk, a nameless gesture of welcome or parting, ridiculous auto-corrected text messages, the cautious curiosity of squirrels, a half-stumble on a bumpy bus ride, the shared emptiness of bureaucratic waiting or the charged anticipation of video

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<sup>23</sup> I am thinking of Steve Mentz's interesting recent book *Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550-1719*, which includes a quite original (if obligatory) reading of *Robinson Crusoe*.

<sup>24</sup> On Derrida's figure of islands and ocean in the BS seminar, see Akira Lippit's beautiful little new book on Derrida and cinema: “Derrida's world gives away to a series of isolated surfaces on the sea. No longer the plenitude of a shared ground but rather an archipelago of solitudes bound together by tides, torrents, and flows”—but for Lippit this is salutary (67). The fact that Lippit's book centers on narcissism is worth mentioning (its subtitle is *Jacques Derrida's Echopoiesis and Narcissism Adrift*), and it opens onto the larger, important question of Derrida's interest in (and defense of) narcissism (and the Echo/Narcissus myth), which I don't have space to treat as needed. It does seem, however, that Derrida believed some primary auto-affective narcissism was the precondition for any relation, which is what we might expect given our framework: “Narcissism! There is not narcissism and non-narcissism; there are narcissisms that are more or less comprehensive, generous, open, extended. What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming, hospitable narcissism, one that is much more open to the experience of the other as other. I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the other would be absolutely destroyed, it would be destroyed in advance. The relation to the other - even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible, for example. Love is narcissistic” (*Points* 199). A lot of work has been done on this; see especially that of Pleshette Dearnitt, who thinks Derrida's idea of narcissism alongside Rousseau's in her *The Right to Narcissism* and other works. It's well known that Derrida's own personality tended toward a monstrous (cf. the monster), if still lovable, narcissism. As his biographer writes: “Many of [Derrida's] friends and colleagues referred to his narcissism. If some of them described him as a bit of a ‘monster,’ this was because it went far beyond traditional narcissism: Derrida practiced it to excess” (Peeters 421). Narcissism: monstrous doubling.

buffering, the agony of a referee's missed call, my open window and the dragonfly spiraling into my house, torn lettuce leaves leftover in the bowl, simple produce of the common.

## II. Measure for Measure: Derrida and Nancy

“Jean-Luc Nancy is the mother of us all: he conceives, he gives birth, and this morning we found out that his concepts sleep around.” –Derrida, *For Strasbourg* 57

“...infinity was offered to share.

Renouncing the infinitely large so that at any moment I can experience, move, relate, exchange myself as incomplete. Having within me an infinitely small space which prevents me from closing myself up as a whole. Never whole in any place. Rather the melodious rhythm of half-opening which makes my measure limitless. Or limits a lack of measure.” –Irigaray, *Elemental Passions* 84

Clearly, however, it can't end here in infinite and somber insularity. There is a deep well of hope in Derrida—and I want to affirm that. And I'm very aware that the Derrida I've been presenting is rather one-sided—for what about key late Derridian themes like the other, hospitality, friendship, democracy, responsibility (from 1991-2001, interestingly enough stopping with his final seminar BS, Derrida's annual seminar bore the general title “Questions of Responsibility”), and so on, all of which are directly concerned with relationality in at least some broad sense? The importance of these and similar concepts is in addition to the fact that Derrida, including the late Derrida, is also a trenchant critic of self-enclosure, ipseity, and isolation (this is a key element of his critique of sovereignty in the very same BS seminar). Indeed just after the bleak passages about absolute solitude and worldlessness just quoted above, Derrida immediately shifts the focus to his beloved line of Paul Celan: *Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen* [The world is gone, I must carry you] (a single line about which Derrida wrote literally hundreds of pages); that is, Derrida wonders how we might respond to, and *carry*, the other across the infinite distances of our private islanded worlds.

These issues must be confronted. Before we do so, I wish to push the line of inquiry I've opened a bit further, by scaffolding a differend—I don't quite say debate—between Derrida and his friend Nancy. There are several reasons for doing this, but not least among them is the fact that the above long block quotes above seem almost to engage in a kind of Nancy-baiting, even though Nancy's name is nowhere mentioned. It doesn't need to be, of course—especially given the context of Nancy and Derrida's decades-long friendship and exchange of thought (including exchanges on the thought and politics of friendship). But what is particularly notable on this score is that in the space of a few lines on a single page (page 267 in the English edition of BSII, 366-367 in the French), *Derrida proceeds ruthlessly to deny and dismantle what are essentially Nancy's four most important terms: monde* (world), *sens* (sense or meaning), *commun* (common, community), and *partage* (sharing). On this one page Derrida says “there is no world,” mentions the “absence of a common world,” the absence of “any common meaning [*sens commun*] at all,” and three times uses the word “unshareable [*impartageable*]” to refer to the distance between islands, each time attaching either “absolute” or “abyssal” to “unshareable” (and implying that we are in “denial” about this “fact” of unshareability). Even aside from any contemporary context it seems difficult to think that this is simply coincidental and not a lightly veiled reference (rebuke?) to Nancy, since Nancy's name is so inextricably entangled with and conjured by *sens*, *monde*, *commun*, and *partage* (aside from his extensive work on community and sharing, one of Nancy's most important books is called *Le Sens du monde*); yet things truly come into focus if we turn to a Derridian text exactly contemporary with the BS seminar, a text that explicitly confronts Nancy with a differend precisely on the question of (*in*)*commensurability*.

This text is *Rogues* (Fr. *Voyous*), published in 2003 but comprised of two long lectures given in 2002, in between years 1 and 2 of the BS seminar. In chapters 4 and 5 of the first part of *Rogues*, Derrida gently chides Nancy for wanting to hold on to the term “fraternity,” as well as for Nancy’s casting of the incommensurable as something that can be shared in (and as) common: “The whole difficulty [with Nancy] will be located in the injunction of the sharing, in the injunction to share the incommensurable...Nancy will give to this sharing of the incommensurable...a name that is to my eyes somewhat suspect: *fraternity*” (47). The next fifteen or so pages of *Rogues* stage in various ways this differend with Nancy, a fascinating encounter of thought which is impossible to summarize, but from which I want to extract a couple of key moments. It seems the two thinkers differ ever so slightly, but this minute difference produces ripple effects that have enormous implications for the problematic that we have been setting up so far.

Essentially, as I see it, and to simplify things somewhat, both Derrida and Nancy agree on the ontological incommensurability of singularity, but differ about how this incommensurability is to be thought and practiced, as well as *where* (and *when*), for a lack of a better phrase, this incommensurability is to be located. Derrida saves the brunt of his questioning and critical remarks for just two or three passages from Nancy’s book *The Experience of Freedom*, in particular a line where Nancy writes: “Fraternity is equality in the sharing of the incommensurable” (*Experience* 72).<sup>25</sup>

According to the Derrida of *Rogues*—and this is to bracket Derrida’s massive book about Nancy called *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (published in 2000)—there are two related problems with such a claim, and indeed with what Nancy is trying to do in general. The first problem is more circumscribed and concerns Nancy’s decision to use the word “fraternity”—a point that “might look like a mere quibbling over terms,” but that opens onto something much larger (*Rogues* 49): a methodological, and even an ontological, differend. The point about fraternity is apparently the less essential of the two objections, though let us note how this objection to “fraternity,” i.e. brotherhood, is in consonance with Derrida’s general tendency to be deeply skeptical of the family, the familiar, and the *oikos*. Derrida had already voiced objections to the concept of fraternity in 1994’s *Politics of Friendship*, and his point here is basically unchanged: the concept of fraternity, even in Nancy’s careful hands, retains too much metaphysico-theological residue, and too much of an oppressive history, to be salvaged. Among other problems, Derrida thinks fraternity—whatever its new possible usages—inevitably naturalizes a hierarchy that, among other oppressions, excludes women: “Let us not forget this overwhelming and terribly blinding fact: the brother of which one speaks is always a man” (*Rogues* 60). Derrida claims he is happy to affirm the deconstructive analyses and the politics that Nancy affirms, and yet he asks, “but why not simply *abandon* the word *fraternity*..?” (167n). In *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida asks the exact same question about community: “I have no qualms about [Nancy and Blanchot’s] communities; my only question is: why call them communities?” (25).<sup>26</sup> Derrida, with his increasingly Kantian tendencies, wants only something like

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<sup>25</sup> Here I should mention an irony of Derrida’s critique of Nancy’s *The Experience of Freedom*, that is, the irony of Derrida effectively pulling rank in a debate about naturalized hierarchy, precisely on the question of the familial and the father, by virtue of Derrida being something like Nancy’s *Doktorvater* (as the Germans call a dissertation advisor). He does this most explicitly in an endnote to *Rogues*: “[Nancy’s book] was first a dissertation that gave rise to a ‘defense’ during which, if memory serves, I already raised this Freudian-Christian question of the father and the brother” (166n). This is almost as if to say: “Come on Jean-Luc, we’ve been over this, you should have listened to your (Doktor)Vater the first time!” Derrida also makes fun of Nancy’s blithe use of seemingly grandiose metaphysical terms in *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* and in *For Strasbourg*.

<sup>26</sup> And Derrida made the exact same claim about the word “people,” as Nancy relates in an interview: “After I’d finished my paper [on the ‘people’], Derrida said to me: ‘I would’ve said everything you said, but not with the word ‘people’; I replied ‘Okay then, but give me another word.’ He answered, ‘I don’t know, but not ‘people’” (*The Possibility of a World* 66).

regulative concepts that can be totally emptied out of content. For Derrida, the problem with fraternity (and community, and people)—even when used as Nancy uses it, i.e. to name a kind of equality based on mutual incommensurability—is that fraternity will always smuggle in a history of violent hierarchy, via an imposed and naturalized common measure. The history of brothers is only another false illusionary bridge or isthmus, a history of common measure forced onto singularity, which means a history of violence: “There is never any war, and never any danger for the democracy to come, except where there are brothers” (*Rogues* 50). Fraternity thus for Derrida *cannot* name relationality without this violence, this war.<sup>27</sup>

Derrida, then, takes the strict Rousseauvian/critique line of wanting to denaturalize any hierarchy based in naturalized equivalence that fraternity (according to this line) will always (re)inscribe. Derrida is quite explicit on this point: “I am simply concerned that when it comes to politics and democracy this fraternalism might follow at the least the temptation of a genealogical descent back to autochthony, to the nation, if not actually to nature, in any case, to birth [*naissance*]” (61). No fraternity, then, and no community: at least, don’t call it these names. Already in *The Politics of Friendship*—strikingly equating deconstruction with denaturalization *tout court*—he had been concerned “with this de-naturalization of fraternal authority (or, if you prefer, with its ‘deconstruction’)” (159). Derrida continues this line of critique in *Rogues*, but the real problem now, as he seems to be aware, is that any name you give for a “sharing of the incommensurable” will sooner or later run into the same problem as “fraternity”; just as the familiar/ial everydayness of brotherhood papers over a long bloody trail of war from Cain and Abel or Romulus and Remus on down, any and every concept has its own history of commensurability, of naturalization, of violence, of hierarchy; no concept or convention—no structure of relationality—is without the original sin of equi-violence (equi-valence).

That means the only moves remaining for deconstructive thought would then be either to have a concept so rigorously and vigilantly emptied of content and everydayness that it must effectively deny relationality; *or* to go ahead and deny that the incommensurable can ever possibly be common, i.e., to deny that the incommensurability of singularity emerges through (and as) relationality, as exposure to a common lack of ontological measure, a common lack of ground, and the sharing of this groundlessness. Derrida ends up making both of these related moves in different manners and in various places: the first with concepts spliced with formulations like “X without X” or “X to come”<sup>28</sup>; these hollowed out concepts function primarily only to clear space for something totally and monstrously other and unrecognizable, an unforeseen event, a stranger (in contrast to something everyday and familiar like fraternity).<sup>29</sup> The second move, to deny that the

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<sup>27</sup> I mention here my indebtedness to the discussion of fraternity in Nancy and Derrida in Philip Armstrong’s article “In Fraternity’s Wake” and in John Paul Ricco’s astonishing book *The Decision Between Us*. Ricco’s work, with the innovative dialogue it stages between Nancy, contemporary art, and queer theory to think a “theory of sociality as shared incommensurability” has deeply influenced my thinking (51).

<sup>28</sup> It should be said that Nancy very early on himself used such formulations, indeed used them both in the same phrase in a passage found in *The Inoperative Community*: “Community without community is *to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*, endlessly, at the heart of every collectivity” (71); this kind of formulation mostly drops from Nancy’s conceptual vocabulary after 1980s, however. And even in this sentence it is clear that the *to come* is at the “heart,” immanent as the kernel of each quotidian collectivity. For an extensive take on Derrida’s important idea of the “democracy to come,” and a strong counterargument to what I characterize as Derrida’s overbearing suspicion of inheritance, tradition, and convention, see Samir Haddad’s recent *Derrida and the Inheritance of Democracy*. On this question see also Steven Goldsmith’s *Blake’s Agitation* for a reading of Derrida, especially in relation to Romanticism and anxieties about agency in contemporary humanities critique.

<sup>29</sup> For Derrida fraternity always—balefully—brings us back to the neighbor, the similar, the home: “[P]ure ethics, if there is any, begins with the respectable dignity of the other as the absolute *unlike*, recognized as nonrecognizable, indeed as

incommensurable (groundlessness) can be a site of sharing, is exactly what Derrida proceeds to do in his reading of Nancy in *Rogues* (as he will do over the next year in his BS seminar). Let's look at part of the passage in question from Nancy's *The Experience of Freedom*, reproduced with Derrida's parenthetical commentary, as it is in *Rogues* (the following is Nancy's text in regular type with Derrida's remarks in brackets and bold):

Essentially, this excess or immeasurability of freedom, as the very measure of existence, is common. It is of the essence of a measure—and therefore of an immeasurable—to be common. The community shares freedom's immeasurability. **[JD: I must admit that I here have trouble following the “therefore”: that measure would be by essence common is clear, but why would it “therefore” be of the essence of an *immeasurable* to be common? What justifies this “therefore”? How does one share and make common an immeasurable? Wouldn't immeasurability be symmetrically opposed to, coupled with and dependent on, measure, indeed common measure?]** Because this immeasurability consists in nothing other than the fact of gesture of measuring itself against nothing, against the nothing, the community's sharing is itself the common (im)measurability of freedom. **[JD: Here again I do not understand the connection between and this parenthetical (“im”), as if im-measurability were still a measure, a simple modality or negative modification of measure; for I myself would tend to think of immeasurability as heterogeneous to all measure rather than as a simple negative measure or negation of measure.]** Thus, it has a common measure, but not in the sense of a given measure to which everything is referred: it is common in the sense that it is the excess or immeasurability of the sharing of existence. (*Rogues* 56-57)

Let us begin with Derrida's first objection, that to Nancy's “therefore”; this “therefore” traverses from the commonality of common measure to the commonality of the incommensurable—a move Derrida cannot accept. Aside from being a trifle glib, Nancy's “therefore” is admittedly a strange and difficult move: how can something be true of measure, and then *therefore* be true of its opposite, the immeasurable (or incommensurable)?

At stake here is what we might call *the immanence of the incommensurable*, that is, a thought of the incommensurable that arises from *within*—though always irreducible to—regimes of common measure and structures of relationality. For Derrida, the commensurable and the incommensurable must always be outside each other, marooned, never touching, absolutely heterogeneous: “I myself would tend to think of immeasurability as *heterogeneous* to all measure rather than as a simple negative measure or negation of measure.” We are familiar with this line of thought: because immeasurability for Derrida is heterogeneous to measure, what measure there is can only be heterogeneous or utterly external, can only come from the outside to impose itself, with violence, on incommensurable singularity (the island). The rejection of Nancy's “therefore,” therefore, is a rejection of the possibility that the incommensurable can inhere in a “here,” in the field of fragile commensurability where everydayness happens; Derrida does not brook the possibility of the incommensurable being immanent in common measure, because he wants common measure to be “deconstructible” and denaturalizable all the way down—pure convention and illusion, like the bridges that would pretend

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unrecognizable, beyond...all recognition: far from being the beginning of pure ethics, the neighbor as like or as resembling, as looking like, spells the end or the ruin of such an ethics, if there as any” (*Rogues* 60).

to connect us islands. For Derrida the incommensurable can only be presented as a “to come” that does not fall under any horizon of recognition or everydayness, a “to come” or an oceanic abyss. We can now begin to understand more of the context of why Derrida claims in the BS seminar that there can be no *sens* in common and no world, and that there is an unshareability at and as the heart of singularity. From this perspective, then, it makes sense why in the above commentary Derrida asks, with marked skepticism and genuine bemusement: “How does one share and make common an immeasurable?” For Derrida the incommensurable cannot be in common and cannot partake in sharing (*partage*), because to be in common at all is to be wrapped up and interpellated in structures of measure and relationality—of recognition, of familiarity, of return, of presence—that are always only naturalized histories, regimes, ideologies, and traps of violence and hierarchy.

For Nancy, on the other hand, the incommensurable is not “heterogeneous” to common measure but is an excess immanent *in* common measure, and is the very truth of common measure—this is why he can write the adverb “therefore” and the parenthetical “(im)” in “(im)measurability,” both of which are gestures Derrida claims he cannot understand. Another way of putting this is to say that Nancy’s entire corpus is essentially a meditation on the secret affinity, even unity, of the two meanings of the word—so much more and less than a word!—*common*: (1) shared and (2) ordinary, everyday. For Nancy, all the quotidian (nothing is not quotidian) gestures and relations and ways of being-in-common—admittedly with all their histories of hierarchy and violence, which are not to be denied—point to an incommensurability that immanently exceeds them: he calls this “sense” [*sens*].<sup>30</sup> While for Derrida the inevitability of islands means the “absence...of any common meaning [*sens*] at all,” Nancy writes that “*Sens* is common or it is not” and, echoing Bataille, “*sens* does not take place for one alone” (*The Sense of the World* 30, 88).<sup>31</sup> *Sens* is necessarily (in) common because it names the simple, ordinary fact that sharing takes place; the world names the simple fact that the place of this sharing is always a particular, situated place—what I’m wanting to call an *oikos*. Here is one of many passages in Nancy’s work on the world<sup>32</sup>:

A world: one finds oneself in it [*s’y trouve*] and *one is familiar with it* [*s’y retrouve*]; one can be in it with “everyone” [*tout le monde*]; the world is precisely that in which there is room for everyone: but a genuine place, one in which things can genuinely take place... The world is never in front of me, or else it is not my world. *But if it is absolutely other I would not even know, or barely, that it is a world...* As soon as a world appears to me as a world, I already share something of it: I share a part of its inner resonances. Perhaps this term *resonance* is capable of suggesting the issue at hand: a world is a space in which a certain tonality resonates. But that tonality is nothing other than the totality of resonances that the elements, the moments, and the places of this world echo, modulate, and modalize... *A world is a world only for those who inhabit it.* To inhabit is necessarily to inhabit a world, that is to say to have there much more than a place of sojourn: its place in the strong sense of the term, is that which allows something to properly take place... *A world is an ethos, a habitus, and an inhabiting* (*The Creation of the World* 41-42; my emphasis)

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<sup>30</sup> The meanings of the French *sens*, which include sense, meaning, direction, go far beyond the English “sense.” Because this is so deeply important to remember, hereafter I’ll mostly use the French word *sens*. *Sens* is perhaps Nancy’s central term—Simon Critchley calls it his “master-word” (“With Being-With?” 241). When in 2004 an important collection of essays on Nancy’s work was published by Galilée, not for nothing was it called: *Sens en tous sens: Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy*.

<sup>31</sup> Bataille: “Or, il n’est pas de sens pour un seul” (*L’Expérience intérieure* 55).

<sup>32</sup> For more on Nancy’s conception(s) of world, see Verena Conley’s article “Nancy’s Worlds.”

A world presupposes some prior intelligibility and recognizability, but not (only) on the order of epistemology or knowledge—it is rather a matter of a particular “resonance,”<sup>33</sup> praxis, ethos, or form-of-life: a rhythm. A world is where one is familiar, that is, where can find oneself there again (*s’y re-trouve*), a habitus, habitation, or *oikos* one can return to (inhabiting is always co-inhabiting). Because it implies an originary sharing (“I already share something of [a world]”), a world cannot thus be reconciled with the “absolutely other,” as Nancy writes in an only slightly covert reference to one of Derrida’s favorite formulations (“But if it is *absolutely other* I would not even know, or barely, that it is a world”). The world returns to us. The world, which is always a plurality of worlds, is never programmatic or general—it is situated and specific but not natural(ized): “the sense of the world [is] its very *concreteness*” (*Sense of the World* 10).

For all his insistence on *partage*, *sens*, *commun*, and *monde*—terms he uses transitively, almost tautologically—Nancy by no means gives up on singularity, the latter being another important and frequent term for him. He even, like Derrida, thinks a singularity that is characterized by radical uniqueness and incommensurability. However, while Derrida places a hyperbolic stress on solitude and claims that particular relations are constructed conventions which impose themselves from without onto the incommensurability of singularity in order to erase it, for Nancy singularity only has its uniqueness through relationality and sharing:

No doubt, the singular is *per se*: it singularizes itself only by or through its singularity. But this does not mean that singularity is its own: singular unicity is what shares it out and what it shares [*ce qui le partage et ce qu’il partage*]... What is common to one and all, their communication with each other, is what singularizes them and consequently what shares them out and divides them up [*qui les partage*]. What is commensurable in them is their incommensurability (*Sense of the World* 72).

Because the truth of singularity is sharing, singularity is always plural—a point Nancy never tires of making and remaking: “*there is singularity only where a singularity ties itself up with other singularities*, but there is no tie except where the tie is taken up again, recast and retied without end, nowhere purely tied or untied” (*Sense of the World* 112; my emphasis).<sup>34</sup>

Derrida in fact agrees here on the question of the necessary plurality of the singular; he often remarks how one is always “more than one” (*plus d’un*).<sup>35</sup> However, Derrida’s thought of plurality is *not* one that is necessarily situated in an everyday rhythm of relationality, which is why he can think a plurality that still permits an absolute ontological solitude and a “resolute quasi-solipsism” (Miller *For Derrida* xix)—there can be a plurality of islands without necessary relations between them. In Derrida, the other, the more than one, is out there (where?), but I cannot truly relate to it—except perhaps only in a “relation without relation”<sup>36</sup>—because it is wholly other (*tout autre*) (I’ll return to

<sup>33</sup> Nancy also discusses resonance in other works, including his book *Listening* (67). See also *Listening* for (re)sonance, rhythm, and return (16).

<sup>34</sup> Nancy claims that singularity is always plural (and vice versa) in more texts than I could list here, but for evidence just look at the title of one of his most important books: *Being Singular Plural*. Therein he writes, for example: “It is a question of practicing singularities, that is, which gives and shows itself only the plural. The Latin *singuli* means ‘one by one,’ and is a word that only exists in the plural” (156).

<sup>35</sup> *Plus d’un* also means in French “no more one.” Derrida used the phrase “plus d’un” obsessively. In an essay called “Plus d’un” Nancy even called it a “fetish expression” of Derrida’s (10). Nancy also has a short book on a portrait of Derrida called *Plus d’un titre*. There is a still untranslated essay by Derrida from 1996 which discusses the lack of shared worlds, giving almost a preview of the BS seminar, called “Fidélité à plus d’un.”

<sup>36</sup> This phrase “relation without relation” originally comes from Blanchot and Levinas, but Derrida used it as well.

this). But for Nancy, on the not wholly other hand, plurality and relationality are mutually constituted: ontological solitude is a contradiction in terms.<sup>37</sup>

In Nancy the uniqueness and plurality of singularity means that it must be shared (and *be* its sharing) in and as a specific situated relational shape: the world. There are no islands, there are only worlds: “but sharing singularity (always plural) means to configure a world, a quantity of possible worlds in the world. This configuration (features, tones, modes, contacts, etc.) allows the singularities to expose themselves” (*Creation of the World* 46). These relations, these exposures, are situated in everyday spaces—and are, to be sure, *constructed* in each case—but always reach across the incommensurability of each singularity to touch. To think this through means leaving the *Schattenreich* of the Kantian *als ob*, to live and think in what Hegel in the *Phenomenology* called “the spiritual daylight of the present”—what we might call the everydaylight (111). Indeed, there are worse ways of framing the Derrida-Nancy differend than seeing it as a kind of deconstructive return of the Kant-Hegel differend. Sure enough, Hegel’s *Science of Logic* has a word for the idea that commensurability and incommensurability, quantity and quality, plurality and singularity, are unified in some strange dance(x)—Hegel calls this “measure”: “Measure, it is true, is an external kind and manner of determinateness, a more or less, but at the same time it is...a determinateness not equivalent [*gleichgültig*] and external but intrinsic. It is thus *the concrete truth of being*...Measure is itself the existing [*seiende*] unity of quality and quantity” (329-330; translation modified).<sup>38</sup>

Let’s dwell with this just a bit longer. So: there is sharing, and there is singularity (which does not refer only to human beings).<sup>39</sup> But there is singularity only through sharing with other singularities in a world. What is shared? What is shared is not a common substance, essence, ground, property, or identity, but strictly speaking, nothing: a shared groundlessness (abyss, *Ab-grund*), a mutual abandonment, a “common nonorigin,” an openness of the incommensurable (Nancy, *Fall of Sleep* 31). However this sharing in (the) nothing looks like anything but equivalence—the nothing is an opening that always inflects or radiates a particular color, flavor, caress, rhythm: resonance. And every resonance of a world necessarily inscribes a rem(a)inder of its finitude. As someone—someone quite Derridian—writes: “A world is nothing more or less than what disappears from it”

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<sup>37</sup> “The world, however, is not a room into which one enters. It is also impossible to start from the fiction of someone who is alone and who finds him or herself in the world: in both cases, the very concept of the world is destroyed. This concept is that of being-with as originary” (*Being Singular Plural* 97). In the incredible 2016 show *Stranger Things*, which is precisely and profoundly about the immanence of the incommensurable, the *oikos*, the family, and the closeness of the other world (I’ll come back to this with regard to Moten and others), which in the show is called the Upside Down, Winona Ryder’s character Joyce Byers says to her son Jonathan (in Episode 7): “This is not yours to fix alone. You act like you’re all alone out there in the world, but you’re not. You’re not alone.”

<sup>38</sup> On this see also Hegel’s *Encyclopedia Logic*, paragraphs 106-111.

<sup>39</sup> Nancy is clear that a stone [*pierre*] is a singularity as much as a man named Pierre; he speaks of “the nonsubstitutable unicity of each singular one (be it, for example, a rock or a man named Peter [*pierre ou Pierre*])” (*Sense of the World* 68). The translator’s note to this calls our attention to the resonance of Christ’s punning designation of St. Peter as the rock of the Church, but I wonder if Nancy is not also thinking of Derrida’s son *Pierre* Alféri. Indeed on the very next page, in the same discussion of singularity, he cites Alféri’s book on Ockham and singularity (as he does throughout *The Sense of the World*). I also think Derrida encodes the name of his son in his discussion of the “stumbling block” [*pierre d’achoppement*] in BSII (6). My suggestion might seem less extravagant if we remember that Derrida admitted encrypting the names of parents and other family members in texts like *The Post Card* (for example, Derrida’s father’s name was Aimé, which is also the French word “loved” (*aimé*), and he had a brother named René (the lowercase *rené* means “reborn”)) (*Points* 120). Thus every time he wrote the words “reborn” or “loved,” Derrida was thinking of his family. It’s hard to imagine this wasn’t the same for “stone” [*pierre*] as well. One of Derrida’s great, longstanding obsessions was the place of (auto)biography generally and in particular its role in philosophy—he would even refer to the human being as the “autobiographical animal” (*The Animal That Therefore I Am* 29). And Nancy says of Derrida: “Throughout [Derrida’s] work autobiography is at issue to such an extent that all other questions appear secondary or derived” (*Finite Thinking* 114). Remember: “La nature de la pierre *est* la pierre.”

(Nathanaël, *Asclepias: The Milkweeds* 8). The thought or wager that groundlessness takes (and gives) place as a situated relational resonance is what I earlier called the immanence of the incommensurable, or an immanent excess; against the temptations of grandiose void, or a huge oceanic abyss, Nancy helps us think the utter mundaneness—the domesticity, one almost wants to say the ecology—of the open: “the only chance for *sens*...reside[s] in the very opening of the abandonment of sense, as the opening of the world. But the ‘open’ is neither the vague quality of an indeterminate yawning nor that of a halo of sentimental generosity. Tightly woven and narrowly articulated, it constitutes the structure of *sens qua sens* of the world” (*Sense of the World* 3). Groundlessness, as he similarly writes in *The Inoperative Community*, is less “the gaping chasm of an abyss than it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities” (27). *Sens* means that—and *is* that—there is an excess or incommensurability, but that this is only ever immanent in the everyday. To think groundless relationality is thus a matter of tracing the banality, the very “triviality of *sens*” (*Sense of the World* 18). This curious quest of the ordinary of *sens* is, as Stanley Cavell knew, deeply tied up with what we call Romanticism. Indeed it has recently been argued that Romanticism engenders not just the (re-)enchantment but the very “*emergence* of the everyday” as such.<sup>40</sup> With his early book on Romanticism *The Literary Absolute*, Nancy himself started off his career as something like a Romanticist. So I follow Theresa Kelley in arguing that, in his later work on community and singularity, he remains one: “to claim, as Nancy then does, that what mediates between singularity and community is a ‘transcendent curiosity’ on either side seems at once profoundly attractive and Romantic” (“Introduction” 11).

To recap, then: both Derrida and Nancy think the incommensurable as the open(ing), gap, spacing, groundlessness, an outside, an excess (*démessure*) that ensures unique singularity’s resistance to totalization, quantification, and hierarchy. So far so good. But in contradistinction to Derrida, for Nancy this excessive opening is *immanent* to the world, it bears the weight and shape and beat of the present and the everyday, as well as the practices and concepts we inherit (like fraternity and community). The excess of *sens* (or *sens* of excess) is like the chipped tooth in the smile or grimace of the world, what Moten calls “another world in the world.”<sup>41</sup> In a public discussion between Nancy, Derrida, and others in 2002—i.e., contemporary with *Rogues* and the BS seminar—Nancy reiterates the point that *sens*, which is irreducibly common, always inheres in (i.e., is not utterly heterogeneous to) a situated structure of relationality: “sense [*sens*], the sense of sense, is for me always a call that comes from *within any community or any world*”; a bit later, after some prodding from Derrida on “your [i.e. you Nancy] ever-present concern for opening,” Nancy protests that “the opening is not just some infinite gaping” (*For Strasbourg* 70, 76, 78). For Derrida, however, this emphasis on the opening immanent to the present (“*within any community or any world*”) is too close to *presence* (and origin, nature, etc.). This is why Derrida’s conception of singularity, indeed so much of his late thought, is tied to a radical notion of the *event*. I’ll address this in the next section,

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<sup>40</sup> See William Galperin’s essay “The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday,” which argues for the Romanticism’s key role in the arrival of a “new category of experience,” the everyday, as opposed to the idea of the “probable” that was dominant through most of the eighteenth century (19).

<sup>41</sup> “I believe in the world and want to be in it. I want to be in it all the way to the end of it because I believe in another world in the world and I want to be in *that*” (*The Undercommons* 118). In other critical works (not to mention his poetry) Moten, a great reader of Derrida it should be noted, expresses something similar. At the beginning of “Black Op,” he writes that in his vision of Black Studies: “Its broken, coded documents sanction walking in another world while passing through this one” (1743). In “Blackness and Nothingness,” he speaks of trying to get “to the elsewhere and elsewhere that I already inhabit but which I have to keep learning to desire” (746). All I’m trying to say is kind of a gloss on that: the other world isn’t out there, we already inhabit it, we have to constantly keep learning to see(d) it and care for it in and as the immanent excess of our broken world. This problematic was already a Shelleyan one: “We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know” (*Defense of Poetry*).

but let us note that the *venir* contained in the world *e-vent* suggests a “to come” (*l’avenir, à venir*), even though this coming is not the coming of a presence, messianic or otherwise. The event of (or as) the other can bear no trace of the present; it is not immanent in the present, which is the time of the everyday—the other’s singular incommensurability is untouchable, it is protected, buffered, buffeted by only the open sea. It has to transcend any horizon of expectation or intelligibility—it is transcendent(al). Because for Derrida the singularity’s incommensurability is entirely “heterogeneous” to any common measure, making the common measure external to the singularity, this incommensurability cannot partake in any structure of relationality; now thinking (nonhierarchical) measure while still avoiding ontotheology (i.e. measure given by a transcendent being or ground) becomes extremely difficult: for he must either relegate the measure of the other into some radically foreign event(u)al space, or he must effectively deny measure altogether and end up with infinitely lonely islands. Were you expecting me to say: same difference?

I know I’ve been repeating myself, but I’m writing, in a way, about return, so please give me some *Spielraum*. But one more time, Jean-Luc: “The measure of unmeasure does not come to control or bridle unmeasure: it is its very rhythm” (*Sense of the World* 142). For Nancy, again, measure in this sense does not “come” from outside to impose itself on and constrict incommensurable singularity, like a wolf lying in wait or a computer virus: measure is that singularities can and do make sense in their everyday being-with-one-another. Measure is singularity’s meter, its rhythm or common trembling: a *pas de deux, pas de deux* with no doubles, *pas au-delà*, here and now, “already at some level realized, already present, in the rhythm of this temporizing—in the scansion of these small, necessarily circumscribed advances, exercises in companionate walking, or intervals in time” (François, “Little While” 145). But to take measure(s) in this sense and not (only) in Rousseau/critique/Derrida’s sense, is an exigency, a chance, a struggle, in short, politics: there is the threat and fact of equivalence, all too generally imposed by capital, there is hierarchy, there is the violent naturalization of this violent hierarchy, there is ecocide and mass extinction. We can’t turn away. We need critique desperately, but perhaps we need it to be a little less afraid of nature, of the bridges that connect us—maybe to look at bridges a little more like Hart Crane looked at them: “Unspeakable Thou Bridge to Thee O love” (Crane). What would it mean to think about our configurations of the everyday as not wholly tainted and exhausted by constricting measure, but rather also containing a bright, quiet kernel of common incommensurability, of groundless relationality? How can we understand everyday rhythms of the common as furtively modeling a political ontology of sharing, a form-of-life? What about a poetic ontology? What would it mean to read poems with this in mind? In what ways would it make sense to call this kind of thinking, reading, being, and writing Romantic? What would it mean to think and to treat, beyond and against any quietism, these motile sites of quotidian commonness and sharing as “cultivated” spaces of “situated volatility,” perpetually on the edge of some eruption of the incommensurable that would sear and s(t)eal us in a new way of being together (Moten “Black Op” 1743)? I’ll let these guiding questions linger and conclude this section with a passage on world, sharing, modernity, and measure by Édouard Glissant, who knew something about islands:

Measure is not Reason nor simply the work of reason. It is *choice*, by which the being puts an end to his liberty in the world and offers to share in it.

The being is *suddenly* modern.  
 He reaches for the world but with passion.  
 He lives Measure Immeasurably.

The being who bursts forth with Immeasure, through struggle, grabs the right to Measure. (*Poetic Intention* 148, trans. Nathanaël)

### III. Et in Akedah Ego, or, Of Raised Knives and Wholly Other Domestic Difficulties

“Beyond the bounds of the ordinary world of lives and houses, unguessed, undreamed of in their commonsense philosophy, lies the vast realm of the improbable: a world too disordered, so it would seem, to hold together for a fortnight, let alone for several years. And yet these lives, these houses continue to maintain a precious equilibrium in defiance of all laws of man and nature. All the same, persons who base their calculations on the inexorable presence of the force of circumstance assume, correctly, that such lives are doomed.

The world owes its enchantment to these curious creatures and their fancies, but its multiple complicity rejects them. Thistledown spirits, tragic, heart-rending in their evanescence, they must go blowing headlong to perdition. And yet, all started harmlessly, in childish games and laughter...” –Jean Cocteau, *Les Enfants Terribles*

To return to the *oikos*. We have already had occasion to touch on Derrida’s suspicion of the everyday, domestic, the proximate, the family, and the familiar—of which fraternity is just one instantiation—but it bears a little more investigating. Basically, I want to see just how we got where we were, that is, how Derrida arrives at his ontology of worldless, senseless, unshareable isolation. My question is thus: is Derrida’s late melancholic vision of islands with no ontology of relation(ality) an anomaly, or can we trace the seeds of this conception in his previous works? How do we get from the Other to the island?

The family, the familiar, and the domestic had long been a concern of Derrida; consider, for example, the great essay of 1968 “The Ends of Man,” which ends with a vision of someone like an *Übermensch*, “not the last man,” dancing “outside the house” (*Margins* 136). There is also an extensive discussion of Hegel, Christianity, and the family in 1974’s *Glas*, a text drawn in part from his 1971-1972 seminar on “La Famille de Hegel” (to be published eventually in the same series that published the BS seminars). According to John Caputo, for Derrida “the family is the circular economy that engenders an other that is the same”—the familiar threat of the double; so the task of deconstruction is “to break out of, to exceed, this family circle” (*Prayers and Tears* 237). *Oikos* as eco is merely ec(h)o: domestic doubling. Against the paternal domestic regime of the family that always has a Father, deconstruction is on the side of the “bastard” (Hegel fathered an “illegitimate” son; so did Derrida in 1984, which was a deeply torturous experience for him).<sup>42</sup> Decades later in a book-length discussion with Elisabeth Roudinesco, Derrida went so far as to claim that “we could show that deconstruction has always been ‘of the family,’ ‘deconstruction of the family’ (with a few small ‘revolutionary’ consequences for civil society and the state, which I will leave it you to imagine)” (*For*

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<sup>42</sup> For more on the bastard in Derrida, see Krell’s book *The Purest of Bastards*. As Krell points out, the Logos, though associated with the son in Christianity, indexes a logocentric reproduction of the same or doubling within the family: “if the *logos-père* is that-which-is, then the *logos-fils*, mimicking that-which-is, writes itself in two forms or moments of familial repetition... Writing is... [the] inevitable contamination of all domesticities” (206). Derrida’s long extramarital affair that resulted in a son was with the philosopher and writer Sylviane Agacinski, who, remarkably, was writing about the event, the other, Kierkegaard’s reading of the Abraham episode, singularity, and even Derrida’s *La Carte Postale*, at the exact same time that Derrida was writing about these issues—the mid 1990’s, long after they had broken up. See Agacinski’s *Critique de l’égocentrisme: L’événement de l’autre* (1996). Agacinski’s reading of *The Post Card* is even more revealing when one recalls that the love letters in that text seem to be based off the actual amorous correspondence between Agacinski and Derrida in the 1970s. It’s no accident that parent-child relations are also a dark recurring theme in *The Post Card*, e.g.: “To the devil with the child, the only thing we will have discussed, the child, the child, the child. The impossible message between us” (25).

*What Tomorrow* 36).<sup>43</sup> It's true that Derrida made many such rhetorical moves—"deconstruction has really always only ever been about X"—but this one, the claim that deconstruction is always of the family, is still quite revealing. Similarly, in *A Taste for the Secret*, he remarks rather programmatically (nodding to Gide<sup>44</sup>): "I am not one of the family" (27), associating this feeling with his general distrust of any community, tie, or structure of belonging. To reject the family is a necessary condition of singularity.<sup>45</sup>

For Derrida, as we saw in the above discussion of fraternity, the domestic, the *oikos*, the everyday, and the familiar are often tied to what should garner our suspicion and summon a deconstruction; they are scions of the metaphysics of presence: sameness, closure and self-enclosure, circularity, nature, presence, the proper, even the dreaded common measure—in *The Politics of Friendship*, Derrida places "common measure" in synonymous apposition to "*oikeiotes*," the Greek word meaning "intimacy, relationship, kinship, familiarity," a word obviously deriving from *oikos* (35).<sup>46</sup> The domestic for him is only ever the place of closure and the proper(ty), the *oikos* of economy. Derrida even speaks of "the double bind of the domestic cage" (BS I.60).<sup>47</sup> So then what gets us out of the cage, how does Derrida get "outside the house," what resists this familial regime of the familiar? The answer resides in a single untranslatable phrase, a flummoxing formula: *tout autre est tout autre*. Every other is wholly other.

Derrida began using this phrase in the early 1990s, and from then on it increasingly occurred in his output, functioning—like singularity—as a kind of watchword, an elliptical summary of his

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<sup>43</sup> It seems that Derrida here is implicitly referring to the Hegelian triad of Family, Civil Society, and the State, which in Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* make up the three parts of *Sittlichkeit* or "ethical life," which is itself the third component in another larger triad preceded by Abstract Right and Morality. Concerning revolution—since Derrida says "revolutionary"—and the family, it would be interesting to think this whole problematic in dialogue with the analysis pursued in Suzanne Desan's *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*. From a very different perspective, but getting at similar key themes, worth mentioning is a recent book on the domestic as a site of relational incommensurability: Kennan Ferguson's *All In the Family: On Community and Incommensurability*. I take up these themes in more detail in my chapter on the Wordsworths.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of this phrase of Derrida's in relation to his beloved Gide's hatred of "les foyers, les familles, tout lieu où l'homme pense trouver un repos," as well as to Genet and the anti-social thought of Leo Bersani, see Olivia Gunn's article "Je ne suis pas de la famille: Queerness as Exception Gide's *L'immoraliste* and Genet's *Journal du Voleur*." This opens onto the larger and very important issue, which I can't treat here, of community and kinship in queer theory.

<sup>45</sup> "I am not part of any group... 'I am not one of the family' means: do not consider me 'one of you,' 'don't count me in,' I want to keep my freedom, always. This, for me, is the condition not only for being singular and other, but also for entering into relation with the singularity and alterity of others" (*Taste for the Secret* 27). The problem with all this is found in that last phrase—relation in not something "entered into," i.e. external to singularity, as if there were an isolated, pre-relational singularity that could then choose to enter into this or that relation according to its sovereign whim.

<sup>46</sup> "[F]riends who are alone because they are incomparable and without common measure, reciprocity or equality. Therefore, without a horizon of recognition. Without a familial bond, without proximity, without *oikeiotes*" (*Politics of Friendship* 35). Later in this text, Derrida makes explicit the connection between *oikeiotes* and *oikos* on the one hand, and presence and nature, on the other, in the context of a discussion of Plato's *Lysis*: "The value of *oikeiotes* dominates the end of [the *Lysis*]...It frequently qualifies the bond of friendship itself, an always natural bond...but it forms an indissociable network of significations which are of import to us here, a semantic locus totally assembled, precisely, around the hearth (*oikos*), the home, the habitat, the domicile—and grave: kinship—literal or metaphorical—domesticity, familiarity, property, therefore appropriability, proximity: everything an *economy* can reconcile, adjust or harmonize, I will go so far as to say *present*, in the *familiarity* of the *near* and the *neighbor*" (154; Derrida's emphasis).

<sup>47</sup> Regarding the cage: in his discussion of G.M Hopkins's coinage "inscape" as singularity in the essay "Justices," Derrida notes Hopkins's research into the etymology of "scape," which may have originally meant "cage." Thus the true cage is not the domestic but the enclosed singularity. Moten nods to Hopkins's term in a poem in *The Service Porch*, but adding a crucial caveat: "Inscape be constantly exscaping" (111). The fact that inscape is its singular shape by *exposure* to relationality ("exscaping") leads us, as Moten says in the same poem, to the "impossibility of an isolated / singularity."

conception of alterity.<sup>48</sup> For the later Derrida, this deeply Levinasian gesture simply means that the alterity of the other is absolute and infinite—the other is and always remains completely unknowable, ungraspable, transcendent to me, utterly incommensurable and wholly unlike me (wholly other). There are not degrees (quantities, measures) of alterity—every single other is similarly infinitely other to me; in this way, the *tout autre* is intimately and explicitly connected with Derrida’s notion of the monstrous/monster and the event. Over and against the dangers of domestication and familiarity, then, ethics would consist in “respect[ing] the distance of infinite alterity as singularity” (“Faith and Knowledge” 60).<sup>49</sup> I don’t want to spill too much more ink on Derrida’s notion of absolute alterity, as it is pretty well-established territory, but I do want to note how close we are again to the dynamic of the monster and the double we traced in Rousseau, where the absolutely other and the same turn out to be one: for whatever else it is, *tout autre est tout autre* is also a tautology and a formula for substitution (Derrida is aware of this irony), a kind of verbal doubling that blurs the lines between something completely monstrously different and something identical.<sup>50</sup> We could thus say that Derrida’s slogan of singularity occurs precisely as a doubling. Now I wish briefly to look at an aspect of the problematic of the *tout autre* through the lens we have set up so far.

Derrida discusses the *tout autre est tout autre* formula first and certainly most extensively in *The Gift of Death* (Fr. *Donner la mort*), which uses the phrase as a title of one of the book’s chapters. I take this exacting, tormented book to be something of a disaster. By now we are in a position to observe that it is probably not accidental that the first use of this phrase occurs in the context of a famous scene of family troubles, indeed of domestic violence: Abraham’s *akedab* and almost-sacrifice of his son Isaac.<sup>51</sup> It would appear that, for Derrida as for Morrissey, barbarism begins at home: domestic

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<sup>48</sup> I have followed Kas Saghafi’s translation of *tout autre est tout autre* as “every other is wholly other.” The French phrase works by repeating the two words “tout autre” but changing their grammatical part of speech: the first *tout* is an adjective and the first *autre* is a noun (“every other person”), while the second *tout* is an adverb and the second *autre* is an adjective (“wholly, or completely, other”). For a partial catalogue of the many different ways this phrase has been translated, and a good list of Derrida’s works where this phrase occurs, see Kas Saghafi’s *Apparitions—Of Derrida’s Other* 172-173n.

<sup>49</sup> The late Derrida’s ethical language increasingly becomes about “respect,” though it’s never quite clear what this “respecting the absolute singularity, the infinite separation” of other is supposed to look like or consist of (*Gift of Death* 122). This emphasis on “respect” is one of several ways that the late Derrida’s ethics and politics edge into a kind of liberalism.

<sup>50</sup> Strangely enough, in an important early essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida builds a respectful but trenchant critique of Levinas’s notion of alterity on almost precisely these grounds (i.e., that the infinitely Other begins to resemble the Same). I am not the first to suggest that Derrida’s early critique of Levinas could perhaps be applied to the later Derrida himself—this suggestion is made by Jack Reynolds (“[Derrida] now propounds a closely related position [to Levinas], and it seems that some of Derrida’s earlier criticisms of Levinas are, in fact, relevant to his own increasingly prophetic concerns”) (54) and, glancingly, by Kevin Hart (330n). A slightly different version of this critique of Derrida’s (and Levinas’s) absolute other is made by Catherine Malabou (a former student of Derrida). She discusses this in several places—take this 2008 interview for instance, where she touches in particular on two issues that have preoccupied me, loneliness and parent-child relations: “[My work] opposes Lévinas’ vision of ethics as defined by some radical other...If you read Lévinas closely, sometimes he seems to say, and Derrida says the same thing, that the other is so remote that it is impossible to act in his or her place. You can’t decide for him or her. For example if you have a child, or it is his or her decision, there’s nothing I can do for him and for her. This is the way in which this ethical vision is not so pure. The other is so remote that it creates a sort of loneliness of the other as such. My vision of things is much more based on reciprocal and mutual relationships” (11-12). Since one way I have been framing the late Derrida’s conception of alterity is that it is a Kantian one as opposed to a more historical and situated Hegelian one, it is not incidental for me to point out that Malabou is an avowed Hegelian, continually in dialogue with Hegel even in her recent work on neurobiology. If space allowed, this would be another place to engage further Derrida’s idea of alterity as it relates to his idea of narcissism.

<sup>51</sup> Since Derrida’s friend (and Yale School-er) Geoffrey Hartman wrote influentially on Wordsworth and *akedab*, in addition to having authored a book on Derrida’s *Glas*, this problematic of *akedab* would be an apt site to triangulate Hartman, Derrida, and Wordsworth in a further investigation of the relation between deconstruction and Romanticism.

violence is a pleonasm. Drawing on the Biblical account and on Kierkegaard's reading thereof, Derrida seeks to demonstrate that "since each of us, every one else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary...then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to *every other (one) as every (bit) other* [*tout autre comme tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret, and as transcendent as Jahweh" (*The Gift of Death* 78). The other, every other but including my family and neighbors, is as transcendent to me as God, fully surpassing any attempt to grasp or relate except in a "relation without relation": untouchable. Already we can see how Derrida is well on his way to the islands of the late BS seminar, for the consequence (and presupposition) of the *tout autre* is solitude—the absolute solitude of God.<sup>52</sup>

But what really interests me is a passage where Derrida takes up not the paradigm of the Abraham-God relation, but the Abraham-Isaac relation. Here he wrestles agonizingly with how to reconcile the experience of the everyday with the ontological claim that *tout autre est tout autre*. For if every other is wholly other, and every single other makes an infinite and incalculable ethical claim upon me from the depths of their unique singularity, how do I possibly justify the fact that I choose to help some and not others? How dare I be intimate and familiar with some ones, even claim to love some particular ones (and feed some particular cats), when this occurs at the expense of everyone else I ignore? For

As soon as I enter into a relation with the other...I know that I can respond only by sacrificing ethics, that is to say by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all the others. I put to death [*Je donne la mort*], I betray and lie, I don't need to raise my knife over my son on Mount Moriah for that. *Day and night, at every instant, on all the Mount Moriahs of this world, I am doing that, raising my knife over what I love and must love, over the other, to this or that other to whom I owe absolute fidelity, incommensurably...I am sacrificing and betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don't know, the billions of my fellows ['semblables'] who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens...thus also to those I love in private, my own, my family, my sons, each of whom is the only son I sacrifice to the other, every other one being sacrificed to every one else in this land of Moriah that is our habitat every second of every day...*

And I can never justify this sacrifice, I must always hold my peace about it. Whether I want to or not, I will never be able to justify the fact that I prefer or sacrifice any one (any other) to the other...What binds me to singularities, to this one or that one, male or female, rather than that one or this one, remains finally unjustifiable, as unjustifiable as the infinite sacrifice I make at each moment. These singularities represent others, a wholly other form of alterity: one other or some other persons, but also places, animals, languages. How would you ever justify that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every day for years, whereas

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<sup>52</sup> I quote Derrida on the solitude of God, from "Justices" again: "What is thus given to us to think, to the point of vertigo, is perhaps the divine character of solitude. But it is above all this, which we are not always ready to think: the terrible and uncanny solitude of God. God is alone. Of course, the solitude of human singularity is in the image of that of God. But God is the most solitary of all his creatures. As he is unique, exceptional, as he is alone in being God, by essence, by definition, par excellence, as he is all alone, as he is alone in being so alone, he is more alone than anyone, and he feels alone, so alone" (702). For a nice recent take on the idea of God's solitude in German Romantic philosophy, see Jason Wirth's *Schelling's Practice of the Wild*.

other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people?...There is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads us to absolute sacrifice[.] (*The Gift of Death* 69-71; *Donner la mort* 98-101; my emphasis)

This should remind us of the BSII passage above where Derrida asked how we account for the fact that we do actually communicate, and even have intimacy with those we “stupidly” call “our own” (*les nôtres*): our family. Here, though, it becomes a matter of accounting for and justifying preference—how do we account for the lived fact that we love only particularly? Quite simply, for Derrida, we cannot. Derrida is tortured by this aporia generated by the absence of any general principle that would justify ethical choice, the choices and sacrifices we constantly make, consciously or not, at every moment of life. Because we cannot justify being with some and not others, every relation for Derrida has the structure of sacrifice; every choice entails the sacrifice of every other possibility that that choice erases. To try to justify our preference for our family and loved ones is to ontologize and naturalize a totally contingent—indeed conventional—relation. This, then, is Derrida’s most revealing conceptual picture of the everyday, the domestic, the family, the habitat(ion) and the *oikos*, one that by now we can put in larger perspective: “this land of Moriah is our habitat every second of every day.” Saying that every aspect and action of everyday life, even one as banal and domestic as feeding one’s cat, actually consists of holding a knife over all our only sons—over all creation under the sun—in fact constitutes a radical *rejection* of the everyday. Once again, for Derrida, the everydayness of relationality (and the relationality of everydayness) hides a violence. As in Rousseau, preference—the quantitative hierarchical ranking of qualitative singularities—is the essence of evil.<sup>53</sup>

In a way, Derrida is of course profoundly right. We absolutely cannot give grounds or provide a coherent justification for our preferences in everyday life—the everyday short-circuits the Kantian order of justification, ends, maxims, and duties (one could read *The Gift of Death*, and in truth so much of the late work of Derrida, as essentially a meditation on deontological crisis). Derrida tarries, excruciatingly, with the aporia between the singular(ity) and the general, instead of thinking at the mediate level where these aporiae or incommensurabilities are constantly negotiated: the everyday. The relations of the everyday for him are an illusion, the truth of which is always only the raised knife. And yet this isn’t something to agonize over—for everyday relationality is not on the order of justification and grounds, but on the order (which is not really an order) of *sens*. The everyday is precisely, and mundanely, *groundless*. Derrida refuses to accede to the ontological bearing of the everyday, however, because to do so is to risk naturalizing it (as we saw above) and perpetuating its violent hierarchies. By the same token, for Derrida, to domesticate singularity is to naturalize and neutralize it, to give it a measure, a structure (i.e. stricture), and a rhythm of relationality. Once again we are back with Rousseau, who blames *literal* domestication—the first building of huts and thus the emergence of settled families—for the “first revolution” that helped bring about the Fall out of the state of nature (which, as we know from the first chapter, was a fall from singularity into relationality).<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Cf. *Of Grammatology*: “As always in Rousseau, evil here has the form of determination, of comparison, and of *preference*. That is to say of difference” (175). If preference represents an evil temptation for Rousseau and the later Derrida, I wonder what it means that the final sentence in the final *Athenaeum* fragment of early German Romanticism—the Romantic fragment, that literary mode so important to Blanchot and Nancy, and so integral to the idea of an inoperative community—represents an explicit embrace of preference, from Friedrich Schlegel to Novalis: “Dich nenne ich statt aller anderen” (*Athenäums-Fragmente* 132).

Instead of the *situated* contingency of the everyday, Derrida gives us a *sheer* contingency, absolute contingency, sheared, unshared, and ab-solved from any necessary relationality, *ab-solutus* (ab-solute). This sheer contingency means “we must always start over” (*The Gift of Death* 80), we cannot settle into any measured structure, familiarity, or rhythm—we cannot go or return home.<sup>55</sup> For as Henri Lefebvre reminds us: “No rhythm without repetition in time and space...without returns, in short without *measure*” (*Rhythmanalysis* 16). The monstrous *tout autre* is who or what cannot be at home.<sup>56</sup> We can now see how and why event, monster, and *l’avenir* are so closely associated for Derrida, and so closely associated with “the other.” The wholly other has the obscure shape of the monstrous future,<sup>57</sup> the incalculable arrival of singularity that Derrida calls the event:

the event, of what *comes to pass* only once, only one time, a single time, a first and last time, in an always singular, unique, exceptional, irreplaceable, unforeseeable, and incalculable fashion... The event must announce itself as im-possible; it must thus announce itself without calling in advance, without forewarning [*prévenir*], announcing itself without announcing itself, without any horizon of expectation, any telos, formation, form, or teleological preformation. Whence its always monstrous, unrepresentable character. (*Rogues* 135, 144)<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> In Rousseau the beginning of settling into the house or *oikos* is also the origin of the family, the system of equivalence that is property, and other disasters: “Soon ceasing to fall asleep underneath the first tree or to withdraw into Caves, they found they could use hard, sharp stones as hatchets to cut wood, dig in the ground, and make huts of branches which it later occurred to them to daub with clay ad mud. This was a period of a first revolution which brought about the establishment and the differentiation of families, and introduced a sort of property” (*Discourses* 164).

<sup>55</sup> In many different texts Derrida says some version of “we must always start over,” thus associating singularity with a nominalism of the instant, a pathos of pure improvisation. This in at least one instance is linked to the question of a “common measure”: “we have no neutral resource here, no common measure given by a third party. [Hospitality] has to be invented at every moment, with every sentence, without assurance” (*Points* 363). For a few similar remarks about always starting over see, for example, *For Strasbourg* (68) and “Avowing—The Impossible” (27). In contrast to this, I’m trying to think singularity not as constantly starting over from scratch, but as a rhythm and return, as habit(at)(ual) and relational. For an analysis of a similar problematic in relation to ecological and agricultural practices, see Anne-Lise François on the proverb “Einmal ist keinmal” (via Ann Smock) in her essay “Shadow Boxing.” Fred Moten’s discourse on improvisation in *In the Break* is also relevant, with its recourse to what Nathaniel Mackey calls “an insistent previousness evading each and every natal occasion.”

<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the secret—another concept Derrida closely links to singularity—is never domestic, never at home: “A secret doesn’t belong, it can never be said to be at home or in its place [*chez soi*]” (*Gift of Death* 92). But must the denial of home go all the way down? Regarding the relationality of the *chez* (that singular French preposition of domesticity), here is Moten glossing a (mis)translation of Fanon’s “*chez lui*,” in the context of Fanon’s critique, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, of Western ontology’s (which is to say Western society’s) constitutive denial of the possibility of black relationality: “The standpoint, the home territory, *chez lui*—Charles Lam Markmann’s insightful mistranslation of Fanon illuminates something that Richard Philcox obscures by way of correction, *Among one’s own*, signifies a relationality that displaces the already displaced impossibility of home and the modes of relationality that home is supposed to afford... But not simply to be among one’s own; rather, also, to live among one’s own in dispossession, to live among the ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything. To live, in other words, within the general commonness and openness of a *l’être*” (“Blackness and Nothingness” 756).

<sup>57</sup> “A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future: it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow” (*Points* 387). Once again Derrida’s binary is all or nothing—either completely monstrous or totally predictable. What about a space between these? I don’t know for certain what’s going to happen tomorrow for me, but I have a pretty good idea. Along these lines, Derrida used the first part of Victor Hugo’s line “For what tomorrow will be, no one knows” as the title of his book *For What Tomorrow*...

<sup>58</sup> cf. Derrida’s “Faith and Knowledge”: “The absence of horizon conditions the future itself. The emergence of the event ought to puncture every horizon of expectation... the opening, to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration. The coming of the other can only emerge as a singular event when no anticipation sees it coming, when the other and death-and radical evil-can come

Just as earlier in *Rogues* the incommensurable was radically “heterogeneous” to common measure, here the event is radically heterogeneous to the everyday. The event for Derrida occurs only once, always for the “first and last time”; while on the other hand, as Blanchot writes, “the everyday is what we never see for a first time, but can only see again” (*The Infinite Conversation* 240).<sup>59</sup> If “we must always start over,” as Derrida says, if there is no “horizon of expectation” whatsoever for the event of singularity which is completely “irreplaceable, unforeseeable,” sheer contingency, then the singularity cannot have any relation to the everyday, which is the site of the familiar and the place of return. Once again, Derrida draws a strict transcendent(al) boundary between the “monstrous” and incommensurable “to come” on the one hand, and the everyday on the other; he overlooks the possibility of the immanent excess—what Moten calls the “situated volatility”—of *sens*: *sens* which returns to us (and to which we return) in and as rhythm. “Nothing ever comes back to the living,” remarks Derrida, who in another text even spoke of the “holocaustic generality of return” (*Ear of the Other* 7; *Sovereignities in Question* 48). Return’s holocaust annihilates singularity.<sup>60</sup> But to refuse return means, quite literally and simultaneously, to refuse relation: relation, from Latin *re-latio*, i.e., “bringing back.” And if there is no horizon at all, there can be no common contour or bounding line—no sharing of, at, and as the exposed limit; since no horizon means no limit, the incommensurable other would then indeed be “some infinite gaping,” a vast ocean between us. No habit(at)(ation), no *oikos*. No recognition, no mediation of singularity. No bridges, but only what Blake calls “an ocean of voidness unfathomable” (*The Book of Urizen* 5:11; E 73).

What I’ve been trying to say is this: Derrida’s aversion to “community,” “fraternity,” “the family,” etc., is not just a terminological reticence, but a refusal to see how relationality always constitutes singularity in a situated rhythm of everydayness. Derrida worries that to think, to think *ontologically*, at the level of this everydayness is to give ground(s) to what should be groundless, that is, to naturalize a contingent common measure that has imposed itself on a unique and solitary singularity. He instead offers the *tout autre*, the monster, the event, the to come—all rigorous apparatuses for *keeping open*.<sup>61</sup> I hope to have shown, though, how such vigilance for absolute openness can undermine the task of nurturing the openness(es) exposed in everyday practices of

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as a surprise at any moment...The messianic exposes itself to absolute surprise” (47, 56). The question of the messianic in Derrida, and its relation to the event, has generated a great deal of commentary. See, for example, Michael Marder’s *The Event of the Thing*, or any number of works by John Caputo. As opposed to Derrida (or Badiou or Deleuze or Lyotard or Romano, say), Nancy is *not* a thinker of the event. This is an important distinction. “There is no road to Damascus for *sens*,” he writes (*Sense of the World* 17).

<sup>59</sup> The fact that the event occurs only ever for the first time is another connection to the monster, of which Derrida says the exact same thing: “The monster is also that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized” (*Points* 386). We might draw a comparison here to how Rousseau describes the state of nature, where people see each other always as if for the first time, not even recognizing their own children. People see each other always as if as monsters—hence also the natural man seeing another man and thinking him a *géant*.

<sup>60</sup> This is Derrida’s own language. See Derrida on Nazism, the name, and singularity in “Force of Law” 58-61. Nazism wanted to eradicate “the singularity of the signature and of the name...there was [in Nazism] a destruction or a project of destruction of the name” (“Force” 60). How astonishingly different from the Derrida of *Of Grammatology*, who is so suspicious of the name and for whom the trace is “the concept that destroys its name” (OG 61). This broaches a question that lurks in the background of my discussion but which I cannot directly address: the issue of Derrida’s Jewishness, and for that matter, Nancy’s Catholicism.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida himself states that “Deconstruction...demonstrates the impossibility of closure” (“Some Statements and Truisms” 86). Cf. John Caputo’s programmatic claim about deconstruction: “The very ‘axioms,’ the axiomatics and axiology of deconstruction—beyond and passing through any ethics of prescriptions—is *always and everywhere to keep the future open*” (“Return of Anti-Religion” 83). Caputo and Martin Hägglund are engaged in a lively ongoing debate about this very question; for their latest positions, see their essays in the recent collection *The Trace of God: Derrida and Religion*.

sharing: something like what David Graeber calls “everyday communism,” or C.L.R. James recognized as clandestinely existing socialism on the capitalist shop floor.<sup>62</sup>

Derrida’s injunction to affirm and respond to the absolute openness of the *tout autre* or the event—which we know is the openness of the open sea—cannot account for the community and relationality that we already practice in the everyday (across and despite, or rather because of, incommensurability) without throwing these practices out almost entirely. That is to say, the late Derrida has trouble salvaging or generalizing practices of the common, because for him each of these practices actually indexes an infinity of raised knives over the world, in addition to conjuring the constant threat of naturalization. Like most strands of critique, Derrida—understandably—wants to unsettle the everyday, but the everyday is itself already a constant living with the unsettlement of Being, the unsettlement that Being *is*, in its groundlessness. The everyday is the coping with the frictions that arise from the incommensurabilities seething up in, from, and as the world; the everyday is a form of living with these frictions more bearably, domesticating them, maybe dancing in spite of them or even with them, in and out of rhythm. Rhythm or *rhuthmos* (ῥυθμός), as Benveniste has shown, originally means, like *logos*, a movement of collecting and assembling.<sup>63</sup> Rhythm: the bright logic of gathering.

So the invaluable gift of Derrida’s thought must be supplemented by a thought of what Lauren Berlant calls—in a Derridian formulation—the “ordinary to come” (408). This would entail finding the “to come” always immanent in the ordinary, hiding precisely in the horizons which are the folds and weaves and cuts of the world(s); it would also entail, as Berlant suggests, a thought and practice of “the commons [that] seeks out infrastructures for sustaining the mutations that emerge from the chains that are already snapping against those exposed to regimes of austerity” (414).<sup>64</sup> To sustain mutations, to foment and foster immanent ruptures in equivalence, is to Romanticize the world. The “ordinary to come” means that the “to come” is already here, that any radical ordinary or ordinary to come would only be different in the recognition that its very ordinariness (which is ours) spills over an exigent communist excess, just as it conducts whatever responses to local exigencies follow from this recognition. We *do* fight to keep openness open, and plurality plural, and community common, but this means paying more attention to situatedness, resonance, and rhythm; paying attention to the way things locally open themselves, like in the gradually vibrating strangeness and tenderness of a Morandi table or an Arvo Pärt melody or a Tarkovsky long take or a Homeric simile. This attention does not entail nominalism and does not preclude thought on the scale of the global.

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<sup>62</sup> On “everyday communism,” see David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5000 Years*: “The peasants’ visions of communistic brotherhood did not come out of nowhere. They were rooted in real daily experience: of the maintenance of common fields and forests, of everyday cooperation and neighborly solidarity. It is out of such homely experience of everyday communism that grand mythic visions are always built” (326). For the idea of everyday acts of cooperation and resistance as being “the outposts of a new society,” see C.L.R. James’s and Grace C. Lee’s *Facing Reality* (154). There the “fundamental task” is “to recognize the socialist society and to record the facts of its existence” (117). Along these lines, though from a quite different perspective, Agamben has just written: “In inoperativity, the classless society is already present in capitalist society” (*Use of Bodies* 94). Thus also to the great Leninist question—what is to be done?—Nancy responds: “Nous sommes déjà en train de le faire” (*Que faire?* 15)—and also “je dis simplement que nous faisons déjà.” Cf. Moten: “We have what we need...there’s nothing wrong with us” (“Black Op” 1747).

<sup>63</sup> See Benveniste’s “The Concept of Rhythm in its Linguistic Expression.”

<sup>64</sup> In adhesive apposition to Berlant’s “ordinary to come,” I would place the concept of the “radical ordinary” proposed by Coles and Hauerwas in their book, which seeks to foster “the textures of relational care for a radical ordinary. By radical ordinary we gesture to the ways in which the inexhaustible complexities of everyday life forever call forth new efforts of attention, nurture, and struggle that exceed the elements of blindness that accompany even our best words and deeds. And we think that nourishing these textures of relational care ought to be a chief aspiration of genuinely revolutionary (which is to say ‘resurrectionary’) politics” (*Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary* 4).

Indeed, thinking at the level of the global without succumbing to logics of general equivalence is exactly the difficult task that is demanded in the age of global capital and its Anthropocene. Along these lines, yet another problem with Derrida's ruthless suspicion of the *oikos* is that it makes a strictly Derridian ecology almost impossible. Ecology: *oikos* and *logos*, both of which Derrida rejects.<sup>65</sup> But what would be a post-deconstructive ecological thought, an eco-criticism in the Anthropocene? What is the fate of the everyday in the Anthropocene? Can we think an *oikos*—or as Jason Moore has proposed, an *oikeios*<sup>66</sup>—one shared with nonhuman and nonliving beings, *other* than as pure naturalization or pure culturization? Eco-criticism literally means *oikos*-criticism, and we should take this in both senses: first of all, a critique of a naturalized *oikos* and a naturalized nature that legitimizes violence to beings human and nonhuman; but secondly, eco-criticism should also designate a criticism that is attentive to the ways that relational worlds are formed, and to the situated rhythms that imperfectly sustain communities. Ecology is always situated—this is what *eco* means. There is no ecology of the *tout autre*—the very concept of “community” in ecological science (an important concept) refers to the study of local, situated patterns, habits, and structures of coexistences, with certain horizons of expectation that are still always fluctuating and flickering (increasingly irregularly, with climate change).<sup>67</sup> So an ecological criticism, in the broad sense, should

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<sup>65</sup> With an emphasis somewhat different from his early critique of logocentrism, starting in the 1980s and all the way up to the BS seminar, Derrida becomes obsessed with Heidegger's reading of the Greek *logos* and *legein*. Heidegger reaches back to the more originary meaning of *logos* as gathering and translates it into German as *Versammlung*. Via this reading of Heidegger, Derrida becomes relentlessly critical of any idea of gathering or collectivity, which in my view is deeply symptomatic of the larger rejection of any community and common that I've been tracing in this chapter. Just as any common is violence, for Derrida the gathering of *logos/legein* is always violently gathering or collecting into a homogenous unity/totality. He opposes this “gathering” to a movement of dispersal, dissemination, scattering; in 1994 he wrote: “One of the recurrent critiques or deconstructive questions I pose has to do with the privilege that Heidegger grants to what he calls *Versammlung*, gathering, which is always more powerful than dissociation. I would say exactly the opposite. Once you grant some privilege to gathering and not to dissociating, then you leave no room for the other, for the radical otherness of the other, for the radical singularity of the other” (*Deconstruction in a Nutshell* 14). See similar analyses of *Versammlung* in the “Geschlecht” series of essays on Heidegger, in *Spectres of Marx* (23ff), and in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*. For Derrida, the only truth of *logos* (like that of the *oikos*) is the master, the sovereign, the Father, the One. Towards the end of BSI, Derrida refers to *logos* as a “forced hegemony” (343). The problem here is that once again Derrida sees gathering and dispersal as *heterogeneous* to each other (like he does with commensurability and incommensurability), instead of trying to go further to think a collectivity-in-dispersal—precisely what Nancy calls *partage*, or in another key, inoperativity. The idea of gathering in and as dispersal is suggested incisively in Nathaniel Mackey's novel *Bedouin Hornbook* by another Nancy—the character Aunt Nancy, the violin player in the ensemble—who puts the following spin on what Jean-Luc calls *partage*: “I don't know where you get this business of gathering vs. dispersing...the sense of them as an either/or proposition, one a choice against the other. We inhale as well as exhale, the heart dilates as well as contracts” (12). For Derrida, the *oikos* and *logos* of eco-logy would only be the “forced hegemony” of a “domestic cage.” My thinking about this has drawn from David Farrell Krell's *Derrida and Our Animal Others* (especially 121-144) and *Phantoms of the Other*. For readings of Derrida more amenable to ecology, see the recent collection *Eco-Deconstruction*.

<sup>66</sup> On the *oikeios* see Jason Moore's landmark work *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*. Moore proposes *oikeios* to name the irreducible human-nonhuman relation and thus to try to get around the terrible nature/society dualism, which “drips with blood and dirt” (4). Moore also suggests renaming the Anthropocene as the Capitalocene, seeing capitalism as the primary culprit of the current environmental crises (see the collection on this question too, that Moore himself edited: *Anthropocene or Capitalocene?*). I understand impulse to call it the Capitalocene (or Colonialocene or Petrocene, or many more such proposed –cene names) but I stick with the Anthropocene, in part because all these various names are symptomatic of the approach I'm trying to delimit, namely, denaturalization (see my Chapter 4 on this). The thinker today who has done the most important work towards ridding us of the nature/culture divide is in my view Bruno Latour. For the late Derrida's dissatisfaction with the nature/culture binary (which of course is also a central concern in *Of Grammatology*), see BSI.15ff.

<sup>67</sup> “Community Ecology” is in fact a distinct branch of the ecological sciences. For a concise summary of the ecological concept of community, see the entry “Community” in Ernest Callenbach's *Ecology: A Pocket Guide*: “Communities in nature are convenient groups of different organisms regularly found in the same place at the same time. These groupings

take the (im)measure of—should locate, magnify, and mobilize—the everyday lived resistances to the Anthropocene, especially insofar as “the Anthropocene might be no more than a name for whatever within capitalist or industrial ‘modernity’ forces the definitive foreclosure of other ways of being modern (or other ‘uses’ of the same spaces by other creatures)” (François, “Ungiving Time”). What other modernities hide in the plain site—the common place—of the everyday?

It’s perhaps true that this chapter has made Mount Moriah out of molehills. In some ways it might be objected that I’ve been unfair, even violent, to Derrida, so let me again affirm my allegiance to him. As Derrida once claimed to “rightly pass for an atheist,” I can say I rightly pass for a deconstructionist, even a Derridian (“Circumfession” 146). So why I have attempted such a violent operation? The tendency in Derrida that this chapter has tried to draw out and highlight is heuristically important for thinking about critique and its vigilant tendency to denaturalize in the name of what Moten calls a “voraciously instrumental antiessentialism, powered in an intense and terrible way by good intentions” (Moten, “Black Op” 1744). If, as the end of the first chapter claimed, Rousseau’s historical fissuring of essence represented a kind of ur-critique, then Derrida’s even more radical ontological denaturalization of any common makes him an especial synecdoche for critique.<sup>68</sup> And this is not to mention the relevant fact that both Rousseau and Derrida were known to share the “paranoia” that Eve Sedgwick so famously diagnosed in critique.<sup>69</sup> Now, I’m not saying that all the bridges of relationality *are* natural, nor that we should commit to some kind of “politics of renaturalization,” as has been recently suggested in a Spinozist vein.<sup>70</sup> To be sure, there are extremely good reasons to be suspicious of common measure, everydayness, the *oikos*, and the hierarchies contingently embedded and encoded therein.

One of the primary reasons to be wary of naturalizing the *oikos* and the domestic is sexuality and gender. Gender oppression is inextricable from both the conceptuality and the lived history of the domestic; it cannot be ignored in any discussion of the *oikos*—or for that matter, the commons—after decades of feminist theoretical and historical work. And especially not after the powerful analyses of Silvia Federici, who in *Caliban and the Witch* shows that after the huge initial waves of enclosure in early modern Europe, women’s bodies and women’s domestic labor became the “new commons.”<sup>71</sup> In the same vein, we must remember that there is no Ancient Greek *oikos*—

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are never absolutely fixed, but in an Eastern mixed hardwood and conifer forest community, we expect to find maples, hickories, pines or hemlocks, oaks, bears, owls, woodpeckers, deer, and salamanders” (25).

<sup>68</sup> After citing Lynn Hunt on Derrida, Rousseau, and the French Revolution and community, James Swenson links Rousseau and Derrida on the question of denaturalized groundlessness, summarizing his remarkable (and too little known) book thusly: “*Of Grammatology* is, of course, a study of Rousseau. In some sense my entire argument here has been simply to say that *this is no accident*, and that the relation between Rousseau and the Revolution is to be found not in a logic of linear causality but rather in a shared constitutive instability, in their practice of ‘deconstruction’... To speak of deconstruction in this context does not mean that texts or events are meaningless. Rather, it recognizes that the construction of textual significations, like that of historical relations of causality or just political systems, *cannot be grounded in nature*” (225-226; my emphasis).

<sup>69</sup> For the “paranoia” of critique, see Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading” in *Touching Feeling*. Rousseau’s pathological hyper-paranoia is famous and evident in many of his works, and was first extensively analyzed by Starobinski (who trained as a psychiatrist). More recently, see John Farrell’s *Paranoia and Modernity: Cervantes to Rousseau*. On the tendency toward paranoia in Derrida’s personality, see Peeters’s biography (“[Derrida] sometimes had a really paranoid side to him,” Ronell says (487; see also 513-514). One manifestation of paranoia is a kind of refusal of the everyday.

<sup>70</sup> I am thinking of Elizabeth Grosz’s and Hasana Sharp’s work, especially the latter’s *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*. See also Kevin Grove and David Chandler, “Resilience and the Anthropocene: the stakes of ‘renaturalising’ politics.”

<sup>71</sup> “[O]nce women’s activities were defined as non-work, women’s [domestic] labor began to appear as a natural resource, available to all, no less than the air we breathe or the water we drink...in the new capitalist regime *women*

or indeed, no *polis*—without slavery; one of the Ancient Greek words for slave is *oiketēs* (οικέτης), a word which when plural also means “women and children of the house.”<sup>72</sup> So there is a very real and historical sense in which slavery is the truth of the family and of the *oikos*.<sup>73</sup> But to say that this is the only or the inevitable truth of the everyday is to cede too much, to foreclose the common, to protect singularity at the expense of the community which exposes singularity as what(ever) it is—in short, to shipwreck on singular islands. Instead, it is a matter of thinking bridges as neither natural nor purely conventional, but as swaying in some antiphonal swing between these two poles, over the azure: some infinite rhythm.

Derrida could be said to be stuck in what he would call “a certain eighteenth century,” a time opened by *Robinson Crusoe*, closed by Kant, but given its truth by Rousseau (OG 114). Three lonely men. In (re)turning to *Robinson Crusoe* and islands in his final seminar, promulgating a quite Kantian categorical imperative of the *tout autre*, and shielding singularity from any common measure like Rousseau, a certain Derrida remains trapped in the same “age of Rousseau” he diagnosed and began his career in *Of Grammatology* deconstructing. But what would and what could come after Rousseau? Romanticism.

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*themselves became the commons*, as their work was defined as a natural resource, laying outside the sphere of market relations” (*Caliban* 97). In a more recent work, Federici urges us to rethink the *oikos* as a site of new community, thus implying the oppressive history of the domestic does not determine its destiny: “If the house is the *oikos* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the houseworkers and house-prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation, providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and above all providing for the foundation for collective forms of reproduction...it is also a protection from ecological disaster” (*Revolution at Point Zero* 147). Federici mentions bell hooks’s essay “homeplace,” which proposes a rethinking of *oikos* as a site of collective resistance from a black feminist perspective. The political question of domestic labor inevitably calls for an engagement with Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, as well as the related discourse of the public vs. private sphere that Habermas opened (thanks to Allison Neal for reminding me of this). Also relevant for thinking the intersection of feminism, the (un)domestic, the political, and the ecological is Stacy Alaimo’s *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* and more recently her *Exposed*. The domestic is the subject of my Chapter 4, on the Wordsworths.

<sup>72</sup> Similarly, *oiketeia* (οικετεια) can mean either “household” and/or (this “and/or” is the whole devastating point) “slaves.” The Latin word that the Liddell and Scott Greek dictionary gives for comparison here to *oiketeia* is, tellingly: *familia*. And grimly, *familia* comes from *famulus*, slave. For more on this see Graeber’s *Debt* 200ff. Cf. the noun “domestic” in English, which can mean servant. Cf. also the older meanings of English “inmate,” which now only means prisoner but used to also mean anyone living in a house (Wordsworth plays on this ambiguity of “inmate” in the “Ode” and elsewhere). This also opens the question of relation between domus, domestic, and dominium (property in Roman law, paradigmatically the slave), domination, dominion, etc. For a more recuperative take on the domestic and its relationality, see the last essay in Lisa Robertson’s book *Nilling*, which takes up “the domestic sphere...[as] mediating skin” and claims the “the domus is the place of rhythmic protection of the vulnerable body” (75).

<sup>73</sup> A thinking of the ordinary and domestic that confronts their truth of slavery would require an engagement with Saidiya Hartman’s work, especially *Scenes of Subjection*, which defamiliarizes in order to plumb “the terror of the mundane and quotidian” (4).



Tableau vivant of Poussin's painting "The Massacre of the Innocents" by the Derrida Family, ca. 1975 (artist: Valerio Adami).

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“For indeed this is one of the real beauties of rainy weather, that while the amount of original and direct light is commonly lessened, the number of things that reflect light is unquestionably increased. There is less sunshine; but there are more shiny things...If rain dims the sky, it brightens the earth.” –G.K. Chesterton, “The Romantic in the Rain”

“Let’s listen to the rain and what we say about it...” –Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*

“Come on in this house, it’s gonna rain...” –Chance the Rapper, “Sunday Candy”

It is raining. Somewhere. It is not raining in California now or much at all recently, not raining enough. Increasingly, with climate change, it is raining not nearly enough in some places, far too much in others. Right now, Haiti. And my home of North Carolina (Hurricane Matthew). It is raining. What is raining? It. What is it? Heidegger liked to use these impersonal verbal constructions to illustrate an essential point about ontology, about Being: a point he called “the ontological difference.” Most often, he invoked the German phrase “es gibt,” which means “there is,” but literally translates to “it gives.” What gives? Heidegger’s point is that Being itself is not *a* being in particular, just as nothing in particular gives the tree when there is a tree (“es gibt einen Baum”), or nothing in particular rains the rain when it is raining. Being gives, Being is raining, but Being is not a particular being that would reign supreme above all others (like God), giving and guaranteeing them existence in a world, as is the case in every ontotheology. Being is raining, not reigning. Being, like nature, loves to hide, stowing itself away in the most mundane, in the rain, in anything at all that *there is*. In Blanchot’s essay on the everyday in *The Infinite Conversation* (a key book for thinking the Romantic genealogy and afterlife of groundless community), he associates the everyday with “il y a,” the French impersonal phrase for “there is,” equivalent to the German “es gibt.” Blanchot even goes so far as to equate the impersonal and the quotidian: “the *il y a* is the human everyday” (245). “It is raining” is both an ordinary and a Romantic constative sentence—a particularly “Romantic constative” precisely insofar as it is an everyday (and an ecological) one.<sup>74</sup>

For Derrida, this mundane everydayness is something we should only be suspicious of. It can tell us nothing new, it can only return us to the same. There can be no *event* of the everyday, no event of the rain:

An event cannot be reduced to the fact of something happening. It may rain this evening or it may not, but that is not an absolute event. I know what rain is; so it is not an absolutely different singularity. In such cases what happens is not an arrival. (“The Deconstruction of Actuality,” 536)

It’s raining. Time to come into the house.

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<sup>74</sup> On constatives of the weather in Romanticism, see Anne-Lise François’s “Unspeakable Weather, or the Rain Romantic Constatives Know.” This essay also contains an illuminating discussion of the everyday and the ordinary with reference to Pierre Alféri.

### Chapter 3: Blake's Circulations

“Wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit? [What are poets for in a time of dearth?]” –Hölderlin, “Brod und Wein”

“Bring out number weight & measure in a year of dearth.” –Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

Is community necessarily entwined with the violence of equivalence? This was the question posed in the first two chapters, which largely explored the very similar ways in which Rousseau and Derrida (and by extension, critique) answered “yes.” Rousseau’s and Derrida’s common critique of commensurability is so stringent as to close off all possibilities for community, especially as these possibilities flicker through the cracks in and of the everyday. Opposing community and its regimes of equivalent common measure, Rousseau and Derrida stake claims on behalf of absolutely incommensurable *singularity*, that is, an ontologically unique being that cannot exist in a structure of relationality without violence. For Derrida especially, the incommensurability of singularity is radically “heterogeneous” to any measure. Because any shape of relationality is ultimately contingent and groundless for Rousseau and Derrida, if it exists it must exist as something created, naturalized, imposed, and grounded; and insofar as singularity is heterogeneous to this naturalized regime, it is alone in the world. Groundlessness must mean either violence all the way down or isolation.

But with this chapter I now turn to Romanticism’s variegated vision of groundless community. The subject is William Blake, whom I view similarly as radically committed to unique singularity (or “minute particularity”) and as retaining a critical account of equivalent measure, ground, and hierarchy. Yet Blake is able to find the common—“all things common,” he says—not other than or outside of measure, but as the incommensurable excess immanent in measure itself. The chapter is divided into two parts. The first part (sections I-II) discusses the use of the image of the circle and its movement of circulation—across various domains like geometry, property, sovereignty, blood, and money—as tools to generate and ensure equivalence from a sovereign center or ground. I also discuss changes in conceptions of both sovereignty and circulation around the time of the French Revolution, and how Blake was critical of techniques of measure both generally and in their historically new instantiations and institutions in emergent modernity.

The second part (sections III-end) builds on the conceptual and historical analysis of the first part in order to situate a venture into Blake’s long poem *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (ca. 1804-1820). Blake attempts to open the grounded, closed, centered community of circulation to its own excess, the excess immanent to any regime of commensurability. This excess pouring out of the open center, ungrounding any system of measure, is how Blake renders groundlessness; this is, however, not a frightening abyss of groundlessness that gives rise to new iron regimes of measure, nor an atomistic nominalism ending in isolation, but a quotidian and minor—even domestic—groundlessness, one showing itself through the everyday relation of forgiveness. For Blake sees the relationality he calls forgiveness as a circulation and sharing of excess, though one that can only exist through measured, situated practices of the everyday. In the wake of recent work in Blake and Romantic studies that mines discourses on secularization and political theology for a renewed approach to Romanticism’s theoretical richness, I turn to *Jerusalem* because this is where Blake most explicitly confronts the question of community.<sup>1</sup> But the community I find in *Jerusalem* is much more mundane, domestic, and quotidian than how we are used to seeing it, despite the poem’s well deserved reputation for apocalypse and extravagant strangeness. As I move through and around in *Jerusalem*, I’ll re-examine Blake’s conceptions of form and of life to articulate their stakes for thinking about community and ecology now. Blake views life neither as an individual vital(ist)

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<sup>1</sup> I’m thinking of recent work by e.g. G.A. Rosso, Kir Kuiken, Patrick McGee, Colin Jager, Christopher Bundock, et. al.

substance nor a participation in a larger current of force, but as an excessive, singular movement common to all things, a rhythmic circulation of all things common.

## **Part 1: Vicious Circles**

### **I. Sovereign Measure**

“Everywhere *sovereignty* declares nature free, it is already in chains. And metaphysically, ecologically, and politically speaking, the claims and chains of sovereignty are all-encompassing: they encircle the world” –Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty* xiii

Measure was made to withstand the flood. Such, at least, is the conjecture of one John Bonnycastle (probably taking an uncited cue from Herodotus) in the preface to his *Introduction to Mensuration* (1782), a mathematical handbook of “practical geometry,” a manual for measuring and making things commensurable. The frontispiece of this measuring book was engraved by a young William Blake, after a design by Thomas Stothard. Bonnycastle, a close friend of Fuseli who may have known Blake, suggests that “the art of measuring” (a “useful and necessary invention”) originated in ancient Egypt, in order to delimit individual property holdings after the “inundations of the Nile” had confounded solitary and separate possessions:

After the overflowings of the river had deluged the country, and all artificial boundaries and land-marks were destroyed, there could have been no other method of ascertaining individual property, than by a previous knowledge of its figure and dimensions. From this circumstance, it appears highly probable, that Geometry was first known and cultivated by the ancient Egyptian. (v)

The flood itself is an excess (*démésure*) of flow, a spilling out of the river’s proper measure, a current overtaking its bounds and washing onto land to liquidate the solidity of ground and boundaries. Measure—*geo-metry* means “earth measure”—then began, suggests Bonnycastle very much in a Rousseauian key, as the aboriginal form of enclosure: a preservation of privatization and a protection from the flood, or excess, of the common.<sup>2</sup>

Suspicious as he was of possessive individualist claims to private property, Blake probably would have balked as he flipped through Bonnycastle’s preface (the book proved to be extremely popular as a math textbook, in its eighteenth edition by 1823). One can also picture Blake cringing a page later as he read Bonnycastle’s singling out of Blake’s great adversary Newton for lavish praise in doing the most to advance the art of measure; the mathematician credits Newton above all others with discoveries “which have not only enhanced [geometry or measuring’s] dignity and importance, but rendered the practical application of it more *general and extensive*” (vi; my emphasis). Measure generalized, that is, generality generalized, in universal equivalence extended across the globe, was precisely the broken world Blake found himself inhabiting and railing against especially after the French Revolution. As he complained in an 1827 letter—to which we’ll return—written months before his death: “Since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable one by another

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<sup>2</sup> In the opening of Part II of the second *Discourse*, Rousseau links the fall out of the state of nature to the first enclosure of private property, the first to draw a line and say “c’est à moi.” See my Chapter 1, on Rousseau. On measure, property, and ancient Egypt, see Serres’s *Le Contrat Naturel* 90ff (a text and author obviously in dialogue with Rousseau), themes picked up in Serres’s later *Geometry*. Bonnycastle’s theme of the origin of geometry—or for that matter the geometry of the origin—also has an afterlife in Husserl and Derrida after him. On the importance of all this to the idea of sovereignty (via Schmitt and Jameson too) and contemporary politics see Bratton’s masterful and enigmatic recent *The Stack*.

Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree” (E 783). Blake’s newly modern world is still our world. Measure, that postdiluvian or rather antediluvian technology, is ever generalized—we’re still trying to enclose, to protect property, to withstand the flood today. And as we do so, the sea levels continue to rise.

Blake had intuited how intimate, and how nefarious, the connection was between measure and individual(ist) property. In a line from Chapter 2 of *Jerusalem*, Los laments that the Daughters of Albion wish “To / Converse concerning Weight & Distance in the Wilds of Newton & Locke” (J 30:39-40; E 177).<sup>3</sup> It is not an accident that this dolorous obsession with measure (“Weight & Distance”) occurs in the “Wilds of Newton *and* Locke.” For Newton, the avatar of measure and quantification (Blake writes sneeringly of “Sir Isaac Newtons calculations” (E 512)), is deeply tied up with John Locke, the avatar of individualist private property. Indeed the modern theory of property comes straight from Chapter 5 of Locke’s *Second Treatise of Civil Government*, which begins by telling us that “God...hath given the world to men in common,” but proceeds to outline how exactly this common becomes divided up, enclosed, into individual property (286). Locke’s answer is *labor*, but this is couched in terms of *measure*: “The *measure* of property nature has well set by the extent of men’s labour... [Man] by his labour does, as it were, inclose from the common” (291). For Locke, then, all things begin as common, but become enclosed through acts of labor by separate, sovereign, and isolated individuals. For Blake, on the other hand, the work or “The whole Business of Man Is The Arts & *All Things Common*” (*Laocoön*; E 273; cf. my project title).<sup>4</sup> Opposed to Lockean labor, which encloses and measures out the common into singular atomistic plots, Blake proffers “The Arts,” which open all things up to their ontological commonness. To render—i.e., to reveal—all things (as) (in) common is thus an act of anti-labor or *inoperativity* (indeed Agamben’s very definition of rendering inoperative, which he also calls profaning, is precisely to (re)open to “common use”); what Blake in *Jerusalem* will call “a labour of love.” In this way, Blake’s “case against Locke” (as Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry* has it) is the same case against Newton—and remember that case (Latin *cadere*) means “fall.” The world is everything that is the fall. The (f)all of Newton and Locke is measure.

In Locke’s account, the sovereignty (“*master of himself*”) of the singular individual is precisely what *grounds* (provides the “*great foundation*” for) the measured enclosure of the common.<sup>5</sup> The position of the sovereign, as a tradition of political theology from Schmitt to Agamben tells us, is the position at the center of a structure that is both inside *and* outside the structure.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>3</sup> I use Erdman’s Blake, with abbreviation (e.g. J for *Jerusalem*), plate and line where appropriate, and E followed by page.

<sup>4</sup> The phrase “all things common” derives from the King James translation of Acts 2:44 and 4:32. Cf. also the seventeenth-century Ranter Abiezer Coppe, who uses the phrase “all things common” (qtd in Makdisi 292). The radical sixteenth-century German preacher Thomas Müntzer does as well, famously claiming: “*Omnia sunt communia*” (all things are common). Clearly this phrase is a watchword for radical Christian communism. And cf. the new book by Massimo de Angelis, *Omnia Sunt Communia*.

<sup>5</sup> “From all which it is evident, that though the things of nature are given in common, yet man, by being master of himself, and proprietor of his own person, and the actions or labour of it, had still in himself the great foundation of property” (298). It’s not an accident that the theorist of the individual subject and the theorist of individual property are *the same person*. On Locke’s denial of relationality and “atomistic” selfhood “disallowing any communal ties,” see Früchtl’s *The Impertinent Self* (134). On this see also Nancy Yousef’s *Isolated Cases* (Ch. 1, “Locke’s Loneliness”), Pfau’s *Minding the Modern*, and Macpherson’s classic *Possessive Individualism*, to name a few. The literature on Blake and Locke is also very extensive—see Frye, Makdisi, Quinney, Glausser. See Loick’s *Missbrauch des Eigentums* for a good recent analysis of Locke, circulation, individuality, the commons, and the ontology of property.

<sup>6</sup> “The paradox of sovereignty consists in the fact the sovereign is, at the same time, outside and inside the juridical order” (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 15). Later: “We have seen that only the sovereign decision on the state of exception opens the space in which it is possible to trace borders between inside and outside” (21). Writing around the same time as Blake (mid 1790s), Joseph de Maistre tries to reassert sovereignty’s divine ground in *Des origines de la souveraineté*.

sovereign is the singular, quasi-transcendent one whose “decision” both removes and includes him or it from the community, the one who has “to decide Two Worlds with a great decision,” as Blake puts it (J 65:1; E 216). The sovereign straddles two worlds, inside and outside, and is included as an exclusion: presently absent as the social body’s impossible and necessary ground. The sovereign, who sets the measure, must thus be totally solitary and indivisible, divorced from relationality. As Goodchild’s *Theology of Money* succinctly puts it: “Sovereignty derives from a severance of relation” (41).

Blake understood well that sovereignty and its political theology is exactly what is at issue in questions of measure, the common, and individuality. This is why the figure in Blake’s idiosyncratic—or rather, let us say *idiosyncretic*—mythic universe most obsessed with measuring is also the figure constantly presenting himself as both solitary and sovereign, God and King: *Urizen*. Urizen’s tendencies are best exemplified in the 1794 work named for him, *The [First] Book of Urizen*. This work, written in the middle of the dark abyss of the French Terror, depicts Urizen “in the depths of dark solitude” searching for a ground, a “solid without fluctuation” (4:6, 10; E 71). It is precisely in this groundlessness, which Urizen can only conceive of as “my solitude,” that he decides to ground and enclose a world based on his own posited sovereignty (what Blake also calls elsewhere the “Selfhood” and the “Center,” or combining them, “the Selfish Center”), a world of *measure*: “[O]ne weight, one measure /one King, one God, one Law” (4:34, 39-40; E 72). The point is that there is an essential link between the demand that there be one common measure and the politico-theological decree that there be one God and King, a sovereign center that would ground a hierarchical world. The sovereign as ground guarantees beings and makes them equivalent according to “one measure”: measurable, numerable, quantifiable, judgeable, rankable—grounded communities, always hierarchical. A few plates later in this same work, Urizen begins to pursue practices and polic(i)es of measure even more assiduously, forming “scales to weigh,” “massy weights,” and “golden compasses...to explore the Abyss” (20: 36-37, 39-40; E 80-81). A-byss literally means groundlessness; and we see here how regimes of commensurability arise out of a frightened, contractive response to groundlessness. Blake discerned this logic in his 1827 letter, where the new systems of “intermeasurab[ility]” have arisen “*since*” the abyssal crisis of measure occasioned by the French Revolution.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed it is the image of Urizen measuring out the dark with a circle-drawing golden compass that is the most familiar one of him, perhaps the most famous of any Blakean image.<sup>8</sup> I mean “The Ancient of Days,” the image that serves as the frontispiece to another 1794 work, *Europe: A Prophecy*. Here Urizen—whose very name not only suggests “reason” but also, crucially, (en)circling and (en)closure<sup>9</sup>—reaches out of a blood-red circular sun into the fallen world. Many observers over the years have pointed out that this image of the measuring sovereign Urizen bears a remarkable similarity to Blake’s monotype print *Newton* from the following year (1795), where the scientist Newton similarly bends over, drawing a circle with a golden compass. And it’s on or in or outside or on the circumference of this *circle* that I want to dwell.

<sup>7</sup> See my overall dissertation introduction on modernity, measure, groundlessness, etc.

<sup>8</sup> “Compass” simply meant “measure” in Middle English; Old French “compasser” and “compas” means measure; “to compass” as English verb also means “to enclose” dating back to early 14<sup>th</sup> c.

<sup>9</sup> The Greek verb *horizein* (ὁρίζειν) means to enclose, limit, even draw with a compass, etc. (cf. our word “horizon”). On God using a compass to create/encircle (the Septuagint uses the same Greek verb), see Proverbs 8. Milton’s famous “golden compass” passage (and the Blakean Philip Pullman’s after him) derives from this (cf. Blake’s use of “golden compass” in *The Book of Urizen* here).



(*Europe*, Copy D (1794) (British Museum); *Newton* (1795) (Tate Collection). [www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org))

## II. The Destiny of the Circle

“Completing a circle, / you have been deceived into thinking you have progressed.” –Marianne Moore, “An Octopus”

Though profoundly a religious artist, Blake only rarely makes a direct address to the divine being. Found among his often cheeky notebook writings, however, is a no less pert epigram of a single couplet called “To God,” which reads as follows: “If you have formed a Circle to go into / Go into it yourself & see how you would do” (E 516). The indignant venom of this blasphemous little verse is actually quite instructive for understanding Blake’s apotropaic attitude toward circles, circularity, and circulation (circular movement), an attitude characterized by hatred, suspicion, and critique. It seems clear the addressee here is the “cruel patriarchal” figure God the Father (J 27:78; E173), whom Blake elsewhere also calls “Nobodaddy”: nobody’s daddy. This being is God the sovereign, the isolated Urizen (whom Blake also associates with Satan), God as the ontotheological ground(ing) that wants to control all beings by submitting them to one measure and one law. What does all this have to with forming “Circle[s] to go into”? Quite a lot—for one thing, recall the propinquity established above between Urizen and drawing circles, including the very meaning of Urizen’s name.

Blake invites God to “go into [the Circle] yourself” to “see how [he, i.e. God] would do.” The implication here is that God as creator is standing *outside* the circle he himself nevertheless created: the archetypal position of the sovereign that is both inside and outside. God has made the circle but stands outside, like the sovereign who according to Agamben says: “I, the sovereign, who am outside the law [or circle], declare that there is nothing outside the law [or circle]” (*Homo Sacer* 15). *The Ancient of Days* image illustrates this perfectly—Urizen is ostensibly outside of the circle he is drawing, and yet kneels inside of a circular disc-shaped sun: inside and outside. God does not wish to enter the circle totally (“see how *you* would do”), because doing so would immerse him in immanence and compromise his sovereign position of transcendence. God’s position of both immanence (inside) and transcendence (outside) in relation to the circle means he stands at and as

ground of the circle, as both its *arche* and *telos*—this is to say he stands (or kneels) at the *center* of the circle.<sup>10</sup> Blake was keenly aware of this perverse inside-outside geometry of the sovereign center or ground, which is why he could write a seemingly nonsense statement like “Without, is formed the Selfish Center,” which only makes sense from the perspective of this logic: the ontological legerdemain of the center (J 71:7; E 225). God is where *arche* and *telos* meet, returning to each other in a circular loop: this is reflected in the couplet, where both rhyme words end in the “-oo” sound, and the circular letter “O.” Derrida: “Sovereignty is a circularity” (*Rogues* 13). So intimate in Blake’s mind was the connection between circles and oppressive sovereignty that he could juxtapose them in a single line of poetry, the lack of verbs only intensifying the identification of these two elements of the same scheme: “Heaven a mighty circle turning; God a tyrant crown’d” (*Europe* 10:23; E 63). When grounded and governed by the center, which tries to close openings and neutralize excess, the measure or ratio of all bright things is only dull circular sameness: equivalence, or all things commensurable.

Though Blake was on the whole a very dialectical thinker, one truly friendly to opposition and ambivalence, it is difficult to find a more consistently deleterious image in Blake’s corpus than the circle—even though “in the history of geometric symbolism, no form has been more universally valued than the circle” (Nelson 25). We have glimpsed some reasons for Blake’s beef with circles: the circle’s tendency to enclose (e.g. “they inclos’d my infinite brain into a narrow circle”) (VDA 2:32; E 47), to limit, to measure, to repeat or loop, and most of all to (claim to) have a governing sovereign *center* or ground. Take for example Blake’s alternate name for the fallen material world, from *The Four Zoas*: “the Circle of Destiny” (FZ 5:11; E 302).<sup>11</sup> Along with circle, “destiny” is almost always something negative in Blake, representing a bad teleology, or what he calls in *Jerusalem* “a murderous Providence” (J 50:5; E 199). The circle of destiny is the circle with an all-determining, fixed foundation or ground—for “destiny” comes from the Latin *destinare*, which means “to fix solidly, to establish, to ground.”<sup>12</sup> The centered circle is the completed, measured, and grounded community: the community of circulation, circles and circles of sorrow.<sup>13</sup>

Circles circulate: they generate “the same dull round” of circulation (E 2). What is circulation? In an important article from 1974 called “The Archaeology of the Circulation Concept in Economic Theory,” Todd Lowry traces various uses, iterations, examples, and images of the

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<sup>10</sup> Here is Derrida in his important early essay “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences” on the idea of the center (the center as both inside and outside): “This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*...the center...because it can be either inside or outside, is as readily called the origin as the end, as readily *arché* as *telos*” (*Writing* 279).

<sup>11</sup> The circle, and the circular serpent, is also, according to Northrop Frye, an image for Blake of the “fallen conception of eternity as indefinite or endless recurrence” (*Fearful Symmetry* 140).

<sup>12</sup> On the question of destiny, compare also Blake’s absolute hatred for the concept of *predestination* (which has the same etymology as destiny, of course), which is otherwise surprising for such a radical Protestant as Blake. “Is this not Predestination?,” scoffs Blake in his marginalia, in response to Swedenborg’s plea for the importance both “general providence” and “singular providence” in the latter’s book *Divine Providence*; Blake proceeds to call the idea “abominable” (E 609-610). Interestingly enough, in another passage in this book that Blake commented upon, Swedenborg uses the phrase “minute particulars” (also a key Blakean term), saying that “even...in the most minute particulars” every man has “his *Place foreseen*, and at the same *Time provided*” (Swedenborg quoted in E 610, italics reflect Blake’s own underlining). Blake’s unyielding affirmation of the importance of minute particulars, but rejection of the idea this kind of particularity is guaranteed, governed in advance, or grounded by providence suggests that Blake’s idea of particularity is one that is open to *contingency*: groundless. Blake thinks Milton’s tyrannical sovereign God “the Father is Destiny” (MHH; E 35).

<sup>13</sup> On the imagery of the circle (and center), especially in Romanticism, see e.g. Poulet’s *The Metamorphosis of the Circle*, Marshall Brown’s *The Shape of German Romanticism*, Abrams’s *Natural Supernaturalism*, Rajan’s “Models for System in Idealist Encyclopedics: The Circle, The Line, and the Body.”

concept of circulation *before* its mainstream entrance into the discourse of political economy in the eighteenth century. Ranging from Heraclitus and The Anonymous Iamblich (5<sup>th</sup> c. B.C.) through the Renaissance to Adam Smith, Lowry proposes to examine and isolate the main valences of circulation before it became central to economics, in order to “carefully scrutiniz[e] the implicit assumptions that [the circulation concept] might implant in rigorous economic analysis” (432). The lesson of Lowry’s article is that the concept of circulation, in any form it takes, is essentially a *technology for producing equivalence*. Circular movement, or circulation, is always grounded in the center of a circle, which provides a single standard of commensurability from which any point in the movement of circulation can be calculated, quantified, or measured: “The circulation concept has furnished economic theory with the model of a perpetual motion machine composed of interacting processes subject to *numerical* analysis...a single thread of *measurement*, a common *fibre*, a flowing *numéraire*, the monetary measure by which all that is significant...to be judged” (444; emphases mine except final). Given that circulation seems essentially to involve a movement through a plurality of points whereby the points are connected via their common relation to a center, a single standard of quantification or general equivalence—“a single thread of measurement”—it was perhaps inevitable that, even though circulation qua concept “developed independently of economic concerns,” money, the general equivalent, would become integrated into the concept of circulation (436). Circulation fit economics like a glove on an invisible hand.

It was also then probably inevitable that, after William Harvey’s discovery of the blood’s circulation, circulating money would find its analogue in circulating blood. After Harvey’s work—the discoveries of which were made possible by new techniques of measurement—it didn’t take long for the circulation of the blood to find its circulatory analogue in the emergent field of political economy. Already in 1651’s *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes wrote of the flow of money’s “common measure” as “the sanguinification of the Commonwealth” (164).<sup>14</sup> By 1667, Dryden could write, seemingly echoing wisdom that had already become conventional, about “Trade, which like blood should circularly flow” (*Poems* 38). From Lowry and Blake, we have already seen how circulation can be conceived as a technology for producing absolute quantifiability, measure, and equivalence from a ground or sovereign center; and sure enough on this score it is Harvey himself who proves, before Hobbes, to be the decisive English theorist of sovereignty. For in his dedication to *De Motu Cordis* addressed to King Charles I, Harvey is explicit in connecting the heart’s role in blood circulation to that of the sovereign, who is the center and the ground (“foundation”) of the hierarchical community.<sup>15</sup> To give context for Blake, let’s quickly look into how the related discourses of sovereignty and circulation were shifting around 1800.

By the mid and later eighteenth century, the importance of circulation had only intensified as the fearful symmetry between commodities—commodity being an etymological calque with symmetry, both words meaning “measure with”<sup>16</sup>—made possible by monetary equivalence became more naturalized, global, and hegemonic; money was “the great wheel of circulation,” to employ a

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<sup>14</sup> Even earlier, in the 1640 text *Elements of Law*, Hobbes describes the “sovereign power” as what is there “to set forth and make known the common measure” (113). On measure, sovereignty, and authority see Kula’s *Measures and Men* (thanks to Celeste Langan for the Kula reference).

<sup>15</sup> “The heart of animals is the foundation of their life, the sovereign of everything within them, the sun of their microcosm, that upon which all growth depends, from which all power proceeds. The King, in like manner, is the foundation of his kingdom, the sun of the world around him, the heart of the republic, the foundation whence all power, all grace doth flow” (Harvey 3). See Goldsmith on Blake and Harvey: “Harvey believed that the blood possesses an innate ‘centripetal tendency’; it directs itself always toward the body’s center, with an impulsive drive that the heart must resist by expelling the blood outward ‘against its will’” (248).

<sup>16</sup> Greek *sym* + *metros*, Latin *cum* + *modus*. Thus Blake’s Tyger could also, literally and etymologically speaking, be wondered at for its “fearful commodity.”

phrase used by both Adam Smith and Edmund Burke. As Jon Mee writes in his insightful essay on Blake's engagements with contemporary ideas of blood and circulation, drawing on the work of David Trotter and others: "the trope of circulation was a defining category for analysis for the eighteenth century...[and] the cardiovascular system provided the key trope for circulation in the period" ("Bloody Blake" 65, 63).<sup>17</sup> This intensifying emphasis on circulation was occurring even as the social body in post-revolutionary Europe was, in Eric Santner's words, "inflamed by the representational deadlock situated at the transition from royal to popular sovereignty"—an abyssal deadlock that released an excess or "surplus of immanence" into circulation and the everyday (*Weight* 29-30).<sup>18</sup> Regulating this excess—in its ontological, its politico-theological, and its material-financial dimensions—and re-assimilating it into measure was increasingly the order of the day in conceptions of both sovereignty and circulation after the French Revolution, as the work of Santner, Mee, and Vogl shows from different angles.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there is a real sense in which the new modes and logics of circulation consolidating in this period are constitutive of global modernity itself, as the postcolonial thinker Achille Mbembe observes: "Circulation is that through which our modern world comes into existence. The constitution of the modern world has to be found within movement and circulation" (24).<sup>20</sup>

Sovereignty was fraying, but the late eighteenth century saw new regimes of measure and circulation—such as finance capital—arising to fill the void at and of the center.<sup>21</sup> Hence we see what Mee notes as "the stress in the 1790s on increasing circulation in all forms," but only a managed circulation that could control the excess always threatening to disrupt the equivalent zero-sum rule of measure, as Mee shows (70). These regimes of measure, though, were as hierarchical as the old ones: for all those sanguinely benefiting from the newly liberated flows of circulatory capital in a world of globalized finance, there were always many more who were impoverished by the continual appropriation and enclosure of this excess. Managed or "charter'd" circulation always had to, like pity in Blake's words, "make somebody poor." In this way, too, blood makes the perfect analogue for money, and in this light we can understand much of Blake's blood imagery as it connects with the oppressive abstract systems of money, empire, and religion (especially after the

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<sup>17</sup> See Trotter's *Circulation*. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, circulation is also essential for understanding the developments of the nineteenth century: "the circulation concept serves as a key to unlock the open triumphs as well as the hidden anxieties of the nineteenth century." Here also the key is to regulate an inherent excess in circulation and reinsert it into measure: "whatever was part of circulation was regarded as healthy, progressive, constructive; all that was detached from circulation, on the other hand, appeared diseased, medieval, subversive, threatening" (*The Railway Journey* 195). Thanks to Alex Bush for this reference.

<sup>18</sup> Santner's claim that the French Revolution releases a libidinal, perhaps even an ontological, excess into the body politic is influenced by Schmitt's account of secularization, where the transcendence of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries gives way to immanence (*Political Theology* 49). From a different angle, Goldsmith also characterizes the revolution as engendering excess: "The revolution leaves behind an affective remainder, an excess of enthusiasm that carries into the future, continuing to demand recognition" (156). Bataille claims that Blake saw the French Revolution as a "divine form of excess" (*Literature and Evil* 94).

<sup>19</sup> See Vogl's work on finance and sovereignty more broadly, but especially "Ökonomie und Zirkulation um 1800," which analyzes how circulation becomes charged with regulating "excess" [*Überschuss*], and "translat[ing it] back into elementary exchange and naturaliz[ing it] in circulation" (70). Santner's recent books *The Royal Remains* and *The Weight of All Flesh* have been preoccupied precisely with rethinking political theology around the matrix of waning sovereignty, excess, and circulation. See also the collection *Sovereignty in Ruins*.

<sup>20</sup> On the transition over the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to circulation as a new mode of economy and governance in a global context, and how these logics are tied up with those of liberalism and empire (a connection which Blake saw like few others in his time, as Makdisi makes clear) see also Lisa Lowe's *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, particularly 74ff.

<sup>21</sup> On the rise of finance capital in the late eighteenth century, and how it connects to regimes of measure like globalization and slavery, see especially Baucom's *Specters of the Atlantic*.

compelling analyses of Anidjar)<sup>22</sup>—often extremely disparate structures that Blake links because of what he sees as their similar underlying logic of measure.<sup>23</sup>

We see this vividly in an aphorism found on Blake's *Laocoön* print (the same work containing the claim of "all things common"): "The True Christian Charity not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor Families)" (E 275). This print, which contains an image of the famous ancient statue of Laocoön and his two sons being strangled and devoured by snakes, along with a variegated series of aphorisms, dates to 1827—the same year as Blake's letter on atomism and (in)commensurability "since the French Revolution." The incisive claim that money is the "lifes blood" of poverty shows Blake's awareness both of the common association between blood and money as circulating substances, as well as the hierarchical dynamics inherent in and produced by circulation. Far from any "sanguinification of the commonwealth," the circulatory flow of money's commensurability is the very blood that sustains poverty; circulating money is not just blood but "*lifes blood*," the essential substance and movement without which poverty would be no more, the circulation of equivalence that is hierarchy's condition of possibility. Art, on the other hand, is not the coin but the *koine*—the common—of the realm.

So Blake knew well that even as traditional sovereignty was waning, the logic of sovereignty as a center or ground of common measure was preserved and transferred to new regimes and structures of circulation.<sup>24</sup> The circulation of money as an analogue of blood is just one new regime of measure we've chosen to examine briefly—in part because Blake keys in on it—but there are many other examples, including modern individualism, which Fred Moten calls "the democratization of sovereignty."<sup>25</sup> The point of all these disparate systems however, as far as Blake was concerned,

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<sup>22</sup> Here Gil Anidjar's recent magisterial, often terrifying account of hematology as political theology *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* warrants a mention, though I cannot give it the close attention it deserves. For Anidjar, blood in Christianity becomes the liquidated substance that both grounds the community of shared substance and, at the same time, ensures inevitable hierarchies: "Blood counts—and then there are bloods that count less. Within the expansive logic of circulation and flow, there occurs, or recurs, a difference between bloods" (19). The question of whether Blake's Christianity escapes the political-theological matrix of violence and hierarchy that, according to Anidjar, blood indexes in and as Christianity, is an important and difficult one (Kuiken says yes). But clearly political theology is for Blake tied up with money and with empire (cf. Rosso here). See especially 17, 26, 38, 128, 145 in Anidjar. Compelling as he is, Anidjar basically remains within the parameters of critique as I tried to delineate them in my chapter on Derrida (and to a degree in my Rousseau chapter) (indeed Anidjar is unabashedly Derridean and has translated some of Derrida's texts). For Anidjar the history of blood is the history of its naturalization, thus the history of an imposed common measure, thus the history of hierarchy, thus the history of violence. Nothing else.

<sup>23</sup> Imagery of blood and circulatory flow (including blood flow's opposite, pallor) is extremely prevalent in the *Songs* and Blake's other 1790s work. Though I don't have space to discuss it, the third stanza of "London" is an illustrative example of how Blake connects imagery of blood flow ("runs in blood") and pallor ("appalls") with abstract systems of oppressive measure like religion ("blackning Church"), state ("Palace"), empire and war ("Soldier"), etc. There's a lot of good recent and current scholarly work on Blake and blood—in addition to Goldsmith and Mee, see for example Gurton-Wachter, Conolly, and Sha.

<sup>24</sup> Kuiken: "seeing that a particular conception of God, which acts as a figure of ultimate sovereignty, has helped perpetrate all manner of political repression, Blake is nevertheless unwilling to cede the notion of political freedom to a secularism he suspects is capable of reproducing many of the old forms of repression and giving them new names in justifications" (21). Kuiken's *Imagined Sovereignties* is an inspiring new work thinking Romanticism alongside political theology, and his concerns with groundlessness and "radical incommensurability," especially in Blake, make him an ally to the kind of thinking I'm trying to engage in (66). Kuiken, however, restricts his analysis to the 1790s prophetic books.

<sup>25</sup> Despite what the phrase might seem to imply at first blush (popular sovereignty in a good sense, democracy), Moten, like Blake, sees this process of "the democratization of sovereignty" in a decidedly negative light: "modernity (the confluence of the slave trade, settler colonialism and the democratization of sovereignty through which the world is imaged, graphed and grasped) is a socioecological disaster that can neither be calculated nor conceptualized as a series of personal injuries" ("Blackness and Poetry"). It's important for our purposes that Moten sees this development of individualism—which is linked to larger structures like colonialism, ecological devastation, and the slave trade—as constitutive of modernity.

was the same: to ensure that the community is closed, grounded, and centered in an equivalent measure, free of any excess. This is especially true of individualism—an instance of “the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures,” to use Foucault’s phrase—which resulted in so many atoms of modernity, cut off from community, detached and measured all at once: Blake’s word for this sovereign individualist principle, be it in a traditional king or in every individual, is the “Selfhood,” or “Selfish Center.”<sup>26</sup>

I would like to return to Blake’s late letter about, or rather against, (in)commensurability as I close Part 1, this time quoting at greater length:

I know too well that a great majority of Englishmen are fond of The Indefinite which they Measure by Newtons Doctrine of the Fluxions of an Atom. A Thing that does not Exist. These are Politicians & think that Republican Art is Inimical to their Atom. For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else Such is Job but since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree. (E 783)

This passage, especially the line about what is not “Intermeasurable,” is quoted by critics often enough, as it appears to give a straightforward account of Blake’s emphasis on unique minute particularity and his suspicion of exchange, equivalence, and commensurability—Saree Makdisi is exemplary in this regard. This is of course correct, but what particularly interests me about Blake’s rejection of ontological commensurability is that it comes just after another rejection, that of atomism—an atom, specifically Newton’s atom (cf. above on Blake associating Newton with circles and measure) is “A Thing that does not Exist.”<sup>27</sup> Blake thus posits the connection between the grounded community of commensurability and the isolated atom.<sup>28</sup> This aggregated, atomistic community is susceptible to manifestations like nationalism: “Englishmen are all Intermeasurable One by Another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree.” The implicit critique of the grounded community of sovereign, imperial nationalism of “Englishmen” here is heightened by the pun on *state*—“a happy state of agreement”—and by the subtle second-order disagreement. That is to say, Blake is not disagreeing with his fellow countrymen—to do so would place him still on plane of discursive public sphere liberalism, where citizens can meet on a

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<sup>26</sup> See Foucault’s “The Subject and Power” (216). See also Foucault generally on biopolitics as a new regime of measure(ment) in the late eighteenth century; he discusses circulation in particular in *Security, Territory, Population*. Cf. Richard Sennett’s *Flesh and Stone* on the link between emergent eighteenth-century capitalism, ideas of blood and economic circulation, and how these relate to the birth of modern isolated individualism (255ff).

<sup>27</sup> The “atom” comes up at other points in Blake, always negatively, and there’s a good deal of work on Blake and/against atomism; for the best historical context of theories of atomism vis-à-vis Blake, see Mary Lynn Johnson’s “Blake, Democritus, and the ‘Fluxions of the Atom.’” Johnson notes that in 1826, a year before Blake’s letter, Humphry Davy identified the atom not with a physical particle but with the very idea of equivalent measure itself. Davy: “the term atom can only have the meaning ‘equivalent’” (qtd in Johnson 121). Blake associated atomism and money—he ridiculed the idea of “building a universe from farthing balls” (E 579). Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy: “One cannot make a world with simple atoms” (*Inoperative Community* 3) (see also his BSP 45). On Blake’s critique of Newton in relation to measure see e.g. Peterfreund’s *William Blake in a Newtonian World*, Ch 5. On atomism, circles, and commensurability, see Lowry 440. Cf. also the shift to the imperial standard of measure that Britain undertook in the 1820s—see Johnson, citing Zupko.

<sup>28</sup> Novalis’s contemporary *Encyclopedia* also critiques Newton and Leibniz’s calculus on the issues of atomism and incommensurability. For Novalis, “calculus really means calculation, division or measurement of the nondivisible—noncomparable—immeasurable” (117). This text also contains many intriguing comments on geometry and circles.

plane of equivalence and disagree. Blake's is rather a meta-disagreement with the state of agreement (measure, equivalence) itself: "Certainly a happy *state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree.*"

Blake, disagreeing to agree, emphasizes his own unique individuality—"to which *I for One*"—precisely in his opting out of the false community of intermeasurable atoms. This singularity is thus neither an isolated atom (for atoms do not exist), nor is it part of the aggregated community of commensurability that atomism tends to generate. What then is Blake implying about his singularity, through his dual, and linked, rejection of atomism and grounded commensurability? Blake's denial of atoms implies a necessity of relationality (there are no isolated beings), yet his simultaneous denial of commensurability means that this relationality is found in something other than a common measure. In fact, rather than a question of something other *than* common measure, it will involve thinking an otherness, an excess, immanent *in* measure.

What this common excess of measure might look like—along with what attempts to corral it through grounded or centered circulation look like—is what we will explore under the general rubric of circulation. We will see how Blake's opening of the center of circulation does not result in islanded atomism or nominalist groundless chaos, but, in a sense, *redeems* measure; in the circulating community of everyday attachments, moorings, and relations, Blake finds an ungraspable, unuseable excess, thus discovering what his disciple Georges Bataille called "the 'Measure' [*Mesure*] without which the 'Measureless' [*Démesure*, i.e. excess] would not be" (*Unfinished System* 229). As Bataille implies, this measurelessness or excess is not apart from or "heterogeneous" (as Derrida says) to measure, but immanent in it as its shared opening. Blake calls the communal circulation of this immanent excess "forgiveness," or in a different register, "life."

## **Part 2: Jerusalem**

"walk underground and turn the center out a circle / with a whole in the middle" —Fred Moten, *Hughson's Tavern*

So far, this chapter has tried to prepare us for reading Blake's *Jerusalem* by making arguments on three separate but mutually related and intertwined levels: a general conceptual level, a historical level, and the level of Blake himself. Conceptually, I looked at how the image of the circle and the movement of circulation is linked to techniques of measure—especially how circles and circulation generate commensurable equivalence, and its subsequent hierarchies, from a grounded *center*. Historically, I briefly examined essential links between circles/circulation, the center, individualism, enclosure, the proper(ty), hierarchy, and sovereignty, as well as ways that ideas both of circulation and of sovereignty were changing in the late eighteenth century, especially after the French Revolution. This period saw the waning of traditional ideas of sovereignty (both royal and divine) at the same time as the assertion of new (and more global, in every sense) regimes of circulation and measure; though the goal of the new regimes of measure was the same: to undergird a hierarchal, closed community by insuring absolute commensurability and closing off any contingency or excess.

Blake thought deeply about the links between measure, the circle, sovereignty, and the center, as well as these new regimes of measure, including individualism, that assured all were "intermeasurable...since the French Revolution." If we focus only on Blake's hatred of traditional sovereignty and kingship and lose sight of the vital fact that Blake was engaged in a simultaneous double critique—of the ancient regime and the nascent modernity that in many ways simply recapitulated the old logic—we risk missing the truly contemporary force of Blake's work. That is,

we miss the ways Blake leverages this double critique in order to think a new kind of community—groundless community—that is only possible (or rather articulable) in modernity.<sup>29</sup>

What ideas of community and singularity does Blake give us then? What does it look like neither to reject all commensurability in favor of unique but atomistic singularity, nor to accede to the total commensurability of a grounded hierarchy? We know Blake hates the idea of a transcendent ground, *telos*, providence, destiny, and commensurability in favor of contingency and excess. We also know Blake praises incommensurable and unique singularity (“minute particularity”) yet denounces the individualism of atomism and claims “nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood” (J 96:28; E 256). If Blake insists on the necessity of groundlessness *and* the necessity of community, we must try to give an account of Blake’s vision of a groundless community (which is at the same time, a relational singularity). That’s what I’m going to attempt to do now, drawing on the Romantic logic of inoperativity or “immanent excess” that I outlined in the last chapter, a logic which can illuminate Blake’s aesthetic, ethical, political, theological, and ontological ideas—all of which were linked in his mind, not least because he saw modernity’s proliferating regimes of measure as links in the same systematic chain of the fallen world. Indeed Blake’s ideas help us reconfigure “the conceptual history of modernity itself,” as Makdisi says (2).

*Jerusalem* interests me not only because it is Blake’s most massive and important work (at least, Blake seemed to think so), but because it deals directly with the question of community and relationality—in all their failures and shiftings and moments of connection and love and then failures again. This insistent ongoingness of the poem’s thematic and formal structure is also what it wants to convey about community: community is always something lived as a shared, ongoing experience of incommensurability or groundlessness in *everyday life*. My reading of Blake and especially *Jerusalem* as more mundane, everyday, and domestic might itself strike some as exotic—but I’m interested in finding a Blake that is irreducible—though still adjacent—to both the transcendent/apocalyptic Blake, and the hyper-historically and politically aware Blake put forth as a materialist corrective to the former. I think my approach, in addition to unearthing a neglected aspect of Blake’s work, can yield new insights into the conceptual and theoretical fecundity of *Jerusalem*.

The extent to which *Jerusalem* is a culmination of Blake’s thought and its development is debatable, but it’s clear there is deep and live thinking going on in real time in this poem; we have still barely scratched the surface in confronting its philosophical intensity. Much of the thinking seems to take place in the form of declarative, general exhortation, but it really happens when these statements are undermined—or enriched—by the poem’s events and characters, and even, as we’ll see, on the minute level of wordplay, rhythm, and meter. And it is just on the question of the poem’s

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<sup>29</sup> Not to mention that we also make Blake into a pretty conventional 1790s radical. Makdisi’s remarkable *Impossible History* has already done the heavy lifting here to make sure we never again conflate Blake with other 1790s radicals and liberals. Makdisi shows that Blake differed from radicals precisely, and most emphatically, on the question of the atomistic individual vs. community, and I absolutely agree with Makdisi (as we’ll see) on Blake “affirm[ing] life as being in common” (2). Though I do have disagreements with the way Makdisi thinks about Blake’s vision of community and collectivity, these mainly stem from different philosophical traditions we draw from, with Makdisi placing his own thought, and Blake’s, in a Spinoza-Marx-Deleuze line, which I think doesn’t quite work for Blake (despite affinities). This however causes him to cast Blake’s ontology as one of force, desire, and “power” (a word that occurs over 100 times in Makdisi’s book), and as *against* definite identity, in favor of singularities as “bundles”: “For Blake too, our being is not fixed in a definite and intermeasurable form in opposition to otherness; instead, we exist as ever changing bundles of feelings, relations, and emotional bonds” (24). But I think Blake *needs* measure and definite identity precisely to open them up to excess; the everyday sharing of this excess is where community—common life—happens. I also take issue with Makdisi’s denial of the everyday in Blake (for his Blake, community and the common is an Event, a “fierce rushing together”), and his strict separation of measure and immeasure (Goldsmith and Haggarty precede me in these two critiques, respectively).

meter (or *measure*) and form that Blake intervenes in concepts of measure and form generally, unfurling existence as a shared, habitual exposure to the impossibility of grounded measure: experienced as measure's excess in the everyday, experienced as simply life.

So all of this will mean finding, in the welter of *Jerusalem*, a more everyday—and ecological—Blake than we are used to, a Blake who despite everything is amenable to limit and measure. It will also mean confronting what Goldsmith aptly calls “the challenge with Blake,” namely, “to understand why [Blake] considered minute particularity compatible with collective existence” (*Blake's Agitation* 53). Goldsmith stresses the need for “reframing” a differend between two major strands of scholarship that view Blake either as more individualist (represented by Morris Eaves among others) on the one hand, or, on the other, more of an eighteenth-century civic communitarian of sociability and conversation (represented by Barrell, but I'd add Mee among others). Any such reframing must take into account that Blake is not quite either of these, but something much weirder. For me, this neither-nor is a both-and: groundless community and relational singularity: a Romantic variation on a furtive, unfulfilled promise of modernity.

### III. Enough! and Too Much: *Jerusalem's* Excess

It's no secret that Blake is a devil's partisan of excess. And Blake's final major poetic work *Jerusalem*, is a poem of excess in almost every sense: it circulates and recapitulates its own excess, like a sonata of situated volatility. A congeries of strange and “uncannily fluid” characters tumble bafflingly through dozens of barely discernible nested and ringed mini-narratives that are “mutually perforating stories”; passages from earlier works are recycled, entire sequences of plates are rearranged in different versions, and an array of countless ambivalent images—verbal and visual—flicker before the reader (Sklar 253; Tucker 173). One has to divest oneself almost successfully of ideas of narrative and stable characters. The huge difficulties of this poem are apparent to any reader from the start—suffice it to say that *Jerusalem* is demanding like perhaps no other long poem in English. One reason is that Blake thinks, writes, and imagines in fundamentally ontological terms; his poetic ontology challenges us to rethink what beings are, what time and space are, what totality is, what relation is, etc., at the most basic level—and we must meet him on these terms. But it does seem fairly safe to say *Jerusalem's* dominant theme is the failure of *community*—one scholar describes it as the recurring narrative(s) and consequences of the central character “Albion's withdrawal from dynamic relationality” (Hutchings 156). From its opening, the poem wrestles with the problem of how to view finitude and separation—as an incitement to atomization and enclosure or an opening to be shared?

The beginning of *Jerusalem* acknowledges, figures, and performs its excessiveness in several ways starting in the preface to the first chapter (of four total), which is addressed “To the Public.” Here, in the same breath as claiming the importance of “continual forgiveness” to his work, the poet confesses his “enthusiasm” and sinfulness, proclaiming that “I am perhaps the most sinful of men!” (J 3; E 145). Not only is “enthusiasm excessive by definition,” as Goldsmith stresses in a discussion of Blake and emotion, but sin is also often associated directly with excess (*Blake's Agitation* 295). We'll discuss the connection between sin and excess more below, but the association between the two should be obvious to any reader of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which praises sin, the devil, and transgression, while promising that “the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” (MHH 7; E 35). A few plates later, Blake provides one of his most direct descriptions of his own composition, written in an authorial first-person that is rare in *Jerusalem*:

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends are astonish'd at me.  
Yet they forgive my wanderings, I rest not from my great task!

To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the immortal Eyes  
 Of Man inwards into the Worlds of Thought: into Eternity  
 Ever expanding in the Bosom of God. The Human Imagination  
 O Saviour pour upon me thy Spirit of meekness & love:  
 Annihilate the Selfhood in me, be thou all my life!  
 Guide thou my hand which trembles exceedingly upon the rock of ages (J 5:16-23; E

147).

Here already we see several important themes of the poem previewed—not least self-annihilation, forgiveness, love, and the gesture of “open[ing],” which is Blake’s “great task”—but I’m interested in the two separate invocations of trembling. Blake sits down to work “trembling,” and as he works his “hand...trembles exceedingly.” This image depicts the process of composition as a double excess: trembling itself is already an uncontrollable excess of movement, and Blake not just trembles but “trembles exceedingly,” that is, to excess. It’s important to note that Blake depicts the very act of composition as an excess—an excess that, hand trembling, is immanent to the act of writing itself—that is to be circulated in the world, that indeed will “open the Eternal Worlds.”<sup>30</sup>

Yet Blake also tells us in the preface on “the Measure in which / the following Poem is written” that *Jerusalem*, this work of enthusiasm and excess, is regulated to a highly calibrated and specific *measure*:

We who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves, every thing is conducted by Spirits, no less than Digestion or Sleep...When this Verse was first dictated to me I consider’d a Monotonous Cadence like that used by Milton & Shakspeare & all writers of English Blank Verse, derived from the modern bondage of Rhyming; to be a necessary and indispensible part of Verse. But I soon found that in the mouth of a true Orator such monotony was not only awkward, but as much a bondage as rhyme itself. I therefore have produced a variety in every line, both of cadences & number of syllables. Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place: the terrific numbers are reserved for the terrific parts—the mild & gentle, for the mild & gentle parts, and the prosaic, for inferior parts: all are necessary to each other. (J 3; E 145-46)

The mention of Milton and the “modern bondage of Rhyming” explicitly hearkens back to the preface to *Paradise Lost*, where Milton defended his use of blank verse for his modern epic, famously calling rhyme both a “modern bondage” and “the invention of a barbarous age” (210). Whereas Milton sees rhyme as a “vexation, hindrance, and constraint” to the full extension of the “ancient liberty” in English, Blake paradoxically rejects both rhyme and the metrical regularity of blank verse not for more looseness and freedom, but for *more strictness, measure, and calculation*. It is only with the freedom to produce constant “variety in every line” that Blake can apply an absolute and exact measure—a kind of commensurability—to the singularity of every single letter: “Every word and every letter is studied and put into its fit place.” It seems here that the modern bondage of meter and

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<sup>30</sup> Blake once told a potential assistant—none other than a young Samuel Palmer—the only requirement in working for him was the ability to work with “fear and trembling” (Bentley 183). Blake’s whole composing and printing process was about the circulation of excesses—excess immanent to the movement and moment of writing. In a way each of Blake’s words and images, written and drawn with acid-resistant ink, are a kind of organized, situated (because making sense in language) excess that was immanent in the flat plate, revealed when the rest of the plate dissolves away. The infinite (excess) that was hid in the finite (measure). Yet it takes an extremely studied, measured process to show this excess.

rhyme are not absolutely modern—nor bondage—enough. Indeed for Blake imaginative poetry is characterized above all by its definite measure: “Spiritual Verse [is] order’d and measur’d” (J 48:8; E 196). Blake is thus not intentionally making a claim to English free verse—even though he more or less invented it—but is rather claiming the most rigorously strict verse imaginable, a bound(ing) verse measured down to the letter. Innocently and immanently, the conduct of the spirit(s) shows itself most in the strictness of the letter.

With the phrase “*modern* bondage,” both Blake and Milton intuit—as did Blake’s contemporary Hölderlin, for whom this very question would become an obsessive concern—that a poet’s seemingly purely formal choices pertaining to meter and rhyme always also imply some reckoning with, or at least orientation toward, historicity and modernity (not least because meter and modernity both etymologically trace back to words meaning “measure”).<sup>31</sup> Gordon Teskey sees Milton as “a poet on the threshold of a post-theological world,” being “the last major poet for whom the act of creation is centered in God and the first in whom the act of creation begins to find its center in the human” (5-6). According to Teskey’s model we would expect to find in Blake a further development of this trajectory, such that creation becomes more completely centered in the poet. Indeed it is possible to read Blake this way, and in a certain sense this is exactly what happens in Blake, but in this preface to *Jerusalem* we find not an attribution of creative agency centered in the human poet but rather a radical disclamation of this agency: Blake asserts that “we who dwell on Earth can do nothing of ourselves” and claims “this Verse was dictated to me.”<sup>32</sup> Yet even as he admits that this poem was “dictated,” Blake gives an account here of carefully and consciously deliberating over the proper “measure” of his poem, including using first person pronouns (“I consider’d,” “I soon found,” etc.) to describe his vacillating between different formal options.

This means that “spirits” must have dictated only the formless *content* of the poem, not in meter, and without suggesting a meter or form; so Blake’s task qua creative agent was only—though crucially—to choose the right measure and to put the poem into this measure. Even though we just saw that composition is figured as a trembling excess, it is not a contradiction also to observe thus that the work of the poet, the work of composition insofar as the poet does anything at all, is *pure measure (measuring)*. The modern poet is the figure who gives measure at the moment of measure’s crisis—when there are no Gods or grounds to give it. “Was bleibet aber, stiften die Dichter,” says Hölderlin in 1803, right around when Blake began to compose *Jerusalem*: the poets give the groundless ground of what remains. Where this measure comes from and how it is situated is now the question. It doesn’t come *ex nihilo* from the genius of the solitary poet,<sup>33</sup> but is always shaped from the excessive measures of the everyday, intimately shared, quotidian as sleep and digestion. The poet tarries with the incommensurable that shines through measure’s collective clefts, in the rhythmic rite, or in Blake’s striking phrase, “innumerable Dance” of the everyday (M 31:61; E 131).

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<sup>31</sup> “Meter” from Greek *metron*, i.e. measure. “Modernity” from Latin *modus*, i.e. measure. On the question of English meter and blank verse in relation to the crisis of modernity, secularization, and groundlessness, see Weinfeld’s *The Blank Verse Tradition from Milton to Stevens: Freethinking and the Crisis of Modernity*. Also relevant here is Mallarmé (no accident that Weinfeld is a translator), and the thought of Henri Meschonnic. Michael Auer’s current work on politics, sovereignty, and meter in the eighteenth century and Romanticism bears on this too. On Blake and meter specifically, particularly late Blake, there is very little scholarship, though see Kumbier’s insightful “Blake’s Epic Meter.”

<sup>32</sup> Cf. a letter to Butts in which Blake claimed merely to be the “secretary” his works: “I may praise [my poem] since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary the Authors are in Eternity” (E 730).

<sup>33</sup> In fact from very early on Blake associates poetic genius precisely with the idea of variety showing itself through similarity: “As all men are alike (tho’ infinitely various) So all Religions & as all similars have one source / The true Man is the source he being the Poetic Genius” (*All Religions Are One*; E 2). Collectivity and singularity are tied together, and mutually defining, in the poetic genius. Blake develops this idea more in *Milton* and *Jerusalem*, where the imagination is the divine body, which is always singular and plural, exemplified by Jesus.

I want to keep these ideas about meter, line, and syllable in mind—especially how Blake’s idea of meter follows the logic of immanent excess, where excess can only exist in tandem with measure and vice versa—as we begin to read *Jerusalem*. Before examining Blake’s vision of groundless community in *Jerusalem*—a community of excess circulated through forgiveness—we need to see again, in more detail, Blake’s critique of the centered, sovereign circulation: a community of accused sin, managed excess, and conquered contingency. We find it most overtly (and illustratively, for our purposes) at the beginning of Chapter Two.

#### IV. Bad Circulation

“Infinite consanguinity it bears—” -Hart Crane, “Voyages”

“I hate the image of a being linked to isolation. I laugh at the solitary who claims he reflects the world. He cannot reflect it: being himself the center of reflection, he ceases to be the measure of *that which does not have a center*. I imagine that the world does not resemble any separate and closed being, but *what passes from one to another* when we laugh or make love.” –Bataille, *Guilty*

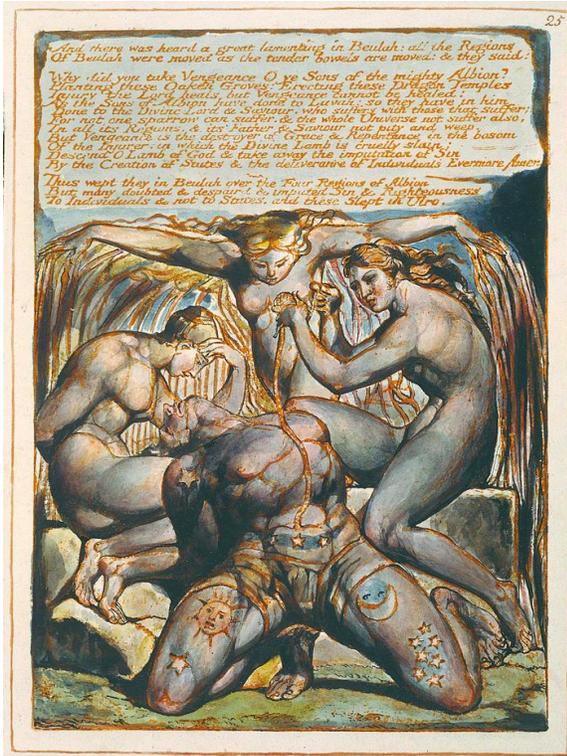
Sovereignty, which Blake calls the “Center,” the “Self,” or “Selfhood,” is the *bad* reaction to the fact of contingency: the desire to be everything, the fear of being nothing. Sovereignty cannot stomach incommensurability (or excess), it tries to isolate and neutralize it. In Blake’s configuration, it does this via the category of *sin*, namely, the accusation of sin. To accuse is to accurse: to isolate and neutralize an accu(r)sed share (what Bataille calls *la part maudite*) under a closed regime, an always hierarchical one, of measure. This is the sovereign or grounded community, with the sovereign occupying the position of the center.

Blake sees the accusation of sin as an oppressive ontological gambit masking itself as a moral category, under the false ideological flag of morality and virtue. Far from a moral judgment, accusation implements a certain (anti)social ontology of measure and hierarchy. But for Blake sin and forgiveness have nothing to do with morality: “The Gospel is Forgiveness of Sins & has No Moral Precepts” (*Annotations to Watson*; E 619). We’ll come back to forgiveness, but let’s zoom into *Jerusalem* to understand how, by the beginning of Chapter 2, Albion—more of the setting than the protagonist of the poem, but still a character—has assumed the position of the sovereign.

Late in Chapter 1, around Plate 19, the already chaotic situation of the poem becomes even more drastic as a conflict between Albion and his sons intensifies (“his children exiled from his breast,” etc.). The image on the bottom of Plate 19 shows Albion stretched out in a deathlike sleep, surrounded by lamenting figures and a setting sun. The narrator describes Albion’s literal (because on the ground) and metaphorical fall in terms relating to the geometry of the circle, terms now familiar to us in their relation to sovereignty: “Albions Circumference was clos’d: his Center began darkning” (J 19:36; E 164). Setting the stage for an assumption of sovereignty, Albion here is figured as a closed circle with a dark, unapproachable center. Like earlier Blake characters such as Urizen, Thel, and Theotormon, Albion frightfully sees the contingency of mortal life as a reason for despair; his raging cry associates mortal finitude (“Destruction”) and contingency (“Accident”) as one: “Or are you born to feed the hungry ravenings of Destruction / To be the sport of Accident!” (J 24:14-15; E 169). It is important to see how for Blake this kind of nihilism is both a cause and effect of the disastrous belief that God is a transcendent ground, inaccessible and distant: “God in the dreary Void / Dwells from Eternity, wide separated from the Human Soul” (J 23:29-30; E 168).

It is here that Albion begins to turn, as response to this *horror vacui*, to “the Wastes of Moral Law,” with a “severe Judge” (J 24:24; E 169). Already on Plate 21, Albion had deemed “sin” as a “deep wound” that should be “clos’d up with the Needle” (J 21:13; E 166). And as Chapter 1

stumbles to a close, he starts to view his emanation Jerusalem as an excess isolatable from and external to him, an excess that is the very embodiment of his sin: “Jerusalem is my Sin!” (J 24:54; E 170). Sure enough, Chapter 1 concludes on plate 25 precisely with Albion getting his wish to be closed up with a needle.



(J Pl 25, Copy E, Yale Center for British Art [www.blakearchive.org](http://www.blakearchive.org))

The image is manifestly ambivalent—this could be a scene of evisceration (even castration?) or one of sewing up an open wound. This ambivalence is of course intentional, not least because the golden string coming out of (going into?) Albion is reminiscent of the recurring and deeply ambivalent image of “fibres” in the poem, as well as of the “golden string” and “ball” that Blake explicitly names as a metonymic image of the poem *Jerusalem* itself.<sup>34</sup> The image invites us to ask whether the thread is an external agent coming to patch up Albion’s opening, or an excess impossible to excise, flowing ever outward (*ex-cessus* means “going out,” like the frontispiece of *Jerusalem*).

But the opening plates of Chapter 2 leave no doubt that, for his part, Albion takes this act as one of *closure*—specifically, the closed center that for Blake characterizes the Selfhood or sovereignty (notice in the image how the thread connects to Albion’s body at its exact center, its *omphalos*). The intense and even moving lament over contingency, finitude, and sin late in Chapter 1 turns maleficent at the beginning of Chapter 2. His center sewn up and closed, Albion himself assumes the position of the Sovereign and judge, seeking to impose his measure on all:

Every ornament of perfection, and every labour of love,  
In all the Garden of Eden, & in all the golden mountains

<sup>34</sup> “I give you the end of a golden string; / Only wind it into a ball, / It will lead you in at Heaven’s gate, / Built in Jerusalem’s wall” (J 77; E 231).

Was become an envied horror, and a remembrance of jealousy:  
And every Act a Crime, and Albion the punisher & judge.

And Albion spoke from his secret seat and said

All these ornaments are crimes, they are made by the labours  
Of loves: of unnatural consanguinities and friendships  
Horrid to think of when enquired deeply into; and all  
These hills & valleys are accursed witnesses of Sin  
I therefore condense them into solid rocks, stedfast!  
A foundation and certainty and demonstrative truth:  
That Man be separate from Man, & here I plant my seat. (J 28:1-12; E 174)

The first stanza details dark transformations in Eden: “ornaments” and “labours of loves” have become objects of envy and jealousy, and “every Act a Crime.” What’s important for us to see is that the sovereign Albion imposes his moral law precisely as a way of (*s*)*tamping out excess*. Decreeing from his throne or “secret seat,” Albion decries “ornaments of perfection” and “labour[s] of love.” Let’s look at these two phrases. An “ornament” obviously refers to something excessive and inessential, that is, external and decorative to an already completed thing; yet the curious phrase “ornaments of perfection” complicates the relation between excess and completion. If the phrase is taken as a subjective genitive, “ornaments of perfection” suggests that something *needs* the excess of an ornament to be perfect, even though perfect literally means totally complete and finished (Latin *per + ficio*, thoroughly made). An “ornament of perfection,” then, would be the unmanageable excess that always belongs to any purported completion: an opening. One gets the sense that Albion opposes not so much ornaments as such, but the idea that ornamentation’s excess is paradoxically immanent to perfection and perfection’s supposedly closed teleology, as a dangerous supplement. Perfection—or completion, closure—always overflows itself, opening onto ornamentation.<sup>35</sup>

In apposition to ornaments, and of a similar species, is the “labour of love.” A labor of love—a syntagma originating in the King James Bible<sup>36</sup>—is also something done without expectation of personal or at least measurable profit, benefit, or reward. Something done out of sheer love, which is excessive, immeasurable, without issue or productive *telos*. A labor that is inoperative, or excessive. As opposed to Lockean labor which, as we saw, encloses from the common and derives property from individual sovereignty, a labor of love is relational and opens to the excess that is (the) common; this inflection on the common and plurality is emphasized in Blake’s ever so slightly awkward double plural: “labours of loves.” A few lines later the corrupt(ed) Albion himself elaborates on his revulsion. Bringing us back to circulation, it has to do with *blood*: “All these ornaments are crimes, they are made by the labours / Of loves: of unnatural *consanguinities* and friendships / Horrid to think of when enquired deeply into.” Excessive, ornamental labors of loves are “unnatural consanguinities,” blood-like relations that aren’t based in “nature” and thus cannot be measured and judged in a grounded system of circulation (remember Albion was just called a “judge”). These consanguinities are groundless, contingent, yet everyday—and just as Albion

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<sup>35</sup> Lisa Robertson on the ornament and sociality: “By ‘the social,’ I mean the gestural ornament...From its vulnerable perch at the cusp of the polis, ornament perceives” (*Nilling* 50, 54).

<sup>36</sup> “Labour of love” originates in the KJV translation of the letter to the Hebrews 6:10: “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love.” Contrast God’s remembrance of the labor of love here with Albion’s “remembrance of jealousy.” Since Chapter 2 of *Jerusalem* is addressed “To the Jews,” it is also effectively Blake’s letter to the Hebrews.

recoiled in horror from contingency at the end of Chapter 1 (“to be the sport of Accident!”), here he rejects the contingent excess of everyday relationality (“friendships”), what he calls *sin*.

Albion sees any excess of measure as sin, and attempts to neutralize and (re)naturalize this excess back into circulation by establishing a ground for the circulation of “natural” consanguinity: a center. Because Albion feels threatened here by sanguinary relationships of blood that are not based in nature or in any ground but only in everyday “friendships” (which he views as excessive, especially to nature), he must try to turn them into a solid ground, “a foundation and certainty” (remember Harvey’s analogy of the king and the heart as centers of circulation, both of which he links via the word “foundation”). Thus the accused become the accursed: “These hills & valleys are accursed witnesses of Sin / I therefore condense them into solid rocks, stedfast: / A foundation and certainty and demonstrative truth: / That Man be separate from Man, & here I plant my seat.”

This attempt at (re)instating a firm foundation or ground (cf. Urizen seeking “a solid without fluctuation” amidst the abyss, and instituting “one law, one measure”) involves a leveling of hills and valleys into s(t)olid flat equivalence, and has the effect of denying relationality and community, as well as ensuring isolated atomization in a line notably in the subjunctive tense: “That Man be separate from Man and here I plant my seat.” It’s no accident that this line is perfectly iambic, nor is it a sport of accident here that every word in this line except “separate” is a single syllable (the only such line on the plate). With its near nominalism, its perfectly measured meter of almost entirely single syllables, the line itself performs a kind of commensurable community of atoms, each word an isolated atomic unit: the iambs of the self-sovereign “I am.” Yet an atom is a thing that does not exist, and the single multisyllabic word “separate” leaves open the possibility, under Albion’s very nose, that separation can itself be a bridge, an opening for the common and plurality, just as the word separate bridges the three syllables se-par-ate. In fact, the word “separate” as an adjective itself toggles between two and three syllables in everyday speech, thus constantly threatening to ruin the perfect iambic measure of this line.<sup>37</sup> Though it’s not meant that way here by Albion, the possibility for separation as sharing, as *partage*, is left open. When Blake says in the preface that every syllable is measured, this what he means; it takes this intensity of measure to open up onto excess. The toggling between measure/meter’s exact perfection and its ornamental undoing becomes an innumerable, inoperative dance: radiant, freighted rhythm of incommensurability. The caught character of this rhythm’s collective inflection is the everyday.

Since the imposition of a ground here happens at the same time as the emergence of the law of “Moral Virtue” (as at the end of Chapter 1, where Albion reacts to groundlessness by instituting “the Wastes of Moral Law), this is also an opportunity to see how this vision of grounded community relates to the accusation of sin. A brief detour into Bataille’s ontology of sin can help us understand what is going on in Blake here. This is not least because Blake, like Bataille (who I think in fact learned all this from Blake himself), thinks of sin, holiness, forgiveness, etc., in *explicitly ontological terms*. Blake’s portrayal of Albion above shows how well he understood that a theory of sin is also a theory of what beings are, which in turn affects how the political and social body is to be conceived. The accusation of sin is an attempt to impose a political and social ontology. We’ve seen how on Plate 21 of *Jerusalem*, Albion—with catastrophic consequences—views sin as a threatening opening, an open wound that must be closed: “That the deep wound of Sin might be clos’d up with

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<sup>37</sup> The motif of “one missing” is also performed in the plate itself: it is Plate 28 in the poem (28 is an important number for Blake, because the product of two other key numbers, 4 x 7), yet this plate has 27 lines. The “27 heavens” is also a motif in Blake; 27 is also bad because it is the cube of 3 (Frye 302). In its original conception, the poem *Jerusalem* itself apparently had 28 plates—we know this because “In XXVIII Chapters” was written on the title plate then deleted during etching (E 809). Or perhaps it was to be a work 7 times as long?

the Needle” (J 21:13; E 166). But to (attempt to) close the wound of sin with accu(r)sing—which is what holiness does—is precisely to close off from the community: to separate, isolate, atomize, and wall off each being in immunization. The need closes up, but the needle can also pierce.

Bataille has a remarkably similar conception of sin and wound. For Bataille—in a book whose title, *Guilty*, could function as an accusation or an acknowledgement of sin (or both at once)—the wound is the opening where beings can touch and communicate, the opening that contingency, incompleteness, and groundlessness make possible: “To the extent that beings seem perfect [cf. Albion on “perfection”!], they remain isolated, closed within themselves. But the wound of incompleteness opens them. Through that which we can call incompleteness, animal nudity, wound, diverse separate beings *communicate*” (*Guilty* 22). Bataille identifies the wound with communication, then does exactly the same with sin: “communication is sin...for those who understand communication as laceration, communication is sin, evil” (*Guilty* 57). Bataille also associates sin with contingency or “chance” and “luck,”<sup>38</sup> and just as importantly, with a wound that makes pure autonomy impossible: “[Sin is a fall] from a state of autonomy and folding back on oneself, to a state of opening, of injury” (“Discussion on Sin,” *Unfinished* 55).

A being without sin would be a being without contingency—a complete being whose excess sin is sewn up. But just as each being has its deep wound,<sup>39</sup> “each being is... the affirmation of randomness, of *contingency*” (*Guilty* 79). The collective shape—fluid, flowering—of this contingent affirmation is community. A complete, autonomous being would be a being without excess—perfection without ornaments, labor without love—isolated and holy, alone, apart, “solid without fluctuation.”<sup>40</sup> If community is possible, it is one of wounds (never homogenous or quite commensurable), of shared excess, common contingency. Contingency, which literally means touching together (*con + tangere*). Community: contingent contact, shaped cadence of accident.

Indeed for Bataille “the idea of *sin* is to reconsider the whole,” namely the whole’s impossibility (*Guilty* 215). This also means to reconsider the holy. The holy—like wholeness, with which it shares an etymology—wants to be closed and complete, isolating and neutralizing all excess, the opening to and of which it sees as sin. The exact same is true in Blake: to be closed—whole, hale, holy—is to be isolated and apart. Blake very often portrays (the bad ideal of) holiness with images of (en)closure, separation, and especially solitude, seeing them as necessarily linked. On Plate 10 of *Jerusalem*, for example, the Spectre of Urthona torments Los with being “clothed in holiness & solitude” (notice the clothed/closed pun which occurs elsewhere in Blake too) (J 10:49; E 153); the association of holiness with Selfhood and Selfishness—“selfish holiness”—is also common in Blake, e.g. later in Chapter 2 of *Jerusalem*: “By Laws of Chastity & Abhorrence I am withered up / Striving to Create a Heaven in which all shall be pure & holy / In their Own Selfhoods” (J 49:26-28; E 198). And because Self and Center are linked for Blake, we should not be surprised that Blake links

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<sup>38</sup> See “Discussion on Sin” 56. For Bataille, chance or contingency has “nothing to do with the calculation of probabilities” (*Guilty* 67). It is an ontological openness.

<sup>39</sup> “There is no being without a crack... in each being, the wound must be found” (*Guilty* 19, 21).

<sup>40</sup> Chapter 2 of *The Book of Urizen* unites basically all of these concerns, concepts, themes, showing their inner connection and logic in a remarkably condensed, but nonetheless remarkable, sequence. It’s too long to quote here but see E 71-72. Much has been made, with good reason, of Blake’s interest in embryology and biology in this text (indeed blood plays a key role in it) (see e.g. Goldstein’s *Sweet Science* on this). But for my purposes it illustrates not so much the formation of the biological human being as such but the formation of the modern sovereign self, the bad reaction to the contingency that modernity lays bare. Cavarero: “There is a sort of embryology of the body politic” (113). For here in incredible clarity is a version of the logic I’ve been adumbrating: the inner link between all the following: the fear of contingency (“void,” “fluctuation”), the assertion of solitude (“I alone,” “my solitude”), the assumption of (en)closed holiness (“In my Holiness,” “set apart”), the accusation of unnatural excess as sin (“terrible monsters sin-bred”), the establishment of a ground (“this rock place”), the assumption of sovereignty (“One King”), and finally, the imposition of commensurable equivalent measure (“One Measure”).

holiness and circles,<sup>41</sup> and especially the *center*: “a False Holiness hid within the Center” (J 69:40; E 223). What I am trying to set us up to realize is just this: because holiness is essentially constituted as solitude and non-relational closure, *sin or excess is communal* (sin is what is in excess of closed holiness, the wound that opens it). And thus precisely because all things are wounded, broken open, *all things are common*.

Earlier in the chapter, I tried to show how the problem with the circle (and its circulation) was a sovereign center or ground, from which all points are commensurable (and where anything in excess of the closure of the circle must be neutralized and made measurable). With this grasp of the details and the logic of certain imagic and conceptual constellations in Blake, we can now understand exactly why right after Albion establishes himself as sovereign in Plate 28, the next plate gives us a clear image of centered circulation.<sup>42</sup> This is done via the Spectre, Albion’s “Rational Power” or “the Great Selfhood / Satan,” the accuser, who after a dark speech to Albion is described thusly:

So spoke the Spectre to Albion. he is the Great Selfhood  
Satan: Worshipd as God by the Mighty Ones of the Earth  
Having a white Dot calld a Center from which branches out  
A Circle in continual gyrations. this became a Heart  
From which sprang numerous branches varying their motions  
Producing many Heads three or seven or ten, & hands & feet  
Innumerable at will of the unfortunate contemplator  
Who becomes his food such is the way of the Devouring Power  
(J 29:16-24; E 175)

Here we have one of *Jerusalem*’s most explicit identifications of the center and the Selfhood, and one of the clearest articulations of its logic: the Selfhood Satan is sovereign (“Worshipd as God”) and identified metonymically with his own “Center.” Around this center forms a circle, which begins a movement of circulation (“A Circle in continual gyrations”). As if to dispel any doubt that circulation is what is at issue, the narrator immediately calls the Center “a Heart”; this heart spreads out its veins and arteries (“numerous branches”) to insure that this blood circulation is one where every point is commensurable and ordered according to one law and one measure, unlike the excessive and “unnatural consanguinities” of the last plate.<sup>43</sup> The veins multiply like the “many heads” of a “polypus” (i.e., hydra), a recurring and ominous image in Blake that often enters the picture in proximity to circles.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “They are beginning to form Heavens & Hells in immense / Circles: the Hells for food to the Heavens: food of torment, / ...In cruel holiness” (J 49:61-64; E 199).

<sup>42</sup> I disagree with Paley, who in reconstructing the different versions of Chapter 2 claims that “the link between [Plate] 28 and 29 is not a strong one” (*Continuing City* 298). On the contrary, the imagery of circles/circulation and the center on Plate 29 makes it a logical follow up to the discourse of sovereignty on Plate 28; but seeing this link required the analysis we undertook in Part 1 of this chapter.

<sup>43</sup> On the connection between the rational power Urizen (“your reason”) as sovereign, patriarch, the center, ground, the heart, and blood, see *Four Zoas* Night 7, E 361, where all these are linked (this is discussed in my Blake-Bataille interlude as well).

<sup>44</sup> The polypus often shows up near bad circles and circulation—e.g., it floats beside the image of Newton drawing a circle (discussed above). Cary Nelson writes that the Polypus is “demonic parody of the ecstatic body...the circumscribed body which hoards its center and draws back from its circumference” (134). On the polypus and circulation, see Goldsmith 339n. On the polypus and relationality see Hutchings.

Bad circulation: this community with a ground is no community at all. Insofar as we can identify any causality in *Jerusalem*, it seems this chain of events began in Chapter 1 when Albion's reaction to groundlessness was to wish to be "clos'd up with the Needle." By the beginning of Chapter 2 Albion has transposed this self-torment onto others, imposing his measure as sovereign center. This occurs just as Albion is closed up right in his center (Plate 25 image). In the midst of all this, though, Blake opens a way out. Opening is, after all, the "great task" of the poem. So Blake opens the center, or rather, shows that it was open, everyday, all along.

## V. Open Center

"all the talk of being 'more centered' was just that, talk, and had long ago become too easy to throw around anymore. He then asked what, or where, was this 'center' and how would anyone know if it were there." – Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*, 11

"each his [center] finds" –Blake, *The Four Zoas*, Night the Second (E 318)  
 "[center] center 1<sup>st</sup> reading del; basement 2<sup>nd</sup> reading del (the deletion of 'center' was a strong ink stroke not easily erased)" –Erdman textual note to this line (E 828)

"If there is a Center it is not / a pure point / but a City / empty of time" –Andrew Joron, *The Absolute Letter*

So far I have tried to delineate Blake's critique of the logic of circulation, center, and measure, and everything constellated around these concepts. We've seen examples and arguments—conceptually, historically, and in Blake, especially the poem *Jerusalem*—of how centered circulation tries to rein in any excess of measure, and how in rendering beings as commensurable atoms, sovereignly decrees "that man be separate from man." Insofar as this excess is considered as sin, the political is also the theological: "Are not Religion & Politics the Same Thing?" (J 57:10; E 207). But what is Blake *for*? What is Blake's vision of groundless community? To open up the hierarchical, grounded community of closed circulation, Blake's community is shot through with the circulation of excess: a community of forgiveness. As I've mentioned, forgiveness in Blake is ontological, indeed Blake's ontology itself takes the form of forgiveness.<sup>45</sup> Forgiveness is how incommensurable unique singularities circulate and relate to each other, groundlessly. As we saw starting in *Jerusalem's* preface on meter, the task—the "great task," he says—is to see excess, incommensurability, and uniqueness not as opposed to measure, but as a shared opening immanent in any situated structure of measure (as heaven and hell are married). Every atom of space and every pulse of a moment, seen under the aspect of its opening, is a chance for expanding sharing, a chance to have saved the world. In the time that remains I'll try to weave these concerns together, including a reconsideration of Blake's key concepts of unique minute particularity and the bounding line, in order to sketch Blake's vision of groundless community in the shared, situated excess of everyday life.

Insofar as *Jerusalem* is "about" anything, it's about forgiveness. Forgiveness is *Jerusalem's* very marrow, even the poem's "whole story" (Tucker 169). The importance of forgiveness, especially in its relation to community, is signaled from the first preface to *Jerusalem* ("To the Public"), where Blake writes: "The Spirit of Jesus is continual forgiveness of Sin: he who waits to be righteous

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<sup>45</sup> Though she doesn't use the word "ontological," this is effectively Jeanne Moskal's claim in *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness*: "In Blake's emergent view [of forgiveness], it is no longer one party's *offense* that provides the occasion to be forgiven, but the *very fact of his otherness* from the forgiver. Forgiveness, then, becomes the sign of identity, in that the otherness has been overcome or 'forgiven'" (69). While I agree with Moskal's decoupling Blakean forgiveness from individual moral acts and ontologizing it, I don't think Blake wants to "overcome" otherness in the name of unifying identity; as we'll see, I think Blake wants not to overcome otherness but rather to set—or if you like, to *etcb*—it in relief.

before he enters into the Saviours kingdom, the Divine Body; will never enter there. I am perhaps the most sinful of men! I pretend not to holiness! yet I pretend to love, to see, to converse with daily” (J 3; E 145). Blake already posits forgiveness here not as a punctuated, discrete act but rather as a “spirit” of the collective “Divine Body” that Blake always associates with Jesus. Forgiveness is conceived of as “continual”—a habitual movement, a situated structure of relationality rather than a moral, ethical, or even political principle; forgiveness is both divine and everyday, a “daily” conversing with. Forgiveness is not just continual but often called “mutual,” hence relational. The community structured by and as continual forgiveness of sin would necessarily also be a community of sin itself, which is excess. This community is explicitly posed as an alternative to one of pretended “holiness,” which as we know is a community of grounded and measured circulation. The latter is no true collective body, only what Blake will apotropaically call near the end of *Jerusalem* “the Satanic Body of Holiness” (J 90:38; E 250).

If accusation needs a holy center of holiness from which to assert measure and commensurable equivalence, forgiveness must perform an operation of opening upon this center. For all his critique of and “antipathy to intermeasurability,” Blake doesn’t want to do away with measure (Haggarty 16); he wants to open it, immanently, to its own improper excess. Thus we find phrases like “the Center opened by Divine Mercy” in a deeply ambivalent passage in *The Four Zoas* (87:3; E 369) that presage certain passages in *Jerusalem*, like one at the close of Chapter 3. After an image of a row of angelic figures trapped in circles, and a dreadful catalogue culminating in “the Abomination of Desolation” Rahab—an ambiguous and obscure figure whose importance for Blake’s critique of political theology has just been illuminated in immense detail by Rosso<sup>46</sup>—Blake offers a brief two-line hint of hope for the apocalypse to come: “But Jesus breaking thro’ the Central Zones of Death & Hell / Opens Eternity in Time & Space; triumphant in Mercy” (J 75:20-21; E 231). Jesus as the embodiment of forgiveness (“triumphant in Mercy”) does not destroy the sovereign center, but “breaks through” it, in order to “Open Eternity in Time & Space.” Eternity is thus not an extension of time nor a state beyond time, but an excess of time immanent in the measurable “Central Zones” of time and space itself. *Not* to accede to this excess, that is, to see time and space under the aspect of closed measure, is to be in hell (“the Central Zones of Death & Hell”). Hell is Blake’s name for the finite world seen as closed, which he also often calls nature (“meer Nature or Hell”) (E 605). The breaking open of measure is even performed in this couplet—the first line is a perfectly iambic Blakean “fourteener,” while the second line begins with a trochee (“Opens”) that immediately breaks the regular iambic meter, in addition to adding two excessive extra syllables (sixteen total, an important number in *Jerusalem* because 4 x 4). After this trochaic opening, the line resumes iambic feet until a heavy caesura punctuated by a semicolon. After this rightly placed caesura—which is the open center of the poetic line itself—the line’s meter is unrecognizably scrambled while reaching the final trochee: “Mercy.”

The natural or vegetative universe, like the groaning creation in that breathtaking St. Paul passage Blake often cites (Romans 8:22), is constantly crying out to be seen under the aspect of its immanent opening. Such gestures of opening, expanding, and opening the center, are frequent in Blake and are essential to his poetics (which is to say his theology, his politics, his ontology, etc.). Early in *Jerusalem*, for example, we learn “The Vegetative Universe, opens like a flower from the

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<sup>46</sup> See Rosso’s new *The Religion of Empire*, where Rahab “constitutes a broad-scale attack on the conceptual bases of British imperialism, which Blake identifies with the political theologies that support empire generally through history” (197). And cf. in this passage, an evil alliance of earthly and divine sovereignty: “Religion hid in War”; also on this plate: “Rahab the great hath destroyed Jerusalem.” Since Jerusalem indexes excess/relationality/forgiveness (as emanation), Rahab as sovereign wants to destroy excess/relation as the common. Jerusalem is the “name of the common” (McGee 99).

Earths center: / in which is Eternity” (J 13:34-35; E157). Notice how, like the last example, the line is iambic (“The Vegetative Universe”) until, after a comma forces a caesura, the trochaic word “opens” breaks open the meter. And similarly, here eternity is simply the floral aperture immanent in the heart of the supposedly vegetative universe, what Blake elsewhere famously calls “the infinite which was hid” in the closed center (MHH 14; E 39).<sup>47</sup> The vegetative universe is the Newtonian universe of demonstration, a world made of measurable atomic units, but it only exists like this if seen to be this way: ontology has political consequences. But in Blake’s ontology, every atom is an invitation to its opening, to sharing, “for a chorus is incarcerated in every point of space,” as a poet says (Joron 5): “She also took an Atom of Space, with dire pain opening it a Center / Into Beulah” (J 48:38; E 197).<sup>48</sup> Eternity, which needs the mercy of time, is the excess flowering and flowing out of the Earth’s open center. And Heaven is not out there, in a transcendent other world: it is the excessive opening immanent to measure’s necessary mundane (s)hell: “For Hell is opened to Heaven” (J 77:34; E 233). Heaven eddies out of the circulation of the air we share: like Frank Ocean sings, “Inhale, in hell, there’s heaven.”

It is important to remember that for Blake it is *mercy* that opens the center. Blake’s typically jarring suturing of theological and geometric language culminates in the pun where the “open center” is possible because each being is an *open sinner* (say the word “center” fast). And an open sinner is exactly what Blake openly declares himself to be in the first preface to the poem: “I am perhaps the most sinful of men!” Since the center is what assures equivalent measure, the opening of the center is what allows measure to be open to excess; mercy or forgiveness is the acknowledgment and—to use Blake’s word—organization of the excess that breaks the circulation of pure measure. Indeed, forgiveness in *Jerusalem* is often figured in relation to an excess of measure. Let’s quickly look at two examples.

The first occurs in Chapter 3, during a clash between a sulfurous and suffering Albion and an increasingly confident Los. From Plates 40-42,<sup>49</sup> Albion rejects the everyday and the domestic, disowning his friends and family via accusing and accursing (“a mans worst enemies / Shall be those of his own house and family”) (J 41:25-16; E 189), until Los—through an act of “open[ing]”—gets him to realize that the everyday relationality he (Albion) disclaims is an essential part of him: “[Albion] saw that the accursed things were his own affections, / And his own beloveds” (J 42:3-4; E 189). Yet Albion cannot stomach the fact that what is proper to him—“his own”—is also a relationality to others that he can never fully own; the accursed share is his own excess. So instead of facing up to this relationality in its entangled richness, Albion “turn’d sick” (J 42:4; E189). He excoriates Los for “Worshipping mercy” and plays the patriarch, “Demand[ing] righteousness & justice” for perceived wrongs to him done by his emanations and familial subjects: “Give me my Emanations back... / My daughters are harlots! my sons are accursed before me / ...accursed with a fathers curse!” (J 42:10, 13-15; E 189). Albion’s problem is thinking that his structure of relationality—his domestic regime of measure—is closed, grounded, hierarchical, with him at/as the patriarchal sovereign center. But

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<sup>47</sup> The flower is a common image of opening in Blake, from *Jerusalem’s* frontispiece to the famous line about “heaven in a wildflower.” In Book II of *Milton*, the flower is again explicitly associated with the open center: “Thou percievest the Flowers put forth their precious Odours! / And none can tell how from so small a center comes such sweets / Forgetting that within that Center Eternity expands” (M 31: 46-48; E 131).

<sup>48</sup> Who performs this particular action of opening a center is ambiguous, but Foster Damon’s dictionary claims it is Eno. This would make sense because Eno is, Damon claims, “the ability of seeing the eternity in all things” (125).

<sup>49</sup> I.e. Plates 40-42 in the Erdman edition, which follows the plate ordering of copies A, C, and F. Copies D and E have a different ordering in Chapter 2. Blake “found both sequences attractive but considered neither definitive” (E 809).

Los answerd. Righteousness & justice I give thee in return  
 For thy righteousness! but I add mercy also, and bind  
 Thee from destroying these little ones: am I to be only  
 Merciful to thee and cruel to all that thou hatest  
 Thou wast the Image of God surrounded by the Four Zoas  
 Three thou hast slain! I am the Fourth: thou canst not destroy me.  
 (J 42:19-24; E 189)

Mercy here is the excess that Los “add[s],” to break the equivalent circle of reciprocal vengeance which Albion calls “Righteousness and justice.” Rather than doing away with righteousness and justice, Los for-gives—“give[s]” them back “in return / For”—but only under the aspect of an excess that opens this circle. As Sarah Haggarty claims, reading the episode under her insightful rubric of gift exchange, “Los will return a transforming excess of mercy...in the same way that offering the other cheek breaks with the exchange of eye for eye” (89). I would add that rather than breaking exchange, Los *breaks open* exchange by adding mercy, opening exchange and measure to a circulation of excess between these figures, just as mercy opens the closed center. Haggarty herself comes close to this view in noting that Los’s mercy is not divorceable from calculation: “Los’s gesture is generous, despite its calculation, which works to protect the Emanations” (89).<sup>50</sup> Given that, according to David Clark, Blake’s emanations are tropes for relationality itself, protecting the emanations is tantamount to keeping open a space for relationality and community as such, by keeping open an excess to—immanent *in*—any commensurable system.<sup>51</sup> This point about protecting relationality is also suggested by the fact that Los’s verb of protection and distancing prohibition (“bind”) is also a word of connection—an important and ambivalent word in Blake: “I...*bind* / Thee from destroying these little ones.” Seeing measure under the aspect of excess and opening is what Blake means by “fourfold” and the number four—this is why Los claims “I am the Fourth” here—but we’ll come back to this.

The fact that this gesture of excessive mercy is one that mediates a scene of potential domestic violence—Albion wants to “destroy” his accursed sons and daughters—should key us in to an important fact that is easy to lose sight of in the midst of *Jerusalem’s* national and mythic and cosmic chaos: despite the poem’s alienating clamor and unremitting calamity, Blake in his strange way is consistently tuned in to the domestic, the habitual, and the everyday—a fact we can now understand and appreciate fully after Goldsmith’s *Blake’s Agitation* has excavated the more quiet(ist)

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<sup>50</sup>Haggarty’s great book *Blake’s Gifts* is valuable, among other reasons, for reminding us how Blake is constantly “mingling” the pure gift with exchange, and theological language with economic language: “Blake’s radicalism did not provoke him entirely to withdraw from exchange” (2). Her account also serves as a gentle corrective to Makdisi, whose analysis Haggarty sees as “pit[ting] the gift against exchange” in too strict an opposition (12). This recalls my Chapter 2, which argues that Derrida, like Rousseau, too strictly opposes the incommensurable with measure, instead of seeing the former as the immanent, situated excess of the latter. Indeed Haggarty’s book is also critical of Derrida here, and intuits how Derrida’s absolute opposition to measure leads him to reject the everyday, and ultimately community, a point I labored in detail in Chapter 2: “To divorce a transcendent deity from everyday human transactions would have been inimical to Blake, for Blake, unlike Derrida, refuses to disengage the gift from relation...If Blake’s divinity is here communitarian, his humanity is communitarian likewise. The contrary is the case for Derrida” (169, 173). For Haggarty—and I am largely in agreement—“Blake’s treasures exceed the quantifiable world. But they are also realized in the present, in an economy in which divinity and humanity, every thing and every person, intermingle” (12). It seems relevant that *commerce* and *mercy* share the same root meaning “exchange”; another, different PIE root meaning exchange (*-mei*) gives rise to words like *mutual*, and the Latin *munus* (which means debt, and is the origin of the words common and community); but this root also gives but also *money*. See Esposito’s *Communitas* on *munus* and community.

<sup>51</sup> David Clark: “the emanation [in Blake] is a trope for the possibility of relationship itself, for the principle of adjoining which inscribes entities in the web of difference” (186).

and everyday Blake, and all the ways that “Blake willingly participated in...domesticity” in his life and work (106). But precisely *because Jerusalem* is a poem of constantly ongoing disaster, the everyday must be construed as the constant shared—often failed, painful, and yes, agitated—negotiation with incommensurability and excess; the wound that is excess is domestic, namely, “The Wound I see in South Molton St[r]eet” (J 74:55; E 230). For 17 South Molton Street—printed on *Jerusalem’s* title plate—is where Blake sat to work on his poem: “I write in South Molton Street, what I both see and hear / In regions of Humanity, in Londons opening streets” (J 34: 42-43; E 180).<sup>52</sup> The street, the place of the everyday: “If [the everyday] is anywhere, it is in the street” (Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation* 242). Blake see(k)s the opening of the streets, “Londons opening streets,” from the charter’d streets that enclose, manage, and manacle the circulation of modern London.

This often subtle but persistent tendency toward domesticity, the mundane, and the everyday in Blake’s long prophecies is most pronounced in *Milton: A Poem*, but even the forbidding difficulty of *Jerusalem* does not prevent us from the seeing the poem as, in a sense, nothing more than “a bizarre rash of family calumnies” (Tucker 173). From this perspective, it is possible to understand the context of my second example of forgiveness as the circulation of an opening or excess in measure—I mean Blake’s revisionist history of Jesus’s conception in Chapter 3. In a long poem about forgiveness, this is perhaps the one concrete historical example of forgiveness that Blake gives; it is no accident that it takes the form of a domestic dispute. In Blake’s retelling of Christ’s conception, he focuses not on the divine conception and virgin birth (a doctrine Blake appears to reject), but on Joseph’s anger at his fiancée Mary’s infidelity, and then his eventual forgiveness. After an argument between the betrothed couple, at the end of which Joseph embraces Mary in forgiveness, Mary relates a dream in which an angel spoke:

Saying, Doth Jehovah Forgive a Debt only on condition that it shall  
Be Payed? Doth he Forgive Pollution only on conditions of Purity  
That Debt is not Forgiven! That Pollution is not Forgiven  
Such is the Forgiveness of the Gods, the Moral Virtues of the  
Heathen, whose tender Mercies are Cruelty. But Jehovahs Salvation  
Is without Money & without Price, in the Continual Forgiveness of Sins  
In the Perpetual Mutual Sacrifice in Great Eternity! for behold!  
There is none that liveth & Sinneth not! (J 61:17-24; E 212)

What interests me here is the rejection of commensurability that forgiveness entails: “the Continual Forgiveness of Sins” is in excess of any abstract system of measure, of which money is one paradigmatic example; forgiveness is “without Money & without Price.” As Blake’s thought developed, he increasingly saw all regimes of measure and circulation as intimately connected, in their logic and in their real historical effects—this is why he so blithely mixes theological, political,

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<sup>52</sup> Plate 34 on E 180 further inscribes the redemptive domestic, everyday, and familial aspects of *Jerusalem*—it gives us an “Eternal Vision” of community as “Universal Family” and “Divine Family,” where the relationality of the everyday is *constitutive of existence as such*: “brothers, sisters, sons, fathers, and friends / Which if Man ceases to behold, he ceases to exist” (J 34:19, 27, 12-13; E 180). This relationality is then cast directly in literal domestic terms (“Houses”), which is figured as a good circulation of blood in excess of the measured (“vegetating”) circulation of blood in Satanic mills: “My Houses are Thoughts: my Inhabitants; Affections, / The children of my thoughts, walking within my blood-vessels, / ...In dreams of darkness, while my vegetating blood in veiny pipes, / Rolls dreadful thro’ the Furnaces of Los, and the Mills of Satan” (J 34:33-37; E 180).

scientific, and economic language. And it is why in the text of the *Laocoön* he can equate money, reason, and the moral law (accusation of sin)—all three are regimes of measure.<sup>53</sup>

Forgiveness is gratuitous, in excess of measure, yet it is “continual,” and as the example shows in its domesticity, is a relation inherent in everyday life.<sup>54</sup> Rather than an illusion of perfection (as the “moral virtues” would have it), forgiveness recognizes the excess (sin) that is (im)proper to every life, simply in the act of living: “There is none that liveth & Sinneth not!” Sin is just the excess that pours out of life, everyday life—even being itself (the word “sin” itself seems to derive from the PIE root for “to be”). This Blakean concept of life—or better, a non-vitalist movement of *living*—will be crucial for the rest of the chapter. The point is that just as we are already sinning as we live, we are also always already forgiving, sharing the excessive and open circulation of life: what Moten calls “the general openness and commonness of a life” (“Blackness and Nothingness,” 756).

Forgiveness, then, is about excess; opening the center, it lives in the excess of measure and managed circulation. It is with-out price, it is the outside immanent to quantifiable price, it also the sharing of the with—it is “withoutside,” to employ a fey Blakean word. An “outside that is not exterior to the world but opens the world in itself” (Nancy, *Adoration* 5). Forgiveness is acknowledging that every individual lives in excess of its determinate modes, even while constantly inhabiting these modes of life in their groundless contingency. Blake calls these modes “states,” and says pretty clearly in *Jerusalem* that the *sine qua non* of forgiveness is to distinguish individuals (singularities) from the states through which they pass in the movement of life, states of bliss and woe and every everyday thing in between.<sup>55</sup> That this excessive movement through life, as life, is necessarily shared and collective is why forgiveness in Blake is always both “continual” and “mutual.” There is an outside to every system or regime of commensurability—this is the system’s excess, a word that means going *out* (Latin *ex-cessus*). But the system and its wound need each other, for this excess or outside is always immanent to measure, never separable from it. It’s always situated, immanent inside in the system of measure as the system’s life or open wound, never transcendentally beyond but opening, expanding, spreading: “There is an Outside spread Without, & an Outside spread Within / Beyond the Outline of Identity both ways, which meet in One” (J 18:2-3; E 162). The “*Outside*” touching the “*Outline*” limns the limit of the inside, opening it. Always shared: “only the limit is common” (Nancy, *Inoperative Community* 73). The limit, the line: life.

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<sup>53</sup> “Money, which is the Great Satan or Reason the Root of Good & Evil in the Accusation of Sin” (E 275). Right next to this claim on the *Laocoön* is yet another association of money with other regimes of abstract measure and circulation: blood circulation, empire (“universal empire” being precisely the attempt of one nation to impose its measure universally and violently), and the religion of nature: “The True Christian Charity not dependent on Money (the lifes blood of Poor Families) that is on Caesar or Empire or Natural Religion” (E 275). That Blake considered morality a system of equivalent measure with the same structure as money is shown on Plate 69 of *Jerusalem*, where Rahab forms “a Commerce to sell Loves / With Moral Law, an Equal Balance” (J 69:34-35; E 223). Morality as the accusation of sin is “equal balance”—equivalence, or a zero-sum system in which hierarchies of more and less emerge. It is also significant that this occurs in the context of the “Spectres” uniting, since the Spectre is another abstract system of measure, namely rationality. Finally, the very next passage on the plate brings home how these systems of measure are all grounded in a *center*, in a line I’ve already quoted: “a False Holiness hid within the Center” (J 69:40; E 223).

<sup>54</sup> Here we should draw a key contrast between Blake’s biblical model of the everyday, and Derrida’s as we saw it in Chapter 2. While both take their model of the everyday from a domestic scene in Bible, Derrida’s is one of domestic violence averted at the last second via the event of a wholly other being (*tout autre*) (the Abraham and Isaac episode), which leaves Derrida in solitude. But Blake’s model of the everyday here is the shared, everyday handling of the incommensurability that inheres in any sustained relationship.

<sup>55</sup> “Learn therefore O Sisters to distinguish the Eternal Human / That walks about among the stones of fire in bliss & woe / Alternate! from those States or Worlds in which the Spirit travels: / This is the only means to Forgiveness of Enemies” (J 49:72-75; E 199). For an extended take on Blake’s idea of individuals vs. states, see Chapter 3 of Moskal’s *Blake, Ethics, and Forgiveness*.

## VI. Life Lines

“The common is constituted in *and* as the very movement of circulation of all that refuses ownership.” – William Haver, “Reading Foucault’s Genet Lectures”

“It is necessary to remember that intimacy can preserve its political meaning only on condition that it remains inappropriable. *What is common is never a property but only the inappropriable.* The sharing of this inappropriable is love.” –Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*

“Die Ewigkeit hält sich in Grenzen.” –Celan

“...the open wound that is my life...” –Bataille, “Letter to X”

The line: the form, the outline, the circumference: “the Outline the Circumference & Form, for ever / In Forgiveness of Sins” (J 98: 22-23; E 257). If the last section dealt with the opening of the circle’s center by mercy, we now turn to the circle’s circumference. Specifically, how does Blake view the circumference or outline—the form—as a shared opening, and what does it have to do with forgiveness, excess, measure, situated everydayness, and community? Derrida himself was attentive to the importance of the circumference in Blake’s *Jerusalem*, including its relation to “revolution” or circular movement, and in a 1986 essay on Celan he quoted the very line from Plate 98 I just quoted<sup>56</sup>; yet Derrida seems to have forgotten Blake and the importance of the limit by his 1999 address “On Forgiveness,” which opens with the claim: “In principle, there is no limit to forgiveness, no *measure*” (27; Derrida’s emphasis). In this chapter we have seen how forgiveness is excessive, in excess of the measure for which centered circulation is a technology. Now, in this last section, I want to demonstrate in detail the even more important point that this excess, *pace* Derrida, only ever exists as immanent to measure and limit, in the situated minute particularity of what Blake calls “organization,” or simply life.<sup>57</sup>

To begin: what does forgiveness have to do with minute particularity? One of *Jerusalem*’s many difficulties (or mini-difficulties) is a brief moment on the critical Plate 38, often unnoticed, where Blake uses apposition to equate exactly these two utterly important concepts (“minute particular,” “mutual forgiveness”)<sup>58</sup>: “Instead of the Mutual Forgivenesses, the Minute Particulars, I see Pits of bitumen ever burning” (J 38: 61; E 185). This is the only time in Blake’s corpus that the word “forgiveness” appears in the plural, and it seems to be plural to heighten the appositive identification with “minute particulars” (which is almost always plural in Blake). Blake felt he could identify these concepts so absolutely as to place them in casual apposition, as if it were obvious that mutual forgiveness is the same thing as minute particularity, without remainder. Because the passage in question moves on to relate a dark vision and doesn’t give us many clues, we have to use what we know of Blake’s conceptual field to reconstruct the reasons for this. Before anything, it seems clear that this apposition means that minute particularity, i.e. unique singularity, does not and cannot exist in itself alone, but is relational. Specifically, singularity is constituted by the habitual relation of shared excess known as mutual forgiveness. While Blake is constantly fighting the subsumption of

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<sup>56</sup> See *Sovereignities in Question* 58-59.

<sup>57</sup> The word “heterogeneous” is key in this text—cf. my Ch. 2 on *Rogues* and measure—and entails a rejection of the ordinary and everyday (e.g. 32). In contrast, for Blake forgiveness can only ever be everyday; forgiveness’s excess is always immanent to a situated structure of relational return. This would be good circulation for Blake.

<sup>58</sup> Not totally unremarked by critics, but I don’t think this strange apposition has been given the attention it deserves; though see Middleton Murray (1933) and recently (2016), McGee.

singularity into abstraction or the “intermeasurable,” he also recognizes singularity can only exist in some field of relation: minute particulars, mutual forgivenesses.

It is important to note that this same plate contains an exhortation to protect and praise minuteness and everydayness (“admire his minutest powers”), and registers the failure to do so precisely as a failure of community: “they accumulate / A World in which Man is by his Nature the Enemy of Man, / In pride of Selfhood unwieldy stretching out into Non Entity / Generalizing Art & Science till Art & Science is lost” (J 38:51-54; E 185). This is the world of centered Selfhood (compare Albion’s earlier decree that “man be separate from man”), a naturalized (“by his Nature”) world of both violently antagonistic atomism and oppressive grounded commensurability. This world comes about as a result of a consequential decision of political ontology, a claim about what beings are and what human nature is; a decision to see finite singularity as closed and bordering on nothingness (“stretching out into Non Entity”), rather than bordering, always minutely and mundanely, on another singularity in an excessive relation of sharing. This latter border is what Blake calls the outline, the form, or “the bounding line”: the *circumference*, in terms of the circle. The bounding line, then, is what links minute particularity and mutual forgiveness.

If forgiveness is a shared acknowledgment and negotiation with the excess proper to singular life, the bounding line is what forgiveness looks like as an aesthetic principle. The very phrase “bounding line” clues us in to excess, as many have noted: the pun on *bounding* as jumping over. But this bounding excess is an *immanent* excess: there can only be bounding over if there is something over which to bound: the line as limit which opens to overflow rather than closes. “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough,” reads one of Blake’s more Hegelian Proverbs of Hell (MHH 9; E 37).<sup>59</sup> Blake’s concept of the bounding line is well-known and crucial to his aesthetic theory and practice.<sup>60</sup> I’m going to quote one famous instance of his advocacy to show how the bounding line relates to our concerns. It’s from Blake’s *Descriptive Catalogue* of 1809:

The great and golden rule of art, as well as of life, is this: That the more distinct, sharp, and wirey the bounding line, the more perfect the work of art; and the less keen and sharp, the greater is the evidence of weak imitation, plagiarism, and bungling. . . The want of this determinate and bounding form evidences the want of idea in the artist’s mind. . . How do we distinguish the oak from the beech, the horse from the ox, but by the bounding outline? How do we distinguish one face or countenance from another, but by the bounding line and its infinite inflexions and movements? What is it that builds a house and plants a garden, but the definite and determinate? What is it that distinguishes honesty from knavery, but the hard and wirey line of rectitude and certainty in the actions and intentions. Leave out this [i]ne and you leave out life itself[.] (E 550)

What strikes one upon reading this is how un-Blakean it at first sounds—from the sobriety and pedantry of the language to the *anti*-antinomian praise of moral “rectitude” and “perfect[ion],” and the Platonic insistence on “idea,” as well as the upholding of exactitude and determinate measure. But the strictness of the line—as well as the meta-strictness of the injunctions about the line—in all these boundaries and measures only makes Blakean sense if we view it as open(ing) to *excess*. The bounding line is not binding, it is a line that itself moves, bends, and bounds, a line that is bound over in the movement of life. Movement of life: circulation of excess. Indeed Blake is clear that the

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<sup>59</sup> Hegel: “[I]f the very fact something is determined as a limitation implies that the limitation is already transcended” (*Science of Logic* 134). On Blake and Hegel see books by Punter and Lorraine Clark.

<sup>60</sup> E.g., a classic account is found in Mitchell; a more recent theoretical reading in Nersessian’s *Utopia Limited*.

bounding line applies to “art, as well as...life.” And in that 1827 letter we’ve had occasion to return to many times, the *line* in its capacity to outline “minutest” particularity is what Blake opposes to the “intermeasurability” he critiques.<sup>61</sup> Outline opens measure, it does not render intermeasurable. The line is a continual movement like “continual forgiveness” is a continual movement: not an infinite striving towards a regulative or otherworldly ideal, but a shared daily negotiation with incommensurability, a creation of the common.

The outline sets a thing free into its minute particularity, which is not a frozen identity but a habitual process of “infinite inflexions and movements,” a rhythm in excess of a centered system of equivalence. However, this movement of excess is not heroic or transcendent, not heterogeneous to all measure, but rather mundane, situated, shared, and domestic, as shown by Blake’s quotidian examples: an oak, an ox, a face, a house, a garden. A face we see is not some unrecognizable wholly other (*tout autre*), but one we recognize in the everyday, perhaps a friend or a lover. The limit of singularity does not border onto “the verge of non-entity”—thinking that it does is exactly the error of closed Selfhood (recall Albion’s bad reaction to contingency in Chapter 1)—but instead opens onto the other; though not an Other in an abstract ethical system, but encountered in the lucid concreteness of living: the lips of this face, the leaf in that garden. The line’s relational *partage* both shares and distinguishes singularities. The line for Blake is literally *everyday life itself*: “leave out this line and you leave out life itself.” Blake’s list of examples also traverses the categories of human, animal, plant, and nonliving, suggesting that his conception of life here has nothing to do with any vitalism or organicism, even less so an anthropocentrism; the fact that the shared line as life conjures a field of relationality open to all beings human and non, as well as the fact that this field of relation takes place as a situated locality or *oikos* (a house, a garden), means that we are above all dealing with a Blakean ecology (however “reluctant” Blake is on this question<sup>62</sup>). An ecology of what Blake elsewhere calls “living form,” or what I’m calling, after Agamben, form-of-life (*On Virgil*; E 270).<sup>63</sup>

That the determinate measure of a bounding line is open—infinately open—to excess is evident in a line in Plate 55 of *Jerusalem*, a line I’ve long considered to be perhaps the most important line in Blake: “The Infinite alone resides in Definite & Determinate Identity” (J 55:64; E 205). The infinite—what exceeds limits—is not out there, otherworldly, heterogeneous to finite particularity; rather, it is *only* (“alone”) ever immanent in definite identity, identity that is always delineated by the bounding outline, circumference, or form: “determinate and bounding form” (E 550). This line from Plate 55 itself performs the logic of immanent excess in its meter: take out the ampersand (“&”) and it reads perfectly iambically. The line’s perfect measure then is interrupted, or opened, in its center by the presence of a symbol/word that means “and”; this word itself semantically suggests excess, for “and” implies something additional. The infinite residing in measure is just measure’s open “and”—a word of excess that is also relational, as it connects and conjoins (e.g. this *and* this, together). Blake’s hyper-attentiveness to the workings of the meter of this line should alert us to another important fact about his theory of the bounding line, one that too often is missing in discussions of this concept by Blake scholars: the bounding line is not just an outline in terms of visual art, it is also a pun on the *poetic line*. Sure enough, the word “line” only occurs twice in the text of *Jerusalem*, and its first occurrence is in reference to the construction of the poetic line. It comes in the preface “Of the Measure” of the poem, in which Blake writes: “I therefore have produced a

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<sup>61</sup> “For a Line or Lineament is not formed by Chance a Line is a Line in its Minutest Subdivision[s] Strait or Crooked It is Itself & Not Intermeasurable with or by any Thing Else” (E 783).

<sup>62</sup> See Amanda Goldstein on “Reluctant Ecology in Blake and Arendt.” Several scholars, especially Moskal, have noted Blake and Arendt’s often similar ideas of forgiveness.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. “General Forms have their *vitality* in Particulars,” vitality i.e. *life*. (J 91:29; E 251). See Gigante’s *Life* for life and organic form in Blake, and Goldstein’s *Sweet Science* for a somewhat different view.

variety in every *line*, both of cadences & number of syllables” (J 3; E 146). Blake’s poetic line is also bounding, then: full of variety and shifts and movement—full of life—even while it is strictly measured: “every letter is studied and put into its fit place.”

I’m also interested in Blake’s choice of verb in this line. What does it mean to say “The Infinite alone *resides*...” in particularity? “Reside(s)” is a fairly rare word in Blake’s corpus, but when it occurs it does so with importance, and usually is a word insisting on *immanence*; e.g., in the *Marriage*, “All deities *reside* in the human breast” (MHH 11; E 38). The word occurs in only one other place in *Jerusalem*—crucially, in the opening passage of the poem, where Christ speaks to Albion and rejects distant transcendence in favor of a immanent, nearby, everyday, even familial divinity, one whose essential component is forgiveness: “I am not a God afar off, I am a brother and friend; / Within your bosoms I reside, and you reside in me: / Lo! we are One; forgiving all Evil; Not seeking recompense!” (J 4:18-21; E 146). “Resides” is literally a domestic verb, implying residing, inhabiting, and living in a home or locality. Thus the infinite that *resides* in determinate, unique singularity is simply the fact of its inhabiting an everyday openness: the infinite lives, dwells, as the immanent excess or *residue* of the finite (immanence itself means *indwelling*). That this residual and excessive openness is shared and situated at the limit (line) is called forgiveness, as Christ’s speech makes clear. Here as always forgiveness is in excess of any system of equivalence, exchange, or “recompense.”

For this openness of singularity is not just shared, but always situated in and as the everyday; aside from “reside” implying the everyday (in)habitual movement of living, it is not an accident that Plate 55 contains, like Plate 38 discussed above, an encomium of singularity or minute particularity, along with an emphasis on everydayness. The plate exhorts us to “Labour well the Minute Particulars...labour well the teeming Earth,” and suggests that this involves doing good to others in everyday acts of kindness—Wordsworth calls them “little, nameless, unremembered”: “He who would do good to another, must do it in Minute Particulars / General Good is the plea of the scoundrel hypocrite & flatterer: / For Art & Science cannot exist but in minutely organized Particulars” (J 55:51,53, 61-63; E 205). Relating to others by doing good is always particular, but not totally random, isolated, and absolutely incommensurable—it is part of a situated structure of recognition and return, which is minute but “organized.” The common is the fecund friction between the uniqueness of singularity and the relational situatedness that constitutes—organizes—it. Art only exists in minutely organized particulars—and the whole business of man is the arts and all things common. Seeing infinity in finite things, in form, is thoroughly mundane and not at all mystical. It does not even mean seeing the mystical *in* the mundane; it means finite singular things are *open*, always in excess of any predetermined ground, essence, or measure. But this open excess is organized, situated into a habitual field of relation. The shared rhythm of this openness is groundless community: its form is that of life. A rhythmic circulation of excess: “Thus Eternity reveals its secrets affectively and *periodically*—according to the regular, rhythmic intervals of circulation” (*Blake’s Agitation* 29).

Blake’s commitment to organization and the exactitude of particular definite form means that even while critiquing measure, he cannot do away with measure, as we know by now. Just as the center was opened, measure itself must be opened and redeemed. This is how we can make sense of a particular moment in the middle of the sheer desolation of Chapter 2 in *Jerusalem*, where measure is quite literally, if briefly, redeemed. Two plates after Los decries the concept of a hidden God, “mured up from the paths of life” and closed off by measure, “Weight and Distance in the Wilds of Newton & Locke,” a struggle between Los and Reuben heightens (J 30: 35, 40; E 177). Los banishes the nations and emanations, and causes the Four Zoas to “change their situations” and separate from Albion, after which “Accident & Chance were found hidden in Length Breadth & Highth / And they [i.e. the Zoas] divided into Four ravening deathlike Forms” (J 32: 35-36; E 178). The Zoas become divided and separated—closed off, frozen, “permanently fixed”—just as the

contingency (“Accident & Chance”) inherent in measure is revealed. As we know, the Selfhood or sovereignty names this closing off, the bad reaction to contingency, being an “essentially prophylactic protocol...of self-protection” (Moten, “Touring Machine” 284). But then we witness a flash of hope in a speech by the mysterious “Eternal Ones,” who offer a different way of looking at this contingency hidden in the heart of measure. After explaining the political consequences of ontology (“What seems to Be: Is: To those to whom / It seems to Be”), they say: “but the Divine Mercy / Steps beyond and Redeems Man in the Body of Jesus Amen / And Length Bredth Highth again Obey the Divine Vision Hallelujah” (J 32:51-52, 54-56; E 179). Just as mercy opened the center, it is mercy or forgiveness that “Redeems Man” and renders “Length Bredth & Highth” in accordance with the divine vision. As before, mercy’s vibrant reprieve does this via *excess*. That is, in a lovely enjambment which is itself a step beyond, “Mercy / Steps beyond”—a *pas au-delà* of excessive movement.

Though this moment of measure redeemed in Chapter 2 is fleeting, reading it according to the paradigm I’ve been trying to build helps us understand the end of *Jerusalem*, namely why the three avatars of closed measure—Bacon, Newton, and Locke—usually Blake’s hated enemies, come back in glorious chariots alongside the poets Milton, Shakespeare, and Chaucer on Plate 98. This occurs after the famously abrupt apocalypse on Plate 94, and the chariots are described as “threefold” (J 98:11; E 257). Closed and completed measure is associated with the number three for several reasons, especially the three tenses of time (past, present, future) and the three dimensions of space—what Blake calls above “Length Bredth & Highth.” Four (or the fourth/fourfold), Blake’s ideal number, adds no content to the threefold, but only names the threefold measure under the aspect of its *opening*; this is why the four is the number of eternity. Redeemed measure—thus Bacon, Newton, Locke redeemed, indeed even Urizen redeemed (“Fourfold the Vision for bright beaming Urizen,” we read on Plate 97)—is simply the threefold as open to its immanent excess, which is the fourfold (J 97:7; E 256).<sup>64</sup>

The three measurable dimensions come back one last time in the poem, just before the apocalypse, in one of Los’s galvanizing speeches to Enitharmon. I mention this because Los here associates measure, as Blake so often does, with the image of the *circle*: “the Druids reard their Rocky Circles to make permanent Remembrance / Of Sin. & the Tree of Good & Evil sprang from the Rocky Circle.../And framed the Mundane Shell Cavernous in Length Bredth & Highth” (J 92:24-25, 27; E 253). This final image of circles and measure ties together the conceptual logic I’ve been outlining one last time: the Druids’ circle is directly responsible for the idea of sin, has a “rocky” ground, a hierarchy (“Tree of Good & Evil”), and measure that “frame[s]” or encloses: “Length Bredth & Highth.” And as usual, these three dimensions come as a unit of *four* words—the word for each of the three dimensions, and that excessive ampersand.

This last attempt to institute the “Remembrance of Sin” through the circle’s imposition of measure and accusation of sin is countermanded a few plates later—after the mysterious Plate 94 apocalyptic event in which, suddenly, “Time is finished”—in Jesus’s speech to Albion that emphasizes forgiveness: “Thus do Men in Eternity / One for another to put off by forgiveness, every sin” (J 96: 18-19; E 255). A mollified Albion responds to this with a gentle shock of mild surprise, recognizing Jesus and the forgiveness he advocates not as a *tout autre* being or an abstraction, but as a relational presence familiar and everyday, “in the likeness & similitude” of a friend (J 96:22; E 256). Jesus’s next lines bring home the importance of the minute everydayness—the “little[ness]”—of relationality, a fraternal relationality that is nothing other than existence itself: “for Man is Love: As God is Love: every kindness to another is a little Death / In the Divine Image nor can Man exist but by Brotherhood” (J 96:26-29; E 256) (recall Nancy and Derrida’s debate on

<sup>64</sup> On three vs. four see the classic account in Northrop Frye’s *Fearful Symmetry* 300-302, which I am in part drawing on.

community as fraternity in my Chapter 2). The mention of “the Divine Image” here recalls a poem of that same name from all the way back in 1789, in *The Songs of Innocence*, where Blake also proclaims the importance of love for existence: “Love, the human form divine” (E 13). The relation of love is essential, even identical, to the idea of form. “For Man is love,” Blake will say here decades later, encoding the four-letter word *form* in the first four letters of the phrase: “**for Man** is love,” a phrase (“for Man”) that is repeated three times in the space of two lines in this passage.<sup>65</sup> Form, then, is both the outline of singularity and the fact that this outline is openly, excessively, datively shared in a relation named love.

### Inconclusion

“The modern superior transcendentalist will find the facts of eternity incredible because they are so solid; he will not recognize heaven because it is so like the earth.” –G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake*

For seeing measure open, under the aspect of the four, is seeing its *form*; or better, seeing it *as* (its) *form*. “What is Blake *for*?” I asked earlier in this chapter. It seems now we can answer that Blake is for the *fo(u)r*. Blake loved the agility and multivalence of the “for-” sound, surely aware of how crucial this sonic unit was to many of his most important words, not least *forgiveness* and *form*. Indeed, the last three textual plates of *Jerusalem* explode with this phoneme, as “for-” cascades irresistible over the text<sup>66</sup>:

Awaking it to Life among the Flowers of Beulah rejoicing in Unity  
 In the **Four** Senses in the Outline the Circumference & **Form**, **for** ever  
 In **Forgiveness** of Sins which is Self Annihilation. it is the Covenant of Jehovah  
 The **Four** Living Creatures Chariots of Humanity Divine Incomprehensible  
 In beautiful Paradises expand These are the **Four** Rivers of Paradise  
 And the **Four** Faces of Humanity fronting the **Four** Cardinal Points  
 Of Heaven going **forward forward** irresistible from Eternity to Eternity  
 (J 98:21-27; E 257)

All these “for-” sounds and “fours”; the fourfold can flourish in eternity because eternity is seeing the finite under the aspect of the four, of opening. Eternity is the full effulgence of form, in whose sight you see the earth again: seeing form as open and shared is seeing it as under the aspect of eternity, that is, seeing it as “living”: “Living Form is Eternal Existence” (*On Virgil*; E 270). Because in addition to the proliferation of the “for-”s sound—which links together here the key notions of forgiveness, form, the fourfold, and eternity (“**for** ever”)—what is notable in this passage and in the last plates of *Jerusalem* is the paramount importance of *life*, the activity of which is indicated by the flurry of present progressive participles (“Awaking,” “rejoicing,” “going,” etc.). This passage opens with an awakening to “Life,” and contains a mention of “The Four Living Creatures,” which, as we know from an apposition earlier in the poem, are the Four Zoas.<sup>67</sup> In seeing form as inherent to the

<sup>65</sup> “And if God dieth not **for Man** & giveth not himself / Eternally **for Man** Man could not exist. **for Man** is Love” (J 96:24-25 E 256). God gives-for, i.e., for-gives; God’s forgiveness is his own death.

<sup>66</sup> Tucker notes in passing, but does not discuss, the prominence of “for” as preposition and prefix (though not as a phoneme in words like form and four) on Plate 96; he relates it to the importance of the dative mode that “for” enacts in the poem (177). On the dative in Blake, see of course Haggarty’s *Blake’s Gifts*.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. “When the Four Zoas of Albion, the Four Living Creatures,” (J 63:2; E 213). The phrase “Living Creatures” recurs throughout *Jerusalem*, including significantly in the post-apocalyptic plates (i.e. post Plate 94), where it occurs—what else—*four* times. It derives from the book of Revelation 4:6 (τέσσαρα ζῳα), which itself is alluding back to the phrase in

question of the fourfold Zoas, Blake, in *Jerusalem* and obviously in the long poem *The Four Zoas* as well, is explicitly taking up the problematic of life, since Blake's Zoa comes directly from the Greek *zōè* (ζωή), which means "life."

Giorgio Agamben has dedicated the dominant energies of his considerable life's work to exactly the problem of life as *zōè*. Agamben is interested in how *zōè* gets separated from its form (*bios*) via mechanisms of domination and hierarchy such as sovereignty, which produce an exclusion, a necessary excess, which Agamben calls bare life, or "life separated from its form"—what Blake in *Jerusalem* calls "life abstracted" (J 29:31; E 175). As opposed to this apparatus of producing bare life, Agamben proposes a concept he calls "form-of-life," where life (*zōè*) and its mode of living (*bios*) mutually interweave; form-of-life causes "*bios* and *zōè* to coincide at every point" (*Use of Bodies* 225). What distinguishes form-of-life is that its character is fundamentally that of *possibility*, opening new models of collective living always from the residue of the intimacy of singular life, and always in excess of any ground, *telos*, or proper essence.<sup>68</sup> Form-of-life, then, is groundless and incommensurably singular, yet at the same time fundamentally exemplary. It means that life, in its carving out a form in the midst of groundless contingency, radiates new possibilities of living, which are always possibilities of living together. Saying with Agamben that form-of-life is "a life that can never be separated from its form," is to say nothing other than what Blake says when he writes that form is the line—in all its infinite inflexions and movements—that simply is "life itself" (*Use* 207).

This emphasis on singular life as emanating communal possibility can help us better understand the way life is construed in the almost impenetrably difficult final plates of *Jerusalem*. Namely, we can see why Blake portrays life in eternity as a mutual conversation, one "in Visionary forms dramatic...in Visions / In new Expanses, creating exemplars of Memory and of Intellect / Creating Space, Creating Time" (J 98:28-31; E 257-8). Eternity allows us to see life as it is lived as "creating exemplars," new ontological models for experiencing collective existence even on the plane of space and time. In a way these "exemplars," or what Blake elsewhere in a characteristically strange double plural genitive calls "Images of Existences" (E 555), are not unlike the exemplarity of the theater, as the word "dramatic" implies and as a recent book argues at length<sup>69</sup>; they are habitual, practiced, and embodied. Viewing and thus forming the singular living of life as open and constituted by possibility is the key to understanding how the situated everydayness of groundless relationality can be expanded—"in new Expanses"—and transposed into a larger political key. This is to say, Blake is trying to get us to wake up to the fact that relationality is inextricably embedded in our everyday lives, and that any properly political intervention must be an *expanding* of this commonness (where common means both ordinary and shared) beyond any equivalence: "wake! Expand!" reads the opening plea of *Jerusalem* (J 4:6; E 146).<sup>70</sup>

Blake's many exhortations to expand are thus exhortations to dilate logics of everyday sharing, of which forgiveness is a paradigm, an exemplar, but not the only one; or as he says in *Milton*, to access the everyday's incommensurable excess and have it "rightly placed" to escape capture and enact "renovat[ion]" (M 35:45; E 136). These lambent logics, always retaining their labile

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the book of Ezekiel. Interestingly for my purposes, Ezekiel 40-48 contains an extended episode of strictly measuring the New Jerusalem with a "measuring reed," a motif also picked up in Revelation 11 and 21. Thanks to Steve Goldsmith and Maddie Lesser for pointing this out to me.

<sup>68</sup> In an earlier version of this text, form-of-life requires an "irrevocable exodus from any sovereignty" (*Means* 8). Form-of-life's necessary potentiality/possibility means it also remains a collective one for Agamben, since he identifies possibility and community without remainder. I am drawing on a number of Agamben's texts, as well as Kishik's account in *The Power of Life: Agamben and the Coming Politics*. On forms of life see also the work of Marielle Macé, e.g. *Styles*.

<sup>69</sup> See Susanne Sklar's *Blake's Jerusalem as Visionary Theatre: Entering the Divine Body*.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Rosso: "If the politics of forgiveness [in *Jerusalem*] begin at home, within the individual and nation, it also must expand on an international scale, where Britain's religion of empire has exerted its greatest sway" (235).

provisional character, can be scaled up and imported into new expanses that are unforeseen domains, and in the process they can warrant unpredictable uses and summon novel networks—one reason why Blake is perennially relevant for thinking about politics, especially in our age of the Anthropocene. Any minute particular can ripple infinitely outward, for the everyday in Blake is not insularly local, but also national and quite literally cosmic (Albion is single person who is also England and also the universe). This is crucial for understanding the stakes of Blake’s poetic and political ontology (which is after all an ecology). The everyday is political, but not, or not only, in the typical denaturalizing sense in which critique makes this claim (or the related claims “the personal is political” or “everything is political”<sup>71</sup>), where for critique the violence of hierarchies imposed by ideology and social constructions goes all the way down to structure all aspects of life; rather, everyday life is political because it is the site where we habitually negotiate groundlessness collectively. The political is the constitution of the common, and the everyday is ground zero of the common, because the everyday is the ground zero of groundlessness: where groundlessness is met and lived. So just as measure is broken open, open to an excess immanent in it, each life—insofar as it coincides with its form—has an excess immanent in it but welling up outward: this excess, hard to tell from a wound, is the collective possibility every life both clandestinely harbors and evanescently exudes.

Plate 98 deals with this logic of expansion in detail, but I must press on to my conclusion; though I want to mention that Blake is clear in extending this conception of form-of-life to nonhuman beings, as evinced by the catalogue of animals on Plate 98 and the procession of animals on the plate’s bottom edge. See all beings as partaking in this logic—this logic of form and of life—is simply what Blake calls humanization, and in this way *Jerusalem* propounds what Hutchings calls the poem’s “human ecology” (153). In fact, the very last mention of forgiveness in the text occurs on this plate, where it is essential to humanization: “Humanize / In the Forgiveness of Sins” (J 98:44-45; E 258).

The act of universally seeing life in and as its form is an act of grand humanization, and it is with just such an apocalypse that this sublime allegory of a poem simmers to its end:

All Human Forms identified even Tree Metal Earth & Stone. all  
 Human Forms identified, living going forth & returning wearied  
 Into the Planetary lives of Years Months Days & Hours reposing  
 And then Awakening into his Bosom in the Life of Immortality.  
 And I heard the Name of their Emanations they are named Jerusalem  
 (J 99:1-5; E 259)

Two instances of “All” bookend the first line, anticipating this passage’s description of a movement of return. Indeed, what we have here is nothing other than a movement of *circulation*, where every being (“*even*” nonliving stone), seen under the aspect of its human form, participates in the participial ongoingness of “living going forth & returning”: circulating. But this is a circulation of life—of excessive “living”—rather than a centered, grounded circulation of closed commensurability, a return of the same dull round, as we have seen it in Blake’s critique.<sup>72</sup> The life circulating here is absolutely mundane and worldly; it is “planetary,” circulating as planets do around the sun, and passes according to planetary forms of temporal measure—earth measures (geo-metry): these are everyday lives, “lives of Years Months Days & Hours.”

<sup>71</sup> On this question see Nancy’s “Is Everything Political?” in *The Truth of Democracy*.

<sup>72</sup> This view of life as open circulation of excess now makes it clear why Blake understands closed, measured finitude as precisely its opposite, with Blake calling it “death” or “eternal death.”

This is life as what Wallace Stevens calls “the pleasures of merely circulating.” It is planetary life on earth, which is common life. No one owns the earth, because everyone does. This is why the elusive Urthona (earth-owner, earth-ohne), the cryptic *Fourth Zoa*, is everyone and no one, whatever singularity, the name of anonymous life in time: “In the Fourth region of Humanity, Urthona namd / Mortality” (J 35:7-8; E 181). It is under Urthona’s sign, then, that mortal life as a circulation of excess can be lived and shared, where “living going forth” is living, going *fourth*, going out in the mortality and finitude of singularity, and waking up “in the Life of Immortality.” What is this life of immortality? Far from being an otherworldly transcendence or afterlife, eternal life simply means community. This after all is what Blake suggests in his rewriting of the Lord’s Prayer, in one of the two times in his work—the other being the *Laocoön*—that he used the phrase “all things common”: “we have all things common among us Every Thing has as much right to Eternal Life as God” (E 669). Notice here the two uses of the absolutely comprehensive, universal word “thing.” From a tree, a scrap of metal, a clod of earth, a pebble, to a human, to a God, an eternal thing is just a common thing.

Such is Blake’s extravagant articulation of the thought and practice of community, which Romanticism opens and bequeaths us still to confront. Community must circulate between us, between the spilled excess of our fragile attachments, in the everyday. We share our non-sharing of a measure—this common incommensurability is where we meet. Forgiveness is Blake’s particular name for this groundless community of the everyday, an everyday ecology that we already live as a situated structure of existence or form of life. The simultaneous universality and concreteness of this thought make Blake’s communism one of the best guides we can imagine for thinking in the Anthropocene—that Romantic geological epoch in which it is finally, disastrously, given to us to consider the “inhuman ecology” *even* of the stone.<sup>73</sup> What Blake wants us to do is see these relational practices already there encoded in our shared lives—see the infinite excess residing hidden in measure—and expand them. “You overflow yourself more than what you’re doing right now. You just need to do more of the shit that you’re doing right now, and that will produce the scale” (Moten and Harney, *Undercommons* 146). This involves imagining what it would be like to live in a world where this idea of forgiveness is recognized as what it already is, to imagine a world without war, poverty, without prejudice, sacrifice, and destruction, without sovereignty—but really to imagine the everyday ways we already live in this world, “to imagine that which we know,” as Percy Shelley says in the *Defence of Poetry. Jerusalem*, despite its despair and suffering and darkness, is a “book of Examples” to that end, like all Blake’s work (E 618). To expand these logics of the everyday is to labor well the teeming earth, to labor the minute particulars which are mutual forgivenesses; this means to labor in the inoperative site of the everyday, the line or life where we come together and part. This labor would be a labor of love: love, which for Blake is the human *form* divine, the form of life, the groundless law of life itself.

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<sup>73</sup> See Jeffrey Cohen’s recent *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, and also Jan Zalasiewicz’s *The Planet in a Pebble: A Journey into Earth’s Deep History*. Blake’s emphasis on the life of the stone possibly derives also from 1 Peter 2:4-5 (“a living stone”).

**Interlude:**  
**Blake and Bataille: Sunray of the Negative**

“There are about a million ways the sun can pulsate, and they are all happening at once: *the footfall of a cat, the roots of a rock, the breath of a fish, the spittle of a bird...*” –Ronald Johnson, *Ark*, Beam 31

“The sun is rising, and light enters my old  
house. What sun is this? The desert star  
or some one flame as in transcendence? I  
won’t ask it. I won’t ask anyone anything.”  
–Alice Notley, *Certain Magical Acts*

Probably the most significant work by William Blake to have been lost is a massive painting called *The Ancient Britons*. This painting, commissioned by Welsh antiquarian Owen Pughe, was shown along with other works of Blake in 1809, and it survives now only in descriptions by those who saw it—including Blake’s own in *The Descriptive Catalogue*. Thomas Butts’s young friend Seymour Kirkup thought, as did Henry Crabb Robinson, that the work was Blake’s masterpiece. Though Kirkup had a complaint: “it was too red, The sun seemed setting in blood” (*Blake Records* 295). Blake’s own description of his painting remarks on the circulation of blood in the figures (“the blood is seen to circulate in their limbs”), and the imagery of the bloody sun: “The Sun sets behind the mountains, bloody with the day of battle” (*Descriptive Catalogue*; E 545).

Why this excessively bloody sun? The association of the sun with blood is not new with Blake of course, but it’s hard not to notice the extreme to which Blake goes, both verbally and visually, in constantly linking these two images, especially in his later work. *The Four Zoas* gives us “the sun with streams of blood,” while even at the very end of *Jerusalem*, on Plate 98, overlooking the events there is “A Sun of blood red wrath” (FZ 25:10; E 314, J 98:10; E 257), to give just two of many examples. It is true that the sun and the energy from sunlight were becoming increasingly incorporated into discourses of circulation and measure over the eighteenth century—this is already present in Harvey’s preface to *De Motu Cordis* of 1628, which compares the sovereign not only to the heart pumping circulating blood, but also to the sun<sup>1</sup>; and eighteenth-century writers like Richard Lovett also made the analogy between the heart and sun as centers of “vast circulatory cycle” of blood and sunlight energy circulation, respectively (Underwood 15, 194n). Such an analogy was increasingly thinkable because the eighteenth century saw a radical transformation in the concept of energy—the word “energy” only then coming into regular use—where, following a reading of Newton, the energy from sunlight came to be thought of as a “formless force,” a universally equivalent quantifiable unit of *work* (16). Ted Underwood’s book *The Work of the Sun* narrates this transition in the rise of energy discourse and the changing conception of “the sun from a specific organizing form into an emblem of universal and placeless agency” in compelling detail, tracking it across scientific, political, and poetic registers in the period (58). It was Blake’s adversary Newton, who in rejecting the minute particularity of quality and the singularity of “specifick Form” as “occult,” in favor of the pure quantitative measure of force, laid the groundwork for energy to be conceived as a circulation of the sun’s light: a measured circulation always doing work towards a calculable end (Newton, *Opticks*, qtd. in Underwood 16).

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<sup>1</sup> “The heart of animals is the foundation of their life, the sovereign of everything within them, the sun of their microcosm, that upon which all growth depends, from which all power proceeds. The King, in like manner, is the foundation of his kingdom, the sun of the world around him, the heart of the republic, the foundation whence all power, all grace doth flow” (Harvey 3).

After the massive increase of fossil fuels and the modern world they made in the late eighteenth century, the tendency to characterize energy as a stored, commensurable, and quantifiable resource for productive ends only intensified. A major catalyst for this transition—both materially and conceptually—was James Watt’s development of the steam engine, which allowed for the efficient use of coal to power the mines and mills that Blake famously called “Satanic.” As Tobias Menely notes: “the steam engine not only manifestly organizes energy conversion—heat transformed into pressure, pressure transformed into kinesis—but also offers a system in which the input (coal) and output (work) can be precisely quantified” (311). What was “Satanic” to Blake about the new steam-powered mills was their *measure*.<sup>2</sup> This is to say: the steam engine and concomitant rise of fossil fuels—and logics of “fossil capital,” following Andreas Malm—were both a cause and an effect of the generalization of what Blake in 1827 diagnosed as post-revolutionary Europe’s obsession with “intermeasurability”<sup>3</sup>: fossil fuels are another of modernity’s new regimes of measure. The infinite excess of the sun’s energy—what Menely calls the sun’s “originary surplus”—fell under the reign of measured circulation (312). Indeed, in this same recent article on solar energy and poetics in Charlotte Smith’s great poem “Beachy Head,” Menely points out that Smith’s poem was published in 1807, the very same year that sees the first recorded usage of the word “energy” to denote a quantifiable material unit, in Thomas Young’s *Lectures in Natural Philosophy and the Mechanical Arts* (309).

I would add that the year 1807 also sees Blake hard at work on *Jerusalem*, still in his initial burst of energy on the long poem he had started around 1804. Given the important role the word “energy” plays in Blake’s corpus, and the fact that the word was so prominent in the discourses of 1790s radicals with whom Blake was familiar, it’s hard to imagine that Blake was not keenly aware of all these developments around energy, as well as their implications.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Underwood argues that not only was Blake deeply interested in the shifting discourse around solar energy, energy, and work, but that he was effectively the lone major figure in the period to *resist* this new paradigm.<sup>5</sup> We need to understand Blake’s critique of this idea of the sun’s energy and work—the sun as producing energy that must do measurable work—and the possibilities Blake opened and opens, not least because Blake, writing amidst the birth of Anthropocene or what Menely calls “the late Holocene,” grappled with problems at their emergence that are still very much with us. That is, Blake and Romanticism can help us think both energy and community as something excessively shared rather than reducible to pure commensurability: an ecological community that includes relations to the earth and to nonhuman beings. This is essential for thinking what kinds of community might come “after oil,” to

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<sup>2</sup> That is, what is “Satanic” about the mills was precisely this new emphasis on efficiency and quantification. The now frequent invocation of this Blakean phrase “Satanic mills” as a blanket denunciation of industrial mills, where “Satanic” means simply “bad,” loses much of its critical bite in not realizing that Blake—otherwise not always opposed to urbanization, technology, and industry—specifically associated Satan with Urizenic forms of measure, equivalence, and circulation (on Satan as regime of measure, and on regimes of measure generally, see my chapter on Blake and circulation and measure). Thus Blake can, for example, directly equate Satan with a system of abstract equivalence like money (money is the general equivalent, Marx says) and reason: “Money, which is The Great Satan or Reason” (*Laocoön*; E 275).

<sup>3</sup> “Since the French Revolution Englishmen are all Intermeasurable one by another Certainly a happy state of Agreement to which I for One do not Agree” (E 783).

<sup>4</sup> In his essay on Blake and circulation, Jon Mee notes that: “‘Energy’ was becoming one of the dominant motifs in British writing when Blake began seriously to develop the idea of his illuminated books” (74). The classic study on the motif of energy in Blake is Morton Paley’s *Energy and the Imagination*.

<sup>5</sup> While Underwood admits Blake as a “solitary exception” to the new idea of energy as impersonal force, Underwood’s own causal explanation for Blake’s resistance to “Romantic solar myth” amounts to a deeply inadequate class reductionism, where it is only Blake’s position as an artisan and his “middle-class ideology” that allow him to think energy otherwise (80, 156, 88).

use the title of a recent text: for what comes after the measured circulation of fossil energy, which is the condition of possibility for modern democracy and technology, but also for globalized capital, colonialism, and climate change? A new thinking of community must be a new thinking of energy, and vice versa: a groundless sharing of the sun's open and everyday excess rather than a privatized scavenging of increasingly scarce "buried sunshine" in the ground (Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy* 12).

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Georges Bataille would make it the perennial theme of his large body of work to contest the world of closed energy circulation, that is, the sun's energy only doing measurable work: the paradigm that was starting to coalesce over the exact span of Blake's adult life (1780-1827). This paradigm especially picked up steam in the 1820s, a time which saw a major increase in industry and shifts in capital,<sup>6</sup> as well as Sadi Carnot's study of steam engines in 1824, now seen as the first formulation of the second law of thermodynamics, which allows energy to be measured with pure quantity. And it was as an oneiric critique of Carnot—whose principle Bataille saw in a dream to be an "absurdity" only based in a false world of "equivalences"—that Bataille's journey begins.<sup>7</sup> For against the worldview of closed measure, quantity, and equivalence, Bataille was obsessed with the circulation of *excess*, constantly pointing out that any use of energy for productive work leaves over a surplus that must be wasted nonproductively, in what he called *la dépense* or expenditure. For Bataille, more energy than can ever be used for work circulates on the earth, and the source of this is the ever-giving sun: "The sun gives without ever receiving...Solar radiation results in a superabundance of energy on the surface of the globe" (*Accursed Share* I 28-29). This single key idea about excess informs so many of Bataille's texts and concepts, but is most explicitly and carefully developed in a three volume work called *The Accursed Share (La Part Maudite)*, first published in 1949, but brewing for much longer.

Bataille was fundamentally against the idea that all energy must do work: productive, quantifiable work. The notion that all energy can be productively harnessed and accounted for (i.e. measured) is what Bataille calls a closed or "restricted economy," which he opposes to his own paradigm of a "general economy." General economy takes into account "the dependence of the economy on the circulation of energy on the earth," and more importantly, "the necessity of losing the excess energy that cannot be used" (*Accursed* I 19-20). Every system, every structure, every individual being, is not closed, but riven open by an excess of energy immanent in it, owing to the sun's infinite radiation; this excess is energy "that does not do work" and thus "defies quantification in measure" (Stoekl xvi).<sup>8</sup> To study phenomena under the aspect of this excess is what it means to think "on the measure of the universe," as Bataille put it—that is, to think in terms of a *general* economy instead of closed circuit of equivalence: "The point of view of excess energy...characterizes general economy" (*Oeuvres* 7:14). Bataille's astonishingly ambitious, almost Casaubonion claim is that his idea of excess "may hold the key to all the problems by posed by every discipline concerned with the movement of energy," which is to say, every discipline: "even what may be said of art, of literature, of poetry has an essential connection with the movement I study: that of excess energy, translated into the effervescence of life" (*Accursed* I 10). General economy is the study of the excess that is "without use"—*sans emploi*, as Bataille says in a different context.

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<sup>6</sup> On the 1820s as a crucial decade in these respects, see Malm's *Fossil Capital*.

<sup>7</sup> "Dans ce demi-sommeil, le 'principe de Carnot' me sembla d'une absurdité criante...De la diversité du monde, la raison ne tire que des équivalences" (*Oeuvres* 7:548) (cf. Blake on reason and/as equivalence). For this quote, and more broadly, I draw on Lysa Hochroth's article "The Scientific Imperative: Improductive Expenditure and Energeticism."

<sup>8</sup> On Bataille and energy see Stoekl's *Bataille's Peak*. Since fossil fuels "impl[y] the effort to maximize production through quantification," Stoekl claims, Bataille's thought of excess is an important tool for thinking outside the paradigm they have created (56). Stoekl call this "post-sustainability."

If Bataille's emphasis on life and (or *as*) excess sounds Blakean—especially after my previous chapter on life, excess, measure, and circulation in Blake's *Jerusalem*—that's because it is. *The Accursed Share* was written quite literally under the sign and seal of Blake. The opening words of the book are not Bataille's but Blake's, in the three word epigraph with which the text begins: "Exuberance is beauty"—one of Blake's Proverbs of Hell from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. It's no accident that the key Blakean word here—"exuberance," in French the cognate *exubérance*—is a word meaning excess, a word that haunts Bataille's *Accursed Share* recurringly, often appearing in close concert with energy, life, and the sun. "Solar energy is the source of life's exuberant development," Bataille writes early in the text (28); we read at other moments of "the exuberance of life" and "life's exuberance," for example (38, 77). At one point in the text, Bataille even turns to Blake's poem "The Tyger" to explicate his theory of the necessity of excess, of nonproductive waste in "the immense squandering of energy" (34). In Bataille's reading, the burning fire of the tiger's eyes is precisely the excess of the sun, of solar energy appearing "first in the remote depth of the sky, in the sun's consumption" (34).<sup>9</sup>

Bataille's discourse on excess and energy, life, work, and solar energy is clearly and explicitly in conversation with Blake—"Energy is the only life," reads a line from the *Marriage* that Bataille quoted in an essay on Blake. Even Bataille's claim that "surplus energy" must be spent uselessly in order to have "an outlet other than war," is found, amazingly in almost the exact same terms, in Blake, who writes: "For war is energy enslaved" (*Accursed* I 187; FZ 120:42; E 390). Indeed Blake is everywhere in Bataille's writing, though this connection is almost totally unexplored by scholars. Bataille translated and introduced a selection of Blake's works and even planned to write a monograph on Blake.<sup>10</sup> Epigraphs from Blake pepper key works of Bataille like *Guilty* and *Inner Experience*, and Blakean imagery occurs throughout—like, for example, the image of the bloody sun.<sup>11</sup> It would be no exaggeration to say that Blake—and Romanticism broadly—makes Bataille's insights possible. And that is in large part because the new world of measure that Blake saw at its birth, Bataille saw at its crystallization and supposed triumph—the one we see now, flaring at its spectacular crisis.

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The year 1807 sees not only the publication of Smith's "Beachy Head," Blake's intensive composition of *Jerusalem*, and the first recorded use of the word "energy" to denote a measurable unit of work in a closed system; the year also brings the publication of a landmark in the history of thought, a book that would cut across Bataille's entire life and work: Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Bataille's struggle with and against Hegel was long and complex, but it is clear enough that Bataille

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<sup>9</sup> The passage reads: "William Blake asked the tiger: 'In what distant deeps or skies burned the fire of thine eyes?' What struck [Blake] in this way was the cruel pressure, at the limits of possibility, the tiger's immense power of consumption of life. In the general effervescence of life, the tiger is a point of extreme incandescence. And this incandescence did in fact burn first in the remote depth of the sky, in the sun's consumption" (34). In his essay on Blake from the book *Literature and Evil*, Bataille also associates Blake's "Tyger" with the sun: "Never have eyes as wide open as [those of the Tyger] stared at the sun of cruelty" (93). Bataille then says about Blake "This form of excess does not reveal the mystery connected with it" (93).

<sup>10</sup> For Bataille's plan to write a book on Blake (which never came to fruition), and on Blake and Bataille more generally, see John Baker's article "À Partir de Georges Bataille et William Blake," one of the only treatments on Bataille's relation to Blake I could find (and a brief one at that). Bataille's Blake translations are found in his *Dossier William Blake*, in vol. 9 of his *Oeuvres*, and were published separately by Fata Morgana, accompanied by designs of André Masson, who drew the famous Acéphale image.

<sup>11</sup> On the image of the bloody sun in Bataille, which derives from his study of the Aztecs (but also, I think, from Blake), see Galland's article "Soleil de Sang: Héroïsme et mystique de l'inutile chez Georges Bataille." For a critique of Bataille's image of the sun and blood, see Baudrillard's "When Bataille Attacked..." Elsewhere, insightfully but still critically, Baudrillard links Bataille's economy of excess to Romanticism: "Bataille's 'devil's share' was still part of the ultimate romanticism of political economy" (*Forget Foucault* 80).

sees Hegel's paradigm as one of completion, closure, and most of all, *work*. As he writes in *Inner Experience*—in a section that bears an epigraph from Blake, no less: “My efforts to recommence and undo Hegel's *Phenomenology*. Hegel's construction is a philosophy of work, of ‘project’...The completion of the circle was for Hegel the completion of man. Completed man was, for him, necessarily ‘work’” (83, 113). The critique of Hegel, then, must be a critique of work—of closure, completion, measurable productive activity, and utility.

The earliest and most vivid formulation of Bataille's immanent critique of Hegelian work occurs in a short unfinished letter to the most prominent French Hegelian of the time, Alexandre Kojève. This letter draft from December 6, 1937, known as the “Letter to X, Lecturer on Hegel” and eventually appended to a later edition of Bataille's book *Guilty*, takes issue with Kojève's Hegelian reading of the End of History. For Kojève, the End of History was near at hand: with the coming of Communism, the self-development of Absolute Knowledge in history would be complete. But in his seismic little letter, Bataille wonders about the role of excess negativity after the completion of the System and of History—after all of Spirit's work is done:

If action (“doing”) is—as Hegel says—negativity, the question poses itself of knowing if the negativity of someone who has “nothing left to do” disappears or persists in a state of “unemployed negativity” [*négativité sans emploi*]. Personally, I can only decide in one sense, being myself precisely this “unemployed negativity”...I imagine that my life—or its aborting, better yet, the open wound that is my life—constitutes all by itself the refutation of Hegel's closed system (*Guilty* 111; *Oeuvres* 5:369)

This letter contains something like the birth of inoperativity. Bataille describes his very life—“the open wound that is my life”—as an excess opening Hegel's closed system.<sup>12</sup> But the same logic applies to any closed system—there is a direct link from this critique of Hegelian closure to the analysis of energy in *The Accursed Share*, where the focus is on “excess energy” (also in that text tied to “life”) that cannot do useful, measurable, and productive *work* (again recall Blake: “Energy is the only life”). And Bataille's language here is explicitly that of utility and work: excess is *sans emploi*. *Emploi* means both use generally and employment—hence the translation “unemployed negativity.”<sup>13</sup> This negativity is out of a job, luxuriating in history's Sabbath: a Sunday of the negative.<sup>14</sup> While Hegel sees negativity as always doing productive work to advance the development of Spirit or System—a paradigm summed up in Hegel's phrase the “work of the negative” [*Arbeit des Negativen*]<sup>15</sup>—Bataille sees the everyday excess of singular living—“*my life*”—as the open wound of the system, the excess immanent in it, unable to be measured and accounted for. *The Accursed Share* is then the development of this insight, generalized and applied to the study of excess energy. I'm trying to show that it is no accident Bataille reaches this insight about energy in excess of work alongside an intensive engagement with Blake. Sure enough, at the end of an essay on Blake, Bataille sums up the poet precisely in terms of inoperative energy, an energy that refuses work: “[Blake's] energy rejected concessions to the spirit of work” (*Literature and Evil* 97).

Because of this persistent excess that is *sans emploi*, this resistance to doing work (*travail*) and to becoming a work (*oeuvre*), a closed system of commensurable equivalence is impossible: there is

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the discussion of Blake, Bataille, sin, the wound, and life in my Blake chapter. It should be clear by now that my adducing of Bataille in that chapter, which may have seemed arbitrary and tangential, was not.

<sup>13</sup> For the problem with this translation, and for a remarkable reading of this text and Bataille generally, see the chapter on Bataille in Alex Dubilet's *The Self-Emptying Subject*.

<sup>14</sup> See Gemerchak's *Sunday of the Negative: Reading Bataille Reading Hegel*.

*désœuvrement* (unworking, inoperativity) immanent in every *oeuvre*. Inoperativity names this groundless immanent excess. What does inoperativity have to do with my central topic of community? Everything. Although Bataille sometimes thematizes community, and often rails against what he calls “the error of fixed isolation” (*Inner Experience* 98), it would take the contribution of Jean-Luc Nancy, fifty years later, to articulate more fully the stakes of this thought for community (right around the time another Hegelian, Kojève’s self-anointed heir Fukuyama, was proclaiming another End of History). Nancy does this in a re-reading of Bataille, and of the concept of community generally, that focuses exactly on Bataille’s resistance to closure, completion, and work, in favor of excess *sans emploi*, the unworking or inoperativity of the work. This is why Nancy calls his book on Bataille *The Inoperative Community* (1983)—or if you like, why Nancy’s book on groundless community is a book about Bataille. But even here, again, Romanticism is central, for Nancy only comes to his epiphany about Bataille and inoperative community after an intimate and extensive engagement with Romanticism—and the question of *désœuvrement*—in 1978’s *The Literary Absolute*.

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What is energy? The word comes from the Greek *energeia*, itself from *ergon* (ἔργον), meaning (and even cognate with) *work*. As we know from above, the Romantic era was undergoing dramatic changes in the notion of energy—the energy from sunlight—into an equivalent quantifiable resource for doing work. These conceptual and scientific shifts (such as the second law of thermodynamics) went alongside and were facilitated by technological and historical developments like the invention of the steam engine and the rise of fossil fuels and fossil capital, as well as—though it was little known to the Romantics at the time—climatic and geological changes that we now recognize as the beginning of the Anthropocene. A recent and growing field known as energy humanities asks us, among other things, to revisit this crucial moment in modernity’s emergence in order to examine critically “the fuel apparatus of modernity, which is all too often invisible or subterranean, but which pumps and seeps into the groundwaters of politics, cultures, institutions, and knowledge in unexpected ways,” as Szeman and Boyer write in the introduction to their new anthology *Energy Humanities* (9). Energy is not a simple “input into modern social and material processes that doesn’t alter their character” (3); fossil fuel culture has shaped or even constituted our modern ideas and practices of freedom (Chakrabarty), democracy (Timothy Mitchell), economy (Malm), colonialism, politics, progress, poetics, and more: “our values, verities, and capacities have been engendered by fossilized sunlight—liquid forces made up of condensed time, an uncanny historical anomaly we have learned to greet with a shrug whenever we encounter it at the gas pump” (Szeman, *Fueling Culture* 391). Modernity itself, some scholars in energy humanities suggest, is “petromodernity” (*After Oil* 55). “Petrolocene” has been proposed as well, as another alternative to Anthropocene.

In this way, many thinkers in energy humanities ask us to see fossil fuels as another regime of measure in modernity, one with its own smuggled in histories, hierarchies, and ideologies. This overall is an exciting and salutary intellectual development. Yet my worry is that this mode of thought is in danger of becoming another round of hegemonic critique as we have been doing it, critique that has run out of steam; the critical study of energy risks being too easily, quickly, and totally folded into critique’s narrative of (de)naturalization and critique’s nominalist ontology (see my Chapter 2 on Derrida), a formless ontology of force that looks awfully like the modern conception of equivalent measurable energy as force for work. Szeman for his part invites the study and thought of energy into critique’s apparatus of suspicion, but also makes room for “surreal vision and wild imagination,” tools for the crucial task of imagining social and energy futures (*Energy Humanities* 9)—one thinks here of a book like Karen Pinkus’s recent *Fuel: A Speculative Dictionary* (2016).

Yet if it is true that energy is “inextricably social,” and that we must not make “the mistake of imagining energy as prior to and distinct from the social,” then we must also not make the mistake of thinking the “social” as something purely constructed and measured itself, without excess

(*After Oil* 17, 20).<sup>15</sup> Will the work or *ergon* of energy in the energy humanities be inoperative, will this thinking have room for the excess immanent in any work or construction—energy excess and social excess? Can we think an inoperative energy, one that resists the ontology of energy as pure productivity or pure resource in a restricted economy, but is instead “unmoor[ed] from production” altogether, in the attempt to “let another energy work and dream, as it gushes forth from the fault lines of the productivist worldview” (Marder 29)?<sup>16</sup> Let us rather think the ecology of general economy—what is already being called a “general ecology.”<sup>17</sup>

That means again, that we start with the sun. In the entry for “Solar” in another recent energy humanities anthology called *Fueling Culture*, Amanda Boetzkes turns to Bataille’s general economy as “among the most influential accounts of solar energy” (314). She notes how Bataille is critical of “capitalism’s failure to acknowledge our innate solarly, and [capitalism’s] fundamental prohibition on expenditure”—expenditure being *dépense*, the need to waste unproductively the excess that is *sans emploi* (315).<sup>18</sup> I would add that global warming itself—the Anthropocene, even—is a grim, giant instance of the failure of *dépense*—for the sun’s excess heat our planet absorbs is increasingly unable to be released, having no outlet, trapped by the carbon suffused sky.

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 “My first thought was that the nature of light / was incompleteness” –Louise Glück, “The Story of a Day”

“‘The light is made new now,’ ‘isn’t it?’ ‘The light has been made new’” –Alice Notley, *The Descent of Alette*

The impression made upon Seymour Kirkup by Blake’s painting *The Ancient Britons* was so profound that, nearly sixty years after his lone viewing of the lost work, Kirkup could describe it in vivid detail, as he did in several letters to Swinburne, W.M. Rosetti, and others. In addition to his complaint that the sun in the huge canvas was too bloody, and perhaps the reason for it, Kirkup was insistent that the light in the picture “*did not come from the sun*” (Bentley 328n). It was indeed characteristic for Blake, at least philosophically speaking, to reject the sun—or God—as a source of light. Damrosch mentions Blake’s “contempt for the traditional symbolism of light,” adducing the penultimate couplet from Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence,” which reads “God Appears & God is Light / To those poor Souls who dwell in Night” (Damrosch 53; E 493). Blake’s suspicion of light is surely related to his aesthetic theories about visual art, which denigrate coloring in favor of form and outline; indeed the final lines of “Auguries of Innocence” tell us that God “does a Human *Form* Display / To those who Dwell in Realms of day” (E 493; my emphasis). Owing to Newton’s theories of light and discovery of the color spectrum, Blake associated light and color with

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<sup>15</sup> On the social as an *explanandum* rather than an *explanans*, see Latour’s *Re-assembling The Social*.

<sup>16</sup> Marder’s new book *Energy Dreams* is a step in this direction, an ambitious rethinking of the ontology of energy. Marder even links his view of nonproductive energy with Nancy’s inoperative community (72), but his brief engagement with Bataille seems like a willfully ungenerous misreading.

<sup>17</sup> See Hörl’s new collection *General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm*, where relationality is central to this new paradigm: “General ecology is a non-philosophical rethinking of relation” (7). The phrase “general ecology” also occurs in Moten’s “Blackness and Poetry,” and *The Undercommons* (138). For one explicit, and very generative, attempt to think *négativité sans emploi* in an ecological key, see Mick Smith’s *Against Ecological Sovereignty*.

<sup>18</sup> Remarkably anticipating the claims of thinkers in the Energy Humanities—who ask us to link together social and economic forms with energy forms—Bataille’s critique of the equivalence of money and money measuring work under capitalism is made in the same terms as his critique of the ontology of energy as equivalent measurable work: “The common denominator, the foundation of social homogeneity, and of the activity arising from it, is money, namely the calculable equivalent of the different products of collective activity. *Money serves to measure all work* and makes man a function of measurable products” (*Visions of Excess* 138; my emphasis). The link to Blake’s own critique of money and commensurability is clear.

Newtonian calculation and quantitative measure: he speaks derisively of “Newtons Particles of light,” and elsewhere sarcastically remarks “That God is Colouring Newton does shew” (E 478, 515).

Long before Derrida critiqued the ontotheological heliocentrism of Western thought, Blake recognized the problem with positing a single measure, ground, or sovereign center that would fully control light. This is why Urizen/Satan, called “Prince of Light” and “King of Light” by Blake (cf. *Lmaifer*), is always trying to hoard the sun and present himself *as* the sun, like in “The Ancient of Days” image, or the passage in Night Seven of *The Four Zoas* where Urizen traps the sun in his temple.<sup>19</sup> So for Blake there are *two suns*—this Satanic sun and the “Spiritual Sun,” as he told Crabb Robinson: “I have conversed with the Spiritual Sun—I saw him on Primrose-hill. He said, ‘Do you take me for the Greek Apollo?’ ‘No,’ I said, ‘that’ [and Blake pointed to the sky] ‘that is the Greek Apollo. He is Satan’” (260). We can understand this more fully if we remember Blake’s most famous portrayal of the two suns, which he explains are just two different ways of seeing the rising sun: “What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy” (*A Vision*; E 565-6).<sup>20</sup> Two suns: sun of measure, sun of excess. Here you have the Satanic sun of measure, represented by the guinea coin, the circulating unit of general equivalence, juxtaposed with the sun as a collective company, a choir crying the holiness of everything that lives, a community resistant to or in excess of pure quantitative measure: “*innumerable*.” Yet as I demonstrated in my chapter on Blake’s *Jerusalem*, you need measure to have excess; excess is not separately opposed to measure, but is immanent in measure as an opening, rendering it inoperative. This is why it is the poet-figure Los (whose name is an anagram for *Sol*, Latin for sun) who in *Milton* creates the “unwearied Sun” of work and measure out of the circulating material of “a red Globule of Mans blood”: “The red Globule is the unwearied Sun by Los created / To measure Time and Space” (M 29:19, 23-24; E 127). This sun, built in order “to measure,” is the sun of work and productivity: “unwearied.”

We know that Bataille sees the sun as a giver of infinite excess energy through sunlight, and is critical of the idea of a closed system of totally measurable work. In another remarkable point of similarity with Blake, though, Bataille explicitly sets this up as a problematic of *two suns*. In the brief early essay “Rotten Sun,” Bataille comments on “this human tendency to distinguish two suns,” and contrasts the sun of measure (“mathematical serenity,” “elevation without excess”) and the sun directly looked at, the sun of excess (“refuse or combustion”) (*Visions of Excess* 57-58).<sup>21</sup> The point, however, like in Blake, is that these are two reactions to the same rising sun: the sun is both the source of measurable energy and work (what Bataille elsewhere calls thinking “the sun is just...a

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<sup>19</sup> In Night Seven, Urizen and his sons build a temple by first establishing “a Center,” associated with the ground (“laid the first Stone”) and the heart (“the image of the human heart”) (for the logic of the center/heart, and its relation to measure, see my Blake chapter) (FZ 87:31-33; E 361). They then trap the sun and hoard its light as a resource for war: “[They] dragd the wheels of the Suns chariot & they put the Sun / Into the temple of Urizen to give light to the Abyss / To light the War by day” (88:15-17; E 361). Similarly, in Alice Notley’s Blakean feminist epic poem *The Descent of Alette*, the Urizenic sovereign figure known as “the tyrant” “owns” “the light” (37); this means also that, like the demurgic Urizen, “the tyrant” “owns form” (25). Until he is killed, that is. The tyrant embodies “endless male / will,” “male will” being Notley’s feminist transfiguration of Blake’s famously misogynistic concept of the “Female Will” (6); in this way though, Notley herself becomes a female Will Blake (the idea of Notley as modern Blake I owe to Jane Gregory and David Brazil). If space allowed, an investigation into the extensive images of blood and circulation in *The Descent of Alette*, especially in their proximity to the same in Blake (as detailed in my chapter), would be apposite here.

<sup>20</sup> See Frye on the “two suns” in Blake, a motif also found in Swedenborg (140-141). Blake also used the metaphor of the sun as a guinea in a 1799 letter to Trusler. Considering the analysis of sovereignty and measure in my Blake chapter, I don’t think it was lost on Blake that in 1816 the guinea coin was replaced by a coin known as the *sovereign*.

<sup>21</sup> Bataille critically associates the sun of measure with “academic painting” (58). I need hardly adduce Blake’s own well-known hatred of the academic painting of his day, represented by Joshua Reynolds.

source of calories”), as well as the source of an excess energy that opens in the heart of any work and escapes (*Oeuvres* 7:191). My point is that we should not forget this inoperative excess as we study, think, and re-imagine energy in the humanities. As the energy landscape changes and the price of solar energy drops while new technologies develop, I claim that Blake and Bataille’s emphasis on the unproductive excess of energy—the solar Sabbath—can help us think new paradigms for sharing this excess, new models of a solar commons. For, as some recent lines from the poet Alli Warren reminded me,<sup>22</sup> the commons has historically been exactly that, the habitual sharing of excess: extra nuts or fruit, unused pasture, excess firewood, etc.

So we should approach solar energy not as a privatized enclosure of the excessive solar common(s)—this would be the sun as guinea, surely how Elon Musk sees it—but as a collective chorus (cf. Blake’s phrase “Choir of Day,” from *Milton*), innumerable, never fully totalizable or measurable by calculative technocratic reason. Blake and Bataille point us toward a thinking of energy that is an endeavor, yes a *work*, of communal care that courses through the everyday, since the sun comes up everywhere everyday, but always differently, locally, singularly. In this way “the work of the sun” would be what Blake’s *Jerusalem* calls a “labour of love,” an ongoing inoperative community.

Blake’s suspicion of the sun and light must be qualified: like the two suns, there are two lights. In the midst of Newton’s particles of light, there is another light, “light made new” (Notley), a light whose nature is incompleteness (Glück), a light always in excess of measure and completion. A light shard, light shared, whose “*glory...isn’t a possession of any one being in particular*” (*Guilty* 49). Like the “other night” (Blanchot), this light would be the light of the other day, the “realms of day” that Blake speaks of, when he rejects idea that God is light. Common light, common day. This other sun, this other day, this other light, is where you see the earth again, its radiant forms displayed in the energy of shared unworking. Bare brightness, barely bright, the brightness of the day.

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<sup>22</sup> “don’t end at lending / nouns to property.../ claim common right / to lap the excess / as a lock’s for frisking / a gale’s gaping gate” (*I Love It Though* 11-12).

## Chapter 4: Wordsworths' Parts

“The whole is smaller than its parts, and if it captures certain aspects of the parts it is only for as long as it keeps moving, connects, gets a grip on itself and starts over from scratch.”

-Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* 416

“Nothing can match the singular experience where it exists. One rediscovers that opening oneself to the world doesn't mean opening oneself to the four corners of the planet, that the world is there where we are. Opening ourselves to the world is opening ourselves to its presence here and now. Each fragment carries its own possibility of perfection. If 'the world' is to be saved this will be in each of its fragments.” -The Invisible Committee, *Now* 23

“Only fragments are accurate.” -Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 55

### I. Part, Whole, Cene

“So at times I stick to principles of incommensurability.” -Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 97

One of the most salient and wide-reaching crises evoked by the “shock to thought” (as Jamie Lorimer has called it) that is the Anthropocene—a crisis extending across domains of methodology, history, epistemology, ontology, and beyond—is that of *mereology*: the question of the mutual relations between parts and wholes. The Anthropocene, the new and ongoing geological epoch named for the human being's (*Anthropos*) increasingly disastrous effects on the climate and the earth system, has now superseded the previous epoch known as the Holocene, the latter from *Holos*, Greek for “whole.” The Anthropocene, quite literally then, is the time *after* the age of the Whole. The problem of linking up part and whole has always been both an important and a vexed one, especially in ecological discourse—for example, how exactly is one supposed to act locally (partially) but think globally (holistically), levels of scale that seem to be incommensurable? But the emergence of the Anthropocene has caused this problematic to be recast in novel ways and with a renewed ethical and intellectual urgency.

The Anthropocene thus occasions a crisis of totality and of measure across multiple domains: epistemological, ecological, and ontological. The most visible instantiation of this crisis is the debates now raging about the very term “Anthropocene” itself. Not long after the word came into common circulation, humanities scholars began to critique “Anthropocene,” charging it with a causal legerdemain whereby the *whole* of humanity—the species *Anthropos*—was blamed for the contingent actions of only a small *part*. The mereological language of many Anthropocene critics is prominent: Jason Moore for example is skeptical of the idea that the crisis is the fault of “the *Anthropos*: Humanity as an undifferentiated *whole*,” because this claim makes the Anthropocene into an “easy story” of “naturalized inequalities” (“The Capitalocene: Part I,” 595); likewise, Malm and Hornborg deny culpability of the whole “species,” instead looking to a “tiny minority...[an] infinitesimal fraction...a clique of white British men” that structured the conditions for the fossil economy and deployed “steam-power as a weapon – on sea and land, boats and rails – against the best *part* of humankind” (63-64); similarly, Bonneuil and Fressoz argue: “It would be better, indeed, to use [the] term ‘Oliganthropocene,’ a geological epoch caused by a *small fraction of humanity*, rather than the Anthropocene” (71; my emphases).

Other critics of the Anthropocene narrative, especially from a feminist perspective, argue that not only is humanity as a whole not to blame for the ecological crisis, but that this *Anthropos* was never whole in the first place, always constituted by exclusions from its category of human—in particular (but by no means only) women. Thus Rosi Braidotti attempts to decenter both “‘Man’ as

the universal humanistic measure of all things and the Anthropos as the emblem of an exceptional species” (26). This *Anthropos*, in its “ostensible universality,” is a “rather familiar versio[n] of man” to “feminist theory, long critical of ‘man,’” as Stacy Alaimo notes (89).<sup>1</sup> The worry here is that the Anthropocene just reinscribes the classic naturalizing operation that the project of critique has done so much, especially over the last five decades, to expose and problematize. We thought the sea had effaced the image of “Man” drawn in the sand, in the metaphor so powerfully introduced by Foucault, but it turns out “Man” has returned with a vengeance to name the whole epoch and earth, and indeed in his very doing so will increase those sea levels to efface everything else.

The critique of the Anthropocene’s “Anthropos” has now become a commonplace, and in its wake a host of other –cenes have been proposed as a corrective, both more accurately to diagnose the causality of this environmental destruction—to match up part and whole—and to contest the abstract, apolitical, and ahistorical category of “Man” or “Human”: Jason Moore’s Capitalocene, the Petrolocene, the Androcene, the Plantationocene, the Coloniocene, Donna Haraway’s Chthulucene, and many more, each new appellation purporting better to measure (up to) the whole of the global crisis.<sup>2</sup> I share the concerns of this critique of naturalized totality and false universalism—it is of course true that a relatively small group of mostly white men have been and are burning the world down with their greed, and it is true that those who contributed least to the crisis will suffer the most.

But what will it actually accomplish to change the name? What if the problem isn’t just with this particular measure of the whole (*Anthropos*), but of our concepts of measure and whole *tout court*? How might we address and even inhabit the incommensurability between the valuable frameworks the –cene proposals variously advocate? This plurality of approaches elicits the need for a common, yet cannot be arranged into a single synoptic totality—even as Moore, for his part, explicitly maintains his ontological holism, propounding an approach he calls “world ecology.”<sup>3</sup> Instead, we must consider that now there is no “whole,” no “Man,” nothing fully to measure or measure up to, only the incommensurable collision of all our attempts at measuring and trying to find a stable ground. Thought under this rubric, the *Anthropos* and its Anthropocene would remain as a *catachresis*, that is, a knowing misnomer for something unnamable, literally a misuse or ab-use of a category, concept, or name to include something incommensurable to it.<sup>4</sup> For isn’t it precisely the exclusionary universalism and false equivalence of “Man” or “Human” that is the logic behind capitalism, colonialism, and other regimes of measure and identity that thinkers have put forward as causal agents of the crisis? In this way, keeping “Anthropocene” as catachresis acknowledges that it is not the human that has caused the crisis, but “the Human,” *the very idea of Man*. Doing so—naming it catachrestically—also leaves open the idea that just as “Human” has meant different contingent

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<sup>1</sup> Both Braidotti’s and Alaimo’s essays appear, with other relevant interventions, in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed, Grusin (2017).

<sup>2</sup> I am thinking of Donna Haraway’s *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016). See my review essay on this book in *qui parle* (“Speculum of the Other Cene”). Haraway continues her critique of holism here: “Characterized by partial connections, the parts do not add up to any whole; but they do add up to worlds of nonoptional, stratified, webbed, and unfinished living and dying” (104).

<sup>3</sup> Moore, for example, writes in his landmark book *Capitalism in the Web of Life*: “Humans relate to nature as a whole from within, not from outside” (46). Moore wants to get rid of the Anthropocene name because “the parts do not add up to the whole” (“The Capitalocene: Part I,” 1), but this failure to make a whole is precisely why I think we should keep the term: to remind us that going back to some vision of the whole is neither possible nor desirable.

<sup>4</sup> Catachresis comes from the Greek *kata* (down, against) + *chresis* (use), thus ab-use. Influenced by Derrida and pushing him further, Gayatri Spivak analyzes catachresis in a political and postcolonial register: see her article “Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality, and Value,” where catachresis names “a space that one cannot not want to inhabit and yet must criticize” (228). This I think is a good way of describing the *Anthropos*. See also Spivak’s discussion of ab-use in *An Aesthetic Education in an Era of Globalization*, a book whose engagement with Romanticism is signaled in the very title.

things in the past, so it can in the future, and in this way we might “collectively give humanness a different future, itself historically charted by [the] past,” as Sylvia Wynter’s vast intellectual project enjoins us to do (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 73).<sup>5</sup> Tarrying with this contingency and incommensurability rather than only trying to re-measure it, as Moore does with his holistic concepts of Capitalocene and *oikeios*, allows it to be seen as a chance to think and practice community, one including nonhumans, where the contingency of our categories and our relationality is foregrounded even as we work within them; and thus a chance “to use chaos against itself,” to use this contingency to shape the future politically with *Anthropos* as both a faceless reminder of its bloody history and a “placeholder” for the world to come (Neyrat, “Economy of Turbulence”).<sup>6</sup>

Thinking through the Anthropocene’s crisis of the whole and of (in)commensurability allows us to confront the facile naturalized narrative of a whole of humanity being blamed for the contingent historical decisions of a metonymic part—what Frédéric Neyrat calls the “masked metonymy” of the *Anthropos*—without succumbing to the same logics (*La Part* 82). Indeed it is Neyrat who in several recent texts provides us with a useful concept for this task, namely his attempt to adumbrate an “ecology of separation,” where every separation is what allows a unique chance for relationality and vice versa. Rather than the ecological holism of equivalence (“everything is connected”), Neyrat proposes: “The objective of an *ecology of separation* is to contest this principle [of total interconnection], not in order to refute it entirely, but to show that every relation is founded on a separation” (“Ecology of Separation” 101). An ecology of separation looks for the “interior distance” of any whole (*La Part* 36), starting with the ways it is separated from or incommensurable with itself, in order “to distinguish [*faire la part*] forms of existence” and open up unforeseen possibilities for and modes of sharing the unwhole earth and its *Unheil* (“Ecology” 101). Puncturing all our mereological measures of totality, “our fascination with an (always illusory) anthropocenic whole,” as Jodi Dean writes apropos of Neyrat, an ecology of separation helps us “cut across and through, finding and creating openings...gain[ing] possibilities for collective action and strategic engagement” (“Anamorphic”).

So every incommensurable separation, every division, is also a sharing—in this way Neyrat’s thought is an ecological variation on Jean-Luc Nancy’s ontology of *partage*, a word which in French means both sharing *and* dividing/separating. Nancy is perhaps the most consequential theorist of community of our time, owing to his radical rethinking of community as “inoperative” or groundless, escaping any essential, teleological, or totalizing identity that is shared in common. *Partage* (the word also relates to the mereological, containing the word *part*) is one of his most important conceptual figures. For Nancy, *partage* is a “sharing [*partage*] of the incommensurable...the incommensurability of being-in-common” (*The Experience of Freedom* 72-73). *Partage* is the distribution, the dividing out, the sharing of what was never whole, unified, commensurable, or grounded in the first place: the very *partage* of existence *is* the first place, the groundless (taking) place of relation. These concepts—the Anthropocene as catachresis and the ecology of separation—

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<sup>5</sup> Wynter’s decades long project to reconstitute the historical and naturalized category of “human” as a non-exclusionary universal through difference is deeply relevant to my point here. In this same interview with Katherine McKittrick, Wynter discusses her project and her conceptual idiom in relation to global warming (though she doesn’t mention the Anthropocene, it is essentially the same problem I have been discussing): “I am saying here that the above [problem of defining the human and the ‘we’] is the single issue with which global warming and climate instability now confronts us and that we have to replace the ends of the *referent-we* of liberal monohumanist Man2 with the ecumenically human ends of the *referent-we in the horizon of humanity*. We have no choice” (“Unparalleled Catastrophe” 24). See also the other essays on Wynter’s work in this volume: *Sylvia Wynter: on Being Human as Praxis* (2015).

<sup>6</sup> I take the idea of the human as a “placeholder” from the end of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s influential essay “The Climate of History”: “Species may indeed be the name of a placeholder for an emergent, new universal history of humans that flashes up in the moment of the danger that is climate change. But we can never *understand* this universal” (221-222).

allow us to think and to expand the concreteness of locality, the *oikos* of *ecology*, without succumbing either to the logic of organic holism or fragmented nominalism. Rather it is precisely the incommensurable separation of part and whole that furnishes singular, always contingent opportunities for, and sites of, relationality without whole and without ground.

I propose that these critical impasses in contemporary thought are both instantiated and illuminated by William Wordsworth's poem "Home at Grasmere." Revisiting Romanticism—the age of the fragment—to recast these issues means revisiting conceptions of part, whole, domesticity, and community at the moment of their breakdown, that is the exposure of their groundlessness, in the midst of a more general breakdown and reformatting of totalizing systems and regimes of measure that we know of as "modernity," and not to mention a time which is also, perhaps, the beginning of the Anthropocene.<sup>7</sup> Wordsworth's poem recapitulates and radicalizes the consequences of this breakdown at the moment they first become thinkable, "Home at Grasmere" itself being an unfinished part of a larger unfinished grand poem of totality, *The Recluse*. Looking at the domestic in "Home at Grasmere"—its chief theme—I argue that Wordsworth configures the *oikos* (the domestic, the family, the everyday, the locality, dwelling) as a site of groundless community of and as sharing. Unworking the partitive relation, Wordsworth finds in the very incommensurability of part and whole a space of relationality that the logic of the poem, from its diction to its fragmentary form, always figures as both sharing *and* separating—a domestic ecology of *partage*. I also find an orientation toward domesticity as groundless sharing in Dorothy Wordsworth's *Grasmere Journal*, composed around the same time as William's poem. In each case, parts are neither assimilable into a larger organic whole nor infinitely broken off and isolated—as in the two primary logics of the fragment, both of which I wish to trouble—but only there to live together in the everyday, contingently shaping a groundless community of shared-separation. In this way, the shared forms, rhythms, and ecological entanglements of everyday domestic life provide what William Wordsworth will call an "image" of the common.

## II. Grasmereology

"A person all partialness and mouth never knows where to begin" —Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 110

It all—the all—begins with a house. Commenced in early 1800, shortly after William Wordsworth arrived in Grasmere to make a home there with his sister Dorothy, the hymn to domestication "Home At Grasmere" is Wordsworth's first crack at the unfinished, impossible philosophical poem whose ever-receding completion would negatively define his working life: *The Recluse*. The characteristic aspiration of *The Recluse* was its aim to absolute totality, to represent a system of "Nature, Man, and Society"—the last term morphed into "Human Life"—in short, the world, in its encyclopedic *wholeness*: "I know not any thing which will not come within the scope of my plan," Wordsworth wrote to a friend about the poem in early 1798, shortly after conceiving it with Coleridge, whose role was to fill out the content of the philosophical system (LEY 212). The deeply personal "Home at Grasmere" was to be the opening part of the larger poem ("Book 1, *Part 1*" reads the heading), and so a question immediately imposes itself: Why begin what is supposed to be the grandest, most totalizing artistic endeavor in human history (make no mistake, this is how Wordsworth and Coleridge thought of it) with a single house? What does this particular domestic setting have to do with Man, Nature, and Human Life?

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<sup>7</sup> The first scientific paper to introduce and argue for the idea of the Anthropocene, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer's 2000 piece "The Geology of Mankind" (expanded upon in *Nature* in 2002), proposed dating the Anthropocene to the late eighteenth century, specifically Watt's 1784 invention of the steam engine, which would make the Anthropocene and Romanticism essentially co-emergent.

Wordsworth's decision to begin at home is all the more strange and striking in the context of Coleridge's September 1799 letter on *The Recluse*, which encourages Wordsworth to think of the poem as addressed to those disappointed by "the complete failure of the French Revolution"; Coleridge couches this counsel in explicitly and vehemently *anti-domestic* terms: "[they] have thrown up all hopes of the amelioration of mankind, and are sinking into an almost epicurean selfishness, disguising the same under the soft titles of domestic attachment" (*Collected Letters* 1.527). Coleridge's denigration of the "selfishness" of domesticity here also clues us in to the fact that *The Recluse*, in addition to propounding encyclopedic philosophical views, was from the beginning fundamentally to be a poem about—and to *bring* about—*community*. It was Coleridge and Wordsworth's great redemptive communal project, which would succeed where both the French Revolution and Coleridge's Pantisocracy community had failed. Yet mere months after Coleridge's whole-mongering instruction to reject the domestic (and to redeem the Revolution's promise of universal community *via* this rejection), Wordsworth would start *The Recluse* with nothing other than a paean to his attachment to his newfound domesticity at Dove Cottage in Grasmere. Sure enough, his one earlier attempt to begin *The Recluse* had also centered on a singular house, a certain "Ruined Cottage." Right from the beginning, then, *The Recluse's* ambitions of wholeness and completeness are undermined by the particularity and partiality of the domestic; domesticity becomes both the conceptual field and lived site where the incommensurability of part and whole is played out, lived out, and shared out. Kenneth Johnston picks up on the strange mereological dynamic of the domestic in his definitive treatment *Wordsworth and The Recluse*, writing of Wordsworth's "constant struggle, clearly evident in *The Recluse*, between wholeness and fragmentation... apparent not only in the physical state of the *Recluse* texts themselves, but in their recurrent image patterns of ruined cottages and ruined dwellers, of unsatisfactory 'Residences' and worthy 'Inmates,' of homes planned, built, destroyed" (xxiii). Wordsworth understood something Coleridge couldn't about what the poet Alice Notley calls "the mysteries of small houses."

Coleridge's disgust for "the soft titles of domestic attachment" in the 1799 letter contains a barely veiled misogyny that in his other writings is evident enough. The domestic sphere has been gendered dating back to the Greek *oikos*, but decades of feminist work both historical and theoretical has helped us track shifts in the material conditions and ideology of the domestic, whose configurations and consequences are malleable even as "the home" persists as a matrix of domination and oppression of women, naturalized hierarchy (indeed naturalization itself), and unpaid, exploited labor.<sup>8</sup> Many scholars both in and outside of literary studies have focused on later eighteenth-century Europe as a key moment in the consolidation of domestic ideology as a new regime of measure, a naturalized ground for identity and essence (one of course gendered and hierarchical). Romanticism is thus coextensive with "the widespread emergence of an ideological construction of the 'domestic' as one of the central means by which class and gender difference were being articulated in the later eighteenth century" (North 14). This operation of naturalization is especially visible in the Romantic era novel, as the work of Nancy Armstrong, Ian Duncan, and Deidre Lynch, among others, variously shows.<sup>9</sup> Many scholars link the ideological construction of the domestic to the French Revolution, either negatively (a protection against "revolutionary

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<sup>8</sup> Feminist scholars Leslie Moran and Beverley Skeggs, citing Henri Lefebvre, discuss the home as a site of naturalization: "the (hetero)genitality of home works to link home to nature and the natural. In turn this is implicated in the idea of home as the guarantor of meaning" (90). On gendered domestic labor, see especially the work of Sylvia Federici and *The Politics of Housework*, ed. Ellen Malos.

<sup>9</sup> See Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*, Duncan's *Modern Romance and Transformations of the Novel: The Gothic, Scott, Dickens*, and Lynch's "Domesticating Fictions and Nationalizing Women: Edmund Burke, Property, and the Reproduction of Englishness."

incursion,” evident in a figure like Burke’s appeal to “domestic ties” and “family affections”), or seeing the Revolution as cementing the division between public (political, male) and private (domestic, female), i.e., what historian Suzanne Desan calls “the domesticating and exclusionary legacy of 1789,” where “the Revolution laid the foundations for domesticity by excluding women from politics and mandating a ‘private’ role for them” (Tuite 125; Desan 10).<sup>10</sup> However, more recent work on the French Revolution, exemplified by Desan’s own book *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France*, allows us to take a more nuanced view. For Desan mentions the claim of this exclusionary legacy of the Revolution in order to challenge it, pointing out how, in the wake of the French Revolution, domesticity and the family were “a site of political and social contestation” into “the early 1800s” (316). Notably, Desan frames her argument about the domestic and the family’s instability precisely in *mereological terms*—the breakdown of the whole: “the Revolution exploded the possibility of simply imagining the family as an organic whole...the Revolution simultaneously destabilized the internal workings of the family, loaded it with immense political significance, and left the nineteenth century with the pressing question of how to harmonize the new individual with the social whole” (315-6).

The point is that the French Revolution, along with the emergent discourse of feminism, made the domestic into a contested site of contingency in the 1790s. One need only look to the radical discourses of domesticity and the family in 1790s writers like William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft, both major influences on Wordsworth (as was of course the French Revolution), to get a sense of how the constitution of the domestic was radically put in question during this time of its simultaneous consolidation, such a contestation even giving rise to a literary tradition of “extreme domesticity” that flowed into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which Susan Fraiman has recently outlined and theorized.<sup>11</sup> What is important here is not so much the content of the ideas of what domesticity is or should be, but the fact of domesticity’s malleability and constructability. The malleability of the domestic implies its exposure to new uses and configurations—as Lisa Robertson writes in her own speculative exploration of domestic rhythms: “The domestic sphere emerges as an embodied vector that breaks open, floods the habitual containment of the public-private binary” (*Nilling* 75-76).

So the late eighteenth century sees shifts and a new ideological configuration of what domesticity means and does, but strictly critical accounts—accounts of naturalization—miss that it is precisely these shifts that allow domesticity to be glimpsed in its actual groundlessness and contingency, its capacity to be undone and rearranged, always in excess of whatever measure

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<sup>10</sup> Here is Clara Tuite’s account of Romantic-era domesticity (and its legacy) at more length: “Both the threat of revolutionary incursion from across the Channel and a form of conservative or organic Romanticism combined to produce a particular representation or ideal of the family, a particular politicization of the idea of the family, in our period. The word family today suggests the exclusion of those who are not part of the biological or nuclear family, constituted by the heterosexual couple and their biological offspring. These late-twentieth-century understandings of the family may be said to be the specific product of ideological developments which date from the eighteenth century, which have naturalized the social construct of the nuclear family” (125-26). In a famous passage from the *Reflections*, Burke writes: “In this choice of inheritance we have given to our frame of polity the image of a relation in blood; binding up the constitution of our country with our dearest domestic ties; adopting our fundamental laws into the bosom of our family affections” (34). The opposition of domesticity and the Revolution perhaps goes some way in helping explain Coleridge’s remark in his 1799 letter. Other influential accounts of the construction of the domestic and nuclear family in the eighteenth century include Davidoff and Hall’s *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850*, and Amanda Vickery’s “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History.”

<sup>11</sup> See Susan Fraiman’s compelling recent *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins* (2017), with its “conviction that the home may be a key site of aesthetic, political, and psychological innovation,” thus attempting “to counter what has become the prevalent framing” of the domestic as a bearer of banality and everything ideologically bad (9).

contingently defines and confines it. If the domestic can be redeemed or rethought, if it is in excess of its all too prevalent and real protocols of violence and “scenes of subjection” (in Saidiya Hartman’s phrase for the terrors of domesticity in the context of American slavery), then thought must also consider this excess as a shaped site for sharing, for future modes of dwelling and community, in the excess of the present. I take my lead on this from the recent trajectory of feminist thinkers like Sylvia Federici and eco-feminist Stacy Alaimo, who have revised their own earlier rejection of the domestic and are reclaiming the domestic as a political site of renewing and remaking community; when Alaimo in her recent book on environmental politics *Exposed* calls for us “to redesign the domestic,” one open to nonhumans and with “walls [that] do not disconnect,” she is precisely thinking the domestic as ecological *partage*, shared separation (18).<sup>12</sup> If the domestic can be redesigned and opened, if it can be an *opening*, it is because it is groundless. The domestic is where groundlessness is lived and configured—perhaps naturalized in enclosure too—but also shared as the commonness of common life.

Seen this way, the modes of sharing that the domestic engenders and conditions can express an image of a community without ground and without a whole. The feminist reclamation of the domestic as a community of *partiality* opposed to holism is best articulated by Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto,” in a passage that—not coincidentally, for our purposes—invokes a cornerstone text of Romantic literature:

The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality...No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological *polis* based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household... The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world. Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden; that is, through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole, a city and cosmos. The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family...they are wary of holism, but needy for connection. (9)

There are thus two parallel moments that I want to constellate: the historical contestation of the domestic in the 1790s, and the contemporary theoretical opening of the domestic by Haraway, Alaimo, Federici, hooks, and others. Both allow opening up and rethinking the domestic as relational separation rather than hierarchical split (to use Neyrat’s terms). This is the spirit in which I want to read Wordsworth’s treatment of the domestic in “Home at Grasmere,” even as I remain

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<sup>12</sup> For bell hooks’s reclamation of the domestic from a black feminist perspective, see “Homeplace (a site of resistance),” an essay with which Federici is in dialogue. For Federici’s own revision of her earlier views on the domestic, see the 2010 essay “Feminism and the Politics of the Common in an Era of Primitive Accumulation,” where the domestic *oikos* is a site of “sharing”: “a center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation...allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions...[The home] is also a protection from ecological disaster” (147). This is related to what Federici’s recent work calls the “double character” of housework—something I was reminded of when reading a note in Lindsay Turner’s amazing poetic sequence on these same issues, “Essays on Working.” Turner ends her sequence—also in dialogue with Neyrat, whom she has translated—opening the home’s door to other creatures and opening to a general common (“everywhere and all together”): “All the work is done here and is done far away. I opened the screen door to let everything in, including the carpenter ants. To tell you how it is would mean that we were everywhere and all together.”

cognizant of what earlier scholars have rightly critiqued in his domestic discourse—his “cultivation of women,” for example, or his disavowal of the particularly gendered “terrors” of the domestic.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to its relevance to all the contexts I’ve adduced so far, “Home at Grasmere” is ripe for reinvestigation for two other important reasons. First, despite its length, inherent power and interest, and its composition spanning key years in Wordsworth’s career, the poem is “extraordinary [but] comparatively understudied,” even “marginalized within the Wordsworth canon because of its identity as a ‘failed’ or ‘fragmentary’ text,” or considered an “orphan” (Boyson 136; Bushell 399; Stelzig 743).<sup>14</sup> It’s also not included in Nicholas Halmi’s recent Norton critical edition of Wordsworth’s major works, for example. Geoffrey Hartman called it “embarrassing” (172). This leads to the second reason: despite the whole poem’s relative neglect, there is the curious fact that a smaller fragment of this already fragmentary poem—the only part published during Wordsworth’s lifetime (in 1814), the hundred or so lines that make up the so-called “Prospectus”—are some of the most studied lines in all of Wordsworth. What is more, the lines of the “Prospectus,” too often divorced from their original (domestic) context within “Home at Grasmere,” are involved in an explicit mereological operation, whereby they are supposed to represent synecdochically not just *The Recluse* or Wordsworth’s poetry, but all Romanticism, even all poetry as such—the “Prospectus” is nothing other than “Wordsworth’s program for poetry,” since M.H. Abrams and indeed since Wordsworth himself.<sup>15</sup> The “Prospectus” is thus a part of a part of a part, taken for a Whole.

Studying the full domestic context of the “Prospectus,” including with the context of Dorothy Wordsworth’s writings, allows us to recast it and understand it more intimately, from its central metaphor—which is an utterly domestic one, namely marriage—to its focus on the ordinary or everyday as a subject, *the* subject, for poetry. Reading “Home at Grasmere” has been stymied by seeing it either as simply a fragment or as itself “deserv[ing] to be read as a complete poem” (Johnston 86). Rather, what it does is precisely unwork the part-whole relation, showing the incommensurability between them to be the groundless ground, the lived fact, of sharing the domestic. In my reading, “Home at Grasmere” is neither perfectly harmonious, nor embarrassingly overblown, nor riddled with dark anxiety (the three main critical currents): rather, it is a poem about incommensurability: it gives us the domestic as a shared lived incommensurability, a habitual exposure to and everyday coping with contingency involving humans and nonhumans, and all distilled in the poem’s persistent impulse to share.

### III. Bringing the All Back Home

“The truth of the common is property.” –Jean-Luc Nancy, “Communism, The Word”

“Through the walls we have holes of the social form called home.” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 79

Wordsworth can never confront the riddle of pure origin, so “Home at Grasmere” begins, as Wordsworth often does, with mediated return. The arrival at Grasmere at the end of 1799 brings to

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<sup>13</sup> See Judith Page’s *Wordsworth and the Cultivation of Women* (1994). Kurt Heinzelman argues that “missing from William’s writing about the domestic in general is an understanding of how the world of domestic arrangements has its own terrors” (67). See also Ann Mellor’s *Romanticism and Gender* (1993) on the Wordsworths.

<sup>14</sup> The exact dating and manuscript history of “Home At Grasmere” is considerably vexed. It is fairly certain that the poem was begun in 1800 and finished by 1806, but scholars are still debating exactly what was composed when. I’ll be citing Ms B of the poem, as given in Gill’s edition of *The Major Works*, except where otherwise noted. References to other manuscripts come from the texts in the Cornell edition of “Home at Grasmere,” edited by Beth Darlington.

<sup>15</sup> Abrams describes the “Prospectus” as “Wordsworth’s program for poetry” in the opening chapters of *Natural Supernaturalism* in an influential reading to which I’ll return at the end of this chapter. Wordsworth himself introduced the lines in 1814 as: “a kind of Prospectus of the design and scope of the *whole* Poem.”

mind his first visit there as a schoolboy, where he felt immediately, almost magically attracted to the place. The opening passage sees the poet ventriloquizing his younger self, who, already death-haunted, no sooner thinks of one day making a home at Grasmere than he thinks of death as separation, the “moral separation” of finitude itself:

What happy fortune were it here to live!  
And, if I thought of dying, if a thought  
Of mortal separation could come in  
With paradise before me, here to die! (9-12)

Reversing the Miltonic “earth was all before them”—and notably removing the totalizing word “all”—paradise lies before the prospect of the young Wordsworth, even as home and separation are inextricably tied together, however reluctantly. The word “fortune” bespeaks a contingency that is picked up in the same passage again via Wordsworth’s assertion that “I was no prophet,” making no predictions that he would live there, only harboring “one bright pleasing thought / A fancy in the heart of what might be / The *lot* of others, never could be mine” (13-16; my emphasis). “Lot,” in its very disavowal, also indexes the contingency introduced by its synonym “fortune,” but its multivalence also introduces the logic of the poem I wish to trace: what I will call the poem’s *partitive* logic, which renders the sharing and the dividing of parts as the same movement.

While the primary meaning of “lot” here is indeed fortune, the fact that the subject of the passage is a possible future home (which in the present tense of the poem has become a reality) should make the pun on another meaning of “lot” readily obvious, i.e., “lot” as piece a land, a (p)lot of property—sure enough this latter use of the word occurs later in the poem (“a little lot of ground”) (473). But these two meanings—lot as fortune, lot as land—open onto a third valence: “lot” as a share or part, which itself gives rise to a whole complex of related meanings and idioms, as the OED bears witness. In various ways and contexts, “lot” indicates a portioning or dividing, which is also a gathering or sharing. Lot can mean “a portion, a share”; “a part”; “a small enclosure” of land that is “divided.” Its semantic proximity to the part is also witnessed by the idiom “neither part nor lot” meaning “to have no *share* or concern in.” A lot as separated off, divided up, means it is enclosed and individualized, though the word’s richness goes *further* to signify multiplicity: “a group, a set” or “large amount”; “people gathered together; a company, party.” Lot is thus the whole (“entirety; all; everything”) and what is divided, singled out from the whole, what *divides* the whole, undoes it, and shares it out into singular plurality: allotted. “Lot”’s own lexical abundance—*abundance* being another meaning of lot—renders indistinct the poles of singular and plural, part and whole, dividing or separating and sharing. And it is precisely at this point of indistinction, which is also a point of incommensurability or inoperativity, that I situate my reading of community in “Home at Grasmere.” Lot is a word of *partage*, partaking in the governing logic of the poem which figures domesticity as a separation that opens onto sharing, an ecology of separation. What is shared is incalculable, up to fortune and contingency (“lot” also names an ambiguous and uncountable multiplicity—“a lot of,” and an immeasurable, amorphous totality: “a whole lot”).<sup>16</sup>

I tarry with the single syllable “lot” at such length because in offering the possibility of an enclosure that is open, common, proliferative, and contingent, as Daniel Benjamin suggests in his

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<sup>16</sup> All of the definitions in quotes come from the online OED entry for “lot”: <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/110425?rskey=EHCdi0&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>. That Wordsworth saw “lot” as basically synonymous with part or portion is seen by the final line from “The Pass of Kirkstone”: “Thy lot, O man, is good, thy portion fair!”

unpublished work on the Wordsworths,<sup>17</sup> it allows us to discern a logic, a not quite dialectical movement, a rhythm that permeates the poem. This is a logic that undermines or unworks the claims to property, non-communal solitude, and the bad possessive, patriarchal enclosing logics that are undoubtedly a competing impulse in “Home at Grasmere,” and that indeed follow in its next passages.<sup>18</sup> After finishing the memory of his boyhood visit to Grasmere with the synecdochic optative of part-whole substitution “here / Should be my home, this Valley be my World,” Wordsworth appears overcome with the rhetoric of property and possession, itself couched in the related language of sovereignty (“Lord,” “owner”) and solitude (42-3): “This solitude is mine... / The unappropriated bliss hath found / An owner, and that owner I am he” (83, 85-86). The poet here casts the *oikos* as the domain of the proper and the patriarch; he is “The Lord of this enjoyment,” who is “exalted with the thought / Of my possessions, of my genuine wealth” (87, 89-90). Yet his non-communal sovereign solitude starts to crumble when he turns to the concreteness of the domestic, even as he adduces the house as “proof”: “For proof behold this Valley, and behold / Yon cottage, where with me my Emma dwells” (97-98).<sup>19</sup>

Such fustian bombast in Wordsworth usually comes when is trying to convince himself— with “proof”—of something he knows is not really the case (just as his most assured thoughts come couched in the understated double-negative of litotes). The turn to the actual house means turning away from detached isolation to the person with whom he shares it: Dorothy (called Emma here, as in other poems, in what we might see as another catachresis or purposeful misnomer<sup>20</sup>). Emma dwells with him, Wordsworth says, and what is more, he further names this act of dwelling with a wonderfully subtle use of the word “divide,” embodying exactly the logic of *partage* I am interested in tracing: “She... / Divides with me this loved abode” (107-8). The first entry for “divide” in the OED is “to separate into parts,” and that is of course the word’s primary meaning, though Wordsworth’s usage here is a much rarer one, clearly signifying *to share*: “To take or have a portion of (something) along *with* another or others; to share” (OED). “Dwells with” less than ten lines later becomes “divides with”; the “with” stays, but the dwelling becomes dividing. Wordsworth’s synonym for domestic dwelling is a word that means both separating and sharing (as with “lot”).<sup>21</sup> What is divided is the “abode,” the home, where everyday life is lived in common, lived *with* and as the *with*: abiding is dividing, and vice versa—abiding in the precarious, contingent, vulnerable entanglements of everyday existence. This evocation of dividing/sharing the domestic with Dorothy/Emma also comes in the context of Wordsworth marveling at the quality of their relationality, which subsists through and as *separation*—for even when apart from her, he feels the “unseen companionship” of his sister “not far off” (112, 109). The following lines then turn again to the part/whole relation, as

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin writes, for example, of: “[A] loose and contingent enclosure, which Dorothy Wordsworth’s prose writings persistently figure as a contingent and provident holding. For Wordsworth even the domestic is this kind of holding” (“Lyric Theory in Apposition” 15-16). We could also compare this notion of enclosure to Blake’s conception of sharing at/as the bounding line in my Chapter 3.

<sup>18</sup> For example, David Simpson remarks on the poem’s “near-hysterical possessiveness” (*Historical Imagination* 135). The tone of the poem is indeed peculiar, owing in part to what Kevis Goodman reminds me are its euphemistic proclivities (eu-phemism in Geoffrey Hartman’s sense, the etymology being “speaking well”). Rowan Boyson also calls it “hysterical” and “hyperbolic,” though she also wants to take the poem at its “happy word,” as do I (136).

<sup>19</sup> Some critics have understandably chafed at the seeming possessiveness of “my Emma” here, though they conveniently forget that Dorothy also refers to her brother as “my William” in her journals. I’d prefer to think of it as a mutual, common dispossession, perhaps related to Anahid Nersessian’s casting of Romanticism as a “mode of utopian thought predicated on dispossession” (*Utopia, Limited* 73).

<sup>20</sup> Thanks to Michael Auer for suggesting this to me. “Emma” is used as a name for Dorothy also in “Poems on the Naming of Places,” which also deal with home and relationality.

<sup>21</sup> The Italian verb for “to share” is *condividere*—literally “to divide with.” Also in German, the verb *teilen* can mean either “to share” or “to divide,” while the noun *Teil* means “part.”

Wordsworth employs the word of totality “all” four times in three lines, ending with two partitive genitives to privilege the particularity and partiality of their connection amidst the totality of his existence: “in this / Favorite of all, in this the most of all” (115-116).

So the claims to property, sovereignty, and solitude are unworked; they must be understood in light of this recasting of dwelling as and abiding as “dividing.” There are many “uses of division,” a fact with which Coleridge could never quite come to terms (we’ll come back to Coleridge).<sup>22</sup> Just as the home/domestic/oikos/abode is divided and exists only in and as this dwelling-dividing, the proper(ty), the “mine,” is always divided and shared. As Nancy elaborates on his conceptuality: “What is proper to me is not my property closed upon itself, it is my self in so far as it opens up” (“Our World” 52)—opens up to the division that is sharing. Sovereignty also divides, but its division is not the *partage* of sharing groundlessness; sovereignty divides in order both to hierarchize and to atomize. “Sovereignty derives from a severance of relation,” according to Philip Goodchild (41).<sup>23</sup> In Neyrat’s terms, sovereignty is a split (characterized by hierarchy), not a separation (characterized by relation).<sup>24</sup> In separation or *partage*, what is divided and shared is the incommensurability, the excess, the groundlessness of existence itself: this division is always communal—it is *community*—as Wordsworth displays in his coupling the relational preposition “with” with the verb “divides”: “Divides with me this loved abode.” Insofar as this domesticity is the dividing-sharing of incommensurability, it is also the demand for equality, what Nancy calls “equality in the sharing of the incommensurable,” which is just “the excess of the sharing of existence...existence delivered over to the incommensurability of being-in-common” (*Experience of Freedom* 72-3).<sup>25</sup> My reading of “Home at Grasmere” is seeking to show how this common incommensurability is lived out as the groundless sharing of the domestic, which is always in excess of property; it is a form-of-life. In doing so, I will ultimately argue that the poetics of the fragmentary common found in Wordsworth—and Romanticism generally—is what makes the political and ontological project of a thinker like Nancy possible in the first place.

#### IV. Nameless “Here”

“He wouldn’t live in a house in which every room was square. It is a matter of a more interesting counting. A fragment is not a fraction but a whole piece.” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 82

After dwelling on the particularity of his own domesticity, Wordsworth zooms back out to consider the whole valley of Grasmere. He experiences the surrounding hills as a kind of open enclosure (“close me in”), nestling him in place while exposing him to the bare openness of the sky: “Embrace me, then, ye Hills, and close me in, / Now in the clear and open day I feel / Your guardianship” (129-131). This “open day” will become the “common day” that is affirmed at the climactic end of the poem. The open enclosure that is Grasmere here is also a figuration of how Wordsworth generally thinks of the domestic in “Home at Grasmere,” and indeed from this prospect he turns to view the other houses in the valley, which are gathered in collectivity

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<sup>22</sup> See Seamus Perry’s *Coleridge and the Uses of Division*.

<sup>23</sup> For more on sovereignty in its relation to Romanticism’s vision of groundless community, see my Blake chapter. Blake is also concerned with the two ways of drawing the enclosing line or ma(r)king the cut: as hierarchical (sovereignty, represented by Urizen) or open (represented by Los/the bounding line).

<sup>24</sup> “Where separation articulates differences, the split juxtaposes identities without relations. In other words, *the denial of the relation is founded on the split, and not on separation*” (Neyrat, “Ecology of Separation,” 104). For a discussion of sovereignty in Wordsworth in step with my own, especially as this question relates to groundlessness and community, see the chapter on *The Prelude* in Kir Kuiken’s *Imagined Sovereignities* pp. 121-168.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy has also reflected at length on the preposition “with”—see for example his *Being Singular Plural*.

(“clustered”), yet “single most” (140). Once again, the domestic is presented as relation in separation: the cottages are “[l]ike separated stars with clouds between” (144).

Grasmere is then put forward as a place of plenitude, bearing a world within it and a network of nonhuman (co-)existence. The nonhuman presences of the valley are listed and linked by a string of “ands”: “Warm woods, and sunny hills, and fresh green fields, / And mountains not less green, and flocks and herds” (146-7). But the catalogue of beings is quickly deflated in importance—“a thousand nooks of earth / have also these”—in order to set up what is arguably the most memorable and problematic passage of the poem, where Wordsworth tries to hit upon what exactly makes Grasmere special and unique. He fails. Critics have often focused on the hyperbolic and totalizing language, missing the significance of the poet’s explicit confession that he “cannot name” what gives content to the singularity of the place:

...but no where else is found—  
No where (or is it fancy?) can be found—  
The one sensation that is here; ‘tis here,  
Here as it found its way into my heart  
In childhood, here as it abides by day,  
By night, here only; or in chosen minds  
That take it with them hence, where’er they go.  
‘Tis (but I cannot name it) ‘tis the sense  
Of majesty, and beauty, and repose,  
A blended holiness of earth and sky,  
Something that makes this individual Spot,  
This small abiding-place of many men,  
A termination, and a last retreat,  
A Centre, come from wheresoe’er you will,  
A Whole without dependence or defect,  
Made for itself, and happy in itself,  
Perfect Contentment, Unity entire.

Long is it since we met, to **part** no more (154-171; my emphasis)

“It is the spot syndrome all over again; and Grasmere becomes a crude omphalos,” Hartman says about this passage, invoking his key concept of “spot syndrome” to describe Wordsworth’s pathological attachment to certain singular locales (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 173). Yet far from being a comfortable navel, Grasmere is unapproachable in language, resisting and receding from all nomination: “*but I cannot name it*,” Wordsworth says just before nonetheless trying out a string of names and descriptions. He can only adduce either the hyper-abstract (unity, whole, center), or the absolutely particular or singular “tis here,” frustratingly repeating it, as if saying the deictic and locative “here” enough times would conjure the site’s haecceity. What many critics have seen as a histrionic idealization in this passage and throughout the poem (whether genuine or apotropaic), I want to place under the rubric of catachresis. The names, brittle in their very abstraction (unity, whole, center) stretch to the breaking point, scraping up against the nameless and the incommensurable: the essential quality of Grasmere is merely “something.”

What are we to make of words like “unity” and “whole” so strangely treated here, almost disavowed in their deliberate evacuation of content, yet meant to carry such particularity? I think we can view it as a kind of lip service to Coleridgean concepts Wordsworth knew were supposed to be grounding *The Recluse*, without quite knowing how to employ them or even agreeing; and Wordsworth was, we know from letters at the time, waiting for philosophical instruction on the

content of the poem from Coleridge that would never come. Indeed, *The Prelude* often makes a point of outsourcing philosophical claims of unity, wholeness, and totality to Coleridge (the entire poem is “to Coleridge,” of course) thus implicitly undermining them: “to thee [Coleridge]...the unity of all has been revealed,” Wordsworth writes for example in Book 2, leaving us to wonder what has been revealed to the poet himself (2.225-26). And the above “Home at Grasmere” passage’s praise for unity and wholeness also yields to particularity, partiality, and plurality. Wordsworth carries Grasmere privately in “my heart,” and the uniqueness of the place Grasmere (“this individual spot”) is actually plural, or rather a *site* of plurality: “abiding-place of many men.” The importance of abiding and dwelling also makes clear the importance of domesticity to the poem—and abiding is dividing, according to that ontological and linguistic grammar of sharing that I have delineated as the heart of this poem. The community at Grasmere is nonexclusionary, open to whomever (“come from wheresoe’er you will”), and not grounded in the soil of the place (“take it with them hence, where’er they go”) even while retaining its uniqueness and “Here”-ness; this is a uniqueness both intensified by and ontologically loosened from determinations and logics of property. It does not even really hold to say that Grasmere is “inclusive,” since it undoes the very binary logic of inclusion/exclusion that subtends any notion of a grounded, enclosed totality.

Grasmere, the site of Wordsworth’s everyday, his dwelling and domesticity, is “whole” only in catachresis: a makeshift, purposefully misused name for something that “cannot [be] name[d],” something incommensurable to language and to measure itself. If the whole here is not a whole, what is it? Just as with the catachresis of the Anthropocene, catachresis can foreground incommensurability, as a problem to be faced up to, not to be dealt with but to be dwelt with. The “whole” is divided with in the absence of a proper measured whole, where living domestically, abiding, is dividing with, a perforated partition. The domestic, the home at Grasmere, is a constant shared habitual negotiation or coping with the nameless, the incommensurable, contingency, the impossibility of wholeness, coherence, of divine or even natural sanction. In the absence of grounds, there is only “something” “here”: daily life together, sharing, community, the common lot. The gestures toward totality and unity in “Home at Grasmere” are remnants of the poem’s original placing in *The Recluse*. They must all be viewed under the aspect of, and indeed containing the very seeds of, the ruins of *The Recluse* as a totalizing project (with its Coleridgean ambitions for totality against the domestic). This passage is one of the more explicit poetic records of Wordsworth and Coleridge’s subtle agon. Just as *The Recluse* itself is an impossible, non-existent whole, “Home at Grasmere”—and thus metonymically, the idea of “home” that is foregrounded in “Home at Grasmere,” the home that *is* Grasmere—is an impossible whole, neither part of something larger nor perfect in itself, but a single incommensurable site of sharing separation, of groundless community.

The undermining of the whole carried out by the strained catachrestic encomium above is further complicated by the next line, which begins a new verse paragraph, and contains the crucial antonym of whole, the word “part”: “Long is it since we met, to *part* no more.” We will continually come back to this morpheme “part,” and how it plays a key role in other words of the poem (depart, partake, participate, impart, partner, etc.) to exemplify “Home at Grasmere”’s partitive formal logic, but for now I want to focus on how Wordsworth characterizes his relation to Dorothy in the next hundred lines, where we see the first true indications of the stakes of the poem and Wordsworth’s wager on the communal importance of the domestic everyday. Just as in Dorothy’s journals, William focuses on the utterly trivial aspects of their life together, how they walk with “undivided steps” literally and figuratively through their life’s paths (179); this understated *undivision*, in its refusal of simple joining or fusion, also indexes the shared-separation that defines William and Dorothy’s relationality, a relation that persists even in and across changes in their domestic situation: “Our

home was sweet; / Could it be less? If we were forced to change, / Our home again was sweet” (179-181). Domesticity is framed as a quiet upheaval, a continual dealing with contingency and change that never quite settles, rather than a fixed and hierarchical regime of identity.

The Wordsworth siblings’ famous walks come back a few lines later, though transfigured and infused with cosmic significance: “in the daily walks / Of business, ‘twill be harmony and grace...an image for the Soul, / A habit of eternity and God” (210-11; 214-15). This “transfiguration of the commonplace” (in Arthur Danto’s phrase) is perhaps the preeminent theme of the poem, and is signified here by the rich word “habit” (invoking its three meanings of clothing, custom, and dwelling) and even more importantly, “image,” which returns in the closing lines of the poem. *Image* is what links the intimate everyday (the “part”) to the political or political-ontological (the “whole”), in the broadest sense. Life secretes an image, or form, which is available for common use and transferrable to unknown destinations and “unknown modes of being” while never subsumable under a regime of general equivalence (*The Prelude* 1.420); at a key moment late in the poem, Wordsworth will use the verb “*impart*” to characterize just this kind of transfer (I’ll return to this). This is what Wordsworth is getting at when he luxuriates in the particular local ecology of Grasmere elsewhere and in this same passage, constellating a local network of nonliving beings (“frosty wind,” “icy brooks,” shower, sunbeam), plants (“naked trees”), and animals (the Hart-leap Well), only to feel, “in the midst of them,” “The intimation of a milder day / Which is to come, the fairer world than this” (225, 229-230, 236, 238-39). It is striking that this utopian communal intimation of a milder day in a world to come—a common day—is situated in the context of William and Dorothy’s domestic and ecologically imbricated life at Grasmere, which is both totally mundane (e.g. “daily walks”) and bears a radical millenarian charge that intimates or creates a communal image for the whole (“fairer *world*”). Thereby it draws together the two senses of the word common: ordinary and shared.

This idea of a local everyday practice that radiates outward to reconfigure the political is then made more explicit in Wordsworth’s claim that he and his sister are

A pair seceding from the common world...  
[Who] in that individual nook,  
Might even thus early for ourselves secure,  
And in the midst of these unhappy times,  
A Portion of the blessedness which love  
And knowledge will, we trust, hereafter give  
To all the Vales of earth and all mankind. (249, 251-56)

Once again we have a partitive construction, where the utopian “portion” is separated from “all mankind.” This part or portion is “secure[d]” for William and Dorothy at home at the lacustrine locality of Grasmere, but only exists proleptically, under the aspect of its spreading outward to and in the world to come: the “hereafter” world of which Wordsworth’s home at Grasmere is an *image*. This “portion” is not a part that fits snugly into a homogenous whole, but rather is incommensurable to the whole in its unique individuality (“individual nook”), which is also its capacity for sharing. “Blessedness” will be given to all, but only in its very portionality, its particular situated shapes of everydayness and unique rhythms of living with contingency. Similarly, the line about “seceding” from the common world should not be viewed as an isolated separating off from the common, but must be seen as following the logic of *partage*, where division also creates the space for sharing. This is precisely how the radical anonymous collective known as the Invisible Committee characterize seceding in their recent deployment of this term. While the Invisible

Community theorize community and political struggle in our own contemporary moment, their thought and idiom is deeply Wordsworthian:

Seceding is not carving a part of the territory out of the national whole, it's not isolating oneself...Seceding is not using the scraps of this world to assemble *counter-clusters* where alternative communities would bask in their imaginary autonomy...Seceding means inhabiting a territory, assuming our situated configuration of the world, our way of dwelling there, the form of life and the truths that sustain us, and from *there* entering into conflict or complicity... Local is the name of a possibility of sharing, combined with the sharing of a dispossession. (*To Our Friends* 184-5; 189)

The exigency of the everyday, insofar as the everyday shelters and shuttles some fey gradient of blessedness, is to dilate its emergent logics of coping and sharing; what is local in the local are the particular, partial configurations of relationality (“possibility of sharing”) that it makes visible and useable—the domestic is a lived site of such configurations. Wordsworth casts dwelling in Grasmere as cultivating a utopian kernel of sociality, one whose communal potential lies precisely in the fact that it is a part or “portion” separated from and incommensurable with the whole.

At the beginning of his discussion of his everydayness at Grasmere and his relation with Dorothy, Wordsworth has recourse to an avian simile. The siblings are “like Birds...two of a scattered brood that could not bear / To live in loneliness” (173, 175-6).<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth then extends and modulates this figure in the coming lines, in one of the most remarkable (and remarked upon) passages in the poem, which describes his witnessing a majestic flock of birds before realizing that two particular swans are missing. Upon seeing the birds, he immediately casts them in domestic terms (“inmates though they be / Of Winter’s household”), and goes on to describe the flock in Coleridgean terms of unity and totality, “as if one spirit was in all” (283-4; 300). Rather than providing another close reading of this flock passage, I want to register that everything the flock embodies—wholeness, unity, harmony, narcissism (they are reflected in the lake), etc.—is introduced by way of a negation. The phrase beginning the description of the flock is “like them / I *cannot* take possession of the sky” (287-88); Wordsworth *cannot* be like them. And in addition to a disavowal of the whole, it is also a disavowal of “possession,” ownership, and property.

All this makes then Wordsworth think of both sharing and separation. Sharing comes in Wordsworth’s gesture of commoning the day, admitting that “this day belongs to thee, rejoice! / Not upon me alone hath been bestowed...The sunshine and mild air,” where Spring has its own domestic gathering, its “own peculiar family”(315-16, 318). Then separation enters, as Wordsworth realizes the coherent picture of the whole was not a whole after all, it was cracked; or if it was a whole, it was another catachresis, one hinted by the *als ob*: “as if one spirit was in all.” Wordsworth is jolted by the fracture:

But two are missing—two, a lonely pair  
Of milk-white Swans—ah, why are they not here?  
These above all, ah, why are they not here  
To share in this day’s pleasure? From afar  
They came, like Emma and myself, to live...  
Chusing this Valley, they who had the choice

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<sup>26</sup> The Ms D version of the poem modifies the language to include the word “part”: “like to Birds, companions in mid air, / Parted and reunited by the blast” (Ms D 161-2).

When Karl Kroeber writes that “[p]robably the most compelling image of [Grasmere’s] living unity is that of the spiraling birds,” he is almost correct, but not for the reason he supposes (183).<sup>27</sup> The unity and wholeness is riven by the missing birds—who had chosen Grasmere as a particular part out of the “whole world”—and whose absence is calibrated in terms of the general scene of sharing the common day: they cannot “share in this day’s pleasure.”<sup>28</sup> The swans are separated from the totality (cf. “these above *all*”), and I claim it is only because two swans are gone or separated, fragmenting the whole, that there can be sharing. They are present in the poem only in their absence and separation—in their, to use another “part” word, *departure*: “they should not have departed” (342). Indeed when Wordsworth briefly countenances the possibility of them being killed by a local shepherd, he somewhat strangely uses the word “part”: “The Shepherd may have seized the deadly tube / And parted them” (352-3). And yet their departure opens up a communal space, as it disrupts the wholeness, coherence, and commensurability of the ecology of Grasmere, exposing it to contingency and finitude, even death.<sup>29</sup> Their disappearance also evacuates the center (cf. Grasmere earlier described, along with unity and wholeness, as a “Centre”), since the swans were “Conspicuous at the centre of the lake,” thus generating something similar to what Blake called an “open center” (331).<sup>30</sup> There is now an ecology of separation modeled, things attended to in their particularity and partiality, which is their sharing (of dispossession). The analogues to the two missing, de-parted birds are explicitly Dorothy and William—not least because of a shared orientation toward domesticity at Grasmere: “They *also* having chosen this abode” (339). But most of all because they are set off from the whole: apart, a part.

## V. Anecdotes for Fathers and Mothers

“I am a shard, signifying isolation—here I am thinking aloud of my affinity for the separate fragment taken under scrutiny.” -Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 52

In the next part of the poem, Wordsworth turns outward from himself and Dorothy to survey some of his surroundings in Grasmere. He tells three successive mini-narratives to give a sense of history to the place and its ecology; all three deal directly with domesticity and family life, and the presence of nonhumans is especially pronounced. The first domestic anecdote is introduced, as we might now expect, by deictic reference to a particular house and the word *part*: “Yon cottage, would that it could tell a part / Of its own story” (469-70).<sup>31</sup> It narrates the story of a patriarchal father of a traditional nuclear family, the “Master” of his “lot of ground,” who destroys his family (and eventually himself) via an adulterous affair with his servant-girl (473). The father’s failure to

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<sup>27</sup> Kroeber’s much-cited essay “Ecological Holiness” contains an early reading of “Home at Grasmere” that emphasizes harmony, unity, and wholeness—that I want to push against such “wholeness” (but also against absolute fragmentation) is already clear. Fiona Stafford is one of the critics who follow Kroeber, seeing “Home at Grasmere” as a poem of “completeness” and “whole[ness]” (43, 45). See also Kroeber on Wordsworth and the perniciousness of “separation” (obviously opposed to my position) in his *Ecological Literary Criticism* (138).

<sup>28</sup> Wordsworth changed this line several times, originally writing in Ms B “to have their share of this day’s pleasure,” then in Ms D writing “partaking this day’s pleasure.” His laboring over this line clearly shows awareness of the close connection between “share” and words with “part” in them, and generally how important sharing is to the poem.

<sup>29</sup> As Kurt Fosso notes in his reading of the poem: “Community in Grasmere thus is neither independent, let alone whole, nor necessarily even all that ‘happy in itself,’ as Wordsworth fervently espouses” (*Buried Communities* 185).

<sup>30</sup> For the communal logic of the open center, see my Chapter 3 “Blake’s Circulations.”

<sup>31</sup> For the significance of this deictic gesture and its relation to history in Wordsworth and Romanticism generally, see Timothy Heimlich’s dissertation on “place-reading.”

accede to the domestic as a site of community and sharing is indexed precisely by his being described as a self-enclosed totality: “himself / Was his own world” (515-16).

The second neighboring family Wordsworth surveys is again introduced by pointing out a cottage in the distance, and employing a word containing “part”: we witness “a Cottage where a Father dwells / In widowhood, whose Life’s Co-partner died” (535-36). This home has a less traditional domestic makeup than the first—a widower and his six young daughters (they are seven)—but is depicted much more in terms of community and plurality: their house itself is “a studious work / Of many fancies and of many hands, / A play thing and a pride” (560-62). This domestic scene also unfolds its own ecology (again cf. the *oikos*)—in addition to a “mimic Bird’s nest” for nonhuman dwelling, there are plants all around, and their garden is a space of *partage*, separation and sharing, good enclosure: each family member has “Within the garden, like the rest, a bed / For her own flowers or favorite Herbs, a space / Holden by sacred charter” (589; 580-82). The ungrounded nontraditionality of their domesticity is also signaled in the explicit reversals of gender roles in the house: one of the daughters does “The service of a Boy, and with delight” for her father; and while other daughters perform the more typically gendered feminine task of spinning at the wheel, Wordsworth makes a point to say they learned this task and other (feminine) household chores from their rather maternal and “mild” father: “That skill in [spinning] or other household work / which from her Father’s honored hands, herself...had learned” (602-4). If the family is imposed as an idealized essence and is only supposed to exist as a neat organic whole, Wordsworth’s labeling this partial household as a “delightful family” is another act of catachresis (543).

The third home at Grasmere to which Wordsworth turns is, like the others, introduced by a deictic and partitive language (“yonder...half-way up the mountainside”). The poet attributes an unprecedentedly original power to his verse, saying it is nothing other than “a stream of words / That shall be life, the acknowledged voice of life,” while also scaling back—using another partitive word—to claim to tell only “some portion” of the place’s history (621-22; 635). This story tells of another partial family, a widow who dwells near a fir-grove that she planted with her then-living husband. The grove is specifically a dwelling to be shared with nonhumans: “a convenient shelter which in storm / Their sheep might draw to. ‘And they knew it well / Said she, ‘for thither do we bear them food / In time of heavy snow” (615-618). Despite the bleakness of the aging widow’s situation—she is “withering in loneliness” without her husband—the space of the grove continues to furnish a domestic ecology, a testament to sharing and community of the domestic: the grove is “now flourishing, while they / no longer flourish” (643; 641-42); Wordsworth is clear that planting the grove—an action which we can metonymically dilate to domestic living itself—was an equal and collective work between partners: “with joint hands / Did [they] plant this grove” (cf. the house as a work “of many hands” in the second story) (639-40). It is important to realize that the fir-grove as an interspecies domestic space is not a stable ground or guarantee—it offers a situated, habitual setting for communally dealing with the precarious contingency of existence in all its uniquely local manifestations: in this case, excessive snow from an unexpected storm.

I want to claim that it is precisely in the disruption or exceeding of grounded identity—including but not only gender roles—that community is possible, as a space of unexpected sharing in the everyday, the common, including sharing beyond the human. In contrast to critics who find in Wordsworth a naturalization of bad domestic ideology on the one hand, or on the other those like Alan Liu who see Wordsworth as “negat[ing] the family” in order to promulgate an “empire of Self” and bask in a “splendid isolation” that “denies history” and sociality, Wordsworth portrays domesticity and the family as a fundamentally relational site of sharing (304, 229).<sup>32</sup> This sharing,

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<sup>32</sup> Liu can only view defamiliarization (incommensurability) as isolation, and so his position is perfectly symptomatic of critique, as I’ve been delineating its anti-social tendencies. Liu speaks of “the Wordsworthian self in its fugitive flight



Home of untutored Shepherds as it is,  
Swarms with sensation, as with gleams of sunshine,  
Shadows or breezes, scents or sounds. (655-58, 660-67)

Wordsworth figures Grasmere as a lamp or source of light that he and Emma take part or “participate” in, with this “part” word emphasizing both their partiality and their relationality (“not...alone”). “Participate” literally and etymologically means to take a *part* of, so its primary meaning as “to share” makes it an apposite verb to describe the kind community that Wordsworth finds to be characteristic of the everyday; and as such “participate” exemplifies the relation between parts, dividing, and sharing that I have been tracing under the formal, philological, and ontological rubric of the poem’s partitive logic. The “lustre” of the “lamp”—which presages another important use of the word “lustre” a bit later in the poem—is not some eternal essence, but “mortal” and finite: “a dying, dying flame.” Again the unique ecology of Grasmere is invoked in the thought that beings such as trees—“these little pastures”—are potentially part of “familiar” everyday dwelling. The valley is alive and “swarm[ing] with sensation” and connections, though not all are happy and harmonious: “Joy spreads and sorrow spreads.”<sup>34</sup>

What follows is an ecologically oriented description of and meditation on human-nonhuman relationality and domesticity, as Wordsworth catalogues a number of particular animals in Grasmere that help people with disabilities there: “the small grey Horse that bears / The paralytic Man,” “the Ass / on which the Cripple...rides,” “the famous Sheep-dog...the blind Man’s Guide, / Meek and neglected Thing” (725-27, 729, 731-32). Just as the widow and her husband in the third anecdote built a winter shelter for their sheep to help them dwell, the animals here make the everyday more livable for humans. Nonhuman beings are always part of the daily project of collective coping, and often even share the domestic space itself with humans: “Who ever lived a Winter in one place, / Beneath the shelter of one Cottage-roof, / And has not had his Red-breast or his Wren?” (733-35). This sharing is situated and shifts with the seasons and according to the place: “and I shall have my Thrush / In spring-time” (736-37). Wordsworth surveys other animals in the specificity of their dwelling practices, including a heifer whose bearing he lovingly calls “Domestic,” before generalizing outward with a seemingly paradoxical formulation of domesticity, one addressed to the nonhumans around him: “Wild creatures, and of many homes” (749; 761). Joined by an “and,” wildness and domesticity are not opposed; they can co-exist because home or domesticity is a not a ground, it is a rhythm of dealing with the radical homelessness—the groundlessness—at the heart of being, which subverts and exceeds any given measure of what the domestic is supposed to be. Wildness names the contingency underlying domestic everydayness, the fact that domesticity can change and is not grounded in a single meaning or place, the fact that dwelling or inhabiting is never essential(izing) but is a rhythm around a void, like the long caesura in the line “Wild creatures, and of many homes”; and in Wordsworth it gestures toward the possibility of living with this contingency as *community*. This is also how Jamie Lorimer’s recent book *Wildlife in the Anthropocene* recasts the idea of the wild, as an everyday commons: “We can think of the wild as the commons, the everyday affective site of human-nonhuman entanglement” (11).

Humans are not at the center of this entanglement—as Paul Fry has argued, Wordsworth is a, or perhaps even *the*, poet of ontological leveling, such that Wordsworth’s originality consists in “making the chain of being a unified, continuous field of being” (19). While nonhierarchical, this

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<sup>34</sup> Approaching my own position that links or even equates partiality and sociality, Peter Larkin’s illuminating essay on “Home at Grasmere” zeroes in on this passage to explain how “partial sociality” coexists with “contingency”: “Joy’s partial sociality is that it remains within this fully achieved space without the vale’s contingency being compromised as a space of exclusive joy” (*Wordsworth and Coleridge* 43).

field of being, as we know, is not a whole—this is brought home again in several further uses of “part” words around this passage, included two uses of the verb “part” to mean a kind of shared-separation (in the formula “part X from Y”). The next fifty or so lines revel in the motions of the nonhuman world, from birds to frost-covered birches to the “lilies that will dance upon the lake,” with Wordsworth once again finding and writing a utopian charge in the “universal imagery” of this unique and everyday site, a promise and image of the common day: “Admonished of the days of love to come” (806, 793, 795). “To be in the world is to be attached to things,” as the early phenomenology of Levinas has it, and it is the presence of things, a poetic ecology of nonhuman relationality, that both embodies and calls for community in the place, a rhythm of attachment (*Existence and Existents* 37). Wordsworth is directly declarative, finding community in the groundless movement of dwelling among *things*: “solitude is not / Where these things are” (807-8). But, each time singularly, “these things” are everywhere.

Thinghood is universal and, like the wild, indexes the commonality of human and nonhuman, from the above sheep-dog characterized as a “neglected thing” to Wordsworth himself.<sup>35</sup> As Adam Potkay writes in a book on *Wordsworth’s Ethics*: “We are things among things, metaphysically, ecologically, participating in a life of things that is nowise reducible to a story we can tell about it” (85).<sup>36</sup> Following Potkay and others, we can say that Wordsworth’s vision of domesticity is an ecological ethics, but ethics in the original semantic sense of *ethos*: custom, habit, form of life, abode, dwelling—“Dwellers of the Dwelling” the poem will soon say. “Dwelling” is a word and concept somewhat abused, especially in Wordsworth studies, where it can evoke a vague pious and holistic sentimentality rather than what “Home at Grasmere” outlines as the sharpness of concrete daily existence, in all of its contingency. Dwelling in common life is dwelling with and dealing with nonhumans, with “the thinghood human being has in common with all being,” which is often terrifying and always uncertain (Fry 22). Yet since ultimately “solitude is not / Where these things are,” life itself is always sharing “the life / In common things” (*Prelude* 1.108-9). Such an orientation to a community of “these things” conducts “Home at Grasmere” to a vision of, as Blake would have it, *all things common*.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Being in community with “all things” occurs at other points in “Home at Grasmere,” such as: “They were moved, / All things were moved; they round us as we went / we in the midst of them” (234-36). In an unpublished draft passage from the same period, an early attempt at writing toward *The Recluse*, he wrote of all things common, that is, of things’ living relationality (“all things shall live”) precisely as a shared excess, “all beings...spread[ing] / beyond themselves” to be in relation:

All beings have their properties which spread  
 Beyond themselves, a power by which they make  
 Some other being conscious of their life,  
 Spirit that knows no insulated spot,  
 No chasm, no solitude, from link to link  
 It circulates the soul of all the worlds...  
 All things shall live in us, and we shall live  
 in all things that surround us (*Major Works* 676, 678).

<sup>36</sup> On “flat” lyric ontology in Wordsworth, see also Lindstrom’s impressive and elegant *Romantic Fiat*. Mary Jacobus’s *Romantic Things* also contains a discussion of Wordsworth and thinghood, one in close dialogue with Nancy. I discuss Dorothy Wordsworth’s relation to the nonhuman in my section on her writing, but see also Sarah Weiger’s “‘A love for things that have no feeling’: Dorothy Wordsworth’s Significant Others.”

<sup>37</sup> Blake likely takes the phrase “all things common”—also my project’s title—from the King James translation of Chapter 2 of Acts of the Apostles, where the early apostles “had all things common” (2:44). Notably, in the next verse, which describes the communistic distribution of common goods, the translation uses the English verb “part” to describe the sharing/dividing of this common: “[They] sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (2:45). The Greek verb translated here as “parted” is διαμερίζω, which derives its root from the noun μέρος (*meros*), or *part* (hence *mereology*).

## VI. Parts of a World

“It isn’t a small world, but there are many ways of dividing it into small parts.” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 61

Lest we forget that *The Recluse* was to be a communal and collaborative project, let us turn to another passage where the philosophical influence of Coleridge is more visible. Or rather, what is visible is Wordsworth grappling with what he takes to be Coleridge’s philosophical vision, a vision that was supposed to supply the content of the totalizing poem.<sup>38</sup> One such passage occurs just after the claim that “solitude is not,” and seems to involve an encomium of just the kind of grounded, holistic, organic domestic community that I have been arguing the poem undermines. We read of a “true community” in Grasmere, “Of many into one incorporate,” with “paternal sway” and “One Household, under God, for high and low, / One family and one mansion” (819-820, 821-23). We know such an attitude toward universal domesticity (“one family”) and community approximates Coleridge’s ideas of the 1790s, because he expressed them in almost those exact terms in “Religious Musings” (begun in late 1794, completed in 1796). “Religious Musings” was Coleridge’s own early attempt to write a philosophical, utopian poem like *The Recluse* before he met Wordsworth and transferred the task to him. Coleridge’s long blank verse poem speaks of community in familial terms, a “vast family of Love” held together by a “common sire” or Father, God (354, 162). For Coleridge, the common is only possible if sanctioned by a common sire. It should also not be surprising that Coleridge here rejects partiality (“no partial gaze”) and situated locality, in favor of subsumption into a larger “wondrous whole”: “to know ourselves / Parts and proportions of one wondrous whole! / This fraternises man” (120; 136-38). Community, here figured as the familial relation of fraternity, is only possible in a universal totality that is grounded and given “cohesion” by the transcendence of an ontotheological sovereign divine being, the “Father’s throne” (159; 58).<sup>39</sup> But this is precisely the “Jehovah” that Wordsworth in “Home at Grasmere” will reject, or rather, in a much more radical way, *utterly ignore*: “pass unalarmed.” Partiality for Coleridge is nothing but selfishness, and selfishness is partiality.<sup>40</sup> This also applies to the domestic: recall Coleridge’s association of “domestic attachments” with “epicurean selfishness” in his 1799 letter to Wordsworth on *The Recluse*. No everyday is possible here in these musings, no ecology, and neither separation nor sharing emerge in Coleridge’s poem. There could be no “home” or “Grasmere” in this totalizing millenarian vision.

How do we know Wordsworth was uneasy about this model of totality, especially as it is expressed here in Coleridge’s “Religious Musings”? Aside from everything I have adduced so far in terms of Wordsworth’s emphasis on situated domesticity and partiality (from the larger decision to start *The Recluse* with his home at Grasmere, down to the very form and diction of the poem), there is the incredible fact that Wordsworth wrote one of the “Home at Grasmere” manuscripts (Ms. R)

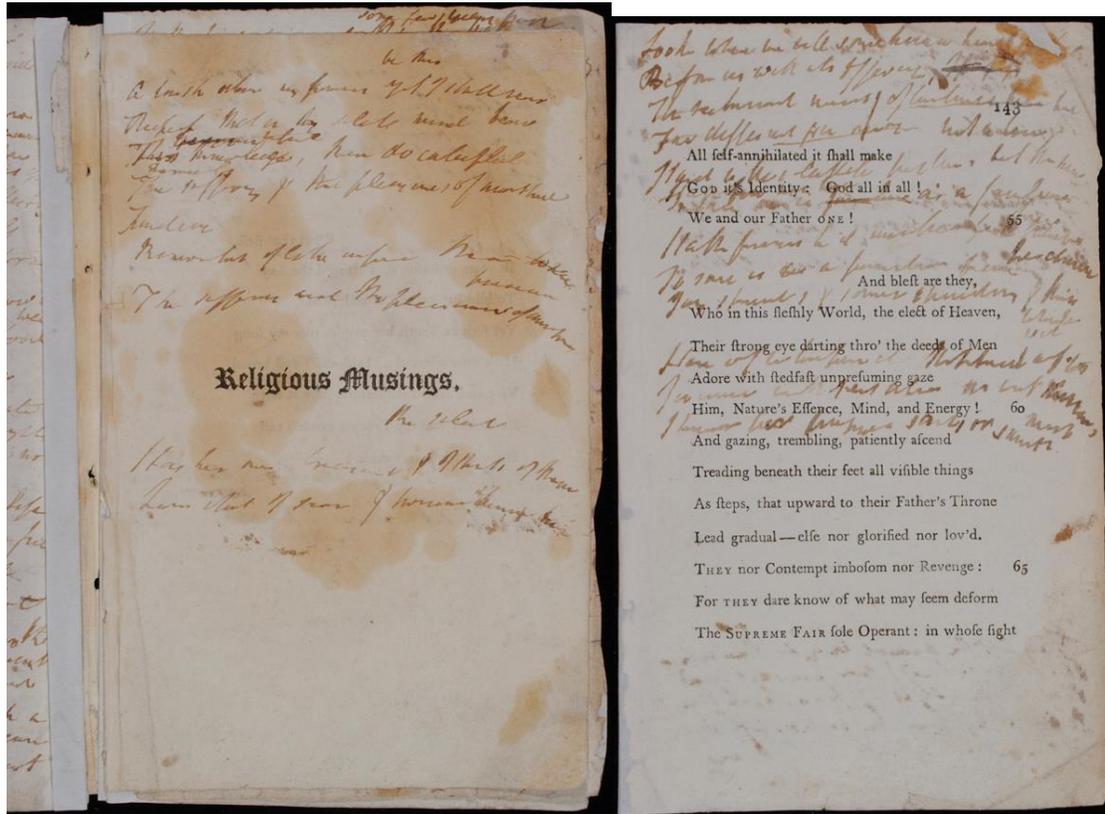
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<sup>38</sup> Wordsworth was genuinely eager for philosophical guidance on *The Recluse* when he was apart from Coleridge for much of late 1803 to 1806. He wrote Coleridge in March 1804, saying: “I am very anxious to have your notes for The Recluse” (LEY 452). He wrote again asking for the notes with more desperation a few weeks later: “I would gladly have given 3 fourths of my possessions for your letter on The Recluse at that time” (LEY 464). It never came. For his part, Coleridge claimed to have sent his friend a large collection of important notes on *The Recluse* while in Malta, notes which never arrived because the person carrying them died en route and had his papers burned as “plague-papers,” and in addition Coleridge’s “long letters” to Wordsworth on the poem “sunk to the bottom of the Sea!” (*Collected Letters* 2.1169). This is a tale about as believable as an interloping man from Porlock.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. also from “Religious Musings”: “But ‘tis God / Diffused through all, that doth make all one whole” (139-140). Coleridge’s poems are cited from Nicholas Halmi’s Norton critical edition of Coleridge’s *Poetry and Prose*.

<sup>40</sup> “Feeling himself, his own low self the whole; / When he by sacred sympathy might make / The whole one Self! Self, that no alien knows!” (“Religious Musings” 166-168).

on top of a copy of Coleridge's "Religious Musings." Thus "Home at Grasmere" literally overwrites, and rewrites, "Religious Musings," splitting open the whole for a vision of dwelling with and sharing parts.



("Home at Grasmere" Ms R p. 135 and 143, collections.wordsworth.org)

Whether friendly palinode or vexed exorcism, Wordsworth's re-vision of Coleridge's "Religious Musings" litters it with Wordsworth's own poetic fragments in an act of declaring poetic independence.<sup>41</sup> And yet, Wordsworth declares his independence from Coleridge only to emphasize partiality and particularity, that is, relationality and *dependence*—a dependence that is materially evident in Wordsworth's depending on Coleridge's poem as a surface to write on, or rather write *with*. Indeed, the textual relationship between "Religious Musings" and this manuscript of "Home at Grasmere" is an exemplary instance of *partage*: the two poems are thematically and spatially incommensurable, separate, irreducible, and irreconcilable into a unity or whole—yet still sharing the same page.

So Wordsworth both literally and conceptually overwrote Coleridge's praise of the whole and the grounded, teleological community. A kind of proleptic palinode, "Home at Grasmere" is an

<sup>41</sup> See Andrew Bennett's *Wordsworth Writing* 91-100 for a reading of Ms R of "Home at Grasmere" in relation to "Religious Musings." In a recent article, Ruth Abbott also writes on this fascinating textual encounter; she is attuned to the debate about parts and wholes that is staged between Wordsworth and Coleridge here: "Where 'Religious Musings' equates its neo-platonic praise of standing in the sun with seeing 'with no partial gaze,' [Wordsworth's] DC MS. 28 embeds its oppositional commitment to the moving parts, partiality, and particularity which things betray in the highly partial and fugitive work with which it overwrites Coleridge's printed universals" (919-20). After writing the above I found an earlier instance of a scholar claiming that "Home At Grasmere" represents a "declaration of independence" from Coleridge (though not in the context of this manuscript encounter)—see Paul Magnuson's *Coleridge and Wordsworth: A Lyrical Dialogue* 232.

apology for the whole that the poem never would or could be. Wordsworth perhaps knew this on some level (and whether *he* knew or not, the poem knew), even as he waited during these years for philosophical guidance from Coleridge that never materialized: guidance precisely on these issues, which tortured Coleridge over a lifetime: what is a whole from the parts? What is a unity from the many? How is community possible?<sup>42</sup> Coleridge’s fears are of solitude; he worries that if the whole is shattered or ungrounded, the incommensurable parts will be “sordid [and] solitary,” sinking into selfish individualism—the selfishness that for Coleridge is always marked by partiality (“Religious Musings” 163). Without a sovereign sire grounding the common, there is only an atomistic “Anarchy of Spirits” (“Religious Musings” 160).<sup>43</sup> Like his modern day heirs emphasizing the transcendent *grounds* for community such as Thomas Pfau, Coleridge cannot think this incommensurability and groundlessness as precisely the common.<sup>44</sup> He cannot think separation as also sharing: as *partage*. As opposed to the Coleridge-Pfau line, the Wordsworth-Nancy line finds the common only in the very absence of the father as ground, the death of the parent as essential totalizing identity or “common substance.”<sup>45</sup> Instead of an “anarchy of spirits,” the flight of the gods opens the possibility of what Wordsworth’s exact contemporary Friedrich Hölderlin calls a “communism of spirits.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Coleridge once wrote in his notebooks that he “would make a pilgrimage to the Deserts of Arabia to find the man who could make me understand how *the one can be many!* Eternal universal mystery!” (*Notebooks* 37).

<sup>43</sup> Here is the “Religious Musings” passage quoted more fully:

Hiding the present God, whose presence lost,  
 The moral world’s cohesion, we become  
 An Anarchy of Spirits! Toy-bewitch’d,  
 Made blind by lusts, disherited of soul,  
 No common center Man, no common sire  
 Knoweth! A sordid solitary thing,  
 Mid countless brethren with a lonely heart  
 Thro’ courts and cities the smooth Savage roams  
 Feeling himself, his own low Self the whole,  
 When he by sacred sympathy might make  
 The whole ONE SELF! (158-168).

<sup>44</sup> See Pfau’s massively ambitious *Minding the Modern* (2013) for a critique of modernity, its contingency, and its epistemological and ontological individualism in similar vein to those of John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy. Coleridge is the hero of Pfau’s book and the “great exception” to all the trends of modernity that, in Pfau’s account, have intellectually and spiritually impoverished us (64). Despite the broad sweep of his book, Pfau is by training a comparative Romanticist, and I think it is no accident that he views Romanticism, like I do, as a key moment for thinking about the relation between modernity’s groundlessness and community. Yet our positions are basically the opposite: we actually agree on the contingency/groundlessness of modernity, but Pfau wants to recover the lost grounds in order to center all relationality in a vision of the (transcendent) whole: he writes with Coleridge and *against* “modernity’s fragmentation of the person” and the “fragmenting the world as a whole” (168, 335). I want to see groundlessness itself as the only possibility for community. The problem with grounded community, as in the analogical model of a Coleridge, a Pfau, or a Milbank, is that it is always hierarchical. As Coleridge writes: “*All* the parts of an organized whole must be assimilated to the more *important* and *essential* parts” (*Biographia*, vol. II, 72).

<sup>45</sup> Nancy writes of “the excess of the sharing of existence,” which “is also fraternity”: “[fraternity] is not the relation of those who unify a common family, but the relation of those whose *Parent*, or common substance, *has disappeared*, delivering them to their freedom and equality” (*Experience of Freedom* 72). In his late book *Rogues*, Derrida takes exception to Nancy’s notions of fraternity, the common, and excess here, a key debate that I discuss in my Chapter 2, on Derrida. A fraternity without common substance is exactly what Wordsworth called an “unsubstantial brotherhood” (“To the Clouds,” *The Poems* 1:817). In the contemporary (to Wordsworth) context of the French Revolution, Lynn Hunt discusses fraternity in a “political world without fathers,” especially in the context of the Revolution’s ambiguous legacy with regard to gender and domesticity, in her classic book *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (200ff).

<sup>46</sup> On Hölderlin’s “Communism of Spirits” [*Communismus der Geister*] as opening a vision of groundless community, see my dissertation’s coda.

Still, I think the invocation of “paternal sway” and community as a universal domesticity of “one household” represents a sincere attempt by Wordsworth to incorporate what he took to be Coleridge’s vision into *The Recluse*. But it is clear he could not sustain this vision, as the next line of the poem recoils from the universal, seeing Grasmere as “divided from the world” (824).<sup>47</sup> We must see this “divide” under the aspect of the partitive logic of the poem I have been outlining, the logic of *partage*, where “dividing from” or “dividing with” is also dwelling and abiding with. By dividing-sharing Grasmere from the world, Wordsworth wants to protect the singular uniqueness of Grasmere not to close it off in isolation, but in order, as in the earlier discussion of “seceding,” to create a “concrete, situated rupture with the overall order of world,” which opens to and as sharing across an incommensurable collision of divided parts (*To Our Friends* 202).<sup>48</sup> This is a fragmentary seceding that is also a seeding of the common.

I have argued that “Home at Grasmere” is suffused with a partitive logic that sees parts as neither utterly detached from nor neatly subsumable into a whole, a certain logic that renders separation and sharing inextricable from yet irreducible to each other, and that finds groundless community in such a configuration. I claim that this partitive logic is the governing formal and thematic current of the poem, troubling its early aspiration to totality, and is detectable even in the morpheme “part” as it plays an important part in many words in the poem. This is especially the case in the next passages of the poem, which lead up to the famous final hundred or so lines that would be excerpted for publication in 1814 and known as the “Prospectus to *The Recluse*.” Demurring from the lush and extravagant millenarianism in “Religious Musings,” Wordsworth rejects “Arcadian dreams, / All golden fancies of the golden age,” employing the important anti-whole verb *part* to decry this kind of utopianism as an escapist parting from the ordinary: “the pageantry that stirs...[when] we wish to part / With all remembrance of a jarring world” (829-30; 833, 835-36). This is a parting that does not open to sharing, dwelling, and living in the everyday, with all its “jarring” contingency. For the everyday, the common, is what Wordsworth is after: “the life / Which is about us” (846-47). The semantic ambiguity and dexterity of the word “about” carries the force of these lines, spanning both its spatial register (about as “nearby or around”) and its intentional one (about as “concerning,” as in a novel *about* marriage): “the life / Which is about us” is thus the life surrounding us in this unique place, and the life which is a story *about us*, about the possibility of making an “us” in community.

Wordsworth continues relishing his new home in mundane wonder. In the everyday ecology of Grasmere, there is a relation of good parting, or sharing, between earth and sky, again signaled by

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<sup>47</sup> Marjorie Levinson writes of “Wordsworth’s characteristic recoil from that hypostatized *one* and his repertoire of strategies for remedial follow-up” (“Notes and Queries” 10).

<sup>48</sup> “The commune regards itself first of all as a concrete, situated rupture with the overall order of the world. The commune inhabits its territory—that is, it shapes it just as much as the territory offers it a dwelling place and a shelter...In each detail of existence, the entire form of life is at stake. Because the object of every commune is the world, basically, the commune must be careful not to let itself be completely determined by the task, the question, or the situation that led to its formation” (*To Our Friends* 202, 216). The Invisible Committee are obviously talking about the struggles of our own moment of ecological collapse and neoliberal globalization, but I invoke their recent political and theoretical intervention on the question of the common, the fragment, the everyday, and forms of life not just to help explicate the logic of what Wordsworth’s poem is doing, but to show how their project is one that is fundamentally in the wake of both the crisis emergent with the Romantic era—still our own crisis—and Wordsworth’s attempts to face it. While Pfau decries “the fragmenting [of] the world as a whole” in modernity, seeing this as only leading to atomization and lonely individualism (*Minding the Modern* 335), the Invisible Committee see in “the endless fragmentation of the world” a promise of community without ground: “With the endless fragmentation of the world there is a vertiginous increase in the qualitative enrichment of life, and a profusion of forms—for someone who thinks about the promise of communism it contains” (*Now* 43-44).

the morpheme *part* (“counterpart”) and by open enclosure: “this aetherial frame / And this deep vale, its earthly counterpart, / By which, and under which, we are enclosed” (852-54). This parting-sharing of earth and sky is something Wordsworth often invoked, for example in *The Prelude*’s description of attempting to “perus[e] / The common countenance of earth and sky” (3.110). As in the *Prelude* line where the emphasis is on the “common countenance,” the *partage* of earth and sky here in “Home at Grasmere” designates an open enclosure of supple situatedness, one not opposed to the common (cf. the non-exclusionary enclosure of Grasmere: “Come from wheresoe’er you will”).<sup>49</sup> This kind of enclosure limns the limits of uniqueness and opens a sharing that makes singular locality possible, which is to say, open enclosure conditions dwelling—as the very next lines affirm: “The Inmates not unworthy of their home, / The Dwellers of the Dwelling” (858-59).

Who are the dwellers of the dwelling? Who shares domesticity? We have already seen several examples of modeling domesticity as groundless community (sharing contingency) in the domestic anecdotes that pepper “Home at Grasmere,” but here Wordsworth celebrates his own extended domesticity at Grasmere, mixing up social and biological roles (or *parts*, “role” being one synonym of part) so as to expose their groundlessness and, as one critic of the poem has put it, “revise the family.”<sup>50</sup> Being at home at Grasmere means sharing the excess that immanently wells up and out within the everyday, everyday being together: “We have enough within ourselves, / Enough to fill the present day with joy / And overspread the future years with hope” (860-862). The domesticity of William and Dorothy’s “beautiful and quiet home” is shared with “a Stranger of our Father’s house” (their brother John), “Sisters of our hearts” (the Hutchinson sisters, including Wordsworth’s future wife Mary), and “a Brother of our hearts” (Coleridge) (865, 869, 870). Thus in this almost chiasmic domestic reshuffling, William’s actual sister Dorothy is his domestic partner with a role essentially like that of a wife, his actual future wife is called a “Sister,” his actual brother John is a visiting “Stranger,” while his close friend Coleridge is called a “Brother.” The already strange domestic setup of just brother and sister has at this point thrown traditional domesticity into utter confusion, yet Wordsworth sees only the overspreading of shared and “open joy” in this “happy band” (872, 874).

The gesture of sharing and spreading out is crucial for the next passage, which contains perhaps the most important “part” word in the poem and in Wordsworth’s poetics: *impart*. Bathed in light, Wordsworth undergoes an ecstatic and ineffable revelation in the midst of a mundane domestic scene, all the more mysterious for the ordinariness of a “humble Roof” and “calm fireside”:

I feel  
That an internal brightness is vouchsafed  
That must not die, that must not pass away.  
Why does this inward lustre fondly seek  
And gladly blend with outward fellowship?  
Why shine they round me thus, whom thus I love?  
Why do they teach me, whom I thus revere?  
Strange question, yet it answers not itself.  
That humble Roof, embowered among the trees,  
That calm fireside, it is not even in them,  
Blest as they are, to furnish a reply

<sup>49</sup> The open enclosure indexed by a sharing of earth and sky is also present at the beginning of “Tintern Abbey,” where the cliffs “connect / The landscape with the quiet of the sky” (*Major Works* 131). The relation of this earth-sky connection to enclosure is signaled by the previous line’s mention of “seclusion.”

<sup>50</sup> See Anne Wallace’s “Home at Grasmere Again: Revising the Family in Dove Cottage.”

That satisfies and ends in perfect rest.  
 Possessions have I, **wholly, solely**, mine,  
**Something** within, which yet is **shared** by none,  
 Not even the nearest to me and most dear,  
**Something** which power and effort may **impart**.  
 I would **impart** it; I would **spread it wide**,  
**Immortal in the world which is to come**.  
 I would not **wholly** perish even in this,  
 Lie down and be forgotten in the dust,  
 I and the modest **partners** of my days  
 Making a silent company in death. (885-906; my emphasis)

In a scene that both generalizes and immanentizes Christ's transfiguration (not to mention the light-appareled world in the Intimations "Ode"), Wordsworth is endowed with a special but nebulous brightness, which is then revealed only to be a capacity for or receptivity to relationality, with no special essence or presence: this "inward lustre" exists to be externalized and shared, "seek[ing]" and "blend[ing] with outward fellowship"—a shared light just as in the earlier mention of the lamp's "lustre" that William and Dorothy "*participate*" in. This singular brightness of Wordsworth is "vouchsafed" to him, not by God, but by the relationality ("fellowship") of those around him, who "shine round [him] thus" with their own shared brightness, the thrice repetition of "thus" indicating the deictic facticity of a singular form-of-life.<sup>51</sup> He then turns to the physical setting of the domestic "Roof" and hearth ("calm fireside") for an explanation of this revelation, but cannot find one: "it is not even in them." Domestic objects exceed themselves and have no "end" or "rest." The focus is all on sharing, yet this sharing is not clearly grounded in anyone or anything around him, just the elusive, collective vector of some singular luster.

Wordsworth then turns again to his singularity and uniqueness, but as elsewhere in the poem, the claim to possessive property, solitude, and individual sovereignty ("possessions have I, wholly, solely mine") is made then immediately undermined by a turn to relationality and sharing, which I connect with the partitive relation. Just as in the earlier passage about the groundless uniqueness of Grasmere, where Wordsworth resorted to catachresis and the absolute vagueness of "something," the word "Something" here returns as an index of unnameability and groundlessness. Wordsworth has "something" that is "shared by none," yet he wants to share precisely this unshareability.<sup>52</sup> Indeed like the "inward lustre" that only exists in blending with "outward fellowship," this unshareable unique singularity exists only to be shared. Crucially, Wordsworth's word for this sharing is "impart": "Something which power and effort may impart. / I would impart it." In addition to being another word containing the morpheme "part" (again putting in question the totality and sovereignty implied by "wholly, solely, mine") "impart" carries within it precisely the logic of shared-separation I have traced in "lot," "divide," and *partage*: one OED definition of "impart" is: "To have or get a share of; *to share*, partake," while another is "to divide." This verb "impart" is integral to Wordsworth's poetics, ethics, politics, and communal vision: *imparting* is what

<sup>51</sup> In *The Coming Community* (1990), his own book on groundless community responding to Nancy, Agamben focuses on the adverb "thus" as what encapsulates singularity, or a form-of-life. For Agamben, a singularity is never reducible to any of its properties, nor to any essence, but only to the *way* it lives, its "thus." The thus or form of singularity is not sealed off but radiates collective possibility, and in fact one of Agamben's figures for the "thus" is the halo—remarkably similar to Wordsworth's description of encountering luminous singularities in this passage.

<sup>52</sup> Wordsworth's imagining of groundless community as sharing the unshareable is picked up in thematizations of this or a similar formulation in many twentieth-century and current thinkers, including Bataille, Nancy, Derrida, Agamben, Blanchot, Alphonso Lingis, José Muñoz, and others.

the poem does and is, how it models new forms of sharing and makes them legible, perhaps even possible.

The centrality of “imparting” to Wordsworth’s poetics is evident in the 1800 “Preface” to *Lyrical Ballads*, a text composed concurrently with “Home at Grasmere” and the most important statement of his poetic theory. The verb “impart” features prominently in the very opening of the document—its second sentence—where it occurs twice: Wordsworth writes that *Lyrical Ballads* was published “to ascertain...that sort of pleasure and that quantity of pleasure may be *imparted*, which a Poet may rationally endeavour to *impart*” (*Major Works* 595). Poetry is im-parting. The poet—really the poem—imparts pleasure that is itself to be shared, and is constitutive of sharing; the “open joy” of the common that the poem will soon call “joy in widest commonalty spread” (968); a groundless(ly) shared pleasure beyond any *telos*.<sup>53</sup>

In Chapter 14 of his *Biographia Literaria* (published in 1817, just three years after Wordsworth’s excerpting of “Home at Grasmere” as the “Prospectus” in 1814), a textual locus previewing one of the most vivid accounts of his disagreements with Wordsworth, Coleridge actually agrees that the purpose of poetry is to provide pleasure. Claiming he must adumbrate his own idea of poetry in order to clarify his differences from Wordsworth, Coleridge then writes: “A poem is that species of composition...proposing for its *immediate* object pleasure...from all other species (having *this* object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the *whole*, as is compatible with a distinct gratification from each component *part*” (BL v. II, 13; Coleridge’s emphases). Thus while other kinds of composition can produce pleasure, the poem is unique in producing pleasure via its *wholeness*, wholeness that is “compatible” with all its parts, grounding, unifying, fusing, and harmonizing them. The poem must ultimately resolve “all into one graceful and intelligent whole,” we read a few pages later—not unlike the vision of the “wondrous whole” in “Religious Musings” (BL v. II, 18). By discussing his theory of the poem as an organic whole directly after saying he will give an account of his differences with Wordsworth, Coleridge is implicitly chastising Wordsworth for being too focused on the *part* (he goes on explicitly to make this charge against Wordsworth in later chapters of his book<sup>54</sup>). And for his part, as I have tried show, Wordsworth’s diction of “part” words and his emphasis on the partial perspective of the domestic—not to mention his literal overwriting of the totalizing and teleological vision of community in “Religious Musings”—constitute his own criticism of Coleridge’s emphasis on wholeness and “teleological aesthetic,” as Perry has put it (“Coleridge and Wordsworth: Imagination, Accident, and Inevitability” 191).<sup>55</sup> But Wordsworth troubles both the part and the whole, seeing the part neither as isolated nor as “compatible” (Coleridge’s word) or assimilable with a whole, but as a sharing of and across the incommensurable, non-teleological, groundless everyday.

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<sup>53</sup> On the communal and non-teleological nature of pleasure and joy in Wordsworth, I am influenced by Rowan Boyson’s brilliant book *Wordsworth and the Enlightenment Idea of Pleasure* (2012), both the book overall and in her reading of “Home at Grasmere” (pp. 136-152). Boyson tracks “a counterstrain of thought...in Wordsworth’s poetry, in which pleasure is inherently communal rather than private or solipsistic...a feeling of community” (1). As is suggested in my discussion of “imparting” and pleasure in Wordsworth “Preface” and in my concern with relation and separation, Boyson recovers the importance of this complex of questions in the late eighteenth century: “At this moment [in the late eighteenth century], then, perhaps the question of what ‘pleasure’ is, and how it might bind or separate people, seemed particularly urgently related to *poetry*” (20). Influenced by Nancy throughout, Boyson even adduces Bataille’s theory of excess in her discussion of “Home At Grasmere,” in a way that recalls my own discussion of Bataille and Blake in this dissertation’s interlude.

<sup>54</sup> One example is the debate over rustic or common language, which Coleridge (rebukingly) sees as “exist[ing] everywhere in parts, and no where as a whole” (BL v. II, 56).

<sup>55</sup> I am indebted to Heidi Thompson’s article “Wordsworth’s ‘Song for the Wandering Jew’ as a Poem for Coleridge” for this Perry reference. In Thompson’s own words: “Poetic beauty for Wordsworth inhabits the incomplete” (39).

By *im*-parting, the poem renders part and whole *inoperative*, opening partiality to sharing in the ruins of the whole.

While Coleridge's whole is self-enclosed or insular—"autotelic insularity" is Amanda Goldstein's felicitous phrase about the kind of organic holism that Coleridge espoused (*Sweet Science* 49, 79)—Wordsworth's poetic "impart[ing]" is identified with an expansive movement of spreading out: "I would impart it; I would spread it wide." What is being imparted—"it"—is precisely nothing, or what amounts to the same thing, an ineffable "something"; to give a specific content to the sharing outward would ground it, providing a homogenous measure to the whole—exactly what Wordsworth is wary of doing; it would close off separation and singularity. Wordsworth's grammar of sharing thus implies a poetic ontology of the common. It articulates how the everyday radiates outward to the world, disclosing or *imparting* an immanent image of its imminent blessedness: "I would impart it; I would spread it wide / Immortal in the world which is to come." This image is formed precisely from a situated position of partiality or "portion[ality]" (cf. the earlier "portion of this blessedness"). Seen as this kind of spreading, im-parting lets each thing, each part, keep its "inviolate" singularity even in the "widest commonalty" (970, 968). The domestic everyday is the site and the object of all this because it has a utopian texture and a tendency to pulse outward. What is spread outward is precisely the incompleteness or partiality of each local, open existence or configuration of dwelling. This models a thinking that avoids both nominalism and homogenous holism—the kind of thinking needed in the Anthropocene, where the global ecological crisis affects everywhere, but everywhere uniquely. The challenge is to think situatedness and universality together, to think inviolate particularity and partiality without casting this partiality as isolated and closed off—but as colliding always contingently with other localities, other struggles. The whole—the earth—is just the incommensurable collision of these interlocking, non-totalizable sites. Dividing and sharing, poetry imparts the promise of the earth, of the community without ground: "the Poet binds together by passion and knowledge the vast empire of human society, as it is spread over the whole earth, and over all time" ("Preface," *Major Works* 606). While one can and should attend to the imperialist note sounded by this sentence, poetry's partitive logic suggests the relationality indexed by "binds together" might also be read as seeing and setting the separated earth into its minute particularity.<sup>56</sup>

The "impart" passage closes with another "part" word, a word of domesticity and relationality: "the modest **partners** of my days." These partners are the everyday companions of domestic sociality—Dorothy above all. Partners of my days, who partake in sharing what Wordsworth calls, at the climax of "Home at Grasmere," "the simple produce of the common day."

## VII. Life, Image, Common

"I seemed to learn  
That what we see of forms and images  
Which float along our minds, and what we feel  
Of active or recognizable thought,  
Prospectiveness, or intellect, or will,  
Not only is worthy to be deemed

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<sup>56</sup> See e.g. Dermot Ryan's suspicious reading of this line in his *Technologies of Empire* 110-111ff. But what the poet carries is only relationality ("relationship and love"), Wordsworth says in the same paragraph. For the truly colonizing and totalizing Enlightenment universal, one must turn to Coleridge, who rebukes Wordsworth's universality for not being universal and totalizing enough, and does so precisely in explicitly colonizing and imperial terms, comparing Wordsworth's language to the less advanced "languages of uncivilized tribes," which unlike European languages, tend to "particularize" (BL v. II, 54).

Our being, to be prized as what we are,  
But is the very littleness of life.”  
-Wordsworth, unpublished *Peter Bell* Ms 2, fragment d, ca.1799

“Always infinity extends from any individual life, but eternity is limited between one’s birth and one’s death.” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 50

“The world is incomplete” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 102

We’ve come to the final hundred or so lines of “Home at Grasmere,” known as the “Prospectus” to the *Recluse*, a title taken from Wordsworth’s account of them in his introduction to these lines as they were published in modified form in the 1814 volume of *The Excursion*, the latter being part two of *The Recluse* (and the only completed part of this incomplete, incompletable poem). As we know, the stirring lines of the “Prospectus” are taken to be representative of the whole of *The Recluse*, indeed of Wordsworth’s whole poetry and poetics, a metonymy that is admittedly encouraged by Wordsworth himself in his 1814 preface to them: “The following passage...may be acceptable as a kind of *Prospectus* of the design and scope of the whole Poem” (*Poetry and Prose* 444). As it happened, this statement proved unintentionally accurate since “the scope of the whole poem” turned out to be only a scattering of fragments (Hejinian: “only fragments are accurate”). The central content of the “Prospectus” is well known: that the subject of poetry should be everyday life on the immanent earth, rather than transcendent gods or ancient historical legends. I wish to ask how we might understand these exhaustively discussed lines differently given the preceding discussion of the domestic, dwelling, partiality, sharing, and the common in “Home at Grasmere.”

That is to say, Wordsworth’s “argument” (his word) in the “Prospectus” for why poetry should focus on the everyday, the ordinary, and the common should be seen under the aspect of the poem “Home at Grasmere,” with its vision of the everyday as sharing and dividing up domesticity and coping with the contingency of co-existence. In this configuration of the everyday, the uniqueness of a singular place, person, thing, animal, etc., is neither closed off from relationality nor absorbable into a larger whole or regime of measurable identity. The textual relationship of the “Prospectus” to “Home at Grasmere” is itself an instance of the part-whole relation as I have been theorizing it: a part both situated in but also divided from a larger whole which is not a whole (since “Home at Grasmere” is itself a fragment). One could say the same about the relationship of “Home at Grasmere” (a part) to *The Recluse* (a larger whole which is not a whole), magnified by one fractal level. The point is that there is always an uncertain sharing and dividing of open, incommensurable, incomplete beings.

Before getting to his claim about the poetry of the everyday, Wordsworth has to perform a breathtaking poetic *recusatio*—all the more breathtaking for its nonchalance—in the form of a literal paralepsis, “pass[ing] unalarmed” by the terrible figure of Jehovah and his angels (984). Wordsworth killed God by strolling past Him. In introducing his poetic subject, which is both concretely plural and singularly abstract—“our minds...the mind of Man”—Wordsworth then proceeds apophatically via a negativity so radical and incommensurable that it effectively undermines any positive general claims he can make about the human (989); the mind of Man is more “fear and awe” inducing than even “The darkest pit / Of the Profoundest Hell, chaos, night, / Nor aught of [blinder] vacancy scooped out / By help of dreams” (984-87). To say that the mind of man is more abyssal, incommensurable, and radically negative than the blackest pit of Hell, night, and chaos is to admit that even saying “Man” is naming the unnameable: the *Anthropos* as catachresis.

These lines are truly striking, but equally striking is how abruptly Wordsworth renders the groundless abyss quotidian. The two lines directly following contain three evocations of locality and

*oikos* (haunt, region, home): “My haunt, and the main region of my song, / Beauty, whose living home is the green earth” (990-91). There is a repetition of “earth”—an important word in the “Prospectus” and in Wordsworth generally—not figured as a solid ground but as a plane of receptivity, whose immanent forms exceed or “surpass” any that have been transcendently crafted from “earth’s materials” (992-93). The following lines evoke even more words of locality and domesticity (tents, Neighbor), as such earthly and immanent beauty “Pitches her tents before me where I move, / An hourly Neighbor” (995-96). Then the turn to the ordinary culminates in Wordsworth’s famous elicitation of paradisiacal bliss in the very “growth of common day” (1001). Although “growth of common day” was later changed to “the simple produce of the common day,” growth and produce are both the externalization of some immanent utopian kernel: a shared and everyday excess of the common.

As I have suggested, such an emphasis on locality, domesticity, and the everyday here in the “Prospectus” (haunt, region, home, tents, neighbor, common) should not be seen to come from nowhere, but the turn to situatedness must itself be situated within the context of how the local and the domestic—and their constitutive role in community—are treated in “Home at Grasmere.” This is also and especially true of the central guiding metaphor of the “Prospectus”: marriage. The common day is accessed once one is “wedded to this outward frame of things,” a truth that leads Wordsworth to characterize his poem as “spousal verse”—both prothalamion and epithalamion since both already here and still to come (1000, 1003). M.H. Abrams’s reading of these lines in *Natural Supernaturalism* is magisterial and still influential, but it utterly divorces the “Prospectus” from its context in “Home at Grasmere.” This leads Abrams to read Wordsworth’s figure of “spousal verse” as a secularization of the apocalyptic marriage of the New Jerusalem.<sup>57</sup> However, the spousal metaphor should be seen in the context of the various marriages and domestic arrangements in “Home at Grasmere”: not a stable and teleological union achieved once and for all, but fragile and liable to be shaken or even broken by infidelity, death, sickness, time—always exposed to contingency. And these marriages are anything but grounded and natural, so that a sister can be like a wife, a wife can be like a sister, a father like a mother, a daughter like a boy, or a brother like a stranger. As we have seen throughout “Home at Grasmere,” marriage is for Wordsworth not a matter of unity and domestic wholeness but is quite close to Stanley Cavell’s definition of marriage—given in a book on Romanticism and the ordinary, no less—as “the mutual acknowledgment of separateness” with no a priori grounds (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 178).<sup>58</sup> Sharing this separateness in and as everyday domesticity, marriage is daily *partage*: as much a joining as it is a division. The ground of marriage—of all domesticity—is groundlessness, as Dorothy’s reaction to William’s marriage ultimately discloses.

Wordsworth closes “Home at Grasmere” with a reflection on the relation of his own singular life to the overwhelming project he has undertaken. Summoning the “human Soul of the wide earth” as a muse, he makes an ultimate request, which is also, twenty lines from the end, the

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<sup>57</sup> See *Natural Supernaturalism* pp. 19-140. Whereas my reading seeks to show how Wordsworth embraces contingency as an opening onto sharing in the wake of the breakdown of totality and teleology, Abrams sees Wordsworth here as disavowing “mere contingency” in favor of an “immanent teleology”: “Wordsworth’s assumption... is that if life is to be worth living there cannot be a blank unreason or mere contingency at the heart of things... [Wordsworth] translates controlling Providence into an immanent teleology” (95-96).

<sup>58</sup> By way of a discussion of comedy, Cavell writes that “the happiness in marriage is dissociated from any a priori concept of what constitutes domesticity... Marriage here is being presented as an estate meant not as a distraction from the pain of constructing happiness from a helpless, absent world, but as the scene in which the chance for happiness is shown as the mutual acknowledgment of separateness, in which the prospect is not for the passing of years (until death parts us) but for the willing repetition of days, willingness for the everyday” (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 178).

poem's final use of the phoneme "part": "unto me vouchsafe / Thy guidance, teach me to discern and part / Inherent things from casual, what is fixed / From what is fleeting" (1029-32; my emphasis). Wordsworth acknowledges a desire to "part" or separate the partial perspective—what he will call the "lowly matter"—of his own contingent existence (casual, fleeting) from the more lofty ambitions of *The Recluse* (inherent, fixed), but it is immediately apparent that this separation is itself not separable from sharing and mixing together. This partitive logic shines through in the very enjambment of the verb "part" ("part / Inherent"), since enjambment is nothing other than a poetic device of separating and joining meaning across the division of the poetic line, an excessive refusal of the completion of meaning at the end of the measurable (metrical) line. A similar enjambment governs the next line ("fixed / From what is fleeting"), as the sharing of meaning flees across the fixity of the iambic line.

The use of "vouchsafe" here calls back to the poem's earlier use of the same word, when Wordsworth was "vouchsafed" an "internal brightness" that he had to "blend with outward fellowship" and "impart" to the world.<sup>59</sup> While the earlier gift vouchsafed was that of imparting, this vouchsafing is parting—the ability to "part" inherent from casual and fixed from fleeting; but as we know, Wordsworth's parting is a sharing, joining, mixing, blending. Wordsworth admits as much—that parting (separating) the "transitory" residue of his everyday life from the whole of his projected grand utopian Poem must also involve "blend[ing]" the "lowly matter" of his life with it—in the crucial closing lines of the poem:

And if with this  
I blend more lowly matter—with the thing  
Contemplated describe the mind and man  
Contemplating, and who and what he was,  
The transitory Being that beheld  
This vision, when and where and how he lived,  
His joys and sorrows and hopes and fears,  
With all his little realities of life—  
Be not this labour useless. If such theme  
With highest objects, may [sort], then Great God,  
Thou who art breath and being, way and guide,  
And power and understanding, *may my life*  
*Express the image of a better time* (1034-1046; my emphasis)<sup>60</sup>

These final lines are a good example of a characteristic Wordsworthian technique, a rare and difficult one: to be totally deflationary and inflationary at the same time. Wordsworth deflates (or domesticates) his own singular life as a transitory and inconsequential journey, while simultaneously offering it up as an "image" for the utopian possibility of a transformed world. The singularity of everyday, contingent, partial life—which in "Home at Grasmere" is emphatically *domestic* life, with the larger ecological charge that the domestic as *oikos* carries—turns out not only *not* to be accidental

<sup>59</sup> The word "vouchsafe," in its meaning of confer or give out, is almost a synonym for "impart." Milton's *Paradise Lost*—obviously the main text that Wordsworth's "Prospectus" is in dialogue with—uses the two words in near-synonymous proximity: "But since thou hast vouchsafed / Gently for our instruction to impart / Things above earthly thought" (8.80). "Vouchsafe" also occurs in a millenarian context in the final passage of the *Prelude* (13.440, 1805 version).

<sup>60</sup> The verb "sort" is in brackets because it was added in a later manuscript version, but it bears noting that "sort" is another word of *partage*. According to the OED, "sort" can mean "To obtain as one's lot; to share in, partake of" but also "To divide or separate into smaller parts; to distinguish."

to the whole vision of the coming community, but in fact even constitutes *its most elementary expression* (and ultimately its only one). This is what Coleridge in his overall criticism of Wordsworth for being too focused on the “common-place,” too partial and local—what Coleridge disparagingly calls “the accidental” —could not fathom.<sup>61</sup> And it is a major differend between the two, since this question of the exemplarity of singularity—the question of form-of-life, life that radiates collective possibility in the very contingency of its forms and gestures—is the central question of *The Prelude*, perhaps of Wordsworth generally.<sup>62</sup>

Yet it is the mundanely accidental, “all the little realities of life” (even the nameless and unremembered) that bear the utopian communal charge and limn the political ontology of the everyday. The personal contents of singularity—“who and what he was... when and where and how he lived”—are neither insignificant and isolated facts, inaccessibly local fragments, nor necessary elements that fit into some larger providential whole. Rather, they order themselves to express an “image” of the common: “May my life / Express the *image* of a better time.” The temporal ambiguity of the word “better” (is the better time past or future?) accentuates both the nearness and distance of the this world to come, of which Wordsworth’s life is an optative image; it is close enough that its image can be expressed by a singular life, yet of a different order of experience, as if in “that other region where the distance holds us,” as Blanchot puts it in his own reflection on the relationship between life and image, or in his words, on what it means “to live an event as an image” (*Space of Literature* 262). The faithful invocation of a “better time” here at the end of “Home at Grasmere” should be placed alongside the earlier utopian intimations of the poem, such as “a milder day / Which is to come, the fairer world than this”; “the days of love to come”; and “immortal in the world which is to come” (238-39; 795; 902). Offord, in the final chapter of his scintillatingly brilliant and beautiful recent book on Wordsworth, writes that “Wordsworth asks us to evaluate his work in the light of utopia,” adding that very few critics have actually done so (181). I agree and want to take Offord’s remark literally, so that the light of utopia is precisely the light of the common day, every day, where we see the earth again.

*What does it mean for a life to express an image?* And not just any image, but an image of a better world to come. Non-visual, non-representational, non-metonymic, non-metaphorical, non-analogical, and beyond any organicism, this image is the form immanent in life itself, though always exceeding any singular life: immanent excess.<sup>63</sup> Life expresses (*ex-pressare*, i.e. to push out or externalize) an image or form (*eidōs*). The “forms and images” that constitute and express the very “littleness of life” (cf. this section’s first epigraph) are for, and call for, use and expansion. The forms of the everyday are not insularly sealed, but are models for sharing and community, paradigms and “living pictures” of the groundlessness and singularity of each life, which has its being only in the

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<sup>61</sup> “I adopt with full faith the principle of Aristotle, that poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, that it avoids and excludes all accident” (*Biographia* v. II, 45-46). He makes this criticism of Wordsworth’s “accidentality” and “matter-of-factness” again in Chapter 22 of the *Biographia*. Here Coleridge comes very close to Samuel Johnson’s aesthetics, namely Johnson’s denigration of the particular, partial, contingent, and “adventitious.” Coleridge criticizes Wordsworth for being too focused on the “common-place” in a 1815 letter to Lady Beaumont that Wordsworth caught wind of and responded to (see the epigraph to my introduction). See Perry’s “Coleridge’s Disappointment in *The Excursion*.”

<sup>62</sup> Consider the final passage of *The Prelude*, where Wordsworth reflects on the exemplarity of his own singular life—though life shared with none other than Coleridge—wanting to “teach others” and provide a model (13.428-453). On form-of-life as a nexus linking the singular and the common, see Agamben’s *The Use of Bodies* (2016).

<sup>63</sup> “Every life, let alone every shared life, secretes ways of being, of speaking, of producing, of loving, of fighting, regularities therefore, customs, a language—forms. The thing is, we have learned not to see forms in what is alive. For us, a form is a statue, a structure, or a skeleton, and never a being that moves, eats, dances, sings, and riots. Real forms are immanent in life and can only be apprehended in motion” (Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends* 232). On form-of-life and the “irreducible plurality of habitation,” see Marielle Macé’s *Styles: Critique de nos formes de vie* (2016).

rhythms of its relationality.<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth is explicit on this question of the utopian *use* of his life's image. In that final passage, three lines before offering "my life" as an "image of a better time," Wordsworth writes (again employing his characteristic optative mood and double negative *litotes*): "Be not this labour useless."<sup>65</sup> The "use" of the image of life is also central to the Blanchot passage cited above, which, cryptic even by Blanchot's occult standards, bears quoting more fully:

To live an event as an image is not to remain uninvolved, to regard the event disinterestedly...But neither is it to take part freely and decisively. It is to be taken: to pass from the region of the real where *we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them* into that other region where the distance holds us -- the distance which then is the lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things. (*The Space of Literature* 262; my emphasis)

It is precisely the contingency, the groundlessness—"the lifeless deep"—that is "behind all things" that allows them to be "order[ed]" and "use[d]" differently, to be loosened from their context and expanded in and as the creation of another world—the world to come. Insofar as this groundlessness behind all things is the quotidian abyss that seeps through the everyday ruptures of the world and its measures, what this ultimately amounts to is that the common (as ordinary) expresses an image of the common (as shared).

Between image and life, there is a groundless and "inappreciable remoteness." There is a separation, a *parting*, between them; the Ms D of "Home at Grasmere," using that crucial verb, speaks of a "boundary" and a "line" "*that parts the image from reality*" (576-77; my emphasis). So the image of Wordsworth's life—itself not opposed to reality but culled from "all the little realities of life"—is parted (joined and separated) from its utopic realization, or rather generalization, by a "line" or "boundary" that measures out the incommensurable: what we share, what shares us, where we live. This is the boundary line that Blake called the "bounding line," and although Blake famously reacted violently against Wordsworth's "Prospectus," the two poets were perhaps never closer. Blake's work offers an extraordinarily similar view of the relation between the utopian communal image (or form) and life—this is evoked in what Blake variously called "Images of Existences," "the Divine Image,"<sup>66</sup> or, especially in the context of life, his favorite formulation: "Human Form Divine." Remarkably, and a fact almost never discussed, Wordsworth around the same time as Blake—just before "Home at Grasmere," in another early attempt to write toward *The Recluse*—uses the *exact same phrase*: "human form divine" (*Major Works* 677). The abyss catachrestically named "human" has no essential content, only form, human form divine.

All along, I've been trying to say that something important is emerging in the Wordsworths and in Romanticism generally: a poetic articulation of a groundless community, a community whose possibility is expressed through the situated, unique, excessive, and contingent sites of the everyday (this emergence is related, I think, to the emergence of the very category of the everyday in

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<sup>64</sup> Wordsworth employs the phrase "living pictures" in an unused *Prelude* draft fragment from 1804, where it is aligned with both with the verb "impart" and with the word "portion": "I will select / A portion, living pictures" (Norton *Prelude* 497).

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Rousseau, who as discussed in my first chapter, offers his own unique singularity as an exemplary life—exemplary precisely in its unrepeatability and incommensurability to others—to be used, in *The Confessions*.

<sup>66</sup> At the exact same moment in Germany, Fichte conceived the singularity of life as producing an infinite and non-teleological image or form (*Bild*) of the divine—a human form divine. On this, see Masmanidis's *Fichtes Begriff der politischen Philosophie*, especially 77-80, 85, 236ff. Thanks to Kirill Chepurin for this reference.

Romanticism, as Galperin has recently argued<sup>67</sup>). More specifically, this groundless community is experienced in the ways that identity, nature, essence, teleology, and totality *break down*. Living in modernity is living together in the ruins of these metaphysical structures, and having to collectively and habitually negotiate their breakdowns. The patterns and rhythms of such negotiations, always communal and always an ecological affair beyond the human, constitute the everyday. In this chapter, I have focused on domesticity as one of these everyday sites, and on the contingency of life as a form of *partiality* that opens onto sharing without fitting into a whole, as well as on the ways this bears on Romantic poetics and questions of form. The community of the domestic is not closed, but open to its visionary expansion (as Blake would put it), the spreading outward, the imparting, of an everyday utopia: what we might call a *generalization of incompleteness*. This is not because the domestic or the ordinary bears any particular content or principle that can be applied (it is simply “something,” Wordsworth says); rather, the domestic *models* (or in Wordsworth’s terms, provides an “image” of) what sharing in groundless community looks and feels like.

Along the way, my adducing a number of twentieth-century and contemporary theorists of community to help clarify the conceptual stakes and contours of Wordsworth’s poem was not happenstance or simply elective affinity, but done in order to show that *Romanticism makes such a theoretical discourse possible and thinkable*. Romanticism asks us to think not so much in terms of part and whole, but in terms of fragment and common; so any contemporary discourse on the fragment as a part that shares in community without ground or whole, or any discourse on groundless community and (its relation to) the everyday, takes place on the terrain of a long and untimely Romanticism. It is not an accident that, for example, Jean-Luc Nancy moves from a reflection on the strange partiality—the “‘unworking’ [*désœuvrement*, inoperativity]...the incalculable and uncontrollable incompleteness...incompleteable incompleteness”—of the Romantic fragment in a book on Romanticism to, a few years later, a reflection on a community that shows itself to be both inoperative and “fragmented”: “The incessant *incompletion* of community...How can we be receptive to the *meaning* of our multiple, dispersed, mortally fragmented existences, which nonetheless only make sense by existing in common?” (*Literary Absolute* 59; *Inoperative Community* 38, xl).<sup>68</sup> Nancy asks this last question—the central question of his life’s work—utterly in the wake of Romanticism, and even though he focuses more on German Romanticism, I would say he asks it in the wake of the Wordsworths. Or take Cavell, whose interest in Wordsworth and Romanticism, the Romantic fragment (including in Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *The Literary Absolute*), and the Romantic everyday, must all be seen in the light of his claim elsewhere that “community is always partial”—or rather, the latter should be seen in the light of the former (“Philosophy as the Education of Grownups” 29).<sup>69</sup>

The same is true for Blanchot, who in a discussion of Romanticism in 1969’s *The Infinite Conversation* speaks of “the opening [to otherness] that the fragmentary exigency [of Romanticism] represents; an exigency that does not exclude totality, but goes beyond it,” and then in 1983’s *The Unavowable Community* invokes community as a “principle of incompleteness” and “separation”

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<sup>67</sup> See William Galperin’s *The History of Missed Opportunities: British Romanticism and the Emergence of the Everyday* (2017). Galperin also traces a genealogy of twentieth-theory from Romanticism that is consonant with though not identical to my own Romantic genealogy of theory.

<sup>68</sup> The fuller passage reads: “Fragmentation never ceased to preoccupy Romanticism. Romanticism, in other words, could never have protected, defended, or preserved itself from its ‘unworking’—its incalculable and uncontrollable incompleteness: its incompleteable incompleteness” (*Literary Absolute* 59).

<sup>69</sup> Cavell’s interest in Romanticism is well documented (and has already generated a good deal of secondary work), but see above all Cavell’s aforementioned *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism* (1988), and his *This New Yet Unapproachable America* (1989). Both of these books contain discussions of the Romantic fragment and of Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe’s *The Literary Absolute*.

(*Infinite* 359; *Unavowable* 5, 14). Blanchot even speaks of “the common day”—“the obscurity of this day that is nonetheless the common day, common to everyone and to every instant”—in relation to a Romantic poet: not Wordsworth, but Hölderlin (*Infinite* 292). There is also Haraway’s linked emphases on the situated, the partial, ecology, domesticity, and groundless relationality in the midst of an allusion to *Frankenstein*; Spivak’s claims about catachresis and the “strategic essentialism” of a community that is ultimately groundless and heterogeneous, in the context of her extensive engagement with Romanticism; and so on—to say nothing of Agamben, Neyrat, The Invisible Committee, Latour, Moten, Morton, et. al. Though all these (and more) thinkers of groundless community have varying degrees of explicit indebtedness to Romanticism, the fact is that they all enter into a discourse that Romanticism opens, makes possible, and names. Wherever there are parts sharing and relating beyond any whole, wherever there is groundless community, there is Romanticism. Even Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* (1980/1987/2003), a project that has provided epigraphs to each of my sections, a project of writing the domestic everyday overtly indebted both to theory and to the Wordsworths, a book obsessed with parts and wholes and fragments and luster and relationality, partakes of this Romanticization of the world.<sup>70</sup> Intentional allusion or not, Hejinian’s exemplary evocation of “my life”—and all the images her life expresses—can be seen in the lineage of Wordsworth’s “my life”: “May *my life* / Express the image of a better time.”

Cavell’s full sentence on partiality, partially quoted above, reads: “Community is always partial, always to be searched for, as individual integrity is, always within circumstances of false unities, misplaced desires” (“Philosophy as the Education of Grownups” 29). The fractal logic of incompleteness thus applies on a communal and an individual level—in fact such an operation undoes any logic of different “levels.” Parts are shared in community in their very separation. Cavell again, decades earlier: “Confirming this separateness...[is] the fact of having *one life*, not one rather than two, but *this one rather than any other*. I cannot confirm it alone” (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 338; my emphasis). The one life I live cannot be a whole, nor can it be part of a whole; it can only open out onto the infinite outside of relationality across, and made possible by, incommensurability. The rhythm of this one life’s opening is its form. In this way Wordsworth *is* ultimately a thinker and a poet of the “one life,” though not Coleridge’s much-vaunted “one life” of unity, totality, and wholeness. Wordsworth’s one life is *this one life*, lived *thus*, in its singularity: my life. Insofar as my life in its partiality expresses the image of a better time, of the world to come, this would not be a world where this partiality is made whole, but a world—an earth—that everywhere accedes to the common radiance of incompleteness.

This and nothing else is the luster of the common day. The common day is the day to come, if day is to come at all.

In the wake of attempts to conceptualize ecology and community in the Anthropocene, and in the wake of the proliferation of recent discourses on “the global,” the Wordsworths’ poetic inhabitation of the common proposes a new logic of part and whole, which in turn offers a vision of groundless global community as necessary as it is untimely. It does so both via the power and eminently contemporary force of its articulation and via its afterlives in theory. The fact that many scholars date the emergence of both the Anthropocene and modern globalization to the late eighteenth century makes an engagement with Romanticism, grappling with these developments at

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<sup>70</sup> The German Romantic Novalis writes of the romanticization of the world: “The world must be romanticized. This yields again its original meaning. Romanticization is nothing else than a qualitative potentization...By giving the common a higher meaning, the everyday, a mysterious semblance, the known, the dignity of the unknown, the finite, the dignity of the infinite, I *romanticize* it” (*Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia* xvi). Elsewhere, Novalis writes of the necessity of separation for relation: “Ohne Trennung ist keine Verbindung” [Without separation there is no connection] (*Werke* 458).

their onset, all the more urgent. This is especially true for rethinking the very concept of (re)distribution and sharing (both of resources and of damage) on a global scale, taking into account singularity, uniqueness, locality, heterogeneity, and incommensurability, rather than succumbing to the general equivalence that the marker “global” threatens to index. There can be no holistic story, there can be no “world-ecology,” because there is no world, only what Wordsworth’s contemporary Karoline von Günderode called, in her own astonishing meditation on totality from the same year, “die Idee der Erde”: the idea of the earth. That is, only a catachrestic whole, us, “everywhere and all together” (Lindsay Turner), all of us, more and less all, on something like the earth.

### VIII. “Unequally Divided”

“Pure duration, a compound plenum in which nothing is repeated...The way Dorothy Wordsworth often, I think, went out to ‘get’ a sight.” –Lyn Hejinian, *My Life* 17

“The holy hides in this so-close. But the day that divides makes it dwell in invisibility.” –Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger* 118

After dinner on October 11, 1800, William and Dorothy Wordsworth set out “in search of a Sheepfold” in Greenhead Gill (GJ 26).<sup>71</sup> When they found the sheepfold, Dorothy—whom I will hence in this section call “Wordsworth,” in part to thematize the sometimes fraught and unequal sharing of a name by two separate authors—described it in this way: “The sheepfold is falling away it is built nearly in the form of a heart unequally divided.” As readers of William’s *Lyrical Ballads*, we are accustomed to recognizing the significance of the fragmentary brokenness of this famous crumbling sheepfold as it features in the poem it inspired, namely “Michael,” where it becomes the emblem of a family broken by tragedy and loss. The fragmentary sheepfold is also, perhaps, a covert prophecy of failure suggesting William’s projected great work *The Recluse*—which he had just begun that year with “Home at Grasmere”—would never be completed: at the end of the poem, the poet writes that Michael “left the work unfinished when he died” (*Major Works* 236). But I am more interested in Dorothy Wordsworth’s description of the sheepfold, which seems to contain two sentences but with no period or punctuation, thus intensifying the link between the fold’s ruination and its “unequal divi[sion]”: “The sheepfold is falling away it is built nearly in the form of a heart unequally divided.” In the larger context of the Wordsworth siblings’ relationship, respective and incommensurate positionality, and disparate literary receptions—and in the context of this chapter’s focus on division as sharing—it is difficult not to think here of the unequal division not just of the heart, but of the *hearth*. In their domestic life together, Wordsworth did the majority of the (gendered) domestic labor, often working at home alongside William, doing laundry or knitting as he composed; many critics have remarked on what Nicola Healey calls the journals’ “jarring juxtaposition of literary industry and domestic labour” (177).<sup>72</sup> Thus, “Home at Grasmere”’s vision of domesticity as a dividing-with which is sharing (“she divides with me this loved abode”) must be supplemented by awareness of the lived material fact that this shared-separation itself is “unequally

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<sup>71</sup> I cite from Dorothy Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journal* (GJ), from the Oxford edition of *The Grasmere and Alfoxden Journals* edited by Pamela Woof. Citations of other works by Dorothy Wordsworth are from Susan Levin’s Longman edition. As earlier, I am indebted in this section to Daniel Benjamin’s unpublished work reading and theorizing the collaborations and communal presences of the Wordsworths.

<sup>72</sup> For an analysis of William taking advantage of Wordsworth’s domestic labor, see Liu “On the Autobiographical Present” (117-118ff), and similar discussions in Mellor, Hess (especially 215), Heinzelman’s “Household Laws” and “The Cult of Domesticity” et al.

divided,” even as *both* William and Dorothy ultimately conceive the everyday and domestic as a groundless ecological sharing that exceeds any measure or identity.

For it is also true that Wordsworth, in a subtly Miltonic passage near the end of the *Grasmere Journal*, associates her home at Grasmere exactly with not an unequally divided heart(h) but a shared community of “whole hearts”: “we were left to ourselves, & had turned our *whole hearts* to Grasmere as a home in which we were to rest” (GJ 129).<sup>73</sup> Like William, Wordsworth is fundamentally a writer of the everyday—her primary theme is indeed the link between the everyday and the fragile, fissiparous modes of relationality it discloses. Her journals consistently and marvelously catalogue what Elizabeth Povinelli calls “the immanent dependencies that emerge from actual social life” (*Empire of Love* 25). While “the community is Dorothy’s theme,” as one of her best critics Susan Wolfson writes, the frequent association of Dorothy Wordsworth and relationality is almost always opposed by scholars (including Wolfson herself) to William’s masculine solitude, rather than being seen as a lived variation on their shared collaborative quest of the common (“Individual in Community” 155).<sup>74</sup>

Against this binary of Dorothy (feminine, relational, domestic) and William (masculine, solitary, heroic), and against seeing Dorothy Wordsworth as simply a martyred “figurehead for women’s repression” (following Nicola Healey), it is possible to situate Wordsworth’s social difference while asking, as I wish to do, how from this positionality she negotiates similar conceptual and aesthetic questions around domesticity, sharing and separation, partiality, ecology, and the everyday discussed so far in the chapter, and how she opened up new pathways for exploring them on her own and in her collaboration with William (173). Wordsworth even more radically than William confronts the groundlessness at the (partial) heart of the domestic and the everyday.

William and Dorothy Wordsworth’s shared life together, and indeed their ideas of home and family, was defined by separation. Lucy Newlyn’s book *William and Dorothy Wordsworth: ‘All in Each Other’* constantly makes clear how the Wordsworth siblings’ orphanhood, experience of homelessness, and separation in childhood and young adulthood—they were largely unable to see each other until 1794—remained the absolute core of their relationship even long after their reunion: “The trauma of early separation... [and] [b]ereavement, separation, and the bitterness of unfair dispossession cast their long shadows over the lives of William and Dorothy Wordsworth” (xii, 5).<sup>75</sup> Sure enough, Wordsworth’s *Grasmere Journal* begins precisely with William’s separation and parting (for a six-week journey). The text’s very first sentence and following reads: “Wm & John set off into Yorkshire after dinner... My heart was so full that I could hardly speak to W when I gave him a farewell kiss” (1). In this same first entry, Wordsworth writes that she “resolved to write a journal of the time til W & J return... because I shall give Wm pleasure by it when he comes home again” (1). Just as William casts poetry as im-parting a pleasure that is constitutively and non-teleologically shared, Dorothy Wordsworth’s writing documents new modes of sharing in its content, and on a second-order level exists for and occasions the sheer sharing of pleasure at “home again”—though crucially, sharing only made possible by separation.

Wordsworth’s writing of domesticity and the everyday is also inherently ecological, attuned to the nonhuman presences that situate a local field of possible relationality, from the valley, to the

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<sup>73</sup> Cf. this association of domesticity at Grasmere with the “whole heart” to a line from “Home At Grasmere,” where living at Grasmere “is now a choice of the whole heart” (78).

<sup>74</sup> For this binary, see e.g. Wolfson’s extended analysis in *Romantic Interactions* (113-207), Mellor’s classic *Romanticism and Gender* (esp. 144-169), Hess (27-28), inter alia.

<sup>75</sup> In the opening chapters of Newlyn’s book, I was struck by how often my key concepts and words like separation, parting, home, community, part, etc., come up. Sure enough, “Parted” is the very first word of the book, on the left flap.

surrounding area, to the home itself. A number of scholars have paid attention to “Dorothy Wordsworth’s ecology,” especially in and since Kenneth Cervelli’s book of that name, and following the paradigm of Neyrat we might see her vision more properly as an ecology of *separation*.<sup>76</sup> Wordsworth’s eco-logic of human and nonhuman shared-separation (or *partage*) is most explicitly evoked in the entry for Wednesday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1800, where Wordsworth both begins and later ends the day with the domestic labor of ironing. In between, she attends the small funeral of an unnamed woman—a woman with “no near kindred, no children”—at a neighbor’s house, and is deeply moved, “affected to tears” (GJ 20). After seeing the woman’s corpse and imagining it lying in the quiet earth, Wordsworth exits the house, turning from this encounter with mortal separation and finitude to the surrounding environment: “When we got out of the dark house the sun was shining, and the prospect looked as divinely beautiful as I never saw it. *It seemed more sacred than I had ever seen it, and yet more allied to human life.* The green fields, neighbors of the churchyard were green as possible & with the brightness of the sunshine looked quite Gay” (20; my emphasis). What is so striking to me about this passage is the paradoxical claim of the nonhuman world being “*more sacred...and yet more allied* to human life.” Going back to the Greek ἅγιος and the Latin *sacer* and *sanctum*, the primary and fundamental meaning of “sacred,” as Wordsworth well knows, is “separated,” “set apart,” or “untouchable”; but here it is precisely the absolutely separated sacredness of the landscape that makes it “more *allied*,” or shared, connected, and related, “to human life,” a seeming paradox that is willfully embraced in Wordsworth’s use of the phrase “and *yet*” (“yet” being a key word in William’s poetry as well).<sup>77</sup> Importantly, Wordsworth is not simply saying that the nonhuman world happens to be both separated and related to human life, but that both conditions (separation and relation) occur in a maximal state, with the intensificatory word “*more*” and phrase “*more sacred than I had ever seen it, and yet more allied.*” The more incommensurable the separation, the more there emerges this relationality (“allied”) made possible by the separation. Everything around the house exists in a state of fullness—the fields are “green as possible”—and spills over into excess signaled by the word “more,” a word that Wordsworth often has recourse to, as we’ll see below, in her writing of the everyday excess of the common. According to Nancy’s “Notes on the Sacred”—a text whose very first example of the sacred is standing before a grave, exactly as Wordsworth is doing here—the sacred is the very rupture in the world’s trembling fullness, the excess that makes relation and touching (or *alliance*) possible: “The sacred or the holy...Holiness or the pure rupture with the world in the fullness of the world...Distant which remains far by drawing near to touch us” (“Notes on the Sacred” 156, 158).

Wordsworth also finds ecological sharing across separate species in the very space of domesticity itself, for example in a series of journal passages from June and July 1802 that describes a group of swallows forming a nest in the cottage. Again here though, Wordsworth bears a disproportionate domestic burden in her acceding to relationality and welcoming of others (here, nonhuman others). Initially, “the swallows come to the sitting-room window as if wishing to build,” but instead of building there, in the generally shared sitting-room, they go to Wordsworth’s room, where she welcomes them: “I believe they will build at my room window” (GJ 110). Sure enough, two days later the journal reports that “the Swallows were very busy under my window this morning” (GJ 111). This group—is it a family?—of swallows comes back in several more entries over the ensuing weeks, including a genuinely anxious passage in which the nest has fallen off the

<sup>76</sup> See Cervelli’s *Dorothy Wordsworth’s Ecology* (2007).

<sup>77</sup> See Anne-Lise François’s essay “‘A little while’ more: Further Thoughts on Hartman’s Nature as Paraclete” for a remarkable reflection on the “small miracle” of temporality, indeed of ecology, in William’s use of the word “yet,” read alongside Geoffrey Hartman and the Biblical and Sophoclean ἐτι (eti) (Greek for “yet, still, further”).

second-floor window and become fragmented into something like a miniature ruined cottage: “[The swallows] could not be more distressed than I was I went upstairs to look at the Ruins. They lay in a large heap upon the window ledge; these Swallows had been ten days employed at building their nest...I had seen them sitting together side by side in their unfinished nest” (GJ 115).

Wordsworth’s practice of building, dwelling, and thinking alongside and with the birds in a domestic space is evinced by her compassion for the birds’ lost domestic labor at the fallen nest—which she measures precisely at “ten days employed”—in this passage, which also shows the inherent fragility and the (here literal) groundlessness of the domestic and the everyday. For the ground can give way at any minute—the nest can fall—but it is in this very same precarious space that we collectively generate rhythms of everyday sharing, and habits of coping with the contingency of a ledge. The nest on a window ledge in fact proves to be a perfect model for the ontology of the domestic everyday as such that I’m trying to bring out throughout this project: a familiar site of return yet fragile, perched snugly on nothing(ness). What is more, a window is an opening of the house, making the separation and enclosure enforced by a home’s walls into an opening onto the outside, so the light of the common day can come in, or a bird can build. The nest is thus what “Home at Grasmere” calls “a home / Within a home,” shared and divided at the liminal marker of a window (261-62).

The swallows eventually rebuild their nest on her window, and Wordsworth listens as they sing, and watches their arrivals and partings. On the eve of a trip with William to Calais to meet Annette Vallon and Caroline before William’s wedding to Mary Hutchinson, Wordsworth parts from the birds (and her domestic surroundings) with sadness, addressing them as “Dear creatures!!,” a sign of affection but also the way she might begin a letter to them: “The Swallows I must leave them the well the garden the Roses all—Dear creatures!!” (GJ 119). Wordsworth thus construes and constructs the *oikos* as an ecological space (true to the etymology of *ecology*), sharing the domestic not just with other creatures, but with the different, separate, and not quite commensurable mode of domesticity (here, a nest) that these creatures inhabit.

In addition to the importance of birds in “Home at Grasmere”’s vision of sharing (and) domesticity, William associates his sister with birds’ nests in a crucial passage about her in the final book of *The Prelude* (Book 13 in 1805, 14 in 1850), just two hundred lines from the end of the long poem: “[T]hou [i.e. Dorothy] didst...teach the little birds to build their nests / And warble in its chambers” (13.233, 235-36). This passage is perhaps the most important address to Dorothy in *The Prelude*, and not coincidentally, a passage that a few lines later contains one of the poem’s main paeans to the ordinary and the common, even employing the syntagm “every day”: William writes that, in life alongside his “dear sister”：“[E]very day brought with it some new sense / Of exquisite regard of common things” (13. 241-42). Still, it’s not quite right to say as William does that Wordsworth taught the birds to build their nests; rather, she simply shared her home with them and let them be. In doing so, Wordsworth’s habits of situated relationality make “worlds with partial connections” to form a “a pattern for ongoing, noninnocent, interrogative, multispecies getting on together,” as Haraway writes in her own study of human-avian sociality (*Staying With the Trouble* 13, 29).<sup>78</sup>

The exquisite regard for common things—for all things common—is a major shared thread of the Wordsworth siblings. Indeed it is a critical commonplace that Dorothy Wordsworth is a

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<sup>78</sup> Avian imagery is obviously also central to “Home at Grasmere,” from the “two birds” that the siblings are compared to, to the missing swans, to the wren on the roof of Dove Cottage, and so forth. On Wordsworth and nests, see William’s poem “The Sparrow’s Nest,” where Dorothy is called not Emma but “Emmeline.” William also asks Wordsworth to write down in her journal a story about unlikely friendship of a turtledove and a mouse (GJ 60). I discuss the Bachelardian domestic motif of nests in my Clare chapter as well.

writer of the domestic and the everyday, enchanted by “the wonders of the everyday” (Pamela Woof) and endowed with a “passion for the particular” (Elizabeth Gunn) that runs alongside and luminously askew her brother’s poetics of the common. And Wordsworth’s journals are precisely ciphers of the everyday, true to the meaning of the word journal (from *jour*, “day”). Yet despite the steady and sturdy rhythms of domesticity of the journals—the repetition of tasks, the coming of visitors familiar and strange (including those indigent with no domesticity, like the family of beggars who “could not keep a house”), exchanging of letters, taking of measures, viewing of landscapes, forays of sauntering, gathering, thinking, writing (GJ 10)—Wordsworth’s world is always on the verge of being broken open, subject to some sudden dissolution or melting, cast into reverie, shock, ecstasy, worry, anxiety, divine splendor, when “Earth and sky were so lovely that they melted our very hearts,” or “all colours, all melting into each other” (GJ 112; 27). The colors of the world melt not into some gray blank uniformity or unity, but into *each other*; their interrelation does not resolve into a single color, but rather intensifies the singular brightness of each one, so that there can be disparate “endless variety” while still a shared lack of difference. As she writes two years later, looking out at Rydale: “all the beautiful colours seemed to be melted into one another, & joined together in one mass so that there were no differences though an endless variety when one tried to find it out” (GJ 133). I’m interested in this apparent contrast between robust everydayness and a universe hanging by an ontological thread—and how the latter actually makes the former possible as sharing. Rhythm is the rhythm between the everyday’s dissolution into groundlessness and its resilience, its ever fugitive return to us, a return that makes “us” in its very undoing of us. Hearts, divided and chambered bearers of all partiality, are made to be melted.

Another instance of Wordsworth’s surrounding world ungrounding itself comes in an entry for April 29<sup>th</sup> 1802, where she sits back on the grass and gazes at some sheep: the animals “look[ed] beautiful but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind—as if belonging to a more splendid world” (GJ 93; my emphasis). In addition to allying itself to William’s utopian premonitions in “Home at Grasmere,” like that of “the fairer world than this,” this vision of the other world as not totally apart from or transcending this world, but immanent in the world as its excess and “strangeness” (the sheep are in the world yet belong to a more splendid world in their very lustrous presence) provides an apt illustration for Wordsworth’s general concern with *excess*, her most familiar ontological and aesthetic tendency or modality. Excess in the journals is most often signified by the word “more,” in a formulation that sees a being extending beyond itself and going outside of itself *by virtue of an intensification or excessiveness of its very singularity*. The more singular a thing is, the less it is itself. Such a logic of immanent excess can be seen in this passage’s evocation of a world that is “more splendid” than itself, and in the earlier mention of a landscape “*more* sacred...yet *more* allied” than ever. Two days after the splendid sheep this excessive “more” returns, as Wordsworth lies down with her brother under a holly tree: “[T]hat holly tree had a beauty about it *more* than its own...Oh the overwhelming beauty of the vale below—*greener than green*” (94). The *Grasmere Journal* is brimming with Wordsworth’s visions of excess, from the world “overflowing with life” in the first week of keeping the journal, to the later sheen of a “sky bluer...than the natural sky blue,” to “trees [that] were *more* bright than earthly trees” and “greenness a thousand times *more* green” (GJ 4, 108, 120, 130).

If Wordsworth’s aesthetic is an “aesthetic...characterized by relationship” or a “poetics of relationship” (Healey 8; though cf. what Glissant calls a *poétique de la relation*), then it is precisely because it is an aesthetics of ontological excess: excess is relational. As in William Wordsworth, in Blake, in Nancy, Bataille, and others, excess is utterly and anoriginally communal: excess is shared, the shared opening of the world, opening to “another world in the world” (Moten), more splendid, fairer, to come. I’m trying to say that an aesthetics—an ontology—of relation and an aesthetics of excess are the same thing. With the other figures in this study, Wordsworth asks us to think this

excessive and groundless relationality as the experience of the ordinary (specifically here, the domestic). Whether on the verge of dissolution or saturated with excess, Wordsworth's world—her home—is perched on groundlessness (like a nest on a ledge), and *never coheres into a whole*.

This ruptured experience of non-coherence and non-wholeness is evident in the very title of a poem by Wordsworth—one of the few that she wrote—called “Grasmere – A Fragment.” This poem about her domestic home at Grasmere can perhaps be seen as Wordsworth's version of William's “Home at Grasmere”; the same is of course also true of the *Grasmere Journal* (which is exactly contemporaneous with William's poem), but “Grasmere – A Fragment”'s generic identity as a poem provides a different and fruitful vantage point to compare with “Home at Grasmere,” especially on the question of the part or fragment, my main framework for reading William's poem. It is indeed striking that the intimate connection between domesticity and fragmentation that I have been painstakingly trying to bring out in William's poem is sitting here in the very *title*: “Grasmere – A Fragment.” Whereas William starts with the aspiration to totality (i.e. *The Recluse*) but ends with a fragmentary poem about his home at Grasmere, Wordsworth *starts* with fragmentariness. This is all the more striking because the poem itself gives no indication of being a fragment other than its title: it is formally whole and intact, and has a final stanza that rings out—however ambivalently—like a conclusion. The titular fragmentation implies there never was a pretention to wholeness in the first place, that there is always plurality, openness, etc.: the title's avowal of fragmentation coupled with the actual poem's seeming completeness also implies that the “a fragment” in the title “Grasmere – A Fragment” applies not, or not only, to the poem, but to the idea of Grasmere as such, which can never be “whole” and “unity entire.” Grasmere the place, the home—thus any place, any home—is a fragment, open to sharing in the common.

“Grasmere – A Fragment” begins with a view of the “many and beautiful” homes in Grasmere Valley, followed by a characteristic Wordsworthian act of narrowing in on a singularity from the many, accompanied significantly by a familial metaphor (“brother”): “But there is *one* that I love best, / A lowly shed, in truth, it is, / A brother of the rest” (6-8). Wordsworth confesses that her preference—indeed her *partiality*—for the simply ordinary and “lowly” Dove Cottage as opposed to the others cannot be explained by any rational measure or teleological ground. While she acknowledges that other people may with good reason be more inclined to the more beautiful neighboring cottages, Wordsworth chalks up her preference to a groundless wild fancy: “My fancies they perchance are wild / —I love that house because it is / The very Mountains' child” (18-20). There is no determinate ground or reason for her attachment to Dove Cottage (or William for that matter—she never reflects on the family bond as such, the sharing of blood, what it means that he is her *brother*: he is only there as whatever singularity he is, breathing, turning pages, eating an apple, causing joy at arriving or sorrow at parting). The only thing resembling a reason for her love for her home is the cryptic assertion that “it is / The very Mountains' child.” This use of another familial metaphor joins a human structure of dwelling, a home, to the nonhuman geological presence of the mountains, which are given the sheltering qualities of a parent.

The theme of shelter, of the home as a sheltering presence, is prominent in the poem. What William referred to as dividing (sharing) the “loved abode” in “Home at Grasmere” occurs here as living in the shelter of “that dear abode.” In an earlier fragment called “A Sketch” that was later partially incorporated into “Grasmere – A Fragment,” Wordsworth even writes of the home Dove Cottage as “a nest”: “The shelter of that little nest” (4). Here she writes of “the shelter of those trees,” and the home as a field of gathering and relationality, where the local forms of sharing made possible here in this ecology are indexed by the song of a throstle and the blooming of foxglove and eglantine. As Susan Levin writes of the poem: “Everything conspires to draw people to Grasmere, to build community there” (*Dorothy Wordsworth and Romanticism* 136). And yet, this scene of sharing ends in Wordsworth separating herself, leaving her brother “to wander out alone” and refuse “the

public road,” which also might be read as the road of publication, to explore what in another poem she calls “my *hidden* life,” and perhaps to “get” a sight (as Hejinian says) (52, 54; “Thoughts On My Sick-Bed” 39). After following “a little winding path” up a hill, she is accosted by the “merry voice” of “a foaming streamlet glancing by; / It seemed to say ‘Rejoice!’” (53, 82-84). In the next stanza, the poem—or the fragment—ends with Wordsworth asking herself: “I stood an Inmate of this vale / How *could* I but rejoice?” (87-88). Many critics have detected an ambiguous and ambivalent note in these final lines, where Wordsworth seems to be forcing herself to rejoice. The rhetorical question’s uncomfortable tone arises from the fact that we, and indeed the poem, cannot decide whether it is actually rhetorical or not. Wordsworth’s own italicization of the verb “*could*” sparks a more than lingering suspicion, indeed a realization, that it is harder for Wordsworth to rejoice unambiguously at her home at Grasmere, as William does in his poem.

Wordsworth’s association of domesticity with groundlessness, the fragment, and the logic of shared-separation is most evident in another poem called “Floating Island at Hawkshead,” which describes the sight of “a slip of earth” floating in the middle of a lake, having been by some mysterious power separated or “dissevered” from the shore (5, 10). This small floating and swaying island, whose size Wordsworth compares to a portion of domestic space (“in size a tiny room”), continues to provide a contingent domestic shelter and sharing of its own, with a few trees for birds, as well as a livable dwelling for insects and plants:

Food, shelter, safety there they find  
 There berries ripen, flowerets bloom;  
 There insects live their lives—and die:  
 A peopled *world* it is;—in size a tiny room. (13-16)

Like the swallows’ nest on the window ledge, this is another image of ecologically imbricated domesticity on top of utter groundlessness—the groundlessness underlying the domestic—but here it is water instead of the air beneath the window. The island itself is a fragment, whose partiality opens not to a whole, but to its own local common; Wordsworth’s focus on the lives of insects, as well as her description of the island as a “a peopled *world*,” bears (out) a logic of the common in close propinquity to what I call a “local world” in my analysis of John Clare’s poetry in Chapter 5 (Clare himself speaks of “the insect world”).

Wordsworth ends the poem imagining the future disappearance of the floating island, but concluding on a note of hope, which notably for my argument, invokes the *fragment*: “Yet the lost fragments shall remain / To fertilize some other ground” (27-28). The singular slip of earth in its very disappearance has turned into plural scattering of fragments, which promise contingently and unforeseeably to foster new life in a world to come. This vision of the fragmentary domestic common giving rise to a utopian community is in accord with the groundless environmental ethics of the everyday I’ve been trying to adumbrate throughout the whole chapter: an ethics not grounded insularly in a single place while still infused with uniqueness of an *oikos*. There is not a nominalist and insular attachment to a specific place here—even though it is a literal island—first of all because the island is floating and moving, and secondly because even when it has disappeared and been “buried beneath the glittering Lake,” it offers models for sharing an everyday ecological common (25). Its fragments—like these poetic fragments—fertilize some other ground, which is to say, some other groundless community, seeding some new produce of the common.

Wordsworth’s most radical and direct confrontation with the groundlessness underlying domesticity occurs on the day of her brother’s wedding, October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1802:

I saw them go down the avenue towards the Church. William had parted from me up stairs. I gave him the wedding ring—with how deep a blessing! I took it from my forefinger where I had worn it the whole of the night before—he slipped it again onto my finger and blessed me fervently. When they were absent my dear little Sara prepared the breakfast. I kept myself as quiet as I could, but when I saw the two men running up the walk, coming to tell us it was over, I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything, till Sara came upstairs to me & said “They are coming.” This forced me from the bed where I lay & I moved, I knew not how straight forward, faster than my strength could carry me till I met my beloved William & fell upon his bosom... I stayed to welcome my dear Mary. As soon as we had breakfasted we departed... Poor Mary was much agitated when she parted from her brothers & sisters & her home. Nothing particular occurred till we reached Kirby. We had sunshine & showers, pleasant talk, love & cheerfulness. (GJ 126)

The passage, censored in early editions of the *Journals*, is never not astonishing. Faced with the major reconstitution of her domestic life at Grasmere in ways both material—Wordsworth gave up her room to the new couple—and less tangible, Wordsworth undergoes an experience of utter self-cancellation and nullity: “I could stand it no longer & threw myself on the bed where I lay in stillness, neither hearing nor seeing anything.” In language that echoes William’s “Lucy” poem “A slumber did my spirit seal” (said by Coleridge to be about his sister), with its concluding vision of nonvision (“No motion has she now, no force; / She neither hears nor sees”), Wordsworth also describes this vertiginous experience of radical ontological dispossession as if the *ground* were taken from under her feet: she could “*stand* it no longer,” and falls back on the bed in utter “stillness.”<sup>79</sup>

One of the last things she says of her brother before he leaves to be married is a “part” word (of which there are a large number in this passage): “William had *parted* from me.” When William comes back, the parts of the nonwhole house fit together differently. The domestic is not some eternal essence, it can be reconfigured into new modes of sharing precisely because it is contingent and groundless; the throes of this kenosis just before her domestic community is re-arranged point to Wordsworth’s direct experience of the ungroundedness of domesticity, its point of incommensurable excess which is its non-place, the non-place at the heart of any local place. This abyss is precisely why sharing can take place. It is ungrounded, a sharing of exposure to the incommensurable, a simple everyday sharing of being. The rhythmic return of the domestic everyday and its utter abyssal groundlessness are mutually constituting. If the everyday was grounded, it could not be shared, could not be rearranged to increase its sharing (to incorporate Mary, or even say, someone coming to visit or to beg, someone desolate whose exposure to contingency is only an intensified image of your own image, no matter how grounded and secure you seem to be). For the encounter with and in the abyss only lasts a moment, and she springs up to greet her brother and shortly after, his new wife Mary, who is experiencing her own version of ungrounded domesticity in finding a new home: “Poor Mary was much agitated when she parted from her brothers & sisters & her home.”<sup>80</sup> Nothing was the same, yet nothing was extraordinary, and after this self-annihilation things seem to return to the everyday: “nothing particular occurred,” and thereupon follows

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<sup>79</sup> Thanks to Anne-Lise François for a conversation on this passage, where among other things she pointed out the allusion to William’s “A slumber.” These famous lines from the Lucy poem are also echoed in the final stanza of Dorothy Wordsworth’s poem “Thoughts On My Sick-Bed”: “No need of motion, or of strength, / Or even the breathing air” (49-50).

<sup>80</sup> Kurt Heinzelman notes how, after the wedding: “Slowly, inexorably, the ‘we’ of Dorothy’s discourse opens up to include Mary” (“Cult of Domesticity” 73).

“pleasant talk, love & cheerfulness.” Though later on the wedding day, the contingency of the domestic is reinforced by a particularly gothic visit to a graveyard with epitaphs of dead children, and the ruins of a castle.

William’s vertiginous experiences of groundlessness of are often those of the isolated and separated self, partaking in what Keats called the “egotistical sublime,” or Hartman “consciousness of self raised to apocalyptic pitch” (*Wordsworth’s Poetry* 17); yet here Dorothy Wordsworth’s vertigo is relational, directed toward and emanating from the heart of the domestic. If the domestic—like any social form—floats on an ontological abyss, it is historically the case that this abyss and the burdens of relation flowing therefrom has been named *woman*. In her searing book on Heidegger, Luce Irigaray asks us to consider whether and to what extent this fact is not just a historical condition, but built into the very conceptuality of ontological groundlessness itself. For Irigaray, the feminine is the groundless ground that has to be cleared, erased, or “forgotten” so that there can be groundlessness in the first (or rather now, second) place, that is, so there can be the clearing that lets things appear in it(s groundless space of gathering): “When man hollows out the first site, he uses the matter that was in place there to hollow it out and surmount it. He and she—likewise and differently—will be closed up—folded up around a certain void wrought from what he takes her irrecoverably” (*Forgetting of Air* 30). In a later passage all too relevant to Wordsworth’s moment of self-annihilation and general disposition, Irigaray writes: “She who gives herself, first, become that which gives itself, become this there on the basis of which there is giving” (94). Irigaray also draws on Heidegger’s emphasis on dwelling and his figure of domesticity—the “House of Being”—to question his ontology of the clearing, and hints at the ecological consequences of this notion of the clearing (ecological questions which her more recent work has taken up more explicitly), in addition to linking this unthought excess of the feminine with the impossibility of the whole.<sup>81</sup> Groundlessness is not simply neutral, but also experienced in and as social difference.

Indeed, the socially enforced groundlessness and relationality of Wordsworth’s gendered positionality allows—rather, forces—her to confront more directly and radically the partiality and groundlessness of the domestic, and the forms of sharing this groundlessness engenders; but this more direct and radical disclosure comes at a cost, as the blinding agony of the above wedding-day journal passage makes evident. This differentially positioned intimation of groundlessness is also evident in the very poem title “Grasmere – A Fragment.” William can start with totality and ownership and “Man,” and then unwork and fragment such structures, but Wordsworth was never granted that positionality of wholeness, property, and self-possession in the first place.<sup>82</sup> A similar point to this is what feminist critics of the Anthropocene (discussed at the opening of the chapter) are rightly insisting be taken into account in contemporary discussions.

This not to say we should abandon thinking the domestic and dwelling as a site of groundless community—Irigaray herself, after Heidegger, calls for a thought “where everything will

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<sup>81</sup> “In air,” or the feminine, “the whole is lost,” and we cannot “pass off the part for the whole” (43, 128).

<sup>82</sup> This point applies all the more to the position of the colonized and enslaved, who are forced to start from partiality and groundlessness. On this question—the enforced condition of partiality and the modes of relationality and ecological personhood this condition generates, in roughly the same time period—see Monique Allewaert’s remarkable book *Ariel’s Ecology: Plantations, Personhood, and Colonialism in the American Tropics* (thanks to Jack Halberstam for posing this question directly to me and suggesting the relevance of Allewaert’s work). Responding in part to something I wrote, Jared Sexton makes a very similar point—regarding the difficulty and importance of situating, suturing, and still separating ontological groundlessness from social and historical deracination—vis-à-vis anti-blackness in an interview with Daniel Barber: “[W]e must be careful to limn the difference between this sort of [ontological] exposure and the structural vulnerability entailed in the anti-black world. How do the overexposed open up to this enlivening, transformative exposure? And how are the underexposed to relate to them there? How do those whose ground is taken from them, who are taken from their ground, who are taken away from themselves as ground—how do they embrace that groundlessness as possibility when it is likewise marked by the scandal of an unaddressed crime?” (“On Black Negativity”).

be differently gathered, sheltered, and preserved. Where dwelling will have a different site [and] where inhabitation will no longer take place in hatred,” new possibilities of dwelling and relationality, and of what Irigaray calls in the title of another of her books, *Sharing the World* (119-120). And ultimately both Wordsworth siblings see domesticity as a shaped site of groundless sharing without whole, and both writers take up the quest for the “new creation of our habitat” and “creation of a new inhabitation” that Cavell saw as characterizing Romanticism (*In Quest of the Ordinary* 53). A new inhabitation can be created by, as William and Dorothy Wordsworth do, looking for and dwelling in the point of incommensurability in any structure of sociality, the point of excess and breakdown where new modes of sharing can be generated and spread outward or imparted as models for others. For the Wordsworths here, this is the case for domesticity and the related institution of marriage. Just as I develop this point about marriage when William will go on in the “Prospectus” at the end of “Home at Grasmere,” to invoke marriage, casting his poetry as “spousal verse,” Wordsworth’s own writing of her experience of marriage remains as the dangerous supplement to William’s, a reminder both of the ultimate groundlessness of domesticity and marriage, and the unequally divided burden of cancellation that this social form demands.

Scholars who discuss the final entry of the *Grasmere Journal*—which describes a visit on Sunday, January 16<sup>th</sup>, 1803 to buy bread from Matthew Newton and his wife and sister, a trio curiously mirroring the makeup of the new Wordsworth household—usually neglect to mention that this entry is not actually the last thing written in the journal. After this entry ends, we read the final writing: “Monda” [sic]. The last word of the journal is a *partial* word, “Monda[y],” the word and day opening the new week, blank with possibility. The fragmentary word is thus an “ending” to the text that in fact opens it infinitely, to the ongoingness and partiality of the everyday. “Monda” is without “y,” *ohne warum*, groundless, and thus this day encodes and furnishes Dorothy Wordsworth’s lambent writing of the common day—common because incomplete, like life.

## Chapter 5: Clare's Worlds

“Die Dichter müssen auch / Die geistigen weltlich seyn.”  
-Hölderlin, “Der Einzige”

“This is the age of our absence from the world, even / while we are living in it.”  
-Wendell Berry, Sabbath Poem XIX (2012)

“But why do human beings expect an end of the world at all? And if this is conceded to them, why must it be a terrible end?”  
-Kant, “The End of All Things”

This final chapter will continue my dissertation's investigation into the Romantic poetics, theory, and praxis of groundless community and the everyday by way of the still fairly neglected poet John Clare. This chapter will also continue the method of situating my exploration of groundless community in relation to a certain social form—previous examples have included the self, circulation, sovereignty, energy, and domesticity—going through a historical shift, and thus exposed in its contingency. In this case, I am interested in the social form of *the local*, specifically the rural local, in all of its ecological color and texture—especially as this social form is under pressure from emergent industrialization, globalization, and enclosure. Given Clare's social and class positionality, historical moment, and unique (and particularly tragic) biography, this chapter also offers a chance to explore further the important question I broached in the last chapter with Dorothy Wordsworth, namely the difficulty yet importance of situating social and political modes of dispossession alongside, yet not asserting an identity with, an ontological disclosure and experience of groundlessness that opens onto community.

It is important for my overall argument, especially my larger claims about Romanticism, to show that groundlessness is a governing affective, ontological, and aesthetic experience in Clare, the Romantic writer who is most associated with attachment to place, rootedness, and being grounded. That is, groundlessness is a *fortiori* more convincingly a structure of feeling in Romanticism if it can be seen to permeate the poet who—at least *prima facie*—most desires a ground. In addition, unlike other Romantic figures that interest me in this dissertation, Clare has not been particularly influential on the formation of twentieth-century and contemporary theory (with the possible, partial exception of Timothy Morton), so taking up his writing is a chance to view my excavation of Romanticism as groundless community on its own, and in its own terms. I will argue that in Clare, the local can disrupt the violence of commensurability not through an insular, hermetic, and static presence that protects what is proper and native to it, but through its particular, open modes of ecologically sharing contingency in the everyday—which for historical, conceptual, and poetic reasons Clare casts as *the commons*.

### I. The End of “The World”

The World will have died a slow death, and a steady one. Yes, one almost wants to say, echoing Nietzsche's lament: *Welt ist tot*, and we have killed it. Allow me to explain: I do not primarily mean this in the ontic sense of apocalyptic world destruction—though the prospect (or even, the fact) of present and coming ecological catastrophe necessarily, and intentionally, haunts such a formulation. What I do primarily mean, and what I wish to explore further in this chapter, is the unmistakable demise of a certain concept in some recent philosophical and theoretical discourses. That is, to put it briefly: the demise of the concept of *World* as a unified and closed totality, as a single harmonious holistic container of everything and of every thing. In 1993, Jean-Luc Nancy—

who has meditated extensively on the various valences of *world* (*monde*) and who will be central to the paradigm of this chapter—opened his book *The Sense of the World* with a chapter entitled “The End of the World,” which begins as follows: “There is no longer any world: no longer a *mundus*, a *cosmos*, a composed and complete order (from) within which one might find a place, a dwelling, and the elements of an orientation” (4).<sup>1</sup> There is no more world, it seems, no place, no dwelling, and nowhere to lay one’s head; one wants a Celan to come forward and shout, or whisper, both nervously and reassuringly: *Die Welt ist fort, ich muss dich tragen* [The world is gone, I must carry you].<sup>2</sup>

At the same time, though, this state of worldlessness has been dialectically accompanied by the increasing feeling that, in the age of contemporary global capitalism, the world is *too* much with us—and more so every day. While globalization can be seen as a confluence of processes fostering relations, connections, and interdependencies across the whole planet, the other side of this coin – or more accurately the implicit theoretical/ideological basis for it – is globalization’s desire to unify, subsume, and totalize heterogeneity under and as *one* World, where the unified World functions as a ground for global networks of equivalence and exchange. It has by now become a commonplace in relevant historical scholarship to locate, if not the birth of globalization as such, then the first real emergence of its modern form in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, literary scholars such as Evan Gottlieb have only more recently begun to think about what such a decisive development might mean for the study of Romanticism, which notably spans this exact time frame.<sup>3</sup> This work comes in the wake of larger “global turn” in literary studies and in the humanities generally, which encourages criticism to shed its Eurocentrism and view the material, political, social, and intellectual networks of the era as part of a “global nineteenth century.”<sup>4</sup>

One crucial Romantic firsthand witness to globalization’s emergence in the early nineteenth century, albeit through very localized manifestations, was the “peasant poet” John Clare. Despite a prolific career and varied body of work, Clare is probably most famous for a number of poems known as the “enclosure elegies,” which depict the effects of the enclosure of common land in and around his small native village of Helpston in Northamptonshire. But why turn to such an exemplarily *local* poet as Clare to think about concepts like “The World” and globalization? For starters, the subtly ecological textures imbued in Clare’s enclosure elegies—as well as his other poetry and prose writings, as we shall see—offer us a suggestive vision of the unique singularity of place: but a conception of singularity that is based on relation, coexistence, interdependence, and

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<sup>1</sup> Nancy’s most recent work has taken up the question of world in earnest once again, especially in two volumes published in the last few years. In 2011’s *Dans quels mondes vivons-nous?*, co-authored interestingly enough with the young French astrophysicist Aurélien Barrau, Nancy makes a similar point to the one he made back in 1993: “[Le monde] ne peut plus être représenté comme un ‘cosmos’ (ordonnance d’un ensemble bien composé)...Peut-être n’y a-t-il plus lieu de parler de nous ‘dans’ le monde comme d’un contenu et d’un contenant, mais devons-nous apprendre l’existence à la fois unique et non unifié, universelle et multiverselle, de tout ensemble” (11-12). Notable is the title of the book—*mondes*, in the plural. Similarly, the title of a 2012 book of interviews with Nancy carefully uses the indefinite article: *La possibilité d’un monde*.

<sup>2</sup> The last line of Paul Celan’s poem “Grosse, Glühende Wölbung” (210). See Derrida’s extended analysis of this line in the essay “Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem,” found in the volume *Sovereignities in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*.

<sup>3</sup> See Gottlieb’s recent book *Romantic Globalism: British Literature and Modern World Order, 1750-1830*, which, in a similar spirit to this chapter, investigates Romanticism’s complex relationship to emergent globalization both for its own sake and as an avenue to think critically about our own current moment: “Recovering the global dimension and dynamics of British Romanticism...may also help illuminate the full range of our contemporary global choices, at a time when their stakes are higher than ever” (16). See also two collections of essays edited by Gottlieb: *Representing Place in British Literature and Culture, 1660-1830: From Local to Global* and *Global Romanticism: Origins, Orientations, and Engagements, 1760-1820*.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Manu Chander’s *Brown Romantics: Poetry and Nationalism in the Global Nineteenth Century* (2017).

sharing. Here the emphasis is not on local essence, but the particular modes of sharing that a locality makes possible. This vision, then, opens up alternative pathways of thought and praxis that would be counter to what we could call the ontology of globalization, with its desire for homogeneity and abstract equivalence under one World—that is, a ground.

What is more, Clare provides an invaluable perspective on the creeping effects of globalization as seen from the margins, in real time—as well as an alternative to such developments, limning an unlived path of modernity. Unlike the major Romantic poets, who were, roughly speaking, either middle-class (Wordsworth, Coleridge), upper-class (Byron, Shelley), or primarily urban dwelling (Blake, Keats), Clare wrote and lived as part of the rural laboring poor. Thus, Clare's very lack of spatial and economic mobility makes him the perfect case study for observing the impacts of burgeoning globalization—or at least, globalization's ideology—on rural communities in the early nineteenth century. The early nineteenth century, however, will lead us right back into our own day. For ultimately, my contention is also that going back to Clare and reading him alongside contemporary thinkers can help us better analyze and confront urgent intellectual and material challenges posed to us by modern globalization, which is nothing other than a growing regime of abstract equivalence and a massive act of enclosure. But first some more theoretical background before moving fully to Clare, himself the essential poet of the *foreground*.<sup>5</sup>

From a certain perspective, attempts to resist or dismantle the concept of totality have been a leitmotif of post-war continental philosophy. Think of Adorno's reversal of Hegel's (supposedly) totalizing dialectics contained in the former's dictum "The whole is the false" and Levinas's opposition of infinite ethical obligation to totality in *Totality and Infinity*; or the more recent attempts by Žižek and Badiou, among others, to think ontological incompleteness and multiplicity, respectively. One could even add into the mix the belated surge of interest that has appeared of late in François Laruelle's project of "non-philosophy," which seeks to oppose itself to (what it sees as) the totalizing claims of the entire Western philosophical tradition.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, I cannot treat the whole genealogy of this major philosophical theme here.<sup>7</sup> Rather, in order to provide some theoretical context for my discussion of Clare and the world(s), I merely want to emphasize that several recent and prominent manifestations of such a position have taken the form of a politico-metaphysical claim that *the World, as such, is not*.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it has become quite frequent of late to maintain the inexistence of the World—or to demand its end, as in the powerful challenge laid down by Afro-pessimist thinkers and their interlocutors.<sup>9</sup> We have already seen Nancy's earlier assertion that "there is no longer any world," but let me cite several varied though representative enough claims, all of which are from works published in the past five or so years:

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<sup>5</sup> John Barrell emphasizes this point in his seminal study from 1972 *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, a book to which I shall return (see especially 143, 166-167 for Clare and foreground).

<sup>6</sup> As Ray Brassier, one of the first to introduce Laruelle into the Anglophone philosophical discourse, writes: "[Laruelle's position] is not so much to totalize philosophy as to identify philosophy *with* totalization" (131).

<sup>7</sup> For one treatment of the concept of totality within the specific domain of twentieth-century Marxist thought, see Martin Jay's magisterial *Marxism and Totality: The Adventure of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*.

<sup>8</sup> See the collection *The End of the World: Contemporary Philosophy and Art*, edited by Marcia Schuback and Susanna Lindberg.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. Denise Ferreira da Silva's "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World" and the interview with Frank B. Wilderson, III entitled "'We're trying to destroy the world': Anti-Blackness & Police Violence After Ferguson." Fred Moten writes that "blackness bears or is the potential to end the world" ("Blackness and Nothingness" 739).

1. As much as everyday language may expose the porous nature of concepts of world, we must always keep open the *possibility* that there is no world. (Sean Gaston, *The Concept of World from Kant to Derrida* 164)

2. *World* is a fragile aesthetic effect around whose corners we are beginning to see... The ultimate environmentalist argument would be to drop the concepts Nature and *world*, to cease identifying with them, to swear allegiance to coexistence with nonhumans without world, without some nihilistic Noah's Ark. (Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* 99-100)

3. We are located in a more than infinite proliferation of fields of sense with no beginning and no end. There is no over-arching structure, no *arche* governing the whole thing. For one thing, there is no whole thing, no world, but only the frayed plurality of manifold appearing. *The world does not exist precisely because everything exists. By not taking place it gives place to everything.* And it is even better that the world does not exist, because, things being this way, it is always up to us to negotiate our various decisions as to how to compensate the lack of world. (Markus Gabriel, "The Meaning of 'Existence' and the Contingency of Sense" 83; my emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

4. [W]e must...affirm that the world as the sum of all beings *does not exist*...It is perhaps possible to accept that the World is nothing, in and of which an infinity of positive and particular worlds emerges, but what could a politics whose ground is the void possibly be? (Sergei Prozorov, *Ontology and World Politics* 8, 36)

5. There is no such thing as the world as such. (Michael Marder, *Energy Dreams* 118)

6. The truth, buried under the immense heaps of progress' debris, is that *there has never been a single world* that would be that of our present, enclosed in the quaternary 'West-Modernity-Democracy-Capitalism', but only an Earth that has never stopped transforming into a multiplicity of worlds. Worlds that appear unified in their separation and hierarchization by cybernetics, capital, metaphysics, and the spectacle. (Marcello Tari, *There Is No Unhappy Revolution: The Communism of Destitution* 4)

Arguments and paradigms like the above go hand in hand with the recent proliferation of what have been called regional, zonal, or modal ontologies, such as Peter Sloterdijk's "spheres," Badiou's "worlds" (as in his recent *Logics of Worlds*),<sup>11</sup> Bruno Latour's comprehensive "modes of existence" project, and Markus Gabriel's own ontology of "fields of sense," to name but several. What distinguishes these contemporary pluralist ontologies is their commitment to exploring the unique validity of separate and autonomous domains of existence, *without* recourse to a single overarching

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriel, an emerging young philosopher from Germany, develops this argument further in a book published in 2013 provocatively called *Warum es die Welt nicht gibt*, which became a surprising best-seller in Germany. Herein Gabriel tells us with equally insouciant cheer about the fortunate nonexistence of the world: "Dass es die Welt nicht gibt, ist also insgesamt eine erfreuliche Nachricht" [The fact that the world does not exist is actually altogether great news] (254). See also the introductory chapter to his 2012 book *Transcendental Ontology: Essays in German Idealism*.

<sup>11</sup> Here is how one recent commentator summarizes Badiou's perspective: "[For Badiou,] [u]ltimately, there are only worlds, to infinity...[but] it would be illusory to believe that a unified Universe synthesizes this irreducible plurality" (Tarby 139).

and totalizing view from everywhere and nowhere. For if there is no World (as unified, holistic cosmos or domain), we are left with the scattered fragments of an infinite play and plurality of *worlds*—worlds which simultaneously are given and must be made, or formed. Worlds that bump up and push against each other, and overlap at times (and places). To quote from Nancy again: “The world is always the plurality of worlds: a constellation whose compossibility is identical with its fragmentation” (*The Sense of the World* 155).

John Clare, with his similar affirmation of singular plurality, uniqueness, and locality over and against homogenizing totality, is a poet who warrants renewed close attention in light of these theoretical developments. Not only can his experience and writings give us insight into the effects of globalization in his time and ours, as claimed above, but in some ways our theory is just now catching up to Clare’s complex vision. Therefore, I want to use the thinking I have just mentioned as a backdrop or context in which to explore Clare’s writing—to think both with and through his work. While there has been a great deal of criticism and scholarship on Clare from a historicist or historically-minded perspective, more theoretically oriented critics have tended to ignore him.<sup>12</sup> The present chapter takes a step toward filling this relative lacuna, while encouraging further research and conceptual engagement with Clare. By putting Clare’s texts in dialogue with some theoretical and philosophical frameworks—particularly that of Nancy—I wish to see what such an approach might yield in terms of reading and understanding Clare, and to ascertain what Clare might be able to add to our current matrix of concepts. Doing so will require examining the hitherto mostly undetected *ontological* implications of such prominent critical lynchpins as Clare’s localism and his resistance to enclosure. As I hope to show, Clare’s implicit social ontology of relation (where “social” is not limited to human beings) teaches us to speak not of *the* World, but of *a* world, or of worlds in the plural—local worlds brimming and bustling with their own networks of coexistence and interdependence, of sharing and shared being-in-common. Clare’s vision of a community without ground and without World models another way to think about and experience locality, divorcing local places from a uniqueness based in some local, proper, and native essence. To paraphrase Thoreau paraphrasing Christ in *Walden*: Whoever is willing to lose the World will find worlds, and the concomitant openings onto and into infinite relation: “Not till we are lost, in other words, *not till we have lost the world*, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations” (166). The World is gone, and must we learn to carry one another.

## II. New Worlds

“I have provd the world and I feel disappointed.”  
-John Clare, *Autobiographical Fragments*

I want to start my thinking about John Clare’s worlds by quoting a passage that is habitually quoted in part and briefly commented on in criticism of Clare. It comes from the series of autobiographical writings that Clare composed in 1824-1825, with the aim, according to his biographer Jonathan Bate, “to ensure that his own record of his life would survive him” (281). The passage recounts a deeply impactful visionary experience the poet had as a young boy that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Clare’s characteristic lack of punctuation lends it an even more rushing and rhapsodic quality than it already would have; the passage in question is astonishing and deserves to be quoted in full, as it rarely is:

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<sup>12</sup> There are several exceptions to this, of course: one is Timothy Morton; others are Sara Guyer and Chris Washington, both of whom have been thinking about Clare in conjunction with contemporary theorists of biopolitics. See, for example, Chris Washington’s article “John Clare and Biopolitics.”

I started off in the morning to get rotten sticks from the woods but I had a feeling to wander about the fields & I indulged it...I had imagined the worlds end was at the orizon & that a days journey was able to find it so I went on with my heart full of hopes pleasures & discoverys expecting when I got to the brink of the world that I could look down like looking into the water So I eagerly wanderd and rambled along the furze the whole day til I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers seemd to forget me & I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one & shining in a different quarter of the sky still I felt no fear my wonder-seeking happiness had no room for it I was finding new wonders every minute & was walking in a new world & expecting the world's end bye & bye but it never came often wondering to myself that I had not found the edge of the old one the sky still touchd the ground in the distance & my childish wisdom was puzzld in perplexitys night came on before I had time to fancy the morning was by which made me hasten to seek home I knew not which way to turn but chance put me in the right track & when I got back into my own fieldds [sic] I did not know them everything lookd so different the church peeping over the woods coud hardly reconcile me... (*Autobiographical Writings* 33-34)

This passage is usually cited as evidence of Clare's provincialism, or his "rootedness" in his local landscape. A recent article by Alan Bewell, for example, is relatively representative in stating that it displays the "intensely local aspects of Clare's nature," and his attachment to them (551).<sup>13</sup> Yet rather than simply being a tale of Clare's particular case of rustic confusion at wandering from home and getting "out of [his] knowledge," the passage should also be read as an account of the precariousness of local spaces and places in general. The intrepid young Clare wants to travel to the edge of *the* world but only reaches the edge of *a* world—his world. Or does he? After only a few miles there are different flowers that "were the inhabitants of new countrys" and "the very sun seemed to be a new one." As Wallace Stevens once intoned: "Another sunlight might make another world" (118). Significantly, Clare enters into an entirely new world without consciously passing through the threshold of the old one: "I was finding new wonders every minute & was walking in a new world & expecting the world's end bye & bye but it never came often wondering to myself that *I had not found the edge of the old one.*" Clare discovers it is only a matter of walking a short way, or even looking at the same things differently, before we "seem to find / A world I never felt before" ("The Meadow Grass" 73-74).

There are multiple worlds here, but the boundaries between them are permeable and uncertain—for, in a sense, there is nothing but betweenness all the way down. Every world is also the space or spacing between worlds; we are never contained solely in one enclosed world. The discovery of this strange, *unheimlich* coexistence, of this new world bumping right up against the one he knew so well, effects a dialectical shift in Clare's sense of his own "place-world" (to use Edward Casey's terminology<sup>14</sup>) when he returns home: "when I got back into my own fieldds [sic] I did not

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Barrell: "Clare is quite conscious of asking the phrase [i.e., 'out of my knowledge']...to carry the full weight of its literal meaning – not just out of the place I knew, but out of *everything* I knew" (121).

<sup>14</sup> See Casey's *Getting Back into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*. For Casey: "To be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place. Place is the phenomenal particularization of 'being-in-the-world,' a phrase that in Heidegger's hands retains a certain formality and abstractness which only the concreteness of *being-in-place*, i.e., being in the *place-world* itself, can mitigate. Can we rediscover and redescribe that concreteness? Can we regain and restore a sense of the full significance of place?" (xv). While doing so is mostly beyond the scope of this article, scholarship on Clare could substantially benefit from incorporating recent philosophical considerations of place; I am thinking of the work of

know them everything lookd so different.” Everything looked so changed, changed utterly to the young Clare because he realized his world of Helpston—his native village—was not the whole world (for there was no whole world), and that it shared borders, unmistakably but indistinctly, with other ecologies, communities, and networks. Other worlds, touching. In the language of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, “one world burrowing on another” (275).

Helpston, it turns out, was not the only world—there is no only world, no “world which is the world / of all of us,” *pace* Wordsworth (*The Prelude* 10.725-26)—but it was *a* world after all. Barrell quotes a passage from Clare’s journal where Clare laments even miniscule changes in his beloved Helpston, glumly concluding that “nothing is lasting in this world” (qtd. in Barrell 118); Barrell then glosses this insightfully: “‘in this world’ means in fact ‘in Helpston’” (119). Place for Clare was *ontological*. The local, surrounding landscape “made up my being,” as he once said (qtd. in Barrell 98). Theresa Kelley hints at the ontological dimension of Clare’s localism in the excellent chapter on Clare in her book *Clandestine Marriage*, aptly employing Heidegger’s notion of *Befindlichkeit*, or “situatedness” as a reference point for Clare (132-134). Keeping this in mind, the remainder of this chapter will explore the ontology and ecology (in the widest sense of the term) of what might be called a “local world” as it appears in Clare.<sup>15</sup> Such a rubric will be inextricably tied to the most prominent theme in most any discussion of Clare: the enclosure of the commons.

### III. We Have Always Been Common

“*A world joins, plays, speaks, and shares: this is its sense, which is not different from the sense of ‘making sense.’*” —Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*

At least as far back as Barrell, the topic of enclosure was already noted as a critical commonplace for studies of Clare: “Almost every critic who has written about John Clare has seen the importance of relating the enclosure of Helpston to Clare’s development as a writer and to the content of his work” (189). For the most part, this has not changed. As a result, we have had ever more nuanced and detailed accounts of the 1809 enclosure of Helpston by an Act of Parliament, and how Clare’s poetry deals with this topological trauma; and many accounts questioning how detrimental this case, or any case, of enclosure really was, and challenging the naïve fantasy of a pre-enclosure rustic paradise<sup>16</sup>; and accounts that chidingly remind us that “the social consequences of open-field enclosure varied from region to region,” and so forth (White 6). This work has been done, and usually done well. Here I am not as interested in the details of particular instances of enclosure, however, as I am in the stakes of the clashing worldviews in question, as these stakes still hold a great deal of relevance for today’s world(s).

The critic Johanne Clare has written that “Clare’s opposition to enclosure was definitely a moral opposition” (37). This is most certainly true—but I want to push this standard account further to claim that it was an *ontological* opposition as well. Enclosure is based on a defective

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Casey, both the book I just quoted and other works like *The Fate of Place*, and also work by Jeff Malpas on Heidegger and place and by Dylan Trigg (*The Memory of Place*). A small step in this direction was taken in a recent article by Gary Harrison, “John Clare’s Poetics of Acknowledgment,” which also makes use of Stanley Cavell’s concept of “acknowledgment.”

<sup>15</sup> While at the outset of this chapter I seemed to place the concept and term “World” under erasure, I think the term can be retained if it is qualified and *pluralized* to suggest the absence of a single, closed totality. Hence throughout this chapter I will speak of local worlds and world (lowercase “w”) forming, but will also employ other terms to denote the same or similar phenomenon of an open relational field: place-world, community, collective, network, ecology, etc.

<sup>16</sup> As Merryn and Raymond Williams complain in their introduction to an edition of Clare’s writing: “Clare, for all his singularity, is still commonly enrolled in that version of the loss of an organic rural society which is typically summarized in a single word: *enclosure*” (13).

understanding of being—that is, what it means to be together. That is to say: enclosure, for Clare, enacts an ontological violence on the givenness and openness of being as it is manifested in the various networks of local worlds that are formed, inhabited, and shared by humans and nonhumans alike. The diversity and multiplicity of the communities that Clare and people like him knew were subjected, if not always in practice then practically always in theory, to the subsuming logic of enclosure. Such a logic sought to abstractly quantify and partition common land in order to increase production and meet the nascent but rapidly expanding demands of capitalism and “modernization”—which was globalization (Neeson 35). As Morton reminds us: “There is an ontology implicit in capitalist production” (*Hyperobjects* 113). This ontology sees both Being and beings (or wants to render them) as abstractly equivalent, as Marx saw: exchangeable, calculable, commodifiable, and totalizable.<sup>17</sup> Hence the rural communities of England like the parish of Helpston become uniformly segregated into nice “little boxes,” as the pre- and post-enclosure maps of Helpston in Barrell’s book make abundantly clear (102, 107). As Barrell himself comments on this change: “The openness and old uniformity of the fields disappeared together, to be replaced by a very different uniformity” (109). The new uniformity—an abstract uniformity without end, which might be called “bad uniformity” in a nod to its similarity with the Hegelian notion of abstract “bad infinity”—is what Clare’s poetry struggles against. One way it does this is by detailing and enacting the forming of local worlds and collectives (in Bruno Latour’s sense<sup>18</sup>), in all of their reticulate vitality, agency, multiplicity, and indeed, their fragility.

Clare’s commitment to the locality of his world, over against the abstract, bad uniformity engendered by enclosure is evidenced throughout his early and middle period poems in a number of ways. One common poetic practice is to single out a particular spot, which metonymically performs an act of focusing or localizing within an already localized landscape. In fact, one could even say that Clare has a peculiar and more restive version of the “spot-syndrome” that Geoffrey Hartman diagnosed long ago in Wordsworth—the obsession with a singular fixed spot or nook.<sup>19</sup> Take “Helpston,” the opening poem in his first collection of poems (*Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, 1820). The very word “spot” is repeated several times in the poem, from the “pleasing spots to which fond memory clings,” to the “dear beloved spot” and the final lines of the poem, where “the aching breast / flies to the spot where all its wishes rest” (117, 165, 185-186).<sup>20</sup> Clare not only singles out a scene or locality, but, again much like Wordsworth, self-consciously performs this singling out with words like “spot,” or commonly, “nook,” as in the opening lines of the gorgeous little lyric “A Scene,” which start with a “stretching view that opens wide,” but quickly zoom in to the singularity of a “shelter’d nook”:

The landscapes stretching view that opens wide  
 With dribbling brooks and rivers wider floods  
 And hills and vales and darksome lowering woods  
 With grains of varied hues and grasses pied

<sup>17</sup> On globalization and colonization in the Romantic period as a widespread imposition of exchangeability, especially in relation to the nonhuman world, see Alan Bewell’s *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History* (2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Latour’s *We Have Never Been Modern*, especially 4, 106-108, 139. For Latour, most simply, a collective signifies an association of humans and nonhumans that is singularly unique in its particular distribution of agency, interdependence, and existence: “All collectives are different from one another in the way they divide up beings, in the properties they attribute to them, in the mobilization they consider acceptable” (107).

<sup>19</sup> For “spot-syndrome” see Hartman’s classic book *Wordsworth’s Poetry, 1787-1814*. Clare’s series of delightful nest poems is also an excellent instance of his warm, Bachelardian fascination and love for cozy spots and nooks.

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise noted, quotations from Clare’s poems are taken from the Oxford edition of the *Major Works*, edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell. Line numbers will be listed after the quotation.

The low brown cottage in the shelter'd nook  
The steeple peeping just above the trees  
Whose dangling leaves keep rustling in the breeze (1-7)

Clare, however, just as quickly zooms back out to acknowledge that “hundreds more [scenes] far off and near / Approach my sight,” thus effectively decentering his lyric eye/I and foreclosing the possibility of an absolute spot that would be a unified whole in itself, unrelated to other localities (12-13).

One distinguishing aspect of Clare’s localizing and focalizing gestures involves purposefully jarring shifts of perspective, especially including the perception of things from nonhuman points of view. This occurs habitually in the poems, but also can be seen in his naturalist prose writings. Mina Gorji mentions the “intimate empathy” with which Clare assumes the perspective of the insects he watches in the grass, where grass and dirt transmute into miniature churches and markets (123):

I have often amused myself in summer by lying in the grass to see the quantities of different insects passing & repassing as if going to a market or fair some climbing up bents & rushes like so many church steeples & others getting out of the sun into the bosoms of flower the most common seen in these busy motions is the long legged shepherd the green beetle & the red & yellow lady flies (*Natural History Prose Writings* 71)

The insects here also form their own local and particular world (notice the species-specificity at the end of the passage)—elsewhere Clare actually uses the exact phrase “insect world” twice, both times in his long pastoral poem *The Shepherd’s Calendar* (“March” l. 233, “July” [Second Version] l. 38). Clare’s empathetic absorption of the perspectives of everything from insects to clouds artfully reveals the layering of interconnected networks across disparate and incommensurable scales, while also functioning as an implicit critique of the anthropocentric perspective of traditional pastoral and descriptive poetry (like that of James Thomson). The poetics of the latter, with its human observer at the center, attempts to unify everything into a coherent whole—that is, by subsuming everything into a single, measurable, framed, and observed World or totality.<sup>21</sup>

Clare evinces everywhere in the early, pre-asylum poetry a Whitman-like easiness among things and the pulsing natural world around him, as his “poetics creates a counterrhythm to enclosure,” as Kelley has it (127). The life of this counterrhythm is born out of Clare’s close involvement with the communities and worlds he knew so well—his best poetry is often concerned with these local worlds that have connections, networks, and ecologies *here and nowhere else*, and thus cannot be corralled into the framework of abstract or general equivalence that enclosure seeks to implement. Clare is attuned to relations that are each time singular – *chaque fois unique*, as Derrida might say; or, unique but not unified, to use Nancy’s language (“l’existence à la fois unique et non unifié”). By intently and consistently showing us the specific hereness of his *here*, Clare confronts

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<sup>21</sup> Paradoxically, but not contradictorily, Clare stages an implicit formal critique of *anthropocentrism* even while on a content level he utilizes *anthropomorphism* (as in the reference to churches and markets, etc., when discussing insects, or when he lets inanimate things speak); it is important to distinguish the two. See Washington’s “John Clare and Biopolitics” on prosopopoeia and Katey Castellano’s work on Clare and anthropomorphism as a “critique of liberal rights” in her book *The Ecology of British Romantic Conservatism, 1790-1837* (141-162). To a similar end, in an influential recent book of political philosophy, Jane Bennett similarly advises “a careful course of anthropomorphization” to help decenter the human subject (122).

head on the question that mystifies Thoreau in *Walden*: “Why do precisely these objects which we behold make a world?” (216).<sup>22</sup>

In fact, like Thoreau, Clare was an assiduous and enthusiastic amateur naturalist and cataloguer of the specific natural world surrounding him, with all its local habitations and names.<sup>23</sup> The specificity is the crucial point here: for certain flowers flourish in this soil and not quite in the soil four miles down in the next parish; the birds sing differently here and different kinds of bugs are squirming underneath the fallen leaves; the humans here even use completely different names to name the nonhuman beings with whom they coexist, and different verbs like “progg”<sup>24</sup> to describe their actions and interactions—this local community makes a local world by making sense to and with one another.<sup>25</sup> There is no facile holism of the *everything is connected, everything is everything, everything is whole and one* variety. On the contrary, Clare and his work challenge us to think a thought that we desperately need to think today: interconnectedness and interdependence without totality; or to use the language of Nancy again, being-in-common without becoming a single immanent and closed common-being. Bristling and touching, not subsuming or combining into one—“contiguity but not continuity” (*Being Singular Plural* 5). Even the local world of Helpston does not add up to a whole, or closed totality; as we saw in the long autobiographical passage quoted earlier, Clare discovered that his local world was open, sharing a fuzzy border with other worlds and other communities.<sup>26</sup>

As I have already suggested, I am building on the foundational and still prevailing account of Barrell, which sees Clare emphasizing the individualized qualities of Helpston in order to oppose “the ideology of enclosure, which sought to de-localize, to take away the individuality of a place” (120); but I am attempting to push this account further. It seems that Clare isn’t just *describing* his local world(s), but *forming* it, and showing how such a place-world emerges, moves, and is shared; how it is formed *through* sharing, the sharing of singularities that could not be anything or anywhere else. Very often the place-world in question is teeming with nonhuman beings and their various networks (to employ Latour’s term, with all its valences). Take this passage from “The Moorehens Nest”:

And then I walk and swing my stick for joy  
And catch at little pictures passing bye  
A gate whose posts are two old dotterel trees  
A close with molehills sprinkld oer its leas  
A little footbrig with its crossing rail

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<sup>22</sup> For an analysis of this problematic in Thoreau, see Sharon Cameron’s *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau’s Journal*, 49-79.

<sup>23</sup> For myriad examples of Clare’s naturalist interests, studies, and writings, see *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (edited by Margret Granger).

<sup>24</sup> See the late Seamus Heaney’s fine essay on John Clare and language, which takes its title from this word: “John Clare’s Prog” (in the collection *Finders Keepers*). We should see Clare’s lack of punctuation, casual and shifting orthography, and extensive use of local dialect words as enacting a kind of protest or resistance to the regime of abstract equivalence through the medium of language itself. For Clare and the politics of language, see chapter 3 of Alan Vardy’s book, which takes its title from a provocative remark by Clare: “Grammar in learning is like Tyranny in Government” (56-70). See also articles by McKusick and Cooper, as well the footnote on Kelley below.

<sup>25</sup> Once again, Kelley’s chapter in *Clandestine Marriage* is a nice reference point here. She is concerned with how Clare uses various dialect names for plants to mark (and preserve) the tenuous individuality of Helpston against the generalizing logic and practices of enclosure: “To mark singularity, Clare pushes the instability and variability of common names to the limit and beyond, insisting more than occasionally on differences in spelling that preserve, or simulate, voice and dialect pronunciations” (128). For a similar view on this point see also Eric Miller’s article “Enclosure and Taxonomy in John Clare.”

<sup>26</sup> As Morton notes, with Clare “[t]he mind and the world it perceives are there, all at once, but not as a nice, integrated, ‘fitting’ whole” (*The Ecological Thought* 50).

A wood gap stopt with ivy wreathing pale  
 A crooked stile each path crossed spinny owns  
 A brooklet forded by its stepping stones  
 A wood bank mined with rabbit holes – and then  
 An old oak leaning oer a badgers den  
 Whose cave mouth enters neath the twisted charms  
 Of its old roots and keeps it safe from harms (65-75)

These “little pictures” of a local world are striking in their fresh particularity, and in the interweaving of human (the observer “passing bye”), animal, plant, and nonliving beings, as well as their perspectives.<sup>27</sup> The grammar and syntax structuring this paratactic litany is also noteworthy: except for the first and last two lines, every line starts and ends with a noun, which are linked together by a verb and usually by a preposition: “oer,” “with,” “by,” “neath,” etc. The preposition is of course the part of speech principally dealing with *relation*, and Clare’s exuberant love of deploying prepositions, both in this poem and throughout his corpus, indicates the diversity, liveliness, and paramount importance of the relations that constitute the being-in-common of a local world’s manifestation of what we might call Clare’s prepositional ontology. This is figured on the level of content as well as grammatical form, for most of the lines in the above-quoted passage not only contain a relating and bridging preposition, but depict an actual path or kind of bridge, from the “footbrig with its crossing rail” to the “stepping stones” that form a path across the brook.<sup>28</sup> “To be is to be in place,” Casey writes (16); and being in place is nothing other than being in the midst of things, inextricably and infinitely related.

Moreover, there is no hierarchy of constituting or relating to the world(s) here, as in Heidegger’s famous divisions between *weltbildend*, *weltarm*, *weltlos*; for Clare, all beings of all sorts are always already enmeshed in, with, under, between, beneath, across, and by one another (to name only a few possible modes of relating, with the spatial metonymically standing in for, and grounding, other kinds of relation). That mankind dwells poetically, we know from Heidegger’s Hölderlin; but for Clare, birds do as well: “they are the yellow hammers and she dwells / a poet-like” (“The Yellowhammers Nest” 16-17). Clare also proleptically assents to Latour’s injunction from *We Have Never Been Modern* that “things too have to be elevated to the dignity of narrative” (90). In fact, he even lets things, and places, *tell* narratives, as in the “The Lament of Swordy Well,” where not the *genius loci* but the *locus* itself speaks and recounts its own fate after enclosure has set in: “Ive scarce a nook to call my own / For things that creep or flye” (113-114). These two remarkable lines demonstrate the importance that Clare attached to relation, sharing, community, and being-in-common, beyond any grounded proper identity: even what is the place’s ownmost (“a nook to call my own”) is in its very being prepositionally *for* others (“for things that creep or flye”).

Indeed, Clare’s verse—especially the enclosure elegies—reveals how the catastrophe of enclosure affected not just humans, but animals, plants, and things alike. As Alan Bewell notes: “Clare recognized that the new conception of property rights embodied in the idea of enclosure had dispossessed not only the rural laboring class but also the non-human beings that had long inhabited

<sup>27</sup> Many critics, especially in recent scholarship, have noticed (and debated) the distinct importance that nonhuman beings have in Clare’s work. Kate Rigby in her book *Topographies of the Sacred* is fairly representative: “[Clare viewed] the land as a dwelling place for a diverse and vibrant more-than-human community” (68). See also Sarah Houghton’s article “The ‘Community’ of John Clare’s Helpston.”

<sup>28</sup> In at least one poem, Clare explicitly associates the lack of paths with solitude and the dearth of relation. The short untitled lyric “High overhead that silent throne” depicts a crane “sailing oer / That *pathless* world without a mate,” in a sky “that makes ones loneliness more lone” (5-6, 3; my emphasis).

the rural countryside” (564). This is particularly evident in these lines from “Remembrances,” one of Clare’s most beautiful and poignant poems:

Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain  
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill  
And hung the moles for traitors--though the brook is running still  
It runs a naked brook cold and chill (67-70)

This passage is especially illuminating for our purposes. Clare writes here that enclosure “let not a thing remain,” though this is not meant in the sense of a sheer annihilation. There is not *nothing*, but there is *no thing*; the natural givenness (the especial *es gibt* that localizes<sup>29</sup>) of the place is wiped away. There are of course still *objects* present after enclosure, but there is no open and shared relational space for things to appear as *things*, to invoke the helpful Heideggerian distinction between *Gegenstand* and *Ding*.<sup>30</sup> It is just like in John Ashbery’s poem “For John Clare”: “There ought to be room for more things, for a spreading out, like” (198). The same idea is at work in the reference to Napoleon, for Bonaparte did not so much utterly *destroy* everything in his path. Rather, he tried to assimilate all of Europe into one abstractly equivalent universal empire—he tried to form one world that would be the *only* world (Clare in other poems associates enclosure explicitly with “tyranny”), just as enclosure tries to assimilate and subsume difference under the banner of equivalence (it goes without saying that the abstract *equivalence* of globalized capitalism and enclosure does not translate into actual *equality*).<sup>31</sup> The bushes, trees, and hills of Clare’s boyhood landscape have been “levelled,” in the sense of being cut down, but also in the metaphorical sense of being made *level*, or uniform and equivalent at every point. Not only is the human, plant, and animal life (the moles, hung like traitors) devastated, but even the brook is altered, running “naked...cold and chill.” It is “naked” because it has been stripped down to its barest external being, severed from the networks within which it was enmeshed in order to run like every other brook in the service of the logistics of greater production. The brook has become alienated from itself and its ecology, its network of relationships, its local world; it has been chilled, stripped, and made into one of Clare’s vapid and yet still haunting (perhaps haunting *because* vapid) “vague unpersonifying things,” in a phrase from his great poem “The Flitting” (90).

#### IV. “Nowhere & every where”

“Step by rooted step,  
the man will lead you to that other field  
where nothing native belongs  
and all is figure and blindness.”  
—Jay Wright, *Music’s Mask and Measure*

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<sup>29</sup> “World’ says the *there* of ‘there is’...But ‘there is’ localizes being. More exactly, the transitivity of being is, first of all, localization. Being entrances the existent in giving way to it, giving it a *place*” (Nancy, *The Sense of the World* 156).

<sup>30</sup> See Heidegger’s “The Thing” found in the collection *Poetry, Language, Thought*. It should be said, however, that Latour offers a strong challenge of Heidegger’s distinction in his important essay “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?”

<sup>31</sup> Compare William Blake’s demiurgic and demonic figure Urizen, an encloser if there ever was one. Urizen, whose name puns on “reason,” wants only “One command, one joy, one desire, / One curse, one weight, one measure / One King, one God, one Law” (72). Elsewhere Blake himself declares against equivalence: “One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression” (44). As it happens, Urizen’s name puns not only on “your reason,” but also on the Greek verb *horizo* (ὁρίζω), which means to limit, to mark a boundary, or even: *to enclose*.

Indeed it is this poem “The Flitting” which offers one of the most salient opportunities for examining Clare’s vision and experience of groundless community—relationality without World—as it models the key tension, or rather the seemingly paradoxical conjunction that I also traced in the Wordsworths in Chapter 4: namely, the conjunction between the incommensurable local particularity of an *oikos* on the one hand, and groundlessness and the impossibility of the proper, on the other. What is important for my purposes is to understand how this groundless particularity—even when experienced primarily as loss, as here in “The Flitting” and in the enclosure elegies—opens onto the *common*. The path to develop this thought has recently been cleared by Sara Guyer, in her reading of “The Flitting” in particular and Clare in general in the remarkable recent book *Reading With John Clare: Biopoetics, Sovereignty, Romanticism*. Guyer’s engagement with Clare asks us to consider that “belonging and attachment have a strange, nonoppositional relation to displacement” (79). Understood in this radical way, Clare’s experience of local dispossession, which is “at once social and existential,” discloses a groundlessness and contingency underlying every social form in (and) modernity itself (80). Guyer wants to think through Clare in order to upend traditional concepts associated with Romanticism, so she would be perhaps suspicious of my emphasis on locality, community, and the common(s), but I want to bring out how these familiar markers (transmuted into a vision of a *groundless* common) are broached by Clare as the truth of his “radical homelessness,” especially in “The Flitting” (87).<sup>32</sup>

In a recent article that is similar in orientation to my reading of Clare and Guyer’s, Shalon Noble excavates the meanings of the word “flitting,” especially in the Northhamptonshire dialect, and their importance for Clare, who uses the word in many poems. Noble traces how the verb “flit” can mean both a removal from or change of habitation, as well as a swift movement, especially of birds. Though she doesn’t discuss the poem “The Flitting,” for Noble the action “flitting” in Clare clues us in to his ecological insights: an ecology that ungrounds and de-sutures ecology from proper rootedness.<sup>33</sup> The context for the poem “The Flitting” is Clare’s change of homes in 1832, from Helpston to Northborough. “The Flitting” begins with an abdication both of the proper or possessive (“my own”) and of property (“home of homes”): “I’ve left my own old home of homes” (1). In this new place, “the summer like a stranger comes,” and Clare describes the local world he has left behind in terms of its networks of connections between animal and plant life (3). Just as in Swordy Well’s nook that exists as something proper only in its capacity for sheltering relationality (“a nook to call my own / For things that creep or flye”), what was local in Clare’s previously local home of Royce Wood was not just that there were certain woodland oaks, but that these trees had branches that shielded and related particular beings in particular ways, creating a common for “*all* below”: “The woodland oaks and all below / That their white powdered branches shield” (13-14). Indeed, these networks of connection (“molehills and rabbit tracks” and “beesom long”) are described in terms of an expanding or spreading sharing of excess: “[There] spread a wilderness” (12).

Yet here Clare undergoes an experience of alienation very similar to the boyhood discovery of a totally “new world” in the passage from his autobiography quoted above. Just as in that experience where “the very sun seemed to be a new one,” in Northborough “the sun e’en seems to loose its way” (55). Similarly, now, displaced in this new place, “all is strange and new” (21). This

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<sup>32</sup> In another important recent intervention in Clare studies, Simon Kövesi takes issue with the “metaphor” of “homelessness” in Guyer and Shalon Noble, but I think such a stricture precludes engagement with one of the most interesting features in Clare, which is precisely the simultaneous inextricability and irreducibility of the social and the existential. See Kövesi’s *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* 30-31.

<sup>33</sup> Noble writes: “Clare’s ecological sensitivity, therefore, lies not in his ‘rootedness,’ but in his rootlessness, or as he calls it, his ‘flitting.’ In this essay, I trace Clare’s revelation of *oikos* as it develops through a series of disruptive recognitions of difference – or flittings” (172).

uprooting appears to lead to isolation, as Clare is “from home and friends and all alone,” and a few lines later: “So I seem / Alone and in a stranger scene” (44, 48-9). The heavy enjambment between “seem” and “Alone” here is intensified by the fact that it is not just a line but also a stanza break. The new stanza thus begins itself in the middle of a clause, thrust alone into a stranger scene, as the line’s predication leaves home, flitting from one stanza to the next. Yet because Clare only “*seem[s]* / Alone,” the verb “seem” leaves open the crucial possibility that the poet is not actually alone, as the poem will eventually bear out. For it will turn out that this experience of groundlessness does not lead to isolation, but the realization of an irreducible, and irreducibly improper, relationality. In this way, Clare’s great insight is that *all things foreign*—“All foreign things where ere I go”—is the truth of *all things common*, and vice versa (98). And this foreignness is also experienced locally, uniquely in the everyday.

The next stanza then introduces weeds into the poem, an image that will (dis)figure this excessive, groundless relationality: “And still my thoughts like weedlings wild / Grow up to blossom where they can” (59-60). The following stanzas continue to praise the particular natural features of Clare’s former home, while carrying a pointed emphasis on the everyday, the minor manifestations of the local world (“plain and simpler things”), like moss: “A small unnoticed trifling thing / To all but heaven’s daily dew.” The excessive stacking of three consecutive adjectives (“small unnoticed trifling”) that are nearly synonymous to describe something utterly mundane (mundane, etymologically “of the world”) cannot but call to mind Wordsworth’s deployment of the same syntactic and semantic move, with the “little, nameless, unremembered acts” in “Tintern Abbey” (and Clare was a great admirer of Wordsworth). In excessively using three adjectives to emphasize how insignificant some trifling thing is, Clare’s (and Wordsworth’s) line paradoxically raises the significance of the mundane thing, thus performing a Romantic valorization and defamiliarization of the everyday. The attention to the dew on the moss also foregrounds the importance of the temporality of fugitive return that marks the everyday. Dew is excess water that wells on the surface of small unnoticed things, excess that returns familiarly and situatedly, every day. Clare writes that the moss is “unnoticed” by everything except the daily dew—but the poem notices it too. This everyday ecology—even though here experienced through loss, as memory—fills Clare’s heart with “rapture not its own,” another formula involving exceeding or rejecting the proper and native (“*not its own*”) for the foreign: “Twas nature’s beautys that inspired / My heart with rapture not its own” (118-119). It’s no accident that the improper excess of rapture here immediately provokes in the speaker a feeling of relationality: “How could I feel myself alone” (120). Rapture is a modality of relation, or rather we should really say that all relation is a modality of rapture (in the sense of ecstasy, ek-stasis, cf. ex-cessus): being in thrall to otherness, self-dispossession.

The next stanza links this realization of relationality (under the rubric of “friendship”) back to the figure of weeds: “And every weed and blossom too / Was looking upward in my face / With friendships welcome ‘how do ye do’” (126-128). Weeds are in many ways the perfect emblem of a groundless ecological relationality, because they are constitutively improper—there are no plants designated everywhere as “weeds,” but plants are only weeds when they are out of place, growing where they are not supposed to. “Weed” names not particular species of plants, but the fact of growing in a non-native place, or the wrong ground (not to mention, weeds are often associated with abundance, waste, and *excess*): a generalized non-nativity or rather, a situated groundlessness. Given the seemingly contingent, excessive, and improper supplemental (non)nature of weeds, it is astonishing that Clare then attributes to them (“weed and blossom” alike) what Nathaniel Mackey calls an insistent previousness, preceding and thus ungrounding any natal occasion or native origin:

All tenants of an ancient place  
And heirs of noble heritage

Coeval they with adams race  
 And blest with more substantial age  
 For when the world first saw the sun  
 These little flowers beheld him too  
 And when his love for earth begun  
 They were the first his smiles to woo (129-136)

The weeds and blossoms are “coeval” with Adam, and yet somehow still older: “blest with more substantial age.” These weed plants, supposed to be foreign and late-coming intruders to a native place, are more originary than humanity, indeed even that the world itself, being the first to take in the sun’s rays, on the first day, before there could even be an “everyday” (because on the first day there could be no return yet); and somehow these plants, which need the sun to grow, already existed when first greeting the sun. The weeds thus index an improperness or foreignness that is ontologically prior to any nativity, what Derrida calls a “prosthesis of origin.”

Seeing the weeds this way is remarkable, but essential for our purposes is how this ungrounding opens up (to) relationality and the common. Before exploring this issue in the concluding stanzas of the “The Flitting,” it is also important to remember that up until this point, most of the poem, including the previous lines about weeds, has been discussing the familiar and loved aspects of Clare’s *old* home, before the displacement or flitting took place. All he can describe about his new home in Northborough is the feeling of alienation (“all is strange and new”). But then, four stanzas from the end of the poem, a shift takes place. We have already noticed how weeds were associated with “friendship,” and the last stanzas of the poem continue to associate the excessive and groundless weeds with relationality; though now Clare, seeing the same weed (the “shepherd’s purse”) in Northborough that he once knew in Helpston, realizes his very displacement offers access to a deeper truth of relation. The stanza-opening phrase “E’en here” (i.e., *even here* in this new place) signals this shift vis-à-vis the affordances of non-nativity:

E’en here my simple feelings nurse  
 A love for every simple weed,  
 And een this little shepherd’s purse  
 Grieves me to cut it up; indeed  
 I feel at times a love and joy  
 For every weed and every thing (185-90)

Clare feels even—or especially—here and now, in his foreignness, a love for and relation to the minor excess of the everyday, the trifling outgrowth that is improper: “A love for every simple weed.” The declaration of love is repeated with the formulation “For every weed and every thing,” a somewhat odd and seemingly redundant formulation: since one would assume that “every thing” includes every weed, why separate and distinguish them? I want to suggest this is because the weed is in excess of totality, of everything, of the World; there is every identifiable, measurable, proper thing, which all fall under the marker “every thing”—and then there are the weeds.

Clare continues to sound the *un-heimlich* relationality offered by the existence of the weeds, refracted by the fact of his displacement. After seeing the shepherd’s purse in the foreign or “strange spot” of Northborough: “I / Feel what I never felt before / This weed an ancient neighbour here / And though I own the spot no more / Its every trifle makes it dear” (196-200). The weed not only indexes friendship, but neighborhood (“an ancient neighbour”), and as such, a constitutive relationship to locality—what is a local place but a particular configuration of neighborings, that itself neighbors other places, other worlds? The weed structures both the “old hut left” in Helpston

and the strange new home, linking them. Yet it is important that Clare only comes to this epiphany about the groundlessness of locality for the first time (“I / Feel what I never felt before”) after his flitting, after a disavowal of ownership and the proper(ity): “And though *I own the spot no more*” (compare the parting from the proper, the leaving what is one’s own, in the poem’s first line: “I’ve left *my own* old home of homes”).

Clare’s own alienation mirrors and finds its emblem in the alienation of weeds, which are the always groundless, excessive, and improper bearers of friendship, an association (i.e., between weeds and friends) repeated yet again in the penultimate stanza: “[The plants] are all and each affections friend” (203). The relationality here figured as friendship is then claimed to be the ontological “essence” of life itself: “[L]ife whose essence is its friends” (208). It is notable that Clare writes that life’s essence is not friend-*ship*, a concept in the abstract, but the concretely plural *friends*. It is the contingent multiplicity of relations—friends—that uniquely gives a life its form. We know these friends to be not only human, but beings of all kinds, including plants (compare Clare addressing a fallen elm as “Friend not inanimate” in “To a Fallen Elm”). Why the aphoristic turn to life and friendship at the end of “The Flitting”? It seems a bit out of place in a poem about displacement, but I’m trying to show that the experience of groundlessness and displacement is what occasions the feeling and realization of necessary relationality, a relationality that for all its undoing of grounded specificity or nativity, is still given as an absolutely unique and incommensurable local event of sharing—but one that opens outward.

The insistence on the local, the everyday, the mundane, the barely noticed, the trifling, and the minor, comes back in the final stanza alongside the poem’s last mention of weeds (“poor persecuted weeds”), where time itself “feels a love for little things” (212-13). So, “The Flitting” is about the changing of worlds. Clare enters a new world where “all is strange and new,” but finds a way to inhabit the traces of a world’s fragments and the possibility of linking worlds via the elusive and quotidian figure of weeds. Weeds—themselves unique depending on context, here a shepherd’s purse—are what is shared between the local worlds; but weeds are precisely what is improper, an original, nonnative, and excessive—yet also minor and mundane, an outgrowth or simple produce that is common. Thus Clare asks us to see each locality under the aspect of its groundless non-nativity. Or as Guyer writes: “What does it mean to imagine a world in which weeds are all that remain?” (96).<sup>34</sup> This is what Clare’s own experience of displacement discloses—he has to leave home to realize there never was a home (as ground) in the first place, and a similar operation of dispossession is at work in the enclosure poems. Clare is quite explicit on this point of disclosure: “I feel what I never felt before.” What I am trying to bring out in Clare’s poetry—counterintuitive for a poet known for his attachment to place—is that it often declares and performs deracination as a modality of *the common*. Displacement and deracination do not negate the importance of situated and unique locality, but disclose that what is local in the local are its particular, cultivated modes of habitually sharing groundlessness with all sorts of beings.

Indeed, weeds do not quite figure absolute deracination, as much as a strange, im-proper racination, a rooting without a ground and without a single unified and unifying World, such that this Worldlessness not only does not preclude, but in fact makes possible an *oikos*.<sup>35</sup> It’s not that there is no proper, but that any proper identity can only come to itself through dispossession,

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<sup>34</sup> Guyer continues: “In ‘The Flitting,’ Clare suggests that leaving—and losing—his home also allowed him to see the world anew, to recognize ivy, woodbine, and grass, not in their locality and specificity, but in their creeping excess, ubiquity, and survival, in their uncomfortable combination of resilient attachment and nonbelonging...[This is] the source for another way of thinking about Romanticism and its legacies” (98).

<sup>35</sup> As Noble argues: “Clare is an ecological poet not through his connection to the land, his rootedness, but his relation to nature as relation itself, a dwelling in nature as *oikos*. A fluid system, a process, a structure without a centre, ecology is, for Clare, the experience of being ‘homeless at home’” (179).

deracination, and groundlessness—an experience that at its dangerous extreme is perhaps indistinguishable from madness. Consider or the haunting evacuation of content undergone in Clare’s two poems directly dealing proper self-identity, the devastating “I Am” poems, where the void comes to be seen in and as the bare lovely blueness of the “vaulted sky.” The experience of dispossession in these two poems broaches an ineffable feeling of remoteness for which despair is by too feeble a name, because groundlessness does not open onto relation, but only onto a blank universe—an isolation indexed by the pointed *lack* of friends (“My friends forsake me”), an obvious contrast to the paradigm of “The Flitting,” where we find a life whose essence is its friends.<sup>36</sup> This ungrounding of proper identity is thus dangerous—indeed “*the most difficult thing* is the free use of the proper,” wrote Clare’s contemporary Hölderlin, who like Clare is forever marked by the fact of his mental breakdown and institutionalization (*Essays and Letters* 208, translation modified). In limning the disclosure of the groundless common by way of the displacement or ungrounding undergone in “The Flitting,” the point is not to justify or recommend such an experience of personal, social, and/or structural dispossession, but to find new modes of inhabiting and resisting, of finding an excessive and weedy common immanent in the undoing of any pure claims to the proper.

The relation of poetry to such an inhabiting and opening of negativity is hinted at by Clare five stanzas from the end of “The Flitting.” He writes:

I love the muse who sits her down  
 ...And pauses by the hedgerow gap  
 Not with that affectation praise  
 Of song to sing and never see  
 A field flower in all her days (177, 180-183)

Poetry, here embodied by “the muse,” must pause by the hedgerow gap, must sit and dwell there, paying attention to the concretely local flowers without “affectation.” Since a hedgerow is of course a man-made borderline marking off an enclosed private property—hedgerows were the most frequent ways that enclosure was enforced in Clare’s time—this perforce means that poetry’s purpose is to dwell in the gaps of the proper(ity), the caesura where the enclosure opens up to a commons which is not equivalent but instead situatedly shared. The gap in the hedgerow (hardly a hedgerow) is its immanent opening or point of excess: where and what we inhabit, and where the poem stops. The poem asks us, and helps us, to keep opening and working on and in this gap, expanding it, turning it into a garden—as Clare writes in a deleted line from a draft version of “The Flitting”: “[E]ach awthorn bough / Turns hedges into gardens now” (*Middle Poems* III.486). But there still is the hedgerow, there still is the enclosure of the commons—and the enclosure of the poem. A poem’s measure or meter (and other formal constraints) subjects it to a regime of commensurability not unlike that of the commensurability demanded by enclosure. But the point in each case is to see this measure under the aspect of its immanent excess, where it opens (to) sharing with other worlds. Indeed, this image of the muse pausing and sitting by the “hedgerow gap” takes on its full noninnocent complexity—and its poignancy—when we recall that Clare himself, out of

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<sup>36</sup> The extreme destitution and desolate ungrounding of identity is displayed the final letter of Clare’s life: “Dear Sir,

I am in a Madhouse & quite forget your Name or who you are you must excuse me for I have nothing to commu[n]icate or tell of & why I am shut up I dont know I have nothing to say so I conclude  
 yours respectfully John Clare” (*Letters* 683).

Three decades earlier, in one of his most incredible pieces of writing, Clare wrote of a fertile and vibrant splintering of identity, anticipating Rimbaud’s “je est un autre”: “I am growing out of myself into many existences” (*Letters* 504). Many existences, many worlds.

necessity, was employed as a worker erecting hedgerows and boundaries to enforce the enclosure of his beloved commons in Helpston.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, in his very exposure and disclosure of the contingency of the local without disavowing local attachment, Clare can be seen to offer another Romantic vantage point onto a groundless ecological ethics for the Anthropocene, one that undoes and rewires categories of local and global alike.<sup>38</sup> Such a thought requires both intensely local attention to incommensurable modes of dwelling and sharing, as well as an opening out of these local situated configurations onto a larger common of the earth and its various worlds. The tension between these two modes is directly taken up in “What is there in those distant hills,” an understudied but fascinating poem from the mid 1830s (ca.1832-1837) that asks how it is possible to imagine a common across distant, separate, and manifestly incommensurable worlds. The poem is a series of rhetorical questions comparing a “here,” the place Clare resides, and an undiscovered country “there” in the distance, and asking if these two could be said to share the same features. Strikingly, when Clare refers to his own locality, he uses the word “common” repeatedly, emphasizing both the uniqueness of its mundane characteristics and its sites for sharing and community. The first use of “common” occurs in the second stanza, where it modifies the flood waters—reminiscent of the excessive flood water that always exceeds, undoes, and erases the proper enclosed and measured markers of private property as invoked by John Bonnycastle at the outset of my Blake chapter: “Does common water make the floods / Thats common every where” (7-8).<sup>39</sup> The questions—it’s never quite clear whether they are rhetorical or not—keep coming, including one about the common day: “Does day come with its common sky / Thats seen both near and far / Does night the self same moon supply” (17-19). The problematic is essentially the same as the passage from the *Autobiography* about the end of the world (or indeed in “The Flitting”): over there, in the distant hills, how can it be the same world? This would a fortiori be the case of the actual world-wide blanket of enforced equivalence of globalization coming into being at this historical moment, a fact which gives Clare’s seemingly local concerns a dialectical and historical intensity. Clare even asks whether there can be a common measure for keeping time (the standardization of time was another key step in consolidating globalization), again employing the adjective “common”: “& have they there a night & day / & common counted hours” (37-38).<sup>40</sup>

Clare seems ultimately to suggest a negative answer to his series of questions—it is *not* the same world in the distant hills, what is common here is *not* common there. Rather, there is a radical incommensurability. The moon that shines here “cannot shine so far” to reach into the other place, the other world (48). Though Clare couches this claim not as a definite fact but only a whimsey in his reveries: “& think me in my reveries / [The moon] cannot shine so far” (47-48). Similarly, the fact that the poem largely consists of a series of questions implies that the point is to put the common *in question*, to unground it, not to seal off any possibility of relation and isolate each local place. Indeed

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<sup>37</sup> See Kövesi 16-18 (also citing Barrell) and Goodridge 108.

<sup>38</sup> Latour encourages us to rethink our concepts local and global, earth (*sol*) and world, avoiding the traps of globalization thinking the local and global as different scales or levels: “Un sol qui n’a rien à voir avec le Local et un monde qui ne ressemble ni à la mondialisation-moins ni à la vision planétaire...Le Global comme le Local donnent de mauvaises prises sur le Terrestre, ce qui explique la désespérance actuelle: que faire de problèmes à la fois si gros et si petits” (*Où atterrir* 116, 118).

<sup>39</sup> This poem “What is there in those distant hills,” not included in the Oxford selected edition of Clare’s *Major Works*, is cited from Robinson, Powell, and Dawson’s edition of Clare’s *Poems of the Middle Period*, Vol. V, pp. 166-168.

<sup>40</sup> Many scholars note the importance of the standardization of time for the rise of globalization and modernity, but see e.g. Lynn Hunt’s *Measuring Time, Making History*, Vanessa Ogle’s *The Global Transformation of Time*, and Jürgen Osterhammel’s *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century*. Osterhammel sees measure and its imposition as essential to the emergent global modernity of the nineteenth century: “The nineteenth century can be seen as the century of counting and measuring” (29).

Clare thematizes this tension between the incommensurable distance of the foreign and the commonness of the everyday: “[M]y fancy idly clings / To notions far away / & longs to roam for common things / All round her everyday” (29-32). Why the conjunction “&”? If Clare’s fancy is drawn to “notions far away,” yet also desires to revel in all the common things of the everyday, shouldn’t the conjunction be “but”? The strangeness of this formulation hints that the other world might not be so distant, or rather that its distance and incommensurability are precisely what allow it to be experienced and accessed intimately as shared and in common (like the foreignness that is prior to any origin in “The Flitting,” and the shared impropriety of weeds in both places).

The hint of the above formulation returns in the poem’s remarkable conclusion, which reconciles Clare to his local place, though *not* to double down on its unique separation that is insular and detached from any other place. Rather than attributing a special essence or presence (i.e. a ground) to his experience of locality, Clare’s poem trails off on an ambiguous note, ending with a (literally) unsettling evocation of groundlessness, evoking the non-place at the heart of every local place, a “zemblance undefined,” a force both “Nowhere & every where”:

Why need I sigh far hills to see  
If grass is their array  
While here the little paths go through  
The greenest every day

Such fancys fill the restless mind  
At once to cheat & cheer  
With thought & zemblance undefined  
Nowhere & every where. (57-64)

Everywhere and “every where,” every single “where” (or “here”) has a “no” or point of incommensurability immanent in it—this “nowhere” is what is common to the various separate places (like the weeds). Even when, as he puts it in another poem, “the place we occupy seems all the world” (“The shepherds almost wonder,” *Middle Poems* V.268), Clare enjoins us to see the incommensurability between worlds as opening onto the common(s); the separation between worlds, places, things, people, beings, creatures, is what allows for their relation, their *partage*. And this is experienced in the ordinary, the quotidian sharings, the minor ecologies of “the greenest every day.”

## V. Commoning

*“The world intends to be seen not just by one, but rather by an infinity of eyes.”*  
-Kaja Silverman, *World Spectators*

What, then, does Clare offer us as opposed to enclosure? The answer is simple enough: the commons. We find this line, for instance, in “Remembrances,” a poem quoted above: “Here was commons for their hills where they seek for freedom still” (41).<sup>41</sup> Clare offers us the commons: not as some prelapsarian rural fantasy that we endeavor to reconstruct nostalgically in a fog of *mauvaise foi*, but as an idea to think through and act on today, when we desperately need to think it and act on it. One way of doing this, which Clare can help with, is to imagine the contemporary commons as

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<sup>41</sup> Much has been written of late on Clare’s idea of the commons, and of community in particular. See, for example, John Goodridge’s book from 2013, *John Clare and Community*. See also Houghton, White, and Bewell, already cited.

an ethos and set of practices (“commoning”) rather than just a place or space, as Peter Linebaugh has proposed.<sup>42</sup> The commons is where—and how—we must seek for freedom *still*. The temporal disjunction between the first part of Clare’s line (“Here *was* commons...”) in the past tense, and the second part in the present tense (“where they *seek* for freedom *still*”) suggests that the commons exists as an idea, as well as a praxis of continual seeking, even after a particular physical commons has been enclosed and is gone. As Hardt and Negri write in *Multitude*: “We need to recognize how the ‘common’ can be constructed politically in our contemporary world” (204). Essential for thinking what the commons could be today—that is, in this iron age of the Anthropocene—is thinking through the open worlds we inhabit and share. This must be done not from the panoramic, totalizing perspective of global equivalence, but rather through the interlocking, each time singular sites of struggle.<sup>43</sup>

For do the commons, or what is left of them, not continue to be enclosed today, and ever more rapidly? Take, for example, the neoliberalization and privatization of public universities in the United States.<sup>44</sup> Yet the commons is still an immensely powerful idea and remains tied up with the most fundamental of questions: the question of being, and, what ultimately amounts to the same thing, the question of being *together* or being-in-common: “What could be more common than to be? We are. Being, or existence, is what we share...Being is in common” (“Of Being-in-Common” 1). Nancy again. By now it is no secret that he has been haunting my language throughout this chapter (and indeed this dissertation), and I wish to return to him once more.

In this chapter I have been thinking alongside Clare’s poetry, exploring how local worlds are formed, and considering how this practice might be conceived of in opposition to the abstract equivalence and uniformity desired by globalization and enclosure (whether the manner of enclosure be ontological, economic, cultural, intellectual, social, ecological, spatial, etc.). I hope to have shown how Clare helps us realize that what commonizes the commons is actually its *lack* of commonness as uniformity—for the true universal and the common are paradoxically found in the unique and in difference: the shared difference that constitutes singularity. A close parallel (and inspiration) to these thoughts is found in Nancy’s book *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, wherein he opposes two words which are normally synonyms in French: *mondialisation*, or world-forming, and *globalisation*, or the march of global capitalism. Much like Clare, Nancy promotes *mondialisation* as a form of

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<sup>42</sup> For “commoning,” see recent works by Linebaugh such as *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons For All* and *Stop Thief: The Commons, Enclosures, and Resistance*. I am indebted to Katey Castellano’s work for this reference.

<sup>43</sup> Sergei Prozorov is helpful and inspiring on this point: “[I]t is only in ‘these worlds here’ and not in the chimera of the ‘whole world,’ only in these here refugee camps and hospitals, city squares and army barracks, shanty towns and offshore zones, factories and universities, printing presses and prisons, that the universality of the axioms of freedom, equality, and community be affirmed. The being-in-common of free and equal beings, a form of life without exclusion, hierarchy and subjection, is to be attained in the worlds we inhabit, not beyond or above them” (146-147).

<sup>44</sup> In an interview, Slavoj Žižek discusses some aspects of what can be considered contemporary enclosures of the commons: “These are problems of the commons, the resources we collectively own or share. Nature is commons, biogenetics is genetic commons, intellectual property is commons. So how did Bill Gates become the richest man on earth? We are paying him rent. He privatized part of the ‘general intellect,’ the social network of communication – it’s a new enclosure of the commons. This has given a new boost to capitalism, but in the long term it will not work. It’s out of control” (“Wake Up...”). In his book *Living in the End Times*, Žižek presents this as an eminently political problem, which takes the form of communism: “Communism is today not the name of a solution, but the name of a *problem*: the problem of *commons* in all its dimensions – the commons of nature as the substance of our life, the problem of our biogenetic commons, the problem of our cultural commons (“intellectual property”), and, last but not least, the problem of commons as that universal space of humanity from which no one should be excluded. Whatever the solution, it will have to solve *this* problem” (481). For one contemporary literary take on the modern enclosure of the commons, see (in person, if possible) Jez Butterworth’s magnificent play *Jerusalem*, which is set in present day England but makes many nods to Romanticism, from its Blake-alluding title to its main character, named Johnny “Rooster” Byron (Clare of course was famously influenced by Byron, and even took on his persona to re-write “Child Harold” and “Don Juan”).

resistance to the “general equivalence” (i.e., what I have been calling abstract equivalence) of *globalisation*<sup>45</sup>:

The world has lost its capacity to ‘form a world’ [*faire monde*]: it seems only to have gained the capacity of proliferating...the ‘un-world’ [*immonde*]...*To create the world* means: immediately, without delay, reopening each possible struggle for a world, that is, for what must form the contrary of a global injustice against the background of general equivalence. (34, 54)

Nancy encourages us not only to form worlds in resistance to the large-scale enclosure that is globalization (a globalization first emerging in Clare’s era), but to open these worlds up to touch and jostle other worlds across their mutual incommensurability, to be-in-common. Indeed, Nancy has emerged as the great anti-enclosure thinker of our time, and is thus especially fitting to pair with Clare.<sup>46</sup> The former has even called one of his books *Dis-Enclosure*, where that term signifies, among other things, “the opening of an enclosure” (6). Later in that same text, he relates the task of dis-enclosure to place and world, key themes for this chapter:

Locations [*les lieux*] are delocalized and put to flight by a spacing that precedes them and only later will give rise [*donnera lieu*] to new places [*lieux nouveaux*]. Neither places, nor heavens, nor gods: for the moment it is a general dis-enclosing, more so than a burgeoning. *Dis-enclosure: dismantling and disassembling of enclosed bowers, enclosures, fences.* Deconstruction of property – that of man and *that of the world.* (160-161; my emphasis)

Nancy’s gesture of *dis-enclosure*—of spacing, of opening—is also one of *disclosure* (Heideggerian *Erschlossenheit*). This is a disclosure of worlds, of singularities, of places; places that are given and formed and shared; places where, as in the Mallarmé poem, *RIEN N’AURA EU LIEU QUE LE LIEU*—nothing will have taken place but the place itself. Disclosed, dis-enclosed, spaced, shared, touched, exposed, worlds are formed, collide, pass away, and become remembrances to sore hearts like John Clare. But these remembrances of worlds engender and pass down thoughts for the possible futures to come. They become, to borrow from Milton, materials to create more (and better) worlds.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Bernard Stiegler’s book *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology* for another recent philosophical perspective on how to deal with the “war” that is globalization, and the possible “reconstruction of the global future” (9-10). Incidentally, in his essay on “John Clare’s Dark Ecology,” Morton suggests that thinking place alongside Clare might help us develop a “more thorough critique” of globalization (180).

<sup>46</sup> Nancy has continued and deepened his critique of the regime of equivalence under global capitalism—especially its deleterious ecological consequences—in recent works like *L’Équivalence des catastrophes (Après Fukushima)* (2012). Here “the equivalence of catastrophes” means not that all catastrophes are the same, but rather “c’est pour finir cette équivalence qui est catastrophique” (17).

<sup>47</sup> This chapter is drawn in part from my previously published article “John Clare’s World.”

## Coda: Hölderlin's Communism

“We make a dwelling in the evening air, / In which being there together is enough.”  
-Wallace Stevens, “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour”

“Air is what is left in common between subjects living in different worlds.”  
-Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*

“Our story was  
the concreteness  
of this becoming  
shared  
by air.”

-Fred Moten, *The Service Porch*

In a neglected bundle of manuscripts in the Württembergische Landesbibliothek in Stuttgart, Germany, one finds a strange, fragmentary text in the handwriting of the nineteenth-century editor and publisher Christoph Schwab. This short, enigmatic text, which bears the even more enigmatic title “Communismus der Geister” (importantly, spelled with the initial “C,” not with the “K” that would become customary in German by mid-century), recounts a conversation between two young men standing before a medieval chapel at dusk. Though the chapel is not named, the details and the description of the surrounding landscape make it perfectly obvious that it is the Wurmlinger Kapelle, an eleventh-century chapel on a hill a few miles outside of the university town of Tübingen. The author of the text is also unnamed, but rather than Schwab himself being the author, we find a far more likely candidate in the poet whose works Schwab was the first to edit and publish as an edition (and whose writings Schwab often copied out as part of his editorial labor): Friedrich Hölderlin. But what is the Wurmlinger Kapelle to Hölderlin? We know from a letter that he visited it with another student in November of 1790, while living as a twenty-year-old theology student in Tübingen. Wishing to avoid the bustle of the fair in town one day, Hölderlin hiked to the gorgeous chapel with a new friend, his roommate at the Stift, a young man named G.W.F. Hegel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One morning in mid-November 1790, after studying late into the night, Hölderlin wrote to his sister Heinrike: “Today it’s the fair. Rather than getting pushed around in the hustle and bustle I’m going for a walk with Hegel, who is in the same room as me. We’re going to the chapel at Wurmlingen with the famous view” (*Essays and Letters* 6).



[The Wurmlinger Kapelle at dusk. Photo by the author.]

There could hardly be a more apt closing figure for this project than Friedrich Hölderlin. In addition to demonstrating that groundless community is vital to a larger Romantic current outside of Britain, concluding with Hölderlin allows me to return to the particular constellation of themes that are not always fully explicit in the other figures of this study, or only intermittently so, but are central and perennial obsessions of Hölderlin: community and the common, ground and groundlessness, modernity, measure, excess, rhythm, earth, and sovereignty—to name only some of the most prominent. Hölderlin’s most famous rubric for working through groundlessness, community, and measure is his atheological poetics of the departed or fugitive gods (“entflozene Götter,” he calls them in the great elegy “Brod und Wein”) (StA 2.1: 94).<sup>2</sup> Where and what is measure after the gods have fled? Is there any measure on earth? Can there be community? A propos of the question of modernity, it is important to remember that Hölderlin’s obsessions with measure (poetic and otherwise) and with the gods, are also fundamentally tied up with *the idea of the change of epoch*—again recalling that “measure” is the etymological root of modernity (from Latin *modus*: measure).<sup>3</sup> In this brief coda on Hölderlin, I wish to dwell with how all of these linked matters culminate in the question of community: a community not grounded in a common measure of identity, not grounded in anything at all. For Hölderlin, the promise of community is found in the shared everyday experience of the groundless and godless air—a poetic and ecological promise that invites us to think this universal element as the site of an everyday commons in the Anthropocene.

To think about this constellation of issues, I turn to the mysterious early prose fragment of Hölderlin, not published until the twentieth century and never published in English translation (and excluded from most German editions of his works), called “Communismus der Geister” (“Communism of Spirits”). This text is precisely about a change of epoch out of antiquity and the Middle Ages to modernity. One of the many fascinating aspects of this short text is the way it characterizes the shift of epoch—and the decline of religious faith and the gods that for Hölderlin indexes such an epochal transition—in terms of “ether,” or in German, *aether*. Ether is a prominent image and concept throughout Hölderlin’s poetry, so much so that Adorno calls ether the “pet word” of Hölderlin in his essay on the poet “Parataxis” (124). I want to ask how major concerns of Hölderlin’s mature poetry—especially this constellation of four I have mentioned: (1) the change of epoch (as the departing of God(s)) (2) the question of form or measure (3) ether and (4) community—are prefigured by “Communismus der Geister,” and how the later work looks differently and is illuminated under the aspect of this almost unknown text. After adumbrating these larger issues in “Communismus,” I will dwell briefly with the third version of the late fragmentary hymn “Griechenland,” which shares this same constellation or quartet of themes with the early “Communismus,” and gestures toward a common earth and common air.

So, “Communismus der Geister.” Let us bracket the questions of authorship and dating and assume that this text, which quite possibly contains the first use of the word “communism” in the

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<sup>2</sup> I cite Hölderlin from Friedrich Beissner’s Grosse Stuttgarter Ausgabe, abbreviated StA, followed by volume and page number. English translations of the poems are from Michael Hamburger’s edition of the *Poems and Fragments*, sometimes modified by me.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. what Veronique Foti calls “epochal discordance” in her book on Hölderlin of that name. Regarding Hölderlin, measure, and modernity, one of the few (curiously few) times Derrida ever mentioned Hölderlin bears quoting: “Hölderlin between Rousseau and Nietzsche. What a trinity! But these are the three madmen of Western modernity. The three measurers of the immeasurable in terms of which Western modernity is measured” (*Memoires: for Paul de Man* 128).

German language, is by Hölderlin and dates to the early 1790s.<sup>4</sup> The text is a short dialogue between two youths, Eugen and Lothar (perhaps Hölderlin and his roommate at the time, Hegel), as they stand before a medieval chapel (the Wurlinger Kapelle) and discuss the decline of religion—what the text calls the “universality of unbelief” [“Allgemeinheit des Unglaubens”]—and the new age they have entered (StA 4.1: 306). As I’ve noted, a striking feature of this text is one of the characters’ use of the word “ether” to figure the transition from antiquity and the middle ages to the present: “To me it is in the same way a hundred times vanished, when I had to turn back out of the free *ether* of antiquity into the night of the present” [“Es ist mir hundertmal ebenso gegangen, wenn ich aus dem freien *Aether* des Altherthums zurückkehren mußte in die Nacht der Gegenwart”] (StA 4.1: 307; my emphasis). Thus to leave antiquity is to leave ether and enter the Night and unbelief: modernity. To leave ether is to leave the realm of presence and the gods, or rather, to have the Gods leave us. To abandon what Hölderlin elsewhere calls the “original communal ground” [*gemeinschaftliche ursprüngliche Grund*] is also to abandon the *forms* that this presence makes possible, the text goes on to say, calling these old communal forms of life “lost, lost forever” [“verloren...verloren auf immer”] (*Essays and Letters* 247; StA 4.1: 222; StA 4.1: 307). “I ask not about dead matter,” the character Eugen says, “but the *form*” [“Ich frage nicht nach dem todten Stoffe, sondern, wenn du so willst, nach der Form”] (StA 4.1: 308).

And ultimately, what this amounts to is a radical uncertainty about the possibility of community. A few lines from when the text breaks off, one of the young men asks: “But now compare that time and ours: where will you find a community?” [“Nun vergleiche aber jene Zeit und unsere, wo willst du eine Gemeinschaft finden?”] (StA 4.1: 308). Thus turning out of ether—turning away from religion and the gods and into modernity—seems, at first, to entail a turning away from community. At the very least, the *grounds* of community are radically in question, for the community that becomes impossible is one that has a “primordial melody” (*ursprüngliche Melodie*), a “center” (*Mittelpunkt*), and “single foundation” (ein *Guss*), as Eugen says (StA 4.1: 308). A grounded community. And yet the title of the text still affirms some new communal possibility, a communism of spirits, one that only presents itself when the old certainties, grounds, hierarchies, modes, and measures of transcendence have withered away.<sup>5</sup>

What exactly is ether? Aside from being the “pet word” of Hölderlin’s poetry, “ether” plays a fascinating and multifarious role in the period in Germany. Thought of both as kind of an airy substance and a liquid, it is an important word in Herder and then the *Naturphilosophie*, where ether is often a kind of universal substrate or “solvent” of matter (Leif Weatherby’s fine recent book *Transplanting the Metaphysical Organ* details some of the uses of ether here); the concept occurs in Schlegel and Novalis—for the latter we are “children of ether,” which is “everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing” (*Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia* 19; 177). Perhaps most fascinatingly in the

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<sup>4</sup> However, I don’t do this bracketing casually—I’ve done a good deal of research on this text and I am convinced that Hölderlin is the author. Beissner does include it in his edition of Hölderlin’s works, but only in an appendix under the heading “Zweifelhaftes” (i.e., “doubtful”). The translation used here is my own, made with David Brazil. I am currently preparing this translation for publication, along with a scholarly introduction discussing questions of authorship, dating, and context. Essentially ignored by the Germans, the only substantive discussions of this text to date, both of which affirm the authorship of Hölderlin and the dating of circa 1790, are from a French and Italian scholar, respectively: Jacques D’hondt’s “Le meurtre de l’histoire” and Domenico Carosso’s *Il comunismo degli spiriti: Forma e Storia in un frammento di Hölderlin*.

<sup>5</sup> On groundless community as community without a center, see my Chapter 3 on Blake. Hölderlin’s vision of groundless community as “communism” may have influenced Maurice Blanchot (a dedicated reader of and commentator on Hölderlin) and his own idiosyncratic use of the word “communism.” For Blanchot: “Communism is what excludes (and excludes itself from) [*s’exclut de*] any already constituted community...community without any common denominator other than penury, dissatisfaction, and lack in every sense of the term” (“Communism without Heirs,” *Political Writings* 93).

period, the very late Kant turns to ether in the group of manuscripts now known as the *Opus Postumum*, written just before he died, where the ether is essentially a transcendental materiality, an a priori plenum of universal presence whose vibrations give rise to individual bodies. In Beth Lord's reconstruction of the late Kant's concept of ether, ether becomes an absolute unity and ground: the "original unity, which is therefore the *ground* of [the] determinations and differences [of individual things]" (*Kant and Spinozism* 160; my emphasis). Ether is always subtending presence, and ether *is* itself a subtending presence, from the ancient philosopher Empedocles (a key figure for Hölderlin, who wrote his only play about him), who introduced ether in his thought to fill all empty space, through the early Hegel (who characterized ether as "the substance and being of all things"), all the way to Derrida, who writes in the famous essay "Différance" that "the privilege granted to the present... is the *ether* of metaphysics" (*Margins of Philosophy* 16; my emphasis).<sup>6</sup> Presence is the ether—and ether is the presence—of metaphysics: of substance, unity, being, ground. Ether is thus a guarantee of ontotheology, a ground of measurable and determinate presence, and as such it makes measurements possible. And it does relate specifically to measure: scientific attempts to measure ether as a substance are frequent until the Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887, a failed attempt to measure ether, negatively proved the "ether hypothesis." The permeating presence of ether is thus the ground of all grounds, the force of both totalization and singularization, the absolute measure.

What about ether in Hölderlin? Indeed he is the quintessential poet not of presence but of absence, especially measure's absence, and what is perhaps the same thing, divine absence. Heidegger's rendering of ether in Hölderlin points to some of the things that interest me, in particular a passage from Heidegger's essay (named after a line of Hölderlin) "What Are Poets For?":

The ether, in which alone the gods are gods, is their godhead. The element of this ether, that within which even the godhead itself is still present, is the holy. The element of the ether for the coming of the fugitive gods, the holy, is the track of the fugitive gods... To be a poet in a destitute time means: to attend, singing to the trace of the fugitive gods. This is why the poet in the time of the world's night utters the holy. This is why, in Hölderlin's language, the world's night is the holy night. (92)

First of all, Heidegger's close association of ether, the gods, and night uncannily recalls the sentence from the "Communismus" text—where the character "turns out of the *ether* of antiquity back into the *night* of the present"—though Heidegger never mentions it.<sup>7</sup> What I wish to draw attention to is Heidegger's intimation that ether in Hölderlin, while still retaining its conventional connotation of presence, is fundamentally characterized by a poetic orientation—a lyric orientation, to use Hannah Eldridge's term<sup>8</sup>—toward trace and absence. This rhythmic alternation of presence and absence is akin to the "waving" between concrete presence and abstraction that Adorno thought characterized Hölderlin's verse in general, especially his use of words like "ether."

This rhythm or waving is also evident in Hölderlin's writings on measure. One of his most famous proclamations is the question and answer that comes toward the end of the fragment "In lovely blueness" ("In lieblicher Bläue"): "Giebt es auf Erden ein Maaß? Es giebt keines"<sup>SEP</sup> "Is there

<sup>6</sup> On aether in early Hegel see Gruner and Bartelmann's "The Notion of 'Aether': Hegel versus Contemporary Physics."

<sup>7</sup> Heidegger never mentions "Communismus der Geister," though he would have had access to it in the appendix to the Beissner edition he sometimes used. Though this is hardly an oversight on Heidegger's part—almost no one ever mentions this cryptic text (Hölderlin scholars included). Interestingly enough, however, one finds a brief mention of it in Celan's posthumous notebooks. See the latter's *Mikrolithen sind, Steinchen: die Prosa aus dem Nachlass*.

<sup>8</sup> For a valuable recent reflection on Hölderlin's poetics of community, including in relation to the everyday, see Eldridge's *Lyric Orientations: Hölderlin, Rilke, and the Poetics of Community*.

any measure on this earth? There is none”] (StA 2.1: 372). Despite such insistence on abyssal immeasurability, Hölderlin is *also* the poet of absolute measure and calculation, what he calls the “calculable law” [*kalkulable Gesez*] of rhythm, the poet who writes that “immer bestehet ein Maas, / Allen gemein” [“always there persists a measure / common to all”] (“Brod und Wein”; StA 2.1: 91).<sup>9</sup> “*Alles ist rhythmus*,” he is reported to have written in his notebooks.<sup>10</sup> Measure is common to all, yet this measure is a common that does not subsume unique singularity. The full verse from “Brod und Wein” reads: “immer bestehet ein Maas, / Allen gemein, *doch jeglichem auch ist eignes beschieden*” [“always there persists a measure / Common to all, *yet each one is allotted their own*”] (my emphasis).<sup>11</sup> Measure is the groundless common, the rhythm of each being sharing its singular existence, without the sheltering guarantee of divine presence, ground, or authorization. Insofar as this common is not something that is *present*, its mode of existence is essentially, anoriginally *poetic*, belonging to song: “Statt offner Gemeine sing ich Gesang” [“Instead of the open common, I sing Song”], reads the first line of the poem “Der Mutter Erde” (“Mother Earth”) (StA 2.1: 123).

I now want to ask how some of these issues can be refracted through a very late hymnic fragment: the third version of “Griechenland.” This is one of the very latest hymns of Hölderlin’s late period (certain editions put it last of all), a gorgeous and elusive text. David Constantine writes that “Greece” is “Hesperian in content,” which is uncharacteristic for a poem called “*Greece*,” since Hölderlin is usually concerned about setting up an opposition between the long modernity of Hesperia and the era of antiquity, precisely to show the crisis of modernity—the fall out of the ether, as we have seen (110). But this Greece is eerily close to us, not like the distant Greece contrasted with modern Hesperia in poems like “Germanien” (“Hesperia” is more or less Hölderlin’s word for modernity and the modern condition). What is more, this fairly short fragment contains the same constellation of 4 themes I introduced in “Communismus der Geister,” namely (though here in a different order): (1) ether (2) the change of epoch (as the turning away of gods/decline of religion) (3) the question of form or *measure* and (4) community.

Ether is mentioned nineteen lines into the poem, which opens with a *mélange* of landscape, invocations of ancient “Unsterblichkeit und Helden” [“immortality and heroes”] and Hölderlin’s gnomic declarations (StA 2.1 257). After a mention of the “common elements” [*die allgemeinen Elemente*], from which it is distinguished, ether appears—or rather, doesn’t appear, since it is inaccessible and “*above all*”:

Lauter Besinnung aber oben lebt der Aether. Aber silbern  
 An reinen Tagen  
 Ist das Licht. Als Zeichen der Liebe  
 Veilchenblau die Erde.

<sup>9</sup> Hölderlin discusses his notion of the “calculable Gesez” in, for example, the “Remarks on ‘Antigone.’” On Hölderlin and calculation, see Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “The Poet’s Calculation.” In fact, these very lines about measure from “Brod und Wein,” translated into French by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, serve as the main epigraph to the original French edition of Nancy’s *La Communauté désœuvrée*. Nancy’s other most important book *Being Singular Plural* also displays an overall epigraph from Hölderlin, as does Agamben’s recent magnum opus *The Use of Bodies*.

<sup>10</sup> Hölderlin’s remark “All is rhythm” is reported by Bettina von Arnim in her text *Die Günderröde*. This is discussed by Blanchot in his *The Writing of the Disaster*, where he goes on to reflect on rhythm as a kind groundless excess immanent in measure: “For always [rhythm] exceeds the rule through a reversal whereby, being in play or in operation within measure, it is not measured thereby” (112-113).

<sup>11</sup> “Beschieden” can be translated “allotted,” but the word also relates to cutting and separating (cf. the verbs *schneiden* and *scheiden*, or the adjective *verschieden*). This could be put in dialogue with the problematic of “lot” and *partage* in my chapter on the Wordsworths (Chapter 4).

[But above, all reflection, lives Aether. But silver  
 On pure days  
 Is light. As a sign of love  
 Violet-blue the earth.] (StA 2.1: 257).

Despite ether's distant absence, a sign of love is given: not up in the atmosphere, but as the light of the pure day and the violet-blue earth. Still, divine absence haunts the poem. In this Greece, God is not fully present, but has hidden (*verberget*) his face: "Und Erkenntnissen verberget sich sein Angesicht / Und deket die Lüfte mit Kunst. / Und Luft und Zeit dekt / Den Schräklichen" ["His face is withheld from the knowing / And covers the airs with art. / And air and time cover / The terrible one"] (StA 2.1: 257-58). Ether's infinite distance, like the god's hiddenness or departure, is replaced by air.<sup>12</sup> The god covers the airs (*Lüfte*) with art, but air and time (*Luft und Zeit*) cover *him*. Though the god is only manifest in his hiddenness through air and time, his relation to earth is cast in terms of *measure*—measuring the unmeasured (*Ungemessene*)—and then a few lines later, community:

[W]ie auf Höhen führet  
 Die Erde Gott. Ungemessene Schritte  
 Begränzt er aber, aber wie Blüten golden thun  
 Der Seele Kräfte dann der Seele Verwandtschaften sich zusammen,  
 Daß lieber auf Erden  
 Die Schönheit wohnt und irgend ein Geist  
 Gemeinschaftlicher sich zu Menschen gesellet.

[As on high places God  
 Leads on the earth. Unmeasured paces, though  
 He limits. But like blossoms golden then,  
 The faculties, affinities of the soul consort  
 So that more willingly  
 Beauty dwells on earth<sup>13</sup> and one or the other spirit  
 More communally joins in human affairs] (StA 2.1: 258)

In a way, the convergence of themes indexes Hölderlin's coming full circle here—from the beginning of his career, with the ca. 1790 "Communismus der Geister," to "Griechenland," which is effectively the end. That is, he moves from a "Communismus der Geister" to here, much later, a *Geist* that represents a "more communal" (*ein Geist / Gemeinschaftlicher*) way of dwelling on the earth. And the possibility of a groundless common is still routed through questions of ether, air, and measure. Indeed a few lines after these, two lines before the text itself breaks off mid-sentence, Hölderlin presents the image of a traveller wandering off the paved road that leads to the church, into the distance: "[W]em, / Aus Lebensliebe, messend immerhin, / Die Füße" ["Whose feet, from love of life, measuring all along"] (StA 2.1: 258). Paces themselves are unmeasured (*Ungemessene Schritte*), yet the rhythm of walking here is a kind of constant measuring (*messend immerhin*): sharing

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Wallace Stevens: "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences. It is not as if they had gone over the horizon to disappear for a time; nor as if they had been overcome by other gods of greater power and profounder knowledge. It is simply that they came to nothing" (*Opus Posthumous* 260).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wordsworth in "Home at Grasmere": "Beauty, whose living home is the green earth" (l. 991).

the measure of the incommensurable. What does it mean to say, as Hölderlin here directly says, that measuring springs out of love, the love of life itself (*Aus Lebensliebe*)? And not only that, this measuring is manifest in and as the most ordinary, common, and everyday activity of walking—“Alltag aber wunderbar” [“Everyday but marvelous”], the same poem earlier says. The everydayness of this walking as measuring limns new common paths on unpaved roads; that is, not on a ground but on an earth.<sup>14</sup>

I close this coda now with a slight shift and a question. Readers of Hölderlin know well how his work is suffused by tense energies of crisis: spiritual and theological crisis, political crisis, aesthetic crisis, the crisis of modernity, personal crisis, and more. But what would it mean to pay attention to intimations of *ecological* crisis in Hölderlin’s poetry? The word “earth,” for example, is mentioned no less than six times in this fragment “Griechenland,” the first time alongside a foreboding invocation of ecological precariousness: “Die Erde, von Verwüstungen her” [“The earth, proceeding from devastations”] (StA 2.1: 257). Closer to the end of the poem, Hölderlin strikes a similarly ominous note: “[A]usgehn will die alte Bildung / Der Erde” [“The ancient knowledge of earth is in danger / Of going out”] (StA 2.1: 258). The knowledge of earth is threatened, and nature is not stable, secure, and grounded, but rather open and contingent: “Denn lange schon steht offen...die Natur” [“For long already...Nature lies open”] (StA 2.1: 258). How might we see ether and air under this aspect?<sup>15</sup> Like Hölderlin, the promise and presence of ether has left us with only the contingency and uncertain measures of air, but with an air now, we know, loaded with too much carbon dioxide. In his 2014 text “Anthropocene Air,” Tobias Meneley proposed to consider air itself as a kind of figureless figure for the Anthropocene, our era of global ecological crisis. Meneley finds both in the universal diffuseness and the invisibility and ungraspability of air, an apt conceptual image for thinking the omnipresent, and ominous, slipperiness of the Anthropocene. Also invoking the important and Hölderlinian question of modernity and change of epoch, Meneley writes:

We add more carbon dioxide and methane to the atmosphere than is removed by the carbon and methane cycles. This accumulative principle poses a problem for the conventional model of crisis as rupture, modernity as historical discontinuity. The catastrophe of the present is not its break with the past but its accretion of the past, a thickening of the air. What elemental resources might we call upon to figure this elusive atmosphere that bears the weight of history? (100)

Taking a cue from Meneley and Hölderlin, we might see this air thick with history, “air and time” (*Luft und Zeit*) to use the phrase of “Griechenland,” as also the opening to think a groundless commons of atmosphere. This calls for the invention, or rather the immanent re-expression, of new modes of becoming, to use Hölderlin’s word again, *gemeinschaftlicher*—which I would now translate as: *more communist*. The rhythm of ether’s absence is lived in the common air we share, from the devastations of the violet earth, to the lovely blueness of the sky.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Anne-Lise François on companionate walking, rhythm, and measure, via the Wordsworths, thinking a common “already at some level realized, already present, in the rhythm of this temporizing—in the scansion of these small, necessarily circumscribed advances, exercises in companionate walking, or intervals in time” (François, “A Little While” 145). This time and rhythm of walking is what François elsewhere calls “unenclosed time” (common time, perhaps), thereby inviting further reflection on the relations between measure and enclosure, that is, between rhythm, measure, and the common (common in both senses). See her “Taking Turns on the Commons (or Lessons in Unenclosed Time).”

Hölderlin’s above convergence of the common, measure, life, and love comes quite close to Blake’s identification (unification?) of form, life, and love, as outlined in my Chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> Some work is already beginning to be done on Hölderlin in this regard: see Michael Auer’s “Hölderlins Klimapoetik” and Chenxi Tang’s “Wetterdienst und Poesie.”

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